



EDITH WHARTON REVIEW

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Undine Spragg and the Transcendental I
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At the close of the nineteenth century, reading Emerson was a nostalgic gesture in a culture obsessively concerned not only with its own changing identity, but also with the consequent worth of American individualism and the possibility of American idealism. This sentimentalized Emerson became a cultural referent marking at once how far America had progressed and how radically it had declined. By the late nineteenth century, Emerson's philosophies had been integrated into the popular culture and actively identified with an emerging marketplace economy. His aphorisms had been sewn into

samplers and hung on parlor walls, copied into primers, and recited at any and every type of rhetorical event.

However, this process of integrating Emerson into American cultural life specifically entailed divorcing the philosopher from the philosophy, essentially commodifying Emerson himself. In her analysis of Emerson's emergence as an American prophet, Mary Cayton writes:

Especially in the Midwest, where the proliferation of religious denominations provided some measure of ideological division, Emerson's ideas were bled of any philosophical, political, or religious implications and used as the basis for a secular faith that focused on a materially defined progress,

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BOOK REVIEW

Edith Wharton: The Fruit of the Tree. Introduction by Donna Campbell. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000. \$47.50 cloth, \$18.95 paper. 633 pp. Introduction pp. v-l (50 pp.)

The reissuing of this important novel by Edith Wharton, originally published in 1907, provides an essential service to both general readers and American literature scholars. Every bit as welcome as the novel's increased availability, however, is its first-rate introduction by Donna Campbell. Campbell's 45-page preface provides not only a synopsis of the novel and an overview of critical reaction to its initial publication, but also a brief survey of current scholarly readings. The introduction includes, moreover, numerous insights of Campbell's own as well as suggested ways to read this complicated novel. Ultimately, Campbell finds much to recommend *The Fruit of the Tree*, from its treatment of marriage, social and labor problems in general to its curiously modern examination of such issues as euthanasia and drug addiction in particular.

Because certain myths have hampered a full appreciation Edith Wharton and her work, contemporary scholarship is at its most valuable when it manages to chip away at and eliminate these old bugbears (Wharton as a female and lesser version of Henry James, for instance). Much as *The House of Mirth* had long suffered from the prevailing criticism of Lily Bart's death as too predictable and too depressing, the conventional critical wisdom regarding *The Fruit of the Tree* was that it suffers from too many themes, lack of focus, overly diverse and loose organization, even too much ambition. Acceptance of such critical commonplaces has done the novel a disservice, and Donna Campbell dispels the lingering aura of such old but pervasive and influential judgments.

Her impressively researched introduction offers rich insights into the novel itself, and enhances the ways in which it may be read. She makes a compelling case for Wharton as the novelist with a social consciousness (vi) and demonstrates persuasively that *The Fruit of the Tree* may be read as an intriguing and thoughtful examination of issues at once inescapably bound to its Progressive Era setting and startlingly modern in its themes (vi). Despite their genuine concerns with these social issues, Justine and Amherst, the main characters, have individually eaten the fruit of the forbidden tree of knowledge and, like that other doomed couple in Eden, have lost their innocence. Their story gives to the title its dark resonances but—perhaps even more significantly, says Campbell—Wharton's juxtaposing of the personal and the political illuminates the way one's life is bound up at the intersection of gender and class as well as with the compelling social issues of the day.

Campbell's introduction additionally includes information on Wharton's life and work that contextualizes the novel (for instance, while writing *The Fruit of the Tree*, Wharton collaborated on a stage version of *The House of Mirth*, wrote the novella *Madame de Treymes*, and read an influential article on the benefits of euthanasia). Campbell also speculates on Wharton's interest in the new professionalized fields of nursing and engineering; points to the complexity of Justine's portrait as the New Woman ("The Nurse in Fiction" appeared in the March 1907 edition of *The Nation*); and traces the roots of reform issues. She analyzes the centrality of the trope of reading, offers a provocative view of Amherst's wife Bessy as the embodiment of sexual desire, and notes Wharton's use of male figures to represent medicine, religion and the law (a technique she would amplify in the later novel *Summer* [1917]). In essence, says Campbell, the novel's themes are as salient for readers today as they were for Wharton's audience: philanthropy, urban planning, marriage and divorce, paternalism and the ownership of mills, worker exploitation, the disparity between rich and poor, women in the professions, gender equality, and, not least, euthanasia and assisted suicide laws (xi). Campbell makes clear that, with its diverse richness and complexity, *The Fruit of the Tree* provides a literary challenge, one that will appear on the most influential reading lists as we near the novel's one hundredth anniversary.

Abby H. P. Werlock
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unlimited wealth, and conspicuous social achievement within the framework of a stable and proscriptive set of moral values. (619)

According to Charles Mitchell, Emerson had become "a glorified cultural icon, demanding reverence but dissociated from the experience and priorities of a newer generation of readers" (13). Unlike Emerson's dissident readers of the 1830's and 40's, or his bourgeois audiences of the 50's and 60's, readers of Emerson at the turn of the century translated his social and political idealism into a kind of romance, an impossible American dream, either no longer desirable in an industrial and global America, or no longer available in an increasingly materialist and alienating society. When Emersonian philosophy surfaces at all, it is as a compendium to an emerging literature of self-help; "self-reliance" ceases to be a critique of materialism, and instead becomes the first step toward self-advancement. In 1870, Charles Eliot Norton, a Harvard professor and a friend of Emerson, wrote, "No best man with us has done more to influence the nation than Emerson,—but the country has in a sense outgrown him. He was the friend and helper of its youth; but for the difficulties and struggles of its manhood we need the wisdom of the reflective and rational understanding, not that of the intuitions" (qtd. in Mitchell 11). According to such a reading, the Gilded Age appears to be the Freudian child of Emersonian philosophy, replacing the father figure with a better and stronger version of the original. In this case, the process of eulogizing Emerson—a process which begins several years before his actual demise—is a part of the cultural project which translates an active critique of American progress into the mournful fiction of historical romance. In effect, Emerson becomes as idealized, as quaint, and as irrelevant as Natty Bumppo, Rip Van Winkle, or Huckleberry Finn.

The novels of Edith Wharton narrate this tense negotiation between nostalgia for the purity of Emerson's aestheticism, and a deep, yet critical, fascination with the mechanisms of progress. Although many of her novels entertain the possibility of transcendence—aesthetic, moral, and even spiritual—none so radically assaults that possibility as *The Custom of the Country*. The destructive energy and materialistic drive that determine the fate of characters like Lily Bart are embodied in the relentless progress of Undine Spragg. This progress at once romanticizes, critiques, and realizes the promise of Emerson's Transcendentalism.

Wharton's relation to Transcendentalism, and to Emerson in particular, is complex. Wharton clearly admired what she perceived as the "real" Emerson, but was critical of popular, cheapening readings of his works. His call in "The American Scholar" to create new paradigms of thinking had led to many

Americans' wholesale rejection of European and classical models—a rejection Wharton found distressing. In an 1896 letter to the editor of the Newport newspaper, Wharton mocked the urge of American architects to turn their backs on the great architecture of the past and be merely original: "To be original at any cost is apparently the first quality demanded of a modern architect," she wrote, adding that "The desire to do differently for the sake of doing differently is puerile" (Wegener, 55, 56). Her disdain for the ignorant search for novelty was expressed again in the first page of *Hudson River Bracketed*, wherein nineteen-year-old Vance Weston ranks "having invented a new religion" as his greatest accomplishment because religion, like everything else, must "go ahead with the times" (HRB 3-4). Wharton particularly despised what she felt were inaccurate readings of Transcendentalist philosophy, remarking biting in an essay entitled "The Vices of Reading" that "Transcendentalism owes much of its perennial popularity to a reverence for the unintelligible, and its disciples are largely recruited from a class of readers who consider it as great an intellectual feat to read a book as to understand it" (Wegener 103). Her mistrust here—clearly—is not of Transcendentalist philosophy itself, but of those who read it unintelligently.

Although Wharton mocked a cheapened and commodified Emerson, she admired what she saw as the authentic Emerson. She wrote that Whitman and Poe were, "with Emerson, . . . the best we have—in fact, the all we have" to admire in what she saw as the limited horizons of American literature (qtd. in Lewis, 236). She admired Emerson's style as well as his thoughts, at one point recommending his prose as a model to her former lover Morton Fullerton (*Letters* 281). She considered using Emerson's phrase "mortal[s] mixed of middle clay" as the title for her first volume of short stories (*Letters* 36-37), and took the title of her last completed novel, *The Gods Arrive*, from his poem "Give All to Love" (Singley 230).

Emerson was important to Wharton at a deeply personal level as well. Wharton summarized her love for Morton Fullerton by quoting a line from Emerson: "I have found in Emerson (from Euripides, I suppose) just the phrase for you—& me. 'The moment my eyes fell on him I was content'" (*Letters* 129). Indeed, both Emerson and Nietzsche were crucially important to Wharton as she began her affair with Fullerton. As Carol Singley has written, Transcendentalist authors "spoke to her sense of romantic possibility, of personal power, originality, and fulfillment" (19); "Emersonian Transcendentalism—with its emphasis on intuitive truth, disregard of external authority, and communion with nature—offered Wharton relief from society's pressures and from Calvinism's burdensome moral audits" (Singley 20). Wharton was, for a time, taken with the work of Nietzsche, believing rightly that Nietzsche himself owed a great deal to Emerson (Singley 19). The emphasis of both Nietzsche and Emerson on power, and the attainment of personal power, must have had a great

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appeal for the increasingly capable author as well as for the woman who for the first time threw off conventionality in her affair with Fullerton (Singley 147).

Further, Emerson's emphasis on the role of beauty as something simultaneously original and transhistorical resonates with much of Wharton's critical writing. In "The Criticism of Fiction" she writes that "It is the critic's affair . . . to point out and insist upon the superior permanence and beauty of the subject deeply pondered [and] discerned . . ." (Wegener 128). Keats linked Truth and Beauty; Emerson and Wharton link "permanence and beauty," and by the time of *The Children* (1928) Wharton was asking whether women's beauty was becoming standardized—which meant, by standards that connected uniqueness with beauty, that it was no beauty at all.

At the same time, Wharton knew that the Transcendentalists were part of the past, no longer a shaping force of the present. Her very remarks on Transcendentalism in "The Vice of Reading" indicate that, in her opinion, Emerson was no longer being read thoughtfully. Her story "The Angel at the Grave" also suggests that Transcendentalism is outdated: the works of a minor Transcendentalist philosopher become less and less appreciated with each passing year.

Wharton's most complex and interesting treatment of Emersonian Transcendentalism, however, came in the middle of her career, in the 1913 novel *The Custom of the Country*. In this work Wharton bemoans the passing of a pure Transcendentalism even as she depicts it as obsolete—while faulting the Gilded Age for commodifying its best impulses. Each of the three central characters of this novel—Ralph Marvell, Elmer Moffatt, and Undine Spragg—has a distinct and fascinating relationship to Transcendentalism. In Ralph Marvell, Wharton expressed her admiration and even her nostalgia for Transcendentalism, while also implying its central weakness: it could not keep up with the devastating energies of Gilded Age capitalism. In Elmer Moffatt, Wharton embodies the Midwestern businessmen who were, as Cayton has delineated, appropriating Emerson for their own financial ends. In Undine, Wharton creates a woman who had probably never read a word of Emerson, but who has, like Moffatt, seized upon the social opportunities implicit in American Transcendentalism.

In contrast to Undine, Ralph Marvell seems genuinely Transcendentalist in his apprehension and his appreciation of external beauty and in his capacity to interiorize it. His first name is the same as Emerson's—no accident, as we see him embodying many of the attributes Emerson praised, particularly in his earliest and most optimistic essays. Ralph's love of the Italian landscape illustrates Emerson's claim that "Nature satisfies the soul purely by its loveliness" (Nature 15). His idealistic pursuits—conversing, admiring natural beauty and human works of art, writing poetry—suggest that his philosophy is in

profound agreement with Emerson's (as delineated in "Nature"):

The world thus exists to the soul to satisfy the desire of beauty. Extend this element to the uttermost, and I call it an ultimate end. No reason can be asked or given why the soul seeks beauty. Beauty, in its largest and profoundest sense, is one expression for the universe . . . (19)

Ralph's cave-like "inner world" (CC 76) is the place in which he seeks and finds beauty. Wharton tells her readers that:

there was a world of wonders within him. As a boy at the sea-side, Ralph. . . had once come on a cave—a secret inaccessible place with glaucous lights, mysterious murmurs, and a single shaft of communication with the sky . . . And so with his inner world . . . it wove a secret curtain about him, and he came and went in it with the same joy of furtive possession. (75-76)

Seen from the Transcendentalist perspective, Ralph is not the impractical loafer Undine's father suspects him of being, but rather a philosopher who has determined what matters most to him and how best to achieve his chosen goals. Ralph knows that he has "enough [money] to buy books . . . and now and then for a holiday dash to the great centers of art and ideas" (CC 75). Like Emerson or his disciple Thoreau, Ralph has simplified his needs, and dedicated his life to beauty.

Ironically, it is specifically Ralph's belief in a transcendental beauty—symbolic, harmonious, and inspiring—that leads to the end of his career as armchair transcendentalist. Emerson proclaims that "Beauty is the mark God sets upon virtue" (Nature 16); Ralph's assumption that Undine, beautiful as she is, must also be virtuous and a fit soulmate to "reign over" his inner world and himself (CC 76), leads him into the marriage that results in his disillusionment, his financial and emotional insolvency, and his eventual suicide. In Ralph, Wharton targets a weak spot in Emerson's stated belief in the artistic and ethical value of beauty. Undine illustrates that a beautiful surface, contrary to Emerson's claims, may not be a trustworthy indication of virtue.

While Ralph Marvell personifies the Transcendentalist as aesthete, he is nonetheless subject to the radical personal and cultural critique implicit in Transcendentalism. He does not have the firm belief in self that Emerson extols in "Self-Reliance," and which is necessary to any original act, whether it be artistic, political, or, in the case of Elmer Moffatt, entrepreneurial. In "Self-Reliance" Emerson sets out qualities that suggest that Elmer Moffatt is, in several important ways, the self-reliant hero Emerson called for at the beginning of his career and whom he would eventually come to suspect. Moffatt has a toughness and resilience which Ralph lacks. Ralph could be the effete character in Emerson's observation that "We are parlor soldiers. The rugged battle of fate, where our strength is born, we shun. If our

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young men miscarry in their first enterprizes, they lose all heart" (SR 275). By contrast, Emerson's description of the self-reliant man applies perfectly to Moffatt. Indeed, one begins to wonder whether Elmer has read the selected inspirational snippets of Emerson which were so popular in his day: "The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do, nor does he know until he has tried. . . . Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string" (Self-Reliance 259-60). When Undine invites Elmer to dine with Ralph and his family, Moffatt again illustrates Emerson's heroic ideal. He presents himself in the aristocratic Marvell home with "loud easiness" and becomes "recklessly explicit" in talking of a political intrigue: "all the details of the prodigious exploit poured from him with Homeric volume" (CC 252). Undine, who has replaced her brash Midwesternisms with a veneer of old New York locutions and manners, finds his behavior embarrassing—perhaps particularly as he accepts a glass of champagne with a phrase Undine has long since rejected as crude: "I don't mind if I do" (253). Ralph and his relatives, more closely allied to the writings of Emerson than Undine, are actually "less disturb[ed]" by his manners than she is. In this situation, Moffatt has the exact air recommended by Emerson: "The non-chalance of boys who are sure of a dinner, and would disdain as much as a lord to do or say aught to conciliate one, is the healthy attitude of human nature. How is a boy the master of society. . . . You must court him; he does not court you" (SR 261). Covertly, of course, Moffatt is "courting" Ralph and his family: he has asked Undine to introduce him to Ralph because he thinks Ralph might be a useful business connection. But this is not even hinted at in his manner. This loud "boy" is indeed "the master of society."

Above all, Emerson stresses the importance of non-conformity: "Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist . . . Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world" (261). "Insist on yourself; never imitate" (278), he says. Over and over again Emerson's exhortations describe Elmer Moffatt. Appropriately, the transcendentalist Ralph appreciates Elmer's strength of character. After meeting Moffatt, Ralph exclaims, "That's an amazing chap" (CC 253) and "There's something epic about him—a kind of epic effrontery" (254). Unlike Ralph Marvell, Moffatt remains sure of himself even when his financial and political schemes falter or fail. He is finally triumphant in his social and financial ambitions, and again Emerson's words describe his success with an almost uncanny aptness: "The voyage of the best ship is a zigzag line of a hundred tacks. This is only microscopic criticism. See the line from a sufficient distance, and it straightens itself to the average tendency" (266). Elmer's self-confidence and self-reliance lead him to success.

As the novel continues, Moffatt embodies not simply the heroism of Transcendental self-reliance; he also begins to evolve in an additional and rather surprising way: he becomes an appreciator, even a lover, of beauty. Like Ralph Marvell in this one way, he would agree with Emerson that "the world thus exists to the soul to satisfy the desire of beauty" (Nature 19). For Elmer, that satisfaction also requires ownership; yet there is no doubt that he admires and needs beauty in a way that Undine can only imagine. Late in the novel, Moffatt stands in an awed silence before the de Chelles family tapestries, finally responding with an awed "By George!" (CC 532). His locutions may be neither refined nor articulate, but he seems to understand the thorough beauty of the tapestries. Similarly, when Undine watches Elmer examining a work of art, "she saw that the thing he looked at moved him in a way she could not understand" (563). He boasts vulgarly that he is "the greatest" collector (532), but his silences show that he collects for the best of reasons: he loves beauty.

In contrast to both of these husbands, Undine Spragg Moffatt Marvell de Chelles Moffatt seems a poor candidate for the embodiment of Emersonian Transcendentalism. She has none of Ralph's, or even Elmer's, pure love of beauty. Her interest in the de Chelles tapestries derives only from her curiosity about how much money they could be sold for. Even her interest in clothes and jewelry has nothing to do with notions of pure, transhistorical, or ideal beauty. For Undine, fashion substitutes for beauty, and even fashion has less to do with the aesthetic than the utilitarian. Emerson crosses a bare common and discovers his true self; Undine crosses the Atlantic and finds her newest self in a dressmaker's boutique. Undine's fashionable gowns, and her evolving sense of style, replace the fluid identity which is the hallmark of Transcendentalism. An eye for fashion, rather than a perception of beauty, helps Undine to find new husbands whose wealth and social status will in turn help her scale the social ladder. When Emerson experiences his moment of revelation, he becomes a "transparent eyeball." This graphic metamorphosis from individual to perception, from "I" to eye, reveals that, for all its provocation and import, the surface beauty of nature is incidental only: "Truth, and goodness, and beauty, are but different faces of the same All. But beauty in nature is not ultimate. It is the herald of inward and eternal beauty, and is not alone a solid and satisfactory good" (Nature 19). Ralph's response to rural Italy confirms Emerson's ideas about the existence of beauty in nature; Undine's lack of interest in Italy shows how unEmersonian she is. Her moments of perception invert Emerson's revelation; Undine looks about her while in Italy and seems to declare, "I see nothing; I am all." Uninterested in perceiving the world around her, Undine is only interested in how she is perceived. In Italy there is no one to admire her beauty, no one to appreciate or applaud the "I" she

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is cultivating—hence she finds the hill towns only hot, dusty, and dull.

Similarly, Undine has none of Elmer's transcendental strength of character. Elmer has "the nonchalance of boys who are sure of a dinner"; Undine has only enough nonchalance to mock the conventions of old New York when she is alone with her mother and the Irish masseuse Mrs. Heeny. And even as she mocks those conventions she is struggling to master them. Far from boldly being herself Undine is (as numerous critics have observed) constantly in a process of self-transformation: learning the right locutions, learning to select the right clothes, stances, attitudes, glances, jewelry, and cosmetics for each social situation she aspires to. Emerson writes, "I am ashamed to think how easily we capitulate to badges and names, to large societies and dead institutions . . . what a blindman's-buff is this game of conformity" (SR 262,264). We can only guess that he would be deeply ashamed of Undine's chronic capitulations to social standards, of her deep passion (which is perhaps her only passion) for the "game of conformity."

At the same time, Undine both parodies and, paradoxically, embodies at least one aspect of Emerson's ideal individual; she is radically dynamic and transforming. It could be argued that Undine's self is change; in that case, her constant shifting is a continual fulfillment of self. Her very insistence on change and social climbing resonates ironically with Emerson's statement in "Self-Reliance," "Life only avails, not the having lived. Power ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state; in the shooting of the gulf; in the darting to an aim" (271).

And yet Undine's daily life in Paris exists as a kind of parody of Transcendentalist fulfillment. Undine herself feels she is living a "real" and rich life: "The scene before her [Paris] typified to Undine her first real taste of life. How meagre and starved the past appeared in comparison with this abundant present!" (CC 281) Undine's sense of the wealth of life—her sense of having "her first real glimpse into the art of living" (285)—epitomizes the kind of vibrant present which Emerson urged his readers to embrace: "why should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe? The sun shines to-day also" (Nature 7). But Emerson might approve less of the conditions that create this sense of "real life" for Undine. If she is refusing to be determined by the past, Undine does not consequently seem to appreciate the significance of the "floods of life" that stream around her. Wharton writes:

Every moment of her day was packed with excitement and exhilaration. Everything amused her: the long hours of bargaining and debate with dress-makers and jewellers, the crowded lunches at

fashionable restaurants, the perfunctory dash through a picture-show or the lingering visit to the last new milliner . . . (282)

The epitome of the self-contradictory, pseudo-transcendentalist nature of Undine's experiences may be in her "motor-rush to some leafy suburb, where tea and music and sunset were *hastily absorbed* on a crowded terrace above the Seine" (282, italics added). Transcendentalist elements are here: the leafy, semi-rural scene, the sunset, the river; but all have been packaged and commodified, all are rushed through and "hastily absorbed" in a crowd. Undine's activities illustrate that no philosophy is resistant to Gilded Age capitalism: even the observation of, and absorption in, Nature can be bought, sold, and skillfully managed—while its consumers convince themselves that they are achieving a certain lovely, disinterested transcendence, a life richly lived. With her boundless energies and her materialistic goals, Undine represents Emersonian Transcendentalism as it was transported into the Gilded Age.

In *Edith Wharton: A Biography*, R.W.B. Lewis claims that Undine Spragg is as much a projection of Wharton's "anti-self" as she is a critique of appetitive American women and declining American values: "Above all, Undine suggests what Edith Wharton might have been like if, by some dreadful miracle, all her best and most loveable and redeeming features had been suddenly cut away" (Lewis 350). Written shortly after Wharton's divorce, *The Custom of the Country* presents divorce as one of the implicit signals of a widespread cultural decline and moral erosion. As the archetypal divorcee, Undine Spragg may well represent both Wharton's self-love and her self-loathing. Not only does Wharton seem to be acting out a monstrous version of her own need for freedom, she seems to be at once examining its apparently shallow motivations, while also distancing herself from divorcees whose motives were, from Wharton's perspective, questionable.

Yet, the catharsis that Undine embodies is as much cultural as it is personal. Undine's refusal to be disciplined or shamed, despite the clear immorality of her actions, demonstrates the paradoxical nature of Emersonian transcendence when embraced by women. In the character of Undine, Wharton experiments with the notion that female transcendence can only be a product of female transgression. Of course, in this regard, Wharton simply highlights an aspect of Emerson's Transcendentalism that had been softened by late nineteenth-century America: the radical freedom and originality which Emerson imagined for the individual demands a willingness to offend and an absolute rejection of conventionality. This assault upon decorum and convention, however, becomes integrated into the mythology of the American male as he engages in the process of self-discovery. As a result we sympathize with the loneliness of Ralph, and admire the vulgarity of Elmer;

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Undine alone incurs the reader's hostility and the author's disapproval. What is at once terrible and wonderful is that Undine doesn't much care about either.

The "dreadful miracle" that might have exposed and transformed Wharton produces Undine, who provides readers with a thrilling counterpoint to the many nineteenth-century narratives—both fictional and not—of women who are destroyed by their desire to be free. A brief survey of other female characters of the age illustrates Undine's dubious victory. Many of them appropriate the perspectives and the tools of American Transcendentalism, but few survive the experiment. Kate Chopin's Edna, for example, awakens to discover "her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relation as an individual to the world within and about her," answering Emerson's invitation, "Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?" (Chopin 34, Nature 7). Like Emerson, Edna is in the process of distinguishing the "Me" from the "Not Me," while also accepting the consequences of such a discovery, "I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I won't give my self" (69). She is, unfortunately, only able to preserve her authentic self through suicide. Similarly, in "The Yellow Wallpaper," Gilman's protagonist yearns for precisely the vista offered by transcendental revelation, "new lands, new men, new thought" (Nature 7):

There comes John's sister. Such a dear girl as she is, and so careful of me! I must not let her find me writing. She is a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper, and hopes for no better profession. I verily believe she thinks it is the writing which made me sick! But I can write when she is out, and see her a long way off from these windows. (Gilman 47)

Her struggle against domesticity, however, is only resolved by creeping out of reality and into the garden in her mind. A generation earlier Hawthorne's Zenobia—a veiled stand-in for Margaret Fuller—manages to escape the intellectual, sexual, and moral limitations placed upon women, only to drown herself in a gesture of loneliness and defiance. Finally, Wharton had also previously represented the inevitable downfall of the transcendental female artist in the character of Lily Bart. Unlike the modern and materialist Undine, Lily's legitimately aesthetic sensibility locates her in a rapidly fading past, and prevents her from commodifying her charms. Unwilling to sell herself to the highest bidder and unable to compete in the open market, Lily chooses to pay her bills and retreat from the world of getting and spending; her suicide is—like that of her fictional predecessors—a defensive gesture, an attempt to preserve "the integrity of her own mind" (SR 261).

The losses of these fictional heroines parallel the lives of many nineteenth-century writers and artists who

struggled with the inherently masculine privilege of transcendence, Margaret Fuller and Louisa May Alcott foremost among them. Although her short fiction frequently imagines women working in defiance of social norms, or resisting the "cult of true womanhood," Alcott's novels celebrate the compulsory processes by which unruly girls become proper little women. Yet, despite her own legitimately rebellious impulses and desires, Alcott martyrs herself to the bourgeois expectations of various Transcendental patriarchs, her father and Emerson in particular. Fuller, on the other hand, discovers toward the end of her life, what was also latent in *Women in the Nineteenth Century*, that is, the inherently limited, and necessarily gendered, scope of Emerson's philosophical vision. According to Bell Gale Chevigny, "Her society would not let Fuller transcend sex as it did Emerson. All of the irony that surrounds the image of Fuller as a Transcendentalist stems from her being female" (Chevigny 261). After her notorious career in Italy, giving birth out of wedlock, marrying a younger man, and acting on behalf of Italian revolutionaries, Fuller drowned with her husband and child off the coast of Long Island. Emerson sounds conventionally disapproving when he writes to Carlyle:

I doubt you never saw in her what was inestimable here. But she died in [a] happy hour for herself. Her health was much exhausted. Her marriage would have taken her away from us all, & there was a subsistence yet to be secured, & diminished powers, & old age (*Letters*, 4: 224).

Fuller's defiance of convention exposes the sexual anxiety built into Emerson's Transcendentalism: "whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist," but whoso would be a woman must also be a lady. Wharton inherits this paradox. As a female American author she resists narrow definitions of gender and genius; yet as a cultural conservative, struggling to resist the incursions and erosions of modernity, she seems to condemn her own advancements.

Despite her persistent efforts to conform, Undine Spragg also flouts the moral conventions of her time. As Undine's mother asks in the opening line of the novel, "Undine Spragg, how can you?" Undine's upward mobility is made possible by her disregard for the sermonizing of others. In "Self-Reliance" Emerson suggests that immorality, or at least the appearance of it, may be one of the consequences of living "wholly from within." In a moment of jaunty rebellion utterly out of keeping with his own experiences, Emerson declares, "but if I am the Devil's child, I will live then from the Devil. No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this" (SR 262). Even while Undine courts the appearance of propriety, she utterly disregards the moral sensibility that is meant to inform such codes. Her

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divorces are the most striking example of the law of her own nature, a device for, as she explains to Ralph's mother and sister, "getting somewhere." Undine's phenomenal progress, from country flirt to New York beauty to Marquise to millionaire to, inevitably, the wife of an ambassador, parodies the spiritual evolution Emerson describes in his introductory poem to "Nature:"

A subtle chain of countless rings
The next unto the farthest brings;
The eye reads omens where it goes,
And speaks all languages the rose;
And, striving to be man, the worm,
Mounts through all the spires of form. (Nature 5)

Emerson romanticizes the evolution of the rose and the worm, and even concedes that the process is inevitably divisive, that a kind of metaphysical divorce lies at the center of all transcendence:

I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part of particle of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances,—master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. (10)

Undine likewise divorces herself absolutely from anyone who might inhibit her evolution; she forgets about husbands, parents, friends, and child in an attempt to feed her appetite for power and her desire for stimulation. In essence, Undine is "striving to be man," using many of the same tools that will liberate Emerson and enrich Elmer Moffett. Her utter lack of moral sensibility is the necessary precursor to her success. It is specifically because Undine views her affair with Peter Van Degen as a tactical error, and not as a tragedy, that she survives the experiment, while her ability to treat her son as a fashion accessory, and not as a fate, makes possible her continual renewals and reinventions. Like Wharton, Undine is a "self-made" woman; as such, she is repugnant in ways that her male counterparts are not. By surviving both her transcendence and her transgressions she has violated the primary imperatives behind "the cult of true womanhood": self-effacement and self-sacrifice. Wharton demonstrates that transcendentalism, either as it feeds Ralph's aesthetic nostalgia or as it fuels Elmer's capitalist triumphs, can only serve to make women grotesque or dead.

If Ralph Waldo Emerson is the father of Transcendentalism, and the grandfather of a culture that suborns it, then his fate is sealed in both in the death of his namesake Ralph Marvell and in the triumph of this self-made woman. Undine insures that Emerson will be at once appropriated and forgotten. And as a feminist alternative to the watery victims who populate nineteenth-century American literature, Undine Spragg at least manages to live well, which is, supposedly, the best revenge.

Endnotes

¹ In *The Conduct of Life*, Emerson contemplates the tense negotiation between the imperatives of life in the world, and the possibility of self-determination and spiritual integrity. In a now famous baccalaureate address to the Yale class of 1981, A. Bartlett Giamatti criticized Emerson a "brazen adolescent" for his admiration of the "coarse energy" of the "bruisers, who have run the gauntlet of caucus and tavern through the country or the state—[they] have their own vices, but they have the good nature of strength and courage" According to this perspective, Elmer Moffatt is clearly an Emersonian ideal. Yet Joel Porte counters this reading by suggesting that in his respect for "the bruisers" Emerson is "simply articulating his own sense of powerlessness—and that of his class—when faced with raw and brutal force" (qtd. in Porte 8, Porte 9). Wharton has insightfully and accurately reproduced the anxieties and desires of that class when Ralph admires the "epic effrontery" of Moffatt.

² See especially Candace Waid: "Undine has a formless quality. [She is a]n archetypal figure of the protean woman..." (136).

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"Outrageous Trap": Envy and Jealousy in Wharton's "Roman Fever" and Fitzgerald's "Bernice Bobs Her Hair"

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F. Scott Fitzgerald's "Bernice Bobs Her Hair" and Edith Wharton's "Roman Fever" revolve around both envy and the romantic jealousy of a central character who feels that she will lose the "formative attention" (Parrott 16) of a partner. Psychological theorists define this term as "attention that sustains part of one's self-concept" (Parrott 16). In Fitzgerald's story, Marjorie feels that Bernice, whom she has personally coached in feminine wiles, is robbing her of the attentions of Warren, her beau. In Wharton's story, Alida long ago plotted to rid herself of her competitor, Grace, whom she felt threatened her engagement to Delphin.

Psychological theorists would find it no accident that these two stories, Wharton's published in 1934 and Fitzgerald's which appeared in *Flappers and Philosophers* in 1920, deal with the issue of jealousy. Given the "changing context for romantic relationships" (Stearns 114) this emotion gained "new prominence," what with the sociological shifts in America in the years from around 1890 to 1920. Courtship practices which involved dating outside the purview of the home environment plus a "new emphasis on love as the basis for marriage relationships" (127) caused increased motivation for jealousy. In fact, "from about 1920 onward... the ability to date, or be dated by a number of individuals became an important badge of popularity..." (Stearns 133).

Although in current parlance we tend to confuse the terms envy and jealousy, there is a distinction between the two. "Envy may be said to occur when a person lacks what another has and either desires it or wishes that the other did not have it. It occurs when the

superior qualities, achievements, or possessions of another are perceived as reflecting badly on the self" (Parrott 4). In contrast, jealousy "may be said to occur when a person either fears losing or has already lost an important relationship with another person to a rival" (Parrott 4). Envy, then, comes out of a "social comparison" of oneself with others, whereas jealousy arises out of fear of "the loss of a relationship one has" (Parrott 7, 23).

"In envy the social comparison is made by the envious person, whereas in jealousy it is presumed to be made by the partner" (Parrott 23). The envious person "knows what is superior about the rival" whereas the jealous person often wonders "what in the world the partner sees in the rival" (Parrott 23). Jealousy and envy can "co-occur," and further, one of these "emotions may lead to the other" (Parrott 23, 24). "In envy, one's own appraisal leads to a dissatisfaction with oneself. In jealousy, the reflected appraisal of another leads to a lack of security and confidence" (Parrott 27). Envy can lead to a host of symptoms: feelings of inferiority, shame, frustration, bitterness, longing, being unfairly treated by life, and finally motivation to improve oneself. Jealousy leads to feeling threatened, rejected, worried, suspicious, betrayed, insecure, and lonely (Parrott 27). Jealousy can result in a host of "cognitive symptoms" including anxiety, inability to concentrate, over-sensitivity, and tendency towards ruminations and preoccupations (Parrott 19).

Romantic jealousy involves an "anticipatory emotion" (Hupka 254) which is aroused by the threat of losing to a rival or interloper "that which is gained by establishing a relationship with someone" (Parrott 16, Hupka 254). The prevalence of cases involving romantic jealousy "can be explained by the importance of the aspects of the self that are supported by this type of relationship in our culture" (Parrott 17). "Once 'maleness' or 'femaleness,' attractiveness, sexuality, and mate getting become significant in the way men and women carve out their identities and in the way they compete among themselves, it is not difficult to understand why ... mate stealing can be threatening acts leading to severe emotional reactions" (Cucchiari 59).

Wharton's "Roman Fever" contains keen portrayals of envy and jealousy. The story concerns two American widows who are visiting Rome, each as "the modest appendage of a salient daughter" (7). While their daughters gallivant unchaperoned with young Italian aviators, Alida Slade and Grace Ansley linger long past lunch at a restaurant overlooking "the outspread glories of the Palatine and the Forum" (Wharton 3). They ruminate about how "the collective modern idea of mothers" and "the new system" have changed to the point that their young daughters feel perfectly free to date without their mothers' supervision. The women comment upon "what different things Rome stands for to each generation of travelers. To our grandmothers, Roman fever; to our mothers, sentimental dangers—how we used to be

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guarded! To our daughters no more dangers than the middle of Main Street" (10). Alida mentally tallies the ways in which she feels superior to Grace. She, after all, had been part of the "exceptional couple" as "wife of the famous corporation lawyer" Delphin Slade. She believes that Grace Ansley and her husband made a "good-looking, irreproachable, exemplary" pair, in short dismissing them as "museum specimens of old New York" (Wharton 6).

Alida experiences classic envy in wanting that which another has. She envies Grace her scintillating daughter Barbara and regards her own daughter, Jenny, as far too tame and introverted. Laughing with "asperity," she expresses her envy to Grace when she wonders aloud how the Ansleys "had managed to produce anything so dynamic" as their daughter Babs (Wharton 11). Parrott calls this type of resentment toward the envied person, "agent-focused resentment" (14) when the envious person feels that another has acquired superiority unfairly. She thinks "half-jealously" about Babs Ansley and wishes, in fact, that her own daughter Jenny "would fall in love—with the wrong man, even; that she might have to be watched, out-maneuvred, rescued" (8). She feels that "Jenny has no chance beside" Babs (11). When Grace tells her that perhaps she overrates Babs, Alida responds, "No; I don't. I appreciate her. And perhaps envy you" (12). In her mind, she pictures the scenario of Babs marrying the "extremely eligible" Italian aviator, "the one who's a Marchese" (11), and envisions Grace having the good fortune of settling down near the young couple in the beautiful foreign location of Rome. Filled with "self-disgust," Alida wonders, "Would she never cure herself of envying [Grace]?" and then makes a mental note to "make one more effort not to hate her" (13).

Now that the sun has set, Alida asks Grace if she's afraid of getting Roman fever or pneumonia. An old family story crops up in the conversation, a tale about Grace's great-aunt and her younger sister who were in love with the same man. Sent by her sister to the Forum to gather a special night-blooming flower, the younger girl had caught a fatal fever. Many years later, the aunt confessed that she had put her sister in harm's way to be rid of her rival. As the women converse, long-held secrets come out, revealing a parallel to this story. In their youth, during the season Alida was engaged to Delphin, she was afraid that her friend Grace, who liked Delphin, might steal away his affections with her "sweetness" and "quiet ways" (17). Wanting her delicate-throated rival to catch a chill and so be "out of the way" (17), Alida had penned Grace a note purportedly from Delphin bidding her to meet him in the Colosseum. After all these years, she makes it known that it was she who forged the note, and though much time has passed, she is still angry that her friend agreed to the

assignment. Alida evidences part of the spectrum of emotions that psychologists claim are connected with jealousy—fear that she'd lose Delphin and hatred towards Grace (17). She claims that when she penned the letter, she was "blind with rage" (20).

When Grace seems visibly wounded by this revelation, Alida's "jealousy" is described as having "suddenly leapt up again at the sight" (18). Alida begins to gloat that she had performed her mean-spirited trick "as a sort of joke," laughing it off that "well, girls are ferocious sometimes [...] girls in love especially" (19). She had enjoyed knowing that Grace, who had betrayed her by going to meet her fiancé, would be left in the cold Colosseum waiting. Shortly thereafter, Alida's plan appeared to have worked, for Grace had suddenly taken ill and, as soon as she could get out of bed, was rushed off to Florence to be married to Horace Ansley. To Alida's consternation, Grace reveals that she hadn't waited alone that night. She had responded to the forged note and Delphin had, accordingly, met her. Alida, emitting an "unquiet laugh," professes that she doesn't begrudge the meeting because, after all, she "had everything" in her twenty-five year marriage to Delphin. She gloats, "And you had nothing but that one letter he didn't write." Grace disabuses Alida by divulging the result of the one-night tryst—she "had Barbara" (20).

F. Scott Fitzgerald's "Bernice Bobs Her Hair" also displays both the emotions of envy and jealousy. The story concerns what Fitzgerald calls "the drama of the shifting, semicruel world of adolescence" (39). Like Wharton, Fitzgerald illustrates the changing social mores. Marjorie and Bernice, her visiting cousin from Eau Claire, attend summer dances where the older set, described as "a great babel of middle-aged ladies with sharp eyes and icy hearts" (39) look on critically to ensure that the younger generation won't succumb to dancing "weird barbaric interludes" (39). They understand that when "the younger set dance in the summer-time it is with the very worst intentions in the world" and perhaps they are vaguely aware that "the more popular, more dangerous, girls will sometimes be kissed in the parked limousines of unsuspecting dowagers" (39).

Envy, that intense "longing for what another person has" (Parrott 13), is experienced by Bernice who admires, envies, and longs for her cousin Marjorie's popularity with the boys. This envy works as a motivator, as she becomes the assiduous student of Marjorie who coaches her in methods of gaining young men's attentions. In contrast to her cousin, who dazzles all the boys with her witty repartee mainly borrowed from the likes of Oscar Wilde and who earned some celebrity "for having turned five cart-wheels in succession" during a dance at Yale, Bernice, though attractive, is a wallflower. The boys hate being prevailed upon to dance with her and Marjorie is tired of having to find dance partners for her boring cousin. Marjorie's boyfriend even wonders

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whether Bernice is a poor conversationalist because she gets no attention or she gets no attention because she's a poor conversationalist (42).

One night after one of these summer dances, Bernice overhears Marjorie complaining to her mother about the burden of her socially inept cousin: "No girl can permanently bolster up a lame-duck visitor, because these days it's every girl for herself" (44). The generational difference in courtship patterns is evidenced by Marjorie's mother who fails to understand, "What's a little cheap popularity" (44). Hurt over this discussion, Bernice confronts Marjorie the next day with a threat to leave. Though envious of the popular girls and especially of her cousin, Bernice comforts herself by thinking that these girls have "something subtly unscrupulous" about them and that they have "cheapened themselves" in some way. She, like Alida in Wharton's story, may be experiencing "agent-focused resentment" (Parrott 14). Yet, still ruing her unpopularity, Bernice desires her cousin's "social success" (43). She decides not to flee from the situation but rather to submit to some coaching from Marjorie. Bernice becomes Marjorie's subject for a social makeover with instructions to think more about her appearance, trim her eyebrows, and get her teeth straightened. Marjorie then continues to instruct Bernice not to lean on a man when she's dancing and to gain conversational and dancing skills by practicing on the "clumsy boys." She tells Bernice that the guy "is the one that counts" (49). Quoting from Oscar Wilde, Marjorie cues Bernice into the importance of witty conversation in social success: "But of course, you've either got to amuse people or feed 'em or shock 'em" (51). Subsequently, she instructs Bernice to shock everyone by throwing out the flippant question, "Do you think I ought to bob my hair [...]?" (50), hypothetical, since in their social set bobbed hair is frowned upon.

Under Marjorie's tutelage, Bernice becomes the focus of attention with many boys eagerly cutting in to dance with her. Fitzgerald states, "But perhaps the most significant symbol of her success" is that Warren, Marjorie's boyfriend, begins to take an interest in Bernice. Even the parlor-maid has noticed, commenting to the cook "that Miss Bernice had gotta hold a Miss Marjorie's best fella" (54). When her friends tease her about Warren's sudden interest in Bernice, Marjorie only laughs them off. However, jealous inside, she soon finds a way of exacting revenge. In front of their circle of friends, she calls Bernice's bluff about getting her hair bobbed and pushes her into agreeing to have her hair shorn immediately at the barber shop. Bernice recognizes this as "the test supreme of her sportsmanship; her right to walk unchallenged in the starry heaven of popular girls" (56). However, en route to the barber's to carry out the challenge and

surrounded by their entire peer group, she has "all the sensations of Marie Antoinette bound for the guillotine in a tumbrel" (56). As the barber, unused to cutting women's hair, fumblingly clips Bernice's luxurious tresses, Marjorie, "her mouth curling in a faint ironic smile," clearly enjoys this foiling of her rival. Immediately after the deed is done, Marjorie turns to Warren "with serpent-like intensity" and asks him to drive her on some errands.

That night as Marjorie braids her own long hair before bed, Bernice, realizes "the outrageous trap that had been set for her" (59) and decides to pack her belongings and leave for home. But before she sneaks out, she deftly clips the braids off her sleeping cousin. Fitzgerald uses the word "amputated" (60), clearly showing the negative impact the shorn hair will have on Marjorie's social life. On her way to the train station, Bernice carrying her bag, realizes she still holds her cousin's two blond braids in her other hand. She flings them onto Warren's front porch as she passes by, laughing, "Scalp the selfish thing!" (60). The preoccupation with romantic jealousy that psychologists claim rose to new prominence in the cusp period between 1890 and 1920 renders unsurprising the foregrounding of romantic jealousy in both Wharton's and Fitzgerald's stories. In both stories, one jealous character sets, what Fitzgerald terms, an "outrageous trap" for her rival. In both cases, the trap backfires, leaving the jealous character to deal with delayed repercussions. Marjorie, upon waking, will discover her shorn hair and will have to cope during the social season with the frowned-upon bob. Alida Slade will have to deal with the delayed revelation that her plan to foil her rival failed and served instead to allow Grace to have an assignation and child with Delphin.

In Fitzgerald's story, the shorn hair symbolizes murderous jealousy. The two hair clipping scenes in the Fitzgerald story are pictured as a decapitation. During the barber shop incident, Bernice feels like Marie Antoinette en route to her beheading. As she inflicts her revenge upon Marjorie, she is said to have amputated the girl's braids at the "point nearest the head" (60). Murderous jealous "fury" (Wharton 17) is also evident in Wharton's story where Alida is shown to have plotted to put her rival in a situation where she might have contracted a lethal fever.

Fundamental to both stories is the idea that the character for whom the "outrageous trap" was set winds up coming out on top. Grace, as a result of her one-night tryst with Delphin, begets the lively Barbara, the daughter that "according to the new standards" is "more effective" and has "more edge" with the opposite sex, including Rome's most eligible males. Bernice, at the end of Fitzgerald's story, has acquired "a new look" a happy, laughing, almost jaunty manner a more determined and self-possessed air that is said "somehow" to have "develop [ed]" out of the incident in the barber's chair. In both stories, the victim of jealous rage winds up as the victor.

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A form of social-sexual Darwinism is at work. Grace Ansley produces the daughter most likely to snag a beau and ensure the continuing fecundity of her family line. Bernice, through her experiences, has acquired a new-found confidence that will presumably make her alluring to a desirable mate. Ironically enough, in both tales the jealous character ensures, rather than spoils, her competitor's chance for success.

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Edgar Allan Poe and Edith Wharton: The Case of Mrs. Mowatt

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In the past few years, feminist scholars have debunked the myth of Edith Wharton as "disciple" of Henry James. In fact, much recent scholarship has focused instead on her connections with other women writers. Consequently, with the exception of Linda Cahir's fine study of Wharton's relationship to Melville, her literary ties with mainstream male writers has largely been neglected. This paper focuses on Edith Wharton's literary relationship with an important male mentor from the American past, Edgar Allan Poe, and the case of actress/playwright Anna Cora Mowatt, seen largely through the lens of Poe's literary criticism. First, I will look at Wharton's connections to Poe, his literary reviews of Anna Cora Mowatt, and finally, some intertextual links of Mowatt's work and Wharton's *The Custom of the Country* with brief references to other works.

Elsewhere I have discussed Wharton's use of

Poe as inspiration in her ghost stories, specifically in her short story "Kerfol."¹ In addition, I indicated her clever prose revision and gender reversal of "The Raven" in her short story "The Pelican," a white bird also associated with "everlasting mournfulness."² While only a bit of Poe's literary output remained in Wharton's library after the German bombing of London (after her death), there is strong textual evidence that she was familiar with the complete works. She may have read, for example, the edition reissued by John Ingram in 1880, or James Harrison's 1902 edition.

Americanists know well that Rufus Griswold's malicious obituary after Poe's death in 1849, and his horrible biography, did extreme damage to Poe's reputation that lasted for some time. As a result, by the time Wharton was beginning to write, his reputation varied among the writers and critics she admired. According to Hutcherson, in Henry James's 1878 essay on Baudelaire, translator of Poe, James digressed in a well-known comment on Poe. He indicated that "an enthusiasm for Poe is the mark of a decidedly primitive stage of reflection," adding that "it seems to us that to take him with more than a certain degree of seriousness is to lack seriousness one's self" (qtd. in Hutcherson 143). James' observation should offer us a clue to Wharton's often neglected sense of humor, especially in a satirical vein. Wharton's friend Andrew Lang wrote in his *Letters to Dead Authors* (1893), "You [Poe] were, unfortunately, a Reviewer" (130) and for this, "...New Yorkers never forgave [you]" (131). Wharton would have appreciated Poe's sharp and critical, sometimes even cruel verbiage directed at poets, playwrights and performances from which Mowatt was not totally exempt.

Finally, in another connection to Poe, Wharton's editor at Scribner's, William Crary Brownell, dedicated a 1909 essay to Poe in which he showed no appreciation or understanding of his work. Wharton's position in this debate on the value of Poe is certainly an independent one. Awaiting Brownell's essay, Wharton expressed her great admiration of Poe as a critical figure in the formation of the American literary canon. Blending her own prose with lines from "To Helen" to express her deep respect for Poe and Whitman, Wharton wrote: "I should like to get in that Nicaean bark with you.... Those two, with Emerson, are the best we have—in fact, the all we have" (Lewis 236). Such an appreciative remark strongly indicates that Wharton was deeply familiar with Poe's work. In fact, I believe that Wharton drew on *all* of Poe's work for thematic inspiration, even his hoaxes and bizarre stories, and she respected his literary assessments of his nineteenth-century contemporaries and poets of the past, including Anna Mowatt.

Wharton's special relationship to Poe and Mowatt is seen best in her 1913 novel *The Custom of the Country*. A close reading of this lesser taught Wharton novel reveals that it is absolutely brimming with indirect

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references to both these writers.

The careful reader of Wharton's critical and creative works will note many affinities to Poe that the reader primarily interested in plot may gloss over. Like Poe, Wharton directs her fiction to several audiences simultaneously, the literary and the popular, and frequently masks her sources by pointing indirectly toward them. For example, at the beginning of *The Custom of the Country*, she invites the reader to become a detective by noting the presence of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* in Undine's hotel. The novel is, of course, by Conan Doyle, not Poe. But following Dupin's associative logic in *The Murders of the Rue Morgue*, the reader could connect the detective story with Poe. We know that Wharton incorporates into her *Custom of the Country* the legend of Undine, a work by Baron de la Motte Fouqué which had been favorably reviewed by Poe in *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine* in September, 1839. In his later review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, Poe praises *Undine* as

[...]the best and undoubtedly a very remarkable specimen [of an] allegory properly handled, judiciously subdued, seen only as a shadow or by suggestive glimpses (emphasis mine), and making its nearest approach to truth in a not obtrusive...appositeness. (Dole 7: 253)

Undine is a water nymph whose existence can be sustained only if she marries a human and has a child by him; the human victim in *Custom* is poor Ralph Marvell, who sacrifices himself to Undine's ambition.

Henry James had told Wharton that her creation of Elmer Mowatt's name was "ingenious," an observation that has puzzled me for some time. Returning to Poe's critical reviews, in 1845 he published several significant articles in the *Broadway Journal* about Anna Cora Mowatt, a Scots name similar to Mowatt in that one can substitute the central consonant "w" in Mowatt with two "f's" as in Moffatt. Born in France in 1819, Anna Cora Ogden was the daughter of an old New York family. She tells us in her 1854 autobiography, in tone and outline similar to Wharton's *A Backward Glance*, that she essentially eloped at age 15 with her persistent suitor, the wealthy lawyer James Mowatt. Composing plays and poems as a young girl, Anna for years avoided the public theater for religious reasons—her family, like Wharton's, was High Church Episcopalian—until her observation of a performance by Fanny Kemble aroused her imagination and she began to take her own plays seriously. After having previously reviewed—rather luke-warmly—poems and novels by Mrs. Mowatt, in March 1845 Poe reviewed rather favorably Mowatt's new comedy, *Fashion; Or Life in New York*, providing a complete summary of the plot and many fine details. In this initial manuscript version, the central couple, Mr. and Mrs. Tiffany, are trying to

raise their social position in New York; the efforts of Mr. Tiffany, originally "a traveling pedlar," are, in Poe's words, "...insufficient to keep pace with the extravagance of his wife, who has become infected with a desire to shine as a lady of fashion" (qtd. in Harrison 112-13). In spite of his newly gained riches, the expenditures of Mrs. Tiffany and their daughter Seraphina force Mr. Tiffany to commit forgery, a crime reminiscent of Wharton's Abner Spragg's mysterious criminal dealings that forced him to leave Apex. Mrs. Tiffany seeks economic relief by hoping to marry Seraphina to a pretend French aristocrat, actually a money-grabbing English cook in disguise. In broad outlines, one can easily see the resemblance to the New York social-climbing of the Spraggs in *The Custom of the Country*, using their daughter as a medium of social exchange. Of course, Wharton's novel makes Undine Spragg rather than the parents the pushy social climber who, exploiting the principles of the business world, drives more than one man into bankruptcy. As in *Fashion*, Undine almost makes a misstep when she falls for a pretend Polish count that she meets in Central Park; he turns out to be a fortune-hunter named Aaronson. As Mowatt indicates in her introduction to *Fashion*, the play is "a good-natured satire upon some of the follies incident to a new country, where foreign dress sometimes passes for gold, where the vanities rather than the virtues of other lands are too often imitated, and where the stamp of fashion gives currency even to the coinage of vice" (*Plays* 4-5).

Couched in a later general attack on the modern drama, Poe praises Mowatt's play while condemning the American audience: "Comparatively, there is much merit in 'Fashion,' and in many respects...it is superior to any American play. It has, in especial, the very high merit of simplicity in plot...the intellect of an audience can never be *fatigued* by complexity" (Harrison 120). He admires the comedy's dialogue as "...spirited, generally terse, and well seasoned with sarcasm of much power" (Harrison 120). These are general qualities of *Custom* as well, especially the satirical tone with which Wharton notes Undine's social rise.

In addition to moving in the same social circles as Wharton's ancestors, by an amazing coincidence with Wharton's life, because of her own consumption and her husband's ill health, at mid-nineteenth century, Mowatt spent many recuperative summers in Lenox, Massachusetts. After James Mowatt "was ruined in the mercantile world," Anna decided to become an actress herself, and Poe wrote glowing reviews of her performances. He praised her grace and beauty and her upper-class origins. Identifying himself as the son of an actress, the tragic ingenue Eliza Poe, Poe defended the reputation of the theater as "ennobling and elevating."

Critics such as Mary K. Edmund and Cynthia Griffin Wolff have pointed out the role of theatricality or the art of performance in *Custom*. Undine is a creature who exists "in

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a beam of light." Before the mirror she rehearses in pantomime her movements and lines. At the opera, she finds herself "...part of the sacred semicircle whose privilege it is, between the acts, to make the mere public forget that the curtain has fallen" (CC 39). She is there to be seen rather than to see. In Mrs. Spragg's words, "I guess my daughter's only got to show herself" (57). Undine's characteristics clearly position her in Mowatt's theatrical world. Furthermore, the title of *The Custom of the Country* and Wharton's protagonist's behavior echo Mowatt's poem "The Trial of Justice" published in her 1837 satire *Reviewers Reviewed*. (See Appendix)

Written as a response to critics' unfavorable reviews of her *Pelayo, or the Cavern of Covadonga*; a *Poetical Romance in Five Cantos Founded on The History of the First King of Asturias, Reviewers Reviewed* itself is composed in riming couplets and replete with classical references. Details of the poem focusing on Fashion, customs and mute miming before mirror are echoed in *Custom*. Furthermore, within the text of the play *Fashion*, Wharton's titled is presaged:

"Mrs. Tiffany: [to the fake count Jolimaitre] I am so much ashamed--pray excuse me! Although a lady of large fortune, and one, Count, who can boast of the highest connections, I blush to confess that I have never travelled--while you, Count, I presume are at home in all the courts of Europe.

Count: Courts? Eh? Oh, yes, Madam, very true. I believe I am pretty well known in some of the courts of Europe--police courts. (Aside...) In a word, Madam, I had seen enough of civilized life--wanted to refresh myself by a sight of barbarous countries and customs--had my choice between the Sandwich Islands and New York--chose New York" (Mowatt, *Fashion* 247).

Recalling James's comment that liking Poe shows one's lack of seriousness, it is clear that Wharton intended *The Custom of the Country* as a comic novel, unlike *The House of Mirth* where no one is laughing. In fact, *Custom* is a witty parody of the heroic epic. In "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe had established "rules" for the epic including the limit that it be read in one sitting. However, he exempts an epic such as Milton's *Paradise Lost* from these principles since "...at least one half of [it] is essentially prose" (Dole 6: 152-53). Wharton avoided the restrictions of Poe's poetic principles by writing her epic entirely in prose. As in the classic epic, she begins "in the midst of things." The opening line is: "Undine Spragg--how can you?" (3) As in *Paradise Lost*, Wharton pictures Undine and her first husband, Ralph Marvell, as a kind of Adam and Eve:

...one of the humours of their first weeks together had consisted in picturing themselves as a primeval couple setting forth across a

virgin continent and subsisting on the adjectives which Ralph was to trap for his epic. (91-92)

Ralph is unable to "tame" Undine and commits suicide. Later the "hero" Elmer Moffatt reappears. Undine is attracted to the jokester transmuted into a rich gentleman of taste. She asks for his "story," and

Absorbed in his theme, and forgetting her inability to follow him, Moffatt launched out on an epic recital of plot and counterplot....It was of no consequence that the details and the technicalities escaped her: she knew their meaningless syllables stood for success, and what that meant was as clear as day to her. (336-37)

Although Anna Cora Mowatt had published novels and a series of eighty *tableaux vivants*, in her autobiography she quotes Schlegel, "Poetry's original end and highest grade [is] the epic....I should write an epic poem" (65). The epic, however, was not her most successful work, but she excelled in the comic farce of the extravagant efforts of New York *parvenus* to get ahead, also fertile ground for Edith Wharton.

For example, both show the use of servants as an instrument of social-climbing; for obvious reasons the picture is different in *Fashion* from *Custom*. In the 1845 play, Mrs. Tiffany has an African-American valet named Zeke whom she renames A-dolph to make him seem "white." She ironically says, "I'm rather sorry that he's black, but to obtain a white American for a domestic is almost impossible; and they call this a free country!" (241) Like Undine, Mrs. Tiffany consistently mispronounces French.

In addition, she has a French maid, Millinette, who councils her on the latest French mode. Millinette knows the real score, as she tells Zeke:

"Monsieur is man of business--Madame lady of fashion. Monsieur make de money--Madame spend it. Monsieur nobody at all--Madame everybody altogether" (241).

By Wharton's day, times have changed. She knows better in post-Emancipation America than to present a dialect-speaking minstrel-type black servant. But she does have in *Custom* a French maid--one of many in Wharton's fiction--Celeste, who tries to assist Undine in selecting her Paris-designed dresses; however, the real counseling comes from the newest New York immigrant group, the Irish. The Spraggs' social adviser is the Irish masseuse Mrs. Heeny. In the first chapter of *Custom*, Mrs. Heeny is described as blunt and discriminating, knowingly documenting her views of social ranking with newspaper clippings. She counsels Mrs. Spragg and Undine how to behave and who to seek out. Another further character resemblance is Mowatt's Snobson, a clerk who threatens to blackmail Mr. Tiffany because he has knowledge of his forgeries; to keep silence he wants to marry the daughter Seraphina Tiffany. One is reminded, of course of Elmer

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Moffatt, once already married to Undine, who has inside information about Mr. Spragg's secret and probably corrupt dealings. Like Elmer, Snobson is a drunkard; at the end of the play, reversing Elmer's story, he is sent West, "where they want men of genius" and he'll give lectures on temperance. [Remember that in the West, Elmer got drunk before giving the main dinner speech to the Temperance Union.]

Finally, Mowatt's *Fashion* presents an upstate rural observer, Adam Trueman, who consistently makes commentary on the folly of social climbing. He tells the Tiffanys: "...let [the women] learn economy, true independence, and home virtues, instead of foreign follies. As for yourself, continue your business—but let moderation, in future, be your counsellor, and let honesty be your confidential clerk" (291). He functions as the objective observer of society like Charles Bowen in *The Custom of the Country* and Lawrence Lefferts in *The Age of Innocence*.

Contemporary critics do not regard *Fashion*; *Or Life in New York* as a feminist play, largely because of Trueman's remarks and, unlike *The Custom of the Country*, the conformity to patriarchal dictates by the end of the play. Nevertheless, Mowatt's dramatic wit and sparkle have made it worthy of consistent inclusion in anthologies of nineteenth century American dramatic literature. Not much criticism has been written about *Fashion* after Poe, but it has been repeatedly performed until recent times. Detsi-Diamonti sums up *Fashion* thus: "Employing the dramatic techniques of melodrama and comedy of manners, ...Mowatt succeeds in placing her characters in a complex socio-economic and cultural context marked by constant changes, confusion, and a crisis of ethics and identity (111-12). This context shapes *The Custom of the Country*, *The House of Mirth*, and even other Wharton works such as *The Age of Innocence*.

To return to the original premise of this paper, through the avenue of Poe's complete works Wharton found a treasure trove of satiric literary material. Through Poe's criticism, I believe, she became acquainted with the American woman playwright and poet, Anna Cora Mowatt and successfully mined her work to create her novel *The Custom of the Country*.

Notes

¹ Carole Shaffer-Koros, "Edith Wharton's 'Kerfol' and the Perversion of Courtly Tradition." *American Literature Assoc.*, 23 May 1997, Baltimore.

² Carole Shaffer-Koros, "'The Pelican': Edith Wharton 'Contests' with Poe." *American Literature Assoc. Fifth Annual Symposium*, 10 November 1995, Cabo San Lucas.

Appendix

"The Trial of Justice" from *Reviewer Reviewed* (1837)

...Custom's reign/ had exiled Justice and her scepter
ta'en:

Custom! Her sanction shields the blackest deed,
And Vice and Folly her approval plead;
Custom! She styles the rich man, Lord of all,
And hurls the poor e'en low as vice can fall;
She smiles on wealth and all its peccadilloes,
And bindeth poverty in Sorrow's willows;
She nurtures the weak child of morbid taste,
Sick Fashion--with her tapered spindling waist,
Gay flashing air (consumptive look unwrecked),
Mute lips, with mirror-studied smiles bedecked,
And arts to banish nature's light proportions,
Or Hebe faces spoil with taught contortions;
She calleth truth outre--or trite--severe---
Forbids the glowing heart and lip appear
In amity or fellowship too near,

[...]

Is lawful all--with Custom for defense!

(31-32)

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