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**Ethics of the Self as an Aesthetics of Existence in Wharton's *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence***

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**vedoucí diplomové práce (supervisor):**

Erik Roraback, D. Phil (Oxon)

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**zpracovala (author):**

Bc. Pavlína Černá

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Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto diplomovou práci vypracovala samostatně a pouze na základě uvedených pramenů a literatury.

I declare that the following master's thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned.

Prague, 16. 04. 2010

Souhlasím se zapůjčením diplomové práce ke studijním účelům.

I have no objections to the master's thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

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### Abbreviations of the works cited:

AI	<i>The Age of Innocence</i>
BG	<i>A Backward Glance</i>
DP	<i>Discipline and Punish</i>
HM	<i>The House of Mirth</i>
TLC	<i>The Theory of the Leisure Class</i>
WE	<i>Women and Economics</i>

What we do modifies us more than what is done to us.

—Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics*

Ethics can be a very strong structure of existence.

—Michel Foucault, *Ethics*

## Preface

Most Edith Wharton scholars have argued *The House of Mirth*<sup>1</sup> (1905) and *The Age of Innocence*<sup>2</sup> (1920) to be naturalist novels interwoven with and based upon socio-economic determinism. Feminist critics, such as Judith Fetterley and Cynthia Griffin Wolff, have depicted Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* as a victim of patriarchal society; meanwhile, Marxist critics like Wai-Chee Dimock have been preoccupied with the omnipresent power of the marketplace in the novel. In the case of *The Age of Innocence*, the criticism has often focused on Wharton's usage of the tribal world of manners as the determining and inescapable force in an individual's life.<sup>3</sup> This thesis will engage in reading *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence* as naturalist novels with an emphasis on the notion of human conduct and ethics.

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<sup>1</sup> Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth: The Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Elizabeth Ammons (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1990). Page references HM in parentheses indicate this edition.

<sup>2</sup> Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence: The Norton Anthology Critical Edition*, ed. Candace Waid (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2003). Page references AI in parentheses indicate this edition.

<sup>3</sup> Nancy Bentley, "Realism, Relativism, and the Discipline of Manners," *The Age of Innocence: The Norton Anthology Critical Edition*, ed. Candace Waid (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2003) 447-460.

In these pages, I will argue that reading Wharton's work from the perspective of Michel Foucault's ethics of the self presents the possibility of free will for the characters within the social entrapments of American literary naturalism. The ethical reading of these two novels challenges their naturalistic interpretations that assert the complete determination of its subjects and the plot of decline. In this view, in *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart's story is one of becoming—Lily moves from being a determined subject of the ideology of lady to a self-governed individual. In *The Age of Innocence* Wharton employs Ellen Olenska as the self-created, independent individual, who living according to her "ethics-oriented morality"<sup>4</sup> defies "the code-oriented morality"<sup>4</sup> of Old New York (representative of the novel's social determinism). For Newland Archer, Ellen opens the possible path of his self-determination.

Through "the techniques of the self,"<sup>5</sup> as theorized by Foucault in his late work on ethics, individuals can acquire a new vantage point from which they see through the norms and discourses that construct them as subjects. This new critical stance is the premise of one's self-transformation. Foucault's "technique[s] of existence"<sup>6</sup> are the means through which an individual can overcome social conditioning and eventually create the self as a work of art.

Edith Wharton's life narrative complements this reading of her fiction through the lens of Foucault's ethics of the self. Through "the techniques of existence," such as

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<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume Two: The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990) 25.

<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, "Subjectivity and Truth," *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 1997) 88.

<sup>6</sup> Foucault, "Subjectivity and Truth," 89.

writing, self-critique, and contemplation, Wharton overcame the means of her early socialization and transformed—recreated—the identity of a lady that had been imposed upon her into that of an independent and successful author. At the same time, employing “awakened” characters in her fiction who, as did Wharton herself, grasped the “philosophical ethos that could be described as a permanent critique of [a] historical era,”<sup>7</sup> she exposed the truth about the class and gender ideology of the Gilded Age and thus opened a space for the redefinition of these categories. Edith Wharton belonged among the realist/naturalist authors who not only reflected reality through their writings, but who had a newly active role in its creation: “like social reformers, they engage[d] in an enormous act of construction to organize, re-form, and control the social world.”<sup>8</sup>

## **I. American Literary Naturalism**

American literary naturalism was, unlike its continental counterpart, a product of a particular historical moment—the transitional period at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. The Industrial Revolution brought about sweeping changes that resulted in the mass production of goods in factories, urbanization, and the rise of consumer culture. The department store

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<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?,” *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 1997) 312.

<sup>8</sup> Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) 10.

[...] had been established as one of the outstanding institutions in the economic and social life of the late nineteenth century; and together with advertising [...] they marked the beginning of present-day consumer society. Stores, posters, brand-name goods, and ads in the daily and magazine press laid the groundwork of an economy in which selling and consumption, by the continual creation of new needs and new desires, became open to infinite expansion, along with the profits and productivity which lay behind them.<sup>9</sup>

Shopping became a new way of passing the leisure time for women from the middle and upper classes. “Impulse buying replaced the planned buying,”<sup>10</sup> and the fixed price policy was introduced.

The Gilded Age was a period of new inventions that fundamentally changed people’s “physical world: the electric light, telephone, telegraph, and automobile appeared within a decade of each other.”<sup>11</sup> New publishing technologies made books more widely available to the general reading public. In 1869 the first transcontinental railroad appeared, which allowed for easier migration of people from the country to the city. New means of transport contributed to the raise of immigration: between 1890 and 1910 the country’s population grew by fifty percent, mainly due to the millions of new immigrants from Europe and from China.

In the increasingly mechanized world that evolved, individual identity, previously based on a sense of belonging to one’s community, culture, and religion, was shattered

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<sup>9</sup> Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 2.

<sup>10</sup> Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola*, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Lehan, *Realism and Naturalism: The Novel in an Age of Transition* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005) 21.

and replaced by the merging of an individual into the anonymity of a city and factory. The agrarian order, based on the notion of the natural time of seasons, was superseded by the industrial order, characterized by the standardized time of the clock. Railroads became the symbol of the new world. As Michael O'Malley observed: "Once individuals experienced time as a relationship between God and nature. Henceforth, under the railroad standards, men and women would measure themselves in relation to a publicly defined time based on synchronized clocks."<sup>12</sup> Henry Adams in "The Dynamo and the Virgin"<sup>13</sup> (1900) explains his struggle to understand the progress; he finds himself in-between two kingdoms of force, which he calls the dynamo and the virgin. Whereas the Virgin is representative of the old natural order—symbolizing the female power of human reproduction and the lost religious order—the Dynamo stands for the new industrial force characterized by the power of production. In Adams's perspective, the masculine mechanistic force has overcome the organic feminine power.

According to Christopher P. Wilson, naturalism, as a predominant literary genre of the period, appeared with the formation of the mass literary marketplace in the 1880s.<sup>14</sup> Professionalization in various areas included that of literary craftsmanship. Naturalism introduced the "masculine ideal of authorship" (xiv)—connected with routine and hard work—as opposed to the notion of writing as an amateur, aristocratic, and effeminate leisure activity. The reporter represented this ideal of a writer dealing with

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<sup>12</sup> Jack Beatty, *Age of Betrayal: The Triumph of Money in America, 1865-1900*, New York: Vintage, 2008) 6.

<sup>13</sup> Henry Adams, "The Dynamo and the Virgin," *The Norton Anthology of American Literature, 1865-1914*, ed. Julia Reidhead (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2007) 351-359.

<sup>14</sup> Christopher P. Wilson, *The Labor of Words* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985) xi-63.

real life: he was an observer, a scientist in the “laboratory of life” who was faithfully recording in his writing the facts as he saw them.

Naturalism was a reaction to the historical changes of the beginning of the twentieth century, including the scientific discoveries of Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, and other evolutionary scientists. In contrast to realism, naturalism portrays its characters as entrapped in a web of heredity and socio-economic forces. As Émile Zola explains in *The Experimental Novel*<sup>15</sup>: “Man is not alone; he lives in society, in a social condition; and consequently, for us novelists, this social condition unceasingly modifies the phenomena (20).” In other words, man is a social animal, “the variable product of a group of living beings, who themselves are absolutely submissive to the physical and chemical laws which govern alike living beings and inanimate” (20). Naturalistic protagonists resemble passive machines that lack free will; they are drawn by their chemically produced passions and desires. In general, naturalism considers environment and biology to be the determining forces of human life—it excludes the self,<sup>16</sup> in the essentialist sense, from its realm.

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<sup>15</sup> Émile Zola. *The Experimental Novel and Other Essays*, trans. Belle M. Sherman (New York: Haskell House, 1964).

<sup>16</sup> Lee Clark Mitchell, *Determined Fictions: American Literary Naturalism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1989). Mitchell argues that the naturalist mode, in comparison to the realist narrative, presents an attack on the reader by disrupting his/her expectation (common for human experience, based on the human life) of the existence of the characters’ inner, autonomous selves. In other words, “naturalism is a [narrative] mode characterized by determinism” (30) that excludes the self from its domain.

On Naturalism see, for example:

Lilian R. Furst and Peter N. Skrine. *Naturalism* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1971).

June Howard. *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism* (London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985).

## II) Foucault and “the Technology of the Self”<sup>17</sup>

The death of the transcendental subject is what naturalism shares with post-structuralism. They perceive an individual to be determined by or constructed through discursive and social practices embedded in the social institutions of a given society. As a poststructuralist, Michel Foucault, especially in his genealogical writings *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* and *The History of Sexuality, Volume One: An Introduction*, focuses on the “technologies of power”<sup>18</sup> and domination and their impact on the subject’s body, which becomes the site of disciplinary practices and norms. In the

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<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 1997) 223.

<sup>18</sup> Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” 225.

Foucault views power not in the traditional sense as imposed from above by a sovereign (juridical notion of power) but rather as coming from beneath. Power is ubiquitous: “Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” [Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume One: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990) 93]. It is imminent in all relationships. Power is “intentional and non-subjective”—it always has a certain goal, or an end, but at the same time no one owns it.

Even though power is omnipresent, as Foucault points out in “Sex, Power, and The Politics of Identity,” it is not synonymous with violence or domination. Power, owing to its multivalence, always already includes the points of resistance in its own network. In fact, resistance is the very basis of all power relationships that can exist only so far as its subjects are to an extent free: “So we are not trapped [...]. It means that we have always possibilities of changing the situation. We cannot jump outside the situation, and there is no point where you are free from all power relations. But you can always change it” [Michel Foucault, “Sex, Power, and The Politics of Identity,” *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 1997) 167]. For Foucault, resistance is not simply a “negation”; it is a “creative process” (Foucault, “Sex, Power, and The Politics of Identity,” 168) that implies an active participation of the subject included.

feminist appropriation of Foucault's work, the female body, in particular, is molded and trained through the techniques of femininity.<sup>19</sup>

While Foucault's genealogical work, dealing with the poststructuralist/constructivist notion of a thoroughly determined subject, is productive for analyzing the body as a machine in literary naturalism,<sup>20</sup> it is Foucault's ethical stage of writing, concerned with subjectivity, that offers a way of defining and examining the self in naturalism in a non-essentialist way. In *The History of Sexuality, Volume Two: The Use of Pleasure* and *The History of Sexuality, Volume Three: The Care of the Self*, his lectures, and interviews,<sup>21</sup> Foucault shifts his focus from "the technologies of power" and its impact on the human body to "the technologies of the self" dealing with subjectivity. It is important to note that his modern theory of subjectivity does not equate with the humanist notion of consciousness as something given, or pre-existing discursive practices of a society.<sup>22</sup> The self cannot exist outside of power relationships. However, at the same time, Foucault does not accept the poststructuralist notion that subjectivity is thoroughly determined and excludes any possibility of agency and resistance.

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<sup>19</sup> Sandra Lee Bartky, "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power," *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*, ed. Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1998).

<sup>20</sup> Irene Gammel, *Sexualizing Power in Naturalism: Theodore Dreiser and Frederick Philip Grove* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1994).

Mark Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>21</sup> Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 1997).

<sup>22</sup> Foucault is not interested in the self from the point of view of its origin (soul as substance); rather, he attempts to trace and to define the activity that has led an individual in different time periods to establishing one's identity, one's selfhood.

In his work on ethics, Foucault considers subjectivity not as something ready-made, given, imposed, and unchangeable; rather, it is transformed continuously through “the technologies of the self”: “the procedures, which no doubt exist in every civilization, suggested or prescribed to individuals in order to determine their identity, maintain it, or transform it in terms of a certain number of ends, through relations of self-mastery or self-knowledge.”<sup>23</sup> Elsewhere, he characterizes “the technologies of the self” as “techniques that permit individuals to effect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, their own souls, their own thoughts, their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves, and to attain a certain state of perfection, happiness, purity, supernatural power.”<sup>24</sup> Through these “technique[s] of existence”—which include among others self-critique, contemplation, autobiography (as a kind of self-writing), letter writing (as a narrative of the self), and truth-telling—the individual can create her/his life as a work of art.

Through the practice of “the techniques of living,”<sup>6</sup> such as self-critique and critique of the norms and discursive practices that have constituted an individual as a subject, s/he can achieve a sort of autonomy within the system. From this position of heightened consciousness, from the new vantage point,<sup>25</sup> one can see through the

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<sup>23</sup> Foucault, “Subjectivity and Truth,” 87.

<sup>24</sup> Michel Foucault, “Sexuality and Solitude,” *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 1997) 177.

<sup>25</sup> As Foucault explains in “What is Enlightenment?,” “[t]his philosophical ethos may be characterized as a limit-attitude. We are not talking about a gesture of rejection. We have to move beyond the outside-inside alternative; we have to be at the frontiers. Criticism indeed consists of analyzing and reflecting upon limits. [...] The point in brief is to transform the critique conducted in the form of necessary limitation into a practical critique that takes the form of a possible transgression.”

Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?,” 315.

entrapments presented by society as unquestionable norms or self-evident truths. I would argue that this “doubled vision”<sup>26</sup> is the premise of the possibility of subverting the established system from within through the unweaving, exposing and recreating of its constitutive norms.

Foucault’s “techniques of existence” are the possible means of an individual’s self-constitution; they are the basis of the care or the ethics of the self. For Foucault, “ethics is the kind of relationship you ought to have with yourself, [...] and which determines how the individual is supposed to constitute himself [*sic*] as a moral subject of his own actions.”<sup>27</sup> The morality of ethics, with its non-normalizing basis, stands in opposition to the morality of Christian and social codes, which are imposed from above as a kind of order. In Greco-Roman culture, ethics, requiring an individual’s continuous, self-transformative work on her/his soul, represented “an aesthetics of existence.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> In “‘That Doubled Vision’: Edith Wharton and *The House of Mirth*,” Benjamin D. Carson argues that the publication of *The House of Mirth* in 1905 marked a shift in the “feminist consciousness” (695). What Edith Wharton and her character, Lily Bart, share is the “doubled vision” of life, the knowledge that they exist simultaneously “inside and outside the ideology of gender” (695) and class that created them. In *The House of Mirth*, it is the charwoman’s view of Lily that conceives her “feminist consciousness.” However, it does not have an environment within the novel to “be fully formed” (714). Carson sees Lily’s death not as a tragic event, but rather as “an opening in the ideology of gender” (714).

Benjamin D. Carson, “‘That Doubled Vision’: Edith Wharton and *The House of Mirth*,” *Women’s Studies* 32 (2003): 695-717.

<sup>27</sup> Michel Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 1997) 263.

<sup>28</sup> Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” 255.

The care of the self is not only “ethical in itself”<sup>29</sup> but also represents a “true social practice.”<sup>30</sup> In other words, attending to oneself implies care of the other. There are many social relationships that support one’s “soul practice”<sup>31</sup> (private counselors, teachers, friends, family). Finally, Foucault believes that individual and social practices exist in a bilateral relationship, which leads to hope for a change in the social order.

### **III) Edith Wharton: Social Entrapments and the Possibility of Transformation**

Edith Wharton’s life and career correspond closely to her fiction, which adds authority to her claims about her class and gender. Born into an upper-class family in Old New York’s Four Hundred, Wharton was expected by her family to become an ornamental hostess and an efficient house manager. However, to her mother’s dismay, Wharton, apart from being an avid reader from an early age, preoccupied herself with “making up”<sup>32</sup> stories. In *A Backward Glance*, her autobiography, she refers to writing as her “Secret Garden” (BG 197), the space through which she created a sort of autonomous life for herself, her sanctuary. From Foucault’s perspective, writing, as a “technique of the self,” served as the means of her continuous self-transformation. For Wharton,

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<sup>29</sup> Michel Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom,” *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 1997) 287.

<sup>30</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume Three: The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 1990) 51.

<sup>31</sup> Michel Foucault, “The Hermeneutics of the Subject,” *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 1997) 99.

<sup>32</sup> Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York: Touchstone, 1998) 33. Page references BG in parentheses indicate this edition.

becoming a professional author was a way of rebelling against the society of “conspicuous leisure”<sup>33</sup> and “consumption” (TLC 43), in which women were expected to be consumers rather than producers and where writing was considered “something between a black art and a form of manual labor” (BG 69). Through her life narrative, Edith Wharton represented a possibility of individual self(re)-creation from an ornamental lady to an independent author.

According to Elizabeth Ammons, Wharton belonged to “the pioneer generation”<sup>34</sup> of women who strived to become not mere “writers” (10) but real “artists,” (10) authors. These women found themselves somewhere between their mothers’ world, which they struggled to leave behind, and the world they had not reached, the one of “the privileged white male artist” (10). Edith Wharton, especially at the beginning of her career, always wrote in the mornings and started her busy social life with the lunch hour, concealing from most people that writing was not just a pastime activity but her whole life.<sup>35</sup> In her short story, *Miss Grief*,<sup>36</sup> Constance Fenimore Woolson aptly portrays the futility of the struggle of a gifted female artist for recognition. Even though Miss Grief (whose real

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<sup>33</sup> Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Dover Publications, 1994) 23. Page references TLC in parentheses indicate this edition.

<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth Ammons, *Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn into the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991) 1-19.

Ammons distinguishes between “writers” (9), for whom writing remained a leisure time activity, compatible with their domestic duties, and “artists” (9). For the latter, as she shows on the cases of the chosen women novelists, marriage and motherhood were not compatible with the role of artist.

<sup>35</sup> Shari Benstock, ed., *Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism: Edith Wharton: The House of Mirth* (Boston: Bedford’s Books, 1994) 9.

<sup>36</sup> Constance Fenimore Woolson, “Miss Grief,” *Scribbling Women: Short Stories by the 19<sup>th</sup>-Century American Women*, ed. Christopher Bigsby (London: The Orion Publishing Group) 271-291.

name is Aarona Moncrief, but the narrator gives her the nickname for her pitiable appearance) “possess[es] the divine spark of genius” (279), she dies poor and unknown as a writer because she is a woman. On the contrary, the narrator who is less gifted becomes famous and a well-respected literatus. It is symptomatic that Miss Grief’s powerful and original writing can never get published in the male critics and publishers dominated literary market, and she takes her work with her to the grave.

In style, Edith Wharton stood between the sentimental domestic fiction of her female predecessors and the realist, naturalist style of her contemporaries.<sup>37</sup> As a naturalist and a novelist of manners, Wharton traps her characters in their social roles, marriages, and other external circumstances; they are imprisoned within the same societal entrapments from which she, as a woman and a writer, suffered. For instance, in *The House of Mirth* Lily Bart feels often enchained and enclosed in a society that does not allow her to breathe freely. In their influential feminist study of the nineteenth-century literary imagination, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert argue that the figurative confinements represented the real confinements of the female authors, both in art and in life. They were enclosed literally in their fathers’ homes and metaphorically within the male literary tradition from which they tried to set themselves free.

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<sup>37</sup> Hildegard Hoeller, *Edith Wharton’s Dialogue with Realism and Sentimental Fiction* (Gainesville: Florida UP, 2000) 1-37.

Hoeller reevaluates Wharton’s work as a dialogue between realism and sentimentalism. Even though Wharton, as a realist, distanced herself from the sentimental tradition, Hoeller argues that the dialectic between the “excess” (xii) of feminine sentimental feeling and the masculine “economy” (xii) of realism remains the underlying trait of her fiction.

According to Gilbert and Gubar, writing was generally considered by literary critics of the period to be a man's work.<sup>38</sup> It is hardly surprising then that the female literary endeavor was accompanied by "the anxiety of authorship" (45) and an inferiority complex. To conquer the fear and the common opinion that women could not create, for their art was "an art of silence" (45), female authors first had to overcome and to "redefine the terms of [their] socialization" (49). From Foucault's perspective they had to self-create themselves. As Virginia Woolf articulated, before women could write, they had to "kill the angel in the house"<sup>39</sup>—the imposed male ideal for women in art and in life. The angel stood for a soulless, inanimate object, an aesthetically pleasing work of art. It was "a phantasmic, unattainable ideal of womanhood as ageless, eternally lovely, incorruptibly virtuous, self-sacrificing, and infallibly wise."<sup>40</sup>

Transforming from a female writer to an artist meant to overcome the ideology of "separate spheres" (of influence and interest) for men and women in society. As John Ruskin aptly characterized them in *Sesame and Lilies*:

He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention; his energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest, wherever war is just, wherever conquest necessary. But the woman's power is for rule, not for battle,—and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision. She sees the qualities of things, their

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<sup>38</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (Yale UP: New Haven, 1984) xi-92.

<sup>39</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 17. *The Angel in the House* (1865), a poem by Coventry Patmore, was a bestseller in its time, expressing the ideology of women as the "fair sex."

<sup>40</sup> Shari Benstock, Suzanne Ferriss, and Susanne Woods, *A Handbook of Literary Feminisms* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002) 70.

clams, and their places. Her great function is Praise; she enters into no contest, but infallibly adjudges the crown of contest. By her office, and place, she is protected from all danger and temptation. The man, in his rough work in open world, must encounter all peril and trial,—to him, therefore, must be the failure, the offence, the inevitable error: often he must be wounded, or subdued; often misled; and *always* hardened. But he guards the woman from all this; within *his* [my emphasis] house, as ruled by her, unless she herself has sought it, need enter no danger, no temptation, no cause of error or offence.<sup>41</sup>

In other words, the female artist had to trespass the imposed boundaries of the private sphere—connected with the “Cult of True Womanhood”—and the public sphere, traditionally a man’s domain. Such a move was not painless, and many women writers, especially before the twentieth century, preferred to publish their works under the shield of a pseudonym. Wharton herself had her first book of verse published by her parents under the name of “Eadgyth”;<sup>42</sup> her family wanted to protect young Edith from unwanted fame, following the Old New York “custom that a respectable woman’s name should not appear in print more than three times in her life, at birth, marriage, and death.”<sup>43</sup>

For Edith Wharton, writing novels, travelogues, short stories, and letters to her friends was a means of creating her self. As she claims in *A Backward Glance*, she had “no real personality of [her] own [...] till [her] first volume of short stories was published” (BG 112). Wharton found her home in “The Land of Letters,”<sup>44</sup> and her

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<sup>41</sup> John Ruskin, *Selected Writings: Sesame and Lilies* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004) 158.

<sup>42</sup> Shari Benstock, *No Gifts from Chance: A Biography of Edith Wharton* (New York: Macmillan, 1994) 37.

<sup>43</sup> Carol J. Singley, *A Historical Guide to Edith Wharton* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) 23.

<sup>44</sup> In *A Backward Glance*, she remembers, “[...] I felt like some homeless waif who, after trying for years to take out naturalization papers, and being rejected by every country, has finally acquired a nationality. The Land of Letters was henceforth to be my country, and I gloried in my new citizenship” (119).

family within the “inner group” (BG 192)—a group of her closest friends, which included, among others, Walter Berry, Henry James, Percy Lubbock, and Howard Sturgis. Even within the restrictive social conventions of her time, she became the author of her own life and one of the best paid novelists of the period. Her self-creation through self-definition was a rebellious response to the normalizing tendencies the upper-class society imposed on women. After twenty-eight years of marriage, she obtained a divorce from her husband Teddy Wharton, had a passionate mid-life love-affair with the journalist Morton Fullerton, and decided to spend the last twenty-four years of her life in France, where she received the Chevalier of the French Legion of Honor for her relief work during the First World War. In 1921, Wharton was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for *The Age of Innocence*, and in 1923, she received an honorary doctorate from Yale University.

Both through her life example and through her work, Wharton challenged the gender-biased conventions of her society. Seeing beyond the ideology of lady, she understood the complexities of what it meant to live with the “double vision.” Apart from characters who are unquestioning products of social determinism, Wharton includes in her fiction “awakened” subjects—characters who acquire double consciousness and who are able to see beyond the social norms that created them. Be it Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* or Newland Archer or Ellen Olenska in *The Age of Innocence*, “awakened” subjects function as subversive, potential points of resistance in the naturalistic narrative and present a possible counter-discourse to the ideology of gender and class in the Gilded Age. From Foucault’s perspective, employing these characters as a vehicle of her social critique, Wharton engaged in uncovering the truth about the New York upper-class and thus opened up a path for its change.

#### IV) *The House of Mirth*

As Donald Pizer notes in his article, “Naturalism of Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*,”<sup>45</sup> Wharton’s famous work provided an example of a novel of manners for approximately fifty years after its publication. Its focus on New York’s upper-class, its conventions and gossip, and the traditional plot that ends in either the death or marriage of the female protagonist were all solid evidence with which to dismiss the novel’s importance in the male-dominated literary canon. Since the mid-twentieth century, most Wharton scholars have been preoccupied with the naturalism that served as the basis of the novel’s social and economic determinism. Feminist critics, such as Judith Fetterley,<sup>46</sup> Cynthia Griffin Wolff,<sup>47</sup> and Linda Wagner-Martin,<sup>48</sup> saw Lily Bart’s fate as determined by the patriarchal hegemony with its “double standard and double bind”<sup>46</sup> and its treatment of women as ornamental objects. Marxist critics, including Wai-Chee Dimock in “Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*,”<sup>49</sup> focused on the economic determination of Wharton’s characters. In their view, all events and human relationships in the novel are commodified; they all have their price that is to be paid.

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<sup>45</sup> Donald Pizer, “Naturalism of Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*,” *Twentieth Century Literature: A Scholarly and Critical Journal* 41:2 (1995): 241-248.

<sup>46</sup> Judith Fetterley, “‘The Temptation to be a Beautiful Object’: Double Standard and Double Bind in *The House of Mirth*,” *Studies in American Fiction* 5:2 (1977): 199-211.

<sup>47</sup> Cynthia Griffin Wolff, “Lily Bart and the Beautiful Death,” *The House of Mirth: The Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Elizabeth Ammons (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1990) 320-339.

<sup>48</sup> Linda Wagner-Martin, “*The House of Mirth*: A Novel of Admonition,” *Edith Wharton’s The House of Mirth: a Casebook*, ed. Carol J. Singley (New York: Oxford UP, 2003) 107-129.

<sup>49</sup> Wai-Chee Dimock, “Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*,” *Edith Wharton: The House of Mirth: Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism*, ed. Shari Benstock (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994) 375-390.

I will argue that interpreting *The House of Mirth* from the perspective of Michel Foucault's ethics of the self defies its deterministic readings. In the ethical reading of the novel, Lily Bart overcomes her socialization of the ornamental lady and self-transforms into an autonomous individual.

In *The House of Mirth*, Foucault's "techniques of the self," which consist of truth-telling and honesty as practiced among friends, retreat into one's self, contemplation, and self-critique, are the means through which Lily acquires and retains her double-consciousness. It consists of the sharpened vision or new vantage point from which she can see through the social conventions that created her identity as an ornamental object. Furthermore, "techniques of existence" present the possibility of agency within the social entrapments, allowing individuals to affect and potentially restructure the means of their social conditioning to self-create themselves.

For Edith Wharton, "the soul of the novel [...] is (or should be) the writer's own soul" (BG 115). Belonging to upper-class New York society at the turn of the century, both Wharton and Lily Bart were determined by the ideology of their class and gender. In *The House of Mirth*, the Dorsets, the Van Osburghs, and other families of Dutch-English middle class descendants represent what Thorstein Veblen termed society's "leisure class." Conspicuous consumption and non-productive leisure, together with the meticulous observance of etiquette, contribute to the creation of the class that establishes the "canon of taste [and] conduct for the classes beneath" (TLC 33). The social rites in *The House of Mirth*, such as elaborate dinners and attendance at the opera and balls, function as public spectacles, where it is equally important to be seen as to see.

In this “society of the spectacle”<sup>50</sup> overt spaces present an opportunity to display the pecuniary strength and power of individual clans. For example, Van Osburgh’s “simple country wedding” (HM 69) is a real celebrity event in which guests arrive in “special trains” (HM 69) and the crowds cram in front of the police-guarded venue. Reporters for local newspapers attempt to get a glimpse of the “stars” of the spectacle that surround the bride. The refined cuisine, including the “mousse of lobster with champagne sauce” (HM 71), accompany the parade of exquisite dresses and the display of bride’s jewels that simultaneously compete for the distinction of being the biggest and most expensive precious stone given as a wedding gift. Apart from impressing the wedding guests, the event serves another purpose. Veblen explains:

Conspicuous consumption of valuable goods is a means of reputability to the gentleman of leisure [...]. The aid of friends and competitors is therefore brought in by resorting to the giving of valuable presents and expensive feasts and entertainments [...]. The competitor with whom the entertainer wishes to institute a comparison is, by this method, made to serve as a means to the end. He consumes vicariously for his host at the same time that he is witness to the consumption of that excess of good things which his host is unable to dispose of single-handed, and he is also made to witness his host's facility in etiquette. (TLC 47)

In *The House of Mirth*, the costly public events and their prescribed codes of manners both mark and secure society’s boundaries against the newcomers and the lower classes. At the same time, the social norms mold an individual into an obedient “cog in the [class] machine” (HM 240), an entrapped subject. The victory of gender and class

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<sup>50</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994).

ideology becomes complete when the subject internalizes society's "normalizing judgment"<sup>51</sup> and its codes of conduct. Thus, the homogenization of the class is not achieved by force; rather, such is accomplished by disciplining its members through discourse and the imposition of its norms. As Sandra Lee Bartky argues, the feminine body, unlike the male physique, is created through various techniques, or disciplinary practices. The aim of feminine indoctrination is to acquire a form of certain proportions, mastering "a specific repertoire of gestures, postures, and movements,"<sup>52</sup> and the cultivation of a body as "an ornamental surface."

The public occasions, which function as examinations (DP 184), enable the members of Lily's circle to watch constantly for the slightest trespasses of the prescribed norms. In this "society of surveillance" (DP 217), women's constant visibility is the insignia of their subordinate/dependent position. On the other hand, less visibility paradoxically signifies more power for the subject<sup>53</sup> (in the sense of lesser social

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<sup>51</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995) 177. Page references DP in parentheses indicate this edition.

<sup>52</sup> Sandra Lee Bartky, "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power," 64.

<sup>53</sup> In "Engendering Naturalism: Narrative Form and Commodity Spectacle in U.S. Naturalist Fiction," Lori Merish argues that visibility (determined by the hidden laws of the market) becomes a means of distinguishing between subjects and objects. Thus, in Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, men's invisibility is not a "sign of marginality" (249) but rather an indicator of their economic and political power. Furthermore, invisibility is connected with mobility and freedom of an individual within society; therefore, Lily Bart's movement, unlike Selden's, is always limited by society's surveillance. Merish's idea was inspired by Foucault's concept of the Panopticon (Jeremy Bentham's), a perfect penitentiary, in *Discipline and Punish*. The Panopticon is an example of the operation of the invisible disciplinary power on a small scale; whereas the punished subjects can be constantly observed in their cells, they do not see the guardian. Lori Merish, "Engendering Naturalism: Narrative Form and Commodity Spectacle in U.S. Naturalist Fiction," *Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth: a Casebook*, ed. Carol J. Singley (New York: Oxford UP, 2003) 229–270.

determination), and it opens up a potentially subversive space for an individual's self-contemplation and self-creation.

Lily Bart is, at first impression, a perfect product of her environment and the ideology of ladyship. From an early age, her mother trained her to be ornamental, acquiring all of the necessary skills—the techniques of femininity—to become successful “chattel” (TLC 111) on the marriage market. “Her beauty itself was not the mere ephemeral possession it might have been in the hands of inexperience: her skill in enhancing it, the care she took of it, the use she made of it, seemed to give it a kind of permanence” (HM 41). Lily masters “the art of blushing at the right time” (HM 7), serving tea even on a train, being a patient listener, and giving self-confidence to timid (HM 17) potential suitors such as Percy Gryce. She learned to display her body in the most advantageous light at the public spectacles hosted by privileged families, such as elaborate dinners, weddings, yacht cruises, or tableaux vivants. Lily's identity is based solely on her reflection in others' eyes and on her self-reflection in the mirror. Dresses play an important role in her performance. Instead of serving as mere garments, they become an integral part of Lily's personality and her means of self-(re)presentation. In a conversation with Selden, she acknowledges that

[...] a woman is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself. The clothes are the background, the frame, if you like: they don't make success, but they are a part of it. Who wants a dingy woman? We are expected to be pretty and well-dressed till we drop. (HM 10)

Lily interprets the beauty of her body as her chief commodity, her ticket into a mercenary marriage, the “vocation... [she] was brought up for” (HM 9). As an orphan, she does not have many choices in life. Lily is financially dependent on her aunt, Mrs. Peniston, until she sells herself into a matrimonial union in which she will acquire, according to the common law, her husband’s identity. In fact,

[...A]ll that she may wish to have, all that she may wish to do, must come through a single channel and a single choice. Wealth, power, social distinction, fame,—not only these, but home and happiness, reputation, ease and pleasure, her bread and butter,—all, must come to her through a small gold ring.<sup>54</sup>

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was stunned that during her time, humans were the only animals in the natural world in which the female was dependent on the male for food: “the only animal species in which the sex-relation [was] also an economic relation” (WE 5). Veblen explained that the institution of marriage goes back to the history of archaic societies in which women were seized as trophies from the enemy. This practice “gave rise to a form of the ownership-marriage, resulting in a household with a male head” (TLC 16). All of the economic power remains in the hands of the male, and the female obtains her status through him:

From the day laborer to the millionaire, the wife’s worn dress or flashing jewels, her low roof or her lordly one, her weary feet or her rich equipage— these speak of the economic ability of the husband. The comfort, the luxury, the necessities of life itself, which the woman receives, are obtained by the husband, and given her by him. (WE 9)

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<sup>54</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics* (New York: Dover Publications, 1998) 37. Page references WE in parentheses indicate this edition.

Thus, a wife's function is decorative. As Veblen puts it, she is the "chief ornament" (TLC 110) of the household. Simultaneously she is a live display of her husband's pecuniary strength and the conspicuous consumer of his wealth.

In spite of her thorough gender and class indoctrination, Lily is vaguely aware of her environmental determination and its entrapments. Wharton conveys her sense of confinement through the prison and chain imagery in the novel. For Lily, "[her] bracelet seems like manacles chaining her to her fate" (HM 8), Mrs. Peniston's house feels like a "dreary tomb" (HM 79), and her room is like a "prison" (HM 86).

Even though Lily does not have any prospect of life outside the patriarchal hegemony, she is unable to succumb to it. She cannot get married for money; throughout her "career," she pushes away several potential suitors, be it an Italian prince or the gentleman of leisure, Percy Gryce, as if attempting to indefinitely postpone her entry into mercenary marriage. Lily's socially degrading transgressions, such as playing bridge for money and smoking, are her first unconscious rebellious attempts to break free from the prescribed norms. In *The House of Mirth*, Lily's ethical actions stand in opposition to those connected with social, economic, and political structure.<sup>55</sup> As Lily admits, even these "intermittent impulses of resistance had sufficed to maintain her self-respect" (HM 204). In the sense of Foucault's ethics of the self, Lily's later, more conscious moral actions contribute to her new self-definition. Burning Selden's letters to Bertha, despite their being a possible means of her return to the upper-class; refusing Rosedale's marriage-business proposal, which includes blackmailing Bertha; and repaying the

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<sup>55</sup> Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 261.

money she owes to Gus Trenor may seem meaningless from the systemic point of view, as Wai-Chee Dimock<sup>49</sup> argues. They do not have the power to significantly alter the social order and, in the end, only impact Lily herself. However, for Lily, they represent a form of revolt as meaningful actions based on love, a refusal to play according to the social schemes, and being someone's property.

It is significant that the person who shows Lily the way to a life beyond the social norms is Lawrence Selden. Selden is one of a few figures in the novel with whom Lily has a relationship that is based on truth-telling and respect, qualities that oppose the high-class social game-playing, empty prattle, and gossip. Their friendship is, for Lily, the real thing. Even at their very first meeting at Benedick, Lily's flirtations with Selden are not a part of her courtship scheme. He does not have enough money to play a relevant role in the suitor game; instead, she truly likes him. It is through her relationship with Selden and their honest conversations that Lily's vague feelings of discontent change into a clear vision of a possibility of new life. From the moment when she dines at Bellmont with the Dorsets, Percy Gryce, and his friends, Lily acquires a new critical stance. According to Foucault's theory, it presents a new vantage point towards the world around her:

[Selden's] presence shed a new light on her surroundings. [...] he has preserved a certain *social detachment*, a happy air of viewing the show objectively, of having points of contact outside the great gilt cage in which they were all huddled for the mob to gape at. How alluring the world outside the cage appeared to Lily, as she heard its door clang on her! In reality, as she knew, the door never clanged: it stood always open; but most of the captives were like flies in a bottle, and having once flown in, could never regain their freedom. It was Selden's distinction that he had never forgotten the way out (my emphasis, HM 45).

Lily subsequently sees her class for what it is. All her friends who previously represented the glittering world that she longed to enter now looked “merely dull in a loud way” (HM 45). This detached, critical view of one’s surroundings, which Foucault terms “philosophical ethos,” is the basis of leading an autonomous existence within society, of living in what Selden calls “The Republic of the Spirit”—the country of the self. As he explains:

My idea of success [...] is personal freedom [...] from everything—from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents. To keep a kind of republic of the spirit—that's what I call success. (HM 55)

In other words, freedom within the social entrapments lies in the realm of the self.

This readjusted vision, presenting the possibility of life beyond the hegemony, gives Lily the reason and strength to act upon her ideals. It opens a new spiritual path to the potential self-realization: individualization through conscious recreation of her subjectivity. Lily realizes that even though the “long white road [of her life]” (HM 46) is more difficult to travel “on foot” (HM 46) than in a “carriage” (HM 46), she also knows that “sometimes the pedestrian enjoys the diversion of a short cut<sup>56</sup> which is denied to those on wheels” (HM 46). Moreover, the same road looks completely different when one drives in a carriage (which, in Lily’s case, always belongs to someone else), the “proper” means of transport for the upper-classes, or if one walks and enjoys the liberty to contemplate life. “Set[ting] her feet in the middle of the long white road” (HM 46), Lily senses the possibility of freedom through her other, newly-conceived, identity:

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<sup>56</sup> A shortcut to understanding the meaning of life, to live life to its fullest.

There were in her at the moment two beings, one drawing deep breaths of freedom and exhilaration, the other gasping for air in a little black prison-house of fears. But gradually the captive's gasps grew fainter, or the other paid less heed to them: the horizon expanded, the air grew stronger, and the free spirit quivered for flight. (HM 52)

Critics have often interpreted the first part of *The House of Mirth* as Lily's triumph, crowned by her exhibition in the Brys' tableaux vivants, and the second part as an example of a naturalistic plot of decline that concludes with Lily's death. However, reading the story as Lily's quest for self-determination, her social downward spiral is a path from servitude and determinism of the social entrapments toward self-knowledge, individuality, and self-empowerment. In other words, Lily's social descent from the upper-class "Society of Spectacle" leads her on the path to the "Republic of the Spirit." This interpretation challenges Cynthia Griffin Wolff's argument in "Lily Bart and the Drama of Femininity"<sup>57</sup> with respect to Lily's inevitable death due to her inability to create a new life that is distinct from that of the True Woman. Wolff argues that Lily Bart is a heroine "in search of an appropriate scenario" who rejects the traditional woman's role, which would require her "natural" submission in marriage, but who is not strong enough to create a new role of her own.

When Lily is cut off by the upper-class, she slowly sinks into social invisibility characterized by diminished social determination that allows more space for self-

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<sup>57</sup> Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "Lily Bart and the Drama of Femininity," *Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth: a Casebook*, ed. Carol J. Singley (New York: Oxford UP, 2003) 209-229.

transformation.<sup>58</sup> Lily descends the social ladder by working for the society's newcomers, such as the Gormers, serving as Mrs. Hatch's secretary, and performing menial labor in the millinery. The further from "the model class" that she gets, the fewer rules she is expected to keep and the fewer schemes in which to participate. As Lily observes working for Mrs. Hatch,

Mrs. Hatch and her friends seemed to float together outside the bounds of time and space. No definite hours were kept; no fixed obligations existed: night and day flowed into one another in a blur of confused and retarded engagements, so that one had the impression of lunching at the tea-hour, while dinner was often merged in the noisy after-theatre supper which prolonged Mrs. Hatch's vigil till daylight. (HM 214)

Only then does Lily realize the extent to which she has been a product of her environment, the degree of her socialization:

Society did not turn away from her, it simply drifted by, preoccupied and inattentive, letting her feel, to the full measure of her humbled pride, how completely she had been the creature of its favour. (HM 204) [...] She had been fashioned to adorn and delight; to what other end does nature round the rose-leaf

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<sup>58</sup> One of the decisive moments in Book Two, accelerating Lily's "downfall," is when Bertha Dorset expulses Lily from *Sabrina*, thus indirectly (and falsely) accusing her of having an affair with her husband George. This incident shows Lily that truth does not matter in the "leisure class," where women use lies and gossip as their means of social power; Bertha Dorset uses it to protect herself from divorce and Grace Stepney to persuade Lily's aunt Mrs. Peniston to disinherit her. Lily realizes that Bertha's version of truth is more valid than hers; "it's a great deal easier to believe Bertha Dorset's story [...], because she has a big house and an opera box, and it's convenient to be on good terms with her" (HM 176) and her "social credit [...] is based on an impregnable bank account" (HM 204). Bertha's "truth" presents the solidifying discourse of the society that joins power and knowledge and is necessarily based on excluding other facts and versions of truth.

and paint the humming-bird's breast? And was it her fault that the purely decorative mission is less easily and harmoniously fulfilled among social beings than in the world of nature? That it is apt to be hampered by material necessities or complicated by moral scruples? (HM 235)

“Lily, for all her dissatisfied dreaming, had never really conceived the possibility of revolving about a different centre: it was easy enough to despise the world, but decidedly difficult to find any other habitable region” (HM 204). From Foucault’s perspective, only after “the critical ontology of ourselves”<sup>59</sup> (through understanding the means of our constitution), we can construct a different identity from the one imposed on us and self-transform ourselves. In short, self-knowledge is the premise of self-creation.

Through the “techniques of the self”—“a spiritual retreat into oneself,”<sup>60</sup> which allows for introspection and self-critique, Lily matures. Being alone, without the ability to see her reflection in others’ eyes, she must create a new identity. It is significant that when she attempts to “kill the ornamental” side of her identity, she feels threatened by Furies. In Roman mythology, the Furies revenge matricide or patricide. In Lily’s case, they signify her dismissal of her mother’s attempt to condition her into a beautiful and empty object.

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<sup>59</sup> Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?,” 319.

As Foucault puts it, “[t]he critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.” (319)

<sup>60</sup> Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” 238.

If we read *The House of Mirth* as a bildungsroman that features Lily's quest for spiritual maturation, it is symptomatic that Wharton employs a space of the self—Nettie Struther's kitchen—in the novel's conclusion. The kitchen stands for a place with the least social determination in *The House of Mirth*. It is a sanctuary hidden from society, a place of comprehension and care. For Lily, Nettie is an exemplary case of the possibility of individual re-creation. From an ill, "fallen woman" to whom Lily gave money for treatment in a sanatorium several years earlier, she becomes a happy mother who lives for her husband and her daughter. Considering Wharton's struggle for self-definition within the still-patriarchal society of the Gilded Age, she interestingly employs a sentimental domestic sphere as a counterpart to social determinism. Nevertheless, from the perspective of Foucault's care of the self, Nettie's kitchen, protected from the public gaze, creates a space for reflection and self-determination.

When Lily returns home and contemplates her visit at Nettie's, she reaches her "enlightenment," enters her "Republic of the Spirit." The juxtaposition of Nettie's life based on the morality of care and Lily's old life of "the society of spectacle" brings Lily a complete clarity regarding her own scenario. She realizes that "there had never been a time when she had any real relation to life (HM 248)." Her parents and other members of the "leisure class," were "rootless (HM 248)," swept by society's current, "without any *personal existence* to shelter them from its shifting gusts (my emphasis, HM 248)." In other words, they were all perfect, unquestioning subjects of the social determinism who were not agents of their own actions. For Foucault, knowing and attending to oneself is not only "ethical in itself," "but it implies complex relationships with others insofar as

this ethos of freedom is also a way of caring for others.”<sup>61</sup> Lily comes to the realization that the “central truth of existence” (HM 248) is “based on the solidarity of life” (HM 248). The greatest impoverishment is not dinginess, as she thought, but the solitude of heart.

However, Nettie, unlike Lily, possesses her husband’s continuous belief in her, which provides her with a provisional shelter when overcoming her role of an ill, working-class, “fallen woman.” “Her husband’s faith in her had made her renewal possible (HM 249)”: “it has taken two to build the nest; the man’s faith as well as the woman’s courage” (HM 248). In Selden’s case, the problem is that he has become “amphibious.” He can “breathe” (HM 56) in the “Society of Spectacle,” while keeping the critical stance of his “Republic of the Spirit.” Because he remains part of the Old New York world, at times he sees Lily as others perceive her—as an ornamental spectacle. This occasional blindness leads to his failure to recognize when Lily needs him most. “How could he lift Lily to a freer vision of life, if his own view of her was to be coloured by any mind in which he saw her reflected?” (HM 125) Selden does show Lily the way to the “Republic” but, being a victim of the system himself, he leaves her half way because he does not believe that she can change. Even when Lily is dead, he fails to acknowledge his mistake by blaming the tragedy on fate instead of on himself.

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<sup>61</sup> For Foucault, “Care for others should not be put before the care of oneself. The care of the self is ethically prior in that the relationship with oneself is ontologically prior.” In other words, attending to oneself is the premise of taking care of others. [Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom,” 287.]

*The House of Mirth* ends with Lily's death—one of the two most obvious endings of a novel of manners; the other is marriage and the living-happily-ever-after scenario. Lily's ambiguous death, allowing for both suicide and an accidental overdose of chloral, has confused readers ever since the novel's publication. Reading the novel solely from a deterministic point of view, Lily's death is the next logical step of her descent on the social ladder; one cannot descend lower. Moreover, through the eyes of social Darwinism, Lily must die. Since she was formed as an ornamental object, she cannot survive outside of her "hot-house" environment.

However, at the end of the novel, Wharton's introduction of Nettie Struther's self-transformed character, who refused to be "cast into the refuse-heap without a struggle" (HM 243), and Lily's consequent illumination "which takes mortal chill from her heart" (HM 246) convey the possibility of hope through self-transformation and present an argument for Lily's accidental death. Just before taking her dose of chloral, Lily understands the truth of her life and comes to terms with it. She goes through her old dresses of which "each fall of lace and gleam of embroidery was like a letter in the record of her past" (HM 246), and she knows that "she was like some rare flower grown for exhibition" (HM 246). The Reynolds' dress that she wore in the Brys' tableaux no longer reminds her of her social triumph; rather, it calls to mind Selden's kiss that night. After unexpectedly receiving a check from Mrs. Peniston's inheritance, she can settle her enslaving debt with Gus Trenor, and resolve her last social obligation. She plans to keep in touch with Rosedale, who has become a friend, and she wants to see Selden again. When falling asleep, for the first time in her life, she feels confident about her future:

Tomorrow would not be so difficult after all: she felt sure that she would have the strength to meet it. She did not quite remember what it was that she had been afraid to meet, but the uncertainty no longer troubled her. She had been unhappy, and now she was happy—she had felt herself *alone*, and now the sense of *loneliness* had vanished. (HM 251)

Even though Lily is alone, she no longer feels lonely and threatened by the prospect of facing her thoughts when allowed a space for contemplation. Her dream of holding Nettie's baby in her arms signifies that she is ready to start a new life based on honesty to herself and others. The final word that she wants to share with Selden when she sees him would, then, be "love."

## V) The Age of Innocence

In *The Age of Innocence*, which Edith Wharton wrote fifteen years after *The House of Mirth*, she returned to the subject of Old New York to recreate in her fiction the social world already lost in the aftermath of the First World War. As Wharton reflects in *A Backward Glance*: "The compact world of my youth has receded into a past from which it can only be dug up in bits by the assiduous relic-hunter; and its smallest fragments begin to be worth collecting and putting together before the last of those who knew the live structure are swept away with it" (BG 7). Walter Berry, while appreciating the novel's historical accuracy, erroneously predicted that with Edith they will be "the

only people who will ever read it” (BG 369) and understand all its historical allusions.<sup>62</sup> Feeling people’s nostalgia for the “secure” and more orderly society of her childhood, Wharton felt once again compelled to tell the truth about the impact of the orderly social conventions upon an individual, the price there is to be paid for one’s “innocence”—unquestioning compliance with the social norms.<sup>63</sup>

When publishing *The Age of Innocence* in 1920, Wharton was already a well-known and acclaimed novelist. The contemporary reviews praised the novel for its style and its realistic depiction of life and manners of New York society in the 1870s. As William Lyon Phelps commented on the novel, “New York society and customs in the seventies are described with an accuracy that is almost uncanny; to read these pages is to live again.”<sup>64</sup> Wharton modeled many of her characters on real people, intermingling freely their traits, which enhanced the novel’s verisimilitude.<sup>65</sup> Whereas the first reviews appreciated Wharton’s skill in capturing the social entrapments of the period,<sup>66</sup> later

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<sup>62</sup> As Julia Ehrhardt points out in “To Read These Pages Is To Live Again: The Historical Accuracy of *The Age of Innocence*” (in *The Age of Innocence: The Norton Anthology Critical Edition*, ed. Candace Waid [New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2003] 409), this assumption turned out to be false: many readers and critics spotted readily the novel’s anachronisms.

<sup>63</sup> In 1921, Wharton received the Pulitzer Prize for *The Age of Innocence*. However, she was less pleased finding out that the committee’s first choice was Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street* and that her getting the price was an attempt to avoid further offence to the values of a Midwestern reader. In fact, the very object of Wharton’s critique—society’s tendency to avoid the unpleasant—became the reason for her winning.

<sup>64</sup> William Lyon Phelps, “As Mrs. Wharton Sees Us,” in *The Age of Innocence: The Norton Anthology Critical Edition*, ed. Candace Waid (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2003) 384.

<sup>65</sup> Shari Benstock, *No Gifts from Chance: A Biography of Edith Wharton* (New York: Macmillan, 1994) 359.

<sup>66</sup> William Lyon Phelps in his review of *The Age of Innocence*, “As Mrs. Wharton Sees Us,” praises Wharton’s capturing of social entrapments of the Old New York: “The absolute imprisonment in which her characters stagnate, their artificial and false standards, the desperate monotony of trivial routine, the slow

critics focused on the novel's social determinism in a rather negative fashion. Some of the more contemporary literary scholars criticized Wharton for not offering any "moral positives"<sup>67</sup> in her fiction. In *Edith Wharton and the Novel of Manners*, Gary H. Lindberg argued that "we are given no compensatory images of the human spirit asserting itself in implacable, even if futile resistance."<sup>68</sup> In other words, he perceives Wharton's characters as passive victims of social entrapments.

On the contrary, Carol Wershoven and Elizabeth Ammons depicted Ellen Olenska as the carrier of positive values. In *The Female Intruder*, Wershoven argues that Ellen, as an outsider, offers a critical perspective on society which is representative of Wharton's own. Similarly, Ammons, in her article "Cool-Diana and the Blood-Red Muse,"<sup>69</sup> sees Ellen as an icon of a "woman artist" (433) who knows the *savoir vivre*. Both critics depict Ellen Olenska's close affinity to Edith Wharton herself—her seeing beyond the norms, her artistic nature, and living according to her rules. From a very early age Wharton spent prolonged periods of time with her parents in Europe—in Italy, Spain, and France, in particular. This juxtaposition of the Old and the New World created young Edith's "double vision" with regard to her surroundings. The exposure to different

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petrification of generous ardours, the paralysis of emotion, the accumulation of ice around the heart, the total loss of life in upholstered existence." Phelps, "As Mrs. Wharton Sees Us," 385.

<sup>67</sup> Carol Wershoven, *The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton* (Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1982) 12.

<sup>68</sup> Gary H. Lindberg, *Edith Wharton and the Novel of Manners* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1975) 175.

<sup>69</sup> Elizabeth Ammons, "Cool Diana and the Blood-Red Muse: Edith Wharton on Innocence and Art," in *The Age of Innocence: The Norton Anthology Critical Edition*, ed. Candace Waid (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2003) 433–447.

cultures not only resulted in Wharton's fluency in Italian, French, and German but also in a critical stance towards her own culture.

Reading *The Age of Innocence* in the light of Foucault's late work on the self reconciles both critical strands; it offers a way of interpreting the novel as Archer's conflict between two moralities<sup>70</sup>: the "code-oriented morality" (30), imposed by Christianity and enforced by society, and the "ethics-oriented morality" (30). Whereas the former is characteristic of naturalism's social determinism, the latter allows for characters' free will. The "ethics-oriented morality" with its non-normalizing basis requires one's critical evaluation of the existing norms, as well as an active participation of the individual in creating her/his relationship to these rules and making his/her own rules.

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<sup>70</sup> As Foucault explains:

By "morality," one means a set of values and rules of action that are recommended to individuals through the intermediary of various prescriptive agencies such as the family (in one of its roles), educational institutions, churches, and so forth [...] But "morality" also refers to the real behavior of individuals in relation to the rules and values that are recommended to them: the word thus designate the manner in which they comply more or less fully with a standard of conduct, the manner in which they obey or resist an interdiction or a prescription; the manner in which they respect or disregard a set of values. In studying this aspect of morality, one must determine how and with what margins of variation or transgression in individuals or groups conduct themselves in reference to a prescriptive system that is explicitly or implicitly operative in their culture, and of which they are more or less aware. We can call this level of phenomena "the morality of behaviors."

Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume Two: The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990) 25.

In *The Age of Innocence* Wharton presents the “social [conforming] self”<sup>71</sup> (30), represented by the society of Old New York and May Welland, in terms of spiritual childhood, and the “critical self”<sup>71</sup> (30) of Ellen Olenska as a sign of a mature individual. Ellen’s ability to see beyond the social norms and to live according to her ethics of the self is the prerequisite of her self-possession. In the “Valley of Childish Things”<sup>72</sup> of Old New York, Ellen Olenska remains one of the few grown-ups, standing for the possibility of creating one’s life as a work of art. For Newland Archer, May and Ellen represent these two different paths in life; in Foucault’s terms, the women represent the two moralities by which he can choose to live.

Cynthia Griffin Wolff<sup>73</sup> argues that *The Age of Innocence* can be read as Newland’s bildungsroman, as his path to self-knowledge. Ellen Olenska’s presence in Archer’s life functions as a “catalyst” (423) in his “self-confrontation” (423); she stands for the possibility of his maturation. However, I would like to argue that despite Archer’s acquirement of the “double vision” from Ellen—the critical stance toward his surroundings—he never reaches his adulthood in the novel. He does not manage to completely discard the “code-oriented morality” and live according to the “ethics-oriented” one. Newland remains a teenager, who despite seeing beyond the world of his

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<sup>71</sup> Terrell Tebbetts, “Conformity, Desire and the Critical Self in Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence*,” *The Philological Review* 30, no. 1 (2004): 25–38. Tebbetts’ “social” and “critical self” correspond to Foucault’s distinction between the “code-oriented morality” and the “ethics-oriented morality.”

<sup>72</sup> Edith Wharton, “The Valley of Childish Things and Other Emblems,” in *The Age of Innocence: The Norton Anthology Critical Edition*, ed. Candace Waid (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2003) 284–288.

<sup>73</sup> Cynthia Griffin Wolff, “*The Age of Innocence* as a Bildungsroman,” in *The Age of Innocence: The Norton Anthology Critical Edition*, ed. Candace Waid (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2003) 421–433.

childhood and its conventions, is not strong enough to act upon his knowledge. He belongs among the “unsatisfactory m[e]n”<sup>74</sup> in Wharton’s fiction.

In the final version of *The Age of Innocence*, as opposed to the three manuscript outlines of the novel, Newland Archer becomes the novel’s center of consciousness. While involving the same main participants in the love-triangle throughout her earlier drafts—Newland, May, and Ellen—Wharton significantly changed the narrative point of view from the omniscient one, combined with an equally distributed narrative perspective among the main characters, to that of Newland Archer. In the first two plans, in particular, Ellen’s narrative viewpoint, close to Wharton’s own, prevailed. As Greeson<sup>75</sup> argues, by changing the narrative perspective, Wharton transformed the novel from the “psychological” (419) one into a “novel of manners” (419). “By fixing Archer, whose interpretative framework is so entirely a product of his society, as the perceiving center of the novel, Wharton made her protagonist to function symbolically in the novel as the mind of ‘Old New York (419)’[...] As she told the story through Archer’s eyes, Wharton’s theme became the cost to individual self-fulfillment of tribalistic social reproduction” (420). In other words, through the change of the main narrative perspective, Wharton gave an individual tragedy much broader social implication; she turned it into a social critique of the lost period.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> David Holbrook, *Edith Wharton and the Unsatisfactory Man* (New York: Vision Press, 1991).

<sup>75</sup> Jeniffer Rae Greeson, “Wharton’s Manuscript Outlines for *The Age of Innocence*: Three Versions,” in *The Age of Innocence: The Norton Anthology Critical Edition*, ed. Candace Waid (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2003) 413–421.

<sup>76</sup> Wharton believed that the “value of a subject depends almost wholly on what the author sees in it, and how deeply he is able to see into it” (BG 206). Being a part of the “Old New York Four Hundred” herself,

Reading *The Age of Innocence* together with Wharton's earlier work "The Valley of Childish Things, and Other Emblems,"<sup>72</sup> published in 1896, offers further insight into Wharton's opinion of Old New York. This parable of innocence and experience anticipates the three main figures in the novel and their relationship.

In "The Valley of Childish Things" (284), children lived together and passed time playing various games. One day, a little girl decided to discover the world outside the valley "beyond the mountains" (284). "Here she saw cities and men, and learned many useful arts, and in doing so grew to be a woman" (284). Because she preferred to live and work with her "old companions... instead of with strangers" (284), she decided to return home. She took a perilous journey back through the mountains, where she met a boy with whom she used to play, and who also left the Valley to gain experience. He helped her over the "roughest places" (284). The little girl was enthusiastic about her return, and they planned together "for building bridges and draining swamps and cutting roads" (284). Because the boy had matured since she last remembered him, she hoped that other children had become men and women as well. However, upon her return she found other children dully playing the same games as before. The more she talked about her grand projects, the more children avoided her for "her presence interfered with their games" (284). Her last appeal is to the only grown-up boy in the Valley, whom she reminds of their plans. However, he is too busy entertaining "a dear little girl with blue eyes and a

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Wharton chose a topic she understood the best—her own milieu. Edith Wharton had a rather ambiguous attitude toward the New York leisure class. On the one hand, she thought it to be the guardian of old traditions upon which civilization (society) is founded, "upholding [...] the standards of education and good manners" (BG 21) for the classes beneath; on the other hand, she perceived the normalizing tendencies of its manners and codes of conduct as destructive of human potential and individuality.

coral necklace” (284). “As she turns away, he adds in the kindest possible way, ‘Really, my dear, you ought to have taken better care of your complexion’” (285).

In *The Age of Innocence*, the grown-up girl becomes a blueprint for Ellen Olenska, the boy turns into Newland Archer, and the angel-like girl becomes May Welland. “The Valley of Childish Things” represents Old New York, and the children’s games the meaningless social rites based on propriety<sup>77</sup> and the observance of etiquette, which create the framework for the “code-oriented morality.”

At the beginning of *The Age of Innocence*, Archer is “The Portrait of a [perfect] Gentleman” (AI 79). He bases his life on the society’s “code-oriented” morality, takes up a “pretense of professional activity” (AI 79) in a law office, which “[is] accounted a more gentlemanly pursuit than business” (AI 80). He attends important public events such as Opera nights and balls given by the important families of Old New York. After May “let him guess that she ‘cared’” (AI 6), he plans to spend the rest of his life with “th[is] young creature whose soul’s custodian he was to be” (AI 28). For Newland Archer, May Welland seems to be a perfect match. Being “an artificial product” (AI 30) of the Cult of Domesticity, she represents the family values and conventions of Old New York society that molded him. May is his “safe” path to conventional marriage, a path well trodden by other members of the “Archer-Newland-van-der-Luyden” (AI 22) clan. She is thoroughly molded through the gender ideology “so cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers and long-dead ancestresses” (AI 30) to become the proper Victorian lady. As Martha Vicinius explains:

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<sup>77</sup> “Few things seemed to Newland Archer more awful than an offence against ‘Taste,’ that far-off divinity of whom ‘Form’ was the mere visible representative and vicegerent” (AI 10).

The cornerstone of the Victorian society was the family; the perfect lady's sole function was marriage and procreation (the two, needless to say, were considered as one). All her education was to bring out her "natural" submission to authority and innate maternal instincts. Young ladies were trained to have no opinions lest they seem too formed and too definite for a young man's taste, and thereby unmarketable as commodity.<sup>78</sup>

Women were required to have just enough education to be able to follow the conversation of their husbands and people of his circle. As Ruskin in his *Of Queen's Garden* puts it: "A man ought to know any language or science he learns, thoroughly: while a woman ought to know the same language or science only so far as it may enable her to sympathize in her husband's pleasures, and in those of his best friends."<sup>79</sup> In other words, a woman was required to be a patient listener, for she was not expected to have her own view of the matter discussed. In *The Age of Innocence*, May epitomizes the angel in the house: she lacks the "freedom of judgment" (AI 29), her sense of humor is restricted, narrowed to laughing at Archer's jokes, and her opinions on the world and art are limited to voicing his. She represents the society's innocence "that seals the mind against imagination and the heart against experience" (AI 91). Throughout the novel Wharton builds up an image of May's "abysmal purity" (AI 6) through her association with the color white.

At the beginning, Newland is content with the fact that May does not even understand the sexual implications of the Opera performance of *Faust*, and he imagines

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<sup>78</sup> Martha Vicinius, "The Perfect Victorian Lady," in *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, ed. Martha Vicinius (Don Mills, Ontario: Fitzhenry and Whiteside Limited, 1972) x.

<sup>79</sup> Kate Millett, "The Debate Over Women: Ruskin vs. Mill," in *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, ed. Martha Vicinius (Don Mills, Ontario: Fitzhenry and Whiteside Limited, 1972) 129.

enlightening her: “She was frank [...], because she had nothing to conceal, assured because she knew of nothing to be on her guard against; and with no better preparation than this, she was to be plunged overnight into what people evasively called ‘the facts of life’” (AI 29). However, at the same time Newland starts rightly suspecting that if he takes “the bandage from this young woman’s eyes, and bid her look forth on the world” (AI 52), the eyes that are not accustomed to seeing “could only look out blankly at blankness” (AI 53). He wonders whether “‘niceness’ carried to that supreme degree were only a negation, the curtain dropped before an emptiness?” (AI 129). In other words, Newland begins to realize that experience cannot be given to another person; it has to be gained by each individual through the living of life. Wharton was especially critical of the harmful innocence that went hand in hand with sexual ignorance,<sup>80</sup> which profoundly affected her own life upon her entrance into marriage with Teddy Wharton. Their union, according to Wharton’s biographers, remained physically unfulfilled, and Wharton had her first sexual encounter in her mid-forties with Morton Fullerton.

The innocent May Welland becomes the target of Wharton’s critique of the immaturity of American women. As Wharton explains in *French Ways and Their Meaning*,<sup>81</sup> “[...] the Frenchwoman is *grown-up*. Compared with the women of France the average American woman is still in the kindergarten” (100). Wharton argues that the Frenchwoman is engaged in “*real living* [my emphasis] [which is] a deep and complex and slowly-developed thing, the outcome of an old and rich social experience. It cannot

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<sup>80</sup> As Candace Waid notes in her “Autobiography and Biography” [*The Age of Innocence: The Norton Anthology Critical Edition*, ed. Candace Waid (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2003)], Balzac’s *Contes Drôlatique*, which lie on Newland’s bedside table, offer “strangely apt commentaries on the tragedy of Edith Wharton’s own sexual ignorance” (275).

<sup>81</sup> Edith Wharton, *French Ways and Their Meaning* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1919) 98–101.

be ‘got up’ like gymnastics, or a proficiency in foreign languages; it has its roots in the fundamental things, and above all in close and constant and interesting and important relations between men and women” (102). Wharton explains that the natural interaction between the two sexes gained during their socializing outside of the home sphere, their different interests, and their contact with new people all contribute to the development of the Frenchwoman’s personality, which is not narrowly female, but multifariously human. In *The Age of Innocence*, Ellen Olenska represents the Frenchwoman’s adulthood gained through experience.

In the very first scene of *The Age of Innocence* at the Opera, Wharton juxtaposes the two main female protagonists —May Welland and Ellen Olenska—who represent the two moralities, the two paths of innocence and experience Newland Archer can take. In contrast to May’s proper white dress and the lilies-of-the-valley she holds, Ellen Olenska, having dark hair and wearing an extravagant, daring, blue velvet “Josephine look” dress, is portrayed as an outsider and thus a threat to the norms of propriety.

Ellen Olenska represents the path to Newland’s self-realization and maturation. She is a disruptive element in the “code-oriented” society of Old New York for she lives according to her “ethics-oriented” morality, according to her own rules, and creates her own relationship to the society’s codes. Ellen does not care about the dictates of “Taste” (AI 10) and “Form” (AI 10) and makes her own “fashions” (AI 47). In other words, she lives her life in an artful manner according to her ethics of the self. From Foucault’s perspective, Ellen possesses the “philosophical ethos”—the critical stance towards the imposed Victorian codes. She acquired her “double vision” from her parents who “had

been continental wanderers” (AI 38) and died when she was ten, through her upbringing by her eccentric aunt Medora Manson, and through her marriage to a Polish Count and the consequent exilic life in Central Europe. Owing to her experience of living the unsheltered, European “real life,” Ellen Olenska stands out as one of the few mature individuals in the novel. As Newland observes:

The Countess Olenska was the only young woman at the dinner; yet, as Archer scanned the smooth plump elderly faces between their diamond necklaces and towering ostrich feathers, they struck him as curiously immature compared with hers. It frightened him to think what must have gone to the making of her eyes. (AI 40)

As Ellen later explains to Archer, she “had to look at the Gorgon” (AI 173); in other words, she had to look at life as it was without the mirage of illusions in order to survive.

In *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton employs other characters who also live according to the “ethics-oriented morality” as Ellen’s co-citizens of the “Republic of Spirit.” Her grandmother Mrs. Manson Mingott, whose “cream-coloured house” (AI 9) is a “visible proof of her moral courage” (AI 9), and the secretary of her husband M. Rivière function as Ellen’s doubles. They all hold the secret of “quant à soi”<sup>82</sup> (AI 122) towards the social norms and the “code-oriented morality” of the society. As M. Rivère voices it: “[...] it’s worth everything [...] to keep one’s intellectual liberty, not to enslave one’s power of appreciation, one’s critical independence [... It is crucial that] one preserves one’s moral freedom” (AI 122). Edith Wharton cherished and shared this critical distance with her friends of the “inner group” (BG 192). It was a group of friends

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<sup>82</sup> In English translation, “quant à soi” means “keeping one’s distance.”

who, being in their forties, had already acquired personalities of their own. “What they liked and respected in one another they liked and respected in themselves, a blend of intellect and sensitivity”<sup>83</sup> (4). “The seemingly disparate personalities of the happy few were united by a shared sense of exile [...]: geographical, intellectual, sexual, aesthetic” (9). The members of the “inner circle,” like M. Rivière and Ellen Olenska, valued a “good conversation” (AI 122); for them also “the air of ideas [was] the only air worth breathing” (AI 122).

Ellen Olenska’s surroundings and clothes are an inseparable part of her non-conforming personality. She stands out as a “young woman [...] careless of the dictates of Taste” (AI 10), unlike most members of Old New York, who are “all as like each other as those dolls cut out of the same folder paper... like patterns stenciled on a wall” (AI 53). For instance, Ellen’s Opera dress is scandalously “perfectly plain and flat—like a night-gown” (AI 26), and where a “simple dinner dress”<sup>84</sup> would be appropriate, Madame Olenska, “heedless of tradition, was attired in a long robe of red velvet bordered about the chin and down the front with glossy black fur” (AI 67). Significantly, for others, her dresses are too fashionable, provocative, and sensual.

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<sup>83</sup> Susan Goodman, *Edith Wharton’s Inner Circle* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1994) ix–19.

<sup>84</sup> A simple dinner dress, as Wharton describes it, should be “a close-fitting armour of whale-boned silk, slightly open in the neck, with lace ruffles filling in the crack, and tight sleeves with a flounce uncovering just enough wrist to show an Etruscan gold bracelet or a velvet band.” (AI 70)

Ellen Olenska's milieu is reflective of the uniqueness of her character: she lives in an artistic "Bohemian" quarter"<sup>85</sup> (AI 65) with "people who wrote" (AI 65). From Newland's perspective, even her room has an air of foreignness:

The atmosphere of the room was so different from any he had ever breathed that self-consciousness vanished in the sense of adventure. He had been before in drawing-rooms hung with red damask, with pictures "of the Italian school"; what struck him was the way in which Medora Manson's shabby hired house, with its blighted background of pampas grass and Rogers statuettes, had, by a turn of the hand, and the skilful use of a few properties, been transformed into something intimate, "foreign," subtly suggestive of old romantic scenes and sentiments. He tried to analyse the trick, to find a clue to it in the way the chairs and tables were grouped, in the fact that only two Jacqueminot roses (of which nobody ever bought less than a dozen) had been placed in the slender vase at his elbow, and in the vague pervading perfume that was not what one put on handkerchiefs, but rather like the scent of some far-off bazaar, a smell made up of Turkish coffee and ambergris and dried roses. (AI 45)

For Edith Wharton, who was an author of a book on interior decoration,<sup>86</sup> rooms often mirror characters' personalities and moods. For instance, in *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart feels imprisoned in the proper Victorian house of Mrs. Peniston. In the *Fullness of Life*, Wharton compares a woman's soul to the hidden, innermost room of the house into which her husband will never enter. In *The Age of Innocence*, Newland finds the

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<sup>85</sup> "Beyond the small and slippery pyramid which composed Mrs. Archer's world lay the almost unmapped quarter inhabited by artists, musicians and 'people who wrote.' These scattered fragments of humanity had never shown any desire to be amalgamated with the social structure. In spite of odd ways they were said to be, for the most part, quite respectable; but they preferred to keep to themselves. Medora Manson, in her prosperous days, had inaugurated a 'literary salon'; but it had soon died out owing to the reluctance of the literary to frequent it. (AI 64)

<sup>86</sup> Edith Wharton, *The Decoration of Houses* (New York: Cosimo, 2008).

Wellands' house "narcotic" (AI 133) and his new household with May suffocating. It is significant that Ellen never feels at home in American houses where one is always under the microscope:

One can't be alone for a minute in that great seminary of a house, with all the doors wide open, and always a servant bringing tea, or a log for the fire, or the newspaper! Is there nowhere in an American house where one may be by one's self? You're so shy, and yet you're so public. I always feel as if I were in the convent again—or on the stage, before a dreadfully polite audience that never applauds. (AI 83)

From Foucault's perspective, in the "society of surveillance" (DP 217) of Old New York the subject's invisibility is potentially threatening to the system, for it allows a space for self-contemplation, and thus opens up a possibility for nourishing, or conceiving the self different from the imposed, conforming one. As Foucault explains in his *Discipline and Punish*:

Disciplinary power [... of the social codes] is exercised through its invisibility; at the same time it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility. In discipline, it is the subjects who have to be seen. Their visibility assures the hold of the power that is exercised over them. It is the fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection. (DP 187)

Ellen Olenska, living according to her "ethics-oriented morality," is not only portrayed as an outsider, but as a menace to Old New York. Seeking to obtain a divorce from her rich husband, Ellen directly threatens the society based upon the "code-oriented morality" and the patriarchal institution of marriage. As Archer explains, even though the

“legislation favours divorce [... the] social customs don’t” (AI 70). In *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton captures the situation in the 1880s when the number of decrees of absolute divorce granted in New York grew unprecedentedly and the laws of the neighboring states allowed the divorcees to remarry multiple times.<sup>87</sup> This increased possibility of social mobility added to the anxiety of the ruling clans (in the novel represented by the Mingotts, Newlands, Chiverses, and Mansons) about their position in Old New York’s “small and slippery pyramid” (AI 31). Also, divorce presented a threat to the slowly accumulated wealth of the oldest patriarchal tribes. Until 1882, when the Married Women’s Property Act became law, “[where] property was concerned [...] a husband assumed legal possession or control of all property that belonged to his wife upon marriage and any property that might come to her during marriage”<sup>88</sup> (4). This law and the divorce practice, which was becoming more popular, meant potential weakening of the wealth and the social status of the ruling leisure class. In short, divorce was harshly opposed by those “interested in the preservation of social morality”<sup>87</sup> (374). In 1913, Edith Wharton herself obtained divorce against the wishes of her family from her husband, Teddy Wharton, who suffered from manic-depression inherited from his father. Divorce is one of the reoccurring themes in Wharton’s fiction.<sup>89</sup> Even though it presents

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<sup>87</sup> “Divorce and Marriages in New York,” *New York Tribune*, October 7, 1883, 9. Reprinted in *The Age of Innocence: The Norton Anthology Critical Edition*, ed. Candace Waid (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2003) 374–377.

<sup>88</sup> Lee Holcombe, “Victorian Wives and Property: Reform of the Married Women’s Property Law, 1857–1882,” in *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women*, ed. Martha Vicinius (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977) 3–28.

<sup>89</sup> As Kimberly A. Freedman notes in her book *Love American Style: Divorce and the American Novel, 1881–1976* (New York: Routledge, 2003), divorce appears in many of Wharton’s fiction, e.g., *The Custom of the Country* (1913), *The Mother’s Recompense* (1925), and *Glimpses of the Moon* (1922).

the legal possibility of breaking the marriage tie, Wharton shows that marriage as an institution remains embedded in the cultural consciousness of society. For instance, in her short story *Souls Belated*,<sup>90</sup> Wharton examines the difficulty, if not impossibility, of defining a woman's life outside of the internalized norms of her gender and her dependent role in marriage. Even though for Lydia, to marry Gannett would mean to lose the "dignity of their relation" (391) based on mutual sharing of their individuality, she is forced to accept the impossibility of its existence outside of the social entrapments. Recognizing her defeat, Lydia finally decides to become Gannett's wife.

Apart from threatening Old New York's social fabric with her intended divorce, Ellen Olenska's honesty challenges society's hypocrisy. In the "hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs" (AI 29), Ellen's truth-telling (as Foucault's technique of the self) presents a potential threat to the established norms of the "code-oriented morality." She ignores the fact that New York is a "labyrinth" of manners. As she admits:

"I thought it so straight up and down—like Fifth Avenue. And with all the cross streets numbered!" She seemed to guess his faint disapproval of this, and added, with the rare smile that enchanted her whole face: "If you knew how I like it for just *that*—the straight-up-and-downness, and the big honest labels on everything!" (AI 49)

It is significant that Ellen, owing to her maturity, already feels like a foreigner in New York. As Archer notes, Ellen even speaks a different tongue. Her direct use of language

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<sup>90</sup> Edith Wharton, "Souls Belated," in *Scribbling Women: Short Stories by 19<sup>th</sup>-Century American Women*, ed. Christopher Bigsby (London: The Orion Publishing Group, 1997) 389–413.

to denote the real nature of the world around her stands in opposition to the “faint implications and pale delicacies” (AI 12) of the New York upper-class, in which people care about what is and what is not “the [right] thing” to do. Ellen ignores the expectation that a woman practices the art of silence and calls things their proper names. When Archer picks up Ellen at the railway station and proposes a relationship even though he is married, she calmly asks him if his idea is that she should be with him as his mistress “since she can’t be [his] wife” (AI 174):

The crudeness of the question startled him: the word was one that women of his class fought shy of, even when their talk flitted closest about the topic. He noticed that Madame Olenska pronounced it as if it had a recognised place in her vocabulary, and he wondered if it had been used familiarly in her presence in the horrible life she had fled from. Her question pulled him up with a jerk, and he floundered (AI 174).

Ellen’s “foreign” language reflects her mature, straightforward, and unpretending attitude about life and people around her. At the same time, it defies society’s sanctimoniousness characterized by the avoidance of unpleasant things, pretence and the use of a double standard.<sup>91</sup>

Last but not least, Ellen, who lives according to her ethics of the self and understands the importance of the “care of the self,” is the only character in the novel who can actually take care of and help someone else. When the old women of the tribe

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<sup>91</sup> Whereas society tolerates Beaufort’s numerous extramarital affairs because he provides entertainment for the society by giving balls and expensive dinners, a different standard is used when it comes to Ellen’s impending divorce. In other words, Beaufort plays according to the society’s unwritten hypocritical rules (code-oriented morality), and thus does not present a threat to the system.

offer Ellen help, it is under the condition of not hearing anything unpleasant. Their proposal is socially motivated, and, in fact, selfish, for Ellen as a black sheep casts a shadow on the family's reputability. On the contrary, Ellen's care for others is real and based on human compassion. Ellen's willingness to help Regina Beaufort,<sup>92</sup> who is shunned by everyone after her husband's bankruptcy, and her helping a little boy in her quarter who gets hurt are altruistic acts based on her own sense of ethics, morality. Similarly, Ellen "couldn't have [her] happiness made out of a wrong—an unfairness—to somebody else" (AI 93), and thus, being honest to herself, she acknowledges that she cannot love Newland unless she gives him up (AI 107).

Ellen Olenska, living according to her ethics of the self, presents a threat to the Old New York upper-class and therefore has to be expelled. As Foucault explains: "What is specific to the disciplinary penalty is non-observance, that which does not measure up to the rule, that depart from it. The whole indefinite domain of the non-conforming is punishable" (DP 178). Aptly, Newland compares Old New York and its ruthless practices in securing its purity of manners to a Jewish orthodox sect:

He remembered what [Ellen] had told him of Mrs. Welland's request to be spared whatever was "unpleasant" in her history, and winced at the thought that it was

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<sup>92</sup> "No one really liked Beaufort, and it was not wholly unpleasant to think the worst of his private life; but the idea of his having brought financial dishonour on his wife's family was too shocking to be enjoyed even by his enemies. Archer's New York tolerated hypocrisy in private relations; but in business matters it exacted a limpid and impeccable honesty. It was a long time since any well-known banker had failed discreditably; but every one remembered the social extinction visited on the heads of the firm when the last event of the kind had happened. It would be the same with the Beauforts, in spite of his power and her popularity; not all the leagued strength of the Dallas connection would save poor Regina if there were any truth in the reports of her husband's unlawful speculations." (AI 157)

perhaps this attitude of mind which kept the New York air so pure. “Are we only Pharisees after all?” he wondered, puzzled by the effort to reconcile his instinctive disgust at human vileness with his equally instinctive pity for human frailty. (AI 60)

The greatest offence in Old New York is the non-compliance with the “code-oriented morality.” As Mrs. Mingott notes, “Not one of them wants to be different; they’re scared of it as the small-pox” (AI 95). Ellen, due to living according to her “ethics-oriented morality,” maintains her self-ownership and thus defies society’s power over her. As the only Mingott who keeps “any wicked blood” (AI 96), she must be ritually gotten rid off in protection of society’s “disciplinary monotony” (DP 141). It is no coincidence that the farewell dinner for Ellen is simultaneously the first official dinner of May and Newland as a married couple. Ellen’s ritual expulsion from the tribe serves as a warning for other potentially non-complying subjects, and signifies that the individual will always be sacrificed to the collective interest.

Ellen, functioning as the disruptive element in Old New York, as the “intruder,” holds up a mirror to Archer’s life and thus opens up a path to his maturation. Ellen’s presence in Old New York conceives Newland Archer’s “double vision”—the critical stance towards the “code-oriented morality.” Ellen, being an outsider herself, makes Archer look at his leisure class life from above:

New York seemed much farther off than Samarkand, and if they were indeed to help each other she was rendering what might prove the first of their mutual services by making him look at his native city objectively. Viewed thus, as through the wrong end of a telescope, it looked disconcertingly small and distant; but then from Samarkand it would. (AI 49)

This new perspective allows, even forces Archer to realize the extent of his social determination and entrapments. Suddenly, he “fe[els] as if [he is] being buried alive under his future” (AI 87). Considering his impending marriage with May Welland, Newland perceives “his fate [as] sealed” (AI 46). It is not surprising that the actual wedding ceremony is conveyed by Wharton in a rather funereal tone. The wedding is a significant social event—ritual—it encompasses and reinforces the codes of propriety, it strengthens the class boundaries, and it solidifies the ties among the ruling clans. In Wharton’s fiction, marriage is one of the most pervasive social entrapments for both men and women because it is embedded in society’s social and economic structure. Newland and May’s wedding is yet another public spectacle with the same faces as those from the “first night at the Opera” (AI 110), and Lawrence Lefferts “mount[s] guard over the invisible deity of ‘Good Form’ who presid[es] at the ceremony” (AI 111). Archer thinks about the possible flaws in the decorum that Lefferts might find and realizes how these were once important to him, too. “The things that had filled his days seemed now like a nursery parody of life” (AI 111). In other words, once Newland looked through the “inverted telescope” (AI 50) through the social entrapments, he cannot return to the innocent, immature view before the fall into this experience. Owing to Ellen, Newland gets a glimpse of the possibility of “real life” beyond the social conventions of Victorian society, and he starts suspecting that “real people were living somewhere, and real things happening to them” (AI 111). The feeling of numbness intensifies, grows stronger after years spent living the conventional, settled life with May. “His whole future seemed suddenly to be unrolled before him; and passing down its endless emptiness he saw the dwindling figure of a man to whom nothing was ever to happen” (AI 139).

Acquiring the new critical stance towards life from Ellen challenges not only the way in which he sees himself, but also to an extent Newland's stereotypical perception of women within the Victorian "angel" and "whore" binary opposition. As Peter T. Cominos explains,

Victorian society and the family spawned two kinds of women, the womanly woman and her negation, the whorely whore: the pure and the impure. [...] The pure woman was innocent, inviolate, inspirational and indulged; the impure woman (less than a woman) was doubtful, detected, detestable and destroyed. No dialectic could join the two; a great and impassable gulf divided them.<sup>93</sup>

Keeping with the general stereotype, at the beginning Newland slots women into categories; he distinguishes between women "one loved and respected and those one enjoyed—and pitied" (AI 61). Whereas May Welland represents the former type, Mrs. Rushworth, with whom Newland had a two-year affair, belongs to the latter category. According to the society's hypocritical double standard, when "such things happened" it was undoubtedly foolish of the man, but somehow always criminal of the woman" (AI 61). As Archer puts it, representing the general view, "it was his duty, as a 'decent' fellow, to conceal his past from her, and [May's], as a marriageable girl, to have no past to conceal" (AI 29). However, the appearance of Ellen Olenska in Newland's life forces him to reevaluate his black and white, simplified perception of women and transform it, at least occasionally, into a more mature, grey vision. Consequently, Newland defends Ellen's divorce and even though on a purely theoretical level accepts that "women ought

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<sup>93</sup> Peter T. Cominos, "Innocent Femina Sensualis in Unconscious Conflict," in *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, ed. Martha Vicinius (Don Mills, Ontario: Fitzhenry and Whiteside Limited, 1972) 168.

to be free—as free as [men] are”<sup>94</sup> (AI 27). Finally, he realizes that May, despite her presumed “innocence,” is rather forceful and fearless when it comes to protecting the family hearth and her position in it. Symptomatically, throughout the novel May is compared to Diana—the virgin goddess of the hunt. She is good at archery, and taking Newland as her target, she finally secures her power over him through her pregnancy. After May’s death, Archer realizes that she knew about his love for Ellen all along.

Even though Archer does mature through the acquisition of the “double vision” from Ellen, because he does not have the moral strength to act and live upon it, he remains a teenager who never reaches his maturity in the novel. Newland sees beyond the norms that have molded his personality and govern Old New York, but he chooses to tread the easier and safer path of social conformity:

In matters intellectual and artistic Newland Archer felt himself distinctly the superior of these chosen specimens of old New York gentility; he had probably read more, thought more, and even seen a good deal more of the world, than any other man of the number. Singly they betrayed their inferiority; but grouped together they represented “New York,” and the habit of masculine solidarity made him accept their doctrine on all the issues called moral. He instinctively felt that in this respect it would be troublesome—and also rather bad form—to strike out for himself. (AI 6)

Newland Archer belongs, like Lawrence Selden in *The House of Mirth*, among the “unsatisfactory m[e]n” in Wharton’s fiction, who when acting upon the “code-oriented”

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<sup>94</sup> Katherine Joslin in *Edith Wharton* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991) labels Newland “an ‘armchair’ feminist” (98). Even though he is less prejudiced than his fellows regarding the woman question, he does not foresee the practical consequences of his opinion about the emancipation of women.

morality, fail to support their female counterparts. Regressing at times into his “angel” and “whore” categorical vision prevents him from supporting Ellen when she needs him most. At the beginning, Newland defends her right to get a divorce from her “brute of a husband” (AI 26); however, upon hearing rumors about Ellen’s extramarital affair with her husband’s secretary, Mr. Rivière, he falls back into judging Ellen as a type and not as a complex individual, and advises her against the divorce. Finally, unlike Ellen, Newland is unable to overcome his socialization and continues to lack self-ownership—the mature individuality—which forms the necessary basis for an equal partnership. Thus, while Newland is ready for a marriage with May based on proprietorship, he is too immature to have an equal relationship with Ellen founded on tolerance, respect, support, and compromise.

Even though Newland gets a glimpse of the life beyond the norms, he never becomes the citizen of the “Republic of Spirit.” He erroneously presumes that living beyond the norms would mean living in a far-away country like Japan or India. He imagines finding a place where people are not judged in terms of the marriage standard and the “code-oriented morality.”

“I want—I want somehow to get away with you into a world where words like that—categories like that—won’t exist. Where we shall be simply two human beings who love each other, who are the whole of life to each other; and nothing else on earth will matter.” [Ellen responds,] “Oh, my dear—where is that country? Have you ever been there?” she asked; and as he remained sullenly dumb she went on: “I know so many who’ve tried to find it; and, believe me, they all got out by mistake at wayside stations: at places like Boulogne, or Pisa, or Monte Carlo—

and it wasn't at all different from the old world they'd left, but only rather smaller and dingier and more promiscuous.” (AI 174)

What Newland fails to understand is that such a country exists only within the realm of the self. One has to create it through the critical evaluation of the existing norms that molded an individual as a social subject. Whereas the “code-oriented morality” characterizes Old New York and its manners, the “ethics-oriented morality,” as practiced by Ellen Olenska, is the basis of “The Republic of the Spirit”—the Republic of the Self. However, living according to the “ethics-oriented morality” would require Newland’s active work in critically examining and re-creating his former self, which he, “being at heart a dilettante,”<sup>95</sup> (AI 4) is unable to do.

The last chapter of *The Age of Innocence* opens in the Old New York of the new generation. It juxtaposes Newland’s conforming life within Old New York and Ellen Olenska’s self-possessed, autonomous life in Paris. As years passed, for Newland, who chose living according to the “code-oriented morality,” “conformity to the discipline of a small society had become almost his second nature” (AI 192). He has become an exemplary citizen “enclosed [...] in the warm shelter of habit” (AI 192) of the social conventions and manners. Having given Newland three children, May Welland prematurely dies of pneumonia. Over the many years of their marriage, she remained in many respects as innocent as the first day they met: “generous, faithful, unwearied; but so lacking in imagination, so incapable of growth, that the world of her youth had fallen into pieces and rebuilt itself without her ever being conscious of the change. This hard bright blindness had kept her immediate horizon apparently unaltered” (AI 208). Even though at

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<sup>95</sup> “Thinking over a pleasure to come often gave him a subtler satisfaction than its realization” (AI 4).

the beginning of their relationship Newland dreamt about showing May the world beyond conventions, he soon realized that “[t]here was no use in trying to emancipate a wife who had not the dimmest notion that she was not free” (AI 119). As Newland explains, “If her simplicity had been the simplicity of pettiness he would have chafed and rebelled; but since the lines of her character, though so few, were on the same fine mould as her face, she became the tutelary divinity of all his old traditions and reverences” (AI 119). In other words, May, not seeing beyond the norms and the ideology of her gender, remains all her life the society’s perfect unquestioning subject.

Despite Newland’s acceptance of the life within the social convention, he realizes that the price he has paid for taking the easier path of conformity was missing “the flower of life” (AI 208)—the happiness and self-fulfillment that would result from living the real life according to one’s ethics of the self. “When he thought of Ellen Olenska it was abstractly, serenely, as one might think of some imaginary beloved in a book or a picture: she had become the composite vision of all that he had missed (AI 208). It is typical of Newland, who never really matures, that when he has a chance to see Ellen Olenska on his visit to Paris, he dismisses the opportunity in order to preserve the idealized, unspoiled image of her in his mind. He does not have enough courage to confront the last remainder of the life he might have chosen to live.

In contrast to Newland, Ellen Olenska chose to live according to the “ethics-oriented morality,” based upon her own codes of behavior. Having been expelled from Old New York, Ellen does not return to her husband, but establishes an independent life for herself in Paris. She represents the adulthood Newland never reaches in the novel.

Ellen is a grown-up individual, who through living the “real life,” (utilizing Foucault’s “techniques of existence,” such as “retreat into oneself,” self-contemplation, and the interaction with friends of similar disposition) finds a way to the “Republic of Spirit”—a place of fulfillment of one’s soul. Like Lily in *The House of Mirth*, the mature Ellen is no longer afraid of being alone. As she admits: “I *was* lonely; I *was* afraid. But the emptiness and the darkness are gone; when I turn back into myself now I’m like a child going at night into a room where there’s always a light” (AI 107). In other words, Ellen finds her happiness within, realizing that “the real loneliness is to live among all these kind people who only ask you to pretend” (AI 50).

Ellen Olenska becomes a spokesperson for the values the novel advocates. It is no coincidence that of all the characters in Wharton’s fiction, she is one of the closest to the author herself. Like Ellen, Edith Wharton spent the last years of her life in a voluntary exile (both geographical and intellectual) in Paris. Apart from living the artistic life of a fiction writer and an interior design theorist, she became the artist of her own life. After her divorce from Teddy Wharton, not afraid of being alone, she created an independent life for herself in which she followed her own rules.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, in this thesis, I have argued that reading Edith Wharton’s novels *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence* through the lens of Michel Foucault’s ethics of the self defies its deterministic interpretations and opens a space to allow free will for the characters in American literary naturalism.

The ethical interpretation of *The House of Mirth* disputes its naturalistic readings, based on the socio-economic determination of its characters and the plot of decline. In this view, Lily Bart's story is the one of self-creation—self-transformation from the determined subject of the ideology of a lady to a self-owned individual.

Reading *The Age of Innocence* from the perspective of Foucault's ethics allows for understanding the novel as Newland Archer's dilemma between two moralities: "the code-oriented morality" and "the ethics-oriented morality." Whereas the first is characteristic of naturalism's social determinism, the latter represents the possibility of the individual's free will and opens up a path to one's self-determination. Even though Newland acquires his "double-vision"—the ability to see beyond the society's norms—he, unlike Ellen Olenska, is not strong enough to completely reject "the code-oriented morality" and self-create. On the contrary, both Ellen Olenska and Lily Bart, living according to their ethics of the self ("the ethics-oriented morality"), stand for the possibility of the re-creation of one's life into a work of art.

For Edith Wharton and for her protagonists, Lily and Ellen, Michel Foucault's "techniques of the self" were the means of creating a different identity from that of the non-productive, ornamental lady. In other words, for them, the ethics of the self became "an aesthetics of existence," the way of their self-transformation. Through "technique[s] of living" such as writing, self-writing (autobiography), and letter-writing to her closest friends, Wharton established an autonomous life for herself within the gender-biased New York upper-class society. Not only through her life narrative but also through her work, Wharton represented the idea of "resistance [...] as a continuous [...] creative

process.”<sup>96</sup> She challenged society’s status quo through uncovering what Foucault called the “games of truth” (i.e., “a set of rules by which truth is produced”).<sup>97</sup> Employing characters in her fiction who acquired “double vision,” such as Lily Bart, Ellen Olenska, and Newland Archer, Wharton offered a critical counter-discourse to the official narrative of her class and gender in the transitional period.

Finally, through her work Wharton conveyed that the possibility of transformation within the social entrapments of American literary naturalism lies in the realm of the self (in the sense of Foucault’s non-essentialist, self-created subjectivity), a self traditionally excluded from naturalistic discourse.

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<sup>96</sup> Foucault, “Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity,” 168.

<sup>97</sup> Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom,” 297.

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## Summary:

### **“Ethics of the Self as an Aesthetics of Existence in Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*”**

Tato diplomová práce nazvaná „Etika jáství jako estetika existence ve Whartonové *Domě radovánek* a *Věku nevinnosti*“ dokládá, že čtení těchto románů skrze Foucaultovu etiku jáství stojí v protikladu k jejich deterministické interpretaci, a otevírá tím prostor svobodné vůle pro postavy v americkém literárním naturalismu. První kapitola definuje americký literární naturalismus a zkoumá jeho historické kořeny. Druhá kapitola vysvětluje Foucaultovu etiku a její spojitost s naturalismem. Třetí kapitola pojednává o životě Edith Whartonové a jejím boji za vytvoření vlastní identity pomocí Foucaultovy etiky jáství a s ním spojených „technik jáství.“ Poslední dvě kapitoly jsou čtením *Domu radovánek* a *Věku nevinnosti* z pohledu Foucaultovy etiky.

V úvodní kapitole nazvané „Americký literární naturalismus“ se dozvídáme, že americký literární naturalismus byl, na rozdíl od toho evropského, produktem historického období konce devatenáctého a začátku dvacátého století. Industriální revoluce přinesla nevratné změny, které vyústily v masovou produkci zboží v továrnách, urbanizaci a vznik konzumní kultury. Toto přelomové období bylo érou nových vynálezů (jako např. elektrického světla, telefonu, telegrafu a automobilu), které dočista změnily fyzickou podobu světa na niž byli lidé do té doby zvyklí. V roce 1869 byla dostavena první transkontinentální železnice, která přispěla ke snadnější migraci lidí z venkova do

měst. Zároveň nové dopravní prostředky přispěly ke zvýšení počtu imigrantů, zejména z Evropy a Číny.

V tomto novém, mechanizovaném světě, došlo ke splynutí individuální identity, která byla předtím postavena na pocitu sounáležitosti s komunitou, kulturou a náboženstvím, s anonymitou prostředí města a továrny. Přírodní řád, závislý na čase ročních období, byl vystřídán standardizovaným časem hodin.

Naturalismus byl nejenom reakcí na výše zmíněné historické změny, ale také na vědecké objevy Charlese Darwina, Herberta Spensera a dalších evolučních vědců. Na rozdíl od realismu, naturalismus ztvárňuje své postavy jako determinované dědičností a socioekonomickými faktory. Naturalističtí protagonisté připomínají pasivní stroje, které nemají svobodnou vůli a jsou smýkány chemicky vyprodukovanými touhami a vášněmi. Naturalismus považuje prostředí a biologii za určující sílu v lidském životě a vylučuje existenci duše v její esenciální podobě.

Druhá kapitola „Foucault a Technologie jáství“ vysvětluje Foucaultovo pozdní dílo zaměřené na etiku. Smrt transcendentálního subjektu sdílí naturalismus s poststrukturalismem. Oba vnímají člověka jako determinovaného a v podstatě konstruovaného skrze diskursivní a sociální praktiky dané společností. Jako poststrukturalista se Michel Foucault zaměřuje ve svých genealogických dílech *Dohlížet a trestat* a v prvním dílu *Historie sexuality* spíše na „technologie moci“ a jejich dopad na jedincovo tělo. Tělo se stává objektem disciplinárních praktik a norem. Zejména ve feministické interpretaci této části Foucaultova díla je ženské tělo formováno „technikami ženskosti.“

Zatímco Foucaultova genealogická část díla, zabývající se konstruktivistickým pojetím determinovaného subjektu, se ukázala být produktivní pro analýzu těla jako stroje v naturalismu, pozdní, etická část jeho díla, která se zabývá lidskou subjektivitou, nabízí možnost definovat a zkoumat „já“ v naturalismu z neesencialistického úhlu pohledu. V *Historii sexuality* (dílu druhém a třetím) a v jeho přednáškách a rozhovorech se Foucault odklonil od analýzy „technologií moci“ a jejího dopadu na lidské tělo, a začal se zabývat lidskou subjektivitou a s ní spojenými „technologemi jáství.“ Je třeba poznamenat, že jeho moderní teorie subjektivity odmítá poststrukturalistickou ideu kompletně determinované subjektivity, která odpírá jakoukoli možnost resistance.

Ve svém díle o etice Foucault nepovažuje subjektivitu za něco daného, neměnitelného a vnuceného z vnějšku. V jeho pohledu je subjektivita stále proměňována „technologemi jáství.“ Skrze tyto „techniky existence,“ jakými jsou například sebekritika, kontemplace, psaní autobiografie (jako způsob sebepsaní), psaní dopisů a mluvení pravdy, člověk může vytvořit svůj život jako umělecké dílo. Praktikováním „technologií jáství“—sebekritikou a kritikou norem a diskursivních praktik, které vytvořily z jedince společenský subjekt, mohou ona či on nabýt určité autonomie v rámci systému. Z této pozice zintenzivněného vědomí může jedinec vidět za svá společenská uvěznění, která jsou společností prezentovaná jako evidentní pravdy. Toto „dvojitě vidění“ je předpokladem možnosti podrytí zavedeného systému skrze rozplétání, odhalení a přetváření jeho konstitutivních norem.

Foucaultovy „techniky existence“ představují možnost jedincovy sebe-konstituce; jsou základem péče o duši a etiky jáství. Pro Foucaulta je „etika typ vztahu,

který by člověk měl mít sám s sebou, a který předurčuje způsob, jakým jedinec tvoří sám sebe jako morální subjekt svých činů.“ „Moralita etiky,“ postavená na svém nenormalizačním základu, stojí v protikladu k moralitě náboženských a společenských norem, které jsou jako řád vnuceny shora. V řecko-římské kultuře representovala etika, která vyžadovala jedincovu kontinuální práci na své duši, „estetiku existence.“

Třetí kapitola nazvaná „Edith Whartonová: sociální uvěznění a možnost transformace,“ popisuje autorčin život jako příklad možnosti individuálního sebe(pře)tvoření: ze společností předepsané role ornamentální dámy v nezávislou a úspěšnou spisovatelku. Život Edith Whartonové je úzce spjat s jejím dílem. Narodila se do rodiny newyorské vyšší třídy na začátku dvacátého století, a očekávalo se od ní, že se stane dobrou hostitelkou a paní domu. Nicméně od raného věku byla Edith vášnivou čtenářkou a trávila svůj volný čas vymýšlením historek. Ve své autobiografii *Pohled zpět* označuje psaní za svou „tajnou zahradu,“ ve které si vytvořila svůj autonomní život. Z Foucaultovy perspektivy se jí psaní (jako „technika jáství“) stalo prostředkem kontinuální sebetransformace. Její dráha profesionální spisovatelky byla svým způsobem rebelií proti „zahálčivé třídě,“ jejíž byla součástí. Pro tuto třídu bylo psaní něčím mezi manuální prací a černou magií. Od žen se očekávalo, že se stanou konzumenty bohatství svého manžela a ne producenty vlastního života a majetku.

Podle Elizabeth Ammonsové patřila Whartonová k první generaci žen, které se snažily stát nejenom pouhými spisovatelkami, ale umělkyněmi a autorkami. Zatímco pro spisovatelky bylo psaní pouze aktivitou ve volném čase mezi domácími pracemi, pro umělkyně nebylo manželství a rodina kompatibilní s jejich rolí autora. Ammonsová

argumentuje, že tato generace se nacházela mezi generací jejich matek, ze které se snažily vymanit, a generací privilegovaného mužského autora, do které ještě nedospěly. Ze začátku Edith Whartonová často psala ráno a začínala svůj rušný společenský život v poledne, jakoby se snažila před všemi skrývat, že psaní pro ni není pouze aktivita pro volný čas, ale její celý život.

Svým stylem Whartonová patří mezi sentimentální domácí proud svých předchůdkyň a naturalistický styl svých současníků. Jako naturalistka a spisovatelka mravů, Whartonová spoutává své postavy do stejných společenských uvěznění a rolí, ve kterých trpěla ona sama, jako žena i jako autor. Podle Susan Gubarové a Sandry Gilbertové reprezentovala figurativní uvěznění často reálná uvěznění autorek v životě a v tvorbě. Tyto ženy byly nejen zavřené v domech svých otců, ale i metaforicky v mužské literární tradici, od které se snažily osvobodit. Psaní bylo považováno po dlouhou dobu za výlučně mužskou záležitost, a tak není divu, že pokusy o literární tvorbu psanou ženami byly doprovázeny úzkostí ze psaní. Aby ženy mohly opravdu začít psát, musely změnit a přetvořit obraz, který jim společnost vtiskla. Jinými slovy musely zabít „anděla v domě,“ vnucený mužský ideál ženskosti, který od žen vyžadoval sebeobětování pro domácnost a velmi omezenou znalost čehokoliv za sférou rodinného krbu.

Změna pouhé spisovatelky v autorku, umělkyni, znamenala nutnost překonání ideologie rozdělených sfér (vlivu a zájmů) pro muže a ženy ve společnosti. Ženská autorka musela překročit hranice domácí sféry spojené s „Kultem ženskosti“ a veřejné, tradičně mužské sféry. Takový přesun nebyl vždy bezbolestný a mnoho autorek, zejména do dvacátého století, publikovalo pod pseudonymem. Není potom překvapením, že

rodina Edith Whartonové nechala její první sbírku básní vydat pod jménem Eagdyth, aby jí uchránila od nechtěné a nevhodné slávy.

Psaní románů, cestopisů, povídek a dopisů přátelům, byly způsoby, které se podílely na vytváření jejího nového „já.“ Whartonová nakonec našla svůj domov v „zemi literatury“ a svou rodinu v okruhu několika intelektuálních přátel. I přes restriktivní společenské konvence své doby se stala autorkou svého života a jedním z nejlépe placených spisovatelů své epochy.

Svým dílem i životním příkladem se Whartonová vzepřela genderově předpojatým konvencím „Starého New Yorku.“ Whartonová prohlédla skrze ideologii dámy a věděla co znamená žít s tímto „dvojitým viděním.“ Kromě postav, které jsou slepě poslušnými produkty sociálního determinismu, Whartonová ve své fikci zahrnuje také „probuzené subjekty.“ Postavy, které získají „rozdvojené vědomí“ a vidí za sociální normy, kterými byly utvořeny. Tyto postavy, ať už Lily Bartová v *Domě radovánek* nebo Ellen Olenská a Newland Archer ve *Věku nevinosti*, fungují jako potenciálně subversivní body resistance v naturalistickém vyprávění a představují protidiskurs k ideologii genderu a „zahálčivé třídy“ v americké literatuře přelomu dvacátého století. Z Foucaultovy perspektivy Whartonová odhalila skrze tyto postavy, které slouží jako prostředky její společenské kritiky, pravdu o newyorských vyšších kruzích, a tak otevřela cestu k její změně.

Kapitola čtvrtá „*Dům radovánek*“ dospívá k tomu, že interpretace tohoto románu z hlediska Foucaultovy „etiky jáství“ odporuje jeho deterministickým čtením. V této

etické interpretaci Lily Bartová překoná svou socializaci „ornamentální dámy“ a přemění se v nezávislého jedince.

Foucaultovy „techniky existence,“ mezi které patří sdělování pravdy a čestnost praktikovaná mezi přáteli, stažení se do ústraní ke kontemplaci a sebekritika, jsou v *Domě radovánek* prostředky, kterými Lily získá a udrží si svoje „dvojitě vědomí.“ Díky této zostřené vizi Lily vidí skrze společenské konvence, které z ní vytvořili ornamentální objekt. „Techniky existence“ představují možnost agence v rámci společenských uvěznění, protože dovolují jedincům ovlivnit a potencionálně přetvořit jejich vnucenou sociální identitu v jinou, autentičtější.

Edith Whartonová, stejně jako Lily Bartová, patřice do newyorské vyšší třídy přelomu století, byly determinovány ideologií své třídy a genderu. V *Domě radovánek* bohaté rodiny Dorestů a Van Osburgů reprezentují vyšší, takzvanou „zahálčivou třídu,“ která se vyznačuje neproduktivní zahálkou, zmasovělou konzumací a úzkostlivým dodržováním etikety. Všechny tyto znaky ji oddělují od tříd pod nimi. Společenské rituály jako honosné večeře, svatby, návštěva opery a bálů plní funkci veřejných spektaklů, ve kterých je stejně důležité vidět jako být viděn.

Na první pohled se Lily zdá být perfektním produktem svého prostředí a ideologie dámy. Od raného dětství ji matka naučila různé ženské taktiky, aby se stala žádanou „trofej“ manželského trhu. I přes tento důkladný trénink a přesto, že pro sebe nevidí jiný život, než ke kterému byla vychována, není Lily schopná se svému osudu odevzdat. Nedokáže se vdát pouze pro peníze a všechny bohaté potenciální ženichy odmítne, jako by se snažila svůj vstup do manželství oddálit na neurčito. Liliny společenské přetupky

jako hraní bridže za peníze a kouření jsou jejími prvními nevědomými pokusy o vyvázání se ze společenských konvencí. Navíc Lily si začíná nejasně uvědomovat svou sociální determinaci. Tento pocit uvěznění Whartonová ztvárnila skrze metafory okovů a vězení.

Není žádným překvapením, že člověk, který ukáže Lily cestu za sociální konvence je Lawrence Selden. S Lawrencem má Lily vztah založený na upřímnosti a na říkání si pravdy. Díky Lawrencovi, který si zachoval odstup od společnosti, Lily získá nový kritický pohled na okolní svět. Toto „dvojité vidění,“ kritický pohled, který Foucault nazývá „filozofický étos,“ je základním předpokladem pro autonomní existenci ve společnosti, pro život v Seldenově „Republice duše.“ Jinými slovy svoboda v rámci společenských uvěznění leží v oblasti jáství. Tato nová vize dá Lily sílu, aby jednala podle svých ideálů. Otevírá pro ni novou cestu potenciální seberealizace skrze vytvoření nové identity, lišící se od té vnucené společností.

Kritici často interpretovali první část *Domu radovánek* jako Lilin triumf, korunovaný její účastí v *Tableaux Vivants*, a druhou část jako příklad naturalistické dějové linie úpadku, která končí Lilinou smrtí. Nicméně, pokud čteme román jako Lilynu cestu za sebedeterminací, je její sociální úpadek cestou ze společenského uvěznění k sebepoznání a individualitě. Jinými slovy, její vyhoštění ze „Společnosti spektaklu“ ji přivede na cestu do „Republiky duše.“ Čím níže Lily klesá na společenském žebříčku, tím méně se objevuje na veřejnosti a tím méně regulí a společenských schémat je nucena dodržovat. Majíc prostor pro přemýšlení, začne si Lily uvědomovat míru do které byla ostatními vytvořena jako ornamentální objekt. Skrze Foucaultovy „techniky existence“— introspekci a sebekritiku—Lily dospěje.

Pokud čteme *Dům radovánek* jako *bildungsroman*, jako Lilynu cestu za duševní vyzrálostí, není překvapením, že Wharton v románu představí Nettiiu kuchyň na jeho samém konci. Tato kuchyň reprezentuje místo, kam už společenské předurčení nedosáhne; je to místo porozumění a péče. Pro Lily je Nettie příkladem možnosti vytvoření nové identity, lišící se od té určené společností. Po návštěvě u Nettie Lily dosáhne plného uvědomění si svojí třídy a smutné role, kterou ve spektaklu hrála. Tímto vejde do „Republiky duše,“ dosáhne svého spirituálního osvícení.

*Dům radovánek* končí Lilynou dvojnásobnou smrtí, která dovoluje interpretaci jak úmyslné sebevraždy, tak nehody, při které se Lily omylem předávkuje chloralem. Pokud čteme román z pohledu naturalisté zápletky úpadku, potom je Lilina sebevražda pouze dalším logickým krokem jejího společenského sestupu. Nicméně uvážíme-li, že Edith Whartonová představuje postavu Nettie jako ženu, která si úspěšně vytvořila nový život a novou identitu, tento fakt lze brát jako argument spíše pro Lilinu náhodnou smrt. Na konci románu je Lily konečně připravena žít nový život, poprvé se nebojí budoucnosti, srovnává svůj dluh u Guse Trenora a těší se, že znovu uvidí Seldena.

Poslední kapitola této diplomové práce je interpretací *Věku nevinnosti* skrze Foucaultovu etiku jáství. Z Foucaultovy perspektivy lze román číst jako dilema Newlanda Archera mezi dvěma morálitami: „moralitou norem“ a „moralitou etiky.“ Zatímco první je charakteristická pro socioekonomický determinismus naturalismu, ta druhá reprezentuje možnost jedincovy svobodné vůle a otevírá cestu k sebedeterminaci. „Společenské jáství“ (spojené s moralitou norem), zastoupené v románu newyorskou společností a May Wellandovou, je známkou duševní nedospělosti a „kritické jáství“

Ellen Ollenská (spojené s morálitou etiky) je znakem zralého jedince. Pro Newlanda, May a Ellen representují dvě cesty, kterými se může v životě vydat. Ellen je tou, která vede k duševnímu osvícení a životu v „Republice duše.“

Tato kapitola dospívá k závěru, že i když Newland prostřednictvím Ellen získá „dvojitého vidění“ od Ellen, nemá dost síly a morální odvahy, aby podle své kritické vize jednal. Protože Newland není schopen se kompletně vzdát svojí „morality norem“ a vytvořit si jinou identitu než tu, která je na něj uvalena, vybírá si nakonec jednodušší cestu společenské konformity, za kterou ovšem zaplatí svým vnitřním štěstím. Naopak v *Domě radovánek* reprezentuje Ellen Olenská duševní vyzrálost a možnost života podle své „morality etiky.“ Není náhodnou, že Ellen Olenská má ze všech postav ve Whartonové fikci nejbližší k autorce samotné. Ellen je znázorněním života a hodnot, které byly Edith vlastní.

Pro Edith Whartonovou, stejně jako pro její postavy, Ellen a Lily, se Foucaultovy „techniky existence“ staly prostředkem k vytvoření nové identity, lišící se od identity neproduktivní, ornamentální dámy. Jinak řečeno, etika jáství se stala estetikou jejich existence, prostředkem jejich sebetransformace. Pomocí „technik duše,“ zejména psaní (fikce, dopisů, autobiografie), si Edith Whartonová vytvořila svoji „Republiku duše,“ svůj autonomní život v rámci genderově předpojaté newyorské vyšší společnosti přelomu dvacátého století. Nejen svým životem, ale i svým dílem Whartonová ztělesnila myšlenku rezistence jako kontinuálního procesu. Odkrytím pravdy o společnosti, ve které žila, zpochybnila její zdánlivě nezpochybnitelný status quo. Postavami, které získaly

„dvojité vidění,“ jako například Lily, Lawrence, Ellen a Newland, Whartonová vytvořila kritický diskurs, který stojí v protikladu k oficiální verzi její třídy a genderu.

Závěrem můžeme říci, že svým dílem Whartonová dokázala, že možnost transformace a vyvázání se ze společenských uvěznění amerického literárního naturalismu leží v oblasti jáství (ve smyslu Foucaultovy neesenciální, přetvořené subjektivity), v oblasti, která je tradičně vyloučena z naturalistického diskursu.