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PhD thesis

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A Home of Their Own
Representations of Women in Interiors
in the Art, Design and Literature of
the Late Nineteenth Century

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Abstract

This thesis engages with the contribution made by literary and visual representations to debates about woman's role in Britain and America between 1860 and 1917. During, that is, a period of transition from the relative securities of the early Victorian period until the radical social shifts propelled by the First World War.

I introduce design reform debates in painting and interior design, and examine how these were approached by George Eliot, Henry James and Edith Wharton, both in the homes they actually lived in, and those they created in their fictions, particularly for their female characters. Issues of the aesthetic and the moral, and the shifting relationships between them, underpin responses to art and design of the period, and are reflected generally in the literary and visual arts. The representation of women in domestic space, in actual and literary interiors, necessarily has ideological implications regarding the proper place of women within society. Thus, directly and obliquely, questions were repeatedly being asked about what constituted a desirable and fulfilling life for women in this society, and how such a life was to be achieved. To support my contention that this is a wide debate, I am looking at representational paintings of women in interiors, and advice about decoration in manuals of household taste, to augment the primary focus of the thesis on various fictional portraits of ladies.

In the Introduction I discuss some recent examinations of women's space and place in Victorian society in art historical, literary and cultural studies. I explain the ideology of separate spheres and how it was interpreted in the plan and decoration of the home, underpinning the codification of interior decoration. I consider also how theorisations of 'the gaze' have been used to analyse representations of women and to explore issues of female empowerment.

In Chapter One I examine the history of the design reform movement, Aestheticism, the application of the separate spheres in practice and the influence of manuals of household taste on how the home was actually decorated. Women's taste was a contested issue and the conceptual conflation of the women's body with the house formed the background to Aesthetic paintings of women. Some women decorators, often

connected to radical political movements, used their professionalism to make the home a site of power, countering the seeming entrapment of women within the interior.

In Chapter Two I examine George Eliot's unconventional home life, particularly the decoration of The Priory. I discuss how she utilised interiors and related themes of seeing and commodity fetishism in the explication of character in *The Mill on the Floss*, *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*. Sympathy with the wider world enables Eliot's female characters to transcend the destruction of subjectivity threatened by constriction within an unhappy home.

In Chapter Three I examine how Henry James dealt with the complicated conceptual relationship of Europe and America in *The Europeans*, using themes of the search for a home and the theatricality of self-presentation. I explain his notion of the House of Fiction, which was expanded by Edith Wharton. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, taste is used as a moral indicator in his discussion of the 'envelope of circumstance', with Aestheticism as the background to its use. James theorises the status of women as objects within interiors and what this means for Isabel's developing consciousness, as she searches for a husband and home. James uses the ambiguities of 'seeing' to explore how good taste is reached at expense of human relationships.

In Chapter Four I discuss Henry James's own search for a home in his later years, and the significance of Lamb House. I discuss his friendship with Edith Wharton and compare their taste in decoration and how this related to moral themes in their novels. In *The Spoils of Poynton* good or bad taste seems to divide people morally. However, the rigidity of these divisions is questioned, and Fleda and Mrs Gereth discover unhappiness as an authentication of experience, in a small home without men.

In Chapter Five I discuss Edith Wharton's development as a writer, the homes she grew up in and how this relates to the decoration and creation of her own homes. Her highly theorised approach to interior decoration is demonstrated by *The Decoration of Houses*, which was put into practice in her own homes, finding its most perfect expression in The Mount. Wharton's experiences of creating a home for herself gave her the strength to write out of a society disinclined to attribute serious artistic effort to

women, and her writings re-enacted the problems she encountered living in this society.

In Chapter Six I examine Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, *Ethan Frome* and *Summer*, employing Wharton's aesthetic theories as a key to interpretation of her fictional works. Lily Bart is seen within different interiors as she descends through society, and gender issues are illuminated by a discussion of how the *tableau vivant* at the centre-point of the book brings together themes of theatricality and the gaze. Lily's self-fashioning is fraught with misreadings by her society, disastrous for her search for a happy and beautiful home. The poorer setting of the two novellas demonstrates that Wharton applied her theories across social strata. For Wharton, the achievement of a happy home, morally decorated, could be impossible for women in American Victorian society.

In the Conclusion I look at paintings by progressive artists which enacted the instabilities of cultural change in their depiction of women in interiors. The Great War destroyed the bourgeois interior that the fictional women I have discussed found it so difficult to remain within. The rejection of the constrictions of separate spheres became part of a new feminist project, articulated by Virginia Woolf and Catherine Carswell. Women no longer felt the need to be constrained by the gilded cage, and looked for possibilities lying outside of the drawing room.

For my grandparents

Ernie and Jean Boyd

T.T. and Netta Davidson

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Abbreviations

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- AS Henry James, *The American Scene* (London: Granville Publishing, 1987), first published in book form 1907.
- Beinecke YCAL MSS 42, Edith Wharton Collection, Yale Collection Of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.
- Benstock Shari Benstock, *No Gifts from Chance: A Biography of Edith Wharton*, 2nd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995).
- BG Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (London: Constable, 1972), first published 1934.
- Companion* John Rignall, ed., *Oxford Reader's Companion to George Eliot* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, repr. without illustrations 2001).
- DD George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. by Graham Handley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), first published 1876, revised 1878.
- DH Edith Wharton and Ogden Codman, Jr., *The Decoration of Houses: The Revised and Expanded Classical America Edition* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), first published 1897.
- Dwight Eleanor Dwight, *Edith Wharton: An Extraordinary Life* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994).
- EF Edith Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, ed. by Kristin O. Lauer and Cynthia Griffin Wolff (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1995), first published 1911.
- EWL R.W.B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis, eds, *The Letters of Edith Wharton* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1988).
- GEL Gordon S. Haight, ed., *The George Eliot Letters*, 7 vols (London: Oxford University Press, 1954-6).
- GG Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd edn (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000).
- HJL Leon Edel, ed., *Henry James Letters*, 4 vols (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974-1984).
- HM Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, ed. by Cynthia Griffin Wolff (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), first published 1905.
- Lewis R.W.B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

- Life* Leon Edel, *The Life of Henry James*, 5 vols (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1953-72).
- Marshall* Scott Marshall and John G. Waite Associates, *The Mount, Home of Edith Wharton: A Historic Structure Report* (New York: Mount Ida Press, 1997).
- MF* George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. by A.S. Byatt (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), first published 1860.
- MM* George Eliot, *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life*, ed. by W.J. Harvey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), first published 1871-2, revised 1874.
- Nuttall's* James Wood, ed., *Nuttall's Standard Pronouncing Dictionary of the English Language* (London: Frederick Warne, [n.d.]), probably late nineteenth century.
- PL* Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), first published *Atlantic Monthly*, October 1880 – November 1881, revised 1908.
- S* Edith Wharton, *Summer in Novellas and Other Writings*, ed. by Cynthia Griffin Wolff (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1990), first published 1917.
- SP* Henry James, *The Spoils of Poynton*, ed. by David Lodge and Patricia Crick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), first published as *The Old Things*, *Atlantic Monthly*, April – October 1896; first published in book form 1897, revised 1908.
- SPNEA* Codman Family Manuscripts Collection, Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, Harrison Gray Otis House, 141 Cambridge Street, Boston MA 02114.
- TE* Henry James, *The Europeans: A Sketch*, ed. by Tony Tanner and Patricia Crick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), first published *Atlantic Monthly*, July – October 1878.
- WF* Edith Wharton, *The Writing of Fiction* (New York: Scribner's, 1925)

Textual Note

In quotations, all emphasis is original unless otherwise stated.

All quotations from original letters and documents in Beinecke or SPNEA are from my own transcriptions, unless additional publication details given. All emphasis, spelling and punctuation are original unless otherwise stated.

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Introduction

Separate Spheres in the Nineteenth Century

And whenever a true wife comes, this home is always round her. The stars only may be over her head; the glowworm in the night-cold grass maybe the only fire at her foot; but home is yet wherever she is; and for a noble woman it stretches far round her, better than ceiled with cedar, or painted with vermilion, shedding its quiet light far, for those who else were homeless.¹

Houses are shaped not just by materials and tools, but by ideas, values, and norms.²

The Victorian woman is in a room: the room has, in a sense, been built around her. It is then decorated for her by others, or by herself. The room is decorated, she is dressed, she sits for her portrait, she is written about, she becomes the subject – she must live in this room. The interior affects and reflects her consciousness; surrounded by this room she sees herself placed in that interior and looks at herself in a mirror to see her background, to find out who she is.

In their groundbreaking study, Gilbert and Gubar prioritise a certain aspect of women and the home, *The Madwoman in the Attic*:

enclosed in the architecture of an overwhelmingly male-dominated society, [...] literary women were also, inevitably, trapped in the specifically literary constructs of what Gertrude Stein was to call 'patriarchal poetry.' For not only did a nineteenth-century woman writer have to inhabit ancestral mansions (or cottages) owned and built by men, she was also constricted and restricted by the Palaces of Art and Houses of Fiction male writers authored.³

These are specific references to Tennyson's poem, *The Palace of Art*,⁴ a trope beloved of Victorian painters, and Henry James's literary theory of the 'house of fiction'. Through a psychoanalytical focus and close readings which are still useful, Gilbert and Gubar found a coherence and homogeneity in nineteenth century women's writing, which so often told of domestic experience. They discovered a common, mad cry. However, they were so concerned with articulating this cry, that their study also limits it almost to the point of

¹ John Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. by E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols (London: George Allen, 1903-1912), Vol. 18, *Sesame and Lilies*, 'Lecture II: Of Queens' Gardens' (1865), 68, p. 122.

² Daphne Spain, *Gendered Spaces* (London and Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), p. 111.

³ GG, p. xi.

⁴ Alfred Tennyson, *The Palace of Art* (1832, 1853), *Tennyson's Poetry: Authoritative Texts, Contexts, Criticism*, ed. by Robert W. Hill, Jr., 2nd edn (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), p. 55.

oikonomia,⁵ reducing it to the domestic. Gender is experienced as anxiety, as Elaine Showalter writes: 'the nineteenth century woman inscribed her own sickness, her madness, her anorexia, her agoraphobia, and her paralysis in her texts'.⁶ Jacqueline Rose, however, comments that 'there is a danger of complicity between a strategy of reading which identifies these instances of disturbance and a damaging image of femininity itself'.⁷

Research into women's domestic experience has developed since Gilbert and Gubar. As they themselves state in the introduction to the second edition, recent critics have

emphasised the ways literary women transmuted stereotypical images of femininity into sources of strength. [...] Domestic space constitutes neither the imprisoning attic nor the confining parlor we stressed as a source of Victorian women's rage but a feminine household economy that helped to establish the conditions for modern institutional culture.⁸

My thesis will not be limited to 'literary women', for by choosing women in the late-nineteenth century home as the locus of my investigation I have found it necessary to investigate other related cultural representations. Various documents, from paintings and house plans to novels and manuals, give a larger picture of the competing discourses that made up the concept of 'home' in the Victorian era. The literature of domestic decoration underwent a huge growth in the period, and reflected larger issues of taste, morality, beauty and function in the wider world of art. Visual representations of women in interiors also dealt with these issues, and as theorists like Linda Nochlin have demonstrated, 'representations of women in art are founded upon and serve to reproduce indisputably accepted assumptions held by society in general [...] about men's power'.⁹ The novelists I will be discussing, George Eliot, Henry James and Edith Wharton, were highly aware of the ramifications of these issues in the contemporary debate on the 'Woman Question'. I will show how their representations of women in interiors

⁵ 'A woman's work that brings everything back into the home', Julianna Schiesari, *The Gendering of Melancholia* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 62.

⁶ Elaine Showalter, 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness' in Elizabeth Abel, ed., *Writing and Sexual Difference* (Chicago and Brighton: Harvester, 1982), pp. 9-36 (p. 25).

⁷ Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London: Verso, 1986), p. 120.

⁸ GG, p. xxxvii.

⁹ Linda Nochlin, *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989, repr. 1994), p. 1.

transcended mere reinscription of the limitations forced upon women, and the idealised 'angels in the house' so common in the period. Women in interiors are important for an understanding of Victorian society as a whole because the ideology of separate spheres subtly permeated every aspect of the way Victorians, men and women, lived their lives.

Separate Spheres

The concept of separate spheres divides men and women into different physical areas and different positions in society along supposedly *a priori* gender characteristics.¹⁰ In 'Of Queens' Gardens', Ruskin demonstrates the paradigm:

now their separate characters are briefly these. The man's power is active, progressive, defensive. 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 [...]. 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. [...] Her great function is Praise: she enters into no contest, but infallibly adjudges the crown of contest.¹¹

These divisions were taken to be natural; the 'separate characters' of men and women were generally described in terms of binary oppositions, for example masculine/feminine, public/private, strong/weak, active/passive, and were extended even to the design and decoration of the house. Jane Lewis explains the seeming rigidity of the separate spheres:

traditional and scientific belief, customary practice and the law combined to prescribe the bounds of women's sphere. Neither men nor women were able easily to transgress the boundaries marking the sexual divisions in society, the only difference being that while women wanted access to the male sphere, men showed relatively little interest in that assigned to women. [...] As the workplace became separated from the home, so a private, domestic sphere was created for women, divorced from the public world of work, office and citizenship.¹²

Women's role as homemakers was prioritised during the Victorian era and theorised in literature, art and journalism. Although they were guardians of important moral virtues, their primary sphere of influence was within the walls of the house. This involved nurturing and creating a safe haven, morally superior to the world of work, money and men. Central to Ruskin's argument is the concept of the home as the woman's place

¹⁰ For discussions of this concept in women's history see Linda K. Kerber, 'Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History', *The Journal of American History*, 75 (1988), 9-39; Amanda Vickery, 'Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History', *Historical Journal*, 36:2 (1993), 383-414.

¹¹ Ruskin (1865), p. 121-2.

¹² Jane Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950* (Brighton: Harvester/Wheatsheaf, 1984), pp. ix-x.

where she will create a refuge for the man to escape from the travails and evils of the world of work:

this is the true nature of home – it is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division. [...] But so far as it is a sacred place, a vestal temple, a temple of the hearth watched over by Household Gods, before whose faces none may come but those whom they can receive with love [...]. This, then I believe to be, – will you not admit it to be, – the woman’s true place and power?¹³

Ruskin’s language emphasises the centrality of religion and morality to ‘woman’s mission’ and the ‘cult of domesticity’.¹⁴ However, the way this ‘power’ evidenced itself became a greatly contested issue during the last thirty years of nineteenth century.¹⁵ The ‘Woman Question’ had been a general topic of discussion from the 1830s and was heightened by changes in the law like the Married Women’s Property Act of 1870, although there was to be no change in the political status of women until after the First World War. A detailed study of what women did in the home demonstrates that this seemingly limited sphere actually allowed some women to write, decorate or paint themselves out of the interior. Women were able to use their sphere to expose society’s limitations upon them, and home became one of the sites of struggle for a new definition of womanhood.

The formation of a domestic ideology was well in place by the time Victoria came to the throne. Impassioned discussions under the umbrella of the ‘Woman Question’, of women’s ‘sphere’, ‘influence’, ‘duty’ and ‘mission’ draw attention to the problem that men and women did *not* stay in separate spheres as common ideology wished. Nancy Armstrong discusses eighteenth-century conduct books as a manifestation of the developing ideology of separate spheres. They elevated domestic economy and the sexual division of labour ‘through the persistent use of certain terms, oppositions, or figures until sexual differences acquired the status of truth and no longer need to be written as

¹³ Ruskin (1865), pp. 122-3.

¹⁴ See Barbara Welter, ‘The Cult of True Womanhood’ in *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Ohio University Press, Athens, 1976), pp. 21-41.

¹⁵ For example, see ‘On The Use of The Term “Woman’s Sphere”’ in Marion Reid, *A Plea for Woman*, ed. by Susanne Ferguson (Edinburgh: William Tait, 1843, repr. Edinburgh: Polygon, 1988), pp. 8-16.

such'.¹⁶ The 'doubled social world', where the private family with a mother at its centre was the oppositional force to a larger view of a public society becoming scattered by economic forces, 'was clearly a myth before it was put into practice'.¹⁷ However, as Langland has pointed out, by using only conduct books, Armstrong is assured of a 'fairly seamless portrait of emerging subjectivity'.¹⁸

Even by mid-century, any consensus over the division between the public and private spheres was in difficulty. Chase and Levenson state:

no one can disagree with John Burnett's assertion that the mid-Victorians were the most 'family-conscious and home-centred' society in English history. But the home centrality of the period was in every aspect shadowed by contradiction, resistance, refusal, and bewilderment.¹⁹

They examine such diverse subjects as the Indian Mutiny, Dickens, sensation novels, Sarah Stickney Ellis's advice books, the divorce bill, Kerr's treatise *The Gentleman's House* and Bloomerism, between the years 1835-1865 in order to chart this confusion. Legal debates on divorce, infant custody and the ability to marry the deceased wife's sister 'forced family trouble to the surface' and into the public sphere.²⁰

Sarah Ellis's books, like *The Women of England* (1839), took as fact essential differences between men and women, and she 'constructs an intricate articulation of the symbolic system of home' which excludes men, leaving the home 'not only as the site of value but as the bristling locus of an intricate social world: diverse, multifarious, dramatic'.²¹ Men are often depicted in her writings as 'domestically inept', which disallows them from attaining the highest position of power within the home. This enables women to be subdued only initially, by their relegation to the private sphere. Ellis teaches women the virtues of domestic management and self-discipline *within* this sphere. This small distinction between a husband's control over his wife and her willingness to

¹⁶ Nancy Armstrong, 'The Rise of the Domestic Woman' in Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, eds, *Feminisms* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), pp. 894-926, (pp. 921-2).

¹⁷ Armstrong, p. 923.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Langland, *Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 5.

¹⁹ Karen Chase and Michael Levenson, *The Spectacle of Intimacy: A Public Life for the Victorian Family* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 6, quoting John Burnett, *A Social History of Housing, 1815-1985*, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 98.

²⁰ Chase and Levenson, p. 186.

²¹ Chase and Levenson, p. 80.

repress herself, seems opposed to later ideas of female emancipation, 'but in the late thirties and forties it played a significant part in the defensive parrying of patriarchal encroachment'.²² Chase and Levenson discuss how the writings of Florence Nightingale extended women's domestic duties and tasks beyond the home, to the hospital. The domestic skills of management and caring for the sick could also fit women for work in the public sphere: 'while never understating the demands of professionalization, *Notes on Nursing* [1860] excites the thought that home can be a training for an escape from home'.²³ These examples show how complex the definition of 'woman's sphere' could be in practice as well as in theory; it was a theory full of exploitable gaps.

Ruskin's pious language draws attention to the religious basis of the ideology of separate spheres, which Catherine Hall has meticulously discussed. Evangelicalism came to be described as 'the religion of the household' due to the stress on the importance of home.²⁴ Evangelicalism rationalised the common ideas of essential differences between men and women. It also allowed what seemed to be an empowering position for women within the constraints of domesticity, by putting them in charge of the morals of their own family and, by extension, the whole country. For example, Hall discusses the hugely popular Hannah More. She

defined certain qualities and dispositions as 'peculiarly feminine'. Cultural differences were seen as natural. Women were naturally more delicate, more fragile, morally weaker, and all this demanded a greater degree of caution, retirement and reserve. 'Men, on the contrary, are formed for the more public exhibition on the great theatre of human life'; men had grandeur, dignity and force; women had ease, simplicity and purity. This absolute distinction between men and women is repeated time and again in Evangelical writing.²⁵

Women could wield their 'influence', an important part of the struggle for the nation's morals, within the home.²⁶ The Evangelicals shared with the Puritans a

need to build a protected space in a hostile world, from which the great campaign of evangelisation could be securely launched. The home was an area which could be

²² Chase and Levenson, p. 84.

²³ Chase and Levenson, p. 138.

²⁴ Catherine Hall, 'The Early Formation of Victorian Domestic Ideology', in Sandra Burman, ed., *Fit Work for Women* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), pp. 15-32 (p. 23).

²⁵ Hall, p. 25, quoting Hannah More, *Essays Principally Designed for Young Ladies* (London: R.B. Seeley and W. Burnside, 1777), p. 5.

²⁶ See Robert B. Shoemaker, *Gender in English Society, 1650-1850: The Emergence of Separate Spheres?* (London: Longman, 1998), pp. 222-225; and Judith Lowder Newton, 'Power and the Ideology of "Woman's Sphere"', in Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, eds, *Feminisms* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991), pp. 765-780.

controlled and which was relatively independent of what went on outside. The home did provide a haven.²⁷

The views of the Evangelicals obviously tapped into a need of the growing middle-class, which was also appreciated by those distributing public images of the Queen herself.

Paradoxically, the head of state also became an icon of domesticity, although a female monarch seemed an 'outrageous mingling of separate spheres'.²⁸ Margaret Homans discusses how popular images of Victoria concealed the paradox, utilising the ideology of separate spheres and subservient womanhood to advance the monarch's image. Representations of Victoria in painting and photography, portraying the queen in terms of her gender and marital status, were utilised to create a complicated public image of a monarch who was also a wife and mother, so that her subjects were 'treated specifically and paradoxically, to the spectacle of royal domestic privacy'.²⁹ Victoria's presentation as an ordinary woman only exaggerated her extra-ordinariness. Photographs of Victoria and Albert (plate 1) dressed as an ordinary upper-middle class couple, 'helped to disseminate a complex picture of royalty's superordinary domesticity, publicizing the monarchy as middle-class and its female identity as unthreateningly subjugated yet somehow reassuringly sovereign'.³⁰ But these public depictions of Victoria were 'legible and efficacious only because they coincided with representations already in place',³¹ that is, the images of female domesticity that were typical tropes of Victorian painting and were also disseminated in writing, both fiction and non-fiction.

The Victorian House

The importance of the house in Victorian novels is detailed by Philippa Tristram in the introduction to her wide-ranging study of the long nineteenth century:

every new-built house or freshly furnished room is a fiction of the life intended to be lived there. Every inhabited building or interior tells a different story, of how life is or was [...]. Moreover, a house, like a novel, is a small world defined against, but also

²⁷ Hall, p. 29.

²⁸ Margaret Homans, 'Victoria's Sovereign Obedience: Portraits of the Queen as wife and mother', in Carol T. Christ and John O. Jordan, eds., *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 169-197 (p. 169).

²⁹ Homans, p. 171.

³⁰ Homans, p. 175.

³¹ Homans, p. 172.

reflecting, a larger one. The plan and appearance of houses, the way they are furnished, mirror the social values of their time; but the best define themselves against those values, inheriting the past, receiving the present, but shaping the future. The same can of course be said of a great novel, for if houses are like stories, stories are also like houses. It is no accident that many of the terms used in critical discourse – ‘structure’, ‘aspect’, ‘outlook’, even ‘character’ – are related to domestic architecture; or that the titles of so many great nineteenth-century novels were taken from the houses at their centre – *Mansfield Park*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Bleak House*, *The Mill on the Floss*. Most of life, after all, is spent within four walls, and the space they define, the objects that fill them, the prospects on which they open, inevitably influence and express our consciousness. [...] Because the novel is invincibly domestic, it can tell us much about the space we live in; equally, designs for houses and their furnishings can reveal hidden aspects of the novelist’s art.³²

This gives a background to the importance of the metaphor of home in the Victorian novel. For anthropologist Daphne Spain, houses themselves

reflect ideals and realities about relationships between women and men within the family and in society. The space outside the home becomes the arena in which social relations (i.e., status) are produced, while the space inside the home becomes that in which social relations are reproduced.³³

She writes in Foucauldian phrase:

women and men are spatially segregated in ways that reduce women’s access to knowledge and thereby reinforce women’s lower status relative to men’s. ‘Gendered spaces’ separate woman from knowledge used by men to produce and reproduce power and privilege.³⁴

Walter Benjamin famously describes the domestic interior as ‘the universe for the private citizen’, emphasising the public/private division of the bourgeois home. The ‘drawing room was a box in the world-theatre’, a sanctuary from which the world could be safely observed, but the house also became an ‘expression of personality’.³⁵ The private home could at the same time be theatrical, ‘a stage on which one’s most intimate feelings could be acted out with the greatest authenticity’.³⁶ For the inhabitants, it was also ‘required of the interior that it should support him in his illusions’ of identity,³⁷ illusions which had to be represented to the outside world. This brings up issues of theatricality, display, conspicuous consumption, the creation of comfort and privacy and the ‘enactment of

³² Philippa Tristram, *Living Space in Fact and Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 1-2.

³³ Spain, p. 7.

³⁴ Spain, p. 3.

³⁵ Walter Benjamin, ‘Louis-Philippe or the Interior’ in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. by Harry Zohn (London: Verso, 1997), pp. 167-169 (p. 167-8).

³⁶ Susan Sidlauskas, ‘Psyche and Sympathy: Staging Interiority in the Early Modern Home’ in Christopher Reed, ed., *Not At Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), pp. 65-80 (p. 65).

³⁷ Benjamin, p. 167.

private identity' recognised by Erving Goffman.³⁸ In the Victorian era the home exposed the 'social construction of sexual difference' identified in painting by Griselda Pollock.³⁹ As the home became more and more the expression of personality, it also became a site for the enactment of power struggles between men and women.

As the workplace moved out of the home, men were less directly involved with its appearance, and Beverley Gordon uses material culture to explore how the decoration of the house became the woman's responsibility: 'it is perhaps not surprising that body and dwelling came to be viewed together. Both bore the name, literally and legally, of the man who "owned" them, and both were adorned to testify to his success'.⁴⁰ As the industrial revolution established itself, and the middle class expanded in size and wealth, people sought to present a unified self-image to the rest of the world in correspondence with their new status and aspirations. The decoration of houses was vital for the construction of this image and was read in particular, codified ways. For women, the home was their allotted sphere and the site of 'cultural production'⁴¹ to which they had greatest access. As Gordon states: 'the house was seen to reflect the same qualities as the woman, and since both the body and home mirrored the deeper self, they were both meant to be looked at'.⁴² I will therefore be discussing literary texts in which the relationship of female characters to their homes is central, the literature of interior design and how that instructed women to decorate their homes, and visual images of women in interiors. All of these cultural practices to a greater or lesser degree question or reinscribe women's relationship to the concept of home. In Pollock's formulation, the term 'representation'

stresses that images and texts are not mirrors of the world, merely reflecting their sources. Representation stresses something refashioned, coded in rhetorical, textual or pictorial terms, quite distinct from its social existence. Representation can also be understood as 'articulating' in a visible or socially palpable form social processes which determine the representation but then are actually affected and altered by the forms, practices and effects of representation.⁴³

³⁸ Sidlauskas, p. 66. See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959).

³⁹ Griselda Pollock, *Vision & Difference, Femininity, Feminism & the Histories of Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 8.

⁴⁰ Beverley Gordon, 'Woman's Domestic Body: The Conceptual Conflation of Women and Interiors in the Industrial Age', *Winterthur Portfolio*, 31 (1996), 281-301, (p. 285).

⁴¹ Pollock, p. 5.

⁴² Gordon, p. 285.

⁴³ Pollock, p. 6.

Although it is a mistake to argue that there is an all-encompassing Victorian 'world view', as Pollock observes, 'in the interconnectedness, repetitions and resemblances a prevailing regime of truth is generated providing a large framework of intelligibility within which certain kinds of understanding are preferred and others rendered unthinkable'.⁴⁴

I will be looking at how the experience of women like George Eliot and Edith Wharton in furnishing and, in Wharton's case, designing, their own homes, helped their creativity, empowered their writing, enabling them to discuss the Victorian woman's position in the home in a sometimes highly theoretical manner. In Gilbert and Gubar's phrase, they demonstrate the 'common, female impulse to struggle free from social and literary confinement through strategic redefinitions of self, art, and society'.⁴⁵ Throughout the period 1860-1917 covered by the novels I discuss, women increasingly felt the need to write themselves out of the drawing room.

Late eighteenth-century novels, or rather, early Victorian novels like those by Jane Austen or Henry Fielding rarely describe the specifics of interior decoration. The later Victorians' concern with commodities and materialism is evidenced by novels where the 'shell of life'⁴⁶ and its specifics are part of the reader's assessment of character. Thus James's literary metaphor of the 'house of fiction' has wide-ranging implications. As Rignall has noticed, the house of fiction acquires its furniture in a development that seems to mimic an historical change, the process by which the sparser furnishings of the eighteenth-century house give way to the richly cluttered Victorian interior with its profusion of plush and accumulations of bric-à-brac.⁴⁷ Obviously, men also have a place in the domestic sphere and this has been explored by other writers;⁴⁸ my place here is to investigate whether Virginia Woolf's project to 'do battle with a certain phantom, [...]

44 Pollock, p. 9.

45 GG, p. xii.

46 GEL, VII, 28.

47 John Rignall, 'George Eliot and the Furniture of the House of Fiction', *George Eliot Review*, 27 (1996), 23-30 (p. 25).

48 See John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999) and Margaret Marsh, 'Suburban Men and Masculine Domesticity, 1870-1915', *American Quarterly*, 40 (1988), 165-186; J. A. Mangon, and James Walvin, eds. *Manliness and Morality: Middle Class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800-1948* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987).

The Angel in the House' is valid,⁴⁹ or whether the home could be a site of power for Victorian women. I will posit that there is an intrinsic and not necessarily disabling connection between literature, including the writing about interior design and painting, and women's role in the decoration of that home.

In her Marxist study of Victorian domestic ideology, Elizabeth Langland contends that narratives are 'discursive practices bound up in and implicated in other discursive practices through which a culture's meanings are articulated'.⁵⁰ She states that her objects of analysis, from novels by Gaskell, Dickens and Eliot to the diaries of Hannah Cullwick, a servant, are

not simply fictional representations but the interacting texts through which a culture represents itself and the shared and conflicting ideological economies that inform these discursive formations.⁵¹

Langland uses these 'interacting texts' to argue that in opposition to a conventional picture of the homemaker as 'passive, helpless and dependant', this 'ideology of domesticity was itself contested by the managerial function of the bourgeois housewife'.⁵² Similarly, Nochlin's method of investigation informs my own:

this is not going to be an attempt to move behind the images into some realm of more profound truth lurking beneath the surface of the various pictorial texts. My attempt to investigate the triad woman-art-power should rather be thought of as an effort to disentangle various discourses about power related to gender difference existing simultaneously with – as much surface as substratum – the master discourse of the iconography or narrative.⁵³

Pollock's investigation of the 'spaces of femininity' is relevant here:

modifying therefore the simple conceit of a bourgeois world divided by public and private, masculine and feminine, the argument seeks to locate the production of the bourgeois definition of woman defined by the polarity of bourgeois lady and proletarian prostitute/working woman. The spaces of femininity are not only limited in relation to those defining modernity but because of the sexualised map across which woman is separated, the spaces of femininity are defined by a different organization of the look.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Virginia Woolf, 'Professions for Women' (1931) in *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life*, ed. by Rachel Bowlby (London: Penguin, 1993) pp. 101-6, (p. 102).

⁵⁰ Langland, p. 3.

⁵¹ Langland, p. 3.

⁵² Langland, pp. 21, 16.

⁵³ Nochlin, p. 2.

⁵⁴ Pollock, p. 84.

Pollock identifies the male gaze of modernity as that of the flâneur, first described by Baudelaire.⁵⁵ What is important for my discussion is, however, Pollock's use of gender and class in her discussion of the spaces of modernism as sites of sexual exchange. And, as Pollock highlights, an understanding of 'the look' is vital for an understanding of women's space.⁵⁶ The portraits of ladies which Eliot, James and Wharton create on the page are fairly complicated representations of women in Victorian society. Their relationship to interiors helps form and explicate their subjectivity, and issues of morality and aesthetics form the background to reading. To unpack the different viewpoints of these portraits is to break down patriarchal society's way of picturing women and to better comprehend the nature of 'the look' and of women's space.

The Gaze: Women and Their Spectators

An important part of feminist cultural studies depends on the relationship between gender and looking.⁵⁷ Throughout this thesis I focus on certain visual aspects of written texts, and how we look at images and make aesthetic judgements is affected by both gender and power relations. Nochlin argues that 'representations of women in art are founded upon and serve to reproduce indisputably accepted assumptions held by society in general [...] about men's power'.⁵⁸ And Jacqueline Rose contends that visual space is 'more than the domain of simple recognition',⁵⁹ thus representations of women in interiors invoke many issues. Using Lacan, Rose goes on to analyse the politicisation and sexualisation of such representations:

the image therefore submits to the sexual reference, but only in so far as reference itself is questioned by the work of the image. And the aesthetics of pure form are implicated in the less pure pleasures of looking, but these in turn are part of an

⁵⁵ See Pollock, p. 79; T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, rev. edn (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999) and Benjamin. For the female spectator, see Deborah L. Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City, and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Janet Wolff, 'The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 2 (1985), 37-46; and Deborah Epstein Nord, 'The Urban Peripatetic: Spectator, Steetwalker, Woman Writer', *Nineteenth Century Literature*, 46 (1991), 351-375.

⁵⁶ See Pollock, p. 85.

⁵⁷ For my discussion of the cultural theory surrounding the concept of the male gaze I am indebted to Suzanna Danuta Walters, *Material Girls: Making Sense of Feminist Cultural Theory* (London: University of California Press, 1995).

⁵⁸ Nochlin, p. 1.

⁵⁹ Rose, p. 231.

aesthetically extraneous political space. The *arena is simultaneously that of aesthetics and sexuality, and art and sexual politics*. The link between sexuality and the image produces a particular dialogue which cannot be covered adequately by the familiar opposition between the formal operations of the image and a politics exerted from outside.⁶⁰

One of the earliest theorists of the complex relation between looking and gender was the Marxist cultural critic John Berger. He explains in *Ways of Seeing* how women are put in a passive position as objects of the male gaze, which is then internalised:

she has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life. Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another. [...] *Men act and women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male; the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object of vision: a sight.⁶¹

In Berger's analysis of the relationship between representation and power, looking can no longer be regarded as a neutral activity. 'Ways of seeing' are unavoidably gendered and privileged for the male viewer:

women are depicted in a quite different way from men – not because the feminine is different from the masculine, – but because the 'ideal' spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him.⁶²

Berger exemplifies the pervasiveness of this aspect of male power by images taken from the entire history of Western art, from the classic female nude to the images of contemporary advertising. This breaks down the categories of 'high art' and 'mass culture': 'the nude is always conventionalized – and the authority for its conventions derives from a certain tradition of art'.⁶³ The nude body of a Venus 'is arranged in the way it is to display it to the man looking at the picture. This picture is made to appeal to *his* sexuality. It has nothing to do with her sexuality'.⁶⁴ Issues of power are also involved, for with a portrait like that of Nell Gwynne, one of Charles II's mistresses, her 'nakedness is not [...] an expression of her own feelings; it is a sign of her submission to the owner's feelings or demands'.⁶⁵ In the novels I will discuss, the main female

⁶⁰ Rose, pp. 231-2, emphasis added.

⁶¹ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972), pp. 46-7.

⁶² Berger, p. 64.

⁶³ Berger, p. 53.

⁶⁴ Berger, p. 55.

⁶⁵ Berger, p. 52.

characters display themselves or are seen by men and theories of the gaze are useful to explain their positions. As I will discuss in Chapter Six, the audience's reaction to Lily Bart's *tableau* can be explained through the relations of the gaze, surveillance and power.⁶⁶

Berger states that 'a man's presence is dependant upon the promise of power which he embodies'.⁶⁷ Walters, in her history of the male nude, terms this the 'abstract paternal power' of the phallus, which may be

moral, physical, temperamental, economic, social, sexual – but its object is always exterior to the man. A man's presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you [...], the pretence is always towards a power which he exercises on others.⁶⁸

Walters states that the male artist finds 'an enhanced image of his manhood reflected in submissive woman' when he depicts the female nude.⁶⁹ In contrast, Berger claims:

a woman's presence expresses her own attitude to herself, and defines what can and cannot be done to her [...] Presence for a woman is so intrinsic to her person that men tend to think of it as an almost physical emanation, a kind of heat or smell or aura. To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men. The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under such tutelage within such a limited space. But this has been at the cost of a woman's self being split into two. A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. [...] From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually. And so she comes to consider the *surveyor* and the *surveyed* within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman.⁷⁰

Men conceive their presence as exterior to themselves, and women are seen as being indivisible from their sense of self. As De Beauvoir famously wrote, 'one is not born, but rather becomes a woman'.⁷¹

In her influential essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Laura Mulvey develops Berger's argument on the passivity of the viewed female, using psychoanalytic readings of the male gaze:

in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/masculine, passive/feminine. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist

⁶⁶ Foucault, of course, discussed these relationships in several works, see especially Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books, 1991).

⁶⁷ Berger, pp. 45-6.

⁶⁸ Margaret Walters, *The Nude Male: A New Perspective* (London: Paddington Press, 1978), p. 8.

⁶⁹ Walters (1978), p. 13.

⁷⁰ Berger, pp. 45-6.

⁷¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, transl. and ed. by H.M. Parshley (London: Jonathan Cape, 1953, repr. London: Everyman, 1993), p. 281.

role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Woman displayed as sensual object is the leitmotif or erotic spectacle; from pin-ups to strip-tease, [...] she holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire.⁷²

Through Lacanian psychoanalysis and the phenomena of scopophilia, voyeurism and fetishism, Mulvey investigates the male gaze in terms of the processes of classic narrative cinema. Suzanna Walters states that

it is hard to overestimate how central this concept has been for feminist cultural studies. It introduced the issue of male power in to the most intimate aspect of the representational process: sight. It moved beyond the notion of stereotypes and claimed that the objectification of women was not an 'added on' attraction, but rather endemic to the very structure of image making.⁷³

Although Mulvey takes cinema's moving image as her genre, her work also bears on static images and fictional narratives. In Mulvey's analysis, viewing is pleasurable in erotic terms, scopophilia being the attainment of sexual pleasure from seeing. The pleasure of looking is located in the processes of voyeurism, that is, looking without being seen, which gives the viewer added power over the image, and fetishism, which endows objects or body parts with sexual meaning. These psychological processes allow woman to be objectified by the look, and defuse her threat as The Other for the male viewer: 'woman in representation can signify castration, and activate voyeuristic or fetishistic mechanisms to circumvent this threat'.⁷⁴ The process of looking in the cinema is split into three parts which constitute the male gaze:

first is the gaze within the representation itself; men gaze at women, who become objects of the gaze; second, the spectator in turn, is made to identify with this male gaze and to objectify the woman on the screen; and third, the camera's original 'gaze' comes into play in the very act of filming; the camera here can be understood as an extension of the male eye.⁷⁵

The process of the gaze in literary texts can be similarly broken down. Although this theory has been developed from the modern phenomenon of film-making, the different positions of subject, viewer and creator can be adapted to the processes of painting and writing: these positions inform my discussion of the images novelists present and the vocabulary of looking that they use to further understanding of character or incident.

⁷² Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 14-28 (p. 19).

⁷³ Walters (1995), p. 53.

⁷⁴ Mulvey, p. 25.

⁷⁵ Walters (1995), p. 57.

George Eliot's female characters are all in important ways 'looked at'. James's Isabel and Pansy are commodified by the act of looking. All these women stand still for their portraits and the background is generally interior, like so many Aesthetic paintings, that were designed to hang in homes. Lily Bart's *tableau vivant* typifies and foregrounds the process of 'the gaze', and as I will show, each member of the audience interprets Lily's pose according to their desire.

There are problems, however, with Mulvey's theory. Its basis in psychoanalysis has been seen as limiting, and

cultural analysts found it difficult to criticise the use of 'blanket' terms culled from psychoanalytic discourse without entering into debates about the usefulness of psychoanalysis for film theory, for feminism, or indeed for its own project.⁷⁶

Feminist and Queer theorists also identify a deficiency in Mulvey's theory: she does not account for the look of either the female film-maker or the female spectator, lesbian or straight, in the monolithic male gaze.⁷⁷ Mulvey maintains the female gaze as a passive position, characterised by narcissism or masochistic identification with the objectified figure of woman on the screen, ignoring active female positions of desire and/or identification. I will show that both Eliot and Wharton use their female characters to demonstrate the inadequacies of the one-sided male gaze. Yet Mulvey's theory of the gaze is still a useful stepping stone for an examination of women in interiors, who are described standing still for their portraits, being looked at by the reader and the men in the text, for 'the look, pleasurable in form, can be threatening in context and it is *woman as representation/image that crystallises this paradox*'.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment, eds., *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture* (London: Women's Press, 1988), p. 5.

⁷⁷ See also Gillian Dyer, 'Women and Television: An Overview,' in Helen Baehr and Gillian Dyer, eds., *Boxed In: Women and Television* (London: Pandora Press, 1987), pp. 6-16; Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment, eds., *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture* (London: Women's Press, 1988); and Reina Lewis and Katrina Rolley, 'Ad(dressing) the Dyke: Lesbian Looks and Lesbians Looking' in Peter Horne and Reina Lewis, eds., *Outlooks: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities and Visual Cultures* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 178-201.

⁷⁸ Mulvey, p. 19, emphasis added.

Word and Image

The extent of this study, across different genres, has not been attempted before. In *Realizations* Martin Meisel discusses painting, drama and literature, focusing on the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century. His vast study is

concerned with formal similarities and with expressive and narrative conventions that fiction, painting, and drama shared, and less abstractly with the intricate web of local connections that show the arts to be one living tissue.⁷⁹

His organising concept is the 'realization' of the dramatic moment, as 'the play in the nineteenth century is the evident meeting place of story and picture'.⁸⁰ Meisel concentrates on issues that he sees as concerning all of the various arts which provoke stylistic correspondences. He documents the 'iconography of character and emotion' and how this 'came to signal not merely moral qualities, but predictable functions in plot and situation', across the genres he is discussing.⁸¹ The nineteenth-century artist needed to find a middle ground of expression between the requirements of reality and signification.

Meisel discusses the eighteenth-century heritage of these concepts, and how artists sought 'the technical means and structural matrices for what was surely the most paradoxical of aesthetic enterprises, the Realization of the Ideal'.⁸² Realization, a technical stage term, is an effect whereby the *re*-creation of a scene makes it a 'more real, that is more vivid, visual, physically present medium'.⁸³ However, my discussion is not concerned with a definition of realism or the Ideal, for De Beauvoir's recognition of woman as an 'ideal' or an 'other' is understood, by the writers I will discuss, as an impossible and unrealistic stereotype.⁸⁴ While Meisel concentrates on formal characteristics my study of literature and art focuses on the thematic and gender-specific concerns brought up by the conjunction of woman and interior, the space around women, the space within their heads. More pertinent is Kathy Psomiades's cross-genre study *Beauty's Body*, which questions 'how Art comes to wear a feminine face' in Aesthetic

⁷⁹ Martin Meisel, *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth Century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 3.

⁸⁰ Meisel, p. 3.

⁸¹ Meisel, p. 5.

⁸² Meisel, p. 13.

⁸³ Meisel, p. 30.

⁸⁴ De Beauvoir, p. 53.

literature and art.⁸⁵ Scrutinizing Marxist and Feminist assumptions, she demonstrates that the contradictions of constructed femininity materially enabled Aestheticism to come into being. For my thesis, the creators of literature and art describe and interpret the world they live in using the figure of woman in the interior to explore the paradoxes inherent in a society concerned with surface appearance; representation is interpreted through moral criteria.

Although I agree with Meisel that the 'union of inward signification with a particularized material reality' is the goal of much nineteenth-century art,⁸⁶ I am taking a particular slant on this, focusing on the domestic interior and its relation to women's bodies and consciousnesses, and how this is related and represented in art. The writers whom I am discussing find a problematic gap between what women were supposed to represent and how they were able to represent themselves. Edith Wharton, brought up in a society of conspicuous consumption, and trained in the established modes of representation of this society, found these at odds with her professional, personal and intellectual needs. For her, the exploration of representation offered a useful method of discussing society's basic flaws. In his conclusion Meisel states that at the end of the nineteenth century, 'fiction turned [...] to the representation of inner landscapes', symptomatic of which was a 'disappearance of pictorial collaboration'.⁸⁷ My thesis will discuss how writers and artists used external representations, specifically that of the domestic interior, to enhance and elaborate the inner life of the characters in novels, particularly women. I follow the progress of the concept of 'woman in the home' showing how it was created, discussed, exploited for its undoubted potential but finally critiqued and dismantled as insufficient and limiting for real women.

I will be arguing therefore, that during the last thirty years of the nineteenth century, this role became in many ways empowering for women, giving them a creative and intellectual output beyond the traditionally circumscribed roles of wife and mother. The

⁸⁵ Kathy Alexis Psomiades, *Beauty's Body: Femininity and Representation in British Aestheticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 1.

⁸⁶ Meisel, p. 17.

⁸⁷ Meisel, p. 435.

trend was towards a fully experienced female consciousness, enabled by an intersection with the decoration of the house and development of the concept of home which was recognised and theorised by both female and male writers. This is evidenced by the actions and opinions of female characters in novels and the writers of those novels; the role of real women in house decoration and design; and further commented upon by the presentation of the female body within the house in paintings of the era. As Harriet Mill stated, 'the proper sphere for all human beings is the largest and highest which they are able to attain to',⁸⁸ and although the domestic ideal was finally found inadequate for real women, domesticity was far from consistently entrapping and disempowering.

⁸⁸ Harriet Taylor Mill, 'Enfranchisement of Women', *Westminster Review* (July 1851), in J. M. Golby, ed., *Culture and Society in Britain 1850-1890: A Source Book of Contemporary Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press and The Open University, 1986, repr. 1992), p. 243.

Chapter One

The Formation of Household Taste

Taste is not only a part and an index of morality – it is the ONLY morality. The first, and last, and closest trial question to any living creature is, ‘What do you like?’ Tell me what you like, and I’ll tell you what you are. Go out into the street, and ask the first man or woman you meet, what their ‘taste’ is, and if they answer candidly, you know them, body and soul.¹

Not a young marrying couple who read English were to be found without *Hints on Household Taste* in their hands, and all its dicta were accepted as gospel truth.²

During the last forty years of the nineteenth century, debates current in fine art and design regarding issues of aesthetics and morality influenced a dialogue regarding household decoration. The burgeoning middle-classes were keen to furnish their homes in ways that demonstrated their new wealth, but were anxious also to do this in ways that were tasteful, for vulgarity was the ‘most powerful criticism’ of the age.³ There was a profusion of books, journals and magazine articles which told readers how to decorate their homes in the most fashionable, healthy and ‘artistic’ way.⁴ These were filled with details of paint colours, room styles, furnishing, and even names of suppliers of everything from hall tiles to fire grates. All the manuals were didactic in their approach, insisting on the importance of a moral sense to the furnishing of one’s home. This grew out of wider artistic and moral debates, but was focused by the Great Exhibition of 1851. This displayed the best of British design along with that of the rest of the world, demonstrating the reach and power of the Empire. However, the style that most of the books were advocating by the time of the popular Macmillan series *Art at Home* of 1876-8, often termed ‘Queen Anne’, had much in common with the taste of the supposedly a-moral Aesthetes. Artists, designers and writers, like Whistler, E.W. Godwin and Wilde

¹ Ruskin, *Works*, Vol. 18, *The Crown of Wild Olive*, ‘Lecture II: Traffic’ (1864), 54, pp. 434-5.

² Harriet P. Spofford, *Art Decoration Applied to Furniture* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1877), p. 18.

³ E.H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1979), p. 37.

⁴ A good chronology of the manuals of household taste and their American counterparts, with an annotated bibliography is provided by Martha Crabill McClaugherty, ‘Household Art: Creating the Artistic Home, 1868-1893’, *Winterthur Portfolio*, 18 (Spring 1983), 1-26.

propounded 'Art for Art's Sake', apparently diametrically opposed to Ruskinian moral precepts of truth to materials. The issue of women's place within this dialogue is somewhat problematic, whether one is discussing women as proselytisers, decorators or consumers. Many of the writers of these manuals were women, whose professionalism has been disguised by history and contemporary circumstance in favour of male architect-designers, for example Morris and Godwin.⁵ The entrenched concept of women as homemakers does not completely accord with an active vision of women painting and decorating. Writers often disparaged the weakness of women's taste and contemporary paintings almost invariably reduced women to just another decorative element in the home. The issue of gender is unavoidable in a discussion of literature that ascribed gendered characteristics to different rooms as a guide to decoration. Above all, these books defined problems in current taste and dictated solutions in accordance with self-perpetuating ideas of morality and fitness of purpose, all couched in recognisable language dependent on assumptions about gender and class. However, some women were able to use their sphere to facilitate their creative and political aims.

The 'Loose Lodging'

There have been illuminating studies in recent years of the books of household taste, yet it is important to reiterate the context out of which they grew.⁶ To understand how the Victorians perceived the concept of the moral interior, *The Awakening Conscience* by Holman Hunt, although perhaps weakened by over-familiarity, is still of central importance (plate 2).⁷ Although it was painted some 20 years before the proliferation of

⁵ Pevsner's prioritisation of a development towards Minimalism has been particularly prevalent, see Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design from William Morris to Walter Gropius*, 2nd edn (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1949). In recent years, this has come under question, for example, by David Watkin, *Morality and Architecture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).

⁶ See Adrian Forty, *Objects of Desire: Design and Society Since 1750* (Moffat: Cameron Books, 1986, repr. London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), pp. 94-119; Judith Ann Neiswander, 'Liberalism, Nationalism and the Evolution of Middle-Class Values: The Literature on Interior Decoration in England 1875-1914' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London, 1988); Juliet Kinchin, 'Interiors: Nineteenth-Century Essays on the "Masculine" and the "Feminine" Room', in Pat Kirkham, ed., *The Gendered Object* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 12-29.

⁷ For detailed discussions of this painting see George P. Landow, *William Holman Hunt and Typological Symbolism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 44-54, and Kate Flint, 'Reading *The Awakening Conscience* Rightly' in Marcia Pointon, ed., *Pre-Raphaelites Re-viewed* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1989), pp. 45-65. Perhaps this

books on Household Taste, the clues which enable us to read the typological symbolism of the painting reveal the inextricable connection of women, interior design and morality that still concerned those who wrote about and practised interior design at the end of the century. The 'awakened conscience' of the title belongs to the young woman and it is the figure of the woman in the home that concerns me, whether as decorator, as homemaker, or as embodiment of the concept of home. This fallen woman is pictured at the moment of realisation that there is hope for her to leave the clutches of her seducer who is keeping her in his 'maison de convenance'.⁸ Her spiritual revelation, emphasised by biblical texts inscribed on the frame, has come about through the couple singing Tom Moore's 'Oft in the Stilly Night' which, in Hunt's own words, arouses 'the memory of her childish home', whereupon she suddenly breaks away 'from her gilded cage with a startled holy resolve, while her shallow companion still sings on, ignorantly intensifying her repentant purpose'.⁹ She bends towards the light we see reflected in the mirror behind her: the light of regenerating nature and the holy *Light of the World* of the companion painting.¹⁰

Ruskin's much quoted letter to *The Times* brings us back to the material world: 'there is not a single object in all that room, common, modern, vulgar [...] but it became tragical, if rightly read'.¹¹ That is, apart from objects in the room being typological symbols of the main drama, as with the engraving above the piano of lovers at *Cross Purposes* by Frank Stone (1854) and the imagery of the wall decoration of slumbering cupids and thieving birds which links to the theme of vigilance of Hunt's *Hireling Shepherd*,¹² the quality and design of the objects in the room underlines the moral of the presentation of a seducer and kept woman. This was misunderstood by some contemporary reviewers, *The Globe* complaining that:

painting is 'a drearily ordinary tragedy which achieves poignancy and the status of art through Pre-Raphaelite realism', John Murdoch, 'English Realism: George Eliot and the Pre-Raphaelites', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 37 (1974), 313-329 (p. 327).

⁸ The artist's daughter, quoted Leslie Parris, ed., *The Pre-Raphaelites*, 2nd edn, rev. (London: Tate Gallery, 1994), p. 120.

⁹ William Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, 2 vols (London: 1905, repr. 1918), II, 430, quoted Landow, p. 45.

¹⁰ Hunt, *The Light of the World*, 1851-3, oil on canvas over panel, arched top, 125.5 x 59.8, Warden and Fellows of Keble College Oxford, reproduced in Parris, no. 57, p. 118.

¹¹ Ruskin, 'Letter to the Editor', *The Times*, 21,733 (25 May 1854), 7.

¹² Hunt, *The Hireling Shepherd*, 1851, oil on canvas, 76.4 x 109.5, City of Manchester Art Galleries, reproduced in Parris, no. 39, p. 95.

every flower in the carpet, every bit of gilding in the clock and cornice, every spray of foliage outside the window, are represented with equal minuteness in Mr. Hunt's picture. It almost reminds us of the marriageable maiden's complaint: 'It used to be females fust, but now it's furnitur.' The accessories detract from the principles.¹³

For Ruskin, the way the furnishings are painted *augment* the painter's message:

that furniture, so carefully painted, even to the last vein of the rosewood – is there nothing to be learned from that terrible lustre of it, from its fatal newness; nothing there that has the old thoughts of home upon it [...]?¹⁴

This house cannot be a home because of the immorality of its occupants, reinforced by the bad design of their modern furniture. Ruskin's evaluation of this painting goes some way to explain why this moral position on aesthetics is so prevalent in later treatises on interior decoration.

As Ruskin points out, Hunt's 'inferior details' which seem to call attention away from the principal subject, actually strengthen his message: 'they thrust themselves forward with a ghastly and unendurable distinctness'.¹⁵ For example, the piano, here a moderately priced upright with rosewood veneer, had a familiar part in the visual and literary presentation of courtship and eroticism, for when a couple were placed in close proximity to play a duet they could be transported by the power of music. For example, in *The Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins, part of the courtship of Laura Fairlie and Walter Hartright is their mutual appreciation of her piano playing. The suppression of their love is demonstrated by the music she plays for her husband, the villain Sir Percival Glyde: she chooses 'new music of the dexterous, tuneless florid kind. The lovely old melodies of Mozart, which poor Hartright was so fond of, she has never played since he left'.¹⁶ Once again, newness is a meretricious quality: garish and lacking the subtle quality of taste. In the eyes of the design reformers the piano can only be endured for its '*invisible beauty*' as a musical instrument, for with its usual fretting and cheap veneer 'there is rarely a line of beauty to be found in the carved woodwork by which it is commonly inclosed', making it the 'most difficult article to deal with in a picturesque

¹³ *The Globe* (29 April 1854), 2, quoted Flint, p. 50.

¹⁴ Ruskin (1854), 7.

¹⁵ Ruskin (1854), 7.

¹⁶ Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), first published 1860, [No. 10], p. 148.

arrangement of a drawing room'.¹⁷ However, the most prevalent of Ruskin's ideas on design was that of truth to materials. The idea of making one material (e.g. plaster) look like another (e.g. marble), raised moral concerns for the Victorians, as the Garretts put it: 'it is the pernicious habit of struggling to imitate costly effects in cheap materials which has done more than anything to debase decorative art'.¹⁸ This sort of vulgar pretension is condemned throughout the books on household taste and informed a huge amount of critical thought and writing on design from the 1860s.

In the press, *The Awakening Conscience* came to be called 'the Loose Lodging',¹⁹ for houses like Woodbine Villa, 7 Alpha Place, St Johns Wood, where it was painted and the model (Hunt's mistress) Annie Miller lived, had a reputation for housing fashionable kept women. These detached villas in the suburbs still had a dubious reputation twenty years later when French artist James Tissot exhibited paintings and etchings at the Grosvenor Gallery, including *A Quiet Afternoon*,²⁰ set in the garden of his house in St. John's Wood; a reviewer noted that these were 'pictures of the "detached villa" kind'.²¹ Although suburbs, in the popular imagination, were seen as areas of domesticity and the province of women and children, far removed and in opposition to the city and world of businessmen, the critical reception of these images revealed a fear of this new, unstable urban area, which focused on the morality of the women who lived there.²² A commentator described these women as 'divorced wives, not married to anyone in particular, mysterious widows whose husbands have never been seen, married women whose better halves were engaged in the City'.²³ Hunt's woman does not wear a

¹⁷ Mrs [Lucy] Orrin Smith, *The Drawing Room its Decorations and Furniture* (London: Macmillan, 1877), pp. 107-8.

¹⁸ Rhoda & Agnes Garrett, *Suggestions for House Decoration in Painting, Woodwork and Furniture* (London: Macmillan, 1876), p. 59.

¹⁹ *Illustrated London News* (13 May 1854), 438, quoted Flint, p. 62.

²⁰ James Tissot, *A Quiet Afternoon* (1879), oil on canvas, 58.4 x 83.8, whereabouts unknown, reproduced in Katharine Lochnan, ed., *Seductive Surfaces: The Art of Tissot* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 32, fig. 15.

²¹ 'The Grosvenor Gallery, Second Notice', *Daily Telegraph* (10 May 1879), 3, quoted Nancy Rose Marshall, 'Image or Identity: Kathleen Newton and the London Pictures of James Tissot', in Lochnan, p. 33.

²² See Marshall, 'Image or Identity', pp. 31-41.

²³ Author of 'A Brave Girl', *The London Journal* (September 1876), 166, quoted Marshall, 'Image or Identity', p. 36.

wedding ring, and her male companion's discarded glove indicates the likely fate of prostitution for a similarly cast-off mistress.

An even more mysterious woman living in the suburbs is the love interest of Wilkie Collins's *Basil*, which was being written around the time Hunt was painting *The Awakening Conscience*. Collins, and his younger brother, Charles, also a painter, were close friends of the Pre-Raphaelite group.²⁴ Just as the heightened colour and great detail of the painting forcefully put across Hunt's message, the melodrama of Collins' second published novel is characteristic of the genre which came to be known as 'sensation' novels. Kate Flint points out that although it is impossible to prove 'direct collusion' between writer and artist, they 'shared a common mode of looking at both furniture and gesture, regarding both as social and moral indicators';²⁵ indeed, this is a prevailing attitude of the writers and artists in my discussion. *The Awakening Conscience* has a literary counterpart in Collins's description of the Sherwin's drawing room, where Basil reads wrongly the evidence of the furnishings, blind in his love for Margaret, who will be revealed as a liar and untrue to his love:

everything was oppressively new. The brilliantly-varnished door cracked with a report like a pistol when it was opened; the paper on the walls, with its gaudy pattern of birds, trellis-work, and flowers, in gold, red, and green on a white ground, looked hardly dry yet; the showy window-curtains of white and sky-blue, and the still showier carpet of red and yellow, seemed as if they had come out of the shop yesterday; the round rosewood table was in a painfully high state of polish; the morocco-bound picture books that lay on it, looked as if they had never been moved or opened since they had been bought [...]. Never was a richly furnished room more thoroughly comfortless than this – the eye ached at looking round it. There was no repose anywhere. [...] The room would have given a nervous man the headache.²⁶

Not only is this close to being a description of Hunt's painting, but Basil's thoughts anticipate the language of Ruskin's description:

nothing is more notable than the way in which even the most trivial objects force themselves upon the attention of a mind which has been fevered by violent and distressful excitement. They thrust themselves forward with a ghastly and unendurable distinctness.²⁷

Thus, bad taste in the 1850s denotes mental distress and physical discomfort, and the

²⁴ Charles Allston Collins is best known for *Convent Thoughts* (1850-1), oil on canvas, arched top, 82.6 x 57.8, Visitors of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, reproduced in Parris, no. 33, p. 87.

²⁵ Flint, p. 52.

²⁶ Wilkie Collins, *Basil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), first published 1852, Part I, X, p. 61.

²⁷ Ruskin (1854), 7.

furnishings of a room could be 'read' to reveal the character of the inhabitants. Or, as Eastlake's American editor put it:

form is silent speech, and as we know that a man is uneducated if he speak ungrammatically, or unrefined if he use vulgar language, so when he voluntarily surrounds himself with ugly shapes we know that he is ignorant, or that his taste is bad.²⁸

The Formation of Taste: The Great Exhibition

The Great Exhibition was held in the 'gayest, most fairy-like, most beautiful and original building in the world',²⁹ the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park and opened on 1 May 1851. Organised predominately by Henry Cole, design reformer and civil servant, and Prince Albert, the Exhibition symbolised Imperial Britain's confidence and ostentation and had a profound influence on British art and design.³⁰ Although the Exhibition was hugely popular and an economic success, the British manufacturers came under attack from design reformers for the inappropriate and excessive ornament of pieces designed more for impact than taste. For example, a gas bracket shaped like flowers in the 'Naturalistic' style, made of highly detailed gilt brass and blue and white glass, designed by a Birmingham firm, came in for criticism for its inappropriate aping of natural forms (plate 3). Pugin's Medieval Court displayed furniture which did not conceal its construction, based on Gothic designs adapted for modern living, and was widely praised above other British contributions by some commentators: 'it is impossible to refrain from speaking in high terms of the works contained in the Mediaeval Court [...] for just principles of decoration, for beautiful details, for correct use of materials, and for excellent workmanship, the general collection is unique',³¹ yet this display was both 'a utopian

²⁸ Charles C. Perkins, Editor's Preface to Charles Locke Eastlake, *Hints on Household Taste* (Boston: James R. Osgood, 1872), p. x. This was the first American edition, quoted Judith Fryer, *Felicitous Space: The Imaginative Structures of Edith Wharton and Willa Cather* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), p. 120.

²⁹ *Illustrated London News* (17 May 1851), quoted Golby, p. 5.

³⁰ For history of the Great Exhibition and the 'Cole group' see Fiona MacCarthy, *A History of British Design 1830-1970* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1979, first published in 1972 as *All Things Bright and Beautiful*), pp. 7-20; Jules Lubbock, *The Tyranny of Taste: The Politics of Architecture and Design in Britain 1550-1960* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 248-278 and Jeffrey Auerbach, *The Great Exhibition of 1851: A Nation on Display* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999).

³¹ Richard Redgrave, 'Supplementary Report on Design' in Royal Commission for the Exhibition of 1851, *Reports by the Juries* (London, 1852), p. 718, quoted Lubbock (1995), p. 264.

view of the future and [...] a lament for a largely imaginary past'.³²

Ralph Wornum (Keeper of the National Gallery after 1854) was perhaps the foremost critic of the exhibition, stating that 'the paramount impression conveyed to the critical mind must be a general want of education in taste'.³³ His criticism, drawing on ideas of Pugin and Ruskin, was directed at the lack of serious innovation in ornamental design, which he saw as merely copying old ideas. Decoration seemed an end in itself and the subordination of form and function destroyed the integrity of the object. In contrast, Owen Jones's interior decorations of the Crystal Palace were simple, in the primary colours and geometric designs he developed from his study of Eastern ornament; he also designed domestic schemes, including The Priory for George Eliot (see Chapter Two). In Jones's opinion, the displays in general revealed the total decline and disorder of European decorative art, particularly British:

we are amazed at the shortsightedness of the manufacturers, who do not see how much it would be in their interest to begin by having a real and proper design from the hands of an artist.³⁴

Design seemed to be corrupted by a ceaseless search for novelty. He felt real innovation should not evolve from the imitation of natural forms, which resulted in items like carpets of illusionistic three-dimensional flowers, but by adherence to principles of design based upon flat, geometrical construction. In 1856 he laid out thirty-seven 'General Principles in the Arrangement of Form and Colour', developed from Pugin's architectural studies of the 1830s and 1840s,³⁵ followed by one hundred colour plates of ornament from around the world in the hugely influential pattern book *The Grammar of Ornament* (plate 34).³⁶

The organisers were so disappointed by British design, that they displayed what they considered the best of the exhibition alongside some of the worst, at Marlborough House in 1852. The approved pieces were some designed by Pugin, china from Minton

³² Auerbach, p. 115.

³³ Ralph Nicholson Wornum, 'The Exhibition as a Lesson in Taste', *The Art Journal Illustrated Catalogue* (London: George Virtue, 1851), pp. v-vi, quoted Auerbach, p. 113.

³⁴ Owen Jones quoted MacCarthy, p. 14.

³⁵ A similar format to A.W.N. Pugin, *Gothic Furniture in the Style of the 15th Century* (1835), *Contrasts: Or a Parallel Between the Architecture of the 15th and 19th Centuries* (1836) and *The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture* (1841).

³⁶ Owen Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament* (London: Day and Son, 1856, repr. London: Studio Editions, 1989).

and Sèvres and work from India and the near East, which were 'favoured as being untainted by technological processes'.³⁷ A small room, nicknamed 'the Chamber of Horrors', held eighty-seven of the worst pieces, for, as the catalogue explained, 'it has been deemed advisable to collect and exhibit to the student examples of what, according to the views held in this Department, are considered to illustrate wrong or false principles'.³⁸ These were pieces with naturalistic or indeterminate rococo ornamentation (like the gas bracket illustrated earlier), surfaces decorated to obscure their material and/or construction, like wallpapers and carpets with illusionistic patterns which disrupted the flatness of the surface.³⁹ As Auerbach has pointed out, these critics had a love-hate relationship with new technologies; they were 'essentially critics of the division of labor, and their critiques were at heart a lament for craftsmanship',⁴⁰ an issue Morris was to bring to the forefront of the design ethic of The Firm.

Shortly after the Exhibition, the Schools of Design, which had been set up in the late 1830s, were extended under the small but influential group of design reformers and civil servants centred around Cole, who felt that something had to be done about the state of British design. The profits from the Exhibition enabled them to purchase land in South Kensington for a Museum of Ornamental Art, which was to house the collection exhibited in Marlborough House, for the 'improvement of public taste in Design';⁴¹ this is now the Victoria and Albert Museum. Thus, design in Britain at mid-century was focused on education, in the first place of artists and manufacturers, but also of visitors to the museum. The writers of Household Taste manuals took this a step further, for they were attempting to educate the general public (particularly the middle-classes) through specific, detailed instructions as to the correct way to furnish the home with well-designed items.

³⁷ Joanna Banham, Julia Porter and Sally Macdonald, *Victorian Interior Style* (London: Studio Editions, 1996, first published in 1991 as *Victorian Interior Design*), p. 72.

³⁸ Department of Science and Art, *Catalogue of the Museum of Ornamental Art*, 5th edn (London: 1853), pp. 13 ff., quoted Lubbock (1995), p. 272.

³⁹ See illustrations of 'False Principles' with their original labels still attached, reproduced in Lubbock (1995), plates 80, 81, pp. 259-60, 272. Although this 'Chamber of Horrors' is discussed extensively in recent histories of Victorian interior design, this tiny room probably only existed for a few months, and went virtually unnoticed in the contemporary press. See Lubbock (1995), p. 271 and MacCarthy, p. 16.

⁴⁰ Auerbach, p. 115.

⁴¹ Lubbock (1995), p. 277.

The Aesthetes and The House Beautiful

In the hands of artists connected with the Pre-Raphaelites, and the larger European movements of Symbolism and Aestheticism, the morality of interior decoration became more complex.⁴² The Pre-Raphaelites, always closely affiliated to Ruskin, shared his love of the Gothic, which involved veneration of the artist-craftsman and honest production. They were even starting to produce their own painted furniture by the mid-1850s.⁴³ Old furnishings were valued for their truth to materials, indicative of their pre-industrial manufacture, and their connection to the venerated figure of the artist-craftsman. These criteria applied even to very basic items, like the wooden bucket Eastlake chose to illustrate in his *Hints on Household Taste* (plate 4), which he praised for its common sense, appropriateness to purpose and solid craftsmanship; 'it can generally be found, that the most commonplace objects of domestic use [...] are the most interesting in appearance'.⁴⁴ The craftsmanship of Eastlake's Gothic style furniture (plate 6) is related stylistically and theoretically to the work of Morris, who famously stated 'have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful'.⁴⁵ In 1861 the co-operative firm Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. was set up to produce furniture, textiles and other well-produced decorative work in a consciously medieval style. Such items could form part of an Aesthetic interior, but the taste of the group of artists, designers and writers who came to be termed 'Aesthetes' was eclectic in style and period of manufacture.

The decorative and spiritual goal of the artistic interior of the 1880s was the 'House Beautiful', a term used by the hugely influential critic Walter Pater in *The Renaissance*:

⁴² For the way Americans dealt with these issues, see Doreen Bolger Burke and others, *In Pursuit of Beauty: Americans and the Aesthetic Movement* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1986) and Katherine C. Grier, *Culture and Comfort: People, Parlors, and Upholstery 1850-1930* (Rochester: Strong Museum, 1988).

⁴³ Holman Hunt 'could find no furniture to buy' so started to design his own, c.1855, according to MacCarthy, p. 21. Interestingly, this is shortly after *The Awakening Conscience* was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1854.

⁴⁴ Charles L. Eastlake, *Hints on Household Taste*, with a new introduction by John Gloag (New York: Dover Publications, 1986), reprint of 4th edn (London: Longman, Green and Company, 1878), p. 60.

⁴⁵ William Morris, *The Collected Works of William Morris* 24 vols (London: Longmans Green, 1910-15), Vol. 22, *Hopes and Fears for Art*, Lecture II, 'The Beauty of Life' (1881), pp. 51-80 (p. 77).

Studies in Art and Poetry, first published in 1873.⁴⁶ First used by John Bunyan in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, where the 'house called Beautiful' is 'built for the relief and security of Pilgrims',⁴⁷ for Pater, it is where 'all breathes of that unity of culture in which "whatsoever things are comely" are reconciled, for the elevation and adorning of our spirits'.⁴⁸ Also, the 'House Beautiful' is where 'the genuine and humanistic workmen of all ages, all those artists who have really felt and understood their work, are building together for the human spirit'.⁴⁹ The beauty, craftsmanship and the religious overtones of the comfort of soul and body inherent in this concept were to be transformed into reality by the late Victorian design reformers. In painting, Aestheticism was a reaction against the moral, sentimental and narrative base of much Victorian painting.⁵⁰ Artists connected with the Aesthetic Movement rejected the idea that art should have a didactic social, moral or political purpose. Rossetti's late paintings of beautiful women surrounded by flowers, musical instruments or beautiful objects, like *La Ghirlandata*, are particularly Aesthetic.⁵¹ In his 'Ten O'Clock' lecture, Whistler complained that 'Beauty is confounded with Virtue, and, before a work of Art, it is asked: "What good shall it do?"'⁵² For such Aesthetes, beauty lay as much in the formal values of the painting as its subject and they wished to avoid the narrative element of painting that formed so much of the work displayed at the Royal Academy.

The Aesthetic creed of 'Art for Art's Sake' was translated from the French Romantic idea of 'l'art pour l'art', a phrase coined by the philosopher and historian Victor Cousin, and expounded by Theophile Gautier in the preface to his novel *Mademoiselle de*

⁴⁶ Walter Pater, 'Two Early French Stories', in *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry: the 1893 Text*, ed. by Donald L. Hill (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), (p. 1-22), p. 20.

⁴⁷ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress From This World To That Which Is To Come* (London: J.M. Dent, [n.d.]), first published 1678, pp. 51, 248.

⁴⁸ Pater, 'Two Early French Stories', *The Renaissance*, pp. 20-21.

⁴⁹ Pater, 'Review of *Children in Italian and English Design* by Sidney Colvin (1872)', in *The Renaissance*, (pp. 193-96), p. 194.

⁵⁰ See Psomiades; Lionel Lambourne, *The Aesthetic Movement* (London: Phaidon, 1996).

⁵¹ Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *La Ghirlandata*, 1873, oil on canvas, 115.6 x 87.6, Guildhall Art Gallery, Corporation of London, reproduced in Steven Adams, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Guild, 1988), p. 98.

⁵² James McNeill Whistler, 'Mr Whistler's "Ten O'Clock"', 20 February 1885, in Nigel Thorp, ed., *Whistler on Art: Selected Letters and Writing 1849-1903 of James McNeill Whistler* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1994), pp. 79-95 (p. 81).

Maupin, where he argues against bourgeois philistinism, practical utility and the ugliness of daily life.⁵³ Pater concluded the first editions of *The Renaissance* with the declaration: 'of such wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for art's sake, has most'.⁵⁴ Within the decorative arts, Aestheticism involved a rebellion against Rococo-esque decorative and household objects, particularly those which were cheaply machine-made. The traditional hierarchy of the fine arts: painting and sculpture as more important than the 'lesser', or decorative arts, was no longer prioritised. Whistler, who designed various interior schemes, insisted to his friends and biographers the Pennells that

to be a painter, one must be a decorator, able to make of the wall upon which his work hung, the room containing it, and, indeed, the whole house, a harmony, a symphony, an arrangement no less than was the picture or print which was part of it.⁵⁵

Aestheticism prioritised the collector over the artist-craftsman; individuality, connoisseurship and the selection of beautiful objects were the key actions of the Aesthetes, whereas the act of creation linked to 'honest' craftsmanship characterised the artists and designers aligned with the Arts and Crafts Movement. For example, by the time Rossetti moved into Tudor House, Cheyne Walk in 1862, he was also collecting antiques, and he is often credited with starting the fashion for furnishing the house in old furniture.⁵⁶ In his sitting room a large mid-nineteenth century Jacobethan mirror jostled for space with early Italian art, a gilded Regency overmantel, Delft tiles in the fireplace and an eighteenth-century Italian sofa among other items (plate 5). For artists decorating their homes and studios with antiques in the 1850s, the emphasis was on eclecticism rather than any particular historical period or special rarity,

There are many different strands that make up Victorian interior decoration. The very rich were able to indulge their personal tastes with the most prestigious artists and designers, not necessarily those whom we now recognise as innovative or influential. Painters were using their skills to decorate furniture or design tapestries and stained glass,

⁵³ Theophile Gautier, *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835).

⁵⁴ This is the wording of editions before 1893. Pater, 'Conclusion', *The Renaissance*, p. 457.

⁵⁵ Elizabeth Robins Pennell and Joseph Pennell, 'Whistler as Decorator', *The Century Magazine*, 83 (1912), 500-513 (p. 501).

⁵⁶ See Stefan Muthesius, 'Why Do We Buy Old Furniture? Aspects of The Authentic Antique in Britain 1870-1910', *Art History*, 11 (1988), 231-254 (p. 233).

like Burne-Jones's work for *The Firm*.⁵⁷ The studios of even the most conservative and popular painters became palaces of art suited to social gatherings as well as their place of work. The magnificent red and gold studio which dominates Lord Leighton's home at 12 Holland Park Road (plate 7)⁵⁸ was the location of annual music parties. Caroline Dakers states in her extensive study of the artists living in Holland Park: 'Leighton was creating a house in which he could perform his public role on a sumptuous stage; his private life required little space'.⁵⁹ The homes of artists and writers were written about in detail in the press, which engendered a cult of personality and strengthened the importance of individuality in the decoration of one's home.⁶⁰ As Veblen argues, 'members of each stratum accept as their ideal of decency the scheme of life in vogue in the next higher stratum, and bend their energies to live up to that ideal'.⁶¹

Peacocks and Porcelain

Artists who were more radical in their painting were often more extreme in their interior decoration as well. In contrast to Rossetti's densely furnished rooms, Godwin and Whistler decorated their homes in a simpler style inspired by the art of Japan, which first made a mark on the general public consciousness with the Japanese display at the Great Exhibition of 1862.⁶² Whistler plunged his homes into Japonisme just as he explored Japanese pictorial conventions in his paintings (plate 8). His walls were painted with flat, subtle distemper washes in neutral colours, often pale yellows with white cornices. Floors were covered with Japanese style straw matting or plain coloured carpet. He preferred curtains made of white muslin or flowered chintz to let in a softly filtered light,

⁵⁷ See Stephen Wildman and John Christian, *Edward Burne-Jones: Victorian Artist-Dreamer* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998), especially Alan Crawford, 'Burne-Jones as a Decorative Artist', pp. 5-23.

⁵⁸ Completed 1866, added to 1877-9, architect George Aitchison.

⁵⁹ Caroline Dakers, *The Holland Park Circle: Artists and Victorian Society* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 60. See Kate Bailey, 'Leighton – Public and Private Lives', *Apollo*, n.s. 143 (1996), 22-26.

⁶⁰ For example, Wilfrid Meynell, 'The Homes of Our Artists: Sir Frederick Leighton's House in Holland Park Road', *The Magazine of Art*, 4 (1881), 169-176.

⁶¹ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1922), first published 1899, p. 84.

⁶² See Susan Weber Soros, ed., *E.W. Godwin: Aesthetic Movement Architect and Designer* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999) and Elizabeth Aslin, *E.W. Godwin: Furniture and Interior Decoration* (London: Murray, 1986).

rather than heavy velvet drapes or stained glass the Victorians often favoured to exclude the sight of the city beyond the windows. The few, carefully-placed ornaments included Japanese prints, flights of fans and shelves of blue and white porcelain. All his rooms were spacious, light and sparsely furnished, partly due to his often dire financial circumstances, but also his admiration for Japanese design and wish to make rooms resonate with colour rather than bulge with furniture. He once advised a client to begin the decoration of his house thus: 'well, first burn all your furniture'.⁶³ He chose furnishings for their beauty and simplicity of line, like eighteenth-century Hepplewhite chairs and the Japanese style furniture designed by his friend Godwin (plate 9).⁶⁴ His decorative style was an extreme distillation of the Aesthetic style, particularly its Japanese elements. Whistler's one-time assistant, Mortimer Menpes designed a far more densely decorated Oriental interior at 25 Cadogan Gardens in the late 1890s, filled with furnishings brought from both Japan and China.⁶⁵ It was not until the end of the century that Whistler's light, uncluttered style had more widespread currency, with the work of designers like Charles Rennie Mackintosh and M.H. Baillie Scott.

Whistler's most abiding passion, and one he shared with Rossetti and Godwin, was the collection of blue and white porcelain. Murray Marks, a successful porcelain dealer, stated that 'it was [Whistler] who invented blue and white in London'.⁶⁶ Although Oriental porcelain had long been collected in Europe, after the opening of Japan to foreign trade in 1854 there was a popular craze for 'blue and white' china as the essential element of the artistic and fashionable home. Rossetti and Whistler competed in the 1860s, when bargains were still to be had, to achieve the finest collection, and their enthusiasm infected all those who aspired to artistic taste. 'Blue and white' also became essential elements of Aesthetic paintings of the domestic interior from the 1870s, which are rarely without a background of Oriental porcelain.

⁶³ Deanna Marohn Bendix, *Diabolical Designs: Paintings, Interiors and Exhibitions of James McNeill Whistler* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1995), p. 172.

⁶⁴ Some of Edward William Godwin's furniture designs are reproduced in the catalogue William Watt, *Art Furniture from Designs by E.W. Godwin* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1877).

⁶⁵ See Nick Pearce, 'The Chinese Folding Chair, Mortimer Menpes and an Aesthetic Interior,' *Apollo*, n.s. 149 (1999), 45-53 and Banham, pp. 154-5.

⁶⁶ Elizabeth Robins Pennell and Joseph Pennell, *The Life of James McNeill Whistler*, 2 vols (London: Heinemann, 1908), I, 116.

George du Maurier satirised this 'Chinamania' in his *Punch* cartoons from 1874, like 'The Six-Mark Tea-Pot' (plate 10).⁶⁷ The 'Aesthetic Bridegroom' bears more than a passing resemblance to Oscar Wilde, who was caught up in the craze while still a student at Oxford in 1874 and is credited with saying 'I find it harder and harder every day to live up to my blue china'.⁶⁸ Although not an artist or a designer, Wilde became a figurehead of the Aesthetic movement. Wilde made the lily and sunflower his own personal emblems and his aesthetic creed was that 'Art is not something which you can take or leave. It is a necessity of human life'.⁶⁹ Wilde was more of a follower than an innovator in design; on his tour of the United States in 1882 his lectures on subjects like 'The House Beautiful' and 'Art and the Handicraftsman' owe much to the writings of Morris, Ruskin and Whistler. When he asked Whistler to superintend the redecoration of his home at 16 Tite Street in 1884, he replied 'no, Oscar, you have been lecturing to us about the House Beautiful; now is your chance to show us one',⁷⁰ and Godwin designed the furniture and interior decoration instead.⁷¹ David Dewing has described him as the 'persona' of the Aesthetic movement, through whom Aestheticism's 'essential qualities were given an identity and became more easily recognisable'.⁷² His cult of personality was symptomatic of the 'Art at Home' movement, in which the 'most important and enduring legacy for the householder was the notion that interior style should be a form of personal expression; that rather than follow any closely defined rules, it was regarded as valuable to develop one's own ideas';⁷³ however, for this one needed household taste books as a guide.

The sumptuous trade card of Murray Marks brings together emblematically the Aesthetic items no home should be without, the peacock feather and blue and white china

⁶⁷ See Linda Merrill, *The Peacock Room: A Cultural Biography* (Washington, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 170 and Charlotte Gere and Lesley Hoskins, *The House Beautiful: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetic Interior* (London: Lund Humphries in association with the Geffrye Museum, 2000), pp. 13-15.

⁶⁸ Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 43.

⁶⁹ Oscar Wilde, 'House Decoration' in Oscar Wilde, *Essays and Lectures* (London: Methuen, 1909), pp. 157-171 (p. 160). Lecture originally called 'The Decorative Arts' [version 2], first delivered 1882.

⁷⁰ Ellmann, p. 234.

⁷¹ See H. Montgomery Hyde, 'Oscar Wilde and His Architect, Edward Godwin', *Architectural Review*, 109 (1951), 175-176 and Gere and Hoskins, pp. 97-107.

⁷² David Dewing, 'Introduction' to Gere and Hoskins, pp. 7-9, (p. 8).

⁷³ Dewing, p. 8.

(plate 11). Although the card was probably designed by Rossetti's assistant Henry Treffry Dunn, in legend it is the collaborative effort of the great artistic Aesthetes Whistler, Rossetti and Morris.⁷⁴ The ginger jar is decorated with blossoming prunus branches on a field of cracking ice, which symbolise the end of winter. Rossetti was to use this pattern as the background for *The Blue Bower* (plate 12), in which one of his anonymous women is playing a dulcimer; the colour of the Chinese porcelain dominates the picture, helping to create an aesthetic art object of the woman. In many of the novels I will discuss below, woman are similarly (and, for them, dangerously) constructed as decorative, particularly Gwendolen, Isabel and Lily. A contemporary reviewer noted: 'the music of the dulcimer passes out of the spectator's cognizance when the chromatic harmony takes its place in appealing to the eye'.⁷⁵ This is in accordance with Pater's dictum held dear by the Aesthetes, that 'all art constantly aspires to the condition of music'.⁷⁶ In 1877 Whistler made the peacock feather indivisible from Aesthetic interiors with his most infamous interior design, *The Peacock Room*, where almost every available surface was covered with an abstracted design of peacock feathers (plate 13).

Sweetness and Light

The 'House Beautiful' for the middle-classes was much more cluttered than these carefully arranged statements, for the Aesthetic 'Queen Anne' style, advocated by household taste books, involved careful selection and combination of varied objects. Lesley Hoskins points out that the term 'aesthetic' was never used in the books, the writers using 'artistic' instead, with the closely related notion of 'taste' which resulted from 'the artistic sensibilities of the individual'; yet taste could also be learned, and was 'an absolute, a prerequisite to an ability to recognise and appreciate the good or the beautiful'.⁷⁷ The books, and the Aesthetes, strove towards an atmosphere of 'sweetness and light'. This term originates in Swift's *Battle of the Books* (1704): 'the two noblest of

⁷⁴ Merrill, p. 177.

⁷⁵ [F. G. Stephens], 'Fine Arts: Mr. Rossetti's Pictures', *Athenaeum*, 1982 (21 October 1865), 546, quoted Merrill, p. 62.

⁷⁶ Pater, 'The School of Giorgione' in *The Renaissance*, p. 106.

⁷⁷ Gere and Hoskins, p. 110.

things which are sweetness and light', and has a definite moral basis. Matthew Arnold was to give it more popular currency in the nineteenth century with his attempt to transform middle-class philistinism: 'the pursuit of perfection, then, is the pursuit of sweetness and light',⁷⁸ where 'sweetness' is the enjoyment or creation of beauty and 'light' is the desire to see and learn intellectual truth. Although Arnold had larger social and moral ends, if vaguely defined, he saw beauty as able to expand the human spirit far above the fetishisation of material objects.

The picturesque 'Queen Anne' architectural style gained international recognition with Norman Shaw's 'Queen Anne House' designed for the Rue des Nations at the 1878 Paris Exhibition, but it was not a straightforward revival style. In interior decoration the ideal was a combination of Jacobethan, Puritan, eighteenth-century and Oriental elements, chosen using taste and aesthetic discrimination.⁷⁹ The house of *Punch* cartoonist Linley Sambourne at 18 Stafford Terrace, Kensington, demonstrates this eclectic style, which echoes Tudor House. It was decorated in the 1870s and is still intact today (plate 14). All the essential elements are here in great profusion: Morris wallpaper (*Pomegranates*, c.1866), blue and white china, eighteenth-century Sheraton and French furniture, stained glass and Turkey rugs. As this is a speculatively built house, the design of the mantelpiece necessitates its covering by a velvet pelmet, just as advised by the manual writers. Sambourne's home is crammed with busts and pictures, perhaps more than is advocated or illustrated by the manuals, but indicative of the personal artistic taste of the occupants of the house. It was common for actual houses to have some artistic elements to indicate their educated taste mixed in with more old-fashioned or cheaper furniture. However, the profusion of objects is ratified by the design of the time, for an overmantel designed to hold many objects like that in Sambourne's house can be compared to an illustration of an overmantel crammed with blue and white, which architect and design reformer Edis installed in his own dining room (plates 15, 16).

Two similar artworks by Walter Crane, depicting women in interiors, demonstrate

⁷⁸ Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), in Miriam Allott and Robert H. Super, eds., *The Oxford Authors: Matthew Arnold* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 343-363 (p. 362).

⁷⁹ See Muthesius, pp. 238-240.

the artistic interior: *At Home – A Portrait* of 1872 and *My Lady's Chamber*, the frontispiece for Clarence Cook's *The House Beautiful* of 1878 (plates 17, 18). The earlier painting shows a woman in an interior influenced by Morris, with a tapestry on the wall, blue-tiled fireplace, blue and white vase and antique oil lamp on the classical white mantelpiece. Although it was painted in Rome, this portrait of the artist's wife holding a Japanese fan demonstrates all the necessary elements of the British 'House Beautiful'. Crane's sister Lucy, an artist and lecturer on household taste, writes on decoration in terms consciously derived from Morris, Pugin and Ruskin: 'to expend labour in disguising use and falsifying material, shows an utter misconception of Art and ignorance of Beauty'.⁸⁰ Interior decoration should be 'an art of simplicity, of cheerfulness and brightness, of comfort, cleanliness, and hospitality, and is a help to good and healthy living',⁸¹ the effect Walter Crane, and the writers on household taste, aimed for. So archetypal is the image of a woman posed by a fire that du Maurier could reinterpret the image for one of his *Punch* cartoons, 'Intellectual Epicures' in 1876 (plate 19). The male figure on the left, 'dilettante De Tomkyns', has a similar pose to Crane's wife with his elbow resting on the mantelpiece and holding a Japanese fan. The pose is also reminiscent of Whistler's widely-known *The Little White Girl*.⁸² Du Maurier's deliberate feminisation of his subject, strengthened by the right side of the cartoon which depicts 'Betsy Waring (who goes out a-charing)', emphasises the satire against Aestheticism's effeminate, non-utilitarian aspects. Remember that the figurehead of the movement who declared their 'love of art for its own sake'⁸³ was the bohemian dandy Wilde, who was to fall so spectacularly from grace because of his 'effeminacy'.

My Lady's Chamber is a more stylised rendering of the decorative elements Cook recommends in his book: the Regency silver tea-set, Japanese fans, blue and white china, the picturesque mixture of a modern Morris designed chair, Regency armchair and china cabinets, tiled fireplace and Eastern rug. In this image, the woman is posed making tea in

80 Lucy Crane, *Art and the Formation of Taste* (London: Macmillan, 1882), p. 29.

81 Crane, p. 37.

82 Whistler, *Symphony in White, No. 2: The Little White Girl*, 1864-5, oil on canvas, 76.5 x 51.1, Tate Gallery, London, reproduced in Richard Dornment and Margaret F. MacDonald, *James McNeill Whistler* (London: Tate Gallery, 1995), no. 15, p. 79.

83 Pater, 'Conclusion', *The Renaissance*, p. 190.

front of a roaring fire, evoking the atmosphere of home. The tea ceremony is an important visual image in paintings of women to indicate domesticity, and is also used in novels; Wharton's Lily Bart takes it one step further by making tea on a moving train and imparting grace and delicacy to an otherwise mundane ritual in order to snare a suitor (see Chapter Six). Crane's interior seems as crowded with antiques and objects as Rossetti's, and its mixture of old and new even holds similar mirrors, rug, fireplace and classical sofa.

**Now he who loves aesthetic cheer
And does not mind the damp
May come and read Rossetti here
By a Japanese-y lamp.⁸⁴**

Aestheticism came in for a large amount of criticism, helped by Wilde's outrageous poses and statements, which were most publicly lampooned by Gilbert and Sullivan's comic opera *Patience* (1881).⁸⁵ That same year, however, *The Magazine of Art* found that this ridicule did not detract from the beauty of the objects that made up the 'House Beautiful':

still, the peacock and the lily are not the less beautiful because they have been made a ridicule by aesthetic *poseurs*; they will survive mere fashion; so will the happy repose of tertiary backgrounds, and the splendid accents of bold yet subtle Oriental colour, and the simplicity of lines, and the rightness of ornament. Meanwhile these good things are somewhat ridiculous – a fact to which we must resign ourselves. Our great satirical draughtsman has laughed at them wittily, and our actors have mimicked them ignorantly, and a very large number of sensible men are sick of the subject.⁸⁶

And perhaps as Lucy Crane stated 'the numerous travesties that have been founded on it, have acquired far larger proportions and obtained much more notoriety than the reality they profess to ridicule'.⁸⁷ Cartoons and satiric illustrations are a useful resource for demonstrating how Aesthetic items were used in the late-Victorian home, for generally, individual pieces were selected by the middle-class consumer to create a personalised domestic setting, rather than a whole unified interior. At the end of the century, the emblems of 'artistic' taste were still easily readable and could be used to identify pretensions to taste. In George and Weedon Grossmith's *A Diary of a Nobody* published

⁸⁴ Anon., 'The Ballad of Belford Park', *St. James's Gazette* (17 December 1881), Lambourne, p. 130.

⁸⁵ For details of *Patience* see Ellmann, pp. 129-131 and Gere and Hoskins, pp. 27-9.

⁸⁶ John Oldcastle, 'The Homes of Our Artists: Mr Millais' House at Palace Gate', *Magazine of Art* (1881), 290-295 (p. 290).

⁸⁷ Crane, pp. 91-2.

in *Punch* in 1892, Mr Pooter feels his social standing is dependent upon his undeviating attachment to domestic values and middle-class suburban living, and much of the comedy derives from his disastrous attempts at interior decoration and DIY. Pooter describes Finsworth's 'beautifully decorated' drawing room which is 'full of knick-knacks, and some plates hung up on the wall. There were several little wooden milk-stools with paintings on them'.⁸⁸ The illustration shows the elements which have made this a beautiful room: above the dado, the wall is covered in paintings with Japanese fans liberally placed behind them, and the milking stool sits somewhat incongruously beside a chair festooned in bows (plate 20).

To return to the figure of the woman in the home, Alfred Concanen's 1881 illustration to accompany the popular satiric song, *My Aesthetic Love*,⁸⁹ shows all the elements of the Aesthetic interior, but the affected pose of the woman highlights his satiric purpose (plate 21). She sits on a Japoniste chair like those by Godwin, with the by now familiar blue and white, peacock feathers, stencilled dado, Eastlake sideboard, all recommended by the manuals. However the satirist's depiction of the woman lost in wistful contemplation of the beauty of her lilies, 'for an hour' at a time, as the song puts it, subverts the aesthetic effect. An illustration from Mrs Orrinsmith's book of just four years earlier, which she captioned 'A Comfortable Corner', shows similar decorative elements at work, but with no intention of cliché (plate 22). Here, almost dwarfed by the Godwinesque furniture, the woman is reading, implying rather more intelligence and industry than the girl transfixed by her flowers. In the accompanying text Mrs Orrinsmith explains how and why this room is the apotheosis of morality and taste: 'comfort comes to one and all with the knowledge that simplicity has beauty. Only honest material, straight lines, wholesome pottery, earnest intention, are needful'.⁹⁰

The Aesthetes were often identified with immorality, and they objected to the conventional explicit moral narrative of much of Victorian painting; however, in his lecture 'The House Beautiful' Wilde states that art 'fosters morality'. In pacifist vein he

⁸⁸ George and Weedon Grossmith, *The Diary of a Nobody* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), first published in book form 1892, p. 188.

⁸⁹ Concanen illustrated thousands of popular song sheet covers.

⁹⁰ Orrinsmith, p. 43.

says that 'national hatreds are always strongest where culture is lowest. And hence the enormous importance given to all the decorative arts in our English Renaissance'. This comment perhaps seems surprising from an advocator of 'art for art's sake', yet he sees the artist as a 'priest' of the Victorian age.⁹¹ The ennobling potential of beauty is embedded in his socialist principles, also held by Morris and Ruskin, for he asks his audience to

create an art that is made with the hands of the people, for the joy of the people too, an art that will be a democratic art, entering into the houses of the people, making beautiful the simplest vessels they contain, for there is nothing in common life too mean, in common things too trivial to be ennobled by your touch, nothing in life that art cannot raise and sanctify.⁹²

The writers on Household Taste utilise this democratic and ennobling aspect of art in their manuals; art and beauty were no longer accessible only to the very rich or the privileged artist, the middle-classes could learn to enjoy art in their own homes and be made better citizens in the process.

Art at Home

Eastlake's *Hints on Household Taste* was greatly influenced by the Design Reform movement, stylistically and theoretically, and although it became hugely popular, particularly in the United States, at 18/- it was a relatively expensive publication. In 1876 the first of the Macmillan series 'Art at Home' was published, W. J. Loftie's *A Plea for Art in the House*, at the much cheaper price of 2/6.⁹³ This was followed by Rhoda and Agnes Garrett's *Suggestions for House Decoration* and Mrs Orrinsmith's *The Drawing Room* in 1877, and in 1878: Lady Barker's *The Bedroom and Boudoir* and Mrs Loftie's *The Dining Room*.⁹⁴ The books in this series remained popular into many editions, and their principles were echoed in many magazines, journals and trade catalogues. In America, Clarence Cook's *The House Beautiful* was second only in popularity to

⁹¹ Kevin H.F. O'Brien, "'The House Beautiful': A Reconstruction of Oscar Wilde's American Lecture", *Victorian Studies*, 17 (1974), 395-418 (p. 417).

⁹² Wilde, 'The House Beautiful', quoted O'Brien, p. 418.

⁹³ W.J. [William John] Loftie, *A Plea for Art in the House; With a Special Reference to the Economy of Collecting Works of Art and the Importance of Taste in Education and Morals* (London: Macmillan, 1876).

⁹⁴ Lady [Mary Anne Stewart Broome] Barker, *Bedroom and Boudoir* (London: Macmillan, 1878); Mrs [Martha Jane Anderson] Loftie, *The Dining Room* (London: Macmillan, 1878).

Eastlake.⁹⁵ In 1881, the architect Robert Edis published his *Decoration and Furniture of Town Houses*, and one of the major concerns of his writing is health and cleanliness.⁹⁶ He recommends removable rugs rather than fitted carpets, and fitted furniture in bedrooms to reduce a build-up of dust. He wrote a booklet, *Healthy Furniture and Decoration*, for the London International Health Exhibition in 1884.⁹⁷ Although the illustrations of all these manuals show some furniture in Eastlake's neo-Gothic style, they mostly advocate 'Queen Anne'. Each book follows a pattern, which Martha McClaugherty has identified as comprising four features: the authors organise their material into specific room types or components; the tone of the writing stresses the importance of a home's environment on the inhabitants; they recommend specific manufacturers; and idealised illustrations reinforce their recommendations.⁹⁸ However, I would add another aspect: the description of 'bad' design in the Victorian middle-class home. This perhaps originated with Pugin's *Contrasts* and was part of the critical dialogue of the Great Exhibition.

The household taste books share a common language of design reform, describing the 'evils' of prevailing middle-class taste and providing 'remedies'. Their solutions are dependant upon beauty, morality, health concerns, economics, and condemnation of the commercial upholsterer and the speculatively built, rented London house. The Garretts set out principles of suitable and 'artistic' decoration, derived from the artistic movements previously mentioned, and are followed by all the other writers on household taste:

The principle in decoration which may be most rigidly adhered to is:— Never go out of your way to make a thing or a material look like what it is not. [...] Every material has in itself a beauty and a suitability which is lost or wasted if it is made to imitate something else.⁹⁹

Do not go out of your way to hide the construction of your house or of any part of your furniture — make it sound so you feel no anxiety to conceal.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ Clarence Cook, *The House Beautiful: Essays on Beds and Tables, Stools and Candlesticks* (New York: Scribner Armstrong, 1878), first published June 1875–May 1877, *Scribner's Monthly*.

⁹⁶ Robert W. Edis, *Decoration & Furniture of Town Houses* (London: C. Kegan Paul & Co., 1881).

⁹⁷ The International Health Exhibition is discussed in this context by Annmarie Adams, *Architecture in the Family Way: Doctors, Houses and Women 1870-1900* (London and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996).

⁹⁸ McClaugherty, p. 2.

⁹⁹ Garrett, pp. 16-17.

¹⁰⁰ Garrett, p. 18.

Always secure a considerable amount of plain, neutral colour in your rooms.[...] Do not cover the wall entirely with pattern, but allow the eye to rest.¹⁰¹

They also warn against the danger of over-ornamentation and filling rooms with objects so that they resemble a museum. These principles would 'enable the amateur to speak with authority and avoid buying furniture which does not suit the room but is "fashionable"'.¹⁰² The furnishings of the 'artistic' home should be of enduring quality and style, yet practicality was often an important concern, particularly in the decoration of the hall, which I will examine in detail.

In the entrance hall, the furnishings and decoration had to be hard-wearing and easy to maintain, due to its proximity to the outside world and weather. Expensive marble flooring and panelling or wooden wainscoting would be most suited to these requirements, and most aesthetically pleasing, but encaustic tiles, from suppliers like Minton are 'a means of decoration which, for beauty of effect, durability, and cheapness, has scarcely a parallel'.¹⁰³ Oilcloth painted with a geometric pattern was also recommended for economy and practicality. The furniture of the hall also had to be hard-wearing, but as it was for seating servants and messengers, did not need to be comfortable. It was not often moved, so an 'appearance of solidity' was aimed at,¹⁰⁴ preferably oak chairs and hallstand.

Cook discusses the importance of the entrance hall on visitor's first impressions of the houses, for it has to be remembered that all these writers were not only concerned with the comfort of the inhabitants, but the outward appearance of the home to others, which provided vital clues as to the character of its inhabitants. He complains of the 'dismal, narrow, ill-lighted entry-ways' of New York brownstone tenements, which were often only sixteen feet wide, and first impressions of the home:

as in meeting a man or a woman, so in entering a house, the first impression generally goes a great way in shaping our judgment. If, on passing the door, we find ourselves in a passage six feet wide, with a hatstand on one side reducing it to four feet, and the bottom step of the staircase coming to within six feet of the door-way in front of us, and a gaselier dropping to within a foot of our head, we get an impression of something that is not precisely generosity, and which is not removed either by finding

101 Garrett, p. 19.

102 Garrett, p. 23.

103 Eastlake (1986), p. 50.

104 Eastlake (1986), p. 63.

the drawing-room overfurnished, or by the fact that the hat-rack was made by Herter, that the carpet on the stairs is Wilton, and that the gaselier is one of Tiffany's imported masterpieces.¹⁰⁵

Kenneth Ames, utilising the strategies of material culture in a chapter on hall furnishings of the middle-class home of the 1870s, studies items such as hallstands in order to investigate how American Victorians sought to present a self-image through the objects and decoration of their entrance halls. The entrance hall was 'a space that was neither wholly interior or exterior but a sheltered, social testing zone that some moved through with ease and familiarity and others never passed beyond'.¹⁰⁶ Cook was an 'Anglophile reformer' who rejected the forms of mid-Victorian furniture on moral and aesthetic grounds, yet Ames discusses how these reformers 'did not reject the functions it embodied and ceremonialized'.¹⁰⁷ Cook's illustration, captioned 'She'll be down in a minute, sir' (plate 23), shows the hallstand's 'utilitarian functions performed by objects devoid of [...] conspicuous grandeur and symbolic allusion', just a top hat and a man's coat, hanging on hooks around a mirror, rather than a grandiose, highly decorated piece of furniture which displayed the wealth of the family through a large mirror and gilding. The image, together with its narrative caption,

are potent demonstrations of the ways artifacts were deliberately used in the nineteenth century as props in the drama of life. The self-consciousness evident here was as much a component of the reform style as it was of the dominant style. Reformers may have rejected the appearance and sociocultural references of objects in the courtly mode, but they endorsed and embraced the functions those objects performed. The issue was not whether the commonplace acts of everyday life should be celebrated and ceremonialized but which forms and styles were most suitable for, or even worthy of, those purposes.¹⁰⁸

Ames here points out the socio-cultural issues at work in the household taste manuals, which are more difficult for twenty-first century readers to discern.¹⁰⁹ Henry James and Edith Wharton in particular utilise artefacts in their writing to illuminate character and incident in their novels. I will discuss how in *The Spoils of Poynton* Mrs Gereth's concern with her 'things' above all, drives the drama.

¹⁰⁵ Cook, p. 26.

¹⁰⁶ Kenneth L. Ames, *Death in the Dining Room and Other Tales of Victorian Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), p. 43.

¹⁰⁷ Ames, p. 29.

¹⁰⁸ Ames, p. 30.

¹⁰⁹ See Grier.

The House Beautiful has a secondary discourse carried out in the captions to the engravings. This is demonstrated by an illustration of a corner of a room showing a Stuart chair with barley-sugar twisted legs and tapestry upholstery, a small Chinese table holding an Oriental china bowl, a Japanese scroll depicting a flower and a small mirrored sconce with two candle holders (plate 24). A turkey rug comes in at the bottom of the engraving, across the wooden floor, and when the illustration was used by Mrs Orrinsmith, she captions it 'Bare Boards' to illustrate her point that fitted carpets are less attractive and easy to keep clean than rugs.¹¹⁰ Cook's caption, 'We met by chance', seems to anthropomorphise the furnishings, yet also describes the method by which elements of the 'House Beautiful' were meant to come together, the chance collection of beautiful, old objects, from all over the world. Thus, decorative concerns are intimately connected with personal ones; the manuals explain how to furnish a home and also how one was meant to live in it, and how to live *well*, comfortably and morally.

Separate Spheres

Some conventions were given in the Victorian home, one of which was the different characters of rooms according to their function and inhabitants. Lucy Crane explains:

the various rooms in our houses are intended for various uses and occasions, and natural instinct for convenience leads us to furnish them in accordance with these uses and occasions – the dining room solid and severe, with large and steady furniture adapted to serious needs; the kitchen, full of useful homely appliances, kept bright and clean; and the drawing room, with its books and pictures and elegancies, suited for leisure and social purposes, and therefore rightly the most decorated room in the house. So bearing the different functions of each room in mind, and furnishing them in accordance with each, we get a general sense of order and appropriateness.¹¹¹

The moral implications of 'order and appropriateness' are clear. However, what Crane does not spell out is the reason for the solidity of the dining room and the 'elegancies' of the drawing room: the Victorian home was decorated upon gender lines, another subtle aspect of 'appropriateness'. Rooms like the dining room and study were seen as the preserve of men, and the decoration was supposed to be suitably sturdy; the drawing room was characterised as a female space and its decoration should be pretty and for

¹¹⁰ Orrinsmith, p. 52. Mrs Orrinsmith, Lady Barker and Mrs Loftie all use Cook's illustrations, see Burke and others, p. 152.

¹¹¹ Crane, p. 66.

show, as was the woman of the house. In the Introduction I described how the idea of 'separate spheres' for men and women permeated Victorian ideology, in the areas of gender, work, economics and political power. This had a particular application in the design of the home; not only was this domestic sphere seen in general as the province of women, but within the house rooms were further divided into spaces characterised as male and female through their use and decoration.

The complicated hierarchy of gender and class in the mid-Victorian townhouse is clear from floor plans, redrawn by the Matrix Design Group from Kerr's influential architectural manual *The Gentleman's House* (plate 25).¹¹² Matrix discuss the concept of privacy in the Victorian home as a middle-class luxury, and how 'the design of houses in Britain reflects the oppression of women in society'.¹¹³ As Jill Franklin explains,

most rooms on the ground floor were shared by family and guests, but very few were used equally freely at all times of day by both sexes; instead they were looked on as the home ground of one or other sex, to be used on occasion by the other, but with permission rather than as of right.¹¹⁴

The main public rooms are limited to the ground and first floors: dining room, drawing room and library. Status within the house often decreased from front to the back, with women's rooms like boudoir or minor drawing room at the back; the male space of the library in this plan is given pride of place next to the front door. The workings of the house are concealed from visitors, for the servants (and children) are segregated to the basement and top floor, although they have access to all areas through their own staircase.

The history of this gender division in the language of household taste books has been examined by Juliet Kinchin. She demonstrates how the conventions of decoration in accordance with masculine and feminine rooms barely changed throughout the nineteenth century. The decoration of the dining room in particular remained remarkably resistant to change. Usually, there were walls painted deep red or green, chocolate coloured woodwork, dark furniture, a turkey carpet, oil paintings in heavy gilt frames, and a

¹¹² For a discussion of gender and class issues in the work of Kerr see Chase and Levenson, pp. 156-178; and Spain, pp. 112-117.

¹¹³ Matrix, p. 55.

¹¹⁴ Jill Franklin, *The Gentleman's Country House and Its Plan 1835-1914* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 43.

general aura of 'massiveness and sombre masculinity, with large powerful furniture layed out in calculated symmetry'.¹¹⁵ Kinchin notes how

national sentiment, the life-style of the gentry, middle-class aspirations and the hierarchical pattern of familial relations were repeatedly reinforced and literally internalised, through the daily ritual of the evening meal.¹¹⁶

The Garretts call the dining room 'the especially masculine department of the household' which, with the study, was a public space where important business could be transacted.¹¹⁷ Furniture and decoration should therefore be 'solid' and 'substantial'.¹¹⁸ Edis illustrates a buffet of his own design for the dining room with plenty of practical cupboards and room to display the ubiquitous blue and white (plate 26). He explains that as gentlemen used the dining room for professional purposes the drawers could contain important papers in addition to table linen. It must be remembered that after dinner, the men would remain to talk of business, smoke cigars and drink, without the restricting presence of women, who withdrew to their own space to drink tea.

In contrast, the drawing room 'presented a minefield of possibilities' in decoration, as it was the showpiece of individual taste in the Victorian home:

there was a degree of tension between what needed to be there to make the room like those of one's peers, and the necessity to mark difference and individual (as opposed to class or public) taste.¹¹⁹

This meant that it came in for some of the severest criticism from the design reformers.

The drawing room also represented the women of the household and its decoration demonstrated 'feminine' values. As Kerr recommended,

the *character* to be always aimed at in a Drawing-room is especial cheerfulness, refinement of elegance, and what is called lightness as opposed to massiveness. Decoration and furniture ought therefore to be comparatively delicate; in short, the rule in everything is this [...] to be entirely *ladylike*.¹²⁰

¹¹⁵ Kinchin, p. 17.

¹¹⁶ Kinchin, p. 16. Neiswander further explores the nationalist aspect of the manuals.

¹¹⁷ Garrett, p. 28

¹¹⁸ Garrett, p. 45.

¹¹⁹ Kinchin, p. 17. See Grier.

¹²⁰ Kerr, p. 119.

This emphasis put the moral ideology of taste under further scrutiny:

the drawing room also elicited the most vitriolic criticism (usually, though not exclusively, from male critics), redolent of negative, moralising attitudes to women, which suggests either that the construction of femininity was more hotly contested than notions of masculinity within the home, or both.¹²¹

Mrs Orrinsmith, whose book is devoted to the decoration of this one room, describes the 'tasteless' drawing room:

who does not call to mind the ordinary lower middle-class drawing-room of the Victorian era? The very head-quarters of commonplace, with its strict symmetry of adornment and its pretentious uselessness. All things seem as if chosen on the principle of unfitness for the fulfilment of any function; everything is in pairs that possibly can be paired. [...]

At the windows hard curtains hang in harshest folds, trimmed with rattling fringes. On the carpet vegetables are driven to frenzy in their desire to be ornamental. On a circular table (of course with pillar and claws) are placed books – too often selected for their bindings alone – arranged like the spokes of a wheel, the nave being a vase of, probably, objectionable shape and material. Add a narrow ill-curved sofa, and spider-legged chairs made to be knocked over, dangerous as seats even for a slight acquaintance, doubly dangerous for a stout friend – and all is consistently complete. Such is the withdrawing-room to which, because of its showy discomfort, no one withdraws.¹²²

I will be discussing how Wharton and Codman make a similar point for utility in *The Decoration of Houses* in Chapter Five, and this passage has obvious parallels with my discussion of *The Awakening Conscience* above. However, Mrs Orrinsmith's pejorative description of the 'useless' adornment and the 'spider-legged' furniture point to an excess of 'feminine' decorative styles. These were light colours, curved lines, forms from nature and often a semi-Baroque or French style, which set this particular room in opposition to the masculine rooms of the house. The drawing room (and bedroom) were to be 'pretty', 'delicate' as they were the domain of women. Edis states:

the rooms where in we practically live, talk, play, and receive our guests are essentially the ladies' rooms of the house and should be decorated in a pleasant cheerful manner, without stiffness or formality. The walls should be pleasant objects to look upon, not cold and dreary.¹²³

However, Mrs Orrinsmith's description reveals the double-bind of female consumption.

In his influential treatise Thorstein Veblen contends that 'household paraphernalia are, on the one hand, items of conspicuous consumption, and on the other hand,

¹²¹ Kinchin, p. 18.

¹²² Orrinsmith, pp. 1-2.

¹²³ Edis, p. 192.

apparatus for putting in evidence the vicarious leisure rendered by the housewife'.¹²⁴ The woman's role of presenting her family's image to the world was open to criticism and her aesthetic taste was constantly under scrutiny. Women 'were generally felt to have an affinity for decoration, and to be better at apprehending two-dimensional, small-scale detail than larger forms in space',¹²⁵ commensurate with ideas of their intellectual inferiority. As Kinchin states,

there was relentless social pressure put upon [women] to assert their identity and status through the purchase of 'artistic', preferably expensive, household goods. At the same time they were constantly accused of susceptibility to the whimsical vagaries of fashion, and unnecessary or unethical consumption.¹²⁶

Women were often the subject of pejorative, and what we would now consider patronising, comments on their susceptibility to be led by the upholsterer, and the artistic naiveté of 'young ladies' is often commented on.¹²⁷ Eastlake, in his condemnation of dressing table 'petticoats' cites the cause as the 'lady's taste is generally allowed to reign supreme in regard to furniture of bed-rooms'.¹²⁸ Even the Garretts describe a 'lamentably commonplace' drawing room, the result of 'the ladies of the family [being] told that it is now their turn to have their tastes consulted'.¹²⁹ Uneducated taste is to blame.

The comparison is often made between fads in styles of decoration and fashions in clothes, and many of the books have chapters on dress, and comment on women's opinion that the more ornament on a piece of furniture, like trimmings on a garment, the more valuable it is; Cook assures us the reverse is true.¹³⁰ Edis equates the woman's body with the interior of the house, an issue I will discuss below: 'as in the well-dressed women of our acquaintance, so in all art decoration, we should be able to see general harmony and simplicity of effect, in which there shall be no glaring patterns or colours'.¹³¹ The layers of anti-macassars, padded upholstery, frilled lampshades, etc. which the Victorians saw as evidence of richness and comfort, now seem merely dust-

124 Veblen, p. 83.

125 Kinchin, p. 20.

126 Kinchin, p. 20.

127 See Eastlake (1986), pp. 3, 162.

128 Eastlake (1986), p. 212.

129 Garrett, pp. 28-9.

130 Cook, p. 324.

131 Edis, p. 12.

collecting clutter (plate 27). This style

aimed at inducing a state of physical and mental comfort. It also discreetly echoed the intimacy and sensuality of the boudoir, and the comfort of the nursery. The protective cocoon of textiles metaphorically communicated the refining and mediating role of woman and culture in softening the harshness of reality.¹³²

However, this profusion of fabrics also came in for criticism. Cook pronounces:

there is no such waste of time, money and patience as the worsted work and embroidery to which our ladies give us so much of their leisure. It isn't beautiful, it isn't useful, and it stands much in the way of educating the eye and the general taste.¹³³

In accordance with the educational aspect of these books, even while they were reproving ladies for their bad taste, the writers also assume that there is room for improvement, for good taste *can* be taught.

A Woman's Place?

Although there was a great quantity written in women's magazines about household management and decoration, from the tone of the books, many of which were written by women, it is often difficult to ascertain which gender the authors were actually addressing and instructing, particularly as there are few pejorative comments on the taste of men. Neiswander states that most of the household literature was written for women, by women.¹³⁴ I suspect that as these reformers were at great pains to ensure the decoration of the home was on an intellectual par with the debates on morality current within the fine arts, they addressed the male reader in their books in order to stress the seriousness of their subject. For example, Loftie, the male editor of the *Art at Home* series, most of which were written by women, prefaces *The Drawing Room* with 'I can only wish that every one who follows Mrs Orrinsmith's guidance may find *his* Drawing Room made comfortable and pleasant as well as beautiful'.¹³⁵ In 1875, Eastlake is even more didactic: 'I cannot warrant the reader against making mistakes, but I can assure him that, if he uses his eyes and his brain properly, his mistakes need not be numerous, while the pleasure of detecting them for himself will be almost worth the money that they have

¹³² Kinchin, p. 21.

¹³³ Cook, p. 138.

¹³⁴ Neiswander, p. 35.

¹³⁵ Orrinsmith, p. viii, emphasis added.

cost'.¹³⁶ Edis states that 'the houses we live in are, after all, the main teaching of our lives',¹³⁷ and the home was also a place for men to be civilised, even feminised: 'it makes an educated man domestic; it makes him a lover of neatness and accuracy; it makes him gentle and amiable',¹³⁸ just as the doctrine of separate spheres advised. However, by the same turn this gave women power and influence within the home. Although the pervasive and seemingly constricting gendering of rooms seems to separate the sexes, women's control of the moral power that was seen as inhering in interior decoration reveals the house as a site of exchange between perceived gender roles.

In her investigation into the design of houses and its relationship to women's needs and work within the home, Alison Ravetz states:

women are identified with houses, both in practice and in reputation. More particularly, they are identified with the interior rather than the exteriors of houses, being responsible for running them and making them produce all the things they are supposed to produce. But paradoxically, women have had remarkably little to do with house design.¹³⁹

The design of the interior suffers from a similar neglect, but in the late nineteenth century, there was a growing number of women writing and practising interior design.

Unsurprisingly, these women were often connected with radical political or social groups.

Anthea Callen has identified four socio-economic groups of women involved in different levels of the Arts and Crafts movement: working class women employed in the revival of traditional crafts; destitute gentlewomen attempting to make an independent livelihood; upper middle-class women philanthropically engaged in the training and employment of both these groups; and finally those in the 'élite inner circle', related by birth or marriage to the key men of the movement.¹⁴⁰ Like the paintings of their associates in the Pre-Raphaelite group, much Arts and Crafts decorative work was in

¹³⁶ [Charles L. Eastlake], 'The Art of Furnishing', *Cornhill Magazine*, 31 (January–June 1875), 535–547 (p. 547).

¹³⁷ Edis, p. 8.

¹³⁸ Edis, p. 22.

¹³⁹ Alison Ravetz, 'The Home of Woman: A View from the Interior', *Built Environment*, 10 (1984), 8–17, (p. 8).

¹⁴⁰ Anthea Callen, *Angel in the Studio: Women in the Arts and Crafts Movement 1870–1914* (London: Astragal, 1979), p. 2.

medieval style, and Isabelle Anscombe states that the 'conception of women as medieval chatelaines sanctioned their involvement in the decorative arts', but at the same time confined the women in The Firm to areas like embroidery.¹⁴¹ Hunt's painting *The Lady of Shalott* perhaps unwittingly demonstrates this (plate 28). The woman is physically surrounded by a large tapestry frame, making her entrapment in the castle of Tennyson's poem also her entrapment by women's work. Women were not assimilated into the Arts and Crafts organisations of the 1880s with equal remuneration or recognition to men. Women's meetings of the Art Workers' Guild were held on separate evenings and even May Morris's take-over of The Firm's embroidery department only reinforced 'a sexual division of labour which was to be largely repeated throughout the Arts and Crafts movement as a whole'.¹⁴² Callen goes on to point out that

a movement with often radical social aims, which should have contained the potential for an equally radical reassessment of the personal and practical relations between men and women, turned out to be reactionary in its reinforcement of the traditional patriarchal structure which dominated contemporary society.¹⁴³

Similarly, as Roger Stein has noted, the Aesthetic Movement in America gave female artists and designers a share of creative responsibility and credit, but their activity did not threaten contemporary gender roles due to the identification of women with taste and refinement.¹⁴⁴ However, some women in the area of the decorative arts *were* attempting a change in society.

In the late 1870s, the history of women decorators became intertwined with the campaign for Suffrage. Sylvia Pankhurst, an artist herself,¹⁴⁵ describes in her history of the movement how her mother, Emmeline Pankhurst, set up a shop called Emerson and Company in 1885 in order to support her family. This shop at 165 Hampstead Road sold

¹⁴¹ Isabelle Anscombe, *A Woman's Touch: Women in Design From 1860 to the Present Day* (London: Virago, 1984), pp. 20. See also Neiswander, p. 68, Anthea Callen, 'Sexual Division of Labour in the Arts and Crafts Movement' in Judy Attfield and Pat Kirkham, eds., *A View From the Interior: Feminism, Women and Design* (London: The Women's Press, 1989), pp. 148-162; and Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: Women's Press, 1996).

¹⁴² Callen, p. 15.

¹⁴³ Callen, p. 17.

¹⁴⁴ See Roger B. Stein, 'Artifact as Ideology: The Aesthetic Movement in its American Cultural Context', in Burke and others, pp. 22-51 (p. 35).

¹⁴⁵ See Ian Bullock and Richard Pankhurst, eds., *Sylvia Pankhurst: From Artist to Anti-Fascist* (London: Macmillan, 1992) and particularly Hilary Cunliffe-Charlesworth, 'Sylvia Pankhurst as an Art Student', pp. 1-35, for a discussion of the Pankhurst family's connection to the artistic world.

housewares; Mrs Pankhurst's aim 'was to be "artistic"', and the shop was 'calculated to appeal to the supposed latent desire of the housewife to have beautiful things about her'.¹⁴⁶ Sylvia Pankhurst states that her mother was indirectly influenced by 'the William Morris movement' and that 'she was groping mainly for more colour and brightness than was generally found in late Victorian house decoration'. The stock of 'fancy-goods' included 'a liberal supply of milking stools, which she enamelled in pale colours and her sister Mary painted with flowers according to the fashion of the period'.¹⁴⁷ A later shop in Regent street stocked more 'artistic' goods, 'in the style of a miniature Liberty's, but more moderately priced, and bearing the impress of her own taste',¹⁴⁸ which included white enamelled fretwork furniture of her own design, Chinese teapots, old Persian plates, Japanese embroidery, Turkey rugs and cretonnes by Morris and his imitators. However, the business was not a success due to its expensive location and Mrs Pankhurst's reluctance to mark up her goods sufficiently. Despite attempts in later years to revive the shop, she confessed 'that Emerson's was a costly burden, giving no hope of success'.¹⁴⁹

In addition, she decorated the Pankhursts' home at 8 Russell Square, which became a place for political meetings, leading to the setting up of the Women's Social and Political Union in 1903. Sylvia Pankhurst describes the care with which her mother decorated the house, for 'it was needed for propaganda activities'. She 'found tremendous pleasure in furnishing it. [...] She put up Japanese blinds of reeds and coloured beads, and covered the lamps with scarlet shades'; the double drawing room 'used for "At Homes" and conferences' was 'decorated in yellow, Mrs. Pankhurst's favourite colour, and lit by tall standard oil lamps, with yellow shades'.¹⁵⁰ She used many items of stock from Emerson's and 'expended a plenitude of ingenious effort to produce beautiful effects at moderate cost, and herself hung pictures, laid carpets, made

¹⁴⁶ E. Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Suffrage Movement: An Intimate Account of Persons and Ideals* (London: Longman, 1931, repr. London: Virago, 1977), p. 83.

¹⁴⁷ Pankhurst, p. 83.

¹⁴⁸ Pankhurst, p. 89.

¹⁴⁹ Pankhurst, p. 113.

¹⁵⁰ Pankhurst, p. 89.

curtains and upholstered furniture'.¹⁵¹ Due to economy and her own energy, Emmeline Pankhurst made her own furnishings, for her husband was 'inapt for any sort of manual effort. "I am a helpless creature!" he often said';¹⁵² yet the designs were also her own and the decorating of this very public house was of vital importance to her and her cause. In her daughter's somewhat ambivalent evaluation: 'beauty and appropriateness in her dress and household appointments seemed to her at all times an indispensable setting to public work. She was a woman of her class and period, in this, as in much else'.¹⁵³ Mrs Haweis, the author of several household taste books which mostly concentrated on descriptions of opulent interiors, in later life opened her home to political and literary meetings, after she had moved into Rosetti's house in 1883.¹⁵⁴ By holding meetings in their own homes, women in the suffrage movement were able to combine political and domestic duties without neglecting their homes and families. Although it was a given that 'every lady should endeavour to arrange her drawing room in such a way that it will at once express in some manner her own individuality and indicate immediately what are her tastes and pursuits',¹⁵⁵ this also enabled women newly professional in the field of decor to make personal statements in an area where male artist-designers had for years been expanding their own creativity.

Other women decorators, similarly involved in radical movements, had more professional success. Agnes Garrett's sisters included Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, one of the first female physicians in Britain, and Millicent Fawcett, president of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies; her cousin Rhoda was known for her public speaking on feminist causes. Rhoda and Agnes set up their designing and decorating business in the 1870s after studying with designer Daniel Cottier and apprenticeship with architect J.M. Brydon.¹⁵⁶ They decorated Elizabeth Anderson's mansion flat at 4 Upper

¹⁵¹ Pankhurst, p. 90.

¹⁵² Pankhurst, p. 90.

¹⁵³ Pankhurst, p. 90.

¹⁵⁴ Mrs H.R. [Mary Eliza J.] Haweis, *The Art of Beauty* (1878), *The Art of Decoration* (1881) and *Beautiful Houses* (1882). In these books she 'spurned the middle-class aspirations of the Queen Anne style', Neiswander, p. 55. She renamed the house Queen's House.

¹⁵⁵ Mrs [Jane Ellen] Panton, 'Artistic Houses and How to Make Them: The Drawing Room', *Lady's World* (August 1887), 344, quoted Neiswander, p. 74.

¹⁵⁶ See Neiswander, pp. 50-55 and Anscombe, pp. 28-9.

Berkeley Street in 1874 and the home of Millicent and Agnes at 2 Gower Street in 1876.¹⁵⁷ This house was a workspace which included a warehouse and space to train women apprentices, but there is little documentation of their designs for private houses and the new female university colleges. Maurice Conway devotes almost five pages to their work and principles in his *Travels in South Kensington*, where although he stresses that 'these young ladies [...] have by no means been driven to their undertaking by the necessity of earning a livelihood',¹⁵⁸ he emphasises their professionalism:

it is precisely this knowledge which everywhere secures respect. The Misses Garrett have made themselves competent decorators; they undertake the wall decorations, upholstery, furniture, embroidery, etc., as fully as any other firm.¹⁵⁹

Similarly, Lucy Crane praises Mrs Orrinsmith's 'really suggestive and useful' book above others, because it describes 'the results of actual practice and experience'.¹⁶⁰

However, the Garretts' professionalism and architectural training are not overly stressed in their manual. Architectural historian Adams points out that their illustrations are perspective drawings, rather than the plans of room layouts or diagrams used by male architects in architectural journals or books on interior planning.¹⁶¹ This 'feminine reliance on the perspective' that Adams recognises is upheld by comments like Mrs Haweis's 'a room is like a picture'.¹⁶² Although the success of the Garretts was unusual, along with other women like Gertrude Jekyll who came out of the craft revival, they opened up previously male-dominated professions for middle-class women. As Neiswander puts it,

the profession of 'lady decorator' was one attempt to meet [the] need for a refined, remunerative occupation for women. The necessary training for this role, or its exact responsibilities, were never defined, however, and the resulting fluidity allowed women

¹⁵⁷ See Lynne Walker, 'Vistas of Pleasure: Women Consumers of Urban Space in the West End of London 1850-1900', in Clarissa Campbell Orr, ed., *Women in the Victorian Art World* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 73, and Elizabeth Crawford, *Enterprising Women: The Garretts and their Circle* (London: Francis and Taylor, 2002).

¹⁵⁸ Maurice Daniel Conway, *Travels in South Kensington With Notes on Decorative Art and Architecture in England* (London: Trübner & Co., 1882), p. 169.

¹⁵⁹ Conway, p. 170. Perhaps Conway is answering Lewis F. Day's complaints about ladies who have more enthusiasm than 'judicial faculty' and knowledge in house decoration in 'The Woman's Part in Domestic Decoration', *The Magazine of Art*, 4 (1881), 457-63.

¹⁶⁰ Crane, p. 94-5.

¹⁶¹ Adams, pp. 147-8. For example, J.C. [John Claudius] Loudon, *An Encyclopaedia Of Cottage, Farm And Villa Architecture And Furniture* (London: Longman, 1833).

¹⁶² Adams, p. 147. Mrs H.R. Haweis, *The Art of Decoration* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1881), p. 10.

to exploit their talents in decoration in a variety of ways.¹⁶³

Thus, the home, seen through the ideology of separate spheres as a retreat from the world, was transmuted into a place of empowerment by radical and politically motivated women. I will discuss in Chapter Five how Edith Wharton, who co-wrote a highly influential household taste manual in 1897, was also able to fulfil her creative and intellectual energies through the decoration and creation of her own homes. Not all the female writers on household taste were part of the suffrage movement – Mrs Haweis only became an outspoken feminist in the last ten years of her life, and neither Eliot or Wharton aligned themselves with feminists.¹⁶⁴ It is important to note that women did use their own homes and the practice of interior decoration for external, political aims. In Chapter Four, I will discuss how Mrs Gereth's only power is in the movement of her furnishings in *The Spoils of Poynton*, yet this is powerful enough to drive the plot.

Woman's Domestic Body

Politicised women in the late nineteenth-century were sometimes able to use their limited 'sphere' as a site of power. However, in artistic representations, women were more usually constricted and depersonalised within that domain. As I mentioned above, many Aesthetic paintings depended upon an alignment of objets d'art with a beautiful woman presented within the interior. This was possible because there was a conceptual conflation of the woman's body with the interior of the house, as Beverly Gordon has examined: 'most strongly between about 1875 and 1925, the connection between women and their houses in Western middle-class culture was so strong that it helped shape the perception of both'.¹⁶⁵ The ideology of woman's 'domestic body', as Gordon states, 'mirrored contemporary ideas about home, fashion, and even beyond that, changing perceptions about women and their social and cultural roles',¹⁶⁶ and was thus an important metaphor for artists and writers. The woman was seen as 'an extension of the home, and in turn the

¹⁶³ Neiswander, p. 49.

¹⁶⁴ See Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank: Paris 1900-1940*, 3rd edn (London: Virago, 1994), pp. 65-70.

¹⁶⁵ Gordon, p. 282.

¹⁶⁶ Gordon, p. 301.

home was seen as an extension of her – an extension of both her corporeal and spiritual self'.¹⁶⁷ Harriet Beecher Stowe, who wrote extensively on American household management, confirms this idea:

self begins to melt away into something *higher* [...]. The *home* becomes her center, and to her home passes the charm that once was thrown around her person [...]. Her home is the new impersonation of herself.¹⁶⁸

The interchangeability of woman and house was a hegemonic norm, 'a deeply held association that functioned more on a structural level, as a way of organizing perception and experience'.¹⁶⁹ Like the body, the home is dressed: windows are 'draped' and rooms described as 'pretty'. Rooms, particularly the parlour or drawing room, are dressed for special occasions, like weddings or funerals, just as women wear special flowers or jewellery for those occasions, and the fashion for displaying Japanese fans, originally part of women's dress, meant that 'the body was symbolically proclaimed in every artistic interior',¹⁷⁰ bringing greater significance to the Aesthetic paintings I discussed above.

The decoration of the home, in this era of conspicuous consumption and formation of bourgeois identity, was a battleground of moral interpretations; and the conflation of 'woman' with 'home' was similarly complex. As 'contemporary ideology held that dress was a reflection of inner character, and a lady who was modest, pious and sincere had to appear modestly dressed', Gordon observes that 'consequently, many women may have chosen to focus more of their attention on adorning their interior environments'.¹⁷¹

However, Gordon contends that these women were not selflessly foregoing consumption, 'instead, they were dressing their other "impersonation," their house',¹⁷² projecting self-expression onto their environment. However, if rooms could be a

¹⁶⁷ Gordon, p. 282.

¹⁶⁸ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *We and Our Neighbours* (New York: J.B. Ford, 1875), p. 152, quoted Grier, p. 6, emphasis added.

¹⁶⁹ Gordon, p. 286.

¹⁷⁰ Gordon, p. 289.

¹⁷¹ Gordon, p. 292.

¹⁷² Gordon, p. 292.

reflection of the character of the woman who had furnished and/or designed them, she could also become part of that interior.

In visual art this slippage is evident in various ways. As Kinchin explains, women could 'become so depersonalised as to merge with the setting and become but one element within an overall aestheticised arrangement of surfaces'.¹⁷³ Illustrations from the household taste manuals demonstrate this on various levels. The women almost merge into the furniture and are dwarfed by Mrs Loftie's 'ideal Parlour Screen' (plate 29) and Mrs Orrinsmith's 'Comfortable Corner' (plate 22). Edis's design for his own drawing room shows women as elements of the frieze, along with the Aesthetes' favourite bird, the peacock (plate 30). Paintings of women in the Aesthetic interior, even portraits, seem to reduce the female model to the status of beautiful object. For example, John Atkinson Grimshaw's *The Chorale* demonstrates the eclecticism of the artistic home and presents the woman as another adornment of the room (plate 31). There is blue and white china, Japanese fans balance on the dado rail, above which is Eastlake's 'Solanum' wallpaper and below the dark wood, is Japanesque checked matting. The furniture and the model's clothes are eighteenth-century and with the brightly coloured eastern rug and carelessly dropped shawl form a patchwork of beautiful colours and patterns. The woman is merely another part of the decoration, as she sits playing the organ with the light from the stained glass window falling on her face. As with Rossetti's paintings of women, once again the correspondences between women, music and beautiful things are there to propound the ideals of Aestheticism. Grimshaw moved these props around his house 'Castle by the Sea' to form other paintings, as can be seen by the reappearance of various items in *The Cradle Song* (plate 32).¹⁷⁴ Many other artists used this technique to promote an ideal of womanhood and an ideal of domestic life, for example Tissot and the American artist Edmund C. Tarbell, who both used their home and antiques to create interior settings for women engaged in domestic tasks. That Tarbell's paintings were executed as late as 1903–1914 demonstrates how potent this type of painting was.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ Kinchin, p. 18.

¹⁷⁴ See Sandra K. Payne, *Atkinson Grimshaw: Knight's Errand* (Wokingham: Corporate Link, 1987).

¹⁷⁵ See Trevor J. Fairbrother, 'Edmund C. Tarbell's Paintings of Interiors', *Antiques*, 131 (1987), 224–233.

Bailey Van Hook has demonstrated women's decorative status in the work of American painters who had trained in Europe and were influenced by Whistler and the Impressionists. Van Hook goes so far as to say that these artists 'considered the use of female subjects to be inevitable when their aim was decoration, either as a function or as a style'.¹⁷⁶ One example of this, which Gordon also cites, is Childe Hassam's *Tanagra* (plate 33), for this type of 'genteel classicism favored by Whistler early in his career' persisted in America into the twentieth century.¹⁷⁷ The anonymous woman is confined within the interior, contemplating an art object, her flower-patterned kimono merging into the screen behind her and reflected in the table top, so that she becomes merely another decorative element. In paintings like this, the woman's face was generally rendered indistinctly so that she functioned as a pictorial motif.¹⁷⁸ There is no narrative, for the theme is a comparison of female beauty with culture, sealed off from the world of work and in contrast to the builders outside and the (male) artworker who made the statuette. Despite the formal and actual limits placed on the woman by the artist, Van Hook points out that:

it could be argued that the artists identified with the feminine realm of culture that they portrayed. Their decorative images helped to reinforce the numerous testimonies to women's ability to decorate and beautify their environment. As such, women and the culture they represented were not only alternatives to the gritty reality of the world outside the home; they were also welcome refuges.

However, these aristocratic refuges so beloved of male artists were not the experience of most women in the late-nineteenth century, nor was every artist seeking to portray this ideal social world.

'I suppose I shall have to get behind the pattern [...] and that is hard!'¹⁷⁹

In her short story *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman brings together the feminist concerns important for Gilbert and Gubar: the 'anxiety inducing connections

¹⁷⁶ Bailey Van Hook, 'Decorative Images of American Women: The Aristocratic Aesthetic of the Late Nineteenth Century', *Smithsonian Studies in American Art*, 5 (1990), 45-69 (p. 56).

¹⁷⁷ See Gordon, p. 283; Van Hook, pp. 53, 58.

¹⁷⁸ Van Hook, p. 56.

¹⁷⁹ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, ed. by Nina Baym and others, 4th edn, 2 vols (New York and London: Norton and Company, 1994), first published 1892, II, 645-657 (p. 656).

between what women writers tend to see as their parallel confinements in texts, houses, and maternal bodies'.¹⁸⁰ Yet Gilman's use of the *decoration* of the house is also highly sophisticated and only augments her cause. The narrator is forced to take a rest cure confined in an attic room where the wallpaper is 'one of those sprawling, flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin'.¹⁸¹ Forbidden to work (write), she begins to see the figure of a woman creeping about behind the pattern, and soon it is evident that this figure is the narrator's double, trapped in an architectural/textual patriarchal society.¹⁸² As she rips off the paper, to let the woman out, the text breaks down into shorter paragraphs, and her own mental stability similarly disintegrates. Gilman's Gothic tale warns against the restriction of women, trapping them within the home unable to work: the 'madwoman in the attic' seen from the inside. Stein argues that it is also 'the nightmare tale of the Aesthetic movement, a vivid protest, an outcry, drenched in the terms and problems of the period'.¹⁸³ The protagonist's madness is her preoccupation with the wallpaper: 'she tries first to understand it as pattern and then seeks to reinvest the decorative and conventional with meaning', uncovering the sinister side of 'sweetness and light' for women trapped within the home; the yellow shade fails to bring sunlight into the room.¹⁸⁴ The Design Reformers attempted to separate interior design from overtly symbolic and narrative meaning, and Stein argues that in this tale 'flat pattern and decorative design are metaphorically transformed [...] into the three-dimensional cage that imprisons the self. Meaning is thereby reasserted'.¹⁸⁵

However, a closer examination of the wallpaper as it is described in the text reveals that this 'bulbous' pattern is not one of those flat patterns of which Owen Jones would have approved.¹⁸⁶ Stein contends that Gilman 'may be seen symbolically as avenging herself on [...] an entire generation of interior decorators whose injunctions seemed to

180 GG, p. 89.

181 Gilman, p. 647.

182 See GG, p. 92.

183 Roger B. Stein, 'Artifact as Ideology: The Aesthetic Movement in its American Cultural Context', in Burke and others, pp. 22-51, (p. 45).

184 Stein, p. 45.

185 Stein, p. 45.

186 Gilman, p. 648.

restrict women within the domestic sphere';¹⁸⁷ but she achieves this by using their language and standards in this clever parody. The narrator states: 'I know a little of the principle of design, and I know this thing was not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry'.¹⁸⁸ The pattern goes against modern, and male, rules of design, and its 'debased Romanesque with delirium tremens' pattern is a gross exaggeration of pretty, floral bedroom wallpapers.¹⁸⁹ It is 'revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow', reminding the narrator of 'a fungus [...] sprouting in endless convolutions', and at night 'it becomes bars' entrapping her like the barred window and gate at the top of the stairs.¹⁹⁰ However, the faint woman behind the pattern, who gradually becomes clearer as her madness worsens, is also a symbol of freedom, however tentative: 'I have watched her sometimes away off in the open country, creeping as fast as a cloud shadow in a wind'.¹⁹¹ Gilbert and Gubar interpret this as the progress of literary women writers in the nineteenth century, creeping 'out of texts defined by patriarchal poetics into the open spaces of their own authority'.¹⁹² This explains why the narrator identifies with this trapped woman who shakes the front pattern of the wallpaper so hard, a design which is also in 'defiance of law'.¹⁹³ Her preoccupation with the wallpaper is a symptom as well as a cause of her madness, but her madness is quite understandable. The pattern which is so ugly and threatening also has a deeper layer, symbolic of her necessary freedom. Gilman has

appropriated the terms of the Aesthetic movement in order to define central ideological issues of the period, even as the specific patterns, the sulfurous colors, and the nightmarish realities of *The Yellow Wallpaper* point toward the transmogrified versions of Aesthetic-movement ideas in their *fin-de-siècle*, Beardsleyesque, and Art Nouveau modes.¹⁹⁴

She becomes lost in a maze of unnecessary sign reading when she is barred from using her creativity; fantasy takes over in a bad way.

187 Stein, p. 45.

188 Gilman, p. 650.

189 Gilman, p. 650.

190 Gilman, pp. 647, 652.

191 Gilman, p. 655.

192 GG, p. 91.

193 Gilman, p. 652.

194 Stein, p. 46.

The Ideal Home

In the last thirty years of the nineteenth century, beautiful decoration was no longer the province of artists or the very rich, for the middle classes were encouraged to join the 'Art at Home' movement. The display of artistic and beautiful furniture and objects became an ideal to those who aspired to present themselves as people of taste and education, for, 'while people knew themselves to be vulgar and vulgarly surrounded, their homely virtues were apt to have a repulsive flavour, and also loftier virtues were felt to be out of place'.¹⁹⁵ The connection between decoration and morality remained a contested one in the twentieth century. In his 1910 essay 'Ornament and Crime', the influential Austrian Modernist architect and designer Adolf Loos takes this idea to its extreme, stating in characteristically polemic vein, that 'not only is ornament produced by criminals but also a crime is committed through the fact that ornament inflicts serious injury on people's health, on the national budget and hence on cultural evolution'.¹⁹⁶ His functionalist aesthetic was opposed to the built-in obsolescence of ornamentation and he believed that human progress would be marked by the abandonment of ornament. His argument that ornament 'represents wasted labour and ruined material',¹⁹⁷ and concern with the remuneration of the craftsman corresponds with Morris's stress on utility and craftsmanship:

nothing can be a work of art which is not useful [...]. To my mind it is only here and there (out of the kitchen) that you can find in a well-to-do house things that are of any use at all: as a rule all the decoration (so called) that has got there is there for the sake of show, not because anybody likes it.¹⁹⁸

However, aesthetic beauty was always a concern of Morris, and his Socialist principles proved an impossible ideal, for The Firm was to produce some of the most expensive and unique decorative works of the late nineteenth-century, work which Loos would have categorised as criminal.

¹⁹⁵ Oldcastle, p. 290.

¹⁹⁶ Adolf Loos, 'Ornament and Crime' (1910), in Isabelle Frank, ed., *The Theory of Decorative Art: An Anthology of European & American Writings, 1750-1940* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 288-294 (p. 291). For a further discussion of the Modernist aesthetic of Loos and Le Corbusier see Lubbock (1995), pp. 299-312.

¹⁹⁷ Loos, p. 292.

¹⁹⁸ William Morris, 'The Lesser Arts' (1878), in Asa Briggs, ed., *William Morris: Selected Writings and Designs* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), pp. 84-105 (p. 102).

A change in women's part in domestic decoration was certainly felt by the beginning of the twentieth century. Mrs Panton, another writer on household taste, could state in her 1910 autobiography that

women may not be the housekeepers, the home-stayers their mothers were, and for that one can give a measured meed of thanks, but men are no longer the arbitrary bullies they once thought it their duty to be when they doled out a few pence for spending-money, superintended every household detail, grumbled at their food while they did not allow enough to be spent to ensure a decent meal, and allowed nothing done in the house until they were called in consultation, or about the white-washing of a ceiling, the renewing of a carpet, or even the price and material of the girl's frocks and the boy's clothes.¹⁹⁹

Women have been empowered and liberated by their move from being merely the decoration of houses to the decorators. The women in the novels I will be discussing also have to make this move in order to live fulfilled lives; the extent to which they achieve this, or are thwarted by society's strictures in their attempts, demonstrates the tragedy of their stories. The gendering of the home was still a moot point into the twentieth century, as Elsie de Wolfe, a follower of Wharton and Codman, expresses in 1913:

we take it for granted that every woman is interested in houses – that she either has a house in course of construction, or dreams of having one, or has had a house long enough to wish it right. And we take it for granted that this American home is always the woman's home: a man may build and decorate a beautiful house, but it remains for a woman to make a home of it for him. Men are forever guests in our homes, no matter how much happiness they may find there.²⁰⁰

In the following chapters I will be discussing how various writers, not exclusively women, were able to find happiness themselves in their homes, and how, irrespective of their gender, they translated their own experiences to investigate the moral lives of the female characters of their fictions. I shall try to show how the nature of happiness and the moral life is examined through the placing of women within domestic spaces. All of these writers ask whether their female characters are able to find happiness in homes of their own.

My first writer, George Eliot, though not primarily known for her interest in interior design, was aware of the debates I have detailed above. In a review of Owen Jones's *The Grammar of Ornament* in 1865 she explains the importance of beautiful

¹⁹⁹ Mrs Panton, *Leaves from a Garden* (London: Eveleigh Nash, 1910), p. 292, quoted Neiswander, p. 35.

²⁰⁰ Elsie de Wolfe, *The House in Good Taste*, (New York: Century & Co., 1913), p. 5, quoted Forty, p. 104.

dwellings on the moral attitudes of the inhabitants:

Has any one yet said what great things are being done by the men who are trying to banish ugliness from our streets and our homes, and to make both the outside and inside of our dwellings worthy of a world where there are forests, and flower-tressed meadows [...]? They, too, are modifying opinions, for they are modifying men's moods and habits, which are the mothers of opinions, having quite as much to do with their formation as the responsible father – Reason. [...] For it is a fatal mistake to suppose that ugliness which is taken for beauty will answer all the purposes of beauty; the subtle relation between all kinds of truth and fitness in our life forbids that bad taste should ever be harmless to our moral sensibility or our intellectual discernment.²⁰¹

I will examine in my next chapter how George Eliot's theory of sympathy, inextricably bound up in ideas of environment, community and home, is developed through some of the female characters of her novels and the homes in which they live.

²⁰¹ George Eliot, 'Notices of New Books: *The Grammar of Ornament* by Owen Jones', *Fortnightly Review*, 1 (15 May 1865), 124-5, (p. 124).

Chapter Two

George Eliot: No Home for the Erring

We get the fonder of our houses if they have a physiognomy of their own, as our friends have. (*MM*, 274)

George Eliot was born Mary Anne Evans on 22 November 1819, the same year as Queen Victoria and John Ruskin.¹ She did not become a novelist until her late thirties, her literary output until that point being translations of major theological works from German and Latin, many journalistic articles and reviews and the editorship of the *Westminster Review*. She became not only a huge commercial and critical success, but one of the most famous and respected women of her age. Her critical reputation suffered in the first few decades of the twentieth century, but her intellectual control of the moral and artistic aspects of her fiction was recognised once more by F.R. Leavis in the 1940s. In more recent years, her writing has been a rich source for modern theorists, in areas such as post-structuralism, feminism and post-colonialism, and she has become a complex and sometimes contradictory figure of the Victorian age. I will focus on only a small part of her literary work, the aspect of home for some of her female characters: Maggie in *The Mill on the Floss*, Dorothea and Rosamond in *Middlemarch*, and Gwendolen in *Daniel Deronda*.

‘Our deeds are fetters that we forge ourselves’ (*MM*, 58)

Eliot’s own domestic arrangements were unusual for a woman of the nineteenth century; her relationship with George Henry Lewes scandalised society. An examination of the homes they shared gives a peculiar slant on the public and private, and the socio-economic position of Victorian women. After her mother’s death in 1836, at the age of seventeen, Mary Anne Evans took over the running of the family household in the red

¹ The standard biography of George Eliot is still Gordon S. Haight, *George Eliot A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968, repr. London: Oxford University Press, 1978). Throughout this chapter I am also indebted to *Companion*. I will use the pseudonym ‘George Eliot’ when discussing her work, but at different periods of her life she used variations of Marian, which I will be following; see Haight, p. 3, n. 1.

brick farm house at Griff, which she described affectionately as 'my old, old home'.² After her father Robert Evans retired from estate management in 1841, they moved to Foleshill near Coventry, her elder sister and brother living with their spouses. This brought her into the intellectual milieu of wealthy ribbon manufacturer and progressive politician Charles Bray, his wife Cara and her sister and brother, Sara and Charles Hennell, the biblical scholar. In order to continue the formal education cut short by the death of her mother, she read widely and seriously, also learning Italian and German, and in 1846 her first translation was published in three volumes: David Friedrich Strauss's *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined* (1835-6). Through the Bray group she met many liberal thinkers, who stimulated and encouraged her intellectually, but this was disapproved of by her family. They thought that an association with such radical freethinkers would hinder the rather plain Mary Ann's marriage prospects. An ardent Christian in her girlhood, strain was put on her relationship with her father by her growing rejection of the evangelical Christianity in which she had been brought up, which resulted in her refusing to attend church with him on 2 January 1842. Eventually a truce came about in this 'Holy War',³ and Mary Ann's commitment to her family is evident from her statement that the time she spent nursing her father through the last few months of his life 'will ever be the happiest days of my life [...] The one deep strong love I have ever known has now its highest exercise and fullest reward'.⁴ After her father's death in May 1849, her home was with the generous Brays, and after a holiday with them in Geneva she decided to stay on alone for eight months, imagining the 'bliss of having a very high attic in a romantic continental town [...] far away from the morning callers, dinners and decencies', where she could read and think.⁵ Eighty years before Virginia Woolf, she knew that 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write'.⁶ After this happy experiment in living independently, she began to sign herself

² George Eliot to John Blackwood, [5 December 1859], *GEL*, III, 224.

³ Haight, p. 40-44.

⁴ George Eliot to Charles Bray, [May 1849], *GEL*, I, 283-4.

⁵ George Eliot to John Sibree, [14? May 1848], *GEL*, I, 261.

⁶ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), *A Room of One's Own* first published 1929, p. 3.

'Marian', and made the radical decision in late 1850 to move to London to pursue a career in journalism.

The conventional thing to do would have been to live with her brother Isaac, but they disagreed on most things, particularly the duties of a younger sister. The unusualness of her decision is difficult to exaggerate; she moved to London, alone and with only the £90 a year her father had left her, to pursue a literary career rather than seek a husband or become a governess, the only acceptable options available to young women without fortune. This was by no means an easy choice, and in her novels she was to expose the difficulties society put in the way of Victorian women attempting to live a fulfilling life. She became a lodger at 142 Strand, the home of left-wing publisher John Chapman, whom she had met through Bray. This was a most unconventional house where Chapman lived with his wife and mistress and from which he ran his publishing business. Marian and Chapman probably had a brief sexual relationship in January 1851; she was forced to leave temporarily due to the almost farcical sexual tensions in the house. On her return in autumn 1851, she worked closely with Chapman on the *Westminster Review*, being editor in all but name of the intellectual and progressive publication, originally founded by J.S. Mill and Jeremy Bentham. She was the only woman at meetings which gathered the radical and intellectual elite of Britain and Europe, from the fields of science, political economy and philosophy, men like Mill, T.H. Huxley, Herbert Spencer and Robert Owen. A fellow lodger at the Strand, after disappointment in Cross's *Life* (famously described by Gladstone as 'a Reticence in three volumes'⁷) was moved to describe the Marian Evans of the 1850s:

she was really one of the most sceptical, unusual creatures I ever knew, and it was this side of her character which was to me the most attractive. [...] I can see her now, with her hair over her shoulders, the easy chair half sideways to the fire, her feet over the arms, and a proof in her hands, in that dark room at the back of No. 142, and I confess I hardly recognize her in the pages of Mr Cross's – on many accounts – most interesting volumes. I do hope that in some future edition, or in some future work, the salt and spice will be restored to the records of George Eliot's entirely unconventional life.⁸

Of course, the most important person Marian was to meet at the *Westminster Review*,

⁷ *Companion*, p. 230. J.W. [John Walter] Cross, ed., *George Eliot's Life as Related in Her Letters and Journals*, 2 vols (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1885).

⁸ William Hale White, [Letter], *The Athenaeum*, 3031 (28 November 1885), 702.

was Lewes, and their relationship was to be so unconventional as to scandalise society.

George Henry Lewes was a prolific writer of novels, hundreds of articles and the hugely successful *A Biographical History of Philosophy* (1845-6), and literary editor of *The Leader*. When he met Marian in 1851 he was planning a life of Goethe and writing articles for the *Westminster Review*. Their intellectual concerns were in accord; he was an atheist and a bohemian, described by Jane Carlyle as ‘the most amusing little fellow in the whole world – if you only look over his unparalleled *impudence*, which is not impudence at all but man-of-genius *bonhomie*’.⁹ However, he was also married to Agnes, whose long-standing affair with his co-founder of *The Leader* and friend Thornton Hunt, Lewes had condoned in the eyes of the law by registering two of Hunt’s children as his own; thus they could never divorce. Some time in late 1852, he and Marian became lovers, and she moved out of The Strand into lodgings at 21 Cambridge Street, Hyde Park Square, where she could receive visitors ‘without the surveillance of the Chapman household’.¹⁰ During this period, Agnes Lewes gave birth to another of Hunt’s children, and in a review of Brough’s farce *How to Make Home Happy*, Lewes cynically remarked ‘as I have *no* home, and that home is not happy, I really stand in need of his secret’.¹¹ However, late in 1853 Marian and Lewes took a momentous step, and decided to live together openly as man and wife. Although Victorian men often had mistresses who were kept quiet,¹² this was to be quite a different affair, and it would be Marian’s reputation that suffered most. Nineteenth-century opinion of their relationship ascribed a rather one-sided emotion; as a reviewer of Cross’s *Life* in 1885 put it, she had ‘evidently found in him someone to cling to amid the dreary solitude of life in London lodgings, and Lewes took the responsibility of accepting her sacrifice’.¹³ Haight explains the advantages of a joint household:

at thirty-four her deeply passionate nature had at last found a wholly satisfying love

⁹ Jane Welsh Carlyle, letter of 5 February 1849, quoted Haight, p. 129.

¹⁰ Haight, p. 134.

¹¹ *The Leader*, 1099 (12 November 1853), quoted Haight, p. 138.

¹² For example, Wilkie Collins never married, but had two mistresses who received equal parts of his estate after his death. See William M. Clarke, *The Secret Life of Wilkie Collins*, rev. edn (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1996).

¹³ Anon., Review of *George Eliot’s Life* by J.W. Cross, *The Athenaeum*, 2988 (31 January 1885), 145-6, (p. 146).

that responded keenly to Lewes's more experienced sexuality. Though far different in intellectual temper, they had vigorous, philosophical minds, lively sense of humour, and romantic sentiments stirred by the same things.¹⁴

As Lewes would be able to work better in a settled home and Marian's £9 rent at her lodgings was relatively high, their union also made economic sense.

They entered into their new domestic relationship by travelling together to Germany on 20 July 1854, just after the publication of Marian's translation of Ludwig Feuerbach's *Das Wesendes Christenthums* (1841). In her translation, the moralities of marriage and love are defined in terms of personal feeling rather than legality:

but marriage – we mean, of course, marriage as the free bond of love – is sacred in itself, by the very nature of the union which is therein effected. That alone is a religious marriage which is a true marriage, which corresponds to the essence of marriage – of love. [...] Yes, only as the free bond of love; for a marriage the bond of which is merely an external restriction, not the voluntary, contented self-restriction of love, in short, a marriage which is not spontaneously concluded, spontaneously willed, self-sufficing, is not a true marriage, and therefore not a truly moral marriage.¹⁵

Feuerbach's radical humanist idea of a 'moral' marriage was obviously one that had been on Marian's mind during the past few months. Elsewhere in the book his elevation of human love and awareness of the individual within a collective society is vital for her development of ideas of human freedom and has links with her development of 'sympathy' and ideas of renewal in her fiction. Temporarily, Marian and Lewes had left gossip behind and, as with their later trips on the continent, found German society stimulating, friendly and liberal about their relationship.¹⁶

Anxieties About Brooms and Kettles

On their return they took lodgings at 7 Clarence Row, East Sheen, and Marian was at pains to emphasise their 'marriage'. She asked the rather militant feminist Bessie Parkes to write to her care of 'G.H. Lewes Esq.'; she often forgot.¹⁷ Marian also wrote to Cara Bray, who had been shocked at first by her old friend's actions, explaining that

assuredly if there be any one subject on which I feel no levity it is that of marriage and the relation of the sexes – if there is any one action or relation of my life which is

¹⁴ Haight, p. 145.

¹⁵ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. by Marian Evans (1854), p. 268, quoted Haight, p. 138.

¹⁶ Haight, pp. 160-8.

¹⁷ Haight, p. 180.

and always has been profoundly serious, it is my relation to Mr. Lewes. [...] Light and easily broken ties are what I neither desire theoretically nor could live for practically. Women who are satisfied with such ties do not act as I have done – they obtain what they desire and are still invited to dinner.¹⁸

It would be many years before Marian was widely invited to dinner, but even when close friends asked her, she made a point of refusing. Kathryn Hughes suggests that ‘Marian’s sensitivity about how she was treated and the roots of her growing isolation’ led her to be wary ‘that she might visit their home only to find some fellow guest or high-minded servant taking offence’; so Marian rarely went to central London, leaving any errands to Lewes.¹⁹ Later, there would be criticism that this self-imposed isolation, and Lewes’s careful censoring of reviews, cut her off from necessary feedback. But at this time, isolation had a positive effect, allowing her to concentrate her energies on writing, for money was needed not only to support their household but Agnes and her children as well.

On 3 October 1855 they moved to 8 Park Shot, Richmond where they would stay for three and a half years. Here Marian continued her journalism and translation (of Spinoza’s *Ethics*), and started to write fiction, beginning with ‘Amos Barton’ in 1856. In this suburb they enjoyed walks in nearby Richmond Park and being ‘far away from the roar of omnibii’ (as poor Joseph Hume is accused of calling them),²⁰ a consideration for Lewes’s rather fragile health at the time. It wasn’t until they moved into Holly Lodge on 11 February 1859 that they would have a whole house to themselves, and the importance of a settled life is evident in this letter to Sara Hennell a few days after moving in:

our house is very comfortable – with far more of vulgar indulgences in it than I ever expected to have again; but you must not imagine it a snug place, just peeping above the holly bushes. Imagine it, rather, as a tall cake, with a low garnish of holly and laurel. [...] [W]e are very well off, with glorious breezy walks and wide horizons, well-ventilated rooms and abundant water. If I allowed myself to have any longings beyond what is given, they would be for a nook quite in the country, far away from Palaces crystal or otherwise, with an orchard behind me full of old trees and rough grass, and hedgerow paths among the endless fields where you meet nobody. We talk of such things sometimes along with old age and dim faculties and a small independence to save us from writing drivel for dishonest money. In the meantime the business of life shuts us up within the environs of London and within sight of human advancement, which I should be so very glad to believe in without seeing.²¹

¹⁸ George Eliot to Caroline (Cara) Bray, 4 September 1855, *GEL*, II, 214.

¹⁹ Kathryn Hughes, *George Eliot: The Last Victorian* (London: Fourth Estate, 1999), p. 233.

²⁰ George Eliot to Charles Bray, 1 May 1855, *GEL*, II, 199.

²¹ George Eliot to Sara Sophia Hennell, 19 February 1859, *GEL*, III, 14-15.

The love for the countryside that was to permeate her novels is here a domestic dream; metropolitan life an economic necessity. Soon, her successes in fiction would enable her to stop this writing 'for dishonest money'. However, household concerns often got in the way of the real work of writing.

Marian attributed much of the stress which was to cause her difficulty when writing, to such domestic issues. The Leweses had the same problems employing suitable servants as everyone else, and in a letter to Cara Bray discussing the need for 'a servant who will cause me the least possible expenditure of time on household matters', she writes:

I wish I were not an anxious fidgetty [sic] wretch, and could sit down content with dirt and disorder. But anything in the shape of an anxiety soon grows into a monstrous vulture with me, and makes itself more present to me than my rich sources of happiness, such as too few mortals are blessed with. You know me.²²

Just after their next move, to 16 Blandford Square where she would write *Silas Marner* and *Romola*, she tells Sara Hennell of 'anxieties about brooms and kettles':

your vision of me as 'settled' was painfully in contrast with the fact. The last virtue human beings will attain, I am inclined to think, is scrupulosity in promising and faithfulness in fulfilment. We are still far off our last stadium of development, and so it has come to pass that though we were in the house on Monday last, our curtains are not up and our oil-cloth is not down. Such is life seen from the furnishing point of view! I can't tell you how hateful this sort of time-frittering work is to me, who every year care less for houses and detest shops more.²³

Far more important is the loss of her 'old favourite pen with which I have written for eight years', so it is not surprising that she would prefer to employ a designer for The Priory, when she could afford it, and continue her writing rather than the 'time-frittering' woman's work of decoration. However, she had high domestic standards, evidenced by this list of the housemaid's daily duties:

lay and light all fires and keep all stoves clean. Shake Mats, clean Entrance. Empty all slops, clean Baths and Washing stands and open Beds. Make beds and dust bedroom furniture. Wash up after Lunch. Prepare tray for dinner. Close dining and drawing room shutters and bring up lamps. Light the Hall gas. Wash up after dinner. Turn down beds etc. Bolt the outer doors and put out the gas.²⁴

A weekly calendar follows, stating when each carpet was to be swept and when the plate,

²² George Eliot to Caroline Bray, 24 February [1859], *GEL*, III, 22-23.

²³ George Eliot to Sara Sophia Hennell, 20 December 1860, *GEL*, III, 364.

²⁴ Haight, p. 440, n. 4. See also George Eliot, 'Servant's Logic', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 1 (17 March 1865), 310-311, in Thomas Pinney, ed., *Essays of George Eliot* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), pp. 391-6.

doorsteps and bell handle were to be cleaned. However, the Leweses were not constrained by gender roles: when Marian was ill with a gastric fever after writing *Middlemarch*, Lewes was 'housekeeper, secretary, and Nurse all in one – as good a nurse as if he had been trained in a hospital'.²⁵ Marian suffered from very black moods when she wrote, and Lewes was very often ill himself. Hughes suggests that the psychological stress of their relationship with the outside world caused their 'endless symptoms'. Perhaps, their unsanctioned domesticity had to have some drawbacks, as Marian wrote 'we have so much happiness in our love and uninterrupted companionship that we must accept our miserable bodies as our share of mortal ill'.²⁶

The Priory and Owen Jones

The Priory was the Leweses' first bought house, and marks a turning point in their domestic state. Although it became a meeting place for the intellectuals of the day, for many years they were still shunned by polite Victorian society, and mostly received men, without their wives. Their interior decorator in 1863 was Owen Jones, and this combination of the most celebrated woman novelist of the time and a male designer who was greatly instrumental in shaping the way Victorians approached taste in design, is a potentially rich one.

Jones had been friends with Lewes since about 1851 and George Eliot favourably reviewed a reprint of his hugely influential *The Grammar of Ornament* in 1865. The plates and 'Principles' were intended for close study and intelligent application rather than copying, to improve the state of Britain's commercial design (plate 34). Jones felt that designers should be aware of the potential of modern materials like glass and cast iron, not merely the imitation and surface application of past styles. He designed vibrantly coloured geometric patterns, often in a Moorish style, which were applied to a wide range of commercial uses, from biscuit labels for Huntley & Palmer to silks for Warners of Braintree and wallpapers for Jeffrey & Co. Expensive as an interior designer, his

²⁵ George Eliot to Caroline Bray, 6 October 1871, *GEL*, V, 197.

²⁶ George Eliot Journal, 7-8 March 1866, *GEL*, IV, 233. See Hughes, pp. 354-5.

commissions tended to be public and elaborate like the Alhambra Court of 1853, at the new home of the Crystal Palace in Sydenham (plate 35), or for the very rich. For example, his work for the collector Alfred Morrison at Fonthill and 16 Carlton House Terrace (1865-70), included panelling, coffered ceilings (plate 36), fireplaces, furniture (manufactured by Jackson & Graham), carpets and wall-hangings. These interiors were exhibited and won gold medals at the International Exhibitions in Paris 1867 and Vienna 1873.

Eliot's review of *The Grammar of Ornament* understands his aims, and is also in accordance with the views of the other Design Reformers. She agrees with their moral argument that good decoration fosters good living:

think of certain hideous manufacturing towns where the piety is chiefly a belief in copious perdition, and the pleasure is chiefly gin. The dingy surface of wall pierced by the ugliest windows, the staring shop-fronts, paper-hangings, carpets, brass and gilt mouldings, and advertising placards, have an effect akin to that of malaria; it is easy to understand that with such surroundings there is more belief in cruelty than in beneficence, and that the best earthly bliss attainable is the dulling of the external senses.²⁷

For Eliot, 'Reason' is the faculty to be nurtured, and one's surroundings are an inescapable influence on character. She continues:

for it is a fatal mistake to suppose that ugliness which is taken for beauty will answer all the purposes of beauty; the subtle relation between all kinds of truth and fitness in our life forbids that bad taste should ever be harmless to our moral sensibility or our intellectual discernment; and – more than that – as it is probable that fine musical harmonies have a sanative influence over our bodily organisation, it is also probable that just colouring and lovely combinations of lines may be necessary to the complete well-being of our systems apart from any conscious delight in them.²⁸

Lewes, as a pioneer in the field of psychological studies, would have been aware of the relationship between mental state and physical health, and Eliot points out that 'one sees a person capable of choosing the worst style of wall-paper become suddenly afflicted by its ugliness under an attack of illness'.²⁹ Lady Barker makes similar points, although she perhaps over-emphasises the effect of aesthetics: 'I have known the greatest relief expressed by a patient, who seemed too ill to notice any such change, at the substitution of one single, simple classical vase for a whole shelf-full of tawdry French china

²⁷ George Eliot, 'Notices of New Books: *The Grammar of Ornament* by Owen Jones', *Fortnightly Review*, 1 (15 May 1865), 124-5, (p. 124).

²⁸ Eliot, '*The Grammar* [...]', p. 124.

²⁹ Eliot, '*The Grammar* [...]', p. 124.

ornaments'.³⁰ Eliot relates the state of design to that of society as a whole:

and if an evil state of blood and lymph usually goes along with an evil state of mind, who shall say that the ugliness of our streets, the falsity of our ornamentation, the vulgarity of our upholstery, have not something to do with those bad tempers which breed false conclusions?³¹

In her 1856 essay on the writings of Wilhelm von Riehl, 'The Natural History of German Life', Eliot pleads the cause of sociological study, although in this essay she is primarily concerned with the presentation of the lower classes in contemporary art:

if a man of sufficient moral and intellectual breadth, [...] would devote himself to studying the natural history of our social classes, especially of the small shopkeepers, artisans, and peasantry, – the degree in which they *are influenced by local conditions*, their maxims and habits, [...] and what are the tendencies in their position towards disintegration or towards development, [...] his work would be a valuable aid to the social and political reformer.³²

This is in effect what she would do herself in her fiction, in, for example, *The Mill on the Floss*, and accords with Lewes's work at the time, *Sea-side Studies*,³³ with which she was closely involved. They both believed that experience was a modification of organic structure, which feeds into her conservative view of social change: 'what has grown up historically can only die out historically, by the gradual operation of necessary laws. The external conditions which society has inherited from the past are but the manifestation of inherited internal conditions in the human beings who compose it'.³⁴ Her novels are often set in the past and history is critically examined as a complex process which can blight existence as well as enable the 'onward tendency of human things' (*MF*, 363).³⁵ This is not determinism in the conventional sense of the word, for the human experience is far more complex than the physical determinism of nature. The cultural realm of personal choice is influenced by tradition, the 'cumulative result of lives lived, choices made, and actions taken long before any individual is born'.³⁶

In her review Eliot concedes that artistic reform cannot start with the drastic

³⁰ Lady [Mary Anne Stewart Broome] Barker, *The Bedroom and Boudoir* (London: Macmillan, 1878), pp. 97-8.

³¹ Eliot, 'The Grammar [...]', p. 124.

³² [George Eliot], 'The Natural History of German Life', *Westminster Review*, 4 (July 1856), 51-79, in Pinney, pp. 266-299, (pp. 272-3), emphasis added.

³³ These scientific investigations of marine biology were first published in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, August-October 1856 and June-October 1857 and in book form in 1858.

³⁴ [Eliot], 'The Natural History of German Life', Pinney, p. 287.

³⁵ See J. Hillis Miller, 'Narrative and History', *ELH*, 41 (1974), 455-473.

³⁶ *Companion*, p. 93.

measure of pulling down ugly buildings,

but every year we are decorating interiors afresh, and people of modest means may benefit by the introduction of beautiful designs into stucco ornaments, paper-hangings, draperies, and carpets. Fine taste in the decoration of interiors is a benefit that spreads from the palace to the clerk's house with one parlour.³⁷

So, although personally resistant to the lures of conspicuous consumption of household goods, she was aware of the importance of a beautiful environment, and, perhaps more than the Aesthetes I discussed in the last chapter, its subtle influence on social change.

Eliot's review gives

all honour, then, to the architect who has zealously vindicated the claim of internal ornamentation to be a part of the architect's function, and has laboured to rescue that form of art which is most closely connected with the sanctities and pleasures of our hearths from the hands of uncultured tradesmen.³⁸

Jones is the architect 'peculiarly associated' with efforts in this area, and she describes his 'magnificent book', as a 'monument' which 'illustrate[s] historically the application of principles' rather than presenting 'a collection of models for mere copyists'.³⁹

The Leweses bought The Priory, 21 North Bank, Regent's Park for £2,000 in August 1863 (plate 37), and this would remain Marian's principal home until the last months of her life. It was 'a pretty, secluded house, set far back from the street in a garden full of roses along the Regent's Canal', spacious, with large windows; now demolished for a power station.⁴⁰ Marian's description of the house stresses its individuality; it is 'not at all like a London house with rooms piled one above the other after the fashion of boxes. It stands in a garden detached from all other houses; and the living rooms are all on [one] floor'.⁴¹ Immediately, 'we went over the house with Harris the builder to see about alterations',⁴² and Jones was commissioned to decorate the interior, in particular the drawing room. Although Jones and Lewes were old friends, Marian 'seems never to have met his wife',⁴³ and in his capacity as book designer, Jones advised on the wrapper for *Middlemarch* in 1871.⁴⁴

³⁷ Eliot, 'The Grammar [...]', p. 124.

³⁸ Eliot, 'The Grammar [...]', p. 124.

³⁹ Eliot, 'The Grammar [...]', p. 125.

⁴⁰ Haight, p. 371.

⁴¹ George Eliot to François D'Albert Durade, 28 November 1863, *GEL*, IV, 117.

⁴² George Henry Lewes Journal, [22] August 1863, *GEL*, IV, 103.

⁴³ Haight, p. 371.

⁴⁴ See George Henry Lewes to William Blackwood, [5 October 1871], *GEL*, V, 196.

The Lewes household was on a rather different economic footing from that of the young married couple expected to use the Household Taste manuals, which disseminated for the smaller budget the interior style previously developed by the rich. George Eliot was able to command high prices for her novels, and in 1863, when they moved to The Priory, *Romola* was being serialised in the *Cornhill Magazine*, for which she received the handsome sum of £7,000. At roughly the same point, the prolific Anthony Trollope generally was earning between £2,500 and £3,000 for his three volume novels.⁴⁵ In contrast, during the 1860s Lewes rarely earned more than £1,000 a year, so once again this unusual household reversed the gender roles; the woman earned more and had the economic power within the relationship. This not only enabled Lewes to send regular amounts of money to Agnes, but they could employ a prestigious designer like Jones to furnish their house in the most fashionable and 'splendid style of living'.⁴⁶

The furniture and decoration of the main reception rooms was left entirely up to Jones, and the expense and upheaval was immense and often commented upon in their letters and Lewes's journal: on 1 September it was 'all scaffolding and paint'.⁴⁷ Lewes describes their domestic troubles, which coincided with a bad bout of influenza for Marian and concerns about his two younger sons (Bertie was studying in Scotland before joining his brother Thornie to farm in Natal):

November the 1st. Since last entry life has been full of worry. The Priory has been one great source: owing partly to builder, painters etc. and partly to the old woman whom we put in to take care of it. Owen Jones kindly undertook to decorate the drawing room and dining room for us, and has made a very exquisite thing of it; only in the pursuit of artistic effect, he has drawn us into serious expence, sacrificing our drawing room furniture, and causing new furniture to be bought. We move in next week.⁴⁸

They eventually moved in on 13 November, and Lewes describes the lengthy progress, which included moving their many books:

On Monday week began moving into the Priory. It took us the whole week to get the things in and the books on their shelves, though, even now they are not arranged, only put up, and the drawing room is still uninhabitable. Besides the trouble and vexation incident to moving we have had extra annoyances. The [piano] tuner was sick over our elegant drawing room paper, which Owen Jones had decorated, and over the carpet! This obliges us to have fresh paper made, as there are no remnants of the old,

⁴⁵ *Companion*, p. 100.

⁴⁶ Rosemary Ashton, *G.H. Lewes: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 219.

⁴⁷ George Eliot to Caroline Bray, 1 September 1863, *GEL*, IV, 106.

⁴⁸ George Henry Lewes Journal, 1-13 November 1863, *GEL*, IV, 111.

and it was originally made for us. [...] The idea of removal is too formidable.⁴⁹

It is difficult to ascertain exactly what the finished decoration was like, as the only visual record is an undated engraving in Cross's *Life* (plate 38). There is also a photograph of a carved oak sideboard in an Elizabethan style, which apparently belonged to Eliot (plate 39). Although Jones's public commissions were very brightly coloured and exotic, for a private home it is possible the colour scheme was more muted in accordance with his clients' and friends' tastes, for Lewes wrote that he had 'made a very exquisite thing of it'.⁵⁰ In her review of *The Grammar of Ornament*, Eliot comments on Jones's use of colour which could have seemed garish to the Victorian eye accustomed to tertiary tones on walls:

those who are most disposed to dispute with the architect about his colouring, must at least recognise the high artistic principle which has directed his attention to coloured ornamentation as a proper branch of architecture.⁵¹

A wallpaper designed by Jones, called 'Queen Jones', gives some idea of what the decorative scheme of The Priory could have been like (plate 40). The pattern is flat like those in *The Grammar of Ornament*, and the muted green background accords with Marian's colour preferences as stated in 1860 on the uncertain charms of rented accommodation at 10 Harewood Square:

I should like for your sake, that you should rather see us in our own house than in this; for I fear your carrying away a general sense of *yellow* in connection with us – and I am sure that is enough to set you against the thought of us. There are some staring yellow curtains which you will hardly help blending with your impression of our moral sentiments. In our own drawing room, I mean to have a paradise of greenness.⁵²

This relation of the colour of decoration to how 'moral sentiments' would be perceived also features in her novels, as I will discuss below. Charles Eliot Norton described 'pleasant, cheerful drawing rooms' though he had a low opinion of their artworks.⁵³ Lucy Clifford, an occasional visitor to the Leweses' select Sunday tea-time 'at homes' after 1875, described the small double drawing room at the Priory as 'booky,

⁴⁹ George Henry Lewes Journal, 1-13 November 1863, *GEL*, IV, 112.

⁵⁰ Haight, p. 371.

⁵¹ Eliot, *The Grammar* [...], p. 125.

⁵² George Eliot to Sara Sophia Hennell, 13 November [1860], *GEL*, III, 358.

⁵³ Charles Eliot Norton to G. W. Curtis, 29 January 1869, Haight, p. 410.

comfortable-looking rooms, with more than a suggestion of Morris colouring'.⁵⁴

Although the rooms were redecorated in September 1875 by the architect Basil Champneys (Jones died in 1874), it is probable that the Leweses' taste had not greatly changed. Marian described to Cara Bray how they were 'enjoying [...] the prettiness of colouring and arrangement' of their new home and how Jones had 'determined every detail, so that we can have the pleasure of admiring what is our own without vanity'.⁵⁵ Jones had stayed after midnight on two nights, 'that he might see every engraving hung in the right place', in order to be ready for the housewarming which was also Charlie's twenty-first birthday party. He even advised Marian on what to wear for the party; she wrote to Maria Congreve that 'you would perhaps have been amused to see an affectionate but dowdy friend of yours, splendid in a grey moire antique – the consequence of a severe lecture from Owen Jones on her general neglect of personal adornment'. She was relieved that 'the crisis is past now, and we think our little home altogether charming and comfortable'.⁵⁶ Lewes reflected that 'in a domestic sense it has been a checquered [sic] year. Much trouble about the two boys; much bother about the new house; continued happiness with the best of women'.⁵⁷

The Leweses seem to have undertaken the furnishing of their houses as a joint venture and trial; often Lewes would undertake these duties so that Marian could work. In his diary he describes a day out in January 1859, when they both went shopping for furnishings:

As Polly was not well we went into town [...]. We then went to a wholesale warehouse in Watling Street and bought our carpet and rugs. After which we walked up Fleet Street and the Strand to the Bankers, and bought a watch, which is to be Polly's present to Charlie. Then we bought an elegant teacaddy and came home thoroughly tired.⁵⁸

During the protracted decoration of The Priory, although shopping offered a relief away

⁵⁴ Lucy Clifford, 'A Remembrance of George Eliot', *The Nineteenth Century and After*, 74 (July–December 1913), 109–118 (p. 112).

⁵⁵ George Eliot to Caroline Bray, 26 December 1863, *GEL*, IV, 124.

⁵⁶ George Eliot to Mrs Richard Congreve, 28 November 1863, *GEL*, IV, 116. She often wore black velvet, usually only worn by married women at the time, see *Companion*, p. 309.

⁵⁷ Haight, p. 373.

⁵⁸ George Henry Lewes Journal, 29 January 1859, *GEL*, III, 4. 'Polly' was a nickname for Marian derived from Apollyon of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and Charlie was Charles Lee Lewes, his eldest son.

from the lingering smell of paint, she describes

such fringing away of precious life in thinking of carpets and tables is an affliction to me and seems like a nightmare from which I shall find it bliss to awake into my old world of care for things quite apart from upholstery.⁵⁹

Marian's dislike of these cares, and 'the miserable details of removal from one house to another' led her to state, 'I think, after all, I like a clean kitchen better than any other room'.⁶⁰

Society With a Big 'S'

Few women visited Marian before they were settled in the Priory, although Barbara Bodichon was a regular visitor when she was in London. As Bessie Parkes noted:

she must have many and sad moments which she would hardly detail to you; little rebuffs, or perhaps little exclusions. For instance, Anthony Trollope goes there next week; but will he take his wife?⁶¹

He would not. Although Marian rarely made calls, after moving into the Priory in 1863 'the attraction of her name and personality made the Priory the centre of the most interesting society in London',⁶² for intellectuals, artists, physicians and writers, including the young Henry James, whose two brief visits were not a success.⁶³ In 1869 Norton described her position in society:

she is an object of great interest and great curiosity to society here. She is not received in general society, and the women who visit her are either so émancipée as not to mind what the world says about them, or have no social position to maintain. Lewes dines out a good deal, and some of the men with whom he dines go without their wives to his house on Sundays. No one whom I have heard speak, speaks in other than terms of respect of Mrs. Lewes, but the common feeling is that it will not do for society to condone so flagrant a breach as hers of a convention and a sentiment (to use no stronger terms) on which morality greatly relies for support. [...] I do not believe that many people think that Mrs. Lewes violated her own moral sense, or is other than a good woman in her present life, but they think her example pernicious, and that she cut herself off by her own act from the society of the women who feel themselves responsible for the tone of social morals in England.⁶⁴

However, after the success of *Middlemarch*, Marian was often invited to dinner, and by 1873 she was 'refusing more invitations than she accepted, and turned away many who

⁵⁹ George Eliot to Caroline Bray, *GEL*, IV, 113.

⁶⁰ George Eliot to Sara Hennell, 16 October 1863, *GEL*, IV, 109.

⁶¹ Bessie Rayner Parkes to Barbara Bodichon, 18 November 1863, Ashton, pp. 219-220.

⁶² Haight, p. 406.

⁶³ He managed to appear when both Thornie and Lewes were near death. See Haight, pp. 416-7, 514.

⁶⁴ Charles Eliot Norton to G. W. Curtis, 29 January 1869, Haight, p. 409.

sought admittance to the Priory'.⁶⁵ Their move up in society was marked by the purchase of a new Broadwood piano, mirror, Persian rug and dinner service, and they even set up their own carriage. After the publication of *Daniel Deronda* in 1876, the Leweses' social life was quieter, perhaps by design, for at the busy Sunday afternoons the guests rarely had more than a couple of minutes' conversation with the great George Eliot. Close friends like Georgiana Burne-Jones, wife of the painter, came on separate days. Haight states that by this time, 'society had pretty much overlooked George Eliot's equivocal marital position',⁶⁶ but, it seems likely Marian still felt the earlier slights, and guests were by invitation only.

The Shell of Life

After unsatisfactory experiences with rented summer accommodation, they bought The Heights at Witley in Surrey in 1876, a red brick, vine-covered house in the Old English Style, large, respectable and standing in eight or nine acres of its own grounds. They greatly enjoyed their country retreat, although grocery deliveries were rare and domestic concerns like inadequate plumbing were still troublesome. Lewes writes to the man who had found the house, and would later become Marian's husband, John Cross:

'Witley Cross' is more ravishing than we fancied it – especially in this splendid weather – and the walks and drives are so much better than Society! (with a big S). Indeed although we are not yet settled, and have still the workmen in the house, and although there have been botherations with pipes, and mattings – tomorrow all the matting will have to be relaid – we don't grumble at anything but stroll about our property and say 'how lovely!'⁶⁷

Perhaps they had found the secluded rural idyll Marian had spoken about so many years before, for Lewes describes Witley as a 'small paradise' where they are 'in perpetual delight'.⁶⁸ They went down to London 'to make decisions about chairs and tables and give orders to tradesmen', however, 'we neither of us like these cares for the *shell* of our life and are ready to wish that we had not burthened ourselves with two houses'.⁶⁹ They visited regular outlets as well as auction houses, as recommended by the household taste

⁶⁵ Haight, p. 455.

⁶⁶ Haight, p. 490.

⁶⁷ George Henry Lewes to John Walter Cross, [10 June 1877], *GEL*, VII, 386.

⁶⁸ George Henry Lewes to Mrs Elma Stuart, 12 July 1877, *GEL*, VI, 393.

⁶⁹ George Eliot to Charles Ritter, 22 May 1878, *GEL*, VII, 28.

manuals, and chose patterns from Morris & Co., china from Doulton, mats from the Army and Navy Stores and 'paid 2£ each for our dining room Chippendales – and a table for 1.15 is enough to excite anyone's envy'.⁷⁰

However, this materialism did not sit easily with the newly wealthy couple, and Marian comments on their moral discomfort with their physical ease in June 1878. They found themselves

suffering, in the superlative degree proper to blundering people, from finding almost everything just wrong in our furniture. The sorrows of the houseless are many, but the sorrows of those who can afford to house themselves are also not a few if they like to think of nothing better than sofa-backs [and] table-legs.⁷¹

Lewes also commented ironically: 'Owen Jones is making a lovely thing of the Priory. But I trouble to think of the "[illegible] Bill." The way he sacrifices furniture & walls is enough to make one's bankers book leap in its desk'.⁷² Most of the money in the bank had been earned by Marian, for whom shops were 'my abhorrence'.⁷³ Her Evangelical background gave her a moral distaste for the role of woman as conspicuous consumer, as she was to explore in the character of Rosamond Vincy. Also, as the daughter of a former carpenter and estate manager she was well-versed in the practicalities of maintaining houses and was able to advise Charlie about a Herefordshire property he inherited in 1879.⁷⁴ Marian had been undecided about the purchase of The Priory, 'hardly liking to lock up any money in land and bricks, and yet frightened lest we should not get a quiet place just when we want it'.⁷⁵ Their ideal home necessitated great financial investment, which they were only able to achieve through her creative efforts.

Marian had the economic strength and practical knowledge to build a family home which included care of Lewes's children, but Lewes was also the 'housekeeper, secretary and nurse' who enabled her creative output. Theirs was a true partnership through which

⁷⁰ George Henry Lewes to Charles Lee Lewes, [10 July 1878], *GEL*, VII, 38.

⁷¹ George Eliot to John Blackwood, 27 June 1878, *GEL*, VII, 33.

⁷² George Henry Lewes to George Smith, [November? 1863], No. 273, William Baker, ed., *The Letters of George Henry Lewes*, 3 vols (Victoria, B.C., Canada: University of Victoria, 1995), II, 48.

⁷³ George Eliot to Cara Bray, 7 June 1878, *GEL*, VII, 30.

⁷⁴ See *GEL*, VII, 159.

⁷⁵ George Eliot to Caroline Bray, 1 June 1863, *GEL*, IV, 87.

the moral scheme of exchange between the sexes that concludes Tennyson's *The Princess* could in part be realised:

Not like to like, but like in difference,
Yet in the long years liker must they grow;
The man be more of woman, she of man ...⁷⁶

'George Eliot' could only exist through the love and support of Lewes who, as Haight claims, 'devoted the last decade of his life almost entirely to fostering her genius.'⁷⁷ The dedication on the manuscript of *Romola* shows how keenly this devotion was felt by Marian: 'To the Husband whose perfect Love has been the best source of her insight & strength, this manuscript is given by his devoted Wife, the writer'.⁷⁸ After his death, perhaps 'she was not fitted to stand alone'⁷⁹ as Haight states. Certainly she was unable to write afterwards and her health continued to fail.

Marian's marriage to her devoted banker John Cross in May 1880 again seemed unconventional, as he was twenty years her junior. Even without considering his sometimes fragile mental health,⁸⁰ Cross was not the intellectual match Lewes had been. Marian left the home she had shared for seventeen years with Lewes for central London, a 'rather quaint and picturesque' house,⁸¹ overlooking the Thames in fashionable, artistic Chelsea, at 4 Cheyne Walk (plate 41). She writes of the prospective decoration: 'you will be glad to hear that Mr. Armitage writes with a decorator's rapture about the possibilities of the Chelsea house and promises himself to make it a chef d'œuvre'.⁸² However, the potential for this house to become a home with Cross was never realised. Although she wrote 'I am quite flourishing again in my rickety fashion, a mended piece of antique furniture',⁸³ sadly, she was to die only three weeks after moving, on 3rd December 1880.

⁷⁶ Tennyson, *The Princess: A Medley* (1847), *Tennyson's Poetry*, p. 199, Part VII, 1.262-64.

⁷⁷ Haight, pp. 392-3.

⁷⁸ British Library, Add. MSS 34027-9, quoted *Companion*, p. 358.

⁷⁹ Haight, p. 530.

⁸⁰ See Hughes, pp. 479-80.

⁸¹ George Eliot to Barbara Bodichon, 5 May 1880, not sent, *GEL*, VII, 269.

⁸² George Eliot to Albert Druce, 27 April 1880, *GEL*, VII, 266.

⁸³ George Eliot to Mme Belloc, 17 December 1880, *GEL*, VII, 348.

In 1841, when moving from Griff to Coventry, young Mary Anne Evans wrote to Martha Jackson reflecting on the part played by material surroundings in forming impressions of the self:

I suppose we are all loved (or despised) a little for the sake of our circumstances as well as for our qualities [...] What extrinsic charm have *I*, to make people care for me a little more than my qualities might deserve? Certainly none from the landscape about me, and as little from the carpets and curtains and other recommendations of an elegant interior which have often helped to fix a man's choice of his partner for life – (for who will pretend that a woman who is reached through a spacious entrance hall with Indian matting can appear as utterly commonplace as Miss Jackson seen through the open parlour-door as you enter the passage?)⁸⁴

The contrast here of the fashionable with the quite ordinary, in regard to household furnishings and the 'shell' of life, focuses upon the domestic woman. In her novels, Eliot often places her female characters in specific settings and their relationship to the domestic interior assists the exploration of character. John Kucich states that 'it is a commonplace to observe that George Eliot's early novels cherish a world of objects' and he discusses the moral status of Eliot's descriptions of objects in *The Mill on the Floss*, including the rural landscape and 'rustic objects' such as ships, trees and rooftops.⁸⁵ Despite the narrator's desire for a Wordsworthian, idyllic scene,⁸⁶ moral evaluations of the countryside around St Ogg's are complicated by encroaching industrial and economic matters, just as Maggie's home and happiness become more difficult to achieve as she grows older. *The Mill on the Floss* and *Adam Bede* 'describe both objects and human lives as intersecting in a plurality of functional relations', but in the later novels, particularly *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot moves further away from material objects for the 'psychological world'.⁸⁷ In *Middlemarch* this is developed by Dorothea's efforts to understand the behaviour of others 'with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling – an idea wrought back to the directness of sense, like the solidity of objects' (*MM*, 243), which she achieves by a contemplation of the world outside her window.

⁸⁴ George Eliot to Martha Jackson, March 1841, *GEL*, I, 86.

⁸⁵ John Kucich, 'George Eliot and Objects: Meaning as Matter in *The Mill on the Floss*', in George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss: Norton Critical Edition*, ed. by Carol T. Christ (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1994), pp. 557-76 (pp. 557, 558).

⁸⁶ For an extensive discussion of Eliot's reactions to landscape and landscape painting, the cult of the picturesque, Ruskin and Wordsworth, see Hugh Witemeyer, *George Eliot and the Visual Arts* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 126-156.

⁸⁷ Kucich, p. 563.

This 'feeling' with the rest of the world and awareness of others' needs is what Eliot termed 'sympathy', relevant to the moral scheme of her novels. In her last essay for the *Westminster Review*, Eliot stated: 'in proportion as morality is emotional, i.e., has affinity with Art, it will exhibit itself in direct sympathetic feeling and action, and not as the recognition of a rule'.⁸⁸ The extent to which characters have the capacity for sympathy with others is generally the key to how the reader should judge them, for it is the utmost moral virtue, and it is through sympathy that female characters can extend their emotional lives beyond the walls of the rooms in which they are situated.

No Home For the Erring

The Mill on the Floss, with its story of Maggie Tulliver, is Eliot's most autobiographical novel. The drama of the relationship between sister and brother is played out against a backdrop of provincial life where the never-ending tide of history is symbolised by the river Floss, which will tragically end the siblings' story. Important to the novel's engagement with the 'woman question' is the relationship of Maggie to her mother and aunts and the larger community. Kucich's interpretation of *The Mill on the Floss* is based on how characters use their control of 'things' to master each other and aggressively assert their own identities. Women in particular 'achieve their place in the world only through their control of domestic objects: either by establishing how men are allowed to use them [...]; or by impressing each other with the value, or lack of it, of things'.⁸⁹ Mrs Tulliver's domesticity gives her a sense of self while at the same time creating a paradigm for Maggie to react against.

Young Maggie is forced to attend to such ladylike tasks as patchwork, which she calls 'foolish work [...] tearing things to pieces to sew 'em together again' (*MF*, 61). She feels her unhappiness so acutely that she runs away from the domestic. However, in the gypsy camp her domestic training is inescapable: she thinks that 'everything would be quite charming when she had taught the gypsies to use a washing-basin and to feel an

⁸⁸ [George Eliot], 'Worldliness and Other-Worldliness: The Poet Young', *Westminster Review*, 67 (January 1857), 1-42, Pinney, pp. 335-385, (p. 379).

⁸⁹ Kucich, p. 565.

interest in books' (*MF*, 172), and she longs to return home. As Showalter has pointed out, Brontë in *Jane Eyre* also uses the myth of the gypsy camp to stand 'for an escape from the zero-sum game of Victorian social codes, at the price of such amenities of civilization as tea, books, and groceries', but Maggie's brief contact is 'more disillusioning, and more humiliating' and more instructive than Jane Eyre's rebellion.⁹⁰ After her second flight, with Stephen Guest, Maggie feels she must return in order to preserve her moral identity and submit to the censure of the village in self-denial.

Kucich contends that Maggie's early rebellion is demonstrated by her dislike of being treated like a thing by her mother and having her hair and dress regulated; she does not use her own 'thing', her Fetish, as an instrument of aggression but to divert her emotions. Young Tom uses his competence with 'things out o' door' (*MF*, 69), like fishing-tackle and kites, to dominate the less-practical Maggie and Philip Wakem. His attempts to control Maggie and reduce her to the status of a possession lead to disaster, for he can only understand her feelings for Stephen or Philip 'in terms of their use value' in his 'reacquisition of respectability' and the Mill.⁹¹ Gifts in the novel, from Tom's peace-offering of plum cake to Wakem's restoration of the Mill to the Tullivers, fall short of their intended effect on human feeling, demonstrating 'the hopelessly inadequate nature of a human world devoted to objects as symbols of feeling: the imprisonment of matter in human use is in this sense the imprisonment of human nature itself'.⁹² In other words, Eliot exposes the hollowness of society's fetishisation of things above love and human sympathy.

Domestic objects have the most obvious importance for Mrs Tulliver, the domestic mainstay of the home at the Mill, who comes from 'a rare family of managers' (*MF*, 68). Her only concern on hearing her husband's plan to send Tom away to school is that 'I should like him to go where I can wash him and mend him; else he might as well have calico as linen for they'd be one as hallow as th' other before they'd been washed half-a-dozen times' (*MF*, 57). Indeed she can only comprehend life in reference to linen and

⁹⁰ Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own from Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing*, rev. edn (London: Virago, 1982), p. 125.

⁹¹ Kucich, p. 566.

⁹² Kucich, p. 566.

such domestic concerns; her next long speech is on the 'best Holland sheets' and ends with her drawing out 'a bright bunch of keys from her pocket', the mark of the housekeeper. Fetishistically, she singles one out and rubs 'her thumb and finger up and down it with a placid smile' (*MF*, 58). Good-natured Mrs Tulliver is 'a bit slowish', and her placid contentedness in domestic concerns marks her out as a comic character (*MF*, 59). In contrast, her husband's interests are purely to do with business; he 'was only susceptible in respect of his right to water-power' (*MF*, 58), which will prove his tragic downfall. Throughout the novel, Maggie's pain is compounded by others prioritising things above human relationships.

Mrs Tulliver is one of the Dodson sisters, a family in which there is a 'peculiar tradition as to what was the right thing in household management and social demeanour'; the Dodsons are always 'superior' (*MF*, 97), both morally and materially. The two eldest Dodsons look down from bourgeois comfort on Mr Tulliver's sister, whom Maggie resembles, who 'had married as poorly as could be, [and] had no china' (*MF*, 116). Although Mrs Tulliver is 'the feeblest member of the family', she is still 'thankful' for her knowledge of the 'particular ways of bleaching the linen, of making the cowslip wine, curing the hams and keeping the bottled gooseberries' (*MF*, 96). Her sisters guard their domestic rites like this preserved fruit, for Mrs Glegg never wears her best lace or her false 'fronts' (hair pieces) but keeps them safely put away in drawers. This has moral overtones, for she 'had both a front and a back parlour in her excellent house at St Ogg's, so that she had two points of view from which she could observe the weaknesses of her fellow-beings' (*MF*, 185-6). Mrs Pullet's house has dangerously glossy stairs, 'from which none but the most spotless virtue could have come off with unbroken limbs', for the 'very handsome carpets' are kept rolled up in a spare bedroom (*MF*, 149), and everything is kept under lock and key, even new bonnets. The whole house is in a 'fortified condition from fear of tramps who might be supposed to know of the glass-case of stuffed birds in the hall and to contemplate rushing in and carrying it away on their heads' (*MF*, 148). Tulliver's bankruptcy jeopardises this material domesticity at its very core by removing the collection of items which form the home.

When Maggie and Tom return home to find their father lying ill from a stroke and the bailiff in the house, their mother is in the store-room where she kept 'all her linen and all the precious "best things" that were only unwrapped and brought out on special occasions' (*MF*, 281). The chapter title, 'Mrs Tulliver's Teraphim, or Household Gods', directs us to her personal tragedy; in Eliot's mock-heroic vein this refers to Judges 18:14-27, which describes the forcible removal of an ephod and teraphim (graven and molten images) from Micah, who said 'ye have taken away my gods which I made [...] and what have I more?' Mrs Tulliver

was seated there with all her laid-up treasures. One of the linen-chests was open: the silver tea-pot was unwrapped from its many folds of paper, and the best china was laid out on the top of the closed linen-chest; spoons and skewers and ladles were spread in rows on the shelves; and the poor woman was shaking her head and weeping with a bitter tension of the mouth, over the mark 'Elizabeth Dodson' on the corner of some table cloths she held in her lap. (*MF*, 281)

Mrs Tulliver's grief angers Maggie because it is directed at Mr Tulliver. She cries: 'to think as your father should ha' married me to bring me to this!' (*MF*, 282). The history of her linen symbolises her virgin state:

to think o' these cloths as I spun myself [...] And the pattern as I chose myself – and bleached so beautiful – and I marked 'em so as nobody ever saw such marking – they must cut the cloth to get it out, for it's a particular stitch. And they're all to be sold – and go into strange people's houses, and perhaps be cut with the knives, and wore out before I'm dead. (*MF*, 282)

These cloths carrying her 'maiden mark' (*MF*, 158) are part of her innocent Dodson youth; they are historical documents of the family that values domestic order above all. Her violent image of the cloths being 'cut with knives' anthropomorphises the things as a part of herself. Kucich points out that most of the characters in the novel have a 'persistent belief that objects always signify in some single human way [...], too strictly valuing objects as complete measures of themselves or their intentions'.⁹³ As I will discuss in Chapter Four, Mrs Gereth in *The Spoils of Poynton* similarly defines herself and her social position through her possessions. However, a major part of the emotion invested in her things has come through the adventures she undertook in order to get them and with Fleda's help, she may be able to carve out a new, though smaller, life for herself when they are gone. In contrast, Mrs Tulliver is inconsolable and Mr Tulliver is so self-

⁹³ Kucich, p. 567.

defined by his management of the Mill that its loss leads to his loss of consciousness and finally death. Thus, regaining the Mill becomes his son's sole goal in life.

Rignall points out that Eliot found the process of moving from Griff house similarly distressing:

to me it is a deeply painful incident – it is like dying to one stage of existence, henceforth nothing will have the charm of old use and wont which makes the days pass so easily – at least until novelty has merged once again into habit.⁹⁴

Eliot appreciated the symbolism of domestic articles. She confided to Lucy Clifford that

in early days – but I don't know precisely to what period she referred – she used to buy things and call them after the stories or books that had provided the money. I remember her saying; 'We have still some tablecloths that Maggie Tulliver gave us'.⁹⁵

The building of a homely environment with Lewes was enabled by her writing; their unconventional marriage had no 'bottom drawer' to furnish it, yet the symbolism of even everyday objects is still pervasive. As Rignall points out, Mrs Tulliver has a totemic fixation on her linen rather than her family in her despair because 'it is only through contemplating the loss of these articles that she can comprehend what has happened to the family, and, although a person of little imagination, she is moved to a poignant flight of fancy'.⁹⁶ But, however much the Dodson sisters might blanch at the thought of 'the family initials going about everywhere' when the monogrammed articles are sold (*MF*, 294), they are far too careful of their savings to lend the Tullivers the money to prevent the sale. Their reluctance to buy Mrs Tulliver's things also demonstrates their lack of emotional sympathy. Mrs Pullet says 'I told her I'd buy in the spotted table cloths – I couldn't speak fairer', despite her sister's desperate state: "I wish it could be managed so as my tea-pot and chany and the best castors needn't be put up for sale," said poor Mrs Tulliver, beseechingly, "and the sugar tongs, the first things ever I bought" (*MF*, 289).⁹⁷ After the sale, in the 'new strange bareness' of their home (*MF*, 323), Maggie despairs at the loss of their books, particularly *The Pilgrim's Progress* she and Tom had

⁹⁴ George Eliot to Martha Jackson, March 1841, *GEL*, I, 86.

⁹⁵ Clifford, p. 115.

⁹⁶ John Rignall, 'George Eliot and the Furniture of the House of Fiction', *George Eliot Review*, 27 (1996), 23-30, (p. 28).

⁹⁷ 'Chany': china; 'castors': vessels with a perforated top for sprinkling.

grown up with.⁹⁸ 'I thought we should never part with that while we lived – everything is going away from us – the end of our lives will have nothing in it like the beginning!' (MF, 325) and thus historical continuity is broken.

Mrs Tulliver sees the state of her household and her person as an indicator of her moral worth in a somewhat questionable conflation of outward appearances and interior morals:

as for liking to have my clothes tidy, and not go a fright about the house, there's nobody in the parish can say anything against me in respect of backbiting and making mischief, for I don't wish anybody any harm; [...] and the linen's so in order, so if I was to die to-morrow I shouldn't be ashamed. A woman can do no more than she can. (MF, 158)

May Tomlinson has pointed out that the Dodsons are presented ironically, so that the reader views them 'humorously and disinterestedly' without forgetting the pathos of the situation.⁹⁹ The characters are unaware of their comic potential, and Maggie and Tom are certainly too close to see any humour in their aunts' opinions, but 'often the humor is not as much in the thing said as in the curious mental processes which it reveals'.¹⁰⁰ Mrs Tulliver's sentimental attachment to her linen and 'chany' is used to expose the limitations of her sympathies and the pressure of this narrowness on Maggie. Tomlinson neglects to mention how, despite her 'humorous exhibition of characteristic obtusity',¹⁰¹ Mrs Tulliver later transcends her limiting attachment to the material. She shows a true sympathy of feeling with her daughter after Maggie's incomplete 'elopement' with Stephen Guest and subsequent rejection by Tom. Despite the opprobrium of 'public opinion' and its double standards (MF, 619), Mrs Tulliver shows herself willing to leave the Mill to go with Maggie in her lowest moment: 'the poor frightened mother's love leaped out now, stronger than all dread' (MF, 614).

For Mr Tulliver, the mill is the 'spot where all his memories centred', and he 'couldn't bear to think of himself living on any other spot than this' (MF, 352). Kucich

⁹⁸ Eliot makes reference to this much loved book throughout her own work. For the importance of Maggie's reading on the development of her character see Carla L. Peterson, *The Determined Reader: Gender and Culture in the Novel from Napoleon to Victoria* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1987), pp. 181-206.

⁹⁹ May Tomlinson, 'Dodsons and Tullivers' in Stuart Hutchinson, ed., *George Eliot: Critical Assessments*, 4 vols (Mountfield: Helm Information, 1996), III, 103-109, (p. 103).

¹⁰⁰ Tomlinson, p. 105.

¹⁰¹ Tomlinson, p. 104.

extensively discusses the emotional significance of the Mill for the Tulliver family, standing 'for everything and nothing at the same time, representing its own physical centrality in the Tullivers' lives and its ability to gather into itself endless mnemonic associations', different for each character.¹⁰² This concentration of place, purpose and meaning, as Kucich discusses, proves detrimental and limiting to the Tullivers, for Maggie is banished from the Mill by her brother and will never have a true home of her own. After her father's death, Maggie has 'a dreary situation in a school' for two years, and as her cousin Lucy Deane says, 'she has hardly had any pleasure since, I think' (*MF*, 472). She then goes to live with the Deanes, where her mother has been staying, while Tom is in lodgings. When she sees the family Bible in Tom's parlour, 'sad recollections crowded on Maggie', for that small room 'was now all that poor Tom had to call by the name of "home" – that name which had once, so many years ago, meant for both of them the same sum of dear familiar objects' (*MF*, 499-500). However, when Tom regains mastery of Dorlcote Mill, his wish to have his sister and mother there to keep house for him is thwarted by Maggie's disgrace and he tells her 'You will find no home with me' (*MF*, 612), for 'the sight of you is hateful to me' (*MF*, 614). In leaving the Mill with her daughter, Mrs Tulliver at last realises the importance of human love over things, but this is born out of poverty and desperation: 'I must put up wi' my children – I shall never have no more. And if they bring me bad luck, I must be fond on it – there's nothing else much to be fond on, for my furnitur' went long ago' (*MF*, 632).

Maggie's lack of a home is made more poignant when the family with whom she lodges name their baby after her, and Bob Jakin offers to let her hold the child to show 'his sympathy and respect' (*MF*, 616). Maggie's mother has returned to Tom, and not only will Eliot's heroine never have her own home, like Wharton's Lily Bart, she will never have the love of a husband and child, which truly make a home. Just before the flood, Dr Kenn advises her to leave St Ogg's altogether and 'be a lonely wanderer', for 'there was no home, no help for the erring' (*MF*, 646). The fantasy ending, of the siblings joined in death, like James's tragedies, shows the inadequacy of social choice

¹⁰² Kucich, p. 571.

and of the novelistic form: 'to the extent that the Romantic paradigm remained alive in Eliot's [...] mind, it is nonetheless viewed pessimistically, if not ironically, for any reconciliatory return home for Maggie [...] has become totally impossible'.¹⁰³

Maggie's diffuse intelligence, shared by Dorothea, gives her the strength to carry on living in St Ogg's after her disgrace. This has come about through the unwillingness of the village to believe that there could possibly be an innocent explanation, and Eliot uses Maggie to demonstrate what Kucich terms 'the actual plurality of every object's human significance' which 'distinguishes her at the end of the novel from other characters and their inflexible demands on her behavior'.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, objects expose, symbolise and activate the divergence of human meanings, like the divided jam puff over which the siblings quarrel. The reader's privileged position allows us to see Maggie's helplessness in the face of the shifting meanings, from her sacrifice and Tom's competitiveness, to the jam puff becoming a source of reverie for Maggie and for Tom, a symbol of her greed. The plurality of meanings reaches an apotheosis in Eliot's work in *Middlemarch*, with its emphasis on the web of human experience. Dorothea is able to remove herself from selfish concerns to consider the larger scale of human morality; indeed the whole moral scale of *Middlemarch* is larger and the meaning of objects is examined more extensively as a consequence of the moral life of individuals. Or, in Kucich's words, Eliot feels that 'neutralizing self-interested appropriations through a perception of the corporeality of human meaning is the first step toward selfless, disinterested – and in that sense "natural" – moral response'.¹⁰⁵ Rignall points out that while the disposition of domestic articles causes pain in *The Mill on the Floss*, by *Middlemarch*, it is 'the acquisition and accumulation of such possessions that has become problematic',¹⁰⁶ for the Lydgates' distress at the enforced sale of their possessions is rooted in the fact that they were bought in an atmosphere of moral inattention to their future life.

¹⁰³ Peterson, p. 180.

¹⁰⁴ Kucich, p. 568.

¹⁰⁵ Kucich, p. 575.

¹⁰⁶ Rignall, p. 28.

Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life

Middlemarch is in one sense a historical document about a provincial community, examining large scale changes wrought by politics and science, but the novel also examines the nuances of personal emotion. The many stories of *Middlemarch*, with their interconnected plots, metaphors, myths and themes have received much critical attention since the 1960s, tending to counter James's criticism that the novel is 'a treasure-house of details, but it is an indifferent whole'.¹⁰⁷ Eliot displays a formal coherence and control in her investigation of 'the history of man' and the 'inconvenient indefiniteness' of 'the nature of women' (*MM*, 25, 26), and her metaphor of the web of interconnectedness permits a multitude of interpretations.¹⁰⁸ However, it is two of the love plots, those of Dorothea Brooke and Rosamond Vincy, and Eliot's use of metaphors of sight which prove the most pertinent to my discussion of the novel's focus on interiors and their relationship to the women situated within them. I shall discuss in Chapter Three how James uses the metaphor of the window in his 'house of fiction' to focus his plot in *The Portrait of a Lady*. For Eliot the running images of web, pier-glass and light, inform her symbolic language of sight.¹⁰⁹ *Middlemarch* also invokes the fashionable telescope and microscope and the different views of the world they produce (*MM*, 83),¹¹⁰ for the gaze of characters can be directed inwards or outwards, implying selfishness or concern with the larger world.

An Exquisite Ornament to the Drawing-room

As I have indicated, in *Middlemarch* the acquisition of possessions, in particular furnishings for the home, becomes problematic for the Lydgates and exposes their

¹⁰⁷ Henry James, 'Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life, by George Eliot', *Galaxy*, (March 1873), in Henry James, *Literary Criticism*, selected by Leon Edel and Mark Wilson (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1984), pp. 958-966, (p. 958).

¹⁰⁸ A detailed study of the various characters' search for a single point of Origin demonstrates this; see Jan Gordon, 'Origins, Middlemarch, Endings: George Eliot's Crisis of the Antecedent' in Anne Smith, ed., *George Eliot: Centenary Essays and an Unpublished Fragment* (London: Vision, 1980), pp. 124-151.

¹⁰⁹ The web imagery in *Middlemarch* is catalogued by Reva Stump, *Movement and Vision in George Eliot's Novels* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1959), pp. 138-154 and examined with metaphors of weaving by GG, pp. 520-8.

¹¹⁰ For the relationship of fiction and fashionable Victorian optical devices like the microscope, camera, and magic lantern see Christ and Jordan.

incompatibility. Narcissistic Rosamond Vincy, is an 'uncommonly pretty woman' (*MM*, 705) with 'elegant accomplishments' (*MM*, 301). Rosamond (worldly rose) sets her sights on the doctor Tertius Lydgate, a 'strong man of nine-and-twenty and of many gifts' (*MM*, 636), an 'ambitious' doctor (*MM*, 177). Their courtship is introduced in Chapter 27 with the famous metaphor derived from Eliot's unusual way of looking at an ordinary household objects:

your pier-glass or extensive surface of polished steel made to be rubbed by a housemaid, will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions; but place now against it a lighted candle as a centre of illumination, and lo! the scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles round that little sun. It is demonstrable that the scratches are going everywhere impartially, and it is only your candle which produces the flattering illusion of a concentric arrangement, its light falling with an exclusive optical selection. (*MM*, 297)

This passage demonstrates that focusing on one character at a time can give a false sense of perspective, dependent on viewpoint. Throughout the novel, 'seeing' and 'vision' are specific organising motifs. Eliot explains the metaphor's particular application: 'these things are a parable. The scratches are events, and the candle is the egoism of any person now absent – of Miss Vincy, for example' (*MM*, 297), but any concentration on an individual character is the same process. The mirror is a particularly suitable metaphor for Rosamond with her primarily narcissistic view of the world, which Eliot also utilises in her description of Gwendolen in *Daniel Deronda*.

Eliot uses the metaphor of the web of affinities to highlight the opposite viewpoint, of a multitude of correspondences between characters, which characterises Dorothea, and the narrator:

I at least have so much to do in unravelling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven, that all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe. (*MM*, 170)

However, the web is not just a visual or structural comparison, for Rosamond manages to engage Lydgate in 'the cobweb of pre-matrimonial acquaintanceship' (*MM*, 45) through her social graces like hair-plaiting (*MM*, 629-30) and 'trivial chain-work' which shakes 'flirtation into love' (*MM*, 335).

The action of the gaze between lovers is important for both the Lydgates and the Casaubons. Although Lydgate sees 'a delightful interchange of influence in their eyes',

(*MM*, 301) he does not realise that the 'influence' is weighted towards Rosamond; she utilises to the utmost the womanly influence that I discussed in the Introduction. Here, gaze becomes action:

circumstance was almost sure to be on the side of Rosamond's idea, which had a shaping activity and looked through watchful blue eyes, whereas Lydgate's lay blind and unconcerned as a jelly-fish which gets melted without knowing it. (*MM*, 305)

Rosamond's watery metaphors of water-nixie and siren mark her as a *femme fatale*,¹¹¹ and Eliot develops the mythical resonance of the female gaze: unlike Medusa, Rosamond's look weakens her victim. Lydgate imagines Rosamond as 'that perfect piece of womanhood who would reverence her husband's mind after the fashion of an accomplished mermaid, using her comb and looking-glass and singing her song for the relaxation of his adored wisdom alone' (*MM*, 628). However, this 'perfect' woman is dangerous, for she only sees her own beauty. He later compares Rosamond with the homicidal Laure: 'would *she* kill me because I wearied her?', deciding 'it is the way with all women' (*MM*, 638).¹¹² Just as Dorothea is 'as blind to [Casaubon's] inward troubles as he to hers' (*MM*, 232), when the Lydgates fall into debt, they experience 'that total missing of each other's mental track, which is too evidently possible even between persons who are continually thinking of each other', and Rosamond's mind presents a 'blank unreflecting surface' (*MM*, 632); her preoccupation with gazing into mirrors means she can reflect only her own, not her husband's, interests. The distressing sale of their furniture leads her to retreat emotionally: 'in her secret soul she was utterly aloof from him. The poor soul saw only that the world was not ordered to her liking' (*MM*, 699). Lydgate's unreal image of Rosamond, which she helps create, cannot withstand the problems of real life and the 'water-nixie' (*MM*, 700) becomes the 'Slough of Despond':¹¹³ a 'swamp, which tempts men towards it with such a pretty covering of flowers and verdure' (*MM*, 633).

We are told that Lydgate's 'intellectual ardour, did not penetrate his feeling and judgment about furniture, or women' (*MM*, 179), making the connection between

¹¹¹ See GG, p. 460.

¹¹² For Laure's significance see GG, pp. 499-500, 514; Rose, pp. 108-111.

¹¹³ Bunyan, p. 14.

women and furniture explicit and ironic. Both are initially of little consequence to the ambitious doctor, but he comes to realise that he can control neither. Lydgate's over-confidence in his own intelligence cannot 'lift him from the vulgarity of feeling that there would be an incompatibility in his furniture not being of the best' (*MM*, 180), because his 'distinguished mind is a little spotted with commonness' (*MM*, 178). It is not surprising that he chooses Rosamond for his wife, the girl who has been trained for marriage and knows that 'she was a much more exquisite ornament to the drawing-room there than any [other] daughter' (*MM*, 632). His lack of intellectual scrutiny of such common subjects such as women and furniture, and his fetishisation of commodities, what Rignall calls 'a thoughtless infection by the materialism of the age',¹¹⁴ will cause his downfall, for as he falls into debt, he is less able to fulfil his research ambitions.

In the first stages of her flirtation with Lydgate, Rosamond imagines 'a handsome house in Lowick Gate', and when her thoughts are not occupied with Lydgate himself, 'she imagined the drawing-room in her favourite house with various styles of furniture'; thus, for Rosamond, flirtation leads to thoughts of houses, the visitors that she will invite to her *own* home and the furniture with which she will fill it (*MM*, 300). The large house she wants 'will take a great deal of furniture' (*MM*, 378), and although Lydgate states that he only wants to 'keep house in a simple way' (*MM*, 496), he is similarly guilty of 'commodity fetishism', in Marx's term.¹¹⁵ He imagines his wife will 'create order in the home and accounts with still magic' (*MM*, 387), but Rosamond has been brought up to think that 'good housekeeping consisted simply in ordering the best of everything' (*MM*, 634), and the bills soon mount up. Rosamond is indignant at the thought of 'plain' living like the Wrenches, and Lydgate, similarly concerned with social standing and appearances, agrees that 'they have very bad taste in everything – they make economy look ugly. We needn't do that' (*MM*, 699). Poor Rosamond has been as much fooled by her idealistic 'delightful dreams' as Lydgate, for marriage 'had freed her from the disagreeables of her father's house, but it had not given her everything that she had

¹¹⁴ Rignall, p. 29.

¹¹⁵ Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, 3 vols (1867-1894); see Rignall, p. 26.

wished and hoped' (*MM*, 711). She now sees the future as 'a house in Bride Street, where the rooms are like cages [...] where she would have scanty furniture around her and discontent within' (*MM*, 710, 712).

The name of this street conveys that the fate of brides can be imprisonment, as Dorothea also finds. This image of Rosamond as a caged bird has many visual analogues, for example, the woman depicted in Walter Deverell's *A Pet* (plate 42). Through visual contrasts – caged and free birds, outside and inside, light and shadow – this painting explicitly compares the caged bird with the woman feeding it. She stands in profile, framed by the doorway, with chiaroscuro emphasising her position on the threshold of the house, half-lit by the outside sun. She accepts her domestic position; like the uncaged birds on her shoulder and in the garden (another enclosure), she is able to leave, but chooses not to. When this picture was first exhibited it was accompanied by a quotation from *Leaves From the Note-Book of a Naturalist* (1852) by W.J. Broderip: 'but after all, it is very questionable kindness to make a pet of a creature so essentially volatile'.¹¹⁶ The conjunction of image and text corresponds with Rosamond's hidden strengths, for 'of course she believed in her own opinion more than she did in his' (*MM*, 631). Lydgate realises that 'the shallowness of a waternixie's soul may have a charm until she becomes didactic' (*MM*, 700). Elaine Shefer has convincingly argued that the woman in *The Pet* represents Elizabeth Siddal, and is related to Deverell's unrequited love for her. Not only is Siddal the model,¹¹⁷ but the painting and caption comment on her relationship with Rossetti, with whom she had just begun to live. Shefer explains that 'the motto reveals Deverell's anxieties about the potentially explosive relationship of the two, and questions the advisability of caging such a woman'.¹¹⁸ This idea has particular resonance when applied to Rosamond, who has been brought up to be a decorative, good wife. She will not completely submit to her husband's will, for she rides when pregnant, and is rebellious at the thought of the bankruptcy sale. Casaubon too had hoped for a submissive wife, 'an elegant-minded canary bird' who would observe him with

¹¹⁶ Elaine Shefer, 'Deverell, Rossetti, Siddal, and "The Bird in the Cage"', *Art Bulletin*, 67 (1985), 437-438 (p. 437). Eliot refers to Broderip's book, *MF*, 206.

¹¹⁷ Although, Parris identifies her as Eustacia Davy, Parris, p. 114.

¹¹⁸ Shefer (1985), p. 438.

'uncritical awe'. But Dorothea becomes a 'spy watching everything with a malign power of inference' (*MM*, 232-3), like Rosamond, her gaze becomes active in disabling her husband.

The Lydgates' move from Middlemarch, described in the Finale, is at the expense of Lydgate's ambitions. Although Rosamond calls the wealth of his 'excellent practice' her 'reward' (*MM*, 892-3), she is still trapped, albeit in a 'cage' that is 'all flowers and gilding' (*MM*, 893). Lydgate feels similarly constrained, sourly calling her his 'basil plant', which 'flourished wonderfully on a murdered man's brains' (*MM*, 893). The notion of women as deadly plants receives another twist in *Daniel Deronda*, where Gwendolen describes how women who are brought up 'to look as pretty as we can, and be dull without complaining' become bored, 'the reason why some of them have got poisonous' (*DD*, 113).

A Foundress of Nothing

As the mirror is an appropriate metaphor for the narcissistic Rosamond, later developed in the treatment of Gwendolen, the window and the view outside are Dorothea's. The subtleties of Dorothea's character have been lost on many twentieth-century feminist critics. For example, Kate Millett castigates Eliot for her character's inability to live up to her own unconventional life: Dorothea 'is an eloquent plea that a fine mind be allowed an occupation; but it goes no further than petition. She marries Will Ladislaw and can expect no more of life than the discovery of a good companion whom she can serve as secretary'.¹¹⁹ Throughout the novel Eliot points out the limitations of Victorian society for women, and critics have found it difficult to deal with the discrepancy that the society which produced George Eliot also thwarted Dorothea.¹²⁰ As we have seen with the Lydgates, the ideal of marriage falls far short of reality, despite Rosamond's acceptance of her restriction within the women's sphere. Dorothea has far larger ambitions, yet they

¹¹⁹ Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (London: Virago, 1977, repr. 1993), p. 139.

¹²⁰ See Jeanie G. Thomas, 'An Inconvenient Indefiniteness: George Eliot, *Middlemarch* and Feminism', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 56 (1987), 392-415.

are unspecific. In her first flush of joy at the thought that Casaubon might want to make her his wife, her

notions of marriage took their colour entirely from an exalted enthusiasm about the ends of life, an enthusiasm which was lit by its own fire, and included neither the niceties of the *trousseau*, the pattern of plate, nor even the honours and sweet joys of the blooming matron. (*MM*, 50)

Childbirth and house-decorating are together in opposition to a higher goal, that of being Casaubon's helpmeet, for Dorothea looks outside the domestic for her fulfilment.

However Casaubon and his work are dead-ends, literally and metaphorically. Dorothea's reactions to interiors at Lowick and Rome, show her realisation that she needs more space for her own happiness. This moral progress to enlightenment is organised by scenes of seeing. However, as with the Lydgates, lovers who imagine reflections of each other's minds are generally seeing too much, 'for all meanings, we know, depend on the key of interpretation' (*DD*, 46). Dorothea initially imagines that marriage will provide a reflection of her own goals and ideas: she 'had looked deep into the ungauged reservoir of Mr Casaubon's mind, seeing reflected there in vague labyrinthine extension every quality she herself brought' (*MM*, 46). Images of light are intellectual, and for Dorothea have a spiritual, philanthropic slant, but she mistakenly imagines this light emitting from Casaubon's dark labyrinth. He stands 'rayless', whereas Ladislav has hair that seems 'to shake out light' (*MM*, 241), more suited to Dorothea's 'altogether ardent, theoretic, and intellectually consequent' nature (*MM*, 51). Also, 'the mere chance of seeing Will occasionally was like a lunette opened in the wall of her prison, giving her a glimpse of the sunny air' (*MM*, 396).

The labyrinth of the Ariadne myth is a negative extension of the web and is both a spatial and intellectual metaphor. Dorothea thinks that marriage to Casaubon would be an escape from the 'narrow teaching, hemmed in by a social life' Rosamond revels in, but for Dorothea 'seemed nothing but a labyrinth of petty courses, a walled-in maze of small paths that led no whither' (*MM*, 51). Casaubon is in a labyrinth of scholarship, if not a catacomb, for he is 'a little buried in books' (*MM*, 62). He admits 'I live too much with the dead. My mind is something like the ghost of an ancient, wandering about the world' (*MM*, 40). Because he is 'the most interesting man [Dorothea] had ever seen' and

'marriage is a state of higher duties' (*MM*, 64), she sees herself as 'a lamp holder' (*MM*, 30) and 'the union which attracted her was one that would deliver her from her girlish subjection to her own ignorance, and give her the freedom of voluntary submission to a guide who would take her along the grandest path' (*MM*, 51).

Dorothea's intellectual needs lead her to idolise Casaubon: 'he thinks with me [...] or rather, he thinks a whole world of which my thought is but a poor two-penny mirror. And his feelings too, his whole experience – what a lake compared with my little pool!' (*MM*, 47). However, it is Miss *Brooke* whose stream of understanding runs far and wide, whereas Casaubon's 'stream of feeling' is 'an exceedingly shallow rill' (*MM*, 87). After reading his formal love letter, her 'whole soul was possessed by the fact that a fuller life was opening before her [...]. She was going to have room for the energies which stirred uneasily under the dimness and pressure of her own ignorance' and would now 'be allowed to live continually in the light of a mind she could reverence' (*MM*, 67). But the dead and dry Casaubon is not capable of this, lost, as he is, in his own labyrinth, and instead of a 'fuller life' opening up, she is trapped in a tiny space. After his death, Dorothea does not fulfil her promise to complete and publish his 'Key to all Mythologies', the 'tomb with his name upon it', after learning of the suspicious codicil to his will that entails his property away from her if she remarries, 'that promise by which he sought to keep his cold grasp on Dorothea's life' (*MM*, 535). Dorothea discovers, 'with a stifling depression', that instead of 'the large vistas and wide fresh air which she had dreamed of finding in her husband's mind' she has merely exchanged one domestic maze for another, the 'ante-rooms and winding passages which seemed to lead nowhither' of marriage (*MM*, 227-8). This phrase echoes her previous thoughts on women's sphere as 'a walled-in maze of small paths that led no whither' (*MM*, 51).

Dorothea's philanthropic aspirations find their most concrete realisation in building homes for the poor. This is the only way she can see 'to lead a grand life here – now – in England', just as many middle-class Victorian women were only able to find an outlet for their energies, which did not involve earning filthy lucre, in charity work. She is insecure about her abilities, and feels that

everything seems like going on a mission to a people whose language I don't know; – unless it were building good cottages – there can be no doubt about that. Oh, I hope I should be able to get the people well housed in Lowick! I will draw plenty of plans while I have time. (*MM*, 51)

Dorothea's wish to create homes is predicated upon practicalities: 'I shall think I am a great architect, if I have not got incompatible stairs and fire-places' (*MM*, 37). She cries 'energetically' that 'life in cottages might be happier than ours, if they were real houses fit for human beings from whom we expect duties and affections' (*MM*, 54). Her source book is Loudon's *An Encyclopaedia Of Cottage, Farm And Villa Architecture And Furniture*,¹²¹ an extremely influential book of architectural plans and designs for interiors and furniture, which can also be read as a document of mid-1830s middle-class taste. From the late eighteenth-century the cottage symbolised a nostalgic, anti-industrial ideal. For example, when the 'coxcomb' Robert Ferrars in *Sense and Sensibility*, pronounces 'I advise every body who is going to build, to build a cottage',¹²² he is thinking of a *cottage ornée*, an ornament for a park sometimes used to house labourers. He has been inspired by Joseph Bonomi, a Neo-classical architect, to plan a cottage with a dining-room that can seat eighteen people. Loudon illustrates how even the simplest structures can be ornamented in various architectural styles, for 'ornamental and plain cottages' are 'intimately connected', providing detailed plans and recommendations for ideal yet practical cottages.¹²³

Tristram points out that Dorothea's concern with the gulf between rich and poor, and her confidence that cottages will give the poor a better quality of life, is anachronistic in the 1830s when the novel is set, but a persuasive assumption by the 1870s when *Middlemarch* was written.¹²⁴ The rural idyll was to be fully developed by the Queen Anne architects of the 1870s like Philip Webb, whose aesthetic ideal of 'sweetness and light' also involved practical issues like hygiene.¹²⁵ In his exhaustive study of Eliot and pictorial art, Witemeyer has pointed out that elsewhere in *Middlemarch*, the picturesque

¹²¹ J.C. [John Claudius] Loudon, *An Encyclopaedia Of Cottage, Farm And Villa Architecture And Furniture* (London: Longman, 1833).

¹²² Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), first published 1811, Chapter 36, pp. 266-7.

¹²³ Loudon, p. 259.

¹²⁴ Tristram, p. 70.

¹²⁵ See Adams and Banham, pp. 157-75.

view of the countryside is shown to be 'precisely what Ruskin called it: an eminently heartless ideal'.¹²⁶ Brooke's tenant's cottage is a parody of the picturesque:

the old house had dormer-windows in the dark-red roof, two of the chimneys were choked with ivy, the large porch was blocked up with bundles of sticks, and half the windows were closed with grey worm-eaten shutters about which the jasmine-boughs grew in wild luxuriance; the mouldering garden wall with hollyhocks peeping over it was a perfect study of highly-mingled subdued colour. (*MM*, 429)

Eliot contrasts aesthetic sensibilities with necessary morality and awareness of the poverty of the human condition, an insight developed from Ruskin.¹²⁷ Even the connoisseur Mr Brooke realises the poverty of his tenants, for it 'never looked before so dismal'. The narrator points out that 'it is true that an observer, under that softening influence of the fine arts which makes other peoples' hardships picturesque might have been delighted with this homestead' (*MM*, 429). As the narrator notes in *Daniel Deronda*, 'perspective [...], is a beautiful thing. What horrors of damp huts, where human beings languish, may not become picturesque through aerial distance!' (*DD*, 131). An emotional outpouring demonstrates the relationship Dorothea finds between real life and that depicted in art:

I used to come from the village with all that dirt and coarse ugliness like a pain within me, and the simpering pictures in the drawing-room seemed to me like a wicked attempt to find delight in what is false. (*MM*, 424).

For Dorothea, the relationship between aesthetics and morals is living and vital; beauty must not be used to obscure the dirt of reality, and her cottages are planned to make life for the poor better, in more beautiful and practical surroundings.

Celia, like other characters in the novel, thinks that it is just her 'favourite *fad* to draw plans', and Dorothea is frustrated by the limitations of women's position: 'what was life worth – what great faith was possible when the whole effect of one's actions could be withered up into such parched rubbish as that?' (*MM*, 60) and can only achieve her dreams with the help of Caleb Garth, who praises her plans and implements them. Casaubon's reaction to Dorothea's 'favourite theme' shows Eliot's humour: he 'apparently did not care about building cottages, and diverted the talk to the extremely narrow accommodation which was to be had in the dwellings of the ancient Egyptians'

¹²⁶ Witemeyer, p. 150.

¹²⁷ For a detailed examination of Ruskin's influence on Eliot, see Wiesenfarth and Witemeyer, pp. 143-152.

(*MM*, 56). Casaubon's interest in 'narrow accommodation' and his academic relation to history is in contrast with Dorothea's aim of social improvement and her own personal need for space. Eliot emphasises that Dorothea's strength is gender-specific: she has 'powerful, feminine, maternal hands' (*MM*, 61), hands that can build and create, not only children, but buildings. However, as Langland points out, despite the dreadful state of the poor in Tipton parish, Lowick 'inexplicably boasts a model village where nothing whatever needs to be done by anyone',¹²⁸ and Dorothea despairs, 'what was there to be done in the village? O dear! nothing. Everybody was well and had flannel' (*MM*, 863). Once again, marriage constricts her ambitions.

Dorothea does not attempt to change her own room at Lowick Manor, deferring to her husband's taste, or rather, the taste of his forebears. She is happy 'to take everything as it is – just as you have been used to have it, or as you will yourself choose it to be' (*MM*, 100). She takes as her boudoir the room that she guesses had belonged to Casaubon's mother 'when she was young', partly because of his liking for it. This room has feminine decoration: 'faded blue' Regency furniture which is 'thin-legged and easy to upset'. It is a highly romantic room, 'where one might fancy the ghost of a tight-laced lady revisiting the scene of her embroidery'. A collection of portrait miniatures on the wall shows Casaubon's ancestors 'with powdered hair' (*MM*, 100). Only two of the portraits are described, those of Casaubon's mother and her sister, who 'made an unfortunate marriage' (*MM*, 101), and is later revealed as Ladislaw's grandmother, significant because 'a man can never separate himself from his past history'.¹²⁹ The simple, old-fashioned beauty of this room and its female heritage will prove supportive during Dorothea's moments of despair, and its position is also important: 'its bow window looked down the avenue of limes' (*MM*, 100), on the 'happy side' of the house (*MM*, 98).

The house has

a small park, with a fine old oak here and there, and an avenue of limes towards the south-west front, with a sunk fence between park and pleasure-ground, so that from

¹²⁸ Langland, p. 198.

¹²⁹ George Eliot, *Felix Holt, the Radical* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), first published 1866, Chapter 21, p. 184.

the drawing-room windows the glance swept uninterrupted along a slope of greensward till the limes ended in a level of corn and pastures, which often seemed to melt into a lake under the setting sun. (*MM*, 98)

This unimpeded view, as yet indistinct and shadowy beyond the window, will give Dorothea emotional strength through meditation due to its connection to the wider world. In contrast, the south and east side of the house 'looked rather melancholy even under the brightest morning'. The garden is untended and 'confined' with high 'sombre yews' (*MM*, 98), trees associated with graveyards, which grow near the windows blocking out light. As with Isabel's first visit to Osmond's Florentine villa (*PL*, 226-7, 253, see Chapter Three), Dorothea does not at first notice the sombre, prison-like quality of the house and its owner:

the building, of greenish stone, was in the old English style, not ugly, but small-windowed and melancholy-looking: the sort of house that must have children, many flowers, open windows, and little vistas of bright things to make it seem a joyous home. In this latter end of autumn, [...] the house too had an air of autumnal decline, and Mr Casaubon, when he presented himself, had no bloom that could be thrown into relief by that background. (*MM*, 98-9)

The images of sadness, death and decay of the house and the sterility of its occupant mean that this house will never be a home, but Dorothea myopically finds 'the house and grounds all that she could wish' (*MM*, 99). The age of the house and its contents have a validity for the naive Dorothea far above her uncle's souvenirs:

the dark bookshelves in the long library, the carpets and curtains with colours subdued by time, the curious old maps and bird's-eye views on the walls of the corridor, with here and there an old vase below, had no oppression for her, and seemed more cheerful than the casts and pictures at the Grange [...]. To poor Dorothea these severe classical nudities and smirking Renaissance-Correggiosities were painfully inexplicable, staring in to the midst of her Puritanic conceptions: she had never been taught how she could bring them into any sort of relevance with her life. (*MM*, 99).

She feels this contrast more intensely on their honeymoon in Rome, but for the moment she wilfully misreads the evidence of Casaubon's narrow mind, as Isabel does in the face of Osmond's taste: 'she filled up all blanks with unmanifested perfections, interpreting [Casaubon] as she interpreted the works of Providence, and accounting for seeming discords by her own deafness to the higher harmonies' (*MM*, 100).

Dorothea is thrust into a painful confrontation with the wider world on her honeymoon in Rome and through this comes to a realisation of her incompatibility with Casaubon. He explains that, for her, the aphorism 'see Rome and die' should be

emended to 'see Rome as a bride, and live henceforth as a happy wife' (*MM*, 231). As Gilbert and Gubar have pointed out, this means 'to be a happy wife to a dead man is to be buried alive'.¹³⁰ In complete contrast to Isabel Archer, who finds 'space to soar' in St Peter's, for Dorothea, the

vastness of St Peter's, the huge bronze canopy, the excited intention in the attitudes and garments of the prophets and evangelists in the mosaics above, and the red drapery which was being hung for Christmas spreading itself everywhere like a disease of the retina (*MM*, 226).

The metaphor of sight has become an illness, the beauty of Rome provoking dis-ease. Later, Featherstone's funeral affects her 'just as the vision of St Peter's at Rome was interwoven with moods of despondency' (*MM*, 360).

Patricia Johnson has demonstrated how the gaze can be used to explore the problematic relationship women have with a history from which they have been excluded, for Dorothea has no-one to guide her through the city of 'visible history' where 'the past of a whole hemisphere seems moving in funeral procession with strange ancestral images and trophies gathered from afar' (*MM*, 224). Johnson contrasts how James and Eliot represent their female characters by employing an omniscient narrator that 'implies an all-powerful gaze'.¹³¹ She argues for a gendered way of seeing and compares parallel scenes where the women are viewed by men in the text. She concludes that James views Isabel through an implicit male gaze (see Chapter Three), but Eliot 'undercuts the assumptions on which the male gaze rests and directly raises questions about the way in which women are represented'.¹³² Johnson contends that Rome represents Western art and the exclusion of women from history, making Dorothea's personal tragedy more intense than merely Puritan naiveté and ignorance. Joseph Wiesenfarth interprets Dorothea as divided between 'her Puritanic conscience and her instinctive life', needing Ladislav's art education 'to reach emotional maturity';¹³³ but Johnson disputes Dorothea's submission to 'male esthetic authority'.¹³⁴ Johnson points out that Ladislav does not see Dorothea as

¹³⁰ GG, p. 503.

¹³¹ Patricia E. Johnson, 'The Gendered Politics of the Gaze: Henry James and George Eliot', *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, 30 (1997), 39-54 (p. 39).

¹³² Johnson, p. 45.

¹³³ Wiesenfarth, pp. 363, 374.

¹³⁴ Johnson, p. 46.

uneducated, but calls her 'a heretic about art generally' (*MM*, 251). Dorothea's alternative position of feminist resistance in the face of male Western art is backed up by Nochlin:

there is an analogy between woman's compromised ability – her lack of self-determining power – in the realm of the social order and her lack of power to articulate a negative critique in the realm of pictorial representation. In both cases, her rejection of patriarchal authority is weakened by accusations of prudery or naiveté. Sophistication, liberation, belonging are equated with acquiescence to male demands; women's initial perceptions of oppression, of outrage, of negativity are undermined by authorized doubts, by the need to please, to be learned, sophisticated, aesthetically astute – in male-defined terms, of course.¹³⁵

Dorothea's reaction to Rome is strong and physical:

all this vast wreck of ambitious ideals, sensuous and spiritual, mixed confusedly with the signs of breathing forgetfulness and degradation, at first jarred her as with an electric shock, and then urged themselves on her with that ache belonging to a glut of confused ideas which check the flow of emotion. (*MM*, 225)¹³⁶

Knowledge of an art history defined by men will not change her reactions, which suggest that 'there is something insidious about the Western artistic tradition, and not mere reflections of the observer's immaturity or prudery'.¹³⁷

Eliot's portraits of ladies in part function through a challenge to the representations of women in the Western artistic tradition. Johnson is helpful here in her meticulous analysis of the scene in the Belvedere Gallery of the Vatican Museum, where Dorothea, beside the statue of Cleopatra/Ariadne, is watched by Ladislaw and Naumann, the Nazarene painter.¹³⁸ Johnson explains how Eliot splits the monolithic male gaze by drawing attention to different viewing positions and showing the conflicts between them.¹³⁹ First of all, the two men position themselves to view Dorothea: 'come here quick! else she will have changed her pose' (*MM*, 219). Secondly, the misidentification of the sculpture implies the narrator's scepticism about 'Western culture's ability to name correctly and even interpret the meaning even of its own portraiture of women'.¹⁴⁰

Although Dorothea is being viewed by men, she is unaware of their gaze: 'her large eyes

¹³⁵ Nochlin, p. 32.

¹³⁶ This relates to the theory of empathetic response to art developed in the 1890s by Bourget, Lee and Berenson. See Chapters Four and Five.

¹³⁷ Johnson, p. 47.

¹³⁸ For the significance of German Nazarene painters and their inheritors, the British Pre-Raphaelites, in *Middlemarch*, see Wiesenfarth, p. 367; Witemeyer, pp. 77-87, and John Murdoch, 'English Realism: George Eliot and the Pre-Raphaelites', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 37 (1974), 313-329.

¹³⁹ Johnson, pp. 48-52.

¹⁴⁰ Johnson, p. 51.

were fixed dreamily on a streak of sunlight', not the sculpture. When she becomes conscious of their gaze she 'immediately turned away' (*MM*, 220). She is not complicit in the men's gaze, unlike Isabel who poses, 'as if' examining a picture, showing Warburton 'her charming back, her light slim figure' (*PL*, 131). Lily Bart's semi-nude pose is even more complicit with the male gaze, as I will discuss in Chapter Six. Eventually, the men are not able to retain Dorothea within their gaze; the 'fine bit of antithesis' between her Protestant beauty and the Pagan sensuousness of the sculpture is fleeting, for 'it is no use looking after her – there she goes!' (*MM*, 220). Unlike Gwendolen, Isabel and Lily, Dorothea is never aware of the picture she presents to the male gaze, or the contrast of her beauty with her surroundings, even though the first line of Chapter 1 is: 'Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress' (*MM*, 29). Her simplicity of dress comes from her religious dislike of adornment, evidenced by her self-conscious disinclination to wear her mother's jewels (*MM*, 34-37).¹⁴¹ Daniel Deronda's initial thought on Gwendolen, 'was she beautiful or not beautiful?' (*DD*, 3) is a more complex development of this theme.

Eliot further explores 'the interlocking issues of power involved in men looking at women' that I discussed in the Introduction, when the two men argue.¹⁴² Ladislav poses the central question 'what is a portrait of a woman?' (*MM*, 222). He attacks Naumann's right to paint Dorothea and the dependance of visual representation on the female subject:

the true seeing is within; and painting stares at you an insistent imperfection. I feel that especially about representations of women. As if a woman were a mere coloured superficialities! (*MM*, 222)

Ladislav argues the superiority of fictive language in description, as it 'gives a fuller image, which is all the better for being vague' (*MM*, 222). Johnson points out that Naumann's attitude exposes the voyeurism of the artist and the treatment of women as possessions, epitomised by Gilbert Osmond. Naumann 'moves from a contemplation of Dorothea's bodily beauty to a consideration of who owns it':¹⁴³ noticing her wedding ring, he wonders if her husband is rich and 'would like to have her portrait taken' (*MM*,

¹⁴¹ See Wiesenfarth, p. 363.

¹⁴² Johnson, p. 49.

¹⁴³ Johnson, p. 50.

220). He also sees this commodification as natural and inevitable, as Ladislaw satirically points out, talking as if his 'painting her was the chief outcome of her existence' (*MM*, 221). However, his view of Dorothea is only one in the labyrinth of interpretations. If the statue of Ariadne 'is misnamed and misinterpreted, and Dorothea is being defined in relation to her, the suggestion is that Western culture cannot interpret Dorothea any better than it can the Ariadne. All the terms of the comparison have become radically destabilized'.¹⁴⁴ Eliot radically questions the assumptions of Western culture and its representations of women, and instead of returning her female heroine to her cage, as James does with Isabel, Eliot allows Dorothea to try and find an 'alternative to a life organized by an all-powerful male gaze' and see for herself in new and different ways.¹⁴⁵

Dorothea is

neither spectator nor object of the gaze, unwilling to split seeing from feeling [...]. Her looking struggles to move beyond power, surveillance, or a narrowly gendered subjectivity. It offers the reader momentary access to a utopian, democratic vision that can represent women and men, and indeed the world without reducing them to objects.¹⁴⁶

She achieves emotional and intellectual oneness with the world she sees around her at the moral turning-point of her life, when she looks out of her window and realises she is 'part of that involuntary, palpitating life' (*MM*, 846).

After the honeymoon, Lowick is stiflingly oppressive, and Dorothea's boudoir looks like the dead husk of its previous self. Outside it is snowing, and inside

the very furniture in the room seemed to have shrunk since she saw it before: the stag in the tapestry looked more like a ghost in his ghostly blue-green world; the volumes of polite literature in the bookcase looked more like immovable imitations of books. (*MM*, 306)

This female room is now a lifeless prison, a light-filled version of Miss Havisham's room of decaying objects.¹⁴⁷ Dorothea feels intensely 'the stifling oppression of that gentlewoman's world, where everything is done for her', and 'the duties of her married

¹⁴⁴ Johnson, p. 52. For a discussion of the Ariadne myth in connection to Dorothea's story see Wiesenfarth, p. 372.

¹⁴⁵ Johnson, p. 53.

¹⁴⁶ Johnson, p. 54.

¹⁴⁷ The 'arrest of everything, this standing still of all the pale decayed objects', is described in Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) first published 1860-1, Chapter VIII, p. 61.

life [...] seemed to be shrinking with the furniture' (*MM*, 307).¹⁴⁸ Just as Will warned, she is 'shut up in that stone prison at Lowick [...] buried alive' (*MM*, 253). Her marriage is 'moral imprisonment' which 'made itself one [...] with the shrunken furniture' (*MM*, 307), and 'each remembered thing in the room was disenchanting, was deadened as an unlit transparency' (*MM*, 308), for the intellectual light has vanished. The only 'companionship' she feels is with the miniature of Ladislaw's grandmother, the woman who had made a different sort of 'unfortunate marriage', which 'seemed to be sending out light' and 'beamed on her with that full gaze' of understanding (*MM*, 308). Yet the gaze of another troubled woman is not enough to help Dorothea find her place in the world.

Dorothea explains to Will that she longs desperately to do 'what is perfectly good, [for] [...] we are part of the divine power against evil – widening the skirts of light and making the struggle with darkness narrower. [...] It is my life' (*MM*, 427). In contrast to the mirror looked into by Rosamond and Gwendolen, the window is suited to the open-hearted Dorothea who contemplates and looks outwards. Her emotional and moral need for intellectual space and light is symbolised by her habit of looking out of windows at decisive moments.¹⁴⁹ When she has accepted Casaubon's proposal, she 'simply leaned her elbow on an open book and looked out the window at the great cedar silvered with the damp' (*MM*, 71). In contrast, Casaubon is 'lost among small closets and winding stairs'; in the labyrinth of his research, 'with his taper stuck before him he forgot the absence of windows' and 'had become indifferent to the sunlight' (*MM*, 230-1); Dorothea cannot survive in a tiny windowless room, the 'dark closet of his verbal memory' (*MM*, 314), physically or spiritually, for the current of her mind is to 'the reaching forward of the whole consciousness towards the fullest truth' (*MM*, 235).

Witemeyer contends that Dorothea uses the view of the landscape to progress from 'despair through indifference to affirmation', and that she is 'sustained by a hard-won vision of the English landscape, a vision that is partly pictorial but not sentimentally

¹⁴⁸ For the invisibility of servants in *Middlemarch* see Langland, pp. 197-208.

¹⁴⁹ For details of Dorothea's inward vision see Stump, pp. 178-204.

picturesque'.¹⁵⁰ Her despair on her return from Rome is echoed by the view she sees from her window:

she saw the long avenue of limes lifting their trunks from a white earth, and spreading white branches against the dun and motionless sky. The distant flat shrank in uniform whiteness and low-hanging uniformity of cloud. [...] Her blooming full-pulsed youth stood there in a moral imprisonment which made itself one with the chill, colourless, narrowed landscape. (*MM*, 306, 307)

Here, outside and inside become one, and 'Dorothea's subjectivity dominates this landscape of despair'.¹⁵¹ After Casaubon's death, the view emphasises the aimless limbo of widowhood:

every leaf was at rest in the sunshine, the familiar scene was changeless, and seemed to represent the prospect of her life, full of motiveless ease – motiveless, if her own energy could not seek out reasons for ardent action. (*MM*, 584)

The view is again characterised by her subjectivity, but as yet 'there is no fruitful interchange between objective and subjective, between nature and the perceiving mind'.¹⁵² Maggie also cannot reconcile her internal state with the outside world:

when she sat at the window with her book, her eyes *would* fix themselves blankly on the outdoor sunshine: then they would fill with tears [...]. She rebelled against her lot, she fainted under its loneliness, and fits even of anger and hatred [...] would flow out over her affections and conscience like a lava stream. (*MF*, 380)

Reading Tom's books of 'masculine wisdom' (*MF*, 380), Latin, Euclid and Logic, only increase her isolation and lack of purpose in the world of men, and she turns to the self-renunciation of Thomas à Kempis to solve her inner torment, a quality Dorothea struggles so hard with.

However, Witemeyer does not discuss the rooms Dorothea sits in, nor their alignment within the house. The two rooms in which Dorothea feels most comfortable are those from which she can see out along the limes, and are female spaces:

the drawing-room was the most neutral room in the house to her – the one least associated with the trials of her married life: the damask matched the wood-work, which was all white and gold; there were two tall mirrors and tables with nothing on them [...]. It was below the boudoir, and had also a bow-window looking out on the avenue (*MM*, 585)

The drawing room is practical, pretty, and 'neutral', without her dead husband's presence. When she talks with Ladislaw about his future plans, avoiding the subject of

¹⁵⁰ Witemeyer, p. 152.

¹⁵¹ Witemeyer, p. 153.

¹⁵² Witemeyer, p. 154.

their love, it is 'near the window' in the drawing room (*MM*, 586); outside are rose-bushes which 'seemed to have in them the summers of all the years when Will would be away' (*MM*, 587). Witemeyer argues that the view aids Dorothea: 'she had been so used to struggle for and to find resolve in looking along the avenue towards the arch of western light that the vision itself had gained a communicating power' (*MM*, 406). Yet, the *interior* of the room also strengthens her. Dorothea has grown 'very fond' of the boudoir's 'pallid quaintness', for 'the bare room had gathered within it those memories of an inward life', and 'even the pale stag seemed to have reminding glances and to mean mutely, "Yes, we know"' (*MM*, 406). However, it is the miniature of 'mysterious "Aunt Julia"' that helps to 'concentrate her feelings' of female solidarity in the face of the difficulties of marriage (*MM*, 406, 407). This image focuses her growing questioning of the economic basis of patriarchy, the inheritance laws and is also symbolic of her growing feelings for Ladislaw.

After Ladislaw's apparent rejection of her love, Dorothea suffers a long night of despair, but in the dawn 'the joy and moral strength that work through time and memory to make up Wordsworthian maturity',¹⁵³ are achieved by her view out of the window:

she opened her curtains, and looked out towards the bit of road that lay in view, with fields beyond, outside the entrance-gates. On the road there was a man with a bundle on his back and a woman carrying her baby; in the field she could see figures moving – perhaps the shepherd with his dog. Far off in the bending sky was the pearly light; and she felt the largeness of the world and the manifold wakings of men to labour and endurance. She was a part of that involuntary, palpitating life, and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining. (*MM*, 846)

The scene of a holy family, agrarian work and the continual cycle of life and history lifts her out of her self-pity; she no longer has a problematic relationship with the landscape. Witemeyer points out that although this particular scene has no direct analogue in visual art, it has a highly pictorial structure: the window acts as a frame, and foreground, middle distance and background are carefully delineated. Like the ironic description of the labourer's cottage, this is no conventional rendering of the picturesque, but what Witemeyer terms the 'noble picturesque', the 'unconscious expression of human

¹⁵³ Witemeyer, p. 154.

suffering'.¹⁵⁴ For all these scenes, a pictorial analogue can be found in Romantic genre paintings of a figure looking out of a window, seen from behind, called *Fensterbilder*. For example, Friedrich's *Frau am Fenster* (plate 43), is 'intended to convey a sense of yearning' which 'expresses the soul's (Romantic) longing to escape from earthly confinement into the infinity of Nature'.¹⁵⁵ Witemeyer maintains this comparison 'because Dorothea's presence in those scenes is always visualized as carefully as the landscape itself, and because the quality of her apprehension is the true center of the audience's interest'.¹⁵⁶ This 'quality of apprehension' is her sympathy, a recurring concept in Eliot's work, related to the Romantic idea of imagination. Forest Pyle claims that 'while Eliot presents both sympathy and imagination as the effects of a Romantic desire to extend consciousness, [...] sympathy, unlike the imagination, is the medium of resolution'.¹⁵⁷

Witemeyer groups *Mariana* by Millais along with these *Fensterbilder* (plate 44)¹⁵⁸, but in an article on Christina Rossetti as the subject of *Mariana*, Shefer argues for a slightly different interpretation. She briefly discusses the iconography of a woman looking out of a window: in seventeenth-century Dutch painting, the image had erotic associations of a woman luring a man, but by the early nineteenth century Romantic painters were using the figure to express a 'more abstract notion of man's ambivalent relationship to nature: his wish to approach it in order to achieve a harmonious rapport with it, and his simultaneous retreat from it in awareness of its greatness'.¹⁵⁹ Shefer argues that during the Victorian era the woman at the window in genre painting was a pervasive and 'glibly sentimental'¹⁶⁰ theme of entrapment and longing: protected from the outside world 'the woman usually either awaits her destiny or dreamily recalls an experience that may hold a future hope'.¹⁶¹ The subject of Tennyson's poem is a woman

¹⁵⁴ Witemeyer, p. 155.

¹⁵⁵ Françoise Forster-Hahn and others, *Spirit of An Age: Nineteenth Century Paintings from the Nationalgalerie, Berlin* (London: National Gallery Company, 2001), p. 70.

¹⁵⁶ Witemeyer, p. 155.

¹⁵⁷ Forest Pyle, *The Ideology of Imagination* (1995), pp. 149-50, quoted *Companion*, p. 425.

¹⁵⁸ Witemeyer, p. 153.

¹⁵⁹ Elaine Shefer, 'The Woman at the Window in Victorian Art and Christina Rossetti as the Subject of Millais's *Mariana*', *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*, 4 (1983), 14-25 (p. 14).

¹⁶⁰ Shefer (1983), p. 22.

¹⁶¹ Shefer (1983), p. 14.

waiting for a lover who never arrives,¹⁶² but Shefer uses biographical information to explain the painting in terms of 'renunciation, frustration and sexual repression'.¹⁶³ Through its mediaeval setting and typological symbolism it depicts 'the tension between the flesh and the soul' of Rossetti's religious devotion, for Mariana's gaze is focused on the Annunciation scene on the stained glass window.¹⁶⁴ Shefer states: 'nowhere in the painting or in [Rossetti's] poetry is there a sign of the contentment and satisfaction that comes from making a definite decision',¹⁶⁵ just the dissatisfaction of a passionate yet nihilistic woman unable to combine love of God with love of man. Dorothea, also deeply religious, is however able to transcend this double-bind by looking beyond the glass, to the wider world, for 'all Dorothea's passion was transfused through a mind struggling towards an ideal life' (*MM*, 68). Dorothea's process of self-awareness through sympathy is closer to the Romantic idea of the sublime than the woman defined by and trapped within the interior, for she is strengthened by the view and able to go out into the world.

Rignall points out that the 'morally admirable' Garths are unaffected by materialism,¹⁶⁶ and are 'very fond of their old house from which all the best furniture had long been sold'. It is a 'homely place', a 'rambling, old-fashioned, half-timbered building' and almost part of the family, for 'we get the fonder of our houses if they have a physiognomy of their own as our friends have' (*MM*, 274). Eliot herself had phrenological readings done and often used the 'science' of reading faces in character description.¹⁶⁷ Perhaps the best home in the novel actually belongs to a man and a bachelor, Rev. Farebrother, who embodies emotional far-sightedness and generosity. The parsonage is old and filled with furniture 'with another grade of age' layered upon it, the emotional value of family heirlooms: 'this was the physiognomy of the drawing-room' (*MM*, 198). The delicate Regency furniture has feminine characteristics, perhaps

¹⁶² Tennyson, *Mariana* (1830), *Tennyson's Poetry*, pp. 36-7.

¹⁶³ Shefer (1983), p. 18.

¹⁶⁴ Shefer (1983), p. 18.

¹⁶⁵ Shefer (1983), p. 19.

¹⁶⁶ Rignall, p. 29.

¹⁶⁷ See Witemeyer, pp. 45-52.

from the presence of his 'white-haired mother' and his matriarchal family,¹⁶⁸ and as with so much of the furniture and houses I am discussing, old is good: there are 'painted white chairs, with gilding and wreaths on them, and some lingering red silk damask with slits in it' from age. However, this is not the decay of death, for the house is 'never dull', but filled with conversation and children (*MM*, 843). Rignall suggests that the term 'physiognomy' used to describe both these houses gives them a 'positive human imprint',¹⁶⁹ for the morally admirable people of Middlemarch do not care whether their furniture is new or of the best. The ideal is sympathy with other human beings; it was not in Dorothea's nature 'to sit in the narrow cell of her calamity, in the besotted misery of a consciousness that only sees another's lot as an accident of its own' (*MM*, 845). As Barbara Hardy has put it, 'Eliot's way of connecting outer and inner, public and private, historic and unhistoric, is to locate and understand the link within the individual consciousness',¹⁷⁰ and for her characters, this is achieved by sympathy.

Maggie holds a similar late-night lonely vigil, meditating on Stephen's letter and finally rejecting him, but she does not look outside. Her murmured prayers are 'quite lost in the loud driving of the rain against the window and the loud moan and roar of the wind' (*MF*, 648) and she does not notice the rising water until it is at her knees.

Although, tragically, Maggie's submission to nature leads to her death, she also sees

the possibility of shifting the position [...] of taking her stand out of herself and looking at her own life as an insignificant part of a divinely guided whole. (*MF*, 384)

In *Middlemarch*, this 'taking a stand out of herself' is what enables Rosamond to act unselfishly for once and tell Dorothea of Ladislav's love. Rosamond's narcissistic 'dream-world' has been 'shattered' by Ladislav's rejection and Dorothea's sympathetic concern makes 'her soul totter' (*MM*, 854). Gilbert and Gubar contend that 'Eliot always, in fact, associates such an act of sympathetic identification between women [...] with a perspective on life that widens as the heroine escapes what the novelist depicts as the ultimate imprisonment, imprisonment within the cell of the self'.¹⁷¹ These two women

¹⁶⁸ See GG, p. 528.

¹⁶⁹ Rignall, p. 29.

¹⁷⁰ Barbara Hardy, 'Middlemarch: Public and Private Worlds' in Hutchinson, pp. 370-386 (374).

¹⁷¹ GG, p. 517.

must find new interiors that they can make into some sort of home. Rosamond is now 'meek enough to nestle under the old despised shelter' of her husband and remain in her gilded cage (*MM*, 858). The chapter in which Dorothea and Ladislaw finally declare their love is prefaced by lines from Donne, which were among those Eliot marked after Lewes's death in 1878:

For love all love of other sights controls,
And makes one little room an everywhere.¹⁷²

Although this refers to the relative poverty in which the Ladislaws will live, also implied is the new direction of Dorothea's aspirations: limited yet fulfilled within the 'room' of marriage. In the words of Gilbert and Gubar, 'Eliot celebrates the ingenuity of women' whose love can make the best of this 'little room'.¹⁷³

Daniel Deronda

The sufferings of Maggie, Dorothea and, to a lesser extent, Rosamond are presented against a background of the rooms they inhabit, and their understanding and sympathy is increased through meditations upon their experiences; however, their characters remain essentially unchanged. In *Daniel Deronda*, Gwendolen Harleth undergoes a more profound development of character through her experience of a disastrous marriage, which is presented through similar interior scenes which change her self-perception. As with Rosamond, Gwendolen's essentially narcissistic character is exposed by looking in mirrors and imagining her portrait, yet her unhappiness changes that mental self-portrait. This novel is the only one Eliot set near her own time, and has been called 'her most comprehensive indictment of contemporary materialism'.¹⁷⁴ As Rignall states, Gwendolen is 'estranged from her material surroundings, and yet at the same time, their victim'.¹⁷⁵ Her dilemma of alienation is brought to crisis-point by the nihilistic Grandcourt but she recovers through Deronda's sympathy, which becomes an almost psychoanalytical process.

¹⁷² John Donne, 'The Good-Morrow', *Poems* (1633), spelling modernised by Eliot (*MM*, 863).

¹⁷³ GG, pp. 498-9.

¹⁷⁴ Rignall, p. 29

¹⁷⁵ Rignall, p. 29

Was She Beautiful or Not Beautiful?

Gwendolen's 'little core of egotistical sensibility' (*DD*, 13) is dependent upon the admiration of others. Her 'power' is in her 'attainment in these branches of feminine perfection' that Rosamond has similarly mastered (*DD*, 214), and she stands out among other girls: 'she was the central object of that pretty picture, and every one present must gaze at her' (*DD*, 89). Gwendolen is always aware of the 'pretty picture' she makes and uses her mirror as her primary audience:

happening to be seated sideways before the long strip of mirror between her two windows she turned to look at herself, leaning her elbow on the back of the chair in an attitude that might have been chosen for her portrait. (*DD*, 12-3)

This portrait is of the 'queen in exile' Gwendolen often imagines she is (*DD*, 33). Her 'first movement' on entering the bedroom she shares with her mother at Offendene is to 'go to the tall mirror between the windows, which reflected herself and the room completely'. Her mother remarks: 'that is a becoming glass, Gwendolen; or is it the black and gold colour that sets you off?' (*DD*, 21). The garish black and yellow decoration of this room, in which the bed is a 'catafalque', could symbolise death.¹⁷⁶ It suits the 'spoiled child' and is perhaps a comment on Gwendolen's moral status, as with Eliot's stated dislike of 'staring yellow' in 1860, mentioned above. Perhaps, like Gilman's description of *The Yellow Wallpaper*: 'it makes me think of all the yellow things I ever saw – not beautiful ones like buttercups, but old, foul, bad yellow things'.¹⁷⁷ Similarly, when it seems the family must move to Sawyer's Cottage, Gwendolen remarks 'how *shall* you endure it mamma? [...] in that closet of a room, with the green and yellow paper pressing on your eyes?' (*DD*, 226). Yellow can also be symbolic of the worship of Mammon, god of money, and Gwendolen herself rather snidely remarks at the archery contest that the heiress Miss Arrowpoint in her gold dress looks 'perhaps a little too symbolical – too much like the figure of Wealth in an allegory' (*DD*, 87). In the first few chapters of the novel, Gwendolen is a selfish, shallow girl, who laughs when she hears of Rex falling off his horse and breaking his arm; certainly not beautiful inside, however

¹⁷⁶ See A.S. Byatt and Igenes Sodre, *Imagining Characters* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1995), pp. 89-90.

¹⁷⁷ Gilman, p. 653.

stunning on the outside. She actually covets this wealth and social standing, for she feels they are only her due; her beauty will enable her to snare a husband who will give her these things. As Jean Sudrann has pointed out, it is not cynicism that propels Gwendolen towards marriage with Grandcourt, with his 'parks, carriages, a title' (*DD*, 120), but 'a healthy respect for these appurtenances'.¹⁷⁸ However, materialism is her downfall, as the epigraph to Chapter XI points out: 'the beginning of an acquaintance whether with persons *or things* is to get a definite outline for our ignorance' (*DD*, 91, emphasis added).

Gwendolen is in complete control of her entrances, as at the party where she is introduced to the neighbourhood:

no youthful figure there was comparable to Gwendolen's as she passed through the long suite of rooms adorned with light and flowers, and, visible at first as a slim figure floating along in white drapery, approached through one wide doorway after another into fuller illumination and definiteness. She had never had that sort of promenade before, and she felt exultingly that it befitted her: any one looking at her for the first time might have supposed that long galleries and lackeys had always been a matter of course in her life. (*DD*, 34)

The enfilade of rooms is made for this sort of grand movement. Her approach into focus is almost cinematic, and according with Mulvey's theory of the gaze, she solicits the look of the men present.¹⁷⁹ Conversations of masculine subjects, 'military manoeuvres', are interrupted with exclamations: 'by George, who is that girl with the awfully well-set head and jolly figure?' (*DD*, 34). The same effect is achieved by Lily's *tableau vivant*, as I will discuss in Chapter Six, which has striking similarities to Gwendolen's poses. However, the *women* have rather different reactions. Mrs Arrowpoint observes, 'it is a certain style she has, which produces a great effect at first, but afterwards she is less agreeable' (*DD*, 35). Gwendolen's constant attitudinising is full of contradictions from the beginning, for the first lines of the novel challenge the relationship of representation and reality.

Gwendolen shares with Rosamond the iconography of serpents and water and is something of the *femme fatale*: at the roulette table she is a 'Nereid in sea-green robes and silver ornaments', with a pale 'Lamia beauty' (*DD*, 7).¹⁸⁰ However, after her marriage,

¹⁷⁸ Jean Sudrann, 'Daniel Deronda and the Landscape of Exile' in Hutchinson, pp. 457-475 (p. 461).

¹⁷⁹ For more on photographic and film conventions in *Daniel Deronda* see Kathleen McCormack, 'George Eliot, Julia Cameron and William Henry Fox Talbot: Photography and *Daniel Deronda*', *Word & Image*, 12:2 (1996), 175-9.

¹⁸⁰ Lamia: a type of vampire in Greek myth. See Byatt and Sodre, pp. 85-6. John Keats, 'Lamia' (1820), *The Poetical Works of John Keats*, ed. by H.W. Garrod, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon, 1958),

her paleness signifies her 'life-in-death' under Grandcourt's power,¹⁸¹ and he takes on the evil serpent imagery. Lydia Glasher, Grandcourt's spurned mistress, is also associated with snakes: her 'vindictiveness and jealousy [find] relief in an outlet of venom, though it were as futile as that of a viper already flung to the other side of the hedge' (*DD*, 517). Yet her poison finds its mark in Gwendolen; she is a 'Medusa-apparition' who later strikes sufficient fear into Gwendolen to turn her to stone (*DD*, 517).

Gwendolen's main amusement on first moving to Offendene, particularly since it is 'a good background' (*DD*, 43), is to organise theatricals and *tableaux vivants*.¹⁸² These originated in the late eighteenth-century 'attitudes' of Emma, Lady Hamilton who sat for the painter George Romney 'in a vast range of personae and passions',¹⁸³ and by the later nineteenth century were a popular form of home entertainment. In Chapter Six I will discuss the more risqué aspects of the *tableau vivant* and its development in America. Scenes from classic literature, sculpture and Renaissance paintings were all popular and have a particular resonance with Eliot's *ekphrastic* descriptions of Gwendolen, where the text evokes works visual art.

pp. 191-214, is about an evil serpent turned into a beautiful woman who enchants a young man, and relates to a persistent theme of Keats, the relationship between the real and the ideal.

181 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), *Coleridge: Poetical Works*, ed. by Ernest Hartley Coleridge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), Part III, I, 193, pp. 186-209, (p. 194). The epigraph to Chapter 56, wherein Gwendolen confesses to Deronda, is ll. 438-41, p. 201.

182 'French, living pictures. Representations of statuary groups by living persons, invented by Madame Genlis while she had charge of the children of the Duc d'Orléans', E. Cobham Brewer, *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, rev. by Ivor H. Evans (London: Cassell, 1986). 'A scene in which statues or pictures are represented by living persons (Fr.)', *Nuttall's*. For a brief history of British *tableaux vivants* see Meisel, pp. 47-9.

183 Meisel, p. 338. Emma, Lady Hamilton was a notorious society woman and mistress of Nelson. An example of her attitudes is George Romney, *Cassandra Raving* (1791), engraving by Francis Legat (1795), London, British Museum. See Meisel, p. 338-9 and Humphrey Ward, and W. Roberts, *Romney: A Biographical and Critical Essay With a Catalogue Raisonné of His Works*, 2 vols (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1904), I, pp. 58-72, II, pp. 179-187.

On first entering the drawing room of Offendene, Gwendolen poses at the organ, exclaiming, 'some one shall paint me as Saint Cecilia' (*DD*, 20), patron saint of music. This is a typical pose for both paintings and *tableaux vivants*, for example, in 1837 Mrs Yates performed a programme which ended with a 'Grand Allegorical Groupe. St. Cecilia Surrounded by the Passions'.¹⁸⁴ As both Witemeyer and Alison Byerly have noted, Gwendolen sees herself as the sort of decorative society lady who would be painted by Reynolds, whose portrait of *Mrs Sheridan as Saint Cecilia* was made famous through engravings.¹⁸⁵ Witemeyer discusses extensively Gwendolen's self-image as a 'Vandyke duchess' and her relationship to allegorical society portraiture (*DD*, 504). For Eliot, the idealisation of such portraits 'falsify in order to please the vanity of their subjects',¹⁸⁶ and Gwendolen is nothing if not vain. Her enthusiasm for posing as Saint Cecilia wanes after Herr Klesmer's 'lofty criticism' (*DD*, 42) of her singing talents, and as Byerly points out, the portraits she emulates 'are both anachronistic and class-bound'. Her pose 'enables her to appropriate the position of a musician in a medium that requires no demonstration of musical skill'.¹⁸⁷

Gwendolen's talent is in looking beautiful, and she takes every opportunity to show off her beautiful arms in a Greek costume as she 'attitudinized and speechified before a domestic audience' (*DD*, 44). All that matters is the reflection of her self-image in the eyes of her audience, like the mute approval she receives from her mirror. The specifics of a more public display depend on Gwendolen's 'desire to appear in her Greek dress' (*DD*, 47) and a silent *tableau* is chosen 'in which the effect of her majesty would not be marred by any one's speech' (*DD*, 48), the statue scene from *The Winter's Tale*.¹⁸⁸ The simplicity of her white drapery and the absence of distractions from other people mean

¹⁸⁴ Playbill, Adelphi Theatre, 22 February 1837, Enthoven, quoted Meisel, p. 48.

¹⁸⁵ Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Mrs Sheridan as Saint Cecilia*, 1775, oil on canvas, 142.8 x 115.5, National Trust, Waddesdon Manor, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, reproduced in David Manning, *Sir Joshua Reynolds: A Complete Catalogue of His Paintings*, 2 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), II, pl. 1154, p. 455.

¹⁸⁶ Witemeyer, p. 96. See also Hugh Witemeyer, 'English and Italian Portraiture in *Daniel Deronda*', *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 30 (1975-6), 477-94.

¹⁸⁷ Alison Byerly, 'George Eliot's Hierarchy of Representation', *Realism, Representation and the Arts in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 106-148 (p. 113). Byerly demonstrates that music is the highest form of art for Eliot.

¹⁸⁸ William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, V.3.

that Gwendolen's beauty is the real subject of the *tableau*. However, instead of the 'statue' of supposedly dead Hermione coming to life in a scene of reconciliation, Gwendolen is frozen again in fear as the panel of the dead face flies open. This provokes a 'piercing cry' from Gwendolen, and 'she looked like a statue into which a soul of Fear had entered' (*DD*, 49). The *tableau* turns into something completely different, an exposure of the inner demons she hides from herself and other people, which will only become clear after Grandcourt's death and her therapeutic discussions with Deronda.

A Vision of Herself

Gwendolen's most appreciative audience is herself and the image returned by mirrors. Even 'in this beginning of troubles' (*DD*, 13), after reading her mother's letter describing their financial ruin, she 'automatically looked in the glass'; her gaze is static – 'she simply stared' as if 'waiting' – and 'she took no conscious note of her reflected beauty' (*DD*, 11). Although she doesn't know it, the process of life-in-death is beginning. It is as difficult for her to realise her new poverty 'as it would have been to get into the strong current of her blooming life the chill sense that her death would really come' (*DD*, 11).

The mirror returns only her own self-deluding complacency:

she sat gazing at her image in the growing light, her face gathered a complacency gradual as the cheerfulness of the morning. Her beautiful lips curled into a more and more decided smile, till at last she took off her hat, leaned forward and kissed the cold glass which had looked so warm. How could she believe in sorrow? (*DD*, 13)

The gaze she solicits is not just her own, for the mirror is also the mirror of the world: she 'had every day seen a pleasant reflection of that self in her friends' flattery as well as in the looking-glass' (*DD*, 13). Too late Gwendolen realises that her power and skills are limited to her beauty.

Before meeting Klesmer to ask him whether she could make a living as a singer, she again looks at herself, unadorned, as if to see her essence:

catching the reflection of her movements in the glass panel, she was diverted to the contemplation of the image there and walked towards it. Dressed in black, without a single ornament, and with the warm whiteness of her skin set off between her light-brown coronet of hair and her square-cut bodice, she might have tempted an artist to try again the Roman trick of a statue in black, white and tawney marble. Seeing her image slowly advancing, she thought, 'I *am* beautiful' – not exultingly, but with grave decision. Being beautiful was after all the condition in which she most needed external testimony. (*DD*, 214)

She attempts to bolster her courage by giving her portrait three dimensions and a classical heritage. Coincidentally, a sculpture of *Lamia* by George Frampton in a similar polychromatic style, is designed to evoke both her beauty and power as a 'deadly threat' (plate 45).¹⁸⁹ Gwendolen is unaware that she is answering Deronda's silent question posed at the very start of the book, but she takes her affirmation from external effects, never looking deep into her soul as Deronda attempts:

what was the secret of form or expression which gave the dynamic quality to her glance? Was the good or the evil genius dominant in those beams? Probably the evil; else why was the effect that of unrest rather than of undisturbed charm? Why was the wish to look again felt as coercion and not as a longing in which the whole being consents? (*DD*, 3)

He feels the power of her beauty as everyone else does, the look she solicits from all about her, but he also recognises the unrest that has come to affect her since she met Lydia Glasher. It will be Deronda who forces Gwendolen to question the good and evil parts of her soul and come to some resolution. However, in the early chapters of the book, the external presentation of her ego is all she is aware of. It is only after Klesmer's blunt truths about her lack of musical ability that she questions for the first time what the mirror says:

all memories, all objects, the pieces of music displayed, the open piano – the very reflection of herself in the glass – seemed no better than the packed-up shows of a departed fair. For the first time since her consciousness began, she was having a vision of herself on the common level. (*DD*, 223)

As Sudrann points out, here 'the ruin of the relation between self and the world is linked to the disintegration of that self: the image in the mirror is simply disappearing along with the very chairs and tables of the drawing room'.¹⁹⁰

This disintegration has also come about from her meeting with Lydia Glasher, Grandcourt's cast-off mistress, when Gwendolen is physically confronted with a different reflection. Mrs Glasher is a sort of sibyl at the ghostly Whispering Stones, who predicts Gwendolen's fate: 'when he first met me, I too was young. Since then my life has been broken up and embittered' (*DD*, 128). Gwendolen feels 'a sort of terror: it was as if some ghastly vision had come to her in a dream and said, "I am a woman's' life"'

¹⁸⁹ See Andrew Wilton and Robert Upstone, eds., *The Age of Rossetti, Burne-Jones and Watts: Symbolism in Britain 1860-1910* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1997), p. 191.

¹⁹⁰ Sudrann, p. 464.

(*DD*, 128). Unlike Dorothea's strengthening contemplation of the miniature of Ladislav's grandmother, Gwendolen sees a reflection of herself in the previous woman that destroys her composure. Her initial refusal of Grandcourt is an impulsive moral reaction when faced with Mrs Glasher's injustices: 'she had not reasoned and balanced: she had acted with a force of impulse' (*DD*, 252). Previously she had wanted to avoid the loss of her independence in marriage, perhaps from physical distaste, as Rex's tenderness 'made her curl up and harden like a sea-anemone at the touch of a finger' (*DD*, 66), but she knows that to 'become a wife and wear all the domestic fetters of that condition was on the whole a vexatious necessity' (*DD*, 30). After having come face-to-face with the victim of Grandcourt's cruelty, she states: 'I don't care if I never marry any one. There is nothing worth caring for. I believe all men are bad, and I hate them' (*DD*, 130).

Gwendolen's meeting with Mrs Glasher profoundly affects her subsequent visions of herself. When her family's poverty becomes a problem that can only be solved by her marriage, Gwendolen's misery is projected onto a prophetic portrait, coloured by the misery both Mrs Glasher and her mother have suffered at the hands of men:

her mind dwelt for a few moments on the picture of herself losing her youth and ceasing to enjoy – not minding whether she did this or that: but such picturing inevitably brought back the image of her mother. 'Poor mamma! it will be still worse for her now. I can get a little money for her – that is all I shall care about now.' And then an entirely new movement of her imagination, she saw her mother getting quite old and white, and herself no longer young but faded, and their two faces meeting still with memory and love, and she knowing what was in her mother's mind – 'Poor Gwen too is sad and faded now' – and then for the first time she sobbed, not in anger but with a sort of tender misery. (*DD*, 246)

These visions have prompted some sympathy in Gwendolen; however, the misery she would suffer herself as a poor governess overrides all, and she agrees to see Grandcourt and accepts his proposal. Her selfish ego and belief in her own power leads her to disregard the visions of other women. For the last time she looks with pleasure on her image and her mother thinks 'she is quite herself again' (*DD*, 251). Gwendolen is confident of her power, 'for what could not a woman do when she was married if she knew how to assert herself?' (*DD*, 252). However, after the wedding, she reflects on her passivity throughout the process: 'was not all her hurrying life of the last three months a show, in which her consciousness was a wondering spectator?' (*DD*, 302). The 'show' is no longer her own beautiful display, but like her previous awareness of her

surroundings, the 'departed fair' (*DD*, 223). She is a participant in 'Vanity Fair' of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, where 'all such merchandise are sold, as houses, lands, [...] titles, [...] lives, blood, bodies, souls, silver, gold, [...] and what not';¹⁹¹ the 'parks, carriages, a title' (*DD*, 120). This numbness is the beginning of Gwendolen's paralysis in marriage, when under her husband's domination she becomes the statue she earlier portrayed.

'A blank uncertainty to her in everything but this, that he would do just what he willed' (*DD*, 365)

As with the marriages in *Middlemarch*, the power relations between Grandcourt and Gwendolen are initially misunderstood. When Grandcourt proposes, 'his strongest wish was to be completely master of this creature – this piquant combination of maidenliness and mischief'; however, there is a 'piteous equality in the need to dominate! – she was overcome [...] by the suffused sense that here in this man's homage to her lay the rescue from helpless subjection to an oppressive lot' (*DD*, 256). Witemeyer points out that Eliot heightens the suspense of Grandcourt's proposal by using the pictorial structure of a courtship painting:¹⁹²

they were both of them seated on two of the wreath-painted chairs – Gwendolen upright with downcast eyelids, Grandcourt about two yards distant, leaning one arm over the back of his chair and looking at her, while he held his hat in his left hand – any one seeing them as a picture would have concluded that they were in some stage of love-making suspense. (*DD*, 254)

This scene also exposes the inadequacy of pictorial art, for the distancing effect and staginess of this scene highlights that the love-making is of a very calculating sort. Byerly states that evocations of visual art are used by Eliot to demonstrate its unlikeness to reality:

a woman who imagines herself as a painting or an actress is indulging in egotistic self-dramatization; a man who describes a woman in aesthetic terms is stripping her of her humanity, and perhaps using aesthetic interest to disguise his sexual interest in her; a person who perceives a scene as picturesque is blind to the devastating social reality that underlies its rustic charm.¹⁹³

¹⁹¹ Bunyan, p. 104.

¹⁹² Witemeyer, pp. 120-121.

¹⁹³ Byerly, p. 107.

Gwendolen is not in love with her suitor and will accept him in order to remain in luxurious surroundings; Grandcourt understands the need for a suitable background, so cultivated by Gwendolen. His own breakfast room is described as a 'still life', which has a 'sober antiquated elegance, as if it kept a conscious, well-bred silence, unlike the restlessness of vulgar furniture' (*DD*, 104); Grandcourt would never have anything 'vulgar' about him, and this extends to women. He comments that the 'giantess' Mrs Gogoff 'spoils the look of a room' (*DD*, 105), but Gwendolen satisfies his 'fastidious' physical and aesthetic requirements in a wife. He does not want a wife

who did not command admiration by her mien and beauty; nor one whose nails were not of the right shape; nor one the lobe of whose ear was at all too large and red; nor one who, even if her nails and ears were right, was at the same time a ninny, unable to make spirited answers. [...] Grandcourt did not feel that he had chosen the wrong wife. (*DD*, 499-500)

Of course, Gwendolen's answers are unimportant, for she becomes completely controlled by him.

Grandcourt is a moral and emotional vacuum, incapable of intense feeling, who 'had no idea of moral repulsion' despite his highly developed sense of 'personal repulsion' for aesthetic ugliness (*DD*, 574). He is the most sinister and sadistic of Eliot's unsuitable husbands. Where Lydgate's 'finely-formed fingers' are ideally formed to sweep up 'the soft festoons of [Rosamond's] plaits' (*MM*, 630), Grandcourt's similarly intimate action of fastening the cursed diamonds brings to Gwendolen's mind the image of his hands 'clinging round her neck and threatening to throttle her' (*DD*, 366). More sadistically than Casaubon's metaphorical dead hand, Grandcourt's 'words had the power of thumbscrews and the cold touch of the rack' (*DD*, 582). Although the image of Casaubon placing 'flowers that would wither in my hand' in Dorothea's bosom is unpleasant (*MM*, 73), more disturbing are Grandcourt's gems which seem 'sawed from cramped finger-bones of women drowned' (*DD*, 122). As Angus Wilson comments, 'there is something over and above the evil that we can explain psychologically or socially in Grandcourt; [...] there is a quality of death about him which transcends the man himself'.¹⁹⁴ Mrs Glasher describes him as a man with 'a withered heart' (*DD*, 303), he is

¹⁹⁴ Angus Wilson, 'Evil in the English Novel: From George Eliot to Virginia Woolf', extract in Hutchinson, pp. 436-438 (p. 437).

'white-handed' (*DD*, 507), like a corpse, yet he is also insidiously powerful.

Rignall notes that his tyrannical, nihilistic will owes something to Eliot's reading of Schopenhauer during the planning of *Daniel Deronda*.¹⁹⁵ Grandcourt becomes symbolic of the spiritual emptiness of contemporary society, like the roulette table where all the players have 'a certain uniform negativeness of expression which had the effect of a mask – as if they had all eaten of some root that for the time compelled the brains of each to the same narrow monotony of action' (*DD*, 5). It is his 'fastidiousness' and manners that make Gwendolen think 'he was likely to be the least disagreeable of husbands' (*DD*, 259); however this is indicative of an emotional sterility and reasoned calculation in everything he does, including his love affairs. Grandcourt embodies, in Rignall's words, the 'terror that stems from the pursuit of style',¹⁹⁶ the aspect James would develop in Gilbert Osmond. He is a world-weary aesthete who has 'worn out all his natural healthy interest in things' (*DD*, 346), and Gwendolen becomes just another one of his possessions.¹⁹⁷

From the very start of the novel Gwendolen is fetishised and discussed in terms of her physical features, as she co-operates as the female object of the gaze. She becomes merely an item Grandcourt has bought, another of his 'symbols of command and luxury' (*DD*, 258) like his horses.¹⁹⁸ Totally subordinated in marriage, she realises that 'to resist was to act like a stupid animal unable to measure results' (*DD*, 582). The imagery of Grandcourt's oppression, whips and bridles, suggest sexual sadism. For example, he is 'conscious of using pincers on that white creature' (*DD*, 503): the creature is Gwendolen white with fear, the pincers words. However, recent criticism has gone beyond the personal, to relate his oppression to his class and its role in the Empire; Gwendolen has been absorbed into his 'empire of fear' just as she has been bought in marriage (*DD*, 365).¹⁹⁹ Grandcourt takes her on the yachting trip in order 'to feel more securely that she

¹⁹⁵ *Companion*, p. 380.

¹⁹⁶ Rignall, p. 30.

¹⁹⁷ For more on Grandcourt's ownership of Gwendolen and the details of property inheritance in the novel, see Jeff Nunokawa, *The Afterlife of Property: Domestic Security and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 77-99.

¹⁹⁸ For a detailed discussion of the riding metaphor see Sudrann, pp. 465-466.

¹⁹⁹ For Post-colonial interpretations of the novel see Katherine Bailey Linehan, 'Mixed Politics: The Critique of Imperialism in *Daniel Deronda*', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 34 (1992),

was his to do as he liked with, and to make her feel it also' (*DD*, 572). He resents the psychological space offered Gwendolen by Deronda, for

what he required was that she should be as fully aware as she would have been of a locked hand-cuff, that her inclination was helpless to decide anything in contradiction with his resolve (*DD*, 499)

That luxurious empire of 'palaces and coaches' (*DD*, 123) will become a prison.

A Restful Escape

Eliot suggests that Gwendolen's moral deficiencies, her selfishness and acquiescence in the barter of the marriage market are in part due to her lack of a proper home. The narrator reflects upon Gwendolen's upbringing:

a human life, I think, should be well rooted in some spot of a native land, where it may get the love of tender kinship for the face of earth, for the labours men go forth to, for the sounds and accents that haunt it [...] a spot where the definiteness of early memories may be inwrought with affection. [...] But this blessed persistence in which affection can take root had been wanting in Gwendolen's life. (*DD*, 16)

Gwendolen's family spend most of the novel under the threat of homelessness due to economic disasters. As I have discussed above, she relates to Offendene only as a background for her beauty. After marriage, as with the Casaubons' return from their honeymoon, Gwendolen is plunged into the grim reality of her new 'home'. When Grandcourt pronounces "Here we are at home!" and kissed her on the lips, she hardly knew of it: it was no more than the passive acceptance of a greeting' (*DD*, 301). 'Passive acceptance' is the only way to survive marriage, yet this proves impossible, and as her self-image disintegrates, so does the home around her. There are no rooted families like the Garths in this novel, and the land is merely a capital asset for landowners such as Sir Hugo Mallinger and Grandcourt, whose 'importance as a subject of this realm was of the grandly passive kind which consists in the inheritance of land' (*DD*, 499). Even Deronda, with his sympathy and expansive character, must set out on quests for his roots and his home: to find his mother and a Jewish homeland. He derives his strength of character from his loving upbringing at the Abbey; he states 'I carry it with me' (*DD*, 362), although he will never inherit it. Sir Hugo's conversion of a chapel into stables at the

and Edward W. Said, 'Zionism from the Standpoint of its Victims' in *The Question of Palestine* (New York: Random House, 1979), pp. 56-114.

Abbey represents the undervaluing of cultural and religious heritage by his class.

Although Sir Hugo is against falsity in architecture, the 'notion of reproducing the old is a mistake' (*DD*, 356), he disregards fitness of purpose. The stables have 'rather a startling effect' of 'piquant picturesqueness' (*DD*, 359), the picturesqueness Eliot elsewhere finds morally suspect.

Perhaps the only true home in the novel is with the Meyricks, which proves so nurturing for Mirah.²⁰⁰ A predominately female household, for 'some of the kindest people in the world [...]. It is a happy home' (*DD*, 169). It is old-fashioned, unostentatious, poor even, with the vital contact of nature (views of the river and gardens at front and back) and connection with the past. Its description holds many of the attributes of good living that I have highlighted throughout Eliot's work:

Outside, the house looked very narrow and shabby, the bright light through the holland blind showing the heavy old-fashioned window-frame; but it is pleasant to know that many such grim-walled slices of space in our foggy London have been, and still are the homes of a culture the more spotlessly free from vulgarity, because poverty has rendered everything like display an impersonal question, and all the grand shows of the world simply a spectacle which rouses no petty rivalry or vain effort after possession.

The Meyrick's was a home of that kind; and they all clung to this particular house in a row because its interior was filled with objects always in the same places, which for the mother held memories of her marriage time, and for the young ones seemed as necessary and uncriticized a part of their world as the stars of the Great Bear. [...] [T]he narrow spaces of the wall held a world-history in scenes and heads which the children had early learned by heart. The chairs and tables were also old friends preferred to new. [...] [T]here was space and apparatus for a wide-glancing, nicely-select life, open to the highest things in music, painting and poetry. (*DD*, 166-7)

This house is not a grand stage, or the setting Gwendolen searches for; in contrast, its women 'were all alike small, and so in due proportion with their miniature rooms' (*DD*, 167). It is more like the suburban homes Eliot herself lived in with Lewes. Perhaps as Sudrann suggests, Gwendolen's alienation is rooted in how Eliot felt her own social exclusion 'in terms more "modern" than Victorian' and sought to define that alienation by making it central to the most contemporary of her novels.²⁰¹

Gwendolen only wakes to the importance of the wider world after Grandcourt's death, when her mother's presence inspires a 'wakeful vision' of Offendene (*DD*, 651).

²⁰⁰ For a discussion of this home as an 'all-female cloister' and anti-materialist workplace, see Monica F. Cohen, *Professional Domesticity in the Victorian Novel: Women, Work and Home* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 166-71.

²⁰¹ Sudrann, p. 457.

Like Dorothea and Maggie, nature and family (even her 'troublesome sisters') are what is truly important:

all that brief experience of a quiet home which had once seemed a dullness to be fled from, now came back to her as a restful escape, a station where she found the breath of the morning and the unreproaching voice of birds. (*DD*, 652)

However, Gwendolen finds no such rest in her marriage, and while on the boat with her husband, 'wildly' states, 'I think we shall go on always, like the Flying Dutchman' (*DD*, 584), who, like the Wandering Jew (who can be metaphorically aligned with Deronda's quest) or the Ancient Mariner, was cursed to wander the earth for his selfishness.²⁰²

The Painted, Gilded Prison

A visual parallel with the Grandcourts' marriage that comes easily to mind is W.Q. Orchardson's trio of paintings depicting the disastrous marriage of a young woman to a rich, older man, the first of which is *Mariage de Convenance* (plate 46).²⁰³ Each painting depicts a moment of dramatic and psychological tension, from which a story can be deduced. The rooms are richly decorated and the vast table or carpet and almost palpable silence signifies the gulf of misunderstanding between the couple. However, the wife's sullen boredom and eventual departure mark her out as a freer individual than Gwendolen, and the husband is powerless and uncomprehending, left alone with the trappings of his wealth and his loneliness.

Although Gwendolen's boudoir at Ryelands sends out 'a rich glow of light and colour', the mirrors are becoming oppressive. She 'threw herself into a chair by the glowing hearth, and saw herself repeated in glass panels with all her faint-green satin surroundings' (*DD*, 302). It becomes worse in the next instant when the 'Medusa-apparition' Mrs Glasher sends the diamonds with a written curse lying across them like an 'adder' (*DD*, 517, 302). Gwendolen drops the 'poisoned gems':

²⁰² See Cohen, pp. 180-185 and Byatt and Sodre, pp. 106-7, 109.

²⁰³ The other two are *The First Cloud*, 1887, oil on canvas, 83.2 x 121.3, Tate Gallery, London, reproduced in Jeremy Maas, *Victorian Painters*, rev. edn, (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1978), p. 245; and *Mariage de Convenance – After!*, 1886, oil on canvas, 113 x 169.4, Aberdeen Art Gallery, reproduced in Arts Council of Great Britain, *Great Victorian Pictures: Their Paths to Fame* (London: London Arts Council, 1978), no. 41, p. 64. *The First Cloud* depicts a younger man, but is included here for similarity of subject and treatment. See Pamela Gerrish Nunn, *Problem Pictures: Women and Men in Victorian Painting* (Aldershot: Ashgate Scholar Press, 1996), pp. 63-5.

she could not see the reflections of herself then: they were like so many women petrified white; but coming near herself you might have seen the tremor in her lips and hands. (DD, 303)

Gwendolen sees herself becoming a multitude of Hermione-statues, and the labyrinth of reflections compounds her sense of entrapment; the richness of her surroundings has now become her prison. Each reflection exposes the original image as an illusion; what Gwendolen has thought is her essence is merely a simulacrum and her ego is destroyed.²⁰⁴ Grandcourt finds her 'pallid, shrieking as it seemed with terror, the jewels scattered around her on the floor. Was it a fit of madness?' (DD, 303). This echoes her scream during the *tableau*, when she 'looked like a statue into which a soul of Fear had entered: her pallid lips were parted; her eyes [...] were dilated and fixed' (DD, 49). Gwendolen is imprisoned in her marriage by her deep sense of the wrong she has done Mrs Glasher, no longer able to recognise herself in her beloved mirror. Despite 'her gratified ambition', Gwendolen 'no longer felt inclined to kiss her fortunate image in the glass; she looked at it with wonder that she could be so miserable'. After only seven weeks of marriage, the reality of her situation is unavoidable and 'the belief in her own power of dominating – was utterly gone' (DD, 363). She walks

about in the large drawing-room like an imprisoned dumb creature, not recognising herself in the glass panels, nor noting any object around her in the painted, gilded prison (DD, 504)

The bird in a cage metaphor is clear, yet unlike Rosamond, Gwendolen's fear of her husband renders her completely passive. She cannot even enjoy her new wealth. She thinks of 'celebrated beauties' who display their husbands' fortune, but 'accomplishments had ceased to have the exciting quality of promising any pre-eminence to her [...] Gwendolen's appetite had sickened' (DD, 368). She has no influence on the man she hates and to leave him would be to 'render herself an object of scandal' (DD, 515). Like Dorothea and Maggie, Gwendolen meditates on her situation: 'without shutting herself up in any solitude, Gwendolen seemed at the end of nine or ten hours to have gone through a labyrinth of reflection' (DD, 514-5). There is no way out of the

²⁰⁴ 'The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth – it is the truth which conceals that there is none', Jean Baudrillard, 'Simulacra and Simulations' in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, ed. by Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), pp. 166-184 (p. 166).

labyrinth she has put herself in, and like Eliot's other characters, she decides that self-renunciation is the only course: 'if I am to have misery anyhow [...] I had better have the misery that I can keep to myself' (*DD*, 515). Yet it is only through sharing this misery with the responsive Deronda that she will be able to survive.

Preparing herself to meet Deronda, who helps her to realise this unselfish stance, she consciously makes herself look less alluring:

she was walking up and down the length of two drawing rooms, where at one end a long mirror reflected her in her black dress [...]. But above this black dress her head on its white pillar of a neck showed to advantage. Some consciousness of this made her turn hastily and hurry to the boudoir, where again there was glass, but also, tossed over a chair, a large piece of black lace which she snatched and tied over her crown of hair so as completely to conceal her neck, and leave only her face looking out from the black frame. (*DD*, 520)

This self-conscious adoption of sombre dress and reluctance to make her appearance a beautiful picture (like Dorothea), indicates that she does not want Deronda to concentrate on her physical appearance, but look into her soul. He has had this power from their first meeting, for she began to lose at roulette under Deronda's 'measuring gaze' (*DD*, 8). 'Her eyes met Deronda's' and the answering glance is not the appreciative one of her beauty that the male gaze normally facilitates; she has 'the darting sense that he was measuring her and looking down on her as an inferior' (*DD*, 5). Deronda's look is a moral probe, which Eliot focuses on Gwendolen's own organs of sight:

she felt the orbits of her eyes getting hot, and the certainty she had (without looking) of that man still watching her was something like a pressure which begins to be torturing. (*DD*, 6)

In contrast, under Grandcourt's complicit gaze at the archery contest, 'the certainty that he was there made a distinct thread in her consciousness', and she wins the gold star (*DD*, 89).

Grandcourt also affects the way Gwendolen sees others, for 'his negative mind was as diffusive as fog, clinging to all objects, and spoiling all contact' (*DD*, 501). In contrast to the mirrors, Grandcourt acts 'like a piece of yellow and wavy glass that distorts form and makes colour an affliction' (*DD*, 576). His gaze becomes a window, once again in morally distasteful yellow, through which she sees the world coloured by his 'petty standards, [...] low suspicions, [...] loveless *ennui*' (*DD*, 576). With a few words, he can make her think that 'Deronda unlike what she had believed him to be, was an image

which affected her as a hideous apparition would have done', reminiscent of the dead face. However, she is saved from this 'sick dream' by a tiny part of the natural world that creeps into her room, a 'stream of sunshine, wrapping her in warmth and light' and like Dorothea's vision, she realises 'there was a world outside this bad dream' and she 'walked about the room in this flood of sunbeams', regaining her faith in Deronda (*DD*, 503). Grandcourt treats Gwendolen as a chattel; he looks at her 'as if she were part of the complete yacht' (*DD*, 575). However, he goes to sea in the belief that 'he could manage a sail with the same ease that he could manage a horse' (*DD*, 583), and as with Lydgate making no distinction between women and furniture, he discovers he can manage neither, and drowns as his wife hesitates to throw him a rope.

'Lamia, no longer fair, there sat, a deadly white'²⁰⁵

When she does not move to help her husband, Gwendolen is frozen like her *tableau*, and after Grandcourt's death, she survives as a ghost, 'pale as one of the sheeted dead' (*DD*, 587). The above line from Keats's 'Lamia' is at the climax of the poem, when Lamia is destroyed by the gaze of Apollonius, his eye 'like a sharp spear, went through her utterly'.²⁰⁶ The gaze in *Daniel Deronda* is examined by Rose, who uses readings of Freud and Lacan to discuss hysteria and ways in which the body of woman can be read to represent the disintegration of Victorian society. I will only represent part of her argument here, her discussion of the 'two moments of horror' that 'echo each other across the text' and happen under the gaze of men.²⁰⁷

As Gwendolen describes the moment of Grandcourt's death to Deronda, the scene becomes a mirror-image of the revealed panel painting: 'I was leaping away from myself [...] and there it was – close to me as I fell – there was the dead face' (*DD*, 597). The second episode fulfils the first, for Grandcourt becomes the dead face, and Gwendolen the fleeing figure: 'a dead face – I shall never get away from him' (*DD*, 590). Yet Gwendolen is also frozen: even before the accident she is 'like a statue' (*DD*, 583), and

²⁰⁵ Keats, 'Lamia', II, 276, p. 213.

²⁰⁶ Keats, 'Lamia', II, 300, p. 213.

²⁰⁷ Rose, p. 105.

often appears like a corpse 'looking very white amidst her white drapery' (*DD*, 578).

Rose states that this 'technique of reversal allows the character, like Shakespeare's Hermione, to pass back and forwards between the state of living and the dead',²⁰⁸ again like the Ancient Mariner.

There is a moral aspect to these scenes, for after her rescue, Gwendolen feels 'as if she had waked up in a world where some judgment was impending' (*DD* 587); Deronda will be that judge. Gwendolen feels guilty about her husband's death: 'I saw his dead face [...] ever so long ago I saw it; and I wished him to be dead. And yet it terrified me' (*DD*, 592). Once again, Deronda ponders on the power of her look: 'she gave the character of decisive action to what had been an inappreciably instantaneous glance of desire' (*DD*, 597). As Rose contends,

the 'glance of desire' stands for that fleeting moment, which suspends and decides the character's relation to the event, while also receiving its other meaning from the gaze of the male onlooker who, in each of these episodes, comes to meet it.²⁰⁹

These scenes also crystallise the question of how Gwendolen's subjectivity is formed and demonstrated; 'was she beautiful?'. In Rose's opinion, Eliot is

distending the spectacle of the woman to the logical point of its most total horror and underscoring its perversion. 'What is being asked of the woman?' – the query reveals itself behind the more obvious question charted by this, and so many other narratives: 'What does a woman want?'²¹⁰

Gwendolen hides her ignorance of her own wants and needs, born out of her lack of roots, by creating a spectacle out of what others want; only Deronda sees the turmoil beneath. Rose highlights the ellipses of Gwendolen's speech and states that

the disintegration of Gwendolen, the breakdown of the novel's own form, start *together* at the moment when the reader is constituted as spectator vis-à-vis a woman whose ultimate decipherment could be said to be the overriding objective of the book.²¹¹

The narrator colludes with the reader's need for voyeurism from the very beginning, and this is exposed in the text, just as Eliot exposes the male gaze on Dorothea.

Rose neglects the scene at the centre point of the text where Gwendolen receives the diamonds, although it supports her statement that 'Gwendolen's hysteria serves to halt,

²⁰⁸ Rose, p. 106.

²⁰⁹ Rose, p. 108.

²¹⁰ Rose, p. 118.

²¹¹ Rose, p. 116.

even as it exposes, the ceaseless dispersal of the text'.²¹² Grandcourt looks on as if 'in some form or other the Furies had crossed his threshold' (*DD*, 303),²¹³ and Gwendolen's hysteria and disintegration of self are represented by her fractured image in the mirrors. When she is 'leaping away from myself', she identifies with the impulse to kill, as well as the dead face. As with Lacan's 'mirror stage', these incidents expose the fragmentation at the heart of subjectivity,²¹⁴ for throughout the novel Gwendolen attempts to integrate her specular image through an identification with the mirror, instead of seeking strength through sympathy with the world as Maggie and Dorothea do. Rignall also connects the two scenes, highlighting how Gwendolen's terror is connected to furniture and interiors. The dead face is hidden in a wall panel, and an ornamental dagger that comes to symbolise her wish to kill her husband is found in a cabinet in her boudoir and locked up in her dressing case: 'it is in her furniture that her secret terrors lie hidden'.²¹⁵

A Freudian interpretation of *Daniel Deronda* reveals that when the domestic interior is metaphorically aligned with the woman's body, then the hidden abyss at the core of her subjectivity will be located in the secret places of that interior. Resolution only comes when she reveals these fears to Deronda, who acts in the position of therapist or father-confessor. He is far more active than James's evaluation that he 'has no blood in his body. His attitude at moments is like that of a high-priest in a *tableau vivant*'.²¹⁶ Deronda knows that 'her remorse was the precious sign of a recoverable nature; it was the culmination of that self-disapproval which had been the awakening of a new life within her' (*DD*, 597). Gwendolen has learned the falsity of spectacle and selfishness the hard way,

after following a lure through a long Satanic masquerade, which she had entered on with an intoxicated belief in its disguises, and had seen the end of in shrieking fear

²¹² Rose, p. 119.

²¹³ The Furies are in *Medea* by Euripides, in which Medea sends a poisoned crown to her husband's new wife. The Furies of Aeschylus's *Eumenides* also torment Lily Bart (*HM*, 148).

²¹⁴ Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience', *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977).

²¹⁵ Rignall, p. 30.

²¹⁶ Henry James, 'Daniel Deronda: A Conversation', *Atlantic Monthly*, 38 (1876), 684-94, in Edel and Wilson, pp. 974-992 (p. 982).

lest she herself had become one of the evil spirits who were dropping their human mummery and hissing around her with serpent tongues. (*DD*, 652)

Now, her sadness and understanding of sympathy has given her beauty a deeper quality; she is 'more fully a human being' (*DD*, 580).

At the end of the novel, the indeterminacy of the first sentence is still there, and the open ending with uncertain futures for both Deronda and Gwendolen, 'is the final move in a novel which consistently questions and disturbs'.²¹⁷ However, it is quietly optimistic for Gwendolen: 'don't be afraid. I shall live. I mean to live. [...] I shall be better' (*DD*, 692). Although Meyrick describes Offendene as 'an excellent *setting* for a widow with romantic fortunes' (*DD*, 685, emphasis added), this is no longer of importance for Gwendolen. By sitting in the 'old drawing room where some chief crises of her life had happened' (*DD*, 686), she is facing up to her life. Although she ends where she began, in her mother's home, alone, now she has a possible way to exist. The obliteration of her ego has been a long journey, which has descended to self-loathing, but now she must learn how to construct a new self every day:

she was experiencing some of that peaceful melancholy which comes from the renunciation of demands for self [...]. Does one who has been all but lost in a pit of darkness complain of the sweet air and the daylight? There is a way of looking at our life daily as an escape, and taking the quiet return of morn and evening – still more the star-like out-glowing of some pure fellow-feeling, some generous impulse breaking our inward darkness – as a salvation that reconciles us to hardship. (*DD*, 682)

Rooms are only settings for her because she has no home. She has so little conception of herself, that she needs Deronda to look at her and discuss her problems; he is like another, more truthful mirror in which she finds reflected justification for her actions. But Gwendolen confuses her need for his look with love, which is not reflected there. Aspiration and desire have been wholly removed for Gwendolen, but the tide of history will continue.

Eliot's conception of history is connected to the concept of home for her female characters; without an awareness of historical precedent, family ties, feel for the environment and a realisation of how this fits with the needs and wants of today's woman, home cannot be achieved by Dorothea, Rosamond, Gwendolen or Maggie.

²¹⁷ *Companion*, p. 87.

Maggie dies but is reunited to Tom; Dorothea drops her ambitions and admits her need for a responsive love; Rosamond momentarily loses her selfishness and takes refuge in material comfort at last and Gwendolen goes through a long process of growing up, from a harsh facing-up to family needs to a taking hold of her own responsibilities. All have to reckon with the bigger picture before they can have peace, look outside themselves to the true needs and wants of other around them to gain self-knowledge and strength to make their own lives work and have some sort of home. In the next chapter, I will discuss how James adapts *Daniel Deronda* to explore his own themes.

Chapter Three

Henry James and The House of Fiction

I had, within the few preceding years, come to live in London, and the 'international' light lay, in those days, to my sense, thick and rich upon the scene. It was the light in which so much of the picture hung. (*PL*, xvii-xviii)

Henry James is known as an American living abroad in Europe, observing and writing about the cultural differences of the Old and New Worlds, his 'international theme'. His Europeanised American characters demonstrate how issues of national, social and personal identity are closely linked to cultural concerns of aesthetics and morality. The cultural advantages of Europe are often meticulously described in his work, against the background of Aestheticism, but the character who most revels in this, the Aesthete collector, often has a moral abyss at the root of their being. James famously dismissed his native land in his biography of *Hawthorne*: 'one might enumerate the items of high civilization, as it exists in other countries, which are absent from the texture of American life, until it should become a wonder to know what was left'.¹ I propose that in his fictional writings, his complicated relationship to his homeland was often expressed through characters searching for a home. James was not to find his own home until he bought Lamb House in 1899, and this chapter is predominately a discussion of fictional works written before then, when he writes of characters' search for love and happiness, which is demonstrated in the creation and decoration of homes.² His portraits of ladies demonstrate how the aesthetics of life help to construct consciousness and aid our understanding of others, but are also clues which must be read carefully. Even relatively early in his career, this adds pathos to a comedy like *The Europeans*, where Eugenia's theatrical dressing of herself and her house highlight the complicated conceptual relationship of Europe and America. The Prefaces, written for the New York Edition,³

¹ Henry James, *Hawthorne* (London: Macmillan, 1879), in Edel and Wilson, pp. 317-457 (pp. 351-2).

² For a detailed bibliography and discussion of houses and possessions in James see Sandra K. Fischer, 'Isabel Archer and the Enclosed Chamber', *The Henry James Review*, 7:2-3 (1986), 48-58.

³ Henry James, *The Novels and Tales*, New York Edition, 24 vols (London: Macmillan, 1908-9), first published two volumes at a time, December 1907-July 1909 by Charles Scribner's Sons, New York.

provide a highly theorised insight into his ideas, producing the famous metaphor of the House of Fiction. Considering James's intellectual and artistic breadth, it is not surprising that his novelistic project should take 'the great G.E. herself' to task,⁴ and *The Portrait of a Lady* develops both Dorothea and Gwendolen in his own particular way. As he wrote to Wharton's sister-in-law: 'if a work of imagination, of fiction, interests me at all (and very few, alas, do!) I always want to write it over in my own way, handle the subject from my own sense of it'.⁵ The young American heiress Isabel Archer is thrust into European society and through her encounters with houses, chooses a husband; as Gill has noted, 'the story of Isabel Archer [...] or Fleda Vetch [...] is also the story of a country house'.⁶ Although Isabel attempts to be independent, she is taken in by appearances and the 'envelope' of the things that surround us and becomes one of many objects owned by the collector Gilbert Osmond. James is sympathetic to the plight of his female characters, and theorises their status as 'things' within houses in a complex fashion.

The Europeans: What is life, indeed, without curtains?

In the gently satiric short novel *The Europeans*, Eugenia, Baroness Münster of Silberstadt-Schreckenstein uses the 'envelope of circumstances' (*PL*, 201) to play the part of an exotic European to court her American cousins, the Wentworths. Like Madame Merle, Eugenia sees herself very much as a *grande dame* of the Old World, despite her American ancestry, but her excessive title verges on the comic.⁷ Eugenia plays the part of a 'Queen of Sheba' (*TE*, 56) as consciously as she arranges herself before mirrors and dresses herself to highlight 'her Oriental or exotic aspect' (*TE*, 35). Her pose appeals especially to young, 'restless' Gertrude who has 'strange notions' and 'very peculiar temperament' (*TE*, 47, 73, 182). However, her father is more cautious: 'we must all be

⁴ Henry James to William James, 1 May [1878], *HJL*, II, 172. See Richard Freadman, *Eliot, James and The Fictional Self: A Study in Character and Narration* (London, Macmillan, 1986).

⁵ Henry James to Mary Cadwalader Jones, 20 August 1902, *HJL*, IV, 237-8.

⁶ Richard Gill, *Happy Rural Seat: The English Country House and the Literary Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 43.

⁷ Patricia Crick points out that 'Silberstadt (silver-town) is perfectly acceptable as a German place-name; Schreckenstein (horror-stone), with its sibilants and guttural, is ludicrous' (*TE*, 198). The name combines wealth and fear.

careful. This is a great change; we are to be exposed to peculiar influences. I don't say they are bad; I don't judge them in advance' (*TE*, 75). As Tony Tanner points out in his insightful Introduction, his 'reactions offer a clear statement of a deep-rooted idea that America might maintain her moral purity [...] by excluding European influences' (*TE*, 21); Wentworth's study is dominated by a map of America and books of law, whereas his daughter avidly reads *The Arabian Nights*.

Before the cousins meet, Eugenia directs her brother Felix to pay the first visit to their cousins so that she can prepare herself:

be sure you observe everything; be ready to describe to me the locality, the accessories – how shall I say it? – the *mise en scène*. Then, at my own time, I will go to them. I will present myself – I will appear before them! (*TE*, 44-5)

She uses specifically theatrical terminology, and like a film director sending off a researcher for a location, she knows the information she requires in order to present herself to full dramatic effect. Only after Felix has sufficiently paved the way for her visit, by telling her story 'in the way that seems to you most – natural', implying *unnaturalness* or fabrication in the telling, will she grant an audience to the Wentworths (*TE*, 45). The amateur artist Felix 'possessed what is called the pictorial sense' which he utilises in his description (*TE*, 41). He belittles the New World through his European points of reference:

it's intensely rural, tremendously natural; and all overhung with this strange white light, this far-away blue sky. There's a big wooden house – a kind of three storey bungalow; it looks like a magnified Nuremberg toy. There was a gentleman there that made a speech to me about it and called it a 'venerable mansion'; but it looks as if it had been built last night. (*TE*, 60)

His puritanical uncle 'is a tremendously high-toned old fellow; he looks as if he were undergoing martyrdom, not by fire, but by freezing', yet Felix's enthusiasm for this new country cannot be dimmed. He prophesies that the Wentworths 'will take a good deal of stirring up; but they are wonderfully kind and gentle. And they are appreciative. They think one clever; they think one remarkable!' (*TE*, 61). Thus, James avoids a heavy-handed satire, bringing in his own expatriate experience, as Gorley Putt contends,

Felix retains the reader's respect by a sincere appreciation of the Wentworth quality, just as James's most sympathetic American travellers show a sincere respect for European qualities.⁸

Certainly one of these is Lambert Strether in *The Ambassadors*, who travels in the opposite direction, from New England to Europe, finding his preconceptions tested and his outlook expanded along the way.⁹ Despite the meeting of two often diametrically opposed sets of characters, *The Europeans* is not a satire of opposites, for the relationships between the two sets of cousins enable us to see the benefits of two different cultures, particularly with the successful marriage of Felix and Gertrude. Tanner explains how the comedy 'is the result of a dramatic confrontation not of Europe and America but of misconceptions about them'.¹⁰ Eugenia does not let herself be assimilated into New England and rejects the prospect of marriage, even to Robert Acton, the most cosmopolitan of the Wentworths' circle. She sets up a romantic, theatrical house with imported French-style decoration and maid, complete with young aspirant suitors hiding in dark corners, a 'foreign house' in the garden of Puritan New England (*TE*, 74).

The Wentworth sisters are captivated by their cousin, speculating at length on what she will do, particularly on what sort of room she would like to stay in: 'she can have the large north-east room. And the French bedstead' and even practical Charlotte has 'a constant sense of the lady's foreignness' (*TE*, 73). However, Gertrude has other ideas, endowed as she is with a 'great deal of imagination' that seems to be 'fairly running riot' (*TE*, 75): 'she will not like it [...] not even if you pin little tidies all over the chairs. [...] She will want something more – more private' (*TE*, 73). When we first see Gertrude, she is intent on being alone in the house on Sunday when everyone else has gone to church. Her wish to have privacy 'puzzles' the other characters, who label her as 'depressed' (*TE*, 50). The Wentworth house is not a solitary place. All the rooms seem to lead into one another, there are many visitors – the Actons, Mr Brand – and people are always coming through doors or windows to join conversations. Privacy is elusive, attractive

⁸ S. Gorley Putt, *The Fiction of Henry James: A Reader's Guide*, 2nd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 101.

⁹ Henry James, *The Ambassadors* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), first published *North American Review*, January–December 1903.

¹⁰ Richard Poirier, *The Comic Sense of Henry James: A Study of the Early Novels* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 45, quoted (*TE*, 27).

and foreign to Gertrude.

The 'little tidies' are the key to Eugenia's performativity and how she makes herself exotic. She decorates the little house with draperies and the material culture of foreignness. By mentioning these knitted or ornamental needlework pieces, which were used, like antimacassars, to protect furniture surfaces, Gertrude makes fun of Charlotte's practicality and inability to understand their cousin. In contrast to her sister, 'Charlotte's imagination took no journeys whatever; she kept it, as it were, in her pocket, with the other furniture of this receptacle – a thimble, a little box of peppermint, and a morsel of court-plaster' (*TE*, 75-6); in a tiny room. Eugenia expresses her difference to the Wentworth house, by the disposition of fabrics of many colours and textures. The Wentworths' simple decoration is diametrically opposed to what her European eyes are used to. It

seemed to her very perfect of its kind – wonderfully peaceful and unspotted; pervaded by a sort of dove-coloured freshness that had all the quietude and benevolence of what she deemed to be Quakerism, and yet seemed to be founded upon a degree of material abundance for which, in certain matters of detail, one might have look in vain at the frugal little court of Silberstadt-Schreckenstein. (*TE*, 77)

Presumably in Silberstadt-Schreckenstein, a little money is made to go a long way with cheap decorative effects, like Eugenia's 'coarse, dirty-looking lace' (*TE*, 79). The Wentworths have utilised their money to achieve the impression of simplicity and innocence rather than ostentation, for they 'thought and talked very little about money' (*TE*, 78). The morality of America's Dutch Protestant founding fathers is reflected in the interior decoration: 'I see you have arranged your house – your beautiful house – in the – in the Dutch taste!' (*TE*, 65). Eugenia grasps for the name of a style because it is so foreign to her. Although she writes to a friend that she expects life there to be 'a little dull' the house is 'very perfect of its kind' (*TE*, 78). The combination of 'the luminous interior, the gentle, tranquil people, the simple, serious life' and the likeness of Mr Wentworth to her mother stir in her 'one of the most genuine emotions she had ever known' (*TE*, 71); she recognises a home she has perhaps never had.

However, Puritanism in life, morals or interior decoration is not really for Eugenia, who is as exotic as 'her much-trimmed skirts were voluminous' (*TE*, 33). She sets about

creating an interior that will be a suitable stage-set for her to present herself within. Her maid Augustine

began to hang up *portières* in the doorways; to place wax candles, procured after some research, in unexpected situations; to dispose anomalous draperies over the arms of sofas and the backs of chairs. The Baroness had brought with her to the New World a copious provision of the element of costume. (*TE*, 79)

This enables her to achieve the nineteenth-century 'concept of the parlor as a theatrical location for personal display',¹¹ identified by Grier, who provides an extensive history and evaluation of the material culture of the American parlour 1850-1910.¹² She examines a wide range of source material, from original photographs and books on household taste to etiquette books and contemporary fiction. 'Victorian Americans were taken with the possibility of non-verbal kinds of expressive "languages" structured by "grammars"', such as the 'language of flowers' and the use of etiquette. Grier has identified a resulting 'semantic taxonomy' of furnishing, where 'carefully planned rooms were designed to be rhetorical statements in the sense that they consciously or unconsciously expressed aspirations, what a person believed or wished to believe'.¹³ The key word in Grier's exegesis is 'comfort', and she investigates in particular the Victorian use of fabrics, in upholstery and drapery, to create a comfortable parlour through the 'aesthetic of refinement':¹⁴

the 'softening of the world' of refined behaviour could be symbolically rendered through upholstery and drapery in the parlor. 'Refinement' could be rendered visually as attention to and appreciation of detail.¹⁵

Eugenia's parlour is a hastily executed version of what would become typical parlour decoration from the late 1870s:

there were India shawls suspended, curtain-wise, in the parlour door, and curious fabrics, corresponding to Gertrude's metaphysical vision of an opera-cloak, tumbled about in the sitting-places. There were pink silk blinds in the windows, by which the room was peculiarly bedimmed; and along the chimney-pieces was disposed a remarkable band of velvet, covered with coarse, dirty-looking lace. 'I have been making myself a little comfortable,' said the Baroness, much to the confusion of

¹¹ Grier, p. 68.

¹² For Karen Halttunen, in her study of sentimentality and theatricality of the middle classes during the middle years of the nineteenth century, 'to say that the middle-class parlor in the 1850s was a stage is to speak the literal truth', Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 175.

¹³ Grier, pp. 11-12.

¹⁴ Grier, p. 136.

¹⁵ Grier, p. 137.

Charlotte, who had been on the point of proposing to come and help her put her superfluous draperies away. (*TE*, 79)

In the late 1840s, when the novel is set, Eugenia's comfortable layers of fabric implying exoticism had not quite become an established mode of decoration, which explains the sisters' bemusement at their cousin's parlour. However, James's readers on both sides of the Atlantic in 1878, would have been well aware of the 'semantic taxonomy' of such decoration.

The *portières* and shawls hanging in Eugenia's doorways have the physical characteristics of the proscenium arch in a theatre as well as softening straight lines to produce more comfortable curves. Dim pink light warms the room, like stage lights, and the fabric that brings to Gertrude's mind an opera cloak emphasises this metaphor.¹⁶

Indian and 'curious' fabrics bring an air of the exotic and the mysterious East to the New England cottage. The haphazard way the fabrics have been 'disposed', although it urges Charlotte to tidy up, enhances the concept of improvisation and casual creation:

what Charlotte mistook for an almost culpably delayed subsidence Gertrude very presently perceived to be the most ingenious, the most interesting, the most romantic intention. 'What is life, indeed, without curtains?' she secretly asked herself; and she appeared to herself to have been leading hitherto an existence singularly garish and totally devoid of festoons. (*TE*, 79)

By the later part of the century, the use of drapery was commonplace, as Gordon illustrates with a room of 1896 decorated with scarves and antimacassars, draped haphazardly, or 'artistically', across chairbacks and on tables (plate 47). Grier emphasises the importance of curtains, lambrequins and festoons and devotes a whole chapter to their history and design:

employed as a frame, as a means of achieving a refined parlor through softened, picturesque light, and as a means of increasing visual and tactile complexity in the composition of the parlor, draperies expressed the presence of a parlor of culture. In their role as barrier to the outside world and signal of a woman's presence in a household, parlor draperies also could make the presence of the comfortable, homey parlor of a properly domestic household.¹⁷

With her imaginative tendency to romance, Gertrude is caught up in Eugenia's effects, just as most American householders would be by the 1880s, realising that her whole

¹⁶ Whistler painted Duret holding a pink lady's domino, a loose evening cloak generally worn at masked balls, which would harmonise with Eugenia's pink silk blinds. See Whistler, *Arrangement in Flesh Colour and Black: Portrait of Théodore Duret*, 1883-4, oil on canvas, 193.4 x 90.8, Metropolitan Museum of Art, reproduced in Dorment and MacDonald, no. 127, p. 206.

¹⁷ Grier, p. 248.

existence is 'devoid of festoons' (*TE*, 79). The conceptual conflation of the woman's body with the house (see Chapter One) explains how Eugenia can present an image of herself through her decoration which would have been easily accessible to James's readers. Even sixty years later, Emily Post could write: 'in choosing her own most becoming background, the woman of taste is merely a stage director who skilfully presents – herself'.¹⁸ Eugenia lives up to Jacob van Falke's insistence that a woman should be 'the noblest ornament of her ornamented dwelling'.¹⁹

Augustine the maid thinks 'that the little white house [is] pitifully bare' when they move in (*TE*, 79); similarly, the Boston hotel, which is the first impression the siblings have of America, distresses Eugenia with its 'certain vulgar nudity, the bed and the window were curtainless' (*TE*, 40). Here decoration is explicitly linked to clothing, an idea common to decoration and etiquette manuals of the time, but also with a moral aspect; the nudity is 'vulgar'. Gordon describes how rooms were 'dressed' in the same way that women dressed up for special occasions:

women also dressed moveable furniture and decorative accessories in their own image. They covered the legs of tables with 'skirts,' much as they covered their own legs. [...] 'Bolsters' adorned both sofas and women's *derrieres* (the word was used to describe the pad or pillow-style bustle fashionable in the 1880s). 'Scarves,' 'shawls,' and 'veils' were also draped around sofas and pianos in this same period, much as they were draped around female bodies, and chair backs were frequently outfitted with bows and collars akin to those worn around a woman's neck.²⁰

Thus, the claim that the Victorians dressed piano legs in frilled trousers, lest they offend, has some basis in actuality, and only strengthens the conflation of women's bodies with their homes.²¹

Just as the Victorian woman's normal dress involved many layers of garments and materials, so the 'fully dressed' window involved multiple layers, 'including underdraperies and overdraperies, tassels, and "jewelry" (brass rings and similar

¹⁸ Emily Post, *Personality of a House: The Blue Book of Home Design and Decoration* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1930), p. 3, quoted Gordon, p. 299.

¹⁹ Jacob van Falke, *Art in the House*, trans. and with notes by Charles C. Perkins (Boston: L. Prang, 1878), p. 333, quoted Gordon, p. 283.

²⁰ Gordon, p. 289.

²¹ This was apparently seen in an American young ladies' seminary by the British Captain Frederick Marryat, *A Diary in America: with Remarks on its Institutions*, 3 vols (London: Longmans, 1839) quoted *passim* Thomas Pyles, *Words and Ways of American English* (New York: Andrew Melrose, 1952), p. 111.

hardware).²² Gordon describes the 1890s 'French shawl' arrangement of draping windows as 'a variety of textures and decorative treatments, from fringe on the outer layer to sheer fabric almost like an undergarment on the inside'.²³ By the end of the century, manufactured lace was relatively inexpensive and became a significant constituent of underwear. At the same time, lace curtains became popular, filtering light and creating a frame for the view outside. However, if lace is now 'an intimate fabric', there are implications of having undergarments on such public display and visible to those outside, as well as those privileged enough to gain entry to the parlour:²⁴

because these were personal garments that were most closely in touch with the woman's body, it is also reasonable to assert that hanging lace curtains in the window signalled a subtle but symbolically important identification between the home and body.²⁵

Wharton found this rather unsettling, as she wrote in an autobiographical article: 'this window garniture always seemed to me to symbolize the super-imposed layers of undergarments worn by the ladies of the period – and even, alas, by the little girls' (ALGNY, 358).²⁶ This has particular implications for the perceived exotic licentiousness of Eugenia in James's novel, where such festoons are a decorative innovation as problematic for the Wentworths as their cousin's character and actions. Perhaps they are uneasy about Eugenia flaunting her underwear in public. The many contrasts between her house and the Wentworth's home, with its cleanliness and simplicity, only emphasise Eugenia's unsuitability to New England; as Robert Acton ironically asks 'what I should like to know [...] is just what has brought Madame Récamier to live in that place!' (*TE*, 84).

Eugenia's role as the hostess of a salon is enhanced by her attentions to Clifford. Initially, Felix proposes that she uses her feminine influence to deter her young cousin from drinking, assuring Mr Wentworth that

²² Gordon, p. 289.

²³ Gordon, p. 289. She goes on to describe how draperies in the bedroom, the most private space, were most likely to be of 'a light weight and color akin to the materials found in women's undergarments', Gordon, p. 290.

²⁴ Grier, p. 243, Gordon, p. 298.

²⁵ Gordon, p. 298.

²⁶ Wharton also describes her mother's collection of antique lace in this article, and her unsettlement possibly has connections with her embarrassment about sexuality, that was due in part to her mother's reluctance to discuss the subject. Regarding window drapery Wharton stated that 'lingerie effects do not combine well with architecture' (*DH*, 76).

she will exercise a civilizing – I may call it a sobering – influence. A charming, witty woman always does – especially if she is a little of a coquette. My dear uncle, the society of such women has been half my education. (*TE*, 117)

He expects Eugenia to have an effect on Clifford similar to that of Madame de Vionnet on Chad in *The Ambassadors*. Strether is alone among the New Englanders to realise that 'Chad had been made over' by the Frenchwoman, and Mr Wentworth is as uncertain as the Pockocks about this type of influence.²⁷ However, Clifford becomes another part of Eugenia's creation of a romantic setting; she 'had a sort of aesthetic ideal for Clifford which seemed to her a disinterested reason for taking him in hand' (*TE*, 132). When Acton visits unexpectedly, she hides Clifford and when he appears 'blushing and looking rather awkward', she explains that Clifford 'has an idea of being romantic. He has adopted the habit of coming to see me at midnight' and that in return for her having cured him of drinking, 'he is in love with me' (*TE*, 146, 147). However, we realise that she has fabricated this story to perpetuate her romantic persona, particularly to play him off against Acton, for Clifford's version of events is rather different. He is bemused by Eugenia's play-acting, for 'a charming woman isn't much use to me when I am shut up in that back room!' (*TE*, 172). When his marriage to Lizzie Acton, with whom he had long had 'a tacit understanding', is announced, Acton notices that Eugenia's pride has been dented (*TE*, 191).

Acton is the most cosmopolitan member of the New England group, and his 'natural shrewdness' makes him a match for Eugenia, who is continually described as 'a clever woman' (*TE*, 100). He is

tacitly felt to be an ornament to his circle. He was the man of the world of his family. He had been to China and brought home a collection of curiosities; he had made a fortune. (*TE*, 98)

In typically Jamesian architectural metaphor, he sees his previous bachelorhood as a 'citadel' from which he 'had removed the guns from the ramparts' and 'the drawbridge had swayed a little under Madame Münster's step'. He thinks that with time she could become 'a tolerably patient captive', especially 'on learning the conveniences of the place for making a lady comfortable' (*TE*, 138-9). Comfort is indeed one of Eugenia's

²⁷ James, *The Ambassadors*, Book 4, Chapter 1, p. 97.

requirements, but despite his 'large fortune' which is 'a great item in his favour' (*TE*, 156), Eugenia does not, finally, accept him because she needs more consistent love. He is aware of his status as a big cultural fish in a small pond, and he is 'action' without a vital 'i', although he 'acts on' people. He prefers to treat their relationship as 'an algebraic problem' and plays games with her (*TE*, 138). He is sure that 'she is a woman who will lie'; however this statement 'failed to frighten him' as he recognises her need for performance (*TE*, 171). Like so many of James's male characters, he merely observes, watching Eugenia from his supine position. Tanner argues that his cruelty and lack of emotion is 'the epitome of immorality' (*TE*, 25). His invalid mother, similarly, has a voice which 'had never expressed any human passions' (*TE*, 166); she is the presence that dominates their house, despite Acton's collection of *Chinoiserie*.

Eugenia thinks the house is 'enchanting', an improvement on the Wentworths'. It is 'more modern' and comfortable,

more redundantly upholstered and expensively ornamented. The Baroness perceived that her entertainer had analysed material comfort to a sufficiently fine point. (*TE*, 107)

This 'fineness' is also an attribute of Osmond in *Portrait*, and thus morally suspect.

Acton's extensive and 'delightful' collection is exotic:

beautifully-figured hand-screens; porcelain dinner-sets, gleaming behind the glass doors of mahogany buffets; large screens, in corners, covered with tense silk and embroidered with mandarins and dragons. (*TE*, 107)

It is 'a very nice place', with 'a mixture of the homely and the liberal, and though it was almost a museum, the large, little-used rooms were as fresh and clean as a well-kept dairy' (*TE*, 107-8). This comparison is unexpected, but brings a mundane and domestic feel to a house so like a museum, and Acton's knowledgeable talk about his collection encourages the feeling 'that she was positively in love with her host' (*TE*, 108). This mundanity makes it less dramatic and stifling than Poynton, another museum (see Chapter Four). On her second visit, however, Eugenia makes a solitary tour of the house after speaking to Mrs Acton, 'noticing a great many things' (*TE*, 168). This has the opposite effect to that made on Elizabeth Bennet by Pemberley without its master, Darcy, in *Pride and Prejudice*. For Elizabeth, the 'real elegance' of the house, and the

housekeeper's revelatory account of Darcy's sweet temper and good-heartedness, makes her feel 'that to be mistress of Pemberley might be something!'; a turning point in her feelings for Mr Darcy.²⁸ Eugenia is impressed with Acton's home and collection and 'she had thought of just such a house as this when she had decided to come to America' (*TE*, 168). However, Acton's mother seems to decide her against staying in America to keep this son of 'a fool' happy (*TE*, 167). She is fed up with Acton's games and inaction; her lack of power over him, or any of the New Englanders, and her lack of understanding of their way of life makes her decide to leave.

The question of where the siblings feel is their home is important in defining character and personal relations throughout the book. Felix describes himself as a wanderer and 'a sort of adventurer', settling on the description 'I am a species of Bohemian', denying specific nationality and confusing his naive cousin:

Gertrude had never heard this term before, save as a geographical denomination; and she quite failed to understand the figurative meaning which her companion appeared to attach to it. But it gave her pleasure. (*TE*, 93)

However, Felix tells his uncle that Eugenia is 'even more of a European than I; here, you know, she's a picture out of her setting' (*TE*, 112). The metaphor of painting is important in the context of Felix the artist and Eugenia's creation of her own physical setting with the decoration of her 'little white house' (*TE*, 79). In the text Eugenia is persistently referred to as 'the Baroness' rather than by her first name, emphasising her distance in attitude and social standing to the Americans and her reluctance to immerse herself in Bostonian life. Her brother's name is more prosaic, 'Felix Young', and he is continually called by his first name as he becomes assimilated into the Wentworth family. For the Wentworths it is an effort to achieve this amount of familiarity with his sister: 'Charlotte and Gertrude acquired considerable facility in addressing her, directly, as "Eugenia"; but in speaking of her to each other they rarely called her anything but "she"' (*TE*, 72).

²⁸ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), first published 1813, Vol. 3, Chapter 1, p. 215. This visit also emphasises Darcy's love for his sister, which particularly endears him to Elizabeth. In contrast, Eugenia is irritated by Acton's submission to Lizzie (*TE*, 172).

Despite the theatrical layers of comfort Eugenia creates, the disappointments between the reality of what she finds in America and her hopes for the New World prove too great for her to stay. Although, as the narrator has 'the honour of intimating, she had come four thousand miles to seek her fortune', she retreats from marriage with the wealthy Acton (*TE*, 132). Eugenia cannot act all the time, and she has been looking for love, a family and a home but she decides that her excursion to America has been in vain. Her decorations now seem 'gimcracks', and as when Gwendolen's hopes are dashed, she feels 'like a strolling actress; these are my "properties' (*TE*, 192).

'Is the play over, Eugenia?' asked Felix.
 She gave him a sharp glance. 'I have spoken my part.'
 'With great applause!' said her brother.
 'Oh, applause – applause!' she murmured. (*TE*, 192)

Felix manages to assimilate himself into the family, but although he and Gertrude are 'imperturbably happy', they must leave: 'they went far away' (*TE*, 194). However, in typical Jamesian style, this fairy-tale ending of marital bliss seems unlikely for Eugenia, with her uncertain position within the morganatic marriage. Again like Gwendolen, who also sought a fortune, she seems doomed to wander the earth, looking for a home. Although Felix assures her that they 'will often meet over there', she ambiguously replies that 'Europe seems to me much larger than America' (*TE*, 194). Her plea to the Wentworths, 'I should like to stay here [...]. Pray take me in' (*TE*, 70), is never fulfilled.

Eugenia's sentiments on leaving are that 'the conditions of action on this provincial continent were not favourable to really superior women. The elder world was, after all, their natural field' (*TE*, 193). This is echoed in *Portrait* by Madame Merle: 'I was born before the French Revolution [...] I belong to the old, old world' (*PL*, 196). However, Madame Merle is a far more consummate villainess than Eugenia: she acts her part throughout her life, and that is also her tragedy. This is exposed by her relationship with young Isabel, to whom she attempts to teach the ways of the old world.

The House That James Built: The Prefaces

Central to an understanding of the work of James and the literary theory behind their construction, is the series of Prefaces he wrote to accompany the New York Edition, which he began in 1907. The Preface for *Portrait*, written in 1908,²⁹ describes how the 'house of fiction' is built around the 'single character' of Isabel: the woman is the foundation stone of the house. To develop the story from this 'germ', he watches his characters and what they do: 'I see them *placed*' (*PL*, vii). The 'placing' of characters, seeing them in a setting, a background of rooms, is essential to my discussion not only of James, but his friend Edith Wharton, who greatly admired his style of writing and developed her own version of novelistic architecture. As I have discussed, Eliot also makes us see her characters 'placed' and reacting to their environments. James, however, highly theorises these notions. How his characters

look and move and speak and behave, always in the setting I have found for them, is my account of them – of which I dare say, alas, *que cela manque souvent d'architecture*. (*PL*, vii)³⁰

This does not mean that James merely gives us detailed descriptions of how his characters look, what they wear, the style of their hair and so on. Yet such details do matter. Wharton explains in her 'Introduction' to *The House of Mirth*, also written at least twenty years after the novel's first publication, that such period details 'date' a novel and this is in a way a virtue:

they need not even be described by the novelist in order to figure in his page as vividly as in contemporary portraiture. Everything dates in a work of art, and should do so; and to situate a picture or a novel firmly where it belongs in the unrolling social picture is to help it draw vitality from the soil it grew in.³¹

This is not merely from the repetition of details, but a social rooting. She also draws attention to the placing of the novel and its characters and draws from these contingencies the telling of essential truths. The

²⁹ For James's revisions of the 1881 edition, see 'Textual Appendix', Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, ed. by Robert D. Bamberg (New York and London: Norton, 1975), pp. 493-575. The change in emphasis on works of art between the two editions are discussed in Adeline R. Tintner, "In the Dusky, Crowded, Heterogeneous Back-Shop of the Mind": The Iconography of *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Henry James Review*, 7:2-3 (1986), 140-157.

³⁰ French: that is often lacking in architecture.

³¹ Edith Wharton, 'Introduction to *The House of Mirth*', in Frederick Wegener, ed., *Edith Wharton: The Uncollected Critical Writings* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 264-269, (p. 267).

supreme, preservative of fiction is whatever of unchanging human nature the novelist has contrived to bring to life beneath the passing fripperies of clothes and custom. The essential soul is always there, under whatever disguises; and the story-teller's most necessary gift is that of making its presence felt, and of discerning just how far it is modified and distorted by the shifting fashions of the hour.³²

I will discuss below how the particular artistic and philosophical 'customs' of the 1880s are vital to the development of *Portrait*.

James worries that he is 'more antecedently conscious of my figures than of their setting', as this problematises the relationship of character and plot. It is 'too preliminary, a preferential interest in which struck me as in general such a putting of the cart before the horse' (*PL*, viii). Plot is inseparable from character: 'I could think so little of any situation that didn't depend for its interest on the nature of the persons situated, and thereby on their way of taking it' (*PL*, viii). Yet he is concerned that his account of them lacks architecture, so he creates a framework for the writing of the novel from his study of character and creates the house of fiction with subjective views of his one, central character.

The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million [...]; every one of which has been pierced [...] in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will. (*PL*, ix)

At each of these windows is a figure watching through a field glass; each sees the view differently, for the windows are 'not hinged doors opening straight upon life'. James goes on to explain his metaphor:

the spreading field, the human scene, is the 'choice of subject'; the pierced aperture, either broad or balconied or slit-like and low-browed, is the 'literary form'; but they are, singly or together, as nothing without the posted presence of the watcher – without which, in other words, the consciousness of the artist. (*PL*, ix)

In the context of the male gaze I have previously discussed, it is interesting to note James's self-description as a 'watcher', particularly when he has emphasised that his subject is a young woman. He observes seemingly impersonally, just as for Ralph Touchett, the 'conscious observation of a lovely woman had struck him as the finest entertainment that the world now had to offer'.³³ Although her consciousness concerns

³² Wegener, p. 267.

³³ Bamberg, p. 499, 1881 text of *PL*, 41. This is echoed in: 'Ralph was conscious she was an entertainment of a higher order' (*PL*, 63).

James above all, he also objectifies her, comparing the 'discovery' of this tale to a visit to a junk shop:

the figure has to that extent, as you see, *been* placed – placed in the imagination that detains it, preserves, protects, enjoys it, conscious of its presence in the dusky, crowded, heterogeneous back-shop of the mind very much as a wary dealer in precious odds and ends, competent to make an 'advance' on rare objects confided to him, is conscious of the rare little 'piece' left in deposit by the reduced, mysterious lady of title or the speculative amateur, and which is already there to disclose its merit afresh as soon as a key shall have clicked in a cupboard door. (*PL*, x)

James recognises his own hyperbole, for he then states that this passage might be 'a somewhat superfine analogy for the particular "value" I here speak of, the image of the young feminine nature' of Isabel (*PL*, x). Also, in the novel it will be Pansy who is compared most literally to an *objet d'art*. The 'conception of a certain young woman affronting her destiny' is the 'single small cornerstone' from which he builds the whole novel (*PL*, x). This is a metaphoric example of the conceptual conflation of the woman's body with the house: the 'building' is also a 'portrait' of his central character:

it came to be a square and spacious house – [...] it had to be put up round my young woman while she stood there in perfect isolation. That is to me, artistically speaking, the circumstance of interest. (*PL*, xi)

James felt that literature was the art most suitable for the dramatising of a fine central intelligence, which was 'an end and a means' to the telling of the story.³⁴ This enables the structure of the novel to have a lodestone which directs its growth. The organic composition of the novel is reiterated throughout the Prefaces. In *The Spoils* the centre of the novel is in one sense the houseful of beautiful furniture, but it is the way various consciousnesses respond to that beauty that in the end constitutes James's subject. Like the intricacy of carved furniture,

I have lost myself once more, I confess, in the curiosity of analysing the structure. By what process of logical accretion was this slight 'personality', the mere slim shade of an intelligent but presumptuous girl, to find itself endowed with the high attributes of a Subject? (*PL*, xi)

He attempts to justify to his reader, who he seems to imagine is hostile, why such literary weight might be held in the 'frail vessel' of a young girl (*PL*, xi), in a borrowed phrase which resonates in *Daniel Deronda* and Eliot's other fiction I have discussed.³⁵

³⁴ Henry James, *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces*, ed. by Richard P. Blackmur (London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), p. xviii.

³⁵ 'What in the midst of that mighty drama are girls and their blind visions? They are the Yea or Nay of that good for which men are enduring and fighting. In these delicate vessels is borne onward

James dramatised his opinion of *Daniel Deronda* in an essay entitled 'Daniel Deronda: A Conversation', which criticises the part of the novel that concerns Deronda as almost superfluous. For example, one of the characters taking part in this fictional conversation complains that the 'Jewish burden of the story tended to weary me'.³⁶ James was aware of the need to keep the reader's attention, despite his own, often dense writing style, using minor characters as light relief and amusement to keep the reader's interest.³⁷ However, in *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot had found 'a noble subject'; in James's opinion, 'it shows a large conception of what one may do in a novel'.³⁸ As Djwa observes, in *Portrait*, James is rewriting Eliot 'in such a manner that her strongly moral sense of life and art become an implicit commentary on Pater's theory of Art for Art's Sake', by borrowing *Daniel Deronda*'s characters and giving them Paterian motivations.³⁹ For his version, James concentrates on the plotline of a beautiful young woman marrying an older man. Isabel is there to dominate the scene, for if he is to 'place the centre of the subject in the young woman's own consciousness', then

you get as interesting and as beautiful a difficulty as you could wish. Stick to *that* – for the centre; put the heaviest weight into *that* scale, which will be so largely the scale of her relation to herself. [...] Place meanwhile in the other scale the lighter weight [...]: press least hard, in short, on the consciousness of your heroines' satellites, especially the male; make it an interest contributive only to the greater one. [...] To depend upon her and her little concerns wholly to see you through will necessitate, remember, your really 'doing' her. (*PL*, xiii)

And thus James achieves his objective, creating a novel that is 'a structure reared with an "architectural" competence' (*PL*, xiii). His reliance on method and 'technical rigour', facilitates artistic creation, inspires him

with the right confidence for erecting on such a plot of ground the neat and careful and proportioned pile of bricks that arches over it and that was thus to form, constructionally speaking, a literary monument. (*PL*, xiii)

This 'literary monument' has irresistible echoes in the novel, its centre point in fact. When Isabel stands beneath 'the far-arching dome' of Saint Peter's in Rome, 'her conception of greatness rose and dizzily rose. After this it never lacked space to soar'

through the years the treasure of human affections' (*DD*, 103). James's appropriation is a misquotation.

³⁶ James, 'Daniel Deronda: A Conversation', p. 979.

³⁷ See Blackmur, p. xvii.

³⁸ James, 'Daniel Deronda: A Conversation', p. 980.

³⁹ Sandra Djwa, 'Ut Pictura Poesis: The Making of the Lady', *The Henry James Review*, 7:2-3 (1986), 72-85 (p. 74).

(*PL*, 295). Dorothea similarly needs space, but the 'vastness' of St Peter's 'huge bronze canopy' becomes a recurrent image for her 'states of dull forlornness' (*MM*, 226).

However, Isabel's romantic conceptions of aesthetic beauty lead her to make decisions that will restrict her, physically and mentally.

James stretches his metaphor of the house of fiction to its most physical lengths, bringing to mind not so much the household taste books I have discussed before, but the French Gothic palaces described by Viollet-le-Duc in his classic work of architectural literature:⁴⁰

I should clearly have to pile brick upon brick for the creation of an interest, I would leave no pretext for saying that anything is out of line, scale or perspective. I would build large – in fine embossed vaults and painted arches, as who should say, and yet never let it appear that the chequered pavement, the ground under the reader's feet, fails to stretch at every point to the base of the walls. (*PL*, xiii-xiv)

That is, his concern is that he does not get carried away with the metaphysical possibilities of his own fictions, wanting to keep them rooted in mundane reality. In his Preface to *The Spoils of Poynton*, James explains his method of building the story, after finding what he termed the 'donnée'.⁴¹ The author

has to borrow his motive, which is certainly half the battle; and this motive is his ground, his site, and his foundation. But after that he only lends and gives, only builds and piles high, lays together the blocks quarried in the deeps of his imagination and on his personal premises. He thus remains all the while in intimate commerce with his motive. (*SP*, 26)

The process of writing is explicitly compared with the building of a house, particularly apt for the Preface to a novel where the focus is the house of Poynton.

The 'careful ascertainment' of which direction his material shall take must be guided with authority, 'since this sense of "authority" is for the master-builder the treasure of treasures' (*SP*, 26). Having a centre of consciousness like Isabel or Fleda around whom the action could revolve creates a sense of the novel as an organic, interconnected whole. As his organising metaphor is the house of fiction, I will discuss the ways in which the representation of women in houses, against backgrounds and interacting with decorative objects, furthers his expression of character. James's

⁴⁰ Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, whose *Dictionnaire Raisoné de l'Architecture*, ten vols (1858-68) and *Dictionnaire du Mobilier Français*, six vols (1858-72) are still indispensable guides to Gothic architecture and decorative arts respectively. Wharton cites *Dictionnaire Raisoné de l'Architecture* in the bibliography of *DH*.

⁴¹ French: fact or element, germ. A term also used by Wharton.

consideration of artistry and what constitutes the artwork is intimately connected to a consideration of what is moral:

there is, I think, no more nutritive or suggestive truth [...] than that of the perfect dependence of the 'moral' sense of a work of art on the amount of felt life concerned in producing it. (*PL*, viii)

In *Portrait*, the relationship between the moral and the aesthetic is central and it is explicated and illustrated by a consideration of what art is.⁴² The modifier in this debate is 'taste'. Through her experience of 'felt life', Isabel must work out whether aesthetic discrimination is enough to live well.

The Portrait of a Lady: Such Adorable Taste

As I have demonstrated, good taste is at the heart of the household manuals and their way of approaching morality. The word 'taste' occurs with remarkable frequency in *Portrait* and in important contexts for the description of character. Rarely is the word used in the more mundane context of food, but constantly in terms of aesthetic discrimination and the social graces. Taste becomes 'a key to a whole system of values',⁴³ a moral indicator, and the contemporary cult of Aestheticism the philosophical background to its use. However, the Aesthetes of the novel, those who live their lives according to the 'pose' of 'Art for Art's Sake' (*PL*, 394), like Madame Merle and Osmond, are morally suspect, even 'defective, excessive, and perverted'.⁴⁴ As in *Middlemarch*, *seeing*, with all its ambiguities and ironies, is an important metaphor for the psychological process. In addition, for James,

aesthetic experience proper, since it is acquired through the senses, is an experience of *feeling*. But so also moral experience, when it is not sheerly nominal and ritualistic, is an experience of feeling. Neither one has reality – has psychological depth – unless it is 'felt' (hence James's so frequent use of phrases such as 'felt life' and 'the very taste of life', phrases that insist on the feeling-base of complete and integrated living).⁴⁵

This 'integrated living', or 'sympathy' in Eliot's term, has Paterian aspects (James had

⁴² See Dorothy Van Ghent, 'On The Portrait of a Lady' in *The English Novel Form and Function* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953), pp. 211-229 (p. 217). For details of how James uses works of art, see Adeline R. Tintner's exhaustive *The Museum World of Henry James* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1986).

⁴³ Fryer, p. 121, in the context of Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* (1920).

⁴⁴ Tintner (1986), p. 241.

⁴⁵ Van Ghent, p. 218.

read *The Renaissance* the year it was published).⁴⁶ Pater declared:

not the fruit of experience, but experience itself is the end. [...] To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life. [...] Only be sure it is passion – that it does yield you this fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness.⁴⁷

I will discuss below how Isabel's Paterian reactions enable her to achieve sympathy like Dorothea. The way characters are seen to decorate their homes, the objects they choose to collect and display, and how they react to other interiors is vitally important in the evaluation of their personal 'taste' and morality.⁴⁸

Taste is also a traditional attribute of good breeding, for *Portrait* is set in the playground of the rich and privileged expatriate Americans. They have art galleries in their own homes which are furnished with the best booty the 'not quite exhausted storehouse' (*PL*, 227) of Europe can provide.⁴⁹ In *The American Scene*, after a discussion of the opulent American interior, James describes how taste implies certain social conditions:

a sense for that completeness is a thing of slow growth, one of the flowers of tradition precisely; of the good conservative tradition that walks apart from the extravagant use of money and the unregulated appeal to 'style'. (*AS*, 121)

Merely collecting great art and displaying it beautifully cannot guarantee emotional and moral 'completeness'. This dismissal of the *parvenu* is also examined by Wharton.

James sees history and change as a gradual process, as did Eliot:

it takes an endless amount of history to make even a little tradition, and an endless amount of tradition to make even a little taste, and an endless amount of taste, by the same token, to make even a little tranquillity. Tranquillity results largely from taste tactfully applied, taste lighted above all by experience and possessed of a clue for its labyrinth. (*AS*, 121)

Although in this context the tradition is that of gentlemen's clubs, the concept of taste as a 'labyrinth' requiring clues, informs *Portrait* (*PL*, 424). Isabel takes the wrong turn and thinks that Osmond's perfect taste, demonstrated by his rooms, is an indication of perfect character. She ignores Madame Merle's advice, trusting to her own naïve instincts and

⁴⁶ See Tintner (1986), p. 240 and Tintner, 'Pater in *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Golden Bowl*, Including Some Unpublished Letters', *The Henry James Review*, 3 (1981-82), 80-95; and Henry James to Edmund Gosse, [13 December 1894], *HJL*, III, 492.

⁴⁷ Pater, 'Conclusion', *The Renaissance*, pp. 188-190.

⁴⁸ See Van Ghent, pp. 217-8 and Sara Stambaugh, 'The Aesthetic Movement and *The Portrait of a Lady*', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 30 (1975-6), 495-510 (p. 500).

⁴⁹ Sandra Djwa sees the idea of the European tour as the organising principle of the novel, in 'Ut Pictura Poesis: The Making of a Lady', *The Henry James Review*, 7:2-3 (1986), 72-85.

the idea that taste is an innately feminine characteristic (see Chapter One). Gordon extends the female associations of 'good taste', with a biological metaphor:

good taste is actually something that the body recognizes and a matter of biological survival; if a substance tastes good it is usually nourishing and safe to eat. If a woman *had* good taste, then, she effectively provided a kind of nourishment and sustenance.⁵⁰

More pertinent to this discussion is that 'every woman is a living example of good or bad taste as is shown by her dress and her immediate surroundings'.⁵¹ For example, Gordon states that the title of de Wolfe's *The House in Good Taste* gave the impression 'that the house is wearing its taste as a costume'.⁵² In *Portrait* taste is, more often than not, used as a costume. James gives us the key to this world in Madame Merle's discussion of the 'envelope of circumstances', which is worth quoting at length for its relevance to my thesis as a whole:

'I don't care anything about his house,' said Isabel.
'That's very crude of you. When you've lived as long as I you'll see that every human being has his shell and that you must take the shell into account. By the shell I mean the whole envelope of circumstances. There's no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we're each of us made up of some cluster of appurtenances. What shall we call our "self"? Where does it begin? where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us – and then it flows back again. I know a large part of myself is in the clothes I choose to wear. I've a great respect for things! One's self – for other people – is one's expression of one's self; and one's house, one's furniture, one's garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps – these things are all expressive.' (*PL*, 201)

It is only through an understanding of material culture that Isabel can 'do' the right thing, but a shell can also be a disguise, calculated to give a certain impression, like Eugenia's layers of fabric. Madame Merle has 'great good taste' (*PL*, 210), but it is mainly concerned with etiquette and the appearance of social acceptability, her greatest weapon in the social world that denies her overt contact with her own daughter. Although Isabel admires and wants to imitate her, for 'it was a pleasure to see a character so completely equipped for the social battle', rather sadly her survival is dependent on a lack of emotion: 'she fell in love nowadays with nothing' (*PL*, 401). Madame Merle recognises the mercenary aspect of her pose in a throwaway remark worthy of Wilde: 'I'm always kind to people who have good Louis Quatorze. It's very rare now, and there's no telling

⁵⁰ Gordon, p. 287.

⁵¹ Grace Starbird, 'The Relationship of Domestic Art to Fine Teaching', *Journal of Home Economics* 2:1 (1910), 19, quoted Gordon, p. 287.

⁵² Gordon, p. 287.

what one may get by it' (*PL*, 359).

Despite Madame Merle's lecture, Isabel does not see that Osmond's Florentine villa displays 'the mask, not the face of the house' (*PL*, 226). When Isabel inspects Gardencourt's paintings Ralph thinks: 'she was evidently a judge; she had a natural taste' (*PL*, 46), but her taste still needs to be educated. James does not condemn his heroine for her self-deception, for she is 'intended to awaken on the reader's part an impulse more tender' (*PL*, 52). Her capacity and willingness to expand her knowledge, like Dorothea's, is laudable, for she has 'a fixed determination to regard the world as a place of brightness, of free expansion'. Isabel's 'certain nobleness of imagination [...] rendered her a good many services' but it also 'played her a great many tricks' (*PL*, 51). James's metaphor for her need for intellectual space is a garden:

her nature had, in her conceit, a certain garden-like quality, a suggestion of perfume and murmuring boughs, of shady bowers and lengthening vistas, which made her feel that introspection was, after all, an exercise in the open air (*PL*, 53-4).

However, it is within interiors that she mostly finds herself, for as Chase states,

the idea of leaving and entering a house, the contrast of different kinds of houses, the question of whether a house is a prison or the scene of liberation and fulfilment – these are the substance of the metaphors in *The Portrait of a Lady*.⁵³

Isabel needs to look carefully, using Madame Merle's 'respect for things' to judge the people she meets and the houses that James so vividly describes.

What Will She Do?

James tells us in the Preface, that his 'primary question' is 'well, what will she *do*?' (*PL*, xiv). This is loaded with moral implications – will she do the right thing? James's moral emphasis is different from Dorothea's self-questioning, 'what could she do, what ought she to do?' (*MM*, 50), deciding that her only outlet for self-expression is charitable work, like building houses. Everybody in *Portrait* watches intently to see where Isabel's personal whims will take her, and I have already noted Ralph's interest which leads him to provide her with a fortune to fulfil his voyeurism. The reader is also implicated in this process of seeing, and like Gwendolen before her, Isabel is framed and put before the

⁵³ Richard Chase, *The American Novel and its Tradition* (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1958), p. 121.

reader. Just as Eliot's question 'was she beautiful or not beautiful?' (*DD*, 3) involves moral and aesthetic judgements, this portrait of a young lady depends on looking, and, as in *Middlemarch*, the theme of seeing is full of ambiguities and ironies.⁵⁴

What Isabel does 'do' is get married, for the romantic plot is one which James feels 'is usually the one that tips the balance of interest' (*PL*, xiii). Her choice of husband is tinged with the concept of 'good taste', however she will be seduced by the outward appearance of things: in her inexperience and youth she fails to look beneath the surface. She first refuses Lord Warburton, 'a man of a good deal of charming taste' (*PL*, 71). Initially Isabel is attracted to Warburton's house, and the quiet, childlike contentedness of his unmarried sisters who sit in a 'wilderness of faded chintz' (*PL*, 76). However, it has lost the architectural purity of 'some of its best points' through modernisation, retaining only a painful 'ache of antiquity' (*PL*, 78). Warburton is unable to adapt the past with imagination, unlike the anglophile Touchett, whose 'real aesthetic passion' (*PL*, 6) has made Gardencourt a modern Eden.⁵⁵ Isabel leaves Warburton's home with 'a certain fear' (*PL*, 81), for *Lockleigh* is prison-like and to marry Warburton would prevent her 'doing' anything further.⁵⁶

Warburton's merit is his quintessential Englishness, but this is like 'the essence of great decent houses, [...] resembling their innermost fixtures and ornaments, not subject to vulgar shifting and removable only by some whole break-up' (*PL*, 290). This is an addition to the 1908 edition, and can be seen in the light of *Poynton*, which, as I will discuss in the next chapter, is worshipped in its aesthetic unity by Mrs Gereth for most of the novel until she learns to adapt to circumstances. Isabel has greater expectations from life than the "'splendid" security' of marriage to Warburton and his proposal makes her feel like 'some wild, caught creature in a vast cage' (*PL*, 108); she must experience life and its 'usual chances and dangers, [...] what most people know and suffer' (*PL*, 132). However, she is seduced by Gilbert Osmond, 'the man with the best taste in the

⁵⁴ See Van Ghent, pp. 215-218.

⁵⁵ See Gill, p. 43.

⁵⁶ 'Lockleigh is etymologically a 'locked garden'; 'leigh(ton) (or 'leek enclosure') being the area closed off from outside for cultivation – of agrarian forms, and by extension, of social forms', Eben Bass, 'Henry James and the English Country House', *Markham Review*, 2 (1970), 4-10 (p. 5), quoted Fischer, p. 57.

world' (*PL*, 427), and ends up in just such a cage, suffering more than she had bargained for. What she will 'do' is related to the contemporary concept of 'women's mission', often referred to in *Portrait*. Her aunt dreads that Isabel will arrive 'at the conviction that her mission in life's to prove that a stepmother may sacrifice herself – and that, to prove it, she must first become one' (*PL*, 277). Ironically, this is just what she does: 'her interview with the daughter of the house, I say, effectually settled th[e] question' of marriage to Osmond (*PL*, 315).

'Ah, there will be plenty of spectators' (*PL*, 149)

James's themes of seeing and collecting in his *Portrait* meet in the theory of the gaze. In Chapter Two I presented Johnson's discussion of how Eliot questions the monolithic male gaze, and both Dorothea and Isabel are 'viewed by other characters in relation to, or even as, artworks, and both struggle to see life and art for themselves'. Although Isabel states 'I only want to see for myself' (*PL*, 150), Johnson argues that James's narrative viewpoint just as often prioritises the 'monolithic gaze of the male'. Using another gallery scene, Johnson demonstrates how James's narration 'bases its gaze on the traditional masculinist assumptions which inform Western esthetics'.

Although Warburton and Isabel are meant to be viewing paintings, 'it is Isabel who is the visual object' in this scene, as in so many others.⁵⁷

Isabel walked to the other side of the gallery and stood there showing him her charming back, her light slim figure, the length of her white neck as she bent her head, and the density of her dark braids. She stopped in front of a small picture *as if* for the purpose of examining it; and there was something so young and free in her movement that her very pliancy seemed to mock at him. Her eyes, however, saw nothing. (*PL*, 131, emphasis added)

Her pose and the emphasis on her white neck and hairstyle are like Gwendolen's mirror images (*DD*, 214), and Johnson points out that she is 'seductively complicit' in the way she positions herself as a work of art.⁵⁸ However, the narrator emphasises that she is unconscious of her effect (she 'saw nothing') and Isabel's usual desire to see is eliminated, underlining 'how this moment belongs exclusively to the male gaze'. Isabel

⁵⁷ Johnson, p. 40.

⁵⁸ See Berger, p. 55.

'does not challenge the viewing possession of herself, even by returning the gaze',⁵⁹ and this lack of tension among the viewing positions makes the reader examine Isabel through Warburton's desire. However, Johnson points out that this scene takes place *after* Isabel has refused his proposal, Warburton's 'gaze has already been frustrated'. Isabel's pose seems 'to mock him' and the male position is thus 'fraught with secrets and problems'. Johnson argues that this allows Warburton's gaze to be presented 'as civilized and gracious';⁶⁰ perhaps this is an element of his taste, but the continual *jouissance* of voyeurism is also typical of Jamesian deferment of gratification.

Ralph's pleasure in spectatorship is clearly connected with Western aesthetics: 'a real little passionate force to see at play is the finest thing in nature. It's finer than the finest work of art' and his cousin's appearance excites him as much as receiving 'a Titian, by the post' (*PL*, 63). However, Johnson contends that James's narrative accrues drama in the way it 'provokes tensions in and questions the very male gaze it authorizes'.⁶¹ I have already noted Ralph's voyeurism and scopophilia and he puts pressure on Isabel to fulfil his 'thrill of seeing' (*PL*, 149), but he also 'dissociates himself from the power of the male gaze by claiming that his spectatorship is intertwined with, somehow dependent on his powerlessness and impotence'. Another tension arises when Isabel attempts 'to find room for a female gaze, while acting within a system that is based on a male gaze which insistently hides and denies its power'.⁶² She states 'I only want to see for myself' (*PL*, 150), but counters Ralph's insistence on binary oppositions of gender: 'I don't think I want to see it as the young men want to see it' (*PL*, 150), for 'women are not like men' (*PL*, 151).⁶³ Johnson holds that a paradox is inevitable: when women 'wish to gaze at themselves they inevitably occupy the male position – wanting to see and not to feel'.⁶⁴ Isabel is trapped within and defined by the system of male gaze.

59 Johnson, p. 41.

60 Johnson, p. 44.

61 Johnson, p. 42.

62 Johnson, p. 43.

63 The ways Jane Campion highlights gendered ways of looking, using cinematic styles, in her film of *Portrait* are discussed by Nancy Bentley, "'Conscious Observation of a Lovely Woman": Jane Campion's *Portrait* in Film', *The Henry James Review*, 18:2 (1997), 174-179. *The Portrait of a Lady*. Dir. Jane Campion. Gramercy Pictures. 1996.

64 Johnson, p. 43.

Osmond is 'the incarnation of taste' (*PL*, 345) and 'the ultimate representative of the male gaze'. Although he makes its power obvious, treating both wife and daughter as art objects, he also provides Isabel 'with the best opportunity to make a spectacle of herself for Ralph, for the narrator, and for the reader'.⁶⁵ All the negative aspects of the system are ascribed to him and he has a 'faculty for making everything wither that he touched, spoiling everything for her that he looked at. [...] It was as if he had had the evil eye' (*PL*, 424). This parallels Grandcourt's gaze like wavy glass that 'distorts form' (*DD*, 576). However, in Johnson's argument 'Osmond is condemned because *he alone attains his object*, collapsing desire and possession'.⁶⁶ James's complex destabilisation of viewing positions allows him both to authorise the gaze and condemn Osmond for displaying Isabel in a manner of which the narrative takes full advantage.

'The figure has [...] been placed' (*PL*, x)

To illustrate her emotional and intellectual development, and further define what she has 'done', James shows Isabel framed as a portrait at significant points of the novel.

Wiesenfarth has noted how these correspond with her status as girl, wife and the lady of the title.⁶⁷ Each time, she is described through the eyes of a man, framed and made passive by the male gaze, motionless in a doorway dressed in black. These portraits are also dependent upon their backgrounds, the houses in which Isabel is posed.

The first chapter is all a build-up to Isabel's entrance, into the scene of stimulating and rewarding cultural interchange between America and Europe. In his study of the literary English country house, Gill states that of all James's country houses, Gardencourt is 'the closest to the ideal'.⁶⁸ As Sarah Luria has noted, in retiral Touchett has 'stopped grasping or "touching" and simply admires'; he has become 'an organic and compelling merger between American business and European manners'.⁶⁹ Gardencourt

⁶⁵ Johnson, p. 45.

⁶⁶ Johnson, p. 45, emphasis added.

⁶⁷ Joseph Wiesenfarth, 'A Woman in *The Portrait of a Lady*', *The Henry James Review*, 7:2-3 (1986), 18-28, (p. 26). See also Fischer, p. 57, n. 12, discussing Michael Routh, 'Isabel Archer's Double Exposure: A Repeated Scene in *The Portrait of a Lady*', *The Henry James Review*, 1 (1980), 262-3.

⁶⁸ Gill, p. 44.

⁶⁹ Sarah Luria, 'The Architecture of Manners: Henry James, Edith Wharton, And The Mount', *American Quarterly*, 49 (1997), 298-327 (p. 323).

is 'a real home', for it 'is not an assertion of his individual greatness, but rather a sign of his identification with, and appreciation for a larger human history and social order'.⁷⁰

This is Eliot's sympathy at work again, but also appropriate taste.

We first see Isabel through Ralph's eyes, a nameless 'tall girl in a black dress, who at first sight looked pretty', framed by the 'ample doorway' (*PL*, 15, 16). She is about to walk outside onto the lawn which is 'but the extension of a luxurious interior' (*PL*, 6).

We are in no doubt of her aesthetic and dramatic impact, for Warburton pronounces: 'you wished a while ago to see my idea of an interesting woman. There it is!' (*PL*, 21).

Johnson points out how this scene parallels the opening of the classic Hollywood film described by Mulvey, where the woman is 'object of the combined gaze of spectator and all the male protagonists in the film. She is isolated, glamorous, on display,

sexualised'.⁷¹ However, in addition Isabel has 'an eye that denoted clear perception'

(*PL*, 16) and her 'impressions were numerous' (*PL*, 19). This is a Paterian term of

aesthetic judgement: 'it is with this movement, with the passage and dissolution of

impressions, images, sensations, that analysis leaves off'.⁷² Henrietta notices that Isabel

has 'been affected by [her] new surroundings' (*PL*, 98), which are described in terms of privacy, good taste and harmony with nature:

the large, low rooms, with brown ceilings and dusky corners, the deep embrasures and curious casements, the quiet light on dark, polished panels, the deep greenness outside, that seemed always peeping in, the sense of well-ordered privacy in the centre of a 'property' – a place where sounds were felicitously accidental, where the tread was muffled by the earth itself and in the thick mild air all friction dropped out of contact and all shrillness out of talk – these things were much to the taste of our young lady, whose taste played a considerable part in her emotions. (*PL*, 55)

She has 'never seen anything so beautiful' (*PL*, 19), 'a picture made real [...] the rich perfection of Gardencourt at once revealed a world and gratified a need' (*PL*, 54). This aesthetic need is also emotional, for despite her wish to see the world, Isabel is most at home in such 'a sanctuary' (*PL*, 561).

Chronologically, the earliest interior Isabel is pictured in is the 'office' at Albany, where James describes her as a child and young woman on the threshold, both physically

⁷⁰ Luria, p. 323.

⁷¹ Johnson, p. 4, Mulvey, p. 21.

⁷² Pater, Conclusion, *The Renaissance*, p. 188, emphasis added. See Djwa, pp. 73-75.

and in terms of her 'career'.⁷³ This room is in a kind of limbo, situated behind the 'condemned' second front door of the house, filled with an air of 'mysterious melancholy' and eerily lit by windows covered with green paper (*PL*, 25). As both Fischer and Stallman have argued, it is a prison like Osmond's Roccanera.⁷⁴ However, it is also a refuge and colour symbolism points up its complex relationship to similarly green Gardencourt.⁷⁵ Like Maggie, young Isabel educates herself through reading and in this 'chamber of disgrace' for old furniture, she has 'established relations almost human' with an old hair-cloth sofa (Isabel's hair shirt) 'to which she had confided a hundred childish sorrows' (*PL*, 25), rather like Maggie's fetish (see Chapter Two). Isabel is ruled by her 'ridiculously active' imagination (*PL*, 32), but unlike Maggie, she has been both 'spoiled and neglected' and the 'unpleasant had been even too absent from her knowledge' (*PL*, 33). The world is 'a strange, unseen place on the other side – [...] a region of delight or of terror' (*PL*, 25). Her consciousness is described in terms of a house: 'when the door was not open it jumped out of the window. She was not accustomed indeed to keep it behind bolts' (*PL*, 32). However, she has 'never opened the bolted door' of the 'office' and has 'no wish to look out' of the windows to assure herself 'that the vulgar street lay beyond' (*PL*, 25).

The room provides a stable base, for her childhood was spent travelling Europe with 'no permanent home' (*PL*, 33), but her preferred existence is in the realm of the imagination, protected by these bolts. As Luria states, 'the hope of ever actually possessing her vision [...] is renounced for the ultimately more satisfying ability to wonder just what might be there'.⁷⁶ The metaphor is repeated during Osmond's proposal, which suggests 'the slipping of a fine bolt – backward, forward, she couldn't have said which' (*PL*, 310), an image evoking both entrapment and safety, along with sexual connotations. This strikes Isabel with 'dread', and she imagines her 'passion' as

⁷³ See Elizabeth Sabiston, 'Isabel Archer: The Architecture of Consciousness and the International Theme', *The Henry James Review*, 7:2-3 (1986), 29-47, (p. 32).

⁷⁴ Fischer, p. 57. See Richard Stallman, *The Houses That James Built* (East Lansing: Michigan University Press, 1961), pp. 1-33.

⁷⁵ Fischer, p. 52; Gill, p. 49.

⁷⁶ Luria, p. 311.

stored in a bank vault (*PL*, 310). Fischer has noted that the 'vulgar street' corresponds to the 'base passions', and Isabel carries the 'protective room' with her throughout the novel, because her 'operative psychological principle [...] is avoidance, non-involvement, solitude'.⁷⁷ Although Ralph provides her with money so she can find space, she is attracted to a man whose house is prison-like.

There is 'something grave and strong' about Osmond's Florentine villa: 'it looked somehow as if, once you were in, you would need an act of energy to get out' (*PL*, 253). The 'imposing front' has a 'somewhat incommunicative character' and is like a mask concealing the true nature of its owner: 'it had heavy lids, but no eyes; the house in reality looked another way – looked off behind' (*PL*, 226). It is the most anthropomorphic house in the novel, every aspect reflecting its owner who, as Ralph recognises, aims

to surround his interior with a sort of invidious sanctity, to tantalize society with a sense of exclusion, to make people believe his house was different from every other, to impart to the face that he presented to the world a cold originality (*PL*, 393)

This is what he makes Isabel believe, even though his home is a Gothic fortress with 'massively cross-barred' windows onto the piazza like 'jealous apertures' which 'seemed less to offer communication with the world than to defy the world to look in' (*PL*, 226-7). Tristram points out that as Osmond has the highest aesthetic sensibility in *Portrait*, his house discloses exactly what he wants it to; a person with less taste would make unconscious disclosures.⁷⁸

Inside is a 'less sombre' setting for Osmond's collection of paintings and *objets d'art*, 'a seat of ease, indeed of luxury' which fulfils all the design reformers' requirements for collecting. Here are antiques and medieval pieces and the house shows the mark of ages with its 'faded hangings of damask and tapestry, [...] chests and cabinets of carved and time-polished oak'. This is combined perfectly with contemporary comforts: 'large allowance had been made for a lounging generation; it was to be noticed that all the chairs were deep and well padded' and there is an 'ingenious' modern writing desk (*PL*, 227). The collection is artistically 'scattered' about, with pictures on easels and 'books in profusion' (*PL*, 260, 227). This would seem to fit Eliot's requirements for a

⁷⁷ Fischer, pp. 52-3; p. 57, n. 17.

⁷⁸ Tristram, p. 231.

good home, but Osmond's only strength is in the choosing and arrangement of beautiful things which becomes increasingly heartless as the novel progresses, as with Acton. As Ralph states, 'everything he did was pose' (*PL*, 394), and he consults 'his taste in everything – his taste alone' to judge both people and objects (*PL*, 262). However, as Madame Merle realises, Osmond's decor is also the way to snare the impressionable Isabel:

she looked about the room – at the old cabinets, pictures, tapestries, surfaces of faded silk. 'Your rooms at least are perfect. I'm struck with that afresh whenever I come back; I know none better anywhere. You understand this sort of thing as nobody anywhere does. You've such adorable taste.'

'I'm sick of my adorable taste,' said Gilbert Osmond.
'You must nevertheless let Miss Archer come and see it. I've told her about it.'
(*PL*, 242)

When Isabel is shown the collection, with her eagerness for new impressions 'there was of course as yet no thought of getting out, but only of advancing' (*PL*, 253).

Isabel is overwhelmed by a mass of learning and beauty she feels inadequate to cope with, and falls under Osmond's spell: 'his pictures, his medallions and tapestries were interesting; but after a while Isabel felt the owner much more so, and independently of them, thickly as they seemed to overhang him' (*PL*, 261). He demonstrates connoisseurship, showing her the 'highly curious' signs 'on the underside of old plates and in the corner of sixteenth-century drawings' (*PL*, 261). However, she mistakenly thinks that this short lesson gives her the discernment to understand character: 'the place, the occasion, the combination of people, signified more than lay on the surface; she would try to understand' (*PL*, 256). But she ignores the external appearance of the villa and is seduced by its owner and his collection: 'I don't see any horrors anywhere [...]. Everything seems to me beautiful and precious' (*PL*, 255). Her mind is made up to marry Osmond when she goes to the villa when only Pansy is at home. His rooms are described like the 'office':

the hour that Isabel spent in Mr. Osmond's beautiful empty, dusky rooms – the windows had been half-darkened, to keep out the heat, and here and there, through an easy crevice, the splendid summer day peeped in, lighting a gleam of faded colour or tarnished gilt in the rich gloom. (*PL*, 315)

So much is the 'cicerone' identified with his 'museum' that the collection seems not even to need his presence for its effect (*PL*, 242).

Bad interior decoration also has a place in *Portrait*, and is given a pointed moral slant. It is the setting of Osmond's proposal:

Isabel sat alone in a wilderness of yellow upholstery. The chairs and sofas were orange; the walls and windows were draped in purple and gilt. The mirrors, the pictures had great flamboyant frames; the ceiling was deeply vaulted and painted over with naked muses and cherubs. For Osmond the place was ugly to distress; the false colours, the sham splendour were like vulgar, bragging, lying talk. (*PL*, 306-7)

The hotel room is showy '*tous-les-Louis*' style and causes Osmond distress, as we shall see Mrs Gereth also suffers at Waterbath. Interestingly the room is a 'wilderness of yellow', a colour I have already associated with dubious morality. Here, it is Osmond's motivations which should be scrutinised:

'Don't you remember my telling you that one ought to make one's life a work of art? You looked rather shocked at first; but then I told you that it was exactly what you seemed to me to be trying to do with your own.'

She looked up from her book. 'What you despise most in the world is bad, is stupid art.'

'Possibly. But yours seem to me very clear and very good.' (*PL*, 307-8)

Despite his alleged dislike for lies, Osmond does not really want Isabel to live her own life; he thinks that 'a woman's natural mission is to be where she's most appreciated' (*PL*, 264). Since Isabel is 'better worth looking at than most works of art' (*PL*, 46), Osmond will add her to his collection as the portrait of a beautiful woman, who will bring him the added advantage of a fortune. His own home also has a 'yellow Empire *salottino*' (*PL*, 372), but although this is authentic, Rosier thinks it is 'very ugly' and 'cold' (*PL*, 371), like Osmond's morality. Because of his highly developed aesthetic taste, Osmond continually describes people as works of art,⁷⁹ but therein lies his heartlessness.

'The collector was the true inhabitant of the interior'⁸⁰

Morally, like Grandcourt, Osmond is an absence not a presence, and he is physically described almost by omission. The upward turn of his moustache 'suggested that he was a gentleman who studied style' (*PL*, 228) and this is the most important part of his character, his concern for surface appearances. Although Isabel interprets his sharp

⁷⁹ See Tristram, p. 119; and Margaret Gilmore, 'The Commodity World Of *The Portrait Of A Lady*', *New England Quarterly*, 59 (1986), 51-74.

⁸⁰ Benjamin, p. 168.

features as a 'fineness' both moral and in appearance: 'she had never met a person of so fine a grain' (*PL*, 261), this relates to Grandcourt's 'fastidiousness' (*DD*, 259). Ralph sees Osmond completely negatively, composed solely of 'a great dread of vulgarity, that's his special line; he hasn't any other that I know of' (*PL*, 249). Osmond is defined by his collection, but this is a substitute for true identity. The Tullivers and Mrs Gereth find this out to their cost.

In his discussion of the cultural and literary interchange of Aestheticism across the Atlantic at the end of the nineteenth century, Freedman has noted that 'whatever [James's] reservations, British aestheticism continually presented itself in his fiction as well as his criticism as a problem demanding careful consideration'. Freedman has convincingly argued that although Osmond is 'perhaps the most odious character in James's fiction',⁸¹ he is not alone in his aestheticism. All the characters to some extent, even Isabel, participate 'in Osmond's aestheticizing vision of human beings as works of art'.⁸² James describes Aestheticism as an 'inane and dull dispute over the "immoral" subject and the moral' in the Preface (*PL*, viii), and though he utilises the descriptive force of *objets d'art* he also reveals the emptiness at the heart of his 'sterile dilettante' Osmond (*PL*, 345). James's response to Aestheticism was equivocal and multi-faceted; he was negative towards the 'decadence' of writers like Wilde, calling him an 'unclean beast' when he met him in 1882.⁸³ However, many of James's characters are modelled on real aesthetes or satiric representations familiar from du Maurier's *Punch* cartoons. As I discussed above, James achieves this by privileging 'the sheer act of seeing' in interpretation, thus establishing a point of contact with Pater's heightened vision. Osmond's villainy is 'intimately linked' to his aestheticism, and it is through Isabel's marital experience that James shows how he treats everyone he meets as an object 'for his mental portrait gallery, to be collected or discarded at whim'.⁸⁴ Tintner details this further:

⁸¹ Freedman, p. 395.

⁸² Freedman, p. 396.

⁸³ *Life*, IV, 43. See Stambaugh for a detailed discussion of James's opinions of Wilde and du Maurier.

⁸⁴ Freedman, p. 396.

each character appended by Osmond to his collection is correlated with a work of art introduced at that point in the narrative when the character stands most in danger of being totally, partially, or potentially controlled by the aesthete.⁸⁵

Osmond's comment that one 'ought to make one's life a work of art' (*PL*, 307) and his taste for collecting bric-a-brac align him with the British Aesthetes I discussed in Chapter One. James describes him with the satire of du Maurier's cartoons which were running in *Punch* at the same time as *Portrait* was being serialised in *Macmillan's Magazine*; as Warburton comments, 'there's a great rage for that sort of thing now' (*PL*, 385). Using 'The Six-Mark Tea-Pot' (plate 10), Freedman concludes that for both James and du Maurier, to live life as a work of art 'ultimately reduces itself to an exercise in triviality, inconsequentiality, and finally, poor taste'.⁸⁶ Osmond's 'indolent' (*PL*, 197) Wildean aestheticism and his social aspirations are denounced by Ralph's evaluation that 'everything he did was pose – pose so subtly considered that if one were not on the lookout one mistook it for impulse' (*PL*, 394). James's villain is complex, and shares characteristics with the more benign characters, like Isabel and Rosier the collector of porcelain, that 'cause them to be defeated or trapped by Osmond'.⁸⁷ Conversely, as Sabiston has pointed out, the down to earth and irreproachable Henrietta and Goodwood lack a necessary awareness of the past because of their inability to appreciate aesthetic beauty.⁸⁸

Freedman points out in particular the textual similarities between descriptions of Isabel and *The Renaissance*:

to burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life. [...] Our one chance lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time. [...] Only be sure it is passion – that it does yield you this fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness.⁸⁹

Isabel has a 'flame-like spirit', she responds with 'quickened consciousness' to Lord Warburton and her impressions of St Peter's are a number of 'pulsations' (*PL*, 52, 66, 287). While Isabel is living life to the full in a Paterian endeavour, her naiveté leads her to overvalue Osmond and his connoisseurship: it is because he seems 'a specimen apart'

⁸⁵ Adeline R. Tintner, 'The Spoils of Henry James', *PMLA*, 61 (1946), 239-251, (p. 243).

⁸⁶ Freedman, p. 396.

⁸⁷ Freedman, p. 397.

⁸⁸ Sabiston, p. 40.

⁸⁹ Pater, 'Conclusion', *The Renaissance*, pp. 188-190.

from all the others around her that she falls in love with him, as the most interesting part of his collection (*PL*, 261). However, 'seeking to collect a collector, she finds herself collected', and Freedman observes that none of the characters can escape the taint of 'Osmond's reifying, manipulative aestheticism' which sees people as works of art.⁹⁰

The second framed 'portrait' of Isabel comes halfway through the novel when she appears for the first time as Mrs Osmond. The symmetry of the scene points up the differences to her unmarried self, and we see her through the eyes of a childhood friend, Ned Rosier. Dressed in black velvet and 'framed in the gilded doorway, she struck our young man as the picture of a gracious lady' (*PL*, 367). As Wiesenfarth points out, this door is completely internal,⁹¹ and her stillness further marks her as an artwork in Osmond's collection: 'she had lost something of that quick eagerness [...] she had more of the air of being able to wait' (*PL*, 367). Like Gwendolen, she is trapped, powerless, within the gilded cage of marriage. Palazzo Roccanera (black rock) is

a high house in the very heart of Rome; a dark and massive structure overlooking a sunny piazzetta in the neighbourhood of the Farnese Palace. [...] [A] kind of domestic fortress, a pile which bore a stern old Roman name, which smelt of historic deeds, of crime and craft and violence, which was mentioned in 'Murray' and visited by tourists who looked, on a vague survey, disappointed and depressed, and which had frescoes by Caravaggio in the piano nobile and a row of mutilated statues and dusty urns in the wide, nobly-arched loggia overhanging the damp court where a fountain gushed out of a mossy niche. (*PL*, 364)

This palace evokes murder and violence for Rosier, but 'local colour' in terms of history and the dramatic frescoes for Osmond. Its enclosure also fulfils Isabel's wish to 'choose a corner and cultivate that' (*PL*, 341). However, Rosier is surprised to learn Isabel does not even decorate the rooms she lives in: 'has she no taste?' (*PL*, 371). It is all left to her husband who, she rather curtly states, 'has a genius for upholstery' (*PL*, 385).

However, Osmond cannot create, merely arrange; he lives in a 'sorted, sifted, arranged world' (*PL*, 262). His only artistic endeavour is a watercolour *copy* of 'a drawing of an antique coin' (*PL*, 534); this is his metaphorical 'portrait' of Isabel and symbolises her true attraction, money.⁹² Although Pansy observes that Isabel has 'a great deal' of taste (*PL*, 371), Isabel takes refuge in inaction: 'I have no ideas. I can never propose anything'

⁹⁰ Freedman, p. 397; Tintner (1946), p. 142.

⁹¹ Wiesenfarth (1986), p. 26.

⁹² Tintner (1946), p. 142-4.

(*PL*, 385). The experience of three years of marriage has made James's 'artist manqué' realise the limits of her vision; she does not have the 'control to be an artist', as Sabiston argues.⁹³ Pansy states that her 'taste' is 'more for literature' and 'conversation' (*PL*, 371); perhaps this is why Isabel's most artistic moment is James's 'representation simply of her motionlessly *seeing*' (*PL*, xvii), thinking about the relationships between people.

The whole of Chapter 42 is a portrait of Isabel's consciousness, framed this time by what she does before and after she realises Osmond's relationship to Madame Merle. She sees them in a rare moment of inattention to etiquette: 'what struck Isabel first was that he was sitting while Madame Merle stood; there was an anomaly in this that arrested her' (*PL*, 408). This is a subtle echo of the scene in *Middlemarch* where Dorothea comes across Ladislaw and Rosamond together (*MM*, 832). Isabel's 'impression' is like a flash-photograph, or *tableau vivant*:

the thing made an image, lasting only a moment, like a sudden flicker of light. Their relative positions, their absorbed mutual gaze, struck her as something detected. But it was all over by the time she had fairly seen it. (*PL*, 408)

Their 'mutual gaze' exposes their intimate relation and results in Isabel's 'extraordinary meditative vigil' by the fire (*PL*, xvii). A woman must sit still to have her portrait painted, and 'without her leaving her chair', this chapter is 'designed to have all the vivacity of incident and all the economy of picture'. Like 'the house of fiction', this 'portrait' is a metaphor for interiority and conceptions of consciousness, meant to 'show what an "exciting" inward life may do for the person leading it' (*PL*, xvii). This is related to the Modernist fictional technique 'stream of consciousness', a term first coined by William James in *Principles of Psychology* (1890). Isabel thinks over what her marriage has become and realises that her husband hates her, for she has not fitted into his ideal: 'he would have liked her to have nothing of her own but her pretty appearance' (*PL*, 428), instead she still has some ideas of her own. However, she had not realised this until 'he had led her into the mansion of his own habitation, then, then she had seen where she really was' (*PL*, 429).

⁹³ Sabiston, p. 40.

Using Bachelard's psychological study of space, Fischer explains James's 'intuitively appropriate' use of architectural metaphors:

the space that each character inhabits becomes a manifestation of the individual personality at the same time that the psyche metaphorically becomes a house with separate rooms. The image of house allows a medium for personal expression while it imposes restrictive boundaries in the mind.⁹⁴

As Isabel sits still, she moves in her mind and imagines the metaphorical house she is trapped in, Osmond's mind:

she could live it over again, the incredulous terror with which she had taken the measure of her dwelling. Between those four walls she had lived ever since; they were to surround her for the rest of her life. It was the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation. Osmond's beautiful mind gave it neither light nor air; Osmond's beautiful mind indeed seemed to peep down from a small high window and mock at her. (*PL*, 429)

She has finally realised the true nature of Osmond's physical houses, prison-like structures of perfect taste in which she must suffer after having made the wrong choice.

In a strikingly similar metaphor to Dorothea (*MM*, 227-8), Isabel has 'suddenly found the infinite vista of a multiplied life to be a dark, narrow alley with a dead wall at the end' (*PL*, 424). Yet, unlike Casaubon, Osmond is actively cruel:⁹⁵

of course it had not been physical suffering; for physical suffering there might have been a remedy. She could come and go; she had her liberty; her husband was perfectly polite. He took himself so seriously; it was something appalling. Under all his culture, his cleverness, his amenity, under his good-nature, his facility, his knowledge of life, his egotism lay hidden like a serpent in a bank of flowers. (*PL*, 429)

The metaphoric similarities to heartless Grandcourt are striking: Osmond's 'appalling' politeness hides his evil, serpent-like ego. Isabel's later disenchantment with her husband provides a different view of aestheticism, the heightening of perception which she demonstrates in her silent reverie at the fire in Chapter 42. Freedman argues that through Isabel's contemplation of the scene she has just witnessed, of Osmond and Mme Merle in intimate conversation, she 'achieves a moment of vision experienced as an end in itself', a 'point of contact'⁹⁶ between the aestheticism of James and Pater, a quickened

⁹⁴ Fischer, p. 49. She refers to Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (1958; trans. 1964; rpt. Boston: Beacon, 1969). Fryer and Mulvey are also influenced by Bachelard. Fryer, p. 382, n. 6; Laura Mulvey, 'Pandora: Topographies of the Mask and Curiosity' in Beatriz Colomina, ed., *Sexuality and Space* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), pp. 53-71, (p. 54).

⁹⁵ For a comparison of Osmond and Casaubon, see Wiesenfarth (1986), pp. 24-5.

⁹⁶ Freedman, p. 397.

consciousness through intensity, achieved here through high emotional drama, rather than 'the love of art for art's sake'. Thus value is given to 'esthesis'⁹⁷ which James describes as 'the mere still lucidity' in the Preface (*PL*, xvii) which seems to have been otherwise satirised or rejected.

Freedman also points out that during Isabel's ride through the *campagna*, after she has learned of her husband's deceit, there is 'profound sympathy' between Isabel and the countryside;⁹⁸ through the 'sadness of the scene' and the 'things that had crumbled for centuries' she has a 'haunting sense of the continuity of the human lot' (*PL*, 518). Rather than treating the scene as 'irrevocably other, as a collection of mute objects unconnected to human emotions and events' as Dorothea finds the Rome of her honeymoon, Isabel is able to return to the city with a sense of shared suffering rather than alienation, 'a companionship in endurance' (*PL*, 518). Like Dorothea's contemplation of the view, Isabel 'gazed through the veil of her personal sadness at the splendid sadness of the scene – at the dense, warm light, the far gradations and soft confusion of colour' (*PL*, 518-9). Dorothea escapes to the *campagna* in order to 'feel alone with the earth and sky, away from the oppressive masquerade of ages' (*MM*, 225) but can only find her place in the larger world on her return to Middlemarch. Isabel 'treats life in the spirit of art, as a generous, ennobling, and tragic spectacle'⁹⁹ and this gives her the strength to return to her husband. In contrast to Osmond's sterile, deadening collection of people as objects,¹⁰⁰ the aestheticism that James found so difficult to come to terms with, the character of Isabel 'enables him to suggest that there might be an aestheticism of imaginative freedom as well as one of narcissistic self-cultivation and self-indulgent posing'.¹⁰¹ James has thus developed Dorothea's redemptive contemplation of the world into one that can be learned through the contemplation of beauty. Johnson argues that this is when Isabel interiorises the gaze:

97 Freedman, p. 398.

98 Freedman, p. 398.

99 Freedman, p. 398.

100 His name emphasises his moral deadness: he is the bones of the world. Latin: 'os', bone; 'mond', world.

101 Freedman, p. 398.

she had long before this taken old Rome into her confidence for in a world of ruins the ruin of her happiness seemed a less unnatural catastrophe. She rested her weariness upon things that had crumbled for centuries and yet still were upright; she dropped her secret sadness into the silence of lonely places, where its very modern quality detached itself and grew objective, so that as she sat in a sun-warmed angle on a winter's day, or stood in a mouldy church to which no one came, she could almost smile at it and think of its smallness. Small it was, in the large Roman record, and her haunting sense of the continuity of the human lot easily carried her from the less to the greater. (*PL*, 517-8)

Isabel's position suggests a statue, which augments the intermingling of her personal tragedy with Rome's, leading Johnson to see this as 'her apotheosis as a character and a representation of woman, as subject and object'.¹⁰²

Our last portrait of Isabel is through the eyes of the rejected Goodwood. She is dressed in mourning for Ralph and once more at the door of Gardencourt, this time pausing only briefly on her way *inside*. Isabel moves out of the gaze, into silence; it is Henrietta who tells Goodwood she has gone back to Rome. She retreats to the 'sanctuary' of the house with its 'deepest shade' (*PL*, 560, 581) to rally for her return along the 'very straight path' (*PL*, 591) to Rome and Osmond. Puritanically, she realises that 'certain obligations were involved in the very fact of marriage, and were quite independent of the quantity of enjoyment extracted from it' (*PL*, 581). Perhaps, as Chase and Fischer argue, she 'has a fatal susceptibility to imprisonment worse than she has escaped',¹⁰³ or as Johnson argues, her final return to Osmond 'implies that her struggle to see always takes place within a system that privileges male looking'.¹⁰⁴ She retreats to the interior, her safe place throughout *Portrait*. Isabel has worked out her own moral position through an appreciation of the world's suffering and rejects her viewer's appropriation and his kiss 'like white lightning' (*PL*, 591) because she made her choice a long time before: 'if ever a girl was a free agent, she had been. [...] She had looked, and considered, and chosen' (*PL*, 405). James writes that

the idea of the whole thing is that the poor girl, who has dreamed of freedom and nobleness, who has done, as she believes, a generous, natural, clear sighted thing, finds herself in reality ground in the very mill of the conventional.¹⁰⁵

As with so many of James's endings, happiness and fulfilment is not an option.

¹⁰² Johnson, p. 45.

¹⁰³ Chase, p. 122.

¹⁰⁴ Johnson, p. 53.

¹⁰⁵ James's notebook, in Bamberg, p. 625-6.

The conventions which constrain Isabel seem to be under the control of her role model, Madame Merle, 'the cleverest woman in the world' (*PL*, 553). She is morally aligned with Osmond, and the etiquette which constitutes her taste is a social shield for her emotions. Isabel notes the advantage of 'having made one's self a firm surface, a sort of corselet of silver' like Madame Merle (*PL*, 401). Her 'carefully arranged apartment' is full of 'jolly good things' (*PL*, 520, 358), but she tells Rosier she hates them. Like Isabel she has become a victim of 'taste' and Osmond, for she will never have a home with her daughter. Her unhappy life is emphasised by her metaphoric identification with porcelain.¹⁰⁶ Rather ironically she describes herself to Isabel as a 'shockingly chipped and cracked' pot which has been 'cleverly mended' (*PL*, 192); she has seen much of life and has hidden her moral flaws. But they are not concealed from Osmond, who 'dryly' points out the imperfections of her collection: one of her cups 'already has a wee bit of a tiny crack' (*PL*, 524). He excludes her from Pansy's life ('you had better leave it to me') and from doing anything good. Looking at the cup after he has left, she despairs: 'have I been so vile for nothing?' (*PL*, 552). On her last meeting with Isabel, Madame Merle is 'very unhappy' (*PL*, 559) and is leaving for America. Cast out of the worlds of both taste and human sympathy, she is doomed to wander like Eugenia. As she stated early in the novel, and as Isabel has found out to her cost: 'a woman, it seems to me, has no natural place anywhere' (*PL*, 196). As I shall discuss in the next chapter, another collector, Mrs Gereth, allows taste to become the sum of her world at the expense of human relationships and happiness.

¹⁰⁶ See J. Laird, 'Cracks In Precious Objects – Aestheticism And Humanity in *The Portrait Of A Lady*', *American Literature*, 52 (1981), 643-648.

Chapter Four

The Houses of Henry James: Rye and Poynton

Such is my admiration of this delightful country that I feel inclined to say that if you talk of anything private the presumption will be that it is beautiful.¹

Although James's concern with houses and other fictional spaces is present from his early work, he did not himself have a permanent residence of his own until the 1880s, after the publication of *Portrait*. He settled in England, and this is where he set *The Spoils of Poynton*. *Portrait*'s concerns of taste, beauty and morality are developed in this satiric novel, perhaps to their comic extremes. Although Mrs Gereth's 'ruling passion' for her *objets d'art* has 'in a manner despoiled her of her humanity' (*SP*, 58), she regains human compassion in a country cottage. James found a home of his own late in life, Lamb House in Rye.

On 6th March 1885 James took a 21 year lease on a fourth floor flat at 34 De Vere Gardens, Kensington, a large Victorian building with a view of Hyde Park. This was a more permanent step on the road to domesticity than ever before, and in letters he wrote about setting up house 'for once in a lifetime' (*Life*, III, 100). Previously, James had been peripatetic, travelling between Europe and America and living in lodgings, hotels or with friends. At the beginning of the 1880s, he had come to feel that London was where he should be permanently established. With his growing circle of friends among the literary and artistic inhabitants of the city, and the company of his clubs, as well as the continuing illness of his sister Alice, also in London, James no longer felt the need to fulfil the role of 'observant stranger' and visitor to the Old World (*Life*, III, 18). He described De Vere Gardens as 'my new-and-airy conducive-to-quiet-and-work apartment' and his desk sat in front of an enormous window (*Life*, III, 97). He wrote to his brother William:

the place is excellent in every respect, improves on acquaintance every hour and is, in

¹ Henry James, 'Abbeys and Castles', *English Hours*, ed. by Alma Louise Rowe (London: Heinemann, 1960), first published *Lippincott's Magazine*, 20 (October 1877), pp. 140-150, (p. 140).

particular, flooded with light like a photographer's studio. I commune with the unobstructed sky and have an immense bird's eye view of housetops and streets. My rooms are very pretty as well as very convenient, and will be more so when little by little I have got more things.²

In his new state of domesticity, he threw himself into the purchase of furnishings, and even managed to acquire a longed-for pet, a dachshund named Tosca, the first of many dogs. His choice of interior decoration seems to have been primarily decided upon by Victorian ideas of comfort. Edel describes the flat in details gleaned from various letters:

there would be no Chippendale, he assured his friends, and no treasures and spoils: he wanted large fat bourgeois sofas, solid tables and chairs: nothing original, 'expectedness everywhere.' For his sitting-room he chose Whistlerian blues and yellows, and in his salon the 'richest crimson'. (*Life*, III, 97)

This all seems to have been in fairly typical Victorian taste and also in a style to suit the age of the building. Whistler had first decorated his own home in contrasting blues and yellows in the late 1860s, and his unusual preference in paint colours had become popular and even commonplace by the time James was setting up home twenty years later. Edel's use of the word 'spoils' is a deliberate reference to *The Spoils of Poynton* which James would write twelve years later and the grand antique treasures of Poynton Park. However, in his unradical decoration of De Vere Gardens, James is adhering to the concept of furnishing appropriate to the character of a house that is so important in the novel. James wrote to Grace Norton that the 'furnishing and arranging of my place has partly amused and partly exasperated and altogether beggared me', an experience rather like Eliot's (*Life*, III, 100). However, the luxury of living in his own home, once all the rooms were furnished, made him reluctant to consider letting the flat out at a later date to make some money.

In the decade that followed, James continued to make many visits to friends on the continent, but kept De Vere Gardens as his base. During this time, he suffered the disaster of his play *Guy Domville* in 1895, which marked the end of a long-cherished wish to be involved in the theatre. After this disappointment, Edel describes James as feeling 'homeless' in London society.³ He spent the summer of 1896 quietly exploring the countryside of Sussex and finishing *The Spoils*; he must have been thinking often on

² Henry James to William James, 9 March 1886, *HJL*, III, 114.

³ *Life*, IV, 152.

the concept of home. He described to William the three months he spent in a small house called Point Hill, overlooking Rye in Sussex: 'it is delightfully quiet and quaint and simple and salubrious, and the bliss of the rural solitude and peace and beauty are a balm to my spirit [...]. This little corner of the land endears itself to me' (*Life*, IV, 151). Before his tenancy was up, he decided to look for a permanent country retreat for himself. One of the houses that caught his eye during his exploration of picturesque Rye was Lamb House, a faded red-brick Georgian house at a curve of cobbled West Street (plate 48).⁴ It had been built in 1723 for one of the town's prominent families, the Lambs, several of whom had been mayors of Rye. At the back of the house was a small ivy-covered building called the 'banqueting room', with Roman arched bow windows looking out onto the street. Coincidentally, in the winter of 1895-6 James saw a watercolour of this room in the home of the architect Edward Warren.⁵ During his stay in Rye the next summer he grew fonder of the house and mentioned to a local ironmonger that he was house-hunting. The next summer he wrote to William of his dissatisfaction with his travels. He was

tired of oscillating between bad lodgings and expensive hotels. [... This will continue] until I can put my hand on the lowly refuge of my own, for which, from year to year, I thirst [...]. On the day I do get it – for the day must come – I shall feel my fortune is made. It can only be made so; for to wander, even in the very slight degree in which I now do it, is more and more intolerable to me. (*Life*, IV, 184)

Strangely enough, a mere two weeks after this letter, and after a discussion with Warren about houses, which included Lamb House, the ironmonger sent James a note informing him that Lamb House was vacant. As he wrote to Warren, James received the news 'a little like a blow in the stomach'.⁶

His dream house was within his grasp, yet James held reservations about such a fundamental change in his style of life from the cosmopolitan to the bucolic. Edel stresses how the magic of wishing for the house and suddenly being in possession of it led to a feeling of doom and that his artistic response was the nightmare terror of *The Turn of the*

⁴ Since 1950 Lamb House has been under the care of the National Trust. The garden room was destroyed by bombing in 1940.

⁵ Edward Warren would later make James a gift of this watercolour and it hung in the drawing room at Lamb House, *HJL*, IV, 3); Houghton Library, Harvard University, reproduced Oliver Garnett, *Henry James and Lamb House* (London: National Trust, 1999), p. 6.

⁶ Henry James to Edward Warren, 15 September 1897, *HJL*, IV, 56.

Screw (*Life*, IV, 193). However, at the end of September 1897 James signed a 21 year lease, at £70 a year, which also bound him over to maintain the walled garden of just under an acre, for which he would employ a gardener. He relates this event to A.C.

Benson with some of the trepidation attributed to him by Edel's Freudian biography:

I am just drawing a long breath from having signed – a few moments since – a most portentous parchment: the lease of a smallish, charming, cheap old house in the country – down at Rye – for *twenty-one* years! (One would think I was your age!) But it is exactly what I want and secretly and hopelessly coveted (since knowing it) without dreaming it would ever fall. But it has fallen [...] together with every promise of yielding me an indispensable retreat from May to October.⁷

Despite the jaunty tone of this letter, his use of the words 'coveted' and 'fallen' bring to mind religious concepts of a Biblical fall from grace, or the word's common Victorian usage in terms of 'the fallen woman'. Perhaps James, who would remain a bachelor, was using the conceptual conflation of women and houses to emphasise the importance of the domestic relationship he was embarking on with Lamb House. This is an unusual slant on the idea of a retreat from the city: he would no longer be the homeless cosmopolitan wanderer, commenting on others from his position as undomesticated *flâneur*. But however 'portentous', the 'retreat' to Lamb House was 'indispensable'. As he approached fifty-five, his increasing age had manifested itself with the onset of rheumatism the previous year, which dramatically reduced his physical ability to write. Edel also identifies James suffering from a 'nervous breakdown [...] In part a failure of confidence' at this time, a depression which had been set off by the failure of *Guy Domville* (*Life*, IV, 10). However, James was to spend many happy and fruitful years at his country retreat:

I have made a few short absences, but the *pax britannica*⁸ of this (to me) so amiable & convenient retreat, awaited me, on my return from my American adventure, with such softly-encircling arms that I have, for the most part, sunk into it deep.⁹

Only illness forced him to leave Lamb House at the end of his life.

James relished the prospect of furnishing anew, as well as his chance to be host for a change. Although none of the rooms at Lamb House were large, there was space for a

⁷ Henry James to Arthur Christopher Benson, 25 September 1897, *HJL*, IV, 57.

⁸ Latin: British peace.

⁹ Henry James to Edith Wharton, 8 November 1905, Lyall H. Powers, *Henry James and Edith Wharton: Letters: 1900-1915* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1990), p. 54.

couple of visitors, with four bedrooms on the second floor and four for servants in the attic. One of the bedrooms was called the 'King's Room' as King George I had slept there in 1726. On the ground floor, leading out to the garden, there was a dining room and parlour, which James was assured were oak-panelled beneath the pasted paper. Off the hall, another panelled room became the 'telephone room' (plate 49) and H.G. Wells describes how 'on the table (an excellent piece) in his hall at Rye lay a number of caps and hats, each with its appropriate gloves and sticks'.¹⁰ The spacious 'garden room' (plate 50) outside was perfect for James to work in, with its view down the street, as one of his visitors, Mrs Fields, describes:

we found ourselves at the top of a silent little winding street, at a green door with a brass knocker, wearing the air of impenetrable respectability which is so well known in England [...]. It was a pretty interior – large enough for elegance, and simple enough to suit the severe taste of a scholar and private gentleman. Mr James was intent on the largest hospitality. We were asked upstairs over a staircase with a pretty balustrade and plain green drugget on the steps; everything was of the severest plainness, but in the best taste, 'not at all austere,' as he himself wrote us. [...] at an angle with the house is a building which he laughingly called the temple of the muse. This is his own place *par excellence*. A good writing-table and one for his secretary, a typewriter, books, and a sketch by du Maurier, with a few other pictures (rather mementoes than works of art), excellent windows with clear light, such is the temple! Evidently an admirable spot for his work.¹¹

Although Mrs Fields attributes the plain decor to James's bachelor status, he had taken pains to furnish this historic house in accordance with its age and character with discrimination and taste. In typical self-deprecation, he termed his eighteenth century pieces 'a handful of feeble relics' (*Life*, IV, 188). As with the furnishing of De Vere Gardens a decade before, he spent a great deal of time that winter visiting curiosity shops, and his pattern of purchasing follows Eliot's:

one must 'pick up' a sufficient quantity of ancient mahogany-and-brass odds and ends – a task really the more amusing, here [in Rye], where the resources are great, for having to be thriftily and cannily performed.¹²

He enlisted the help of Lady Wolsely, who had a connoisseur's eye for antiques, in the purchase of discreet Georgian mahogany, Chippendale, Sheraton and tapestry.¹³ As late as 1900, James was asking her advice:

¹⁰ H. G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, 2 vols (London: Gollancz, 1934), II, 537.

¹¹ From the diary of Mrs J. T. Fields, Monday 13 September 1898, *Life*, IV, 209.

¹² Henry James to Mrs William James, 1 December 1897, *HJL*, IV, 64.

¹³ Viscountess Louisa Erskine Wolsely, wife of Field Marshal Viscount Wolsely and correspondent of Henry James for forty years. Her own house in Portman Square was abundant in Queen Anne bric-a-brac 'to a degree that quite flattens one out', *Life*, IV, 111.

I wish I had thought to ask you to be so good as to look, for me, at a vast and massive old 'desk' that Jarvis is keeping for me – an escritoire that I am afraid to have him send down. I wish you to arm me with courage; and I fear I must wait for your next visit. I'm a little sorry he didn't go round with you; there is an out-of-the-wayness as to some of his things.¹⁴

This letter expresses the reliance he had on her opinion, as well as his interest in unusual furniture and antiques, quite different to his previous objective at De Vere Gardens.

Eventually there were six secretary desks at Lamb House (this was the home of a writer), one of which he sent to Hugh Walpole in 1913, as he couldn't help taking an 'interest of the tenderest and most practical' in the furnishing of The Cobbles.¹⁵

Of course, Lamb House held an extensive library, gradually moved from De Vere Gardens, which he let out from 1898, but James took a particular effort to furnish according to the character of the house, which was in harmony with his own needs and tastes:

the house is really quite charming enough in its particular character, and as to the stamp of its period, not to do violence to [it] by rash modernities, and I am developing, under its influence and its inspiration, the most avid and gluttonous eye and most infernal watching patience, in respect of lurking 'occasions' in not too-delusive Chippendale and Sheraton.¹⁶

This description of the influence Lamb House has imposed on his search for suitable furnishings, resulting in an 'avid and gluttonous eye', echoes the attitude of Mrs Gereth, 'the mistress of Poynton', towards her 'old things' in *The Spoils*, which had been published in book form nine months previously (*SP*, 61, 190). Poynton's primary aesthetic importance is its appearance as a 'complete work of art', and in searching for its furnishings, Mrs Gereth is described variously as a fanatical 'treasure hunter' and conqueror (*SP*, 41, 47). James seems to have been similarly bitten by the bug of the collector, though always with an eye to value, as with Mrs Gereth's 'almost infernal cunning, that had enabled her to do it all with a limited command of money' (*SP*, 42). To Lamb House he added old Dutch tiles, new Georgian style fireplaces of Siena marble (see plate 52) and fitted bookcases in the Morning Room. The decoration, and peeling-off of pasted paper to reveal the wooden panelling, was supervised by Edward Warren, whose

¹⁴ Henry James to Viscountess Wolseley, 10 June 1900, *HJL*, IV, 146-7. Jarvis was an antique dealer.

¹⁵ Henry James to Hugh Walpole, 16 March 1913, *HJL*, IV, 651.

¹⁶ Henry James to Mrs William James, 1 December 1897, *HJL*, IV, 64.

wife made up his curtains (*Life*, IV, 189). The simplicity of James's own bedroom was described in the diary of Theodora Bosanquet (his amanuensis from 1907). It was 'such a nice room, panelled, all quite simple, photographic reproductions on the wall. Two *charming* little silver candlesticks by the bed. A very good old mirror against the wall' (*Life*, V, 371).

In 1899, Lamb House came up for sale, and James, whose 'whole being cries out aloud for something that I can call my own', of course, bought it, for £2,000.¹⁷ His way of life had become less peripatetic with his increasing age and the necessity, through agonising writer's cramp developed in 1896, of dictating to an amanuensis with a typewriter. As he prophesied to A.C. Benson:

the merit of it is that it's such a place as I may, when pressed by the pinch of need, retire to with a certain shrunken decency and wither away – in a fairly cleanly and pleasantly melancholy manner – toward the tomb. It is really good enough to be a kind of little becoming, high-door'd, brass-knocked *façade* to one's life.¹⁸

James had the front door photographed by Alvin Langdon Coburn for the frontispiece of the New York edition of *The Awkward Age* (plate 51), and Mr Longdon's home in that novel holds an affectionate resemblance to Lamb House:

beyond the lawn the house was before him, old, square, red-roofed, well assured of its right to the place it took up in the world. [...] [T]he look of possession had everywhere mixed with it, in the form of old windows and doors, the tone of old red surfaces, the style of old white facings, the age of old high creepers, the long confirmation of time. Suggestive of panelled rooms, of precious mahogany, of portraits of women dead, of coloured china glimmering through glass doors and delicate silver reflected on bared tables, the thing was one of those impressions of a particular period that it takes two centuries to produce.¹⁹

As with Eliot's sympathetic homes, this description demonstrates how Lamb House had become under James's care 'one of the most perfect pieces of suitably furnished Georgian architecture imaginable'.²⁰ It is important to see how this statement stands up to the scrutiny of his friend Wharton, another Georgian enthusiast.

James and Wharton first met properly in London in late 1903 after correspondence regarding their writing began in 1902, and thereafter became close friends. Wharton

¹⁷ Henry James to Mr and Mrs William James, 9 August 1899, *HJL*, IV, 99.

¹⁸ Henry James to Arthur Christopher Benson, 1 October 1897, *HJL*, IV, 58-9. Benson was later to live in Lamb House for a while with his brother E.F. Benson, who took over the lease in 1919 until his death in 1940.

¹⁹ Henry James, *The Awkward Age* (London: Macmillan, 1908), Book 7th, p. 335-6.

²⁰ Wells, II, p. 535.

described him as ‘perhaps the most intimate friend I ever had’, with the qualifier ‘in many ways we were so different’, and it is doubtful whether James felt quite the same way about her (*BG*, 173). Their similarities included an upbringing and youthful education in Europe and their positions as expatriate American writers in later life.²¹ They had many mutual friends before they met, including the Bourgets, Vernon Lee, Howard Sturgis, Walter Berry and William Morton Fullerton. But although Wharton came to be classed as his literary disciple, their writings, characters and lifestyles were very different.²² James was twenty years her senior and never achieved the commercial success from his writing that Wharton did; she also had a substantial private income in addition to her royalties.²³ Although both wrote out of their own experience as Americans in Europe, Wharton became known as ‘the social chronicler of her age’ (Benstock, vii), whereas James was seen to define the position of expatriate experience.

Wharton visited Lamb House for the first time in Spring 1904 and came to Britain almost every year after that, using Lamb House as a base for motoring trips. Wharton’s commanding presence on these trips led James to describe her teasingly as ‘the Firebird’ and ‘Angel of Devastation’ (*Life*, V, 213). In a series of half-ironic letters in the summer of 1912 he anticipates Wharton’s inexorable advance to disturb the work of ‘the poor old Ryebird [...] [who] feels his barnyard hurry and huddle, emitting desperate and incoherent sounds, while its otherwise serene air begins ominously to darken’.²⁴ To Rye neighbour Fanny Prothero: ‘I clutch at anything to hang on by – Mrs Wharton being due in her motor-car half an hour hence, straight from Paris [...] and designing, with a full intensity, to whirl me away for several days – into the land at large’.²⁵ Lamb House was primarily a writer’s retreat and James admitted there was ‘not much room’ in his ‘little pavilion of inspiration’, for ‘the hard-pressed table and the tilted chair’, but with its

²¹ *Life*, V, 206-214; and Millicent Bell, *Edith Wharton and Henry James: The Story of Their Friendship* (London: Peter Owen, 1965).

²² Benstock describes how Wharton did not ‘relish’ the critics’ view that *The Greater Inclination* was written in a Jamesian style (Benstock, 99-100).

²³ In the late 1890’s, when James was better off than in previous years, his annual income was £2,000 in comparison to Wharton’s £10,000, *Life*, V, 213.

²⁴ Henry James to Howard Sturgis, 20 July 1912, *HJL*, IV, 620.

²⁵ Henry James to Fanny Prothero, [n.d.], *Life*, V, 465.

'privacy bright and open', there 'is room for a novelist and his friends'.²⁶ Wharton, however, went in for socialising on a far grander scale, as exhibited by the design of The Mount, her country 'retreat' which I will discuss in Chapter Five (plate 53). Wharton's home at 58 Rue de Varennes in Paris, where she set up her own literary 'salon' from 1907, was described sardonically by James as 'the house of mirth' (*Life*, V, 348) where he was kept in 'gilded chains, in gorgeous bondage', both relishing and rejecting the luxury and society of Wharton's set.²⁷ He teased her, in suitably decorative terms, about her life in Paris as being 'a dance on an Aubusson carpet', evoking the richness of the red carpet at 58 Rue de Varennes and the frivolity of the social whirl enacted thereon.²⁸ He uses a contracted version of this image in *The Spoils*, describing Ricks crammed with the spoils as 'too much like a minuet danced on a hearth-rug' (*SP*, 82). Although he parodied Wharton as a Pampered Princess in his 1909 tale 'The Velvet Glove', his admiration of her was to grow throughout the years. The 'wonderful, the unique Edith Wharton' swept through his life on 'the iridescent track of her Devastation' (*Life*, V, 359), and he was an invaluable support during the collapse of her marriage and affair with Fullerton.

Wharton's respect and affection for 'the Master' were demonstrated in her attempts to gain him greater recognition and monetary recompense; she proposed him for the Nobel Prize in 1911 and secretly gave him \$8,000 through Scribner's, disguised as an advance on *The Ivory Tower* in 1912.²⁹ She appreciated Lamb House both aesthetically and as the home of her dear friend, as she describes in detail in her autobiography:

from the moment when I turned the corner of the grass-grown street mounting steeply between squat brick houses, and caught sight, at its upper end, of the wide Palladian window of the garden-room, a sense of joyous liberation bore me on. There he stood on the doorstep, the white-panelled hall with its old prints and crowded book-cases forming a background to his heavy loosely-clothed figure. [...] Then, arm in arm, through the oak-panelled morning-room we wandered out onto the thin worn turf of the garden [...]. I was led up the rickety outside steps to the garden-room, that stately and unexpected appendage to the unadorned cube of the house. (*BG*, 244-6)

The decoration of Lamb House accorded with Wharton's aesthetic preference for the eighteenth century and formed a perfect 'background' for James. House and owner were

²⁶ James, 'Winchelsea, Rye, and "Denis Duval"' in *English Hours*, first published in *Scribner's Magazine*, 29 (January 1901), pp. 178-194, (pp. 188, p. 191).

²⁷ Henry James to Henry Adams, 8 May 1908, *HJL*, IV, 490.

²⁸ Bell, p. 139.

²⁹ See Appendix II, *HJL*, IV, pp. 789-792. This novel remained unfinished at James's death.

a harmonious picture which aroused in her a feeling of 'joyous liberation', for

some of my richest hours were spent under his roof. He was very proud of his old house, the best of its sober and stately sort in the town, and he who though himself so detached from material things tasted the simple joys of proprietorship when, with a deprecating air, he showed his fine Georgian panelling and his ancient brick walls to admiring visitors. (*BG*, 246)

As with Ricks, the small, unostentatious house suits its inhabitant perfectly.

Although her hospitality was on a different scale, Wharton was similarly suited to her abode, as James wrote to Howard Sturgis from The Mount:

the social life, not unnaturally, is the note of this elegant, this wonderful abode, where I have been since Saturday [...]. It is an exquisite and marvellous place, a delicate French chateau [sic] mirrored in a Massachusetts pond (repeat not this formula), and a monument to the almost too impeccable taste of its so accomplished mistress. Every comfort prevails, and you needn't bring supplementary apples or candies in your dressing-bag. The Whartons are kindness and hospitality incarnate, the weather is glorious-golden, the scenery of a high class.³⁰

Although The Mount's design is British-inspired with New England colouring, not French (see Chapter Five), his description catches onto its double nature.³¹ Wharton's house is aesthetically at one with the landscape of the Berkshires and her creation is 'exquisite', not least because of the hospitality and comfort therein, an emanation of the hostess. Berkeley Updike was to comment similarly 'I do not remember any house where the hospitality was greater or more full of charm' (Lewis, 149). A couple of months later James stayed with the Whartons in their tiny flat at 884 Park Avenue, New York (plate 54), where his hostess eased many of the tensions caused by such close proximity. It was

a bonbonnière³² of the last daintiness naturally but we were more compressed than at Lenox and Teddy more sandwiched between, and we gave a little more on each other's nerves, I think, and there was less of the Lenox looseness. [...] [S]he was charming, kind, and ingenious, and taste and tone and the finest discriminations, ironies, and draperies mantelled us about.³³

Wharton's decoration and hospitality are here described like clothing, as Lamb House became a 'domiciliary skin' for James.³⁴

During this same lecture tour of America in 1904-5, James stopped at the largest

³⁰ Henry James to Howard Sturgis, 17 October 1904, *HJL*, IV, 325.

³¹ See Luria, p. 320.

³² French: sweet box or bijou residence.

³³ Henry James to Howard Sturgis, January 1905, *Life*, V, 272.

³⁴ Henry James to William James, 2 November 1908, *Life*, V, 389.

house in the country, George Vanderbilt's Biltmore in North Carolina. This was designed in 1889 by Richard Morris Hunt, the leading exponent of the American Renaissance style. Wharton disliked these huge mansions of the rich, feeling the Vanderbilts 'retard[ed] culture'.³⁵ Like the 'cottages' of Newport, buildings like this did not follow the principles of Wharton's *The Decoration of Houses*, with their eclectic mixture of architectural styles and conspicuous disposal of money. James's opinion was similar, and he writes to Wharton from the 'strange colossal heart-breaking house' which is 'in spite of the mitigating millions everywhere expressed, indescribable'.³⁶

I mean one's sense of the extraordinary impenitent madness (of millions) which led to the erection in this vast niggery wilderness, of so gigantic & elaborate a monument to all that *isn't* socially possible there. It's *in effect*, like a gorgeous practical joke – but at one's own expense, after all, if one has to live in solitude in these league-long marble halls & sit in alternate Gothic and Palladian cathedrals, as it were – where now only the temperature stalks about – with the 'regrets,' sighing along the wind, of those who have declined.³⁷

Luria points out that through metaphor, James ties his inability to describe the subject to the size of the house, and by saying 'I can't go into it' and that the only inhabitant of the house is the weather, implies that Biltmore has no interior. It is not a home, because it stifles expression and 'social possibilities'.³⁸ This is important for her detailed discussion of James and Wharton as novelists of manners through their concern with privacy and concept of home. Unlike *The Mount*, Biltmore has no relation to the landscape that surrounds it, particularly in the 'deep snow' and 'vast blur of sleet' of James's experience. He concedes that 'in the early spring I can conceive it as admirable', but he reveals his own need for comfort in a home:

I feel that in speaking of it as I have, I don't do justice to the house as a phenomenon (of brute *achievement*). But that truly wd. take me too far! It's only as a place to live in & in the conditions, fatally imposed, that I, before it, threw up my hands – ! But we will talk of it.³⁹

Despite the expense involved in its construction, Biltmore has more in common with the 'esthetic misery' of Waterbath than Poynton Park. Although James tries to appreciate the

³⁵ Edith Wharton to Ogden Codman, 2 May 1897, SPNEA.

³⁶ Henry James to Edith Wharton, 8 February 1905, *HJL*, IV, 346.

³⁷ *HJL*, IV, 346-7.

³⁸ Luria, pp. 298-9.

³⁹ *HJL*, IV, 347.

house, he is driven to distraction by its discomfort, and like Mrs Gereth, 'had given way to tears' (*SP*, 37):

since writing the above, I have been down to luncheon, and been able to see more of the house, – & feel a bit shabby at failing to rise to my host's own conception of the results he has achieved. They *are*, in a way, magnificent & such a complicated costly mass has of course all sorts of splendid sides (I admire it as mere masonry), & contains innumerable ingenious features & treasures. Still, I repeat – for a tasteful Southern *home*, it merely makes me weep! – ⁴⁰

The effect of Biltmore is continually to impose the host's wealth and social standing upon his guests, an ostentatious effect totally unlike Wharton's home. Its 'ingenious features' include a bowling alley (one of the first in a private home), billiard room, 70,000 gallon swimming pool and 250 rooms. It could be that James's sensitivity to the house had been heightened by the second instalment of *The House of Mirth*, which he tells Wharton he has just read 'with such a sense of its compact fulness, vivid picture and "sustained interest" as make me really wish to celebrate the emotion'.⁴¹ Among the first chapters of this novel are those describing Lily's stay at the luxurious mansion Bellomont and the vacuity of the lives of the other guests (see Chapter Six). He wished that for Wharton's visit at Christmas 1905,

may those marble halls not expand, but *contract* to receive you, & may you have, as you of course will, one of the apartments of state, & not a bachelor bedroom, as I did in a wing overlooking an ice-bound stable-yard, & that even the blaze of felled trees didn't warm. But there must be always this about Biltmore, that it thoroughly fills the mind while one is there – little as the mind can do to fill it. – ⁴²

Wharton wrote only of her admiration for the gardens to Sara Norton.⁴³ Luria contends that due to his 'lingering Puritanism' James found both Biltmore and The Mount 'corrupt'.⁴⁴ Wharton's intellectual stance on design (see Chapter Five) and her ability to make 'consumption look like restraint' corresponded to 'the literary architecture of manners' which 'allowed one to criticize and yet fully enjoy a life of luxury'. Luria argues that James found this moral superiority rather hollow and the 'luxury-made-moral side of the architecture' distasteful.⁴⁵ Wharton's greater wealth was sometimes a source

⁴⁰ *HJL*, IV, 347-8.

⁴¹ *HJL*, IV, 346.

⁴² Henry James to Edith Wharton, 18 December 1905, Powers, p. 58.

⁴³ Edith Wharton to Sara Norton 26 December 1905, *EWL*, pp. 100-1.

⁴⁴ Luria, p. 322.

⁴⁵ Luria, p. 320.

of friendly resentment for James,⁴⁶ and Luria questions James's disavowment of enjoyment: 'what, exactly, was being deferred? Was it gratification? Or was it restraint that had just as clearly become the dream?'.⁴⁷ This self-restraint is the final state for so many of James's characters, including Isabel and Fleda, that perhaps it is James's ideal. In any case, the 'Rye-bird' found a home in the relatively unostentatious Lamb House.

In later life, with the onset of shingles, the solitude of 'remote and romantic' Lamb House proved too prone to breed depression and loneliness for James to spend more than the summers there.⁴⁸ For some years, his winter base in London had been rooms at the Reform Club, but in 1912 he took a large flat at 21 Carlyle Mansions, Cheyne Walk, with views over the Thames. The move in January 1913 was 'rather like a blackish nightmare' due to his ill health.⁴⁹ He returned to the conveniences of London that he had virtually abandoned in the 1890s: 'the remedy of London – of the blessed miles of pavement, lamplight, shopfront, apothecary's beautiful and blue jars and numerous friends' teacups and tales!'⁵⁰ The area of Chelsea, with its many artistic and literary inhabitants, evoked for James acquaintances of an era now past, like Eliot, and friends of the present such as John Singer Sargent whose studio was at 13 Tite Street. However, Lamb House remained his primary home, where he felt 'really domesticated in this pleasant small corner'.⁵¹ This domesticity became an ever increasingly important and necessary part of his life, as he wrote to his brother: 'I have lived *into* my little old house and garden so thoroughly that they have become a kind of domiciliary skin, that can't be peeled off without pain'.⁵²

⁴⁶ See *BG*, 243-3, *Life*, V, 212-3 and Percy Lubbock, *Portrait of Edith Wharton* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1947), pp. 69-70, for anecdotes of James's supposed poverty.

⁴⁷ Luria, p. 322.

⁴⁸ Henry James to Antonio de Navarro, 15 June 1898, *HJL*, IV, 75.

⁴⁹ Henry James to Mrs William James, 5 January 1913, *HJL*, IV, 647.

⁵⁰ Henry James to James Jackson Putnam, 4 January 1912, *HJL*, IV, 597.

⁵¹ Henry James to Charles Eliot Norton, 26 December 1898, *HJL*, IV, 97.

⁵² Henry James to William James, 2 November 1908, *Life*, V, 388-9.

The Spoils of Poynton

James's novel dealing most explicitly with houses and the characters of their inhabitants is *The Spoils of Poynton*. James initially thought of giving the novel the Paterian title 'The House Beautiful'.⁵³ This is an explicit reference to the household taste books I have already discussed and the burgeoning cult of home decoration, for the first issue of the decorating magazine *House Beautiful* was also in 1896.⁵⁴ This year also saw the collaboration of Wharton and Codman on *The Decoration of Houses*, further confirming the trans-Atlantic popularity such subjects held at the time; as James described it:

that most modern of our current passions, the fierce appetite for the upholsterer's and joiner's and brazier's work, the chairs and tables, the cabinets and presses, the material odds and ends, of the more labouring ages. (*SP*, 26)

When first serialised in the *Atlantic Monthly* the title was *The Old Things*, highlighting the central 'character' of the novel, the antiques on whose situation the whole plot revolves. James chose a photograph of such 'things' from the Wallace Collection for the New York edition frontispiece (plate 55). It is important to realise the 'things' are not great works of art, but pieces defined by their production in 'the more labouring ages'. As I indicated in Chapter One, the fashion for these hand-made objects was a reaction to the increase in machine-made furniture and ornaments, and their perceived lower spiritual and economic value. Descriptions of the houses in this novel are so exaggerated as to place them at opposite ends of a scale of taste, with Waterbath as the epitome of bad taste and mass-production, and Poynton the palace of art. However, as with Eliot's moral scheme, and as we shall see in Wharton's work also, the plainest house, Ricks, is also the one with most integrity and the only possible home for the women in the novel.

'Marie Antoinette in the conciergerie' (*SP*, 132)

James describes in his Preface how he first conceived of the Things as the 'real centre' of the novel and 'the citadel of the interest with the fight waged around' them, until Fleda 'planted herself centrally' and let it be seen that 'she had character' (*SP*, 29). This is the opposite process to that of *Portrait*, which began with 'exactly my grasp of a single

⁵³ Henry James to Horace E. Scudder, 3 September 1895, *HJL*, IV, 18; see Chapter One.

⁵⁴ First published in 1896 in Chicago by William Gannett.

character'. James describes 'my pious desire but to place my treasure [Isabel] right', inside 'the large building' of *Portrait*, 'put up round my young woman while she stood there in perfect isolation' (*PL*, x-xi), as if she is one of the spoils. The characters of Isabel and Fleda are very different, opposites almost, corresponding to the different purpose of James's later narrative method. Isabel asserts her own choices throughout the novel and the main focus is 'what will she *do*?' Fleda, conversely, is dependent on the charity and choices of other people and is mostly characterised by what she does *not* do or say. Yet, James's concern in *Spoils* is how, despite this, he can imbue her part in the drama with 'beauty of action and poetry of effect' and make her 'heroic', a more difficult and subtle enterprise (*SP*, 225). He manages this by putting her inaction against the dramatic actions of the other characters, particularly Mrs Gereth's 'arrogance of energy' (*SP*, 191). However, although Isabel is rich enough to undertake a Grand Tour of Europe, she is at a disadvantage in terms of aesthetic discernment and response in relation to Fleda, whose 'only treasure was her subtle mind' (*SP*, 42). Mrs Gereth takes Madame Merle's concern with 'the whole envelope of circumstances' (*PL*, 201) to the extreme: she has a 'strange, almost maniacal disposition to thrust in everywhere the question of "things," to read all behaviour in the light of some fancied relation to them'. The Aesthetic collector has developed from Osmond's irretrievably malevolent use of perfect taste, to the more comic Mrs Gereth, whose collection is her whole life to the exclusion of family relationships. Both see people in terms of the value of 'things': Mrs Gereth 'had really no perception of anybody's nature – had only one question about persons: were they clever or stupid? To be clever meant to know the "marks"' (*SP*, 126).

Whereas in *Portrait*, good taste is a desirable attribute and few people are tasteless, in *Spoils* aesthetic taste seems to divide the characters into good or bad. Certainly this is the way Mrs Gereth divides people, but we move from sympathy with the widow to distaste for her aesthetic and moral narrowness of vision. As all the characters are English with not an American expatriate in sight, perhaps this novel can be seen as a comment upon the nation which James had decided to make his home, and it is not a particularly flattering picture. In the opinion of Putt, although James's intention is never to be a

'cultural anthropologist or political statistician', he became 'a progressively disenchanted critic of the moral and aesthetic values upon which his own chosen and richly enjoyed social *milieu* was based', and the satire of *The Spoils* is perhaps an example of this.⁵⁵ The value judgements made by the characters, with their basis in the shaky ground of taste and the overwhelming importance of objects over people, are ultimately destroyed by the fire that consumes Poynton, and Ricks comes to have more taste and humanity than any other place of habitation.

Waterbath: A Chamber of Horrors

James's satire is first directed at the house of bad taste, Waterbath, the extravagant horrors of which amuse in their vulgarity and familiarity, even today. Part of Waterbath's ghastliness is its perversion of nature and how the Brigstocks ignore natural forms. Suffering in the conservatory Fleda 'had caught a cold in the company of a stuffed cockatoo fastened to a tropical bough and a waterless fountain composed of shells stuck into some hardened paste' (*SP*, 55). These oxymoronic items distort nature, and Waterbath also ignores the nature surrounding it, like Biltmore, adding to its tastelessness. If we remember that for James, part of the charm of *The Mount* is the way it fits into the landscape, we can see that he is undermining the house inside and out. Although Waterbath's grounds restore Mrs Gereth after the trial of the house, this just exaggerates its perversity, for the view is beautiful and 'Waterbath ought to have been charming' if only it had 'taken the fine hint of nature!' (*SP*, 35-6). Initially we see the house through the eyes of Mrs Gereth, but gradually her prejudiced point of view is supplanted by Fleda's consciousness.

Mrs Gereth despairs at the decorative taste of the Brigstocks, which she attributes to lack of breeding, and maybe inbreeding, for she describes their furnishing as abnormal and perverse:

it was an ugliness fundamental and systematic, the result of the abnormal nature of the Brigstocks, from whose composition the principle of taste had been extravagantly omitted. In the arrangement of their home some other principle, remarkably active, but uncanny and obscure, had operated instead, with consequences depressing to

⁵⁵ Putt, p. 214.

behold, consequences that took the form of a universal futility. (*SP*, 37)

She is able to read the essential character of the Brigstock family through their possessions and choices of household ornamentation, by using the deeply embedded Victorian codification of interior decoration. The threat of her son marrying Mona brings up more explicit reference to this genetic taint, in euphemisms that would more often be used to describe an illegitimate birth in a Victorian novel:

nothing so perverse could have been expected to happen as that the heir to the loveliest thing in England [Poynton] should be inspired to hand it over to a girl so exceptionally tainted. Mrs Gereth spoke of poor Mona's taint as if to mention it were almost a violation of decency, and a person who had listened without enlightenment would have wondered of what fault the girl had been or had indeed not been guilty. (*SP*, 43-4)

Mrs Gereth's aesthetic hyper-sensitivity is bludgeoned by the Brigstocks' idea of what is attractive to live with:

they had smothered [the house] with trumpery ornament and scrapbook art, with strange excrescences and bunchy draperies, with gimcracks that might have been keepsakes for maid-servants and nondescript conveniences that might have been prizes for the blind. They had gone wildly astray over carpets and curtains; they had an infallible instinct for gross deviation and were so cruelly doom-ridden that it rendered them almost tragic. [...] There was in [Mrs Gereth's apartment] a set of comic water-colours, a family joke by a family genius, and in [Fleda's] a souvenir from some centennial or other Exhibition, that they shudderingly alluded to. The house was perversely full of souvenirs of places even more ugly than itself and of things it would have been a pious duty to forget. (*SP*, 37)

Here we have in detail the 'superfluous gimcrack' so disparaged by Wharton and Codman (*DH*, 176). Such items had been condemned in household taste books for the previous twenty years. The Brigstocks' personal touches are a comically exaggerated version of Grier's description of the typical middle-class parlour in America after 1880, that aspires to a higher aesthetic currency than the occupants can afford:

among the more conventional objects such as parlor suites, pianos, a center table, the best curtains in the house, and a decorative mantelpiece or mantel shelf, a family could include more personal objects – family photograph albums, or homemade objects such as needlework pictures. [...] Finally, other accessories – natural specimens, paintings, ceramics or *bibelots* from foreign places – communicated further details of the cultured facade of the parlor's owners.⁵⁶

Mrs Orrinsmith's description of 'the ordinary lower middle-class drawing-room of the Victorian era' is uncannily similar to Waterbath with its eclectic selection of kitsch items and violently coloured and disported draperies:

⁵⁶ Grier, pp. 81-2.

mats and footstools of foxes startlingly life-like with glaring glass eyes; ground-glass vases of evil form and sickly pale green or blue colour; screens graced by a representation of "Melrose Abbey by moonlight," with a mother-o'-pearl moon. Carpets riotous with bunches of realistic flowers, chintzes with bouncing bouquets, chairs with circular seats divided into quarters of black and orange, their backs composed of rollers of the same in alternate stripes; cheffoniers [sic], with mirror-doors too low for any purpose save to reflect the carpet in violent perspective, or perchance a novel view of a visitor's boots.⁵⁷

I imagine that Mona would particularly appreciate the new view of 'the sheen of her patent-leather shoes' (*SP*, 52). Although this is a description of a 'lower middle-class' room, Mrs Orrinsmith warns the reader that 'a higher position in the social scale, or the possession of larger means, will do little to modify the unsatisfactory state of things [...]. There are plenty of errors in taste to be found in the mansions of the rich'.⁵⁸ James's satirical description associates the Brigstocks with a particularly middle-class method of furnishing, for Mrs Gereth's aesthetic snobbery is also social.

Waterbath is described with religious vocabulary:

the maddening relics of Waterbath, the little brackets and pink vases, the sweepings of bazaars, the family photographs and illuminated texts, the 'household art' and household piety of Mona's hideous home (*SP*, 45).

The alliterated phrase 'household piety' is disparaging, for this concept is once again generic to the middle-class, as Grier describes:

overtly religious artifacts in and around the center table cued the equation of religion and home, an aspect of the concept of comfort. [...] 'Art corners,' decorated mantels, draped shelves, and small tables were also shrines dedicated to the secular values of civilization or culture, the other axis of parlor values made manifest in furnishings. The displays of exotica, souvenirs, minerals, and books on [an] *étagère* [...] create a shrine to civilization.⁵⁹

This religious language is also used to describe Poynton, an example of how the distinctions of taste come to be meaningless as moral value indicators in the novel. Marx's 'commodity fetishism' describes how objects come to be imbued with transcendental values and 'metaphysical and theological niceties' once they enter the commercial market.⁶⁰ The Brigstocks value their souvenirs and home-made art because of the people or places they evoke and as a key for visitors to understand the current preoccupations of the family. A fascination for 'conveniences', like the billiard room and

⁵⁷ Orrinsmith, p. 5.

⁵⁸ Orrinsmith, p. 3.

⁵⁹ Grier, p. 88.

⁶⁰ Alan Bullock and Stephen Trombley, eds., *The New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, 3rd edn (London: HarperCollins, 1999).

conservatory, and Mona's wish to have a 'winter garden thrown out' at Poynton which would have the effect of 'a shiny excrescence on the novel face of Poynton', show that the family aspire to be absolutely modern, for they are material evidence of the family's wealth, however tasteless they might appear to others (*SP*, 55-6).

At Poynton, however, the antiques and *objets d'art* have accrued meanings and value due to their age and pre-industrial method of production. In a process of 'commodity reification', age and provenance are the important aspects of the spoils, which elevates their position from mere things to works of art in themselves. Poynton seems to have no modern conveniences, not even wallpaper for 'in all the great wainscoted house there was not an inch of pasted paper' and Mrs Gereth's abhorrence of such things means she is 'kept awake for hours by the wall-paper in her room' at Waterbath (*SP*, 35, 48). This anticipates Wilde's discomfiture in 1900, when he is reported to have said on his deathbed: 'my wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. One or the other of us has to go'.⁶¹ However, Mrs Gereth's commodity reification is self-delusion and an avoidance of the modern world, as Lodge points out:

the Mrs Gereths of this world can suppress the knowledge that they inhabit a capitalist society based on the exploitation of labour; and their obsessive collecting is a kind of inverted reification, treating 'things' as absolute and irreplaceable. (*SP*, 15)

The things have replaced the concerns of humans, and perhaps she is just as 'perverted' as the Brigstocks, with her 'strange, almost maniacal disposition to thrust in everywhere the question of "things"' (*SP*, 49). The destruction of Poynton can be seen as James's judgement on her self-delusion and snobbery, which are only mitigated by her eventual acceptance of Ricks with all its 'ghosts' of human 'disappointment' (*SP*, 203).

Fleda and Mrs Gereth also find the varnished furniture distasteful:

the worst horror was the acres of varnish, something advertised and smelly, with which everything was smeared: it was Fleda Vetch's conviction that the application of it, by their own hands and hilariously shoving each other, was the amusement of the Brigstocks on rainy days. (*SP*, 37-8)

This is a comic exaggeration of Ruskin's description of the highly polished furniture of *The Awakening Conscience*: the 'terrible lustre of it, from its fatal newness; nothing there that has the old thoughts of home upon it, or that is ever to become part of a

⁶¹ Ellmann, p. 546.

home'.⁶² The best polish was achieved by the passage of time and thus the 'newness' and vulgarity of Waterbath could never be a home to Fleda and Mrs Gereth. The varnish and shiny veneer, so castigated by writers of household taste books,⁶³ also evokes the physicality of the Brigstocks that makes Mona 'a regular barbarian' (*SP*, 60). This is also connected to social standing, for we get the impression that the Brigstocks are parvenus; new money always has a lower social standing than old, giving Mrs Gereth another reason to look down on her son's fiancée.

The commercial aspect ('something advertised') of the varnish is connected to ideas of modernity and novelty. Similarly the sarcastic description of Mrs Brigstock's 'lady's magazine':⁶⁴ 'a horrible thing with patterns of antimacassars, which, as it was quite new, the first number, and seemed so clever, she kindly offered to leave for the house [Poynton]'. For Mrs Gereth, the offer 'was in the style of a vulgar old woman who wore silver jewelry and tried to pass off a gross avidity as a sense of the beautiful' (*SP*, 51). Surely no man wearing Macassar-oil in his hair would dare to sit in one of the chairs at Poynton. In great disdain she throws the 'female magazine with the what-do-you-call-'em? – the greasecatchers', back at Mrs Brigstock's carriage 'higher in the air than was absolutely needful' (*SP*, 57). This is an ironic echo of the scene in *Vanity Fair* where Becky throws her school leaving present of 'Johnson's Dixonary' out of the carriage window, shocking Miss Pinkerton's academy.⁶⁵ However, Mrs Gereth's dramatic display is subverted by Mona deftly catching the magazine 'as easily as she would have caused a tennis-ball to rebound from a racket', and the 'romping laughter' Mrs Gereth hears reflects the 'humiliation' she is caused by her son's future bride (*SP*, 57, 43).

'In the house the house was all' (*SP*, 211)

Gill suggests that Poynton's name suggests the 'point' or apex of a high aesthetic

⁶² Ruskin (1854), 7.

⁶³ Eastlake explains that varnish is 'destructive of all artistic effect' because 'the surface of wood thus lacquered can never change its colour, or acquire that rich hue which is one of the chief charms of old cabinet-work', Eastlake (1986), p. 83-4.

⁶⁴ Crick proposes that this could be *Madame*, first published 1895 (*SP*, 239).

⁶⁵ William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), first published 1847-8, Chapter 1, p. 10.

standard, but 'its later fate may imply "poignancy" as well'.⁶⁶ Its decoration is evoked rather than described in the same detail as Waterbath. This contributes to the spiritual atmosphere that makes Mrs Gereth so reluctant to give it up under the terms of her husband's will:

thanks to the rare perfection of Poynton, she was condemned to wince wherever she turned. She had lived for a quarter of a century in such warm closeness with the beautiful that, as she frankly admitted, life had become for her a true fool's paradise. She couldn't leave her own house without peril of exposure. (*SP*, 41)

Just as 'every Englishman's home is his castle', in the familiar phrase, Mrs Gereth is protected from the aesthetic vagaries of the outside world by the home she has created for herself. Waterbath cannot compete with the aesthetic perfection of Poynton: 'there were places much grander and richer, but no such complete work of art, nothing that would appeal so to those really informed' (*SP*, 41). In his discussion of the development of the appreciation of the antique, Muthesius sums up the message of the design reformers as simply 'old work is best'.⁶⁷ For early nineteenth-century interiors 'what mattered most was unity in form and tone, in dramatic impression', which is exactly the effect of Poynton, which requires a profound appreciation of the beautiful which is at the same time unspecific.⁶⁸ It was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that there were 'more academic kinds of study of the history of the applied arts'.⁶⁹ Mrs Gereth's collecting dates from the early 1870s, the time when collecting was mostly done by amateurs; when it became widespread in the late 1890s there were also fewer good objects available.⁷⁰ It wasn't until the early 1890s that the influence of the Arts and Crafts Movement gained international influence and

directed the eye and touch towards the elements which helped to establish the degree of age. It was these visual and tactile preferences, in conjunction with the general ideology that, in a very comprehensive sense, things in the past were better made anyway, which helped to form this new notion of authenticity, a notion which we largely take for granted today.⁷¹

Thus at the time James was writing, the idea of the antique was formed, and Mrs

⁶⁶ Gill, p. 271.

⁶⁷ Muthesius, p. 235.

⁶⁸ Muthesius, p. 231.

⁶⁹ Muthesius, p. 232.

⁷⁰ Muthesius, p. 242.

⁷¹ Muthesius, p. 245.

Gereth's experiences of collecting and the growth of her aesthetic sensibility follow the general pattern. James's readers also would have been well aware of the concepts behind the descriptions of the things at Waterbath and Poynton.

The distancing we experience as readers, unable to see the details of Poynton, relates to the fetishising of the things by Fleda and Mrs Gereth. Fetishisation is the displacement of erotic desire from a person onto an inanimate object or non-sexual part of the body. This displacement is particularly exhibited by Fleda: she avoids Owen's embraces, most often by running away and shutting doors in his face, and is consoled by dreaming of the things: 'she thought of them hour after hour; they made a company with which solitude was warm' (*SP*, 193). Fleda's love for Owen is described in masochistic, violent terms, explicitly denying the sense of sight: 'her little gagged and blinded desire' (*SP*, 113). Mrs Gereth is the more frequent recipient of Fleda's kisses, and generally this is in terms of a subject showing subservience to a monarch, or a guilty re-avowal of allegiance. These forced and difficult relations between people in the novel are in opposition to the strong influence of and affection held for the things, which particularly drives Fleda and Mrs Gereth. Thomas J. Otten claims that our impression of objects in the novel 'focuses on the sense of touch, rather than vision'.⁷² The things especially are described in terms of touch rather than their appearance: 'Mrs Gereth left her guest to finger fondly the brasses that Louis Quinze might have thumbed, to sit with Venetian velvets just held in a loving palm' (*SP*, 48). The qualifiers 'fondly' and 'loving' highlight the process of fetishisation that is going on.

the novel has a great interest in the point of contact between the human hand and the objects that lie immediately adjacent to it; it zooms in on some of the hand's most ordinary movements, raising them to a surprisingly high level of significance, or at least of narratability.⁷³

The objects are able to be identified without being seen, by those who truly love them, for example Mrs Gereth describes her intimate relation with her things: 'blindfold, in the dark, with a brush of a finger, I could tell one from another' (*SP*, 53). Although Poynton is repeatedly described as a museum, 'a place where objects are seen rather than used',

⁷² Thomas J. Otten, 'The Spoils of Poynton and the Properties of Touch', *American Literature*, 71, (1999), 263-290 (p. 263).

⁷³ Otten, p. 264.

Otten finds that 'it is really the use of objects and the narrowness of the distance between person and thing that the novel repeatedly emphasizes', particularly as the things are items such as cups and cabinets that have handles and invite touch.⁷⁴

Developing my earlier point about taste and class, Otten argues that there is a double concept of class in the novel, which can be traced through the touches and gestures of the characters. There is 'a set of standards that can be articulated and rationalized, promoted, even shared, and a bodily truth that is indisputably real but absolutely unsharable' and 'the language of class becomes inseparable from the language of identity'.⁷⁵ Otten links the hand of the owner with the nature of craftsmanship and its subsequent value for connoisseurs. Wharton and Codman make this relationship of touch and handiwork explicit in their chapter on 'Bric-à-Brac', stating that one 'should limit himself in the choice of ornaments to the "labors of the master-artist's hand"' (*DH*, 195). Otten identifies a relationship between homes and the bodies of their inhabitants, where 'houses become such extensions, [and] the details of design shape the details of the body' in such writings on interior decoration.⁷⁶ This is related to the concept of 'felt experience' through aesthetic discrimination that I discussed in relation to *Portrait*.

Mrs Gereth's physiological reactions to bad decoration at Waterbath are like those in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, where a woman is even more distressingly kept awake by wallpaper (discussed in Chapter One) and the hypersensitivity of Poe's Roderick Usher.⁷⁷ Otten explains how this physiological reaction 'would seem to be a fundamentally different account of the body and its objects than the one that sees decor as a matter of individual self-expression',⁷⁸ as was recommended by the household taste books. Gender plays an important part here; although women had innate sensitivity to taste, paradoxically their weaker intellect could also incline them to imitation: 'they epitomize both the hazards of indiscriminate duplication of other people's things and the potential for more disciplined, more carefully studied imitation to yield an

⁷⁴ Otten, p. 266.

⁷⁵ Otten, p. 265.

⁷⁶ Otten, p. 271.

⁷⁷ Edgar Allan Poe, *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839).

⁷⁸ Otten p. 274.

“individualized” decor’.⁷⁹ Fleda’s faculty for ‘imitation’ takes the form of her physical suitability to Poynton with its levelling artistic influence over all within it, for ‘a vetch is a plant that takes its form from another plant, adapting its structure to something outside itself’.⁸⁰ As well as fully appreciating its beauty, she can easily adapt to suit the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of Poynton, evidenced by her commencing ‘a wonderful piece of embroidery suggested, and precisely at Poynton, by an old Spanish altar-cloth’, the hand of the original artist leading her own in creation (*SP*, 73).

‘Hands that lightly lingered’ (*SP*, 202)

Otten discusses the theory of empathy formulated by Bernard Berenson and Vernon Lee among others, ‘who held that the sensations of the perceiving body pattern themselves after the contours of a work of art’.⁸¹ As Berenson wrote, ‘seeing is really touching’.⁸² A similar physical reaction to paintings was theorised in the nineteenth century by César Daly with his ‘aesthetic geometry’ and Wölfflin, who stated that architecture, as an ‘art of corporeal masses, relates to man as a corporeal being’.⁸³ Bourget, French chronicler of the United States and friend of both James and Wharton, wrote that not only did interior decoration suggest its inhabitants’ temperament, it became symbolic of feelings itself: ‘the surface of a room, the shape of an object, its color, can inspire sympathy, or even antipathy [...] objects become signs of a great number of small actions’.⁸⁴ These are further developments of the Paterian ideas of ‘felt seeing’ James utilises in *Portrait*. In the context of this novel, these concepts explain how Mrs Gereth can express the loss of her things as an ‘amputation’ (*SP*, 79), for ‘the boundary between the body and its property

⁷⁹ Otten, p. 274.

⁸⁰ Otten, p. 274. Vetches are not parasites, but ‘climbing or clambering plants’, Richard Fitter and Alastair Fitter, *The Wild Flowers of Britain and Northern Europe* (London: Collins, 1974), p. 122.

⁸¹ Otten, p. 285. See Vernon Lee and C. Anstruther-Thomson, ‘Beauty and Ugliness’, *Contemporary Review* (October 1897).

⁸² Bernard Berenson, *Florentine Painters of the Renaissance* (1896), quoted Rene Wellek, ‘Vernon Lee, Bernard Berenson and Aesthetics’, in *Friendship’s Garland: Essays Presented to Mario Praz on His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. by Vittorio Gabrieli, 2 vols (Rome: Storia & Letteratura, 1966), II, 233-251 (p. 241).

⁸³ Heinrich Wölfflin, ‘Prolegomena to a Psychology of Architecture’ (1886), quoted Sidlauskas, p. 69.

⁸⁴ Paul Bourget, *Nouveaux Essais de Psychologie Contemporaine* (Paris: Lemeure, 1886), p. 152, quoted Sidlauskas, p. 73.

dissolves'.⁸⁵ The nature of the relic, where 'ownership leaves a residue', emphasises the previously mentioned religious and mystic nature of objects, as with 'the brasses that Louis Quinze might have thumbed'.⁸⁶ Perhaps part of the attraction for James of Lamb House was the history entailed by the 'King's Room'.

For Victorians anxious to retain social divisions, class 'becomes something buried deep within the body, located in the nerves and the hand they govern'.⁸⁷ For example, in interior design, the ideal was to keep servants' areas completely separate from the rest of the house.⁸⁸ Otten discusses the chapter on 'habit' in *Principles of Psychology* by James's brother William, who explains that habit 'keeps different social strata from mixing', for example, a social climber cannot speak in the correct vocal tone as he cannot unlearn the tones of his upbringing, because habits are 'actions that have "become embodied in the [...] nervous system" until we don't think about them anymore'.⁸⁹ Thus, class becomes 'incontestable' and 'the body ensures that class will be seen as indisputably real even as it also ensures its mystification'.⁹⁰ Although the main characters of *Spoils* are within the same broad class band, there are a few lower class intrusions at the margins of the text, described in physical terms and these borders 'are points of traffic' between the spaces of separate classes.⁹¹ For example, Fleda's place in her third class railway carriage is taken by 'a fat woman with a basket' and she visits the 'smellier shops' of Maggie's town (*SP*, 192, 156). These moments 'outside the drawing room [...] allow class to be conceived as spatial, as something with recognizable boundaries', and their broaching is a threat that 'class is coming apart'.⁹² Otten concludes that 'a sense of one's own bodily processes must be the ultimate private property';⁹³ his argument is connected to Isabel's rejection of the physical for a Paterian felt life.

85 Otten, p. 276.

86 Otten, p. 277.

87 Otten, p. 278.

88 See Franklin, p. 39 and Chapter One.

89 William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, ed. by Frederick Burkhardt and others (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983) first published 1890, p. 125, quoted Otten, p. 278.

90 Otten, p. 279.

91 Otten, p. 286.

92 Otten, p. 283, 283, 284

93 Otten, p. 286.

'The record of a life' (SP, 47)

Poynton is 'supreme in every part; a provocation, an inspiration, the matchless canvas for a picture' and Mrs Gereth is the 'artist' who has been inspired by the house to create a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a unified and total work of art, in every part. She has spent 'twenty-six years of planning and seeking' to create its effect, using her 'personal gift, the genius, the passion, the patience of the collector'. This entails 'an element of creation, of personality' (SP, 41-2), as household taste books recommend. Unlike Waterbath, the house is only described in vague terms, for the parts go together perfectly to make the whole. The individual objects are not seen, only their cumulative effect: 'the beauty of the place throbbed out like music' (SP, 50). This description of aesthetic perfection echoes Pater's dictum 'all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music'.⁹⁴ Like idyllic Gardencourt, Poynton is an 'exquisite' early Jacobean house, evoking a continuity with the past and English history. Mrs Gereth has carefully 'refined on nature' outside the house, as the Brigstocks should have done at Waterbath, and Poynton is a physical part of the countryside: 'for England you looked out of old windows – it was England that was the wide embrace' (SP, 48). The furnishings create an atmosphere:

the shimmer of wrought substances spent itself in the brightness; the old golds and brasses, old ivories and bronzes, the fresh old tapestries and deep old damasks threw out a radiance. (SP, 71)

There are few paintings, for the decorative arts are supreme at Poynton, according with the importance of the 'lesser arts'⁹⁵ and craftsmanship for commodity reification: 'there were not many pictures – the panels and the stuffs were themselves the picture' (SP, 48). In the Preface, James explains that he decided a detailed description of 'the splendid Things' would 'have been costly to keep up' at the expense of dialogue and its explication of character. Our misty impression of Poynton distances the spoils, enabling their elevation into religious icons and 'brazen idols [...] in the tempered light of some arching place of worship' (SP, 29). The pieces seamlessly make up the whole: there are 'clear chambers where the general effect made preferences almost as impossible as if they had been shocks, [...] open doors, where vistas were long and bland'. 'Blandness' is a

⁹⁴ Pater, 'The School of Giorgione', *The Renaissance*, p. 106.

⁹⁵ Title of a lecture by Morris, *The Lesser Arts* (1878).

strangely pejorative term, for Fleda's response is dramatic and prepares us for Poynton being 'too splendidly happy' (*SP*, 47, 203).

Fleda has a religious response, when at last 'the palpitating girl had the full revelation' of Poynton. Like Saint Theresa in ecstasy, she 'dropped on a seat with a soft gasp and a roll of dilated eyes' and 'tears which on [her] part were the natural and usual sign of her submission to perfect beauty'. Fleda 'had never known a greater happiness than the week passed in this initiation' (*SP*, 47), but the god invoked at Poynton is that of beauty. Fleda has a natural propensity for aesthetic appreciation, unlike Isabel's overconfidence:

such were the emotions of a hungry girl whose sensibility was almost as great as her opportunities for comparison had been small. The museums had done something for her, but nature had done more. (*SP*, 48)

Fleda is described as a 'rare creature' who can identify the pieces 'by direct inspiration', and later a 'saint' and 'pilgrim' (*SP*, 126, 119, 209). The items are constantly described in religious terms, elevating them above their prosaic nomenclature as mere 'things'. Mr and Mrs Gereth are defined by their furnishings and taste, like the Tullivers (see Chapter Two): 'they were our religion, they were our life, they were *us!*' (*SP*, 53). The one item mentioned frequently and described in any detail is a religious piece, 'the gem of the collection', the Maltese Cross. It is described in the terms of amateur Victorian scholarship discussed by Muthesius: its name is 'technically incorrect' for it is 'a small but marvellous crucifix of ivory, a masterpiece of delicacy, of expression and of the great Spanish period'; its provenance is shrouded in 'mazes of secrecy', and it was discovered by 'odd and romantic chance' (*SP*, 208, 82). This enhances its mysticism and suitability as the piece Owen suggests Fleda takes after she loses him to Mona; it symbolises her hidden love. She makes the journey to collect it 'as a pilgrim might go to a shrine' only to be finally frustrated in this as well, by the all-consuming fire (*SP*, 209).

'I prefer the constables and the dragging' (*SP*, 64)

Mrs Gereth's late husband's will has signed the things over to Owen when he marries, but she is concerned with which *woman* will look after them:

I could give up everything without a pang, I think, to a person I could trust, I could respect. [...] There's a care they want, there's a sympathy that draws out their beauty. Rather than make them over to a woman ignorant and vulgar I think I'd deface them with my own hands. (*SP*, 53)

Mrs Gereth is reliant on women's 'natural' attributes of care and aesthetic discernment, but Mona is the epitome of ignorance and vulgarity. Her reaction to Poynton is the opposite of Fleda's sympathetic and ecstatic response: she is 'like a bored tourist in fine scenery' (*SP*, 50). The religious aspect of the things is further emphasised by Mrs Gereth's pointed pleading with Fleda: 'who'd save *them* for me [...]?' (*SP*, 54). This need for someone to 'save' the things becomes intertwined with Fleda's efforts to 'save' Owen from Mona. Although Mrs Gereth initially thinks Fleda has 'no beauty', she bolsters Fleda's confidence and attraction to Owen by saying her *behaviour* has been 'exquisite', 'beautiful', and most importantly, 'like such a saint' (*SP*, 36, 119). On her knees, she pleads with Saint Fleda to 'save him' and the things from Mona (*SP*, 118). Ironically echoing his mother's words, Owen later also pleads with Fleda to marry him, calling her 'beautiful' and 'an angel': 'what I want you to say is that you'll *save* me!' (*SP*, 160). The strong religious emphasis continually put on the things is commensurate with the passion of their collection. In her indignation at being treated so ignobly by her husband's will, Mrs Gereth thinks of herself as a martyr to beauty: 'I'd kidnap – to save them, to convert them – the children of heretics. When I know I'm right I go to the stake. Oh he may burn me alive!' (*SP*, 109). In the end it is the spoils which are sacrificed to Mr Gereth's will and Owen's choice. As she physically identifies with the things throughout the novel, their funeral pyre could be hers, and she becomes increasingly weak after she gives them back.

Mrs Gereth's passion for collecting is described in increasingly violent terms as the power of the 'spoils' over the action increases. They are the most important thing in her life, even above her son, to whom she barely speaks, using Fleda as a go-between: 'the truth was simply that all Mrs. Gereth's scruples were on one side and that her ruling passion had in a manner despoiled her of her humanity' (*SP*, 58). The use of 'despoiled' makes it explicit that the spoils have replaced humans in her affection. The word resonates throughout the novel with several meanings: the collection has been looted from

throughout the world by Mrs Gereth; the things are again fought over in the battle between mother and son; their effect is marred when crammed into Ricks; and finally they are spoiled beyond repair in the fire.

As I discussed in Chapter Two, Eliot uses normal household items such as tablecloths to describe Mrs Tulliver's relation to the social world and her own place within it, and for Mr Tulliver his home and workplace, the Mill, is his whole purpose in life. Their loss leads to great pain, physical collapse and the disintegration of their family, which is irrecoverable with the destructive flood and the deaths of Maggie and Tom. Mrs Gereth is also defined by her possessions, but when threatened with their loss, she does not have to depend upon the charity of selfish sisters to buy them back. Just as she has used her own energy to collect them, so their story and hers are indissolubly linked, she takes drastic actions to keep her things. When they are finally taken away, and are in fact destroyed, Mrs Gereth rallies and with the help of Fleda is able to redefine herself and her life.

Mrs Gereth is the creator and keeper of the museum of Poynton, as well as the looter of the countries that have given up their treasures to her vision. The house is 'a record of a life' rather different from Waterbath's mementoes; Mrs Gereth's life was devoted to the creation of Poynton. Unlike the Brigstocks' home-made objects the collection was created by master craftsmen of different countries and eras, and is thus a record of the artistic life of the world: 'it was all France and Italy with their ages composed to rest' (*SP*, 47-8). Under Mrs Gereth's directing power the pieces have relinquished their particular historical context for the greater beauty, for 'everything at Poynton was in the style of Poynton' (*SP*, 51). The 'composition' has made Poynton more of a museum than a home but still the items need to be 'handled with perfect love' (*SP*, 45). The impression of Mrs Gereth as bandit queen is continually evoked in the metaphors used to describe her actions; she is queen, conqueror, explorer, collector, 'treasure hunter', witch, 'wonder working wizard' (*SP*, 47, 80). The 'high pride' of this 'wonderful woman' is described through Fleda's eyes in dramatically imagined scenes (*SP*, 48, 126):

pale but radiant, her back to the wall, she planted herself there as a heroine guarding a treasure. To give up the ship was to flinch from her duty; there was something in her eyes that declared she would die at her post. [...] She trod the place like a reigning queen or a proud usurper; full as it was of splendid pieces it could show in these days no ornament so effective as its menaced mistress. (*SP*, 63)

When Mrs Gereth secretly moves the things to Ricks, Fleda realises her power: 'what she undertook was always somehow achieved'. She has 'more than one kind of magnificence' and confesses 'audaciously enough, to a sort of arrogance of energy' which has enabled her such power over things and servants; 'such a woman was great' (*SP*, 191).

Whistler wrote to James after he received a signed copy of *Spoils* about his enthusiasm for Mrs Gereth's stand. He describes how Balzac had received 'written appeals from excited readers interceding in [sic] behalf of a favourite' character, and how he 'quite understood this as I read your beautiful book!'⁹⁶ Recognising a fellow aesthete, Whistler writes that as Balzac's readers pleaded for the

charm that should outweigh mere justice in the fairyland of Fiction, so I would have begged for the dear lady who had only robbed, and hid a bit, and burgled in the glorious cause of Old Blue!
She was delightful! – and the girl charming! –⁹⁷

James writes back, delighted

to have pleased you, to have touched you, to have given you something of the impression of the decent little thing one attempted to do – this is for me, my dear Whistler, a rare and peculiar pleasure. For the arts are one, and with the artist the artist communicates.⁹⁸

Whistler certainly recognised the importance of the lesser arts.

As Owen's marriage come closer, Mrs Gereth becomes indistinguishable from the things:

the mind's eye could indeed see Mrs. Gereth only in her thick-coloured air; it took all the light of her treasures to make her concrete and distinct. She loomed for a moment, in any mere house of compartments and angles, gaunt and unnatural; then she vanished as if she had suddenly sunk into a quicksand. (*SP*, 132)

There is only one solution to prevent Mrs Gereth's 'abdication' and the despoilation of her home:

⁹⁶ James McNeill Whistler to Henry James, [February 1897], Whistler J26 (#02405), Special Collections, Glasgow University Library, University of Glasgow, unpublished.

⁹⁷ 'Old Blue' refers to blue and white china. See Chapter One.

⁹⁸ Henry James to James McNeill Whistler, 25 February 1897, Whistler J25 (#02404), Special Collections, Glasgow University Library, University of Glasgow, published *HJL*, IV, 43.

Fleda lost herself in the rich fancy of how, if *she* were mistress of Poynton, a whole province, as an abode, should be assigned there to the great queen-mother. She would have returned from her campaign with her baggage-train and her loot, and the palace would unbar its shutters and the morning flash back from its halls. (*SP*, 132)

Fleda anthropomorphises Poynton, linking its movements to Mrs Gereth's. She is 'a custodian equal to a walking catalogue, a custodian versed beyond any one anywhere in the mysteries of ministration to rare pieces' (*SP*, 132). This evokes an image of Mrs Gereth as a caring ghost or a talking part of the collection, certainly not entirely human. Similarly Mrs Gereth writes to Fleda that the act of leaving her things has been 'an amputation': 'her leg had come off – she had now begun to stump along with the lovely wooden substitute' (*SP*, 79). This is perhaps the most gruesome treatment of the conflation of the woman's body with the house. Fleda is 'appalled' at the 'theft' of the spoils from Poynton to furnish Ricks. The 'full picture' of the aesthetic effect is the picked-clean corpse of Poynton: 'the far-away empty sockets, a scandal of nakedness between high bleak walls'. Mrs Gereth has broken the rules of both aesthetics and propriety in her desperate act, a 'scandal' Fleda, the moral consciousness of the novel, cannot condone (*SP*, 80-1).

Ricks: 'Knocking together a shelter' (*SP*, 70)

In the opinion of Owen and Mona, Ricks 'wasn't a place like Poynton – what dower-house ever was? – but it was an awfully jolly little place' (*SP*, 62). This jolliness will come into question as Ricks undergoes various decorative changes, but as Gill has pointed out, Ricks 'comprise[s] elements needful to the moral life but missing from both other houses'.⁹⁹ Originally the house was left to the late Mr Gereth by a maternal aunt, 'a good lady who had spent most of her life there'. The narrator describes its decor as practical: it 'was amply furnished, it contained all the defunct aunt's possessions', yet this is insufficient for Mrs Gereth's aestheticism (*SP*, 62). Although Fleda tries to alleviate the situation by exclaiming 'why it's charming!' her companion initially 'grimly gazed' (*SP*, 67, 68). Mrs Gereth says nothing, and her thoughts on the 'small prim parlour' are belittling and snobbish (*SP*, 67). She wonders

⁹⁹ Gill, p. 64.

how a place in the deepest depths of Essex and three miles from a small station could contrive to look so suburban. The room was practically a shallow box, with the junction of the walls and ceiling guiltless of curve or cornice and marked merely by the little band of crimson paper glued round the top of the other paper, a turbid grey sprigged with silver flowers. (*SP*, 68)

The glue and 'turbid' or muddy colour work against the pretty cottage style sprigs of flowers. The wallpaper border imitating a cornice is mere sham compared to Poynton's 'not an inch of pasted paper' (*SP*, 35). The 'big square beam papered over in white' in the middle of the ceiling is a decorative error concealing any element of the 'picturesque' (*SP*, 68). The architectural elements of the house can only be hideous when compared with the Jacobean elegance of Poynton. There is a modern single plate sash window – 'Mrs Gereth hated such windows' – for surely Poynton has small-paned Jacobean windows. Even the doors are repellent:

on the subject of doors especially Mrs Gereth had the finest views: the thing in the world she most despised was the meanness of the undivided opening. From end to end of Poynton there swung high double leaves. At Ricks the entrances to the rooms were like the holes of rabbit-hutches. (*SP*, 67, 68)

That the 'high double leaves' would be completely out of scale at Ricks does not matter. The garden is also described, putting Ricks into its setting as Poynton and Waterbath have been. Here the view is of 'four iron pots on pedestals, painted white and containing ugly geraniums, ranged on the edge of a gravel path and doing their best to give it the air of a terrace' (*SP*, 67-8). Just as there is a 'parlour' and the 'horror' of a green baize door demarcating the servant's domain, the garden aspires to being a 'terrace', but these lower middle-class pretensions aesthetically and socially fall short of Mrs Gereth's standards (*SP*, 100). The smallness of the house is emphasised throughout, culminating in the 'rabbit hutch' doors (*SP*, 68).

However, Fleda is surprised at 'the pretensions of a shipwrecked woman who could hold such an asylum cheap', and recognises Ricks' merit (*SP*, 68):

it was all, none the less, not so bad as Fleda had feared; it was faded and melancholy, whereas there had been a danger it would be contradictory and positive, cheerful and loud. The place was crowded with objects of which the aggregation somehow made a thinness and the futility a grace; things that told her they had been gathered as slowly and as lovingly as the golden flowers of the other house. (*SP*, 68)

The absent aunt has been, in her quiet way, just as much a collector as Mrs Gereth, and Ricks is also 'a record of a life' (*SP*, 47). The furnishings and decoration at Ricks evoke

the personality of its last occupant, so different from Mrs Gereth and once again Fleda's 'sensibility' recognises the merits of even this humble decor (*SP*, 48):

the more she looked about the surer she felt of the character of the maiden-aunt, the sense of whose dim presence urged her to pacification: the maiden-aunt had been a dear; she should have adored the maiden-aunt. The poor lady had passed shyly, yet with some bruises, through life; had been sensitive and ignorant and exquisite: that too was a sort of origin, a sort of atmosphere for relics and rarities, though different from the sorts most prized at Poynton (*SP*, 68-9)

However, Mrs Gereth only wants to obliterate the aunt and her life by moving the spoils.

Mrs Gereth's military announcement, 'I've crossed the Rubicon, I've taken possession', does not prepare Fleda for her next visit to Ricks (*SP*, 73). The house is filled with the familiar antique tapestries, cabinets, sofas and lamps, and 'this instant perception that the place had been dressed at the expense of Poynton was a shock' (*SP*, 80). She feels like an 'accomplice' in a 'theft' and that 'the whole place was in battle array'. However, 'in the soft lamplight, with one fine feature after another looming up into sombre richness, it defied her not to pronounce it a triumph of taste'. The 'gorgeous audacity' of Mrs Gereth's act and Fleda's love of the beautiful overwhelm morality, as Whistler appreciated. Interestingly, this shift of setting also involves a shift in aesthetic evaluation. When Fleda remarks that Mrs Gereth has taken 'the very best pieces – the *morceaux de musée*', she replies 'I certainly didn't want the rubbish, if that's what you mean'; the first Fleda has heard of there being any 'rubbish' at Poynton (*SP*, 80, 81). Perhaps this is the first stage in Fleda's renunciation of the solely beautiful.

Fleda is made uneasy by the perfection of her bedroom at Ricks: 'the quiet air of it was a harmony without a break, the finished picture of a maiden's bower. It was the sweetest Louis Seize, all assorted and combined – old, chastened, figured, faded France' (*SP*, 85). Although she is 'impressed anew with her friend's genius for composition', faded France does not fit in the house of the faded maiden-aunt; Mrs Gereth seems to have lost her ability to create a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The things take on a new moral slant, for Fleda 'couldn't care for such things when they came to her in such ways; there was a wrong about them all that turned them to ugliness' (*SP*, 85). Later, with her added sense of the injustice done to Owen, 'the age of Louis Seize suddenly struck her as wanting in taste and point' (*SP*, 103). Continuing the anthropomorphisation of Poynton, 'the parts

of it now around her seemed to suffer like chopped limbs' and it is Owen's face she sees mixed with Poynton's 'gaps and scars' in a 'concrete image' of her guilt, pity and love (*SP*, 85).

'There isn't a woman in England for whom it wouldn't be a privilege to live here' (*SP*, 201)

Mrs Gereth finally restores the things to Poynton and Owen, in the mistaken belief that he has broken his engagement to Mona. Fleda has a 'dreadful image' of Mrs Gereth in an empty Ricks, overcome by grief for the loss of her treasures to Mona, yet still regal: 'she had a vision of her now lying prone on some unmade bed, now pacing a bare floor as a lioness deprived of her cubs' (*SP*, 201). However, Ricks is not 'disfigured' as Fleda expects for Mrs Gereth has put her talents to suitable use:

the elements were different, but the effect, like the other, arrested her on the threshold: she stood there stupefied and delighted at the magic of a passion of which such a picture represented the low-water mark. (*SP*, 201)

Mrs Gereth has created a beautiful interior from the few 'wretched things' left by the aunt. The 'little worn bleached stuffs and the sweet spindle-legs' are in such a different decorative idiom from Poynton that Mrs Gereth does not recognise their merits: 'she didn't in the least know what she had done' (*SP*, 202). After all her weeks of uncertainty about Owen's feelings and hectoring from his mother, it is now Fleda's turn to be 'the one who knew most. That counted for the moment as a splendid position' (*SP*, 202).

Despite all their struggles and disappointments, Mrs Gereth still has

your admirable, your infallible hand. It's your extraordinary genius; you make things 'compose' in spite of yourself. You've only to be a day or two in a place with four sticks for something to come of it! (*SP*, 202).

However, the collector's gift is now imbued with a more sympathetic aspect, and Ricks now gives the impression 'of something dreamed and missed, something reduced, relinquished, resigned: the poetry, as it were, of something sensibly *gone*' (*SP*, 203). The excessive alliteration here stresses the poetic and possibly self-deluding nature of Fleda's idea that an additional presence has been brought back to the house with the restitution of its furniture, the aunt and her disappointments in life.

Fleda's initial response to Ricks was to wonder 'if it didn't work more for happiness not to have tasted, as she herself had done, of knowledge' and of things she can never have herself (*SP*, 68). This biblical metaphor of the Tree of Knowledge refers to her exposure to the treasures of Poynton, and is continued during her wait for news at West Kensington: 'she wandered vaguely in the western wilderness or cultivated shy forms of the "household art" for which she had had a respect before tasting the bitter tree of knowledge' (*SP*, 131). In some ways, this glimpse of the upper echelons of society in which she will always be as a 'little pensioned presence' or even 'a leech' has acted as a temptation throughout the novel (*SP*, 104, 73). The beauty of Poynton and its treasures is rare and its attainment impossible for a middle-class girl whose 'only treasure was her subtle mind' (*SP*, 42); Fleda's moralism is no match for Mona's strength of character in the battle for Owen and the spoils.

There are now three of them at Ricks, 'if you count the ghosts – !', which Fleda certainly does. Ghosts, real or imagined, play a larger part in *The Turn of the Screw*, published two years after *Spoils*.¹⁰⁰ The maiden aunt is almost brought back to life by the restitution and rearrangement of her furniture, and becomes 'this dear one of ours'. Fleda and Mrs Gereth sympathise with her: 'she had (as I *know* she did; it's in the very touch of the air!) a great accepted pain' (*SP*, 203). They decide that her pain is worse than their own losses of Owen and the furniture, for Fleda and Mrs Gereth respectively. This becomes 'a considerable part of the basis of their new life' (*SP*, 204). Ricks has grown 'submissively and indescribably sweet' (*SP*, 208), and they can now accept their disappointments and join the ghosts. Ricks is frequently described as 'sweet' and the use of 'submissive' brings to mind Victorian stereotypes of the feminine characteristics. In Ruskin's opinion, woman's 'intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision'.¹⁰¹

When Fleda touches the objects she explicitly remarks upon the female atmosphere Mrs Gereth has created:

¹⁰⁰ First published *Collier's Weekly*, January–April 1898.

¹⁰¹ Ruskin (1865), 68, p. 122.

ah the little melancholy tender tell-tale things; how can they *not* speak to you and find a way to your heart? It's not the great chorus of Poynton; [...] This is a voice so gentle, so human, so feminine – a faint far-away voice with the little quaver of a heart-break. You've listened to it unawares. (*SP*, 202)

Fleda exclaims, 'there isn't a woman in England for whom it wouldn't be a privilege to live here', yet Ricks becomes the province of women only, without men (*SP*, 201). The women of Ricks have each other, but they also have their disappointments. Their new relationship has 'begun to shape itself almost wholly on breaches and omissions' – the lack of the things, but most of all, the lack of a male presence, without which a house cannot truly be a home (*SP*, 205). The news of Owen's marriage is greeted only by the 'hush of the house' (*SP*, 204). The simplicity of Ricks adds to its sweetness, making it a suitable refuge for these women who have been dealt with unfairly to live with their disappointments. It also fits in with Edis's idea of the moral home:

by the Creator's wise arrangement, beauty and art go together, the prettiest house will be the healthiest, most convenient, and most comfortable. And I am persuaded that great moral results follow from people's houses being pretty as well as healthy.¹⁰²

We have seen the same merits of simplicity and female characteristics in the happiest homes of Eliot's work, and relatively poor interiors have the same moral worth in Wharton's work. Just as James called England 'demoralizingly comfortable', according to Wharton,¹⁰³ the women eventually agree that 'Poynton was too splendidly happy'. Ricks and its things come to embody the validation of disappointment as the authentication of experience (*SP*, 203).

Male Space: 'the one monstrosity' (*SP*, 72)

It is worth looking at why Owen cannot be trusted with the spoils. Ironically the novel's action is controlled by women, strong in different ways, all fighting for a 'disgustingly weak' man (*SP*, 186). Owen is 'robust and artless, eminently natural yet perfectly correct, he looked pointlessly active and pleasantly dull' (*SP*, 39), a typical country gentleman. Repeatedly described as handsome and friendly, his earthy physicality and maleness attract Fleda: 'he struck her as all potent nature in one pair of boots' (*SP*, 135).

¹⁰² Edis, p. 22.

¹⁰³ Edith Wharton to Eunice Maynard, 7 January 1907, Beinecke.

However, he has 'no imagination' (*SP*, 61), and his artlessness is the very opposite of Fleda and Mrs Gereth. Owen's 'simple stare at the tapestries' demonstrates his lack of understanding (*SP*, 89): he cannot make Paterian 'impressions' and he has never seen the transcendent beauty of the spoils. Out of their usual setting, at Ricks, he realises that 'I never knew how much I cared for them', but can only describe them in terms of their monetary value: 'they're awfully valuable, aren't they?' (*SP*, 92). His physicality and lack of artistic appreciation for the spoils reduces them to the prosaic and bodily: 'the furniture – the word, on his lips, had somehow to Fleda the sound of washing-stands and copious bedding' (*SP*, 61).

Owen's room at Poynton is filled with his own collection, which is particularly masculine and violent, and is

the one monstrosity of Poynton; all tobacco-pots and bootjacks, his mother had said – such an array of arms of aggression and castigation that he himself had confessed to eighteen rifles and forty whips. (*SP*, 72)

Owen never uses the latent sadism of his sporting accoutrements, for throughout the novel he is gentle and kind, if stupid, and his treatment of Fleda, though apparently cruel, is due to omissions, weakness and thoughtlessness. The people who most exhibit cruelty, violent actions and masochism are Mrs Gereth and Fleda. Mrs Gereth shows little regret but great activity in severing connections with her son and stealing his inheritance, whereas Fleda puts Owen in the difficult position of having to choose between two very different women.¹⁰⁴ Their brief, illicit courtship brings out Fleda's masochism, symbolised by the cheap pincushion she accepts from him as a present. She forces herself to hide her love from his mother and 'her little gagged and blinded desire' becomes more and more violently trapped (*SP*, 113). When her failed love is exposed by Mrs Gereth, Fleda's earlier role as a 'saint' becomes 'tortuous' self-martyrdom (*SP*, 172, 173).

The exaggerated maleness of Owen's room relates to his complete exclusion from Mrs. Gereth's life, i.e. Poynton. She views their estrangement in language usually associated with the things:

¹⁰⁴ Mona's name allies her closer with Owen's characteristics: 'brig': a country bridge; 'stock': part of a gun, and stockiness i.e. thickset, stupid.

the great wrong Owen had done her was not his 'taking up' with Mona [...] it was his failure from the first to understand what it was to have a mother at all, to appreciate the beauty and sanctity of the character. (*SP*, 65)

Mrs Gereth collapses filial affection into her own materialistic love of the things, exposing the lack of a loving family relationship. Tintner sees Owen and the spoils as part of an equation of love:

the plastic sense diverted by a mother from her son to her furniture, produc[es] a beautiful house and a boorish son. The spoils and Owen are respectively the formed and unformed results of a mother's attention, and their basic unity explains why Fleda Vetch cannot possess even one small piece of the spoils when she has lost their human counterpart. James parallels the burning of the spoils with Owen's marriage, that stage where he ceases to be his mother's material.¹⁰⁵

Owen is so far out of step with his mother's taste that he instantly prefers the simplicity of Ricks: 'I think it's awfully nice here [...]. I assure you I could do with it myself' (*SP*, 100). His awareness of natural order leaves no option but that the spoils must go back, as 'if everything was all right' (*SP*, 100). However, things cannot be 'all right' in this novel where things matter more than human relationships. The falsity of this materialism is demonstrated by Mrs Gereth's emotional disinheritence of her son; the loneliness of the women; Owen and Mona's desertion of their country and the home they have fought for; and the destruction, almost by self-combustion, of the spoils at the end of the novel.

A 'little pensioned presence' (*SP*, 104)

Fleda's family also demonstrates the paucity of family relationships, for even Owen notices, 'you don't – a – live anywhere in particular, do you?' and, 'if one were plain about it, [she had] no home of her own' (*SP*, 99). Her father's house at 10 Raphael Road (the only urban setting in the novel) is threatening, yet irresistible: 'there were nice strong simplifying horrors in West Kensington; it was as if they beckoned her and wooed her back to them' (*SP*, 127). Once again this is masochism, for there is no happiness or companionship in West Kensington, just her father, who is 'always out – all day long' (*SP*, 149). He has a collection of which he is as proud as Mrs Gereth, and similarly 'he was conscious of having a taste for fine things which his children had unfortunately not

¹⁰⁵ Tintner (1946), p. 247.

inherited' (*SP*, 131). However, Mr Vetch collects

objects, shabby and battered [...] old brandy-flasks and match-boxes, old calendars and hand-books, intermixed with an assortment of penwipers and ash-trays, a harvest gathered in from penny bazaars

Unsurprisingly, this 'appealed little to his daughter' (*SP*, 131), although the smoking accoutrements are also collected by Owen. Fleda's despair and loneliness in London is emphasised by the tastelessness of her father's things: 'now that she was really among the penwipers and ash-trays she was swept, at the thought of all the beauty she had forsworn, by short wild gusts of despair' (*SP*, 132). Fleda has picked up Mrs Gereth's snobbery and she especially feels the vulgarity of the house during the tea ceremony she performs with a 'smutty maid' in Chapter 14. Fleda and Owen's awkwardness is exaggerated by the 'stunted slavey' bringing the tea things in one at a time, and 'the coarse cups and saucers and the vulgar little plates' provoke Fleda's embarrassment; 'she was aware she produced more confusion than symmetry' (*SP*, 138, 139). Again, things are not in their right place and they discuss the location of the spoils. More than anything Fleda feels the difference in their classes exposed:

her hideous crockery and her father's collections [...] measured the length of the swing from Poynton and Ricks; she couldn't forget either that her high standards must figure vividly enough even to Owen's simplicity to make him reflect that West Kensington was a tremendous fall. (*SP*, 139-40)

Mrs Brigstock appears at the moment Owen is declaring his love to Fleda, and 'the sprawling tea-things' and their blushes are 'elements that made the little place a vivid picture of intimacy' (*SP*, 148). This intimacy is unusual in a novel where lack of direct communication propels the plot. Otten's concept of the breakdown of class barriers comes into play for their gaze implies physical touch; the 'couple stood with their eyes *holding* each other's eyes' (*SP*, 147, emphasis added). This is the climax of the transitional nature of her father's house, which is only rented 'lodgings' (*SP*, 73) and can never be 'home' for Fleda. It is an unstable environment: her father is constantly going in and out, and it becomes a disturbing locus for class differences, exhibited by 'the very vibration in the air' during Owen's visit (*SP*, 149). Fleda's depressed emotions here are also unstable: 'she had neither a home nor an outlook – nothing in all the wide world but a feeling of suspense. It was, morally speaking, like figuring in society with a wardrobe

of one garment' (*SP*, 131-2). For James, to have no home is a deeply disturbing moral, physical and emotional state.

As in *Portrait*, the metaphor of an architectural consciousness is used pointedly. James's descriptions of people in terms of buildings augment their characters in various ways. For example, when Owen is described as 'his impatience shining in his idle eyes as the dining-hour shines in club-windows' (*SP*, 64), it encapsulates his stupidity and vacuity, which is as transparent as windows, yet also brings to mind his practical preoccupations like dinner and his nameless club in London, which one feels is more his home than Poynton. Fleda often thinks of her consciousness in terms of a room, which can mark her separation and difference from the other characters: 'she sat with her patience in a cold still chamber from which she could look out in quite another direction'; yet it is liable to invasion: 'Mrs. Gereth popped in and out of the chamber of her soul' (*SP*, 193, 123). When depressed, she identifies with her drab surroundings and attempts 'to lose herself in the flat suburb she resembled' of West Kensington (*SP*, 131). The image she thinks of when she reveals to Owen that she cares for him is the dramatic invasion of a walled garden: 'he had cleared the high wall at a bound; they were together without a veil. She had not a shred of a secret left; it was as if a whirlwind had come and gone, laying low the great false front she had built up stone by stone' (*SP*, 161). This destruction of her poise along with her consciousness is almost as distressing as Goodwood's lighting kiss for Isabel.

The only married couple in the novel present a stability in no way attractive to Fleda in terms of either taste or fulfilment. Her sister 'Maggie's union had been built up round a small spare room', which seems to evoke romantic frugality, and that it is a 'retreat' where Fleda 'might try to paint again' (*SP*, 133). However, this is more of a last resort than the physically comfortable retreats of Isabel. Maggie is 'distinctly doomed to the curate' and her home is a 'mean little house in the stupid little town' (*SP*, 73, 155); she has moved even further away from the social circles of Poynton and Waterbath to lower middle-class drabness, so far away from beauty that she is trapped within the physicality and odours of the body. She joins Maggie on shopping trips and charitable visits, 'diving

with her into smelly cottages and supporting her, at smellier shops, in firmness over the weight of joints and the taste of cheese' (*SP*, 156). Only Fleda's secret love for Owen enables her to support Maggie, for the charitable works that fulfil Dorothea are aesthetically repellent to Fleda. The curate's only action is to produce a 'diagram, drawn with a fork on too soiled a tablecloth, of the scandalous drains of the Convalescent Home' (*SP*, 156); once again poverty is emphatically not picturesque.

Unlike her sister, Fleda needs to be surrounded by beautiful things and cannot compromise in marriage: 'Maggie had embraced a condition of life which already began to produce in [Fleda] some yearning for hotels in London' (*SP*, 168). The brief descriptions of Maggie's furniture diminish her decorative efforts to create a home: there is a 'tiny hall, where [Fleda] had taken refuge between the old barometer and the old mackintosh'; a 'little painted stair rail'; 'poor Maggie's scant mahogany' (*SP*, 165, 166, 193). When Mrs Gereth arrives, Fleda 'observed how characteristically she looked at Maggie's possessions before looking at Maggie's sister', and not in approval (*SP*, 195). Even in her defeat, Mrs Gereth's aesthetic sense controls her: she selects 'a seat less distasteful than the one that happened to be nearest' (*SP*, 195). The furnishings and the emptiness of Maggie's drawing room reflect the women's state of mind, and 'the face of the stopped Dutch clock' evokes a vision of 'the empty little house at Ricks' (*SP*, 195-6). Yet Ricks will be transformed by Mrs Gereth into the refuge and home the two women require, although it is also a compromise with its lost loves and hopes. Owen and his new wife do not find a home either, as they decide to live abroad, and before their return to Poynton careless servants manage to set the house on fire, destroying everything.

'The spoils had crept back' (*SP*, 193)

Although this novel is a comedy, James's audience would have recognised the important moral debate beneath the surface through contemporary debates on interior design and morality of the home that I discussed in Chapter One. The reader is caught up in this valuation of character, and initially it seems as though the characters in the novel can be split up into binary oppositions of tasteful and vulgar, good and bad, clever or stupid,

through the descriptions of their homes and collections. Who is suitable to inhabit these houses, and should be allowed to stay there in Mrs Gereth's opinion, depends on their sense of taste, and their appreciation of the beautiful, which is bound up with intelligence and thus class distinctions. Initially Mrs Gereth's consciousness and prejudices form the primary narrator, but Fleda's reflections and equivocations assume the dominant narrative voice, exposing the narrowness of Mrs Gereth's aesthetic vision and how complicated the decipherment of the envelope of circumstances is. Fleda is used as mediator between the various warring parties, and it is her movement between the various houses, her first impressions of them and her stays in the lower class houses of her family that allow us to form our own opinions of character. Mrs Gereth's commodity fetishism exposes her snobbery and she becomes morally suspect, as Fleda reflects, 'the age of Louis Seize suddenly struck her as wanting in taste and point' (*SP*, 103).

In the debate between aestheticism and vulgarity, which seems to be carried out between such binary oppositions, neither wins. The spoils are never in the right place to be appreciated for their beauty, and are contested over in terms of monetary gain and in ignorance of human compassion. In the end it is morally right that no-one should have them, if they are truly, transcendently special. The only morally correct compromise is formed from a combination of a true sense of the value of 'things' and an acceptance of impermanence and the unreality of perfection. The two women resign themselves to Ricks with its somewhat tasteless and poor, yet simple and pretty things. Augmented by a few ghosts, this house symbolises authentic experience and sympathy with the human lot that Isabel discovers in the Roman *campagna*. In a typical Jamesian refutation of happiness, no-one in the novel is able to sustain the human relationships that would make them contented, as 'The Old Things' exert their power over the characters. Finally, the 'spoils' which are booty from Mrs Gereth's foreign travels and cause such a war between the Gereths, are themselves spoiled by the all-consuming fire.

James's characters are searching for a home, and find one which has conditions attached, at the same time that James was settling into Lamb House and truly settling down to live in Britain. Although this was to be his home for the rest of his life, *The*

Spoils in part expresses his reservations about a permanent residence. The nineteenth-century bourgeois identification of self with home which is expressed in so many ways throughout the works I have examined, is put under the microscope by James in this novel. Just as the literary style of his later novels would resonate in the stream of consciousness and interior psychological dramas of Modernist writers after World War I, his theme in *The Spoils* strangely predicts a time when possessions would be swept away by forces inconceivable to their owners. I will discuss in Chapter Six how his near-contemporary and friend Wharton would approach this very theme. However, the next chapter deals with Wharton's long search for a happy home, for even with a fortune at her command and 'a sort of arrogance of energy' (*SP*, 191) like Mrs Gereth and Fleda, Wharton found the ideal home, in terms of taste and companionship, difficult to achieve.

Chapter Five

Edith Wharton: The Novelist as Designer

No one fully knows our Edith who hasn't seen her in
the act of creating a habitation for herself.¹

Edith Wharton is famous of course for her intense literary productivity: she published at least one book a year from 1897 until the end of her life.² She also found the time, however, to write about interior decoration, and created in her own homes schemes that expressed her exacting ideas, which combined taste with practicality. This second career has only recently become part of Wharton scholarship, yet its importance in the development of her fictional writing cannot be overemphasised. Although Amy Kaplan and Judith Fryer both discuss Wharton's architectural expertise and how it enabled her to release her creativity, they see her strengths mainly outside the home. Kaplan states that Wharton made an effort 'to write herself *out of* the private domestic sphere'.³ I agree with Luria's argument that 'Wharton's domesticity is inseparable from her work',⁴ and that she follows the same set of rules for both. Luria holds that the architectural 'space of writing' enables the 'aesthetic of deferred and ultimately renounced, gratification' I have discussed in relation to James's work.⁵ However, I will argue that Wharton's creation of a suitable 'shell' gave her the strength to write out of a society disinclined to attribute serious artistic effort to women, and her writings re-enacted the problems she encountered living in this society. I will examine the decoration of the homes of her early life, up until she moved to live in France permanently around 1909. Their design disseminates the ideas first formulated in her interior design manual, *The Decoration of Houses*, and this in turn relates to the deployment of interior space in her writing. In the next chapter I shall consider three novels which show the wide breadth of social strata her work encompassed over the years.

¹ Henry James quoted Lubbock (1947), pp. 129-130.

² In total, 21 novels, 11 collections of short stories, 9 works of non-fiction, numerous articles and reviews.

³ Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 69, emphasis added.

⁴ Luria, pp. 301-302.

⁵ Luria, p. 302.

One of the 'wretched exotics produced in a European glass-house'⁶

When Edith Newbold Jones was born on 24 January 1862, the third child of Lucretia Rhinelander and George Jones, she entered into the upper strata of New York society, in the 'Gilded Age' of late nineteenth-century America. She was tutored by her socialite mother in the ways of this set: the rituals of 'calling', chaperonage and entertaining, the importance of the clothes one wore, where one was seen and with whom.⁷ Above all, her mother stressed the importance of appearance, and in her autobiographical writings Wharton repeatedly describes an insecurity about her appearance. In her autobiography *A Backward Glance* Wharton describes her first meeting with James. Eager to speak to him about his work, her first thought was 'how can I make myself pretty enough for him to notice me?' (*BG*, 172). The famous author did not notice her and it was years before their mutual interests drew them together in friendship. Wharton found the life of a debutante shallow, constricting, and at odds with her desire to write and she later made her critique of the strict rituals of this elite circle the moral basis of her novels. The societal preoccupation with appearances and the envelope of circumstances has specific importance for *The House of Mirth*.

Much of Wharton's childhood was spent travelling in Europe, and in 'Life and I' she records a 'bitter disappointment' on her return to America, which reveals the effect architecture had on her. She describes how she had been 'fed on beauty since my babyhood' and her first thought on returning to New York was '*how ugly it is!*' She insists she had never since felt 'otherwise than as an exile in America', and she often dreamed her family was returning to Europe.⁸ This 'exile' status she was to share with many of her contemporaries and friends, like James, Sargent, Ogden Codman and Walter Gay.

Wharton's imaginative world was an important part of her young life and she was

⁶ Edith Wharton to Sara Norton, 5 June 1903, *EWL*, 84.

⁷ For details of the etiquette of this society see Maureen E. Montgomery, *Displaying Women: Spectacles of Leisure in Edith Wharton's New York* (New York: Routledge, 1998) and in Britain, Leonore Davidoff, *The Best Circles* (London: Croom Helm, 1973).

⁸ 'Life and I,' *Edith Wharton: Novellas and Other Writings*, ed. by Cynthia Griffin Wolff (New York: Library of America, Literary Classics of the United States, 1990), pp. 1080-1081. This is the first publication of an autobiographical fragment Wharton started in 1922, which was later revised as *BG*.

more interested in 'making up' stories than socialising with other children. Before she was able to read, she would hold a book, often upside down, and recount tales from her imagination (*BG*, 33-5). Later she wrote them down on the brown paper that had wrapped the gowns her mother ordered from Paris. Benstock discusses the different physical responses Edith had to reading and writing, to explain the hold that her creative passion for writing had over her from an early age:

to 'make up,' Edith had to move about and pace the floor. Reading, however, required that she sit immobile. Telling stories triggered physical urges, movement and speech, but reading induced a motionless and fixed concentration.

Benstock suggests that 'books sometimes produced in her powerfully erotic, even frightening responses that only later in life did she recognize as sexual', and perhaps this is why her parents became increasingly concerned about the power this world had over their self-absorbed daughter (Benstock, 20). When her marriage proved unfulfilling, Wharton channelled her energy into the areas of decoration as well as writing.

Her father allowed her many treasured hours in the 'kingdom' of his library, and after her social *début*, gave her Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice* and Pater's *The Renaissance*. These guided her sightseeing on their trip to Europe during her father's last illness and further inspired her to the actual writing of poems (*BG*, 43, 87; Lewis, 43). However, particularly between mother and daughter, there was always a tension over her passion for literature, leading Edith to have little confidence in the literary efforts she so enjoyed creating. It was a rare moment of maternal indulgence when in 1878 Lucretia Jones arranged the publication of a volume of her daughter's poems, *Verses*.⁹ Artists and other 'bohemians' were treated by her mother's set with extreme caution and even fear: 'in the eyes of our provincial society authorship was still regarded as something between a black art and a form of manual labour', particularly unattractive in a woman (*BG*, 68-9). Throughout her life, Wharton felt herself an anomaly in American high society, once saying: 'I was a failure in Boston [...] because they thought I was too fashionable to

⁹ Privately printed by C. E. Hammett, Jr., Newport, RI. Lewis describes how Lucretia Jones made the selection of poems for *Verses* from a notebook she kept of her daughter's writings (Lewis, 31). However, taking the information from Elisina Tyler's 'Memoir', Benstock states that it was her father who arranged the publication (Benstock, 36). Perhaps George Jones financed the venture.

be intelligent, and a failure in New York because they were afraid I was too intelligent to be fashionable' (*BG*, 119).

Between 1872-82, on their return from Europe, the Jones family lived in the four and a half storey, Italianate brownstone in which Edith had been born, at 14 West 23rd Street, New York. Although this was 'a comfortable town-house, luxuriously mounted' (*BG*, 55), like other New York buildings it had the 'universal chocolate-coloured coating of the most hideous stone ever quarried' and held everything she would later dismiss in *The Decoration of Houses*.¹⁰ On entering one probably met with a vestibule 'painted in Pompeian red, and frescoed with a frieze of stencilled lotus-leaves, taken from Owen Jones' *Grammar of Ornament*' (plate 34), like the generic New York brownstone Wharton describes in a late memoir (*ALGNY*, 357). This was typical ornamentation of the period, on both sides of the Atlantic, advocated by the popular manuals of household taste.¹¹ On the ground floor was her father's study, which Lucretia would rarely have entered, in accordance with the ideology of separate spheres. It was furnished with a huge oak mantelpiece and writing desk adorned with carved knights in visors and a Turkey rug.¹² The walls were hung with 'a handsome wallpaper imitating the green damask of the curtains', also typical decor for a room meant to promote serious, masculine values. The low, glass-fronted bookcases were filled with six hundred volumes of the classics of history, drama and poetry which Edith loved to read, although they were merely 'the younger son's meager portion of a fine old family library' (*ALGNY*, 361).

Lucretia Jones's domain was the drawing room, the principal room in the Victorian house, which was 'considered sacred to gilding and discomfort' (*DH*, 126). Her views on the ambience of the drawing room can be gathered from her reaction to Wharton's first attempt at a novel, at the age of eleven. This began with a character apologising to a guest

¹⁰ 'Life and I', p. 1081.

¹¹ Although Jones does not illustrate the combination of Pompeian colours and lotus leaves, many writers recommended stencilled patterns and a warm, Pompeian red dado with black woodwork for the hall, and it became commonplace, see Eastlake (1868), p. 47; Edis, p. 165. Edis was published in America (New York: Scribner & Welford, 1881).

¹² Eastlake recommends that library decoration should comprise furniture of 'strong and solid oak' and a Turkey carpet of a 'sober pattern', Eastlake (1986), p. 126.

'if only I had known you were going to call I should have tidied up the drawing room'. Wharton describes how 'timorously I submitted this to my mother, and never shall I forget the sudden drop of my creative frenzy when she returned it with the icy comment: "Drawing-rooms are always tidy"' (*BG*, 73). The Jones drawing room was a 'full-blown specimen of Second Empire decoration, creation of the fashionable French upholsterer, Marcotte', with the same printed fabric covering every surface (*ALGNY*, 361). The effect would have been similar to that of the drawing room at 28 West 25th Street, to which Edith and her mother moved after her father's death (plate 56). In Lucretia's showcase room, mass-produced replica antiques were as crowded as the wallpaper pattern: 'monumental pieces of modern Dutch marquetry', a Mary Magdalen 'minutely reproduced on copper' sat on a table of Louis Philippe *buhl* with ornate brass heads at the corners; and inside a glass cabinet Lucretia's famous collection of old lace was pinned inside indigo-blue paper for its preservation. The floor-length windows were draped without regard to their practical purposes of light and ventilation:

hung with three layers of curtains: sash-curtains through which no eye from the street could possibly penetrate, and next to these draperies of lace or embroidered tulle, richly beruffled, and looped back under the velvet or damask hangings which were drawn in the evening (*ALGNY*, 358-361).

The whole combined to be gloomy, suffocating and ugly, exactly the sort of room Wharton would later rail against, and provide so many models of improvement for, in *The Decoration of Houses*.

Pencraig House in Newport, Rhode Island, where the family spent the summer months, was 'roomy and pleasant' (*BG*, 45), yet furnished with a similar collection of ornaments, photographs, potted ferns and faïence, 'turned out by the industrious Ginori of Florence' (*ALGNY*, 360), covering every surface (plate 57). As with other design reformers, Wharton found the abundance of ornaments, which she termed the 'superfluous gimcrack', one of the most objectionable aspects of the unreformed home (*DH*, 177). Lucretia had purchased 'a fine lot of highboys and lowboys, and [...] sets of the graceful Colonial Hepplewhite chairs' (*BG*, 44), in order to match inherited Colonial-era silverware. This also followed popular British 'Queen Anne style' regard for antique furniture (see Chapter One); the American equivalent in the 1880s was often called

'American Renaissance Style'.¹³ This utilised eighteenth-century Colonial furniture and decoration, but simplicity never really found favour among the very wealthy. To Wharton's vexation her mother 'did not develop this branch of her collecting mania and turn a deaf ear to the purveyors of sham Fra Angelicos and Guido Renis' (ALGNY, 360-1); as with other design reformers, to Wharton the fake is never acceptable.

At Pencraig Edith gained some sort of stability and sense of home after the years of travelling; the house was 'full of merry young people' (BG, 79), and she enjoyed outdoor pursuits like riding and sailing. One of the regular visitors was Edward (Teddy) Wharton, a friend of her elder brother Henry. He was a handsome, jolly man of leisure, who could see through the pretentiousness of others and was 'sunshine in the house' (Benstock, 52). He shared her loves for the outdoors and small dogs, even if he lacked Edith's literary sophistication, and they married in 1885. As he was also 'a good raconteur with a quick eye for social foibles', Wharton often drew on his tales for her writing (Benstock, 187). According to Updike, 'both she and her husband loved simple yet luxurious living, knew how to effect this intelligently and were past masters in the art of entertaining; and in this there was between them a complete unanimity of taste'.¹⁴ Edith's ideas on taste, however, were to become far more theorised than her husband's.

Their married life was not intellectually fulfilling, sexually a 'disaster', and Wharton initially lacked a sense of purpose, albeit within a highly structured pattern of movement (Lewis, 52-3). They lived in the cottage in the grounds of Pencraig from 1885-1893, but regularly spent February to May in Italy, 'and it was then that I really felt alive' (BG, 91). Her energies went into domestic and social organisation, including the planning of their travels, which involved exploring 'some new and relatively unfamiliar region, choosing in preference places which offered examples of seventeenth and eighteenth century architecture' (BG, 101). Based in Milan or Venice, the party of friends and servants would hire a carriage to explore the region, taking different routes to those described in guidebooks and sending Teddy ahead by bicycle to order meals and

¹³ See Fryer, pp. 61-5 for a brief discussion of the style; and Richard Guy Wilson and others, *The American Renaissance* (New York: Pantheon, 1979).

¹⁴ Lubbock (1947), p. 27-8.

accommodation (Dwight, 69-86). These activities were to become increasingly more important for her work and the creation of her self-identity.

Pencraig Cottage

Significantly, in her autobiography Wharton barely describes the occasion of her marriage, instead stating that 'my first care was to create a home of my own' (*BG*, 90). She utilised their limited funds to create a simple, practical interior at Pencraig cottage in line with her developing ideas of taste. The overstuffed chairs, thick carpets or crowded pictures and ornaments of the usual Victorian home, like Pencraig House, were kept to a minimum, although in one room the wallpaper and overmantel are like those in Linley Sambourne's house (plate 58). In these light-painted rooms with simple drugget and Persian rugs on the floor, antique Venetian furniture brought back from their travels sat alongside photographs of family, friends and dogs, carefully selected objets d'art and floral arrangements picked from the small garden Wharton had created (plate 59). Although she was later to describe some elements of the interior, like the floral wallpaper and door portières, as distasteful, Wharton was beginning to use interior decoration to define her own personality as distinct from the society she had been brought up in. In *The Decoration of Houses* Wharton highlights how the 'wants of dead and gone predecessors' and the unconscious clinging to habit can often explain an unsatisfactory relation between people and their rooms (*DH*, 19). Pencraig Cottage was a house to be lived in, where the comfort and intellectual pursuits of the inhabitants were uppermost, and the numerous books and magazines on shelves and heaped on tables were certainly not there primarily for decorative effect.

Rather than an attempt to impress visitors, the house expressed Wharton's growing aesthetic sense, and her love of having beautiful things around her. In 'Life and I' she states 'I always saw the visible world as a series of pictures, more or less harmoniously composed, & the wish *to make the picture prettier* was, as nearly as I can define it, the form my feminine instinct of pleasing took'.¹⁵ It is probable that her first attempts at

¹⁵ 'Life and I', p. 1071.

interior decoration stemmed in part from an attempt to compensate for her unsatisfactory marriage and a need to channel her creative energies.¹⁶ Scott Marshall suggests that this was a chance to please the husband whose personality was revealing itself more and more to be at odds with her own (Marshall, 26). In James's opinion, she had done 'an almost – or rather an utterly – inconceivable thing' in marrying Teddy (Lewis, 52). Although it was Edith whose aesthetic tastes and ideas were in charge, Teddy was always involved in the creation of their home together. His advice was often invaluable in their dealings with house agents and workmen. In 1913, just after their divorce, when Wharton was considering buying Coopersale in England, James worried at the 'magnitude' of the undertaking 'without Teddy's former practical aid' that had been 'very great in their constructive days'.¹⁷ Later when his mental breakdown was apparent, it was the running of The Mount that provided Teddy with some sort of stability. Edith was generally the one in charge, as Consuelo Vanderbilt observed; to her, Teddy 'seemed more of an equerry than an equal walking behind her and carrying whatever paraphernalia she happened to discard. She wore an ostrich boa she had a habit of dropping'.¹⁸ Despite his later affairs, there seems to be some truth in Lewis's description of Teddy as 'devoted in a winningly subservient way'. Wharton perhaps describes her own experience in the short story 'Expiation' where a novelist is distressed by the 'one form of conjugal misery which has perhaps received inadequate attention; and that is the suffering of the versatile woman whose husband is not equally adapted to all her moods'.¹⁹

'The soul sits alone and waits'

The roles of society hostess and homemaker Wharton was expected to play, conflicted with her gradual movement into a more intellectual social milieu. The pleasures of

¹⁶ In a letter to his mother, Ogden Codman gossips about the private side of the Whartons' relationship: "There is a story going round town that [...] the Teddy Whartons are what Emily Eliot used to call "wife in name only" but I do not believe this do you?" Ogden Codman to Sarah Bradlee Codman, 19 March 1901, SPNEA.

¹⁷ Henry James to Howard Sturgis, 2 September 1913 (Benstock, 283).

¹⁸ Consuelo Vanderbilt Balsan, *The Glitter and the Gold* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1952) p. 273, quoted Kimberly Chrisma, "'The Upholstery of Life": Clothing and Character in the Novels of Edith Wharton', *Dress*, 25 (1998), 17-32 (p. 29).

¹⁹ Edith Wharton, 'Expiation', *Short Stories* (New York: Dover, 1994), first published 1904, p. 9.

Newport were beginning to pall as it became more fashionable in the 1890s; very different from her carefree childhood. Teddy enjoyed this social scene far more than Edith, who developed a growing dislike of its 'watering place mundanities' (Lewis, 76). She lacked confidence throughout her life in her ability as a serious writer and she reveals her early frustrations in her autobiography: 'I had as yet no real personality of my own, and was not to acquire one till my first volume of short stories²⁰ was published – and that was not until 1899' (BG, 112). After a letter of praise for *The Touchstone*, her first novella, from Sally Norton, she replied 'I am so lacking in self-confidence & my work falls so far short of what I try for that I am almost childishly grateful for the least word of approval'.²¹

A story written during the first years of her marriage expresses the entrapment she felt in an architectural metaphor. 'The Fullness of Life' describes a woman's dissatisfaction with her marriage to a man of a very different temperament, who is unresponsive to artistic beauty. Revealingly, her emotional stultification is expressed through the metaphor of rooms in a house:

I have sometimes thought that a woman's nature is like a great house full of rooms, there is the hall, through which everyone passes in going in and out; the drawing room, where one receives formal visits; the sitting room, where the members of the family come and go as they list; but beyond that, far beyond, are other rooms, the handles of whose doors are never turned, no one knows the way to them, no one knows whither they lead, and in the innermost room, the holy of holies, the soul sits alone and waits for a footstep that never comes.²²

Later, Wharton would describe this story as 'one long shriek', declining Scribner's wish to republish it in volume form as it was too direct an expression of her own experience at the time.²³ Luria relates this state of being 'buried alive' to the layers of curtains in the Victorian room.²⁴ Thirty years later, Virginia Woolf would use a similar metaphor to describe the domestic matriarch Mrs Ramsay in *To The Lighthouse*:

[Lily Briscoe] imagined how in the chambers of the mind and heart of the woman who was, physically touching her, were stood, like the treasures in the tombs of the

²⁰ *The Greater Inclination*.

²¹ Edith Wharton to Sara Norton, 1 March 1899, Beinecke. *The Touchstone* was first serialised in *Scribner's*, March and April 1900.

²² Edith Wharton, 'The Fullness of Life,' *Scribner's Magazine*, 14 (1893), 699-704 (p. 700). Rejected by *Scribner's* in summer 1891, but published in the December 1893 issue.

²³ Edith Wharton to Edward L. Burlingame, 10 July [1898], *EWL*, 36.

²⁴ Luria, p. 308.

kings, tablets bearing sacred inscriptions, which if one could spell them out, would teach one everything, but they would never be offered openly, never made public. What art was there, known to love or cunning, by which one pressed through to those secret chambers?²⁵

Woolf uses similar metaphors of writing and space to describe Mrs Ramsay's emotional distance from Lily Briscoe, who seeks 'intimacy itself, which is knowledge' from the older woman.²⁶ This is like the labyrinth metaphor used by Eliot and James. For Wharton and Woolf the centre of the labyrinth is the secret space of the woman's soul, her creativity, shielded by conventions, traditions and space, like Isabel's desired small chamber. Wharton, in fact, wrote in her 'holiest of holies', her bedroom.²⁷ Fryer, taking Wharton's title for the chapter on her writing process in *A Backward Glance*, calls this Wharton's 'secret garden', which has 'connotations of incomprehensible symbols, of hieroglyphics, implies secret, blooming passion of a forbidden or illicit sort'.²⁸ She finds this metaphor of 'mind-body fusion' negated by Wharton's highly controlled plans for houses and gardens. However, Luria has argued that the barriers of doors, manners and 'literary architecture' enabled James and Wharton to 'bring the interior and exterior spaces of life back into a tense narratable relation'.²⁹ Woolf's matriarch is of a generation soon to be swept away by the Great War, when the dead woman's principles and 'all her being [...] became dusty and out of date'.³⁰ Luria argues that Wharton's design and writing is characterised by 'restraint', which becomes a morally questionable game,³¹ a symptom of the leisure class that perhaps should be destroyed like Mrs Ramsay. I will argue in Chapter Six that in her fictional writings Wharton uses her architectural ideas to propose that a society which puts women in that small space is not a moral society.

However, during this difficult period of finding her own purpose in life, Wharton was laying the foundations of her self-confidence through a rather different sort of literary productivity, with the publication of *The Decoration of Houses* in 1897. People

²⁵ Virginia Woolf, *To The Lighthouse* (London: Grafton, 1986), first published 1927, Part 1, Chapter 8, p. 50.

²⁶ Woolf, p. 51.

²⁷ Luria, p. 308.

²⁸ Fryer, p. 173; *BG*, 197, Chapter IX.

²⁹ Luria, pp. 302, 308.

³⁰ Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, Part 3, Chapter 5, p. 162.

³¹ Luria, pp. 317, 320.

she was meeting outside the usual New York/Newport set were greatly instrumental at this time in helping her to develop her artistic discrimination and a belief in her own literary aspirations.

'Life and I'

In 'Life and I' Wharton describes her 'visual sensibility' as intense throughout her life, yet lacking coherence when she was a young married woman.³² Rationalisation of her artistic eye came with the help and guidance of friends made outside her family's social milieu. The young lawyer Walter Berry had a discriminating literary mind and was willing to discuss in depth the subjects that were so important to Wharton. On their first acquaintance in 1883 he proclaimed 'it is easy to see superficial resemblances between things. It takes a first-rate mind to perceive the differences underneath' and Wharton felt for the first time a sense of intellectual fellowship that gave her the critical orientation she had been looking for (Lewis, 48). He became one of her closest friends, advising and supporting the insecure Wharton on literary and personal matters until his death in 1927, in Wharton's apartment at 58 Rue de Varenne, Paris.³³ For Wharton, 'no words can say, because such things are unsayable, how the influence of his thought, his character, his deepest personality, were interwoven with mine' (*BG*, 115-6). Lewis describes him as her 'literary counselor' and the first person 'not only to have recognized her talent, but more important, to have taken the measure of her belated literary ambition and fully sympathized with it' (Lewis, 85).

After Wharton's marriage, her first important literary acquaintance was the internationally esteemed novelist and essay writer, Paul Bourget. Despite her proficiency as hostess for her wealthy Newport neighbours, Wharton describes their first meeting in a characteristically self-deprecating tone which also emphasises her growing estrangement from the life enjoyed by her husband:

what a thrill for a young woman passionately interested in literature, but who never dreamed of making herself part of the illustrious fraternity of writers! [...]

At the time of our meeting I knew almost no men of letters. I had always led a

³² 'Life and I', p. 1071.

³³ Rented from the George Vanderbilts in 1907.

purely social life, and the thought of receiving a great French writer into my own home intimidated me at least as much as it flattered me. Not sharing my husband's taste for the frivolous and monotonous Newport life, I did not realize the documentary attraction that a kind of life which seemed to me to be a hopeless banality could hold for a foreigner as fond of novelty as Bourget.³⁴

They became friends through their shared tastes, Wharton's antique furniture helping Bourget to feel at home, as she later reflected: 'it is thanks perhaps to my library and my Venetian consoles that we were immediately at ease with each other'.³⁵ It is likely Wharton was the model for the 'intellectual tomboy' of Bourget's essays, later collected as *Outre-Mer*. She

has read everything, understood everything, not superficially, but really, with an energy of culture that could put to shame the whole Parisian fraternity of letters. The trouble is that nine times out of ten this mind, which is capable of assimilating everything is incapable of tasting anything. [...] Though like all the others she gets her gowns from the best houses of the Rue de la Paix, there is not a book of Darwin, Huxley, Spencer, Renan, Taine, which she has not studied, not a painter or sculptor of whose works she could not compile a catalogue, not a school of poetry or romance of which she does not know the principles.³⁶

Despite this rather ambivalent view of the intellectual American woman, when Bourget left Newport, Wharton felt she had made a long-lasting friendship.³⁷ Their many conversations on literature and fictional technique had opened up to her a new level of intellectual activity, which she longed to expand. Wilson notes that Bourget's synaesthetic theories of 'sympathy' with objects (see Chapter Four) are linked to Wharton's 'belief in the sensuous aspect of architecture, furniture and decoration'.³⁸

In 1894, through Bourget, Wharton met Vernon Lee, 'the first highly cultivated and brilliant woman I had ever known' (Dwight, 75). This was the pen name of the writer and aesthetic theorist Violet Paget, who had also developed a theory of 'empathy' and 'tactile values'. This was to be developed by Bernard Berenson into the phrase 'seeing is really touching',³⁹ which has obvious correspondences to Bourget's theory.

³⁴ Wharton, 'Memories of Bourget Overseas', *Revue Hebdomadaire*, 21 June 1936, in Wegener, pp. 211-226, (p. 213).

³⁵ Wegener, p. 215.

³⁶ Paul Bourget, *Outre-Mer: Impressions of America*, (New York: Scribners, 1895), quoted Dwight, p. 44. Wharton describes Taine as 'one of the formative influences of my youth – the greatest after Darwin, Spencer and Lecky', Edith Wharton to Sara Norton, 16 March [1908], *EWL*, 137.

³⁷ In 1907 Bourget was to write 'a very beautiful preface for the French translation' of *HM: Chez les Heureux du Monde*, transl. Adeline Tintner, *Edith Wharton Review*, 8:1 (1991), 19-22, Wegener, p. 223.

³⁸ Wilson, pp. 176-7.

³⁹ See Wellek.

Like Wharton, Lee had travelled extensively in Europe while she was growing up. She lived in Florence and having a great knowledge of Italian art and architecture, particularly that of the eighteenth century, was able to guide the Whartons on their travels. When Wharton published her collected essays on *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*, the dedication was 'To / Vernon Lee / Who, better than anyone else, has understood and interpreted the garden magic of Italy'.⁴⁰ Lee had been a friend since childhood of another expatriate American, the painter John Singer Sargent who was later to make an appearance in *The House of Mirth* as Paul Morpeth. Meeting with these people outside of 'the somewhat cramping companionship of the kindly set I had grown up in' gave her confidence and an ability to move from 'the cool solitude of my studies, into the warm glow of a cultivated intelligence' (BG, 92).

The most important of Wharton's early acquaintances to shape her attitude towards interior style was bibliophile and art collector Egerton Winthrop. He was a lawyer who in Wharton's words 'combined a cultivated taste with marked social gifts' (BG, 95). Nearly twice her age, he undertook the roles of friend and teacher to Wharton in 1885 and 'filled some of the worst gaps in my education', introducing her to the great French novelists and scientific literature such as Darwin and Huxley (BG, 94). However, his house at 23 East 33rd Street was also a revelation to Wharton, being 'the first in New York in which an educated taste had replaced stuffy upholstery and rubbishy "ornaments" with objects of real beauty in a simply designed setting' (BG, 92). It had been designed in French Second Empire style in 1878-9 by Richard Morris Hunt, the first American to attend the *École des Beaux-Arts*, and was completely different in style and effect to the eclectic overabundance of the houses she grew up in (plate 60). Winthrop's relatively simple interior decoration and predilection for the eighteenth century became basic elements of the style Wharton utilised in her own homes and elaborated upon in *The Decoration of Houses*. However, she thought he was envious of her essential 'indifference to the world of fashion', suspecting that at the heart of his veneration of society was an interest in the

⁴⁰ Edith Wharton, *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* (New York: Century, 1904; repr. New York: Da Capo, 1976).

'trivial' (*BG*, 92-3). This manifested itself in a fastidiousness which had every article in his house imported from France, putting an emptiness at the heart of his 'American Renaissance' showpiece home. To George Sheldon it seemed Winthrop had thought:

I will create a Louis Seize room that shall reproduce the impression of an absolute original. It is the kind of room that I prefer to all others, and neither diligence nor expense shall be spared in pursuit of my object.⁴¹

Wharton's homes, however, would be expressions of her personality and needs, as well as demonstrating her consummate taste. The aesthetic education she had begun almost unconsciously during her childhood travels was developed through the educative influence of friendships with American and European amateur scholars. It was to culminate in her first major publication, *The Decoration of Houses*, written with Ogden Codman Jr., hired by the Whartons to redesign their first house, Land's End.⁴²

'A clever young Boston architect' (*BG*, 106)

Wharton and Codman shared many of the same tastes: a dislike of the dullness of Newport society, an appreciation of good cuisine and an overwhelming love of the art and culture of Europe, especially that of France and Italy. Codman had much of the dilettante about him, stating

I hate shabby dilapidated houses and poor cooks and all that sort of thing and no culture or interest in art. [...] What I want is comfort. [...] I always decide against poverty when I see very good bric-a-brac.⁴³

They were close in age and social background and Codman's interest in the culture of France had been inspired by his childhood experience of living abroad. Architectural historian Richard Wilson describes them as

characters right out of her fiction: Ogden the ever-pretentious architect finically obsessed with social niceties and status, and Edith the artful arranger of chairs or tapestries calculated to create an impression upon the innocent visitor, whom she would carefully observe.⁴⁴

⁴¹ [George William Sheldon], *Artistic Houses*, 2 vols (New York: D. Appleton, 1883-4) I, pt. 2, p. 135, quoted Richard Guy Wilson, 'Edith and Ogden: Writing, Decoration, and Architecture' in Pauline C. Metcalfe, ed., *Ogden Codman and the Decoration of Houses*, (Boston: The Boston Athenaeum: David R. Godine, 1988), pp. 133-184, (p. 137).

⁴² Metcalfe states that he was probably consulted on the redecoration of Pencraig Cottage in 1891, Metcalfe, 'From Lincoln to Leopolda', pp. 1-40, (p. 9).

⁴³ Ogden Codman to Sarah Bradlee Codman, 6 December 1900, SPNEA, quoted Metcalfe, 'From Lincoln to Leopolda', p. 9.

⁴⁴ Wilson, p. 133.

However, their working relationship was a mutual exchange of ideas and experience. In terms of interior design, Codman had the expertise for them to put into practise their shared belief that 'interior decoration should be simple and architectural', free from the 'sumptuary excesses' of the usual Victorian home (*BG*, 107). One of his earliest projects was the restoration of his family home, The Grange in Lincoln, Massachusetts, and this instilled in him a love of the 'charm and dignity' of Colonial architecture. During the 1890s he removed the decorative efforts of his uncle John Hubbard Sturgis and Marcotte of twenty years before. He replaced dark wool curtains and heavy furniture with French and American eighteenth-century pieces to create a light, uncluttered interior, with panelled walls based on an architectural order. He explains how this process of restoration was vital to his conception of architecture:

in the old days, when I only did decoration in houses built by other architects, I had to correct so many bad mistakes that it taught me many things that were very valuable when I planned whole houses. [...] American architects only cared for how a house would look from the outside and never gave much thought to the interiors. As I had to begin by only planning decoration, I learned to plan houses with rooms that lent themselves to decoration.⁴⁵

Wharton was one of his earliest clients and her recognition of his promise gained him commissions among her friends. She also advised him on business matters, although later this professional relationship broke down over Codman's fees for his work on Land's End and The Mount. Although the apogee of their friendship was during the writing of *The Decoration of Houses* in 1897, they remained friendly, although sometimes intermittently, for nearly fifty years. Just before Wharton's death in 1937, they were both resident in France and conferring on a new edition of the book, testifying to its continuing popularity.

Wharton found that employing an architect to design an interior in the early 1890s, was

a somewhat new departure, since the architects of that day looked down on house-decoration as a branch of dress-making, and left the field to the upholsterers, who crammed every room with curtains, lambrequins, jardinières of artificial plants, wobbly velvet-covered tables littered with silver gew-gaws, and festoons of lace on mantelpieces and dressing-tables. (*BG*, 106-7)

⁴⁵ Ogden Codman to Robert Tritton, 23 December 1936, quoted Metcalfe, 'Design and Decoration', pp. 65-110, (p. 74).

This is very much the effect of the houses of Wharton's childhood, and the same decorative elements British design reformers so disliked. The rich social circle Wharton and Codman both belonged to was more interested in grand effect than good design and its implications of morality. The extent to which the Whartons involved themselves in the decoration of Land's End was also quite unusual. Both Edith and Teddy had extensive consultations with Codman and communicated constantly by post when the Whartons were out of the country. A letter from Teddy in Versailles to Codman on 1 September 1896 shows his interest in the decoration of his home and his delight in bargain-hunting:

Puss [Edith] & I went in Paris today & did lots of business. You remember the "Pope" in the rue le Peleties that they asked 600 - frc [francs] for, well we dropped in today & the asking price was only 350 frcs & we bought it for 300 frcs; what do you think of that for pure luck. I think it will look well in the hall at Land's End.⁴⁶

Although aspects of their marriage were not ideal, they both 'tried to make the best of a bad business' and Teddy supported Edith in decisions such as taking an Aegean cruise when they could not really afford it, and encouraged her writing.⁴⁷ In terms of her efforts to create their home, Teddy was beginning to show 'unexpected acumen and extremely good taste in the details of house design' (Lewis, 68). He even consulted Codman on an idea of his own, the building of new bathing houses at Bailey's Beach, Newport and his letter includes a small sketch (plate 61) which he describes:

main aisle 8ft, side ditto 4 ft size of each house 6 x 4 we have also to put in shower-baths, just turn over the elevation in yr' powerful mind & Burden & I will get you this small job, not a fortune in it, but a good advertisement & a good excuse for coming & stopping at Land's End.⁴⁸

Perhaps it was his input that led Wharton to write later on the different attitude of the sexes towards decoration:

it seems easier to most people to arrange a room like someone else's than to analyse and express their own needs. Men, in these matters, are less exacting than women, because their demands, besides being simpler, are uncomplicated by the feminine tendency to want things as other people have them, rather than to have things as they are wanted. (*DH*, 19)

Wharton certainly does not fit into her own definition of the 'feminine tendency'. With her independent ideas and distaste for the way other people had their houses, she could

⁴⁶ Teddy Wharton to Ogden Codman, 1 September 1896, SPNEA. This seems to have ended up in 884 Park Avenue (plate 71).

⁴⁷ Craig, p. 81.

⁴⁸ Teddy Wharton to Ogden Codman, 29 May 1897, SPNEA.

have felt herself to be in the masculine position, being as she was one of the very few women she knew at the time involved in professional literary and artistic practices (Lewis, 52, 54). She examined this combination of gender roles in her literary theory (see Chapter Six). Edel attributes some of James's admiration for Wharton to her transgender attitude:

it was said of her that she brought a man's strength to the sympathy and solicitude of a woman, and a man's organizing power to a woman's interest in dress and the decoration of houses. James would put it in another way, comparing her with the volatile and 'liquid' George Sand and the intellectually powerful George Eliot. In her novels he found 'the masculine conclusion' tended 'so to crown the feminine observation.'⁴⁹

Land's End

The Whartons bought Land's End, Newport, in 1893. Lewis stresses the importance of the location of this house for Edith: it was at the furthest end of the island from Pencraig, and the ethos behind her interior decoration would also be miles away from Lucretia Jones's clutter. The house still stands on Ledge Road, and has a dramatic view over cliffs to the Atlantic Ocean (plates 62, 63). Although this house in the 'Stick Style' with large mansard roofs Wharton described as 'incurably ugly' on the outside, they simplified the exterior decoration and 'helped it to a certain dignity by laying out a circular court with high hedges and trellis-work niches' (*BG*, 106). Teddy praised Codman's garden designs in a letter: 'yr [sic] trellis is simply the triumph of yr' long & successful life, only the posts are up but already it looks architectural & delightful'.⁵⁰ Inside, 'there were interesting possibilities' for change (*BG*, 106). Wharton began to seriously create a home that, as Wilson notes, would also be a showpiece 'in the manner of the much-admired rooms of Egerton Winthrop' for her developing ideas of taste.⁵¹ The rooms were redesigned to the style the Whartons and Codman preferred, as described in the introduction to *The Decoration of Houses*:

now, in the hands of decorators who understand the fundamental principles of their art, the surest effects are produced, not at the expense of simplicity and common sense, but by observing the requirements of both. (*DH*, 2)

⁴⁹ *Life*, V, 207.

⁵⁰ Teddy Wharton to Ogden Codman, 29 May 1897, SPNEA.

⁵¹ Wilson, p. 140.

Land's End involved far more extensive redesigning than had been attempted at Pencraig Cottage and in Marshall's opinion, represents 'a major step toward the philosophies exhibited ten years later at The Mount' (Marshall, 29). The alterations required detailed designs by Codman, but it was Wharton who decided the ultimate look. Codman's watercolour design for the 'library' shows two low bookcases flanking a grey marble fireplace surmounted by a mirror and a plaster medallion of a Roman emperor (plate 64).⁵² Above the white panelled dado, the walls are coloured red, with a paler stripe. However, a photograph of the room shows pale panelling and engravings of European monuments (plate 65). A letter from Wharton is misinterpreted by Wilson as instigating this change, but her opinion of the morning room of a different (unnamed) client of Codman's is still relevant:

I think your morning room will suffer very much unless the draughtsman can take off that dark red from the upper part of the panels & make them a uniform pink. In a design which depends solely on colour & not on form, such an effect of colour does great injury & might prejudice them altogether against the decoration –
[...] Do please have the morning-room changed before you show it. I am sure it will never be understood or accepted as it is –⁵³

The same principles were at work in Land's End, and the revised scheme is more suited to the modest-sized room. In other rooms the walls were similarly delineated by architectural mouldings and painted in light colours.

The frequent letters from Wharton on her travels to her architect reveal their common interests and the extensive detail with which Wharton was involved in the task. She wrote from Milan:

I do hope you will be an angel & have the room ready & the paint dry when we arrive. You ought to for I am bringing you a lot of photographs of Mantua which will make you fall down & worship, & then tear you hair out to think you didn't go there.
[...] We have all the furniture, very pretty old noyer,⁵⁴ & I think it will look very nice.⁵⁵

The furnishings of Land's End were French chairs, Venetian consoles and other antique *objets d'art* the Whartons brought back from their travels. Wharton details the cost of

⁵² Although this room is often called 'the library' (Marshall, 29), Ramsden finds this function associated with the verandah and drawing rooms, p. xxii.

⁵³ Edith Wharton to Ogden Codman, [1893], SPNEA, dated by Wilson, p. 146.

⁵⁴ French: walnut.

⁵⁵ Edith Wharton to Ogden Codman, 23 April 1895, SPNEA.

their bargains, as in this letter from Venice:

I have got some nice furniture for the morning-room, & such a nice 18th century picture of a Carnival scene! The "pickings" here are very pleasant, for people who adore simple 18th century Italian furniture, as I do more & more every day. It is still to be had for the asking, too – we are negotiating now for a beautiful armchair covered with old silk for 40 francs! I wish you were here to poke about with us, & I hope you may be when we return. – ⁵⁶

There were books everywhere: on shelves, in piles with magazines and ashtrays on writing desks; and imparting another personal touch, round dog beds beside the library fireplace. One of the more informal rooms, which was furnished with a writing desk and French wicker *lit de repos*, was a glass verandah (plate 66). This had been converted from a porch and lined with panels brought back from Italy, although the delay in completion of this room accounted for many sharp words from Wharton.⁵⁷ Even with the barrier of its heavy lambrequin, this room demonstrated how mullions and sashes could 'serve to establish a relation between the inside of the house and the landscape, making the latter what, *as seen from a room*, it logically ought to be: a part of the wall-decoration, in the sense of being subordinated to the same general lines' (*DH*, 70). Codman also designed an Adamesque or Pompeian 'tent' ceiling, although it was never installed. The design of rope patterns across sky and clouds would have further emphasised the nature of the room as a combination of inside and outside. However, Wharton was not to repeat this particular type of room which unites interior and exterior with its view across the garden to the cliffs. A gradual movement between nature and the inside of the house was to be used slightly differently in the entrance hall of The Mount.

The French-inspired staircase hall is also close to the effect advocated in *The Decoration of Houses* (plate 67). The wrought-iron railings, simple panelling and plain stair carpet follow the recommendation that the character of the decoration should 'form a

⁵⁶ Edith Wharton to Ogden Codman 4 May 1896, SPNEA.

⁵⁷ 'We shall be in Newport on June 9th, & oh, won't you catch it if the glass verandah isn't ready. The panels started for Newport a week ago, but even if they don't arrive as promptly as you might wish, you knew perfectly well that, with Jansen's sketch, & the measures & all you can get on without them – & all I can say is that if, on the 9th of June, I stumble over paint-pots & carpenter's benches in stepping in to my glass-verandah for afternoon tea, the W. Starr Millers will be merciful in their comments on you compared to what I shall say. I shall give out that you design all [Pernon's] furniture for him, that you built Mrs Admiral Baldwin's house, & that it was you who inspired the F. Vanderbilt hall & billiard room!! & if that doesn't blast you, I'll withhold from you all the Mantua photographs, & give them to Father Newton!!!!' Edith Wharton to Ogden Codman, 8 May 1895, SPNEA.

natural transition from the plain architecture of the street to the privacy of the interior' (DH, 107). Although the floor is practical paving stones, as *The Decoration of Houses* would recommend, this is covered by a turkey carpet, and there is an upholstered settee below the stairs, going against the advice for sturdy marble, stone or wood furniture. Wharton would perfect the arrangement of staircase and vestibule in terms of private space at The Mount, for alterations at Land's End were limited by the existing structure of the building, as well as the developing nature of her taste. Contemporary photographs of the drawing room demonstrate this stylistic transition (plate 68). The French armchairs, bookcases and small statues are integral to Wharton's later rooms, and the wall sconces were later used in the dining room of The Mount. However, the delicate plasterwork on the ceiling is perhaps too low for the room and the curtains, although on simple poles, are heavily draped and lined with lace. Portraits on the walls are lost in the busy pattern of the damask wall covering that Wharton and Codman later condemned as insanitary. Elsewhere there are deep fringed and bobbed curtains, well-upholstered velvet armchairs, clocks and urns which are too large for the mantelpieces they sit upon and lace-fringed gas lamps which are reminiscent of the typical 1890s clutter Wharton wished to avoid. Many of the ornaments and furniture were later moved to the more spacious Mount, where they could be viewed more harmoniously in a spacious, purpose-built environment, and decorative elements which had proved to work well were repeated, for example Codman's Roman medallion above the library fireplace which was copied for Teddy's Den (plate 87).

The results of the work at Land's End, along with Wharton's friendship, resulted in a prestigious commission for Codman, for Cornelius Vanderbilt Jr.. Codman wrote to his mother on 13 December 1893: 'just think what a client!! The richest and nicest of them all. I can scarcely believe it is true. [...] I am going to thank Mrs. Wharton who brought this about' (Dwight, 52). In 1894-5 he designed thirteen bedrooms and bathrooms on the upper floors of The Breakers.⁵⁸ With its seventy rooms, this was the most sumptuous of the summer 'cottages' springing up on the cliffs of Newport which

⁵⁸ Completed 1895, architect Richard Morris Hunt.

were filled with the spoils of European tours. Codman's rooms have delicate plasterwork and panelling, concealed doors hide the entrances to bathrooms and dressing rooms, mirrors reflect the symmetrical arrangements, and the rooms are filled with pale-coloured eighteenth-century French-style furniture (plate 69). This is in marked contrast to the flamboyant, Second Empire style of the downstairs rooms designed by the French firm of J. Allard *et fils*, the most highly respected decorating firm of the time. The whole of the panelled, gilt and marble music room was shipped over from Paris and constructed by local workmen. In the vast dining room (plate 70), every inch is covered in Rococo decoration, and its huge chandeliers, extensive gilding and twelve columns of rose alabaster, below the ceiling painting of Aurora heralding the dawn, dwarf the thirty-four scarlet silk chairs and mahogany dining table in the centre. Although the room is two storeys in height, the heavily draped windows barely reach half-way up the wall, making it surprisingly bereft of light for a summer house. I have already discussed James's opinion of such houses, and Wharton described the general lack of taste of the wealthy Americans in a letter to Codman, concentrating particularly on the influence of the wealthiest family:

Teddy hasn't yet rallied from the effects of the Whitney house.⁵⁹ It must indeed be a Ghoul's lair. I wish the Vanderbilts didn't retard culture so very thoroughly. They are entrenched in a sort of Thermopylae of bad taste, from which apparently no force on earth can dislodge them.⁶⁰

Codman had a rather ambivalent relationship with his wealthy customers, for he enjoyed their hospitality and patronage, but as a rather snobbish member of an old Boston family, he looked down upon *nouveaux riches* like the Vanderbilts. In private he often made fun of his millionaire clients and their taste and rather loftily stated that he only approved of what went on in the rooms *he* had designed in the Vanderbilt palace (Dwight, 52).

⁵⁹ Completed 1894, architect Gordon W. Lloyd, the Detroit home of David Whitney Jr., lumber baron. This Romanesque mansion made of South Dakota Jasper, a pink granite, is sumptuously decorated with wood-panelling, Tiffany glass and ornate plasterwork. It has been a five star restaurant since 1986.

⁶⁰ Edith Wharton to Ogden Codman, 2 May 1897, SPNEA, quoted Wilson, p. 149.

Park Avenue: 'elegant though very gentle bondage'⁶¹

In 1896 Codman also helped with designs for the New York brownstone, 884 Park Avenue, that the Whartons had bought in 1891. Initially this tiny house was rented out for \$1,300 a year but they lived there at various times over the next ten years, later buying 882 next door for the staff to live in. Codman was consulted over connecting the two houses and altering the facade (Lewis, 67). Although Wharton called it a 'little shanty',⁶² the rooms were more formal than at Land's End, and James described it as 'a bonbonnière of the last daintiness naturally'.⁶³ Wharton remembered that 'I had the amusement of adorning our sixteen-foot-wide house in New York with the modest spoils of our Italian travels' (*BG*, 143), and contemporary photographs show similar antique furniture and paintings to Land's End, as well as the ubiquitous books. Marshall suggests that the presence of striped wallpaper in the drawing room could be the reappearance of the rejected library scheme for Land's End, as this particular eighteenth-century style is unusual for Wharton's other homes (plate 71).⁶⁴ This room with white painted chairs upholstered in matching striped fabric is more formal than the comfortable velvet armchairs in the drawing room of Land's End.

Sybil Cutting seems to have been so affected by the unostentatious interior style that she found the brownstone English:

at first sight the house was reassuring. It was small, plain and unpretentious, and might have stood unnoticed in a quiet corner of Brompton. Once inside I was not so sure. It was English certainly, but with a minute and studied perfection quite unknown to me in English houses of its kind. The drawing-room too, where I had vaguely hoped to find Mrs. Wharton seated at her literary labours, was as barren of any sign of habitual occupation as all the other New York drawing-rooms in which I had waited.⁶⁵

Wharton actually wrote in the morning in bed,⁶⁶ but the lack of activity in her drawing room is typical of the period, when this was a room primarily to receive callers. It also highlights Wharton's preference for living, entertaining and working at her country home. After a bout of bronchitis, Wharton wrote 'I am wretched at being in town [...]

⁶¹ Henry James to Howard Sturgis, 1905, *Life*, V, 262.

⁶² Edith Wharton to Ogden Codman, 4 May 1896, SPNEA. In the same letter she also calls it a 'a cheap pied à terre' and 'bicoque': French, shack.

⁶³ *Life*, V, 262.

⁶⁴ Marshall, p. 159, n. 75

⁶⁵ Lubbock (1947), p. 37.

⁶⁶ See Marshall, pp. 97, 169, n. 27.

Oh, to live in the country all the year around'.⁶⁷ However, a town house was a social necessity, and the Whartons would return to find numerous calling cards. In later years, Teddy returned to New York and the life of the gentlemen's club when the literary company at the Mount made him feel excluded (Lewis, 173).

In the dining room, a large patterned wallpaper above the dado rail depicted trees, flowers and birds in an exotic Chinese-inspired design (plates 54, 72).⁶⁸ Wharton describes this room in the deprecating manner she often adopted in letters to Codman regarding this house:

as to the wainscot in the dining room, it is not very pretty, as you say, but I kept it because I have a white paper with trees & birds & chinoiserie, & that kind of paper loses all its character if it goes down to the ground & has furniture put in front of it.⁶⁹

The room was reflected in a large overmantle mirror decorated with garlands; once again quite different to the panelling and damask wallpaper of the dining room at Land's End. These different decorative schemes in the Park Avenue house reflect the formality of life in New York as opposed to the homes Wharton created in the country. James wrote 'I go back with you in spirit to the little Park Avenue House, of which I have, really, a thrillingly romantic recollection. I vibrated much there & got a great deal out of it.'⁷⁰ Also, the tiny rooms presented a new decorative problem for Wharton and Codman which necessitated a different solution. Codman wrote to his mother that the Whartons'

New York house will be a great success [...]. The things are so pretty. Just what I have always wanted to do myself. I never saw any one learn so quickly as she has, she gets very different things from what she did when I first knew her — I think we have both learned much and each has taught the other.⁷¹

This partnership of ideas and interests was demonstrated by the names Mr and Mrs 'Pusscod', by which they addressed each other in letters, which incorporated Wharton's pet name since her youth, Pussy.⁷² The experience of working with Codman had been a process of further crystallising Wharton's own taste. She later wrote that 'finding that we

⁶⁷ Edith Wharton to Sara Norton, [1906], (Lewis, 19).

⁶⁸ Wharton and Codman praise the 'fantastic gaiety and variety of Chinese designs', especially for textiles (*DH*, 167).

⁶⁹ Edith Wharton to Ogden Codman, 20 November 1896, SPNEA.

⁷⁰ Henry James to Edith Wharton, 18 December 1905, Powers, p. 59.

⁷¹ Ogden Codman to Sarah Bradlee Codman, 5 January 1897, SPNEA, quoted Dwight, p. 62.

⁷² Edith Wharton to Ogden Codman, 4 March 1899, SPNEA.

had the same views we drifted, I hardly know how, toward the notion of putting them into a book' (*BG*, 107).

'As you have done no work lately on the book, dont [sic] be a beast but do as she asks you'⁷³

The actual writing down of their shared ideas was not as easy as it sounded. The process took nearly a year, from late autumn 1896 to September 1897, and taxed their friendship severely.⁷⁴ It is difficult to determine exactly what each author brought to the collaboration, as they would both make different claims over the years. Metcalfe decides that

Edith's crisp prose gave the book its style, while Ogden contributed both a practical understanding of the principles of interior design and many of the illustrations of splendid rooms in the great palaces and country houses of Europe.⁷⁵

However, Wharton's own ability to analyse dispassionately her response to beauty had been maturing quickly during their practical collaborations, and Wilson states that 'Edith was certainly the person who took the lead'.⁷⁶

Wharton smooths over any disagreements in her circumspect autobiography, admitting 'that neither of us knew how to write!' and it was her old friend Walter Berry who brought his 'literary instinct' to bear on the 'lump' of a manuscript with the words 'come, let's see what can be done.' His help on Wharton's first long, and indeed first critical, writing was invaluable experience for her, as she describes it: 'I afterwards discovered, I had been taught whatever I know about the writing of clear concise English' (*BG*, 107-8). This honing of her literary skills is parallel to the development of her ideas on interior decoration. In both cases she learned to avoid unnecessary clutter in order to achieve a succinct elegance and her own style. Her autobiography also stresses that male help was necessary for her development – from Winthrop, Bourget and Berry. In her discussion of gender co-operation in Wharton's life and writing, Carol Singley evaluates that it would be misguided to think of the process of writing *The Decoration of*

⁷³ Teddy Wharton, to Ogden Codman, 17 August 1897, SPNEA.

⁷⁴ Many letters in SPNEA attest to this (Lewis, 77; Benstock, 83-4).

⁷⁵ Metcalfe, 'From Lincoln to Leopolda', p. 9. In fact, many of the photographs were taken by the Whartons on their European trips, as with her later work on *Italian Villas*. See Wilson, p. 148.

⁷⁶ Wilson, p. 148.

Houses 'in radically feminist terms, as a mutual and thoroughly satisfying collaboration that altered the way each thought about the production and control of knowledge'. Though Wharton seemed to view 'collaboration as a positive departure from the norm',⁷⁷ she never again engaged in collaborative writing. Singley neglects to mention an article on James that she encouraged their mutual friend Fullerton to write in 1908 and probably collaborated on.⁷⁸ Certainly Wharton oversaw most of the book's production, and 'her pursuit of perfection, coupled with Codman's busy schedule, strained the collaboration to the breaking point'.⁷⁹ Benstock declares that the book is 'in every way, [...] stamped with Edith Wharton's signature' (Benstock, 87), and in my later discussion I will be regarding the opinions in the book as being Wharton's own; considering her perfectionism, it is unlikely she would allow anything under her name, particularly her first published volume on which she took so much time, to contain anything she did not agree with.

The Decoration of Houses follows similar lines to other contemporary manuals of household taste, which had become increasingly popular on both sides of the Atlantic from the late 1860s. As I have discussed in Chapter One, these books described how to decorate the home in the most fashionable, beautiful and morally correct way. The bibliography of *The Decoration of Houses* includes Kerr's *The English Gentleman's House* (1865) and J.J. Stevenson's *House Architecture* (1880), both architectural classics. *The Decoration of Houses* similarly describes the problems of the modern home, and presents decorative solutions. However, Wharton and Codman approach the subject rather differently to other manuals of the period in their concentration on the need for decoration to work alongside the architectural framework of a house. Their target audience was also higher up the social scale than the middle-class newly-weds who bought the 'Art at Home' series. Predominately they address the rich upper-class Americans whose exuberant spending needed to be checked to prevent their falling into

⁷⁷ Carol J. Singley, 'Edith Wharton and Partnership: *The House of Mirth*, *The Decoration of Houses*, and "Copy"', in Irene C. Goldman-Price and Melissa McFarland Pennell, eds, *American Literary Mentors* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999), pp. 96-116, (p. 110).

⁷⁸ See Wegener, Appendix C, pp. 299-304.

⁷⁹ Singley, p. 109.

bad taste with elaborate schemes, for the 'vulgarity of current decoration has its source in the indifference of the wealthy to architectural fitness' (*DH*, 3). They also draw attention to the moral debate in order to dismiss it:

architecture addresses itself not to the moral sense, but to the eye. The existing confusion on this point is partly due to the strange analogy drawn by modern critics between artistic sincerity and moral law. Analogies are the most dangerous form of reasoning: they connect resemblances, but disguise facts; and in this instance nothing can be more fallacious than to measure the architect's action by an ethical standard. (*DH*, 66)

Their concern is with architecture as an art developed through the centuries by the needs of inhabitants and an adherence to order. To avoid vulgarity, one must remember that truth is architectural fitness, as they explain in the chapter on 'Doors':

'Sincerity,' in many minds, is chiefly associated with speaking the truth; but architectural sincerity is simply obedience to certain visual requirements, one of which demands that what are at once seen to be the main lines of a room or house shall be acknowledged as such in the application of ornament. The same architectural principles demand that the main lines of a room shall not be unnecessarily interrupted; and in certain cases it would be bad taste to disturb the equilibrium of wall-spaces and decoration by introducing a visible door leading to some unimportant closet. (*DH*, 66)

These notions of architectural 'truth' are evident in Wharton's novels, for example, the style and beauty of the Colonial houses in *Summer* places them in the novella's moral scheme.

Wharton and Codman begin their book by describing how 'the last ten years have been marked by a notable development in architecture and decoration' (*DH*, 4). This refers to the 'American Renaissance' style of firms like McKim, Mead & White, which was inspired by Colonial and eighteenth-century architecture and decoration. William Coles, in an introduction to a recent edition, writes that *The Decoration of Houses*

did not initiate this taste, but rather explained it, ordered and corrected it, rationalized it, and related it to the historical tradition of decoration, thus making it more available to laymen of cultivated taste.⁸⁰

They provide an extensive architectural bibliography, histories of the development of architecture and individual rooms, and 56 plates of extant rooms of the period to provide an academic basis to their style. The publishers did not include architectural plans as Wharton had hoped. In other manuals, historicism was presented in an eclectic fashion, and it was a commonplace for the Victorian home to have rooms decorated in different

⁸⁰ William A. Coles, 'The Genesis of a Classic', *DH*, pp. 256-275, (p. 262).

styles from history which came to be associated with different functions, but Wharton and Codman advocate the style of eighteenth century Italy and France in all rooms.

The book is divided into sixteen chapters, six dealing with architectural components (doors, fireplaces etc.) and seven on separate rooms (dining room, library, etc.). In her biography, Wharton describes the predominant theme of the book:

the interior of a house is as much a part of its organic structure as the outside, and that its treatment ought, in the same measure, to be based on right proportion, balance of door and window spacing, and simple unconfused lines. We developed this argument logically, and I think forcibly. (*BG*, 107)

Indeed, throughout the book, the same precepts are reiterated, emphasising their adaptability to each component of the house:

rooms may be decorated in two ways: by a superficial application of ornament totally independent of structure, or by means of those architectural features which are part of the organism, inside as well as out. (*DH*, 1)

Decoration 'is only interior architecture' and harmony between the decoration and the structural limitations of the building is necessary to produce a 'rhythm that distinguishes architecture from mere construction' (*DH*, 13). Along with the importance of form above surface ornament, the 'surest effects are produced' from 'simplicity and common sense' (*DH*, 2). The justification for the use of photographic plates of grand rooms, such as those in the palaces of Versailles and Fontainebleu, is their accessibility to the traveller (plate 73), but, more importantly to Wharton and Codman's thesis, that their effect 'is based on such harmony of line that their superficial ornament might be removed without loss to the composition' (*DH*, 3).

In Wharton and Codman's opinion, modern decoration suffers from people's ignorance, most thinking that a 'thing must be beautiful because it is old and appropriate because it is beautiful' (*DH*, 14), whereas, beauty is dependent on appropriateness. The decorator should study the plans of the house and take into consideration how the house is to be used, taking care that all openings (doors, windows) are in the proper place. For example, doors 'should always swing *into* a room' and 'be so hung that they screen that part of the room in which the occupants sit' (*DH*, 65). The fireplace should be the focus of every room, with the windows the next important. Doors should never be placed opposite the fire, and the wide openings common in American homes are condemned for

'exposing what should be the most private part of the room to the scrutiny of messengers', for privacy is the little recognised 'first requisite of civilized life' (*DH*, 24, 25). Maxims throughout the book, such as 'proportion is the good breeding of architecture' and 'symmetry [...] may be defined as the sanity of decoration' (*DH*, 33, 35), reveal the sense of order at the heart of their style. The moral values implied in these almost didactic statements are also intrinsic to their ideas, a factor in common with other household taste books. As Metcalfe writes:

underlying the reasoning for the taste set forth in *The Decoration of Houses* is a strong belief in the necessity for form and ceremony in the structure of life. These qualities, which permeated the lives of Ogden Codman and Edith Wharton, were essential to Codman's conception of design and decoration.⁸¹

This 'form and ceremony' is related to Luria's discussion of manners. James espouses a similar sentiment in a discussion of New York 'villas', where the 'air of unmitigated publicity' and 'the fact that in such conditions there couldn't *be* any manners to speak of; that the basis of privacy was somehow wanting', is 'a doom' for 'the complete "home"' (*AS*, 7-8). For Wharton and Codman, there is no excuse for not attempting good taste in house decoration, it is all or nothing:

there are but two ways of dealing with a room which is fundamentally ugly: one is to accept it, and the other is courageously to correct its ugliness. Half-way remedies are a waste of money and serve rather to call attention to the defects of the room than to conceal them. (*DH*, 32)

However, as the book goes on, the reader realises that 'to accept' ugliness is not really an option.

Wharton asked Charles McKim for his opinion on the manuscript, because 'he represents the "high-water-mark" of criticism in that line in America'. He was the foremost American Renaissance architect, which was fast becoming the style of America's great public buildings.⁸² He sent her three pages of notes on the introductory chapter, which led to some rewriting, but 'the other chapters he entirely agrees to which is nice'.⁸³ There was a similar enthusiastic reaction from other experts in the field on the book's publication, as Wharton wrote to Codman in 1899: 'P.S. No 2. Did Teddy tell

⁸¹ Metcalfe, 'Design and Decoration', p. 65.

⁸² For illustrations, see *DH*, 193-238.

⁸³ Edith Wharton to Ogden Codman, [6] February 1897, SPNEA, dated by Wilson, p. 180, n. 50.

you that Lady Stafford told him that the curator of the Kensington Museum told her that House Dec. was the best book ever written on the subject?’⁸⁴ The authors also had praise from W.J. Loftie, editor of the ‘Art at Home’ series:

I have received your charming volume with the greatest pleasure. Thank you also for the kind inscription you & Mr Codman have placed in it. [...] I am glad you have stated so clearly your views as to the worst feature of modern architecture – excessive & unmeaning ornament [...]. Will you kindly convey my very warm thanks & congratulations to Mr Codman & accept the same for your self.⁸⁵

The reputation of *The Decoration of Houses* was assured and its popularity exceeded the expectations of the publishers, for its first edition of one thousand copies was sold in a few months. It went into many editions during her lifetime and forty years later, in June 1937, the authors were discussing a new edition of the book at Codman’s home, Château de Grégy, when Wharton had the heart attack that would lead to her death just weeks later (Benstock, 452; Lewis, 79). I agree with Coles’s statement that the book

brought to a happy resolution her experiences of the last decade in travel, studying and buying furniture, and interior decoration. In a sense, then, her first sustained venture as a writer was more directly distilled out of her immediate recent experience than were her first attempts at fiction.⁸⁶

Wharton’s fiction and non-fiction writing were both intimately connected to the way she lived her life, and the habitation she created for herself out of 113 acres of empty land in Lenox.

The Mount

The principles of *The Decoration of Houses* were finally put into concrete form with the house Wharton built herself, The Mount (plate 74).⁸⁷ Although Codman was involved in the original plans, because of arguments over his fee, the Whartons decided to save the friendship by employing the architects Hoppin & Koen instead. Wharton and Codman sketched out the H-shaped plan of the Mount and the symmetrical formation of the principal rooms within (plates 75, 76). She took as inspiration for the facade Belton

⁸⁴ Edith Wharton to Ogden Codman, 19 January 1899, SPNEA. The curator could be Sir Thomas Armstrong who was Director for Art, 1881-1898.

⁸⁵ William John Loftie to Edith Wharton, 3 January 1898, SPNEA.

⁸⁶ Coles, pp. 259-60 and Sarah Bird Wright, *Edith Wharton’s Travel Writing: The Making of a Connoisseur* (London: Macmillan, 1997).

⁸⁷ For a detailed examination of the history, inspiration and realisation of The Mount, Marshall is indispensable. See also Fryer, pp. 65-75.

House, Lincolnshire, constructed in 1684 and attributed to Sir Christopher Wren, for: 'the average French or English country house built after 1600 is perfectly suited to our climate and habits' (*DH*, 280). However, instead of being built in grey stone, the exterior of The Mount is a wood frame covered in white stucco, with green shutters, like other New England houses. The terrace, Palladian staircase and the interior arrangement of rooms and stairs took inspiration from various French and Italian models. As Marshall states 'much of the genius of Edith's design of The Mount is in the skilful blending of the best of French, English, and Italian classical design elements to create a new American vocabulary' (Marshall, 37).

The cost of constructing Codman's design, coupled with his fee, caused weeks of arguments between the three strong-minded people involved. In a manifestation of his later mental problems, Teddy was also becoming increasingly difficult over Codman's fees and their arguments are related with relish by Codman in letters to his mother. The 'final break' came in March 1901, to Codman's relief, for 'they are nearly enough to drive one crazy when they are clients'.⁸⁸ However, their friendship was partly salvaged after Codman sent some conciliatory flowers to 'Mrs Pusscod', to which Wharton replied:

it is of much more importance to me that we should maintain our old relation as good friends than risk it by entering in the new and precarious one of architect and client. We are in such close sympathy in things architectural that it would have been a pleasure for me to work with you, but perhaps after all we know each other too well, & are disqualified by that very fact for professional collaboration.⁸⁹

Later, Codman told his mother 'the Wharton feud is really over & you may feel sure it was entirely due to Teddy who has such a big head & thought he owned the earth. The more unreasonable he became the less he got'.⁹⁰ In a compromise Codman was brought in to design the interiors of the principal rooms in January 1901 and their collaboration continued on a lesser scale. A letter from Teddy during the decoration of the house reveals that tensions could still run high between the two men:

you are at times a demon & have lots of really bad qualities, but I forgave all your baseness of character when I saw the work (wood-work-) in Puss's [Edith's] boudoir,

⁸⁸ Ogden Codman to Sarah Bradlee Codman, 9 March 1901 and 11 March 1901, SPNEA.

⁸⁹ Edith Wharton to Ogden Codman, 25 March 1901, SPNEA.

⁹⁰ Ogden Codman to Sarah Bradlee Codman, 16 April 1901, SPNEA.

which is more than half up. It is perfectly delightful to look at & does yr [sic] taste credit.⁹¹

New York architects Francis Hoppin and Terrence Koen started work on plans for the house in March 1901. Both had previously worked with McKim, Mead & White. They were used to working closely with their clients on large country residences and were known for the classical symmetry of their designs. Above all, Hoppin & Koen were able to reduce the construction budget. Also of great importance to Wharton's choice of architect would be the care they took

to arrange the necessities of domestic life with the least care in maintenance for the mistress and the domestics; to divide properly and practically the living part from the service; to give access to all rooms from hallways without traversing any apartment to enter another.⁹²

Service areas are not mentioned in *The Decoration of Houses*, as with the majority of household taste books, but for a house the size of The Mount with its many guests, a large and smooth-running complement of staff was essential. The service wing of The Mount is in addition to the main facade,⁹³ but set back with a separate entrance. As Luria points out, various tricks makes the house looks symmetrical, although Wharton is visually able 'to screen it from our consciousness', making the servants even more invisible.⁹⁴ These practicalities, though vital to the ethos of privacy espoused in *The Decoration of Houses*, were something Codman could be careless about. His initial designs for The Breakers omitted gas outlets, light fixtures and other necessities of modern life.⁹⁵ The firm's publications demonstrate many of the same design philosophies as Wharton, enabling a harmonious working relationship between the architects and their independent client.

Construction of The Mount began in July 1901 and the Whartons took up residence in September 1902. The interior decoration of The Mount utilises the same eighteenth-century plasterwork, panelling and antiques as her previous houses, although on a grander scale. Wharton now had the money to have vaulted ceilings, marble fireplaces,

⁹¹ Teddy Wharton to Ogden Codman, 11 May 1902, SPNEA.

⁹² Hoppin & Koen, 'Some City and Country Residences,' *The New York Architect*, 5 (1911), 149, quoted Marshall, p. 43.

⁹³ To the left of plan, plates 75, 76.

⁹⁴ Luria, p. 318.

⁹⁵ Metcalfe, 'From Lincoln to Leopolda', p. 12.

terrazzo floors and brass door furniture from France (plates 77-9). An examination of the house as a guest would enter it and proceed through the rooms demonstrates how *The Decoration of Houses* was utilised in the actual building of the house. The Mount is situated on a hill, looking east over Laurel Lake across terraces and formal gardens, surrounded by woodland (plate 80). As Wharton wrote to Codman during the building works, “‘The Mount’ is progressing well. We are going to ruin ourselves in terraces, but the effect will be jolly’”.⁹⁶ These gardens and the layout of the grounds were designed by Wharton, possibly with her niece Beatrix Farrand, whose knowledge of plants and utilisation of the layout of French and Italian formal gardens accorded with Wharton’s own ideas on spatial relationships.⁹⁷ The Mount’s Walled Garden and sunken Flower Garden, joined by the ‘Lime Walk’, exemplify Wharton’s liking for ‘garden rooms’.⁹⁸ She saw the garden as an extension to the house, and in *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* she describes the Italian formal garden in the same terms as interior decoration. The landscape architect should ensure that:

his garden must be adapted to the architectural lines of the house it adjoined; it must be adapted to the requirements of the inmates of the house, in the sense of providing shady walks, sunny bowling-greens, parterres and orchards, all conveniently accessible; and lastly it must be adapted to the landscape around it.⁹⁹

In Wharton’s opinion, these elements of architectural fitness, practicality and suitability, were most successfully combined by Italian country house gardens, 1500-1700. The concept of garden rooms and the subdivision of space outside is as important as considerations taken within the house:

as the garden is but the prolongation of the house, and as a house containing a single huge room would be less interesting and less serviceable than one divided according to the varied requirements of its inmates, so a garden which is merely one huge outdoor room is also less interesting and less serviceable than one which has its logical divisions.¹⁰⁰

Just as with her principles for house design, Wharton’s maxim for gardens is that ‘the real value of the old Italian garden-plan is that logic and beauty meet in it, as they should

⁹⁶ Edith Wharton, to Ogden Codman, 29 July [1901] (postmark ‘30 JUL 1901’), SPNEA.

⁹⁷ See Mia Manzulli, “‘Garden Talks’”: The Correspondence of Edith Wharton and Beatrix Farrand’, in Clare Colquitt, Susan Goodman and Candace Waid, eds, *A Forward Glance: New Essays on Edith Wharton* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999), pp. 35-48.

⁹⁸ See Fryer, p. 173-178.

⁹⁹ Wharton, *Italian Villas*, p. 7.

¹⁰⁰ Wharton, *Italian Villas*, pp. 46-7.

in all sound architectural work'.¹⁰¹

The entrance to The Mount is screened from the surrounding woodland and the service entrance by a walled forecourt. The front door is remarkably small for a dwelling of its size, and is on the simpler west facade which gives the impression of it being the back of the house. These elements reinforce the intimacy of the house, and the grand east facade with terrace and Palladian staircase over which the principal reception rooms look, is hidden from all but invited guests. The entrance hall at the lowest level is dug out of the solid rock of the hill and Wharton conceived of it as a grotto, another Italian feature (plate 81). The vestibule should form 'a natural and easy transition from the plain architecture of the street to the privacy of the interior', and the transition from the woodlands outside is here emphasised by stucco panels textured to emulate stylised dripping water and a fountain surmounted by a figure of Pan, god of Nature.¹⁰² The terracotta tiles and marble baseboard, along with a table and benches of polished Italian marble all accord with the practical recommendations that the decor of the vestibule should be 'as permanent as possible in character, in order to avoid incessant small repairs' and 'produce the impression of being waterproof' (*DH*, 109).¹⁰³

The coat room, at one end, has mirrored doors which balance those concealing the staircase hall. This reminds us of Wharton's opinion that 'while the main purpose of a door is to admit, its secondary purpose is to exclude' (*DH*, 107). Wharton and Codman condemn, for their lack of privacy, the open plan of 'living halls' like that of Pencraig House, where the wide staircase is part of the same space as the entrance hall and crowded with large pieces of furniture and ceramics (plate 57). Wide doorways, covered only by a curtain or portière, were detrimental to their concept of privacy, which is little recognised as 'one of the first requisites of civilized life' (*DH*, 25). The stairway in a house is for those who inhabit it and the vestibule is used 'by persons in no way concerned with the private life of inmates. If the stairs, the main artery of the house, be

¹⁰¹ Wharton, *Italian Villas*, p. 47.

¹⁰² Frederick MacMonnies, *The Pan of Rohallion*, 1890, bronze, recently returned from the Berkshire Museum, Pittsfield, Massachusetts.

¹⁰³ The furniture of 1904 is described in 'The Mount in Lenox', *Berkshire Resort Topics*, II (10 September 1904), 1-2 (p. 1), quoted Marshall, p. 71.

carried up through the vestibule there is no security from intrusion' (*DH*, 116). This sort of intrusion is illustrated by Eastman Johnson's *Not At Home*, where the lady of the house is seen creeping up the stairs to hide from an unwanted caller to whom she would be clearly visible in the drawing room (plate 82). The panelling of the staircase is plain, for as the 'vestibule is the introduction to the hall, so the hall is the introduction of the living-rooms of the house; and it follows that the hall must be much more formal than the living-rooms' (*DH*, 118). This arrangement also creates a sense of anticipation, and the visitor feels privileged on entering spaces that become ever more intimate to the occupants of the house. The staircase up to the bedroom floor is isolated from the first staircase by double glass doors.¹⁰⁴ Two other sets of doors lead to the dining room and the gallery, which connects all the rooms on the first floor and was possibly painted blue green, to match the staircase.

The high ceilinged gallery (plate 83)¹⁰⁵ is the only room in *The Mount* which comes close to the description of a Gala room in *The Decoration of Houses*, for the house was not intended for grand entertaining. These are separate from family rooms and are meant for general entertainments,

never for any assemblage small or informal enough to be conveniently accommodated in the ordinary living-rooms of the house; therefore to fulfil their purpose they must be large, very high-studded, and not overcrowded with furniture, while the walls and ceiling – the only parts of a crowded room that can be seen – must be decorated with greater elaboration than would be pleasing or appropriate in other rooms. (*DH*, 139-140)

In the modern, large American house, these comprise the Ballroom, music room, gallery and saloon. However, *The Mount* was primarily a country house, where the guests were Wharton's intimate friends and she had no desire or requirement for such rooms. The *Mount*'s forty-four foot gallery, however, creates a grand first impression on the visitor, with its banded terrazzo floor and barrel-arch ceiling making the most of the play of light through the windows. The only furniture was a couple of chairs and a collection of terracotta statuary and Chinese jars on marble pedestals. Symmetry is maintained and three high arched windows looking out over the front door are faced by two arched

¹⁰⁴ No. 101 on plan.

¹⁰⁵ No. 102 on plan.

doorways to the drawing room on either side of an arched mirror, which, from the outside, creates the illusion of a view through the house.

On this floor are the reception rooms: dining room, drawing room and library, as well as Teddy's den. Each of these rooms has French doors onto the terrace and there are connecting double doors between the rooms as well. The dining room has panelled walls (plate 84)¹⁰⁶, originally off-white, for 'the walls should be sufficiently light in color to make little artificial light necessary', for gas lights tend 'to produce heat and to exhaust air is especially objectionable in a room used for eating' (*DH*, 162). For similar practical reasons, 'the avoidance of all stuff hangings and heavy curtains is of great importance' (*DH*, 162); it is unlikely the curtains were of the same heavy material topped with a lambrequin that can be seen in a photograph of the dining room at Land's End. However, the other furnishings were moved intact from that house, including white Louis XIV-style caned chairs, a typical Victorian pedestal table and wall sconces which were converted from gas to electric fittings. On the walls are two Flemish-style paintings set into the panelling, and plaster ornaments in the style of Grinling Gibbons, depicting festoons of fruits, flowers, vegetables and fish. This iconography is suitable, for the walls of eighteenth-century dining rooms

were often hung with fruit or flower-pieces, or with pictures of fish or game: a somewhat obvious form of adornment which it has long been the fashion to ridicule, but which was not without decorative value and appropriateness. (*DH*, 164)

Surprisingly, the dining room is not large, comfortable enough for the table setting for four shown in contemporary photographs, yet not crowded by ten dinner guests.

The drawing room is the largest room in the house (36 by 20 feet), again with wall panelling in pale colours and a terrazzo floor (plate 85)¹⁰⁷. In a letter to Codman,

Wharton discusses the drawing room decoration:

I don't care to have the chimney in the drawing room moved, but surely, the tapestries match so perfectly in the essentials – i.e., colour & composition – the fact that one is narrower than the other need not matter, since you can put an extra narrow panel on each side of the smaller tapestry.

I am dreadfully sorry that the bust can't be recessed over the drawing-room chimney. Could it be done by making a small chimney-breast? Of course they did

¹⁰⁶ No. 107 on plan.

¹⁰⁷ No. 106 on plan.

have them in Louis XIV houses – 108

Although the bust and odd tapestries were not utilised, the final effect was still tastefully opulent. Above the doors are deep broken pediments, the floor was covered with an Aubusson carpet and a Brussels tapestry was set into the south wall, denoting the extra comfort of this room. Also, the marble fireplace and cast-iron fireback (depicting the sacrifice of Isaac) are the most elaborate in the house. The ceiling has a deep plaster ornamentation of medallions and garlands, the only such ceiling in the house. In *The Decoration of Houses* Wharton and Codman take pains

to trace as clearly as possible the mixed ancestry of the modern drawing-room, in order to show that it is the result of two distinct influences – that of the gala apartment and that of the family sitting-room. (*DH*, 126)

They conclude that the bourgeois American drawing room is

a remnant of the ‘best parlor’ superstition [which] too often fails to fulfil its purpose as a family apartment. It is curious to note the amount of thought and money frequently spent on the one room in the house used by no one, or occupied at most for an hour after a ‘company’ dinner. (*DH*, 126-127)

However, as Amelia Peck has noted, the drawing room of The Mount seems to have had aspects of both the *salon de famille* in its comfortable furniture and the *salon de compagnie* in the careful placement of the French *bergères* and chairs.¹⁰⁹ In *The Decoration of Houses* Wharton states:

circulation must not be impeded by a multiplicity of small pieces of furniture holding lamps or other fragile objects, while at least half of the chairs should be so light and easily moved that groups may be formed and broken up at will. (*DH*, 128)

Perhaps Wharton intended to direct the conversation of her guests, as was practised in the literary salons of the Faubourg St Germain in Paris, which she described with such fondness in her memoir (*BG*, 262-282). However, it was in the library that most socialising took place, suiting the tastes of the literary friends Wharton gathered about her.

Following Wharton’s advice that ‘every house should be decorated according to a carefully graduated scale of ornamentation culminating in the most important room of the

¹⁰⁸ Edith Wharton to Ogden Codman, Friday [after Mar 1902], SPNEA.

¹⁰⁹ Amelia Peck, ‘Restoration Plan for the Interior of The Mount, Lenox, Massachusetts’ (thesis for the Division of Historic Preservation, Graduate School of Architecture and Planning, Columbia University, 1984), Marshall, p. 89.

house' (*DH*, 26), the oak panelled library is striking in comparison to the other palely painted rooms (plate 86).¹¹⁰ In contrast to the 'masculine' decoration, this was Wharton's domain, a cosy room where her guests enjoyed many evenings of witty and literary conversation, surrounded by her beloved books.¹¹¹ Three walls are taken up by shelves in the 'most decorative and most practical' fashion, forming 'an organic part of the wall-decoration' and surmounted by more Gibbons-esque carving (*DH*, 151). The ceiling, above the elaborate carved scrollwork and garlands, also follows *The Decoration of Houses*: it is painted white to lighten the room and the coving 'increases the apparent height of a low-studded room', for 'a flat surface overhead looks monotonous' (*DH*, 97). There was a tapestry on the west wall, a few sculptures on a commode in front, various Chinoiserie reading lamps on tables, but no paintings, according with the principle that 'the general decoration of the library should be of such character as to form a background or setting to the books, rather than to distract attention from them' (*DH*, 152). It was here that James, on his first visit to The Mount in October 1904, started the tradition of poetry readings, reading at length from Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* in his 'perfectly modulated organ voice' (Lewis, 140). A pair of doors balancing those to the drawing room in the south wall hides a narrow cupboard, probably used as a drinks cabinet.¹¹²

Adjacent to this library, accessed by a hidden door is Teddy's private space, the 'den' (plate 87).¹¹³ Here, Wharton has subtly skewed the gendering of rooms in her house, if not the decorative idiom, for unlike her parents' home, the library was Edith's preserve. Marshall notes that Teddy and Edith 'each had a private space in which to work or to relax, but the spaces were connected (as were their bedrooms directly above)' (Marshall, 77). Wharton's bedroom is split up into a boudoir (which mirrors the layout

¹¹⁰ No. 105 on plan.

¹¹¹ A detailed history of Wharton's extensive library, its contents and the importance of books to her literary and personal life makes up the introduction of Ramsden, i-xxi.

¹¹² Although Wharton occasionally drank Cointreau or champagne, she disliked wine and it was Teddy who was in charge of this part of their hospitality, for 'his taste was superb, and the finest wines were served at the table' (Lewis, 149).

¹¹³ No. 103 on plan.

of the den directly below), bedroom and bath (plate 88).¹¹⁴ The most private space in the house is also the furthest from the entrance, which despite her well-appointed library, was where she wrote.

I have discussed how one of the main aspects of both *The Mount* and *The Decoration of Houses* is the distinction between public and private areas; movement between the two is highly controlled. There are no vaguely defined spaces and the abundance of doors provides a number of different pathways to the rooms on the symmetrical plan. These 'Thoroughfares', in Kerr's term,¹¹⁵ harmonise the flow of servants and guests between highly characterised spaces without need for wide openings, yet create a subtle order: 'any architect of experience knows that ease of circulation depends far more on the planning of the house and the position of the openings than on the actual dimensions of the latter' (*DH*, 52). The organisation rests on a balance of rooms and proportion, where door and window openings create a symmetrical picture. To achieve this at *The Mount*, Wharton utilised doors which were concealed in the wall-panelling of one room and balanced other features in the room on the other side.¹¹⁶ The service wing has separate stairs, and bathrooms have two entrances to facilitate the concealment of the domestic machinery that kept the house running. The whole house evidences Wharton's complete control over her environment.

As Hepburn argues, in his study of collectors in Wharton's fiction, the rigid division of the spaces of modernity by Pollock into male and female spheres 'does not account, however, for a woman like Wharton who created her own spaces'.¹¹⁷ Benstock argues that *The Mount* represents

another of Edith's efforts to redesign the dark loneliness of her inner world: rising upward and outward to sun and air, the house commands the landscape that surrounds it while its inner spaces privilege quiet graciousness. (Benstock, 130)

¹¹⁴ Nos 206, 209 and 208 respectively on plan. Teddy's dressing room, bedroom and bathroom are Nos 210-212.

¹¹⁵ See Kerr, pp. 98, 74, 173.

¹¹⁶ For example, the door between the den and the library, just seen, right of plate 87.

¹¹⁷ Allan Hepburn, 'A Passion for Things: Cicerones, Collectors, and Taste in Edith Wharton's Fiction', *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory*, 54 (1998), 25-52, (p. 34).

It would be easy to dismiss Wharton as the 'housekeeperish person' she called herself,¹¹⁸ a consummate hostess who could inspire Updike to comment 'I do not remember any house where the hospitality was greater or more full of charm' (Lewis, 149). However, she herself indicated that her two passions, writing and creating a home to write in, were indivisible parts of her identity: 'zwei Seelen wohnen, ach, in meine[r] Brust'¹¹⁹ & the Compleat Housekeeper has had the upper hand for the last weeks'.¹²⁰ Despite, or perhaps because of her unfulfilling marriage, she created her own environment in which she could write, as well as entertain and enjoy the company of the friends she loved, who stimulated her intellectually in return. It is unsurprising that her advice to Mary Berenson, also depressed by the philandering of her husband, took the form of a decorating metaphor:

make one's centre of life inside oneself, not selfishly or excludingly but with a kind of unassailable serenity – to decorate one's inner house so richly that one is content there, glad to welcome anyone who wants to come and stay, but happy all the same in the house when one is inevitably alone.¹²¹

For a woman from her background to become a professional writer required self-education and strength and belief in her own abilities. Even in 1922 she was expressing uncertainty. In a letter congratulating Beatrix Farrand on a commission for Yale University, she expresses the uncertain position these similarly ambitious women held:

well, it's a great satisfaction, isn't it, to find one's work recognized, & know that the dedicated sense one had within one corresponds to an outward reality? I know the feeling, & am sure you'll agree with me that it's about the best there is in the world of uncertainties.¹²²

This struggle to be true to her ambitions in a society which hindered the serious efforts of women necessitated the creation of her own space. The women in her novels are similarly disadvantaged in society by their gender, coming up against the double-standard whenever they try to assert their own beliefs in the way a good life should be lived.

¹¹⁸ Lubbock (1947), p. 35.

¹¹⁹ German: 'two souls, alas, do dwell within my breast', Goethe, *Faust* (1808), part 1, I, 1.1112.

¹²⁰ Edith Wharton to Sara Norton, 30 September 1902, *EWL*, 72.

¹²¹ Edith Wharton to Mary Berenson, 6 July [1918] (Benstock, 130).

¹²² Edith Wharton to Beatrix Farrand, 1 December 1922, Beinecke.

Chapter Six

The Designer as Novelist

Order the beauty even of Beauty is.¹

The aesthetic theories Wharton had worked out in *The Decoration of Houses* and which we have seen she put into practice in *The Mount*, come to have a specific resonance in her novels. She is well known as a chronicler of late nineteenth-century high society, able as she was to comment critically on fashionable New York 'in all its flatness and futility' (BG, 207) as both a product of that society and an outsider, through her self-imposed intellectual education and emigration to Europe. The research she put into *The Decoration of Houses* enabled her to comment intellectually on one of that society's most obvious ways of presenting itself, the opulent houses of the rich. However, her concerns with the place of women in society in general led her also to write about women from much poorer backgrounds. In fictions like *Ethan Frome* and *Summer* we can see the all-pervasiveness of her aesthetic and social concerns, particularly through the houses her characters live in, the happiness they attempt to attain and the homes they create for themselves. Luria has demonstrated the importance of manners for both the fictional technique and architectural discrimination of James and Wharton, seeing a similar retreat from fulfilment. Like her friend James, Wharton refers to an 'architectural' method of writing. The moral judgements I have argued were fundamental to nineteenth-century thinking on interior decoration are used by Wharton for a parallel argument on the way society treats women attempting to create a home. I will be discussing *The House of Mirth*, *Ethan Frome* and *Summer*, all of which demonstrate Wharton's architectural concerns in the fictions she created.

The main characters in the three fictions are all searching for a home that will fit with their requirements for a moral life along with love and community, but as with

¹ Thomas Traherne, 'The Vision', *Centuries, Poems and Thanksgivings*, ed. by H.M. Margoliouth, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1958), II, p. 26. This appears both on the title page of *WF* and on the second page of Wharton's diary for 1924, beneath the heading 'My Motto', Beinecke.

Isabel and Fleda, their attempts at reconciling their needs and desires with social and moral constraints fail to find happy resolutions. In *The House of Mirth*, Wharton's 'portrait of a lady',² Lily Bart, feels that 'the dinginess of her present life threw into enchanting relief the existence to which she felt herself entitled' (*HM*, 34). We see this beautiful young woman in a succession of interiors, as she makes her tragic descent through New York society and its houses. Wharton's use of the language of space and her concerns with decoration are not limited to tales of the upper echelons of society. She takes the countryside surrounding The Mount, the Berkshire hills, as the setting for two short novels describing the lives of the poorer people who were her neighbours, demonstrating even more starkly the poverty of choice for women at the turn of the century. The 'plaintive ugliness' of Ethan's cottage holds important metaphorical significance for the sad tale of deception and poverty of feeling in the wintry countryside (*EF*, 10). Taking place in the same remote area during a different season, *Summer* is a kind of counterpart to the other novella. Wharton wrote: it 'is known to its author and her familiars as the Hot Ethan',³ and that it 'deals with the same type of people involved in a different tragedy of isolation'.⁴ For Charity Royall, the claustrophobic atmosphere of her small village and the arrival of a young architect fascinated by the abandoned Colonial houses in the hills, leads to love and the need to confront her shameful roots. Although the 'culture of consumption' informs much of Wharton's writing on interior decoration, with her condemnation of excessive ornament and misapplication of expense without regard to architectural fitness, her principles of basic design and architectural space inform her writing about even the poorest surroundings, confirming the consistency at every level of her ideas on creating a home, a place in which an appropriate life may be lived.

² Loving compares the two versions of *Portrait* with *The House of Mirth* and sees influences from Wharton on the New York Edition of *Portrait*. Jeremy Loving, 'The Death of Romance: A Portrait of a Lady in the Age of Lily Bart' in Colquitt and others, pp. 100-115.

³ Edith Wharton to Gaillard Lapsley, 21 December 1916, *EWL*, 385.

⁴ Edith Wharton, 'The Writing of *Ethan Frome*', *The Colophon: The Book Collectors' Quarterly*, 2:4 (1932), n.p., in Wegener, pp. 261-263, (p. 262).

Her House of Fiction

Even before James, Wharton stated that she attempted an architectural method of writing (see Chapter Three), as Kaplan has noted,⁵ Wharton believed this architecture was necessary to hold a novel together and she wrote to her publisher: 'your seeing a certain amount of architecture in [*The House of Mirth*] rejoices me above every thing'.⁶ A contemporary reviewer was of the opinion that Wharton's art 'creates a tiny world and leaves the reader to draw his own conclusions. [...] Miss [sic] Wharton is cynical but not heartless; her narrative has the texture and architectural qualities of a good French novel'.⁷ Wharton's opinions on architecture, interior design and the homes we live in, form an integral part of the structure of her novels, and are not mere set-dressing. Depictions of character and setting are indivisible from Wharton's concerns with order, symmetry and her particular type of aesthetic morality. Her theory of suitable house decoration, so fully formulated in *The Decoration of Houses* provides a key to the interpretation of characters and their actions in her novels.

Wharton describes the structuring process in the practical terms of the designer:

it should be the story-teller's first care to choose this reflecting mind deliberately, as one would choose a building site, or decide upon the orientation of one's house, and when this is done, to live inside the mind chosen. (*WF*, 46)

She was concerned that her tales would become untidy and not symmetrical, just as symmetry, order and the 'sense of interrelation of parts, or unity of the whole' are of vital importance in the decoration of houses (*DH*, 192). During the writing of *The House of Mirth*,

my trouble was that the story kept drawing into its web so many subordinate themes that to show their organic connection with the main issue [to] keep them from crowding to the front, was a heavy task for a beginner. (*BG*, 207)

She found her solution in the character of Lily Bart, the 'typical human significance' (*BG*, 207), the treatment of whom, as with a Jamesian central consciousness, orders and controls the whole story as she appears in parallel scenes in this tightly architected novel. In her essay 'The Criticism of Fiction', Wharton states that 'it is only by viewing

⁵ Kaplan, p. 174.

⁶ Edith Wharton to William Crary Brownell, 5 August 1905, *EWL*, p. 94.

⁷ Anon., *English Review* (4 November 1905), Beinecke.

the novel as an organic whole, by considering its form and function as one, that the critic can properly estimate its details of style and construction'.⁸ This need for 'organic' wholeness in artistic creation is repeated in her writing on interior decoration: 'everything a room contains should be regarded as a factor in its general composition' (*DH*, 186). Similarly, 'every short story, [...] like every other work of art, contains within itself the germ of its own particular form and dimensions'.⁹ The story itself suggests the manner of writing it: 'if, then, design is inevitable, the best art must be that in which it is most organic, most inherent in the soul of the subject'.¹⁰ In the case of *Ethan Frome* and *Summer*, this can be extended to the 'forms' that the characters inhabit, their houses and the landscapes in which they are situated.

Wharton extends this architectural concern into gender differentiations and classifies the ability to control as a masculine virtue:

I more than agree with you that I haven't been able to keep the characters from being, so to speak, mere *building-material*. The fact is that I am beginning to see exactly where my weakest point is. – I conceive my subjects like a man – that is, rather more architectonically & dramatically than most women – & then execute them like a woman; or rather, I sacrifice, to my desire for construction & breadth, the small incidental effects that women have always excelled in, the episodic characterisation, I mean.¹¹

Neither approach to fiction is deprecated, but Wharton is aware of the tension between them: 'while they may not be mutually exclusive, they are not easily combined'.¹²

Wegener, in his discussion of Wharton's critical writings, finds that she is reluctant to ascribe critical facility to women writers. Finding the writing of criticism difficult, she did not write her first review until she was forty, and continued with the genre only sporadically, despite being well-read in critical writings in various languages since her youth. In Wegener's opinion, 'equipped though she was with a highly refined and penetrating critical intelligence, this is a woman who obviously found it difficult to take

⁸ Edith Wharton, 'The Criticism of Fiction', *Times Literary Supplement*, (25 May 1914), 229-30, in Wegener, pp. 120-134, (p. 127).

⁹ *BG*, 114. This phrase first published in Edith Wharton, 'Introduction to *Ethan Frome*', (New York: Scribner's, 1922), in Wegener, pp. 259-261 (p. 259).

¹⁰ Wharton, 'The Criticism of Fiction', Wegener, p. 125.

¹¹ Edith Wharton to Robert Grant, 19 November [1907], *EWL*, 123-5, regarding his analysis of *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907).

¹² Julie Olin-Ammentorp, 'Female Models and Male Mentors in Wharton's Early Fiction', in Goldman-Price and Pennell, pp. 84-95, (p. 85).

women seriously as writers of criticism'.¹³ But her own attempts to live up to her high standards of creative writing were subject to great self-criticism. Wharton referred to the architectural structure of *The House of Mirth* in a letter to William Brownell of Scribner's, a man she described at his death in 1928 as the 'most discerning literary critic' of his time (Benstock, 85). Her insecurity about her own writing is obvious, but concerns with an architecture of writing come to the forefront of her thoughts:

the whole thing strikes me as so loosely built, with so many dangling threads, & cul-de-sacs, & long dusty stretches, that [...] your seeing a certain amount of architecture in it rejoices me above everything – my theory of what the novel ought to be is so exorbitant, that I am always reminded of Daudet's 'Je rêve d'un aigle, j'accouche d'un colibri'.¹⁴

She found James the master of this 'architecture': 'it was one of his profound originalities to feel, and to illustrate in his own books, the three-dimensional qualities of that rich art which had hitherto [...] been practised in the flat'.¹⁵ He managed this through what Wharton called the 'essential' elements of 'the new method' of fiction writing: 'the choice of a central situation, and of what might be called centripetal incidents'.¹⁶ This is similar to the Jamesian view from one of the windows of his house of fiction, with the consciousness of the central character filtering and organising the action.

At the beginning of their friendship, James wrote to Wharton praising and criticising her tale 'The Line of Least Resistance'.¹⁷ He urged her to develop her strengths:

and I applaud, I mean I value, I egg you on, in your study of the human life that surrounds you. Let yourself go in it & at it – it's an untouched field, really: the folk who try, over there, don't come within miles of any civilized, however superficially, any 'evolved' life. And use to the full your remarkable ironic and valeric gift; they form a most valuable, (I hold,) and beneficent engine.¹⁸

The opinion that America lacks a 'civilised' and "evolved" life' is as we have seen a famous Jamesian position, the expatriate comparing the people of his homeland with the older civilisation of Europe. Wharton similarly explores the highly codified culture of

¹³ Wegener, p. 11.

¹⁴ *EWL*, 94-5. French: 'I dream of an eagle, I give birth to a hummingbird'.

¹⁵ Edith Wharton, 'Henry James in His Letters', review of *The Letters of Henry James*, ed. by Percy Lubbock, *Quarterly Review*, 234 (1920), 188-202, in Wegener, pp. 137-150, (p. 147).

¹⁶ Wharton, 'Henry James in His Letters', Wegener, p. 147.

¹⁷ 'The Line of Least Resistance', first published *Lippincott's Magazine*, October 1900.

¹⁸ Henry James to Edith Wharton, 26 October 1900, *HJL*, IV, 171.

American high society and finds it wanting, and James approves of Wharton's treatment of contemporary American culture. Two years later, James again encouraged Wharton to choose modern life as her subject, rather than the eighteenth-century Italy of her first full-length novel, *The Valley of Decision* (1902):

so, as, after all, to mention it in two words does it no sort of justice, let it suffer the wrong of being crudely hinted as my desire earnestly, tenderly, intelligently to admonish you, while you are young, free, expert, exposed (to illumination) – by which I mean while you're in full command of the situation – admonish you, I say, in favour of the American Subject. There it is round you. Don't pass it by – the immediate, the real, the ours, the yours, the novelist's that it waits for. Take hold of it and keep hold, and let it pull you where it will. It will pull harder than things of mere tarabiscotage,¹⁹ which is a merit in itself. What I would say in a word is: Profit, be warned, by my awful example of exile and ignorance. You will say that j'en parle à mon aise²⁰ – but I shall have paid for my ease, and I don't want you to pay (as much) for yours. But these are impertinent importunities, from the moment they are not developed. All the same Do New York! The first-hand account is precious.²¹

Wharton had not sent James the novel, but was so impressed with this advice and the praise for *The Valley of Decision* earlier in the letter that she had typescript copies of it made and sent to Brownell, her friend Sara Norton and probably Walter Berry (Lewis, 127). Brownell, knowing that Wharton had already begun to tackle the subject by starting 'Disintegration' in mid-spring 1902, a novel about society in New York and Long Island, replied 'well, you are going to do New York, anyhow, so your other admirers needn't speculate about the wisdom of his counsel'.²² In Benstock's opinion, James's advice was now 'superfluous', as Wharton had already begun the subject (Benstock, 125). Perhaps Benstock is at pains to deny the strength of the influence of the 'Master' over the younger writer in order to emphasise Wharton's artistic autonomy. His imperiousness is evident in a letter to Wharton's sister-in-law Minnie, where, after praise for her short stories, he describes how he wants to

get hold of the little lady and pump the pure essence of my wisdom and experience into her. She must be tethered in native pastures, even if it reduce her to a backyard in New York.²³

However, Lewis proposes that the 'paradoxical' result of James's letter to Wharton was

¹⁹ French: ornateness.

²⁰ French: it's easy for me to say so.

²¹ Henry James to Edith Wharton, 17 August 1902, *HJL*, IV, 235-6.

²² William Crary Brownell to Edith Wharton, [n.d., August 1902?], (Lewis, 127).

²³ Henry James to Mary Cadwalader Jones, 20 August 1902, *HJL*, IV, 237-8.

the abandonment of 'Disintegration' for the 'larger and more focused ambition that fulfilled itself eventually in *The House of Mirth*' (Lewis, 127, 150).

Although the Whartons had moved in at the end of September 1902, and The Mount was ready to receive guests in July 1903, all the buildings were not completed until Spring 1904. At last Wharton was able to devote her time, or at least her precious mornings, to writing what would become her first best-seller, *The House of Mirth*, which she began seriously to work on in September 1903. In October James came to stay at The Mount for two weeks and as Fryer points out, while she was beginning her writing career, he was ending his.²⁴ The novel was to begin serialisation in *Scribner's* in January of 1905, and while she was writing 'very hard' every morning,²⁵ James, in the guest bedroom, was working on the New York Edition (Benstock, 144). Perhaps the long experience of designing and building her own home over the last three years had a bearing on her concern with an architecture of fiction. In a letter to Fullerton from The Mount a few years later, Wharton wrote:

the heat is bad, and so is the drought; but in spite of both the place is really beautiful, and so much leafier & more 'fendu'²⁶ than two years ago that I was amazed at the success of my [efforts]. Decidedly, I'm a better landscape gardener than novelist, and this place, every line of which is my own work, far surpasses the House of Mirth.²⁷

This emphasises the link Wharton felt between her two passions, of writing and creating a home and garden.

However unsure of her talents in writing she might have been, *The House of Mirth* still expresses Wharton's concerns with fundamental truths expressed through a harmoniously designed whole. She manages this through an understanding and identification with James's method, augmented by her own studies and concerns with architectural design and interior decoration. Not only is the novel filled with descriptions of interiors, but their relationship to her central character and how Lily is represented within them is part of the whole conception of the novel. Beer comments that Wharton's shorter fiction reflects her 'enduring commitment to exploring the topography of the

²⁴ Fryer, p. 74.

²⁵ Edith Wharton to Sara Norton, 18 November [1904], (Benstock, 145).

²⁶ French: well established.

²⁷ Edith Wharton to W. Morton Fullerton, 3 July 1911, *EWL*, 242.

moral life of a culture. As ever in Wharton's work, aesthetic issues are also ethical issues'.²⁸ Similarly, in *The House of Mirth*, aesthetics and morality are dealt with both thematically and structurally. In the first few pages, Lily is described by Selden humorously as illustrating the "argument from design" (*HM*, 5), the religious implications of which augment Wharton's concern to describe 'the "old woe of the world"' in this 'society of irresponsible pleasure-seekers' (*BG*, 207). Lily is fully self-aware of her beauty and the uses it can be put to. It also brings in the idea that she is a designed object, as much an artificially cultivated beauty as the hothouse varieties of the flower she is named after. However, Lily is also the designer, creating her own representations, and thus exposing the flaw in this theistic proof. And so Wharton approached the writing of her novel and the description of her main character with an awareness of the creation of such artificial representations. I will be discussing the specifics of the houses and backgrounds Lily is in, for as Montgomery states, in her detailed study of Wharton's writings in the context of the *haute bourgeoisie*, 'the material culture of the homes of New York's social elite – furnishings, decorations, the use of space – was integrally connected to their "presentation of self"'.²⁹

It is vital to Wharton's architectural sense of this novel that at the very centre she puts Lily's *tableau vivant*. Like Gwendolen's *tableaux*, this scene is more literally and explicitly a 'portrait of a lady' than James's framing scenes. Wolff notes that no-one previously 'had troubled to detail what it would be like to be the woman thus exalted and objectified'.³⁰ Both Isabel and Gwendolen achieve marriage and possession by a man, the purpose for which beautiful women sit still for their portrait. Lily, however, is continually moving and changing, to those around her and to herself. She has flaws of inconsistency, snobbery and small-mindedness, which she eventually sheds, like Jane Austen's Emma. Her continual slippage between what she seems to represent and how she behaves means she will never achieve resolution and marriage. Instead she ends in

²⁸ Janet Beer, *Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton and Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Studies in Short Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1997), p. 9.

²⁹ Montgomery, p. 64.

³⁰ Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 132-3.

loneliness and death, aware of what she could have been and what she has lost. In *The Writing of Fiction*, Wharton details an 'important principle' of description in fiction:

the impression produced by a landscape, a street or a house should always, to the novelist, be an event in the *history of a soul*, and the use of the 'descriptive passage,' and its style, should be determined by the fact that it must depict only what the intelligence concerned would have noticed, and always in terms within the register of that intelligence. (*WF*, 85, emphasis added)

Wharton's sense of how the self is constructed, its artificiality and dependence upon languages of representation, and her stress on the physical elements that decorate our lives, mean that Lily's portrait resonates on many levels, enabling multiple interpretations within the novel and by the reader.

The House Of Mirth

The novel's title is from Ecclesiastes 7.4: 'the heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth'. The themes of Ecclesiastes are vanity and the insubstantiality of worldly experience. Wharton applies this to modern life and asks 'in what aspect could a society of irresponsible pleasure seekers be said to have, on the "old woe of the world", any deeper bearing than the people composing such a society could guess?' The answer to this question of aesthetics and morality is 'that a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideals' (*BG*, 207). In the novel, society destroys Lily Bart, an 'amazingly pretty' (*HM*, 8), fashionable, yet penniless young woman, who has been trained from her girlhood to be purely decorative, and her descent is played out against the backgrounds of various houses. Her movement from the drawing rooms and ballrooms of high society to her eventual death by overdose of sedatives in a run-down boarding house is through increasingly disordered spaces, in complete contrast to the ordered movement Wharton designed for *The Mount*. The keystone of the plot, and our understanding of the main character, is Lily's *tableau vivant*, at the centre of the novel, where her beauty is displayed for all to see and admire, as she represents herself as a living portrait.

A Moment's Ornament

Lily is a beautiful orphan who needs to marry a fortune in order to survive, and whose only skills are how to look beautiful and make others comfortable. She is 'highly specialized' (*HM*, 5), and seems to be the perfect embodiment of the lady of conduct books: 'a lady is a parlor ornament, a willing show gallery, a mistress of tongue-tied etiquette'.³¹ Similarly, narcissistic Rosamond is an 'uncommonly pretty woman' (*MM*, 705) with 'elegant accomplishments' (*MM*, 301). Lily's only hope of survival is through an advantageous marriage, yet she develops a moral squeamishness about following through her role as a commodity in this society led by 'conspicuous consumption' as 'evidence of pecuniary strength' in Veblen's phrase.³² Lawrence Selden, whom Wharton describes as the 'negative hero'³³ of the book, is the most important of her spectators and sees her as 'so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate' (*HM*, 7). Lily is all too aware that her only asset is her beauty and that she is constantly on show, telling Selden: 'if I were shabby no one would have me: a woman is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself. The clothes are the background, the frame' (*HM*, 12). This relates metaphorically to Isabel's framed portraits, but Lily paints her *own* 'portrait of a lady' as Selden cynically observes: 'you are an artist and I happen to be the bit of colour you are using today' (*HM*, 66). Her main talent is her ability to display herself to her best advantage.

Her aim is to escape the fate of 'dinginess' which she fears with a 'physical distaste' (*HM*, 35, 168). Dinginess, for Lily, covers poverty, ugliness and boredom; obviously not a suitable background for this hothouse flower. Wharton ascribes this aesthetic sensitivity to herself, remembering that she

must always have been too keen for middling pleasures; my photographic memory of

³¹ Reverend G. S. Weaver, *Aims and Ends for Girls and Young Women* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1856), p. 125, quoted Carolyn Brucken, 'In the Public Eye: Women and the American Luxury Hotel', *Winterthur Portfolio*, 31 (1996), 203-220, (p. 220).

³² Veblen, p. 68. Although Wharton does not specifically state that she had read Veblen, *HM* shows that she was aware of his arguments. See Ruth Bernard Yeazell, 'The Conspicuous Wasting of Lily Bart' in *New Essays on The House of Mirth*, ed. by Deborah Esch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 15-42.

³³ Edith Wharton to Sara Norton, [n.d. given], (Lewis, 155).

rooms and houses – even those seen but briefly, or at long intervals was from my earliest years a source of inarticulate misery, for I was always vaguely frightened by ugliness (*BG*, 28).

Wharton connects this fear of ugliness with ‘rooms and houses’, and in the novel, Lily’s dread ‘dinginess’ is encapsulated by the ‘cramped flat’ with ‘cheap conveniences and hideous wall-papers’ (*HM*, 25) of spinster, Gerty Farish. Young Lily’s mother teaches her that ugliness only comes with poverty and those with money are never ugly; however, the moral judgements implicit in this categorisation come under constant scrutiny throughout the novel, not least by Lily herself. By the end of the novel, the only happy home she has been in is the poorest, and the riches of *parvenu* Sim Rosedale do not make him any more attractive to her as a husband.

Lily must marry money, for ‘her whole being dilated in an atmosphere of luxury; it was the background she required’ (*HM*, 26). To achieve this, she must maintain her suitability for this background, and she constantly scrutinises her face in the mirror for signs of age. The mirror does not always give the correct reflection. She has had to learn ‘the value of contrast in throwing her charms into relief’ (*HM*, 47) and snares potential suitor Percy Gryce by making tea on the train to a country house party: ‘he watched her in silent fascination while her hands flitted above the tray, looking miraculously fine and slender in contrast to the coarse china’ (*HM*, 19).

Selden evaluates Lily as Osmond does Madame Merle, in terms of porcelain:

he had a confused sense that she must have cost a great deal to make, that a great many dull and ugly people must, in some mysterious way, have been sacrificed to produce her. He was aware that the qualities distinguishing her from the herd of her sex were chiefly external: as though a fine glaze of beauty and fastidiousness had been applied to vulgar clay. Yet the analogy left him unsatisfied, for a coarse texture will not take a high finish; and was it not possible that the material was fine, but that circumstance had fashioned it into a futile shape? (*HM*, 5)

Lily is explicitly an art object, allowed her way of life through the sacrifices of the ‘dull and ugly’ people behind the scenes, servants like Mrs Haffen, who affects Lily’s choices by the end of the novel more than she could imagine. The comparison of Lily with porcelain echoes Madame Merle’s self-identification with her cracked cup. Both ‘ornaments’ have cunningly concealed flaws; Madame Merle states that hers is age, part of Lily’s fear of dinginess. However, Selden’s metaphor of connoisseurship points up his own concern with surface appearances. Throughout the novel, his inability to believe

in Lily's 'fine' character beneath leads him to reject her. Her beauty and poise, which are indeed studied and expensive, also reflect a developing inner morality, which makes her unable to marry a dull man like Percy Gryce for his money and 'the honour of boring her for life' (*HM*, 25). Ironically, she can never be happy, as this is what her training has made her fit for and, like Madame Merle, this destroys her.

As the book's working title suggests, she is merely 'A Moment's Ornament' (Lewis, 109, 155);³⁴ her evanescence is enforced by her fair-weather society friends who treat her according to how she can be of use to them. Wharton points the reader towards an understanding of Lily's fluctuating moral centre:

for all the hard glaze of her exterior, was inwardly as malleable as wax. Her faculty for adapting herself, for entering into other people's feelings, if it served her now and then in small contingencies, hampered her in the decisive moments of life. She was like a water-plant in the flux of the tides. (*HM*, 53)

Through her growing self-realisation of her lack of skills to earn a living, and her moral refusal to compromise herself, even for her most deep-seated desires, she falls down through the ranks of society, and further from her ambitions.

'The being to whom no four walls mean more than any others, is, [...] expatriate everywhere' (*HM*, 148)

At the beginning of the novel Lily is between trains, and she is constantly on the move between houses, none of which she can call home. Each one is evaluated by Lily as a suitable background for her beauty and thus the life she wants to lead, whether it is the luxury of Bellomont (where she feels she has the most suitable background), the 'glacial neatness' of her Aunt Peniston's house (*HM*, 37), or the even more transient, flashy hotel rooms she lives in with Mrs Hatch. Wharton had the greatest admiration for Eliot,³⁵ and Lily's early life is described very like Gwendolen's, with the explicit importance of

³⁴ Abbott's detailed study of Lily as 'an actual personification of Art Nouveau', implicit in this phrase, develops Fryer's evaluation of Lily as 'a living symbol of Art Nouveau', by examining Lily's description in terms of curves and the clothing, jewellery and furnishings of the novel. Reginald Abbott, "'A Moment's Ornament': Wharton's Lily Bart and *Art Nouveau*", *Mosaic*, 24:2 (1991), 73-91 (p. 74); Fryer, p. 350, n. 29.

³⁵ George Eliot was 'perhaps born with the richest gifts of any English novelist since Thackeray' (*WF*, 65-6). Wharton wrote a review of Leslie Stephen's biography of Eliot. 'George Eliot', *Bookman*, 15 (May 1902), 247-51, in Wegener, pp. 71-8.

surroundings on character:

a human life, I think, should be well rooted in *some spot of a native land*, where it may get the love of tender kinship for the face of earth, [...] a spot where the definiteness of early memories may be inwrought with affection.³⁶

Eliot's Wordsworthian view and its rural emphasis on soil and growth are anterior to my concentration on constructed interiors, but Eliot's concern with an attachment to one's early environment has obvious parallels with Lily's upbringing. Wharton emphasises the *lares et penates*, the household gods:³⁷

she herself had grown up without any *one spot of earth* being dearer to her than another: there was no centre of early pieties, of grave endearing traditions, to which her heart could revert and from which it could draw strength for itself and tenderness for others. In whatever form a slowly-accumulated past lives in the blood – whether in the concrete image of the old house stored with visual memories, or in the conception of the house not built with hands, but made up of inherited passions and loyalties – it has the same power of broadening and deepening the individual existence, of attaching it by mysterious links of kinship to all the mighty sum of human striving. (*HM*, 319, emphasis added)

Here Wharton tells us what attributes make a home: history, love and kinship, enforced by 'visual memories', and like Eliot, the individual's link to the 'sum of human striving'. The image of a 'centre of early pieties' with its religious overtones, points us to the warmth of a hearth, an image central to the concept of home in *Ethan Frome*. Lily grows up in a house where 'no one ever dined at home' and there are 'precipitate trips to Europe' or Newport. In charge of 'the turbulent element called home' is the 'vigorous and determined figure of a mother still young enough to dance her ball-dresses to rags', who, after they have lost the money her 'effaced and silent' father has earned, tells Lily 'with a fierce kind of vindictiveness: "But you'll get it all back – you'll get it all back, with your face"' (*HM*, 28-9). Her early life has been characterised by 'a zig-zag broken course down which the family craft glided on a rapid current of amusement, tugged at by the underflow of a perpetual need – the need of more money' (*HM*, 30) – the same uncertain movement Lily takes throughout the novel, as she gambles to keep up face (in both senses), searches for a rich husband, and takes risky loans from supposed friends.

³⁶ *DD*, 16, emphasis added. Mary Nyquist uses a psychoanalysis to compare *The House of Mirth*, *Daniel Deronda*, *The Portrait of a Lady* and *Emma* in her wide-ranging 'Determining Influences: Resistance and Mentorship in *The House of Mirth* and the Anglo-American Realist Tradition' in Esch, pp. 43-106.

³⁷ 'Lares' is also Latin for hearth. James writes of Wharton's 'Parisian pēnates [sic]' in a letter of 6 September 1913, filled with classical allusions, Powers, p. 263.

Lily's recklessness with money and her dread of seeming poor to the outside world has been bred in her by her mother.

The environment Lily feels she is meant to inhabit is the Trenors' luxurious country house Bellomont, where her room has soft lighting, a silk bedspread, a vase of fragrant carnations and 'everything in her surroundings ministered to feelings of ease and amenity' (*HM*, 39). Wharton writes about such luxury in her own life:

we are really having a good rest after those wild N.Y. days (you had a sample!), for this ship is 'demoralizingly comfortable', as H. James says of England, & I am resting like a lady, in a Louis XVI boudoir (incidentally converted into T.W.'s bedroom at night), with a writing-desk, a pink-shaded lamp, curtains of vieux-rose silk, & a red azalea blooming on the centre table – ³⁸

The luxury, isolation from the pressures of a busy life, is a 'rest-cure' for the hard-working Wharton, yet she is aware this could be 'demoralizingly comfortable'. Lily has a different set of moral standards:

there had been nothing in her training to develop any continuity of moral strength: what she craved, and really felt herself entitled to, was a situation in which the noblest attitude should also be the easiest (*HM*, 262).

For Lily, this 'ease' is aesthetic, and means seeing herself in a luxurious interior, against an ideal background: 'the subtle elegance of the setting she had pictured for herself [...] in which every tint and line should combine to enhance her beauty and give distinction to her leisure' (*HM*, 110). Yet, her search for ease in the form of a rich husband, is thwarted by her 'fastidiousness', for example, the inaction that allows Percy Gryce to slip out of her grasp. Discussing Lily as a decorative woman in the context of Art Nouveau and the symbol of the American Girl, Fryer finds Lily's fastidiousness 'more physical than moral'.³⁹ She sees a paradox in Lily the actress, displaying herself in diaphanous drapery, able to take money from Gus Trenor, yet repelled if men touch her. She has 'no clearly formulated standard of judgement', and many of her actions seem impulsive, yet they are 'consistent in relation to her own body'.⁴⁰ Fryer points out that despite having to entertain George Dorset while his wife has an affair, Lily can board the yacht 'because it is a comfortable temporary berth'.⁴¹ In 'the world in which Lily moves,

³⁸ Edith Wharton to Eunice Maynard, 7 January 1907, Beinecke.

³⁹ Fryer, p. 90.

⁴⁰ Fryer, p. 90.

⁴¹ Fryer, p. 90.

space is money, and more space means less human contact'.⁴² Wharton suggests that Lily's moral sense has a wilful blindspot: 'her personal fastidiousness had a moral equivalent, and when she made a tour of inspection in her own mind there were certain closed doors she did not open' (*HM*, 82). This echoes Isabel's 'natural shrinking from raising curtains and looking into unlighted corners' (*PL*, 199). In both cases this wilful ignorance and physical fastidiousness proves damaging.

At Bellomont, despite being among friends, Lily's ability as an actress, on which Selden reflects 'somewhat cruelly, that even her weeping was an art' (*HM*, 72), is expected. She is only a guest in this house of ease with its undercurrents of social and sexual mobility; part of the invitation to stay at Bellomont is the unspoken assumption that she will help Judy Trenor with the 'social drudgery' her secretary normally performs (*HM*, 39); it is 'one of the taxes she had to pay for their prolonged hospitality' (*HM*, 26). Although this life is like a 'great gilt cage in which they were all huddled for the mob to gape at' (*HM*, 54), Lily needs to remain inside, for these people are 'lords of the only world she cared for' (*HM*, 50). Isabel remains inside the morally corrupt gilded cage because of her duties as a married woman; Lily stays because she cares for this world and must gain a husband.

In this grand country house, the social, sexual and economic interrelation of the guests is constantly on show, albeit behind a thin veneer of manners. Everything is known to Judy, who seems 'to exist only as a hostess' (*HM*, 40), planning how her guests are going to interact in this atmosphere of

large tumultuous disorder, [...] where no one seemed to have time to observe any one else, and private aims and personal interests were swept along unheeded in the rush of collective activities. (*HM*, 229)

Although Wharton also directed her guests, her home is constructed around private spaces. The social interaction at Bellomont is similarly aided by rather different architecture, which we first see from Lily's point of view. Standing at the top of the 'broad stairway', she looks down on a game of bridge:

the hall was arcaded, with a gallery supported on columns of pale yellow marble. Tall clumps of flowering plants were grouped against a background of dark foliage in the

⁴² Fryer, p. 91.

angles of the walls. On the crimson carpet a deer-hound and two or three spaniels dozed luxuriously before the fire, and the light from the great central lantern overhead shed a brightness on the women's hair and struck sparks from their jewels as they moved. (*HM*, 25)

This almost mediaeval scene is the hall as 'living room' – a direct contrast to the ideal stair and hall of *The Decoration of Houses*, where the emphasis is on privacy and separation. Bellomont is a modern addition to an old manor house, degrading the original plan; the only remaining original room is the library. As with the library at The Mount, it is the furthest public room from the entrance, and its decoration is sober and unostentatious, 'revealing the traditions of the mother-country in its classically-cased doors, the Dutch tiles of the chimney, and the elaborate hobgrate with its shining brass urns'. Unlike the library at The Mount, this room 'was in fact never used for reading, though it had a certain popularity as a smoking-room or a quiet retreat for flirtation' (*HM*, 59). Here we find Selden with a woman 'whose lace-clad figure, as she leaned back in an adjoining chair, detached itself with exaggerated slimness against the dusky leather of the upholstery'. However, this is not Lily, but Bertha Dorset, with whom he has had an affair. As Lily is the character most conscious of flattering backgrounds, it is no surprise that she disrupts the couple, having expected Selden 'to be on the watch for her' (*HM*, 60).

Selden and Lily's relationship is based on mutual attraction tempered by constant observation; he tells her she is 'a wonderful spectacle; I always like to see what you are doing' (*HM*, 66), in a phrase reminiscent of Ralph's interest in Isabel. It is Selden's evaluations of how Lily looks, as he scrutinises what she does, and makes moral judgements based on what he sees, that punctuate the narrative and affect how Lily judges herself. Similarly, Deronda's scrutiny of Gwendolen affects her view of herself. Selden echoes Deronda's role as confessor when he gives Lily advice at Mrs Hatch's: 'in his presence a sudden stillness came upon her, and the turmoil of her spirit ceased' (*HM*, 278). However, corresponding with the importance of surface impressions and the shallowness of emotions in Wharton's novel, Lily's reaction depends on his physical appearance rather than what he says, which has angered her: 'she was very near hating him now; yet the sound of his voice, the way the light fell on his thin dark hair [...] even

these trivial things were inwoven with her deepest life' (*HM*, 278). Selden, in his attitude of 'admiring spectatorship' (*HM*, 68) is searching for the 'real' Lily, beneath the artifice, like Deronda ('was she beautiful?'). Lily admires his critical eye: 'everything about him accorded with the fastidious element in her taste, even to the light irony with which he surveyed what seemed to her most sacred' (*HM*, 65). His fastidiousness and irony align him more with Grandcourt and Osmond, giving his 'republic of the spirit' and 'personal freedom [...] from everything' (*HM*, 68) a morally uneasy slant. This rather Aesthetic pose attracts Lily, but Selden never puts his sympathetic 'republic' into action. Lily and Selden's Jamesian banter, different from that of other characters, suggests the stasis and inability to act that marks Jamesian 'heroes' – a tragic renunciation of fulfilment. Lily thinks she understands 'the peculiar charm of her feeling' for him, and that 'she could put her finger on every link of the chain that was drawing them together' (*HM*, 65).

However, Wharton's image of the chain, echoing Selden's view of Lily's bracelet 'like manacles chaining her to her fate' (*HM*, 7), indicates their entrapment and compliance within a society where Lily cannot marry a man who has no money, no matter how attractive or intelligent, and Selden, despite his search for the 'real' Lily, judges her by the double-standards of the society he affects to despise.

'An impenetrable domesticity'

Although Bellomont provides Lily with the physical comforts she desires, her 'home' at this point in her story is the house of her aunt, Mrs Peniston, where she lives in the status of poor relation. This house symbolises old New York society, stiff and unchanging and seems to encapsulate total order in opposition to the disorder and promiscuousness of the other dwellings in which Lily resides. Mrs Peniston is one of the 'well-fed and industrious stock of early New York', which is revealed

in the glacial neatness of [her] drawing-room and in the excellence of her cuisine. She belonged to the class of old New Yorkers who have always lived well, dressed expensively, and done little else. (*HM*, 37)

Although the house has an 'opulent interior' (*HM*, 37), Wharton indicates that, like the homes of her youth (see Chapter Five), this New York brownstone holds some of the

worst of High Victorian taste, representing small-mindedness, the worst of tradition and a lack of familial warmth; Lily's aunt 'was the kind of woman who wore jet at breakfast' (*HM*, 107). Mrs Peniston

had always been a looker-on at life, and her mind resembled one of those little mirrors which her Dutch ancestors were accustomed to affix to their upper windows, so that from the depths of an impenetrable domesticity they might see what was happening in the street. (*HM*, 37)

Her domesticity is like a fortress from which the world is looked upon and judged. In her discussion of realism in the novel, Kaplan suggests that this reference to the Netherlands is a rejection of Dutch genre painting that Eliot 'advocated as a model for realism'.⁴³

However, I think that Wharton is making a link with the first settlers of New York and the esteemed families of 'old money'. Her opinion of this group is equivocal: tradition has its good points as well as its hide-bound rituals, a theme of much of Wharton's writing. The original Dutch tiles in the library at Bellomont are symbolic of a golden age of correct decoration, but the small Dutch mirror of Mrs Peniston's mind indicates how we are 'unconsciously tyrannized over by the [...] wants of dead and gone predecessors' (*DH*, 19). Mrs Peniston lacks human sympathy; in comparison to other warm fires in the novel her 'icy drawing-room grate shone with a forbidding lustre: the fire, like the lamps, was never lit except when there was company' (*HM*, 107). We are reminded of Wharton's mother's statement that 'drawing-rooms are always tidy' (*BG*, 73).

Mrs Peniston's drawing room is decorated with 'glossy purple arm-chairs' and matching curtains and items like an 'ormolu clock surmounted by a helmeted Minerva, [...] throned on the chimney-piece between two malachite vases' and a *Buhl* table, like Lucretia Jones's (*HM*, 107, 101, 108, 222). There is also a 'Dying Gladiator in bronze' in the window (*HM*, 98); Jennie Kassanoff calls this an 'unseemly replica' in the light of Wharton's dismissal of the fake in *The Decoration of Houses*. In Kassanoff's study of race and class in the novel, these items signify 'patrician decline',⁴⁴ and Mrs Peniston is a symbol of the reprehensible aspects of American culture and high society. The distaste

⁴³ Kaplan, p. 86. However, there is a danger in taking Eliot's remarks in Chapter 17 of *Adam Bede* 'as a key to her oeuvre', Witemeyer, p. 106.

⁴⁴ Jennie A. Kassanoff, 'Extinction, Taxidermy, *Tableaux Vivants*: Staging Race and Class in *The House of Mirth*', *PMLA*, 115 (2000), 60-74 (p. 72).

Lily feels for her aunt's house is that of a captive; her own room 'seemed as dreary as a prison' in contrast to the 'light tints and luxurious appointments' of the houses in which she is a guest; she is repelled by the small dark rooms Isabel feels safe in. The decoration is heavy, dark, old-fashioned, the inheritance of a dead man:

the monumental wardrobe and bedstead of black walnut had migrated from Mr. Peniston's bedroom, and the magenta 'flock' wall-paper, of a pattern dear to the early 'sixties, was hung with large steel engravings of an anecdotic character. (*HM*, 109-10)

Like Eugenia, Lily has tried to do the best she can with this room, imposing some sort of individuality and femininity with bits of material:

Lily had tried to mitigate this charmless background by a few frivolous touches, in the shape of a lace-decked toilet table and a little painted desk surmounted by photographs; but the futility of the attempt struck her as she looked about the room. (*HM*, 110)

The other house with walnut furniture belongs to Percy Gryce, explaining why Lily rejects him. It is 'an appalling house, all brown stone without and black walnut within, with the Gryce library in a fire-proof annex that looked like a mausoleum' (*HM*, 22). The equivocation of death with old-fashioned, dark decoration is made again. For Lily to marry the collector of Americana would be immuring herself like Dorothea.

Lily is grateful for her 'refuge', and the house is 'at least not externally dingy', yet 'dinginess is a quality which assumes all manner of disguises' (*HM*, 37). Paradoxically, Lily is revolted by the neatness and cleanliness of the house, which are indicative of dinginess: 'this moral repulsion found a physical outlet in a quickened distaste for her surroundings' (*HM*, 99). Cleaning provokes the physical fastidiousness noted by Fryer because it thrusts into view the machinery of everyday life, the work of servants, and Lily is revolted by the 'the slippery gloss of the vestibule tiles, and the mingled odour of sapolio and furniture-polish' (*HM*, 99). Mrs Peniston revels in seasonal cleaning; it is

the domestic equivalent of a religious retreat. She 'went through' the linen and blankets in the precise spirit of the penitent exploring the inner folds of conscience; she sought for moths as the stricken soul seeks for lurking infirmities. The topmost shelf of every closet was made to yield up its secret, cellar and coal-bin were probed to their darkest depths and, as a final stage in the lustral rites, the entire house was swathed in penitential white and deluged with expiatory soapsuds. (*HM*, 98)

Lily finds her aunt's attitude of 'cleanliness is next to godliness' deeply disturbing, as it is anathema to her pleasure-loving soul, just as she finds it almost impossible to explain to disapproving Mrs Peniston that she requires more money to pay her gambling debts.

In the end this request provokes her aunt to leave most of her money to Grace Stepney, a distant cousin of 'adaptable manners' (*HM*, 100), thus destroying Lily's prospects of solvency. However, Lily's conscience is also pricked during the cleaning by the appearance of the char-lady who saw her at the Benedick visiting Selden alone. Mrs Haffen reappears to sell Selden's love-letters to Bertha Dorset, thereby plunging Lily into a moral quandary. But it is the mere *presence* of 'such creatures' in the house that Lily finds 'insufferable' (*HM*, 99).

Mrs Peniston is determined to keep her wayward niece constantly aware of her 'dependence' (*HM*, 38). Lily's discomfort in the house is intense, and once again, connected with death and constriction:

the house, in its state of unnatural immaculateness and order, was as dreary as a tomb, and as Lily, turning from her brief repast between shrouded sideboards, wandered into the newly-uncovered glare of the drawing-room she felt as though she were buried alive in the stifling limits of Mrs. Peniston's existence. (*HM*, 100)

The shine from the polished mahogany furniture emphasises the harshness of the life to which Mrs Peniston tries to restrict Lily. After the reading of her will, when Lily realises her small legacy of ten thousand dollars will only just cover her debts, 'the purple drawing-room, [...] more than ever, in its stuffy dimness, resembled a well-kept family vault, in which the last corpse had just been decently deposited' (*HM*, 224). Like Isabel, Lily also requires 'space to soar' (*PL*, 295), but to 'soar into that empyrean of security where creditors cannot penetrate' (*HM*, 49); her idea of greatness requires money. Her attempt 'to bring her [aunt] into an active relation with life was like tugging at a piece of furniture which has been screwed to the floor' (*HM*, 38). This metaphoric relation of people and decorative objects emphasises Mrs Peniston's unchanging and limited personality. Mrs Peniston's wealth is to Lily's eyes wasted and she 'sighed to think what her mother's fierce energies would have accomplished, had they been coupled with Mrs. Peniston's resources' (*HM*, 37-8), and by extension, what Lily herself could do – she 'had frequently wounded [Mrs Peniston's] susceptibilities by suggesting that the drawing-room should be "done over"' (*HM*, 101).

Early in the novel she expresses this same need to express herself through interior decoration to Selden: 'if I could only do over my aunt's drawing-room I know I should

be a better woman' (*HM*, 8). In fact, this need to decorate, or change and modernise her surroundings seems to have frightened off an earlier suitor: 'oh, his mother was frightened – [...] she wanted me to promise that I wouldn't do over the drawing-room' (*HM*, 10). The summit of Lily's ambitions is to have a husband, and join a family home where she can 'do over' the drawing room; she does not entertain the possibility of being by herself, and creating her own home. This becomes crystallised, as the novel progresses, into a fear of being alone where her personal Furies can torment her: 'alone! it was the loneliness that frightened her' (*HM*, 148). In this time of panic, after she has escaped Gus Trenor's attack, she feels she cannot go back to Mrs Peniston's, because it is not really her home:

she had always hated her room at Mrs. Peniston's – its ugliness, its impersonality, the fact that nothing in it was really hers. To a torn heart uncomforted by human nearness a room may open almost human arms, and the being to whom no four walls mean more than any others, is, at such hours, expatriate everywhere. (*HM*, 148)

Maggie, Gwendolen and Isabel similarly have no loving home; only Dorothea achieves a home and family.

'One little room'⁴⁵

I have discussed how Wharton was able to buy her own house and independently create her own interior space. Gerty Farish, Selden's dowdy, spinster cousin, is the only independent woman in the novel, and has 'been known to enjoy the privileges of a flat' (*HM*, 7). For Lily, Gerty 'typified the mediocre and the ineffectual' (*HM*, 88); she has 'a horrid little place, and no maid, and such queer things to eat. Her cook does the washing and the food tastes of soap. I should hate that, you know' (*HM*, 7). The smallness of Gerty's flat is emphasised, and this is part of what Lily calls dinginess:

she had a vision of Miss Farish's cramped flat, with its cheap conveniences and hideous wall-papers. No; she was not made for mean and shabby surroundings, for the squalid compromises of poverty. (*HM*, 25-6)

By the end of the novel, however, it is clear to Lily that she cannot make the moral compromises required in order to live in luxury, and she is forced into the physical compromises of worse poverty. Gerty's life of 'philanthropy and symphony concerts'

⁴⁵ Donne (*MM*, 863).

(*HM*, 89) with no prospect of marriage, seems duller than Lily's: 'such flashes of joy as Lily moved in would have blinded Miss Farish, who was accustomed, in the way of happiness, to such scant light as shone through the cracks of other people's lives' (*HM*, 149). It is as though Gerty is forever on the other side of the door, looking at all the fun that Lily has, but her existence is more stable, emotionally and situationally, and she has her own small space which suits her perfectly. When Selden visits her for dinner, her flat's 'modest "effects," compact of enamel paint and ingenuity, spoke to him in the language just then sweetest to his ear' (*HM*, 154). As many women's magazines recommended, Gerty fashions her own simple decor: she has made rosy-pink candle shades 'for the occasion' and Selden 'complimented her on the ingenuity with which she had utilized every inch of her small quarters'; the smallness of the rooms only enhances their comfort and 'they fitted as snugly as bits in a puzzle' (*HM*, 155). He compares her abilities with Lily's skill of trimming hats, but he never sees Gerty's quieter skills with such a 'throb of pride' (*HM*, 154). Fryer points out that they drink from 'her grandmother's egg-shell cups' and that the importance of this particular tea-ceremony 'is not in the setting, but rather in the preserving of a tradition handed down in old cups'.⁴⁶

The conversation turns to Lily, and Gerty realises Selden's great interest in her has brought an overpowering third person to 'the feast she had spread for him' (*HM*, 156).

Wharton describes Gerty's unhappiness in terms of interior space:

the little confidential room, where a moment ago their thoughts had touched elbows like their chairs, grew to unfriendly vastness, separating her from Selden by all the length of her new vision of the future – and that future stretched out interminably, with her lonely figure toiling down it, a mere speck on the solitude. (*HM*, 156)

Soaring vastness frightens Gerty, as its opposite disturbs Lily; she is 'conscious of the steepness and narrowness of Gerty's stairs, and of the cramped blind alley of life to which they led. Dull stairs destined to be mounted by dull people' (*HM*, 263); again Lily feels the dread suffocation of cramped spaces. When Lily visits, her movements 'threatened destruction to Miss Farish's fragile tea-table', for she has 'forgotten there was no room to dash about in – how beautifully one does have to behave in a small flat!' (*HM*, 265). Even Gerty's mirror gives her a worse reflection than usual: 'what a horrid

⁴⁶ Fryer, p. 82.

looking-glass – it's all blotched and discoloured. Any one would look ghastly in it!

(*HM*, 265). In fact, Gerty is the only person to see the tiredness beneath her public mask:

she leaned back for a moment, closing her eyes, and as she sat there, her pale lips slightly parted, and the lids dropped above her fagged brilliant gaze, Gerty had a startled perception of the change in her face – of the way in which an ashen daylight seemed suddenly to extinguish its artificial brightness. She looked up, and the vision vanished. (*HM*, 266)

Although we have the feeling that the 'real' Lily is somewhere in Gerty's view, Wharton emphasises that it is an intangible 'vision', and its presence is fleeting. Gerty is Lily's most constant and loyal friend, despite her jealousy for Selden's affections, and their characters are diametric opposites. In Lily's view, their differences are simple: 'she likes being good and I like being happy. And besides, she is free and I am not' (*HM*, 7).

However, Gerty can be just another background for Lily: 'today, however, her chirping enthusiasms did not irritate Lily. They seemed only to throw her own exceptionalness into becoming relief, and give a soaring vastness to her scheme of life' (*HM*, 89).

When Lily's star is waning, she realises that their situations are not so different, although their viewpoints are:

she felt the real difficulties of her situation to be incommunicable to any one whose theory of values was so different from her own, and the restrictions of Gerty's life, which had once had the charm of contrast, now reminded her too painfully of the limits to which her own existence was shrinking. (*HM*, 263)

Only Gerty asks for Lily's side of the story, when Bertha Dorset has turned her off the yacht: 'but what *is* your story, Lily? I don't believe any one knows it yet' (*HM*, 226).

Kassanoff points out the irony of this question so near the end of the novel, and interestingly, finds Lily's answer 'opaque' in its attribution of her flaws to genealogy, not environment:⁴⁷

why, the beginning was in my cradle, I suppose – in the way I was brought up, and the things I was taught to care for. Or no – I won't blame anybody for my faults: I'll say it was in my blood, that I got it from some wicked pleasure-loving ancestress, who reacted against the homely virtues of New Amsterdam, and wanted to be back at the court of the Charleses! (*HM*, 226)

Although it is not my purpose here to follow arguments of heredity or race, I feel that Kassanoff is mistaken in ignoring Lily's sarcasm. As I have already argued, Wharton *does* ascribe Lily's artificiality to her upbringing and environment. There is probably no

⁴⁷ Kassanoff, p. 60.

'sybaritic ancestress',⁴⁸ but it is another story Lily can use in her theatrical presentation of herself, in order to evade anyone finding her 'real' essence, and create the multiplicity of meanings Wharton will exploit in the *tableau vivant*. Perhaps Lily's evasion is due to her growing awareness that there is nothing at her core, or at least nothing significant to the 'republic of the spirit'; she is merely 'A Moment's Ornament'. Once again she is creating her background, and will not explain the full story even to Gerty, leaving it till her deathbed for her motives to be examined, for she knows that appearances are what matter in her world.

Tableaux Vivants

The culmination of Lily's self-presentation arrives at the physical centre point of the book, which is also, in the architectural structure of the novel, the highest point for Lily's social star; from here, she can only fall. Her part in an evening of *tableaux vivants* organised at the Wellington Brys' mansion allows her to use all her theatrical and aesthetic talents, and paradoxically forces us to look for 'the real Lily Bart' at the same time. Wharton wrote that the novelist should rely on 'the *illuminating incident* to reveal and emphasize the inner meaning of each situation', and Lily's short appearance as *Mrs Lloyd* is such an incident. Since 'illuminating incidents are the magic casements of fiction, its vistas on infinity' (WF, 109), Lily's *tableau* opens up a huge number of interpretations, almost infinite, but all dependent upon how her audience, and by extension the reader, look at her self-representation. In some senses it is more successful than Gwendolen's (see Chapter Two), and also closely follows actual *tableaux vivants*.

According to Robert Lewis, *tableaux vivants* were introduced to New York theatres by English actors in 1831 and were a 'new fad in the America of the 1840s' taking place in private homes as well as on the public stage. By the late 1840s, shows of 'the divine female form' in theatres had a rather shady moral reputation.⁴⁹ However, in a private context the claim of *tableaux* to be a 'rational recreation' with instructive purpose could be

⁴⁸ Kassanoff, p. 60.

⁴⁹ Robert M. Lewis, 'Tableaux Vivants: Parlor Theatricals in Victorian America', *Revue Française d'Études Américaines*, 36 (1988), 280-291 (p. 281).

put into full effect.⁵⁰ Highly detailed manuals were produced to school the middle-class in various entertainments, including charades, theatricals and *tableaux*, all part of the idea of gentility as a kind of performance.⁵¹ Karen Halttunen, in her study of sentimentality and theatricality in the American middle classes during the middle years of the nineteenth century, states that parlour theatricals 'became the most popular form of middle-class parlor entertainment'. Although Halttunen identifies a 'sentimental antipathy for theatricality' and hypocrisy from Puritanism, there was an 'abundance of guides to parlor theatricals published in the 1850s and 1860s [which] clearly suggests a new middle-class interest in the use of the parlor as a stage'.⁵² Writers of these manuals assumed extensive expertise for even small parlour theatricals and 'the spectacular effects so prized demanded prodigious efforts of organization' which were probably quite unrealistic.⁵³ The parlour could be transformed into a theatre in various ways and productions could involve large amounts of props, detailed costumes and complicated lighting. For *tableaux vivants*, 'several layers of gauze were stretched over the curtain frame to give a misty, dreamlike cast to certain scenes', just like the Brys' 'delusive interposition of layers of gauze' (*HM*, 133). In most *tableaux* the poses were held for only thirty seconds, and then the curtain was lowered again.⁵⁴ So Lily's 'attitude' would probably have been for a similar short length of time, once again, she is merely a 'moment's ornament'. Lily's *tableau* also pushes the idea of play-acting to its limit, exposing and reinforcing ideas of what should or could be seen, and exactly what is being represented.

There are obvious differences between Lily's *tableau vivant* and those discussed by Lewis and Halttunen; they also do not discuss amateur theatricals after 1880. Montgomery reproduces a page from *Vogue* in 1910 where society ladies are pictured in

⁵⁰ Lewis (1988), p. 282.

⁵¹ For the theatricality of Victorian social relations see Goffman; Richard Bushman, *The Refinement of American Culture: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Vintage, 1992); John F. Kasson, 'Rituals of Dining: Table Manners in Victorian America' in Kathryn Grover, ed., *Dining in America, 1850-1900* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), p. 114-141.

⁵² Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 175. See also Montgomery, pp. 12-14.

⁵³ Lewis (1988), p. 286.

⁵⁴ Halttunen, p. 176.

costumes for *tableaux vivants* including the Queen of Sheba and a Spanish Dancer.⁵⁵ This shows that these entertainments were still taking place, even in the drawing rooms of high society, at the turn of the century. Montgomery describes the lavish entertainments of Mrs Stuyvesant Fish in January 1900, which were reported in the society section of the *New York Times*.⁵⁶ Although these were private entertainments, the social standing of the participants ensured that they would be reported to the public. This accords more with the scale of the Brys' ballroom entertainment, where the subject, art of the Old Masters, is a long way from the 'typically banal Victorian allegorical representation'⁵⁷ presumably performed in parlours across the country. According to Lewis, subjects from art like classical sculpture or Renaissance painting were greatly popular in Britain but 'in America, such high-culture *tableaux* were exceptional',⁵⁸ so the Great Master paintings displayed in the Brys' ballroom were unusual.

Lewis briefly discusses *The House of Mirth*, although out of his chronological context, but he takes Wharton's description of the magic of the scene as documentary reportage, ignoring the subtle web of representations Wharton creates. However, interestingly in the context of Lily's exposure, Lewis quotes from an instruction manual of 1860 on the risqué *tableau* of 'Venus Rising from the Sea', which called for a 'flesh-coloured dress fitting closely to the body, so as to show the form of the person'. Lewis surmises that 'only privacy made it acceptable to the genteel audience',⁵⁹ but this is evidence that such bodily display was far from alien to the concept of *tableaux vivants*, even in the parlour.

Lewis concludes that these *tableaux* were 'uncomplicated, uncontroversial fun',⁶⁰ and they highlighted a peculiarly nineteenth-century perception of the climactic moment like Meisel's 'realization', which 'gave the respectable an opportunity to taste the

55 'Costumes in *Tableaux Vivants*', *Vogue* (12 February 1910), 10, reproduced Montgomery, fig. 4.

56 Montgomery, p. 78.

57 Lewis (1988), p. 288.

58 Lewis (1988), pp. 284-5.

59 James H. Head, *Home Pastimes; or, Tableaux Vivants* (Boston: [n.p], 1860), p. 31, quoted Lewis (1988), p. 285.

60 Lewis (1988), p. 288.

pleasures of impersonation and display.⁶¹ However Lily's pose *is* complicated and controversial, as I will explain. For Halttunen, parlor performances taught the middle-class to use theatricality 'as an integral part of their parlor social lives, and they were doing so with a high degree of self-consciousness'.⁶² Theatrical space which is divided between audience, performers and backstage by various means (curtains, screens) mirrors 'the genteel performance' of the parlour enabled by the labour of servants. This involves more than just a distinction between public display and private machinery, for there has to be a tacit agreement by all the 'performers' to recognise what the performance is about. Charades require the audience to guess the phrase being enacted and perform in turn, 'just as in the genteel performance any lady or gentleman who tactfully affirmed the gentility of another was thereby demonstrating her or his own gentility'.⁶³ However, Lily's performance provokes a multiplicity of responses and gazes from her audience, and Wharton makes us aware of the subjectivity of society, and the complex nature of the representation of women.

Reading Lily's Pose

Wharton emphasises this theatricality with the description of the Brys' new ballroom, where 'one had to touch the marble columns to learn they were not of cardboard' and everyone present, 'in obedience to the decorative instinct which calls for fine clothes in fine surroundings, had dressed rather with an eye to Mrs. Bry's background' (*HM*, 132). Wharton highlights how much the sense of 'genteel performance' and the importance of surface rather than depth is ingrained in this social group, who are masters of reading signs according to the rules of etiquette. The *tableaux* themselves are described as requiring not only the 'happy disposal of lights' but a willing suspension of disbelief on the part of the spectators, who readily comply with these rules in order to immerse themselves fully into the illusion (*HM*, 133). The women have been dressed and arranged by the 'distinguished portrait painter' Paul Morpeth (*HM*, 131), probably based

⁶¹ Meisel, p. 48.

⁶² Halttunen, p. 179.

⁶³ Halttunen, p. 184.

on Sargent, and the 'scenes were taken from old pictures' by Old Masters, including Titian, Botticelli and Watteau. The 'participators had been cleverly fitted with characters suited to their types' (*HM*, 133), yet this is only in the physical sense, not in terms of their personality. In fact, Morpeth's skill has been in subduing the personalities of the 'actors' for aesthetic effect, an 'illusion' devoid of underlying meaning (*HM*, 134). Lily, however, turns this concept on its head when she appears as Reynolds's *Mrs Lloyd* (plate 89), the contrast being that 'the curtain suddenly parted on a picture which was simply and undisguisedly the portrait of Miss Bart'. She is no mere model grafted on to a 'type' like the other women, 'she had shown her artistic intelligence in selecting a type so like her own that she could embody the person represented without ceasing to be herself' (*HM*, 134).

Lily's aesthetic abilities find their apogee under the 'guidance' of Morpeth: her 'vivid plastic sense, hitherto nurtured on no higher food than dress-making and upholstery, found eager expression' (*HM*, 131). As Fryer suggests, borrowing Wharton's childhood phrase, 'the real Lily Bart is one who is always engaged in "making up"',⁶⁴ constantly aware of the backgrounds she decorates herself for. She has chosen a painting 'without distracting accessories of dress or surroundings' so that she can 'embody the person represented without ceasing to be herself', and the flimsy gauzy 'classical' costume very obviously shows off Lily's figure, her 'flesh and blood loveliness' (*HM*, 134). Gwendolen chooses a similar style of *tableau* for very similar reasons. Reynolds' painting of Joanna Leigh commemorates her marriage to Richard Bennett Lloyd in 1775 and shows the young woman dressed in a white, classical-style robe, tied around the waist with a fringed sash and thin blue sandals. It was a well-known painting and often copied,⁶⁵ so Lily's audience would have recognised her original. The undisguised physical exposure of Lily's body incurred by Mrs Lloyd's thin costume was certainly risqué and 'an acknowledgement of an erotic nature that is never mentioned in her society'.⁶⁶ Her physical beauty produces 'the unanimous "Oh!"' (*HM*,

⁶⁴ Fryer, p. 77.

⁶⁵ See Manning, I, p. 309.

⁶⁶ Fryer, p. 77.

134) which distinguishes Lily's *tableau*. However, the gasp from the crowd that she receives as 'approval' is read very differently by Selden, who has had revealed to him not just her overall physical beauty, but 'the whole tragedy of her life' for he sees 'the real Lily Bart, divested of the trivialities of her little world'. The audience are stunned by the 'damned bad taste' of her frankly presenting her body and her sexuality, for in the painting a shaft of light is directed at the top of the woman's thighs. Lily has become a blatant advertisement of her availability, 'standing there as if she was up at auction', Stepney's words highlighting the double standards of the marriage market (*HM*, 134-6, 157).

These double standards, predicated upon patriarchal power, are put into action in this scene through the working of the male gaze. Lily sets out to turn 'herself into an object of vision: a sight'.⁶⁷ Elisabeth Bronfen, in her investigation into the visual and literary presentations of the dead woman, *Over Her Dead Body*, uses the theory of the gaze to discuss Lily's *tableau vivant*. This is a key scene in Bronfen's demonstration of Lily as an enigmatic symbol of death and the *unheimlich*, the Freudian term for the 'uncanny', an uneasy representation of the Other. This emphasis is rather different to mine, but her discussion of the gaze is still relevant:

the different interpretations Lily's *tableau vivant* elicits, crystallise the way that she, by being the site of endless possibilities, of desires potentially realised, not only provokes a plethora of fantasies in her audience but also, at her body, collapses the distinction between literal and figural meaning; between the art of play and the reality of life. In so doing, she disrupts the code of conventions by causing a confusion as to how to respond to, how to read her spectacle.⁶⁸

Bronfen defines certain fixed social positions for women, which are also relevant to Isabel's framed portraits. Lily is neither girl nor wife but the 'premarital bride', and by performing as Mrs Lloyd (the recent wife) and insisting that people look at her, she represents the 'danger of the transitional' and is an object of speculation in various ways. Bronfen explains in detail 'how the speculations which the spectacle of her beautiful body arouses intertwine an erotic, a hermeneutic and an aesthetic gaze'.⁶⁹ Lily invites the

⁶⁷ Berger, pp. 46-7.

⁶⁸ Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), p. 271.

⁶⁹ Bronfen, pp. 270, 272.

masculine gaze and provokes conjecture for she 'could potentially belong to everybody'.⁷⁰ The majority of the audience sees her pose as sheer vanity: 'deuced bold thing to show herself in that get-up; but, gad, there isn't a break in the lines anywhere, and I suppose she wanted us to know it!' (*HM*, 135). It is also a literal comment on her availability in the marriage market: 'a girl standing there as if she was up at auction' (*HM*, 157). The meaning of Lily's *tableau* is ambivalent, and the multiplicity of meanings ensures its power, its success and scandal.

Lily's scanty costume, although true to the painting, could also be pornographic. Its untailored simplicity is perfected by Lily's sense of style; her ability to act putting in doubt Selden's statement that this is 'the real Lily Bart'. Bronfen claims that:

what her tableau leaves undecided is whether this is an indecent self display or a rare aesthetic moment; whether it calls for a *moral or an aesthetic reading*. Owing to this uncanny shifting between stylisation and honest simplicity, it is further undecidable whether Lily hides her truth behind the veil of her costume; or whether the costume hides that there is nothing behind, that she is only appearance; or whether it sanctions the forbidden, the presentation of a disclosed/dis clothed body.⁷¹

Yet what is Lily's view of herself? Initially, the prospect of the *tableau vivant* arouses narcissism and exhibitionism, the 'exhilaration of displaying her own beauty under a new aspect' (*HM*, 131). Like Rosamond, Gwendolen and Isabel, Lily is complicit in, and enjoys, the process of the male gaze, and afterwards, the 'approval' that she has 'not an instant's doubt' about, 'and the completeness of her triumph gave her an intoxicating sense of recovered power' (*HM*, 136). However, Wharton explores the way in which the *tableau* inevitably exposes the double standard of patriarchal society more explicitly than either Eliot or James.

Wharton describes the silent language of looks, which follow exactly the processes of the gaze expected by the men who enjoy the activity of looking and scopophilia. Lily is imitating the fixity of a work of art, so there can be no dialogue, and she never hears the men's opinions, basking 'in a warm atmosphere of praise'. Wharton makes the male-dominated environment explicit; and in 'the tacit free-masonry of the ballroom' (*HM*, 137), Lily complies with what is expected of her as an objectified woman. She turns 'on

⁷⁰ Bronfen, p. 270.

⁷¹ Bronfen, p. 272, emphasis added.

Ned Van Alstyne and George Dorset the look [Selden] had dreamed of capturing for himself', the look of capitulation and love: 'she holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire'.⁷² When Selden approaches, 'finding the expected look in her eye, he had the satisfaction of supposing he had kindled it'. She is complicit in the creation of the romantic notion that he is the knight in shining armour who will save her from 'dinginess':

the look did indeed deepen as it rested on him [...]. She read, too, in his *answering gaze* the delicious confirmation of her triumph, and for the moment it seemed to her that it was for him only she cared to be beautiful (*HM*, 136-7, emphasis added).

However, this seeming moment of fulfilment for Lily is just as much an illusion as her *tableau* and she soon comes to realise the consequences of her duplicitous performance when Trenor attempts to assault her as payment for her debts, for 'the look, pleasurable in form, can be threatening in context'.⁷³

Bronfen points out that three men read Lily's pose as giving a message to them particularly. *Nouveau riche* Sim Rosedale's 'speculation' combines the economic with the aesthetic: 'if I could get Paul Morpeth to paint her like that, the picture'd appreciate a hundred percent in ten years' (*HM*, 158). The economically struggling Lily 'seems reducible to a natural/material sign for wealth',⁷⁴ increasing her desirability for Rosedale. However, Bronfen omits that Rosedale still offers his love to Lily when her social and economic status is nil, and her beauty almost ghastly in its morbidity:

the dark pencilling of fatigue under her eyes, the morbid blue-veined pallour of the temples, brought out the brightness of her hair and lips, as though all her ebbing vitality were centred there. Against the dull chocolate-coloured background of the restaurant, the purity of her head stood out as it had never done in the most brightly-lit ball-room. (*HM*, 289-90)

Even her intense fatigue near the end of the novel does not diminish the 'poignant surprise of her beauty' (*HM*, 289). Wharton's first description of Rosedale is tinged with racism and snobbery:

Mr Rosedale stood scanning her with interest and approval. He was a plump rosy man of the blond Jewish type, with smart London clothes fitting him like upholstery, and small sidelong eyes which gave him the air of appraising people as if they were bric-a-brac. (*HM*, 14)

⁷² Mulvey, p. 19.

⁷³ Mulvey, p. 19.

⁷⁴ Bronfen, p. 272.

His look is repellent to Lily – although she solicits such looks, she often finds her effect morally distasteful. Rosedale is a debased portrait of Osmond, looking sideways at tawdry ‘bric-a-brac’. Only at the end of the novel is he allowed a full gaze, different from his previous ‘fugitive glances, looks winged in flight and swiftly lost under covert’ (*HM*, 291). Unlike Selden, he is the only person to offer practical solutions to her problems. For despite being a man who doesn’t ‘waste his time in an ineffectual sentimental dalliance’ (*HM*, 298), Rosedale truly loves her. His admiration for her ‘pluck’ in her determination to pay back her debts leads him to the ‘heroism’ of the offer to visit her in her grubby boarding house (*HM*, 293). However, despite his recognition of the situation as ‘a farce’ (*HM*, 298), his offer of marriage depends on a reconciliation with Bertha Dorset; something that her moral standards will no longer allow. Lily’s growing perception of his worth is commensurate with her own moral growth and his attraction to that. Lily knows that his aesthetic discrimination has developed:

the sense in her of unexplained scruples and resistances had the same attraction as the delicacy of feature, the fastidiousness of manner, which gave her an external rarity, an air of being impossible to match. As he advanced in social experience this uniqueness had acquired a greater value for him, as though he were a collector who had learned to distinguish minor differences of design and quality in some long-coveted object (*HM*, 299-300)

Yet she cannot accept his offer, for ‘his new passion had not altered his old standard of values’ (*HM*, 300); she is still an *objet d’art*. Perhaps his better understanding of her situation and character comes from the visual impression she makes, for Lily has always been aware of the ‘value of contrast in throwing her charms into relief’ (*HM*, 47) and he looks around the room saying that her ‘being in a place like this is a damnable outrage’ (*HM*, 298).

Gus Trenor reads Lily’s *tableau* in explicitly financial terms. Bronfen argues that ‘for the money he has been lending Lily he wants her to acknowledge him in public by privileging him with her look’, just as in Berger’s discussion of the portraits wealthy men commissioned of their mistresses. Trenor interprets Lily’s pose as ‘an invitation to call in his claim’,⁷⁵ for the next night he tricks her into coming to his house when he is alone, to discuss the money he has ‘speculated’ for her. Bronfen develops this issue of the double

⁷⁵ Bronfen, p. 272.

standard by identifying Lily as signifying a double sense of absence: she lacks the wealth and security of her society audience, yet through her beauty and discrimination 'embodies the refinement they in turn lack'.⁷⁶ Also, as Hepburn argues, 'Wharton uses her female characters to question precisely this tendency to fetishize art as something other than a commodity'.⁷⁷ This is how Selden thinks:

for the first time he seemed to see before him the real Lily Bart, divested of the trivialities of her little world, and catching for a moment a note of that eternal harmony of which her beauty was a part. (*HM*, 135)

Selden persists in believing that there is a 'real' Lily, yet the text is ambiguous in its concentration on her self-creation and designed aspects. By concentrating on her beauty which is 'detached from all that cheapened and vulgarised it' (*HM*, 135), he reads the surface of her presentation as depth, the 'eternal harmony' of his 'republic of the spirit'. He idealises her as the perfect companion for a life based on the attainment of an impossible truth that he yearns for: 'his craving was for the companionship of one whose point of view should justify his own, who should confirm, by deliberate observation, the truth to which his intuitions had leaped' (*HM*, 152). Ironically, as Bronfen points out, Selden's reading of Lily's pose leads him to locate this truth 'on the surface, [and] his deification readily changes to a univocal condemnation'.

When Selden sees Lily leave Gus Trenor's house at night, he 'will not accept that appearances are deceptive, and without explanations disengages himself from her'.⁷⁸ Bronfen does not discuss Rosedale, who sees the true moral change in her although he cannot completely understand it. Selden, in his 'gentle understanding' (*HM*, 307), retreats from action into a contemplation of her physicality, which with hindsight, he sees as foreshadowing her death:

he noticed how thin her hands looked against the rising light of the flames. He saw too, under the loose lines of her dress, how the curves of her figure had shrunk to angularity; he remembered long afterward how the red play of the flame sharpened the depression of her nostrils, and intensified the blackness of the shadows which struck up from her cheekbones to her eyes. (*HM*, 310)

Bronfen focuses on this aesthetic of death and how 'Lily traces the figure of death

⁷⁶ Bronfen, p. 270.

⁷⁷ Hepburn, p. 47.

⁷⁸ Bronfen, p. 273.

throughout her twenty-ninth year before its actual event'.⁷⁹ She sees in all Lily's former presentations the inevitability of her last pose when she appears 'with motionless hands and calm unrecognizing face, the semblance of Lily Bart' (*HM*, 325). This argument ignores some of Wharton's ambiguities in her description of Lily: that she is constantly moving and seen in different spaces leads to a multiplicity of Lilys, and meaning is deferred even at end of the novel. Hepburn observes that Lily practices 'paralyzing self-stylization',⁸⁰ and this is also morally paralysing. Bronfen states that her 'playing to the fantasies of the masculine gaze irrevocably means complicity; self-display can never be innocent and all readings, even the crudest, are somehow intended by her';⁸¹ yet Bronfen reduces this to doubleness. Using the rhetoric of *Unheimlichkeit* (death's figure in life), Bronfen sees Lily as the site of exchange between life and death; she is a liminal character through her beauty with its rarity and ephemerality: 'Lily is forced to face her own doubleness, i.e. that ugliness and calculation are merely veiled by her decorative self-display'.⁸² As she flees Trenor, 'she seemed a stranger to herself, or rather there were two selves in her, the one she had always known, and a new abhorrent being to which it found itself chained' (*HM*, 148). Wharton's phrase anticipates Berger's discussion of woman's division of self that I discussed previously: 'a woman's self [is] split into two. A woman must continually watch herself'.⁸³

Gary Totten uses Lily's self-representation to explore the relationship of narrative and reality, discussing how she

uses the *tableau* to stage her subjectivity, and her experience as an eyewitness (indeed as an 'I'-witness) during the scene exposes the tension between her individual acts of gazing and a Realist ideology.⁸⁴

He points out that Fryer simplifies the scene by focusing on the 'author-gaze': 'Wharton watching men look at women who watch themselves being looked at'.⁸⁵ This is at the

79 Bronfen, p. 275.

80 Hepburn, p. 28.

81 Bronfen, p. 273.

82 Bronfen, p. 274.

83 Berger, pp. 45-6.

84 Gary Totten, 'The Art and Architecture of the Self: Designing the "I"-witness in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirih*', *College Literature*, 27:3 (2000), 71-87 (p. 72).

85 Judith Fryer, 'Reading Mrs Lloyd' in *Edith Wharton: New Critical Essays*, ed. Alfred Bendixen and Annette Zilversmit (New York: Garland, 1992), p. 45, quoted Totten, p. 75.

expense of Lily's gazing at herself, the 'auto-gaze'.⁸⁶ Lily is continually aware of her audience, and looks at how they look at her: she is 'a gazing subject, observing the processes and methods of her own subjectivity under construction, and is 'very literally a product of her own design'.⁸⁷ Totten goes on to explain, using Foucault's notions of self-fashioning, that

Lily turns to her conception of herself as *objet d'art* in order to enact self-representation. In the absence of traditional social and cultural tools for maintaining a self, she depends on the discursive devices of the *tableau* to reassert her subjectivity and re-establish her social worth.⁸⁸

Like Gwendolen, Lily *must* be a spectator of herself to have a sense of self, but this continual self-regard also reveals physical changes and moral development.

Mirrors and Selves

Lily's habit of gazing at herself in mirrors reveals her increasing loss of control, encompassing not only her outward decay but her 'increasing lack of control over self'.⁸⁹ Although 'Mrs. Bry's admiration was a mirror in which Lily's self-complacency recovered its lost outline' (*HM*, 113), what Lily sees in mirrors is not so comforting. At Bellomont she is 'frightened' by the little lines revealed on her face, which she blames on the electric light; switching them off, the 'white oval of her face swam out waveringly from a background of shadows, the uncertain light blurring it like a haze; but the two lines about the mouth remained' (*HM*, 28). The next morning they have disappeared, or perhaps 'the glass was at a happier angle', and she is filled with 'a pleasant glow' (*HM*, 58). She is so dependent on her self-image that Wharton describes her as carrying it with her almost as a talisman: she 'recalled the image she had brought away from her own glass' (*HM*, 88). When Trenor attempts to call in his debt in his deserted house, she is in 'a room with the looking-glasses covered' (*HM*, 154); she can no longer derive strength from her reflection. She describes to Gerty the horrors of her soul that must be replaced by the image she creates for the world:

⁸⁶ Totten, p. 75.

⁸⁷ Totten, p. 76.

⁸⁸ Totten, p. 76.

⁸⁹ Totten, p. 78.

can you imagine looking into your glass some morning and seeing a disfigurement – some hideous change that has come to you while you slept? Well, I seem to myself like that – I can't bear to see myself in my own thoughts. (*HM*, 164)

When Selden sails without contacting her, it similarly affects her view of herself: she 'stood gazing at herself for a long time in the brightly-lit mirror above the mantel-piece. The lines in her face came out terribly – she looked old' (*HM*, 179). As she walks 'with mechanical precision between the monstrous roses of Mrs. Peniston's Axminster' (*HM*, 179), abandoned by Selden, the disintegration of herself is only exacerbated by the outmoded taste and constriction of her surroundings. Despite this constant self-scrutiny, ironically, as Montgomery explains, Lily's 'desire for control is undermined by the ability of male characters to define her behavior as promiscuous'.⁹⁰

Problematic Exits

Twice Lily is seen leaving a house after visiting a lone man and she becomes the subject of gossip. Her 'problematic exits'⁹¹ are when she leaves The Benedick building after taking tea with Selden and is seen by Rosedale; and the second is when she escapes from the Trenors' house at night, and is seen by Selden and Ned Van Alstyne. The men are entirely influenced by appearances which obliterate their knowledge of Lily's morality. Lily and Trenor are seen 'silhouetted against the hall light' in the doorway (*HM*, 160). Her attempt to stage-manage the awkward exit to maintain her dignity in front of servants is not heard: 'an insistent voice warned her that she must leave the house openly, and [...] exchange light words with Trenor' (*HM*, 147). However, for the other witnesses 'the whole scene slipped by as if with the turn of a stereopticon' (*HM*, 161), a silent slide show. The men assume the worst, for although neither man discusses the incident, Van Alstyne haltingly states without conviction, 'appearances are deceptive – and Fifth Avenue is so imperfectly lighted' (*HM*, 161). Selden is particularly hypocritical, as he was complicit in her first inappropriate exit.

⁹⁰ Montgomery, p. 132.

⁹¹ Montgomery, p. 185.

As Pollock argues, 'the public space was officially the realm of and for men; for women to enter it entailed unforeseen risks'.⁹² Montgomery traces the 'sexualization of bourgeois women in public' in the 1890s and 1900s. Commentators increasingly aligned how women were seen to walk the streets with 'an emerging form of commercialized prostitution';⁹³ this problematises Lily's appearances alone on the street. Montgomery details the unspoken social codes of where and how one should be seen, that prove Lily's downfall.⁹⁴ When Bertha publicly throws her off the yacht in Monte Carlo, Lily saves face by her 'admirable erectness' and steady gaze at the 'wavering eye' of her former hostess (*HM*, 218). Yet once again her bravado cannot change the opinion of society gossip, and she knows it is useless to tell her own side of the story when powerful women like Bertha Dorset are the leaders of society. A single woman is constantly judged by visual appearance alone. Close to the end of the novel, after she has said her final good-bye to Selden, Lily stops exhausted, and sits on a park bench 'in the glare of an electric street-lamp'. In Wharton's code of interior decoration, electric light is generally vulgar and she sits 'looming black for a moment in the white circle of electric light' (*HM*, 311). Montgomery points out that she can be misrecognised as a streetwalker due to the symbolic significance of prostitutes standing beneath streetlamps. However, Lily is at such a low ebb that 'for the first and only time, Lily is *unconscious* of her setting and her appearance';⁹⁵ although 'one or two of these passers-by slackened their pace to glance curiously at her lonely figure [...] she was hardly conscious of their scrutiny' (*HM*, 311).

Down the Ladder

The result of these failures to represent herself in a manner strong enough to repudiate gossip leads Lily to be ostracised by her set and forced to move down the social scale to

⁹² Pollock, p. 69.

⁹³ Montgomery, p. 140. For similar attitudes in London see Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 64-73.

⁹⁴ Montgomery, p. 96-9.

⁹⁵ Montgomery, p. 99.

that of persons of 'rising consequence' (*HM*, 241). These people are described in terms of their houses and Van Alstyne (who 'prided himself on his summing up of social aspects') describes the house Rosedale has just bought as indicative of the worst taste of the uneducated parvenu:

a typical rung in the social ladder! The man who built it came from a *milieu* where all the dishes are put on the table at once. His facade is a complete architectural meal; if he had omitted a style his friends might have thought the money had given out (*HM*, 241).

This is one of the houses of mirth. The Brys' mansion is even more indicative of their social and intellectual pretensions:

that's the next stage: the desire to imply that one has been to Europe, and has a standard. I'm sure Mrs. Bry thinks her house a copy of the *Trianon*; in America every marble house with gilt furniture is thought to be a copy of the *Trianon*. (*HM*, 160)

Interestingly, Van Alstyne compares the house with the wife of its owner: 'what a clever chap that architect is, though – how he takes his client's measure! He has put the whole of Mrs. Bry in his use of the composite order', for Wharton tells us, 'the wide white facade, with its rich restraint of line, [...] suggested the clever corseting of a redundant figure' (*HM*, 160). The conflation of the woman's body with the house is here the ultimate display of 'conspicuous consumption'.

As Lily moves down the 'social ladder' in the opposite direction to Rosedale, she joins the Gormers' set, previously 'a social out-skirt which Lily had always fastidiously avoided' (*HM*, 234). However, this *milieu* is 'only a flamboyant copy of her own world, a caricature approximating the real thing as the "society play" approaches the manners of the drawing room' (*HM*, 234). Wharton's emphasis on the theatrical relates to Lily's *tableau vivant*, and the representations of themselves people wish to put forward in society. This group is made up of professional actresses and others who make up 'a kind of social Coney Island' (*HM*, 233) where everything is at a higher pitch, everything is 'more':

the difference lay in a hundred shades of aspect and manner, from the pattern of the men's waistcoats to the inflexion of the women's voices. Everything was pitched in a higher key, and there was more of each thing: more noise, more colour, more champagne, more familiarity – but also greater good-nature, less rivalry, and a fresher capacity of enjoyment. (*HM*, 234).

Lily is welcomed into the set, as 'the heroine of a "queer" episode' (*HM*, 234), and must 'contribute as much to the general amusement as [a] graceful actress' (*HM*, 234). Thus, Lily's acting abilities, her gifts of pretence and entertainment are most valued here, initially to her distaste. However, she loves physical ease and luxury and accepts the hospitality of people she would previously have 'disdained' (*HM*, 235), despite their lack of pretension in comparison to her old set. The Gormers' set does not kow-tow to the established rules; they have 'struck out on a line of their own: what they want is to have a good time' (*HM*, 232); yet their lack of rules and 'easy promiscuities' (*HM*, 234) are anathema to Lily, just as physical proximity distresses her. Here promiscuity is used in its older sense, to mix indiscriminately;⁹⁶ indicating the growing disintegration of the spaces Lily is moving through. Wharton is describing how easily this group dispenses with the class boundaries which hold together 'society'. Conspicuous consumption at work is 'failed architecture' for Wharton. Luria argues that these 'novelists of manners', James and Wharton,

establish their authority not through their fantastic control of their characters' fates, but by the accuracy with which they represent the social and economic architecture through which we move and over which we have so little control.⁹⁷

As the novel progresses, Lily's moral awareness grows. She recognises the falsity of her existence and, like Madame Merle, to deal with this 'a hard glaze of indifference was fast forming over her delicacies and susceptibilities, and each concession to expediency hardened the surface a little more' (*HM*, 235). Lily is able to control her moral scruples but the emphasis on the creation of her beauty questions whether she is self-fashioning or society is dictating her shape.

When she is forced to seek employment with Mrs Hatch as a 'regulator of a germinating social life' (*HM*, 275), the excesses result in a further disintegration of Lily's world. She finds herself 'once more lapped and folded in ease' but in the hitherto unknown 'world of the fashionable New York hotel' (*HM*, 273-4). Here, Lily has 'an odd sense of being behind the social tapestry, on the side where the threads were knotted

⁹⁶ 'Promiscuous, collected in a body or mass without order; indiscriminate; not restricted to one (L. *pro*, and *misceo*, to mix)', *Nuttall's*.

⁹⁷ Luria, p. 304.

and the loose ends hung'. In her autobiography Wharton develops this image, likening herself when writing, to a Gobelin tapestry weaver who must work on the 'wrong' side, 'and if now and then he comes around to the right side, and catches what seems a happy glow of colour, or a firm sweep of design, he must instantly retreat' (*BG*, 197). Fryer suggests that Wharton is punning on the word 'gob[e]lin'.⁹⁸ Wharton uses this image to express how difficult she found it to examine her process, and close work on the underside of the tapestry can give the design a quality of nightmare. For Lily, from a distance, it looks like a picture of the society she is used to and she finds the unconventionality 'distinctly refreshing after her experience of the irony of conventions' (*HM*, 276). However, Wharton's biographical stress on nightmare emphasises the difference between the two worlds. Eventually Lily is overwhelmed by a sense of disgust at the 'vast gilded void of Mrs. Hatch's existence' (*HM*, 276); it hasn't the control of a gilded cage.

The moral emptiness of Mrs Hatch's set is described through the excessive decorative style of the hotels they live in:

the environment in which Lily found herself was as strange to her as its inhabitants. She was unacquainted with the world of the fashionable New York hotel – a world over-heated, over-upholstered, and over-fitted with mechanical appliances for the gratification of fantastic requirements, while the comforts of a civilized life were as unattainable as in a desert. Through this atmosphere of torrid splendour moved wan beings as richly upholstered as the furniture, *beings without definite pursuits or permanent relations*, who drifted on a languid tide of curiosity from restaurant to concert-hall, from palm-garden to music-room, from 'art exhibit' to dress-maker's opening [...] to be sucked back into the stifling inertia of the hotel routine. (*HM*, 274, emphasis added)

The structureless existence and the essential tastelessness of this milieu is signified by the 'excesses of the upholstery [and] the restless convolutions of the furniture' (*HM*, 273). Everything is 'over-heated', 'over-upholstered'; the sofas in the apartment are 'elephantine' and 'monstrous' (*HM*, 278); this decorative excess goes completely against *The Decoration of Houses*. The impression given is that of badly executed Louis Quinze style which was frequently chosen for opulent interiors by those who wished to demonstrate conspicuous consumption. In *The Decoration of Houses*, Louis Quinze style is castigated: ceilings are 'weak in form' (*DH*, 97), and modern versions of the style are

⁹⁸ Fryer, p. 156, p. 359, n. 30.

badly executed: 'the wavy movement [...] is suffered to run riot [...], so that the bewildered eye seeks in vain for a straight line amid the whirl of incoherent curves' (*DH*, 15). The reign of Louis Quinze was often seen in the nineteenth century as 'a time of corruption, extravagance, licentiousness and intrigue', and 'a state of society in which the boudoir became of far more importance than the salon', a morality which was thought to be reflected in its decorative style.⁹⁹ The nineteenth-century revival of Louis Quinze style scrolls and curves was seen by some design commentators as having little 'character and restraint'.¹⁰⁰ The sexual depravity of this style is Lily's present background, and she is not morally comfortable in it: 'the difficulty was to find any point of contact between [Mrs Hatch's] ideals and Lily's' (*HM*, 276).

Selden eventually finds her in a room 'alone in a wilderness of pink damask', and she reacts with 'an inward start of embarrassment' (*HM*, 277). This echoes the sham 'wilderness of yellow' (*PL*, 306) in which Osmond proposes to Isabel. Lily fears the emptiness of a life lived in these rooms; despite her self-creation of a beautiful exterior, she longs for something more than the life of the hotel dweller:

somewhere behind them, in the background of their lives, there was doubtless a real past, peopled by real human activities: they themselves were probably the product of strong ambitions, persistent energies, diversified contacts with the wholesome roughness of life; yet they had no more real existence than the poet's shades in limbo. (*HM*, 274)

Lily's dread of becoming a 'shade', of death and its dinginess, is exacerbated by this 'Oriental indolence and disorder' (*HM*, 275). As Fryer points out, Mrs Hatch is merely a more vulgar representation of Lily,¹⁰¹ an ornamental woman, spending her time in a 'jumble of futile activities', angling to marry the Van Osburgh millions (*HM*, 275). The disorder of Mrs Hatch's life threatens Lily, who needs to feel some order in life; although she is stymied by society's conventions, she needs them to live, for these are the rules that dictate a pretty girl will marry a rich man. However, Lily's awareness of the misalignment of society's rules with her own personal desires is her downfall. Her need to be worth more than just her face is derived from and affects her relationship with

⁹⁹ Frederick Litchfield, *Illustrated History of Furniture From the Earliest to the Present Time* (London: Truslove & Shirley, 1892), pp. 152-3.

¹⁰⁰ Litchfield, p. 216.

¹⁰¹ Fryer, p. 86.

Selden; during this time she had 'felt his long absence as one of the chief bitternesses of the last months: his desertion had wounded sensibilities far below the surface of her pride' (*HM*, 277).

Lily does leave Mrs Hatch, but once again she has 'withdrawn from an ambiguous situation in time to save her self-respect, but too late for public vindication' (*HM*, 283). She is thrust completely out of society into a milliner's shop, where she refuses to work in the show-room, although 'as a display of hats, a fashionable beauty might be valuable asset' (*HM*, 284). It seems she has had enough of being on display and would rather find 'something that her charming listless hands could really do' (*HM*, 283). Being a 'highly specialized product' herself (*HM*, 301), however, she is unfit for any other sort of work. Unable to sew spangles on straight, she sits working among other women for the first time in the novel, but it is a grim scene:

there were twenty of them in the work-room, their fagged profiles, under exaggerated hair, bowed in the harsh north light above the utensils of their art; for it was something more than an industry, surely, this creation of ever-varied *settings for the face* of fortunate womanhood. Their own faces were sallow with the unwholesomeness of hot air and sedentary toil. (*HM*, 282, emphasis added)

But Lily cannot create this sort of 'setting' and she is 'an object of criticism and amusement to the other work-women' (*HM*, 284). Now she is so far behind the tapestry of society that her only contact with it is the gossip of the workgirls about the ladies whose hats they are making:

it was the strangest part of Lily's strange experience, the hearing of these names, the seeing the fragmentary and distorted image of the world she had lived in reflected in the mirror of the working-girls' minds. (*HM*, 285-6)

Having refused Gerty's offer of hospitality, she lives in a boarding house to maintain some semblance of privacy and independence. The building is a decayed testament to the fashions of previous years, with its 'blistered brown stone front, the windows draped with discoloured lace, and the Pompeian decoration of the muddy vestibule' (*HM*, 293). When Rosedale visits her, the shabbiness seen through his eyes takes on an aspect of disgust:

in the peacock-blue parlour, with its bunches of dried pampas grass, and discoloured steel engravings of sentimental episodes, he looked about him with unconcealed disgust, laying his hat distrustfully on the dusty console adorned with a Rogers statuette.

Lily sat down on one of the plush and rosewood sofas, and he deposited himself in

a rocking-chair draped with a starched antimacassar which scraped unpleasantly against the pink fold of skin above his collar. (*HM*, 298)

Everything is faded, out of date, grubby and uncomfortable, the art objects sentimental and mass-produced.¹⁰² As Rosedale states, this room is no background for Lily, and she no longer even has a reflection, for 'his eyes fixed on the long vista of the room reflected in the blotched glass between the windows' (*HM*, 298). Lily is also absent from the novel's final mirror, in the room where she lies dead, and Selden shrinks from its 'blank surface' (*HM*, 327).

Lily's room has 'blotched wall-paper and shabby paint', far worse in its 'ugliness and discomfort' than Gerty's flat (*HM*, 287) and she has 'a dread of returning to the solitude of her room' (*HM*, 294). Its walls are only a visible semblance of privacy, for the 'heavy fumes' (*HM*, 293) of the basement dining room and the 'intimate domestic noises of the house and the cries and rumblings of the street' penetrate her space as 'uncongenial promiscuities' (*HM*, 301). As was common among higher class commentators on servants, she associates the workings of life, the necessities of the kitchen, with bodily disgust. Langland describes in her discussion of the relationship between servants and the middle-classes, how 'kitchen odors or smells, associated inevitably with bodily processes and needs, were taboo'.¹⁰³ As I have already noted, despite Lily's ability to pose her body, it is always with a higher aim, to remove herself from the physical and perfect her 'fine glaze'. Now out of economic necessity, she is part of the 'machinery [...] so carefully concealed' in her old world (*HM*, 301). However, even early in the novel, Lily has a certain contradictory relationship with servants. At Bellomont she undresses without her maid, because

she had been long enough in bondage to other people's pleasure to be considerate of those who depended on hers, and in her bitter moods it sometimes struck her that she and her maid were in the same position, except that the latter received her wages more regularly. (*HM*, 27-8)

Although Lily shuns the 'machinery' for most of the novel, trying to ignore its existence,

¹⁰² 'Rogers Groups' were inexpensive (\$10-15) plaster statuettes, with subjects like *Slave Auction* (1859). After thirty years of popularity, John Rogers retired in 1894 to obscurity. See D.H. Wallace, *John Rogers: The People's Sculptor* (Middletown, CT, 1967).

¹⁰³ Langland, p. 42 (see Chapter One). Langland goes on to describe the architectural division of the house along class lines, particularly to divide the kitchen from the rest of the house, and the dehumanisation of the working classes.

this is because she realises the tenuous position she has; at any time she could be part of the serving classes, where indeed she ends up; she hates what she fears she may so easily become. In reply to Selden's plea for her to leave Mrs Hatch, she reminds him of her own position in society: 'as far as I can see, there is very little real difference in being inside or out' (*HM*, 280-1).

'She much preferred the proximity of the kitchen fire' (*HM*, 314)

After her dismissal from the milliner's, Lily passes her days 'stranded in a great waste of disoccupation' (*HM*, 302); any order her life might have had has been swept away by poverty and loneliness. Recognising the faces of her fair-weather friends in passing carriages, 'this fleeting glimpse of her past served to emphasize the sense of aimlessness with which Lily at length turned toward home' (*HM*, 297). The true poverty of her own existence, and the impossibility of Selden's 'republic of the spirit', is revealed to her in the home of Nettie Struther, a girl she had met while helping Gerty in her charitable works. In her 'extraordinarily small and almost miraculously clean' kitchen (*HM*, 313), Lily sees the result of her earlier 'spasmodic benevolence' (*HM*, 316): a young woman whose past as a prostitute is immaterial to the father of her child – 'George cared for me enough to have me as I was' (*HM*, 315) – who has had the strength to start her life over again. Lily finds it ironic that this girl who seemed destined for the 'social refuse-heap of which Lily had so lately expressed her dread' has been given strength through family and love so that her 'frail envelope was now alive with hope and energy', a state Lily has no hope of achieving (*HM*, 313). Lily's contact with the child and the discovery of a home, neat and warm despite Nettie's poverty, gives her a 'surprised sense of human fellowship [which] took the mortal chill from her heart' (*HM*, 316). The cleanliness of Nettie's kitchen is an extension of her happiness, and contrasts with the harsh order of Mrs Peniston's house, just as much as the dirt and broken items of Ethan Frome's kitchen figure despair. Lily feels this contrast keenly in her dingy bedsit, which is also filled with despair, realising that 'her first glimpse of the continuity of life had come to her that evening in Nettie Struther's kitchen' (*HM*, 320); the actual 'republic of the spirit'. As she

falls into her last sleep, aided by the overdose of chloral, she dreams of Nettie's baby, the baby she will never have herself, whose warmth 'flowed through her once more, she yielded to it, sank into it, and slept' (*HM*, 323).

The Last Space

In *The Writing of Fiction*, Wharton states that 'at the conclusion of a novel the illuminating incident need only send its ray backward; but it should send a long enough shaft to meet the light cast forward from the first page' (*WF*, 110). At the end of the novel, Lily lays out the white dress she wore for her *tableau* and is 'startled to find how the atmosphere of her old life enveloped her' (*HM*, 317). She remembers her last triumph in the world of appearances, but far more important is that she is at last able to discharge her bills and her debts to Trenor with the arrival of her inheritance cheque. We are again reminded of the biblical passage: Lily has set her heart in the house of mourning, and abandoned the house of mirth and the vanity that is its only concern. She is struck by

the clutch of solitude at her heart, the sense of being swept like a stray uprooted growth down the heedless current of the years. That was the feeling which possessed her now – the feeling of being something *rootless* and ephemeral, mere spin-drift of the whirling surface of existence. (*HM*, 319, emphasis added)

This is like the beginning of the novel, where Lily stands still, as Kassinoff puts it, 'in a moment of arrested dynamism; fixed in the first of her many tableaux of racialized stasis' with everyone else rushing by.¹⁰⁴ She is still without a home, yet now she feels her rootlessness more keenly than when between trains; then she had some hope for the future. She will be still, to be looked at by Selden once more, but only in her death. Once again he attempts to decipher her enigma:

he stood looking down on the sleeping face which seemed to lie like a delicate impalpable mask over the living lineaments he had known. He felt that the real Lily was still there, close to him, yet invisible and inaccessible; and the tenuity of the barrier between them mocked him with a sense of helplessness. (*HM*, 325-6)

Yet, when he looks through her correspondence, he realises that he only knows 'as much as she had chosen to show him' of her life (*HM*, 327). Only her last acts fully reconcile her to him; far too late he realises his mistaken judgements, and his final morbid act of

¹⁰⁴ Kassinoff, p. 64.

love is indicative of his unattainable and inadequate 'republic of the spirit': 'he knelt by the bed and bent over her, draining their last moment to its lees; and in the silence there passed between them the word which made all clear' (*HM*, 329).

In her discussion of Wharton's own search for friends and mentors, Singley finds 'Lily's death at the novel's end [...] as much Wharton's indictment of failed communal love as it is a critique of individually squandered opportunity'.¹⁰⁵ Selden never knows 'the whole truth', but as Lily herself laughs, 'what is truth? Where a woman is concerned, it's the story that's easiest to believe' (*HM*, 226). Bronfen states that 'death is the logical extension of Lily's attempt to turn herself into an art object during her lifetime', yet Lily refuses to be fixed, even in death – is it suicide or not? The ambiguity of the text is emphasised by the inadequacy of Selden's response, and as Totten states:

when we as critics continue to fetishize Lily's existence and focus on her death as the failure of subjectivity, we perpetuate such ideology, destroying Lily's possibilities for subjectivity (however temporary) each time we read her as object of the gaze rather than a gazing subject, or 'I'-witness.¹⁰⁶

For Kassanoff, 'only in her final tableau of death is Lily truly transmogrified into her authentic racial personality – a disembodied soul, at once real and invisible'¹⁰⁷ – she is still homeless. Lily is trapped by the emotional paucity of her upbringing and the limits of her imagination as much as her poverty and lack of skills:

the utmost reach of her imagination did not go beyond picturing her usual life in a new setting. She could not figure herself as anywhere but in a drawing-room, diffusing elegance as a flower sheds perfume. (*HM*, 100)

This tiny boarding-house room is not the refuge Isabel feels so safe in, or the plain, small space of Ricks with all its ghosts which echoes the disappointments of Fleda and Mrs Gereth; it is poor, dirty and lonely, and though Lily has nowhere else to go, she cannot live there either. There is no path open to Lily apart from death, however, this is due more to her developing moral nature drawing her away from what she was bred for than Wharton's support for the society which created her. Wharton is ambivalent about her central character, pointing out her moral weaknesses along with the other characters in the novel, but still ensuring that the end is tragic.

¹⁰⁵ Singley, p. 104.

¹⁰⁶ Totten, p. 84.

¹⁰⁷ Kassanoff, p. 68.

As we have seen, Lily is constantly aware of her background, and is evaluated by the author in terms of the spaces she inhabits.

if one were not a part of the season's fixed routine, one swung unsphered in a void of social non-existence. 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*, 261)

Fryer points out that just as *Mrs Lloyd* has 'no expressive background' Lily similarly has no suitable background: 'no place, no room, no setting'.¹⁰⁸ Fryer also argues that all Lily's posing of her body is 'alienating', for the object in view is to give it up to another in marriage: 'social bonding is for Lily physical bondage, while at the same time it is impossible for her to be independent, all spaces available to her are prisonlike'.¹⁰⁹ Wharton exposes the hollowness of Society's Houses of Mirth by using the house as both a metaphor for the value of a life and the means of measuring the moral life of its inhabitants. At the start of the novel, Lily blithely tells Selden 'if I could only do over my aunt's drawing-room I know I should be a better woman' (*HM*, 8), but she will never be able to find a home of her own in this society. Her *tableau* exposes how patriarchal society makes Lily's moral and aesthetic concerns irreconcilable. Too late she perceives how a space that can be a home must be built out of co-operative love rather than the mere application of money and taste. Wharton was brought up to be similarly decorative, yet she had the intellect and wealth to pour her energies into writing and building her own home. She never achieved true happiness in her relationships with men and compensated for this throughout her life with the decoration of houses, both real and literary.

¹⁰⁸ Fryer, p. 82.

¹⁰⁹ Fryer, p. 92.

'For years I had wanted to draw life as it really was in the derelict mountain villages of New England' (BG, 293)

Wharton's investigation of women and interiors is not confined to her fictions of upper-class life. The spatial qualities of her fiction are also notable in the lonely environments of *Ethan Frome* and *Summer*, where the novelist as designer takes a hand in accurately constructing less prepossessing interiors. It may seem quite a distance to travel from Lily's glamorous New York world to the grim existence of a crippled farmer and his women-folk in an isolated Berkshire hamlet, or to a girl born in poverty on top of The Mountain. However, the central characters in all three fictions are trapped in unhappy, lonely existences, which are exacerbated and in part explicated by their physical surroundings, specifically the houses they live in. In both novellas, the Berkshire landscape seems to control the villagers, dooming them to passivity and stasis. The inadequacy of human relationships is directly related to the inaccessibility of the landscape and developed by the buildings the people inhabit. The main characters are unable to leave either Starkfield or North Dormer, primarily because of the economic necessity that also traps Lily, but also because of a sense of their own inadequacy when faced with the larger world of learning: they 'lack juice',¹¹⁰ as Wharton described the landscape. The two novellas share themes and setting: both describe the entrapment of small villages, doomed love, the ignorance and small-mindedness of gossiping villagers. She obviously saw the two works as forming a pair with seasonal differences, calling *Summer* 'the Hot Ethan'; *Ethan Frome* was entitled 'Hiver' in French (Lewis, 396). Although primarily the story of its titular character, *Ethan Frome* also tells of the two women he lives with, who are even more completely imprisoned within the bleak farmhouse; their tragedy is displaced by Ethan's in the narrator's tale.

Ethan Frome

Wharton wrote to Berenson, 'the scene is laid at Starkfield, Mass. and the nearest cosmopolis is called Shadd's Falls. It amuses me to do that décor in the rue de

¹¹⁰ Edith Wharton to Sally Norton, 23 [June 1907], Lewis, 180.

Varenne'.¹¹¹ There could hardly be a bigger contrast between Wharton's apartment in Paris and the 'plaintive ugliness' of the Frome farm (*EF*, 10). However, as other commentators have noted, there is a certain closeness between Wharton's own life and the failed affairs of Charity and Ethan, which could correspond with her short-lived love affair with Fullerton, which ended October 1909. As she completed *Ethan Frome*, her marriage with the increasingly mentally unstable Teddy was at a crisis point; she divorced him in 1913 (Benstock, 247). The hopelessness of the story could echo Wharton's emotional state in the aftermath of her only passionate and physical relationship. If we take Ethan as Wharton's counterpart in his entrapment in a loveless marriage and his inability to escape with the object of his infatuation, he functions as a transferred self, providing the literary release for her emotions. He is thus a feminised character, in his emotional and physical castration. But Ethan's wife Zeena and paralysed Mattie Silver are also unable to leave, and see few visitors. Thus, the women, by social and economic as well as physical reasons, are trapped in the interior of the house more than Ethan, who still visits the village. Wharton manages to use her writing as a positive force and writes herself out of her life, as the characters in the novella are unable to, for, she says 'it was not until I wrote "Ethan Frome" that I suddenly felt the artisan's full control of his implements' (*BG*, 209).

Wharton describes the desperate poverty of the Berkshires, which sat alongside the grand holiday homes (like The Mount) built by wealthy families from New York and Boston:

in those days the snow-bound villages of Western Massachusetts were still grim places, morally and physically: insanity, incest and slow mental and moral starvation were hidden away behind the paintless wooden house-fronts of the long village street, or in the isolated farm-houses on the neighbouring hills: and Emily Brontë would have found as savage tragedies in our remoter valleys as on her Yorkshire moors. (*BG*, 293-4)

These housefronts refuse to present a face to the world, and in this way promote a retreat into an interior where much more lurid things may be happening. An isolated country setting and poverty are only enlivened by raw emotions, and stark moral choices. I have discussed how Lily's 'rootlessness' affects her personality; in *Ethan Frome* and *Summer*,

¹¹¹ Edith Wharton to Bernard Berenson, 4 January [1911], *EWL*, 232.

the landscape conversely 'seizes the characters in its steely grip' (*WF*, 133), working in the opposite direction to Eliot's empowering Nature. In these two stories, environment has two aspects. First the cold and sterile landscape perverts relationships between the Fromes and Mattie, but when fruitful it creates a similar fertility for Charity; secondly, the poverty of their houses affects the characters' actions. The relationship between Ethan and his home is a particularly symbiotic 'life-in-death': none of the characters can 'get away' (*EF*, 5; *S*, 171). Wharton's descriptions of houses and interiors, and the resonant symbolism of even the smallest items with them, enhance the themes of entrapment, isolation, hopeless passion and the misery of poverty. Frome's house is the grimmest and most unhomely of all the houses in Starkfield, because of poverty and its distorted design: its physical lack echoes and actually exacerbates Ethan's physical and emotional state.

Ethan's house is first described in a snow storm and seems to be in the continual grip of icy winter; Wharton utilising the vocabulary of death. The 'solitary roof' of Ethan's 'exanimate' saw-mill is seen first, through branches of hemlock (a spruce tree in America, named for its resemblance to the poisonous plant) which have been 'bent inward' by snow, suggesting rejection, even by the vegetation, of the world beyond, echoing the self-imposed isolation of the Fromes. The house itself is

one of those lonely New England farm-houses that make the landscape lonelier. [...] The snow had ceased and a flash of watery sunlight exposed the house on the slope above us in all its plaintive ugliness. The black wraith of a deciduous creeper flapped from the porch, and the thin wooden walls, under their worn coat of paint, seemed to shiver in the wind (*EF*, 10).

Wharton's anthropomorphisation of the house, which 'seemed to shiver', increases the effect of oppression. Its insubstantiality violates the most basic architectural principles, for it does not even provide adequate shelter. It is placed in a most isolated spot, facing a road that was busy before the railroad came and took traffic in a different direction. The industrial development that gave Eliot the distance to look back at the mill on the Floss has overtaken and deteriorated what little society there is in Starkfield.

Ethan's house looks worse than other similar dwellings, 'unusually forlorn and stunted', due to its part destruction, but its 'worn coat of paint' points to a previous better

existence. Ethan explains: 'the house was bigger in my father's time: I had to take down the "L" a while back'. The 'L' is

that long deep-roofed adjunct usually built at right angles to the main house, and connecting it, by way of storerooms and tool-house, with the wood-shed and cow-barn. (*EF*, 10)

Ironically, the narrator comments on the 'symbolic sense' of the 'L' and the 'image it presents of a life linked with the soil' – the 'L' has been destroyed and the Frome 'farm' can no longer thus sustain itself. The 'L' had enclosed 'in itself the chief sources of warmth and nourishment' because it enabled 'the dwellers in that harsh climate to get to their morning's work without facing the weather', so its protective aspect and association with warmth are also lost. By dismantling it, Ethan has lost the heart of his home, for the 'L', 'rather than the house itself seems to be the centre, the actual hearth-stone, of the New England farm'. The narrator sees 'in the diminished dwelling the image of [Ethan's] own shrunken body' (*EF*, 10). More than his visible disability is evoked here: Ethan's unhappy marriage, disastrous and unconsummated love affair and subsequent entrapment in a house of paralysed and ill women, unattractive in body or temperament, point to his emasculation, and the dismantling of the 'L' as symbolic of castration.

'Each step like the jerk of a chain' (*EF*, 4)

Fryer compares the house with a plan of a typical New England hall-and-parlor house (plate 90), and concludes that 'the plan of the Fromes' house has, in fact, been subverted' by the removal of the 'L' and the addition of Ethan's 'study' behind the 'best parlor', which creates an irregular outline.¹¹² In emotional terms for Ethan, the creation of the study is as indicative of impotence as the removal of the 'L', and its contents are emblematic of his failures. Designated Ethan's own personal space on his enforced return from college, it holds all his hopes for an escape from Starkfield through learning, cut short by his parents' illness. By hanging an engraving of Abraham Lincoln and a calendar with 'Thoughts from the Poets' (emblems of the American Dream and learning) on the 'rough plaster wall', he attempts 'with these meagre properties to produce some

¹¹² Fryer, p. 189.

likeness to the study of a "minister" who had once been kind to him' (*EF*, 53). His furniture is of the roughest kind: simple shelves for books, a kitchen table and a self-built 'box-sofa out of boards and a mattress'. Wharton did not denigrate such simple means in *The Decoration of Houses*, for

it is easy to make a room with tinted walls, deal furniture and dimity curtains more beautiful, because more logical and more harmonious, than a ball-room lined with gold and marbles, in which the laws of rhythm and logic have been ignored. (*DH*, 18)

But it is freezing cold since Mattie took the stove; he can only use the room as his 'refuge' in summer, which seems never to come to Starkfield.

After Zeena's climactic discovery of the broken pickle-dish, he spends the night in his 'cold dark "study"' (*EF*, 54). Wharton's quotation marks emphasise how unlike a study this room is and how meagrely its pretension to learning is fulfilled. Although it could seem as though Wharton is belittling her creation, the reader is reminded throughout the novel that the influence of his surroundings and poverty reduce his opportunities and render escape impossible. As with Charity, Ethan's inability to access knowledge or express himself adequately indicates the small-mindedness of the Berkshire countryside. The room, which reminds him of 'the destruction of his hopes' and his unfinished education, is now indivisible from his failures and Zeena's influence. When he attempts to sleep, 'under his cheek he felt a hard object with strange protuberances', surprisingly, a cushion. It had been made by Zeena when they were engaged and is 'the only piece of needlework he had ever seen her do' (*EF*, 54). Its unfitness for its purpose symbolises their unhappy marriage and her inability to create a loving home. He flings it against the wall in an impotent gesture of rejection and anger, but is unable to complete the letter telling Zeena that he wants to leave her. He realises that he and Mattie do not even have enough money for a train fare West, but he cannot forget his responsibilities to Zeena either. If it is that the 'smart ones get away', they are also those free of responsibilities, or without morals (*EF*, 4). The 'inexorable facts closed in on him like prison-warders hand-cuffing a convict', as with Lily's bracelets 'like manacles chaining her to her fate' (*EF*, 55; *HM*, 7). Both are trapped by poverty, and by their inability to make choices against their own moral codes.

Without the 'L' on the house, the back door leads straight into the kitchen, the entrance Ethan uses most often, eschewing the front porch. Fryer describes how 'the original house plan was an image of classical harmony and balance', with a floor plan that 'promotes order', where the front door leads onto a small hall and staircase, on either side of which were parlour and kitchen.¹¹³ This accords with Wharton's architectural principles of order and suitability:

a building, for whatever purpose erected, must be built in strict accordance with the requirements of that purpose; in other words, it must have a reason for being as it is and must be as it is for that reason. (*DH*, 11)

The original, symmetrical plan of the Frome house conforms to *The Decoration of Houses*, and promotes privacy, vital to Wharton's conception of a home (see Chapter Five). Spaces graduate the transition from outside to inside: the 'L', porch and hall, particularly necessary in harsh weather for removing muddy boots, or as a place for visitors to wait. It was not built as a low-status labourer's cottage: the original plan had the requisite divisions of space for middle-class privacy, between the labouring work of the farm and the private home. In relation to other New England houses built at mid-century for labourers and farmworkers, the design is relatively sophisticated. Usually, guests would have walked straight into the multi-purpose 'hall' which contained living, cooking and eating space together. Milette Shamir discusses the uses of the parlour, and its development as a separate room in these homes in her gender-based discussion of the significance of public and private spaces. Her discussion of Melville, Hawthorne and Beecher Stowe explores the traditional identification of the private with the feminine and the 'sentimental' in literature, by finding a complex identification of private space in the middle-class home with masculinity. She uses the parlour as indicator of the development of middle-class values, illustrating her discussion with a plan for 'A Laborer's Cottage' of 1850. This has a communal living room, very different from the room divisions of the Frome house. Shamir cites the architect of this house, A.J. Downing, who explains that the "frank," "openhearted" laborer required no individual privacy and hence no hallway

¹¹³ Fryer, pp. 188-9.

and spatial enclosure'.¹¹⁴ Downing's class assumptions are clear here, and go directly against Wharton's overriding principle of privacy.

The deterioration at the end of the tale to the Fromes all living in one room, the kitchen, reveals their financial and moral inability to live up to the plan of the original house and hence their original aspirations. Fryer states that the house plan has 'been subverted',¹¹⁵ indeed, since the degradation of the Frome house has followed the emotional life of its inhabitants, it has rather been *inverted*. The complete failure to live up to the original aesthetic ideal of their home reveals the moral and emotional collapse of the inhabitants. The greatest indicator of this is the kitchen, the room where traditionally most of the life of a farm is lived. Even in the poorest labourer's cottage, the placing of the fireplace in the centre of the house indicates its importance, as Downing explains: 'above all, the chimneys should be larger and more generous-looking, to betoken the warmhearted hospitality'.¹¹⁶ In the Frome household there is only one occasion when 'a bright fire glowed in the stove', during the night Ethan and Mattie spend alone together, but then Ethan is '*suffocated* with the sense of well-being' (*EF*, 34, emphasis added). In this house comfort increases the sense of entrapment. The kitchen is 'a poor place' with 'the deadly chill of a vault after the dry cold of the night' (*EF*, 29, 23), and the tomb characterises the existence of all three after the 'smash up'. Gloomily Zeena intones that 'the fire's out long ago' (*EF*, 24). In *The Decoration of Houses*, Wharton states that 'nothing can be more cheerless and depressing than a room without fire on a winter day' (*DH*, 92).¹¹⁷ By the time the engineer visits the Fromes, the cold is overwhelming. As he crosses the threshold into the kitchen, we realise the role-reversal that has occurred

¹¹⁴ Milette Shamir, 'Divided Plots: Interior Space and Gender Difference in Domestic Fiction', *Genre*, 29 (1996), 429-472 (pp. 439-40). Andrew Jackson Downing, *The Architecture of Country Houses* (New York: Appleton, 1850), quoted *passim*. The 'epoch-making work of A.J. Downing' is mentioned in *Hudson River Bracketed* (1929). Wharton owned Downing's *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening, adapted to North America; with a view to the improvement of Country Residences; with remarks on Rural Architecture*, 6th edn (New York: Moore, 1859). Her copy has 'a little marking and annotation; a rough pencilled sketch of an arch on a rear blank'; Ramsden, p. 36.

¹¹⁵ Fryer, p. 189.

¹¹⁶ Downing, p. 138, quoted Shamir, p. 440.

¹¹⁷ She goes on: 'without a fire, the best-appointed drawing-room is as comfortless as the shut-up "best parlor" of a New England farm-house. The empty fireplace shows that the room is not really lived in and that its appearance of luxury and comfort is but a costly sham prepared for the edification of visitors' (*DH*, 92).

between the Mattie and Zeena, and are given the vision of events that have turned Ethan into no more than 'the ruin of a man' (*EF*, 3).

Framed in the Doorway

The crossing of thresholds functions in a variety of ways in the novel. This is connected actually and metaphorically with the spaces within houses, and between interiors and exteriors, but is also used by Wharton as a narrative device and a theme indicative of choices made in life. Beer argues that all Wharton's 'regional stories' are concerned 'with borderlines, with the territory between private and public space, between culture and anarchy'.¹¹⁸ The crossing into 'anarchy' is more explicit in *Summer* with Charity's visit to The Mountain. The 'anarchy' of *Ethan Frome* is more a cultural disintegration, encapsulated by the grim kitchen of bare subsistence. The 'borderline' between the private and public of the Frome house is physically and intellectually invaded by the engineer, and directly leads to his telling the painful tale which they are unable to articulate.¹¹⁹ Wharton places the engineer's tale just at the point where he crosses the threshold into the kitchen of the Frome house, emphasising that it is this entry into the house that crystallises his vision of the lives of the inhabitants, which itself lays such an emphasis on the physical spaces and divisions of that house. The threshold becomes the dominant metaphor for the choices Ethan has made in his life and he is often placed on the juncture between two worlds. Most important is the threshold of Ethan's own house, for it marks where the two narratives diverge as well as the two companion incidents where Ethan is met by one of the women on the other side of the door.

The first gives us a truly nightmarish vision of Zeena. The scene is set as Ethan and Mattie approach the house and the metaphors of death abound: 'the shutterless windows of the house were dark. A dead cucumber-vine dangled from the porch like the crape streamer tied to the door for a death'. Zeena surprises them by opening the door:

against the dark background of the kitchen she stood up tall and angular, one hand drawing a quilted counterpane to her flat breast, while the other held a lamp. The

¹¹⁸ Beer, p. 119.

¹¹⁹ As Fryer states, '*Ethan Frome* is two stories, one about the narrator and one that the narrator makes up', see Fryer, pp. 184-6. For Wolff his story is a 'vision'. Wolff, pp. 164-84.

light, on a level with her chin, drew out of the darkness her puckered throat and the projecting wrist of the hand that clutched the quilt, and deepened fantastically the hollows and prominences of her high-boned face under its ring of crimping-pins. (EF, 23)

She seems like a skeleton, frightening, half-dead, unwomanly with her 'flat breast' and metallic pins. Ethan 'felt as if he had never before known what his wife looked like' (EF, 23), only now aware of her unattractiveness. Like Isabel, she is framed in the doorway, but this portrait of a lady is ghastly. Defamiliarisation makes Zeena into a witch or an overgrown changeling replacing his wife, but the real changeling is Mattie.

The next night the scene is repeated with 'strange' precision, yet the woman opening the door is Mattie:

she stood just as Zeena had stood, a lifted lamp in her hand, against the black background of the kitchen. She held the light at the same level, and it drew out with the same distinctness her slim young throat and the brown wrist no bigger than a child's. [...] through her hair she had run a streak of crimson ribbon. This tribute to the unusual transformed and glorified her. (EF, 34)

In comparison to gaunt Zeena, Mattie embodies sexual attraction to Ethan. The slimness of *her* throat is beautiful, for Ethan only sees the differences between the women through the 'rosy haze' of his infatuation with Mattie (EF, 23). He refuses to recognise the similarities and the potential interchangeability of the two women on the threshold. Their silence emphasises the nightmarish or prophetic qualities of the incidents, which are also like *tableaux vivants*. Both are revealed by the door opening, like the drawing of the curtain on a *tableau*, the scenes are spotlit by lamps, and they remain in position only briefly. The women become representations of types, evil witch and fairy princess, in the language of melodrama used in parlour theatricals.¹²⁰ Ethan 'felt as if he had never before known what his wife looked like' (EF, 23), just as Selden thinks that 'for the first time he seemed to see before him the real Lily' (HM, 135). Both fail to see the complexities of the attitudes; they don't look beneath the surface, seeing only the *type* of woman they want to see. For Ethan the similarities of the scenes emphasise the two women's differences in age, beauty and sexual attraction; but he fails to see that each represents parts of the other. This scene is also a portent of Mattie's end, when she no longer has youth and beauty to distinguish her from her cousin.

¹²⁰ See Halttunen, p. 178-9; Lewis (1988), pp. 284-285.

The final threshold, out of the many doors that open and close in the story, is death. But Ethan and Mattie seem unable to cross that threshold. When he is with Mattie, 'the sight of the little enclosure' of the graveyard, gives Ethan 'a warm sense of continuance and stability' and he imagines a happy life for them together, but he cannot escape his fate (*EF*, 22). As Waid suggests, the great elm they crash into is 'the door that will not open',¹²¹ the event ominously marked by ellipses: 'and *then* the elm ...', echoing the moment on an earlier threshold: '*then* the door opened and he saw his wife' (*EF*, 70, 23, emphasis added). The elm does not 'open' to admit them to death, whether this is an afterlife where they will be together forever, or only a release from their pain of life-in-death. Ethan is unable to escape his upbringing or his home, for he

seemed a part of the mute melancholy landscape, an incarnation of its frozen woe, with all that was warm and sentient in him fast bound below the surface. (*EF*, 8)

Such is the importance of the land, that it is as though the suicide/freedom attempt on the sled is condemned by the landscape itself. Just before impact with the elm, Ethan thinks 'it's waiting for us: it seems to know' (*EF*, 69). He lives 'in a depth of moral isolation' and the narrator senses 'that his loneliness was not merely the result of his personal plight' but Hardy-esque Fate: 'the profound accumulated cold of many Starkfield winters' (*EF*, 8).

'Nobody knows Zeena's thoughts' (*EF*, 73)

Although the novel is named after its central male character, the tragedy is not Ethan's alone. Through the companion *tableaux* Wharton points out the silent tragedy of the women in the novel: young, beautiful, smiling Mattie, is turned at a stroke into Zeena, sitting paralysed in front of a fire that has gone out. The central story is told as if through Ethan's eyes, but the narrative frame imposes a distance that enables the story of Mattie and Zeena to creep in from the margins. Fryer describes some of the 'other versions' that an against-the-grain reading of the engineer's story allows; perhaps Zeena 'has some tragedy of her own'.¹²² The women's tragedy is pushed aside in the already tragic story

¹²¹ Waid, p. 181.

¹²² Fryer, pp. 181-3.

of Ethan, but he can at least go to Starkfield to look for work. In the house, the women's private spaces, their bedrooms, are barely described in comparison to the detail given to Ethan's study, and the paucity of description accords with the poverty of their space in the novel as a whole.

In part it is the smallness of the house which enables Fryer to remark that so clearly is the house presented through the movements and gestures of its inhabitants that we can visualize its plan and understand the patterns of movement of the people who live there.¹²³

Poverty and work instil certain patterns of action and any variation is highly noticeable, as when Ethan takes to shaving every day for Mattie's benefit, thinking 'stupidly' that Zeena would not notice (*EF*, 18). Fryer describes how in a life of poverty,

if you have only one special dish among the common ones, then [...] the setting of the table with that special dish as Mattie does [...] are actions that acquire a great, even an ominous significance [...]. If there are only two chairs by the hearth to sit on and only one room to sit in, if you sit in the chair that is by custom someone else's, it is a more audacious statement than it would be in a house full of rooms and chairs.¹²⁴

In this house, how space is claimed or lost becomes vitally important to the inhabitants, and Zeena controls the house and the feelings of the other occupants: 'she had mastered him and he abhorred her' (*EF*, 48). Zeena dominates even during the night she is away, for Ethan thinks 'it was surprising what a homelike look the mere fact of Zeena's absence gave' (*EF*, 29); all heat and homeliness are restored to the cottage. They are both aware of her when Mattie sits in her chair (which is near the stove):

as her young brown head detached itself against the patch-work cushion that habitually framed his wife's gaunt countenance, Ethan had a momentary shock. It was almost as if the other face, the face of the superseded woman, had obliterated that of the intruder. (*EF*, 37)

Ethan now sees the similarity he ignored before, and Mattie also senses Zeena's presence and moves to a different chair. However, at the end of the novel, Mattie's paralysis allows her to claim the seat by the fire, and she now has the 'witch-like stare' and is the 'bitter, querulous woman' (*EF*, 71, 53); she has literally swapped places with Zeena. As with Ethan's preoccupation with the graveyard, Mattie's fate seems predestined.

¹²³ Fryer, p. 187.

¹²⁴ Fryer, p. 191.

The decoration of the house is minimal, but as I have indicated, Wharton did not deride rooms decorated plainly because of poverty, because taste could be produced with the cheapest of materials: the 'surest effects [are] produced by observing simplicity and common sense' (*DH*, 2). Wharton was not alone in the advocacy of plain decoration. For rural homes, home-made furniture was often the only option and by using what came to hand, from Berlin work and embroidery to mending and recycling furniture and textiles, even making upholstered armchairs from barrels and sacks, like Ethan's 'box-sofa' (*EF*, 53), the most utilitarian objects could produce the effect of comfort necessary for the domestic ideal.¹²⁵ However, the Frome house is so poor and ramshackle that such emblems of thrift and domestic economy, in its most literal sense, are nowhere to be seen, and the narrator describes the kitchen almost as a hovel:

even for that part of the country the kitchen was a poor-looking place. With the exception of the dark-eyed woman's chair, which looked like a soiled relic of luxury bought at a country auction, the furniture was of the roughest kind. Three coarse china plates and a broken-nosed milk-jug had been set on a greasy table scored with knife-cuts, and a couple of straw-bottomed chairs and a kitchen dresser of unpainted pine stood meagrely against the plaster walls. (*EF*, 71)

The word 'unpainted' emphasises the unfinished nature of the dresser; no-one can be bothered to try to make it look better. The meal that is presented in that cold room, 'the remains of a cold mince-pie in a battered pie-dish', is an 'unappetising burden' (*EF*, 71). Illness, isolation and despair have produced this bareness; and domesticity is leached out of the inhabitants, the longer they remain in the house.

When Zeena first arrived to perform the typical female duty of tending the sick, she was a breath of fresh air to Ethan and her domestic 'efficiency shamed and dazzled him' (*EF*, 30). Similarly, Mattie's arrival brings with it colour, demonstrated by her simple decoration of her bedroom. As with her use of the special pickle dish, Mattie likes to have pretty things around her; whereas Zeena's possessions, like medicine bottles, are of the utilitarian nature associated with illness. Mattie's room is 'bare and comfortless' when she arrives but she fills it with personal things which are colourful, attractive and decorative: a red and white quilt, a 'pretty pin-cushion' (*EF*, 59). But, by the end of the

¹²⁵ The practice of creating such furniture, which peaked between 1880-1910, is detailed in the chapter 'Making Do: Homemade and Recycled Upholstery' in Grier, pp. 163-200.

story, when Mattie has turned into another Zeena, such elements are completely missing from the Frome house. Mattie's air of domesticity is deceptive, for Ethan 'did his best to supplement her unskilled efforts (*EF*, 16-17)', even scrubbing the kitchen floor at night. As with all of Ethan's dreams, his 'idea that if she were to marry a man she was fond of the dormant instinct would wake, and her pies and biscuits become the pride of the county', is completely illusory (*EF*, 16). His bad reading of character will be a millstone around his neck for the rest of his life. For Mattie, 'domesticity in the abstract did not interest her' (*EF*, 16). Zeena is the efficient housekeeper, despite her own unspecific sickliness and inability to make comfortable cushions. She keeps a watchful eye, knows when anything is broken or changes, and 'has always been the greatest hand at doctoring in the county' (*EF*, 7).

The burden of the emotional aspect of homemaking seems to come down to Ethan, as Harmon Gow ponders, 'I guess it's always Ethan done the caring' (*EF*, 4). Although he is feminised physically and emotionally, he remains the breadwinner and gender roles remain conventional. The horrible irony is that Ethan now has to live forever imprisoned, within his own lame body as well as within his house with *two* sickly women. They have control over the house, but are also even more inexorably trapped, unable to physically leave the house at all. Although Zeena has been re-empowered by Mattie's collapse, it is a perverse sort of triumph, her power restricted to that grim kitchen, her only subject the paralysed Mattie. It is a woman, Mrs Hale, who sheds a different light on Zeena, telling the engineer that 'she's had the strength given her to care for those two for over twenty years' (*EF*, 73). This view tempers that of the engineer's tale, of Zeena as an uncaring witch, complete with cat.

The isolation of permanently wintry Starkfield got to Zeena within a year; eventually it demoralises all three and we are left with the vision of them all trapped in that cold, grubby kitchen. Fryer demonstrates the relevance of Wharton's architectural concerns:

Ethan Frome takes the structures of everyday life, the structures Edith Wharton knew – the carefully balanced house plan, a particular relationship between house and land mediated by some connecting extension of the house, the repeated rituals of daily living – and reduces them to their barest essence, takes from them all warmth and

nourishment and possibility of human intercourse. Outside is the obliterating vastness of unbounded space; inside are the clearly marked boundaries of imprisonment.¹²⁶

The symbiosis of house and occupants, who are locked in a grim life-in-death cycle, is exacerbated by poverty and illness and demonstrated by the lack of decorative elements in the kitchen. The inability of the women, or even the most consistently domestic of the trio, Ethan, to create any sort of home, emotionally or decoratively, only emphasises their nightmare existence. For Wharton again, the small space without love is hell. As Charity says: 'we all live in the same place, and when it's a place like North Dormer it's enough to make people hate each other just to have to walk down the same street every day' (*S*, 180). The stark existence of both *Ethan Frome* and *Summer* means that characters remain locked together in dislike because of material necessity. However, a heightened awareness of loneliness in these remote villages also increases these characters' sense of responsibility to each other.

In the context of my discussion, this novella demonstrates the most unhappy and unfulfilling of homes created by women, even though it contains a husband. Whereas Fleda and Mrs Gereth have a fairly peaceable existence with their ghosts at Ricks, Mattie and Zeena are trapped in a nightmare of poverty, illness and isolation where the ghosts are very much alive. Lily's only escape is the apparently peaceful sleep of death, but the characters of *Ethan Frome* are denied even that pessimistic release. Yet, although the Fromes' impoverishment is undeniably a major factor in the emotional poverty of their existence, Wharton makes it clear that the symbiotic relationship between inhabitants, house and landscape, in this place of eternal winter, is what enables the truly disturbing aspect of her tale. There is no prospect of change for Ethan, Mattie and Zeena, even if they live till a hundred, which they probably will.

***Summer*: 'it must have been more of a place once' (*S*, 164)**

There are many metaphoric and thematic similarities between *Summer* and *Ethan Frome*. The metaphor of the threshold is echoed in the first paragraph of *Summer*: 'a girl came

¹²⁶ Fryer, p. 192.

out of lawyer Royall's house, at the end of the one street of North Dormer, and stood on the doorstep' (*S*, 159). This is Charity, on the brink of the experiences in her hitherto uneventful life which will form the trajectory of the novella. Although this 'weather-beaten sunburnt village of the hills' is opposed to the freezing of Starkfield (*S*, 160), the images of death, sadness and entrapment are here too. In the second paragraph we are alerted to 'the black hemlock wall enclosing the cemetery', 'weeping-willows' and 'doleful' spruce trees (*S*, 159). North Dormer seems to represent 'all the blessings of the most refined civilization' (*S*, 161), but this is only in contrast to the mysterious and savage Mountain where Charity was born. The village and its dwellings are more representative of insularity and hypocrisy.

The name North *Dormer* indicates the *dormancy* of its inhabitants, for even lawyer Royall, the most influential figure in the village and Charity's guardian, had 'a way of accepting events passively, as if he had long since come to the conclusion that no-one who lived in North Dormer could hope to modify them' (*S*, 203). As Makowsky and Bloom have remarked, it also indicates the 'detached and chilly vantage point' of a northern rooftop dormer window,¹²⁷ and the inhabitants often take an erroneous moral high ground. The moral and physical decline of the rural population represented in *Ethan Frome* by the 'forlorn and stunted' farm house (*EF*, 10), here takes the different form of well-scrubbed and sterile homes. Wharton describes the landscape as a place where 'insanity, incest and slow mental and moral starvation were hidden away' behind the housefronts (*BG*, 294). As Fryer points out, despite its 'cold neatness' (*S*, 168), the 'red house' is a facade for moral disorder.¹²⁸

The Royall house is not as poverty stricken as the Fromes', yet the house with a 'faded red front' is similarly 'cheerless and untended', with a garden of overgrown flowers (*S*, 167). It does not seem to be a home, for neither Charity or Royall care enough about it to tend the garden and repaint the front. Inside, the table is covered in

¹²⁷ Veronica Makowsky and Lynn Z. Bloom, 'Edith Wharton's Tentative Embrace of Charity: Class and Character in *Summer*', *American Literary Realism*, 32 (2000), 220-33, (p. 223). 'Dormer-window': 'a vertical window pierced through a sloping roof, so called as belonging originally to a sleeping room', *Nuttall's*.

¹²⁸ See Fryer, p. 196-7.

'faded oilcloth', and her room has 'bare boards' and simple 'white-washed wall[s]' (*S*, 170, 176). The only thing Charity cares to decorate is herself, and she has little money to do even that. The 'cruet-stand and japanned bread-basket' on the dining room table become symbols of Charity's lower social status, for these tawdry objects lie literally and figuratively 'between' her and Harney, the educated architect (*S*, 219). Charity's discontent with village life is reflected by her home and, like Lily's detestation of Mrs Peniston's cleanliness, the 'scrubbed floor [...] and the peculiar smell of yeast and coffee and soft-soap' of the red house are things that Charity 'had always hated' (*S*, 201). However, this house holds more disturbing hypocrisy: the colour red is usually indicative of passion, yet the only passion in this house is on the night Royall lustfully tries Charity's door. This gives her the moral high ground, for 'in her narrow world she had always ruled' (*S*, 167).

Mr Royall seems to support the ideology of separate spheres, keeping home and work apart: 'professional dignity and masculine independence made it necessary that he should have a real office, under a different roof'. However, he has to share this roof with the Post Office and Town Hall; the office is 'dusty' and he generally sits there 'clerkless and unoccupied'. He spends most of his time in the store, with its masculine 'atmosphere of rope, leather, tar and coffee-beans', gossiping with other men (*S*, 175). He has an 'office' at home, but like Ethan's study, it is referred to in inverted commas, and functions more as a den (*S*, 172, 177). Royall's job seems to indicate that he represents the order of society, and 'it was the fact of having lived in Nettleton that made lawyer Royall, in spite of his infirmities, the strongest man in North Dormer' (*S*, 182). Perhaps Royall's story is as unsatisfactory as Charity's, and Fryer notes that 'his days at home are meaningless, without occupation and, for this articulate man, without conversation'.¹²⁹ Wharton did write to Berenson 'I'm so particularly glad you like old man Royall. Of course, *he's* the book!'¹³⁰

Recent critics are greatly divided over the character and thus the novella's

¹²⁹ Fryer, p. 197.

¹³⁰ Edith Wharton to Bernard Berenson, 4 September 1917, *EWL*, 398.

conclusion. Many contemporary reviewers ignored the incestual implications of this resolution, just as critics today try to fit the end of the novella into a pattern of resolution (Benstock, 328). For example, Makowsky and Bloom discuss how Royall's 'actions consistently speak a generous character',¹³¹ his marriage proposal a second act of charity. However, Rhonda Skillern contends that his role as an authority figure is put on trial throughout the novel, through his drunkenness, incestuous leanings and the failure of his personal ambitions and career. Charity's resistance to the symbolic order and 'the structural doubleness of the novel exposes the inadequacy of traditional patriarchal representations'.¹³² Elizabeth Ammons sees *Summer* as 'Wharton's most open criticism of America's patriarchal sexual economy',¹³³ but 'read in light of its racial implications', *Summer* has a colonial narrative 'in which the dark female from dangerous territory lying just outside the boundaries of white patriarchal control is brought under the white man's authority by completely ancient means'.¹³⁴ Perhaps Wharton's 'white privilege' is 'inscribed in her texts',¹³⁵ but I have shown her gender concerns are a driving force throughout her work, supported by architectural description and style. These competing points of view emphasise the various entrapments Charity is subject to, but ultimately, despite Royall's ambiguous relinquishing of sexuality in the hotel room, the incestuous aspect of the novel cannot be ignored. Charity is forced by circumstances to submit to the 'harsh code of the village' (*S*, 283), which is predicated on social and sexual hypocrisy.

The dwelling most representative of the hypocrisy of the village is Miss Hatchard's house, where all seems 'freshness, purity and fragrance' (*S*, 201). Her 'pale prim drawing room' (*S*, 246) is aligned with the 'austere seclusion' of Mrs Hale's 'horse-hair parlour' where half-truths and allusions are spoken, inspiring the engineer to construct his nightmare tale (*EF*, 72). Along with the rest of the village, Miss Hatchard is concerned only with surface appearances and the *status quo*. In the safety of her own

¹³¹ Makowsky and Bloom, pp. 30-31.

¹³² Skillern discusses various recent critical viewpoints of *Summer*. Rhonda Skillern, 'Becoming a "Good Girl": Law, Language, and Ritual in Edith Wharton's *Summer*' in Millicent Bell, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Edith Wharton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 117-136, (p. 119).

¹³³ Skillern, p. 118.

¹³⁴ Elizabeth Ammons, 'Edith Wharton and Race' in Bell (1995), pp. 68-86, (p. 81).

¹³⁵ Ammons, p. 83.

house she can refuse to confront the painful reality of Charity's existence:

in the security of the threshold, [Miss Hatchard] said with a glance of evasive appeal: 'I know Mr. Royall is ... trying at times; but his wife bore with him; and you must always remember, Charity, that it was Mr. Royall who brought you down from the Mountain. (S, 172)

She reinforces the first act of charity in the novella, and she is unable to talk about Royall's lechery, let alone do anything to help Charity. She looks 'about the pale walls of her sitting-room, seeking counsel of ancestral daguerreotypes and *didactic* samplers, but they seemed to make utterance more difficult' (S, 169, emphasis added). The faces and needlework of Mrs Hatchard's ancestors exert an unfeeling morality. The village, 'with all its mean curiosities, its furtive malice, its sham unconsciousness of evil' (S, 238), constricts Charity. It is a place where everyone watches what she will do, primarily her clandestine relationship with Harney. Significantly, Miss Hatchard's is the headquarters for the girls' preparations for Old Home Week, 'that form of sentimental decentralization' desired more by those who have left the village than 'those who had been obliged to stay there' (S, 246). Only Harney, educated in the historical language of architecture, is able to see the potential of the building: 'my cousin's house, now, is remarkable. This place must have had a past – it must have been more of a place once' (S, 164).

Colonial House

Harney finds further evidence of this past exactly halfway up the alluring yet barbaric Mountain, an abandoned eighteenth-century house which, as Fryer points out, 'seems to promise harmony, fulfilment, possibility'.¹³⁶ James describes such buildings as showing 'all charming aspects and high refinements of the older New England domestic architecture', their 'discreet voice' quavering, 'we are good, yes – we are excellent; though, if we know it very well, we make no vulgar noise about it' (AS, 30). This house has remnants of a similar former order, aesthetically and morally 'good', and it becomes the lovers' meeting place:

the little old house – its wooden walls sunbleached to a ghostly grey – stood in an orchard above the road. [...] Slender pilasters and an intricate fan-light framed the opening where the door had hung; and the door itself lay rotting in the grass, with an old apple-tree fallen across it.

¹³⁶ Fryer, p. 197.

Inside, also, wind and weather had blanched everything to the same wan silvery tint; the house was as dry and purse as the interior of a long-empty shell. But it must have been *exceptionally well built*, for the little rooms had kept something of their human aspect: the wooden mantles with their neat classic ornaments were in place, and the corners of one ceiling retained a light film of plaster tracery. (*S*, 250, emphasis added)

The initial plan of controlled and ordered beauty is still evident in this 'well built' dwelling. The pale colours, here faded through age and neglect, correspond with the paint colours Wharton chose for much of *The Mount*, off-whites and creams (Marshall, 90). The door has fallen off, removing the barrier between inside and out, a telling symbol of how the whole dwelling has been overtaken by the more powerful force of nature. As I have discussed previously, Wharton recommended that doors remain shut to maintain privacy. Yet the incursion of nature has not been entirely detrimental; the 'pale blossoms' of the rose-bushes co-ordinate with the 'wan silvery tint' of the building, as well as the colour schemes recommended by Wharton in *The Decoration of Houses* (*DH*, 30-32). The overall effect is delicately pretty, despite the abandonment, for the 'rooms had kept some of their human aspect', that is, the architectural adornments of panelling and plasterwork, essential to maintain the classical order of the building.

Although the house is an 'empty shell', it has the beauty of mother-of-pearl. It just takes the architect's eye to look beneath nature's growth, and open Charity's eyes.

Goodwyn states that this house is

representative, in miniature, of the entire community of North Dormer. Too many people have gone – 'the smart ones' of *Ethan Frome* – for there to be anything but a spirit of disappointment left to rule in the lives of those who remain.¹³⁷

Although it encapsulates the moral and physical ruination of the surrounding area, sound architectural principles also gives this particular type of house a validity and a lingering sense of moral order above that of the village. Like Isabel's experience of the *campagna*, there is a 'haunting sense of the continuity of the human lot' (*PL*, 518). The architecture of the dwellings outside the village that Harney has come to sketch therefore 'signify simultaneously both the presence and absence of an aesthetically sophisticated populace'.¹³⁸ It is a place in which love can blossom and a refuge for Charity in a way

¹³⁷ Goodwyn, p. 78.

¹³⁸ Beer, p. 125.

the 'red house' can never be. The lovers create a homelike atmosphere by using the simplest of decoration, furnishing 'in primitive camping fashion'; they bring nature into the house with 'an earthenware jar holding a big bunch of wild asters' (*S*, 250). It is not specifically Charity who decorates this house and perhaps it is less a matter of taste than the expression of love, like Nettie's 'miraculously clean' kitchen (*HM*, 313). The ruined building is also as 'vulnerable as Charity's body and as transitory as her youth'.¹³⁹

Wharton was possibly inspired to this ruined scene by the war-torn landscape of France of the time of writing.¹⁴⁰ She was involved in the plight of Belgian refugees, for whom she set up hostels, sanatoria and workshops, and made several trips to the front with Berry, one of few women to visit in an official capacity (Lewis, 365-383). In his study of the effect of the Great War on Wharton, Alan Price evaluates 'it was not the bawdy or sexual element of life that offended her sensibility; it was the destruction of life and culture that she found blasphemous'.¹⁴¹ Her personal morality was based more on larger issues pertaining to beauty and culture. In this sense, Royall can be seen as helping to continue the life force, by looking after Charity's illegitimate child.¹⁴² Sidlauskas argues that

both the symbolic and material utility of the bourgeois interior would be irrevocably compromised by the destruction of World War I. For many artists, the effects of the war were most poignantly distilled in the image of a home rent asunder, its interiors exposed to view.¹⁴³

This is an issue to which I will return in the Conclusion. Wharton was particularly affected by the war during the writing of *Summer*. In part it enabled her to write herself out of the difficulties around her, being

as remote as possible in setting and subject from the scenes about me; and the work made my other tasks seem lighter. The tale was written at a high pitch of creative joy, but amid a thousand interruptions, and while the rest of my being was steeped in the tragic realities of the war; yet I do not remember ever visualizing with more intensity the inner scene, or the creatures peopling it. (*BG*, 356)

¹³⁹ Fryer, p. 198.

¹⁴⁰ For a detailed history of Wharton's activities during the First World War, see Alan Price, *The End of the Age of Innocence* (London: Robert Hale, 1996). Price also suggests this but makes no definitive judgement, Price, p. 181.

¹⁴¹ Price, p. xv.

¹⁴² See Makowsky and Bloom, p. 232.

¹⁴³ Sidlauskas, p. 79.

In Wharton's essays written to describe the war for *Scribner's*, she describes the devastation of war:

Ypres has been bombarded to death, and the outer walls of its houses are still standing, so that it presents the distant semblance of a living city, while nearby it is seen to be a disembowelled corpse. Every window-pane is smashed, nearly every building unroofed, and some house-fronts are neatly sliced off, with the different stories exposed, as if for the stage-setting of a farce. In these exposed interiors the poor little household gods shiver and blink like owls surprised in a hollow tree. A hundred signs of intimate and humble tastes, of humdrum pursuits, of family association, clung to the unmasked walls. Whiskered photographs fade on the morning-glory wall-papers, plaster saints pine under glass bells, antimacassars droop from plush sofas, yellowing diplomas display their seals on office walls. It was all so still and familiar that it seemed as if the people for whom these things had a meaning might at any moment come back and take up their daily business. And then – crash! the guns began, slamming out volley after volley all along the English lines, and the poor frail web of things that had made up the lives of a vanished city-full hung dangling before us in that deathly blast.¹⁴⁴

This shows the personal aspect of war's destruction, turning people's lives upside down, removing them from their homes, and exposing their private lives to public view. In the face of death, the things are no longer important, but their presence increases the pathos of the scene. The elements of 'farce' and 'surprise' show the inability we have to comprehend or describe this event; that people might come back any minute seems possible, but the force of the guns merely emphasises the frailty of everything we take for granted in life.

On a more metaphoric level it shows the destruction of the Victorian world by the Modern, a change which Wharton found deeply upsetting, as Price argues:

even though England and France won the war, the world Wharton valued was largely lost. It was obliterated by the mass world, a world without taste, a world without an aristocracy of intellect [...]. The war was not just a shock; it was a catastrophe that threatened one's ability to make a world. For a novelist who made fictional worlds and for a woman who created aesthetic spaces (her houses and their gardens), the loss of control was potentially devastating.¹⁴⁵

Wharton disliked a lot of modernist writing (Benstock, 419),¹⁴⁶ and a letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald, where she thanks him for a copy of *The Great Gatsby* (1926), couches her sense of difference in decorative terms: 'I must represent the literary equivalent of tufted

¹⁴⁴ Edith Wharton, *Fighting France: From Dunkerque to Belfort* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915), p. 152-4, quoted Price, pp. xv-xvi.

¹⁴⁵ Price, p. xvii.

¹⁴⁶ Wharton's lack of relationship with female, Modernist writers living in Paris in the inter-war period is discussed in Benstock (1994), pp. 61-70. On James Joyce's *Ulysses*: 'it's a turgid welter of pornography', Edith Wharton to Bernard Berenson, 6 January 1923, *EWL*, 461.

furniture and gas chandeliers'.¹⁴⁷ Although the colonial house represents nostalgia for a golden age now gone, Wharton's first-hand experience of devastation made her aware that more than mere nostalgia was at stake in a desire for lost order. Eliot consciously utilised historical distance to adumbrate her sympathy with human suffering. Similarly, this house represents hope for humanity's self-regeneration, for which awareness of the past is necessary, and Harney's project is to ensure that such beauty is not forgotten. Regeneration is also part of the cycle of the seasons indicated by the novella's title. But, Charity's happiness is evanescent; as summer is ending, so is their relationship, and they never return to the old house together.

The Mountain

Mr Royall's sentimental Old Home Week speech glibly stresses the importance of roots: 'the best way to help the places we live in is to be glad we live there' (*S*, 258).¹⁴⁸ This is impossible for Charity, who feels inferior and isolated due to her birthplace. Although the landscape is dominated by the Mountain, 'North Dormer took the Mountain for granted, and implied its disparagement by an intonation rather than by explicit criticism' (*S*, 190); as with other matters, this constant threat to civilisation is barely discussed. Charity cannot remember her life there, and this inability to connect with her birthplace, as with Gwendolen and Lily, is deeply problematic, leaving her with unanswered questions and a continual rootlessness. Skillern argues that the Mountain is associated with 'the feminine in general and with female sexuality in particular';¹⁴⁹ it seems 'the clue' to Charity's 'own revolts and defiances' (*S*, 190). The wild side of Charity's heritage unfolds in the summer landscape and the joy she takes in the physicality and fecundity of nature is almost dreamlike: 'she was blind and insensible to many things, and dimly knew it; but to all that was light and air, perfume and colour, every drop of blood in her responded' (*S*, 166). However, Charity's awareness of 'her tainted origin' (*S*, 188) is exacerbated when she discovers her pregnancy, and she 'revolts': 'I'll go back to my own folks' (*S*, 239).

¹⁴⁷ Edith Wharton to F. Scott Fitzgerald, 8 June 1925, Beinecke.

¹⁴⁸ See Goodwyn, p. 80.

¹⁴⁹ Skillern, p. 120.

On the Mountain people are 'herded together in a sort of passive promiscuity in which their common misery was the strongest link' (*S*, 294), and the minister only goes up for burials, not marriages. This 'promiscuity' and probable incest is the key to the villagers' fear of the Mountain: up there the traditions of family and taboo are ignored. The Mountain is characterised by darkness, coldness, death, drunken squabbling and confused reminiscences. Just as all the people seem to be called Hyatt, Charity sees them all related in their facial features, the evidence of their degradation through drink (we presume) unto death. The houses are even worse than the Fromes': 'they were hardly more than sheds' (*S*, 287). Charity's mother is in 'the most ruinous', at the bottom of the hierarchy of dwellings in the novella: 'a stove-pipe reached its crooked arm out of one window, and the broken panes of the other were stuffed with rags and paper' (*S*, 287). Once again, Wharton uses anthropomorphism to stress the dereliction of the scene. But Charity's last possible link to her birthplace is denied because her mother is dying; now 'she would find herself as much alone on the Mountain as anywhere else in the world' (*S*, 285). Her mother's mouth is open but she is unable to speak, 'a present absence, an absent presence'.¹⁵⁰ Whatever answers she hoped to find are denied and her birthplace is a 'heart of darkness' filled with horror.¹⁵¹

The disorder of the homes on the Mountain destroys what Wharton saw as necessary for freedom, order and discipline. In contrast, the red house 'now seemed the very symbol of household order' (*S*, 200). As Penelope Vita-Finzi argues, Charity realises 'household order' is necessary to bring up her baby.¹⁵² She now understands why her mother let her be taken away from the abject poverty of her birthplace to comfort: she 'had always thought of her as destitute of all human feeling; now she seemed merely pitiful. What mother would not want to save her child from such a life?' (*S*, 295). Repeating history, she lets Royall take her down from The Mountain again, to be married in Nettleton.

¹⁵⁰ Skillern, p. 120.

¹⁵¹ Joseph Conrad, *The Heart of Darkness* (1902). Conrad contributed to *The Book of the Homeless* (1916) and wrote to Wharton on 1 October 1917 to praise *Summer*. Everywhere, he said, the book 'presents itself *en beauté – toujours en beauté*', and he particularly admired Mr Royall, who was 'immense' (Lewis, 398).

Nettleton

It seems initially that the nearest large town, Nettleton is a suitable middle-ground between the hypocritical cleanliness of North Dormer and the wildness of the Mountain. Royall worked there before marriage and it is the only town Charity has visited. She goes with Harney to the 4th July carnival and they eat 'queerly flavoured things' in a restaurant where, like Ethan's evening with Mattie, Charity has 'the illusion' of being 'alone with him in foreign countries' (*S*, 228). However, as Fryer has pointed out, 'this magic is as transitory as fireworks'.¹⁵³ Everything 'they saw seemed to glitter' (*S*, 229), and the barely controlled chaos of carnival quickly becomes a nightmare of 'looking glass and lustrous surfaces' with the repellent 'reek' of sickly sweets and over-ripe fruit (*S*, 227). All is a facade, like hypocritical North Dormer, and when Royall appears drunk with a group of prostitutes, Charity realises Nettleton is not the heaven on earth that was promised when the clergyman displayed pictures of the Holy Land there. Royall's physically repellent appearance and his pointing *her* out as a whore epitomise the hypocrisy in the novel: 'what she had before supposed to be a mad aberration now appeared to her as a vulgar incident in a debauched and degraded life' (*S*, 239).

Circus-like Nettleton is displaced by the abortionist's office, which is filled with objects and people that are excessive, unfamiliar, fake and disturbing. The mulatto maid has 'a bushy head and a frilled apron', the card tray is a 'stuffed fox on his hind legs' and Dr Merkle herself is 'a plump woman with small bright eyes,' rather like the fox, with 'an immense mass of black hair coming down low on her forehead, and unnaturally white and even teeth [...] she smelt of musk and carbolic acid'. Although the waiting room is 'handsomely furnished', with 'plush sofas surmounted by large goldframed photographs of showy young women', it seems more like a brothel than a doctor's surgery, so full is it of falsity, shininess and showiness (*S*, 275). Charity is so bemused by the place and the situation that she could believe the woman is the devil herself: 'this woman with the false hair, the false teeth, the false murderous smile – what was she

¹⁵² Penelope Vita-Finzi, *Edith Wharton and the Art of Fiction* (London: Pinter, 1990), p. 3.

¹⁵³ Fryer, p. 196.

offering her but immunity from some unthinkable crime?' (*S*, 276). Thus Nettleton, with its drunken festivities and doctors who want to kill, despite the beauty of the transitory fireworks, is even more hypocritical than North Dormer, for behind closed doors lurk the passions and disregard for the law that characterise the Mountain. It is the backdrop for the final scene of hypocrisy and expediency when Charity marries Mr. Royall.

Charity gradually realises that she has no choice *but* to return to Royall. Like Lily, Charity 'had never learned any trade that would have given her independence in a strange place' (*S*, 239). The options of an abortion or making a living in Nettleton as a prostitute like Julia lie on her mind like 'a mortal lassitude' (*S*, 295). In a state of 'complete passiveness' she submits 'obediently' to marriage in a church with unknown witnesses and clergyman, where she cannot look at herself in the mirror (*S*, 299, 304). Afterwards, 'as in a confused dream', surroundings lose their distinctness: a Nettleton restaurant becomes merely a 'pleasant room' where she is fed (*S*, 303). Ironically, her new status as wife of a lawyer allows her to gain access to the 'fashionable hotel where she and Harney had vainly sought a table' (*S*, 305). She is ill at ease in her new position and the richness of the room overwhelms her:

she had never before been in so handsomely furnished a room. The mirror above the dressing-table reflected the high head-board and fluted pillow-slips of the double bed, and a bedspread so spotlessly white that she had hesitated to lay her hat and jacket on it. The humming radiator diffused an atmosphere of drowsy warmth, and through the half-open door she saw the glitter of the nickel taps above twin marble basins. (*S*, 305)

All is made for the married couple she is now part of – the twin basins, the double bed – but she daren't even lay down her jacket. She sleeps, 'surrendering herself to the spell of warmth and silence' (*S*, 305), but the use of the word 'spell' emphasises how unreal and insidious the warmth from the radiator is, and how much it contrasts with the brutal reality of the Mountain of only the night before. The glitter of the hotel confuses Charity, just as the 'blaze of light' from the electric chandelier in their room is 'unfamiliar illumination' under which the new husband and wife 'face each other awkwardly'; she cannot even 'manipulate' the electric light switch (*S*, 306, 307). The richness of the furnishings only upsets her: 'she had never felt such smooth sheets or such light warm blankets; but the softness of the bed did not soothe her' (*S*, 307).

However, her wedding night is not to be as dreadful as she thinks, for Royall enters quietly and sleeps on the chair, fully dressed. She is finally soothed by this action, drawing from it not only the realisation that he is not going to rush her into an unwilling sexual relationship as he had tried in the past, but that he knows about her baby. Certainly she is now *safer* than living on the Mountain, or as a prostitute, with access to material comforts and clean domesticity for her unborn child: 'every other consideration disappeared in the vision of her baby, cleaned and combed and rosy, and hidden away somewhere where she could run in and kiss it, and bring it pretty things to wear' (*S*, 295-6). Royall is the only stable thing in her life and will provide a father and security for the baby: his 'silent presence gave her for the first time, a sense of peace and security' (*S*, 302). But this security has been bought at the price of the independence she has striven for throughout the novella, and cannot obliterate her 'sick sense of coming doom' (*S*, 307). Although Charity seems more in control of her home environment than Lily or the Fromes, there is no certainty that Royall will remain circumspect about her wishes and 'surround her with benevolent protection' (Lewis, 397); she will live in a decidedly *ungilded* cage. Although Ammons maintains that Wharton gives her blessing to this marriage,¹⁵⁴ I would argue that marriage is Charity's only choice for her survival and that of her baby. She has not managed to break free from either the village or the red house, which she so longed to escape, and now she seems trapped irrevocably.

The red house will continue to be Charity's home, in which she is now mistress of her own family, yet true happiness will evade her like the women of Ricks, and the baby will be a reminder of her lost love, a kind of ghost. She has made a great compromise, but like the Frome family and Lily, her choices are severely limited by economics and society's morals. All have abandoned true love and their final abodes have something of the prison about them. Consistently, Charity stays with Royall out of pity for his loneliness, making a similar moral choice to Ethan, of not abandoning those dependent

¹⁵⁴ Ammons, p. 82.

upon him. Although Charity has a baby from love (denied to Lily and impossible in the sterile environment of *Ethan Frome*) it has forced her to compromise her personal life. As Skillern states:

like so many of Wharton's most memorable characters, Charity also seeks a space beyond the confines of the exchange market, away from a system of representation that not only fails to represent her but that renders her own desires virtually unrepresentable.¹⁵⁵

Thus, as for Lily and the characters in *Ethan Frome*, her choices of homes and actions are really no choice at all. Like Isabel, she returns for the sake of a child and cannot even contemplate suicide like Ethan, Mattie and Lily. Only marginally is making her home behind the hypocritical walls of the 'red house' with her foster father any more of a 'happy' ending than Lily's death sleep with her imaginary baby.

In these novels, marriage fails to concur with the characters' wish for romantic love. Lily is unable to marry Rosedale for his money, as she realises her dreams of doing over her own drawing room mean nothing without love and a family, and Selden's realisation of 'the word which made all clear' comes too late (*HM*, 329). Charity's lover similarly proves to be unworthy, and slips out of her grasp because of her lower social standing. Her pregnancy forces her to marry a man she does not love, yet we hold out little hope for happiness in the tiny kingdom of the 'red house'. Ethan and Mattie's imagined relationship would turn out exactly the same as his with Zeena, unhappiness and poverty in a cold kitchen. Lily, desperately, ends by going to sleep forever, having cleared all her debts, but with nothing to live for. It is as though Charity, Mattie and Ethan live through the possible choices Lily does not take; an unhappy marriage or a hideous life-in-death. The options of prostitution are constantly on the margins of the novels, mostly under the legal guise of marrying a man for his money. This is considered and dismissed by the women due to their moral scruples, for Lily is desperate to keep her self-respect, but Charity is overwhelmed by love for her baby, whose future life is more important than her own. For Mattie, shop work in the city is a fate almost as bad as prostitution. If the prize is a rich husband, Lily knows in her heart of hearts that it is not worth reaching for.

¹⁵⁵ Skillern, p. 129.

Wharton is saying that the needs and wants of women: happiness, love, a family and contentment, are impossible for those with a deeper awareness of the true values of life, in the patriarchal, hypocritical society of the Gilded Age. Dreams are glimpsed but can never be achieved in the socio-economic subjugation of women and for those who truly understand what a home should be built from, it can never be achieved. Shallow, fashionable people, or those willing to succumb to the hypocrisy of patriarchal society, are the only people able to live in beautiful homes with the trappings of a seemingly happy family. Wharton herself knew the unhappiness of marriage and the difficulties for a woman to make an intellectual contribution to this world. She was lucky enough to have the economic resources to allow an outlet for her creative energies. Where other women were limited to 'doing over' the drawing room, she built her own house for her emotional and physical needs and was able to follow through her ideals on the order of civilized life. Significantly, on moving into Château Ste. Claire, her post-war home in France, she wrote: 'I am thrilled to the spine [...] I feel as if I were going to get married – to the right man at last!'¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁶ Edith Wharton to Royall Tyler, [c.1919], Lewis, 421.

Conclusion

The Twentieth Century: Out of the Drawing Room

A house is a dead-give-away [...] We are sure to judge a woman in whose house we find ourselves for the first time, by her surroundings. We judge her temperament, her habits, her inclinations, by the interior of her home. We may talk of the weather, but we are looking at the furniture.¹

Among all the female characters I have been discussing, none clearly achieves the goal of a fulfilling life in a home sustained by love and beauty, and even Dorothea's ambitions of beautifying service have been greatly reduced. Perhaps the open ending of *Daniel Deronda* will allow Gwendolen to move forward in life with her new conscience forged by suffering. But Maggie is reconciled to her family only in death; Rosamond renounces love for economic security; Eugenia and Madame Merle will wander the earth, in Europe and America respectively; Fleda and Mrs Gereth seek solace in each other and a house of ghosts; Isabel's moral code dictates that she return to her prison-like marriage; Lily dies with nothing in the world; Zeena and Mattie are locked in mental and physical torment and Charity compromises her happiness for the life of her unborn child. There is some hope for Gwendolen, for she has had to change her attitude to the world; Lily and Isabel also learn through suffering, but the endings of both their novels obliterate or close down hope.

The writers themselves were also concerned with creating a home where they could live, write and love. Among women creating homes, surely Eliot had one of the most difficult jobs. She was rejected by her family, ostracised from society, unable to visit other women or other private homes and only able to fulfil her need to write through a scandalous relationship. Like Wharton, she was immensely commercially successful, even to the point of keeping Lewes's children, and the space she created for herself was maintained by her talent, but at the expense of isolation. She and Lewes were only able to feel 'at home' and accepted when they went abroad, where she didn't experience the same kind of social disapprobation. Eliot did not want to be unconventional, but was

¹ De Wolfe, pp. 18-21.

driven against society's laws by keeping true to her intellectual ideals, which led her to argue with organised religion, and by the impossibility of rejecting love and lifelong companionship. Wharton never found this, although she had many rewarding friendships with male intellectual equals. The personal and intellectual differences with Teddy were overwhelming; at first hand she experienced the sadness and difficulties of a marriage that society smiled upon but which proved unfulfilling for the people involved. Instead she poured her considerable energies into her career as a writer and the creation of homes. Independently she achieved great economic success, and organised whole households, as well as refugee hostels in France. James's continual travelling led to an intense need for a home of his own in later life, but even in his dream home in Rye he was a perpetual bachelor. Each of these writers distilled their own experiences of a search for a home in their writing. That they chose to express this so often through female characters mirrors the complex relationship women had with their 'natural sphere'. Although so many of the female characters I have discussed grow in intellectual and moral stature through the narratives, the search for a true home becomes increasingly difficult, perhaps even impossible in Victorian society, without some sentimental suppression of the problems.

In terms of visual imagery, Sidlauskas persuasively argues that certain late nineteenth-century paintings actually '*enacted* the instabilities' of cultural change and offered alternative readings to merely decorative representations of women in interiors.² This was achieved through revolutionary compositional strategies which later became 'fundamentals of the vocabulary of abstraction: the identification of figure and ground, the emphasis on "negative" space, the expressive distortions of space, scale and perspective, and the schematic treatment of physiognomy'.³ These pictorial structures 'exploited the interior's accessibility as a sign, even as they subverted its commonplace associations with comfort and safety'.⁴ The 'pictorial fusion of figure and ground on the surface of the canvas' I discussed in Chapter One, has a rather different aim in the Modernist aesthetic, as it is 'inevitably in tension with the spectator's psychological

² Sidlauskas, p. 65.

³ Sidlauskas, p. 68.

⁴ Sidlauskas, p. 65.

resistance towards wholly merging a body with its surroundings'.⁵ The images Sidlauskas has chosen 'do not *narrate* stories of psychological discomfort' and alienation, 'they act out their effects through figural and spatial arrangements that were calculated to provoke a bodily empathy on the part of the sentient viewer'.⁶ Sidlauskas finds that many artists 'produced an image of disorientation and discomfort, in which a pictorial instability between figure and ground enacted a psychological discomfort – between body and house'.⁷

One of her early examples is Whistler's *Harmony in Green and Rose: The Music Room* (plate 91). This was painted only six years after *The Awakening Conscience*, yet approaches the subject of woman in an interior rather differently. There is no immediately recognisable 'story', and Whistler's use of the word *Harmony* highlights the formal aspects of the image:

while the configuration of the space – and the mirror that partially reflects it – is only vaguely defined, the draperies assume the stiffness of walls, become partitions that compress and further isolate three already stranded figures.⁸

The furnishings are the pale colours and floral patterns of feminine rooms, yet the women are presented dressed for unrelated occasions, the black riding habit especially providing a striking visual contrast. The 'animacy' of the furnishings helps to create a 'sense of simultaneous compression and isolation',⁹ perhaps relating to the social status of women. Rather than portraits of specific women, the figures can be read as representing three ages of woman: girl, wife and widow. Images such as this show a challenge to pictorial and psychological autonomy, subjectivity dissolves just as Gwendolen and Lily see happening in their mirrors; they can no longer live as purely decorative objects.

After The War

Progressive art rejected the overwhelming reliance on a moral code for narrative painting and the decoration of the interior, through an emphasis on formal values and related

⁵ Sidlauskas, p. 67.

⁶ Sidlauskas, p. 68.

⁷ Sidlauskas, p. 70.

⁸ Sidlauskas, p. 71.

⁹ Sidlauskas, p. 71.

psychological concerns. Paintings of well-decorated homes with their occupants placed awkwardly, sometimes members of the same family divided from each other by physical or pictorial barriers, provoke unease in the viewer commensurate with the psychological unease felt by the subjects. For example, Sickert's *Ennui* (plate 92) has distortions of scale, uncomfortable posing and lack of interaction between the man and woman. Here 'space and figure are locked in a tense equipoise that seems perpetually on the brink of dissolution', just as Europe was on the brink of war in 1914.¹⁰ Sickert does not see the home as happy or comfortable for either gender. Instead, they seem trapped by repeated patterns, familiar objects now appear strange. The couple themselves, although painted as if one flesh, face in different directions. Sickert rejected the comfort and beauty of the Victorian era:

the more our art is serious, the more will it tend to avoid the drawing-room and stick to the kitchen. The plastic arts are gross arts, dealing joyously with gross material facts. [...] [W]hile they will flourish in the scullery, or on the dunghill, they fade at a breath from the drawing room. Stay! I had forgot. We have a use for the drawing-room – to caricature it.¹¹

Thus the moral, well-decorated, supposedly comfortable, bourgeois home is constructed as psychologically restricting. Sidlauskas's discussion demonstrates that male artists too were aware of women's entrapment within the home.

During the time period spanned by the novels I have discussed, 1860-1917, the 'Woman Question' became ever more urgent, and this is reflected in the increasing impossibility for these female characters to find a home in either British and American society. As I discussed in Chapter One, Mrs Pankhurst and other early feminists began their revolution in the space of the drawing room. The writers I have been discussing place their female characters in various style of drawing rooms, in different social strata, but none inhabit truly happy homes. Although none of the writers I have discussed called themselves feminists, they were aware that something had to be done and women's position in society was untenable. Sidlauskas states that

both the symbolic and material utility of the bourgeois interior would be irrevocably compromised by the destruction of World War I. For many artists, the effects of the

¹⁰ Sidlauskas, p. 67.

¹¹ Sickert, Walter, 'Idealism', *Art News* (12 May 1910) in *The Complete Writings on Art*, ed. by Anna Gruetzner Robins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 228-9, (p. 229).

war were most poignantly distilled in the image of a home rent asunder, its interiors exposed to view.¹²

I discussed in Chapter Six how Wharton reacted to the war in just this way. If the inhabitants of the Victorian bourgeois interior were identifiable by their domestic possessions, 'with the destruction of those possessions, whether literally in a bomb blast or through the destruction of the world of Empire which economically sustained them, identity will be troubled'.¹³ The Great War marks a real change in attitudes towards the bourgeois idea of home; afterwards, the ideas of morality and taste so important in novels like *Portrait* came to look like dilettantism, without relevance to contemporary life. A society predicated upon delicate rules of etiquette and a hidden servant class became untenable. Existence became characterised by huge loss of life, violence and instability. Thus, suffrage was not achieved by demonstration alone, for it was only through the cataclysm of war that some women were able to vote – in 1918 in Britain and 1919 in the United States.

Wharton was profoundly affected by the war and recognised this change, writing about it specifically. *The Age of Innocence* (1920) deals with a past time that cannot be recovered, with rules almost inexplicable to the younger generation. The age of innocence is before the war, the 'lost paradise' of Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945).¹⁴ Wharton's period detail evokes perfectly what only the old would remember, thereby putting it at further distance for the modern reader. The motivations and actions of the characters within the bounds of respectability and etiquette are as alien to the young people at the end of the novel as they are quaint and romantic to the contemporary reader. This is evoked by the decoration and use of rooms, specifically the study, whose decor changes while the Eastlake-designed desk stays the same, just as Archer remains hide-bound to convention. However, Wharton's literary style does not anticipate the Modern as much of James's later work does, for Isabel's meditation is a type of stream of consciousness.

¹² Sidlauskas, p. 79.

¹³ Sidlauskas, p. 80.

¹⁴ Gill, p. 214.

Out of the Drawing Room

Any discussion of women and home must at least nod in the direction of Woolf, who formulated the desire for a 'room of one's own'. As I discussed in Chapter Five, the war provides a narrative shift in *To The Lighthouse* and Mrs Ramsay's Victorian domesticity becomes redundant, if not somewhat pernicious, for women wanting to express their needs and desires and build their own lives. In a world where domestic trappings seemed to have lost much of their meaning, Woolf saw a future life without the bourgeois drawing room. In her diary she wrote, '[I] thought how a house should be portable like a snail shell. In future perhaps, people will flirt out houses like little fans; and go on. There'll be no settled life within walls'.¹⁵ The shell metaphor echoes Eliot's dislike 'for the shell of our lives', James's 'envelope of circumstances', and perhaps the 'long-empty shell' of the Colonial house in *Summer*. However, this new shell and possessions are portable, no longer the layers of fabric and accumulation of beautiful, but superfluous, objects of the Victorian home.

But it is in the work of a less well-known writer, who also trained as an artist, that the concerns of this thesis are finally distilled. Catherine Carswell goes even further in her rejection of the drawing room, and in the end for her the only course for women's freedom, intellectual and emotional happiness is an escape into the countryside. In the semi-autobiographical novel *Open the Door!*, the artist Joanna/Catherine experiences various types of homes, created by women, as she grows up, only to reject them all. This position has much to do with Carswell's friendship with D.H. Lawrence, yet it only stresses the insufficiency of the settings for women that were being formulated before the war. In *Summer*, Charity tries to escape the constriction of her village:

she supposed it was something in her blood that made the Mountain the only answer to her questioning, the inevitable escape from all that hemmed her in and beset her. (S, 282)

However, she has no alternative but to return to the hated village. Similarly, for Carswell's heroine, 'her intenser life was lived in her flights. She had many avenues of

¹⁵ Virginia Woolf, 'Tuesday, September 12, 1935', *A Writer's Diary*, ed. by Leonard Woolf (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1953), p. 246, quoted Sidlauskas, p. 80.

escape; but of these the best was provided by her passion for the country'.¹⁶

At the end of the novel Joanna returns to the countryside of her youth and undergoes a process of rebirth, bathing in 'silent, almost hidden water'.¹⁷ Unlike the other fictional women I have discussed, she is not alone and has the physical love of Lawrence Urquhart. He has gone through a similar pilgrimage, enabling them to look at each other 'full of recognition' right to the 'primary flames of being'.¹⁸ The look is reciprocated and equal, Pater's 'gemlike flame' is no longer merely aesthetic appreciation, but physical action. Only with this mutual love is Joanna able to run, 'this time for life',¹⁹ through the 'door of utterance',²⁰ right out of the Victorian drawing room.

¹⁶ Catherine Carswell, *Open the Door!* (London: Virago, 1986), first published 1920, p. 31.

¹⁷ Carswell, p. 389.

¹⁸ Carswell, p. 397.

¹⁹ Carswell, p. 395.

²⁰ Carswell, p. 145.

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Plates



Plate 1. J.J.E. Mayall, *Queen Victoria and Prince Albert*, 15 May 1860

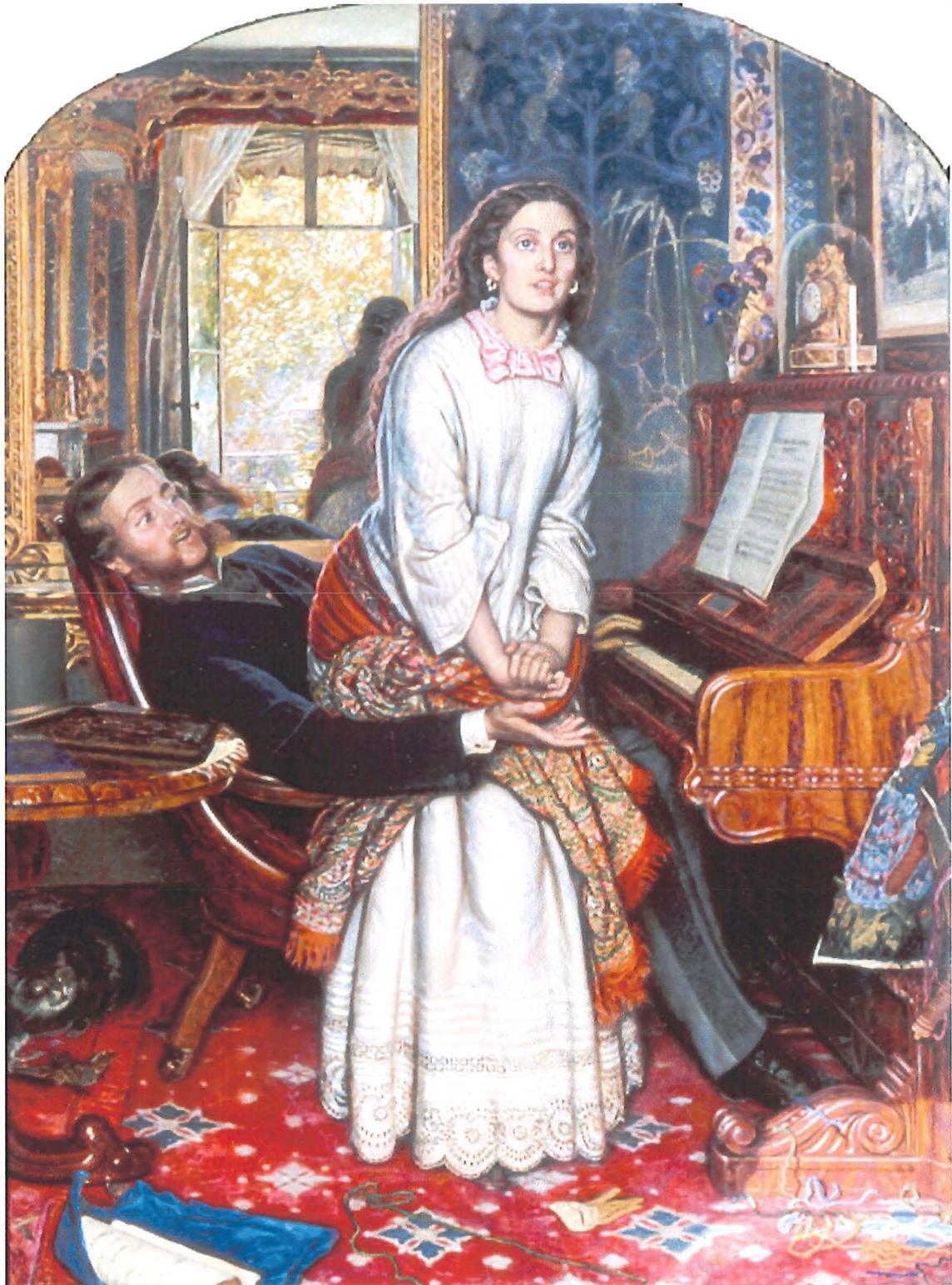


Plate 2. William Holman Hunt, *The Awakening Conscience*, 1854



Plate 3. Gas Bracket, Winfield Ltd, 1848

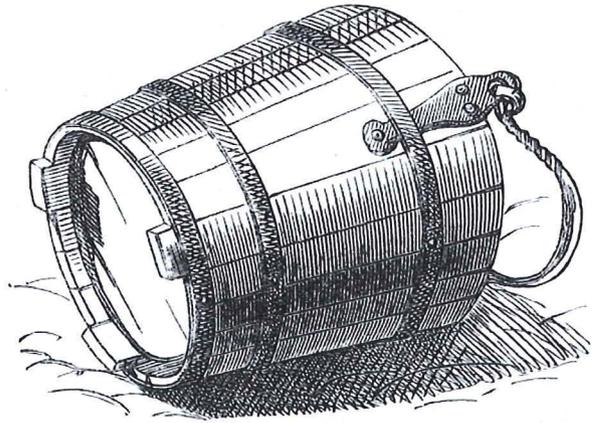


Plate 4. C.L. Eastlake, *House Bucket*, 1868

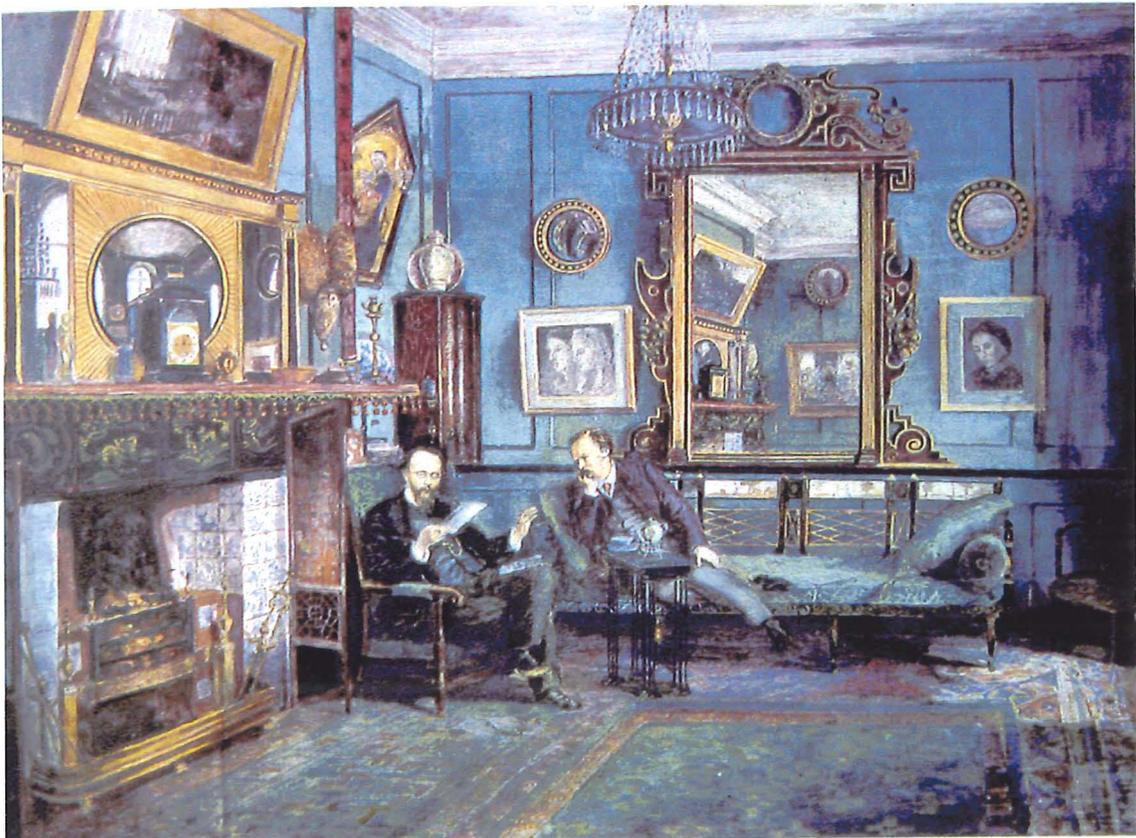


Plate 5. Henry Treffry Dunn, *Living Room of Dante Gabriel Rossetti in Chelsea*, 1882

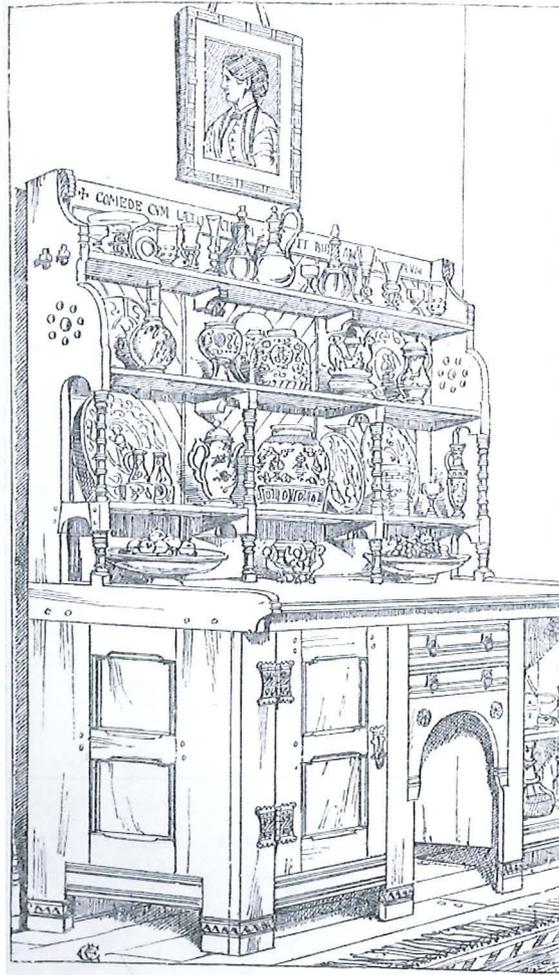


Plate 6. Charles L. Eastlake, *Dining-room Sideboard*, 1868

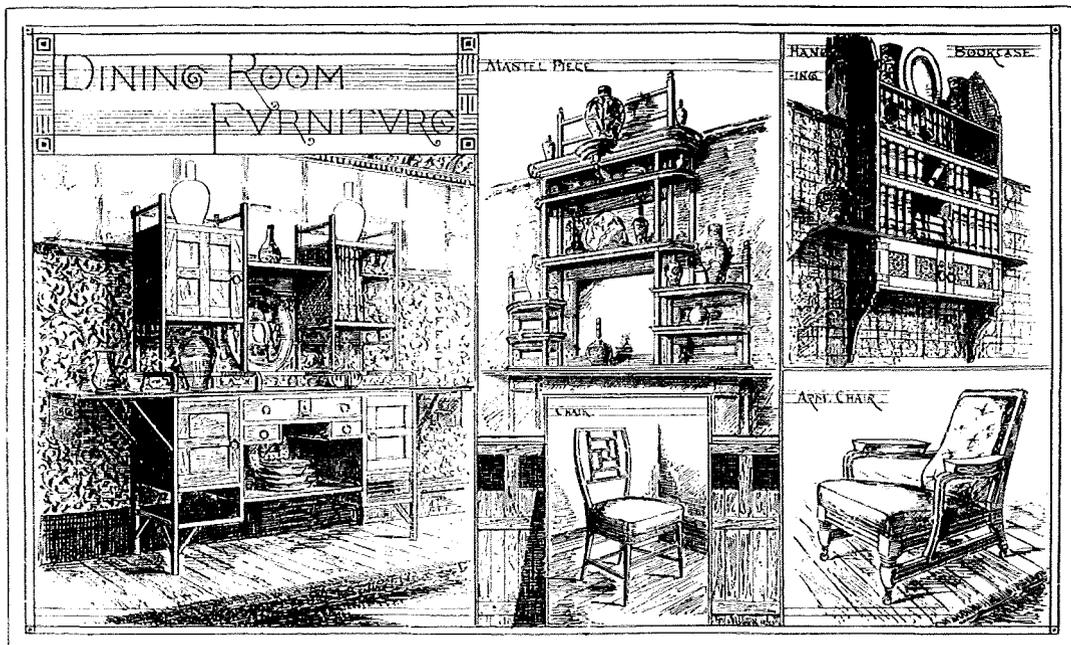


Plate 7. Leighton House Studio, 12 Holland Park Road



Plate 8. Drawing Room, 2 Lindsey Row, London, 1867-8

PLATE N° 6



ART FURNITURE WAREHOUSE,
21. GRAFTON STREET, GOWER STREET, LONDON.

Plate 9. E.W. Godwin, Dining Room Furniture, 1877

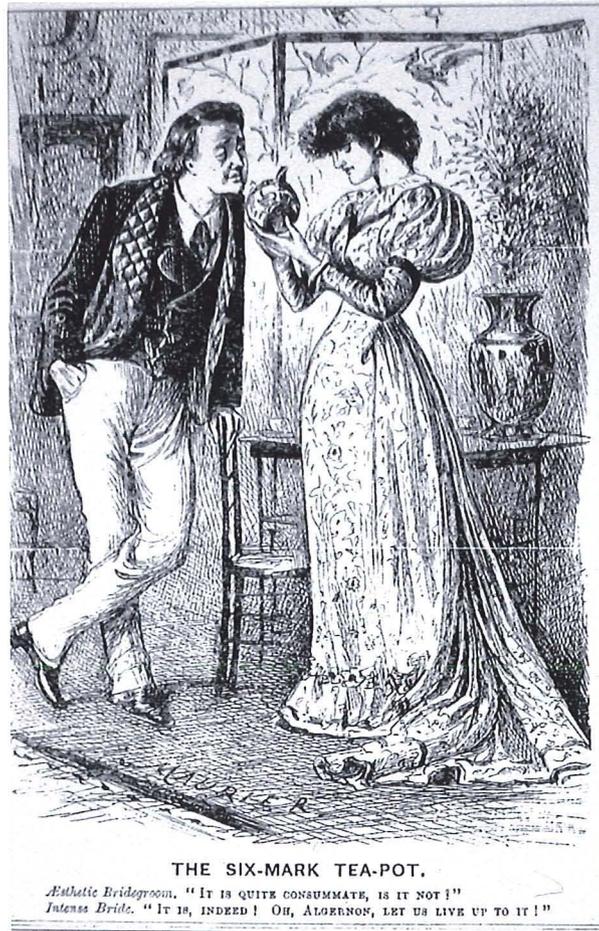


Plate 10. George Du Maurier, 'The Six Mark Teapot', 30 October 1880

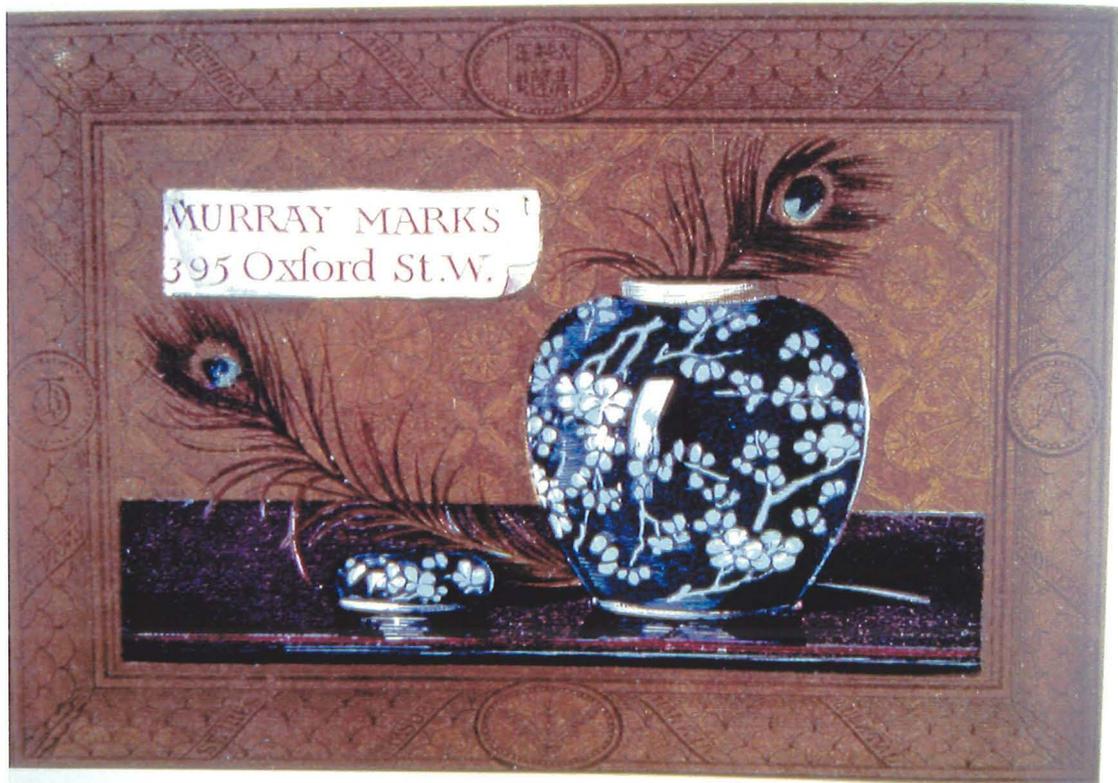


Plate 11. Henry Treffry Dunn (attrib.), Trade Card of Murray Marks, c. 1875

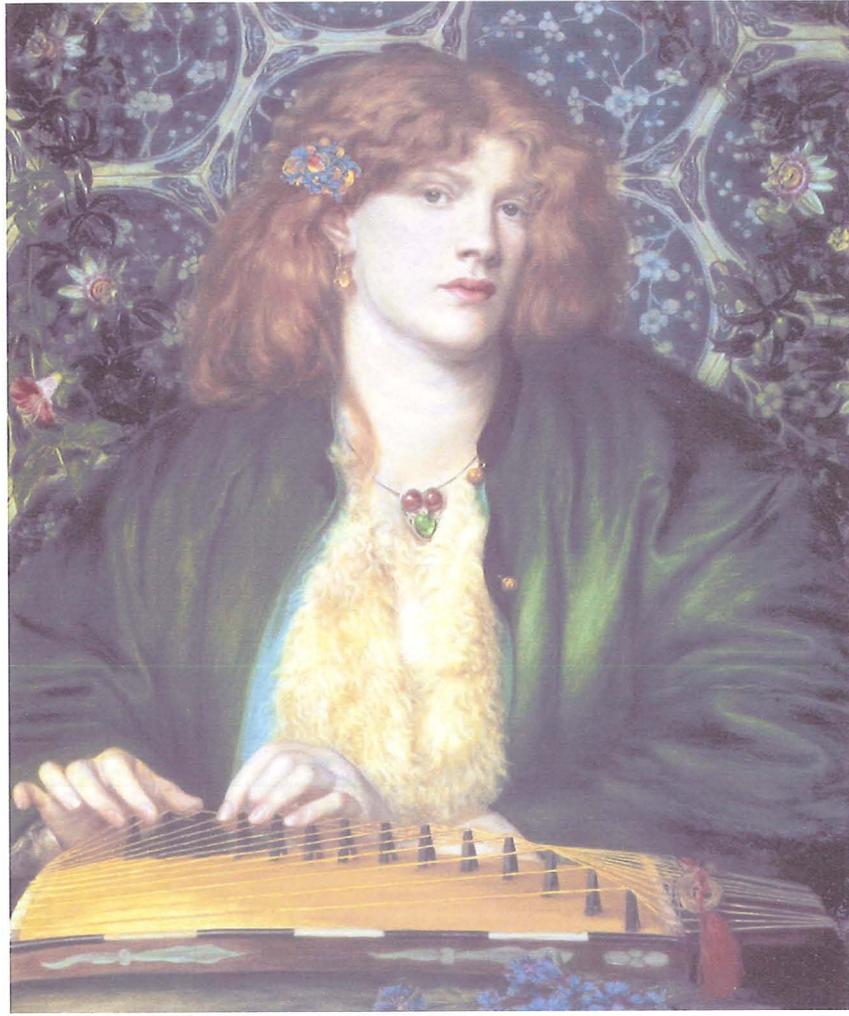


Plate 12. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Blue Bower*, 1865



Plate 13. James McNeill Whistler, *Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room*, 1876-7



Plate 14. Fireplace in the Morning Room, Linley Sambourne House, c.1874



*A Dining Room Fireplace - showing how an ordinary Chimney & Mantel Piece may be treated **
ROBERT W. EDIS, F.S.A. ARCHT.

Plate 15. Robert W. Edis, A Dining Room Fireplace, 1888



Plate 16. Dining Room Overmantel, 3 Upper Berkeley Street, c.1880



Plate 17. Walter Crane, *At Home – A Portrait*, 1872

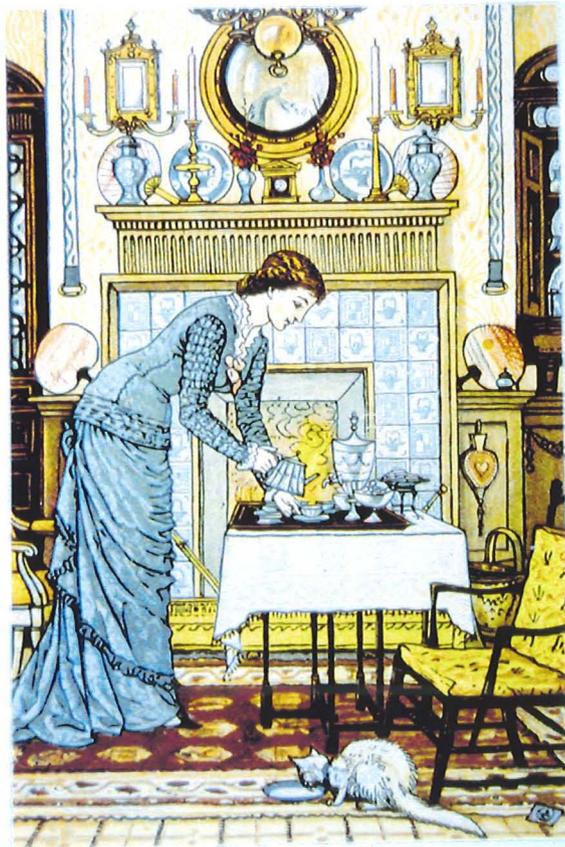
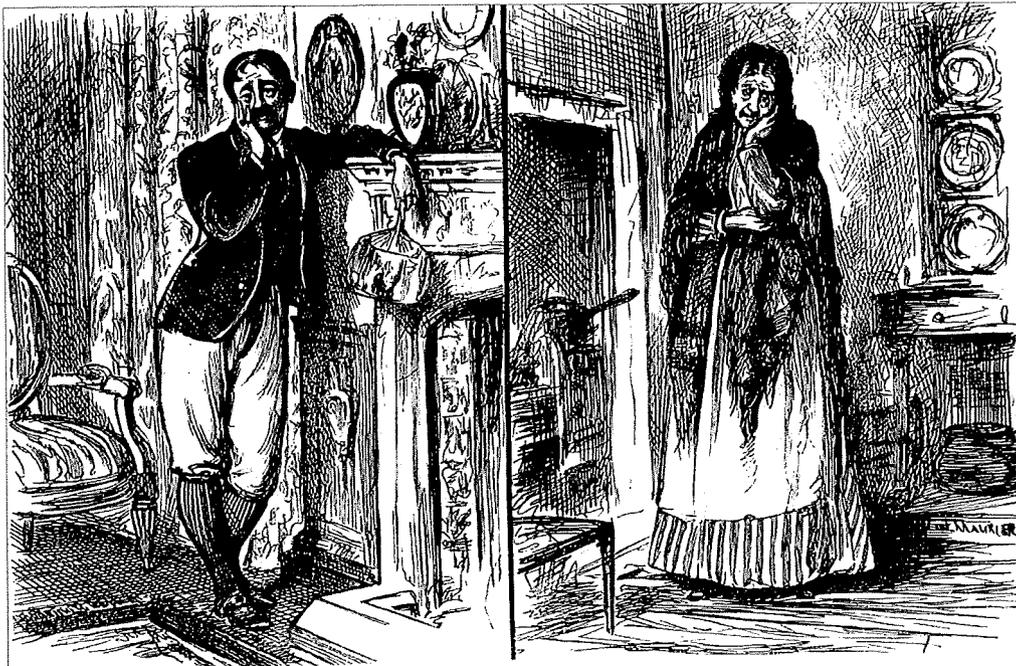


Plate 18. Walter Crane, *My Lady's Chamber*, 1878



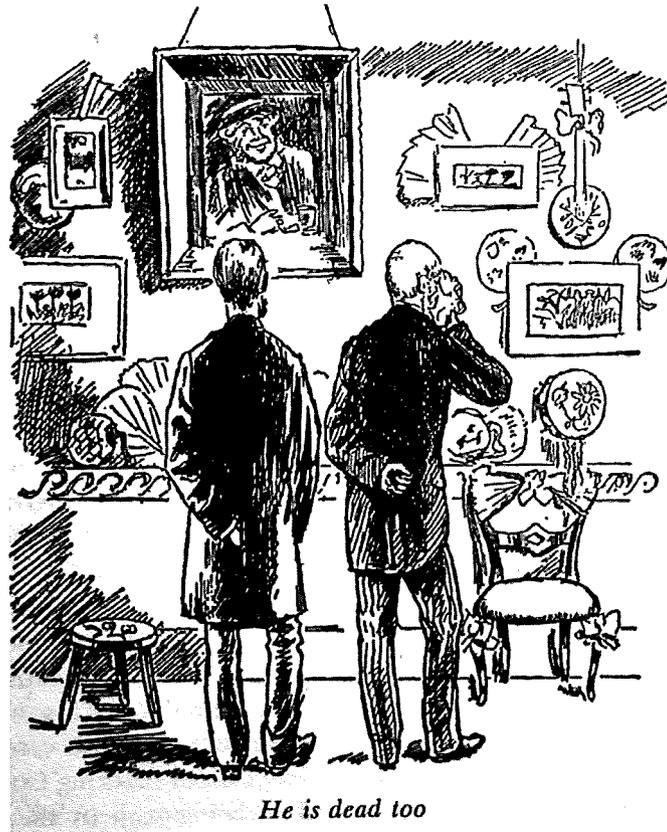
INTELLECTUAL EPICURES.

STEPPED IN ÆSTHETIC CULTURE, AND SURROUNDED BY ARTISTIC WALL-PAPERS, BLUE CHINA, JAPANESE FANS, MEDIEVAL SNUFF-BOXES, AND HIS FAVOURITE PERIODICALS OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY, THE DILETTANTE DE TOMKYN'S COMPLACENTLY BOASTS THAT HE NEVER READS A NEWSPAPER, AND THAT THE EVENTS OF THE OUTER WORLD POSSESS NO INTEREST FOR HIM WHATEVER.

Betsy Waring (who goes out a-charing) and is a Martyr to Rheumatics (what comes o' damp attics), expresses similar viciss. In her own words:—

"I'VE OFTEN HEARD RUMOURS
OF WARS AND CONTUMOURS,
SEA-SARPINTS, AND COMICS AS LIGHTS UP THE SKY;
STEAM-HINGINS A-BUSTIN',
AND BANKS AS FOLKS TRUST IN,
BUT THEY DON'T NEVER FRET A OLD 'OOMAN LIKE I!"

Plate 19. George Du Maurier, 'Intellectual Epicures', 5 February 1876



He is dead too

Plate 20. Weedon Grossmith, 'He Is Dead Too', 1892

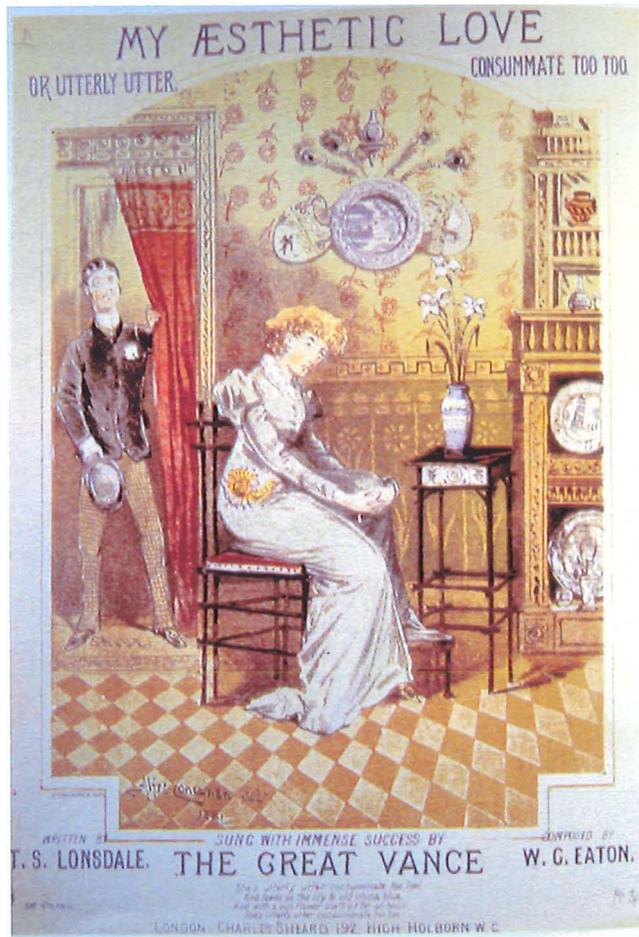
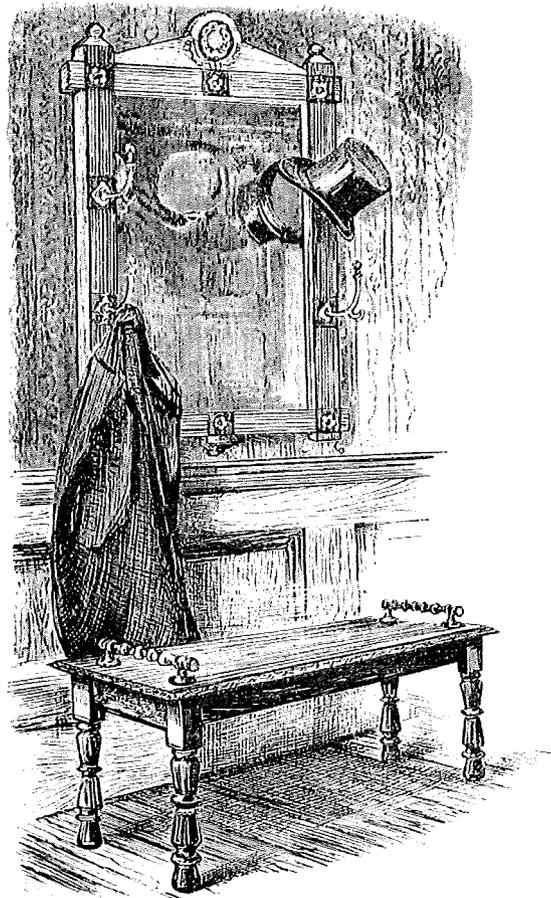


Plate 21. Alfred Concanen, *My Aesthetic Love*, 1881

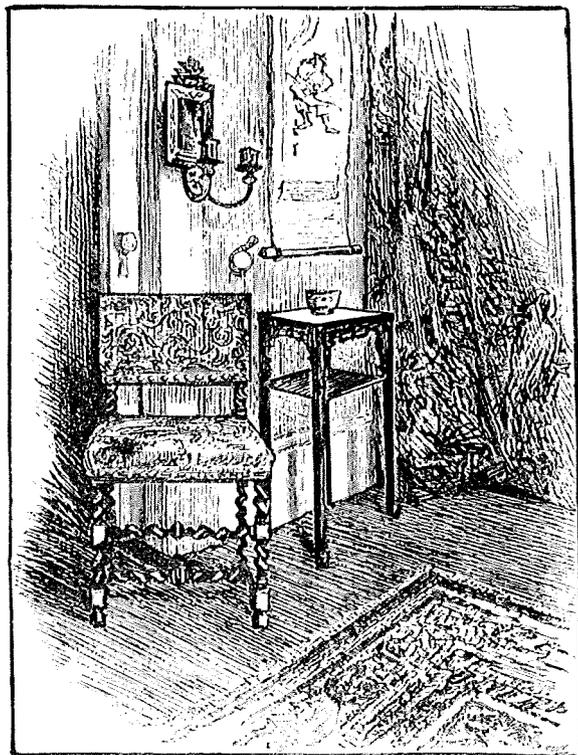


Plate 22. Alexandre Sandier, 'Much in Little Space', c.1877



"She'll be down in a minute, sir."
No. 2.

Plate 23. Francis Lathrop, 'She'll Be Down In A Minute, Sir', c.1877



"We met by chance."
No. 62

Plate 24. Francis Lathrop, 'We Met By Chance', c.1877

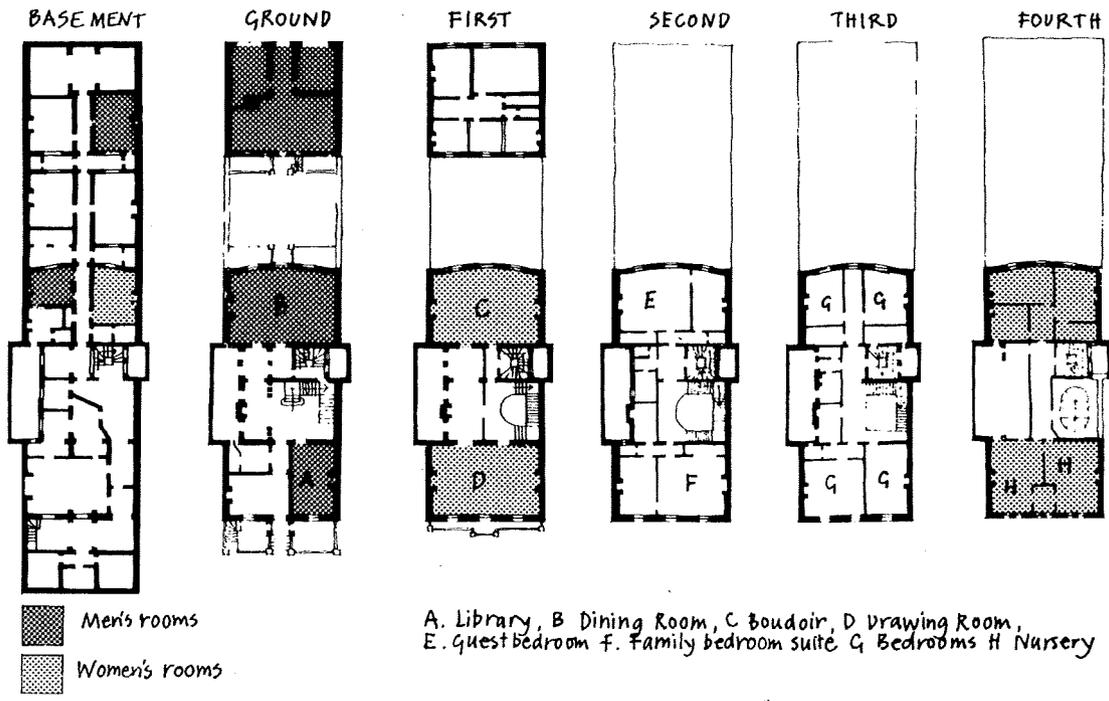


Plate 25. Matrix Design Group, *Design for a Row of London Houses* redrawn to show the separation of men's and women's rooms



A Dining Room Sideboard

MESSRS JACKSON & GRAHAM

Plate 26. Robert W. Edis, *A Dining Room Sideboard*, 1881



Plate 27. Drawing Room at Glen Roy in Moseley, Birmingham, 1881

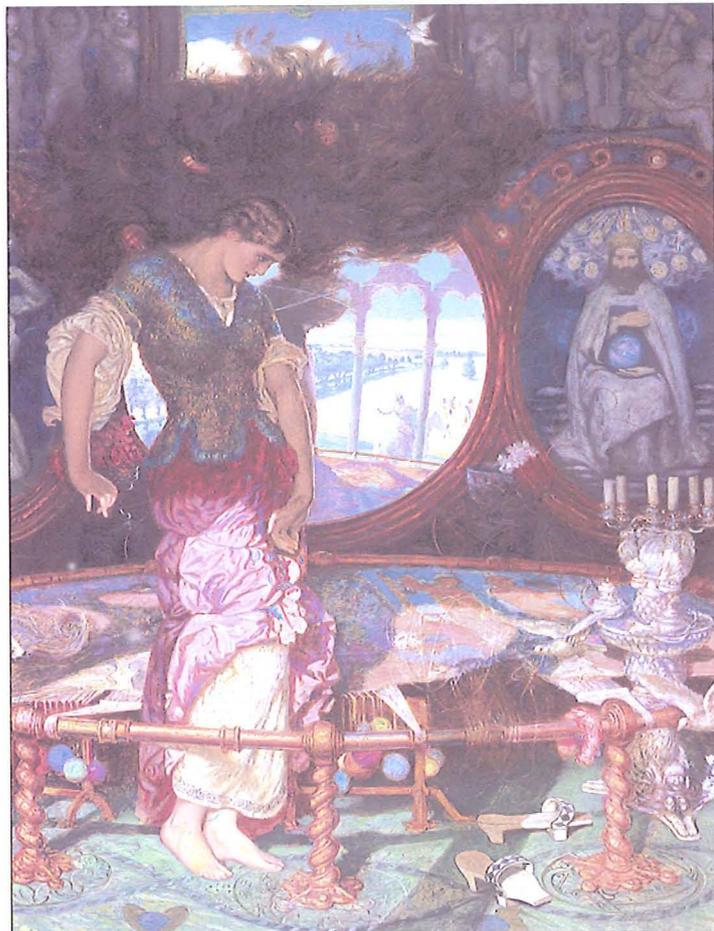


Plate 28. William Holman Hunt, *The Lady of Shalott*, c.1886-1905



Plate 29. Maria R. Oakey, 'A Screen of Books', c.1877



Plate 30. Robert W. Edis, *A Drawing Room Corner*, 1881

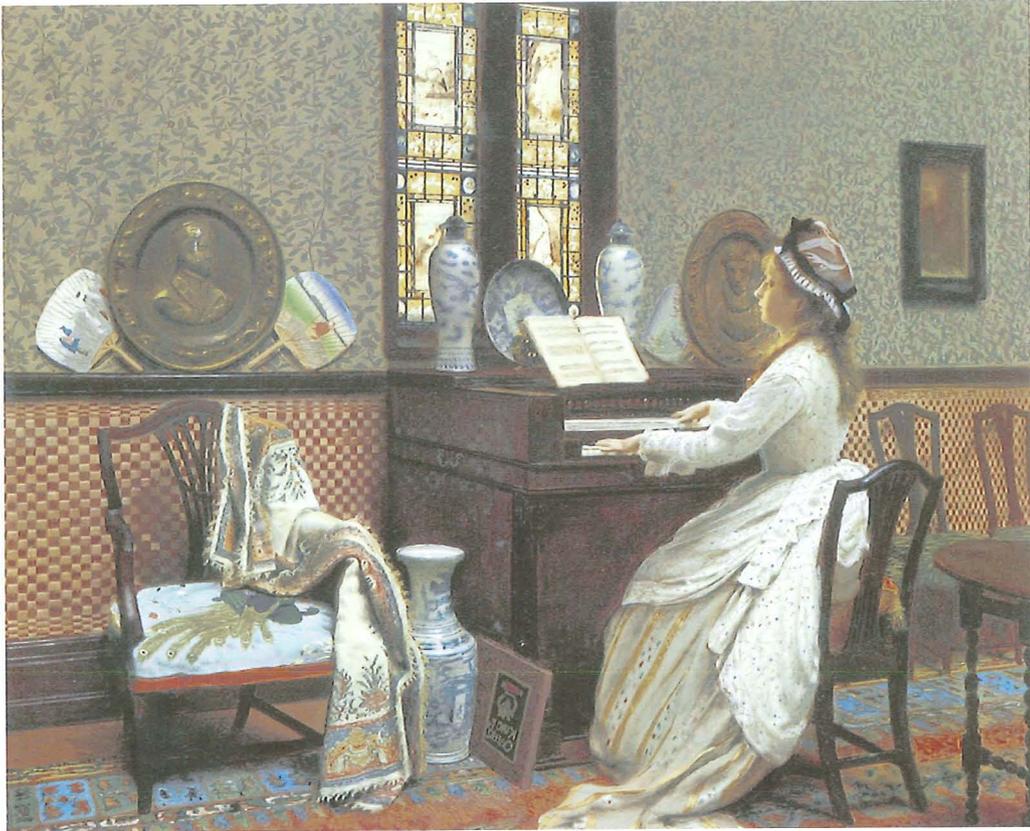


Plate 31. John Atkinson Grimshaw, *The Chorale*, 1878

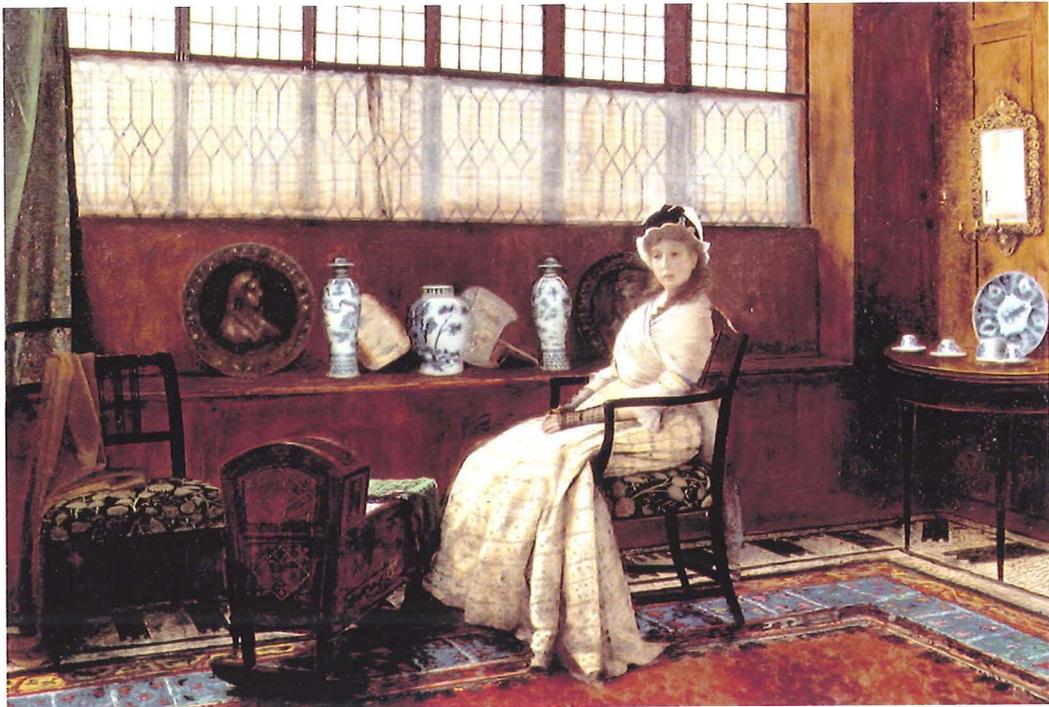


Plate 32. John Atkinson Grimshaw, *The Cradle Song*, 1878



Plate 33. Childe Hassam, *Tanagra (The Builders, New York)*, 1918



Plate 34. Owen Jones, 'Pompeian No. 1', 1856

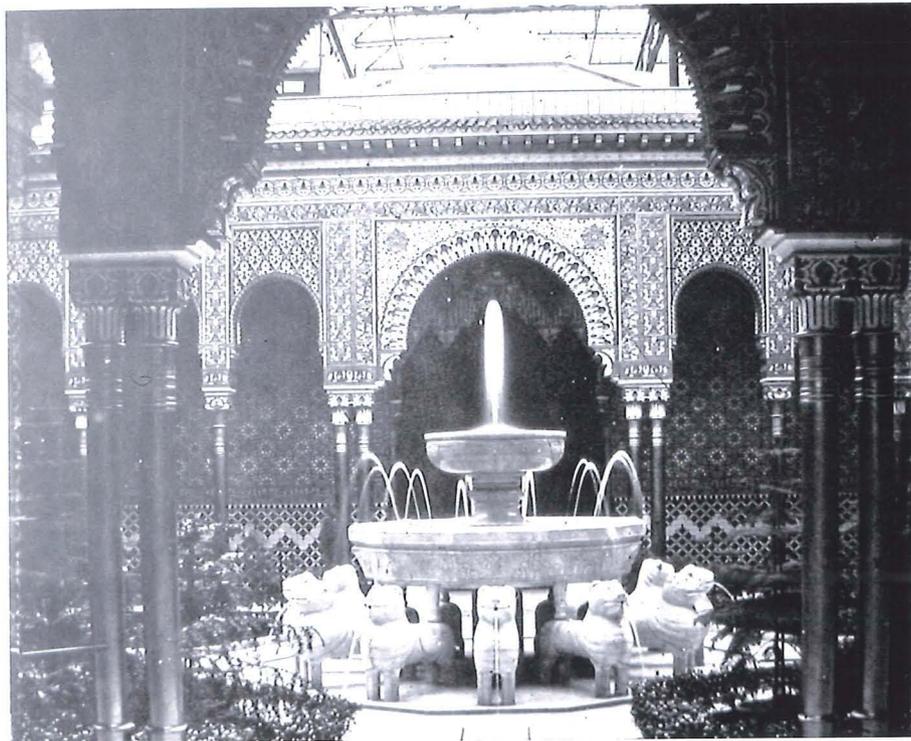


Plate 35. The Alhambra Court, Crystal Palace, Sydenham, 1853



Plate 36. Owen Jones, Ceiling at Alfred Morrison's House,
16 Carlton Terrace, London, 1870



Plate 37. The Priory, Regent's Park, London



Plate 38. C. Graham, *Drawing Room at the Priory*, c.1885



Plate 39. Emery Walker, *George Eliot's Sideboard*



Plate 40. Owen Jones, *Queen Jones*, c.1870,



Plate 41. 4 Cheyne Walk, London, photographed by author, 2000



Plate 42. Walter Howell Deverell, *A Pet*, 1853



Plate 43. Caspar David Friedrich, *Frau am Fenster*, 1822



Plate 44. Sir John Everett Millais, *Mariana*, 1851



Plate 45. George Frampton, *Lamia*, 1899-1900

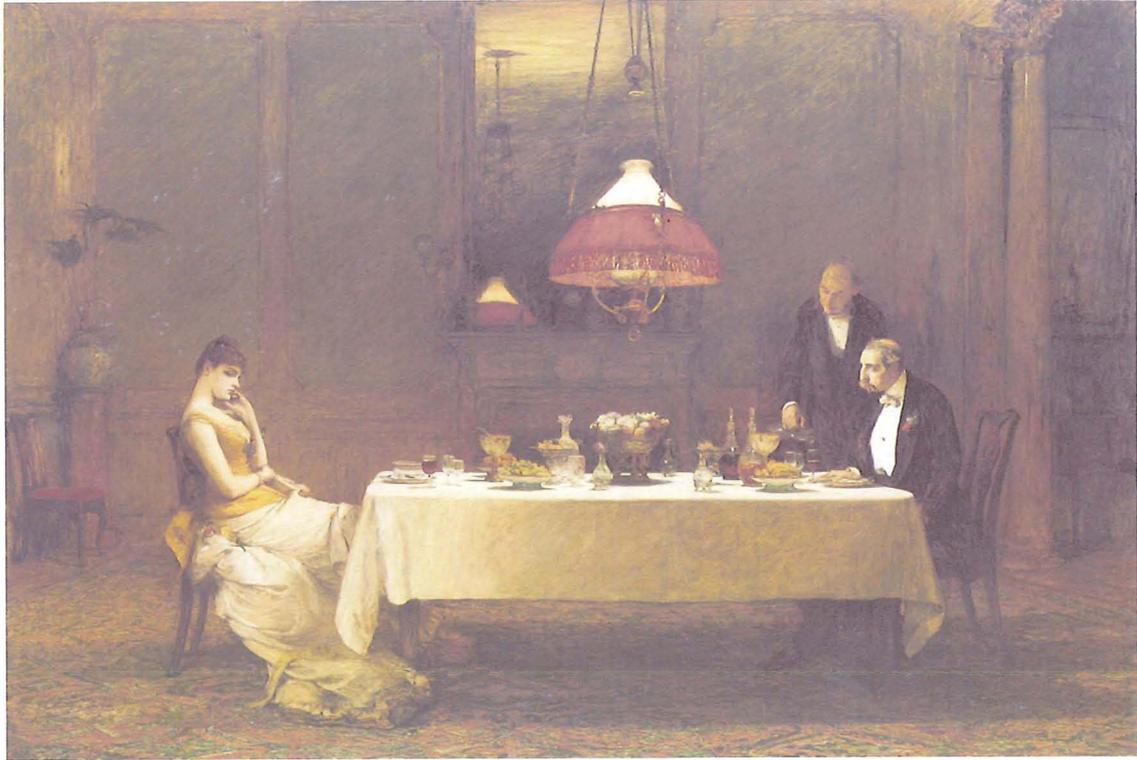


Plate 46. William Quiller Orchardson, *Mariage de Convenance*, 1883



Plate 47. Annie Krueger, *Room in Mrs H.W. Brown's House*, 1896



Plate 48. Lamb House, Rye, c.1999



Plate 49. Alvin Langdon Coburn, Telephone Room, Lamb House, during James's residence



Plate 50. Garden Room, Lamb House



Plate 51. Alvin Langdon Coburn, *Mr Longdon's*, c.1906



Plate 52. David Sellman, Parlour, Lamb House

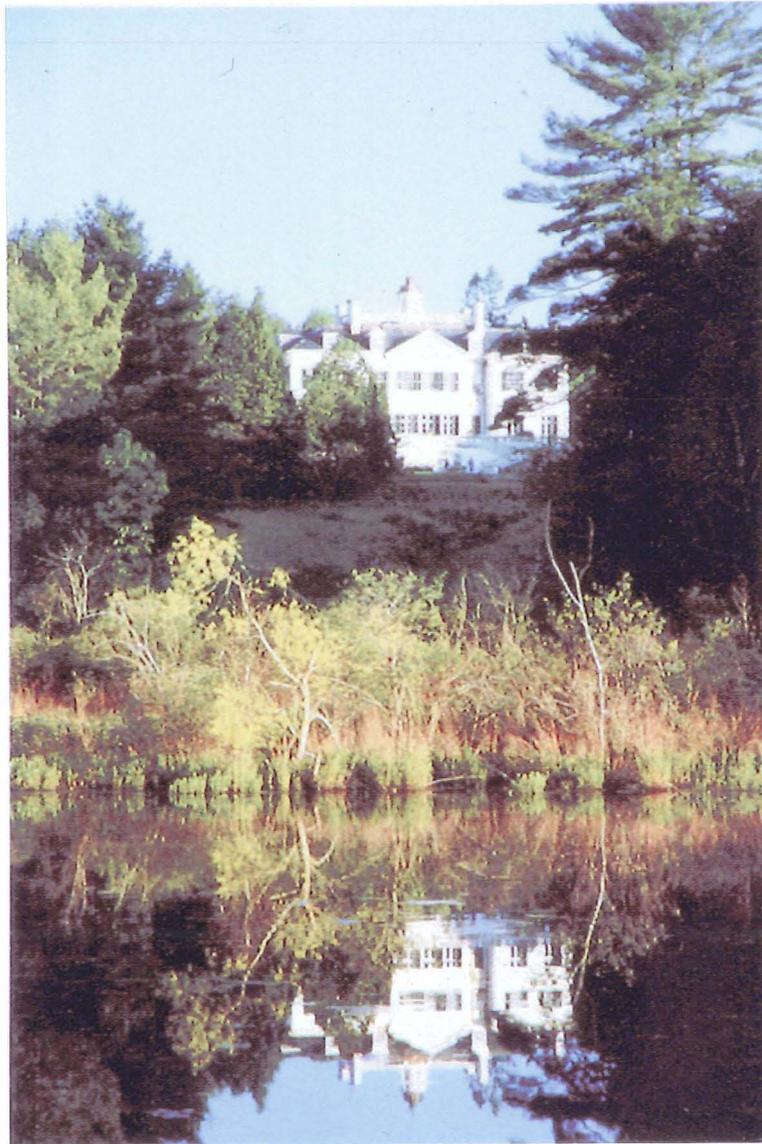


Plate 53. James Gambaro, The Mount Reflected in Laurel Pond, 1986

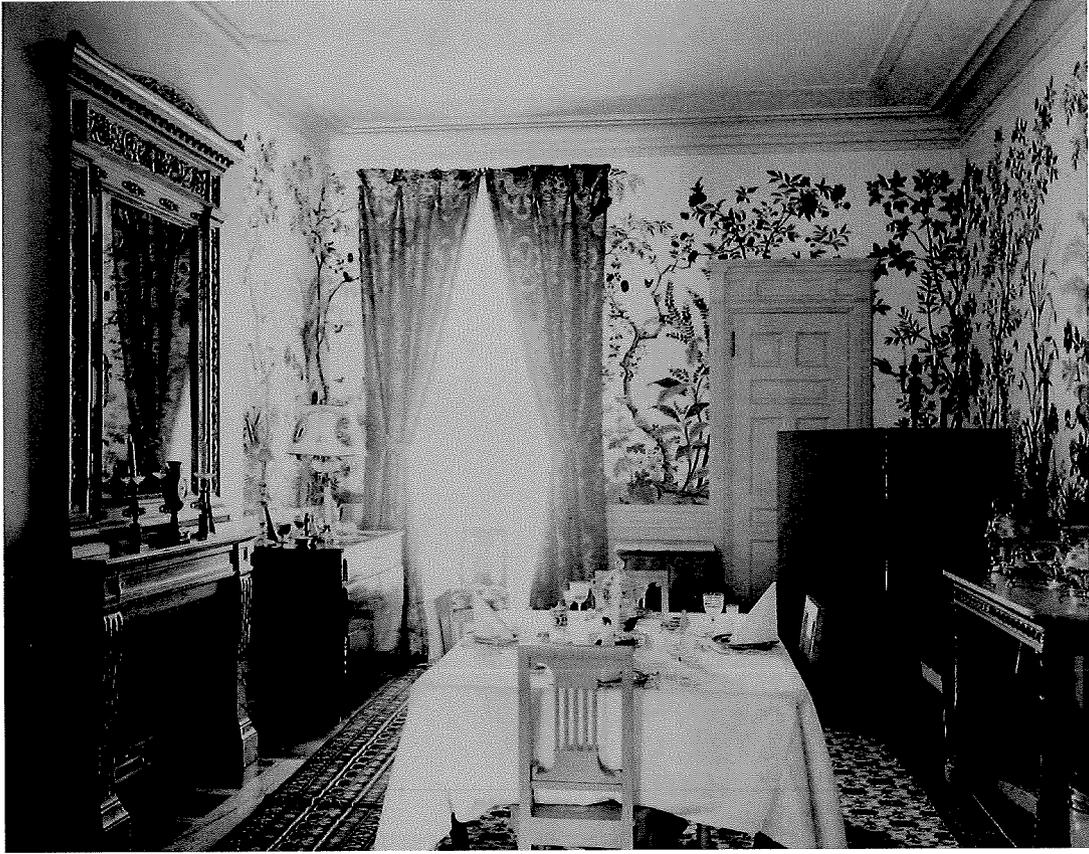


Plate 54. Dining Room, 884 Park Avenue, New York, c.1895

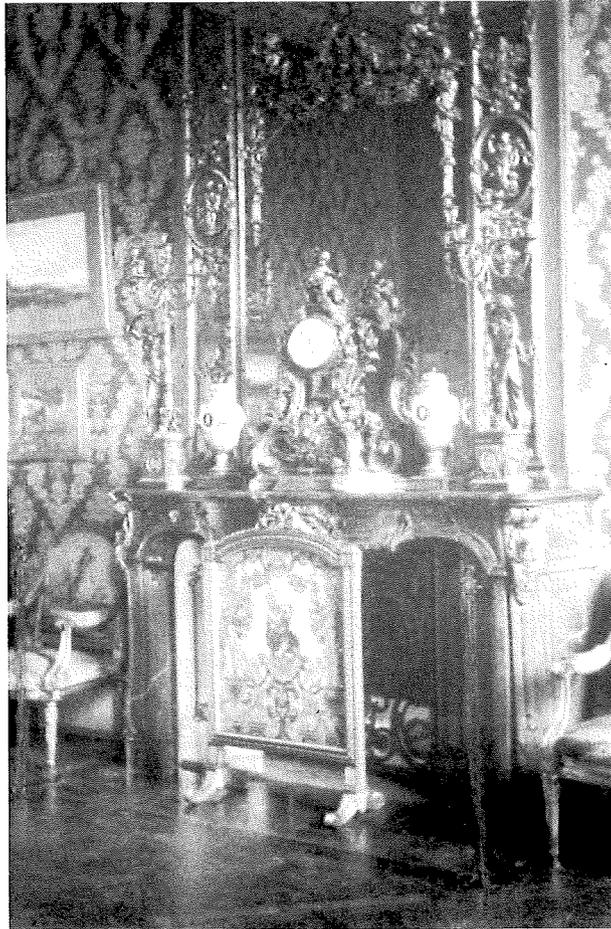


Plate 55. Alvin Langdon Coburn, *Some of the Spoils*, c.1906



Plate 56. Drawing Room, 28th West 25th Street, New York, 1880s



Plate 57. Entrance Hall and Stairs, Pencraig House, Newport, 1880s



Plate 58. Interior, Pencraig Cottage, c.1885

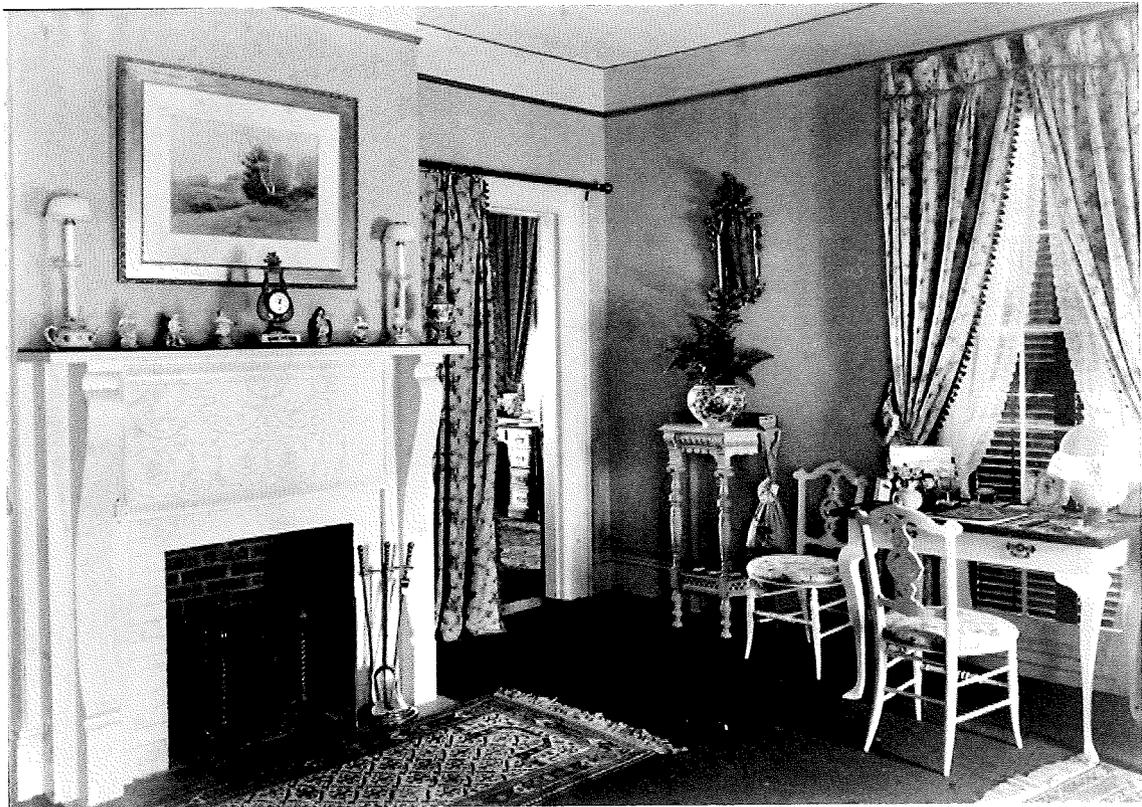


Plate 59. Drawing Room, Pencraig Cottage, c.1885



Plate 60. Walter Gay, *Drawing Room, Egerton Winthrop House*, c.1900

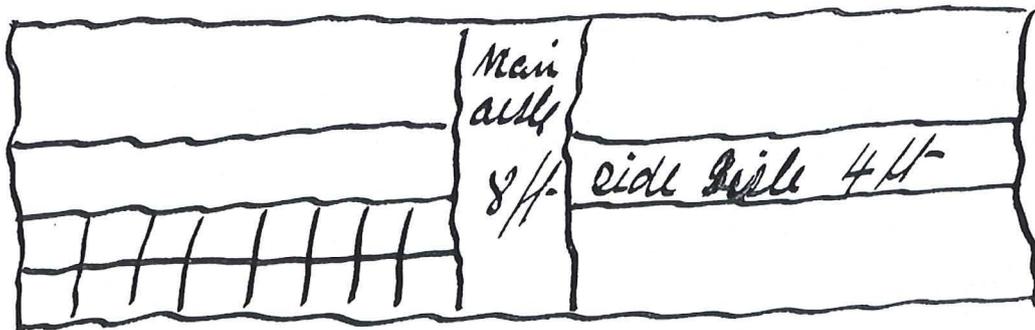


Plate 61. Teddy Wharton, *Sketch of Bathing Houses*, 29 May 1897



Plate 62. Land's End, Newport



Plate 63. Land's End, Newport, c.1890

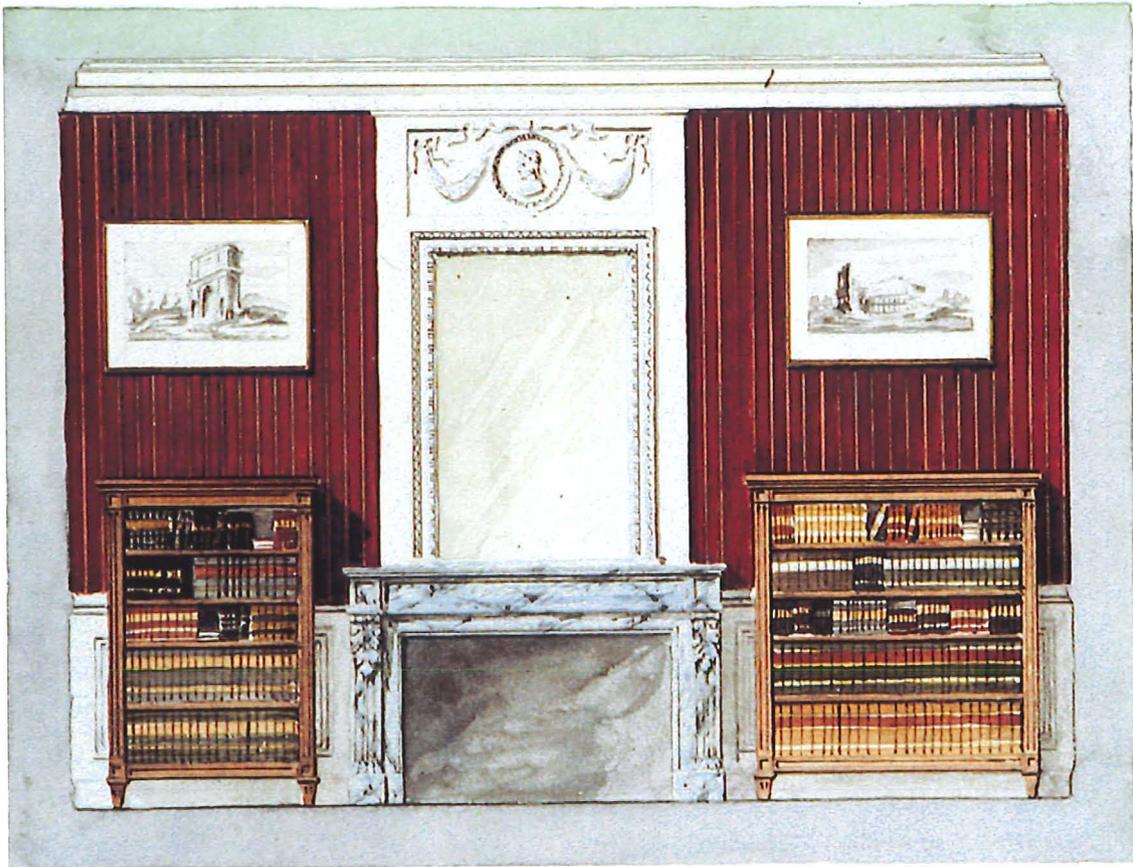


Plate 64. Ogden Codman Jr., *Design For Fireplace Wall, Library, Land's End, 1893*



Plate 65. Library, Land's End, 1890s



Plate 66. Glass Room, Land's End, c.1900



Plate 67. Stair Hall, Land's End, 1890s



Plate 68. Drawing Room, Land's End, c.1900

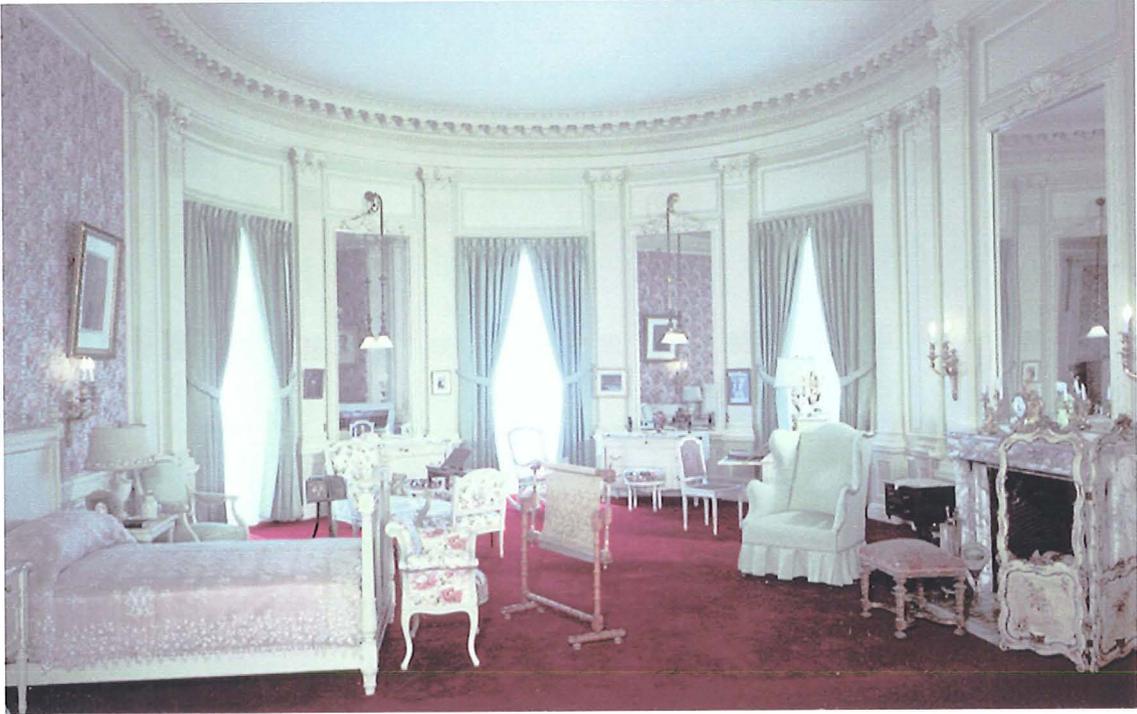


Plate 69. Mrs Vanderbilt's Bedroom, The Breakers, Newport, c.1895



Plate 70. State Dining Room, The Breakers, Newport, c.1895



Plate 71. Drawing Room, 884 Park Avenue, New York, c.1895

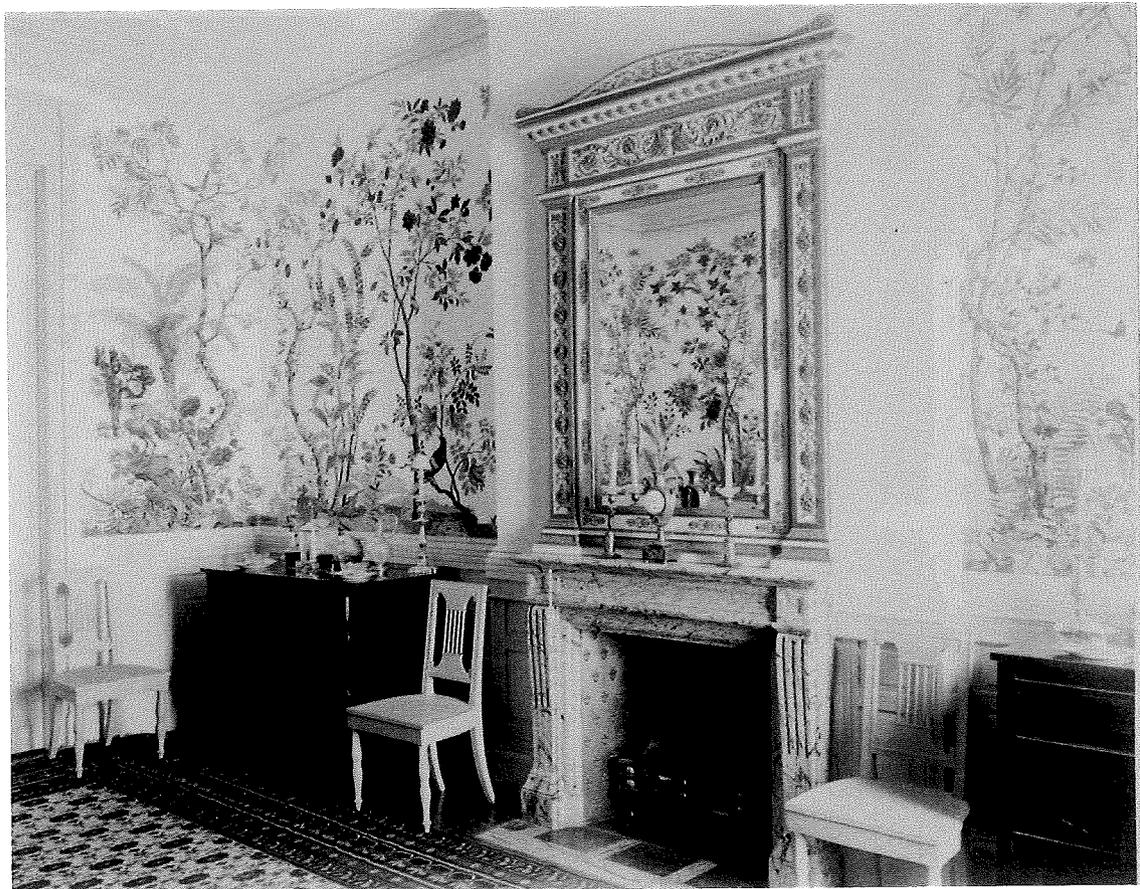


Plate 72. Drawing Room, 884 Park Avenue, New York, c.1895

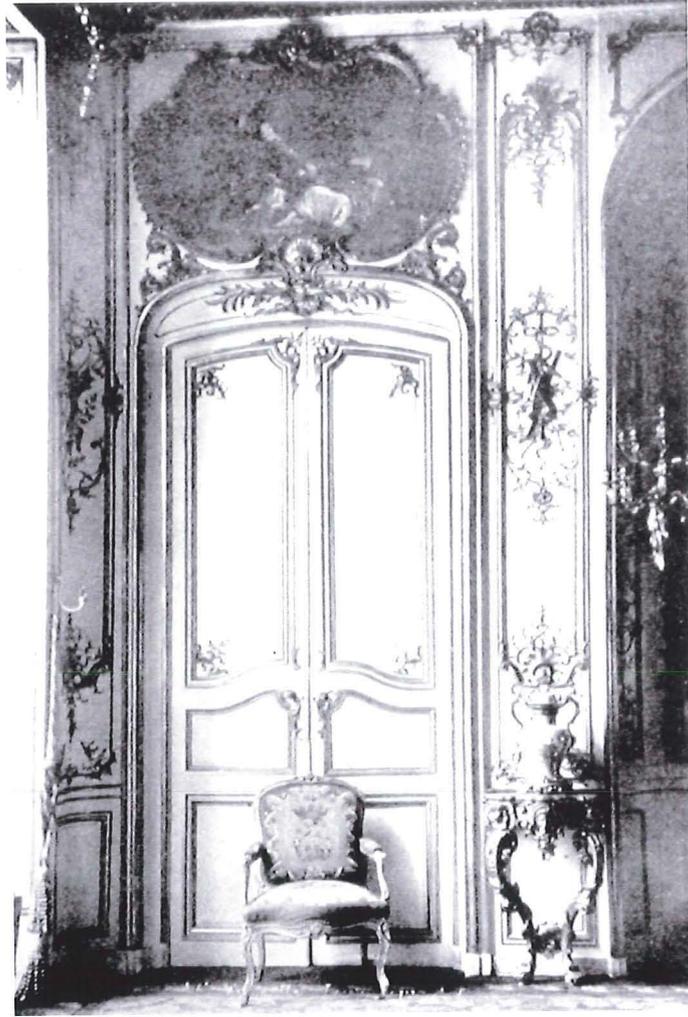


Plate 73. [Edith Wharton?], *Carved Door, Palace of Versailles, Louis XV period (showing painted over-door)*, c.1896



Plate 74. The Mount, Lenox

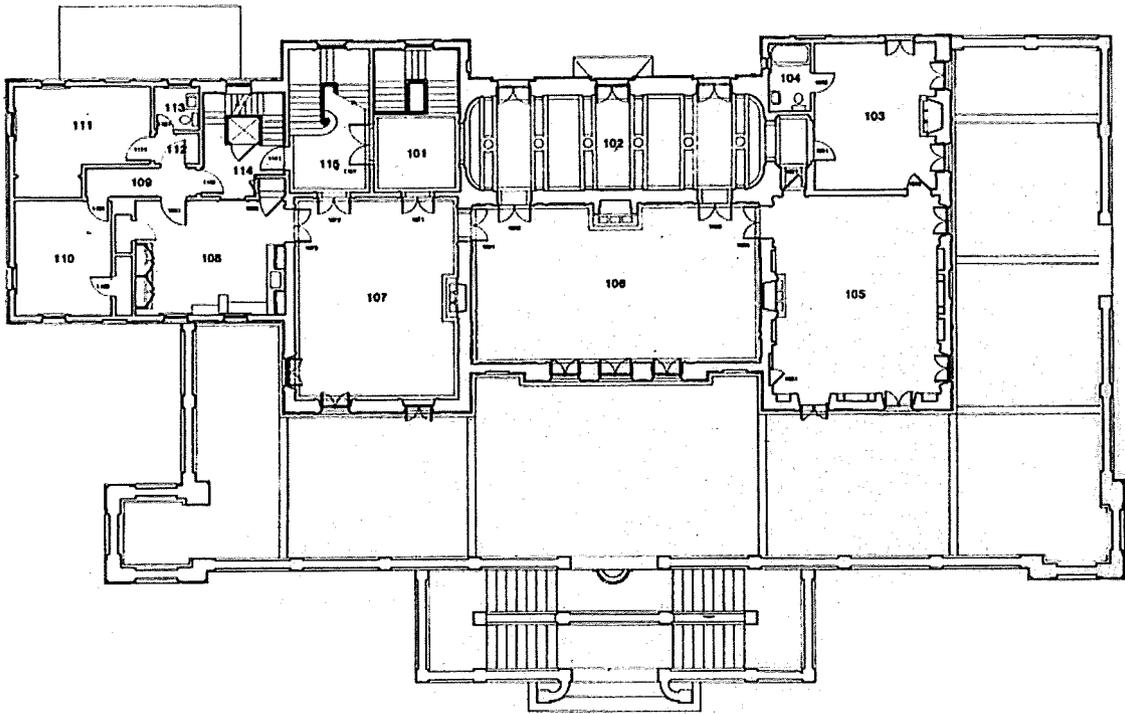


Plate 75. John G. Waite Associates, *The Mount, First Floor Plan*

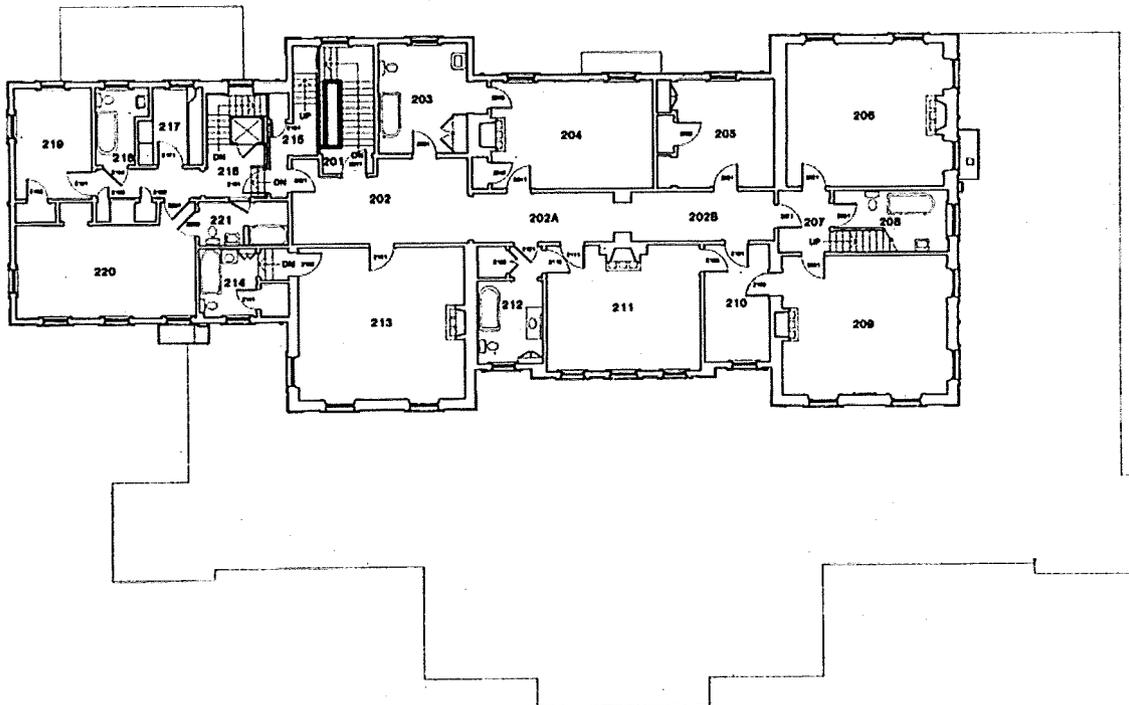


Plate 76. John G. Waite Associates, *The Mount, Second Floor Plan*



Plate 77. Terrazzo Floor, Gallery, The Mount



Plate 78. Brass Door Knob, The Mount



Plate 79. Brass Patio Door Knob, The Mount

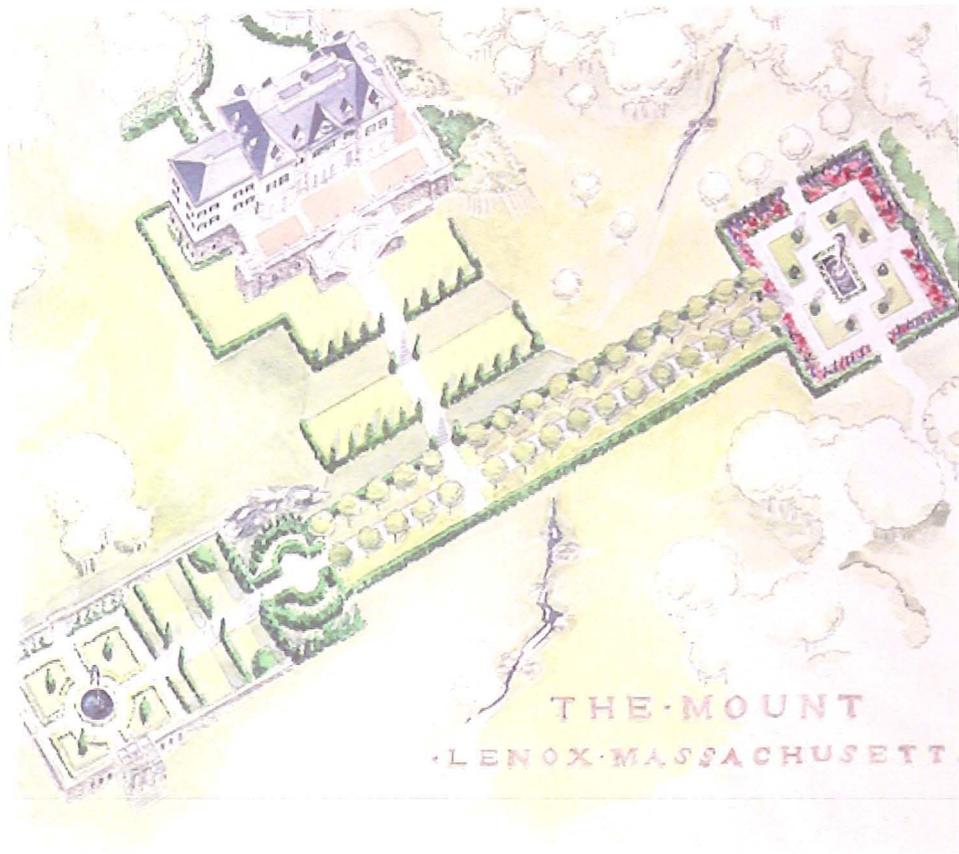


Plate 80. Carole Palermo-Schulze, Garden Plan of The Mount



Plate 81. Entrance Hall, The Mount, c.1942

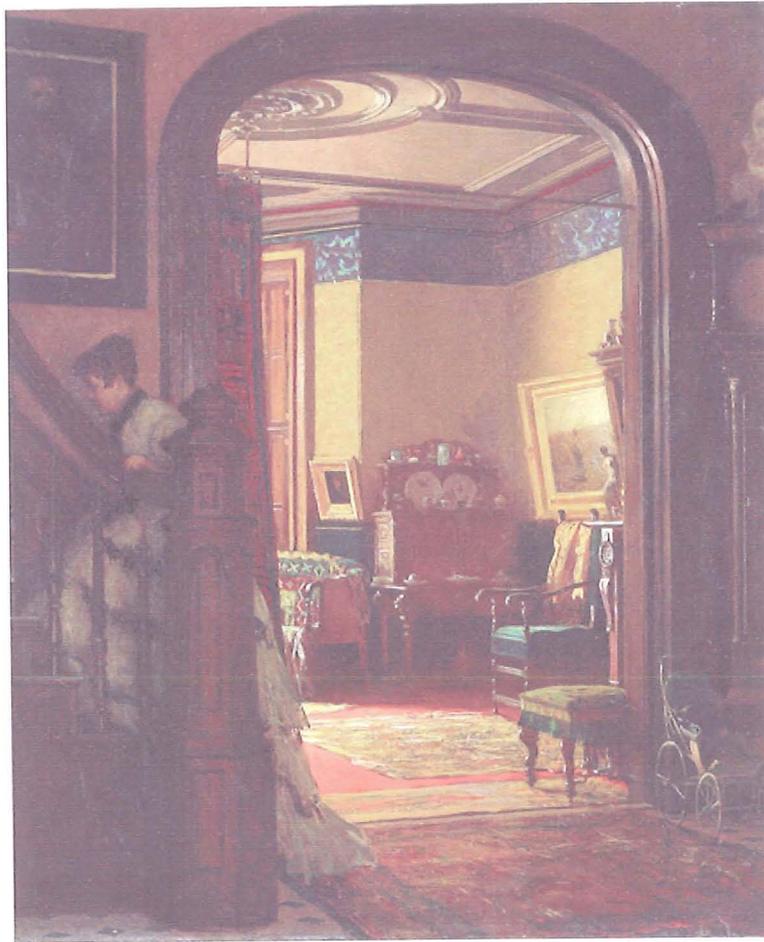


Plate 82. J. Eastman Johnson, *Not At Home*, c.1873



Plate 83. Gallery, The Mount, during the Whartons' residence

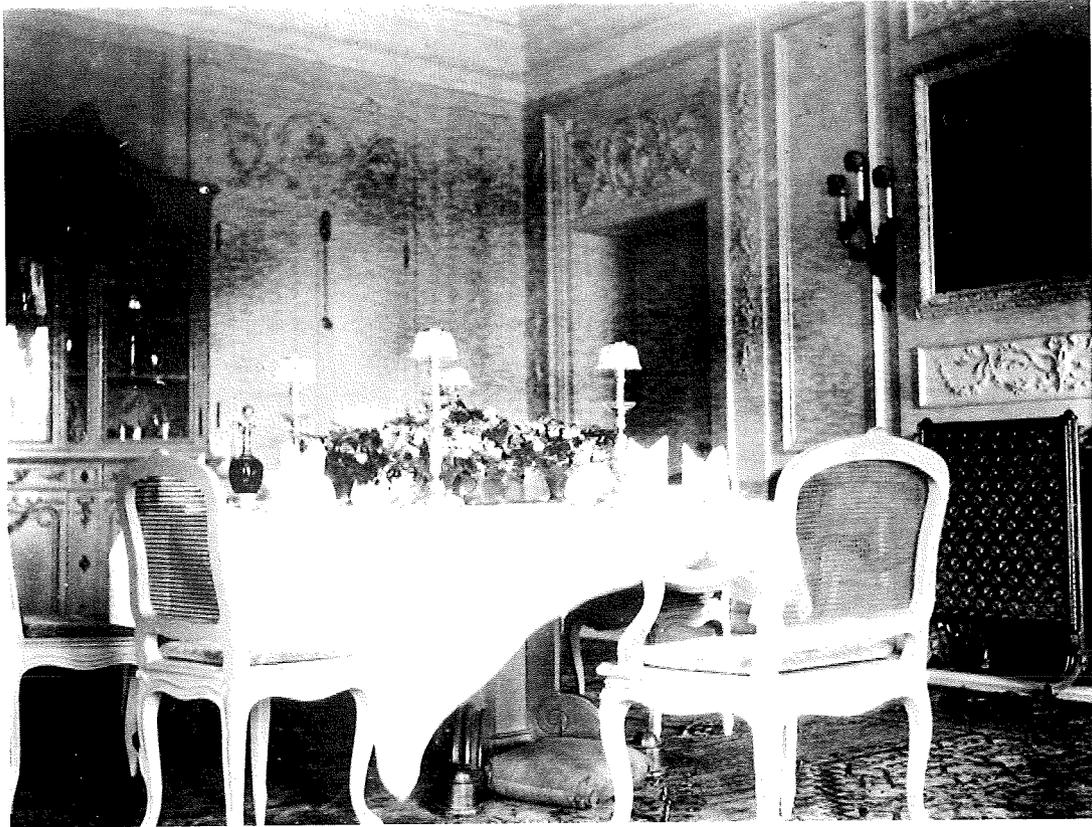


Plate 84. Dining Room, The Mount, during the Whartons' residence



Plate 85. Drawing Room, The Mount, during the Whartons' residence



Plate 86. Library, The Mount, during the Whartons' residence



Plate 87. Teddy Wharton's Den, The Mount



Plate 88. Edith Wharton's Boudoir, The Mount, during the Whartons' residence



Plate 89. Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Mrs Lloyd*, c.1775/6

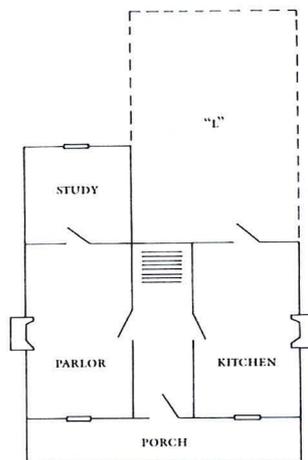
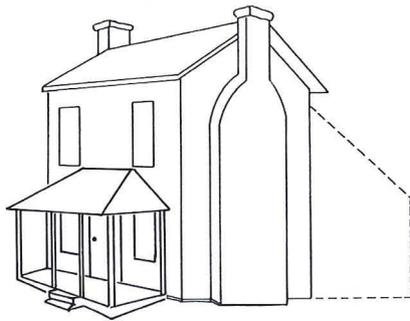


Plate 90. Judith Fryer, *Author's Conception Of Ethan Frome's House, Facade And Plan*



Plate 91. James McNeill Whistler, *Harmony in Green and Rose: The Music Room*, 1860-61



Plate 92. Walter Richard Sickert, *Ennui*, c.1914