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Abstract

Elizabeth A. Jordan

From World War to Consumer Culture: An Investigation into Edith Wharton and the 1920s

### **Chapter 1**

For decades, many critics assumed Edith Wharton's post-World War I fiction to be valuable only in the shadow of her earlier, and supposedly greater, writing. In this thesis, I intend to explore three of these novels in further critical detail, The Glimpses of the Moon (1922), Twilight Sleep (1927), and The Children (1928). Their combination allows for a solid, comprehensive and multifaceted sample of Wharton in the 1920s. Integral to this thesis are the Marxist reasoning of Fredric Jameson and the utilisation of his semantic rectangle.

### **Chapter 2**

At the time of its publication The Glimpses of the Moon was critically ignored. However, the exploration, at length, of the semantic rectangles produced from this novel has directed us to four points of conclusion. First, that The Glimpses of the Moon provides a transition from the tragic historical romance to the modern problematic lifestyle. Secondly, that the novel is displaced in time. Thirdly, the knowledge gained from this new exploration has worth at least equal to novels written prior to 1920. And finally, that the conclusion of this novel has significant ambivalence hidden within the neatness of the resolution.

### **Chapter 3**

Wharton's task in this novel, Twilight Sleep, is much more to act as an illustrator of the ambivalence that marked the later 1920s. Each incarnation of the binary between power and subordination reveals a separate area of uncertainty and two dichotomous manners of resolving it. What follows from them is an intense inability or refusal to endorse any of them by Wharton. Without providing answers, Wharton equitably divides failure between the characters and binaries. Rather than success, this novel and rectangle are about failure.

### **Chapter 4**

The warring notions of modernity and tradition produced, pragmatically, the conflict between change and stability. As modernity crept into being, social guidelines slowly disappeared, leaving people awash in a sea of possibilities. Wharton was deeply troubled by the uncertainty and transience that characterised once solid worlds. In The Children, she explores the questions posed by debating the merits of change and stability and ultimately expresses her inability to come to terms with either through the ambivalence that marks this novel.

### **Chapter 5**

The body of contemporary Wharton critics have managed to identify the factors that precipitated the change in Wharton's post-World War I fiction. This thesis, employing Marxist critic Fredric Jameson's methodology and tools, has attempted to show the critical worth of the 1920s works through examining three selections. Jameson's ability to merge historicism, ideology, criticism and philosophy extends into a synthesized methodology for literary critique applicable to Wharton.

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## Chapter 1: Edith Wharton and the 1920s

### Introduction

From her first publication in 1891 to her final work, published posthumously in 1938, Wharton never approached the blank page with anything less than a ferocious fervour for perfection and a demanding lust for the creative process – she deftly employed the gamut of tools from meticulous political correctness to brash societal challenge. Wharton possessed the reverence and commitment modern day author Stephen King writes of, yet she also possessed an impatience with those only playing at writing, as does King, “If you can take it seriously, we can do business. If you can’t or you won’t, it’s time for you to close the book and do something else.”<sup>1</sup> For Wharton, this connection between readers, writers and books was active rather than passive, and at times it was also exclusive, requiring a particular insight to unlock the connection, “Books are alive enough to an imagination which knows how to animate them.”<sup>2</sup> As the stable New York world of her birth gradually metamorphosed into the turbulent decades of the early twentieth century, Wharton’s books grew with this change. For decades, most of her post-World War I fiction was brushed away by the critical world. Using analytical techniques just short of the criteria necessary to fully animate these “changeling” novels, many critics assumed her later work to be valuable only in the shadow of her earlier, and supposedly greater, writing.

Her post-war works do show a marked change in nearly every aspect of her fiction; however, such a change is not necessarily to her deficit. Lineally, her novels of the 1920s are the creative cusp of Wharton’s career, and as such, these transitional pieces have received less critical attention. I intend to explore three of these novels in further critical detail, The Glimpses of the Moon (1922), Twilight Sleep (1927), and

The Children (1928). Each of these three novels has been chosen from Wharton's 1920s portfolio; each possesses specific qualities that propelled it into consideration here. Sociologically, the three work in concert to expose diverging aspects of modernity. Rhetorically, each novel approaches modernity through a different paradigm. Their combination allows for a solid, comprehensive and multifaceted sample of Wharton in the 1920s. Wharton's path starts as intensely questioning and settles into abject ambivalence near the decade's end.

In The Glimpses of the Moon, the earliest novel presented in my thesis, Wharton probes the struggle between modernity and tradition. Funnelled through the binary oppositions between blocked and unblocked transactions, Glimpses addresses economic, social and interpersonal aspects of the early 1920s. This novel's position at the beginning of this decade is unique – Wharton was still actively questing toward reconciling modernity with Old New York, “Publishers wanted another House of Mirth, a modern-day novel of manners that would capture a wide American readership. Edith had signed an \$18,000 serial rights contract with the Pictorial Review in 1916 for just such a book (“The Glimpses of the Moon”).<sup>3</sup> Once Lily Bart began her catastrophic path, it was only a matter of time until her demise was complete. Nick and Susy Lansing, on the other hand, possess a wealth of options not available to Lily. Whereas Old New York guaranteed a specific ending, modernity guaranteed no such thing. As much as Wharton's fiction may have criticised the rigidity of Old New York, the elasticity of modernity was, at best, uncomfortable and, at worst, unconscionable for her. While Wharton does attempt to resolve the characters' dilemma in Glimpses, she ultimately comes to a repressive and questioning finale. Many critics have disparaged Glimpses as a weak novel, but Wharton's work habits suggest the author felt differently. Wharton's biographers

record her patterns of writing at specific times each day, “In spring and summer 1921, Edith worked on The Glimpses of the Moon, completing this short novel in mid-September, nine months ahead of her own contractual deadline.”<sup>4</sup> Had Wharton wanted to work on this novel more, she had ample time to do so, suggesting that the author was satisfied with the novel as she published it.

Following chronologically, 1927’s Twilight Sleep is the next novel I consider. The author’s position in Twilight Sleep is vastly different from her role in Glimpses; Wharton crafts this novel much as a reporter of the Jazz Age. From a trip taken with Walter Berry, she had first hand experience with the social and political milieu it was capable of creating, “they found themselves for five days amid the ‘human wreckage’ of the Lido season.”<sup>5</sup> In Twilight Sleep, Wharton records how various facets of the Jazz Age mentality can gently infiltrate a representative modern family. Through each member of Pauline Manford’s family, Wharton logs a different facet of the struggle between power and subordination. By presenting the basic levels of power and subordination across gender, occupation and age gaps in one wealthy family, Wharton conveyed the mess she foresaw, “the tragedy’s flat tone matched its emotion, a sense of being lulled into disaster.”<sup>6</sup> At the novel’s conclusion, none of the characters have risen to leadership, resulting in the chaos that Wharton feared for all of society, “Edith believed not only that this theme was timely, but also that society would pay heavily for its continued evasion and emotional bankruptcy.”<sup>7</sup> As Benstock notes, evasion is the central feature of Twilight Sleep. Neither Wharton nor her characters endorse *any* of the corridors they follow. At the novel’s conclusion, the only way for the Manfords and the Wyants to continue is to actively avoid each other through travel. Focusing through the lens of power and subordination, Wharton illustrates the fluctuating balance of power spurred onward by mass consumer culture.

Published just a year after Twilight Sleep, The Children is totally different from its predecessor in its complexity and strategy. In Glimpses, she attempted the reconciliation of modernity with tradition, in Twilight Sleep, she positioned herself as a reporter of the new and destructive zeitgeist, but in The Children Wharton's ambivalence at the new era comes to a reluctant rest. Shari Benstock describes the relationship between Wharton's books and critics at this time, "The House of Mirth, Ethan Frome, and The Age of Innocence, which are today considered among her best works, received mixed reviews when they first appeared. Critical opinion of them was later revised upward, often by reviewers who had first raised doubts about their quality."<sup>8</sup> The Children's role in relation to this statement is interesting. Around the time of its publication, critics jabbed Wharton for losing touch with America and for writing to an audience with "no standards of taste."<sup>9</sup> As the second to last novel of the 1920s, Wharton had been away from the United States for a long time during its composition, yet this is one of the most comprehensive novels ever written by Wharton.

The characters range in age from infant (Chipstone Wheater) to mature adult (Rose Sellars), represent both genders, several personality types and varying degrees of morality. Further, a hefty range of issues are thoroughly confronted – law, education, fertility, and reality. The geography of this novel is clearly European; the characters are solidly American. This comprehensive nature is the key quality for The Children's inclusion in my thesis. In this novel, Wharton builds the division between each binary opposition as strongly as she can, as if to indicate some basis for choice between the two. However, she cannot make the positive resolution of any binary mix fluidly with the circumstances of modern life. Looking through the conflict between change and stability, Wharton endorses no specific position – no solution is fully



complete. Despite all her examination and rational argumentation, Wharton abandons the notion of a happy ending similar to the conclusion of Glimpses. At the novel's end every living character has some cross to bear that reflects past and present action.

In order to fully explore these novels in a critical framework, one must examine not only Wharton's texts but the scholarly context surrounding them as well. Initially, a thorough but concise review of four contemporary, pivotal approaches to Wharton will be presented, with specific attention given to each doctrine's post-war analysis. Secondly, a tracing of how and why the later works have been denigrated or ignored by these doctrines is necessary; following that explanation, it is important to defend the post-war work as integral and relevant to Wharton's career. Finally, based on the work of Marxist theorist Frederic Jameson, I will introduce an analytical framework for this thesis that capably addresses the paradigm in which Edith Wharton's novels of the 1920s exist.

#### **Four Corners: Cynthia Griffin Wolff, Elizabeth Ammons, Dale Bauer and Janet Beer Goodwyn**

Since her literary career began in earnest in 1899, a great deal of critical work has been generated about Wharton's writing, but in the recent past, four distinct methods of analysis have emerged. Within her 1977 critical book A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton, Cynthia Griffin Wolff draws her methodology strongly from Sigmund Freud and subsequent theories of psychoanalysis.<sup>10</sup> Following in 1980, Elizabeth Ammons' Edith Wharton's Argument With America creates a feminist cultural and political context in which to view Wharton's progression as an artist and a woman.<sup>11</sup> Janet Beer Goodwyn's Edith Wharton: Traveller in the Land of Letters, published in 1990, pays close attention to the role of geography (or 'place') in

each text while drawing on Wharton's talents as a sightseer and travel book author.<sup>12</sup> Finally, Dale Bauer structures her 1994 reading of Wharton's post-1917 works in Edith Wharton's Brave New Politics through "cultural dialogics," a method abandoning traditional conceptions of Wharton's later works through revealing a different purpose for fiction in the last two decades of Wharton's life.<sup>13</sup> I have selected these four critics because each represents a distinct category of modern Wharton analysis. Therein, each possesses distinctive and specific layers I am able to draw from in the construction of my methodology as well as portions that I intend to challenge.

In an academic reflection of Wharton's stringent belief in the personal authority of the writer, Wolff is both adamant and confident in her psychoanalytic methodology. In the opening passages of The Feast of Words, Wolff makes a point of illustrating the "evolving" nature of her psychoanalysis of Wharton by showing the diverse critical base on which it rests.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, Wolff's work is based on the notion that we will never be able to approximate much of the "true" story of Wharton's life due to the weakness of the human mind, "We are all fabricators when it comes to reconstructing our own histories. Many things that seem sharply etched memories are actually subtle distortions."<sup>15</sup> Therefore, as scholars, our responsibility becomes manifest in the study of "the fictions, not the life" because "given only Edith Wharton's side of the story, we could never attain certainty" in our analysis.<sup>16</sup> Initially, this may seem to drift away from the Freudian notion that the latent knowledge and experiences of the subconscious will manifest themselves in ways recognisable to the human eye through careful observation. However, Wolff adapts psychoanalysis to the modern era by acknowledging the fiction as a portal to the mind and possibly to the muse, "Exploring the contours of an artist's mind can help us to

understand the verbal artefacts that she left, can even, perhaps, allow us to know some of the forces that compelled her to creativity in the first place.”<sup>17</sup> By not relying fixedly on Freudian psycho-sexual theories of development and literary interpretation, Wolff grounds herself in the latter half of the twentieth century rather than in the misogynistic paradigm created by the originator of psychoanalytic theory.

In Elizabeth Ammons’ critique of Wharton the presence of feminist theory is potent. The culture that is interpreted by psychoanalysis for Wolff is viewed through the lens of a developing female intellect in Ammons’ estimation. The development of that intellect “is not simple. It begins in the 1890s uncertainly, develops...into a highly sophisticated critique that fuses sociological, economic, psychological and anthropological perspectives.”<sup>18</sup> The novels and short stories published during each era have qualities that are different from those published in other segments of Wharton’s development as a female artist and politician of sorts. Further, Wharton’s published works exist as, “both a record of one brilliant and intellectually independent woman’s thinking about women and a map of feminism’s ferment and failure in America in the decades surrounding the Great War.”<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, Ammons treats failure as an inevitable part of both feminism and authorship, and as such, she is able to dislike portions of Wharton’s life or writing without rendering entire pieces or eras useless. Also, Ammons’ treatment of the decades surrounding World War I is unique in that she directs the readers’ attention to the historically and socially complex effect of war beyond the few years directly adjacent to it. While susceptible to fragmentation, Ammons’ manner of reading Wharton is fluid, kinetic and flexible, inviting intellectual dialogues in the same vein as Bauer will be shown to do.

Goodwyn’s critical book addresses an aspect of Wharton in concert with Bauer, but Goodwyn ties the political and cultural events of Wharton’s life and

literature to the specificities of geographical location. Traveller in the Land of Letters asserts, “Wharton thought of her fiction as possessing a particular geography...she was to regard the plying of the written word as much more than her profession...her art became her place of residence,” and as such, a “topographical” approach to Wharton’s fiction is key in revealing yet another aspect of this complex author.<sup>20</sup> Goodwyn’s approach necessarily grounds analysis inside the text itself, creating a very tangible tie between author and critic. This topographical approach subsequently allows Goodwyn to make analytical groupings that Bauer’s temporal arrangement will not permit; Goodwyn groups eight novels ranging from The House of Mirth (1904) to The Children (1928) based on their landscape, narrative structure and theme. Due in large part to her upbringing, Wharton was a “perpetual tourist,” and according to Goodwyn, a product of this was “Wharton’s sense of the unity of culture between America and Europe, the way in which one landscape can suggest another...[it] is constantly a theme in her fiction and travel writing.”<sup>21</sup> This critic gives authority to Wharton for taking American fiction into the twentieth century through bridging a gap ranging from Henry James to F. Scott Fitzgerald. However, the break in Wharton’s own fiction after World War I is highly evident, “The balance of power moved from one side of the ocean to the other. [Wharton’s] landscapes reflect the locus of power, whether east, west or mid-Atlantic, and her characters the personal and cultural effects of a shifting centre.”<sup>22</sup> For Goodwyn, Wharton’s fiction relies upon culture, politics and society, but all of these phenomena are surrounded by the geography of the author’s setting.

Finally, Bauer begins her 1994 book with a powerful statement regarding the dichotomous nature of Wharton’s work. Her attentions are focused on a twenty-year period beginning with the publication of Summer in 1917 and culminating in

Wharton's 1937 death and the subsequent 1938 publication of The Buccaneers. Bauer clearly describes the first half of Wharton's career "as generating a certain way of reading her, one developed out of the New Critical model, largely appropriated from reading Henry James...and then later unwittingly reconstructed by many feminist critics."<sup>23</sup> In divergence from this critical approach, Summer (1917) inaugurates a period of "self-conscious attention to the politics of culture."<sup>24</sup> Further, according to Bauer, with the exception of The Age of Innocence (1920), this period of Wharton's life and career "has been the less intensely studied one precisely because of the way that Edith Wharton has been used by conservative and feminist critics arguing specific agendas."<sup>25</sup> The critic thus suggests moving away from earlier commitments to the study of aesthetics and form in Wharton's work and focusing on Wharton's own concentration on the developing mass culture. Wharton pursued issues of reproductive choice, personal affiliations and political allegiance while using the new presence of mass culture "as another 'voice' in the representation of an orchestrated, and carefully controlled dialogue."<sup>26</sup> Additionally, attention is drawn to the 'inner life' that Wharton found so important in the shadow of the ever-growing consumerism and ever-waning individualism. The over-arching principle upon which Bauer stands is the quality of Wharton's later works, which she terms exhilarating, contemporary and insightful.

### **A Great Debate**

When Wharton's work is examined in its totality, the schism between her early and later works is readily apparent. In many circles, the 1920 publication of The Age of Innocence, which won Wharton the Pulitzer Prize, is considered to be the final great act of her career. Around this time, a few friends and several editors began to

complain “that her English was growing more and more awkward” due to her daily usage of colloquial French and Italian; Wolff, quoting critic Edmund Wilson, asserts that Wharton herself believed her English language skills to be shrinking as she aged.<sup>27</sup> By the end of the war, many of her closest friends, including Henry James, were dead, and Wharton comments in her autobiography that many of these friends were those who used to read and critique her manuscripts prior to publication. This, coupled with her exhaustion from complete immersion in war efforts, created a situation in which she craved the creative outlet of her writing but also physically needed a break from work of any kind. Given these conditions, Wharton and her publishers agreed she would spend time in America, reacquainting herself with the culture – but only Yale University’s honorary degree brought her back to the States in 1923, and then only for 11 days.<sup>28</sup>

Wolff, who touted Wharton’s “triumph” in the title to her major critical work, proclaims the author restless and out of touch with America in the post-war period, Wharton uncharacteristically “started so many things and left them hanging.”<sup>29</sup> In a pattern to be repeated by other critics, Wolff labels The Glimpses of the Moon as the weakest of Wharton’s 1920s novels; her specific criticisms of Glimpses are easily generalised to the other two novels in question here. Wolff concludes that Wharton was borrowing her themes and even specific scenes in the 1920s novels from earlier material – material which Wolff claims was done to a higher standard the first time around. Ammons and Goodwyn attest to this perceived diminishment of grandeur as well. However, in most instances, the differences lie in the resolution of the central conflict. For example, Wolff contrasts the involvement of Lily Bart and Susy Lansing with other women’s children, but the scenes differ in one key manner: while Lily is falling into the intangible realm of death, Susy is finding the tangible realm of life.

Wolff's assertions regarding the possibility that Wharton was borrowing from her earlier work in reality only add to the veracity of later work because the author is exploring the manner in which events play out in a new world governed by the same basic human emotions.

While Ammons does consider the integrity and quality of Wharton's work across the entire chronology, she, too, identifies a decline in the novels in the last two decades of Wharton's life. She is the critic with the least confidence in Edith Wharton's mental state and cognisance during the post-war period. She explains her conception of the changes in Wharton during the war and then declares, "For a number of years she was not aware of the change," as if the author was writing blindly and without the self-awareness so evident in Wharton's autobiography and letters.<sup>30</sup> In conjunction with this, although she claims Summer and The Age of Innocence, both set far away from Wharton's geographical and temporal location, to be reactionary novels, Ammons also steadfastly asserts the war to have had a "profound but *delayed*"<sup>31</sup> effect on the author.<sup>32</sup> This pushes her critique beyond the immediate post-war novels into the 1920s and 1930s. In Ammons' reasoning, the delayed effect of the war was responsible for "the marked conservative shift in her argument and concomitant decline in the quality of her novels."<sup>33</sup> This critic also points to The Glimpses of the Moon as a crossbreed of earlier works. Ammons identifies Susy Lansing's "predicament [as] a cross between Lily Bart and Undine Spragg," unwittingly providing evidence of Wharton's playing with old conceptions of marriage, money and divorce in a *new* world.<sup>34</sup> Contradictorily, Ammons continually discusses the very factors that contributed to Wharton's changing perception of the world and then treats the results therein as detrimental to Wharton's ability as a writer and as an intellectual female figure. She highlights Wharton's

wartime experience with children and with gender relations, identifying “a fundamental shift in her analysis of female human nature and the relationship between the sexes,”<sup>35</sup> but labels her continuing interest in the subject as “treading water on the old issues of economics and social pressure.”<sup>36</sup> Given these elements of her argument, Ammons has in her possession all the factors to which Wharton’s change can be attributed. While she has presented new questions to future critics, she chooses not to penetrate the critical surface of those new questions. She correctly states that surface to be a difference between old and new, simply one that she does not explore further.

Goodwyn initially writes a compelling argument for the exploration of Wharton’s later works before demoting them through heavy criticism. Her reasoning for the downturn in the second half of Wharton’s career is well reasoned and concurrent with the conclusions of Ammons and Bauer. The shift in Wharton’s later career rests upon modern culture of the masses that surrounded the author in later life. Goodwyn recognises, “the novels which have at their heart the changing, constantly disintegrating and restructuring American scene,” and realises the need “to make a radical re-reading of the novels of the 1920s – novels substantially ignored by critics in the past.”<sup>37</sup> Like Ammons, she also identifies the key differences in Wharton’s fiction, commenting, “The very calculated nature of The Glimpses of the Moon, and in particular its neatness of resolution, are, however, what actually make the novel deserving of serious attention.”<sup>38</sup> Goodwyn further correctly points to the fertile comparisons of gender roles and economic status in The House of Mirth (1904) and The Glimpses of the Moon as a major shift in Wharton’s identification with her socio-economic reality. However, once she enumerates the critical points needed in this re-reading, she dismisses the novels’ importance, pointing to “the crazes –



philosophies of body, mind and spirit” that Pauline Manford is attracted to in Twilight Sleep.<sup>39</sup> Then Goodwyn refers to Glimpses as a failure in the same right, “[the themes] are ultimately too unimportant; the satirical focus...is too superficial to carry the weight of her argument, and it is this weakness which has been seized upon to condemn the novel[s].”<sup>40</sup> The messages of acceptance and criticism conflict with one another.

In caustic opposition to the prevailing attitude, Bauer advocates giving Wharton’s later novels their due consideration. Responding to the critical denigration of these novels, Bauer suggests a forceful argument in favour of their study:

The chapters of the present volume are not apologies for the “lesser works” that supposedly resulted from Wharton’s benighted effort to write popular fiction after 1920, novels interesting only because Wharton wrote them and useful only because they show the superiority of her earlier achievement. As I will argue here, Wharton’s late fictions reveal an author hungrier than ever for fame and critical acclaim, as well as for a wider audience than she had even imagined during the advent of her career.<sup>41</sup>

Bauer distinctly understands Wharton’s post-war works to be *different* but not *worthless*. The majority of the mutations from earlier texts have identifiable causative indicators; the sustained level of intense violence and chaos during the war was like acid to Wharton’s soul. The sounds of the conflagration alone were inescapably thrust into her being, “we were on Big Bertha’s deathly trajectory, her evil roar was also a well known sound [...] the throb of distant artillery, a sound with which my expeditions to the front had made me painfully familiar;” these sensations caustically branded her consciousness forever.<sup>42</sup> This war necessarily changed everything on the globe, and Wharton’s personal world was unrecognisably twisted along with it. Where there had been a certainty of personal, national and international politics, standards and existence, there was now a vast grey and undefined emptiness in which few things remained static. The concrete, realistic norms were gone from Wharton’s

paradigm, “Wharton’s late style exhibits more ambivalence than irony because her plots develop unresolved ideological conflicts rather than tragic conclusions.”<sup>43</sup> The social structures from which Wharton drew her creative fodder were irreversibly changed, but the emergence of a new and confusing reality could not be ignored. Reflecting the upheaval of the world, Wharton’s writing changed with the times.

### **A Mediating Force: Frederic Jameson and Marxism**

The body of contemporary Wharton critics have managed, with varying degrees of success, to identify the factors that precipitated the transformation in Wharton’s 1920s work. Few have chosen to break through the surface into the deeps of this period. Given this, the astute reader is left wanting further investigation into the new avenues proffered. Noting the wide-ranging nature of the issues central to this period of Wharton’s career, an approach both highly developed and thoroughly flexible is necessary; such an approach is found in the work of Marxist cultural and literary critic Frederic Jameson. Comparatively, the rhetorical umbrella formed by Jameson’s theories is a far superior tool to unlocking the wealth within Wharton’s later work than what other critics have presented. Jameson’s ability to merge historicism, ideology, criticism and philosophy extends into a synthesized methodology for literary critique. Over the last 50 years, Jameson has continually revised and expanded his critical approach, forming a complex, diverse and interactive web for the literary critic to draw on:

It is as a Marxist that Jameson first came to prominence. His insights derive from and always relate to a left-wing perspective on culture and literature, but he is never doctrinaire, and his appeal is by no means limited to those who share his political views. In everything Jameson has written, it is the range and flexibility of his critical approach, as much as the penetration of his insights that have won him so wide an audience.<sup>44</sup>

Jameson does not, in any way, provide all the answers to the questions I am asking within this thesis. His greatest critical strength, and my preference for using his tools lies in the flexibility of form and content utilised. Under the individual methodologies of Wolff, Ammons, Goodwyn and Bauer, it is more difficult to create a *comprehensive* and *coherent* belief system by which to judge Wharton's work.

Jameson, on the other hand, pragmatically provides the tools for using his dialectical thinking. Most importantly, he allows for the selective encompassing of other critics (such as those mentioned above) when needed. Jameson, simply put, willingly pulls together various beliefs and fashions them into a core philosophy by which the multifaceted work of the 1920s can be truly looked at through a collective but differentiated lens:

If there is anything that distinguishes history as such from other modes of objects of study, it would seem to be precisely this indeterminacy of distance, which permits us to change focus and to see the same event anew, either close up, from a relatively documentary viewpoint, or else from across a larger range in which it comes before us as the mere detail of a larger movement or pattern.<sup>45</sup>

The application of Frederic Jameson's semantic rectangle coupled with his Marxist theories of literary interpretation serves two purposes. Initially, it places Edith Wharton's work of the 1920s into an appropriate critical context for the exploration of previously discarded novels, thus facilitating the investigation called for earlier. Secondly, it provides a method for demonstrating how Jameson's techniques, pragmatic tools fuelled by comprehensive theories, function to peel back the layers of "history" in literature.

Jameson's Marxism itself is distinguished by the melding of two dichotomous philosophical strands, which Jameson himself describes as a, "coordination of Hegelian and Marxist conceptual operations."<sup>46</sup> While Jameson focuses primarily on literature, recent work has expanded his critical paradigm to include the modern

phenomena of the cinema. Given these theoretical characteristics, it is evident how Jameson's theories can begin to unravel the tangle of modern social, political and economic issues addressed by Wharton in the 1920s. A brief tracing and defining of Jameson's critical approach is necessary at this point; after which the specificities of applying his methodology to Wharton will be presented. Owing to the self-admitted pedantic and somewhat verbose nature of Jameson's primary texts, a coupling of primary and secondary sources will expedite this explanatory process most quickly.

By far the most important concept in Jameson's methodology is that of historicism. For every Marxist critic, the act of interpretation is one ruled by politics, "As far as Jameson is concerned...it is all shaped by the way people relate to people and by the socio-economic realities that underlie and determine how those relationships happen."<sup>47</sup> Therefore, while other schools of criticism may see history as simply the background setting for fiction, Jameson sees it as the scaffolding which can never be completely removed from the finished work. In this vein, Jameson also views history in the manner of a continuum rather than a fixed locus, "the present is a site contested by past and future histories, 'now' being a composite of the traces of the past and anticipations of the future present in our contemporary mode of production."<sup>48</sup> This view of history particularly suits itself to the 1920s interpretation of Edith Wharton because of the swirling socio-economic forces present at that time – the immediate past of World War I, the present development of consumerism, and the anticipation of the future loss of individualism and social gravity. What this formulation of history and interpretation does *not* say is as important as what it does – because history is not explicitly fixed, solid and binding, there cannot be one standard of correct interpretation. History, instead, provides a membrane in which to contain more correct, complete interpretation and by which to exclude criticism not centred in

Marxist definitions of reality. Jameson's Marxism addresses various facets of humanity within his context, including a comment in Marxism and Form regarding historicism and emotion in the individual critic, "It is perhaps more a question of a feeling than of a concept; and I am tempted to say that the feeling of necessity or historical inevitability is simply the emotion characteristic of historical understanding as such, that feeling which accompanies the mental process."<sup>49</sup> In addition to historicism, Jameson draws from psychoanalytic theory (in relation to repression and the unconscious) and places great importance on the concept of reification.

Jameson provides a solid set of tools by which to make use of his frequently metacritical conceptions of history and interpretation. In Marxism and Form and The Political Unconscious Jameson describes his commitment to a dialectical understanding of literary criticism. In The Prison-House of Language, his review of Russian Formalism and Structuralism, he introduces a concept relating to linguistics known as the semantic rectangle. Adam Roberts reiterates Jameson's understanding of history and interpretation as "involved in complex interrelations with subtle ramifications on both sides," as well as spotlighting the critic's admission that no interpretation using such complex criteria can be straightforwardly accessed and instantly decoded.<sup>50</sup> Coupling Roberts' succinct definition of dialectical thinking with Jameson's introduction of its usage with the semantic rectangle allows the concept to be quickly implemented:

The word 'dialectics' derives from the Greek word for argument or debate, and refers to a particular method of doing philosophy by stating a proposition (a thesis), then examining its contrary or opposite to see whether it has anything valid to contribute to the debate (the antithesis), and finally arriving at a third proposition that incorporates both sides (the synthesis).<sup>51</sup>

Jameson defines this as "stereoscopic thinking," the ability to isolate and think through both sides of any argument. The semantic rectangle is designed to diagram

the manner in which, given any starting point, a whole network of meaning possibilities can be derived, thus resulting in the description of an entire meaning system. The rectangle is diagrammed as follows.

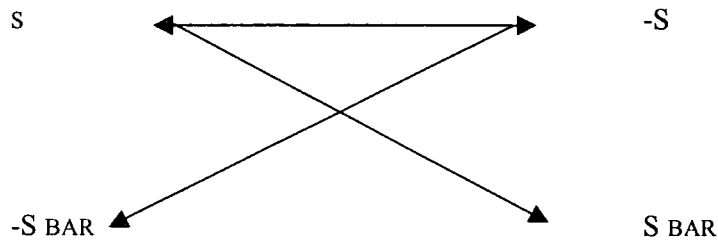


FIGURE 1. THE SEMANTIC RECTANGLE

Where S is that starting point, -S is the dialectical opposite of S, forming a strong, positive binary opposition. S bar is the simple negation or denial of S, and -S bar is the negation of the negation of S. In this way, the rectangle forces the formation of binary oppositions from an independent concept and prompts discussion on the difference between the opposite and the negation of a term. Given such a diagram, the levels of discourse it creates will aid in the search for a mediating or resolving concept that reveals the meaning present in the narrative.<sup>52</sup> Relating to this task, Structuralist theory postulates, “all conscious thought takes place within the limits of a given model and is in that sense determined by it.”<sup>53</sup> Wharton, too, echoes this viewpoint in her critical work:

The experiments of the new novelists, and the comments of the docile interpreters, have proved, in spite of both, that any lasting creative work must be based on some sort of constructive system; the creator must have a conviction to guide him.<sup>54</sup>

She goes so far as to say that even the conscious denial of any such system is in itself a paradigm to follow. The primacy and urgency Wharton placed on the various tensions within modernity can be explored at several levels using this “semantic rectangle.”<sup>55</sup>

Roberts further clarifies two aspects of Jameson's thoughts concerning this manner of opening the interpretive cask. The first is a limitation that Structuralist methodology places on the critic; since Structuralism is primarily a linguistic theory of signification, to consider only the binary oppositions within the literature would eliminate the Imaginary and artistic aspects of the work. Thus, Jameson suggests using a Structuralist tool within his own interpretive framework, one that cannot separate art, music or literature from the larger political consciousness.<sup>56</sup> The second is concerned with the differentiation between forms of Marxism. Rather than dismissing most individual texts as unimportant in terms of the larger consciousness as a "vulgar" or Hegelian Marxist would tend to do, Jameson tends to follow the Althusserian school of criticism:

An Althusserian critic is never going to be seduced by the gesture towards sweeping generalisation, but will always pay attention to the particulars of any text without, of course, losing sight of the fact that there are larger systems that apply (capitalism, for instance).<sup>57</sup>

A balance is sought between the detail and the environmental totality. This great flexibility facilitates a sense of permeability throughout Jameson's framework that subsequently extends to the literary works to which it is applied.

Marxist theory postulates that human experience is not directly absorbed into our consciousness, but rather is mediated through some outside tool, thus making it available for our consumption. His definition of history *encourages* the full range of Wharton's experiences to be drawn into consideration with the fiction borne of them, and the usage of the semantic rectangle provides a simple tool with which to grasp the substantial arguments beneath the surface plots of The Glimpses of the Moon,

Twilight Sleep and The Children. Roberts comments:

One of the key arguments in The Political Unconscious is that narrative, story-forms and plots...play a dominant role in mediating individual experience and social totality, according to a process of what he calls transcoding – the

translating into an accepted code...of social and historical reality to make it accessibly mediated for the individual.<sup>58</sup>

The shift in Wharton's writing that manifests itself in the 1920s exemplifies this statement; massive reality shifts produced massive shifts in the author's plots, overarching story structure and narrative voice in order for her to reach her audience with a new, different message. In the following chapters, I intend to first identify and then explore these new and different messages.



## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Stephen King, On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2001) 118.
- <sup>2</sup> Edith Wharton, A Backward Glance (London: Century, 1987) 92.
- <sup>3</sup> Shari Benstock, No Gifts From Chance: A Biography of Edith Wharton (New York: Scribner's, 1994) 356.
- <sup>4</sup> Benstock 365.
- <sup>5</sup> Benstock 196.
- <sup>6</sup> Benstock 397-8.
- <sup>7</sup> Benstock 398.
- <sup>8</sup> Benstock 393.
- <sup>9</sup> Benstock 393.
- <sup>10</sup> Cynthia Griffin Wolff, A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton (New York: OUP, 1977) vii.
- <sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Ammons, Edith Wharton's Argument with America (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1980) 1.
- <sup>12</sup> Janet Beer Goodwyn, Edith Wharton: Traveller in the Land of Letters (New York: St. Martin's, 1990) 1.
- <sup>13</sup> Dale Bauer, Edith Wharton's Brave New Politics (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1994) xi.
- <sup>14</sup> Wolff vii.
- <sup>15</sup> Wolff 5.
- <sup>16</sup> Wolff 5.
- <sup>17</sup> Wolff 5.
- <sup>18</sup> Ammons ix.
- <sup>19</sup> Ammons ix.
- <sup>20</sup> Goodwyn 1.
- <sup>21</sup> Goodwyn 2.
- <sup>22</sup> Goodwyn 6-7.
- <sup>23</sup> Bauer xiii.
- <sup>24</sup> Bauer xi.
- <sup>25</sup> Bauer xii.
- <sup>26</sup> Bauer xii-i.
- <sup>27</sup> Wolff 345.
- <sup>28</sup> Sarah Bird Wright, Edith Wharton A to Z: The Essential Guide to the Life and Work (New York: Checkmark Books, 1998) 267.
- <sup>29</sup> Wolff 295.
- <sup>30</sup> Ammons 157.
- <sup>31</sup> Emphasis mine.
- <sup>32</sup> Ammons 157.
- <sup>33</sup> Ammons x.
- <sup>34</sup> Ammons 157.
- <sup>35</sup> Ammons 162.
- <sup>36</sup> Ammons 158.
- <sup>37</sup> Goodwyn 4-5.
- <sup>38</sup> Goodwyn 81.
- <sup>39</sup> Goodwyn 92.
- <sup>40</sup> Goodwyn 92.
- <sup>41</sup> Bauer xiii.
- <sup>42</sup> Wharton, Backward 358.
- <sup>43</sup> Bauer xiv-xv.
- <sup>44</sup> Adam Roberts, Frederic Jameson, Routledge Critical Thinkers Ser. (London: Routledge, 2000) 2.
- <sup>45</sup> Fredric Jameson, Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971) 360.
- <sup>46</sup> Jameson, Marxism and Form 361.
- <sup>47</sup> Roberts 48.
- <sup>48</sup> Roberts 27-8.
- <sup>49</sup> Jameson, Marxism and Theory 360.
- <sup>50</sup> Roberts 51.
- <sup>51</sup> Roberts 22-3.

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<sup>52</sup> Fredric Jameson, The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972) 163-4.

<sup>53</sup> Jameson, Prison-House 101.

<sup>54</sup> Edith Wharton, "Tendencies in Modern Fiction," Edith Wharton: The Uncollected Critical Writings, ed. Frederick Wegener (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996) 172.

<sup>55</sup> Jameson credits A.J. Greimas for the initial creation of the semantic rectangle but expands upon it greatly.

<sup>56</sup> Roberts 69.

<sup>57</sup> Roberts 30.

<sup>58</sup> Roberts 78.

## Chapter 2: Personal Transactions: Economics and Communication in The Glimpses of the Moon

### Introduction

Published following The Age Of Innocence (1920), arguably Wharton's best novel, and A Son At The Front (1921), often considered her novel of reckoning with the war, The Glimpses of the Moon (1922) contrasts with almost every feature of Wharton's writing to that date. Consisting of a tightly circular group of comrades whose problems and personalities have been finely fitted together by Wharton, The Glimpses of the Moon provides an ideal starting place for the kind of analysis postulated by Bauer. This novel is also a companion to an important concept of Karl Marx's, reification, "The word means 'the transformation of a person, process or abstract concept into a thing.'"<sup>1</sup> Jameson believes this concept to be growing ever more important because of the widespread capitalism, "It is that actual human interaction is metamorphosed into commodities: that society moves towards the position, for example, the only way one human being can express love for another human being is by entering the world of commodities."<sup>2</sup> From the outset, the novel is governed by such a concern, namely the central conflict between open and blocked transactions, and it is this from which the primary semantic rectangle in this investigation stems. The rectangle is illustrated below.

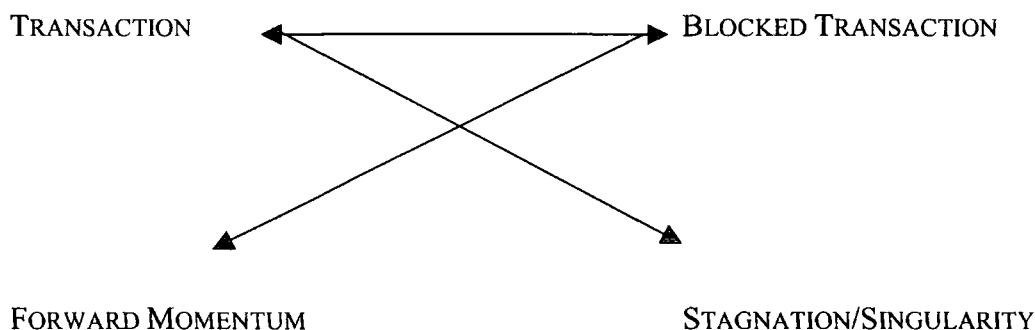


FIGURE 1. SEMANTIC RECTANGLE 1

Transactions, in this capacity, are defined as any act, between two parties or within an individual, which can be considered an exchange. Blocked transactions, simply stated, are therefore the antithesis of transactions; to call upon Greimas' terminology, the dialectical opposite of S in this case is simply the total denigration of its completion. On the bottom level of the rectangle, when transactions are negated or denied, then the paradigm is left in a state of stillness (stagnation). This leads to a state of paralysis caused by the inability of individuals to interact and further escorts into being a forced solitude of, or even within, the individual (singularity). Finally, forward momentum is what arises when the means (tangible or intangible) to block transactions disappears from the scene; it is both the ushering in of modernity and commercialism as well as the ushering out of the staunch principles governing Wharton's Old New York social world. This concept of forward momentum operates on several levels and, in one capacity, is the force behind the significant social and cultural movements characterising the 1920s.

In later novels, Wharton presents conflicts (as that between modernity and tradition) in a sort of cacophony with one another, thus necessitating a complex hierarchy of semantic rectangles, but this is not so in The Glimpses of the Moon. The primary areas to be explored in this analysis of Glimpses are communication and economics; neither of

these principles is powerful enough to be the overarching axiom of the novel, but through designing the semantic rectangles, it becomes clear that either opposition could be substituted into the positions of S and –S with no need for modification on the lower levels of the conceptual tool.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the two areas must be discussed not as if they are the spanning, central antagonism of the novel but as individual incarnations of that basic idea and argument. Additionally, the concepts of transition and reproduction will be layered throughout the chapter amid the oppositions presented; these subjects are threaded cleverly through the narrative by Wharton but are nearly always found in conjunction with another principle. Further rectangles may be introduced later in the analysis dealing directly with Wharton's plot points and general account of the romance, but great numbers of rectangles that will be needed later in this volume are not needed here.

### **Introduction to the Couples**

This defence and analysis of Glimpses signalled by Bauer's commentary is a compound task. Independent and new textual analysis forms the heart of the study, but it is ultimately useful to manoeuvre within the space left behind by previous critics and scholars as well. For example, Cynthia Griffin Wolff, a champion of The Age of Innocence, notes that the two novels immediately following it are "strangely transitional works."<sup>4</sup> Inherent in that statement is the notion that, from Wharton's point of view, a transition was needed to bridge the gap between the tragic historical romance and the modern problematic lifestyle; further, this statement also suggests that Wharton was, in fact, providing that bridge through The Glimpses of the Moon. This notion of two

separate ends needing a means of connection appears frequently within the narrative of Glimpses through the actions of the “couples” at the core of the intrigue.

The young married couple, Susy and Nick Lansing, have repeated difficulties with communication in nearly any form, especially when it concerns money or economics. Their marriage rests upon a business-like agreement joining the two only to advance their respective social positions while honeymooning with (and financed by) their wealthy friends for as long as possible; if either member discovers a more well positioned partner, they are free to dissolve the union as soon as possible. While they communicated well prior to their marriage, a short while into their honeymoon, Nick finds himself questioning the plan that had “at first enchanted [him]; but now it began to rouse vague fears [...] Was there, among her delicate discriminations, any equivalent to his own rules?”<sup>5</sup> Nick hides his nagging feelings from Susy; she, however, also finds herself in a predicament she conceals from her husband. Knowing her actions would enrage him, but also knowing her actions are necessary if they wish to continue their honeymoon in Italy, Susy is forced to aid their hostess, Ellie Vanderlyn, in concealing a tryst from her husband. Should she reveal the errand she has performed, Susy knows “the depth of her own danger” regarding her union with Nick (83). From this point, their exchanges become fewer and less expansive in length until Nick finally discovers what Susy has done and leaves her a note marking the breakdown in communication, “I’ve got to work this out by myself [...] You’ll get a proper letter in a day or two” (99). Months go by and the pair never exchanges even a single letter; both look to the post at every opportunity, expecting a letter from the other to be there, but both are equally incapable

of writing or cabling each other. Their marriage comes days away from being dissolved by a Paris divorce lawyer before they communicate again.

In contrast to the difficulties the Lansings have with exchanges of both the tangible and the intangible, their friend Charlie Strefford moves about their world with an ease and a directness not depicted through the other characters. Streff possesses a deep admiration from within his social set, causing the others to beam “on him with the deep sense of satisfaction which his presence always produced in his friends. There was no one in the world, they all agreed, half as ugly and untidy and delightful as Streffy” (47).

Whereas Susy cannot communicate with her husband regarding the letters she sent for Ellie, “Susy instantly resolved to risk speaking to [Strefford], if need be even betraying to him the secret of the letters” (83). This shows an ability to be direct, an active choice of trust and an acceptance of confrontation and its consequences – with Strefford. Nick and Susy are constantly troubled by blocked exchanges regarding monetary considerations; from the cigars at Strefford’s villa to the jewel laden presents from Ellie, the acceptance of gifts and the “management” of money pulls Nick and Susy apart as they instinctively strain for opposite ends of the continuum. Strefford, on the other hand, deals in matters of money and emotion easily. Propelled into a position of wealth and responsibility in the English aristocracy by the sudden death of two relatives, Strefford transitions smoothly. Once it appears that Susy and Nick will be divorcing, he takes stock of his financial and emotional state and reveals his long repressed desire for Susy. It is Susy who must take steps to comprehend the confident change in her friend, “she still continued to treat him as she had always treated the Strefford of old, Charlie Strefford, dear old negligible impecunious Streff; and he wanted to show her, ever so casually and adroitly, that the

man who had asked her to marry him was no longer Strefford, but Lord Altringham” (225-6). While Susy eventually blocks the completion of this exchange, Strefford exhibits all the characteristics to facilitate true communication.

The relationship between Nick Lansing and Coral Hicks stands in direct opposition to Nick’s marriage to Susy; while the marriage rests upon borrowed time, usurped wealth and constructed beauty, Nick and Coral operate on a plane of harsh honesty, mutual respect and integrity. Coral’s competence in her world is never questioned, even by Susy herself:

The fat school-girl had changed into a young lady of compact if not graceful outline; a long-handled eyeglass had replaced the spectacles, and through it, instead of a sullen glare, Miss Coral Hicks projected on the world a glance at once confident and critical [...] If she was not pretty, she was well-dressed; and if she was overeducated, she seemed capable [...] of carrying off even this crowning disadvantage (49).

Further, Coral’s ability to adapt herself to various situations and to pursue her own happiness with a purposeful ambition endears her to Nick as “about as well worth doing anything I know,” placing her in direct opposition to the constant nagging presence of Susy’s ability to ‘manage’ (50). As Strefford does for Susy, Coral provides Nick with a foil for his beautiful, playful and sincerely conniving wife and opens the loophole in his marital bargain.

The Glimpses of the Moon is somewhat of an anachronism in itself. Wharton gives no specific dates within the text of the novel, yet in her private notes, she states that a sequel, to be called Love Among the Ruins, will be set after World War I. The difficulty herein is that the novel deals with modernity and its zeitgeist with a tone decidedly different from pre-war Wharton. Further, the aura of agitation that encircles the characters constitutes a full illustration of the disconnected pathos of the post-war



world. The complete breakdown of communication between Susy and Nick echoes Wharton's all-encompassing experience with the war and is, in many ways, a cathartic struggle. As this forms such an integral part of the novel, the collapse of interaction and the subsequent surge of catharsis catalysed by Strefford and Coral will be discussed at length in the Susy/Strefford and Nick/Coral rectangles. Further, the final section of this chapter will emphasize the volume of economic and commercial ties to post-war modernity through discussion of Ellie Vanderlyn, Ursula Gillow and Violet Melrose. These ties give the reader some of the earliest indications of the imminent change in Wharton's fiction. One of the strongest critical elements of Glimpses, however, is its connection to Wharton's experience with, reaction to and perception of World War I.

Bolstered by Susy's "inexhaustible" faith in her power to find a profitable way out of any situation, the first month of their honeymoon at Strefford's villa mirrors the splendour of the Western world prior to the war (32). Nonetheless, when the expensive cigars become a point of contention amongst the couple, an alien emotion is introduced to their world, accurately described using Wharton's words on the beginning of the war, "Everything seemed strange, ominous and unreal, like the yellow glare which precedes a storm. There were moments when I felt as if I had died, and waked up in an unknown world."<sup>6</sup> Even in Nick's attempt to smooth over the argument, their relationship is shown to be permanently tainted, "as he threw his head back to smile up at her she noticed that his look was still serious, almost remote. It was as if, for the first time, a faint veil hung between his eyes and hers" (34). It is a very few days after this argument that Susy plunges their pact, designed to bring so much joy and ease to the pair, into certain, unavoidable despair, conflict and dark silence by obeying Ellie Vanderlyn's request.

Once again reminiscent of Wharton's description of World War I's beginning, Nick and Susy's reaction to themselves was akin to a nation's, "France was paralysed with horror. France had never wanted war."<sup>7</sup> Their desire to patch their pact after the incident at Como is made evident by Wharton, "as they held each other fast in silence [...] doubts and distrust began to seem like a silly injustice," but by the evening of their parting in Venice, both have passed out of the realm of emotion and into the mode of immediate combat (63). Susy sees the matter pragmatically, "When they had entered into their queer compact, Nick had known as well as she on what compromises and concessions the life they were to live together must be based. That he should have forgotten seemed so unbelievable," while Nick defines them both "born parasites" but ranks his morals higher than Susy's (90-2). In her pain, Susy is frozen within her social activities while Nick, in his despair, reverts to his practised and reasoned intellect and ethics. Even a brief survey of these issues reveals that time placement of Glimpses is necessarily an omnipresent deliberation.

As Wharton created Nick and Susy as the disrupted two ends of a plot needing connection, she also created, in Strefford and Coral, the possibility of a bridge between the two. Strefford is able to choose, in both his inner and outer lives, to act mostly as a normal, modern man, something not easily achieved in a Wharton novel. His connection with Susy highlights her ability to communicate skilfully as well as delineating for her the connections between money and morality. In Coral, Wharton created not only a character with the legitimacy wanting in Susy, but also a character that lacks the conscious and constant need to consider each move as if on a social chessboard. Instead of the business-like atmosphere in which his marriage was conceived, Nick is tacitly

offered a reality based on truth rather than a reality constructed with borrowed materials; from this he learns that legitimacy of all kinds is not ensured by wealth, thus allowing him to return to his wife. Throughout these relationships Wharton threads a sense of tenacity gained from faring “so long on the thin diet of hope deferred.”<sup>8</sup>

From this point, with the couples introduced and the analysis briefly framed, the chapter will proceed using the semantic rectangles for Susy Lansing and Charlie Strefford, and Nick Lansing and Coral Hicks.

### **Susy Lansing and Charlie Strefford (Lord Altringham)**

#### ***Economics and Morality***

Economics and morality are intricately woven into the fabric of the relationship between Charlie Strefford (alternately Lord Altringham) and Susy Lansing. The feature that most distinguishes her economic interaction with Altringham from such interaction with Nick is the treatment of the financial world in an unobstructed manner, whereas with Nick, any such discussion necessitated negativity, discomfort and all-pervasive manipulation. In relation to the umbrella rectangle for this chapter, Susy and Altringham represent the “transaction” while Susy and Nick represent the “blocked transaction.” In essence, using Jameson’s terms, when the actions of one couple are denied or negated, the resulting void is filled by the other couple’s conduct. The negation of each remains summarised through the terms “forward momentum” and “stagnation/singularity,” however, listed below each negation are the components which define the general terms in direct, unique relation to this discussion of economic transactions between Wharton’s two couples.

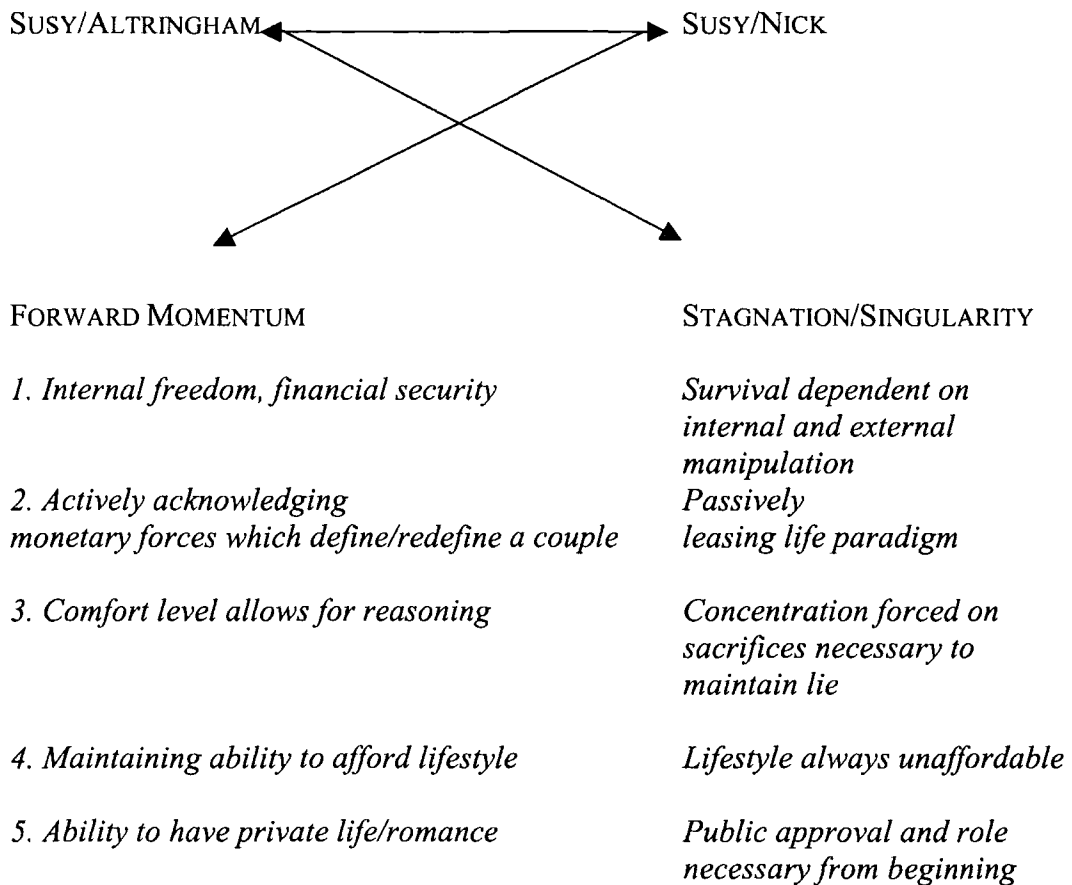


FIGURE 2. SEMANTIC RECTANGLE 2

With the larger rectangle individualised, Wharton's careful construction of these textual binaries emerges as a window into the international social economy of the 1920s.

At the beginning of her romantic attachment to Altringham, Susy stands in the shadow of her conflagration with Nick, discerning concretely, for the first time, the moral limitations imposed by economic dependency, and the resulting arrangements with Altringham continue to affirm the connection between internal freedom and financial security. While Susy has previously felt indebted to her wealthy friends, Ellie Vanderlyn causes Susy to experience "a sense of being tripped up, gagged and pinioned" unequalled by any earlier incident (33). Subsequently confronted with Violet Melrose's thinly veiled

offer of a jade pendant in return for Susy's services as a governess for the Fulmer children, Susy is propelled to secure her personal freedom:

The mere fact that she might henceforth, if she chose, be utterly out of reach of such bribes, enabled her to look down on them with tolerance. Oh, the blessed moral freedom that wealth conferred [...] Yes, it was only on such terms that one could call one's soul one's own [...] That night she wrote to Strefford (146).

Reflecting the first binary presented, the resulting arrangement with Altringham continues to affirm the connection between internal freedom and financial security.

Ursula Gillow reappears unexpectedly in Susy's life, attempting to secure her services as a weekend flirtation for Fred, and Susy is able, because of Altringham's money, to accept or refuse Ursula's offer on her own terms, "rather than do what Ursula asked she would borrow a few hundred pounds of Strefford, as he had suggested" (165). Suddenly, as presented in the third binary, Susy has choices based on considerations other than the fact that "Ursula was no the woman to forget on which side the obligations lay between them" (165). The economic freedom Wharton has given to Susy allows her to take into account her own comfort level and to dynamically reason her way to action:

She saw that, decidedly, it would be better to yield to Ursula's pressure; better to meet him at Ruan, in a congenial setting, where she would have time to get her bearings, observe what dangers threatened him, and make up her mind whether, after all, it was to be her mission to save him from the other women (167).

Adroitly illustrating the conflict in binary 4, this connection to the Altringham money produces Susy's freedom to proceed with more freedom than during or before her marriage to Nick; indeed, her union with Nick was based solely on her ability to please characters such as Ursula Gillow. In conjunction with the third binary in the semantic

rectangle, Lord Altringham and Susy both passively and actively acknowledge the significant changes in his life from his days as Charlie Strefford, but Susy's interaction with Ursula signals her full understanding of "how different his destiny had become" and highlights the changes in her own destiny (166).

The binaries that characterize the conflict between forward momentum and stagnation often overlap in the text, particularly in the conflicts between affordability and privacy of lifestyle. Altringham's position as catalyst to Susy's financial and moral control flows even into their relationship. Secure in the fact that "he would wait as long as was necessary if only she would take immediate steps for a divorce," Susy assertively insists upon dining with him at a restaurant that suits her budget (177). With Altringham as her host, their fashionable Parisian options are innumerable, and even as he prods her toward other venues, Susy maintains her capability of both affording the luncheon and keeping their affair somewhat private. This is in direct contrast to the public spectacle characterising her marriage to Nick and their parasite-like existence. Further, Susy and Altringham operate in a remarkably open environment, of which they may be only subliminally aware, with regard to money and material cares. In a jocular manner, Altringham suggests to Susy that she should extract gifts from him before he becomes a rich, stingy old man. Slightly alarmed by the suggestion, Susy tries to manipulate the concern brought up by the second binary between acknowledgement of monetary influence and exclaims, "at present there's nothing I loathe more than pearls and chinchilla...or anything else in the world that's expensive and enviable" (178). The erroneous statement embarrasses Susy because she knows it to be untrue and because it smacks of the same language other women would use to attract Altringham. Instantly

Susy begins to dwell on her blunder but her self-deprecating thoughts are broken by his astute inquiry into the change in her mood. Susy quickly acknowledges her mistake and Altringham has immediate insight into her thoughts, “Because it was what so many other women might be likely to say – so awfully unoriginal?” (181). Wharton enables these two with the skills to surf the forward momentum, but the Lansings stagnate, repelled from each other like the opposite poles of two magnets.

Once again we see the interaction between the binaries as Wharton uses Susy’s betrothal to Altringham to more deeply explore facets of Susy Lansing’s character. As Coral Hicks places Nick inside his ideal setting, the former Charlie Strefford offers Susy everything she has ever wanted. Inside this sphere of comfort, Susy relives the last painful months of her life, coming inevitably to the conclusion that “she was weary of anguish: her healthy body and nerves instinctively rejected it [...] she felt herself irresistibly struggling back to life and youth” (200-1). Paralleling Nick’s intellectual and rugged weeks reading and cruising on the *Ibis*, Susy finds herself in the company of her old tools as well, “There lay all the old expedients at her hand – the rouge for her white lips, the atropine for her blurred eyes, the new dress on her bed” (201). The difference, however, is in the point of view from which Susy is surveying her situation; rather than acting as the extension of some rich patroness, Susy is well aware of “the thought of Strefford and his guests awaiting her, and of the conclusions that the diners of the *Nouveau Luxe* would draw from seeing them together” (201). The first and last binaries concerned with the economics of Susy’s life are intersecting; the independence of Strefford’s old money coupled with the ability to choose an independently public or private lifestyle are bolstering Susy’s precarious self-esteem. From this point, Wharton’s

description of the explicit decoration of guests such as Ellie Vanderlyn and Violet Melrose provides a conduit for the guests' reactions to Susy and Susy's reactions to them. Echoing the second binary, the patriarchal power capable of transforming Charlie Strefford into a responsible, traditional young Lord has reached and refocused Susy as well, "in all the women's eyes she could read the reflected lustre the jewels she could wear when she chose: it was as though their glitter reached her from the far-off bank where they lay sealed up" (201-2). Through the interaction innate in the social event, Susy regains a degree of self-identity in the presence of their set. She, for a short while, feels none of the embarrassment over her marriage or divorce and savours that confidence, "once again events had followed the course she had foreseen [...] it was awfully exciting, they all seemed to say, seeing Susy Lansing pull it off!" (201). Strefford sets Susy as the crown jewel in his life; a role, materially at least, that Susy is naturally suited for.

Mentally, however, Susy's enjoyment of her life with Altringham has become a matter of semantics – he's given her a new lease on life, one that isn't actually a lease, but Wharton taints her happiness with a sense of resignation. Shortly after the dinner at the Nouveau Luxe, Susy finds herself on a natural high, "Yes: the taste of it all was again sweet on her lips," but she also acknowledges honestly "an almost complete absence of sensation" (202). Life with Altringham at her side in Paris gives Susy a chance to experience the fantasies of her entire life: her discriminating taste and eye for clothing have both the appreciation and the funding they require, and Susy has no apologies to make or secrets to keep from Altringham. Further, her friends are able to float in and out of her life but the pleasure that "there was nothing, now, that she couldn't buy, nowhere



that she couldn't go: she had only to choose and to triumph" stays constant (203). In a vein similar to Nick's, Susy has approximately half of what she desires, and having known the depth and sharpness of pain, she concludes, "If it failed to provoke any acute reactions, whether of pain or pleasure, the very absence of sensation would make for peace" (202-3). Logically, however, she takes advantage of the bits of saccharine around her, "in the meanwhile, she was tasting what, she had begun to expect, was the maximum of bliss to most of the women she knew" (203). It is as if, at this point in the narrative, that Susy is aware of all the absolute, competing negations around her and constructs her behaviour and perceptions in accordance with them.

Ultimately, it is a combination of Susy's newfound ability to reason her life and the conflict between public and private romance that is the downfall of her relationship with Strefford. When Altringham offers Susy "a little house in London" she compares the offer to that of staying with Ursula Gillow or Violet Melrose "such an arrangement, in the long run, would be no less humiliating to her pride, no less destructive to her independence, than Altringham's establishment" (211-2). The stagnating side of the third binary, that of sacrificial action to maintain a false lifestyle, has reared its head inclusive of Altringham for the first time in Susy's estimation. As she hesitates to accept Altringham's offer, she realises she is getting away with indecision because of his happiness over her formal filing of divorce papers. Susy relishes the degree of independence she has gained since their arrangement became public and she does not want to let go of it – especially to be faced with the task of looking after Strefford during the year preceding their marriage. The final blow to their relationship comes when, in the course of discussing an engagement ring, Strefford's involvement with Ellie Vanderlyn

and Algie Bockheimer the previous summer reveals itself. Susy's marriage with Nick came into serious peril because of issues rooted in the perilous financial world of Strefford, and her honest intention to marry Lord Altringham is blighted by the revelation of his choices in the private versus public dichotomy of this world.

### *Communication and Integrity*

Operating at an equally influential level to the monetary concerns presented are the varying communicative patterns and devices employed by Susy and Strefford, methodologies that Wharton establishes early in the novel. Upon Strefford's arrival at the Vanderlyn's villa, "[Susy] was halfway down the stairs when he ran up them," placing the two at a foretelling and symbolic halfway point (39). By crafting such a close and open relationship amongst Susy and Strefford, Wharton grants the reader a counterbalance to the stunted communication between the Lansings and constructs a portal from which to further view the personas of Altringham and Susy. As with the last semantic rectangle, the task here is to individualise the categories of "forward momentum" and "stagnation/singularity" to this particular quandary.

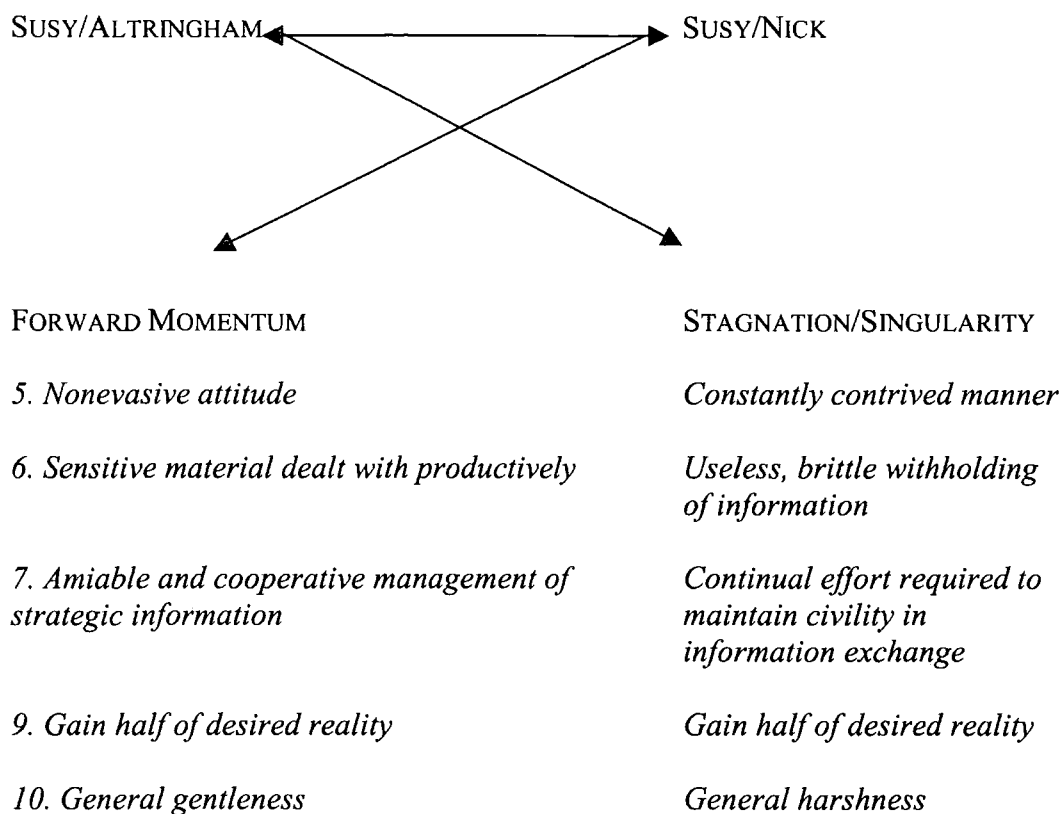


FIGURE 3. SEMANTIC RECTANGLE 3

Altringham's existence in the narrative both bridges and exposes the mental gaps that plague the Lansings, their benefactors and their peers. Through the juxtaposition of the fragile marriage pact and the solid but undefined friendship of Altringham and Susy, the development of a modern human psyche is drawn.

Wharton pursues the notion of Strefford acting as a bridge in the initial interactions between Susy and Streff at once. As described by the fifth binary, their conversations are marked by open communicative exchanges and branded by a non-evasive attitude toward one another. This binary facilitates the existence of binary six; because Susy and Streff rarely find it necessary to hide emotionally charged bits of information from one another, a great many of their exchanges focus on sensitive

information being dealt with in a productive manner. The singular critical block in their discourse appears only after Susy has deliberately placed a barrier between them based on her inability to deal with the explosive incident with surrounding Ellie Vanderlyn. Indeed, Strefford is identified as the only character to whom both Lansings are straightforward with about the sham of their marriage; Susy validates his importance by commenting, “You forget that Nick and I don’t need alibis,” revealing the degree of criminal deception to other members of their social set (41). Although his sphere of influence will eventually encompass primarily Susy, initially Strefford is essentially placed between Nick and Susy’s reality and that reality perceived by those around the couple. Further than simply acting as the reality detector indicated in binary nine, Strefford repeatedly operates with a disconcerting “flash of insight” into the pair (42). Through his quick analysis, Strefford manages to act as a bridge between Nick and Susy by highlighting a major concern, “But how can you be sure that, when Nick wants a change, you’ll consider it for his advantage to have one?” (42). While Susy is irritated with the appearance of an individual capable of such feats of analysis, she is mentally formed to admit, “It was the point that had always secretly tormented Susy; she often wondered if it equally tormented Nick” (42). Wharton’s early depictions of Susy, Nick and Strefford are reliant on Strefford’s role as a communicative mediator – a role that grows more complex and integral as the narrative progresses.

Interestingly, Susy and Strefford have also built a delicate bridge of their own in the amount of sensitive information one reveals to the other on very specific subjects, as previewed in the sixth and seventh binaries. The playful debate as to the cause of Susy’s elevated state of bliss takes place with general childishness, however, there is a slight bit

of deprecation in Strefford's exclamation, "Oh, hang Nick's goodness!" that clues the reader in to the mild antagonism between Nick and Strefford (46). Susy, still loyal to Nick at this point, simply switches the conversation onto Streff's state of happiness rather than place the two men in direct confrontation. However, when it comes to certain matters, Wharton has both individuals strategically hold back potentially powerful information. Strefford, for example, retains the knowledge of who has rented his villa from Susy and other guests, essentially accepting an "outrageous price for the villa" in return for his silence about its occupants (46). Strangely enough, this places Strefford in a similar position to Susy's participation in Ellie's scheme. It is important to note, however, that while Susy does inquire as to the identity of the mystery guests at the villa, she deliberately avoids identifying Ellie's new lover; given her knowledge of Ellie's schedule and the little she knows about the couple at the villa, conclusions could be inferred if Susy choose to analyse the information available to her. Additionally, when Susy reveals a new, positive view on the Hicks family, Strefford challenges her by asking, "And even if *you* owned the yacht?" (52). Susy, rather than answer the question asked in half-jest, dismisses it as "beside the point" and slips into her own thoughts of the Ibis (52). She is unwilling to allow Strefford to his flash of insight in regard to that particular subject, and she is also unwilling to reveal unabashedly the role money plays in her scrutiny of people. Essentially, none of these incidents cannot be classified as a negative or blocked incident of communication because both parties are aware of the unspoken subtext.

Further, these fancy communicative footsteps serve to show Strefford and Susy the degree to which their interaction is free and cooperative; the evening when Nelson and Ellie are together in the Palazzo Vanderlyn, Susy apprehensively realises, "Of course

Streff knows everything!” but rather than to draw her from Strefford, it brings her closer (68). Instinctively following Susy to the balcony, he stands silently until she cries out “You see Streff – oh, why should you and I make mysteries to each other?” and from this point Strefford and Susy serve as each other’s most important confidante (70). Echoing the seventh binary and including elements of the reality debate present in the eighth, that role does not necessarily mean strict honesty; by allowing Susy and Strefford to keep bits of information to themselves, Wharton illustrates the existence and importance of the inner self and inner reality. Further, the veil of sentimentality, Wharton shows that even the most intimate of relationships cannot equate one’s own sphere.

From a critical standpoint, by pointedly illustrating Susy’s intellectual ability to strategically manipulate information, emotion and relationships, Wharton reflects the burgeoning female intellect that was functioning in the 1920s. Ammons’ manner of reading Wharton invites intellectual dialogue in the same vein as Bauer, and crucially, she identifies Susy Lansing as much more than a socialite or pawn. Susy has successes and failures in her quest to find an identity as a feminine entity, but through the creation of her intellect and its rival in Coral Hicks, Wharton brings the social and political question of modern female intellect into the spotlight. Ammons’ reading of Wharton is fluid and kinetic enough to ride with, rather than against, the constant oppositions present in Glimpses and can provide the key pillar of legitimacy regarding the lack of a clean resolution to the intellectual binary between Susy and Coral – Ammons treats failure of resolution (or clarity) as an inevitable part of both feminism and authorship.

Excepting the very beginning and very end of The Glimpses of the Moon, the reader experiences the grinding harshness between Nick and Susy Lansing, however,

Wharton writes a remarkable degree of gentleness, honest and trust into Strefford and Susy. In most instances, this gentleness (binary ten) is combined with the base of candour (binary five). The level of trust between Susy and Strefford also seems to exceed the level present between the Lansings and most of their social circle. The night of Nick's departure, those around Susy are not quick to notice the obvious physical symptoms of her heartache; it is Strefford alone who calls attention to her pallor. Susy attempts to brush it off as a makeup problem, and Strefford does not hesitate to answer, "No: too little [rouge]. Look at yourself" (93). Socially, Strefford's position is the same as that of his counterparts at dinner (Gillow, Breckenridge and the Prince) – to admire and compliment everything about their hostess, Susy Lansing – but his regard for her well-being supersedes any social duty. As the night progresses, the full force of their argument and Nick's departure hits Susy. She stays closer to Strefford than the others on their midnight romp through Venice, and upon finding herself in the darkened streets with him, she asks, "Steffy, old dear, don't mind me: but for God's sake find me a gondola and send me home [...] alone" (98). Susy's basis for asking Strefford, and not their others, is the overwhelming desire to be alone with her thoughts, and she takes solace in the knowledge, "it was never any concern of Streff's if people wanted to do things he did not understand, and she knew that she could count on his obedience" (98). Their parting by the gondola is an overtly physical manner of describing the understanding between dyad, one amplified by the life-changing and tragic messages awaiting both at the Vanderlyn estate.

Susy and Strefford's conversation does, of course, function at times just as Nick and Coral's does – as a foil for the other couple and for the marriage between the

Lansings. One poignant example of this is the written and verbal discussion after Susy has relocated to Paris and Strefford has settled the matters in regard to the death of his relatives. In her despair, Susy dispatches a quick note to Strefford, and her emotions overflow when she receives a telegram in response, “She re-read Streff’s telegram. She understood that he had snatched the time for this hasty trip solely in the hope of seeing her, and her eyes filled. The more bitterly she thought of Nick the more this proof of Strefford’s friendship moved her” (127). The author gives another “flash of insight” into the relationship in the details of Susy’s letter to Strefford. With the trust highlighted in binaries five and ten and the strategy innate in the seventh, Susy does not ask the new Lord Altringham to keep the condition of her marriage and the reason for the separation secret. This is partially because she is too emotionally exhausted to bother, but Altringham in fact keeps the secret, and in return for listening to Susy and supporting her, he offers his own story, “It was horrible...seeing them both their together laid out in that hideous Pugin chapel at Altringham...the poor boy especially...I suppose that’s really what’s cutting me up now” (130). Strefford, almost apologetically, lets Susy inside the painful circumstances surrounding his rise to power, showing his own distaste for the evil twists of reality.

Wharton adds a highly ironic twist to the conversation that follows the mutual catharsis; Susy and Strefford dissect the break-up of the Lansings’ marriage. In a reversal back to the withholding characteristic of her relationship with Nick, Susy blocks herself from fully divulging the incident with Ellie Vanderlyn’s letters to anyone, she does bring the consistently difficult fight over “managing” to Strefford’s attention. Nick repeatedly



feels unable to explain to his wife why her actions to prolong their honeymoon go against the grain of his morality, but Strefford manages to do so in a few quick sentences:

Look around you and see. And did you ever imagine that you and Nick, of all people, were going to escape the common doom, and survive like Mr. and Mrs. Tithonus, while all about you the eternal passions were crumbling to pieces and your native divorce-states piling up their revenues [...] the only difference between you is that he's had the sense to see it sooner than you that those are the things that last, the prime necessities [...] at your age one doesn't reason one's materialism. And besides you're mortally hurt that Nick has found out sooner than you, and hasn't disguised his discovery under any hypocritical phrases (132-3).

Strefford presents these lessons from the point of view of an older friend, and Susy takes them as gently but as straightforwardly as they were given to her. Her husband may refuse to write or telegram her, but Strefford provides Susy with an avenue to follow out of the total darkness in which she was living. Since both Susy and Strefford believe Nick to have taken advantage of the pact remaining from their crumbled marriage with Coral Hicks, Altringham also offers Susy a place at his side. Lord Altringham also acts in a manner completely opposite of the rapid pace of Susy's engagement and marriage by telling her, "Don't do anything in a hurry [...] but look here, my dear – when you come to a decision one way or another let me know, will you?" (135). Wharton paints Susy's reality as full of jagged spikes and holes, but the interaction with Altringham provides her with a fresh, soothed outlook on life, even if she does not, at the time, fully intend to marry him. Further, at this point, Susy and Altringham part ways with definite pathways to and intentions of communication. It is at this point that Wharton comes closest to resolving the semantic rectangle describing communication in this novel; all five binaries are producing positive outcomes through unblocked transactions, resulting in forward momentum.

It is only near the very end of their adventure that Susy and Altringham find themselves in the dark tangle of blocked and negative communication; the poles of the rectangle reverse and every binary produces the negative outcomes. However, even in their stunted attempts at traversing the canyon that ultimately stands between them, they are purposeful in discourse and maintain their individual senses of integrity. Ironically, it is Susy, in her all youth and inexperience, who cannot convey the vast emotions and impenetrable values present in her soul to Altringham. In the wake of her discovery of the real circumstances surrounding Ellie Vanderlyn and Algie Bockheimer's stay at the villa, Susy knows she will never be able to explain to Altringham why that particular truth could cause her to leave his side, "Ah, the loneliness of never being able to make him understand!" (216). Altringham repeatedly pleads with Susy to explain her actions on a level he can understand, but she quickly discovers that the moral code Nick held in such esteem is not something she can let go of, "almost, she suddenly felt, as if he had left her with a child" (217). As their frenzied, stagnant conversation draws to a close, Wharton surrounds them with sure signs of termination, "her head drooped, and she saw the dead leaves whirling across the path at her feet, lifted on a sudden wintry gust" (218).

Altringham and Susy relapse into singularity. He remains confused, and Susy loses confidence in all human relations:

She looked at him helplessly, penetrated by the despairing sense of their inaccessibility to each other. Then she remembered that Nick, during their last talk together, had seemed as inaccessible, and wondered if, when human souls try to get too near each other, they do not inevitably become mere blurs to each other's vision. She would have liked to say this to Streff – but he would not have understood it either. The sense of loneliness once more enveloped her, and she groped in vain for a word that should reach him (218-9).

As they walk away from each other on the cold Paris night, each knows the end of their relationship is clear, and even their strong sense of honesty or integrity cannot save them.

### **Nick Lansing and Coral Hicks**

For Nick Lansing, Coral Hicks functions in the same manner as does Altringham for Susy – both provide an emotional and financial outlet for the separated lovers. While Coral is not as likeable a character as Strefford, Wharton carefully constructs the narrative to underscore the effects Coral has on Nick. Unlike the centrally issue-focused relationship of Susy and Altringham, Nick and Coral both strive for and operate on basic philosophical tenets; therefore, the two semantic rectangles that follow are a great deal more intangible than those previously presented in this chapter and describe the quest for self-actualisation. Economics and communication remain Wharton's focus, but the manner in which these concepts span the plot is more thoughtful and encompasses the characters in a fashion resembling a thick fog. Recalling the central concept of blocked and unblocked transactions, it is important to remember that unblocked transactions will be represented by those actions or ideas in conjunction with the left hand column of the binary oppositions while blocked transactions will be those listed on the right hand column. The first of these rectangles, illustrated in the diagram below, places Nick and Coral in contradiction to Nick and Susy.

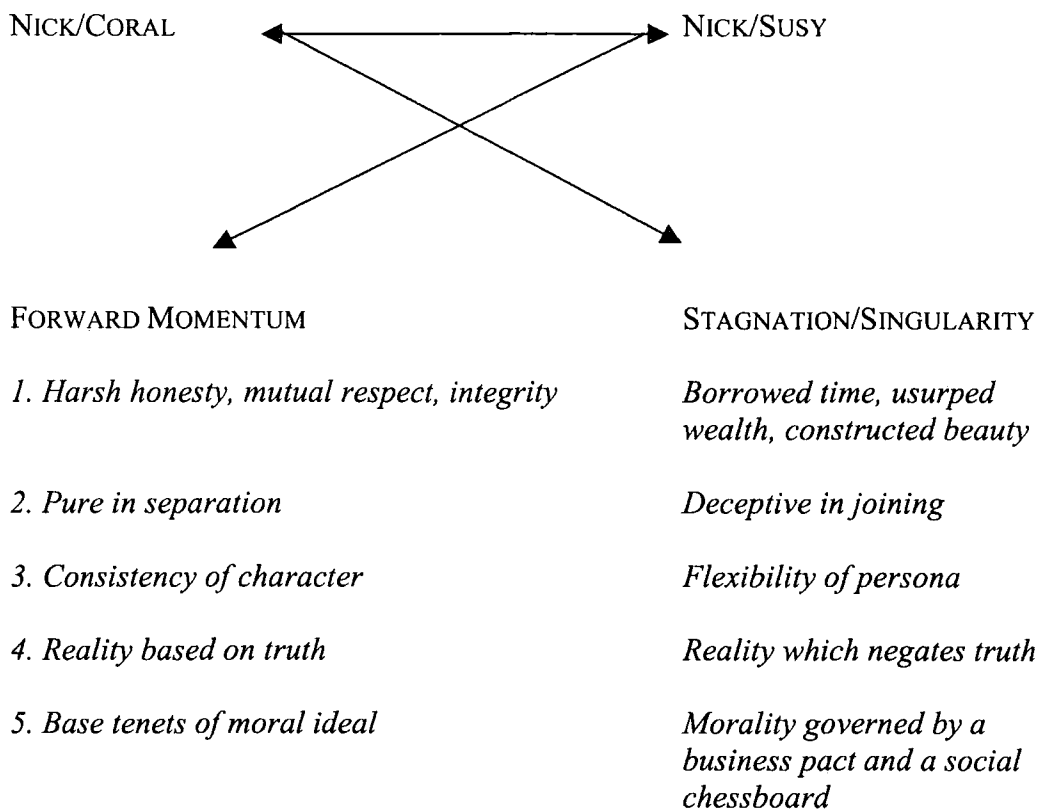


FIG. 4. SEMANTIC RECTANGLE 4

The second rectangle, presented later, deals diametrically with the competition between Coral and Susy.

### ***Legitimacy and Truth***

To a certain extent, Wharton endows Coral with a knack for being in the right place at the right time. While Susy and Ellie Vanderlyn are off for a picnic with Ellie's husband, Nick finds himself with time to wander Venice, ultimately stopping at the church of the Scalzi, where Coral happens to be studying the artwork. This chance meeting provides Coral with the opportunity for a solitary talk with Nick, which she proposes with "an abruptness that might have seemed awkward had it not been so completely unconscious" (77). Wharton's introduction of Coral's manner of speech

comes just shortly after Susy's verbal and mental gymnastics were highlighted by Nelson Vanderlyn's presence in his home at the same time as his wife and is further augmented by the fact that Susy is, once again, on a social outing that represents yet another move on the social chessboard of her existence. Rather than slowly approaching the subject, Coral initiates a frank discussion with Nick regarding the nature and timing of his marriage. Already having provided the substance for the first and fifth binaries through this conversation, Wharton draws further attention to Coral's serious smile, unblinking scrutiny, demanding eyes, odd harshness and occasional clumsiness, all physical traits representative of mental traits remiss in Susy Lansing (77-9). This juxtaposition with Susy is echoed in the substance of the conversation as well; Nick and Coral talk passionately about their love of archaeology, a diversion they both consider to be Nick's "real work," and Coral grows agitated upon hearing Nick may give it up to support his wife (78). In a final burst of heavy emotion, Coral declares to Nick, "I was never young [...] but I *am* in love," whereas Wharton paints Susy as young and not purely in love, hence the sixth binary (79). While, at the time, Nick brushes the discourse off for thoughts of his wife and friends, Coral has unconsciously 'managed' to place herself in direct opposition to Susy – an action that prompts the delineation with clarity of the couplings outside the marriage while also creating an antagonism important enough in its own right to be dealt with in the below rectangle.

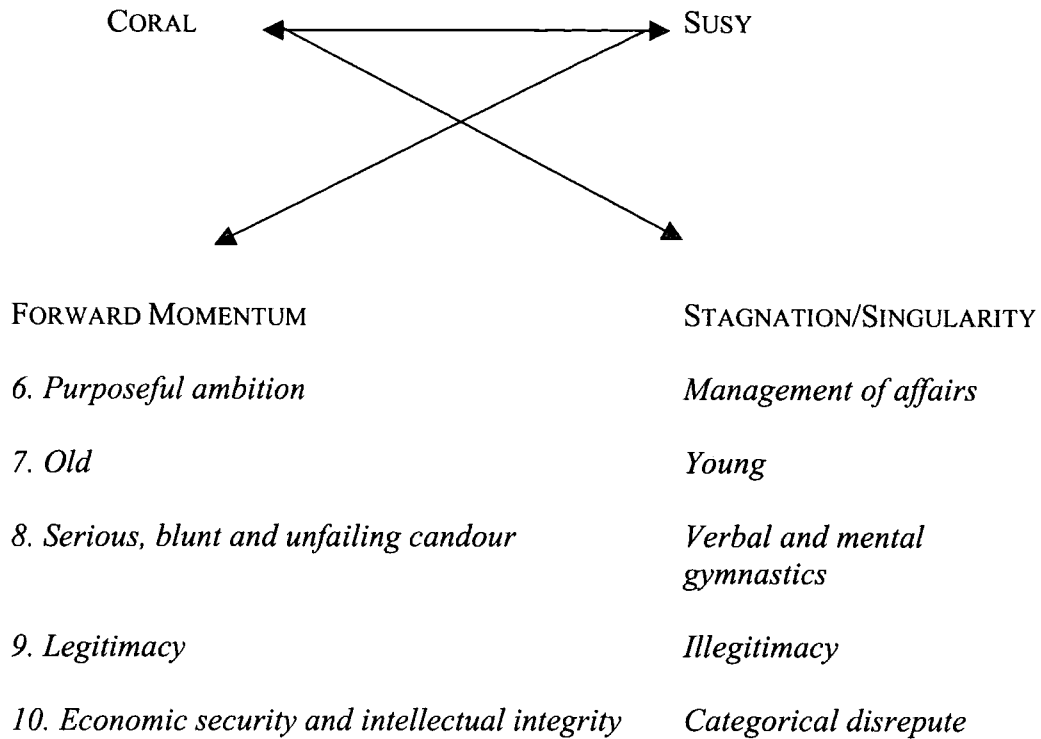


FIG. 5. SEMANTIC RECTANGLE 5

Coral, in turn with the fourth and fifth binaries, submits to Nick the tools he needs to move forward rather than treading water with Susy's constant striving to maintain the status quo of the leisure class.

Interestingly, Nick's increasingly important connection with the entire Hicks family is spurred onward by Susy's enjoyment of the large number of friends who "pop down to Venice and take a look at the Lansings," throughout the summer (56). Given the continuous doldrums of teas, luncheons, and evening soirees, Nick finds the Hickses, and their yacht the Ibis, among the least boring of his friends; ironically, Nick takes into account that the Hickses are not in Venice for "opportunities for bathing and adultery" (59). As such, when he finds himself in Genoa with a bruised marriage and a broken soul, his sighting of the Ibis is significant. While he initially feels even more alone because of the low probability of its occupants being located, Coral once again drops into Nick's life

at just the appropriate moment. The concept of legitimacy in binary nine that is defined by the Ibis and its occupants is fully negated by his existence with Susy. Nick has repeatedly dealt with Susy's ability to round up the appropriate garment, trinket or favour in order to fit into society – but always as an illegitimate figure. Indeed, even Susy's capricious request for wedding cheques rather than gifts has included Nick as one more object in her borrowed splendour. However, as Coral encloses Nick in her world, she, too, has been “in this broiling sun for hours, shopping and watching for you at the same time” (112). Coral's aggregation of material goods, and her search for Nick at the same time, is different from Susy's because, as she has the means to afford her purchases, Coral's shopping trip is legitimate in Nick's perception. As such, Nick does not so much mind being added to the packages at her feet, “Nick Lansing sank down beside her. As he did so he noticed a heap of bundles at her feet, and he felt that he had simply added one more to the numbers” (112-3). This legitimacy offers Nick a safe respite from his embarrassment and allows Nick to “be carried up to the deck-house to be displayed with the others” (113). Binary nine is among the most important oppositions presented in this chapter; its power functions so vigorously as to allow Nick to believe in both his ability to clarify his own thoughts, and (even though he does not succeed) to “have reached some kind of decision about his future” by the end of the day (113).

### ***Juxtaposition and Precision***

As Nick's journey with the Hicks family progresses, his thoughts toward Susy turn decidedly negative. Wharton increasingly juxtaposes Susy's worst traits with Coral's best features; the scope of the comparison expands from simple physical and mental attractiveness to include more concrete economics, intellectuality and personal

philosophy. His deliberation between the two women provides the basis for the second semantic rectangle concerning Coral and Susy; he is categorical and clear in his estimation of both women. Nick acknowledges Susy's possession of "exquisite insight" and "intuitive discrimination," but those skills are immediately discredited (and hence relegated to the stagnant end of binaries six and eight) by the manner in which Susy has used them, "for the most part [...] reading the thoughts of vulgar people, and extracting a profit from them [...] wasted, since her childhood, on all the hideous intricacies of 'managing!'" (151). The clarity with which Nick views his description of Susy in his summation, "That was Susy..." (151). What immediately follows this glorification and subjugation of Susy initially appears to be criticism of Coral, "There was something harsh and bracing in her blunt primitive build, in the projection of the black eyebrows that nearly met over her thick straight nose and the faint barely visible black down on her upper lip" (152). Given a lower level of innately valuable traits, highlighted here through her appearance, the appraisal of Coral must include the manner in which she, too, has used her abilities and manipulated their environment:

Some miracle of will-power, combined with the artifices that wealth can buy, had turned the fat sallow girl [...] into this commanding young woman – almost handsome – at times indisputably handsome – in her big authoritative way (152).

In the fact that it reflects the bluntness and candour of binary eight and the primacy of intellectual integrity of binary ten, Coral's refusal to mask the harshness of her face and figure forces Nick to consider these blemishes in the light of binary six. As Coral takes control of herself with purpose and ambition, Nick ultimately cannot fault her the way he can Susy. The delineation between the two women is crystallised in Nick's psyche as he



concludes, “That was Coral...” (152). For Nick, the precision of this separation comes down to the fact that Coral’s conduct reflects motivation and veracity while he can categorically negate Susy’s positive traits through their usage. Susy is disreputable while Coral is principled and admirable.

This juxtaposition between the two heroines continues to develop when Coral skilfully and efficiently address Nick concerning the state of his creative and financial situation; her comportment during this conversation reflects the positive side of all five binaries separating her from Susy. Further, the tact, decorum and conscientiously masked emotion Coral uses combines the power of her “new money” with the standards and rule associated with the “old money” with which her family competes. While Nick, at the outset, is annoyed with Coral’s “relentless questioning” and doubts her ability “of getting far enough out of her own thick carapace of self-sufficiency to penetrate into any one else’s feelings,” he responds to her questioning honestly (153). His admission of “dreaming dreams” (in reference to his novel) and the need of a paying job enables Coral to offer Nick something Susy will never be able to: economic security coupled with intellectual integrity. This counteracts the stagnant side of binary ten. Furthermore, as she offers Nick a position as secretary to her parents, Coral manages to do so in a “softer voice, with an unwonted hesitation,” all the while stroking Nick’s ego, “It seems a shame that with gifts like yours you shouldn’t find some kind of employment that would leave you leisure enough to do your real work...” (154). Coral gives credibility to Nick’s self-respect, his talent as a writer and archaeologist and his high value to her parents as a guide and partner in adventure. In short, Coral offers Nick the base tenets of his ideal moral, financial and physical world; Susy, in their marriage pact, had offered him exactly

the opposite. In this proposal, Coral pairs the all-important credibility and legitimacy of binary ten with the affirmation of the third binary. If Nick accepts what she has put forward, he can guarantee the comfortable consistency of his own personality and is able to count on the reciprocation of this by others in his life. In the same vein has Strefford has given Susy the gift of time to decide, Coral encourages Nick, “Take time – think it over,” adding necessary formality only at the end of her statement, “Farther wanted me to ask you” (155). In return for her offer and her kindness, Nick communicates with Coral more so than he has with Susy since the break, acknowledging that he “had chucked everything, even letters, for a few weeks” (155). As Susy finds ease in communication with Strefford, Nick feels safe enough with Coral to admit his inability to communicate with those outside his current paradigm – through interacting verbally with Coral, he recovers somewhat from the financial and communicative vortex in which he has survived since leaving Susy.

### ***Emergence to Reality***

Nick’s decision to accept the position vacated by Mr. Buttles provides a catalyst for major changes in his relationship to Coral and her parents. Rather than the “weeks of drug-taking on the Ibis” he had used to deaden his feelings about the split with Susy, he finds “his hours seldom his own, for both Mr. and Mrs. Hicks were becoming more and more addicted to sudden and somewhat impervious demands upon his time” (147, 231). Further, rather than utilising his language and archaeological skills, Nick finds himself arranging social events with the Hicks’ new social set, “condemned to play a part he had not bargained for” (194). Nick is acting, for all intents and purposes, exactly like Susy. His position requires him to “manage” his way through each day, constantly violating the

positive sides of binaries three, four and five that he anticipated being encouraged by the financial security of the job. The extent of this degradation of his character is not realised fully until Wharton introduces a bland and seemingly transparent aide-de-camp attached to the Prince and Princess Mother of Teutoburg to parallel Nick's place in the Hicks' entourage. The aide-de-camp routinely speaks with Nick in a "confidential tone that Lansing had come to dread," because of its close relation to the verbal and mental gymnastics of binary eight practiced by Susy (195). As soon as Nick realises his position is tantamount to a social secretary, he resolves to resign his position in order to regain his integrity. Shortly after Nick comes to the conclusion that his only real alternative to this job is to marry Coral Hicks, the aide-de-camp reveals something that shocks Nick's system back into full reality. The Prince and Princess Mother have charged their aide with the task of "feeling out" the reaction to the possibility of proposing marriage to Coral Hicks; it is then that Nick's tone turns to ambivalent admiration of Coral, "There was nothing nervous or fussy about Coral Hicks; and he was not surprised that, plastically at least, the Princess Mother had discerned her possibilities" (197). For the first time, Nick is faced with both the starkness of his choices and a necessary immediacy of action. Knowing he may well be faced with the task of formally communicating the proposal to the family and that Coral's decision may well be linked inextricably to his own situation, Nick is sure of only one thing, "he knew no more what his own [future] was going to be than on the night [...] when he had flung out of his wife's room in Venice to take the midnight express for Genoa" (198). At this point, Nick sees all of his pathways to forward momentum as blocked, and he is as stagnant and alone as he will be at any point in the novel.

As Wharton describes the despair and indecision inside Nick, she also carefully constructs the narrative to underscore the influence Coral has had on Nick's existence during the four months he has been away from Susy. He has previously lauded Coral for her will power, and it is the concept of will power that comes back to him as he reviews his own situation. Nick discerns:

Will power [...] was not a thing one could suddenly decree oneself to possess. It must be built up imperceptibly and laboriously out of a succession of small efforts to meet definite objects, out of the facing of daily difficulties instead of cleverly eluding them, or shifting their burden on others (199).

Inherent in these ruminations is a realisation of what his life is missing; despite the fact that he continues to condemn Susy for similar, if more magnanimous, crimes, Nick comes to terms with the fugitive nature of his life thus far. Through being in Coral's company, Nick has been instructed in the necessity of strong decision-making skills as well as the importance of commitment to individuals and pursuits of personal importance, items key to reaching the solution that is the ultimate goal of these semantic rectangles. Though she may be the least likeable of the four main characters, Coral has managed to maintain forward momentum at all costs and she has imparted upon Nick this philosophy. The author leaves Nick with his thoughts for several chapters, and when the action returns to the Ibis, the relationship between Nick and Coral has nearly run its course.

Nick Lansing returns to the action with a few decisions made and a somewhat mournful attitude towards his future. Finally willing to admit his passion for Susy, he muses, "such all-encompassing loves were the rarest of human experiences; he smiled at his presumption in wanting no other" (233). In this tone, Nick does not act with any haste to complete the divorce proceedings started by his wife. Additionally, Nick resolves

to end the enforced torture of employment with the Hicks, “when they left Rome for Central Asia he had no intention of accompanying them” (231). With these decisions, finally unblocked and firm, Nick’s affection for Coral does not lessen, “he was sincerely attached to Coral Hicks, and hoped for her a more human fate than that of becoming Prince Anastasius’s consort” (233). As he and Coral near their final separation, they still communicate with a high degree of honesty, intelligence and integrity. Wharton characterises the Prince’s proposal with all the trappings Coral might face as a member of their royal family by calling attention to the empty, elaborately decorated room Nick enters upon realising the proposal has been made and accepted. In her brusque fashion, Coral quickly but thoroughly lays out her situation to Nick; she can either marry the Prince and achieve her goals or she can marry Nick and achieve love. Nick highlights the level of understanding between them at this moment:

They had a sort of grim nobility. And when she spoke of ‘the other kind of happiness’ he knew that she understood what she was talking of, and was not merely saying something to draw him on, to get him to commit himself. There was not a drop of guile in her, except that which her very honesty distilled (237).

They exist just out of one another’s reach; given Nick’s love for Susy, he cannot, in the spirit of his friendship with Coral, marry her. Equally, given Nick’s inability to marry her, Coral must have the will power to abandon the search for pure happiness and achieve alternate goals through separate means. Both characters ultimately validate binary four by choosing a reality based on truth rather than one constructed of whatever materials are available, however variable they may be. As illustrated in binary two, the pair is seemingly as pure in their separation as the Lansings are deceptive in their joining. Were Wharton to allow the relationship to end at this point, it would be with a show of gallantry on either side.

Despite the ample changes in his paradigm, Nick is still presented with few options for his future. This, coupled with the relatively certain connection between Susy and Lord Altringham, pushes Nick into a rationalisation of his introspective thoughts, “In vain he had tried to rouse in himself any sense of interest in his own future. Beyond the need of reaching a definite point in his relation to Susy his imagination could not travel” (254). Knowing that the divorce papers cannot remain inert forever, and perceiving his true happiness to be out of his reach forever, Nick falls back into negative thought patterns perpetuated by Susy. Feeling any transaction besides the final one with Susy forever blocked, Nick logically concludes, “he had been moved by Coral’s confession and his reason told him that he and she would probably be happy together, with the temperate happiness based on a community of tastes and an enlargement of opportunities” (254). Nick, once again in conjunction with binary nine of Susy and Altringham’s rectangle, accepts Coral’s view of the world and intends to grant her the right to love him even if he cannot truly love her in return. As the dramatic turn-about begins, Nick returns to Paris:

In Paris, it instantly became the thinnest of unrealities. Not because Paris was not Rome, nor because it was Paris, but because hidden away somewhere in that vast unheeding labyrinth was the half-forgotten part of him-self that was Susy...For weeks, for months past, his mind had been saturated with Susy (255).

Despite the fact that Nick does not return to Coral, she does not leave his consciousness in the manner Susy allows Strefford to do, “as he sat there [...] he thought of Coral Hicks. He had been a coward in regard to Coral [...] yet his mind dwelt on Coral with tenderness, with compunction, with remorse” (296). His actions finally negate any degree of gallantry present; Coral ends up with questionable marriage prospects and without Nick; Nick ultimately finds love in Susy, but never forgets Coral. As Susy and

Altringham find their relationship sullied by the very items they valued most in it, moral, economic and communicative freedom, Nick and Coral find theirs blocked by their commitment to honesty and integrity in their own philosophical economics and communication. To that extent, however, their relationship will always be marked by a consistency of character not present in either the Lansings' union or that between Susy and Altringham.

### **Mass Consumerism**

The mass consumerism that had slowly begun to evolve in the Old New York of Wharton's youth expanded with previously unwitnessed fervour during the first quarter of the twentieth-century. The period of time stretching from the beginning of World War I to the early 1920s saw exponential increases in the use of visual media to attract consumers and witnessed equal growth in the industries needed to support the newly discovered capitalist tool. Entrepreneurs were captivated by the effort "to make urban space and time completely amenable to the circulation of commodities, and they focused increasingly on removing constraints on the expression of consumer desire and on expanding that desire."<sup>9</sup> While store owners and advertising firms focused on expanding commercialism, scholars and artists took advantage of the time as well. Wharton, as well, enjoyed higher circulation of her books and even benefited financially from the "Book of the Month" clubs. In conjunction with this expanding of consumer culture, Wharton's narrative drive expanded greatly to encompass the kaleidoscope of new societal trends; this section of the chapter will explore her skilful and deliberate application of

commercialism and bind it to the primary conflict between open and blocked transactions.

Economic historians necessarily highlight the need for a strong organisational basis for a social movement of this size, “the last factor underpinning the articulation of modern display and decoration was the development of a complex institutional infrastructure that supported it in every way.”<sup>10</sup> Such a structure allowed for communication between all those involved in the process, from storeowners to display designers to the manufacturers of the massive amounts of glass, wood and lighting materials needed for the successful display of goods. Further, the process of building an America of consumers was impossible to accomplish by multiple, independent economic actors; only full-fledged institutions, respected and integral to commercial life, could give the movement the impetus to swing forward, “no single institution could have achieved this, but several, interlinked and cross-fertilising one another, endowed the display aesthetic with a secure life of its own.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed, this “circuitry” was the controlling factor in the development of a commercial culture that “assumed many different guises by the 1920s” and held “the authority and power of a new commercial urban culture.”<sup>12</sup> This culture was so diverse as to include department stores, art and business schools, museums, manufactories and even somewhat intangible intellectual issues such as anthropology; additionally, although the new commercial culture meant very different things for people of different economic classes, it did permeate throughout the upper, middle and lower classes of the United States.

As a keen observer of social politics, this notion of a massive socio-economic infrastructure fits well with Wharton’s principle topics for analysis and commentary. The



complexity and diversity of the circuitry echoes the carefully traced social connections of Wharton's world. As in Wharton's creative paradigm, much attention is paid to the necessity of specific tools and materials for each step in the process, and this cycle of mass consumerism has a built-in method of reproduction. Those in the inner sanctuary of the movement – exemplified by Ursula Gillow, Ellie Vanderlyn and Violet Melrose – are those who control both the field of education and initiation into the movement. Perhaps most importantly, the infrastructure described by Leach and other historians is, to a large degree, inescapable, thus providing a secure lens through which to scrutinize Nick and Susy Lansing as well as their set of friends. One of the most overt manners in which Wharton makes the expansion of her narrative subject matter apparent is through the role Susy's three associates play in her life. Each woman plays the role of Susy's friend and benefactor, but all three seek to imprint their way of life onto her soul, regardless of Susy's ability to live up to those standards, thus revealing Wharton's complex layering of commentary, narration and plot in The Glimpses of the Moon.

In Glimpses, Wharton carefully constructs an infrastructure as complex, rigid and firm as that belonging to Fifth Avenue; while there is a degree of fluctuation within the structure, all actions continue to support the central ideal or goal. The author uses individual actors or characters within an established unit to frame this architecture. Ursula and Fred Gillow, Ellie and Nelson Vanderlyn and Violet Melrose all serve to represent the high society, moneyed, leisure class from which Wharton herself came and into which Nick and Susy struggle to gain admission. With the steady backing of old money, all three units pursue their lives with a sense of the emerging modernity. Grace and Nat Fulmer add another layer to the infrastructure, seemingly representing a degree

of purity and stability as well as a degree of blindness as they are tossed about like pawns by the wealthy. Finally, Wharton develops the Charlie Strefford character with a sense of tradition and rootedness not present in any other character, providing the architecture with a strong central ground wire to old traditions coded in his British lineage. Other actors presented in the work generally stand to support the intentions and actions of one or more of the other units of force. Wharton has thus constructed a cast that provides her with the scaffold to appraise the operation and performance of mass consumerism.

### *Ursula Gillow*

We are first introduced to the succinct nature of Ursula Gillow's power by her simple interference with the budding relationship between Susy Branch and Nick Lansing. Ursula's interest in Nick is analogous to a cat with a mouse, yet she wholly maintains control over her plaything, "Ursula Gillow was jealous, and they would have to give up seeing each other" (10). As a lady of leisure, Ursula's attention is heavily focused on securing the possession of everything she wants, including the attention of others; her function in the framework of this novel is summed in the below rectangle.

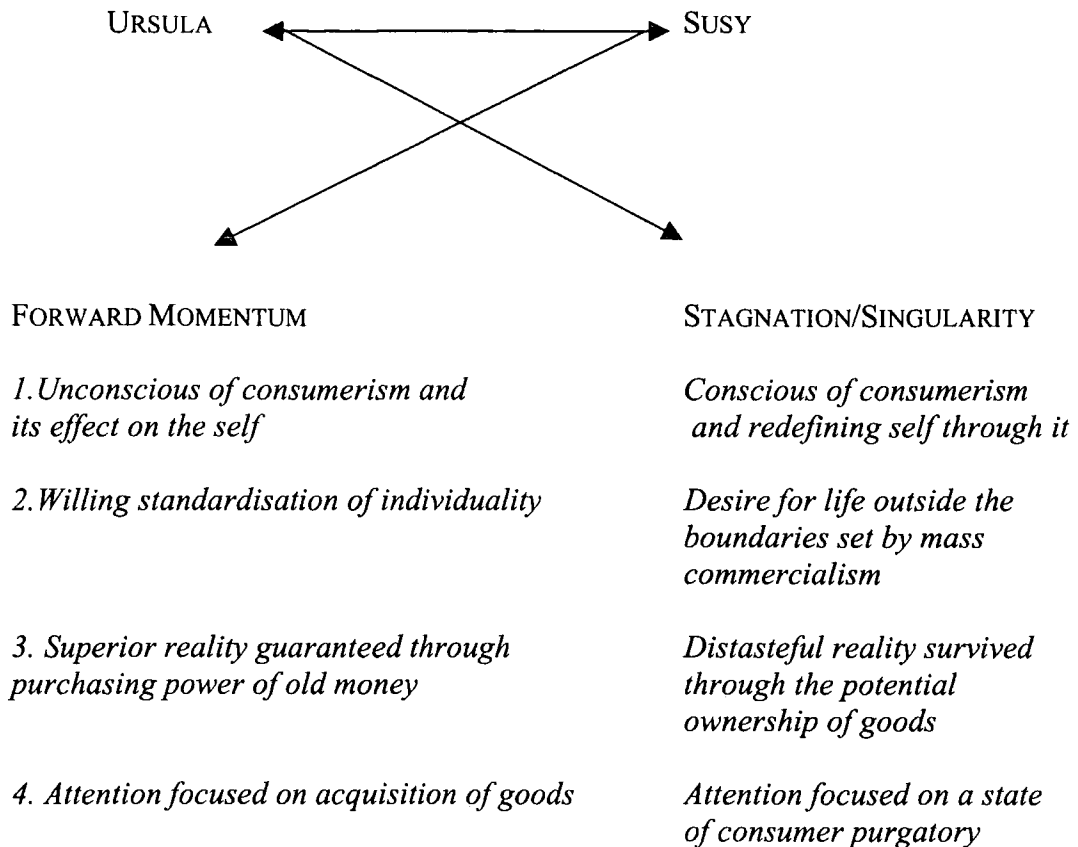


FIG. 6. SEMANTIC RECTANGLE 6

Underlying this rectangle is a base belief, on the part of Ursula, that equality or compromise can never exist between herself and Susy. In her study of consumer culture and the literature of the early twentieth century, Rachel Bowlby describes the transformation from shopping as negotiation to shopping as an open yet implicit transaction, “a fixed price policy, supported by clear labelling, put an end to the conventions of bargaining which focused attention on shopping as paying.”<sup>13</sup> Like the department stores, Ursula knows exactly what Susy’s services and friendship are worth to her and communicates this to Susy with ease and confidence. However, in deference to the all-important public reputation of financial ease, Ursula is careful about the phrasing and timing of her offers. In his account of the social economics of the leisure class in this

era, Thorstein Veblen describes what he terms a “half-caste gentleman of leisure,” essentially a person who exists within the sphere of the leisure class without the means to support such a lifestyle; it is unthinkable for such an individual to take on work suited for the lower or middle class but equally impossible for the same person to support a leisured lifestyle through his or her own means.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, a system of “dependence or fealty” develops between an upper class patron and the half-caste individual – the system serves the interests of both parties by allowing the patron to spend money on something wasteful and impractical while giving the other party the means to a leisured lifestyle.<sup>15</sup> Susy, as this half-caste individual, can thus take stock of the personal “economics” of her relationship to Ursula at any time. Wharton, indeed, endows Susy with the awareness of her position to Ursula and ultimately shows Susy mentally cataloguing her gains from the relationship, “the dress she had on had been given to her by Ursula; Ursula’s motor had carried her to the feast from which they were both returning. She counted on spending the following August with the Gillows at Newport,” as well as exploring the aversion to her alternative, associating with the Bockheimers, “whom she had hitherto refused even to dine with” (8). Within the semantic rectangle, Ursula is the unblocked transaction due to the infinite array of options surrounding her whereas Susy functions as the blocked transaction due to the price she must pay for every move on the social chessboard. While Susy, and consequently Nick, recognises the systematic way in which Ursula treats her, she ultimately complies with it all for the assurance of her place in Ursula’s society, thus embodying the characteristics of this modern economic and social movement.

As a result, Ursula self-servingly (and temporarily) detaches the pair from one another, but she also succeeds in (permanently and repeatedly) reminding Susy of the luxuries and leisure that are tandem with wealth – items which Susy can only retain by her association with affluent friends. The degree to which a standardisation of individuality, binary 2, held influence in the development of the advertising culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century cannot be overlooked in Wharton's creation of this relationship. Ursula, like the most influential directors of the mass consumer movement, is crafting Susy's behaviour to reproduce the values and attitudes most important to her kind. Advertising historian Jackson Lears traces this instinct to a movement called mimesis – “the notion that art must directly mirror reality” – and its impact on literature and bourgeois standards during this time period.<sup>16</sup> Without any children of her own and a waning interest in her husband, Ursula develops a “preoccupation with acquiring a ‘correct likeness’” or “a ‘perfect likeness’” of herself in Susy.<sup>17</sup> Pointing to the broader cultural movement correlating commercial advertising with art, Susy essentially becomes Ursula's work of art; in this sense, Ursula embraces the standardisation of individuality perpetuated by consumer culture and she seeks forward momentum by recreating it in Susy. Advertising executives were elated by a consuming public holding all the traits that Ursula Gillow takes pride in, but they never stopped to consider that some sections of the population may not have wanted to emulate the ideals presented to them in powerful ads, and in this fashion, Ursula discounts the possibility of Susy challenging her, thus negating the opposite side of binary 2, because she cannot visualise a power structure that would enable Susy to do so. Through the majority of the novel, Wharton allows Ursula and her representation of commercial

culture to reign supreme, but in the closing chapters of the novel, polarities reverse. Nick arrives in Paris to finalise their divorce and is shocked by Susy's transformation, "something in her look, her dress, her tired and drooping attitude, suggested poverty, dependence, seemed to make her after all a part of the shabby house in which, at first sight, her presence had seemed so incongruous" (261-2). Susy's poor appearance and association with the Fulmer children is a direct result of what she terms "precarious independence" (274). In this manner, Susy has rejected what Ursula's attempt to standardise her existence and circumvented the boundaries set by commercial culture. Susy's actions at first provide the evidence for the opposition illustrated in the second binary and then resolve the conflict between the two – at the novel's conclusion, Nick and Susy stand at the precipice of a new beginning, one which is neither stagnant nor singular, their position bolstered by the desire to colour outside the lines of consumerism.

Wharton's characterisation of the bond between Susy and Ursula in the space between the instances described above is diverse. Mentally, a great deal changes for Susy after their encounters early in the novel. Her position relative to consumer goods has been transformed from a paradigm of "just looking," a phrase Bowlby labels "the conventional apology for hesitation before a purchase in a the shop" to one of relative economic liberty through Lord Altringham's money.<sup>18</sup> Susy's means to this transformation are more legitimate than Theodore Dreiser's Carrie Madenda's initial means to material comfort, but they are nonetheless as mentally taxing for her. Through the opposition present in binary 1, unconscious consumerism versus conscious consumerism, Wharton illustrates the changing economic connection between the two. The motivations behind their

shopping strategies and their cognisance of this are key to revealing their uses of financial power. Susy considers the material cares of her future with a cold plan of attack:

She had calculated long ago just how many dinner-dresses, how many tea-gowns and how much lacy lingerie would go to make up the outfit of the future Countess of Altringham. She had even decided to which dress-maker she would go for her chinchilla cloak – for she meant to have one, and down to her feet, and softer and more voluminous and more extravagantly sumptuous than Violet’s or Ursula’s...not to speak of silver foxes and sables...nor yet of the Altringham jewels (159).

Through these dreams brought on by the engagement, Susy is instantly drawn into a redefinition of self, “Consumer culture transforms the narcissistic into a shop window, the glass which reflects an idealised image of the woman...who stands before it, in the form of the model she could buy or become.”<sup>19</sup> Aspects of her relationship with Altringham may strike her as distasteful, especially the physical part of their courtship, but in surveying the horde of trimmings available to her, Susy “sees what she wants and what she wants to become” and feels no hesitation.<sup>20</sup> In conjunction with her side of the first binary, Susy seeks to redefine herself through her future shopping excursions and is aware of her ability to manipulate consumer culture to her own strategy. However, these actions still keep Susy on the stagnant side of the rectangle because she never becomes the Countess of Altringham and thus does not fully experience legitimate economic freedom.

Ursula, on the other hand, approaches her shopping trips with an indoctrinated paradigm. Leach describes the process by which the upper class American’s needs for goods was spurred on, “what was remarkable about this growth was that, almost uniformly, it far outpaced the needs of the population.”<sup>21</sup> Through their efforts to create repeat customer bases, advertisers and stores were striving to mark many goods as

disposable, thus supporting the excessive lifestyle Wharton endows Ursula with. Leach further points to the key difference between Ursula and Susy's thought process about these goods – Ursula, unaware of the thought processes at work, sees the goods manifest meaning, while Susy, actively reasoning her way through consumerism, sees the goods' latent meaning. Ursula approaches the shopping trips with a vibrant energy:

After luncheon they got into the motor together and began a systematic round of the West End shops: furriers, jewellers, and dealers in old furniture [...] Ursula pounced on silver foxes and old lacquer as promptly and decisively as on the objects of her surplus sentimentality: she knew at once what she wanted, and valued it more after it was hers (161-2).

For Ursula, the simple act of possession can alter the reality both of an object and its owner; indeed, the value of a commodity in her realm increases dramatically once it belongs solely to her. The fundamental state of a new dress or a piece of old, stately furniture is not changed by its ownership, but by the power of imagination called upon by display designers and admen that unconsciously changes Ursula's perception of such goods and subsequently of herself. The line between real and unreal is blurred such that consumerism is connected to all aspects of her life; Wharton's use of economic terms such as "surplus" and emotional concepts such as "sentimentality" alongside a very categorised description of a shopping trip show the tangible and intangible permeation of Ursula's life with consumption. The juxtaposition of these two characters in a commercial situation allows Wharton to present the very conscious process of display and advertising against the society matron's unconscious reaction to it and the neophyte's strategic use of it (binary 1).

Despite the influence of Altringham's money, Susy is still on a different plane from Ursula. Like Leach, Bowlby as well draws attention to the reality of objects,



deeming them “unreal in that they were images set apart from everyday things, and real in that they were there to be bought and taken home to enhance the ordinary environment.”<sup>22</sup> This statement accurately describes Susy’s relationship to her world at this point in the novel; the heroine spends a great deal of time in consumer purgatory, caught between full enfranchisement into society and the half-caste lady dependent on a patron (binary 4). Additionally, this purgatory is perpetuated by the undefined state of her romantic attachments – one yet to end formally and the other formally yet to begin. The goods she plans to purchase as the Countess of Altringham are unreal to her because they are not yet purchased, but she experiences their power in a vicarious manner through their potential to be real one day. Indeed, this effect is reflected in others as well; at the embassy dinner, all eyes reflect congratulations onto Susy, “Approval beamed from every eyes: it was awfully exciting, they all seemed to say, to see Susy Lansing pull it off!” (201). In contrast to Ursula’s luxurious reality secured by the purchasing power of old money, Susy’s reality, however it vacillates, is survived through the potential purchasing power perilously secured by her relationship to Altringham (binary 3). Susy is, however, able to feel the power of the Altringham jewels even as they lay far away from her; these jewels represent a stringent divide from advertising and consumer culture because of the degree of stability and indispensability they symbolise. Wharton’s placement of these jewels as having some sway on Susy Lansing’s mind is a direct affront to advertising’s efforts to create repeat customer bases through disposability. The dichotomous relationship between Susy and Ursula leaves the reader heavily aware of the compromises, deals and transactions that are required to move forward as the modern economic bleeds into social reality.

### *Ellie Vanderlyn*

Ellie Vanderlyn's role in The Glimpses of the Moon is that of a gateway to commodification; her paradigm is representative of a direct exchange system for goods and services. Further, her attitude towards these goods, particularly her clothing, is elevated beyond the sensible valuation of basic needs, Ellie's "need of dress is eminently a 'higher' or spiritual need," and can be depicted in the next semantic rectangle.<sup>23</sup>

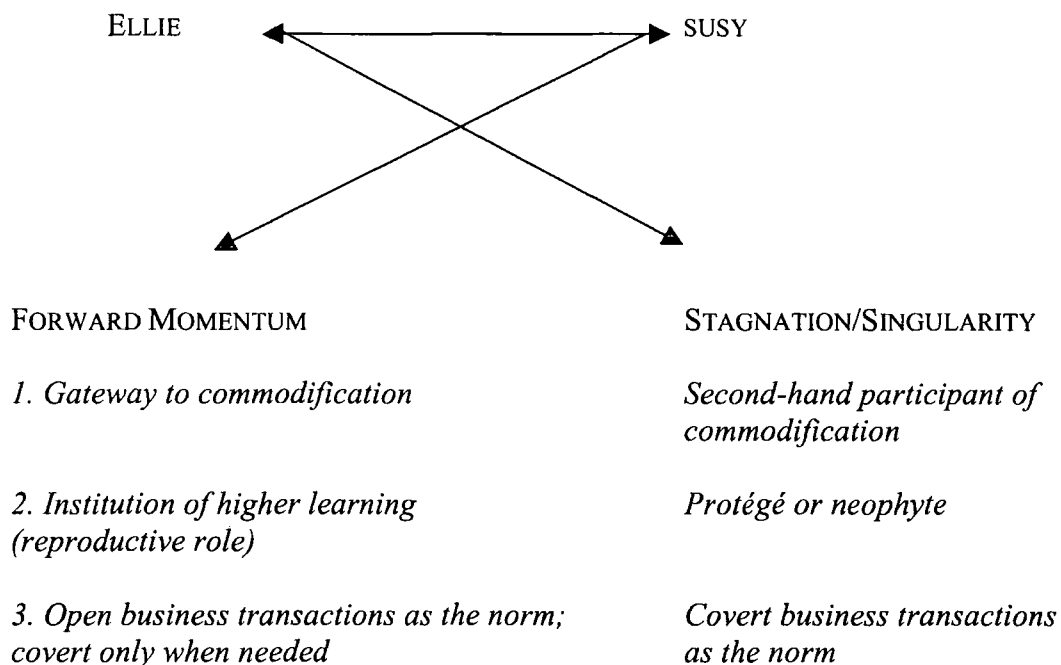


FIG. 7. SEMANTIC RECTANGLE 6

According to Lears, a major foundation for businesses in this era can be described as an "age of faith" wherein consumers held a near religious belief in the words of advertisers and store owners. Such a description is an accurate portrayal of this relationship; more so than Ursula Gillow or Violet Melrose, Ellie is a slave to the retail god. For Wharton, Ellie is both the epitome of modern consumer culture and a cynical statement on that same culture.

Jackson Lears further comments on the effects of this age of faith, “Given an ‘age of faith,’ and a lot of money to be made from acquiescent belief, the temptation to lie was overwhelming.”<sup>24</sup> Despite her millions and comfortable surroundings, Ellie, like the admen, cannot resist the temptation for personal gain through dishonesty. Unlike the countless open transactions that occur in her daily life, thus adding to the perception of her husband’s wealth and her uselessness, Ellie’s extramarital affair must be hidden and therefore requires some covert action, for which she enlists Susy Lansing’s help. The degree to which both women’s world hinges on payment for services rendered is shown in this bargain. For mailing false letters to Nelson Vanderlyn and not revealing this duty to anyone, including Nick, Susy gains use of the Palazzo Vanderlyn for their honeymoon summer. Ellie’s interaction with Susy after the favour has been performed flounders from that of mutual confidantes to that of covert business partners, “[Ellie] had contented herself with vague expressions of gratitude, allusive smiles and sighs, and the pretty ‘surprise’ of the sapphire bangle slipped onto her friend’s wrist” (84). For Susy, keeping transactions quiet is what she is used to; while the dress she wears to a dinner party may have previously belonged to the hostess, it is not a subject to be discussed openly (binary 3). Thus, while this particular deed bothers her immensely, she is able to justify its necessity to herself and keeps the secret. Much like the relationship between Dreiser’s Carrie and Charlie Drouet, between patron and patroness, the meaning of the gift is implicit, however, in keeping with the opposition presented in binary 3, Ellie, who is used to open exchanges of money, is ultimately unable to keep her secret entirely to herself and Susy. Ellie’s final act in this situation is that of a “revealing rumination” which ultimately muddles Susy and Nick’s marriage.<sup>25</sup> As she leaves, Ellie makes her gratitude

known to the unsuspecting Nick, and Wharton makes his contempt for the exchange readily apparent, “before him, on the pale velvet lining, lay a scarf-pin set with a perfect pearl [...] it was so like her to shed jewels in her path!” (82). Unlike his wife, Nick firmly refuses the chance to participate in the ever-increasing exchange of goods and services. The simplification of relationships through commodity exchange calls attention to the change in values spurred on by modernity; what would have been cause for blanking in the 1870s now caused nothing more than the blink of an eye.

The massive change in values is reflected in the first binary; Susy and Ellie are the major economic players in the transaction that leads to the major conflict of the novel. The fact of the matter is that although Susy is a second hand consumer, the gifts are given to her by women with economic power rather than from a man, as in the case of Lily Bart in The House of Mirth. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, feminist and abolitionist in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America, called on the newfound economic power of women to enable the masses through consumerism. Taking the text from one of the feminist’s speeches, Rachel Bowlby comments, “Significantly, the injunction to buy comes from woman to woman, not from a man, and involves first bypassing and then mollifying a male authority. To ‘go out’ and buy invokes a relative emancipation in women’s active role as consumers.”<sup>26</sup> This statement reflects the reciprocal actions on the part of Susy to Ellie’s request for a favour, and subsequently, in her reaction to the gift, “the bangle was extremely handsome. Susy, who had an auctioneer’s eye for values, knew to a fraction the worth of those deep convex stones alternating with small emeralds and diamonds” (84). Ellie’s role as the entrance to a commercial existence is clear, as is

Susy's cunning second hand participation – her intention is for the bracelet to finance the continuation of her emotional gamble with Nick.

As the narrative progresses, Wharton does not fail to extend Ellie's reproductive role to that of the initiation and education of the neophyte (binary 2). While her marriage with Nick allowed Susy some social standing and a larger bank balance than she had previously possessed, her true entrance to society is clearly marked by her engagement to Lord Altringham, the former fun-loving Charlie Strefford. It is only through Altringham that she can become the "chief wife" of Veblen's theory and thus exempt herself from all productive work. This arrangement would finally give her the purchasing power characteristic of Ursula, Ellie and Violet Melrose. Ellie's reaction to the news is both volatile and immediate. Upon discovering Susy "critically" examining a "matchless [chinchilla] cloak" Ellie's first concern is to sharply interrogate Susy as to for whom she is shopping (169-70). Through the accusatory tone, Wharton explores the difference between the two women. In Veblen's estimation, due to her years of relative poverty, Susy has been engaged in "an unremitting struggle to attain the beautiful in dress...a gradual approach to artistic perfections," but Ellie has been involved in the yearly exercise in "reputable waste and futility" since her birth, and thus regularly contributes to the upwardly spiralling change and outlandishness of fashion.<sup>27</sup> The twentieth century had allowed for a greater degree of upward mobility than was ever present before, and the conflict between new and old money, including all their implications, is sharply shown in this incident. Susy may have better skills at choosing fashionable attire than Ellie does, but Ellie is not willing to be shown up by a newbie. When Susy "serenely

acknowledge[s]” that she is shopping for herself and subsequently reveals her attachment to Altringham, Ellie exclaims:

Oh Susy, whatever you do, don't miss your chance! You can't conceive of the wicked plotting and intrigue there will be to get him – on all sides, and even where one least expects it. You don't know what horrors women will do – and even girls! (174).

Despite the possible competition, Ellie does want Susy to be in a position of social prominence, and she feels it necessary to warn her protégé of the perils existent in the pursuance of a wealthy man. Ellie acts as an institution of commercial and social higher learning as defined by Leach, “The skills taught in these institutions – the skills of commodity exchange, representation and interpretation – were developed to the needs of modern...merchandising;” her desire is first for the acquisition of a perfect good in the cloak and secondly to educate the newcomer to the nuances of the world in order to assure Susy's success in the quest for the ultimate goal of financial luxury.<sup>28</sup> The pinnacle of Ellie Vanderlyn's commodity driven consciousness is the “cold disinterestedness” through which she views Susy and Nick's break up, but Susy recognises, “at least her advice was sincere; and perhaps it was wise” (174-5). It is this sincerity which separates this character from Ursula and Violet; for Wharton, Ellie lacks the vindictiveness of Ursula or Violet but is completely, unquestionably programmed in the cult of modern culture – much like the items Dreiser's Carrie Madenda takes with her when she flees from George Hurstwood in Sister Carrie, (hand-made table linens, a gilded clock and several useless trinkets adorning the house) Ellie values the wasteful beauty of jewels and clothes over the knowledge contained in a book.

### *Violet Melrose*

In a departure from Ursula and Ellie’s methods, Violet Melrose’s attempts to communicate her paradigm to Susy are reminiscent of the section of the infrastructure responsible for coordinating the spectacular window displays that attracted so many shoppers to department store chains, as framed in this rectangle.

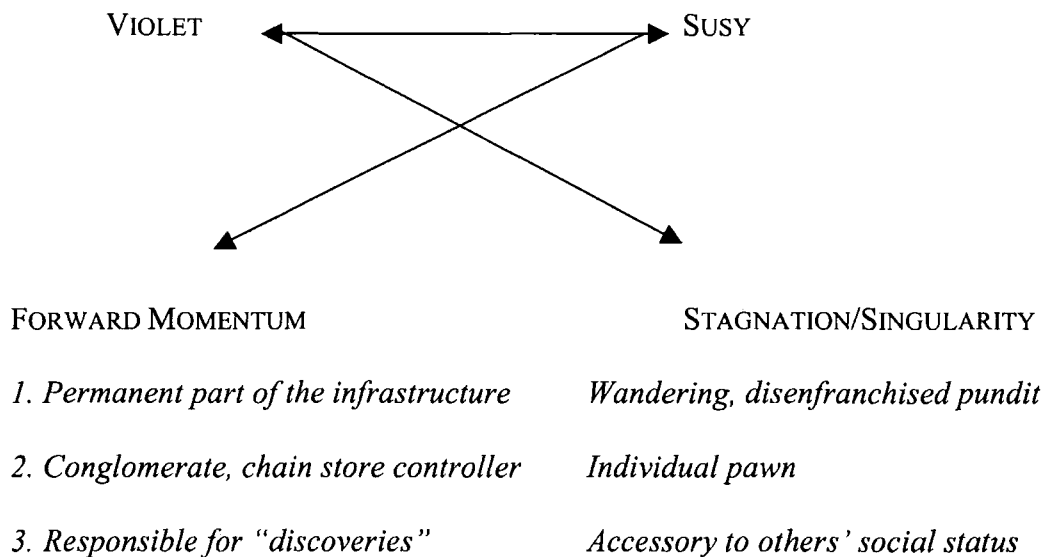


FIG. 8. SEMANTIC RECTANGLE 8

Like the window dressers, Violet is able to hop from place to place, absorbing the representative images into her being and later translating those into her clothing, furnishings and environment. Upon arriving at Violet’s Versailles estate, Susy is shocked to find her hostess in residence rather than in China travelling but then recalls, “[Violet’s] drifting, disorganised life, a life more planless, more inexplicable than that of any of the other ephemeral beings blown about upon the same winds of pleasure” (119). Relating this description to the frame of consumer culture, Violet is much like the window surface itself, acting “As both barrier and transparent surface, representing freedom of view joined to the suspension of access...and ambivalent, powerful union of distance and

desire.”<sup>29</sup> Unlike Ursula and Ellie, Violet’s social standing hinges upon this careful balance between distance and immediate access. In a twist, Violet as a social novelty exists largely because of her continual role as a benefactor or patron. Wharton describes Violet as “a harmless vampire in pearls who sought only to feed on the notoriety which all her millions could not create for her,” and in this manner she appears somewhat as a foil to Susy, who has a great deal of notoriety but little money (120-1). This character’s motivation is similar to that of the advertising executives and chain store moguls, “there is no sense of social mission, but rather of the expansive opportunities offered... as a means to personal fame.”<sup>30</sup> Violet is perhaps more patronising than she is a true patron.

Illustrating binaries 2 and 3, Violet is careful not to reveal her “discoveries” until the appropriate moment. While she may bumble about regularly, her control is tight-reined, her role as patron giving her “the power to manage people.”<sup>31</sup> Violet exemplifies the kind of control only possible due to a large power base, like that of the big chain stores, and the sense of selfish responsibility toward her newest merchandise only shown when personal gain is at stake. Susy’s entire being, on the other hand, is compressed into the singularity of one individual who is passed about as a social pawn, used when convenient and forgotten when not – she is the accessory with which Violet hopes to facilitate the patronage of Nat Fulmer. The combination of these factors, and Nat’s skill as a painter, bring Nat and Grace Fulmer back into the narrative:

A man emerged from the more deeply cushioned and scented twilight of some inner apartment, and [Susy] saw with surprise that Nat Fulmer... standing before her in lordly ease, his hands in his pockets, a cigarette between his lips, his feet solidly planted in the insidious depths of one of Violet Melrose’s white leopard skins (119).



In her continuing quest to outdo her counterparts, Violet has laid claim to Nat's painting talents. In line with her practice of exerting control over people, she has also taken over most aspects of his personal life. Wharton's description of Nat's luxurious surroundings strikes Susy so profoundly because it is so different from the New Hampshire bungalow from which he comes, and his placement in Violet's lair brings to light a serious question of personal and public space. His placement so deeply in the apartment lends itself to the assumption Nat is an intimate friend of Violet's, yet his relationship with her is only weeks old at this point in the narrative. For Violet, his presence in her apartment is a function of his valuable newness to serious art and high society; because of her role as a permanent part of the infrastructure, her apartment loses its position as her private space and becomes a place of public display for the merchandise (binary 1). Wharton contrasts Susy's expectation of finding the house empty with Nat's seemingly erroneous presence, leading the reader a "perception of...fluid, circulating crowds of people" necessitating a new "conception of what was public...[in] consumer culture."<sup>32</sup> Susy, condemned to wandering by her marital and financial difficulties, is totally disenfranchised from her participation in consumer culture by Violet regardless of her expertise and is, instead, consumed into the orchestration of Nat's success. Wharton has replaced the quietude Susy sought with clues to the quickening pace of life.

Engrossed as she is in the tutelage of her new discovery, the way in which Violet grooms and displays Nat is much like that of a pampered pet; even her plan for the usage of Susy rests upon using her as a convenient babysitter to further the ease of Nat's upcoming travel plans. In Veblen's measure, the value of a kept animal is tied to the pet's uselessness, "these commonly are items of conspicuous consumption, and are

therefore honorific in their nature and may legitimately be considered beautiful.”<sup>33</sup> Such animals are items through which the owner can display pride in his or her financial and social achievements, however, even a cat’s ability to catch mice can give it an industrial purpose and thus demean its socio-economic utility. Nat is doubly valuable in this analysis because his chief pursuit, painting, provides beauty and intangible riches, thus contributing further to the conspicuous display of wealth and leisure. In this triangle, Wharton has drawn attention to the conflict between women’s full participation in consumer culture and men’s supposedly restrained role through their duty to follow serious, and lucrative, pursuits, particularly if art is their profession. In this regard, Bowlby points to the attitude of the time that women were “particularly suited to this realm of show, colour and make-believe,” while men often faced a conflict between their responsibility to be active and constructive and “the artistic temperament” present in many.<sup>34</sup> Through her tight control, Violet deems Susy and Nat available resources in her grand display of wealth, culture and patronage, thus continuing her forward momentum while blocking Susy’s ability to make transactions of her own.

As in one instance with Ursula, Susy is able, in one scene, to resolve the conflict illustrated in the semantic rectangle. Wharton construction of Violet Melrose’s affirmation of Susy’s entrance into social glory gives the reader a pure sense of social orchestration on the parts of Susy and her associates and replicates the use of jewels in the post-World War I advertising culture. As Susy leaves the restaurant on Altringham’s arm, she receives “the scarcely-repressed hint of official congratulations” through “the smiles and hand-pressures crowding about her;” her actions cease to be perceived as necessary and begin to be viewed as cunning moves in the elaborate game (201). In this

manner, she defies all three stagnant conditions in the binaries. While Susy considers “the reflected lustre of the jewels she could wear when she choose: it was as though their glitter reached her from the far-off bank where they lay sealed up in the Altringham strong-box,” Violet’s compliment confirms the transition from poorly adorned to richly plain, “It’s most awfully clever of you, darling, not to be wearing any jewels” (201-2). Susy is no longer the pauper for Violet to feed off of, but a member of the class allowed to make decisions based on a whimsical existence; Violet thus chooses to bolster Susy’s new identity. For post-war America, the light and colour of artificial and real jewels reflect many emotions, including renewed hope for a peaceful and prosperous era, “These jewelled forms signified a new way of life welcoming Americans into the pleasures of a new consumer age.”<sup>35</sup> Wharton gives Susy potential access to the jewels, but she doesn’t immediately enable her with access to them, nor does she costume Susy with them, thus foreshadowing the demise of Susy’s relationship with Altringham. The proximity of Susy to her dream is clearly illustrated by Wharton, but the possible irretrievability of that dream is also present.

## **Conclusion**

In his history of Edith Wharton and World War I, Alan Price comments that Wharton’s three barefaced war novels<sup>36</sup> were labelled everything from sentimental war histories to ruthless and bloodthirsty. Like with Price’s description of this phenomenon, at the time of its publication The Glimpses of the Moon fell prey to the same critical simplicities and was largely ignored, a trend which continued into the decades well after Wharton’s death in 1937. The exploration, at length, of the semantic rectangles called

from the depths of the character interactions in this novel has led us to four points of conclusion. First, that The Glimpses of the Moon provides a transition from the tragic historical romance to the modern problematic lifestyle, essentially bridging two separate ends needing a connection. Secondly, that the novel is displaced in time, written as a novel of modernity and commercialism with strong echoes of the war experience but anachronistically undated. Thirdly, though the critical excavation of this work must be completed differently than the pre-war novels of Wharton, the knowledge gained from this new exploration has worth at least equal to works written prior to 1920. And finally, that the conclusion of this novel has significant ambivalence hidden within the neatness of the resolution of Greimas' and Jameson's semantic rectangle. Price's conclusions regarding Edith Wharton's war experience draw significantly from historical and biographical segments of her life, while my thesis deals primarily with her literary career, but when the two are employed in a dialogue, they allow Wharton's complete paradigm to spring to life.

When Susy Branch and Nick Lansing plot to begin their married life together as two nations entering into a treaty (with a convenient and secret "out clause"), Wharton endows them with the belief that they are in total control of their lives. However, within weeks of their wedding, they find their treaty in tatters and their state of affairs spiralling out of control at light speed. Price describes Wharton's view of World War I in much the same light:

Edith Wharton's experiences in the First World War grew out of events that she could not control. For a woman who created imaginative worlds in her fiction and who designed living spaces and gardens, this loss of control was traumatic. Both Wharton and Henry James thought that if Germany won, the cataclysm would bring about the end of civilisation.<sup>37</sup>

Susy and Nick begin with clear parameters set for behaviour, much like the world Wharton grew up in and chose to participate in through her adult life. They are then forced into separation by outside influences (Ellie Vanderlyn) and regroup with other parties (Charlie Strefford and Coral Hicks). Through this separation and realignment, Wharton delineates the issues which separate these characters from those in her earlier works. Susy's relationship with Strefford forces her to examine the connections between economics and morality because she has a genuine choice to make regarding her actions; more options are open to her than Lily Bart ever imagined. Yet, at the same time, Altringham's old money and the traditions associated with it remind the reader, and Susy, of the world Wharton was forced to leave behind. Nick, on the other hand, is forced to confront his innate need for legitimacy, allowing Wharton to explore, compare and contrast what legitimacy is in this new world of the 1920s. Coral Hicks' new money is Nick's temptation – a chance to forgo social acceptance for intellectual freedom through monetary stability. The binary oppositions described through the applicable semantic rectangles leave Susy and Nick so traumatised that their communication breaks down for the majority of the novel, leaving both with open and raw wounds. In the same manner that Wharton was forced to go on with her war efforts despite her physical and mental fatigue, Susy and Nick must continue strategising their lives in the face of circumstances seemingly larger than themselves. By the end of the novel, Susy and Nick Lansing come full circle, having survived their war and ready to begin again on their own terms, just as Wharton established her own post-war routine by the seasons and her houses in France. The Glimpses of the Moon is the arena in which Wharton clashes and connects Old New

York and the new economic, political and social order; the ambivalence that is hidden within the ultimate happy ending is a trait that will mark a great deal of her later works.

Wharton never explicitly dates Glimpses. The commercial and material content of the novel, however, strongly suggests that these characters exist in a world of department stores, advertising, and commercialism that hit America in a wave over the 1910s and cascaded into Europe fully after the end of World War I. Further, the biographical aspects of these characters and the issues they must confront too closely mirror Wharton's war experiences to be simple coincidence. Price explains the changes in Wharton and the conceptual models her life was based on:

Wharton lived through the passage of one world into another. After the Armistice she could no longer count on a meritocracy of the elite. No longer was philanthropy based on the private model of noblesse oblige; during a few short weeks in 1917 it shifted to the corporate model of the American Red Cross, with economies of scale and huge amounts of money raised through advertising and huge public appeals. The character of the world had changed.<sup>38</sup>

Cynthia Griffin Wolff, discussed in chapter 1, maintains that if we have only Edith Wharton's word to rely upon, we can never be sure in our analysis. In this aspect of this novel, the reader is given far more than simply the author's word – every aspect of interaction in The Glimpses of the Moon can be classified as a transaction and their patterns mimics those of war. With all three primary sets of couples, their interactions consist of intense but small skirmishes from which emotions are retained until such a time as the final attack is unleashed by any number of catalysts. The states of fragility and solidity within the human psyche are constantly juxtaposed, usually within the context of communication, a direct effect of the war on the development of the modern human paradigm. For the wealthy women, Susy becomes a philanthropy of sorts, a

manner of advertising their ability to play patron to a poor but valuable neophyte, and her relationship with Altringham very much becomes a public appeal when she appears with him at social occasions. Flags to this modernity are present throughout the novel and have been discussed throughout this chapter; the fact that Wharton left this novel undated is in concert with the idea of Glimpses as a bridge between two worlds. It contains some of the old but is very clearly in the domain of the modern.

Further comment on the implementation of an analysis methodology along the lines described by Dale Bauer and utilising Marxist techniques is not particularly necessary, as the reader will undoubtedly recognize these methods in the previous pages. It does, however, add to the continuity between this novel and the changing nature of Wharton's personal life to reflect on Price's historical assessment of the author's reaction to war:

Wharton's first response to the war was to get involved. At first glance, she showed amazing executive abilities – “amazing,” that is, until one considers her earlier administration of a large household, her creation of her own writing career, and her designing and building of The Mount in Massachusetts. Her talents were those of a general officer in the war on homelessness and tuberculosis. . . . The emphasis was always on restoring temporarily displaced individuals to employment and self-sufficiency as soon as possible.<sup>39</sup>

The angle in which this analysis was conducted is much the same – rather than returning to the traditional tools in criticizing Wharton, a new leaf has been turned in order to understand the novels of the 1920s in their own light, rather than solely by the precedent set by their antecedents.

For one accustomed to the tragic endings of Wharton, the surface happiness and bliss of The Glimpses of the Moon ending can be startling and puzzling. With the hero and heroine back together, bathed in the bliss of the Fulmer children while staying in a

less than fashionable hotel, the reader is apt to wonder exactly what the purpose of the heart wrenching previous two hundred pages is! For Susy and Nick, Wharton has resolved the overarching conflict between open and blocked transactions by leading the two through journeys arduous enough to open their eyes to the importance of each other. It even seems as if Susy has been jolted out of her consumer cares while Nick has relaxed his strict mores for a more pragmatic view of life and finances. However, for herself, Wharton was entering a period in her life that still remains difficult to decipher:

Her personal relations during the war were also in upheaval....Was she simply flirting on these occasions, or did her comments reveal a wish to be part of a relationship?...At times Wharton's appeals for companionship seems less innocent...Wharton's sustained grief over the death of Ronald Simmons points to a deep, unmet need in her busy life.<sup>40</sup>

Price points to the fact that this cat and mouse game concerning her true feelings over friendship and romance is something that slips in and out of her personal writing and is never quite nailed down exactly. Rather, Wharton establishes a routine of summer near Paris and winter in the south of France and publishes approximately a book a year, allowing various aspects of this routine to absorb the majority of her free time. In truly looking at the ending of Glimpses, one finds that little is as glamorous as it seems on the surface. While Susy has left behind her feelings for Altringham, Nick refuses to let go of Coral, even while in Susy's embrace. Further, the setting for their tryst has been paid for by Ellie Vanderlyn's bangle bracelet, given to Susy in return for concealing her extramarital affair, signalling a watering down of Nick's staunch integrity. The family environment around them belongs truly to the Fulmers, individuals who are directed around Nick and Susy's social group by their wealthy benefactors. Underneath the happy resolution of the conflict lies a myriad of halfway points, summing to a very large degree



of moral and pragmatic uncertainty. The happiness of her finale is a small portion of this novel – Wharton’s characters are constantly questioning every aspect of their interaction with other humans, and ultimately this novel wonders if humans can meaningfully interact with each other given the tumultuous nature of modern life, “She looked at him helplessly, penetrated by the despairing sense of their inaccessibility to each other...and wonder if, when human souls try to get too near each other, they do not inevitably become mere blurs to each other’s vision” (218-9). At the end of this novel, Wharton questions if humans can grasp even a glimpse of each other through the haze of modernity.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Adam Roberts, Frederic Jameson, Routledge Critical Thinkers Ser. (London: Routledge, 2000) 39.
- <sup>2</sup> Roberts 40.
- <sup>3</sup> Refer to Chapter 1, page 18 for the theoretical semantic rectangle.
- <sup>4</sup> Cynthia Griffin Wolff, A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton (New York: OUP, 1977) 345.
- <sup>5</sup> Wharton, Edith. The Glimpses of the Moon (1923; New York: D Appleton and Co., 1926) 26. Future references will be listed parenthetically in the text.
- <sup>6</sup> Edith Wharton, A Backward Glance 1934. (London: Century, 1987) 338.
- <sup>7</sup> Wharton, A Backward Glance 338.
- <sup>8</sup> Wharton, A Backward Glance 360.
- <sup>9</sup> William Leach, "Strategies of Display and the Production of Desire," Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display of Goods in American 1880-1920, Simon J. Bronner, ed. W.W. Norton & Company, New York and London, 1989.
- <sup>10</sup> Leach 105.
- <sup>11</sup> Leach 104.
- <sup>12</sup> Leach 130.
- <sup>13</sup> Rachel Bowlby, Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola (New York and London: Methuen, 1985) 4.
- <sup>14</sup> Thorstein Veblen, The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions (London: Unwin, 1970) 77.
- <sup>15</sup> Veblen 77.
- <sup>16</sup> Jackson Lears, Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America (New York: Basic Books, A Division of Harper Collins Publishers, 1994) 82-3.
- <sup>17</sup> Lears 82-3.
- <sup>18</sup> Bowlby 32.
- <sup>19</sup> Bowlby 32.
- <sup>20</sup> Bowlby 32.
- <sup>21</sup> Leach 100.
- <sup>22</sup> Bowlby 2.
- <sup>23</sup> Veblen 168.
- <sup>24</sup> Lears 217.
- <sup>25</sup> Lears 217.
- <sup>26</sup> Bowlby 22.
- <sup>27</sup> Veblen 177.
- <sup>28</sup> Leach 103.
- <sup>29</sup> Bowlby 34.
- <sup>30</sup> Bowlby 124.
- <sup>31</sup> Simon Bronner, "Reading Consumer Culture," Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display of Goods in American 1880-1920, Simon J. Bronner, ed. (New York: Norton, 1989) 13.
- <sup>32</sup> William R. Taylor, "The Evolution of Public Space in New York City: The Commercial Showcase of America," Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display in America 1880-1920, ed. Simon J. Bronner (New York: Norton, 1989) 288, 291.
- <sup>33</sup> Veblen 139-40.
- <sup>34</sup> Bowlby 122.
- <sup>35</sup> Leach 105.
- <sup>36</sup> The Marne (1918), A Son at the Front (1923), and The Mother's Recompense (1925)
- <sup>37</sup> Alan Price, The End of the Age of Innocence: Edith Wharton and the First World War (New York: St. Martin's P, 1996) 180.
- <sup>38</sup> Price 181.
- <sup>39</sup> Price 180.
- <sup>40</sup> Price 181.

## Chapter 3: The Nothing Novel: Power Struggles, Personal Politics and Twilight Sleep

### Introduction

Despite the myriad of troubles she faced in later life, biographer R.W.B. Lewis describes the older Edith Wharton developing a less prescribed and more open zest for life, as reflected in her correspondence:

In the 1920s and later, as Edith Wharton's taste in fiction grew to favour less the tightly composed Jamesonian mode and more the Victorian novel, and especially the gossipy narratives of Anthony Trollope, her letters became looser, more leisurely and spacious, more filled with solicitous inquires, reports about friends, random anecdotes and musings.<sup>1</sup>

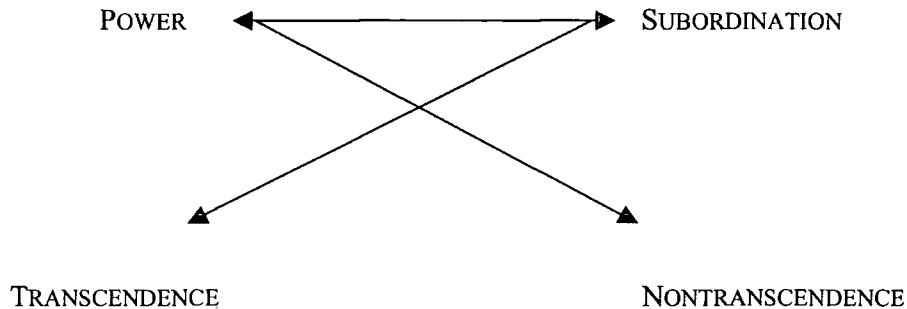
In conjunction with this change, Wharton's 1927 novel Twilight Sleep possesses a hint of gossip threaded throughout the narrative as well as a more loosely fitting framework than earlier pieces. It is precisely this combination which has prompted critics, historical and contemporary, to pan Twilight Sleep as disorganised and analytically impotent. Amid a sea of disparaging colleagues, Dale Bauer once again steps forth to champion Wharton's cause, "Twilight Sleep is chaotic, but no less brilliant for being so. The chaos Wharton represents in the novel is not one of plot but of culture – and of women's place within it."<sup>2</sup> In this novel, as she tackles the issues of the Jazz Age from the inside, Wharton's role as social critic becomes covert while her function as a social historian is propelled to the forefront of the reader's consciousness, "What Edith Wharton did, obviously, as a superb and intuitive social historian, was to dramaticize the condition of women, which usually meant the repression and the entrapment of women, in the social worlds she lived in."<sup>3</sup> This is demonstrated by the equity with which she approaches these characters – everyone,

from beginning to end, deals with roughly the same amount of trouble and, at the conclusion, receives roughly the same results for their actions. Wharton differentiates among them by assigning each character a sphere of influence but does not morally elevate any one character over the others. In this way, Twilight Sleep poses a unique opportunity for the Jamesonian critic.

Lewis classifies Wharton as a thoroughly dialectical personality,<sup>4</sup> however, Bauer highlights that there are “no easy binaries between good and evil to be transcended at the end”<sup>5</sup> of Twilight Sleep. The answer, I believe, is somewhere between these two opinions. There are significant binary oppositions present in this novel that can be analysed using the Jamesonian model; the key difference between this and others will be in the mediating concept used – that of ambivalence coupled with apathy or failure. This mediating concept is that which the semantic rectangle strives to produce, the way in which the central conflict is textually translated into an accessible social and historical reality for the reader. Paralleling Bauer’s notation, these binaries are more ethereal than the concrete communication issues in The Glimpses of the Moon or the legal quandaries in The Children. Thus, this is a dialectical novel, but the binaries present exist to exemplify what Wharton could not, or would not, resolve. It is only through the ambivalence and failure which so irritated critics that Wharton’s point with this novel is revealed. Twilight Sleep itself echoes this pattern – it neither advanced Wharton’s career critically nor brought her the sums of money she would later receive for The Children. The relaxed and flowing nature of the socio-political argument in this novel is positively lax compared to the sharpness of an earlier Wharton text such as Ethan Frome, but the narrative form of Twilight Sleep is in conjunction with its connotation. In this chapter, I will argue that Wharton produces several incarnations of the central conflict between power and

subordination, systematically writes each binary into evasive failure while providing no real consequences for that failure, and finally concludes the novel itself in the same pattern.

The primary semantic rectangle for this chapter is diagrammed as follows:



Power, in this case, is defined and exemplified by the characters' eternal search for control. In the hopes of attaining total control over her daily interactions, Pauline Manford is constantly obsessed with her timetable. Further, her social calendar is a carefully mixed blend of opportunities to exert her will over others (frequently her husband and daughter) and chances to lend her name to a cause, thus extending her potential power without increasing her workload proportionally. When power is negated, subordination occurs. Lita Wyant is adept at forcing her family members into subordination – her inability to arrive on time forces Nona, Dexter and Jim to wait for her arrival throughout the narrative. Further, her physical appearance reduces both Dexter and Jim to teenage boys, a technique she uses to fully negate their financial power over her. In Twilight Sleep, Wharton's characters are all engaged in a quest for transcendence – for a happiness or a settledness that rests, each believes, on the achievement of an individual set of desires. Jim Wyant chases after a contented home life with his wife and son while Arthur Wyant fights, as aggressively as he is able, to keep Jim's beloved wife in check. In order to reach transcendence, any of these characters must negate subordination and come to power. The crux of the novel,

however, is that none of them are able to do this; therefore, the ultimate result of this rectangle lies in its demise.

Due to the opaque nature of the mediating concept for this rectangle, Twilight Sleep requires a great deal of contextualization. Janet Beer comments, “Edith Wharton, whilst a self-declared moralist, did not often write with transparent ethical purpose.”<sup>6</sup> As Glimpses does not represent a simple love story with a happy ending, Twilight Sleep is not a transparent novel simply about the human inability to choose between competing options. Specifically, this novel centres on the changing power relations between men and women, within women individually and as a cohort and the paradox between power and confinement. In line with Jameson’s theories, these issues are presented within an entire system of thought, “Leaving behind the mores of Old New York, Wharton’s late fictions challenge the ideology of domesticity and sexual nature.”<sup>7</sup> Twilight Sleep has been criticized as both too politically timid and as politically reactionary, but Bauer contends that Wharton’s goal was to redefine the political novel. In such a manner, Wharton introduces the characters to a series of binary choices and then uses her narrative to capture the entire process of their failure to choose – concluding by stressing the abyss into which they fall by their inaction. Further, the binaries Wharton places these characters in are not the easy or immediately available ones created by popular culture, such as that between New Woman and flapper, “Wharton’s target is the contradictory nature of these choices offered to women. Was twilight sleep a feminist answer to the fears of childbirth, and thus a way to advance women’s power, or was it a conservative gesture of advancing the cause of positive eugenics?”<sup>8</sup> The harsh nature of these contradictions is exemplified in the procedure of twilight sleep itself:

Women’s bodies experienced their labours, even if their minds did not remember them. Observers witnessed women screaming in pain during

contractions, thrashing about, and giving all the outward signs of 'acute suffering'.... Once the labouring woman was under the effects of scopolamine, the doctors put her into a specially designed crib-bed to contain her sometimes violent movements.<sup>9</sup>

In order to control the pain of her childbirth, a woman had to give up control of her body and her memory to a medical establishment almost entirely male and almost entirely without concern for her. As Dexter Manford notes, these complex paradoxes, "all were strands woven into the very pile of the carpet he trod on his way up the stairs" and they will form the binary basis of this chapter (62). Because no one character succeeds in subordinating their compatriots, it is difficult to re-sketch each semantic rectangle by substituting characters for the concepts of power and subordination. Instead, I present simple binary oppositions between two personalities and discuss their relation to power, subordination, transcendence and nontranscendence rhetorically.

### **Nona Manford versus Lita Wyant**

Wharton was critical of character development in modern novels, "The characters in modern fiction are often...no more differentiated than a set of megaphones, through all of which the same voice interminably reiterates the same ideas."<sup>10</sup> In this narrative, Nona Manford and Lita Wyant are a direct affront to this trend; the sisters-in-law could not be more divergent in their life strategies. They represent opposite extremes of the concepts of power, vacuity and sincerity; Nona is often referred to as solid, strong, and consciously managed, while Lita is presented as flighty, ethereal and naturally manipulative. At the novel's conclusion, neither woman has transcended their daily lives into a level of supreme happiness and contentment, thus providing evidence of the strong theme of failure in Twilight Sleep.

Critics have seen Nona Manford as a largely straightforward young woman, so much so that David Holbrook describes her completely in a single sentence, “Pauline has a ‘serious’ daughter, Nona, by her second husband.”<sup>11</sup> Wharton, however, thoroughly endows Nona with a questing, active mind, and from early in the novel uses her to call attention to the paradoxes present:

There were moments when Nona felt oppressed by responsibilities and anxieties not of her age, apprehensions that she could not shake off and yet had not enough experience of life to know how to meet...After all, somebody in every family had to remember now and then that such things as wickedness, suffering and death had not been banished from the earth; and with all those bright-complexioned white-haired mothers mailed in massage and optimism, and behaving as if they had never heard of anything but the Good and the Beautiful, perhaps their children had to serve as vicarious sacrifices<sup>12</sup> (45).

The three characters that should be allowing Nona to pursue the carefree life of a wealthy nineteen year old are caught up within their own affairs – Pauline Manford with her spiritual advisors and her ever-present calendar, Dexter Manford with his business and personal affairs, and Arthur Wyant with his son’s marriage. Therefore, it is through Nona that the reader remains grounded; hers is the only mind with a worldview encompassing more than its limited sphere of influence. Nona’s source of power in *Twilight Sleep* comes from this unique vantage point – she is able to recognize and analyse the behaviour of others in light of society, politics and even common sense. This also allows Nona to engineer her interactions with others; whereas Lita’s influence is wielded without thought, Nona possesses the ability to manufacture situations. Given this ability, Nona seems to be a likelier candidate for holding power, subordinating others and gaining transcendence, but for Wharton, and thus for Nona, the equation is not that simple.

Despite consciously holding the tools necessary to shape the world to her needs, Nona, throughout the novel, does not follow this potential through into



actuality. Time and again, she correctly identifies and analyses the components of a given situation and then takes little or no action. One of the earliest instances is presented through her relationship with Stan Heuston, “Nona caught Stan Heuston’s smile, and knew he had read her thought; from him too she turned...Something deep down and dogged in Nona always, when it came to the touch, made her avert her feet from the line of least resistance” (68-9). The key obstacle to pursuing a relationship with Heuston lies in his marriage to a virtual nun, Aggie, who refuses to grant him a divorce. Through subordinating Aggie, Nona could gain Stan a divorce and subsequently pursue a romantic relationship with him. She is given two opportunities to advance this cause, one through the chance to be honest with Stan about her feelings and another when Aggie offers to divorce Heuston only if Nona will marry him. In both instances, Nona backs away from sincerity by declining to act and negates her potential for power by the same means. Nona actively chooses to negate her own power, even when to follow its course would be that line of least resistance.

Wharton offers proof of Nona’s awareness of her unique position in her family:

What nonsense, to talk like that, when all those others needed her: Jim and his silly Lita, her father, yes, even her proud self-confident father, and poor old Exhibit A and her mother who was so sure that nothing would ever go wrong again, now that she had found a new Healer! Yes; they all needed help, though they didn’t know it, and Fate seemed to have put her, Nona, at the very point where all their lives intersected, as a First-Aid station is put at the dangerous turn of a race-course, or a points-man at the shunting point of a big junction (143).

Nona exists as the strongest character – she is the one person that all the others trust and will turn to, but Nona doesn’t see that from this position, she possesses the greatest position from which to take a stand and manipulate those around her into following. Her actions are limited, largely, to bringing two characters together (her mother and Lita, to discuss the divorce) or keeping them apart (Pauline and Arthur, when they visit New York from Cedarledge). At the story’s end, Nona’s feeble

attempts to preserve the happiness of those around her have failed as well as any personal bid for transcendence. Rather than resolving the semantic rectangle, she has unified it through her blank ambivalence, professing a desire to join “a convent where nobody believes in anything” (315).

While Pauline seems to stand for everything, neither Nona nor Lita stand for anything in particular. They do, however, represent different segments of Wharton’s world at the end of the 1920s. Whereas Nona is a solid entity, her power and vacuity derived from thought and her sincerity thus in question, Lita Wyant is gossamer on the wind. In her essay “The Great American Novel,” Wharton comments:

The same motives which send more and more Americans abroad now draw an annually increasing number of foreigners to America. This perpetual interchange of ideas and influences is resulting, on both sides of the globe, in the creation of a new world, ephemeral, shifting, but infinitely curious to study and interesting to note, and as yet hardly heeded by the novelist.<sup>13</sup>

Lita, with her dancing, movies and chronic boredom is this new world with all its transient characteristics. The strongest positive characteristic Wharton gives Lita is her sincerity; Lita is vacuous enough that everything she says or does can be taken at face value. In contrast to Nona, Lita does not have the ability to see outside her sphere of influence, and, as follows, is not in control of her powerful characteristics:

But then Lita was made to be worshipped, not to worship; that was manifest in the calm gaze of her long narrow nut-coloured eyes, in the hieratic fixity of her lovely smile, in the very shape of her hands, so slim yet dimpled, hands which had never grown up, and which drooped from her wrists as if listlessly waiting to be kissed, or lay like rare shells or upcurved magnolia-petals on the cushions luxuriously piled about her indolent body (17).

Interestingly, the reader never sees Lita except through another character’s eyes, but the pressure she places throughout the narrative is immense. In conversations with both Arthur Wyant and Nona, Jim Wyant (her husband), is willing to divorce her in

order to facilitate her happiness and is even willing to give up his son to ensure Lita's happiness. His love for Lita is easily pushed to the level of self-denigration and forms the bedrock of the entire plot. Lita is, however, much more successful at wielding her power than is Nona, but much of that is due to the nature of its manifestation. At various points during the novel, Nona and Dexter Manford arrive at the Wyant house to find Lita drastically late or still in her "boudoir" during the early afternoon, thus forcing them into submission.

The commodification that played such a large role in The Glimpses of the Moon finds a more developed home in Lita Wyant. Susy and her comrades spent a lot of time planning their shopping trips and purchased within a framework that still had remnants of Old New York structure in it. Lita, on the other hand, is even more a child of the department store, "The client on her way from one department to another might well be attracted in passing by something which she had no previous intention of acquiring. 'Impulse buying' replaced planned buying."<sup>14</sup> Lita operates on impulse: she sees what she wants, and she must have it immediately. Because Jim is so enamoured with his wife, the Manford/Wyant family members scuttle about attempting to please Lita for Jim's sake. Lita successfully subordinates the members of her extended family, but the problem is that Lita's attentions are fleeting – she does not have the attention span necessary to continually control them, "You can't take out an insurance against boredom....I'm not much good at reasons. I want a new deal, that's all" (194-5). No matter how well she has subordinated them, her interest will fade and the cycle must begin again. Lita's permanent transcendence simply isn't possible. Further, since she is so focused on herself, Lita fails to take into account all the players in the novel, most importantly Arthur Wyant. By making Lita a woman born into the commodity cult, Wharton makes an important point. Rachel Bowlby

describes Theodore Dreiser's Carrie Madenda, "To be 'something' means, paradoxically, to imitate passively and minutely gestures which are not her own. Carrie's 'personality,' her recognition as an individual, is guaranteed only to the extent that it is an exact reflection of the other's."<sup>15</sup> Lita, further on in the modern age from Carrie or Susy Branch, owns those gestures fully – she *is* what these women strove to create.

Lewis cites Dante's The Inferno as an influence on Wharton;<sup>16</sup> in Nona Manford and Lita Wyant, we find two women whom Dante would place just outside the doors of hell, forever carrying a blank banner. Through these two, the binary opposition between power and subordination is illustrated in totally divergent manners. Nona, in her solidity, thought and well-intentioned manipulation fails to grasp control of the situation and emerge into a leadership role. Lita, with her eternal cycle of boredom and her virtual seclusion from the realm of conscious thought, unknowingly places herself at the centre of everyone's attention yet still fails to reach transcendence. Through their divergent paths, Wharton shows us that neither woman stands for anything substantial or takes decisive action. Both women fail, but at the novel's conclusion they stand on relative footing. While suffering from gunshot wounds, Nona must deal with the fact that she could not fix her family in the way she desires; her only gain from the situation is that of some much needed time alone. Lita remains in the marriage that so entraps her, but gained amusement through her affair with Dexter and a trip to Paris at the height of the fashion season. Wharton's ambivalence for both their methodology is revealed in the equity of their failure.

### **Internal Struggles: City Dexter Manford versus Country Dexter Manford**

Dexter Manford is very much presented as two separate entities warring for space within the consciousness of one man. Wharton's tendency to live dichotomously, splitting her time between different houses, friends and subject matter, became more perceptible in her later life. R.W.B Lewis and his wife find this evidence of this tendency in even her early letters, "Early and late, the letters of Edith Wharton oscillate between the literary and the friendly: between the more or less consciously composed and the gracefully expressed at one moment, and the gossipy, the querying, the commiserating at another. In this respect, the letters mirror the life."<sup>17</sup> The two Dexter Manfords oscillate between the legal, which can be compared to the literary of Edith Wharton, and the agricultural, which is comparable to the friendly disposition of Wharton. Dexter self-describes first his legal, or "city," aspects of his personality:

He, Dexter Manford, who had been brought up on a Minnesota farm, paid his own way through the State College at Delos, and his subsequent course in the Harvard Law School; and who, ever since, had been working at the top of his pitch with no more sense of strain, no more desire for evasion (shirking, he called it!) than a healthy able-bodied man of fifty had a right to feel! If his task had been mere money-getting he might have known – and acknowledged – weariness. But he gloried in his profession, in its labours and difficulties as well as its rewards, it satisfied him intellectually and gave him that calm sense of mastery – mastery over himself and others known only to those who are doing what they were born to do (52-3).

He then describes his agricultural, or "country," personality:

Wasn't that perhaps the kind of life Manford himself had been meant for? Farming on a big scale, with all the modern appliances his forebears had lacked, outdoing everybody in the country, marketing his goods at the big centres, and cutting a swathe in state politics like his elder brother? Using his brains, muscles, the whole of him, body and soul, to do real things, bring about real results in the world, instead of all his artificial activity, this spinning around faster and faster in the void, and having to be continually rested and doctored to make up for exertions that lead to nothing, nothing, nothing...(70-1).

As Nona and Lita go about their power-gathering exercises in different ways, the country and city Dexter Manfords diverge in most aspects of their personalities. Obviously, city Dexter Manford refers to the instances in which he is in New York, while country Dexter Manford refers to the time spent at Cedarledge. This is the second of the incarnations of the primary binary opposition between power and subordination that Wharton presents.

While Manford is in New York, his power strategies rely on traditional methodology and he tries to be his family's champion through official channels. Wharton's primary example of this is the manner in which Manford addresses the conflict between the Mahatma, the Lindon family, Pauline Manford and finally Lita Wyant. Within the context of his law practice, another society family, the Lindons, approaches Manford for advice concerning their daughter's involvement with a New York spiritual healer, the Mahatma. As she has been intricately involved with the Mahatma's practices at his facility, Dawnside, this case poses a unique conflict for Pauline. Initially, Manford steadfastly refuses to allow Pauline's influence to jade his legal mind, "And as his professional authority grew, he had become more jealous of interference with it. His wife ought to have understood that [...] 'Look here, Pauline, you know all this is useless. In professional matters, no one else can judge for me'" (60-1). At that evening's dinner party, he also refuses to discuss the matter with Gladys Toy, thus retaining his power over others by sticking to professional guidelines. In order to challenge this power strategy, Wharton must introduce a variable that is outside of lawyer Manford's control, impossible to ignore, and unfeasible to contradict. This variable arrives in the form of Lita Wyant. As previously stated, the retention of Lita as Jim's wife is a primary goal of all family

members – while Pauline’s social unease cannot penetrate Dexter’s legal integrity, the social embarrassment of Lita and thus Jim can.

Through a typist at his office, Dexter discovers a picture of Lita at Dawnside (with Bee Lindon, incidentally) in a gossip magazine and is forced into action. His methodology, however, remains that of a lawyer as he interrogates first Lita and then her former guardian as to the history behind the photograph. The results of both interviews negate Dexter’s power as a lawyer; Lita is positively delighted at the photograph, “You darling – did you bring me this? What luck! I’ve been hunting all over the place for a copy – the whole edition’s sold out. I had the original photograph somewhere – but couldn’t put my hand on it” (110). While he addresses Kitty Landish “in his dry cross-examining voice,” he simply discovers that her greatest concern is getting Lita into the movie business in order for monetary gain (166). By operating in a different value code than Dexter, Lita and her aunt have negated his attempt to subordinate them through his legal, metropolitan prowess. Dexter is forced to convince himself that through his own paradigm, he can subordinate them once again by disallowing the entire matter to come to public debate:

The resolve to act brought relief to his straining imagination. Once again he felt himself seated at his office desk, all this professional authority between him and his helpless interlocutors, and impressive words and skilful arguments ordering themselves automatically in his mind. After all, he was the head of his family – in some degree even of Wyant’s family (166).

Dexter convinces the Lindons to drop their suit, therefore letting the picture fade into the social background rather than forcing it, and the indiscretions it implies, into public consciousness. He then convinces his family (including Lita and the baby) to congregate at Cedarledge over the Easter season while simultaneously sending the male Wyants to an island off the Georgia Coast. While Dexter feels that these actions, made within a legal power structure, place him back in control of the

situation, he in fact uses that legal mindset to show its failure in subordinating others. As city Dexter, he has failed to keep his family in line, something that would have placed him in line for transcendence through a stable family structure balanced with a challenging career. Therefore, Wharton has him relocate the key players to Cedarledge, where Dexter can attempt a different set of power seeking techniques.

Janet Beer describes Wharton's creative process, "She sought the company of artists and men and women of letters, the literary world was her chosen milieu and the practice of her art was intimately bound up with her social life and the people with whom she chose to associate."<sup>18</sup> Dexter Manford's character echoes this influence – the kind of power techniques he exerts are intimately tied up with his location, and his location with the dominant social paradigm. When he, Nona, Pauline, Lita and the baby congregate at Cedarledge, his power strategies change from those structured and defined within the legal world to techniques more amorphous. As he drives Lita from the city to Cedarledge, he contemplates his "success" at arranging the Easter vacation but plans to address the problems with a very different attitude:

If only Pauline would have the sense to leave him alone, let him enjoy it all in Lita's lazy inarticulate way, not cram him with statistics and achievements, with expenditures and results. He was so tired of her perpetual stock-taking, her perpetual rendering of accounts and reckoning up of interest...But he longed to let himself sink into the spring sweetness as a man might sink on a woman's breast (219).

The journey to Cedarledge, for Manford, is a major transition. Rather than relying upon the largely moral parameters of his New York life, Manford takes a much more naturalistic approach to life and power. Pauline, Nona and Dexter are all aware that they must keep Lita entertained at Cedarledge, and the majority of that responsibility falls on Dexter's shoulders; he accompanies her to local social clubs in the evening and early morning. Initially these visits are contrasted with this enjoyment of the countryside, sometimes with Nona and sometimes alone:



He stretched himself out under a walnut tree on a sunny slope, lit his pipe and gazed abroad over fields and woods...The sun on his face felt warm and human, and gradually life began to settle back into its old ruts – a comfortable routine, diversified by pleasant episodes. Could it ever be more, to a man past fifty? (229)

Apparently, for Dexter, it can be, because within a page of this contemplation, he is flirting with and kissing Gladys Toy. This indiscretion alone is enough to show him returning to a more earthy, base paradigm wherein he satisfies his urges, be they sexual, aesthetic or practical. It is not the last, however, of his indiscretions. Dexter admits to having a “moonlight obsession,” and by satisfying it through a romp with Gladys Toy, he is able to handle an inspection of all Pauline’s changes to Cedarledge and to view Lita as “one of Crivelli’s enigmatic Madonnas carrying a little red-haired Jesus” (232-3). In this manner, he reasserts power by enabling himself to properly place his familial relations. But when Gladys appears at Pauline’s party in a dress far too tight for her figure, Dexter is disgusted and his obsession is no longer satiated, thus bringing back his irrational behaviour. When Dexter discovers Lita missing from the party, he immediately traces her, and the broken down car, to the road near the village, where they have a fantastic fight. Wharton never explicitly states there is an affair taking place between Lita and Dexter, but after this point in the narrative, we see little of the pair. Nona and Pauline make mention of their daily absence and excuse it as Dexter simply keeping Lita amused. Driven away by Pauline, “Dexter Manford...begins an affair with his stepson’s wife, Lita.”<sup>19</sup> (It is probable that the affair was taking place while in New York, but it becomes more easily perceptible at this point in the narrative due to their collective absence.) In any case, the frequency of the meetings increases as well as does their visibility.

While at Cedarledge, “country” Dexter Manford returns to a more pragmatic, less moral and poorly defined set of power gaining tactics. Initially, he asserts power



through keeping Lita happy while simultaneously settling into his childhood comfort with an agricultural setting. From that point, he starts to satisfy his sexual urges with a woman neither his wife nor daughter-in-law. This temporarily allows him to subordinate his family by tailoring his behaviour to shepherd theirs into positive territory. When this affair ends, however, he ultimately finds himself subordinated to Lita's beautiful appeal and loses his ability to manage Pauline and Nona to his liking. At this critical stage of the narrative, Wharton removes the broad sight that characterised Manford throughout the novel. As Pauline and Nona deal with Arthur Wyant's heavy concerns over Jim and Lita's marriage, Manford is oblivious. He loses all power he once exerted when the gun-toting "Exhibit A" breaks into Cedarledge to avenge his son's hurt and, missing his true target, shoots Nona.

In a letter she wrote while constructing Twilight Sleep, Edith Wharton said, referring to a social situation, "Of course there are green isles in that sea of misery – but they're so far apart & they don't encircle one another dancingly, like some islands we know. Alas, there are not enough to go around."<sup>20</sup> This, in essence, portrays Dexter Manford's two conceptions of power. In both cases, there are sprinklings of pure bliss but there will never be enough to satisfy his needs. As city Dexter, he is able to control his atmosphere at work and believes he is able, through straightforward techniques, to solve any quandary at home. His position as a male, moneyed lawyer in the late 1920s guarantees the subordination of others; Dexter never considers the existence of a variable outside his control. While country Dexter, he employs a less rigid system that combines a pragmatic satisfaction of his needs with the shepherding of Pauline, Nona and Lita into their predetermined roles. In this case, the confounding variable arises from an individual he considered to be both under his control and geographically excluded from consideration. The nature of Arthur

Wyant's negation of Dexter's power is shattering – he and Pauline escape the country to travel for an extended period of time. In the late 1920s, Wharton suffered a crushing blow when ice and snow storms destroyed many of her gardens in the south of France, and for a while, she put literary concerns on the back burner to reconstruct what she had lost.<sup>21</sup> Ultimately both city Dexter and country Dexter solve their lack of transcendence by metaphorically acting in kind to Wharton. In both of Dexter Manford's manifestations, he chooses to metaphorically wipe the slate clean through changing his physical location. Wharton again balances their failures to avoid giving an opinion on either method of addressing the fight for power in the latter 1920s.

#### **Arthur Wyant versus Jim Wyant**

The father and son characters of Arthur and Jim Wyant mark the third incarnation of the conflict between power and subordination. This conflict is defined by two sets of borders, one between innocence and experience and another between passivity and aggression. In the binary between Nona and Lita, the conflict flows throughout the narrative as a strong undercurrent, yet the binary relating to Dexter Manford is staunchly separated between halves of the novel. The roles that Jim and Arthur Wyant play in the narrative are different from the other binaries presented here – they are introduced into individual scenes somewhat jaggedly and always in direct conjunction with a power struggle. While they are often described as two peas in a pod, there is one key difference between them. Arthur, propelled by his middle age and his divorce from Pauline, is vehemently protective of his son's marriage. Jim, on the other hand, is just like a young Arthur – willing to do anything to preserve his wife's happiness, including divorcing her. Arthur is most certainly underestimated by every character in Wharton's storyline.

Cultural critic Simon Bronner describes the manner in which Victorians approached the changes of modernity, “They felt that one could not turn back to the rootedness of the small face-to-face community and achieve the sense of a rising civilization.”<sup>22</sup> Arthur Wyant conceptualises life in much the same style. Having granted Pauline a divorce in his youth, he does not want to return to the innocence of that age. Instead, he wants to disallow his son from making the same mistake. Cocooned within his shabby surroundings and his strange relationship with his cousin, Arthur Wyant has no quibble with the changes modernity has brought about simply because they haven’t effected his world. Arthur’s problem, rather, is how Jim responds to the relaxed attitudes that so empower his wife, Lita. From Arthur’s power standpoint, he holds, over Jim, decades of experience and a firsthand knowledge of how passivity can ruin a life – but it is only from these two details that his aggression flows. In an outburst to Nona, Arthur expresses his frustration with Jim’s passivity and rambles, somewhat incoherently, about what he wants Jim to do, “Why to *act*, damn it...take a line...face things...face the music [...] is he going to keep his wife, or isn’t he?” (266). When Nona explains that Jim believes the decision to divorce or not is for Lita to decide, Arthur further states, “For Lita to decide! A pretext for his damned sentimental inertness. A *man* – my son! God, what’s happened to the young men? Sit by and see...see” (266). Wyant’s complaint about young men is ironic because twenty years prior, he acted just as Jim is now, docile and passive. Wyant eventually settles down and asks Nona, “So the modern husband’s job is a purely passive one, eh?” (267). This simple question reveals the binary opposition between passivity and aggression that motivates his behaviour. Despite Exhibit’s agitated state, Nona discounts his outburst:

Nona felt a sudden exasperation against Wyant for trying to poison Jim’s holiday by absurd insinuations and silly swagger. It was lucky

that he had got bored and come back, leaving the poor boy to bask on the sands with his pipe and philosophy. After all, it was to be supposed that Jim knew what he wanted, and how to take care of it, now he had it (268).

Arthur Wyant's transcendence depends on his son's happiness, and that happiness is dependent upon Lita staying the happy, contented and loving wife she once was. He systematically tries and fails to subordinate Dexter, Jim, Nona, and Pauline through conversations, which range from calm to highly erratic, before he takes action of his own accord. Finding that he cannot exert power through normal means, "Arthur appears at night with a pistol, to avenge the family honour, and by mistake shoots Nona, whose arm is broken."<sup>23</sup> Immediately after he takes this decisive action, Wyant stands "shivering and staring in a corner [...] shrinking, motionless [...] his arms hanging down, his body emptied of all its strength, a broken word that sounded like "honour" stumbling from his bedraggled lips" (299-300). Arthur's attempt at subordinating the family members turned from customary to violent, and in both manners his attempts are subordinated – the second leaving him shattered and empty.

Jim Wyant has the most passive attitude in the entire novel, and his transcendence is entirely dependant on his wife's happiness. Prior to his marriage, Wharton describes him as having the same personality traits as his father:

[Pauline Manford] was relieved at his settling down, and at his seeming to understand that marriage connoted the choice of a profession, and the adoption of what people called regular habits. Not that Jim's irregularities had ever been such as the phrase habitually suggests. They had chiefly consisted in his not being able to make up his mind about what to do with his life (so like his poor father, that!), in his always forgetting what time it was, or what engagements his mother had made for him, in his wanting a chemical laboratory fitted up for him at Cedarledge, and then, when it was all done, using it first as a kennel for breeding fox-terriers and then as a quiet place to practise the violin (29-30).

Through Dexter Manford's connections, Jim becomes employed at a well-respected bank and pours his existence into creating the perfect world for Lita. Power, for Jim, means gathering all his mental, financial and physical resources to subordinate any entity that could pose a threat to his marriage. The problem, however, is that Jim is unwilling to subordinate Lita herself. Wharton never places Jim and Lita in the same location long enough to seriously discuss their marriage, and the best characterization of Jim's attitude occurs in a distraught conversation with Nona. Jim's self-negation is evident as he describes his attitude over the potential divorce, "Hurt? A fellow can stand being hurt. It can't hurt more than feeling her chained to me. But if she goes – what does she go to?" (183). The young man so wayward in developing a stable adult life is so devoted to his wife's happiness that he wishes to continue his work in order to support her outside their marriage:

That's *that*. And now, my child, what can I do? What I'd honestly like, if she wants her freedom, is to give it to her, and yet be able to go on looking after her. But I don't see how that can be worked out. Father says it's madness. He says I'm a morbid coward (185).

Given this attitude, it may seem that Jim's character has little rhetorical purpose for Wharton. However, in presenting Jim with this particular level of apathy, Wharton shows that simply abdicating one's authority in life will not result in any better outcome than avidly controlling one's own being. Ultimately, Jim allows himself to be cut out of the family efforts to save his marriage – while Arthur resists the Manford's efforts to programme Lita at Cedarledge, Jim allows himself to be cut out of the picture entirely. At the novel's conclusion, it may seem as if Jim is granted his most sacred wish, but Lita's boredom with the marriage, desire to dance and obsession with Hollywood all remain. The extended trip to Paris may be a temporary patch on the marriage, but Jim has not secured long-lasting happiness for her. Trapped within his own search for transcendence, Jim is doomed an exhausting and

futile life gathering his resources to amuse Lita and thus subordinate the newest person, place or fad.

David Holbrook, in his book Edith Wharton and the Unsatisfactory Man, claims, "The failure to hold onto a critical view in Twilight Sleep means that the promiscuous antics of the people lose interest for the reader."<sup>24</sup> Arthur and Jim Wyant are a direct offence to this statement. More so than with any other character, Wharton brings the pair into the narrative when the main conflict in the novel is at stake. Jim Wyant's passivity and innocence are crucial to the reader's understanding of the other family member's actions regarding his marriage – his total infatuation with Lita and his complete inability to manage the marriage himself are shown in a few key conversations with Nona and Arthur. In the same manner, Arthur's precarious mental balance is revealed chiefly through his interaction with Nona and his vane pleading for a meeting with Pauline. The manner in which everyone manhandles him is made most apparent in a single interaction with Dexter Manford – one told from Dexter's point of view to emphasize the negation of Arthur. Wharton clearly shows the borders which govern each man; Jim with his innocence and passivity and Arthur with his experience and strange aggression. In a novel more loosely framed than previous works, Wharton must provide the reader with some definitive lines. The insertion of Arthur's unbalanced power paradigm coupled with Jim's complete passive aggressive influence creates the vortex that subsumes the other characters, thus producing the novel's alarming conclusion. In this battle between father and son, their quest for power, subordination and transcendence becomes a balanced equation. At the end, Arthur does not ensure his son's happiness and Jim does not ensure Lita's. The critical view Wharton presents in Twilight Sleep

is failure personified, but it is a failure evenly distributed over all of contemporary life.

### **Pauline Manford: Excess versus Self-Control**

Jackson Lears describes one of the many binary oppositions in the consumer culture that was simmering the late 1920s:

The tension between dreams of excess and methodical self-control (whether under religious or scientific auspices) embodied a conflict between two overlapping but distinct visions of economic development: speculative expansion on the one hand, systematic organization on the other. These visions could be made to coexist but conflict between them would shape American attitudes toward material abundance from the beginnings of a market society to the era of consumer culture.<sup>25</sup>

The period of time Lears refers to stretched beyond the 1950s and is still reflected in the religious yet extremely materialistic America of today. This conflict describes exactly the mental processes of Pauline Manford, the matriarch of Twilight Sleep. Without realising the inherent contradiction, Pauline endorses every political position possible, especially if it concerns women. Further, she routinely allocates thousands of dollars to improving a country home (and the surrounding town) that her family rarely uses. Initially, her reaction to Jim and Lita's marital troubles is to redecorate their home. On the other hand, however, Pauline Manford relentlessly pursues self-control and spiritual transcendence through a series of healers and "doctors" who, in reality, offer nothing more than participation in the latest New York fad. Additionally, and most interestingly, Pauline tries to mediate the semantic rectangle presented at the beginning of this chapter through bringing together people inherently opposed to one another on social occasions in order to facilitate agreement amongst them. Power, for Pauline, is a thoroughly confusing prospect, "Wharton, in all her works of fiction and non-fiction, undertook the task of establishing herself as a writer with her own distinct



voice, subject and artistic ambition,” but Pauline continually negates her own efforts to do so.<sup>26</sup> The intrinsic binary in this character lies between exerting power through wealth, incongruous political activity and entrepreneurial skill and exerting power through self-discipline and the search for transcendence. In each case, the subordinated entity ranges from specific people to broad concepts.

One half of Pauline Manford manipulates her wealth to exert power over others and even over her own consciousness, “She falsifies everything, even by coming to believe her own fantasies, and by seeking to make everything seem good and proper when it is not.”<sup>27</sup> Amongst the many examples of this presented by Wharton, two of the most important are her simultaneous support of unlimited motherhood and birth control (eugenics) organizations and her renovation of Cedarledge.

As the reader is introduced to Pauline’s thoughts on public speaking, it seems as if she recognizes the gravity that accompanies a platform gained by wealth and notoriety, “She seldom spoke in public, but when she did, she took the affair seriously, and tried to be at once winning and impressive...she liked getting the more effective passages by heart – it brought her closer to her audience to lean forward and speak intimately” (84). As she begins her speech to the Mother’s Day crowd, it would further seem that Pauline recognizes the difference between that organization and the Birth Control speech she is to give in the near future. She accidentally begins reciting the speech written for the Birth Control association, but seamlessly saves the day by transitioning into the correct speech, “that’s what our antagonists say,” and then continuing (98). A few lines later, Pauline acknowledges the “paradoxical” nature of the two speeches (98). Later, Nona questions her mother’s political consistency by pointing out that the two speeches appearing in the newspapers

simultaneously could cause Pauline social conflict. Wharton then reveals Pauline's justification. In regard to the contradiction, Pauline says, "Not in reality. The principles are different, of course; but, you see, they are meant to apply to – different categories of people. It's all a little difficult to explain to any one as young as you are [...] a girl naturally can't be expected to know" (190). This paradox operates at two levels in the narrative. On the spiritual level, the attempted fusion of these two very separate ideas in Pauline's mind is a mechanism through which to reach or provide transcendence. Her dealings with the Mahatma have taught her that the highest levels of transcendence provide a world wherein discord is muted into a "higher harmony" (99). On the pragmatic level, as a social and familial matriarch, it is invaluable to Pauline that she maintains control. Without control, she would not be able to monitor her family's exploits nor would she retain power to dictate a portion of the leisure class social scene. The key to understanding the importance of this paradox is, of course, the failure that is produced.

Jim comments once that Lita's desire for a divorce was exacerbated by his mere existence as the father of her child, and that existence negated the possibility of her contentment. Only after the her blunder does Pauline begin to doubt the "expediency" of supporting two such causes, even if she may (or may not) apply them to different classes of people. In the same manner as Lita, the existence of her mistake negates the possibility of personal transcendence or true subordination of the women involved. She cannot step back from either front because to do so after the fact would cause her to lose any residual power she has gained or will gain from the factions. On the pragmatic level, Nona's "derisive chuckle" and accusations of contradiction are a constant reminder of the tenuous hold Pauline has on her family (99). She attempts to dismiss Nona's question, but Wharton shows that the damage

has already been inflicted as Pauline analyses, “That sounded firm but friendly, and as she spoke she felt herself on safer ground” (190). The socio-political platform Pauline is provided by her wealth fails to provide her with a solid source of transcendence, as do her efforts with Cedarledge, the family’s country estate.

Seasonally settled at two different ends of France, Edith Wharton took semi-frequent trips to Paris. After one such trip, in which she had cared for Walter Berry after he developed appendicitis, Wharton reflected in a letter, “The peacefulness of this blessed terrace seemed all the more soothing & when, two days ago, I finished Twilight Sleep, I said ‘ouf.’”<sup>28</sup> This peacefulness and soothing atmosphere are exactly what Pauline Manford is trying to create at Cedarledge, but Pauline never pauses long enough to say ‘ouf’ and enjoy her creation:

The place was really of her own making, for though the house had been built and the grounds laid out years before she had acquired the property, she had stamped her will and her wealth on every feature. Pauline was persuaded that she was fond of the country – but what she was really fond of was doing things to the country, and owning, with this object, as many acres of it as possible [...] To Pauline each tree, shrub, water-course, herbaceous border, meant not only itself but the surveying of grades, transporting of soil, tunnelling for drainage, conducting of water, the business correspondence and paying of bills which had preceded its existence; and she would have cared for it far less – perhaps not at all – had it sprung into being unassisted (212-3).

As she approaches Cedarledge, Pauline mentally catalogues first each feature of the surrounding village and finally each feature on the two-mile ride from the gates to the house. Although she enjoys spending the money necessary to create such an Eden, Pauline values far more the power it allows her to exert over her family. As Holbrook made mention of, Pauline loses herself in this fantasy world in order to gloss over the familial problems; she credits these improvements with Dexter’s visit to Cedarledge:

How her expenditure at Cedarledge was justifying itself! Her husband, drawn by its fresh loveliness, had voluntarily given up his annual trip to California...all to spend a quiet month in the country with his wife

and children. Pauline felt that even the twenty-five thousand additional bulbs had had a part in shaping his decision. And what would he say when he saw the new bathrooms, assisted at the village fire-drill, and plunged into the artificially warmed waters of the new swimming pool? A mist of happiness rose to her eyes (214).

Cedarledge fails, however, to restrain Lita's desire for dancing and socializing at the nearby Greystock club. While Dexter does take advantage of the opportunity for taking long tramps about the countryside, riding horses and cavorting with the dogs, he ultimately spends the majority of his time "entertaining" Lita. In response to Pauline's disappointment and stress at Dexter's inability to tour Cedarledge with her, Nona points out his needing to attend to Lita, "We mustn't let her get bored here – she won't stay if we do" (227). Given the higher goal of preserving Jim's marriage, Pauline has to grudgingly accept the situation, "Pauline felt a sudden weariness in all her bones. It was as if the laboriously built-up edifice of the simple life at Cedarledge had already been crumbled into dust at a kick of Lita's little foot" (227). The wealth that Pauline has exorbitantly funnelled into the expansion of Cedarledge was intended to subordinate her family through the remoteness of the location and the extravagance of the surroundings. Nona, considered by the characters to be the most solid family member, was never the target of Pauline's plans for Cedarledge. Dexter and Lita, however, were. Rather than returning her husband to the folds of his family and his agricultural roots, she has given him an opportunity to philander with his daughter-in-law and with Gladys Toy. Further, he is even more entranced by Lita's activities. For Lita, the time spent at Cedarledge has no perceptible positive effect – she is still the same ephemeral being with intentions to divorce her husband. Pauline's application of her entrepreneurial skill to the transformation of Cedarledge and its town wholly fail to empower her. It is ironic that the new burglar alarms she had installed serve to

reveal the crime scene that ultimately fractures the family and signals their fall into abject failure.

In her study of short fiction, Janet Beer comments, “Edith Wharton sought to change and renew the subject and the structure of fiction to reflect...wider cultural dislocations...and, especially, the implications of social and technological change for women.”<sup>29</sup> Within Twilight Sleep, this is reflected through Pauline Manford’s endorsement of the various healers (religious, spiritual or scientific) that are available. By the third paragraph of the novel, Wharton introduces the reader to Pauline’s various psychological and physical treatments through a sample of her schedule for the day:

7.30 Mental uplift. 7.45 Breakfast. 8. Psychoanalysis. 8.15 See cook. 8.30 Silent meditation. 8.45 Facial massage. 9. Man with Persian miniatures. 9.15 Correspondence. 9.30 Manicure. 9.45 Eurythmic exercises. 10. Hair waved. 10.15 Sit for bust. 10.30 Receive Mothers’ Day deputation. 11. Dancing lesson. 11.30 Birth Control committee (9-10).

The mere fact that these appointments are scattered amongst the more traditional activities of a society woman’s day shows the infiltration of these modern fads into daily life. Pauline uses these treatments to protect her sensitive nervous system from the “killing New York life, with its ever-multiplying duties and responsibilities;” afraid that, “if her family had been allowed to tumble in at all hours and devour her time, her nervous system simply couldn’t have stood it,” she usually requires her children and husband to make an appointment if they wish to see her during the day (10). Pauline’s ultimate aspiration is total self-control – she wishes to continually convince herself that nothing could possibly be wrong. In this fashion, she seeks to gain power over her family members and over her own perception. Subordinating her own thoughts would lead Pauline to transcendence by allowing her to function free of *internal* pressures and emotions. Subordinating her family members would extend

this calmness to those around her, thus making it easier to centrally manage the entire family without *external* pressures or emotions.

In deference to the impermanence of the era, Wharton places Pauline in a cycle of discontent. In her search to mediate the binary between excess and self-control, Pauline travels from one healer to another, quitting each when their largely bogus techniques lose their power over her. (The power Pauline believes to emanate from these leaders actually exists within in her own mind – the release she feels is a placebo effect.) All of the healers Pauline works with eventually lose their sway over her, and as she tosses each aside it is with equal disdain. The Mahatma, whose methods include “eurythmics, gymnastics, community life...mental deep-breathing,” loses his efficacy when Dexter agrees to try a law case against his clinic, Dawnside (120). The case results in the discovery of Lita’s involvement with Dawnside – in a published photograph with the girl at the heart of Dexter’s case. These events do not directly result in Pauline’s abandoning the Mahatma’s teachings, but they do damage the ability of the healer to provide the kind of power Pauline is seeking through treatment. In any case, when Pauline hears of a new healer, she jumps at the chance to meet him. As with the Mahatma, she initially acclaims Alvah Loft’s practices:

Alvah Loft simply took out your frustrations as if they’d been adenoids; it didn’t last ten minutes, and was perfectly painless [...] You told him what was bothering you, and he said it was just a frustration, and he could relieve you of it, and make it so it didn’t exist, by five minutes of silent communion. And he held you by the wrist, very lightly as if he were taking your temperature (121).

Yet, when Pauline arrives at Cedarledge, instead of feeling refreshed and relaxed she feels “languid and vaguely apprehensive” despite Loft’s treatments (262). Confronted with a situation in which she is unable to sweep her troubles away and control her mind totally, she begins to doubt if Loft’s treatments “were of the lasting sort” (262).

Because, for Pauline, mental disarray is more difficult to deal with than total chaos, she quickly begins to search out another healer, "it always stimulated her to look forward to seeing a new healer" (262-3). In this final healer, the pattern is replicated once again. Pauline begins treatment with unrestrained praise of the new technique:

The resemblance was merely superficial, as the Scientific Initiate had been careful to explain to her. Her previous guides had not been Initiates, and had no scientific training; they could only guess, whereas he *knew*. That was the meaning of Immediacy: direct contact with the Soul of the Invisible. How clear and beautiful he made it all! How all the little daily problems shrivelled up and vanished like a puff of smoke to eyes cleared by that initiation! And he had seen at once that Pauline was one of the few who *could* be initiated; who were worthy to be drawn out of the senseless modern rush and taken in Beyond the Veil (273).

Pauline's life has all the modern conveniences that Beer's statement alludes to – telephones, motors, unlimited purchasing power, divorce, political influence and accessible travel. Wharton's careful drawing of Pauline through this circle of discontent three times conveys the sense of being awash in a storm of choices. At the novel's conclusion, Pauline is still mentioning the Scientific Initiate, but she is primarily consumed with planning their world trip, writing letters and searching out the spiritual leaders they may encounter as they travel. Early in the novel, Pauline thinks to herself, "to reconcile these contradictions had seemed as simple to invite the Chief Rabbi and the Bishop of New York to meet Amalasantha's Cardinal" (99). She does, near the end of Wharton's novel, succeed in bring the three figures together (with the Scientific Initiate as well), but as Nona muses, there was nothing present to detract from "the general picturesqueness" of the event (310). Pauline even backs away from inviting the Mahatma "whose Oriental garb would have been so effective," because she wants the evening to be brilliant, entertaining and dignified (310). As

Pauline fails to achieve transcendence through any of her healers, she instead presents a carefully orchestrated image of it to her public.

Pauline Manford is perhaps the most widely representative character in Twilight Sleep. As Lears states, the conflict between strong organization and exploratory expansion would shape culture in the United States far beyond Edith Wharton's death. While the two concepts would eventually settle into equilibrium with one another, this arrangement would not evolve until decades after Pauline Manford's world was dead as well. David Holbrook's description of Pauline agrees with the argument I have presented here, "The anti-heroine is the mother Pauline, who is devoted to ignoring and denying pain, and who pursues endless trivial obsessions to avoid reality."<sup>30</sup> In Pauline's case, exerting power and subordinating others always depends on manipulating reality to meet her specifications. With Pauline, Wharton addresses the issues of wealth, mental health, and political dualism. Her inability to succeed with any of these strategies reflects the diversity of Wharton's reading public. Unlike Dexter, Pauline's quest for power draws on all her techniques regardless of her location, but the failure of both techniques results in the same withdrawal from regular life through travelling.

### **Conclusion**

In the next chapter, I will show Wharton acting as an investigator into many of these same issues, but Wharton's task in this novel is much more to act as an illustrator of the ambivalence that marked the later 1920s. Each incarnation of the binary between power and subordination reveals a separate area of uncertainty and two dichotomous manners of resolving it. Through placing Nona Manford and Lita Wyant in opposition, Wharton explores two different strategies available to young



women who had only recently had their first taste of real influence. Nona's solid, grounded and constructed approach to managing her family is placed against Lita's ephemeral, shifting and transient conception of life. The two halves of Dexter Manford contradict the mannered, ruled, and professional characteristics of modern, urban life directly with the amorphous and pragmatic world of the country, agricultural setting. As more and more people moved to urban centres for regular employment and other conveniences, these two ways of life were clashing with a regularity not previously experienced. The binary between Arthur and Jim Wyant parallels history more so than the other binaries. Jim, innocent and passive, is much like the world prior to World War I; he can afford to be both because he has little or no conception of what they will eventually cost him. Arthur, on the other hand, knows from experience what the cost will be – namely his wife and his long-term happiness. Thus, his aggression is borne out of personal, experientially gained knowledge. And finally, in Pauline Manford Wharton forces the twin concerns of self-control and massive spending to confront one another. The importance of these four binaries is in bringing at least eight different ways of addressing the issues that existed during this point in history. What follows from them is an intense inability or refusal to endorse any of them by Wharton. Twilight Sleep is a novel about putting forth questions, about intimately drawing the reader into the all-encompassing contradictions without providing answers. Jameson's semantic rectangle is mediating by its own failure: without providing answers, Wharton equitably divides failure between the characters and binaries, thus resolving the struggle between power, subordination, transcendence and nontranscendence by reverse. Rather than success, this novel and rectangle are about failure.

The criticism of Twilight Sleep was never as venomous and dismissive as that surrounding The Glimpses of the Moon, but at its publication and over time the critics were still incredibly displeased with this novel:

As one novel followed another, the critical reception almost inevitably grew mixed and even a trifle impatient....Edmund Wilson, who had had admiring words for Edith Wharton's previous novels, found Twilight Sleep an acute piece of social criticism; Dorothy Gilman judged it a disaster. At the present moment, it is fair to say...[Twilight Sleep is] being upwardly reappraised."<sup>31</sup>

It is my opinion that this upward reappraisal is due to more innovative critical doctrines being applied to Wharton's later novels. In regard to Twilight Sleep, Wharton's function as social historian as well as social critic in this novel makes it extremely well suited to Jameson's unique synthesis of literary theory. Jameson is always rooted in Marxist theory, but he draws in aspects of psychoanalysis, mostly Freud and Lacan, as accents, "In particular, Jameson accepts a Freudian model of surface and depth."<sup>32</sup> This model of surface and depth is based on concepts called the latent and manifest content – these can refer to dreams, waking psychoanalysis or literature. In regard to literature, the manifest content will always be the novel itself while the latent content is that aspect lurking beneath the surface that represents the material of the true unconscious. Distinguishing between the two, "is not an arbitrary process, of course, but one always controlled by an awareness of the forces that shape the passage from unconscious to conscious from latent to manifest – for Jameson, the forces of history."<sup>33</sup> The synthesis of these concepts into a definitive methodology is thus, "But the three terms that orient Jameson's approach in this work have to do with linking together these different Freud-style levels of the text: narrative, mediation and history. To put it in a sentence: the surface narration usefully mediates the unconscious reality of the text's relationship with history."<sup>34</sup> This leads us back to my

argument for this chapter: Wharton drew upon the same latent content to create four separate, historically based manifestations of the same mediating concept, namely failure.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> R.W.B Lewis and Nancy Lewis, eds. The Letters of Edith Wharton (London: Simon, 1988) 8.
- <sup>2</sup> Dale Bauer, Edith Wharton's Brave New Politics (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994) 105.
- <sup>3</sup> Lewis 9.
- <sup>4</sup> Lewis 7.
- <sup>5</sup> Bauer 104.
- <sup>6</sup> Janet Beer, Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton and Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Studies in Short Fiction, (1997; London: Macmillan ; New York: St. Martin's, 1997) 20.
- <sup>7</sup> Bauer 103.
- <sup>8</sup> Bauer 95.
- <sup>9</sup> Judith Walzer Leavitt, Brought to Bed: Childbearing in America 1750-1950 (New York: Oxford UP, 1986) 128-9.
- <sup>10</sup> Edith Wharton, "Permanent Values in Fiction," Edith Wharton: The Uncollected Critical Writings, ed. Frederick Wegener (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996) 175.
- <sup>11</sup> David Holbrook, Edith Wharton and the Unsatisfactory Man, Critical Studies Series (1991; New York: St. Martin's P; London: Vision P, 1991) 174.
- <sup>12</sup> Edith Wharton, Twilight Sleep (1927; New York: Simon, 1997) 45. Future references will be listed parenthetically in the text.
- <sup>13</sup> Edith Wharton, "The Great American Novel," Edith Wharton: The Uncollected Critical Writings, ed. Frederick Wegener (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996) 157.
- <sup>14</sup> Rachel Bowlby, Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola (New York and London: Methuen, 1985) 3.
- <sup>15</sup> Bowlby 63-4
- <sup>16</sup> Lewis 19
- <sup>17</sup> Lewis 6.
- <sup>18</sup> Beer 9.
- <sup>19</sup> Holbrook 174.
- <sup>20</sup> Lewis 492.
- <sup>21</sup> Lewis 509.
- <sup>22</sup> Simon Bronner, "Reading Consumer Culture," Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display of Goods in American 1880-1920, Simon J. Bronner, ed. (New York: Norton , 1989) 53.
- <sup>23</sup> Holbrook 174.
- <sup>24</sup> Holbrook 174.
- <sup>25</sup> Jackson Lears, Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America (New York: Basic Books, A Division of Harper Collins Publishers, 1994) 33.
- <sup>26</sup> Beer 2.
- <sup>27</sup> Holbrook 174.
- <sup>28</sup> Lewis 495.
- <sup>29</sup> Beer 2.
- <sup>30</sup> Holbrook 174.
- <sup>31</sup> Lewis 418-9.
- <sup>32</sup> Adam Roberts, Frederic Jameson, Routledge Critical Thinkers Ser. (London: Routledge, 2000) 74.
- <sup>33</sup> Roberts 59.
- <sup>34</sup> Roberts 76.

## **Chapter 4: The Wanderers: Parenting, Marriage, Divorce and The Children**

### **Introduction**

Edith Wharton's 1928 novel The Children is a novel of the modern era. Set amongst the various European "hot spots" of the 1920s, it follows a band of children through their fight to remain together despite their parents' various marriages and divorces. The seven Wheater children come to rely upon middle-aged engineer Martin Boyne, a distant acquaintance to their parents, as their advocate. Through the interaction of these children and the adults linked to their existence, Wharton poses questions related to the continual and dramatic changes modernity has brought about. Although The Children was published in the last decade of Wharton's life, it was during this decade that the combination of massive upheaval in her subject matter and the knowledge that her time was not as infinite as it had once seemed spurred her onward with vigour, "In her final decade Edith Wharton was remarkably productive; she produced a massive volume of work that includes some of her best short fiction. At the age of sixty-six, although disheartened and ill, she completed a best selling novel (The Children) and began the first of several long works, including three novels and a memoir."<sup>1</sup> The Children was, in fact, the peak of Wharton's success as a popular novelist, "In two months time, it had earned its author \$95,000 from all sources (including film rights), more than any novel she had ever written;" it was chosen as a Book-of-the Month Club selection in September of 1928.<sup>2</sup> The most logical place to begin analysis of The Children is at the uppermost layer of its modular structure.

## Modernity versus Tradition

Beginning with the largest and most encompassing rectangle, the opposition between the concepts of modernity and tradition (non-modernity) is explored. The second portion of the rectangle deals, essentially, with the negation and/or denial of the previously stated binary opposition; in this case, modernity and tradition.

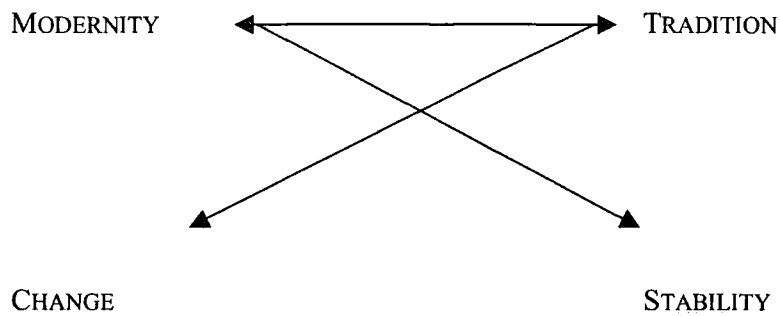


FIGURE 1. SEMANTIC RECTANGLE 1

Given the historical and consumer contexts, it can be seen that in negating modernity, one would gain stability, while negating tradition would introduce change into the paradigm. Like the first rectangle in the previous chapter, this first rectangle is of supreme importance because, due to the scope of the modernity versus tradition debate, all the other binary oppositions refer back to this initial conceptual model. Therefore, while Semantic Rectangle 1 will be discussed at length, it will be important throughout the chapter to keep in mind “the conceptual limits of the model” because of its function as “a kind of bedrock of thought, ‘a theoretical praxis,’ where it functions as a type of infrastructure.”<sup>3</sup> The rectangles dealing specifically with legality versus emotion, fertility versus sterility, education versus ignorance and reality versus illusion illustrate thought within the borders of modernity, tradition, stability and change. Given that “on all sides perplexity awaits us,” the key question, for Wharton, was simply how much quality material could be legitimately extracted from a granted subject.<sup>4</sup>

Modernity, within The Children, is exemplified through the majority of the Wheater clan. The parents, Cliffe and Joyce Wheater, have themselves been married twice, and each of them has remarried and divorced during the duration of their initial disassociation. Further, Joyce Wheater's second marriage was with an Italian prince while Cliffe's second marriage was to an American film star living abroad.

Additionally, the Wheaters' decision to stay abroad involves a refusal to settle in one spot; their lifestyle is that of a constant rush of activity, with no more permanency than that of their whims. This flexibility of marital status and the process of continual relocation stand in opposition to the more traditional behaviour of Martin Boyne's beloved Rose Sellars. Wharton presents Mrs. Sellars as a woman of patience, dignity and grace as well as functioning as Boyne's moral compass, the "pole-star of his whirling skies, the fixed point on which his need for permanence could build."<sup>5</sup> She endures a loveless marriage for the majority of her adult life and focuses her existence upon keeping up appearances; even after the death of her husband, she pursues the long delayed relationship with Boyne through a model of social propriety. Even in her travels to Cortina, Rose creates a home in which to live a centred, ordered life. A secondary opposition between modernity and tradition can be seen through the Wheater's social set and through Martin Boyne himself. The adults with whom the Wheaters associate all meddle in each other's business; when Boyne tries to discuss the children's future privately with Cliffe and Joyce, he finds himself in a beach tent with a total of seven people, only three of whom have any legal say or immediate connection to the children in question! However, Boyne may have lived a modern life in terms of his extensive long-term travelling, but by his solitary lifestyle he has not drawn any other player into the modern pitfall of disconnectedness. By this point in his life he is also aware "that he combined with the wanderer's desire for rest the

wanderer's dread of immobility" and that while "secretly he knew that that was how the heart of man had always craved it," he could not have it both ways (82). The reader can thus see the black and white nature characterizing Boyne's actions (tradition) in contradiction to the confused and frenzied nature of those surrounding the Wheaters (modernity). Finally, the children themselves are a perfect picture of the consequences of modernity; for Wharton, as for Rose Sellars, they are all too aware of adult matters, too derelict in their manners and social behaviour, and have never known a "proper" family environment. Through this binary opposition, the definitions of the terms modernity and tradition are revealed and their roots in the text identified.

This is supported by Wharton's novel; the actions of the Wheaters often do deny the influence of tradition, and as such, they are in a state of continual rush and fluctuation extending from interpersonal relationships to fads, living arrangements, personality and economics. Further, as Rose Sellars and Martin Boyne live outside the influence of the increasingly modern post-World War I world, they maintain social norms, carefully consider actions before they are performed subscribe to economic prudence and thus have static, stable lives. The terms of change and stability can also be thought of as certainty and transience, respectively. Through the first semantic rectangle, Wharton poses a plethora of questions stemming from the conflict between modernity, tradition and their negations. How is modern life different? What problems does it cause? From where do those problems arise? Who do they affect? What is the nature of modern life? How does the individual interact with economics, politics and society? How does one cope with constant change? Is change always destructive, and how is it best dealt with? Is stability synonymous with stagnation? These are but a few areas Wharton probes with this novel – the status of The Children's existence in modernity is not in question, making forays into its effects



much more readily available than the sequestered subtext of modernity in The Glimpses of the Moon.

Besides their firm anchorage in the text of The Children, modernity and tradition took on a very personal meaning for Wharton in this novel. For the majority of her life, even before her writing career formally began, Wharton saw herself from the outside in order to facilitate more objective observations of the situations she encountered. As Ellen Pifer observes, this tactic of self-dramatization was a useful one, allowing her to play out and store situations in her mind as the seeds for stories she would later summon up and weave around fictitious characters:

But as Wharton's long and distinguished career was nearing its end, the novelist's tendency to observe herself from the outside – to see herself as another or the *other* – took a remarkable turn. In The Children... Wharton both dramatized and critiqued herself as a character, recasting her relationship to the society that shaped her.<sup>6</sup>

This bold move had two primary motivations. The first was to dive into the deep end of the problems facing American novelists of the time; as much as she detested some of the changes modernity had brought to America, at this point in her life Wharton was ready to throw off the carefully shrouded commentary in The Glimpses of the Moon and steadfastly confront the “motley welter” of modernity versus tradition. Secondly, by “imagining herself as an outsider named Martin Boyne” who has lived for years in the rough countries of the globe, she gained the opportunity to critique two paradigmatically opposed females from the perspective of an “other.”<sup>7</sup> Rose Sellars resembles Wharton herself, while Judith Wheater, on the other hand, is much like Charity Royall in Summer – an abomination produced by modernity. Rather than judging them from her usual omnipotent perspective, Wharton looks at them through the eyes of a different person, one who had a certain degree of independence. In a way, it allowed Wharton to judge herself, through Rose Sellars, with a degree of

harshness difficult for most people to handle while simultaneously exploring Judith Wheater, her binary opposite, in search of both the good and the bad. In her search for the mediating concept that would repair, or at least clearly chart, the dialectical opposition in Semantic Rectangle 1, Wharton twisted the venture into the self and the quest outside of the self into terms that would offer something different from earlier works.

Semantic Rectangle 1 is the unifying force behind the varying specificities in The Children; its resolution cannot be accomplished without the exploration of other binaries in the text, nor can Wharton's complete critique of modern society be understood without the consideration of those duos. Beyond Semantic Rectangle 1 there are two further levels of binaries. The second level contains four semantic rectangles numbered 2-5 (respectively) dealing with legality versus emotion, fertility versus sterility, education versus ignorance and reality versus illusion. Semantic Rectangles 2, 3, 4 and 5 expand upon the different facets of the narrative's larger implications as a social and political critique.

### **Legality versus Emotion**

Semantic Rectangle 2 establishes the opposition Wharton presents between the concepts of legality and emotion.

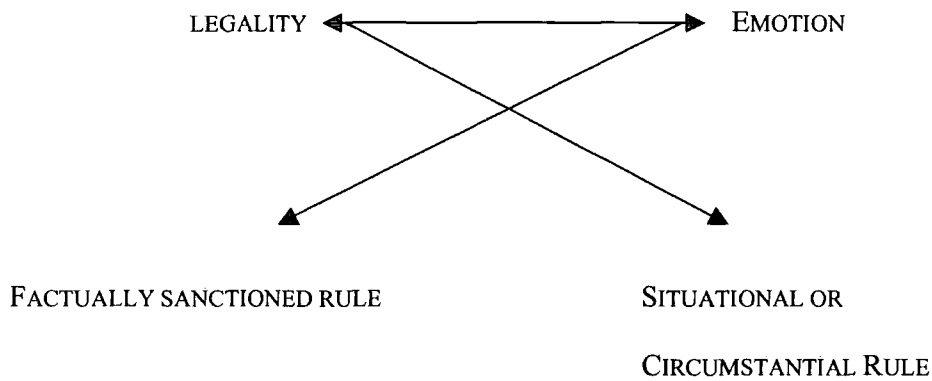


FIGURE 2. SEMANTIC RECTANGLE 2

Dale Bauer calls attention to the fact that Wharton herself could not look without a strong response upon this debate between what she saw as individuality against legality. Wharton openly suggested “the unpredictability of human motives and the impossibility of legislating morality”<sup>8</sup> and “the [blasted] simplification in such measures”<sup>9</sup> as barriers to legality in personal matters. Through this distaste for simplification and a guarded endorsement of individuality Wharton could validate her exploration of “the family’s irregularities and permutations...as important human and familial variations,” non-traditional as they may be in the Wheater’s case.<sup>10</sup>

Legality, in Wharton’s estimation at that time, referred to the legislation of personal morality and other such binding actions. Within this text, legality functions in two key lines of the plot, those of the various marriages and divorces and the subsequent custodial issues related to the children. Legality, of a type, drives Rose Sellars to insist upon not marrying Boyne within her “year of mourning.” Bound by social convention and the prudish, but wealthy, Aunt Julia nothing, including emotion, can sway her to marry before that year is out. Within the notion of legality, however, there lurks the contrary instinct of emotion, a fact that is brought to light by the use of the semantic rectangle. The driving force behind the children’s allegiance to one another is anchored in emotion, which is, by definition, more abstract and more

illogical than legality. Emotion acts as the binding power behind their oath taken at Biskra on “Scopy’s ‘Cyclopaedia of Nursery Remedies’” to never again part ways. Since both legality and emotionality describe a certain point from which decisions can be made, when either concept is negated or denied, a new strategy must materialise in its place. In the second semantic rectangle, the negations of S and –S are somewhat easily surmised.<sup>11</sup> When the concept of legality is removed from consideration, one is left with situational and circumstantial decision-making ability only, as when Judith Wheater appears in Cortina announcing to Boyne “we’ve run away” (106). The children’s decision to run away has negated the legality of their custody agreement; when confronted with the immediacy of her needs, Boyne has no choice but to “give Judy something to eat and get her back to her pension” (108). It is only after Boyne has had a chance to step back from the problem that he realises he must contact their parents. In such a scenario, each individual conflict must be dealt with in consideration of the factors unique to it, thus creating a world with situational and circumstantial rule. In the same vein, when emotions are removed from any context, actors are left simply with facts. Boyne sees this in the arguments of the Princess Buondelmonte, “The sentiments he appealed to seemed to have a sort of romantic interest to her, as feudal ruins might have for an intelligent traveller; but he saw there were no words for them in her vocabulary” (288). Without any prior attachment to the children and with a degree in eugenics, the Princess is obedient only to the facts of the situation, namely that she must bring home Bun and Beechy. The disputability of emotion is removed and factually sanctioned rule remains. Consequently, this dialogue between legality and emotion arches over the entire universe created in The Children, and by placing the two methods by which a character’s fate may be sealed

side-by-side, Wharton forces the reader to see the divergence between the two concepts.

The legality versus emotion debate is intricately tied to the modernity versus tradition paradigm. Eric Mottram states that during the 1920s “literature functioned more toward the stabilising of the accepted area of conflict than towards the changing of the social structure by invention and legislation.”<sup>12</sup> Wharton, after witnessing the horrors of World War I, had developed an abhorrence of all events, movements or people that sought to turn “others into animals, things, corpses” as she feared fascism (for her, the ultimate in modern totalitarian government) would.<sup>13</sup> The time period portrayed was one wherein there existed a significant effort to identify and define the socio-political and artistic conflicts at hand. The gulf between legality and emotion as decision-making paradigms was readily apparent as people took advantages of what Mottram identifies as a surplus of new beginnings after the “volcanic barbarism” characterised by the late 1910s. While within this response, individuals and groups consistently used traditional social tools such as “rites, codes, parties, and get-together grids of all kinds” to facilitate the path to new existence in the modern world, authors such as Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald were questing after “an equation of emotion and information hopefully offered towards stability without deadly stasis.”<sup>14</sup> These factors that Mottram identifies support my assertion that Wharton was, essentially, searching for the mediating concept Jameson claims will result from the semantic rectangle.

Through her narrative in The Children, Wharton embarks on her own quest through the issues of modern life in conjunction with the debate between legality and emotion. Initially, through Boyne and Miss Scope, Wharton illustrates the difficulty of identifying all the issues surrounding the children and their entourage:

Now that she saw that he didn't know, she would try to make it clear to him – if one could use the word in speaking of such a muddled business. It took a great deal of explaining – as he would see – but if any one could enlighten him she could, for she'd come to the Wheaters' as Judith's governess before Blanca and Terry were born (28).

Paralleling Mottram's description of the decade, the focus is on gaining information and then settling the areas of conflict into a context. This information gathering exercise, however, cannot remain as it simply is. Wharton uses Boyne's position to exemplify just how tightly knotted the fight between legality and emotion is. Once intimate with the situation, Boyne realises the uselessness of the legal paradigm for the children, but when he emotionally appeals to the parents the Duke of Mendip is quick to recognize the insolubility of Martin's problems and quips, "Solomon" (162). With Zinnia Lacrosse pledging to spend thousands to affirm her legal rights to her child and Joyce Wheater fighting Syb Lullmer over which new couple will gain custody of the biologically Wheater children, the parents are firmly entrenched in the legal paradigm. The deep irony of this situation is that Solomon was able to save the child through the caring of its true mother, while Boyne fails at this task because of the bickering between the parents. It is worth noting that from the parent's totalitarian regime, two deaths result – Syb Lullmer's daughter, Doll Westway, has previously committed suicide to escape the pressures of a modern childhood, and before the tragic end of the novel the Wheater's healthiest and most robust child will die from meningitis.

From this tangled web emerges one character who is able to become the mediator – Mr. Dobree. From his first appearance in the text, he is a quiet, unassuming man with a bookish legal background who has carried a flame for Rose Sellars nearly as long as Boyne has. Ultimately, however, it is Mr. Dobree who approaches the conflagration with a confident hand. While he cannot keep all the

children together because neither Cliffe nor Joyce has any legal right to some of them, he does calm Joyce Wheater to the degree that “Boyne had to admit that she had improved – that Mr. Dobree’s influence had achieved what others had failed to do” in just a few weeks (324). Through a combination of legal and emotional influences stemming from her new husband, Joyce Wheater accepts her children as “the sole object of her life” (326).

### Fertility versus Sterility

The second in the current layer of binary oppositions is the conflict between fertility and sterility (Semantic Rectangle 3). These models play a key role in the development of The Children and provide a metaphor for modernity’s alternating functions as conservative and destructive.

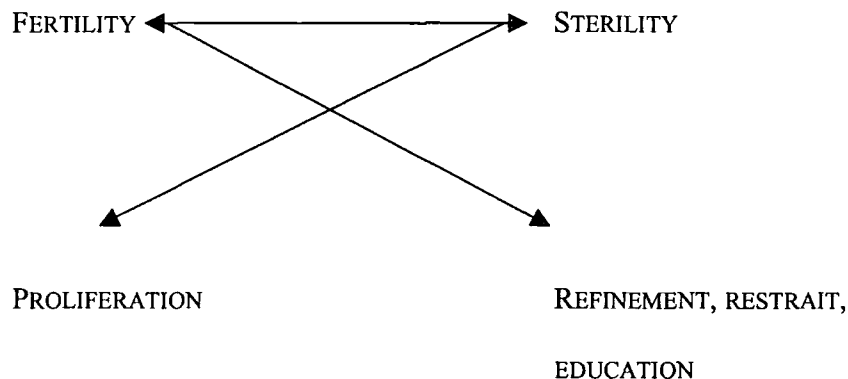


FIGURE 3. SEMANTIC RECTANGLE 3

For Wharton, as America became more and more modern, it lowered itself artistically and practically by embracing modern utility and refuting traditional aesthetics. Where a lush garden of character and culture had once flourished, the author now found compartmentalised lives:

America has indeed deliberately dedicated herself to other ideals. What she has chosen – and realised – is a dead level of prosperity and security. Main Street abounds in the unnecessary, but lacks the one thing needful. Inheriting an old social organisation which provided for

nicely shaded degrees of culture and conduct, modern America has simplified and Taylorized it out of existence, forgetting that in such matters the process is necessarily one of impoverishment.<sup>15</sup>

The debate among fertility and sterility thus centres Wharton's argument with America. While the internationalisation of the globe could have elevated American life and literature to that of France, Germany, England or Italy, it instead led to a standardisation of life and a stagnation of thought, "[America] has reduced relations between human beings to a dead level of vapid benevolence."<sup>16</sup> This dynamic would consume Wharton in her later works; as passion and companionship took their places as "two of Wharton's ultimate values,"<sup>17</sup> they lead her to some degree of sexual experimentation herself, but she remained "deeply split, especially with respect to the threat of unchecked sexual desires, in which Wharton sees social anarchy such as the kind she envisioned in the Harlem Renaissance."<sup>18</sup> In this way, the debate over fertility and sterility extends to the type of fertility experienced by a character or even by a nation.

Fertility is signified by everything radiating from the Wheater family. Through her marriage to Buondelmonte, Joyce adds two children not biologically connected to herself to the pack; Cliffe manages to add one child and eventually another adult (Lord Wrench) to the complicated picture through his involvement with Zinnia Lacrosse. Further, the children frequently exemplify fertility through their exuberant play, affinity for animals and enjoyment of Cortina's lush landscape. Wharton uses Martin Boyne and Rose Sellars as the primary examples of sterility in the novel. Even while he works at improving quality of life for people through his engineering projects, Boyne distances himself from solid relationships and operates in distant, rough, barren terrain. Consequently, rather than pursuing Rose Sellars, he simply waits for time to pass and circumstances to change. Rose, however, is presented more



sternly sterile than he is. Wharton gives her no children of her own and an affinity only for Blanca and Terry, the children with the quietest, more formal personalities. Further, through her choice of small quarters, Rose prevents any impurity from entering her relationship with Boyne (or anyone else) and spatially limits her involvement with the children. This refusal to conform her physical surroundings to any situation other than that which appears perfectly benign is a reversion to the conflict between modernity and tradition. As cultural historians record, as the post-1920 world evolved, the spatial aspect of city planning had been forced to take into account the necessity for the financially fertile flow of traffic into and out of the city as well as the demand for a designed recreational space; additionally, the function of spatial planning as a manner of communicating the importance of commerce (key to modernity) to the citizens in much the same manner as television and radio would in the coming decades became indisputably valuable and essential.<sup>19</sup> In light of Boyne's involvement with the Wheater children, the chalet which is so well suited to one leisured woman with a few essential servants becomes reminiscent of a larger refusal to see the needs of modern people as a fluid population with physical needs.<sup>20</sup> From the specific textual description of Rose's dwelling, Wharton ties the sterility of the textual environment to the greater issues at hand, "the reasoned relating of their individual case to the general human problem."<sup>21</sup>

As shown later in the text, if fertility itself is negated or denied, one finds an increase in self-restraint, refinement and stoicism. A prime example of this phenomenon can be found in Joyce Wheater's actions after meeting and, later, marrying Mr. Dobree. Once the lifestyle she enjoyed as Cliffe Weather's companion is no longer open to her, at least in a moral/mental manner, she becomes more subdued in all aspects. While she remains a part of the upper class social circle, there

is a distinct pacification of her behaviour. In another example from the text, when Martin Boyne's avenues to a fruitful life are dead in respect to both the children and Mrs. Sellars, he returns to a lonely and stoic life in South America. If sterility itself is denied, as exemplified by the Wheater family, the result is proliferation of every kind. Cliffe Wheater's on-hand cash supply is so large that he cannot keep track of it, and Joyce Wheater organises her life around picking up new fashionable items of clothing or jewellery. Even within the children, the importance of his economic proliferation is shown in their continual expectation of presents from adults.

### Education versus Ignorance

The fourth pair of divergent concepts lies in an area of substantial importance in the narrative, namely education versus ignorance.

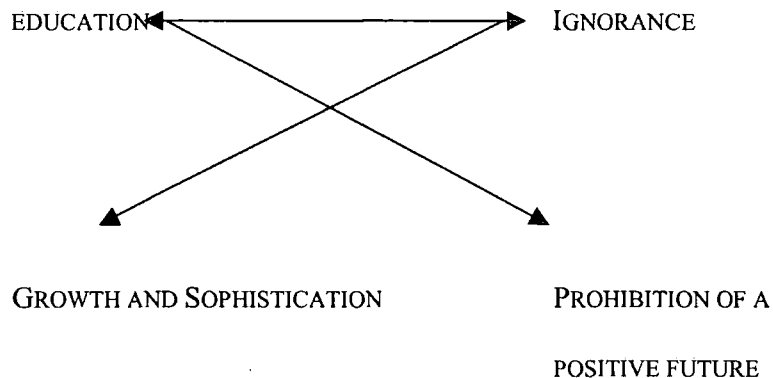


FIGURE 4. SEMANTIC RECTANGLE 4

Education, in the realm, deals specifically with the kind of book learning Boyne, tutor Gerald Ormerod, and, to a lesser extent, Cliffe Wheater have mastered through their schooling. It is what Terry Wheater seeks so earnestly, "Make them understand that I must be educated. There's no time to lose," and it is not the kind of social or common knowledge that would be apparent in a comparison of Rose Sellars and Judith Wheater (42). Ignorance, then, refers to the lack of this knowledge. Wharton writes

Judith Wheater as the pinnacle of his concept; despite her ability to run an entire family at the tender age of 15, she has been, as Boyne points out, “brought up in complete ignorance of the past, and with no more comprehension than a savage” of art and other subjects (35). By her own bashful admission, Judith is “more ignorant than you could have possibly imagined” (34). With regard to the bottom half of the semantic rectangle, The Children shows that if education is negated or denied, the hope for a positive future dwindles and can eventually extinguish all together. The Princess Buondelmonte’s eugenics inspired game, “Ambition,” provides evidence of this. As the Princess carefully supervises their game, none of the children, save Terry, give responses which are both legible and show a concrete grasp of the concepts of a life and a vocation grounded in reality. In concert with this, at the conclusion of the novel, Zinnie remains lodged in her world of play with the lift-boys at their hotel. In contrast, however, when ignorance is negated, Wharton illuminates the kind of growth and sophistication gained by its denial. Amongst the children, Terry’s ultimate denial of ignorance arises in his decisions to attend boarding school in Switzerland, which allows him the freedom to grow personally, academically and socially. It cannot be glossed over, however, that Joyce Wheater undergoes a serious transformation under Mr. Dobree’s moral tutelage.

Wharton knew the difficulties of presenting a large cast of characters and praised authors such as Leo Tolstoy for having the skill to differentiate among their creations significantly enough for the reader to identify each as an individual. In order to fully illustrate the continuum that exists between education and ignorance, Wharton needed all seven of the Wheater children, and it is through this paradigm that the reader becomes most familiar with the different personalities and attributes of the children. In her own work, however, she feared that when the range became too close,

objects tended to become less defined and blurry. The concept of education is universal to children ranging in age from that of Chipstone to Judith, and it provides Wharton with the gentle gradation necessary to both differentiate amongst the children and enunciate a different element through each children. In this manner, as I have shown, Wharton uses the education versus ignorance model as a lens through which to focus her rhetoric.

Contemporary intelligence theorist Howard Gardner has articulated a theory of multiple intelligences that facilitates my effort to demonstrate how Wharton separates each child from the larger group, thus illustrating the entire educational continuum from within the Wheater children. Gardner's theory proposes seven different kinds of intelligences: linguistic (as in a poet), logical-mathematical (as in a scientist), musical (as in a composer), spatial (as in a sculptor or airline pilot), bodily kinaesthetic (as in athlete or dancer), interpersonal (as in a salesman or teacher), and intrapersonal (exhibited by individuals with accurate views of themselves).<sup>22</sup> Terry, the most scholastically oriented of the group, can be seen to possess both linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligence; he feels promptly at ease with his tutor, and when Mr. Ormerod proves "unexpectedly good at games which involved scampering, hiding and pouncing" with the other children Terry is able to join in, his need for knowledge finally having a link to satiation (80). Judith, the leader and defender of the clan, exemplifies interpersonal intelligence as she deals effectively with the children and the adults they encounter during their travels. Upon discovering the Princess Buondelmonte visiting the children, Judith transitions, within just a few minutes, from a vigorous and fiery defender of her troops to a mother gently displeased with the children's behaviour to the boss of Scopy and Nanny and finally to the cordial but defensive woman in charge of the Wheater children (284).

On the other hand, the younger children, Bun, Beechy and Zinnie, seem to exist in a world of bodily kinesthetic and spatial intelligence as they bound around whatever environment is available to them. The reader's first glimpse of Zinnie is as "a stark naked little figure with a shock of orange-coloured hair and a string of amber beads" running across the deck of a ship (12). Bun and Beechy's confidence with their bodies extends to their constant falling over one another in both grief and exuberance, but Wharton characterises them best through their gymnastic feats, a trait the Princess wants to harness through "scientific gymnastic" (289). Blanca, who blends into most situations easily, is difficult to classify among these intelligence categories. She carries the quietude of Rose Sellars and the enthusiasm for material goods of Joyce Wheeler or Zinnia Lacrosse, and she is also the child Boyne seems most immune to. Most likely characterized by intrapersonal intelligence, Blanca never doubts or defends her actions and usually gets what she wants. Judith comments to Boyne, "But Blanca got away with my present. Did you see that? I knew she would! That's what she came down for – to wangle it out of Zinnia!" (75). Even though the box had Judith's initials on it, Blanca saw something she wanted and coolly made sure she got it. Without placing the children in a true school setting, as would be impossible with their modern chaotic lives, Wharton is still able to grant them individuality and identity through their varying types of intelligence and personality. The diversity within The Children echoes Wharton's sentiments regarding the future of letters, "There is no fear of monotony while the creative springs perpetually bubble up in new intelligences."<sup>23</sup> In addition to what we can see by viewing Wharton's presentation of the Wheeler children through Gardner's theory, there is another angle operating within the text. One of the sure marks of modernity upon the United States as the degree of interaction Americans had with foreigners. As Americans mix with

citizens of other lands, familial and friendly bonds are bound to take place, and this offers the novelist “another way of ‘catching the likeness’ of the foreigner, and that is as his idiosyncrasies are reflected in the minds of the novelist’s characters who are the latter’s own kin.”<sup>24</sup> Whereas an isolationist American culture would make it difficult to include the foreign characters as a matter of course, the worldly state of America provides for the siblingship that binds Bun and Beechy, who are technically Italian royalty, to the biologically related Wheater clan.

### Reality versus Illusion

The next opposition, that between reality and illusion, is an important one for the critic because it requires a dialogic understanding of the relationship between text, author and interpreter. Semantic Rectangle 5 describes at least two perceptions in this text. “Reality” is that which the critic can rely upon – not just the individual facts, but the paradigm or context they form when collected as well, while “illusion” is that information filtered through the character or narrator which may not be empirically true.

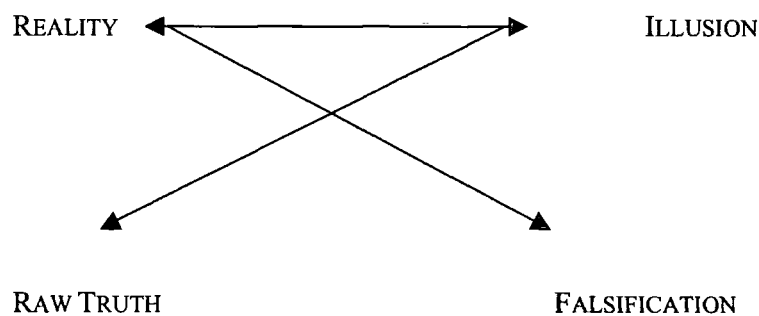


FIGURE 5. SEMANTIC RECTANGLE 5

While reality is presented, presumably, without a bias and as a descriptive process, illusion is an “air-brushed” version of the facts which may be coloured by human (real or fictitious) perception. Both have their place within analysis of this narrative, but the

distinction between the two can be important as nearly the same level as the modernity versus tradition opposition. Within The Children, reality is represented ultimately by the figure of Mr. Dobree; he disburses the Wheater children to their inevitable fates while remaining kind, becoming a father figure of sorts. Martin Boyne, on the other hand, cannot seem to grasp reality strongly within the confines of this novel. In his dealings with both the Wheaters and Rose Sellars, his actions are marked by a combination of pursuing answers to impossible questions and hiding from his true feelings and desires; while he may be able to effectively manage reality as an engineer, his life as a lover and a surrogate father is wrapped in illusion of his own making. As was the case with the debate between legality and emotion, the negations of these terms are relatively simple to identity. When one negates reality, a situation like that of the Princess Buondelmonte arises. She comes holding no knowledge of the children's reality with a full conviction of returning them to Italy with her, causing her perception to veer, not into illusion, but rather into a false discernment of the circumstances. Without the empirical data that can be expected from reality, truth loses its primacy in perception and impurities can infiltrate all aspects of cognition. On the other hand, the negation of illusion results in raw truth without the context of reality. Raw truth, without the supportive nature of its own paradigm, is dissociative and displaced, leaving the perceiver with a barren mode of explication. For example, when Boyne is confronted with Zinnie and the other Wheater children after returning from Brazil, he has no context in which to place their existence and thus experiences the dizzying task of trying to re-place them within his mental structure.

While exploring tendencies in modern fiction, Wharton considered the position of the abnormal or unreal in literature. Her conclusion was that the reader

could be receptive to such devices so long as they appeared in context as they would in reality. Dostoyevsky, in Wharton's example, "essayed the study of abnormal people; but he blent them with the normal, as life does – and thus, incidentally, showed, that their chief interest, for the reader, lies not in their own case, but in its tragic and destructive reactions on the normal."<sup>25</sup> Within reality, thus, there is a place for the unreal, but like the illusion covering Martin Boyne when he proposes to Judith Wheater, it is ultimately a construction surrounded by reality. Judith, shrouded in her own youthful version of innocence, is not harmed by the interchange, whereas Boyne, possessing full powers of cognition, is devastated by his venture into the realm of impaired perception "he trembled inwardly with the effort of recovery" (310). The critical recognition of reality coupled with the unreal, abnormal or illusion resonates between Wharton and Dostoyevsky. It is important to recognize that from her earliest short story to her last unfinished novel, Wharton used the plots of her stories as tools, or vehicles, for far more important commentary and critique on a variety of issues. Augmenting my identification of Wharton's transformation during the 1920s, Judith Sensibar suggests, "In The Children, Wharton uses the market-place expectations and literary conventions drawn from popular fiction to mask her real subject."<sup>26</sup> Therefore, if the reader does not acknowledge the subtle uses of reality and illusion and reads the novel at face value, "her fluffy, melodramatic main plot camouflages Wharton's new reading" of the overarching conflict, modernity versus tradition.<sup>27</sup> Further, the purpose and action of reality versus illusion was a topic Wharton herself wrote on and intellectually considered at some length.

This idea of screens or shrouds from reality appears frequently in critical work considering The Children. Sensibar, in a homosexual reading of this novel, makes the statement, "Martin constantly manipulates women and situations to serve



as screens behind which he can pursue fantasies that protect him from his panic.”<sup>28</sup>

While my thesis does not concur with Sensibar’s opinion regarding Boyne’s sexuality, Boyne’s necessity for barriers is readily apparent. The most obvious of Boyne’s barriers lies in his career choice – his travels keep him away from friends, family and, more importantly, Rose Sellars. In this manner, Boyne has indeed manipulated the situation to place him at great reach from what he desires; furthermore, Boyne has become so good at convincing himself of the immobility of these barriers that he refuses to acknowledge the possibility of the excitement he supposedly craves entering his life:

Though he was given to travel, and though he had travelled much, and his profession as a civil engineer had taken him to interesting and out-of-the-way parts of the world, and though he was always on the alert for agreeable encounters, it was never at such times that they came to him. He would have loved adventure, but adventure worthy of the name perpetually eluded him; and when it has eluded a man till he is over forty it is not likely to seek him out later (2).

Boyne places himself so deeply inside this illusion of boredom that then he quips, “I believe it’s something about the shape of my nose” (2). The manipulation of reality in this regard is entirely within Boyne’s mind – he has convinced himself that he is powerless to change his life into a more exciting or fulfilling path. Like Nick and Susy Lansing in the previous chapter, Boyne is unable to act or articulate his feelings when Rose Sellars tries to make him choose between her and his life with the children and Judith, “Rose...becomes Martin’s beast when...she insists that Martin try to seek out the truth about his desire.” His negation of reality leaves him paralysed and makes those living within reality enemies – his only option is to avoid them.

Even near the novel’s completion, when factors could more easily than ever before facilitate his feelings for Judith, Boyne forces a physical barrier between the two that allows him to view her without her knowledge:

Boyne continued his walk, and turning an angle of the building, found himself facing the windows of the ballroom. The terrace on that side, being away from the sea, was but faintly lit, and the spectacle within seemed therefore more brilliantly illuminated (297).

He then “drew back into an unlit corner of the terrace, and sat there a long time in the dark” while Judith whirls about the ballroom as a young woman (298). Boyne wonders if Judith has grown up or if she is still a child inside a woman’s young body, but he refuses the opportunity to find out because “as long as he can continue to insist that Judith is a child and also continue to desire her, he succeeds in replicating the comfortable situation he had with Rose Sellars before her husband’s death.”<sup>29</sup> Finally, keeping with the status quo of his falsified world, Boyne puts the ultimate barrier back in place when he returns to Brazil. By placing these physical and mental screens between himself and his true desires, Boyne alters reality and forces himself into the minefield of reality versus illusion. If he negates reality, as is demonstrated above, he must operate in a world of falsification. Rather than being surrounded by and acting on real, solid phenomenon, he denies himself the chance for success of any kind. If, however, he were to negate the illusions he creates by these barriers, he could operate with the raw truth of humanity and would at least be able to successfully begin or end situations and relationships. The only area in which Boyne overcomes the dichotomy between reality and illusion is in his engineering work – a profession so mathematical and precise that the guidelines by which he must work are literally set in stone.

While in the last example, Wharton touts the importance of staying grounded to reality, she also writes of the necessity for creative worlds so enticing that their characters live outside of the text itself. In her brief essay, “Visibility in Fiction,” Wharton writes, “They [invisible characters] live only in their story...[visible and lasting characters] live as we live, in time and space, live a life independent of the

narrative in which they figure, a life overflowing the bounds of even the vast scene which their creator conceived for them.”<sup>30</sup> Such characters fill the space offered by illusion and spill over to create their own identity and interact with the reader and the outside world. These musings on such illustrious, living creations parallels the development of advertising and department store displays during the 1920s. Combined with the new commercial culture, these musings on reality and illusion in fiction show Wharton’s contemplation of the delicate balance between the two abstractions. Pifer shows that, in The Children, Wharton truly gives modern reality a chance to triumph over the precious world of her past. Rather than staying with the failure Wharton wallowed in during Twilight Sleep or continuing the overpowering falseness of life as Boyne:

In composing The Children, Wharton’s gifts as a writer, her talent for casting herself in the role of another or the *other*, clearly took precedence over her most cherished social standards and critical views. Here one is reminded of Tolstoy, who, in the process of bringing Anna Karenina to life, overcame as an artist his patriarchal intolerance and moral didacticism... With similar unpredictability, I would suggest, Wharton in The Children artistically undermines her intense personal antipathy to the modern era and its avatars. In bold opposition... Wharton evokes – through the eyes of her protagonist and male *other*, Martin Boyne – the sylvan figure of Judith Wheater, whose untamed image captures all the spellbinding appeal of the wilderness... Imaginatively participating in Boyne’s rapture, Wharton’s readers share in that optimistic vision.<sup>31</sup>

Pifer’s observation is keen; in this novel, rather than simply criticize without conclusion, Wharton attempts to resolve the opposition which plagued her after the mid-1910s. Regardless of the success or failure in the resolution of this semantic rectangle, the personal and artistic efforts in this novel were applied with a different shrewdness, setting The Children apart from other novels, especially when its commercial success is considered.

## Conclusion

The warring notions of modernity and tradition produced, pragmatically, the conflict between change and stability, and it was the conflict between these two negations that forced this clash into daily life for Wharton. The tradition of her early life, and the routines that ruled her later life, were borne out of a desire for stability and certainty. While not only allowing Wharton to be in control at all times, these guidelines provided a framework in which all participants knew what could be expected in any social interaction ahead of time. As modernity crept into being, such guidelines slowly disappeared, leaving people awash in a sea of possibilities. No longer were polite conversation topics assured and no longer were the rules of marital relationships fully binding. On the one hand, Wharton benefited directly from modernity with respect to the failure of her own torturous marriage, but on the other, she was deeply troubled by the uncertainty and transience that characterised once solid worlds. In The Children, she explores the questions posed by debating the merits of change and stability and ultimately expresses her inability to come to terms with either through the ambivalence that marks this novel.

Nowhere is Wharton's desire for change and stability to be contractually binding more evident than in the conflict between legality and emotion. Wharton's first consideration in this debate is the divergence between factually sanctioned rule and situational or circumstantial rule. She places these two concepts side-by-side in order to show the divergence between the two ways a character's fate may be sealed, but is ultimately unable to come to a strong conclusion about the supremacy of either. The author makes a strong case for factually sanctioned rule, but in each situation, the facts of the matter are not stable enough on which to build a solution. Boyne's attempt to ensure stability in the children's lives by speaking with the Wheatons solely

on the facts of the situation is overrun by those emotionally involved and no amount of negotiating on his part is able to overcome this. Rose Sellar's letter to Boyne proposes a solution which she believes fits the logical facts of the quandary, but it ignores all the children except Blanca and Terry. Further, Rose's reliance upon the stability of Aunt Julia's rule of a "year of mourning" ultimately prevents her from marrying Boyne early in the novel and thus preventing his deepening involvement with the children. On the other hand, the times when Wharton forces her characters to act within only the situation at hand, the solutions are only temporary. The luncheon with the Princess Buondelmonte is handled in a dignified manner at the time, but no conclusions on the future of the children are made, thus leaving their future still open to much change. Even as the children are settled into their pension for the majority of the novel, the existence is day to day rather than part of a woven plan of life – the random visit of Zinnia Lacrosse and their stressful visits with Rose Sellars are support to this. As hard as she tries, Wharton is not able to rely fully upon either method of governance. Totally negating legality and acting through circumstantial rule leaves her characters drifting through constant change, while totally negating emotion forces the actors into solutions, which may be stable in abstraction but in reality denigrate mental health.

This enforced ambivalence was not unique to Wharton during this decade, as Mottram suggests, "Clarity is rare in the decade's general tone, which is compounded of a certain brash post-war sense of a confused but lively spree which suffers change and stability as its external afflictions. Escape from stale principle was assumed to confer genius on an artist."<sup>32</sup> Wharton had clarity of a different kind, because while artists like F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway were searching for a principle which would transcend the problems between change and stability, Wharton was

actively sifting through the historical strands that lead to the confusion of the 1920s. Her action was to explore the matter fully even if it did not result in a resolution of the issue, something she was not afraid to make clear to Fitzgerald, "My present quarrel with you is only this: that to make Gatsby really Great, you ought to have given us his early career (not from the cradle – but from his visit to the yacht, if not before) instead of a short resume of it."<sup>33</sup> Her novels of this era, rather than eliminating the past, seek to reflect from whence the confusion of post-war life originates. For the children, the choice between change and stability is never really resolved. Mr. Dobree's marriage to Joyce Wheater provides a platform for sorting out the legality of their relationships, but through this process they lose Bun and Beechy. Even as Joyce calms down and claims custody of the remaining children, their life is still filled with the constant change of a travelling lifestyle. Realistically, neither change nor stability provides the ultimate solution and accompanying happiness.

The fertility versus sterility binary opposition is markedly different from the other semantic rectangles in that its effects are tangible and non-ignorable. While the cast of The Children could put aside thoughts of the legal custody of their children or Judith could avoid having to display her illiteracy, the children and marriage partners physically existed. The question, therefore, is whether or not the effects of fertility and sterility are constructive or destructive with regard to change and stability. Once again, Wharton's crucial indecision regarding the answer to this question is evident. While the difference between those characters indicative of sterility and fertility is wide, Wharton's treatment of their lives is not all that different. Rose Sellars and Martin Boyne, characters who are by all means sterile, end up alone and closeted within worlds of their own making, thus suggesting that their sterility led to stability which was destructive or negative by nature. However, those characters suggestive of

fertility, all those present in the beach tent conference, including the Wheaters, Zinnia Lacrosse and her new husband, Lord Wrench, ultimately must deal with the changing but constant vapidness of their lives. Cliffe Wheeler virtually disappears from the ending of the novel, and Joyce Wheeler becomes a literal ghost of her former self. The children, the product of pulling between sterility and fertility, fall into a sort of purgatory that Wharton saw within the American post-war culture:

She had tried. She had written a series of essays, French Ways and Their Meanings (1919), extolling French intellectual and cultural values....The resulting essays, however, were less of a handbook for American Expeditionary Force soldiers trying to understand France than Wharton's most unequivocal defence of her presence for France."<sup>34</sup>

As a result of the extremely fertile post-war commercial culture and the rise of new money, by the time The Children was published, Wharton had developed a sense of disgust for the gluttonous and ignorant Americans populating her prized Europe. The stability of pacifism was leading to an extremely fertile culture in every way, and the change, sterility and destructiveness of war was unimaginably horrible for Wharton, therefore the best comment she could make through this novel was to simply illustrate a purgatory of sorts, waiting for the answers to sort themselves out through time.

Interestingly, Wharton introduces an entire continuum to illustrate the conflict present in Semantic Rectangle 4, education versus ignorance. Through the children, she presents characters that are at every stage of development from infant to young adult, through Rose Sellars, Martin Boyne and Mr. Dobree she presents adults who have attained a high level of refinement and education, and through the other adults, she shows those who have acted in defiance of either standard. The Wheaters and their social set defy the parameters of the semantic rectangle; in paradigm of their creation, education and ignorance have no importance or power, shown through their complete forgetfulness regarding Terry's instruction, further they seem to find

stability through the constant change of scenery gained through transience. In this manner, Wharton suggests one possible resolution to the binary opposition, but it is not one that she personally endorses, as is evident through the critical manner in which more refined characters view it, rather it is a solution of popular culture. The doubt that possess Wharton in regard to the resolution of the other semantic rectangles transforms into a different guise with regard to this rectangle. First we are presented with the character of Mr. Dobree, who, although somewhat obscure, enters the picture and is able to detangle the mess that exists between the various parents of the children. The level of his education, a law degree, is really the only description we are given from Wharton about Mr. Dobree. That education leads to change for the children, something that is unexpected from the binary, but it is through this change that some degree of stability is reached; further, his marriage to Joyce Wheeler promotes change in her as well, which also leads to further stability in the marriage. Secondly, Terry Wheeler is initially frantic about the delay in his education, exclaiming, "there's no time to lose," but when he finally begins boarding school in Switzerland, he is able to move quickly up the ranks, thus showing that there was, in fact, time to lose (42). Through this point, Wharton resolves part of the binary, showing that the negation of education leading to the loss of a positive future can be overcome. The relationship between education and ignorance and its relation to change and stability is more fluid and flexible in Wharton's estimation, thus leaving the reader without complete ambivalence. Such an idea is prevalent in some circles of modern Marxist criticism, "Bennett's intention is to dispel once and for all the idealist illusion that there is such a thing as 'the text in itself' ...with the result that the text's supposed self-identity is shattered."<sup>35</sup> Just as there is no one path to interpretory criticism, there is no one, scheduled path to education.



The reality versus illusion debate is the opposite of the fertility versus sterility debate, because the products of reality versus illusion are entirely inside the mind. Boyne, in particular, creates his own smokescreens from the world, and therefore, by changing the nature of the world around him, he makes it stable for himself. In describing the creation of characters which live outside the manuscript, Wharton comments:

We may still conjecture that a common denominator is, after all, to be found in the patient intensity of attention which these great novelists concentrated on each of their imagined characters, in their intimate sense of the reality of what they described, and in some secret intuition that the barrier between themselves and their creatures was somehow thinner than the page of a book.”<sup>36</sup>

In this statement, Wharton illustrates the translucent nature of the relationship between reality and illusion; Martin Boyne’s duplicate personalities embody this relationship in The Children. His actions are often based on painstaking thought; in the case of Rose Sellars, those actions have been considered for the entirety of his solitary adult life. When it comes to his dealings with the Wheater children, his loyalty to them, his feelings toward Judith and their interaction with Mrs. Sellars are ruled by different aspects of himself, but they are so closely related in his heart and mind that their separation is marked only by a gossamer thread. He flips between both sides of this opposition incessantly – and his lot at the novel’s conclusion is a direct result of this. If Wharton does not grant those characters still living at the end of the novel happiness, she grants them a sufferable life with comfortable surroundings. For the most part, she also aligns them with one side of the binary. Boyne, on the other hand, is given to a life constituting two of Wharton greatest fears – loneliness and relegation to the uncivilized countries of the world. Martin has never resolved the opposition between reality and illusion, nor has he chosen one by which to lead his life, thus making his relegation inescapable. This semantic rectangle alerts

the reader to Wharton's intense struggle to resolve this binary through exploration, but the novel's ending suggests that if one is incapable of resolving it, then choosing one side by which to abide is a better fate than to straddle both sides simultaneously. In Wharton's 1920s, The Children stands apart as a novel of investigative strife rather than ambivalence.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Gloria C. Erlich, The Sexual Education of Edith Wharton (Berkeley: U of CA P, 1992) 148.
- <sup>2</sup> R.W.B Lewis and Nancy Lewis, eds. The Letters of Edith Wharton (London: Simon, 1988) 509.
- <sup>3</sup> Fredric Jameson, The Prison House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972) 135.
- <sup>4</sup> Edith Wharton, "The Great American Novel," Edith Wharton: The Uncollected Critical Writings, ed. Frederick Wegener (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996) 153.
- <sup>5</sup> Edith Wharton, The Children (1928; New York: Simon, 1997) 82. Future references will be listed parenthetically in the text.
- <sup>6</sup> Ellen Pifer, "The Children: Wharton's Creative Ambivalence to Self, Society, and the "New World," A Forward Glance: New Essays on Edith Wharton, eds. Clare Colquitt, Susan Goodman, and Candace Waid (1999; Newark: U of Delaware P; London: Associated U Presses, 1999) 221.
- <sup>7</sup> Pifer 221.
- <sup>8</sup> Dale Bauer, Edith Wharton's Brave New Politics (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994) 135.
- <sup>9</sup> Bauer 170.
- <sup>10</sup> Bauer 173.
- <sup>11</sup> Refer to Chapter 1, page 18 for the theoretical semantic rectangle.
- <sup>12</sup> Eric Mottram, "The Hostile Environment and the Survival Artist: A Note on The Twenties," The American Novel and the Nineteen Twenties, Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies 13 (London: Edward Arnold, 1971) 234.
- <sup>13</sup> Bauer 189.
- <sup>14</sup> Mottram 255.
- <sup>15</sup> Wharton, "The Great American Novel" 154.
- <sup>16</sup> Wharton, "The Great American Novel" 154.
- <sup>17</sup> Bauer 142.
- <sup>18</sup> Bauer 166.
- <sup>19</sup> William R. Taylor, "The Evolution of Public Space in New York City: The Commercial Showcase of America," Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display in America 1880-1920, ed. Simon J. Bronner (New York: Norton, 1989) 290.
- <sup>20</sup> Taylor 291.
- <sup>21</sup> Edith Wharton, "Permanent Values in Fiction," Edith Wharton: The Uncollected Critical Writings, ed. Frederick Wegener (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996) 177.
- <sup>22</sup> Howard Gardner, Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences (London: Heinemann, 1984).
- <sup>23</sup> Wharton, "Permanent Values in Fiction" 176.
- <sup>24</sup> Wharton, "The Great American Novel" 157.
- <sup>25</sup> Wharton, "Permanent Values in Fiction" 178.
- <sup>26</sup> Judith L. Sensibar, "Edith Wharton Reads the Bachelor Type: Her Critique of Modernism's Representative Man," American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism and Bibliography 60 (1998): 576.
- <sup>27</sup> Sensibar 577.
- <sup>28</sup> Sensibar 578.
- <sup>29</sup> Sensibar 583.
- <sup>30</sup> Edith Wharton, "Visibility in Fiction," Edith Wharton: The Uncollected Critical Writings, ed. Frederick Wegener (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996) 165.
- <sup>31</sup> Pifer 223.
- <sup>32</sup> Mottram 237.
- <sup>33</sup> Edith Wharton, letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald, 8 June 1925, The Crack Up, ed. Edmund Wilson (New York: James Laughlin, 1956) 309.
- <sup>34</sup> Alan Price, The End of the Age of Innocence: Edith Wharton and the First World War (New York: St. Martin's P, 1996) 169.
- <sup>35</sup> Steve Giles, "Against Interpretation? Recent Trends in Marxist Criticism," The British Journal of Aesthetics 28 (1988): 69.
- <sup>36</sup> Wharton, "Visibility in Fiction" 169.

## Chapter 5: Concluding Thoughts

At the beginning of this thesis, I set out to argue the worthiness of Edith Wharton's works of the 1920s by intricately examining a subset of three novels, The Glimpses of the Moon (1922), Twilight Sleep (1927), and The Children (1928). After much investigation, I found the methodology put forth by Marxist critic Frederic Jameson to be most well suited to this literary excavation because of its comprehensive nature and flexible structure. Over the five decades of his career, Jameson has scrutinized every academic, practical, cultural, political and economic detail within his published work. His dominion as a Marxist cultural and literary critic has been under continual expansion; Jameson's recent publications have focused on contemporary cinema rather than literature. Comparatively, the rhetorical umbrella formed by Jameson's theories is a far superior tool to unlocking the wealth within Edith Wharton's later work than what other critics have presented. Most importantly, Jameson grounds literary criticism in history and provides an inclusive definition for history. For Jameson, any fixed moment in history includes residue of the past and sketches of the future in addition to the actual present. Further, his conception of history as an analytical tool extends from the largest philosophical system (for example, capitalism) to the smallest discussion by two people living within that system. Secondly, Jameson rather pragmatically provides the critic with a set of tools by which to administer his unique, synthesized methodology. Jamesonian logic is always dialectical. In this manner, the critic may isolate any point in the narrative, form an argument or thesis about it, examine the thesis and its negation, and subsequently come to a conclusion that has appraised both sides of the argument. In The Prison-House of Language, Jameson presents a model originally produced by

another critic, A.J. Greimas, and modifies it to fit his line of reasoning. This semantic rectangle forms the base presentation of my arguments within this thesis.<sup>1</sup>

In relation to Wharton, I have used the semantic rectangle to define and diagram the system in which all the action of a particular novel takes place. For each novel, a unique, over-arching semantic rectangle is created that identifies the tensions at work in the narrative. In this way, each novel can be taken individually. In addition, distinct but parallel themes within that novel can also be dialectically explored through creating subsequent incarnations of the original rectangle. As previously discussed, the primary problem most literary critics have had with Wharton's 1920s themes has been their divergence from her previous works. Whereas many of the works prior to The Age of Innocence (1920) were set within Wharton's Old New York, the later novels are set primarily contemporary to Wharton – meaning they reflect a flurry of social, political, moral and economic choices not even fathomed prior to the oncoming of modernity. Additionally, these are choices that Wharton herself struggled with and to which she had no concrete answer. Critics have been able to identify the causes of change in Wharton's work, but the 1920s remained largely unexplored. The breadth of Jameson's methodology encompasses all the issues that have been discussed in relation to the individual novels here, while the intensity of it penetrates to the heart of issues by relying on a Freudian model of latent and manifest content.<sup>2</sup> Jameson's semantic rectangle and the binary oppositions inherent to it allow Wharton of the 1920s to be appropriately framed, dissected, and subsequently reconstructed through mediation of the conflicts represented. Each of Wharton's novels of the 1920s surveys a different aspect of the trek across the supposed wasteland of modernity.

The chief goal of my exploration of these novels was to prove that Wharton's novels of the 1920s are as much a richly fashioned garden as are her novels from before World War I. (At the concluding sections of each chapter I have discussed at length how each novel individually fits into and supports this purpose.) Inherent in this is the need to disprove the common assumption that Wharton was in mental, physical and creative decline during the last two decades of her life. One major detriment to this assumption, as R.W.B. and Nancy Lewis note, is the sheer amount of money Wharton made in these later years, "To give some sense of her earnings: during the five years of 1920 through 1924, as best one can calculate, Edith Wharton's work brought in about \$250,000, not much less than \$3,000,000 before taxes today."<sup>3</sup> This was four years *before* the explosive success of The Children. The other major blow to this assumption of decline becomes evident in the chronological succession of her novels. Certainly, if Wharton had been experiencing the decline so many blaspheme her with, her language skills failing, her independence lessening and her creative muses dying out, any creative work she did muster out would be stale with old plots, musty characters and dry phrases rather than her usual graceful prose. What I have found in the excavation of these three novels directly contradicts any such image of the robust woman in her prime.

The Glimpses of the Moon, published in 1922, stands alone in several regards. Probably the most criticised novel of her entire career, it reveals both the lasting effect of World War I and a keen discernment of the coming commercial society. The novel's main conflict is that between blocked and unblocked transactions as they relate to communication and economics. The young heroes, Nick and Susy Lansing, become warring parties when their precarious marital plot is upset by a moral crisis neither is equipped to deal with. Glimpses bridges the gap between Wharton's tragic

historical romances, like The Age of Innocence, and her modern, problematic novels while simultaneously illustrating her discomfort amongst the swirling winds of change. Like Wharton herself, the novel feels displaced in time. Finally, the unusually happy and saccharine ending introduces the reader to Wharton's new theme of ambivalence. Nick and Susy are happy on the surface (the manifest content), but Wharton leaves the reader, and her characters, wondering if true human relations can ever be unblocked and thus move forward.

Twilight Sleep (1927), the next novel presented here, was published five years after The Glimpses of the Moon, and reflects a deepening of the ambivalence that marked the ending of its predecessor. In this novel, Wharton steps back from her position as a social critic and becomes, for just one novel, a social historian of sorts. She chronicles, in her fiction, the choices that modernity has placed upon two generations of one family. Each figure in her narrative is a beacon for some specific aspect of the world and a specific incarnation of the over-arching semantic rectangle. Modernity is made even more apparent in the structure of the Wyant/Manford family, and in the fact that the central conflict is a struggle between power and subordination – a residue of World War I, a reflection of the current (1927) uneasy balance of power and a sketch of the future conflagration, World War II. Wharton herself does not know the path to total contentment, or transcendence, and she is also aware that most of the public is no closer to a resolution than she is. Thus, for this moment in time, she mediates the semantic rectangle with an overwhelming sense of failure. No member of the Wyant/Manford family is able to assert power because no one strategy is any better than the others. The total ambivalence, hesitancy and confusion of the era are conveyed thus.

By the time she wrote The Children in 1928, Wharton was ready to investigate the issues presented by modernity rather than reporting on them as she had done in Twilight Sleep. Within this novel, she straightforwardly set out the conflict between modernity, tradition, change and stability. Through her multitude of characters, amazingly diverse settings and thoroughly exhaustive presentation of issues, Wharton attacks matters in this novel with a great zeal and determination. She explores binary oppositions between legality and emotion, fertility and sterility, education and ignorance, and reality and illusion. By the novel's conclusion, Wharton is not able to come to terms with all the binaries she has set up. She does, however, make a different statement than at the end of Twilight Sleep; rather than leaving the characters in total confusion, she does identify most of them with one side of the binaries. Her statement, thus, suggests that in the absence of a resolution or mediation to the conflict, it is better to choose a side rather than trying to bestride both – advice Pauline Manford could have put to good use!

Wharton's novels continue to develop new paradigms, encompass new issues and present amazingly fresh characters throughout this decade. If anything, these novels of 1920s are a welcome break from fiction that had been largely akin from 1899 to 1920. If Wharton had been in decline, it would have been difficult, if not impossible, for her to have developed such contemporary plots and to have written the subtext necessary to communicate her intentions in these novels. For Jameson, Marxism with a critical methodology so encompassing was only natural, and for Wharton, the transition of her writing simply flowed from filtering her experiences through her sharp mind. Adam Roberts captures what I argue to be the heart of this thesis:

It is not that Emily Bronte set out to write a coded criticism of the rise of capitalism or that the job of the critic is to decode the novel. It is



that all the literary resources available to her as a writer – the novel and romance modes she used, the literary antecedents she alludes to and her own social and cultural determinants – already embodied, as a sort of unconscious, the socio-economic circumstances of her day.<sup>4</sup>

Critical work on the final decades of Edith Wharton's career requires a full immersion in the contemporary history of the time period.

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<sup>1</sup> Refer to Chapter 1, page 18 for the theoretical semantic rectangle.

<sup>2</sup> Adam Roberts, Frederic Jameson, Routledge Critical Thinkers Ser. (London: Routledge, 2000) 75-6.

<sup>3</sup> R.W.B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis, eds. The Letters of Edith Wharton (London: Simon, 1988) 418.

<sup>4</sup> Roberts 87.

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