

**‘A Construction in the Void’  
Formal Architecture in the Novels of Edith Wharton**

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## Abstract

Edith Wharton has been persistently framed as an author detached from the ‘modern’ twentieth century literary world she inhabited. Intellectually compromised by critical conceptions of her as the “last Victorian”, and Henry James’s “heiress”, Wharton’s attentiveness to modernism’s fractured worldview and her original employment of literary form to redress this perspective have been largely overlooked. This thesis seeks to re-evaluate Wharton’s ‘old-fashioned’ authorial persona. Instead of reading her commitment to a past perspective as evidence of her literary obsolescence, this thesis argues that her adherence to a bygone worldview serves as a means of managing the disorientation and disorder of the modern, incomprehensible present.

Following Wharton’s evolving conception of stylised aesthetic form across pre-war and post-war worlds, I suggest that Wharton’s literature evidences a tension between two opposing literary aspirations. On the one hand, her texts reveal a desire to abandon aesthetic enclosures and realise an unbounded, authentic interior reality. Yet on the other hand, Wharton’s works underscore the poignant sense of fulfilment acquired within a life bound by such aesthetic architecture. Chapter One outlines Wharton’s critical stance in relation to both realism and modernism. It discusses the way in which the outbreak of the Great War motivated Wharton’s implementation of a critical ‘interior architecture’, in which a modernist interiority is held in play alongside an encompassing realist reality. Chapter Two assesses the stunted nature of stylised aesthetic forms in the pre-war world as evinced in *The House of Mirth* (1905). There, Wharton demonstrates how a lack of grounding in reality renders such aesthetics devoid of an internal anchorage that clarifies their purposeful relation to the world around them. Vacant of real-world relation, such forms abstract, disintegrating

into formlessness. In Chapter Three, I reveal how Wharton moves from scorning to celebrating the artificial nature of aesthetic form in the wake of the Great War. In *The Age of Innocence* (1920), aesthetic forms deemed arbitrary and artificial in *The House of Mirth* are revaluated and revealed as possessing an invisible, intrinsic real-world purpose. From denying realism, stylised aesthetics are redeemed in their attempt to frame individuals in relation to a formless world. Though such forms are inherently fictitious, Wharton asserts that their provision of an illusion of structure aids in the preservation of interpersonal and intergenerational connection. These forms thus cultivate an interior architecture within which society can shelter against an intrinsically unstable reality.

## An ‘Old-Fashioned’ Aesthetic

Mrs. Virginia Woolf writes a long article ... to say that no interesting American fiction is, or should be, written in English; and that Henry, Hergesheimer and I are negligible because we have nothing new to give—not even a language! [...] Well—such discipline is salutary.”

—Edith Wharton to Gaillard Lapsley (1925)<sup>1</sup>

One hundred years ago, American novelist Edith Wharton became the first female recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. It was an award she earned with *The Age of Innocence*, a novel whose buoyant title seemed to stand removed from a corrupted, contemporary state of affairs. The year was 1921. The dawn of the new decade should have evoked a sense of potential with its presentation of a clean untainted social slate. Yet the trauma of the Great War continued to ring in society’s shell-shocked mind. In this unsettling aftermath, Wharton, like many contemporary writers of her day, looked to literature to house and heal her melancholic post-war self. In this “strange post-war world of the rear”, many artists drew inspiration from the alien brokenness of the present (*BG* 369). As these literary figures strove to come to terms with their unprecedented modern landscape, pre-war formal frameworks felt increasingly insufficient, unable to adequately express the interminably fractured nature of the present. A break from existing literary structures had already been germinating as modernism began to emerge at the turn of the century, but the Great War, dislocating society from its antecedent state, cemented this schismatic process. While Wharton’s contemporaries experimented with new modes of formal expression that accurately expressed the disconsolation and disorder of their current war-torn socio-cultural frame, Wharton seemed to do the opposite. Instead of consulting and

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Colapinto’s article “Virginia Woolf, Edith Wharton, and a Case of Anxiety of Influence.”

negotiating the abyss-like present, she peculiarly retreated some fifty years into the past, into the distant world of America's Gilded Age.

Despite this odd setting, *The Age of Innocence* is a war novel. It is not, as Cynthia Griffin-Wolff notes, “a brutal battlefield tragedy nor an apocalyptic jazz satire” as Hemingway and Fitzgerald later provided in *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) and *The Great Gatsby* (1925) (*AOI* xxii).<sup>2</sup> Rather, the text veils itself as a novel of manners, appearing to detail and assess the ramifications of a life tightly bound by old New York's antiquated social code of conduct. So how then does this relate to the war? If Wharton was self-consciously aiming—as she later reflected—to “deal objectively with the stored-up emotions of those [war] years”, why would she choose to “get away from the present all together” and retreat into a socio-cultural frame so detached from a post-war reality (*BG* 369)? The disconnectedness of the two eras draws attention to the very point Wharton was trying to make. The Gilded Age, like the innocent old New York of the novel, was an era of latent social issues smothered by a thin ‘gilding’ of economic prosperity. On an aesthetic, surface level, it seemed light-years away from the desolation of the post-war world. What *The Age of Innocence* does is bring this seemingly old-fashioned setting into conversation with the early twentieth century—explicitly in its final chapter, and implicitly as a whole, for through the reader, the Gilded Age is framed against a 1920 present. In doing so, the settings present an essential similitude, and what were separate historic periods become strung into a continuous, interconnected chain. The aesthetic frames that variegate the different periods lose their differentiative power, and what seem to be isolated moments in history are collapsed into a single, interwoven temporal tide. As a result, localised moments in history diminish in magnitude, as individual life spans

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<sup>2</sup> All references to *The Age of Innocence* hereafter cited under the abbreviation *AOI*.



are framed within time's infinite, enduring schema. This schema functions as a 'frame' that holds existence together, securely containing reality as it weathers disorderly cycles of rupture and renewal that occur within its unfolding body.

For Wharton, the war was an intensely amplified example of an ongoing process of rupture and renewal synonymous to time itself. Her comprehension of historical change relates to Erik Erikson's conceptual framework Griffin-Woolf cites in *A Feast of Words* (313). Wharton understood that an individual enters into a socio-temporal frame that seems static—"prepared by tradition [and] held together by tradition"—yet this frame is paradoxically dynamic, reforming and disintegrating simultaneously. Younger generations adapt and broaden the parameters of the socio-historic frame they are born into, reinvigorating it and modernising it according to the nature of the present. Consequently, some elements of the framework that informed the same generation's early existence gradually fall away, whilst others are reformulated into newer, more modern social processes, yet the frame itself persists. The past then is not deadened or discarded, but a "living image" active and present, and though superficially camouflaged in modern processes, can be understood as the root of social change (Wharton to Jewett 351).

*The Age of Innocence* is thus an exhibition of how the ideological and psychological issues of the past, divested of their socio-temporal aesthetics, are the same issues that plague the present. The 'age of innocence' is not associable with a single socio-historic moment—it is an eternal, universal state of being humanity finds itself in as it struggles blindly through the indistinction of the present. An 'age of innocence' is a state of modernity—a constant condition of human existence. Wharton's novel underlines the interconnection of past and present, rejecting the myth of the modern as a moment solely tied to the twentieth century. For her,

modernity is a condition of being experienced universally and trans-temporally. This sense of instability that plagued the modern age, this fear of the incoherent now, was, somewhat comfortingly, a recognisable state. This post war disorientation was (as I shall proceed to discuss in chapter one), analogous to the consciousness Thomas Hardy had his protagonist in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) experience back in rural Britain's long depression of the 1870s—"the ache of modernism"—a specific emotional response experienced by those living in a period marked by immense historical change (124). Because Wharton was sceptical of the rationale behind modernism as a time-specific movement, she regarded its contiguous stylistic arm with suspicion. This stylistic aspect was, for her, simply the transitory aesthetic response of a society going through the motions of intense socio-cultural upheaval—a topical tributary to realism's deeper, broader river (Lewis, *Bio* 423).

This thesis is primarily concerned with Edith Wharton's dynamic perception of the value of aesthetic forms as exhibited in the pre-war, fin-de-siècle context of *The House of Mirth* (1905) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920). I argue that Wharton's conception of the value of aesthetic form changes and deepens over this early twentieth century period thanks to the impact of the Great War. I define aesthetics here as artificially constructed forms, material or immaterial expressions or applications of creative skill and imagination that beget works or ideological structures of beauty and/or emotional power ("art, n.1." *OED*). 'Aesthetics' thus operates as a blanket term that will be used to refer to art objects (visual arts, books etc.), artistic performances (theatre, opera etc.), and ideological forms (literary, social, cultural, individually-imagined). In the pre-war world of *The House of Mirth*, Wharton critiques the illusory nature of an out-dated nineteenth-century realism, using the restrictive aesthetic of the ornamental leisure lady as a means of critiquing

literary realism's idealistic, stylised and ultimately improbable conception of reality. This literary realism failed to encompass the nuanced nature of raw reality, omitting psychological reality due to its emphasis on 'real' material forms, which in themselves were heavily stylised. In *The House of Mirth*, this aesthetic appraisal centres upon protagonist Lily Bart, whose aestheticised social identity constricts her interior self, ultimately suffocating her. Pre-existing aesthetics in this pre-war era are presented as providing a reductive, limited objective perspective on a genuinely complex contemporary reality. By 1920, post-war, Wharton's evaluation of 'past' aesthetic forms had changed significantly. In *The Age of Innocence*, aesthetic forms are framed as poignant and recuperative. Through the perspective of Newland Archer, readers acknowledge the illusion and artifice of such aesthetic forms, but push beyond their unreality to comprehend value in the real emotional power they enact. The novel evidences the way in which aesthetics have the power to psychologically hoist humanity out of what appears to be an overwhelmingly formless reality. They do this by implementing an existential framework that, though aestheticised and inherently synthetic, facilitates an otherwise elusive mental resilience. In tracking Wharton's evolving appraisal of aesthetic form, what I hope to underline in this thesis is the way in which she understands aesthetics as a kind of psychological shelter—offering an 'interior architecture' that provides an individual with an internalised objective purpose in a world that, in her lifetime, seemed set to implode.

The Great War had an acute impact on the way in which Wharton viewed aesthetic form. In 1913, Wharton relocated to France when her marriage to upper-class Boston gentleman Edward 'Teddy' Robbins Wharton deteriorated. He had suffered from ongoing mental health issues, both had dabbled with adultery and, according to R. W. B. Lewis, Edith found herself incapable of coping with Teddy's

intellectual shortcomings and their relationship's lack of sexual intimacy (*Bio*, 66). Following their divorce, Wharton settled herself at her Parisian apartment at 53 Rue de Varenne. Whilst Wharton was returning from a trip to Spain on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of August 1914, Germany formally declared war on France. Over the next four years, Wharton busied herself as a tireless and ardent supporter of the French war effort. Early on, she established an *ouvroir* (workroom) in the Rue de l'Université with several dozen seamstresses who produced garments for French troops (Lewis, *Bio* 365-66). She then set about creating a rescue lodging for the massive influx of refugees who were arriving in Paris in great waves, establishing the 'American Hostels for Refugees' of which she was administrator, and later, as untold numbers of Belgian children flooded into Paris following the heavy German shelling of their homeland, Wharton headed 'The Children of Flanders Rescue Committee'. She was also one of the few female literary figures to directly encounter the horrific nature of life upon the Western Front. By midsummer 1915, she had bravely made five trips to the lines from Dunkirk to Belfort (in Alsace), to document conditions as a part of a larger propaganda campaign to pressure the United States out of its neutrality and into the war.

Highly attuned to society's need for comfort and shelter, Wharton noted a vital 'domestic' impulse amongst those in the direct line of fire, observing a "resolute determination to establish a network of relationships and home-like spaces—society's most primitive response to the threat of extermination" (Griffin-Wolff, *Intro* xxii). In the face of literal fracture (shell fragments, gunfire and the like), humankind sought to steady itself with the comforting illusion of containment: "houses partly underground, connected by deep winding 'bowels' over which light rustic bridges have been thrown [...] real houses, with real doors and windows [...] neat rows of bunks, mess-tables, sizzling sauce-pans over kitchen fires" (*FF* 141). In that "strange war-world of the

rear, with its unnatural sharpness of outline and over-heightening of colour”, Wharton identified a human need for psychological enclosure (*BG* 410). Her direct contact with refugees and the wounded left her sensitive to their “strangely purified and matured” expressions and the way in which these people’s severe trauma had “burned them down to the bare bones of character” (Lewis, *Bio* 374). It was an observation that yielded a peculiar peace. For all the war’s razing of livelihoods, its dismantlement of surface level distinction revealed a fundamental human nature exposed in individuals’ *shared* responses to physical and emotional pain. With the war stripping away life’s superficial layers to reveal an essential state of affairs, Wharton drew consolation from the fact that the war’s unfolding was a natural, inevitable process: a “horror [that] had to be gone through, for some mysterious cosmic reason of ripening and rotting” (Wharton qtd Lewis, *Bio* 374).

In order to understand Wharton’s changing evaluation of aesthetic form, we must first turn to *The House of Mirth*, which sets up the restrictive formal architecture Wharton later seeks to renovate and restore. In this 1905 novel, Wharton implicitly calls for the deconstruction of a rigidly stylised house of realism, pushing for its development into a flexible framework better equipped to encapsulate authentic interior self and an individualised experience of reality. However, this was not an intimation of modernism. As I will discuss in more detail in this thesis’ first chapter, Wharton’s interrogation of realism cannot be read simply as a transition towards modernism, for Wharton was a scathing critic of the movement.<sup>3</sup> In her 1925 essays on the craft of fiction titled *The Writing of Fiction*, Wharton decries the modernist style in a thinly veiled comment: “The distrust of technique and the fear of being unoriginal—both symptoms of a certain lack of creative abundance—are in truth

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<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of Edith Wharton’s relation to modernism, see Jennifer Haytock’s “Modernism” in *Edith Wharton in Context*.

leading to pure anarchy in fiction” (*WOF* 14). She was particularly critical of the way that “certain schools” were regarding “formlessness” to be “the first condition of form”. Wharton saw herself as a “master-builder” as critic Katherine Fullerton Gerould defined in her 1922 *New York Times* book review of *Glimpses of the Moon* (1922) (Killoran 5). She possessed, in the words of Gerould, a “masculine power of handling events”—constructing her novels with a certain “Architectonié”. For Wharton, a narrative’s form was of profound importance. In a letter to Robert Grant following the failure of her industrial novel *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), Wharton described her style of novel building as being like that of “a man—that is [conceived], more architectonically and dramatically than [in the works of] most women” (Wagner-Martin 246). This overarching identification of a predominantly ‘masculine’ compositional impulse sat uneasily against the way in which Wharton rendered her content “like a woman”.

In Wharton’s lifetime, to write in a ‘feminine’ manner was to include “small incidental effects that women have always excelled in, the episodic characterisation” (Wagner-Martin 246). Thus to capture “every half-aware stirring of thought and sensation, the automatic reactions to each passing impression” as the modernists sought to, was, in Wharton’s opinion, a distinctly feminine response. Because this detail was often felt to obscure an overarching narrative structure, it was considered a lesser approach to novel writing. To provide “construction and breadth”, a “whole picture” for readers—a ‘mosaic’ of underlying order—was to write in a ‘masculine’ style (Joslin 207, 210). In a period where society was still overwhelmingly patriarchal, to write in a ‘masculine’ manner was to write with quality and critical distinction. This focus on constructing a totalistic ‘whole’ picture of life for readers was not only a tendency typical of realism, but symptomatic of a

dominant patriarchal perspective, being a creative attempt to control an unfathomable reality, repackaging it through a highly structured, tamed lens. Annette Benert has suggested that Wharton's personal alignment with realism's 'masculine' element was a strategic move as she endeavoured to free herself from the prevailing identities associable with upper-class femininity that made authentic selfhood difficult (58). Lily Bart's attempts to secure and reconcile herself alongside the restrictive ideological frameworks of her society can thus be read in relation to Edith Wharton's own struggle to hold her professional and personal selves in harmony.<sup>4</sup>

Yet rather than tackling Wharton's formal choices from a strictly biographical perspective, I seek to interrogate Wharton's aesthetic decisions from a socio-historic perspective, interested in the way in which she adapts her novels' aesthetic form to both articulate and mediate the psychological impact of contemporary socio-cultural influences. In this thesis I do not wish to position Edith Wharton as a nostalgic realist, nor as a failed modernist. Instead, I read her as a figure arching between, seeking to 'bridge the abyss' between the two schools by holding their contrasting objective and subjective perspectives together in a single form. In this sense, I borrow from Elaine Showalter's reading of Wharton as an author instigating a "historical transition" from "one house of American [...] fiction to another" (2). While Showalter's argument deals with Wharton's influence in cultivating a gendered shift in American literature, I take her architectural analogy to reframe Wharton as a literary figure instigating an 'interior architecture'. By this I mean to suggest that Wharton was renovating the existing form of the novel so that it retained an exterior realist architecture but exposed and later furnished what was a wanting psychological interior, thus

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<sup>4</sup> Amy Kaplan suggests that Wharton endeavoured to "write herself out of the private domestic sphere and inscribe a public identity in the [professional] marketplace", an act that sought to "overturn the boundary between the interior and exterior"—the private and professional identity—"to achieve a synthesis between them that would modify each realm" (434, 444). See "Edith Wharton's Profession of Authorship" for a more detailed discussion.

producing a flexible form that arches between the two schools. This form of ‘interior architecture’ enabled Wharton to reconcile her divergent authorial methods, providing a fluid narrative ‘house’ in which she could accommodate the personal ‘feminine’ subjective aspects of her writing with a professional, ‘masculine’ objective framework.

Wharton interpreted modernist principles in her own, unique way. She acknowledged that “each of us flows imperceptibly into people and things” and claimed that “Modern fiction really began when the action of the novel was transferred from the street to the soul” (*WOF* 7, 3). Yet she based these conceptions within a realist framework. *The House of Mirth*’s pointed critique of aesthetic form had underlined Wharton’s belief that “the bounds of personality [were] not reproducible by a sharp black line”, yet this was not to be mistaken for a wholehearted embrace of modernism (7). Rather, Wharton’s letters suggest she was wary of modernism’s capacity for superficiality. After reading Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* (1928), Wharton wrote to close friend Bernard Berenson:

I [...] tackled *Ulysses* & cast it from me [...]—it’s a turgid welter of pornography (the rudest schoolboy kind) & uninformed and unimportant drivel; & until the raw ingredients of a pudding make a pudding, I shall never believe that the raw pudding of sensation and thought can make a work of art without the cook’s intervening. The same applies to Eliot.<sup>5</sup> (Lewis, *Letters* 461)

For Wharton, novelistic subject required authorial structure in order to successfully bear creative fruit. This was the key issue she took with modernism. It was too embryonic, too abstract, too theoretical. It lacked the grounding of tangible

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<sup>5</sup> The title of this thesis draws from a phrase in James Joyce’s novel *Ulysses* (1922), the same text Wharton scorns in the excerpt above. In “The Metaphysics of Modernism”, Michael Bell discusses how *Ulysses* acknowledges its ultimate groundlessness, reenacting “in contemporary terms an ancient tale of homecoming and thereby express[ing] a modern sense of what the human home is”: “founded, like the world, macro and microcosm, upon the void” (Bell 14, Joyce 145). In using Joyce’s text to inform the works of Wharton, I underline the two authors’ shared understanding of literature as aesthetic construction—a conceptual characteristic that transcends their formal disparity.



convention, as the “theory came first and dominated it” (461). Modernist literature’s “exultations and agonies” that “succeed[ed] each other below the surface” provided a fractured vision, a vision unsatisfactory to Wharton (*WOF* 4). The “plot [...] and an air of probability embalming the whole” that Virginia Woolf reprehended in the realist novel was what Wharton believed mental flux needed to be encased within so readers could comprehend the narrative’s ‘whole picture’ (McNeillie 160). It was not enough, from her perspective, for this mental flux to exist as a literary artwork as an end unto itself.

For Wharton, the “raw pudding of sensation and thought” needed to be set within a secure mould (Lewis, *Letters* 461). Yet this was formally challenging. Realism’s implementation of objective perspective clashed with the subjectivity of modernism, and we see Wharton experimenting with the alignment of the two perspectives in *The House of Mirth* before refining it in *The Age of Innocence*. In her earlier novel, protagonist Lily Bart succeeds in harmonizing these two states temporarily, in a tableaux vivant. This tableau enables her to “embody the person represented” (an ideal feminine type) “without ceasing to be herself” (*HOM* 134).<sup>6</sup> Yet because she chooses a material backdrop to enact this fastening (Reynolds’s portrait painting of “Mrs. Lloyd”), the “spell”—the marriage of these perspectives—must inevitably be “broken”, as the tableau cannot transcend the socio-temporal moment in which it is executed (136). Indeed, synthesising self with art object ultimately results in Lily’s regression into material waste. By the time Wharton came to *The Age of Innocence*, she was aware that material things, “little things, that used to be necessary and important to forgotten people”, are unable to “give meaning and continuity to the present” if they are detached from the individuals that engage them

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<sup>6</sup> All citations for *The House of Mirth* hereafter cited as the abbreviation *HOM*.

(*AOI* 255, Griffin-Wolff *Intro* xi). The war's shelling had proven that when material objects were estranged from their possessors, they became objective outlines of meaning, contracting the object's individual nuance. Wharton noted the haunting sense of loss implicit in the abandoned personal belongings she saw in village after village whilst on the frontlines in France, observing residual photographs on the walls of bombed houses, wedding-dresses left behind in old trunks, and bundles of letters abandoned on the side of the road. Intimate family photographs were reduced to anonymous portraits, a wedding dress became a ghostly symbol of a bygone romantic union, and letters devoid of life became inconsequential and meaningless, fading—like the dead Lily Bart—into hollow, insignificant objects. A life without a domestic interior was, as Wharton has Ellen Olenska voice in *The Age of Innocence*, a “cruel”, tragic fate (*AOI* 255).

So how does Wharton develop an aesthetic form that successfully preserves a vital subjective element within a fixed objective frame, if this objective frame seems to counteract a genuine subjective impulse? The solution reveals itself in *The Age of Innocence*. In this later novel, aesthetic forms are detached from their material origins to avoid being subject to the demands of the empirical world. The aesthetic form that successfully secures Archer's interior self within a stable social identity is immaterial: it is an aestheticised memory. Similarly, the aesthetic form that enables his community to indulge their individual desires whilst encased in a durable external identity is ideological rather than material. These post-war Whartonian aesthetics are abstract: they are *imagined* pillars of meaning, constructed immaterially yet realised externally.

Through *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton positions the historical-realist novel as one such aesthetic form that can successfully preserve a vital subjective state

within an overarching objective form. The historical-realist novel operates in two separate ‘worlds’. The first is the narrative world, which, detached from the world of the reader, unfolds according to its own unique timeline, allowing us access a subjective world and societal consciousness with seeming objectivity. Focalised through Archer, we encounter his environment from his subjective perspective, yet because we as readers exist outside the novel’s world and timeline, we can observe his subjective state objectively. In this way the novel operates as one such aesthetic form that bridges subjective and objective states, as it is capable of moving within and above a specific temporal moment.

One might argue that this is what acclaimed realists such as George Eliot were already practicing in novels like *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). Yet what makes Wharton’s application of this temporal shift unique is that, while Eliot and fellow realists were relying on omniscient narration to navigate this shift between historic present and that of the contemporary reader, Wharton builds this shift into the formal structure of the novel itself. In *The Age of Innocence*, the narrative architecture facilitates a reversal out from Archer’s enveloping subjective perspective. We never truly abandon the confines of his viewpoint to view his situation in the round. Instead, to shift between subjective immediacy and objective distance, Wharton draws attention to the way time’s progression has modified the parameters of the socio-cultural frame he inhabits. The parameters of this frame of culture and tradition that facilitated Archer’s inception have been subjected to reformulation and expansion with the birth of younger generations. In his maturity, Archer is able to identify the socio-cultural frame that is subjectively experienced by his son, Dallas, because he himself is no longer actively modifying the frame itself. The “narrow groove” Archer was born into has expanded into “the new state of things”—a wider socio-cultural

frame (*AOI* 286) As a character remarks early on in the novel, just as “modern sports [...] spread the joints—but the skin [remains] white”, modern generations expand their socio-cultural frames, but the frame itself remains stable (24). By aestheticizing the subjective experience of history’s ‘spreading of joints’, the process of socio-cultural transition, Wharton holds subjective and objective perspectives in relation within a single, material text. Modernism’s subjectivity services—and even champions—a realist vision of a shared, totalistic reality. Archer’s subjective experience of his world is not diminished, nor stylised by an all-knowing narrator, yet his unfiltered experience operates to underline the productivity and value inherent to a life promoting false mimetic truths.

Early critics failed to identify this sophisticated execution of aesthetic form. Instead of comprehending the past as an aesthetically modified, active aspect of present reality and the root of social change, critics failed to recognise the work’s delineation of the past as the key to present psychological shelter. Instead, Wharton’s ‘backward glance’ was read as evidencing her detachment from a contemporary state of affairs. If the *The House of Mirth* perceptibly underlined the stunted nature of past aesthetic forms, *The Age of Innocence* appeared, on a surface level, to embody the incompetency of such aesthetics. As I shall discuss in more detail in Chapter One, the 1920 Pulitzer Prize board erroneously celebrated the text for “uplifting American morals”, self-interestedly seizing onto Archer’s gentlemanly dedication to family and communal structure in his failure to receive the socially disruptive Ellen in the novel’s final chapter (Lewis, *Letters* 445). Its jury also seemed to overlook the contemporary relevance of Wharton’s historical novel, implying that the text was “dead” and lacked representational force (Pride). This brutal reading had a damaging flow-on effect. Carl van Doren, writing in 1923, lamented Wharton’s inconsequential historic subject,

claiming that her “advance in satire may arise from nothing more significant than her retreat into the past for her subject” (qtd Killoran 4). Robert Morss Lovett similarly deemed her “a relic who did not understand evolution or the problems of the masses”, as her temporal removal from the contemporary period “destroyed any sense of her relevance to modern life”. Lovett painted Wharton as a figure “whispering the last enchantments of the Victorian age”, evading engagement with a difficult, uncomfortable post-war present (Killoran 4-5).

The idea that Wharton was burying her head in the sand and escaping reality by retreating into her “childish memories of a long-vanished America” persisted in later twentieth century criticism (*BG* 369). In 1961, Blake Nevius Blake read *The Age of Innocence* as a “recoil from the post-war world” (Killoran 96). Later, in 1989, Shari Benstock portrayed Wharton as deaf to modernity, belonging “totally to the nineteenth-century [...] although she spent thirty-seven years of her life in the twentieth” (*Women of the Left Bank* 86).<sup>7</sup> In 1993, following Martin Scorsese’s cinematic interpretation of *The Age of Innocence*, Andrew Delbanco moved to yet again characterise Wharton as “a woman who, though contemptuous of the saturated Victorian interiors in which she had grown up, had not yet made the turn into the modern” (31). Wharton’s perceived detachment, her apparent failure to grapple with the challenging nuance of the post-war world’s “unnatural sharpness of outline and over-heightening of colour,” left her imprisoned in an ‘old-fashioned’, sentimental identity, as the twentieth century’s “last Victorian” (*BG* 369, Killoran 3).

While criticism in the latter half of the twentieth century has been dominated by feminist and materialist readings of Wharton’s gender and class, studies in the 2000s have broadened to discuss Wharton’s presentation of race and survey her texts

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<sup>7</sup> All Benstock citations hereafter refer to her text *No Gifts From Chance: A Biography of Edith Wharton*.

from a post-colonial perspective.<sup>8</sup> Modern scholarship on Wharton has also broadened to consider her lesser-read works, such as *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), *The Reef* (1912) *Summer* (1917), and *Glimpses of the Moon* (1922). Recent critics have also assessed Wharton's interest in interior and architectural spaces.<sup>9</sup> However, this thesis's identification of an 'interior architecture' departs from existing readings in the sense that it assesses how Wharton's spatial metaphors negotiate formal, temporal and socio-cultural transition.

Contemporary 1920s criticism of Wharton's datedness centred not just upon her backward subjects, but her backward formal techniques. While early critics frequently lambasted her for her "indifference to social or political problems", she was also condemned for her technical conservatism (Machaud qtd Killoan 5). In 1928, Gerald Bullett of the *Saturday Review*, claimed that Wharton, when compared to Virginia Woolf, was "content to practice the art of fiction without enlarging its technical scope" (qtd Majumdar and McLaurin 163). It was a statement that echoed Woolf's own 1925 notion that Wharton (alongside fellow American authors Henry James and Joseph Hergesheimer), did not provide the literary world with "anything we have not got already" (Woolf qtd Calapinto). In that same initial review, Bullett lauded Woolf's "brilliant experimentalism" in *Mrs. Dalloway*, praising the novel's progressive technique:

It is not so much that the picture lacks definition as that it lacks stability; its outlines are incessantly flowing into new, bright patterns. Nothing for a moment stands still: the flying landscape daubs our vision a myriad bright streaks of changing colour; shapes are perpetually disintegrating and revolving into new shapes. (qtd Majumdar and McLaurin 164)

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<sup>8</sup> For a comprehensive overview of contemporary Wharton criticism, see Jessica Schubert McCarthy's chapter on "Modern Critical Receptions" in *Edith Wharton in Context*.

<sup>9</sup> See Sarah Luria's "The Architecture of Manners: Henry James, Edith Wharton, and The Mount.", Annette Benert's *The Architectural Imagination of Edith Wharton*, and Gary Totten's *Boxes and Guarded Interiors: Edith Wharton and Material Culture*. Laura Rattay's *Edith Wharton in Context* also offers up two interesting chapters on "Architecture" by Celia Macheski and "Interior and Garden design by Helena Chance.

It was everything Wharton's work, from a critical perspective, was not: animated, unrestrained, dynamic and above all, vital. One of the most damning pieces of all criticism that highlighted Wharton's 'dead' style came from modernist author Katherine Mansfield. In her 1920 review for the *Athenaeum*, Mansfield ruthlessly remarked: "Does Mrs. Wharton expect us to grow warm in a gallery where the temperature is so sparkingly cool? We are looking at portraits—are we not? These are human beings, arranged for exhibition purposes, framed, glazed, and hung in the perfect light" (qtd Killoran 93). Wharton's text seemed much like the artefacts Ellen laments in *The Age of Innocence*'s museum scene—a "time-blurred substance" indicating a period that "used to be necessary and important to forgotten people" and now is "guessed at [...] and labelled: 'Use unknown'" (*AOI* 255).

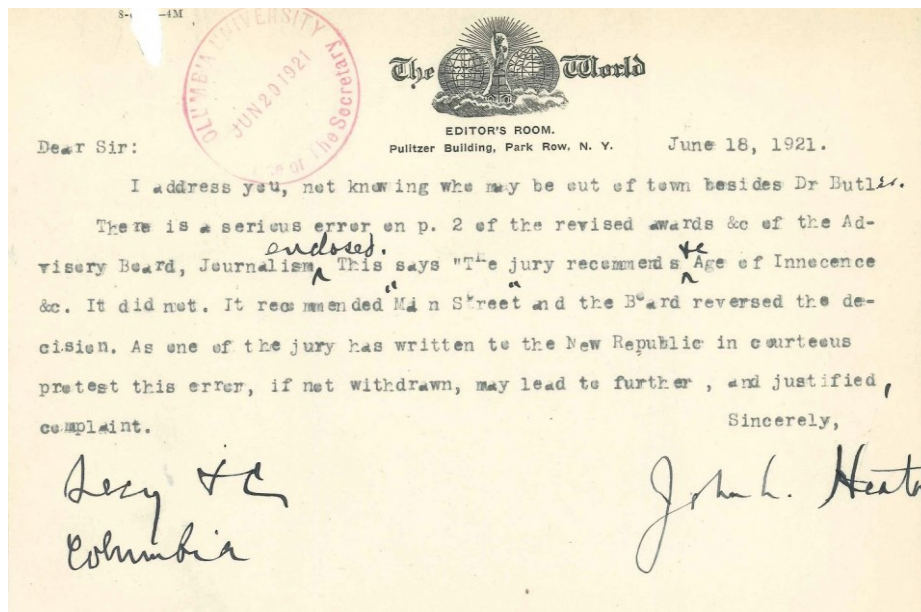
"Use unknown" was exactly how the Pulitzer jury and board read *The Age of Innocence*. Failing to comprehend the psychologically restorative purpose of her old-fashioned aesthetics, Wharton was established as America's "first lady of letters", yet also as an author unable to "entreat a little wildness, a dark place or two in the soul" (Killoran 95). Whilst she received general praise, the novel's commitment to aesthetic order and design instigated Wharton's later authorial identification as the priggish winner of the "Virtue Prize". It was a characterisation that would come to unfairly colour criticism of her work for the majority of the twentieth century, and a characterisation this thesis seeks to dismantle in its following chapters (Benstock 365).

## **1. Bridging the Abyss**

The welter is always out there and the present generation hears close underfoot the growling of the volcano on which ours danced so long; but in individual lives, though the years are sad, the days have a way of being jubilant. Life is the saddest thing there is, next to death...

—Edith Wharton (*BG* 379)

“Disgust” and “despair” are not emotions one would typically associate with the discovery of one’s winning a major literary award. Yet this was Edith Wharton’s initial response to her winning the Pulitzer prize in 1921. As the first woman to ever win the award, the prize appeared to cement her literary prowess, paving the way for an honorary doctorate she later accepted from Yale in 1923 (Kunz 77). It seemed to be the authoritative moment in which Wharton appeared to shake off her “drifting amateur” ‘lady novelist’ identity and firmly progress into the status of “professional” (*BG* 209). Yet she nearly failed to win the prize at all.



**Figure 1:** John L. Heaton's note clarifying that the Novel jury did not recommend Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* for the Pulitzer in 1921.

*The Age of Innocence* had not been the Pulitzer jury’s first choice. Chaired by novelist Hamlin Garland, the jury also included two “journalists-turned-academics”: professor of literature Robert Morss Lovett (who had a brief tenure as



editor of the *New York Herald Tribune* book section and was one of Wharton's most scathing critics), and Stuart Pratt Sherman, who later took over the editorship Morss Lovett had previously held (Benstock 364). The three had clear mid-western associations. Garland hailed from Wisconsin, Sherman was a prior faculty worker at the University of Illinois, and Lovett had held a teaching role at University of Chicago. The trio thus represented the westward-direction and middle-class sympathies that had been slowly brewing in American fiction over the past fifty years. In light of this, and perhaps unsurprisingly, the jury comprehensively favoured *Main Street* (1920), the latest novel by the "red-haired tornado from the Minnesota wilds", Sinclair Lewis (H. L. Mencken qtd Bode 166). *Main Street* was lauded for its vital commentary on contemporary American life, possessing characters that "persist[ed] in memory as three-or-four dimensioned robust beings months after they are met" (Pride). Wharton's novel was contrastingly read as "dead" (Lovett qtd Benstock 364). *Main Street's* "abundant comic spirit and critical as well as representational force", meant that it did "something to the mind as well as to the feelings": it both activated and widened the socio-cultural frame of its readership (Pride). *The Age of Innocence*, by contrast, failed to live up to Sherman's three tenets of "a work of art", lacking multifaceted characters, wanting active contemporary resonance, and failing (for Sherman) to challenge its readers' socio-cultural conception of the world in which they lived.

Like Wharton's protagonist Newland Archer, *Main Street's* Carol Milford is pressed back into position by the conservatism of her community, yet Carol actively asserts her intellectual liberty and moral freedom when seemingly immobilized at the novel's conclusion. Archer contrastingly preserves his individual desire internally: in the inaudible, abstract, aestheticised image of Ellen—"a relic in a small dim chapel"

(AOI 296). While Archer represses his desire for an unfettered existence, Carol refuses to restrain or delimit her desire for an expanded life. *Main Street*'s active "get[ting] down in the muck" is what separates the two novels (102). For the Pulitzer jury, Sinclair's concluding image of Carol's open, ceaseless rebellion against the status quo felt more pertinent to the contemporary literary and social moment in comparison to Wharton's venerable image of conformity. This portrayal of individual repression serving communal preservation was the likely cause for Wharton's elevation to prize-winner. Lewis's satirical novel was rumoured to be considered "too controversial" by the Columbia board, as it had the potential to destabilise the university's relationship with wealthy midwestern industrialists (Benstock 365). The man most likely behind the switch was Nicholas Murray Butler, the president of Columbia University (Pride).

Wharton was soon made aware of the debate behind her decoration as well as the bureaucratic nature of Lewis's rejection. Responding to a stiff letter of congratulations from Lewis, Wharton expressed her disillusionment regarding the underlying circumstances of her victory:

When I discovered that I was being rewarded—by one of our leading Universities—for *uplifting American morals*, I confess I did despair. Subsequently, when I found out the prize should have really been yours, but was withdrawn because your book (I quote from memory) had 'offended a number of prominent persons in the Middle West,' disgust was added to despair. (qtd Lewis, *Letters* 445, emphasis added)

Wharton was dismayed that her work was being awarded on the basis that it best presented "the highest standard of American Manners and manhood" (Pride). The Pulitzer jury, caught up in the contemporary dynamism of *Main Street*, failed to look beyond *The Age of Innocence*'s historical veneer and identify Wharton's nuanced exhibition of a timeless modernity. Its setting within old moneyed New York society—an isolated segment of the United States as a whole—felt out of touch with

the dynamic social realities of 1920s America and unintentionally pandered to critics hungry for further evidence of Wharton's upper-class failings. As I suggested earlier, this austere, old-fashioned image of Wharton evolved through academic critics irked by her wealth and upper class 'aristocratic' origins.<sup>10</sup> As Killoran suggests, these critics, influenced by early socialism, felt that the accident of Wharton's wealth and connections made her undemocratic and outside the spirit of "realism" (1).<sup>11</sup> But the bureaucratically-minded board appreciated the novel's closeted depiction of American society, as it set a precedent for the style of society modern America should aspire to: one sensitive to individual honour, family dignity and the traditions and customs that facilitated socio-cultural continuity. *The Age of Innocence* was the timely exemplification of the rigid formal structure and rigorous code of moral honour that characterised the Gilded Age—a social cultural framework that required reinforcing when novels like *Main Street* looked to shatter the sentimental American myth of happy small-town life with its satire of narrow-minded provincialism.

The Pulitzer's bestowal not only informed the public's reading of *The Age of Innocence* but set a critical precedent for how Wharton was to be read. Indeed, its weight as a prestigious literary award continues to inform our understanding of Edith Wharton today, and it fanned the discriminatory scent of personal and literary stiffness that has lingered alongside Wharton's name. Despite contributing to warped perceptions of her novelistic intention and authorial identity with their political decision, the Pulitzer board did get something right: they correctly identified *The Age*

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<sup>10</sup> Hermione Lee's chapter "Making Up" (pp. 10-44) in her larger biography *Edith Wharton* gives an excellent overview of Wharton's prestigious ancestral links to the old patroon families of the former Dutch government of New York and New Jersey. The idiom 'keeping up with the Joneses' is said to be a reference to Wharton's paternal family, whose extreme wealth lay in property.

<sup>11</sup> "Realism" here refers to the genre of writing associated with William Dean Howells—the preferred style of writing at the time (Killoran 1).

*of Innocence* as an “uplifting”, buoyant work (Lewis, *Letters* 455). Here, I shall look to demonstrate why the Pulitzer Prize administrators misread *The Age of Innocence*, and in doing so contributed to a broader misreading of Edith Wharton’s authorial objective that has permeated criticism following her death in 1937.

In this chapter, I seek to re-frame the critical architecture that has traditionally structured literary readings of Wharton. To do this, I will first assess Wharton alongside the modernism she deemed anarchistic. Through this discussion, I will reappraise her inferred status as a ‘failed modernist’, identifying a philosophical modernism in her work despite her open rejection of literary modernism’s ‘underdeveloped’ aesthetic and theoretical principles. Positioning her between this twentieth century modernism and its realist predecessor, I look to further loosen Wharton’s tie to Henry James, differentiating her from his art of fiction by emphasising her attempts to *effectuate* the psychological complexity James has his characters ruminate but never realise. In this way, Wharton attempts to present a modernist interiority in play alongside an encompassing realist reality, mobilising interior consciousness in an active temporal world.

This chapter aims to show how Wharton’s injection of a ‘modernist’ interiority into a pre-existing realist mode was a means of re-centring a form that was at once restrictive in its stylised perspective and “large, loose [and] baggy” in its expansive attempts to mimetically encompass reality (James 1107). In both inverting and tightening realism’s parameters, Wharton looked to renovate the mode, reframing the historical-realist novel to emphasise a perennial, philosophical modernism. In doing so, she cultivated a formal architecture that sought to psychologically house a human spirit that perpetually ached in response to the natural irregularity and uncertainty of existence. I will thereby position Edith Wharton as a ‘modern’ realist,

who constructs in her literature an ‘interior architecture’ in which a modern psychological interior is cultivated within an expanded realist container. Wharton thus emerges as a figure ‘bridging the abyss’: collapsing notions of historical and formal division by suggesting that the present is simply an aesthetically altered reformulation of the past. In exhibiting this theory of historical development, Wharton implicitly provides a way to bridge the seemingly insurmountable abyss between pre-war and post-war worlds, drawing readers attention to an inherent socio-cultural interrelatedness that endures beneath an exterior world of aesthetic change and progression.

Such a model additionally offers an alternative means of understanding Wharton’s own position within literary history. As her conception of the past enduring into the present collapsed the notion of fixed breaks and gaps in historical time, Wharton undermined the utopian modernist ideal of breaking from histories past to establish a new literary mode. She thus reads literary modernism as a shallow aesthetic development, incapable of truly activating a divorced state of originality that modernists like Pound, Eliot and Woolf believed they were striving towards. Modernist texts were simply past concerns clothed in experimental, contemporary garb. Sympathetic to Georg Lukács’s dogged belief that literary realism enabled the historical process to be understood and artistically represented, Wharton moves to underscore the psychological value of such a totalising belief system. Yet she simultaneously acknowledges the impossibility and ultimate artificiality of uniting micro and macro level perspectives in a single aesthetic form. In the work of Wharton, individual consciousness and a shared reality are held side by side, but, as Harry Shaw suggests, psyche and society remain fundamentally unstable entities, incapable of being convincingly united (47). Wharton recognises this structural

incongruity and refuses to fuse the two together. Newland Archer remains internally individually minded, but his external circumstances do not mirror this state of being. Though his interior and exterior worlds do not integrate, Wharton ensures they are held together against one another. In doing so, she shows her readership how one might bridge the abyss between micro and macro, between present and past, between interior and exterior. Acknowledging the ephemerality of existence and the way in which individually contributing to an ideological aesthetic can help preserve the life span of a humanity to come is what mediates individual, topical trauma. Recognising that one is, like Archer, a “brick” in “a well-built wall” serves to diminish the paralysing magnitude of individual life, whilst simultaneously announcing a single person’s significance in contributing to a pattern broader than themselves (*AOI* 286). Knowingly subscribing to an artificial state of being that upholds a regenerative socio-cultural frame enables the development of a psychological citadel: a house that cushions one through the inconsistencies of external life. Archer thus performs the role of an ideal, astute reader: correctly identifying the existence of an artificial, stylised presentation of reality, surrendering himself to its depiction, and in doing so finding refuge in the immaterial communication that lies within aesthetic form itself.

### **I. A Philosophical Modernism**

Few of Edith Wharton’s early twentieth century literary contemporaries subscribed to the past’s vital continuity in the present. Her critical peak (1905-1920, according to Edmund Wilson<sup>12</sup>) arose within an intellectually and psychologically tumultuous historical period, a period that looked to invalidate perspectives past. The fin-de-siècle had just turned, the uncertainty of a new century loomed overhead and, towards the latter half of her professional prime, global stability and existing

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<sup>12</sup> See Wilson pp. 159-173.

worldviews imploded with the outbreak of the Great War in 1914. This dimming of the familiar, unfolding of the new, and abrupt, violent disruption of societal stability bound Wharton's oeuvre to an era characterised by what critics have described as a "crisis time" (Sherry 2). What generated this cognitive crisis was the sense of being temporally hinged on the brink of history. The monumentality of transitioning from the end of one decaying decade to the beginning of one new and unknowable produced an immense focus on the present moment as one of intense significance, and from this present self-consciousness, a sense of one's modernity. In his "Introduction: A History of Modernism", Vincent Sherry provides a valuable overview of the epistemological origins of modernism as a concept. Deriving from the Latin word *modos*, meaning "just now", the word *modern* entails a meaning "narrower than an adjectival understanding of 'recent' or 'current'; [rather] it finds its meaning as a temporal adverb, telling the time of an action occurring [...] 'just now'" (Sherry 2). With a heightened focus on the immediate now, society registered the period from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century as one temporally "pressured by an immense sense of eventful change: a special present, a brink of time, a precipitous instant, all in all, a crisis time".

Time was no longer experienced in a "natural, apparently gradual time of diurnal days and seasonal rounds" as it had in the nineteenth-century and centuries prior (3). Instead, thanks to the technological and theoretical developments of the early twentieth century, time felt as if it were being "sliced ever more finely and grandly by the developing mechanisms of chronometry". The division of the globe into twenty-four equal time zones and the parsing of micro times within a supposedly seamless instantaneity meant that time felt increasingly like a series of "vertiginous instants" than a stable, uniform onward-flowing cycle. Time seemed to lack sequence

or consequence, as the space that formerly declared a span or a between looked set to collapse. Time thus appeared as the “accumulation of qualitative impressions [rather] than a quantifiable and progressive movement” (Taunton). No longer imagined as a line or a chain, or a succession of hours and minutes, time was conceived as “pure heterogeneity” (Bergson 121). As such, ‘modern’ twentieth century time no longer retained a connection to times past and was consequently understood as an “isolated and radicalised piece of time, being at once full of itself and emptied of precedents or destinies” (Sherry 7). The twentieth century thus appeared to stand alone as a new, alien era. Far from evidencing a vital continuity, Edith Wharton’s social age read the past as decidedly broken from the present.

What reinforced this intellectual gulf and sense of alienation from ages past was a compelling current of hermeneutic suspicion and philosophical scepticism that derived from the age’s intensified attention to the present state of existence. As Michael Bell notes, Marx’s analysis of the external realm of social and economic processes had exposed the “false consciousness” through which the ruling classes rationalised their condition (9). Freud introduced the concept of “sublimation”, in which he purported consciousness may complexly mask the true nature of instinctive desire. And Nietzsche had pronounced the whole tradition of Western metaphysics from Socrates onwards a subtle form of falsehood, with Christianity especially framed as a “gigantic fraud perpetrated by the psyche on itself”. External appearances were increasingly perceived as untrustworthy, limited and fallible, often disguising contrary truths. Indeed, thanks to society’s increasing technological, scientific and artistic faculty for streamlining reality, imposing justice upon the general mass and creating beauty through the careful elimination of extraneous matter, many given truths were re-examined as artificial deceptions projected onto a fundamentally unstable natural



world. As philosopher Martin Heidegger noted in his 1938 lecture “The Age of the World Picture”, during the modernist period: “The world picture does not change from an earlier, medieval one into a modern one, but rather the fact that the world becomes a picture at all is what distinguishes the essence of the modern age” (qtd Bell 13). In other words, the development of a relativistic consciousness—the understanding that the ‘truth’ of existence is framed in relation to a distinctly human perspective—was the defining characteristic of modernity.

The modern age’s exposition of a ‘real’ time, previously shrouded by the narrative veneer of history, and the stark, fractured vision of reality that replaced it heavily impacted the arts. Up until this revelatory modern moment, realism had been the presiding aesthetic movement. Realist artists aimed to represent their subject matter truthfully, without artificiality or the implementation of artistic convention. The movement’s comprehensive, totalising portrayals of reality were, in light of this modern consciousness, exposed as inherently unreliable and irrational. In its quest to capture reality, realism had covertly invoked an artificial reconciliation of language and the world, presenting streamlined, selective social order and worldview: an aestheticised image rather than a genuine untainted mimetic representation of reality.

The modernist movement reacted against realism’s representational inauthenticity and inability to authentically capture the multifariousness of dynamic raw reality. In literature, modernist writers sought to emphasise realism’s implausible marriage of language and the world, accentuating an authentic struggle to procure totality and attempting to open the novel up to a more inclusive view of everyday life (Castle 6). One of the most recognisable figures of literary modernism was the English novelist Virginia Woolf. In her seminal essay “Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown”, published in 1924, Woolf articulated the representational crisis the literary modernists

faced, claiming that “in or about December 1910, human character changed” (2). In reality, human character hadn’t changed. Rather, assumptions around the essential knowability of individuals and our aesthetic capacity to totalistically represent individuals in their multiplicity were subject to revision. Woolf claimed that pre-existing “Edwardian tools” for literary representation were “the wrong ones [...] to use” because they “laid an enormous stress upon the fabric of things” (16). In stressing external, material appearances, they provide us with the skeleton of character rather than the psychological innards. Literary modernism sought to give body to these immaterial, incongruous interior.

As I suggested earlier, readings of Wharton as “outdated as the dust of old-lavender”, and shut off from “the problems of the masses” failed to register a woman highly attuned to the contemporary age’s prominent “ache of modernism” and the representational crisis that stimulated this sense of existential incoherence (Killoran 3-4). Looking across Wharton’s fiction from 1905-1920, we can identify an awareness of the psychological disorientation a modern ‘crisis time’ instigated in the early twentieth century. In *The House of Mirth*, modernity’s “multiplication of wakefulness” is concentrated in the image of the “electric light” (321-322). The electric light lays the protagonist Lily’s physical disintegration bare, and later enters into “her head”, tormenting “her poor little anguished self” which shrinks and “cower[s] in it, without knowing where to take refuge”. Lily’s “ache of modernism” results in perspective disappearing—“the next day press[ing] close upon her, and on its heels came the days that were to follow—they swarmed about her like a shrieking mob” (322). As well exhibiting the disruptive nature of modernism as a feeling, Wharton similarly confronts modernity’s representational crisis. *The House of Mirth* is a novel full of aestheticised stock figures—“the beautiful, suffering heroine and the

analytical, judgemental masculine observer”—but “turns them askew” (*FLOW* 111). This disruption of surface layer highlights the double layered nature of contemporary reality, showcasing realism’s fixed outer layer of artistic distortion and underlining its role in obscuring underlying truths of reality beneath—a notion I shall unpack in more detail in Chapter Two.

If we flash fifteen years forward to *The Age of Innocence*, Newland Archer, like Lily Bart, is held psychologically captive by the unreality of his social world. Recognising the falsity of his existence within the synthetic aesthetic of old New York’s “hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs”, Archer finds himself in “a state of odd imponderability” (*AOI* 36, 276). With his individuality compressed into an external identity framed by the “masculine solidarity” of old New York, Archer finds himself in a “state of abstraction”, with his remaining subjective self “float[ing] somewhere between chandelier and ceiling” (276, 203, 243). Archer’s dislocation and subjective paralysis instigated by his modern consciousness is echoed in “the shell-shocked aphasia of a Septimus Smith in the character of Ethan Frome, [and in] the modernist hesitancy of J. Alfred Prufrock in her 1928 work *The Children’s* Martin Boyne” (*Fetishized Family* 24). In particular, *Ethan Frome* (1911) evidences a domesticity destabilised, unmooring the domestic sphere from its nineteenth-century associations and presenting it as a space of absence and modernist alienation (Clarke 195). Detailed plots and domestic detail fail to result in a secure, stable household: ordinary domestic enterprise does not result in a refuge, but an intensification of emptiness (196). In *Ethan Frome*, we see modernist poet W. B Yeats’s sentiment realised: “Things fall apart: the centre cannot hold” (Yeats, line 3). Wharton’s modernist sensibilities were also located in her fiction by contemporary critics.

Edmund Wilson, writing in 1926, saw a modern sense of desolation in the “aesthetic and emotional wasteland of [American] puritan character” demonstrated in the bleak landscapes of *Ethan Frome* and the shattered human relationships of *The Custom of the Country* (1913) and *Summer* (1917) (qtd *Fetishized Family* 19). Such features led him to suggest that T. S. Eliot’s quintessentially modernist poem “The Waste Land” had not emerged from a vacuum, but from the modernist sensibilities of fellow American expatriates like Wharton.

Even the modernists themselves recognised a preoccupation with literary modernism’s theoretical concerns in the works of Edith Wharton. F. Scott Fitzgerald, writing to his friend Thomas Boyd after having failed to call on Wharton in Hyères in May 1924, described her as “a very distinguished grande dame who fought the good fight with bronze age weapons when there were very few people in that line at all” (Brucoli and Duggan 141). For the remainder of this chapter, I intend to expand upon this vision of Edith Wharton as a pivotal literary figure who dealt with the theoretical concerns of modernism with “bronze age weapons”—outmoded formal techniques the modernists would later abandon (Fitzgerald qtd Brucoli et al. 141). Specifically, I look to explain Wharton’s deliberate decision to remain stylistically “old-fashioned”, and not try “to follow the new [formal] methods” (Lewis, *Letters* 480). A viable way of articulating Wharton’s definitive divergence from the formal techniques of modernism is to compare her literary trajectory to that of Virginia Woolf. Alongside her clear, coherent description of the modernist cause, Woolf provides us with an excellent frame against which we can assess Edith Wharton’s contrary conception of modernism and the shared modernity they inhabited. Not only was Woolf a literary figure active at the height of Wharton’s authorial career, but she also bears resemblance to Wharton in other interesting ways. Both were novelists,

both came from upper-class backgrounds that denied girls a formal education, both experienced forms of challenging sexual repression and both utilized writing as a means of psychological alleviation.

Writing in relatively close proximity to Wharton's 1905 *The House of Mirth*, Woolf began work on her first novel *The Voyage Out* in approximately 1908, before eventually publishing it in 1915 (*VO* xii). In this text, Woolf echoes Wharton in her attempt to communicate the theoretical concerns of modernism in an outdated formal container. In *The Voyage Out*, Woolf attempts to move outside the formal parameters of the traditional realist novel, pursuing a stylistic form that could suitably convey her modern metaphysical concerns. *The Voyage Out* subsequently presents itself as an anti-bildungsroman that draws attention to the ways in which conventional formulas of self-development fail to encompass and express the modern, myriadic experience of being and maturing. The text thus presents a conventional narrative structure in tension with its ambiguous, dreamlike narrative subject—a subject that frequently seeks to evade its structural confines. As Lorna Sage notes, “the plot doesn't really change” (*VO* xiv). Rather than action, the novel is dominated by characters' mediations on the unsatisfactory nature of words, the limitations of interpersonal relationships and the inherent unknowability of human character. Rachel Vinrace, the novel's protagonist embodies these cognitive limitations. Despite her protagonist status, Woolf deliberately denies her the knowability of character and has her remain a shapeless, impressionable entity for the duration of the novel. Others attempt to “form her and ‘bring her out’”, yet in purposely keeping her shadowy, Woolf ensures Rachel does not become a ‘vessel’, falsely circumscribed and fated to reproduce outdated Edwardian conventions in future generations (xxx).

Conventional social identities are similarly depicted as being in tension with one's sense of interior self. Despite shrinking England and voyaging out to attain a new, foreign perspective, Rachel continues to collide with expectations of marriage and motherhood. As the material world continually provides a limited space for Rachel to organise and express her interior self, she turns to the non-referential, anti-materialist art form of music to articulate her desire to move beyond pre-existing social structures and expressions of selfhood. Music "goes straight for things", it says "all there is to say at once (*VO* 239). It dissolves emotional divisions and expresses the "ineffable aspects of human experience—the sense of that reality one saw and felt" (Varga 79). When she plays, Rachel is able to momentarily bridge the gap between human consciousness and its exterior and creates an abstract space—"a shape, a building"—in which communication is liberated from the rules and principles instigated by oral and written language (*VO* 86). Yet this united expression of a is ultimately as transitory as "light passing over the surface and vanishing", and Rachel's death at the novel's close affirms the impossibility of reconciling inner world and material reality (*VO* 138).

By the time we reach *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *Between the Acts* (1941), Woolf abandons the novel's coherent structural framework of chapters, plot, linear temporality, focalisation and dialogue in favour of a style of text that evinces unstructured mediations narrated in stream of consciousness and occurring over the duration of single days. In this way Woolf has her literature formally mirror her modernist concerns, stylistically inverting a totalising representation of reality and a linear conception of time. In *The Voyage Out* subjective consciousness is articulated in a coherent, exteriorized form and shared amongst an audience. Rachel's audience see in her music "a building with shapes and columns succeeding each other rising in

the empty space”, which enables them to “to see themselves and their lives, and the whole of human life advancing very nobly” (*VO* 187).

Following the Great War, however, Woolf refuses to grant aesthetic form the power to convey an orderly existential narrative or meaning. *To The Lighthouse* (1925) and *Between the Acts* (1941) present art as producing a transient abstract meaning that evades the material world. This invisible, incoherent air of meaning erupts as the work’s “orts, scraps and fragments” interact in active play, producing a momentary illumination that dissolves as quickly as it emerges, leaving only the disconnected vestiges of its advent for observation (*BTA* 170). In *To the Lighthouse*, amateur artist Lily Briscoe endeavours to unify her painting by capturing the lighthouse that forms the novel’s title. As Lily enters the moment in which she actively completes the artwork, she has a “sudden intensity” of illuminating “vision” that then evaporates when the work is rendered static and materially complete (Woolf 176). In *Between the Acts*, Miss La Trobe’s paegent similarly endeavours to enact the unification of life and art by turning her actors into walking mirrors so the audience becomes what it sees. Yet as with Lily Briscoe’s artwork (and as we shall later see Lily Bart’s tableaux), this synthesis cannot be concretely fixed, as time’s incessant flow denies the permanent unification of audience and play, perpetually negating wholeness. For a moment, play and audience, audience and image, merge. Yet “unification is merely a pious hope, not an opportunity—a conception expressed when the parson’s word “opportunity” is cut in half by military aircraft” (*BTA* xxxiii). A sense of whole is constantly frustrated as characters fail “in a common effort to bring a common meaning to birth”, flitting between “Unity—dispersity” (*BTA* 137, 181). And yet evolving out of these unsuccessful attempts to lay ahold of this obscure meaning beyond material realisation are “invisible threads” that gesture towards a

collective consciousness, a bodiless language “behind the eyes; not on the lips”—  
 “thoughts without words” (*BTA* 135, 50).



**Fig 2:** Edith and Walter Berry with two members of the French military at Nieuport in western Belgium. Her four 1915 trips to the front included Lorraine, the Vosges, Alsace, and Verdun, which she described in Scribner’s Magazine articles later collected in *Fighting France: From Dunquerque to Belfort* (1915).

For Woolf, “The proper stuff of fiction does not exist [...] Everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss” (McNeillie 164). By “proper stuff”, Woolf refers to the cohered image of reality fiction endeavours to depict. For her, literary art fragmentedly gestures towards a unified meaning collectively felt, but beyond material realisation in coherent, whole form. Wharton, however, opposed this theoretical premise. Despite her suspicion and later acknowledgement of the falsity inherent in totalising representations of reality, Wharton retained her belief in the value of a shared worldview, as well as an aesthetic form that endeavoured to preserve such a perspective. Why? The answer rests in Wharton’s direct contact with



wartime trauma. Alongside her dealings with distressed wartime refugees, Wharton had made four trips to the front in 1915. In August, she toured the Alsace front, recalling the “scarred land, the faces of the men in the trenches, her emotion at arriving at posts” (Benstock 314).

Wharton struggled to come to terms with the reality of the war. Just prior to confirmation of the war’s outbreak, Wharton described the French social scene as “strange, ominous and unreal, like the yellow glare which precedes a storm. There were moments which I felt as if I had died, and waked up in an unknown world. And so I had” (*BG* 338). Later in March 1915, when the war had come to fruition, she wrote to Henry James to describe her recent trip to the frontlines in Verdun,<sup>13</sup> and recounted her refusal to believe that the war “was true, or happening to me” (qtd Lewis, *Letters* 353). Wharton’s time at the front forced her to recognise that reality, in light of the war, was a “pretense” one could no longer convincingly uphold—a revelation that struck her as she and her friend Walter Berry skirted around active front lines, evading the German army’s “invisible eyes” (356). What Wharton experienced there, besides the terrifying “sense of being in the very gates of hell”, was a real-life conception of Heidegger’s “world picture” (Lewis, *Letters* 356, Bell 86). It was an experience akin to H. G. Wells’ description in *Mr. Britling Sees It Through* (1916):

The familiar scenery of life was drawn aside, and War stood unveiled. ‘I am the Fact,’ said War, ‘and I stand astride the path of life. I am the threat of death and extinction [. . .] There can be nothing else and nothing more in human life until you have reckoned with me.’ (186)

The world preceding the war was, just as Wells suggests, mere “scenery of life”, an artificial aesthetic obscuring a stark reality of disorder and meaninglessness. Prior to

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<sup>13</sup> This front in Verdun would later become the site of the Battle of Verdun, the longest battle of the Great War, lasting for some 302 days.

this awakening, society had operated as “like children in a nursery”, accepting reality at face value (46). The Great War registered a new conception of life in relation to the natural world. British novelist Ford Maddox Ford, who was gassed and shell-shocked during this time, described the intense psychological repercussions of battle in *It Was the Nightingale* (1933), claiming that:

No one could have come through that shattering experience and still view life and mankind with any normal vision. [. . .] Ordered Life itself was stretched, the merest film with, beneath it, the abysses of Chaos. One had to come from the frail shelters of the line to a world that was more frail than any canvas hut. (Ford qtd Chantler and Hawkes 3)

“Normal vision”, as Ford suggests here, gave way to the bleak realisation Woolf articulates in *To the Lighthouse*: the realisation that nature did not supplement what humankind advanced, that the “dream, of sharing, completing, of finding in solitude on the beach an answer, was then but a reflection in the mirror, and the mirror itself [...] broken” (114). Having previously consoled spiritlessness and existential confusion, nature was now recognised as simply a surface layer upon which humankind futilely projected order and purpose. For writers like Katherine Mansfield, the Great War revealed the “ubiquitous presence of death within life and demanded not only that life be seen differently but also that it be valued all the more” (Gąsiorek 233). Writing to husband John Middleton Murry, Mansfield remarked that life was now “intensified” and “illumined” (O’Sullivan and Scott 97). The war’s instigation of a new metaphysical vision could be understood as a “tragic knowledge”, as humanity now saw “death in life as we see death in a flower that is fresh unfolded”. As such, artists compose hymns “to the flower’s beauty”, endeavouring to immortalise the beauty of life “because we *know*” (288; emphasis original). *The Age of Innocence* thus operates as a literary hymn to the innocent beauty of human life, extolling humanity’s

fragile aesthetic mechanisms that work to cushion a death imminent in the raw reality in which we live.

## II. Reframing Realism

Wharton was greatly affected by the war's intensification of an awareness around the inevitability of death and its close proximity to life, despite the apparent vitality of the natural world. Her time on the front roused meditations on the psychological state of society, particularly now that, following the upheaval of the war, the world seemed (as Ford had suggested) "more frail than any canvas hut" (qtd Chantler and Hawkes 3). The conception of our socio-cultural world as a delicate architectural structure (like the hut Wells references) played a major role in Edith Wharton's literature. In the nineteenth-century, an analogic tradition of literary architecture emerged, with architects imagining buildings as books that could be read and authors correspondingly imagining books as constructing abstract architectural spaces within their bounds (Stephenson 1096). Wharton, following in the footsteps of Walter Pater, Honoré de Balzac and her compatriot Henry James, connected literary form with architectural design. *The House of Mirth* depicts an individual structurally encased in a morally frivolous society. In this biblically-realised 'house of mirth', spatial metaphors are used to present the way in which a materialistic, egotistical society carelessly destroys "what is most beautiful and blameless within it" (Singley 3). While interior spaces contract and imprison the protagonist in *The House of Mirth*, in the post-war publishing environment of *The Age of Innocence*, these same constrictive interior spaces become psychologically liberating, "blessed refuge[s] from the turmoil and mediocrity of today"—sanctuaries in a "mighty temple" (Lewis, *Bio* 424). Wharton's interconnection of society and architecture here echoes the way

in which she discusses buildings in her earlier travel text *A Motor-Flight Through France* (1908). There, she remarks on how:

a great Gothic cathedral [...] has sheltered such a long succession of lives [...] that it is like some mysteriously preserved ancestor of human race, some Wandering Jew grown sedentary and throned in stoney contemplation, before whom the fleeting generations come and go. (*MF* 10-11)

Architecture here becomes synonymous with civilisation and, as Wharton herself suggests, it promotes a “continuity of life”, being “a vascular system, binding the place together in its network of warm veins” (Benert 155). Stable, coherent buildings, like this “great Gothic cathedral” become figurative, material embodiments of humankind’s socio-cultural frame—an abstract structure materialised in the form of aesthetic tradition. As I discussed in the introduction, this frame is critical in its initiation of a secure foundation upon which human society can develop, progress and regenerate. Wharton was a firm believer in the value of such a socio-cultural frame. In her war novel *A Son at the Front* (1923), she envisions the Great War as a moment in which this frame appeared to be disintegrating. Her protagonist, John Campton, has a sudden realisation, consciously recognising “himself and the few beings he cared for as a part of a greater whole, component elements of the immense amazing spectacle” (*SATF* 184). The rupture of the war exposes “man as a defenceless animal suddenly torn from his shell, stripped of association, habit, background, daily ways and words, daily sights and sounds, and flung out of the human habitable world into naked ether, where nothing lives or breathes”. A society without this frame, this “shell”, existed—as the title of this thesis suggests—in the void.

Edith Wharton was a woman of order and design. One of her earlier publications, the non-fiction interior manual *The Decoration of Houses* (1897), was a call for a return to “the golden age of architecture” and its values of simplicity, privacy and restraint (Stephenson 1097). Rejecting the gilded age of decoration which

saw interiors saturated with fussy furniture, baubles and trinkets, Wharton and her co-author Ogden Codman Jr. instead celebrated “the sense of interrelation of parts, of unity of the whole” (DOH 198). Wharton’s intense interest with interior decoration and classical architecture has been well documented.<sup>14</sup> Here, I want to argue that this reverence for interior design and architectural practice fed into her philosophical stance and literary form.

Wharton’s celebration of architectural unity is mirrored in her admiration of the establishment of communal structure upon the battlefield. These separate commendations reveal a joint valuation in self-grounding human constructions: structures that serve to anchor us within the “naked ether” of our existence. From this stance, I argue, comes Wharton’s “old fashioned” devotion to the “bronze age weapons” of literary realism (Brucoli et al. 141). For her, the ultimate value of realism as a form lay *not* in its confirmation of a capitalist totality of existence as philosopher, literary historian and critic Georg Lukács proclaimed. Rather, it lay in realism’s determined *attempt* to express the existence of some kind of overarching structural entity that governs and informs our experiences in an inherently formless world. It is helpful to consider Lukács’s defence of literary realism in order to understand why Wharton retained an allegiance to its formal structure, despite her awareness of the fundamental divide between ‘realist’ representation and reality itself.

In his 1962 preface to *The Theory of the Novel* (which was published in 1920—the same year as Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence*), Lukács retrospectively claimed that “the problems of the novel form are [...] the mirror image of a world gone out of joint”, a disjointedness produced by the Great War (*Theory* 17). In this

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<sup>14</sup> See footnote no. 7 in this thesis’s introduction.

post-war period: “reality no longer constitutes a favourable soil for art”; art thus dismisses the “closed and total forms which stem from a round totality of being”. Yet earlier in the century, Lukács strove to vindicate realism as an art form, claiming in his essay “Realism in the Balance” (1938) that realism’s inherent value lay in its ability to confront an objective reality that exists in the world—a confrontation absent in modernist literature. For Lukács, illuminating the experience of the masses and demonstrating how their social experiences are latently influenced by the objective totality of capitalism was of the highest literary order. Relying heavily on Marxist theory as a brace, Lukács suggests that capitalism’s unified economic and ideological theory and influence over social relations form a totalising whole structure that functions independent of human consciousness (Day 208). Lukács argues that a subjective, immediate experience of life may seem individualistic and divorced from objective reality, but in reality, such responses are really provoked by the objective totality of capitalism<sup>15</sup>. Events that appear to be subjectively experienced have a capitalistically provoked ‘essence’. For Lukács, the abstract nature of the capitalist system conceals its hidden social forces that inform an individual’s subjective experience. The abstract nature of currency, in the sense that money is the abstract product divorced from objective origins of trade, is used as the critical example here. For Lukács, the most skilled realist authors incorporate this style of abstraction in their writing to discover the objective relationships that make up society and give them artistic shape in the form of a character’s subjective experience. In this way, realist authors “depict the vital, but not immediately obvious forces at work in objective reality”, concealing them in the subjective, immediate experience that

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<sup>15</sup> See Gail Day’s chapter “Realism, Totality and the Militant Citizen : Or, What Does Lukács Have to Do With Contemporary Art?” in *Georg Lukács: the Fundamental Dissonance of Existence* for a discussion of Lukács’s theory of capitalist totality.

characterises a capitalist totality's influence on real-life individuals ("Realism in the Balance" 47-48). Successful realists did not simply portray "the totality of a society in the crude sense of the word"; rather, they recognised that the plenitude of totality is impossible to grasp, and instead addressed a particular segment of life. Yet rather than resting within this segment and treating it as an autonomous entity, for Lukács, a successful realist provides a positive focus for reflection, highlighting the way in which this 'slice of life' is interconnected with other facets of reality and integrated into a larger totality beyond expression. In this same essay, Lukács then moves on to critique literary modernism's rejection of this capitalistic objective reality. In "taking the isolated state of mind of a specific class of intellectuals", the modernists "construct a sort of home-made model of the contemporary world", capturing the surface ruptures and discontinuities that obscured an underlying social totality, rather than gesturing towards this objective totality itself (42).

Lukács's comprehension of the school of modernism echoes Wharton's cruder sentiment that their literary form was "unformed & unimportant drivel" (Lewis, *Letters* 461). For her, "the raw material of sensation and thought"—a partial perspective of objective totality—could not "make a work of art". Art could not rest within particularities; instead it had to escalate its scale of effect, charting the connection of part to whole. Implicitly differentiating the modernists from the realists, Wharton claims that:

The chief difference between the merely sympathetic and creative imagination is that the latter is two-sided, and combines with the power of penetrating into other minds that of standing far enough aloof to see beyond, and relate them to the whole stuff of life out of which they but partially emerge. (*WOF* 15)

This ability to connect part to whole, regardless of the legitimate existence of the whole itself, was the aspect of realism Wharton cherished most. Realism's delusory

faith in the fundamental unity between part and whole, its conviction that particular and universal, individual and collective could reflect one another and ultimately mesh in harmonious whole was, for Wharton, a poignant, steady fallacy. In his seminal analysis on the formal possibilities and limitations of the historical novel form, Harry Shaw uses Siegfried Kracauer's discussions of historical perspective to elucidate this fundamental disconnection: "the bird's-eye view [of macrohistory] and the fly's-eye view [of microhistory] is in principle unfulfillable. The two kinds of enquiry may co-exist, but they do not completely fuse: as a rule, the bird swallows the fly" (47).

Likewise, the historical novel, operating in the broader vein of the realist novel, in the words of Judith Wilt:

[...] attempts an impossible task. It works, in good faith, from the premise that microcosm (the individual character, the novel) and macrocosm (the culture, the bird's-eye view called history) are equal to a third thing, the value/behaviour system they mutually create (God, Hegel's Spirit), and so are equal to, or equally represent, each other. But the premise is fundamentally unstable, the seam does not close. (254)

Wharton demonstrates her recognition of this fundamentally unstable premise in *The Age of Innocence*, when she has protagonist Newland Archer hold his individual desiring spirit in play alongside the aesthetic formal structure of old New York. The "seam" as Wilt describes it, does not close. Archer's individual self is ideologically at odds with his social identity: he wants freedom, but exists encased in a confined social world. Yet Wharton denies Archer a whole life within this subjective particularity, drawing both him and the novel outside a partial perspective, and putting forth a positive focus for reflection in the final chapter that seeks to push Archer's part towards a whole, enlightened understanding. In this last chapter of *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton's "two-sided" feat (a feat Archer performs and embodies), enables her protagonist to become cognisant of a broader, more poignant force beyond himself: the generational stability he enacts by continuing to suppress his



authentic, subjective self in favour of an objective reality that is inherently false and fundamentally unstable (*WOF* 15). In formally upholding this artificial, exterior version of himself, Archer preserves the framework that has instigated his existence, and engenders the continued existence of future generations to come. At the cost of authenticity, he has protected an “innocent” conception of the world—a “hard bright blindness” that keeps the “immediate horizon apparently unaltered” (*AOI* 287). In this way, Wharton demonstrates how Archer’s enduring partial position within his culture’s formal aesthetic enables him to access “some absolute good, some crystal of intensity, remote from the known pleasures and familiar virtues, something alien to the processes of domestic life, single, hard, bright, like a diamond in the same which would render the possessor secure”: the old New York code—the “construction in the void” (*Lighthouse* 113, Bell 14).

While I look to tease this concept out further in my third chapter, what I want to underline here is Wharton’s commitment to realism’s maintenance of a psychological ‘age of innocence’. Archer mirrors Wharton in the sense that she, like Archer, acknowledges the artificiality of the real, yet ultimately upholds an artificial ‘construction in the void’ because it ensures a psychological presence and fortitude necessary to progress through disorienting historical change. So while the pro-realist critic Lukács reads literature as a means of clarifying the experiences of the masses and expressing their boundedness within a capitalistic totality, and key literary modernist Woolf reads literature as a fluid, abstract vehicle that presses towards existential enlightenment, Wharton bridges the abyss between.

### **III. Wharton’s “Uplifting” House of Fiction**

As a transitional figure between realism and modernism, Wharton has been intellectually and creatively impugned throughout the twentieth century by frequent

comparisons to Henry James, to whom she was positioned as “Henry James’s Heiress” (qtd Bell, “Literary Relation” 619). While Wharton and James had an intimate literary friendship<sup>16</sup>, Wharton’s originality as an author has been heavily checked by comparisons to James. Because both wrote in the manner of realism, both dealt with themes of innocence and experience, and both reiterated the human damage caused by warped moral values, Wharton was frequently cast in James’s shadow (Killoran 8). Yet critics generally failed to specify how the two reflected one another beyond these broad similarities. For example, Wharton is described as “always slightly missing greatness” by Irene and Alan Cleaton (1937), having written “books that are always well-bred and never fail to reveal her high admiration of Henry James” (Killoran 129). Likewise, earlier Edward O’Brien described her works in 1923 as “a superb pastiche of Henry James with little added” (qtd Killoran 129). What exactly was missing from her work, and in what way her work operates as a Jamesian pastiche are left unexplained.

Despite her frequent classification as James’s greatest “pupil”,<sup>17</sup> Wharton differed from James in her pronounced interest in “the pressures of circumstance and history” (“Literary Relation” 619, Hanley 147). While James “suspends time in order to arrest the object of his attention”, Wharton was of the opinion that “such extreme

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<sup>16</sup> For a detailed critical account of Wharton and James’s relation, see Millicent Bell’s *Edith Wharton & Henry James: the Story of Their Friendship*.

<sup>17</sup> Wharton was immensely frustrated with the constant tethering of her name to James. In a letter to Scribner’s editor, W. C. Brownell, she complained that, “The continued cry that I am an echo of Mr. James (whose books of the last ten years I can’t read, as much as I delight in the man), makes me feel rather hopeless” (Bell, *Intro* 4). Ignoring her individual nuance critics claimed that Wharton “enveloped all she touched in a thick Jacobean atmosphere, in which nothing human, not even an emotion could stir” (Pollard qtd Bell *Intro* 4). Yet Wharton’s realistically observed social world is a structure distinct from James’s highly centralised psychological designs. In a 1913 letter to Charles Scribner, Wharton underlines her separation from James, stating that her next novel would “deal with a group or groups of people, and with a series of events rather than a central situation” (Bell, *Intro*, 6). Wharton’s work is socially-oriented, rather than mentally oriented and interacts with its socio-cultural setting, rather than a sequestered incident.

refinement of consciousness” neglected “the desultoriousness, the irregularity, of life caught in the act, and pressed still throbbing between the leaves of the book” (Hanley 147). Wharton believed that James’s “technical theories and experiments” sacrificed “the spontaneity which is the life of fiction” (*BG* 190). Despite the “profound moral beauty” of James’s novels, Wharton saw his theoretical principles as obscuring “atmosphere”, being “more and more severed from that thick and nourishing human air in which we all live and move”. In focussing so intently on consciousness, James stripped his characters “of all the human fringes we necessarily trail after us through life”, and suspends his characters in “the void” (191). While William Righter sees this as evidence of “how little Wharton had understood” James’s elevation of consciousness above “presuppositions of realism”, what I see Wharton as highlighting here is the value she places on the self-grounding aspects of realism—the way in which the form ventures outward from human consciousness to establish coherent context and civilised order, interacting with the ‘real’ world beyond the parameters of the human mind (102-103).

Wharton’s motion to have her characters secure a stable position within their novel world is a characteristic highlighted by Millicent Bell. Bell notes that “Wharton almost always closed the case of her characters before their story was underway”, whereas James’s stories opened up a spacious “intercourse with the world” (*EW & HJ* 310). However, both authors identify an invisible pattern-making that goes into the construction of our world. For James, these patterns are unconscious psychological impulses that work to effectuate the reality that unfolds around us. Wharton contrastingly identifies this invisible pattern-making impulse in material and ideological aesthetic forms that shape our everyday lives.

The two authors divergent conceptions of perspectival importance can be seen in the two author's differing architectural conceptions of 'the house of fiction'. In his 1908 New York edition preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), James famously described his conception of "the house of fiction":

The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million [...] these apertures, of dissimilar shape and size, hang so, all together, over the human scene [...] They are but windows at best, mere holes in a dead wall, disconnected, perched aloft; they are not hinged doors opening straight upon life [...] The spreading field, the human scene, is the "choice of subject"; the pierced aperture, either broad or balconied or slit-like and low-browed, is the "literary form"; but they are, singly or together, as nothing without the posted presence of the watcher—without, in other words, the consciousness of the artist. (James 1075)

James's architectural image of a house of fiction does not equate to a shared vision of reality. Though this reality is "the same show", "one is seeing more where the other sees less, one is seeing black where the other sees white, one is seeing big where the other sees small, one is seeing coarse where the other sees fine". Reality itself is conclusive, yet it cannot be apprehended in whole, shared form because "everyone with a pair of eyes" conceives a unique "impression distinct from every other". It is thus a house multifarious and disordered. It does not offer a vision "straight upon life", but endless visions of a uniform reality experienced uniquely. Wharton herself noted that "James sought the effect of verisimilitude by rigorously confining every detail of his picture to the range, and also to the capacity of the eye fixed upon it" (*WOF* 89-90). His novels enact "the elaborate working out on all sides [...] of] a central situation" (*EW & HJ* 242). This situation unfolds in isolation, divorced from the occurrences of a broader social reality in what Wharton critically describes as a "void".

Wharton's "house of fiction" is not so tightly centralised, nor so concerned with interior psychological dynamics and minute mental shifts in comparison to

James's. Rather, she explores socio-cultural situation and the bearing this has upon the inner forces of character. As such, her works are perhaps better suited to the classification of 'chronicle novel', in the sense that they reflect typical developments in social history over a sustained period. Yet within this exterior architecture of social history, Wharton injects James's reflecting consciousness, a psychological comprehension of the significance of the events witnessed. Material and socio-cultural context is witnessed within a state of perspectival restriction. Yet ultimately Wharton prioritizes outward gaze over James's insular inward one. The following two chapters of this thesis will explore how Wharton uses aesthetic forms to articulate the changing value in aestheticised perspectives of reality across the tumultuous fin-de-siecle period. Chapter Two will explore *The House of Mirth's* exposition of the detrimental nature of an exclusively outward perspective, revealing a vibrant, vital interior reality that is tragically stifled as a result of such stylistic predominance. Chapter Three will outline Wharton's reevaluation of aesthetic forms deemed arbitrary and artificial in *The House of Mirth*, revealing their possession of an invisible, intrinsic real-world purpose in *The Age of Innocence*. From denying realism, stylised aesthetics become testaments to a sense of order and permanence fragmented in the passing moment. Affirming Woolf's existential understandings exhibited in *To the Lighthouse*, Wharton reads aesthetic forms as highlighting the "little daily miracles" that operate as "matches [striking] unexpectedly in the dark", illuminating a "shape" within the "eternal passing and going" (138). Despite her 'old-fashioned' formal aesthetic, Wharton's literature similarly expresses this sense of an ambiguous existential architecture and underlines humanity's role in "mak[ing] of the moment something permanent" in aesthetic forms. Aesthetics forms function to psychologically buoy humanity, instigating structure in life's void.



## 2. The Gap Within: Wharton's *The House of Mirth*

Order the beauty even of Beauty is,  
It is the rule of bliss,  
The very life and form and cause of pleasure.

—Thomas Traherne.<sup>18</sup>

In order to understand Wharton's developing sense of value in a stylised realist aesthetic, we must first turn to her pre-war novel *The House of Mirth*, in which she bitingly exposes the worthlessness of an aesthetic form dislocated from reality and devoid of a moral purpose that might validate its abstract existence. Published in 1905, the novel implemented advice Wharton had received from Henry James in the fall of 1900. Having sent him a copy of her short story *The Line of Least Resistance* (1900), James encouraged Wharton to “study the human life that surrounds you. Let yourself go in it and at it. It's an untouched field really [New York society]: the folk who try, over there, don't come within miles of any civilised, however superficially, and evolved life” (Lewis, *Bio* 125). Yet Wharton recognised that identifying a truly contemplative, civilised being within a society structured by superficiality would be challenging. Writing retrospectively in *A Backward Glance* (1934), Wharton noted that the key issue would be “how to extract from such a subject the typical human significance which is the story-teller's reason for telling [...] The answer was that a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys” (150). New York's social waste, its debasing of people and ideals, is what emerges as the text's moral centrepiece. Embodying this wasted human possibility is protagonist Lily Bart. Lily's symbolic name hints at the novel's key concern. As well

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<sup>18</sup> The first of these three lines from “The Vision” by seventeenth-century metaphysical poet Thomas Traherne was chosen as the headline to the first volume of *The Writing of Fiction* (1925) and can be understood as the “guiding principle of [Wharton's] own artistic aesthetic” (Griffin-Wolff 112).

as being the dominant decorative motif of the Art Nouveau movement popular at the time of the novel's publication, lilies held a deep religious significance, symbolising the Virgin Mary (the petals being her pure body and the golden anthers the radiance of her innocent soul) (Meagher). The divergent connotations of Lily's name reflect her split nature. She is half flat, unnatural and purely material in the vein of Art Nouveau; half sensitive and vital: a departing example of moral virtue. This latter aspect of Lily's being is what Wharton identifies as valuable, and its corruption at the hands of an illusory realism is what drives her devastating narrative.

In this chapter I argue that through the disintegration of Lily Bart, Wharton expresses the necessity of possessing a metaphysical moral framework, a perspectival shelter that aesthetically situates one within a coherent worldview, grounding one within a dynamic, formless existence. Lily Bart lacks this vital psychological framework. Cultivated as a purely ornamental object, designed for artistic spectacle and that alone, Lily's aesthetic formation deprives her of a developed interior. Her exterior state informs her entire being, which ultimately leads to her complete objectification and the death of her subjective self. The aesthetic identity Lily has been bred to embody is the ornamental leisure lady, an identity tied to the principles of the late nineteenth-century aestheticist movement. This movement argued for the pursuit of, or devotion to, what is beautiful or attractive to the senses, as opposed to an ethically or rationally based outlook ("aestheticism, n." *OED*). This stylistic movement reflected the ideological aesthetic of the ornamental leisure lady, an American fin de siècle type Thornstein Veblen identified in his 1899 text *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. The governing objective of this identity was to "beautify" the household sphere as its "chief ornament", deliberately not engaging in practical labour to demonstrate her male keeper's substantial economic capacity (Veblen 72).



To underline the ‘un-reality’ of this material identity, Wharton frames Lily through the lens of concurrent artistic movements that distort and idealise real world images. Lily’s physical body thus flits between neo-classical, symbolist, aestheticist and art nouveau delineations—delineations that impress a sense of self that is nothing more than a series of “lights judiciously thrown and shadows skilfully softened” (Griffin-Wolff 127).

Wharton saw an identity shaped by these aesthetics as psychologically suffocating. Such an identity was founded on projected, idealised images of reality, thereby subjecting women to an empty vision of self and stunting them. Though these artistic movements do not claim ‘realism’ in the sense that they are not actively attempting to capture an accurate, unembellished depiction of nature, the aesthetic movement especially argued for the collapse of aesthetic containment, for art’s infiltration of everyday life<sup>19</sup>. Because aestheticism failed to articulate a deeper vision of reality beyond shallow external representation, Wharton saw its fusion with an everyday realism as instigating a reduced, naïve understanding of reality. Not only would intangible, psychological realities become entombed, but such aestheticism would obscure a broader comprehension of the world and one’s place in it beyond an immediate, surface level.

In *The House of Mirth*, then, Wharton anticipates modernism’s call to break open an interior life buried under conventional aesthetic forms. Tearing off this naïve, shallow aestheticisation does not result in consignment to an unregulated mode of existence. For Lily it does because she lacks a “centre of early pieties, of grave endearing traditions, to which her heart could revert and from which it could draw strength for itself and tenderness for others” (*HOM* 319). Lily lacks a grounded

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<sup>19</sup> For more on modernity’s destruction of ‘reality’, see Bentley pp. 50-51.

conception of herself in relation to the world around her. She is devoid of what Wharton metaphorically presents as an ‘interior architecture’—a physical and psychological anchorage to steady her in the face of life’s “wild centrifugal dance” that refutes the steady frame her aesthetic identity demands of her (*HOM* 319).

Wharton’s oeuvre is rife with images of physical and metaphorical enclosure, and in her work, we can identify an underlying tension between a need to throw off stifling conventional aesthetic forms and a fundamental need for psychological containment. A year before *The House of Mirth* was published, Wharton produced *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* (1904). There, Wharton judged that the modern landscapist was poorly inclined to “annihilate his boundaries”, producing a single unbounded space disappearing into a “vague whole” (46). In *The House of Mirth*, we see this aesthetic tendency re-emerge. Aesthetic boundaries and ideological frameworks prevent a descent into a “primitive” formlessness Wharton associated with modern life (*HOM* 146). Yet they also cloud the obscure, uncalculated impulses that make us authentically human.

Wharton internalised this tension for the majority of her life. She desired the open inhabitation of an authorial identity beyond the parameters of the ornamental leisure lady type. Yet she also craved a domestic centre like Lily. Griffin-Wolff suggests that Wharton’s “early sense of moral bewilderment (which later experience would only serve to intensify) laid upon the little girl the necessity of creating her own order” (12). Wharton’s mother, Lucretia Jones, was—like Lily Bart’s mother—an emotionally distant “manager”, set on situating Edith within New York’s prestigious familial network (*HOM* 30). Lewis describes Lucretia as a figure possessing “a sort of absence, an emptiness, gaps of character filled in by artifice and trivia” (*Bio* 24). Wharton recalled her mother in predominantly ornamental terms,

remembering “flounced dresses”, “painted and carved fans”, “ermine scarves” and “perfumed yellowish laces” (26). Yet these were “dim impersonal attributes of a mother” lacking definition. According to Wharton, Lucretia’s “matter of factness [...] shrivelled up” her father’s ill-defined poetic tendencies, and her fixation on maintaining surface appearances led her to “falsify and misdirect” Edith’s sexual life (Wharton qtd Benstock 58). This childhood made Wharton feel locked out of reality by a cultural system that kept young women in a state of false modesty and innocence, all for the sake of a social aesthetic.

Elaine Showalter argues that in *The House of Mirth*, Wharton symbolically kills this ‘lady’ aspect of herself to make way for her modern, artistic self, versed in the “language of feminine growth and mastery” (136). Pushing forth from this claim, I suggest that her depiction of Lily Bart’s innocent death is a grieving for her own naïve young womanhood, sacrificed to a suppressive cultural aesthetic and lacking in internal moral strength to bear her unworldliness resolutely. An image of this emotional starvation presents itself in Wharton’s short story “The Fullness of Life” (1893):

I have sometimes thought that a woman’s nature is like a great house full of rooms [...] but beyond that, far beyond, are other rooms, the handles of whose doors are perhaps never turned; no one knows the way to them, no one knows whither they lead; and in the innermost room, the holy of holies, the soul sits and waits for a footstep that never comes. (Benstock 71)

In *The House of Mirth*, Wharton has us wait alongside Lily, who grapples in vain for moral containment, failing to actively express and possess not “the *word* which made all clear” but a self and worldly definition cultivated in childhood and secured by adulthood, definitions that would dually provide a “fullness” and a “continuity of life” would render her inwardly secure (Benstock 71, *HOM* 319).

In the following sections, I shall detail the way in which *The House of Mirth* exhibits Lily as a figure negotiating the novel's central tension between a life of pure, unbridled subjectivity and a life securely bound in a frame of fixed decorative objectivity. In the first section of this chapter, I shall discuss how Wharton underscores the opposing qualities of these two states of being by shuffling Lily between neo-classical and art nouveau delineations, rendering Lily impressionistic. Struggling to reconcile these incongruous states, Lily finds herself disintegrating, becoming physically and psychologically indefinite. She thus seeks a means of securely framing herself against decomposition, a pursuit that results in her embodiment of the gap between. The chapter's first section will consider alternative feminine aesthetic identities Lily could inhabit to preserve her insecure being. However, each lacks active circulation, material definition or the true semblance of moral consciousness—each of which Lily's incongruous selves demand. The second section will discuss Lily's fractured, capitalistic home life and its contribution to her stunted state of being. The third and fourth sections will delineate figures embodying the feminine and masculine frames Lily could potentially inhabit, each unsatisfactory because they demand either subjective limitation, moral corrosion or material rejection. Delving deeper into the frame Selden offers Lily in section five, I discuss Selden as a "negative hero" and figurehead for society's construction of illusory aestheticised identities (Coulombe 3). This chapter will end with an analysis of Lily's death, which I present as evidence of Wharton's inability to realise an underlying modernist subjectivity within a formal realist architecture. While a stylised 'realist' mode swallows Lily in *The House of Mirth*, tragedy lies not in the way that the protagonist is encased in an aesthetic enclosure, but in the sense that this particular

aesthetic frame offers no ‘interior architecture’—no rich, internal purpose that justifies its external aesthetic.

### I. Embodying the Gap

We first encounter Lily Bart suspended in New York’s Grand Central Station, apparently “waiting for some one” (*HOM* 3). “Desultory” and separate from the masses, Lily appears “a highly specialised [specimen] of womanhood”, according to flaneur-like “spectator” Lawrence Selden, who is “refreshed” and “arrested” by her presence (3-4). He assesses her physique like a connoisseur inspecting a rare piece of sculpture. Through his speculative eyes, readers correspondingly view Lily in distinctly material terms. She is as “polished as a bit of ivory” with a “vivid head, relieved against the dull tints of the crowd” and a “smoothness [and] purity of tint” (7, 4). This description implicitly associates Lily with the idealised neo-classical aesthetic that came to dominate the self-image of a fledgling American republic (Griffin-Wolff 112). Early twentieth century New York was familiar with this kind of imagery. The Statue of Liberty, the ancient Roman goddess of liberty, had been erected in New York harbour just under twenty years earlier, and Hiram Powers’ *The Greek Slave*<sup>20</sup> remained in the national consciousness as one of the most notorious artworks to tour the country. Both sculptures idealise women as symbols, presenting them as the visual embodiments of virtue. Griffin-Wolff builds on this feminine aestheticization by noting that the most visible art forms in the latter nineteenth-century capturing this image of an ‘ideal republican America’ was mural painting (112). Such murals

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<sup>20</sup> *The Greek Slave* was a life-sized neo-classical sculpture depicting a young woman, nude and chained, holding in one hand a small cross on a chain. Selden correspondingly describes Lily as “the victim of the civilisation which had produced her, and the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate”—a visual echo of Powers’ work (*HOM* 7). Wharton critic Jennie Kassanoff reads Lily here as evidencing “eugenic superiority”, an “exclusive, albeit imperilled race—at once superior and overly specialised” (43). See Kassanoff’s *Edith Wharton and the Politics of Race* and the National Gallery’s “The Greek Slave”.

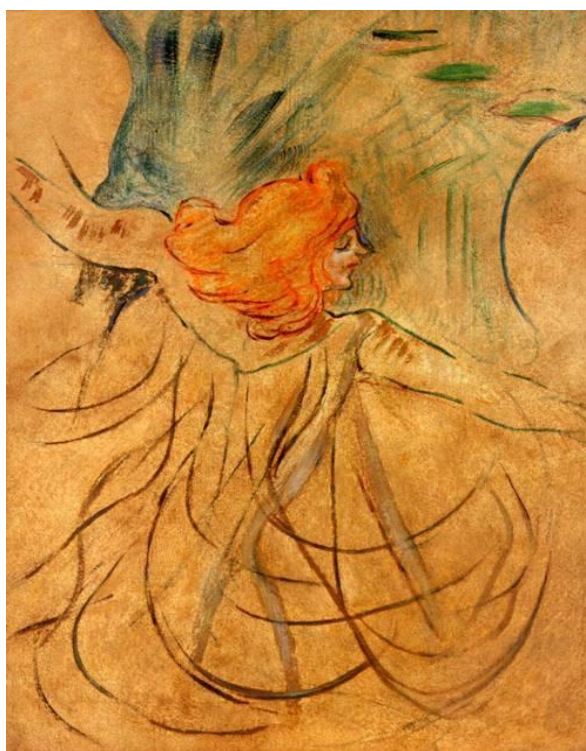
exhibited sexless women draped in white or national colours variously labelled ‘Justice’, ‘America’, ‘The Law’, ‘Alma Mater’, ‘The Future’, ‘The Triumph of Manhattan’ or ‘The Ballet’. Such aesthetics reduce women from complex real-life figures into colossal monuments of purity and virtue, encompassing general socio-cultural institutions rather individual nuanced identities.



**Figure 3:** Hiram Powers’ *The Greek Slave* (1841-1846).

These idealised images could “hardly be mistaken for realistic representation”, yet they promoted the distorted inference that women were intrinsically virtuous, two-dimensional beings. Yet this is not the only artistic form Selden’s gaze encases Lily within. Later in the chapter, Selden notes her “drooping profile” and “the long slope of her slender sides, which gave a kind of wild-wood grace to her outline—as if she were a captured dryad subdued to the conventions of the drawing room” (*HOM* 13). Lily’s description here becomes associable with a pervasive Art Nouveau aesthetic. Growing out of the Arts and Crafts and Aestheticist movements of the late nineteenth-century, Art Nouveau was a decorative style that thrived in Europe and America from

the 1880s up until the Great War. Its aesthetic was characterised by asymmetry, sinuous lines and a flame-like patterning of the surface with motifs such as the willowy, elongated, female figure with flowing hair and the fantastic curves of stylized flowers (Hopkins). The movement consciously broke from traditional aesthetic values, asserting the community and equality of all visual arts and rejecting classical historicism of academic orthodoxy for more exotic alternatives (“Art Nouveau” OCEL).



**Figure 4:** American actress and modern dancer *Miss Loïe Fuller* sketched by Henri Toulouse-Lautrec (1892)<sup>21</sup>

Art Nouveau bred an idealised image of women derived from nature, problematically suggesting that women were *naturally* ornamental and exquisite. Synthesising art and everyday life, the Art Nouveau movement endeavoured to cultivate spiritually

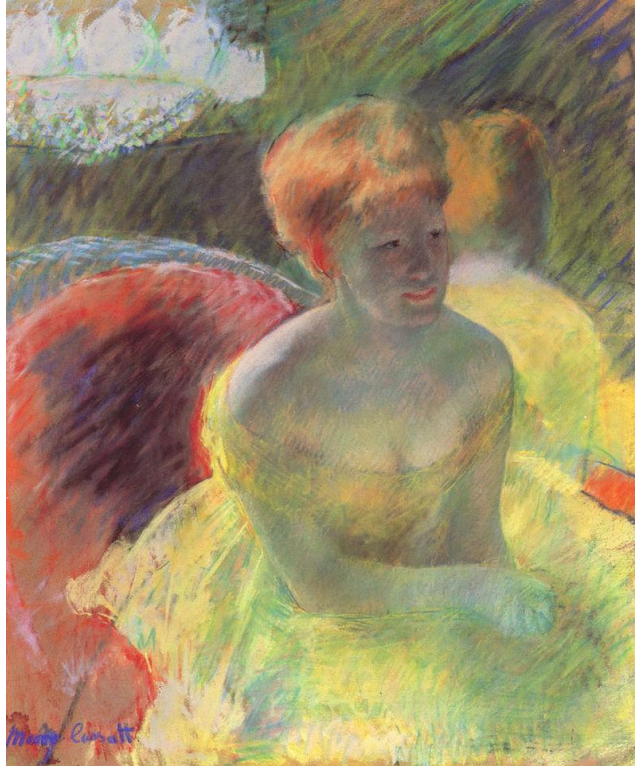
<sup>21</sup> In her section on *The House of Mirth* (pp. 112-133), Griffin-Wolff references Loïe Fuller as the manifestation of Art Nouveau imagery. Fuller was a famous American modern dancer, performing dances including ‘the Butterfly Dance’, ‘the Fire Dance’ and ‘the Lily dance’ using transparent veiling and coloured lights. Fuller’s performance and Toulouse-Lautrec’s imagery recall Lily Bart’s tableau vivant in Chapter 12. See Garelick’s “Scarring the Air: Loïe Fuller’s Bodily Modernism.”

uplifting ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’—total works of art, where painting, sculpture, and architecture are combined together into a single, harmonious ensemble (Gontar). This meant that Art Nouveau not only penetrated the public sphere, but also the domestic interior of American culture. In Art Nouveau, form is flattened to mere outline with flat infills of colour. Figures thus become indistinct, akin to the “vague whole” Wharton describes in *Italian Villas* (46). Lily Bart becomes one such figure. Her outline is fixed but “inwardly [she is] as malleable as wax” (*HOM* 53). Her exterior identity is a “mask of very definite purpose” that veils an essential “air of irresolution”—the opposite of what Selden thinks he perceives at Grand Central (3).

Wharton’s projection of each artistic form upon Lily underscores a critical tension the novel seeks to expose: the tension in Lily being split between a desire for complete subjective freedom and secure objective containment. The fixed, sculpted nature of Neo-classicism is associable with a static objectivity, whilst the pervasive liquescence of the Art Nouveau aesthetic reflects a tendency toward an uncontained subjective state. As well as being incongruous, these aesthetics are idealised. Lily’s drive to embody the two states is thus impossible, for she must either sacrifice her vital subjectivity and turn to stone or forgo her objective identity and become bodiless. Neither state is feasible in reality.

This tension plays out on Lily’s body. Early in the novel, when Lily is still in the early stages of mediating these tensions, her beauty is described as having a “warm fluidity”, a “transparency through which the fluctuations of the spirit were sometimes tragically visible” (191-192). She is thus visually indefinite, flickering between desultory and resolute. Selden notes this ambiguity in the opening scene, describing her as being “at once vigorous and exquisite, at once strong and fine” (5).





**Fig 5:** Mary Cassatt's *Lydia Leaning on Her Arms (in a theatre box)*, 1879.

This compositional flux gives her an impressionistic appearance, characterising her as a fleeting and ultimately fading being. It is in this state that Lily appears at Grand Central. Raised to perform a “purely decorative mission”, Lily relies on an audience to successfully exist as artistic spectacle and therefore sustain herself (301). Prior to Selden’s arrival, there is no one to frame and contain her aesthetic self. Without this aesthetic function, Lily becomes unmoored. Prior to this point, Lily has been contained, like an exotic flower in “Mrs. Van Osburgh’s conservatory” (4). This “conservatory” is the kind of socio-economic container Lily requires to ornamentally blossom. Being “like some rare flower grown for exhibition”, designed for “a purely decorative mission”, Lily requires social, financial and psychological containment within the New York leisure class’s “revolving” social body (317, 301, 50). Lily requires two incongruous accommodations: a stable financial base from which she can materially “dilate” and flourish ornamentally and a flexible space where she can

act upon her emotions without restraint and indulge in “the luxury of an impulse” (26, 15). Yet these opposing conditions cannot be realised. New York’s fluctuating social body denies absolute stability, and its capitalist economy based around a “vast mysterious Wall Street” refutes enduring security (82). In addition, acting freely upon her emotions and impulses agitates Lily’s quest for socio-economic security. The socio-economic frame of her time negates the possibility of absolute containment.

Lily thus continually finds herself held in “the gap”, negotiating a fixed objective wholeness against temporal change and subjective divergence (39). Prior to her disruption, Lily had been provisionally rotating around New York’s social circuit, moving between “Tuxedo,” “the Gus Trenors’ at Bellomont,” “Rhinebeck” and her Aunt’s in New York (4). Alongside these inhabitants comfortably embedded in “Society”, Lily desperately clings to the possibility of permanence. In these spaces she performs “social drudgery”: letter writing, composing notes and hunting up lost addresses—tasks that cohere society’s mesh, facilitating connection and drawing people together (39). Writing here is presented as an aesthetic means of solidarity, of drawing disparate groups together into harmonious connection. In fulfilling these “tiresome” duties, Lily meets the “obligation” she owes her hosts for a slot “on the broad space which had once seemed her own for the asking” (39, 38). Yet Lily also performs these tasks to “develop[...] an outline” and render herself indispensable to the social collective (274). This indispensability lies in her cohesive capacity, smoothing over moments of social volatility and filling the gap in discordant social settings. We see this structure exhibited during a dinner with the Gus Trenors at Bellomont. Placed at a cross section of romantic entanglement between Mr. and Mrs. Dorset, Lily identifies underlying tension and sets about ensuring its alleviation. Allaying George Dorset’s feelings of marital neglect, “Lily, unfailingly adaptable”

cooperates with his attempts at self-diversion: “according her radiant attention to his prolonged denunciation [...], with a supplementary tirade [...] (56). In doing so, he “pour[s] his grievances into [her]” and Lily becomes a container for fragmentation, consuming fractured elements of her socio-economic environment.

Lily’s cultivation of a cohesive space for others thus corrodes her ability to exist as a consolidated individual. Occupying and closing “the gap” becomes her paradoxically defining feature (39). If Lily shirks from her cohesive labour, she risks ejection from society’s body and destroys the chance to inhabit a suitable, purely ornamental frame. Yet in “adapting herself and entering into other people’s feelings”, Lily’s interior identity becomes fractured (53). To consolidate the splintered environment that requires her labour, Lily effaces her own involvement so her presence in the first place is no longer necessary. As I shall discuss shortly, each character in *The House of Mirth* requires access to ideological or material resources for their survival and “real relation to life” (319).<sup>22</sup> Lily, dislocated from these resources, becomes progressively abstracted from reality. She thus must continue this self-effacing work, for to cease is to stunt her chance of procuring a fixed outline. Failing to labour results in one’s being cast out of active circulation, a failure that inevitably results in death.

## II. A Fractured Home

Luckily for Lily, the “amphibious” flaneur Lawrence Selden reveals himself as a spectator capable of framing her and thus rescuing her from structural disintegration (70). Carrying her out of her unintentional stasis, Selden removes Lily from Grand Central Station’s fragmentary nexus and revives her in a kind of ‘Green

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<sup>22</sup> *The House of Mirth* has been frequently described by critics as a naturalist novel. For the purposes of this thesis, I have folded Wharton’s naturalism under the broader formal umbrella of realism. For more naturalistic-specific discussions of Wharton’s work, see Bentley, Pizer and Merish.

World'<sup>23</sup>: his bachelor-pad fittingly named “the Benedick” (Bauerlein 7, *HOM* 6).<sup>24</sup> Detached from the friction and heat of New York’s urban body, Selden’s apartment represents an alternative, elusive lifestyle for Lily—that of the independent, socially fluid bachelor. It is an identity beyond Lily’s reach, and this unattainability is underlined in the Benedick’s “fantastically varied”, elevated exterior façade (*HOM* 6). The interior is superficially exotic and mentally simulative, furnished with a “Turkey rug” and literature from “old morocco” (7, 10). Yet the encounter quietly evidences Selden’s buried moral disdain and rigid perspective that comes to smother Lily’s innocent vitality at the novel’s close. He owns a first edition copy of French satirist La Bruyère<sup>25</sup> and is “rather fond of the law” (12). Despite Lily’s imploration for him to take “a sentimental view of her case”—her self-serving material interest in marriage—Selden remains “imperturbable”. In this space removed from the conventions of New York society, Lily’s subjective self is temporarily freed, and she moves from “desultory enjoyment to active conjecture” (10). As she acclimatizes to the space she moves from manifesting a chiselled “old ivory” neoclassical aesthetic to the fluidity of Art Nouveau, revealing a “wild-wood grace” and “streak of sylvan freedom” within her “outline”—an internal characteristic that induces Selden to compare her to a “captured dryad subdued to the conventions of the drawing room” (7, 13). Yet Selden’s isolated apartment lacks the materiality and gallery-space Lily needs to operate as an ornamental spectacle (12). She thus moves to reinstate herself

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<sup>23</sup> For an expanded definition of Northrop Frye’s ‘Green Worlds’ see Frye p. 183.

<sup>24</sup> Benedick is key character in William Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing* (1598-99). He openly despises marriage, swearing he will never marry. Benedick’s stance thus parallels Selden’s persistent evasion of Lily’s implicit call for a marital frame.

<sup>25</sup> Jean de La Bruyère, (1645-1696), was a French satiric moralist who is best known for one work: *The Characters, or the Manners of the Age, with The Characters of Theophrastus* (1688). La Bruyère was proudly middle-class, but was ridiculed for his graceless physique, melancholic manner and sharp tongue. In his *Les Caractères*, La Bruyère satirically and “penetratingly observes the power of money in a demoralized society, the tyranny of social custom and the perils of aristocratic idleness, fads and fashions” (“Jean de La Bruyère” *EB*).

upon New York's revolving social circuit and catch a train "to the Gus Trenors' at Bellomont" (4).

Lily must remain in active circulation in order to sustain herself within *The House of Mirth's* socio-economic environment. Pause is an impossibility within this system—it is only permissible as an illusory exterior guise. Lily's fractured motions derive from her parents' failure to sustain the gendered aspects of capitalist economics. The insatiable capitalist society of early twentieth century New York demanded that individuals labour relentlessly to survive *and* assert their social superiority. Ruth Yeazell, discussing Veblen's *Theory*, suggests that following the Industrial Revolution in America, the conscious exhibition of wealth became the new means of asserting one's status (715). Financial dominance was exhibited through the female body, which ornamentalised patriarchal labour. Status was thus acquired from the open display of how much one could afford to waste.

Lily's dead parents' relationship manifests this socio-economic dynamic. Mr. Bart, as the traditional patriarchal provider, is tasked with accumulating wealth that his wife and daughter can conspicuously consume. As Veblen correspondingly underlines in his *Theory*, Mr. Bart may involve himself in the "fighting-cock" nature of a developing capitalist economy, but to retain his gentlemanly status, he must not reveal the exertion of productive labour (Veblen 716, *HOM* 81). Fittingly, the nature of Mr. Bart's employment is left unsaid. However, the detrimental consequences of his relentless "hustle to keep this kind of thing going" manifests itself in Mr. Bart's being (*HOM* 81). While Lily finds herself eaten away by the social fragments she actively consumes, Mr. Bart's being is similarly corroded under the force of incessant financial labour. In maintaining a superficial guise of stasis to mask his industrious reality, Mr. Bart's physical being deteriorates into an absent presence. Because

material interests come to dominate his entire self, his subjective self becomes increasingly hollowed out, which ultimately leads to total immateriality, and he becomes a “hazy outline” with “neutral-tint[s]” who “filled an intermediate space between the butler and the man who came to wind the clocks” (29). Bound to the relentless production of capital, Mr. Bart is unable to rest. To do so “tire[s]” him, for as soon as he lacks the self-constructing purpose of labour, he becomes “extinct”, devoid of the self-structuring scaffolding that animates him and gives him life (29, 33). Indeed when he announces himself financially “ruined”, he becomes “for the most part [an] unconscious [...] blur”, and he eventually “dip[s] below the horizon”, falling into oblivion (29).

Prior to the “ruin” of this material backdrop, Lily’s mother is “vigorous and determined” (29). She consumes Mr. Bart’s labour in her active ornamentation, grounding his being—and her own—down in the process. Derailment from progression alongside the social pack pulls at Lily and her mother’s ability to successfully re-circulate within society. Without the financial means to close the gap, Mrs. Bart and Lily are forced to exist in cracks and fissures, moving “from place to place” and living a life of “hungry roaming” (Scanlan 216-17, *HOM* 33, 35). Indeed, when the financial aid that fuels her consumption is withdrawn, Mrs. Bart’s “faculty [...] deserted her” and she sinks into “a kind of furious apathy, a state of inert anger against fate” (33). Mr. Bart’s financial frame was the backbone of her identity. Without his wealth to conspicuously exhibit, Mrs. Bart is no longer capable of exerting “effort”, and she falls into stasis—stuck in an immobile “hole” (35).

With a “hazy outline” of a father and the hollow “figure” of a mother, Lily lacks a cohesive family unit and home base (29). She has never experienced home as a total world; rather it existed in fragmented form as a series of details and scenes—a

“turbulent element” rather than a concrete entity (Scanlan 211, *HOM* 29). The narrator details Lily’s childhood home as a blur of fluctuation:

A house in which no one ever dined at home unless there was ‘company’; a doorbell perpetually ringing . . . a series of French and English maids . . . quarrels in the pantry, the kitchen and the drawing room; precipitate trips to Europe, and returns with gorged trunks and days of interminable unpacking; semi-annual discussions as to where the summer should be spent, gray interludes of economy and brilliant reactions of expense—such was the setting of Lily Bart’s first memories. (28)

What is striking about this set of memories is the absence of loving parental presence.

As Lily implicitly notes, it is predominantly a “house”, not a “home”. Mrs. Bart, geared like her husband around material wealth, leaves Lily bereft of “filial instinct”, imploring the value of “a good cook” and “decent dress” over the immaterial cultivation of self-definition home should provide (33, 30). In doing so, she leaves Lily materially aware yet emotionally “ineffectual”: unable to translate her internal feelings and desires into “active expression” (33). This results in a frustrated psychological state. Without the self-informing foundations of a domestic interior, Lily’s early life is “a zig-zag broken course”, directed by “a rapid current of amusement” and “tugged at by the underflow of a perpetual need” (30). As Gaston Bachelard notes in *The Poetics of Space*, houses function to “give mankind proofs or illusions of stability” (qtd Mayne 3). With Lily’s family home facilitating the opposite, it is no wonder that she latches upon her material beauty and considers it a constant. Lily’s mother adds to the centrality of her beauty by encouraging Lily to consider it as the “nucleus” around which “their [lives could] to be rebuilt” (*HOM* 34). Mrs. Bart subsequently nurtures and indulges Lily’s ornamental identity, so Lily does not have to partake in adult administrative duties. This, as Griffin-Wolff notes, leads her to see money as a vague natural resource, and furnishes her with a “rarefied sensibility” that exclusively demands an ornamental frame (116).

This aesthetic nurture results in a stunted emotional capacity. Lily requires “a new opera coat”, clothes of “complicated elegance” and “frivolous touches, in the shape of a lace-decked toilet table and a little painted desk” because such these objects not only supply her with the ornamental environment she needs but inform her decorative personality (*HOM* 111). Trained as spectacle, “her every mood, emotion, [and] public attitude is a deliberate piece of acting”, and as a result, she cannot ascertain the quality of a real emotion when it appears (Griffin-Wolff 128). Indeed, Lily cannot even cohesively comprehend herself, identifying herself and her emotions as distorted parts, dependent upon reflections received through either a mirror or the eyes of her audience: “Mrs. Bry's admiration was a mirror in which Lily's self-complacency recovered its lost outline” (113). Lily’s sense of self is thus embedded in material form. However, this physical beauty is inherently transient. Over the course of the novel, Lily fatigues under the pressure of labouring, and like her father, regresses, becoming increasingly frail as an outline, with a face “hollow and pale” and “two little lines near her mouth, faint flaws in the smooth curve of her cheek” (28). The fracture of Lily’s youthful body underlines the fact that she cannot negotiate these irreconcilable tensions for long, as the eventual “process of crystallization” which will fuse “her whole being into one hard brilliant substance” (191-192).

### **III. Alternative Aesthetics**

Incapable of independently developing personal security internally, Lily seeks containment beyond herself. Following her splintered family’s fall into oblivion, her next opportunity for shelter is bound by a “static force” (38). Assuming the charge of the orphaned Lily, Mrs. Peniston, Lily’s Aunt, reluctantly appears to offer her niece a springboard from which she can supposedly carve out a “foothold on the broad space” of her socio-economic environment. Yet the living conditions Mrs. Peniston provides



are offset by an “impenetrable domesticity”, a setting that proves antagonistic to the active circulation Lily requires to carve out a permanent space within society’s revolving body (37).

As a widower, Mrs. Peniston sustains herself through the estate left by her dead husband. This estate can be conceptualised as ‘dead labour’ abstracted and contained in material form. Mrs. Peniston thus operates as a vampiric figure, feeding off her the expiring financial body of her dead husband and existing in dislocation from an active economic system. As a result, she rests upon New York’s socio-economic periphery as “padding”, ‘within’ the social body thanks to her stable wealth, but insular and removed from circulation (37). Lily, as her ward, becomes subject to this self-contained form of consumption. Lily’s drive to contain herself and inhabit ‘the gap’ in society’s revolving body provides Mrs. Peniston with a connection to animated society, socially preserving her. Facilitating Lily’s social buoyancy, Mrs. Peniston grants episodic means of financial sustenance in the form of “handsome presents” and “occasional cheques”—a “method of giving [that] kept alive in her niece a salutary sense of dependence” (38). This restricted financial independence allows Mrs. Peniston to feed off Lily’s circulatory sociability yet denies her the capacity to “stand on her own legs”, an arrangement that works to preserve Mrs. Peniston’s socio-economic status at the expense of Lily’s.

Lily’s modern energies are thus quelled by her aunt’s insular habits. Indeed Mrs. Peniston’s domestic interior is likened to a religious hermitage. When Lily returns from the external world of “fashion” in Chapter 9, Mrs. Peniston undergoes “the domestic equivalent of a religious retreat” (98). She goes through her “linen and blankets in the precise spirit of the penitent exploring the inner folds of conscience”, attempting to eradicate “lurking infirmities”. Fumigating her space of modern

fragmentation, Mrs. Peniston swathes her domestic realm in static sameness, resisting change to replicate and maintain a stable mode of being. This stagnant sameness is underlined in Lily’s description of the house. The Peniston estate’s “black walnut” interior constitutes a “complacent ugliness”, and it is consistently described in dead terms as “tomb-like” and “unnatural” (99-100). Mrs. Peniston’s fervent maintenance of the “glacial neatness” of the space mirrors her vehement maintenance of her similarly embalmed habits (37).



**Fig 6:** *Dying Gaul*, Roman, 1st or 2nd century AD, marble, 37 x 73 7/16 x 35 1/16 in. Sovrintendenza Capitolina — Musei Capitolini, Rome, Italy.

As a character she reflects her drawing room’s central figurine: the “Dying Gladiator”<sup>26</sup>, who faces oncoming death in stoic silence (101). Lily desperately wants to “do over” and modernise this drawing room space, thereby bringing her Aunt back into “active relation with life”—a movement likened to “tugging at a piece of

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<sup>26</sup> Mrs. Peniston’s display of this miniature Bronze in her drawing room reflects the vein in which Mrs. Peniston perceives herself—as a warrior of the past fighting to preserve a domestic empire of old in the face of modernity. See figure list for “The Dying Gaul”.

furniture which has been screwed to the floor” (38). Yet to escape her Aunt’s socio-economic space is to deny herself the financial pedestal she so desperately needs to create an independent socio-economic space for herself. While Mrs. Peniston models a means of surviving the novel’s socio-economic environment as an independent woman, this continuity relies upon the erection of an unsustainable border between herself and time. While Mrs. Peniston achieves this by burrowing herself in her home environment, along with extreme processes of preservation and isolation, Lily, lacking this ‘rich’ home base, cannot afford to enact such measures.

Frustrated with the limitations of her socio-temporal frame, Lily begins to “have fits of angry rebellion against fate” and longs “to drop out of the race and make an independent life for herself” (39). Gerty Farish is another independent female character who provides an alternative mode of independent female operation in *The House of Mirth*. Gerty refuses to participate in a commodity-based system of labour/consumption. Instead, she lives a life defined by material lack, yet immaterial gain. Gerty unconventionally labours to abstractly consume sentiment: aesthetic emotion. While Lily draws on a material aesthetic for self-definition and fulfilment, Gerty utilizes sentiment as a means of enriching and aestheticizing her starved existence. Indeed, Lily notes that Gerty “has the power of dressing up with romance all our ugly and prosaic sentiments”, for her “heart [is] a fountain of tender illusions” (95, 122). Like her cousin Selden, Gerty possesses a “vision-building” capacity that enables her to consume the fragmented modern world in a way that engenders personal meaning (134). We see this when Gerty accompanies Selden to the Wellington-Brys’ Tableau Vivant in Chapter 12. Gerty, “lost” in “indiscriminate and uncritical enjoyment,” finds a “deeper sense of contentment” in the emotional

pleasure *others* take in material aestheticism, relishing in the artificial moral beauty she herself fashions from material reality (132).

Unfortunately, this form of sentimental fulfilment is insufficient for Lily. The illusory feelings Gerty consumes lack the secure material definition Lily so craves. Lily's "finer perceptions" afford her an aesthetic penetration that renders her aware of the way in which one's "own delicacies of feeling" can be misapplied (132, 90). Gerty is not a "close enough reader" of her surroundings to "disentangle the mixed threads" motivating actions and occurrences (151). Rather, her life is framed by "simple formulas"—less responsive in comparison to Lily's heightened consciousness of the nuance of material reality. The other key issue with sentiment is that it is a subjective, rather than objective notion. It is also impermanent: spontaneously generated subjectively out of inconsistent external actions. Sentiment cannot be easily concretised for display, nor does it offer material satisfaction, and these deficiencies prove insufficient for Lily, whose fulfilment is derived wholly from the objective material world. This form of consumption also demands the consumer have a capacity for self-subsistence. Lily, who has been denied an internal 'house' of moral anchorage in childhood, lacks the capacity to personally facilitate an aesthetic emotional satisfaction through herself as Gerty does. We see Gerty's aesthetic consumption in process during the Van Osburg wedding in Chapter Eight. Gerty passively soaks up the sentimental aspects of the opulent scene by proxy, consuming it in fracture rather than as a whole. To make up for the scantiness of the situation, she ascribes meaning to the scene, casting her fellow society-goers in a virtuous light—a reading highly unlikely to the objective Lily. Eighteenth-century economist Adam Smith, in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), suggests that ideally, man would earn his status by virtue of his wisdom (Gagnier 127). However, because wisdom is an abstract

quality it is notoriously harder to discern than wealth, so most of the world judges by appearance. It is by this logic Lily refutes Gerty's sentimental mode of operation. In its abstractness, its subjective dislocation from objective reality, this sentimental mode of being fails to cater to Lily's longing for a fixed shelter and "whole structure of existence" (*HOM* 104).

Lily briefly attempts to mimic Gerty, tasting beneficence by donating money to Gerty's cases—young women not unlike herself, leading "a life in which achievement seemed as squalid as failure" (112). The act of charity momentarily provides Lily with a sense of fulfilment. Yet Lily cannot permanently feed off this mode of sustenance, as her "nature [is] incapable of such renewal: she could feel other demands only through her own, and no pain was long vivid which did not press on an answering nerve" (151). Indeed, she only vaguely comprehends their affective plight through their superficial relation to herself. Utilizing her self-centred "dramatizing fancy", Lily imagines that the girls' ambiguous "bundles of feeling [were] clothed in shapes not so unlike her own" (151, 150). Frivolously aiding these women makes Lily feel as though she is elevating internally beautiful self—her moral self. Yet this moral beauty is shallow, it is a superficial *arrangement* of beneficence rather than true altruism. Lily derives personal satisfaction from the admiration and interest her presence excites rather than the philanthropy itself.

While Gerty's sentimental consumption is too abstract and creative for the materially dependent, emotionally underdeveloped Lily to access, she does possess a hazy moral consciousness that rules her out of operating in the vein of Carry Fisher, the only other 'independent' woman in *The House of Mirth*. Mrs. Fisher is a socially promiscuous, "striking divorcee" (26). Like Lily, Cary services the upper classes in order to retain her position within society's revolving body. Yet she lacks a moral

fastidiousness. Cary divorces her second husband purely for the alimony, uses her body to render herself appealing to New York’s upper-class men, and positions herself as the escort of the unpolished nouveau-riche, helping them lay siege to Lily’s citadel-like social circle. “Notoriously rash”, and devoid of nuanced moral fibre, Carry Fisher flits from promoting “Municipal reform” to “Socialism” to “Christian Science” (213, 47). She uses these movements as Lily uses material decoration—to embellish her personality and superficially offset her role as an advocate of those of “obscure origin [with] indomitable social ambitions” (112). Gus Trenor likens her to a “professional sponge”, being “simply a mental habit corresponding to the physical titillations of the cigarette or the cock-tail” (84). Mrs. Fisher’s lifestyle lacks the delicate aesthetic sensibility Lily requires.



**Figure 7:** Francisco Goya’s *La maja vestida* (1800-1805)

During the Tableaux Vivant scene, Carry Fisher casts herself as a “typical Goya”, with her “short dark-skinned face, the exaggerated glow of her eyes, the provocation of her frankly-painted smile” (133). Spanish painter Francisco Goya

painted *La maja vestida* as a pendant painting.<sup>27</sup> The other ‘half’ of *La maja vestida* is *La maja desnuda*—“the first totally profane life-size female nude in Western art” without pretense to allegorical or mythological meaning (Krumrine 39). The painting depicts a ‘maja’, a female common person of Spain. Majas and male ‘majos’ envisioned themselves as the exemplifications of pure Castilian spirit and superior to the upper classes. The upper-classes, recognising the group’s eminence, replicated their “vulgar, motley [and] boisterous” dress and manner. Carry Fisher, in her superficial promiscuity, mirrors the maja’s repose. Likewise, her crass behaviour and excessive volubility liken her to the maja as a social type, while her functioning as a promiscuous escort echoes the double-sidedness of Goya’s two majas. Unlike Cary, Lily cannot split herself in two—evidenced later in chapter 12 of book two when Lily must “go forth and leave her old self with [Selden]: that self must indeed live on in his presence, but it must still continue to be hers” (*HOM* 309). Ultimately, an independent existence cannot accommodate the trifold manner of life Lily is accustomed to, lacking circulatory potential, a distinctly material backdrop, or a delicate moral framework. These deficiencies force her into procuring an alternative frame for herself, one that can sustain her utterly dependent existence.

#### IV. Finding a Frame

For Lily to satisfy this trifold of needs, she must attain a frame that can provide her with “fastidious aloofness and refinement in which every detail should have the finish of a jewel, and the whole form a harmonious setting to her own jewel-like rareness” (90). Yet within this material setting, there needs to be space for her to flexibly express her inner character, her “finer sensibilities”. In the early 20th century, marriage was the paramount means of socio-economic containment. Yet marriage is

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<sup>27</sup> A pendant picture is one of two pictures designed to hang together as a matching pair. See “Pendant” *Tate*.

yet another fabricated means of stability, subject to the social fluctuation of divorce. To underline the impossibility of the stasis Lily desires, the novel offers Lily marital opportunities—each of which are inherently dissatisfactory and ultimately empty forms of containment.

The first “whole form” who seems capable of offering Lily a suitable ornamental container is Percy Gryce. Gryce is “the possessor of the Gryce Americana”, a collection of books, manuscripts or other literary or artistic artefacts relating to, or made in the United States and which are considered to possess historical significance (*HOM* 21, “Americana, n.” *OED*). Gryce conspicuously consumes these commodities, attracted to their rarity rather than the intellectual or aesthetic stimulation they offer. These valuable objects declare Gryce’s wealth and the rarity of the assemblage enables him “assert a superiority that there were few to dispute” (20). Through his consumption of Americana, Gryce is able to forget himself. Indeed, they form the keystone of his entire identity, supplanting Gryce’s individual self. The result is an individual character “crammed with an unmarketable commodity”—the “horribly dull” Americana. Through this collection, Gryce carves out a material container within which he can plant his thirsty ego. Yet, in allowing this commodified collection to take the place of his identity, Gryce finds himself, like Mrs. Peniston, on static terms. Items of Americana are ‘dead commodities’—products no longer serving active purpose. In accumulating Americana Gryce rejects active participation within a progressive economic system and becomes a deadened object himself. Gryce’s personal space reiterates this deadness. The Gryce library is notably “in a fire-proof annex that looked like a mausoleum”, and Gryce himself is similarly deathly, being an “opaque” figure embalmed in an “incipient film” (22, 20).



Despite his lack of animation, Lily believes Gryce can offer her an opportunity for socio-economic security if she can plant herself within his Americana—his “huge outlet of egotism” (49). Lily, a specialised figure of American womanhood, attempts to present herself as the animated equivalent of Gryce’s material Americana: a living object—“the one possession in which he [would take] sufficient pride to spend money”. What Lily fails to comprehend is that Gryce’s mode of being is directly at odds with Lily’s craving for keen stimulant. Lily—a beautiful woman subject to the effects of time—is a gamble of an investment due to her drooping physical state and erratic yielding to impulse. After spending time with Gryce, Lily realises that the frame of opportunity he offers up is one full of inherent restriction; it is a life of aesthetic monotony, material deprivation and mental limitation. He is a man of “arduous [...] religious obligation”, has a “constitutional dislike of [...] ‘committing himself’”, and a “guarded” nature grafted with “every form of prudence and suspicion” (57, 47, 22). Marrying him would strangle Lily’s “vivid plastic sense” and put her on an aesthetically “low diet” (131, 23). Lawrence Selden’s unanticipated presence disrupts Lily’s beguilement of Gryce, and she suddenly becomes aware of Gryce’s marital frame as being “great gilt cage” (54).

The un-palatability of marital partnership is also exhibited through the figure of Simon Rosedale. A “little Jew” attempting to penetrate society, Rosedale evidences a “hard surface of [...] material ambitions” and operates as the racial contrast to Lily’s perfect state of eugenic superiority (16, 300). In her penetrating study *Edith Wharton and the Politics of Race*, Jennie Kassanoff describes Lily is a “hyper-evolved specimen” of white American culture “whose purity demands a life sheltered from the encroaching dinginess of American democracy” (44). Rosedale is correspondingly read as the epitome of an ensuing heterogeneous America and is

correspondingly shunned by Lily, who finds him “increasingly repugnant” (*HOM* 176). However, what makes Rosedale similarly unpalatable is his “natural imperviousness” (257). Rosedale, with his clothing that fits “like upholstery”, evinces a personal impenetrability, and Lily is correspondingly incapable of isolating and entering an appropriate gap in his socio-economic identity (14). While Lily autonomously adapts herself to other social situations, with Rosedale she is forced to sit within the “cold strength” of his “grasp” (258).

Rosedale is “steadily bent” on achieving a natural rootedness within society’s “inner paradise” (240). To do this he requires “the right woman” to smooth his entry and to offset his “fat”, “shiny”, “sloppy manner” (175, 81). Such a woman must elevate his extreme wealth, making it look “easy and natural”, as if “it grew on her” (176). Lily’s biological superiority, her “highly specialised” womanhood, as well as her fluid aesthetic capacity to shape “all emotions to fresh forms of grace” position her as key to Rosedale’s entry into New York’s social Eden (5, 131). Rosedale, though “sensitive to shades of difference”, is incapable of exerting superiority “because he [has] no corresponding variations of manner” (121). With Lily at his side, Rosedale obtains “the complementary qualities needed to round off his social personality”.

Yet Lily can’t overlook Rosedale’s inflexibility, noting there is “something hard and self-contained behind the superficial warmth of his manner” (253). Rosedale operates in “a region of concrete weights and measures”, simplifying “fluctuating ethical estimates” into an “essential baseness” (259). It is Rosedale’s contraction of morality that Lily balks at. When he proposes Lily’s re-establishment, it comes with the necessary sacrifice of one of Lily’s “abstract notions of honour that might be called the conventionalities of the moral life”—her innocent internal essence (300).

Lily refuses to expose the inflammatory love letters written by Bertha Dorset to Selden, and in doing so, refuses to efface her feeble moral interior within. Rosedale's baseness makes him an improbable frame for her noble ornamental aesthetic.

An underlying, internal degeneracy is also Lily's reason for refuting the socio-economic frame Gus Trenor offers. With marital frames proving deficient, Lily looks to develop an independent frame through the "vast mysterious Wall Street world of 'tips' and 'deals'" (82). Access into this abstract system can only be extracted through an individual embedded within this financial framework. To induce such extraction for herself, Lily strategically positions herself to furnish the voids in the life of financier Gus Trenor. Trenor, belittled by his wife and used by 'wire-pulling' society women, drinks up "the rare enjoyment of a confidential talk" and "exult[s]" in Lily implying his "superiority over his wife" (81, 83). By patching these holes in Trenor's social mesh, Lily appears "as agreeable to [Trenor] as the sight of a cooling beverage"—a commodity to swallow (80). Lily naively believes she can access the financial containment Gus Trenor offers "without risk to herself", assuming her "costly show" of emotional buttressing will be sufficient payment for Trenor's speculations (85). Lily does not realise that Trenor has been supplying her with his own concrete fortune, thus containing her in his personal financial body. Unaware of the corporeal nature of their exchange, Lily naively believes there is a disconnect between herself and her finances; a belief that underpins her attempts to enact a barrier between herself and Trenor. Contrastingly, Trenor's behaviour mimics the reality of an all-encompassing economic system. Knowing Lily's speculation is really "interest on [his] money" Trenor demands a correspondingly physical share in her body (146). So while Lily pays Trenor in looks and expressions, Trenor presses for possession of her body, emphasising the financial system's interconnectedness and

arguing therefore that, “the man who pays for the dinner is generally allowed to have a seat at table” (145). Trenor thus preys on her, hunts for her, and touches her, probing right into her intimate layers of self, shrugging off “Miss Bart” to slip “into the use of her Christian name” (91). The economic space Lily gains by inhabiting Trenor’s desires occurs at the detriment of her personal space. In acting in this way, Trenor not only encroaches on Lily’s independent body, but cripplingly compromises her moral fastidiousness.

We see this play out in Chapter 13, when Trenor, frustrated by the lack of tangible compensation for his financial aid, lures Lily to his New York home. There, he attempts to wholly consume Lily as a spectacle following commodification upon entry to Wall Street, an attempted consumption that takes the form of an attempted rape. As Trenor attempts to consume Lily, he simultaneously works to collapse her social framework, holding her captive in the identity of a ‘fast’ woman. Trenor’s collapse of Lily’s stable social identity is likened to a physical blow with “the brutality of the thrust” destabilizing Lily’s pure exterior image, and revealing her child-like, underdeveloped interior beneath her ornamental armour (145). This near consumption—this violation of material and immaterial self—instigates an internal tear in Lily which establishes “two selves [...], the one she had always known, and a new abhorrent being to which it found itself chained” (148). Emerging from this assault is a modern cognizance of the lack of order and lack of implication structuring contemporary man. Lily’s exterior identity is “a voice that was her own yet outside herself”, and once freed from Trenor’s clutches, the streets are “familiar [yet] alien”—all is “the same and yet changed”. This same sense of dislocation occurs in Trenor. Seconds before consumption, Trenor becomes aware of his internalised modern socio-economic self—the self driven by a ceaseless, heedless desire for

material satisfaction. In his insatiable desire for self-gratification, Trenor acts like a “sleep-walker [close to] a deathly ledge”, wavering momentarily to reveal “the primitive man” lurking within (146, 147). It is a self akin to the “abhorrent being” Lily finds herself shackled to—a raw self buried beneath a stylised realist glaze (148).

What pulls disordered Trenor back into his human self is a “cold air” filled with “old habits, old restraints, the hand of inherited order”—the cultural framework of the socio-temporal age (147). Trenor is saved from this unconscious fall into a primal, mechanised state by society’s civilising structures, structures implemented in their earliest stage through one’s domestic space—one’s home. Domestic interiors possess a configurative power, operating as “human arms”: generators of comfort and containment (148). The love and empathy cultivated in such spaces have a formative power, providing a structure for being. Unlike Trenor, Lily lacks these “enfolding arms [and] the silence which is not solitude, but compassion is folding its breath”, and as a consequence, we leave her at the chapter’s close in an “expatriate” state, enlightened to her interior lack (149). Unprotected from modernity’s “iron clang”, Lily becomes haunted by the realisation of the inadequacy of her existence, destabilised by the “Furies”, which awaken “in the dark corners [...] of her brain” (148).

### **V. Illusions of Morality**

The only thing that would appear to protect Lily from the psychological formlessness the modern consumer world enacts is the frame Lawrence Selden offers. While the financially informed containers Gryce, Rosedale and Trenor offer look to consume Lily’s “poor little anguished self” Selden’s alternative frame appears to disregard her material being (321). Wharton implies that Selden will move to contain Lily if she can demonstrate an ability to become a “flawless, absolutely constant

embodiment of virtue” (Griffin-Wolff 129). To do this, she must exhibit an ideal mental state, stoically holding herself above material entities. Yet she must simultaneously remain physically ideal, an ideal reliant upon the material world. If Lily can demonstrate this capacity, Selden can arrange himself in the vein of the “kindred spirit” in Wharton’s “The Fullness of Life” (1891), awakening Lily to the emotional richness of existence whilst grounding and protecting her against life’s “shifting gusts” (Benstock 71, *HOM* 319). He thus offers her psychological shelter in which she can tether herself and come into “real relation to life”. What Selden seems to offer Lily is an interior architecture: a space of internal liberation and external security. Yet as we shall see, in world of *The House of Mirth*, such a frame is but an illusion.

Selden has, like Lily, inherited his parents’ worldview and mimics their moralistic aesthetic. Mr. and Mrs. Selden treat money with disdain and consider themselves morally superior in rejecting such an earthly entity. Yet both are quietly partial to absolute material quality, with Mrs. Selden possessing “an understanding of old lace” and Mr. Selden “an eye for a picture” (152). Selden thus possesses “the stoic’s carelessness of material things, combined with the Epicurean’s pleasure in them”. However, such attitudes are mutually contradictory, and the frame Selden offers Lily reflects this impossible standpoint (Griffin-Wolff 120). We see Selden’s contradictory moral-aesthetic stance play out in the opening chapter, when he takes a “luxurious pleasure” in Lily’s aesthetic refinement at Grand Central (*HOM* 5). Suddenly acknowledging the carnality of his material appreciation, Selden re-frames Lily as an incipiently “vulgar clay” camouflaged under a “fine glaze of beauty and fastidiousness”. Yet this analogy leaves him “unsatisfied”, and he longs to view her material beauty as not monetarily financed but fashioned from a moralistically “fine”

material that “circumstance had fashioned [...] into a futile shape”. As I mentioned earlier, Wharton casts Selden in the identity of the flaneur, a figure who wanders amidst yet also against the crowds and the urban flows of modern life—an isolated figure of modern urban alienation (Murail 29). The flaneur identity validates Selden’s keeping “free from permanent ties” and legitimizes his critical distance and unwillingness to cradle Lily’s child-like interior self (151). Selden is attracted to Lily’s aesthetic superiority, her being above “the dinginess, the crudity of [an] average section of womanhood” (5). She is, materially, his perfect woman, yet he will only accept her into his frame if she can demonstrate that she shares his “moral habit of self-righteous otherworldliness” (Griffin-Wolff 120).

Selden thus demands Lily fit an aesthetic that is purely ornamental, yet simultaneously rejects the material world that engenders such ornamentality. The only times Lily is capable of uniting these incongruous attitudes are in moments detached from reality. She first displays her potential to rise above the material world when she forgoes her material pursuit of Percy Gryce. Assuming Selden will behold her now she has disregarded her earthly interests, Lily naively arranges herself handsomely in a “romantic scene”, relying on material surroundings to reengage his attention (61). Yet Selden fails to come, and without his perspective Lily disintegrates, the “sparkle” dying out of her “and the taste of life [...] stale on her lips”. Her lack of potential beyond decorative rendering leaves her to sense “a vague sense of failure, an inner isolation deeper than the loneliness about her”. Selden offers Lily a means of accessing a moral interior. He leads Lily into an alternative “pastoral” world along “the edge of the wood” (63). In this dream-like liminal space Lily is “lifted into a finer air” (73). There, Selden lauds his “Republic of the Spirit”, a life dislocated from the material (68). Lily is at first sceptical, arguing that to truly detach from the

material world, one must “have a great deal of [money]” in order to do so (69). Yet attracted to the freedom Selden’s vision impresses, Lily motions towards her harbouring a potential for a materially indifferent life, remarking that while she’d “look hideous in dowdy clothes”, she could “trim [her] own hats” (73). Lily’s acquiescence to Selden’s image of supreme moral and aesthetic perfection has them transcend reality temporarily “like adventurous children who have climbed to a forbidden height from which they discover a new world”. The idea that Lily can really exist in such a vein can only be entertained in an un-real world. Indeed, Lily soon finds she cannot “breathe long on the heights” (262). Lacking the “moral strength” to attain and preserve Selden’s ideal aesthetic, she wavers, hearing a motor-car, a symbol of capitalist materiality, and falls from Selden’s frame back down to earth.

Lily comes close to uniting these opposing attitudes and embodying Selden’s moral-aesthetic stance at the Wellington Bry’s presentation of tableau vivants.<sup>28</sup> There, she becomes a ‘living picture’, choosing to embody Joshua Reynolds’ *Mrs. Lloyd*. It is a conscious rejection of the material world’s “distracting accessories of dress [and] surroundings” in favour of her pure “unassisted beauty” (134). In *Mrs. Lloyd*, Lily “select[s] a type so like her own that she could embody the person represented without ceasing to be herself”, and the painted “phantom” is banished “by the beams of [Lily’s] living grace”.

In dismissing the portrait’s connection to the material world, Lily temporarily achieves Selden’s moral-aesthetic ideal, evoking a “noble buoyancy of [...] attitude”, a “suggestion of soaring grace”, as well as exhibiting a “touch of poetry in her beauty”. Yet this exhibition is Lily artificially *presenting* herself as “divested of the

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<sup>28</sup> A silent and motionless person or group of people posed and attired to represent a well-known character, event, or work of art. In extended use: a person or group of people forming a striking or picturesque scene (“Tableau vivant” n., *OED*).



trivialities of her little world” and thus philosophically ideal (135). She is not, as Selden perceives, “the real Lily Bart”. Instead, her real, inconsistent self has been artificially contained within the ideal, neo-classical aesthetic discussed earlier in the chapter, exhibiting a Lily Bart lethally reduced.



**Fig. 8:** Joshua Reynolds’s *Mrs. Lloyd*, 1775-1776.

Lily’s quest for material security thwarts her maintenance of Selden’s philosophically virtuous aesthetic, and neither mode of being allows her to exist in a way that is anything other than ideal. Her financial interactions with Gus Trenor and acts of “fill[ing] the gap” with George Dorset leave her aesthetically and psychologically disfigured (39). The insinuation of impurity results in Lily being shunned from the public eye, and her inability to aesthetically exhibit herself—the act that informs her entire way of being—results in her rapid deterioration. Lily’s interactions with the “carnivorous” Trenor and the vain Mrs. Hatch expose the

contradictory nature of Selden's vision (55). Despite proclaiming himself an "amphibious" creature, capable of appreciating material decoration whilst remaining personally detached, Selden's "own view of [Lily is] coloured by any mind in which he saw her reflected" (70). Her dealings with the carnal Trenor "sicken" him, and her persistent connection to the "gaudy" Mrs. Hatch elicits his "disgust" (154, 276, 272). As Griffin-Wolff suggests, Lily considers Selden to be the mirror of her inner moral potential, and in having to repeatedly grind for material security, she effaces Selden's comprehension of her having a beautiful, virtuous interior (129).

### **VI. A Hollow "Centre of Early Pieties"**

Now lacking the social potential to attain an ornamental frame and reading her inner self as an "abhorrent being", Lily loses an objective outline and with it a subjective sense of purpose (148). She thus deteriorates into a formless being, on "the verge of delirium [hanging] near the dizzy brink of the unreal" (321). Upon her deathbed Mrs. Peniston denies her domestic anchorage in her estate and Lily finds herself completely devoid of an interior realm upon which she can "cling" and "shelter" from life's "shifting gusts" (319). Her room at the boarding-house is painfully "utilitarian", lacking a personal centre from which "her heart could revert and from which it could draw strength for itself and tenderness for others" (297, 319). Having conveyed her renunciation of the material world and leaving the real, morally pure Lily Bart with Selden in Chapter 12 of Book Two, Lily's footing upon the illusory "buoyant ether which emanates from the high moments of life" fails her, and she descends down with "accumulated [...] weariness" to the "dull pavement beneath her feet" (310-311). Without the personal dignity Selden's moral aesthetic supplies and devoid of the material padding her ornamental aesthetic demands, Lily is left ideologically bare. Devoid of aesthetic enclosure, her layers of self begin to

dismantle. Her sense of perspective disappears, and “the next day presse[s] close upon her, and on its heels [come] the days that were to follow”, swarming about her “like a shrieking mob” (322). The raw, formless reality that exists beneath the elevated social system she has been ensconced within strips Lily of the aesthetic cladding that has cohered and enclosed her inner being. When she is at last unclad and she “alone left sentient in a lifeless universe” (321). The real Lily is revealed in infantile form as Nettie Struther’s innocent, helpless child. Lily’s identification with the child “gives silent testimony to the infantilising force of the mutilating image of women that society fosters” (Griffin-Wolff 130).

This baby Lily encounters in the kitchen of Nettie Struther symbolises “the central truth of existence”—a poignant human innocence vulnerable to life’s ruthlessness (*HOM* 319). In Nettie Struther’s domestic interior, this innocence is protected, held fast in “the frail audacious permanence of a bird’s nest built on the edge of a cliff—a mere wisp of leaves and straw, yet so put together that the lives entrusted to it may hang safely over the abyss” (320). Lily—epitomizing her innocent floral namesake—is a variation of this innocence Nettie Struther’s child embodies. To underline their connection, the narrator describes the child as “enter[ing] into [Lily] and becom[ing] a part of herself” (316). Yet unlike this child, who has been afforded a “habitual anchorage”, Lily has “grown up without any one spot of earth being dearer to her than another”. She therefore lacks a “centre of early pieties, of grave endearing traditions”, no interior resolve “to which her heart could revert and from which it could draw strength for itself and tenderness for others” and no external, material architecture that shelters her from life’s “shifting gusts” (315, 319). Without this concrete anchorage that informs one’s purposeful, moral relation to the surrounding world, Lily’s ‘interior architecture’ is superficial—a shallow, frivolous ‘house of

mirth', devoid of the "old habits, old restraints [and] the hand of an inherited order" that might steady a "bewildered mind [...] jolted from its ruts" (147).

Although *The House of Mirth* concludes with Lily's ultimate failure to find an anchor, Nettie Struther's domestic interior offers a glimpse of later developments in Wharton's thought. This domestic space exists because Nettie "found the strength to gather up the fragments of her life" (319). Yet as Lily notes, "it had taken two to build the nest; the man's faith as well as the woman's courage" (320). Nettie's husband fixes his affections on what is potential and possible in his wife—his "faith in her ha[s] made her renewal possible". Lily courageously gives herself up to Selden's moral standards by refusing an immoral material life, thus retaining a pure, albeit underdeveloped, moral interior. Selden, despite his "vision-building faculty", can only comprehend Lily superficially, unable to identify her possibility and potential like Nettie's husband (134). In rejecting the sustenance in the material world, Lily dies, becoming the only Lily Bart Selden can tolerate: a beautiful, idealised object, enclosed in an "invisible and inaccessible" aesthetic—the product of a house of mirth (326). The interior faith Nettie's husband demonstrates, a faith based on aesthetic illusion, is what transforms an unstable reality into a thing of fragile beauty (Logue 87). And it is this interior faith that will become valuable in the aftermath of the Great War—a power underpinning *The Age of Innocence*, which I shall explore in the following chapter.

### 3. Housing ‘The Flower of Life’: Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence*

No! In vain hath my soul aspired, with ardent longing,  
All to know,—all in earth and heaven.  
No light illumines the visions, ever thronging  
My brain; no peace is given,  
And I linger, thus sad and weary,  
Without power to sunder the chain  
Binding my soul to life always dreary.  
Nought do I see! Nought do I know!

—Faust, Charles Gounod’s *Faust* (1859)

Despite originating from an operatic interpretation of Goethe’s *Faust Part One* (1808), the above epigraph expresses a sentiment not dissimilar to Hardy’s “ache of modernism” mentioned in this thesis’s opening chapter (124). It is this unsettling desire for existential vision that colours the beginning of *The Age of Innocence*, which opens with Gounod’s *Faust* as its aesthetic backdrop. There, old New York’s “exceptionally brilliant audience” gathers to hear Christine Nilsson sing in her first operatic appearance of the winter (*AOI* 3). Held within the watching crowd is the novel’s protagonist, Newland Archer. However, the scene from *Faust* that Wharton chooses to depict is not Faust’s crisis of worldview, nor his succumbing to otherworldly temptation. Rather, it is a scene of “tender reverence” for the “abysmal” aesthetic of innocence Faust will shortly corrupt in his quest for uninhibited knowledge (6). According to Gounod’s version of the famous narrative<sup>29</sup>, Faust is a disgruntled scholar, who, dissatisfied by the limited knowledge the natural world affords and desiring an expanded comprehension of existence, attempts and fails to gain an understanding of nature and the universe by supernatural means (Fisher 2). Faust’s desire then echoes a desire present across the two Wharton texts this thesis covers: the desire to abandon aesthetics that enclose the material world and realise an

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<sup>29</sup> For a synopsis of Gounod’s operatic interpretation of *Faust*, see Burton D. Fisher.

unbounded authentic reality that exists beyond. It is a desire that parallels the aesthetic ambitions of the twentieth century modernists, who looked to break out of stifling literary representations of material reality and express “a realm or system that transcends nature”—subjective reality (“Supernatural”, adj. *OED*). Faust, Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* and the modernist movement all suggest that in order to attain an expanded, uninhibited experience of existence, an innocent, face-value conception of reality must be sacrificed. In modernism, arbitrary formal instruments that inform and naively presume totalistic comprehension are abandoned. Likewise, in *Faust* and *The House of Mirth*, characters like Marguerite and Lily are tragically sacrificed for naively retaining faith in illusory figures of stability, who appear to offer them personal enclosure (Faust and Selden). An older, innocent image of the world as representationally honest had to be uprooted for reality’s raw truths to come to light. In depicting this innocent scene of *Faust’s* Marguerite, full of a “delicate pleasure” so “rare and exquisite in quality”, Wharton draws attention to what is tragically lost in the quest for existential enlightenment, and her hinging of the narrative upon this particular scene points to the potential sacrifice that *The Age of Innocence* will seek to negotiate (*AOI* 4).

As a young woman, Wharton shared in Faust’s initial dissatisfaction with what she understood as ‘natural’ reality. Wharton’s grasp of the truths of the natural world was largely barred by her mother’s aestheticised conception of femininity and feminine knowledge. As such, Wharton found herself locked out of the realm of sexual knowledge. In “Life and I”, a draft first chapter of *A Backward Glance*, Wharton recalls being “seized” with “dread of the whole dark mystery of marriage”, and in the extremity of need begged her mother Lucretia: “I’m afraid mamma—I need to know what will happen to me” (Wharton qtd Benstock 57). This ‘not knowing’

implicitly led to an unfulfilling sexual life and Wharton's melancholy sense of having to live "on" herself, intellectually and emotionally (Benstock 167). However, momentary sexual fulfilment did occur later in life, thanks to her affair with American print journalist, author and foreign correspondent for *The Times*, Morton Fullerton, to whom she was introduced through Henry James in 1907. The "kindred spirit" Wharton was deprived of in the early years of her marriage is here embraced in the figure of Fullerton, leading Wharton to joyously record the pair's silent communication—the same kind of enveloping, knowing communication that comes to underpin the value of *The Age of Innocent's* naïve aesthetic world (Benstock 71). Watching Henri Bataille's *La Femme nue* in February 1908, Fullerton slips into Wharton's loge to pay her a surprise visit, much like Archer seeks out May in *The Age of Innocence's* second chapter (Benstock 180). Recording the scene, Wharton remarked that:

The other night at the theatre, when you came into the box [...] I felt for the first time that indescribable current of communication flowing between myself and someone else—felt it, I mean, uninterruptedly, securely, so that it penetrated every sense and every thought... and said to myself: "This must be what happy women feel." (Wharton qt Benstock 180).

It is the same shared state of secure knowing Archer exhibits with May, whom like Fullerton and Wharton understand "each other without a word", as this form of silent communication "bring[s] them nearer than any explanation would have done" (*AOI* 14). For Wharton, this interconnection functions as "the flower of life"—the feeling of being objectively comprehended and known in one's internal subjective state (286). Fulfilment occurs when Wharton's contradictory desires are met: when she can realise an unbounded interior reality within a secure, enclosing frame. This is what *The Age of Innocence* enacts: the bringing of interior life into real world relation,

bridging the abyss between Wharton's philosophical modernism and her countervailing regard for realism's structural coherence.



**Fig 1:** Christine Nilsson as Marguerite in Gounod's *Faust*

In this chapter, I shall argue that *The Age of Innocence* underscores the value of stylised aesthetic forms that deny modernism's raw vision of reality in the wake of the Great War. In veiling the fluctuating, fractured nature of reality, these aesthetics protect society from the paralysing vision of existence as lacking meaningful design and being fundamentally apathetic to human life. *The Age of Innocence* is, in many respects, a call for society to 'come back down to earth' following the Great War's uprooting of the nineteenth-century's prior stable worldview. While *The House of Mirth* exhibits the danger of an individual cultivated in a claustrophobic aesthetic frame that lacks "real relation to life" (an implicit critical response to 'suspended' texts like Henry James' 1904 novel *The Golden Bowl*), *The Age of Innocence* exhibits Wharton's revised evaluation of aesthetic enclosures after having directly experienced



conditions upon the Western Front (*HOM* 319). Whilst on the frontlines, Wharton records in *Fighting France* (1915) a sudden, shocking awareness of the anarchy underpinning human existence:

I had the sense of an all-pervading, invisible power of evil, a saturation of the whole landscape with some hidden vitriol of hate. Then the reaction of unbelief set in, and I felt myself in a harmless ordinary glen, like a million others on an untroubled earth (*FF* 149)

In this disorientating moment, Wharton shares in Ford Maddox Ford's realisation that beneath ordered life lay "the abysses of Chaos" (qtd Chantler and Hawkes 3). As I have discussed previously, what soothed this revelation was a manufactured aesthetic of order and structure. This powerfully revised Wharton's lagging pre-war opinion of aesthetic enclosures disconnected from reality. In *The House of Mirth*, aestheticised visions of reality are presented as debilitating. Yet by the time Wharton approaches *The Age of Innocence*, aestheticised representations of reality are reframed as constructive. 'Old fashioned' aesthetics pull Newland Archer out of a dangerous inner-world that threatens to dislocate him from his socio-cultural world, and set him against a 'pricking' of the innocent aesthetic that cushions his community against external fragmentation. This changing stance reveals Wharton's developing understanding of the positive and negative formal qualities of the realist and modernist movements. The superficial, illusory aesthetic frames slammed in *The House of Mirth* are infused with a deep moral poignancy in *The Age of Innocence*, and Archer's objectification of Ellen and corresponding accordance with a false, aestheticised interpretation of reality is portrayed as noble, self-sacrificing move.

Wharton was convinced that in the post-war world, "the historical novel, with all its vices will be the only possible form for fiction" (Lewis, *Bio* 423-424). The historical novel form flawedly presumes it can objectify a segment of history past, express it in a totalising fashion, and place it within an unfolding temporal process.

To do this, the novel constructs a specific character within a calculated timeframe and tries to have their microcosmic experience of history reflect the broader macrocosmic historical process. Yet this as a principle is unfulfillable. As a rule, as Kracauer states, “the bird will swallow the fly”: objective perspective drowns out a narrower subjective perspective (qtd Shaw 47). Professing to authentically fuse these perspectives in a single text and thus producing a totalistic worldview was the key tenet of realism modernists took issue with. Such a process could not, as Shaw suggests, realistically exhibit the “inward complexity” an authentic character demands (48). By charging their characters with the reflection of objective reality, historical novelists—and more broadly realist novelists, thinned their characters so that they translucently exhibited the historical process (49). Wharton initially shared in the modernists’ lamentation at the suppression of subjective character to exhibit broader ideological principles—a lamentation embodied in Lily Bart. Yet after the war, reverting inward for a more authentic grasp of reality seemed counterintuitive to Wharton. The fractured nature of interior consciousness would only serve to produce a fractured worldview in her eyes. This was an injurious perspective unproductive for a society in desperate need of psychological recuperation. By contrast, the historical novel’s establishment of an artificially comprehensible reality provided a way of suspending oneself above ‘the abysses of chaos’, as following its formal logic involved reading the past as a consistent chain connected to the present, rather than a prior mooring lost to the war’s perspectival apocalypse. *The Age of Innocence*, in its exhibition of Archer’s Gilded Age rupture and fin-de-siècle recovery, presents the war as the product of a coherent historical process: a “horror [that] had to be gone through, for some mysterious cosmic reason of ripening and rotting” (Wharton qtd Lewis, *Bio* 374). Archer thus endures his comparatively minor rupture thanks to the

implementation of an aesthetic frame atop reality which coheres his existence and grounds him. In retaining this aesthetic veneer, Archer is able to preserve his family, society and culture—the real “flower of life” (*AOI* 286).

### **I. The Invisible Deity of "Good Form"**

We open *The Age of Innocence* to a society on the precipice of transition. The “sociable old Academy” holding *Faust* is, like the realist form of the nineteenth century, a site anticipating oblivion (*AOI* 3). It is due to be cast aside in favour of a new, more modern structure: a “new Opera house, which should compete with costliness and splendour of those great European capitals” is to be erected “in remote metropolitan distances ‘above the Forties’”. The old Academy functions as a metaphor for old New York society. Just as the old academy is externally threatened by foreign ideologies, customs and conventions, the old New York society that fills its hall seeks to preserve itself against the inevitable temporal tide of change, blocking any form of oncoming modernity with “impenetrable reserve” (157). Non-New Yorkers viewing old New York society from the outside see it as an insular bubble: a kind of “heaven” where its inhabitants are “dead and buried” (15). Yet from the inside, old New York is full of exquisite, dynamic implications, a society finely interwoven through “excellent acoustics” (3). Being held within this insular bubble gives rise to a “hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs” (36). Bound in a world of shared understanding, communication passes in a “blessed silence”—a silence riddled with comprehension and emotional nuance (195). This poignant domestic interconnection and sheltered sense of living in a shared world is the ‘flower of life’ that old New York protectively houses and ruthlessly seeks to preserve.

Enabling this ongoing innocence is “the invisible deity of ‘Good Form’”: the external, aesthetic presentation of formal convention (149). In old New York, aesthetic form consolidates and presides over society, ensuring its enduring innocent configuration. It operates as an ideological layer that screens the fragmented reality of old New York’s social world, cultivating an “unruffled layer” of innocence which soothes and suppresses the “scandals and mysteries” that smoulder under society’s surface (8). In this sense, old New York’s innocent ideological aesthetic parallels Erik Erikson’s conception of tradition, a theoretical structure Cynthia Griffin-Wolff utilises in *A Feast of Words* as the basis for Wharton’s conception of social change (313). As discussed in the introduction, for Wharton, aesthetic traditions function to prepare and cohere a society’s socio-cultural frame. Such traditions provide a stable frame within which individuals can grow and develop. Yet this same frame is reforming and disintegrating simultaneously. Old New York’s traditions, for instance, procure its inhabitants the aesthetic illusion of a stable framework for life. Its conventions correspondingly mould Newland Archer’s life, and endow him with a sense of purpose and stability. Yet as a young man, he pushes at the fixed parameters of old New York’s formal container, attempting to drastically modify its borders. Archer fails to recognise that this aesthetic frame of which he is a part is not an “armed camp”, but a stabilising framework that regulates change, ensuring it unfolds incrementally rather drastically (*AOI* 277). As *The Age of Innocence*’s final chapter shows, when a society maintains a stabilising aesthetic frame, dated, inconsequential conventions fall away slowly, whilst others are reformulated into newer, more modern social process. In upholding “Form”, change occurs, but not through the sacrifice of societal and psychological fracture (12). We see the benefits of maintaining “Form” exhibited outwardly in the figure of old Catherine Mingott. As “society’s weightiest

incarnation and [...] its liveliest blood”, old Mrs. Mingott reflects old New York’s amalgamation of outward stasis and internal dynamism (Knights 28). She also figuratively articulates Wharton’s understanding of social change. Upon examining May Welland’s engagement ring (the aesthetic embodiment of a social tradition of interlinking), Catherine notes that her younger hand is “large”, as “modern sports” have “spread [her] joints”, yet “the skin [remains] white” (*AOI* 24). Change has invisibly unfolded beneath an aesthetic veneer of sameness and it is this movement that underpins the structure of *The Age of Innocence* as a whole.

Newland Archer likens “Form” to an “invisible deity”, and indeed religious terminology underpins native New Yorkers’ descriptions of their social enclave (149). The incoming, socially turbulent Ellen Olenska considers old New York a kind of “heaven” (15). Archer describes social etiquette as possessing a “religious solemnity”, and the immaculately presented Lawrence Lefferts is described as “high priest of form” (36). As a man-made aesthetic framework proposing existential stability, old New York’s ideological aesthetic functions like a religion. German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher described religion as “the feeling of absolute dependence”, in the Christian sense that believers are utterly dependent on the worldview that places them in relation to God (qtd Behrens 472). Old New York’s ideological aesthetic functions in the same vein, as its inhabitants are utterly dependent on the innocent aestheticised worldview for a sense of relatedness to the world. The self-image old New York presents is one of “straight-up-and-downness”, indicating “big honest labels on everything” (*AOI* 62). In reality, however, it conceals a “labyrinth” beneath. This aestheticised surface of innocence ensures potential wounds lying beneath reality are covered, and in refusing to give them air, old New York evades the risk of “uncovering a wound [it] could not heal” (91). Its naïve realism overlooks the

“unpleasant”—a strategy Wharton saw as a possible precedent for the post-war world (21).

Yet despite this outward appearance of an unruffled surface, behind the façade old New York society is an unstable, fragile space. As the opening of the novel intimates, it is a society with increasing “crack[s] in its surface”, subject to “strange weeds pushing up between the ordered rows of social vegetables” (210). Traditionally, old New York upholds its innocent aesthetic in two key ways: firstly, by the cohesion and overarching stability of one’s family unit, and secondly, by an individual’s adherence to “Taste”, which is the act of conforming to that which is considered offensive and acceptable from the perspective of the social collective (12). To break Form is to weaken this ideological layer and expose society as susceptible to external social forces and inevitable temporal fragmentation. Thus Form is effectively upheld when society members “carry to its utmost limit that ritual of ignoring the ‘unpleasant’”—any type of external fracture that has the potential to disturb the static tranquillity of old New York’s enduring exterior impression of stability, purity and innocence (21). A sure way to break Form is to fail to uphold a personal state of formal composure that aligns with the aesthetic dictates of the collective. Such fracture transpires when an individual allows their intimate, instinctive self to spill over into the public sphere. This formal fragmentation manifests in the character of Ellen Olenska: the aesthetic object of Archer’s subjective fancies, his soon-to-be wife’s cousin, and the exotic estranged wife of a Polish Count.

The Countess Olenska enters New York as a fragment, having already broken out of Form. Because she has withdrawn from the institution of marriage, Ellen returns to the city as an ‘uncontained’ woman, lacking the cohesion of marriage yet simultaneously lacking the definitive status of divorcee. Her apparent inclination



**Fig 3: Katharine Cornell as Ellen Olenska in the theatrical reproduction of *The Age of Innocence*, performed at the Empire Theatre, New York in 1929.**

towards divorce heightens old New York's perception of her as the threatening embodiment of fracture, and she unconsciously exacerbates this sense of instability by failing to uphold the material aspects of this ideological form. Ellen moves beyond old New York's set formal parameters in a number of ways. Firstly, at the performance of *Faust* in the opening chapter, she fails to observe the modest dress New York expects from its female constituents. Unlike May Welland, who perfectly observes appropriate 'innocent' form in her "modest tulle tucker" and clasping of a symbolic "bouquet of lilies-of-the-valley", Ellen reveals "a little more shoulder and bosom than New York was accustomed to seeing" (5, 12). Ellen's dress is conspicuous and "unusual". She styles herself in the "Josephine look"<sup>30</sup> wearing a

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<sup>30</sup> In this scene, Ellen wears a *Directoire* style gown—a dress symbolic of revolution and modern independence. For more on the symbolic implications of dress in *The Age of Innocence*, see Joslin's *Edith Wharton and the Making of Fashion*.

“dark blue velvet gown rather theatrically caught up under her bosom by a girdle with a large old-fashioned clasp” (7-8). The countess’s showy, exposed body attracts unwanted attention, stimulating the imagination rather than suppressing it as May Welland’s does. Provoking individual thought that veers away from “collective interest” is a means of inciting a potential schism—an idea I will turn to in the chapter’s next section (91).

Ellen’s clothing is not the only evidence of her breach of Form. To the dismay of her family, she chooses to settle in “a strange quarter”, with “Small dress-makers, bird-stuffers and ‘people who wrote’ [as] her nearest neighbours” (55). This quarter exists outside old New York’s “small and slippery pyramid”, being an “almost unmapped quarter” inhabited by “scattered fragments of humanity [who] had never shown any desire to be amalgamated with the social structure” (82). Her settling here underlines her position as an outsider. Having exited old New York in favour of Europe’s interblended cultural ‘hot-house’, Ellen’s form has adapted to her foreign environment. In Europe, Ellen grows in an unregulated, artificially stimulating environment. There, her old New York form ebbs and she loses the perspective and purpose that her native culture grants. Upon her return, it is “generally agreed in New York that the Countess Olenska had ‘lost her looks’” (48). In exiting old New York’s ‘Eden’, Ellen has lost her innocent aesthetic and becomes pale “thin, worn, [and] a little older-looking than her age” (50). Her corruption in the real world beyond New York has eroded her innocent aesthetic padding, and she becomes a formless figure, living in the heat of the moment, devoid of purpose beyond individual pleasure.

In this same scene, we see Newland Archer’s instinctive adherence to old New York’s code, despite his proclamation of difference and distinct superiority in comparison to his genteel male counterparts. When the Mingott family reintroduce



their foreign, worldly cousin to their family box within the old Academy, they metaphorically open old New York's ideological innocence up to foreign contamination. If the Mingotts had contained her to the privacy of the family circle, Ellen's return would be considered acceptable. To receive her in public, however, is to weaken the fortified borders old New York maintains to keep itself ideologically pure and socially uncontaminated. This "aplomb" generates a divide within the old Academy, pitting the daring Mingotts against an outraged old New York society. Archer's automatic response is to 'arch' over this fissure, supporting the Mingotts and backing their public championship of Ellen (12). In bridging the discord between the two parties, Archer seeks to mitigate the intensity of the fracture between two groups. To embrace Ellen and grant her access into an old New York circle is less dangerous than condemning his new family and contributing to a deepening rift within the social body. Archer's automatic act then is to secure communal coherence. In lending the weight of his social identity to the Mingotts and Ellen, their act of defiance is steadied and appears less of an infraction. When the Mingotts attempt to fold Ellen into society with the invitation "To meet the Countess Olenska", "the most fashionable and yet most irreproachable of the dominant 'young married' set" brazenly refuse the invitation, deepening the interior divide within old New York over the potential fracture Ellen could assert (38-39). Archer again moves to arch across this divide, and alongside his mother and May, seeks out the "super-terrestrial" van der Luydens, who possess a supreme, aestheticised social authority. The van der Luydens, aghast that old New York is becoming divided over the matter of Ellen, seek to encase her in their dominant interior. They proceed to wrap her in a weighty old New York aesthetic, inviting her to dine with "The du Lac Sevres and Trevenna George II plate", "the van der Luyden 'Lowestoft' (East India Company) and the Dagonet Crown

Derby”—aesthetic objects that represent the aged social superiority of the couple. In dressing her in these “heavy old-fashioned settings”, Ellen is ingrained within old New York’s internally innocent body (50-51).

Yet despite her wanting “to become a complete American again”, Ellen finds she cannot reintegrate back into old New York’s Eden having fallen into outer corruption: she has lost the old New York art of silent communication and does not speak their language (53). Unable to fully understand the reasoning behind old New York’s hieroglyphic world, she cannot grasp the necessity of pretending and avoiding what is emotionally unpleasant for the sake of grander social stability. She thus collapses old New York’s innocent aesthetic, making Archer suddenly cognizant of its superficiality and underlying fragility. When Archer attempts to convey the fact that the aged, closeted van der Luydens are “the most powerful influence in New York society”, Ellen punctures their image of strength by suggesting that their “great influence” is simply the result of them making themselves “so rare” (61). She similarly perceives the old Academy’s “exceptionally brilliant audience”, draped in social fineries and splendid dress “in knickerbockers and pantalettes”, brutally penetrating beyond their outward appearance (3, 15). Ellen cuts through old New York’s innocence, and in doing so opens Archer’s eyes to the falsity of the world he lives in, “stir[ing] up old settled convictions and set[ting] them drifting dangerously through his mind” (35).

## **II. A Dangerous Dilettantism**

As the van der Luydens’ exhibition of art objects at dinner suggests, material aesthetics play a significant role in old New York society. The arts function in the same vein as old New York’s ideological aesthetic in the sense that they operate as containers for potential fracture. The Archer household provide an excellent example

of the inward function of the arts in the novel's narrative world. The Archer family are known for their airy, detached aesthetic. "Alpine scenery" is a prominent topic in conversation, the Archer women enjoy discussing the 'unrealistic', exotic, yet morally didactic novel *The Marble Faun* (1859), by Nathaniel Hawthorne, and their "Madeira ha[s] gone round the Cape", meaning it has retained its purity in not being tarnished by inland transportation (27-28). As well as aesthetically 'arching' above the earthiness of reality, the Archer women live in a highly closeted environment. Mrs. Archer is a widow and shrinks back from society. Both women live out of active social circulation, and instead choose to engage with society "from the lofty standpoint of a non-participant" (210). Starved of interaction within society itself, the two women collect "minor gossip" that "fills out the gaps in [the] picture" (27). Their impression of old New York is thus one constructed indirectly, mediated by the imagination. In their spatially "confined [...] narrower quarters" on West Twenty-eighth street, Janey and Mrs. Archer's creative outlets are similarly narrow and contained (28). They "cultivate ferns in Wardian cases" and focus their artistic endeavours on domestic "macramé lace and wool embroidery on linen", as opposed to the more overt highbrow discipline of "painting". Both are "great lovers of scenery", reading "Ouida's novels for the sake of the atmosphere", and enjoying literature that tends to focus on "peasant life" thanks to its rich descriptions of picturesque "scenery and pleasanter sentiments". These inward art forms exercise the Archer women's subjective imaginations in a way that does not threaten their exterior social identities, which in turn means that old New York's collective aesthetic is not impinged.

To mitigate the potential disruption of an unrestrained imagination, old New York regulates creative thought and individual drive into select, siphoned off areas. Insular occupations like sport and culture do not come with the risk of public

degradation. Both pursuits can be administered within private circles, and neither produce outcomes that substantially affect the formal composition of the collective. Business and politics, engaging with the public arenas of Wall Street and the state and national governments contrastingly expose one's individual and familial identity to public scrutiny, especially if one were to be involved in an economic collapse or "roll up one's sleeves and go down into the [political] muck" (102). In Archer, this mentally constrictive existence gives rise to a vibrant, imaginative interior life. Yet it also produces a deep-set fear of "anonymity and personal significance", as he feels repressed within a broader "masculine solidarity" (Griffin-Wolff 318). To counter this insecurity and bolster his self-image, he fervently consumes the arts—a socially permissible space for creative and imaginative exercise. The aesthetic consumption of all matters "intellectual and artistic" endows Archer with the sense of feeling "distinctly the superior" amongst "chosen specimens of old New York gentility", as he naively feels he has "probably read more, thought more, and even seen a good deal more of the world, than any other man of the number" (*AOI* 6-7). Archer's feeding on literature and theatre especially instil in him a deep longing for "a life that moves well beyond the charted realms of the familiar, a life of high emotional intensity and sustained moral and intellectual complexity" (Griffin-Wolff 318). This, combined with his rearing in a heavily stylised, ultimately artificial socio-cultural environment breeds a dangerous dilettantism, as he assesses these arts with the surface-level gaze his culture has inculcated within him, releasing his frustrated imagination upon these exterior aesthetic entities to both offload and distract himself.

Accordingly, Archer fervently consumes Alphonse Daudet's highly sentimental tales and George Eliot's psychologically interrogative novel *Middlemarch* (1860). Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "The House of Life" (1881) is particularly admired

by Archer. A sonnet sequence that intensely describes the mysteries of physical and spiritual love, Rossetti's collection was described as "a house built upon ever-shifting sands", containing poetic concepts and images of "hyper-dense, multifaceted, significance" (Roger Lewis 1-2). This 'house of life' quite literally comes to house Archer's emotional life, plunging him into "an atmosphere unlike he had ever breathed in books; so warm, so rich, and yet so ineffably tender, that it gave a new and haunting beauty to the most elementary of human passions" (*AOI* 113-114). With his deeply ingrained innocent perspective clouding his ability to identify the constructed nature of old New York society, Archer accordingly fails to recognise that the literary worlds he pours his emotional self into are similarly aesthetic fabrications. Archer's emotional life, like his social world, is idealised and detached from the hardness of reality. In substituting his emotional reality for literature's intensity of feeling, Archer founds his emotional life upon artifice, which only further detaches him from the nuances of the real world. This becomes a coping mechanism, a way of reading meaning and letting air into an artificial existence Archer finds "stifling" (77). Yet it is a highly risky stratagem, as it means that his emotional life becomes encased in fantasy, an encasement that jeopardizes his hold on reality.

### III. Satisfying Vanity

We see this emotional aestheticisation of reality take place perhaps most obviously when Archer goes to watch the melodramatic play titled *The Shaughraun*.<sup>31</sup> After watching "the hackneyed sentiments and clap-trap situations" the play produces, Archer becomes particularly taken with the "sad, almost monosyllabic scene of parting", in which the actress's lover pauses to look at her, steals back, lifts one of the velvet ribbons on her dress, kisses it and leaves the room, all without her

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<sup>31</sup> See Wheatley's chapter on Dion Boucicault's *The Shaughraun* for a copy of the play and an introductory discussion of its context.

acknowledgement (93). This scene moves Archer “more than the most famous histrionic outpourings” in its “reticence, [and] dumb sorrow”. While the scene foreshadows the poignant ending of *The Age of Innocence*, it also exhibits Archer’s tendency to apply aestheticised meaning derived from art to reality. Archer immediately moves to project the scene upon his reality, “reminding him—he could not have said why—of his leave taking from Madame Olenska after their confidential talk a week or ten days earlier”. Archer himself notes that “it would have been difficult to discover any resemblance between the two situations” (94). What Archer does identify, however, is an aesthetic aspect to Ellen Olenska’s exterior appearance and background. She “hardly [says] a word to him to produce this impression”, but Archer claims to identify a “mysterious faculty [for] suggesting tragic and moving possibilities outside the daily run of experience” in her, aesthetically projecting meaning upon her through her “mysterious and outlandish background”. As such, the “quiet, almost passive young woman” becomes one of “vivid countenance”, transformed and aestheticised in Archer’s mind. He endeavours to detach her from reality, and after having imagined the scene of *The Shaughraun* with himself and Ellen as the actors, Archer claims he meant “to leave the theatre” at that moment “in order to take the picture away with [him]” (96). Like the works of Daudet, Eliot and Rossetti, Ellen becomes the detached container in which he stows his sequestered emotional life<sup>32</sup>.

Problematically, Archer finds it easier to deal with “The case of the Countess Olenska”—the aesthetic container he has constructed in his head—as opposed to Ellen herself, who is complicated by the antagonistic details of reality (Griffin-Woolf 318). Upon Ellen, Archer applies his society’s doctrine that “the real thing” is to be

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<sup>32</sup> For more on Archer’s relic-like containment of Ellen, see Kilmasmith.

“never said or done or even thought” and looks instead to her surface layer for reality (*AOI* 36). Ellen becomes an aesthetic manifestation of foreignness, freedom and experience, and thus an object of desire for Archer, who craves “a life that moves well beyond the charted realms of the familiar, a life of high emotional intensity and sustained moral and intellectual complexity” (Griffin-Wolff 318). Her exotic dress, exposed body and emotional reactions uninhibited by social etiquette therefore merge to epitomize subjective freedom. This aestheticised *idea* of Ellen is externally confirmed in the way her actions follow on emotion “with such Olympian speed” (*AOI* 134). Yet, like the innocent aesthetic of old New York, this image of Ellen is suspended above reality. Archer’s romanticised vision of Ellen is conveniently imprecise, blurred and indefinite (Griffin-Woolf 319). The spaces she inhabits are “intimate, ‘foreign’, subtly suggestive of old romantic scenes and sentiments” (*AOI* 58). Her suggestion of “tragic and moving possibilities outside the daily run of experience” is a markedly “mysterious faculty”, and her “authority of beauty”, her “sureness”, and embodiment of experience and enlightenment is likewise a baseless description “mysterious” in origin (94). In reality Ellen is not an exotic temptress beguiling Archer towards subjective freedom. Rather, she is “pale”, “thin, worn, [and] a little older-looking than her age” (50). She is also “so quiet, quiet in her movements, her voice, the tones of her low-pitched voice”. She “trembles” when she makes a social move at odds with old New York etiquette, and “colour[s]” at the insinuation that there is anything more to her and Archer’s relationship than that of a cousinhood (53, 96). Nor is she a figure who openly cultivates fancy. When Archer turns to her for potential escape, she “ruthlessly outlines” his reality, “wrenching his passional life away from pure imagination to an actual person (however romantically construed) and a series of particular situations within which he can measure his true capacities”

(Griffin-Wolff 325). Yet Archer disregards this and builds “up within himself a kind of sanctuary in which [Ellen] throne[s] among his secret thoughts and longings” (215).

Ellen is not the only woman Archer falsely aestheticises to enrich his starved emotional, moral and intellectual life. May Welland, Archer’s fiancée and later wife, is also subject to his aesthetic distortions. As Archer watches *Faust*, he projects the opera’s innocent, performed image of Marguerite upon May. *Faust’s* Marguerite is a figure who embodies what Goethe originally described as the ‘eternal feminine’: an idealised philosophical vision of womanhood, wherein women are considered responsible for men’s ascension into moral and spiritual righteousness (“German Literature” *EB*). In the original *Faust* by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Faust’s soul is wrested from the Devil partly by the intercession of his former beloved, who comes to earth from heaven. Faust is redeemed thanks to his endless striving for God, a striving that would have unfolded in vain if it were not for the supernal quality of love Marguerite embodies. At the novel’s close May does evidence an exquisite quality of love that validates Archer’s existential path, but she is not the two-dimensional image of feminine purity Archer cages her into. May Welland quite literally hits the “bull’s-eye” in her embodiment of “Good Form” (*AOI* 173, 149). Outwardly, she seems to lack “experience”, “versatility” and “freedom of judgement”, in accordance with old New York’s ideological aesthetic training (36). Yet this is simply another carefully crafted facade implemented to uphold old New York’s overarching innocent aesthetic. Unfortunately, for reasons suggested earlier, Archer lacks the depth of perception to identify this. Instead, he takes May’s exterior innocence as conclusive and subsequently fears her adherence to the strictures of form has resulted in the



“negation” of her inner self, and that her outer being is merely a “curtain dropped before an emptiness” (173).

This aestheticisation of May is not only cursory and false, but self-indulgent, as it casts Archer in the role of the trapped, emotionally starved partner—a self-conception that appeals to his fanciful self desiring of a life of high emotional intensity. Imprisoning May in this aesthetic by refusing to “lift[...] the curtain” thus intensifies his individual melodrama whilst also giving him a kind of personal licence to engage his emotional desires elsewhere—to a more fluid, recipient woman: Ellen Olenska (173). Yet countering this cold, sterile image of an “indestructible youthfulness” maintained by “preserving fluid” is—in the vein of old New York—a latent dynamism and subjectivity (154). Despite Archer considering May’s gaze to be “transparent”, her eyes betray an inner depth of feeling, a depth that is occasionally pulled back to reveal a “new being” below the surface: one with a “generosity of [...] view” and “an attitude [...] recklessly unorthodox” (122). Yet despite May protesting that she “hears” and “notices” and possesses subjective “feelings and ideas”, it is safer for Archer to view her in the same vein as the “Kentucky Cave-Fish [...] which had ceased to develop eyes because they had no use for them” (121, 67). To view her as simply a ‘form’—a body—denies her the capacity for variation and neutralises her potential to disrupt his own aesthetic vision of himself. Aestheticizing May in this way is therefore a means of control and self-assurance. It isn’t coincidental then that Archer describes May in heavy, physical terms, with “goddess-like build” and an “athletic erectness of carriage” (264). While her exterior expresses her internal adherence to old New York’s stabilising innocence, for Archer it connotes a deathly sense of stasis. To articulate what he sees as May’s archaic, obsolete mode of operation, Archer likens her to Diana, the ancient Roman Goddess of the hunt,

women and childbirth—a figure of reproduction, security and sexual austerity. Yet he fails to recognise the rich meaning he applies to her character in likening her to such a figure. As Griffin-Wolff suggests, the goddess Diana “presides over the generation of life itself”, and in “her ‘primitive’ purity”, May upholds “the most fundamental human processes, and in this commitment, she is as ruthless as nature itself” (323). May’s exterior aesthetic mirrors that of old New York: dedicated to the “regulation of the process of generation”, her traditional being upholds the socio-cultural frame that gives rise to methodical change, and although clothed in the image of the past, May is the conduit of the future. Archer’s blindness to this fact underscores the reality of his own “abysmal innocence”.

#### **IV. Dropping Away from Experience**

This aestheticisation of reality reveals a tension within Archer. Just as Lily Bart is torn between the desire for a secure enclosure and complete subjective liberation in *The House of Mirth*, Newland Archer demonstrates an internal division between a deep-seated instinct to uphold his society’s constrictive aesthetic and contrastingly to renounce it. This tension is fittingly evidenced as the novel splits between books—a division marked by Archer’s marriage to May. Archer’s wedding to May is presented (through Archer’s restricted focalisation) as a moment of transition wherein Archer renounces his subjective freedom and is enveloped into the “black abyss” of a heavily insulated socio-cultural existence (153). Yet this subjective perspective Archer provides us with is simply another aestheticised, streamlined version of reality. In pointedly underlining Archer’s self-proclaimed detachment from reality, the novel quietly questions the truthful nature of subjective perspective and the validity of suspending characters in the void—a proto-modernist technique Henry

James exhibited in *The Golden Bowl* (1904), and one Wharton took issue with.<sup>33</sup> The psychological impact of Archer's isolated subjective perspective plays out as the wedding unfolds. Now that he has realised the objective aesthetic perspective old New York projects is false, he reads his peers as operating within "a nursery parody of life", and in their quibbles over the presentation of the wedding they wrangle like "medieval schoolmen over metaphysical terms that nobody had ever understood" (149). Archer becomes suspended above reality, and detached, he functions as if he were a "stranger", subject to "hallucinations" and "adrift far off in the unknown" (152).

Indeed, each time Archer tends towards aesthetic renunciation in favour of subjective freedom, Wharton renders him formless and psychologically uncontained, devoid of the social body his cultural aesthetic constructs. He becomes a 'modernist' figure, caught in the raw, bodiless state of pure sensation and thought. This state is exacerbated the closer Archer gets towards abandoning old New York and throwing off his aesthetic identity in order to realise his love for Ellen Olenska. Indeed, Archer's aestheticised subjective vision soon becomes:

the scene of his real life, of his only rational activities; thither he brought the books he read, the ideas and feelings which nourished him, his judgments and his visions. Outside it, in the scene of his actual life, he moved with a growing sense of unreality and insufficiency, blundering against familiar prejudices and traditional points of view as an absent-minded man goes on bumping into the furniture of his own room. Absent—that was what he was: so absent from everything most densely real and near to those about him that it sometimes startled him to find they still imagined he was there (215-216)

Archer's psychological disintegration reaches a pinnacle in the novel's second to last chapter, when he looks to be taking "the irrevocable step" of abandoning May and his

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<sup>33</sup> In *A Backward Glance* (1934), Wharton recalls asking James: "What was your idea in suspending the four principle characters in 'The Golden Bowl' in the void? What sort of life did they lead when they were not watching each other, and fencing with each other? Why have you stripped them all of the *human fringes* we necessarily trail after us through life?" (191, emphasis original).

family and following Ellen back to Europe (272). Yet what Archer fails to see is that the union of himself and Ellen can take place nowhere. When he envisages their escape from old New York, it is hazy and indefinite. Archer wants “to get away with [Ellen] into a world where words like that—categories like that—won’t exist. Where [they] shall be simply two human beings who love each other, and are the whole life to each other; and nothing else on earth will matter” (238). Yet Ellen, experienced in the world beyond old New York’s citadel, recognises the idealisation in the world Archer describes, and knows that such isolation does not exist: “Oh, my dear—where is that country? Have you ever been there? [...] I know so many who've tried to find it; and, believe me, [...] it wasn't at all different from the old world they'd left, but only rather smaller and dingier and more promiscuous” (238-239).

A realist, Ellen seeks compromise. She asks Archer whether he wants her to live as his “mistress—since [she] can’t be [his] wife” (238). Yet this statement brutally outlines Archer’s entrenchment within old New York’s cultural code. The “crudeness” of the question startles him, and he is pulled up from his lovers daydream with a “jerk” and “flounder[s]”, unable to combat the realism of her response. Below his proclamations that “women should be free”, Archer is deeply uncomfortable with an unbridled femininity, shying away from the unseemly nature of the term ‘mistress’, as well as the sexual openness it entails (35). Indeed, each time Archer is faced with moments of social liberation or deviation from old New York’s code of conduct, he finds himself distressed. He initially recoils from Ellen’s “misplaced flippancy” and “wince[s]” at her easy relation with Julius Beaufort, a fellow outsider Archer “abhor[s]”, whose “habits were dissipated, his tongue [...] bitter, [and] his antecedents [...] mysterious” (15, 63, 17). So when Archer fancies he has the capacity to escape with Ellen, it comes as no real surprise that he ultimately fails to realise the

aesthetic vision of himself as a “ruthless magnificent fellow”, as in reality, he is a man formed wholeheartedly by old New York’s conservative, form-preserving code (292). His faith in his own capacity for release is shallow and illusionary: it is an aestheticised self-conception true of a dilettante bred in the innocent aesthetic of old New York. Furthermore, Archer and Ellen’s union fundamentally cannot take place, as their love is founded on their maintaining the aesthetic they have projected upon one another. As mentioned earlier, Archer aestheticises Ellen as the personification of subjective freedom. Ellen correspondingly imputes to Archer a “moral substance” that “does not yet fully exist” (Griffin-Wolff 324). She loves him for his honour and commitment to “rather old-fashioned ideas [...] any convention that keeps the family together”—qualities that at this point in the novel are not yet fully formed (332). Both love in the other qualities that they desire for themselves in their compromised social frameworks. To maintain this love for each other, the couple must remain in these aesthetics, and to remain in these aesthetics is for Archer to remain morally upright and for Ellen to remain free. If they realise their love and engage in an affair, Archer will be corrupted and Ellen will become compliant, contained in a relation that counteracts her image of subjective sacrosanctity. The only way they can feasibly and purely love each other is from a distance, separated.

In the novel’s second to last chapter, Archer’s aestheticised daydream is severed and he is correspondingly brought down to earth. Surveying “the tribal rally around a kinswoman about to be eliminated from the tribe”, it suddenly dawns on him “in a vast flash made up of many broken gleams, that to all of them, he and Madame Olenska were lovers” (276). This sudden awareness of society’s panoptic vision and his impending division from the subjective freedom Ellen Olenska entails results in an amplified incongruity between Archer’s body and mind. Mentally, Archer considers

himself “a prisoner in the centre of an armed camp” about to be “closed in [to] the family vault”—his subjective self dissipating as he is coerced into old New York’s reductive innocent aesthetic (277). Panicking, he weakly attempts to evade his social imprisonment and his voice suddenly rises to a pitch as he claims he “mean[s] to do a lot of travelling [him]self before long” (278). But this individualism is quashed by the force of his peers, who collectively shut down his opportunities for physical escape. Using the “deathly sense of the superiority of implication and analogy over direct action, and of silence over rash words”, Archer’s subjective self is repressed by the sheer weight of the collective (277). His individualism is subsequently drowned over the course of the evening, and he only intermittently comes back into “consciousness”, having been swept away by innocent “talk” that gluts him like “some senseless river running and running because it does not know how to stop” (279). Yet Archer’s subjective suffocation is offset by what he considers to be a strange external presentation of ease in the situation. He speaks in a voice that is “natural” and finds himself robotically helping Ellen into her coach to leave without moving to actively moving to influence the social tides threatening to engulf them (277). Old New York’s hold over Archer’s identity is too strong for his long-starved, weak individualism to throw off, and the ease with which he reverts back into an outward unruffled-ness underlines this fact. Archer’s alignment with old New York’s forces here also suggests that his internal proclamation of steadfast individualism is but a self-deceiving aesthetic. Archer is not a man of internal resolve. Rather, as a dilettante, he lacks commitment and application and thus floats “in a state of odd imponderability”, watching proceedings unfold before him, unable to “get down in the muck” (276, 102). He is not “the ruthless magnificent fellow he dreamed of being”, but “a man who longs for a change, and is yet too weary to welcome it” (292).

What further stifles his intent to get “away from everything” is May’s announcement of her pregnancy (282). This is the nail in Archer’s self-perceived coffin. To abandon May in her pregnant state would be the highest social sin Archer could commit, as it would fracture the secure domestic interior old New York so fiercely protects. May here acts as a true “tall and silver-shining [...] young Diana”, being a master ‘Archer’ who hits the bull’s-eye, ruthlessly shooting down Archer’s individualistic aesthetic with the force of collective interest: an act that verifies her ruthless “commitment to the most fundamental of human processes” (*AOI* 252, Griffin-Woolf 323). May is not the innocent Marguerite Archer imagines her to be when he identifies with *Faust* at the novel’s opening. She is the ‘eternal feminine’, the source of all creativity and continuity, who strives with all her power to protect old New York’s interior against the threat of external fracture. We thus leave Archer at the end of this chapter a ruptured man, “sick”, “cold” and on the verge of death (282-283).

#### V. A Relic in A Small Dim Chapel

If the novel were to end at Chapter 33, we would have, essentially, a reinterpretation of *The House of Mirth*. Condemned to a life of individual oppression within the bounds of a heavily stylised, prison-like aesthetic, Archer—like Lily—seems to be destined to metaphorically die, subsumed into a purely objective form. Yet this is not the case. Instead, Wharton provides us with a final chapter that catapults readers from the 1870s into the pre-war period, presenting us with fifty-seven year old Newland Archer, very much alive. Archer has not died from his rupture from Ellen Olenska—quite the contrary. He has gone on to build a full, decent life following the division. His marriage to May has been fruitful, producing three children, who have gone on to live “larger li[ves]”, with “more tolerant views” in comparison to the “narrow groove” Archer and May inhabited in their youth (288,

286). The couple's long, silent years together have been lightened by "the dignity of duty", and Archer has personally led a rich civic life, contributing to "philanthropic, municipal or artistic" movements and overall, contributing to "the new state of things" and realising his "old brick" nickname by operating like a "brick" old New York society's "well-built wall" (286). What this final chapter does is haul us as readers out of Archer's closeted subjective perspective, positioning him in relation to life.

Archer's rupture from Ellen may have stifled the realisation of his individual desires, but the break has rechannelled his powerful 'vision-building' capacity into the community, which has led to the expansion of the collective's socio-cultural psyche. This is realised in his son Dallas, who as an "architect" of the new world is able to engage in both constructive and creative work, and his daughter Mary, who wears symbolically looser clothing, living a life less "closely girt" (285, 288).

What has enabled Archer to remain encased within this artificial framework is the aesthetic that Ellen has projected upon him. As stated earlier, Ellen is in love with her imposed image of Archer. During her time in old New York, Archer constantly demonstrates gallant (albeit empty) acts of familial loyalty Ellen deeply admires. As Griffin-Wolff states, Ellen's "contact with Old World corruption enables her to appreciate the pious primitivism of her American cousins" (Griffin-Wolff 323).

Archer's external embodiment of this civic goodness enables Ellen to see "that under the dullness there are things [in old New York] so fine and sensitive and delicate that even those [she] most cared for in [her] other life look cheap in comparison" (*AOI* 198). Ironically, Archer inculcates Ellen with the understanding that freedom purchased at the expense of others is despicable—a dictate he himself has not yet come to terms with. We see this when the pair meet at the Metropolitan Museum in Chapter 31. Whilst Archer is "consumed by [...] wants and [...] longings", Ellen looks



upon the museum's "hardly recognisable domestic utensils, ornaments and personal trifles" fractured from the domestic interior they historically informed (257, 255). Such fracture for Ellen is "cruel", a form of "irreparable harm", and she begs Archer for their love to not "destroy" the domestic interior of those who have helped her "remake" her own (255, 257). To Ellen, the individual suffering she undergoes to preserve the innocent lives of others is a beautiful, "exquisite" pain—a pain rendered "pleasurable" by the knowledge her personal sacrifice has ensured the stability of those around her (198). In inadvertently opening Ellen's eyes to the "exquisite pleasure" of domestic harmony and insulated innocence that exists beneath old New York's outwardly static formal architecture, Archer impresses himself into Ellen's mind as a man of moral principle, familial honour and collective duty. To maintain Ellen's love for him, Archer must uphold this image, as it is the only way he can show her that her love is reciprocated. The pair cannot physically enact their love, for to do so would be to destroy their aesthetic image of one another. To come to Archer as his mistress is for Ellen to lose her aesthetic of independent foreign freedom. Likewise, for Archer to steal away with Ellen would entirely undermine his principled, gentlemanly identity. To be pure in their love and true to their subjective desire is thus to give each other up and love deeply in immaterial, detached terms. In doing so, they retain their exterior aesthetic form and internally gratify their emotional selves.

The internalised aesthetic image Archer casts Ellen in is therefore an image that reminds Archer of the civic aesthetic he has been charged to uphold. It is of Ellen as "a dark lady, pale and dark, who would look up quickly, half rise, and hold out a long thin hand with three rings on it": the Ellen to whom he emptily imparted the significance of old New York's code in his youth, the Ellen who aestheticises him as the epitome of a "good citizen" (297-298, 286). What this image does is steady

Archer to play his part in the present. It keeps him from fracturing the form of his socio-cultural collective by entreating him to contain his desire for freedom within. Through aesthetic projection, Archer is thus able to hold his subjective self and objective self in alignment. He retains a fixed exterior architecture of social identity, whilst maintaining an interior subjectivity through Ellen, whose image provides a “centralising weight of association and habit”, enriching and ordering an otherwise purposeless life (*MF* 46). Ellen’s image then operates like a religious “relic”—her spiritual enthronement within Archer’s psyche bids him to remain devoted “centre of early pieties, of grave endearing traditions”—the domestic interior old New York’s formal architecture protects (*AOI* 296, *HOM* 319). Archer thus undergoes a kind of psychological conversion, sacrificing his individual life as an act of perfect obedience that upholds the innocent psyche of the collective.

#### **VI. "Say I'm old-fashioned: that's enough."**

Archer’s devotion to the interior “sanctuary” upon which Ellen “throne[s]” faces one final test before the novel’s close (215). Journeying to Paris with his son Dallas, he has the opportunity to meet with Ellen Olenska. With May dead, and old New York’s structural innocence reformulated, “There [is] nothing now to keep her and Archer apart”, and the repressed, passionate part of Archer longs to be “in the blessed hush of her nearness” (294-295). Yet Archer ultimately chooses not to see her, waiting on the street below her Parisian apartment because “It’s more real to me here than if I went up” (298) To visit Ellen now and have his love requited would be to hollow out the purpose of the good, decent, binding commitments he has made in years preceding their meeting (Griffin-Wolff 331). While to have his love unrequited would be to have the intermittent years prior guided by a meaningless image—a realisation that would render Archer’s past conduct and time wasted. Both options

deem Archer's life thus far purposeless. What facilitates Archer's decision to renounce reality and remain encased in his aesthetic illusion is a piece of silent communication drawn up from the past. In the vein of Fullerton to Wharton in the theatre box mentioned earlier in the chapter, Dallas relates that May wholly comprehended and understood Archer's nobly buried life upon her deathbed and was sympathetic to his subjective sacrifice. The belated knowledge that May has intuitively recognised his aching state moves Archer "indescribably" and validates his decision to remain loyal and ensconced within old New York's aesthetic moral code (*AOI* 294). In this disclosure of her silent communication and invisible intuition, May demonstrates loyalty, gallantry and a loving lack of resentment. These are inherently good qualities born out of an aesthetic illusion worthy of Archer's championship. Old New York's aesthetic, like Ellen's aesthetic, operates as an instructive moral "light", enabling their devotees to develop a "fine and sensitive and delicate" morality that encourages them to purposely uphold an alleviative interior architecture (141, 198). Wharton understood these communally minded aesthetics as enacting a "vital radiation", enlightening society in its relation to life and therefore shielding humanity from understanding life to be "a mere irrelevant happening, a meaningless scrap of fact torn from its context" (*WOF* 28-29). Without Ellen's illusory aesthetic, Archer would be like Lily—an exemplar of wasted human possibility. Yet May saves Archer, as Marguerite does Faust with a timely call from the afterlife, validating Archer's 'arching' service to the old New York community and thus ensuring he achieves personal salvation. May's magnanimous acknowledgement confirms that Archer has attained a meaningful life by committing himself to a life within old New York's "small", "dim", innocent "chapel" (*AOI* 296). Her compassionate understanding also charges him with the resolve to resolutely quell his passionate self in order to preserve

the aesthetic image of Ellen, which in turn has preserved his ‘vital radiation’ of socio-cultural responsibility and familial security.

In rejecting the un-aestheticised Ellen awaiting him at the Place des Invalides, Archer finally realises that the raw, real Ellen is in fact invalid. A real-world Ellen stripped of her deistic aesthetic lacks the creative power to form Archer into a morally substantial man. In the same way, Wharton deems a raw, real literary modernism invalid. Its inability to illuminatively string the fractured “raw ingredients” of life together into coherency leaves it unable to rise beyond the status of a “turgid welter”—a jumbled mass of “unformed & unimportant drivel” (Lewis, *Letters* 461). Realism’s application of aesthetic illusion is what enables it to progress beyond “the temporary shelter of flitting fancy [to] the four-square and deeply founded monument which the novel ought to be” (*WOF* 75). Aesthetic illusion procures Archer a substantial reality filled with poignance and meaning, and this ‘illusory’ capacity is therefore the most valuable aspect of Ellen’s being. So, while the aesthetic that informs Archer’s life is unreal, it gives rise to “most of the real things of his life”: the composition and growth of his family, the sense of personal contribution and the “dignity of a duty” (284, 286). Illusory aesthetic forms then effectuate the transformation of life’s “raw ingredients” into “a pudding”—a thing of substance (Lewis, *Letters* 461). At the novel’s close, Archer realises that the life he has inhabited is not a “painted tomb” like that of Plato’s cave, but a contained interior that protects society from an immoral, corrupt life beyond (176). His unwillingness to transcend reality and approach the pure, real form of Ellen in the in her apartment beyond reveals that Archer has found a Faustian limitlessness within the “old silent images” of Ellen (176). These images provide a poignant interior communion, a communion initially presented in the silent, shared communication May and Archer

demonstrate at the “sociable old Academy” of the novel’s opening chapter (3). This is the psychological substance literary realism offers. And this essence of manufactured meaning and structure fancifully drawn from reality is what Wharton asserts as the substance that will reformulate a ruptured humanity, just as it reformulates and substantiates Archer in *The Age of Innocence*.

## Conclusion

I see them [Church and Theatre] standing up side by side, like summits catching light when all else is in shadow.

—Edith Wharton (Dwight 272).

Edith Wharton's first publication, *The Decoration of Houses* (1897), provides a framework for understanding the function of formal architecture in her literature. In the manual, Wharton calls for interior decoration to align itself with governing architectural principles. For when interior decoration aligns itself with its architectural container, she suggests, unity and coherence is granted to the whole structure. A failure to relate to a founding architectural frameworks results in a "piling up of heterogeneous ornament" and a "multiplication of incongruous effects" (*DOH* xvi). This is because there is no "definite first conception", no holistic vision of the entire structure, and as a consequence, a sense of wholeness and harmony is unrealised (xx). This designerly assessment mirrors Wharton's perspective on the formal purpose of the novel. For Wharton, a foundational narrative structure residing below "the raw pudding of sensation of thought" was crucial if the novel was to evolve to be a successful "deeply-founded monument" (Lewis, *Letters* 461, *WOF* 75). Life, Wharton would argue, requires the same comprehension of an underlying architecture or social design in order to be coherently, composedly lived. It is a sentiment she implies in her 1914 essay "The Criticism of Fiction", when she claims that "The bondless gush of 'life' to be tasted and savoured must be caught in some outstretched vessel of perception; and to perceive is to limit and choose" (qtd *Wharton & James* 288-289). For Wharton, "raw life" does not offer us anything beyond itself. A selective, shaped version of life contrastingly "push[s] [perception] to the last point of its exquisite powers of pattern making" and enables the extraction of "the last drop of figurative

beauty” from “raw life”. Patternmaking, aesthetic form, and social design are “exquisite [human] powers” that construct something non-existent naturally, imbuing reality with a meaning and poignancy it fundamentally lacks. So, while Wharton acknowledges that this stylistic implementation of structure is an artificial and illegitimate presentation of ‘raw’ nature, it nonetheless produces a derivational beauty—an aesthetically even, harmonious version of reality. It domesticates our unruly existence, controlling it and rendering it secure. Encasing characters within such stylised aesthetic forms thus procures their psychological insulation, a poignant protection from the empty disorder of the modern world, a “huge kaleidoscope where all the social atoms [spin] around on the same plane” (*AOI* 291).

Yet in order for these aesthetics to perform such a momentous task, they must be infused with a depth of purpose. A life framed by two-dimensional aesthetics that fail to instil one with a moralistic perspective results in one’s development of a superficial interior architecture. Without a rooted set of interior principles, one lacks a sense of relation to exterior life, as well as a personal fortitude and moral constancy that guards against physical and psychological disintegration. Aesthetics are capable of erecting an immaterial essence of meaning absent in reality. This “vital radiation” of meaning is not only capable of instilling a sense of internal purpose, but has the potential to relate and reconcile one to the deficiencies of raw reality (*WOF* 28). This ‘arch’ of meaning that bridges life’s abyss is the ‘exquisite power’ inherent to realism’s “bronze age weapons”. Realism’s aesthetic artifice has the power to alleviate the “ache of modernism”, but only if readers are willing to arch above reality and seek salvation in an inner sanctuary of domestic communion. Yet Wharton’s interior architecture is more than just a refuge from a disordered reality: it is an ideological frame that provides humanity with the foundational capacity to modify

and transform the chaos inherent to the world around them. Edith Wharton then only superficially appears not to “enlarge fiction’s technical scope” (Bullett qtd Majumdar and McLaurin 163). Below her ‘old-fashioned’ aesthetics lies a smouldering modernism that seeps into her historic narrative measuredly, not wrenchingly. What her formal architecture evidences then is that old-fashioned aesthetic forms ground and regulate modern thinking. They slow the pace of modernity’s infiltration in order to preserve “the background of the spectacle through which we pass” (*MF* 29). To disregard our history, to render past aesthetics redundant is for society to dissolve into a raw existence—a “mere battle of ugly appetites” (*AOI* 286). So, while Virginia Woolf may have scorned Wharton for possessing the “shell of a distinguished mind”, Wharton herself recognised that this shell, this aesthetic container, was both the brace and gatekeeper of a modern mind within (qtd Joslin 202). Wharton acknowledged that Woolf had a “very imaginative mind, perhaps a very poetic mind”, but she wondered whether “she was fundamentally endowed with true curiosity” (Lewis, *Letters* 461). Could the “raw sensation and thought” of literary modernism create novels equal to the mighty, “blessed” temples of literary realism? (Lewis, *Bio* 424).

Following the Great War, Wharton herself retreated into a “mighty temple” of structure, away from the post-war world’s intense “atmosphere [...] too dense and yet too stimulating for [her] lungs” (Lewis, *Bio* 424, *AOI* 296). In 1918, Wharton moved from her central Parisian apartment on the Rue de Varenne into the outskirts of Paris, to the Pavillon Colombe at St. Brice-sous-Forêt. After moving, Wharton remarked that as soon as she moved in “peace and order came back into [her] life” (*BG* 363). This property, and that of Château Sainte-Claire in Hyères, east of Toulon (nestled in the grounds of a ruined seventeenth-century convent), were spaces she worked to



restore continuity and rootedness to her life. In France, Wharton took joy the way the French had made the:

The happy momentous discovery that good manners are a short cut to one's goal, that they lubricate the wheels of life instead of obstructing them [...] [This] application of the finest of mental instruments to the finest process of living—seems to have illuminated not only the social relation, but its outward, concrete expression, producing a finish in the material setting of life, a kind of conformity in in-animate things—forming, in short, the background of the spectacle through which we pass... (MF 28-29)

Critics have associated Wharton's retreat from the lived fabric of urban life to be a reversion from the discombobulating effects of modernity. As Annette Benert suggests, "it was as if she could no longer insulate herself from the speed, the cacophony, 'the intensification of nervous stimulation' in the modern metropolis that German sociologist George Simmel described in 1903" (194). Her dislocation from modern life likewise meant her novels lacked a certain realism; instead reality is derived from inferences, allusions and abstractions (195). As Eleanor Dwight declares, as Wharton "separated herself more and more from the world in her precious retreat, she became increasingly out of touch with modern life as a subject for fiction", and as a result "her novels suffered" (228). Wharton's house, just like the aesthetic shelter of *The Age of Innocence*, may have attempted to insulate her against the disorder and meaninglessness of the post-war world, but this sense of existential buoyancy was elusive. Wharton remained torn between what Candice Waid describes as "two opposing impulses" of childhood, "the desire 'to make... pictures prettier' and the necessity of telling the truth" (228). This childhood contradiction remained with her in old age. Intellectually isolated post war and concerned that humanity was becoming one-dimensional, without depth or substance, she came to balance her fears and attenuate her loneliness through literary construction—"the basis for what she would later describe as her 'real life'" (228).

Indeed, living internally in imagination and memory became increasingly appealing in Wharton's last ten years of life. Mussolini's horrifying rise to power, Hitler's Nazism and the growing forces of "Bolshevism" in countries like France and Spain had Wharton foresee a "roaring chaos" approaching amidst "all the shattering, crashing and smashing" (Dwight 275). In a revealing comment to friend Elisina Tyler, Wharton remarked: "I don't think this world-gloom agrees with me" (Benstock 448). In the face of this social descent, Wharton's friends noted her drifting towards a potential conversion to Catholicism in her old age. In Gaillard Lapsley's opinion, Wharton developed a realisation that the rationalistic Nietzschean system was insufficient in its explanation of "what life and reflection had taught her" (Lewis, *Bio* 510). A recorded conversation between Wharton and Elisina Tyler has Wharton remark that:

Religious thought is certainly a great power. The greatest of all. It embraces everything. And now science has moved so far away from the standpoint of the materialistic school that perhaps we are on the very edge of a great discovery [... of] The limitless spaces. (Lewis, *Bio* 512)

Over the fin-de-siècle period, a surprising number of literary figures converted to Catholicism, including Gerald Manley Hopkins, Ford Maddox Ford, T. S. Eliot (an Anglo-Catholic), Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene. In spite of the pleasure she derived from its practises, Wharton did not join this list of converts. For Lapsley, she was too much of an "intellectual rationalist" to accept Catholicism's transrational doctrines. Yet she found "peace in the Roman Church", a peace in its liturgical practices, rituals, ceremonies and narrative structures (511). As Lapsley notes, Wharton was "sensitive to the beauty of ritual", finding poignancy in the systematic belief in a transcendent power informing reality (qtd Benstock 430). Catholicism offered an ideological aesthetic that guided one through life's formlessness. For Wharton, aesthetic suspension above life's "mysterious [...] ripening[s] and

rotting[s]” was the most ‘exquisite pleasure’ existence offers (Lewis, *Bio* 374). It was an entrenched faith in aesthetic containment that she maintained through to her death in 1937. Her tombstone keeps vigil of this ‘construction in the void’:

Ave Crux Spes Unica

—Hail to the Cross, our only hope.

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