

Introduction

No story teller . . . can do great work unbased on some philosophy of life.

Edith Wharton, "A Reconsideration of Proust"

IT is easy to overlook the religious and spiritual dimensions of Edith Wharton's life and fiction if we view her primarily as a novelist of manners. The label "aristocratic lady novelist" – a designation revealing the biases of gender and class – also discounts her intellectual seriousness. In fact, Wharton infuses even her most socially minded texts with religious, moral, or philosophical reflection.¹ And although she resisted the more vociferous forms of feminist activism at the turn of the century, her voice is often clear and dissenting, calling for moral as well as social equality for women. Concerns for ideals and for women's place in structures that often exclude or marginalize them are consistent motifs in Wharton's life and writing.²

Morals and Manners

Although Edith Wharton thought of herself as a novelist of manners, she might have chosen a different designation had she foreseen the limitations of the term. To understand this category of realism, I take Lionel Trilling's definition: a novelist of manners writes of society's conventions, including not only etiquette and decorum but principles, rules, and laws that are established by tacit assumption ("Manners" 200–1). However useful the label "novelist of manners" may be, it exerts a subtle bias, allowing critics to focus on the social features of a writer's portrayals at the

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expense of her deeper levels of insight into human nature.³ In Wharton's case, it implies little or no development of moral problems except in terms of social convention. Thus, Louis Auchincloss writes that society is Wharton's "medium" (*Edith* 11), and Robert Spiller declares her commitment to it "in its narrowest sense" (1209). This label shortchanges works like *Ethan Frome* (1911) and *Summer* (1917), which do not depict wealthy New York society, and it opens Wharton to charges such as those made by Vernon Parrington when he dubbed her "our literary aristocrat": that her upper-class characters are unrepresentative and her poor, rural ones inauthentic.

One need not look far to find evidence of Wharton's religious, moral, and philosophical concerns, despite what others have suggested. A survey of her fictional titles, themes, and forms leaves no doubt that she was richly influenced by classical and Christian traditions and that she engaged these traditions to explore the contemporary crisis of faith brought on by Darwinism and industrial capitalism. Some of her titles suggest a philosophical or religious outlook. As Wharton notes, the title of her second short-story collection, *Crucial Instances* (1901), is a term drawn from philosophy that "keeps a sort of connection" with her first collection, *The Greater Inclination* (1899) (*Letters* 43). She borrows the title of her third volume of stories, *The Descent of Man* (1904), directly from Darwin. Titles of other fictions are explicitly religious, even when ironic: "The Twilight of the God," "The Duchess at Prayer," "The Angel at the Grave," "The Confessional," "Expiation," "The Seed of the Faith," and "The Confession." Wharton goes directly to the Bible for some appellations – *The Valley of Decision* (Joel 3.14), *The House of Mirth* (Ecclesiastes 7.4), *The Fruit of the Tree* (Genesis 3.3), and "That Good May Come" (Romans 3.8) – using it, as did many Victorians, not so much as sacred text but as mythology or ethical touchstone.

Wharton's interest in these issues goes deeper than her choice of titles. Even texts ostensibly concerned with material or social issues reveal a moral, spiritual, or religious sensibility. The name Lily in *The House of Mirth* (1905), for example, alludes not only to Matthew, as many have noted, but to the Song of Songs. When Songs is juxtaposed with Ecclesiastes, which gives the novel its title, the novel's contrasting themes of spiritual despair and ideal love become evident. In Wharton's satirical masterpiece, *The Age of Innocence* (1920), the New York elite, besieged by industrialists and the nouveau riche, hear a Thanksgiving Day sermon not of gratitude but of denunciation. By having the rector draw his text from the prophetic book of Jeremiah, Wharton delivers an ironic commentary on the collapse of a spiritually depleted society intent on worshipping false

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gods of taste rather than truth. And the butler in “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell” (1902) recites “dreadful texts full of brimstone” (*Stories* 1: 464) when his master enters the house. His diatribes – like those of Isaiah, whom he quotes – rail against moral bankruptcy and the servant class’s destiny of suffering.

Much of Wharton’s fiction abounds with characters facing moral choices or seeking nonmaterial values, but because she does not accentuate these difficulties, they are easily missed. The short stories “The Pretext,” “The Verdict,” “The Potboiler,” and “The Best Man” – all published in *The Hermit and the Wild Woman* (1908) – turn on moral problems, as Cynthia Griffin Wolff notes (*Feast* 151). Odo Valsecca searches for God in Wharton’s early novel, *The Valley of Decision* (1902); the speaker in the poem “Margaret of Cortona” (1901) appeals to Christ for help with grief; and Vance Weston is heartened by the words of St. Augustine in the late novel, *The Gods Arrive* (1932). Other characters struggle to find faith in a disillusioning age: Christian charity eludes Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*; Mattie and Ethan suffer spiritual as well as physical deformity in *Ethan Frome*; Ann Eliza Bunner stops believing in a caring deity, although her sister converts to Catholicism (“Bunner Sisters” [1916]), as does Lizzie Hazeldean in *New Year’s Day* (1924); and Grandma Scrimser pursues a vague transcendentalism in *Hudson River Bracketed* (1929).

Clerical figures and religious controversies also abound. In fact, the sheer range of religious references found in Wharton’s narratives – to Catholic views on divorce, New England fundamentalism, Episcopalian governance and laxity, and spiritualism – shows how keenly she followed religious developments. A Catholic priest stands at the dock while the divorced Lydia Tillotson decides whether to leave her lover, a silent reminder of the sacrament she has broken (“Souls Belated” [1899]); a vain bishop manipulates the media for personal gain and lies about the identity of his church’s benefactor (“Expiation” [1903]); and Charity Royall, pregnant out of wedlock, meets a raging fundamentalist preacher en route to the Mountain and her mother (*Summer*).

Wharton’s fiction describes past as well as present religious controversies. Ecclesiastical intrigue plays a role in her ghost story “Kerfol” (1916), which is commonly read as a tale of tangled romance and vengeance. But as Helen Killoran points out, it also describes a historical Jesuit–Jansenist conflict (“kerfol” = foolish quarrel) over religious fidelity. Two stories, in particular, trace the effects of late nineteenth-century conflicts between science and religion. In “The Descent of Man” (1904), Professor Linyard sees his scientific research misappropriated by a populace eager for assurance that the old faith is still possible; “The Blond Beast” (1910) explores challenges

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to traditional faith posed by the higher criticism; and in “Xingu” (1911) “maturer-looking” volumes such as *The Confessions of Saint Augustine* compete with studies of genetics for a place in Mrs. Ballinger’s drawing room (*Stories* 2: 214). Wharton also shows how comparative studies of religion cast new doubts on Christianity. In “The Seed of the Faith” (1919), a missionary in Africa witnesses his mentor’s collapse and concludes that his life’s work has been futile because the doctrines he preaches are true only in a relative, rather than absolute, sense. The missionaries have come to convert “the poor ignorant heathen – but were not they themselves equally ignorant in everything that concerned the heathen?” (2: 441).

Wharton suggests moral or spiritual concerns through her narrative forms as well as themes. Indeed, she constructs many fictions as allegories, parables, or fables – forms often used in religious or philosophical teachings.⁴ The short story “The Fullness of Life” (1893), commonly read as a criticism of marriage, is a fable about the search for spiritual fulfillment on the earthly plane. And “After Holbein” (1928), as Lawrence Berkove points out, is a parable of Old Testament judgment against hardheartedness. To the extent that forays into the unknown express a desire to explain life’s meanings and mysteries, Wharton’s ghost stories, of which she wrote many, constitute moral or spiritual inquiries. We can also see the instructive dimensions of Wharton’s longer narratives. *The House of Mirth* recounts the failure of Christian love, charity, and redemption in turn-of-the-century society. *Ethan Frome* is a modernist allegory of Calvinist sin and frozen human will; *The Reef* (1912), an attempt to reinstate the feminine divine through the character Sophy Viner, who alludes to the ancient Sophia; and *The Custom of the Country* (1913), a contemporary jeremiad that rails against reckless materialism. And in *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton uses Plato’s allegory of the cave to represent Newland Archer’s search for truth and love.

Wharton developed a fondness for the fable form early in her career, as “The Valley of Childish Things, and Other Emblems” (1896) demonstrates.⁵ Focusing on the first of ten vignettes, critics tend to read the tales as lessons about love’s disillusionment (Lewis 77) or as political or personal statements about female inequality (Ammons 4, 9; Wolff, *Feast* 228). However, these didactic stories, which Scribner’s rejected for being “too esoteric” (Lewis 76), convey moral and spiritual messages. The first fable sympathizes with a woman who seeks higher goals but is told she “ought to have taken better care of [her] complexion” (*Stories* 1: 59); the second satirizes financial waste and lack of common sense; the third laments that marriage is the only future for intelligent women. Desire is the subject of the next three stories: a man regrets that he “never had enough happiness

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to make a sorrow out of" (1: 60); a couple achieves a mutual relationship despite society's crippling restrictions of women; and a soul is reminded that whoever tarries in "the land of Gratified Longings" rather than in "the desert of Unsatisfied Desires" grows blind. With this tale, Wharton emphasizes the value of the spiritual search, regardless of its outcome.

The seventh story, a forerunner of Wharton's third novel, *Sanctuary* (1903), introduces the theme of moral integrity: an architect guilty of poor workmanship is too proud to accept the "judgment angel's" proposal to rectify his flaws (1: 61). The eighth tale satirizes a man's desire for a wife who merely reflects his own ego. The ninth story cautions against moral detachment: a gentleman who "disliked to assume any responsibility" and prides himself on aloofness is visited by Death (1: 62). When he attempts to put Death off with the lie that he has invited friends to dinner, the devil carries him away. In the tenth and culminating tale, a man despairs because he sets out to build his god a temple like the Parthenon but can produce only a thatched, mud hut. A passerby explains two worse plights: "one is to have no god; the other is to build a mud hut and mistake it for the Parthenon" (1: 63). In this last fable, Wharton underscores what for her constitute basic truths: the need for goals beyond material ones, the importance of effort, and the awareness of human insufficiency. The last fable also bears Wharton's hallmark: a combination of Christian faith and classical reason.

Finally, Wharton's literary aspirations themselves take the form of spiritual quests. She believed that a moral, spiritual, or philosophical system was vital to the artistic imagination and documented that belief in her writing. Her theoretical book, *The Writing of Fiction* (1925), includes mandates such as: "a good subject . . . sheds a light on our moral experience" (28); art "must illustrate some general law, and turn on some deep movement of the soul" (146); and "in vain has it been attempted to set up a water-tight compartment between 'art' and 'morality'" (28). Two qualities distinguish great literature, Wharton elaborates in "Permanent Values in Fiction." One is the writer's ability to create living characters and the other to relate these characters "to whatever general law of human experience made the novelist choose to tell this tale rather than another" (604). An unpublished article, "Fiction and Criticism," provides the clearest statement of Wharton's moral theory. Drawing on Matthew Arnold's assertion that fiction is "a criticism of life," Wharton writes, "it does not follow that great fiction should not communicate a moral emotion." The aesthetic pleasure of the text is crucial; however, the writer's treatment of his subject – "his faculty for penetrating below the surface of his fable to the 'inherences' which relate it to life as a whole" – determines the success of the creative work (2).

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Wharton further explains: “every serious picture of life contains a thesis. . . . The novelist ceases to be an artist the moment he bends his characters to the exigencies of a thesis; but he would equally cease to be one, should he draw the acts he describes without regard to their moral significance” (4–5).

From the beginning of her career, Wharton consciously followed her own prescription that art have a moral dimension. She described her narrative practice as one that keeps “in sight only the novelist’s essential sign-post; the inner significance of the ‘case’ selected” (*Backward* 115). Despite its biblical title, she did not consider her first best seller a religious novel,⁶ but when Morgan Dix, rector of Trinity Church, commended her on *The House of Mirth*, she enthusiastically wrote back, outlining her views:

I could not do anything if I did not think seriously of my trade; & the more I have considered it, the more has it seemed to me valuable & interesting only in so far as it is “a criticism of life.” – It almost seems to me that bad & good fiction (using the words in their ethical sense) might be defined as the kind which treats of life trivially & superficially, & that which probes deep enough to get at the relation with the eternal laws. . . . No novel worth anything can be anything but a novel “with a purpose,” & if anyone who cared for the moral issues did not see in my work that I care for it, I should have no one to blame but myself – or at least my inadequate means of rendering my effects. (*Letters* 99, original emphases)

Wharton is adamant about the moral import of her writing: she stresses not only fiction’s “ethical sense,” which refers to society’s standards, but a deeper “relation with the eternal laws,” from which ethics are derived. The tone of this passage is revealing: not only does she suspect that readers will misunderstand her, she is willing – in a manner that suggests her insecurity as a female author – to accept blame for their failure to grasp her purpose. Wharton was no heavy-handed moralizer; in fact, she despised explicitly didactic literature. However, she believed that “so much of one’s own soul” goes into the writing of fiction (*Backward* 212). Her keen sense of social detail notwithstanding, Wharton incorporated “soul” in her fiction and admired it in other writers such as George Eliot and Marcel Proust.

American Roots and Rootlessness

A study of Edith Wharton’s religion and spirituality must place Wharton in the context of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American intellectual, social, and religious developments, expanding that

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context as necessary to include Western traditions and values. Whereas the designation “novelist of manners” excludes Wharton from the mainstream traditions of American literature – “the fact is,” Trilling asserts, “that American writers of genius have not turned their minds toward society” (“Manners” 206) – a contextualized approach acknowledges her American roots; develops her relationship to “moral” writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and New England local colorists and sentimentalists, with whom she also shares a Calvinist legacy; and establishes her as a realistic and modernist innovator in her own right.

Although she seemed to downplay her American connections once she settled in France, Wharton indicated that she wished to be considered in a native tradition when she borrowed the title for her memoir *A Backward Glance* from Walt Whitman’s *A Backward Glance O’er Travel’d Roads* and thus positioned herself in an honored nineteenth-century tradition. Recent studies have explored her American connections beyond the Jamesian ones. Feminist scholars, in particular, have done much to rescue Wharton from the category “minor writer.” However, despite attention to the myriad social, economic, and psychological factors that affected her authorship, Wharton is still inadequately situated in the history of ideas and beliefs. Considered too advanced for the Victorians and too old-fashioned for the modernists, she lacks an intellectual or philosophical “room of one’s own.”

Wharton’s religious sensibilities developed as a result of widely different and rapidly changing factors in American society. When she was growing up in the 1870s and 1880s, religion still played an important role in everyday American life. Wharton recalls, for example, reading the Bible and notes her family’s regular attendance at church services (*Backward* 70; “Little” 362). However, discoveries in science – especially of evolution – as well as new practices in historical biblical criticism, anthropology, and comparative religion rocked the cultural foundations of religious faith. Americans of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries radically questioned and eventually abandoned traditional notions of faith for more reasoned, secular, and individualized approaches – all made possible by adherence to rational thought and positivism. According to this new rationalism, as James Turner notes, knowledge developed historically and must be verified by experience; the scientific approach and experimentation were superior to feeling and intuition; and empirical truths superseded transcendental reality (133–35). These theories threatened traditional church teachings and made the sacredness of the Bible seem obsolete. It was an age, as Henry Adams wrote, when every individual had to invent a “formula of his own for his universe” because “the standard formulas failed” (*Education* 472).

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The changes and controversies that swept American culture profoundly influenced Edith Wharton. She was especially affected by her position in society as an upper-class Victorian woman. With characteristic understatement, she attempted the unthinkable for a woman of her class and time: she strove to understand the underlying issues of the science–religion debate. This meant not only taking religious doctrines seriously but developing the intellectual capacity necessary to digest technical and scientific material. Although Wharton’s background and training presented significant obstacles, development of her mind became a crucial first step on her spiritual path.

Wharton’s privileged New York society faced the crisis of belief with casualness bordering on indifference, but she never shared its complacency. Unlike more introspective Protestants – evangelicals, who feared God’s rejection, or moderates, who entertained nagging doubts about individual worthiness – aristocrats felt that material and social well-being also guaranteed them God’s grace. They made a virtue of necessity, viewing God’s increasing distance from everyday human endeavors as fortuitous, and – following Anglican rather than Calvinist models – deeming intense piety or introspection superfluous. They accepted scientific theories of evolution as popularly presented to them, especially those of Herbert Spencer, who preached moral and social progress; they did not inquire of science too deeply. Instead, they tended to adopt an evolutionary optimism, a secular form of Protestant liberalism, which permeated the upper tiers of society and, as Jackson Lears notes (21–23), had the practical effect of encouraging the status quo.

Wharton also inherited this benign faith through her gender as well as her class. Coming of age in the second half of the nineteenth century meant immersion in the ideologies of domestic and religious sentimentality and exposure to novels by Protestant women intent on recuperating religion in the age of Darwin. Such writers, as Barbara Welter notes (129), were read more widely at this time than were Emerson, Rauschenbusch, and William James. Although some novels – for example, Margaret DeLand’s *John Ward, Preacher* and Mary Wilkins Freeman’s *Pembroke* – defended Calvinism or dealt anachronistically with the effects of twisted will, many more upheld sentimental creeds.⁷ Sentimentality gave a new face to an old faith. As Ann Douglas explains, it constituted a shift from a harsh Calvinist doctrine in which God enacts his divine plan through Christ’s death to one in which Christ becomes the sympathetic, vicarious sufferer for human sins. The focus moved from God to human as God’s power was lessened – and his post-Darwinian absence explained – through human appropriation. In this optimistic theology, the notion of Atonement became a “fantasy . . .

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of the weak that the strong will spontaneously give up the[ir] pre-eminence,” a dream “honoring . . . enforced passivity” (151). Christ, the supreme example of selflessness, graciously succumbed so that others might model themselves on him. Women were the perfect candidates for this Christlike sacrifice: they willingly gave of themselves to compensate for their spiritually inferior male counterparts and to better the race as a whole. The sacrifice was made through the daily execution of domestic duties, but it was also accomplished, as was Christ’s, through death. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Little Eva in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Mara Lincoln of *The Pearl of Orr’s Island* exemplify the edifying effect of this ultimate display of female sacrifice. Wharton rejected this sentimental model, as she did the aristocratic one.

Wharton stands in uneasy relationship both to genteel Episcopalianism and popular sentimentality. First, she was too serious about religion to be fashionable. Although she obeyed her parents’ mandate to keep religion a private affair and never impose her beliefs on others, her godson William Royall Tyler remembers her as a “devout person . . . always close to the metaphysical aspect of life, always” (Interview, 29 October). “She would broach the substance of religion without putting it on the table as a subject,” Tyler recalls; she had “a deep religious sense” (Interviews, 12 April, 29 October). He cites as examples her well-used copy of the Apocrypha and her annotated, leather-bound *The Imitation of Christ*, which bears a Saint-Brice-sous-Forêt bookplate but is so worn that it must have been read over many years (Letter). These comments as well as compelling evidence in Wharton’s writing demonstrate her difference from other members of her class, who weighed social lapses more heavily than spiritual ones.

Second, Wharton parted ways with social elites and sentimentalists because, by temperament, she was disinclined toward their facile accommodation of suffering and redemption. Although she favored a cultural ethos of compassion over competition, she rejected “separate sphere” ideologies that made spiritual salvation the sole province of women. She was equally unwilling to accept the relativism and materialism that newer empirical theories fostered. Although she applauded gains brought about by reason and technology, she feared that the emphasis on money and status that late nineteenth-century capitalism encouraged led to disintegration of crucial spiritual values. Third, Wharton enthusiastically followed current scientific developments and set out to master theories propounded by figures such as Darwin, Spencer, Huxley, and Haeckel. She strove for intellectual credentials that would distinguish her from nineteenth-century domestic writers – she wanted to be known for the sharpness of her mind as well as for the

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generosity of her heart. Unlike her leisured compatriots, Wharton took evolution seriously and abhorred its trivialization by dilettantes. She considered the Darwinian challenge to religious certainty one of the most important issues of her time.

As this overview suggests, Edith Wharton's theology evolved as a result of complex social and personal factors. Appreciating her keen intelligence and unwavering drive to develop her intellect is a crucial step toward understanding her religion and spirituality because at the turn of the nineteenth century, religion was severely undermined by secular theories. For the thinking person, simple, unproblematic belief was no longer possible. Chapter 1, "Priestess of Reason," traces Wharton's arduous journey toward intellectual autonomy, explaining the various religious and secular forces that helped to chart her path. Each of the subsequent chapters explores a different facet of Wharton's spiritual, religious, and philosophical development, with focused attention on its expression in seven of Wharton's novels, numerous short stories, and selected nonfiction.

Exploring the interplay of Wharton's scientific and spiritual concerns leads to consideration of her first best seller, *The House of Mirth* (1905). This novel, discussed in Chapter 2, "Spiritual Homelessness," represents with brilliant irony the dangerous relativism and feelings of rootlessness that followed from society's casual adherence to Darwinian principles and abandonment of spiritual values. Lily Bart's problem in this novel, spiritually speaking, is the same as the speaker's in Robert Frost's poem "The Oven Bird": "what to make of a diminished thing" (line 14). Wharton presents a post-Christian society in which "the word" – of God, faith, love, and redemption – is tragically lost. Her heroine, an ironic spiritual pilgrim adrift and alone, struggles futilely in a materially rich but spiritually destitute world. The ending of *The House of Mirth* – a scene of beautiful, feminine death – also vividly demonstrates Wharton's ironic stance toward sentimentality. Lily's death is preceded by a visit to Nettie Struthers's cozy kitchen, but no redemption follows: traditional forms of feminine acceptance, submission, and forgiveness have become impossible in the modern world. The novel's conclusion is troubling, not soothing; the reader is left with a terrible emptiness that Lily's death cannot alleviate.

That Wharton had reluctantly rejected a sentimental solution to the crisis of faith is apparent not only in *The House of Mirth* but in her next novel, *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907). The plot resembles that of Margaret Deland's "At the Stuffed-Animal House," in which a retarded girl, Annie, administers a fatal dose of chloroform to end her sister's suffering. In Deland's story, the minister – named Dr. Lavendar to suggest his sympathy with the sentimentalists – accepts Annie's decision as an act of feminine,