

As Natural as Breathing:
Edith Wharton and the Born Reader

by
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For Ann Guardi

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This is for you.

Abstract

In this project I examine Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* (1920) through the lens of the born reader. The born reader is a term she introduces in her scathing article "The Vice of Reading," and is an idea she returns to throughout her career. The born reader refers to a person with an innate appreciation for the aesthetic. The aesthetic, in Wharton's view, is beauty and culture as defined by Europe, and in particular, France. The American aesthetic, for Wharton, refers to the European cultural heritage on American soil.

In my introduction, I analyze Wharton's exploration of the born reader in her own fiction and criticism, looking at the short story "Xingu" and the novella, *Summer*. As the concept of the born reader is a conservative one with racial implications, I examine Wharton's conservatism as discussed by Wharton scholars such as R.W.B. Lewis, Amy Kaplan, and Richard A. Kaye. I then put the concept of the born reader in both the historical context of the Gilded Age and a Social Darwinist context. I next present an analysis of a born reader in Wharton's fiction using the character Newland Archer.

Primarily I argue that Edith Wharton sees the born reader in America as the last upholder of European culture on American soil. The born reader is the possessor of the inherited trait of the ability to appreciate European culture and it is a trait that is doomed for extinction. In *The Age of Innocence* (1920), as Wharton looks back to her parent's generation, she projects the decline of the born reader. She believes that the born reader was protected by the separation between public and private space in her parents' Old New York society. While Old New York possessed many "primitive" traditions, it was valuable because it protected the born reader. When the parvenu overruns that society, the born reader loses its private niche and is exposed to the public world. As a trait that has no value in the public sphere, the born reader becomes obsolete. The trait dies out and with it dies the last vestiges of culture in America.

In my conclusion, I investigate the female born reader in both *The Age of Innocence* and *The House of Mirth*. I also discuss Wharton's view of what the extinction of the born reader means for the writer, looking to her writing in *The Writing of Fiction*. I lastly examine the born reader within the context of our own twenty first century society and reflect on the various ways in which the subject of the born reader is relevant to today's world.

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Short Titles

- R&S: Hoeller, Hildegard. *Edith Wharton's Dialogue with Realism and Sentimental Fiction*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000.
- NY: Homberger, Eric. *Mrs. Astor's New York: Money and Social Power in a Gilded Age*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.
- PR: Kassanoff, Jennie A. *Edith Wharton and the Politics of Race*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- TLC: Veblen, Thorstein. *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. New York: Random House, 2001.
- AI: Wharton, Edith. *The Age of Innocence*. New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1920.
- VR: Wharton, Edith. "The Vice of Reading." In *Edith Wharton: The Uncollected Critical Writings*, edited by Frederick Wegener, 99-105. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996.
- BG: Wharton, Edith. *A Backward Glance*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934.
- HM: Wharton, Edith. *The House of Mirth*. New York: Bantam Books, 1986.

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“The Age of Innocence” by Sir. Joshua Reynolds, 23

Introduction

“Human nature is inextricably linked with the effects of climate, soil, laws, religion, wealth, and,
above all, leisure”

-- “The Great American Novel”--

The Reader is Born

In a recent article in *Real Simple*, nestled between “4,500 Organizing Tips” and “30 Minute Recipes,” *New York Times Book Review* editor Sam Tanenhaus is quoted giving this advice: “You shouldn’t read because it’s good for you... but because you want to.”¹ Titled “Reading the Classics,” author Elizabeth Kricfalusi espouses the idea that reading is a pleasurable act only to be performed if one is so inclined. Because the article appears in *Real Simple*, a magazine that serves as a de facto instructional manual for daily living, it must also serve a prescriptive function; the purpose of the article is to teach someone how to appreciate reading. “Reading the Classics” is part of a larger column titled “Know How/Get Started” and appears alongside instructions on how to play the piano and invest in the stock market. Kricfalusi advises new readers to join book clubs to “get started,” but the reader shouldn’t read just any book. The reference to “great literature” and the word *classics* in the title suggests that if reading is an opportunity for self-improvement, only a certain prescribed canon will give the reader full results. She turns to the literary elite from *The New York Times* and Yale to define the canon, forming a book list for self-improvement that ignores individual preferences. While the magazine ends its how-to on reading with the admonition that reading is to be done solely if it is enjoyable, it also cannot let go of the idea that reading is an activity to be done because it’s “good for you.”

¹ Elizabeth Kricfalusi, “Reading the Classics,” *Real Simple* 6 (October 2005): 52.

Edith Wharton would have found the idea of reading for self-improvement an anathema to her beliefs about the value of reading and who can appreciate it. While the editors of *Real Simple* rely on experts to define great literature, Wharton, on the basis of her privileged background, assumes that authority for herself. She defines great literature as possessing a form suited to the topic,² a sense of what Balzac calls “vrai dans l’art,”³ and, most importantly, “plasticity” or the “quality of being...diversely molded by the impact of fresh forms of thought.”⁴ Since great literature’s “plasticity” depends on the ability of the reader to bring his or her own ideas to works of literature, Wharton is placing great importance on who is reading. For Wharton, great literature is a “gateway into some paysage choisi of the spirit” that only the select few can ever access (VR, 102). Even her use of the term “paysage choisi,” which excludes those without knowledge of French, suggests her elitism. In order to access the “paysage choisi,” one must be a certain type of reader. She defines these select few as the “best readers” for whom the desire to read is intrinsic to their being. This is a far cry from the reader who can learn to appreciate literature by picking up a copy of *Real Simple*. Rather than needing to be taught, the elite reader performs the act of reading and appreciating literature as “unconsciously as [one] breathes” (VR, 99). An appreciation for literature can’t be learned and the desire to read isn’t the product of a certain environment, but of nature. In other words, readers aren’t made; they are *born* readers.

² Edith Wharton, “The Criticism of Fiction,” in *Edith Wharton: The Uncollected Critical Writings*, ed. Frederick Wegener (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996).

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Edith Wharton, “The Vice of Reading,” in *Edith Wharton: The Uncollected Critical Writings*, ed. Frederick Wegener (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 99. Hereafter cited in the text. Page numbers refer to its placement in *The Uncollected Critical Writings of Edith Wharton*.

The born reader's appreciation for literature is an appreciation for the aesthetic and the aesthetic falls under the more general umbrella of culture.⁵ For Wharton, the culture appreciated by the born reader is "European Culture,"⁶ especially French culture, as Wharton considers France to be the "capital of civilization."⁷ When the born reader appreciates the aesthetic or culture, they are appreciating Anglo-Saxon or French culture, not American culture. For Wharton, any worthwhile American culture was inherited from Europe.⁸

I argue that Edith Wharton sees the born reader in America as the last upholder of European culture on American soil. The born reader is the possessor of the inherited trait of the ability to appreciate European culture and it is a trait that is doomed for extinction. In *The Age of Innocence* (1920), as Wharton looks back to her parent's generation, she projects the decline of the born reader. She believes that the born reader was protected by the separation between public and private space in her parents' Old New York society. When the parvenu overruns that society, the born reader loses its private niche and is exposed to the public world. As a trait that has no value in the public sphere, the born reader becomes obsolete. The trait dies out and with it dies the last vestiges of culture in America.

While I focus primarily on the born reader "race" and the effects of social transformation, in my conclusion I also briefly address the complications Wharton brings

⁵ The Oxford English Dictionary defines *culture* as synonymous with the "artistic achievement" that creates a culture's aesthetic ("Definition of *culture* [10 March, 2006]," <http://ets.umd.umich.edu/cgi/o/oed/oed-idx?type=entry&byte=89179328>).

⁶ Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), 6. Hereafter cited in the text.

⁷ Elizabeth Ammons, *Edith Wharton's Argument with America* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980), 128.

⁸ Frederick Wegener, "'Enthusiasm Guided by Acumen': Edith Wharton as a Critical Writer," in *Edith Wharton: The Uncollected Critical Writings*, ed. Frederick Wegener (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996).

to this view when she examines the plight of the female born reader and look at the consequences for the death of the born reader for writers like herself.

In this introduction, I will review some instances of the born reader in Wharton's criticism and fiction. I will also review Wharton's conservatism in light of critical scholarship, illustrate the historical background for New York at the turn of the century, and place the born reader within a Darwinian context. Lastly, I will illustrate the concept of the born reader through an examination of *The Age of Innocence*'s Newland Archer.

The Born Reader in Wharton's Criticism and Fiction

Wharton introduces the born reader in an essay for the *North American Review* titled "The Vice of Reading" (1903). She uses the concept as a contrast in her impassioned tirade against the "mechanical reader" who mistakenly thinks that reading is as virtuous as "thrift, sobriety, early rising, and regular exercise" (VR, 103, 99). The mechanical reader represents a threatening "class" of bourgeois invaders who, in their "desire to keep up," look to intrude on the elite literary realm of the upper class (VR, 100). These invaders try to place the art of literary appreciation within their system of morality in order to distinguish themselves from the lower classes. Even the name "mechanical reader" links both the artificial unthinking consumption of books and the early twentieth century industrial boom that likely afforded these offenders their newfound leisure. The born reader must, like a painter, receive training to realize his or her fullest potential, for "[t]he gift of reading is no exception to the rule that all natural gifts need to be cultivated by practice and discipline" (VR, 100). Yet, even with training the mechanical reader could never succeed in being like the born reader because he or she

can never reach the same intellectual heights. The born reader reads for intellectual pleasure, for “unpremeditated harmonies,” while the mechanical reader reads only for intellectual validation and to keep up with the Joneses (VR, 99, 100).⁹ And while the born reader is busy engaging in “an interchange of thought between writer and reader, “his or her “manufactured copy” is deluded into thinking “that intentions may take the place of aptitude” and that a “zeal for self-improvement... confer[s] brains” (VR, 99, 101, 100).

It is not surprising that these harsh statements originally appeared in the *North American Review*, a critical periodical patterned after “the British intellectual and sectarian reviews” that had an audience composed of the intellectual elite.¹⁰ Wharton is writing for upper class intellectuals, siding with them in her argument and targeting them as her audience. Yet, while the concept of the born reader starts as an appeal to her upper-class brethren, she does not stop there. Even when Wharton publishes criticism in mass-circulated publications like the *Saturday Review of Literature* and *The (London) Times Literary Supplement*, she does not leave the concept of the born reader behind.¹¹ In an essay written eleven years after “Vice” for *The Times*, she describes the critical engagement with reading as an instinct and a “natural appetite,” hearkening back to the idea of a great reader being born instead of made.¹² In her collection of essays titled *The Writing of Fiction* (1924), Wharton describes the ideal reader in the same terms as the born reader, writing that the ideal reader is an “other self,” a person as creative and

⁹ “Keeping up with the Joneses” is a phrase that scholars believe originally referred to Edith Wharton nee Joneses family (Shari Benstock, *No Gifts From Chance: A Biography of Edith Wharton* [New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1994], 26).

¹⁰ Lawrence Buell, *New England Literary Culture: From Revolution through Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 31. The NAR still exists today and maintains its exclusionary intentions, as evidenced by its catchphrase, “Cause friends don’t let friends read junk” (“North American Review Home Page [March 10, 2006],” <http://www.webdelsol.com/NorthAmReview/NAR>).

¹¹ Frederick Wegener, “‘Enthusiasm Guided by Acumen.’”

¹² Wharton, “The Criticism of Fiction.”

intellectual as the writer who can make use of a book's plasticity.¹³ Towards the end of her career, in 1934, she writes of "the selective minority" to whom the "average reader" looks for "hints" of what to read, an argument that recalls the intellectual elitism she brings to the concept of the born reader.¹⁴ Time and again Wharton returns to this idea. Regardless of what publication she writes for or argument she is making, Wharton repeatedly engages with the born reader in her criticism.

The same can be said for her fiction. *Summer* (1917) is Wharton's New England novella of adopted country-girl Charity Royall and her love affair with the handsome city-man, Lucius Harney. Wharton describes Harney as a man "fond of old-books" and as an architect-cum-writer preparing a book on old houses.¹⁵ His aesthetic appreciation and love for literature marks him as a born reader. This natural gift lies in sharp contrast to Charity's innate lack of appreciation for books and her "joy at escaping from the library."¹⁶ When examined in light of Charity's ethnic "rough dark" hair and dubious origins from an anarchic realm called "The Mountain," the contrast between the white born reader, Lucius Harney, and the non-reader of mysterious pedigree, Charity Royall, becomes a contrast of racialized culture as well.¹⁷

In "Xingu" (1911), Wharton portrays a hilariously inept society club, "the Lunch Club," that is composed of "indomitable huntresses of erudition."¹⁸ None of them are born readers; they all live with supreme "mental complacency" and if they are asked to

¹³Wegener, "Enthusiasm Guided by Acumen."

¹⁴ Edith Wharton, "Permanent Values in Fiction," in *Edith Wharton: The Uncollected Critical Writings*, ed. Frederick Wegener (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996).

¹⁵ Edith Wharton, *Summer* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1998), 85, 171.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 66.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 193.

¹⁸ Edith Wharton, "Xingu," *Ethan From and Other Short Fiction* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), 193.

give an opinion on a book, they can only repeat what others have said.¹⁹ Mrs. Roby, a born reader who engages with Trollope and is a “biological member” of the world of culture, plays a nasty trick on the group in retaliation for their snobbish treatment when she joins the club.²⁰ The trick is that she leads them to believe, in front of celebrated author Osric Dane, that Xingu, which is actually a Brazilian river, is a literary text that they have been engaging with for months. The comedy of contrast between the foolish non-reading pursuers of “Culture” (Wharton’s capitalization) and the intelligent, born reading Mrs. Roby, is emphasized by the futility of the Lunch Club’s pursuit. They will never learn to appreciate literature because it cannot be learned.

The Born Reader in Criticism on Wharton

The born reader is an example of the conservatism that has often been ignored by Wharton’s critics. R.W.B Lewis and Nancy Lewis, editors of *The Letters of Edith Wharton*, admit to omitting any letters they felt would be too controversial.²¹ Likewise, in R.W.B Lewis’ Pulitzer Prize winning biography, he focuses on the psychological motives behind her work, attributing, for example, the writing of *The Age of Innocence* to a nostalgic need to reclaim her past.²² Feminist writers, such as Gilbert and Gubar and Elizabeth Ammons, have stayed away from her conservatism and have instead focused on her Feminist politics. Ammons argues that Wharton’s “argument with America” is

¹⁹ *ibid.*, 197.

²⁰ *ibid.*, 194-195.

²¹ Jennie A Kassanoff, *Edith Wharton and the Politics of Race* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 31. Hereafter cited in the text. *Vid.* Nancy Lewis and R.W.B Lewis, eds., *The Letters of Edith Wharton* (New York: Scribner, 1988).

²² R.W.B Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1975), 423-6

that “marriage enslaves women”²³ and Gilbert and Gubar focus on Wharton’s portrayal of the “arts of the enslaved” in works like *The Age of Innocence*.²⁴

When critics do focus on Wharton’s conservatism, they tend to see it only in her later works. Many critics have deemed Wharton’s writing after *The Age of Innocence* a decline in achievement and the end of her progressivism.²⁵ Hildegard Hoeller argues that this view of decline is, in fact, an acknowledgment of the increased Sentimentalism in Wharton’s later fiction (*R&S*, 20). Hoeller sees the distaste for Sentimentalism as distaste for both “inferior female writing” and “conservatism” (*R&S*, 21). She argues against a tradition of viewing Wharton as a Realist, a view furthered in Amy Kaplan’s *The Social Construction of American Realism*. Kaplan argues that Realism is related to the “rise of consumer culture” at the turn of the century and that Realists “engage in an enormous act of construction to organize, reform, and control the social world.”²⁶ She also argues that “Wharton portrays... upper class society in relation to the pressure of other classes lurking in their boundaries,” acknowledging the class issues central to Wharton’s work.²⁷

Yet none of these critics address Wharton’s racial or political conservatism. This may well be due to the fact that prior to 1996 and the publication of *Edith Wharton: The Uncollected Critical Writings*, the only access to much of Wharton’s criticism was through The Yale Collection of American Literature. It is a crucial book for revealing Wharton’s politics; in many of her critical essays, including “The Vice of Reading,” she

²³ Elizabeth Ammons, *Edith Wharton’s Argument with America*, 155.

²⁴ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Excerpt from “Angel of Devastation: Edith Wharton on the Arts of the Enslaved,” in *The Age of Innocence*, ed. Carol J. Singley (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000).

²⁵ Hildegard Hoeller, *Edith Wharton’s Dialogue with Realism and Sentimental Fiction* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 20. Hereafter cited in the text.

²⁶ Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 7, 10.

²⁷ *ibid.*, 11.

is much more vocal about her views than in any of her fiction. After its publication, Wharton's conservatism, especially her racism, started to be discussed (*PR*, 39). But as Jennie Kassanoff has shown, the discussion still tends to focus on issues of phenotype (*PR*, 38). Yet even she still tends to discuss race within the boundaries of our modern perception, viewing it as part of a social phenomenon and ignoring the nineteenth and early twentieth-century's assumption of its biological basis.

Even when we turn to critics who examine the Darwinian influence in Wharton's work, there is still a tendency to focus on sexual evolutionary themes and ignore race. Richard A. Kaye argues that Wharton's writing "reveals a career-long preoccupation with the new terms of sexual selection theory" as written by Charles Darwin.²⁸ Bert Bender also offers an interpretation of Wharton's work that investigates her fiction in relation to Darwin's *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, again ignoring the applied social aspect of Darwinian theory.²⁹ It is important, now that scholars have easy access to Wharton's criticism, to redefine her in the context of both race and evolutionary theory. Wharton's concept of the born reader is a biological explanation for the continuance of white European culture in America. The fatalism of this view, as well as the implications for our own modern attitudes regarding talent, intelligence, and high culture, makes this an important issue. It is true, indeed, as Hoeller writes, that "[e]ven though Edith Wharton need not be recovered, she does need to be rediscovered" (*R&S*, 2).

²⁸ Richard A. Kaye, *The Flirt's Tragedy: Desire without End in Victorian and Edwardian Fiction* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2002), 156.

²⁹ Bert Bender, *The Descent of Love: Darwin and the Theory of Sexual Selection in American Fiction, 1871-1926* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 314.

The Exclusivity of New York

The Age of Innocence takes place just before the turn of the century, at a time commonly referred to as a “second industrial revolution.”³⁰ It was a time of vigorous economic growth and individual wealth, to the point that Mark Twain gave it the name “the Gilded Age.”³¹ Behemoths like James D. Rockefeller’s Standard Oil Company, Andrew Carnegie’s Steel Company, and Cornelius and William Henry Vanderbilt’s railroad companies consolidated and monopolized their way to the top.³² These men were robber barons, parvenus, and even though William Vanderbilt died the richest man in the world,³³ he still wasn’t invited to dine with Mrs. Astor until two years before his death.³⁴ New York society, which Mrs. Astor led, was a society bent on exclusion. The 1900 Federal Census counted three million New Yorkers, of which less than one percent was of society (NY, 11). While two horrendous depressions, one in 1873 and one in 1893, shook America, New York society lived in exclusive luxury.³⁵ These people were not upper class; inheritance was still the “principle vehicle” for social status (NY, 3). A more accurate term is “aristocrat,” which historian Eric Homberger describes as “a group of high status possessing a conscious sense of shared rituals, identity, and organization” (NY, 3). Also known as the “upper ten” or “upper dom,” they were the 10,000 New Yorkers who led society (NY, 1). The highest circle was the Four Hundred, which was led

³⁰ T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 8.

³¹ Sean Dennis Cashman, *America in the Gilded Age: From the Death of Lincoln to the Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 2.

³² *ibid.*, 43, 58, 33.

³³ *ibid.*, 33.

³⁴ Eric Homberger, *Mrs. Astor’s New York: Money and Social Power in a Gilded Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 8. Hereafter cited in the text.

³⁵ Cashman, *America in the Gilded Age*, 3.

by Mrs. Astor and created to compete with the highest five hundred aristocrats in Britain (NY, 4).

Surrounding the aristocrats was intense “industrial strife” in the form of strikes, riots, and the famous Haymarket bombing of 1886.³⁶ The parvenus were dangerous because they reminded the aristocrats of the fluidity of their social sphere and how easy this lower class unrest could invade their world (NY, 5). Wharton, in *The Age of Innocence*, depicts the necessary exclusionary tactics of these aristocrats while at the same time bemoaning the collateral damage of the born reader.

The Biology of the Reader

Wharton uses words like “innate,” “born,” “natural” and “instinctive” to describe her born readers and if these words seem to have a biological ring to them, it is because they are strongly influenced by the work of naturalist Charles Darwin (VR, 100).³⁷ His most famous works, the *Origin of the Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871), sent “shock waves” through American society and were used by everyone from anthropologist Franz Boas to industrialist John D. Rockefeller to voice his or her beliefs on the future of humankind.³⁸ Darwin’s own “ecological ‘web of affinities’” of species makes a nice metaphor for the far extending reverberations of his theories.³⁹ *Origin*, in particular, although it excludes humankind from its discussion, was “sufficiently

³⁶ Walter Licht, *Industrializing America: the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 169.

³⁷ Wharton, “The Criticism of Fiction.”

³⁸ Rick Tilman, “Introduction,” in *Darwin’s Impact: Social Evolution in America, 1880-1920, Volume 1: Social Darwinism and its Critics*, ed. Frank X. Ryan (London: Thoemmes Press, 2001), ix-x.

³⁹ Gillian Beer, *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 19.

ambiguous” enough to lend itself to everything from eugenics and phrenology⁴⁰ to laissez-faire economics to equalitarian philosophies.⁴¹ Darwin was “the greatest scientist of his time” and was used by everyone with a political or social agenda to justify his or her point of view. To understand the impact he has had, we have only to look as far as our own debates over creation theory in education.⁴² In short, he changed the way America sees itself.

While the application of Darwin’s theories to other fields is commonly called Social Darwinism, it would be a mistake to define Wharton as a Social Darwinist. Major revisionist work has been done to explore the different groups that had previously all fallen under the Social Darwinist umbrella.⁴³ The group historians now refer to as the Social Darwinists was headed by the most influential American writer on Darwin in the early twentieth century, William Graham Sumner. They promoted “the law of competition” that leads to “the concentration of business...in the hands of the few.”⁴⁴ The Social Darwinists were composed essentially of “robber barons” who used Darwinian theory to justify their predatory business strategies.⁴⁵ The Social Darwinists were, in effect, the parvenu, the mechanical readers from “The Vice of Reading” and the type of people Wharton harshly satirizes in characters like Elmer Moffat in *The Custom of the Country* (1913).

Ironically, despite Wharton’s conservative politics, she would be better placed in the reform Darwinist trend. Reform Darwinists such as Arthur M. Lewis and Arthur

⁴⁰ Frank X. Ryan, “Introduction,” in *Darwin’s Impact: Social Evolution in America, 1880-1920, Volume 2: Race, Gender, and Supremacy*, ed. Frank X. Ryan (London: Thoemmes Press, 2001), ix.

⁴¹ Tilman, “Introduction,” x.

⁴² *ibid.*, xxii.

⁴³ *ibid.*, x.

⁴⁴ Andrew Carnegie, “Wealth,” in *Darwin’s Impact: Social Evolution in America, 1880-1920, volume 3: Evolution, Law, and Economics*, ed. Frank X. Ryan, (London: Thoemmes Press, 2001), 46-47.

⁴⁵ Cashman, *America in the Gilded Age*, 42.

Jerome Eddy argued that “industry could now be organized along cooperative rather than competitive lines” and that evolutionary theory was proof of the potential for “political and social reconstruction.”⁴⁶ While at first this stance seems completely at odds with Wharton’s elitism and extreme exclusionism, the reform Darwinists’ emphasis on “group loyalty” and “self denial” is the emphasis Wharton places in her praise of Old New York in novels such as *The Age of Innocence*.⁴⁷

And Wharton was certainly influenced by Darwin. She once declared to a friend that Darwin was one of “the greatest influences of [her] youth.”⁴⁸ Shari Benstock’s biography describes how Wharton would ruminate on the works of Darwin as well as his contemporaries in science such as Jean Baptiste de Lamarck.⁴⁹ The most direct evidence of Darwin’s influence on Wharton is in the title of one of her collections of short stories, *The Descent of Man And Other Stories* (1904), published in the year after “The Vice of Reading.”⁵⁰ “The Descent of Man” itself is a short story on a Professor who writes an ironical pseudo-scientific confession of faith that ends up getting sold to “the Average Reader” as a “serious” piece of literature.⁵¹ Not only then, did Wharton have Darwin on her mind; it is clear that for her, the ideas of Darwin and her own ideologies on reading and literature are intertwined. In fact, it is not misplaced to talk of the born reader using the terminology of inheritance and to describe it as a heritable trait. For if reading for the born reader is innate, it is a trait that can be passed down to offspring according to

⁴⁶ Tilman, “Introduction,” xv.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, xv, xvii.

⁴⁸ R.W.B Lewis and Nancy Lewis, *The Letters*, 136.

⁴⁹ Shari Benstock, *No Gifts From Chance: A Biography of Edith Wharton* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1994), 62.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 139.

⁵¹ Edith Wharton, “The Descent of Man,” in *The Descent of Man and Other Stories* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1904), 15, 32.

Darwinian thought. And if it is a trait that can be passed down, it is also a trait that can become useless and die. In other words, the born reader can become extinct.

Newland Archer as a Born Reader

Of all the examples of born readers scattered throughout Wharton's fiction, Newland Archer, the protagonist of *The Age of Innocence* (1920), is perhaps the most perfectly matched to Wharton's definition. Wharton presents him with deceiving straightforwardness as a "book-lover" who had a childhood "saturated with Ruskin."⁵² It is important that one understands that he isn't simply a reader, but a born reader with a trait passed down through the family bloodlines and a need for literature that is as powerful as the need for air.

This trait, although rare, is acknowledged to occasionally occur in the Archer line. Wharton writes that "the Archer-Newland-van-der-Luyden tribe" is "devoted to travel, horticulture and the best fiction" (*AI*, 31). The family line possesses that finer, aesthetic appreciation that is the signature mark of the born reader. Its rareness is evidenced by the fact that it is a trait that has not been passed down to Archer's mother or sister (*AI*, 31). "Literature and art [are] deeply respected in the Archer set," but Mrs. Archer and her daughter read principally for the scenery and "pleasant sentiments" described in fiction, distinguishing them clearly from the born reader and his or her appreciation of fiction's critical and aesthetic properties (*AI*, 100, 31). They are not mechanical readers because they are members of the most exclusive of the New York elite; they simply don't have the capacity to appreciate reading like Archer does. Using terminology from Mendel's

⁵² Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1920), 137, 68. Hereafter cited in the text.

work on genes rediscovered by Hugo de Vries at the turn of the century, we could even go so far as to declare the born reader trait to be recessive.⁵³ However, regardless of whether Wharton was aware of gene theory, she is making one thing clear; the born reader is not going to be found in every member of the heritable lines that possess the trait. Or, to put it in other words, being a born reader is rare.

As a born reader, Archer sees literature as an “interchange of thought between writer and reader” (VR, 99). The truest evidence that Archer is a born reader comes from the fact that, for him, reading, immersing in this conversation with the aesthetic, is a need. When he receives a new shipment of books, they are a “feast” to be enjoyed with “sensuous joy” (AI, 137). In fact this feast is more important to him than real food, as he passes up “three dinner invitations” in order to enjoy his books instead (AI, 137). This comparison to his biological need for food is crucial to Wharton’s depiction of Archer as a born reader. He reads because it is in his blood, he reads because he must, and to deny the born reader the engagement with the aesthetic is to deny him food or air.

Extinction

If being a born reader means possessing a biological trait, then it is a trait that can disappear. Darwin writes, “[a]ny form which is represented by few individuals will run a good chance of utter extinction, during fluctuations in the nature of the seasons, or from a temporary increase in the number of its enemies.”⁵⁴ The born reader is rare and, as Wharton illustrates in *The Age of Innocence*, it also has many enemies. It is a trait that neither helps the born reader further him or herself in the increasingly conspicuously

⁵³ Tilman, “Introduction,” x.

⁵⁴ Charles Darwin, *The Origin of the Species by Means of Natural Selection and The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (New York: Random House Inc., 1936), 82.

consuming world, nor serves as protection from the parvenus, the mechanical readers and the enemies to culture. Wharton asks us to both think of race in terms of inherited abilities and to simultaneously think of the race of the born reader as the last chance for America to possess real culture. As we will see, the outcome for America, according to Wharton, is grim indeed.

**As Natural as Breathing:
Edith Wharton and the Extinction of the Born Reader**

“Any form which is represented by few individuals will run a good chance of utter extinction, during fluctuations in the nature of the seasons, or from a temporary increase in the number of its enemies.”

When the Vessel Breaks

In Edith Wharton’s autobiography, *A Backward Glance* (1934), she reflects on Old New York⁵⁵:

When I was young it used to seem to me that the group in which I grew up was like an empty vessel into which no new wine would ever be poured. Now I see that one of its uses lay in preserving a few drops of an old vintage too rare to be savored by a youthful palette. (BG, 5)

On one hand, Wharton’s image of the vessel captures the essence of her feelings about her parents’ generation. While the vessel itself has little value, it protects the “rare” “vintage” that would otherwise be exposed to the harsh world. It is a bloody racial metaphor; the inherited tradition of “European culture” is protected in the blood or “vintage” of Anglo-Saxon New York to prevent contamination, or worse, evaporation and “race suicide” (BG, 5).⁵⁶ As Jennie Kassanoff has demonstrated, Wharton, like others in her time, was deeply afraid of the contaminating and overwhelming influences of “the

⁵⁵The term “Old New York” is also the title of Edith Wharton’s novella that looked at New York in the 1840’s, 1850’s, 1860’s, and 1870’s. I use it here to apply to the New York world she describes in *The Age of Innocence*, the society of New York’s aristocracy in the 1870’s (AI, 1).

⁵⁶ President Theodore Roosevelt was among those of Wharton’s contemporaries who feared that the Anglo-Saxon “race” was not reproducing at a rate comparable to the rates of other races. If the trend continued, “race suicide” would result (Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 30).

Vid. Phillip Barrish, *American Literary Realism. Critical Theory, and Intellectual Prestige, 1880-1995* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 115.

ill bred, the foreign, and the poor” (*PR*, 3). The “culture” of America, one inherited from Anglo-Saxon Europe, is protected by the traditions of Old New York (*BG*, 5).

On the other hand, in her autobiography, Wharton admits to being less critical of Old New York than in previous years (*BG*, 5). In *The Age of Innocence* (1920), written fourteen years prior, Old New York is not the gentle vessel that protects American culture. Instead it is a deeply communal and utilitarian society, represented primarily by the Mingotts, Wellands, Archers, and van der Luydens, that only values that which protects its autonomy from the threatening masses. This utilitarianism excludes the personal, un-learnable and therefore non-communal appreciation of the aesthetic. In other words, it places no value on the traits of born readers like Newland Archer.⁵⁷ Wharton goes so far as to paint Old New York with tribal, primitive imagery that emphasizes its lack of an appreciation for Anglo-Saxon culture. This is quite different from her image of the fragile vessel protecting culture from obliteration.

Yet the image of the protective vessel is applicable to her depiction of Old New York in *The Age of Innocence*. While she does criticize Old New York with biting wit, she also portrays it as a society that has delineated boundaries, a society with a sharp distinction between the private and the public realm. This distinction allows Old New Yorkers, while they obey the dictates of society in public, the privacy to develop an individual identity, the identity of the born reader. This private sphere is where Archer can preserve his instinctual appreciation for literature.

But Old New York society is doomed to fade like “the Pharaohs” (*BG*, 6). When the parvenus, represented mainly by Julius Beaufort, invade, they destroy the distinction between the public and private sphere with their conspicuously consuming

⁵⁷ For my analysis of Newland Archer as a born reader, please see pages 13 to 15 in the Introduction.

individualism.⁵⁸ In this world there is no space for aesthetic appreciation, a trait that doesn't serve the pursuit of personal monetary gain. It is a world, Wharton believes, that will force born readers, like Archer, to extinction. Female born readers like Ellen Olenska have quite a different experience, but for the purposes of this discussion, I will focus on Archer.⁵⁹

It is within born readers like Archer that Wharton finds the few drops of “vintage” precious enough to validate the otherwise “empty vessel” of Old New York. For Wharton New York is splintering; World War I “tore down the old frame-work” and left nothing recognizable in its place (*BG*, 6). In *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton looks back and grimly predicts the death of American culture. While the “vessel” of Old New York protects the few drops of born reader blood left in American society, when the vessel breaks, the born reader faces annihilation.

The Born Reader in Old New York

R.W.B Lewis describes how in writing *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton made use of her readings from *The Golden Bough* and other anthropological texts.⁶⁰ Then it is no surprise that she uses imagery to describe Old New York that could have come straight out of the work of James George Frazer. For Wharton, Old New York is a primitive tribal clan. She sardonically calls it a “*little* tribe” (my emphasis) and an “old-fashioned” clan that exists in isolation from the world like “the pictures on the walls of a deserted house”

⁵⁸ The differences between Wharton's portrayal of Old New York in *The Age of Innocence* and *A Backward Glance* can also be seen in her depiction of the parvenu. In *Innocence* she seeks to find the societal cracks that ruptured with the World War. She places the blame for these cracks on the parvenu and contends they have led to the decline of New York's civilization. Yet, in *Glance*, after experiencing the momentous changes of the twenties and thirties that came about after World War I, she views the parvenu as merely affronting imitators, the nearly insignificant “lords of Pittsburg” (*BG*, 6).

⁵⁹ For my analysis of Ellen Olenska as a born reader, please see pages 39 to 40 in the Conclusion.

⁶⁰ Lewis, *Edith Wharton*, 432.

(*AI*, 182, 79, 92, 124). The van der Luydens are the clan's chieftains and the "mouth-pieces" for its "remote ancestral authority" (*AI*, 52). They rule over this "tight little citadel" that, in its rigidity, acts like a tomb for its members (*AI*, 28).

This rigidity is part of the symbolic imagery of the primitive as well. Susan Manning writes that during this time Native Americans were frequently depicted "as noble, often solitary, representatives of a race destined to extinction by the march of civilization."⁶¹ As a representation, they are the sole preservers of the traditions of the tribe and simultaneously frozen in that role and unable to change. Kassanoff has shown how Wharton's appropriation of the image of the representative aborigine is used to depict the loss of tradition in *The Custom of the Country* (1913) (*PR*, 17). Wharton repeats this device in *Innocence*. The van der Luydens are the nearly embalmed representatives of soon-to-be-extinct Old New York. Their homes are "gloomy" and like a "mausoleum" and their dinners are "funeral" (*AI*, 71, 129, 85). The van der Luydens themselves both have "the same look of frozen gentleness" engraved on their countenance (*AI*, 51). Mrs. Henry van der Luyden, in particular, is described as possessing the look of "having been rather gruesomely preserved in the airless atmosphere of a perfectly irreproachable existence, as bodies caught in glaciers keep for years a rosy life-in-death" (*AI*, 50). In depicting the van der Luydens as embalmed representational aborigines, Wharton emphasizes that they are static, unable to evolve and survive the destructive forces of the parvenu.

Wharton also depicts New York as a primitive tribe in order to criticize its lack of appreciation for European culture. Writer Ned Winsett, Archer's friend and "a pure man

⁶¹ Susan Manning, "Americas," in *Romanticism: An Oxford Guide*, ed. Nicholas Roe (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

of letters,” voices Wharton’s frustration with Old New York’s willingness to let public culture die for lack of care, or as Winsett puts it, a lack of “hoeing and cross-fertilising” (*AI*, 122, 124). As a community without culture, which is defined as a community without an appreciation for higher western ideals, Old New York falls into the category of what many in the turn-of-the-century would consider to be a lower or primitive society. Intellectuals of the time often described these societies using the terminology of individual human development. They believed that the primitive society was still in “the childhood of the race,” while Western society had already reached “social adulthood.”⁶²

Wharton conveys the primitive childishness of Old New York primarily through Archer’s fiancée, May Welland, a “nice” girl who is a “terrifying product of the social system” (*AI*, 40). When she acts, she acts for society, so that when Archer looks at her he sees “the embodied image of the Family” (*AI*, 335). As the image of Old New York, she too is a representational aborigine. Wharton took the title *The Age of Innocence* from a Reynolds genre painting of a young blonde girl in white who gazes off at distant vistas.⁶³ Miss Welland, when we first meet her, is also “a young girl in white with eyes ecstatically fixed” on the distant stage (*AI*, 3). As the young Reynolds’ girl come to life, she represents the childlike innocence of the tribe and consequently, its primitiveness. Elizabeth Ammons acknowledges Miss Welland’s childlike image, calling her “permanently pure” and “permanently juvenile,” and adding that she is a “character frozen in endless childhood.”⁶⁴ However, Ammons attributes this imagery to Wharton’s indictment of the idealization of the childlike-woman by American writers such as

⁶² Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 147.

⁶³ Elizabeth Ammons, excerpt from “Cool Diana and The Blood Red Muse: Edith Wharton on Innocence and Art,” in *The Age of Innocence: Complete text with Introduction. Historical Contexts. and Critical Essays*, ed. Carol J. Singley (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 395.

⁶⁴ Ammons, “Cool Diana,” 396, 395.

William Dean Howells and Henry James.⁶⁵ Her stance cannot account for the references to May Welland's boyishness that litter the novel almost as much as her girlishness. While in one instance she is in a state of "timorous girlhood," in other instances she has a "boyish smile," is full of "cool boyish composure," and gets likened to a "young marble athlete" (*AI*, 149, 191, 141). She represents both the childlike female *and* the male and so embodies the childishness of all of Old New York. Miss Welland symbolizes the primitive development of the society and most importantly, its lack of appreciation for European culture. It is this lack that separates Old New York from the born reader.

Of Course May Welland is more than a flat representation of the primitive child. Wharton reveals Miss Welland's complexity in her moment of "victory," the moment of her cousin Countess Ellen Olenska's exile to France and the end of the supposed affair between her and Miss Welland's husband, Newland Archer (*AI*, 343). That she is aware of Archer and Ellen Olenska's relationship is testament enough to her adult-like acuity. She also lies, telling her cousin that she is pregnant in order to hasten her to Paris (*AI*, 346). It is a move containing the "instinctive guile" that Archer had believed her to have lost to Old New York's imposition of "factitious purity" (*AI*, 43). That her purity or childishness is "factitious" and not inherited does not make Old New York any less primitive. Instead, Miss Welland's complexity reveals that her primitiveness is a learned social habit developed as part of Old New York's "ethos of exclusion" (*NY*, 10). To choose to reject European culture, to choose to be primitive, is a way for Old New York to distinguish itself from foreigners and other outsiders.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, 398.

⁶⁶ Homberger discusses, in his historical account of New York society, how Old New York imitated the aristocratic traditions of France and especially England (*NY*, 7). However, it is clear from Old New York's



“The Age of Innocence” by Sir. Joshua Reynolds (1788), The Tate Collection Online (10 March, 2006), <http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?workid=12395&tabview=text>.

distaste of everything “foreign,” especially from the re-definition of Ellen Olenska as a foreigner when she is expelled, that Wharton’s Old New York defines itself against Europe and its culture (*AI*, 281).

Wharton fears that this socially constructed primitivism will lead to biological de-evolution. Seeing Miss Welland's incapacity for appreciating literature, Archer wonders whether she is like the "much cited instance of the Kentucky cave-fish, which had ceased to develop eyes because they had no use for them" (*AI*, 81). In other words, in a society that does not have a use for the trait of innate aesthetic appreciation, i.e., the trait of the born reader, it may disappear altogether.

Wharton's fears are grounded in the perception that instead of maintaining European culture on American soil, Old New York upholds a "blind conformity" to the traditions of form and family (*AI*, 242). Lawrence Lefferts is Old New York's priestly authority over the "invisible deity of 'Good Form'" (*AI*, 182). Besides the knowledge of whether to wear Oxford shoes or "pumps," he possesses the knowledge of the correct state of mind (*AI*, 6). Old New York, in accordance to form, is filled with "the chill of minds rigorously averted from the 'unpleasant'" (*AI*, 96). This aversion of the unpleasant means that everyone must "keep to the surface" and live "in a kind of hieroglyphic world, where the real thing [is] never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs" (*AI*, 110, 42). In order to interpret these formal signs, Old New Yorkers possess one other crucial trait: the ability to "perceive the shade of difference" in meanings as well as people (*AI*, 59). Form distinguishes between insiders and outsiders, between those who understand shades of difference and those who do not. E.H. Chapman, a nineteenth century New York Reverend, declared, "where there are no

adamantine barriers of birth and caste, people are anxiously exclusive.”⁶⁷ Form soothes this anxiety by keeping out the dangerous Other (NY, 5).⁶⁸

The tradition of family serves this function as well. Old New York “cling[s] to any convention that keeps the family together” and regulates itself through appeals to the “family council” (AI, 110, 26). The tradition of family regulates matters of form. The families of Old New York rest on a “firm foundation of... an honourable but obscure majority of respectable families who... had been raised above their level by marriage with one of the ruling clans” (AI, 46). Families like the Archers compose the next level of the pyramid and the van der Luydens rest at its apex (AI, 46). Old New York’s most sanctified rituals, such as the “nineteenth century New York wedding [,] a rite that [seems] to belong to the dawn of history,” are performed to preserve this tradition (AI, 179). The tradition of family is used to keep marriage, the only sanctioned form of social ascension, under the tight reign of society’s leaders. If the only way to get ahead is to marry-up, then the leaders can determine just who will be granted the privilege. Mr. van der Luyden notes that “[a]s long as a member of a well-known family is backed up by that family it should be considered — final” (AI, 53-4). The adherence to form and family serves a specific function, that of supporting insiders and maintaining exclusion.

Exclusion is also maintained through Old New York’s communal organization. It acts, in fact, as a form of Darwinian inclusive fitness. Inclusive fitness is a “complex set of psychological dispositions,” both cognitive and social, that ensures an individual’s

⁶⁷ Reverend E.H. Chapman. *Humanity in the City* (New York: DeWitt and Devenport, 1854), quoted in Eric Homberger, *Mrs. Astor’s New York: Money and Social Power in the Gilded Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 8.

reproductive success.⁶⁹ Each individual is concerned with the survival of his or her genes and not the welfare of the species as a whole, but this concern extends to all who are *perceived* to share the individual's bloodlines.⁷⁰ Old New Yorkers collectively support the tribal families because in supporting each other they ensure the survival of themselves. Wharton opens the novel with a demonstration of this collectivism; all of Old New York comes to the opera in similar looking "Brown *coupés*" so they can jump into the closest one without having to wait in line for their own (AI, 1). While Wharton mocks this practice's "playful allusion to democratic principles," she is also revealing that within itself, Old New York values collectivism over individualism (AI, 1). The individual is a member of society only when part of "the whole" that "[represents] New York" (AI, 6). Amy Kaplan describes New York's aristocracy as families who "formulate rituals and rules of polite behavior designed to consolidate their class interests and regulate the admission of newcomers."⁷¹ "Autonomy" exists outside of class interests and becomes something "taboo" because it threatens the tribe.⁷² Newland Archer recognizes this when he realizes that it would be "rather bad form...to strike out for himself" (AI, 6). He also makes this clear when he warns Ellen Olenska against ignoring the family and divorcing her abusive husband, for "the individual...is nearly always sacrificed to what is supposed to be the collective interest" (AI, 110).

This collective interest is to remain exclusive. It can be described as an aristocratic form of the utilitarianism that Max Weber analyzes in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (PE, 52). Instead of a "duty of the individual toward the

⁶⁹ Joseph Carroll, *Literary Darwinism: Evolution, Human Nature, and Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 9.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, 10.

⁷¹ Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism*, 92.

⁷² Gilbert and Gubar, "Angel of Devastation."

increase of his capital," it is a duty to the clan and the preservation of form and family (*PE*, 51). And similarly to the utilitarian pursuit of capital, this duty becomes so important that it takes on the classification of a virtue (*PE*, 52). When Archer is considering adopting some radical notions concerning women's rights, he ultimately recoils, for he is going against gentlemen who represent New York and "the habit of masculine solidarity [makes] him accept their doctrine on all the issues called *moral* (*AI*, 6, my emphasis). The issue of going against the doctrine of Old New York is one of morality, not just duty. When they are first engaged and appear in public at a ball, Archer and May Welland keep their emotions silent for the sake of "the family dignity which both [consider] so high a virtue" (*AI*, 14). They virtuously sacrifice their personal voices to the tradition of family. When Ellen Olenska first arrives in New York, Archer dislikes her disregard for form. For him, few things are more awful "than an offence against 'Taste,' that far-off divinity" that is the essence of form (*AI*, 12). Transgressions against form and family are at least "an offense" and at worst, immoral (*AI*, 12).

And just as Weber's utilitarian society develops a "certain ascetic tendency," Wharton's Old New York, despite its wealth, possesses this tendency as well (*PE*, 71). In one scene, Archer's mother, Mrs. Archer, and a family friend, Miss Jackson, lament over the modern "extravagance in dress" they find in Old New York's youth (*AI*, 259). Miss Jackson comments, "it was considered vulgar to dress in the newest fashions" in her day and that the proper tradition was to let one's gowns "mellow under lock and key" (*AI*, 260). For these women, a woman wearing her dress as soon as it is bought is flaunting her possessions and going against Old New York's asceticism. And since the display of the new dress adds nothing to the community, only the individual, it is immoral as well.

Old New York's asceticism is even revealed in the first scene where Wharton describes its preference for "the shabby red and gold boxes of the sociable old Academy" over a more elaborate music hall. The preference derives from it being "small and inconvenient" and thus serving the purpose of "keeping out the 'new people'" (AI, 1). Its asceticism serves the overall utilitarian goal of exclusion.

The traits of the born reader do not serve this goal. The rareness and very innateness of these traits creates in born readers like Archer a set of individual needs outside of the realm of the collective interest. Penelope Vita-Finzi writes that Wharton has a "an impulse towards romantic values and the freedom of the imagination, away from conscious design and towards spontaneity."⁷³ This unconscious spontaneity is the instinctual desire of the born reader, a desire that does indeed have a "romantic" quality. While Wharton is famous for her Realism, the born reader is a Romantic concept.⁷⁴ The born reader is the Romantic reader, who, "as she or he overhears this conversation of the poet within himself [or herself]...is to identify with, to experience, these feelings [of the poet], this consciousness, and these thoughts."⁷⁵ While this action furthers the development of the born reader or Romantic reader's soul, it serves no other purpose. It does not serve to uphold the traditions of family or form and it excludes everyone except the born reader and the author, something that undermines Old New York's collectivism. Wharton emphasizes Archer's uselessness when she describes him as "at heart a dilettante" and as someone for whom "thinking over a pleasure to come often" gives "a

⁷³ Penelope Vita-Finzi, *Edith Wharton and the Art of Fiction*, (London: Printer Publishers, 1990), 46.

⁷⁴ Vid. Amy Kaplan (*The Social Construction of American Realism* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988]) for her analysis of Wharton's place within the Realist tradition.

⁷⁵ Andrew Bennett, "The Idea of the Author," in *Romanticism: An Oxford Guide*, ed. Nicholas Roe (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 656.

subtler satisfaction than its realisation" (*AI*, 2). He would rather keep his pleasures internal than expose them to the harsh utilitarian judgment of Old New York.

Being a born reader is also Romantic, or more specifically, Transcendentalist, in its ability to transcend the market of exchange.⁷⁶ The Transcendentalists turned "their project against what is customarily called the "Protestant ethic" and strove to create beauty outside of the market world."⁷⁷ Similarly, Archer's desires lie outside of the realm of Old New York's market economy. Old New York has exchanged the possession of public European culture for the maintenance of their exclusivity. But the presence of an appreciation for culture or the aesthetic in the born reader is not something to be exchanged for something else. Instead of a commodity, it is a basic need, like eating, so that when Archer gets a new shipment of books he has the "impatient" need to devour literature as though it were a "feast" (*AI*, 137). These needs of the born reader endanger the collectivism of Old New York in their sheer uniqueness. To use the born reader trait as a tool for exclusion would mean excluding everyone in Old New York society besides Newland Archer, the sole born reader. To value the trait of the born reader would force Old New York to devalue itself. If Archer is not contained within the parameters of society, Old New York, to protect itself, must force him into exile.

Luckily for Archer, Old New York maintains sharply delineated public and private spheres. The home is the heart of the private sphere in Old New York, to the point

⁷⁶ Susan Manning describes Transcendentalism as "the name given to the German-inflected manifestation of Romanticism in the writing of a small group around Emerson in the 1840's and 1850's" (Manning, "Americas"). The Transcendentalists were "children of the Puritan past who, having been emancipated by Unitarianism from New England's original Calvinism, found a new religious expression in forms derived from romantic literature and from the philosophical idealism of Germany" (Perry Miller, ed. *The American Transcendentalists: Their Pose and Poetry* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1957), ix.

⁷⁷ Miller, *The American Transcendentalists*, ix-x.

that its narrow brownstone interiors become a physical display of agoraphobia.⁷⁸ When the monstrously obese Mrs. Mason Mingott, the “ancestress” of Old New York, puts her bedroom on the first floor to make it easier to access, everyone is “startled and fascinated” by this arrangement (*AI*, 24, 25). Such a “flagrant violation of all New York proprieties” is an act of “foreignness,” for it breaks the rules regarding the privacy of the home (*AI*, 25, 26). The front rooms of the home are considered public and suitable for visitors, but the bedroom is the most private room of all and is to be kept entirely removed from the public sphere.

Old New York defines this public sphere to be a place inhabited by both the insiders and outsiders of society. When Archer is discussing the possibility of Countess Olenska’s divorce from her husband, his mother admonishes him for discussing the matter in front of the butler and Archer acquiesces, “mindful of the bad taste of discussing such intimate matters in public” (*AI*, 38). It does not matter that they are in their own dining room; the presence of the outsider, the butler, is enough to mark the space as public. The ultimate function of the separation between the public and private sphere is to indicate a person’s status. Those within society can enter private spaces while outsiders cannot. In the case of the bedroom, ostensibly the only way to gain entrance is through marriage, a ritual that transforms the outsider into an Old New Yorker.

Form dictates the behavior within these public and private spheres. Sarah Luria writes, “Manners for...Wharton functioned as doors. They were the architecture of human behavior, through which one’s inner feelings and longings might be concealed, or

⁷⁸ Sarah Luria, “The Architecture of Manners: Henry James, Edith Wharton and the Mount,” in *Domestic Space: Reading the Nineteenth-Century Interior*, ed. Inga Bryden and Janet Floyd (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1999).

revealed.”⁷⁹ These manners are a way to conceal private thoughts and emotions in public. When May Welland announces her engagement to Newland Archer at a ball, her mother, Mrs. Welland, affects “the air of parental reluctance considered suitable to the occasion” (*AI*, 20). Her mother’s private feelings are joy but they must be concealed for the sake of propriety in the public sphere. The private sphere acts as a place to contain all emotions and thoughts, even positive ones like joy, which might create disorder in the collective.

It is in this private sphere, which for Archer is his library, that he can be a born reader. His library is the place where he can smoke, be alone with his thoughts, and most importantly, engage in the “sensuous joy” of reading (*AI*, 2, 83, 137). When he marries May Welland, her parents choose his home, she chooses the décor, but Archer is the one who chooses the library’s “‘sincere’ arm-chairs and tables” (*AI* 69, 336, 206). The word *sincere* is repeated twice in connection to the decoration of the library, suggesting that it is the place where Archer can engage in his “sincere” self as a born reader (*AI*, 70, 347). And as the place where Archer’s soul develops, it is not surprising that it becomes the place “in which most of the real things of his life” happen as well (*AI*, 347).

While the library serves as Archer’s physical sanctuary, the other private realm for the born reader is spiritual. Kassanoff sardonically remarks on this spiritual world, saying, “[c]hoicer real estate [is] to be found in the land of letters, where elite grandees [live] on magnificent hereditary estates” (*PR*, 29). While she is referring to Wharton’s own literary paradise, this realm is where all born readers ultimately live, in a “paysage choisi of the spirit” (*VR*, 102). In this realm, the private spiritual realm away from the utilitarianism of society, Archer stores his feelings for Ellen Olenska. He forms a “sanctuary” where he brings “the books he read[s], the ideas and feelings which [nourish]

⁷⁹ Luria, “The Architecture of Manners.”

him, his judgments and his visions” (*AI*, 265). Archer’s love for Ellen Olenska isn’t sanctioned by society and the fact that he stores his love for her in the same place in his spirit that he stores his need for literature, the “ideas and feelings” that feed him, speaks volumes for how little his aesthetic appreciation is valued by Old New York. His traits as a born reader must be kept as contained as the illicit love he feels for his wife’s cousin. But in private, in his library and the inner sanctuary of his mind, Archer can both love Ellen Olenska and be a born reader.

But the world of Old New York, both public and private, is coming to an end. When Archer and Countess Olenska meet for the last time alone together, Wharton prophetically places them near the “Cesnola antiquities.” Looking at them, Countess Olenska remarks “that after a while nothing matters... any more than these little things, that used to be necessary and important to forgotten people, and now have to be guessed at under a magnifying glass and labeled: ‘Use unknown’” (*AI*, 312). Many have read this scene as one of nostalgic longing, a regret for the loss of Old New York’s “necessary and important” traditions, and the poignant sense of transience is certainly there (*PR*, 162). Yet, more than this, the scene works on multiple levels of irony and meaning. The “forgotten people” also refers to Archer and Countess Olenska, whose love affair will be forgotten once they are dead. It certainly refers to the end of the traditions of Old New York, which Wharton reveals throughout to be slowly disappearing at the hands of the parvenu. Interestingly, recent scholarship has revealed that the Cesnola artifacts were widely suspected to be fakes and this adds another layer to the scene’s meaning, an ambiguity of whether Old New York’s soon-to-be forgotten traditions are “the real thing” or a “sham” (*PR*, 162). As rejecters of European culture, Wharton does view Old New

York as fake, with one important caveat. For, despite its flaws, Old New York's separation between public and private is what keeps the born reader from extinction. Once this protection is gone, the born reader is doomed.

Modern Spaces and the Born Reader

As Homberger puts it succinctly, "They were living in a community undergoing rapid social change" (*NY*, 25-6). The "they" he refers to are Old New Yorkers and the changes are the assaults against their society by the parvenu. In many ways it is a hostile takeover. In fact, "the press used quasi military metaphors" to describe the interaction between the parvenu and Old New York (*NY*, 25). The breaches in New York's "citadel" even come from within at the hands of betraying insiders (*AI*, 261) One "traitor" is Mrs. Manson Mingott, the obese matriarch who admires Julius Beaufort, a parvenu who has, through her good graces, worked his way into the realm of Old New York (*AI*, 261, 28). In fact, Beaufort is *as* accepted as Mrs. Manson Mingott, to the point that attending his dinners is an unremarkable event (*AI*, 18).

Beaufort is clearly meant to represent the parvenu at its worst. He is a "vulgar man" who, while trying to conform, acts in ways that reveal the parvenu's "fundamental canon of conspicuous waste" (*AI*, 33).⁸⁰ His footmen are "silk-stockinged" in a display of wealth that Thorstein Veblen believes is used to display a man's "ability to pay" (*TLC*, 47). The Beauforts' house is "one of the few in New York" that possesses a ball-room "used for no other purpose, and left for three-hundred-and-sixty-four days of the year to shuttered darkness, with its gilt chairs stacked in a corner and its chandelier in a bag" (*AI*,

⁸⁰ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Random House, 2001), 68. Hereafter cited in the text.

16). The ballroom is a display of wealth because it reveals the ability to waste resources. The Beauforts are also among “the first people in New York to own their own red velvet carpet” instead of renting it, a contrast that emphasizes the difference between the individualistic ownership of the parvenu and the communal utility of Old New York (*AI*, 18). But by providing luxuries, Beaufort has infiltrated New York. Wharton sees Old New York’s acceptance of these luxuries as the fatal blow that allows the parvenu to conquer.

The wife also acts to display a man’s wealth and Mrs. Julius Beaufort is no exception. She looks like an “idol, hung with pearls, growing younger and blonder and more beautiful each year” (*AI*, 17). As a symbol for her husband, Mrs. Beaufort’s eternal youth suggests that his wealth and power are timeless. When she gives her annual ball on an opera night, an act that places her at the opera and away from the preparations, Mrs. Beaufort is highlighting both the ability of her husband to pay for a “competent” staff and her “complete superiority to household cares” (*AI*, 16). As a trophy for her husband, her only role is to be a living display of wealth. This display of wealth goes directly against Old New York’s preference for asceticism, yet everyone attends the ball. Wharton reveals that Beaufort and his individualistic displays of wealth are going to surpass the old traditions.

The old tradition of collectivism is certainly doomed. Instead of acting in a form of Darwinian inclusive fitness, the parvenus act with the idea of “survival of the fittest” and engage in aggressive acts designed to assert their “superior force” (*TLC*, 16).⁸¹ This

⁸¹ “Survival of the fittest” is a Spenserian term Darwin borrows to clarify his description of “natural selection,” the processes by which those in the same species compete for their existence (Charles Darwin, *The Origin of the Species and The Descent of Man*, 52).

is an individual struggle that pits the members of Old New York against each other and goes directly against its sense of communal unity. Beaufort betrays this sense of collectivism thoroughly by ruining the lives of “hundreds of innocent people” in bad business deals for the pursuit of his own wealth and power (*AI*, 276). His deceit physically affects Mrs. Manson Mingott, who has a stroke when she hears of the scandal (*AI*, 274). Her stroke, a biological reaction to Beaufort’s duplicity, reveals that the consequences for allowing the parvenu in Old New York’s midst are more than financial. The parvenus are dangerous to Old New York’s health.

To emphasize their destructiveness even further, Wharton addresses the racial ambiguity of the parvenu. To Wharton, race was “fixed within a stable aesthetic” and “guarded against the potential slippages of class” (*PR*, 30). Wharton questions Beaufort’s race and thus his intrusion into society, literally asking the reader to question “who [is] Beaufort?” and find the answer to be *not an Old New Yorker* (*AI*, 17). The Beauforts are not mere commoners, as parvenus “they [are] even worse” (*AI*, 16). Beaufort is worse because while a commoner can be easily identified and expelled, a “mysterious” man like Beaufort is able to “[pass] for an Englishman” (*AI*, 17). Passing taps into the deepest fears in the era, “America’s fixation on the lurking possibility of ‘invisible blackness’” or Jewishness in their midst (*PR*, 9). The Struthers represent an even more blatant portrayal of this racial fear. Mrs. Struthers is described as having “intensely black” hair in the “Egyptian style” and yet is being invited to dine by Beaufort (*AI*, 34, 28). The fact that Beaufort invites the Struthers to dinner signals that the doors to the citadel have been opened and the eventual takeover of Old New York by these parvenus is inevitable.

As this takeover unfolds, society gets more and more public. Physically, technology brings the outside world into the private sphere through devices like the telephone. When Dallas, Archer's son (who is an adult by the book's end), calls him to discuss their plans for a trip to Paris, his father uses the phone in his library. The phone, which brings Dallas' voice in the room so that he seems to be "lounging in his favourite armchair by the fire," means that it is no longer a room cut off from communication with the outside world (*AI*, 352). The physical realm of the library has been tainted with the possibility of intrusion through the telephone.

Yet the physical private realm of the library is not the only realm affected. The differentiation between the world of private thoughts and the public display of form has merged and made understanding "the shade of difference" obsolete (*AI*, 59). Dallas Archer gently mocks his father's old distinction between public and private when he says that Old New York was "a deaf-and-dumb asylum" where everyone was focused on the realm of private thoughts (*AI*, 359-60). He speaks in the modern, public way, bringing up issues like Archer's affair with Ellen Olenska that in Old New York were always relegated to the private realm (*AI*, 359). He in fact, has not even the "rudiments of reserve" in him for, in Dallas Archer's view, they are only obstacles to getting to the real, the formerly private, meaning of things (*AI*, 359).

Where does this leave the "paysage choisi of the spirit" (*VR*, 102), the realm of the born reader? By the novel's end, Archer has been able to do worthy things with his life, he has "[rolled] up his sleeves" and been a "good citizen," but it is clear that he is really a person with no skills to offer the public world (*AI*, 349). He is still a born reader, "by nature a contemplative and a dilettante," and while he has contributed to society in a

small way, he certainly cannot survive the aggressive fight of the parvenu for wealth in the business world of steel, rails, and oil. The new world order is one without the finer distinctions of culture; it is a “ huge kaleidoscope where all the social atoms” spin “on the same plane” (*AI*, 356). These spinning atoms point to the speed of the modern world, its individualism, and most alarming for Wharton, the slackening of class distinctions. The European model of culture maintains strict class boundaries with cultural institutions of status. While Old New York’s tactics for exclusion managed to preserve some of this European ethos, the world of modernity has given it up and put everyone “on the same plane.” Modernity has both eliminated the remnants of European culture in America and exposed the born reader to the masses.

The born reading trait has not been passed on to Archer’s children because it is not useful for survival. Archer’s daughter, Mary, has no taste for literature (*AI*, 348). Dallas Archer is able to transfer his “vague leanings towards art” into a successful career in architecture, but the vagueness of his artistic inclination suggests that it is a diluted from of the born reader trait if one at all (*AI*, 348). In the last scene of the novel, Archer sits on a bench in Paris outside of Ellen Olenska’s window while Dallas goes up to see her (*AI*, 364). Wharton emphasizes the difference between the modern Dallas, who is able to enter the house of a woman he barely knows, and the too “old fashioned” Archer, who cannot take his private memories of his and Countess Olenska’s past relationship and move it into the public realm of reality. He decides to remain below and retain his personal “shadow of reality” than to turn his love into something public and real (*AI*, 364, 365). He maintains his private “paysage choisi of the spirit” and becomes a solitary image on a bench (*VR*, 102). The novel closes with Archer alone, separated from his

children, unable to accept the loosened confines of modernity, and possessing a trait that is worthless and exposed.

Conclusion

“History followed different courses for different peoples because of differences among people's environments, not because of biological differences among people themselves.”

Women in the Vessel

As Wharton explores the transformation of society from Old New York to modernity in *The Age of Innocence*, she simultaneously explores the woman's place in this change. Ellen Olenska serves as Archer's counterpart throughout the novel and while they share the same trait of the born reader, the fate of these characters is not the same. Feminist critics such as Elizabeth Ammons have acknowledged Countess Olenska's appreciation for the aesthetic. She writes that Countess Olenska is “at heart and artist” and “an avid and intrepid reader.”⁸² Wharton, in fact, explicitly states that “poetry and art are the breath of life to her” and that she “lives for” “art and beauty” (*AI*, 158, 161). In her house in New York, Wharton describes that Countess Olenska lives literally surrounded by the books “scattered about her drawing room” (*AI*, 102). In short, Countess Olenska is clearly, like Newland Archer, a born reader.

And, yet, why then, does she get exiled while Archer is accepted in Old New York? Ellen is too independent, too original, and too foreign to stay. Ammons calls her “the woman of intellect and artistic disposition” who “is such a threat that she must be expelled.”⁸³ She dresses provocatively, sees through the conventions of Old New York, and, unlike Archer, publicly voices her craving for European culture (*AI*, 15, 22, 104). She refuses to relegate her need for the aesthetic to the private realm. For all of these transgressions she is sacrificed and exorcised from New York (*AI*, 338). She retreats to

⁸² Ammons, *Edith Wharton's Argument with America*, 145.

⁸³ Ammons, “Diana and the Blood Red Muse.”

France, a place where, for Wharton, women are allowed to “have intellectual and some sexual freedom.”⁸⁴ There she can engage with culture and have a real life.

The House of Mirth (1904) explores the relationship between bachelor Lawrence Selden and the marriageable Lily Bart. It is in contrasting these two characters that Wharton reveals the difference between a woman’s choices in modern American society and a man’s. Both Selden and Miss. Bart are born readers. Selden is a literature lover who “like[s] to have good editions of the books [he is] fond of.”⁸⁵ He is a man who reads, engages with, and enjoys literature; he reads for the natural pleasure it gives him. Lily Bart is also a born reader who, despite her social role as a woman conniving to be a trophy wife, has her “imagination seized” by “Eumenides” and is a part of Selden’s “republic of the spirit,” a place very similar to the “paysage choisi of the spirit” (*HM*, 62, 142, 64).

But this republic is only open to those who retain their privacy through bachelorhood. Selden is able to avoid the “consciously conspicuous” “costume-play” of the parvenus through this bachelorhood, a state that allows him to keep his small apartment and simple lifestyle away from the public spectacle (*HM*, 175, 10). Miss. Bart does not have this option. Marriage is her “vocation” and forms the “manacles chaining her to her fate” (*HM*, 8, 6). In the end, torn between her desire for money and the avoidance of “dingy” spinsterhood and the desire to be a part of the “republic of the spirit,” Lily ends up a scapegoat for her former friend Bertha Dorset’s marital indiscretions, and, cast out of society, sinks into poverty and dies (*HM*, 159, 85, 64). Lily,

⁸⁴ Ammons “Diana and the Blood Red Muse.”

⁸⁵ Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (New York: Bantam Books, 1986), 9. Hereafter cited in the text.

as a born reader, physically cannot survive the demands both her biological need for culture and the societal pressure to become a man's trophy place on her.

Lily Bart is doomed to die and the imaginary child she hugs as she sinks into death reminds us that her unmarried state means that the born reader trait will not be passed on to another generation (*HM*, 310). Even Lawrence Selden, in his bachelorhood, will not be passing down the trait of the born reader. For Wharton, this points to the death of culture in America.

The Born Reader and the Writer

What does the extinction of the born reader mean for the writer? In *The Writing of Fiction* (1925), Wharton states:

No writer—especially at the beginning of his career—can help being influenced by the quality of the audience that awaits him; and the young novelist may ask of what use are experience and meditation, when his readers are so incapable of giving him either. The answer is that he will never do his best until he ceases to think of his readers...and begins to write...for that other self with whom the creative artist is always in mysterious correspondence, and who...will some day receive the message sent to him.⁸⁶

In other words, Wharton writes for the born reader, for the rare person left who can engage with the text and thus be able to “receive the message sent to him [or her].” Yet, even as Wharton disparaged her “incapable” readership, she was by no means an author shy of popularity or unwilling to regard the business aspect of writing. Amy Kaplan argues that Wharton, in fact, sought to professionalize her writing in an effort to reject the

⁸⁶ Edith Wharton, *The Writing of Fiction* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 19.

genteel models of writing as a leisure activity.⁸⁷ Wharton “defined her own writing against the popular women’s fiction that preceded her and the society novelist” in an effort to legitimize herself.⁸⁸ She sought out the balancing act of maintaining her artistic vision even as she made almost forty thousand dollars on *The Age of Innocence* and made a best seller out of *The House of Mirth*.⁸⁹ Her way of navigating the tricky space between popularity and being a respected Pulitzer Prize winning author is to imagine a reader like herself, an “other self” with which one can have a conversation. Her answer is the born reader. That the born reader is doomed to extinction does not deter Wharton from thinking this way. For, as she writes, she is *imagining* this other self. In the born reader she created a readership that would serve her vision of what her books were meant to represent. It didn’t matter whether that readership was real or not.

Author Mairtin O’Cadhain was once asked why he chose to write in the dying language of Irish Gaelic and he answered, “it is every inch as hard for people to read my writing as it is to read poetry. I do not yield to the reader -- but I have readers.”⁹⁰ Just as O’Cadhain seeks to find those who can understand Irish and writes for them, Wharton seeks to find those few who understand her language of the born reader. In the protective vessel of her writing, Wharton stores the language of culture in the hopes that someone will be able to read it and understand.

⁸⁷ Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism*, 68.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*, 13.

⁸⁹ Lewis, *Edith Wharton*, 423, 151.

⁹⁰ Joan Trodden O’Keefe, *Churchyard Clay: A Translation of Cré na Cille by Mairtín O’ Cadhain with Introduction and Notes* (University of California, Berkley Doctorial Thesis, 1984).

The Born Reader Today

Even though we twenty-first-century Americans know that race is not a genealogical entity and that there is no such thing as the born reader, we should hesitate before we dismiss the concept as antiquated. While we don't call it by the term "born reader," words like *talent*, *intelligence*, and *natural gift* are all commonly used to describe people's natural abilities today. There is a biological component to natural predilections for certain activities, but there is also a connotation attached to those words that can either elevate or lower the person in question.

It is also important that we remember to think of the born reader as a race. Often when we think of race issues, we think of phenotypical conceptions. While it is vitally important that we discuss racism along those culturally normalized definitions, the application of the term race to that which we tend to think of as neutrally biological, such as the possession of natural gifts or talents, is useful for opening our eyes to our own conceptions of what it is possible to inherit. If you have ever been told that you have a gift for writing or reading, you are being told that you are a version of the born reader. If we study these issues long enough, perhaps we will someday find an answer as to why *Real Simple* felt the need to advise its readers to improve their lives by picking up a copy of one of Norton's anthologies.⁹¹

⁹¹ Elizabeth Kricfalusi, "Reading the Classics," *Real Simple* 6 (October 2005): 52.

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