

“[T]he poetic value of the evolutionary conception”: Darwinian allegory in the major
novels of Edith Wharton, 1905-1920

by

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ABSTRACT

My study investigates Edith Wharton's engagement with Darwin's evolutionary theory in The House of Mirth (1905), The Custom of the Country (1913), and The Age of Innocence (1920). The value of juxtaposing Wharton's narratives with her scientific knowledge has been recognized by critics since the 1950's. Yet, the few existing discussions of Darwinian allegory that examine these novels do not adequately describe the political dimension of Wharton's fictional sociobiology. My investigation addresses this insufficiency in the criticism.

Examining Wharton's fiction in relation to her autobiographical writings, letters, and literary criticism, I demonstrate that her major novels link those laws governing gradual change in the natural world—described by Darwin, and theorists such as Herbert Spencer—with the ideological shifts affecting privileged social groupings. The introductory chapter outlines the critical response to Wharton's sociobiology, and examines specific scientific texts that the author refers to in her extra-literary writing. In chapter two I examine The House of Mirth's portrayal of cultural practices that lead to the elimination of unfit individuals such as Lily Bart, and show how Wharton critiques the position that natural selection and other laws theorized in The Origin of Species *should* apply within human society. The following chapter, on The Custom of the Country, demonstrates Wharton's interest in representing the effects on existing leisure-class cultural practices of the newly-moneyed socioeconomic elite, whose rise Wharton attributes to social evolution. The novel also describes, I show, an inadequate leisure-class ethics that fails to confront the new elite's biological justification for expansion and dominance. Chapter four investigates The Age of Innocence, in which Wharton takes aim

at leisure-class morality by depicting it as a “negation” (AI 212) of culturally obscured biological instinct, and by representing the sacrifice of individuals to a “collective interest” (AI 111) that is portrayed as frivolous. In the concluding chapter, I summarize the ways I have extended existing Wharton scholarship, and describe potential pathways for future research. One key conclusion of my dissertation is that Wharton associates ideological change with natural selection, and sexual selection, in order to articulate the challenges to achieving social equality posed by “primitive” (CC 470) and “instinctive” (CC 355) energies.

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List of Abbreviations

Lewis R.W.B. Lewis, Edith Wharton: A Biography. (1975) New York: Fromm, 1985

Letters R.W.B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis, eds, The Letters of Edith Wharton. New York: Collier Books, 1988

Yale The Edith Wharton Archive in the Yale collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University (YCAL MSS42)

Page references to Wharton's published and unpublished works are indicated in the text using the following abbreviations, which refer to the given editions.

AI The Age of Innocence (1920) (New York: Collier Books, 1993)

BG A Backward Glance (New York: Appleton-Century, 1934)

CC The Custom of the Country (1913) (New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1997)

CSS The Collected Short Stories of Edith Wharton R.W.B. Lewis, Ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968)

DH The Decoration of Houses (1897) (with Ogden Codman) (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997)

FT The Fruit of the Tree (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907)

FW French Ways and their Meaning (New York: Appleton and Co., 1919)

HM The House of Mirth (1905) (New York: Penguin, 1985)

IB Italian Backgrounds (1905) (London: Jonathan Cape, 1928)

IM In Morocco (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920)

LI "Life and I" [n.d.] (Beinecke Library, Yale Collection of American Literature) (unpublished MS)

UCW The Uncollected Critical Writings Frederick Wegener, Ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996)

WF The Writing of Fiction (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925)

Chapter One

Introduction: Edith Wharton's Darwinian Poetic

I. Darwinian New York

This study investigates Edith Wharton's engagement with evolutionary theory in The House of Mirth (1905), The Custom of the Country (1913), and The Age of Innocence (1920). In each of these novels, Wharton depicts the social practices of New York's traditional gentry, and a newly-moneyed elite, from a perspective informed in part by the central concerns of Darwin's major works. My main claim here is that these novels link those laws governing gradual change in the natural world described by Darwin, and theorists such as Herbert Spencer, with the "general process of intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic development" (Williams 90) of privileged social groupings. The resulting fiction represents the effects on existing leisure-class cultural practices of a socioeconomic elite whose rise Wharton attributes to *social* evolution. The author associates such change, I show, with natural selection and sexual selection¹ in order to articulate the challenges to achieving social equality posed by "primitive" (CC 470) and "instinctive" (CC 355) energies.² The resultant conceptual interplay, wherein Wharton uses language and ideas specific to the physical sciences in the context of fictional social analysis, depends upon biological allegories of social relations that confront and show the limits of social Darwinist interpretations of the place of nature in culture.

My examination of three Wharton novels through the framework of her scientific knowledge is not exhaustive, for her work often demonstrates an interest in using this knowledge to produce fiction.³ What has guided my choice of The House of Mirth, The Custom of the Country, and The Age of Innocence is their unique mating of evolutionary

science to the task of social criticism. For example, The House of Mirth draws on the theory of natural selection articulated in The Origin of Species (1859), and critiques New York society from a perspective informed by The Descent of Man's (1871) biological view of human social relations.⁴ The novel assaults the idea that intense competitions for resources, and the extermination of the unfit, are aspects of social relations permissible because they are analogous to natural processes. However, Wharton selectively exempts certain instinctive tendencies from her critique of the way contemporary social relations seem to reflect bloody nature. Most notable in this regard is her critique of the suppression of female sexual choice in The House of Mirth. In her fiction, Wharton faces the dilemma that "[n]atural and sexual selection pose grave threats to liberal ideology, in general—to the ideal of democratic equality and to possible moral or social reform" (Bender 4); yet, she shows that without knowledge of the effect of nature on culture, no meaningful collective response to natural and sexual selection is possible.

Against The House of Mirth I juxtapose The Custom of the Country's portrait of its anti-heroine, Undine Spragg, who typifies a destructive, individual moral agency, during a time of "social disintegration" (CC 77). This novel is more sophisticated in its application of scientific language and ideas, particularly in its argument with social Darwinism's misinterpretations of evolutionary theory, an implicit criticism in the The House of Mirth. In The Custom of the Country, "Wharton's perception of the conflict between the gentry and the socioeconomic elite crystallized" (Bratton 211), making the novel a good test case for my claim that these classes are distinguished in the narrative by their respective assumptions about the value of excluding natural forces from cultural processes.

The hazards of a superficial scientific perspective are, themselves, a subject of The Age of Innocence, which adds images and vocabulary drawn from anthropology and ethnography to the language of evolutionary biology present in the earlier novels. Here, classes are “tribes” (AI 32) and stories regarding genealogy are passed down orally from one generation to the next. In this text, the omniscient voice uses anthropological images and phrases, as does the protagonist Newland Archer, who casually studies anthropology. But this is not to suggest that evolution and biology as subjects are obscured by the presence of other discourses, for Archer’s attraction to Ellen Olenska betrays an instinctive sexual response that causes his heart to beat “suffocatingly” (AI 287). The Age of Innocence maintains a particularly critical stance toward the distancing of Archer’s instinct by his intellect. Simultaneously, though, the narrative relies on images and vocabulary from anthropology and ethnography to frame its subjects: coercive tradition, and rites of exclusion, to name just two. Moreover, the novel explicitly judges Archer’s scientific viewpoint. He derives his objectivity from his scientific knowledge, which brings him into contact with the view that human culture grows from a biological foundation; but he is a “dilettante” (AI 4), and thus unable to absorb this fact, which might free him from the constraints of his caste by demonstrating—the narrative’s larger point—that instinct and culture are part of a continuum, and not separate spheres.

In one instance, Archer skips a social evening because “a new volume of Herbert Spencer” (AI 138) has arrived from his London bookseller. This detail is significant because Spencer’s teleological interpretation of Darwinism argued that even in human culture only the fittest could, or should, survive. Spencer viewed the destruction of individuals as a part of social progress. Wharton takes issue with Spencer’s thought in each of the novels I examine.

Her ironic depiction of Archer's contact with Spencer shows that while the former "turned the pages with the sensuous joy of the book-lover, he did not know what he was reading" (AI 138). Archer is not equipped, Wharton shows, to comprehend Spencer's biological interpretation of culture, which counters the separation of instinct and tradition valued by the leisure class.⁵

Archer's inability to interpret the implications of Spencer's work is a critique of the failure to defend the integrity of the class hierarchy from misinterpretations of Darwin's thought which rationalized a voracious form of capitalism. Spencer's interpretation of Darwin, as I discuss in detail in the coming chapters, offered a biological theory that applied to human culture, and provided a way to view social progress as just another natural process. Spencer's view, though, "was not Darwin's view of evolution—he [Darwin] dismissed the distinction between lower and higher animals as meaningless. [. . .] natural selection is a contingent, short-term process that works with accidental, rather than progressive, variation" (Ridley 3). Archer has great difficulty comprehending the contingent, or accidental aspect of nature. This is so for Archer because his appeal to scientific knowledge, like his wish "to keep the surface [forms of his wedding ceremony] pure" (AI 23), is the product of manners, rites, and traditions that would control disorder. As a reader of scientific books, Archer seeks and supports a framework that orders chaotic nature. As a result, the marriage rite patterns sexual desire, which causes instinctive imperatives to recede from view. All three novels I examine represent acculturated biological imperatives with manners sublimating instinct.

Ironically, the overarching narrative in The Age of Innocence frequently undermines Archer's sense of intellectual control, even as the omniscient frame seems to embrace a scientific perspective on social relations. Archer, through the flawed lens of his objectivity,

monitors his milieu. The aging leaders of his class, “gruesomely preserved in an airless atmosphere” (AI 52) in an expansive mansion, also stand against a breakdown of values manifested in Archer’s inherited wish to keep ‘forms’ pure. Yet, his attraction to Ellen Olenska illustrates the difficulty posed to the stability of forms by the conflicting impulses of his reasoning, policing intellect, and his biological instincts. Alongside Archer’s example of how sexual energy and other urges foster cultural change, one finds illustrations in this text and others of Wharton’s skepticism toward the idea that “Americans [...] regard the fact that a man has made money as something intrinsically meritorious” (FW 107). Wharton represents this insight by showing how members of the developing socioeconomic elite in The Age of Innocence act out a common misinterpretation of Darwinian natural selection that links cultural progress and the buildup of material wealth through aggressive means. The confinement of biological instinct by the leisure-class, and the teleology of progress embraced by the new rich, are subjects of each work examined here.

Social complexity will not be equated with progress in these novels. Wharton takes aim at the moral authority of Archer’s tribe by painting leisure-class morality or “niceness” as a “negation” (AI 212) of culturally obscured biological instinct, and by depicting the sacrifice of individuals to a “collective interest” (AI 111) that is portrayed as frivolous. Hence, the narratives render as inadequate a leisure-class ethics that does not confront the new elite’s biological justification for expansion and dominance. T.H. Huxley, whose influence on Wharton’s fiction of the period is major, articulates one idea that becomes a central metaphor in each of the novels I investigate:

[I]f our hemisphere were to cool again, the survival of the fittest might bring about, in the vegetable kingdom, a population of more and more stunted and humbler and

humbler organisms, until the 'fittest' that survived might be nothing but lichens [. . .]

They, as the fittest, the best adapted to the changed conditions, would survive.

("Evolution and Ethics," 327)

Applied to social transformation, Huxley's statement opposes the idea that change will result in 'progress,' and opens Wharton's texts to the interpretation that they detail a downward trend, or devolution of culture.

Adaptation to changing environments is the key to survival in nature, not complexity. Wharton imports this idea into her fictional social analysis where 'the best adapted to the changed conditions' of *culture* believe falsely that their success is due not to a changing social environment, but to their fulfillment of a distinctly American teleology of progress that has, in fact, altered social conditions in a way favorable to a less morally oriented, yet more individualistic ethos of economic success. By representing the damage to individuals caused by this misapplication of Darwinism to social evolution, the novels urge the recognition and regulation of the ways nature and culture interact.

Control over a culture growing out of nature is a crucial responsibility carried out by an elite that, in Wharton's view, had abdicated its leadership role. She referred to the damage this caused in a letter written in 1905, the year The House of Mirth was published:

New York society is still amply clad, & the little corner of its garment that I lifted was meant to show only that little atrophied organ—the group of idle & dull people—that exists in any big & wealthy social body. If it seems more conspicuous in New York than in an old civilization, it is because the whole social organization with us is so much smaller & less elaborate --& if, as I believe, it is more harmful in its

influence, it is because fewer responsibilities attach to money with us than in other societies. (Letters 97)

The metaphors Lawrence Selden uses to talk about his class animate The House of Mirth's portrayal of competition between two versions of the relation between nature and culture. In the version held by the class Selden serves as a lawyer, and is nominally a member of, tradition ideally moderates change. In the period covered by the novel, though, this 'atrophied organ' of cultural dissemination has defaulted on its mission. What was high has been brought low by shifts in industry, technology, and economics. When Selden envisions "the great gilt cage in which they all were huddled for the crowd to gape at" (HM 54) aristocrats become zoological exhibits, and lower-class spectators view the elite social fray from objective heights. The environment in which social evolution occurs is changing, and *it* will determine which class 'species' is fittest; but as Wharton shows, the "atrophied organ of [...] idle & dull" (Letters 97) members of the leisure class, its former power of cultural dissemination notwithstanding, relaxes control over the environment with the result that the tendrils of change invade the ecosystem of an old order.

The novels in this study spark questions capable of extending current critical discussions of those allegories, metaphors, and vocabulary in Wharton's fiction informed by scientific contexts. Relating both to formal and thematic issues, these questions are as follows: what cultural work does the hybridization of social analysis and evolutionary and biological science perform in the novels; more specifically, what is at stake, politically, in the premise that social evolution is influenced by the laws of physical evolution? Furthermore, to what extent is Wharton's biological interpretation of culture an aesthetic conceit that capitalizes on a popular passion for things scientific? To what degree do the texts assert that

biological laws function as agents of social change? Lastly, how, from novel to novel, does Wharton refine her interjection in the public dialogue about social Darwinism's assertion that the 'survival of the fittest' not only does obtain in human culture, but should? In addressing these questions, the following chapters will also examine how Wharton's narrative strategies negotiate with the market for popular fiction.

To address these questions, my assessment of Wharton's interest in evolution, biology, and the fiction market between 1905 and 1920 examines her interests in light of the fact that she was "passionately addicted to scientific study" (Lewis 108). I show how she balanced this addiction with her desire to be a best-selling author, and her intense interest in the sales of her books.⁶ Wharton was, of course, not alone in her desire for sales that would reward her work. American realists and naturalists who were Wharton's contemporaries—William Dean Howells, Henry James, and Frank Norris—"[c]ollectively [...] fashioned a theory of how to write a novel under the conditions imposed by the mass market in literature" (Borus 10). Wharton was no less compelled by these 'conditions,' as correspondence with her editors confirms.

But one obstacle Wharton had to surmount in achieving popular success was what W.D. Howells articulated when he acknowledged that "what the American Public wants is *a tragedy with a happy ending*" (FW 65). Valuable for its snapshot of the way Howells saw the serious writer's predicament, Wharton's reference to his comment in French Ways and their Meaning (1919) also demonstrates her concern with the literary tastes of the American reader. What accommodates these tastes in the three novels examined here, even if it does not render a potential tragedy happy in the way seen in The Rise of Silas Lapham (1885),⁷ is the sense that Lily Bart, Undine Spragg, and Ellen Olenska are subject to natural laws that

cause the elimination of the unfit, the triumph of aggression, and the expulsion of difference. The severely qualified happy ending, in these cases, would originate in a critique of the elite that readers would have found satisfying, allowing them to confirm their conviction that the rich are cruel and decadent.

Alluding initially to the Malthusian principle of excess population so useful to Darwin in formulating his theory of natural selection, and, thereby, aligning her social analysis with biological inquiry, Wharton characterizes her 'tragedy' in an introduction to the 1936 Oxford edition of The House of Mirth as focusing on lost opportunities for intervention by the privileged into the conditions that destroy Lily Bart:

The fact is that nature, always wasteful, and apparently compelled to create dozens of stupid people in order to produce a single genius, seems to reverse the process in manufacturing the shallow and the idle. Such groups always rest on an underpinning of wasted human possibilities; and it seemed to me that the fate of the persons embodying these possibilities ought to redeem my subject from insignificance. This is the key to *The House of Mirth*, and its meaning; and I believe the book has owed its success, from the first, as much to my picture of the slow disintegration of Lily Bart as to the details of the 'conversation piece' of which she forms the central figure.

(UCW 266)

Here, 'wasteful' nature exerts its effects on Lily. Moreover, nature manufactures many who are 'shallow' and who might otherwise create the conditions wherein 'possibilities' such as those possessed by Lily would not result in her 'disintegration.' In rendering The House of Mirth's 'happy ending' by detailing Lily's vulnerability and extermination, Wharton depicts with intense irony the rotted fruits to be harvested from the sowing of a social Darwinist

ethos. The sense that the novel's ending confirms the efficacy of the social mechanisms it depicts places Lily's fate in 'happy' concord with the spirit of her times.

Wharton presents tragedy as a diminished aesthetic category that in her contemporary setting has no correlative in a society textured by radically indifferent nature ungoverned by decaying upper-class social controls. The social context in which tragedy would produce its effects on its audience is melting away. If the teleology of social progress that includes the idea that only the fittest *should* survive is morally invalid, as Wharton maintains, its disruption must be encouraged; the novels I investigate take this as their central task. In depicting the 'slow disintegration of Lily Bart,' however, Wharton compromises with the social Darwinist view that individual agency is entirely subordinate to natural processes uncontrolled within society. Even as this fictional technique negotiates with popular ideas about evolution by partly validating social Darwinism (Lily *is* unsuited to her environment and *does* perish), it coexists with psychological and social textual spaces in which individual volition and imagination are shown by Wharton to provide a path away from the domination of reason by nature.

Evolution argues for invisibly slow, but inescapable change, an idea that assaulted not only theological principles, but the a-historical tenor of an America society that saw itself as exempt from the political dialectics of the old world.⁸ For the novels investigated here, evolution figures as a theoretical framework that can help explain how emerging social conditions that favor Simon Rosedale, Elmer Moffatt, and Julius Beaufort might cause a powerful leisure class to decline. Wharton formally suggests that social evolution progresses by chance variation, aligning historical dialectics and nature in a way that predicts old-world troubles for the new. In doing so she questions the proposition that the United States can

make progress toward a pre-ordained ideal holding that self-interested individuals can pursue enrichment unfettered. This ideal relies upon the notion that the “fierce interplay” (CC 195) of the forces of capitalism, and the “business instinct” (CC 212) of Undine Spragg’s father, can produce benefits for the wider collective in The Custom of the Country, but the ideal will yield nothing but a collocation of blinkered individual interests according to the texts discussed here.

The chaos and aggression on display in conflicts within and between classes are juxtaposed with the possibility of controlling these tendencies. Wharton identifies, in eroding leisure-class values, a traditional and conservative counterforce able to act centripetally against nature’s contingent essence. But these timeworn values also foreclose positive change by being intolerant of difference. This is illustrated when Newland Archer’s mother remarks that “people should respect our ways when they come among us” (AI 86-87). In such a world stability is simultaneously repressive, desirable, and loathsome, and ultimately impossible to maintain. In the novel’s focus on an age that ushered in radical changes to technology, business, and the class structure, however, Wharton again shows her concern with the possibility of progress in a society composed of instinctive subjects.

In discussing The Custom of the Country I show that Undine Spragg is a regression, a flashback to a remote point in the cultural history of the United States. She is an atavistic character representative of a violent stage in the social evolution of her country marked by revolution, and colonial savagery directed against Native Americans; in this she is quintessentially of the United States. The narrative thus uses the variegating tendency of biological evolution to illustrate the inevitability of unpredictable social change, which includes the recurrence of what is viewed by the leisure class as primitive. Undine succeeds

in the avaricious environment of *new* New York because she possesses variations such as aggressiveness, beauty, and superficiality that suit her to a social world where the “inner life” (CC 194) is valued less than “the forces of business” (CC 195). Wharton’s application to New York culture of a Darwinian interpretation of change in nature illustrates how chance variations manifested in Undine undermine the idea that social development occurs in a logical and linear way. Rather, random mutations of ideology steer social change in unforeseeable directions. In depicting evolutionary laws as applying to culture, Wharton delineates the specter of contingency at the center of Darwin’s work on natural selection, and finds no predetermined goal or direction for social change. The narrative thus confronts a pervasive ideal that views humankind, and the nation, as perfectible.⁹

In The House of Mirth, The Custom of the Country, and The Age of Innocence, the principle of chance, figured as the speculative economic activities of an elite made up of financiers and industry titans, exists in opposition to a leisure class adherence to order and stasis; the new rich exemplify the idea that nature underwrites the relation of the individual to the social collective. Amongst this set, accumulation is more valued than philanthropy, and advantage is taken whenever it is glimpsed, as when Simon Rosedale buys “the newly finished house of one of the victims” (HM 121) of a stock-market crash. In The Custom of the Country in particular, the aristocratic Marvell, who invites the upstart Undine Spragg into his circle and eventually marries her, does not anticipate that introducing a new species into his environment will result in disaster.

Undine, Marvell discovers too late, is a mutation immune to the moderating capacity of socialization, which would soften her tendency to “assert herself as the dominant figure of the scene” (CC 48). In this way Wharton portrays a sequence in which an altered social

environment produces and confirms the viability of Undine by a kind of natural selection. Her rise occurs within a social 'environment' now subject to evolutionary forces no longer acting exclusively on "the plants and bushes clothing an entangled bank" (Origin 125), for the socioeconomic elite have dismantled the old stone walls of insular values to build palatial monuments to capital. Representative of this reality is the displacement by the new socioeconomic elite of a familiar leisure class species that is the repository of cultural memory and aesthetic achievement. Charles Bowen, Wharton's "sociologist" (CC 249) and double in The Custom of the Country, calls this established animal of the New York landscape "Homo Sapiens Americanus" (CC 188). The suicide of Ralph Marvell, the representative of this species, personifies its extinction.

The Custom of the Country presents, as the 'genetic' material of cultural heredity, an ideology of gentility and ritual that governs Ralph Marvell's caste. Distinguishing an oppositional ideology is its market orientation, lack of ritual, and encouragement of the vital instinct that guides the business dynamo Elmer Moffatt, and those like him. In presenting these ideological equivalents of heredity, Wharton synthesizes the vocabulary and imagery she encountered in her study of works by principally Charles Darwin and T.H. Huxley. The language used to carry out this narrative activity lends her depiction of characters living within particular class ideologies a sense of objectivity associated with scientific analysis.¹⁰ Lily Bart is variously a "sea-anemone" (HM 301) and a "blue-bottle" fly (HM 115). Undine Spragg is "instinctive" (CC 355) and "primitive" (CC 470), and Newland Archer sees himself as "a wild animal" (AI 67). Archer, however, feels that this is a "coarse view" (AI 67), demonstrating that his class makes a careful distinction between biology and culture that the narrative counters. It does so by critiquing Archer's aversion to the idea that he is an

'animal,' and by encouraging sexual selection as a basis for pairing. Indeed, each of these texts proffers the idea that culture grows from its biological foundation, but must assert control over the hazards to equality posed by natural law.

The Dorsets in The House of Mirth, and the Marvells and Dagonets in The Custom of the Country, obsess over a process of cultural heredity defined as a passing on of rites and values. Newland Archer's distinction between his social sensibilities and his biological instincts exhibits a belief that cultural heredity delivers its ideological content without the potential for mutation that occurs in 'coarse' nature. The preoccupation of this class with ritual displaces interest in the plain facts of biological inheritance and the variations it introduces, and the possibility that the inheritance of values is subject to similarly disruptive laws. This leisure-class attitude appears from Wharton's viewpoint to completely mask an undervalued "naked instinct" (Letters 159) that asserts itself in the unfulfilled desire shared by Lily Bart and Lawrence Selden in The House of Mirth, and Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska in The Age of Innocence.¹¹ Unsurprisingly, the passion of these characters carries them outside the pale of the permitted, something Wharton makes concrete in the geography of empty houses and distant shores where forbidden expressions of sexuality surface only to be repressed. Acknowledging instinct as an ineradicable facet of culture, Wharton suggests, is a step toward accounting for, and limiting, powerful and disruptive natural laws at work on social groupings.

II. Critical response to Wharton's fictional sociobiology

Critics have long been aware of Edith Wharton's scientific interests. An appreciation of the effect on her narratives of Wharton's devotion to scientific study, however, has emerged slowly. The *Athenaeum's* 1913 review of The Custom of the Country states that "Mrs. Wharton, by [. . .] laying stress upon the sequence of environment, upbringing, character, has made her character a natural and pathetic figure" (*Reviews* 209-210). While one reads 'natural' as 'realistic' in this context, ample evidence exists in the novel to indicate that its protagonist, Undine Spragg, is also to be seen as natural in a biological sense. She is an "organism" (CC 64) adrift in a strange environment where "all was blurred and puzzling to the girl in this world of half-lights, half-tones" (CC 48). Wharton's characterization of Undine as a biological specimen coexists with a detailed rendering of the 'puzzling' leisure-class social environment. Ralph Marvell and his kind, through their bifurcation of nature and culture, elicit Undine's confusion; 'organisms' and social 'abbreviations' are incommensurable in their world. The leisure-class express *their* interpretation of the relation between nature and culture in a way that reveals their interest in moderating "impulses" (CC 39), and in channeling base energies represented by the "grotesque saurian head" (CC 58) of the lascivious Peter Van Degen. So while the contemporary review of the novel published in the *Athenaeum* identifies "the sequence of environment, upbringing, character" as a central concern that reflects the novel's objectivity, links between natural and social environments explored in the novel escape the scrutiny of the reviewer.

In 1953 Blake Nevius addressed the difficulty of charting the relation between evolutionary theory and Wharton's "naturalistic tragedy," concluding that "it is impossible, perhaps, to calculate [...] but it has never been considered" (56). The past decade has seen

scholarship taking up the task of considering the relation of Wharton's writing to the fields of biology and evolution, as well as to anthropology and sociology. These disciplines are now visible as defining constituents of the author's fiction.¹² Nancy Bentley, for example, has persuasively shown that Wharton's fictional framework peers "[t]hrough an ethnographic lens, [to find that] manners become the keys to the secrets of social control and cohesion" (Bentley, The Ethnography of Manners 70). Wharton, however, demonstrates that instinct and the contingency of the natural world are also objects of social control. These forces are symbolized by 'manners,' rites, and other practices that anthropology and ethnography describe, but whose biological essence cannot be fully explored by them.¹³

Nevius's study is valuable too for its implicit claim that ideology is a subject of The House of Mirth. This is evident in his reference to Lily's loose "theoretical grasp of the principles which enable Selden to preserve his weak idealism" (57). Nevius writes, furthermore, that Lily Bart "is as completely and typically the product of her heredity, environment, and the historical moment which found American materialism in the ascendant" (57). In choosing the word 'heredity,' Nevius perpetuates that which makes it difficult to explicate Wharton's fictionalized examination of the term, for heredity is an aggregation of both biological and cultural inheritance conceived of in conflicting and contradictory ways by different characters, and the omniscient voices of the narratives. One difficulty the analysis of this aggregate encounters is Wharton's propensity to represent social change within the terminological framework of physical evolution. With ideology being presented as the cultural analogue of the medium of physical heredity in The House of Mirth, Wharton's application of theories from the physical sciences to a domain more properly the subject of sociology poses the question of whether the text identifies a biological

basis for cultural change, or whether its application of natural law is a conceit intended to illustrate the need to resist ideological evolution by associating it with ungovernable instinct.

Nevius's suggestion that evolutionary theory and ideology are aspects of Wharton's narratives was an initial step toward exploring the ways these aspects of the texts are related. In The House of Mirth, Selden's idealism is a trait of the class to which he belongs, and is a core principle that he inherits. He is an agent of a social stratum that asserts "concepts and categories that distort the whole of reality in a direction useful to the prevailing power" (Makaryk 558), which he diligently serves as a lawyer. Yet he also has a sense of the way he is limited by his class values, and how the price of stepping out of his role is the termination of the privilege he enjoys. Compared to Lily, he is a different species, and she recognizes that he belongs "to a more specialized race" (HM 65).

Selden's heightened consciousness exists in contrast to Lily's nature, which is multifaceted in being socially conditioned to pursue a place in the preserve of the elite, and in driving her pursuit of a life unconstrained by the tradeoffs that accompany Lily's need to "marry the first rich man she could get" (HM 84). She has an instinctive reaction to "agreeable tones and textures that was one of her inmost susceptibilities" (HM 10). Her instinctive simplicity in this regard leaves little doubt that Lily Bart demurs marriage, and her rejection of a string of potential husbands manifests a variation from standard ideology. Claire Preston sees Lily as a "non-viable mutation" (51), critically employing Darwinian language that elides Wharton's defining mixture of evolutionary theory and sociology, which views the former as helping to create cultural conditions wherein Lily can be viewed as a 'non-viable' creature whose death benefits a collective fixated upon a social Darwinist

interpretation of evolution. This fictional method sees Darwinian rules of physical heredity regulating the way governing ideological principles are handed down.

When Nancy Bentley reports that “Wharton, at certain fictional extremes, make[s] the exchanges of drawing-room culture indistinguishable from acts of coercive force” (The Ethnography of Manners 70), one can build on this insight to claim that this coercion is a patterning of biological imperatives such as competition for resources and sexual partners. The ‘exchanges of the drawing-room’ also contain and limit the visibility of the biological reality represented in strictly prescribed social relations. Manners imply a process of signification that intrigues Lawrence Selden. Yet as an observer of habit, he often fails to connect normative behavior to the concern over preserving his hereditary caste that manners represent. Thus blinded to passion and enervating desperation in ways Lily is not, he is “as much as Lily, the victim of his environment” (HM 152).

Similarly, Newland Archer in The Age of Innocence is insensible to impending social change. Whereas he can foresee life in the house that his father-in-law will build for May Welland and himself, “beyond that his imagination could not travel” (AI 71). The exchanges of the drawing room offer rites and forms that restrict the imagination in a way that disrupts access to instinct. Indeed, Lily is “a captured dryad subdued to the conventions of the drawing room” (HM 13). Mannered exchanges signify victimization by an ideology that shrinks the horizon of the imagination. Bentley’s comment thus directs one to consider *why* force must be used in the ‘drawing-room,’ opening the subject of manners in the texts to an examination of their relation to disruptive instincts that, as we have already seen, the novels depict as poorly understood, and whose potential to spark social renewal is undervalued.

Bentley's insight about manners as agents of coercive force enable one to view Selden's preoccupation with social forms as playing a causative role in his interpretation that Lily's every move is part of a "carefully-elaborated plan" (HM 5). His expectations regarding Lily's wishes mislead him; he knows that she must marry to survive, but he doesn't comprehend her desire to do the "natural thing" (HM 15) (to choose whom she will love) even though he is told that in being compelled to find a rich husband, "she despises the things she's trying for" (HM 189). In this way Lily reacts to traditions and values that direct the reader's attention to the imperfection of Selden's world. He, though, interprets even Lily's weeping "as an art" (HM 72), and could "never be long with her without trying to find a reason for what she was doing" (HM 11) because "his own view of her was [...] colored by any mind in which he saw her reflected" (HM 159). But where Selden conventionally sees Lily as a grasping and artful marriageable woman, she, ironically, "had never been able to understand the laws of the universe [her social world] which was so ready to leave her out of its calculations" (HM 27).

Juxtaposed with Selden's opinion of Lily is her sense that she is, by the novel's end, "rootless and ephemeral, mere spindrift of the whirling surface of existence" (HM 319). The "exchanges of the drawing-room" do a disservice to them both; social forms displace instinct, yet Selden has little understanding that their functioning denies him a part of himself. Acted upon by these same exchanges, Lily is badly served by the formal social categories of wife, mistress, and worker that the standard ideology makes available. The coercive force Bentley assigns to manners is interconnected in the narratives with the principles that foster and police a leisure class ordering of female sexual selection and male desire.

I build on Bentley's relation of Wharton's fiction to anthropology and ethnography, and on Nevius's suggestion that Wharton's interest in evolution carries over to her depiction of the principles of idealism relied upon by Selden's caste. I look beyond the limits of anthropological influences for a narrative remainder that can only be addressed by investigating Wharton's knowledge of biology and evolutionary theory. One rationale for my method is that the influence on Wharton of leading contemporary practitioners of the natural sciences is discussed in her letters and memoirs, a subject I address in detail below. Another reason for this approach is evident in a statement made by Dale Bauer, who has elaborated on Wharton's response to "the nineteenth-century anthropological model, [in which] culture functions as an imposed restraint upon the primitive and unlimited impulses and desires" (16). This view allows one to see Newland Archer's reading of books on "Primitive Man" (AI 44) as contributing to his analysis of his world, giving him insight into the ways he is controlled, and his sacrifice of instinct to conformity. Restraint of the primitive affects such leisure class characters as Lawrence Selden, Ralph Marvell, and Newland Archer, redirecting the 'naked instinct' of each character into aesthetic pursuits. For all three men, sexual matters vaporize in an aesthetic fog where cultural narratives envelope the 'impulses and desires' they encode, control, and dematerialize.

Wharton's own literary criticism also displays her interest in 'impulses and desires,' and evolutionary biology. In discussing the weaknesses of early novels in her 1934 essay, "Tendencies in Modern Fiction," she observes that "most of the characters in fiction were either 'stylized' abstractions or merely passive subjects of experiment, or both" (UCW 170). She states too, however, that "presently someone [. . .] noticed the impact of surrounding circumstances on every individual life, [. . .] the religious and atmospheric influences, and

those subtler differences produced by the then scarcely apprehended law of variability” (UCW 171).¹⁴ Noteworthy here is Wharton’s focus on the way material reality or ‘circumstances,’ and social institutions such as religion, are subject to the ‘law of variability’ so central to Darwin’s work. Fiction, according to this passage, can represent the complex interaction of social environment and natural laws, a claim further evidenced by her belief that “[d]rama, situation, is made out of the conflicts [. . .] produced between social order and individual appetites” (WF 13-14).

The relevance to the study of Wharton’s work of literary criticism that explores how other writers were affected by advances in evolutionary theory has also propelled the present investigation. Gillian Beer’s Darwin’s Plots (1983), which elegantly demonstrates the explanatory potential of evolutionary theory for late nineteenth-century literature, is a case in point. In another work by Beer—Open Fields: Science in Cultural Encounter (1995)—she quotes the final paragraph of The Origin of Species as an epigraph. This passage resonates with Wharton’s concerns as I have thus far defined them: “In the distant future I see open fields for far more important researches. Psychology will be based on a new foundation, that of the necessary acquirement of each mental power and capacity by gradation. Light will be thrown on the origin of man and his history” (3). Darwin’s statement seems centrally relevant to Wharton’s extension of his ideas into cultural spaces, for it postulates that processes described by evolution were active in the development of capacities for conceptual thought that define human beings. The affinities between the passage Beer cites and the texts I investigate provide a frame for viewing Wharton’s interest in American society’s gradual acquisition of ‘mental power and capacity,’ and a resultant cultural capital that can curb contingent and recursive evolutionary processes affecting social collectives.

Claire Preston, whose Edith Wharton's Social Register (2000) was published while this study was being written, notes that "Edith Wharton's work is difficult to place within the conventions of 'women's' writing; she is influenced instead by social fictions and by non-fictional work in biology and evolution, anthropology and sociology" (xii). Wharton's act of redirecting biology, and evolutionary theory, toward the task of fictional social criticism, suggests that the physical laws studied by science play on individual and social bodies in unacknowledged ways. The methods of science help her create work "supplemented by the intellectual range and detachment needed for the survey of culture" (UCW 205). Preston discusses The House of Mirth's objectivity, or 'detachment,' affirming that a biologically framed portrait of culture exists in the novel. Her discussion, however, points toward social commentary in this aesthetic:

Lily is not a self-supporting organism; she can only live in unnatural, ultimately insupportable conditions. Her dainty ideas of social suitability are unsustainably specialised: archaic, outmoded, they are more appropriate to an Old New York which social evolution has left behind, impossible in a New York in which 'the purely decorative mission' (HM 487) is no longer a sufficient *modus vivendi*. (50)

According to the values of the text, Lily *should* be able to live.

The old New York left behind by 'social evolution' had created a niche in which she could thrive, though such an existence limited her options. Whereas old New York aspired to fence itself off from contingency, the socioeconomic elite has dispersed this ideal and altered an environment that formerly offered sustenance to creatures like Lily. Wharton's depiction of this process is persuasive, not neutral; her method is argumentative, not objective.

Preston's suggestion that the conditions Lily *does* live in are natural is correct. Yet this must

be qualified by stating that Lily succumbs in an environment where the predatory activities of Wall Street seep into a protected social sphere. Lily has been “fashioned to adorn and delight; to what other end does nature round the rose-leaf” (HM 301), but this trait has flourished in the context of an *idea* of nature symbolized by the hothouse, or conservatory, that appears in the novels.

Wharton is clear in showing that Lawrence Selden’s view of Lily as artificial is correct, but only to the extent that her delicate beauty is a product of an older patterning of contingent nature. This pattern is dissolving in a new idea; nature is not only uncontrollable, but should be allowed into the enclosed garden of New York as something that will invigorate “the blind inherited scruples” (HM 104) of a desiccated world. Yet, as I show in my chapter on The House of Mirth, Lily would be a ‘self-supporting organism’ in a social context that acknowledged the example of a natural world wherein Darwin’s “ecological image of the ‘inextricable web of affinities’” (Beer, Darwin’s Plots 19) serves as a model for social relations that Wharton shows to be an option for a society composed of reasoning beings. Preston’s book has furthered this project by focusing it on those novels most amenable to being apposed to Wharton’s studies in biology and evolution, and by articulating “the severe logic of natural competition” that has penetrated “the social hot-house” (51) of The House of Mirth. I build on her work by connecting Wharton’s evolutionary interests to the goals of the author’s didactic fictional social analysis.

Despite Preston’s claim about the difficulty of placing Wharton’s work ‘within the conventions of ‘*women’s*’ writing, Hildegard Hoeller has recently argued for the presence of “a dialogue between the realist and sentimental voice in Edith Wharton—who is praised for her mastery of the former and deplored for her lapse into the latter” (10). Hoeller asks,

“[w]hat, aesthetically and ideologically, did the sentimental tradition have to give to Wharton” (10)? This is an important question, one relevant here for its suggestion that Wharton used the sentimental tradition for particular aesthetic ends, one of which, I argue, was to balance, with humanistic conventionality, the objectivity that permeates narratives which embrace scientific modes of description.

Hoeller’s identification of a dialogue between women’s sentimental writing and a realist, masculine gendered tradition, is particularly valuable for its assertion that Wharton’s fiction drew on both modes. Although the novels examined here were aesthetically not “of the highly sensational and sentimentally romantic type” created by the best-selling author E.D.E.N Southworth, for example (New York Times 1 Jul. 1899: 7), they drew from the tradition Southworth shaped. Wharton’s sentimental ‘lapses’ can be read as counterweights to her scientific realism. Lily Bart’s nostalgic inspection in her boarding-house room of fine dresses that are “survivals of her last stage of splendour” (HM 317) is but one example of sentimental writing that carries to the market Wharton’s biologically influenced narrative line, which otherwise depersonalizes Lily by classifying her as a cultivated and “rare flower grown for exhibition” (HM 317).

Wharton’s affiliation with, and skepticism toward, certain aspects of American realism and naturalism intersects with my interest in building on the work of these critics because both of these literary tendencies have been associated with a scientific perspective. Daniel Borus describes how those “who have tried to answer the question of why realism emerged in the late nineteenth century have often pointed to the prevailing cachet of science and its stress on observation and exactness” (9). Wharton’s pronouncements on naturalism in particular are harshly critical, even though she was clearly interested in ‘observation and

exactness' in her own work. While she shows a lack of sympathy in her criticism for fiction unwilling to represent the potential response of the individual to deterministic forces, critics have found in her fiction links to Crane, Dreiser, Howells, Norris, and lesser-known writers like Robert Grant. Wharton was a friend of Grant's and was acquainted with Howells through Henry James and Charles Norton. She "had a great admiration for 'A Modern Instance' and 'Silas Lapham'" (BG 146-147), for example. Nevertheless, one can identify a significantly different texture in the grain of Wharton's representation of determinism in comparison to this group of writers. The House of Mirth demonstrates, in the consequences of Lily's repayment of the money she has received from Trenor, the harm of a purely instrumental model of human relations, showing that such an implicit "[c]ontract might, as A Modern Instance dramatizes, undermine appeals to a higher standard of equity" (Thomas 33). Wharton's novel presses her case that biological models that bypass a 'higher standard' will result in extreme forms of competition.

Hoeller claims that Wharton's The Writing of Fiction is her "most self-conscious attempt to place herself inside the critically approved, and predominantly male, realist tradition" (12). Yet once inside, Wharton looked to the possibility that the individual acting in concert with the collective can take saving action in a hostile environment "against which only genius can prevail" (WF 133), differentiating her perspective from Stephen Crane's depiction of chance and the implacability of nature in "The Open Boat" (1894), for example. Representing, in the psychology of her characters, a potential to respond to indifferent forces, Wharton's beautiful failures (Lily Bart, Ralph Marvell, and Newland Archer, among others) diagnose their society's malaise by coming to naught. Yet each character gamely plays out his or her straitened options: Lily by trying, uselessly, to work, Marvell by playing the

market to purchase the custody of his beloved son from Undine, and Archer by moving as far toward Ellen Olenska as his tribe will allow him. Drawing upon another 'predominantly male' tradition, that of science, Wharton represents tensions between agency and determinism, and analyzes the way social-Darwinist attitudes create the reality they were thought merely to reflect.

Through these characters, Wharton participates in naturalism's affirmation of "the significance and worth of the skeptical and seeking temperament, of the character who continues to look for meaning in experience even though there probably is no meaning" (Pizer, Realism and Naturalism 37). Yet, her own criticism depicts naturalism as a mode in which "the novelist exchanged his creative faculty for a Kodak" [. . .] and "statistics crowded out psychology" (UCW 171). Ironically, in The Custom of the Country's Undine Spragg, Wharton perpetuates just the kind of shallow characterization she criticizes. Wharton's negative characterization of existing representations of social determinism chides writers inattentive to the ability of disenfranchised subjects to *comprehend and reply to* the effects of determinism, and for the failure of such authors to assert that where there is 'no meaning,' meaning can be made. Wharton counters texts that mute the actions of higher perception via the outcast Ellen Olenska's ability to identify "the blind conformity to tradition—somebody else's tradition—that I see among our own friends" (AI 240). Ellen's difficulties present the effects of tradition on the individual, but her reaction demonstrates her capacity to respond with a reasoned and critical reaction to the pressures she faces. Her rational judgment confirms the soundness of the narrative's probing of tradition, for Wharton carefully represents conformity, *and* articulates the attempt to control sexuality such conformity serves.

The author's focus on the socially useful response to determinism of characters expelled or extinguished by it differentiates Wharton's protagonists from W.D. Howells' depiction of moral salvation through independent action in The Rise of Silas Lapham. Although Wharton admired the novel, Howells' hero makes a redemptive decision despite the fact that he is characterized throughout the narrative as a man who acts out an ethos of economic individualism. In Wharton's fiction, no ghost in the machine of social mechanism facilitates unrealistic combinations of hyper-competitiveness and moral agency. The effort at self-redemption in Lily Bart's repayment of her debt to Gus Trenor, or Ralph Marvell's attempt in The Custom of the Country to regain the custody of his son, ends in failure and death that are attributed in both narratives to a collective abdication to a natural model of interpersonal competition that renders the moral impulse irrelevant.

This is an important difference between Howells and Wharton, for the latter refutes the notion that moral progress can spring from the cultural politics of her age. In her discussion of Dreiser, Rachel Bowlby notes that his "reading of Herbert Spencer is evident in a picture of an individual wholly subject to distant 'invisible forces'" (53). As much as this description might seem to apply to The House of Mirth as well, Wharton does not emulate Dreiser's uncritical depiction of a Spencerian interpretation of natural selection, whose reach, and qualification for representation in realist novels, is facilitated by a popular belief that nature is unconstrained within society, *and should be*. Wharton admired Dreiser's An American Tragedy when she read it in 1933, and was evidently struck by "his compassionate vision of the human being trapped and doomed to disaster by the very nature of things" (Lewis 520). So, too, did she respect Robert Grant's Unleavened Bread, a model for The Custom of the Country (Lewis 148), and Norris's McTeague. These were "great novels"

which had a “bitter taste” (UCW 132). Wharton was dissatisfied, though, with presentations of determinism that portrayed society as necessarily reflecting natural processes, for this only fed back into the perception that social Darwinism described a relation between nature and culture that was absolute.

For all her respect for the American realists and naturalists whose work she read, Wharton believed that “copying can never be a substitute for creative vision” (UCW 171). Her realism extended beyond depicting the material effects of determinism, taking her French masters as its model. In The Writing of Fiction she relates how “Balzac was the first not only to see his people, physically and morally, in their habit as they lived [...] but to draw his dramatic action as much from the relation of his characters to their houses, streets, towns, professions, inherited habits and opinions, as from their fortuitous contacts with each other” (5). One explanation for Wharton’s sensitivity to the presence of social evolution implicit in the hereditary system of values she notes in Balzac is the fact that “she had immersed herself in the skeptical sciences, especially in evolutionary Darwinism, and she understood both manners and morals to be evolved products of slowly altering social and ethical conventions” (James Tuttleton, “Justine and the Perils of Abstract Idealism” 165). From this immersion in science Wharton finds a way to focus on her characters’ will to evade the effects of ‘inherited habit and opinion’ seen in Ellen Olenska’s wish to ignore the instruction offered by “our little social signposts” (AI 122). Wharton offered “a much more complicated notion of selfhood and human agency than they [realists] are given credit for” (Thomas 23). Still, those writers who did not represent the complexity of the human response to determinism “beat their brains out against the blank wall of [a] ‘naturalism’” (UCW 171) which did not represent the

coercive aspect of inherited manners invisible in fictional portraits of mere 'houses, streets, towns, professions.'

Wharton's ambivalence toward fiction that lacked an affirmative perspective on the individual's search for meaning is evident, too, in her sympathetic recollection of Henry James's attitude toward naturalism. James, she recalls, noted that in such writing whatever was "smelt, seen, tasted, or touched, was given precedence over moral characteristics" (UCW 171). This recollection of James's opinion on the subject admits the importance of a moral dimension that in Wharton's fiction appears as an advocacy of reasoned action responsive to that which "seizes the characters in its steely grip, and jiu-jitsus them into the required attitude" (WF 133). In The House of Mirth, Lily's casting into the fire of Bertha Dorset's letters to Selden is one such deliberate act, the negative consequences of which are clear to Lily even as she acknowledges the potential "triumph" (HM 104) her possession of the letters represents. Whereas it is evident that Wharton reifies in her work the pessimistic determinism she critiques in her pronouncements on naturalism, it is her characters' active response to damaging circumstances that brings into being a sense of control, despite the fact that these acts can be self-abnegating.

Looking at the matter from this angle helps to clarify Wharton's statement that "real drama is soul drama" (WF 132). Indeed, acknowledging the role of 'soul drama' in her writing can help the reader avoid one interpretive trap in particular. The critic who would see in a fictional lens ground from biology and evolution a tendency to believe that for Wharton determinism is unanswerable must keep in mind that she tempers her realist "novel[s] of manners" with a sensitivity to less tangible human psychological faculties. This sensitivity results in the depiction of the "crowded stage" of each tale, where a "continual interweaving

of individuals with social analysis" (UCW 14) reveals her interest in representing her characters' *desire* to transcend a rigidly determined fate as perhaps the only consolation available to them. This imaginative, creative desire is also one way in which a deterministic environment might be transformed.

In the preceding pages, I have shown aspects of the critical reaction to the fact that the narratives I investigate make the case that whereas nature and culture exist on a continuum, "[e]ach of us flows imperceptibly into adjacent people and things" (UCW 6). The theme of interconnectedness is palpable in Wharton's fiction. Natural selection operates in social evolution; instinct and manners, and even fiction and science, are richly connected. Wharton doesn't plead against the central Darwinian principle that "many more individuals of each species are born than can possibly survive" (*Origin* 68) in suggesting that Lily Bart or Ralph Marvell should be spared. However, what ought to stand against the ideological reconstruction of unfettered natural selection within a rapacious elite culture in these novels is a collective capacity for reason that can preserve manners, traditions, and rites as a stabilizing influence in an increasingly complex civilization. Despite the fact that Wharton is a materialist in her recognition of the realities of class, capital, and labor, the politics of these texts argue, through insisting that agency and choice can negotiate with natural law, that ideas, not biology, are destiny. These novels attempt to critique the contemporary emergence of a "Darwinian ecosystem" (Preston 50) within society that downplays the potential for moral agency. Yet they face great difficulty in suggesting a way to fix the social problems that flow from a social-Darwinist model of social evolution unwilling to confront the moral questions it generates.

III. Sources and effects of Wharton's scientific study

In A Backward Glance (1934) Wharton acknowledges the role in her intellectual development of "the wonder-world of nineteenth century science" and in particular "'The Origin of Species' [. . .] Huxley, Herbert Spencer, Romanes, Haeckel, Westermarck, and the various popular exponents of the great evolutionary movement" (94). Furthermore, her letters refer to her reading of neo-Darwinist¹⁵ works such as R.H. Lock's Variation, Heredity and Evolution (1906) and Vernon Kellog's Darwinism Today (1907). The French writer Paul Bourget, who met Wharton in 1893 and was thought by her to be "brilliant and stimulating" (BG 103), described Wharton in a way that rounds this portrait of the writer as deeply engaged in scientific study: "there is not a book of Darwin, Huxley, Spencer, Renan, Taine, which she has not studied" (qtd. in Lewis 69). Furthermore, Wharton explored these interests during a period in which an "overwhelming interest in scientific developments and the new rationalism" (Hofstadter 24) took hold in the United States.

In the framework offered by evolutionary theory, the novelist's depictions of class competition dramatize a statement made in Darwin's masterwork:

As species of the same genus have usually, though by no means invariably, some similarity in habits and constitution, and always in structure, the struggle will generally be more severe between species of the same genus, when they come into competition with each other, than between species of distinct genera. (Origin 127)

That Wharton tended to see a human dimension in her biological reading is related in a 1908 letter wherein the author admitted that "[m]y biological reading is always embarrassed by the fact that I can't help seeing all these funny creatures with faces and gestures" (Letters 151).

These 'creatures' were the "biophors and determinants" (Letters 151) she encountered in contemporary texts on evolution.

In The Custom of the Country the social inheritance of values so important to a leisure class nonetheless "doomed to rapid extinction" (CC 78) orders primitive impulses and longings. In The Age of Innocence, similar patterning results from "Taste" and "Form" (AI 14), both of which overlie the instinctive energies they ultimately represent. Each of these narratives describes characteristics of the elite class through the reductive materialism of a biological viewpoint concerned, outside of its use in the fictional realm, with reproduction, biological change, and extinction. In the context of Wharton's 'biological reading,' this viewpoint juxtaposes the principle of mutability in nature—a central tenet of scientific texts that are metaphorical seedbeds for her portraits of social change—against the desire for cultural stasis. Newland Archer exemplifies the desire to control social evolution when he derides "[t]he stupid law of change" (AI 310).¹⁶

In addition to immersing herself in the study of scientific works, Wharton encountered in her reading of fiction varying literary responses to developments in biology and evolutionary theory. Donald Pizer¹⁷ describes the influence of evolution on American literature during the period examined by this study. He identifies a key misinterpretation of Darwinian thought that the novels I examine refute in a systematic way:

[...] Darwin's belief that biological change is the product of variation and natural selection was immediately available as a possible means of examining change in other phases of man's experience. The application to literary study of the environmental determinism implicit in the theory of natural selection was also encouraged, of course, by Taine's belief that literature is the product of a nation's

physical and social conditions. But the basic pattern of evolutionary change which was joined to Taine's environmental determinism to produce an evolutionary critical system was seldom Darwinian. Rather most critics accepted and absorbed Herbert Spencer's doctrine that evolution is, in all phases of life, a progress from the simplicity of incoherent homogeneity to the complexity of coherent heterogeneity. [...] The combination of Taine and Spencer is therefore the basic pattern in most evolutionary critical systems of the 1880's and the 1890's. (Realism and Naturalism, 88)

Born in 1862, Wharton came of age intellectually in the period Pizer discusses. In recalling that "Taine was one of the formative influences of my youth, the greatest after Darwin, [and] [...] Spencer" (Letters 136), she alludes to Taine's role in her creation of an 'evolutionary critical system' that would take up subject matter familiar to her contemporaries.

However, Wharton would not share the optimism implied by Spencer's doctrine, which viewed evolution as a goal-directed process. Informed as she was in these matters, Wharton would have encountered criticism of Spencer's views on evolution. He had, for example, come under attack from the American sociologist Albion Small who wrote that "biological sociology" had unfortunate ethical and social consequences, as Wharton dramatizes. In 1897 Small charged that Spencer's alleged "principles of sociology" were really "supposed principles of biology prematurely extended to cover social relations" (qtd. in Bannister 45). Something similar to this exception to Spencer's work figures ever more prominently in Wharton's texts between 1905 and 1920.

Spencer's influential interpretation of evolution as "a general law, applying outside biology as well as within, provided a justification for ethical action" (Ridley, Evolution 368)

that damned those at the margin. Wharton's literary application of evolution drew more from Darwin than Spencer. Hence, it is difficult to make the argument that her fiction is sympathetic to the idea that "the history of literature" and the history of her country displayed "progress toward a democratic individualism in expression and subject" (Realism and Naturalism, 88). Literature itself, particularly naturalism, could potentially play a role in propagating ethical action that eliminated the unfit by representing deterministic influences neutrally, without moral comment.

In self-consciously inscribing her place in the literary history of the United States by writing her memoir, Wharton clarified how her methodology differed when she asked, "[i]n what aspect could a society of irresponsible pleasure-seekers be said to have on the 'old woe of the world', any deeper bearing than the people composing such a society could guess? The answer lies in its power of debasing people and ideas" (BG 207). For Wharton, the optimistic and progressive idea that social evolution results in coherence is not reconcilable with the view she would have encountered in Huxley's writing that "social progress means a checking of the cosmic process at every step" ("Evolution and Ethics" 327).¹⁸ In the novels, Wharton assigns metaphorical meaning to this 'cosmic process' by associating the 'power of debasing people and ideas' with a relaxation of concern about the dangers to social selves of intense competition.

Wharton, of course, was not alone in seeing commonalities between nature and society, but her vision is easily distinguished from intellectuals in Spencer's corner. In 1901, for instance, Thorstein Veblen wrote that "[t]he life of man in society, just like the life of other species, is a struggle for existence, and therefore it is a process of selective adaptation. The evolution of the social structure has been a process of natural selection of institutions"

(147). One of my claims is that Wharton's fiction represents the extension of biological principles to cover 'social relations' alluded to by Veblen in order to articulate the limits that ought ideally to be placed on such principles, and to offer a counter-interpretation. The portraits of class conflict in the texts I address fictionally amplify points of tension between Darwin and Huxley, and Spencer's interpretation of how, or whether, to control nature's role in human society. Different interpretations of natural selection¹⁹ found in the work of these figures surface in the fiction as varying attitudes toward competition and sexuality held by the leisure class and the socioeconomic elite.

One way of quantifying the claim that certain of Wharton's texts work against the idea that literary history in the United States depicts progress toward democratic individualism is to locate and describe the uses of science visible in her own 'expression and subject matter.' This is an important activity because it can demonstrate ways that Wharton evades reproducing in her narratives a positive valuation of the ideology of progress she represents. While Darwin "never ceased to admire the clearness and condensed vigor of Huxley's prose" (Desmond 313), it is likely that Darwin's bulldog made a similar impression on Wharton, for she sought an "economy of material" (WF 56) that is at least partially responsible for the critical perception that "objectivity is practically a hallmark of her realism" (Karin Garlepp-Burns 39). Attentive also to Huxley's standard of proof, Wharton copied into a notebook his refusal "to put faith in that which does not rest on sufficient evidence" (qtd. in Lewis 229-230). Her remark that dialogue "should be reserved for the culminating moments, and regarded as the spray into which the great wave of narrative breaks in curving toward the watcher on the shore" (WF 73) illustrates her pursuit of an 'economy of material' with an organic image that makes of the reader an objective observer.

This rigorous basis for the avoidance of subjective and impressionistic fictional representation combines with her focus on claim and proof to suggest that Wharton questioned the application of a Spencerian evolutionary system to social relations.

Huxley's "Evolution and Ethics" (1893) appears to have influenced the formulation of the approach I have just described. This essay portrays "ethical man revolting 'against the moral indifference of nature.' [...] 'Evolution and Ethics' split the world; it separated a wild zoological nature from our ethical existence. 'Social progress means a checking of the cosmic process'. It selects not the 'fittest' but 'ethically the best'" (Desmond 597-598). Recalling Bourget's remark about Wharton that "there is not a book of Darwin, Huxley, Spencer, Renan, Taine, which she has not studied" (qtd. in Lewis 69), one feels justified in claiming points of contact between Huxley's essay and Wharton's fiction. In The Age of Innocence, Newland Archer's observation that May Welland "was making the answers that instinct and tradition taught her to make" (AI 82) demonstrates Wharton's sensitivity to the interplay of 'cosmic' and ethical processes in the social stratum she chronicles, and her protagonist's confusion over how to manage the conflicts they produce. Archer's inability to distinguish between instinct and tradition, evident in his conflation of the terms, illuminates cultural work that remains undone; the leisure class must come to understand that their "instinctive recoil [...] [from] unusual situations" (AI 108) is a hindrance to social stability whose guardians must rationally react to a random cosmic process in order to forestall it.

Evidence that this narrative perspective had been forming in the years before The House of Mirth is visible in Wharton's review of Leslie Stephens' biography of George Eliot (1902). Here Wharton defends Eliot against the charge "that she was too scientific, that she sterilised her imagination and deformed her style by the study of biology and metaphysics"

(UCW 71). Troubled by a perceived split between literary and scientific disciplines that she saw as richly connected, Wharton writes against the “belief that scientific studies have this [sterilising] effect on the literary faculty” (UCW 71). In this review, she refutes the principle implicit in “Darwin’s well-known statement that, as he grew more engrossed in his physiological investigations, he lost his taste for poetry” (UCW 71). Wharton’s reply to Darwin argues that

there is more than one way of studying the phenomena of life [...] the fixity of purpose and limited range of investigation to which the scientific specialist is committed differ totally from the cultivated reader’s bird’s-eye view of the field of scientific speculation. George Eliot was simply the cultivated reader, and her biological acquirements probably differed in degree, rather than in kind, from those, for instance, of Tennyson, who is acknowledged to have enlarged the range of poetic imagery by his use of metaphors and analogies drawn from the discoveries of modern science. (UCW 71)

Putting her observations about Eliot into practice, Wharton’s metaphors and analogies draw together organisms and individuals, but also literary and scientific methods. The resulting narratives reflect a refusal to be limited by disciplinary boundaries in her fictional use of evolutionary thought.

Promoting her own combination of scientific method and social criticism in the review of Stephens’ book on Eliot, Wharton differentiates her own work from the necessarily narrow concerns of science without excluding the use of its methods. While she can praise Robert Grant for “his consistent abstinence from comment, explanation & partisanship” (UCW 25), her objectivity is, however, deeply compromised by the interpretive social

commentary that is an element of her work. Even in a statement on the scientific theory that was an intellectual touchstone, one detects Wharton's appreciation of the persuasive uses to which it can be put: "No one can deny," she writes, "the poetic value of the evolutionary conception [...] almost all the famous scientific hypotheses have an imaginative boldness and beauty" (UCW 72). This 'beauty' lies in the metaphorical richness and transferability to *social* evolution of Darwin's 'conception.' Gillian Beer relates one reason for this when she remarks on how the "readerly community of the educated mid-nineteenth century in Britain assumed that it could rely on gaining access to whatever knowledge was current even within specialist groups. It was, consequently, often taken for granted that words retain the same signification across widely divergent fields" (Open Fields 203). Wharton was a member of this community, too, systematically educating herself in the science of the period, and reading her way through swaths of her father's library.²⁰ Beer's remark provides one possible reason for Wharton's imposition of scientific language on a social field seemingly removed from the study of natural selection. Wharton's texts, moreover, posit real connections between the development of human culture and biological processes.²¹

Contemporary skepticism toward this idea not specific to Wharton's fiction is easy to find. E.O. Wilson cautions that while there is evidence for a "hereditary human nature. [...] it is still risky to [see social practices] as evidence of the linkage between genes and culture" (149). In creating fiction and not scientific knowledge, though, Wharton is free to imagine connections unproven by the available evidence, but clear enough to a writer working out how instinct coerced into submission for the greater good results in misery for individuals. One potential source of encouragement for Wharton's creation of a linkage between genes and culture is Huxley's argument that "man, physical, intellectual, and moral, is as much a

part of nature, as purely a product of the cosmic process, as the humblest weed" ("Evolution and Ethics" 290). And while this may strike one as similar to Spencer's inclusion of social relations in the sphere covered by biology, Huxley finds in moral agency a way to differentiate nature and culture.

Social evolution can be constrained to a degree, not by embracing social Darwinism, which is shown to rest on an economically exigent interpretation of evolutionary theory, but by considering and acting on Huxley's statement that the "optimism of philosophers [...] prevented them from seeing that cosmic nature is no school of virtue, but the headquarters of the enemy of ethical nature" ("Evolution and Ethics" 324).²² It is this perspective that frames Wharton's critical representation of a hereditary leisure-class whose values the socioeconomic elite dissipate. The material success of this latter class has no collective benefit; social Darwinism is a sham model of the culture's biological foundation that disregards the ability of the human collective to grow toward a virtuous limiting of 'cosmic nature.'

One encounters a similar view in Darwin's The Descent of Man:

It must not be forgotten that although a high standard of morality gives but a slight or no advantage to each individual man and his children over the other men of the same tribe, yet that an advancement in the standard of morality [. . .] will certainly give an immense advantage to one tribe over another. (185)

When Wharton writes that "George Eliot's noblest characters shrink with a peculiar dread from any personal happiness acquired at the cost of the social organism" (UCW 76), it is a positive valuation of Darwinian interconnectedness that also endorses morality as a way to reasonably confront mute nature. Ironically, such a conflation of natural dependency and

human moral judgment affirms the need to suppress instinct, which can potentially vitiate the social model that attempts to exclude it.

Such ironies exist, too, in The Age of Innocence, where a representation of “the inscrutable totem terrors that had ruled the destinies of his [Newland Archer’s] forefathers” (AI 4) finds Wharton both utilizing and examining anthropology in her fiction. Archer muses on his “readings in anthropology” (AI 67). But his studies distance him from the ability to understand why it is that he feels that he has been “cunningly trapped” (CC 67) by class values that arrest his passion for Ellen Olenska. Alienated by these values from his ability to enact his passion, normal social relations blanket an understanding of sexuality for Archer. He evaluates his situation through his scientific readings, which allow him to analyze the ‘totem terrors’ that ruled his ancestors, but this simultaneously distances him from the passions such terrors symbolize. Wharton uses an anthropologically inclined narrative omniscience for the negative valuation of such a perspective in Archer. But the text’s implicit comparison of Archer’s dilettantish knowledge to the narrative’s authoritative critique of the analytical scientific perspective that deadens instinct seems ambivalent about strict control over the ‘cosmic process’ discussed by Huxley.

Lily Bart’s death in The House of Mirth is the logical outcome of the belief that ‘the survival of the fittest’ is a valid basis for social progress. The increased complexity of a society that creates members of a socioeconomic elite such as Simon Rosedale, Elmer Moffatt, and Julius Beaufort, to take an example from each of the novels I examine, should not be equated with progress in the moral sphere. For Spencer, nature and culture were not divisible. They developed in tandem.²³ Wharton learned this from Spencer. For Wharton, though, Elmer Moffatt’s “weapons of aggression” (CC 180), an unsheathed sign of the “new

spirit of limitless concession" (HM 272), assault the building blocks of literature, painting, and architecture that symbolize a cultural bulwark against filthy, unpredictable nature. In the monstrous combinations of old and new world architectural styles used to build their garish mansions, the titans reassemble elements of culture. Doing so breaks the "spell [...] [that] "seemed to emanate from the old house which had long been the custodian of an unbroken tradition" (CC 445); this 'spell,' of course, is a set of leisure-class principles that constitute a façade of order and control.

Violent fragmentation of a leisure-class symbolic order occurs in The Custom of the Country when Undine Spragg shows Moffatt the art treasures secreted in the private collections to which she has gained access; having already purchased a key symbol of a French aristocrat's familial association with royalty when he acquired a valuable Boucher tapestry, Moffatt eventually corners the art market and puts these symbols beyond the reach of the penurious aristocracy. In demonstrating that the 'success' of Undine and Moffatt is destructive to those around them, and to the fabric of leisure-class ideology the tapestry could stand for, Wharton holds with the fact that "Darwin's anti-teleological, anti-rationalist proposition demotes volition of all kinds, and with it human determinism" (Preston 51). These two ungovernable characters embody energies disruptive to the symbolic order of the aesthetically-inclined aristocracy. The natural law that they epitomize, once introduced into the social garden, disrupts the leisure-class performance of control over chance. The Custom of the Country's Charles Bowen thinks that "the surest sign of human permanence" (CC 243) is the impulse to create an illusion of volition. But whether leisure-class ideology is an illusion or not, Wharton's narratives assign to it the ability to enervate human determinism, and supply a response to Darwinian anti-rationalism.

Wharton's rejection of social Darwinism is also palpable in The House of Mirth's depiction of Lily as a fly banging "irrationally against a window pane" (HM 115). She is an "organism" with "inherited tendencies" (HM 301) who, though highly moral, is eliminated because the 'cosmic process' is poorly regulated. The Custom of the Country draws Undine Spragg as an example of an earlier stage in the evolution of society, as I have shown, who finds her "impulses" (CC 39) untrustworthy in a leisure-class context devoted to arresting the process that kills Lily in The House of Mirth. But Undine soon gravitates to Elmer Moffatt's sphere, where she can release her primal power. Undine is the logical outcome of Spencer's interpretation of Darwinian theory: "[t]he 'survival of the fittest' [. . .] is not just Mother Nature's way, but *ought* to be *our* way. According to the Social Darwinists, it is 'natural' for the strong to vanquish the weak, and for the rich to exploit the poor" (Dennett 461). Wharton's depiction of Undine's aggression illustrates this contemporary 'scientific' devaluation of moral agency, and judges it negatively.

The degradation suffered by Lily in The House of Mirth, and the triumph of aggression in The Custom of the Country, expertly describe the problem posed by an overt biological sense of social 'progress.' In these novels, Wharton portrays the eroding authority of a leisure-class that imagines a society wherein "the cosmic struggle for existence, as between man and man, would be rigorously suppressed, and selection, by its means, would be as completely excluded as it is from the garden" ("Evolution and Ethics" 293). In The Custom of the Country Ralph Marvell does not initially recognize the relationship between the social gardening Huxley describes and the 'cosmic' processes that necessitate it. Marvell's is a world that has lost sight of the hazards posed to social evolution by instinct. One such hazard is Undine, a protagonist who exemplifies Huxley's characterization of the

struggle for existence as “the unscrupulous seizing upon of all that can be grasped” (“Evolution and Ethics” 311). In her instinctive appetite for wealth, she displays a lack of the qualities ideally possessed by members of Marvell’s class. His stratum, forgetful of its obligations, has yielded to her, and become “frivolous” (BG 207).

The narrative shows Marvell’s romanticism blinding him to the need to ‘rigorously’ suppress the struggle for existence. He sees Undine through a scrim of myth, and fantasizes about lifting her to his own level of aestheticism. From his vantage he “seemed to see her like a lovely rock-bound Andromeda” (CC 86) and not the vestigial form she is. While Marvell criticizes a brand of capitalism associated with ungoverned nature that buoys the rise of the socioeconomic elite in the novel, he doesn’t divine the danger it presents to his way of life. Behind the new capitalism is a destructive “Wall Street code” (CC 233) fostering a “chaos of indiscriminate appetites” (CC 78) that admits the ‘cosmic struggle’ to the hothouse.

Similarly, in The Age of Innocence Julius Beaufort transgresses on establishment morality in his relationship with Fanny Ring. From the perspective of those he offends, his behavior does not require suppression as outlined by Huxley, only casual remonstrance. His actions are interpreted as an affront not to social integrity, but style, for “few things seemed to Newland Archer more awful than an offense against ‘Taste,’ that far-off divinity of whom ‘Form’ was the mere visible representative and viceregent” (AI 14). Divorced from real instinct by the very systems of signification used to control them, Archer and Selden taste the regret caused by taking ‘Form’ for reality.

Each of these novels finds that biology and culture are not separate spheres, though such a claim would trouble Selden, Marvell, and Archer. Before these characters experience the passions that will redefine them, they believe something like the following contemporary

description of an erroneous view of the relation between nature and culture: “[w]hereas animals are rigidly controlled by their biology, human behavior is determined by culture, an autonomous system of symbols and values” (Pinker qtd. in Dennett 490). The assault by the modern on the assumption held by these characters that nature and culture are separate results in their exposure to the fact that “[w]hereas animals are rigidly controlled by their biology, human behavior is *largely* determined by culture, a *largely* autonomous system of symbols and values, growing from a biological base, but growing indefinitely away from it” (Pinker qtd. in Dennett 491). Such growth, these novels maintain, requires vigilance, for nature is an ineradicable element of culture.

In the form of desire, instinct enters the life of Selden, Marvell, and Archer, showing them that their symbols and rituals signify something utterly true about themselves—their status as biological entities called upon to forge out of primitive energies a coherent society. They cleave to existing ‘symbols and values,’ and possess the tools to refine the forms that shore up an existing order, even if they are finally unable to. In French Ways and Their Meaning Wharton insists on this: “we should cultivate the sense of continuity, that ‘sense of the past’ which enriches the present and binds us up with the world’s great stabilizing traditions of art and poetry and knowledge” (97). Ideas are destiny; they form the content of cultural heredity that in turn stabilizes the social medium of its transmission.

When one considers Wharton’s ability to assert in best-selling novels a biological interpretation of social evolution, her narratives seem directed at moving beyond existing realist practices in terms of method and content. Her attempts to exceed the tools of cultural analysis she inherits from realist and naturalist writers, moreover, have consequences for the understanding of the cultural politics of the novels I investigate, for these narratives demand

the dispersal of interpretive tendencies and prejudices (social Darwinism, existing definitions of primitivism, and of nature) that obfuscate the complexity of biology's interactions with society. Wharton remarked that "intellectual honesty, the courage to look at things as they are, is the first test of mental maturity" (FW 58). As an instructor of 'intellectual honesty' to a wide readership, she sets the plank of biology as she understood it²⁴ into the platform of her fictional efforts to represent class conflict and the reproduction of political ideology in each new generation of Americans.

Chapter Two

“blind inherited scruples”: Lily Bart’s evolutionary ethics

I. “the requirements of the public” (UCW 25)

Edith Wharton responded positively to the “‘The Origin of Species’ [. . .] Huxley, Herbert Spencer, Romanes, Haeckel, Westermarck, and the various popular exponents of the great evolutionary movement” (BG 94). But the generality with which Wharton speaks favorably of Spencer’s work calls for a detailed account of The House of Mirth’s negative portrayal of social Darwinism’s belief in “an accord between moral fitness and the ability to survive” (Beer, Darwin’s Plots 64). The novel’s depiction of cultural practices that lead to the elimination of unfit individuals such as Lily Bart critiques the position that natural selection and other laws theorized in The Origin of Species *should* apply within human society.

Wharton frequently alludes to the writings of Darwin and T.H. Huxley in The House of Mirth, and exhibits her knowledge of contemporary books on evolution such as R.H. Lock’s Heredity and Variation.¹ These works provide her with a framework within which to articulate what Hoeller describes as “Lily’s specialization, Rosedale’s ‘impossibility,’ Trenor’s ‘carnivorous’ bestiality, and Gryce’s boring mediocrity,” which together comprise the novel’s “boundaries of race, taste, and morality” (133).²

The text’s commentary on what is wrong with the excesses permitted by such ‘boundaries’ proceeds through the presentation of Lily’s destruction by four elements: her socialization, or “training” (HM 301), her vulnerability to being “ruthlessly sacrificed” (HM 227) by Bertha Dorset, the complex influence of Lawrence Selden and his idealized “republic of the spirit” (HM 68), and an instinctive sensibility that drives Lily’s non-adaptive choices, and resembles Selden’s idealistic personal philosophy. Social Darwinism’s interpretation of

the role of nature in culture is only one facet of the novel, which is also concerned with the effects of such an interpretation on individuals like Lily Bart. Her socialization, and Selden's guiding influence, form part of an 'education' that suppresses finer "instinctive" (HM 17) tendencies made "obscure" (HM 105) to her by the available modalities for self-interpretation.

I focus here on biological allegories in The House of Mirth that demonstrate how an interpretation of culture that maintains it should *not* grow away from its biological underpinnings complicates the maintenance of a sustainable framework for social equity. These allegories problematize Spencer's biological view of collective human relations and counter it by suggesting that biological determinism must be reckoned with in a way less damaging to the always instinctive, yet reasoning individual. Investigating this set of issues seems particularly relevant given the contradiction latent in describing Wharton as a writer who has much to say regarding social and biological determinism, and who also claimed to be a student of a Spencerian sociobiology intrinsically hostile to democratic principles. The arguments made here on this subject are thus indebted to a reviewer of two recent books on Wharton's fiction, who comments on how "[o]ne can hardly think of a body of literature more hostile to feminist premises than the social Darwinist sociology and anthropology that Wharton apparently learned so much from" (Nowlin 227). My interpretation of what Wharton might have learned from social Darwinist sociology builds on this statement to find The House of Mirth fastening on to it as a correlative of those attitudes in elite American society she found most damaging.

Although Wharton copied passages from Herbert Spencer's First Principles (1875) in her Daybook in the 1890's (Howard 145), by the time she came to compose The House of

Mirth³ her enthusiasm for Spencer's work had evidently faltered. The shift in Wharton's fictional response to popular scientific works of the kind authored by Spencer, one that is visible in The House of Mirth, is illustrated in her short story "The Descent of Man" (1904), a work whose date aligns it with the novel. The story critiques the influence on serious intellectual pursuits of the market for popular books, depicting the perilous interaction with the world of bestsellers of an eminent biologist named Professor Linyard. "The Descent of Man" is also an early depiction within Wharton's corpus of the audience for popular books, a subject that appears in The Custom of the Country's detailed representation of mass culture and its effect on its consumers.

"The Descent of Man" portrays a public accepting of a subspecies of science made digestible through a suspect synthesis of fact and faith, and a literary marketplace wary of works that offer unadorned truths about the biological origins of life. Such unsweetened facts have the potential to disturb, as Wharton put it, "a public long nurtured on ice-cream soda and marshmallows" (UCW 153). Linyard is a rationalist who "felt within himself that assurance of ultimate justification which, to the man of science, makes a lifetime seem the mere comma between premise and deduction" (DM 360). But he writes a book in which his commitment to the method of 'premise and deduction' seems to bend to a popular metaphysics. The sequence of events surrounding this apparent "change of front" (DM 353) is the focus of the story.

The Professor is alarmed at a popularization of science that obfuscates the difference between facts laboriously attained and the way such facts are interpreted by newspapers, magazines, and best-selling books that equate science with metaphysics. This theme appears again in Wharton's fiction as a tension between the methods of the amateur and the specialist

in The Age of Innocence, where the “dilettante” (AI 4) anthropologist Newland Archer’s perspective is implicitly critiqued by the more comprehensively objective narrative. This subject is investigated in chapter four. In the short story, Linyard notes that “[e]very one now read scientific books and expressed an opinion on them. The ladies and the clergy had taken them up first; now they had passed to the school-room and the kindergarten. Daily life was regulated on scientific principles; the daily papers had their ‘Scientific Jottings’” (DM 349). It is not, however, the diffusion of a scientific way of thinking Linyard objects to most strenuously:

The very fact that scientific investigation still had, to some minds, a flavour of heterodoxy, gave it a perennial interest. The mob had broken down the walls of tradition to batten in the orchard of forbidden knowledge. The inaccessible goddess whom the Professor had served in his youth now offered her charms in the marketplace. And yet it was not the same goddess after all, but a pseudo-science masquerading in the garb of the real divinity. (DM 349-350)

In discerning an alignment between the “marketplace” and “pseudo-science,” the narrative attributes a misleading quality to representations of scientific fact sponsored by the former. The ‘flavour of heterodoxy’ possessed by ‘scientific investigation’ creates the prospect of strong sales for works that exploit this fact, but the focus imposed on scientific subject matter in being framed for popular consumption renders it unscientific.

In its portrait of how the predilections of a spiritualized public that has seized on science affects what passes for fact, “The Descent of Man” defines one objection Wharton has to popular interventions into the realm of the specialist. Yet she was herself one of those ‘ladies’ that read scientific books, though her reading was perhaps more rigorous than that of

the women disparaged by Linyard. "The Descent of Man" thus invites one to ask whether the signs of Wharton's intense interest in science are those of a specialist's attempt to create a higher standard for mass culture products such as her own serialized novels, and to what extent she sought to counter the trend noted by the protagonist of her story. That these related questions raise issues pertinent to the novels I discuss is bolstered by Gaillard Lapsley's⁴ claim in an unfinished introduction to Wharton's critical writings that she "disliked & disbelieved in metaphysics" (qtd. in UCW 43).

Wharton was placed in the position of reconciling her dislike of and disbelief in metaphysics with the tastes of her audience, whose belief in religion and simultaneous interest in science are carefully reproduced in "The Descent of Man." Hence, one can also assign Linyard's lack of sympathy for 'pseudo-science' to his creator. In the story's negative depiction of the interpretation of science through the prism of faith, and the seductive compensations of a market unsympathetic to Linyard's wish to write a "real book" (DM 362), "The Descent of Man" foreshadows the challenges faced by Wharton in achieving commercial success on her terms. Foremost among these challenges was Wharton's wish to reach a wide audience with 'real books' that critically addressed popular 'pseudo-science' with a reductive biological materialism that rejected metaphysics, positively valued the pursuit of truth through science, and yet questioned a similar materialism manifest in Spencer's thought because of its elision of moral agency.⁵

In "The Descent of Man," Wharton was perhaps defining specific problems posed by non-professional science to a clear articulation of how nature and culture interact. Examples of the kind of thinking Linyard attacks in the story can be found in Spencer's work itself. In First Principles, the book from which Wharton copied passages in the 1890's, Spencer argues

that “a civilized society is made unlike a barbarous one by the establishment of regulative classes” (317). Spencer’s reasoning is of interest here for Wharton’s exception in The House of Mirth to the methodology exhibited in the passage.

To make the case that the establishment of classes will result in ‘a civilized society,’ Spencer builds his argument by first describing how the mammalian embryo is reliant upon nutrition supplied by surrounding tissue. This is an illustration of the way “organisms are made dependent on one another” (315). Spencer’s observation echoes Darwin’s point that plants and animals “are bound together by a web of complex relations” (Origin 124-125). As I claimed in chapter one, The House of Mirth’s allegories, metaphors, and allusions indicate that Wharton drew on and transfigured Darwin’s idea, defining through the absence of interconnectedness the system of values regrettably lacking in Selden’s set.

In First Principles, the primitive dependency of organisms on one another is given a moral tone as the argument describes the operation of this axiom among more complex animals. This is evident in Spencer’s statement that “creatures who hunt in packs, or that have sentinels, or that are governed by leaders, form bodies partially united by cooperation” (315). As Spencer moves in his discussion from lower to higher organisms, his anthropomorphism surfaces in words such as ‘governed’ and ‘co-operation,’ which accents instinctive behavior with the vernacular of human politics, making his description of non-human, mammalian behavior inexact. Civilized society, in Spencer’s account, is ‘natural’ to the extent that it reflects the mutual dependency found in nature outside of the human social sphere. But Spencer’s conclusion that the appearance of ‘regulative classes’ makes ‘a civilized society’ unlike a ‘barbarous one’ is countered in The House of Mirth, where what defines and maintains classes is destructive to Lily Bart.

Wharton's literary reiteration of an ecological model of class relations derived from Darwin reenacts Spencer's methodology of drawing parallels between natural and social processes, but does not draw the conclusion that progress toward 'regulative classes' might protect The House of Mirth's protagonist. Lily's trials depict a society that has not incorporated one of Darwin's key points: "Let it be borne in mind how infinitely complex and close-fitting are the mutual relations of all organic beings to each other and to their physical conditions of life" (Origin 130). Her depiction of the applicability of Darwin's comment about mutual relations bends biological theory to social commentary, dramatizing her critique in terms that would present a positive alternative to the dispersive effects on interdependence wrought by wealth without responsibility, and by an aristocratic denial of instinct.

"The Descent of Man" goes on to relate the genesis of the Professor's reply to the 'pseudo-science' that he finds so ubiquitous in American culture:

This false goddess had her ritual and her literature. She had her sacred books, written by false priests and sold by millions to the faithful. [...] they filled him with mingled rage and hilarity. [...] the hilarity remained, and flowed into the form of his idea. And the idea [...] was simply that he should avenge his goddess by satirizing her false interpreters. (DM 350)

Linyard's new work will be "a skit on the 'popular' scientific book; [...] it should be the trumpet-blast bringing down the walls of ignorance, or at least the little stone striking the giant between the eyes" (DM 350). To realize this goal he takes the completed manuscript to Ned Harviss, an old friend who has become one of the nation's "purveyors of popular literature" (DM 350). Further revealing the story's juxtaposition of profitable faith and less

remunerative fact, Harviss “looked as if he had been fattened on popular fiction; and his fat was full of optimistic creases” (DM 351).

Wharton’s production of popular novels that exploit the cultural capital created by science becomes interpretable as an act of social intervention when one recognizes how in “The Descent of Man” she portrays the ability of the market to undermine the “the objective faculty” (WF 78) that is as important to the scientist as it is for the novelist. The tale retains the virtue of ‘objectivity’ even though it is pitched to the same audience depicted as having made “The Vital Thing” a blockbuster by containing the whole through satire. In considering The House of Mirth from this angle, though, one senses the need for an assessment of whether Wharton made compromises similar to those entered into by Professor Linyard, who believed that the “elect would understand; the crowd would not” (DM 354). I argue that Wharton successfully negotiates, in The House of Mirth, this strait between the demands of the market and her belief that the serious novelist is an agent of cultural change.⁶

During the initial meeting between author and publisher, Harviss, not having read the manuscript, suggests that Linyard take it to an educational house, adding that “[y]ou’re a little *too* scientific for us. We have a big sale for scientific breakfast foods, but not for the concentrated essences” (DM 360). When he does read Linyard’s book, its satire evades him. Harviss, instead, sees unlimited commercial potential in the work. In welcoming the Professor for their second meeting he thus exclaims, “I don’t know when I’ve had a bigger sensation [...] you’ve brought it so exactly to the right shop” (DM 352). Harviss takes the book to be Linyard’s “apologia—your confession of faith, I should call it” (DM 352). What makes the book a potential bestseller in Harviss’ opinion is that it is “full of hope and enthusiasm; it’s written in the religious key” (DM 354). This scene resonates with Wharton’s

call in The House of Mirth, and the other novels I examine, for the modification of an American 'hope and enthusiasm' that, ironically, extirpates Lily Bart, elevates the atavistic Undine Spragg in The Custom of the Country, and in The Age of Innocence expels Ellen Olenska and her belief in a mode of personal relations evasive of social control. Wharton's critique of the marketplace's fact-altering purveyance of a national ethos of progressive improvement indebted to spiritual faith is thus an element of her fiction one can trace to the period immediately prior to the publication of The House of Mirth.

When Linyard finally overcomes Harviss' belief that the book represents a "shifting" of "stand-point" (DM 353) and reveals to the publisher "the very core of the joke" (DM 353), Harviss reacts by saying "I don't pretend to be up in such recondite forms of humour" (DM 353). Such satire, to a man who claims to "represent the Average Reader" (DM 354), lies beyond the margin of intelligibility. As Harviss's eye for opportunity adjusts its focus, he suggests that the author not "insist on an ironical interpretation" (DM 354). The "book is susceptible of another" reading (DM 354), something proven by Harviss's initial reaction. Claiming that the work "is just on the line of popular interest," he convinces Linyard that "it'll sell like a popular novel if you'll let me handle it in the right way" (DM 354). The Professor agrees, and the book, now titled "The Vital Thing," goes to market.

Wharton perceived that the expansion of mass culture constituted a threat not only to the authority of literature, but also to the integrity of fiction's capacity to express the private voice. She retreats, via panoramic social chronicles, from "the nightmare weight of the cinema close-up" (BG 97) that makes a fetish of the individual at the expense of representing the social bond. Her comment on how a "universal facility of communication" (UCW 154) erodes idiosyncrasies, and makes society as a fictional subject difficult to depict, also

suggests that in her writing the cultural work of literature and the reader's capacity to become critically aware of his or her world are connected. "[O]nly when mediocrity has achieved universal diffusion" she writes "does it become completely unpaintable" (UCW 154), and thus, one imagines, invisible to author and reader alike.

Wharton's satire on works in which "ancient dogma and modern discovery were depicted in close embrace under the lime-lights of hazy transcendentalism" (DM 350) depicts Linyard's own mock-metaphysics as being subverted by popular taste. Yet the story is noteworthy too for its foreordination of Wharton's narrative practice in her most commercially successful novel, for the tonal darkness of The House of Mirth obviates the connection in "The Vital Thing" between bestseller status and the optimistic tone favored by the publisher of this tale within a tale. While "The Descent of Man" and "The Vital Thing" are both satirical, Wharton dissuades her reader from interpreting the former as a parable of a morally barren science in which "the recantation of an eminent biologist, whose leanings had hitherto been supposed to be toward a cold determinism" (DM 355) marks a victory for irrational metaphysics. She blocks this reading by equating such faith with a consumerism that caters to a public ready to follow the reasoning of writers like Spencer.

The House of Mirth reveals the author to be faced with a conundrum similar to Linyard's desire to take issue with the misrepresentation of how one arrives at facts when practicing science. There, Wharton depicts the social Darwinism that extinguishes the unfit Lily Bart as one result of a popular misinterpretation of natural selection that has become a cultural tenet. To make her point, though, Wharton must negotiate with the market for her work represented by men like Harviss. To succeed, she redacts unsentimental biological interpretations of social relations that would otherwise be perceived to run against the grain

of popular scientism that seems similar to our contemporary New age movement, relying in the process on established modes of popular fiction to increase the palatability of her product.

Of course, sales of "The Vital Thing" are strong. The book is compared by Harviss with the "'How-To-Relax' series, and they sell way up in the millions. [...] he drew the Professor a supplementary cheque" (DM 358). Once a solitary walker in the pursuit of truth, Linyard becomes a celebrity:

Presently his head began to figure in the advertising pages of the magazines.

Admiring readers learned the name of the breakfast-food in use at his table, of the ink with which 'The Vital Thing' had been written. [...] These confidences endeared the Professor to millions of readers, and his head passed in due course from the magazine and the newspaper to the biscuit-tin and the chocolate-box. (DM 360)

Linyard eventually feels the pull of his real work. The professor proposes a serious scientific book to Harviss, but the publisher refers to it as "a little harmless amusement. When you want more cash come back to us" (DM 362). The story ends with the Professor's decision to put off for six months the scientific study he wants to write. Instead, he'll do another volume for Harviss, which will be included in a boxed set with "The Vital Thing" that "will take tremendously in the holidays" (DM 362). Although this rational man justifies the decision to himself when he muses, "I can do better work when I get my new instruments" (DM 363), the reader is left with the sense that the Professor's scientific career is over.

Echoing her protagonist, Wharton's letters show that she had rigorous standards regarding intellectual integrity, but she also believed that "[t]he greatest writers have made concessions (if unconsciously, yet inevitably) to the requirements of the public" (UCW 25). Whether or not she made concessions that inadvertently rendered the sociobiological aspect

of her fictional social analysis illegible is a question that in being answered can illustrate the extent to which Wharton's desire to change her culture was overshadowed by the marketplace in which she labored. The "microscopist" (DM 355) of "The Descent of Man" understands his scientific pursuits to be a social act too. Linyard takes "a sociological view of his case, and modestly regarded himself as a brick in that foundation on which the state is supposed to rest" (DM 348). Like the author, Linyard associates the pursuit of unalloyed fact with political praxis. In this way, the narrative grants the seriousness of its protagonist's dilemma, one that is also Wharton's, in being faced by a "gross crowd" (DM 350) whose avid consumption of romanticized truths represents a turning away from an essential and continuing reinforcement of the state's foundation. Like Wharton, Linyard looks up from his loom to take the measure of his readers: "[f]rom this first inspection of the pattern so long wrought over from behind, it was natural to glance a little farther and seek its reflection in the public eye" (DM 349). The difficulties in addressing the mass market for fiction Wharton perceived in this reflection called for a careful and programmatic use of the scientific knowledge that would carry her social criticism to a reading public that took its fact with a strong dose of fancy.

II. Doing the "natural thing" (HM 15)

Wharton was a serious reader of Darwin,⁷ and she winnowed from his work a number of implications for social interaction of close-fitting interrelations amongst species. But The House of Mirth shows that a natural model of interrelatedness is comparable to a contractual view of relations in which human feeling is converted to a mode in which a pecuniary "mutual accommodation" (HM 259) is the gold standard for conduct. Scratch the surface of

the novel's presentation of Lily acknowledging her debt to Gus Trenor and paying it, despite the fact that this act impoverishes her, and one finds in the misery that results a critique of the transactional requirement she fulfills. For the novel, nature's model is a starting point only.

A strict adherence to a red-clawed mode of social relations will not address the moral dilemmas the novel presents. Thus, Lily's status as a biological entity (created by a social Darwinist viewpoint in the social environment the novel depicts), whose survival or extinction is 'natural,' is a problem faced by the narrative's hoped for vision of equitable social relations. But the narrative's biologizing metaphors and allusions also play to "Mr. Herbert Spencer's philosophy," which Wharton refers to as "the popular superstition" (UCW 73). As she holds out to her audience a portrait of Lily in accord with popular sentiment regarding 'the survival of the fittest,' the author also describes the damage to individuals caused by such a view. Moreover, the biologizing of Lily the text engages in, and describes as an activity of the milieu Lily occupies, conforms to the views of those who might believe in 'the popular superstition' *and* demonstrates the abandonment of moral social relations by those who turn Lily out of an artificial environment to succeed or fail. In ostensibly staying true to biological imperatives by turning her out, though, the dictates of manners limit Lily's power of sexual selection, which is problematic to the maintenance of social control. Lily, it seems, cannot fully be an 'organism'; social Darwinism's process of biologizing her selectively subjects to social control attributes that would disturb its own fictitious, politically invested sociobiology.

Such claims can be tested by ascertaining whether Lily behaves in ways that run counter to social self-interest only when doing so fulfills her biological will. "Why could one never do a natural thing without having to screen it behind a structure of artifice" (HM 15)

Lily wonders as she lies unconvincingly to Rosedale about the reason for her visit to Selden's apartment. Lily unthinkingly behaves in what the text renders as a natural way. Yet this behavior is not effectively modified by social considerations that are repressive when they are concerned with the fact that a woman must marry. Lily resists the reformulation of her habit of "measuring distances and drawing conclusions with all the accuracy needful of [...] [her] welfare" (HM 115) by the demands of her "training and experience" (HM 16). The marriage market would break her desire to evolve, and confine Lily's definition of her 'welfare' to the fulfillment of the expectation that she marry well. However, her urge to fulfill her nature is signified by the word "Beyond" on her signet ring, which implores her to do the 'natural thing'⁸ so deeply problematic in her social environment.

The House of Mirth consistently depicts Lily Bart as a biological entity compelled to move in a human social world where she

was less to blame than she believed. Inherited tendencies had combined with early training to make her the highly specialized product she was: an organism as helpless out of its narrow range as the sea-anemone torn from the rock. She had been fashioned to adorn and delight; to what other end does nature round the rose-leaf and paint the hummingbird's breast? And was it her fault that the purely decorative mission is less easily and harmoniously fulfilled among social beings than in the world of nature? (HM 301)

The metaphor equates Lily with the 'sea-anemone,' projecting a strongly reductive biological image. The Darwinian assertion that "[n]atural selection did not demand that life continually progress, only that animals anchor themselves into niches" (Desmond 258-259) finds its analogue in the fact that Lily is 'torn' from her 'narrow range' by "the cultural upheaval

marked by unprecedented technological, demographic, and political changes that were taking place between 1875 and 1920" (Nowlin 226). Her difficulties signify, in the novel's cultural politics, a failure of the organizing principles created by the 'social beings' amongst whom she lives. Wharton juxtaposes the battleground of New York society where an ethos based on competition holds sway, with the 'narrow range' in which Lily might otherwise survive. New York, and the oceanic environment of Lily's metaphorical equivalent, are thus similar. The phrase 'fashioned to adorn and delight' reflects an overlapping biological and social determinism in which her manufacture by 'social beings,' and biological processes, demonstrates the inseparability of nature and culture. Leisure-class social codes resist this implication, which is undermined by the novel's metaphorical blurring of the lexical distinctiveness of the definition of heredity in social and biological contexts.

The House of Mirth seemed to the critic who reviewed it for *Outlook* on October 21, 1905 to have "escaped the danger of setting up moral sign-posts on the road, and has given her [Wharton's] novel a concentrated and tragic moral significance" (*Reviews* 111). Nevertheless, the author's system of evolutionary metaphor displaced into the terms of scientific discourse a moral critique of "fashionable New York" (BG 207) intent on showing the damage to the social fabric wrought by a class possessed with great resources, but a failed sense of social responsibility. The fictional effects created by Wharton's clothing "[a] world in which such things could be" (HM 27) in metaphors and language grounded in evolutionary thought did the cultural work of moral signposts without being overtly moralistic.

The House of Mirth's representation of the social determinism that guides Lily Bart toward her fate is a central feature of a novel intent on showing how a "frivolous society" debases "people and ideas" (BG 207). Hence, one must focus on the methods Wharton uses

to realize the artistic task of associating such debasement with the favorable valuation of ruthlessness in business and personal relations which flows from the capitalist ethos the novel details. Undergirding this ethos is a fixed idea about the primacy of nature over culture the narrative shows to be erroneous. The leisure-class view that nature and culture are separate spheres errs in its belief that the latter is unaffected by biology; conversely, the view of the socioeconomic elite that nature is a model for culture, or might just make culture in its image, regardless of ameliorative efforts to the contrary, is also depicted as misguided. The resulting representation of a rapidly stratifying New York altered by urbanization, industrialization, and unheard of concentrations of wealth thus satirizes a new materialism that diminishes socially useful, yet abstract, notions like equality. This was recognized by a contemporary reviewer who commented on how “[i]t seems to me that she creates a very high ideal by her masterly presentation of the absence of all ideals” (Reviews 119).

The novel converts into literary capital a turn-of-the-century fascination with popular Darwinism by using evolutionary or biological metaphors. There are nearly thirty instances in The House of Mirth of the word ‘instinct,’ or a variant of it, for example. Over a dozen uses of ‘inheritance’ or ‘inherit’ accrue, conflating class values, and capital—both of which are passed from one generation to the next—with biological heredity. This mixing of social and biological registers is at the heart of the novel, informing Wharton’s method by facilitating her dissolution of a division between nature and culture. In The House of Mirth, this mixing of the social and the biological serves to allegorize random occurrences, connecting Lily’s card playing, her decision to drink the chloral, and her accidental meeting with Rosedale at the *Benedick*, with chance variations in nature. Chance thus becomes visible as a constituent of ordered upper class New York, despite the fact that leisure-class ideology

sees contingency as intolerable and controllable. Wharton uses evolutionary and biological language within a realistic presentation of social mores to carry forward her contestation of the way a 'frivolous society' turns Darwin's ideas to justifying injustice.

The text's interpretation of the nature/culture continuum does not deny that competition, or natural selection, are factors in social evolution. The novel, though, is at odds with contemporary society's interpretation of connections between nature and culture. Aspects of human instinct such as behaving in ways beneficial to the collective good are vital to the development of culture away from its biological foundation, while others, such as competition for resources, hinder the process. Finding consistency in the novel's presentation of what requires suppression, and what must be allowed to flourish, is a complex task. However, patterns emerge that suggest Lily's instinctive power of sexual selection, which causes her rejection of *socially* acceptable suitors, is valued positively, rendering as misguided the suppression of sexuality and the encouragement of capitalist excesses in the culture at large.

That Lily views her world from a perspective anchored in nature is clear. She sees different character types as "species" (HM 49); in a strong metaphorical invocation of natural selection, she admits to the belief that "a slowly accumulated past lives in the blood" (HM 319) of her parents. The psychology of individuals, moreover, is made up of "inherited passions" (HM 319) that firmly ties the behavior of social beings to biological heredity. In this way The House of Mirth represents a hybrid of social and biological evolution as a fact available for literary representation. The creation of a politically weighted alternative to the forces that destroy Lily Bart is one result of Wharton's method. This alternative values Lily's freedom to choose a partner, and her fate.

Organic metaphors describe Lily; it is not poverty from which the heroine turns “with the greatest shrinking” (HM 318), but the sense that she is “mere spindrift of the whirling surface of existence, without anything to which the poor little tentacles of self could cling before the awful flood submerged them” (HM 319). Although it is the narrative’s omniscient voice that most often describes Lily in evolutionary terms, even Selden feels “how highly specialized she was” (HM 5). The text also articulates how the evolutionary ethics possessed by Lily lie at the base of her negation of the marriage market. This makes of her self-sabotage in the nuptial sweepstakes an assertive act that exhibits “all her inherited resistances, of taste, of training, of blind inherited scruple” (HM104). Her resistance, in this reading, is a manifestation of “the blind motions of her mating instinct” (HM 319) that cause her rejection of Percy Gryce and others.

The narrative relates that “[i]n judging Miss Bart, he [Lawrence Selden] had always made use of the ‘argument from design’” (HM 5). The argument from design saw in the complexity of nature proof of God’s existence.⁹ In Selden’s application of this argument to Lily, her complexity proves to him the omnipotence of the social conditioning to which she is subjected, which is all-powerful in his eyes. But as with the argument from design, which was used to refute natural selection,¹⁰ but succumbed in time to the explanatory power of Darwin’s theory, there is a better explanation for Lily’s behavior. Selden attributes to her ‘training’ Lily’s pursuit of what she has been conditioned to want, but when she responds to his vision of freedom “from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents” (HM 68), he does not recognize that this ideal is an accord with her instinctive, though as yet unfelt values. Lily initially states that her idea of success is “to get as much as one can out of life” (HM 68). Prompted by Selden, though, her instinct is

metaphorically converted to values that cause her to repay Gus Trenor, and to refuse to blackmail Bertha Dorset. These values are set against a debasing society that uses nature's code without considering its potential mitigation by reason.

At the head of this society are the leaders of finance and industry. Characters such as Gus Trenor and Simon Rosedale possess attitudes reminiscent of J.P. Morgan's statement: "I owe the public nothing" (qtd. in Morris 30). The text's association of an anti-Darwinian argument from design with Selden's perspective on Lily reveals his willingness to apply faulty explanations for biological reality to social relations. His irresponsibly casual and consequential intermixing of biology and standards for social relations serves to damn the relativism of his class values, which loom starkly when Lily loses her social standing because it is "convenient to be on good terms" with Bertha Dorset (HM 226), who is jealous of her husband's affection for Lily.

Wharton's reference to evolution in the context of human social relations results in a literary sociobiology¹¹ that complicates the idea that moral and material progress proceeds linearly. Another contemporary review of the novel recognized the author's refusal to sustain the progressive note of a forward-looking nation that equated evolution with advancement toward perfection, remarking that "Mrs. Wharton makes no concession to the optimistic mood which is supposed to dominate American readers" (Reviews 112). Writing without conceding to such optimism for an audience with an inexact understanding¹² of key aspects of Darwin's ideas meant that Wharton had to confront and dispatch erroneous thinking on the subject. The House of Mirth thus explicitly shows the dilettantish Selden applying the argument from design, and repeatedly depicts his belief that nature only exists in culture as an imaginative construct, as when he notes that "the sylvan freedom in her [Lily's] nature

[...] lent such a savour to her artificiality" (HM 13). The novel portrays this misreading of Lily, and its dependence on Selden's belief that culture is a human invention insulated from nature, even as it formally exploits the familiar application of Darwin's work to society so it can offer an alternative to Selden's view. The effect of this, though it is perhaps too subtle to register on a reader laboring under misconceptions regarding Darwin's thought, is to demonstrate that the elite are out of touch with the social implications of evolution.

Defining the role of Wharton's scientific interests in The House of Mirth enriches existing criticism of her narrative. Elizabeth Ammons argues that "[p]art of the point of The House of Mirth [. . .] is to dramatize how perfectly trained she [Lily] is for the important job society expects her to serve as some rich man's wife" (31). Ammons's discussion of the novel takes up "the predatory economics and sexual politics" (35) that she finds evident, for example, in the crucial episode between Lily and Gus Trenor. While Ammons writes of Lily's failed opportunities to marry that "she does not want to be owned by any man" (35), her feminist perspective is not concerned with the source of Lily's refusals, seeing as self-evident Lily's resistance to patriarchal institutions. Ammons thus interprets Lily's actions as hesitation toward entering into relationships in which she is "powerless" (35).

Although the narrative encourages this reading insofar as it portrays the negative effects of marriage on women, Wharton's framework of evolutionary metaphor also introduces factors such as sexual selection, and presents Lily's refusals as the acts of a woman whose "social habits are instinctive" (HM 115). Hence Wharton portrays Lily as a woman who does not consciously understand her most natural response to circumstances. She therefore lacks (though it is sometimes a matter of degree) the intentional aspect Ammons ascribes to her.¹³ While opportunities to marry arise frequently—Percy Gryce,

Lawrence Selden, an Italian prince, George Dorset, and Simon Rosedale are potential partners—Lily, at crucial moments, acts in ways that preclude consecration of a match. The question of what causes Lily to defeat her goal of marrying well is complicated by the narrative's ambiguity regarding Lily's intentions (in doing so). Textual evidence suggests, however, that this ambiguity is a marker of Lily's *lack* of intention, or at least that inarticulate instinct guides her refusals of inappropriate (from her perspective) pairings because of what Selden calls Lily's "genius," which "lies in converting impulses into intentions" (HM 67).

As Lily "despises the things she's trying for" (HM 180), it is clear that she possesses an innate moral sensibility the text aligns with her instinct, the latter of which would, unhindered, drive her to try for the man she desires, and not one whose only virtue is wealth. Lily is instinctive too in that she does not consider her debt to Gus Trenor while she is in Europe, for example, because "[m]oral complications existed for her only in the environment that had produced them [. . .] but they lost their reality when they changed their background" (HM 196). This lack of intentionality is present, too, in her obsession over the question of why her best efforts to secure a husband go awry. She asks herself whether it was "her own fault or that of destiny" (HM 28), unable to discern that her actions are under the sway of a powerful instinct the narrative shows to be patterning her refusal to choose.

Another recent critic of the novel has noted that The House of Mirth "presented a specimen case of evolutionary metaphors. [. . .] Rosedale is 'still at a stage of his social ascent' (6). Percy Gryce [. . .] feels in Lily's ministrations 'the confused titillation with which the lower organisms welcome the gratification of their needs' (21)" (Howard 144). While Howard states that these "allusions toy with the evolutionary concerns of the day" (144), her

insight leaves undeveloped the conceptual exchange inherent in social Darwinism which makes Lily a “victim of avenging moral forces” (UCW 269) that are atavistic, and thus suggestive of a ‘moral’ code predicated on a natural elimination of the unfit. Clearly, then, the novel represents this version of morality as one unable to accommodate differences that can invigorate and renew it.

Howard states that “[i]t is not fate, after all, but a fastidious irresolution” (143) that causes Lily’s destruction, allowing the interpretation that Lily’s actions indicate her unwitting attempt to follow the dictates of sexual selection. Howard does not note Selden’s perception that Lily wears “an air of irresolution which might [. . .] be the mask of a very definite purpose” (HM 3). Selden’s attribution of intent to Lily is correct, but he doesn’t realize that she cannot see through her ‘mask’ either. Lily understands, at least, that infamy will result from her habit of wasting opportunities to marry well, even if this habit asserts a provisional independence. She “knew that there is nothing society resents so much as having given its protection to those that have not known how to profit by it: it is for having betrayed its connivance that the social body punishes the offender who is found out” (HM 104). Notwithstanding this, Lily recalls a sensation experienced during a youthful romance that is something she feels again with Selden. It is a “sense of lightness, of emancipation [. . .] that glow of freedom” (HM 65). For Lily, ‘irresolution’ holds at length the hollow alternative of the socially sanctioned match in favor of an attraction that fulfills biological ‘will’ and is felt bodily. Lily’s instinct thus carries her toward the fulfillment of her biological will, but also into conflict with leisure-class ideology intent upon suppressing instinct, and a system of thought held by the socioeconomic elite (particularly Rosedale) sympathetic to Lily’s natural impulses, yet intolerant of her habit of lowering her ‘value’ as social currency

The view that Wharton portrays a form of competition modeled on nature has found acceptance in recent criticism of The House of Mirth. Claire Preston, for example, “considers Wharton’s use of Darwinian metaphors of survival and adaptation [. . .]. Lily’s outcasting is, in a sense, impersonal, merely biologically necessary rather than governed by volition or intention; the tragic agent of The House of Mirth is thus less human than environmental” (xiii-xiv). Preston, though, is unclear here on the question of just who is using ‘Darwinian metaphors’ in the novel; one important question her analysis does not address is the potential for the biased use of such metaphors, which are a powerful tool for the elimination of the unfit and the ideological nonconformist, by the social collective Wharton depicts. In writing of Wharton’s use of Darwinian metaphors, Preston collapses the author’s depiction of the way evolutionary thought permeates elite New York, *contributing to* the view that Lily’s demise is ‘environmental,’ or ‘natural,’ and the omniscient narrative’s perspective on the heroine’s fate, which delineates Lily’s life as one of “wasted human possibilities” (UCW 266).

A hereditary gentry that might be a venerable caretaker of aesthetic and intellectual achievement becomes, in the view the novel critiques, a stratum that has allowed the contours of its social environment to resemble the natural world, where no moral center exists to offer an alternative to what befalls Lily Bart. The tragic movement of the novel portrays a character victimized by the fact that her “specialized” (HM 5) traits are ill-suited to the demands of a shifting environment ready to embrace Spencerian sociobiology. In such an understanding, moral volition of the kind Lily, to her detriment, eventually practices is an ideal only, one she sees as such: “[w]hy do we call our generous ideas illusions, and our mean ones truths?” (HM 70). Her avoidance of the “personal contamination” (HM 104) she

feels in contemplating the fact that she can “overthrow with a touch the whole structure” (HM 104) of Bertha Dorset’s life displays non-adaptive, non-competitive behavior that is an insupportable ideal in her social context. This ideal, however, constitutes the marketable core of this novel of moral sentiment.

Lily’s searching reaction to her downward social and economic status defines an equally unrealistic desire for interdependence between classes and individuals as her “vision of the solidarity of life” (HM 319). This outlook is evident, too, in Lily’s “faculty of adapting herself, for entering into other people’s feelings, [which] if it served her now and then in small contingencies, hampered her in the decisive moments of life” (HM 53) such as those moments where she ought to follow through on opportunities to marry. This shape-shifting trait is not uncommon in her set, for even Selden has “tried to remain amphibious” (HM 70); he wishes to retain an ability to function amongst the elite, while maintaining the ability to breathe “in another air” (HM 70). Yet conventional definitions of womanhood, and Selden’s pernicious aestheticism, overwrite Lily’s instincts, which have no standing in the realm of a leisure-class ordering of selfhood through language, ritual, and other symbolic modes such as visual art.

The limits of Lily’s consciousness show one aspect of the often-overestimated influence of Henry James’s writing on Wharton’s formal practices. In The Writing of Fiction Wharton notes how “James sought the effect of verisimilitude by rigorously confining every detail of his picture to the range, and also to the capacity, of the eye fixed on it” (WF 89-90). In her depiction of Lily’s imperfect understanding of how early conditioning betrays her better instincts, Wharton adheres to this axiom rigorously while omnisciently describing the factors that condition the range and capacity of Lily’s viewpoint. Lily’s inability to marry

Selden, or her other suitors, may be self-destructive. She's been warned that "the only thing that can save you from Bertha is to marry somebody else" (HM 252), but her bristling refusals temporarily preserve her dissolving sphere of autonomy.

Whether or not Lily comprehends the friability of this autonomy is a question Wharton critics have addressed. Modellmog argues that "[j]ust when we think we are getting to know 'the real Lily Bart,' Wharton discards her authorial omniscience and withholds from us central elements of Lily's consciousness. 'Intimacy' seems no more possible between Lily and the reader than between Lily and Selden" (338). Such a critique can be made of Wharton at those moments in the novel when Lily seems inexplicably to act in a way that contradicts her goal of marrying well. However, Modellmog's interpretation doesn't contend with the possibility that Wharton withholds nothing of Lily's *consciousness* from the reader, and that her portrait finds warring influences of sexual selection and socialization nullifying the latent connection with Selden.

Furthermore, the text 'withholds' intimacy between Lily and the reader because Lily is awash in the riptide of her 'early training,' even as she senses the weak countercurrent of her instincts in her physical reaction to Selden. The 'central elements of Lily's consciousness' referred to by Modellmog are in flux, and thus cannot be represented by her except as what Selden calls Lily's "irresolution" (HM 3). For example, while the reader can see no reason why Lily shouldn't blackmail Bertha, it is an action the narrative indicates would deeply compromise the protagonist's better instincts, even as it would save her socially. Lily wavers over whether to use the letters to benefit herself, but her knowledge of the consequences for Selden prevails, and a course of action unmediated by Lily's training is prevented:

Bertha Dorset's letters were nothing to her—they might go where the current of chance carried them. But Selden was inextricably involved in their fate. Men do not, at worst, suffer much from such exposure; [. . .]. Nevertheless, the fact that the correspondence had been allowed to fall into strange hands would convict Selden of negligence in a matter where the world holds it least pardonable. (HM 105)

A second reason for withholding the letters, one that resonates with the Darwinian metaphor of interdependence as social model, is that saving Selden is an expression of Lily's love for him. Still, Lily's awareness of the interconnectedness of those from different classes is incomplete at this stage, for a few pages earlier she has swept by a char-woman on her aunt's stairs, thinking it "insufferable that Mrs. Peniston should have such creatures about the house" (HM 99). Notable, too, is Lily's sensitivity to the presence of 'chance' in the matter of the letters, a process she interrupts by taking action, and which is consonant with the mitigation of the harmful effects of natural selection her story symbolizes.

Other novels express interdependence in organic terms as well. In The Fruit of the Tree (1907), "human relations [are] [...] a tangled and deep-rooted growth, a dark forest through which the idealist cannot cut his straight path without hearing at each stroke the cry of the severed branch: '*why woundest thou me*'" (FT 624). Similarly, Lily Bart's non-adaptive interest in 'solidarity,' and the fact that she refuses her opportunity for redemption via Bertha Dorset's letters, recreates in the text a tension between competition and interdependence addressed in the following passage from The Origin of Species:

The dependency of one organic being on another, as of a parasite on its prey, lies generally between beings remote in the scale of nature. This is often the case with those which may strictly be said to struggle with each other for existence [. . .]. But

the struggle almost invariably will be most severe between the individuals of the same species, for they frequent the same districts, require the same food, and are exposed to the same dangers. (Origin 126)

Mrs. Haffen's offer to sell Bertha Dorset's letters to Lily presents an exchange-based form of mutual dependence in which Selden's reputation has a cash value. Yet Lily refuses what, in the light of Darwin's statement, would be the natural thing. Here, a working-class woman and Lily, beings 'remote in the scale of nature' now transposed to a class system, would fulfill the principle of 'the dependency of one organic being on another.' Instead, Lily opts to follow Selden's lead and not participate in the exchange. She occupies an environment hostile to her ameliorative impulse to redefine 'the struggle' detailed by Darwin. In this environment, doing the "natural thing" (HM 15), whether enacting her power of sexual selection, or by competing directly with Bertha Dorset, will in the former case upset the sublimation of sexual instinct to class affiliation, or in the latter, play into an ethos of intense struggle Lily's selectively, authorially politicized 'instincts' oppose.

Lily's initial outrage at Mrs. Haffen's offer is tempered when "an obscure impulse restrained her" (HM 105). The 'obscure impulse' provoked by Haffen is an upwelling of Lily's instinctive morality, which though innate, seems also a reversion to Selden's influence on her evaluation of potential courses of action: "[i]f Lily weighed all these things it was unconsciously: she was aware only that Selden would wish the letters rescued, and that therefore she must obtain possession of them" (HM 105). Selden's idealism governs Lily. The most adaptive act, obtaining the letters for her own protection, is an alternative that if it occurs to her, only occurs 'unconsciously.' Her desire to protect Selden, though, is one that betrays his influence.

Gaining possession of the letters gives her no real advantage, as it leads her to the brink of blackmailing Bertha Dorset, an act that would save her socially but compromise the sense of self established in freeing herself from “what had contented [her] before” (HM 308). This freedom is of Selden’s design and cannot sustain Lily, but beyond the consequences for Selden “her mind did not travel” (HM 105). Only later, as her fortune declines, will Lily understand that her own instinctive ethics, which are quite similar to Selden’s, enables her to see into the lives of “young girls, like herself [...] leading [...] a life in which achievement seemed as squalid as failure—and the vision made her shudder sympathetically” (HM 111-112). Sympathy, unfortunately, is incompatible with self-preservation in her environment.

III. “What *is* your story Lily?” (HM 226)

Many years after writing The House of Mirth Wharton wrote that women seeking an education might “better stay at home and mind the baby” (qtd. in Benstock 387). Her portrait of the straitened options available to Lily Bart, and the consequences descending on women such as Ellen Olenska who make untraditional choices, make the statement a warning, rather than an indication of authorial conservatism. The danger to those who do not take up the domestic role Wharton refers to is apparent in The House of Mirth. When Selden alludes to the effects of determinism on Gerty Farish, whom he believes to be “so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate” (HM 7), the narrative directs attention to Selden’s narrow view of the choices available to women. He does not admit that Lily might find a niche for herself by emulating Gerty, whose lack of husband has consigned her to the margin. This would be a less compromising path for Lily, whose impecuniousness subjects her to “the

shock of the insult” of Bertha Dorset’s public humiliation when Lily must absorb the fact that she ““is not going back to the yacht”” (HM 218) and has no place to stay.

While the links of Gerty Farish’s bracelet are of the same manufacture as Lily’s, around Lily’s wrist rests a “sapphire bracelet” which causes Selden to appreciate “the irony of suggesting to her such a life as his cousin Gertrude Farish” (HM 7). Selden’s aesthetic appreciation of Lily hinders his realistic assessment of her material circumstances, and shapes the guidance that flows from that impression. To him, Lily’s attempts to avoid self-compromise are “like a cry for rescue” (HM 158) that elicits from Selden only chivalric fantasy in which he imagines himself aiding Lily as she “clings to him with dragging arms as he beats back to land with his burden” (HM 154). That Lily takes Selden’s opinion to heart is explicit in her statement that his idealized view of her “kept me from really becoming what many people have thought me” (HM 307). Nevertheless, she demonstrates her awareness that her manacles are of iron, not gemstone, when she asserts, in reference to the period in which she initially met Selden, that “[e]ven then her feet had been set in the path she was now following” (HM 304), as her circumstances worsen.

Alongside Selden’s misinterpretation of Lily is her own confusion about what Gerty has achieved. Lily’s barb that Gerty has “no maid, and such queer things to eat” (HM 7) doesn’t acknowledge the degree of autonomy Gerty maintains. Lily’s disdain is clear, for Gerty’s “was a hateful fate. [...] but how to escape from it?” (HM 25). Yet in a moment of insight Lily acknowledges that “she is free and I am not” (HM 7). The novel makes clear that the extent to which Gerty is free is dependent on her knowledge that “[r]eason, judgment, renunciation, all the sane daylight forces, were beaten back in the sharp struggle for self-preservation” (HM 162-163). Gerty has an acute sense of her limitations, and fashions her

life according to her awareness of the social restrictions placed on her. Having found a niche she enjoys “the privileges of a flat;” but Lily remarks that it is “a horrid little place” (HM 7). Try as she might, Lily can only ask “what else is there” (HM 9) except marriage, even though the compromise alternative presented by Gerty is in plain view. Not until the end of the novel when she admires the choices made by Nettie Struther does Lily see a positive aspect to a life in which she might not capitalize on her own status as a “marriageable girl” (HM 7).

Despite the conflicting demands of personal integrity and economic salvation through marriage, Lily avoids falling into what is defined within the context of the novel’s figurative system as real barbarism: behavior that violates a fictionalized version of Darwin’s remark about “how infinitely complex and close fitting are the natural relations of all organic beings to each other and to their physical conditions of life” (Origin 130). Lily refuses marriage offers despite the fact that acceptance would transform her from the figuratively trapped insect she is into the member of society her training urges her to become. But she acts, unawares, in ways that run counter to her best interests as a social being. This renders Lily opaque to others: “[a]ll I can say is, Lily, that I can’t make you out!” (HM 75) utters an exasperated Mrs. Trenor after Lily has spoiled her opportunity to marry Percy Gryce. Mrs. Trenor is bewildered because Lily wants to do the “natural thing” (HM 15) and choose a partner on the basis of sexual attraction, and sympathies of mind and intellect, independent of the manner in which desire is guided by ideologies of class.

When Selden asks Lily “[i]sn’t marriage your vocation?” (HM 3), he defines the goal of her social training. His question defines a prevalent attitude that Lily must negotiate with. Wharton articulates this attitude in writing that “[m]arriage, union with a man, completes and

transforms a woman's character, her point of view, her sense of the relative importance of things. [...] A girl is only a sketch; a married woman is the finished picture. And it is only the married woman who counts as a social factor" (FW 114). That one must be cautious in imputing social conservatism to Wharton on the basis of such comments is clear from her fiction, where women who do not marry are sympathetically portrayed as socially hobbled. Such statements are better interpreted as describing a reality the author seeks to alter. This proposition is bolstered by the fact that while Lily is unwilling to marry the 'right' man, who in each scenario is seen to be a poor match, her unwillingness guarantees that she will not be a 'social factor.' From the perspective of the social environment Wharton describes, Lily is 'only a sketch,' which makes it more necessary than the protagonist knows for her to attend to the 'sharp struggle for self-preservation' that occupies Gerty.

A critical view of The House of Mirth as an example of a naturalist mode that portrays an unanswerable social determinism has been qualified by the contention that Lily is a seeking and self-affirming character.¹⁴ However, the presentation of Gerty's way of evading those aspects of the social environment that oppress Lily describes a path not taken by the heroine. Early in the novel, Lily defines success as getting "as much out of life" as she can (HM 68), but her statement is ambiguous, referring perhaps to material, not spiritual satisfaction. Lily won't consider Gerty's sacrifices and compromises, even though they grant Gerty provisional freedom. Instead, the protagonist's negation of the social determinism depicted in the novel, primarily the idea that "a girl must [marry], a man may if he chooses" (HM 12), takes the form of a series of acts which modify, even subvert, her stated definition of success. Lily might make a self-affirming choice in refusing to marry an "ass" like Percy Gryce (HM 83), though in wondering "why she had failed" (HM 28) she doesn't perceive

what motivates her actions. What she seeks is driven by mute impulse. While Gerty is maddened because “[t]he provoking part was that Lily knew” (HM 16) how to play the social game to her advantage, Lily recognizes what is expected of her, but perceives with less clarity the instinctive avoidance of the inappropriate mate that is the source of her baulking.

Gerty poses an important question after Bertha Dorset’s public sacrifice of Lily that illustrates the parameters of Lily’s understanding of her behavior and why it is at odds with Lily’s social context. Gerty asks, “[w]hat *is* your story Lily? I don’t believe anyone knows it yet [. . .] I don’t want a version prepared in advance—but I want you to tell me what happened from the beginning” (HM 226). Lily is not sure how to answer: “My story?—I don’t believe I know it myself” (HM 226). Lily continues, remarking that “the beginning was in my cradle, I suppose, in the way I was brought up, and the things I was taught to care for. [. . .] I’ll say it was in my blood” (HM 226). What she has been taught to care for and what she has inherited culturally and biologically run together in Lily’s mind. In contrast to Selden, she makes little distinction between the two sources of influence. What is in her blood attempts unsuccessfully to express itself within an environment made up of “a hundred shades of aspect and manner” (HM 234) that encode the biological will that Lily displays in refusing to marry.

A contemporary review of The House of Mirth praises Wharton for her ability to register “to the last degree of delicacy the jumble of crudity and overcivilization which she finds in New York life of to-day. She describes coolly and patiently [. . .] the interminable race after pleasure which that fierce little world [. . .] engages in” (Reviews 117). This remark emphasizes the wide-angle perspective of a novel that is also acutely focused on a single consciousness. Lily’s response to the pressures of the marriage market confirms a

conflict between an innate sensibility distinguished by her contradictory, though natural, avoidance of 'the things she's trying for,' and the deforming emphasis on "the use she made of it [her beauty]" (HM 49) in marrying wealth. When she states, "I am horribly poor—and very expensive. I must have a great deal of money" (HM 10), her self-conscious analysis of her situation demonstrates an understanding only of public expectations. The text signals how the 'obscure' initiative of primal, truer impulses is blunted by this expectation, with the result that Lily suffers in a hermetic social world that gives her only "the doomed sense of the castaway who has signaled in vain to fleeing sails" (HM 229). The narrative's connection of this personal suffering to a 'race after pleasure' emphasizes the causal sequence of 'overcivilization,' and its invalidation of Lily's socially redemptive impulse to simultaneously limit competition, and choose her sexual partner.

Lily's experience with Gus Trenor shows how her inaccurate surmises reflect negatively on the 'fierce little world' she lives in, rather than on her own "instinctive feeling" (HM 17). Trenor offers to invest money in the stock market for Lily and she comes to believe, as he reports that her investment is performing well, that the "first thousand dollar cheque" (HM 85) represents a return on her investment. In truth, Trenor gives Lily his own money, expecting sex in exchange. Through the interaction of these characters, Wharton examines multiple interpretations of the word *obligation*, which is understood by Lily early in the novel, before her consciousness-raising dialogues with Selden, only in the sense of a debt that can be settled and erased. Later, after becoming fully conscious of Trenor's ruse, and examining the situation from a fresh perspective, she feels that "it was not the sort of obligation one could remain under" (HM 292).

This reaction bears the mark of Selden's idealism (and possibly his jealousy), and its influence on Lily. His vision of "a country one has to find the way to one's self" (HM 68) ironically directs Lily to act in ways that ruin her. Lily's training obscures her discernment of a path to Selden's country, despite the fact that he sways her toward belief in his 'republic.' Before she becomes enmeshed in his ideals she admits to the fact that "a girl who has no one to think for her is obliged to think for herself" (HM 67), but even this provisional independence is compromised by the effects of her 'fierce little world,' particularly in the ways it has shaped her interpretive powers. Thus, when she tells Selden that she would "never have found my way there if you hadn't told me" (HM 68), one senses that her training functions to subdue her impulse to find a niche outside of marriage. Lily feels that she "had never been able to understand the laws of the universe" (HM 27). Neither does she perceive explanations regarding concrete aspects of her world with great clarity, finding descriptions of Wall Street machinations to be "slurred" (HM 85), and her own impulses to be "obscure" (HM 105). Her assumption that she contends with the real 'laws of the universe' is erroneous. Rather, she is subject to interpretations of these laws that originate with Selden, Trenor, Rosedale, and others.

Lily's sense of obligation to Trenor is a result of her training, her innate Darwinian ethics, and the influence of Selden's idealism. Her decision to pay the debt is spurred by a snub from Judy Trenor and Carry Fisher. Lily assumes that her maltreatment by these women comes from the fact that Mrs. Trenor knows of the protagonist's indebtedness to her husband. Although discharging the debt will leave her with "nothing left to live on but her own small income [...] this consideration gave way to the imperative claim of her wounded pride" (HM

229). Lily's reaction reveals that maintaining her standing is supremely important; in this instance, training guides her.

Her repayment of the debt cannot be motivated exclusively by a wish to follow her training, though. Lily receives the money to make good on the obligation only after she has been "cut" (HM 225) by her former friends, and therefore won't benefit from being perceived to conform socially. Repaying the money to Trenor is unnecessary from this vantage, for "what debt did she owe to a social order that had condemned and banished her without trial?" (HM 300). That Lily ultimately pays Gus Trenor shows again that the social environment, not Lily, is faulty, even though her ways are obsolete, and so faulty in that sense. The text does also make a predominant ethos of hypocrisy clear by showing that had Lily inherited Grace Stepney's legacy, cordial relations might have resulted: "[t]hey were afraid to snub me while they thought I was going to get the money" (HM 225). Later in the narrative, Selden tells Lily that "[t]he difference is in yourself—it will always be there" (HM 307). This serves to reinforce my argument that the freedom of the individual to maintain a 'republic of the spirit' (HM 68) parallels Lily's instinctive sensibility in moral and sexual matters, which she gradually becomes aware of through her dialogues with Selden. As Lily acknowledges this heretofore unperceived aspect of herself, Selden describes her as a "dark angel of defiance" (HM 225) possessed of a "habit of resolutely facing the facts" which "did not allow her to put any false gloss on the situation" (HM 227) of her social rejection.

Clearly, Selden's mediating aesthetic, which filters his understanding of Lily, does not consider the actual conditions of her life. This is evident when he defines his 'republic of the spirit' as "[f]reedom [. . .] from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents" (HM 68) without acknowledging how inapplicable to Lily it is, for she

can't marry him. Selden's attempt to live by this ideal has a powerful effect on Lily. She consistently envisions herself through frameworks for self-understanding established by other people, and her physical environment, as when "the day seemed the accomplice of her mood" (HM 58). She is particularly responsive to Selden's vision; her sympathetic reaction points to the preexistence of similar tendencies in Lily. For example, she reacts to Selden's statement of principle for his 'republic' by leaning "forward with a responsive flash. 'I know [. . .] that's just what I've been feeling today'" (HM 68). When she admits to Selden that his love gave her "the help of your belief in me" (HM 308), such a belief can only be reckoned as destructive to Selden's protégé. His shaping influence on Lily stands forth as the product of class values that compel a viewpoint that will destroy the woman he loves if she attempts to adopt it, making him "as much as Lily a victim of his environment" (HM 152). Huxley wrote of how "only in the garden of an ordered polity can the finest fruits humanity is capable of bearing be produced. [Yet] [...] the garden was apt to turn into a hothouse" ("Evolution and Ethics" 313). Selden, like his counterparts in the other novels under investigation here, illustrates this possibility by misunderstanding the consequences of his effect on Lily.

A transformation occurs in which Lily's normative attitudes shift, and come to resemble Selden's impractically idealistic viewpoint. Early in the novel Lily behaves in socially acceptable ways that also display, from the narrator's perspective, an inadequate sense of social responsibility. Lily's three-hundred-dollar donation to Gerty Farish's charitable enterprise saves the life of Nettie Struther, who subsequently bears the child dreamt of as Lily succumbs to the chloral. The donation returns to Lily in the form of a comforting hallucination of solidarity, but it is a transitory firing of neurons in Lily's dying

brain. Discovering that she is connected to a common web of humanity is a realization laced with irony, for she has already ingested the chloral and will be indisposed to act on the insight given form in her dream. This unsentimental termination of the possibility of Lily's enacting her instinctive ethics stands for arrested progress in the society at large.

On donating to Gerty's charity, however, the still unreformed Lily receives the kind of compensation endorsed by a society that is charitable only when there is personal benefit. But even as Lily gains a self-serving satisfaction from her generosity, another feeling accompanies this that marks her nascent awareness of a self beyond that modeled by her training:

The other-regarding sentiments had not been cultivated in Lily [. . .] but today her quick dramatizing fancy seized on the contrast between her own situation and that represented by some of Gerty's 'cases.' [. . .] by some obscure process of logic, she felt her momentary burst of generosity had justified all previous extravagances [. . .]

Lily parted from her with a sense of self-esteem which she naturally mistook for the fruits of altruism. (HM 111-112)

This 'process of logic' is not available to Lily's examination because it is instinctive. The conventional compensation for altruism is the "mood of self-approval" that gives one "a sympathetic eye for others" (HM 111). But Lily 'mistook' 'a sense of self esteem' as those 'fruits' of an act that fulfills a deeper law of affinity and interconnectedness amongst species parsed in the text as classes. By noting the contrast between herself and the recipients of Gerty's charity, Lily betrays her perception of a need for charity because of the operation of her 'fancy,' or representation of instinct to which she has no conscious access. Lily understands that "money stands for all kinds of things—its purchasing quality isn't limited to

diamonds and motor cars" (HM 70), sensing a basis for social relations beyond the economic quid pro quo.

Gerty Farish's way of generating a viable niche emerges as a positive counter-example to Lily's experience with values that have a pecuniary basis. Gerty's seeking of funds from the well-to-do for her charitable work acknowledges, within Wharton's Darwinian framework, how "the dependency of one organic being on another [. . .] lies generally between beings remote in the scale of nature" (*Origin* 126). Moreover, Gerty is marginal, undervalued, and reviled by Lily; for all her useful work she is cast off by the 'civilized' denizens of New York. Gerty's evasion of marriage illustrates that Lily is not so trapped in "the great gilt cage" (HM 54) as she thinks. However, Lily's perception is, for a time, as absolute as the manacles that bind Gerty to her fate. Lily's belief that her only option is marriage is cast in the same foundry of her early training that leads her to believe that Selden's preservation of "a certain social detachment, a happy air of viewing the show objectively" (HM 54) marks him as free. In truth, Selden's 'objectivity' bars the kind of emotional contact Lily seeks from him. The depth of her belief that she must make the family fortune "back with her face" (HM 28) compels her pursuit of a life unlike Gerty's.

Selden shapes Lily's perceptions by refusing to see her in other than aesthetic terms (Wolff xxiv). Lily overcomes this assumption that she is a delicate flower carefully fashioned to attract the right man by rejecting the solipsism at the core of his 'republic of the spirit.' This becomes clear after Nettie Struther rescues the ailing Lily from Bryant Park. Lily's recognition and valuation of interconnectedness suggests that Selden's individualistic 'republic,' if embraced universally, would result in the political disengagement and lack of social praxis displayed by him when he distantly observes with "aesthetic amusement" and

“admiring spectatorship” (HM 68) those he disparages. As a result of her interaction with Nettie, Lily transcends the limitations of objectivity personified by Selden to embrace engagement as a foundational principle for social conduct that resists a biologized view of the social collective. Ironically, she learns this from a woman she once thought “destined to be swept prematurely into that social refuse-heap of which Lily had so lately expressed her dread” (HM 313).

Warming herself in Nettie’s tiny apartment, Lily holds the daughter of her hostess. The infant penetrates Lily’s consciousness “with a strange sense of weakness, as though the child entered her and became a part of herself” (HM 316). The child would not have existed without Lily’s donation to Gerty’s charity. Soon after, Lily becomes aware that an obligation involves an interest in others: “the little episode had done her good. It was the first time she had ever come across the results of her spasmodic benevolence, and the surprised sense of human fellowship took the mortal chill from her heart” (HM 316). This contrasts with the narrative’s earlier description of how a sense of social responsibility is occluded by Lily’s inability to see beyond her immediate desires after she receives a check from Trenor: “[t]he fact that the money freed her temporarily from all minor obligations obscured her sense of the greater one it represented” (HM 111). Lily acknowledges the interdependence of individuals and classes in her dealings with Nettie, and exemplifies through the evolution of her character the principle of change, and how closely the text aligns her with natural processes the novel’s leisure-class characters believe to be controllable.

Lily’s interactions with Trenor show money as an unexamined medium of interpersonal exchange. But the seemingly impersonal, cash-based obligation incurred by Lily, in contrast to her encounter with Nettie, depicts the corruption of any meaningful sense

of responsibility for the welfare of others among Trenor's class by being directed toward sexual exploitation. Wharton's omniscience is subtle in this respect, for the reader glimpses Lily's sexual naïveté through the lens of the heroine's innocent perception:

Trenor and Miss Bart prolonged their drive till long after sunset; and before it was over he had tried, with some show of success, to prove to her that, if she would only trust him, he could make a handsome sum of money for her without endangering the small amount she possessed. She was too genuinely ignorant of the manipulations of the stock-market to understand his technical explanations, or even perhaps to perceive that certain points in them were slurred; the haziness enveloping the transaction served as a veil for her embarrassment, and through the general blur her hopes dilated like lamps in a fog. She understood only that her modest investments were to be mysteriously multiplied without risk to herself. (HM 85)

As the setting sun casts the scene into darkness that symbolizes Lily's confusion over the implicit connection made between sex and cash, Trenor's instrumental attitude toward money forecloses on non-monetary interdependence.

Once Lily is "excluded from those sacred precincts" of the socially acceptable (HM 280), she discovers that "there is very little real difference in being inside or out" of "what we call society" (HM 280-281). This is so, she learns, because both positions require different though equally unacceptable compromises. Access to the resources of 'those sacred precincts' comes at the expense of being regarded as pure ornamentation. Outside the margin, however, the acquisition of material comfort requires either indebtedness to Trenor, marriage to an unsuitable man, or the kind of compromise chosen by Gerty Farish. Lily feels compelled to repay the debt to Trenor, who expects that he and Lily will "go off somewhere

on a little lark together" (HM 117). But even the act of salvaging her reputation and sense of self worth is problem-fraught, for in repaying the debt Lily participates in a contractual system of interpersonal relations.

In a moral climate inhospitable to Lily's sensibility Wharton's metaphorical substitution of ethics for the non-adaptive physical traits of a species predicts Lily's biological death, and sketches the demise of an ethos that would have supported her as a work of art. Lily's "abstract notions of honour that might be called the conventionalities of the moral life" (HM 300) therefore stand in contrast to the treatment to which Trenor subjects her, and seem to be passing from view. Lily's repressed better judgment, rendered repeatedly as 'instinctive,' is in this way associated with a past wherein the "rapacity" (HM 229) now exhibited by members of the new socioeconomic elite might be controlled. Lily's adherence to these notions is, therefore, less an assertion of will against a patriarchal system than a demonstration that her honour is not relative, but is indicative of a textually idealized cultural negotiation with biology.

The omniscient tracing of the heroine's inability to consciously understand herself in terms other than those suggested by her "training and habit of mind" (HM 278) opens onto representations of Lily gaining a better vantage for self knowledge.¹⁵ Her negation of the requirement to marry is animated by an instinctive reluctance to move outside her "narrow range" (HM 301). Lily's awakening to Selden's vision confounds her, eliciting tortuous syntax that is a sign of cognitive disarray: "[i]t was not that—I was not ungrateful [...]. But the power of expression failed her suddenly" (HM 306). Silence is the sign of inarticulate instinct as Lily senses the consonance between her nature and Selden's mediated ideal of the free individual. Although Gerty Farish recognizes that "Lily might be incapable of marrying

for money" (HM 162), suggesting the presence in Lily of motive urges unconditioned by social requirements, the narrative continually reiterates its vision of Lily as an organism, or "a water plant in the flux of the tides" (HM 53). Determined in numerous ways then, Lily is carried by the current of convention toward marriage, drawn back by Selden's vision of personal freedom, and finally pulled under when her true impulses compel a non-adaptive attempt at autonomy that leads to death.

IV. "[T]he essential baseness of [...] freedom from risk" (HM 260)

The different types of gambling that appear in The House of Mirth function metaphorically to represent the element of contingency at play in the novel's social environment. When Lily takes her place at the bridge table at Bellomont, and enters the marriage market, she feels she has no choice but to play both games. She suffers her losses at cards as "the taxes she had to pay [. . .] for the dresses and trinkets which occasionally replenished her insufficient wardrobe" (HM 26). In her interactions with Selden, coincidence is another form of chance that complicates her plan to marry. When Rosedale spots Lily leaving Selden's apartment, she is disturbed that she must "pay so dearly for the least escape from routine" (HM 15) that results from having "yielded to a passing impulse in going to Lawrence Selden's rooms" (HM 15). Juxtaposing 'impulse' and chance with the predictable routines engendered by "social discipline" (HM 16), the narrative makes the paradoxical relation between these elements a thematic focus.

Chance passes through the ideological barriers erected by a liberal democracy that has sidelined the possibility that positive social change is caused by anything other than the work of industrious men. One example of this leisure-class ideal is offered by the stock market,

which is a crucible of competition, and the primary example of the embrace of chance by the socioeconomic elite which succeeds or fails by it. The novel depicts, moreover, how the unpredictability of the stock market is concealed by *leisure-class* assertions regarding the causes of economic success. These signal the presence of an ideology of progress that attributes the growth of wealth to the activities of “many estimable citizens trained to all the advantages of self-government” (HM 120).

The text contains and counters, through negative examples, the stories Selden’s social environment tells itself. Rosedale, for example, suggests to Lily that he will marry her if she blackmails her way back into social favor. He sees the potential transaction as “a transfer of property or a revision of boundary lines” (HM 259) and this approach holds some appeal initially: “Lily’s tired mind was fascinated by this escape from fluctuating ethical estimates into a region of concrete weights and measures” (HM 259). The means Lily might use to rehabilitate herself can be interpreted, she discovers in this encounter, in a light different than that cast by Selden’s ideals.

Coming to her senses, however, she sees “that the essential baseness of the act lay in its freedom from risk” (HM 260); chance is natural, while the contract proposed by Rosedale is artificial, and unnatural. Rosedale believes that “it’s because the letters are to *him*” (HM 260) that Lily declines his offer, not understanding that her instinct is to value a *lack* of ‘concrete weights and measures’ more attuned to continually variegating nature. The politics of the narrative are borne out by her reaction to Rosedale, which binds right moral action to a refusal to interpret such matters in a relativistic way, and embraces ‘risk’ and novelty as tending to produce new combinations of genetic and cultural matter.

Wharton's metaphoric doubling of chance and social renewal critiques the leisure-class belief that it has segregated itself from contingency. Mrs. Peniston, the Dorsets, and others, possess a sense that extinction and change don't exist in their world. These characters "belonged to the class of old New Yorkers who have always lived well, dressed expensively and done little else" (HM 37). Such are the "inherited obligations" (HM 37) of a class unready to place themselves within the dominion of the laws of inheritance as defined by Darwin. Rosedale is different. As a Jew on the cusp of respectability, though still at the margin, he knows social evolution is a dynamic process.

From the perspective of the leisure class, Rosedale is the last person who should ever reach the position he does, having "been served up and rejected at the social board a dozen times within [...] memory" (HM 16). Yet the narrative portrays his rise in terms that show the error of the novel's social arbiters, who believe they are immune to the whims of "the terrible god of chance" (HM 26). Ironically, even this deification of chance denies its unthinking essence in the Darwinian scheme, casting fate in terms of a higher intelligence. While "[i]t had been a bad autumn in Wall Street" (HM 120) Rosedale senses that the new economy will give him the opportunity to be less guarded, to reveal more of himself in a society whose prejudices force his close adherence to convention, for "Mr. Rosedale wanted, in the long run, a more individual environment" (HM 121). The depiction of his achievement of social acceptance draws on the evolutionary notion that a shifting environment can result in the success of any species.

In subjugating Lily, Selden's circle asserts control over contingency. In her 1905 review of Howard Sturgis's Belchamber, Wharton encapsulated a perspective evident in The House of Mirth's portrait of how leisure-class values assault Lily's power of "measuring

distances and drawing conclusions with all the accuracy needful of [her] [...] welfare" (HM 115). The author wrote how "[a] handful of vulgar people, bent only on spending and enjoying, may seem a negligible factor in the social development of the race; but they become an engine of destruction through the illusions they kill and the generous ardors they turn to despair" (UCW 110). This statement hints that Wharton's class politics play a role in her juxtaposition of Lily's natural tendencies with the way the codes of Selden's class impose "the standards by which she was fated to be measured! Does one go to Caliban for a judgment on Miranda?" (HM 135). The literary allusion is Selden's, and demonstrates that his view of Lily is conditioned by his aestheticism. His comparison of New York's elite to Caliban suggests that moral progress toward a world that might accommodate Lily will not occur, for in Shakespeare's play Caliban is a savage who learns nothing, despite Prospero's efforts to educate him (Stephen Orgel 23).

The reference to Caliban also recalls the violence this character is capable of visiting on Miranda, and posits Lily as a potential victim of sexual and psychological violation. Selden attempts to educate Lily, and in this respect one can view this bookish character as a Prospero possessed of a magical idealism that leads Lily to her fate. However, from his perspective, Lily is "a captured dryad subdued to the conventions of the drawing room" (HM 13). As a forest spirit she is unconventional, natural, and only partially 'subdued.' As a result, Selden can't take "a sentimental view of her case" (HM 12) because Lily seems to be not entirely helpless. She is an "artist and I [Selden] happen to be a bit of colour you are using today. It's a part of your cleverness to be able to produce premeditated effects extemporaneously" (HM 66). To Selden, Lily's "wild-wood grace" lends "a savour to her artificiality" (HM 13); his understanding of nature, it seems, is defined by imaginative renderings of the wild. While Selden sees Lily as

one whose illusions might be 'killed' by the 'vulgar people' of his class, he is wary of her too. Although he criticizes society for not possessing fine enough sensibilities with which to judge Lily, his allusive perspective rewrites her in artistic terms that obscure any realistic vision of her circumstances, and reveals the limits of his ability to engage with a living example of his republic of the spirit.

Selden sees intent in Lily's attempts to advance within the framework of marriage, but he doesn't consider the deterministic force of the institution. He tries to show Lily the thinness of what she desires—to "get her foot across the threshold" of the rich—telling her that he cannot "guarantee your enjoying the things you are trying to get" (HM 71). When Lily, tearful, realizes that "the best you can say for me is, after trying to get them I probably shan't like them? [. . .] What a terrible future you foresee for me" (HM 71), Selden imagines that "even her weeping was an art" (HM 72). He attributes intention to Lily's behavior while she feels swept along by forces outside her control; Lily's "discretions interested him almost as much as her imprudences: he was so sure that both were part of the same carefully-elaborated plan" (HM 5). His attribution of grasping materialism is correct, but only to the extent that it anticipates behavior the social stratum to which he belongs expects from a marriageable woman.

Selden's lack of engagement with the material circumstances of Lily's plight is caused by his inability to evaluate her situation outside of the ideological framework Wharton attributes to his class. Were he to perceive the relationship between Lily and the mediating power of her training he might note how he too is caught in its stamping-machine duplication of social beings. This might give him the knowledge to actually save their love "whole out of the ruin of their lives" (HM 329). The novel portrays his limitation as arising directly from an

epistemological perspective conditioned by an aesthetic native to the novel's leisure class.¹⁶ This is depicted most forcefully in the Brys' *tableaux*. In this scene one of the paintings represented by the women on stage is by Watteau, an artist who idealized "the [theme] of courtship" (Hartt 842), not his contemporary Chardin, who depicted the lives of the French lower middle class. Goya and Titian too, the former an artist "we can hardly call anything but Romantic" (Hartt 880), and the latter, known for his mythological paintings, are authorial choices that reinforce the preference of the leisure class for representations of their values that materialize an association of beauty and symbolic control over sex and violence.

One sees desire for such control in the way Selden wants to take Lily "beyond the ugliness, the pettiness, the attrition and corrosion of the soul" (HM 154) caused by the expectations forced upon a marriageable woman; his desire to do so is shaped by a belief that "Perseus's task is not done when he has loosed Andromeda's chains, for her limbs are numb with bondage, and she cannot rise and walk, but clings to him with dragging arms as he beats back to land with his burden" (HM 159). Selden's mythologizing of Lily sharpens Wharton's portrait of the rift between Lily's sociobiological status as a dead-end variation unequipped for the environment she inhabits, and Selden's aesthetic, one in which a representation of Lily drawn from visual art and myth blooms in the hothouse of his imagination.¹⁷ The narrative generates antipathy toward Selden's skewed perspective, showing that his Claude-glass¹⁸ view of Lily is an example of "Art subduing Nature to its own purposes" (Grove Dictionary 387), destructive because it distorts the basic facts of her existence.

Selden perceives Lily as his aesthetic would have him do, countering the accidental and random aspect of existence experienced by Lily with the forceful ordering of the world offered by art. His approach to Lily's beauty is shown by Wharton to point up aesthetic

valuations that reflect wider cultural values present in the popularity of *tableaux vivants*. These performances play out a “master plot” that tells “the story of a woman metaphorically killed by the process of being made into an allegorical figure, an object of art, or her husband’s property” (Chapman 31). The ideology of Selden and his caste possesses “a force of negation which eliminated everything beyond their own range of perception” (HM 48). He therefore denies that Lily is subject to those economic and political forces his ‘republic of the spirit’ seeks to forestall, even though he acknowledges her subjection to the norm of “the conventional rich marriage which she had been taught to consider the sole end of existence” (HM 155-156). His perspective on Lily is disconnected from the material reality of her life. He views Lily through a “responsive fancy” that inhabited “the boundary world between fact and imagination” (HM 133). Further evidence that Selden’s ‘fancy’ focuses his view of Lily exists in the penultimate paragraph of the novel. Here, one encounters Selden’s view that the love he and Lily shared has “been saved whole out of the ruin of their lives. It was this moment of love, this fleeting victory over themselves, which had kept them from atrophy and extinction” (HM 329). Selden’s romantic elevation of love at the moment he is faced with the stark reality of Lily’s corpse is telling proof of his inability to see beyond the borders of his individualistic liberal aesthetic.

In contrast to the natural, if self-destructive behavior of the protagonist, the Brys display their wealth, and allegiance to an aesthetic ethos Selden upholds, in expensive *tableaux vivants* that reproduce “a series of pictures” (HM 135) already alluded to. Lily’s inherited resistances ‘of taste, of training’ manifest themselves when Lily unselfconsciously signals the males gathered at the Brys of her availability by using her “dramatic instinct” (HM 131) to stand out among the other women. The reproduction of pictorial fictions in the *tableaux vivants*

expresses the mediated, non-instinctive concept of beauty native to Selden's species; this is a spell Lily's appearance breaks. Possessed herself with "an imagination which only visual impressions could reach" (HM 131), Lily presents an image that deflects a reading of her appearance that fits into categories which would pattern her sexuality. That Lily has "selected a type so like her own that she could embody the person represented without ceasing to be herself" (HM 134) alerts the reader to the extent Lily is unselfconscious about exercising her sexual attraction, for Lily has "yielded to the truer instinct of trusting to her unassisted beauty" (HM 134).

Wharton's reiteration of 'instinct' differentiates Lily from the other women whose true selves, unlike Lily's, do not escape from behind the portraits of "Titian's Daughter [. . .] the frailer Dutch type [. . .] a Veronese supper [. . .] and a Watteau group" (HM 134). However, when Selden sees Lily attired as Reynolds' Mrs. Lloyd he is moved, but characteristically interprets Lily from an aesthetic perspective, "catching for a moment a note of that eternal harmony of which her beauty was a part" (HM 135). At the moment Selden feels closest to Lily the difference between his aestheticism and her instinctive nature is clear. Moreover, the fact that the Brys have chosen the exhibition of "fashionable women" (HM 131) who disguise their sexual display behind reproductions of artistic creations as their means to socially "advance into a strange country" (HM 130) accents the difference between Lily's unnerving display of sexuality as a path to social betterment and the Brys' highly-coded entertainment as a way to accomplish the same thing.

Lily desires Selden despite the fact that she feels she cannot afford to wed him. She can only imagine a "state of existence in which, all else being superadded, intercourse with Selden might be the last touch of luxury" (HM 88). They imagine the distance between them

in the unavoidable lexicon of money, wherein Lily is “very expensive” and Selden has “no money to spend” (HM 10). A second hindrance to their love is Selden’s inability to perceive Lily outside the framework for evaluating a woman’s social suitability. He wonders how he could “lift Lily to a freer vision of life, if his own view of her was to be colored by any mind in which he saw her reflected” (HM 159). Ironically, then, his desire to lift her clear of the terms of her existence reenacts the suppression of her will to move “Beyond!” (HM 154) her state. This is so because Selden’s coercive aestheticism scuttles Lily’s chances of finding an independent existence by assisting in the emergence of her true, but unviable self.

Lily’s self-abnegating scrupulousness in moral matters becomes a way to assert her agency even as it forecloses a certain kind of future. For example, her sense that “the reward” to be realized from marrying Gryce “seemed unpalatable” (HM 28) reads as a response to Selden’s influence. The effect of his personal philosophy is clear enough when Lily remarks that “I have never forgotten the things you said to me at Bellomont, and that sometimes [. . .] they have helped me and kept me from mistakes; kept me from really becoming what many people have thought me” (HM 307). However, Lily’s turning away from the life she has been trained for marks a refusal of convention that exceeds what one can credit Selden with eliciting. Lily’s behavior resembles that of another female persona who desires to avoid surrender under terms not of her choosing depicted in the final stanza of Wharton’s 1909 poem “Non Dolet!.” Here, a figurative suicide bestows a sense of ironic control over difficult circumstances. The similarity of the poem’s main theme to Lily Bart’s response to her situation is striking: “‘It hurts not!’ dying cried the Roman wife;/ And one by one/ The leaders in the strife/ Fall on the blade of failure and exclaim:/ ‘The day is won!’” (*Artemis to Acteon* 83-84).¹⁹

Claire Preston suggests that if Lily's death is a suicide it "is her single gesture of self-determination" (72). One problem with this interpretation is that if her suicide is intentional it is an act for which the formative influence on Lily of her training must also share responsibility, for "[l]ost causes had a romantic charm" for Lily (HM 35). As such, the act realizes preconceptions surrounding the fate of lost women. Her death may be an act of self-determination, but as such it determines her as a woman under the influence of a presiding model of what *should* happen to a woman unable to attain the object of her love. If intentional, Lily's death fulfills an imagined allegiance to an idealized social order present in her fantasy that she might be in a position as the wife of an "Italian prince to sacrifice her pleasure to the claims of an immemorial tradition" (HM 35). This facet of her persona abets her destruction. She sacrifices herself to 'tradition' by not defending herself in the Dorset affair, and by not assuaging the suspicion that she is trying to help Mrs. Hatch marry Freddy Van Osburgh. Lily is sacrificed, too, "to Bertha Dorset's determination to win back her husband" (HM 227), yet Lily won't make her side of the story known out of a sense of 'some obscure disdain and reluctance.' The protagonist's 'reluctance,' suggests the fineness with which one must make a distinction between Lily's instinctive ethics, which compels her 'disdain,' and a training that compels her idealistic self-sacrifice and motivates her idealization of 'lost causes.'

It is important, however, not to insist on discovering whether Lily does, or does not commit suicide, but to recognize that her ingestion of the chloral represents her conversion to the point of view that chance, or contingency, is an elemental aspect of the enduring, *real* natural world in which she lives, one unreconstructed by the social Darwinism of the elite. It is the moment when Lily's true self emerges completely into her hostile environment, one in

which she abandons her adherence to the social order as she “remembered the chemist’s warning. If sleep comes at all, it might be a sleep without waking. But after all that was but one chance in a hundred: the action of the drug was incalculable” (HM 322). Now openly embracing natural laws that the narrative has figuratively maintained as subtext, Lily is killed. Her death, whether from accident or suicide, demonstrates that chance penetrates the social order, and will not leave her out of its workings, even though a society that believes that its rituals distance contingency does just that.

V. “that tuning-fork of the novelist’s art” (WF 120)

The House of Mirth is a reaction to the view that human agency is an illusion in a Darwinian world. Wharton’s fictional response follows the contours of William James’s rejection of Spencer’s interpretation of evolutionary theory: James “could accept apes for ancestors, but he could not abide dogmatic extensions of Darwinism which denied free will, the efficacy of consciousness, or the value of the individual” (Meyers qtd. in Howard 145). Feminist critical views on The House of Mirth that see the novel as a clinical account of a social environment in which the exercise of free will is deeply problematic for women thus direct one to see the difficulties presented by a pervasive interpretation of nature unsympathetic to the exercise of sexual selection.

Wharton’s articulation of Lily’s dilemma asserts that mechanisms for self-preservation, and propagation, can be traced by attending to an unreasoning, guiding instinct. But interference with these mechanisms by manners and their constraints, she shows, impairs an individual’s viability: “[b]ecause a blue-bottle bangs irrationally against a window-pane, the drawing room naturalist may forget that under less artificial conditions it is capable of

measuring distances and drawing conclusions with all the accuracy needful of its welfare” (HM 115). Illustrating this, Lily moves in an ‘artificial’ environment in which her inability to compromise herself morally is an unsustainable variation. Given the opportunity to marry George Dorset, Lily recognizes, as I’ve shown, that “revenge [against Bertha Dorset] and rehabilitation might be hers at a stroke” (HM 245). At this moment, however, “fear possessed her—fear of herself, and of the terrible force of temptation” (HM 245).

The House of Mirth allegorically depicts Lily Bart as a species whose instinctive but alienated intelligence is a handicap in a social environment that equates the ability to thrive economically with unethical action. The negative implications for a society that does not limit the potential of natural selection to be an agent of social evolution are evident in the way Lily becomes a victim of material accumulation divested of social responsibility. This illustrates Wharton’s view of “the moral sensibility, [as] that tuning-fork of the novelist’s art” (WF 120). The House of Mirth thus fulfilled Wharton’s wish to write “the type of fiction wherein the adventure grows [. . .] out of the development of character and the conflict of moral forces” (UCW 75).

As Lily becomes a moral agent as a result of being shaped by Selden’s views, which help her to discover her own sensibilities, she repays her debt to Gus Trenor. In the last chapters of the novel she discovers the value of interdependence in Nettie Struther’s kitchen when the latter remarks how “it’s so lovely having you here, and letting you see just how you’ve helped me” (HM 315). Wharton contests Selden and Rosedale’s respective values by countering them with Lily’s code, which she expresses through biological allegory. The formal means she uses to accomplish this shows the brutality of rules governing the social

hierarchy of elite New York, rhetorically positioning this system far from the organic figurative language employed to attribute instinct to Lily.

In doing so, Wharton depicts Lily's social world as unnatural, even inorganic. In one instance the author uses a mechanical metaphor to contrast Lily with her environment: "I can hardly be said to have an independent existence. I was just a screw or a cog in the great machine I called life" (HM 308). But while this statement would indicate that the novel depicts social determinism which denies Lily her agency, her attempts to transcend a fate that would provide "a future of servitude to the whims of others, never the possibility of asserting her own eager individuality" (HM 101) stands as a valuation of the impulse to assert a self which holds the promise of social renewal. Such a possibility, though, is sacrificed by the lockstep 'race after pleasure' depicted in the novel.

Chapter Three

A “society [...] most instinctive”: Tradition and Contingency in The Custom of the Country

I. “[T]he new spirit of limitless concession” (CC 269)

In 1935 Edith Wharton expressed her high opinion of The Custom of the Country (1913) in a letter to H.S. Milford at the Oxford University Press. Milford hoped to publish an edition of The House of Mirth, but the author suggested otherwise. Wharton replied through her secretary, who wrote that “Mrs. Wharton is disappointed that you should have fixed on *The House of Mirth*. She thinks *The Custom of the Country* a much better book” (UCW 269-270). This is a curious comment if the appraisals of Wharton’s critics are to be used as a guide, for their consensus has been that The House of Mirth is the more unified novel.¹ This difference between critical consensus and the author’s own estimate of her fiction is addressed in this chapter by arguing that The Custom of the Country expands the range of subject matter amenable to representation through Wharton’s sociobiological frame of reference.

In The Custom of the Country, New York is a “new environment” (CC 27) in a biological sense. Unlike The House of Mirth, though, the later novel represents explicitly interpretations regarding the relation of nature to culture held by different classes. While The House of Mirth relates how Lily Bart’s expression of an instinctive ethics modeling an idealized moral code would benefit a country dealing with the disruptive ‘technological, demographic, and political changes’ already alluded to, The Custom of the Country represents competing classes more comprehensively than the earlier novel by fictionally analyzing their respective ideologies. These ideologies are associated with the varying and

competing interpretations of the nature/culture question I've outlined. In important ways, however, The Custom of the Country carries forward the project of The House of Mirth by depicting the sympathy enjoyed by social Darwinism in a culture increasingly enthralled by individualist business titans represented by Elmer Moffatt.

Foremost among these similarities is the novel's linkage of the protagonist Undine Spragg's negation of the tradition of equality and natural rights² with her achievement of material success viewed as a sign of social progress by the socioeconomic elite. Where Undine instinctively understands that the 'survival of the fittest' is a call for the devastation of any obstacle she perceives, the narrative asks the reader to recognize an ecological Darwinian interdependence of species in the social realm that recalls one of the major themes of The House of Mirth.³ In this thematic scheme, action directed at the presence of natural processes within society can maintain provisional equilibrium and compensate for a "primitive impulse to hurt and destroy" (CC 470) personified by Undine.

Another similarity between the two novels exists in the way Undine's negation of the aforementioned traditions reflects her lack of awareness of a social and historical context that would otherwise preserve and transmit "that impalpable dust of ideas which is the real culture" (UCW 156) also valued by The House of Mirth. Where Lily Bart's death illustrates the effects of the dispersion of a 'real culture' premised on equality that might sustain her difference, however, Undine Spragg is an instrument of social evolution that atomizes a traditional leisure-class way of life that has been "the product of continuity and choice" (CC 243). When the narrative relates that "allusions to pictures and books escaped her [Undine]" (CC 46) while she listens to a dinner party conversation, she is distinguished as a character unable to contribute to the collective project of maintaining a social context whose values are

concentrated in its artistic products. This motif reappears some pages later when Undine, having been to an art gallery where she sights “Peter Van Degen, the son of the great banker, Thurber Van Degen” (CC 58), finds that “she could not remember anything about the pictures she had seen” (CC 59).

The narrative gives form to competing ideologies of the gentry and the socioeconomic elite by portraying the “system of ideas,” to use Raymond Williams’ phrase (157), that governs each class. Establishment characters in The Custom of the Country, such as Ralph Marvell, the Dagonets, Charles Bowen, and the Fairfords, are the bearers of a tradition that is the transmission medium of culture. Wharton makes this clear by inflecting leisure-class tradition with biological meaning through the use of Darwinian language and metaphors seen also in The House of Mirth. In The Custom of the Country, social relations are biologized as “inherited intimacy (Undine had noticed that they were all more or less cousins)” (CC 48). Moreover, the literary compression of social change and processes such as natural selection familiar from the earlier novel is present too in The Custom of the Country. The eroding upper-crust system of maintaining order contrasts with certain pernicious habits of the socioeconomic elite—divorce, aggression, and financial speculation—that compete with and modify old forms of social governance.

Yet one must be cautious about calling the ideology of the socioeconomic elite in this novel a ‘system.’ Their ideas reflect instead a thematically significant “incoherence” (CC 243) of recombined signs of leisure-class tradition. The narrative views the adoption by the new elite of cultural forms such as dress, language, and architecture as a form of ideological expansionism that resonates with the biological metaphors of a novel that charts the movement into an unexploited leisure-class environment of a new species. Thus, Undine

views the opportunities for exploitation of her new milieu as opening “ampler vistas” that afford her an avenue of expression for the fact that “her pioneer blood would not let her rest” (CC 64).

Members of the gentry rely on tradition to prevent uncultured individuals like Undine from entering their class enclave. She is “primitive” (CC 470) and emblematic of a contingent natural world that spurs leisure-class regulative practices. She is the opposite of her second husband, Ralph Marvell, and an agent of the demise of his class in the historical sequence the novel chronicles. This process begins when she aligns herself with an economically elite social stratum distinguished by an absence of tradition, wherein families are not settled, but live transiently in places like the loudly decorated “Hotel Stentorian” (CC 21) in one of its Versailles-like “Looeys suites” (CC 21). Such appropriation of cultural forms defines Undine’s type. In depicting her transformation from prairie girl to paragon of café society, the novel aligns her with Elmer Moffatt, the uncouth predator (from the gentry’s viewpoint) who by novel’s end becomes a “billionaire Railroad King” (CC 502). Marvell and Moffatt epitomize old and new money attitudes respectively. Wharton also introduces the ancient cultural practices of the French aristocracy in her characterization of Undine Spragg’s third husband, Raymond de Chelles. These characters represent the novel’s spectrum of class-based attitudes toward tradition.

In the novel’s programmatic bolstering of its cultural politics through scientific metaphor, the individualism of the new rich is a surging tide of chaotic nature. Undine embodies this elemental force: “she felt a violent longing to brush away the cobwebs and assert herself as the dominant figure of the scene” (CC 48). Moreover, her “strange sense of lucid resistance” (CC 127) to Peter Van Degen suggests the operation of sexual selection.

Wharton juxtaposes the natural aspects of Undine's character with the latent capacity of Ralph Marvell's class to address the tension between social chaos and the pursuit of continuity, the former of which historically has been controlled by coercively confronting "the new spirit of limitless concession" (CC 269) with rites whose past authority is represented in The Age of Innocence (set in the 1870's).

New cultural forms, particularly the products of mass culture, undermine the stewardship role of Marvell's class. Wharton describes an American, market-driven form of highly visible cultural activity that revalues the example of leisure class probity, gentility, and artistic achievement: "[t]he whole world has become a vast escalator, and Ford Motors and Gillette razors have bound together the uttermost parts of the earth. The universal infiltration of our American plumbing, dentistry, and vocabulary has reduced the globe to a playing field for our people" (UCW 156). For Ralph Marvell, a new mass culture exposes the "hidden hereditary failing" (CC 378) of the inflexible "conventions of his class" (CC 378), which cannot compete against the full color advertisement, nor the barrage of messages made possible by mechanical reproduction. The novel connects class ideology and the law of natural selection by charting how unviable the former is in the social environment engendered by mass culture.

The narrative links Undine's shallowness with a mass culture of disposability and novelty, while asserting a commitment to fictional social analysis as one way to examine and reply to the 'spirit of limitless concession' that defines the age. In Charles Bowen one finds this impulse exemplified. He comments on "human nature's passion for the factitious, its incorrigible habit of imitating the imitation" (CC 243) as he observes how the new rich

model themselves on socialites who resemble the real-life Astors. These characters borrow the signs of the leisure class, and thus resemble the new money Vanderbilts.

Bowen also embodies an analytical perspective that views objectively the cultural context it critiques. As in The House of Mirth, this trait defines the biases and assumptions of characters that possess it; Bowen's blind spot is his passive intellectual acuity, which though one aspect of a tradition dependent on knowledge, generates no social action. This is most evident when, sitting in the restaurant of the fashionable Nouveau Luxe Hotel in Paris, Bowen makes the following observation on

what unbounded material power had devised for the delusion of its leisure: a phantom 'society' with all the rules, smirks, gestures of its model, but evoked out of promiscuity and incoherence while the other had been the product of continuity and choice. [...] and their prompt and reverent faith in the reality of the sham they had created, seemed to Bowen the most satisfying proof of human permanence. (CC 243)

This 'reverent faith in the reality' of 'a sham' describes a socioeconomic elite whose forms owe much to the 'promiscuity and incoherence' of a mass culture that does little to contribute to the 'continuity' Bowen deems valuable. His account of the new rich resonates with Wharton's comment that "[s]ocial conditions as they are just now in our new world, where the sudden possession of money has come without inherited obligations, or any traditional sense of solidarity between classes, is a vast and absorbing field for the novelist" (Letters 99). The ostensible neutrality of Bowen's depiction of this subject, which in Bowen's case is made possible by the "perpetual exercise of his perception" (243), demonstrates the novel's focus on the forms by which the socioeconomic elite defines itself, but also shows that Bowen's leisure class viewpoint is unprepared to deflect the new forces overtaking his world.

Bowen's tendency to look on matters "impartially from the heights of pure speculation" (CC 187) is founded on the cultural capital of a leisure class that Wharton also draws on. But his highly discerning viewpoint is limited by the inability of observation to compel positive social change. Bowen's perspective contrasts with the lack of correspondence between social forms and traditional continuity he associates with a 'phantom' society. Although the new rich ape the forms of the leisure class, the narrative informs one that the crowd Bowen watches does not share the ideals that underlie leisure class forms. Thus, the novel's method is more than only generally sociological, for it persuades one of the acuity of its method by objectifying its impartiality in Bowen's measured insights, and exceeding them by depicting the flaws of his perspective. Fictional methodology becomes a subject for authorial self-reflexivity as the limits of Bowen's viewpoint are defined. The dependency of Wharton's method on a scientific frame with its own shortcomings is clear at that moment when Bowen "felt the pang of the sociologist over the individual havoc wrought by every social adjustment" (CC 249). Rational analysis alone cannot generate social action, but the novel, at least, can foster awareness of how vital it is to address the 'havoc' wrought by social evolution.

'Social adjustment' in The Custom of the Country often proceeds by the mechanism of natural selection wherein the 'macro-social' is depicted as a selection environment, as Preston argues in regard to The House of Mirth. This primary biological allegory threads its way through the texts examined in this study. Wharton strengthened The House of Mirth's contention that culture grows out of nature, and hence is not a separate, human-made system, by depicting how individual traits viable in the New York social environment nevertheless require control. In the novel one finds modern pressures exerted on Selden's idealistic

individualism—social norms that prohibit Lily’s preparation for any vocation other than being a “marriageable girl” (HM 7), and the dehumanization caused by a social Darwinist interpretation of human relations—to reconstitute the old social environment. The qualities of this environment are favorable to some individuals, and not to others. Undine, an “intruder” (CC 69) upon this social environment, is powerfully Lamarckian in her capacity to “adjust herself” (CC 67); she creates a continuum between the text’s representation of social and biological change.

In The Custom of the Country the portrayal of natural selection as an agent of social change exceeds the achievement of The House of Mirth by incorporating an examination of ideology’s role in social inheritance. Bauer observes that “Wharton critics have typically divorced her work from larger ideological issues implicit in the act of writing fiction and have denied her politics, in part because her views are often conflicting and in part because her works have not been read in light of the relevant intellectual debates of her day” (qtd. in Wegener 138n). By refining her method of presenting political content through biological allegories and metaphors, her handling of ideology in an evolutionary context foregrounds the subject of change. This brings the novel into contact with John Dewey’s view in “The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy” (1910), where he writes that the great evolutionist’s influence “resides in his having conquered the phenomena of life for the principle of transition” (qtd. in Dorothy Ross 316). That Wharton’s biological metaphors connect with her depiction of the evolution of ideology reflects to a degree her participation in, and the influence of, the “transfer of interest from the permanent to the changing” (Dewey qtd. in Ross 316).

As in The House of Mirth, one central question to be asked of The Custom of the Country is whether the presence of scientific contexts in the novel is a narrative conceit intended to endow Wharton's literary social analysis with authority in the minds of the reading public, or whether there is an attempt really to demonstrate that principles of evolution have analogues in the historical dialectic that gives rise to ideological systems, and sees them falter. In The Custom of the Country the latter is the case, for Undine Spragg and Elmer Moffatt are agents of what was described in the previous chapter as an ideology in which material gain is equated with progress, and indeed theirs is "a costly expression of a social ideal" (CC 243).

Undine's "instinct of adapting herself to whatever company she was in, of copying 'the others' in speech and gesture as closely as she reflected them in dress" (CC 150), though, shows that those who equate change and progress premise their actions on a "confusion of ideals" (CC 34) that corrodes the system it copies. Undine emulates leisure-class rites and forms that facilitate a "gestureless mute telegraphy" (CC 79). This symbolic communication is an attribute of a leisure-class social context in which Mrs. Fairford is figured by the text to be "harmonizing and linking together what [...] [her guests] said" (CC 46), making a social occasion one for reaffirming the efficacy of the language that binds this class. Undine's attempt to copy these forms results in her feeling "mistrust" (CC 46) toward her hosts, suggesting that her 'confusion of ideals' alienates her from the vital connection between social forms and the complex ameliorative process a tradition based on choice represents. In using these forms at the same time she is divorcing Marvell or abandoning her son, however, Undine distorts their meaning and contributes to the breakdown of the values these forms refer to.

Elmer Moffatt is similar to the Lamarckian protagonist in that “something in his look seemed to promise the capacity to develop into any character he might care to assume” (CC 107). Both Moffatt and Undine can be likened to embryonic stem cells harvested from the historical protoplasm that would produce an ambitious and destructive American character. One finds Moffatt “sharpening his weapons of aggression” (CC 180), while Undine’s “inherited prejudices” (CC 279) compel her to ignore “the strength of [...] social considerations” (CC 375). Like Undine too, Moffatt is a new species exploiting an ecosystem possessed of no natural defenses with which to combat him, for “no one seemed to know from whence he came” (CC 195). Deals hammered out by this cutthroat primitive don’t mix with the deference to the past involved in preserving outmoded traditions, no matter the cohesiveness fostered by doing so. When Moffatt says of de Chelles, “[h]is ancestors are his business, Wall Street’s mine” (492), the text assigns separate ideologies to the classes represented by each character. Moffatt’s “epic effrontery” (CC 227) derogates a Fifth Avenue philosophical premise that one can moderate contingency; still, his attitude is valid because it acknowledges flux and chance as governing principles which leisure-class social constructs fumble with symbolically through tradition and its rituals.

Ralph Marvell’s clan believes in what Moffatt disdains, for juxtaposed with the gilt surfaces associated with the new elite are the worn, lived-in spaces occupied by the leisure class. These spaces represent the constructed unity of a society that attempts to minimize the effects of natural selection and its agents. This effort requires knowledge and, indeed, the Fairford’s house contains “rows of books from floor to ceiling” (CC 44). Relying on the books at the foundation of its own fictional analysis, the narrative views organic and social evolution through a lens that focuses both simultaneously. This is an important characteristic

of Wharton's method that illuminates her novel's resistance to a point of view in which "God would not create the living world by random variation and the survival of the fittest [...] Even to think of the human condition in such a manner [...] is intolerable" (qtd. in Wilson 37). Wharton's reductionism sees the human condition in just this 'intolerable' way, a trait of her novel signified in one early instance by the description of Undine as a "tremulous organism drifting helplessly" (CC 64). Yet, the author's reductionism makes the biological basis of culture unavoidable, and so serves a politics that seeks a mitigation of chance, not a return to ossified leisure-class forms quickly dissolving in the age of mass culture.

Four sections follow this overview of how The Custom of the Country continues the program of cultural work begun in The House of Mirth, and what new directions the novel investigated here takes in developing Wharton's sociobiological viewpoint. In section two I examine the role of mass culture in Undine Spragg's socialization and the way this training affects her response to tradition. In doing so I explore the narrative's representation of mass culture as a new medium of cultural inheritance that competes with, and displaces leisure-class ideology. In section three I continue to investigate the question of cultural heredity as it is posed in the novel in order to argue that one significant accomplishment of The Custom of the Country is its implicit theory of the extent to which class-based traditions are subject to natural law. I argue that in making this representation the narrative reveals its own critique of leisure-class custodians of tradition by depicting their sense of invulnerability to an erosive process of *social* selection their class cannot elude. Here, too, I address The Custom of the Country's nuanced criticism of the socioeconomic elite's assumptions regarding social Darwinism. In section four my discussion positions different class-based assumptions regarding the tension between nature and culture alongside evolutionary works whose ideas

provided a fertile metaphorical ground for Wharton's novel. This aspect of the chapter continues the juxtaposition of T.H. Huxley's essay "Evolution and Ethics" with Wharton's fictional analysis of what aspects of nature can or should be modified by culture. Section five considers Ralph Marvell's encounter with mass culture and the market as a confrontation with contingency that a leisure-class ideal cannot survive, and contrasts his experience of being "in all the papers" (CC 97) with Undine's. The concluding section addresses the novel's method, and resolves how its claim to authoritativeness in the area of social criticism relies on an intermixing of biology and fictional analysis that cannot conceal within its objective register its interest in controlling the mutability of the social world it portrays.

II. "all the hints in the Sunday papers" (CC 44)

Undine Spragg has provoked critical reactions in the past few years that are in agreement about her superficiality. Mary Papke comments on Undine's "voracious materialism and [...] her limited consciousness" (142), while Candace Waid discusses the protagonist's "absence of interiority" (132). Claire Preston offers the following interpretation: "there are only two or three elements in her success (principally her beauty, her naïveté, and her blankness, her readiness to accept the imprint of projected idealising by deceived men)" (110). Although Undine is a young woman of "lovely lines" (CC 22), her vivid beauty, which "defied the searching decomposing radiance" (CC 36) of the brightest light, parallels the eye-catching designs of the tabloids she reads. Like the popular papers, she is all surface. She can reformulate her persona to appeal to those who would consume her. She learns to do so in a cultural climate fascinated with the simple snapshot of life and the speed with which it is produced by the press. Darwin wrote that "[w]e see beautiful

adaptations everywhere” (Origin 87), and it is this that Wharton observes in a social environment as she chronicles her heroine’s mimicking of traditions. Part of Undine’s significance then is to be found in her adaptability. Her changeling nature is attributable in part to the mass culture products the depthless Undine consumes.

Gossip sheets and dime novels present a new medium of acculturation in The Custom of the Country, and in this respect they can be said in part to define what is new about the material environment the novel depicts. Habermas states that the public sphere “was supposed to link politics and morality in a specific sense: it was the place where an intelligible unity of the empirical ends of everybody was to be brought about, where legality was to issue from morality” (115). Applied to the novel, this statement outlines an ideal that is not realized in the environment Wharton portrays. Habermas articulates a fictional subject matter that fulfills Wharton’s wish to portray situations “in which some phase of our common plight stands forth dramatically and typically” (WF 29). In her introduction to a 1936 edition of The House of Mirth Wharton writes that “when there is anything whatever below the surface in the novelist’s art, that something can be only the social foundation on which his fable is built” (UCW 265).⁴ This thought is played out in The Custom of the Country’s confrontation of an ideology fostered by mass culture that exists ‘below the surface of her art.’ The association of mass culture with the new rich, and tradition with an older leisure class, places the *forms* that hold each system of ideas at the center of the narrative’s field of vision.

As I have claimed, Undine’s attitude toward the seemingly impenetrable “damask,” “gilt,” and “onyx” (CC 21-22) world she intrudes upon is a product of mass culture. This influence creates in her consciousness “the key of the world she read about in the Sunday

papers" (CC 37). She is a character given to saying "I want the best" (CC 38) who discovers standards of social prestige, fashion, and language in the pages of the newspapers, magazines, and the sentimental novels she reads. In aligning Undine with such printed matter, the narrative associates a mass culture that feeds on what is new with the "instinctive" (CC 355) protagonist, thereby valuing negatively much popular writing. But it is the absence of an effort to foster an 'intelligible unity [...] of ends' in a public sphere popular writing helps to define that the text derides most strongly. Noting Undine's lack of connection to those around her reinforces this view, for she "had remained insensible to the touch of the heart" (CC 210).

That which Undine reads must be saleable. Such writing responds to public taste, but also helps to create it. What it also creates is Undine's representative and amoral plasticity, which the text devalues. Where her "novel-reading had filled her mind [...] with pathetic allusions to women's frailty" (CC 327), such a sentiment is used by Undine to justify feeling wronged when her father orders her to return the valuable pearls Peter Van Degen has given her. The protagonist, of course, is hardly frail. Rather, she is possessed of a "youthful flexibility" (CC 25) that gives the appearance of strength to her "incessant movements" (CC 36).

Undine resolves, against her nature, "to trust less to her impulses" (CC 39) in order to fit in with her new surroundings. Her resolution, however, shows her embrace of a system influenced by mass culture that has no concern with what is true of her, or the pre-existing culture she lives within. Learned from the fashionably shifting values represented in the papers, Undine's relativism becomes deeply engrained. Her relativism is like the scientifically bankrupt Lamarckian theory her adaptability echoes, the former of which is

insufficient to the task of addressing the problems of the social environment. The significance of her *use* of a sentimental sensibility encountered in her 'novel reading' is its demonstration that she can adapt any stance within her view;⁵ the mutability of values evident in a press-defined public sphere is fostered by the logic of a market-driven mass culture that fosters Undine's transient personae.

Mining the tabloids for information, Undine initially takes their representations as truthful. Marvell, on the other hand, "reads the fiction number of a magazine" (CC 113). He has no need of the facts she seeks because he lives in a world of ideas that propagates fictions in order to maintain the status quo. Undine runs into such a fiction when she realizes that her attribution of factualness to the tabloids is mistaken. She finds this "confusing and exasperating. Apex ideals had been based on the myth of 'old families' ruling New York from a throne of Revolutionary tradition, with the new millionaires paying them feudal allegiance. But experience had long since proved the delusiveness of the simile" (CC 177). Undine is disoriented by her discovery, but her ability to find a vantage where a better understanding would be possible is complicated by other forms of storytelling.

Novels such as "When The Kissing Had to Stop" and melodramas called "Oolaloo" and "The Soda-Water Fountain" (CC 48) show 'subjective' or more market-oriented writers⁶ issuing narratives that compete in the public sphere and crowd out socially useful tales that create common ground for individual citizens, and which might educate Undine.⁷ Juxtaposed with these shallow stories are the tastes of Undine's leisure-class interlocutors at the Fairford dinner. They attend classical dramas that she hears as "'Leg-long [...] Fade'" (CC 48-49).⁸ Upon leaving the dinner Undine, realizing she is out of her depth, "falter[ed] out stupidly from the depths of her disillusionment: 'Oh—good-bye'" (CC 50). Her disturbing discovery is a

moment when, for the consumer of the tale, “the contradictions inherent in bourgeois society surface, seem to break through the reified patina of the objectified world, revealing the incoherence of the rational systems by which [history] has been obscured, as well as the historically mediated nature of ‘objectivity’” (Porter qtd. in Anesko 84). The system of ideas held by the leisure class falls into plain view, along with the fact that mass culture does not present an accurate portrait of its subject. It is, of course, the narrative that frames this, reading tradition, and literature, as a much-needed guide, and goad, to cultural continuity.

After realizing that the representation of the elite she has assembled from the press is not true, Undine decides to “watch and listen without letting herself go” (CC 46). The strategy of not ‘letting herself go’ comes easily to one who possesses nothing interpretable save her ability to adapt and mimic the characteristics of others, as when “her attention was drawn to a lady in black who was examining the pictures through a tortoise-shell eye-glass. [...] It seemed suddenly plebian and promiscuous to look at the world with a naked eye” (CC 57). Undine becomes a corollary of the papers. She is attractive, but not cultured, and anticipates the needs of her readers by adjusting the editorial content of her persona. In seeking for the ‘originals’ of those images to which she relates so intensely, “unsuspected social gradations were thus revealed to the attentive Undine” (CC 41). As a result, she discovers that her initial perceptions about the ‘golden aristocracy’ are gross simplifications and eventually becomes able “to make distinctions unknown to her girlish categories” (CC 176). This is a crucial moment in the novel, for as Undine discovers that representation and truth don’t correspond in the press, so she understands that her beauty, her advertisement as it were, doesn’t have to deliver the submissiveness exchanged for the “money, clothes, cars, the

big bribe she's paid for keeping out of the man's way" (CC 189).⁹ In other words, mass culture shows Undine, and the reader, the artificiality of cultural norms.

Wharton apparently took issue with what she saw as an American fetish for the new that blunted perception of the crucial distinctions handed down by tradition. She attributes this insensitivity to "[a] long course of cinema obviousness and of tabloid culture [that] has rendered the majority of readers insensible to allusiveness and irony" (UCW 179). Yet Undine Spragg's "ear was too well attuned to the national note of irony" (CC 47) not to notice that her leisure-class companions at the Fairford dinner are "making sport" (CC 47) of the society painter Claude Popple whom she has glimpsed in the press. Undine's perceptiveness will eventually except her from the run of 'readers' that take 'tabloid culture' at face value. She comes to learn that the perceived correspondence between actual people and their lives rendered by journalistic narrative or photograph is not to be trusted.

For a time, though, Undine mistakes the hackneyed plot and the time-worn stereotype she discovers in the papers for valid portraits of the New York scene. She is thus shocked when she discovers, on coming into contact with actual members of the leisure class, that the papers present a simplified portrait of the social network. Wharton's presentation of the press in general, especially in its effect on Undine, echoes Mott's observation about newspaper editorials of the period. He characterizes these pieces as "not long and never hard to read. Short words, sentences, paragraphs were the rule. Complex subjects reduced by symbol to the lowest common denominator" (581). Social progress is Undine's career, and she prepares by studying the "social potentates whose least doings Mrs. Spragg and Undine had followed from afar in the Apex papers" (CC 27). The complexity of upper-class social practices must, though, remain undetectable in the accounts Undine reads. Other forms of popular culture

mislead her for a time as well. As I have mentioned, sentimental novels supply a misleading notion regarding gentry values: “[h]er novel-reading had filled her mind with the vocabulary of outraged virtue” (CC 327). But such unsubtle modes of expression are useless in a leisure-class environment where “all Undine’s perceptions bristle” (CC 47) to ascertain the socially acceptable locution. What Wharton called ‘tabloid culture,’ Undine discovers, diminishes her perceptive powers.

Reversals and revelations are central aspects of Undine’s experience. The limits of her mediated vision become ever clearer to her when the “camera obscura of New York society” (CC 94) turns her expectations upside down. When she discovers that Marvell’s family will be involved in the couple’s wedding plans she understands that in comparison to practices in her hometown of Apex, “New York reversed this rule” (CC91). In Paris she senses “[o]nce more that all the accepted values [of New York] were reversed” (CC 254). After she terminates her marriage to Marvell her “New York friends were at no pains to conceal from her the fact that in their opinion her divorce had been a blunder. Their logic was that of Apex reversed” (CC 307). Even a princess does not conform to pattern. Undine expects a royal representative of the imperious Faubourg to be finely attired. Instead, Princess Estradina is “small, slight and brown” and is “dressed with a disregard of the fashion” (CC 333). This “overthrew all Undine’s hierarchies” (CC 334). Some element of the society she moves in is clearly beyond the scope of the newspaper’s portrait, and hence her own understanding.

As for revelations, I have already shown that all Undine “sought for was improvement: she honestly wanted the best” (CC 60), but she learns about what is ‘best’ by her continual pursuit of “something beyond” (CC 62), mirage-like and continually receding.

At every new level of the fashionable Undine finds another stratum above her. She first wants to “get away from Apex” (CC 60). Later she meets girls “whose parents took them to the Great Lakes for August” (CC 61) and instantly wants to do the same. Her parents are “impelled” by Undine to a “Virginia ‘resort’” and in another reference to the coloring of realities by mass-culture representations, “its atmosphere of Christmas—chromo sentimentality” (CC 62). However, as soon as Undine hears from a Miss Wincher that the resort is a “hole” and that the Wincher family is “going to Europe for the Autumn” (CC 63), the protagonist “loathed all the people about her” (CC 63). A violent disappointment sweeps over her on these occasions when “everything was spoiled by a peep through another door” (CC 62). Finally believing she has discovered *the* environment within which to achieve social and material progress, “Undine vowed to herself with set lips ‘I’ll never try anything again until I try New York’” (CC 64).

“Undine’s first steps in social enlightenment” (CC 39), once she arrives in New York, find her seeking “in vain for the originals” (CC 41) she has encountered in the papers. She discovers that the leisure class mirage that shimmers in the pages of the tabloids does not represent the subtler aspects of the elite. When Undine asks Mrs. Heeny about the social status of the Fairfords and another guest, Ralph Marvell, Undine is delighted to hear her reply: “if they ain’t swell enough for you, Undine Spragg, you’d better go right over to the court of England” (CC 38), for that is one trunk (another being Holland) from which the family tree of the American gentry has grown. She believes that Marvell and his class are the ‘originals’ upon which are based the narratives in the “Boudoir Chat” column in the Sunday papers, which report on what “the smartest women” are doing (CC 33). Finally, given the opportunity to realize her goal of moving into a better circle where she might find “the best”

(CC 38), she attends the dinner in a house that “was small and rather shabby. There was no gilding, no lavish diffusion of light [...] The dinner too was disappointing. [...] With all the hints in the Sunday papers, she thought it dull of Mrs. Fairford not to have picked up something newer” (CC 44). Such ‘hints’ form Undine’s definition of social and material sophistication, but the variance she notes between portrait and reality indicates to her, and the reader, a competition between varied representations of reality.

The narrative begins to draw the arc of Undine’s changing perception of mass culture by recounting how, even before her family’s move from Apex to New York, she takes representations of the elite found in the newspaper at face value: “She knew all of New York’s golden aristocracy by name, and the lineaments of its most distinguished scions had been made familiar by passionate poring over the daily press” (CC 41). She learns about “the smartest dinners in town” from the manicurist and hairdresser Mrs. Heeny’s “newspaper cuttings” (CC 25). Undine garners what she believes is knowledge about the leisure class from poring over “the Society Column” (CC 45). The young woman structures her mornings “after the manner described in the article ‘On a Society Woman’s Day’” (CC 52).

Undine truly possesses “the instinct of adapting herself to whatever company she was in, of copying ‘the others’” (CC 150). Her identity, like the stories she reads in the tabloids, becomes a manufactured good that needs advertising. To this end she acquires a “press-agent” (CC 181) and becomes “a product, generic and commercial, a roaming brand-name” (Preston 93). Undine interprets depictions of normative leisure-class behavior to constitute a standard that ought to be as easily realized as the act of buying the papers in which the *Marvells* and *Dagonets* figure so prominently. She sees no connection between the signs of class she notes, and the traditions that underlie them.

Sounding like an anthropologist of fictional methodology, Wharton writes that “[t]he subjective writer lacks the power of getting far enough away from his story to view it as a whole and relate it to its setting” (WF 78). In the context of Undine’s first meeting with real members of the leisure class, the narrative asserts something like Wharton’s statement by warning that mass culture alienates its consumers from the essential, democracy-serving business to be conducted in the press. Moreover, a “universal facility of communication” (UCW 154) that is a characteristic of Wharton’s contemporary America displaces traditional narratives of leisure-class continuity such as Raymond de Chelles’ tale of his family’s hereditary association with royalty, and Marvell’s wish to merge “the personal with the general life” through “the releasing powers of language” (CC 134). For Marvell, this would fulfill an aesthetic that seeks to present the fragmentary world in an artistically unified way. In its market-oriented ability to communicate quickly with the greatest number of people, the press drowns out narratives that reiterate valued qualities of the social ‘setting’ which can distance culturally disruptive elements. The novel presents the oppositional quality of artistic and mass culture narratives in the uses Marvell and Undine make of them. The fact that Wharton’s novel was serialized in *Scribner’s* magazine complicates The Custom of the Country’s extended critique of mass culture, which, ironically, applies to the medium of the novel’s initial publication.

The Custom of the Country parries mass culture’s thrust at authoritative literary representations of the consequences of eroded, ameliorative, leisure-class traditions. Yet it did so initially in the pages of a literary *magazine*, even as it detailed the consequences for Undine of gaining her understanding of the public sphere from the popular press. But The Custom of the Country’s portrait of how mass culture thrives on a feedback loop that

conditions the self-perception of its consumers, and then validates the personae it has helped to mold, takes its object lesson to *Scribner's*, where readers like Marvell, who reads 'the fiction number' of magazines, will find it. One imagines that Undine does not read *Scribner's*, for Mrs. Heeny responds to her pronouncement regarding her fear that Marvell's father will not approve of her by asking, "[d]id you read the description of yourself in the *Radiator* this morning? I wish't I had time to cut it out. I guess I'll have to start a separate bag for *your* clippings soon" (CC 89). With her likeness in circulation, Undine becomes a 'product,' to use Preston's term, who internalizes her own press. In the process, Undine ensures that a useful, though waning tradition, that is "blurred and puzzling," and where even "graduations of tone were confusing" (CC 48), will remain beyond her perception. Undine's 'fate' is in this respect a cautionary tale issued to the consumers of Wharton's serialized novel who, more like Marvell than the protagonist, can glimpse how ineffective are its cultural institutions in inculcating the values Undine so clearly lacks.

Seemingly objective comparisons between Marvell's affiliation with leisure-class traditions, and links between mass culture and Undine's psychology, can seem like the work of a social microscopist intent on dividing and analyzing. Yet Wharton's insights are those of an author who links her observations to a wider tradition of investigation whose key process is, as Gillian Beer argues in discussing George Eliot, 'imagination.' Beer writes of Eliot, whose influence on Wharton has been well documented,¹⁰ that she

emphasises the congruity between all the various processes of the imagination: the novelist's and the scientist's enterprise is fired by the same prescience, the same willingness to explore the significance even of that which can be registered neither by instruments nor by the unaided senses. (*Darwin's Plots* 141)

Considered in light of this statement, Wharton's view that biological and social evolution are related bridges the "too deep an abyss of difference" (CC 337) separating the natural contingency represented by Undine, and the project of maintaining an 'intelligible,' goal-directed public sphere that ought to be maintained by the narrative's leisure class.

While with other characters one could object to the suggestion that image and psychology can be viewed as identical, the text demonstrates that the surmise is appropriate in Undine's case, for she has a "delicious sense of being 'in all the papers'" (CC 97) that satisfies her completely. This satisfaction does nothing to harness her 'primitive' destructiveness because she finds no moral guidance in her reading. The narrative juxtaposes the fact that Undine's "mind was as destitute of beauty and mystery as the prairie schoolhouse where she had been educated" (CC 139-140) with Marvell and de Chelle's conviction that the 'beauty and mystery' possessed by tradition is the source of social continuity. Her 'education' by 'the papers' is ultimately destructive to those values held by the two men, for she is both a subject, and agent, of mass culture.

The historian Jackson-Lears writes that "[w]hen antimodernists preserved higher loyalties outside the self they sustained a role of protest against a complacent faith in progress and a narrow positivist conception of reality" (xvi). It is in this sense that The Custom of the Country is anti-modern, for the narrative's depiction of Undine's notion of progress as social advancement shows her willingness to use individuals instrumentally. From the position of the narrative's allegiances, human interrelatedness needs acknowledgement, not exploitation. Aside from a desire to consume, and to rise within the social hierarchy, there is little to Undine. But this is an effect of Wharton's representation, and not an aesthetic failure. Undine's narrow view of reality makes her irrelevant to the

project of questioning faith in progress contained in the novel; Marvell “soon saw that she regarded intimacy as a pretext for escaping [...] into a total absence of expression” (CC 143). The narrative’s antimodernist orientation, to use Lears’s terminology, shows the difficulty in forging mutually beneficial social bonds out of the material of Undine’s calculating individualism.

A further example of the narrative’s perspective on a ‘faith in progress’ predicated on material gain exists in the fact that for Undine only the contractual is a suitable basis for hazarding one’s assistance to another. This becomes apparent when she pleads with Moffatt, “Oh, Elmer, if you ever liked me, help me now, and I’ll help you if I get the chance” (CC 112). Even intimacy is a pretext for making smart arrangements, but this is unsurprising given the economic underpinning of the marital state Wharton details. Undine is strongly drawn to Moffatt. Her initial engagement to him in Apex, and their subsequent marriage, presents no advantage socially in the view of Marvell and his caste: “Undine felt that in the Marvell set Elmer Moffatt would be stamped ‘not a gentleman’” (CC 112). Their attraction to each other does represent the operation of Undine’s capacity for sexual selection, however.

Physically, Moffatt is a powerful, “stoutish figure [...] thick yet compact” who had “a look of jovial cunning” and a “brisk swaggering step” (CC 106-107). Moffatt and Undine personify the desire for material gain, which the text links to an amoral contractual basis of interpersonal relations. That Moffatt cuts the figure of an animal, and that Undine’s capacity for sexual selection singles him out, demonstrates that they are less governed by a leisure-class moderation of sexuality that makes Clare van Degen, who is in love with her cousin Marvell, “light and frivolous, without strength of will” (CC 195). However, the fact that Undine’s exercising of her sexual selection seems to predict a problematic social and genetic

'renewal' through a union with Moffatt is inconsistent with the positive valuation of sexual selection present in The House of Mirth and The Age of Innocence.

Undine's marriage to Marvell is a good one for her socially, but she comes to understand that because of his relative lack of wealth, "money was what chiefly stood between them" (CC 204). Her insightfulness can be traced to the fact that she is "animated by her father's business instinct" (CC 212). Furthermore, Undine is put forward in society on the premise of a calculation that highlights how she differs from Marvell, and how the difference indicates class priorities: the Spraggs "had lived in New York for two years without any social benefit to their daughter; and it was of course for that purpose they had come" (CC 28). Undine grows impatient for the accrual of this 'benefit.' When she finally marries Marvell she forms a union with one whose idea of marriage bears little resemblance to her own. He had "preserved, through all his minor adventures, his faith in the great adventure to come" and possessed "the imaginative man's indestructible dream of a rounded passion" (CC 85). His imagination, affiliated with tradition and its pale of cultural stability, hinges not on the contract, but on the human interaction the contract both formalizes and distances.

As a representative of an intrusive species, Undine imports her defining moral blankness into the ranks of the elite. This complicates the perception of Wharton as an anti-modern social critic who wishes to preserve 'higher loyalties outside the self,' for Marvell does not recognize Undine as a regression who also represents the future of the country, and the demise of his class ideology. There is little authorial nostalgia for a past whose values cannot cope with the present. For her part, Undine adheres to no internalized code save one that makes the evidence of her atavism invisible to others: "[h]er quickness in noting external differences had already taught her to modulate and lower her voice, and to replace 'The *i-*

dea!' and 'I wouldn't wonder' by more polished locutions" (CC 92). Like the papers she reads, her attractive form conceals an adaptive self-presentation addressed to the desires of her consumers. This key trait depends on an expertise at mimicry that makes it "instinctive with her to become, for the moment, the person her interlocutors expected her to be" (CC 355). In this, she pointedly lacks any sign of being the product of social continuity.

The instinct that governs Undine is instantiated by mass culture forms that project, in their status as throwaway objects, a world ephemeral and disposable, along with their message that change is progress whether it takes the form of new fashion or new identity. The Custom of the Country lays blame for Undine's harmful notions of progress on printed ephemera that propagate her tendency to emulate what she finds "in the glowing pages of fiction" (CC 68). She is a chameleon product of a world her aristocratic French husband decries when he remarks of Americans: "You come from hotels as big as towns, and from towns as flimsy as paper, where the streets haven't had time to be named and the buildings are demolished before they're dry" (CC 468). In directing such blasts at America, Wharton would differentiate herself from a realist forerunner she greatly admired:

For [...] W.D. Howells, literature ought to reflect and play a major role in encouraging the social and political progress that had received its fullest expression in the American effort to unite scientific inquiry and political democracy into a means for a better life for all men. [...] Howells [...] thus accepted wholeheartedly the central evolutionary premise of much nineteenth century thought that loosely joined social, material, and intellectual life into a triumphant forward march. (Pizer, "Naturalism [...] of The House of Mirth" 66)

Wharton recalls in her memoir how “Howells was the first to feel the tragic potentialities of life in the drab American small town; but the incurable moral timidity which again and again checked him on the verge of a masterpiece drew him back” (BG 147-148). The journalist Bartley Hubbard’s interview of Silas Lapham shows that as early as the mid 1880s Howells addressed the role of the press in equating success within the American capitalist system with a social Darwinist interpretation of evolution.

Lapham, like Undine, is ignorant of a radical implication of Darwin’s theory. He doesn’t see that “evolution is not a process that was designed to produce us” (Dennett 56), but he is a figure to whose social-Darwinist logic Howells does not give free play. Wharton, on the other hand, traces out the consequences of the fact that Undine believes that social evolution *is* a process designed to produce her. The protagonist is “the perfect result of the system, the completest proof of its triumph” (CC 190) in the words of the sociologically insightful Charles Bowen. It is a system, though, that does not reflect the intricate interplay of nature and culture that cautious leisure-class traditions monitor, and in the past have policed.

In Howells’ novel the journalist tells Lapham that he is “just one million times more interesting to the public than if you hadn’t a dollar” (3). Here, Howells’ realist narrative demonstrates that the papers’ popular record of the noteworthy is responsive to the high value attached to material accumulation. It is a definition of progress Howells presents neutrally. Wharton’s text rejects this association, and vitiates this version of progress for its potential to commodify human relationships. An example of this occurs when Undine contrives for Marvell to pay her one hundred thousand dollars so that he might gain custody of their son. When Undine spots the boy, named Paul, on the railway platform, having forced

Marvell to send him to her, she thinks “what an acquisition he would be” (CC 414). With this statement Undine illustrates how her outlook on ‘progress’ as accumulation objectifies the child, and presents Undine as unfeminine in her lack of maternal responsiveness. Apposed to her view of Paul as an ‘acquisition’ is the outlook of the aristocratic de Chelles, who in accepting Paul into his household asserts that progress is linked to acculturation by stating that “he won’t be a savage long with me” (CC 414).

Undine’s intelligence is wasted by an ethos that can’t turn her abilities away from ‘larger opportunities’ and toward the collective project of controlled social renewal. Her inability to engage in social practices that inhibit cultural fragmentation is a function of her training by mass culture, which can’t educate her fully. “Fiction has been enlarged by making the background a part of the action” (UCW 18), Wharton writes. Undine correlates with mass culture’s effects in narrowing the perspective of the American citizen. Her story articulates the interaction of the mass culture ‘background’ and her advancement, which reads as logical in her avaricious world. But while the printed matter Undine reads cannot render subtle distinctions of class and status (recall her mistake in taking members of the newly-moneyed class for the gentry), this is the very thing the novel does well.¹¹ The Custom of the Country in this way asserts the ability of fiction to portray aspects of culture not visible from the perspectives offered by the forms of communication associated with Undine.

The narrative’s excavation of the social environment or ‘background’ reveals that Undine’s mediated idea of an undifferentiated elite persuades her, initially, to seek affiliation with a group that does not believe in linking material and social progress. She turns away, however, from the provisional efforts of the leisure class to subdue the unpredictable results of immoderate individualism, realizing that she “had given herself to the exclusive and the

dowdy when the future belonged to the showy and the promiscuous” (CC 176-177). While waning social status is held by one subset of the elite represented in the papers she reads, waxing prestige and power belong to members of another group, such as “the wife of a Steel Magnet” (CC 41), and to Peter Van Degen, who is “the hero of ‘Sunday Supplements’ [...] the supreme exponent, in short, of those crowning arts that made all life seem stale and unprofitable outside the magic ring of the Society Column” (CC 58). Although it is true that Van Degen belongs to one of the first families of old New York, the narrative depicts him as leading the way toward the adoption of an outlook practiced by the *nouveau riches*. His “odd physiognomy” (CC 58) reminds one that unsuppressed sexuality is a central concern of leisure class tradition, for as Van Degen faces Undine, “his batrachian sallowness unpleasantly flushed,” the text describes him as “primitive man looking out of the eyes from which a frock-coated gentleman usually pined at her” (CC 207). It is in their shared primitiveness, veneered with tradition in Van Degen’s case, and gilded in Undine’s, that Wharton finds a growing resemblance between ‘the exclusive and the dowdy’ and ‘the showy and the promiscuous’ that results from social evolution.

Undine learns from the angle of vision offered by mass culture forms, though this learning limits her perception. She might see that the papers don’t tell the whole truth, as I have demonstrated, but she remains ignorant of their deterministic effect on her interaction with the broader aims of the social collective. She thus has “no clear perception of the forces that did not directly affect her” (CC 97). As a representative of her type the protagonist is, like other Americans, “told every morning, by wireless and book jacket, by news item and picture-paper, who is in the day’s spotlight, and must be admired (and if possible read) before the illumination shifts” (UCW 178).

The novel contains and represents Undine's attributes, particularly the fact that she is "passionately imitative" (CC 34). It therefore advertises its avoidance of the fallacy that adaptability, as exemplified by mass culture, can propel social evolution in a direction in keeping with the principles of equality and natural rights. Undine concludes, in what becomes "one of the guiding principles of her career," that "*It's better to watch than to ask questions*" (CC 71). The italics are Wharton's, and the emphasis placed on this statement alerts the reader to the harmful consequences for all Americans of Undine's method—one learned from the 'objectivity' of tabloids and how-to guides that she consumes—of a watchful, predatory stance toward the ramifications of new cultural forms.

Mass culture's influence on contemporary society in the narrative is analogous to the environmental influences on innumerable generations of individual species familiar to the Darwinist. As Undine finds fictions presented as facts in the newspapers, the novel presents these 'facts' as creating new conditions in the 'macro-social environment.' A comparison with the long gestation of Marvell's class values is often implicit in the text's depiction of contemporary values uninfluenced by leisure-class mores. For example, a "Wall Street code" which creates "a world committed to swift adjustments" (CC 233) shapes Undine's need for the immediate acquisition of "something still better beyond" (CC 62). Marvell, on the other hand, reflects on an acting lesson he recalls observing as a young man, remembering the way a classic role was "dissolved into its component elements and built up again with a minuteness of elucidation and a range of references that made him feel as though he had been let into the secret of some age-long natural process" (CC 233). The formation of one's persona has a history in Marvell's interpretation of the scene. The process is both 'natural' and intellectual in its reliance on 'minuteness of elucidation' and 'range of references.' But

he also understands this artifice to be a function of an 'age-long [...] process' resulting from historical continuity, and *choice*. The narrative's recording of Marvell's personal history, and a deeper social history he imagines shapes the self, contrasts with the immediacy of communication and the inconsequentiality of content that defines mass culture, Undine, and Wharton's contemporary society.

III. "the student of inheritance might have wondered" (CC 116)

In "The Great American Novel" (1927) Wharton comments on a failing of the criticism of fiction that echoes The Custom of the Country's interest in popular culture's inability to value a refined tradition:

The idea that genuineness is to be found only in the rudimentary, and that whatever is complex is inauthentic, is a favorite axiom of the modern American critic. To students of natural history such a theory is somewhat disconcerting. The tendency of all growth, animal, human, social, is towards an ever-increasing complexity. [...] Traditional society, with its old-established distinctions of class, its pass-words, exclusions, delicate shades of language and behavior, is one of man's oldest works of art, the least conscious and the most instinctive; yet the modern American novelist is told that the social and educated being is an unreality unworthy of his attention.

(UCW 155)

This passage finds the perspective of a 'student of natural history' to be a useful corrective to that of the 'American critic.' Its implied critical stance suggests the novelist's politics can be directed by science. The critic might apply science to social analysis because the reality of

‘traditional society’ is a phenomenon ‘least conscious and the most instinctive,’ and therefore a fitting candidate for rigorous examination.

But what are the signs such a scientific fictional poetic can examine? Fusing particular architectural forms like the hothouse to individual class strata in The House of Mirth externalizes how a tradition that is ‘least conscious and the most instinctive’ in Selden’s leisured cohort might moderate the ‘tendency of all growth [...] towards an ever-increasing complexity.’ The mistake made by Selden and his type, though, is their idea that the social stasis represented by the hothouse is natural. What Wharton suggests is that though strictly false when considered biologically, their idea is the result of ‘continuity and choice,’ and is for this reason rational. When Selden and Lily converse in the Brys’ conservatory the setting emblemizes a distancing of the natural by the novel’s gentry, which is reflected in the fact that the two cannot become romantically involved. The state of relations between them is fictionally visible as one sign of an ethos of control over nature.

Like Marvell in The Custom of the Country, who is preoccupied with “states of feeling” (CC 194), Selden is an “orchid basking in its artificially created atmosphere” (HM 150). Selden exemplifies “that little illuminated circle in which life reached its finest efflorescence, as the mud and sleet of a winter night enclose a hot-house filled with tropical flowers. All this was in the natural order of things” (HM 150). But Selden’s ‘order’ is not ‘natural’ at all. The ‘little illuminated circle’ is a product of nature, of course, to the extent that culture arises from a biological base, but the ‘circle’ is alienated from natural processes by reason and tradition, which together attempt to forestall variation and class hybridization in the social realm by objecting to the union of Marvell and Undine in The Custom of the Country.

Wharton shows that the ‘social foundation’ projects more than a single social ‘fable’ or ideology. This is apparent in conflicting interpretations of social evolution present in reactive leisure class attitudes toward unregulated change, and the socioeconomic elite’s regressive ignorance of the hazard posed by chance to the underlying democracy that supports their business activities. The narrative’s portrait of Undine’s inhumanity in pursuing her goals of wealth and power, and her harmful effect on Marvell and de Chelles, illustrates this. Relaxing standards that formerly connected wealth and social responsibility create her as “a creature of skin deep reactions, a mote in the beam of pleasure” (CC 202).

An older standard is measured out for the reader in Marvell’s condescending estimation of Undine, which signifies his class fable: “He was not blind to her crudity and her limitations, but they were a part of her grace and her persuasion. [. . .] her obvious lack of any sense of relative values, would make her an easy prey to the powers of folly” (CC 85-86). Here, the text juxtaposes Undine’s singular *instinctive* values against Marvell’s recognition that ‘relative values’ exist, and compete with each other. The ‘skin deep reactions’ exhibited by Undine mark her as dangerously unaware of this fact, while Marvell’s attraction to ‘her grace and her persuasion’ is his Achilles’ heel; he underestimates the vulnerability of ‘old-established distinctions of class.’

In The Custom of the Country Undine’s aggressive exploitation of what Bowen calls “the whole problem of American marriages” (CC 187)—consensual divorce, the expectation of female passivity, and “[t]he fact that the average American looks down on his wife” (CC 187)—goes unchecked even inside Marvell’s class-bound enclave. Inside the class barrier, the breakdown of an idealistic distancing of the uncivilized first seen in The House of Mirth facilitates Undine’s ability to act as she does. The later narrative presents a hothouse

damaged to such an extent that a native species epitomized by Undine and Elmer Moffatt overgrows the orchids of the gentry within it. Undine misidentifies the moderating purpose of culture advocated by the narrative, seeing instead such a practice as the source of a life ever “more luxurious, more exciting, more worthy of her” (CC 62). The text confronts the effects of her erroneous distinction on an organic social entity the protagonist sees as a mechanism that can satisfy “her usual business-like intentness on gaining her end” (CC 454) without demanding a substantive contribution to it.

Wharton read in Vernon Kellogg’s Darwinism Today (1907) that “Variation [. . .] occurs according to the laws of chance” (32). She extends Kellogg’s claim to her fictional social analysis by showing that the ‘best’ in elite culture hold their position through a coincidence of chance variation and receptive environment. Undine’s ability to realize her intent, in other words, is the result of prevalent social conditions that favor her superficiality. Her variation, as I have suggested, is also a regression. The text critiques her need to fulfill desires compelled by a shallow society, seeing them as an asocial and centripetal historical development.

The particular meaning of the words ‘complexity’ and ‘progress’ in the Darwinian context complicates the task of interpreting the author’s portrait of their class-centered definitions. Fortunately, E.O. Wilson makes a distinction about these words that is useful in deciphering the text’s recombination of social evolution and natural selection:

If we mean by progress the advance toward a preset goal, such as that composed by intention in the human mind, then evolution by natural selection, which has no preset goals, is not progress. But if we mean the production through time of increasingly

complex controlling organisms and societies, in at least some lines of descent, with regression always a possibility, then evolutionary progress is an obvious reality. (98)

Accordingly, social evolution and regression are matters of increasing or decreasing complexity alone. 'Progress' consists only in increased complexity, whether the organism is biological or social. Applied to The Custom of the Country, Undine's pursuit of 'improvement' (CC 60) or 'progress' through the realization of her materialistic intentions is therefore a goal predicated on faulty assumptions regarding the applicability of evolution by natural selection to social change. Here, the novel intervenes to illustrate what popular culture ignores, displaying its dedication to affecting what lies within its field of vision. In so doing the narrative foregrounds the untapped capacity of a leisure class perspective that looks down, as has been shown, "impartially from the heights of pure speculation" (CC 187), but cannot beat back the forces of chance with its rationalism.

An example of the threat presented by uncontrolled natural competition that also exemplifies Wharton's compression of natural and social phenomena exists in the movement eastward of the Spragg family and Undine's subsequent triumphs. Contained within this plot sequence is a Darwinian truism connected by the narrative to the growing mobility of Americans in the nineteenth century. Yet the Spraggs are unaware of their conformity to anything but their own desire to see Undine advance, demonstrating again the novel's association of sudden material increase with a primitive attitude toward the social collective's purpose.

Geographical and class mobility are obvious characteristics of this new world. A passage from The Origin of Species serves well to describe the family's journey from the ironically named Apex City to the exploitable landscape of New York, and what happens to

those Undine mingles with upon her arrival: "If the country were open on its borders, new forms would certainly immigrate, and this would seriously disturb the relations of some of the former inhabitants" (Origin 102).

New York is opening up, something shown by the success of Elmer Moffatt, and in The House of Mirth, Simon Rosedale. As if to prove the applicability of Darwin's statement in the social context, Undine's arrival in New York upsets the prevailing social equilibrium. Undine hears, for instance, "that Mrs. Marvell had other views for her son [than to marry Undine]" (CC 92), but "there had been no reprisals [...]. That was not her ideal of warfare" (CC 92). No thought of fighting off the "intruder" (CC 69) enters Mrs. Marvell's mind. On the contrary, true to her vestigial ideals, Marvell's mother "seemed anxious to dispel any doubts of her good faith" (CC 92) once his decision to marry Undine has been made.

The narrative's portrait of class relations in the social environment of New York demonstrates how both the leisure class and the socioeconomic elite see a connection between nature and culture. Compare, for example, Undine's enactment of social life as a battle of the 'fittest' in which "she was going to get what she wanted" (CC 42) via "her blind desire to wound and destroy" (CC 454) with Marvell's comment regarding the displacement of those who succumb to the invaders:

Ralph sometimes called his mother and grandfather the Aborigines, and likened them to those vanishing denizens of the American continent doomed to rapid extinction with the advance of the invading race. He was fond of describing Washington Square as the "Reservation" and prophesying that before long its inhabitants would be exhibited at ethnological shows, pathetically engaged in the exercise of their primitive industries. (CC 77-78)

Marvell's eyes are open to the displacement of his class, but his response denotes passivity. His comparison of his class to the American aborigine made extinct by the same 'blind desire' exhibited by Undine lacks insight into the actual extinction of individuals and entire cultures. While fluent in abstractions, Marvell is unable to conceive of the ramifications of the avidity summed up in Undine and her colonial, and biological, antecedents.

Similarly, in The Rise of Silas Lapham Bromfield Corey compares the Lapham family to the Sioux: "clever but uncivilized" he says (96). Corey and Marvell share key traits. Both are leisure-class aesthetes. Corey, a painter, believes that civilization starts with literature, while Marvell is an aspiring author. But they are relics. Marvell, a 'vanishing denizen' himself, acknowledges the fact of invasion allegorically (he calls his family 'the Aborigines') and thus distances its reality. Corey, commenting on a member of the new socioeconomic elite in referring to Lapham, disparages the class that will displace his own by brandishing a now irrelevant ideal civilization whose authority is crumbling before the new capitalism. For both characters, the connection between nature and culture is obscured by a fixation on the reflection of culture in art, as when Marvell goes to "the length of quoting poetry" (CC 175) to a woman deaf to its tradition and to its representation of a culture built up slowly through time. For Undine Spragg, nature and culture, instinct and its enactment, are of a piece.

Shades of difference emerge in the text between individuals who are not members of the leisure class, while members of the gentry possess a homogeneous character. The Custom of the Country portrays New York's socioeconomic elite as conforming to Darwin's observations of "thousands of gradations and variations between organisms" (Dennett 35). Charles Bowen observes "a seemingly endless perspective of plumed and jeweled heads, of

shoulders bare or black-coated" (CC 242) that catalogues display by the new rich in a way that recalls Darwin's descriptions of variations within a species: "No one supposes that all the individuals of the same species are cast in the very same mould. These individual differences are highly important to us, as they offer materials for natural selection to accumulate" (Origin 102). In such transpositions of evolutionary writing into a fictional frame, class and species become coequal. Because of this, variation from the social mean can be presented as natural, while conformity to it can be seen as a sign of insupportable artifice. The rigidity of tradition's suppression of variation in the leisure class is its downfall.

Material culture provides class-centered views on social evolution. For instance, the women of the socioeconomic elite take to heart the principle that fashion evolves. Undine's "unworn" dresses "looked old-fashioned already" (CC 35). What is 'best' and 'new' are synonymous to Undine. She is thrilled when de Chelles gives her "glimpses of another, still more brilliant existence, that life of the inaccessible 'Faubourg'" (CC 253). Meanwhile, the old money lives in unchanging fustiness where esteemed women wear "dowdy black and antiquated ornaments" (CC 45). What marks one as fashionable in the socioeconomic elite is the ability to express wealth as "incoherence" (CC 243) unrestricted by tradition. The practices that identify membership in the leisure class, though, straitjacket individuals who believe that progress and change are not equivalent.

As I have shown elsewhere, before Undine discovers that she has allied herself with "the exclusive and the dowdy" (CC 176-177) she believes in an undifferentiated elite distinguished by their display of wealth. Wandering through the rooms of an art gallery she senses that "the ladies and gentlemen wedged before the pictures had the 'look' which signified social consecration" (CC 57). In conforming to this 'look,' members of the

socioeconomic elite symbolize visibility and mutability as properties of their class. Undine's "sparkling eyes" (CC 392), her "high fluting tone" (CC 95), and the fact that a "blotched looking glass [...] could not disfigure her" (CC 219) bestow upon her beauty a primal quality that in contrast to the "plain" women (CC 45) of the gentry distinguishes her as a biological archetype.

In *Darwiniana* (1897), a work that Preston suggests Wharton read,¹² Huxley writes that

Atavism ["[r]esemblance to [...] remote ancestors rather than to parents; tendency to reproduce the ancestral type in animals or plants. [...] Recurrence of the disease or constitutional symptoms of an ancestor after the intermission of one or more generations" (OED)] [...] is, as I said before, one of the most marked and striking tendencies of organic beings; but side by side with this hereditary tendency there is an equally distinct and remarkable tendency to variation. The tendency to reproduce the original stock has, as it were, its limits, and side by side with it there is a tendency to vary in certain directions, as if there were two opposing powers working upon the organic being, one tending to take it in a straight line, and the other tending to make it diverge from that straight line, first to one side and then to the other. (398)

Atavism is one of Undine's defining traits: "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" (CC 116). Marvell wonders "from what source Undine's voracious ambitions had been drawn" (CC 279). She is the chance regression who causes others to question the source of her "inherited prejudices" (CC 282). Among these prejudices is her attitude that social progress is intertwined with material

accumulation and destructiveness. Undine is in this way linked to social Darwinism, and is cast as a historically primitive type that has returned to define the future of American society.

Undine's regressive aspect is one that repels what would acculturate her into the ideals of the leisure class she twice marries into. Her previously documented habit of seeking improvement is one that relies on exploitation, making of progress an end with no ethical restriction on the means used to achieve it. Huxley accepted an interpretation of Darwinism that acknowledged the struggle for existence and the elimination of the unfit. However, the following passage from "Evolution and Ethics" (quoted in part in chapter one) articulates Huxley's qualification of this point, which centers on the notion that humans, as reasoning beings, can take moral action in the face of the struggle for existence. It is a qualification the novel reiterates frequently:

There is another fallacy which appears to me to pervade the so-called 'ethics of evolution.' It is the notion that because, on the whole, animals and plants have advanced in perfection of organization by means of the struggle for existence and the consequent 'survival of the fittest'; therefore men in society, men as ethical beings, must look to the same process to help them towards perfection. I suspect that this fallacy has arisen out of the unfortunate ambiguity of the phrase 'survival of the fittest.' 'Fittest' has a connotation of 'best'; and about 'best' there hangs a moral flavour. In cosmic nature, however, what is 'fittest' depends upon the conditions. [. . .] if our hemisphere were to cool again, the survival of the fittest might bring about, in the vegetable kingdom, a population of more and more stunted and humbler and humbler organisms, until the 'fittest' that survived might be nothing but lichens [. . .]

They, as the fittest, the best adapted to the changed conditions, would survive.

("Evolution and Ethics" 327)

In Huxley's view, 'conditions' are the key factor successful adaptation must answer to within cosmic nature. His criticism is reserved for interpretations of social evolution that deny human control over social conditions. Refuting the 'survival of the fittest' in the terms one finds in Wharton's narrative, he provides a position from which to view Undine as a character who is a 'stunted [...] lichen' well adapted to the changed conditions of a modern world that favor such a creature.

Because Marvell's class has not arrested the decay of 'conditions' symbolized by Undine's thriving, the gentry falls within the scope of Wharton's critique. Undine's calculating enactment of the idea that '[f]ittest has a connotation of best' damages the people and traditions she comes into contact with, contributing to the erosion of the social order whose material privileges she enjoys. But Wharton's harshness toward the socioeconomic elite is balanced by her criticism of an aristocracy inattentive to 'the changed conditions' Undine capitalizes on. What is extinguished by the forces Undine represents—namely the cultural practices of Ralph Marvell and Raymond de Chelles—has no special claim to endure save for the care with which it was created. The inability of tradition to intervene in its diminution by mass culture and the market has made the leading class vulnerable to the dynamics of a cultural form of natural selection they had thought suppressed. With the old system no longer viable, contingency makes the same short work of leisure-class cultural practices that try to moderate contingency as the dialectic of science makes of "Mrs. Marvell's classification of the world [...] absolute as medieval cosmogony" (CC 177).

Ancient, complex, and outdated, Mrs. Marvell's outlook is as vulnerable as the complex of traditions and rites riven by the lichen-like Undine.

In a passage that echoes The Custom of the Country's reasoning about the purpose of tradition, and Undine's ignorance of the protections offered by it, Huxley writes:

Laws and moral precepts are directed to the end of curbing the cosmic process and reminding the individual of his duty to the community, to the protection and influence of which he [or she] owes, if not existence itself, at least the life of something better than a brutal savage. It is from neglect of these plain considerations that the fanatical individualism of our time attempts to apply the analogy of cosmic nature to our society. ("Evolution and Ethics" 328)

Undine's application of 'the analogy of cosmic nature' displays her own role (Moffatt's is similar) in natural selection within the confines of old New York. Marvell recognizes this, in the context of a disagreement with Undine over the company she keeps. He perceives her refusal of his commands as "the perfect functioning of her instinct of self-preservation" (CC 152). Furthermore, her connection to 'cosmic nature,' like Moffatt's, resists linguistic codification, reinforcing the regressive aspect of both characters: "here was someone who spoke her language," she notes of Moffatt, someone "who knew her meanings, who understood instinctively all the deep-seated wants for which her acquired vocabulary had no terms" (CC 460). She sees society as a part of the natural world, not a mitigation of it. In this view her relation to a moderating tradition is occluded by the violence of enacted desire present in "the sinister change" that "came over her when her will was crossed" (CC154).

Marvell rebukes her by saying: "You know nothing of this society you're in; of its antecedents, its rules, its conventions" (CC 151). Yet Undine's is not a willful disparagement

of the old rules, but an expression of instinct. She is more like Peter Van Degen, who instead of thoughtfully discharging his responsibility as a social leader is presented as a sexually aggressive amphibian with a “Batrachian countenance” (CC 151). The latter is an allusion to his sexual attraction to Undine comprehensible to one with a thoroughgoing knowledge of Darwin’s The Descent of Man, for in that work one finds that in nature “the male seems much more eager than the female; and so it is with [...] Batrachians” (200). Van Degen’s drives, like Undine’s, distinguish him from Marvell, who seems particularly bloodless when Popple “leaned over to give Marvell’s hand the ironic grasp of celibacy” (CC 99). Marvell might refer to ‘antecedents’ and ‘rules,’ but he does nothing to perpetuate them when he brings Undine into the walled garden of the elite. For her part, Undine works from instinct that transmits no memory of the ‘conventions’ championed by Marvell.

Other scientific works contributed to Wharton’s fictional analysis of nature and culture in The Custom of the Country. Her corrective to individualistic enactments of false but influential interpretations of natural selection was founded on sources that shed new light on heredity in nature. Familiarity with R.H. Lock’s Variation, Heredity and Evolution (1906) gave her insights into a contemporary interpretation of Darwin’s work on natural selection and variation that, along with Kellogg’s Darwinism Today, presented current thinking on the then inadequately understood medium of heredity. In The Age of Innocence, as I show in the next chapter, rituals of the elite ‘tribe’ are one medium by which regulative cultural practices are perpetuated. In the novel under consideration here, though, the roles played by factors *outside* the control of the leisure class jam their mechanisms of cultural inheritance.

Lock’s work is rich with passages Wharton may have found useful for examining this subject:

the features of every part [of an organism] are aimed at some useful purpose; or if they are not, then they have been useful in former times and under different circumstances, and are now undergoing a process of gradual removal, because the individuals in which the useless structure is least developed will have the best chance of surviving. (Lock 51)

In the sociobiological framework of the novel, Marvell and his kind are undergoing 'gradual removal,' as I have shown. As Marvell appreciates the old world as the foundry of his traditions, so Undine thinks of the European towns she visits with him as "places [that] seem as if they were dead. It's like some awful cemetery" (CC 144). His 'removal' by suicide is one whose agency lies with the workings of the market, which dissolves his capital when he risks it to regain his son. Wharton's knowledge of Lock's work, then, like her knowledge of Huxley's, can be seen as underscoring how the process of natural selection that causes 'the process of gradual removal' in nature also persists in human society.

The presence of such processes mandates others created by the aristocratic collective to arrest the unjust removal of individuals like Lily Bart and Marvell, who might be seen from one angle as 'useless,' to use Lock's term. In contrast to the notion of individual rights suggested by this position, Undine's assumption regarding her success recalls the reasoning of the nineteenth-century sociologist William Graham Sumner, who in the following passage views natural selection as having escaped the effects of social modification:

The millionaires are a product of natural selection, acting on the whole body of men to pick out those who can meet the requirements of certain work to be done. [. . .]
They may fairly be regarded as the naturally selected agents of society for certain

work. They get high wages and live in luxury, but the bargain is a good one for society. (qtd. in Hofstadter 58)

Undine's actions are predicated on the assumption to be observed in Sumner's statement that natural selection acts freely on 'the whole body of men.'

Her self-exemption from social regulation is founded on the belief that adhering to tradition would subject her to a spurious dilution of her will. The novel suggests that the period it chronicles witnesses the fruition of Sumner's statement. It is the effect of Undine's actions on others that is thus given significance: "[i]n all her struggles for authority her sense of the rightfulness of her cause had been measured by her power of making people do as she pleased" (CC 454). Moreover, if Undine is a 'naturally selected agent' deserving of the material gains she accumulates as she passes from marriage to marriage,¹³ the fact remains that what 'the whole body of men' receives in Undine and Sumner's 'bargain' is nought.

Wharton's depiction of the effects of ascribing a cultural role to natural selection in the way seen in the passage from Sumner poses the question of how social Darwinism affects the continuity of tradition, social stewardship, and artistic achievement Marvell's class would carry on. As was the case with Huxley's writing, Wharton's familiarity with Ernst Haeckel's work supplied her with a biological theory suggestive of forms with which to depict the regressive aspect of Undine's combative 'ideology' of natural selection. Hackel's theories supply a frame that isolates for examination the novel's portrait of the reappearance in culture of primitive attitudes.

The question of whether Wharton was familiar with Haeckel's influential theory of recapitulation is resolved by turning to Kellogg's Darwinism Today. Wharton wrote that she was "deep in Kellogg's" book in a letter to Sara Norton dated May 29, 1908 (Letters 146).

This occurred during one of the periods in which Wharton wrote The Custom of the Country (Lewis 228). Kellogg summarizes Haeckel's theory¹⁴ as follows: "The species recapitulates in the ontogeny (development) of each of its individuals the course or history of its phylogeny (descent or evolution). Hence the child corresponds in different periods of its development to the phyletic stages in the descent of man" (Kellogg 21). Paralleling this description, Undine is frozen in her childlike state. She is impulsive, "remote and Ariel like" (CC 143), and she "wanted [...] amusement [...] despite her surface-sophistication her notion of amusement was hardly less innocent than when she had hung on the plumber's fence" (CC 308). The presentation of her innocence in the text finds her impervious simplicity of purpose and arrested social development to be related; from Marvell's perspective "she was completely unconscious of states of feeling on which so much of his inner life depended" (CC 194). Represented as being 'unconscious,' Undine has no 'inner life' except for those moments of insight into what must be emulated in order to gain an advantage. In this she represents an American character unsuited by its atavistic appetites to refashioning the incoherence of its history into a social ideal able to contain these energies.

To illustrate this, the narrative describes Undine as having come from "a ragged outskirts" (CC 36) of a western town. Marvell wonders of the Spraggs "how long would their virgin innocence last" (CC 84), not realizing that what he interprets as innocence is a regressive primitivism destabilizing of the Byzantine construction of "old-established distinctions of class, its pass-words, exclusions, delicate shades of language and behavior" (UCW 155). In the garden of New York's elite, Undine represents the ethical blankness of the new world asserting itself over old world standards. Her lack of a moral center leaves only instinct. Thus, Undine's wariness of Van Degen is presented as an ability to "go on

eluding and doubling, watching him as he watched her" (CC 201). This resonates with her perception in him of "a hint of the masterful way that had once subdued her in Elmer Moffatt" (CC 258). Undine's attraction, in Moffatt's case, is an attraction to force unmediated by the cultural forms represented by Marvell.

As I have shown elsewhere, Wharton's memoirs relate her excitement at reading Haeckel's work (BG 94). Turning to the original passage in Haeckel that Kellogg discusses, one finds the former's account to be equally suggestive for Wharton's biologically informed fictional interpretation of social history:

the series of forms through which the individual organism passes during its development from the ovum to the complete bodily structure is a brief, condensed repetition of the long series of forms which the animal ancestors of the said organism, or the ancestral forms of the species, have passed through from the earliest period of organic life down to the present day. (255)

Wharton knew of Mendelism (Letters 146, 151) and evidently understood its premise that "discrete bodies (now called genes) control the inheritance of any particular character and that these are inherited in accordance with certain simple laws" (O.E.D. 662). Allusions to heredity that recall Haeckel's and Mendel's work surface in the narrative's account of how markers of class are passed on from one generation to the next.

In The Custom of the Country, Bowen admires De Chelles as "a charming specimen of the Frenchman of his class" (CC 245); Marvell thinks Moffatt a "good specimen of the one of the few picturesque types we've got" (CC 195). The traits that define these 'specimens' arise from a typically Whartonian mix of biological and social origins. Being a specimen of a particular class means conforming, as I have shown, to a particular class

ideology. Yet the fact that the text frames individuals as specimens invokes biological allegory as a potential factor in such descriptions. In bringing together ideology and biology to describe class species between which there is an “abyss of difference” (CC 337) too deep for reconciliation,¹⁵ the text suggests two ways in which the individual is defined by his or her environment. However, as is the case elsewhere in the novel, these registers of influence run together in the name of the novel’s broader aim of showing that nature and culture should not be thought of by the leisure class as separate phenomena.¹⁶

Wharton’s portrait of Undine’s regressive nature capitalizes on the theory of recapitulation to represent in her progress the historical development of a country. Recapitulation, outlined in the quotation from Haeckel, deals with the relation between ontogeny, which is the science of the development of the individual human organism, and phylogeny. Phylogeny is “the science of the evolution of the various animal forms from which the human organism has developed” (Haeckel 255). In drawing Undine thus, the author fuses to the evolution of the society that has spawned Undine the protagonist’s individual development.

Gillian Beer demonstrates the interest in ontogeny and phylogeny during the nineteenth century in a way that has facilitated this study’s detection of links between Haeckel’s theories and The Custom of the Country:

The new question formulated [...] by the contemplation of transformation and metamorphosis was this: can transformations within the individual life cycle (ontogeny) act as a valid model for species mutation (phylogeny)? And as a subsidiary question, do we see the phases of evolutionary process *recapitulated* in the individual organism. [...] The embryo was held to recapitulate (or condense) the

development of the species to which it belonged. It seemingly offered, therefore, visual and experimental evidence for earlier phases of evolutionary development.

(Darwin's Plots 98)

The narrative reframes these questions in the context of social evolution distinguished by ideological shifts. Wharton's chronicling of Undine's career, particularly the character's transformation from eager ingénue to savvy aggressor, thus charts America's progress toward empire by articulating how Undine's primitive energies drive the particular brand of 'progress' valued by her. The novel illustrates, too, that 'the phases of evolutionary process *recapitulated* in the individual organism,' as Undine undergoes her formative experiences, 'condense the development' of the species Bowen calls "homo-sapiens Americanus" (CC 188) and in this way visibly stage American social transformation.

Much textual evidence supports this hypothesis. Undine begins the novel as a young woman convinced that the socioeconomic elite is corrupt: "[a]s her imagination developed the details of the Van Degen dining room it became clear to her that fashionable society was horribly immoral" (CC 69). While she rebukes 'fashionable society' for a time, she soon becomes its exemplar, and finds herself competing with, and ultimately weakening, Marvell's "inherited notion of 'straightness'" (CC 273). In the text's depiction of this transition, Undine illustrates a dialectical process of social evolution. This suggests to the reader that Undine's optimistic definition of progress is not the linear fulfillment of attaining "the best" (CC 60), nor the promise of something "still better beyond" (CC 62) she believes it to be.

Undine's stunted social self is a manifestation of an earlier state of the 'evolutionary process' experienced by American culture. It is a regression that is predicted for the whole

species by Undine's success, one that exhibits again the narrative's skepticism toward the kind of progress its protagonist embraces. Her immaturity is a trait prominent in the narrative's representation of her arrested evolutionary state. She is bewildered by the "eliminations and abbreviations" (CC 48) of leisure-class discourse. But despite this, Undine's striving, emulative tendency, evident in the fact that "all she sought for was improvement" (CC 60), indicates her own sense that "ampler vistas" (CC 64) await her. In sensing a wider horizon that will mean 'improvement' for her, Undine echoes an optimistic turn-of-the-century American attitude to the frontier. But rather than push westward with migration and expanding civilization, she moves east against the grain of Manifest Destiny. In doing so, Undine embodies an authorial refutation of a narrow and optimistic progressivism apparent in Wharton's comment that "the conditions of modern life in America, so far from being productive of great arguments, seem almost purposely contrived to eliminate them" (UCW 153).

The push westward strains the capacity of an already diminished leisure-class cultural heritage to impart itself to the distant Undine in Apex City. Mass culture, however, and its ability to shrink distance through modern methods of distribution, grabs the opportunity. This new form of acculturation contributes to Undine's replacement of Marvell as 'Homo Sapiens Americanus' by making her its agent. She is a reiteration of a past phase in the social evolution of her country characterized by rapacious expansionism. "[T]he pioneer blood in Undine would not let her rest" (CC 64), and her pioneering spirit lays waste to the social ground she settles.

One element of the value system held by Marvell and de Chelles pressured by the regressive Undine is the conceit of cultural continuity. While tradition *is* passed down

through the generations of Dagonets, Rays and Fairfords, and de Chelles, its mutability is downplayed. Marvell's denial of the triumph of money over taste exemplifies this; he wants to save Undine from "Van Degen and Van Degenism" (CC 85) without realizing that she is its prime exponent. He also hopes to "implant in Paul [his son] some of the reserves and discriminations which divided that tradition from the new spirit of limitless concession" (CC 269) despite the fact that the new spirit has already dissipated the traditional symbol of continuity, the family, by allowing divorce. 'Chelles' uses arguments "drawn from accumulations of hereditary experience" (CC 428) in his attempt to counter Undine's wish that they live a more regal life. His "plea," however, is "unintelligible to her" (CC 428). A model for living that defers to the goals of community rather than the individual is to Undine unintelligible.

Wharton's locking together of the cultural and the natural is the cornerstone of her attempt to create an unassailable foundation for her valuation of a social ideal of interdependence neither class fulfills in The Custom of the Country, for neither group considers the connectedness of these two phenomena. This approach predicts the premise of "gene-culture coevolution" (Wilson 136) that would suggest the existence of a "basic unit of culture—now called meme" (Wilson 136) related in its function in the social collective to the role of the gene in biology. One question this raises, however, is whether in being set against social evolution by the leisure class this traditional ideological 'unit' is overmatched by contingency.

Tradition has mystic beginnings to Marvell and de Chelles. Undine notes it too, finding it to be concentrated in the "spell" that "seemed to emanate from the old house which had so long been the custodian of an unbroken tradition" (CC 445). But leisure-class

characters find that tradition, irrevocably altered by Undine, manifests the same randomness it is set against. Despite its seeming immutability, that unnamable 'spell' is an ideological conceit that conceals and is placed in opposition to natural law's bedrock algorithms, or physical properties.¹⁷ Indeed, social evolution is the process that brought provisional order to the leisure class initially, but this is a fact that has not been thoroughly appreciated by either Marvell or Charles Bowen. Undine successfully dissipates the 'spell' of the gentry's interpretation of tradition that imagines it as an unchanging and stabilizing force. Moreover, in so doing she illustrates that the main characteristic of social evolution is flux. Ideology is friable, as the custodians are beginning to comprehend when they sight "the social disintegration expressed by widely-different architectural physiognomies at the other end of Fifth Avenue" (CC 77) where the new money lives.

The self-involvement of both the leisure class and the socioeconomic elite projects no authoritative sphere of cultural protection against chance; mitigation of nature is despoiled by variability and regression. Cultural movement toward a complexity that seems like progress is countered by the unforeseeable result in The Custom of the Country: Marvell's intoxication with Undine results in his suicide; her own distaste for the socioeconomic elite is reversed and she arrives at the pinnacle of new money 'culture' through her remarriage to Moffatt. In a novel that the author considered a "chronicle" (BG 182), and a "magnum opus" (Letters 240), the effect on Marvell of this reversal to accepted thinking documents the erosion by a competing ideology of continuity rooted in architecture, refined self-consciousness, and a separation of public and private selves dashed by the "divorce-suit" that is "a vulgar and unnecessary way of taking the public into one's confidence" (CC 282).

IV. "[S]wept from the zenith like a pinch of dust" (CC 294)

In The Decoration of Houses (1897) Wharton observes how "[t]he survival of obsolete customs which makes the study of sociology so interesting, has its parallel in the history of architecture" (5). In comparing European and American society, Ralph Marvell engages in social commentary using architectural terms that contrast the single-minded pursuit of financial gain he finds in New York with a code of conduct that "the very lines of the furniture in the old Dagonet house expressed" (CC 77). Marvell goes on to define the 'society' fostered by the attitude of the new tycoons in terms of the palaces in which they live:

what Popple called society was really just like the houses it lived in: a muddle of misapplied ornament over a thin steel shell of utility. The steel shell was built up in Wall Street, the social trimmings were hastily added in Fifth Avenue; and the union between them was as monstrous and factitious, as unlike the gradual homogenous growth which flowers into what other countries know as society, as that between the Blois gargoyles on Peter Van Degen's [New York] roof and the skeleton walls supporting them. (CC 77)

The appropriation of leisure-class forms by the new rich results in an incoherent assemblage of symbols gathered from other classes and countries. In being 'monstrous,' Van Degen's 'misapplied ornament' recalls the random combination of traits familiar from Darwin's comment on the presence of variation within species. But the narrative values negatively the forms Van Degen creates. Described from Marvell's perspective, the union between Wall Street and Fifth Avenue displayed in the new architecture objectifies the colonization of leisure-class forms by the unpredictable dynamics of nature.

Historically shortsighted in its ignorance of the value of continuity, the socioeconomic elite sunders the “intrinsic rightness” (CC 77) of leisure-class architecture through the creation of new combinations of its parts. Marvell sees “his mother and Mr. Urban Dagonet [...] so closely identified with the old house in Washington Square that they might have passed for its inner consciousness as it might have stood for their outward form” (CC 77). No distance exists between the ideas intrinsic to ‘the gradual homogenous growth’ of their society and the forms that express them in Marvell’s mind. A new money attitude toward tradition is manifest, too, in borrowings of “locution” (CC 92) or “vocabulary” (CC 46) from the leisure class, which Undine has yet to master when she plainly exclaims “I don’t care if I do” and “I wouldn’t wonder” (CC 46) at a dinner part held by the refined Mrs. Fairford. But Marvell, who might be more guarded in his attraction to a woman with such obvious “inherited prejudices” recalls ruefully that he “had thought Undine’s speech fresh and natural” (CC 282).

New projections of class status compete with Marvell’s standards by hybridizing leisure-class symbols. Undine’s set constructs its own ‘outward form’ by reordering the symbolic system of establishment New York. Appropriating signifiers such as the ‘Blois gargoyles’ and the ‘old lines’ of the Dagonet furniture, this forced change of context is acquisitive and competitive. A new force on the social Serengeti intersects with Marvell’s life when he becomes extricated in mass culture and the market. These are the very forces that model the *bricolage* of recombined forms for those, like Van Degen, resigning their hereditary membership in an old elite and eschewing ‘obsolete customs.’¹⁸ Marvell’s experiences with these elements of a new America are far different than Undine’s.

“Inheriting an old social order,” Wharton writes, “which provided for nicely shaded degrees of culture and conduct, modern America has simplified and Taylorized it out of existence” (UCW 154). Mass culture and industry have regularized a life of efficiencies, according to this view. This violates an old ideal of interdependent classes undone by the industrialist’s dehumanizing emphasis on productivity, and the newspaper’s selective, profit driven pastiche of the significant.¹⁹ Despite the nostalgia that tinges Wharton’s statement about ‘shaded degrees of culture and conduct,’ The Custom of the Country judges harshly the contemporary exemplars of the ‘old social order’ because Ralph Marvell’s class has lost its ability to lead in a haze of leisure disconnected from the task of mitigating the changes that ‘Van Degenism’ brings.

Wharton wrote that leisure, “itself the creation of wealth, is incessantly engaged in transmuting wealth into beauty by secreting the surplus energy which flowers in great architecture, great painting, and great literature” (UCW 156). But Marvell is a failure as an artist, despite his leisure. He is an aesthete who mistakes the predatory Undine for a maiden. Although *she* exploits him, he “seemed to see her like a lovely rock-bound Andromeda” (CC 86). He is artistically impotent, finding a question about his writing “distasteful to him” (CC 283), and is irrelevant as a social actor in the new order.²⁰ He can ponder “the thought of his projected book” (CC 146), but can’t overcome his creative inertia, thus symbolizing a leisure class that has lost sight of a responsibility to convert ‘surplus’ wealth into socially beneficial art capable of accommodating cultural complexity and change.

To understand the effects on Marvell of the appropriation of cultural forms it is necessary to define the romantic system of ideas that guide him. Marvell is named after the metaphysical poet, and his perspective on Undine is controlled by a system of ideas that

resembles certain aspects of Wordsworth's initial *Preface* to "Lyrical Ballads." This system of ideas focuses Marvell's attention on his feelings, causes him to look for artistic inspiration outside his environment, and facilitates an impressionistic viewpoint that makes little distinction between the reality of what he observes, and how his imagination transforms reality. Class ideology has become a class poetic in his mind. The artistic result of leisure, one that can bind the collective together, is now the end purpose of those like Marvell forgetful of the responsibility attached to privilege. Marvell, exhibiting his place in society by engaging in 'work' that fulfills only a class-defined role that demands idleness, looks for mundane subject matter to elevate poetically. He sees himself as an artist—"I'll write, I'll write" (CC 142), but for him, artists don't weave experience into cash.

His unfinished critical and literary efforts—"The Rhythmical Structures of Walt Whitman' [...] 'The Banished God'" (CC 81)²¹ possess titles contrived with avoidance of the marketplace in mind, and signify in the former case his interest in form, and not those underlying truths which manners, and Whitman's poetry—in the way poetic line can reflect the human breath—might represent.²² Wharton's preparatory comments for her own study of Whitman suggest what Marvell might have learned from the poet: "his characterization of natural objects is extraordinarily suggestive; he sees through the layers of the conventional point of view and of the conventional adjective straight to the thing itself, and not only to the thing itself, but to the endless thread connecting it to the universe" (qtd. in Janet Beer, Edith Wharton 82-83). On his honeymoon with Undine in Italy, though, Marvell can only look at Undine's hands and think that he "had never felt more convinced of his power to write a poem" (CC 135). Although alert to such situations in which a "spontaneous overflow of

powerful feelings" (Wordsworth 163-164) might occur, he remains powerless to articulate them in a public way.

In commenting on the line "She neither hears nor sees" in Wordsworth's "Lucy" poem "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal," Wharton wrote that it is "the result of a great deal of writing, of a long & expert process of elimination, selection, concentration of idea and expression" (Letters 106). Marvell does not possess such a focused critical faculty, and his aesthetic, though it may be Wordsworthian, blurs his artistic subjects, rather than focuses them. Whereas he is "not blind to her [Undine's] crudity and limitations" he views these attributes as "part of her grace and her persuasion" (CC 85), demonstrating that his powers of 'elimination, selection, concentration of idea' are insufficient to discern and represent Undine's defining traits. His concentration on her 'grace' is evidence of his wish to "throw over [Undine] [...] a certain coloring of imagination" (Wordsworth 162) that in the hands of a Wordsworth might present a unified portrait of the "nereid-like" (CC 137)²³ protagonist.

The aridity of the life bestowed upon him by his class, a life in which he is expected to "go to Columbia or Harvard, read law, and then lapse into more or less cultivated inaction" (CC 79), forces him to seek, under cover of literary interests, the "low and rustic" in which the "essential passions of [his] heart [...] are under less restraint" (Wordsworth 162-63). And while Undine is 'low and rustic' in the sense of her class and geographical origins, the 'coloring of imagination' required to perceive her as Marvell does reinterprets Undine's hard clarity, which is hyper-real in its defiance of impressionism: "she paused before the blotched looking-glass [...]. Even that defective surface could not disfigure her" (CC 219). Marvell's romantic ideas guide his perception of Undine, but unconstrained forces in the guise of Wall Street's unpredictable cycles of boom and bust soon singe his ties to the books that mediate

his vision of the protagonist. As a result “the whole archaic structure of his rites and sanctions tumbled down about him” (CC 405).

Marvell’s feelings toward Undine are guided by an aestheticism characterized by a broken connection between art and the wider social causes that, according to the text, it should serve. His concern is with the immediate impression that fulfills his valuation of surface beauty divorced from the political role of art that might promote a ‘structure of rites and sanctions.’ This outlook prompts him to see in Undine’s physicality “mystic depths whence his passion sprang, [where] earthly dimensions were ignored and the curve of beauty was boundless enough to hold whatever the imagination could pour into it” (CC 135). To reinforce the need for an informed artistic consciousness able to connect aesthetics and ideology, the narrative depicts Undine’s reaction to one of Marvell’s frequent comparisons between her and an unnamed mythological beauty. During this sequence, she lets one of his obscure remarks “drop into the store of unexplained references which had once stimulated her curiosity but now merely gave her leisure to think of other things” (CC 137), demonstrating that his “allusions to pictures and books” (CC 46) do not carry forward the ‘old social order.’ The cost of Marvell’s failure is, as a member of his vanishing breed puts it, that Undine is “marrying into our aristocracy” (CC 86). Her subsequent penetration of the leisure-class cultural genome finds her “astray in a new labyrinth of social distinction” (CC 94) that she will wreck rather than attempt to refine.

Of course, Marvell’s remoteness from the political task of ameliorating social change has a personal cost as well. After Undine leaves Marvell to pursue Peter Van Degen, Marvell travels alone to the Adirondacks for a vacation. Leisure may be his, but he has a dawning sense that his structured existence is but a meadow of order in a forest of chaos:

“[n]ow and then he got into the canoe and paddled himself through a winding chain of ponds [...] and watched the great clouds form and dissolve themselves above his head” (CC 294). The random permutations of the clouds mark an end to his unconsciousness of nature’s contingent state in a moment when “[a]ll his past seemed to be symbolized by the building up and breaking down of those fluctuating shapes, which incalculable wind-currents perpetually shifted and remodeled or swept from the zenith like a pinch of dust” (CC 294). Marvell’s pastoral meditation foreshadows his encounter with mass culture and the market, which teaches him of social evolution.

Mass culture intersects with Marvell’s settled opinions when the tabloids take an interest in his divorce. For a man whose romantic idealism has previously caused him to take pleasure in elevating the ‘low,’ “nothing that had gone before seemed as humiliating as this [the newspaper’s] trivial comment on his tragedy”(CC 300). He finds being read by mass culture distressing. Ironically, what the imagination of the press does with Marvell’s divorce approximates Marvell’s own impressionistic rendering of Undine. His elevation of her through marriage, and an education in the ways of his class, had been acts indicative of his attitude toward tradition as something that can be benignly spread, for the “task of opening new windows in her mind was inspiring enough to give him infinite patience” (CC 139-140). Similarly, Newland Archer in The Age of Innocence feels, when contemplating May Welland, that it “would presently be his task to take the bandage from this young woman’s eyes” (AI 81). It is the blindness of both characters to what has defined them that is at issue in their respective narratives, however.

Marvell imagines that “the devouring monster Society careering up to make a mouthful of her” warrants his intervention; to this end he pictures “himself wheeling down

on his winged horse [...] to cut her bonds, snatch her up, and whirl her back into the blue” (CC 86). But it is he who will be devoured. Elevating her, whether by raising her into the sky in his daydream, idealizing her in poetry, or by lifting her up to his class, are actions that address a sense of class responsibility rendered irrelevant by her modernity and its association with the press and the market. Rather than being a potential victim of society, Undine approaches differences between herself and members of the leisure class in the spirit of competition. She knows that “[t]heir ideas are all different from ours” (CC 215). When Marvell becomes the subject of mass culture’s imagination it is as if Undine’s aggressiveness is externalized in its forms.

Marvell’s tradition competes with the economically unpredictable, market-driven actions of buying and renewing espoused in the Sunday papers. The genetic material of ideology that will reproduce itself in the consciousness of mass culture’s consumers is at odds with the principles of his type. These are, as I have shown, configured by Wharton as ‘inherited obligations’ that create a ‘sense of solidarity between classes.’ The narrative’s presentation of the scene in which Marvell discovers that his divorce has become a news item is insightful about the novel’s view of the way mass culture erodes leisure-class standards regarding the subordination of public persona to “the slow strong current [of tradition] already fed by so many tributary lives” (CC 445).

Upon seeing the story of Undine’s divorce suit against him “the blood rushed to Ralph’s forehead as he looked over the man’s arm and read: ‘Society Leader Gets Decree,’ and beneath it the subordinate clause: ‘Says Husband Too Absorbed In Business To Make Home Happy’” (CC 300). The irony is that Marvell is a failure in business; Abner Spragg wonders, “wasn’t he ever taught to work?” (CC 118). The headline cites the standard reason

of abandonment given for divorce (preserving a measure of his dignity) even though it is untrue in Marvell's case. In fact, Undine has left him and their son to travel to take advantage of the "Dakota divorce-court" (CC 318), and its lenient residency requirement.

When his eye is caught "by his own name on the first page of this heavily headlined paper which the unshaved occupant of the next seat held between grimy fists" (CC 300) the novel associates a belief in the validity of mass culture as an objective representation of social reality with this working-class reader. He represents the wider populace to whom Marvell's stratum has leadership obligations. But proximity to this man magnifies Marvell's unease, for the 'poet' has lost contact with the lower depths and the responsibilities that would connect their situations. His condescension toward this lost ideal is clear enough when he selfishly thinks the story a "trivial comment on his tragedy" (CC 300), showing as a facile result of his romantic poetic his desire to elevate the low. Marvell's reaction indicates the uniqueness he assigns to his divorce, despite the ready-made attitudes toward this activity in the newspaper which indicate how common divorce has become. The aspiring literary artist sees his private failure transmuted into the gold of a saleable narrative by the tabloids. He suffers the dispersal of his previously stable association of private, leisure-class literary 'work' with his heightened sensitivity to his innermost thoughts. The marketplace has a use for his experience, even if he can only engage in desultory attempts to create literature. As a result of his discomfort, he blushes as he feels "the coarse fingering of public curiosity" fumbling at "the secret places of his soul" (CC 300).

No longer in control of self-representation, Marvell begins to understand that his desire to be an artist is an aspiration mediated by his class membership. The perennial lack of fulfillment of his literary goals indicates that what he takes to be his vocation is in actuality a

fulfillment of ideological suggestion patterning his failure as an artist. Veblen describes this kind of leisure-class 'work' when he writes:

The criteria of a past performance of leisure therefore commonly take the form of 'immaterial' goods. Such immaterial evidences of past leisure are quasi-scholarly or quasi-artistic accomplishments and a knowledge of processes and incidents which do not conduce directly to the furtherance of human life. (34-35)

Veblen's statement is useful because it indicates a similarity between the interests of the prominent sociologist and Wharton's representation of particular class traits. While similar in sharing a common subject, however, Wharton's chronicle examines the effects on the communal social project of the "Veblenesque socioeconomics" that in part anchors the "primitivism of Undine's character" (Ammons 105), thus qualifying her text as one situated against the social Darwinism that colors Veblen's best known work.

This aspect of The Theory of the Leisure Class, one alluded to in chapter one's quotation of Veblen's statement that "[t]he evolution of the social structure has been a process of natural selection of institutions" (147), reminds one of the pervasiveness of the view that natural selection operates without hindrance in the social sphere. Fiction emerges as a potent discourse that can array these perspectives in Wharton's novel. The significance of Marvell's desire to be a writer lies in the way this desire is alienated by 'the performance of leisure' he mistakes for the writer's life, and which is nebulously expressed in borrowings from a romantic poetic. His wish to make art, while once a real function of his class, is no longer required to create "that impalpable dust of ideas which is the real culture" (UCW 156). The tabloids obviate the finer observations a discerning sensibility would fashion into literature.

He should have negotiated royalties for the use of his story, but Marvell is no Undine. Wharton describes the way news of his divorce circulates: "The paragraph continued on its way through the press, and whenever he took up a newspaper he seemed to come upon it, slightly modified, variously developed, but always reverting with a kind of unctuous irony to his financial preoccupations and his wife's consequent loneliness" (CC 300). The falsehood that Marvell has driven Undine to divorce him is also used in a magazine contest. Marvell discovers a story that reports that he has isolated Undine by being engrossed in business, a possibility that is unlikely, for he has "an inability to get a mental grasp on large financial problems" (CC 231). He finds his story "in a Family Weekly, as one of the 'Heart Problems' propounded to subscribers, with a Gramophone, a straight-front corset and a Vanity-Box among the prizes offered for its solution" (CC 300).

Such misinterpretation connects his story with the anxiety over the way the marketplace distorts facts present in "The Descent of Man." Marvell's tale, by being printed in a mass-market magazine, recasts his sanctified private world in terms of a commodity. The misleading story is "served as a text for pulpit denunciations of the growing craze for wealth" (CC 300). Fiction in the guise of fact thus elicits an institutional response addressed to a phantom generated by the tabloids. As social authority is distracted by a non-reality, the unchecked problem of the tabloid's emplacement of a lens for viewing the social whole elides the greater culture stewarded by the declining American gentry.

Marvell exemplifies Huxley's description of a society in which "The garden was apt to turn into a hothouse. The stimulation of the senses, the pampering of the emotions, endlessly multiplied the sources of pleasure" ("Evolution and Ethics" 313). But Marvell is a vestigial remnant of the old world unaware, until the events that lead to his suicide, that

beyond the misted opacity of his glass-walled world lurk the conditions that required its creation. His conceptualization of self is in lock step with a class training whose faithfulness to an original ideological form is degraded by mutation. When he realizes he can't reckon with the events of his life in any frame other than that handed down to him, the flaw of his tradition as a medium of cultural heredity appears to him:

He had been eloquent enough, in his free youth, against the conventions of his class; yet when the moment came [...] deflecting his course like some hidden hereditary failing. [...] his great disaster had been conventionalized and sentimentalized by this inherited attitude: that the thoughts he had about it were only those of generations of Dagonets, and that there had been nothing real and his own in his life but the foolish passion he had been trying so hard to think out of existence. (CC 378-379)

He sees nature in the guise of 'passion' as both real and 'foolish,' again suggesting his inculcation into a code that distances unmanageable instinct. The real eludes Marvell at the same time the press strikes down his ready-made identity.

The second aspect of Wharton's portrait of Marvell's encounter with contingency focuses on his dealings with the stock market. He is member of a class destined for extinction. He is shown, within the narrative's network of evolutionary metaphor, to be a vestigial "survival, and destined, as such, to go down in any conflict with the rising forces" (CC 249). The market dissolves boundaries between the leisured and the socioeconomic elite, obliterating the class-consciousness that forms the foundation of Marvell's viewpoint. He sees the signs, reflecting thus on the modern version of marriage: "The daughters of his own race sold themselves to the invaders; [. . .] it all ought to have been transacted on the stock

exchange" (CC 81). He has traded on his social status to gain Undine's hand, marrying a woman who will, ironically, cause the final act of their union to play out on Wall Street.

The market is a primary feature of men's lives in the novel, even for those members of the leisure class, like Marvell, previously insulated from its demands by a steady income that required no labor save for an appreciation of beauty: "he should live 'like a gentleman'—that is, with a tranquil disdain for mere money-getting, a passive openness to the finer sensations" (CC 78). Still, the ability of the market to pull social mechanisms into its sphere is well illustrated by Marvell's experience. His perception that his fine feelings are insulated from economic matters is undone when he discovers that the free-spending Undine requires capital. Her sole custody of their son Paul, as has been shown, provides her with an avenue by which to raise it. Marvell's experience with the market comes to a crisis point when he is faced with the task of raising enough money to pay Undine "to admit that it was for her son's advantage to remain with his father" (CC 388). The protagonist's act further distances her from the tradition of close-knit bonds between family members because she has wanted, in fact, nothing to do with her son. Marvell needs to make the required sum through a "quick turn" on the stock market so he consults the "speculator" (CC 389) Elmer Moffatt.

Marvell has trouble focusing on Moffatt's "intricate concert of facts and figures" (CC 391) for he is only able to think of his son: "when I pick him up to-night he'll be mine for good!" (CC 391). Perhaps no other scene in the novel so succinctly juxtaposes the calculating rationality of the market and its chaotic effects with the humanistic traits Wharton sees such objectivity as diminishing. Ironically, Marvell's humane sensibility here seeks shelter in the shadow of what has heretofore been represented in the novel as a dangerous form of capitalism free from modulation by social constraints.

After learning from Moffatt that the investment has failed, Ralph sees the market with a gritty realism at odds with his usual languid and self-centered habits of perception. He stands "at the corner of Wall Street, looking up and down its hot summer perspective. He noticed the swirls of dust in the cracks of the pavement, the rubbish in the gutters" (CC 406) for the first time. His loss makes him see the world beyond the garden of his class from a fresh perspective. Having chanced his capital in an attempt to gain custody of his son, he becomes a pauper. But he ultimately realizes that what he has viewed as his authentic self relies on capital that must work in the marketplace. This makes his way of life complicit with the institution he had thought at arms length. It is an insight that leaves him, as his work does when he is forced to seek employment, "possessed of a leisure as bare and as blank as an unfurnished house" (CC 368). Deprived now of the illusions proffered by a justificatory leisure-class ideology, he recognizes that his artistic pursuits have no redeeming social purpose.

Chapter Four

Newland Archer's 'Hieroglyphic World'

I. "twice removed from reality" (UCW 107)

Claire Preston has focused critical attention on Wharton's knowledge of evolution, biology and sociology, and related this knowledge to the "social and genetic groupings" (54) found in the novels examined in this study. Preston discusses how Wharton's

analysis of human interaction and of the society of Old New York has an almost clinical precision about it, as if she herself were one of the biologists she admired; in other moods she is the investigating anthropologist describing the folkways of a backward and aboriginal people. Wharton's sociobiological frame of reference predicts modern social analysis, which has made precisely this useful analogy between evolution/selection theory and social development, treating the macro-social structure as 'a selection environment.' (Preston 54-55).¹

To this point, I have built on Preston's important claim. My examination of The House of Mirth, for example, depicts the ill-adapted Lily's demise in the 'selection environment' of that novel. My focus thus far, however, has been on discerning the effects of Wharton's deformation of scientific concepts resulting from each novel's analogical treatment of 'evolution/selection theory and social development.' Doing so has allowed me to illustrate how this process contributes to Wharton's social criticism.

Wharton's use of the analogy Preston articulates is also evident in The Custom of the Country's chronicling of Undine Spragg's rise. I demonstrated in the previous chapter how changes to the 'selection environment' wrought by mass culture and contemporary capitalism result in a contest between systems of ideas that undergird particular subspecies of the New

York elite. In The Age of Innocence, Newland Archer attempts to make sense of his social environment, which has yet to evolve into the battlefield occupied by openly oppositional ideologies portrayed in The Custom of the Country. Archer's tale is marked by his ambivalence toward social mechanisms that vitiate identity, whereas Undine Spragg embraces them. His ambivalence is evidenced by a questioning of "the elaborate futility of his life" (AI 125) that causes him to feel that he is "being buried alive under his future" (AI 139), and his interrogation of a "traditional" world that causes him to wonder at "what age 'nice' women [like his fiancé May Welland] began to speak for themselves" (AI 81). Despite his insights, and his mixed feelings, Archer's consciousness is, nevertheless, severely limited by his class identity, which stands in contrast to the more comprehensive vision of links between the social and the natural articulated by the framing narrative.² These two issues are the main concern of this chapter.

This section of the chapter examines Wharton's refinement in The Age of Innocence of a fictional approach that through biological allegory suppresses differences between the natural and the social. Section two relates this approach to Archer's aesthetic perspective, one formed by the artistic and scientific works he comes into contact with. These works disrupt his capacity to react to Ellen Olenska's "bodily presence" (AI 243). Disruption of this sort, I show, is one symptom of a cultural distancing of nature the novel represents. In a broader sense, I continue to investigate links between Wharton's scientifically-influenced fictional method and her socially critical engagement with old New York, but focus on gradations of objectivity personified in the novel's characters, and displayed in the overarching narrative. This attribute of the novel is noteworthy because differences in perceptiveness between Newland Archer and the wider field of vision that tells the story, in

which the problematically transparent ideology of his class is embedded,³ indicates the presence of multiple 'objective' perspectives.

To cite one example, Wharton's analogy 'between evolution/selection theory and social development' facilitates her depiction of language as a carrier of ideology, which appears in the text as a 'genetic' means of cultural reproduction. I examine this subject in detail in section three. This is one area of fictional analysis that distinguishes the framing narrative from the point-of-view of Newland Archer, who, while suspecting that rites, rituals, manners, and language narrow his experience, cannot create anew his consciousness, which they have molded. Section four of this chapter examines further how social form underwrites Archer's consciousness. In doing so I investigate the protagonist's superficial learning to demonstrate how class doctrine makes it difficult for Archer to perceive the real conditions of his life. Section five concludes the chapter by applying these arguments to the final sequence of the novel.

Archer's sense that there exists something beyond his lawyerly life is confirmed at many points in the narrative. In one episode he meets "Dr. Agathon Carver, founder of the Valley of Love community" (AI 157) at Ellen Olenska's house. Carver, whose strange garments inspire Archer's "curiosity" (AI 155), gestures in a way that makes him appear to Archer as if he "were distributing lay blessings to a kneeling multitude" (AI 156). Indeed, Carver does have something to say, but Archer won't hear the message. Ned Winsett asks Carver if there is time to explain to Archer the "illuminating discovery of the Direct Contact" (AI 158), but the visionary must rush to deliver a lecture. Carver's phrase invokes Whitman, of whom Wharton wrote, "[h]e has the direct vision" (qtd. in Janet Beer, *Edith Wharton* 82-83). Wondering whether "this young gentleman is interested in my experiences" (AI 158),

the leader of the 'Valley of Love' presents an opportunity to Archer to experience that which lies beyond the boundaries of the "life-in-death" (AI 52) he and his tribe lead.

Archer's understanding of his 'instinctive' behavior is severed from the meaning the term has in the context of biology because it has been reformulated in the context of social practices to be perceived by him as "the conventions on which his life was moulded" (AI 5). The novel portrays Archer as a man cognizant of coercive, class-based rules and rituals yet unable to free himself from their effects. Despite his frustration at this prospect, opulent signs of wealth charge his sense of identity, and compensate for his resentment of the system:

There was something about the luxury of the Welland house and the density of the Welland atmosphere, so charged with minute observances and exactions, that always stole into his system like a narcotic. The heavy carpets, the watchful servants, the perpetually reminding tick of the disciplined clocks [...] the whole chain of tyrannical trifles binding one hour to the next, and each member of the household to all the others, made any less systematized and affluent existence seem unreal and precarious.

(AI 218)

Archer's frequent disavowals of the anesthetizing effect of this atmospheric 'narcotic' point out that the social surface is an elaborate fiction.

It is a fiction, though, that is taken to be the whole of reality by May Welland.

Although the effect on him of his father-in-law's house may quiet his perceptions, Archer, at his most sensitive, responds to 'tyrannical trifles' with dread: "'Darling!' Archer said—and suddenly the same black abyss yawned before him and he was sinking into it [...] while his voice rambled on smoothly and cheerfully" (AI 187). In his chilled heart, Archer harbors hope that his marriage to May might skirt convention, but "[t]here was no use in trying to

emancipate a wife who had not the dimmest notion that she was not free" (AI 195). Because Archer is the primary reflecting consciousness in the narrative, it is easy to take his negative evaluation of May unflinchingly. Wharton, however, shows May's wisdom to be the intelligence of the social collective.

That Archer's previously blinkered perceptions are changing is clear from his ability to discern that May Welland in "making the answers that instinct and tradition had taught her to make" might, if she were to see things as they were, "only look out blankly at blankness" (AI 82). His musing supposes that May's faculties are defined by her socialization. Although his dilettantish study of anthropology (AI 67) obscures the biological essence of himself and others, Archer's interest in the discipline at least prods him out of a paradigm that he has taken for granted by alerting him to the significance of social forms. The use of these forms continually repels alternatives to convention, such as the ideas of Dr. Carver. Archer notes this too, thinking that "we all are [...] old maids" when so much as "brushed by the wing-tip of reality" (AI 85). Perceiving in his own marriage ceremony a ritualistic codification of some deeper reality he cannot comprehend, he notes "the imitation stone vaulting" (AI 180) of the church in which he and May are married. At other points, ossified codes of conduct and feeling demonstrate their inflexibility, and like the "archaic French" (AI 84) Archer reads, become progressively more irrelevant and restrictive as his involvement with Ellen Olenska deepens.

Wharton's interest in what is "felt in the blood" (Letters 433) takes the form in The Age of Innocence of showing biological instinct's entanglement with social 'instinct' instantiated by ritual and tradition. That these two meanings of 'instinct' are in play in the novel is clear. Archer might seem to understand that "untrained human nature [...] was full

of the twists and defences of an instinctive guile" (AI 45), but he also recognizes that trained 'human nature' creates a collective 'guile' which demands individual deference to the needs of the collective: "if the family had ceased to consult him it was because some deep tribal instinct warned them that he was no longer on their side" (AI 252). A class-aligned representation of the real sublimates biological imperatives into social forms. The manners and rites that are the framework for a standard leisure-class view of a social subsuming of biological instinct prohibits the infusion of new blood offered by exogamy, something visible in the conspiracy to eliminate Ellen Olenska from the leisure-class "tribe" (AI 14). Yet the silent but mutually understood effort to expel Ellen targets the knowing Archer too:

He guessed himself to have been, for months, the centre of countless silently observing eyes and patiently listening ears, he understood that, by means as yet unknown to him, the separation between himself and the partner of his guilt had been achieved, and that now the whole tribe had rallied about his wife. (AI 335)

Archer's tale is not a tragedy, for he finds compensation for his losses within his class context, but it is a story that relates the difficulty of transcending his training, and the coercive manners of his class. As the passage just quoted shows, Archer's insight into the system that separates him from Ellen only liberates his perception of how securely he is chained to a class ideology that in translating and moderating instinct makes a cage of privilege.

The Age of Innocence's analogy between 'evolution/selection theory, and social development,' sees natural selection as a motor of cultural change. As in the other novels examined in this study, this analogy helps convince the reader of a particular explanation for the fact, as Archer's mother puts it, that "you couldn't expect the old traditions to last much

longer” (AI 48). A narrative fusion of social and biological evolution denotes the superficiality of Archer’s distinction between these elements. Despite his awareness that it is impossible for him to inhabit “a world where action followed on emotion” (AI 164), his insights are only penetrating enough to dissatisfy him. Indicative of his affiliation with the traditions that encode spontaneous expressions of desire, and separate emotion and action, is his embrace of aesthetic achievement with an energy that is almost sexual. Representations of beauty and desire made by art during a life of running to “the National Gallery [...] to catch a glimpse of the pictures” (AI 194) are like his memory of Ellen at the end of the novel, “more real” (AI 362) to Archer than other reference points in experience. His first sexual encounter with May Welland, which one imagines to have occurred on their honeymoon in London, is attended by Archer’s comment that she resembles a virginal goddess, and “looked handsomer and more Diana-like than ever” (AI 193).

Moreover, the validity of Wharton’s fictional method as a way to analyze and diagnose Archer’s problem can be viewed as one of the novel’s subjects. This is tangible, firstly, in the novel’s representation of Archer’s interpretation of the same analogy ‘between evolution/selection theory and social development’ used in the narrative’s omniscient register.⁴ The Age of Innocence contains and shows the specific qualities of Archer’s thinking on this subject. Central to his interpretation are two elements. First, he idealistically views the social selection environment within which systems of thought compete as a ground for social development. In his view, being unsuited to one’s environment does not necessarily imply extinction: “even after his most exciting talks with Ned Winsett he always came away with the feeling that if his world was so small, so was theirs, and that the only way to enlarge either was to reach a stage of manners where they would naturally merge” (AI

102-103). For Archer, antinomies between social groups, or between groups and the social selection environment, are resolved under a progressive view that difference can be 'naturally' accommodated. Archer's experience with the way coercive drawing-room manners react to his relationship with Ellen dashes this perspective.

The second element salient to Archer's view on 'evolution/selection theory and social development' is his imagination, which consistently colors the real biological and tribal forces affecting him, for "thinking over a pleasure to come often gave him a subtler satisfaction than its realization" (AI 4). This aspect of his character remains unchanged by his experience, and in fact ensures that this is the case. Archer and his class express the compelling ideas of evolutionary science only in terms of concern over social change, finding little in science to illuminate the problems presented by social development. In fact, Archer imagines that a scientific instrument distances the novel's primary exponent of social form: "far down the inverted telescope he saw the faint white figure of May Welland" (AI 77). This puzzling image is partially clarified by noting that properly used, the telescope, and other scientific tools, might yield clues with which to construct a realistic picture of the physical universe out of which Archer's social world grows.

The natural and the social exist on different planes for Archer. His association of social and ethnic difference with artificial hybridization helps illustrate this. Recalling a youthful trip to Italy, he remarks on how the Florentines he met "were too different from the people Archer had grown up among, too much like expensive and rather malodorous hot-house exotics" (AI 197). Cross breeding is unnatural, as is a conception of sexuality uncontained by manners directed toward signifying class membership. Thus, the novel

presents the reader with an “Archer-Newland-van-der-Luyden tribe” that “looked down on the grosser forms of pleasure” (AI 32).

As Archer distances pleasure, he also fails to recognize that sexuality is expressed in cultural forms such as fashion. This is evident when he notes Ellen’s appearance in “a long robe of red velvet bordered about the chin and down the front with glossy black fur” (AI 104).⁵ However, his impression of Ellen fails to respond to her explicitly sexual appearance; she reminds Wharton’s culturally inoculated aesthete only of a painting he has recently seen in London. Archer can only respond aesthetically to this thinly disguised presentation of Ellen’s sexuality, for he

remembered, on his last visit to Paris, seeing a portrait by the new painter, Carolus Duran, whose pictures were the sensation of the salon, in which the lady wore one of these bold sheath-like robes with her chin nestled in fur. There was something perverse and provocative in the combination of fur worn in the evening in a heated drawing room, and in the combination of a muffled throat and bare arms; but the effect was undeniably pleasing. (AI 105)

What is primary in Archer’s perception is the way Ellen’s outfit violates that “far off divinity” called “taste” (AI 14). Only as a second thought does he grant that Ellen is pleasing to the eye.

The apparent disjunction between narrative frame and Archer’s outlook likely has a polemical point. Wharton’s engagement with evolutionary and sociological thought sweeps away hesitancy about the inapplicability of evolutionary theory to the changing texture of upper class life in the 1870’s.⁶ Nancy Bentley’s consideration of Wharton’s fictional method is thus valuable for its insight into the author’s linkage of ethnography and culture, but shows

too, that a formulation that does not consider the role of evolutionary theory in the fiction cannot accurately interpret Archer's assumptions, nor account for the novel's position that culture grows from a natural foundation:

By splicing together the roles of novelist and ethnographer to create a figure she calls 'the drawing-room naturalist,' Wharton appears to blithely transcend the distinction between a humanist tradition, in which culture signifies a set of prized Western values that advance human perfectibility, and a sociological sense of culture as a web of institutions and lived relations that structure any community, [...]. Within this expanded sense of culture, savage and civilized worlds can share, at long last, a common language of interpretation. (Bentley, The Ethnography of Manners 3)

Whereas Bentley rightly views Wharton to be 'splicing together the roles of novelist and ethnographer,' the sociological focus on 'institutions and lived relations' present in The Age of Innocence maintains evolution as a touchstone that the practices of 'tribal rituals and bourgeois manners' contend with symbolically. This is apparently the case when May, having returned from the "three months wedding-tour" during which her sexual initiation took place, "vaguely summarized [it] as 'blissful'" (AI 194).

An ideology of perfectibility inhibits Archer's deeper understanding of his culture's proximity to nature. He has "the passionate man's indestructible dream of a rounded passion" (CC 85) that is optimistic in assuming it is achievable. Bentley's formulation of the fiction's 'smooth suturing [...] of antagonistic strains of the culture idea' helps define the interaction of The Age of Innocence with scientific and sociological currents, and bolsters the validity of positing the existence of a continuum between 'savage and civilized' in the novel, even if Bentley's perspective is not inclusive of evolution. What is 'rounded' for Archer is, indeed, a

'dream,' or imaginary view of a holistic passion more about beauty than sexuality, and, therefore, not as complete as he thinks. The text aligns this falsehood with Archer's appreciation of what Bentley formulates as a 'humanist tradition, in which culture signifies a set of prized Western values that advance human perfectibility.' For Archer, 'instinct' is expressed by adherence to social 'form.' The controlling narrative shows that he redirects his own sexual and competitive drives toward social cohesion. Potential conflicts between instinct and class affiliation subside in the intense ideological light that guides Archer's reasoning. Pressuring his rational behavior, though, is the "sudden revulsion of mood" that causes him, "almost without knowing what he did" (AI 79), to send roses anonymously to Ellen.

That the novel's methodology is one of its subjects is a proposition bolstered by Wharton's pronouncement that "the mode of presentation to the reader, that central difficulty of the whole affair, must always be determined by the nature of the subject" (WF 72). When that subject is the difficulty of accessing what is 'felt in the blood,' Wharton's representation, focused to the depth of the cultural background where social practices shape perception, and depict the substitution of taste and form for Eros, seems a working out of her belief "that some new theory of form, as adequate to its new purpose as those preceding it, will be evolved from the present welter of experiment" (UCW 124) in the novelistic genre. At one point, Archer senses that he is being "shown off like a wild animal cunningly trapped. He supposed that his readings in anthropology caused him to take such a coarse view of what was after all a simple and natural demonstration of family feeling" (AI 67). In thinking this way, he distances as uncivilized the scientific viewpoint he dallies with; he is thus in direct

conflict with the narrative's view that he is both a 'wild animal,' or biological being, *and* capable of a finer 'family feeling.'

Wharton does not associate the implications for human society of evolutionary science with the kind of coarseness to which Archer makes reference. His anthropological learning, he understands, colors as 'coarse' that which is interpreted through its framework. He assumes that the disciplinary lens of anthropology only focuses what is primitive. Wharton's narrative would, if consistent, not make the mistake of using science to classify its social subjects as morally high or low, for natural selection dictates that simple organisms can be more successful than humans in the right environment. But this might lead to the kind of morally unweighted naturalism Wharton disliked, a subject that was addressed in chapter one. Yet it is Wharton's point, and one aspect of a 'new form' that suppresses difference between the natural and the social through biological allegory, that Archer is victimized by his perspective. Furthermore, that Wharton may have been struggling toward a form capable of containing an evolutionary reading of social development, and finding it in the biological allegory and scientific metaphor discussed here, may explain her over-sensitivity to the perception that her social criticism was perceived to be authoritative because of her membership in the social stratum she portrayed.⁷

II. "a curious indifference to her bodily presence" (AI 243)

Despite her disinclination to be interpreted as authoritative solely because of her class membership, first-hand experience with elite manners and tastes certainly facilitated Wharton's depiction of Archer's superficial appreciation of the opera he attends in the first scene of The Age of Innocence. This performance possesses edifying content that goes

unnoticed by viewers not attuned to the ability of art to represent what is otherwise fragmentary and incomprehensible. In the autobiographical fragment "Life and I," Wharton reveals the centrality of the literary work on which the opera she represents is based, pronouncing that her reading of "Faust was one of the 'epoch-making' encounters for me" (LI 31).

The first sentence of the novel relates that "Christine Nilsson was singing in Faust at the Academy of Music in New York" (AI 3). This performance is capable of demonstrating to Archer the error of viewing his world as explicable solely through the terms offered by his superficial study of "the books on Primitive Man that people of advanced culture were beginning to read" (AI 44). Real knowledge of his primitive, or instinctive self, might redeem Archer, but he is late for his lesson for the same reason he can't understand it once he arrives, for "it was 'not the thing' to arrive early at the opera" (AI 4). His adherence to the standards of form, like Ralph Marvell's concentration on the rhythmical structures of Whitman's poetry at the expense of its content in The Custom of the Country, precludes the perception of vital ideas. Manners thus affect Archer's exposure to an argument about the value of knowledge apart from its instrumental power that the primary narrative perspective illustrates on the spectacular scale of operatic performance.

In examining Goethe's Faust, which Gounod reworks for his opera, one finds that Archer's compulsion to be fashionably late causes him to resemble the "Women of Crete" who "[n]ever listened when poetry/Sang its sweet lesson" (Goethe 161). Under the sway of "what was or was not 'the thing'" (AI 4), his lateness is a function of a way of thinking that prefers the old "Academy of Music [...] to a new Opera House" because the Academy's small size keeps out "the 'new people' whom New York was beginning to dread" (AI 3); this

focus on adherence to the dictates of taste turns Archer's perception away from ideas on which to found an identity less dependent on his social environment. Social ritual expresses the system of thought particular to his class, one crystallized in the centrality of 'the thing.' This system brings certain benefits to Archer.

One such benefit is apparent in his domestic arrangement, wherein "[a]n upper floor was dedicated to Newland while the women squeezed themselves into narrower quarters below" (AI 33). The text shows here that the luxuriousness of Archer's surroundings compensates for the limits class membership places on him. But in being transfixed by manners he cannot ultimately elude, such as propriety in romantic relationships (even if he is aware of the "hypocrisy" [AI 41] of these manners), his capacity to progress intellectually and comprehend how he is controlled by class ideology is numbed. Although Archer makes a progressive assertion in "exclaiming [...] I hope she will" (AI 41) in reference to the possibility that Ellen Olenska will be divorced, he is beholden to "conventions" (AI 5) that compel his interest in discovering who occupies the various family boxes at the Academy. Instead of discovering his entanglement in a leisure-class thought system that resembles a "[f]able, more persuasive than truth" (Goethe 162), Archer "turned his eyes from the stage" (AI 5).

Even as The Age of Innocence defines the limits of Archer's perspective, its own objectivity can move from its grounding in the sciences to less firm foundations. I've shown that Wharton's fiction recasts Darwinian theory,⁸ creating a fictional ground for the exchange of concepts related to natural laws and manners. In The Age of Innocence this practice can show clearly Archer's tendency to sever the connection between instinct (sexual desire, propagation) and culture that the story seeks to connect. One finds this in Archer's

displacement of drives into a love of art and knowledge. Wharton makes this a function of his class when "the spoils of the ages" on display in the new Metropolitan Museum are reduced to "a series of scientifically catalogued treasures" (AI 344) divorced from the individuals and the histories that produced them. Archer's stripping of an emotional and psychological context from cultural works is one product of the impulse to catalogue and classify. But in fictionally representing the countercurrents of training and impulse that affect Archer, Wharton slips out of an objective mode into representations of subjective human consciousness where her concern is no longer strictly sociological, nor grounded on any explicitly scientific psychological model.

New York's maintenance of a smooth and untroubled social surface in The Age of Innocence keeps its values unimpaired by the mutant individualism associated with membership in the socioeconomic elite. Yet, aspirations of ascending to a place among the Four Hundred founded on the Struthers's shoe polish fortune, or on Julius Beaufort's mysteriously gotten wealth, rasp against class divisions annealed by the power and prestige evidenced by old rituals and the possession of old money. Although the sound of rustling silk dresses, the calling cards left in the front hall, and the predictable rhythms of the social season suggest a world of probity, Newland Archer's class is atavistic in its repulsion of the new. The enactment of social power is linked to primitive rites in the novel and constant vigilance makes tradition impervious to the mutation of social order that might follow on books being "out of place" (AI 103) in Ellen Olenska's drawing room, or by Ellen, "heedless of tradition" (AI 104), wearing the wrong kind of dress in which to receive guests in the evening.

Archer, whose dissatisfaction prods his attempt to span the two worlds that he and Ellen Olenska represent, would, if true to his type, prefer an undisturbed continuity of ritual that bars social miscegenation. But he becomes aware that this preference, the result of his training, limits his ability to experience Ellen's European ideas, which have the power "to brush away the conventions" (AI 239) that smother him. Newland may be an 'Archer' in the sense that he attempts to arc toward Ellen's way of life, but May is a "Diana-like" (AI 211) huntress whose skills within her social context prove deadly to Archer's aspirations of freedom. She proves in preserving her marriage how wrong Julius Beaufort is when he comments, within earshot of Archer, on May's skill with a bow and arrow: "that's the only target she'll ever hit" (AI 211). This comment is notable because Beaufort is an outsider unable to see May's behavior as the perfectly modulated performance of social instinct and encoded competitiveness in the arena of sexual selection, where her body can be displayed in the athletic competition and all can see her "classic grace [...] nymph-like ease" (AI 211). The narrative's depiction of the way biological imperatives are encoded in May's performance of social instinct shows the unreality of Archer's assumption that nature and culture are unrelated.

Despite his limitations, Archer does see May's actions as an exhibition of cultural mores. This is apparent when he discerns in her "the factitious purity, so cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers and long dead ancestresses" (AI 45). His skepticism toward the naturalness of May's purity illustrates his deep suspicion of that set of rules which has formed his judgment too, making Adorno's well-known statement, "[o]ne must have tradition in oneself, to hate it properly" (52), as applicable to Archer as it has always been to Wharton. His understanding, and wariness of

the socially constructed dimension of May's purity, inflects his role as the central consciousness of the novel with a detachment shaped by his contact with "scientific books" (AI 82). However, Archer is capable only of a flawed objectivity characterized by a belief that he might analyze the complexity of his class from a perspective of a "sham" (AI 243) life that has created within him an impressionist's obsession with his perceptions. One finds that this is the case in a passage where Archer's passion for Ellen is intense. It is a moment when he feels "a curious indifference to her bodily presence [...]. Now his imagination spun about [...] [Ellen's] hand as about the edge of a vortex; [...] his one terror was to do anything which might efface the sound and impression of her words" (AI 243-244).

The novel often portrays the presence of a class-specific imperative to ensure order by arresting change. This requirement is encoded in everyday social practices. The first line of defense against the erosion of social stasis is the intermarriage of elect families. Archer is very pleased that "he was a New Yorker, and about to ally himself with one of his own kind" (AI 31) through his impending marriage to May. The gentry monitor potentially dangerous affiliations: "grandfather Newland always used to say to my mother: 'Whatever you do, don't let that fellow Beaufort be introduced to the girls'" (AI 35). Other methods of control lie in the specifics of manners: rigid standards of dress, intricate rules governing social calls, and the requirement of strict adherence to particular wording in the refusal of invitations (AI 47).

These manners are so deeply inculcated in Archer that "[f]ew things seemed to [him] more awful than an offence against 'Taste,' that far off divinity of whom 'Form' was the mere visible representative and viceregent" (AI 14). The depiction of Archer's insight that there exists some irreducible foundation for the behavior he notes, beyond its manifestation in 'form,' again demonstrates his interpretive tendency; the passage also shows, however,

that his concern, indicated by his formulation that taste is the Platonic essence of which form is a manifestation, is more concerned with the *signs or effects* of such foundations and not the coercive patterning of contingency, variation, and instinct which 'taste' and 'form' also signify. This preoccupation with signs is a distinguishing characteristic of Archer's thoroughly aesthetic orientation, which is signaled to the reader by the fact that his "boyhood had been saturated with Ruskin, and he had read all the latest books: John Addington Symonds, Vernon Lee's 'Euphorion,' the essays of P.G. Hamerton, and a wonderful new volume called 'The Renaissance' by Walter Pater" (AI 69).⁹

What these writers present to Archer's consciousness colors his evaluative habits, suggesting to the reader that the aesthetic values of his class modulate his perception. The pictures hanging in Ellen Olenska's room, for example, "bewildered him, for they were like nothing that he was accustomed to look at (and therefore able to see) when he traveled in Italy" (AI 294). Spanning the ethical aesthetics of Ruskin and the 'art for arts sake' detachment of aesthetics from a responsibility for moral teaching found in the work of Ruskin's student Pater, Archer's reading has exposed him to a variety of authoritative Victorian opinions on art. Immersion in the works of the writers Wharton names, I suggest, impresses upon Archer a general concept articulated by one critic who writes that the "goal of the positive Victorian aesthetics [...] was not to objectify others as art, but to provide the conditions that would allow oneself and others to live with the freedom of art" (Gagnier 271). That Archer strives to realize something like this formulation is clear when May tells Archer that "[w]e can't behave like people in novels" and he replies by saying "[w]hy not—why not—why not?" (AI 82). Archer's artistic interests therefore demonstrate one way his connoisseurship sublimates instinct to aesthetics.

The text portrays Archer's struggle with the limits posed by his overly aestheticized understanding of self and society when his internal conflicts seem to him represented by paintings. When Archer visits the Louvre before he and his son Dallas are to see Ellen Olenska, "the pictures [...] fill his soul with the long echoes of beauty. After all, his life had been too starved" (AI 358). When Archer "stands before an effulgent Titian" his old passion for Ellen is recalled, but "[f]or such summer dreams it was too late" (AI 358). In the novel, renaissance painters like Titian proffer a more truthful representation of pre-Christian instinct than does the static primitivism of pre-renaissance Italian painting from which the Victorian pre-Raphaelite aesthetic was partially derived. Archer is sympathetic to this sensibility, and at odds with a wildly popular pre-Raphaelitism, for he speaks with "condescension" (AI 69) of Fra Angelico, one of the group's touchstones. Moreover, the writers mentioned above are significant to this analysis of Archer's powers of appreciation because Pater, Symonds, and Vernon Lee are referred to in the Wharton manuscript "Italy Again" as examples of the "cultivated amateur," whom Wharton contrasts with the "trained specialist" (UCW 292). Their interpretations of painting, sculpture, and architecture make of Archer an informed amateur who knows the difference between the cultural values expressed in a Fra Angelico and a Titian. Nevertheless, Archer's dilettantism in matters of art gives him a superficial appreciation of beauty and sexuality which causes "his sense of inadequacy and inexpressiveness" (AI 358).

One frequently notes differences between the authorial specialist and her amateur protagonist. Early in the novel, upon seeing Ellen's "swarthy foreign looking maid [...]" whom he vaguely fancied to be Sicilian," Archer reacts by deploying the classificatory armature of his anthropological reading: "[h]e knew that the southern races communicated

with each other in the language of pantomime, and was mortified to find her shrugs and smiles so unintelligible” (AI 69). His inability to comprehend the maid illustrates that Archer is indeed an amateur in anthropological matters. Although the maid is a punning real-life embodiment of the ‘Italian primitive,’ she is, in Archer’s characterization of her, a narrative vehicle that expresses the difficulties of applying his training and knowledge in human encounters. Archer views with ‘condescension’ the signified human he knows only through art, and the maid thus remains ‘unintelligible.’ As with his inattentiveness to the significance of *Faust*, the value to Archer of his aesthetic and scientific amateurism is limited in its ability to help him interpret the real signified by sexuality.

Wharton’s representation of Archer’s objectivity charts the framing of his perspective by the artistic, literary, and scientific works he consumes. While works of art history and aesthetic interpretation that depict a positive renaissance revaluation of pre-Christian instinct also seem to Archer authoritative in their call for a life as free as art, they both enlighten and lead to disappointment. Style in painting, orderly geometrical compositional principles, and the perfectly smooth surface of a canvas can represent ‘instinct.’ The Titian Archer is so moved by demonstrates this. But their value to Archer has been obscured by the aesthetic terms of his appreciation. What the Titian might have taught Archer wasn’t visible through his “‘Taste,’ that far off divinity of whom ‘Form’ was the mere visible representative” (AI 14). By the end of the novel, then, Archer understands—as he realizes it is ‘too late’ for him—that “the new generation [...] had swept away all the old landmarks, and with them the signposts and danger signals” (AI 358). This leaves him to question the principles by which he has lived, and confirms the presence of dynamic social evolution that shifts in the history of art illustrated all along.

When Archer unpacks the latest shipment from his London bookseller, finding “a new volume of Herbert Spencer, another collection of the prolific Alphonse Daudet’s brilliant tales, and a new novel called ‘Middlemarch’ [...] he had declined three dinner invitations in favour of this feast” (AI 138),¹⁰ it is a prelude to the dispersal of his assumption that he is leading a life that utilizes these works. In her 1902 Bookman review of Leslie Stephen’s biography of Eliot, Wharton defended Eliot against charges that she “was too scientific” (UCW 71), demonstrating her allegiance to the author of a work to which Henry James referred by writing, “Middlemarch is too often an echo of Messrs. Darwin and Huxley” (qtd. in Beer 139). Archer’s reading of Middlemarch is thus a fictionalized encounter with a writer Wharton was sympathetic to, “but though he turned the pages with the sensuous joy of the book-lover, he did not know what he was reading” (AI 138). Throwing over his social persona for the evening to immerse himself in these works, he demonstrates that he is quite ready to enjoy “possibly forbidden pleasures of the mind” (Preston 42)¹¹ that are capable of rubbing through the patina of a leisured life. Yet he is not prepared for the complexity of the new vision that he finds.

The dispersal of a fantasy generated by his immersion in a book of verse entitled “The House of Life,” which “gave a new and haunting beauty to the most elementary of passions” (AI 138), comes the following morning when he looks out on the brownstone houses of the street. Again, Archer can’t break down the binary of passion, or Eros, and “beauty” so characteristic of his perspective. His conception of ‘elementary passions’ in terms of “warm [...] rich [...] ineffably tender [...] haunting beauty” (AI 138) shows once more that for Archer sexuality is signified by aesthetic ‘taste.’ He has pursued in “those enchanted pages the vision of a woman who had the face of Ellen Olenska” (138), but

making of this fantasy an actuality is “far outside the pale of probability” (AI 138). His training disrupts his instincts. What completely dissipates his vision of Ellen is the “thought of his desk in Mr. Letterblair’s office, and the family pew in Grace Church” (AI 138). The social institutions of law and religion overmaster Archer’s fantasies, and the expression of their authority as ‘desk’ and ‘pew’ is a metonymical illustration of his subordinate position to class ideology.

The novel’s presentation of the forms taken by “rituals of exclusion” (Bauer 12) is one of its first concerns. Julius Beaufort is considered dangerous because he is “a ‘foreigner’ of doubtful origin” (AI 44). In the case of Ellen’s expulsion there “were certain things that had to be done, and if done at all, done handsomely and thoroughly; and one of these, in the old New York code, was the tribal rally around a kinswoman who was about to be eliminated from the tribe” (AI 334). Ellen is to be expelled because the “individual, in such cases, is nearly always sacrificed to what is supposed to be the collective interest” (AI 111). But ‘rituals of exclusion’ are also the manacles of inclusion.

May does not possess Archer’s consciousness of the harm potentially done by the ‘collective interest,’ even though she is the primary exponent of this phenomenon in the text. Archer sees this, reflecting upon how, after marrying May, “[i]t would presently be his task to take the bandage from this young woman’s eyes” (AI 81). But the inability to transcend expected thoughts and actions that Archer notes in May he sees in himself too, causing him to resent the extent to which his life is choreographed: “[s]ameness—sameness!” he muttered, the word running through his head like a persecuting tune” (AI 83). Archer reacts to the narrow, coercive aspect of manners, providing an example of how, as one critic has argued, “the text makes it hard to sustain readings that dismiss cultural furnishings as

'background' (whether picturesque or oppressive) or that see characters as discrete beings, with an independent 'selfhood' separate and intact from any social inscriptions" (Knights 20). Archer is all too aware of the social inscriptions that write him into a tradition he cannot resist. This tradition envisions marriage as a duty that if not considered as such, lapses into "a mere battle of ugly appetites" (AI 347) that must be patterned. The difficulty of remaining coherent to oneself outside that tradition keeps Archer from smelling "the flower of life [...] a thing so unattainable and improbable" (AI 347).

Standing at the center of the establishment, Archer becomes alienated from habits and customs that are transparent to his future wife. He is unafraid to remedy May's unawareness of the fact that she is the product of social determinism: "We're all as like each other as those dolls cut out of the same folded paper. We're like patterns stencilled on a wall" (AI 82), he cries. Despite the fact that he feels a responsibility to teach her, his sense that "she simply echoed what was said for her" (AI 81) elicits foreboding: "[h]e shivered a little, remembering some of the new ideas in his scientific books, and the much-cited instance of the Kentucky cave-fish, which had ceased to develop eyes because they had no use for them" (AI 82). This allusion to Archer's knowledge of natural selection figures social evolution in Darwinian terms, making of class ideology a component of the social selection environment that over the course of generations 'blinds' May and those like her.

Another passage from Wharton's 1905 review of Howard Sturgis's Belchamber addresses the topic of representation in a way useful to understanding how and why Wharton constructs Archer's perspective in her novel as she does. In the essay, Wharton suggests that following the rules of 'taste' by adhering to 'form' in the creation of art denies an element of the real. She writes that form "when it is a mere lifeless reproduction of another's design, the

dreary ‘drawing from a plaster cast,’ twice removed from reality, it is of no more artistic value than any other clever reproduction; whereas [. . .] the thing personally felt and directly rendered, asserts itself through all accidental difficulties of expression” (UCW 107). In The Age of Innocence this artistic dilemma mirrors Archer’s situation, for his is a position ‘removed from reality’ by his training, which elevates ‘form,’ as has been shown, to a primary position that makes of his passion a thing that cannot be directly felt. This claim, as will be seen, finds support in the narrative’s presentation of a class-specific lexicon that substantially affects what Archer can and cannot signify.

One might object to the suggestion that Wharton creates Archer’s compromised objectivity in order to articulate the dangers of a superficial scientific basis for social analysis on the grounds that she sought only to depict a tragic story of thwarted love. In fact, such an objection could rely on Wharton’s own words: “I did so want ‘The Age’ to be taken not so much as a ‘costume piece’ but as ‘a simple and grave’ story of two people trying to live up to something that was still ‘felt in the blood’ at that time” (Letters 433). But it is exactly what Archer and Ellen feel ‘in the blood’ that their social environment forbids them to express. It is those moments where mutual understanding is elusive when the barriers to their expression become a subject.

One could object too that the novel’s concern with ‘tribes’ and ‘ritual’ employs an anthropological point of view that responds to the fact that “[t]he subject of manners [...] had been newly discovered in this era by social scientists, anthropologists, social theorists, and psychologists [who] increasingly located the source of all social praxis and regulation in cultural habits and customs” (Bentley 69). Such an objection would imply that Wharton is not interested in the sources of Archer’s viewpoint, but wishes only to represent it. Evidence

to the contrary exists in the specific qualities of the contrasting perspectives of Archer, and the narrative within which his viewpoint is contained; in particular, such evidence is visible in the novel's representation of how linguistic norms modulate the way Archer sees his world. It is to this matter that I now turn.

III. "'Word Dust'" (WF 16)

In French Ways and their Meaning,¹² a treatise "[i]ntended to instruct American military men about French mores" (Benstock 348), Wharton characterizes an aspect of American language that in The Age of Innocence affects Archer's ability to express himself. Composed while she wrote the novel, French Ways bemoans the "deplorable loss of shades of difference in our blunted speech" (FW 83). Wharton attributes this loss of the means to make fine distinctions to the fact that in America one finds "a race that has had a recent beginning" (FW 83). Due to "the sudden uprooting of our American ancestors and their violent cutting off from all their past" (FW 82), Americans live in linguistic poverty in comparison to the French. This claim materializes in the novel's portrayal, in a long passage from which I've chosen the following excerpts, of Archer's difficulty discussing with May his involvement with Ellen Olenska:

[T]here's something I want to say [...] the slight distance between them [...] an unbridgeable abyss [...] The sound of his voice echoed through the homelike hush, and he repeated: 'There's something I've got to tell you [...] Archer checked the conventional phrases of self-accusal that were crowding to his lips. He was determined to put the case baldly [...] 'Madame Olenska—' he said; but at the same time his wife raised her hand as if to silence him. (AI 323)

In this passage, Wharton's portrayal of Archer's involvement with Ellen is a reality that cannot be represented by a class dialect that reduces linguistic means to a reflection of concepts and behavior appropriate to burnished, guilt-laden drawing rooms.

In 1925 Wharton articulated a problem for the fiction writer that bears on her representation of Archer's point-of-view in The Age of Innocence, and my interest in the limitations to what Archer can represent linguistically:

The novelist works in the very material out of which the object he is trying to render is made. [...] It is relatively easy to separate the artistic vision of an object from its complex and tangled actuality if one has to re-see it in paint or marble and bronze; it is infinitely difficult to render a human mind when one is employing the very word-dust with which thought is formulated. (WF 16-17)

The difficulty Archer has in recognizing why he cannot transcend his training is a variation on the artistic issue presented in the passage above; his cultural analysis is limited by the breadth of a system of signification specific to his class, not just his amateurish scientism. His shallow scientism obfuscates the inability of 'scientific' knowledge to impassion him, and conceals that what he wishes to learn through books can be understood only experientially. Furthermore, Wharton's fictional examination of the linguistic forms of old New York is an aspect of her controlling mode of objectivity, one that subordinates Archer's perspective, and positions the narrative's objectivity outside the reach of the effects it describes.

Archer's limited ability to grapple with "hard facts" (AI 198) shines through the text's reflection on the linguistic habits of his tribe:

In reality they all lived in a kind of hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by an arbitrary sign; as when Mrs. Welland, who knew exactly why Archer had pressed her to announce her daughter's engagement at the Beaufort ball (and had indeed expected him to do no less), yet felt obliged to simulate reluctance, and the air of having her hand forced.

(AI 44)

Beneath the glitter of the chandelier the articulation of a mating rite in ritualistic forms that include the obligation to 'simulate reluctance' contains a sign of its foundation in inarticulate instinct. One sees this in Mrs. Welland's perception of the 'arbitrary sign' as encoding, or signifying something she will not directly state, for though 'she knew exactly why' Newland wants a hasty marriage, there is no acceptable lexicon available through which to express the sexual subject matter running below sexuality's oblique referents in social forms.

Social 'form,' as I have shown, defines a system of referents available for Archer's objective inquiry, but this system depends not just on dress and gesture as forms of signification, but on language. 'Doing the unspeakable' thus consists in behavior that has no corresponding entry in the lexicon of Archer's tribe, one in which the fashionable is possessed of a gravity whose source is a historical past distant yet singular in its influence: "What was or was not 'the thing' played a part as important in Newland Archer's New York as the inscrutable totem terrors that had ruled the destinies of his forefathers" (AI 4). In linking normative social habits with the 'totem terrors' that guided the 'destinies of his forefathers,' Archer is similar to his law partner, who is seen by him as "the Pharisaic voice of a society wholly absorbed in barricading itself against the unpleasant" (AI 98). What is 'unpleasant' is an aspect of the real at the periphery of Archer's perception. This is not to say

that Archer isn't skeptical of the appearance of absolute verity that gilds surfaces, ideas, and thoughts he finds in his class environment. In fact, while he stands at his wedding he thinks that "real people were living somewhere, and real things happening to them" (AI 182).

Archer's problem, though, is that in this two-fold fictional world in which Archer's perspective is nested within that of the narrative, he is anchored in the unreal by a system of signification unequipped to represent the 'real' he alludes to.

Language is the transmission medium for cultural traits that in Wharton's genetic theory of values is shown to convert into linguistic matter what is 'felt in the blood.' In Wharton's era "Mendel's laws, and with them the concept of the gene as a unit of heredity, was the salvation of Darwinian thinking" (Dennett 220). Salvation though it was, these were daunting ideas, even for Wharton's discipline-crashing intellect. She recognized the significance of "the allelomorphs & heterozygotes" explained in Lock's book (Letters 151). But, as I shall show in a moment, she portrays the transmission of values in terms that equate genes and language. Yet, hers is not only a metaphorical representation of social reproduction in which language carries cultural DNA that manifests itself as a class-bound angle of vision. Rather, it is an argumentative strategy that demonstrates the inseparability of 'taste' and forms of social expression, including language, from biological foundations.

Wharton's implicit theory of cultural reproduction shows language to evolve, presenting its mutation and variation as inevitable. Archer's statement that "[w]e've no character, no colour, no variety" (AI 241), is thus true to a point. But errors in transmission still result in Beaufort and his type, whose presence hints at the reality of alternate classes and other ways of articulating passion in the social context. This reading adds a dimension to interpretations that have seen Beaufort solely as representative of new money. It is the

resistance to mutation and variation that distinguishes Archer's class as being engaged in a maladroit attempt to preserve their social artifice under the rotting umbrella of so-called "natural [...] conventions" (AI 5) that are anything but. This effort, moreover, fixes linguistic borders of representation in such a way as to incite May's "blushing circumlocution" (AI 344) and the other instances of inarticulateness, as when Archer's "arms were yearning up to her [Ellen]; but she drew away, and they remained facing each other, divided by the distance that their words had created" (AI 172).

One critic has discussed Ian Burkitt's work in a way that backgrounds my argument that Wharton pursued the effects of ideological inscription through language on individual psychology: "[p]ersonality develops within discourse," that is [...] 'self' and 'mind' are formed within the communicative activity of the group" (Knights 21). The evidence necessary to grant that something like this exists in The Age of Innocence falls into two related categories; first, the novel shows the use of language to be regulated by ideological interpellations regarding what can and can't be said, and second, that such communication affects the ability of individuals to conceive of ideas outside the "pale of probability" (AI 138). These aspects of language use are portrayed in the novel within the hierarchy of narrative and character perspectives already discussed. For example, shortly before Archer is to leave for Washington, D.C., where he hopes to meet privately with Ellen, an omniscient narrative interjection follows an exchange between Archer and May that differentiates Wharton's analytical mode from her protagonist's:

'The change will do you good,' she said simply [...] It was the only word that passed between them on the subject; but in the code in which they had both been trained it meant: 'Of course you understand that I know all that people have been saying about

Ellen, and heartily sympathise with my family in their effort to get her to return to her husband. I also know that, for some reason you have chosen not to tell me, you have advised her against this course, which all the older men of the family, as well as our grandmother, agree in approving; and that it is owing to your encouragement that Ellen defies us all, and exposes herself to the kind of criticism of which Mr. Sillerton Jackson probably gave you, this evening, the hint that has made you so irritable. [...] Hints have indeed not been wanting; but since you appear unwilling to take them from others, I offer you this one myself, in the only form in which well-bred people of our kind can communicate unpleasant things to each other: by letting you understand that I know you mean to see Ellen when you are in Washington, and are perhaps going there expressly for that purpose; and that, since you are sure to see her, I wish you to do so with my full and explicit approval—and to take the opportunity of letting her know what the course of conduct you have encouraged her in is likely to lead to. (AI 267-268)

It is a “mute message” (AI 268) that they share, but as the narrator makes clear, much is communicated that is not verbalized.

Here one might object that Archer and May have transcended the linguistic code that I am arguing limits their ability to conceptualize alternatives to scripted behavior. However, what is encoded is a not-said that is yet signified by oblique reference and gesture: “‘and you must be sure to go and see Ellen,’ [...] Her hand was still on the key of the lamp when the last word of this mute message reached him. She turned the wick down, lifted off the globe, and breathed on the sulky flame” (AI 267); thus is Ellen extinguished. In other words, the taboo subject of sexual infidelity can be signified within a class-specific system of meaning,

but it is a sign at the margin partially dependent on the silence that corresponds to unknown but possible entries in Archer's lexicon. In this unsaid is the inescapable potential for linguistic evolution that powers social change too, and leaves Archer regretting the "stifled memories of an inarticulate lifetime" (AI 357).

Such passages are an ironic manifestation of Wharton's edict governing "[t]he use of dialogue in fiction [...] [which] should be reserved for the culminating moments, and regarded as a spray into which the great wave of narrative breaks in curving toward the watcher on the shore" (WF 73), for this key exchange passes in silence. At the level of what *is* enunciated one finds that May, at the end of the scene, does not state directly her desire that Ellen's threat to the marriage be ended. Rather, May again refers to Ellen metaphorically when upon snuffing the flame of the lamp she remarks: "[t]hey smell less if one blows them out" (AI 268). Although, May's reference is to the imminent social extinction of Ellen, the representation of a felt need to avoid direct statement is fictionally registered by depicting a system of signification that assiduously disperses the question of why such linguistic obscurantism exists. The narrative's perspective brings this forth by using a less constrained objective stance that arises from the wide scope that contains and gives meaning to Archer and May's exchange.

The issue of *why* these characters can't speak plainly, apparently attributable to the simple fact that the topic is off limits, is seen by a wider narrative perspective that reads in May's stifled thoughts an enunciation of a linguistic code that is class-specific: 'the only form in which well-bred people of our kind can communicate.' One could contend, as Wharton herself did, that "[w]hen, in real life, two or more people are talking together, all that is understood between them is left out of their talk" (WF 74). But in the quoted passages,

Wharton's subject is an involuntary self-censorship evidenced by the author's insistence on reiterating that meaning—such as it is—emerges in such exchanges from the context of straitjacketed communication that May and Archer's son refers to as the sign of a “deaf-and-dumb asylum” (AI 357). That the requirement to encode is in full effect is also evident in the frequency with which Archer catches himself in ingrained habits and thoughts, as when he becomes “conscious in himself of the same instinctive recoil [at “unusual situations”] that he had so often criticized in his mother” (AI 108).

Further evidence of Wharton's interest in identifying connections between language, social practices, and individual psychology exists in her statement that in “[i]nheriting an old social organization, modern America has [...] reduced the English language to a mere instrument of utility [...] so she has reduced relations between human beings to a dead level of vapid benevolence” (UCW 154). The vapidness of the smooth social surface that Archer both loves and loathes belies a deeper reality that Wharton's fictional method makes a claim to represent. For instance, the announcement of Archer's engagement to May prompts him to reflect that “[h]is joy was so deep that this blurring of the surface [the public announcement of the engagement] left its essence untouched; but he would like to keep the surface pure too” (AI 23). His preference, in other words, is to avoid social intercourse where the topic of his marriage is concerned, and to not see his affections interpreted in the language of the tribe: “it was not thus that he would have wished to have his happiness known. To proclaim it in the heat and noise of a crowded ball-room was to rob it of the fine bloom of privacy which should belong to things nearest the heart” (AI 23). Archer doesn't want the private ‘essence’ of his feeling toward May articulated in stock phrases.

In so thinking, he displays a wish to avoid the use of English as an 'instrument of utility' to represent this 'fine bloom.' He prefers to avoid the discursive fray altogether: "Now we shan't have to talk" he whispers to May as they ritualistically float "away on the soft waves of the Blue Danube" (AI 23). May follows Archer into silence. He observes how "she made no answer [...] as if bent on some ineffable vision. What a new life it was going to be, with this whiteness, radiance. Goodness at one's side" (AI 23). But May's 'whiteness' is blankness and her 'Goodness,' like her 'niceness,' nearly empty except for its signification of stock language affiliated with "admonitory" (AI 65) manners. The guilt of normalcy that makes of ideological effects an objective reality for May has been rubbed off in Archer's perception, giving him "an awkward way of suddenly not seeming to take the most fundamental things for granted" (AI 252).

Archer's joy at the imminence of his marriage to May does not survive his first meeting with the adult Ellen (with whom he once played as a boy). Ellen is a woman who can satisfy Newland's yearning for "transcendent experience" (Wolff, A Feast of Words 319) both sexually and intellectually. Late in the novel, as Archer and Ellen travel by steamboat to Point Arley, Ellen's effect on Archer is cast in terms that allude to the value placed on the unblemished surface by his world, and also the potential for movement toward an alternate reality Ellen represents: "As the boat left the harbour and turned seaward a breeze stirred up about them [...] The fog of sultriness still hung over the city, but ahead lay a fresh world of ruffled waters, and distant promontories with light-houses in the sun" (AI 238). This vision, distinguished by the visual clarity bestowed by multiple sources of illumination, is linked to a sensual image in which "Madame Olenska, leaning back against the boat-rail, drank in the coolness between parted lips" (AI 238). The truth of sex and its resistance to linguistic

representation, its association in the scene with nature, and the knowledge of the world beyond New York that Ellen possesses, draws Archer away from his love of surface. Wishing to evade a social order that has become as labyrinthine in its layers of subtle signs as the royal court at Versailles, he feels solidarity with yet another phantom—that imaginary place he longs to escape to with Ellen.

Ellen, for her part, sees the matter clearly and articulates the situation using words that sound alien to Archer's ears:

Is it your idea then that I should live with you as your mistress—since I can't be your wife? The crudeness of the question startled him: *the word was one that women of his class fought shy of*, even when their talk flitted closest about the topic. He noticed that Madame Olenska pronounced it *as if it had a recognized place in her vocabulary* [italics added] [...] Her question pulled him up with a jerk, and he floundered. 'I want—I want to get away with you into a world where words like that—categories like that—won't exist. Where we shall be simply two human beings who love each other, who are the whole of life to each other; and nothing else on earth will matter.' She drew a deep sigh that ended in another laugh. 'Oh, my dear—where is that country? Have you ever been there?' (AI 290)

Archer, in fact, need not look past his own world to find a place where such words and categories 'won't exist.'

Indeed, in conceiving of ideal conditions in which he and Ellen can live, he imagines a place where limitations on vocabulary and concepts are in full force. This seems to describe the very world he seeks to flee—a place where 'words like that [...] won't exist.' Finding himself within an alien lexicon, he flounders and proposes a return to the sphere he knows.

Alternative frameworks in which they might be together would be contexts in which he, as a socially construed subject, would not exist—so tightly integrated with his milieu does Wharton conceive of his psychology. The only context in which contact between them can continue, Ellen observes, is that of kinship relations; however, this framework does not allow for the expression of desire either:

‘Then what exactly is your plan for us?’ he asked. ‘For *us*? But there’s no *us* in that sense! We’re near each other only if we stay far from each other. Then we can be ourselves. Otherwise we’re only Newland Archer, the husband of Ellen Olenska’s cousin, and Ellen Olenska, the cousin of Newland Archer’s wife, trying to be happy behind the backs of people who trust them.’ ‘Ah, I’m beyond that,’ he groaned. ‘No, you’re not! You’ve never been beyond. And I have,’ she said in a strange voice, ‘and I know what it looks like there.’ (AI 291)

Ellen’s ‘beyond’ is a psychic space, and a material and sexual one, outside of the linguistic and experiential frame within which Archer interprets and analyzes the social stratum he dwells in.

Particular limitations on the meaning of language, certain programmatic evacuations of meaning from key words and concepts, make it difficult for Archer to imagine what Ellen’s ‘beyond’ looks like. His perceptions are directed, as I have shown, by “the invisible deity of ‘Good Form’” (AI 182). For example, in Archer’s set the concept of women’s equality contains no arguments, suggests no thesis or antithesis, something made tangible in how his exclamation that “‘Women should be free—as free as we are,’ struck to the root of a problem that it was agreed in his world to regard as non-existent” (AI 43). Additionally,

'Nice' women, however wronged, would never claim the kind of freedom he meant, and generous minded men like himself were therefore—in the heat of argument—the more chivalrously ready to concede it to them. Such verbal generosities were in fact only a humbugging disguise of the inexorable conventions that tied things together and bound people down to the old pattern. (AI 43)

In contemplating May, he wonders: "What if 'niceness' carried to that supreme degree were only a negation, the curtain dropped before an emptiness?" (AI 212). May's 'niceness' is a socially generated aspect of 'inexorable conventions' that in part explains how it is that in May "such depths of feeling could coexist with such absence of imagination" (AI 188).

May's deep feelings are expressed in conventional marriage-day statements. When Archer admits that "I thought I'd lost the ring. [...] I had time to think of every horror that might possibly happen" (AI 187), May responds by "flinging her arms about his neck. 'But none ever *can* happen now, can it Newland, as long as we two are together?'" (AI 187). Such wishful thinking does have depth insofar as their marriage will be vigorously defended by the same "conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers and long dead ancestresses" (AI 45) responsible for May's normative attitudes, and in this sense nothing *can* happen to them. But May is not wholly cognizant of this coercive element of her happiness. Her statements are like her "clear eyes [which] revealed only the most tranquil unawareness" (AI 188). May's physical characteristics mirror the fact that she speaks for a social order and its traditions: "[p]erhaps that faculty of unawareness is what gave her eyes their transparency, and her face the look of representing a type rather than a person; as if she might have been chosen to pose for a civic virtue or a Greek goddess" (AI 189). Nothing as natural as the chance variation in the codes passed from generation to generation exists in this static

environment, one in which the *ingenue* is, though an embodiment of ideal physical grace, a type rather than a person, and one seen as stone no less, for “her face wore the vacant serenity of a young marble athlete” (AI 141).

A recent critical response to the issue of May’s ‘niceness’ as a negation is expressed in terms that view the linguistic nullities of Archer’s tribe as a sign that it avoids the ‘real’:

‘Not-niceness’ is an odd litotes which seems to summarise an essential linguistic and behavioral demarcation in Wharton’s fiction. It represents an impoverishment of vocabulary, in which the opposite of a thing is formulated merely as its own cancellation. It is the evasion of particularity (what is ‘niceness’, *exactly*, and how far would one have to go not to be nice?). Non-logical and ‘indeterminately evaluative’, it represents the linguistic atrophy of her fictional tribe. (Preston 1-2)

In contrast to May’s conformity to a static class-world in which the opposite of ‘niceness’ has no signifier, Ellen’s fate in the ‘macro-social environment,’ one explicitly troped as a selection environment by the overarching narrative, is “what we’ve all contrived to make it” (AI 144). This is evidence of a social environment that can deflect change through limitations on what can be represented linguistically. Ellen’s ability to think for herself makes her an oddity in a world that favors May’s adherence to a typology in which ‘nice women’ never claim the kind of freedom Ellen has. Yet to call it ‘linguistic atrophy,’ as Preston does, underestimates the capacity of such a ‘weak’ linguistic system to quell unorthodox ideas.

In Archer’s world, verbal utterances in the form of refusals of invitations, and linguistic gestures of opprobrium and obliquity, direct scripted ritual behavior between Archer and May, the collusion that excludes Archer from discussions of Ellen’s fate, and her eventual banishment itself. Archer sees that “to all of them he and Madame Olenska were

lovers, lovers in the extreme sense peculiar to ‘foreign vocabularies’ (AI 335). Such otherness must be expelled. “[T]he silent organization which held his little world together” (AI 339) is non-verbal, and reliant on a mode of communication that is similar to the effusion of wordless desire rendered elsewhere as the ability of Ellen’s “silence to communicate all she had to say” (AI 245). In contrast to the inability to speak plainly that is characteristic of Archer’s class, his initial conversations with Ellen contain “hard facts,” but “[t]heir very vocabulary was unfamiliar to him” (AI 108); confronted with Ellen’s frank discussion of her past, Archer does not verbalize a response to the question “[y]ou know about my husband—my life with him?” (AI 108). Instead, “He made a sign of assent” (AI 108) that avoids the bramble of locution his silent reply skirts. Archer cannot enter into such conversations; the class-based lexicon that defines what he can and cannot say, think, and do has no entry for Ellen’s situation.

IV. “the knowledge of ‘form’ must be congenital” (AI 8)

The opening sequence of The Age of Innocence at the old “Academy of Music” (AI 3) blurs distinctions between the high art the audience takes its evening’s entertainment to be, and the gatherings of “Primitive Man” (AI 44) with which Archer implicitly compares it to. The scene introduces the reader to Archer, to the way leisure-class manners create the group psychology affecting him, and his concomitant sense of apartness and superiority. Archer won’t openly challenge “the carefully brushed, white-waistcoated, button-hole-flowered gentlemen who succeeded each other in the club box” (AI 7) because doing so will impair his connection to the group. However,

[i]n matters intellectual and artistic Newland Archer felt himself distinctly the superior of these chosen specimens of old New York gentility; he had probably read more, thought more, and even seen a good deal more of the world, than any other men of the number. Singly they betrayed their inferiority; but grouped together they represented 'New York,' and the habit of masculine solidarity made him accept their doctrine on all the issues called moral. He instinctively felt that in this respect it would be troublesome—and also rather bad form—to strike out for himself. (AI 7-8)

Archer feels 'solidarity' with these men even as he distinguishes himself from them; his insight is acute in matters of habit and dress. As a 'white-waistcoated' gentleman he conforms, in part because of a coercive 'masculine solidarity,' and the potential violation of form likely caused by independent thought.

'Form' is primary in Archer's world; its violation leaves a mark of difference on the offender. In turning again to the language found in Wharton's characterization of men as 'specimens' and Archer 'instinctively' sensing a threat in the group, variation from which would be 'troublesome,' she figures black tie as attire expressive of tribal conformity. Yet Wharton's protagonist does something similar. Archer, in the posture of the concealed anthropologist as he stands in shadow at the back of his opera box, is struck "by the religious reverence of even the most unworldly American women for the social advantages of dress [...] and he understood for the first time the earnestness with which May [...] had gone through the solemn rite of selecting and ordering her extensive wardrobe" (AI 198). As his focus turns to Ellen's dated outfit, the text makes adherence to sumptuary codes a primary marker of membership in the tribe, and its violation an act that invites observation and sanction. Ellen appears in a "dark blue velvet gown rather theatrically caught up under her

bosom by a girdle with a large old-fashioned clasp. The wearer of this unusual dress, who seemed quite unconscious of the attention it was attracting, stood a moment in the center of the box” (AI 9). It is Lawrence Lefferts who spies Ellen across the auditorium. His surveillance of the audience, conducted through a “glass” (AI 9), indicates sensitivity to matters of form that compels him to note nuances of dress and gesture. Lefferts is only one of many who “turned their opera-glasses critically on the circle of ladies who were the products of the system” (AI 8).

Lefferts is a metonymical caricature. He monitors all who pass under his gaze and stands for the watchfulness of the audience as a whole. He is “the foremost authority on ‘form’ in New York” who can only stammer “My God!” (AI 8) when he sees Ellen Olenska attired archaically. Lefferts had, Archer notes, “probably devoted more time than any one else to the study of this intricate and fascinating question; but study alone could not account for his complete and easy competence. One had only to look at him [...] to feel that the knowledge of ‘form’ must be congenital” (AI 8). In this way Archer suggests that Lefferts was born with this trait, and that it is, in fact, a trait common to the social stratum Lefferts represents. The protagonist’s statement is biologically inflected in calling Lefferts’s knowledge ‘congenital,’ and inductive in its conclusion through an accumulation of facts, illuminating the particular qualities of Archer’s objectivity.

The terms of Archer’s quasi-scientific commentary reflect the superficial learning acquired in his “Gothic library” (AI 4) where he dallies before arriving late to the opera. Archer’s mind earlier touched on works by Herbert Spencer and George Eliot (AI 138) when he occupied this special room, one decorated “with glazed black-walnut bookcases and finial-topped chairs” (AI 4). His appreciation of the decoration scheme of the library parallels

his light skimming of “one book after another [that] dropped from his hand” (AI 138). Once in his box at the opera, Archer surveys the scene alongside Lefferts, but as he “turned his eyes from the stage and scanned the opposite side of the house” he merely notices the “monstrous obesity” (AI 5) of Mrs. Manson Mingott, and does not police the scene as Lefferts does. The omniscient register of the narrative here presents Archer’s shallow knowledge as hereditary and defective. His spurious objectivity enables his comment on Lefferts’s knowledge of Form, but comes from one “shocked and troubled” by the way Ellen’s dress “(which had no tucker) sloped away from her thin shoulders. [...] He hated to think of May Welland’s being exposed to the influence of a young woman so careless of the dictates of Taste” (AI 15). Wharton’s amateur anthropologist cannot grasp how Form limits his analysis of its effects by deflecting deeper considerations. One thus finds in this scene distorted varieties of objectivity represented by Lefferts, who observes Ellen, but is watched by Archer, and the authoritative scope of the narrative that depicts both viewpoints.

Following the sighting of Ellen Olenska at the opera, audience members in Lefferts’s box look to Sillerton Jackson for an interpretation of her unexpected presence: “the whole of the club turned instinctively to hear what the old man had to say; for old Mr. Jackson was as great an authority on ‘family’ as Lawrence Lefferts was on ‘form’” (AI 8). A tribal elder possessed of vital knowledge regarding kinship ties, Jackson

knew all the ramifications of New York’s cousinships; and could not only elucidate such complicated questions as that of the connection between the Mingotts (through the Thorleys) with the Dallahses of South Carolina, and that of the relationship of the elder branch of Philadelphia Thorleys to the Albany Chiverses [...] but could also enumerate the leading characteristics of each family. (AI 9)

Wharton's depiction of this thicket of intertwining family trees emphasizes the importance to this group of knowing each person's place in a social hierarchy where ambiguity over whether one belongs or not, as is the case with Ellen, can ripple the pool of the elect.

That Wharton was intent on representing such intolerance of difference through a narrative lens shaped by current trends in anthropology and sociology is an argument made by Bauer, who observes that Wharton had,

[I]n *The Age of Innocence* only a few years before Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* and Bronislaw Malinowski's *Sex and Repression in Savage Society*, already dismantled the binary opposition between primitive and civilized cultures, by showing that civilized New York is as dependent upon rituals of exclusion and scapegoating as any other pattern of culture. (11-12)

The 'binary opposition between primitive and civilized cultures' Bauer refers to, moreover, can be 'dismantled' by the framing narrative only because Archer's flawed scientific angle of vision exists within the narrative as a devalued point-of-view.

The consequence of Archer's reading of culture is the maintenance of a perceived gap between the primitive and civilized. He, therefore, sublimates instinct, or what is 'felt in the blood,' to the requirements of a group whose 'masculine solidarity,' symptomatic of its power of exclusion and inclusion, controls Archer's urge to 'strike out for himself.' In this way social evolution is potentially arrested. But the tactic of 'exclusion and scapegoating,' while successful in keeping Archer within the fold, will fail to mold the next generation, one represented by Archer's son.

In the novel's opening scene, the imminent social miscegenation between Archer and Ellen is metaphorically foreshadowed by a depiction of botanical hybridization. In observing

the stage scenery, Archer notes how “a daisy grafted on a rose-branch flowered with a luxuriance prophetic of Mr. Luther Burbank’s far-off prodigies” (AI 6).¹³ Considered in terms of the text’s advocacy of the notion that new ideas, and new blood are needed to reinvigorate a stifled leisure class, this passage presents the possibility of renewal to be inherent in fresh combinations of social/genetic pairings. Archer’s demonstration that he knows Burbank’s work, however, is spurred not by real flowers, but by stage dressing for which “[n]o expense had been spared” (AI 6), reinforcing the fact that this costly portrayal of hybridization is safely confined to the stage, where it can be seen from a distance and controlled for viewers like Archer. Furthermore, the text associates Archer’s analysis with his scientific amateurism by having him comment on mere figures of flowers. His difficulty in transcending manners that encourage him not to look deeply into scientific matters is confirmed by his hesitance at invigorating timeworn form and inbred genetic stock through an exogamic pairing with Ellen.

Garlepp-Burns’ recent discussion of The Custom of the Country argues that its scientifically informed narrative contains significant contradictions. It is worth noting that her argument allows one to view the political dimension of The Age of Innocence as compromising the apparent objectivity of Wharton’s method. Objectivity, she writes

may seem to exclude the subject, but since its very definition requires a subject to observe the object, the apparently alien element of *subjectivity* complicates the picture; its connotation of impersonality and impartiality may suggest a neutral purpose, but it often masks the desire and acts as the very mechanism for *control* in narratives; and it may appear totally subservient to outward facts, but it is frequently

used as a form of moral and intellectual *authority* derived from its source, the revered discipline of science. (Garlepp-Burns 29-30)

Wharton's representation of New York's elite as a "clan" or "tribe" (AI 32) whose qualities are presented in a framework cobbled from the author's evolutionary, biological, and anthropological sources controls the narrative intermittently. The disparity between apparent neutrality and didactic social criticism is too great for Wharton's method to bear without its constituent parts being revealed.

Wharton's is not a mode of literary realism that unselfconsciously aligns her narrative method with the conventional view Archer represents. Instead, she distances her text from the conventions it portrays through highlighting Archer's *manqué*-scientist judgments. These judgments reveal a socially generated 'objectivity' that transforms Ellen, for example, from a potential source of positive cultural change into "a young woman [...] careless of the dictates of taste" (AI 15). It is in these juxtapositions between the narrative's scientifically influenced 'moral and intellectual *authority*,' and Archer's mediated conclusions, that one finds Wharton's tendency to place authorial objectivity in the service of a vision of social renewal.

This narrative strategy demonstrates one reason why Wharton does not suppress omniscience in the way practiced by her modernist contemporaries. Phrases that originate with the controlling voice, such as "beyond that his imagination could not travel" (AI 71), and the abandonment of Archer as a reflecting consciousness in the novel's final chapter, indicate that a single narrative register would be insufficient for Wharton's analysis of Archer's consciousness, and her representation of the cultural elements that shape it.¹⁴

Wharton writes that "the modern American novelist is told that the social and educated being is an unreality unworthy of his attention" (UCW 155). This statement is related to her

abjuration of modernist narrative practices, for the fact that Archer is such a 'being' who nevertheless cannot disentangle himself from mediation by manners requires a narrative position from which to assess and value socialization and education.

"[S]tudents of natural history" (UCW 155), including Wharton, might assume they can evade the complex ideological pressures exerted on Archer by "society [...] one of man's oldest works of art" (UCW 155), by representing the collective through a scientifically inflected omniscience. However, Wharton's narrative objectivity produces a problem that in her critical writing she describes, and distances herself from. She finds fault with

the early French 'realists,' that group of brilliant writers who invented the once-famous *tranche de vie*, the exact photographic reproduction of a situation or an episode, with all its sounds, smells, aspects realistically rendered, but with its deeper relevance and its suggestions of a larger whole either unconsciously missed or purposely left out. (WF 10)

Wharton's articulation of what is 'left out' by this literary form accurately describes Archer's dilemma, wherein the conventional social surface made up of manners and speech he observes and analyzes "tended to draw him back into his old habits of mind" (AI 195) and away from the 'deeper relevance' of the coerciveness of these habits.

For Archer, as for the 'French 'realists,' form is all. But Wharton's commentary describes a formal literary problem she faces in attempting to depict a social self troublingly inattentive to the deeper meanings of manners: how to represent superficiality as a feature of a character and an ideology without seeming to share the values that prompt it. Her politically attenuated objectivity avoids a superficial naturalism 'totally subservient to outward facts' by employing an omniscient mode that colors in what is 'unconsciously

missed' by her main character. As I have shown, in Archer's case what is averted is "naked instinct" (Letters 159), or desire. This is clear when the narrator relates that Archer sent flowers to Ellen "almost without knowing what he did" (AI 79). The text's representation of the 'deeper relevance' and 'larger whole' unperceived by Archer causes his shallow consciousness to resemble a supposedly 'exact' literary mode. The Age of Innocence transcends this mode, but only because it maintains a politically invested, deeply subjective projection of objectivity.

I have argued to this point that The Age of Innocence relies on a polemical sociobiology that advances the genre of the novel as a form capable of critical acuity beyond that possessed by the frame through which Archer, a cataloguer of social habit himself, analyzes his class. But within the narrative, as I've claimed, is a representation of the protagonist's disquiet at the limitations imposed on him by the habits and standards he notes. Such clouds of disillusionment indicate the presence of social evolution. These are manifest in the attitudes of the next generation, which are represented by Archer's son:

Dallas belonged body and soul to the new generation. He was the first-born of Newland and May Archer, yet it had never been possible to inculcate in him even the rudiments of reserve. 'What's the use of making mysteries? It only makes people want to nose 'em out,' he always objected when enjoined to discretion. (AI 356)

Wharton reflects on subtle shifts in the spirit of her age, signifying through Archer's partial awakening to the narrowness of his world the existence of alternatives to the paradigms of his class. It is too late for Archer, though, whose indoctrination has crippled his capacity to redefine himself. This impoverishment leads him to feel that the "things that had filled his days seemed now like a nursery parody of life, or like the wrangles of medieval schoolmen

over metaphysical terms that no one had ever understood" (AI 182). Although he feels dissatisfied, those who have moved outside the bounds of acceptable behavior and attitude disturb Archer.

While the novel contains characters who believe that "tolerating men of obscure origin and tainted wealth" such as Julius Beaufort can only end in the "total disintegration" of society (AI 338), this representation, made by the hypocritical Lawrence Lefferts, ignores the fact that Beaufort is a variation that the enlightened know their closed system needs. Granny Mingott's intuition that "new blood" (AI 30) can infuse a hermetic class with variations that will ensure its continued viability makes of Beaufort, who is heedless of straitening moral codes, a carrier of new values who shares traits with outcasts such as Ellen Olenska and Fanny Ring.

Yet Archer reacts to Beaufort with hostility. He believes himself to be in competition with Beaufort for Ellen, thinking that "to have routed Beaufort [from Ellen's house] was something of a triumph" (AI 108). The protagonist illustrates how the pall of linguistic convention settles over one's ability to discern any sensibility beyond that given by moral standards, limiting his sympathy with, and understanding of, Beaufort and Ellen's European sensibility. This is evident when Ellen, by uttering the phrase "my husband," causes Archer to wonder at her ability to say the words "as if no sinister associations were connected with them, [...] Archer looked at her perplexedly, wondering if it were lightness or dissimulation that enabled her to touch so easily on the past at the very moment when she was risking her reputation in order to break with it" (AI 105-106). Beaufort's cordiality with Ellen models the possibility of codes of conduct other than those Archer knows. But blindness to the possibility that Beaufort represents an expansion of his narrow world causes Archer to

rehearse class-based prejudices: “his business would be to make her see Beaufort as he really was, with all he represented—and abhor it” (AI 77).

For one who wishes to be free of convention, an abhorrence of the unusual indicates deep internal conflict. Not only do Archer’s internalized mores inform his distaste for Beaufort, and Archer’s ambivalence toward stepping out of his milieu with Ellen, they descend upon him from external sources too. Counter-pressure to Archer’s desire for Ellen surfaces in subtle expressions of reproach directed toward him mere moments after he becomes conscious that she stirs his interest. During their first conversation, Ellen touches Archer’s knee with her “plumed fan.” For Archer, “it was the lightest touch, but it thrilled him like a caress” (AI 65). In the next moment, however, the intimacy shared by the two characters is peremptorily terminated when Archer feels “his host’s admonitory glance on him” (AI 65). Archer is observed and his behavior noted. Evidence that he is being watched exists also in the closing of ranks amongst his own family, who, divining his feelings for Ellen, intervene to preserve the smooth social surface he frequently expresses a desire for: “He saw it in a flash that if the family had ceased to consult him it was because some deep tribal instinct warned them that he was no longer on their side” (AI 252). Archer pursues a path that as a student of kinship ties he should foresee ending in the tangled undergrowth of tribal intervention.

An equally serious impediment to his freedom is his subjugation by Form. Wolff notes that “the danger that his life will be insignificant lies not so much in the probability that he will fail to fulfill these fantasies [of an unconventional life with Ellen] as in the more immediate possibility that, having failed to fulfill them, he will lack the capacity to give *any* aspect of his life authenticity” (A Feast of Words 318). This lack of capacity, though, results

in part from the fact that even avenues for escape are predetermined, and lead back through that 'narrow passage' to the 'ball-room' in which 'Form' dominates. This is clear from the text's account of Archer's affair with Mrs. Thorley Rushworth:

He passed for a young man who had not been afraid of risks, and he knew that his secret love-affair with poor silly Mrs. Thorley Rushworth had not been too secret to invest him with a becoming air of adventure. But Mrs. Rushworth was 'that kind of woman'; foolish, vain, clandestine by nature, and far more attracted by the secrecy and peril of the affair than by such charms and qualities as he possessed. When the fact dawned on him it nearly broke his heart, but now it seemed the redeeming feature of the case. The affair, in short, had been of the kind that most of the young men of his age had been through. (AI 95-96)

The path to authenticity, and a capacity for self-definition at least partially free from determination by Form, lies in an unmediated passion represented by Ellen. In an earlier attempt to realize what he might find with her, Archer discovers, ironically, that even his pre-marital affair is understood within his social context as conventional behavior.

Archer's latent sexual desire is arrested just when it is stirred, indicating the strength of internalized manners. Dizzied by his own desire for Ellen, her "words stole through him like a temptation, and to close his sense to it he moved away from the hearth and stood gazing at the black tree-boles against the snow [...] Archer's heart was beating insubordinately" (AI 133). As Archer moves away from the figurative and literal fire toward the icy scene outside, the reader sees him crave Ellen and distance her simultaneously. But it is not solely self-regulation that halts Archer. He senses at this moment that the watchfulness of his class permeates even the architecture of "the house of the old Patroon" (AI 132), which

is empty save for the unhappy couple. As he feels observed, so he becomes again a watcher when the couple's solitude is interrupted by the appearance of Beaufort. His presence causes Archer to withdraw into his anthropological perspective. The real represented by sexuality grows dim in the presence of Beaufort's social otherness and its pressure on leisure-class mores, both of which Beaufort symbolizes. While "strolling back through the park" with the conversing Ellen and Beaufort, Archer feels "the ghostly advantage of observing unobserved" (AI 135). His surveillance is central to maintaining order within his class, and is associated in the text with a form of 'objectivity' that regularizes standardized behavior.

Despite his apparent powerlessness, the narrative makes the point that Archer, at one level, knows that social institutions need to evolve to remain viable. This is clearly the case when, seeking to correct an affront to Mrs. Mingott and Ellen (all the invitees to a dinner in the latter's honor have refused Mrs. Mingott's), Archer visits the van der Luyden clan. Of all the leading families in New York, this family is one "of the three in it who can claim an aristocratic origin in the real sense of the word" (AI 49). The van der Luydens are the touchstone of 'taste,' the gold standard from which 'form' arises. As the petitioners approach these deities, Mrs. van der Luyden can be seen to be emblematic of inscrutable powers of influence that, as far as Archer is concerned, more properly belong in a museum showcase: "She always, indeed, struck Newland Archer as having been rather gruesomely preserved in the airless atmosphere of a perfectly irreproachable existence, as bodies caught in glaciers keep for years a rosy life-in-death" (AI 52). Archer, already feeling the pinch of what one review of the novel described as "artificial and false standards, the desperate monotony of trivial routine, the slow petrification of generous ardours, the paralysis of emotion, the accumulation of ice around the heart, the total loss of life in upholstered existence" (Reviews

285), understands that his description of Mrs. Van der Luyden is equally applicable to himself. Later, while looking upon May, he wonders at “[h]ow young she is! For what endless years this life will have to go on!” (AI 266).

Facing these totemic embodiments of the past, he recognizes that his social heritage is materialized in the stony pair before him: “Archer contemplated with awe the two slender faded figures, seated side by side in a kind of viceregal rigidity, mouthpieces of some remote ancestral authority” (AI 54). The van der Luydens are venerated icons. They are statues imputed to have oracular abilities within a social religion predicated on genealogical mysticism. Their static form is notable because, as I’ve already remarked, other sculptural forms exist in the novel: the stiff figurations of the Italian primitives, whose paintings, and pre-Raphaelite followers, Archer rejects, and even May’s face, which “wore the vacant serenity of a young marble athlete” (AI 141). May’s eyes, moreover, are thought by Archer to “look out blankly at blankness,” much like an ancient Greek *kouros*.

Indeed, May has the look “of representing a type rather than a person” (AI 188). That she represents, like a *kouros*, an ideal of youth, rather than the individualism Archer strives for, finds support in the phrase that she is like other “ladies who were the product of the system” (AI 8). Archer extends his perception that May is static in aspect to her personality. She possesses, he thinks, a “Diana-like aloofness [...] not a thought seemed to have passed behind her eyes or a feeling through her heart” (AI 211). In summary, those most strongly connected to tradition—May and the van der Luydens—are associated with a sexless ‘viceregal rigidity,’ and virginal figures such as Diana and the *kouros* that are representations of people who are not the ‘real thing’ at all.

After relating the story of the wrong done to Mrs. Lovell Mingott in the mass refusal of her invitation to meet Ellen, Archer notes “a silence during which the tick of the monumental ormolu clock on the white marble mantle-piece grew as loud as the boom of a minute gun” (AI 54). In the presence of New York’s oracle, Archer interprets the moment of the van der Luydens’ consideration of the matter before them in a way he ties to a particular temporal mood. Tradition, ritual, and the passage of time, the latter perceived to occur with military precision, encompass and define an ordered, inelastic chronometry. One recalls, at this juncture, how in a passage already quoted, “the perpetually reminding tick of the disciplined clocks [...] made any less systematized and affluent existence seem unreal and precarious” (AI 218). In contrast to these scenes, Archer, while in Ellen’s apartment and therefore outside the boundaries of his milieu, finds himself, as he notes that the clock has stopped, in “a room unlike any room he had known” (AI 69). The pairing of the smooth passage of time with the flow of an undisturbed social surface so evident in Archer’s perception of the scene at the van der Luyden residence, and at the announcement of Archer’s engagement to May, is disrupted by his passion for Ellen, and his sympathy toward her nonconforming perspective.

Archer’s sense of fleeing a life ordered by ‘reminding’ ticks is especially present on his trip to Boston to see Ellen. There he senses a weakening of his connection to the training that underwrites his identity. Having lied to May about his reasons for the trip, he finds himself outside a defining frame of reference. He nods in greeting to the men at his club in Boston, but having strayed out of context through his intent to enter into an unsanctioned social relationship, he has compromised himself as a signifier of ritual act and utterance. What results is social vertigo: “the usual greetings were exchanged: it was the same world

after all, though he had such a queer sense of having slipped through the meshes of space and time" (AI 229). Physically absent from the New York environment, intent upon putting distance between himself and the 'booming' minute-gun of an ordered existence, Archer feels dissociated from his native frame of reference. Through the text's representation of the van der Luydens and May, the reader comes to feel how the material richness of architectural surfaces, and a particular construal of temporality as mechanically measured and closely tied to ritualistic pattern, structures and constrains Archer's motive energies.

Archer finds in Ellen a woman who is not a two-dimensional representation of New York's aversion to social evolution. Her European upbringing has allowed her to avoid indoctrination. The feelings that exist between her and the disillusioned Archer are complicated by the fact that each sees the other's world as an escape from that which they know. Archer's nascent belief that it is possible to evade the reach of society is at odds with Ellen's opinion that the growth of the individual within the context of the social is the only viable means of attaining selfhood. In this way Ellen's attitudes resemble those implicit in the framing narrative's perspective, for Ellen asks, "Does no one want to know the truth here Mr. Archer? The real loneliness is living among all these kind people who only ask one to pretend" (AI 77). As an internal perspective in the narrative by which Archer's views are countered, Ellen's viewpoint epitomizes the argument put implicitly by the frame of the story in terms defined by one critic as the view that "reality included not only material forces and human instincts but the irreducible reality of social forms. In Durkheim's words, 'man is human only because he is socialized'" (qtd. in Bentley 51).

That Wharton considered the ways in which 'material forces and human instincts' affected each other is tangible in her statement that "real men, unequal, unmanageable, and

unlike each other, [...] are all bound up with the effects of climate, soil, laws, religion, wealth—and above all, leisure” (UCW 155-156). Social and physical environments are inseparable in this view, and the social selection environment in The Age of Innocence, an allegory of Darwinian nature, makes just this point. Ellen recognizes what Archer does not: that the ‘country’ to which he hopes to flee, a place where they might, in his words, “be simply two human beings who love each other, who are the whole of life to each other” (AI 290), would, if they found it, strip them of their identities.

V. “Say I’m old fashioned” (AI 361)

In The Age of Innocence Edith Wharton depicts the physical characteristics of the post-civil war era of her youth with the same detail she devotes to any of her flesh and blood characters. Of a planned stage version of the novel she wrote that she was “very anxious about the staging and dressing. I could do every stick of furniture & every rag of clothing myself for every detail of that far-off scene was indelibly stamped on my infant brain” (Letters 439). This focus on accurately representing the material culture of the period is part of the novel’s bestowal of an ideological aura upon furniture and fashion, architecture, art, and even the books Archer reads. The impressionistic psyches of subjects trained to locate their proper coordinates in the field of social meaning triangulate their position in relation to ‘the luxury of the Welland house and the density of the Welland atmosphere.’ The luxury and atmosphere in which Archer lives, though, is one in which “superiorities and advantages” are “the surest hindrance to success” (AI 201), and conformity is valued.

The Age of Innocence reproduces, as has been shown, elements of a past less tangible than Parisian dresses or Fifth Avenue brownstones, but equally indicative of the flavor of the

age. The author builds her observations into a vivid portrait of how class values resolve—if unhappily—Archer’s experience of his own life. For example, “[h]e perceived with a flash of chilling insight that” the need “to fit” different people and ideas into the New York milieu, combined with the requirement to follow the dictates of Form, must result in the fact that “many problems would be [...] negatively solved for him” (AI 204). This kind of characterization, which concentrates on displaying how class-based values insulate Archer from the new, seems scientific in its apparently transparent portrait of fallacies inherent in his objectivity. The value of a detailed rendering of both individual consciousness and the ‘macro-social world’ achievable in fiction, Wharton shows in such instances, lies in its ability to depict their interrelation.

Fictionally analyzing the interpellation of ideology in social beings by employing a sociobiological framework can also be read as a response to the early-twentieth-century sociologist Wesley Mitchell’s statement that “[i]t is not lack of will that impedes progress, but lack of knowledge. We putter with philanthropy and coquette with reform. [. . .] What we need as a guide for all this expenditure of energy [in the study of society] is sure knowledge of the causal interconnections between social phenomena” (qtd. in Ross 305). In her exploration of causal connections between social form and class-specific systems of thought in the novel, Wharton outlines manmade impediments to social evolution. Moreover, she shows how the network of leisure-class thought and standards becomes undermined by the “bare and cool” (AI 239) reality of a desire for the new, and for the expression of instinctive sexuality. The narrative associates such a reality with the place and time apart where Archer and Ellen meet in a “room [...] with the sea coming in at the windows. [...] with a table covered by a coarse checkered cloth” (AI 239). Here a fresh ‘atmosphere’ pointedly lacking

in luxury contributes to Ellen's ability to "brush away the conventions and make him feel that to seek to be alone was the natural thing" (AI 239).

Deprived of a life wherein his inmost desires can be expressed, Archer finds that "[t]he taste of the usual was like cinders in his mouth" (AI 139). While what he discovers makes, for a time, a desert of his heart, the author ties his unhappiness to the greater matrix of class and politics in which he is a mere indication that ideology operates. In doing so, Wharton echoes Lukács' pronouncement on an essential choice facing a man in Archer's position:

the veil drawn over the nature of bourgeois society is indispensable to the bourgeois itself. For the insoluble internal contradictions of the system become revealed with increasing starkness and so confront its supporters with a choice. Either they must consciously ignore insights which become increasingly urgent or else they must suppress their own moral instincts in order to be able to support with a good conscience an economic system that serves only their own interests. (66)

The version of 'moral instincts' that Wharton portrays Archer's class to be practicing denies implacable natural law by throttling social evolution and denying individual instinct.

Archer's indecisiveness, and his ultimate failure to achieve the escape velocity required to overcome the gravity of his class affiliation, demonstrates that the novel's view of his ability to act independently to transcend the "endless distance" (AI 230) he perceives between Ellen and himself is perhaps less optimistic than Lukács' attribution of agency to members of 'bourgeois society.'

The novel of character, according to the author, provides a framework in which the literary artist "develops his tale through a succession of episodes, all in some way illustrative

of the manners [...] out of which the situation is eventually to spring” (WF 137). In The Age of Innocence the ‘situation’ of Archer’s entanglement with Ellen is the mainspring of the narrative. As such, Wharton, at the end of the novel, makes no explicit indication of whether Archer’s desire to stay below and avoid the reality of the aged Ellen is a tragic moment, for this emotion, felt by an individual, is subsumed under the attention given to the reasons for the impasse. The concentration on what stands between them depicts Archer’s particularly American attitude toward history, one which sees in sunset hues “[t]hat vision, faint and tenuous” (AI 347) of a past more real. The novel’s nuanced portrait of Archer’s youthful encounter with Ellen makes of it the single transcendent experience of his life, but one from which he must return.

Like The House of Mirth, a novel focused on the effects of a hostile social environment on Lily Bart, the true antagonist of The Age of Innocence is the iron band of class-based rules, rituals, and linguistic practices which are regulative in their coercive ability to finally ‘elevate’ the disenchanted Archer to his socially sanctioned roles of husband, father, and politician. This compensation has its own price. By the novel’s conclusion, Archer is “the kind of man the public wants” (AI 345), but such a man, what “people were beginning to call ‘a good citizen’ (AI 346), represents not cowardice, but the narrow spectrum of choices available to him. Yet nostalgia for a lost romance causes Archer to recall Ellen, by the novel’s end, as “the composite vision of all that he had missed” (AI 347). His avoidance of her in the final pages is thus an indication that he never learns to conceptualize a path by which he might pass through the tangled hedgerow of tradition and the impassable undergrowth of language that restricts experience.

While Archer and his son Dallas stand in the square looking up at the “modern building, without distinctive character, but many windowed” (AI 360) in which Ellen lives, the text illustrates again Ellen’s ability to see life from multiple perspectives. Archer tells Dallas to go up without him. The son, searching for an excuse to give Ellen for his father’s absence, rejoins that he’ll “say you’re old-fashioned, and prefer walking up five flights because you don’t like lifts” (AI 361). Archer, though, wishes Ellen to understand; he instructs Dallas to “[s]ay I’m old fashioned: that’s enough” (AI 361). To be ‘old fashioned’ in the sense he means is to be unable to transcend the “fear lest that last shadow of reality [his memory of Ellen] should lose its edge; this kept him rooted to his seat” (AI 362). His fear at having this image of Ellen replaced makes him reluctant to surrender the vision of a reality into which he could not travel. This figures the social world *he* has occupied as unreal, while confirming the hold of the binary of taste and form over his character, adding a note of resigned awareness to Archer’s closing statement that “[i]t’s more real here than if I went up” (AI 362).

Chapter Five

Conclusion: Manners, Memes, and the Paradox of Progress in Wharton's Major Novels

In a recent book on the critical reception of Edith Wharton, Helen Killoran writes that scholars “have yet to recognize the full dimensions of Edith Wharton’s greatness because they have not yet recognized the knowledge, aesthetics, and magnificent technical innovations at the root of her creative philosophy” (xi). In the preceding chapters, I have related Wharton’s scientific knowledge to the aesthetics and politics of her major novels, supporting Killoran’s claim. I have accomplished this by extending the implications for Wharton’s portraits of ideological competition of Claire Preston’s argument that “Wharton’s sociobiological frame of reference predicts modern social analysis, which has made [...] [the] useful analogy between evolution/selection theory and social development, treating the macro-social structure as ‘a selection environment’” (54-55). Preston’s argument served as a starting point for my investigation of fictional instances in which Wharton’s application of the physical sciences to ‘social development’ intervenes in the social-Darwinism which makes of Lily Bart, among other characters, a “non-viable mutation” (Preston 51).

My argument that instinct and contingency are subject to social control in the texts builds on the work of others as well. Nancy Bentley’s scholarship, which illustrates that for Wharton “manners become the keys to the secrets of social control and cohesion” (Ethnography of Manners 70), has been especially helpful. That the locks turned by these ‘keys’ bar the fulfillment of desire, and substitute a socially constructed ‘instinct’ for biological impulse, suggests that manners ultimately signify biological realities in this group of novels. Wharton represents the diminishing of biological instinct by manners, and in so doing delineates her position in “the literary controversy over [...] sexual reality” (Bender

317). The novels enter into this controversy by examining the linguistic nullification of sexuality in conversations between Archer and May Welland in The Age of Innocence, and by associating choice and equality with the expression of female sexuality in The House of Mirth.

The coercive force of manners in distancing sexual realities in the novels prompted me to question the source of such power. I came to realize that ideology is a central subject of these texts, and that the lack of awareness of ideological power displayed by particular characters is an aspect of its depicted, and depleted, operation. Yet the larger claim of this study finds ideology to be linked by Wharton to Darwin's theory of natural selection, which is to be seen as a mechanism affecting *social* change. Blake Nevius's criticism directed me to explore issues surrounding Wharton's depictions of heredity, which express the inextricability of biological and social inheritance. In this sense, Wharton's method assaults the artificiality of manners that represent social heredity solely in terms of tradition, ritual, or as in Archer's world, "the [fashionable] thing" (AI 4) which The Age of Innocence reveals to be a codifying cloak that conceals biological essences; Ellen Olenska's unconventional garments, which express her sexuality, make this clear.

While not focused on Wharton's fiction, Gillian Beer's Darwin's Plots helped me to discern the way Wharton views nature as being brutally competitive, and as offering a model for an ecological interrelation of individuals that might be conducive to social equality. When applied to Wharton's fiction, Darwin's Plots helps one to understand the implied argument in the novels that the social cannot alone explain dialectical cultural change. Paradoxically, though, the novels contend that repressive social codes channel libidinal energies, directing them into the creation of what Wharton refers to approvingly as "that impalpable dust of

ideas which is the real culture" (UCW 156), even as the redirection of these energies is portrayed neutrally, or negatively in its effect on desexualized male aesthetes such as Archer. Wharton is thus quite Freudian, despite her hostility to Freud's work, in her implicit theorization of how the sublimation of drives produces culture. Much work remains to be done on this subject.

Beer has also influenced this study's consideration of the exchange of ideas between science and social criticism that occurs in the novels I have examined. She writes that Darwin struggled "to find a language to think in. He was working in a milieu where natural theology had set the tone for natural historians" (*Darwin's Plots* xviii). In her narratives, Wharton entered into a conversation with a national literature shaped by sentimental bestsellers, and overlapping realist and naturalist strains of fiction that included the varied representations of determinism found in the fiction of Dreiser, Crane, Norris, and others. She "would have seen that the new psychology" she was exposed to when Winthrop introduced her to Westermarck's *The History of Human Marriage* "was reiterating what her American predecessors in the fiction of courtship and marriage had known since the 1870's, that 'many of the psychic facts in human courtship point directly to that of animals'" (Bender 317). In finding her own 'language to think in,' she located a scientific ground from which to extend existing fictional considerations of the 'animal' aspects of human culture.

The forms in which this knowledge manifested itself in her fiction show Wharton's facility with the literary traditions she inherited. And Beer's research into Darwin's intellectual milieu, and the latter's efforts to exceed the ways available for him to make his arguments, offered me a frame for reading Wharton's encounter with an American literary scene her novels confronted with an unsentimental, biological view of 'love.' This view of

love is evidenced by attractions between Lily and Selden, Peter Van Degen and Undine, and Archer and Ellen that are *not* socially useful. From this perspective, the individual's search for sexual fulfillment is one that must contend with erasure by the social of 'animal' vestiges that the The House of Mirth and The Age of Innocence view as salutary. Yet, this aspect of an animal aspect to human courtship is nested inside Wharton's tactical use of the sentimental tradition, which clothes her fiction in forms recognizable in the marketplace, and gathers her audience to the scene of her startling messages about the impossibility of escaping chance, and the dubiousness of contemporary ideas of social progress, even if these messages are obscured by a market-oriented narrative strategy. In one respect, then, Wharton seems to have crafted her major novels in a fashion similar to the way Professor Linyard, her scientist turned popular metaphysician in "The Descent of Man," creates his satirical texts. She, too, crafts layered meanings out of multiple literary traditions, and like Linyard believes that the "elect would understand; the crowd would not" (DM 317), even as she provides 'the crowd' with a satisfying tale.

Exploiting a descriptive tone found in scientific contexts, Wharton draws her characters as if she were sketching them in a naturalist's notebook. Of Undine Spragg's father she writes: "it was the hereditary habit of the parent animal to despoil himself for his progeny" (CC 483). This characteristic re-visioning of individuals as biological entities reinforces a thematic concern with breaking down conceptual divisions between nature and culture. It is this same narrative tendency that results in her analogy between evolutionary and social change. Gillian Beer relates how Samuel Butler recognized that one "problem implied" by Darwin is how "in human affairs, biological evolution takes place across another evolutionary form, that of cultural memory" (Darwin's Plots xx). Wharton seems to have

found in evolutionary science 'a language to think in' that would aid her in representing how 'cultural memory' might parallel 'biological evolution' in its mutability. By depicting her characters as organic entities, Wharton suggests that cultural memory, created by human agents, contains an evolutionary element.

In making these arguments, I have been conscious of the tenuousness of Wharton's Darwinian allegory, for she invokes Darwinism at a moment in its history when it was being reassessed in the light of Mendelism.¹ The resultant fictional texts, indebted in part to ideas that were the subject of intense debate among evolutionists by 1900, bear witness to the interest in science that existed during the period addressed in this study. Wharton creates quasi-scientific characters who are insufficiently aware of how contingent nature compels the codes by which they live, and how their enmeshment in class ideology, and, in Archer's case, scientific amateurism, has prevented them from seeing how evolution applies to human culture. Lawrence Selden's air of detachment in The House of Mirth, Charles Bowen's socially critical observations in The Custom of the Country, and Archer's dilettantish anthropological mode of social observation are, finally, insufficient to the task of preventing the leisure class from becoming 'frivolous' and irrelevant.

Their 'objectivity' lacks the dimension of each narrative's omniscient register, which shows biology to be inseparable from culture. But while the texts devalue the compromised objectivity of their characters, there is an ambiguity in Wharton's analogizing of ideology and the biological medium by which traits are inherited that may be the result of the provisional status of knowledge on the subject in her scientific sources. The analogy functions to illustrate the fact that individuals, in a qualified sense, 'inherit' the systems of thought that govern their class. Yet the analogy fails in that through her adoption of

terminology from an evolutionary context, Wharton represents a connection between biological law and social change not provable in the fictional context.

One way to extend this criticism would be to investigate the extent to which Wharton's representation of ideology intersects with the concept of memes, which are claimed to be "units of cultural transmission analogous to the genes of biological evolution. [...] Like genes, memes are supposed to be replicators, in a different medium, but subject to much the same principles of evolution as genes" (Dennett 143).² Systems of thought from which particular classes derive their values are never entirely stable in this group of novels. There is no 'pure' ideology, except in the Platonic sense revealed in Archer's notion that "'Taste,' [is] that far-off divinity of whom 'Form' was the mere visible representative and viceregent" (AI 14). Ideological and biological miscegenation is unavoidable, as The Custom of the Country and The Age of Innocence maintain through their portraits of intermarriage between members of different classes.³ The preceding chapters should make it possible to discover, through the application of work on memes, the texts' implicit positions on how the ideological 'units of cultural transmission' they portray are affected by 'the principles of evolution.'

Because it is concerned with the interaction of random variation and environment, natural selection functions well as an allegory of 'progress' from which intentionality is absent, emphasizing the unpredictability of social transformation. One cannot evade, moreover, the suggestion that natural selection is more than a figurative presence in the novels because of the implication that it does in fact interact with the "system of ideas" (Williams 157) of different sub-species of the elite in Wharton's fiction. As an allegorical referent, natural selection, which is textually evoked by evolutionary language, and

characters that fail or thrive in transformed environments, foregrounds the contingency concealed by leisure-class thought. My argument that these texts feature a view of ideology wherein a leisure-class 'system of ideas' is subject to variation, and intermixing with the system of the socioeconomic elite, shows that natural selection is an important part of an aesthetic which mixes the social and the biological to confront the distinction between the two.

The sociobiological element in Wharton's major fiction between 1905 and 1920 suggests that while the increasing complexity of a culture can represent growth away from its biological foundation, such complexity does not indicate that culture's severance from the biology of the individuals who enact it, or signify progress of the kind that might lead to social equality. Wharton depicts a culture that does not exercise its capacity to moderate a 'survival of the fittest' ethos, or respond to those natural laws which social Darwinism links with moral fitness. Yet, even if the class represented by Selden, Marvell, and Archer was successful in this task, they would then moderate, too, the openness of culture to potentially positive changes, such as those that might be supplied by Lily Bart's revulsion at the prospect of marrying a man who is not her intellectual equal, or Ellen Olenska's European attitudes, which The Age of Innocence values positively; illuminating this paradox is an important result of my research into Wharton's Darwinian allegory.

Whereas Archer might presume that his "coarse sense" that he is being "shown off like a wild animal cunningly trapped" is merely the result of "his readings in anthropology" (AI 67), the narrative emphasizes that his interpretation is faulty, and that he *is* in some unassailable sense a 'wild animal' living in mediated disbelief of this fact. Wharton shows how Archer's belief that nature and culture are distinct leads him away from sexual

expression, and toward the fulfillment of social 'instinct' realized in discharging his duties as lawyer, husband, and later, politician. From the omniscient narrative's perspective, though, this social instinct is false insofar as it neutralizes Archer's inclination to find fulfillment, sexual and otherwise, with Ellen. The presence of a socially authored 'instinct' of manners, along with the ideologically sponsored aestheticized desire that sublimates the biological instinct of many male characters, details the mechanism by which they are desexualized.

In her attempts to depict the viewpoint evident in Archer's inability to reckon with the new elite's demotion of moral fitness to just another survival mechanism (one does what one must to survive), Wharton co-opts for her sociobiology a form of moral agency inflected, or infected, with humanism. The humanism contained within these texts defines the sphere of human thought, and human variety that must be protected from the vagaries of natural competition. If Archer's world of 'taste' and 'form' has abandoned, for the relativism of fashion, a set of values inimical to creating "that impalpable dust of ideas which is the real culture" (UCW 156), then it has also turned away from the challenge of countering the pressure on individual rights presented by biological imperatives. Furthermore, moral agency, these texts maintain, may have a biological basis that social Darwinism discounts. Such concerns resonate with contemporary research in sociobiology. The evolutionary biologist Steven Pinker states in a recent interview that "[a]gency, personal responsibility and so on can all be tied to brain function [...]. It's a fallacy to think that hunger and thirst and sex drive are biological but that reasoning and decision making and learning are something else, something non-biological" (Rakoff 27). Thus, when 'Taste,' or genealogical connections, become totemic for Archer, his contact with the reality of chance and biology is broken.

Marvell and Archer are insensible to the possibility that a morally charged Darwinian definition of interdependence among species (translated into terms of individual and class relations in Wharton's fiction) might be useful in moderating the competition that cannot entirely be eliminated from the social sphere. Darwin, recall, writes "that an advancement in the standard of morality [. . .] will certainly give an immense advantage to one tribe over another" (Descent of Man 185), linking what had heretofore been seen as distinctly human behavior to the biology of evolution, and perhaps supplying Wharton with one basis for seeing in evolutionary thought a viable middle way between social Darwinist materialism and the insupportable idea that "human behavior is determined [entirely] by culture, an autonomous system of symbols and values" (Pinker qtd. in Dennett 490). In The Fruit of the Tree, where Wharton posits ethics as "the universal consensus—the result of the world's accumulated experience" (418), one senses that ethics is to be seen also as a product of evolutionary processes that ties, in Pinker's words, '[a]gency, personal responsibility and so on' 'to brain function.'

The fictions I have examined oppose the idea that it is not possible to curb the harm to individual equality caused by unregulated 'cultural' selection, and so in this limited sense believe a kind of progress is possible. Ironically, though, they do not offer a clear sense of how to balance nature's positive effect on culture—how sexual freedom might lead to a mutually enriching hybridization of genes *and* cultural practices in the case of Ellen and Archer—with nature's disruptive potential. Individual moral agency holds out the possibility of resisting, even altering a pervasive 'survival of the fittest' ethic defined as "the Spencerian notion of an accord between moral fitness and the ability to survive" (Darwin's Plots 64); this idea holds that what is morally viable is determined by the social environment. Outside a

problematic social Darwinist culture, there exists another interpretation of nature in Wharton's texts, but it is one that must now be acknowledged as an interpretation with its own distinct political thrust. In this interpretation exists a 'web of affinities' wherein mutual dependence that crosses boundaries between species provides a model for relations between individuals, and between classes. This model, though, must nonetheless be viewed as a way of seeing biological truths that reveals how Wharton's sociobiology counters perceived injustices by suppressing antinomies between contingent natural change and goal directed cultural transformation.

The narratives maintain that an acknowledgement of the negative consequences that arise from acquiescence to natural law can bring into focus what in evolutionary theory most contributes to equality. In short, the texts find in Darwinian ecology a model for obviating the kind of individual aggression displayed by Undine Spragg, and the cultural expansionism depicted in Wharton's statement that "[t]he modern European colonist apparently imagined that to plant his warehouses, *cafes* and cinema-palaces within the walls which for so long had fiercely excluded him was the most impressive way of proclaiming his domination" (IM 22). Intervention is called for in preventing the wastage that is visited on humankind in a wholly natural state, and which persists in a 'civilized' world that extirpates Lily Bart and Ralph Marvell, causes the social death of Ellen Olenska, and colonizes other cultures.

Wharton's formal refinement of the narrative means by which to object to the assertion that the 'survival of the fittest' is a law that not only does obtain in human culture, but should, is evident in the fact that her Darwinian allegories of ideological competition and selection are clearer in The Custom of the Country and The Age of Innocence than they are in The House of Mirth. The conflict between old and new class worlds seems decided in

Ralph Marvell's tale, and is stated in terms of the superior adaptation to a rapidly changing social environment of the socioeconomic elite. This is evident when Marvell refers to "his mother and grandfather [as] the Aborigines, and liken[s] them to those vanishing denizens of the American continent doomed to rapid extinction with the advance of the invading race" (CC 77-78). In The Age of Innocence, the leisure class still holds the advantage, but Beaufort and his type, whose daughter marries Archer's son, are already asserting their dominance. Furthermore, the latter two novels move beyond The House of Mirth's isolated reference to a "cinematograph syndicate" (HM 87) to present mass culture as a factor in ideological competition. When one finds that "the daily press had already learned to describe" the opera goers in The Age of Innocence as "an exceptionally brilliant audience" (AI 3), it is clear that the text is interested in showing how the press, by acting in accord with the logic of the marketplace, responds to its customers, rather than enact the social role implied in its being constitutionally protected.⁴

However, when The Custom of the Country's Undine Spragg exercises her sexual selection, she seems to predict a problematically regressive social and genetic 'renewal' through a union with Moffatt that is inconsistent with the positive valuation of sexual selection present in The House of Mirth and The Age of Innocence; this inconsistency needs to be investigated. Wharton's scientism, and its associated objectivity, is deeply compromised by her interpretive social commentary on marriage and female sexual choice, which often conflicts with her articulation of the need to moderate for purposes of equality the mechanisms of 'cosmic nature' within the social collective.

The contention "that it is not right to separate the Darwinian debate from broader cultural, ideological, political, and economic issues" (Young 19) is one that Wharton's

novels in the period 1905-1920 foresee. Future investigators seeking to establish parallels between Wharton's fiction and Young's claim will find that Wharton had to contend with just such a separation in the culture that consumed her work. One fictional context in which this ought to be examined is The Fruit of the Tree. This novel presents the reader with a portrait of labor-management relations in an early twentieth-century industrial context. John Amherst, the manager of the Westmore textile mill, in discussing the mill's female owner, states that, "Bessy's interests in Westmore should be regulated by her interests in it—in its welfare as a social body, aside from its success as a commercial enterprise" (FT 189). Here, the factory is a microcosm of the 'social body' seen in The Custom of the Country, which depicts a commercial ethic that reconstitutes interpersonal relations as economic relations. The Fruit of the Tree addresses the idea that "each particular wrong could be traced back to a radical vice in the system" (FT 112), and is in this way similar to The Custom of the Country's critique of marriage as a business enterprise that corrodes familial ties, and socially useful traditions.

Wharton wrote that "Milton's allusion to Galileo's 'optic glass' shows how early the poetic mind was ready to seize on any illustration furnished by the investigations of science" (UCW 72). This study of evolutionary allegory in Wharton's major novels shows that these texts are equally well furnished by the investigations of Darwin, and other evolutionists. In building on the work of critics who have explored Wharton's engagement with science, I have demonstrated some of the ways natural selection, among other natural laws, is figured by Wharton to play a role in social evolution. By bringing nature and culture into proximity, she is able to depict how individuals "unequal, unmanageable, and unlike each other, [...] are all bound up with the effects of climate, soil, laws, religion, wealth—and above all, leisure"

(UCW 155-156); indeed, it is leisure that testifies to the opportunity open to privileged social groups to forestall the 'cosmic process.' In fictionally fusing the physical world to the ideas by which classes, and societies, define themselves, Wharton erodes the separation of biological instinct, change, and social institutions. This fictional strategy challenges the absence of alternatives to rituals of exclusion, the codification of desire, and the propagation of an unrealizable, static, ideology, found in a world which, ironically, refutes nature in the name of order, and prevents equality for 'unequal' individuals like Lily Bart.

Notes to Chapter One

¹ “This preservation of favorable variations and the rejection of injurious variations I call Natural Selection”

(Darwin, Origin 131). In The Descent of Man, Darwin summarized sexual selection as follows:

Sexual selection depends on the success of certain individuals over others of the same sex in relation to the propagation of the species [...]. The sexual struggle is of two kinds; in the one it is between the individuals of the same sex, generally the male sex, in order to drive away or kill their rivals, the females remaining passive; whilst in the other, the struggle is likewise between individuals of the same sex, in order to excite or charm those of the opposite sex, generally the females, which no longer remain passive, but select the most agreeable partners. (qtd. in Bender 11)

² Wharton represents two kinds of instinct in each of the novels I examine that are related. One is social ‘instinct,’ which appears to motivate characters that act out behavior scripted by manners, but which the texts refer to nevertheless as ‘instinctive.’ Lily Bart’s halfhearted attempts to secure a husband of means, and Newland Archer’s happiness in conforming to tradition by marrying May Welland, are two examples of behavior driven by this first type. The second type of instinct the novels depict is biological. However, making a distinction between these two varieties of instinct is problematic because of Wharton’s apparent interest in showing the deleterious effect on Lily Bart, Ralph Marvell, and Newland Archer of distinguishing one form of ‘instinct’ from the other. This sundering of instinct’s fullness is a sign of a leisure-class division of nature and culture, which, for example, short-circuits sexual selection in favor of socially approved matches. The texts seem intent on showing that social ‘instinct’ and its biological analogue are inseparable, despite the culture’s attempts to divide them. In one instance this aim is accomplished when Archer, seeming to acknowledge that there are two distinct kinds of instinct (which are linked in ways beyond his understanding), observes that May Welland “was making the answers that instinct and tradition taught her to make” (AI 82). Wharton’s portraits of leisure-class attempts to control the concept of instinct thus seem to be directed toward establishing a broader understanding of it similar to Freud’s, who wrote, “[t]he concept of instinct is thus one lying on the frontier between the mental and the physical” (Three Essays 83).

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³ For example, Janet Beer writes that a “structural principle, used repeatedly in Wharton’s later fiction, is also established in the novella [1900-1907] where she draws powerful contrasts and imagery from language usually found in other contexts, for example in the law, commerce, science, anthropology” (99). Beer refers to the novellas The Touchstone (1900), Sanctuary (1903), and Madames de Treymes (1906). Short stories that draw imagery from scientific contexts exist as well. Notable among these is “The Descent of Man” (1904), which I discuss in chapter two.

⁴ Wharton owned a copy of The Origin of Species and The Descent of Man (Ramsden 32).

⁵ It may appear contradictory to claim that Wharton was antagonistic to Spencer’s biological view of human culture, for she represents how wrong Archer is in thinking that the social and the biological are separate. However, it seems clear that for Wharton the problem was not Spencer’s assumption that nature was operant in culture, but rather that his materialism seemed to demote the potential of human moral agency to mitigate the inequality inherent in natural competition. Nevertheless, one also finds that Wharton was indebted to Spencer for his articulation of mind as

an adaptive function [that] was also a crucial influence on the development of the pragmatic philosophy and functional psychology of William James and John Dewey. James said that ‘few recent formulas have done more real service of a rough sort in psychology than the Spencerian one that the essence of mental life and of bodily life are one, namely, ‘the adjustment of inner to outer relations.’ (Young, “Herbert Spencer’s Concept of Evolution” 276)

Insofar as Wharton deals with the psychology of her characters by examining the effects upon them of class ideologies, she seems to model in her fictional method something like William James’s statement that Spencer is valuable because he showed that “since mind and its environment have evolved together, they must be studied together” (Young, “Herbert Spencer’s Concept of Evolution” 276).

⁶ In reference to The House of Mirth Lewis relates that “[t]en days after publication Brownell notified Edith Wharton gravely that ‘so far we have not sold many over 30,000’ [...]. Edith observed in her diary that 20,000 more copies were being printed by October 30, and 20,000 more on November 11” (151).

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⁷ Wharton expresses her admiration for the novel in A Backward Glance 146.

⁸ My understanding of American exceptionalism (the sense that America had a special destiny) is indebted to Ross 22-50, and to Sacvan Bercovitch.

⁹ Thomas Kuhn's articulation of what was most radical about The Origin of Species can help clarify what were difficult and important aspects of evolutionary theory for Wharton to present, particularly as she applied these to human culture: "Though evolution, as such, did encounter resistance [...] it was by no means the greatest of the difficulties Darwinians faced. [...] All the well-know pre-Darwinian evolutionary theories—those of Lamarck, Chambers, Spencer, and the German *Naturphilosophen*—had taken evolution to be a goal-directed process. The 'idea' of man [...] was thought to have been present from the first creation of life. [...] Each new stage of evolutionary development was a more perfect realization of a plan that had been present from the start. [...] The *Origin of Species* recognized no set goal either by God or nature. [...] What could 'evolution,' 'development,' and 'progress' mean in the absence of a specified goal?" (171-172). The 'idea of man' present in these 'pre-Darwinian evolutionary theories' views the human moral dimension as subject to a process of perfectibility supposedly spelled out in natural law; Wharton would also depict the idea of this 'realization of a plan,' but only in terms of the damage to individuals like Lily Bart that resulted from the misconception about progress at its base, which contributes directly to Lily's fate. A nineteenth-century teleological view of the evolutionary process, one which Wharton was conversant with, thus presented her with a working example of assumptions about man as a perfectible moral being *her* biological reading of culture had to dislodge.

¹⁰ Amy Kaplan alerted me to Wharton's review of Leslie Stephen's biography of George Eliot, in which Wharton, as Kaplan writes, "attributes Eliot's waning reputation to the hostile reception of her scientific metaphors and vocabulary" (The Social Construction of American Realism 75). In addition to illustrating Wharton's sense of the danger to literary reputation of a feminine appropriation of masculine scientific language, Kaplan reports that "[s]cience conferred the authority to represent social reality in the late nineteenth century; such knowledge distinguished the expertise of the specialist from the common sense of the lay person"

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(The Social Construction of American Realism 75). While this is clearly one reason for Wharton's appeal to science, Kaplan's claims leave unexamined the ways in which Wharton's 'scientific metaphors' affect her representation of human subjects and the collectives they create.

¹¹ In an essay on Nietzsche's importance to Wharton's short story "The Blond Beast," Macnaughton writes that the philosopher's "influence is also present in The Custom of the Country, not only in the way Wharton uses the idea of the will to power to explain character relationships, but also in her conception of individual characters" (17) such as Elmer Moffatt. Macnaughton characterizes the 'will to power' as "the active drive to expand and dominate, rather than merely to survive by adapting, or to obtain pleasure – [this] is the principle that governs all organisms in the universe" (14). In The Age of Innocence this 'naked instinct' also exists, but is the subject of punitive "admonitory" glances (AI 65) radiated by the stifling traditions Wharton portrays.

¹² Bauer, 164; Bentley "Hunting for the Real" 47-67, The Ethnography of Manners 160-211; Hoeller 144-145; Pizer "The House of Mirth" 242; Preston 49-91.

¹³ My suggestion that Wharton depicts the way primal energies are patterned by social conventions brings this discussion into the proximity of Freud's statement in Civilization and its Discontents that "civilization is a process in the service of Eros. [...] man's natural aggressive instinct, the hostility of each against all and of all against each, opposes this programme of civilization" (81-82). A reactionary attitude to Freud's work has been attributed to Wharton as a result of her comment in a 1922 letter to Bernard Berenson in which she directs Berenson's wife Mary "not to befuddle" a mutual friend "[...] with Freudianism & all its jargon. She'd take to it like a duck to-sewerage. And what she wants is to develop the *conscious*, and not grub after the subconscious" (Letters 451). This hostility to Freud's theories of human psychology, however, should not prevent the exploration of the fact that Wharton's sustained interest in representing how civilization patterns instinct aligns her fiction of the period with Freud's late work on culture.

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¹⁴ On the subject of variation, Darwin writes the following: “No one supposes that all the individuals of the same species are cast in the very same mould. These individual differences are highly important to us, as they afford materials for natural selection to accumulate, in the same manner as man can accumulate in any given direction individual differences in his domestic productions” (The Origin of Species 110).

¹⁵ The term refers to those who carried on Darwin’s project with the knowledge of Mendel’s work in genetics.

¹⁶ These words occur to Archer as he admires Ellen Olenska, who is resplendently sexual as she stands before him “in her long sealskin coat, her hands thrust in a small round muff” (AI 310). Seeming not to register the sexual display that the narrative symbolizes through Ellen’s attire, Archer instead curses ‘change’ for the purely aesthetic reason that it will alter the “pure harmony of line and color” (AI 310) presented to him by Ellen’s appearance. This is another example of the way instinct is shown in the narrative to be patterned into terms of artistic connoisseurship associated with Archer’s class.

¹⁷ Pizer’s work on American literary realism and naturalism has shaped my understanding of Wharton’s reaction to these movements.

¹⁸ My argument about the influence of Huxley’s “Evolution and Ethics” (1893) on Wharton’s recurring theme of an elite society that saw itself in terms of a walled garden or hothouse (the latter of which Preston insightfully discusses without reference to Huxley’s text) is based on shared analogies, and thematic concerns which I perceive to exist between the essay and the novels under examination here.

¹⁹ The viability of such an approach to Wharton’s engagement with Darwin’s work is modeled in Gillian Beer’s Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction (2nd ed. 2000). While the book does not mention Wharton, the applicability of Beer’s arguments to the narratives I investigate is clear. In Beer’s Open Fields (1995), which mentions The House of Mirth’s “condensation of sang-froid and violence, private and public [...] where the highly polished surface of Lily Bart’s milieu is crazed with dirt”

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(281), Beer recounts “[a]n engrossing question” explored in Darwin’s Plots that asks “what happens when unforeseen readers appropriate terms and texts” (1). My indebtedness to Darwin’s Plots and to Beer’s work on literature and science elsewhere is evident in my formulation of Wharton as one of these ‘unforeseen readers’ whose allegories of nature and culture provide one instance of what happens when readers appropriate ‘terms and texts.’

²⁰ In “Life and I,” Wharton catalogues her youthful non-scientific reading: “Ford & Marlow & Webster! [...] the Niebelungen in the original [...] my studies led me naturally to philology, & Skeat, Kemble, Morris [...]. I plunged with rapture in the great ocean of Goethe. At fifteen I had read every word of his plays & poems” (LI 42).

²¹ For another view, see Garlepp-Burns, who states that Wharton’s “use of scientific jargon remains essentially symbolic, and as such, unscientific” (40).

²² Wharton owned a copy of Huxley’s Collected Essays, which included “Evolution and Ethics,” and copy of Darwiniana (Ramsden 60).

²³ “Instead of civilization being artificial, it is a part of nature; all of a piece with the development of the embryo or the unfolding of a flower” (qtd. in Hofstadter 40).

²⁴ Wharton’s knowledge of biology was limited, obviously, by the state of the discipline itself, but also by her lack of formal scientific training. As a self-taught scientist she struggled, for example, with “Lock’s ‘simple’ exposition of Mendelism” (Letters 151).

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¹ See Letters 157, and Lewis 228.

² In The Social Construction of American Realism Amy Kaplan states that “[a]ppeals to ‘the scientific spirit’ were commonplace among realists as diverse as Zola and Howells. Science conferred the authority to represent social reality in the late nineteenth century, much as portraiture had entailed the authority to represent the individual in an earlier period. In general, science became the major source of legitimation for most professions in the late nineteenth century” (75). Kaplan also notes that Wharton defended George Eliot’s brand of scientific realism, which Eliot’s critics complained “sterilised her imagination and deformed her style by the study of metaphysics and biology” (Kaplan 75). This criticism of Eliot has the same thrust as a number of reviews of Wharton’s own novels.

³ In his biography, Lewis remarks that Wharton was “sketching out” the novel during 1900 (109).

⁴ Lapsley was Wharton’s friend and literary executor.

⁵ Yet Wharton could be enthusiastic about what she perceived to be sociobiological thought that struck her as not being strictly scientific. In an assessment of Beyond Good and Evil she writes in a letter to Sara Norton that Nietzsche “has no system, & not much logic, but wonderful flashes of insight, & a power of breaking through conventions that is most exhilarating” (Letters 159).

⁶ Bauer claims that “dismissing Wharton as an antimodernist, a label suggesting uninterest in politics, wrongly erases Wharton’s profound concern for changing her culture” (4).

⁷ See A Backward Glance (95); Lewis (56-57); Letters (131, 136); Pizer, “Naturalism” (242).

⁸ The word “Beyond!” hints at Lily’s belief in the scientifically false Lamarckian notion that behavioral adaptation can produce physical changes (here metaphorically transformed by Wharton into psychological

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terms) which subsequent generations would inherit. Erasmus Darwin's thinking on this subject was similar to Lamarck's. Darwin wrote that "all animals undergo transformations which are in part produced by their own exertions, in response to pleasures and pains, and many of these acquired forms or propensities are transmitted to their posterity" (White & Gribbin 44). While Lily does 'undergo transformations,' becoming conscious of her incommensurability with her environment, she does not survive to reproduce. Within the framework of this Lamarckian idea resettled in social analysis, this suggests a foreclosure by the social 'environment' of her desire to transcend her circumstances that is indicative of antipathy to renewal or change.

⁹ Dennett offers Hume's defense of the Argument from Design as one of its "most eloquent expressions":

"Look round the world: Contemplate the whole and every part of it: You will find it to be nothing but one great machine, subdivided into an infinite number of lesser machines [. . .] All these various machines, and even their most minute parts, are adjusted to each other with an accuracy which ravishes into admiration all men who have ever contemplated them. The curious adapting of means to ends, throughout all nature, resembles, exactly though it much exceeds, the productions of human contrivance—of human design, thought, wisdom, and intelligence. Since therefore the effects resemble each other, we are led to infer, by all the rules of analogy, that the causes also resemble, and that the Author of Nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man, though possessed of much larger faculties, proportioned to the grandeur of the work which he has executed. By this argument *a posteriori*, and by this argument alone, do we prove at once the existence of a Deity and his similarity to human mind and intelligence" (29).

¹⁰ See Desmond (267-291) for a discussion of the reaction that followed the publication in 1859 of Darwin's The Origin of Species.

¹¹ In referring to Wharton's novel as "literary sociobiology" I am borrowing the latter word, and a definition of what such an enterprise entails, from Dennett's discussion of Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morals, (461-467). Dennett writes that Nietzsche's "primary target was the historical naïveté of the Social Darwinists (Hoy 1986), their Panglossian optimism about the ready adaptability of human reason (or Prudence) to Morality" (462).

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Wharton's interest in Nietzsche's work has been noted by Lewis, who in his biography of the author writes that "She was intently reading Nietzsche's writings—*Beyond Good and Evil*, *The Will to Power*, and *The Genealogy of Morals* were all in her inventory of favorites [. . .] What she especially admired was Nietzsche's exhilarating 'power of breaking through the conventions,' and she thought that it was 'salutary now and then to be made to realize '*Die Unwerthung aller Werthe*' ["the re-evaluation of all values"] and really get back to a wholesome basis of naked instinct.' Thus enthralled, Edith Wharton shared for a time Nietzsche's driving hostility to Christianity as an emasculating force and a repressive 'instrument of culture.' She applauded Nietzsche's concept of 'the blond beast,' a mythic embodiment, as it were, of naked instinct: an unfettered animal impulse that Nietzsche believed needed to erupt from time to time in an assault upon traditional culture and upon Christianity's influential distrust of the human body. 'There are times,' Edith wrote Sally Norton, 'when I hate what Christianity has left in our blood—or rather, one might say, what it has taken out of it—by its cursed assumption of the split between body and soul'" (230). As the representative of a biological instinct allegorically related to her innate moral goodness, the failure of Lily Bart's encounter with traditional culture demonstrates the ability of liberal Christian values to repress what is 'salutary' about nature.

¹² See Desmond, Dennett, and Ridley for accounts of how different interpretations of Darwin's work, particularly Spencer's, linked evolution to social progress. I address one way Wharton's novel responded to this aspect of Spencer's work later in this chapter.

¹³ See Ammons (25-55) for an influential example of a feminist approach to Wharton's handling of the 'marriage question' in this novel and *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907).

¹⁴ This is Pizer's view in "The Naturalism of *The House of Mirth*."

¹⁵ The tension between habit or instinct, and early training, obscures Lily's view of her own history, causing her to imagine her own evolution in terms that fuse her development to the casting of her femininity as a commodity: Lily "remembered how her mother, after they had lost their money, used to say to her with a kind

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of fierce vindictiveness: 'But you'll get it all back—you'll get it all back, with your face' . . . The remembrance roused a whole train of associations, and she lay in the darkness *reconstructing the past out of which her present had grown*" (HM 28) (italics added).

¹⁶ Desmond relates how by 1859 T.H. Huxley was shipping "intellectual arms across the class divide [. . .] he fashioned a low-caste Dissenting image of science. [. . .] Every man his own pastor. [. . .] Huxley's scimitar was the latest cleansing weapon. [. . .] 'If I have a wish [. . .] it is that I may see the foot of Science on the necks of her enemies. But the new religion will not be a worship of the intellect alone.' It would have the Christian ethics of love and duty—the old moral core, left after science had stripped off the mythical excrescences" (252-253). Similarly, Wharton crosses the divide between high and mass culture via the medium of the popular novel. Huxley's 'old moral core' remains as the text demonstrates the limits of Selden's aesthetic, mythic view of Lily, which prevents him from saving her.

¹⁷ Claire Preston identifies the hot-house as "An important image in The House of Mirth [. . .] the romantic climax, when Lily and Selden kiss after her *tableau* performance as Reynolds's Mrs. Lloyd, takes place in the deserted Bry conservatory, a sort of *in vitro* simulacrum of the world outside its panes, an environment as delicate and improbable as Selden's 'republic of the spirit'" (49). In chapter one I suggested that Wharton uses the image of the enclosed garden to represent society after reading T.H. Huxley's essay "Evolution and Ethics." The hothouse is obviously another, even more hermetic version of this enclosed garden.

¹⁸ A Claude glass is a "small mirror, slightly convex in shape, with its surface tinted a dark colour. Carried in the hand, it was used by artists, travellers and connoisseurs of landscape and landscape painting. It has the effect of abstracting the subject reflected in it from its surroundings, reducing and simplifying the colour and tonal range of scenes and scenery to give them a painterly quality, similar in appearance to the work of Claude Lorrain, hence its name. A larger variant, which could be fixed to the side of a carriage window to reflect the passing scenery, also appears to have existed" (Grove Dictionary of Art 387). Wharton herself felt the draw of Lorrain's landscapes. A passage from Italian Backgrounds nominates the painter's work as an exemplification

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of the visual aesthetic that captures Selden's imagination and diverts his attention from his own sexuality, and the rest of the world outside his 'republic of the spirit': "With each bend in the road the views down the Valtelline toward Sondrio and Como grew wider and more beautiful. No one who has not looked out on such a prospect in the early light of an August morning can appreciate the poetic truth of Claude's interpretation of nature: we seemed to be moving through a gallery hung with his pictures" (32).

¹⁹ The full text of the poem reads:

Age after age the fruit of knowledge falls
To ashes on men's lips;
Love fails, faith sickens, like a dying tree
Life sheds its dreams that no new spring recalls;
The longed-for ships
Come empty home or founder on the deep,
And eyes first lose their tears and then their sleep

So weary a world it lies, forlorn of day,
And yet not wholly dark,
Since evermore some soul that missed the mark
Calls back to those agroped
In the mad maze of hope,
'Courage, my brothers—I have found the way!'

The day is lost? What then?
What though the straggling rear-guard of the fight
Be whelmed in fear and night,
And the flying scouts proclaim
That death has gripped the van—
Ever the heart of man
Cheers on the hearts of men!

'It hurts not!' dying cried the Roman wife;
And one by one
The leaders in the strife
Fall on the blade of failure and exclaim:
'The day is won!'

Notes to Chapter Three

¹ Initial reviews of The Custom of the Country were very favorable (see Reviews 201-218). Yet The House of Mirth has attracted greater positive critical attention over the years. One explanation for this is suggested by Wolff's remarks on the The Custom of the Country's complexity. She argues that it is "a deliberate unsettling of every comfortable conviction: the Marvell-Dagonet culture is beautiful and ugly [...] Ralph is both admirable and pitiable; Undine both villain and victim. The fictional world of The Custom of the Country is a daring tour de force: view it head on, you will draw one set of inferences; shift your vantage to a slightly different angle, it will become something altogether different" (235).

² I am indebted to Hofstadter for his observations on the conflict between social Darwinism and equality and natural rights.

³ Darwin writes of how "The dependency of one organic being on another, as of a parasite on its prey, lies generally between beings remote in the scale of nature" (Origin 126). Importing this view into the sphere of human society might suggest a politically distasteful interpretation of the relationship between poor and rich as one of a dependency that rationalizes paternalism. The selectivity with which Wharton metaphorically transforms certain aspects of evolutionary thought while leaving others untouched is potentially a rich area for study.

⁴ Wharton examines the complicity of mass culture in building ideological consensus around the idea that capitalism is beneficial to individuals and institutions. To do so she portrays a series of complex business deals: the Pure Water Move, the Ararat Trust deal, and the subsequent investigation of the latter by the authorities. This sequence shows a different side of the ethics of business than is presented in the press, again distinguishing the novel as capable of exceeding the ability of other forms to address complex social issues.

⁵ In one sense, Wharton is similar to her protagonist in that she adapts other literary traditions within her view by recreating the tonal qualities and scenic traditions of sentimental texts. This is noticeable in the novel's early chronicling of the Spraggs' attempts to help Undine realize the "social benefit" for which "they had come" (CC

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28) to New York. Such practices would appeal to that segment of the reading public that had made E.D.E.N Southworth, for example, into a best-selling author.

⁶ The irony here lies in the serialization of The Custom of the Country in Scribner's Magazine (alongside ads for various products similar, no doubt, to those consumed by Undine) and Wharton's status as a popular author.

⁷ Near the end of the novel Mrs. Heeny takes out of her bag a fistful of newspaper clippings about Undine and shows them to the protagonist's son: "Paul listened, fascinated. He had the feeling that Mrs. Heeny's clippings, aside from their great intrinsic interest, might furnish him with a clue to many things he didn't understand, and that nobody ever had time to explain to him" (CC 500). Like his mother before him, Paul looks not to traditional institutions such as his now defunct family for training, but to the media..However, as he listens to Mrs. Heeny read to him from one of her clippings about how his stepfather Elmer Moffatt has by continual purchases driven up the value of art by "at least seventy-five percent" (CC 500) Wharton suggests the constancy of the need to connect: "I'd rather hear about my mother" (CC 500).

⁸ Preston identifies these as Rostand's *L'Aiglon* and Racine's *Phédre* (116).

⁹That an anti-heroine such as Undine should violate this contract, one vital to the perpetuation of leisure-class tradition, seems to suggest its positive valuation by the narrative. But the narrative critiques too the fact that marriage is a business that compels Undine to seek the "choicer fare" (CC 57) of Elmer Moffatt.

¹⁰ Lewis 94; Wolff, A Feast of Words 89-90; Waide 7. In her Bookman review of Leslie Stephens's biography of Eliot, Wharton writes that "The great investigators have never wearied of repeating that all the forward steps in science have been made by an imaginative effort, by the deductive rather than the inductive method. Goethe the poet was nourished, not stunted, by the scientific inductions of Goethe the morphologist. [...] Is it because these were men, while George Eliot was a woman, that she is reproved for venturing on ground they did not fear to tread?" (UCW 71-72).

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¹¹ Amy Kaplan makes the argument that “[t]he 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” (Kaplan “Edith Wharton’s Profession of Authorship” 453). Kaplan writes elsewhere that the appearances of clippings from “Town Talks” “differentiate the novels as works of art that transcend the mere curiosity of the marketplace” (The Social Construction of American Realism 85). This insight led me to discover other instances in the novel in which Wharton asserts the primacy of fiction’s ability to represent social processes.

¹² Preston writes, “Of Huxley’s many works it is difficult to guess which she might have read, but obvious ones would have been The Advancement of Science in the last Half-Century (1887); American Addresses (1877) (three lectures on evolution); and Darwiniana (1893)” (196n.). Bentley states that “Wharton was fascinated by biology and evolutionism, reading deeply in Darwin, Huxley, Ernst Haeckel, and in current studies of heredity and Mendelism” (“Hunting for the Real” 51). The appearance of Ramsden’s book on the subject of Wharton’s library will obviously help critical activity that seeks to connect the author’s intellectual interests to the formal properties of her fiction.

¹³ This is not to suggest that the system of marriage Undine exploits is equitable or worthy of preservation. Obviously, consensual divorce facilitates her nuptial repetitions. The narrative is clear about its position that Undine’s instrumental attitude toward marriage, like Lily Bart’s recalcitrance toward sacrificing her freedom for material comfort, is justified by the disparity in benefits assigned by the marriage contract.

¹⁴ Wharton owned Haeckel’s The History of Creation (1868) (Ramsden 55).

¹⁵ The episode from which this quotation is taken finds the princess Estradina puzzled over Undine’s habit of leaving her son in the care of others. This habitual disregard for intimacy in family relations is a frequently illustrated characteristic of the protagonist.

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¹⁶ Obviously, Wharton and the evolutionists she read had no knowledge of genes. However, the neo-Darwinists had started to incorporate Mendel's work at the beginning of the twentieth century, and Wharton was almost certainly aware of this. My knowledge of the history of evolutionary science owes much to the work of Dennett and Ridley.

¹⁷ See Dennett 52-61

¹⁸ Contrasts between the living spaces occupied by Clare and Peter Van Degen in their "palace" (CC 280) illustrate an ongoing transition between the importance of expressing the forms of Washington Square, and a need to emulate the gaudy styles of the new business elite:

The lowered awnings of her [Clare's] inner drawing-room cast a luminous shadow on old cabinets and consoles, and on the pale flowers scattered here and there in vases of bronze and porcelain. Clare's taste was as capricious as her mood, and the rest of the house was not in harmony with this room. There was, in particular, another drawing-room, which she now described as Peter's creation, but which Ralph knew to be partly hers: a heavily decorated apartment, where Popple's portrait of her throned over a waste of gilt furniture. (CC 280)

¹⁹ That such matters were on Wharton's mind is evident in The Fruit of the Tree (1907), which addresses these issues in its portrayal of factory life. John Amherst, one of the novel's protagonists, expresses dissatisfaction with the reality that "[i]t costs more to increase [...] [the size of the factory] than to maim an operative now and then" (FT 11).

²⁰ Ironically, the only genuine social comment he contributes is his suicide. This act protests the way his private life is made a commodity by the press, and the way the market insinuates itself into his familial relationships when he finds himself constantly short of the money Undine requires to live luxuriously, and when he is unable to ransom his son Paul from Undine.

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²¹ The association of Marvell with Whitman is consistent with Wharton's implication that the leisure class is capable of artistic and moral leadership. She writes that "being a Whitmanite, like being an agnostic, cultivates forbearance and humility" (qtd. in Lewis 193).

²² Janet Beer discusses "the outline of a study of Whitman's poetry Wharton had planned to write, and, indeed, had mapped out in some detail" (Edith Wharton 81).

²³ Notable in Wharton's choice of the word is that Nereid is a mythological figure (a daughter of Nereus), and also the name of a species of sea centipede. Undine is thus characterized in a way that is coherent both from Marvell's angle of vision, and the novel's scientific perspective.

Notes to Chapter Four

¹ The passage from Preston footnotes Harré's discussion of one lesson offered by Darwin. This lesson can be seen to underwrite the novel's method in portraying Archer's display of socially mediated 'instinct.' Harré describes how "The sciences have been at their most fruitful when they have exploited analogies and borrowed conceptual systems, modifying them in the process. [...] the social order is no exception. But if I borrow from organic evolutionary theory there must be some preliminary adjustments of that theory [...] The lesson biology learned from Darwin, that adaptation need not require some form of teleological explanation, can also be taken to heart by social theorists. Part of the charm of mutation/selection systems is that they offer us the possibility of the explanation of adaptive change without positive causality for that change, and in particular they allow us to separate the processes by which mutant forms are created from those by which they are selected" (164). This statement describes a primary difference between the perspectives offered by the overarching narrative's application to social evolution of the Darwinian 'explanation of adaptive change,' and Archer's own point-of-view. Wharton employs this implication of Darwinism in replying to the efforts of Archer's class to subdue 'adaptive change' through a teleology of human perfectibility. The novel thus offers a concept of relative *moral instincts* in which the mutation of values is a naturally occurring process not containable by leisure-class manners.

² The biological facts of the sexual act are transposed into an architectural register in an allusion to the lowering of barriers to entering the leisure class. Beaufort's house "had been boldly planned with a ball-room, so that, instead of squeezing through a narrow passage to get to it (as at the Chiverses') one marched solemnly down a vista of enfiladed drawing rooms" (A1 21). Beaufort's type is thus made to seem promiscuous, and his house, a place that anyone can enter, a reflection of this fact.

³ Williams again provides a useful framework for pinning down Wharton's concept of ideology, which in The Age of Innocence strikes one as "the system of ideas appropriate to [...] [Archer's] class" (157). Williams goes on to relate "the distinction suggested by Engels, in which ideology would end when men realized their real life-conditions and therefore their real motives, after which their consciousness would become genuinely *scientific* because they would then be in contact with reality" (157). Demonstrating the difficulty of achieving

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something like 'scientific consciousness' seems to be one goal of the novel. This is borne out in the example of Archer, who sees, in his amateurish scientific manner, partway into his 'life conditions,' but cannot achieve sustained contact with the reality Ellen represents.

⁴ Work needs to be done on the fact that while these analogies are aspects of Wharton's literary texts, they are seen by the fiction to exist also in the culture it represents, where they do the cultural work of containing base energies and directing them toward social cohesion. Wharton's realism thus parallels a cultural practice wherein manners 'analogize,' convert, and transliterate biological impulses.

⁵ Knights uses the same passage to make the point that Ellen presents "herself as the image of sexuality" (33). This insight facilitated my discernment of other instances in which Ellen's attire encodes her sexuality.

⁶ In this Wharton's narrative may owe a debt to the methods of European social science, which were filtering into American universities during the period prior to the novel's composition. Ross relates how "[t]he historic-political scientists set out to strengthen their science by using the critical historical method developed most fully in Germany. Grounded in philology and the historiographical program of Ranke, this conception of historical method as a science providing real access to the past had made its way to America through the influence of study abroad and American adaptations. [. . .] The gentry political scientists were not, as has long been thought, nominalistic historical positivists, believers that historians could discover 'facts alone, with no generalizations and with a renunciation of all philosophy.' Rather they believed that the facts, when contemplated, would yield those underlying principles that guided political progress" (71). In its focus on underlying ideological principles that *give rise to* the view that taste and form represent all of reality one needs to know of, Wharton's narrative method in excavating Archer's world pursues a historical account of the evolution of social forms.

⁷ One need only look to the way Scribners' advertised The House of Mirth to find that Wharton's class membership was seen to affect the reading public's perception of her authority to write about the rich. Wharton's reaction to Scribners' efforts illustrates that she wanted to downplay this perception, which might be

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seen, one supposes, to color her own objectivity. The novel was initially marketed in a way that showed that Scribners anticipated it would be viewed as a realistic inside narrative of elite New York. Wharton duly complained about this, writing to her editor William Brownell to demand that he remove "that dreadful ad on the paper cover of the H. of M.: 'for the first time the veil has been lifted from N.Y. society by one who etc. etc.'" (Aaronson 8).

⁸ As have Preston 50-51, Janet Beer, Edith Wharton 8, and Kaplan, The Social Construction of American Realism 75.

⁹ Of this group, Renaissance scholars all, the least known today is likely Vernon Lee, the pseudonym of Violet Paget (1856-1935). R.W.B. Lewis describes her as "the author of many brilliant and scholarly studies of Italian history and art" (Letters 35n). Wharton states that her books "*Euphorion*, *Belcaro* etc.—were the delight of a generation initiated by Ruskin and Wallace into the beauties of the great Italian primitives [...] she was one of the last representatives of that world before the war, where one gathered with friends to talk about beautiful paintings and beautiful music, without suspecting under what mortal blows this peaceful society was soon to crumble" (UCW 221).

¹⁰ "Spencer's blend of biology, sociology, ethics, and psychology are clear influences on much of her writing; the works was published in 1897" (Preston 196 n.). The question of which of his works she actually read (aside from First Principles (1875)) remains an open one. One section of Spencer's Principles of Sociology theorizes how it is that an instinctive suspicion of unfamiliar individuals becomes a common characteristic in a social group. In Wharton's hands this is extended to cover the suspicion of unfamiliar practices and beliefs exhibited by members of Archer's class, but the Lamarckian heresy committed by Spencer in suggesting that acquired characteristics can be passed on to future generations has an equivalent in the reproduction of ideology through a class-specific language viewed as a *social* construct in The Age of Innocence. One finds in Spencer the following example of the slip reproduced by Archer's class: "To the evolutionist, it is clear that constant experiences received by men during tens of thousands of years of savage life, must have produced organic

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modifications; and he will not be surprised to see indications of them given by the child in arms. In *The Principles of Psychology* [...] I have shown that whereas on islands never before visited, voyagers find the sea-birds so tame that they will not get out of the way, birds of kinds which, through unmeasured ages, have been in contact with mankind, have acquired an instinctive dread of them [...] Similarly through countless generations of men the mental association between stranger and enemy, has, by perpetual repetition, been rendered partially organic; so that an unfamiliar face causes the infant gradually to contract its features [...] an unformed cloud of painful feelings is raised by this presentation of an unknown appearance which, in the history of the race, has constantly preceded the reception of injuries" (*Principles of Sociology* 693).

¹¹ Preston discusses the role of libraries, and the reading habits of Selden, and Marvell (40-48).

¹² Lewis writes that *French Ways* is "a hurried, rambling book, though not lacking in the usual perceptive and delicate observations of the French reverence for life" (Lewis 422). Wolff pronounces the work "a superficial study of French society" (*A Feast of Words* 296), while Benstock writes that it "revealed her commitment to its [France's] cultural and political values" (348). The book's importance to this study is, first, its method, which is implicit in its statement that "intellectual honesty" is comprised of "the courage to look at things as they are" (58), and second, its revelations about Wharton's own aesthetic values: "That a thing should be in scale—should be proportioned to its purpose—is one of the first requirements of beauty, in whatever order. No shouting where an undertone will do; and no gigantic statue of liberty in butter for a world's fair, when the little Wingless Victory, tying on her sandal on the Acropolis, holds the whole horizon in the curve of her slim arm"(41). This valuation of subtlety is illustrated in the deft portrait of the way class ideology in *The Age of Innocence* operates through the relay of language on the psychology of individual characters.

¹³ Luther Burbank was famous in Wharton's day for his experiments in hybridization.

¹⁴ Wharton seems to have thought that the exclusion of an omniscient perspective created difficulties in limiting the selectivity of a represented consciousness. The potential result of doing so, one surmises from her few

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statements on the matter, would be the elimination of a lens to focus the welter of sense perception bearing in on the fictional subject, and in the case of her own work, the elimination of a textual space from which to contrast omniscient and character-centered perspectives on manners. Wharton's statement in her essay "The Criticism of Fiction" (1914) supports this claim:

two principal perils seem, in fact, to lurk for the new novelist. One is consequent on the shock of his sudden release from the white-washed cell of conventions into the daylight and the outer air. To the poor Caspar Hauser of the pen everything in this grimy noisy rough-and-tumble outer world is so new and of such amazing interest that he is solicited with equal urgency by facts and instances that are not always of equal value. (UCW 127)

Her lack of enthusiasm for the work of Woolf and Joyce turned on her perception that, particularly in Joyce's case, "the raw material of sensation & thought can't make a work of art without the cook's intervention" (Letters 461).

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¹ See Bender (314-326) for a discussion of the difficulties Wharton must have encountered in creating correspondences between different aspects of evolutionary theory and their representation as themes in the novels.

² Dennett goes on to argue that

[i]f this is right, then all the achievements of human culture—language, art, religion, ethics, science itself—are themselves artifacts (of artifacts of artifacts ...) of the same fundamental process that developed the bacteria, the mammals and *Homo sapiens*. There is no Special Creation of language, and neither art nor religion has a literally divine inspiration. (143-144)

This idea would have appealed to Wharton who, recall, “disliked & disbelieved in metaphysics” (qtd. in UCW 43).

³This is evident in Undine’s marriages to Marvell and DeChelles, and in the marriage of Newland’s son Dallas to Fanny Beaufort.

⁴ In the 1870’s a story reporting on an opera performance would likely have appeared in the rapidly expanding Sunday supplements. Mott reports how an English observer of the period declared that “American journalism [...] has reached its highest development in the Sunday newspaper. [...] It is at once a newspaper and a miscellany, a society journal and a household magazine” (482). The papers thus blurred class barriers by representing high and low culture side-by-side, and by appealing to a wide socioeconomic spectrum. In French Ways and their Meanings Wharton opined on how “[a]s long as America believes in short-cuts to knowledge, in any possibility of buying taste in tabloids, she will never come into her real inheritance of English culture” (55).

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