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The New York Hieroglyphs

Urban Ekphrasies in the New York Novels of Edith Wharton



Johnny Finnigan, MA

Dissertation submitted for the degree of PhD



Department of English Literature, University of Glasgow

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ABSTRACT

Johnny Finnigan, M.A.

The New York Hieroglyphs *Urban Ekphrases in the New York Novels of Edith Wharton*

Supervised by Professor Susan Castillo
(*Department of English Literature, University of Glasgow*)

THIS THESIS CRITICALLY APPLIES the principles of classical rhetorical ekphrasis to Edith Wharton's three major New York texts — *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country* and *The Age of Innocence*.

The opening chapter of this thesis analyses several basic concepts: the classical genesis of ekphrasis (a vivid verbal description in its simplest sense); the role of the city in literature; Wharton's own knowledge of New York City; the cognitive mechanics of understanding images in literature; and of vital importance, Wharton's own formal aesthetic strategies which underpin the entire thesis, and which connect with the former strategies mentioned above. Each of these elements are invoked and developed to illustrate the idea that the New York backdrop of Wharton's major New York texts can be ekphrastically decoded in order to generate a micronarrative which in turn refracts¹ the master narrative.

In the following chapter, I analyse *The Age of Innocence* and its introduction of topographical sites which, singularly, have a refractive

¹ As a prism refracts light; changes simple white light into its component parts whilst changing the direction of the light, the ekphrastic analysis of a master narrative both changes its 'direction' and opens up a view of its component parts.

quality on the master narrative, and, collectively, serve to colour the entire text. The ekphrastic model is likened to Bakhtin's chronotopic model and the city is at first viewed in terms of individual topographical sites. I then view these sites collectively as a cipher which when decoded, comments on the changing nature of the New York social hierarchy at the time the novel is set, and establishes the initial element in what — in looking at the three novels studied — is a narrative of change. This metamorphosis, the genesis of which is illuminated in *The Age of Innocence*, would eventually result in the social, commercial and geographical peripheralisation of its traditional patriarchs, whilst being replaced by an insurgent *nouveaux riches*.

The House of Mirth is discussed in Chapter Three, where a different hieroglyph of the city is constructed by Wharton. This hieroglyph, once decoded, illuminates the peripheralisation of Lily Bart through her lack of a 'place of her own'. This chapter analyses the naturalist impulse which characterises Wharton's writing, and serves to substantiate the narrative of change which is apparent in *The Age of Innocence*, by showing a city in a state of flux, with Lily Bart's journey being a journey of discovery for the reader, as they observe the difficulties, and possibilities, of social movement in *fin de siècle* New York.

Chapter Four completes the individual analyses of Wharton's New York novels by looking at *The Custom of the Country*. It also provides the final component of the narrative of change. The catoptric structure of the text is investigated, once again highlighting the emergence of a different hieroglyph which serves to enhance the central thematic concerns which revolve around the palimpsestic sublimation of the patriarchs by the *nouveaux riches*. Individual

topographic sites are analysed ekphrastically and subsequently thematic exponents of the text are explored.

Finally, the New York hieroglyphs, as defined in each of the novels, are seen as offering a view of a notional narrative of change which charts the evolution of the social fabric of New York City over a 30 year period. Wharton's naturalist credentials are then established with an overview of the entire thesis.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ENDEAVOURS ON THIS SCALE ARE SELDOM completed within a vacuum. I have been very fortunate to have support through every aspect of my life over the years that it has taken to travel on this particular road. Family, friends, colleagues and a whole selection of academic minds have all contributed to this research, and I would like to offer my thanks to all those not mentioned by name in this acknowledgement.

In the first instance I would like to thank Susan Castillo for taking me on pretty much sight unseen. Moreover, I would like to thank her for allowing me the room to explore my ideas, offering direction when required, and letting my research develop as organically as possible while still respecting the need to channel it toward completion. As supervisors go, I feel that had my perfect match.

I will always be eternally grateful to the Department of English of the University of Glasgow as a whole. This is the environment in which I have been immersed for over a decade, and each member of the department through their teaching, their words of support and through their intellectual insights have inspired me in all my work. In particular, Professor Andrew Hook offered words of encouragement to me when needed, and it was those words in particular which opened the door to where I am now: for those words, I am thankful. Also, thanks must go to the librarians of the University of Glasgow, the New York Public Library, New-York Historical Society and the Beinecke Library at Yale University.

To my good friends I also owe the very warmest of thanks: Todd & Angela Garner, Adrian McMurchie, Denis Donoghue, Colin Sutherland, Graham Yarr, David Young, Kieran Kearney and Eddie & Linda White: my closest friends, were a constant source of support in many ways throughout my whole academic life — cheers. Special thanks also go to my mother, mother-in-law and father-in-law for their support in many ways: needless to say, sustaining vigorous research without the help of family would make a challenging task more difficult.

Finally, my devoted thanks go to the two people who have sustained me with their constant love and support — my wife Christine and my son Sammy. Without them I may have finished this project sooner, but with them my happiness and love knows no bounds as they have both made my life richer and complete in all the important ways.



ABBREVIATIONS

DH — *The Decoration of Houses*

Edith Wharton & Ogden Codman, Jr. *The Decoration of Houses* [1897], New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997.

HM — *The House of Mirth*

Edith Wharton. *The House of Mirth* [1905], edited by Elizabeth Ammons, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1990.

CC — *The Custom of the Country*

Edith Wharton. *Novels*, New York: Library of America, 1985.

HRB — *Hudson River Bracketed*

Edith Wharton. *Hudson River Bracketed*, London: Virago, 1986.

TS — *Twilight Sleep*

Edith Wharton. *Twilight Sleep*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997.

AI — *The Age of Innocence*

Edith Wharton. *Novels*, New York: Library of America, 1985.

BG — *A Backward Glance*

Edith Wharton. *Novellas and Other Writings*, New York: Library of America, 1990.

WF — *The Writing of Fiction*

Edith Wharton. *The Writing of Fiction* [1925], New York: Touchstone, 1997.

IVG — *Italian Villas and their Gardens*

Edith Wharton. *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* [1904], with pictures by Maxfield Parrish, New York: De Capo Press, 1988.

EWB — *Edith Wharton: A Biography*

R.W.B. Lewis. *Edith Wharton: A Biography*, London: Constable, 1975.

Table of Contents

	Abstract	i
	Acknowledgements	iv
	Abbreviations	vi
	<i>Introduction</i>	1
CHAPTER 1	<i>'Imaging' New York</i>	15
CHAPTER 2	<i>Still Moments in a Turning World</i>	41
CHAPTER 3	<i>'Beyond!': The Bart Milieu</i>	99
CHAPTER 4	<i>"I'll never try anything again till I try New York"</i>	157
CHAPTER 5	<i>Conclusion: The Three City Trilogy</i>	199
	<i>Bibliography</i>	219

Pro Urbis Amore



Introduction



'Spatial images are the dreams of society. Wherever the hieroglyphics of any spatial image are deciphered, there the basis of social reality presents itself.'

Siegfried Kracauer¹

'Every man's house is in some sort an effigy of himself. It is not the snails and shell-fish alone that excrete their tenements, but man as well.'

John Burroughs²



AN EDITH WHARTON'S *THE WRITING OF FICTION*, her much underrated foray into the mechanics of modern fiction, she made clear not only her admiration for Honoré de Balzac's work, but also her awareness of his importance in the development of the modern novel. Balzac was, Wharton writes, one of the first to view 'each character first of all as a product of particular material and social conditions'.³ Wharton builds upon this statement further when she writes that Balzac was also the first

to see his people, physically and morally, in their habit as they lived, [...] to draw his characters to their houses, streets, towns, professions, inherited habits and opinions, as from their fortuitous contacts with each other. (WF, 8)

¹ Cited in David Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 1985), 109

² John Burroughs, *Signs and Seasons*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin & Co., 1886, as cited in Lewis Mumford, ed. *Roots of Contemporary American Architecture* (New York: Reinhold Publishing Co., 1952), 292

³ Edith Wharton, *The Writing of Fiction* [1925] (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 9 (hereafter cited in text as WF)

Thus Wharton acknowledges the importance of one of the cornerstones of literary naturalism: the impact of social environment on the characterisations within a text. We also begin to see Wharton herself as defining her own literary attitudes through her own writings; not only those writings focussed upon literature alone, but all her non-fiction writings concerning decoration, architecture and travel.

From the early years in her professional writing career, Edith Wharton would consistently use environment and architecture as literal and figurative touchstones providing vital colour for her fiction. As early as 1893, Wharton used the elaborate analogy of a house to define the emotional anatomy of a woman's view of her marriage in the short story 'The Fulness of Life':

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 whose doors perhaps 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.⁴

Moreover, Wharton saw the construction of the novel itself as being akin to the construction of a building: 'that slowly built-up monument in which every stone has its particular weight and thrust to carry and of which the foundations must be laid with a view to the proportions of the highest tower.' (WF, 30) Three of Wharton's earliest published books — *The Decoration of House* (1897), *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* (1904) and *Italian Backgrounds* (1905) — establish Wharton's credentials in understanding and appreciating architecture and the contiguous

⁴ Edith Wharton, 'The Fulness of Life' In: *Collected Stories 1891-1910*, New York: Library of America, 2001. This story was first published in *Scribner's Magazine* in December 1893.

landscapes which surround edifices. Wharton's interest in landscape and architecture is not only a vital element of her fiction, but also a central element of her travel writing: *The Cruise of the Vanadis* [Wharton's diary of her cruise on the *Vanadis* during 1888] (1992), *A Motor-flight through France* (1908), *Fighting France, From Dunkerque to Belfort* (1915), and *In Morocco* (1920). All of these texts attest to Wharton's lifelong fascination with matters architectural — an interest which was not limited to her writings alone but also to practice as can be seen by her work on her various homes through her life: Pencraig, Park Avenue, rue de Varenne in Paris, Land's End, The Mount, the Pavillon Colombe outside Paris and Ste. Claire Château near Hyères in the south of France — but they also serve to focus the attention of her readership on the paramount importance of the architecture which inevitably permeates her fiction.

Much of Wharton's non-fiction writing — *The Writing of Fiction*, *The Decoration of Houses*, *A Backward Glance* and *Italian Villas and their Gardens* — provides valuable insights into a vital component in all her literature, namely the social fabric (rooms, buildings, streets, and monuments) which simultaneously *informs* and is *informed* by the characters which inhabit her fiction. Although I will investigate a series of theoretical elements throughout this thesis such as classical rhetoric, Bakhtin's chronotopes and spatial theory, there is no doubt that the thesis is always being driven by Wharton's own theories contained within her non-fiction works, and are referred to throughout.

As Wharton's own personal and familial antecedents were tightly woven into the upper echelons of New York society, it is unsurprising that Wharton's insight into the relationship between

environment and the individual was at its most acute when dealing with this particular society, the society of *old* New York. As a result of Wharton's own circumstances, New York City would have the strongest imprint in her fiction of her understanding of the symbiotic nature of the character/environment dichotomy.



ON RETURNING FROM EUROPE in July 1877, Edith Wharton would recall in her autobiographical work *A Backward Glance*, her 'depressing impressions ... of the intolerable ugliness of New York,' a city of 'mean monotonous streets, without architecture, great churches or palaces, or any visible memorials of an historic past.'⁵ Her attitude towards her 'home' was one of disgust with the architecture and the aesthetic qualities of the city as a whole, yet throughout her life she could not stay away from her roots for long.

Edith Wharton sold her New York home in 1910, and this act was one which would cement her physical separation from the United States. Wharton would visit the United States on two more occasions in her lifetime after 1910; once in 1913 for her niece Beatrix Jones' wedding, and her final visit would then be a decade later as she received an honorary degree from Yale University. *The Age of Innocence* was published in 1920 and would be an escape back to her teenage New York of the 1870s. Indeed, it was to be her place of solace at a terrible time in Europe's history after the First World War when she would return — in spirit if not in person — to the city of her childhood through *The Age of Innocence*.

⁵ Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* [1934]. In: *Novellas and Other Writings*. (New York: Library of America, 1990), 324 (hereafter cited as BG)

Wharton's urbane insights into the city of her own past and her family's past lie at the heart of her success at portraying the city through her literature. Her renderings of New York are full of life, complexity and relevance, not only to Wharton alone but also to the readers of her fiction. The fabric which she created for the backdrops of her New York fiction were of such intensity that it transcended mere quotidian backfill. It had few of the qualities of static descriptive elements prevalent in much late nineteenth century fiction.

Wharton rendered the social fabric of New York to such a specific and detailed degree that it could itself be read as a narrative in its own right. When coupled to the characterisations and master narratives of the works themselves, the vivified social fabric of New York City would ultimately augment the master narrative in a way that was closely associated to *ekphrasis*: an exercise classical rhetoricians would use to enhance their verbal communication by creating verbal descriptions of such visual vividness that they would be narratives in their own right.

Viewing Wharton's construction of the New York social fabric as ekphrastic has many advantages. Firstly, it enhances our awareness of Wharton's own keen 'visual sensibility' (BG, 805) as an active element in her fiction. Also, it offers an efficiency of expression and narrative which can rarely be found outside of the pure pictorial idiom of the plastic arts. As I have touched upon previously, ekphrasis and the associated vividness which lies at the heart of any ekphrastic discourse, serves to act as a narrative prism through which master narratives are refracted. It is this particular refraction which not only reinforces the major themes and patterns in Wharton's major New York texts, but also to some degree

establishes Wharton's fiction strongly within the Naturalist literary tradition, a tradition which often places Wharton on the periphery of the Naturalist canon due the pre-eminence of the upper classes in her fiction, as opposed to the working classes in the works of the standard bearers of literary Naturalism such as Frank Norris and Émile Zola. It could also be argued that Wharton's 'construction' of New York through her New York texts is, paradoxically, a proto-modernist *decreation* of the city and society she had known.

Edith Wharton's geographical range within her fiction is substantial. From the eastern seaboard of the United States to mainland Europe, Wharton would write of the worlds she came into contact with and inhabited. Yet it is no coincidence that it has been her three major New York novels which have, rightly in my opinion, been given such critical and commercial prominence over the last few decades. Both *The House of Mirth* (1905) and *The Custom of the Country* (1913) were set in times contemporaneous to their publication whilst Wharton was still, to all intents and purposes, a 'New Yorker.' *The Age of Innocence* (1920), whilst written the best part of a decade after Wharton had left the United States to live in Paris, is set within the 1870s in a New York which Wharton would have known and comprehended as a young woman. *Twilight Sleep* (1927), *Hudson River Bracketed* (1929) and *The Gods Arrive* (1932) are set, in part or in whole, actively in the New York of the 1920s and 30s. This was a New York City which boasted a new Museum of Modern Art, a new Museum of the City of New York, nine new bridges connecting the city to Brooklyn, the Bronx and New Jersey, and a city which welcomed the groundbreaking modernity of the Chrysler Building, Empire State Building and the Rockefeller Centre – these iconic structures were

structures not within the purview of Wharton's experience of the city.

In carrying out an ekphrastic analysis of New York City in Edith Wharton's fiction, I had to determine which of her many writings set in New York I would consider as most appropriate for the purposes of a *relevant* and *sustained* ekphrastic analysis. For a *sustained* analysis I felt that *The Age of Innocence*, *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country*, *Twilight Sleep* and *Hudson River Bracketed* fulfilled this particular requirement. These five novels could at least offer the promise of a sustained analysis of New York, as New York was the primary backdrop to them all. I had then to look at the *relevance* of these texts. By relevance, I had to discern which novels had a true insight and understanding of the temporal, spatial and societal mechanics of New York City and its societies, a relevance which would instigate a full ekphrastic analysis. As I explained earlier in this chapter, *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country* were set contemporaneously with their publication dates and also with Wharton living in New York during these times; *The Age of Innocence* was set in a time when Wharton lived in New York, and these facts alone would give Wharton a great understanding of the city as she wrote *of* the City.

Although *Hudson River Bracketed* is set in New York City, it is importantly set in the New York of the 1920s, and as previously stated, this was a New York which, comparatively speaking, Wharton had little knowledge of in terms of the spatial and societal mechanics which were then at play. As we shall see throughout this thesis, Wharton's understanding of New York City between the 1870s and the 1910s — in the three novels I will discuss — is succinct and insightful to such a degree that she

discerns nuances which contribute to the aesthetic and thematic textures of the works of and about these times.

In *Hudson River Bracketed* Wharton does not — indeed *cannot* — go beyond the general descriptions of Vance Weston's New York as being loud, busy and materialist:

The noise and rush of traffic, the clamour of the signboards, the glitter of the innumerable shops distracted him from his purpose, and hours passed as he strayed on curiously from street to street. Some faculty separate from mind or heart, something detached and keen, was roused in him by this tumult of life and wealth and energy, this ceaseless outpour of more people, more noises, more motors, more shopfuls of tempting and expensive things.

[...]

the mere air of New York seemed to wake people up, make them sparkle like the light on this balmy day.⁶

Vance Weston's alienation and lack of recognition of this particular version of New York mirrors Wharton's own distance from this place when she writes of Weston's visit to Trinity Church where he 'had roamed about the graveyard, brooding over names and dates' and had come across the 'idea that there had been people so near his own day who had lived and died under the same roof, and worshipped every Sunday in the same church as their forebears' that it 'appealed in an undefinable way to his craving for continuity.' (*HRB*, 191) This particular reference is the most precise geographical reference in the text; precise as it still had resonances from Wharton's own life, yet a reference which offers no sustained and relevant possibilities of deciphering this new version of New York in the 1920s, indeed it is a reference which points to Weston's own feelings of alienation in this city.

Likewise with *Twilight Sleep*, Wharton makes next to no direct reference to the particular locations within New York City

⁶ Edith Wharton, *Hudson River Bracketed* [1929] (London: Virago, 1986), 153, 192 (hereafter cited in text as *HRB*)

which would enable an ekphrastic reading of the city. As Wharton had no direct comprehension of the changing face of the city, she had little to refer to in this novel other than to the actual 'changing face' of New York City, specifically through Mrs. Landish's 'last fad' which had been to

establish herself on the banks of the East River, which she and a group of friends had adorned with a cluster of reinforced-cement bungalows, first christened El Patio, but altered to Viking Court after Mrs. Landish had read in an illustrated weekly that the Vikings, who had discovered America ages before Columbus, had not, as previously supposed, effected their first landing at Vincyard Haven, but at a spot not far from the site of her dwelling. Cement, at an early stage, is malleable, and the Alhambra *motifs* had hastily given way to others from the prows of Nordic ships, from silver torques and Runic inscriptions, the latter easily contrived out of Arabic *sourats* from the Koran. Before these new ornaments were dry, Mrs. Landish and her friends were camping on the historic spot; and after four years of occupancy they were camping still.⁷

Wharton here points to the eclecticism of fads driven by new wealth, and the fluid and insubstantial architecture mirrors the fluid and insubstantial relationships throughout this particular novel. Like *Hudson River Bracketed*, *Twilight Sleep* is a novel which is centred within a decade in New York's history of which Wharton had no real knowledge, a fact that is subsequently mirrored in the texts themselves with the sparse reference to the New York City of the 1920s in terms of spatial hierarchies, or in terms of interior and exterior architectures.

There is no doubt that Edith Wharton's shorter fiction set in New York provides some wonderfully picturesque views of the city which are moving toward the ekphrastic. 'Mrs. Manstey's View' (1891), 'A Cup of Cold Water' (1899), and 'Bunner Sisters' (1916, yet written in 1892) in particular use New York as the backdrop. Essentially, the city is *not* fully integrated into the fictional fabric of these texts. This may well have as much to do with the fact that

⁷ Edith Wharton, *Twilight Sleep* [1927] (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 131 (hereafter cited in text as TS)

these are early stories in Wharton's career where her craft was still developing, as well as being too short to sustain a full-blown ekphrastic analysis on this level.

The final group of texts considered for inclusion in this analysis were Wharton's quartet of novellas collectively titled *Old New York* (1924) and *The Buccaneers* (1938). In many ways, these texts were problematic in that they present insights which offer readings of the city to support the ideas developed in *The Age of Innocence* in particular. Although they provide insightful support and subtle development of the ideas which are established in *The Age of Innocence*, they do not in themselves offer a consistent view of the city to justify anything other than a supporting role, albeit an important one, in the overall ekphrastic analysis of the city.

In *Old New York* we have four tales linked primarily through a chronology which has each story set in a decade between the 1840s and the 1870s.⁸ 'The Spark' and 'False Dawn' have no discernable backdrop with which to develop an ekphrastic view of New York, and whilst 'The Old Maid' is permeated with a stronger sense of place, Wharton did not incorporate New York City into this text to a degree comparable to that of *The Age of Innocence*, *The House of Mirth*, and *The Custom of the Country*. Yet, in the final novella of this quartet, 'New Year's Day', Wharton once again reaches back to her own personal past as she did in *The Age of Innocence*, and offers some insight into the New York of the 1870s once again. Not only are there links temporally and spatially with *The Age of Innocence*, but the characterisations of Henry van der Luyden and Sillerton Jackson connect the texts, a fact which allows 'New Year's Day' to be viewed as an important addendum to *The*

⁸ *Old New York* comprises 'False Dawn' (*The 'Forties*); 'The Old Maid' (*The 'Fifties*); 'The Spark' (*The 'Sixties*) and 'New Year's Day' (*The 'Seventies*).

Age of Innocence in that it supports certain attitudes in *The Age of Innocence*. 'New Year's Day', which does not have a great amount to discuss in terms of specific sites of ekphrastic interest, also offers comment on what is not included in *The Age of Innocence*: the attitude towards the 'hotel' in society which would be further developed and commented upon in *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country*.

Also on the periphery of this analysis would be *The Buccaneers*. Set contemporaneously with *The Age of Innocence*, it is, by and large, set *outside* New York City, and has little in the way of extended description of New York in terms of spatial hierarchies, exterior architecture or interior design. What it does comment on is the importance of the correct *address* in New York, the importance of the correct *decoration* in New York, and how difficult — even with money and beauty — it was to break through the solid bastions of New York society in the 1870s without breeding, and I will touch upon the insights offered by this novel later in the thesis.

Wharton, in *A Backward Glance* (1934), admitted that the 'low-studded rectangular New York' of her adolescence would be in the 1920s 'as much the vanished city as ... the lowest layer of Schliemann's 'Troy' (BG, 824). The ancient city of Troy was seen to have had nine different cities, built upon each other between 3000BC and 1200BC. There is no doubt that Wharton perceived New York City in this manner, albeit in a more compressed timescale. In many respects, the New York of her youth is certainly one New York that by the 1920s has been mostly eradicated with a *new* New York rebuilt on top of it. Like Troy, with its multiple existences through time, *Twilight Sleep* and *Hudson River Bracketed* were set in a New York which was not *her* own, and also a New

York which she had not visited let alone lived in for two decades. Try as she would, the city in these two novels was not rendered with the detail, subtlety and relevance which she had applied to her three *major* New York novels. If the city and its geographies and architectures are a language in their own right, Wharton in the 1920s would have more difficulty in articulating the language of a city which she barely knew.



THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK which underpins this thesis is one which, like Wharton's own knowledge, is based on eclecticism. Building my ideas upon Wharton's own non-fiction writings has been an invaluable starting point and a constant touchstone which drives this analysis forward throughout the thesis, yet I will also investigate in some depth ekphrastic theory based upon original classical rhetorical principles, the link to Bakhtin's chronotope and spatial theory within the city.

In a study of this nature, a great amount of thought has to be given to a range of spatial theories to discern the most relevant in terms of a study like this which is constructed upon a strong emphasis on the aesthetic and topographic. Any research in this area has as a starting point in both Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* and Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*.⁹ I would say that much of my analysis on the dwellings throughout this thesis can certainly be said to be viewed tacitly in the Bachelardian sense of the values of inhabited space. Yet linked to an ekphrastic analysis I focus on the

⁹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, [1958] translated from the French by Maria Jolas with a new foreword by John R. Stilgoe, Boston: Beacon Press, 1964, & Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991.

concrete (even the notional concrete of fiction) in order to drive the analysis forward. The nature of an ekphrastic analysis is making the verbal visual, and the visual verbal (the very process of the author/reader compact.) As such, the link to visualisation is paramount in the thesis and therefore the primary focus falls upon design, topography and history. Also, with *The Production of Space* Lefebvre provides interesting theories on the reading of space, and interesting possibilities in terms of a unified theory on space, yet as with Bachelard's work, I do tacitly acknowledge certain elements of his theories but concentrate on what I feel to be the more relevant aesthetic, historic and geographical decodings which to my mind render stronger ekphrastic readings of Wharton's major New York fiction.

Ultimately, New York City is not 'a chaos of meaningless lines but rather a script that has to be deciphered.'¹⁰ Encoded by Wharton in each of the major New York texts, the New York hieroglyph in each text is delicately (and obviously) adapted to suit Wharton's thematic purpose. In decoding and understanding the particular New York hieroglyph in each text, Wharton delves into the evolutionary mechanics which would see the *old* society of the patriarchs transformed into the new society of the robber barons. Wharton the polymath would use the languages of architecture, anthropology and naturalism to delineate the city she knew well, but in doing so she would create a narrative of its destruction, a narrative that would define the city as palimpsest, a city which Eric Homberger would define as a "metaphor [...] for the destruction of

¹⁰ This quote was Franz Lowitsch's view of the network of streets permeating Berlin in 1931, but I think it is utterly pertinent in its application to New York City in this discussion. Quoted in David Frisby, 'The metropolis as text: Otto Wagner and Vienna's "Second Renaissance"', in: Neil Leach, ed. *The Hieroglyphics of Space: Reading and Experiencing the Modern Metropolis*. (London: Routledge, 2002), 19.

a whole series of past cultures"¹¹ an idea that would gain greater resonance in the post World War One flux which Wharton found herself at the centre of.



¹¹ Eric Homburger, 'Chicago and New York: Two Versions of American Modernism,' In: Malcolm Bradbury & James McFarlane, eds, *Modernism. A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930* [1976], Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991: 160



'Imaging' New York City




*'To the thinking soul images serve as sense-perceptions...
Hence the soul never thinks without an image.'*

Aristotle¹

*'...the city and its literature share textuality ...the ways of
reading literary texts are analogous to the ways urban historians
read the city. Shared are constructs built on assumptions about
the mechanistic, the organic, the historical, the indeterminate,
and the discontinuous. From Defoe to Pynchon, reading the
text has been a form of reading the city.'*

Richard Lehan²



HEN HENRY JAMES WROTE IN *The Bostonians* that 'a figure is nothing without a setting'³ he was stating an obvious literary commonplace. The truth of such a statement would seem so obvious that we rarely ever give it much thought, as we often perceive 'setting' to be an inert element within the text, a backdrop which has little to offer in terms of a detailed analysis of the structural and aesthetic elements which underpin a literary artefact. Yet we could not possibly have a

¹ Aristotle. *De Anima* (Books II and III, with certain passages from Book I), translated with an introduction and notes by D.W. Hamlyn (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1968), 63

² Richard Lehan. *The City in Literature* (London: University of California Press, 1998), 8

³ Henry James. *The Bostonians* [1886]. In: *Novels 1881-1886* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 971

Manhattan Transfer set anywhere except Manhattan, nor a *Berlin Alexanderplatz* anywhere other than Berlin. We could not have conceived of Joyce placing Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom in London, or Proust setting *À la recherche du temps perdu* in Chicago.⁴

Even though Wharton's 'English friends' were to remark on reading *The Age of Innocence* that they 'had no idea New York life in the 'seventies had been so like that of the English cathedral town, or the French "*ville de province*", of the same date' (BG, 915), we could not conceive of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, *The Age of Innocence* and *The Custom of the Country* being 'set' anywhere other than New York City. Although Wharton's friends could see in New York of the 1870s similarities with the patriarchal societies in other parts of Europe, they may not have perceived the narratives of change which would be unlocked through ekphrasis in the three novels.

'Place' in fiction is much more than a backdrop to plot, characterization and narrative. It is in many respects the glue which binds these elements together. Eudora Welty has written that place 'is the named, identified, concrete, exact and exacting, and therefore credible, gathering-spot of all that has been felt [and] is about to be experienced, in the novel's progress.'⁵ 'Place' or 'setting' is a 'gathering-spot' for feeling and for history. In this sense 'feeling' pertains in many ways to the characterization constructed within a text, and 'history' is not only that montage of 'factual' matter which the author inscribes within the text, but also the subjective knowledge that each individual brings to their reading of a text. Ellen Esrock describes this 'subjective knowledge'

⁴ John Dos Passos, *Manhattan Transfer* (1925); Alfred Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929); James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1922); and Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-27)

⁵ Eudora Welty, 'Place in Fiction,' *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 55 (January 1956), 62

as the 'connotative information'⁶ which will bring a scene into sharper focus for a reader. In this perspective the meaning of a text is constructed by the interaction between authorial inscription and the subjective knowledge of a reader.

In Wharton's 'New York texts', New York City is (obviously) the 'setting' or 'place'. Within these particular texts the reader brings his/her own subjective experience to a text. This input has been constructed through the accumulation of references to any number of fictional and non-fictional, verbal *and* visual narratives concerning New York City, all of which contribute to an accumulated cultural knowledge which need not be totally factual *or* accurate within the mind of the reader. The 'cultural knowledge' accumulated by *any* reader about *any* place need not be based solely on fact alone. Indeed, we all have preconceptions of many cities which we have not physically been to. These preconceptions are created from a collection of eclectic narratives which may be based in fiction or may well just be out of date. This is the 'symbolic currency through which we recall, describe, and so negotiate the city.'⁷ This falls into line with Wharton's own understanding of how literature *should* be read, in that she writes that if a text 'enters the reader's mind just as it left the writer's — without any of the additions and modifications inevitably produced by contact with a new body of thought — it has been read to no purpose.'⁸ Hana Wirth-Nesher supports this understanding and writes that

When authors import aspects of "real" cities into their fictive reconstructions, they do so by drawing on maps, street names, and existing buildings and landmarks, enabling a character to turn the

⁶ Ellen Esrock, *The Reader's Eye: Visual Imaging as Reader Response* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 192.

⁷ James Donald, 'This, Here, Now: Imagining the Modern City', in: Sallie Westwood & John Williams, eds., *Imagining Cities: Scripts, Signs, Memory* (London: Routledge, 1997), 187.

⁸ Edith Wharton, 'The Vice of Reading,' [1903]. In: *The Uncollected Critical Writings*, edited with an introduction, by Frederick Wegener (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996) 99.

corner of a verifiable street on the map, to place him in a "realistic" setting. These urban elements signify to the reader within a particular culture a whole repertoire of meanings.⁹

For Edith Wharton the reader must bring a 'whole repertoire of meanings' to the readings of her texts, and as Wirth-Nesher indicates to us, visual markers such as 'maps, street names, and existing buildings and landmarks' play a very important part in creating the 'picture' of the city in a reader's mind, as well as situating the text firmly within the realist mode. Indeed Wharton depends on the reader *deciphering* the 'pictures' of the city which she constructs within her texts, because through this process of deciphering Wharton's New York hieroglyphs, the reader gains a more detailed understanding of the scene, which will in turn bring many important elements within the master narrative into sharper focus.

Much of Wharton's construction of the New York backdrop to her major novels can be discerned from her autobiographical texts, namely *A Backward Glance*, 'A Little Girl's New York' (1938) and 'Life and I'.¹⁰ In looking at the three New York novels being investigated in this thesis a notional trilogy is palpable, a trilogy which charts the narrative of change which defines the very nature of New York itself, and which charts the insurgency of the nouveaux riches into New York society. The three autobiographical texts above delineate the time of the first 'premonitory tremor' which was to foreshadow the 'chasm'¹¹ which was to divide Wharton's New York of the 1870s with the New York of the early twentieth century.

⁹ Hanna Wirth-Nesher, *City Codes: Reading the Modern Urban Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 10.

¹⁰ 'Life and I' is a 52 page unpublished holograph autobiography held in the Beinecke Library at Yale University. This holograph has at its core the events covered in the early chapters of *A Backward Glance*.

¹¹ Edith Wharton, 'A Little Girl's New York' In: *The Age of Innocence* [1920], edited by Candace Waid (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2003), 232 (hereafter cited as LGNY).

On one level, by reading these particular autobiographical texts, a reader is able to discern a vivid picture of the 1870s in Wharton's New York, but is also able to distinguish Wharton's incisive metaphorical leanings toward the archaeological and the anthropological, as she nostalgically looks back over half a century and acknowledges that everything

that used to form the fabric of our daily life has been torn in shreds, trampled on, destroyed; and hundreds of little incidents, habits, traditions which, when I began to record my past, seemed too insignificant to set down, have acquired the historical importance of fragments of dress and furniture dug up in a Babylonian tomb. (LGNY, 232)

This metaphorical tone is one which is consistent throughout her three New York novels, and is a tone which underpins the theme of a New York which is either lost or in the throes of being lost.

It would be reasonable to say that in most fiction, place is perceived as inhabiting a subordinate position within the structural hierarchy of a text. A reader will analyse a text in terms of its obvious narrative structure, its political and aesthetic ideologies, the many important characterisations, and will follow many other obvious analytical pathways before focussing on the backdrop to the 'action' taking place. The 'setting' of a text is comprehended as being the background upon which a fictional montage is projected by the author. This montage is a collection of characterisations, descriptions, voices, imaginative 'facts', and perceived 'pure facts' all woven within the narrative matrix. This common separation of the obvious structural elements of a text from the backdrop upon which it is set can truly be perceived as a blind spot within literary studies. The 'setting' or 'place' at the centre of many texts is an essential node into which all other structural elements of a text 'connect'. This interconnectedness of the background (place) and the many recognized literary elements of a text can be illuminated

by looking at a set of early cinematic experiments which look at the creation of a new and precise fictive space through editing and montage.

In the early twentieth-century the Soviet film-maker and theorist Lev Kuleshov undertook a series of experiments in cinematic montage which would be known as the 'Mozhukhin Experiments.' These experiments would involve a single close-up of the actor Ivan Mozhukhin being superimposed upon three different backdrops: the body of a woman lying in a coffin, a bowl of hot soup, and a small girl playing with a teddy bear. An audience was then asked to reflect upon the emotional response on the actor's face at the end of each sequence. 'Sorrow,' 'hunger,' and 'fatherly pride' were seen on the face of Mozhukhin, yet the shot of the actor was in fact the same one used in each sequence.

This experiment was primarily a demonstration of the power of film editing to alter the audience's perception of the subject, but we can also see that this has important implications in literary studies. An audience, in terms of the 'Mozhukhin Experiment', are primarily drawn to the actor, yet their comprehension of the scene is vitally influenced by the background setting. Likewise in fiction, and in particular fiction with a highly descriptive element within it, the reader will primarily be drawn to the characters at the heart of the narrative, yet they too can be conditioned in their understanding of the semantic content of the scene in terms of the backdrop to the scene itself.¹²

¹² Lev Kuleshov, *Kuleshov on Film*, translated and edited with an introduction by Ronald Levaco (London: University of California Press, 1974), 200. and Nick Davis, 'Narrative Composition and the Spatial Memory.' In: Jeremy Hawthorn, ed. *Narrative: From Malory to Motion Pictures* (London: Edward Arnold, 1985), 25. Although I have referred to film theory here I do believe that the interaction between the background and foreground is totally relevant in terms of narrative synergy.

An author such as Charlotte Brontë, from a tradition of Victorian word-painting, like Wharton, makes great use of her highly descriptive environments in order to drive both character and narrative forward. From this passage from *Jane Eyre* (1847) we can see the vividness of Brontë's writing as Jane first comes upon St John Rivers' cottage:

Having crossed the marsh, I saw a trace of white over the moor. I approached it; it was a road or track: it led straight up to the light, which now beamed from a sort of knoll, amidst a clump of trees ... Entering the gate and passing the shrubs, the silhouette of a house rose to view; black, low, and rather long; but the guiding light shone nowhere. All was obscurity. Were the inmates retired to rest? ... In seeking the door, I turned an angle: there shot out the friendly gleam again, from the lozenge panes of a very small latticed window, within a foot of the ground; made still smaller by the growth of ivy or some other creeping plant, whose leaves clustered thick over the portion of the house wall in which it was set. The aperture was so screened and narrow, that curtain or shutter had been deemed unnecessary; and when I stooped down and put aside the spray of foliage shooting over it, I could see all within. I could see clearly a room with a sanded floor, clean scoured; a dresser of walnut, with pewter plates ranged in rows, reflecting the redness and radiance of a glowing peat-fire. I could see a clock, a white deal table, some chairs. The candle, whose ray had been my beacon, burnt on the table; and by its light an elderly woman, somewhat rough-looking, but scrupulously clean, like all about her had been deemed unnecessary¹³

Brontë, before the reader has met St John Rivers, establishes the environment which mirrors him, an environment of order, purity and seeming spiritual enlightenment which is, importantly, opposite to that of Rochester. The extract above is typical of Brontë, and as we shall see, of Wharton also.

This static yet highly visual description of Brontë's is at odds with an author like Ernest Hemingway. A fellow American in Paris of Wharton's after the First World War, Hemingway is an author whose visceral journalistic prose cuts through such description. He provides the facts but offers little in terms of the descriptive

¹³Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* [1847] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), 371-72

narrative drive that Brontë does as can be seen by this extract from Hemingway's *Fiesta* (1927):

The taxi went up the hill, passed the lighted square, then on into the dark, still climbing, then leveled out onto a dark street behind St Etienne du Mont, went smoothly down the asphalt, passed the trees and the standing bus at the Place de la Contrescarpe, then turned onto the cobbles of Rue Mouffetard. There were lighted bars and late open shops on each side of the street.¹⁴

Even acknowledging the obvious stylistic differences between Brontë and Hemingway, Hemingway's prose has a sense of life and dynamism which is common in much of his writing; his narrative has a clarity which moves almost in real time and is suffused with movement, and although the above extract is moving through Paris, the extract itself offers very little in terms of descriptive detail which may enhance the narrative drive of the text. Now, looking at Wharton's treatment of Paris in her article 'The Look of Paris', we can see how she uses description to add another dimension to her writing:

It was sunset when we reached the gates of Paris. Under the heights of St. Cloud and Suresnes the reaches of the Seine trembled with the blue-pink lustre of an early Monet. The Bois lay about us in the stillness of a holiday evening, and the lawns of Bagatelle were as fresh as June. Below the Arc de Triomphe, the Champs Elysees sloped downward in a sun-powdered haze to the mist of fountains and the ethereal obelisk; and the currents of summer life ebbed and flowed with a normal beat under the trees of the radiating avenues. The great city, so made for peace and art and all humanest graces, seemed to lie by her river-side like a princess guarded by the watchful giant of the Eiffel Tower.¹⁵

Wharton uses her descriptive prose to intensely evoke the picturesque beauty and serenity of Paris on the eve of the war. Her prose is not just evocative for the sake of being evocative; it also serves to amplify the shock that the war will make on this scene in the latter chapters of *Fighting France* (1915). The master narrative is

¹⁴ Hemingway, Ernest, *Fiesta* [1927] (London: Arrow Books, 1993), 24

¹⁵ Taken from: Edith Wharton, *Fighting France, from Dunkerque to Belfort* [1915], (New York: Scribners, 1918), 3

being subtly, yet decisively, altered through the application of Wharton's stylistic use of description in her prose.



PLACE IS AN INTEGRAL LITERARY element which is woven through the fabric of all literary texts with varying degrees of usefulness. In Edith Wharton's major New York texts New York City is paramount to the structural and aesthetic integrity of her writing. New York City was important to Wharton in that it was where she was born, it was where she spent many of her early formative years, and it was where her family were themselves members of the social elite which she would write about in much of her fiction — *Old New York*.

Wharton was not always consistent in her acceptance of Henry James's advice that she should 'Do New York!',¹⁶ and place the city and its structures at the centre of her fiction, yet there is no doubt that she seemed to be at her most comfortable, in many respects, when New York City was at the centre of her fiction. When Edith Wharton described her childhood New York of the 1870s as being akin to 'the lowest layer of Schliemann's Troy' (*BG*, 824), or when she also described the same time and place in *The Age of Innocence* as 'a kind of hieroglyphic world'¹⁷ she was acknowledging two important personal perceptions of this city: firstly, that the Old New York of her youth was now 'buried' under a new city (or cities) which operated within a different semantic

¹⁶ Letter from Henry James to Edith Wharton, 17 August 1902. In: Lyall H. Powers, ed. *Henry James and Edith Wharton: Letters: 1900-1915* (New York: Scribner's, 1990), 34

¹⁷ Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, in: *Novels* (New York: Library of America, 1985), 1050 (hereafter cited in text as *AJ*)

(and visual) register, and secondly, that like a hieroglyph — a 'picture' standing for a word or words — New York City itself could be read as a text, and as importantly, could be *written* as such.

Edith Wharton's sense of her own visual aesthetic was an important element in the overall philosophy of her fiction. Her book on interior decoration with Ogden Codman Jr., *The Decoration of Houses* (1897), and her work on landscape gardening, *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* (1904) seem to have provided a solid grounding for her fiction, and there can be little doubt that Wharton had a more than firm grasp on the politics and aesthetics of space when *The House of Mirth* was published in 1905. Wharton would often refer quite specifically, and in great detail, to the exterior architecture of buildings, the interior decoration of rooms, and the general landscapes which surround the protagonists in her fiction. Harmony between the exterior landscape, the architectural artefact, the interior landscape and the 'inmates'¹⁸ (Wharton's own term) is of vital importance in both *The Decoration of Houses* and *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*, and Wharton would use these elements as 'habitual sources of metaphor in her fiction.'¹⁹ The interconnectedness of the many elements of 'personal landscape' would play an equally important role in Edith Wharton's fiction as well as her books on design, and like the images in the background of Ivan Mozhukhin's face in Kuleshov's experiments, the settings within which her protagonists would be placed would undeniably influence the readings of her work.

Wharton herself wrote in 'The Writing of Fiction' that

[t]he 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

¹⁸ Edith Wharton, *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* [1904], with pictures by Maxfield Parrish (New York: De Capo Press, 1988), 7 (hereafter cited in text as IVG)

¹⁹ R.W.B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography* (London: Constable, 1975), 121 (hereafter cited in the text as EWB)

use of a "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, 63)

This is more than a basic acknowledgement of the importance of setting and description within Wharton's fiction. Firstly, Wharton is acknowledging her use of the 'descriptive passage' as more than a simple static ornament in the overall strategy of her fiction; Wharton's link between the 'impression' of a landscape with an 'event in the history of a soul' begins to suggest confluence between the spatial (the 'impression') and the temporal (the 'event'). Secondly, she links her 'descriptive passages' directly to the 'register of that intelligence' of the protagonist who in his/her own words, or through his/her particular consciousness, describes the scene, thus further acknowledging the interconnectedness of the descriptive with the narrative. This recognition of the value of the 'descriptive passage' in terms of narrative is of vital importance to the understanding of the function of the 'descriptive passage' within Edith Wharton's New York texts, and serves to highlight Wharton's active understanding of the power of description within her writing.



WILLIAM EMPSON, IN 1962, STATED THAT 'Imagery...is a great delusion.'²⁰ By 'imagery' Empson means the evocation of visual images for readers of literature. Empson is being subjective. It is difficult to see this view as being anything more than his own opinion, as he offers no solid substantiation for such a claim.

²⁰ William Empson, 'Rhythm and Imagery in English Poetry,' *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 2 (1962): 45

Central to his statement is the thought that there is an overestimation of 'the aesthetic merit of the visual imagery formed by readers'²¹ when reading a text. Yet I feel that Empson misses the point in that the visual image which has been conjured by the author and realised by a reader may well have little intrinsic aesthetic merit, but it often holds the key to a greater understanding of the semantic content of a scene and thus contributes to the whole aesthetic matrix which underpins the text.

Work in the field of cognitive psychology over the last thirty years supports this position by outlining that readers who are defined as 'high imagers' — readers who during the act of reading a 'descriptive or narrative' text, produce a sequence of visual images that express the semantic content of the text'²² — are those readers who create more detailed and complex images, and are more able to extract 'figural information' from the image itself. This cognitive strategy would allow a detailed and complex image to be created in the reader's mind, the decoding of which would give an increased understanding of the text through a greater understanding of the semantic content.

Integral to Edith Wharton's New York texts is her construction of 'descriptive passages' in which she pushes her reader towards 'high imaging' with a resultant increase in the 'semantic content' of the passages. These passages are hieroglyphs in that they are visual pictures — rendered verbally — which hold within themselves a decipherable micronarrative. This intersection of the spatial/static element involved in the visual object, and the

²¹ Estock, *The Reader's Eye*, 1

²² Michel Denis, 'Imaging while reading text: A study of individual differences,' *Memory & Cognition*, 10.6 (1982): 540-45. The basic experiment is straight forward enough: a descriptive text is given to a sample of students, and the time taken to read the text is recorded. Also, a questionnaire is answered after reading the text in order to gauge the amount of information taken from the text. The high imagers are those readers who take more time to read the extract, as well as having a higher mark in the questionnaire.

temporal/ dynamic narrative integral to verbal description, creates, in a basic sense, a Bakhtinian chronotope.

Bakhtin describes these moments of spatial/temporal intersection or nodes within a literary text as being 'organizing centers for the fundamental narrative events of the novel ... a place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied.'²³ He goes on to reinforce the importance of the chronotope within fiction when he writes that within the chronotopic moment '[t]ime becomes,... palpable and visible' making 'narrative events concrete ... [making] them take on flesh, [causing] blood to flow in their veins.' Bakhtin's work on the chronotope, on an elementary level, defines the chronotope as being 'the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature'; a statement which points to a node within the literary text which has the spatial and temporal in a state of coexistence. He goes on to expand on this by saying that in 'the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible, likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history.'²⁴ What is of further importance in Bakhtin's essay is that a chronotope 'occurs within well-delineated spatial areas.'²⁵ Bakhtin's chronotopes of the road, salon, threshold, and provincial town all fall within the spatial auspices of the urban. In particular reference to New York City in Edith Wharton's works, we would expect these particular chronotopes to exist, and indeed they do.

²³ M. M. Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,' [1937-38], in: *The Dialogic Imagination*, edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84.

²⁴ Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel', 250

²⁵ Ibid.

As we can now see, a seemingly straightforward 'descriptive passage' of New York City in Wharton's texts now takes on greater complexity. It is a moment of narrative density which not only brings together questions about description and narrative, but also brings the spatial/temporal loci of the chronotope to the fore, as well as introducing elements of urban theory into our understanding of these 'nodes.' Kevin Lynch writes that the urban 'node' as defined in urban theory is

the strategic foci into which the observer can enter, typically either junctions of paths, or concentrations of some characteristic....The junction, or place of break in transportation, has compelling importance for the city observer. Because decisions must be made at junctions, people heighten their attention at such places and perceive nearby elements with more than normal clarity.²⁶

Therefore we begin to see that through the very nature of the descriptive passage within a text we have a spatial/temporal locus which can be seen as a classical Bakhtinian chronotope, which has also much in common with the urban node in Lynch's work.

More important to my analysis of Edith Wharton's New York texts is that the nature of the particular 'descriptive passages' can be defined through the use of a single term rather than a collection of terms focussing on a similar function. In looking at description, narrative, temporality and spatiality, and the Bakhtinian chronotope, we can look at a type of description used in classical rhetoric which will bring together these individually complex elements into a simpler form: *ekphrasis*.



²⁶ In Kevin Lynch's *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press, 1960), 72-73.

THE TRANSLATION OF THE TERM 'EKPHRASIS' is literally 'bringing before the eyes what is to be shown',²⁷ and this is achieved by making a description vivid. In particular, classical ekphrasis is highlighted by the use of *enargeia*, a 'vividness' brought to the descriptive passage. The word *enargeia* means literally "in work"; energizing or actualizing. It refers to the rhetor's goal of arousing the passions within the audience to move them to act. It is this vividness which brings the description "before the eyes"²⁸ it is the *enargeia* which energises the text to create an ekphrastic moment.

In dealing with this term in the twentieth century, we come up against a problem. The problem here lies with the appropriation of the term 'ekphrasis' by modern literary practitioners and critics, who apply it in their own limited way to fit their own particular aesthetic agendas. Indeed, the term could be said to have been 'black boxed' in the words of Bruno Latour²⁹: modern critics would seem to understand ekphrasis in terms of an input and an output, but fail to truly comprehend the internal mechanics of the 'black box' itself, the ekphrastic process. This lack of investigation by critics into the ekphrastic process itself does not negate or devalue the results gained by modern critics in their use of ekphrasis, but the lack of understanding of the term itself *has* limited its application in the field of literary studies.

The modern definitions of ekphrasis are all a variation on the same theme in that they are primarily based on the notion that ekphrasis is limited to the poetic genre, and that the object at the centre of modern ekphrastic discourse is the 'art object.' Leo

²⁷ Donald Lemen Clark, *Rhetoric in Greco-Roman Education* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), 201

²⁸ Edward P. J. Corbett, *Classical Rhetorics for Modern Students*, 2nd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 319

²⁹ Bruno Latour, *Science in Action* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 2-3: 'The word black box is used by cyberneticians whenever a piece of machinery or a set of commands is too complex. In its place they draw a little box about which they need to know nothing but its input and output.'

Spitzer in 1945 begins by telling us that ekphrasis is 'the poetic description of the pictorial or sculptural work of art ... the reproduction, through the medium of words, of sensuously perceptible *objets d'art*'³⁰; Jean Hagstrum writes that ekphrasis is 'that special quality of giving voice and language to the otherwise mute art object'³¹; and in the words of James Heffernan 'ekphrasis is the verbal representation of visual representation.'³² Heffernan goes on to explain that within his use of ekphrasis the Brooklyn Bridge as described in Hart Crane's poem 'The Bridge' (1927), cannot be an ekphrastic object as it 'was not created to represent anything.' He does not seem to accept that an object can accrue representational 'weight' after its initial creation. With this prescriptive understanding of ekphrasis, Heffernan would not allow a description of Auschwitz to be ekphrastic. Firstly it isn't an art object, secondly, when built, it was built with a utilitarian use, and didn't represent anything. I would suggest that over the last 60 years, Auschwitz has accrued a representational value, and therefore could be used as an ekphrasis within a text.

These very critics, and many others besides, have all acknowledged the classical roots of the term, yet they have chosen to ignore the full and complex narrative implications which lie at the heart of ekphrasis. Indeed Heffernan himself has more recently acknowledged that in some respects he has appropriated the term to fit his own aesthetic and critical agenda.³³

³⁰ Leo Spitzer, 'The "Ode on a Grecian Urn," or Content vs. Metagrammar,' 1945, in: Anna Hatcher, ed. *Essays on English and American Literature* (New York: Gordian Press, 1984), 72

³¹ Jean H. Hagstrum, *The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Gray* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 18.n.34

³² James A.W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 3-4

³³ In my correspondence with Professor Heffernan he acknowledges that his use of the term ekphrasis has a 'narrow' definition, and that for him this narrowing of the definition makes ekphrasis 'more useful as a distinctive critical term.' This narrowing of the definition in turn narrows the nature of the ekphrastic object itself, hence its restriction to the 'representational art object.' My aim is to open up the definition by referring to

This modern definition is limited by its very nature. The New Critics' and Formalists' valorisation of 'poetic discourse over that of fiction,'³⁴ has focussed discussion on poetry as opposed to drama and in particular the novel. Also, the fact that ekphrasis for many years has been 'rooted in the tradition of *ut pictura poesis*'³⁵ results in this tightly defined twentieth-century definition which conveniently ring-fences a precise poetic canon. This modern definition has significantly limited the nature of the ekphrastic object. The limited definitions of the twentieth century theorists in this field are valid ones, and I do acknowledge that within all literary criticism, there is some fluidity within each individual's comprehension of any given movement, text, or device. This fluidity allows the diversity of thought which surrounds a phenomenon such as ekphrasis. Yet over the years, there has undoubtedly been such a prescriptive use of the term that the primary elements of ekphrasis have been overlooked (both intentionally and unintentionally). Ruth Webb asks if it is at all possible to pin down this phenomenon called ekphrasis:

[...] when one looks more closely at the range of definitions on offer, one is inevitably struck by a degree of divergence strangely at odds with the belief in a quasi-immanent meaning suggested both by the modern etymologies and the many assertions of what 'ekphrasis is' to be found in the burgeoning literature. The confidence of all these assertions is striking, too striking perhaps, for it masks some fundamental (but rarely stated) disagreements about the nature of *ekphrasis*. For some, *ekphrasis* includes descriptions of non-representational arts, for others it is the 'verbal representation of visual representation.' [Heffernan] On the one hand *ekphrasis* is a 'classic genre' with its roots deep in antiquity, on the other scholars do not agree about which works should be included in this genre: do descriptions of buildings count? Does 'description' include a catalogue entry? As each new study redefines the term to fit the critic's selection of works and to accommodate a particular critical

the classical genesis of the term, where the term's scope is indeed broader, and on many levels more complex.

³⁴ Mack Smith, *Literary Realism and the Ekphrastic Tradition* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 26

³⁵ *Ibid.*

stance, one is tempted to ask whether there is in fact a single phenomenon that can usefully be called 'ekphrasis'.³⁶

I agree here with Webb in that the term has been too easily moulded to fit a number of aesthetic agendas. Taking a classical rhetorical term such as *ekphrasis* from antiquity and transplanting it within a sophisticated and varied canon of relatively modern texts makes the *absolute* translation of the classical application difficult if not impossible.

Ekphrasis is classically based within the act of the spoken word and today is primarily established within the written word. This in itself offers a distorted perspective of the term's function in modern literary analysis, but I do believe that the basic principle of using vivid verbal description within texts to enhance a reader's/listener's understanding is one which is absolutely viable in modern literary analysis.

Ekphrasis is a term which also overlaps into iconography and pictorialism, and as such becomes difficult to pin down, but in Murray Krieger's article '*Ekphrasis* and the Still Movement of Poetry; or, *Laokoön* Revisited' (1967) we encounter a critic whose aim was to define ekphrasis as a general principle within literary studies. In doing so he was able to define ekphrasis in terms of 'still movement' and bring some much needed illumination to the true complexity of ekphrasis:

I have been openly dependent upon the pun on the word *still* and the fusion in it of the opposed meanings, never and always, as applied to motion. Having, like Eliot, borrowed it from Keats, I have freely used it as adjective, adverb, and verb; as still movement, still moving, and more forcefully, the stilling of movement: so "still" movement as quiet, unmoving movement; "still" moving as a forever-now movement, always in process, unending; and the union of these meanings at once twin and opposed in the "stilling" of movement, an

³⁶ Ruth Webb, 'Ekphrasis ancient and modern: the invention of a genre,' *Word & Image*, 15.1 (January-March 1999): 7. Webb's work is thorough and thought provoking, and her understanding of ekphrasis through the classicist's eyes has allowed me to understand the narrative implications of ekphrasis all the more.

action that is at once the quieting of movement and the perpetuation of it, the making of it³⁷

Krieger's important examination of ekphrasis focuses upon the seeming dichotomy between *description* and the static nature of description, and (subterranean) *movement* which has the temporality of narration at its core.

Gérard Genette would define *narration* as the depiction of objects and people in movement, and *description* as the depiction of people and objects in stasis. This initially simple view of narration is, on the whole, a useful understanding of a basic narratological principle. However, with ekphrasis (and Bakhtin's chronotope) we encounter a moment of great narrative complexity. Krieger's view of ekphrasis as 'still movement' is immediately redolent of Bakhtin's chronotope in respect to the seemingly paradoxical co-existence of narrative (time) and space (description) within a single descriptive node of a text³⁸. One would initially feel that ekphrasis falls into the confines of description as it is a verbal evocation of a visual episode, yet when we look much closer at the classical roots of ekphrasis we will see that narrative plays an integral part in our understanding of the descriptive episode within the text.



AS THE DEFINITION OF EKPHRASIS lies at the very heart of this thesis, I believe it is very important that we have a closer look at the classical genesis of the term. Ekphrasis was originally embedded within what is known as the progymnasmata. The

³⁷ Murray Krieger, 'Ekphrasis and the Still Movement of Poetry; or, *Laokoön* Revisited,' [1967], in: *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 267-68.

³⁸ Gérard Genette, *Figures of Literary Discourse*, translated by Alan Sheridan, with an introduction by Marie-Rose Logan (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), 134-136.

progymnasmata were a collection of graded exercises used by the early Sophists in order to teach students the rudiments of rhetoric. Ekphrasis in classical rhetoric 'was defined as a descriptive digression allowing rhetoricians to support arguments with a relevant example.'³⁹ Yet we must not read 'digression' as a pejorative term. Digression it may be, and ornament it may be, but the 'descriptive digression' *does* contribute towards the understanding of the whole. Its place was to 'support' the arguments, and hence it is an active element within the discourse.

The ekphrastic digression had a role to play in the overall scheme of the rhetor's speech, and likewise, it has an important role in the overall plan of Edith Wharton's New York texts. The ekphrastic exercise was one of the more complex exercises of the progymnasmata, and importantly was the *only* exercise which was described in terms of having an effect on its audience. The use of *enargeia* in the ekphrastic description is of vital importance; it indicates vividness of description and an emotional appeal to the audience. Quintillian explains that 'distinctness, or, as some call it, representation, is something more than mere perspicuity... It is a great merit to set forth the objects of which we speak in lively colors, so that they may as it were be seen.'⁴⁰ Thus an audience which is being persuaded by verbal rhetoric also has its emotions heightened by a descriptive passage which, through its innate vividness, brings 'before one's eyes what is to be shown ... the style must through hearing operate to bring about seeing.'⁴¹

It is this vividness of description which lies at the heart of the descriptions within Wharton's novels. The descriptions are

³⁹ Smith, *Literary Realism and the Ekphrastic Tradition*, 115-16

⁴⁰ Quintillian (from *Institutio Oratoria*), as quoted in Clark, *Rhetoric in Greco-Roman Education*, 202

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

such that there is an increased awareness of the visual element in the texts, and subsequently the semantic content of the descriptive elements within the texts themselves is increased. These descriptive elements are much more than 'a simple window to visible phenomena' but must also include 'the judgements and emotions of the describer.'⁴² It is this that makes ekphrasis in terms of narrative within fiction very important — we do not merely have an accurate but semantically weak visual description. Through these vivid descriptive elements within a text, the author brings his/her own 'judgements and emotions' to the text, as well as inviting the reader to bring his/her own connotative input to the text.

I had earlier touched upon the problem of the nature of the ekphrastic object in ekphrasis, as well as the prescriptive nature of modern ekphrastic discourse in terms of its being limited to the poetic mode. In modern ekphrasis, we see that the object is almost singularly an art object, or some object of representation whether real or notional. Liz James and Ruth Webb do not support this particularly prescriptive definition of the ekphrastic object:

The subjects suggested for such visual presentation [as ekphrasis] are persons, places, times and events (encompassing such diverse entities as battles, cities, festivals and crocodiles). The modern definition of ekphrasis as first and foremost 'a description of a work of art' therefore has no foundation in classical rhetorical theory and is not only inaccurate but misleading. In fact, works of art are not mentioned as a subject until Nikolaus Rhetor in the fifth century and even then they appear as an afterthought.⁴³

It would seem that the view of ekphrasis as centred around the art object is based in a later conception of the term based on the descriptions of the Shield of Achilles in Chapter 18 of *The Iliad*,

⁴² Andrew Sprague Becker, *The Shield of Achilles and the Poetics of Ekphrasis*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), 8,11

⁴³ Liz James & Ruth Webb, 'To Understand Ultimate Things and Enter Secret Places': Ekphrasis and Art in Byzantium' *Art History* 14.1, (March 1991): 6

and of the probable notional ekphrasis of the paintings in the *Imagines* of Philostratus. Philostratus was a sophist, and although he guides us through this (most probably) imaginary gallery in his *Imagines* with descriptions of paintings of historical, mythological and idyllic scenes, he is primarily concerned with the 'literary form in which he writes his descriptions.' Whatever the painterly merits of the paintings themselves, Philostratus has as his 'aim to emphasize and develop the sentiment ... which he found in the paintings.' The descriptions were in themselves primarily 'lectures or rhetorical exercises to display the powers of the sophist.'⁴⁴

Much time has been spent on investigating the nature of the relationship between the temporal and the spatial in ekphrastic studies. Murray Krieger's earlier quote on the 'still movement' encompasses what can at times be seen as the ekphrastic paradox: that the verbalisation within the ekphrastic act itself is a temporal act, but the object at its centre is static. This may be true in the modern understanding of the term, but in its classical sense, the ekphrastic object may or may not be static. Intrinsic to the *Imagines* of Philostratus we have a narrative held within the static object. Philostratus talks of a painting which is literally static, yet in describing the painting he employs a narrative to make the painting into a temporal moment, he describes a narrative which lies behind the static figures on the painting. We can now see how this poses a challenge to Genette's conception of narration as the depiction of people and objects in movement, and description as the depiction of objects and people in stasis. This ekphrastic description in Philostratus begins to bring the spatial and the temporal much closer together. Likewise, when Lessing talks of the statue of the

⁴⁴ See Introduction to: Philostratus. *Imagines*, translated with an introduction by Arthur Fairbanks, (Loeb Classical Library) (London: William Heinemann/New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1931), xxi-xxii.

Laocoön,⁴⁵ we have a static art object, yet it has a latent narrative in its own right. Similarly, with most descriptions of a work of art, whether it be the Greek urn of Keats, John Ashbery's description of Parmigianino's 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror', or Auden's meditations on Breughel's painting of Icarus in his 'Musée des Beaux Arts' we have interior narratives within the static objects themselves.

In mentioning three poems concerning art objects I am following the pervasive modern attitude on the restriction of genre to which ekphrasis has been applied. However, we may also look at Zola's description of Géricault's 'Le Radeau de la Méduse' in *L'Assommoir*, and George Eliot's description of the statue of Cleopatra in *Middlemarch* in order to bring the novel into the scope of ekphrastic discourse. Additionally, we can look to the classical genesis of ekphrasis in ancient rhetoric to see that we can have ekphrases of 'war ... places, seasons, or persons.'⁴⁶ Ruth Webb explains in further detail that the ancient authors who have written of ekphrasis in the progymnasmata

go on to suggest the range of subject-matter proper to *ekphrasis*. The earliest of them, Theon, suggests persons (*prosopa*), places (*topoi*), times (*chronoi*), and events (*pragmata*). This list remains standard throughout, although it undergoes various emendations: Aphthonios adds plants and animals, while Nikolaos adds festivals⁴⁷

There has been the feeling that the range of objects used within classical ekphrasis is arbitrary in some way,⁴⁸ as there is a flexibility in the range of phenomena described between the classical rhetoricians who write of the progymnasmata, though as Webb

⁴⁵ Ephraim Gotthold Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* [1766], translated with an introduction and notes by Edward Allen McCormick, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984.

⁴⁶ Charles Sears Baldwin, *Medieval Rhetoric and Poetics (to 1400)*, 1928, (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1959), 35-36.

⁴⁷ Webb, 'Ekphrasis ancient and modern', 11.

⁴⁸ Tamar Yacobi touches upon this in her article 'Pictorial Models and Narrative Ekphrasis,' *Poetics Today*, 16.4 (1995): 599-649.

points out 'the list remains standard throughout.' This list 'formed a coherent set in the ancient rhetorical system,' a set which

represent[s] four of the six parts of narration (or *peristaseis*), corresponding to who? (the agent), what? (the act), and when and where? (time and place). Missing are the cause (why?), which is rarely amenable to being 'placed before the eyes,' and the manner in which the act was committed (how?). The last part of narration is included by Theon, and was the category in which he placed the Shield of Achilles, but is not found listed as a category elsewhere, although Nikolaos does explain how it might be included in an *ekphrasis*.⁴⁹

Ekphrasis appeals to the audience through description enhanced by *enargeia*, describing a set of 'objects' which are closely linked to the major elements of narrative, where ekphrastic description was more often than not an 'evocation of a scene, often a scene unfolding in time.'⁵⁰ This brings the nature of classical ekphrasis much closer to a narrative of an event or episode than to the modern perception of a poetic ekphrasis of a static work of art. Ruth Webb strikes at the heart of the relationship between ekphrasis and narrative when she writes that

Ekphrasis was an evocation of a scene, often a scene unfolding in time like a battle, a murder or the sack of a city. The impact derived from the judicious choice of details that correspond to the audience's prior knowledge and expectations, calling up the mental images already stocked in the store-house of memory. Such passages, far from constituting 'narrative pauses' (and consequently demanding interpretation) were often an intensification of the narrative, introducing a degree of detail which would involve the audience both imaginatively and emotionally. And far from being independent, detachable passages, *ekphraseis* could contribute to the persuasive effect of the whole.⁵¹

This links directly to Wharton's own use of descriptive passages which are ekphrastic, and also links in with the 'judicious choice of details that correspond to the audience's prior knowledge and expectations, calling up the mental images already stocked in the

⁴⁹ Webb, 'Ekphrasis ancient and modern', 12

⁵⁰ Webb, 'Ekphrasis ancient and modern', 14

⁵¹ Ibid.

store-house of memory.' This understanding of ekphrasis is central to my use of the device within the New York texts of Edith Wharton. And although the descriptive passages within the New York texts of Wharton may well be detachable in some way, they are far from the 'useless detail' which Roland Barthes ascribes to descriptive passages within narrative.⁵²



IN USING DESCRIPTIONS OF NEW YORK CITY or alluding to episodes which have the patination of all that New York City is submerged in, Wharton appeals 'to the audience's prior knowledge and expectations' of the city. This induces an 'intensification of the narrative, introducing a degree of detail which would involve the audience both imaginatively and emotionally.' These ekphrastic passages are not merely ornamental, but involve themselves in controlling the direction and tenor of the master narrative within any given text. Also, the passage may be detachable in that the general sense of the text may be retained without it, but the detailed sense of the whole text will definitely be eroded without it.

We can now see that ekphrasis has a validity which allows it to act as a descriptive episode within a novel, an episode which is made vivid by the author, an episode which can be seen as a subterranean narrative which acts as a 'prism' to refract the master narrative, and an element which holds meaning for the author and the reader, a narrative within a narrative — a metadiegesis.⁵³ Keith Cohen writes that the metadiegesis is the 'creation within the main

⁵² Roland Barthes, 'The Reality Effect,' [1968], in: *The Rustle of Language*, [1984], translated by Richard Howard (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 143.

⁵³ Keith Cohen, 'Unweaving Pulg's *Spiller Woman*: Ekphrasis and Narration,' *Narrative*, 2.1 (1994): 19.

narrative of a new story. A second level of narration ... [which] happens whenever a character in the main narrative begins to tell a story.' Whilst I will not be looking at the direct telling of another story by characters within the main narratives of Wharton's works, I do believe that the ekphrastic passages within the texts do in themselves instigate 'a second level of narration.'

Also, in relation to urban theory, we can also note that Wharton's descriptive passages concerning New York City can be seen to be akin to Kevin Lynch's urban 'node' in that they are points of focus, intersection, crossover or meeting. The fact that individual episodes within a text can be imbued with such a selection of analyses can be confusing at times, but importantly we should understand that what all these analyses (chronotopic, ekphrastic, and urban theory) point to is a moment of density and meaning within a text, a moment which demands investigation and deciphering. These moments of density in the New York texts of Edith Wharton are highly descriptive. When the reader 'imagines' such an episode, the semantic content of the episode is increased in such a way that the micronarrative itself becomes an important textual element which will direct and colour the master narratives being discussed.



2

Still Moments in a Turning World



'A city may be likened to a house; its waterways, bridges, railroads, and highways are the entrances, vestibules and exits; its public buildings and drawing rooms, its streets and halls and corridors, the manufacturing districts the kitchens and workshops; tunnels and subways are its cellars, and its rookeries the attic; the parks and the recreation places are its gardens, and its systems of communication, lighting and drainage are the furniture. The city is a house of many chambers, and the first condition in forming its ideal plan is the shortest route from each to each.'

J.F. Harder¹



Unexpectedly, it is a conversation between two physicists which prompts this journey in search of the hieroglyphic nature of New York City in Edith Wharton's fiction.

Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg were visiting Kronberg Castle in Denmark, when Bohr observed the following:

Isn't it strange how this castle changes as soon as one imagines that Hamlet lived here? As scientists we believe that a castle consists only of stones, and admire the way the architect put them together. The stones, the green roof with its patina, the wood carvings in the church, constitute the whole castle. None of this should be changed by the fact that Hamlet lived here, and yet it is changed completely. Suddenly the walls and the ramparts speak a quite different language. The courtyard

¹ Julius F. Harder, 'The City's Plan,' *Municipal Affairs*, 2 (1898): 33

becomes an entire world, a dark corner reminds us of the darkness in the human soul, we hear Hamlet's "To be or not to be." Yet all we really know about Hamlet is that his name appears in a thirteenth-century chronicle. No one can prove that he really lived, let alone that he lived here. But everyone knows the questions Shakespeare had him ask, the human depth he was made to reveal, and so he, too, had to be found a place on earth, here in Kronberg. And once we know that, Kronberg becomes quite a different castle for us.²

Kronberg Castle works on a different semantic register once Bohr 'imagines' that Hamlet may well have lived there. The location of the castle coupled with the information about Hamlet, has produced a *new* place in the mind of Bohr, a place which is now imbued with power and meaning. This power contributes toward a new understanding of the place itself, and importantly, of Hamlet the 'man', and *Hamlet* the text.

In a similar way, by using New York City in her most important fiction, Edith Wharton insists that the reader look beyond the basic physical and utilitarian aspects of a city, and asks them to look deeper into the city called New York. The resultant reading, constructed through the marriage of Wharton's allusions and descriptions with the reader's own subjective knowledge of the city, will produce new understandings of the place itself, but also of the protagonists who inhabit the city and the text. In the first third of the twentieth-century when Edith Wharton flourished as a writer, New York City was at the very least a known image to her readership. Her readership would undoubtedly know *of* New York and if not know the city in terms of a visit to the city or living in the city, would indeed understand its reputation as the capital of the world in terms of its commercial pre-

² Heisenberg, Werner. *Physics and Beyond: Encounters and Conversations*, translated by Arnold J. Pomerans (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971), 51

eminence as well as its great population and its increasing profile as an urban icon.

In Edith Wharton, we have an author who was *visually* as well as *verbally* literate, and it is through the vivid visual descriptions within her New York texts that an ekphrastic moment is created. It is through this ekphrastic moment that a secondary narrative is instigated, a secondary narrative which makes a vital contribution to the overall understanding of the text through the subtle refraction of the master narrative.

By and large, it is Wharton's intimate knowledge of New York City and its socio-topographic nuances which underpin the master narratives of all her major New York texts. An appreciation of the spatial hierarchies, which exist within urban space in general and New York in particular, will be the starting point for my analyses of Wharton's New York texts. Leonard Lutwack outlines a general understanding of the spatial hierarchies contained within the urban matrix when he writes that '[a] number of place attributes depend on the relative position of a place in relation to other places — whether a place is high, low, central, or apart.'³ Yi-Fu Tuan, in *Space and Place*, further expands upon these spatial hierarchies and explains the pre-eminence of specific spatial positionings beginning with the *centre*, whereby we all perceive our 'own homeland as the "middle place" or center of the world.' Tuan expands on this when he writes:

Among some people there is also the belief, quite unsupported by geography, that they live at the top of the world, or that their sacred place is at the earth's summit. The nomadic tribes of Mongolia, for example, once held the idea that they inhabit the top of a broad mound, the slopes of which are occupied by other races. A common belief in Rabbinical literature is that the land of Israel stands higher above sea level than any other land, and that the Temple hill is the highest point

³ Leonard Lutwack, *The Role of Place in Literature* (Syracuse NY: Syracuse University Press, 1984), 39

in Israel. Islamic tradition teaches that the most sacred sanctuary, the Kaaba, is not only the center and the navel of the world but also its highest point. Kaaba's spatial position corresponds to the polar star: "no place on earth is closer to heaven than Mecca." This is why prayers said in its sanctuary are more clearly heard.⁴

The "centre" hierarchy is then followed by the *front*, where 'frontal space is primarily visual and is "illuminated" because it can be seen'⁵ — with the additional understanding that New York is the 'frontal portal' to the United States and as such places the city in a position of geographical sovereignty⁶; and finally the *right*, which

in nearly all the cultures for which information is available, ... is regarded as far superior to the left. ... In essence, the right is perceived to signify sacred power, the principle of all effective activity, and the source of everything that is good and legitimate. The left is its antithesis; it signifies the profane, the impure, the ambivalent and the feeble, which is maleficent and to be dreaded. In social space the right side of the host is the place of honor. In cosmological space "the right represents what is high, the upperworld, the sky; while the left is connected with the underworld and the earth." Christ, in pictures of the Last Judgement, has his right hand raised toward the bright region of Heaven, and his left hand pointing downward to dark Hell.⁷

Not only does New York's relative geographical position support these ideas of spatial hierarchies in a global sense — with New York being located *centrally* between the old world of Western Europe to the east, and the burgeoning new frontier of the American West — but we also have these spatial hierarchies coming to prominence *within* New York City itself. The location, aesthetics and construction of specific topographical sites within Wharton's New York fiction illuminate the social, financial and moral values of those who inhabit these particular sites.

⁴ Yi-Fu Tuan. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 38-40.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 40

⁶ *Ibid.*, 42

⁷ *Ibid.*, 43

'Topographical sites' as defined in this thesis are specific locations within Wharton's New York fiction which lend themselves to being deciphered in terms of: understanding their spatial hierarchies within the city itself (location); the aesthetic architectural qualities of the exterior of the location (building); and the interior architecture and decoration of an architectural structure (decoration). All or one alone of these elements may exist within one topographical site. Yet with Wharton, she is rather precise in her delineation of specific sites within her New York fiction and for the most provides the reader with an indication of location and interior/exterior architecture and decoration.

In *The Age of Innocence*, there are many topographical sites which will be discussed. Most are the homes of the major protagonists, yet I will also look at the Academy of Music on 14th Street, therefore I don't limit the use of this terminology to domestic residences. Likewise, in *The House of Mirth* I will be looking at Grand Central Station, the Emporium Hotel, as well as the residences of some important characters within the text. In *The Custom of the Country* I will look at a more general understanding of the spatial hierarchies of New York City by looking at the relative hierarchies of Washington Square, Fifth Avenue and the Upper East Side as well as their European reflections. Wharton understands the geographical physiology of New York City in the major texts being investigated in this thesis, and as such her detailed descriptions instigate the secondary narratives which define the episodes as ekphrastic in the true sense of the word. Wharton understands the geographical physiology only of the New Yorks which she has *inhabited*, and as such points to the reason that

this analysis is not, and cannot, be applied to the same degree in *Twilight Sleep* and *Hudson River Bracketed*.



IN THE NEW YORK OF EDITH WHARTON IN GENERAL, but in the New York of *The Age of Innocence* in particular, Wharton creates a tightly delineated world within the city. From Washington Square to Central Park, a few readable cross-streets and squares, and Wall Street with its immediate homogenous environs, we have a milieu which contains the residential structures, streets, landmarks and monuments which would define her own old New York society, a milieu in which 'every detail ... was indelibly stamped on my infant brain.'⁸ Wharton's whole 'vision of American life focuses on the politics of space',⁹ the space which the city inhabits, the space which is inhabited by buildings, and the space which is the *inhabited* space within these buildings. Where Wharton outlines the northward expansion of her society's environs through the series of 'moving pictures' constructed within the four novellas of *Old New York*, which for obvious reasons can be viewed as a moving picture of New York in its depiction of a subtle development through time of the social mores at work in the city between the 1840s to the 1870s, *The Age of Innocence* in many respects provides a 'snapshot' of a particular moment in New York's social and urban history during the 1870s.

⁸ From a letter from Edith Wharton to Mary Cadwalader Jones, February 17, 1921 collected in *The Letters of Edith Wharton*, edited by R.W.B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis (London: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 439

⁹ Marilyn R. Chandler, 'The Age of Innocence: Tribal Rites in the Urban Village.' In: *Dwelling in the Text: Houses in American Fiction* (Oxford: University of California Press, 1991), 149

In *The Age of Innocence* Wharton does not wish to look at the expansion of the city *per se*. What Wharton wants is for the reader to view what happens within a *precise moment* in the history of New York, and by 'deploy[ing] her protagonists in locations that give precision to the time and place'¹⁰ the reader is better able to understand the social structures which rule the actions of the protagonists. Also, by establishing the precise spatial hierarchies of the city at this particular moment in time, Edith Wharton further enhances the reading of *The Age of Innocence* with a view of the city as it enters an important phase of its evolution.

Each *precise* location within Edith Wharton's New York texts has a distinctive function within the text. It is important to understand the uniqueness of each topographical site in that it will, as William James observed, emote a 'peculiar shade of feeling, which it would not have in another place.'¹¹ It may seem that James is stating the obvious, yet it is a statement which we *must not* take for granted. On the simplest level, the author's choice of location will affect the demeanour of a character. As an example we can turn to Newland Archer and have no doubts that his 'peculiar shade of feeling' when he is at work at the law firm of 'Letterblair, Lamson and Low' will be entirely different to that when he has a private moment with his fiancée at St. Augustine. On this basic level, an author may use place to enhance particular characterisations.

The locations which Wharton chooses within *The Age of Innocence* come to the fore due to the detail which is embedded within them, detail which too has a function, not merely as aesthetic

¹⁰ Janet Beer, *Edith Wharton*, (Writers and Their Work Series) (Tavistock, Devon: Northcote House, 2002), 23

¹¹ William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, volume 2 (London: Macmillan and Co. 1890), 155

ornament, or 'realist backfill', but which serves to imbue the scene with an *enargeia* which will enhance the semantic definition of the scene. In *The Writing of Fiction* Wharton discusses the 'need of selection' and that an incident 'cannot but be fringed with details more and more remotely relevant, and beyond that with an outer mass of irrelevant facts' (WF, 11). As would be expected with the best authors, detail is seldom extraneous ornament, but serves a purpose in making a scene more vivid. The question that the reader may then ask is why make the episode more vivid, the answer being simply that the author wishes to draw the reader's attention to the particular scene, yet more complexly in Wharton's case, to instigate a micronarrative through such vivid depiction. This 'detail' may be consciously supplied by Wharton herself, yet often she relies on the subjective knowledge — a knowledge which need not be based upon incontrovertible fact, but may well be based upon common perceptions or misconceptions, or general perceptions of what the city of New York means to people in general — which the reader brings to the text to make the connections which enable a deciphering of these particular scenes.

These scenes or episodes within Wharton's New York fiction are what Wharton herself would call '*illuminating incidents*'. 'Incidents' which 'reveal and emphasize the inner meaning of each situation ... the magic casements of fiction.' (WF, 78-79) These '*illuminating incidents*', though having Wharton's own aesthetic agenda at their heart, are redolent of Wordsworth's 'spots of time', Joyce's 'epiphanies' and Woolf's 'moments of being.' As previously mentioned, the illuminating incidents are also redolent of the narrative intensities of Bakhtin's chronotopic moments. I see these '*illuminating incidents*' as Wharton's acknowledgement that there is

more to her fiction than that which exists on the surface, that there are 'inner meaning[s]' in her fiction. The 'inner meaning[s]' Wharton writes of are the secondary narratives of the ekphrastic moment. Here, Wharton tacitly acknowledges the mechanics of ekphrasis in her own definition of the '*illuminating incidents*' which play a central part in all her fiction.

The analysis of an 'illuminating incident' within *The Age of Innocence* can be seen as viewing a photograph from a distance. As we draw closer to the photograph we may begin to notice a general location. Moving closer, a more specific location may be discerned, and along with that recognition, an understanding of the location's position relative to other important sites. Finally, we move close enough to the image to see the detail at its centre — a building and a protagonist associated with that building. The viewer has brought together information concerning landscape, exterior architecture, interior architecture, and the protagonist. The analysis of the whole leads to the deciphering of the 'illuminating incident' or more precisely for this particular analysis, the ekphrastic moment.

The symbiotic relationship between protagonist and environment lies at the heart of my interpretation of *The Age of Innocence* and Wharton's other New York texts. As each individual descriptive element is deciphered and overlaid upon each other we build up an overall image of the location and environment which exists within the ekphrastic moment. The result is the accumulation of visual signs which when deciphered, like a hieroglyph, often offer more than a single word in their deciphering, and more often than not are translated into a subterranean narrative which at simplest adds to, and, more complexly, refracts the master narrative. The ekphrastic

moment, or episode, within any given text can be viewed as a narrative prism which refracts the master narrative. Such refractions (for there are usually many within a text) instigate new readings of a text, and in the case of Wharton's notional trilogy, offer a collection of narratives which coalesce into a narrative of change.



THE AGE OF INNOCENCE, PUBLISHED IN 1920, is the only novel of Edith Wharton to delve into her distant past and her childhood memories of *old* New York. Although *The House of Mirth* (1905) and *The Custom of the Country* (1913) were written earlier, they were set contemporaneously with their publication. *The Age of Innocence*, being set in the 1870s, is the only full length novel situated within the temporal and spatial location of her own childhood. Edith Wharton spent 6 years in Europe with her family from 1866 until 1872. At 10 years old, Wharton and her family returned to New York City to live at 14 West Twenty-third Street. The New York City of *The Age of Innocence* is the New York City which Wharton discovered at this time, a New York 'without architecture, without great churches or palaces, or any visible memorials of an historic past' a New York of 'intolerable ugliness.' Yet, by the time that Wharton came to write *The Age of Innocence* that New York would *have* an historic past in that it would be 'as much a vanished city as Atlantis or the lowest layer of Schliemann's Troy.' (BG, 824) Wharton had expressed the view that

[b]efore the war you could write fiction without indicating the period, the present being assumed. The war has put an end to that for a long time, and everything will soon have to be timed with reference to it. In

other words, the historical novel with all its vices will be the only possible form of fiction. (EWB, 423-24)¹²

This insight into Wharton's view on how the novel would have to be positioned *post*-World War I is coupled to the fact that she understood that 'something crucially valuable had been lost' (EWB, 424) and that in particular *her* America had gone, to be replaced by 'nothing but vain-glory, crassness, and total ignorance.'¹³ It is in response to this perception of post-war America that Wharton would go

in search, imaginatively, of the America that was gone. Looking across the vast abyss of the war, she located the lost America in the New York of her girlhood: the New York she had come back to in 1872, after six years in Europe... a safe, narrow, unintellectual, and hidebound world, but from the tremendous distance of time and history, an endearing and an honorable one. (EWB, 424)

There may well be the temptation to view Wharton's choice of period as being an ambiguous retreat from the difficult times in post-war Europe, yet far from creating a purely nostalgically saccharine view of old New York in *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton would create a world which was portrayed with her usual cynical clarity, and like Eliot and Hawthorne — the great historical novelists before her — would ensure that her account of the past was also an commitment with the present. Like Newland Archer who 'cherished his old New York' (AI, 1064) she saw herself as being in a position not only to smile at New York, but to perform a post-mortem on a society which to all intents and purposes had now died.

The Age of Innocence is a novel of both dislocation *and* relocation. It is a story of the confident Newland Archer 'attempting' to dislocate himself from the New York social structure into which he was born, and relocate himself with the Countess Ellen Olenska in an

¹² This quote is a paraphrase of Bernard Berenson's recollection of Wharton's words.

¹³ Quoted from a letter to Sally Norton (EWB, 424).

environment outside that of New York City. Simultaneously, the Countess Olenska is attempting to dislocate herself from the web of the European aristocracy which she had married into, and relocate to the New York of her youth ... 'in my own country and my own town' (AI, 1073).¹⁴ It is the fact that both characters are travelling in *opposite* directions that dooms this affair to failure. Like two locomotives travelling parallel to each other but in opposite directions, we have a meeting of the two for but an instant, and it is this relative 'instant' that lies at the heart of the novel.

The ekphrastic nodes which I will analyse within the text will allow us to see the descriptive talents of Edith Wharton in action. When narrative momentum is built up through the text, we expect this momentum to stall at the descriptive elements within the text, yet the power of the master narrative is not dissipated once this particular type of scene is reached. The momentum of the master narrative doesn't falter, and indeed the subterranean narrative contained within the ekphrastic node contributes to the movement of the master narrative even if it in turn *refracts* the master narrative.

There is no doubt that Wharton herself perceived her old New York as such and in particular she writes that 'the catastrophe of 1914 had "cut all likeness from the name" of my old New York' and that 'the war abruptly tore down the old frame-work, and what had seemed unalterable rules of conduct became of a sudden observances as quaintly arbitrary as the domestic rites of the Pharaohs.' (BG, 780-81) As I have already stated, Wharton had written that the New York of her past was 'much a vanished city as Atlantis or the lowest layer of

¹⁴ It would be fair to comment that Ellen Olenska's attempt to find solace and comfort in the nostalgia of her childhood New York, mirrors what Wharton may well have been doing in the writing of *The Age of Innocence*.

Schliemann's Troy'(BG, 824), and that 'nothing but the Atlantis-fate of old New York ... makes [my] childhood worth recalling now.'(BG, 827) Not only do these statements establish Wharton as a polymath with a focus on anthropology, but they are also an acknowledgement of old New York's status as a 'lost' city in many respects, with the appropriateness of the inhabitants being referred to as a lost 'tribe.' It is no great coincidence therefore, that the New York which Newland Archer inhabits in *The Age of Innocence* 'is a kind of hieroglyphic world'(AI, 1050) not only through his own eyes, but through Wharton's and through those of her readers. Couched in anthropological and archaeological terms, these particular references to old New York are used consistently throughout Wharton's writings, and would tend to reiterate Wharton's understanding that this society is no more, that the new cities which have been constructed upon it not only obscure the social rigidity which existed, but also occlude all that was good about it. These references also indicate to the reader that, as is the case with archaeological or anthropological investigation, we, the reader, will have to dig, obtain evidence, and reconstruct the society which we seek to investigate.



THE ACADEMY OF MUSIC
IRVING PLACE AT 14TH STREET
(OFF UNION SQUARE)
NEW YORK CITY

EDITH WHARTON WROTE THAT 'the first page of a novel ought to contain the germ of the whole' (WF, 39) and that 'my last page is

always latent in my first' (BG, 940). These are simple yet important statements of her literary theory which she puts into action throughout her writing. These are also statements which imbue the opening scenes of her fiction with a great formal strength. *The Age of Innocence* opens with a night at the Opera, or to be more precise, a night at the Academy of Music. The Academy of Music was opened in 1854, and was *the* opera house of New York City until its pre-eminent position was usurped by the opening of the Metropolitan Opera House in 1883. It is interesting to note that the Metropolitan Opera House was built when a number of wealthy residents of New York were unable to obtain boxes at the Academy of Music. This fact fits into the theme of the old patriarchs of New York fending off the insurgent *nouveaux riches*, and direct us toward the first signs of change and evolution within this particular facet of the New York social organism.

The whole scene in the Academy of Music, which covers the first two chapters of the novel and mirrors a later visit to the opera in Chapter XXXII, not only establishes the narrative foundation of the novel, but acts as an ekphrastic node in that the location itself, and the environs which surround this particular topographical seat, offer a detailed subterranean narrative which supports the master narrative but also provides an insight into the nuances of the narrative movement as well as prefiguring the core themes of the novel.

New York City was central to *The Age of Innocence*, as Wharton's original working title of 'Old New York (1875-80)'¹⁵ would indicate, and it leaves little doubt that the city itself would be a central element

¹⁵ Edith Wharton, "Subjects and Notes, 1918-1923", Wharton Archives, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University (YCAL MSS42): 37

in this particular novel. In terms of perceiving the ekphrastic nodes within the text itself, we cannot fail to see the description of the New York of the early 1870s as constituting an overarching ekphrastic node within the text. The opening line of *The Age of Innocence* establishes the epicentre of the text immediately by referring to not only the spatial but the temporal location of this novel:

On a January evening of the early seventies, Christine Nilsson was singing in Faust at the Academy of Music in New York. (AI, 1017)

This opening line can primarily be perceived as a statement of fact to establish the basic setting of the novel, and as such can be seen to have very little narrative substance. Yet in terms of the ekphrastic moment, we have the establishment of several different levels of ekphrastic discourse.

The fact that the novel is placed within New York is of vital importance in that it establishes a connotative link between reader and text which will create images of the city within the mind of the reader in terms of New York's wealth, diversity, and unique topography. The mention of 'New York' also instigates a rather simple, yet important subterranean narrative in its own right, as every reader will bring preconceived ideas (whether accurate or not) of New York City to their reading of the text. Yet in this opening sentence, the idea of location is further defined in that it is set in 'January in the early seventies.' The temporal location and the spatial location are immediately outlined, and they act together not only as important elements in the ekphrastic node itself, but also important elements in terms of narrative.

Virginia Woolf acknowledged the value of simple cartography in understanding place by writing that

it is safe to say that if you want to know the look of some town [...] the best plan will be to get a map and study its portrait there. For some reason there is more of the character of a place in this sheet of coloured paper, with its hills of shaded chocolate, its seas of spotless blue, and its villages of dots and punctures than in all the words of an ordinary vocabulary, arrange them how you will.¹⁶

Applying this simple visual understanding to the topographical seat of the Academy of Music at the northwest corner of 14th Street and Irving Place, close to Union Square, enhances the fact that this event lies at the heart of New York Society's social season in the 1870s. In this particular novel Union Square lies physically at the heart of the city as outlined by Wharton in *The Age of Innocence*. Lying in a central position between the Hudson and East rivers, it also lies centrally between the law offices of Newland Archer downtown, and Mrs. Manson Mingott's home at 58th Street and 5th Avenue, the outer



Figure 1: *The Academy of Music, Irving Place and 14th Street.* {1895}. MCNY

¹⁶ Virginia Woolf 'Portraits of Places.' [1906]. In: *The Essays of Virginia Woolf: 1904-1912*, volume 1, edited by Andrew McNeillie. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1986), 124

limits of the novel in terms of the city itself. This seemingly simple exercise in cartography is another step towards the fabrication of an ekphrastic node built around a specific New York location within this text.

A further element which contributes to an overall understanding of any location within New York City is the city's instantly recognisable grid system. A result of the Commissioners' Plan of 1811, the grid is of great importance in that it is one of the few elements of the city which has remained relatively solid for the last two centuries amidst the constant architectural flux of this city. The Commissioners' Plan, or Randel Survey of 1811 is probably the most important document in the development of New York City. This was a comprehensive plan which viewed the expansion of New York City not only being inevitable but important in its transition from the small eighteenth-century city to the modern city of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries.

The gridiron was a favoured system of urban planning within the United States and was already employed in New Orleans, Philadelphia, Charleston and Savannah. The gridiron facilitated the construction of buildings in rectilinear plots, but in terms of urban aesthetics and planning was seen to be detrimental to the natural topography of the island itself. Clement Clarke Moore who owned real estate where new streets were to be constructed wrote that 'the natural inequities of the ground are destroyed, and the existing water courses disregarded... These are men... who would have cut down the seven hills of Rome.'¹⁷ In the twentieth century Lewis Mumford would reiterate this point and write that 'With a T-square and a triangle,

¹⁷ Robert T. Augustyn & Paul E. Cohen. *Manhattan in Maps, 1527-1995*. (New York: Rizzoli, 1997), 103.

finally, the municipal engineer, without the slightest training as either an architect or a sociologist, could "plan" a metropolis.¹⁸

The grid itself was uniform with the exception of the diagonal Broadway, which would slice through the grid, and at each major avenue would create a 'Square.' These 'Squares' are not only an interesting means of following the northward expansion of the city as Broadway moves through Union Square (4th Avenue); Madison Square (5th Avenue); Herald Square (6th Avenue); Times Square (7th Avenue) and Columbus Circle (8th Avenue), but are also an index of where the 'most intense cultural commerce took place'.¹⁹ In Union Square, we have at this particular period in New York City's history, an area of intense 'cultural commerce' with the Academy of Music at its centre.

Returning to the opening sentence of the novel, the opera being attended is being performed within the Academy of Music. This small piece of information itself locates the beginning of the story in a more exact location, not merely temporally and spatially, or cartographically but (in terms of the old New York society of *The Age of Innocence*), historically as well. John Frederick Cone, in his excellent study of the politics of the opera in nineteenth-century New York, *First Rival of the Metropolitan Opera*, explains that the Academy

enjoyed the patronage of many of New York's first families, an aristocracy of old wealth with assured social ascendancy, a class identified with this fashionable home of opera since its opening in 1854 and known to social arbiters of the day as the Faubourg St. Germain set: the Belmonts, Lorillards, Cuttings, Van Nests, Van Hoffmanns, Schuylers, Astors. On many gala occasions these and other aristocrats held public court in their opera boxes, one of the epoch's symbols of New York's inner circle.²⁰

¹⁸ Augustyn et al. *Manhattan in Maps*, 102

¹⁹ William R. Taylor. 'The Launching of a Commercial Culture: New York City, 1860-1930.' In: John Hull Mollenkopf, ed. *Power, Culture, and Place: Essays on New York City*. (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1988), 109

²⁰ John Frederick Cone. *First Rival of the Metropolitan Opera*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 2-3

This understanding of the nature of the patrons of Academy of Music is further enhanced when the narrator mentions that 'there was already talk of the erection, in remote metropolitan distances "above the Forties," of a new Opera.' (AI, 1017) This particular aside referred to a proposal by many of the *nouveaux riches* of New York society that a new opera house should be built to allow *them* to participate in their own parallel social ritual. The boxes of the old Academy were where members of the old families of 'the Four Hundred' were resident during the winter season. Ward McAllister, Mrs Astor's social arbiter of the late nineteenth-century 'remarked offhandedly that there were only "about four hundred" people in New York Society' a number arrived at as this was the number which Mrs. Astor's ballroom could accommodate. Jerry Patterson goes on to explain further that "'Society" was to be a select circle of recognizable people who could be counted on to behave conservatively and submit willingly to the guidance ... of their leader [Mrs. Astor] and her first chamberlain [Ward McAllister].'²¹ The boxes were *so* exclusive that even the enormous wealth of the 'new people' (AI, 1017) such as the 'Vanderbilts, the Rockefellers, the Goulds, the Whitneys and the Morgans, who were not welcomed by the old English and Dutch families who occupied the fifteen boxes in the Academy of Music'²² were unable to secure a box, and therefore secure their position at the 'top table' of New York society.

Wharton's immediate reference to both opera houses in the first page of the novel outlines a theme with which she had engaged with head-on in both *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country*

²¹ Jerry E. Patterson, *The First Four Hundred: Mrs. Astor's New York in the Gilded Age*, (New York: Rizzoli, 2000), 7-8

²² Joan Zlotnick, *Portrait of An American City: The Novelists' New York*, (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1982), 43

— that of the carnage which could be wrought by a clash of two socially distinguishable but wealthy groups within the same society. Yet in *The Age of Innocence* Wharton is establishing the rigid social lines which define the society of this particular time, establishing the fact that all who were in attendance within the Academy of Music on this 'fashionable night' described in chapter I were of the old order, were those directly or indirectly related to the 'three families ... who can claim an aristocratic origin. ... the Dagonets ... the Lannings ... and the van der Luydens.' (AI, 1054) Wharton was outlining the strong social framework of this time yet she is still acknowledging the fact that on the horizon, the powerful forces of the *nouveaux riches* of New York were gathering and would assert their authority in New York society in the very near future.

Wharton writes of the reasons that New York society attended the opera at the Academy of Music. Firstly, the 'conservatives' liked it because it was 'small and inconvenient, and thus keeping out the "new people" whom New York was beginning to dread and yet be drawn to' (AI, 1017). Its smallness was important in that the core of New York society which was contained within the Academy on these 'fashionable nights' was tightly defined and manageable and thus easily policed by the likes of 'Lawrence Lefferts... the foremost authority on "form"' (AI, 1021) and Sillerton Jackson who was a 'great ... authority on "family"' (AI, 1022). Wharton also explains that the 'sentimental clung to it for its historical associations' and the musical 'for its excellent acoustics' (AI, 1017), yet implicit in Wharton's explanations of the 'sociable' Academy's attraction is that the musical function of the Academy is but a pleasant aside, a tertiary motive for attending the opera. This point is further enhanced by the fact that we have an

expensive production with world-renowned singers, where the press comment on the "exceptionally brilliant audience" rather than on the opening performance of such a production. At the heart of the opening chapters set within the Academy, we decipher the location and building within the text and see New York society as a culture as closed as much as that of the 'Puritan colony, one in which status and identity depend on conformity to the rules of the community.'²³ Here, Wharton's detail is decoded ekphrastically to divulge the micronarrative which modifies the master narrative; that of the isolationist credo of the patrician families of the 'Four Hundred' who are trying to protect their territory from the encroachment of outsiders with strong financial credentials but with none of the family credentials.

The Academy of Music is the embodiment of society as Newland Archer himself understands it. Through Archer's consciousness we are able to perceive this society in terms of the 'tribe' and the formalities of society as akin to the 'totem terrors' of his forefathers. Pamela Knights writes 'that looking at a race's preponderant words is one of the best ways of getting at its nature [and that] *The Age of Innocence* contains a glossary of old New York.'²⁴ Although a reliable concordance does not, to my knowledge, exist for any of Wharton's works, we can readily discern a vocabulary which supports anthropological and archaeological perceptions of old New York: 'tribe', 'ritual' and 'sacrifice', as well as a consistency in the use of terms like 'society', 'duty' and 'convention.' Hence we see in this

²³ Maureen E. Montgomery, *Displaying Women: Spectacles of Leisure in Edith Wharton's New York*. (New York and London: Routledge, 1998), 37

²⁴ Pamela Knights writes in 'The Social Subject in *The Age of Innocence*.' In: Millicent Bell, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Edith Wharton*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 21

particular text, and others that an understanding of both disciplines is needed to comprehend both the character's and author's approaches to the city and this tale. Archer also perceives his own life in terms of 'conventions' and 'duty' where '[c]onformity to the discipline of a small society [which] had become almost his second nature.' (AI, 1271) There is a social 'form' to be adhered to within the Academy of Music itself, but this is merely as a microcosm of what is expected within New York society as a whole.

The establishment of the social web at the heart of New York society via this night at the opera sets the scene for the entrance of the Countess Ellen Olenska into this sensitive and finely balanced environment. Although the Countess was originally a member (albeit a peripheral one) of New York society, her entrance is important due to its superimposition upon the established social environment which Wharton has presented through her description of this event. Unlike the insurgent new money trying to enter old New York society, the Countess has no financial credentials, but vitally her familial credentials are acceptable. The exclamations of "Well — upon my soul!" from Lawrence Lefferts and "My God!" (AI, 1021) from Sillerton Jackson, give an immediate indication that there is a disturbance in terms of 'form' and 'family' within the fabric of society as seen by Lefferts and Jackson, the self-appointed social arbiters of old New York society. The inappropriateness of her dress and her "Josephine look" (AI, 1021) not only makes her the centre of attention when she enters the Mingott box, but is also establishing her status as a 'foreign' body which could disturb the framework of this society. As this is the early moment of her *re*-entrance into New York society, she merely causes a ripple on the surface, yet the nuances of

spatial hierarchies once again come into play in the positioning of the Countess in the Mingott box. The Countess

stood a moment in the centre of the box, discussing with Mrs. Welland the propriety of taking the latter's place in the front right-handed corner; then she yielded with a slight smile, and seated herself in line with Mrs. Welland's sister-in-law, Mrs. Lovell Mingott, who was installed in the opposite corner. (AI, 1021-22)

The Countess is at the front and in the centre of the Mingott box. Due to the uncertainty of the Countess's social position, she is not yet put to the right (acceptance) or the left (refusal); the statement of intent has been made in an atmosphere of 'faint implications and pale delicacies.' (AI, 1028)

At the centre of this intricate web of New York social stratagems we have Gounod's *Faust* unfolding. In the early chapters of the novel the opera's 'Daisy Scene' is being performed, with Marguerite singing "M'ama ... non m'ama ..." (AI, 1018, 1272), mirroring in many respects Newland Archer's own doubts about his feelings toward May Welland and Ellen Olenska, but also providing a consistent refrain on how Newland Archer feels about New York society itself. This scene is mirrored in the final chapters of the novel. The same location, the same opera, the same scene is re-enacted, thus reiterating Newland Archer's continuing doubts about himself and New York, as well as establishing the strength and power of New York social ritual by which he will consistently be bound.

In this seemingly spare opening line of *The Age of Innocence*, we have spatial definition *and* temporal definition. There are several levels of semantic understanding: New York City, Union Square, the Academy of Music, Gounod's *Faust*, and the intricate social jockeying within the boxes themselves. With all this information a reader can begin to formulate the 'germ' of the novel itself. Wharton writes:

'The arrest of attention by a vivid opening should be something more than a trick. It should mean that the narrator has so brooded on this subject that it has become his indeed, so made over and synthesized within him that, as a great draughtsman gives the essential of a face or landscape in a half-a-dozen strokes, the narrator can "situate" his tale in an opening passage which shall be a clue to all the detail eliminated (WF, 40)

So Wharton, with her visual allusions, further illuminates our comprehension of what we can expect in *The Age of Innocence* and of her fiction in general. The 'arrest of attention' indicating stasis associated with the visual image, the 'vivid' nature of the opening connecting directly with *enargeia* all point to this particular location as an ekphrastic episode in this text.

Although Wharton does not put a name to this approach, it is ekphrastic in its very nature. As Wharton points out, 'the vivid opening should be something more than a trick' and likewise, ekphrasis should be more than a rhetorical trick or luxury. The ekphrastic moment located within this location is a rhetorical element which enhances the overall definition of the central themes of the text. In this opening scene at the Academy of Music we begin to see the consistency and power of old New York society, and we also see that Ellen Olenska will in some way, provide a challenge to this society.



MRS. MANSON MINGOTT
5TH AVENUE
(BETWEEN 57TH & 58TH STREETS)
NEW YORK CITY

On November 10th, 1901, an advert for an apartment in a block called the 'Henry James' at 501 West 113th Street on the corner

of Amsterdam Avenue, appeared in the *New York World*:

The Henry James ... All outside light: 8 spacious rooms; bath, toilets, servants' stairs, most careful individual management, beautiful unobstructed views and healthful section: specially appeals to refined persons: liveried service, opposite St. John's Cathedral, Columbia University and many parks.

William Dean Howells forwarded this to Henry James, telling him of the newly opened apartment house in New York and James replied:

Your most kind communication ... in respect to the miraculously-named "uptown" apartment-house has at once deeply agitated & wildly uplifted me. The agitation, as I call it, is verily but the tremor, the intensity of hope, of the delirious dream that such a stroke may "bring my books before the public," or do something toward it — coupled with the reassertion of my constant, too constant, conviction that no power on earth can ever do that. ... The Henry James, I opine, will be a terrifically "private" hotel, & will languish, like the Lord of Burleigh's wife, under the burden of an honour "unto which it was not born." Refined, liveried, "two-toileted," it will have been a short lived, hectic paradox, & will presently have to close in order to reopen as the Mary Johnson or the K.W. Wiggin or the James Lane Allen. Best of all as the Edith Wharton.²⁵

Henry James humorously, but with more than a modicum of seriousness, relates the location and architectures — and I say architectures intentionally — of this apartment block to his own perception of his personality and status as a writer. The facets of the apartment block are paralleled with those of James himself. Interestingly, James's usual self-deprecatory style — including a small, not so well camouflaged barb in the direction of these more popular writers — points to the fact that this particular 'honour' may well be best bestowed on Edith Wharton, whose popularity and taste may be better associated with this particular building. Needless to say, James did not know Wharton at this time, or he would have seen the unsuitability of comparing this apartment to Wharton or her fiction.

²⁵ Letter from Henry James to William Dean Howells, 25 January, 1902. In: Michael Anesko, *Letters, Fictions, Lives: Henry James and William Dean Howells*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 368-369. Advertisement as quoted in Anesko, 369.

Yet James's allusion to the relationship between architecture and protagonist is still valid. Looking at the interior and exterior of the private home in *The Age of Innocence* we may, relative to the Academy of Music, feel that we are now stepping into the *private* domain of the characters. While this is true to a certain degree, it would also be true to say that in terms architectural, there are no forums of *pure* privacy within the novel. I say this not in the sense that the reader is always privy to the comings and goings within the text, but in the sense that the exterior of *any* building is intrinsically public. Also, the interior spaces of the private residences of the protagonists of *The Age of Innocence* are public in that to the eye educated in the tastes and mores of old New York society (and who else would enter the public portals of these residences), the social level, wealth, and even morality of the inhabitants can be discerned by the code established by location, architecture and decoration.

In *The Decoration of Houses*, written with the architect Ogden Codman Jr. and published in 1897, Edith Wharton's credentials as a serious student of interior and exterior form and decoration were established. Shari Benstock writes that

Soon after her marriage, Edith began to study seriously the history of architecture, furniture design, and house decoration. Her Italian travels contributed to these studies by opening her eyes to the neoclassical order of the eighteenth century. But the major "Awakener" — her term for people or books that opened new worlds and extended her horizons — was James Fergusson's monumental *History of Architecture*. In a day when few such studies were available, this was to her an "amazing innovation." Historically and technically precise, it cleared the mists from her "haunting sense of the beauty of old buildings." ... Fergusson's work gave her not merely an intellectual perspective, but a vocabulary as well.²⁶

²⁶ Shari Benstock, *No Gifts From Chance: A Biography of Edith Wharton* [1994]. (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1995), 61

This vocabulary, along with the vocabulary gained in her book on *Italian Villas and their Gardens*, allowed Edith Wharton to comprehend and articulate her ideas on the complete lived environment. She saw this environment as composed of the natural landscape within which a building is located, the exterior façade of a building and the interior decoration of a building which she wrote 'must never be forgotten, is only interior architecture' (*DH*, 14) and should be 'best suited to the master or mistress of the house which is being decorated.' (*DH*, 19) Once again it is Marilyn Chandler who articulates the aesthetic sensitivity involved in Wharton's use of these composite environments:

[... the] narrator's often ironic descriptions of furniture, fabrics, and facades reminds us that every house and every object within it reflect a choice, if only a choice to conform to prevailing fashion, and that these choices have moral and psychological as well as aesthetic consequences. The relationship of character to environment is emphatically reciprocal, and the houses the characters inhabit influence them as surely as these houses reflect the characters' influence.²⁷

It is this principle of 'choice' which creates such a relationship between character and environment; the choice of location, choice of exterior and choice of interior are all linked to choice in terms of taste, morality and marriage in the eyes of old New York. These choices are not merely broad 'manifestations of physical traits and social types'²⁸ as Maureen Montgomery points out, but are detailed descriptions imbued with semantic nuance which vividly evoke a more complex image of the society in general, and the inhabitants of the building in particular.



²⁷ Marilyn R. Chandler. *Dwelling in the Text: Houses in American Fiction*, (Oxford: University of California Press, 1991), 157

²⁸ Montgomery. *Displaying Women*, 67

CATHERINE MINGOTT'S POSITION WITHIN OLD New York society is symbolised nowhere more succinctly within *The Age of Innocence* than in Edith Wharton's subtle yet evocative description of the Mingott mansion which is located 'in an inaccessible wilderness near the Central Park.' (AI, 1025) There can be little doubt that the character of Catherine Mingott is based on that of Wharton's own aunt, Mary Mason Jones, just as Catherine Mingott's mansion in *The Age of Innocence* would be modelled upon Mary Mason Jones's home at Fifty-seventh Street and Fifth Avenue. R.W.B. Lewis wrote of Mary Mason Jones that

after living for some years in downtown Waverley Place, [Mary Mason Jones] startled society by moving almost beyond visibility to build a majestic Parisian mansion on Fifth Avenue between Fifty-seventh and Fifty-eighth Streets: a structure of pale cream stone with balustraded pavilions looming up amid the debris, the rocks, and the makeshift shanties that otherwise characterized the area. Here, with advancing years and increasing obesity, she lived in a suite off the entry hall from which she would be carried in to dominate a reception (as it might be) for a great-granddaughter. (EWB, 13)²⁹

The Mary Mason Jones house at 734-745 Fifth Avenue (Marble Row), designed by Robert Mook (1867-9) 'consisted of boldly mansarded houses in a version of the French Renaissance-inspired style that had recently been used for the new pavilions at the Louvre.' The similarities between the house and personage of Mary Mason Jones with that of Catherine Mingott and her mansion are too striking to ignore. Strangely enough, Catherine Mingott's presence within the text is prominent, yet to New York society as a whole within the text, Catherine Mingott — who, like Mary Mason Jones, rarely leaves her

²⁹ Robert Stern, Thomas Mellins & David Fishman. *New York 1880: Architecture and Urbanism in the Gilded Age*. (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1999), 578. Here we had the English concept of terraced housing put into practice in New York whereby several townhouses were housed 'within a unified monumental façade.' Christine M. Boyer. *Manhattan Manners: Architecture and Style 1850-1900*. (New York: Rizzoli, 1985), 24

mansion due to incapacitation caused by her obesity — could be said to exist 'beyond visibility'.

Such is Catherine Mingott's reclusive nature that she rarely if ever attends the opera any more, and she does not attend the wedding of May and Newland at Grace Church, the two major social events in *The Age of Innocence*. It is interesting to note that Newland Archer has a thought at his wedding "How like a first night at the Opera!" (AI: 1158.) We have the music, the flowers, the protagonists, and 'all the same faces in the same boxes' as well as having Sillerton Jackson and Lawrence Lefferts to cast their critical eye over the proceedings. Also, we have another important social occasion which Catherine Mingott is forced to, or chooses to, miss. This reclusiveness is undoubtedly exacerbated by the location of the Mingott mansion itself.

The position of the Mingott mansion relative to the rest of New York City is vital to our understanding the nature and importance of Catherine Mingott within the novel. Once again, in looking back to *The Decoration of Houses* and *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* I refer to Wharton's insistence on a harmonious relationship between the architectures of exterior, interior and 'inmate.'³⁰ Marilyn Chandler elucidates this point further when she writes that

Wharton teaches us in [*The Age of Innocence*] to read architecture and interior decoration, and indeed the entire environment of fabricated objects, as an intricate network of symbolic systems that make visible and reinforce the behavioural mores and severe social stratification whose implications are so consistent an issue in her work. Living space is

³⁰ Wharton writes in *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* of some problems Renaissance architects would face in constructing villas and their gardens: ' [...] the 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, [...] and lastly it must be adapted to the landscape around it.' In: Edith Wharton, *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* [1904], with pictures by Maxfield Parrish. (De Capo Press, 1988), 7. This is a statement subsequent to those made in *The Decoration of Houses* in 1897, that supports Wharton's assertion that there is an organicism which connects landscape with the exterior and interior architecture of a building. It is this connection which underpins much of the analysis of not only *The Age of Innocence* but with *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country* too. Chapters 3 and 4 will look in some detail at the latter two novels.

always significant space, never free of moral resonance from the moment the colors are chosen for the curtains.³¹

This further reiteration of the interconnectedness between the lived environment and its inhabitant supports my analysis of the

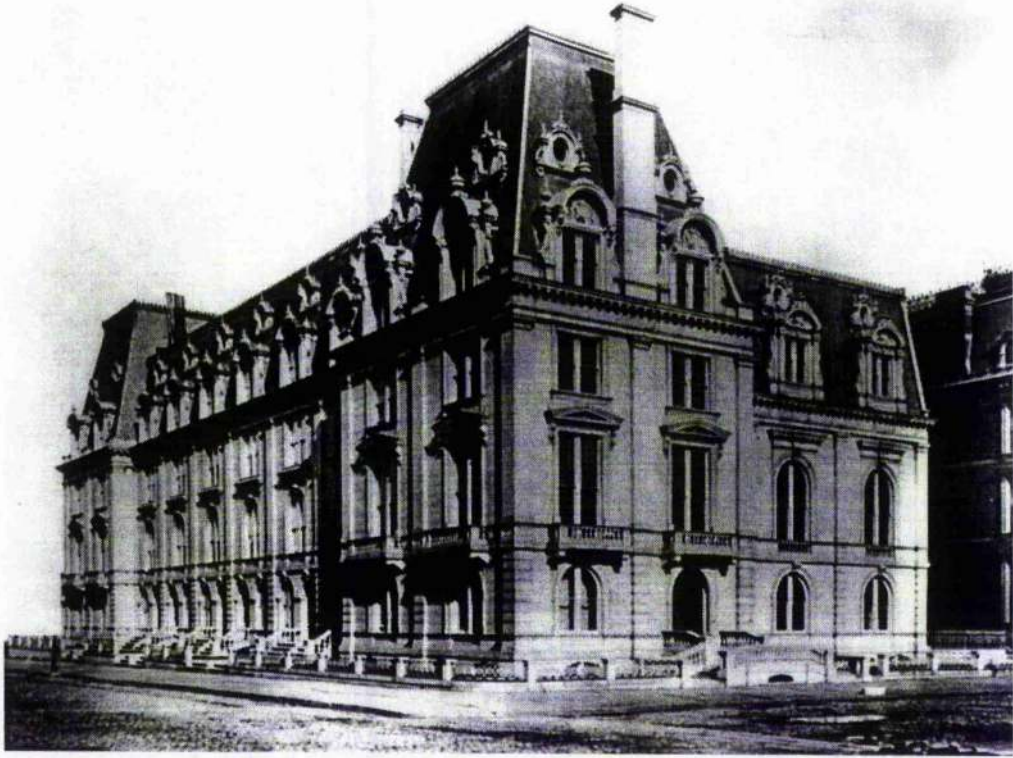


Figure 2: Mrs. Mary Mason Jones' Residence [Marble Block], Fifth Avenue and 57th - 58th Streets.
{1875}MCNY

architectural elements within the text as more than general ornamentation or backfill. They are linked directly to a greater understanding of individual characterisation and also to a greater understanding of the entire texture of the novel.

In a society which lives more by the sign than by the word, Wharton's detailed descriptions of architectures (interior and exterior) and the particular placement of these architectures within New York's topography, acts as an important hieroglyph in a society where 'the

³¹ Chandler, '...Tribal Rites', 157

real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs' (AI, 1050). The house is a composite image which through the written word is made visual. The visualisation is then deciphered by the reader in order to create an intermediate textual element which aids in the comprehension of the important societal mechanics at work in the novel.

In every possible sense of the word, Catherine Mingott can be said to inhabit the *liminal* zones of New York City, both



Figure 3: Madison Avenue, looking Northwest from 55th Street, showing one of the 'Marble Row' residences on the Northeast corner of Fifth Avenue & 57th Street. [light coloured building with mansard roof at centre-left was the home of Mrs. Mary Mason Jones] {c. 1870} MCNY

topographically and socially. The Mingott house, if we see Wharton's Aunt Mary Mason's house as its analogue, would be located at 'the other end of nowhere' (AI, 1161) on the east side of Fifth Avenue between 57th and 58th Streets, surrounded by 'hoardings ...quarries ...one-story saloons ...[and] ragged gardens.' (AI, 1036) Although Catherine Mingott is on the periphery of New York society's physical world, this is also the position of the pioneer. She would sit at the

window of her home far up Fifth Avenue 'as if watching calmly for life and fashion to flow northward to her solitary doors.' (AI, 1036) There is no doubt about the solitary location of the house, and yet Catherine Mingott seems to be sure of the inevitable movement of much of old New York society towards her position, in terms of both location *and* attitude.

As old New York society is hindered in its progress — both socially *and* topographically — by its sheer social inertia, Catherine Mingott seems to have an innate understanding of the forces which will have to come into play in order to sustain this particular social organism called 'old New York society.' No longer would this society be able to exist within the hermetically sealed environment delineated by the 'slippery pyramid' of Mrs. Archer, or the touchstones of New York's social season. The outside world was penetrating the cracks appearing in this environment and were now transforming the very nature of this society.

On the surface, what seems like a very eccentric location for the Mingott mansion would seem to the twentieth-century reader of a text published in 1920, a remarkable piece of foresight in terms of real estate speculation. Catherine Mingott is not only bold and strong willed, but she is shrewd — as her 'untying [of] her husband's fortune' (AI, 1026) would attest to. She foreshadows the 'advance of residences as stately as her own' (AI, 1036) towards her own home; she is also aware too that she is a pioneer of sorts in her own implicit comparison to Columbus:

When I built this house you'd have thought I was moving to California! Nobody ever *had* built above Fortieth Street — no, says I, nor above the Battery either, before Christopher Columbus discovered America. (AI, 1037)

Possibly the most important element of Catherine Mingott's prescient view of the future of old New York society concerns the marrying off of her two daughters to 'an Italian marquis and an English banker' (AI, 1025). She understands, at a stage in the history of old New York society when "new people" with their "new money" were still being repelled at the gates of 'the tight little citadel of New York', that there was a need for 'new blood and new money' (AI, 1039) in order to revivify a society which was in decline.

The very positioning of this house upon the map of Manhattan begins to build an ekphrastic moment. An image of the topography of New York City shows in a primary sense the location of the Mingott mansion, yet its relative position to the rest of New York City instigates a more sophisticated secondary narrative which creates a clearer and more detailed picture of the character Catherine Mingott, and also of her formal function within the text itself. The position of the house is linked directly to Catherine Mingott's position within this society, and her views of the future of the society.

If we draw a little closer to this ekphrastic moment, as Wharton herself does as she develops her description of the Mingott mansion, we can see that Wharton's view of the exterior architecture of the house is consistent with what we already understand of Catherine Mingott's character. The exterior of the mansion is distinctively 'French' in that it was 'supposed to be modelled on the private hotels of the Parisian aristocracy'. (AI, 1025) The mansion is on the topographical periphery of the society's domain, yet it is still an integral element of the social fabric of New York City. We see that there are direct parallels between the Mingott mansion and Catherine Mingott in that she is once again seen as being a part of the New York

'aristocracy', whilst having strong links with European continent with its 'foreign society ...[and] corrupt and fashionable circles.' (AI, 1025) Wharton also makes the connection between the style of the exterior architecture (where the 'cream-coloured house was there as visible proof of [Catherine Mingott's] moral courage' (AI, 1025)) and Catherine's own position within the moral spectrum of old New York, further increasing our understanding of the importance which Wharton attributes to the lived environment within this text. The homes are not only

measures of [New York society's] wealth and taste but also, in a more subtle fashion, of their priorities, their authority, their recognition of consensually decreed standards of taste and behaviour, and their various degrees of hesitancy to depart from these standards.'³²

Catherine Mingott consistently deviates from the staid standards of 'taste and behaviour' which the general mass of New York society hold in such high esteem, and her choice of home (location, architecture, organisation and decoration) is truly indicative of her own strong personality.

Catherine Mingott hopes that one day the cobblestones outside her Fifth Avenue mansion will be replaced by 'smooth asphalt, such as people reported having seen in Paris' (AI, 1036). Her home is modelled after the 'private hotels of Parisian aristocracy' and the interior architecture mingles 'the Mingott heirlooms ... [with] the frivolous upholstery of the Second Empire' as well as with 'pre-Revolutionary furniture and souvenirs of the Tuileries of Louis Napoleon.' (AI, 1025) The interior environment which Catherine Mingott immerses herself in, like the exterior architecture of the Mingott mansion, is one which emphasises the comfortable

³² Chandler, '...Tribal Rites', 157

coexistence of both American and European influences. This fact underpins her attitudes towards New York society and the inevitable injection of new blood into the society.

Catherine Mingott's broad geo-cultural perspective enables her to widen her world view and her understanding of her own society, and also understand the nature of the world as it is in Europe and how it will influence *this* society in the near future. Once again, Catherine Mingott turns to the European influence in the structure of the internal architecture of her home:

The burden of Mrs. Manson Mingott's flesh had long since made it impossible for her to go up and down stairs, and with characteristic independence she had made her reception rooms upstairs and established herself (in flagrant violation of all the New York proprieties) on the ground floor of her house; so that, as you sat in her sitting-room window with her, you caught (through a door that was always open, and a looped-back yellow damask portiere) the unexpected vista of a bedroom with a huge low bed upholstered like a sofa, and a toilet-table with frivolous lace flounces and a gilt-framed mirror. (AI, 1037)

This layout comes close to that described by Wharton in *The Decoration of Houses* where she develops the idea of the drawing-room which in mediæval England was a "with-drawing-room" where 'the lady and her maidens retired from the boisterous festivities of the hall' (DII, 124-25). Later in France, the "with-drawing-room" would split into two rooms, the inner room being the 'sleeping chamber' and the outer room which was used 'not only for administering justice and receiving visits of state, but of informal entertainments and the social side of family life.' (DH, 124) Catherine Mingott does entertain (against the social proprieties of New York) in a home firmly established within the European tradition, reiterating further the overarching view that Catherine Mingott does not fear in the least the intermingling of differing cultural codes.

The cumulative elements which create a comprehensive description of Catherine Mingott's home result in a consistency and harmony between exterior location, the interior decoration and exterior architecture, but also a consistency in the lived environment as it pertains to Catherine Mingott herself. The architecture has a distinctive French patina, it is individual, and it foreshadows the mansions which will arrive at the top end of Fifth Avenue just a few years later. It breaks with the convention and proprieties of New York society in the early 1870s just as Catherine Mingott herself had done. Yet these 'idiosyncratic departures from architectural and social proprieties'³³ are not created by Wharton as a whim: they are created to firmly establish the genesis of the narrative of change which connects Wharton's three major New York novels.

The depiction of the Mingott mansion points to Catherine Mingott as a person who exists within society without adhering rigidly to the social conventions as understood by the social arbiters of that society (Laurence Lefferts and Sillerton Jackson). Wharton is providing the reader with a key to unlocking the inner selves of many of the main characters within this text by showing that there is linkage between exterior, interior and inmate. Our increased understanding of Mingott through an exploration of Wharton's description of her home opens up our understanding of Ellen Olenska who retains the 'wicked blood' (*AI*, 1138) of Catherine Mingott's father, old Bob Spicer, and is the only one who, as Catherine Mingott announces 'takes after me [Catherine Mingott]' (*AI*, 1137). This connects Ellen Olenska to Catherine Mingott in their similar attitudes toward convention, and her own understanding of both the old New York mind and that of

³³ Chandler, '...Tribal Rites', 157

the European as well. Ellen's downfall here is that she does not possess the wealth to project her will, nor protect her will, as her aunt does.

Although New York through its history has been characterised by currents of change, the core of the city has remained constant throughout. In *The Age of Innocence* we see that the topographical solidity of the street plan itself, and its inherent predictability, mirrors the social predictability of the old New York society which is inhabited by May Welland and Newland Archer. Yet the text, like the city itself, contains its originality and character within the detail.

The importance of Catherine Mingott's home is central to much of *The Age of Innocence* in that she is within *and* without the society of old New York. Carol Singley writes that *The Age of Innocence* 'develops two world views, one centred in the staid traditions of old New York, and the other in the dynamic life of Ellen Olenska.'³⁴ However, Catherine Mingott seems to me to embody a 'third world view.' She is established within 'the staid traditions of old New York' yet still retains many influences and attitudes of her time in Europe, influences which, without her genealogical and financial credentials, would put her on the *outside* of New York society.

We may look at May Welland as the personification of the staid social predictability of old New York and its isolationist ethos, and Ellen Olenska as being its antithesis in that she embodies the contradictory principles of sociable unpredictability and individuality within this particular social edifice. But with Catherine Mingott we have a woman who is very much a part of both these camps. She is undoubtedly an integral influence upon old New York society despite

³⁴ Carol J. Singley, *Edith Wharton: Matters of Mind and Spirit*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 165

the fact that she 'never had beauty'(AI, 1027), and was 'nothing but a vulgar Spicer'(AI, 1137) who in her younger years

mingled freely in foreign society, married her daughters in heaven knew what corrupt and fashionable circles, hobnobbed with Dukes and Ambassadors, associated familiarly with Papists, [and] entertained Opera singers.(AI, 1025)

Despite these social eccentricities, Catherine Mingott was 'bold' and retained a 'strength of will and hardness of heart'(AI, 1025) and most importantly exhibited 'extreme decency and dignity of her private life...' (AI, 1027) Catherine Mingott's unorthodoxy remains acceptable within the conservative New York society because her core values (a good personal reputation, linked with her financial wealth and probity), are those which lie at the centre of New York society.

In a society which guards its membership through carefully selected marital and commercial unions which help to solidify the financial foundations of their inherited wealth and position, Catherine Mingott's daughters are indicative of a time in the not too distant future when New York society could not sustain itself without marrying into money and position beyond the rarefied precincts of old New York. Edward Westermarck, whose works Wharton was familiar with, would write of the 'tendency of endogamous peoples to die out' and that 'it is a well-established fact' that in a small community where 'scarcely any members ... marry members of other communities' that they are more 'liable to every kind of deterioration than ... larger groups.'³⁵ Catherine Mingott's understanding of what was just over the 'social horizon' appears to reiterate the narrator's opening observations in the first chapter of the novel concerning 'the "new

³⁵ Edward Westermarck. *The History of Human Marriage*, 3rd edition. (London: Macmillan, 1903), 346-348 as quoted in 'Appendix F-5' - *The Age of Innocence* [1920], edited by Michael Nowlin. (New York: Broadview, 2002), 410-411.

people" whom New York 'was beginning to dread and yet be drawn to.' (AI, 1017)

Wharton has not chosen the temporal and spatial settings of this text by chance, nor has she chosen them solely for the sake of her nostalgic feelings about this time and place in her own life. She has chosen them because the text itself lies on a threshold; a threshold leading from the old order to a new order relying greatly on the financial power of the *nouveaux riches* for its overall fiscal health, where pure wealth and exogamous social unions will become pre-eminent. By the end of the novel, this particular point is shown through the up and coming marriage of May and Newland's son Dallas to Fanny Beaumont. Newland, and society as a whole, has accepted a new social structure which allows such a marriage, and indeed embraces it.

Catherine Mingott's characterisation foreshadows this union, as do the location, the architecture, and the decoration of her home. Each element fits neatly together to form a complete ekphrastic node, a highly visual ekphrasis which acts as a hieroglyph — a picture representing words — which once deciphered opens up a secondary narrative with Catherine Mingott at its centre, and which feeds directly into the theme of societal evolution and change.



COUNTESS ELLEN OLENSKA
(FAR DOWN) WEST 23RD STREET
NEW YORK CITY

WHILE THE TWO TOPOGRAPHICAL SITES ALREADY discussed establish the complexity of old New York society and a

possible discordant element evolving around this society, it is the relationship between Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska which is the lynchpin bringing all the elements together.

Newland Archer's first visit to Ellen Olenska in her 'hired' home 'far down West Twenty-third Street'(AI, 1067) is of central importance to a text where the relationship between Ellen and Newland is pivotal. Returning to my earlier analogy that this novel is primarily about the point of meeting of two 'trains travelling in opposite directions', this particular episode can be seen to be that moment of intersection. Obviously, Newland and Ellen have met before, but only within the rigidly policed structures of old New York society, and importantly, only in public. In viewing this episode as the point of intersection, the importance of this moment lies in the fact that it is the first private, face to face, engagement of these two important characters. Wharton emphasises this particular episode's structural importance by framing the interior element of the location in such a way that not only is the reader's perspective altered by the framing, but Newland Archer's perception is changed within this frame.

Newland Archer stands on the threshold of Madame Olenska's house on West Twenty-third Street where 'curiosity was his utmost feeling'(AI, 1070). The 'threshold' is a place of entry not only into this specific novelistic episode, but an entry into the Bakhtinian chronotope of the *threshold*. Bakhtin sees the chronotope in general as an 'organizing center' where spatial markers and temporal markers intersect and fuse. This creates a chronotope which allows us to read texts 'as x-rays of the forces at work in the culture system from which

they spring."³⁶ More specifically, the chronotope of the *threshold* operates within this matrix as one which is

highly charged with emotion and value, ... it can be combined with the motif of encounter, but its most fundamental instance is as the chronotope of *crisis* and *break* in life. The word "threshold" itself already has a metaphorical meaning in everyday usage (together with its literal meaning), and is connected with the breaking point of a life, the moment of crisis, the decision that changes a life (or the indecisiveness that fails to change a life, the fear to step over the threshold). In literature, the chronotope of the threshold is always metaphorical and symbolic, sometimes openly but more often implicitly ... In this chronotope, time is essentially instantaneous; it is as if it has no duration and falls out of the normal course of biographical time.³⁷

There is no doubt that this entire scene, played out within Ellen Olenska's home, is a chronotope of the threshold. The spatial markers in particular — location, description of exterior and interior decoration — are vividly constructed by Wharton. The temporal marker which gives the feeling that 'time is essentially instantaneous' occurs when Newland notices that the 'only visible specimen' of a clock in Ellen Olenska's drawing-room 'had stopped' (AI, 1070). Newland's understanding of the crossing of Ellen's threshold is linked to his implicit guilt at being there, as he understands that this is a point of 'crisis' in his life. Newland perceives that by crossing the threshold, he is crossing the threshold which has up to that point separated Newland and Ellen from a sexually charged environment which will facilitate their mutual attraction. But the merging of the chronotopic elements within this scene run parallel to Murray Krieger's 'still movement'³⁸ within ekphrasis where Krieger sees the multitude of understandings of this phrase as underpinning the essential nature of

³⁶ M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981: 250, 425-426.

³⁷ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 248.

³⁸ Where Murray Krieger, in his article 'Ekphrasis and the Still Movement of Poetry; or, *Laokoön* Revisited,' [1967], In: *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992: 263-288.

the ekphrastic episode in that it is the co-existence of the stasis (still) with which description is linked and the dynamic (movement), where narrative is linked. The descriptive elements in both ekphrasis and the chronotope are embedded in a static matrix, yet they simultaneously produce a micronarrative which informs and refracts the master narrative.

Like the location of all Wharton's buildings within her New York texts, the topographical site of a building is linked through its architectures to the residents themselves. Ellen Olenska's 'hired' home 'far down West Twenty-third Street' is *not* enclosed within Mrs. Archer's 'small slippery pyramid' (AI, 1096) — an accurate phrase used to describe the finite and precipitous nature of old New York's social hierarchies — but in a 'strange quarter' with denizens like 'dress-makers, bird-stuffers and "people who wrote".' (AI, 1069) Catherine Mingott may well live in the seemingly uncharted wilderness near Central Park, but she does have money and her reputation. Ellen has chosen to live in a 'bohemian' area of the city — '*des quartiers excentriques*' (AI, 1074) — an area which *is* 'charted' yet is not deemed *totally* unacceptable by mainstream New York society. It is a position which once again mirrors Ellen Olenska's positioning in the Mingott box at the opera, where she takes up a position which neither includes nor excludes her totally from the inner sanctum of New York society.

The street is 'dishevelled' and the house had 'peeling stucco ... with a giant wisteria throttling its feeble cast-iron balcony' (AI, 1069). As is the case with Catherine Mingott's mansion, Ellen's house is out of the ordinary, and is not the standard brownstone constructed townhouse of Mrs. Archer's circle. It is dislocated from the arena of New York's social kingdom just as Ellen Olenska herself is, yet

Newland is able to bridge this divide. Although he is a member of New York society, he keeps a toe in the 'cultural' waters of New York with his books, and his acquaintance with "fellows who wrote" ... musicians and ... painters' (AI, 1096) who he meets at his club, the Century Association; a club organised in 1847 to 'form an association of gentlemen of the city of New York ... engaged or interested in literature and the fine arts, with a view to their advancement, as well as the promotion of social intercourse.'³⁹

Ellen Olenska acknowledges her own peripherality, yet it seems to be what she wants:

"I like the little house," she admitted; "but I suppose what I like is the blessedness of its being here, in my own country and my own town; and then, of being alone in it." She spoke so low that he hardly heard the last phrase; but in his awkwardness he took it up.

"You like so much to be alone?"

"Yes; as long as my friends keep me from feeling lonely." (AI, 1073)

Ellen Olenska is acknowledging her independence outside the collective of New York society. She says, 'I suppose I've lived too independently,' thus establishing herself, like Archer, as one who is a part of society yet still able to move outside it. Once again, however, the similarities between Newland and Ellen are only on the surface. Reality will not allow them to exist together: where Newland is firmly ensconced within old New York society with solid reputation, money, family connections, and his gender, Ellen comes from the other direction: her gender, reputation (and we cannot forget that reputation and gender are intrinsically linked within all Wharton's fiction), financial position, and 'otherness' in terms of her European

³⁹ Quoted from Robert Stern, Thomas Mellins & David Fishman. *New York 1880: Architecture and Urbanism in the Gilded Age*. (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1999), 216. During the period of the novel the club would have been located at 109 East Fifteenth Street between Union Square and Irving Place, only a few yards from the Academy of Music.

background, firmly place her out with society. It is only her family connections which allow her a tenuous foothold in society itself.

Ellen Olenska has undertaken the transformation of the interior of this house into *her* interior. In an old New York society where objects expressed cost through their scale, materials and elaboration, Ellen Olenska's 'bits of wreckage' are notable for by their delicacy; her paintings are noteworthy in that in the eyes of Newland Archer (who believes himself to be educated in these matters) they are not recognised as being within the confines of New York's own understanding of what a fashionable Italian painting is and isn't.

Archer is 'bewildered'. He is bewildered by the sense of what he perceives to be Ellen's 'taste', which is not the taste defined by those who inhabit that narrow spine between the Hudson and East Rivers. This bewilderment at the interior of Ellen's home is mirrored by the Countess's own bewildered perception of a New York which on the surface she thought so simple in that it is 'so straight up and down — like Fifth Avenue ... with all the cross streets numbered'. (AI, 1076) She has, however, a dawning understanding of the labyrinthine qualities of this city.

This theme of social polarisation can be taken further when we look at the future home of May Welland and Newland Archer, which 'was thought remote':

[The] newly built house in East Thirty-ninth Street ... [was] built in a ghastly greenish-yellow stone that the younger architects were beginning to employ as a protest against the brownstone of which the uniform hue coated New York like a cold chocolate sauce. (AI, 1072)

Like the homes of Catherine Mingott and Ellen Olenska, Archer's prospective home is remote, and architecturally is of a form which differs from the ubiquitous brownstone of collective society. Yet in

terms of the city's spatial hierarchies the house is moving closer to the top of the island and is on the East side or the 'right side', thus keeping it within society's *cordon sanitaire*, and within Mrs. Archer's 'small slippery pyramid' which delineates New York society.

The framing device of the threshold to the Olenska house gives the reader a focus on a moment where time seemingly stands still, and a description is given which causes the perception of the reader to change from the verbal *to* the visual. This change in perspective is further enhanced by the important 'telescope' motif which runs through this chapter: another visual tool which aids in Wharton's control of how a reader will visualise the scene at its centre, and another device which helps frame the ekphrastic moment. It is here that Newland's own perception of his world is modified for a time, and importantly, as it is constructed through Newland Archer's own consciousness, it modifies how the reader perceives old New York society.

Newland Archer's entire perception of the exterior world (New York) changes once he enters Ellen Olenska's home. At the point of crossing 'Madame Olenska's threshold' into this realm, he has his first feelings of doubt and guilt, pondering on the fact that he 'meant to tell May of the Countess Olenska's request — her command, rather — that he should call on her that afternoon' (AI, 1070). The irony that Newland is not a 'free man' due to the fact that Ellen had appeared in New York, is not lost on him, and the implicit subtext here convinces Newland that this is all the more ironic due to his attraction to Ellen. Newland Archer feels great 'curiosity' as he is about to enter the house of the Countess, and this curiosity is not disappointed in any way. Crossing the threshold into Ellen's houses changes Newland Archer's

relative position concerning New York City and allows him to perceive that world in a different manner. He learns through being with Ellen Olenska, to 'open ... [his] eyes to things' which he had 'looked at so long' that he 'ceased to see them.' (AI, 1075) In Wharton's first outline of what was to become *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton wrote that 'Gradually Archer falls in love with [Ellen] & sees that life with May Welland, or any other young woman who has not had Ellen's initiation, would be unutterably dull.' Also, Ellen is perceived as being the personification of 'an Awful Warning to young girls with an inclination to "marry foreigners"' and who herself believes that "European corruption" has tainted her soul.' It seems that Wharton's general understanding of the character Ellen Olenska in her primary outlines was to be one of her symbolising an individual who has been 'infected' with some European disease which she will forever be unable to shake off. These obvious statements from the first outline to the novel are transformed into the 'faint implications' which would be expected from an author borne of the very society at the centre of the novel. Not only does this reinforce the unhealthy insularity of old New York society, but it also allows the reader of the final published work to comprehend where both Catherine Mingott and Newland Archer fit into the overall schemata in terms of their own 'infection' by the European disease.⁴⁰ The Countess's maid is Newland's first introduction to this 'other world' into which the Countess has already been initiated. The 'swarthy foreign-looking maid, with a prominent bosom under gay neckerchief' does not speak Newland's language, but he 'knew that the southern races communicated with each other in the

⁴⁰ Taken from Edith Wharton's "Subjects and Notes, 1918-1923" from the Edith Wharton Collection, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, In: 'Appendix C: Wharton's Outlines' — Edith Wharton. *The Age of Innocence* [1920], edited by Michael Nowlin. (New York: Broadview, 2002), 343-344.

language of pantomime, and was mortified to find her shrugs and smiles so unintelligible.' (AI, 1070) This fact introduces us into a world where communication on an initial level will *not* be verbal, but visual. Newland is unable to communicate verbally, which by and large is true of a New York society itself which is seen to communicate by 'faint implication and pale delicacies.' It is this non-verbal, visual communication which will establish the atmosphere of this interior:

What he saw, meanwhile, with the help of the lamp, was the faded shadowy charm of a room unlike any room he had known. He knew that the Countess Olenska had brought some of her possessions with her — bits of wreckage, she called them — and these, he supposed, were represented by some small slender tables of dark wood, a delicate little Greek bronze on the chimney-piece, and a stretch of red damask nailed on the discoloured wallpaper behind a couple of Italian-looking pictures in old frames. (AI, 1071)

This drawing-room in a house in New York City, 'by the turn of the hand, and the skilful use of a few properties, [had] been transformed into something intimate, "foreign," subtly suggestive of old romantic scenes and sentiments.' (AI, 1071-72) Newland's new perspective locates him within a 'romantic scene' and places him at such a distance from New York that 'it seemed much farther off than Samarkand.' (AI, 1076) This implied detachment from New York whilst under the influence of the atmospheric drawing-room of the Countess Ellen Olenska

makes him look at his native city objectively. Viewed thus, as through the wrong end of a telescope, it looked disconcertingly small and distant; but then from Samarkand it would. (AI, 1076)

This 'new' perspective allows him to see the talismanic nature of the van der Luydens (the *first family* of New York society in both a literal and figurative sense) implode when Ellen points out that like any commodity, the value increases the rarer it becomes: 'At a stroke she had pricked the van der Luydens and they collapsed.' (AI, 1075) This

is the climax of the earlier episode where Ellen described the van der Luyden mansion as 'gloomy' and Newland felt an 'electric shock' which thrilled him.

This room whose 'atmosphere ... was so different from any he had ever breathed' allows Newland, who has an educated aesthetic palate, to build another world within this room, a world which is as intoxicating to him as Ellen herself. 'Newland Archer prided himself on his knowledge of Italian art. His boyhood had been saturated with Ruskin, and he had read all the latest books on art: John Addington Symonds, Vernon Lee's "Euphorion," the essays of P.G. Hamerton, and a wonderful new volume called "The Renaissance" by Walter Pater. He talked easily of Botticelli, and spoke of Fra Angelico with a faint condescension.' (AI, 1071) The spell is broken when reality begins to appear when the Countess weeps. In comforting her Newland slips out of his trance-like state:

It was burnt into his consciousness that he had called her "Ellen" — called her so twice; and that she had not noticed it. Far down the inverted telescope he saw the faint white figure of May Welland — in New York' (AI, 1077)

And now the spell is broken. The Duke of St. Austrey enters the scene with Mrs. Struthers, and Newland is soon back out onto the 'wintry street' where 'New York again became vast and immanent.' (AI, 1078) The telescope now viewed through the proper sight, is upon him, and time begins to move once again.

Wharton further reiterates the 'otherness', yet simultaneously the attraction, of Ellen's house in this conversation between the Countess and Newland Archer:

"How do you like my funny little house?" she asked. "To me it's like heaven."

As she spoke she untied her little velvet bonnet and tossing it away with her long cloak stood looking at him with meditative eyes.

"You've arranged it delightfully," he rejoined, alive to the flatness of the words, but imprisoned in the conventional by his consuming desire to be simple and striking.

"Oh, it's a poor little place. My relations despise it. But at any rate it's less gloomy than the van der Luydens'."

The words gave him an electric shock, for few were the rebellious spirits who would have dared to call the stately home of the van der Luydens gloomy. Those privileged to enter it shiver there, and spoke it as "handsome." But suddenly he was glad that she had given voice to the general shiver. (AI, 1073)

With the van der Luydens considered as being close to the apex of the 'small and slippery pyramid' which symbolised New York society in the eyes of many, we may well expect Newland Archer to feel an 'electric shock' when their home in New York is described as 'gloomy'. Yet 'gloomy' precisely describes the Madison Avenue townhouse of Louisa and Henry van der Luyden.



MR. & MRS. HENRY VAN DER LUYDEN
MADISON AVENUE
NEW YORK CITY

THE ADJECTIVE 'GLOOMY' HAS RESONANCES OF AN OLD HOME, an often *uninhabited* home, a home of the *past*. There is no doubt that the general timbre of the descriptions of the van der Luyden's drawing-room in their mansion on Madison Avenue, is one of the past. Yet when Newland Archer acknowledges that the 'large shrouded room' was 'so complete an image of its owners' (AI, 1058) we cannot fail to see that there is more complex machinery at work.

Once again, Wharton directs us towards the harmonies involved in the complex lived environments contained within *The Age of Innocence*. I use the term 'harmonies' in order to once again reiterate

Wharton's construction of environments which have at their core the intricate relationship between character and milieu. There is an undoubted harmony which exists between all the characters discussed and their homes, where the home underpins the character's position within the city's social hierarchy as well as delineating the attitudes of the residents too. Wharton locates the van der Luyden mansion on Madison Avenue, most probably located somewhere between 24th and 34th Streets, thus locating it in a *central* longitudinal location between the Washington Square of another old aristocratic New York family, the Dagonets, and the Mingott mansion on Fifth Avenue between 57th and 58th Streets. The van der Luyden mansion is also placed on the *right-hand* side of Fifth Avenue, thus further enhancing and defining a spatial location which would be perfectly connected to the social position of the inhabitants of this mansion.

The progress of New York City in many respects followed Broadway as it sliced its way diagonally thorough the city. Madison Square, being another important node where Broadway intersects an avenue, and not just any avenue but Fifth Avenue, is where Madison Avenue begins, and as M. Christine Boyer writes in *Manhattan Manners: Architecture and Style* 'The Madison Square Presbyterian Church was the first indication that residential buildings would follow when it was constructed in 1853 at Twenty-fourth Street and Madison Avenue. By the late 1850s the homes of New York's first families could be found on all the adjacent side streets between Fourth and Sixth Avenues.'⁴¹ The van der Luydens can undoubtedly be classified as one 'of New York's first families', and as the upper reaches of both Madison and Fifth Avenues (above 42nd Street) were

⁴¹ M. Christine Boyer, *Manhattan Manners: Architecture and Style 1850-1900*, New York: Rizzoli, 1985: 50

still relatively undeveloped, it would be fair to assume that the van der Luyden mansion was placed somewhere between 24th and 34th Streets, as in its description in *The Age of Innocence* it seems to have been a firmly established home for some time.

Yet, in Wharton's novel *The Buccaneers*, set contemporaneously with *The Age of Innocence*, some doubt is cast on this particular location when she writes of the inappropriateness of this address during one of the few short passages set in New York

When Colonel St George bought his house in Madison Avenue it seemed to him fit to satisfy the ambitions of any budding millionaire. That it had been built and decorated by one of the Tweed ring, who had come to grief earlier than his more famous fellow-criminals, was to Colonel St George convincing proof that it was a suitable setting for wealth and elegance. But social education is acquired rapidly in New York, even by those who have to absorb it through the cracks of the sacred edifice; and Mrs. St George had already found out that no one lived in Madison Avenue, that the front hall should have been painted Pompeian red with a stencilled frieze, and not with naked Cupids and humming birds on a sky-blue ground, and that basement dining-rooms were unknown to the fashionable.

...
The Colonel, who was insensitive to details, continued to be proud of his house; even when the Elmsworths, suddenly migrating from Brooklyn, had settled themselves in Fifth Avenue he would not admit his mistake, or feel the humiliation of the contrast. And yet what a difference it made to a lady to be able to say "Fifth Avenue" in giving her address to Black, Starr and Frost, or to Mrs Connelly, the fashionable dress-maker! In establishments like that they classed their customers at once, and "Madison Avenue" stood at best for a decent mediocrity.⁴²

This passage offers an important insight into the van der Luydens in that although they are socially at the top of the tree, they are physically being left behind as the Dagonets would be in *The Custom of the Country*, and can be seen as being little more than "decent mediocrity" in the whole scheme of old New York society.

⁴² Edith Wharton, *Fast and Loose & The Buccaneers*, [1977 & 1938], edited by Viola Hopkins Winner (Charlottesville and London: University Press Virginia, 1993):182-83

Next, we can note that Wharton spends no time on the exterior architecture of this environment, and as one of the true patriarchs of old New York society, there is *no* exterior ostentation in the van der Luydens' architecture. Wharton instead moves directly to the central focal point of the episode, the drawing-room itself, which appears as a long-abandoned and forgotten room. The 'monumental ormolu clock on the white marble mantelpiece' has 'gauze still veiling' it, keeping it as it was when the van der Luydens were previously here. This could have been the previous winter, or it could have been twenty years ago. In a 'high-ceilinged white-walled ... drawing-room' time itself slows down to such a pace that the 'tick of the ... ormolu clock ... grew as loud as the boom of a minute-gun.' This scene is as static as any within this text, and it is deliberately so. The van der Luyden mansion is located in another temporal plane, as are the inhabitants, as are their values and outlook.

The two slender figures within this edifice on Madison Avenue seemed to have been 'gruesomely preserved in the airless atmosphere of a perfectly irreproachable existence, as bodies caught in glaciers keep for years a rosy life-in-death'(AI, 1056-59) and are thus in total harmony with the timelessness of the mansion itself. The portrait dating from twenty years before this visit, of Louisa van der Luyden wearing 'black velvet and Venetian point', is no different from Louisa as she is today in the flesh. Likewise, Henry van der Luyden, 'spare and frock-coated, with faded fair hair, a straight nose like his wife's and the same look of frozen gentleness in eyes that were merely pale grey instead of pale blue', is another gently faded picture of the past. Both Henry and Louisa van der Luyden, perceived as 'merged identities'(AI, 1057), inhabiting a 'super terrestrial twilight,'(AI,

1054), are locked into an existence in which they are used as a talismanic artefact 'of some remote ancestral authority' (AI, 1058), which will not only bind the families of old New York together, but will ward off the ever-pervasive influences of change which have been a part of the fabric of the city since its birth.

This entire description of this particular topographical site has very strong elements of ekphrasis throughout. The static nature of the portrayal of the van der Luydens and their environment, through not only the mode of verbal description, but also through implicit and explicit statements relating to the van der Luydens themselves, establishes the basis of the ekphrasis. It is the secondary narrative which is created *through* the description which evokes an ekphrasis which makes the point about how the van der Luydens are perceived by the society, as well as how they are used by that society to attempt to allay any movement *with the times*. Yet, the power of this particular description is increased all the more by the contrast with what is a diametrically opposite position and timbre, the Beauforts of Fifth Avenue.



MR. & MRS. JULIUS BEAUFORT
FIFTH AVENUE
NEW YORK CITY

WHERE THE VAN DER LUYDENS REFRAIN from any public show of their existence and wealth, Julius and Regina Beaufort publicly display their wealth through their Fifth Avenue mansion, which was perceived as the 'most distinguished house in New York.'

The Beaufort's 'heavy brown-stone palace'(AI, 1031) lies *on* Fifth Avenue, the spine of the city itself, where the flow of traffic would fix this house firmly on a very public location in terms of both its position (on the *central* axis of the city) and its architecture.

By having their annual ball on an Opera night they indicate to the world that they employ enough people to take care of such arrangements in their absence whilst at the Opera themselves; having a ballroom which was 'left for three-hundred-and-sixty-four days of the year to shuttered darkness, with its gilt chairs stacked in a corner and its chandelier in a bag'(AI, 1030) indicates the importance to the Beauforts of public display, by creating a room for the sole purpose of the ball which is used but one evening a year. They have their own 'red velvet carpet and have it rolled down the steps by their own footmen, under their own awning.'(AI, 1032) This is a home which has been 'boldly planned' with public display as its prime function, and contrasts absolutely with the private and subdued van der Luyden mansion.

The interior of the house, in planning and detail, once again underpins the idea that public display of wealth is a core function of this mansion's existence. In order to enter the ballroom, the house is designed so that

instead of squeezing through a narrow passage ... one marched down a vista of enfiladed drawing-rooms (the sea-green, the crimson and the *bouton d'or*), seeing from afar the many-candled lustres reflected in their polished parquetry, and beyond that the depths of the conservatory where camellias and tree-ferns arched their costly foliage over seats of black and gold bamboo.' (AI, 1032)

Newland Archer arrives late and 'dawdles' in the Beaufort library 'hung with Spanish leather and furnished with Buhl and malachite.' (AI, 1032) a library which, in many ways, could be the library of

Elmer Moffatt in a future incarnation of New York City in *The Custom of the Country*. Eric Hobsbawm explains a purpose for such decoration:

Objects express their cost and, at a time when most domestic ones were still produced largely by manual crafts, elaboration was largely an index of cost together with expensive materials. Cost also brought comfort, which was therefore visible as well as experienced. Yet objects were more than merely utilitarian or symbols of status and achievement. They had value in themselves as expressions of personality, as both the programme and the reality of bourgeois life, even as *transformers* of man.⁴³

The Beaufort mansion is constructed as a 'transformer of man' and indeed the transformer of woman, exemplified in the transformation of Mrs. Beaufort:

Mrs. Beaufort belonged indeed to one of America's most honoured families; she had been the lovely Regina Dallas ... a penniless beauty introduced to New York society by her cousin, the imprudent Medora Manson, who was always doing the wrong thing from the right motive (AI, 1030)

Also, Julius Beaufort cannot escape the seed of doubt planted in the 'business conscience' of New York City with the rumour of his being "helped" to leave England by the international banking house by which he had been employed.'(AI, 1031) The Beauforts' financial display of strength, of their *ownership* of the trappings of wealth (as opposed to the rental of the trappings of wealth), to some degree, has transformed them — society attends their social functions albeit with an understanding that the 'Beauforts were not exactly common ... they were even worse.'(AI, 1030) It seems to be fitting, in the overall pattern of the text, that the impending financial ruin of Julius Beaufort causes him to attempt one final roll of the dice. He 'hires' a spectacular emerald necklace which Regina Beaufort wears to the Opera one evening. In the eyes of New York society, those factors which allowed the Beauforts' membership of New York society —

⁴³ E. J. Hobsbawm. *The Age of Capital, 1848-1875*. (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975), 231

family, wealth, and reputation — have been irreconcilably altered. The most powerful weapon the Beauforts had, their wealth, has gone, and the *rental* of the trappings of wealth is now indicative of their fall from grace.



THE PRIMARY NARRATIVE OF *The Age of Innocence* tells a tale of the doomed affections of Newland Archer for his fiancé's exotic cousin, the Countess Ellen Olenska, in the face of the rigid rituals and rules of a powerful New York society. Placing New York City at the centre of this tale begins to alter the tale on a subterranean level. Specific topographical sites within the text function in many ways as Bruno Latour's 'black-boxes' do⁴⁴: they provide an effect without explicitly stating the process which produces the effect in question.

In this chapter I have looked at the process in question, one of illumination through *ekphrasis*, which in itself is an act of deciphering the visual images constructed within the text. An ekphrasis of a topographical site in this novel is a description of a location within New York which contains a subterranean secondary narrative which offers greater semantic detail to the reader in order to aid their understanding of the text. Each topographical site which I have analysed acts as a prism through which the master narrative is refracted, thus changing the nature of the novel in its process. As is the case with any exercise in deciphering, the reader is now in possession of more information than he/she had before, information

⁴⁴ Bruno Latour. *Science in Action*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987: 2-3.

which can only increase their comprehension of this carefully crafted text, and established the germinating idea of change in this particular old New York society, at this particular time.

The narrative strategy which is underpinned by this use of the *illuminating incidents*⁴⁵ or ekphrases within the text, is one where the scope, power, and conflicts of the society are rendered through the opening scene at the Academy of Music. The importance, stability and vitality of particular positions within the upper echelons of this society are established and commented upon through the descriptions of the locations and structures of the homes of the van der Luydens, the Beauforts and Catherine Mingott. Understanding the mansions of these characters is vital for an understanding of the characters themselves.

Finally, the detailed description within the novel of Ellen Olenska's home becomes the focal point of the novel, as this is the moment of intersection of the two primary protagonists, Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska. They are in an environment which is foreign to that of old New York society and are then able to communicate outside the taciturn society within which they generally exist.

This point is not only a point of meeting, but is the moment in the text where, through Newland Archer's consciousness, we begin to gain a clearer view of a society which has been veiled by 'faint implications and pale delicacies.' It is this shift in perception, catalysed through the description of Ellen Olenska's home on West

⁴⁵ There are many terms used within this chapter concerning the analysis of the text, namely 'illuminating incidents' chronotope, ekphrasis. Ekphrasis is the over-riding term which lies at the heart of the analysis as it is the written description of a scene, art object, building or event. The ekphrasis makes a scene more vivid thus making a reader focus on the semantic definition. The description in its own right may be narratologically at a stop, but what is being described holds within it a secondary narrative which refracts the master narrative. The ekphrases

Twenty-third Street, which tells the reader more about *the* real main protagonist of the novel, old New York society, and in particular establishes the narrative of change which is carried forward through *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country*.

A novel constructed around Newland Archer's aesthetically acute consciousness offers the reader an insight into this particular society through what can be seen as the *sub*-conscious vision of Archer. The society initially has the strength and purity of the original patrician society, but there are hints about its failing health as old society becomes drawn to the 'new people' with the 'new money' who were beginning to make their new mark on society. The van der Luydens and their home, described as 'fading', brings about an understanding that although they seem not to be getting any older, their influence is indeed fading. Conversely, the disgraced Regina Beaufort — who married into 'new' money and was seen to be 'growing younger and blonder and more beautiful every year.' (AI, 1031) — is the example of the restorative and transforming powers of incredible wealth. Catherine Mingott 'sees' the society changing, and is comfortable with this to a certain degree. Her whole being is one which has existed in both the old New York and European societies, which appear throughout the novel to be an anathema to each other, but is an exemplar of how the society *will* function and flourish in the future. These are the themes in which Edith Wharton would immerse herself in both *The Buccaneers* and more importantly, as I shall discuss in chapter four, *The Custom of the Country*.



in this analysis are of places in particular, yet these same analyses intersect with Wharton's understanding of her 'illuminating incidents' and Bakhtin's chronotopes.



Beyond!': The Bart Milieu



'But every man Jack when he first sets foot on the stones of Manhattan has got to fight. He has got to fight at once until either he or his adversary wins. There is no resting between rounds, for there are no rounds. It is slugging from the first. It is a fight to a finish. Your opponent is the City. ... And, oh, the city is a general in the ring. Not only by blows does it seek to subdue you. It woos you to its heart with the subtlety of a siren. It is a combination of Delilah, green Chartreuse, Beethoven, chloral and John L. in his best days.'

O. Henry¹

'Most reckless things are beautiful in some way.'

John Ashbery²



The ease with which critics have pigeonholed Edith Wharton's major fiction as 'novels of manners' shows a distinct lack of imagination and intellectual rigour in the reading of her major fiction. *The House of Mirth*, in particular, has very strong naturalist credentials and Barbara Hochman writes that this novel 'neatly exemplify[ies] the "naturalist" plot of individual decline, with its concern for the pressures of environment and circumstance, and its

¹ O. Henry [pseud. of William Sydney Porter]. 'The Duel' [1910] In: Kenneth T. Jackson & David S. Dunbar, eds. *Empire City: New York Through the Centuries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 497

² From 'An Interview with John Ashbery.' In: Richard Kostelanetz, ed. *American Writing Today*, volume I, (Washington DC: US International Communication Agency, 1982), 270

focus on forces (both inner and outer) beyond the control of the characters'.³ The fiction of Edith Wharton is seldom discussed with a naturalist critique to the fore, yet throughout her fiction Wharton has consistently understood the vital importance of both heredity and environment upon her own fiction. Wharton's own appreciation of the naturalist tenets within literature can be gleaned from *The Writing of Fiction*, where she writes of the importance of the 'relation of [...] characters to their houses, streets, towns, professions, inherited habits and opinions' (WF, 8) in Balzac's fiction in particular, but implicit within this appreciative view is that these elements are also important in Wharton's own writing. Wharton's undoubted appreciation of Balzac and the principles which underpinned his fiction can be found within much of her own writing, but *The House of Mirth* in particular places a great emphasis upon the environments within which Lily Bart locates herself as not only indicators of her social disintegration, but in some ways, *causes* of her social disintegration.

Wharton's own personal understanding of her own environments throughout her life, and their palpable aesthetic and emotional importance to her, can be seen in her own statement that she 'always saw the visible world as a series of pictures more or less harmoniously composed'.⁴ She goes on to say that she had a 'secret sensitiveness to the landscape'; that she perceived the 'unifying magic beneath the diversities of the visible scene' (BG, 824); and that from a young age she had a 'photographic memory of rooms and houses' (BG, 805). All these statements support the fact that the visible world, in

³ Barbara Hochman, 'The Awakening and *The House of Mirth*: Plotting Experience and Experiencing Plot,' in: Donald Pizer, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism: Howells to London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 212.

⁴ As quoted in Eleanor Dwight, *Edith Wharton: An Extraordinary Life* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 8.

terms of landscape and architecture, had a very important role to play in Edith Wharton's life and fiction, and they also point to the fact that although ekphrasis and the chronotope are excellent general theories, her own aesthetic theories held within her biographical and other non-fiction writings are the real foundations of this analysis.

Wharton's vivid descriptions throughout *The House of Mirth* — of the varied environments or milieus which Lily Bart passes through — can be read as ekphrastic descriptions. The descriptive detail used by Wharton to construct her milieus is enhanced by the connotative information already located with the reader, and the resultant micronarrative — subterranean to the master narrative but certainly not of lesser importance — enhances the reading of the text as a whole.



WHERE NEW YORK CITY OF THE 1870s in *The Age of Innocence* was a 'remembered place' for Edith Wharton — writing the novel in France during 1919-20; the New York City of the 1900s in *The House of Mirth* was a 'lived place' at the time of its composition, with Wharton still resident on Park Avenue. The publication chronology of Wharton's three major New York novels is as follows: 1905 - *The House of Mirth*, 1913 - *The Custom of the Country*, and 1920 - *The Age of Innocence*. Yet they are set respectively in c1900, c1910 and c1875. As a group of three texts which address the mechanics of change within New York society at different periods, Wharton has an excellent sense of the period as can be seen through many of her writings, and importantly for these particular novels, Wharton has

lived, recognised and 'painted' these particular versions of New York with some degree of skill and accuracy.

Wharton does struggle, however, with her rendering of the city and its society in both *Twilight Sleep* (1927) and *Hudson River Bracketed* (1929). These novels are set contemporaneously with their publication, and having not been resident in New York for almost 20 years, and having visited only once since 1913, Wharton did not have the requisite social, geographical or architectural knowledge of those particular versions of New York. She does not offer a detailed rendering of the city in either novel, and as such, an ekphrastic reading is not possible to the degree reached in the novels being analysed in this thesis. Once again, we can compare New York to Schliemann's Troy in that the cities of *Twilight Sleep* and *Hudson River Bracketed* are new cities built upon those illustrated masterfully in her three major New York novels, where she was writing of the city which she had inhabited or was inhabiting.

Candace Waid writes that as early as 1902, Wharton was at work on a New York novel entitled "Disintegration", a novel which would remain unfinished, though elements from "Disintegration" would find their way into *The House of Mirth* (original working title "A Moment's Ornament") which Wharton may have started composing as early as 1903 and completed in 1905.⁵ In terms of the narrative of change which exists through Wharton's three major New York novels, "Disintegration" seems to be an apt source for some elements which found their way into *The House of Mirth*; apt in the sense that where *The Age of Innocence* implied that the currents of change were on the

⁵ See Candace Waid, 'Building *The House of Mirth*.' In: James Barbour & Tom Quirk, eds. *Biographies of Books: The Compositional Histories of Notable American Writings*. (Columbia & London: University of Missouri Press, 1996).

visible but distant horizon, *The House of Mirth* would acknowledge the imminent arrival of the nouveaux riches, not only through understanding Lily Bart's own journey but through the explicit arrival of Norma Hatch towards the end of the novel, foreshadowing the spectre of Undine Spragg and all that she represents in *The Custom of the Country*.

Wharton wrote *The House of Mirth* from within New York society, and as a result, on publication she had a distinctly critical reception from some within New York society. Wharton wrote of *The House of Mirth*:

This supposed picture of their little circle, secure behind its high stockade of convention, alarmed and disturbed the rulers of Old New York. If the book had been the work of an outsider, of some barbarian reduced to guessing at what went on behind the stockade, they would not so much have minded — might have laughed over its absurdities, or, more probably, not even heard of its existence. But here was a tale written by one of themselves, a tale deliberately slandering and defiling their most sacred institutions and some of the most deeply revered members of the clan! And what picture did the writer offer to their horrified eyes? That of a young girl of their world who rouged, smoked, ran into debt, borrowed money, gambled, and — crowning horror! — went home with a bachelor friend to take tea in his flat!⁶

The 'picture' which Wharton offered to the 'horrified eyes' of her 'clan' in writing *The House of Mirth* was one which lacked the precise topographical sites we have analyzed in *The Age of Innocence*. There is no Academy of Music which can epitomize the sophisticated dynamics of old New York society in such an oblique yet effective manner; there are no *easily* decipherable domiciles like that of Catherine Mingott's marble mansion in the New York hinterland which so clearly offers a prescient view of the future of old New York society. Yet within *The House of Mirth* there is still the city itself. With the inhabitants of this

⁶ Edith Wharton, 'Introduction to *The House of Mirth*,' [1936] in: *The Uncollected Critical Writings*, edited with an introduction, by Frederick Wegener. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 268

particular novel and their own less concrete but still powerful milieus, there continues to exist a basis for the ekphrastic analysis of the city.

As has been stated in the previous chapters, classical ekphrasis has its modern analogues in Wordsworth's 'spots of time', Woolf's 'moments of truth' and in particular Joyce's 'epiphanies'. Of these, it is the epiphanic trope which has been most consistently discussed in recent years. In particular it was Ashton Nichols who was most articulate in discussing the concept:

The notion that a powerfully felt, momentary experience can be transformed by the mind into a significant image plays a central role in Romantic theories of poetic meaning. The new literary epiphany reverses traditional ideas about inspiration by providing a poetic technique in which meaning emerges only after the interpretation of the revelatory moment.⁷

Although he is primarily dealing with 'Romantic theories of poetic meaning' there are no obstacles to the application of this concept to the novel itself, as Proust, Joyce and Faulkner have shown. The nature of an ekphrasis, as outlined in chapter one, examined *enargeia* within a verbally descriptive context, it was the *enargeia* which made 'vivid' the description, thus raising semantic awareness through the vivid description in the mind's eye, much like the 'emergent meaning' in Ashton's definition of the 'revelatory moment' above. Wharton's delineation of Lily Bart's journey through the many 'circles' of New York society is the device by which the emergent meaning from this particular novel surfaces, and also the device which drives the three novels forward.



⁷ Ashton Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany: Nineteenth-Century Origins of the Modern Literary Moment*. (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1987), xi

IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND THE NATURE of the 'Bart Milieu' of this chapter's title, we must first understand that Lily Bart *has* no milieu. Her milieu is, in actuality, 'beyond' whatever milieu the reader is located in whilst reading the novel. At no time is Lily Bart firmly established within a setting that she can call her own. This is the predicament which lies at the heart of *The House of Mirth*, and it is the source of the narrative drive of the novel.

In *The House of Mirth* — set around a quarter of a century later than *The Age of Innocence* in *fin-de-siècle* New York — Wharton writes of the transience and fragility of wealth and beauty. Lily Bart's journeys within New York City serve to focus the reader's mind upon her place as a beautiful 'ornament' within this society, a 'highly specialized product' which would be as 'helpless out of its narrow range as the sea-anemone torn from the rock.' (*HM*, 235) Lily Bart's narrow range is just that, and her progress through the novel is defined by the narrowing of that range through a series of decisions and circumstances that move her through a succession of milieus which are not her own.

Lily Bart self-consciously strives to find her own place in *The House of Mirth*. She desires to be at the centre of society, within the rarefied atmosphere of a citadel she can call her own. Yet through Wharton's use of the topographical site we come to understand that Lily is *never* established at the centre of her desired environment, but is always on the threshold of each environment, at the edges of the 'carefully differentiated strata' referred to by Diana Trilling.⁸ It is Carolyn Heilbrun's understanding of this threshold position or

⁸ Diana Trilling, 'The House of Mirth Revisited.' In: Irving Howe, ed. *Edith Wharton: A Collection of Critical Essays*. (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 106

'limen', which establishes a clearer understanding of how the topographical sites in the novel function as a series of ekphrases which will allow us to identify with Lily Bart's singular journey:

The word 'limen' means 'threshold,' and to be in a state of liminality is to be poised upon uncertain ground, to be leaving one condition or country or self and entering upon another. But the most salient sign of liminality is its unsteadiness, its lack of clarity about exactly where one belongs and what one should be doing, or wants to be doing.⁹

This statement on liminality, particularly as it pertains to the position of women in society, precisely defines Lily Bart's precarious existence in relation to New York society, and it is her 'unsteadiness' and her 'lack of clarity' which mirrors the 'unsteadiness' of New York society as its *cordon sanitaire* is breached by the insurgent *nouveaux riches*.

At the age of twenty-nine, and with no inherited fortune from her parents, Lily will be consistently 'unsteady' until she marries or inherits from someone else within her family. It is also obvious at an early stage in the novel, in her dealings with prospective husband Percy Gryce, that she has clarity of purpose concerning her future, but is not willing to take the necessary steps to realise this purpose. Lily Bart's journey is one which maps onto a fluctuating liminal position. Lily never stays on the threshold of one particular milieu in the novel, but moves through increasingly socially isolated milieus.

As a woman without any strong familial or financial roots in the world in general, and in New York City in particular, Lily Bart has nothing to anchor her to any single location. This lack of physical mooring feeds into her lack of mental mooring, particularly in terms of decision-making. She is a beautiful kite blowing in the wind, who keeps herself just out of reach of those who can bring her under control. Where location was an intrinsic element in the understanding

of the delicate mechanics of old New York society in *The Age of Innocence*, the lack of these firm locations in *The House of Mirth* calls upon an analysis based upon the incompatibility of Lily Bart with the spatial milieus which she passes through as the novel progresses. Wharton, through her work on interior and landscape design,¹⁰ believed in a harmony between inhabitant, domicile, and landscape. In reading Wharton's New York novels in particular, a cipher is apparent which enables us to understand the mechanics of her texts. In this particular context the reader perceives a series of discrete details which have a broader and more complex meaning once they have been deciphered using a key. The key, in looking at Wharton's New York novels, is her own keen aesthetic sense coupled with her understanding of harmony between inmate, building and landscape. It should also be noted that cipher is another term for 'hieroglyph': an image standing for words, or a sign having some hidden meaning.

The ekphrases involved in the major New York novels covered in this thesis are the strongest in all Wharton's fiction. Her innate understanding of the intricacies of the social machine that is New York society, in the periods covered by the three novels (1870s -- 1910s), is at its strongest here as this was the period that Wharton herself was a *part* of that society. *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907) and *Ethan Frome* (1911) both have distinct naturalistic tendencies concerning environment and the relationship to characterisation, yet they lack the sophistication and comment implicit within the New York ekphrases, a sophistication which is lacking as Wharton did not have the innate

⁹ Carolyn G. Heilbrun. *Women's Lives: The View From the Threshold*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 3

¹⁰ See *The Decoration of Houses* (1897) [with Ogden Codman, Jr.]; *Italian Villas and their Gardens* (1904) and: *Italian Backgrounds* (1905).

knowledge of these areas as she did the New York of this particular period.

In Lily Bart, we have a peripatetic protagonist, and as such, we do not have firm contexts which might enable us to ekphrastically decode, frame and read the character as was the case in *The Age of Innocence*. This, however, is exactly the point. Lily Bart lacks a room of her own, as it were, and it is her incompatibility with the environments she passes through which is the central focus of this chapter.



ALTHOUGH THE NOVEL MOVES THROUGH several geographies — Bellomont, Monte Carlo, Hudson Valley, Long Island and Tuxedo — it is New York City which plays a pivotal role in creating a more incisive understanding of *The House of Mirth*. Lily Bart's journey begins at the centre of the city (the centre here being Grand Central Station) and the centre of society, and through centrifugal social forces she is catapulted through a succession of milieus until she reaches the 'outside' edge of her city in her final days at the boarding-house. Although we are aware of the surface mechanics of Lily's movement through different social environments, it is an ekphrastic understanding of the milieus Lily inhabits through the novel which offer an enlightened understanding of Lily Bart's character and flaws, as well as that of the city and society itself.

In terms of ekphrasis, New York City functions in a similar way in *The House of Mirth* to that in *The Age of Innocence*. A particular topographical site or environment is examined in terms of its location within New York; its hierarchical position within the city; its exterior

architecture and its interior architecture. By accessing our 'store-house of images derived from sensory perception and informed by common culture'¹¹ we are able to *image* Lily Bart's environments and decode the novel in a more efficient and insightful manner. Through a series of these analyses we will see how Wharton has used the overarching ekphrasis of New York City (and all that the city represents) to increase the semantic complexity of the novel.

With *The House of Mirth*, we do not have a text which has the obvious topographical sites that *The Age of Innocence* has. The former, on first inspection, can undoubtedly be seen to be much closer to the contemporary understanding of ekphrasis in its analysis of Lily Bart herself, as a commodified object of beauty and value. The novel's original working title of 'A Moment's Ornament' points toward this as does the pivotal *tableaux vivants* scene in chapter XII of the first book of *The House of Mirth*. These elements are undoubtedly deeply connected to the visual arts¹², yet they are not the primary material which I will be looking at. These elements have their own importance within the text, and the deciphering of these particular 'images' — from an ekphrastic point of view — is rather straightforward.

In this analysis of *The House of Mirth* I will be concentrating on the city itself within the text. This study will not focus on the *firm* relative hierarchies that were involved in the analysis of *The Age of Innocence*, but will investigate Lily Bart's fluid transitions through a series of social environments within the text. Lily's passage through society is indicated through the reading of each topographical site. As

¹¹ Ruth Webb, 'Ekphrasis ancient and modern: the invention of a genre,' *Word & Image*, 15.1 (January-March 1999): 13

¹² For an excellent analysis of Lily Bart's own personal aesthetic construction and value see Reginald Abbott, "'A Moment's Ornament': Wharton's Lily Bart and Art Nouveau," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, 24.2 (1991): 73-91

well as each reading having intrinsic literary worth in terms of comment on society and characterization, the overview of Lily Bart's movement through a whole series of settings will serve to emblemize her social decent and parallel geographical peripheralisation.

Like *The Age of Innocence* in the previous chapter and *The Custom of the Country* in the next chapter, New York City has a pre-eminent position within the mechanics of the text. The city's commercial and cultural pre-eminence is intrinsically linked to New York society and its relationship to the commodity, and commoditisation is of central importance in this text.¹³ Success in *The House of Mirth* is seen in the attainment of wealth and position (and the appropriate home which goes along with such wealth), yet the power of wealth, as Robert Gates writes, 'crushes and subverts the finer instincts ... Justice, honour, courage, love — all are sacrificed in the search for wealth and a false security against poverty and loneliness.'¹⁴ Time has moved on, as has New York society, and as Catherine Mingott in *The Age of Innocence* had hinted, the old order themselves would be superseded by a new breed of parvenus whose 'sudden possession of money has come without inherited obligations'.¹⁵ In the words of Maria Melvill, a girl who had attempted to establish herself within New York society almost a century before *The House of Mirth* was written: 'If you have not wealth, you must have patience to put up with every slight, &

¹³ Wayne W. Westbrook's article 'Lily-Bartering on the New York Social Exchange in *The House of Mirth*,' *Ball State University Forum*, 20 (1979): 59-64, offers a succinct analysis of the social commodification of Lily Bart.

¹⁴ Robert A. Gates, *The New York Vision: Interpretations of New York City in the American Novel*. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987), 38.

¹⁵ Letter from Edith Wharton to Dr. Morgan Dix, December 5th, 1905. In: Edith Wharton, *The Letters of Edith Wharton*, edited by R.W.B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis. (London: Simon & Schuster, 1986), 99.

many mortifications.¹⁶ Lily Bart has not the wealth, and ultimately she does not have the patience either.



THE OPENING SENTENCES OF *The House of Mirth*, like those in *The Age of Innocence*, establish both the ekphrastic and chronotopic elements in this novel: 'Selden paused in surprise. In the afternoon rush of the Grand Central Station his eyes had been refreshed by the sight of Miss Lily Bart.' (*HM*, 5) Spatially, the scene is defined by the reference to Grand Central Station, the

gate-way of the city [which] marks the beginning and end of many things. ... a rendezvous for lovers and the means of flight for the faithless. [W]here the city goes out into the fields to play, and the country comes to the town to work.¹⁷

In terms of temporality, Lawrence Selden has 'paused' at the sight of the aesthetically exquisite Lily Bart, and is himself static in the 'rush' of the station — connecting us to Murray Krieger's idea of the ekphrastic paradox of 'still movement'.¹⁸

Wharton also writes that Lily may well be perceived as being 'in the act of transition' (*HM*, 5) in this opening passage. This understanding of Lily Bart's appearance at this particular location in a state of transition establishes the liminality of the character in terms of physical environment, but also hints at her emotional positioning on the limen. She is without a firm sense of her own place, and the opening paragraphs of *The House of Mirth* point forward to Lily Bart's

¹⁶ From a letter from Maria Melvill to Peter Gansevoort 'December Saturday morn.' 1818. As quoted in Eric Homberger, *Mrs. Astor's New York: Money and Social Power in the Gilded Age*. (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2002), 55

¹⁷ Jesse Lynch Williams. 'The Gates of the City.' *Century Magazine*, 74.4 (August 1907): 488

continual movement through points of transition. This is as static as Lily gets at the centre of the novel, which begins at the centre of the city itself.

This idea of transition which follows Lily Bart throughout the text is established by the firm spatial coordinates at the opening of the novel. Wharton's opening scene is of course not by chance, but by design. Her dichotomous description (movement/stasis — functional/accessory — colour/monochrome) of the scene at Grand Central Station is intrinsically ekphrastic in that through her vivid description, a secondary narrative is activated by way of the *enargeia* generated through an ekphrasis of the scene. As has previously been stated, Lily Bart is a woman without financial or architectural substance, and is a character of great fluidity. Yet Wharton cleverly opens the novel in Grand Central Station at a time when the station's own architectural quality was in a state of fluidity, as it was undergoing a process of architectural transition from the old Grand Central Station to the Grand Central Station we know today. This fact ideally locates Lily Bart both temporally and spatially at the beginning of *The House of Mirth*.

Structurally, Wharton chooses Grand Central Station as the starting point of the novel for several reasons. First, that Grand Central Station is *the* physical locus of the city in terms of topography and functionality, and also that Lily's journey from the centre to the periphery is best illustrated by initially placing her at the station, and then illustrating her centrifugally driven passage toward the periphery of the city and society.

¹⁸ See pages 27-34 of this thesis for a more thorough investigation into Krieger's 'still moment' as it pertains to ekphrasis.

Also, in terms of ekphrastic discourse, Grand Central Station's position at the centre of the city is important in that it is a point of comparative stasis at the centre of New York City. This fact fulfils the primary prerequisite of description within the novel; of having any point of description in a state of temporal stasis, thus we have the narrative pause which allows for the spatial development of any descriptive element of a text.

Grand Central Station also plays into our understanding of spatial hierarchies of the city; it is *high* up the island, *central*, and just to the *right* of New York's central spine, Fifth Avenue, therefore it holds a pre-eminent position within the topography of the city itself. Grand Central Station is also a structure which acts as 'a physical separation between the dense working-class tenement developments to its east and the genteel refinements of Fifth and Madison to the West'.¹⁹ Again, this establishes very early on the liminality of Lily Bart as she struggles to remain at the centre of New York society.

Wharton has written of Lily's being in the 'act of transition' and the very location of this scene delineates this position and supports it. The station itself also possesses some representative meaning in our initial understanding of Lily Bart in the novel. Grand Central Station, in its original guise as Grand Central Depot, then Grand Central Terminal, was intended to be an awe-inspiring structure celebrating the triumph of Cornelius Vanderbilt in building his railroad empire. It was to be the metaphorical jewel in his crown. The structure was modelled after the Louvre, with an exterior of

¹⁹ Elliot Willensky, 'Grand Central: Shaper of a City.' In: Deborah Nevins, ed. *Grand Central Terminal: City within the City*, with a foreword by Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. (New York: Municipal Art Society of New York, 1982), 85-86

grandeur and beauty whose 'Imperial Façade'²⁰ in no way conveyed the plain interior aspect of the structure, and which by the turn of the century 'no longer conveyed [this] sense of grandeur'²¹. This particular view of Grand Central Station directly maps onto Lily Bart's character in this novel; a woman who is primarily engaged with her external beauty (as most observers of Miss Bart *are*). Nonetheless, the tacit implication of the question: 'had she indeed reached the nine-and-twentieth birthday with which her rivals credited her?' (*HM*, 6) is that she may well be reaching the last stages of her own shelf-life (as Grand Central Station was at this time), and her imperial and beautiful exterior may well mask an empty cavernous interior which has 'traffic' yet no room to call one's own. As has been stated, the station itself also has an important semantic value within the text in that it was also in a state of transition. Only in 1898 was the revamped Grand Central Terminal renamed Grand Central Station. At the time of composition and publication of *The House of Mirth*, plans were already afoot to build the Grand Central Station we know now, which has so firmly held onto its iconic status throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century.

The *mise-en-scène* which opens the novel finds Lily Bart and Lawrence Selden static at the central point of the city, and ironically in a place of pure functionality — Grand Central Station. The reader is drawn in by the fact that the protagonists are static as the world rushes around them. We are drawn to this scene where 'Selden paused' whilst seeing that Lily Bart 'stood apart from the crowd'. (*HM*, 5) Like an observer of a fine piece of art in a museum, Selden's

²⁰ Attributed to Lewis Mumford in Kurt C. Schlichting, *Grand Central Terminal: Railroads, Engineering, and Architecture in New York City*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 33

²¹ Schlichting, *Grand Central Terminal*, 53

stasis is one of necessity in his admiration for the object he beholds, and he is not alone in being affected by the power of beauty, as 'Miss Bart was a figure to arrest even the suburban traveller rushing to his last train.' (HM, 5) Wharton immediately establishes Lily's aesthetic radiance in the eyes of Selden *and* those of the reader by describing her in the most obvious artistic language, full of form and colour, through Lawrence Selden's own painterly consciousness: Lily Bart's 'vivid head' had a 'purity of tint', her 'lashes were set in her smooth white lids, and ... the purplish shade beneath them melted into the pure pallour of the cheek' with her 'hand, polished as a bit of old ivory'.

As I have mentioned previously, Lily Bart has no environment of her own to delineate and limit her actions and behaviour. Therefore, she is able to cross thresholds, even thresholds which would normally be considered inappropriate for a woman of her standing to cross, like that of Lawrence Selden's apartment at *The Benedick* — a *batchelor* apartment building — where Lily commits her first major social transgression of the novel. *The Benedick*, possibly named after Shakespeare's most famous bachelor, is an apartment which seems to have been constructed for the domicile of professional single men. Simon Rosedale owns the building, as Lily Bart soon finds out after leaving Selden at the end of chapter one, and it is he who mentions the name of the building as she leaves:

"The Benedick?" She looked gently puzzled. "Is that the name of this building?"

"Yes, that's the name: I believe it's an old word for bachelor, isn't it? I happen to own the building — that's the way I know." (HM, 15)

Selden is comfortable and able to move within this building for obvious reasons, and Lily Bart is clearly not, once again for reasons linked to social impropriety. This frictional moment of cohesion is indicative of the whole complex relationship between Lily and Selden — they are physically attracted to each other yet they aren't financially compatible. Lily requires a milieu which matches her expensive exterior, and Selden cannot provide the financial wherewithal to accommodate Lily. As Lily says herself with a brutal honesty which she seems to be at ease with in Selden's company; 'I am horribly poor — and very expensive. I must have a great deal of money.' (HM, 10)

Lily Bart herself, unlike Ellen Olenska and Catherine Mingott in *The Age of Innocence*, and Ralph Marvell in *The Custom of the Country*, has *no* symbolic architecture which can define her position in society. Architecture defines not only social position, but also character in Wharton's novels to a great degree. It defines the action and reaction of characters as well. Where Simon Rosedale gravitates toward a mansion which firmly establishes his position in society due to his wealth, his aspirational goals, and his particular position upon the hierarchical map which even at the beginning of the twentieth-century still underpins much of New York society, Lily Bart has no such structure to her life. Yet in many respects we have the ideal synergistic partnership here, in which Rosedale's status would be enhanced by the acquisition of Lily Bart, and Lily's own position within the centre of society would be cemented by her appropriation of a husband and a milieu fit for a beauty such as hers. Her rejection of such a match later in the novel will push her further toward the periphery of society. For

much of the novel Lily is offered a setting, yet rejects it as being inappropriate for her persona.



THE SELDEN MILIEU

LILY BART'S FIRST TENTATIVE MOVE AWAY from the centre of city occurs quite innocently when she asks Selden to take her somewhere 'for a breath of air' (*HM*, 6) after they meet at the station in the opening chapter of the novel. With the inevitability which follows any movement from the centre, in this case New York City's centre at Grand Central Station, Lily Bart moves toward the periphery as she and Selden turn 'northward' on 'Madison Avenue' (*HM*, 7). It is during this particular stroll that Lily Bart passes through the 'Selden milieu' for the first time, a setting which — like most of the others in *The House of Mirth* — not only defines the eponymous inhabitant, but will also highlight the fact that Lily Bart has *no* place of her own in this sense, is not suited to the Selden milieu as it stands, and who actively sees the success of her future as being connected directly to her appropriation of her *own* environment.

In analysing the character of Lawrence Selden this early in the novel we must look only at his abode — *The Benedick* — to understand him. Again, Wharton uses the harmony of inhabitant, architecture and landscape to establish a character. The description of not only the location of the building, its name, its architectural character and the design and decoration of the interior of Selden's apartment all serve to induce an ekphrasis where the description itself brings the surface

narrative to a seeming stasis. A subterranean narrative, however, is generated which can be seen as prescient by the careful reader; prescient in that the building's name points to Selden's status as a confirmed bachelor and prescient in the sense that his financial strength perceived through the interior detail of the apartment is seen as being incompatible with Lily Bart's expensive needs.

The Benedick itself is an imaginary building in the sense that it did not exist in this part of town at this time. Yet it would be of no surprise to us that Wharton did know of the existence of an apartment block called *The Benedick* at 80 Washington Square East at the time of composition of *The House of Mirth*. Robert Stern writes of this particular block between West Fourth Street and Washington Place: 'a six-story apartment house intended for bachelors, ... [it] contained thirty-three apartments on the first five floors with four artists studios on the sixth' built from 'Philadelphia red brick and Nova Scotia stone facade'.²² This matches up quite well with Selden's *Benedick* with its 'new brick and limestone house-fronts' (*HM*, 7), yet it is undoubtedly more important to understand that these particular types of structures were as the *New York Times* wrote, of a 'new order of domestic architecture' which had 'grown out of the demands of modern society'.²³ Selden's own cultural credentials would make him ideally suited to such an apartment block. He is a bachelor, he is an aesthetic, and he is not endowed with noticeable wealth.

Selden's apartment is well located in terms of its relative position to Fifth Avenue, the major artery of New York City, lying on

²² Robert Stern, Thomas Mellins & David Fishman. *New York 1880: Architecture and Urbanism in the Gilded Age*. (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1999), 542

²³ From *New York Times*. 'A Home for Bachelors.' (June 29, 1879): 5, in: Robert Stern, Thomas Mellins & David Fishman. *New York 1880: Architecture and Urbanism in the Gilded Age*. (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1999), 542

50th Street between Fifth and Madison Avenues. Furthermore the apartment's own position 'on the top floor' (*HM*, 7) further cements its pre-eminent position within the city's spatial hierarchies, and serves to solidify Lawrence Selden's own milieu and his own character within the novel as a man who is established and accepted within New York society.

Selden invites Lily up for tea whilst she waits for the next train to take her to Bellomont:

He paused a moment. "Come up and see," he suggested. I can give you a cup of tea in no time — and you won't meet any bores."

Her colour deepened — she still had the art of blushing at the right time — but he took the suggestion as lightly as it was made.

"Why not? It's too tempting — I'll take the risk," she declared.

"Oh, I'm not dangerous," he said in the same key. (*IIM*, 7)

Lily understands that there is an element of 'risk' in her going into the building, and Selden seems to have an understanding of this too with his placatory comment 'I'm not dangerous.' This I believe is true, Selden is *not* dangerous, but the apartment block *is* and will be even more so when Lily meets Simon Rosedale on leaving. Lily is a valued commodity in this society at this moment, and the choice she makes here devalues her. The decision she makes and its seeming 'spontaneity' (*IIM*, 7) is indicative of her peripatetic nature in this novel. Lily Bart has nowhere of her own, nowhere to anchor her and dictate the behaviour required by her place in society which she would hold as delineated by her *own* environment. Lily Bart's physical peripateticism parallels her mental peripateticism, hence this risky decision of going into a building so singularly unsuited to her — *The Benedick* — and hence the decisions she makes throughout the novel.

Lily Bart's rootlessness in New York City is one of the reasons that she makes the decision to cross Lawrence Selden's threshold.

Bakhtin's succinct view of the chronotope of the threshold as a 'motif of encounter [...] of *crisis* and *break* in a life' with a strong metaphorical implication connected with the 'decision that changes a life'²⁴ is an excellent exegesis of what the 'threshold' means in the fiction of Wharton. Wharton seems to consciously delineate particular areas within her novels with the motif of threshold. In *The Age of Innocence* this is obvious in chapter IX when Newland Archer visits Ellen Olenska for the first time at her home on West Twenty-third Street: 'he stood on Madame Olenska's threshold'. Much like Lily Bart's decision to enter *The Benedick*, Archer's decision to enter Ellen Olenska's is one where risk is recognised yet ignored. Archer has the protection of *family* and *position* in a society where those factors are significant: Lily has no real family, no real position and therefore no protection.

Lily Bart's time in Selden's apartment begins with her crossing the threshold²⁵ into Selden's bachelor apartment. The décor itself establishes two important factors about Lawrence Selden. The first is that he is undoubtedly a bachelor, and one who has a strong aesthetic sense in his taste in cultural artefacts ('old prints', 'walls of books', and 'faded Turkey rug' (*HM*, 8)) throughout his apartment, and secondly that he is not a man of great wealth, with a part-time servant, 'faded' rug, 'shabby leather chairs', 'shabby' coat, and 'shabby walls' (*HM*, 8, 11, 12) — the reiterative adjective 'shabby' does not miss its mark with the reader. This entire environment works on two levels. It first establishes the fact that Lily is not a part *of* it and has no environment of her own, and it also establishes that Lawrence Selden

²⁴ Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel', 248

²⁵ *HM*: 8, 12.

and Lily Bart, although there exists a mutual attraction on many levels, are ultimately not able to coexist in this environment, as she is a precious and delicate work of art, and he is a middle-class bachelor who has tastes above his means.

The environment within which Selden exists is one which obviously delineates many aspects of his own character, yet it also acts as a harsh contrast to the feminine delicacy of Lily Bart;

As he watched her hand, polished as a bit of old ivory, with its slender pink nails, and the sapphire bracelet slipping over her wrist

...

she was amazingly pretty

...

he noted, with a purely impersonal enjoyment, how evenly the black lashes were set in her smooth white lids, and how the purplish shade beneath them melted into the pure pallour of the cheek. (*HM*, 8-10)

Throughout this opening chapter Lily is viewed through the male gaze of Lawrence Selden and is viewed purely in terms of physical beauty. As an aesthete, it is no surprise that Selden admires and desires her, and the setting serves to tell us of Lily's beauty and its untouchable nature where Lawrence Selden is concerned; his particular milieu is not grand enough to accommodate such an artefact except on a very temporary basis. Lily's own comment that 'It seems so odd to want to pay a lot for an ugly badly-printed book that one is never going to read!' (*HM*, 11) implies that one may as well purchase the *beautifully* printed-book that no-one is going to read. Here, Lily Bart sees herself as Percy Gryce's next piece of expensive Americana to be purchased.

In a novel which is about the rootlessness of a beautiful woman in New York City and its upper class society, we have ekphrases at work in the initial delineation of Lily Bart and her transitional status in her appearance at Grand Central Station. Lawrence Selden's apartment also establishes the most salient characteristics of the two

most important protagonists in *The House of Mirth*. Selden is described, through his own environment, as a man who admires Lily but cannot afford her, and Lily is defined as an aesthetic artefact who has great worth on the open market, a market peopled only by wealthy male vendees. The women who are competition to Lily in many respects ('my best friends — well, they use me or abuse me; but they don't care a straw what happens to me' (*HM*, 10)) will play a part in devaluing Lily within the market and thus affect her chances of finding a place of her own.

In this chapter, it becomes clear that Lily Bart consciously understands her value and place within New York society. Although she understands her own value in the society her goal is never as obviously vulgar as gaining a particular financial sum through marriage, but to appropriate a space which she can call her own. She sees her own fulfilment lying in establishing her own environment: 'If I could only do over my aunt's drawing-room I know I should be a better woman.' (*HM*, 8) She also proceeds to tell Selden of one of the reasons why she never married a previous suitor, Dillworth:

"[Dillworth's mother] was afraid I should have all the family jewels reset. And she wanted me to promise that I wouldn't do over the drawing-room."

"The very thing you were marrying for!"

"Exactly!" (*HM*, 10)

Once again, Lily acknowledges the importance of acquiring a place for oneself, and it is Dillworth's mother's act of blocking this acquisition which lies at the centre of failure of this particular courtship. Lily is, in her very own words, 'horribly poor — and very expensive', and she understands that there is really but one way to address this issue: marriage.

The single major point of contention which arises through the reading of *The House of Mirth* is that of Lily Bart's *own* culpability in her downfall. Early in the novel it is explained that Lily 'was 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, 8) Here, it seems that Lily has no power to control her future, and that her downfall is fated. At the end of the novel Lily herself tends to support this perception when she says

I was just a screw or a cog in the great machine called life, and when I dropped out of it I found I was of no use anywhere else. What can one do when one finds that one fits into one hole? One must get back to it or be thrown out into the rubbish heap' (HM, 240)

This particular attitude of being dislocated from the 'one hole' she can function and flourish in is one which is supported throughout the novel by her inability to 'fit' elsewhere. Throughout all the social strata Lily encounters in *The House of Mirth*, she struggles to find her place because she has none. Constantly in flux, Lily is *unable* to exist in any environment outside the one environment where she would 'fit' one she has yet to encounter when the novel opens, and one which seems to exist only within the ether of her idealised inner world. Lily Bart, through her own character and circumstance, is ultimately 'beyond' the environments she attempts to inhabit.

Yet Lily does see entering *The Benedick* as a 'risk' and makes a decision all on her own to enter the building. She admits to Selden toward the end of the novel that 'Once — twice — you gave me the chance to escape from my life, and I refused it: refused it because I was a coward.' Maybe it is the case that this is the price exacted by society on a woman who carries out, as Richard Poirier has written,

'tiny acts of independence.'²⁶ Free will, to some degree, does not seem to be a factor in Lily's actions; she 'fits into one hole' only.

On finally parting from Lawrence Selden's apartment for the final time, Lily can but leave the memory of her previous self with Selden. This may be Lily's own acknowledgement that Selden was in the past a viable partner who would have made her happy. Now, however, it is too late. She can only leave a trace of her personality with Selden:

There is some one I must say goodbye to. Oh, not *you* — we are sure to see each other again — but the Lily Bart you knew. I have kept her with me all this time, but now we are going to part, and I have brought her back to you — I am going to leave her here. When I go out presently she will not go with me. I shall like to think that she has stayed with you — and she'll be no trouble, she'll take up no room. (*HM*, 240)

This is a reiteration of an earlier understanding of the dual nature at work within Lily when she is walking with Selden at Bellomont:

There were in her at the moment two beings, one drawing deep breaths of freedom and exhilaration, the other gasping for air in a little black prison-house of fears. (*IIM*, 52)

There are two Lilys at work here: one which is governed by the society which she was born into and its 'black prison-house of fears', and the other a place of independence and freedom where her own spontaneous thoughts and emotions *can* exist. These spontaneous thoughts and emotions are at their strongest upon the rural landscape with Selden, a place where both are not impinged by concepts of milieu and terrain and ownership. We cannot fail to understand that Selden was 'as much as Lily, the victim of his environment' (*IIM*, 120) yet he had his place within the environment, a place of safety. Importantly, Lily's feelings of independence and happiness occur only when she is extracted from New York City *and* its society, a fact which

²⁶ Richard Poirier. *A World Elsewhere: The Place of Style in American Literature*. (London: Chatto and Windus, 1967), 222

establishes the city itself as the means of Lily's eventual social suffocation.



THE PENISTON MILIEU

JAN COHN SUCCINCTLY EXPLAINED THE plot and structure of *The House of Mirth* when she wrote:

Lily Bart represents polish and respectability attempting to achieve financial security. As Lily falls from the sanctity of society to loss of reputation and finally financial destitution, Mrs. Wharton provides us with a series of houses, rooms, furnishings, and ornaments that emblemize this decent.²⁷

Grand Central Station is the first of a series of architectures which Wharton uses to 'emblemize' Lily's descent. Lily Bart's time within the Selden milieu opens up our understanding of her rootlessness in terms of a home, and in terms of her emotional physiology. In analysing Julia Peniston's milieu, we primarily engage with it through an ekphrastic discourse which establishes the necessary conditions to create a subterranean narrative to aid our understanding of Lily Bart. Ironical as it may seem, there is no direct description of any 'real' Bartian setting throughout the text — as of course she has none — yet through the ekphrastic descriptions of the environments she passes through, we are able to discern through contrasts, perception, and the metadiegesis within ekphrastic description, Lily's *idealised* milieu, as well as the increasingly potent message to the reader, that she will never have her own place.

²⁷ Jan Cohn. 'The Houses of Fiction: Domestic Architecture in Howells and Edith Wharton.' *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 15.3 (Fall 1973): 545

Building upon Cohn's understanding of the basic elements of *The House of Mirth*, Thomas Bender, in his article 'The Modern City as Text and Context' provides a more focussed approach to this text by writing that '[c]ities ... are on-going contests over the possession and appropriation of terrains'.²⁸ Lily Bart is constantly attempting to appropriate her own 'terrain', and she consistently fails in her 'on-going contests' for a terrain of her own as can be seen in her early attempt to marry Dillworth, and also in her contest with Grace Stepney over the Peniston milieu. If there is any 'terrain' or milieu within *The House of Mirth* which comes close to *becoming* Lily Bart's, it is not one to be gained through matrimony, but one which would be gained through inheritance. As Julia Peniston's favoured niece — in the early part of the novel — there is a consistent expectation that on the horizon lies in wait the Peniston mansion and the 'four hundred thousand' (*HM*, 174) that go with it.

Mrs. Julia Peniston is Lily's aunt, and the detailed description of her home in *The House of Mirth* is of vital importance to our understanding of a setting which is the polar opposite to that which Lily Bart imagines to be her ideal. To begin with, the mansion's location itself moves Lily another step further away from the centre, thus showing that the centrifugal forces of New York society are at work. The setting also serves as a foreground to display Lily's own inappropriateness in this house, in a sense foreshadowing her fall from grace in Mrs. Peniston's eyes.

The Peniston milieu is an environment which is constructed by Wharton to decry a past, yet acknowledge that it still prevails. It is

²⁸ Thomas Bender, 'The Modern City as Text and Context: The Public Culture of New York,' *Rivista di Studi Anglo-Americani (RSA)*, 6 (1990): 21

also constructed in order to articulate, to some degree, the naturalist expression of Wharton's literary technique of this time. Wharton's aim in looking at Mrs. Peniston's mansion is not to provide us with any great insight into the Peniston persona *per se*, but to provide a highly contrasting backdrop upon which Lily Bart can be placed, dissected and studied. It is once again through an ekphrastic engagement with the text that the reader will be better able to understand Lily Bart's peripheral positioning within society. The reader will also more clearly understand Lily's struggle to appropriate her own terrain, and her battle against the consistent undercurrent of deterministic ideology which underpins Wharton's naturalist approach.

As Edith Wharton so often does with many of her characters, we are introduced to them via their own specific surroundings. In this case, we are introduced to Lily Bart's aunt with a rather unique description of the domestic ablutions which precede the opening of her Fifth Avenue home for — as she perceives it — the New York social season:

The first two weeks after her return represented to Mrs. Peniston 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 rights, the entire house was swathed in penitential white and deluged with expiatory soapsuds. (*HM*, 78)

The quotidian task of cleaning a house is likened metaphorically to a religious experience or more exactly a religious cleansing of the soul, a fact which is supported by the use of formal religious diction throughout. Here we have a passage where a direct connection is being made by way of metaphor, between the physical environment and the

moral character of the inhabitant; the act of cleaning the house is seen as being parallel to the act of cleansing the soul.

The quasi-religious experience of cleansing the house is supported also by the description of Mrs. Peniston herself:

Mrs. Peniston was a small plump woman, with a colourless skin lined with trivial wrinkles. Her grey hair was arranged with precision, and her clothes looked excessively new and yet slightly old-fashioned. They were always black and tightly fitting, with an expensive glitter: she was the kind of woman who wore jet at breakfast. Lily had never seen her when she was not cuirassed in shining black, with small tight boots, and an air of being packed and ready to start; yet she never started. (*HM*, 84)

This description, both funereal and militaristic, holds that no colours except black and grey are associated with Mrs. Peniston. Most importantly, the final comment that she had an 'air of being packed and ready to start; yet she never started' holds within it the implication that she is dressed as if in mourning yet seems to have nothing to mourn for, except possibly the passing of a different age. This insightful line; 'ready to start; yet she never started', also establishes the stasis required in an ekphrastic passage; something is ready to start but does not, hence there is no temporal movement. Through both opening descriptions of milieu and character, temporal stasis is created, yet the descriptions themselves place the milieu and character (for they are intrinsically linked) at the centre of a subterranean narrative which establishes the Peniston environment as one which exists in the past.

Edith Wharton implies at the outset that Mrs. Peniston and her milieu are in some way isolated from *fin-de-siècle* New York society:

In Mrs. Peniston's youth, fashion had returned to town in October; therefore on the tenth day of the month the blinds of her Fifth Avenue residence were drawn up, and the eyes of the Dying Gladiator in bronze who occupied the drawing-room window resumed their survey of that deserted thoroughfare. (*HM*, 77)

Much can be gleaned from this short extract, and the simple statement that Julia Peniston's house is located on 'Fifth Avenue' furnishes her with a certain level of financial and social credibility. Yet the extract does contain a temporal shift to Julia Peniston's youth which in turn makes us consider the possibility that her adherence to New York's social timetable is one which is out of date by several years. Julia Peniston's own isolation from society seems to be parallel to that of the Dying Gladiator's own isolation as he surveys the 'deserted thoroughfare' that is Fifth Avenue, a street which — if society was adhering to Mrs. Peniston's social timetable — would have been more active.

Although no exact geographical coordinates are given, there is no doubt that the Peniston house is central in terms of its vantage point over the comings and goings of New York society:

Fifth Avenue had become a nightly torrent of carriages surging upward to the fashionable quarters about the park, where illuminated windows and outspread awnings betokened the usual routine of hospitality. Other tributary currents crossed the main stream, bearing their freight to the theatres, restaurants or opera; and Mrs. Peniston, from the secluded watchtower of her upper window, could tell to a nicety just when the chronic volume of sound was increased by the sudden influx setting toward a Van Osburgh ball, or when the multiplication of wheels meant merely that the opera was over, or that there was a big supper at Sherry's. (*HM*, 95)

Julia Peniston's house is central in that it lies upon the central spine of New York City — Fifth Avenue — a fact which in itself indicates Mrs. Peniston's *financial* comfort and to some degree her *social* comfort. This extract further establishes that Lily's aunt lives on Fifth Avenue below Central Park, and yet far enough up Fifth Avenue not to have been overtaken (yet) by the commercial diaspora which by the end of the nineteenth century had settled up to around Forty-second Street.

There is little in the way of specific indicators within *The House of Mirth* which point to an exact topographical site of the Peniston mansion, yet we can discern its likely position by understanding the nature of commercial and domestic development along Fifth Avenue throughout the nineteenth century. In particular, Jerry E. Patterson in his informative book *Fifth Avenue: The Best Address* not only writes of the commercial encroachment on Fifth Avenue at the end of the nineteenth century up to around Forty-second Street but also writes that above 'Forty-second Street, new residences tended to be larger than those from Thirty-fourth to Forty-second streets.' These indicators, along with the fact that Sherry's restaurant seemed to be in the close vicinity of the Peniston house — 'Sherry's had relocated to Fifth Avenue and the southwest corner of Forty-fourth Street ... in October 1898' — points to Julia Peniston's house being located in the Forties on Fifth Avenue.²⁹

In terms of spatial hierarchies and spatial location, the Peniston milieu is one which is located close to Grand Central Station, and as explained earlier in this chapter, this location is one which lies at the centre of the city, and as such has a seemingly stationary locus. If one imagines a wheel turning, all points on the periphery and plane are in motion, but at the central point of the plane, the point about which the system revolves is seemingly stationary. Here, referring back to the moment of stasis at the beginning of the novel, where Lily Bart's 'arrested' form exists within some arabesque reality which is in flux all around her, we have the stationary locus of the novel. It is here that she technically comes to life in the novel, and it is here that she is in

²⁹ Jerry E. Patterson. *Fifth Avenue: The Best Address*. (New York: Rizzoli, 1998): 108, 125, 135

the 'act of transition' which will begin her journey toward the periphery.

Lily Bart in the opening chapter of the novel is static as an art object in many respects, and likewise with a setting which is close to the locus of the city, Julia Peniston in her mansion is also static. As an individual character she is — comparatively — a static object in that she is often the detached observer of the flâneuristic tradition in her 'secluded watchtower':

Mrs. Peniston followed the rise and culmination of the season as keenly as the most active sharer in its gaieties; and, as a looker-on, she enjoyed opportunities of comparison and generalization such as those who take part must proverbially forego. (*HM*, 95)

Not only does Julia Peniston refrain from engaging *with* society whenever possible but she seems to primarily exist spatially in a state of sedentary stasis. She does not seamlessly merge *with* modern society. With the exception of her 'rare entertainments' and her interrogations of Grace Stepney and Lily Bart where she seeks to absorb 'the secret chronicles of society' (*HM*, 97-98), Julia Peniston exists spatially at the centre of the city, and temporally in the 1860s.

It is here that we can see that Julia Peniston has important parallels with Mrs. Manson Mingott in *The Age of Innocence*. They are both, in different ways, geographically isolated yet socially accepted within society; both function formally to illuminate certain thematic tenets within their respective texts, Mrs. Manson Mingott pointing to the necessity of accepting new blood (primarily European) into a society which needs to change to survive in the *future*, and Julia Peniston symbolising a world which had now gone and was in the *past*, and was increasingly being left behind.

It is also interesting to note that Julia Peniston 'from the secluded watchtower of her upper window' would watch 'the sudden influx' of people who were 'setting toward a Van Osburgh ball, or [...] the multiplication of wheels [which] meant [...] that the opera was over, or that there was a big supper at Sherry's' (*HM*, 95). This particular act is referred to in Wharton's novella 'New Year's Day' — a novella set in the 1870s — as 'a Dutch habit still practised in the best New York circles'³⁰, and although this act of observation and judgement of society from the Parretts' mansion windows is an act which tunes in with the aristocracy of old New York society of the 1870s, it is an act which is outmoded a quarter of a century later in the world of Lily Bart, and an act which once again places Julia Peniston in a different temporal and aesthetic plane from Lily Bart and which further isolates Lily within this milieu.

If the previous short, succinct, and suggestive description of Julia Peniston induces a feeling that she is perceived as some embalmed corpse with the agelessness and timelessness associated with such a creature, then the milieu within which she exists will also have similar qualities if Wharton's use of setting is to be consistent and credible. It should be of no surprise that her technical and artistic virtuosity is both consistent and credible in *The House of Mirth*:

'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*, 79)

The funerary allusion is extended from the description of Mrs. Peniston to that of her home as well. With words invoking shrouds,

³⁰ Edith Wharton, 'New Year's Day' in *Novellas and Other Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1990): 492

tombs, burial, and if one reads instead of 'newly uncovered glare' *newly uncovered grave*, Wharton establishes a harmony between character and milieu. Yet we also perceive the scene through Lily's consciousness and thus understand that she herself feels entombed within this 'dreary' environment, once again demonstrating that this cold, narrow, aged and colourless mansion does not match the character of the spry and beautiful Lily Bart, who is indeed stifled by the 'limits of Mrs. Peniston's existence'. Freedom from this situation will only come when Mrs. Peniston no longer exists.

Lily's own perception of this suffocating environment is further heightened by the description of her own room in the Peniston house. It is also important to note that Lily's own consciousness hints toward what she *herself* sees as her own ideal milieu:

Her room was large and comfortably-furnished — it was the envy and admiration of poor Grace Stepney, who boarded; but, contrasted with the light tints and luxurious appointments of the guest-rooms where so many weeks of Lily's existence were spent, it seemed as dreary as a prison. The monumental wardrobe and bedstead of black walnut had migrated from Mrs. 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. 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. What a contrast to the subtle elegance of the setting she had pictured for herself — an apartment which should surpass the complicated luxury of her friends' surroundings by the whole extent of that artistic sensibility which made her feel herself their superior; in which every tint and line should combine to enhance her beauty and give distinction to her leisure! Once more the haunting sense of physical ugliness was intensified by her mental depression, so that each piece of the offending furniture seemed to thrust forth its most aggressive angle. (HM,86)

Lily once again sees herself as imprisoned within this 'dreary' setting. The room may be 'large and comfortably-furnished' but it is her aesthetic 'distaste' for the 'ugliness' (HM, 78) which surrounds her which so easily makes her a stranger to this place. Although the décor

may well date back to the 'sixties, Lily attempts to counterbalance each element of the décor in the Peniston milieu with her own additions to the room; where there are 'steel engravings', Lily brings 'photographs' to the room; where Mrs. Peniston's furniture is 'monumental' in scale, Lily has a 'little painted desk'; and the light touch of Lily's 'lace' on her 'toilet table' is overwhelmed by the bold 'magenta "flock"' on the walls of the room. As one would now expect, the precise and delicate beauty of Lily Bart could only desire a setting of a similar aesthetic vein to exist within, and in order to appropriate such a setting Lily will have to marry appropriately first, or inherit a large sum.

In creating a patchwork description of the Peniston mansion, supported with much discrete descriptive detail, Edith Wharton establishes the ekphrastic scene. The reader is given a vivid amount of descriptive detail, and the metadiegesis established through the description tells us much about the environment which is required to sustain Lily Bart. In regard to Lily's needs and expectations Wharton tells us that '[Lily Bart] could not figure herself as anywhere but in a drawing-room, diffusing elegance as a flower sheds perfume' (*HM*, 79). Mentally, Lily cannot contemplate any other milieu in which she can exist. She does consider a future where she will be able to convert the Peniston ménage to her own needs as she 'had frequently wounded [Mrs. Peniston's] susceptibilities by suggesting that the drawing-room should be done over' (*HM*, 80). Yet, as a reader we understand that it is Grace Stepney who '[s]incerely admired the purple satin drawing-room curtains, the Dying Gladiator in the window, and seven-by-five painting of Niagara' (*HM*, 79), it is she who envied and admired Lily's

room in the Peniston house, and it is Grace Stepney who is and will be best suited to inherit the Peniston mansion.

At the heart of the ekphrastic discourse surrounding the Peniston mansion, we have to consider two important passages related to Lily's existence in the mansion. Firstly: 'As was always the case with her, this moral repulsion found a physical outlet in a quickened distaste for her surroundings' (*HM*, 78) and 'Once more the haunting sense of physical ugliness was intensified by her mental depression.' (*HIM*, 86) Both extracts establish a strong link between Lily Bart's emotional physiology and her aesthetic sense, thus once again strengthening the foundations of Wharton's consistent treatment of the major characters in her New York novels up to this point, in that she constructs them with an associated milieu to further solidify their temperaments, attitudes, actions, and fates, and subsequently provides a richer texture to the novel than would otherwise be expected on a cursory reading of the text.

In looking at ekphrasis within the New York novels of Edith Wharton, one might be expected to look at the famous *tableaux vivants* scene in *The House of Mirth*. In terms of the modern understanding of ekphrasis, it is *the* scene which would be best suited for analysis in terms of ekphrastic discourse. Yet I believe its simplicity within the structural context of the novel relegates its importance to that of another example of the primary leitmotif which permeates the novel, that of the commodification of female beauty. What I see as being a more sophisticated reading of the text, which burrows deeper than the surface understanding of the text, is the fact that Edith Wharton has used her undoubted knowledge of New York City, its topography, architectures, history and social stratifications to great effect in

suffusing the novel with a vitality which comes only from an understanding of nuance within the text.

Wharton has constructed the Peniston milieu, along with the character Mrs. Peniston, to show the reader that milieu and character are strongly connected to each other. The locating of the mansion within New York, on Fifth Avenue, with interior décor which temporally locates the mansion, initiates an ekphrastic discourse. The result of this discourse is that we come to understand that Wharton's descriptive construction serves to underpin Lily Bart's struggle to find a 'room of her own.' Herein lies the paradox for Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*. Where Virginia Woolf insists that 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction'³¹ Wharton is indicating that for Lily's future to be perceived as successful, she must have a room of her own and money to exist as she wishes, yet paradoxically it seems that the room cannot be obtained without money, and money without the room.

Through an ekphrastic reading of the Peniston milieu, we see that Lily *cannot* acquire a place of her own. We see that she is not suited to the Peniston mansion, and more to the point, we see that it is Grace Stepney who is best suited, in all ways, to occupy the Peniston milieu, as indeed she does after Mrs. Peniston's death. Finally, analysing this particular location in the novel allows the reader to gain an insight into the idealised environment which Lily sees herself inhabiting in the future, the idealised environment which she sees as being her own milieu: one of great beauty (and cost) which would create a mutual growth and enhancement of both mansion and

³¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* [1929], In: *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), 3

inmate, yet somewhat ironically, one which the reader increasingly finds difficult to picture Lily within.



THE FARISH MILIEU

WHERE MOST LOCALES WITHIN *The House of Mirth* are used to show Lily Bart's transition from the New York social elite to the physical and societal peripheries of New York City, the Farish milieu does so but provides some further added value in terms of our understanding of Lily Bart. An overall descriptive picture of the Farish apartment, gleaned from dialogue and descriptive text throughout the novel, creates an ekphrastic element within the text. Once again, the descriptive detail concerning locale and interior of the Farish apartment acts not only as detail which enhances the realist texture of the novel, but also establishes a context within which Lily Bart is placed, and like the cinematic Mozhukhin experiment³² touched upon in Chapter One of this thesis, induces specific reader responses.

The Farish apartment in *The House of Mirth* is a setting which far from being used as a place which Lily passes through fleetingly, is a place which is described and referred to throughout the text. In this sense, the Farish apartment acts as a touchstone for the reader. This setting functions as an implicit indicator of Lily's own shifting thoughts about such an environment and how they subtly change through the course of her experiences within the city. The Farish milieu also builds upon the thematic concern of the peripheralisation

³² See page 15 of this thesis for a fuller explanation of the Mozhukhin experiment.

of Lily Bart, as the Farish milieu is undoubtedly a further step away from Grand Central Station, Lawrence Selden's apartment and Julia Peniston's mansion.

In the very first chapter of the novel, Lily Bart imparts to Lawrence Selden her feelings about both girls like Gertrude Farish *and* the milieus they inhabit:

"How delicious to have a place like this all to one's self! What a miserable thing it is to be a woman." She leaned back in the luxury of discontent.

Selden was rummaging in a cupboard for the cake.

"Even women," he said, "have been known to enjoy the privileges of a flat."

"Oh, governesses — or widows. But not girls — not poor, miserable marriageable girls!"

"I even know a girl who lives in a flat."

She sat up in surprise. "You do?"

"I do," he assured her, emerging from the cupboard with the sought-for cake.

"Oh, I know — you mean Gerty Farish." She smiled a little unkindly.

"But I said *marriageable* — and besides, 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, 8)

Lily at once equates the 'horrid little place' of Gerty Farish and girls like her with the fact that they are not '*marriageable*'. The implication — ironic as it turns out — is that they are not beautiful like Lily, and are therefore destined for a life of dull spinsterhood. Selden himself seems to understand that such a milieu as that of Gerty Farish would not suit Lily: 'he was struck with the irony of suggesting to her such a life as his cousin Gertrude Farish had chosen.' (HM, 8) Here at an early stage, Wharton establishes Lily's understanding of her world. She is beautiful, thus marriageable, thus able to marry well and have the milieu to match ... ideally. Gerty Farish herself seems to agree with such connections when later on Wharton writes (through Gerty's consciousness) that it may well be the case that '[a] dull face invited a

dull fate' (*HM*, 128), thus supporting a view that beauty attracts men, money and a sparkling life.

We discover more of Lily's attitude toward Gerty and her flat when she remembers Gerty is Selden's cousin:

"It was horrid of me to say that of Gerty," she said with charming compunction. "I forgot she was your cousin. But we're so different, you know: she likes being good, and I like being happy. And besides, she is free and I am not. If I were, I daresay I could manage to be happy even in her flat. It must be pure bliss to arrange the furniture just as one likes, and give all the horrors to the ash-man." (*HM*, 8)

Important here is Lily's assertion that Gerty 'likes being good, and I like being happy', her understanding being that being good *and* happy are mutually exclusive, and Lily's implicit acknowledgement that she has to be 'bad' to be happy. Yet more important is the statement that Lily sees Gerty as being free. Lily, in her own mind, is not free. She is not free to do as she wishes, but has to do as society expects. She is not free to create her own space until she has married; and she is not free from her own fate, not the fate that belies a beautiful woman, but the fate which belies a beautiful woman who has no place of her own to condition her behaviour, but has a spirit which consciously or subconsciously fights against the expectations of New York society.

The Farish apartment is not an environment which Lily passes through discreetly. It is a touchstone of some importance to the text. We have seen it act as a context which brings to the fore Lily's own worries and fears very early in the novel, but it is also an environment that for a brief instant becomes her own. It becomes a milieu which for a brief moment in the novel, is matched by Lily Bart's own emotional physiology.

After an ugly and threatening *tête-à-tête* with Gus Trenor at his New York mansion (which Lily had attended due to some duplicitous

moves on the part of Trenor) her self-delusion is momentarily shattered. Trenor appears to have been giving Lily his own money, and not the rewards of the good investment of Lily's capital as he had said. She had been faced with a choice: repayment with her affections or repayment of the \$9000 she owes Gus Trenor. Lily is devastated:

Over and over her the sea of humiliation broke — wave crashing on wave so close that the moral shame was one with the physical dread. It seemed to her that self-esteem would have made her invulnerable — that it was her own dishonour which put a fearful solitude about her. (*HM*, 116)

and is all the more so because she knows that *she* is primarily responsible for the predicament. Lily, at this point in the novel, is arguably at her most vulnerable, both physically and morally. It is at this moment that Lily is seen to be vulnerable in that she has no place of her own, no physical sanctuary and no place which in itself would denote a firm position within New York society which would have released her from this situation. In a small amount of time, Lily has changed: '[s]he 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*, 117). Where previously, Lily's beautiful self could not conceive of existing in the Farish milieu, her abhorrent self of this moment sees some refuge on the 'familiar alien streets' of New York in the flat of Gerty Farish. Lily herself articulates her malaise to Gerty:

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 — I hate ugliness, you know — I've always turned from it — but I can't explain to you — you wouldn't understand. (*HM*, 131)

We have, once again, a succinct articulation of Wharton's theory of harmony between character and milieu. Lily Bart sees

external physical appearance as being connected directly to the emotional aesthetic, both of which are directly linked to an appropriate environment. Lily is initially confident in her external beauty and her marriageable credentials, and sees a future ahead of her where she will inhabit her very own place. At the confrontation with Gus Trenor, his own articulation of the vulgar deal between them brings Lily's own complicity in such an arrangement to the forefront of her psyche. She perceives herself as being two people, the beautiful Lily and the abhorrent Lily. The abhorrent Lily cannot exist within the Peniston milieu at that point; she is unable to exist within an environment which almost reeks of a restrictive moral code which is out of synchronisation with her perception of her own moral turpitude at this point in the novel.

Lily spends the night in Gerty Farish's flat, and on waking in the morning, the beautiful Lily comes to her senses as it were:

This sense of physical discomfort was the first to assert itself; then she perceived, beneath it, a corresponding mental prostration, a languor of horror more insufferable than the first rush of her disgust. The thought of having to wake every morning with this weight on her breast roused her tired mind to fresh effort. She must find some way out of the slough into which she had stumbled: it was not so much compunction as the dread of her morning thoughts that pressed on her the need of action. But she was unutterably tired; it was weariness to think connectedly. She lay back, looking about the poor slit of a room with a renewal of physical distaste. The outer air, penned between high buildings, brought no freshness through the window; steam-heat was beginning to sing in a coil of dingy pipes, and a smell of cooking penetrated the crack of the door. (*IIM*, 133-34)

A fresh day has dawned and the aesthetic Lily awakes from her fugue of the previous evening. Her normal sensibilities now take over and she reacts against the Farish environment. Her 'physical discomfort' has a 'corresponding mental prostration', once again establishing the link between physical environment and mental pathology of the

character. In the space of a few hours the Farish apartment has been both a sanctuary for Lily and an anathema, thus we have an ekphrastic description of an environment which allows for a substantially more sophisticated secondary narrative to evolve.

Our understanding of the importance of the Farish milieu is not only based around Lily Bart's superimposition upon it, but also that of Selden, and Gerty Farish too. Gerty's own perception of her personal environment comes into sharp focus after her matchmaking to bring Selden and Lily together. The irony here, however, does not escape her in that *she* loves Selden. This irony is heightened by the clarity of her insight into the nature of Lily Bart in that she 'might be incapable of marrying for money, but she was equally incapable of living without it, and Selden's eager investigations into the small economies of house-keeping made him appear to Gerty as tragically duped as herself.' (*HM*, 128) Gerty's own depression at the hopelessness of her situation corresponds with her view of her own milieu:

She remained long in her sitting-room, where the embers were crumbling to cold grey, and the lamp paled under its gay shade. Just beneath it stood the photograph of Lily Bart, looking out imperially on the cheap gim-cracks, the cramped furniture of the little room. Could Selden picture her in such an interior? Gerty felt the poverty, the insignificance of her surroundings: she beheld her life as it must appear to Lily. (*HM*, 128)

Gerty's interior feelings of sadness and jealousy parallel her perception of the pallid surroundings drained of all colour. Gerty is as insightful as any character in *The House of Mirth* when her consciousness pushes forward the statement that '[a] dull face invited a dull fate' (*HM*, 128) and undoubtedly, a dull milieu.

As Gerty has so lucidly understood, Selden's 'eager investigations into the small economies of house-keeping' (*HM*, 128) has its basis in an expectation of a future with Lily. He views Gerty's

flat not *as* Gerty's, but as a view of the possibilities of a future existence with Lily on a limited budget:

Gerty's little sitting-room sparkled with welcome when Selden entered it. Its modest "effects," compact of enamel paint and ingenuity, spoke to him in the language just then sweetest to his ear. It is surprising how little narrow walls and a low ceiling matter, when the roof of the soul has suddenly been raised. Gerty sparkled too; or at least shone with a tempered radiance. He had never before noticed that she had "points" — really, some good fellow might do worse ...

[...]

Selden evinced an extraordinary interest in her household arrangements; complimented her on the ingenuity with which she had utilized every inch of her small quarters, asked how her servant managed about afternoons out, learned that one may improvise delicious dinners in a chafing-dish, and uttered thoughtful generalizations on the burden of a large establishment. (*HM*, 128)

Here, the Farish apartment is transfigured into a notional Selden/Bart milieu. Yet this is a place that will never exist outside the imaginations of the protagonists.

The Peniston mansion, comparatively speaking, is rather simple in its form and function within *The House of Mirth*. It primarily serves to articulate Lily's movement away from the centre of New York and its ruling class, and her placement upon the peripheries of New York City and its society. The sophisticated elements in the instance of the analysis of the Farish apartment revolve around Lily's duality which begins to outline the conflicts within Lily's mind between what is *expected* of her, what she is *fated* to do, and what she *wants* to do. The use of the milieu also substantiates Wharton's own technique in linking milieu with character, and finally it places Lily even further away from the centre of the city and its ruling society.



THE HATCH MILIEU

LAWRENCE SELDEN, ON HIS RETURN FROM EUROPE, and after a plea from Gerty Farish, attempts to find Lily Bart in order to provide 'such vague help as he could offer' (*HM*, 212). In doing so he finds out that she has left her hotel, but the hotel clerk hands him a slip of paper with her forwarding address:

and he read on it: "Care of Mrs. Norma Hatch, Emporium Hotel," his apprehension passed into an incredulous stare, and this into the gesture of disgust with which he tore the paper in two, and turned to walk quickly homeward. (*HM*, 212)

There is no doubt as to the feelings of Lawrence Selden at this news. His disgust is built upon his love for Lily and the disappointments of her 'liaisons' with Gus Trenor and George Dorset, and this news of her new place of residence adds further to this anger and disappointment, as he sees it as being a strong indicator of Lily's place within society and her own attitude toward the silent moral and financial decrees that underpin the society.

The hotel, in the fiction of Edith Wharton in particular, inhabits a very particular place in the social and architectural hierarchies at the centre of Wharton's New York fiction:

Not only does the hotel have the worst design of any of the author's habitations, but it is the dwelling place of persons of questionable repute: those who are rootless and ill-bred, and those who are refined, but who have chosen to rebel against the mores of the social class into which they were born. Appropriately, Wharton uses the hotel as a setting ... as a residence for characters who are undergoing or attempting to undergo, a change in social standing —always an inauspicious enterprise in her novels. Throughout her fiction, in fact, Wharton consistently portrays the hotel as the antithesis of what she considered to be the ideal home.³³

³³ Susan Koprince, 'Edith Wharton's Hotels,' *Massachusetts Studies in English*, 10.1 (Spring 1985): 13

As the antithesis of the ideal home, the hotel also lacks other attributes which we connect with a home. It lacks the 'warmth and stability of a genuine home' and because it has 'no history or class tradition' it fails to be a 'repository of values which a family has built up over time and passed down from one generation to the next.'³⁴ All of these understandings about the hotel in Wharton's fiction act as a strong counterpoint to the milieu Lily has passed through throughout *The House of Mirth*, and serves to foreshadow the place hotel living has in *The Custom of the Country*, with the attendant moral implications on the queen of hotel/hôtel living, Undine Spragg. Koprince further articulates the associative values of the hotel by stating that the hotel in Wharton's New York fiction

is generally contrasted with the brownstone — a dwelling which, though old-fashioned and constraining, is nonetheless the most respectable upperclass home the New World has to offer. Thus, the lavish disorder of the Emporium Hotel in *The House of Mirth* stands in contrast to the "glacial neatness" of Julia Peniston's Fifth Avenue brownstone.³⁵

Lawrence Selden's attitude toward Lily's new-found residence is explained all the more by this contextualisation of the hotel milieu in *The House of Mirth*. The reader is also enlightened as to Lily Bart's further peripheralisation and the associated emotional strain which is being exerted upon Lily in such an environment.

When the reader is first introduced to Lily within the Hatch milieu of the Emporium Hotel, Lily seems at long last to be comforted by her environment:

When Lily woke on the morning after her translation to the Emporium Hotel, her first feeling was one of purely physical satisfaction. The force of contrast gave an added keenness to the luxury of lying once more in a soft-pillowed bed, and looking across a spacious sunlit room at the breakfast-table set invitingly near the fire. Analysis and introspection

³⁴ Koprince, 'Edith Wharton's Hotels', 14

³⁵ Ibid., 20

might come later; but for the moment she was not even troubled by the excesses of the upholstery or the restless convolutions of the furniture. The sense of being once more lapped and folded in ease, as in some dense mild medium impenetrable to discomfort, effectually stilled the faintest note of criticism. (*HM*, 212)

It is of no surprise that Lily finds such comfort both physically and emotionally acceptable at this point in the novel after so many blows from those around her, and this point can also be likened to her evening spent with Gerty Farish after her meeting at Gus 'Trenor's mansion. Yet we are still aware that Lily has made another move towards the periphery of New York society, indicated not only by Lawrence Selden's response to discovering her new address, but Lily's own feeling that 'she had been conscious of entering a new world' (*HM*, 212), a new environment that we feel cannot house Lily Bart. For the first time in the novel, Lily has stepped into an environment which was totally 'strange to her.' Lily has now passed out of the New York society she had been familiar with into the nether-world of the aspirant *nouveaux riches*. Lily becomes aware of the artificiality of the milieu on meeting Mrs. Norma Hatch:

Seated in a blaze of electric light, impartially projected from various ornamental excrescences on a vast concavity of pink damask and gilding, from which she rose like Venus from her shell. The analogy was justified by the appearance of the lady, whose large-eyed prettiness had the fixity of something impaled and shown under glass. (*HM*, 213)

Lily is aware of the artificiality of this environment yet Norma Hatch is not, or does not seem to. Lily has experienced 'true culture [and] resided in ... truly aristocratic dwelling[s]'³⁶ and is totally 'unacquainted with the world of the fashionable New York hotel' (*HM*, 213). There is indeed comfort, sumptuousness and wealth underpinning this environment, and albeit Lily Bart's first response is

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 17

that of relief, she quickly understands that she is a stranger in a strange land where the Hatch milieu is concerned. Lily eventually seems almost detached from the hotel environment as 'Mrs. Hatch and her friends seemed to float together outside the bounds of time and space' (*HM*, 214), and she herself is, in a sense, a voyeur in that she 'had an odd sense of being behind the social tapestry, on the side where the threads were knotted and the loose ends hung' but this also indicates that Lily Bart is now on the wrong side of the social tapestry, that she is truly nearing the outer limits of New York City.

In many ways this is not a place within which Lily truly participates, but is more accurately a scene which she observes with a flâneuristic quality; the detached observer from within the crowd. In an environment which on the surface Lily should be happier within, Lily ends up being more isolated as she finds it difficult to 'find any point of contact between' (*HM*, 215) her own ideals and those of Mrs. Hatch. This comes as no surprise as we see that the movement of Norma Hatch, powered by her wealth, is *into* mainstream New York society, whereas Lily, in her poverty, is travelling in the *opposite* direction.

Lily Bart's contact with this milieu is short-lived. Her placement within the hotel serves to show her continuing journey toward the social and physical extremities of the city. This is an alien environment in every way and serves to establish Lily Bart in a 'wilderness of pink damask', the operative word here being 'wilderness'. The hotel is another point of transition very much like Grand Central Station in the first chapter of the novel. Where Grand Central Station is a node where people physically move in and out of the city, the Emporium Hotel here is transitional in that it is a node

where people are attempting to *enter* society, whilst Lily is *leaving* the society.



'BEYOND!': THE BART MILIEU?

EPHRASIS, USED IN THE ANALYSES of Edith Wharton's major New York fiction, is an extremely potent device in our comprehension of not only the more complex narrative threads and textures of the text, but also of Wharton's own overarching philosophy concerning the relationships between milieu and character. Throughout this thesis I have alluded often to Edith Wharton's naturalist credentials. The publication of *The House of Mirth* in 1905, was at a time in literary history when Theodore Dreiser [*Sister Carrie* (1900)], William Dean Howells [*The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1872); *The Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890)], Stephen Crane [*Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893); *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895)] and Frank Norris [*McTeague* (1899); *The Octopus* (1901)] were all an important part of the literary landscape. The realist/naturalist credentials of these authors are beyond question, but Wharton herself is seldom looked at with a naturalist perspective. When Zola wrote in *The Experimental Novel* in 1893 that the acts of man 'are not produced in isolation or in a bare void' and that 'the social condition unceasingly modifies said acts'³⁷, he was outlining a manifesto which Edith Wharton would, to some degree, buy into with her thoughts on the importance of milieu on character. Indeed, her

³⁷ Zola quotes from Stephen Regan, ed. *The Nineteenth-Century Novel: A Critical Reader*, (London: Routledge, 2001), 112

strong naturalist impulse is applied to the novel in that here she has an aesthetic organism whose dichotomous nature lies at the heart of this fiction. I would argue that the environment/character paradigm established by the ekphrastic decoding of the texts is at its most potent when used in the New York fictions. Yet, in *The House of Mirth*, it is the seemingly paradoxical issue of Lily Bart's lack of a place of her own which brings this particular novel alive. Lily Bart's role as the peripatetic in *The House of Mirth* takes her through numerous environments, all of which are associated with characters other than herself. Yet they tell us much about Lily Bart and the importance which New York society gives to financial power, and about the consequences meted out to those who do not ruthlessly take their chances and give in to any thoughts of true love and individualism.

Subsequent to Lily Bart's attempt at gainful employment as a millenary assistant at Mme. Regina's, Lily is *beyond* New York society. Lily is physically beyond the environs of that society in that she now inhabits a boarding-house on the geographical periphery of the city, but she is also beyond that society in that she no longer has power or influence enough to survive within that particular atmosphere. 'Beyond!' is the word imprinted upon Lily Bart's seal, and it best describes Lily Bart's milieu in *fin-de-siècle* New York. In terms of anything she has previously experienced, the boarding-house is ultimately 'beyond' the environment where she wanted to exist. Yet, this particular milieu is a place which Lily readily, and for the first time, calls 'home.' In the latter part of the novel Lily has a strong perception of the boarding-house being 'home': 'Lily at length turned toward home' (232); 'as she turned homewards' (232); 'she was too tired to return home' (235); 'she actually had a reason for hurrying

home' (236); and 'She found, however, on reaching home' (236). This signals to the reader (and to Lily herself) that Lily now exists within a milieu which parallels her social and emotional state. The boarding-house is another transitional space, much like Grand Central Station at the opening of the novel, yet this is a transitional space beyond the city as Lily perceives it. This is a milieu that Lily is paying for, it is a milieu which is temporary by its very nature, and it is the temporary nature of the milieu which generates the question of where will Lily go to next, and as such prepares the reader for the *coup de grâce*.

It is rather simple to perceive *home* as a distinctly positive concept, but it is not inherently a qualitative term. Home is in actuality a dwelling, it need not be warm, comfortable, nor aesthetically pleasing, and in the case of Lily Bart, the boarding-house certainly has no great attraction to her, as we can see when Lily returns to the boarding-house after another day on the streets:

As she turned homeward her thoughts shrank in anticipation from the fact that there would be nothing to get up for the next morning. The luxury of lying late in bed was a pleasure belonging to the life of ease; it had no part in the utilitarian existence of the boarding-house. She liked to leave her room early, and to return to it as late as possible; and she was walking slowly now in order to postpone the detested approach to her doorstep. (*HM*, 232)

It would be a simple, but misguided step to see Lily's understanding of the boarding-house as being 'home' as an acknowledgement of her finding her own place. As an independent being, she inhabits a room of her own, but it is hardly a milieu which suits her. The boarding-house is yet another example of a transitional milieu within which Lily exists before moving off to the next, which for Lily Bart will ultimately mean her suicide, with death becoming her ultimate dwelling place.

The boarding-house location is not given as an exact address (as is the case with most residences in *The House of Mirth*), yet the city can

be viewed as a social organism which has a hierarchical structure inherent in its topography, and, we can thus have an educated guess as to where the boarding-house is located and can decode its hierarchical character within the city itself. As previously stated in Chapter Two of this thesis, pre-eminence is given to the centre, the top, and the right in many societies both ancient and modern.³⁸ It is established that Lily Bart's boarding-house is located west (to the *left* of centre) of Fifth Avenue, an important fact in that Selden, the Dorsets, Mrs. Peniston (and Grace Stepney), the Trenors, and Simon Rosedale all live on or to the east (right) of Fifth Avenue, the central social artery of the city, and are pre-eminent within the city's social hierarchy. Not only is the boarding-house located on the west side of the city, but it is deep into the west as we discover when Rosedale accompanies her home from the *Longworth*:

they emerged from the hotel and crossed Sixth Avenue again. As she led the way westward past a long line of areas which, through the distortion of their painted rails, revealed with increasing candour the *dissecta membra* of bygone dinners (*HM*, 229)

Not only is the boarding-house milieu not central, it is far to the west (left) and therefore low in the topographical hierarchy as was the Countess Olenska's home in *The Age of Innocence*. The down-at-heel area in itself points to Lily Bart's misfortune, her financial predicament, and her overall emotional destitution. In using the Hotel Longworth in *The House of Mirth*, Wharton may well have had the Langwell Hotel on West 44th Street in mind. Although the Longworth seems to be in the vicinity of an elevated railroad station on Sixth Avenue, and at the turn of the twentieth century the only elevated railroad stations on Sixth Avenue in this vicinity were at 33rd Street

³⁸ See pages 44-45 in this thesis for further discussion on spatial hierarchies.

and 42nd Street. Towards the end of the novel, on leaving Selden's apartment for the last time, Lily walks down Fifth Avenue to 41st Street, before resting in Bryant Park. The exact details are not of great import here, but what is important is the general vicinity of Lily Bart's milieu — the boarding-house — and from these details we can deduce that she is living somewhere in the garment district (close to Mme. Regina's shop) in and around Chelsea. This location is a far cry from the affluent and sought after Fifth Avenue, Washington Square, and east side of the city.

As would seem to suit a residence *beyond* the environs of accepted New York society, the exterior of the boarding-house is rundown, and its inappropriateness as a residence for Lily is seen through the eyes of Simon Rosedale as he scans 'the blistered brown stone front ... discoloured lace, and the Pompeian decoration of the muddy vestibule' (*HM*, 229) and as he comments vociferously to Lily Bart that 'it is no place for you!' (*HM*, 233)

Like Mrs. Peniston's house, this boarding-house is placed temporally in another time. The 'Pompeian decoration' alluded to in the above extract points to Clarence Cook's publication of 1880, *What Shall We Do With Our Walls?* in which he shapes the tastes in American decorative design by promoting the aesthetic (and social) advantages of classical Pompeian decoration. This was a trend 20 years previous to the period in which *The House of Mirth* is placed. This only serves to focus on the fact that the boarding-house hasn't been decorated for a very long time, and that it exists outside Lily Bart's ideal *temporal* location as well as her ideal *spatial* location.

In terms of the interior of the boarding-house, the décor is in sympathy with both location and exterior detail. Indeed, there is

something redolent of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's wonderful short story 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892) in terms of the confined 'small quarters' of Lily Bart's 'narrow room' with 'its blotched wall-paper and shabby paint' (HM, 224-25). There is indeed a correlation between both milieu and emotional state in both *The House of Mirth* and 'The Yellow Wallpaper', and this coupled with 'the peacock-blue parlour, with its bunches of dried pampas grass, and discoloured steel engravings of sentimental episodes, ... [and] the dusty console adorned with a Rogers statuette' (HM, 232) substantiates the fact that this is a place which is unsuitable for Lily Bart. It is as unsuitable as the Peniston mansion was, in that it is of another age, it is not of Lily's 'moment'. Also, it lacks suitability as it is aesthetically exhausted; it does not match the beauty and freshness of Lily Bart even in her most impoverished state.

Not for the first time in *The House of Mirth* we become aware that milieu and character become entwined. Lily sees a connotation between her physical state and the aesthetic surroundings of the boarding-house residence:

For a while she had been sustained by this desire for privacy and independence; but now, perhaps from increasing physical weariness, the lassitude brought about by hours of unwanted confinement, she was beginning to feel acutely the ugliness and discomfort of her surroundings. (HM, 224)

Much like her initial feelings in awakening in the Hatch residency of the Emporium Hotel for the first time, likewise with the boarding-house these feelings soon turn to despair. In reading the physical/aesthetic dichotomy, we should also note the transformative qualities of the boarding-house environment through Lawrence Selden's positive emotional outlook as he sees himself stride toward a future with Lily Bart:

The next morning rose mild and bright, with a promise of summer in the air. The sunlight slanted joyously down Lily's street, mellowed the blistered house-front, gilded the paintless railings of the door-step, and struck prismatic glories from the panes of her darkened window.

When such a day coincides with the inner mood there is intoxication in its breath (*HM*, 251)

Selden's own positive attitude and flexibility of approach now mirrors his earlier feelings on visiting Gerty Farish's flat for dinner. Through his happiness a patina of respectability and accommodation can be reached. Yet fate has its part to play in the life of Lawrence Selden too. The temporary gilding of what Lily herself would perceive as the soiled cage of both Gerty's flat *and* the boarding-house, is just that, temporary. Lily Bart's 'struggle against the influence of her surroundings' (*HM*, 256) ends where the fates of heredity and milieu have always led throughout the text, beyond the periphery of the physical city and its society, (beyond the periphery of life itself,) into death.



THE IDEA THAT LILY BART IS SUBJECT TO powerful social centrifugal forces is probably most obvious in the penultimate chapter of *The House of Mirth*. It is at this point that Lily Bart is now beginning to acknowledge the tragic reality of her situation. She has moved beyond the exterior nature of her 'material poverty' and confronted the altogether more salient and brutal poverty of her interior life:

It was indeed miserable to be poor — to look forward to a shabby, anxious middle-age, leading by dreary degrees of economy and self-denial to gradual absorption in the dingy communal existence of the boarding-house. But there was something more miserable still — it was 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, without anything to which the poor little tentacles of self could cling before the awful flood submerged them. And as she looked back she saw that there had never been a time when she had had any real relation to life. Her parents too had been rootless, blown hither and thither on every wind of fashion, without any personal existence to shelter them from its shifting gusts. 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*, 248)

This passage is worth quoting in full as it not only establishes the interior and exterior chaos of Lily's life at this point near the end of the novel, but also firmly reiterates the point of view that at the heart of all Lily Bart's perceived shortcomings is the fact that she had *no* centre of gravity in terms of a physical domicile, and thus no centre within which to gather 'passions', 'loyalties' and 'visual memories' which would have given her a centre from which to thrive. Lily Bart's innate social fluidity, far from being a talent, is the very facet of her personality which produces the multitude of 'accidents' which lead to her final resting place: the boarding-house. Lily Bart's social fluidity corresponds directly with her *in*definition and *incapacity* to find her *own* environment. The fact that Lily Bart has no home of her own, no structure to hold and protect her physical and mental being from marginalisation, is related directly to the fact that her interior self has no limits; therefore mentally and emotionally Lily cannot be contained within the city. She has no 'room of her own' in the sense of Wharton's understanding of the preferred harmony between environment and character, and as Lily Bart concedes in this passage

'[s]he herself had grown up without any one spot of earth being dearer to her than another.'





'I'll never try anything again till I try New York.'



...all literature, in one sense, is made up of guide-books.

Herman Melville¹

*To name a place, in fiction, is to pretend in some degree to represent it
— and I speak here of course but of the use of existing names, the only
ones that carry weight.*

Henry James²



Writing of *The House of Mirth* in 1905, Edith Wharton talks of 'our new world, where the sudden possession of money has come without inherited obligations or any traditional sense of solidarity between the classes.'³ Ralph Marvell in *The Custom of the Country* — published eight years later — ponders also of the 'new world' whose genesis lay within the insurgent *nouveaux riches* at large in New York City during the first decade of the twentieth century:

what Popple called society was really just like the houses it lived in; a muddle of misapplied ornament over a thin steel shell of utility. The steel shell was built up in Wall Street, the social trimmings were hastily added in Fifth Avenue; and the union between them was as monstrous and factitious, as unlike the gradual homogenous growth which flowers into what other countries know as society, as that between the Blois

¹ Herman Melville, *Redburn: His First Voyage* [1849] (London: Constable & Co., 1929), 201

² Henry James, 'New York Edition Preface to *Roderick Hudson*,' In: Henry James, *Literary Criticism: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces of the New York Edition* (New York: Library of America, 1984), 1043

³ Letter from Edith Wharton to Dr. Morgan Dix, [December 5th, 1905]. In: *The Letters of Edith Wharton*, edited by R.W.B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis (London: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 99

gargoyles on Peter Van Degen's roof and the skeleton walls supporting them.⁴

Marvell, in articulating his thoughts in such a way, tells us of the traditionalist 'Dagonet view of life' (CC, 669). In particular, he provides a Dagonet reading of *their* own society as having evolved *naturally* through 'gradual homogenous growth' as opposed to the pejorative view of the insurgent invader society as 'monstrous and factitious', built upon financially strong yet insubstantiate social and cultural foundations. Importantly, Marvell also makes implicit the correlation between character and setting in the comment 'society was really just like the houses it lived in.' This correlation between 'society' and its 'houses' is the paradigm which drives the ekphrastic analyses throughout all of Wharton's New York fiction, and in *The Custom of the Country* it is a vital element not only in terms of decoding the more sophisticated nuances of narrative, but also in terms of the overarching structure of the text itself.

In creating this paradigm to look at Edith Wharton's major New York texts, there may well be a perceived obstacle in the application of such an analysis to *The Custom of the Country*. The structure of *The Custom of the Country* — which could well be subtitled 'The Custom of Two Countries' — is such that only half of the novel is actually set in New York, with the remainder primarily in France. *The Custom of the Country* has five books, with the first set primarily in New York, and the last in Saint Désert and Paris. Already we can see a catoptric structure⁵. The middle three books are primarily set within New York, yet there is a strong counterbalance with the European

⁴ Edith Wharton, *The Custom of the Country* [1913], from *Edith Wharton: Novels* (New York: Library of America, 1985), 669 (hereafter cited in text as CC)

⁵ Catoptric is a term which refers to qualities of mirrors and in particular reflections within mirrors.

settings. Where Wharton uses Mrs. Manson Mingott and her milieu in *The Age of Innocence* to ekphrastically offer a glimpse of New York society's changing nature, Wharton is certainly more explicit in her structure of *The Custom of the Country*. The difficulty here could be seen to be that an analysis of the New York ekphrases would constitute only a partial analysis of the text, and that this novel's inclusion in a thesis on Wharton's major New York texts could well be seen as invalid in some respects. Yet, acknowledging that the European element is vital to the overall understanding of the novel, there can be no doubt that New York City is *the* vital element at the heart of this text. It is the contrasting Spragg, Marvell and Van Degen milieus in particular which delineate and substantiate not only the major characterizations, but also the major themes at the centre of the novel. It is the New York elements of the novel which provide the most substantive ekphrastic material and associated analyses, yet the European dimension of the text is of *some* importance. Wharton's catoptric structure throughout the novel serves to use the reflected European spatial analogues as a commentary in themselves upon their New York equivalents.

Wharton's delineations of the two societies are *reflections* of each other; they are likenesses yet with the reversal of structure that is inherent within all reflections. When we look into a mirror we are seeing a likeness of our own face, yet the structure is reversed in the sense that the mirror-image has been folded around the vertical axis to create a left-right transposition, hence a structural reversal. The catoptric structure does not only apply to the overarching structure of the novel, but also has a part to play in understanding the central characterisation of Undine Spragg in the text. As a mirror reflects

light, so Undine reflects the multitude of surfaces which surround her. Not only does she reflect the surface aesthetics of her surroundings, but also the attitudes which are firmly associated with a particular surrounding.

The very nature of specularity is that a mirror can only reflect what is on the surface; it has no literal power to reflect what is subterranean to the surface image. This intrinsic/extrinsic dichotomy lies not only at the heart of our understanding of reflection but also at the heart of ekphrastic analysis itself. Ekphrasis allows for the *extrinsic* descriptive detail contained within certain parts of a text to be decoded. This decoding subsequently reveals *intrinsic* semantic content which enhances our understanding of the central thematic tenets within a given text. In *The Custom of the Country* this intrinsic/extrinsic relationship lies not only on the ekphrastic level but on a recurring thematic level. More obviously, in Wharton's construction of Undine Spragg, she has created a character that has extrinsic surface appeal through her visual appearance, yet lacks substantive qualities in terms of her intellectual and emotional pathology. To all intents and purposes Undine is the personification of the 'thin steel shell of utility' symbolising material wealth with a 'muddle of misapplied ornament' (CC, 669), surface attraction being her sole attraction. Importantly, if the wealth weakens so does Undine, hence her constant drive for material wealth throughout the novel to sustain and enhance her own existence.

In applying an ekphrastic analysis to the primary New York settings within *The Custom of the Country*, we do not only gain a more thorough understanding of a character (or characters) associated with a particular setting, but we also gain an insight into the 'reflected'

topographical site in France. In using ekphrastic analyses and each reader's connotative associations with New York City, the reader is able to decode the collective descriptive detail which creates each topographical site, thus attaining a greater level of understanding of the text. As a result, the reader is able to view the European *reflection* of the New York site and substantiate the reading of the site and the associated character.

An obvious example of this would be to examine Ralph Marvell and his Washington Square home and Raymond de Chelles and his Parisian home in the Faubourg Saint Germain. These two characters and their family homes are very similar in many ways, as are their own representational values in relation to the social hierarchies of their respective cities. However, a single major reversal in the structure of the reflection is the *survival* of de Chelles and the *destruction* of Marvell at the end of each man's marriage to Undine Spragg. This inevitably throws up the question, 'Why is there this deviation from such a well rendered reflection?' The answer is that the catoptric structure Wharton has used insists that where there is reflection there is also a structural reversal, a reversal which brings to the fore an important issue. In this particular case Wharton is commenting upon both the strength of the foundations upon which old New York society and European aristocracy are built, and Marvell's particular attitude towards his own (constantly evolving) society as that of an outsider; Marvell does not link himself to the evolving New York society and as New York society evolves, he does not and suffers as a consequence.

I will be focussing upon these particular aspects of the text with more rigour in that I will once again look to Wharton's application of her design principle harmonizing location and both

interior *and* exterior architecture with character. It is this particular principle which drives the whole analysis, and is one which is structured so well in Wharton's text that it is an integral element of the literary architecture of the novel itself. Yet the overarching issue which Wharton appears to be establishing for the reader (and for herself) is that of the nostalgia for a New York aristocracy and its structures and traditions — of which she herself was once a part — which were undergoing a transmutation into a society *barely* connected to its immediate precedents. The fact that this change is perceived along with a view of the survivalist European aristocracy as personified by de Chelles, raises many questions about the relationship between new world and old world societies. This relationship not only viewed in the reflected European sites but also in the attitudes within New York society itself.



WHEN RALPH MARVELL TELLS THE READER that he 'sometimes called his mother and grandfather the Aborigines and likened them to those vanishing denizens of the American continent doomed to rapid extinction with the advance of the invading race' (CC, 669), he is articulating both his own *and* Edith Wharton's recognition of the inevitability of the upheaval of the final remnants of old New York society as they both knew it. This acknowledgement of the shifting hegemony toward the invader race of the *nouveaux riches*, and the social and geographical peripheralisation of the old New York society that his mother and grandfather (and Marvell himself) represent, lies at the

centre of the ekphrastic analysis of the New York topographical sites in *The Custom of the Country*.

In Undine Spragg and her parents we have the literal embodiment of this 'invading race' who have docked for embarkation 'in the lofty hotels moored like a sonorously named fleet of battleships along the upper reaches of the West Side: the Olympian, the Incandescent, the Ormolu' (CC, 638) and of course the Stentorian. Each one of these structures is declaratory in its very name⁶, and with the Stentorian, with its metaphorical voice, 'monumental threshold' and a 'façade ... all aglow', we encounter a milieu which wishes to be seen, heard and known, as does Undine Spragg. *The Stentorian Hotel* in *The Custom of the Country* was in fact *The Majestic Hotel* which was located at West 72nd Street at Central Park (as is *The Stentorian* in the novel, where Undine's bedroom 'looked along Seventy-second Street toward the leafless tree-tops of the Central Park' (633)). Ironically enough, the building which occupied the corner opposite *The Majestic* was the now famous Dakota Apartment Building at 1 West 72nd Street. Built at the initiative of Edward Clark, president of the Singer Manufacturing Company, the Dakota's name was said to reflect its remoteness at the time it was built (1882-84). Very much like Mrs. Manson Mingott's house in *The Age of Innocence*, the Dakota was seen to be in the 'wilderness' of the city. Undine also talks of the 'Dakota divorce-court' (862) in Chapter XXV of the novel; where she had to go to obtain a divorce from Ralph Marvell. The battleship metaphor also points to the mercenary and acquisitive attitude of the Spraggs as they 'embark' from the west on the 'shores' of New York City. As we have

⁶ Stentor was a Greek herald in *The Iliad* 'endu'd with brazen lungs/ Whose throat surpass'd the force of fifty tongues' [V: 978-979], Homer. *The Iliad*, translated by Alexander Pope (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), 252

previously discovered, Wharton's use of milieu is never gratuitous, particularly within her major New York novels. More so, it is an integral element within the works as it pertains to her understanding of the harmony between setting and character, or indeed the disharmony, as seen with Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*.

In terms of Wharton's view of the harmony between character, external architecture and interior design, the Stentorian Hotel proves to be ideally suited to Undine Spragg. The Looney suite where Undine lives 'showed no traces of human use' (CC, 623), it is an environment which has no personal imprint *of* its inhabitant, and we could very well state that at the beginning of the novel Undine Spragg has no personality to imprint *upon* her environment.

In the opening chapter of the novel, we find out that although she has been in the city for two years, Undine Spragg and her parents 'had made little progress in establishing relations with their new environment' (CC, 627); Undine had not engaged with the environment and the environment had not engaged with her. Undine Spragg could be said to be much like a mirror when the reader is introduced to the character; her 'passionately imitative' (CC, 633) self constructs a personality through her absorption of the extrinsic detail which she comes into contact with at any given moment. She may also be viewed as a *tabula rasa* in that she has, at the opening of the novel, yet to be 'inscribed' upon. Her early understanding of New York society, whilst still living in Apex, 'had been made familiar by passionate poring over the daily press.' (CC, 639) Undine constructs her personality and life around impressions gleaned from the press, her surroundings and everything that passes past her eyes and ears. Indeed, Undine's ideas on Europe were 'gathered ... chiefly from the

conversation of her experienced attendant' (CC, 717) and like a mirror, Undine 'could not help modelling herself on the last person she met' (CC, 633). It is Undine Spragg's extrinsic aesthetic qualities which act as a key into the societies throughout *The Custom of the Country*, and as previously stated, this seems to be the very way in which the Stentorian itself functions.

Undine *reflects* her environment, unlike other Wharton protagonists such as Ellen Olenska, Mrs. Manson Mingott, Gerty Farish, and Julia Peniston whose *milieus reflect character*. As a reflective surface Undine 'was what the gods had made her — a creature of skin-deep reactions' (CC, 770); she leaves no imprint of her *own* upon the setting itself. Undine's uniqueness in *The Custom of the Country* lies in her ability to absorb light and reflect a likeness of a milieu in human form, a fact which may well help support Wharton's own nostalgia-driven agenda as to the inappropriateness of these invaders overwriting, as it were, the old New York mercantile aristocracy of which she herself had once been a part.



THE HOTEL MILIEU, IN GENERAL, is one which Wharton uses to great effect in that it is a place which houses

persons of questionable repute: those who are rootless and ill-bred ... a residence for characters who are undergoing or attempting to undergo, a change in social standing ... the antithesis of what [Wharton] considered to be the ideal home.⁷

Through this understanding of the hotel in Edith Wharton's novels, we can see that Undine Spragg is perfectly suited to the hotel

environment, as she has elements of all of the above in her characterization. Gary Lindberg goes on to write that hotels had become 'representative of a new way of life'⁸ at the beginning of the twentieth century, and in *The Custom of the Country*, with its theme of social assimilation assuming a central role in the novel, the hotel-world of the Stentorian in particular has an important role to play.

In an ekphrastic analysis of the Stentorian, one need only look at the physical location of the hotel in order to place it within the topographical hierarchy of the city: it is placed on the West side of the city, which is associated with apartment and hotel living, and more particularly, is distanced from the wealthy and more sophisticated East side of the city and its age-old connections to New York's own 'aristocratic' communities.

It is interesting to note that *The Custom of the Country* was published a mere dozen years before F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925). Both texts investigate the insurgency of individuals from the West into the East, and show the repercussions of this juxtaposition in such surprisingly different ways. In *The Great Gatsby*, a novel devoid of a moral centre in many ways, 'the East' — East Egg where Tom and Daisy Buchanan live — comes to represent old money and old society, and their understated 'red-and-white Georgian Colonial mansion, overlooking the bay' with its front door a 'quarter of a mile' from the beach points to the Buchanans having confidence in their wealth and position without having to publicise the fact. In particular, this interior is one which maps on to Daisy Buchanan's ephemeral personality with its 'French windows ... ajar and gleaming

⁷ Koprince, 'Edith Wharton's Hotels', 13

⁸ Gary H. Lindberg, *Edith Wharton and the Novel of Manners* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1975), 95

white' with a breeze which 'blew curtains in at one end and out of the other like pale flags, twisting them up toward the frosted wedding-cake of the ceiling'⁹ a description which in itself foreshadows Daisy's own impending moral frivolity and ephemerality.

The 'West' of West Egg and Jay Gatsby's mansion, can so obviously be described as a 'muddle of misapplied ornament over a thin steel shell of utility.' Gatsby's house geographically and aesthetically opposes the Buchanan's and was 'a factual imitation of some Hôtel de Ville in Normandy, with a tower on one side, spanking new under a thin beard of raw ivy, and a marble swimming pool, and more than forty acres of lawn and garden'¹⁰ — this is a house which has an adolescent compunction to show off and attract the butterflies from across the bay, and points to not only a naivety in understanding the social mechanics at work here, but also of Gatsby's desperation.

Although finally perceived as amoral by Nick Carraway at the end of the novel, moneyed old society — like de Chelles in *The Custom of the Country* — nonetheless survives and strives unlike Marvell. In Wharton, we have a somewhat more cynical (and maybe realistic) view of this conflict, as the West meets East, and once again has the same representational theme of the nouveaux riches being associated with the West, and the old money being associated with the East. As I've previously mentioned, there is (early in the text) an implicit understanding that the invaders from the West have power, money and influence enough to conquer and subjugate the old society. Ralph Marvell is testament to the fact that the power balance has gone

⁹ F. Scott Fitzgerald. *The Great Gatsby* [1925], edited with an introduction and notes by Ruth Prigozy, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 9-10

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 8

against the patriarchs, and that the new money with the inherent attitudes, is here to stay.

As Fifth Avenue dissects New York City to form the east-west axis around which the social hierarchies of Wharton's New York novels are constructed, all the major domiciles in her fiction of any social 'worth' are consistently placed upon the east side of the city, and those of the perceived social inferiors, on the west. In *The Age of Innocence* the Mingotts, Van der Luydens, and Archers inhabit the east whilst Ellen Olenska inhabits the western reaches of 23rd Street. In *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart not only moves further away from the centre of the city in a southerly direction, but also moves to the west where she finds her final resting place in the boarding-house on the western periphery of the city and society. Likewise in *The Custom of the Country*, the west side of the city is inhabited by the Stentorian, and Ralph and Undine's marital home on West End Avenue — actually belonging to Undine Spragg's father therefore associated with the Spraggs rather than the Marvells — whilst on the east are the great houses on Fifth Avenue (the Avenue itself is seen socially to be on the east) which Undine aspires to and acquires by the end of the novel.

The Stentorian's physical location places it low down the social hierarchy in terms of its geographical location within New York City. In reality Wharton modelled the Stentorian on the Majestic Hotel which had the Dakota apartment building on the opposite corner of West Seventy-second Street. The fact that the Dakota had been seen to have acted as a 'symbolic gateway'¹¹ from the wilderness of the West into New York civilization places the Stentorian on the very periphery of New York City's social heart. The Stentorian is the

¹¹ Stern, Mellins & Fishman. *New York 1880*, 752

perfect starting point for Undine Spragg within the catoptric structure of *The Custom of the Country*, as this is mirrored with her notional position in the city at the end of the novel at 5009 Fifth Avenue: on the socially prestigious east side of the city, and as high up Fifth Avenue as you can go.

The highly ornate Stentorian (and in particular the Looey suites which are inhabited by the Spraggs,) is replete with 'gilt armchairs ... highly-varnished mahogany ... salmon-pink damask ... florid carpet ... and Mexican onyx.' (CC, 623) This is an environment where external adornment is paramount and serves to attract the social moths that will gild the hotel with their presence. Undine's own construction, defined in a sense by her position as a reflective surface within this society, mirrors the milieu which she inhabits at the beginning of the novel in her own physical appearance which is described as 'vivid' yet possibly 'crude' (like the Stentorian itself), with her

black brows, her reddish tawny hair and the pure red and white of her complexion defied the searching decomposing radiance; she might have been some fabled creature whose home was in a beam of light. (CC, 635)

Undine's external picture is very much like that of her 'polychrome suite at the Stentorian' (CC, 826); indeed she mirrors it very well, and offers the reader a first ironic glimpse of her intrinsic nature.

Although it is the Spraggs as a family who inhabit the Stentorian, it is a habitation which is particularly associated with Undine. When Undine leaves the Stentorian, it is almost inevitable that her parents will move to an environment which better suits them, hence their shift further downtown to that 'grim abode' (CC, 865), the Malibran Hotel. The ekphrastic analysis of the Stentorian's

location on the social periphery of old New York society; its external ornament of the 'marble vestibule' and 'monumental façade' all aglow; and the gaudy hyperbolism of the Looey suites inhabited by Undine all firmly establish Undine Spragg's own identity for the reader. She has been a *tabula rasa* who has, after all, been inscribed by her inhabited environment, and is a character who has nothing to offer in terms of inscribing her own personality upon an environment.

Of course this relationship is indicative of the hotel-world which Undine inhabits, and inhabit it she does throughout the novel as she moves through the Stentorian and Malibran in New York; her honeymoon hotel in Siena; the Engadine Palace in St. Moritz; and the Nouveau Luxe in Paris. Her comfort in the hotel environment is visibly clear when Wharton writes that Ralph 'had risen visibly in her opinion since they had been absorbed into the life of the big hotels'; only when Ralph Marvell is absorbed into Undine's chosen environment does she offer some sense of appreciation for her new husband.

Marvell himself observes that Undine, and those 'duplicates' who inhabit 'every scene of continental idleness' (CC, 724), spend much of their time trying to 'disguise the difference between the high Alps and Paris or New York' (CC, 725) to create that homogenous 'phantom "society"' (CC, 802) that is the 'invading race' of Americans decanted in Europe. This invading race are primarily the powerful moneyed class who consistently move toward a life of promiscuous excitement in the public sphere of the hotel, as opposed to the high regard given to a conservative private life by an impotent traditional society such as those of the Dagonets and de Chelles.

Charles Bowen, a friend and companion of Mrs. Henley Fairford, is cast by Wharton as the seemingly objective voice of the social anthropologist. I say 'seemingly' objective because Bowen, like Ralph Marvell, has a distinctly smug attitude toward the phantom society of the invading race. This attitude seems to be one borne out of a sense that old New York society will still flourish accordingly even with the advent of a new strain of New York society. He offers a view similar to that of Marvell as he surveys the dining-room of the Nouveau Luxe:

During some forty years' perpetual exercise of his perceptions he had never come across anything that gave them the special titillation produced by the sight of the dinner-hour at the Nouveau Luxe: the same sense of putting his hand on human nature's passion for the factitious, its incorrigible habit of imitating the imitation.

[...]

The dining-room at the Nouveau Luxe represented ... what unbounded material power had devised for the delusion of its leisure: a phantom "society," with all the rules, smirks, gestures of its model, but evoked out of promiscuity and incoherence while the other had been the product of continuity and choice. (CC, 802-03)

Bowen acknowledges the fact that these societies are but imitations of the 'model' society, and Joseph Ward sums up the moral and cultural vacuousness of the 'phantom "society"' when he writes that '[t]o live and play in a hotel is to abdicate responsibility for one's residence and one's behaviour. Hotel life implicitly extends freedom and condones carelessness.'¹² Lily Bart's quest to appropriate her own place in *The House of Mirth* was one based upon the idea that a specific milieu would cement her place and role in society, thus it would also define the appropriate behaviour associated with that position in society. Undine Spragg's own preference for the hotel seems to reinforce this

¹² Joseph A. Ward. "The Amazing Hotel World" of James, Dreiser and Wharton.' In: Lynn H. Powers, ed. *Leont Edel and Literary Art* (Studies in Modern Literature, No. 84) (Ann Arbor/London: UMI Research Press, 1988), 159

idea of social and moral fibre being intrinsically associated with the physical milieu in which Wharton's characters exist.

Undine Spragg is the embodiment of the hotel world in *The Custom of the Country*:

The asserted noise and brilliance offered by these establishments is the desired alternative to the quietness and subdued light of the old New York and Paris communities that momentarily lure Undine, but which finally bore her, in spite of her yearning to possess the social benefits of the aristocracies.¹³

She also embodies that view of life which says that *the grass is always greener on the other side*, and with marriage, Undine seems to see such a union as a key to *the other side* as it were, and not a movement towards the security of a private and quiet domestic life. Throughout the novel Undine marries to enter into what she imagines to be the *newest* social strata, only to be disappointed at the reality, and return once again to hotel life. This she does in all four of her marriages: her first marriage to Elmer Moffatt sees her return to her family and eventually the Stentorian in New York; her second marriage to Ralph Marvell sees them barely leave the hotel society as they 'settle' in West End Avenue only for Undine to end up with Peter Van Degen at the Nouveau Luxe and a selection of other European hotels; her third marriage to Raymond de Chelles ends once again as she recaptures Elmer Moffatt in the Nouveaux Luxe; and finally, her fourth marriage to Elmer Moffatt — once again — at the end of a novel, Undine is housed in a 'new *hôtel*' in Paris. *Hôtel* in French does not necessarily mean a hotel in the English-American sense. More exactly, Undine's new home in Paris with Elmer Moffatt is more probably an *hôtel particulier*, which is more akin to a private townhouse. Although this

¹³ Ward. "The Amazing Hotel World", 158

'*hôtel*' is in fact her new home in Paris, it is to all intents and purposes a hotel much like all the others she has lived in throughout the novel.

Although *Hôtel Moffatt* is not strictly a hotel, it is in many respects Undine's own private hotel, and retains many of the qualities of the Stentorian. Located in 'one of the new quarters of Paris' (CC, 1003) comparable to the location of the Stentorian in the Upper West Side of New York, Undine's new home has an exterior which is one of public display:

The trees were budding symmetrically along the avenue; and Paul, looking down, saw, between windows and tree-tops, a pair of tall iron gates with gilt ornaments, the marble curb of a semi-circular drive, and bands of spring flowers set in turf. (CC, 1003)

The exterior architecture and landscape of the Moffatts' new home encourages guests towards it; whilst the Stentorian is conspicuous by its polychromatic nature and its mass of gilt applied at every turn, the description above is one that is redolent of the public entrance to a grand hotel.

The interior of *Hôtel Moffatt* is also of the scale of a grand hotel like the Stentorian with an 'immense marble dining-room' and a décor which is altogether as clinical and *unlived-in* as an hotel with its

gold arm-chairs ... gold baskets heaped with pulpy summer fruits ... crystal decanters with red and yellow wine, ... and against the walls were sideboards with great pieces of gold and silver, ewers and urns and branching candelabra, which sprinkled the green marble walls with starlike reflections. (CC, 1005)

Paul Marvell feels 'embarrassed' by the 'newness and sumptuousness' of the large marble dining-room, and the décor itself seems to literally repel any idea of the personal imprint and supports the idea of this interior aesthetic *mélange* as being symbolic of wealth and not taste or necessity with its 'white fur rugs and brocade chairs [...] maliciously on the watch for smears and ink-spots.' (CC, 1004)

The *Hôtel Moffatt* is a structure which may be owned by Undine and Elmer Moffatt, but like the structure itself, everything which ornaments the *hôtel* has been appropriated in order to create an extrinsic image of culture and tradition, very much as Moffatt had done to his Wall Street office when he first tasted financial success. His office, in a utilitarian and nondescript 'steel and concrete tower' (CC, 701) called the Ararat building, is a building with a name which is not lost on the reader with the biblical connotation referring to the landing place of Noah's Ark; to the place of the new beginning as a new existence is inscribed upon an old one. Moffatt's office is transformed by the application of a 'muddle of misapplied ornament':

Paint varnish and brass railings gave an air of opulence to the outer precincts, and the inner room, with its mahogany bookcases containing morocco bound "sets" and its wide blue leather arm-chairs, lacked only a palm or two to resemble the lounge of a fashionable hotel. Moffatt himself, as he came forward, gave Ralph the impression of having been done over by the same hand: he was smoother, broader, more supremely tailored, and his whole person exhaled the faintest whiff of an expensive scent. (CC, 920)

We are sure the books have been purchased for extrinsic ornamentation and not intrinsic worth, and Wharton once again firmly associates environment with character by noting that the application of décor to Moffatt's office and his person were possibly applied by 'the same hand'. The office is also likened to a hotel lounge which supports the idea that Moffatt too has a predilection for hotel living. This acquisition and application of ornament is emphasised all the more in the *Hôtel Moffatt* itself.

The 'wigged and corseleted heroes on the walls' of the *Hôtel Moffatt* did not represent Elmer Moffatt's ancestors; the books in the library 'bound in dim browns and golds', like those 'morocco-bound "sets"' in his Wall Street office, are there for their aesthetic qualities

and not for their intellectual worth as is shown by their *visual* availability and *intellectual* unavailability behind the 'gilt trellising' in the library. Elmer Moffatt's purchase of the de Chelles tapestries, the Vandyck painting 'Grey Boy', and Marie Antoinette's 'necklace and tiara of pigeon-blood rubies' (CC, 1004-09) all further display the social strategy of the invading race: to apply a 'muddle of misapplied ornament over a thin steel shell of utility' built upon speculative financial transactions in the engine-house of New York City, Wall Street.

The ekphrastic analysis of the Stentorian Hotel, based upon the reading of locale, exterior, and interior décor, translates to the reader a subtle yet incisive reading of the character who inhabits the hotel, Undine Spragg. As Wharton herself wrote: 'the first page of a novel ought to contain the germ of the whole' and the opening chapter within the Stentorian, establishes a world which is mirrored throughout the novel. This particular pattern concerning the hotel-world and Undine Spragg serves Wharton's own agenda of attacking the impermanence and vulgarity of the pervasive *nouveaux riches* as they establish themselves within New York society. It is not only the brutal acquisitiveness of the *nouveaux riches*, but their parasitical absorption of the superficial features of the host society which Wharton seems to be commenting upon here. This 'new society' is one which very quickly has moved from infancy to full exterior development without having gone through adolescence, with a resultant immaturity concerning tradition and morality.



HENRY JAMES, IN WHAT HE HIMSELF would call a 'topographical parenthesis' in his novel *Washington Square*, depicts the early years of Washington Square as being the 'ideal of quiet and genteel retirement' with 'very solid and honourable dwellings ... of established repose'.¹⁴ This may well have been the case early in the nineteenth century, but as the century progressed and commerce and population growth fuelled the city's northward expansion, the established families of Old New York's mercantile aristocracy would move northward as well. By the latter quarter of the nineteenth-century Washington Square had been surpassed as the most fashionable neighbourhood in what Edwin Burroughs and Mike Wallace would call 'the social arms race'.¹⁵ As a result, most of New York's major families would inevitably move northward toward Murray Hill and Fifth Avenue.

Eric Homberger points out that as early as the 1880s the geographical distribution of the old New York 'Patriarchs'¹⁶ — the self-elected New York aristocracy — was beginning to move away from Washington Square, but would still lie within the geographical parameters which would define the New York social hierarchy:

thirteen [Patriarchs] lived on Fifth Avenue and an additional seventeen lived on the blocks immediately east and west of Fifth. Three Patriarchs lived on Madison Avenue, two on Lexington Avenue, and two lived on Gramercy Park. Only two continued to live on Washington Square.¹⁷

The fact that Ralph Marvell and the Dagonet family seat is still located in Washington Square at the turn of the twentieth century has a very specific meaning within the context of Edith Wharton's *The*

¹⁴ Henry James, *Washington Square*, in: *Novels 1881-1886* (New York: Library of America, 1985), 15-16.

¹⁵ Edwin G. Burrows & Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 1083.

¹⁶ Eric Homberger, *Mrs. Astor's New York: Money and Social Power in the Gilded Age* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2002), 189.

¹⁷ Homberger, *Mrs. Astor's New York*, 190.

Custom of the Country. The geographically static Marvell and his Dagonet precedents are in this situation for two particular reasons. First, the Dagonets do not have the financial wherewithal of many of the other families within the patrician group of old New York society, a fact that is articulated by Ralph Marvell's understanding that '[In]aterial resources were limited on both sides of the house' (CC, 671). Therefore the financial power to move further northward was not available to the Dagonets. It is also important to note that expansion northwards — throughout the nineteenth-century in particular — into new territory on Manhattan Island by the mercantile aristocracy, was dependant on owning their own means of transport (be that by horses or horsepower). It is noticeable that the Marvells/Dagonets do not have their own means of transport, a further comment upon their overall position within the financial hierarchy of the patrician society.

Secondly, and most important in terms of the central thematic concerns of *The Custom of the Country*, the geographical stagnation of the Dagonets and Ralph Marvell establishes them as a symbol of the indigenous aristocratic race of New York. The emphasis here seems to focus upon what the gilded band of invaders did *not* have, and that is pedigree. The fact that the house on Washington Square is inhabited at one time in the novel by four generations of Marvells/Dagonets serves to point to a time when society had 'organized social bastions based not on wealth, or even accomplishment, but on heredity.'¹⁶ As the house and its location are seen as tired and behind the times, so the values which the house on Washington Square represent are seen as exhausted and indeed fragmenting in the glare of the new mélange

¹⁶ Burrows & Wallace. *Gotham*, 1083

of society. This is a view which is made all the clearer when this particular topographical seat is examined ekphrastically.

An ekphrastic analysis of Ralph Marvell's house on Washington Square entails three particular strands of analysis; location, exterior, and interior. Understanding the overarching ekphrastic effect generated through the interaction of these three strands creates, in turn, a solid understanding that another triumvirate is created; that of Washington Square, Ralph Marvell and Old New York society, and that to understand one element is to understand all elements. In terms of location, I have already discussed Washington Square's historical position as the genteel neighbourhood of the middle decades of the nineteenth century, but what is as important as this historical contextualization are the spatial hierarchies at work when viewing the Marvell/Dagonet house on Washington Square at the turn of the twentieth century.

There is no doubt that Washington Square has held a very important, yet fluid, position within the spatial hierarchies of New York City since its inception at the beginning of the nineteenth century. At one time, Washington Square was *the* pre-eminent neighbourhood within the city, and held a pre-eminent hierarchical position in that it was both 'central' and at the 'top' of the city. Although this neighbourhood would always have central pre-eminence on the east-west axis, and therefore never be tainted as socially dubious as is the case of the neighbourhoods Ellen Olenska and Lily Bart would inhabit in *The Age of Innocence* and *The House of Mirth*, it is along the north-south axis that Washington Square would be devalued through time.

New York society's inexorable move north through the city in the nineteenth century, as I have previously mentioned, was one which was driven primarily by commerce and the fact that by the 1830s, in and around the exclusive Battery Park area, the 'murmur of trade had become a mighty uproar.'¹⁹ This moved the wealthier citizens north to the Washington Square area, which in many respects could be seen as the last bastion of a New York that had not yet started to inhabit the grid system outlined in *The Commissioners' Plan* of 1811.²⁰ Where this migration northward in the 1830s would see Washington Square perceived as being on the frontier of the city, by 1848 it was to be seen as the heart of the city, and by 1900 it would be seen as being firmly located on the margins of the city where 'society' was concerned. The social devaluation of the area lies in the fact that as time moves on and the city expands northwards, the spatial hierarchy of Washington Square changes along the north-south axis, and this movement along the north-south axis of the city is inexorably linked to time. The fact that the Marvells and Dagonets fail to move throughout the latter part of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century indicates that soon Washington Square will be seen to be literally behind the times.

At the turn of the twentieth-century the Marvell/Dagonet house on Washington Square is still 'central' but is lower down in the city. Only a few years later, Undine Spragg and Elmer Moffatt would be married once again, and their own location would also be central on Fifth Avenue, but would undoubtedly be at the top of the city at 5009

¹⁹ James. *Washington Square*, 14

²⁰ L.N. Phelps Stokes regarded *The Commissioners' Plan* as 'marking the end of Old New York and the beginning of the Modern City.' *The Iconography of Manhattan Island, 1498-1909*, 6 volumes [1915-28], in: Robert T. Augustyn & Paul E. Cohen. *Manhattan in Maps, 1527-1995* (New York: Rizzoli, 1997), 102

Fifth Avenue, up around a non-existent 274th Street. The social avarice of both Elmer Moffatt and Undine Spragg locates their New York address at the absolute pinnacle of society at 5009 Fifth Avenue, a non-existent address, which would be Wharton's final implicit comment of such aspiration. This ironic 'fact' only serves to underline the pace and nature of the Moffatt's acquisition of social currency, and establishes an enormous contrast in the geographies of both Washington Square and the new frontier at the top end of Fifth Avenue where the Moffatts would place themselves. The geographical gap would also point to the gap in values and pedigree, elements that would now be buried along with the Dagonets and be soon forgotten.

The spatial hierarchy of the house as a comment upon the increasingly opaque social position and importance of the inhabitants of Washington Square can be substantiated in an analysis of the Marvell house itself. Through Wharton's anthropomorphic rendering of the Washington Square house, the reader is left in very little doubt as to the fact that the house itself holds within its architecture the Marvell/Dagonet personality:

Ralph Marvell, mounting his grandfather's door-step, looked up at the symmetrical old red house-front, with its frugal marble ornament, as he might have looked into a familiar human face. (CC, 668-69)

This extract not only establishes Marvell's familiarity with the family home as being like that of an old friend, but is also a statement which establishes a sharp contrast to the hotels, like the Stentorian, within which Undine Spragg and her breed flourish. The exterior of the Washington Square house is conservative and 'frugal' compared to the gilded behemoths of the stature of the Stentorian and the Nouveau Luxe. Wharton develops this point further:

"They're right, — after all, in some ways they're right," he murmured, slipping his key into the door.

"They" were his mother and old Mr. Urban Dagonet, both, from Ralph's earliest memories, so closely identified with the old house in Washington Square that they might have passed for its inner consciousness as it might have stood for their outward form; and the question as to which the house now seemed to affirm their intrinsic rightness was that of the social disintegration expressed by widely-different architectural physiognomies at the other end of Fifth Avenue. (CC, 669)

The pedigree of this house and its inhabitants is obvious, but vitally, the bond between house and inhabitants is made explicit. The exterior of the house and the interior consciousness of its inhabitants seem to merge into a single homogenous organism. Thus, early in the novel Wharton is establishing a central relationship which drives our comprehension of not only the themes of the novel itself, but also the mechanics of Wharton's own fiction.

Where the Stentorian and its European clones embody the impermanence and opulence of the new invader class of Americans, Washington Square and the Marvell/Dagonet house embodies the traditional conservative values and social prominence of the patrician families of old New York. Wharton's own distaste for the invading classes can be seen in the extracts above. There is a tone of Wharton's own acquiescence of the traditional Old New York ways, yet there is also an understanding of not only the inevitability of the incorporation of the *nouveaux riches* into New York society, but also the possibility of the old New York society being totally subsumed and left, as Ralph sees it, as an exhibit 'at ethnological shows, pathetically engaged in the exercise of their primitive industries.' (CC, 669)

The position of Washington Square within the spatial hierarchy of *fin-de-siècle* New York, and the staid yet classical exterior of the Marvell/Dagonet house both point to the increasing redundancy of the

Dagonets — and what they represent — within the social hierarchy of the city. What the exterior also points to is the intrinsic/extrinsic dichotomy as seen in the analysis of the Stentorian. Where the Stentorian has a highly ornate and visual exterior (like Undine Spragg), it has an interior which allows no imprint of its inhabitants and no personality. Conversely, Washington Square has no need for exterior ornament as the importance lies in its interior wealth, and likewise with its inhabitants, interior wealth ultimately is valued over exterior aesthetics.

By interior wealth I do not speak of sumptuous interior décor but of personality built of tradition, and of an interior emotional and intellectual life where sustenance and comfort can be gained. The interior of the Dagonet house is one which is subtly lit by lamps as opposed to the garish electric lamps of the Stentorian, and the interior adornment of the house is also dark and understated with its 'faded drawing-room'(CC, 681), 'quiet "Dutch interior"' (CC, 669), 'dark mahogany doors'(CC, 669), 'worn damask'(CC, 756) and the 'dim portraits of "Signers" and their females'(CC, 681). The habitat of Ralph Marvell's sister, Laura Fairford, is also very much like the Marvell/Dagonet home on Washington Square. Located on 'Thirty-eighth Street, down beyond Park Avenue'(CC, 626) the Fairford house is as peripheral to the fashionable Fifth Avenue enclaves as Washington Square. Yet the house is still located on the hierarchically important 'right' (east) of the city. The interior of the house is not only notable for its similarity in tone to the Marvell residence in that it is 'small and rather shabby' and is lit softly by 'green-shaded lamps making faint pools of brightness', but also, due to the fact that there 'was no gilding' and 'no lavish diffusion of light'(CC, 642), it is placed

in opposition to the Stentorian. This serves not only to define both traditional and *nouveau* environments, but also to polarise each environment's inhabitants and their incumbent attitudes.

Not only is the interior of the Dagonet residence in Washington Square described much like a Dutch genre painting of a quiet family interior lit dimly by a few solitary candles, but in references to the 'Dutch interior' and the 'Signers', Wharton establishes the Dagonets' 'aristocratic' pedigree. Not only is reference made to their Dutch antecedents (as the original inhabitants of New York) but also to ancestors who signed the Declaration of Independence in 1776, facts that imbue the Dagonets not only with tradition but with status in the foundation of the nation itself.

The entire ekphrastic analysis of Washington Square in *The Custom of the Country*, constructed of the three elements outlined previously, serves to establish the characteristics of Ralph Marvell and his family in the overall context of New York society at the turn of the twentieth century. It also serves to offer a contrast with the invader race and their hotel world. The polarization is important thematically in that it tends to foreshadow the inevitable conflict between these two elements of New York society as personified by Undine Spragg and Ralph Marvell. It also leads us to view the intrinsic (and extrinsic) structures of both societies as diametrically opposed to each other, a fact that would imply that they could not co-exist successfully. Yet Clare Van Degen and her husband seem to offer an example of how this can function; function it does, but at a cost, as will be demonstrated later in this chapter.

Understanding the ekphrastic elements of Washington Square and the Dagonet residence, the subterranean narrative they project for

reader now allows us to have a comprehension of its mirror image in Europe; the 'fine old mouldering house'(CC, 938) that is the Hôtel de Chelles in Paris.

Undine Spragg, soon after her marriage to Raymond de Chelles, comments that 'he reminded her of Ralph' (CC, 939). This 'disturbing resemblance to his predecessor' (CC, 955) is further reiterated when Mrs. Heeny almost lets slip that de Chelles' infatuation with Undine is redolent of Marvell's own feelings toward Undine at the time of their marriage when she says that de Chelles "reminds me of the way —" but she broke off suddenly, as if something in Undine's look had silenced her.'(CC, 943) The catoptric effect is obviously functioning in the depiction of these two characters, but this effect is also apparent when we view the Hôtel de Chelles.

The location of the Hôtel de Chelles in the Faubourg Saint Germain in Paris establishes the house within *the* aristocratic suburb of Paris. The *faubourgs* of Paris (and the Faubourg Saint Germain in particular) were the neighbourhoods which opened up for the bourgeoisie of Paris in their quest to escape the commercialisation of the city as well as the 'compressed and smelly confines of the Marais.'²¹ The Faubourg Saint Germain was

the stronghold of the Legitimists (that is, the nobility of the ancien regime), the Faubourg in due time had opened up to the newer nobility of the Napoleon and Louis-Philippe regimes. It had also become home to the wealthy industrialists of the middle and late nineteenth century and, after the Franco-Prussian War, to some of the more prominent writers and artists. Edith Wharton herself lived in its midst from 1900 to 1920, for short periods until 1911, and then on a more permanent basis after the sale of The Mount, her Lenox residence in western Massachusetts.²²

²¹ Alistair Horne, *Seven Ages of Paris: Portrait of a City* (London: Macmillan, 2002), 141. The genesis of the Faubourg Saint Germain mirrors that of Washington Square.

²² Anne Fozza, 'Edith Wharton and the Faubourg Saint-Germain: the diary of the Abbe Mugnier' *Twentieth Century Literature*, 43.4 (Winter 1997): 394

This suburb may well have been the *traditional* suburb for the aristocratic families of Paris, but by the turn of the twentieth-century it 'became overshadowed ... by new breeds of Parisian'²³ much like New York's 'invader race', and was also an environment which was known well by Wharton. The tradition and pedigree of the de Chelles family is also established by highlighting the importance of heredity with the 'drawing-room hung with portraits of high-nosed personages in perukes and orders' and the 'circle of ladies and gentlemen' looking like these 'every-day versions of the official figures above their heads' (CC, 937). Where Moffatt buys in portraits which have no connection to himself or his wife, the de Chelles family portraits are the real thing, and establish the pedigree of the family straight away.

In marrying de Chelles, Undine is mirroring the same mistakes that she made in New York in marrying Ralph Marvell. Undine Spragg marries into, and falls in love with the idea of what each of her husbands *represent*. Through the extrinsic information she has garnered from gossip and the press is Undine motivated to join the upper echelons of society, and not through an intrinsic knowledge or understanding of these men and their traditions. Both Marvell and de Chelles, once married to Undine Spragg, attempt to impose limits upon Undine's chosen social circle; in St. Moritz Marvell tries to dissuade Undine from associating with Baroness Adelschein, and in Paris, de Chelles attempts to limit her association with Princess Estradina. Financially, both men attempt to curb Undine's insatiable appetite for spending money, and both ultimately fail. Geographically, both men attempt to settle and locate themselves in what Undine Spragg could only perceive as social wildernesses: de Chelles moves to

²³ Horne. *Seven Ages of Paris*, 245

Saint Désert which, as the name suggests, is a literal wilderness in the eyes of Undine and which keeps her away from the hotel world in Paris which offers her such comfort; and Marvell moves to West End Avenue, seen as a backward step by Undine as it is even further west than the Stentorian, thus taking her farther from her desired social berth on Fifth Avenue.

In these two particular marriages Undine Spragg comes to a realization that '[s]he had found out that she had given herself to the exclusive and the dowdy when the future belonged to the showy and promiscuous.' (CC, 748) The 'dowdy' Marvell/Dagonet residence turns out to be an inappropriate 'setting' for such a bauble as Undine Spragg. The ultimate end here is that Undine resets the family heirlooms of both Marvell and de Chelles — the Dagonet ring and pendant and the de Chelles' Boucher tapestries. Not only are the jewels and the tapestries given new modern settings to show to the world, but Undine — herself an expensive ornament — is given a new settings to be placed in: the Hôtel Moffatt in Paris, and the new Fifth Avenue mansion in New York which is a modern remodelling of the Pitti Palace in Florence.

De Chelles' survival of his marriage to Undine and Marvell's death as a result of his marriage to Undine can be viewed as an important point of divergence between the two characters. Ralph Marvell speaks from a position outside the 'aboriginal' standpoint of his mother and grandfather:

Small, cautious, middle-class, had been the ideals of aboriginal New York; but it suddenly struck the young man that they were singularly coherent and respectable as contrasted with the chaos of indiscriminate appetites which made up its modern tendencies. He too had wanted to be "modern," had revolted, half-humorously, against the restrictions and exclusions of the old code; and it must have been by one of the ironic reversions of heredity that, at this precise point, he began to see what

there was to be said on the other side — *his* side, as he now felt it to be.
(CC, 669-70)

Marvell, in stepping out of his natural environment is unable to survive, whereas de Chelles is consistently anchored to his family and an age old European aristocratic tradition which anchors it. This attitude and de Chelles' attitude to this invading race is delivered in one of the most succinct expressions of the differences between old and new society when de Chelles confronts Undine about her desire to sell the Boucher tapestries to Elmer Moffatt:

"... you're all alike," he exclaimed, "every one of you. You come among us from a country we don't know, and can't imagine, a country you care for so little that before you've been a day in ours you've forgotten the very house you were born in — if it wasn't torn down before you knew it! You come among us speaking our language and not knowing what we mean; wanting the things we want, and not knowing why we want them; aping our weaknesses, exaggerating our follies, ignoring or ridiculing all we care about — you come from hotels as big as towns, and from towns as flimsy as paper, where the streets haven't had time to be named, and the buildings are demolished before they're dry, and the people are as proud of changing as we are of holding to what we have — and we're fools enough to imagine that because you copy our ways and pick up our slang you understand anything about the things that make life decent and honourable for us!" (CC, 982)

Not only is this speech redolent of Ralph Marvell's rare incursion into a mode of admonishment with Undine, telling her: "You know nothing of this society you're in; of its antecedents, its rules, its conventions" (CC, 728), it is also a précis of the entire intrinsic /extrinsic dichotomy which lies at the heart of the novel. De Chelles accurately outlines the precocity of Undine Spragg and many others like her. Indeed, they cannot speak his 'language,' nor any other except that of their own breed, and they are a breed who have built a new society which will last, but which is defined by its inherent insubstantiality.

Undine Spragg may well talk like the de Chelles and Marvells, she may ape their behaviour, but she has no depth in her understanding of the importance of tradition and family, because she *has* no tradition and an increasingly devalued family life. Undine Spragg's relationship with her mother is distinctly shallow as her mother also has no great intellectual, emotional or cultural depth. Her father is merely perceived as the financial source for all her wants. At no time in the novel does Wharton allow the relationship with her parents to gain more than these single dimensions. Her attitude toward her own son is one which also lacks warmth or humanity. He is a commodity to be used, and indeed she does so in the dealings with Marvell which drive him to suicide, and she also sees him as an 'acquisition' (CC, 938) which will help with her integration into the de Chelles family after marrying Raymond. Through the entire novel, Undine strives to create the illusion of a woman of substance, yet her exterior actions and expectations are merely a result of her 'passionately imitative' (CC, 633) personality which builds these expectations through hearsay and tabloid tittle-tattle. Undine Spragg's own nature as a *tabula rasa* is one which defines her defect. As Ralph observes, Undine's 'very sensitiveness to new impressions, combined with her obvious lack of a sense of relative values, would make her an easy prey to the powers of folly' (CC, 676), and by the end of the novel the powers of folly have Undine firmly within their grasp.



UNDINE SPRAGG SUFFERS 'incessant pin-pricks inflicted by the incongruity between her social and geographical situation' (CC, 753) when she and Ralph Marvell set up their marital home on West End Avenue. For a woman whose insatiable aspirational drive has always pointed to a future on Fifth Avenue, West End Avenue is an address which is singularly unsuitable. Being married into one of the major New York families fires her desire to live in a major New York address, namely, Fifth Avenue. Geographically, being further west than the Stentorian isolates her even further from the fashionable Fifth Avenue society which she believes she has the right to be a part of through her marriage to a Marvell.

The ekphrastic analyses of both the Stentorian and the Marvell residence on Washington Square serves to highlight not only the characteristics of each setting as it pertains to the characters who inhabit them, but also serves to establish the distinct polarization between the two social strata. This polarization is one which asks questions about the possible compatibility of the two strata. The 'incongruity between her social and geographical situation' seems to undermine the success of such a proposition, yet in the marriage of Peter and Clare Van Degen we do have a union which seems to function within such a polarization.

Once again, Wharton's application of her visual scrutiny upon the location and architectures of a setting within her fiction, provides a detailed ekphrastic reading which not only adds important detail to the reader's understanding of the setting itself, and the inhabitants *themselves*, but also serves to refract the master narrative through the ekphrastic prism with a resultant new understanding of the text as a whole.

The reader's first introduction to the Van Degen world is one which is seen through Undine Spragg's own imagination:

Undine had a sharp vision of the Van Degen dining-room — she pictured it as oak-carved and sumptuous with gilding — with a small table in the centre, and rosy lights and flowers, and Ralph Marvell, across the hot-house grapes and champagne leaning to take a light from his hostess's cigarette. (CC, 662)

This could very well be a description of a room from the Stentorian with its mass of visual ornamentation, and the ubiquitous 'gilding' which seems to be a part of every environment inhabited by the *nouveaux riches* in this novel. Yet Undine has drawn this imaginary description from her own picture-house of memories taken from 'scenes on the stage' and the 'glowing pages of fiction' (CC, 662). Undine's own persona is one which is constructed by the absorption of such surface ornament and detail, and it is the reader's own absorption of such detail in the novel which enhances our understanding of the Van Degens.

Clare Van Degen, at once a Dagonet *and* a woman capable of 'rash ardours and vague intensities' (CC, 832), was Ralph Marvell's first love. They 'were of the same blood and had the same traditions' (CC, 763) yet possibly due to her own capricious nature and 'rash ardours', Clare Dagonet married the vulgar yet wealthy Peter Van Degen; an action which she came to regret but could do little about considering the old New York attitude to divorce as an 'unfortunate' arrangement which would leave 'a divorced woman ... at a decided disadvantage' (CC, 685). Peter Van Degen has all the trappings of the fabulously wealthy man; his boat, his art, his Long Island house, and importantly, his Fifth Avenue 'palace' and his blue-blooded wife.

The Van Degens' New York home on Fifth Avenue is an important topographical site to examine, as it will now obviously be indicative of the relationship between those who live there. What we must understand is that Clare Van Degen is prone to acting like a Van Degen as she herself acknowledges when she brings a gift for Paul Marvell on his birthday:

I knew it was the boy's birthday, and I've brought him a present: a vulgar expensive Van Degen offering, I've not enough imagination left to find the right thing, the thing it takes feeling and not money to buy. (CC, 761)

This is an acknowledgement that she *is* who she is, that she has lost a part of herself to what Ralph would call 'Van Degenism' (CC, 676), yet her understanding of the weakness in her 'Van Degen' behaviour marks her out as still having the Dagonet character at heart, as does her home on Fifth Avenue.

The 'Van Degen lair' (CC, 672) on Fifth Avenue is eminently situated both topographically and socially. The mansion is central, and high up the primary thoroughfare of New York City (Fifth Avenue), and this is mirrored socially in that not only do the Van Degens have enormous wealth but also the antecedents of lineage brought to the marriage by Clare Dagonet. In terms of the architectures of the mansion, it seems to be primarily of the thoughtless eclecticism which defines the *nouveaux riches* throughout most of Wharton's fiction.

In particular, Wharton's description of the 'polyphonic' (CC, 830) Van Degen drawing-room and the mansion's general décor is much like the Stentorian and its 'polychrome' suites. The 'heavily decorated' mansion — with one of the public rooms described by Ralph Marvell as a 'gilded and tapestried wilderness' with a

'monumental sofa behind a tea-table laden with gold plate'(CC, 830) — actually matches up very well with Undine's own imaginings of the Van Degen dining-room.

There should be no great surprise that the Van Degen mansion has similarities with the Stentorian and Undine's own ideas of the mansion, as both Undine and Peter Van Degen are cut from the same cloth in that they are members of the invading race. Van Degen, like Undine, has a home but seems to be constantly away from it in the more suitable hotel-worlds we see and hear of him frequenting throughout the novel. As Undine fails to leave an imprint on her own environments, so to does Peter Van Degen fail to leave an imprint on his. The only sense of any personality imprinted upon his home are the two large portraits of Peter and Clare Van Degen overlooking the 'waste of gilt furniture'(CC, 830). The purpose of Peter Van Degen's portrait is to 'cast ... the satisfied eye of proprietorship' over the mansion, and the purpose of 'Poppo's effigy'(CC, 922) of Clare Van Degen is to show the world that she too, like the Fifth Avenue mansion and opulent furniture, is merely a chattel with which Van Degen signals his own position within society. Yet there is one important difference between the hotel-worlds of the Spraggs and Van Degen in that Clare Van Degen, much like Ralph Marvell has done in West End Avenue, has created a small alcove within the 'Van Degen lair' which is distinctly that of Clare Dagonet.

Although Wharton writes that Ralph Marvell visits Clare Van Degen's 'inner drawing-room', the room has the feel of a *boudoir* in its innate privacy from all except Clare Van Degen's very closest friends.²⁴

²⁴ Wharton writes in *The Decoration of Houses* that when 'a small sitting-room adjoins the family drawing-room ... if given up to the mistress of the house, is virtually a boudoir.' (DHL, 133)

As such, it has the patina of good taste pervading the room which Wharton sees as being a natural side effect of the pedigree and tradition represented by the Dagonets. Where the Stentorian and its counterparts are suffused with the 'harsh white glare' of electric light which Wharton thought could 'vulgarize interior decoration' and deprive a room 'of privacy and distinction' (*DH*, 128), Clare Van Degen's inner sanctum is defined by the subtlety of the natural light.

The 'pale' and 'luminous' shadows which illuminate the room caress the 'old cabinets and consoles'. The 'vases of bronze and porcelain' and the 'old lacquer screen ... with gold leaves floating on it' show the breeding and taste in their understated delicacy. This is an environment which has no deleterious glare on the décor or the inhabitant of the room, and although Wharton makes clear her own preferences in décor and character, she does not do so blindly. Wharton was an inhabitant of a Dagonet-type world and as such has a fondness for much of it, yet she is still able to see its flaws, and view them both nostalgically and realistically. Clare Van Degen's 'inner drawing-room' is appreciated by Wharton, but she does define and locate it in a way which establishes it as a last bastion of the old New York society on Fifth Avenue.

Importantly, Wharton once again makes clear the correlation between setting and character as she writes that Clare Van Degen adapts 'her own appearance to her soberer background.' (*CC*, 830) This is an environment created by Clare Van Degen purposefully to both comfort and reassure Ralph Marvell:

Her way of receiving him made him feel that her restlessness and stridency were as unlike her genuine self as the gilded drawing-room, and that this quiet creature was the only real Clare, the Clare who had once been so nearly his, and who seemed to want him to know that she had never wholly been anyone else's. (*CC*, 830)

Marvell views the room with a 'confused pleasure' which can only come from his recognition of an environment which is redolent of his own in Washington Square, but with the additional element of Clare Van Degen signifying the ideal of 'what could have been' and what may well be in the future. I cannot help but think that Clare Van Degen has been infected by Van Degenism to such a degree at this point, that in her future she may well see divorce and remarriage as a viable possibility, thus clarifying this particular setting as one not only of comfort and reassurance, but of seduction too.

The ekphrasis of the Van Degen mansion on Fifth Avenue serves several purposes in our overall understanding of this novel. First, the nature of the *nouveaux riches*' imprint upon this New York is once again highlighted as being mere surface ornamentation with no substantive structure to it, and is connected directly to Peter Van Degen's vulgar consumption and acquisitiveness. Secondly, Clare Van Degen, as a member of the patrician Dagonet family, is seen to be complicit in the elevation of Van Degen within society, with the resultant loss of much of her own original identity. And finally, the final element of the previous point, the 'loss of much of her own original identity', defines a central theme of the text in its attempt to ascertain if both the traditional and new societies can co-exist within the city simultaneously and together. The Van Degen example seems to answer this by pointing to the fact that the traditional society must give up much of its original character to flourish, and Clare Van Degen does so. The survival of the older society is constantly questioned as we believe, that much like the city of Troy, this particular layer of New York society is doomed to be buried underneath the more powerful and vibrant invader society.



UNDINE SPRAGG, ALTHOUGH INTELLECTUALLY and emotionally insubstantial, is able to decode the surface images which populate her New York life at the turn of the twentieth century. She recognises specific settings not for their qualities of design or functionality, but for what they represent to her in particular:

It was of no consequence that the details and technicalities [of Wall Street] escaped her: she knew their meaningless symbols stood for success, and what that meant was as clear as day to her. Every Wall Street term had its equivalent in the language of Fifth Avenue. (CC, 976)

It is the language of Fifth Avenue and its bejewelled façades which communicate directly to Undine Spragg's own consciousness. Her entire being is one which is — like the water nymph her name suggests — concerned only with surface perceptions and their refraction onto her own being. The catoptric construction of this particular character is one which anchors the entire text. Not only does she personify the 'muddle of misapplied ornament over a thin steel shell of utility' (CC, 669) which so well defines the insurgent *nouveaux riches* who are being absorbed into the social fabric of the city, but she acts as an exemplar in her own right of the acquisitive parasite which Wharton had so often written about.

It is this particular character trait which emphasises the ekphrastic ethos at the centre of Edith Wharton's major New York texts. The visual language of the descriptive detail held within the text, like a hieroglyph, is decoded to reveal a more complex verbal narrative

which in itself enhances our understanding of the master narrative of the text. Sarah McGinty states that

[a]s a writer, Mrs. Wharton applied the scrutinizing eye trained on European and American architecture and interior design to the homes and habits of her fictional characters. The "manners" in her novels of manners are, in part, the settings that form the stage on which the patterns of behaviour, custom, and habit are enacted.²⁵

Wharton has once again constructed a text with a knowing eye on both the architecture *within* and *of* the text itself. Not only has the architecture of New York been tacitly employed to offer substantiation to individual characterizations such as Undine Spragg, Ralph Marvell and Clare Van Degen, it has also been used in the wider context of commenting on these particular characters as historical archetypes at a specific moment in New York City's history.

Undine Spragg and Elmer Moffatt are perfect examples of what Claire Preston calls 'Whartonian buccaneers' intruding upon 'previously closed social categories.' Preston goes on to expand on the idea of these buccaneers as being

essentially destroyers, devourers of worlds. The principles of family, heredity, land, culture, or achievement which have determined the nature of these élite populations are obliterated by the power of cash, a cancellation clearly figured in the marriages of Clare Dagonet to Peter van Degen, and of Ralph Marvell to Undine Spragg.²⁶

Marvell is an obvious victim of these rapacious buccaneers, and the indications that the Dagonet/Marvell home on Washington Square (representing one the traditional patriarchal families of the city) is being slowly peripheralised by the northward expansion of new society supports Preston's succinct analysis. Marvell makes explicit the adamant bond which holds the home, family and tradition

²⁵ Sarah M. McGinty 'Houses and Interiors as Characters in Edith Wharton's Novels,' *Nineteenth Century*, 5 (1979): 49-50

²⁶ Claire Preston, *Edith Wharton's Social Register* (London: Macmillan Press, 2000), 103

together. United they may well stand, but united they will fall also, a fact made clear by Wharton's depiction of a setting which is out of time *and* place with the new ruling hegemony of those wealthy insurgents like Peter van Degen.

In Wharton's overarching narrative of change which is constructed through the three major New York novels, *The Custom of the Country* is the novel that does away with faint implication and deals with the real visceral conflicts between both host and insurgent societies. Wharton is casting a nostalgic yet accepting eye over this new social order. She is nostalgic for all that tradition entails, and what it had meant to her. Through all the major New York texts, there does emerge a subtle patina of acceptance of the inevitability of change, and change for the worse. Through her depiction of the world of Mrs. Manson Mingott in *The Age of Innocence* where the European influence on the architectures of her home and the marriages of her daughters foreshadow the dilution of old New York society's pseudo-aristocratic bloodline, to the gradual acceptance into society of Mrs. Norma Hatch and Simon Rosedale in *The House of Mirth*, and finally the brutality of the Whartonian buccaneers in *The Custom of the Country*, Wharton outlines the changing of the old guard, for the new guard.

There is no doubt that New York society can be at once a blunt instrument *and* a delicate tool, and both of these images apply to *The Custom of the Country*. The stark contrast between the two main protagonists and their respective environments of choice is rather blunt, yet these social gradations are perceived in a more delicate manner as Undine herself increases her own power through her beauty and guile, and as she begins to socialise with those with a foot in

either camp, such as Claude Popple and a selection of other personages who are comfortably able to fuse both tradition and vulgarity.



5

Conclusion:

The Three City Trilogy



'Manhattan is the twentieth century's Rosetta Stone.'

Rem Koolhaas¹

'New York is or can be regarded as a collage and the point of collage is that unlike things are stuck together to make, in the best case, a new reality.'

Donald Barthelme²



EDITH WHARTON DID NOT CONSTRUCT her three major New York texts as a trilogy, but a trilogy is how they can be perceived. Each novel's specific New York hieroglyph can be decoded, and the resultant analysis of the three novels interconnected to form a cohesive socio-historical narrative of the 'remaking' of New York and its social elite over several decades, an era where Ward McAllister's precious 'Four Hundred' would be displaced by the new wealth of what was to develop into the 'Fortune Five Hundred'.

As important as the socio-historical narrative Wharton would construct would be her tacit understanding of the condition of

¹ Rem Koolhaas. *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 6

² J.D. Belamy. *The New Fiction: Interviews* (Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1974), 51

modernity which the city of New York, paradoxically, had at its core in the decades Wharton inhabits. The paradox lies in the idea that the modernity of the city situates itself in the decline and debasement of its own people and fabric, yet this in itself results in a reconstruction of the city into a newer version of New York – a palimpsestic act of erasure and re-inscription. Marshall Berman offered further clarity to this idea in *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (1983) when he wrote that

To be modern is to live a life of paradox and contradiction ... in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and our world – and, at the same time, threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are.³

This idea lies at the heart of the condition of modernity in the metropolis, it lies at the heart of Wharton's three New York novels as these novels have paradox and contradiction at their core, and central to all the paradoxes and contradictions is the city which she situates at the heart all three novels – New York.

There is no doubt that, to some degree or other, there are several obvious elements of proto-modernism in the mechanics of the literary naturalism which informs Wharton's New York fiction. In particular the importance of environment is paramount to Wharton as it was to Zola, Norris and Dreiser. She would use the city in an act of nostalgia yet be prepared to highlight the multitude of incongruities of place and character which would define New York and its transformation. Malcolm Bradbury would call New York one of the 'storm-centres of civilisation' where 'the intensities of cultural friction and the frontiers of experience'⁴ are manifest. The sheer complexity of the city depicted by Wharton in terms of its social and spatial

³ Marshall Berman. *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 1983), 15

mechanics offers a backdrop to modernism, and serves to provide the reader with a cognitive map which enables them to underpin their readings of the city.

The New York City of Wharton's childhood, accurately portrayed on many levels in *The Age of Innocence*, was one of genteel respectability. The society in this particular novel is one peopled with the immutable spectres of a social aristocracy whose lineage stretched back to Wharton's own ancestors, and was surely the city with which Wharton felt most at ease, albeit from the distance of forty years.

New York City's rise to *the* pre-eminent commercial position in world trade and commerce during the latter half of the nineteenth century was such that the city's social identity naturally evolved in parallel. Yet many of the old New York aristocracy did *not* evolve. Instead, the immutability of these static elements of old New York society brought on a stagnation which would, in the end, result in its peripheralisation and in some cases its destruction. Wharton's New York, and those who occupied her particular stratum, would eventually succumb to the immoveable force of the enormous wealth of the 'new' New Yorkers such as the real-life figures of Rockefeller and Morgan, and the August Belmonts, Simon Rosedales, and Elmer Moffatts of Wharton's fiction.

Edith Wharton's New York trilogy charts the influx of the *nouveaux riches* into the city, and their influence and parasitical relations with the host society. Wharton's keen mind understood exactly this evolutionary process as she herself outlined in *A Backward Glance*:

* Malcolm Bradbury, 'The Cities of Modernism.' In: Malcolm Bradbury & James McFarlane, eds. *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930* [1976] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 97-98.

Not until the successive upheavals which culminated in the catastrophe of 1914 had "cut all likeness from the name" of my old New York, did I begin to see its pathetic picturesqueness. The first change came in the 'eighties, with the earliest detachment of big money-makers from the West, soon to be followed by the lords of Pittsburgh. But their infiltration did not greatly affect old manners and customs, since the dearest ambition of the newcomers was to assimilate existing traditions. Social life, with us as in the rest of the world, went on with hardly perceptible changes till the war abruptly tore down the old frame-work, and what had seemed unalterable rules of conduct became of a sudden observances as quaintly arbitrary as domestic rites of the Pharaohs. (BG, 780-781)

Here Wharton outlines the gradual influx of new wealth into New York City, and in her fiction, she tracks this evolution too through her three New York novels — *The Age of Innocence*, *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country* — each novel depicting a new and evolving semblance of New York City over a few decades. Wharton, not only accurately charted old New York's evolution over a particular half century through these three novels, but also accessed particular genres in order to generate the required narratives which would cohere and create a master narrative of change, a master narrative which would define the palimpsestic process which would see the old New York of Wharton's youth be overwritten new versions of the city.

Wharton's active career covered not only a whole series of important historical and political upheavals, but also spanned some of the most important and formative literary movements of her, and our, time, many of which she would actively engage with. In particular, literary naturalism would play a pivotal role in her three major New York novels. With *The Age of Innocence* Wharton chose to write a historical novel, as she saw it as the 'only possible form of fiction' she could turn to after the upheaval of the First World War. Yet this is a

novel which 'certainly spoke to modernist sensibilities'⁵ on some level. This novel is a novel of renunciation, one where the main protagonist Newland Archer chases the status quo in a world that moves on and away from him. In *The Age of Innocence* — which would merely insinuate at the power and influence of the circumstance, biology and environment which lay at the heart of literary naturalism — Wharton would reveal the 'old world' which had been overwritten by the time *The Age of Innocence* was published in 1920. Wharton's use of this particular genre allowed her to delineate a world which, from the post-war perspective, seemed to be of a more 'innocent' vintage than that of the world she inhabited in 1920, and which tacitly acknowledged the loss of values and attitudes which she held dear. Yet, as with all things Wharton, complexity is never far from the surface and the complexity of this novel would be the idea of modernity being driven through her implications of a new reality and a new New York.

Where Wharton's naturalist framework is subtly encoded in *The Age of Innocence*, in *The House of Mirth* it lies explicitly in the foreground of the novel. The construction of the novel is such that there is an initial feeling that the author has allowed circumstance, biology and environment to control all the outcomes in this novel. Lily Bart's fate seems to be preordained on many levels, driven by the environmental determinism outlined through the ekphrastic readings of many aspects of the text. These aspects illuminate the inevitable extinction of an organism which cannot protect or promote itself in such an environment, but with the added sophistication that Wharton does, to some degree, make the characters at least *partly* responsible

⁵ Michael Nowlin. 'Edith Wharton's Higher Provincialism: French Ways for Americans and the Ends of *The Age of Innocence*.' *Journal of American Studies*, 38.1 (2004): 92

for their fates. Yet like Newland Archer in *The Age of Innocence*, Lily Bart is left behind as she does not fully capitalise on her trade value.

Finally, in *The Custom of the Country*, the naturalist model is concrete in her use of the binary pairs that would 'recurrently pit the social old guard against the ascendant crass arrivistes.'⁶ Yet Wharton enters the realist mode in that she, at times, moves away from the seeming absolutism of a powerful environmental and biological agency, towards the idea of the self-willed actions of Undine Spragg driving the narrative forward. Paradoxically, the seeming objectivity constructed within *The House of Mirth* in particular, is eroded in *The Custom of the Country* with such an overwhelmingly powerful characterisation of Undine Spragg who, being a powerful force of nature in her own right, seems to have absolute control over her own fate and the fates of others in the novel. This particular reading, together with those of *The Age of Innocence* and *The House of Mirth*, not only define Wharton's literary sophistication, but also characterise Wharton's genuine understanding of how genre supports and constructs the readings which mirror the overarching narrative of change which is generated through the three New York novels. Not only would Wharton make these more obvious connections to literary naturalism but she could not but help integrate the subtle rhythms of modernity which touched upon buried cultures, new philosophies, new morals and museums that would preserve – in some degree – against what Newland Archer would see 'with respect to Ellen Olenska's fragile beauty, as "the stupid law of change"' (*AI*, 1262)⁷

⁶ Cecelia Tichi, 'Emerson, Darwin, and *The Custom of the Country*' In: Carol J. Singley, ed. *A Historical Guide to Edith Wharton*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003: 91

⁷ Nowlin, 'Edith Wharton's Higher Provincialism' 93



WHARTON'S ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL discourse throughout *The Age of Innocence* underpins the fact that Wharton was seeing this particular New York City from a distance, both temporally and spatially.⁸ *The Age of Innocence* shows the precise dissection of that particular society, at that particular time in the 1870s. Of course, the primary narrative strand revolves around the relationships between Newland Archer, May Welland and Ellen Olenska, yet there is no doubt that the ekphrastic elements of this text illuminate a secondary strand as well as the primary strand.

The secondary narrative strand focuses on the changing face of New York society itself. Wharton's construction of each topographical site not only comments on the human drama which unfolds throughout the text, but also comments implicitly on the evolution of New York society. As has been noted earlier, Wharton had written that in respect to New York City, the 'first change came in the 'eighties with the earliest detachment of big money-makers from the West'. *The Age of Innocence* is set in the late 1870s, on the cusp of such a change, yet Wharton consistently points to the future of the society through the ekphrastic elements of the novel.

Wharton's opening of the novel, where she refers to 'keeping out the "new people"' from the Academy of Music, and her allusion to the building of the Metropolitan Opera House a few years later, offer the foundations of Wharton's secondary narrative strand. The idea of an insurgent race is developed very early in the novel and the

⁸ Temporally, Wharton was distanced from *The Age of Innocence* as she was writing it between 1919 and 1920. While spatially, Wharton had been living in Europe for the best part of a decade when she wrote the novel.

foundation of the secondary narrative is built upon further with the extensive ekphrasis of the Mingott mansion high up on Fifth Avenue. Here, Wharton expresses, through both the aesthetics and locale of the mansion, the future of New York society. She acknowledges, through her depiction of Mrs. Manson Mingott and her home, the fact that the future will require a dilution of the bloodlines which had sustained society to that point in the city's history.

The old New York architecture has been crossbred with the European influence as has the interior layout and décor of the Mingott mansion. Mrs. Manson Mingott's own daughters' marriages to families outside 'the tight little citadel of New York' mirror her own profile as a woman who has taken on some European traits herself, as with her 'odd foreign way of addressing men by their surnames'. Mrs. Manson Mingott's acknowledgement of her admiration for Julius Beaufort and her explicit remark that 'we need new blood and new money' (AI, 1039) within New York society reiterates the view that society as it was could not sustain itself in the hermetically sealed world of 1870s New York. Through the spatial hierarchies of the city itself, the Mingott mansion and its inhabitants are viewed as pre-eminent and are given a pre-eminent voice in the novel thus highlighting the reality which Wharton herself had acknowledged, that society had to evolve or die.

Mrs. Manson Mingott's acceptance of the exotic Countess Olenska into society is another indicator of a new acceptance of 'impurities' into old New York society, as is the ekphrastic description of the Countess's house on West 23rd Street. This house, like the Mingott mansion, is located within New York, yet internally the décor points to a personality which has both New York and European

sensibilities. Opposing this house is that of the van der Luyden's New York home with its literal fading appeal and impact, once again presaging the inevitable loss of influence of the patriarchal families on New York society.

Where *The Age of Innocence* hieroglyph is deciphered through ekphrasis to show the rigid and constrictive qualities of New York society (which in turn informs the human drama at the heart of the text), it also points to a future where New York society will have to open the gates to its sacred inner sanctum, not only to sustain itself but to evolve. The van der Luydens fade away, yet Mrs. Manson Mingott, Ellen Olenska and Newland's own son Dallas — who marries the Beaufort's daughter — evolve and survive.



THE AGE OF INNOCENCE OFFERS A PREMONITORY glance at a pivotal moment in New York society's evolution, yet there is little doubt that 1870s New York was *still* shaped and controlled by the influences of its patriarchal figureheads. The inevitability of such an evolution is well established in *The Age of Innocence* through the multiple ekphrases of the city, but in *The House of Mirth* — the second part of a notional New York trilogy — we also have a text which, like *The Age of Innocence*, functions on two different yet intertwined narrative levels.

In *The House of Mirth*, in my mind the most sophisticated of the three novels discussed, Wharton's hieroglyph begins to explore a theme of incompatibility. Wharton moves away from the relative harmony of the old society in *The Age of Innocence* and invests the New York society of Lily Bart with a strain of discord which evokes a city

and society in flux, and a city which is in the throes of the transforming influences of modernity. Viewing Lily Bart's peripheralisation and eventual destruction brought on by massive centrifugal social forces, the social landscape seems to show throughout the novel the disparate nature of Wharton's characters and their seeming inability to co-exist within each other's environments. This society in *The House of Mirth* is a society which is far from settled. Where *The Age of Innocence* offers the possibility of change through the characters of Mrs. Manson Mingott and Ellen Olenska, *The House of Mirth* views a society which is in the midst of change shown through the constant social perambulations of Lily Bart herself.

The stratification of the society is manifested in physical terms by Lily Bart's descent through each social ring of the city until she reaches the milieu of a boarding house for transients – a more than suitable environment for a woman whose social ephemerality will be her undoing. Lily Bart, in many ways quite naturally, takes on the mantle established by Ellen Olenska in *The Age of Innocence*, that of the outsider. Where Ellen Olenska still has family, innate social awareness and a strong survival instinct, Lily Bart has *no* family, a social awareness which she singularly fails to engage with and a doubtful survival instinct.

The most obvious narrative strand in *The House of Mirth* undoubtedly focuses upon the process of Lily Bart's peripheralisation in New York society, yet the secondary narrative strand is activated through the ekphrases of the milieus which Bart momentarily inhabits throughout her journey. As Maureen St. Laurent correctly asserts: '*The House of Mirth* is not primarily the story of Lily; it is rather Wharton's

representation of her culture through the play of its forces on Lily's life',⁹ and as such, *The House of Mirth* represents a New York society at the turn of the twentieth century which is in a state of flux. The seemingly solid walls protecting the rarefied environs of 1870s New York are now fluid, and Lily Bart's journey exemplifies the social fluidity of society as can be shown through the nature of the habitats and the inhabitants in *The House of Mirth*. These now fluid social walls of *fin-de-siècle* New York allow movement in both directions, with Lily Bart moving *out* and Norma Hatch moving *in*.

From the very beginning of *The House of Mirth* Lily Bart is a dislocated soul within New York City. In a moment of spatial and temporal stasis at Grand Central Station, Lily considers her limited options. These options are widened by the introduction of Lawrence Selden to the scene, an ingredient which establishes from the outset, the new fluid mechanics of New York society. Where the city and many of its inhabitants adapt and evolve with the new order of this society, Lily does not. Where Ellen Olenska, in a similar position of dislocation in *The Age of Innocence*, is given the benefit of the doubt and sanctuary to some degree through familial connections, Lily Bart has no such protection in a *new* New York society which has an individual's 'commercial' value as the pre-eminent factor in their overall place and worth in society. Wharton's characterisation of Lily Bart as a parentless ingénue strips the character of any possible protection in this society and henceforth, she moves into a social freefall which lays bare the dangerous workings of the city's evolving social machinery.

⁹ Manreen E. St. Laurent, 'Pathways to a Personal Aesthetic: Edith Wharton's Travels in Italy and France,' In: Katherine C. Joslin & Alan Price, eds. *Wretched Exotic: Essays on Edith Wharton in Europe*. (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 177

The paradox which lies at the heart of Lily Bart is that she knows herself to be a commodity of some value, but refuses to place herself on the market in the right place or at the right time, whilst taking seemingly conscious steps to devalue herself. The paradox of Lily Bart is extended in the role of the home in the novel; Lily Bart can only create a place of her own when she marries, yet she seems unable to marry due to the fact that she does not have a place of her own.

The new change in emphasis and structure of New York society is emphasised throughout *The House of Mirth* with the reference to new ways of living. Apartment living is indicative of a new social independence offered to those without extensive financial backing or familial support, and Lawrence Selden and Gerty Farish both live in such environments. Lily rejects Selden as a husband and Gerty as a house-mate, both seen as being unsuitable for her purposes, and in rejecting these possibilities, Lily plays an important role in her own downfall, a fact which invests Wharton's own brand of literary naturalism with some added sophistication and which gives the reader a greater sense of the moral conflicts at play.

Lily's entire journey through the novel is one of dislocation. Not only is Lily dislocated from the apartment life which may have offered her independence and a future, she is also dislocated from the atavistic mansion of her aunt, Julia Peniston, representing the hermetically sealed décor and morality of another age. Also, in moving further from the centre of society, Lily passes those who are moving *towards* the centre of society. Norma Hatch and her 'hotel world' is yet another setting from which Lily is dislocated. Although Lily is initially at ease within this society, the ultimate moral and social divide is such

that she cannot exist within it. Ironically, it is perhaps the boarding-house (literally and figuratively her final resting place) where Lily feels most at peace; Lily's own geographical transience throughout the novel is matched by the function of the boarding-house as a home for transients. At the point in her life where there seems to be nothing left to be lost, the boarding-house is a point where Lily has reached where she feels a certain amount of 'ease' with her life. This is not just the terminus of the novel, nor of the city at its periphery, but also of the life of Lily Bart.

Reading Lily Bart is like reading the city itself. The city, in its state of flux, is neither the old New York society of Wharton's own childhood, nor the New York society of Undine Spragg which offers a city of possibilities to anyone with ruthlessness, nous and luck. Lily Bart exists upon the limen in the purest sense of the term in that her position can be constantly defined as being in a state of 'unsteadiness, [with a] lack of clarity about exactly where one belongs and what one should be doing, or wants to be doing.'¹⁰ Lily Bart is a woman of breeding from the old society, yet her independent spirit is certainly one which seems to be more in keeping with another New York; not one in the past or the present, but one of the future, and one in which Undine Spragg was to reside in within *The Custom of the Country*: a new New York which had all but erased the worlds of Archer and Bart.



¹⁰ Carolyn G. Heilman, *Women's Lives: The View From the Threshold*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 3

WHERE THE SELF-EFFACING COUNTESS OLENSKA ultimately sides with family and honour in *The Age of Innocence*, Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* travels to a place on the limen with no family to speak of, increasingly flimsy social lineage and no honour in the eyes of society. Yet in Undine Spragg, in *The Custom of the Country*, we have a character that likewise has *no* honour, a *non-descript* family, *no* social antecedents but she *does* have the 'seed' money and beauty to display herself within New York society.

In *The Custom of the Country*, Wharton completes her investigation into the evolution of New York society over a third of a century, and it is here that the barriers have been broken through and the insurgent *nouveaux riches* become firmly established as the major players within New York society. This novel is a tale of social ascendancy, but its secondary narrative strand importantly completes the development of the ideas established within *The Age of Innocence* and carried through *The House of Mirth*; the ideas of a changing New York society, and the idea of a New York society which must — in some way — absorb as best it can, both the pressing influences from the robber barons of the west, and the European influences from the east.

In many ways New York's cultural and commercial pre-eminence is a result of its geographic position. The city straddles two continents and is the hub which connects America and Europe in terms of trade and ideas. It is in this same position that New York society in Wharton's three novels finds itself under pressure to change. The pioneer spirit of the west has produced new wealth which in turn has created a new wealthy class. It is with wealth that these people seek position in the aristocratic society of New York, and it is

with position and status that there are pressures from Europe of social position looking for wealth (New York being the place to find it in many respects). Edith Wharton's aristocratic and 'pure' society of the mid-nineteenth century comes under increasing pressure through each of the three novels, but it is in *The Custom of the Country* that this pressure is at its greatest.

Alfred Kazin would write that Wharton's 'class was dying slowly ... and ... was passing on into another existence'¹¹ and these three novels were the tales of the yielding to the new wealth, and of the harsh journey to reach a point of reconciliation between the patriarchs and the *nouveaux riches*. In *The Custom of the Country* Wharton reaches that point of reconciliation, or more realistically, the point of capitulation of the patriarchs to the *nouveaux riches*. Wharton would also be writing of a city which bore little resemblance to that described in *The Age of Innocence*, thus the palimpsestic impulse of modernity would be at its zenith in *The Custom of the Country*.

In *The Custom of the Country*, this socio-historical journey comes to its end with the brutality of Undine Spragg's plague-like presence throughout the novel. Here Wharton succinctly observes the actual results of old New York's reticence in allowing the 'lords of Pittsburgh' into the society when they were at the citadel door. It is at this point in New York's history that the *nouveaux riches* were moving close to becoming the commercially dominant race. Their wealth and malleability allowed them to acquire *all* the trappings of the old New York society and this novel, in many ways, sounded the death knell

¹¹ Alfred Kazin, 'Edith Wharton,' [1942] In: Irving Howe, ed., *Edith Wharton: A Collection of Critical Essays*. (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 91

for Wharton's own particular New York, and also for Wharton's own time in New York City.

As I have mentioned in chapter four, Undine Spragg is different from Ellen Olenska, Newland Archer, Gerty Farish, Ralph Marvell and Lawrence Selden in that *she* reflects the environments she inhabits whilst the others exist in environments which reflect *the individuals who live in them*. This is a subtle but important distinction, and it is one which makes Undine Spragg a rather unique protagonist. In *The Custom of the Country*, Undine is an efficient reflecting surface of all that surrounds her, but she also has the knowledge and drive which understands that money and position will open up the paths she wishes to follow.

Initially in the novel, Undine perceives that she has money (via her father) and it is social position which she is attracted to through her marriage to Ralph Marvell. This position evolves throughout the novel as she finally comes to comprehend that with great financial power she can appropriate social position. Ralph Marvell has the position but not the wealth and he is, on the whole, ultimately unwilling to compromise himself or his position, an attitude which results in his own extinction. Clare Van Degen *does* compromise, and *does* sell a part of herself, and she *does* survive. Raymond de Chelles also survives by compromising and evolving and by selling family heirlooms. In fact in many ways, de Chelles and his environment of the Faubourg Saint Germain offer a glimpse of a society that has compromised to exist with as much of its original semblance intact, and may well have been a model which the Washington Square Dagonets should have noted.

The primary narrative strand in *The Custom of the Country* is of course based around Undine's rapacious exploits in climbing the social ladder, but the ekphrastic analysis of the text produces a subterranean narrative which outlines the final stage in the social evolution of New York City from the era of Wharton's youth, outlined in *The Age of Innocence*, to the second decade or so of the twentieth century in *The Custom of the Country*.

The very nature of Undine Spragg, analysed ekphrastically, is that of a palimpsestic socialite. She is a character who is constantly being reinscribed with the patterns of the society which surround her. When married to Ralph Marvell, Undine — on the surface — falls into the role of beautiful New York society wife; when married to Raymond de Chelles she likewise fits that role — for a time. Like the water-sprite her name suggests, there is an intrinsic ephemerality to her character, an ephemerality which befits the archetypal *reflector* in Wharton's fiction. It is apt that she should be seen in this way as New York itself is also palimpsestic in its very nature, continually being reinscribed through time, and it is this connection which may well provide the greatest insight into the city.



EDITH WHARTON'S VIEW OF NEW YORK CITY has been one of tempered nostalgia at times, yet she, more than anyone of this age, understood the harsh realities of this society in terms of its aesthetics and its evolution. The nostalgic view of the city is carried principally through the primary narratives of the three novels, whilst the secondary narratives gleaned through ekphrastic analyses deliver

the anthropological vicissitude of New York society. Whilst Wharton may not have consciously attempted to create a trilogy, these three novels certainly do cohere to form a larger picture of a society in flux.

In looking at the ekphrastic analyses in all three novels, there is little doubt that these analyses are supported by Wharton's own wide interests in anthropology, aesthetics and travel. It is through her non-fiction texts¹² in particular that we are able to discern Wharton's literary credo. This is a credo built upon a recognition of the harmony and disharmony which exists between landscape, architecture and 'inmate'; her knowledge of the social mechanisms of New York City over the period covered by the three novels; and her grasp of the inevitability of evolution and extinction in the field of human and social anthropology. One cannot underestimate Wharton's autobiographical writings as, Michael Nowlin writes, acting as an 'evolutionary bridge between past and present, or, in the figurative terms of both the novel and the memoirs, between pre-historic old New York and modern America.'¹³ At the core of Wharton's thinking once again lies the harsh co-existence of her acceptance of the inevitable change which was the life-blood of the city, juxtaposed with a sense of admiration, respect and loss of what had once been.

Ultimately, each novel concerns itself with the pressures of environment and circumstance and focuses upon the 'forces (both inner and outer) beyond the control of the characters.'¹⁴ This understanding points towards Wharton's naturalist credentials;

¹² I do not only refer to the obvious prefaces, articles, letters, autobiographical texts and *The Writing of Fiction*, but also *The Decoration of Houses*, *A Motor-Flight Through France*, *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*, *Italian Backgrounds* and *French Ways and Their Meaning*.

¹³ Nowlin, 'Edith Wharton's Higher Provincialism' 106

¹⁴ Barbara Hochman, 'The Awakening and The House of Mirth: Plotting Experience and Experiencing Plot,' in: Donald Pizer, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism: Howells to London*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995: 212

certainly familiar with the writings of Darwin, Taine and Zola and Spencer,¹⁵ Wharton's implicit view of a society in decline is carried through this trilogy. These rather esoteric fields are integrated into the readings of her novels in such a way as to be 'dissolved' in the writing of the texts and then 'reconstituted' in the reading of the texts — and in particular reconstituted through *ekphrastic* readings of the texts. Yet it is vitally important to emphasise that Wharton's adherence to discrete applications of literary methods do not stop firmly with literary naturalism. Although Wharton has seldom been seen as a modernist, there can be little doubt that Wharton's three New York novels have undoubted leanings toward modernity individually, but once again, as a collective they define the state of modernity which existed in New York in the period she subtly crafts through her three New York novels.

In *A Motor-Flight Through France* we return once again to Wharton's autobiographical writing, which seems to, once again, articulate Wharton's understanding of the world which she translates into her fiction when she writes:

in those arts that lie between the bounds of thought and sense, and leaning distinctly toward the latter, is there not room for another, a lesser yet legitimate order of appreciation — for the kind of confused atavistic enjoyment that is made up of historical association, of a sense of mass or harmony, of the relation of the building to the sky above it, to the lights and shadows it creates about it — deeper than all, of a blind sense in the blood of its old social power, the things it meant to far-off minds of which ours are the oft-dissolved and reconstituted fragments?¹⁶

¹⁵ Wharton's own personal library contained many works of Émile Zola, Hippolyte Taine and Charles Darwin as recorded in George Ramsden's *Edith Wharton's Library* (Settrington: Stone Trough Books, 1999). Knowing Darwin, it is reasonable to assume that she knew of Herbert Spencer's work in applying evolutionary philosophy to the sphere of social interaction.

¹⁶ Edith Wharton, *A Motor-Flight Through France* (New York: Scribners, 1908), 178

Here we seem to have a concise definition of how Wharton's greatest fiction is constructed and read: constructed with a three-dimensional sense which exists within the plastic arts yet delivered through the written word, a process which ultimately requires a key to translate or decipher, a key which has its roots in the classical rhetoric of ancient Greece — ekphrasis.

This 'New York Trilogy' is one which defines the intrinsic character of the city as the palimpsestic city which Wharton could barely recognise by the end of her life. In the three novels discussed, the heartbeat of the city is discernable in a manner which is redolent of a diastolic – systolic pulse of the city as it continually looks outwards to the world, and then inwards upon itself, repeating the cycle constantly, but with each pulse overwhelming the one before – a distinct precept of modernity. As the nineteenth century diarist Philip Hone would write:

Overtun, overturn, overturn! is this the maxim of New York. The very bones of our ancestors are not permitted to lie quiet a quarter of a century, and one generation of men seems studious to remove all relics of those who preceded them.¹⁷

A fitting insight into not only the nature of New York City, but also into the nature of Edith Wharton's 'New York Trilogy.'



¹⁷ From *The Diary of Philip Hone* as quoted in William Cole, ed. *Quotable New York: A Literary Companion*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), 50

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