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# The Classical Versus the Grotesque Body in Edith Wharton's Fiction

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# THE CLASSICAL VERSUS THE GROTESQUE BODY IN EDITH WHARTON'S FICTION

by

JOSHUA T. TEMPLES

(Under the Direction of Caren J. Town)

## ABSTRACT

In her landmark works *The House of Mirth* (1905), *The Custom of the Country* (1913), and *The Age of Innocence* (1920), Edith Wharton responds to earlier depictions of the classical, pure Victorian and Edwardian woman. Wharton's "inconvenient" women overturn popular stereotypes. Subsequently, they are barred from their social groups, but they are independent, unlike the complicit and obedient women of the classical body, most of whom ascribe to the trope of the "Angel in the House." The grotesque seeks to undercut the unrealistic expectations enforced by the classical through its embodiment of progression and humanity, and Wharton is drawn to its libertine nature. Using theorists and critics such as Mikhail Bakhtin, Laura Mulvey, and Judith Butler, as well as secondary critics Emily J. Orlando, Claire Preston, and Elizabeth Ammons, the thesis will explore Wharton's preoccupation with the grotesque and her ultimate preference for the transitional body—a combination of the two opposing ideals.

INDEX WORDS: Edith Wharton, Body, Laura Mulvey, Male gaze, Judith Butler, Gender, Classical body, Grotesque body, Mikhail Bakhtin, *The House of Mirth*, *The Age of Innocence*, *The Custom of the Country*, Art, *Tableaux vivants*, Victorian, Edwardian, Judith Butler, New York, Fashion, Greek mythology, Sculpture

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate my thesis to the late Candy B.K. Schille, Ph.D., whose tireless assistance and patience allowed me to become the scholar I am today.

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## CHAPTER ONE

## Introduction

Edith Wharton's fiction clearly distinguishes between popular notions of classical and grotesque models of femininity, and this distinction works to suggest how these characters succeed or fail. This binary appears most prominently in Wharton's New York society novels—*The Age of Innocence* (1920), *The House of Mirth* (1905), and *The Custom of the Country* (1913)—with Wharton portraying women such as May Welland and Undine Spragg as virginal, beautiful, and static. However, the beauty and grace of May and the conniving loveliness of Undine Spragg are offset by a glaring, often unpalatable opposite, such as Mrs. Lovell Mingott and the Marchioness Manson in *The Age of Innocence*. Mingott and Manson both represent the grotesque, with one being enormously, morbidly obese and the other behaving so unconventionally that she has been reduced to a mere oddity. Even though the Old Guard of New York respectfully acknowledges their positions, Wharton's descriptions are a skillful display of the grotesque.

Interestingly, though, Countess Ellen Olenska from *The Age of Innocence* and Lily Bart from *The House of Mirth* straddle both sides of this divide, largely due to their uncertain and unorthodox positions in New York high society. The characters who are grotesque, including Ellen and Lily, are totally enigmatic as opposed to the perceivable, uncomplicated characters like May. Such a preference, considering the time period in which Wharton lived and wrote, is certainly unconventional and undermines the popular ideal of the classical, unblemished body. Wharton is initially repulsed by the grotesque, but eventually, she perhaps prefers it, explaining the transitional natures of Lily and Ellen. She explains her early preference for the classical and aversion to the grotesque in her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*. During her youth, her

summers were spent at Pencraig, the family's Newport home, watching "lawn tennis, played on our lawn by young gentlemen in tail coats and young ladies in tight whale-boned dresses" (79). Surrounded by such displays of pastoral athleticism, Wharton admits that she "was always vaguely frightened by ugliness" (28). Her extensive use of the classical body aside, Wharton's characters of the grotesque body are often more developed, intuitive, and liberated than those of the classical. Ellen, fleeing an unhappy and presumably abusive marriage, chooses to live her life on her own terms, a decision that wins her few admirers. With this example come many others, creating a menagerie of unconventional yet complex women who go against the grain of the society that has borne them—the society that Wharton herself would have remembered nostalgically if not necessarily fondly.

Because Wharton pays close attention to representation and language, literary theory is essential to a deeper understanding of several of Wharton's characters. In turn, Bakhtin's imagining of the grotesque is applicable to several of the aforementioned figures. In addition to Bakhtin's, Laura Mulvey's and Judith Butler's approaches to gender apply to Wharton's works, particularly her most famous novels. The themes of woman as object and gender performance feature prominently in these New York novels, necessitating a critical reading. Mulvey's idea of the male gaze aligns itself with the women of Wharton's fiction, the most prominent example being *The House of Mirth*, where the reader is greeted with the feminine enigma that is Lily Bart. The male gaze appears in *The Age of Innocence* and *The Custom of the Country* as well, especially in scenes that take place at the opera—a place of accusatory spectatorship. With Butler, a viewpoint similar to Mulvey's is apparently at work in Wharton's society novels. May, Lily, and Undine wear varying but basically similar masks to conceal their true selves, such masks being those of polished, cultivated femininity, all to satisfy the requirements of their rank.

Butler maintains that the adoption of gender is a performance. Applied to Wharton's female characters, this theoretical framework is most revealing. In the case of Lily Bart, she grudgingly plays the part of the proper upper-class woman both to remain in her social set and to find a wealthy, well-connected husband. Underneath, however, she clearly detests this performance and the role to which she has been subjected. With this in mind, then, this *affectation* of gender, this hyper-femininity held so dear by the Victorians and Edwardians, is merely a performance in Wharton. In this world of conspicuous consumption and frivolity, however, such a performance is necessary in order to avoid excommunication—and, consequently, financial and social ruin.

Through her grotesque and transitional women, Wharton appears to attack the image of the virtuous, ornamental American upper-class woman of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. According to Emily J. Orlando, Wharton effectively “deflates the myth of the American woman and challenges the tradition that assigns her to types: either woman-as-artless (ingénue, angel, Diana, American Girl) or woman-as-art (femme fatale, dark lady, imaginary beloved, Pre-Raphaelite stunner)” (195). By conscientiously dismantling this mold into which she herself was forced, Wharton rebels against the myth of the American female. Chapter Two deals with the Bakhtinian theory, as well as the arguments of Laura Mulvey and Judith Butler and how they are applicable to Wharton's work. Chapter Three discusses the New York novels individually, starting with Wharton's first major authorial success, *The House of Mirth*, and the presence throughout of the classical and the grotesque. Chapters Four and Five will discuss Wharton's other New York novels, *The Age of Innocence* and *The Custom of the Country*. My thesis argues that, though often compared to Henry James in his composition of the complicated female, Wharton's conception and execution of womanhood is equally complex. More importantly, Wharton is a master of crafting complicated, “inconvenient” female characters, in

opposition to those whose purpose does not extend beyond embodying the ideal. My approach to this argument is unique in that it does not focus on mere behavior to assess Wharton's characters, but analyzes the body and its representations to form cohesive images of female characters deemed unfit and cast aside.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Theorists and Critical Perspectives

Writing in the long shadow cast by the Exposition Universelle in Paris in November of 1900, Henry Adams wrote extensively of his observations of the event and the technological innovations displayed. In his famous essay “The Dynamo and the Virgin” (1900), Adams struggles to come to terms with the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries. In the essay, Adams is perplexed by what he perceives to be a shift in “power”; the woman, symbolic of the Virgin Mary, once the driving force of production and civilization, has been supplanted by the dynamo, the manmade engine touting features such as increased efficiency and less noise. The natural world, represented by Mary and female reproduction, has been rejected in favor of a technological one, represented by the grotesque machine. Using the examples of Diana of Ephesus and female Oriental deities, Adams paints a picture of the ideal woman as a classical being—a pure, virtuous conduit through which life is created and introduced to the world. Adams concentrates on the great works of art created before the advent of the dynamo, further aligning the woman with the classical in her role as mother and nurturer. Consequently, the woman as arbiter of purity and delicacy is the classical being, with the dynamo filling the role of the grotesque. The dynamo is considered to be the “other,” this new and advanced mechanism that emerges to change the world to which Adams has become so accustomed. Paired with this are the physical characteristics of the dynamo itself, with its large, intimidating mass and network of complex gears and pistons.

Using such a stark juxtaposition of beauty and ugliness, Adams’ essay serves as a fitting introduction to Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories of the classical and grotesque bodies. The classical body is set apart from the grotesque and its emphasis on realism and accuracy. The classical

body never changes; it is the body of Greek sculpture and Renaissance paintings, a body that “possesses no open orifices” to make it grotesque though real (Patin and McLerran 21). The classical body is ideal in that it does not secrete or defecate, nor does it involve itself in biological functions such as pregnancy and lactation. In short, according to Dale M. Bauer and Susan Jaret McKinstry, it is “closed” and “aristocratic,” a fitting state for ideally feminine characters like May Welland and Undine Spragg, whose anatomical functions are excluded completely from their respective novels (77). According to Eleanor Ty, Bakhtin imagined the classical as “the inherent form of high official culture” and the ideal that humans should strive to emulate (99). Characters endowed with classical features—smooth, unblemished skin, timeless beauty, and a graceful figure, to name a few—are often aristocratic, graceful, fashionable, and, above all, ladylike. They carry and present themselves as queens, though these characters often have little depth and are consumed by superficiality and artifice.

As their classical identities suggest, they are like living sculpture—flawless, ageless, and smooth from the outside, yet lacking substance beneath the finely crafted veneer. Before continuing, however, I must distinguish the exact meanings of my use of the terms “classical” and “grotesque.” When a character is termed classical, such as May Welland, I mean that she is classical in a literal and a figurative sense—her body follows a strict set of rules, and her life does in turn. My application of the grotesque follows an inverted model. For example, Ellen Olenska is grotesque in both a literal and figurative sense as well; her body is literally grotesque, according to Bakhtin’s philosophy, and her unconventional, often scandalous behavior further highlights her grotesque, transitional nature. Though Bakhtin’s conception of the classical and the grotesque does not extend past the literal in Undine, their inherent qualities can be applied piecemeal to create full, cohesive images of Wharton’s women.

Like Adams, Mikhail Bakhtin explores the body and its representations, resulting in his distinction between the classical and the grotesque. For Bakhtin, the grotesque body is one that both acknowledges and embraces its natural functions. In *Rabelais and His World* (1965), Bakhtin gives a personal account of what he envisions the grotesque to be: “Eating, drinking, defecation and other elimination (sweating, blowing of the nose, sneezing), as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body—all these acts are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world, or on the confines of the old and new body. In all these events the beginning and end of life are closely linked and interwoven” (317). Instead of concerning itself with beauty and stasis like the classical, the grotesque body embraces the mutable human anatomy, undermining the unrealistic classical code. Sue Scott and David Morgan focus on the libertine nature of the grotesque body: “The grotesque body is uncontrolled, unappealing according to dominant aesthetic standards, and constructed as being much closer to nature [...] [and] tends to be associated with the working or lower classes” (82). Despite the unpleasantness of the grotesque body and its stance as “other” in the face of the classical ideal, Bakhtin takes a democratic view of the two bodies, presenting them as two parts of a whole, as one cannot exist without the other. The classical body is the ideal, and the grotesque is the reality.

In *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film*, Robert Stam examines Bakhtin’s affinity for the grotesque, stating, “By calling attention to the paradoxical attractiveness of the grotesque body, Bakhtin rejects what might be called the ‘fascism of beauty,’ the construction of an ideal type or language of beauty in relation to which other types are seen as inferior ‘dialectical’ variations” (159). Appropriately designated as fascist, this system of classification idealizes and even idolizes one conception of beauty and shuns its

opposite. Bakhtin, further illustrating the grotesque's complexities, maintains that there are three crucial moments of "spasm" in the life of the grotesque body: "Sexual intercourse, death throes (in their comic presentation—hanging tongue, expressionless popping eyes, suffocation, death rattle), and the act of birth. Frequently, these three acts are transformed or merged into each other insofar as their exterior symptoms and the expressions coincide (spasms, tensions, popping eyes, sweat, convulsions of arms and legs)" (160). With this in mind, then, the taboo of the grotesque has a perverse attractiveness for one seeking to undermine the widespread notion of the classical woman, a façade with nothing behind and no purpose other than childbearing. As Bakhtin devoted his study to the depth of the grotesque and its allure, Wharton does the same in her fiction, thereby humanizing the female as opposed to beatifying her.

Laura Mulvey contributes to this discussion of the classical and grotesque and its relation to the female form and extends Bakhtin's analysis through her discussion of the male gaze. In many ways, the male gaze is essential to the female way of life and survival in Victorian and Edwardian New York, for reasons that will be discussed in the succeeding chapters. In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey contends that the male gaze helps men commodify women. More broadly, the male gaze is a means of enforcing the woman's place as object and source of entertainment or sexual desire. To Mulvey, the "determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly" (837). In scenes from *The House of Mirth*, *The Age of Innocence*, and *The Custom of the Country*, the omnipresent male gaze is directed particularly at women in public spaces and during social occasions. Borrowing concepts from Freud, Mulvey contends that this desire to gaze, known as scopophilia, is distinctly sexual in tone and hints at deeper prurient desires: "Freud isolates scopophilia as one of the component instincts of sexuality which exist as drives quite independently of the erotogenic zones. At this



point, he associates scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (845). Mulvey argues that, at its most extreme, this compulsion to gaze is often destructive and a gateway for alternative sexual desires: “It can become fixated into a perversion, producing obsessive voyeurs and Peeping Toms, whose only sexual satisfaction can come from watching, in an active controlling sense, an objectified ‘other’” (835). The male gaze and its implications are most prominently seen in *The House of Mirth*, with men such as Gus Trenor and Simon Rosedale viewing Lily only for her aesthetic value and availability for use. Trenor sees her as merely a sex object, one by which he can escape a presumably unhappy marriage with his wife, Judy, while Rosedale wants to marry Lily to gain access to her social circles.

In turn, the object of the gaze, most commonly women, is sexualized and therefore commodified for another’s enjoyment. Furthermore, the woman’s appearance and its attractiveness, or more colloquially the way she is “done up,” is assumed to be indicative of her enjoyment of this pointed voyeurism: “In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-look-at-ness*” (837). Citing examples such as the Ziegfeld Follies and mid-century pin-ups and burlesque shows, Mulvey examines the image of women as objects upon which men project their individual desires: “Women displayed as sexual object is the *leit-motiff* [*sic*] of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire” (837). Most prominent in the entertainment sector, including cinema and television, the catering to male desires is widespread and deeply ingrained into the most basic framework of society. In cinema, the

woman is more or less laid bare for the male viewer. With surreptitious voyeurism unnecessary, the viewer is free to analyze to his heart's content:

The beauty of the woman as object and the screen space coalesce; she is no longer the bearer of guilt but a perfect product, whose body, stylised [*sic*] and fragmented by close-ups, is the content of the film, and the direct recipient of the spectator's look. There is little or no mediation of the look through the eyes of the main male protagonist. (841)

Wharton's male characters, however, lacking the modern conveniences of television and cinema, rely primarily on painting and dumb show such as *tableaux vivants* and public portrait sittings to satiate their voyeuristic desires. Crass but normalized and tolerated by polite society during Wharton's time, the male gaze both defines and determines the "worthiness" and attractiveness of the female. The male gaze is a vital part of Wharton's narrative technique, and the presence of evaluative eyes adds to the claustrophobic nature of New York society. Wharton's female characters, trapped and displayed like animals in a zoo, either thrive or buckle under the constant pressure. Subsequent chapters, especially those dealing with the main three novels—*The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country*, and *The Age of Innocence*—will apply Mulvey's ideas to Wharton.

Judith Butler also has noticeable connections to Bakhtin and Mulvey—and to Wharton. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of the Identity* (1990), Butler asserts that gender itself is a performance. In executing this performance, one must conform to gender norms. If one fails to behave as his or her gender mandates, he or she is punished: "Gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences. Discrete genders are part of what 'humanizes' individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, we regularly punish those who fail to [perform]"

their gender right” (149). Most commonly, and for the purpose of this thesis, Butler’s argument for the manufactured, mannered gender performance applies especially to women, often the focal points of Wharton’s literature. Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir and *The Second Sex*, in which de Beauvoir states, “One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one,” Butler asserts that this phrase is initially “nonsensical,” as it is impossible for one to become a woman if one were not a woman from the start. Clarifying this, however, Butler states, “Beauvoir, of course, meant merely to suggest that the category of woman is a variable cultural accomplishment, a set of meanings that are taken on or taken up within a cultural field, and that no one is born with a gender—gender is always acquired” (142). Bearing in mind Butler and Beauvoir’s assessments of gender and womanhood as an “accomplishment,” Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze serves as a parallel. The male gaze, a socially sanctioned form of voyeurism typically aimed at women, determines a woman’s attractiveness or “worthiness” according to the popular, male-determined conceptions of beauty and desirability. Undine Spragg from *The Custom of the Country* is a perfect example of this reality. Her first husband, Ralph Marvell, falls in love with her based solely on her physical beauty, and he relishes in projecting his artistic fantasies upon her. In fact, all of Undine’s suitors are dazzled by her beauty and see little else, realizing only too late her true nature.

Similarly, Butler’s idea of the achievement of womanhood as a cultural expectation is relevant to my discussion. If culture forms a girl into a woman, and keeping in mind that gender is not a fixed trait at birth, the categorization of gender is determined according to the cultural, i.e. male point of view. Mulvey’s theories relate strongly to Butler’s, as the male point of view and the male gaze similarly form women. Of course, one *does* have a sex at birth in de Beauvoir’s estimation, but gender and sex do not necessarily go hand in hand:

On the other hand, de Beauvoir was willing to affirm that one is born with a sex, as a sex, and that being sexed and being human are coextensive and simultaneous; sex is an analytic attribute of the human; there is no human who is not sexed; sex qualifies the human as a necessary attribute. But sex does not cause gender, and gender cannot be understood to reflect or express sex [...] sex is immutable factic, but gender acquired, and whereas sex cannot be changed—or so she thought—gender is the variable construction of sex, the myriad of open possibilities of cultural meaning occasioned by a sexed body. (142)

The key passage in the above quotation describes gender as a “variable construction of sex,” meaning that female characters and their “womanliness” are judged by their desirability to men. In Wharton, this idea presents itself clearly, as the female characters are forced to “perform” their prescribed roles as upper-class women in order to avoid being cut from the pack. Though these women are appropriately “sexed,” as Butler and de Beauvoir theorize, this affectation of gender is exactly that—an affectation. Pigeonholed, the female characters sometimes willingly and sometimes grudgingly perform their parts, proving that Butler and de Beauvoir’s arguments apply to Wharton’s heroines, especially those who prove “inconvenient.” For example, in *The House of Mirth*, Lily grudgingly performs her social duties, such as losing at bridge to her host and buying the latest gowns that she cannot afford. Once she rebels against these expectations, she is ostracized for failing to adequately “perform” as her gender dictates.

In this same vein, Butler, reviewing the work of Monique Wittig, states, “The discrimination of ‘sex’ secures the political and cultural operation of compulsory sexuality [...] ‘sex’ is always already female, and there is only one sex, the feminine. To be male is not to be ‘sexed’; to be sexed is always a way of becoming particular and relative [...]” (144). From the

outset, then, women are pigeonholed and forced into this “compulsory sexuality” to keep them subjected to the “unsexed” male. Though homosexuality is rarely mentioned in Wharton, her female characters experience this forceful submission to the norm. In addition to being the one who is “sexed,” the female is the other to (and thereby the lesser of) the male. Butler expresses this enforced femininity and repressed sexuality expected of Wharton’s women. Anita Brady and Tony Schirato put it this way: “Butler argues that a range of acceptability in terms of gendered body modification is routinely aligned with the normative expectations of gender. This ranges from penile enhancements or breast surgeries, to decisions about hair length or body size” (33). Nothing so extreme is endorsed in Wharton’s works, but nineteenth-century society imposed its own regulations on the bodies of women. By manipulating the female form with whalebone stays and yards of fabric draped into bustles and trains, Society exerts enormous pressure on Wharton’s characters to look a certain way. For example, May Welland from *The Age of Innocence* dresses fashionably yet modestly and to great praise, whereas Ellen Olenska takes risks with fashion and is shamed for doing so. Similar to modern beauty standards, the upper-class society of Wharton’s novels lauds those who reach the expectations of their gender and punishes those who do not.

Integral to one’s understanding of nineteenth- and early-twentieth century women is a comprehension of their position within the home and the duties inherent to housewifery and motherhood. Connected to Butler’s notions about gender is the nineteenth century ideal of the “Angel in the House.” Promoted by both private and public spheres, and immortalized in Coventry Patmore’s poem “The Angel,” the image of the female as household goddess lasted into the twenty-first century. To be a wife and mother was the highest form of achievement to the Victorians. Quoted by Harvey Green in *Light of the Home: An Intimate View of the Lives of*

*Women in Victorian America*, Josiah Gilbert Holland asserts that the role of wife and mother is the bedrock of a national character. She is expected to be a figurative angel, presiding over the domestic sphere with a gentle but efficient hand. Citing the potential of childrearing and the blessing of procreation, Holland states that children allow women to “reach the highest and most harmonious development of which [they] are capable” (29). Subsequently, spinsters and barren women were seen as wasting this divine privilege and failing to realize their moral and physical potential: “A woman who neglected this ordained purpose was denying herself an opportunity for physical and moral development” (29).

According Green, quoting H. S. Pomeroy in *Ethics and Marriage* (1888), “childless women also faced a greater chance of disease than did mothers” (29). Proponents of the ideal devised pointed marketing strategies in an attempt to entice all women into joining this cult of motherhood. Along with perfect childrearing, women were expected to create the perfect living environment for their families. Using the historic metaphor of the “home as garden,” Green explains the wife and mother’s designation as gardener:

Indoor gardening in the bay windows that were popular from the middle nineteenth century onwards was so commonplace that the women’s magazines of the period usually printed articles about the care and treatment of plants.

Women’s responsibility for tending the realms of plants as well as children is emphasized by many of the pseudonyms of writers in women’s magazines—Fanny Forrester, Fanny Fern, Grace Greenwood, Minni Myrtle, Lily Larkspur, and Jenny June. (37)

The double entendre in this metaphor is clear. In addition to being a suitable “gardener,” the woman is also expected to have a “green thumb,” her fecundity allowing for a new generation of Victorians.

Consequently, those who chose to fill the role of wife and mother were put on pedestals for realizing their God-given female potential. The wife and mother was the epicenter of spirituality in the home. Without her, chaos and immorality would reign. The wife and mother is the “divine light” that safeguards the home (Moore 47). Understandably, these tropes placed enormous pressure on a woman. Not only was the wife and mother charged with safeguarding the souls of the nation’s youth, but she was the symbol of eternity for the white, Anglo-Saxon race—the “race” of Wharton’s own experience.<sup>1</sup> However, at its core, this trope had nothing to do with domesticity. Instead, it was a calculated attempt by society to keep women out of the public sphere as a response to their increasing role outside of the home. This “Woman Question” placed increased scrutiny on “women’s intellect, character, and role within society in relation (inevitably) to that of men.” Deeming women “secondary and firmly subordinate creatures,” society embraced the trope fully (Moore 41). But for those who were familiar with their roles and having been trained since girlhood, housewifery and motherhood is not so much intimidating as ritualistic. Like their parents and grandparents before them, the women in Wharton’s fiction are expected to marry and produce offspring to perpetuate Old New York.

In conjunction with the theories of Bakhtin, Mulvey, and Butler, as well as Green’s explanation of the “Angel in the House,” other critics offer vital insight into my argument of the classical and grotesque. For example, Emily J. Orlando’s *Edith Wharton and the Visual Arts* applies to my discussion of both the classical body and the male gaze. Focusing on the use of women as art, Orlando delves into both body studies and gender criticism. Similarly, Claire

Preston explains more of the female condition in Wharton's world in *Edith Wharton's Social Register*. By describing the binary between May and Ellen, Preston works to apply the character of Ellen to Wharton herself, citing their similarities in lifestyle. In my discussion of the classical body, Elizabeth Ammons' article "Cool Diana and the Blood-Red Muse: Edith Wharton on Innocence and Art" gives a detailed reading of May as the pinnacle of femininity, grace, and fashion in contrast to Ellen's exoticism. In turn, Harvey Green examines the ideal that May represents in *Light of the Home: An Intimate View of the Lives of Women in Victorian America*, offering an in-depth discussion of the "Angel in the House" trope and its saturation of nineteenth century culture. In the coming chapters, I will apply the theories of these critics and those of Bakhtin, Mulvey, and Butler in relation to Wharton's most famous novels.



## CHAPTER THREE

*The House of Mirth* and the Grotesque Statuesque

Emerging as a bestselling novelist by the turn of the twentieth century, Edith Wharton published *The House of Mirth* in 1905. According to Candace Waid, the novel is “the breakthrough work in which Wharton could be said to have invented herself as a novelist” (16). *The House of Mirth* concerns itself largely with the topics of class, propriety, and the places of women in society, and it chronicles the tumultuous life of Lily Bart and the circles in which she moves. With Lily as the central character, the novel juxtaposes the old world and the new, while focusing on those who live in the rapidly disappearing old world. Languishing on the marriage market for one too many years, Lily Bart begins actively searching for a wealthy, well-connected husband, despite her complicated feelings for Lawrence Selden. A long-time friend and fellow Old New Yorker, Selden and his relationship with Lily become more ambiguous as the story deepens. Their interactions imply mutual love, but one cannot be sure, as Lily dies before they can declare themselves.

After a series of misadventures and small rebellions, Lily declines or flees any marriage offers that come her way. Once her high-society group has tired of her charades, and after she has inadvertently embroiled herself in a major scandal, Lily is cast out and left to fend for herself. Without the support of rich and generous friends, Lily is forced to work for her living, something a woman of her standing normally would never consider doing. Not only that, but she is also unfit for *any* kind of manual labor, shown in her workplace embarrassments. Realizing the hopelessness of her situation and her inability to be self-sufficient, Lily gradually declines. Tired, sick, and lacking the will to live, Lily dies after overdosing on a sleeping draught, leaving behind a grieving Selden and an uncertain reader. Atypical despite her classical looks, Lily Bart

challenges the socially accepted view of the woman as inviolate. Instead of making her heroine fully grotesque, however, Wharton gives Lily a transitional quality—a combination of the classical and grotesque—that is both real and attractive as opposed to artificial and intimidating. Instead of making her a smiling, apparently-vacant façade like May Welland from *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton gives Lily a beautiful and classical, but ultimately enigmatic, aura.

When Lily first appears in Grand Central Terminal, we are introduced to her through the eyes of Lawrence Selden. She is presented initially as a classical body, with flawless manners, pedigree, and personal appearance: “Selden had never seen her more radiant. Her vivid head, relieved against the dull tints of the crowd, made her more conspicuous than in a ball-room” (*HOM* 5). After they have fled the hot, close surroundings of Grand Central Station, the narrator conveys Selden’s appreciation of Lily’s appearance: “Selden was conscious of taking a luxurious pleasure in her nearness: in the modeling of her little ear, the crisp upward wave of her hair [...] the thick planting of her straight black lashes [...] Everything about her was at once vigorous and exquisite [...]” (7). A strikingly beautiful woman, Lily rises above the unwashed, grotesque rabble that makes up the rest of New York, with its “sallow-faced girls in preposterous hats” and “flat-chested women struggling with paper bundles and palm-leaf fans” who occasionally stop to gaze at her (6). The image conveyed in the passage is clear and extraordinarily effective. In this instance, Lily is a living marble statue, a different “race” than the others around her. Lily stands out among the sea of unremarkable passersby, like a museum piece come to life, and her fellow travelers study her as they would a work of art.

Declining to have tea in the cool, luxurious enclosure of Sherry’s, a fashionable New York restaurant in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Lily insists that they retreat to Selden’s apartment. This is the more private option, of course, befitting the gravity of their

conversation, but it entails risk, as Lily discovers later. As an unmarried woman without a chaperone, Lily exposes herself to censure. A single woman alone with a bachelor is scandalous enough, but the discovery of Lily in Selden's private rooms, or even in his apartment in general, would be ruinous for both of them. However, even committing such a potentially dangerous lapse in judgment aside, Lily is the classical ideal, with her beauty offset by the somewhat shabby interior of Selden's apartment: "She paused before the mantelpiece, studying herself in the mirror while she adjusted her veil. The attitude revealed the long slope of her slender sides, which gave a kind of wild-wood grace to her outline—as though she were a captured dryad subdued to the conventions of the drawing-room" (12). Despite her recklessness, her "wild-wood grace" and her look of a "captured dryad" evoke the classical ideal I seek to analyze. The realities of her situation and its dangers are still present, however. And with her actions, Lily's previously irreproachable reputation is placed at risk. Though the cracks are slight and carefully hidden, Lily Bart's marble-like, statuesque body is beginning to crumble. Considering Lily's future and untimely end, perhaps this scene is intended as subtle foreshadowing. Her seemingly minor rebellion eventually leads into an outright rebuke of the social norm, which has disastrous consequences.

The image of Lily as the unblemished, unassailable lady endures for most of the novel, and it is magnified when she is around those whom she seeks to impress. Claire Preston states that, despite her volatile upbringing and the unhappiness of her parents, Lily has blossomed into a beautiful, pleasing young woman: "A non-violable mutation, Lily is a unique, spontaneous development of beauty and grace (quite clearly she is a creature wholly distinct from her proud father and crude grasping mother)" (51). Whereas her parents were greedy and bitter, Lily rises above to become the apotheosis of the upper class woman—a "non-violable mutation."

While walking through the countryside of Bellomont, Gus and Judy Trenor's estate in upstate New York, Lily displays none of the typical side effects of physical activity. Not only does Wharton use the pastoral to illustrate the landscape, with its "lane[s] plumed with asters and purpling sprays of bramble" (51), but she uses the same device with Lily as well: "Lily dropped down onto the rock, glowing with her long climb. She sat quiet, her lips parted by the stress of the ascent [...] Selden stretched himself on the grass at her feet [...]" (52). Instead of being damp with perspiration and breathing heavily due to her restricting corset, Lily glows with the light of physicality, as if she is a classical nymph whose body seems untouched by sweat or strain. Also, her pristine morning dress is completely unstained at the end of their journey, despite being dragged through earth and weeds along the wooded trail, and her hair is unaffected by the summer humidity. Like May Welland from *The Age of Innocence*, whose classical body remains unsoiled even during sport, Lily seems to be completely unaffected by both anatomic and environmental realities. Reminiscent of Pygmalion's Galatea, Lily is a creation of largely aesthetic value—a beautiful statue come to life. However, evidenced by ancient architecture, statues rarely survive the elements, and Lily is no exception.

*The House of Mirth* proves to be a lesson in both gender studies and feminist criticism, given the presence of the male gaze and its sexualizing nature paired with Lily's displays of femininity for others' benefit. Seen through Laura Mulvey's description of the "male gaze," Lily is both a victim and a manipulator of the male gaze and its inevitable sexualization of the female body. Appropriately, Lily serves as an object of aesthetic pleasure for those around her, particularly the men. According to Eleanor Dwight, the female character is, therefore, "set, tableaulike, against a dynamically populated backdrop in order that both her physical beauty and her place in society be illustrated for the reader" (190). Lily reaches her (classical) apotheosis in

the climactic *tableaux vivants* scene at the Wellington Brys' ball. A staple of upper-class social events throughout the nineteenth century and popularized in New York by Ada Adams Barrymore, *tableaux vivants* have, according to Emily J. Orlando, "a historical connection to the theatre: they were staged between acts of eighteenth-century Parisian theatrical performances, and they made their New York debut during the 1831-32 theater season" (60).<sup>2</sup> Copying Joshua Reynolds' *Mrs. Lloyd*, Lily becomes the living embodiment of the classical ideal. Lily is the sylvan virgin—the Diana of Reynolds's portrait.

Waid gives a concise description of Reynolds' painting: "The narrative does not note that the portrait of Mrs. Lloyd is the figure of a woman engaged in writing. Reynolds' portrait depicts the young Joanna Leigh at or near the time of her marriage to Richard Lloyd, standing in ... classical dress next to a tree in a wood. Holding a penlike [*sic*] instrument, she appears to be carving the letters of her husband's name in the bark of the tree. One can make out two *L*'s and the *O* that she is in the process of completing" (28). Aside from the obvious classical elements to the painting and Lily's imitation of it, the implications of the sitter's actions and stance make the painting all the more meaningful. Not only is the sitter *writing* (or carving), evoking the controversial female writer, but also her pose is suggestive in itself. The slouched stance paired with the thin, clinging fabric allows the viewer to see the shapes of both her thighs and breasts. Also, the only two sources of illumination in the portrait highlight the sitter's (or stander's) crotch and breast. In *The Age of Innocence*, Ellen's body is displayed in a similar manner at the opera. Attired in a clinging, revealing gown, she is shunned by New York and deemed grotesque, whereas Lily's display of her form is praised.

When the curtain lifts and Lily is revealed to the audience, there is an audible gasp. The guests at the Wellington Brys' "general entertainment" are dumbstruck by the cold beauty that

has made Lily a desirable but ultimately unattainable woman (103). Wharton writes, “It was as though she had stepped, not out of, but into, Reynolds’s canvas, banishing the phantom of his dead beauty by the beams of her living grace” (106). With her regal bearing and poetic beauty, Lily appears to Selden as a woodland dryad: “Her pale draperies, and the background of foliage against which she stood, served only to relieve the long dryad-like curves that swept upward from her poised foot to her lifted arm” (106). However, not all of the men are artistic connoisseurs of Selden’s caliber, and they respond crudely instead of appreciatively. In this sense, she is both classical and grotesque, depending on who is looking. Since I am positioning Lily as a transitional character, perhaps this is because she is a living work of art with real body parts; the duality opens her up to praise for her classical body and criticism for her grotesque one. After this controversial display of beauty, however, Lily’s descent is swift and brutal. With her *tableaux*, she reaches her classical zenith, so, naturally, her trajectory leads downhill afterwards.

The male gaze makes its presence known from the novel’s opening. Instead of being introduced to Lily outright, the reader is first given an image of her through Selden’s eyes. His evaluative stare, facilitated by the crowdedness of Grand Central Terminal, allows for a vivid—if somewhat harsh—image of the heroine. In effect, Lily is not only commodified for the reader’s visual and mental pleasure, but for Selden’s as well. His objectification of her is made clear while they are strolling along Madison Avenue in Chapter I: “He has a confused sense that she must have cost a great deal to make, that a great many dull and ugly people must, in some mysterious way, have been sacrificed to produce her” (*HM* 7). As an expensive commodity, Lily is expected to follow the rules of her set: marry a rich husband, have an army of well-bred children, and live as a beautiful relic of old New York.

Not surprisingly, it is this *tableaux vivants* sequence in *The House of Mirth* that most obviously lends itself to Mulvey's theories. As Mrs. Lloyd, Lily puts herself on display for the scrutinizing gaze of the men and women at the Wellington-Brys' ball. Though praise for Lily is glowing and universal, there are those who seek to cheapen this display of her beauty. Ned Van Alstyne breaks the spell that Lily has cast and crudely comments upon her appearance, much to the annoyance of Selden. Instead of viewing her as a classical being in her pose and dress, she is sexualized: "Deuced bold thing to show herself in that get-up; but, gad, there isn't a break in the lines anywhere, and I suppose she wanted us to know it" (106). As much as Selden may wish to discard Van Alstyne's remark, evidence by his "indignant contempt" of the crude man, the comment has many levels of meaning (107).<sup>3</sup> The most obvious is, of course, his sexualization and commodification of Lily through the male gaze. More broadly, this unfortunate product of Lily's display connotes the origin of the *tableaux* as entertainment. Before it was a fashionable parlor game for the upper class, the *tableaux* was a source of scandal:

Most *tableaux vivants* were sensational in nature and designed to titillate. But controversy did not surround these performances until women's bodies entered the scene. One observer noted in 1850 that "[up] to this time these exhibitions had been composed exclusively of men, and we never heard of their being immodest; but the moment ladies bodies made their appearance, an outcry of outraged public decency rose on all sides." As soon as the viewer's gaze shifted to female bodies on display—and scantily clad bodies at that—the tradition became associated with indecency. (Orlando 61)

Effectively, then, Van Alstyne's comments not only cheapen Lily, but they hearken back to a time in which such high-class games were considered immoral.<sup>4</sup> Granted, when one sees

Reynolds's painting, its sexual undertone makes itself immediately apparent, so any emulation of the portrait would logically carry the same quality. However, this does not excuse Van Alstyne's comments. Touted as the moral leaders of American society, Wharton's upper-class characters rarely prove themselves to be so. This substantial evidence demonstrates the degradation of the moral fabric of the American upper class.

However, the sexualization inherent to the male gaze is a two-way street of sorts according to Mulvey, with the male deriving pleasure from viewing the woman and projecting his erotic desires upon her, and the female deriving pleasure herself, reveling in the attention men provide. Wharton demonstrates this power play by revealing Lily's pleasure at being viewed during the *tableaux vivants* scene: "She had feared at the last moment that she was risking too much in dispensing with the advantages of a more sumptuous setting, and the completeness of her triumph gave her an intoxicating sense of recovered power" (107). As opposed to being diminished or disturbed by the perversion of her display in the male psyche, Lily is empowered and rejuvenated by the attention. In "The House of Mirrors: Carrie, Lily, and the Reflected Self," Caren J. Town asserts that Lily's acting "provides a way for her to recover her power over society, and especially over the eligible men in that society" and that the "stage presentation of her beauty [...] [will] make it more valuable" (48). Lily's behavior and the enjoyment of the *tableaux* shown by the female guests reveal the extent to which women are complicit in their own objectification under Mulvey's model. As can be seen from the audience reaction, many of those praising Lily are women. Far from protesting their objectification, Wharton's women use it to their advantage, often profiting greatly from the desires of the men around them. To Orlando, this proves that "the ideal spectator is not always male" (71). Often, those with the most calculating, evaluative eyes are the female characters.



This moment of perfect beauty cannot last, however. After a dinner party at Bellomont, the Trenor estate, Lily looks at herself in the mirror. Despite the soft, hazy lamplight, Lily is able to see her imperfections: “The white oval of her face swam out waveringly from a background of shadows, the uncertain light blurring it like a haze; but the two lines about the mouth remained” (25). Tired, sick, and isolated, Lily becomes the grotesque in her physical appearance, betraying the mutability of the human body and its susceptibility to illness. When she encounters Mr. Rosedale after she has been expelled from society, he notes her enduring beauty, but her situation has clearly had its effects on her looks: “The dark penciling of fatigue under her eyes, the morbid, blue-veined pallour of the temples, brought out the brightness of her hair and lips as though all her ebbing vitality were centered there” (226). Though she still retains vestiges of the classical in the descriptions of her hair and lips, Lily’s looks have faded. She looks older than her age, made grotesque by the injustices she has suffered.

Furthermore, even Selden is surprised at how quickly Lily has declined. In their final meeting in his apartment before her suicide, Selden notes the “pallour of her delicately-hollowed face” (238). The use of “pallour” is significant here because Lily becomes whiter, more statuesque, and more marble-like as her condition worsens, foreshadowing her return to the classical in death. Aside from her face, Lily’s new life in “the rubbish heap” has had its effects on her body as well. Once nubile, her figure has since given way to angularity and thinness, evidencing her illness. Before she leaves him for the final time, Lily surreptitiously casts Bertha Dorset’s letters into the fire, allowing Selden to evaluate her one last time: “He saw, too, under the loose lines of her dress, how the curves of her figure had shrunk to angularity; her remembered long afterwards how the red play of the flame sharpened the depression of her nostrils, and intensified the blackness of the shadows which struck up from her cheekbones to

her eyes” (241). Granted, Lily never jumps headlong into the grotesque like Catherine Mingott or Medora Manson, but her sickness and obvious physical decline make her grotesque but also hint at her return to the classical upon her deathbed. After the *tableaux* scene, Lily’s social and physical decline is rapid.

Almost immediately, Lily aligns herself scandalously with Gus Trenor, becoming his unwitting almost-mistress in her quest for financial independence via the stock trade. Desperate to escape the accusing eyes of New York, Lily accepts the Dorsets’ invitation to tour the Mediterranean on their yacht, the *Sabrina*. Lily’s presence on the cruise proves to be her undoing, however, because it is used as a cover by Bertha to facilitate an affair with Ned Silverton. To divert rumors from her liaison, Bertha insinuates that Lily is conducting an affair with her husband, George, and bars her from the yacht. After word of the incident reaches New York, Lily is ruined, and her reputation is left in tatters. Disinherited by her Aunt Peniston, Lily descends the social ladder, her appearance becoming more and more grotesque. Though she herself is not necessarily unpleasant or disgusting, the acknowledgement of the natural body in her illness is a unilateral mark of the grotesque. Considering Lily’s place as challenger of the classical body, Wharton’s unsparing description of Lily’s illness further displays her preference for the grotesque, transitional body and its emphasis on truth instead of fantasy.

Shortly before she dies, Lily begins her reversion to the classical body, which is further enforced after she passes. Being in her very early thirties at the time of her death, Lily dies while she is still young and her beauty is therefore preserved. More practically, Lily is classical because her body does not go through the normal processes that accompany death and decay. There is neither yellowing of the skin nor an unpleasant smell; no involuntary expulsion of bodily wastes and gases. Instead, she looks as if she is asleep, patiently waiting for Gerty Farish

and Selden to arrive: “He stood looking down on the sleeping face which seems to lie like a delicate implacable mask over the living lineaments he had known. He felt that the real Lily was still there, close to him, yet invisible and inaccessible” (253). Owing largely to her method of suicide—overdosing on a sleeping draught—Lily’s beauty is preserved, so much so that Selden cannot believe she has died. Like the saints entombed in their glass sarcophagi, Lily is incorruptible in death. Cynthia Griffin Wolff makes a similar argument in “Lily Bart and the Beautiful Death,” maintaining that Lily’s death freezes her aging, allowing the remaining vestiges of beauty to grace her corpse: “The effect of her death is redemptive: it recaptures and fixes forever Selden’s esteem for her; it apotheosizes her triumphant *tableau vivant*” (337). Despite the physical and mental effects of her fall from grace, Lily’s beauty is restored in the end. The qualities that earned her Selden’s admiration in the first pages of *The House of Mirth* reemerge in her final *tableaux*.

Continuing the theoretical discussion of the novel, Lily’s behavior fits Butler’s model of a socially-enforced performance of gender. The first instance Lily’s gender performance is her pursuit of Percy Gryce, heir to the Gryce fortune and connoisseur of “Americana.” Lily, seeking to attach herself to a wealthy suitor, adopts an air of innocence and piety in order to appeal to the bookish Percy. Lily begins her pursuit on the train to Bellomont in Chapter II. She begins by appealing to Percy’s chivalry, as any young man of social standing would be glad to offer assistance to a woman of Lily’s stature: “She waited till the train had emerged from the tunnel and was racing between the ragged edges of the northern suburbs [...] she rose from her seat and drifted slowly down the carriage. As she passed Mr. Gryce, the train gave a lurch, and he was aware of a slender hand gripping the back of his chair” (17). Once she has enticed Percy and made her presence known, Lily goes in for the kill. When the train lurches again, Lily is nearly

jostled into his arms. Though there is no physical contact, Percy is “enveloped in the scent of her dress” (17). By gently touching his arm and artfully arranging herself on the train seat, Lily ensnares Percy, until her spell is broken by the intrusion of Bertha Dorset. By affecting such hyper-feminine mannerisms, such as exaggerated delicacy and modesty, and casting herself as the helpless lady, Lily effortlessly attracts men like Percy Gryce, however contemptuous of them she may be.

Attempting to make herself even more attractive to the shy, quiet Percy, Lily feigns interest in his collection of American memorabilia, dubbed “Americana” by Wharton. It is made clear in the text that Lily cares little for the conversation, simply going through the motions in order to satisfy the rules of the game in which she is engaged:

But Miss Bart, it appeared, really did want to know about Americana: and moreover, she was already sufficiently informed to make the task of further instruction as easy as it was agreeable. She questioned him intelligently, she heard him submissively; and, prepared for the look of lassitude which usually crept over his listeners’ faces, he grew eloquent under her receptive gaze. (19)

Interestingly, Lily reverses the male gaze in her evaluation of Percy. But by feigning interest in him, Lily becomes exactly what he wants, as well as what most men of her class want as well: a young, beautiful woman who will hang on their every word and serve as the perfect wife at their sides. In turn, Percy is obviously affected by her beauty, and his own ideas of womanhood and desirability are projected upon her.

In order to satisfy Percy Gryce’s strict, almost Puritanical sense of morality and propriety, Lily goes to great lengths to make herself appear irreproachable. However, this plan initially backfires on the train to Bellomont, after Bertha Dorset has interrupted their

conversation. After she sits, Bertha asks Lily for a cigarette, embarrassing Lily and damaging her innocence in Percy's eyes: "Miss Bart caught the startled glance of Mr. Percy Gryce, whose own lips were never defiled by tobacco" (22). Similar to the treatment Ellen Olenska receives for her smoking in *The Age of Innocence*, tobacco usage was not necessarily suitable for the upper class woman, it being primarily a male indulgence. Subsequently, a woman seen smoking would have been adopting unflatteringly masculine qualities. More broadly, this would be seen as subversive and dangerous to the existing order. Nevertheless, despite her minor *faux pas*, Lily is able to recover herself. Affecting an air of modesty and devotion, she plans to wear a particularly simple dress to church with Percy: "She has an idea that the sight of her in a grey gown of devotional cut, with her famous lashes dropped above a prayer-book, would put the finishing touch to Mr. Gryce's subjugation [...]" (45). However, Lily is unable to execute her plan. She realizes the implications of a proposal from Percy, and the image of a luxurious life is quickly shattered, replaced by one of inanity and routine: "The sight of the grey dress and the borrowed prayer book flashed a long light down the years. She would have to go to church with Percy Gryce every Sunday. They would have a front pew in the most expensive church in New York [...]" (47). By marrying Percy Gryce, Lily knows that she would be sentencing herself to a life of boredom and sterility, owing largely to the disdain she has for the lamblike Percy.

In contrast to Lily's classical perfection, Gertrude "Gerty" Farish represents the grotesque in this novel. As the spinster cousin of Selden, Gerty is rarely included in the social circles in which Lily moves. She is mentioned with little affection, owing largely to her manner of life and her plain looks. While visiting Selden in his apartment, Lily disdainfully remarks on Gerty's way of life: "'Oh, I know—you mean Gerty Farish.' She smiled a little unkindly. 'But I said marriageable—and besides, she has a horrid little place, and no maid, and such queer things to

eat. Her cook does the washing and the food tastes like soap. I should hate that, you, know” (8). Due to Gerty’s lack of money and her “unmarriageable” status, Lily writes her off, her later dependence on her notwithstanding. After Lily’s *tableaux*, Gerty approaches her to praise her “performance,” but even then, Lily’s attitude toward her is biting: “Gertude Farish, in fact, typified the mediocre and the ineffectual [...] her eyes were of a workaday grey and her lips without haunting curves” (70). Aside from her grotesqueness, Gerty is an independent woman. Though she does not live grandly, she appears happy in her solitary life of charity work and philanthropy. In her quest for independence apart from marriage and rich friends, Lily looks at Gerty with jealousy, as she is unable to support herself in the same manner. Instead of adopting Lily’s pitying, resentful attitude towards Gerty, Wharton presents her with admiration. Lily’s imperious bearing notwithstanding, *she* is framed as the one to be pitied.

Instead of living her life as an ornament and expiring, Lily attempts to make her own way in life, a move that both further alienates her from her set and drives her to the grave. She tries to live as Gerty does but fails horribly. On the other hand, Gerty thrives. In a similar social position and with even fewer funds, Gerty leads an active life as a single woman. Lily attempts this in her jobs with Mrs. Norma Hatch and the millinery shop, but she fails in each endeavor. Not only does Gerty set up one of these jobs, but she bears witness to Lily’s failures and is a figure on whom Lily depends. Her shortcomings fling Lily, “ashamed and penitent, on the broad bosom of Gerty’s sympathy” (221). Not only is Lily regularly confronted with an example of female independence in Gerty, but Gerty also comforts her and witnesses her mistakes. This results in Lily’s subtle resentment of Gerty’s repeated nurturing: “She did not, however, propose to lie there prone, and Gerty’s inspiration about the hats at once revived her hopes of profitable activity” (221). These hopes prove to be misguided, and Lily ends up in poverty. Though Lily

resents Gerty for her freedom and ability, she is able to experience life independently for at least a brief period. She is able to experience *real* life in a role outside that of upper-class woman.

Though Lily delves into the classical with her striking but emaciated appearance, she remains a transitional character whose devolution follows the novel's progression. Aside from Gerty, Wharton illustrates other, even more grotesque characters alongside her heroine. The first of these is the house cleaner Mrs. Haffen. Poor, unattractive, and desperate, Mrs. Haffen uses what little knowledge she has in a failed power play. Lily, leaving Selden's apartment alone, encounters the charwoman on the stairs, vigorously scrubbing the floor. Noting her grotesque appearance, Lily brushes past her, barely taking in Mrs. Haffen's presence: "The woman paused in her work and looked up curiously, resting her clenched red fists on the wet cloth she had just drawn from her pail. She had a broad, sallow face, slightly pitted with small-pox, and thin, straw colored hair" (13). Worst of all, though, is her "thin straw-coloured hair through which her scalp shone unpleasantly" (13). Pitted against the statuesque, lace-clad Lily Bart, Mrs. Haffen is both lower-class and physically grotesque.

When she visits Lily in Chapter IX, she is once again depicted as grotesque. Attempting to extort money from Lily under the assumption that she is Bertha Dorset, the woman with whom Lawrence Selden is having an affair, Mrs. Haffen's ugliness is juxtaposed with Lily's beauty in the dimly lit drawing room: "The glare of the unshaded gas shone familiarly on her pock-marked face and the reddish baldness visible through thin strands of straw-coloured hair" (80). Effectively, then, Mrs. Haffen fulfills the main requirements of the grotesque body by being ugly *and* low-class. More practically, though, she serves as a contrast for Lily's beauty. Lily's beauty is highlighted by the charwoman's grotesqueness on the stairs of the Benedick and in the drawing room of the Peniston mansion. While Lily serves as the classical ideal, Gerty Farish and

Mrs. Haffen are firmly grotesque. Although they are relatively minor characters, they serve as foils to Lily while simultaneously enhancing her beauty with their grotesqueness.

Outside of objectification and the male gaze, Lily adheres to dominant social norms and its restrictive gender roles—mainly in regards to women, their places in society, and their behavior. Fulfilling Judith Butler’s theories on gender performance, Lily puts on a charade for the benefit of herself and those around her, despite the fact that her projected self is far removed from her actual personality. Desirous of freedom and independence but restricted by class and lack of ability, Lily behaves as an upper-class woman is expected to behave, executing this socially-enforced song and dance with aplomb. Nevertheless, Lily sees the emptiness of such performances, as they very clearly rob her of her individual identity. Olive Schreiner explains the levels to which women must stoop to survive in Wharton’s America: “A curious tendency has manifested itself for the human female to become more or less parasitic; social conditions tend to rob her of all forms of active, conscious, social labour, and to reduce her [...] to the [...] exercise of her sex functions alone” (293). Subsequently, they become carbon copies of one another—women commodifying and typifying themselves in order to attract a wealthy husband.

Though she is sexualized and objectified by the men and the majority of the women around her, Lily remains inviolable, conducting herself with a quiet dignity after she has been expelled from her set. She may perform in a manner suggestive of her breeding and social standing, but it is made abundantly clear that there is much more depth to Lily than meets the eye. Rather than choosing the way of convenience through a rich marriage, Lily decides to experience life more or less on her own terms. While she embodies the classical and stuns with her beauty, she eventually devolves into the grotesque once she is expelled from her social circle. However, she regains her classical body in death, thereby complicating a direct classification of



her. Lily is then the first in a set of Wharton's "complicated" women—transitional characters who present an attractive combination of the classical and grotesque bodies.

## CHAPTER FOUR

*The Custom of the Country* and Classical Savagery

Published in 1913, *The Custom of the Country* demonstrates a change in style compared to Wharton's more understated New York novels: *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*. Perhaps the most obvious example of the novel's difference is its heroine, Undine Spragg Marvell de Chelles Moffat. Challenging the image of the pure, classical woman, Undine is more or less a monster concealed by a mask of physical attractiveness. This authorial change of pace coincided with a series of pivotal events in Wharton's life. The novel came at a risky but liberating time in Wharton's life, which has led to the assumption that Wharton's tumultuous period heavily influenced *The Custom of the Country*. After an extended affair with American journalist William Morton Fullerton, Wharton finally obtained a divorce from her husband, Teddy Wharton, in 1913. While this may have led another kind of woman to find safety in creating more conventional heroines, Wharton defied the typical. In *Edith Wharton's Argument with America*, Elizabeth Ammons argues that Wharton was able to write the novel and create Undine Spragg *because* of her affair and subsequent divorce: "It makes sense that, until her own freedom from marriage was secured and official, she would be unable to complete Undine's story: personally, divorce was repugnant to Wharton; but so was marriage in many respects, and *The Custom of the Country* gave her the opportunity to attack both with vehemence" (99). Wharton's views on marriage are hardly unwarranted, as her first and only husband was renowned for his philandering and alcoholism, but divorce was a lengthy, scandalous process at the time.

Evidenced by Ellen Olenska's treatment in *The Age of Innocence*, divorce in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially among the wealthy and powerful, often amounted to social suicide. In divorce, shady business dealings, affairs, and various personal

secrets are discovered and unceremoniously revealed. However, Wharton emerged from her divorce practically unscathed from a social standpoint due to her financial resources and lofty connections. Like Undine, she fled to France. Ammons comments further on the unusualness of the novel, focusing on the savagery of the plot and the characters. To her, the novel's harshness reflects Wharton's relationship with her husband and their eventual split: "If there is an undeniable ferocity about the book it is probably because *The Custom of the Country* was freed—let loose—from [...] Wharton's imagination by her final break with her own husband" (99). Plagued by abuse and financial woes in its early years, Wharton's marriage and her divorce were neither amicable nor peaceful, mirroring Undine's separations from her husbands.

Departing from the typified image of the pure, upper-class woman, Undine is childish, spoiled, and single-mindedly selfish, charming and destroying in equal measure. Undine seeks to conquer both American and European social hierarchies, armed with striking beauty and the latest fashions. Despite her success, however, she remains an outsider—a rough-and-tumble Midwesterner amid East-coast Puritans. At the novel's beginning, Undine is still struggling to make her way in New York society. Despite her father's considerable funds, she is unable to find a match that suits her and her ambition. First setting her sights on Ralph Marvell, scion of the prestigious Dagonet and Fairford families, Undine quickly marries him. However, the lives of the New York elite are not to her liking. Blinded by the idea of old wealth and prestige, Undine is shocked to realize that these families are not only cash-poor, but their social relevance is also diminishing. While holidaying in Europe, Undine embarks on an affair with wealthy Manhattanite Peter Van Degen, desperate to experience the luxury that her status affords, but her husband unfortunately cannot. Peter is soon confronted with Undine's selfishness and shallowness, however, causing him to renounce her and sever all romantic ties. With her plans

for a more advantageous marriage destroyed, Undine divorces Marvell and flees New York. She loses her place in society and has to scheme her way up the social ladder once again. Without the Marvell name, Undine has to rise again by virtue of her own craftiness.

In Paris, Undine meets the French count, Raymond de Chelles, to whom she becomes instantly attached. Lacking enough money with which to bribe the Pope into annulling her first marriage, she blackmails Ralph, eventually driving him to commit suicide. This conveniently opens up the prospect of her match with Raymond. Undine finds little satisfaction within the gloomy confines of the French aristocracy, however, largely due to the family's inability to afford the trappings representative of their titles. She finds that she is more or less back where she started. Resentful of the de Chelles' genteel poverty, she divorces Raymond and marries Elmer Moffat, her first husband, whose existence she has kept secret throughout the novel. The ambiguous ending of the novel suggests that Undine's social climbing is not yet finished, and readers see her longing to be the wife of an ambassador.

Undine Spragg is a character completely unlike any of Wharton's other women. Obviously lacking the temperament and refinement of Lily Bart, Undine is left with her physical attractiveness and her father's limited funds to facilitate her rise in society. Undine remains a creature of the classical body throughout the novel. Her beauty never diminishes, and she retains her youthful appearance even in advanced age. One could even argue that she hardly ages *at all*. Regrettably, there are two sides to this coin—her personality does not change, either. Though she is a classical character, she is unlike May Welland or the van der Luydens. Instead of having an inherent mastery of decorum and fashion, Undine is a master of manipulation and cruelty and is often abrasive and tacky, exposing her common, *nouveau riche* origins. Generously, Ammons states, "By nature aggressive, assertive, confident, and ambitious, Undine is at the same time

manipulative, theatrical, and adaptable” (105). Aside from her beauty, Undine’s adaptability—the ease with which she transmutes from one “form” to the next—is viewed by some as her most admirable feature. Effectively, then, Wharton is challenging the classical female standard with her fashioning of *The Custom of the Country* and its crass heroine.

Instead of having her rebel as Lily does, Undine embraces the strict confines of the classical body, but only in a literal sense. Only her body is classical, while her behavior is decidedly grotesque. On the outside, Undine is the classical ideal, the flawless statue of Bakhtin’s imagining, but on the inside, she is rotting organic matter, a cancer that latches onto weaker hosts. To that effect, Wharton uses Undine to prove that the standards set by the classical body are unrealistic in their dictation of physical beauty and that women cannot always be the pure, nurturing figures one would expect. Undine is not interested in motherhood, nor is she particularly keen on marriage and domesticity, inverting the dominant social image of the woman as an angel in the house. Though a satire of Undine and her group of *nouveau riche* “invaders,” the novel further shows Wharton’s insistence on and attraction to the grotesque.<sup>5</sup> These invaders, spearheaded by Undine Spragg, not only have the ability to blend into New York society, but they are also capable of emulating the classical figures whom they are gradually supplanting.

Contemporary reviewers, unappreciative of the risks Wharton took in the novel, were somewhat hostile. What Elaine Showalter has termed “critical revulsion” manifests itself in the vitriol aimed at Undine and her abhorrent behavior (89). In her introduction to *The Custom of the Country*, Sarah Elmsley lists the predominantly negative responses to the novel and its heroine: “Most reviewers of the novel and many of the later critics have focused, perhaps not surprisingly, on Undine as the heroine. Contemporary reviewers such as L.M.F., writing in the

*New York Times Review of Books*, compared Undine with Lily Bart and concluded that Wharton's later heroine is "greed personified" (27). Indeed, Undine comes under attack for her behavior, with many readers expressing their concern with such an "immoral heroine" (27). However, there were some who defended Wharton's representation of Undine, with a reviewer from the *Athenaeum* stating, "Wharton does show a degree of sympathy with her heroine's situation" (27). Such a statement is not difficult to make considering Undine's position as a crafty, ambitious woman in a male-dominated world. One cannot help but be impressed at Undine's swift rise to the upper levels of American and European society, but her methods appear to have caused most of Wharton's early readers discomfort. In a 1915 essay, James Huneker stresses that Undine is not necessarily wicked, "only disagreeable and fashionable" and ultimately "monotonous" (27). To him, Undine is just one of many well-dressed but unsophisticated women on Fifth Avenue and, therefore, not worthy of a second glance.

Charitably, the reviewer for the Australian *Adelaide Register* in January of 1914 posits that Undine is simply a product of her environment as opposed to an inherently ruthless woman: "Undine is not immoral. Undine is the product of the unequal distribution of wealth, like the slums. She is a social disease. She is the queen of the Snobs ..." (27). Raised in the fledgling Midwest and well acquainted with the shady business dealings in which men like her father have engaged, Undine is single-minded and ruthless in her pursuit of position and fortune. Multiple critics argue that "the novel is flawed by Wharton's animosity toward her heroine, an uncouth bouncer whose greed and ignorance she finds repellent" (Ammons, *Wharton's Argument* 101). Although she lands on her feet after every misstep, the frequency with which Undine is thwarted shows a certain amount of *schadenfreude* on Wharton's part.

Despite her moral shortcomings, however, Undine is a perfect specimen of the classical body. She is not only graceful and beautiful, but her appearance and her calculated mannerisms admit her into the most exclusive salons in New York. Before she appears in the novel, the reader can see her classical body, as her name itself evokes the classical ideal. According to Candace Waid, the *undine* is a “beautiful water nymph or water spirit [that] can gain a soul only by having a child” (145). However, Undine fails to gain a soul after she has a child, for neither her body nor her personality changes in motherhood. After she is introduced in Chapter I, Undine’s classical body is illustrated extensively, beginning with the curve of her neck and ending with her dainty feet: “Every movement she made seems to start at the nape of her neck, just below the little roll of reddish-gold hair, and flow without a break through her whole slim length to the tips of her fingers and the points of her slender restless feet” (41). Furthermore, Undine embodies the beauty ideal of the early twentieth century à la Gibson Girl with her “black brows, her reddish-tawny hair and the pure red and white of her complexion [which] defied the searching decomposing radiance” (51). This is a deceptive lightness, however, existing only on the surface. Those who are drawn to Undine’s “light” are often destroyed by it, and her “restless feet” shatter the classical ideal that she represents because they expose her true nature: ambitious, constantly in motion, and ever-changing.

After she has received the invitation to the Fairford’s dinner party, Undine practices her mannerisms—the swish of her skirts and the positioning of her arm on the back of the chair. She walks around her room, “[enacting] the same perfect pantomime, gliding in, settling her skirts, swaying her fan, moving her lips in soundless talk and laughter” (51). Later in the novel, at the opera, Undine’s luminous beauty is displayed. A common device in Wharton’s work, the opera serves a specific purpose for Undine. The gilded, brightly lit auditorium works to enhance her

classical body. Undine encounters Ralph Marvell while exiting the opera box for which her father handsomely paid. Realizing her opportunity, Undine becomes a statue, naturally but very consciously raising her arm to retrieve her cloak then holding the graceful pose: “Undine stood with one arm listlessly raised to detach her cloak from the wall. Her attitude showed the long, slimness of her figure and the fresh curve of her throat below her bent-back head. Her face was paler and softer than usual, and the eyes she tested on Marvell’s face looked deep and starry under their fixed brows” (81). Her display works its magic on Marvell because she is exactly what he seeks: a beautiful, delicate woman upon whom he can project his artistic fantasies.

In Mulvey’s terms, Undine is subject to the male gaze in this scene, a fact of which she is acutely aware and by which she profits. Subsequently, Marvell views her in the classical framework. Fooled by her apparent innocence and reflecting upon his own disenchantment with his social group, Marvell “seemed to see her like a lovely rock-bound Andromeda, with the devouring monster Society careering up to make a mouthful of her; and himself whirling down on his winged horse [...] to cut her bonds, snatch her up, and whirl her back into the blue” (90). This mythological precedent parallels Undine with Ellen Olenska. Newland Archer views Ellen as a victim of the society that reared her, and he often explores her vulnerable position in similar terms. Undine is quickly engaged and married to Ralph Marvell, allowing her access to the exclusive, cloister-like world of Old New York.

Recalling Judith Butler and her theories on gender performance, Undine enhances her femininity to her attain goals and to satisfy her greed. To reach the position in which she thinks she belongs, Undine uses a false image to be more attractive. Undine has obviously been assigned a female gender, similar to Lily Bart, but she affects her femininity for the benefit of the men around her. In this respect, she “performs” in the expected manner. She becomes a placid,



respectable upper-class woman and suppresses her true nature: that of an inexperienced but enthusiastic Midwestern girl. For example, at the opera, Undine makes sure to draw attention to her conversation with Peter Van Degen. Coming from one of the most illustrious families in the New York set, Peter is an important ally, a fact of which Undine is fully aware: “Undine sat well forward, curving toward him a little, as she had seen other women do, but holding back sufficiently to let it be visible to the house that she was conversing with no less a person than Mr. Peter Van Degen” (79). Familiar from personal research with the complicated workings of his social set, Undine knows the steps of this “dance.” She knows with whom she is supposed to speak, and she knows what role she is to play. With Marvell, she is delicate and innocently sexual; with Van Degen, she is seductive and free-spirited. Of course, she is neither of these completely, but she performs her required role(s) in order to succeed. Like Lily Bart, she adopts an air of hyper femininity to fulfill the fantasies of the men around her, performing her part and commodifying herself. However, while Lily becomes disenchanted with her life as an ornament, Undine faces no such crisis. This is chiefly due to the fact that Undine is financially stable and has no economic need to take a serious, evaluative look at herself like the penniless Lily Bart.

Proud of her beauty and hungry for attention, Undine intentionally puts herself on display and is complicit in her objectification. Undine is aware of the eyes turning to her when she arrives at the opera: “Her consciousness seemed to take in at once the whole bright curve of the auditorium [...] and she herself was the core of that vast illumination, the sentient throbbing surface which gathered all the shafts of light into a centre [*sic*]” (75). Undine is conscious of the eyes following her down Fifth Avenue as well. Not only does she enjoy the attention, but she also craves more eyes on her: “She had to content herself with the gaze of admiration which she left in her wake along the pavement; but she was used to the homage of the streets and her vanity

craved a choicer fare” (67). Consumed by vanity and desirous of what she thinks only men can give her, Undine *pretends* to live a life of quiet servitude to the men around her. Though she destroys these men one by one, she willingly subjects herself to the male gaze in order to reach her goals, turning her surroundings into backdrops for her unsullied body.

Waid addresses Undine’s habit of performing, explaining Undine’s consciousness of “herself as spectacle, even when she is alone” and that her “theatricality turns all places into settings for her and all people (even her young son, Paul) into accessories” (136). In exhibiting such shallowness, Undine joins a long line of historical women. Comparing Undine to Josephine Bonaparte, whose likeness she imitates for a costume ball, Emily J. Orlando states, “Like Undine, Josephine captivated, flirted, and charmed and was romantically linked to several men before, during, and after marriage. Further, both women relished the accouterments of wealth: fashion, jewelry, a life of luxury” (91).<sup>6</sup> Undine’s ultimate goals are wealth and position, and she is willing to sell her body and all “accessories” at her disposal to achieve them.

Critics such as Josephine Lurie Jessup and Gloria C. Erlich have used Undine’s scrupulousness to compare her to Scarlett O’Hara from Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* (1936), citing her “devouring” nature (Jessup 28). Elaine Showalter rejects Jessup’s comparison, however, maintaining that Undine never has to face real, life-threatening issues like Scarlett: “In [...] *Gone with the Wind*, a novel influenced by Wharton [...] Scarlett O’Hara has a shrewd business sense and a capacity for hard work beyond anything Undine achieves. Unlike [...] Scarlett, Undine is never forced to confront real hardship or fight for her survival” (92). As opposed to Ellen or Lily, who both attempt lives of independence and who fail in individual ways, Undine has no interest in liberation, nor does she wish to return to her humble life in

Apex. Unlike Scarlett, who, despite money and position, realizes the importance of home and family, Undine continuously wanders, unable to satisfy her greedy personality.

While on her honeymoon with Marvell in the rugged Italian countryside, Undine is further shown to be a classical figure. She is unable to find a comfortable position leaning against the rough bark of a tree: “Undine, nearby, leaned against a gnarled tree with the slightly constrained air of a person unused to sylvan abandonments. Her beautiful back could not adapt to the irregularities [...] But her expression was serene” (125). As a creature of the classical body, Undine is uncomfortable amid the “dirty” parts of nature—the dust and heat of an Italian summer—and she is unable to adapt herself to her irregular, imperfect surroundings. However, her body does not betray her by perspiring, and she remains “cool as a wave,” pastoral amidst the arid Sieneese countryside. Similar to the way Lily is viewed in her walks at Bellomont, Undine is not described as experiencing the realities of physical exertion after hiking: “She came back late, flushed with her long walk, her face all sparkle and mystery, as he [Marvell] had seen it in the first days of their courtship [...]” (137). Seen through Marvell’s eyes, Undine’s graceful athleticism anticipates May Welland, inviolable in her white gown and wielding her bow and arrow. Undine glows with the vigor of activity instead of being damp with sweat, and her hat is still perfectly in place. Like Lily, the hem of her dress is unsoiled by the dusty terrain, as is her skin. But, this is seen through Marvell’s eyes, and he views her with a pure aesthetic in mind. In doing so, Marvell projects his own desires upon Undine, using the male gaze to reinforce her classical body. Her pure, unsullied body notwithstanding, Undine is unmatched in her savagery, blackmailing Marvell into a divorce and eventually driving him to suicide. Like the Trojan Horse, Undine possesses a benign exterior while secretly holding death and destruction within. The unwise Trojans, Undine’s husbands, choose to see her in a positive, classical light and

ignore the dangers in her character. She is a master of disguise, and her suitors learn of this, to their costs.

*The Custom of the Country* contains very little in the way of grotesque physicality. Undine's classical body is so inviolate that even its natural functions are excluded from the narrative. Undine's pregnancy is only mentioned in passing. The plot goes from the couple's return from their honeymoon, to moving into their first home, and then skips ahead to the infancy of their son, Paul Marvell. In excluding the less attractive aspects of pregnancy—the stretching of skin, the weakness of bladder, birth itself—Wharton is preserving the heroine's classical body. According to Claire Kabane, this suggests Undine's aversion to not only pregnancy and childbirth, but also the very *idea* of being a mother and host to a growing life: "In pregnancy, the woman's very shape changes, as she begins to feel another presence inside her, growing on her flesh, feeding on her blood" (245). Kabane's point about the negative views of pregnancy applies to Undine and her resentment of motherhood. As she forgets her child regularly and eventually abandons him, it is clear that she cares little for her offspring. She feels no maternal attachment, nor is she inclined to curb her style of living for the sake of her unwanted son. Paul Marvell is himself an "invader" by inheriting a portion of his mother's common blood, and he is an unwelcome reminder of Undine's mistakes.

Remaining true to her classical body, Undine shuns the distasteful reminder that her body was once grotesque and primal. Her desire to hide her grotesqueness is such that she comes to appreciate the drab townhouse she shares with Ralph in the unfashionable West End. Far away from the prying eyes of Society and Fifth Avenue, Undine is free to roam at will, assured that no one of consequence will see her: "That first winter [...] she had not regretted her exile: while she awaited her boy's birth she was glad to be out of sight of Fifth Avenue, and to take her hateful

compulsory exercise where no familiar eye could fall on her” (162). The glow of motherhood and the bond between mother and child is nonexistent with Undine. Her child is a burden that ruins her figure and forces her into social exile. In opposition to her namesake, Undine does not gain a soul after childbirth. Though she is soulless in her dealings with others all along, her motherhood highlights it most prominently.

At the novel’s end, both Undine’s personality and her appearance are unchanged. Her classical body is preserved even as years pass, and her exact age is not revealed, giving her an ageless quality. After her disastrous marriage to Raymond de Chelles has been dissolved and she has married Elmer Moffat, she hosts a lavish party at her home. Before greeting her “brilliant” guests, Undine turns to “give herself one last look in the glass” and sees the “blaze of her rubies, the glitter of her hair” (408). The vivid color of her hair has not dimmed, nor has time changed her looks in any significant way. She appears as if she is still a young woman in her prime, and the novel ends with her musing on a possible divorce from Elmer in favor of marrying a diplomat. Though her personality and behavior are repellent, Undine is a perfect example of the classical body, and her appearance barely changes over the course of the plot. In several scenes of the novel, Undine even expresses her fear of the changes time will bring. Reflecting upon her beauty, she voices this terror, “[shuddering] at the thought that she might someday deviate from the perpendicular” (52). The idea of her body changing and becoming grotesque not only repels her, but she dreads aging even as a young woman.

To Undine, losing one’s looks and fading away are tantamount to death. She understands that she will one day grown old and die, but she struggles to come to terms with this fact of life: “It was incredible that she too should be destined to swell the ranks of the cheaply fashionable; yet were not her very freshness, her malleability, the mark of her fate?” (89). Her beauty and

guile being above average, Undine sees herself and her classical body as separate from the larger population and the “invaders” occupying Manhattan. But her classical body does, in fact, set her apart from the masses, though not in a necessarily flattering way. Undine is not a character who one would feel comfortable placing alongside May Welland; she is the cheetah to May’s gazelle. As vehemently as she may deny it, she is one of the “invaders” of which Marvell speaks.

As with Lily Bart and Ellen Olenska, Wharton uses Undine Spragg to break down further the illusion of the classical female body and allow for a less condemnatory beauty model, despite the grotesque’s minimal presence in the novel. Other than Undine’s grotesque personality, there is very little in terms of physical grotesqueness. Nonetheless, the character of Undine represents an evolution in Wharton’s style. As opposed to forcing her heroine to conform to prominent social ideologies, Wharton uses her character to challenge the dominant social image of women. Wharton dismantles the trope of the “Angel in the House” and exposes the artifice of the classical body by having Undine ruthlessly dispose of her husbands and the reject the title of mother. Instead of encountering a delicate, modest woman and a domestic angel, the reader is confronted with a succubus—a vampire who stalks and drains men both financially and mentally before finding another victim, a Medea who rejects motherhood and her children due to cruel self-interest. In this Undine mirrors neither the van der Luyden’s old order nor Ellen Olenska’s progressive, modern sentiments.<sup>7</sup> Instead, she suggests the rise of something different: the new upper-class, white American girl, a *bon vivant* unconcerned with manners and breeding.

One can easily understand the negative critical reaction to Undine, as she embodies the looming threat posed to the American status quo. With Undine’s arrival in New York, the old order hears its death knells ringing from the towers of Trinity Chapel.<sup>8</sup> Over the fifteen years between the publications of *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton’s work

undergoes a marked transformation, and Undine Spragg is representative of that transformation. From her classical origins, Wharton turns to the grotesque, exploring the body and its functions through her characters. Eventually, though, her apparent preference for the grotesque/transitional body manifests itself in her later fiction. With the lack of grotesque figures in *The Custom of the Country*, one assumes that Wharton was testing her abilities with the grotesque in crafting Undine. Seen in this way, Undine Spragg is a practice run for Wharton's most famous transitional character, Ellen Olenska. Undine stands apart from the Wharton's other female figures despite these parallels, singular in her underlying greed and savagery.

## CHAPTER FIVE

*The Age of Innocence: The Male Gaze and Social Blood Sport*

Published late in Wharton's career and arguably her most famous work, *The Age of Innocence* won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1921, making Wharton the first woman to gain such prestige. Although the novel represents the zenith of Wharton's career as a writer, it also marked the end of her period of dominance over American fiction. According to Elizabeth Ammons, "After *The Age of Innocence*, critics agree, the quality of Wharton's long fiction changes ... *The Age of Innocence* marks the end of Edith Wharton's major period. It also marks the end of her Progressive era fictions" (433). *The House of Mirth*, published fifteen years previously, pulled the curtain aside and allowed her readers to glance into the exclusive, secular world of the New York elite, and *The Age of Innocence* delves even more deeply into this illustrious coterie.

Chronicling the romantic exploits of Newland Archer, a young man of impeccable breeding and manners and a scion of this New York set, *The Age of Innocence* pits old-world ideas against those of the rapidly emerging new one, challenging and satirizing the ruling class in the process. After being promised to the beautiful, placid May Welland, a girl who matches him in both breeding and manners, Archer discovers that a life of gentility and luxury is ultimately empty. Before May's cousin, Countess Ellen Olenska, arrives in New York, Archer has no idea that a life devoid of passion and excitement is no life at all. Countess Olenska, who has recently fled the household of her abusive European husband, seeks refuge with her family in Manhattan, assuming she will be safe in the city of her origin. Ellen's exotic, bohemian aesthetics and sexuality attract Archer despite the hostility that society harbors for her, and he quickly becomes disenchanted with his meaningless, directionless way of life. Unable to contain their feelings,



Archer and Ellen embark upon a passionate but unconsummated affair, culminating in Ellen's expulsion from the New York circle, and Archer's settling for his appropriate, cultivated wife, May. Decades later, after the Archer children have been reared and May has died, Archer has the chance to see Ellen again while in Paris. Afraid to disturb his happy memories of Ellen and fearing the change that time has wrought upon her, Archer declines his son's invitation to join him in her salon, choosing instead to solemnly walk the streets of Paris alone.

In this novel, as in all of Wharton's fiction, the classification of the female body is complicated. In addition to classical body represented by May and the grotesque by Mrs. Mingott, a third, less concrete category of the female body emerges: the transitional body. In her possession of both classical and grotesque qualities, Ellen is a transitional character who represents the combination of both bodies. Instead of purely classical, the transitional woman anticipates a modern, egalitarian era. *The Age of Innocence* demonstrates the clash between the old world and the new. The text exposes the rift between the idealized upper classes, which are supposedly morally sound, and the rise of a new, multi-ethnic American population.

The most prominent example of the classical body in Wharton's novel is Archer's intended, May Welland, who embodies the classical feminine ideal. Not surprisingly, she captivates those around her, especially those who hail her as the model upper-class, white American woman. In *Edith Wharton's Social Register*, Claire Preston illustrates May's allure:

Newland is captivated by every article of this familiar Victorian catalogue, most of which he finds in May, who is what Lady Grenville praises in "the old-fashioned English maiden": "a rosebud in appearance and purity, gentle of heart, soft of speech, the denizen of our ancestral homes, a lady in soul, and mind, and manner." He believes her innocent and guileless in the extreme, even though she

explicitly reminds him that “you mustn’t think that a girl knows as little as her parents imagine.” (33)

Despite her perfection, Newland is fully aware of May’s artifice, as well as the multiple family members, governesses, and finishing schools that have formed her into the woman before him. Newland resents the pressures of society instead of being grateful for such a perfectly suitable wife and feels “oppressed by this creation of factitious purity, so cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers and long-dead ancestresses, because it was supposed to be what he wanted, what he had a right to [...]” (AI 30). Knowing this, he continues to evaluate May using the “virginal script that he criticizes” (Knights 31). Archer chooses to stay with May in the end, however, settling for the safe, uncomplicated option. Though he admires new ideas and embraces the role of artist, Archer is unwilling and unable to ignore his duty and break with tradition.

As Preston suggests in her inclusion of Lady Grenville’s imagining of the English lady, May fulfills the role expected of her, creating an overall image of controlled loveliness. More broadly, of course, she is emblematic of the ideal. May’s signature image is that of the idealized, ceaselessly graceful body, which “was produced in mass culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in both Europe and the United States” (Porter 14). According to Ammons, May is commodified by New York as “one of old New York’s loveliest virgins,” offsetting her against her more sensual and exotic cousin, Ellen (AI 435). In May’s first appearance at the opera, when the entirety of the New York set is attending the opening of Gounod’s *Faust*, the reader is introduced to May’s classical, youthful radiance: “A warm pink mounted to the girl’s cheek, mantled her brow to the roots of her fair braids, and suffused the young slope of her breast to the line where it met a modest tulle tucker fastened with a single gardenia” (5).<sup>9</sup> There are sexual

implications in the description of the slope of her breast, not to mention the obvious implications of a budding, fragrant flower at her breast. But, she is protected from the accusing gazes of others by a layer of tulle covering her bosom and preserving her modesty. Furthermore, when Newland visits the Wellands in St. Augustine, May is again described in pastoral terms: “The sun that netted the little waves with gold seemed to have caught her in its meshes. Across the warm brown of her cheek her brown hair glittered like silver wire; and her eyes too looked lighter, almost pale in their youthful limpidity” (88). As they walk together, the narrator depicts May as having the “long swinging gait [...] of a young marble athlete” (88). The implications of her image as a marble athlete are clear: she is young, vibrant, and active, but without the grotesque consequences of physical exertion such as perspiration or body odor.

May is also compared to a mythological figure at the Newport lawn party. To Newland’s satisfaction, May looks “handsomer and more Diana-like than ever. The moist English air seemed to have deepened the bloom of her cheeks and softened the slight hardness of her virginal features” (118). Though married life clearly suits her, her purity remains in her outward appearance, as is evidenced by her white gown and the “wreath of ivy on her hat” giving her a “Diana-like aloofness” (128). This aloofness presents a problem, though. It prevents her from being a true partner to Newland, which is a grave issue for a woman bred to be a wife and mother. When she raises her bow, she *is* Diana; she is at once the powerful, virginal huntress and the youthful nymph: “The attitude was so full of classic grace that a murmur of appreciation followed her appearance, and Archer felt the glow of proprietorship [...]” (129). As such, May serves as a source of aesthetic pleasure for her preoccupied husband and those surrounding her in society, but her embodiment of the classical ideal, what with her classical aloofness, ties her to this behavior and cannot be compromised. Archer’s view of this “unsuitable” attractiveness

notwithstanding, she is perfect to everyone around her. To compromise this image—to defile his lovely piece of property—would be almost sacrilegious.

Considering May's classically demure nature, any display of romantic affection or sexuality makes her extremely uncomfortable. This is seen when Newland first arrives in St. Augustine and kisses her, the force and passion of which startles her: "He put his arm about her and kissed her [...] his pressure may have been more vehement than he had intended, for the blood rose to her face and she drew back as if he had startled her" (88). Newland's handling of her as a young woman on the verge of sexual awakening not only startles May, but also the urgency of his kiss makes the encounter awkward due to the previously unacknowledged sexual tension between them. Subsequently, this outburst of passion creates a "slight embarrassment," causing her hand to "slip out of his" (88). She is "disturbed" by Newland's behavior and "shaken out of her cool boyish composure," which likely means her previously sexless demeanor (88). With this in mind, it seems that May is averse to sex, or at least overwhelmed by the eroticism of Archer's advances, and therefore alienated from her inner sexuality. Or more simply, Archer's ardor could be so vastly different from his usual behavior that May is shocked and unsettled. Regardless, though, May's discomfort with Archer's displays of physical affection cannot be overlooked.

Soon after the couple's engagement, socialites Julius and Regina Beaufort give a ball in their home, inviting all of the exclusive New York set. Archer, wading through the crowd of finely dressed, well-bred contemporaries, is able to steal away with May for a moment. After cautiously checking their surroundings, he kisses her:

As he spoke he took a swift glance about the conservatory, assured himself of their momentary privacy, and catching her to him laid a fugitive pressure on her

lips. To counteract the audacity of this proceeding he led her to a bamboo sofa in a less secluded part of the conservatory, and sitting down beside her broke a lily-of-the-valley from her bouquet. She was silent, and the world lay like a sunlit valley at her feet. (17)

Most obviously, this passage further highlights May's discomfort with public intimacy and physical affection, as young women were not encouraged from engaging in such behavior in public. The "fugitive pressure" Newland applies to her lips may appear sterile and passionless, but to a virtuous, upper-class young woman, this action is improper. Consequently, Archer often treats May with kid gloves, consoling her when he overwhelms her with his advances. Archer then leads May back toward a "less secluded" part of the Beaufort conservatory, showing May's fear of and discomfort with Archer's public advances. As a buffer, and as a means of recovering from such a shock, May seeks the refuge of her pack, sidling closer to them in order to keep her fiancée at arm's length. Wharton reveals rather ominously May's near total ignorance of sex, citing her no doubt surprising introduction to intercourse on her wedding night.

Once she is married, the fact that May's pregnancies are obscured in the novel reinforces the classical ideal. Not only are her pregnancies mentioned years after the fact, but also Wharton bypasses May's entire existence as a mother. Her first pregnancy is announced despite her uncertainty, chiefly because it is used to hasten Ellen Olenska's departure, but the anatomical changes that come with pregnancy—the stretching of skin, the enlarging of the body—are absent, as befitting a woman of the classical body. Moreover, her scheme to rid New York of Ellen reveals an underlying manipulative aspect of May's personality. Parley Ann Boswell goes so far as to term May a "silent conspirator," quietly observing the interactions between Archer and Ellen and planning her next defensive move (79). Her last-minute revelation does not

necessarily change the reading of her as a classical figure, but her actions hint that she is more astute than she appears. May's children seem to have been born via Immaculate Conception, as one does not see her engage in sex or as a pregnant woman. The story skips from the early years of the Archer marriage to decades later, with the children grown and May having died several years previously. Not only is May a creature bred to wear the mantle of wife and mother, but she is also most comfortable with domesticity and the home environment. She is the model wife for Archer and fulfills her role by dazzling guests and carrying out her domestic duties with exceptional refinement.

Later in the novel, the reader is given an evocative image of this household angel, enthroned alongside her husband with her needlework: "She was so placed that Archer, by merely raising his eyes, could see her bent above her work-frame, her ruffled elbow-sleeves slipping back from her firm round arms, the betrothal sapphire shining on her left hand above her broad gold wedding ring; and the right hand slowly and laboriously stabbing the canvas" (177). What is important to notice in this passage is the duality of lens through which the reader sees May. Of course, one sees in her the very embodiment of the classical ideal, what with her "firm round arms" and delicate hands, but the objects used to illustrate her position are notable as well. From the description of her needlework to her wedding jewels, these domestic and marital objects that suggest both commitment and household comfort *define* May, as they defined most upper-class white women at the time.

Even in death, May is preserved as a classical figure whose eyes follow her husband and children, due in part to the large portrait of her on the wall of the Archer mansion. Though she dies of an infectious disease, a grotesque device that is often relegated to the lower classes, she is still a classical character—a Madonna-like figure nursing her children and caring for them until

the very end. In this manner, May parallels Lily Bart, who returns to the classical body with death. Applying the nineteenth century trope of the “Angel in the House,” May embodies this idealistic female image. According to Pamela Knights, “May is the ‘Nice Girl,’ the Angel and Diana of public sanctuary [...] everything about her signals purity—an ‘innocence’ which licenses her appeal and guarantees the survival of the family” (30). As is expected of a woman of her social and economic standing, she is to marry well, have many children, and then live out the rest of her years in marital and domestic happiness of her own making. Her entire worth is based upon what she brings to her marriage with Archer and the children and heirs borne from that union. There is no evidence that she likes—or even engages in—sex, aside from the presence of her children. Ammons agrees: “May Welland is Wharton’s rarefied version of the stereotype. Unsoiled by life, May is always connected with white: her virginity, mentally and emotionally, cannot be touched” (437). A mother though she is, May is more of a sterile birth machine than an object of desire.

By being a shining example of the classical ideal of beauty and stasis, May has no concept of the grotesque as a mechanism for human freedom. Therefore, she has no desire to be free from the confines of the classical body, making any attempt to “emancipate a wife who had not the dimmest notion that she was not free” completely useless (119). May serves as a beacon to which the young women of New York society can look: the seemingly perfect woman in every way. But, this image is flawed because it prevents her from being a real partner to Newland and leaves a certain distance between them despite their love for one another.

In addition to May, there are other examples of the classical body within Wharton’s novel: Newland’s mother and sister. Both tall, thin, pale, and above all graceful—the women are dimmer examples of the classical body: “Mother and daughter, who were as alike as sisters, were

both, as people said, ‘true Newlands’; tall, pale, and slightly round-shouldered, with long noses, sweet smiles, and a kind of drooping distinction like that in certain faded Reynolds portraits” (22-23). Well-bred but staid, the Archer women are relics of old New York. Like the paintings of the aforementioned Reynolds, in which women are presented almost as classical goddesses, the Archer women are both timeless and dated. Newland’s sister, Janey, is given considerable attention for her innocence and virginity: “Miss Archer’s brown and purple poplins hung, as the years went on, more and more slackly on her virgin frame” (23). Janey has remained unchanged in her spinster state. Though her ill-fitting clothes may seem to qualify her as grotesque, her dress shows that her body has not filled out as a woman’s does as she ages. Instead, her body is locked in this youthful, inviolate state of virginity.

Equally effective in conveying the stasis of the classical body are the van der Luydens. Regal, straight-laced, and staid to the point of petrification, Louisa and Henry van der Luyden are representative of the world on which Wharton is reflecting in *The Age of Innocence*, a superfluous but judgmental, insensate world of country houses and garden parties. Louisa van der Luyden, like May, is startling in her classically defined, somewhat severe body: “Her fair hair, which had faded without turning gray, was still parted in flat overlapping points on her forehead, and the straight nose that divided her pale blue eyes was only a little more pinched about the nostrils [...]” (34). Though she has aged, she has done so infinitesimally, but such preservation comes at a price: “She [Louisa] 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 kept for years a rosy life-in-death” (34). If May is Diana come to life, a living, breathing statue, then the van der Luydens are inanimate statues. Lacking May’s vibrancy and youth, the couple sits isolated, gathering dust. Like the sculptures and old



master paintings that decorate Skuytercliff, the van der Luydens are attractive fixtures in their palatial but empty home, becoming more and more like statues with every passing day. Similar to Newland and Mrs. Archer during their visit to Skuytercliff, one feels unsettled and intimidated by such immaculateness.

Despite her fixation on May and the classical, Wharton's attraction to the grotesque manifests itself in *The Age of Innocence*. Of course, such an endorsement would have gone against the status quo, but as an established author and woman of means, Wharton was shielded from possible social ramifications. With her receiving of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1921, it is clear that she was praised for her progressive stance on female representation. Without doubt, Mrs. Manson Mingott, from her immense size to her unconventional behavior, is wholly and unabashedly a grotesque body. In opposition to the classical body, hers is one that stretches and expands as her weight increases, nor is her appearance immune to the ravages of time and biology. The narrator emphasizes her grotesqueness: "The immense accretion of flesh which had descended on her in middle life like a flood of lava on a doomed city had changed her from a plump active little woman [...] into something as vast and august as a natural phenomenon" (18). However, she chooses to accept this debilitating physical burden, satisfying herself with being the enthroned grand dame of New York society. Furthermore, when she laughs, she does so uproariously, which makes "her chins ripple like little waves" (95), and her wrists are encircled with "rolls of aged fat [...] like ivory bracelets" (19). This unpalatable description of her hands stands in stark contrast to the classical descriptions of May's flawless ones, which are perfect enough to be carved in marble.

After a stroke, Mrs. Mingott is left with a drooping face and arm and slurred speech, a further departure from the unchanging, unnatural body of the classical ideal: "The two servants

[...] had found their mistress sitting up against her pillows with a crooked smile on her face and one little hand hanging limp from its huge arm” (164). This horrific, illness-inducing obesity embarrasses her family, which is shown during the planning of Newland and May’s wedding: “The idea of this monstrous exposure of her person was so painful to her relations that they could have covered in gold the ingenious person who suddenly discovered that the chair was too wide to pass through the awning which extended from the church door to the entrance” (112). So, instead of having her appear in public, her relations would rather she remain secluded in her pale stone fortress, all to preserve the classical beauty of the wedding of the New York social season.

Catherine Mingott’s girth is such that her mobility, even in her own home, is limited to a series of rooms on the ground floor, in a complete reversal of convention: “The burden of Mrs. Manson Mingott’s flesh had long since made it impossible for her to go up and down stairs, and with characteristic independence she had made her reception rooms upstairs and established herself (in flagrant violation of all the New York properties) on the ground floor of her house” (19). She is not just fat, but she is so large that she must transform the bottom floor of her home into her personal quarters, an eruption of the private space into the public that both intrigues and repels those who visit her: “Her visitors were startled and fascinated by the foreignness of this arrangement, which recalled scenes in French fiction, and the architectural incentives to immorality such as the simple American had never dreamed of” (19). The intimacy of her private rooms and their proximity to her formal reception rooms logically disturbs those who live by the strict code of manners enforced by New York.

Catherine Mingott has lived and continues to live an unconventional life, and, instead of being ostracized and shunned like Ellen Olenska or Lily Bart, she is seen as a universal eccentric grandmother, and the elite pay court to her. According to Pamela Knights, “Old Catherine’s vast

body is society's weightiest incarnation and holds its liveliest blood, energized by the Spicer past, life at the Tuileries, [and] the pioneering house [...]" (28). This is exemplified in the construction of her home, which is well beyond the boundaries of polite society in Manhattan. Instead of building a brownstone on Fifth Avenue with the rest of Old New York, she chooses to build a white stone palace in the unpopulated area outside of the city: "It was her habit to sit in a window of her sitting room on the ground floor, as if watching calmly for life and fashion to flow northward to her solitary doors [...] she seemed in no hurry to have them come" (18). Moreover, she does not appear attached to the old-world ideas of her social group. For example, when she first appears in Chapter IV, Mrs. Mingott expresses excitement at Ellen's arrival, believing society is in need of a shake-up. Reflecting on the claustrophobia and, frankly, boringness of New York society, Mrs. Mingott states, "We need new blood and new money" (20). Money is needed to save the prestigious families from ruin, and new blood is necessary to avoid Old New York's isolation from the modern world.

Grotesque and unconventional though she is, Catherine Mingott nevertheless has a spark of vivacity that her granddaughter May and the rest of elite society do not. Her position allows her to defy expectations, and she revels in this privileged status.<sup>10</sup> As I suggested in my introduction, Wharton further uses such a grotesque woman to break down the stereotypes surrounding women and femininity in the nineteenth century. Instead of making Mrs. Mingott a delicate, graceful society dame, Wharton breaks with tradition and humanizes her using the grotesque model. Though May and the classical body remain the dominant image of beauty, Wharton challenges this with characters like Ellen Olenska and Catherine Mingott, favoring a more inclusive, egalitarian approach to the female body and its representation. Acknowledging

the changing times and the drastic evolution of the female image during the 1920s, Wharton's characters reflect the dawning of a new era.

Another example of the grotesque is Ellen's mother, the Marchioness Medora Manson, who is viewed as an oddity by the New York circle due to her disadvantageous marriages and rootless, bohemian lifestyle. When Newland first meets her in Ellen's home, she is clothed in an outfit that is "intricately looped and fringed, with plaids and stripes and bands of plain color disposed in a design to which the clue seemed missing" (97). Also, she is wearing a "Spanish comb and black lace scarf, and silk mittens, visibly darned, [to cover] her rheumatic hands" (97). Paired with her faded hair and her "emaciated bosom" (100), she casts a striking but confusing figure: an amalgamation of styles in threadbare fabrics and accessories, like a less morose Miss Havisham. Later, the Marchioness attends an event in Newport dressed as if she were attending a costume ball instead of a lawn party: "She was extraordinarily festooned and bedizened, with a limp leghorn hat anchored to her head by many windings of faded gauze, and a little black velvet parasol on a carved ivory handle absurdly balanced over her much larger hat-brim" (127). The Marchioness is grotesque not because of physical attributes like Catherine Mingott, but her age as well as her faded, worn clothing work to create a striking if not disturbing note. The Marchioness is a clear product of the passage of time and its adverse effects.

Similar to Mrs. Mingott, the Marchioness intentionally and gleefully defies popular fashion, choosing instead to lead a nomadic existence: "'I have always lived on contrasts! To me the only death is monotony [...] it's the mother of all the deadly sins'" (127). Because of her choices and methods in raising her daughter, Ellen, New York has come to see the Marchioness as a mere oddity. She does not fit in with polite society, but her name and lineage entitle her to respect. As Knights states, "To New York, she remains unreadable; her narrative takes her

farther and farther away from acceptable spaces [...] until she loses her fortune in the Beaufort crash, finishing in Paris with Ellen” (30). However grotesque and unacceptable they may be, Medora and Mrs. Mingott have an undeniable allure that draws people to them. Granted, Medora Manson and Catherine Mingott are not deemed entirely fit, but there is a definite attraction to their individualism. Additionally, though they fall outside of the realms of typically polite society, those around them acknowledge their respective positions. In the Marchioness’s case, she has both the bloodline and the family name, which allow her access to New York and its luxurious environs. In Mrs. Mingott’s case, however, she is not only the grand dame of society, but along with the Van der Luydens, she is a deciding voice on taste and decorum:

He [Archer] had always admired the old lady, who, in spite of having been only Catherine Spicer of Staten Island, with a father mysteriously discredited, and neither money nor position enough to make people forget it, had allied herself with the head of the wealthy Mingott line, married two of her daughters to ‘foreigners’ (an Italian Marquis and an English banker), and put the crowning touch to her audacities by building a large house of pale cream stone [...]. (9)

Once again, Wharton introduces a character who defies tradition and lives as a free agent in her grotesque body.

The Marchioness’ daughter, Countess Ellen Olenska, one of the novel’s central characters, proves herself equally inconvenient and grotesque. As opposed to the aforementioned women, however, Ellen is a more transitional character, oscillating between a grotesque and a classical identity. As she is neither accepted nor acknowledged by most of New York, Ellen resigns herself to her role as outlier. From her very first appearance in the novel, Ellen scandalizes the Old Guard of New York and shakes society to its very core. Challenging the

popular fashions of rigid corsets, bustles, and heavy trimming, Ellen instead wears an “Empire dress” (AI 8), more commonly known as the Josephine style, which featured a “straight, low-necked gown framed with a *chérusque* and a train” (Boucher 350).<sup>11</sup> Though sanctioned by the neoclassical aesthetic of the early nineteenth century, such a revealing cut and light, airy fabrics would have stood in opposition to Victorian silks and brocades. In spite of the reputation that precedes her, this is Ellen’s first instance of rebellion, albeit unwitting, seen in the novel. She follows the trend set by her mother and Mrs. Mingott, who “have a bohemian tendency and a desire to establish their own fashion” (131). However bold and unconventional Ellen’s gown may be, her sense of style goes unappreciated, her intentions are misunderstood, and she is rejected by her contemporaries, as evidenced by New York’s joint refusal to attend Mrs. Mingott’s dinner in her honor.

Not only is it a social *faux pas*, but Ellen’s gown pushes the limits of Victorian decency: “Her eyes [were] fixed on the stage, and revealing, as she leaned forward, a little more shoulder and bosom than New York was accustomed to seeing, at least in ladies who had reasons for wishing to pass unnoticed” (10). This move also qualifies her as grotesque. Ellen’s gown exposes her breasts, displaying the presence of the body parts underneath. In accordance with the grotesque body, which acknowledges anatomical realities, Ellen’s choice of dress defies Society. This is one of the many grievances leveled against Countess Olenska before her expulsion from New York at the end of the novel. Unlike May, whose modest tulle *fichu* hides the sight of her breasts and only hints at the classical slope of her bosom, Ellen’s gown, “which [has] no tucker” (11), bares too much in a show of grotesqueness that displeases her social jury.<sup>12</sup> This instance is just another in a long line of sartorial mistakes Ellen has made, beginning with her debut many years before the events of the novel. Spurning white or another color suggestive of youth, purity,

and femininity as May would have done, Ellen chose a black gown to wear for her coming out. Scandalizing New York and further embarrassing her family, Mrs. Welland tells Newland of the disadvantages that come with Madame Olenska. Instead of viewing Ellen as a lost cause or damaged goods like the rest of New York, she correctly attributes Ellen's mistakes to her unconventional upbringing. However, her main criticism of Ellen is, again, her choice of clothing. Before its status as the mark of wealth and high fashion, black was firmly associated with mourning and severity, along with evil, violence, and witchcraft (Heller 105). These negative connotations were not lost on the men and women of New York society, and Ellen's selection did not go unnoticed:

She was barely eighteen when Medora Manson took her back to Europe—you remember the excitement when she appeared in black at her coming out ball? Another of Medora's fad—really this time it was almost prophetic! That must have been at least twelve years ago; and since then Ellen has never been to America. No wonder she is completely Europeanized. (90)

Despite New York's and Mrs. Welland's views of Ellen and her adopted European customs, there is an inherent contradiction in this attitude. In the mid- to late-nineteenth century, American heiresses migrated en masse to Europe and Great Britain. Armed with new money and the latest fashions, these young women and their wealthy families went to great lengths to secure titles and rescue cash-poor aristocrats. Wharton chronicles these aristocratic aspirations in *The Custom of the Country* (1913), and in her last, unfinished novel, *The Buccaneers* (1938). This American contempt for the continent and its customs is perplexing. Granted, Ellen Olenska is neither Consuelo Vanderbilt nor Jeanette Jerome, but the American upper class hungered for the prestige

and longevity that American society lacked. Thus, Wharton fashions an image of old New York that is secular, contradictory, and judgmental.

Later in the novel, Ellen receives Archer in a gown of equal inappropriateness. The correct dress for a woman at home, especially when visitors were to be received, was something modest yet elegant: “It was usual for ladies who received in the evening to wear what were called ‘simple dinner dresses’: a close-fitting armor of whale-boned silk, slightly open at the neck, with lace ruffles filling in the crack, and tight sleeves with a flounce [...]” (66). After meeting with Mr. Letterblair about Ellen’s divorce, Archer visits Ellen in her bohemian townhouse. Not only is he confronted with the unwelcome sight of Julius Beaufort, a fellow old New Yorker and rival for Ellen’s hand, but also he finds his hostess clad in “a long robe of red velvet bordered about the chin and down the front with glossy black fur” (67). This deviation from the norm, this subversion, makes Ellen threatening and also grotesque in a Bakhtinian sense. The warmth of the room and the glossy fur that adorns Ellen’s dress, not to mention the implications of the color red—passion, lust, and energy—work to create an overtone of muted but potent sexuality. Ellen’s (possibly unconscious) acknowledgement of her body and her sexuality makes her grotesque. The classical woman is ambivalent toward sexuality, but Ellen grotesquely puts hers on display in defiance of all social customs. Archer takes immediate notice of her state of undress, and he remarks on the exciting deviance of the scene: “There was something perverse and provocative in the notion 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” (67). This acknowledgement of sexuality and the live, mutable body makes Ellen grotesque, and Archer finds it titillating. The scene further pits Ellen against her rival; she is the perfect yellow rose to May’s pink rose.<sup>13</sup> In this respect, Wharton further challenges the classical



ideal with Ellen and her sexuality. Far from a graceful, nymph-like figure as the classical expects, Ellen is exotic, sensual, and most importantly, grotesque.

According to Martha Banta, Ellen's choice of dress is not only conscious, but Wharton is also trying to push a specific agenda. Instead of openly stating the problems of such restrictions on dress and nearly every other aspect of a woman's life, Wharton chooses to channel this through the outfits of her characters: "Edith Wharton viewed women's fashions as one of the more important markers by which she traced shifts in the social habitus occupied by her fictional characters in the final decades of the twentieth century. The clothes with which the female protagonists adorn themselves *speak* [...] to *where they are*" (52). Fashion as an indicator of a character's personality is very apparent in *The Age of Innocence*. May Welland, the eternal virgin, is usually attired in pastels and lace, whereas Ellen Olenska, the exotic, scandalous lady, wears unconventional, revealing clothes that hint at her artistic mindset. Seeing as Ellen rebels in her fashion sense and refuses to apologize for doing so, she represents the new woman that Wharton uses to criticize the classical body and, ideally, destroy the oppressive model completely.

Although she is described as beautiful and charming, Ellen is also drawn quite unflatteringly in certain scenes. After another uncomfortable meeting with Beaufort and Archer, Ellen is fatigued, and the full weight of her distress shows on her face: "Her face looked pale and extinguished, as if dimmed by the rich red of her dress. She struck Archer, of a sudden, as a pathetic and even pitiful figure" (69). Also, after sharing a passionate kiss, Ellen flees Newland's embrace and slouches against the mantelpiece, a stance that highlights her raggedness: "One of the locks of her chignon had become loosened and hung on her neck; she looked haggard and almost old" (106). Far from the smooth, unbroken lines of the classical model, Ellen neither

seeks to hide her imperfections nor beautify them under a false veneer. This haggardness not only makes Ellen grotesque in its acknowledgement of imperfection, but also the mention of her age qualifies her as so, too. The classical body, remaining in a state of immortality, does not grow old or show signs of aging. May, an eternal symbol of the classical, dies before her appearance can be ravaged by old age, preserving the statuesque image readers have of her. Ellen, however, already shows signs of aging and fatigue, at least from Archer's perspective, thereby making her grotesque.

Contrasting May, whose every action, emotion, and utterance is controlled by an ingrained sense of decorum, Ellen is a more human, spontaneous woman. She experiences the complexity of human emotions and shows herself to possess a depth of character that exceeds Archer's. The dichotomy between May and Ellen mirrors conflicts within Wharton's own life. In Wharton's case, her artistic aspirations posed a threat to both her way of life and the group to which she belonged. In *Edith Wharton's Social Register*, Claire Preston argues that May was the woman Wharton was expected to be, and Ellen was who she actually wanted to be:

*The Age of Innocence* seems to refract American womanhood with special power through imagined fates, possibly because Wharton was imagining herself: May Welland is the woman Wharton was designed by old New York to be; Ellen Olenska, what she actually was, her imaginative projection of what it would have been like to return to the narrow compass of her innocence. (38)

With Ellen, Wharton advocates for the *real* woman, not the perfect, domestic model woman of Victorian imagining. Ellen is not an "angel in the house," nor is she a model society lady. She is a woman who has come to consciousness and seeks to improve her situation, serving as a harbinger of the women's movement that would gain international prominence nearly half a

century after the events of the novel. Furthermore, Wharton advocates for the woman artist in Ellen, setting a path for future female writers.

Ellen's transitional nature is further illustrated in her sporadic embodiment of the classical. Ostracized and derided by her peers, Ellen is equal parts classical and grotesque. For example, when Archer first visits Ellen's unfashionable, bohemian-inspired townhouse, she holds a pose by the mantelpiece that bathes her in a golden hue: "She bent over the fire, stretching her thin hands so close that a faint halo shone about the oval nails. The light touched the russet rings of dark hair escaping from her braids, and made her pale face paler" (49). In this instance, she becomes a classical figure, poised with the smooth, pale skin of a statue and wreathed in gold. This technique of her being wrapped in lights and ringed with gold is shown again when she entertains Newland and the rest of her circle of bohemian intelligentsia: "She was dressed as if for a ball. Everything about her shimmered and glimmered softly, as if her dress had been woven out of candle beams; and she carried her head high, like a pretty woman challenging a roomful of rivals" (101). Ellen rivals May's classical body in this scene, glowing and radiant with all eyes on her. Instead of bathed in light, Ellen *is* the light. Though not beautiful in the same way as May, Ellen's appearance in this scene matters greatly. However grotesque and foreign she may be to New York, she has moments of staggering, captivating beauty. She represents the duality and intricacy of the human form, gender notwithstanding.

Simultaneously, Ellen is the scandal of New York and its alien *cause celebre*, but the classical body as applied to Ellen is different from that prescribed to May. While Ellen may possess certain qualities of the classical, she is not a living Greek marble like her rival. At Skuytercillf, the van der Luyden ancestral estate, a party is thrown in Ellen's honor as compensation for her previous rejection. She is undeniably lovely in Wharton's description, but

there are signs of wear in her appearance, a haggardness brought on prematurely by the strain of her former life: “She was thin, worn, a little older-looking than her age, which must have been nearly thirty. But there was a mysterious authority of beauty, a sureness in the carriage of the head, the movement of the eyes, which, without being in the least theatrical, struck him [Archer] as highly trained and full of a conscious power” (39). Juxtaposed with May once she arrives, Ellen does not necessarily pale in comparison to her cousin, but she represents a different brand of beauty from that endorsed by Society. If May is the pristine sitter of a Reynolds portrait, Ellen is that of a Rossetti painting. Beautiful but with noticeable flaws, Ellen charms and repels Archer in equal measure.<sup>14</sup>

Though Wharton’s message in *The Age of Innocence* reflected the changes in the roles of women, she experienced considerable resistance during the publication process. First published in *The Pictorial Review* as a serial, the editor, Arthur Vance, had a different vision of the novel entirely and grossly misinterpreted Wharton’s work. This affected the novel’s marketing campaign as well, which bypassed Ellen as the central female character in favor of May. Though seemingly unrelated, the editorial conceptions of May and Ellen and the thwarting of Wharton’s ideas show the initial public reaction to her “complicated” women. Put simply, *The Pictorial Review* marketed the book “as nostalgia for a simpler time,” instead of a social commentary (Thornton 30). The reliance on nostalgia reveals itself in the original illustrations by W.B. King: “King’s illustrations [...] are strikingly old-fashioned in their reference to well-known, nineteenth century theatrical conventions such as the tableau and the histrionic acting style, which used poses, rather than movement, to suggest emotional states” (30). Most egregiously, however, is Vance’s perversion of the characters and their importance. Shrewdly, Vance placed May in the forefront of the novel, as she is the more identifiable character—the simple, sweet

woman with whom more readers would sympathize (31). To that effect, activities for readers were included in early volumes, such as quizzes and worksheets entitled “Does Your Husband Really Love You?” and “Tell Us What You Really Think About Marriage,” along with character descriptions: “Thus even before the serialization has begun the reader has received vital information about who the heroine is (‘Mrs. Archer); where to identify (with May); where ‘not’ to identify (with Countess Olenska, the ‘other woman’) and who the transgressor will be (Newland)” (32). Such a pointed reading provides a skewed perception of the characters and the themes at work in the plot. Moreover, it scandalizes the relationship between Ellen and Newland and what it represents. Failing to see the relationship as representative of the widespread disillusionment with the Old World, Vance chose to depict it in moral terms alone, disrespecting Wharton’s artistry.

Understandably, Wharton was enraged by this editorial decision, as she “loathed melodrama” and the soap opera quality of Vance’s editing (44). However, Thornton maintains that once an author entered the mainstream market, the potential for profit trumped his or her personal desires. Wharton, resigned but disturbed by her novel’s treatment, explains her ideas in *A Backward Glance*. Almost as if anticipating the initial misunderstanding and apathy directed toward the text and its complexities, Wharton writes, “I found myself a momentary escape in going back to my childish memories of a long-vanished America, and wrote *The Age of Innocence* [...] [my friend] Walter Berry [...] said: ‘Yes, it’s good. But of course you and I are the only people who will ever read it [...] nobody else will be interested’” (44). Nearly a century after its publication, Walter Berry was clearly mistaken, and Vance’s illustrations, inappropriate and ill-informed in their simplification of Wharton’s novel and her characters, have faded into obscurity.

Far from trivial and uncomplicated in its presentation of the classical, grotesque, and transitional bodies, *The Age of Innocence* presents an America in its complete, unfiltered entirety, which has long since passed. The America of Wharton's youth cannot and does not last, and it is eventually supplanted in favor of a modern, egalitarian society: one that welcomes women like Ellen instead of ostracizing them. The novel expresses this idea most obviously in the fates of its female characters. Dependent upon fragile social norms, the classical body falls out of fashion and fades into obscurity, whereas the modern, transitional body perseveres. As a classical figure, May serves her purpose and dies, while Ellen, the symbol of progress and modernity, lives on. Instead of using the novel as a piece of nostalgia to preserve the past and perpetuate a lie, Wharton uses her most famous novel to challenge the stereotypes and false representations endorsed by her class and society as a whole.

## CHAPTER SIX

## Conclusions

Though she believed in the ideal of the classical body in her youth, Edith Wharton appears later to have been attracted to and have a preference for the grotesque/transitional body, and it manifests itself in her extensive body of work. Fashioning characters like Ellen Olenska and Catherine Mingott from *The Age of Innocence* and Lily Bart from *The House of Mirth*, Wharton challenges the typical depictions of women in nineteenth and early-twentieth century literature, choosing instead to endorse an inclusive, healthy body image and a more egalitarian form of female representation. In figures like May Welland, Mrs. Archer, and Louisa and Henry van der Luyden, Wharton examines and eventually overturns the classical ideal endorsed by Society and its male rulers in favor of more progressive characters and body images. In contrast to the staid classical body, the women of Wharton's later fiction "are neither frozen nor static: they are mobile, they are moving" (Orlando 88). However, Wharton changes tactics in *The Custom of the Country*, choosing instead to have a beautiful, classical woman with a grotesque interior. Disregarding the trope of "The Angel in the House" later played out by May Welland in her happy fulfillment of wifely duties, Undine Spragg shuns motherhood and domesticity, abandoning her infant son and driving her first husband to suicide. With such a character, Wharton further attacks the classical standard because Undine defies almost every social expectation placed on women, undermining the ideal and revealing its falsity. Under her lustrous, carefully placed veneer, an entirely different person exists. As Undine's husbands quickly realize, the luster proves fatal to those who get too close. In creating a beautiful, ageless woman and making her a sociopathic monster, Wharton attacks the classical, artificial body for the purpose of promoting a sensible female image.

This revisionist approach to characterization extends to Wharton's other works as well, particularly her novellas *Ethan Frome* (1911) and *Summer* (1917), which further illustrate the transformation of Wharton's style later in her career. Both works show Wharton embrace of the grotesque through her characters. In *Ethan Frome*, for example, though the rural New England landscape lends itself to the pastoral, the characters of the novel are either grotesque or become grotesque over time. Ethan's wife, Zenobia, is prematurely grey and haggard due to her multiple illnesses, leaving her increasingly bitter toward her younger husband and his even younger "girlfriend," Mattie Silver. Though beautiful and full of youthful vivacity, Mattie eventually succumbs to the grotesque as well. After a sleighing accident leaves her crippled and Ethan with a permanent limp, Mattie becomes another Zenobia, infirm and constantly griping and haranguing Ethan. He witnesses the transformation of Mattie before his very eyes. By acknowledging their natural, mutable bodies, Mattie and Zenobia are grotesque. However, Mattie, like Ellen and Lily, is more of a transitional character because of her classical origins. As in her other works, Wharton uses the grotesque in *Ethan Frome* to challenge the notion of the classical body. Youth and beauty do not last forever, and Mattie is a reminder of this reality, proving that the classical ideal is not only impractical but also unfeasible.

In *Summer*, Wharton again explores the grotesque in the character of Charity Royall. Born into poverty and prostitution before being adopted by Lawyer Royall, Charity, though lovely and not necessarily disgusting, embodies the grotesque. Paired with her job at the library—an occupation deemed unfit by the older generation of North Dormer—Charity's romantic exploits make her grotesque as well. After befriending and sleeping with Lucius Harney, she becomes pregnant. Lacking options and abandoned by Lucius, she marries the much-older father figure, Lawyer Royall, filling the place left by his late wife. Unlike May and



Undine, both of whom barely acknowledge their pregnancies due to their classical bodies, Charity embraces hers and accepts her grotesqueness. In addition to having a controversial, independent heroine, Wharton uses the grotesque in *Summer* to challenge the dominant image of the classical body. Wharton's novellas work toward the same goal as her novels: to question publicly the unrealistic and oppressive expectations put upon women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The discussion between the classical and grotesque bodies applies to Wharton's short stories as well. Like in her novellas and New York novels, Wharton uses the characters of her short fiction to challenge the standards of the classical body. For example, in "Roman Fever" (1934), Wharton delves into the grotesque in her description of sickness and out-of-wedlock pregnancy. The title of the story lends itself to the grotesque, too, as "Roman fever" was a euphemism for malaria. In her descriptions of Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley's daughters, Wharton looks ahead to the modern American girl. Free from the confines of Victorian morality that defines their mothers, the girls run free in Rome with their many suitors. Additionally, Wharton explores the grotesque in "Mrs. Mantsey's View" (1893). Employing flower imagery, Wharton chronicles Mrs. Mantsey's gradual decline after she has lost the one source of light in her cramped apartment. Mrs. Manstey, without sunlight and a connection to the outside world, transforms from a sturdy, respectable older woman into a cadaver. There are other stories that explore the classical and grotesque bodies, of course, and "Roman Fever" and "Mrs. Manstey's View" represent a much larger body of work on the subject.

Several other authors join Wharton in exploring the female body and its representations. The most obvious contemporary of Wharton's is Henry James. His novels *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) and *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) feature heroines who, though beautiful and attractive

to those around them, eventually become grotesque. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, Isabel Archer unwittingly embroils herself in scandal and depravity, while Milly Theale from *The Wings of the Dove* is diagnosed with an incurable disease, gradually wasting away before her death at the novel's end. Joining James in his similarity to Wharton is William Dean Howells. In works such as "Editha" (1905) and *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1884), Howells presents young, beautiful women and the men around them. However, in the case of "Editha," the heroine is selfish and childlike, much like Undine Spragg. Though several of her contemporaries deal with women and the female body in their works, I posit Wharton as a forerunner in the discussion of representations of women in literature. Initially a proponent of the classical body as a woman of Old New York, Wharton, becoming increasingly disillusioned with the American upper class, turns to the grotesque and transitional bodies in her crafting of Lily Bart and Ellen Olenska. By doing so, she challenges the status quo and anticipates the future of the representation of American women in novels.

In her rebellion, Wharton clears the way for other writers who challenge Society and its standards. For example, in 1928, eight years after the publication of *The Age of Innocence*, D.H. Lawrence first published *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Scandalous and initially banned, the novel chronicles the sexual exploits of Lady Chatterley and her grotesque body. Though Ellen Olenska never acts on the sexual feelings she has for Archer, her overt sexuality and unconventionality sets the stage for Lawrence's heroines. Resentful of her life as nursemaid to her invalid husband, Lady Chatterley, like Ellen, shuns her role in order to experience life—and the gamekeeper "helps" her in this endeavor. With its explicit descriptions of sex and use of curse words in relation to the female body, Lawrence's novel builds upon the grotesque precedent set by Wharton as a work that "celebrates the body," according to Deborah J. Zak (126). Joining

Lawrence in this is Gore Vidal and *Myra Breckenridge*. Published in 1968, Vidal's novel further dismantles popular notions of American womanhood with its transsexual hero/heroine, Myron/Myra Breckenridge. *Myra Breckenridge*, full of explicit, perverse sex and experimental drug taking, does not just challenge the classical—it completely destroys the ideal and pours salt into its roots. Though they bear little relation to Wharton's in terms of plot summary or historical context, the aforementioned works further Wharton's attempts to banish the classical body from the mainstream. In its place, more realistic, egalitarian representations of femininity and the female form are introduced.

## Notes

1. Jennie A. Kassanoff gives a racially-charged reading of Wharton's New York novels in her book *Edith Wharton and the Politics of Race* (2004). Her inspiration for the novel, the preceding article "Extinction, Taxidermy, *Tableaux Vivants*: Staging Race and Class in *The House of Mirth*," gives a more condensed version of her view of race and its danger to Old New York. What with the influx of foreigners migrating to the American metropolis in the late nineteenth century, the Anglo-Saxon, purebred upper class was justly frightened. To them, this increased ethnic mixing, comprised mostly of Eastern Europeans, Irishmen, and Italians, warned of their downfall and extinction. The America that we have come to know—the melting pot of world civilization—was not embraced by Wharton's set. Moreover, Wharton quietly harbored these feelings herself, as explained by Kassanoff in her article: "Wharton's sympathy with a group of like-minded northeastern intellectuals who, fearing for the country's future, increasingly forged a rhetoric of 'racial nativism' (Higham 137). Charles Eliot Norton, writing in 1888, had decried 'a predominance of [...] the uneducated and unrefined masses, over [...] the more enlightened and better-instructed few' (321). Under such circumstances, he worries, the republic surely would not survive the melting pot. As the *New York Tribune* editor Whitelaw Reid told a posh gathering of the New England Society in 1903, "We have emphatically and even vociferously made everybody else, from all over the world, at home in our Fathers' house. But as we look around at the variegated throng, do we always feel just as much at home ourselves?" (68-69). Additionally, Kassanoff turns her sights on Wharton and her feelings on this "racial" matter: "In 1902 Wharton began writing a novel she would abandon after some seventy pages to begin work on *The House of Mirth*. It was entitled 'Disintegration.' The story of an ambitious woman who deserts her shabbily genteel husband and their daughter only to win social redemption after marrying an

upstart millionaire, ‘Disintegration’ was a dress rehearsal for ‘The Mother’s Recompense’ (1925). More fundamentally, however, Wharton’s unfinished project outlines the racial consequences that were to dominate *The House of Mirth*” (69). Interestingly, though, not only does the unfinished “Disintegration” anticipate *The House of Mirth* in its race discussions, but also its heroine bears a remarkable resemblance to Undine Spragg from *The Custom of the Country* (1913).

2. Orlando offers additional contemporary views of the *tableaux* in *Edith Wharton and the Visual Arts*: “These presentations drew a mixed public reaction in the latter half of the nineteenth century; on the one hand, respectable audiences [...] [were] given ‘permission’ to stare at women in a state of semi-nudity (often only the covering would be paint sprayed on the body) under the guise of viewing ‘great art’ [...] On the other hand, certain segments of the population, such as the WCTU [Women’s Christian Temperance Union], were outraged by the indecent displays” (61).

3. See Julie Olin-Ammentorp’s article “Edith Wharton’s Challenge to Feminist Criticism” for a more charitable reading of the men in Wharton’s novels.

4. Concerning women and *tableaux*, Orlando delves into the complicated history of the popular parlor game, citing the similarities between it and prostitution. Far from being an activity of the upper class, women who posed for *tableaux* were often hired models. However, models in the nineteenth century had a dual vocation, to say the least: “Modeling and prostitution in the nineteenth century, were, in fact, considered interchangeable activities, and the parallels between the professions were enunciated by the facts that (1) both were construed as operating outside of marriage, in private secreted spaces, for financial reward; (2) the terms ‘procure’ and ‘hire’ were used; and (3) girls were often supplied by older women” (57). Van Alstyne’s comments about

Lily's body recall the days of moralistic condemnation of the *tableaux* and modeling. He is therefore cheapening Lily and equating her to a prostitute.

5. Ralph Marvell explains this disparaging attitude towards Undine and her *nouveau riche*, Midwestern clan. Reflecting upon the diminished place of the Old New York set, Marvell very cynically predicts the eventual demise of his way of life: "The daughters of his own race sold themselves to the Invaders; the daughters of the Invaders bought their husbands as they bought an opera-box" (86). The daughters of these "Invaders," armed with ready cash and the latest fashions, not only conquer New York society, but they marry into this exclusive hierarchy. In doing so, they muddy centuries-old, aristocratic bloodlines, endangering the existence of this separate "race" indigenous to Fifth Avenue. In *Edith Wharton's Argument with America*, Ammons concurs: "*The Custom of the Country* can be read as a conservative satire on the nouveaux-riches [*sic*] invaders who threatened the leisure-class values Edith Wharton grew up with" (101).

6. The painting referenced by Orlando is Pierre-Paul Prud'hon's *Portrait of Josephine at Malmaison, 1805*. "Painted shortly after Napoleon's coronation, [the painting] depicts a thoughtful Josephine positioned in poetic, pastoral splendor, resting on a rocky glade. In this painting, Josephine looks romantic and mysterious, in the style of portraiture for which Prud'hon was known. Undine has done well to choose this likeness of Josephine, for the painting captures the subject at the height of her powers, having recently attained the status of empress [of the French Empire]" (91). In many ways Orlando's parallel is apt. Undine, a woman of relatively unknown origins, marries the most eligible bachelor in New York and becomes the unofficial "empress" of society. This moment is fleeting, however, owing to Undine's insatiable nature.

7. Showalter addresses the similarities and differences between Undine and Lily in “*The Custom of the Country: Spragg and the Art of the Deal*.” Though alike in terms of beauty and grace, they are opposites in their navigation of the New York social scene. Lily, due to her ladylike nature, cannot bring herself to challenge Gus Trenor or Bertha Dorset, while Undine does whatever it takes to destroy those who stand in her way: “The opposite of Lily Bart, with her exquisite taste and refined moral sense, too scrupulous finally to survive in the crass social jungle, Undine has no ladylike instincts at all [...] It is striking that Undine, who is no lady, acts out many of the impulses that Lily rejects. Both Gus Trenor and Peter Van Degen demand sexual interest, an erotic installment on their loans to Lily and Undine. Yet it is Undine who, irrationally, goes to live with Van Degen for several months. Again, Lily would rather die than blackmail Bertha, whereas Undine plays every card in her hand to get her husbands and to shed them” (96).

8. The Trinity Chapel Complex is a historic Episcopalian church in Manhattan and frequently mentioned in Wharton’s fiction. May and Newland are married there in *The Age of Innocence*, and many of Old New York’s families are buried there. Wharton, when she was still Edith Newbold Jones, married Teddy Wharton in the church in the spring of 1885 (White, Willensky, and Leadon 199).

9. According to Irene Goldman-Price in *My Dear Governess: The Letters of Edith Wharton to Anna Bahlmann*, Gounod’s opera was a favorite of Wharton’s, This was influenced by her close relationship with her governess, Anna Bahlmann: “The warmth of Edith’s response to the opera *Faust* and the way she linked it to her feelings for Anna tell us much about Anna’s centrality to Edith’s emotional, as well as intellectual, development. Gounod’s *Faust*, based on the Goethe play which she had read with Anna, would remain a touchstone for Edith all her life. She would

immortalize a performance of the opera in the opening scene of the novel *The Age of Innocence* (1920), in which she describes Christina Nilsson singing the role of Gretchen/Margherita” (50).

10. Catherine Mingott is based on Wharton’s aunt. Like her literary counterpart, Mary Mason Jones built the “Marble Row” on Fifth Avenue long before it was a fashionable residential location (Auchincloss 30). Wharton’s use of family members as source material is not always done in a flattering way, however. An example of this is seen in Mrs. Peniston from *The House of Mirth*. Based on another of Wharton’s aunts, Julia Peniston is a cruel, withholding woman who clings to antiquated ideas. Mrs. Peniston’s belief in the upholding of decorum and the preservation of family honor pushes her ultimately to disinherit Lily.

11. See Katherine Joslin’s *Edith Wharton and the Making of Fashion* for more information on the Josephine-style gown and its exposing cut: “The Empire or Directoire cut of the gown comes from the Directory and Consulate periods following the French Revolution as Napoléon Bonaparte I and the Empress Josephine set fashions in France and indeed throughout Europe. Neoclassical and Egyptian (gleaned from expeditions in the Middle East) designs influenced furnishings, ornaments, and art as well as garments and jewelry fashionable at court [...] The raised waist and natural flow of the skirt marked the move away from the elaborately hooped polonaise silhouette fashionable in pre-Revolutionary France” (133). Far from simply inappropriate and revealing, Ellen’s gown has a historical precedent as well as displaying her artistic mindset. Unfortunately, the operagoers do not appreciate Ellen’s individuality, and she is viewed as grotesque.

12. Archer’s shock and discomfort at Ellen’s excessive décolletage is reflective of the popular views of the time: “Naked ladies outside their master’s chamber could only be transgressive—evil siren, Scylla or Circe, bacchante, or else, typically, the whore’s body servicing male desire”



(Henderson 30). Furthermore, this display of sexuality is noted by Katherine Joslin as well, who compares Ellen's exposure to "Venus dropping her garment and stepping onto a throne" (122).

13. Borrowing from John H. Young, Waid takes this "language of flowers" and applies it to *The Age of Innocence*: "In the traditional language of flowers, the meaning ascribed to yellow roses varies unusually widely in the lists that compromise nineteenth-century flower dictionaries.

Yellow roses are associated variously with jealousy, infidelity, love that will not last, and friendship" (51). Effectively, then, the flowers themselves work to set up the opposing auras of Ellen and May. Ellen is the yellow rose, full of passion, and May is the iconic pink, associated with grace and beauty.

14. While Reynolds' paintings often focus on the pastoral and the classical body, Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882) crafts unusual images of women. Instead of sylphlike beings in a wood or reclining on a settee, Rossetti's sitters are often striking in appearance, possessing a mixture of feminine and masculine features. For example, see his painting *Helen of Troy* (1863), in which Helen has a pronounced, square jaw and rather large hands, but possesses flawless skin, high cheekbones, and long, golden hair.

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