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Edith Wharton's "Secret Sensitiveness," *The Decoration of Houses*, and Her Fiction

House images move in both directions: they are in us as much as we are in them.
Gaston Bachelard

The breakfast table was a still life. . . . It was a fact that the lemons and plums, together, made a pattern that he recognized with pleasure, and the pleasure was so fundamentally human it asked to be noted and understood.

A. S. Byatt

I thought of my difficulties with writing, my struggles to articulate feelings not easily expressed. Of my struggles to find a language for intuition, feelings, instincts which are, in themselves, elusive, subtle, and wordless.

Anais Nin

Living gracefully does not require that we attempt the impossible, however. What it does require is a determination that the aesthetic not be reduced to a commodity and ourselves to passive consumers of it, as well as a conviction that creativity and imagination are essential to our lives. It requires us to break the vicious cycle of compartmentalization that obliges us to live and work in a functional world that leaves little room for an aesthetic response. It requires us above all to understand that modern society separates: not only art from life, but life from death and all three from meaning. It is up to us to connect.

David Maybury-Lewis¹

Surely one of the reasons that Edith Wharton lived most of her life in France was that she greatly admired the way the French "instinctively applied to living the same rules that they applied to artistic creation." Wharton believed that the French had an eye for beauty, or what she called "the seeing eye," in contrast to Americans whose sight had been dimmed by the puritanism of their Anglo-Saxon heritage.² However, in her last and unfinished novel, *The Buccaneers* (1938),

¹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 1958, trans. Maria Jolas (Beacon Press, 1969), p. xxxiii; A. S. Byatt, *Still Life* (The Hogarth Press, 1985), pp. 163-64; Anais Nin, *The Diary of Anais Nin, 1931-1934* (Harcourt Brace and Company, 1966), p. 276; and David Maybury-Lewis, *Millennium: Tribal Wisdom and the Modern World* (Viking, 1992), p. 174.

I would like to thank Viola Hopkins Winner for her helpful comments on this article.

² Edith Wharton, *French Ways and Their Meaning* (D. Appleton and Company, 1919), p. 40, pp. 51-52. Further references will be cited in the text.

Wharton suggests through her American protagonist's relationship with her European governess, Laura Testvalley, that the art of seeing can be taught, even to Americans.³ And starting with her first book, *The Decoration of Houses* (1897) and continuing with her fiction, Edith Wharton, like Laura Testvalley, teaches that sensitivity to one's surroundings is important to well-being. In theorizing about character and setting in *The Writing of Fiction* (1925), Wharton insists that “The impression produced by a landscape, a street or a house should always, to the novelist, be an event in the history of a soul.”⁴ But the different fictional environments which Wharton chose throughout her career affected her treatment of the domestic environments that so fascinated her.

* * * *

One of Wharton's earliest memories was an aesthetic response to her aunt's house on the Hudson River, where she vacationed when she was three years old. This experience foreshadows the intense relationships that Wharton experienced with the houses in which she lived and the multiple uses she would find for place in her fiction. In her autobiography, *A Backward Glance* (1934), Wharton reminisces about the significance of this early memory:

My visual sensibility must always have been too keen for middling pleasures; my photographic memory of rooms and houses—even those seen but briefly, or at long intervals—was from my earliest years a source of inarticulate misery, for I was always vaguely frightened by ugliness. I can still remember hating everything at Rhinecliff, which, as I saw, on rediscovering it some years later, was an expensive but dour specimen of Hudson River Gothic; and from the first I was conscious of a queer resemblance between the granitic exterior of Aunt Elizabeth and her grimly comfortable home, between her battlemented caps and the turrets of Rhinecliff. But

³ Wharton also advanced this idea in *French Ways and Their Meaning* (pp. 51-56), but she first articulated her views in *The Decoration of Houses* ([1897] W. W. Norton and Company, 1978). Although reviewers made fun of the chapter on “The School-Room and Nurseries” because both Wharton and Codman were childless, this chapter gives insight into their strong beliefs that people are creatures of their environment and into their equally strong desires not only to nurture children's aesthetic senses but also to be aware of their visual sensitivities. See Richard Guy Wilson, “Edith and Ogden: Writing, Decoration, and Architecture” in *Ogden Codman and the Decoration of Houses*, ed. Pauline C. Metcalf (David R. Godine, 1988), p. 157-58.

In *The Buccaneers* (D. Appleton-Century Company, 1938), Annabel St. George's misunderstanding of her visual sensitivity and her relationships to her surroundings literally cause her to marry the wrong man and to live in the wrong house. In this novel, Wharton rewrites the traditional courtship plot by using response to visual sensitivity as a test for compatibility and setting not simply to reveal characters to readers but as a way of revealing characters to each other, a technique which she experimented with throughout her career.

⁴ Edith Wharton, *The Writing of Fiction*, 1925 (Octagon Books, 1977), p. 85. Further references will be cited in the text.

all this is merged in a blur, for by the time I was four years old I was playing in the Roman Forum instead of on the lawns of Rhinecliff. . . . The chief difference was that the things about me were now not ugly but incredibly beautiful.⁵

When she was young, Wharton found such aesthetic responses, or what she called her “secret sensitiveness,” to be something “quite incommunicable to others” (*Glance*, p. 824). In *The Decoration of Houses*, written with the architect Ogden Codman, Jr., as well as in her fiction, Wharton sought to articulate these early and abiding reactions, to explain not only the power of people to project feelings onto places, but the power of places to produce feelings in people. Wharton's friendship with the British author and aesthete Vernon Lee (the pseudonym of Violet Padget), whom she met in Italy in 1894, perhaps helped her begin to articulate this early and abiding sensitivity to her surroundings. Influenced by William James, Lee was especially interested in delineating the “bodily sensations” which people had “no clear notion of” that accompanied aesthetic responses.⁶ She was among a new generation of aestheticians, many of whose works Wharton read, such as George Santayana's, and some of whom she became good friends with, such as Bernard Berenson. Some of these new theorists, who were revising John Ruskin's thinking, “severed the consideration of art from moral questions and frankly treated the work of art as a material object, a complex of forms, and the observer's response to art as a psychological phenomenon.”⁷ Although Wharton found these ideas congenial, she continued to believe in the

⁵ Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance in Novellas and Other Writings*, ed. Cynthia Griffin Wolff (Library of America, 1990), pp. 805-06. Further references will be cited in the text.

⁶ Vernon Lee and C. Anstruther-Thomson, *Beauty and Ugliness and Other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics* (John Lane, Bodley Head, 1912), p. 159, 158. *Beauty and Ugliness* was originally published in *Contemporary Review*, LXXII (1897), pp. 544-67, pp. 669-88. In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton writes, “Vernon Lee was the first highly cultivated and brilliant woman I had ever known. I stood a little in awe of her, as I always did in the presence of intellectual superiority, and liked best to sit silent and listen to a conversation which I still think almost the best of its day” (p. 884). Richard Guy Wilson mentions in passing that Vernon Lee introduced Wharton to the concept of empathy, although Lee does not use the term in her own work until after Wharton published *The Decoration of Houses*. See Chapter 9 in Vernon Lee's *The Beautiful: An Introduction to Psychological Aesthetics* (Cambridge University Press, 1913). When Wharton met Lee, she was especially interested in the connection between physiology and the aesthetic response, although she later revised her belief that body movements caused aesthetic responses. See *Beauty and Ugliness*, pp. 153-55.

⁷ Roger B. Stein, *John Ruskin and Aesthetic Thought in America, 1840-1900* (Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 256. See Stein's discussion of the critique of Ruskin's aesthetic theories (pp. 186-223) and a summary of the theorists who followed him: Henry Rutgers Marshall, George Santayana, George Lansing Raymond, John La Farge, and Bernard Berenson (pp. 255-65). See also Wharton's own criticism of Ruskin's predilection for asymmetry in *The Decoration of Houses*, pp. 33-34.

moral value of aesthetics as well.⁸

In *The Decoration of Houses*, Wharton writes of interior spaces and of the “relations” which people have “with their rooms” (p. 18), in terms very similar to those that Vernon Lee uses when she compares those places which people find special to good “friends”: “for it is the good of charming us, of raising our spirits, of subduing our feelings into serenity and happiness; of singing in our memory like melodies; and bringing out, even as melodies do when we hear or remember them, whatever small twitter of music there may be in our soul.”⁹ Later, when Wharton began to write fiction, it is not surprising that she represented places as provocative presences that elicit interaction, not just as stationary backdrops. Throughout her career, she used domestic spaces both mimetically to identify characters and symbolically to reveal personality traits, but also thematically to explore their power to affect feelings and emotions.¹⁰

In *The Writing of Fiction*, Wharton praises Balzac and Stendahl for their innovative treatment of fictional characters as products “of particular material and social conditions” (pp. 6-7), but Wharton goes a step further than her models in her attempt to represent the psychological as well as the sociological effects of place. In doing so, she approaches what she defines as Marcel Proust's “rarest quality”: “the power to reveal, by a single allusion, a word, an image, those depths of soul beyond the soul's own guessing” (*Writing*, p. 169). In representing visual sensitivity in her fiction, Wharton, like aestheticians and psychologists of her own day, shows the profound effects that places have on well-being, often without people being aware of the cause—a topic of renewed interest among both psychologists and scientists today.¹¹ In her novels Wharton provides her most sympathetic

⁸ In describing the effects of French medieval cathedrals in *A Motor-Flight through France* (Macmillan, 1908), Wharton contends that their “chief value, to this later age, is not so much aesthetic as moral” (p. 9). See Carol J. Singley's "Introduction" to *Edith Wharton: Matters of Mind and Spirit* for an analysis of the influence of the Aesthetic Movement on Wharton's thinking (Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 1-30. See also Susan Goodman's *Edith Wharton's Inner Circle* for an analysis of the similarities between Bernard Berenson's and Wharton's early thinking about art as a substitute for religion (pp. 93-96).

⁹ Vernon Lee, *Genius Loci and the Enchanted Woods* [1899] (Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1906), p. 12.

¹⁰ Narrative theorists have been more interested in character, plot, narration, and point of view than in setting. I find D.S. Bland's “Endangering the Reader's Neck: Background Description in the Novel” in *The Theory of the Novel* (ed. Philip Stevick, The Free Press, 1967) to be the most helpful examination of setting and thus have used his categories. Yet Bland confines his discussion to landscape description and gives short shrift to “evocation,” which he discusses only in terms of readers' responses rather than effects on characters (p. 330). Bland finds evocation “at its best in the work of women novelists,” such as Elizabeth Bowen, Rosamund Lehmann, Iris Murdoch, and Virginia Woolf (p. 331). To his list I would add A.S. Byatt, Jessie Fausset, and Edith Wharton.

¹¹ See Winifred Gallagher's summary of recent scientific research on the ways in which physical surroundings influence behavior and emotions in *The Power of Place: How Our Surroundings Shape Our Thoughts, Emotions, and Actions* (Poseidon Press, 1993).

characters with complex relationships with the rooms in which they live.¹² She also makes her readers aware of evanescent visual moments, thus bringing into focus human potentialities for visual pleasure: how a “broad band of moonlight” can transform a “room into two shadowy halves” and how a window can create a work of art by framing a “triangular glimpse of blue wind-bitten sea between the roofs.”¹³ At first though, Wharton's desire to satirize the conventionality and materialism of the gilded age combined with an early interest in naturalistic fiction¹⁴ to hinder her ability to transpose the ideas of *The Decoration of Houses* into her fiction, in expressing what she intuitively knew so well—that beautiful, although not necessarily expensive, interiors feed the soul.

* * * *

When Wharton was growing up in New York, Victorian aesthetics reigned supreme, but she found the clutter of dark Victorian rooms oppressive and depressing, and by 1893, when she began to decorate her own first home, Land's End in Newport, Rhode Island, she chose the simpler, more symmetrical lines of classical architecture and French furnishings. In making this choice, Wharton was simultaneously rejecting the tastes of her domineering and unsympathetic mother, embracing the classical revival underway in American design at that time, and selecting a style that suited her own shy personality and need for order.¹⁵ Not surprisingly, the decorator whom Wharton tapped to

¹² Odo Vansecca in *The Valley of Decision* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923), Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*, 1905, in *Novels*, ed. R.W.B. Lewis (Library of America, 1985), Justine Brent in *The Fruit of the Tree* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907), George Darrow and Anna Leath in *The Reef*, 1912, in *Novels*, ed. R. W. B. Lewis (Library of America, 1985), Ralph Marvel and his son Paul in *The Custom of the Country*, 1913 in *Novels*, ed. R. W. B. Lewis (Library of America, 1985), Ellen Olenska in *The Age of Innocence*, 1920, in *Novels*, ed. R. W. B. Lewis (Library of America, 1985), John Campton in *A Son at the Front* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923), Kate Clephane in *The Mother's Recompense*, 1925, in *Novellas and Other Writings*, ed. Cynthia Griffin Wolff (New York: Library of America, 1990), Nona Manford in *Twilight Sleep* (D. Appleton and Company, 1927), Rose Sellers in *The Children* (1928), Vance Weston and Halo Spear Tarrant in *Hudson River Bracketed* (D. Appleton and Company, 1929) and *The Gods Arrive* (D. Appleton and Company, 1932), and Annabel St. George, Laura Testvalley, and Guy Thwarte in *The Buccaneers* (D. Appleton-Century Company, 1938). References to these novels will be cited in the text.

¹³ *Glimpses of the Moon* (D. Appleton and Company, 1922), p. 59, and *A Mother's Recompense*, p. 555. Further references to these novels will be cited in the text.

¹⁴ In *Edith Wharton: A Biography* (Harper & Row Publishers, 1975), R.W.B. Lewis notes Wharton's early interest in Theodore Dreiser, p. 148.

¹⁵ See R.W.B. Lewis, pp. 78-79, and Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton* (Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 77-79 and pp. 84-85, for Wharton's relationship with her mother; Richard Guy Wilson, pp. 133-38, for changing architectural fashions; and Winifred Gallagher, pp. 160-76, for the connection between personality types and interiors and between sensitivity to place and allergies, a malady from which Wharton suffered.

remodel both Land's End and her Park Avenue townhouse shared her tastes. Ogden Codman, an up-and-coming young Boston architect, was designing the houses and decorating the homes of the rich and famous in Newport to resemble those in France, where he had grown up. The decorating manual which he and Wharton wrote together popularized the late nineteenth-century revival of classical aesthetics that they both embraced. But at the same time, that *The Decoration of Houses* criticized the tastes of their day¹⁶ by praising the architecture and furnishings of the past, the manual's emphasis on designing houses for "comfort and convenience" (p. 18) looked forward to Modernism's focus on function.¹⁷

Wharton's fascination with her own emotional and physical responses to places fostered her desire not simply to promote classical aesthetics and furnishings familiar to her social class, but to determine and explain in *The Decoration of Houses* what factors produce the "charm" of "satisfactory" rooms and the "discomfort" in rooms "shunned by everybody in the house" (p. 19). *The Decoration of Houses* attempts to define which interior architectural elements lift people's spirits and which depress them. Wharton and Codman argue that "the material livableness of a room" will "generally be found to consist in the position of the doors and fireplace, the accessibility of the windows, the arrangement of the furniture, the privacy of the room and the absence of the superfluous" (p. 19). For example, they indicate that men's clubs were popular in the late nineteenth century because the "dreary" drawing rooms in their homes lacked the "simple comforts"¹⁸ found in

¹⁶ Although Wharton criticizes professional interior decorators in *The Decoration of Houses*, only a few minor characters in her novels are decorators. Popple, the fashionable New York painter of society portraits in *The Custom of the Country*, is also "an authority of decoration" (p. 772), who advises Undine about the French "period rooms" that Wharton criticizes with such glee. Wharton's heavy satire of decorator Tommy Ardwin in *Twilight Sleep* illustrates an important argument in her decorating manual, that "unless the architect who has built the house also decorates it, the most hopeless discord is apt to result" (*Decoration*, p. 15). Ardwin's main decorating principle is just the opposite of Wharton's belief in the "laws of rhythm and logic" (*Decoration*, p. 16): he thinks that "Everything in art should be false. Everything in life should be art. Ergo, everything in life should be false" (*Twilight Sleep*, p. 89). His studio provides an example of his ridiculous design principles; he has bricked up a window with a spectacular view of the Brooklyn Bridge and the East River and hung there instead a painting of an open window looking out on brick walls and fire escapes.

¹⁷ Wharton and Codman were influenced by the French architect and designer Eugene-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, "who taught the age to see that styles and forms were not mere matters of taste, but were related to practical needs, uses, and modes of life" (William A. Coles, "The Genesis of a Classic" in *The Decoration of Houses*, p. xlv). For an assessment of the wide influence of *The Decoration of Houses* on both sides of the Atlantic, see John Barrington Bayley in "The Decoration of Houses as a Practical Handbook" in *The Decoration of Houses* (p. xxi), William A. Coles (p. xxiii-xxiv), Pauline Metcalf in *Ogden Codman and the Decoration of Houses* (p. ix), Richard Guy Wilson (pp. 157-58), and Charlotte Gere in *Nineteenth-Century Decoration: The Art of the Interior* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989), p. 333.

¹⁸ Wharton's and Codman's description of a comfortable room shares many similarities with contemporary American definitions of comfort as described by the designer Billy Baldwin and the

their clubs: “windows unobscured by layers of muslin, a fireplace surrounded by easy-chairs and protected from draughts, well-appointed writing-tables and files of papers and magazines” (p. 20).¹⁹ Wharton and Codman believe that architectural problems, such as the misplacement of doors and windows, are “distressing” or “fatiguing” because they disturb the natural flow in a room (p. 35).²⁰ Many of the architectural design suggestions in *The Decoration of Houses* are duplicated in a recent comprehensive critique of modern architecture by Christopher Alexander and other architects, who believe, as Edith Wharton did, that there are predictable answers or “a pattern language” to architectural design problems because the solutions are archetypal, “so deeply rooted in the nature of things, that it seems likely that they will be a part of human nature, and human action, as much in five hundred years, as they are today.”²¹ Although these architects analyze many more problems

architect Christopher Alexander. In *Home: A Short History of an Idea* (Viking, 1986), Witold Rybczynski summarizes Baldwin's and Alexander's definitions of comfort: “They include convenience (a handy table), efficiency (a modulated light source), domesticity (a cup of tea), physical ease (deep chairs and cushions), and privacy (reading a book, having a talk),” (p. 230). Rybczynski, who is an architect, argues that while Western ideas of comfort have changed—from privacy, intimacy, and domesticity in the seventeenth century; to leisure and ease in the eighteenth; to mechanically aided comforts related to heat, light, and ventilation in the nineteenth; and to efficiency and convenience in the twentieth century—the new ideas about comfort do not replace earlier notions of domestic well-being, but add layers to the previous meanings.

¹⁹ This contrast reappears frequently in Wharton's fiction. In *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), whenever Justine Brent has any time free from nursing Bessy Amherst in her pretentious country home, she escapes from the “rest of the great soulless house” (p. 399) to restore her spirit in John Amherst's pleasant book-lined study. In *The Custom of the Country* (1913), the money that is sunk into Undine's “over-furnished” drawing room means not only that Ralph has “no study of his own” but also that he has sacrificed his “literary projects” (p. 764-65). In *The Age of Innocence* (1920), Newland Archer despairs over the “purple satin and yellow tuftings” of his fiancée's parents' drawing room, but takes “comfort” in the fact that May Welland will “probably let him arrange his library as he pleased” (p. 1072). In *Twilight Sleep* (1927), Nona Manford wonders if the wife of a man who has fallen in love with her “had substituted deep upholstered armchairs for the hostile gilt seats, and put books in the marqueterie cabinets in place of blue china dogs and Dresden shepherdesses,” whether “everything in three lives might have been different” (p. 236).

²⁰ Wharton's and Codman's concerns with comfort resemble some aspects of feng shui, the ancient Chinese belief that location and environment affect inner peace, a concept about place that is gaining currency in contemporary Western society. In linking Wharton's interest in the effects of place on the emotions with feng shui, I do not mean to suggest that Wharton knew about feng shui or that she would agree with all of its propositions. See Stephen Skinner, *The Living Earth Manual of Feng-Shui* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), p. 3. See also Sarah Rossbach's *Feng Shui: The Chinese Art of Placement* (Dutton, 1983).

²¹ Christopher Alexander, *et al*, *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction* (Oxford University Press, 1977), p. xii.

than do Wharton and Codman, their solutions are strikingly similar—from their interest in natural light, privacy, and flow through rooms to the relationship between public and private spaces.²²

But comfort is both physical (lighting, ventilation, privacy) and visual (decoration, fabric color)²³, and although, for the most part, Wharton and Codman limit their discussion to the functional aspects of interior architectural design, focusing on architectural elements and functions of rooms apart from individual styles and passing fashions, their own biases—clearly a product of their upper-class status—invariably show up.²⁴ While Wharton and Codman are convinced that elements of classical architecture would eliminate common-sensical design problems that lead to discomfort and distress, they also feel that classical aesthetics bring pleasure and thus create the most pleasing interiors. Unlike some of their own contemporaries,²⁵ they see their preference not as indicative of the fashion of their day or of their social class, but as a universal response: “The desire for symmetry, for balance, for rhythm in form as well as in sound, is one of the most inveterate of human instincts” (*Decoration*, p. 33). Thus even though Wharton and Codman encourage individuality in decorating classically designed rooms (“the individual tastes and habits of the people who occupy [a room] must be taken into account”— p. 17), they go on to identify certain colors, furnishings, and designs as “cheerless” and “distracting” and others as

²² Some concepts in *The Decoration of Houses* are timeless, others hopelessly dated. However, given the recent critique of the visual and tactile austerity of modern design, as well as its impracticality in ignoring needs for privacy not afforded in the open interior spaces which it favors, it is not surprising that this book has found its way back into print. See Chapter 9 in Rybczynski's *Home* for a criticism of modern architecture and furnishings and John Barrington Bayley's Introductory Note to *The Decoration of Houses* for an explanation of why *The Decoration of Houses* was reprinted in the Classical America Series in Art and Architecture. For another perspective, see Karen Halttunen's “From Parlor to Living Room: Domestic Space, Interior Decoration, and the Culture of Personality” in *Consuming Visions*, ed. Simon J. Bronner (W. W. Norton & Company, 1989); she argues that the choice of classical architecture and furnishings has more to do with wealth than functionality (p. 174).

²³ See Rybczynski, pp. 226-27.

²⁴ In *The Decoration of Houses*, Wharton and Codman certainly use adjectives and metaphors that reveal their upper-class background and bias; “vulgar” is a favorite adjective, and “proportion is the good breeding of architecture” (p. 31) is a most important rule. Furthermore, they illustrate their handbook with some of the most elaborately-decorated rooms in Europe.

²⁵ For theories about the subjectivity of the aesthetic response by Wharton's contemporaries, see Henry Rutgers Marshall's *Pain, Pleasure and Aesthetics* (Macmillan and Company, 1894), and John La Farge's “Ruskin, Art and Truth” *International Monthly*, 2 (November 1900), pp. 510-535. For a recent explanation of the effect of social class on taste, see Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Harvard University Press, 1984). For a recent discussion of the replacement of the parlor and character as the concept of self by the living room and personality at the turn of the century, see Karen Halttunen's “From Parlor to Living Room.”

“comfortable,” “restful,” and “pleasurable.” This seeming contradiction is also present in George Santayana's *The Sense of Beauty* (1896), in which he argues that aesthetic judgements are not universal, but vary according to “origin, nature, and circumstance,” at the same time that he asserts that the “charm of symmetry” is universal because of the way the eyes move, a belief which he shared with Vernon Lee.²⁶

While the historian Karen Halttunen is right to state that Wharton and Codman are concerned primarily with setting forth “classical standards of proportion and design drawn from the past,” they do not do so, as Halttunen argues, simply because “old wealth is far more concerned with decorating homes according to classic standards of taste and propriety than with the art of personal self-expression through interior decoration.”²⁷ Instead, Wharton and Codman assume that classical aesthetics will provide both physical comfort and aesthetic pleasure for everyone.²⁸ To mediate between tradition and fashion, they set forth an important rule in *The Decoration of Houses*: “The golden mean lies in trying to arrange houses with a view to our own comfort and convenience; and it will be found that the more closely we follow this rule the easier our rooms will be to furnish and the pleasanter to live in” (p. 18). Although their rule is simple, they acknowledge the difficulty many people have in following it because “every one is unconsciously tyrannized over by the wants of others” (p. 18).²⁹ Those others may be family “who have an inconvenient way of thrusting their different habits and tastes across the current of later existences” or decorators that “go to the opposite extreme and discard things because they are old-fashioned” (p. 18).

Judith Fryer has noted Wharton's tendency to mock the women's world of the drawing room and attributes her satiric descriptions of upper-class living spaces to “the deep ambivalence women writers felt about exploring and naming their own experience.”³⁰ While this is certainly often the case, there is little ambivalence in Wharton's description of interiors if her characters have

²⁶ See Santayana's *The Sense of Beauty* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1896), pp. 40-41, p. 90.

²⁷ Halttunen, p. 174.

²⁸ In *The Decoration of Houses*, Wharton and Codman assert both concerns in a single sentence: “[proportion] is that something, indefinable to the unprofessional eye, which gives repose and distinction to a room: in its origin a matter of nice mathematical calculation, of scientific adjustment of voids and masses, but in its effects as intangible as that all-pervading essence which the ancients called the soul” (p. 31).

²⁹ Also of interest is Wharton's and Codman's explanation of the ways in which gender compounds the problem. They suggest that the rooms which women give men the freedom to decorate, such as libraries or dens or smoking rooms, are more comfortable than the drawing rooms and formal dining rooms for which women choose the decor because men select furnishings that reflect their personal needs rather than their social pretensions, the fads of their time, or the tastes of their neighbors (*Decoration*, p. 17).

³⁰ *Felicitous Space: The Imaginative Structures of Edith Wharton and Willa Cather* (University of North Carolina Press, 1986), p. 44.

decorated them with a view toward their own comfort and convenience, as suggested in *The Decoration of Houses*. I think that Wharton's own tastes in interior design have much to do with her representations of domestic spaces, and her choices of fictional forms and modes of narration, especially early in her career as a writer, created some of the ambivalence which Fryer observes. Because the illustrations in *The Decoration of Houses* are of rooms in palaces and chateaux, some early reviewers criticized Wharton and Codman for what they saw as their focus on expensive elegant interiors³¹ and neglected their interest in the ways in which place affects the human spirit. Similarly, literary critics have concentrated on socio-economic factors in Wharton's fictional worlds and have overlooked the psychological aspects of Wharton's exploration of visual sensitivity and domestic space.³²

* * * *

The eighteenth-century Italian setting of Wharton's first novel, **The Valley of Decision** (1902), gives her the opportunity to make use of conversations which she had had with Vernon Lee and notes she had gathered about architectural, interior, and landscape design during two tours through Italy. Wharton endows her protagonist, nine-year-old Odo Vansecca, with her own early visual sensitivity and uses the same language to describe Odo's youthful aesthetic responses that she would use thirty years later to reminisce in *A Backward Glance* about her own childhood feelings. Like Wharton, Odo “trembled” (*Valley I*, p. 23) in the presence of beauty. Like Wharton, his aesthetic experience is “the most vivid emotion of his childhood” (p. 24), and he too “groped for speech and understanding” of his responses because he “had grown up among people to whom such emotions were unknown” (p. 116). Wharton even confers her preference for classical design on her protagonist when he turns twelve (p. 104, p. 257). But in evoking Odo's responses to his surroundings, Wharton is clearly a novice, as can be seen by comparing the difference in Wharton's ability to convey the agreeable feelings which Odo experiences in pleasant rooms with those which Lily Bart experiences in Wharton's next novel, *The House of Mirth* (1905). In *The Valley of Decision*, Wharton uses an omniscient narrator rather than his own perspective to describe what Odo sees:

The kitchen indeed on winter nights was the pleasantest place in the castle. The firelight from its great stone chimney shone on the strings of maize and bunches of

³¹ Wharton tried to defend herself by saying that she chose these buildings because they were open to the public. See William A Coles's analysis in “The Genesis of a Classic” in *The Decoration of Houses*, p. xxxviii. See also R.W.B. Lewis's *Edith Wharton, A Biography* (p. 79) and Shari Benstock's *No Gifts from Chance: A Biography of Edith Wharton* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1994), p. 87.

³² See Jean-Christophe Agnew's “A House of Fiction: Domestic Interiors and the Commodity Aesthetic” in *Consuming Visions*, pp. 133-155, for a discussion of the cult of personality and consumerism and Wai-chee Dimock's “Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*” *PMLA*, C (1987), pp. 783-92, for a discussion of market ethics.

dried vegetables that hung from the roof and on the copper kettles and saucepans ranged along the wall. (*Valley I*, p. 50)

In contrast, by 1905 Wharton has modified both the narrative point of view and her descriptive style. Although she still employs an omniscient narrator, she narrates Lily Bart's reactions to domestic spaces from Lily's own perspective:

Everything in her surroundings ministered to feelings of ease and amenity. The windows stood open to the sparkling freshness of the September morning, and between the yellow boughs she caught a perspective of hedges and parterres leading by degrees of lessening formality to the free undulations of the park. Her maid had kindled a little fire on the hearth, and it contended cheerfully with the sunlight which slanted across the moss-green carpet and caressed the curved sides of an old marquetry desk. Near the bed stood a table holding her breakfast tray, with its harmonious porcelain and silver, a handful of violets in a slender glass, and the morning paper folded beneath her letters. There was nothing new to Lily in these tokens of a studied luxury; but, though they formed a part of her atmosphere, she never lost her sensitiveness to their charm. Mere display left her with a sense of superior distinction; but she felt an affinity to all the subtler manifestations of wealth. (*House*, p. 41)

In *The Valley of Decision*, Wharton does not explain why the kitchen is “the pleasantest place,” nor does she describe how the firelight “shone.” In contrast, in *The House of Mirth*, Wharton is more specific: explaining why Lily's feelings are pleasant (because she experiences a sense of “ease and amenity”) and indicating that Lily not only sees but also experiences the fire (“it contended cheerfully with the sunlight” and “caressed” the desk). It is clear from Wharton's rather heavily reworked holograph manuscript that she was intent on choosing precise words which would code pleasurable sights and soothing feelings. For example, Wharton changed “delicate [transparent] porcelain and shining silver” to “harmonious porcelain and silver,”³³ thus shifting the emphasis from the visual alone to the process through which the viewer experiences the visual. The stylistic and narrative changes bring readers closer to Lily and her feelings. Wharton's interest in representing the transitory effects of interior light is similar to that of her friend Walter Gay, who was similarly interested in capturing “the spirit” of rooms in his paintings yet wary of people misunderstanding his attempts.³⁴

In her two earliest novels, Wharton depicts a tension between her protagonist's aesthetic and

³³ The holograph manuscript of *The House of Mirth* is in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University.

³⁴ Walter Gay, *Memoirs of Walter Gay* (William Edwin Rudge, 1930), p. 60, as quoted in Gary A. Reynolds' *Walter Gay: A Retrospective* (Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York University, 1980). This catalogue contains an analysis of Gay's paintings of interiors without people.

moral sensibilities.³⁵ While she combines Odo's "wondering joy in the mere spectacle of life" with "a deep moral curiosity that ennobled his sensuous enjoyment of the outward show of life" (*Valley I*, p. 91), she continually provides him with choices which separate these entwined parts of his personality, suggesting, then—at the same time she declares otherwise—that these traits cannot co-exist. Wharton identifies austere, coarse interiors with the intellectual ferment of the democratic reformers to whom Odo is drawn, and she links the beauty and grace of living that captivate Odo with the self-satisfied clergy and self-centered nobles who ignore the living conditions of the peasants in their care. However, in Volume II, in which Odo becomes Duke, Wharton fails to explore fully this conflict between morality and aesthetics set up in Volume I, abandoning it for plot-driven political power struggles.

Wharton does a better job in *The House of Mirth* of sustaining a thematic interest in the relationships of the characters with their surroundings. At the beginning of the novel, Lily Bart takes tea in Lawrence Selden's slightly shabby but exceedingly pleasant library, and Wharton describes the room through Lily's eyes as "cheerful," with "its walls of books, a pleasantly faded Turkey rug, a littered desk, and . . . a tea-tray on a low table near the window. A breeze had sprung up, swaying inward the muslin curtains and bringing a fresh scent of mignonette and petunias from the flower-box on the balcony" (pp. 6-7). In this setting, Lily expresses her love of beauty and her frustrations with the social conventions that force marriageable young women such as herself to live with their families: "How delicious to have a place like this all to one's self! What a miserable thing it is to be a woman" (p. 7). And yet in this novel, Wharton continues to position visual sensitivity and ethical behavior as incompatible. Lily Bart comes to a bitter end, in part because of a hyperactive aesthetic sense—a love of beautiful objects which she cannot afford and an aesthetic response to life which seems to produce a "moral lassitude" (p. 245). However, Wharton's lingering and luscious descriptions of the exquisite houses in which Lily will never live—contrasted with the excruciatingly unpleasant detail which she reserves for the rooms that Lily must live in because of her straitened circumstances—portray a visual sensitivity similar to Wharton's own. Ironically, Wharton's criticism of the conspicuous consumption that Thorstein Veblen details in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) becomes in some respects an attack on visual sensitivity, just as Veblen's criticism of conspicuous consumption has been perceived as an attack on culture itself.³⁶

The need that Lily expresses for an attractive room of her own in the first scene with Selden

³⁵ In *Passing Strange and Wonderful: Aesthetics, Nature, and Culture* (Island Press, 1993), the geographer and aesthetician Yi-Fu Tuan argues that such a conflict is a product of modern Western society (pp. 214-18).

³⁶ This criticism of Veblen is Theodor Adorno's; see "Veblen's Attack on Culture" in *Prisms*, 1941, trans. Samuel and Sherry Weber (MIT Press, 1981), pp. 73-94. In "Beyond Veblen: Rethinking Consumer Culture in America" (*Consuming Visions*, pp. 73-97), Jackson Lears argues that Veblen's assignment of only one meaning to consumption—status striving—"resonates with a long tradition in Anglo-American Protestant culture: the Puritan's plain-speak assault on theatrical artifice and effete display" (p. 75). Surely this tradition in America has something to do with the distinction which Wharton saw between American and French cultures in *French Ways and Their Meaning* (pp. 51-56).

reveals Wharton's interest in articulating human responses to domestic spaces and in suggesting the importance of environment to emotional well-being. In this early scene, Lily equates aesthetic pleasure with both emotional and moral well-being; she tells Selden, ““It must be pure bliss to arrange the furniture just as one likes, and give all the horrors to the ash-man. If I could only do over my aunt's drawing-room, I know I should be a better woman”” (p. 7). Whenever she can, Lily escapes her aunt's depressing house with its “complacent ugliness” and “unnatural immaculateness and order” (p. 104) to stay at Judy Trenor's country home, whose “charm” Wharton lovingly evokes in long passages alive with detail.

In *The Decoration of Houses*, Wharton proclaims the hearth as a sign of domestic comfort and hospitality, natural light as a necessity for well-being, and light colors as uplifting. In *The House of Mirth*, Wharton depicts Lily's aunt's house as just the opposite, cold and dark: “the fire, like the lamps, was never lit except when there was company” (p. 112). Lily's bedroom is a typical Victorian room filled with massive black walnut furniture, papered with old-fashioned magenta flocked wallpaper, and darkened with heavy drapes—the very furnishings that occasion the most scathing criticism in *The Decoration of Houses*. Lily's aesthetic response to her aunt's house manifests itself in physical revulsion and psychological suffocation:

She revolted from the complacent ugliness of Mrs. Peniston's black walnut, from the slippery glass of the vestibule tiles, and the mingled odour of sapolio and furniture-polish that met her at the door. . . . The house, in its state of unnatural immaculateness and order, was as dreary as a tomb, and as Lily, turning from her brief repast between shrouded sideboards, wandered into the newly-uncovered glare of the drawing-room she felt as though she were buried alive in the stifling limits of Mrs. Peniston's existence. (p. 104)

Throughout the novel it is obvious from the omniscient narrator's perspective that Wharton sympathizes with Lily's aesthetic responses to the rooms which she inhabits.

But Wharton does not allow her readers to experience fully Lily's physical discomfort as an important human response to one's surroundings. The difficulty occurs in part because the narrative perspective which Wharton chooses oscillates between irony and sympathy, between criticizing Lily's moral failings and social parasitism and validating her social criticism and visual sensitivity.³⁷ Thus, there is sometimes an ironic distance between the narrator's slant and the character's filter, to use Seymour Chatman's terms,³⁸ while at other times the two points of view are the same, making the narrator sympathetic to the filter-character. Furthermore, because of the configuration of

³⁷ See Catherine Quoyeser's “The Antimodernist Unconscious: Genre and Ideology in *The House of Mirth*” (*Arizona Quarterly*, XLIV [1989], pp. 55-79) and Michael J. O'Neal's “Point of View and Narrative Technique in the Fiction of Edith Wharton” (*Style*, XVII [1983], pp. 270-89) for detailed analyses of Wharton's narrative technique.

³⁸ In *Reading Narrative Fiction* (Macmillan, 1993), Chatman distinguishes between the point of view of the narrator, which he terms “narrator's slant,” and the point of view of the character whose story the narrator is telling, “character's filter.” The narrator speaks the story, and the filter-character sees it. Wharton termed the filter-character a “reflector” or “reflecting consciousness.”

characters and the deterministic plot, readers are often encouraged to conflate Lily's visual sensitivity with her love of luxury, thereby viewing her visual sensitivity as the spoiled behavior of a pampered young woman accustomed to wealth and to having her own way.³⁹ For example, the night on which Lily realizes that Gus Trenor expects sexual favors for the money he has loaned her, she goes for comfort to Gerty Farish, who gets out of bed to build a fire, to make tea for Lily, to listen compassionately to her troubles, and to tell Lily of Selden's fascination with her even though Selden is the man whom Gerty loves. Wharton contrasts Gerty's selfless care for Lily in the middle of the night with Lily's self-centered thoughts when she awakes in Gerty's bed the next morning. Such a juxtaposition of scenes makes Lily's revulsion from her surroundings seem ridiculous and uncalled for:

She lay back, looking about the poor slit of a room with a renewal of physical distaste. The outer air, penned between high buildings, brought no freshness through the window, steam-heat was beginning to sing in a coil of dingy pipes, and a smell of cooking penetrated the crack of the door. (p. 177)

This last sentence is Wharton's assessment of Gerty's room as surely as it is Lily's, for she will recycle it in later novels.⁴⁰ But the reader's attention to the potentially depressing effects of such interiors is diverted by Lily's lack of gratitude to Gerty, an assessment which some readers may also make about Lily's squeamishness in her aunt's house. In conjuring up a more pleasing atmosphere while in Gerty's bedroom, Lily's vision is dependent on lavishness not cleanliness, space not coziness. Lily, who now wants not simply a comfortable room of her own, like Selden's, but an expensively decorated one, is identified with luxury, beauty, and leisure and represented as narcissistically concerned with her own well-being. Gerty Farish, who lives in a small apartment, is identified with poverty, dinginess, and work, but her selfless concern for others is depicted as admirable. Wharton establishes her as Lily's aesthetic and moral opposite. Joan Lidoff has noticed that "in her conception of Gerty and Lily, Wharton makes a complete and exclusive dichotomy of pleasure and usefulness: Lily's mode is all pleasure, Gerty's all use."⁴¹

And yet in *The Decoration of Houses* Wharton and Codman call for both pleasure and usefulness (p. 18), and periodically demonstrate that some of their decorating rules can be adapted "at the smallest possible cost" (p. 25-26).⁴² But Wharton does not allow Lily even a small can of cheap

³⁹ For example, a comment by Cynthia Griffin Wolff in *A Feast of Words* suggests that she views such aesthetic preoccupations with interiors as wholly negative: "This fascination with sweeping, clinging drapery, the addiction to personal accessories of every sort, the pitiful longing to 're-do' Aunt Peniston's house are all assertions of Lily's beautiful limited self" (p. 117).

⁴⁰ For example, see *Hudson River Bracketed*, p. 398-99.

⁴¹ Joan Lidoff "Another Sleeping Beauty: Narcissism in *The House of Mirth*" in *American Realism: New Essays*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), p. 246.

⁴² In 1937, just two months before Wharton's death, she and Ogden Codman were planning an inexpensive edition of *The Decoration of Houses* so that their ideas could reach a wider audience (Wilson, p. 133).

white paint to cheer her narrow rented room at the end of *The House of Mirth*. The naturalistic plot that makes Lily a “victim of the civilization which had produced her” (*House*, p. 7), makes her a victim of her visual sensitivity as well.⁴³ Ironically, Wharton designed *The Decoration of Houses* to produce just the opposite effect, so that readers would not become victims, either of the dictates of tradition or of the passing extravagances of fashion or their own surroundings. Early in *The House of Mirth* it seems as if Lily does not mind Selden's “pleasantly faded” and “shabby” furnishings; indeed, she finds his library “cheerful” and comfortable and his apartment “delicious” (pp. 6-7). In the course of the novel, however, Lily's need for pleasing surroundings is yoked to her desire for sumptuous ones, and Wharton's interesting attempt to depict the significance of Lily's emotional responses to places is trivialized because of this link. Gerty Farish's assessment of Lily's social and moral downfall articulates this unfortunate connection: ““You know how dependent she has always been on ease and luxury—how she has hated what was shabby and ugly and uncomfortable. She can't help it—she was brought up with those ideas”” (p. 284). Lily is depicted as a woman in thrall to beauty, a characteristic which dooms her to disaster. Carol Singley argues that aestheticism's beneficial effects, such as spiritual solace, were compromised by competing nineteenth-century social forces such as greed and the objectification of women, problems which Wharton was clearly concerned with in *The House of Mirth*.⁴⁴

As Lily disentangles herself from the lure of consumerism and luxurious living and pays her debt to Gus Trenor, her fall on the social scale results in a moral rise, but Wharton's deliberate irony in making Lily's moral rise contingent on her aesthetic fall also creates an unintentional tension in the text. The determinism of *The House of Mirth*, which makes Lily a product of social, economic, and aesthetic forces beyond her control, does not encourage a sympathetic understanding of her visual sensitivity. Surely Nettie Struther, the working-class woman whose cozy kitchen Lily visits on the day when she takes an overdose of sleeping pills, does not “fall in with the conditions” (p. 334) of her “meagre” (p. 337) life as Lily insists she herself must learn to do, for Nettie's kitchen seems so inviting, so “warm” and “miraculously clean” (p. 331). But Wharton does not make Nettie, a very minor character, a filter-character or endow her with special sensitivity to her surroundings—which would explain her cozy kitchen and disrupt the unintended linkage between visual sensitivity and wealth.

In *The House of Mirth*, Wharton satirizes the conspicuous consumption and questionable tastes that she criticized in *The Decoration of Houses*, but her novel, unlike her decorating manual, does seem to equate the love of pleasing domestic spaces with consumerism and hedonism. However, this equation is more the fault of the novel's naturalistic form and equivocal point of view rather than Wharton's judgement of Lily's visual sensitivity. In her next novel, *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), Wharton takes on a subject—the living and working conditions of factory workers—that enables her to break the link between wealth and comfortable interiors and to dissolve the conflict between visual sensitivity and morality. Indeed the novel's opening—showing how grim surroundings may affect working people's emotional and physical well-being—suggests that *The*

⁴³ Michael O'Neal defines Lily as a “victim of sensations” (p. 283).

⁴⁴ See Singley's "Introduction" to *Edith Wharton: Matters of Mind and Spirit*, especially pp. 21-30.

Fruit of the Tree may evoke in words what Jacob Riis, a contemporary of Wharton's, had captured in photos in such books as *How the Other Half Lives*.⁴⁵ In *The Fruit of the Tree*, John Amherst, the assistant manager of a mill, hopes to influence the owner's daughter, Bessy Westmore, to take an interest in the needs of her family's employees. A chance conversation with Justine Brent, a nurse who recognizes that she is herself “wearied by habitual contact with ugliness and suffering” (p. 153), makes Amherst think not only of health care, child care, education, and physical exercise for the factory workers, but also about the possible connection between their ugly surroundings, both at home and at work, and their emotional well-being:

With sudden disgust he saw the sordidness of it all—the poor monotonous houses, the trampled grass-banks, the lean dogs prowling in refuse-heaps, the reflection of a crooked gas-lamp in a stagnant loop of the river; and he asked himself how it was possible to put any sense of moral beauty into lives bounded forever by the low horizon of the factory. . . . This out-spread meanness of the suburban working colony, uncircumscribed by any pressure of surrounding life, and sunk into blank acceptance of its isolation, its banishment from beauty and variety and surprise, seemed to Amherst the very negation of hope and life. (pp. 22-23)

When Amherst, who is “so familiar” with the place “that he had lost the habit of comparison” (p. 22),⁴⁶ looks at the squalor of the mill through Justine's eyes, he sees both the physical and the psychological effects that places may have on people: “It was no wonder, therefore, that workers imprisoned within such walls should reflect their long hours of deadening toil in dull eyes and anaemic skins, and in the dreary lassitude with which they bent to their tasks” (p. 58). Ironically although Bessy Westmore is sensitive to ugliness in her own life (she finds the house built for the mill owner ugly and refuses to stay there even overnight), she is unable to see any similarity between her own reactions and those of her family's workers. As Justine Brent observes, Bessy shuts “herself into a little citadel of personal well-being while the great tides of existence rolled on unheeded outside” (p. 223). Thus, Amherst, who marries Bessy and finally has the potential to institute much-needed reforms at the mill, finds that he can begin to achieve his goals only after Bessy's death. Wharton's opportunity to highlight the connection between one's surroundings and one's well-being is muted, however, not only because she focuses more on Amherst's personal relationships with Bessy and Justine than on life among the mill workers, but also because she never lets readers see the grim factory and its sordid residences through the mill workers' eyes. Even after Amherst has instituted some of his reforms, it is Justine, who becomes Amherst's second wife, rather than the mill workers, who appraises the effect:

⁴⁵ See Jacob Riis, *How The Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890). In *Felicitous Space*, Judith Fryer points out that Wharton's depiction of the conditions of working-class lives should not be surprising given the attention paid to this subject in publications of the day, as in Riis's “The Tenement House Blight” in the *Atlantic Monthly*, as well as *How the Other Half Lives* and *The Battle with the Slum* (pp. 101-02).

⁴⁶ Santayana explains this phenomenon in *The Sense of Beauty*, p. 215.

Justine's eye saw signs of humanizing change. The rough banks along the street had been levelled and sodded; young maples, set in rows, already made a long festoon of gold against the dingy house-fronts; and the houses themselves—once so irreclaimably outlawed and degraded—showed, in their white-curtained windows, their flowery white-railed yards, a growing approach to civilized human dwellings. (p. 454)

Since Justine neither lives nor works at the mill, she can describe only what the changes look like, not how it feels to live and work there after the reforms and renovations, nor how Amherst's attention to aesthetics may have touched the workers' souls. It can certainly be argued that in this novel Wharton attributes her own upper-class sensitivity to ugly surroundings to working-class people, who, because of necessity, are forced into what Pierre Bourdieu defines as a “pragmatic functionalist ‘aesthetic,’” which refuses “every form of art for art's sake.” Although the mill workers might not have the education or the wealth to have acquired what Bourdieu terms a purely “aesthetic perception” (perceiving, that is, in terms of form and not function), their socially conditioned tastes do not preclude visual sensitivity or sensuous pleasures.⁴⁷ From *A Motor-Flight Through France* (1908), it is clear that when Edith Wharton thought of the aesthetic response, she made room for both “the technical, and what must perhaps be called the sentimental.”⁴⁸

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⁴⁷ *Distinction*, p. 376, pp. 29-30. While I agree with Bourdieu's argument about the social construction of tastes, I also find merit in recent research which shows that boarded-up buildings and trash-strewn empty lots in inner cities are not just symbols but agents of devastation and that residents in such areas register many complaints about their surroundings, thus confirming their visual sensitivity. See Gallagher, p. 191. See also Roger Barker's *Ecological Psychology* (Stanford University Press, 1968) and Ralph B. Taylor's *Human Territorial Functioning* (Cambridge University Press, 1988) for an analysis of the complexity of this relationship between place and people in the inner city. See also James Howard Kunstler's *Home From Nowhere: Remaking Our Everyday World for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996). Bourdieu's statistical data on social classes and their interior decoration is interesting. While there is a variation among the social classes in a desire for “harmonious” interiors, there is little statistical difference in people's desires for “cosy,” or what Wharton might call “comfortable,” interiors (p. 534).

⁴⁸ In *A Motor-Flight Through France* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908), Wharton asks, “is there not room for another, a lesser yet legitimate order of appreciation—for the kind of confused atavistic enjoyment that is made up of historical association, of a sense of mass and harmony, of the relation of the building to the sky above it, to the lights and shadows it creates about it—deeper than all, of a blind sense in the blood of its old racial power, the things it meant to far-off minds of which ours are the oft-dissolved and reconstituted fragments?” (p. 177-178). In *Edith Wharton's Inner Circle* Susan Goodman points out the similarities between Wharton's thoughts on aesthetics and those of her friend Bernard Berenson (pp. 93-96).

The Reef (1912), published five years after *The Fruit of the Tree*, avoids the problems of the earlier novels in expressing Wharton's interest in the effect of interiors on emotions. With *The Reef*, Wharton breaks the inadvertent equation between visual sensitivity and moral lassitude that haunts *The House of Mirth* and finds a narrative perspective more conducive than that of *The Fruit of the Tree* both to revealing her characters' reactions to place and to evoking them in her readers. For this novel, Wharton chooses a more Modernistic form, which not only allows her to focus on her characters' subjectivity and emotions—their thoughts and feelings, rather than their social relationships—but also calls for the narrator to tell the story through two filter-characters, limited to their perspectives in separate, alternating chapters and avoiding the judgmental slant of an omniscient narrator.⁴⁹

Even though Wharton distrusted Modernism, believing it “ridden by theory rather than warmed by life,”⁵⁰ this fictional form with its interest in exploring the mind's reality and in jettisoning omniscient narrators, proved quite congenial for expressing Wharton's interest in visual sensitivity. Love and infidelity, trust and jealousy are Wharton's subjects in *The Reef*, but descriptions of an elegant Parisian apartment, a shabby hotel, and a well-appointed country estate figure as prominently in this novel as do the feelings which they produce in the American expatriate Anna Leath and her diplomat fiancé, George Darrow—the filter-characters through whose eyes readers see and feel the action. In this novel, Wharton makes fine distinctions between characters who experience life visually and those who do not, but those characters with keen visual sensitivity are not judged as narcissistic and materialistic because of their visual sensitivity—as Lily Bart seems to be. Early in *The Reef*, as George Darrow and his young American friend, Sophy Viner, stroll the streets of Paris, Wharton distinguishes between his technical sense of forms and colors and her sentimental response:

The storm of the previous night had cleared the air, and Paris shone in morning beauty under a sky that was all broad wet washes of white and blue; but Darrow again noticed that [Sophy's] visual sensitiveness was less keen than her feeling for . . . “the human interest.” She seemed hardly conscious of sensations of form and colour, or of any imaginative suggestion, and the spectacle before them—always, in its scenic splendour, so moving to her companion—broke up, under her scrutiny, into a thousand minor points; the things in the shops, the types of character and manner of occupation shown in the passing faces, the street signs, the names of hotels they passed, the motley brightness of the flower-carts, the identity of the churches and public buildings that caught her eye. (pp. 377-78)

⁴⁹ I am not arguing here that Wharton never describes her characters' responses to their surroundings when she employs an omniscient narrator, for certainly she does when she employs a filter-character such as Lily in *The House of Mirth*. But such responses are described less frequently and usually not as intensely in her less Modernistic works.

⁵⁰ Lewis, p. 442.

Sophy forms emotional and communicative reactions to her surroundings (“the human interest”), but she does not respond perceptually or intellectually to them (“hardly conscious of sensations of form and colour, or of any imaginative suggestion”).⁵¹ Attuned to the people and objects that she sees, or to their content, Sophy misses what Darrow sees: the forms—that the sky looks like a painter's canvas brushed with “broad wet washes of white and blue.” From this point on in her fiction, Wharton, like Darrow in this scene, will view those characters who do not possess keen “visual sensitiveness” to form, color, and imaginative suggestion as missing one of life's enjoyable and enriching experiences.

Wharton makes a further distinction in *The Reef* between those characters, such as Anna Leath, who find visual pleasure in beautiful surroundings and those, among them her husband, Fraser, who are simply collectors of objects. This is an elaboration of the distinction in *The Fruit of the Tree* between visual sensitivity (represented by Justine, who knows “ugliness, pain, and hard work”) and a materialistic viewpoint (represented by upper-class Bessy Westmore, who is “tethered to the ledger” [p. 221]). In *The Reef*, however, Wharton does not suggest that all wealthy people miss the “poetry of their situation,” as she does in *The Fruit of the Tree* (p. 221). In *The Reef*, Wharton forces readers to compare Anna Leath's aesthetic response to their home with her dead husband, Fraser's, materialistic response:

[Anna] was at the end of the house, in the brown-panelled sitting-room which she frequented at that season because it caught the sunlight first and kept it longest. She stood near the window, in the pale band of brightness, arranging some salmon-pink geraniums in a shallow porcelain bowl. Every sensation of touch and sight was thrice-alive in her. The grey-green fur of the geranium leaves caressed her fingers and the sunlight wavering across the irregular surface of the old parquet floor made it seem as bright and shifting as the brown bed of a stream. . . . [S]topping now and then to straighten a chair or alter the position of a vase, Fraser Leath used to march toward her through the double file of furniture like a general reviewing a regiment drawn up for his inspection. At a certain point, midway across the second room, he always stopped before the mantel-piece of pinkish-yellow marble and looked at himself in the tall garlanded glass that surmounted it. (pp. 428-29)

While Wharton depicts Fraser's martial and narcissistic relationship with this sitting room as controlling, she describes the relationship between Anna and this room in terms Vernon Lee might

⁵¹ The definitions of the psychologists Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson's of the four ways in which people interact with works of art can help distinguish the different responses of Darrow and Sophy to visual stimuli. In *The Art of Seeing: An Interpretation of the Aesthetic Encounter* (J. Paul Getty Trust, 1990), they explain these four ways as: “a perceptual response, which concentrated on elements such as balance, form, and harmony; an emotional response, which emphasized reactions to the emotional content of the work and personal associations; an intellectual response, which focused on theoretical and art historical questions; and, finally, what we characterized as the communicative response, wherein there was a desire to relate to the artist, or to his or her time, or to his or her culture, through the mediation of the work of art” (p. 28).

have chosen; the room's warmth, color, and light not only charm Anna, but raise her spirits, thus representing both Lee's and Wharton's beliefs that pleasant domestic spaces are like good friends. She suggests that Anna's sensitive relationship with the room is interactive: the personified "geranium leaves caressed her fingers," an illustration of the response to objects and places that Vernon Lee called empathy.⁵² In a similar vein, Wharton was apparently intent on amending the static quality of the following clause as she first wrote it, "the sunlight wavered across the irregular surface of the old parquet floor made it look like the brown bed of a stream." The holograph manuscript reveals that she altered the verb tense from past, "wavered," to the progressive, "waving"—thereby making the sunlight dance continuously. She also extended her simile by adding the phrase "as bright and shifting as the brown bed of a stream."⁵³

Throughout the novel, Anna and her fiance George Darrow talk about comfortable rooms and comfortable relationships in the same terms. Anna speaks of both the "bliss" of her love for Darrow (p. 440) and "the bliss of waking from a bad dream in one's own quiet room" (p. 546). Darrow's greatest satisfaction with Anna and his certainty that they are meant for each other emanates from "the mere elemental sense of well-being in her presence" (p. 444). The room that she chooses for him at Givre gives him a sense of well-being: "Upstairs, the room held out the intimate welcome of its lamp and fire. Everything in it exhaled the same sense of peace and stability" (p. 461).⁵⁴ In *The Reef*, Darrow is attracted to both Anna and her sitting room. The rooms which she has decorated reflect her tastes; the guest rooms she has chosen for him in her home suit his. They experience intimacy, serenity, and security in these rooms and with each other⁵⁵—that is until suspicion about

⁵² *The Beautiful*, pp. 61-69. Drawing on German aestheticians Lotze and Vischer and psychologists Lipps and Wundt, Lee defines empathy as more complex than simply "attributing what goes on in us when we look at a shape to the shape itself" (p. 64). Rather she argues that empathy is "another of those various mergings of the activities of the perceiving subject with the qualities of the perceived object," and she insists that empathy "depends upon a comparative or momentary abeyance of all thought of an ego." Lee uses the example, "*The mountain rises*" (p. 61), explaining that "if we become aware that it is *we* who are thinking the rising, *we* who are *feeling* the rising, we should not think or feel that the mountain did the rising" (p. 67).

⁵³ The holograph manuscript of *The Reef* is in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University.

⁵⁴ In analyzing the poetics of space, Gaston Bachelard argues that the feeling which people experience from a place that seems like home harkens back to the fact that "life begins well, it begins enclosed, protected, all warm" and thus one feels "bathed in nourishment, as though he were gratified with all the essential benefits" (p. 7). If one feels intimacy in a house or room, Bachelard believes that it is because of "attraction" (p. 12).

⁵⁵ Wharton alludes indirectly to this notion of knowing someone through his or her surroundings in both *The Valley of Decision* and *The House of Mirth* and directly to it in *The Buccaneers* and *The Fruit of the Tree*. When Justine Brent discovers in Bessy Amherst's "great soulless house" that she is comfortable only in Bessy's husband's study, she realizes "the irreconcilable difference between the two natures she had striven to reunite" (*Fruit*, p. 399).

George's affair with Sophy Viner destroys the "tranquil current" of Anna's love (p. 519). Then these rooms can be a haven only for Anna, not for George.

Wharton suggests why. In contrasting the dingy, generic hotel room in Paris in which Darrow carries on his affair with Sophy Viner, and Givre, the old French chateau that Anna has moved to after her marriage to Fraser Leath, Wharton is suggesting that those rooms or houses that people make their own do not take on symbolic coloration as easily as do places which they have not had a hand in creating to their tastes. Thus, for Darrow, the Parisian hotel room furnished in "noncommittal drabs and browns, with a carpet and paper that nobody would remember, and chairs and tables as impersonal as railway porters" (p. 405) means nothing until he feels guilty about his affair with Sophy. Then, "the featureless dulness of the room" (p. 405) becomes "ugly" and "vulgar" (p. 406) and begins to exert power over him:

The room was getting on his nerves. . . . [I]t seemed to have taken complete possession of his mind, to be soaking itself into him like an ugly indelible blot. . . . It was extraordinary with what a microscopic minuteness of loathing he hated it all: the grimy carpet and wallpaper, the black marble mantel-piece, the clock with a gilt allegory under a dusty bell, the high-bolstered brown-counterpaned bed, the framed card of printed rules under the electric light switch, and the door of communication with the next room. He hated the door most of all. . . . (p. 406)

In the next chapter, Wharton turns to Anna's evolving relationship with Givre. Anna has not had a hand in decorating the chateau; thus, her initial relationship to the house is like Darrow's to his hotel room, one of projection:

The possibilities which the place had then represented were still vividly present to her. The mere phrase "a French Chateau" had called up to her youthful fancy a throng of romantic associations, poetic, pictorial and emotional; and the serene face of the old house seated in its park among the poplar-bordered meadows of middle France, had seemed, on her first sight of it, to hold out to her a fate as noble and dignified as its own mien.

Though she could still call up that phase of feeling it had long since passed, and the house had for a time become to her the very symbol of narrowness and monotony. Then, with the passing of years, it had gradually acquired a less inimical character, had become, not again a castle of dreams, evoker of fair images and romantic legend, but the shell of a life slowly adjusted to its dwelling. (p. 410)

Yet there are rooms in the chateau that Anna has made her own, and they become places which nurture and protect her. Thus as her relationship with Darrow changes, her relationship with her rooms which Darrow has visited remains the same. In contrast, Darrow's relationship with Anna's rooms at Givre changes because he has only had a passing relationship with them: "Here in this very place, he had drunk his deepest draughts of happiness, had had his lips at the fountain-head of its overflowing rivers; but now that source was poisoned and he would taste no more of an untainted cup. For a moment he felt an actual physical anguish" p. 538). Unlike Darrow, Anna will continue to be comforted by these rooms because, psychologists would argue, her relationship with

them is built from numerous sensory interactions locked into her nervous system over time, which link experiences and their settings and become part of one's habit memory.⁵⁶

* * * *

After *The Reef*, Wharton's fictional forms became more realistic than Modernistic as she once again employs omniscient narrators with an ironic distance from her characters. For the rest of her career, Wharton, like most novelists of manners, uses interiors primarily to place characters in social settings and to reveal their personalities. Because of Wharton's interest in design, these works taken together contain a history of interior decorating during her lifetime. In *The Custom of the Country*, for example, Wharton satirizes the provincial Undine Spragg's vacuous slavishness to fashion through her predilection for period rooms; in *The Age of Innocence*, she highlights the cosmopolitan Ellen Olenska's imaginative taste and individualism through her choice of the Aesthetic Movement's eclectic decor; and in *Twilight Sleep*, Wharton reveals Lita Wyant's capricious tastes and indolent self-absorption through her Art Deco-inspired redecorating attempts. In these and other realistic novels, Wharton is less concerned with the psychological experiences of domestic spaces than she is with their social significance. But she continues to echo her primary concern of *The Decoration of Houses* identifying, at least briefly, what factors produce the “charm” of satisfactory rooms and the “discomfort” of unsatisfactory ones by employing rooms with contrasting interior decoration.

For example, in *The Custom of the Country* (1913), a novel that explores what happens when modern life destroys historical continuity, Wharton dramatizes what happens when people are “unconsciously tyrannized over” by the fads of the market place and when people infer that “everything artistic is unpractical” and everything old is “old-fashioned” (*Decoration*, p. 18). She

⁵⁶ See Chapter 9 of Winifred Gallagher's *The Power of Place*. See also new research by neuroscientists about the creation of place memories by brain cells. This new research published in the journal *Cell* is summarized by Rob Stein in “Advances Reported in Grasping How Brain Cells Make Memories,” *Washington Post* (27 December 1996), p. A7.

Such novels as *The Custom of the Country* (1913), *Glimpses of the Moon* (1922), *A Son at the Front* (1923), *The Children* (1928), and *Twilight Sleep* (1928) show that Wharton, like Kate Clephane in *The Mother's Recompense* (1925), was “scornful of luxury when it had symbolized the lack of everything else” (p. 598). Susy Lansing has a “morbid loathing” of ugliness (*Glimpses*, p. 192); Kate Clephane is “morbidly receptive of details” (*Recompense*, p. 724); and Vance Weston in *Hudson River Bracketed* has a “morbid sensitiveness to the visible world” (p. 405). It is important to point out that Susy Lansing's indiscretions stem not from her visual sensitivities, which are actually mentioned only once in the novel (pp. 192-94), but, as with Lily Bart, from her desire for “money, luxury, fashion, pleasure” (p. 134), which blinds her to what she discovers are the “immaterial values” of love and of “good music, good books and good talk” (p. 298). She learns this lesson caring for the children of artists in their small cottage, which is very different from the luxurious accommodations which she has managed to acquire from her rich friends. Susy is one of several Wharton heroines who live an impoverished emotional life in the midst of great wealth, but, unlike Lily Bart, she discovers her error before it is too late to remedy it.

uses the decorating trend of period rooms so popular in the 1890s⁵⁷ to satirize those newly rich Americans who believe that possessions will confer status, but who have little knowledge of what they are buying, specifically what Wharton termed “the solid qualities of good material, good design and good workmanship” (*Decoration*, p. 27). Undine Spragg's fixation on being fashionable (“I want what the others want” is her refrain p. 688) causes her to break Wharton's primary rule of decorating, functional suitability, and thus to create rooms of “exquisite discomfort” (*Decoration*, p. 20). Rather than arranging the house she shares with her husband, Ralph Marvell, for their own “comfort and convenience” as Wharton advocates in *The Decoration of Houses*, Undine purchases “fragile gilt chairs” (*Custom*, p. 773) in hopes of transforming her drawing room into “a French ‘period’ room” (p. 772). Later, after Undine has divorced Ralph and married Raymond de Chelles, she finds life in a real French chateau moldy and monotonous—one of the novel's exquisite ironies. The omniscient narration in this novel is heavily, deliciously, and often cryptically ironic, implying thereby a reader of the same tastes and sensitivities as the author.

In *The Age of Innocence* (1920) Wharton dramatizes the other “tyrannical” decorating force that she discusses in *The Decoration of Houses*, family traditions. She uses interior decoration in this novel to underline the dis-ease and distress of characters such as Newland Archer, who are imprisoned in old New York society. In the cheerless, formal homes of the richest families in the city, Wharton represents “the discomfort which causes so many rooms to be shunned by everybody in the house, in spite (or rather because) of all the money and ingenuity expended on their arrangement” (*Decoration*, p. 19). In contrast to these Victorian monstrosities is an informal, bohemian drawing room which inexplicably captivates everyone who sees it. This room bridges the gender gap which Wharton and Codman refer to in *The Decoration of Houses* by combining the intellectual life of the men's club and the cultural life of the library with the intimacy of family life in the home. Decorated eclectically⁵⁸ by Ellen Olenska, the room, like its owner, has an individuality and informality that all the male characters are drawn to. In Ellen's drawing room, where the fire is never allowed to go out and new books arrive frequently, Archer is as comfortable and intellectually stimulated as he is his club or library. The vision he has there of another way that domestic life could be lived, what Wharton calls “the complex art of civilized living” (*Glance* p. 830), tantalizes but simultaneously disconcerts him because it is not what he is accustomed to.

⁵⁷ See Karen Halttunen's analysis of interior decoration as an expression of personality (pp. 182-83).

⁵⁸ The Turkish reference suggests that Wharton was playing upon the turn-of-the-century fashion of creating an oriental “cozy corner” in the parlor, which an 1899 *Ladies' Home Journal* by William Martin Johnson suggests “invites repose and freedom from conventionality” (16.6 [May 1899], p. 27). Significantly, Wharton has the cozy corner envelop the parlor in Ellen's house. Ellen's drawing room is enticing in part because it is exotic, just as she is, but it also combines the comfort and individualism that Wharton called for in *The Decoration of Houses* with a sense of beauty and pleasure that depends more on domestic well-being than on a large bank account. Wharton even has Ellen use “a stretch of red damask” to disguise “the discoloured wallpaper” (p. 1071), a tip from *The Decoration of Houses*. See Halttunen's analysis of the evolution of the cozy corner into the living room, replacing the parlor entirely, pp. 164-66. See Gere, for additional photographs, pp. 338-39.

When Ellen describes her “poor little place” as “less gloomy than the van der Luydens” (p. 1073), she voices feelings that Archer and his social set have experienced but have neither understood nor articulated because they have been awed by the van der Luydens' wealth and social position: “Those privileged to enter it [the van der Luydens' home] shivered there, and spoke of it as ‘handsome’”—p. 1073). Readers see Ellen's drawing room through Archer's eyes because he is the only filter-character in this novel, and although he tries “to analyse the trick” (p. 1072) that makes the atmosphere of this room so different from others, he is not successful. Wharton's focus in *The Age of Innocence* is to explain how the conventions of society imprison its occupants, making it difficult for them to articulate what they feel. Wharton represents the rooms in *The Age of Innocence* in almost photographic detail, but she is more interested in the symbolic significance of the van der Luyden's home or Ellen's drawing room, how they reflect the conventionality or unconventionality of her characters, than in explaining their literal effects on her characters' psyches.

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Only in *The Mother's Recompense* (1925) of her later novels does Wharton evoke a character's responses to domestic spaces as palpably and powerfully as in *The Reef*.⁵⁹ She again turns to the more Modernist narrative technique of limiting the narrative perspective to that of her protagonist and using indirect interior monologue, thus giving readers the rhythm of Kate Clephane's speech as well as her thought patterns. For Wharton, this mode of representing a character's reactions to her surroundings results in descriptions of vibrant immediacy and passionate intensity.

Ironically, Wharton, like the writer Vance Weston in *The Gods Arrive* (1929), rejected the

⁵⁹ It is significant that in her last two completed novels, *Hudson River Bracketed* (1929) and *The Gods Arrive* (1932), Wharton returns to the effect of grim, ugly surroundings on the human spirit, a subject that she had not treated with total success in *The House of Mirth* and *The Fruit of the Tree*. In *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*, however, Wharton chooses to explore the effects of such an environment on characters, a male writer and his lover, whose imaginations she can more easily enter into than the factory workers in *The Fruit of the Tree*. The effect of place on the writer and the art of making atmospheres are subjects that Wharton focuses on here, but the first subject gets lost in writer Vance Weston's rambling adventures and Wharton's rambling satire on the publishing world and literary Modernism. The second subject, which is closely related, loses significance because the decorating talents and visual sensitivities of Vance's lover, Halo Tarrant, reinforce traditional gender roles and the cult of female domesticity. See Carol Singley's discussion of the aesthetic movement's reinscription of traditional attitudes toward women (pp. 29-30) and of Wharton's problematic portrayal of Halo Tarrant (pp. 201-08), whose creativity is represented as serving Vance's career. In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton mourns “the extinction of the household arts” and bemoans a liberation of women that would value a university curriculum above what she calls a “curriculum of housekeeping” (p. 830). While she does not want young women to be taught “to despise the kitchen and the linen room, and to substitute the acquiring of University degrees for the more complex art of civilized living” (p. 830), Edith Wharton surely does not want to relegate women to the domestic sphere, which is where she places Halo.

prevailing view that the novel of manners was an outmoded form and that Modernism was the wave of the future, arguing instead that "the fishers in the turbid stream-of-consciousness had reduced their fictitious characters to a bundle of loosely tied instincts and habits, borne along blindly on the current of existence" (*Gods*, p. 112). Yet I cannot help wonder whether, if Wharton had fished more frequently in the stream of Modernism, she might not have evoked even more fully her "secret sensitiveness" to the visual world. In *The Writing of Fiction*, Wharton saves her highest praise for Proust's Modernism: "No one else has carried as far the analysis of half-conscious states of mind, obscure associations of thought and gelatinous fluctuations of mood" (p. 155). When Wharton's own fictional technique approaches Proust's, as it does in *The Reef* and *The Mother's Recompense*, she articulates the visual sensitivity and psychological meanings of domestic space that many readers are only half-conscious of. From *The Writing of Fiction*, it is clear that Wharton knew the "value" of the Modernist stream of consciousness technique "in making vivid a tidal rush of emotion" (p. 13), but it is equally clear that she is wary of the "formlessness" (p. 14) which she feels results from this technique. Perhaps Wharton's own strong aesthetic sense—her need for order, simplicity, symmetry—made what she saw as the "pure anarchy" of Modernism as repulsive to her as a room cluttered with bric-a-brac or a door off-center. Although Wharton abandons what she sees as Modernism's chaos for realism's familiar form, she uses her fiction to teach Americans what she had sensed as a child—that people's relationships with places richly deserve understanding. It is in her Modernist novels, however, that Edith Wharton not only best evokes but best explains these elusive and subtle relationships.