

“A Great House Full of Rooms”

Explorations of Literary Tradition and Gender Norms in
Three Novels by Edith Wharton

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by

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Abstract

This thesis explores gender and narrative technique in three Edith Wharton novels: *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country*, and *Summer*. Women writers before Wharton were often not taken seriously, and this thesis examines the writing techniques that simultaneously placed Wharton within the male literary tradition and questioned its premises. Many of Wharton's female protagonists made waves with readers and deviated from expectations for female characters; thus, this thesis explores them as "difficult women", a reflection of their deviancy from gender norms and expectations. In creating female protagonists which were based in literary convention, Wharton challenged those norms with subtle changes to the predominantly male literary tradition, specifically through her use of narrator's voice, focalization and chronology. Based on the concepts of masculine authority and fiction as disguise, this thesis examines Wharton's fiction as an implicit criticism of women's position in American society in the early twentieth century.

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Introduction

But I have sometimes thought that a woman's nature is like a great house full of rooms: there is the hall, through which everyone passes in going in and out; the drawing-room, where one receives formal visits; the sitting-room, where the members of the family come and go as they list; but beyond that, far beyond, are other rooms, the handles of whose doors 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.

Wharton, "The Fullness of Life".

Though Virginia Woolf's room metaphor is undoubtedly more famous, Edith Wharton's preceded her by roughly 30 years. Where Woolf focuses on the writer, the quote above from one of Wharton's characters focuses on the unexplored range of women's experience that never seems to reach the mainstream. What is remarkably clear when reading the fiction of Edith Wharton is her strong focus on exploring these so-called "other rooms" of women. Therefore, this thesis will explore Wharton's fictional foray into these other rooms as what is called Wharton's "difficult women". They are so called because they deviate from gender norms in significant and meaningful ways in narratives that build on and deconstruct canonically male literary conventions and expectations. In other words, they are situated in the "other rooms" of women and therefore arguably unfamiliar as literary characters. Being a woman is not a fixed measure; yet it is undeniable that society affects women's behavior, and the combined weight of expectations and judgements is what makes these characters difficult women. Additionally, these heroines have caused reactions in readers in different ways. By examining the narrative structures and heroines in *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country*, and *Summer*, I argue that Wharton has fundamentally changed the function and perception of the heroine. I will close read and turn to concepts from narratology to examine Wharton's narrative techniques, including such elements as focalization, the narrator's position, and chronology. These technical choices are structured as to imply a criticism of

women's position and society and lack of rights, typically without stating any such position overtly. The result is a complex array of fiction which simultaneously uses and exploits both literary and societal conventions and expectations to expand the role and nature of the female protagonist of Wharton's day.

One relevant background for this project is provided by Alfred Bendixen in *Edith Wharton: New Critical Essays*. He writes that "[a]bout two decades ago, the literary reputation of Edith Wharton could be summed up easily and neatly. Scholars recognized that she had some historical importance, but they usually relegated her to the second rank of American writers, most often describing her as a talented and graceful imitator of Henry James" (vii). This is important to the thesis, because it makes room for questioning why Wharton garnered this reputation when she was clearly always a sophisticated and technical writer: she experimented with narrative structures and conventions to breathe new life into her novels. Yet it may be precisely preconceived notions about women writers that have prevented previous critics from acknowledging her full range and relegating her to the status of Henry James' imitator. For instance, Marilyn Jones Lyde has unearthed the opinion of one critic who is referring to Wharton when he states that "[o]ne cannot be an artist and a lady" (xiv). He is not the only one to state such opinions regarding women and art.

This introduction will examine how nineteenth-century women writers were devalued because of their gender, and consider some previous works on Wharton, narrative, and gender. In turn, this context is vital for the argument that Wharton simultaneously distanced herself from other women writers and their reputations, while still questioning and deconstructing the male literary tradition she sought to be included in. Based on these traditions and the gendered context, the questions that I want to explore in the thesis are what narrative techniques Wharton has used to ensure her authority as a writer when her novels have sometimes shocked and scandalized readers, as well as how the protagonist is defined through narrative aspects that also heavily criticize systems of oppression of women. In other words, how do gender and narrative connect in Wharton's writing strategies?

Women Writers and Male Traditions

Wharton is not the first female writer to contend with a male literary tradition. If we consider nineteenth-century women writers and literary feminist criticism, before turning to feminist narratology, it becomes clear that Wharton both writes herself into a tradition of rebellion on the part of women writers *and* rejects the label that comes with being a woman writer to gain

access to writing as art. In other words, though Wharton can be placed in a female tradition, it is also visible in her writing that she distances herself from it. Many feminist literary scholars have discovered a broad, cultural devaluation of nineteenth-century women writers, and a dismissal of their work based on gender stereotypes. Furthermore, they argue that these women writers balance the dominant cultures and its demands and the ability to write covert criticism in their fiction. I will first examine the historical evidence for devaluation of female writing, discuss briefly some common structures for writing covert criticism, and then discuss Wharton's interest in women as it appears in her life and authorship.

In *Nineteenth-Century American Women's Novels: Interpretive Strategies* Susan K. Harris discusses the critic Fred Lewis Pattee, whose work *The Feminine Fifties* exemplifies a common attitude towards nineteenth-century women writers. In his survey of nineteenth-century women's novels, Pattee's methodology is described by Harris as one starting with assumptions about the author's sex, reliant on their autobiography, and ultimately proceeding to "examine her work as an extension of her biological structure and life experience" (2). She claims that studies like Pattee's "have acted in complicity with the cultural assumption that women's writing — with women's oral discourse — was testimony to female irrationality and emotionalism and to American women's struggle to emasculate the American male" (2). In other words, nineteenth-century women writers are dismissed because of supposed femininity, and assigned emotion and irrationality as a strategy of emasculation. Furthermore, Harris claims that for Pattee, "women were both the cause and the representatives of this excess: irrational, unreasonable, and . . . excessive; spilling over with feeling and, worse, expressing it verbally" (3). Pattee's book was published in 1940, twenty years after women's right to vote was ratified in the United States, and still his attitude towards women writers show little consideration for them as anything other than stereotypical women. Another critic equates "excess" and "the heart" with women, and as a result disregards the broad range of issues that women treated in their fiction as "pernicious emotionalism" (5).

Nina Baym writes that novels written by women between 1820 and 1870, "was by far the most popular fiction of its time", which even led to authorship being considered a woman's profession (11). She concurs with Harris that "[t]oday we hear of this literature, if at all, chiefly through detractors who deplore the feminizing—and thus degradation— of the noble art of letters" (11). Cheri Register details this degradation in writing that "Anthony Burgess says that he cannot bear to read Jane Austen because she is too feminine. Yet he is equally critical of George Elliot for achieving a successful "male impersonation" and Ivy Compton-Burnett for writing "sexless" literature. Some critics give backhanded praise to

female authors who "transcend" their femininity . . ." (9). Clearly, the fact that these writers are women affect the way they are seen by male authors.

Several sources confirm that men, and perhaps even society, have strong feelings about women as artists. They can be writers, but not serious artists. Furthermore, to write as a living required a comfortable financial situation. Elizabeth Ammons sums up the work of Nina Baym, Judith Fetterley and Mary Kelley, stating that "middle-class white women at the middle of the nineteenth century . . . conceived of themselves as professional writers rather than as artists" (*Conflicting Stories* 5). Elaine Showalter comments, on the lack of women writers on college English syllabi in 1971, that women students will "perceive that literature . . . confirms what everything else in society tells them: that the masculine viewpoint is considered normative, and the feminine viewpoint divergent" (qtd. in *Register* 9-10). Judith Fetterley, in *The Resisting Reader* (1978), goes so far as to state that "American literature is male" (xii). She elaborates that "[t]o read the canon of what is currently considered classic American literature is perforce to identify as male. Though exceptions to this generalization can be found here and there . . . these exceptions usually function to obscure the argument and confuse the issue . . . Our literature neither leaves women alone nor allows them to participate" (xii). These statements, mostly spanning the second wave of feminist scholarship and literary criticism, consider how women were excluded from being seen as serious artists, and how in turn this lack of representation excluded a feminine viewpoint. Cheri Register observes that "[t]he cosmic terminology employed in literary criticism helps maintain the subcategory status of literature written by women" (10), especially as the male experience is deemed universal. She claims that "[t]he 'female experience' is peripheral to the central concern of literature—which is man's struggle with nature, God, fate, himself, and, not infrequently, woman. Woman is always 'the Other'" (10). Thus, as Wharton wrote her novels before and during the period that these scholars describe, she lived through a time where women were not considered seriously as writers.

However, feminist literary criticism has also identified a subversive streak in this undervalued and delegitimized female literature. Tamara Wagner writes that literary critics have found that antifeminist writers in the Victorian age carefully negotiate art, work, and the divide between the domestic and public sphere (7). She argues that "popular texts produced for mass consumption cannot therefore automatically be presumed to be 'simply formulaic and non-thought-provoking'. Rather, 'markets could both limit and liberate popular writers, who were able to manipulate generic conventions in order to allow readers to interpret texts oppositionally'" (7). Additionally, Nina Baym has identified an overplot which presents itself

in much of nineteenth-century women writing. Susan Harris summarizes the overplot, as it "mandates that the heroine of any given work will be left destitute — usually financially; will struggle for physical subsistence; and, in the process, will learn to value independence" (9), and Harris also notes that Baym shows how "individual works simultaneously observe those [genre] restraints and create variations on a basic theme" (9).

Both Wagner and Baym identify women writers who write from within convention while simultaneously altering them, which allows readers to "interpret texts oppositionally", in Wagner's terms. Mary Eagleton, in "Literary Representations of Women", has also noted this pattern. She discusses the feminist literary criticism of the 1970s, particularly an essay written by Mary Jacobus. Jacobus discusses Virginia Woolf's claim that George Elliot was caught between "a desire for a male-dominated culture" and "a valuing of women's separateness" (113). Once again, the divide between women and men is the focal point of a female writers' practice. Eagleton writes that "[w]omen's desire for access to the widest cultural realm is legitimate but demands conformity to the dominant order, while a position of difference risks another confinement, to marginality or the irrational" (113). She sums up the position of Jacobus as looking "for those moments in writing when the centre *does not* hold, when what is silent becomes heard" (113). Women writers, by navigating a reputation as emotional and excessive, must manage to find both their voice and a place in the discourse that is not dismissed as an outlier. Instead of perpetuating the opposition between men and women, Jacobus looks to writers who expand notions of what women can do inside the bounds of the dominant culture. In a similar manner, Nina Baym's overplot contains variations on existing literary conventions and may also fulfill this function of covert criticism.

Both Amy Kaplan and Dianne L. Chambers have written about the conditions for Wharton's authorship. Chambers suggests that Wharton's "development as an author occurs at a time when ideological, economic and historical forces governing ideas about sexual difference, gender roles and the profession of writing were undergoing significant changes" (25). Furthermore, she claims that Wharton had to "reconcile the double identity of author and woman" (26), which places Wharton within the discussion that nineteenth-century women writers faced before her. On the other hand, Kaplan notes that Wharton had to "confront the silence and exclusion of women from literary production", but also contend with women novelists who "viewed their writing as an extension of woman's work at home" (436). Here is a slightly different perspective, which is that women writers before Wharton included their identities as housewives and mothers in their writing. Kaplan concludes that

"the power of Wharton's social criticism stems not from the external perspective of a writer who resisted an incipient consumer culture, but from one whose identity as an author and whose narrative forms were shaped by her immersion in this very modern culture" (453).

Kaplan is correct, as Wharton had to shape her career around the demands of upper-class womanhood. Katherine Joslin, in *Women Writers: Edith Wharton*, states that Wharton's parents "preferred that their daughter follow the conventional female text by marrying, having children, accepting the social responsibilities of women of her class" (10). Additionally, she writes that educated women from well-to-do families were "expected to remain within the home, playing the part of moral, innocent, nurturing 'angels'" (11). An episode in Wharton's autobiography describes the eleven-year-old Wharton handing her mother a short story which begins with Mrs. Thompkins stating she would have tidied the living room if she had known there would be visitors; her mother replies icily that drawing rooms are always tidy (73). Kaplan describes this as a "chilling double message", in which "woman's work is never done", and should never be done in public, and that "nice girls do not write novels" (435). Wharton herself writes that because of this comment she turned from writing fiction to poetry, rudely shaken (73); and, as her parents did not see the value in her literary ambitions, she had to beg for the cast off wrappings of parcels to have any paper to write on.

Many scholars have interested themselves in Wharton's perspective on women, writing and rights. This thesis is not biographically oriented, yet it is clear that Wharton's writing and life was affected by societal expectations for women. In turn, this affects and perhaps explains some of her narrative choices, which will be detailed shortly. Elizabeth Ammons claims that Wharton argued the issue of freedom for women for more than three decades, however, "Edith Wharton sounded a sour, dissenting note" because she did not believe change was occurring (*Edith Wharton's Argument* 3). Ammons also argues that Wharton relentlessly examined popular optimism and reality in her writing: "Typical women in her view—no matter how privileged, nonconformist, or assertive . . . were not free to control their own lives" (*Edith Wharton's Argument* 3). Conversely, Julie Olin-Ammentorp believes that Wharton has an "unstated belief in the inferiority of women" (15). In the case of Janet Malcolm's *New York Times* book review of Wharton, one need not even go past the title, where she describes Wharton as "The Woman Who Hated Women" (Malcolm). Susan Goodman summarizes Percy Lubbock's view of Wharton as a "woman who is imperious, insensitive, and belligerent to other women, one who liked and repeated the remark that she was a 'self-made man'", yet goes on to question him: "another more sympathetic listener

might have detected in her inflection an ironic undertone or 'depths of sad initiation'" (1). Goodman also comments on the arguments put forth both by Ammons and Malcolm and claims that "the seemingly incompatible readings of Malcolm and Ammons reflect Wharton's own conflict about her roles as woman and author" (4). Arguably these contradictions show the struggle between writing and being a woman that Wharton, like the nineteenth-century women writers before her, could not escape. This struggle reveals itself in Wharton's narrative techniques and choices.

The work of Linda Wagner-Martin and Susan Lanser sheds light on these narrative choices. Wagner-Martin's book *The House of Mirth: A Novel of Admonition* deals with both women's legacy as writers and Wharton's specific narrative techniques. It also introduces an incredibly productive concept: fiction as disguise. Wagner-Martin writes that "*The House of Mirth*, taken with Chopin's *The Awakening* and Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper", is a key example of a woman's voice exploring significant women's themes in a covert manner: fiction as disguise" (7). With *The House of Mirth* as her example, Wagner-Martin claims that in "unraveling the text of Lily Bart's story, through a narrative that appears to be conventional but causes surprising division among its readers, the modern-day reader can recognize the subterfuge women writers needed to employ in order to keep their share of the reading public while exposing potentially unpopular truths" (7). Wharton has exposed many such "potentially unpopular truths", which in this thesis will be explored as her choice of narrative structure, her narrative techniques and her subtle play with literary convention.

An interesting point of view is that of Ammons. In her influential *Edith Wharton's Argument with America*, she claims that Wharton did not learn, until *The House of Mirth*, to "completely and coolly" express women's plight (3). Before that, her fiction was often confused and angry (3). The opening quote of this introduction is from one of these early works and is a quite explicit and philosophical metaphor for the underevaluation of women's potential. In the short story it originates in, "The Fullness of Life", the character who says this, also says her husband never got beyond the family sitting room; and that "I felt like crying out to him: 'Fool, will you never guess that close at hand are rooms full of treasures and wonders . . . ". The focus of this thesis is on the other part of Ammon's claim: that from *The House of Mirth* and on, Wharton is cool and complete in her covert criticism of American patriarchy, which also confirms the view of Wagner-Martin. Ammons asserts that "[*The House of Mirth*] serves as an exciting example of the creation of narrative techniques that allow the expression of an alternate story, as a seeming subtext, under the more apparent plot line of a . . . primary text" (*Edith Wharton's Argument* 7). Equally interesting in this

context is Alfred Bendixen's assertion "Wharton's relationship to various literary traditions continues to draw interest and arouse debate, but there seems to be a clear tendency to emphasize the way in which she revises traditions instead of merely following them" (xii). And Katherine Joslyn observes the tendency to direct attention to men both in *The Writing of Fiction* and Wharton's autobiography: "The decidedly male direction of her philosophical and literary education allowed her to link herself . . . to the dominant culture, the . . . public world of the powerful white male. Supposedly 'objective' scientific discourse gave her female voice the power of male rhetoric" (43). The argument of this thesis builds on this assertion: Wharton has a clear tendency to appropriate and subvert the male literary tradition from her position as a woman, and through an analysis of her heroines and their construction, the narrative techniques that serve as their foundation will be discussed.

So, what *is* the male literary tradition? One of the answers can be found in Susan Lanser's vital work *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice*. Lanser explores "what forms of voice have been available to women, and to which women, at particular moments" (15). She introduces the term "authorial voice" to address narrative situations that are "heterodiegetic, public, and potentially self-referential" (15). Lanser states that women writers adopt this privileged position, "transgressing gendered rhetorical codes", because women's access to public discourse has been curtailed; much in the same vein that Joslyn observes Wharton's use of male rhetoric. A convenient example is precisely the status of women writers from the nineteenth century. Lanser claims that "authorial voice has been so conventionally masculine that female authorship has not necessarily established female voice" (18). According to her, a "startling number of critics" have referred to both *La Princesse de Clèves* and *Pride and Prejudice* in the generic masculine. Based on these observations, Lanser writes

on the one hand, since a heterodiegetic narrator need not be identified by sex, the authorial mode has allowed women access to "male" authority by separating the narrating "I" from the female body; it is of course in the exploitation of this possibility that women writers have used male narrators and pseudonyms. . . . It is possible that women's writing has carried fuller public authority when its voice has not been marked as female. (18)

Wharton had no male pseudonym, yet this thesis argues that her authorial voice is not marked as female and that this contributes to the public authority and success she had as a writer. Wharton exploited the extradiegetic, heterodiegetic narrator and its implications; her more often than not extradiegetic and heterodiegetic narrators are removed from the stories she

tells and in part account for the cool and complete criticism described by Ammons. By adopting the "male voice" as it had been assumed in the male literary tradition, Wharton gained access both to authority and writing as an art instead of just a profession.

Primary Texts and Structure

The three primary texts chosen for this thesis are *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country* and *Summer*. There are three chapters, one devoted to each novel, which discuss the main narrative techniques that ensure Wharton's authority and grasp over the audience, as well as structures to support the characterization of the heroines. The thesis establishes the extent of Wharton's "masculine authority" in the first chapter only, as the narrator's presence in all three novels are a variation on the extradiegetic, heterodiegetic narrator. I have chosen these three novels, because they show Wharton's ability to covertly criticize systems of oppression within her limited experience as an upper class, white woman: the tragic and romantic heroine Lily Bart, the mean and beautiful Undine Spragg, and the confused and sensual Charity Royall. Additionally, the three novels build on existing narrative traditions that are somehow thwarted by each respective novel's ending.

The first chapter considers how *The House of Mirth* is based in the "masculine authority" of the extra-heterodiegetic narrator, and how the protagonist, Lily Bart, is both victim and victor. Through manipulation of existing narrative conventions and literary expectations, Lily Bart is portrayed as both a society belle with little means to provide for herself, and a player in a game she is bound to lose. This chapter examines the way narrative structure as a whole is in line with tradition, and ensures verisimilitude for contemporary readers, and how focalization is used to create both a male and a female gaze. Additionally, the chapter evaluates the push and pull between expectations for femininity and womanhood and Lily's choice between wealth or happiness and how they contribute to Wharton's construction of the heroine. It concludes that the sum of Wharton's narrative mastery both creates sympathy for Lily as well as highlights the "difficult woman" she is perceived to be by others because of her subtle refusals to play societal games.

The second chapter examines Undine Spragg in all her cunning and meanness, and how the narrative structure supports her characterization through both a chronology that mirrors the character's tempo and tendency to filter her world view, and the use of business language and a performative femininity which consolidates Undine as a sort of business woman instead of the socialite belle with good manners. I argue that Undine is a prototype

for allowing female characters to be mean or bad and that in some ways the male and female character expectations are flipped. Undine is the prototype of the anti-heroine, and her "success" is clearly marked by the gendered expectations women face.

The third chapter studies the narrative techniques that make Charity Royall a distinctly different protagonist from the two others, with basis in focalization and the focus on sensory pleasure and sexual awakening. Once more the narrative hinges on pre-existing expectations. The nearness between the male characters as both hero and villain, father and lover, represent the control that men have over women's lives. This control is in turn seen as a function of the male characters in the narrative, especially as it pertains to the use of legal language. The chapter argues that Charity Royall and her two men act as a subtle critique of what Elizabeth Ammons calls the "incestuous nature of patriarchal marriage" (*Edith Wharton's Argument* 133).

In the conclusion, I summarize the findings of the three chapters and discuss how the narrative techniques appear to reflect aspects of the personality that Wharton has inscribed for her protagonists; focalization from a male and female perspective regarding Lily, focalization and chronology as manipulation for Undine, and focalization as perceptive mode and interpreter for Charity. Additionally, the use of language to "masculinize" Undine, in business terms, and evocative language to blur the lines between father and romantic interest in *Summer*, show Wharton's implicit criticism of gender roles and patriarchal marriage. Finally, I indicate some further areas of research with regard to Wharton's narrative techniques and gender.

Finally, some information regarding usage and other practical matters. The narrator will be referred to as "it"; as Mieke Bal states, this is to remind both writer and reader that the narrator is a construct, a linguistic subject (15). It is not a person; it is an entity. Where other narratological terms become relevant, they are defined in their first use and then subsequent uses all build on the same definition. There are many interpretations and variations on what these terms mean. Typically, in this thesis, the terms are understood as either Gerard Genette or Seymour Chatman have defined them.

In the course of the thesis, I will refer to the "reader" or "readers". This term refers to the implied reader, unless otherwise stated. Wolfgang Iser coined this term, and *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* states that it denotes "the hypothetical figure of the reader to whom a given work is designed to address itself. Any text may be said to presuppose an 'ideal' reader who has the particular attitudes (moral, cultural, etc.) appropriate to that text in order for it to achieve its full effect" ("implied reader"). Robyn Warhol defines the implied

reader as "the virtual projection of a consciousness that can tune into the narrator's message—an imaginary reader who 'gets it' even—or especially—when the narratee appears to be in the dark" ("Reception" 144). She also argues that the "degree to which the actual reader can identify with the implied reader establishes the actual reader's affective response to the text" ("Reception" 146).

The argument of this thesis is based on the knowledge that nineteenth-century women writers were severely critically underestimated, and that Wharton made use of pre-existing literary conventions to give her a stronger authority as a writer. This authority is typically envisioned as Wharton's adherence to the male literary tradition, which, combined with verisimilitude, ensures that her audience can believe her stories. It would be wrong to assume to know what an actual reader would feel about Wharton's fiction; however, the implied reader is in many ways "the perfect reader": someone who understands the cultural and moral codes involved in the text, and who will react predictably to a breach of either literary or societal convention in the novels. Susan Lanser states that "the reception of a novel rests on an implicit set of principles by which textual events (for example characters' behaviors) are rendered plausible. To the degree that a text's values deviate from cultural givens . . . they must be established (or inferred) for each narrative instance so that readers can construct the story as 'plausible' and embed it in a 'world view'" (17). The thesis will refer to readers' plausible reactions to Wharton's use of cultural conventions. This is not necessarily a singular reaction yet based on historical information about gender and society it is within the realm of possibility.

For the modern reader, it is useful with a reminder of basic attitudes to gender in the nineteenth century, as sex and gender were understood differently than they are today. Toril Moi, in *Sex, Gender and the Body*, writes that in the nineteenth century there was a "belief that science in general and biology in particular both could and should settle questions about women's role in society" (6), which led to the urgent need for feminists to separate "nature and social norms" (6). Moi goes on to describe what she calls the pervasive image of sex in the nineteenth century; namely that biological sex is seen as something which "seeps out from the ovaries and testicles into every cell in the body until it has saturated the whole person" (11). In this context, she argues that heterosexuality is taken for granted, and that "if housework, childcare, and selfless devotion are female, heroic exploits are male, and so are science and philosophy" (12). In *The American Woman: Who Was She?*, Anne Firor Scott writes:

Nineteenth-century Americans exhibited a good deal of anxiety about the question of "woman's sphere". What were the things appropriate for women to do? The most conservative view was that God had created women to take care of men and children, and that whenever they took part in public activities they were being unladylike. Women were seen as gentle, pious, sentimental, emotional — and not very bright. (5)

Firor's discussion shows that women's expected role in society was changing, yet that Wharton's starting point was the strict view that women had specific tasks and traits.

Elizabeth LeBlanc discusses the norms of compulsory heterosexuality with regard to *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, first published in 1899. LeBlanc claims that methods for enforcing compulsory heterosexuality include "socialized acceptance of a man's right to possess a woman . . . confining standards of dress and behaviour for women, use of women as pawns in male interactions, and deliberate stifling of women's creative potential through reinforcement of 'marriage and motherhood' as the only acceptable mode of self-definition" (291). The limitations placed on women in the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century are not merely legal, they are also societal. Wharton was born in 1862, and many of her novels deal with the nineteenth century. For contemporary readers, both the understanding of women as outlined was acceptable, and the challenge to women writers was known, if not explicitly debated. This is also the understanding of gender this thesis specifically will deal with in discussing Wharton's narrative techniques.

Finally, a note on women writers and scope. Firstly, I have outlined the context for nineteenth-century women writers, even though the novels examined in this thesis were all published in the twentieth century. The reason for this is that Wharton was born in 1862, and for this reason the legacy she wrote herself into builds on the tradition and gender norms from the nineteenth and not the twentieth century. Furthermore, there are many nineteenth-century women writers that do not neatly fit into the discourse on writing sketched above, and it is prudent to note that there is not a "woman's voice" or "feminine voice" here. Rather, the historical context provided is meant to explain how and why women writers could end up in a largely similar writing position. Similarly, the "masculine authority" described is not rooted in a belief in essential male position. The fact that many male authors did write from what is often called the neutral third person, before women were accepted in the writing profession, means that there have been decades where a certain kind of narrative both abounded and was associated almost entirely with men. Therefore, because men have been economic breadwinners and public figures long before women had access to either role, this narrative

position is known and authoritative to readers. It does not mean that no woman wrote like this, or that all men did; rather, it is the overarching historical context for the literary position that Wharton was born into and that shaped her writing.

Additionally, since the scope of any thesis is limited, the primary focus is Wharton's women and their grasp, interpretation or performance of femininity in conjunction with narrative techniques. Where it is considered relevant, briefly other matters such as class or race will be examined. I have limited the discussions primarily to the relation between female characters and narrative technique, and this discussion is so large in itself that there is little room for extended considerations of other thematic aspects. That does not mean they are not there; as others before me have doubtless claimed, a single Wharton novel could fill several volumes. Wharton was interested in many subjects, and as such, there are many themes explored in her works; some of these will be outlined in the conclusion.

1 *The House of Mirth*

"Sometimes," she added, "I think it's just flightiness—and sometimes I think it's because, at heart, she despises the things she's trying for. And it's the difficulty of deciding that makes her such an interesting study."

Wharton, *The House of Mirth*.

Lily Bart, the "she" in question, seemingly waxes and wanes with the tides. Her conflict between her own heart and the interests of society is the central focus of *The House of Mirth* (1905); though there are many perspectives on her characterization, I argue that the way Wharton produces and presents Lily Bart through a selection of narrative structures is part of her project to represent women outside the norm, the so-called difficult women. In this chapter, I examine the narrative structures and narrative choices Wharton has made in *The House of Mirth* with regard to her protagonist as a difficult woman. Wharton's narrative choices align with what has previously been asserted as masculine narratorial authority. Yet her narrative choices subvert traditional gender roles and narrative expectations, therefore, the novel as a whole functions as covert criticism, or fiction as disguise. More precisely, I will discuss the narrative structure with regard to the narrator, narrative structure, and choices pertaining to focalization. Through both the male gaze and the female gaze, Wharton manipulates existing expectations regarding both manhood and womanhood. These structures all contribute to the way the reader will react to the heroine, Lily Bart, and thus the "difficult women" of the day, which will be discussed as a culmination of all the narrative choices Wharton has made in producing her.

1.1 Previous Criticism

According to Judith Fetterley, a common focus of study for *The House of Mirth* is one of waste as a predominant theme, yet Fetterley claims that "neither character, nor critic, nor author, recognizes . . . the precise nature of who and what is being wasted" ("The Temptation" 200). The relevance here is that Fetterley argues that "social waste is female"; through a system of double standards and double binds, *The House of Mirth* is "a powerful denunciation of patriarchal culture" ("The Temptation" 200). Fetterley's focus is thematic, and this thesis will discuss the narrative structures that are in place to ensure what could well

be called a denunciation of patriarchal culture. Lois Tyson claims that Lily Bart is seen as a "heroic figure who is morally superior to the society whose victim she becomes", though readers may disagree on other aspects of the character (3). Linda Wagner-Martin claims that "Wharton managed in *The House of Mirth* to choose strategies that appeased the hostile readers. In her choice of a point of view that told the story with seeming objectivity, Wharton was able to show all sides of Lily Bart's personality" (6). Another perspective is that of Deborah Lambert, in "The House of Mirth: Readers Respond". She writes "Lily's actions and techniques echo those of the narrative voice; their strategies and manipulations illuminate each other" (76). If we briefly return to Wagner-Martin, she states that

[t]he tragedy of Lily's attempts at a story is that it is a non-story: she has been forced throughout her life to react to the demands of society. As a young and marriageable woman, she has never been able to act. . . . Lily's purpose in life is to react, to respond, to the social code that originates and reinforces established power. (23)

Though these claims may seem contradictory at first, in that Wagner-Martin considers Lily much more of a victim than Lambert does, the outcome of their argumentation is to define Lily's position in the narrative. Lambert makes equal the manipulations of both the narrative and the character in it, while Wagner-Martin highlights the lack of autonomy for Lily, as her narrative is not even a story but a response. Tyson's claim, that Lily is seen as morally superior by readers, also supports this. These criticisms are the starting point for the argument of this thesis, namely that the character Lily is designed to appear both difficult, manipulative and victimized, but that the narrative, through Wharton's narrative techniques, will still champion her cause. In other words, the difficult woman construction is supported or echoed in the choice of narrative structure.

Furthermore, Lambert argues that

Wharton has achieved powerful new effects by transforming, and ultimately subverting, familiar fictional elements. In addition, having become victims of narrative manipulation, we necessarily respond as critics of a society: initially adopting that society's false values, we finally become defamiliarized—shocked into awareness of deplorable social realities. (80)

The perspective of this thesis is that Wharton has transformed and subverted familiar *fictional* elements, but her use of narrative techniques questions and subverts traditional gender roles too. William E. Modellmog comments on the use of narrative omniscience in *The House of Mirth*, stating that "[i]n disowning authorial omniscience, [Wharton] also disowns a form of

knowledge grounded in the seamless harmony of subject and object, owner and property, husband and wife" (356). Though I disagree that Wharton has entirely disowned authorial omniscience and will argue that the narrator simply chooses selective omniscience, I agree that the choice of omniscience leads to what Modellmog calls the harmony between husband and wife, Wharton disrupts it. Through the use of variable focalization and the unusual choices of her protagonist, Wharton has created a heroine who questions, and thus makes the reader question, the expected path for women, namely marriage, especially since the heroine dies before any resolution regarding her ultimate marital status can be reached.

Both Lambert and Wagner-Martin comment on the narrative choices relating to Lily's death. Lambert claims that "[t]he picture of Lily lying dead with a repentant Selden at her side, grief-struck, imports the conclusion of an eighteenth-century novel of seduction to Wharton's satirized twentieth century world" (79). This view is supported by Nancy Miller's assertion that in eighteenth-century women's literature in France and England, "novels offer only two possible fates to the female characters at their centres: they can get married or they can die" (qtd. in Warhol "Feminist Narratology"). Wagner-Martin, on the other hand, argues that when Lily dies, "the reader wants some vindication for that death" (7). Furthermore, by not answering whether or not society has paid for the meaningless death of Lily, "Wharton foreshadowed the very kind of 'open' text the modernists would pride themselves on creating" (7). So, one can argue that, though the ending is traditional seen from the perspective of an older female literary tradition, Wharton still subverted tradition because of the refusal to state outright whether Lily committed suicide or died from an accidental overdose. In this way, one can investigate the narrative structure as so-called fiction in disguise, that is, the covert ways in which narrative structures contribute to an understanding of the multiple layers in the novel.

1.2 Narrative Structure

This section will be focused on the narrative structure, with particular focus on the narrator. First, the overarching narrative structure will be defined. Second, the omniscience of the narrator will be explored, and its use of different characters in expressing covert criticism. Finally, the omniscience and position of the narrator will be discussed in relation to the concept of the implied author. I argue that the combined use of these techniques ensures narrative authority. This means that the narrative is accepted by the reader as acceptably

realistic or rendered "plausible" according to their understanding of the storyworld, as Lanser would put it. In turn, this authority can contribute to the success of Lily Bart as a variation of the existing romantic heroine in the eyes of readers.

1.2.1 The Covert Narrator

The narrator in *The House of Mirth* is never self-referential, and there is no personal pronoun like "I", or any apparent involvement in the story. This means that the narrator is extradiegetic, or "hovering over the narrated world" (Herman and Luc 88). Additionally, since the narrator has not experienced the events of the fictional world, it is also heterodiegetic (Herman and Luc 88). All through *The House of Mirth*, there are instances of unclear antecedent or precedent in observations and statements; sometimes a statement has no clear referent at all. And sometimes there is quite clearly a "someone" responsible for the narration, though it is unclear who. The first indication of this is in Chapter 2, when the narrator states that, "Mr. Rosedale, it will be seen, was thus far not a factor to be feared. . ." (18). Thus, the narrator is positioned not only outside the narrative, but retrospective to its events. This kind of foreshadowing does not happen often, but it is seen again when the narrator states that "fortune willed, however, that the hurried approach of Mrs. Fisher . . . should break up the group . . . and if Selden had approached a moment or two sooner he would have seen. . ." (119-20). These two examples show an omniscience that is rarely utilized in the rest of the narrative.

Narratorial omniscience can be delineated in Seymour Chatman's terms of covertness or overtness. The covert narrator is the one which will concern us the most. Chatman describes it as hearing "a voice speaking of events, characters, and setting, but its owner remains hidden in the discursive shadows" (197). This describes the narrator of *The House of Mirth* well, as the descriptions and comments are given without any clear signs as to whom this voice belongs. There is no use of the personal pronoun "I", many narratorial comments simply hang in the air, as if spoken by no one. Additionally, Chatman claims that the covert narrator describes characters' thoughts and actions indirectly. This is important, because as readers we cannot then be sure that these words and thoughts are conveyed to us as they appeared from the character (200). One of these ambiguities can be seen in how in *The House of Mirth*, there is only has one character acting as focalizer at a time. The shift between variable focalization and the narrator's voice means that there is only one character who visibly perceives at a time. The choice of a certain character over another as focalizer is a

choice to withhold information, and this choice influences the position the reader is placed into. The combination of a covert narrator and variable focalization limits the information the reader can glean, yet since the narrator has no direct position in the storyworld, this narrative withholding is also hidden. This makes room for narratorial manipulation, and perhaps the readers' own questioning of what perspective is privileged. Wharton knew well the milieu she wrote of, and therefore the narrative choices that will be discussed here put forward implicit opinions and criticisms through their covertness. This is fiction as disguise; the extradiegetic, heterodiegetic narrator persuades the reader into thinking that the information they have access to is neutral, when it is not. The effect is that the narrator holds a certain authority because of its omniscience; any criticism of society, or of a character for that matter, is hidden in the very fabric of the narrative.

An example of this authority in action is the Jewish character Simon Rosedale. A rich businessman, he has been trying to penetrate the upper social circles of Old New York with little success. He is described twice in two pages, as having "his *race's accuracy* in the appraisal of money" (16, emphasis mine) and "that mixture of artistic sensibility and business astuteness which *characterizes his race*" (17, emphasis mine). Irene C. Goldman-Price claims that at the close of the nineteenth century, antisemitism was on the rise and there were plenty of stereotyped representations of Jews in popular literature (30). Furthermore, she observes that

Wharton is using Rosedale to make overt what is being practiced covertly by all the members of society, namely the governance of private life by the exchange theory of economics. . . . Who better than a Jew, who "naturally" speaks openly of such things, to force the old society to reexamine the hypocrisy of its feigned indifference to money? (32)

Through Rosedale, ideology inherent in the fictional world is leveraged to underscore a thematic and structural point. Thematically, wealth, or the absence of it, matters a great deal in New York society, especially the latter. For the heroine, it is wealth or its absence that motivates many of her choices. Structurally, Wharton finds an opening to break the rules of society by including a Jew in the narrative. However stereotypical and judgmental it is to discuss Rosedale only in terms of his perceived Jewishness, it puts focus on an obsession with wealth, being good with finance, and also that Rosedale specifically is repugnant to Old New York. What difference does it make if an unpopular character breaks the rules of decorum? Goldman-Price claims that "Rosedale's Jewishness [illuminates] economic issues and social hypocrisies in the society that would otherwise remain underground" (26), which

is precisely the point of his characterization. However else he may function in the plot, he is also there to verbalize matters normally not permitted any speaking time. For instance, when Lily's father loses his job, her mother's first instinct is to make sure the servants are out of earshot and to have Lily close the door (31). Lily also reflects that she has suffered a social loss because of borrowing money. If a married woman had done the same, it would cause a shock, but then it would be "punished privately" without any public interference (70). Therefore, the narrator utilizes Rosedale, with his blunt statements and unconventional social behavior, to put forward a covert criticism of the "feigned indifference to money" these wealthy characters assume. In this way, "unspeakable things" can be discussed in the narrative without it seeming like the narrator's intervention, and thus the narrator remains hidden and seemingly neutral.

Additionally, choices regarding chronology can also affect the authority of the narrative. The story is divided into two books; the first book is set mainly in New York, while the second starts in Europe before going back to New York again. The most relevant aspect of the chronology is its relation to the focalization in the novel. Both the opening and the closing of the whole narrative is seen from Lawrence Selden's point of view, and the omniscient narrator only inhabits one mind at a time. This narrative choice can affect reliability; seeing Lily from the outside in such defining moments affects the rest of the narrative. Selden is very invested in her, and the reader depends on Selden's point of view because his eyes dominate the narrative at crucial moments. In any case, the male perspective brings authority; especially in the guise of focalization, which will be discussed later. The many veiled criticisms, which come from a host of places, are central to the narrative's authority as a whole.

An important aspect of these veiled criticisms pertains to the narrator's lack of tolerance in its worldview. There are several comments regarding gender (at the time, sex), that prescribe gender norms without any explanation, and as such one may call presuppositions: what Chatman calls an "expressive device" (209). Chatman continues: "A presupposition is a portion of a sentence (the other part an assertion) that is offered as a *datum*, something that goes without saying, already understood, perforce agreed upon by everyone including the listener" (210). To read Wharton in 2021 means that the cultural context is different from the early 1900s. For a reader in that time period, these judgements regarding gender may very well be a supposition that they accept without question. However, Chatman points out that any questioning could be seen as "acknowledging your own ignorance" and thus "affirms its validity" (210). Though the reader could deny the legitimacy

of the presupposition, they are in "no position to question or a deny what a narrator tells them", because that is the "price we pay" to accept or follow along with a story's discourse. In other words, the price we pay to understand a story and believe in it is to accept its premises.

After confiding in Mrs. Dorset her plans to court Percy Gryce, Lily is described as finding herself in "the centre of that feminine solicitude which envelops a young woman in the mating season" (43). It is not further explained what this feminine solicitude is, or who is responsible for it.. In another passage, Lily wonders why Selden has shown up, after declining his invitation to Bellemont in the first place; and it is stated that she did not consider that he just wanted to get out of town, because "women never learn to dispense with the sentimental motive in their judgements of men" (55). The first example shows the intimate knowledge, or omniscience, of the narrator with regard to the society it describes; additionally, it shows the ostensible alignment of the narrator's values with those of the fictional society's ideology. The second example is akin to saying that women judge men only with their feelings, which, though perhaps offensive to the present-day reader, is in accord with the nineteenth-century view on women as emotional and sentimental creatures. Again, the reader is expected to go along with these value statements, or perhaps not? The narrator could be ironic, but this becomes a matter of judgement or interpretation.

At one point, before a climactic scene between Gerty and Lily, the narrator writes about Gerty that "[w]oman-like, she accused the woman" (141). The narrator also asks when "are a woman's perceptions at fault?" pertaining to matters of the heart (141). The narrator quite clearly plays on the expectations for women at the time, and the presuppositions establish the gender hierarchy of the novel.

In another passage, Lily is considering her financial options. The narrator writes:

She could of course borrow from her women friends—a hundred here or there, at the utmost—but they were more ready to give a gown or a trinket, and looked a little askance when *she* hinted her preference for a cheque. *Women are not generous lenders*, and those among whom *her* lot was cast . . . (70, emphasis mine)

The thoughts and actions directly connected to Lily are preceded by pronouns, "she" and "her", yet the statement about women not being generous lenders lack any pronouns, only to be followed by the pronouns "her" directly after. There is also a difference in tense; Lily's thoughts are in the past tense and the evaluations of female economics are in the present tense. It may be argued, that since the rest of the passage is so clearly from Lily's point of view, this phrase about women must also be included in her reflections. This is not

convincing: the phrase stands out. Again, to view these anomalies regarding verb tense and pronouns as presuppositions make the structure and choices in the narrative coherent. These choices follow the text, for instance when the narrator writes that "*She* had always hated her room at Mrs. Peniston's. . . *To a torn heart uncomforted by human nearness a room may open almost human arms, and the being to whom no four walls mean more than any others, is, at such hours, expatriate everywhere. / Lily* had no heart to lean on" (130, emphasis mine). In the preceding and succeeding sentences, Lily is referenced by name and by pronouns, "She", but in the main sentence, regarding her torn heart, there are no such markers of her presence: it is thus the presence of the narrator, which is the only other entity which can be held responsible for this claim about the torn heart. Elsewhere in the text, Lily is indeed described as disliking physical touch (147), so the passage is clearly about her, but she is seen from the outside and there is no other character there to see her. What does this narratorial positioning mean?

A brief return to Lanser and Wagner-Martin can shed light on this. As Lanser has indicated, the use of an external viewpoint can strengthen the objective or neutral appearance of the narrator. As Wagner-Martin claims, the objectivity gained from Wharton's chosen point of view ensures that Lily is seen from all sides of her personality. The omniscient, extradiegetic heterodiegetic narrator chooses to align with the moral compass that the characters in the novel have shown as their ideology. In turn, this lends the plausibility to the storyworld, that the reader may require for the novel to make sense to them. The sympathy extended to Lily is concealed in the focalization, visible due to differences in tense, yet still seamlessly part of the narrative.

There are other aspects of the narrative which also pertain both to character and gender. Though Gerty Farish is primarily a positive force and an altruistic character, there is considerable ambivalence regarding her characterization in the narrative. For instance, in a turn which both highlights the omniscience of the narrator as well as their stance, the narrator writes that "Gerty Farish was not a close enough reader of character to disentangle the mixed threads of which Lily's philanthropy was woven" (132). Additionally, there is this passage which puts Gerty down: "If these two factors seem incompatible to the student of feminine psychology, it must be remembered that Gerty had always been a parasite in the moral order, living on the crumbs of other tables, and content to look through the window at the banquet spread for her friends" (131). Firstly, there is the phrase "the student of feminine psychology", which hints at Gerty's distance from the feminine; yet she is kind, altruistic and warm: somewhat reminiscent of a maternal figure.

It perhaps seems strange that the narrator should envision Gerty as a "parasite in the moral order", which has also been remarked by William E. Cains in "Wharton's Art of Presence: The Case of Gerty Farish in 'The House of Mirth'". He explains Wharton's treatment of Gerty, as "Wharton's powerful, and often punishing (and perhaps self-punishing) presence in *The House of Mirth*" (2). Furthermore, he writes that,

[t]he case of Gerty Farish illustrates how Wharton is animatedly "present" in her writing in a variety of complex, and sometimes contested, ways. Her language fastens our attention on meanings that Wharton may not have seen herself but that she was shrewdly intelligent enough to manage to propose. The more one reads *The House of Mirth*, the more one likely tends toward making inquiries and posing questions about Wharton, rather than her characters as such. (8)

These questions place Wharton the author into a position of self-punishment, and her presence in the novel is examined; in this thesis, the presence is attributed to the implied author. In general, implied authors "do not have an audible voice . . . They constitute the source for the aggregate of norms and opinions that make up the ideology of the text" (Luc and Herman 17). There are many objections to the implied author, especially as bearer of meaning, because then the implied author is a product of, and not a source for, interpretation (Bal 2017; Luc and Herman 2019; Ginsburg and Rimmon-Kenan 1999). Still, if one envisions the implied author as a means of interpretation, it gives meaning in Wharton's works. Someone is responsible for the ideological comments regarding the feminine psychology and the like, and to attribute them to Wharton would be meaningless. However, comments about gender can be seen as a way the implied author aligns with the ideology of the society in the novel. On the whole, the narrative gains authority, because the reader understands and identifies with the novel's representation of gender. In other words, the reader takes the novel seriously, because they understand its value system as one similar to their own. Because of this similarity, Wharton's covert criticism and implicit questioning of patriarchy is well-received, as it is veiled as sympathy for the protagonist, Lily.

The ideology of the work as a whole closely follows that of the New York society it describes. The character's statements regarding the importance of their house parties over their servants attending to a family crisis, the importance of wealth, the role of conspicuous consumption, all go without challenge precisely because a covert narrator affirms the values of the novel and in turn creates verisimilitude. And as Chatman has stated, such presuppositions "confirm a value structure that the narratee cannot help but share" (211), but

they also may hint that "the character whose consciousness is presented is deluded, naive, ignorant, self-deceiving, or whatever" (211). The complexity of these presuppositions lies in the fact that they are meant to align the narrator with the world it describes, creating intimacy with the reader, simultaneously with covert criticism in other aspects of the narrative, which creates doubt about its validity. The effect of this positioning of the implied author is once again to give authority to the novel through narrative strategies which both uphold and upend the values of the fictional society it describes.

1.3 Focalization: The (Fe)male Gaze

Focalization plays a major part in how Lily Bart is perceived. By turning now to focalization, I make the point that Lily is defined through others, especially through Selden's critical (and male) gaze. What is visible of her own identity is in large parts the struggle between society's standard and her own attempts at developing her feelings and moral attitudes. Additionally, though Lily in small ways deviates from feminine expectations, she is seen through the eyes of a very warm and motherly character at a climax in the novel. I will therefore also discuss the female gaze and its implications for Lily. In sum, Wharton's use of focalization strengthens her authoritative position and creates sympathy for Lily through multiple perspectives.

Though Lily is the heroine, the first glimpses of her are through another character. Lily is defined as an object, as someone who is perceived: she is introduced by Lawrence Selden's gaze from the very beginning. Selden is the focalizer and Lily is the focalized; this dynamic persists throughout the entire novel. In this section, I will discuss the male gaze in *The House of Mirth*. The main focus will be on Selden and how his privileged position as a focalizer affects the narrative as a whole. However, I will also contrast his position to other male characters through their dialogue, as this will show the difference in male perspective.

Returning to Susan Lanser, the masculine voice carries authority and weight in narratives; what about the masculine gaze? Laura Mulvey's formative work on the male gaze in cinema has been much discussed in literary studies as well. Particularly in feminist narratology, the male gaze and point of view can inform each other in analysis. Robyn Warhol claims that the gaze in "film and the focalization of verbal texts are similar in their function", yet "they might also resemble each other in their potential for carrying connotations of gender. . . . John Berger extend[s] this observation into culture at large: '*Men act and women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at'"

("The Look" 8). So, that the gaze rests with a male character is expected and may even be traditional; the way Lily observes or objectifies herself is perhaps expected and will be discussed later. In Wharton's narrative, the male gaze may evoke authority where female characters would not. Especially since men had all the economic power in the New York upper classes (Wagner-Martin 2), the role of male focalization in this female protagonists' narrative gives it gravitas.

At the beginning of *The House of Mirth*, Selden is positioned as the gaze turned towards Lily: "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" (5). Lily's beauty is central; Selden does not merely "see" her, his eyes are "refreshed" by her. Though there is "nothing new" about her, he still feels "a faint movement of interest" (5). The focus on the visual is emphasized in the relationship between Selden and Lily; he "had never seen her more radiant" (6), and Selden as "a spectator ... had always enjoyed Lily Bart" (6).

The reader sees Lily, the protagonist, through the eyes of someone who admires her, but who also thinks to himself that "her simplest acts seemed the result of far-reaching intentions" (5). Selden does not trust Lily to be without an agenda in her every action. Though an example of great mental capacity, this is also ultimately a judgement of Lily as a manipulative person. Selden seems to adhere to this logic, as he decides to stroll past her: "He knew that if she did not wish to be seen she would contrive to elude him; and it amused him to think of putting her skill to the test" (5). The word choice is illuminating. Selden does not think that Lily will avoid him; rather, he thinks that she will "contrive to elude him" and he is "putting her skill to the test", which gives a distinct feeling of the planned out and cunning nature of Lily Bart in Selden's eyes. Furthermore, he thinks that both Lily's indiscretions and imprudence was "part of the same carefully-elaborated plan" (6). When he invites her up to his apartment, "[h]e knew she had accepted without afterthought: he could never be a factor in her calculations" (8). Though it is interesting that Selden thinks himself either above or below her scheming, he nonetheless thinks of her as a person with "calculations". Additionally, Selden thinks that he "could never be long with her without trying to find a reason for what she was doing" (12). Selden is expecting Lily to have ulterior motives; and this view of her, so early in the novel, affects how a reader will judge Lily in general. As focalizer, Selden is pointing the reader towards Lily's beauty and cunning.

Selden also notes, "with a purely impersonal enjoyment, how evenly the black lashes were set in her smooth white lids" (11), which points to the aesthetic value Selden places on watching Lily. The phrase "purely impersonal enjoyment" indicates that these feelings do not

entirely belong to Selden. In many ways, this foreshadows the objectification of Lily at the hands of other men. This sentiment is followed by the observation that Lily "was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate" (9). If these two sentiments are viewed together, there is a connection between the impersonal enjoyment, meaning the general appeal of Lily's beauty, and the victimization she will go through. This turn from purely visual and aesthetic appreciation to a more socially conscious critique happens multiple times in the opening sequence. For instance, Selden compares her radiance to other women by way of clay, as he thinks

the qualities distinguishing her from the herd of her sex were chiefly external: as though a fine glaze of beauty . . . had been applied to vulgar clay. Yet the analogy left him unsatisfied, for a coarse texture will not take a high finish; and was it not possible that the material was fine, but that circumstance had fashioned it into a futile shape? (7)

In this passage, Selden touches upon a question that is visible all through the book: would Lily's life have gone differently if her circumstances, or environment, were different? It also foreshadows the descent that Lily goes through and contributes to the covert social criticism that the narrator is orchestrating. Reminiscent of Rosedale's function as a plausible loudmouth in a world of understatement, Selden's position is outside the world where Lily seeks belonging. His function is therefore both watcher and critic. His pronunciation of her potential implies that there may be circumstances outside of her control which affect her life, without the reader being too clear about what they are just yet.

Additionally, in the opening sequence Selden thinks that Lily "must have cost a great deal to make", and that many "ugly people" must "have been sacrificed to produce her" (7). These word choices place Lily in the realm of money; both the fact that she must have cost a great deal and that she has been "produced" indicate perhaps the representative view on women in this specific society at the time. Both wealth and women are expendable in this environment; again, men's economic power produces, as Wagner-Martin claims, a double standard where "society recognized that men could do whatever they wanted in relation to women" (2). Selden's admiration places the focus on Lily's beauty instead of the cost it took, and yet again this particular perspective means that the reader may not pick up the criticism very clearly. The power dynamics of the society are established, and they place women below men on the hierarchy.

Arguably, both the production comparison and the clay passage turn Selden's gaze from mere objectification to the critical gaze, which later dialogue will continue to support. In other words, Selden's gaze, though he marvels at Lily's beauty, is not just a gaze. It is also a criticism of a society which places such high value on beauty and wealth, and in turn rejects the poor and physically unattractive, like Gerty Farish, considered so even though she has a maid; or that refuses to see that a servant's family may be more important than a house party. As we have seen, this subtle or covert criticism is present in other narrative aspects too.

In addition to the gendered perspective on authority in focalization choices, the way Selden switches between aesthetic appreciation and critical reflection can be seen as a mediating role. Michael O'Neal describes the narrative representation of Lily through Selden as a perspective "less on Lily than on someone watching Lily ... [which] places her immediately in a social context" (273). In this way, the choice to focalize Lily through Selden connects the thematic and the technical, in the unity between how society objectifies or watches Lily and how Selden sees something else, perhaps something better, in her as well. Selden both confirms and denies what everyone else sees, which produces uncertainty both in the dynamic with Lily, and her view of herself, and gives the reader room for questioning the events of the novel.

The second book also opens with Selden as focalizer, and once more Lily is in his thoughts. The meeting is coincidental and, in this way, mirrors the first opening scene, yet it takes seven pages for Selden to stumble upon her. This is quite a contrast to the first book, where Lily is the object of observation from the first sentence, and this time Selden does not express such utter delight when he sees her. He had time for "a rapid impression of Miss Bart", and this is what he sees:

Scarcely three months had elapsed since he had parted from her . . . but a subtle change had passed over the quality of her beauty. Then it had had a transparency through which the fluctuations of the spirit were sometimes tragically visible; now its impenetrable surface suggested a process of crystallization which had fused her whole being into one hard brilliant substance. The change had struck Mrs. Fisher as a rejuvenation: to Selden it seemed like that moment of pause and arrest when the warm fluidity of youth is chilled into its final shape. (165)

This observation is quite the contrast to his earlier points, but it also fits in with the comparison between Lily and clay, now Lily and crystallization. The passage criticizes the apparent hardening of Lily; in simpler words, Selden thinks her age is finally catching up

with her. This focalization is part of what Wagner-Martin calls the unconventional narrative choices of *The House of Mirth*: Lily is in fact 29 years old by the time the action in the novel takes place. Wagner-Martin calls this an "ironic choice", which "allows [Wharton] to question the wisdom of Lily's having followed the dictates of her society" (4). By showing Selden's somewhat poetic gaze as he looks at Lily for the first time in three months, the criticism is veiled rather than bluntly stated. Again, such a choice makes it easier for the reader to sympathize with either Selden or Lily or both, which avoids the resistance that may come with an outright criticism of the system which oppresses her.

As Wagner-Martin has stated, Selden's gaze is one of authority; his perspective is privileged in the narrative. However, as Selden is pictured as somewhat on the outskirts of society, he may not be so representative of the male perspective in the novel at large. Though there are fleeting instances of focalization via other male characters, the most revealing perspective on the male point of view is found in dialogue. For instance, when Lily is dispatched to accompany Mr. Trenor from the train station, he correctly guesses that his wife has sent Lily, who says she is "the safest person" for him to be with. Trenor replies that "it's because you wouldn't waste your time on an old hulk like me. We married men have to put up with what we can get: all the prizes are for the clever chaps who've kept a free foot" (71). Trenor views Lily's company as a prize, which also belongs to the realm of competition and money.

In another scene, where Lily is dressed up for a tableaux vivant, another male character exclaims that Lily is a "deuced bold thing to show herself in that get up; but, gad, there isn't a break in the lines anywhere, and I suppose she wanted us to know it!" (118). This may confirm the view of Lily as a beautiful and conniving woman. It may be unusual for a woman to take such charge of herself, therefore making her bold. This same character continues to say: "Gad, what a show of good-looking women; but not one of 'em could touch that little cousin of mine. Talk of jewels—what's a woman want with jewels when she's got herself to show?" (121). Again, the comparison between Lily and objects of wealth is undisguised, and in this way, she herself becomes an object of wealth. Another male character, Lily's relative, addresses her unexpected and unwarranted boldness, claiming that "Really, you know, I'm no prude, but when it comes to a girl standing there as if she was up at auction—I thought seriously of speaking to cousin Julia" (138). The role of objectification in *The House of Mirth*, and also in Old New York society in general, is undisputable; both in the sense that women clearly depend on men, and, as several scholars have discussed, the role of both consumption and wealth in the objectification of women in this environment

(Fetterley "The Temptation"; Dimock; Tyson). However, it is clearly too much that Lily herself be too cooperative in her own objectification, as her relative seems to think it warrants a word with her guardian. These comments are further nuanced when the relative states that Lily is his family and *he* is married (138), which implies that the reputation of one is the reputation of all. The social scenery is sensitive to the slightest change. Another male character states that a girl as good-looking as Lily "better marry; then no questions are asked" (138).

So, the male word, as well as the male gaze, is imbued with the authority granted to it by men's economic power. Though other men see Lily's beauty, they may not see much else in her. In this sense, Selden's point of view is important, because it adds a distinctive layer to the story. The narrator does not dispute the comments uttered by the other male characters because it does not need to; the reader has so long followed Selden's admiring and shrewd gaze, that they may at this point question the other men because Selden sees Lily in such a different light. Still, Selden is not above reproach; he has previously engaged in an affair with the married woman Bertha Dorset. However, this serves to increase the tenuous bonds Selden has to Old New York society; he is not without fault, and in this way a part of the male group. Additionally, Wagner-Martin claims that by the end of the novel, as Lily has died, "the reader is not sure that Selden is so admirable—and if he is not, then his authoritative voice should be questioned" (7). The authority that Selden holds is not without limits, and so it echoes the limits of gender roles and expectations. He is also not necessarily the traditional male in this particular New York environment. Still, if he is given certain authority through his central role in the novel, Wagner-Martin's assertion supports a reading of Wharton's narrative structures and choices as covertly critical, or as fiction in disguise.

In contrast to the male gaze, the use of the female gaze supports the authority of the novel, while subverting the traditional female role. In this section, I will explore the role of Gerty Farish at a pivotal moment in the novel. I argue that her point of view establishes a traditional femininity within the novel, which is contrasted with Lily, because Gerty is kind and emotional where Lily is materialistic and vain.

Gerty Farish is described throughout the book as both poor, kind and sentimental, while Lily thinks she is dull and pitiable. Yet, in the climax of the first book, it is Gerty whom Lily turns to, and Gerty who comforts her in her hour of need. Previously, Selden's gaze has been the one in focus, yet in Chapter 14, another gaze is turned towards Lily: Gerty's. Though Lily is the protagonist of the novel, this is the only place where another female character's gaze is the one focalizing the narrative. As the narrator only goes "inside"

the mind of one character at a time, which was the case where Selden focalizes Lily, the choice to focalize through Gerty means that the reader only sees Lily from the outside. The effect is that the reader is guided by Gerty's experience and opinion.

In the nineteenth century, women were mothers and wives first and foremost; they were seen as "gentle, pious, sentimental, emotional—and not very bright" (Scott 5). Gerty Farish is sentimental at weddings, devotes her life to philanthropy, and is seen, at least by Lily, as "not very bright". In the opening pages of the novel, Lily contrasts herself to Gerty, saying "she likes being good, and I like being happy" (9). Otherwise, Gerty Farish is seldom mentioned without being accompanied by her altruism, conventional morality, and meager lifestyle. She is not physically present before Chapter 8, where her attendance at a wedding highlights her enthusiasm and generally cheerful disposition. In Lily's eyes, "Miss Gertrude Farish, in fact, typified the mediocre and the ineffectual", yet Lily also acknowledges "her wide frank glance and the freshness of her smile", which mostly annoys Lily because Gerty is so content with what Lily considers "being fatally dingy and poor" (78). The next time Gerty is present is a chance encounter at a shop, and Gerty's charity work is in focus (97). However, Gerty Farish is not married or a mother; arguably she has filled the role with her altruism and is thus seen to live a proper life as a spinster.

Though the characterization of Gerty is ambivalent, she is still an example of what women were expected to be: kind, selfless and enthusiastic. Therefore, the role she plays in Lily's moment of despair is an interesting choice with regard to the narrative. In the span of two pages, the focalizer shifts four times; from Gerty to Lily, back again, and then to Selden. The subject of focalization remains Lily in all four. One may argue that the focalization is multiple; though the event is not a single one, as Genette would demand of it, the focus is diverted between three characters in describing a longer sequence of actions, which arguably all contribute to the same event. The rapid shift between Gerty, Selden and Lily creates suspense, because the pace of the book is elsewhere comparatively slow. As this chapter contains the dramatic climax, the rapid pace supports the anxious feelings involved. As a consequence, the shifting of perspective from male to female character preserves the authority that Selden has held in his gaze.

Throughout the chapter, each character is followed from happiness to despair. Gerty goes from loving sentiment, towards both Selden and Lily, to grief when she understands that Selden loves Lily and not her. Selden goes from infatuation to apathy when he realizes Lily has been alone with Gus Trenor, a married man. Lily is already panicked, as she has just realized her supposed income was all along the money given to her by Gus Trenor and he

expects return on his "investment". The composition of these events becomes even more dramatic because of the disruptions to the chronology of the story. Lily's discovery regarding Trenor's money happens in Chapter 13, which ends with Lily giving Gerty's address to her cab driver. Chapter 14 starts the same day over, to describe Gerty's lovely day; a day which ends in a dinner with Selden where Gerty realizes that Selden does not reciprocate her feelings. Gerty finds that "there had been a third at the feast she had spread for him, and that third had taken her own place" (137). Then the narrator follows Selden as he leaves Gerty's apartment, and through a series of unfortunate events he sees Lily leave the Trenor's apartment where he knows only Gus is home. Therefore, the reader knows that Selden is disillusioned with Lily long before she does, and at this point the narrator returns to Gerty in all her heartbreak. She ruminates for a while, and then the doorbell rings. The effect of this disruption of the chronology is to create an insurmountable anticipation as to what Gerty will do when Lily shows up at her door. Previously the reader would expect Gerty to selflessly help her, as that is her clearest function in the novel; yet, a narratorial wild card has shown up in the form of love. Gerty's realization that Selden is in love with Lily and not herself throws it all into disarray. The reader may undoubtedly feel sympathy; in Chapter 13 for Lily, then in Chapter 14 for Gerty.

This sympathy is the key to the importance of the female gaze that Gerty brings to Lily's climatic moment. Though the reader already has an image of Gerty as kind and somewhat dull in contrast to the other characters, sympathy towards her is enhanced when Gerty finds out that the subject of her infatuation, Selden, does not reciprocate her feelings. Selden then tells Gerty that Lily "has it in her to become whatever she is believed to be—you'll help her by believing the best of her?" (137). So, for Gerty to reject Lily at her door would be to believe the worst of her. Though Gerty hates Lily in the moment when she goes to bed, crying, and though, when Lily is at her door, "Gerty's first movement was one of revulsion" (143), she soon gives in to her nobler instincts. The narrator states that, "Gerty's compassionate instincts, responding to the swift call of habit, swept aside all her reluctances. Lily was simply some one who needed help—for what reason, there was no time to pause and conjecture: disciplined sympathy checked the wonder on Gerty's lips. . ." (143). Even when Gerty sees the worst of Lily, she still cannot help but help her. The language chosen supports the view of Gerty as traditional in her womanhood; her "compassionate instincts", "swift call of habit", and "disciplined sympathy" all imply the same structured and ingrained part that compassion plays in her life. The continued care, through tea and a rekindled fire, as well as the consistent plea for Lily to let Gerty help her, puts emphasis on empathy. Especially when

Gerty feels tortured to hear Lily breathing beside her in bed, and still thinks that as "Lily turned, and settled to complete rest . . . Everything about her was warm and soft and scented: even the stains of her grief became her as rain-drops do the beaten rose" (147). Even in her own agony, Gerty is still fond of and mesmerized by Lily. For her, the good by far outweighs the bad.

Since womanhood in the nineteenth century is so associated with care and nurturing, the female gaze has two effects. Simply put, to use these traditionally female qualities to inform the focalization from Gerty towards Lily, is to use the traditionally female to sanction the traditionally unfemale. Gerty's care and nurturing position is contrasted to Lily's manipulation and plotting, which have put her in a difficult position. Though Lily perhaps only has herself to blame for her precarious state, the positioning of focalization through Gerty means that sympathy wins the reader over. Though not all readers are alike, such a naïve and hopelessly romantic character as Gerty undoubtedly inspires some pity or sympathy. The temporal aspect, in the retrospective that interrupts the otherwise chronological style of the novel, as well as Gerty's characterization, contributes to a feeling mood, which primes the reader to also feel for Lily.

To refuse Lily's point of view when she is so helpless also puts the focus precisely there: her helplessness in a society which in no way supports her independence. Lily is turned almost into a child in her helplessness, which contrasts to the male gaze where she is conniving and beautiful. So, the female gaze creates sympathy for Lily by inhabiting the feminine expectations of the time through Gerty's eyes, while simultaneously subverting the traditional narrative by taking the position of the Other, instead of Selden's authoritative eyes. Precisely because the change is so swift and happens through the use of multiple focalization and anachrony, the authority of the narrator is not lost, though the focalizer is no longer male.

1.4 Lily: Malleable, Marriable or Manipulative?

In this section, I examine Lily Bart, the most central yet ambiguous female gaze and perspective in the novel. I argue that Lily's gaze supports, rather than defines, her tendency to self-objectification, and then explore her character as malleable and subject to the influence of everything around her. In this discussion, I take into account the role of Gerty and Bertha as foils to Lily's central conflict as a woman: the choice between wealth or happiness.

Lily is described time and again as indecisive; "malleable as wax", a "water-plant in the flux of the tides", and that her adaptability "hampered her in the decisive moments of life"

(48). She is also characterized as rather impulsive; for instance, "[e]very drop of blood in Lily's vein invited her to happiness" (52), and her comment that Gerty likes being good and she likes being happy indicate that her choices will depend on her state of mind. When her plans to marry a wealthy man are going well, she sees her friends in a favorable light and she liked "their elegance, their lightness, their lack of emphasis: even the self-assurance which at times was so like obtuseness now seemed the natural sign of social ascendancy. They were lords of the only world she cared for, and they were ready to admit her to their ranks and let her lord it with them" (46). Even in an uplifted mood, she still sees the hierarchy for what it is. There is not any mention of friendliness, of intimacy between her and others; there is only the admittance to their "ranks". Moreover, the good qualities of her friends, "elegance" and "lightness", are soon followed by "their lack of emphasis" and "sense of self-assurance" that was "so like obtuseness". Lily aligns herself with their beliefs, even though she sees they are limited: "Already she felt within her a stealing allegiance to their standards, an acceptance of their limitations, a disbelief in the things they did not believe in, a contemptuous pity for the people who were not able to live as they lived" (46). This is a subtle foreshadowing of the way the very wealthy will treat Lily when she is no longer one of them, disguised as Lily's own opinions. This disguise softens the critique if one compares it to, for instance, a character focalizing from an I-witness position or a narrator launching into a direct statement of its personal opinions. In plain text, the warm glow that envelops Lily's wish to ascend is accompanied by the knowledge that her social superiors are limited, do not necessarily believe in the things Lily does, and that they cannot conceive of other people not wanting their lives. Their wealth is their crutch and they imagine everyone else to have broken both legs. As Lily states elsewhere, the only way not to think of money is to have a great deal of it (61). The way Lily's thoughts are framed as a positive and happy reflection, while the contents of her thoughts are perhaps not so happy, is an effective mode of covert narration.

Lily's awareness of both herself and others changes often. Perhaps it is not surprising that Selden's appearance mere hours later changes her inspired, yet passive aggressive, view of her friends. As she "looked down the long table, studying its occupants one by one", she comes to the conclusion that there is a "long stretch of vacuity" and that these people were "dreary and trivial" (51). This is quite the contrast to "elegance" and "lightness". Lily goes on to reflect about Selden,

that he had preserved a certain social detachment, a happy air of viewing the show objectively, of having points of contact outside the great gilt cage in which they were all huddled for the mob to gape at. How alluring the world

outside the cage appeared to Lily, as she heard its door clang on her! In reality, as she knew, the door never clanged: it stood always open; but most of the captives were like flies in a bottle, and having once flown in, could never regain their freedom. It was Selden's distinction that he had never forgotten the way out. (50)

This is an immense contrast to the feelings she has had only pages earlier. It also points to the rather monumental and slightly hidden recognition Lily has of her own position; though she may feel trapped, she knows that the door is open for her to leave. In a way, a life of wealth is all she knows, and therefore, she is struggling to reconcile her own hopes with the expectations of society. Lily, though she is the focalizer in many scenes, is still very much defined by those around her. The narrative choices made by Wharton, and the cage image in particular, signals a belief in the free will of an individual; yet Lily's insight does not really help her or lead her anywhere. She is a difficult woman, not because she is mean or cruel, but because she deviates from the norms and expectations of women in her time, in her society. The alternation in narrative focus, as well as focalization, reflects the temperamental and fast-paced social life, where being seen with the wrong person can irreparably damage your reputation. It also solidifies Lily as one in the crowd, one among her set; she may be the heroine, and the majority voice, yet the wealthy people surrounding her affect her position and her economic status.

The use of foils is also a narrative choice which highlights the central conflict of the difficult woman. As we have seen, Lily is contrasted with Gerty, who has chosen happiness over wealth, and Bertha, who has chosen wealth over happiness. This is, of course, a brief summary of a complex situation; Gerty is not happy all the time, yet her outlook on life is a striking contrast to Lily's. And Bertha does not lack happiness every day, but her marriage is full of affairs; she would arguably not need affairs if her pollinating approach to men was accepted, or her marriage was fulfilling. By contrasting Lily with these two women repeatedly through the novel, the conflict Lily faces emerges as more nuanced; it's not as easy as simply choosing Selden, though she wants him, or marrying a rich man, though that will take care of her financially. Additionally, this conflict is about gender; Lily is contrasted to two female characters who are performing their womanhood acceptably for the novel's time period. In other words, these women live their lives in a way that does not upset the ideology of their fictional society, and it is Lily's sporadic refusal to do so which gets her into trouble. These nuances make Lily's conflict less flat, and her characterization more rounded.

First, if we look to Gerty, even when she hates Lily, she cannot turn away a friend in need. Still, Lily continues to look down on Gerty even though Gerty helps her; waking in the morning, the first thing she sees is "her evening dress and opera cloak lying in a tawdry heap on a chair", which at home would be laid away by her maid so she would be "spared" the "sight of such incongruities" (147). The lack of space in Gerty's bed makes her body ache, yet a "renewal of physical distaste" is brought on by the lack of fresh air, the sight of "dingy pipes" and the smell of cooking through the crack of a door (148). Considering that at this point, Lily is in thousands of dollars of debt, the message is clear. For Lily, the loss of wealth is unthinkable. It is highlighted several times in the novel that Lily has a well-developed aesthetic sense; for instance, one night at the Opera, the narrator states that Lily was "always inspired by the prospect of showing her beauty in public, and conscious tonight of all the added enhancements of dress . . . Ah, it was good to be young, to be radiant, to glow with the sense of slenderness, strength and elasticity . . ." (101). This perspective clues the reader into the self-awareness that accompanies Lily's beauty. Yet her aesthetic appreciation is mostly tied up with wealth: its expressions and its implications. For instance, looking at the jewelry at a wedding gift table, "[t]he glow of the stones warmed Lily's veins like wine. More completely than any other expression of wealth they symbolized the life she longed to lead, the life . . . in which every detail should have the finish of a jewel, and the whole form a harmonious setting to her own jewel-like rareness" (79). For Lily, not only is wealth security, it also leads to the sort of aesthetically pleasing life she would prefer to lead. However, this does not make her seem very likable or sympathetic, especially as her first thought on seeing Gerty in the morning is that her "face looked sallow and swollen in the dreary light, and her dull hair shaded imperceptibly into the tones of her skin" (148). Neither Gerty nor her flat have any warmth or comfort for Lily, even if it is the place she chosen to go in a moment of deep despair. In this situation, Lily is attached to the machinations of wealth; however, it is not surprising when the lack of wealth in such an environment is so frowned upon.

On the other hand, there is Bertha Dorset, who has chosen wealth over happiness. This is a simplification; she may have married George Dorset both for money and love, yet her numerous extramarital affairs are a recurring topic in *The House of Mirth*. Bertha even invites Lily as a guest aboard her yacht, so that she can occupy George while Bertha continues her affair. It is the wealth (in the form of a husband) that keeps her from pursuing freely the man or men that she wants. As foils, Gerty and Bertha could not be any more different, though their names evoke each other. Where Gerty is kind and altruistic, Bertha is conniving and jealous. Mrs. Trenor, who calls Bertha nasty, says to Lily: "Every one knows

you're a thousand times handsomer and cleverer than Bertha; but then you're not nasty. And for always getting what she wants in the long run, commend me to a nasty woman" (41). Gerty and Bertha embody the two poles that Lily is torn between, time and again. Gerty's is the life where happiness abounds, but the pipes are "dingy", and the opera cloak left on the floor. Bertha's life is exquisite and extravagant, yet it entails entertaining the whims of an unpredictable and demanding man, and a questionable moral stance on her own part. These foils are taken to great lengths, as their subjects are explored in the potential paths Lily can take.

The two poles of happiness and wealth are echoed in two of the subplots of the novel. Lily goes through two defining and crucial choices that are parallels to the emphasized qualities in Bertha and Gerty. These are Lily's debt to Gus Trenor and her meeting with Nettie Strutters. The events surrounding her debt to Gus Trenor can be seen as a demanding and unpredictable man in the role of "husband". Though Lily is still unmarried, her platitudes and manipulations towards Gus imitate the behavior of Bertha Dorset. Likewise, Lily's encounter with Nettie Strutters towards the end of the book, acts as a foil for what Gerty shows her a good life can be, without the wealth of the upper classes.

Nettie Strutters was helped by Lily's charitable contribution to gain her health back after illness, and she shows Lily her unexpected lucky turn, in having acquired health, a husband and a baby. Both Lily and Nettie express their surprise that it is Nettie who is well, and no longer Lily (269). Though, of course, Nettie has not chosen poverty, she is a part of Gerty Farish's world and thus illustrates the relative happiness of the meager masses. Both Lily's underhanded, feigned seduction of Trenor and her fleeting encounter with poverty, are laced through the central conflicts of the novel with irregularity. They are extremes on the two poles that Lily is stuck between, and they show her character more often than not. For instance, when Gerty shows gratitude for Lily's contribution to her charity, Lily mistakes her feeling of self-esteem for altruism (98). And when Selden comes upon Lily just moments after she has gazed with affection upon a number of men, "[f]ortune willed" that this social group disbands right before Selden's arrival and thus he thinks the look is meant for his eyes only (119). These two examples are meant to show the latitude of Lily's character; she gives to charity, but not for the right reasons. She has eyes for a man, and he gets those eyes, yet her position in the world depends on her also giving those eyes, however briefly, to other men who may be of use to her.

These parallels that represent the conflict between wealth and happiness are finally brought to a conclusion in the decision Lily makes regarding her blackmail letters. She has

the opportunity to gain a wealthy husband, if only she releases the letters that will expose Bertha and Selden's affair to the public. She will then also get revenge on Bertha, who betrayed her and contributed to her downward spiral. She does not do this. Arguably this is a moral redemption for her, as well as a choice to be happy or at least not ridden with a guilty conscious. She could have chosen wealth, and she did not. Through to the end of the first book, Lily knows that she is in a great amount of debt to Gus Trenor. Though she keeps putting him off, she knows she will have to pay him somehow and someday. The ending of the novel is her payment being made to Trenor, making her debt free. And her chance encounter with Nettie Strutters follows on the heels of her refusal to use the blackmail letters. Therefore, Lily is awarded, emotionally, for her moral choice; she gets to see the happiness she has created for another human being, and that life without wealth does not mean that happiness is gone.

Of course, there is also an element of nurture versus nature in Lily's conflict, which I mentioned briefly previously. She was raised by a mother who said that they would gain their lost wealth back through Lily's beautiful face (27). No one talks about wealth, and borrowing money is not acceptable for Lily. There is also environment; Selden's remark that she is a victim of her civilization early on is an implication that the way society works affects Lily's life and her choices. The struggle between wealth and happiness is therefore also a struggle between tradition and a new way of life: between the family expectations and the societal expectation Lily faces. Undoubtedly, they both affect her; however, no matter what choice Lily wants to make, she will still have to contend with society. In other words, Lily cannot circumvent societal expectations, though they are, as she has reflected, merely a cage with an open door. She does not know the way out, nor do the others, except possibly Selden.

The structure of the novel with regard to Lily's characterization thematizes the rapid back and forth, the tension between allowing happiness for oneself, and how dependent that happiness is on wealth for Lily. Lily is the embodiment of the central conflict for many women, in different centuries and different continents: autonomy. Lily's struggle may seem superficial, and even trivial: she is still wealthy. The focus on how others see Lily, through the narrator's seemingly neutral position and its many comments, and focalization through Selden and Gerty, makes performing femininity or being a woman a plural process. There are so many rules, written and unwritten, in addition to actual law, that choice has not always been on the menu for the American woman. The contradictions in Lily's character, her sporadic kindness and her occasional self-centeredness and prioritizing of wealth, are both what makes her a difficult woman and a character the reader gains sympathy with. She is not

difficult because her intentions are bad, or because she is mean or cruel; she is difficult because she is very visible in her struggle against convention, a convention which, arguably, often applies more rigorously to women than men.

A brief return both to Selden and the end of the novel will synthesize the different aspects of narrative considered in this chapter in their relation to Lily. Until the very end, Selden cannot make up his mind about Lily. Though he has gone to her with the intention of telling her something important, presumably that he loves her, several changes occur after he learns that she is dead. When he is standing over her dead body, Selden "felt that the real Lily was still there, close to him, yet invisible and inaccessible; and the tenuity of the barrier between them mocked him with a sense of helplessness" (280). He goes on to think that there "had never been more than a little impalpable barrier between them . . . And now, though it seemed slighter and frailer than ever, it had suddenly hardened to adamant, and he might beat his life out against it in vain" (280). Again, Selden likens Lily to a jewel; though she is beautiful, she is beyond him. Yet the moment Selden sees one of Lily's letters addressed to Gus Trenor, he goes through a crisis: "He felt himself flung back on all the ugly uncertainties from which he thought he had cast loose forever. After all, what did he know of her life? Only as much as she had chosen to show him, and . . . how little that was!" (281). His intimacy with Lily is endangered on account of appearances, which is ironic, because he supposedly saw through those and to the real Lily. He is also positioned within the ideology of society: "Did the cheque to Trenor explain the mystery or deepen it? At first his mind refused to act—he felt only the taint of such a transaction between a man like Trenor and a girl like Lily Bart" (282). The conventions of society live strongly within Selden, however much he has been characterized as a free spirit. Still, when Selden puts together the pieces of the puzzle and realizes that Lily has paid off her debt, rather than engage any further with Trenor, his feelings change:

He saw that all the conditions of life had conspired to keep them apart; since his very detachment from the external influences which swayed her had increased his spiritual fastidiousness, and made it more difficult for him to live and love uncritically. But at least he *had* loved her—had been willing to stake his future on his faith in her—and if the moment had been fated to pass from them before they could seize it, he saw now that, for both, it had been saved whole out of the ruin of their lives. (282)

In the span of three pages, Selden's stance towards Lily fluctuates extremely, before he settles in his love for her.

This can be compared to the fragile state of Lily's reputation in the novel, or her tendency to impulsivity, or how frail friendships and family bonds can be if one part disregards tradition. Tensions build all through the novel, and the inner turmoil that Lily experiences is understood through Selden. Additionally, these tensions are echoed in the narrative choices. The variable focalization, the dependence on male authority, as well as the subversion of female sympathy in focalization, toy with the storyworld's conventions and makes the reader undecided as to what character or position in the society's ideology they should side with. This is also true for the narrator, who shows rather than tells the strict rules of Old New York, all the while covertly criticizing it in parallel with Lily's downward spiral. The masculine authority of the omniscient, yet covert, narrator and the novel are preserved, yet also challenged and undermined by the intricate narrative techniques Wharton has chosen. There is never any outright closure, yet this is the fact that makes it plausible for the reader to extend their sympathies to Lily. Lily is not a simple character, she is not without her flaws; still, she is romantic and passionate, which is contrasted with her tendency to use her beauty to her own advantage. Her characterization in conjunction with the narrative structure makes up the difficult woman. The novel that launched Wharton's career also launched her lifetime project of increasing the literary field both in fictional terms and for real-life women.

2 The Custom of the Country

All was blurred and puzzling to the girl in this world of half-lights, half-tones, eliminations and abbreviations; and she felt a violent longing to brush away the cobwebs and assert herself as the dominant figure of the scene.

Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*.

Undine Spragg, in her very name, is crude. Many critics have uttered their contempt at the adventures of Undine, one going so far as to call her an "international cocktail bitch" or the prototype of the gold digger (Rattray 3). However, Undine is only as abhorrent as her environment will allow her to be. That is to say, Undine has learned her crass and manipulative behavior from somewhere. She steps outside the expectations for women in exhibiting much the same behaviors as men. In this chapter, I will argue that Undine is unlikable, because she challenges the expected role for upper-class women, as well as for fictional heroines at the time. Furthermore, I will explore the ways in which Undine's weaponized femininity and forays into the masculine world of men and business are echoed by the narrative structure. In *The Custom of the Country*, Edith Wharton advances the "difficult woman" to be someone the reader no longer feels particular sympathy toward, and in the process creates space for heroines to be villains. In this chapter, I examine the narrative structures that build Undine, with particular focus on masculinity in the language of business and femininity as self-identification. I argue that Undine challenges the conventional heroine and exemplifies an early anti-heroine.

2.1 Previous Criticism

Identified previously as an "international cocktail bitch", Undine's public reception is further summarized by Laura Rattray, who states that "[r]eviewers were both fascinated and repelled by the incessantly self-gratifying exploits of Undine Spragg", and that she was "perceived as 'an ideal monster', 'sexless', 'absolutely unmoral [sic]', 'absolutely selfish, logical and repulsive', 'the most repellent heroine we have encountered in many a long time' and 'a mere monster of vulgarity'" (3). These contemporary reviews are rather different from scholarly essays. Arielle Zibrak labels Undine "wholly a creature of the present" (4), referencing the

fact that Undine is an "'invader' from the West" (4) who is not raised in the traditions and customs of the New York environment she wishes to penetrate. Elaine Showalter points out that "many feminist critics have argued that Undine is an Elmer manqué, or rather, that Elmer is what she might have been if she had been born male" (90). Elmer Moffat, romantic interest and businessman, is merely an opening for the question: is Undine considered difficult and "cocktail bitchy", because she is too similar to other men of the time?

Martha Patterson states that Undine is "fluid", both because her name denotes water spirits and waves (215), but also because she is "arguably Wharton's most developed 'new woman' protagonist" (213). The term New Woman is applied to many of Wharton's female characters. This is also an interesting discussion vis-a-vis the question of masculinity and gender roles. Elizabeth Ammons notes that "even dashing young New Women like Undine and her friend Indiana—still live through men. In Wharton's view, the woman who wants to make it to the very top of the American pyramid still has only one route: confederate with a man already up there, or one on the way" (*Edith Wharton's Argument* 112). This criticism is also echoed in Wendy M. DuBow's article "The Businesswoman in Edith Wharton", where DuBow discusses the expectations for female literary characters:

[I]n her characterization of [Undine], Wharton defies most traditional expectations of a sympathetic female character. Ferguson points out that in the traditional novel, "women who rebel against the feminine role are perceived as unnatural and pay the price of unhappiness". . . . [S]he concludes that "the view of women as passive has been integral to the male novel of development". (13)

All these criticisms focus on gender roles in literature, in comparing Undine to a man, in using the term "New Woman", and in the deviance from tradition that DuBow claims. In this thesis, I will investigate this deviance further with respect not only to the female character, but with respect to narrative techniques. Though Wharton does not experiment in the range of, say, modernism, she still chooses a narrative structure which accentuates Undine's manipulative personality in her characterization and thus the character is echoed by the narrative. I will also argue, in extension of the criticism regarding Elmer Moffat and Undine the "new woman", that Undine is partly identified with masculinity through the language of business, while still playing into the expectations for women of her environment on a more superficial level.

The subject of the literary role for women has also been discussed by Cynthia Wolff, who claims that Wharton chose the money novel as the mode of exploration for "feminine

initiative" (119). The money novel was based on the belief that money could solve every ailment, typical of the novels by Horatio Alger. Wolff continues, "Horatio Alger's myth in all its manifestations was for men, not for women. The new captains of industry were men, and the literature that celebrated their conquest was a saga of active men and passive women" (119). Once more, the passive woman as expected in literature is seen in connection with *The Custom of the Country*, because Undine is not passive. Wolff also states that for Wharton, "the language of heroinism was insufficient to the breadth of her own experience". She examines initiative and drive as human traits, not masculine traits (120). This chapter will build on these assertions. Firstly, I will examine masculinity and femininity in Undine, which arguably builds on Wharton's turn from male experience to human experience. Secondly, the conclusion of this chapter will examine the insufficiency in the language of heroinism by considering Undine as an anti-heroine. Though she is disliked, there are only two scholars who mention the term "anti-heroine" in connection with Undine, and they do so in passing (MacNaughton, Towheed).

Elizabeth Ammons argues that

Edith Wharton uses Undine to reveal her criticism of the attitudes implicit in leisure-class marriage, an institution . . . [that] encourages the husband to assert his autonomy . . . while the wife, expected to be supportive and dependent, must channel her desires for self-assertion into the role of conspicuous consumer for him. Her life, in contrast to her husband's, is by definition parasitic and vicarious. (*Edith Wharton's Argument* 102)

In critiquing the leisure class marriage, Wharton incidentally also criticizes the gender roles inherent in it. Though Wharton creates a fictional world based on a small sample of American women, she still points out the double standards inherent in this world with precision.

Through the narrative structure, she shows that the very worst "product" of such a world is Undine Spragg. I will also argue that the worst product of such a world has absorbed the worst, or at least most cynical, aspects of femininity and masculinity, as seen in the leisure class marriage institution.

Wolff, in the expansive *Feast of Words*, asserts that in the period from 1912 to 1920 there is "an abrupt and dramatic departure of tone—almost as if Wharton's creative life had begun anew and she had determined to plunge into the immensities of a dawning universe whose shapes and ways loomed unfamiliar and unclear in the half-light" (193). This change of tone is perceptible to me as well, especially if one, as Wolff does, regards *The Custom of The Country* and *The House of Mirth* as companion novels. Comparing these two novels

leads to some striking observations both regarding narrative structure and theme. This dramatic change in Wharton's creative life is also relevant when considering the drastic shift from the beautiful but tragic tale of Lily Bart to the ultimately victorious but also vile Undine Spragg.

2.2 Narrative Structure

In this section, I will first examine the overarching narrative structure of *The Custom of the Country*, especially as compared to *The House of Mirth*. In this comparison, I will also consider the parallels between novels. Then I will move on to the narrator and its presence and consider how both narrator and choices regarding chronology and tempo are structured to mirror the protagonist Undine.

2.2.1 Structural Parallels to *The House of Mirth*

Wharton only published two other novels in the time between *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country*, which both deal with markedly other subjects and as such are outside the scope of this thesis. Additionally, Wharton started *The Custom of the Country* as early as 1907, yet it lay in her desk for some time before she continued working on it. It is interesting that Wharton has gone from portraying, as is often quoted from her autobiography, a "frivolous society [that] can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys" (207), in *Lily Bart*, to the exploits of Undine Spragg, undoubtedly a frivolous character, who in her battle to invade this frivolous society destroys quite a few things. Cynthia Wolff has written that Wharton "might have made a similar statement about *The Custom of the Country*" as she did *The House of Mirth*: "Do you want an image of your corruption? Look at what you have produced! Look at Undine Spragg!" (230). Fittingly, though Lily and Undine are quite different, the narrative echoes their approach to life. For Lily, that means she is followed throughout both by the male gaze and her own. For Undine, it means, for instance, the use of chronological displacement to conceal information undesirable to Undine's worldview or self-image, or which would place her in a bad light. Therefore, it is logical to consider the two novels together. While *The House of Mirth* is about social descent and *The Custom of the Country* about social ascent, there are still many parallels in the structure and themes of the two novels. The heroine of the first is a social insider and the heroine of the second is a social climber and an outsider, yet the focus on social status and women's marital status is present in both.

There is also an apparent echo of Lily in Undine, in that Undine finishes what Lily started. Where Lily is infatuated with the artistic and free-spirited Selden, but rejects him for marriage because of his economic deficiency, Undine meets and marries the rather similar Ralph Marvell. The men have in common that they are from old, respected families in the New York hierarchy, though Selden is on his own in *The House of Mirth*, and that they are sensitive, artistic types with an appreciation for nature and art. Though Marvell's family has a marginally better economic standing than Selden's, Ralph has little access to this money and so it is still expected that Undine's family will pick up the tab for the wedding, the honeymoon, and a monthly allowance for the couple. Undine marries Ralph for his social standing, as well as her mistaken perception that he has sufficient money to support her extravagant needs. One can only assume that a wedding between Lily and Selden, happy as they might have been, would have run into similar financial problems. Both Lily and Undine have self-professed expensive tastes. Undine's second husband is a French aristocrat. Though there is no direct comparison to Lily, as she is never pursued by anyone from Europe, there is a mention of at least one prince that she could have married, if she had not flirted with his stepson. What Undine does not realize is that, though the French aristocrat will bolster her social status, he too does not have sufficient funds to sustain the lifestyle she desires. The people in the New York upper classes already have this knowledge, which singles Undine out as an outsider yet again. Lastly, there is Undine's marriage and remarriage to Elmer Moffat, who can be compared to Simon Rosedale. In *The House of Mirth*, Simon Rosedale offers Lily the financial stimulus to be the type of married woman she would like to be; however, he is so-called "new money", with no ties to the old and respected families that Lily wants to be part of. She therefore rejects him. By the time she is desperate enough to consider his offer, it is rescinded. Elmer Moffat, alongside Rosedale, is a self-made man with no family history to rival the born and bred, "old money" New Yorkers. The difference is that not only does Undine marry Moffat, she marries him twice. Undine's choices are undoubtedly influenced by the fact that she is not a native upper-class New Yorker, as well as her ambitious social aspirations. Undine is not prone to reflection, yet this may not matter as she lacks the insider knowledge of the upper-class New York families. Unlike Lily, she does not know how the social codes work, and thus cannot make an informed choice in her interactions even if she wanted to.

When considering the two novels as companion pieces, this parallel gives room for thinking that *The Custom of the Country* is an extension of the unfinished or rejected subplots of *The House of Mirth*. It also gives room for reflecting on what difference in character is

reflected in their choices: Lily is uncertain, empathetic, and kind; whereas Undine is aggressive, demanding, and dissatisfied. Lily is a rather passive character, while Undine is active. Things happen to Lily, while Undine is the catalyst in her narrative. The main interest in discussing this development is to see what choices Wharton makes in her novels, and how she utilizes a different position for the protagonist in the same environment to broaden the expectations for female protagonists of the novel. And so, Undine becomes an early anti-heroine, which will be discussed in detail later.

The chief similarity is that though much happens, everything stays the same. The opening pages of the book show Undine and her mother translating upper-class social norms with the help of their masseuse. The end of the novel is the premonition that Undine could rather enjoy and be good at the role of ambassador's wife, if only she were not divorced and therefore excluded from the role (372). So, while the opening of the novel foregrounds Undine's objective, which is to climb as far and fast as possible; the ending concludes that, though her objective has been achieved in the sense that Undine *has* climbed far and fast, she has also burnt too many bridges to continue the climb. Thus, the structure of the novel is circular, repeating Undine's work to raise her own status ad infinitum.

Similarly, in *The House of Mirth*, Lily is watched by Selden in the opening chapter and the closing chapter. Of course, in the latter, she is dead and remains as unmarried as ever. In the time between opening and close, Lily has tried and failed to secure a husband. Her goal remains the same and, in this way, it is as iterative as the process Undine goes through, and their outcome is both different and the same. Lily's path can be seen as the reverse of Undine's, going down where Undine goes up, but ultimately, they meet the same end: Lily is literally dead, and Undine is somehow spiritually dead and will probably never feel satisfied. The very character of Undine, as well as the subject of the entire novel, is captured in the refusal to give any closure or visible character growth or moral fiber. Though she is unlikable, Undine is also in some ways masculine, and an interesting variant of the difficult woman characters that Wharton creates.

2.2.2 The Ironic Narrator

As in *The House of Mirth*, the narrator of *The Custom of the Country* is extradiegetic and heterodiegetic, meaning that the narration is carried out from a position outside of the storyworld and the narrator is not a character in the storyworld. The narrator appears neutral and objective, especially given that it is never self-referential. Still, the narrator in *The*

Custom of the Country has evolved; it explains character choices, comments on what is not said or done and has a quite ironic or condescending tone towards the main character.

There seem to be no comments regarding gender or sex in the way they were presented through the narrator in *The House of Mirth*. These comments are present in the narrative, they just do not belong to the narrator anymore but are conveyed through the characters. The only explicit mentions of the term sex are through Undine herself. At one point Undine feels that a man is interested in her, and it is "the instinct of sex" (45) tells her that he is glad to be near her. In another scene, Undine "had always associated finish and refinement entirely with her own sex" (45). The effect of this choice is to align internal values less with the narrator and more with the characters.

This is not to suggest that the narrator is entirely invisible. Much in the same way as in *The House of Mirth*, the narrator reveals its own retrospective positioning and selective omniscience. However, there is a condescending tone towards the characters in the novel, as well as some clear instances of narratorial comment. The first clear instance of this omniscience is while Mrs. Spragg is reflecting on her family's move to New York. After considering that her family had lived there for two years "without any social benefit to [her] daughter", she thinks that,

[i]f, at the time, there had been other and more pressing reasons, they were such as Mrs. Spragg and her husband never touched on . . . and so completely had silence closed in on the subject that to Mrs. Spragg it had become non-existent: she really believed that, as Abner put it, they had left Apex because Undine was too big for the place. (9)

If Mrs. Spragg does not think of these "other and more pressing reasons", then someone else is foregrounding them: the narrator. Simply put, the narrator is commenting on an absence which the character would not be aware of, and therefore is unlikely to observe. Though the narrator in *The House of Mirth* revealed a temporal positioning, it rarely made comments on what was not said or done. In another scene, where Mrs. Spragg talks to one of Undine's romantic interests, a similar description is found; the man was "too little versed in affairs to read between the lines of Mrs. Spragg's untutored narrative, and he understood no more than she the occult connection between Mr. Spragg's domestic misfortunes and his business triumph" (52). Firstly, the statement that he "was too little versed in affairs to read between the lines" is yet again one of absence; the character presumably does not know what he does not know. The same goes for Mrs. Spragg, as he is said to understand "no more than she", and so they are at least together in ignorance. Additionally, there is an undercurrent of

arrogance in these observations when combined with the phrase "untutored narrative", as it suggests the uneducated nature of Mrs. Spragg's story. It also reveals the level of knowledge the narrator possesses, though it may not use it all the time.

Furthermore, in an early scene Undine is described and explained quite thoroughly, seemingly by no one. After she wavers over what choice of letter paper she should use, this passage follows:

Undine was fiercely independent and yet passionately imitative. She wanted to surprise every one by her dash and originality, but she could not help modelling herself on the last person she met, and the confusion of ideals thus produced caused her much perturbation when she had to choose between two courses. She hesitated a moment longer, and then took from the drawer a plain sheet with the hotel address. (13)

There are no grammatical indications that these are Undine's own reflections. Since there is no one else either physically present or implicitly present in the scene, it must be the narrator's perspective. This direct characterization is one of the reasons the narrator in *The Custom of the Country* is more present than in *The House of Mirth*, where descriptions were often connected directly to a character's point of view.

Additionally, the narrator's tone is undoubtedly ironic at times. In a scene where Ralph Marvell, Undine's first husband, is the focalizer, he walks into his home to find his wife and Peter van Degen. It is made evident by previous interactions that Ralph is not fond of him. Peter gives Ralph an informal greeting, which Ralph thinks insufficient, and it is stated that "Peter in intimacy was given to miscalculations of the sort" (108). Though it is clear from the surrounding passage that it is indeed Ralph's perspective that dominates this particular scene, this tone is similar to the one employed by the narrator in the scene with Mrs. Spragg, and the statement is not tagged by any grammatical markers. Merely a page later another comment lands its punch, when the narrator states that "Peter, unsolicited, was comfortably lighting a cigarette" (109). Cigarettes were not frowned upon in the same way then as they are now, yet the phrasing is quite illuminating. Placing the word "unsolicited" early in the sentence and then moving on to say that Peter lit his cigarette "comfortably" creates a contradiction between the narrator's position and Ralph's focalization. Though the attentive reader will already know that Ralph dislikes Peter, the result of this contradiction is to imply Ralph's disdain, rather than to directly state it.

This ironic undercurrent is also seen in the treatment of Undine, which becomes at times clairvoyant. At one point, the narrator states that "Undine sat between Mr. Bowen and

young Marvell, who struck her as very 'sweet' (it was her word for friendliness), but even shyer than at the hotel dance" (22). The words "sweet" and "friendliness" are not so different that they need an explanation, yet the narrator is making a point regarding Undine's ignorance by explaining it. The narrator often gravitates towards ironic commentary when it comes to Undine. At one point, in conversation with the same "sweet", young Marvell, Undine was "a little disappointed that he did not compliment her on her dress or her hair—Undine was accustomed to hearing a great deal about her hair . . ." (45). Again, it is the narrator that informs the reader about Undine's expectations, which makes her seem superficial.

Additionally, at an earlier stage Undine has gotten a dinner invitation from Ralph Marvell's sister, whom she has never met. Undine says "She says she wants me to dine with her next Wednesday. Isn't it queer? Why does *she* want me? She's never seen me!" and the narrator follows directly on her trail, stating that her "tone implied that she had long been accustomed to being 'wanted' by those who had" (6). This observation again both implies omniscience and a slightly sardonic tone when it comes to Undine's less admirable traits. It also reflects that the narrator is rarely on Undine's side; while she is lost in contemplation of how she has made some wrong choices, the narrator writes that "she was in the case of those who have cast in their lot with a fallen cause, or—to use an analogy more within her range—who have hired an opera box on the wrong night" (121). This is quite unusual commentary from the narrator, because it is so glaringly overt. As the narrator is positioned outside the storyworld, and with no visible person behind it, the very constructed nature of any fiction is staring the reader in the face. Who made this evaluation? No one knows, but it fits in with the general tone of the novel. In another scene, focalized from Undine's perspective, she is gazing at another woman's pearls. The narrator states that the pearls "were real; there was no doubt about that. And so was Indiana's marriage—if she kept out of certain states" (217). So, the narrator does not step outside the bounds of tone and mood in the novel, but it shows its hand in so obviously condemning Undine, and mirrors Undine's way of talking in the way it demeans Indiana.

Moreover, the narrator's presence is discernibly different when Undine is in the company of the upper-class characters versus when she, for instance, is with Elmer Moffat, who has known her since her Apex days and is also an outsider at the outset of the narrative. There is a great deal more explicitness in the rules explained by the narrator at dinner parties, in conversations and for life in general with the upper classes. In contrast, Undine's first and second encounter with Elmer Moffat in New York are relatively uncommented on, except for continuous references to Moffat's appearance. These examples denote the varying presence of

the narrator, but they are also part of Undine's characterization, so they will be discussed in detail later.

Though the narrator has some similarities to that of *The House of Mirth*, it has also into a slightly more overt and ironic tone. This contributes to painting Undine in an unfavorable light, and in some ways to aligning the narrator with the reader. The distance created through irony means that the reader is following the narrator in its judgements of Undine, as tasteless or shallow or mean.

2.2.3 Chronology

The chronology in *The Custom of the Country* is mostly linear, but the instances of achronology have a particular function and effect. In this section, I argue that the chronological displacements present in the novel align the narrative to Undine; in other words, the temporal order of the novel follows Undine's tendency to gloss over what she does not like and to focus instead on events that place her in a positive light. Both Undine's behavior in the narrative and the chronology of that narrative are based on some concealment and manipulation of the truth.

As I have discussed, the narrator has already indicated that Undine did not come to New York simply because she was too big for Apex, but also because there is something else going on. This something else is revealed later in the narrative, but the extended concealment affects the way the reader feels about Undine. Emma Kafalenos has written about the effects of narrative withholding through chronology. She states that "[m]issing information matters because we interpret and reinterpret events from moment to moment, on the basis of the information that is available to us at the moment" (35). Kafalenos claims that readers organize events in chronological sequence, and that these configurations will change when new information is revealed (35, 39). She also discusses Sternberg's term "double chronological displacement": an event is first displaced when it is suppressed in the chronological order, and then again when it is revealed to the reader, as they then will know *what* happened as well as *when* (37). This is a term that is useful in discussing the displacements in *The Custom of The Country*: though some events are outside the chronology completely, they are still visibly concealed when they are first brought up and only later revealed, and thus there is an act of double chronological displacement. As there are several instances of concealment in *The Custom of The Country*, this will be discussed as a function of the narrative. What is more, the concealment of temporality, as Chatman claims, shows the

hand of the narrator. The more a narrative deviates from a chronological presentation of events, "the more it highlights time manipulation as a process of artifice, and the more loudly a narrator's voice sounds in our ears" (233). Chronology is thus connected to the narrator's presence, as well as to the mode of characterization chosen for Undine.

The first such concealment is the already discussed "forgotten" reason that the Spraggs moved to New York. After Mrs. Spragg "forgets" the reason they came to New York, there is a conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Spragg which hints at something hidden. Both persons are distressed when Mr. Spragg tells Mrs. Spragg that he saw Elmer Moffat downtown. The narrator states that "[a] wave of almost physical apprehension stole over Mrs. Spragg" (11), and Mr. Spragg is frowning. This initial conversation does not necessarily conceal anything; both Spraggs know why they dislike Elmer and therefore there is little reason to say it aloud. However, it is implied that Elmer has done something bad to Undine, as the exchange ends in the following manner:

"He can't do anything to her, can he?"

"Do anything to her?" He swung about furiously. "I'd like to see him touch her—that's all!" (12)

The implication is not only that Elmer has hurt her, but that he could do so again. The Spraggs seem to think that Moffat is dangerous to Undine, but the narrator later contradicts this assertion when following Undine's point of view.

The next appearance of the Apex-situation is not readily apparent until a second reading of the novel. Undine is asked by Mrs. Heeny, society masseuse, if she has been engaged before. Her reasons for asking are innocent, as Undine is currently engaged to Ralph Marvell and Mrs. Heeny simply says, "[i]f he could see you now!" (56). She clearly means to uplift Undine by saying her former partner will be jealous. However, at the question Undine blushes, and Mrs. Spragg drifts across the room and becomes lost in examining a dress (56), physically distancing herself from her daughter. Only when Undine has said that she was engaged to the Prince of Wales does her mother return. The Prince of Wales is a title given to the heir apparent to the British throne. If Undine had ever been engaged to him, she would be world-famous, perhaps even infamous for breaking it off. None of the older women engage with the claim and Undine's mother simply changes the topic (56). If it is a joke, it is surprisingly subtle and uncharacteristic of Undine; and if not, can she be said to be lying when the "lie" is so outlandish and obviously untrue from the start? Whatever the reader decides, it can be one of Undine's strategies for avoidance and arguably it works rather well.

It is not until after Undine has met her first goal that the reader will get any resolution regarding Elmer Moffat, which at first is slim. When Undine has become engaged to Ralph Marvell, she runs into Elmer Moffat at the Opera. At first, she is startled and pale, which fits with her parents' fear of her meeting Moffat. However, this is quickly dispelled; their brief conversation is quite direct, compared to Undine's usual social engineering, and she begs him please not talk to her. He obliges, but in return asks her to see him later, and she replies "I promise. I—I want to" (65). Wharton has set the tone for Undine's past as difficult and mysterious, with Moffat in the role of the villain, by use of displaced chronology and narratorial suppression. Undine's reaction, that she wants to see Moffat, may be surprising, because her parents' have been so fearful that she would run into him. During her talk with Moffat in the next chapter, it is revealed that Undine used to be involved with Moffat when she lived in Apex, and her parents did not approve. She only wants to disassociate from him now, because in New York it is frowned upon for women even to have been "*engaged*" (72), which implies that Undine and Moffat were perhaps something more. Undine is nervous about her reputation and swears Moffat to secrecy. At a later point, Moffat tells Undine that he doesn't understand "what on earth" her father thinks could be in Moffat's power to do to her (157), which, pointing back to Mr. Spragg's fear, opens up for the many interpretations that follow the elusive Apex days.

It is another 220 pages before Moffat reveals, to Undine's then ex-husband Ralph, that Undine was in fact divorced before she even got to New York (292). The chronological displacement in the narrative echoes the strategies Undine uses, as she too is prone to conceal, both in her scarce inner monologue and in conversation with others. The character Undine is thus reflected in the narrative structure, and the novel as such is doubly "hers". In the same way as Undine manipulates her appearance to the other characters in her set, the reader is manipulated through the choice of chronology and focalization by the narrator. This is temporary, though. The reader, perhaps not infatuated with Undine to start with, gets confirmation of her manipulation and concealment when the truth is revealed. As a consequence, the reader may have the same feeling as the people from whom Undine has concealed her past. They are first drawn in, but are then disappointed and disillusioned later. The narrative "manipulates" the reader in parallel with Undine manipulating her peers and audience.

This same echo of Undine's character in the narrative structure can also be seen in the tempo of the novel. Undine's fast pace is apparent from the very first page: dinner invitations, trying on dresses, scheming to get money from her father, showing off in an art gallery, all go

by rapidly. The two months spent being courted by Ralph Marvell are skipped, the narrative going straight to their engagement, rapid marriage, and honeymoon. When Undine finds out she is pregnant, which is to her an obstacle, it is not given room in the narrative. In fact, her pregnancy and three first years of marriage are left out of the narrative entirely. The tendency to leave out slower paced parts of Undine's life means that the reader is thrown from one event to the next, which, in addition to making *Custom* a page-turner, also leaves little room for reflection. Undine does not reflect on her mistakes when she makes them; she simply moves on to bigger and better things. By not giving room to slower or calmer events in the narrative, the reader is forced to keep pace and has little time to reflect either. This is, of course, not literal. A reader can take any number of breaks in reading a novel. However, the tempo echoes Undine's refusal to slow down for anything, and thus gives the reader an indirect glimpse into her consciousness.

There is one more instance of achronology that potentially contradicts some of the character-building the previous structural choices have implied. Undine, after orchestrating a windfall for her husband, leaves for Paris. An entire chapter is focalized through Charles Bowen, a minor character who is somewhat of a gossip and entirely on the "inside". After his dinner party in Chapter 20, the next chapter returns to Undine six weeks later. In this case, the narrative skips over a part of Undine's life that is fast and glamorous to go straight to the point: she wants Peter Van Degen to marry her and is in the process of ensnaring him in Paris. Just as she is about to leave and go home to Ralph, Peter promises to do anything to keep her, which marks the end of the second book. The third book starts in New York where Ralph is, but Undine is nowhere in sight, and chronicles three chapters of Ralph's life without Undine.

This is where the achronology starts. The chronological order of events is that Undine goes to Dakota to await Peter and get her divorce, Peter does not show up, and as a result, Undine goes to Indiana Rolliver to orchestrate a "coincidental" meeting with Peter at a dinner party. Indiana refuses to do this after talking to Peter. The "order of discursive presentation" (Chatman 63), that is, the order that the reader is given, is not the same as the one described above. The novel goes directly from Ralph's three chapters to a scene with Undine and Indiana Rolliver. After securing a promise that Indiana will invite her to a dinner where she will meet Peter and talk to him, Indiana instead returns to Undine with the news that he will not see her, and that Indiana does not blame him. Evidently Peter has caught on that Undine is not such a caring person, because she refused to see to her ex-husband while he was sick (226). What follows is a period of introspection for Undine, as she goes to a quiet hotel and

tries to live in peace and quiet. Only then does the narrator reveal, in a flashback, that she was travelling with Peter for several months and went alone to await him in Dakota, where it was possible to get a divorce. She waits and waits, but he never arrives. She returns in failure to New York, manages to sell some jewelry and get back to Paris. This is where, chronologically, the episode with Indiana Rolliver would fit in. This amounts to a double chronological displacement: the first one being the scene with Indiana Rolliver, and then the next mention of it where it would chronologically fit in. By starting with the action and then unravelling the episode to the reader, the narrative privileges action over inaction, and Undine's strategy of concealing or pretending bad things do not exist is mimicked.

If we briefly return to Deborah Lambert, we recall her claim that Lily Bart's manipulative strategies were echoed in the narrative structure (76). This is also true of Undine in *The Custom of the Country*: narrative and character are closely entwined. However, Lily Bart had room and time for slowness; Undine does not. In this way, she is cemented as superficial and energetic, which in turn makes her harder to like. Correspondingly, the narrative structure contributes to the "difficult woman" construction that is Undine Spragg.

2.3 Focalization as Manipulation

While Lily Bart was quite thoroughly focalized and accessible to the reader, insights regarding Undine's feelings, thoughts and schemes vary in accordance to what will put her in the best light. In this section, I argue that Wharton uses the narrator's distance and focalization to purposefully mimic the self-objectification and self-deceit that is at the center of Undine's "personality", as well as utilizing characteristics often associated with specific genders to make up a complex, and difficult, woman. I will briefly consider the differences between Lily Bart and Undine Spragg, and how these differences play out in Undine's case, with particular focus on focalization. The lack of inner mental activity in some parts of the narrative is used to reflect how Undine pushes her own narrative and uses information to her advantage, while not stopping to consider either her own or others' feelings.

In *The House of Mirth*, the heroine Lily Bart is beautiful, kind and mostly likable. Her worst female enemy is Bertha Dorset, described as a "nasty woman" who nonetheless gets what she wants (41). In *The Custom of the Country*, it is fair to say that Bertha Dorset has been given a new role: she is reflected in the heroine Undine Spragg. Both women stop at nothing to get what they want, and they do not care, or at least are not hindered by, whom

they may harm along the way. So, what does it look like "inside" the nasty woman's head, and what motivates her? In this section, I will examine how focalization is closely tied to other narrative techniques and choices in the novel to create a unified image of Undine. I argue that the self-objectification that Undine employs in order to get what she wants is indeed woven into the very fabric of the novel.

As previously stated, Lily is followed quite closely in the narrator's focalization of her. Undine is quite a contrast, as she is narrated with surface-level focalization. The narrator also employs a somewhat sardonic tone when focalizing Undine, especially regarding her attempts to break into the upper classes and to fathom their confusing social customs. To examine this pattern, I will analyze the way Undine is focalized in meeting the upper classes and in meeting Elmer Moffat. I argue that the narrator's presence is different in these instances, because to Undine these encounters have different functions. As such, they show that Undine is quite calculated and, at heart, an active agent rather than a passive thinker.

When Undine is invited to a dinner party early in the narrative, she wavers even in the choice of her notepaper and ink; after hesitating for a while, she ends up with a plain sheet which most closely resembles the one sent to her (12-13). She even rewrites her letter on account of having to redo her mother's signature four times in lieu of not knowing the proper etiquette (13-14). The narrator writes, "[t]hat might be conventional, Undine reflected, but it was certainly correct" (14). Conventions do tend to be correct, and there is no slight irony in the poor phrasing Undine chooses, even "inside" her head. It evokes the same feeling as the example where Undine calls someone "sweet" and the narrator adds that, to Undine, this is a word meant to convey friendliness. The narrator explains Undine's thought process even when there is little to explain, and most closely describes what is visible to the outside; the choice between one sheet of paper instead of the other, as well as the rewriting of signatures. These are tangible acts; holding paper in your hand, writing a signature over and over. Clearly, the focalization is focused on action rather than thought.

Additionally, when Undine is asked by her hostess for her opinions on books and movies, the narrator states that "Undine did not even know that there were any pictures to be seen, much less that 'people' went to see them; and she had read no new book but 'When the Kissing Had to Stop,' of which Mrs. Fairford seemed not to have heard" (24-5). It is no surprise that this "book" is unfamiliar to Mrs. Fairford, because it is the line from a poem, not its title even, and not a book at all (374). This lack of refinement is also emphasized when Undine, while leaving this engagement, mistakenly assumes both that another upper-class woman will invite her to dinner, and then that young Marvell will walk her home. When he

says goodbye right outside the building, she blushes, and when she replies to Ralph, she "faltered out stupidly" (26). It is Undine's perspective that is followed in these scenes and therefore the focalization is unusual compared to the insights usually accompanying focalization in Wharton's novels. Undine is mostly followed through her actions; what she says, how others respond, and rarely any meaningful mental activity. This consistent focus on her "flaws" in encounters with the upper classes makes her seem both superficial and ignorant. The focus on her actions also makes her active rather than passive; she acts, instead of thinking. This is an opposition that is interesting to discuss in conjunction with gender, which will be done later in the chapter.

These overbearing explanations pertain mostly to the upper classes. In her interactions with Elmer Moffat, there is little such commentary. Undine evaluates him as someone not bearing the mark of a "gentleman" in the company of the upper classes, and the narrator focuses quite extensively on his appearance. He has an "outline thick yet compact" and a "round head set on a neck" and a face with "rounded surfaces" as well as a "jovial cunning," which strikes Undine as "merely vulgar" (69). Physical appearance is described much more closely in Undine's interaction with Moffat than the upper classes, yet she at times seems to like him much more. There is some contradiction between Undine's words and the actions that the narrator describes to go with them. She "softened her frown to a quivering smile" (70) and says she is glad to see Moffat, which indicates that the smile is not spontaneous but planned. When it is made clear that Moffat will continue living in New York, the narrator states that "Undine, recovering herself, held out her hand impulsively" and says she is glad (71). These actions contradict each other; recovery implies premeditation, while the other act is described in itself as impulsive. There is a tension here that is not always present in other interactions.

In fact, in the succeeding pages, her interaction with Ralph, whom she deems a correct man to romance, is quite different. Where she has "submissively" let Moffat take off her veil (70), Ralph is met with "a quiver of resistance" (74). While she does eventually let him remove her veil, his persistent questions regarding her well-being are to Undine "as irritating as her mother's" (75). When Ralph, perhaps half-jokingly, wishes they could elope, her face "lit up by a new idea" and in his hold she has no "intent of tenderness", but is "too deeply lost in a new train of thought to be conscious of his hold" (75). It seems like Undine is lost in her own plans and manipulations of the situation to a much larger extent than with Moffat, though the latter is a threat to her social status. With Ralph, who is much more upper-class, the narrator highlights her introspection and calculated nature. In a much later

encounter with Moffat, there may be a slight explanation for Undine's act. The narrator states that, "Undine was perfectly aware that he was a vulgar over-dressed man, with a red crease of fat above his collar and an impudent swaggering eye; yet she liked to see him there, and was conscious that he stirred the fibres of a self she had forgotten but had not ceased to understand" (260). There is a contradiction between what Undine knows to be the correct course of action, and what she feels inside. Lily has the same experience, and it is undoubtedly connected to the gendered societal expectations they face. These tensions are also a part of the play between masculinity and femininity that Undine exhibits, or the choice between what is presently desirable and what will be advantageous to her in the future.

Undine is over-explained in meeting the upper-classes, and the narrator also emphasizes her calculated approach to these social opportunities. Yet there arise some tensions inside Undine when she meets Moffat, precisely because she actually enjoys his company, but she knows that it is not strategic to be seen with him. The presence of the narrator is different in the two scenes and this is also connected to focalization. There is no hard and fast rule for how deep focalization must be, yet it is often consistent throughout one work. In Undine's case, the focalization could perhaps be said to be unreliable. This is because the focalization sometimes reveals what Undine feels, like in the last encounter with Moffat, while at other times the only clue to her position is in the dialogue. It is the narrator who focalizes, yet the narrator is such an outsider to the story that it seems it is Undine who is holding back. As Undine often says what is expected or what she thinks is proper, this does not really give the reader any meaningful clues as to her true feelings.

In Undine's characterization, there is an echo of the chronological structure as well as the choice of a slightly overt narrator; distance is created between Undine and the narrative, simultaneously as the narrative mimics her strategies of manipulation. Undine is not really available to the reader, because she is sometimes the focalizer and other times just narrated. The chronology is disarranged to benefit Undine's own choice of life narrative. In sum, the narrative strategies and Undine the character play off each other in a continuous loop.

2.4 Undine the Anti-Heroine

In much the same way that the narrative strategies echo Undine's social strategies, her personality is also steeped in both a traditional femininity and masculinity for the time. As men held the economic power in the family long into the twentieth century, they were also the heads of the family. In the process of getting ahead socially, Undine navigates what

behavior is expected of her and what behavior will get her what she wants. Often these two paths are in conflict; one being expected female behavior and the other being a more aggressive, active, and typically "male" behavior at the time. This tension between expectation and deviance from norm contributes to the "difficult woman" that Undine acts out in the novel, as well as negatively affects her critical reception. To examine these tensions and oppositions, I will discuss how business language used as a narrative technique places Undine in the realm of masculinity without ever physically placing her "there": that is, to make her in any way physically or otherwise visibly masculine or to give associations to manhood. I will then compare this characterization to the inner world of Undine, which is often feminine, and connected to her own sense of womanhood. The chapter will end with a consideration of Undine as an anti-heroine, which is the anti-hero with clear gendered implications.

In using the language of business while focalizing Undine, Wharton has connected the world of Fifth Avenue socializing, which is the feminine sphere, to that of business, which is the masculine sphere. While the focus in this thesis is more on narrative structure and choices in the traditional sense, I argue that her use of masculinity and femininity are narrative, structural choices. Wharton is a subtle and intelligent author, and she has used actions, traits and language associated with either gender, in femininity and masculinity, to portray Undine. She is also noted for playing with narrative conventions and expectations. Therefore, I view feminine and masculine traits not as given and immutable, but as culturally determined and rooted in the language chosen by Wharton to describe Undine, both in action and inaction. As noted by Chatman in his use of the term "verisimilitude", which he discusses as part of the process of "naturalization", readers "recognize and interpret" conventions by incorporating them into their own frame of reference (49). Simply put, the reader appeals to their own worldview to make sense of the storyworld they read about and to fill in gaps where they may appear. Chatman rightly notes that what is real or probable is a "strictly cultural phenomenon" (49). Therein lies the strength in Wharton's narrative choices. For her contemporary readers, the social conventions in the novel will be expected and normal; one can guess that to align Undine too closely with masculinity would have upset the balance of the probable and real. For later readers, the customs of earlier centuries will be known, though perhaps not intimately. So, when Undine's masculinity is skillfully presented as an inherited trait from her father, concurrent with Undine's disinterest in business, it becomes both an interesting object of study in gender research and for literary scholars. Additionally, as noted by DuBow, Wharton has defied "most traditional expectations of a sympathetic

female character"; most female characters, in male novels at least, are expected to inhabit a far more passive role (13). In other words, though Undine is unsympathetic and manipulative, she is still presented as a woman, and she inhabits the role that women in Old New York were expected to fill: this role is decidedly more warm, compassionate and polite. She is positioned between the active and the passive, which makes her an outsider not only in social rank, but perhaps in gender too. These contradictions in the gendered spheres, in business language and Undine's sense of a feminine self, can then be discussed as narrative techniques.

The most prevalent connection between business language and Undine is heredity. The narrator states that,

Mr. and Mrs. Spragg were both given to such long periods of ruminating apathy that the student of inheritance might have wondered whence Undine derived her overflowing activity. The answer would have been obtained by observing her father's business life. From the moment he set foot in Wall Street Mr. Spragg became another man. (76)

Undine is often described as both energetic and active. Wolff claims that *The Custom of the Country* in its entirety is about energy (232). However, what stands out in this passage is how Undine is connected to her father specifically through business and also in "inheritance". There are several mentions of Undine's likeness to her father (his brows, his brooding and so on); few regarding her mother. While there is no stretch of the imagination broad enough to label Undine boyish, as she is far too invested in dresses and jewels, the focus on paternal inheritance strengthens the possibility of masculine traits in Undine as entirely "natural" to the reader. After all, she did get them from her father.

This particular focus is present throughout the novel. While contemplating her summer as one of social disappointment, Undine casts aside her reminiscence, because "she was too resolutely bent on a definite object, too sternly animated by her father's business instinct, to turn aside in quest of casual distractions" (148). Again, her cynicism is cast in terms of inheritance. This business instinct is illustrated by her cynical approach to solving her problems: in an interaction with her father, she gives an answer which would have satisfied the men in her social environment, and sees instantly "the mistake of thinking it would impress her father" (149). Her structured approach to their conversation runs throughout; she keeps going until she sees that "she had found the right note: she knew it by the tightening of her father's slack muscles and the sudden straightening of his back" (150). Here, Undine is observant and aggressive; she makes a false move, but she keeps pushing against her father until she sees signs, which she has already memorized, of his "defeat". In

another scene, this time with her husband Ralph, this calculated nature is again on display. After Undine has forgotten her son's birthday party because of her own plans, she returns to their home in Peter Van Degen's car (the same van Degen whom Ralph dislikes). Ralph has watched Undine's appearance from the window and asks where she was and how she got home. She answers truthfully, but Ralph, the focalizer, notes that she is flushed and her lower lip twitches slightly (138). This may indicate that she is not comfortable in admitting Van Degen brought her home. In fact, Undine's account of the situation in the next chapter confirms this view. After pondering how her forgetfulness of the boy's birthday feels to Ralph's family the "last slight", she had also "been frightened when she guessed that he had seen her returning with Van Degen. . . . [H]e evidently had a reason for not believing her when she told him she had come from the studio" (141).

The matter of her truthfulness to Ralph is tactical and not moral; she has observed him and possibly detected a difference in his demeanor. This is also confirmed in her view that there was "something both puzzling and disturbing in his silence" regarding her whereabouts and that "it must either be explained or cajoled away" (141). There is no mention of concern for her husband or regret over her actions, either the lying or the time spent with another man. There is only the plan to eradicate his suspicions. In another scene, where she lets Van Degen hold her hand, though her heart beat fast, "she felt within her a strange lucid force of resistance. . . . So Mr. Spragg might have felt at the tensest hour of the Pure Water move" (184). The Pure Water move is a business deal, and again Undine's choices are compared with her father's choices to the effect that her every action seems calculated and manipulative. There is seemingly little emotion present to motivate her actions. She is, on the whole, focalized through her actions and the "inside view" is restricted to her calculations of what move to make next. She is continually shown to be a "businessman", yet she is never technically in business and the comparison is softened somewhat by its connection to her father. Undine is not a man, she is just her father's daughter, the text seems to say.

However, Wharton also contradicts these actions both by continual reference to Undine's indifference regarding business and her own emotional positioning regarding her womanhood or femininity. It is remarked that Undine does not care for Wall Street, unless it affects the "hospitality of Fifth Avenue" (123), that "business" is a mystery to her (148), and at one point in conversation Ralph pauses, because he knows "Undine's indifference to business matters" (160). To Undine, there is nothing business-like about her conduct; she is simply getting ahead. As noted multiple times in the narrative, Undine cannot help it if other people are "unreasonable" (29, 167). She thinks at one point that there is a correct way to talk

to a "true woman", and she identifies in this the "eloquent" way Ralph had spoken to her during the first few months of their marriage, thus making her a true woman (119). At one point, she even identifies manhood with business and womanhood with being cared for; she thinks that business was "man's province" and "what did men go 'down town' for but to bring back the spoils to their women?" (33). Undine's quest to become a legitimate upper-class woman in the eyes not only of herself, but of society, is in her head enmeshed with the ways gender "works". That is to say, Undine will conduct herself correctly, appear attractive and say the correct things, provided that there is a man present to take care of her and play the manly role.

Quite early in the narrative, Undine is also shown playing dress-up by herself. The narrator remarks that during childhood she would rather "play lady" in her mother's skirts than play with the other children (15). She is playing at womanhood even in the words she uses: "play lady". It is stated that Undine "still practiced the same secret pantomime, gliding in, setting her skirts, swaying her fan, moving her lips in soundless talk and laughter" (15). She is indulging in girlishness. It is also stated that she yielded "without afterthought to the joy of dramatizing her beauty" (15). She is well aware of her appearance, as already discussed, and she takes pleasure in being feminine. However, Undine's calculated nature is never far behind; as she is "fanning, fidgeting, twitching" (15), the narrator remarks that these movements are not the result of shyness. No, they are what Undine thinks the correct way to be "animated in society" (15). So, though Undine undoubtedly finds great pleasure in being attractive, it is not an unbridled joy. It is the expected behavior and its pleasantness, as well as the characteristic "business sense", which tells Undine not what she must do for femininity, but what it must do for her.

Perhaps this is just an astounding lack of self-awareness, yet there is something shrewd in the characterization Wharton has chosen for Undine. For Undine does see her life in terms of business occasionally; after her divorce from Ralph Marvell, her goal is articulated as getting back "an equivalent of the precise value she had lost in ceasing to be Ralph Marvell's wife", and the sight of her Christian name on her card is a reminder of "her diminished trading capacity" (227). In fact, no irritation in her life could compare "to this sense of a lost advantage" (227). This is very much a contradiction to the assertion that she does not understand nor care for business. The loss she feels from her divorce is conveyed in business language. Her entire life is a business transaction, where instead of money changing hands, it is social status. Wendy M. DuBow observes that Wharton "creates female characters" in both *The Custom of the Country* and *The House of Mirth* with "no

understanding of conventional business" (11). The key word is "conventional", for Undine quite clearly has an analytical and tactical mind. Additionally, DuBow brands both Lily and Undine businesswomen, noting that "Wharton exploits the custom in high society of referring to a single woman's marriage quest as her 'career'" (11). It is indeed the only vocation Undine Spragg ever has; the quest for the man who can give her more than her last. The use of business language furthermore connects love and social life to conquest and business, which comes together in women's marriage quests as career.

Undine takes pleasure in femininity, when it suits her needs and advances her cause, yet she is entirely dependent on her self-image as a woman to pursue her goals and seems to identify completely with womanhood as such. Simply put, Undine wants to be refined and proper; she may not always be good at it, but she still inhabits the role of upper-class woman to the best of her ability. At one time, when she is socially associated with some free-spirited Europeans, she is embarrassed that she is "expected to be 'queer' and 'different'" (222). Though this embarrassment could stem from the obstacle these people represent to her social climbing, the sentence is followed up by stating that Undine's "business shrewdness" suggests that "this was not the moment for such scruples" (222). In other words, Undine does not want to stray from convention, but her business sense, quite the male trait, tells her to do so. And she is perhaps almost as "malleable" as Lily Bart. When she sees an upper-class person with an object or position that gives them attention or praise, she wants it too. And it is not wrong to deem Undine uninterested in business, as she thinks to herself that the "chief difficulty in the way of her attaining any distant end had always been her reluctance to plod through the intervening stretches of dulness [sic] and privation" (148). In fact, her "imagination was incapable of long flights" (148). Of course, one may simply dismiss Undine as frivolous and cynical, yet this is an underestimation of her character.

There is no slight irony in the fact that the only parts of upper-class womanhood that Undine gets right are the ones she has seen from the outside. That is to say, she is acting out the *appearance* of upper-class womanhood, not the feeling or internalization of its norms and values. For the natural insiders, those with long family ties to the upper classes for instance, the feeling for refinement is almost innate. The bounds of social acceptance seem more obvious, though anyone can misstep. Lily strays far less outside these bounds, and recognizes them more easily, because she has been inside them from birth. This is also apparent in her indecision about her marriage, because it hinges entirely on her insider knowledge that not all men would be appropriate and satisfying life partners. In this regard, Undine is perhaps a caricature of what the common person would see in the upper class from the outside. An

example of what she gets wrong, which also goes to the core of her personality, is motherhood. She is distressed when she learns she is pregnant, and she is not interested in her child in the slightest. She forgets his birthday and thinks only of how to manipulate Ralph into obedience, and then what it means when Ralph surprisingly is manipulated (141). At no point does she consider that her son was disappointed, though Ralph tells her so. Before her divorce from Ralph, she goes to Paris on her own and leaves the child with her husband. Her only concern is that she can no longer ascribe her financial needs to providing for her son (236). Though an instance of longing for her son washes over her (255), the surrounding passages make clear that Undine is mostly sorry for what her son does not get her in social standing and money. He is an integral part in trying to blackmail her ex-husband for money. Additionally, he helps Undine create the image of a happy nuclear family to her new romantic interest, who happens to be a French aristocrat and therefore positioned as the European equivalent of the New York upper classes (262).

No, motherhood cannot be performed, and therefore Undine does not understand it. In this case, she is adequately focalized; there is simply no warm feelings or reflections to report. Undine does not care for children, and her actions (distancing herself from her son, forgetting his birthday, using him for economic gain) shows the reader all they need to know. If we return briefly to *The House of Mirth*, Lily fails in her quest, because she does not get married. She does, however briefly, show warm feelings towards children. Undine, on the other hand, succeeds in marrying, multiple times, and though she has a child, she is not particularly interested in him. This is the strictest judgement that Undine could ever get, because women are often intrinsically linked with children, in fiction and real life. This can also be read as a well-placed comment on the way society at times restricts women to the home, or to the missing autonomy that many women had at the time. The value system of the novel is more neutral than that in *The House of Mirth*, where the narrator's comments on femininity align the implied author with the implicit ideology of the novel. Therefore, one can question whether the implied author is as strongly implicit in the values shown in *The Custom of the Country*, as it is in *The House of Mirth*. Though the narrator is severely ironic, the novel as a whole does not condemn Undine's attitude towards children and the implied author is therefore subtly different from that in *The House of Mirth*. Therefore, Undine is perhaps more judged for being a bad person than a bad woman, and this positioning of the implied author contributes to the way criticism is still covert, or fiction in disguise.

To conclude this chapter, I want to discuss the different narrative strategies as they relate to Undine as an anti-heroine. The play on business language to align Undine with her

father and masculinity, while her self-identification is more aligned with femininity, contributes to Undine's position as an active, rather than a passive character. This active position is in contrast to previous notions of what a female protagonist could be. Undine goes against conventions completely alien to her, and similarly to Lily her inner conflict is part of what makes her a difficult woman; the other part is the complex web of masculine and feminine traits that Wharton has chosen as characteristics for her character. And in being a difficult, active woman, Undine is positioned as an anti-heroine. Additionally, in turning Undine into a kind of "man", someone must play the role of "woman": in this instance, Ralph Marvell does. In sum, the narrative reverses the traditional gender positions.

This chapter has discussed Undine as a complex character, because of the combined forces of her dull, yet still present, business sense, and her strong sense of womanhood, however much performed or based on superficial pleasures it is. The sum of these traits amounts to a narrative technique. The language of business associates Undine with masculinity, especially through likening her to her father, yet she is never directly called manly, masculine or the like. The acting out, or performing, of femininity, is one of the most characteristic traits Undine consistently displays throughout the novel. Combined, these traits make up a complex characterization for a somewhat simple character. She is the culmination of everything in both leisure class marriage and in business life, that was wrong with America at that time. In Undine, Wharton rejects the fast-paced life that privileges money-making and external appearances through her novel's narrative techniques. And in Undine, Wharton creates a powerful anti-heroine, because Undine has weaponized her femininity and contained the businessman's sense for opportunity and risk, no matter the cost. Traditionally, the hero is associated with heroism, courage and morality, which Undine is entirely lacking. She is, therefore, the anti-hero: "conspicuously lacking in heroic qualities" ("antihero"). However, she is also a *female* character, whereas heroes typically are male.

This structure, of positioning Undine as anti-heroine, is especially visible in her dynamic with Ralph. What is interesting is that Ralph envisions the role of hero for himself. Before his engagement to Undine, he wants to protect her "virgin innocence" from other vulgar men (52). The narrator reflects on Ralph's "notion of women" (shaped by his good looks and charm), and Ralph reflects that though he has not been stirred by any women he had still preserved "his faith in the great adventure to come" (53). The language of the fairytale is evoked through emphasize on Ralph's adventures, and also his remark that Undine was "his mission", or "the 'call' for which his life had obscurely waited" (53). It is also associative that Ralph claims that his "faith" made him "so easy a victim when love had at

last appeared clad in the attributes of romance" (53). Ralph goes on to reflect that Harriet Ray, another upper-class woman, was "sealed up tight in the vacuum of inherited opinion", where "there would be no call to rescue" her (53). Undine, on the other hand, "had no such traditional safeguards" and therefore she would be an "easy prey to the power of folly" (54). Ralph even goes so far as to liken, or fantasize about, Undine as Andromeda and himself to Perseus on Pegasus, "his winged horse" (54). Rescuing the victim, as Perseus rescues Andromeda, is a standard part of both fairy tale and myth. However, this is not how the story ends for Ralph. He ends up divorced from Undine, taking care of his son, whom he loves, which is traditionally the role of the woman (in fiction, as well as outside of it). When Undine blackmails him by threatening to claim sole custody of their son and Ralph is unable to come up with the money, he commits suicide. Undine then marries her next husband and gains some financial security. Ralph, in all his artistic sensitivity, paints a picture of himself as Undine's hero and rescuer. It is ironic that not only does he not rescue her, she is the very reason for his demise. The traditional fairytale adventure where the hero (Ralph) rescues the "princess" (Undine) has been turned inside out and upside down: the "princess" refuses the hero and leads him to his death. Ralph's hero complex has not been fulfilled. Instead, Ralph becomes the victim, which is also typically the role given to the passive female character.

The only part missing is that of the hero that Ralph makes his sacrifice for; yet there is no stretch of the imagination which would give Undine the name of hero. Instead, she is then the anti-hero: the mean, cynical and cunning character in the structural position of the hero. This positioning is possible both because of the narrative structure and the traits attached to Undine. She is the protagonist, after all, and therefore the novel follows her "adventures"; she succeeds, like many protagonists do, and she does this in part because of her easy transition between masculine action and feminine performance. As Woolf has mentioned, the money novel which *The Custom of The Country* is reminiscent of, speaks to Wharton's enormous capacity for playing off familiar literary conventions that readers would recognize. So, though it would be an exaggeration to call Undine well-liked, the novel containing her sold well and led to widespread discussion regarding her evil ways. Additionally, it makes Undine an anti-heroine and not just an anti-hero: her experience, and her characterization, are explicitly connected to the female experience, an experience which Wolff claims there is no room for—before Wharton makes it.

3 *Summer*

Never had her ignorance of life and literature so weighed on her as in reliving the short scene of her discomfiture. "It's no use trying to be anything in this place," she muttered to her pillow; and she shriveled at the vision of vague metropolises, shining super-Nettletons, where girls in better clothes than Belle Balch's talked fluently of architecture to young men with hands like Lucius Harney's.

Wharton, *Summer*.

In *Summer*, Wharton has exchanged her New York upper classes for the New England rural masses. Charity Royall is a quiet young woman on the cusp of experiencing independence, yet her development is hindered by her foster-father's advances, her limited knowledge, and her sexual awakening and subsequent pregnancy. In this chapter, I examine the narrative structure of *Summer*, and discuss how Wharton's use of narrative technique leads to a different heroine from her usual one. I argue that Wharton's use of the senses as central to her main character solidifies the connection between Charity and nature, and contrasts to the men in her life, who at various points try to remove her from it. In addition, I examine the function of several of the other characters and how Wharton blurs the line of what typically happens in a romance novel through her language use and the novel's ending.

3.1 Previous Criticism

The previous literary criticism of *Summer* has examined the novella from many relevant perspectives both structural and thematic, with a focus on narrative technique and Wharton's subversion of narrative conventions. Elizabeth Ammons claims that "Charity Royall is a born rebel. She is a social outcast who is poor, feels nothing but contempt for the hypocritical morality of respectable small-town America, separates sex and Matrimony in her own mind and life, and looks on marriage as a threat to the independence she craves" (*Edith Wharton's Argument* 132). Na Walker observes that "Charity's link with her origins on the Mountain is conscious as well as symbolic and serves to remove her from the heroine of romantic fiction" (108). Taken together, these two claims are doubly interesting, as one may ask if the traits

Ammons sees in Charity are connected to her "removal" as the heroine of romantic fiction, and thus entrance into the role of difficult woman.

Jean Frantz Blackall examines the narrative structure in *Summer* with reference to the previous short novel *Ethan Frome*. Both stories are set in rural New England and concern characters who lack the sophistication of the New York world Wharton mostly wrote about. What is different between the two is that *Ethan Frome* is surrounded by a framing device in the shape of an outsider who visits the town where Ethan lives and tells his story. Blackall claims that this is how Wharton can "render Ethan's inner life in a language inaccessible to Ethan himself without violating her premise of verisimilitude" and that the problems encountered there remain for Charity, who "lacks education, lacks words and perspective" (115). She goes on to discuss Wharton's technique of "translating 'other mind stuff' into sensuous experience throughout the novel" and that it's "counterpart is that words . . . are represented as being obstacles in Charity's path" (117). The focus on Charity's senses in the narrator's focalization gives insight into a character who is not intellectually inclined. I will argue that the divide between external focalization with overt narration and exclusive internal focalization through Charity isolates her from the village, and that Charity's sensuous nature is set up as a contrast to the two "big city" men in her life: Mr. Royall and Lucius Harney. I will also argue that these men, in turn, then remove Charity from her preferred state of mind and physical place of peace, nature, and thus show the inherent lack of legal protection women had at the turn of the twentieth century.

On the topic of legality, Abigail Dallmann claims that "Charity seeks aspects of privacy that were not available to women at the time the novel was published" (409). She concludes that *Summer* "traces Charity's desire for independence and private decision-making, and presents the narrow parameters of autonomy for women, particularly women who did not have material wealth" (409). Emily J. Orlando claims that "*Summer* frequently documents the dynamic by which men second guess women and tell them what is best" (224-5), adding that

Homosexuality and homosociality are, for this novella, about consolidating male power and undermining women. . . . Indeed, Mr. Royall is perhaps the most obvious stakeholder in the patriarchy that continually "brings down" and controls Charity, and he delights in the "man's companionship" that Harney's visits afford him (36). Charity ultimately becomes an object of exchange between the two men much in the way that, before the novella begins, she was an item of exchange between Mr. Royall and her outlaw father . . . (225)

The bond between men, and the legal rights they have as opposed to women, are closely connected. And it is the starting point for the argument that, through her narrative choices, Wharton blurs the line between hero and villain, rescue and abduction, while covertly criticizing the legal system that made women dependent on men.

Additionally, Walker argues that the "complexity of *Summer* is due in large measure to Wharton's use of the conventional 'seduced and abandoned' theme so pervasive in both popular and serious fiction of the period" (107). Both Walker and Barbara White argue that Wharton exploits genre conventions. Walker claims that the usual heroine of such a story is either a "naïve young girl", seduced by a heartless charmer, or "the virgin-turned-bitch who hounds the man into a hasty marriage, thus ruining his chances for success" (107). Since Wharton chooses neither extreme, Walker argues her "characterizations are far more realistic, and the novel enlarges upon the conventional theme to become a story about the ambiguity of human relationships"(107). White expands this argument, pointing out that "[w]hatever her opinion on woman's fiction, Wharton thoroughly understood and made use of its conventions in *Summer*. She combined two of the standard plots and exploited the standard emphasis on feeling, on the primacy of the heart as opposed to the head" (223). White goes on to claim that "[a]t the same time she made dramatic changes in the character of the heroine, creating a 'bad' protagonist instead of the typical model of perfection" (223). The focus in this chapter will be on how Charity's focalization emphasizes her more attractive and sympathetic side, which is her appreciation for nature and her reliance on her senses. Still, the play on convention is important, and the thesis will argue that Charity is only put in the position of a "bad" protagonist, or a difficult woman, because of the legal system she exists in where autonomy is limited.

3.2 Narrative Structure

In this section, I will first examine *Summer* as it contrasts to the previous works in this thesis, and then move on to a discussion of the narrator and its use of external versus internal focalization.

3.2.1 Structural Parallels to Previous Works

Summer is more different than similar to the two previous novels I have discussed, *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country*. *Summer* concerns a different geographical location (New England vs. New York), a different milieu (village life vs. upper-class society), and

different subjects and themes (sexual awakening and identity vs. social climbing and marriage). Structurally, there are both similarities and differences. *Summer* is shorter: both other works are at least a hundred pages longer and divided into separate books. Where *The House of Mirth* ends tragically and *The Custom of the Country* ends optimistically, though ironically, *Summer* is open-ended and depends on the interpretation of the reader or critic. There are few characters in *Summer* when compared to either previous novel. However, the narrator is still extradiegetic and heterodiegetic, the form is similar (a mostly chronological narrative split into chapters), and there is the same degree of inside view of the main character, though Charity's perception is conceived differently from the two other heroines. Though the change to New England is undoubtedly interesting thematically, the most drastic difference is in the narration and focalization of the protagonist Charity Royall.

3.2.2 The Articulate Narrator

The narrator of *Summer* is outside the story, never refers to itself and is not a character in the storyworld: an extradiegetic and heterodiegetic narrator. On the surface this narrator is no different from other Wharton narrators; however, at a second glance, it stands out from the previously encountered narrators. The choice to present another character whose story could be classed with *Ethan Frome*, bearing the name of the notoriously silent and inwardly turned character, means that Wharton has evolved her narrator to be one that is intelligent, omniscient and still self-effacing at times. To examine this narrator, I turn to Chatman's distinction between voice and point of view.

Chatman distinguishes point of view from the narrator's voice in three forms. Firstly, there is the perceptual point of view: the literal view from someone's eyes (151). Secondly, there is conceptual point of view: what worldview or ideology someone is seeing the world through (151). Thirdly, there is the interest point of view, explained as "characterizing his general interest, profit, welfare, well-being, etc." (152). The key difference between these three is that the character can be the vantage point for the first two, while the third is an expression of the narrator's voice: "the speech or other overt means through which events and existents are communicated to an audience" (153). The first, the literal view from someone's eyes is also comparable to Genette's internal focalization, where "the story's events are "focalized through" one or more story-internal reflector characters, and narrative information is restricted to data available to their perception, cognition, and thought" (Jahn 98). Since Charity Royall, the heroine, is by all accounts a character with limited intellectual capacity

regarding things such as religion, literature, and art, the extradiegetic, heterodiegetic narrator's perspective is vital. The narrator, from the vantage point of interest, can assume the general interest and well-being of the character. Since Charity is not a character of many words, this choice of narratorial voice ensures both verisimilitude and that Charity is better understood by the reader. These terms also explain how an articulate narrator can follow an inarticulate character closely; the language used is often a reflection of a "well-spoken narrator" (Chatman 157), not the character itself.

The first glimpse of this discrepancy is Charity's reminiscence of her first trip to a larger town. She is said to have developed a taste for information, because she realizes that her hometown, North Dormer, is indeed quite a "small place" (3). However, after "feverishly and disconnectedly" dipping into the books from the village library, Charity decides that it was "easier to take North Dormer as the norm of the universe than to go on reading" (3). So, three pages into the novel, Charity is described as being uneducated and disinterested in reading. Five pages later, while meeting Lucius Harney, her romantic interest, for the first time, he remarks that Charity does not "seem strong on architecture" (8). This lack is entirely of the academic or intellectual sort, and there may not be much need for such knowledge in a small village. However, Charity is shown to be confused by the words "character" (44) and "garden party" (65), which are quite basic concepts. These scenes form the backdrop that separates the narrator and character into two spheres: as educated, or "well-spoken", and uneducated, or ignorant.

Another aspect of the narrator's presence is vocabulary. A description of the weather in Eagle County in June states that it was "usually a month of moods, with abrupt alternations of belated frost and mid-summer heat; this year, day followed day in a sequence of temperate beauty" (37). The sentence structure is complex, and phrases such as "sequence of temperate beauty" would not be Charity's way of putting things, as she is not familiar with garden parties nor does she understand a concept such as "character". The same can be said for the assertion that North Dormer's celebration of its Old Home Week stems from the desire to set an example on account of the "sentimental decentralization . . . still in its early stages" (117), the key words here being "sentimental decentralization". In yet another passage, Charity is feeling bad and wants to be left alone; this sentiment is described by the narrator as "the secretive instinct of the animal in pain" (105). Charity does not speak much in the novel, and some chapters are entirely without her dialogue even when she is the focalizing character and protagonist of the story. When her romantic interest is gone, perhaps for good, she is not able to formulate any sentiment to him and simply sends him a postcard that reads "With love

from Charity" (148). She does feel inadequate about this, guessing that she will seem cold and reluctant, yet she is unable to express herself. When she finds out that this love interest is engaged to another woman, her letter reads, in its entirety, "I want you should marry Annabel Balch if you promised to. I think maybe you were afraid I'd feel too bad about it. I feel I'd rather you acted right. // Your loving, // Charity" (153). The language is filled with hesitations, "I think maybe", "I feel I'd rather", putting distance between Charity and her emotions. As will be seen, the focalization is rife with senses, images and feelings, so it is quite the contrast both to Charity's poor verbal skill and the articulate narrator who follows her. Words such as "sentimental decentralization" are not words to be expected from such a character as Charity. These examples show the voice of the narrator: it is an articulate entity which grasps about inside Charity to interpret her innermost thoughts, while also acknowledging that she is not the articulate type.

The narrator is also shown to be quite overt in its ability to say what Charity is not thinking or feeling. It is also slightly omniscient with regard to the other, secondary characters, who are not internal focalizers. As early as the second chapter, Charity lies in the grass "for the mere pleasure of feeling the wind and of rubbing her cheeks in the grass. Generally at such times she did not think of anything, but lay immersed in an inarticulate well-being" (12). These scenes continue through the entire novel. In one scene, the narrator states that not "a thought was in her mind; it was just a dark whirlpool of crowding images . . ." (106), and in yet another that she "did not think these things out clearly; she simply followed the blind propulsion of her wretchedness" (109). In addition, the narrator shows its omniscience, for instance, when Charity says something that makes another character blush, "as though it had touched him in a way that she did not suspect" (114). The narrator also points out that in a crowded, noisy room, "Charity's silence sheltered itself unperceived under their chatter" (119). No one is focalized at this stage and Charity is not thinking about her own silence; again, this is a matter of absence. The narrator is able to describe what is absent, and to explain what thought process is going on inside Charity's head. Therefore, the narrator is an omniscient and perhaps overt narrator who internally focalizes Charity.

The use of internal and external focalization in *Summer* is different from the other Wharton novels examined, and this particular narrative choice shows Charity's isolation in the town. In *The House of Mirth*, a range of characters are internally focalized, though there are also instances of narratorial presence. In *The Custom of The Country*, nearly all characters are internally focalized in the narrative when they are in focus, with few prolonged instances of external focalization. The narrator in *Summer* is clearly omniscient, yet the only internal

focalization is through Charity. The statements regarding what Charity had said and her blushing conversation partner's response are an example of this. In another scene, Charity requests to become the town librarian, and the narrator states that "the request seemed to surprise Miss Hatchard: she evidently questioned the new candidate's qualifications" (17). Surprise can be seen from the outside, mostly in body language; however, it would be quite an extraordinary feat to observe Miss Hatchard's skepticism towards Charity's qualifications in the same way. The sentence is then followed up by Miss Hatchard asking Charity if she might not be a little young (17). With this question, Miss Hatchard implies her doubts about Charity's qualifications, and on the next page, Miss Hatchard laments that Charity never went to school. Still, it is never directly connected to the first statement of skepticism. Again, the narrator chooses wisely where to show its hand. The effect is an added feeling of isolation for Charity, particularly as the narrator's omniscience is focused on how others perceive Charity's shortcomings.

The only character who the story is focalized through is Charity, while there are instances of external focalization throughout the text that concern such things as the weather, the town, and Mr. Royall. In the opening of the novel, the narrator states that Charity "had the street to herself. North Dormer is at all times an empty place, and at three o'clock on a June afternoon its few able-bodied men are off in the fields or woods, and the women indoors, engaged in languid household drudgery" (2). The tense changes from past to present when the narrator turns the focalization from Charity's point of view to a general description of North Dormer. The aforementioned weather scene is another paragraph which is entirely unmediated by any character's internal point of view. In another chapter, Mr. Royall's work routine is described: where his office is, when he goes there, what other places he visits during a workday (23-24). There are no references to his own thoughts, only what can be seen from the outside. All these examples amount to external focalization, which entails an outside view or "what would be visible to a camera" ("Focalization").

If *Summer* is compared to *The Custom of the Country*, they differ quite significantly; in the latter, except for the opening sequence of the novel, all events are internally focalized. One chapter follows a minor character named Charles Bowen, and even *his* thoughts are conveyed to the reader (170-173). Undine is the most often the focalizer, while the narrative also utilizes her first husband Ralph as focalizer extensively. In *The House of Mirth*, where multiple characters are focalized, the major focus is on Lily Bart and Lawrence Selden. There are instances of description similar to the weather of Eagle County in the other novels, yet the

effect is not the same precisely because more than one character is internally focalized throughout.

Though there are paragraphs focused on other characters than the heroine, only Charity has the "privilege" of internal focalization, reminiscent of Henry James's pioneering reflector, or the "center of consciousness", which the narrative then is filtered through by use of a third-person narrator (Herman 281; "Narrative Techniques"). The narrator's selective omniscience is an expansion of Charity's world view and inner world, and thus the reader understands all the events of the narrative mainly through Charity's perspective. The outside view of Charity would exclude, for instance, her sense of well-being while she lies in the grass, and all the thoughts she did not actually think. Charity's direct verbal expressions, written or spoken, are sparse, as seen in her letter-writing particularly, and the minimal amount of words she speaks in the narrative. She is also at times angry or withdrawn. Charity hides from others, she impulsively ruins a lace her friend Ally has handsewn and when she is understandably upset, Charity asks her to go before she hates her too (151). She is crass towards Miss Hatchard, the town spinster, and Ally is her only friend. Without the crucial insight of her inner world, the character may become flat or simply undeveloping. The effect is that the reader is more likely to sympathize or understand what motivates Charity, and why she does what she does. It also avoids branding Charity dumb or inarticulate in action; much of her brilliance lies in her ability to sense the world around her, and this ability is inside her. She is also adept at reading people's tones and faces, which will be discussed further in the section on focalization.

Additionally, the choice of narration isolates Charity from the rest of the town, setting up the tension between people from North Dormer and people from the Mountain. Though Charity often guesses at the thoughts and motives of other characters, sometimes correctly, she is still the only character the reader sees from within. All the prejudices, norms and traditions of North Dormer are filtered through Charity's point of view. Because of this, and the extensive focus on Charity's senses, Charity's isolation and feelings of alienation in the narrative are prominent. She does not come from the town; she is adopted from the Mountain. Ever since she was a child, everyone in the village had told her that "North Dormer represented all the blessings of the most refined civilization" (3). It is also stated that, though "Charity was not very clear about the Mountain," in keeping with her assumed ignorance, "she knew it was a bad place, and a shame to have come from" (4). The choice to focalize only Charity internally, and all others externally, aligns the reader with Charity and gives the space to follow her sensory experience in the world without being too colored by the opinions

of other characters. It also means that Charity's feelings of isolation are echoed by the narrative technique.

3.3 Focalization as Perception

The sensory focus in *Summer* means that focalization can be discussed as a representation of perception. In this section, I examine the prominence of Charity's senses in the focalization. I argue that the turn to Charity's senses is a way to mitigate her perceived ignorance about art and literature, and that the back-and-forth between Charity's senses and the outside world reinforces the value system of the novel inside the novel, as well as challenges it outside the novel. In other words, on the story level Charity is living with the consequences of her ignorance; on the discourse level, Charity is seen as both intelligent in her own way, and a victim of a society which does not give women the right to live their lives independently. As briefly discussed in the introduction, women were expected to keep to the home as if this was part of their nature. Although discussions about women's rights were ongoing, backwards and misogynist attitudes were still abundant. Wharton faced the dilemma of how to adequately portray someone of few words, which she had done with an eyewitness-narrator in the case of Ethan Frome. *Ethan Frome* and *Summer* are comparable in the characterization of their protagonists, yet the combined effects of the narrative technique in *Summer* and Charity's upbringing and life experience make room for a discussion about gender and perception in *Summer* that is different from the previous work. The focalization is centered on the senses and nature and sets up the opposition to the male characters, who are intellectual men in professions of high status.

As discussed previously, Charity is not especially interested in literature or art, and on the whole presented as quite ignorant. However, this is mitigated by the strong focus on her sensory pleasures and her rich inner world. After her first meeting with Lucius Harney, Charity closes the library early and walks towards her home. Then, the narrator states that

instead of entering she passed on, turned into a field-path and mounted to a pasture on the hillside. She let down the bars of the gate, followed a trail along the crumbling wall of the pasture, and walked on till she reached a knoll where a clump of larches shook out their fresh tassels to the wind. There she lay down on the slope, tossed off her hat and hid her face in the grass. (11)

Whereas, for instance Undine is riveted by admiration and social status, and Lily appreciates architecture and luxurious furniture, Charity lies down in the grass quite literally to smell the

roses. The narrator relates that Charity often climbs the hill and "lay there alone for the mere pleasure of feeling the wind and of rubbing her cheeks in the grass" (12). In another scene,

Charity Royall lay on a ridge above a sunlit hollow, her face pressed to the earth and the warm currents of the grass running through her. Directly in her line of vision a blackberry branch laid its frail white flowers and blue-green leaves against the sky. Just beyond, a tuft of sweet-fern uncurled between the beaded shoots of the grass, and a small yellow butterfly vibrated over them like a fleck of sunshine. (37)

These vivid descriptions engage the reader and gives a sense of Charity's connection to nature and the earth. In this excerpt, Charity is tactile, in pressing her face to the earth, and visual in her gaze on the blackberry branch and the sweet ferns. Additionally, the narrator highlights her emotional connection to her senses, writing that though this is "all she saw", she also feels "above her and about her, the strong growth of the beeches clothing the ridge, the rounding of pale green cones on countless spruce-branches, the push of myriads of sweet-fern fronds in the cracks of the stony slope below the wood. . ." (37). Charity is explicitly connected to nature; feeling it, as opposed to knowing it or merely seeing it. This connection is also important for the overarching narrative structure, because it is contrasted with a more intellectual approach to experience, and because both the main male characters control Charity's life. This will be discussed in detail as part of Wharton's tendency to disrupt narrative conventions and expectations.

Furthermore, Charity is explicitly disengaged from any intellectual inclination. Following the first quoted passage is the assertion that Charity "was blind and insensible to many things, and dimly knew it; but to all that was light and air, perfume and colour, every drop of blood in her responded" (11). Following the second quote, we see that Charity usually "did not think of anything, but lay immersed in an inarticulate well-being" (12). By her own admission, Charity is portrayed as both romantic, in smelling the grass, and somewhat ignorant or dim, in not understanding "many things". While Charity reminisces about a trip to a larger town, again the reader glimpses the primary worldview which Charity employs. She "looked into shops with plate-glass fronts, tasted cocoa-nut pie, sat in a theatre" (3), all experiences that are sensory. While she "listened to a gentleman saying unintelligible things before pictures", it is stated that she would have enjoyed looking at them more "if his explanations had not prevented her from understanding them" (3). It is the "unintelligible" words spoken by the man that ruin the experience for Charity, which also implies to the reader that Charity is not primarily a verbal person. As noted in the section of narration,

however, she soon forgets the impressions of Nettleton, and it is stated that "she found it easier to take North Dormer as the norm of the universe than to go on reading" (3).

In combining Charity's capacity for sensory pleasure and skills at observation with her lack of intellectual aptitude, the focalization contributes to round out her character. Instead of the ignorant and small-minded village idiot, Charity is delicate and sensuous in her tendency to dream and to lose herself in the sensory pleasures of the world. On the one hand, Charity is not a part of any intellectual environment; she rejects going to school on account of her guardian (15). In her work at the library, she is only rarely there till closing time, deciding often on a whim to leave early; and she "hated to be bothered about books. How could she remember where they were, when they were so seldom asked for?" (12). You would think that the town librarian would know. Therefore, the choice to include sensory information as part of Charity's point of view is a signal of the focus on bodily experience over intellect. Barbara White points out that Wharton "could hardly have chosen a more sacred convention for Charity to violate," because the "heroine's love of reading is so fundamental" (227).

On the other hand, Charity spends time dreaming and imagining both helpful and more confusing scenarios, yet this aspect of her perception is couched in terms of visualization rather than reflection. After her fateful meeting with young Harney, she lies in bed thinking of both her ignorance and how he made her feel:

She remembered his sudden pause when he had come close to the desk and had his first look at her. The sight had made him forget what he was going to say; she recalled the change in his face, and jumping up she ran over the bare boards to her washstand, found the matches, lit a candle, and lifted it to the square of looking-glass on the white-washed wall." (25)

She goes on to look at herself in the mirror, opening her nightgown and imagining their first kiss (25). Earlier in the same scene, "she shivered at the vision of vague metropolises, shining super-Nettletons, where girls in better clothes than Belle Balch's talked fluently of architecture to young men with hands like Lucius Harney's" (25). Vision is often central to how Charity conceptualizes the world, as the above passage is focused on the images Charity sees in her mind, as opposed to, for instance, envious thoughts. This is also the case when she does not know what a garden party is; and instead "her glimpse of the flower-edged lawns of Nettleton helped her to visualize the scene" (66). In another scene, Charity is listening to Mr. Royall tell her that Harney has gone. She is upset, and "[a]s she listened, there flitted through her mind the vision of Liff Hyatt's muddy boot coming down on the white bramble-flowers. The same thing had happened now; something transient and exquisite had flowered in her,

and she had stood by and seen it trampled to earth" (81-82). The feelings Charity feels are not represented in her mind as words, but as images which form analogies or visual metaphors of Charity's experience. There are many modes of perception, and much research into the way the inner mind works. As Dorrit Cohn has pointed out, the translation of "other mind stuff" is not as simply transcribed as dialogue or action: "it can only be narrated" (11). This is also precisely why Wharton is so advanced in her technique. Previously, in *Ethan Frome*, she has described a reticent character through an intelligent narrator, and now she uses the character herself to explore the perceptual mode of the quiet and introverted.

Additionally, Charity is shown many times to have an acute ability to read people's faces and their tone, which is also a visual or auditory way to perceive the world and highlights her intelligence and intuition. As early as the first chapter, while meeting Harney the big city architect, "[s]he thought she detected a slight condescension in his tone" (6). And when she sits next to Mr. Royall on their porch, she notes that his "hair stood up above his forehead like the crest of an angry bird" and that his "cheeks [were] blotched with red", which she knows to be "the sign of a coming explosion" (66). In an early conversation with Harney, she detects a new note in his voice, which disarms her; "no one had ever spoken to her in that tone" (34). When she dresses up for Harney, she immediately reads "reward in his eyes" when he sees her (87). So, Charity relies on her senses and arguably she does so because it serves for her protection. She detects condescension, new tones of voice, and the signs that her foster father will soon be angry. He is something of a drunk, and Charity has described him as "harsh and violent" (13). She hides the key to the cupboard to prevent his drinking (16). This serves her well, as he tries to enter her room to seduce her late at night during one of his bouts of drinking (17). Things might have gone differently if he had access to more alcohol and Charity knows this. She reads faces, because they are images that she remembers, concrete visual reminders of what people think or feel when she cannot figure this out from their words alone. She is also capable of some degree of reflection, as in this paragraph:

She did not quite know what he meant by having a good deal of character; but his tone was expressive of admiration, and deepened her dawning curiosity. It struck her now as strange that she knew so little about the Mountain. She had never asked, and no one had ever offered to enlighten her. North Dormer took the Mountain for granted, and implied its disparagement by an intonation rather than by explicit criticism. (44-45)

Where the narrator is overt, the tense has previously changed; here it remains the same. So, though there are no grammatical tags such as "She thought Norther Dormer took..." here, it is still reasonable to assign the evaluation to Charity. It could also be an explanation of why Charity is good with faces and tones of voice; the village as a whole depends on "intonation rather than . . . explicit criticism."

In sum, Charity's reliance on her senses serves her well. As will be seen in the discussion of the "father" below, in relation to both Mr. Royall and Harney, Charity has taken every opportunity she has to gain some semblance of personal freedom. Additionally, her perceptive brilliance is contrasted with the minimal autonomy she has over her own life and her own words. Wharton shows how a quiet and simple person contains multitudes, and in the process also widens the narrative conception of perception. The implied author, as the agglomeration of values and ideology within the text, makes room for questioning the value system of the town and the novel as a whole. The narrator's choice to only focalize Charity from within, when it clearly has much more information, gives her precedence in the narrative. Her somewhat standoffish nature, and her lack of words, are supplemented by the descriptive beauty the narrator creates through narration of her perception. This makes her complex, and her central struggle for a more autonomous life is easier to sympathize with. On the discourse level, outside the story, Charity is perceptual, romantic and emotive, whereas inside the story she seems merely to be quiet and difficult. This choice of focalization is effectively fiction as disguise; through no active commentary at all, Wharton still questions the limitations on Charity's autonomy.

3.4 Charity's "Father"

In *Summer*, Wharton has chosen to limit her character gallery. Two of the most central characters are both respected men in highly valued professions, who take a great interest in Charity. Therefore, the choices made regarding representing their characters are doubly interesting, as they affect the protagonist; it shows how much Charity, a young girl, depends on men to lead a life of value. In this section, I explore the ways in which Charity perceives the two men, and the language used both by her and the narrator to define the two men as both different and similar. I argue that, though Wharton has made a story about the "ambiguity of human relationships" (Walker 107), she has also exposed what Elizabeth Ammons calls the "incestuous nature of patriarchal marriage" (*Edith Wharton's Argument* 133). I discuss how Charity's perceptive mode, one of senses and nature, is affected by the

control these two men have over her life and what that means for understanding the literary conventions and expectations Wharton has built on.

One of the most scandalous aspects of *Summer* is the marriage between foster father and daughter; Barbara White claims Boston was "shocked", reviewers felt "uneasy" and Wharton received "shy and frightened letters from old friends" (226). In this section, I will first define some terms relating to the functions in a narrative, then explore the particular roles fulfilled by Mr. Royall and Harney, and examine how they, both as similar and different characters, function similarly in the narrative in relation to Charity, and especially as they highlight how little autonomy she has. In Mr. Royall and Harney, the hero becomes the villain, and the villain becomes the hero, because the line between lover and father is blurred. Arguably, with the little control women have over their own lives, the narrative implies that the distinction perhaps does not matter.

To examine the blurring of lines between father and life partner, a brief turn to literary convention, genre, and function is necessary. There are many names for the different roles and functions one can find in a novel, the most commonly used being protagonist, antagonist, hero, heroine, to name a few. Literary conventions abound, and mostly in connection to genre. In the detective novel, for instance, there is generally a mystery or crime of some sort that a detective will solve. When reading such a story, the reader will have certain expectations; to use the detective story as an example, one may reasonably expect the crime or mystery to be solved. In a romance, one may similarly expect that the heroine will get married. And in even more general terms, one may expect that a story will have a resolution, or at least an ending. One may also assume that the story will have a hero, the main character, and a certain number of helpers and opponents.

Greimas has created a typology of roles based on Vladimir Propp's analysis of the function of characters in Russian fairytales ("Actant"). *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative* states that

Greimas initially identified a total of six actants to which he thought all particularised narrative actors could be reduced: Subject, Object, Sender, Receiver, Helper, and Opponent. He explicated this scheme as follows: "[i]ts simplicity lies in the fact that it is entirely centred on the object of desire aimed at by the subject and situated, as object of communication, between the sender and the receiver—the desire of the subject being, in its part, modulated in projections from the helper and opponent." ("Actant")

This framework is helpful in discussing the roles that can be played out in a literary narrative. It is expected that there will be a hero in any story, and this will often entail a villain. This can be articulated as the Subject, who desires some kind of Object, and the Opponent who wants to stop or thwart the Subject. This is, of course, a simplification, yet it is helpful to explore certain questions. The main character and protagonist, therefore the Subject, of *Summer* is Charity. The argument of this section is that both Royall and Harney can fulfill a role as Helper *and* Opponent, and as both hero and villain. The latter terms are more loaded, which is helpful, because it situates the characters in more ethical terms: a hero is exalted, and villains are detrimental and bad. As already discussed, Wharton has played with the "seduced and abandoned" trope in *Summer*. Here I will argue that she gives the narrative resolution, but not the happy ending that more romantic stories usually have. This is achieved in part by blurring the line between the parent and the partner and by the nuance in the representation of human relationships that Walker describes, where both men alternate as hero and villain.

Charity's first glimpse of Harney is that "he was a stranger, that he wore city clothes, and that he was laughing with all his teeth, as the young and careless laugh at such mishaps" (1). Later, they speak in the library and her inability to help him find books makes her feel like the time she looked at pictures that a gentleman "explained", and "the weight of her ignorance settled down on her again like a pall" (8). The gentleman explaining pictures was a man in Nettleton, a larger town Charity visited with her congregation, and their commonality is their intellectual superiority towards Charity. After this meeting, Charity lies in bed thinking through her day. She thinks that Harney's smile looked "shy yet confident, as if he knew lots of things she had never dreamed of, and yet wouldn't for the world have had her feel his superiority. But she did feel it, and liked the feeling; for it was new to her" (12). The opposition between Harney's intellectual inclination and Charity's fondness for nature (e.g. lying in the grass) is pronounced from the very beginning of the novel. Harney is the cousin of Miss Hatchard, a North Dormer spinster and descendant of Honorius Hatchard, a writer who inspired the building of the North Dormer library in his memory. Harney is also an architect (8). The Honorius Hatchard Memorial Library is described as the only link between North Dormer and literature (5), and similarly, Lucius Harney becomes Charity's only link to literature. Like the link between the town and literature, that between Harney and Charity is frail. She feels inadequate when Harney, "absorbed in his job, forgot her ignorance and her inability to follow his least allusion, and plunged into a monologue on art and life" (42).

In comparison, the first direct description that Charity gives of Mr. Royall is that he is the "biggest man in North Dormer"; so much too big for it, in fact, that outsiders, who didn't know, always wondered how it held him" (12-3). The narrator gives a description of Mr. Royall, stating that "[p]rofessional dignity and masculine independence made it necessary that he should have a real office, under a different roof; and his standing as the only lawyer of North Dormer required that the roof should be the same as that which sheltered the Town Hall and the post-office" (23). Clearly Mr. Royall is a man of some standing in North Dormer, both being the only lawyer in town and by implication with the weight of sharing office space with the official government representatives in town. However, it is implied that Mr. Royall's drinking is excessive; at one point Charity hides the key to the cupboard containing the whiskey (16). And previously, the comment about Mr. Royall being too big for North Dormer and "outsiders, who didn't know", who wondered how it held him, is followed by Charity's assertion that she knows "why he had come back to live at North Dormer" instead of pursuing his legal career in a larger town (14). In another instance, he talks to Charity about what a fool he was to leave Nettleton, and how his wife made him do it. Charity "immediately perceived that something bitter had happened to him" (16) and leaves the dinner table to avoid the conversation. Combined with the several instances of excessive drunkenness in the narrative (16-17, 103-4), it is reasonable to conclude that his drinking may have hindered his career.

Still, the two men are in prestigious occupations (lawyer and architect), and intellectually superior to most people around them. Those are the main similarities, and they are quite significant, because they place the two men on the same level; intellectually, career-wise, and so on. The two men have spent time talking on Mr. Royall's porch, and Charity sees that this gives her guardian, "for the first time in years, a man's companionship. Charity had only a dim understanding of her guardian's needs; but she knew he felt himself above the people among whom he lived, and she saw that Lucius Harney thought him so. She was surprised to find how well he seemed to talk now that he had a listener who understood him" (48). Mr. Royall states that "[h]e's a pleasant fellow to talk to—I liked having him here myself. The young men up here ain't had his chances" (80). Orlando's claim that this bond consolidates male power and undermines women (225), places Mr. Royall and Harney in the same sphere.

The most pronounced difference between the men is their age, Mr. Royall's drinking, and Charity's perception of and attitude to the two men. Charity happens upon Mr. Royall freshly shaven in a brushed black coat, and he "looked a magnificent monument of a man; at

such moments she really admired him" (15), which can perhaps evoke the image of the superiority that Charity is drawn to in Harney. However, she also considers him "an old man" (19), knows that he "was harsh and violent, and still weaker [than his wife]" (13) and feels a deep disgust when Mr. Royall tries to enter her bedroom late at night (17). Charity feels "no particular affection for him", but "she pitied him because she was conscious that he was superior to the people about him, and . . . she was the only being between him and solitude" (14). Charity also thinks to herself that "lawyer Royall ruled in North Dormer; and Charity ruled in lawyer Royall's house" (13). Though she does not enjoy the transition from daughter to potential wife, she still pities her guardian for his involuntary solitude. In contrast, Charity thinks of Harney that she

had liked the young man's looks, and his short-sighted eyes, and his odd way of speaking, that was abrupt yet soft, just as his hands were sun-burnt and sinewy, yet with smooth nails like a woman's. His hair was sunburnt-looking too, or rather the colour of bracken after frost; his eyes grey, with the appealing look of the shortsighted, his smile shy yet confident. . . (12)

There is something soft and almost feminine in what Charity sees in Harney.

Yet the similarities between Harney and Mr. Royall are more obvious once the romance progresses between Harney and Charity. The first time they kiss, they are seated, Harney behind Charity, and her "face was drawn backward" when Harney kisses her, and with "sudden vehemence he wound his arms about her, holding her head against his breast while she gave him back his kisses" (102). Charity feels that an "unknown Harney had revealed himself, a Harney who dominated her" (102). The romance brings out the same masculine figure that Mr. Royall represents when he tries to enter Charity's bedroom. Something happens to Harney when he and Charity touch; in another instance, a kiss makes Harney "the new Harney again, the Harney abruptly revealed in that embrace, who seemed so penetrated with the joy of her presence that he was utterly careless of what she was thinking or feeling" (111). It may seem sweet that Harney is ravished by Charity's presence, but the end weight of the sentence reveals that he cares more for his own joy than her thoughts or feelings. Comparably, this is what Mr. Royall has done in going to Charity's bedroom late at night, drunk. Kathy Grafton goes so far as to say that Harney needs "a certain degradation of Charity to occur before he can find her sexually accessible", and that he subconsciously needs to "separate feelings of sexual desire and attraction from feelings of genuine tenderness and high esteem" (350). This is clear, because on multiple occasions Harney seems to be drawn to Charity and touches her because she is in emotional pain (60), and once even seems to

Charity to hold her as if he was "snatching her from some imminent peril" (115) and then goes on to kiss her. There is a blurring of the lines; Harney wants to protect her, to rescue her, but the basis of these feelings is almost parental; and the sexual feelings are surely not. This blurring is also seen when Harney kisses her without the same vehemence as earlier, but "tenderly, almost fraternally" (112). Similarly, Charity has taken to describing Harney as her comrade and her friend (98), though, clearly, they are more than this. So, not only is the body language and the descriptors similar between Mr. Royall and Harney; in a twisted way Mr. Royall tries not to be Charity's father, though he is her guardian, and Harney is described by words that evoke family relations. So, the father is not the father; and the lover is perhaps family.

Another commonality between the men is their impact on Charity's personal growth and freedom of choice. Firstly, they have both quite literally brought her away from or stopped her flight into the Mountain, where she originally came from. Barbara White notes that to Charity, the mountain "represents untrammelled freedom" (228). The narrator's focalization of Charity very much leans into her nature roots, her enjoyment of the earth and so on, as well as her skills at observation, both in human interaction and in nature. The Mountain is said to contain an unruly people, who live outside the village and without regard for any law (45). As Charity sees for herself towards the end of the novel, the Mountain people are poor and live in squalor (170-171), so the freedom Charity envisions is not really there. However, to Charity the Mountain is still a place of freedom, because she has roots there in the shape of biological parents. To bring her down from the Mountain has symbolic significance: it removes Charity from her roots, the place where she has competence. Mr. Royall brought her down from the Mountain as a child (13), and then again when she runs away pregnant with Harney's child (184). Harney stops Charity from going to the Mountain after Mr. Royall has embarrassed her and called her names (112), persuading her that she should not leave him. These two men use their relation to Charity as a way to stop her from making her own choices, where flight to the Mountain is one of the few major choices Charity ever makes.

In addition, there are more subtle refusals of Charity's growth: one being her refusal to go to school on account of Mr. Royall (14-15). He does not literally or physically stop her, but she cites his being so "lonesome" as the reason she stays in North Dormer (14-15). One may wonder if Charity would have learned to understand art and literature, areas where she feels so ignorant, if she had not made this choice on account of her foster father. Charity states that Harney persuaded her to stay in North Dormer, not because she sees the force of

his argument, which she does, but because "it was Harney's wish. Since that evening in the deserted house she could imagine no reason for doing or not doing anything except the fact that Harney wished or did not wish it. All her tossing contradictory impulses were merged in a fatalistic acceptance of his will" (120). Firstly, Charity is so infatuated, that she blindly follows Harney's word. Additionally, the choice to describe her "contradictory impulses" as "merged in a fatalistic will" is quite telling. As previously argued, the narrator is responsible for the more complex words chosen to describe Charity's state of mind. Dictionary.com defines fatalistic as "demonstrating a belief that all events are inevitable, so one's choices and actions make no difference" ("fatalistic"), which supports the assertion that Charity is blind with emotion. When she afterward goes to meet Harney, she is glad to arrive first, as to take in "every detail of its secret sweetness" (123). Harney also makes Charity feel that love is "as bright and open as the summer air" (123), and that upon "his touch things deep down in her struggled to the light and sprang up like flowers in sunshine"(126). So, in one way, Harney contributes to her closeness to nature. However, Charity wants to take it all in alone first, because "his first kiss blotted it all out" (123). Arguably, Charity is removed from her sensory enjoyment of the world through Harney's influence. Therefore, he has both literally stopped her going into nature when she leaves for the Mountain, and his influence on her emotions make her "give up" the mode of perception which makes the world make sense to her.

Mr. Royall is also described in terms similar to the "fatalistic acceptance" of Harney's will. After dinner one night, Mr. Royall requests a talk with Charity. She has spent the previous night outside Lucius Harney's window and their conversation eventually turns to this topic. However, Charity spends some time evaluating Mr. Royall: "And suddenly she understood that, until then, she had never really noticed him or thought about him. . . . he had been to her merely the person who is always there, the unquestioned central fact of life, as inevitable but as uninteresting as North Dormer itself, or any of the other conditions fate had laid on her" (76). He is "inevitable", one of the "unquestioned central facts of life", a condition of fate. Which is to say that he shrouded in the same language as Harney. They are not the same, they are quite obviously different, yet the language in the narrative keeps showing up their similarities and parallels. Though Charity refused school out of a sense of obligation and not from love towards her foster father, and stayed with Harney because of love, the result is the same. Charity is kept from growing on account of the men in her life, and these events are couched in the language of fate, fatalism, and inevitability.

Wharton has connected the men through their professions as well as their intellect, yet she goes one step further in confusing their character and their legal relation to Charity.

Charity remarks that, though Mr. Royall is her guardian, he has never legally adopted her (14), and Harney does at one point propose to marry Charity, but never does (145). Again, Ammons argues that Wharton considers "the incestuous nature of patriarchal marriage . . . the largest, the enveloping subject of *Summer*" (*Edith Wharton's Argument* 133). The two men are fused together both in their legal relation to Charity, and in the way their characters echo each other in the narrator's language for how Charity sees them. They are both dominant towards her. In linking marriage and legal rights as topics in the novel, Ammon's claim is persuasive.

Firstly, there is the legal claim that Mr. Royall wishes to pursue: marriage, rather than adoption. After Mr. Royall has tried unsuccessfully to enter Charity's bedroom, he asks Charity to marry him. She looks at him as he stands there, "unwieldy, shabby, disordered, the purple veins distorting the hands he pressed against the desk . . . he seemed like a hideous parody of the fatherly old man she had always known" (21). She turns him down quite brutally. For her, there is something odd in his proposal, precisely because he is such a paternal figure to her. Yet he is only free to propose, because he has never legally claimed her as a child and there is no biological relationship between them.

As a conclusion to this chapter, I want to consider the two men's verbalization of their supposed rights to Charity, as the men do actually discuss this. It is Mr. Royall that instigates the discussion. Mr. Royall surprises Charity by showing up at her rendezvous spot with Harney. He wants to talk to her and tells her, "See here, Charity—you're always telling me I've got no rights over you. There might be two ways of looking at that—but I ain't going to argue it" (142). Mr. Royall does not have any right to Charity in the legal sense, because he never adopted her. Yet he did raise her, and the village considers him as her savior and rescuer. Everyone in the village has told her to be thankful, even "old Miss Hatchard" (3). Mr. Royall is a lawyer and must know that he has no legal status in Charity's life. What is also interesting is his reference to his attempted seduction in his statement that "there's no justice in weighing that half-hour against the rest" (142), again returning to legal language, "justice". He holds over Charity's head the fact that he raised her. Since she stayed in his house after his attempted seduction, he has the right to keep her "out of trouble" (142).

When Harney shows up, Mr. Royall soon confronts him about his affair with Charity by asking if their rendezvous spot is the house he means to take her to once they are married (143). Again, Mr. Royall returns to the matter of legal rights and property, which implies that Charity is not free to do as she pleases without a man by her side. Harney deflects, and in the process shows his rather more liberal position: "Miss Royall is not a child. Isn't it rather

absurd to talk to her as if she were? I believe she considers herself free to come and go as she pleases, without any questions from anyone" (143). So, what are Charity's rights?

The National Women's History Museum states that, through long-standing legal practice dating back to the colonial era, the term coverture "held that no female person had a legal identity. At birth, a female baby was covered by her father's identity, and then, when she married, by her husband's" (Algor). However, they also note that not all states closely observed coverture. During the nineteenth century, many married women gained access to their own property or worked. Coverture has been eroded "bit by bit" (Algor). Women in the United States gained the right to vote in 1920, when the proposed law was ratified, and discussions regarding women's rights continue to this day. Elisabeth Ammons claims that for Wharton, nothing "points to the demise of marriage as woman's one vocation" (*Edith Wharton's Argument* 126). Furthermore, she argues that "[e]conomic dependence, sexual repression, the double standard, proprietary marriage—these remain the facts Wharton stresses about woman's lot in *Summer . . .*" (*Edith Wharton's Argument* 127). Anne Firor Scott writes that in the nineteenth century, women had little legal standing and this position was reflected in a view of woman as inferior to man (5). This context points to implicit structural criticism inherent in *Summer*. While technically no one owns Charity, "coverture" gives appropriate context for how infantilized women have been for much of history. It also makes room for considering the structural inequality women faced when a foster father could evade familial status by neglecting to adopt a child only to proposition her at the right time, again pointing back to the "incestuous" patriarchal marriage where a woman is passed off from man to man.

Though Harney and Mr. Royall can be seen as simply nuanced and complex as humans tend to be, they can also be seen as representative of a flawed system. Through Charity's push and pull between the two men, as well as the choice for Harney not to "claim" Charity and for Royall to do so instead, the reader is faced with the same impossibility as Charity: The choice of evaluating whether her story ends happily or not. Charity is not happy; she did not want Mr. Royall and has said so repeatedly. Yet she is saved from public ostracism, isolation and shame over her illegitimate child, because of the protection and status her marriage gives her. She does not end up alone, destitute, or as a prostitute.

Even though these men are clearly different, Wharton's use of descriptive similarities and similar function for these characters in the plot mean that they end up in a similar position. They both contribute to Charity's confinement, even though they may not have meant to; Harney by getting her pregnant and Mr. Royall by marrying her. They both rescue

and destroy her. Charity gets to experience a pure and exhilarating love with Harney, but he leaves her without clarifying things between them. Mr. Royall is a constant in Charity's life that she never doubts, yet he cements her fate as stuck in North Dormer with him by marrying her; an act that rescues her from public scrutiny, regarding her pregnancy, but also consigns her to private resignation and hidden wants and desires. In conjunction with their hindrance of her personal growth, the two men are in greater control of her life than she is herself. One may even say that Wharton has made sure that in *Summer*, all men are the same, at least in relation to women. The claim Ammons put forth regarding the incestuous nature of patriarchal marriage rings true, not only because Charity's foster father marries her, but because her "true" love is such a patriarchal force; he dominates her *and* he comforts her. Regarding roles, functions and actants, the men fulfil both roles as hero and villain, as helper and opponent. This blurring of the lines regarding narrative structure means that there is no clear or instructive ending either. Additionally, this contributes to a criticism that is never explicit, but hidden in the narrative techniques Wharton has chosen in this novel; the internal focalization makes Charity more accessible to the reader, and the lack of other characters' focalization makes her isolated in the narrative. In combination with the way language is used to confuse the roles filled by the male characters, the implied author of the work creates an atmosphere of sympathy for Charity on a higher level; she is not seen as intelligent or resourceful by any character in the fictional world she exists in, yet her portrayal makes her so to the implied reader. Charity is not happy, but she is safe. Her legal position and her tenuous grasp on her own role in the gender market make her one of Wharton's difficult women; she is an atypical heroine, and cannot necessarily articulate her lack of autonomy, yet she is aware that it is there. It also means that Wharton has explored yet another room in the vast house of women.

4 Conclusion

In this conclusion, I will summarize the findings regarding Wharton's narrative techniques for her difficult women. Briefly summarized, I asked in the introduction how Wharton ensured her authority as a writer, when her novels sometimes shocked readers, and how her female protagonists are defined through narrative aspects that also have covert criticism in them. How do gender and narrative connect in Wharton's writing strategies? I will go through chapter by chapter and then summarize what is common in all three, as well as discuss some potential areas for further research into Wharton's other novels.

In Chapter 1, I discussed how Wharton questions the marriage plot and the accompanying restrictions for women through Lily Bart. At best, Wharton uses *The House of Mirth* to show a considerable ambivalence towards women's role and function in society. At worst, she shows that the way which society views women ultimately kills them. The standard plot, the marriage plot, "marry or die", is fulfilled insofar as Lily remains unmarried and dies in the end. Yet Wharton's narrative techniques create considerable doubt regarding the validity of this trope and this societal norm. She exploits the masculine authority inherent in an omniscient, extradiegetic and heterodiegetic narrator and establishes herself as a voice of reason, because of the narrator's assumed neutrality in this position. Furthermore, Wharton uses focalization to create a male gaze and a female gaze; the male gaze contributes to the same authority, while the female gaze places Lily in a more favorable light. Lily is beautiful, manipulative and partakes in the objectification of herself that makes her marriageable; still, her doubts about the marriage plot quite literally kill her. She deviates from norms, both in her fictional society and the one Wharton belonged to and based her fiction on, and her minor *fax paus* make other characters view and treat her as a difficult woman.

However, the narrative structure reflects the characterization of Lily. The combination of switching between focalizers, playing with chronology and emphasizing Lily's worldview means that the protagonist is fully immersed in what is supposedly a neutral narrative, because of the omniscient, outsider narrator. The characteristics of the narrative evoke the traits Wharton has chosen for her protagonist. In sum, the narrative manipulates the reader into a position of sympathy, much as Lily manipulates those around her with varying success.

In Chapter 2, the continuation of the difficult woman is explored in the anti-heroine Undine Spraggs. Undine is egotistical, materialistic, ambitious, and energetic. She lacks the insider status and moral goodness of Lily Bart and therefore blunders her way through social

situations. Unlike Lily Bart, she is willing to play both rough and dirty: she lies, manipulates, conceals and demands whatever may give her an edge. And similarly, Wharton has developed a narrative structure which echoes this approach to life. Undine's fast-paced and unreflective mode of existence is echoed in the pile on-structure of the novel, where things happen rapidly and at every turn; and a displaced chronology, where the unfavorable sides of Undine are only revealed after the fact. The narrator, extradiegetic and heterodiegetic, remains on the surface-level when it comes to using Undine as focalizer, allowing the character to avoid matters she does not like, does not know how to handle, or does not want to reveal. Furthermore, the consistent use of business language both in describing Undine and in her own assessments of her life associates her with the masculine world of the upper classes. Though understanding little of business, both by her own admission and in the view of those around her, the language choice still equates many of Undine's choices and active nature with masculinity. In combination with this masculine energy, Undine shows a performative pleasure in femininity: she enjoys pretty dresses and diamonds, but abhors both the pleasures and demands of motherhood. In combination with the role her first husband Ralph plays (that of victim rather than hero), Undine is quite clearly an anti-heroine. Wharton's choice to echo Undine through displaced chronology and shallow focalization is still positioned within a novel which is traditional (there is no modernistic experimentation taking place). The narrator is sardonic at times, yet still heterodiegetic and extradiegetic. Combined with an overall narrative structure similar to *The House of Mirth* and what is often called the novel of manners, Wharton has taken advantage of the familiar and safe fictional world known to her readers to expand the possibilities of the heroine. Though readers may have hated Undine, *The Custom of the Country* was still a popular novel and thus challenged many readers' conception of what a female protagonist and also women in general should be like. Yet again, Wharton's command of literary convention and tradition amount to writing fiction in disguise.

In Chapter 3, the thesis examined *Summer* and its rather different protagonist Charity Royall. Once again, Wharton turns to focalization, this time to create an atmosphere of isolation for Charity. She is the only internally focalized character and the reader sees only her point of view. Wharton has developed a language for the many senses Charity employs in her experience of the world, with a large focus on what she sees and textures she feels and smells from flowers and grass. The narrative also uses language to associate the two men in Charity's life with each other: her foster father has never legally adopted her, and her romantic interest is described as both fraternal and dominant. Implied in this confusion of

roles is a criticism of the incestuous nature of marriage, where a girl goes from the hands of her father to the hands of her husband. In this case, they rather ironically and tragically turn out to be the same person. As a difficult woman, Charity is defined by her inactivity rather than her action: she stumbles over her words, struggles to write letters, and relies on her sensory exploration of the world. She is not especially amoral, like Undine, or struggling between happiness and fate, like Lily. Her narrative seems one of chance, yet the connection between the two men in her life and her inarticulateness show a different side of the difficult woman. Charity is not particularly inclined to choose a life outside the boundaries of acceptance from society. So, implicitly, a woman risks being deemed difficult simply through unfortunate circumstance. Charity's circumstance is pregnancy, and her salvation from rumors and slander is the very home she always wanted to escape. She has no education, no skills, and no ability to articulate the unfairness and inequality between the sexes, which has led to her dilemma. So, though Wharton's criticism is always indirect, here it is even more veiled and poignant. This concealed criticism goes precisely to the dependence women had to men at the time, and that this dependence was almost equal to marrying your own father sooner or later.

In summary, these female protagonists, however different, show Wharton's approach both to narrative and society in her ability to covertly question societal norms and structures. It also shows a larger project in expanding or twisting existing literary conventions to the needs of her fiction and examining flawed societal structures. This two-fold project is encapsulated in her choice of "difficult women" in one form or another as her protagonists over time. When considering the sum total of these works, Wharton's use of focalization especially stands out. It singles out and creates an image of beauty and cunning in Lily Bart, it highlights the superficial tendencies of Undine, and it shows the depth of Charity's nature, where from the outside it would seem that she has little. Additionally, Wharton's enduring ability to incorporate and bend existing literary convention is shown in *The House of Mirth* through the marriage plot, in *The Custom of the Country* through the money novel, and in *Summer* through the "seduced and abandoned" theme in romantic fiction. This ability creates complexity in her works and also ensures the masculine authority that male writers had, and which was unavailable for women for a long time. On the whole, Wharton's use of narrative technique is different in the three novels only by degree; yet her narrative choices show a clear understanding of the protagonists' psyche and develop a structure which enmeshes and parallels their personality.

This thesis began with an assertion that Edith Wharton explores the "other rooms" of women, which one of her characters claims are "unvisited". However, Wharton's oeuvre is large and further research could take up other aspects of these rooms. One of these aspects is the male gaze turned on the female character. In *The House of Mirth*, the male gaze is utilized from the perspective of a non-protagonist. Yet, in for instance *The Age of Innocence*, the male protagonist is the focalizer: Newland Archer ponders women's freedom, especially as his romantic interest is a married woman seeking divorce. Archer on the whole is a reflective and tender character, perhaps comparable to Selden or Ralph. How does Wharton's authority change when the protagonist is male? What is her use of narrative techniques and how do they connect to Archer? Does the male gaze change when it is the focal character who inhabits it?

Another male-centered novel is *Ethan Frome*, where the eye-witness narrator tells the tragic story of Ethan Frome. Both men and women are trapped in their destinies in this novel, and this gives space for discussing not only the hidden rooms of women, but equally the hidden rooms of men. Ethan Frome is not particularly articulate, and the narrator pieces together his story from different people in his village. Ethan has a strong moral belief in his duty to help care for his farm and his wife; when Ethan falls in love with someone else, they both try to commit suicide together. Less dramatically, Newland Archer is ready to leave his wife for another woman, yet his wife's announcement of a pregnancy foils this plan. It is implied that this pregnancy was divulged to his romantic interest weeks before, sparking her decision to leave New York. In these two novels one could consider men's hidden rooms. Both Ethan and Newland have a strong sense of moral duty, so how does this affect their lives and feelings? Does Wharton criticize male gender roles in any capacity? And is there any overarching difference in the narrative strategies Wharton chooses to portray male protagonists?

In addition, Wharton's stories have many minor female characters, seen for instance in the foils Gerty and Bertha from *The House of Mirth*, but also in other characters not discussed in this thesis, such as Undine's mother, sister-in-law, mother(s)-in law, and different sorts of acquaintances. Charity has what one could conceivably call a best friend named Ally Hawes. How does Wharton explore homosocial bonds between women? Do they function only as foils or are they independent entities in her fiction?

Lastly, I wish to touch on the disagreements between Wharton scholars regarding her views on women. Based on the three female protagonists analyzed in this thesis, it is clear that Wharton more than anything else was a realist. She saw women for what they were:

individual people. Women can be kind, cruel, manipulative, naïve, or opportunistic or pessimistic, in just the same capacity that men can be. Her use of female protagonists that expand the literary role of women was at the time such an innovation that the ambivalence assumed in Wharton's own opinions are not that odd. Furthermore, the sum total of these novels shows that Wharton, however shrewdly she managed the male literary tradition, was still part of it. To put distance between herself and the unfortunate reputations of the nineteenth-century women writers, Wharton's narrative techniques do at times align her with a "masculine" mode of writing. In turn, this means that she is never wholly radical, never explicitly critical of either gendered conventions for writing or gender inequality in society. Simply put, Edith Wharton wrote from inside the box that is gender and heteronormativity; to nudge the box is possible, but to destroy it from within, or to step outside it, would be difficult. Yet, in the end, this thesis asserts that she stayed true to her intention to investigate the other rooms of women, and did so brilliantly.

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