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## After the Age of Innocence: Reclaiming Edith Wharton's Satirist Status

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After the Age of Innocence:  
Reclaiming Edith Wharton's Satirist Status

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
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## Introduction

On August 13, 1937, the New York Times ran an obituary, undoubtedly seen on the newsstands and the brownstone steps of those formerly acquainted with a writer who had not stepped foot in New York in decades. It read as follows:

*EDITH WHARTON, 75, IS DEAD IN FRANCE*<sup>1</sup>

Few headlines could have better encapsulated Wharton's later years, having been dead to society since leaving for Paris over two decades prior. The obituary, citing *The Age of Innocence* as her most prominent work, credited her as both the author and the child of the age, paying credence to her service to New York as the cynical chronicler of society and scandal. "As a child she lived within the inner circle of New York society that always thought of itself as spelled with a capital S.... Besides Fifth Avenue, there was Newport. Beyond that was only Europe."<sup>2</sup>

When her marriage ended and her time in society consequently came to an end, Wharton left New York behind, never to return. Although her obituary focuses primarily on her early life, the formative years of Edith Wharton were stifled by a stuffy world that she never truly belonged to. It was in her second act, starting in her forties, that Wharton was free to live. Her most notable works, which I will be discussing in this paper alongside her autobiography and criticism, deal with the repercussions of not belonging. *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country*, and *The Age of Innocence* all take place in New York society, and have been subjected, much like the rest of her body of work, to criticism that fundamentally misunderstands Wharton

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<sup>1</sup> "Edith Wharton, 75, Is Dead in France," New York Times, last modified August 13, 1937, accessed February 24, 2018, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/bday/0124.html>.

<sup>2</sup> "Edith Wharton," New York Times.



as an author and as a woman who had lived. Wharton admitted herself that, prior to writing *The House of Mirth*, “she had felt fashionable New York society was too shallow to be interesting.”<sup>3</sup> She changed her mind, evidently, as she became known for her New York novels, in which she artfully lampooned a world that looked alluring on paper, but was as cutthroat and cold as she, a New York insider, remembered. Hardly sentimental about her time spent as a debutante turned wife, “Wharton exposed the shallow values of this affluent ‘society.’”<sup>4</sup> She did this by adopting and deconstructing elements from the novel of manners. The novel of manners itself is, as Lionel Trilling writes, “a nearly indefinable subject,”<sup>5</sup> although understood as a novel that incorporates “a culture’s hum and buzz of implication.”<sup>6</sup> Characters in such novels have clearly defined desires and motivations, but clash with a culture where they are forced to sublimate their desires to maintain manners and avoid falling out of social favor. Wharton expanded upon this premise by proposing an oppressive air to the culture of society, and making her characters begrudging participants. She dealt with themes of belonging and searching for fulfillment in a world where everything is structured and everybody has their place, and the only agency is the agency to go along with the status quo and accept that one might be entitled to luxury, possibly afforded a spouse and a family and a home, but that the path to true fulfillment would always be nebulous.

These themes carry over into her novels set outside of the city, *Ethan Frome* and *A Son at the Front*. Neither of the protagonists in those novels feel as though they are getting what they want out of their lives, and without the trappings of wealth, there are no surface superfluities to

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<sup>3</sup> Eleanor Dwight, *Edith Wharton: An Extraordinary Life* (New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), [Page 8].

<sup>4</sup> Dwight, *Edith Wharton*, [Page 7].

<sup>5</sup> Lionel Trilling, "Manners, Morals, and the Novel," in *The Kenyon Review* (Gambier, OH: Kenyon College, 1948), 10, no. 1:[Page 11].

<sup>6</sup> Trilling, "Manners, Morals," 10, no. 1:[Page 12].

prompt the reader to ask, “Why is this not enough to make them happy?” Wharton made sure to address that curiosity in her body of work. Most of her characters are privileged, but she implores the reader to see past that privilege and understand that society living is imperfect. Her novels are not a love letter to the society game she once played, but an admonishment of the impossibility of winning that game. In this project, I will deconstruct the notion that Wharton is a sentimentalist, and that her novels, which favor subtlety and implore readers to focus on what is said as much as what is left unsaid, have been judged unfairly, and dismissed in part because of gender biases and a confused analysis of the implications of Wharton’s conflicting identities as an American and an honorary European, simultaneously a champion of the common man and a debutante.

To understand what is being lost when Edith Wharton is described as a sentimentalist, it is important to understand what sentimental writing is, and how hers has been misconstrued as such. The sentimental novel is a classification that has been applied across other genres, including the genre of the novel of manners that Edith Wharton adapted and spoofed in her New York dramas. The work that sparked this trend in classification was the 1768 Laurence Sterne travel novel *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy*. A sentimental novel is defined as one that “assumed the individual and social importance of sensitivity to the troubles of others. In addition to representing heroes, and occasionally heroines, of extraordinary responsiveness, they also commented on social institutions.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Jane Tompkins writes “The power of the sentimental novel to move its audience depends on the audience’s being in possession of the

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<sup>7</sup> Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Novel Beginnings: Experiments in Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), [Page 127].

conceptual categories that constitute character and effect.”<sup>8</sup> Reading Wharton, it is easy to see why critics would bestow the term “sentimentality” onto her writing, and label her a sentimentalist. She never admonishes her characters for their privileges, and depicts heroes and heroines who are savvy in the machinations that they take to find their footing in a world where they must advocate for themselves, responding to and acknowledging external pressures. The way that Wharton’s characters conduct themselves, and the boundaries that they push that push upon them are not where the satire lies in her novels. She comments on social institutions, but does so to such an extent that her work transcends the sentimental and leans into satire. The way that Wharton tears down social institutions with words while leaving them narratively intact is where much of the satire is derived in her novels. Tompkins posits that the sentimental novel of the nineteenth century “represents a monumental effort to reorganize culture from the woman’s point of view.”<sup>9</sup> The satirical novel is the twentieth century answer to the sentimental: Wharton builds upon the foundation of her literary forebears while using a more acerbic approach to critiquing society and recognizing the voices of her characters, from the subjugated women to the emotionally stunted men.

Just like sentimentality, satire examines society, but satire offers a more targeted admonition of society’s faults. As Jean Weisgerber puts it, “Satire is connected with society in several ways. Unlike the lyricist poet, the satirist never soliloquizes. He is deeply ‘committed.’ He talks about (other) people and what is wrong with them.”<sup>10</sup> Wharton’s methodology is clearly satirical; she uses irony to highlight the flaws in social structures, and only uses sentiment to

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<sup>8</sup> Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1985), [Page 271].

<sup>9</sup> Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, [Page 269].

<sup>10</sup> Jean Weisgerber, "Satire and Irony as Means of Communication," in *Comparative Literature Studies* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1973), 10, no. 2:[Page 159].

establish expectations (both for the reader and for her characters) that she skillfully subverts. Wharton does not embrace the sentimental, but her satire relies on sentimental preconceptions of the world she is depicting in order to expose the darker side of society. Weisgerber goes on to say that “One of the main characteristics of satire is that it identifies the disease while usually only hinting at the remedy.”<sup>11</sup> This analogy is seen throughout Wharton’s work: the disease is society and the expectations and limitations that it imposes on Wharton’s characters, and while the remedy—removing oneself from society and searching for fulfillment elsewhere—is presented as a possibility, these characters are so engrained in their world that they reject such a remedy and attempt to work within the system for fulfillment. The irony is that that the solution to the problems created by society is far from unattainable, but is such a nuclear option that for Wharton’s characters it is a nonstarter.

Edith Wharton should not be reduced to an author of the sentimental novel, and so I posit that the conception of Wharton as a sentimentalist is a complete misrepresentation of a woefully misunderstood artist. Her literary identity cannot be completely assembled from the character that she presents in her nonfiction work, nor from the characters she has constructed in her fiction. Understanding Wharton means dismissing preconceived notions of her as a writer and as a woman and realizing that her writing was shaped alongside her personal growth, as she experienced a divorce, the death of her closest friend, and the First World War. By the end of this paper, I will prove that Wharton is not guilty of the sin of sentimentality for which critics hold her in contempt, and is instead a master satirist, weaving together a body of work that is representative of a place and time that she spent a lifetime trying to fully realize, both on and off the page.

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<sup>11</sup> Weisgerber, "Satire and Irony," 10, no. 2:[Page 160].

In the first chapter, I will discuss Wharton's early life in conversation with *The House of Mirth* (1905) while briefly introducing and touching on *The Age of Innocence* (1920), also considering contemporaneous and modern criticism of the two texts and how the attitudes that they espoused towards society swung the critical pendulum between designating Wharton sentimental or satirical. *The House of Mirth* is the story of Lily Bart, a woman whose life has yet to begin since she is unable to find a suitor. The novel offers Lily two romantic options: the wealthy Percy Bryce, who is the ideal society husband and would allow her to marry up, and the much less wealthy though dashing and passionate Lawrence Selden. Wharton uses these two options to illustrate that Lily's choice (a choice that really belongs to the men) is, by necessity, governed more by expectations than by her own feelings. It is a cynical interpretation of the marriage plot, with the twist that Lily, a romantic beggar, cannot be a chooser, but is discerning anyway, eventually ending up with no husband at all. *The Age of Innocence* depicts the result of an unhappy marriage built upon convenience and tradition. Its romantic pairing, Newland Archer and May Welland, are not suited for each other, and Newland begins to question his ostensibly perfect marriage in an ironic unraveling. His thoughts stray to Ellen Olenska, a free-spirited woman who represents a life outside of the bondage of convention, though Newland lacks the constitution to be a free spirit himself, and he grapples with his own identity as an insider who feels like an outsider.

In the second chapter, I will discuss *The Custom of the Country* (1913) and *Ethan Frome* (1911), two novels that avoid the trap of sentimentality by featuring unromantic outsiders, bringing in criticism of the stories and their protagonists. *The Custom of the Country* is the story of Undine Spragg, certainly Wharton's most unique and fiery protagonist, who manages to both question the societal structures into which she wishes to assimilate while romanticizing

everything that is just out of her grasp. Her sentimental longing for the promise of New York is turned sardonic by her inability to be satisfied with everything that she gains, not by inheritance but by cleverness and manipulation. *Ethan Frome*'s titular protagonist is a man who has fallen out of love with his wife, and gives into temptation in the form of a girl who he believes will offer him an escape from the constraints of his marriage and small town lifestyle. That this escape is unachievable, and he believes he deserves more than his quiet existence while neglecting the one person who depends on him, is where the irony lies in this novel.

In the third chapter, in conversation with Wharton's biography *A Backward Glance* (1934) and her antiwar novel *A Son at the Front* (1923), I will once again discuss *The Age of Innocence* and attempt to answer the question that has baffled critics for nearly a century: why did Wharton return to the New York of her childhood for what is arguably her most famous work? How can readers and critics alike reconcile the nostalgia of *The Age of Innocence* with the notion of Wharton as anything other than a sentimentalist? By the end of this paper, I will answer these questions, and argue the importance of all of these novels in the literary canon as satirical works, particularly *The Age of Innocence*, the novel that best exemplifies Wharton's relationship with sentiment and satire, dispelling the misconception that she leaned towards the sentimental.

## CHAPTER ONE

### *A House of Mourning in the Age of Sentimentality: Portrait of a Scribbling Woman*

In 1879 New York, the parents of Edith “Pussy” Jones made the decision to have her debut a year early, at seventeen. Their daughter had spent much of her childhood reading across Europe, from France to Germany to Italy, reading during summers in Newport, Rhode Island, and finally reading in her father’s library upon their return to New York in the early 1870s. Her parents, old money types, disapproved of their child’s bookishness and sought to introduce her to the society that was her birthright. Forty years later, she would be worldly and independent and able to satirize Old New York in *The Age of Innocence*. For now, though, the girl who would one day become Edith Wharton had every right to be bitter.

As bitterness is unbecoming in society, Wharton’s characters are forced to swallow their sullenness and proceed through the motions in order to fit into the world in which they may not belong, but have legacy membership and much to prove. *The House of Mirth* opens at Grand Central Station, where Lily Bart, a young woman just passing marriageable age at twenty-nine, is en route to a party at Bellomont, where society girls will vie for proposals. While she waits, she meets with the charming but poor (relative to other society men) Lawrence Selden and joins him for tea at his flat. This seemingly innocuous interaction sets off a chain of events that threaten her already dwindling marriageability.

Three years after her debut, Edith was engaged to be married, at the modest age of twenty. That engagement, like the one expected for Lily Bart, quickly fell apart, and she was not married until she turned twenty-five. This marriage, to Edward “Teddy” Wharton, was not the love story that young Pussy Jones had dreamed of. Teddy, who Jonathan Franzen would one day

describe as “an affable dud of modest means,<sup>12</sup>” was not the intellectual partner who Edith needed. He loved the society of which she reluctant to be a part. They were not meant to be together, and their marriage lacked passion. But it was a marriage.

Readers might draw a comparison between Teddy and Selden, as neither were men of exceptional means, but the similarities end there. Edith could overlook this, and had to overlook all of Teddy’s shortcomings—if they were shortcomings; they were, ultimately, just very different people—but Lily’s “heart of fools” seeks something more. The romantic world of exploration, of Europe and artists and intellectuals awaited Edith. But for decades, she was trapped in New York. She would have to leave the society that she had rejected, the society that rejected Lily, to become Edith Wharton.

In the third chapter of *The House of Mirth*, the narrator recalls Lily’s adolescent years. Young and foolish and blissfully unaware of the power that money will hold over her, she lives fairly lavishly. Her family has servants and is able to afford for Lily to have a “dazzling debut,”<sup>13</sup> probably not unlike the debut of young Edith Jones. Yet her father has lost most of the family’s money, a reality that sets in with “a heavy thunder-cloud of bills”<sup>14</sup> following cotillion. Lily realizes that her family is not as comfortably well off as she might have thought when she asks for fresh lilies-of-the-valley for luncheon. Although the choice of flower is a little bit on the nose, the symbolism here could not be clearer. Flowers are frivolous and fleeting. The money spent on something temporary, and pretty only for a moment before they die is not unlike the money spent on Lily’s debut, the costs of which have made a significant dent in the family’s

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<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Franzen, "A Rooting Interest," *The New Yorker*, February 20, 2012, accessed February 24, 1018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/02/13/a-rooting-interest>.

<sup>13</sup> Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1993), [Page 30].

<sup>14</sup> Wharton, *The House*, [Page 30].



wealth. Lily is the batch of lilies-of-the-valley that will wilt in no time at all, though she does not know this yet.

Later on in her life, after she had renounced New York society and settled into her life as an adventurous, spiritually European divorcee, Edith Wharton would write about the sorts of women who were “dead” before they actually died. The titular character from her 1926 story “Miss Mary Pask” is declared dead for her old age—forties!—and her unmarried status. *The House of Mirth* was written during Edith’s marriage to Teddy Wharton. She had successfully avoided the living death of a society woman, even if she had married late, at twenty-five. Lily, alternatively, would have ten years between her debut and the timeframe of the novel to be disappointed by the society that rejected her. The years that followed were harsh and before she knew it she was twenty-nine. This perilous period began with the death of her father, and living conditions for the Barts only declined from there. “It was a relief to Lily when her father died. Then a long winter set in. There was a little money left, but to Mrs. Bart it seemed worse than nothing—the mere mockery of what she was entitled to.”<sup>15</sup> The notion of entitlement is a theme that carries through this and later Wharton novels. Living in an environment of excess, where wealth is a demonstration of somebody’s status (and in some instances marriageability), it is easy to draw comparisons between those who have and those who have less. Lily and her mother are in the latter camp, being firmly middle class but lacking the privilege to avoid work and exclusively enjoy leisure time; Selden also belongs to this class.

Lily’s mother would not live to see her get married. Of course, Lily would not live to see herself get married. This was not necessarily because of her station, but because she simply lacked the opportunities to meet people that she would have had if her family had retained its

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<sup>15</sup> Wharton, *The House*, [Page 33].

wealth. By the time of her stay at Bellomont, Lily still hoped for a love that might not come: “Younger and plainer girls had been married off by dozens, and she was nine-and-twenty, and still Miss Bart.<sup>16</sup>” The married, yet-to-shun-society Edith Wharton might have smiled as she wrote these words, knowing she was Miss Edith Jones no more. How would she have known that her life would begin after her death in society?

Of course, Edith did not always wish to live independently from the pomp and circumstance that accompanied New York living. For a time, she actively participated in the culture of the society. Being married to Teddy Wharton was a compromise—he had his social events, and she had the Mount, an estate in the Berkshires. The New England home was where she did the bulk of her writing, and escaped from the pressures of New York.

I had grown very weary of our annual wanderings, and now that I had definite work to do I felt the need of a winter home where I could continue my writing, instead of having to pack up every autumn, as we had been doing for over fifteen years. Personally I should have preferred to live all the year round at the Mount, but my husband’s fondness for society, and his dislike of the New England winter cold, made this impossible.<sup>17</sup>

It was during this time, spending winters at the Mount and starting to achieve more than modest success as a writer, that Wharton noticed her correspondence with friends and family had grown strained. Her life’s passion was of little interest to them. On this she mused, “At first I had felt this indifference acutely; but now I no longer cared, for my recognition as a writer had

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<sup>16</sup> Wharton, *The House*, [Page 38].

<sup>17</sup> Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York, NY: Curtis Publishing Company, 1934), [Page 143].

transformed my life.”<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Wharton’s rising intellectual status and prolific writing career that was beginning to take off made it harder to connect with those previously close to her; yet her love for writing eclipsed any concerns about this. She was sometimes lonely, but she was always writing.

Edith Wharton survived her rejection from society by rejecting it herself. In her younger years, with the naïveté of Lily Bart, and no promise ahead of her except the possibility of a husband and a home, she went along with the life laid out before her by her parents. Once she had wed Teddy, however, she was free to write. And write she did. Unfortunately, the fictional but no less pitiable Lily did not have such an outlet for her creativity. Hobbies and interests came secondary to the ultimate objective of marrying and joining society, starting a family in a grand estate, and continuing the cycle for generations to follow.

After living into her middle age in Old New York society, Edith Wharton was jaded, and this attitude characterizes both her early and later works. Unfortunately, she had already gained a reputation as a sentimental writer, and though *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*, written on different sides in the timeline of her marriage, are both rife with satire, abnegating nostalgia and glamour in favor of her sincere take on the pitfalls of privilege, the label stuck. Wharton’s body of work was painted with broad critical strokes, and continues to be. There is some truth in her sentimental streak, however. Sentimentality and cynicism can coexist, and in her writing Wharton wields the two side by side, just as she split her time between New York and the Mount.

The notion of sentimentality is consistently touched on by critics of Wharton. More often than not, “sentimental” is used as a dirty word. Yet, as Hildegard Hoeller argues, “To appreciate

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<sup>18</sup> Wharton, *A Backward*, [Page 143].

the complexity of much of Edith Wharton's writing, one must explore and discover the role that sentimental writing plays in it."<sup>19</sup> Hoeller's analytical work, *Edith Wharton's Dialogue with Realism and Sentimental Fiction*, proposes that critics have misinterpreted the development of Wharton's fiction. These critics have found a sort of rawness in Wharton's earlier works, latching on to the realism of *The House of Mirth*. The comparative whimsy of her writing after the 1920s—read, after *The Age of Innocence*—has been dismissed as “low art, as vulgar, and as belonging to an inferior female genre of writing.”<sup>20</sup> Wharton could never belong to any imagined “female genre,” especially as her later works, including *The Age of Innocence*, took on male protagonists while still discussing the pitfalls of being a woman in a man's world. She considered the limitations faced by women and the maneuvers they had to undergo in order to triumph, as well as the angst and embarrassment felt by emasculated men, discussing gender distinctions as just part of the human condition she explored.

*The Age of Innocence* is indeed the turning point for Wharton's career. The culmination of a career spent satirizing the society that she felt rejected by, this is a novel written about that society after it had officially shown her the door. Seven years divorced and enjoying her fifties a world away from New York, Wharton removes her evening gloves for *Age of Innocence*, a mean, biting satire. And yet what is most striking about this novel is that Wharton does not cast any small part of herself in Newland Archer, the novel's protagonist. There are certainly shades of Wharton in the leading ladies and gentleman of her other important works, finding herself in men and women alike—another reason why it is unfair to dismiss her writing as belonging to “the female genre.” Her first novella, *The Touchstone*, marked a young man's passage into adulthood

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<sup>19</sup> Hildegard Hoeller, *Edith Wharton's Dialogue with Realism and Sentimental Fiction* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2000), [Page 1].

<sup>20</sup> Hoeller, *Edith Wharton's*, [Page 20].

alongside her own. Lily Bart was the older girl whose debut failed to procure her a husband. Even Ethan Frome from the novel of the same name was isolated, trapped in a loveless marriage, without intellectual equal.

The critical reception of Edith Wharton can be summarized fairly bluntly: she was, in order, sentimental, a woman, and out of touch with the common American. The first two of these critiques go hand in hand; her sentimentality was linked to her womanhood. Killoran recalls Nathaniel Hawthorne, who once referred to “scribbling women,”<sup>21</sup> a scornful nomenclature that he invented to describe the privileged society women with which he competed for the literary public’s attention. In her leisurely, married, American years, Wharton was quite literally a scribbling woman, spending her mornings and early afternoons in bed writing daily. Of her many loves, including travel, interior design, and eschewing intimacy with her husband, writing was Wharton’s first love. In *The Decoration of Houses*, her first published work, she describes a writing desk as the most important piece of furniture in a room. However, Edith Wharton could write anywhere, and if she could write whole novels from her bed, why should she not write whole novels from Europe? Leaving New York and the States behind never to permanently return alienated Wharton from American critics. They had already dismissed her as out of touch due to her privileged upbringing, her “misfortune of fortune,”<sup>22</sup> and her abandoning her country to live in World War I and post-World War I Europe created a further disconnect between Wharton and America. Critics in the decades immediately following her death “mostly speculated, repeating much of what had been previously written about: her apparent lack of knowledge about her native country and her failure to ‘discover’ it. She had lived abroad too

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<sup>21</sup> Helen Killoran, *The Critical Reception of Edith Wharton* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2001), [Page 3].

<sup>22</sup> Killoran, *The Critical*, [Page 3].

long to know America, critics said, explaining her ‘inferior’ late work.<sup>23</sup>” This critique leveled against Wharton is another facet of her public identity, if not her private, personal one, that isolates her further from the common reader. The rejection of America during wartime further alienated her from critics, though her status as a writer who could not ever be trusted to speak for the common reader was seemingly determined at birth.

Edith Wharton’s old money, Old New York roots, and subsequent rejection of American society, prevented her from being a writer who, at least in the eyes of her critics, could accurately write about the American condition. However, she never really attempted to do so. It is possible that the reason for this perception is that *Ethan Frome* had re-entered the critical sphere by this point. Although the novella did not feature debutantes or marriage plots, its titular protagonist was miserable for his elitism. *Ethan Frome* is the story of a man stuck in a loveless marriage in a loveless town. In short, it is a story about the pains of living in the country. The fictional Starkfield, Massachusetts, is a landscape void of culture and opportunity. Starkfield is the side of America to which Wharton, who had spent time in such places but would never choose to live there, much less through a harsh winter, felt superior. This elitism without irony makes *Ethan Frome* an anomaly in Wharton’s body of work, which is, for better or worse, characterized by sentimentality.

*The Age of Innocence*, a novel about choosing between passion and a secure and traditional courtship, features as its protagonist Newland Archer, a young man who makes very few of his own decisions, his most significant decision being an almost-affair with the Countess Ellen Olenska, who has left her husband and is free to pursue her own interests. She is the

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<sup>23</sup> Killoran, *The Critical*, [Page 6].

subject of whispered gossip, (“There are rumours”... “I hear she means to get a divorce”<sup>24</sup>) and yet she is free. “Well, why not?” says Newland Archer on the subject of the Countess’ divorce. “Women ought to be free—as free as we are.”<sup>25</sup> Yet despite this declaration, Archer enjoys his traditional life, and eventual traditional marriage, and never faces the consequences of his extramarital desires. Hoeller writes, “Sentimental characters do not get second chances and do not remarry or fall in love again.”<sup>26</sup> To call *Age of Innocence* sentimental would be reductive, because by 1920, hardened by a divorce, an affair, and with few dear friends to offer her affection and intimacy, Edith Wharton had stopped longing to be Newland Archer. She embraced her status as Ellen Olenska. Although Newland is the protagonist of the novel, he is not free like Olenska. He does not recognize the irony of declaring that women should be free when in Old New York, nobody is, and the pressures put upon divorced women are beyond anything he, a privileged man who benefits from the comparatively light pressures that keep him from freedom, could fathom. Wharton, a divorcee, understands Olenska, but knows better than to give her a second chance at love—Olenska represents the price a person, usually a woman, pays in society for her freedom, which is a price Wharton knew all too well.

To understand Edith Wharton’s attitude towards relationships, one must first understand the only two significant romantic relationships that she had in her adult life. The first was, of course, Teddy Wharton. To say theirs was a loveless marriage like Ethan Frome’s would be largely true but perhaps an oversimplification. The two were affectionate. They vacationed together. She humored his social climbing, and he seemed to love her not in spite of but because

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<sup>24</sup> Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* (New York, NY: Barnes & Noble Books, 2004), [Page 36].

<sup>25</sup> Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, [Page 36].

<sup>26</sup> Hoeller, *Edith Wharton's*, [Page 27].

of the very bookishness that her parents thought would preclude her from finding a husband. In fact, when the Whartons parted ways, Teddy was the one left heartbroken. Edith did not have room in her heart to mourn the dissolution of her marriage. She was still reeling from the loss of the only man she had ever truly loved, her partner in affair, intellectualism, and the one man who had proven to be a true match for her: Morton Fullerton. In a letter to her dear friend Henry James, she wrote: “I don’t know what’s happened to Morton. He’s broken my heart with his inability, or perhaps I should say ‘refusal,’ to answer any of my posts. What could be hampering him? Do you know if he is ill? Or has he found someone else to love?”<sup>27</sup>

Morton Fullerton, the rugged, bisexual, playboy journalist, played fast and loose with Wharton’s affection. In *The Sexual Education of Edith Wharton*, Gloria C. Erlich posits the question, “Why did this moralistic woman yield so readily to an adulterous liaison, and why with a man whose sexual history and personal style pointed so clearly toward her ultimate humiliation?”<sup>28</sup> It is hard to fault Wharton for her affair when examining her passionless relationship with Teddy. Nor should it be surprising that she would fall for a man who represented everything that she could not have as a member of Old New York society. Perhaps her time as a young woman in Europe had left a longing for the world beyond the States, and Fullerton’s occupation as a foreign correspondent for the London-based paper *The Times* offered her a connection to that world. While many critics and biographers have focused on Wharton’s sexuality, particularly in regards to this affair—which sparked her to write that “I have drunk of the wine of life at last, I have known the thing best worth knowing, I have been warmed through

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<sup>27</sup> Lynn Neary, "Age of Desire': How Wharton Lost Her 'Innocence,'" NPR, last modified August 10, 2012, accessed February 24, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2012/08/10/158237287/age-of-desire-how-wharton-lost-her-innocence>.

<sup>28</sup> Gloria C. Erlich, *The Sexual Education of Edith Wharton* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), [Page 88].



and through, never to grow quite cold again till the end.”<sup>29</sup>—there is more to be found in Wharton’s repression of her own sexuality. This is due in part to her mother, who she blamed for never teaching her about sex: “Although Edith Wharton was endowed by nature with good health and an appetite for sensuous experience, she suffered in youth a repression of her sexuality so massive that she claims to have known virtually nothing of the ‘process of generation till [she] had been married for several weeks.’”<sup>30</sup> Wharton’s limited sexual experience did not impede her from writing about other aspects of romantic relationships. Sexuality in her novels is tethered to desire, and it plays out in more subtle ways, with characters such as Ellen Olenska defined by their sexuality, even if it is only alluded to.

Wharton’s secret status as an adulteress was not exposed until later on. She did not live under the pressures that plagued Ellen Olenska, although her divorce placed her on equal footing with the scorned, promiscuous (for the time and standards of society) Olenska. What examining Wharton’s sexuality overlooks is the absolute lack of overt sexuality in her fiction—save for one pornographic work.<sup>31</sup> In *The House of Mirth*, it is scandalous to be seen with a man to whom one is not engaged. In *The Age of Innocence*, gloves must be worn or a handshake crosses the line from courteous to friendly.

Wharton sprinkles her own experiences into many of her characters, tracking her development from the clueless Newland Archer to his eventual bride, May Welland, who eventually gets a clue. Newland may have traces of Morton Fullerton in him, although he also

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<sup>29</sup> Erlich, *The Sexual*, [Page 75].

<sup>30</sup> Erlich, *The Sexual*, [Page 16].

<sup>31</sup> Kristin O. Lauer, "Is This Indeed 'Attractive'? Another Look at the 'Beatrice Palmato' Fragment," in *Edith Wharton Review* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1994), 11, no. 1:[Page 26].

has traces of Wharton herself. She was a willing affair partner, but her affair partner had little loyalty himself. Newland pines over Ellen Olenska similarly to how Wharton pined over the loss of Fullerton. In a letter from the mount, Wharton wrote to her beloved: “I have spent three weeks of horrible sadness, because I feared from your silence that within ten days of our goodbye the very meaning of me had become a weariness. And I suffered—no matter how much; but I said to myself: ‘I chose the risk, I accept the consequences.’ And that is what I shall always say.”<sup>32</sup> This letter, written from the Mount on July 1, 1908, is one of several desperate letters that Wharton wrote. In the throes of a love affair that could never last, she poured her heart out to Fullerton. In late August of that year, she wrote to him again: “Dear, won’t you tell me soon the meaning of this silence? At first I thought it might mean that your sentimental mood had cooled, & that you feared to let me see the change; & I wrote, nearly a month ago, to tell you how natural I should think such a change on your part, & how I hoped that our friendship—so dear to me!—might survive it.”<sup>33</sup> But their friendship did not survive, and with the cooling of Fullerton’s sentimental mood came the cooling of Wharton’s. She finally experienced the dreadful, traumatic sensation of heartbreak, and the passion that she had consummated with Fullerton was replaced with the mature and worldly knowledge that an affair is fleeting. Her critics may not have noticed because Wharton was suffering in silence following the end of her relationship with Fullerton, the end of her relationship with Teddy, and the end of her relationship with the New York society that had groomed her to be somebody she no longer was, but Wharton now knew and understood the way of the world, and put these discoveries into her writing.

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<sup>32</sup> R.W.B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis, eds., *The Letters of Edith Wharton* (New York, NY: Scribners, 1988), [Page 156].

<sup>33</sup> Lewis and Lewis, *The Letters*, [Page 160].

Viewing the final chapter of *Age of Innocence* through this lens, there is a certain catharsis to the revelation that May Welland is not oblivious to her husband straying, and she is strong enough to stake her claim on his life and the life they have built, preventing their marriage from becoming a casualty of misdirected passion. When May becomes privy to Newland and Ellen's affair, in the novel's climactic moment of triumph, she confronts him, revealing that she is pregnant. She gives him the news after informing "Only Mamma and your mother... That is—and Ellen."<sup>34</sup> The novel ends, before an afterword bringing Old New York into the then-present, with May's "blue eyes wet with victory."<sup>35</sup> Here, Wharton brings closure to Newland's affair with Ellen, and her own affair with Fullerton, using her signature style: leaving the truth unsaid, because it is understood, by both parties, and nothing more must be expressed. The repression of her sexuality is the one trait that Wharton shares with every one of her characters; beyond not acting on sexual desires, the characters in her novels either feel uncomfortable discussing them, or refrain from doing so in order to satisfy societal expectations.

Returning to *The House of Mirth*, in Lily Bart's inner monologue, Wharton alludes to the struggle that she herself faced as a young woman seeking marriage. Lily is unsure whether or not she is in love with Selden when they meet again at Bellomont. She wonders whether or not she can love another person, and what that really would mean. Her understanding of love is her affection for dreams, and the promises that they might bring. A husband would fit into this model, but could a husband really promise her the happiness that she hoped for?

She had several times been in love with fortunes or careers, but only once with a man.

That was years ago, when she first came out, and had been smitten with a romantic

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<sup>34</sup> Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, [Page 278].

<sup>35</sup> Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, [Page 278].

passion for a young gentleman named Herbert Melson, who had blue eyes and a little wave in his hair... Everything about [Selden] accorded with the fastidious element in her taste, even to the light irony with which he surveyed what seemed to her most sacred. She admired him most of all, perhaps, for being able to convey as distinct a sense of superiority as the richest man she had ever met.<sup>36</sup>

Lily is conflicted here—she does not know if the love of a man can sustain her, and if she could be in love with Selden, despite her deep admiration for him. It is in this internal conflict that the cracks begin to form in the path that has been set out before Lily and every woman of marriageable age who will follow her: the expectation of love is not enough, nor is the promise of marriage, or the comfortable life that will follow. This is all that Lily has to look forward to, and even that may be unattainable. At this time in her life, as her window to get married slowly creaks closed, Lily, just as Wharton once was forced to, must find a husband, and maybe then find some semblance of happiness, even if marriage alone cannot bring her that happiness, much less a sense of purpose or something to truly fall in love with.

*The House of Mirth* represents a pivotal period in Wharton's early career. It is only her second novel, and her first novel set in New York—or America, for that matter (*The Valley of Decision* [1902] takes place in Italy). The story of a young girl with exceptional promise mirrors Wharton's family's high expectations for her own future. While Wharton found love with the bland but kind Teddy, Lily Bart's hopes for romance are dashed, and the novel ends with her melodramatic death, a symbol of the metaphorical societal death that awaits women who fail to find a mate in the world of New York. Outside of its own merits as a cautionary tale and a somber yet sardonic take on the novel of manners and the marriage plot, *The House of Mirth* is significant because it serves as a precursor to Wharton's most famous and critically acclaimed

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<sup>36</sup> Wharton, *The House*, [Page 64-65].

(and maligned) novel, *The Age of Innocence*. I will be discussing *The Age of Innocence* at length in the third chapter of this project, but for now it is important to consider Wharton's earlier New York novels as predecessors to that one, as it is the culmination of both her career and her satire of New York society. The next novel in Wharton's society canon is *The Custom of the Country*. This novel also follows the game of courtship in upper crust New York, but stars a ruthless protagonist who understands she is playing a man's game, and will play to win at any cost. *The House of Mirth* was Wharton's first foray into the field of New York satire, and the tragic demise of Lily Bart presents only one of several possible outcomes for women attempting to make lives for themselves in New York. The protagonist of *The Custom of the Country* fares better, if only because she knows what is at stake and has the advantage of an outsider's perspective.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Undine Goes East, Ethan Coasts: New York as Viewed by an Outsider, and a New York Insider's Depiction of Rural Poverty*

1913 was a busy year for Edith Wharton. In the space of several months, she divorced Teddy and published *The Custom of the Country*, a novel that bridged the gap between her time in New York and her future spent exclusively in Europe. The novel's protagonist is a young girl named Undine Spragg who has aspirations of social climbing in New York society. Unlike Newland Archer or even Lily Bart, Undine is introduced to the reader unceremoniously and unglamorously. She is something of an elitist, and more conscious of the materialism and glitz that high society can offer.

Perhaps the distinction between a Spragg and an Archer stems from the fact that Wharton's other characters are born into privilege and are unaware of their privilege and the opportunities that it affords them. Undine Spragg is not lucky enough to have inherited a fortune or a name, but she has ambition. Where Lily Bart is dubious about marrying somebody who will not elevate her station, Spragg is adamant in her desire to marry up, and unapologetically selfish in her tenacity. This is not to say that the Spraggs are hard up for cash: Undine represents a middle tier in the Wharton world of wealth. She and her parents have some money of their own, with her father's work as a financier airily waved away. Yet they are not old money, and as high as anybody can climb in society, earning one's way is less respected than being of an established, esteemed family, whose roots go back many generations. Earning one's way in a potentially dishonest and dubious manner is even worse.

“Since the Spraggs, some two years previously, had moved from Apex City to New York,

they had made little progress in establishing relations with their new environment.”<sup>37</sup> Wharton immediately establishes Undine and her parents as outsiders. In fact, the Apex City where Abner Spragg, Undine’s father, made his living, is not a real location. The creation of an alien town, impossible to use as a reference point for readers by virtue of its lack of existence, effectively erases the Spraggs’ past. Wharton does not give it any significance in the story, so the reader does not ask for answers, and is forced to accept that the story begins when the Spraggs arrive in New York City. For Undine Spragg, that arrival is the start of her story. An ambitious, cutthroat, and single-minded young woman, Undine sees the upper echelons of high society as her destiny. She is unconcerned by her last name, because that will be shed as soon as she finds a husband. Unlike Lily Bart, or even Wharton herself, both for whom marriage was a last resort, for Undine it is the last hurdle that will elevate her towards the life she desires.

In an essay drawing a thin comparison between *The Custom of the Country* and Donald Trump’s 1987 memoir *The Art of the Deal*, Elaine Showalter paints a contrast between the two Wharton protagonists: “The opposite of Lily Bart, with her exquisite taste and refined moral sense, too scrupulous finally to survive in the crass social jungle, Undine has no ladylike instincts at all... In killing Lily Bart, Wharton had killed off both the perfect lady and the ‘lady novelist’... in herself.”<sup>38</sup> Showalter is arguing that Undine represents a different approach to women conquering high society. They must be as merciless as the men they pursue. The men in Whartonian society have the luxury of masking their own mercilessness with decorum, and young women are expected to demonstrate restraint, while never learning how to work within the

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<sup>37</sup> Edith Wharton, *The Custom of the Country* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), [Page 10].

<sup>38</sup> Elaine Showalter, "Spragg: The Art of the Deal," in *The Cambridge Companion to Edith Wharton*, ed. Millicent Bell (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), [Page 96].

confines of the system. The system does not favor them, and does no favors for them. In a way, then, Undine's status as an outsider creates the perfect opportunity for Wharton to satirize the courtship ritual. A young woman born into New York society would never be taught how to be shrewd and cunning. With her equally enterprising parents, Undine is never instructed to tame her shrewdness either. She is able to etch a place for herself in a world that is already too full to accept young women like Lily Bart who are there in earnest, hoping for a husband and an ordinary life.

The Spraggs, particularly Undine, are exceptional for reasons beyond their enigmatic family history. They openly display snobbery towards those with less: "What if white paper were really newer than pigeon's blood? It might be more stylish, anyhow. Well, she didn't care if Mrs. Fairford didn't like red paper—she [Undine]—did! And she wasn't going to truckle to any woman who lived in a small house down beyond Park Avenue."<sup>39</sup> Undine's obsession with the fashionable and unfashionable is only rivaled by her elitism. She might accept the preferences of somebody who has more than her, as their knowledge of what is in vogue is supported by their wealth. Undine makes the mistake of thinking that the higher she climbs up the social ladder, the more her opinion will matter. Ironically, as she was not born into society, her opinion does not matter to anybody but her, but she is both her harshest critic and staunchest supporter. The world of New York is viewed in *The Custom of the Country* through the eyes of Undine, as the world of Undine, and perhaps this makes it Wharton's most personal portrayal of high society yet. Though Wharton was a New York insider, her feelings of isolation and alienation allowed her to view her society through a different lens. Undine views society through this same lens, with the difference being her desperate desire to be a part of it.

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<sup>39</sup> Wharton, *The Custom*, [Page 15].



Beyond the contrast between Undine's New York and the glamorous, respectable society inhabited by the Newlands and Lilys of Wharton's works, Undine represents an unflinching honesty that reveals as much about Wharton's true feelings about society as it does about her feelings towards herself. While Lily served as an analog for Wharton's fears about being rejected by her world, Undine is an aspirational figure for anybody who does not have the old money birthright. This is not because she is able to fit into society despite it all, but because she is able to game the system and make society work for her. Undine's first love interest in the novel, Ralph Marvell, is more Teddy Wharton than he is even Lawrence Selden: a safe choice, if a boring one. The Marvells are a family of modest wealth, but who are fairly well known about town: Undine asks Mrs. Heeny of them, "do you know the Marvells? Are they stylish?"<sup>40</sup> It is significant that Undine does not ask here if the Marvells are wealthy. She has only just met Ralph and is not seriously considering him as a suitor at this point, but it is still important that she surround herself with people who are influencers. Mrs. Heeny gives a brief rundown of the family, offering Ralph's parentage and his mother's family name, thereby demonstrating that this is how a person's worth is measured in this world. Undine's mother is satisfied with the parentage—Ralph's mother's maiden name is Dagonet, which is apparently a respectable family—but distraught to learn that the family lives in a house with Ralph's grandfather. "Haven't they got the means to have a home of their own?"<sup>41</sup> she declares, but Undine moves on quickly, still curious about Ralph, and demonstrably less shallow than her mother in this moment. Despite Undine's materialistic nature and desire for a glamorous life, she recognizes that in this world, the value of a name carries more weight than being the wealthiest family in the

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<sup>40</sup> Wharton, *The Custom*, [Page 7].

<sup>41</sup> Wharton, *The Custom*, [Page 7].

city. A once-wealthy old money family is still more impressive than a Spragg with money, and so Undine sets out in search of adornments, including a name that signifies her arrival in society.

*The Custom of the Country* introduces a number of unique and unusual names with etymologies more implicit than the usual names in the Wharton canon. While *The House of Mirth* featured Lily as its protagonist, a young woman who is doomed to either be plucked or wither away like her namesake flower, and *The Age of Innocence* featured Newland Archer, a young man growing up at the height of the development of a new land in a new era (his surname a reference to Henry James' Isabel Archer from *The Portrait of a Lady* [1881]), Wharton is cleverer with her use of names in this novel—to some extent. “Undine” is a name given to mythical female figures associated with the water.<sup>42</sup> They may be spirits, or nymphs, or even mermaids, but one central element associated with undines is that they long to be human. They occupy a space where they are not quite otherworldly, but not quite of this world. Such a name is thus fitting for Undine, a young woman from Apex who intends to leave her roots behind and try her luck on dry land. She does not necessarily dream of social-climbing in New York, but social-climbing in general—wherever she is, she wants to be at such a place's apex (another less than subtle naming choice by Wharton). Her mother at one point muses, ““Father was a rich man for Apex, but that's different from being rich in New York.””<sup>43</sup> to which Undine “raised her head with an impatient jerk. ‘Why on earth did we ever leave Apex, then?’ she exclaimed.”<sup>44</sup> While her first name indicates rebirth and transformation, her surname hints at her desire to get there.

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<sup>42</sup> "Definition of Undine by Merriam-Webster," Merriam-Webster, accessed March 3, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/undine>.

<sup>43</sup> Wharton, *The Custom*, [Page 34].

<sup>44</sup> Wharton, *The Custom*, [Page 34].

Spragg is derived from an Old Norse name, meaning “sprightly, vivacious.”<sup>45</sup> Put together, Undine Spragg is a sprightly and vivacious young woman who will do anything to get on top (Apex) as she was formerly underwater.

Wharton plays the Spraggs against the other important family in the early part of the novel, the Marvells. There is, of course, the obvious association of the Marvells with the word marvelous, or with the insinuation that they are something to marvel at, but it is also significant that it is Ralph’s mother’s married name. Her father’s name, Urban Dagonet, screams Old New York. By now a very old man, he would have been given his Christian name while New York was becoming rapidly more urban. He is not only a relic of old money, but also a relic of a pre-industrialized landscape. Such a world might more closely resemble the Spraggs’ native Apex, signifying that the two families come from similar backgrounds, but the Spraggs were only now arriving in New York.

As important as family name is to the Spraggs, whose family name may define their character but does not grant them any privilege, their other concern is real estate. During Undine and her mother’s conversation with Mrs. Heeny, Undine’s mother inquires about where Mrs. Fairford lives, after being impressed by Mrs. Heeny’s description of Mrs. Fairford’s elaborate and urbane dinner parties. Mrs. Spragg’s first guess is that Mrs. Fairford lives on Fifth Avenue, and she is crestfallen to discover that Mrs. Fairford simply has “a little house in Thirty-eighth Street, down beyond Park Avenue.”<sup>46</sup> This location is not necessarily the problem; it is a fine place to live, but it is not Fifth Avenue. The Spragg women have a small obsession with Fifth Avenue specifically: to them it represents New York in all its glory. They have arrived in New

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<sup>45</sup> Surname Database, last modified 2017, accessed February 24, 2018, <http://www.surnamedb.com/Surname/Spragg>.

<sup>46</sup> Wharton, *The Custom*, [Page 9].

York City, but desire to arrive on the street that they dreamed of before they had left Apex for greener pastures. “Undine’s white and gold bedroom, with sea-green panels and old rose carpet, looked along Seventy-second Street toward the leafless tree-tops of the Central Park... Beyond the Park lay Fifth Avenue—and Fifth Avenue was where she wanted to be!”<sup>47</sup> For Undine, New York is a zero sum game, just like romance, and wealth, and everything else. She cannot be sated; despite her perfectly fine address, there is always the possibility of something better. The same goes for the men in her life, who continually cannot offer her what she really wants. “Even in Apex, Undine’s tender imagination had been nurtured on the feats and gestures of Fifth Avenue. She knew all of New York’s golden aristocracy by name, and the lineaments of its most distinguished scions had been made familiar by passionate poring over the daily press.”<sup>48</sup> Undine has only been in New York for a short while, and though her heart has left Apex behind, there is a part of her that still sees herself as an observer and a dreamer rather than an active participant in this world. Even with her social-climbing aspirations, the mere fact that she has such aspirations gives her character a sort of vulnerability. It is easy to forget that Undine is a transplant as well as an outsider, and a tourist in her own city. She can meld New York in her mind to be a place that will work for her, but that is only in her mind; outside, beyond her apartment overlooking the Park, she does not yet exist to the world—he is only a Spragg.

In *Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction*, scholar Blake Nevius posits that “For all its sentimentality, her first published story, ‘Mrs. Mantsey’s View’ (1891), with its sordid tenement setting and its unhappy resolution, provided a truer indication of her bent. If we can take seriously one of Mrs. Wharton’s earliest recollections, she was destined from the beginning to be

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<sup>47</sup> Wharton, *The Custom*, [Page 15].

<sup>48</sup> Wharton, *The Custom*, [Page 22].

a realist.”<sup>49</sup> The recollection recounted here is a young Edith Jones sitting in front of a window in Paris, holding a book that she cannot read, and filling the pages with imagined stories based on the adults in her life, as those are the only people that she had observed as a child. Wharton’s ability to capture realism in her fiction comes from her status as an observer. Although she inserted facets of herself into characters across her body of work, Undine is something of an observer herself. While young Wharton looked out at Paris, Undine looks out upon New York, studying the natives. It is not only because she is a transplant that she has a peculiar way of looking at the city streets and passersby. There is a method to Undine’s observation. She is studying people to understand how she can belong in the way that they do. Every machination of her social climb serves the purpose of belonging.

Yet, Undine is aware that the version of herself that she presents is a façade; her modus operandi of getting what she wants is openly on display in an exchange with her parents where she negotiates the “purchase” of an opera box. Mr. Spragg, with just a slight bit more awareness of the frugality that the family must practice in New York, as despite their windfall of new money, they do not have old money to fall back on, informs Undine that an opera box would be an irresponsible expenditure, especially as it would only be for one night. She responds indignantly, “I only want it once,”<sup>50</sup> to which “He looked at her with a quizzical puckering of his crows-feet. ‘You only want most things once, Undine.’”<sup>51</sup> The issue of the opera box reveals two things about Undine’s character: the first is that she understands that she cannot have everything that she wants, but still rejects that notion, as she is the center of her own world in

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<sup>49</sup> Blake Nevius, *Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1961), [Page 53].

<sup>50</sup> Wharton, *The Custom*, [Page 32].

<sup>51</sup> Wharton, *The Custom*, [Page 32].

and out of New York, and it would be unfair for her to be denied; second, Undine's interests are fleeting. She is content to play debutante for a day, as this will temporarily sate her, though she will be lastingly content.

Where money is an ever-present roadblock preventing Undine from social ascension, it is also useful to provisionally allow the Spraggs to find a sense of belonging. Rather than scrounging and saving, the family will selectively spend what money they have with a modicum of restraint in order to better belong. After the opera box conversation, Mr. Spragg offers retail therapy as a compromise. ““Why don't you take your mother shopping?” Mr. Spragg suggested, conscious of the limitation of his resources.”<sup>52</sup> In the then-contemporary society world where men worked for leisure but may not have been the primary breadwinners, as the family bread had been won generations ago, Mr. Spragg has the unique (for a Wharton novel) experience of supporting his family, which includes indulging the ever-changing whims of Undine. She looks to marry for a provider, as her father's hardly paltry income is still not enough for her. As the novel progresses chronologically, the reader is at this point unaware of Undine's future marriage prospects and marriages, but the question must still be raised: how much will be enough for Undine? If she can toy with temporary gratitude, only to grow bored and seek her next fix, will she ever be truly satisfied? Furthermore, Undine is irritated by the fact that even if some things come easily to her, the onus is on her to advocate for her every whim and want. “She was almost sure she would get her opera box, but she did not see why she would have to struggle for her rights.”<sup>53</sup> To Undine, privilege is not something that one earns or is born into. It is not her birthright because of her name, nor because of the city she hails from. She believes that she

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<sup>52</sup> Wharton, *The Custom*, [Page 33].

<sup>53</sup> Wharton, *The Custom*, [Page 33].

deserves everything that she desires because the world should be fair—at least it should be fair to her. When her mother asks if she has met anybody, suggesting, as Mrs. Spragg is nearly as materialistic as her daughter, that Undine might meet a man who can provide for her, Undine unleashes her anger. “‘Meet anybody? Do you mean anybody I know? I don’t *know* anybody—I never shall, if father can’t afford to let me go round with people!’”<sup>54</sup> This outburst exhibits a flaw in Undine’s social-climbing plan, and the paradoxical problem that precludes her from finding a potential provider. Without money, she cannot mingle with the men who have money. A husband would be more than simply a benefactor—marriage would afford Undine some level of stability, adventure, and perhaps, though it is for her a lower priority, love. Her father is supposed to give her the means to find all of those things in an eventual mate, and she is as bitter with him as she is bitter that she was not dealt a better hand of cards, along with a trust fund.

New York is as foreign to the Spraggs as America might have been to European readers of the time. Referring to a Henry James remark about the obsession to “keep step socially”<sup>55</sup> being a strange and distinctly American phenomenon, Nevius says “It was precisely this drama inherent in American social life that Edith Wharton exploited in *The Custom of the Country*.”<sup>56</sup> Although Wharton would continue writing about American drama, particularly New York drama, after her departure to Europe, it is significant that her last published novel before leaving New York behind is an ode to this drama, and a satirical takedown of those still pitted against each other in the race to “keep up” that Wharton was finally leaving behind. Similarly, as Undine

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<sup>54</sup> Wharton, *The Custom*, [Page 35].

<sup>55</sup> Beverly Haviland, *Henry James' Last Romance: Making Sense of the Past and the American Scene* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), [Page 173].

<sup>56</sup> Nevius, *Edith Wharton*, [Page 85].

wallows in self-pity over the ever-growing chasm between her dreams and the restrictions of her reality, she recalls when she first conceived of the hopes that she feels have been dashed:

She was plunged in one of the moods of bitter retrospection when all her past seemed like a long struggle for something she could not have, from a trip to Europe to an opera-box; and when she felt sure that, as the past had been, so the future would be. And yet, as she had often told her parents, all she sought for was improvement: she honestly wanted the best. Her first struggle—after she had ceased to scream for candy, or sulk for a new toy—had been to get away from Apex in summer.<sup>57</sup>

Before the Spraggs even came into their first bout of fortune, Undine knew that there was a world outside of Apex, and that she wanted to be a part of it. It is not clear from her recollections whether she was dreaming of obtaining “the best” or simply wanting a refuge from Apex, where upward mobility seemed unachievable, but it had always been as clear to her as the crystal ball of which other children, somewhere else, with wealthier families and limitless prospects ate dinner, that Apex was not enough for her. Undine continued to pine for the chance to be somewhere else, while her family slowly accumulated affluence (relative to Apex). “At school Undine met other girls whose parents took them to the Great Lakes for August; some even went to California, others—oh bliss ineffable!—went ‘east.’”<sup>58</sup> Despite the opera box setback, Undine is undeterred. She would have her opera box, and, having at last gone east, she would have New York.

After the subversive and explicitly satirical *House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country* can be seen as a return to Wharton’s sentimental roots—depending on the critic. While Nevius makes the argument that Wharton captures a cynicism emblematic of America at the time, in

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<sup>57</sup> Wharton, *The Custom*, [Page 38].

<sup>58</sup> Wharton, *The Custom*, [Page 39].



which New York might be considered the capitol of social climbing and one-upmanship, essayist Louis Auchincloss disagrees, considering this novel as a return to “the rich, sure ground of New York and the novel of manners,”<sup>59</sup> while acknowledging that “this time the central character in the conflict of social groups is not a victim but an invader. Undine Spragg is a creature of alloy, as sentimental in her judgments of herself as she is ruthless in her judgments of others.”<sup>60</sup> There is indeed an argument to be made that Undine embodies the sentimental in her fascination and near fetishization of New York society, but in truth the only thing that Undine holds sacred is herself. Auchincloss is correct that Undine is sentimental, but the novel’s embrace of a toxic character who admires New York society is satirical, suggesting that somebody like Undine, who admires the high stakes game of high society, fits in perfectly well with the city painted as a wicked world by Wharton. While Wharton may be criticized for viewing the society that she shunned and that shunned her back in her later novel *The Age of Innocence*, casting Undine as an outsider, or, as Auchincloss says, an “invader,” distances this Wharton protagonist from sentimentality. She is starting fresh in a new city, ironically the city that, at the time of writing, Wharton is already preparing to leave behind forever. Undine’s persistence in the face of constant rejection (“Now she had gained her point and tried New York, and so far it seemed, with no better success.”)<sup>61</sup> is written as admirable. She is a woman resolute in her ambitions, and she will play the game for as long as it takes to win. Yet Auchincloss believes that “The flaw in the novel that keeps it from ranking equally with its predecessor is that Mrs. Wharton hates

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<sup>59</sup> Louis Auchincloss, *Edith Wharton* (St. Paul, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1961), [Page 24].

<sup>60</sup> Auchincloss, *Edith Wharton*, [Page 24].

<sup>61</sup> Wharton, *The Custom*, [Page 42].

Undine too much. She sees in her incarnate the devil of the modern world... whose origin seems to lie vaguely in the American Middle West.”<sup>62</sup> Auchincloss is casting Undine here as a predator in sheep’s clothing, masquerading on Fifth Avenue and infecting New York with her otherworldly, outsider status. This is a misreading of Undine’s character. She is as New York as any New Yorker, because she does not feel at home there, just like Edith Wharton. And if Edith Wharton herself is not the ultimate New Yorker, nobody is. Auchincloss cements this reading with her assertion that “In *The House of Mirth* our compassion goes out to Lily; in *The Custom of the Country* it goes out to the society which Undine is trying to crash.”<sup>63</sup> Such a statement, almost akin to nationalism, but on a smaller, intimate scale, fails to realize that the world that Wharton is writing about is inherently flawed, and no less wicked than those who enter it and seek to exploit it. Lily Bart is a victim of the society machine. Undine’s determination to not be a victim places her firmly in the right; in *The Custom of the Country*, New York is the villain, and Wharton’s utter rejection of New York norms in favor of telling the story of a plucky newcomer from the Middle West is a fitting footnote to the end of her own tenure in the society that she could never conquer.

While comparisons can be drawn between Undine and other Wharton characters such as Lily Bart and Ellen Olenska, Undine’s true counterpart is Ethan Frome from the novel of the same name, published two years earlier in 1911. They both feature in stories where they are the outsider looking in on a world where they do not belong. While Undine seeks to assimilate to New York society, Ethan feels isolated and trapped in Starkfield, Massachusetts, a fictional town perhaps a stone’s throw away from the Berkshires (and Wharton’s country home, the Mount.) A

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<sup>62</sup> Auchincloss, *Edith Wharton*, [Page 24].

<sup>63</sup> Auchincloss, *Edith Wharton*, [Page 24].

stage coach sums up Ethan's status as a broken man succinctly: "Guess he's been in Starkfield too many winters. Most of the smart ones get away."<sup>64</sup> Ethan is not only battered down emotionally by his extended stay in a town he believes to be beneath him, but physically disabled due to a "smash-up"<sup>65</sup> that left him limping and prematurely aged. He is also othered by his short stature. The narrator remarks that Starkfield natives are generally tall, and Ethan is of a "stockier foreign breed."<sup>66</sup>

Disability plays a significant role in *Ethan Frome*; while Ethan is, in the prologue and epilogue of the novel, crippled in all regards but still trudging along in an almost Sisyphusian manner, struggling against all odds and left a shell of the man he once was, but fighting to maintain the life he does not even seem to want, his wife Zeena is from the start "what Starkfield called 'sickly.'"<sup>67</sup> Despite Ethan's bitterness for his lot in life, he takes care of her, while secretly resenting the fact that he does not believe himself strong enough to give her the care that she needs. His masculinity is as fragile as his body will one day become, and he can only take pride in the fact that he is still a provider, a caregiver, and a husband, though his love for Zeena wanes every day. The solution to his and Zeena's ailing arrives in the form of her younger and more beautiful cousin Mattie, who will help to take care of Zeena and, in a sense, Ethan. Zeena is aware of Ethan's attraction to her cousin, noting that "since Mattie Silver's coming he had taken to shaving every day."<sup>68</sup> Just as Starkfield is a stark departure from the glamorous New York in the novels that this one is sandwiched in between in the Wharton library, Zeena's immediate

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<sup>64</sup> Edith Wharton, *Ethan Frome* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2005), [Pages 2-3].

<sup>65</sup> Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, [Page 1].

<sup>66</sup> Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, [Page 1].

<sup>67</sup> Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, [Page 18].

<sup>68</sup> Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, [Page 19].

awareness of the budding relationship between Ethan and Mattie is a twist on the traditional Wharton formula for extramarital longing. Power dynamics fall away in a world where Ethan is beholden by duty to his wife. She may be wary of Mattie, but knows that she has Ethan exactly where she wants him, and can keep him.

A favorite pastime of the young people in Starkfield, including Mattie but excluding Ethan, who is well beyond his years of idle fun, is coasting. Wharton, always deliberate with her choice of words, has picked coasting as an activity because it is what all three of these characters are doing in some regard: Ethan is coasting by on his stable job, stable albeit loveless marriage, stable existence in a town where he cannot die; Zeena is coasting by on her husband's sense of obligation; Mattie is the only one who truly coasts, carefree, as her basest desire is to be a youth on a sled on an icy hill. Ethan watches Mattie marvel at the hill: "He longed to stoop his cheek and rub it against her scarf. He would have liked to stand there with her all night in the blackness."<sup>69</sup> Coasting, despite its name, is an activity with potentially perilous consequences. It involves giving up control, and giving in to Starkfield's perpetually frozen ground, in hopes that the sled riders will arrive safely at their destination. Of course, reaching the bottom of the hill, just like Sisyphus, means returning from a temporary respite. The only true escape from Starkfield is death.

The portrayal of marriage and what it means to male and female protagonists is notable in this novel, especially when read alongside Wharton's other works because it shows that even in a society without options or upward mobility, men will often feel trapped in their marriages, while women are able to make the most of what they have. To Lily Bart, the searches for true love and a provider are two separate things. Undine Spragg's cynicism allows for her to game the system

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<sup>69</sup> Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, [Page 23].

so that she can find her true love, which is societal acceptance and extravagant wealth above all else. For golden boy Newland Archer, a wife is just one more thing to grow bored with. He, however, has a loving wife, May Welland, while Ethan's marital purgatory stems from the simple fact that he is his wife's husband and nothing else. Ethan will never be a society playboy, coasting from the cotillion to the opera, unhappily married and malcontent because he has all that he ever wanted but that is not enough. Ethan's dissatisfaction can only be resolved by coasting of a different kind: one final coast, down the icy slope, hopefully to his death. In the climax of the novel, Ethan and Mattie attempt suicide on a sled, realizing that they cannot be together, and he has the realization, perhaps more jarringly, that he is not ready to die. He is not a young man; he does not have his whole life ahead of him. "Her breath in his neck set him shuddering again, and he almost sprang from his seat. But in a flash he remembered the alternative. She was right: this was better than parting. He leaned back and drew her mouth to his..."<sup>70</sup> The consummation (by Whartonian standards) of Ethan and Mattie's relationship is bittersweet, and though innocent, tragic for different reasons than the fizzling of the unrequited emotional affairs usually depicted by Wharton. Just as the author of *Ethan Frome* could never be with Morton Fullerton, even if she was able to physically be with him, Ethan can steal a kiss from the woman he loves, but the moment passes as quickly as the sled travels down the slope.

Rather than dying and passing from Starkfield into a plane of peace, Mattie is crippled in the accident at the bottom of the hill, and Ethan's body is mangled, resolving the mystery of how he became disabled as seen in the prologue. Zeena is victorious in this macabre turn of events: she is able to keep Ethan close, and the cousin who has betrayed her is at her mercy too. It is here that the reader grows skeptical for the second time of Zeena's condition; previously, Ethan

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<sup>70</sup> Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, [Page 92].

believed that Zeena may not be “as ailing as she believed,”<sup>71</sup> and a woman of Starkfield remarks that, when faced with the newly-disabled Ethan and Mattie, Zeena “seemed to be raised right up when the call came to her... before the accident she thought she couldn’t even care for herself.”<sup>72</sup> In a small town, relationships are perhaps a life raft to be held tightly onto, even moreso than in the big city. Zeena does her best to preserve the relationships that she has, with fewer machinations than Undine Spragg or May Welland.

In a chapter entitled “*Ethan Frome* — The Murder of a Masterpiece” Helen Killoran states “No work could be less like *The House of Mirth*... than *Ethan Frome* (1911).”<sup>73</sup> She posits that the criticism of Lionel Trilling, who believed the novel to be “morally inert”<sup>74</sup> prevented *Ethan Frome* from being seriously considered in academia between the years of 1956 and 1977. This, a crucial period encompassing several decades after Wharton’s death, was unkind to the author whose critical reputation has experienced revivals and dismissals throughout the twentieth century. Killoran pinpoints late 1970s readings of the text by Cynthia Griffin Wolff and Elizabeth Ammons as a turning point for the novel in the critical sphere, revitalized by a new feminist appreciation for the novel’s female protagonists: “To them the woes suffered by Mattie, Zenobia, and Ethan’s mother must contain allegories of Wharton’s life and result from a social patriarchy that seeks to repress women.”<sup>75</sup> While Ethan is the protagonist of the novel, and his perennial misery and wavering apathy is both the impetus of the novel’s action and the cause of

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<sup>71</sup> Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, [Page 18].

<sup>72</sup> Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, [Page 98].

<sup>73</sup> Killoran, *The Critical*, [Page 49].

<sup>74</sup> Killoran, *The Critical*, [Page 49].

<sup>75</sup> Killoran, *The Critical*, [Page 49].

much of the meandering narratively and in his own life, the women that he loves, or once loved, soldier on silently through their personal New England winters. Wharton is not withholding of Zeena and Mattie's narratives: their struggles are implied, and it is in this that she captures the essence of a woman in a man's (in this case, Ethan's) world. Zeena lets Ethan provide for her, and in doing so holds more power than he does. Even a man as resigned to his fate as Ethan must take some solace in knowing that he is still a man. Zeena, untethered by the insecurities of failed potential and fragile masculinity, compartmentalizes her day-to-day ennui, more than aware that her husband will take care of her physical needs while being either oblivious to or uninterested in her emotional needs.

Perhaps the most valid twentieth century criticism of *Ethan Frome* came in the form of the ever-reappearing notion that Wharton was out of touch with the masses. Killoran muses that "When the Great Depression of the thirties stimulated intellectual interest in varieties of socialism, it became tempting either to try turning *Ethan Frome* into a social commentary against the viciousness of poverty, or to rail that Wharton knew nothing about what she had written."<sup>76</sup> Killoran presents critics Ralph Phillip Boas and Katherine Burton, both writing on the novel in 1933, as dismissing the significance of the story told in *Ethan Frome* because of Wharton's immense wealth and privilege. This would be a more persuasive argument if it had been a contemporary criticism of the novel, at a time where it would be easy to write Wharton off as a New York socialite who could not comprehend rural poverty, vacationing in the shoes of somebody who embodies the struggle of being destitute in Massachusetts as she loafs around in her enormous Massachusetts estate. However, *Ethan Frome* arrived in publication during a turning point in Wharton's marriage and life—she felt trapped, like Ethan, intellectually

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<sup>76</sup> Killoran, *The Critical*, [Pages 52-53].

incompatible with her partner, and unable to escape. As a woman, she had no more agency to leave her situation than Ethan, a man without means. Killoran also offers the voice of poet John Crowe Ransom, who believed that “ideally Ethan would tell his own story.”<sup>77</sup> The flaw here is that Wharton’s protagonists do not tell their own stories—a narrator, generally omniscient and removed from the action, but in this novel an audience to Ethan’s recounting of his fall from (comparative) grace, provides the narrative. The prologue and epilogue, and the first person narration featured in them, simply offer the reader foreshadowing and resolution. Ethan, “bleak and unapproachable... stiffened and grizzled”<sup>78</sup> does indeed tell his own story, to the narrator. While it is the narrator who imparts this story upon the reader, the nested narrative shows that this is the sort of tale that ordinarily goes untold. Wharton lets the Newland Archers and Lily Barts and Undine Spraggs of New York be followed by the voyeuristic eye of their disembodied narrators, but Ethan communicates his tragedy directly to the only person who is interested in finding out just what happened to unaccomplished man in a depressed New England town. The very existence of the narrator may undermine the novel *Ethan Frome* in the eyes of critics, but for the character of Ethan Frome it validates the human experience undergone by himself and those closest to him. The setting of Starkfield falls away as Wharton captures the broadly accessible and universal tragedy of a squandered life and a protagonist that is broken in every sense of the word.

In crafting two of her most compelling characters and dropping them into what is for them uncharted territory, Edith Wharton closes the longest chapter of her life with a flourish, portraying two sides of outsiderdom: the desperation to belong, and the desperation to escape.

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<sup>77</sup> Killoran, *The Critical*, [Page 53].

<sup>78</sup> Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, [Page 1].



Though *The Custom of the Country* is set largely in New York, it is New York through the eyes of Undine Spragg, and a break from her tradition of casting her protagonists as people who belong. That this novel follows *Ethan Frome* is an indication of Wharton embracing the misfits that she writes about, as something of a misfit herself. Ultimately, none of Wharton's characters truly belong, from the protagonists to the socialite sycophants they seek to impress. There is nothing sentimental about the society Undine attempts to break into, nor does Wharton romanticize Ethan's larger-than-Starkfield ego. In these two novels, she shows that a girl from a nowhere town can prove that New York is no better than her, and that Ethan is no better than his small town purgatory. When Edith left Teddy, New York no longer felt like home. Her home became Europe, and the worlds within her words, on the pages of her next two major novels, *A Son at the Front* and *The Age of Innocence*, where she would leave one protagonist trapped forever, and another trapped in Old New York, allowing Wharton to conquer the city once and for all from across the Atlantic.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### *The First World War and the End of the Age of Innocence: Glancing Backward in the Face of Global Turmoil*

Time and place are most significant in Edith Wharton's next two major novels. *The Age of Innocence* is a return to Old New York, while *A Son at the Front* opens poignantly on a specific date in Paris, ominously indicating the shape of things to come: "John Campton, the American portrait-painter, stood in his bare studio in Montmartre at the end of a summer afternoon contemplating a battered calendar that hung against the wall. The calendar marked July 30, 1914. Campton looked at this date with a gaze of unmixed satisfaction."<sup>79</sup>

*A Son at the Front* was first published in 1923, two years after Edith Wharton became the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for Literature for *The Age of Innocence*, nine years after the First World War, and ten years after her divorce. These events, coupled with the death of her closest friend Henry James, to whom she dedicates an entire chapter in *A Backward Glance*, led Wharton to take on a darker and more modern subject than she had attempted previously: the war novel. Much as modern readers will recall where they were when they first learned a tragedy had taken place, Wharton recalls a party at her friend Jacques Blanche's home in France, where the news first reached her that the Archduke Ferdinand was dead: a tragedy in itself, but a tragedy that would mark the beginning of the First World War. The implications of the event were not lost on Wharton and her friends, but she remembers how "to most of us the Archduke Ferdinand was no more than a name; only one or two elderly diplomatists shook their heads and murmured of Austrian reprisals. What if Germany should seize the opportunity—? There would be more particulars in next morning's papers. The talk wandered away to the interests of the hour... the

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<sup>79</sup> Edith Wharton, *A Son at the Front* (New York, NY: Scribner Press, 1923), [Page 3].

last play, the newest exhibition, the Louvre's most recent acquisitions..."<sup>80</sup> Wharton follows this anecdote with a rejection of a false narrative she would be confronted with in the decade that followed. She scorns the "more recent legend that France and England actually wanted war,"<sup>81</sup> painting herself and other 1914 residents of France as horrified by the possibility of war. Wharton never calls herself a Frenchwoman, and is aware of her foreign status, highlighted by the fact that for the first time in her life, she has no money of her own. "When I reached Paris I had about two hundred francs in my pocket,"<sup>82</sup> she says, and ironically it is only with financial help from a bank transfer in New York that she is able to stay in the country. The story of an American in France is told in both Wharton's recollections of her life in Paris and in *A Son at the Front*, where national identity is only a concern due to Campton's son being born in France. Campton is the protagonist, and though his son appears in the novel's title, the action of the novel follows Campton's efforts to save his son.

This novel's distaste for war, a sentiment shared by its author, is born not out of a rejection of duty to own's country, but pacifism. Campton's son George is as American as he is French; the men are simply living in Paris, but their nationality is American. When the war breaks out, George is obligated to participate, even as this breaks his father's heart: "Campton himself did not 'believe in the war' (as the current phrase went),"<sup>83</sup> but he must accept that the war is happening, and he has less claim to his own son than the French Army. He is initially in denial about the fact that his son might have to go off and fight; he does not believe that George will be

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<sup>80</sup> Wharton, *A Backward*, [Pages 336-337].

<sup>81</sup> Wharton, *A Backward*, [Page 338].

<sup>82</sup> Wharton, *A Backward*, [Page 339].

<sup>83</sup> Wharton, *A Son at the Front*, [Page 5].

called due to his poor medical record and scrappy build. If not for Paris, however, George's "wonderful recovery"<sup>84</sup> from his many ailments may not have taken place. The trade-off is that George had been born in France, and was, for all intents and purposes, now the property of a nation to which Campton, an expat, believes George owes nothing. He begins to express in a conversation about his son that "After all, we're Americans; this is not our job—" <sup>85</sup> but it is a moot point. Campton struggles with his nationality, and has felt the foreignness of Paris for all twenty years of his son's life. He is now forced to ask himself, as somebody who has made France his home, if he is still a foreigner, or just an American abroad: "And what was the criterion of citizenship, if he, who owed to France everything that had made life worthwhile, could regard himself as owing her nothing, now that for the first time he might have something to give her?" <sup>86</sup> He feels enormous regret for the trade that he unknowingly made having George in France: in a Faustian twist, Campton has potentially bartered for the chance that he and George might have a prosperous life on the condition, unbeknownst by either of them before now, that the only birthright Campton has achieved for his son is sending him to the front.

In her essay "'Behind the Lines' in Edith Wharton's *A Son at the Front*: Rewriting a Masculinist Tradition," Judith L. Sensibar posits that Campton's true struggle in the novel is to reclaim his son from both the war and his son's own agency. A portrait artist, Campton is able to capture the image of his subjects at a moment in time, frozen forever. He has one such portrait of George, painted when George was a young man, and a sickly one at that. The strong and army-ready George who returns to Paris from a brief stay in America at the start of the novel is

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<sup>84</sup> Wharton, *A Son at the Front*, [Page 18].

<sup>85</sup> Wharton, *A Son at the Front*, [Page 18].

<sup>86</sup> Wharton, *A Son at the Front*, [Page 19].

threatening to Campton, not because George has grown into a man, but because Campton, a single father surrounded by paintings of moments past, can no longer keep him. Sensibar goes on to discuss what is perhaps most noteworthy about *A Son at the Front* as a war novel: “For the most part, war here is viewed from behind the lines, where money coupled with mature age and masculinity are crucial to dominance and where financially successful artists use their pedestrian talents to curry the favor of the powerful and manoeuvre to destroy people they despise. In wartime Paris, fashions in art are as changeable as *haute couture*.”<sup>87</sup> This analysis favors George and his desire to become his own man, while depicting Campton as desperate and insecure, capable of capturing a representation of others in his portraits while never advocating for himself as a subject separate from his portrait subjects (including his son). Wharton, who assisted in aiding soldiers but never fought in the war herself, or saw the frontlines that the title references, experienced the war through the eyes of an artist in Paris at the time. While she never exploited the war and the changing tastes and sensibilities for material gain, what she witnessed in France resonated with her, and years later, when the world began to crash down around her, she returned to the story of Paris, 1914, a time of turmoil felt across the world, not just by her.

Following the death of Henry James in 1916, Wharton began to envision the novel that would capture the pain she had experienced in the past years: “My spirit was heavy with these losses, but I could not sit still and brood over them. I wanted to put them into words, and in doing so I saw the years of the war, as I had lived them in Paris, with a new intensity of vision, in all their fantastic heights and depths of self-devotion and ardour, of pessimism, triviality, and

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<sup>87</sup> Judith L. Sensibar, "'Behind the Lines' in Edith Wharton's 'A Son at the Front': Rewriting a Masculinist Tradition," in *Journal of American Studies* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 24, no. 2:[Page 190].

selfishness.”<sup>88</sup> In order to write an antiwar novel, which would, unlike everything that she had written prior, directly discuss the feelings of losing control, losing loved ones, losing one’s identity, and getting lost in an unwinnable war (World or personal), Wharton had to experience all of these feelings first, and then sit with them until she was ready to write. “Though I began planning and brooding over *A Son at the Front* in 1917 it was not finished until four years later. Meanwhile I found a momentary escape in going back to my childish memories of a long-vanquished America, and wrote *The Age of Innocence*.”<sup>89</sup> Just as *A Son at the Front* was conceived with a heavy heart and a desire to portray the First World War that Wharton witnessed helplessly firsthand, rather than the sentimentalized portrayal that she was attempting to dispel, *The Age of Innocence* was a return to the New York that she grew up in awe of. Perhaps Wharton was sentimental in her choice to revisit this time in her life and the life of the city she had left behind, but there is an irony to *The Age of Innocence*: Old New York was never innocent. It was ripe for satire, and Wharton, herself an ex-New Yorker expat, was exactly the right person to satirize the city and its society.

Returning to the setting of New York in the intervening time between writing *The Custom of the Country* and *A Son at the Front* is an exercise in escapism, which Edith Wharton was no stranger to practicing in her writing and in her life. Escapism through writing should not be conflated with sentimentality, because though Wharton used the nostalgic simplicity of telling a story set in a world that she grew up in and at one time felt comfortable in—or at least more comfortable than she felt in her isolation in France, without Henry James and without a nation—she set her rose-colored glasses askew on the bridge of her nose and wrote her most famous and

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<sup>88</sup> Wharton, *A Backward*, [Page 368].

<sup>89</sup> Wharton, *A Backward*, [Page 369].

ironic novel. The question of war and peace is a binary, and her Old New York homecoming is a revisitation of the nuance in the war between men and women, and, to acknowledge one of her literary forebears, sense and sensibility. The First World War and the events surrounding it mark the culmination of her autobiography, and in the years immediately after the war she had to look backwards before she could write about the war. As Nevius explains, “Although Edith Wharton was in her seventies when she wrote *A Backward Glance*, it was not through weariness but design that her chronicle came to an end, except for a perfunctory postscript, with the Armistice of 1918. The world she knew best, the world that had formed and sustained her, did not survive that event.”<sup>90</sup> It is noteworthy that, despite nearly two decades of life following the war, Wharton did not feel that she had lived any further experiences worth committing to the pages of her autobiography between 1918 and its publication in 1934. Likewise, having never returned to New York following her departure in 1913, Wharton chose to revisit the New York that she knew as a young girl rather than the city that, rapidly developing, would be unrecognizable to her.

*The Age of Innocence* is set in 1870s New York, capturing Wharton’s formative years through three characters that represent different facets of the woman that she was and would become: there is Newland Archer, a man who has learned to accept and even crave structure in an already structured life; there is May Welland, the archetypical society wife; there is Ellen Olenska, the liberated woman who has the potential to break the structure built around May and Archer. However, the latter two characters are viewed through the eyes of Newland; it is not until the end of the novel that he realizes that there was more to May Welland than the simple wife, and he was never a kept husband but a man who failed to relate to her outside of the

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<sup>90</sup> Nevius, *Edith Wharton*, [Page 174].

structure that he constructed when he married her. Ellen Olenska represents temptation, both in her comparatively sexualized nature and in the fact that she is unattached and uncommitted, but because the novel follows Newland in his observations and revelations, he fails to see her outside of who she could be in the context of his life and his relationships. Immediately, Wharton has subverted the novel of manners by pitting its characters against a more deeply ingrained structure that was constructed not by Newland but by generations of societal expectations. Just as Newland toys with the notion that he, like Olenska, could deviate from the path laid out before him, Wharton deviated from the path that her critics expect from her, even though she had already proved with *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country* that she was capable of sending up New York society. The challenge in writing *The Age of Innocence* was that she had to be able to tell a story that in some ways romanticized a world that was only romantic on the surface—this meant that as she deconstructed the New York structure, the surface level romanticism would be the first to go. In the drama that plays out Olenska lives outside that structure, and Newland's very birthright is the structure built around him, and the only thing he is able to change is his romanticization of a perfect life with May, which he is distracted from by his romanticization of living outside the confines of his marriage and being with a woman who may offer adventure but cannot offer him the structure that he unwittingly cannot live without.

One of the major themes in the novel is the burden of choice, particularly when one choice has seemingly already been made for a character. Newland initially chooses May because he is attracted to qualities in her that he has been conditioned to admire in women. She is the perfect wife, and eventually mother; she is a homemaker and, as Newland incorrectly assumes, naïve enough to allow for him to build a future for himself where she is his accessory more so than partner. Nevius notes that “May Welland personifies all the evasions and compromises of



his clan; she is the ‘safe’ alternative; whereas Ellen has the ‘mysterious faculty of suggesting tragic and moving possibilities outside the daily run of experience.’”<sup>91</sup> The tension in the novel never stems from the chance that Newland might choose Olenska over May and leave his marriage for a passionate affair that is unsustainable. The mere fact that a relationship between Newland and Olenska would be unsustainable is what drives the drama—they will never consummate a fleeting love, because to do so Newland would have to give up everything he holds dear. Just as John Campton made the unknowing sacrifice to raise his son in Paris at the potential cost of his son’s life, Newland is faced with a similar Faustian exchange, although in this instance Newland is aware of the potential consequences of choosing Olenska. He could be with Olenska, but it would mean giving up the very foundation upon which he built the structure of ostensibly ideal living circumstances. Wharton has previously played with the question of whether somebody who does not truly belong to a world should fight to hold onto their stake in the world or establish a new one for themselves, but Newland is not Undine Spragg, nor is he Ethan Frome, or Lily Bart. The ultimate tragedy in *The Age of Innocence* is that Newland Archer is the poster child for Old New York. He is not an outsider, he cannot transcend—he will never escape.

The critical question surrounding *The Age of Innocence* is not whether it is a sentimental piece or a work of satire but exactly what Wharton was feeling when she wrote the novel. Authorial intent is key to analyzing the emotional core of any story, and still reeling from the aftermath of the First World War, it is entirely possible that Wharton could not help but inject sentiment into an otherwise dry and ironic tale. “In *The Age of Innocence* (1920) Mrs. Wharton’s

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<sup>91</sup> Nevius, *Edith Wharton*, [Page 185].

recoil from the postwar world is felt mainly by indirection, in her choice of setting.”<sup>92</sup> The indirection discussed here is the return to New York, but setting her story in a time also long before the war began, in pre-prewar America. Even as she set out to deconstruct her former stomping grounds, Wharton is still forced to grapple with the reality that her present world has been irrevocably altered, and that the age of innocence (ironic as that title may be) still retained some semblance of innocence. The postwar world could not be favorably compared to blissful ignorance, even when the bliss was artificial and her life, just like Newland’s, had been mapped out from birth. Nevius posits that though Wharton “could reconcile two points of view, the indictment outweighs the defense... But underlying her protest was the nostalgia evoked by the setting and manners familiar to her childhood, a nostalgia that was to grow with the years until it effaced what bitterness remained.”<sup>93</sup> There is an undeniable sense of longing for a simpler world, a world that has problems that are navigable and relationships that are negotiable. Wharton let sentiment slip into *The Age of Innocence* because the bulk of the action takes place at a time where she, were she stronger and aware of the truths about marriage and men that she learned later in her life, could have been happy. May Welland is an aspirational character as she is in a loveless marriage, and manages to negotiate the structure without tearing it down.

Negotiating a structure without entirely dismantling it is crucial to Wharton’s balancing act between irony and sentiment. Louis Auchincloss, considering the satirical edge that sets Wharton apart from other chroniclers of upper crust society, writes:

The reason Mrs. Wharton succeeded where so many others have failed is that in addition to her gifts as an artist she had a firm grasp of what ‘society,’ in the smaller sense of the

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<sup>92</sup> Nevius, *Edith Wharton*, [Page 177].

<sup>93</sup> Nevius, *Edith Wharton*, [Page 177].

word, was actually made up of. She understood that it was arbitrary, capricious, and inconsistent; she was aware that it did not hesitate to abolish its standards while most loudly proclaiming them.<sup>94</sup>

Wharton was able to tackle the onerous task of anatomizing the living world of Old New York and all of its inhabitants—wealthy, less wealthy; men, women—because she herself was both insider and outsider. She allowed herself to be cynical when writing *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country*, but it was only by the time that she wrote *The Age of Innocence* that she truly tapped into the immutable foundation of her ever-changing city. Living in any society, but particularly the old money, old sensibility, rigid and conservative world of Old New York, requires one to play games. Some people, such as Newland Archer, are equipped with the means to succeed at the games of marriage, career, family, and home life. Others, generally women, are forced to learn how to play games that the more privileged people in their orbit are completely unaware they are players in. “Newland knows that he never really has a chance from the beginning; that is his pathos. He is engaged to May Welland, and he will marry May Welland and spend a lifetime with May Welland, and that is that, and both he and May’s beautiful, Europeanized, disenchanted cousin, Ellen Olenska, realize it and accept it.”<sup>95</sup> While Newland is forced to learn that he cannot have everything that he will want in his life, May must navigate both her husband’s follies and the limitations of choice that she has as a woman in a man’s world in order to carve out some piece of what she wants in her own.

The great flaw in Newland’s relationships with both May and Olenska is that he cannot be present for either of them, or aware of their wants and needs, as he is wrapped up in his own

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<sup>94</sup> Auchincloss, *Edith Wharton*, [Page 42].

<sup>95</sup> Auchincloss, *Edith Wharton*, [Page 29].

contemplations and fantasies about what his life could or should resemble. The reader views Newland and May's wedding day through his eyes, as his mind wanders, "and once more Archer became aware of having been adrift far off in the unknown. What was it that had sent him there? he wondered."<sup>96</sup> This is a day that, like each day prior in Newland's life, has been meticulously planned. "Every detail of the day had been so carefully thought out,"<sup>97</sup> and yet Newland feels as much a bystander as the other faces in the crowd. Even so, Newland goes along with the structured service and ceremonious country honeymoon that awaits him and May, who is spellbound by the happiest day of her if not his life. Newland feels an odd and wary uncertainty as they sit on the train, riding towards the country home that has been arranged, thoughtfully, not by Newland, for the newlyweds. Something has changed between him and May, however: "May was still, in look and tone, the simple girl of yesterday, eager to compare notes with him as to the incidents of their wedding... At first Archer had fancied that [his] detachment was the disguise of an inward tremor; but her clear eyes revealed only the most tranquil unawareness."<sup>98</sup> Something within Newland is threatened by seeing his wife for the first time; he wonders if the woman that he was attracted to, because he believed her to be innocent and simple-minded, is no longer there, and now that he has committed his life to her, might be more of a partner with whom he is capable of having a true and equal partnership. He waves this way by dismissing her as "unaware," failing to read her eyes, beneath which are a complex and attentive individual who can keep step with him, and perhaps can keep a step ahead of him when his mind (and fidelity)

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<sup>96</sup> Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, [Page 152].

<sup>97</sup> Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, [Page 153].

<sup>98</sup> Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, [Page 154].

wander. Looking into her eyes “with the startled gaze of a stranger,”<sup>99</sup> Archer considers those eyes to betray her naïveté and lack of awareness, showing little self-awareness himself. Her clear eyes are, at the climax of the book, given back their hue, as May reclaims her agency and proves that her husband should never have doubted her. Upon tricking him into receiving confirmation of his emotional affair, Wharton reveals May’s “blue eyes wet with victory,”<sup>100</sup> If the eyes are the window to the soul, Newland has drawn the blinds and refused to accept that there is more to May than may meet his own eye. In doing so, he gives her the power to have a voice in their marriage. She uses that voice to advocate for herself, and wins the society game that Newland, the man of the house, a wealthy and privileged lawyer, would have otherwise won by default. May and Wharton are both aware of the game because of the unspoken understanding between New York women. It is no secret, but the men in society have the choice not to play, with their male ancestors having written the rules long ago.

The question remains of where Edith Wharton fits into all of this, as a wealthy woman previously confined to the society that May belongs to. Becoming a writer, and an important and widely read writer at that, is in some ways Wharton’s way of reclaiming herself and her agency. She too is playing the society game, but though she favors intimate portrayals of interpersonal conflict within society, writing for a broader audience extends the scope of her escape from society. In her book *Displaying Women: Spectacles of Leisure in Edith Wharton’s New York*, Maureen E. Montgomery writes “In both her fiction and nonfiction works, then, Wharton asserts her privileged gaze. But, in entering the game, she “identifies herself as a writer of serious fiction

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<sup>99</sup> Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, [Page 154].

<sup>100</sup> Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, [Page 278].

and distances herself from popular novelists,”<sup>101</sup> while she simultaneously “counters the discourse of society journalism, or at least the part of it that legitimizes the ostentatious display of wealth and mistakes ‘conspicuousness’ for ‘distinction.’ She therefore claims superiority over society columnists and popular writers.”<sup>102</sup> Wharton’s modus operandi of chronicling and subtly skewering high society is what sets her apart from not only the pompous and fawning newspaper writers who espouse their admiration for wealth and status, regardless of the other qualities of one’s character, but also sentimental writers who cannot see the failings of an imperfect system where the worth of one in the eyes of their society peers is measured by what material possessions they have and lack. The reason that *The Age of Innocence* has withstood decades of criticism, and will always fall back in favor after it falls out of favor is that the text understands fundamentally that the glamorous society it portrays is built upon a shaky foundation, and the structure that permits its players to live obliviously is the very structure to which they are confined forever. This is a novel that does not concern itself with outsiders looking in; Olenska has the same birthright as May and Newland, and even she, without conforming to the trappings of a traditional life, still enjoys the trappings of opulence. In avoiding her usual strategy of employing an outsider as an audience surrogate, Wharton asserts an uncomfortable truth that carries her characters through the novel: either everybody is an outsider in their own society, but nobody will admit to it for fear of not fitting in—or, perhaps more frightening than that, nobody is an outsider, and it is time for the age of innocence to end.

Considering Wharton’s own experiences with marriage and extramarital affairs, Gloria C. Erlich, author of *The Sexual Education of Edith Wharton*, suggests that there is a distinction

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<sup>101</sup> Maureen E. Montgomery, *Displaying Women: Spectacles of Leisure in Edith Wharton's New York* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1998), [Page 165].

<sup>102</sup> Montgomery, *Displaying Women*, [Page 165].

made between marital love and passion, which Wharton experienced in her own life and brought into her writing. Erlich refers to Wharton's affair with Morton Fullerton as "the passion experience,"<sup>103</sup> borrowing a term from psychologist Sophie Freud. The relationship between Newland and May, beginning with the two barely knowing each other and continuing out of obligation to their unborn child, is an example of the cynicism that Wharton felt for marital matches in New York society. Just as Lily Bart had little pick of her own mate, Newland and May marry young and face the threat of growing apart. Wharton does not present this as an inevitability; the wedge between the couple is driven by Newland's apathy and the comparative allure of the unknown in Olenska. A New York society marriage offers stability, as it is built upon an unshakable structure, but the "passion experience" is not guaranteed. In *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton explores both the fantasy of passion and the absence of passion, which is applicable to relationships consummated and left unconsummated, marital or otherwise. Despite her initial, if dim, feelings of love and passion for Teddy Wharton, these eventually subsided, coinciding with her growth as a writer, which brought their differences to the surface and accelerated the process of the two growing apart. "Edith Wharton's marriage, mildly companionable at first but never sexually fulfilling, became increasingly burdensome with the passage of time. The more she developed as a writer and intellectual the less companionship could she find with her husband Teddy."<sup>104</sup> The strained partnership between Newland and May echoes that of Edith and Teddy; while neither party is at fault in the fact that they are simply incompatible, tepid efforts to preserve the love between them are not enough to invoke the passion that they might have with others, or even with each other if they could only

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<sup>103</sup> Erlich, *The Sexual*, [Page 86].

<sup>104</sup> Erlich, *The Sexual*, [Pages 116-117].

communicate. Both Edith and Teddy engaged in extramarital affairs: there was the Fullerton affair, and a series of dalliances that Teddy apparently began when his wife took up with Fullerton. Erlich notes that Wharton was hurt by her husband's philandering, and though she "was pained and embarrassed by his flagrant disregard of appearances, as one who herself had strayed she tried to pass off his behavior with humor."<sup>105</sup> This suggests that Wharton did to some extent love her husband, and was open to salvaging what remained of the marriage. Newland and May do not have consummated affairs, and it is Newland whose eye strays towards Olenska; nonetheless, May is committed to maintaining their life together and avoiding the perils of divorce. A divorcee herself, Wharton is hardly sentimental about the premise of saving a marriage. She could very well have portrayed the dissolution of a picture-perfect but fundamentally flawed match in the final chapters of this novel in order to demonstrate the irony of the image of the model wife and husband being a sham. If Wharton shows her sentimental side in this novel, it is that she offers Newland and May a reprieve, and allows them to return to their imperfect life without promise that it might one day be perfect.

As the reader learns from the epilogue, they would not share a perfect life together, but they would share a life. Newland stands in his library and recalls the day that May told him of her pregnancy and effectively ended his inclination to stray, to flee, to abandon all they had built. This time, however, he views the scene through different eyes. It was the start of something magnificent. He recalls her face, "with a blushing circumlocution that would have caused the young women of the new generation to smile."<sup>106</sup> Their son Dallas is of this new generation, and signals the end of the Old New York that Wharton satirized for thirty-three chapters prior.

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<sup>105</sup> Erlich, *The Sexual*, [Page 117].

<sup>106</sup> Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, [Page 279].



Ironically, the twenty-six years that have passed put the epilogue of the novel in the same chronological territory as *The House of Mirth*, a novel where New York society is still ruthless. Dallas has a more modern take on the story of his father's unrealized love affair, and as May has passed away years prior to the epilogue, encourages his father to speak with Olenska in Paris. Dallas even teases Newland, telling him that he will tell Olenska that Newland is taking his time coming up to her apartment because he is old-fashioned and averse to taking elevators. Newland's sly retort—"Say I'm old-fashioned: that's enough"<sup>107</sup>—illustrates the differences between the two men and their eras. Yet, rooted to his era, Newland cannot bring himself to speak to the woman for whom he once had feelings and true passion. He realizes once and for all that he and Olenska were not right for each other nearly thirty years ago, and that even if their sole obstacle—May—is gone, the life he built with his wife has echoed through the decades, best exemplified by his son. Newland says to himself, "It's more real to me here than if I went up,"<sup>108</sup> and remains seated outside until the shutters are closed in the window to Olenska's apartment. Newland is given a brief window of opportunity to have a relationship with the one who could have been, but he chooses his wife, the one who was. This is significant as the burden of choice has never been on Newland; once it is, outside of Old New York and in prewar Paris, he makes the right decision. It is a happy ending, perhaps even a sentimental ending, but the satirical edge comes from Wharton's suggestion that, if not for May's pregnancy, if not for the birth of Dallas and the dawning of a new era in New York, the idealized, romanticized, perfect privileged marriage could have fallen apart.

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<sup>107</sup> Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, [Page 292].

<sup>108</sup> Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, [Page 292].

Erlich observes *The Age of Innocence* as not a critique of marriage exclusively but of the limitations of characters living in a structured society: “Wharton’s protagonists feel themselves constrained by inflexible social boundaries despite manifold examples of social change and accommodation all around them.”<sup>109</sup> Here she is tapping into the way Wharton’s leading ladies and gentlemen, such as Newland, are vessels for a critical takedown of the structures against which they they rail despite benefitting from because of a lack of self-awareness. An older Newland at the end of the novel chooses not to reignite the flame between him and Olenska, although he knows that the changing societal mores would permit it. The younger Newland is so overcome with angst over not being able to pursue every whim that enters his head that he is oblivious to all that he already has. Additionally, Erlich touches upon Newland’s attendance of *Faust* at the opera house. She considers Newland’s arc in this novel to be anti-Faustian, as he is able to “banish temptation,”<sup>110</sup> yet notes that Newland initially picking May in order to conform to the societal expectations that he will marry somebody pure, innocent, and plain, is only a surface rejection of the Faustian bargain. Erlich posits that “One could think of May as a victim, a sleeping beauty whom Newland Archer declines to awaken because he is too attached to the image of her opposite.”<sup>111</sup> Newland sees in Olenska what Wharton saw in Fullerton: somebody who has lived, with a font of experience that piques his curiosity. This curiosity is, by the standards of his society and also by the standards of the conservative views that he has internalized, inappropriate. He is expected to have a wife who belongs to society, not one who has been cast out, whose sexuality is unrepressed and openly on display. Newland does not

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<sup>109</sup> Erlich, *The Sexual*, [Page 132].

<sup>110</sup> Erlich, *The Sexual*, [Page 133].

<sup>111</sup> Erlich, *The Sexual*, [Page 133].

ultimately make the Faustian choice to abandon his wife and have an affair with Olenska because, in the most ironic twist of all, May is the safe pick from all perspectives: for the sake of building a future modeled after other traditional society families, for the sake of avoiding scandal and being cast out from society himself, and most importantly to Newland, whether or not he knows it, for the sake of protecting himself from his own insecurities. He spends so much time deliberating whether May is enough of a woman for him, without bothering to question whether he is enough man for May. Next to Olenska, a woman who is challenging to him because she has lived and he has only lived the life of a privileged conservative, Newland feels small. May is a virgin who seemingly wants to just fall in love and start a family. Newland values her purity over the other qualities, which are secondary to a man who is unsure if he wants to live under the confines of his structured society. Wharton is acknowledging and embracing the understood conditions for a young wife, and subverting the narrative by portraying Newland as possessive of May's sexuality from the very start, only for May to exercise the product of her sexuality, a pregnancy, to possess Newland for the rest of her years and beyond.

Although Wharton's own romantic and sexual life was left behind in New York as she left for Paris, she found fulfillment in her writing, and through her writing was able to deconstruct the nature of romantic and sexual relationships in her old society. A lover of architecture and the decoration of homes, Wharton was never able to truly build a permanent home with Teddy, and though the Mount still stands today, their fizzling romance only stood as a testament to the chasm between passion and apathetic love that preserves tradition at the cost of embracing new traditions. Her wartime experiences put her experiences with and without love into perspective, and so in succession, Wharton wrote *The Age of Innocence* and *A Son at the Front*, two very different novels representing two very different time periods, with their common

link being the dawning of Wharton's understanding of interpersonal relationships. Wharton needed to narratively return to New York in order to write about the First World War, and she needed to live through the First World War in order to write a cynical yet genuine account of a bygone era. Both novels are about change, and removing sentimental blinders in order to embrace changing social values in a changing social climate. With these two novels near the end of an illustrious career, Wharton cemented herself as a satirist adept at telling grounded and emotionally honest stories—even if she, having spent the past two decades putting her fictional romantic pairings through the wringer, gave one lucky couple a happy ending.

## Conclusion

Edith Wharton lived a full life in New York, New England, and Europe. She had a lukewarm marriage, a passionate affair, and an abundance of friends and admirers. Yet her truest love was not Teddy, or Morton, or France, or New York. It was writing. Forever a “scribbling woman,” from the Mount to her home in Paris, Wharton spent more of her life writing than other society women. Since she discovered the joy of spinning vast tomes of text in her middle age, she more than made up for lost time by creating some of the most significant and lasting novels of the twentieth century. *The House of Mirth* persists as a cautionary tale, warning young people that societal expectations are less important than finding true love, and to be careful playing unwinnable games. *The Custom of the Country*, alternatively, turns the novel of manners on its head by introducing a character dissimilar to other female protagonists traditionally featured in the genre. *Ethan Frome* is a study of the effects that isolation and broken dreams can have on an already broken man, and the desperate lengths that one can be driven to in order to find some thin paring of happiness in a relentlessly cold winter. *A Son at the Front* is an antiwar novel, for Europeans and Americans alike, showing that the only difference between Americans and their transatlantic neighbors is which country they will fight for, or stand in defiance of, the fighting. Lastly, *The Age of Innocence*, the winner of the 1921 Pulitzer Prize for Literature, teaches readers that it is possible to go home again in their recollections of simpler times, but warns that nostalgia can cloud one’s perception of how happy, or innocent, they truly were.

What each one of these novels has in common is an understanding of the basest desires of people, whether they are a wealthy lawyer such as Newland Archer, or a poverty-stricken carriage driver like Ethan Frome. All of Wharton’s characters seek fulfillment and affection; they

are all to some extent misfits and outsiders, even those born into the New York society way of living. Wharton's central conceit seems to be that everybody is an outsider. Those who appear to fit in are only pretending, because the very social structures that are relied upon in order to provide a traditional, prosperous lifestyle for members of a society, elite or otherwise, are fundamentally flawed. For this reason, it is impossible to say that Wharton is a sentimentalist. She acknowledges the idealistic world that she came from, yet relishes in her rejection of it, having come to terms over the course of the first half of her life with the fact that her unhappiness in New York was not predicated on any failing of her own to fit in and accept the privileges that her status afforded her, but the cracks in the system about which few of her society peers spoke.

Rather than grumbling about a world she could not reform, Wharton satirized it in the pages of her novels. Her New York novels, which include *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country*, and *The Age of Innocence*, each capture a different facet of New York's dark side. *The House of Mirth* is a straightforward satirical tragedy, the unromantic tale of Lily Bart, who for all intents and purposes should be able to find her place in New York, but ultimately removes herself from the world altogether in the act of suicide. *The Custom of the Country* features Undine Spragg, an analog for observers of New York, who read about the city from towns across the country and dream about all the opportunity it could offer them. Wharton quickly dismisses this fantasy, depicting an ironic twist where with every opportunity, Undine is less and less sated, and is left unfulfilled, as fantasy is more alluring than reality. *The Age of Innocence* presents the courtship of Newland Archer and May Welland, and is set in the time of Wharton's youth. Any preconceptions of Old New York as a romantic place of opulence and tradition are slowly subverted over the progression of the novel: Wharton shows that marriages will always have

problems, and sometimes scandals; the members of Old New York society were simply better at keeping their matters private, a product of necessity due to the society's rigidity.

Edith Wharton's strategic and limited use of the sentimental should not define her just as none of her novels should be defined only by their genres. She effortlessly borrowed elements from the antiwar genre with *A Son at the Front*, the pastoral with *Ethan Frome*, and the genre of manners in her New York romances. While a sentimentalist would have weaved character studies with light critiques of society, Wharton's outright denouncement of society through the use of irony and disruption of the status quo places her firmly in the role of satirist. Overlooking Wharton's satire extinguishes the subtlety and wit that went into her biting social commentary—the quiet, tradition abiding Edith Jones of Old New York never had a voice, but the woman and writer that she eventually grew into did, and that voice should not be written off. From *The House of Mirth* to *The Age of Innocence*, and all of her novels between, Wharton earned her place in the canon of American fiction as a satirical chronicler of society, and the ultimate scribbling woman.

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