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Peter Betjemann

This thesis is arranged in three chapters which explore Wharton’s representations of nature in three novels: The House of Mirth (1905), The Fruit of the Tree (1907), and The Custom of the County (1913). This thesis contends that Wharton’s novels reveal changes in the interplay between representations of nature and patterns of gender, privilege and commerce. In so doing, I reveal how idealizations of nature fulfill specific social functions.
Edith Wharton’s Dark Ecology: Representations of Nature in Three Major Novels

by

Julie M. Bacon

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_____________________________________________________________________
Julie M. Bacon, Author
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Edith Wharton’s Dark Ecology: Representations of Nature in Three Major Novels

Introduction

In Edith Wharton’s fiction, the culturally constructed relationship between people and nature comprises a complex set of issues. In literature and art, one type of culturally constructed relationship between women and nature highlights the latter's fecundity, freshness, and classical beauty. In the nineteenth century, books which promoted botanical knowledge and appreciation, as well as a number of sentimental works with botanical overtones, were produced both in Europe and America. One French manuscript by J. J. Grandville, entitled *Les Fleurs Animées* (The Flowers Personified) provides an especially apparent example of how women were likened to plants (Figures 1-3). Published in 1847, this work’s illustrations figure women as flowers, their bodies incorporated into botanical forms (Norwood 12-15). While some of the graphics feature flower-women engaged in activities like dance or play, many illustrate immobile passivity. This is especially true of those flowers whose names often double as common appellations for women. Grandville places Lily and Camilla for example in the center of the page, rooted in a full-frontal pose to optimize their visual consumption (Figs. 1 and 2).

1 Perhaps even more disturbing is the image of “Periwinkle” in figure 3. This image appears to be of a cut flower, thus a dead woman, but like Camilla and Lily she too occupies the center of the page and is displayed in full-frontal view so that the observer may have the best and fullest access for visual consumption. This similarity in presentation suggests that the dead passivity of periwinkle does not compromise her value as an object for visual consumption, an idea that I believe informs Selden’s reaction to the dead body of Lily Bart.
More contemporary graphic images and advertisements produced around the turn of the century continued to present women as extensions of the environment’s natural beauty. The still popular images of Alphonse Mucha often conflate women’s bodies with botanical and even geologic forms. His decorative panels depict women as the embodiments of flowers, fruit, gems, seasons, and times of day (Figures 4-6). These images were not only popular as works of art—a designation which might have limited their availability—but were widely distributed for advertising purposes. As commercial art, Mucha’s images were used to sell a number of products both in Europe and America, flooding all classes with the image of idealized “natural” femininity.

This fusion of woman with nature figures prominently in many of Edith Wharton’s texts, and is often interrogated through the gaze of a male pastoral-consumer. In Wharton’s fiction, as in Euro-American history, the connection between women and nature is shaped by men. Wharton addresses prevalent western patriarchal dominance of both nature and women in two ways, either explicitly, or in encoded representations of female characters, representations that rely upon pre-established cultural relationships between nature and women.

Wharton presents a number of characters who, like those created by Grandville and Mucha, are conflated with the natural world. This conflation can be symbolic, as in The Age of Innocence where May Welland, whose name evokes spring, is also imbued with a “floral type” -- the lily of the valley -- while her cousin Ellen Olenska is symbolically related to the yellow rose; or the relationship may be suggested through an overtly botanical name, such as Lily Bart in The House of Mirth. Lily Haskett in
“The Other Two,” Zinnia Lacrosse in The Children, and heroine Daisy Ambrose from “In Trust”.

This conflation of women and nature in Wharton’s texts appears to be tied to issues of consumption. This connection presents itself clearly in Wharton’s examinations of the marriage market, as she not only reveals the destructive effects of marriage on women, but also illuminates the way in which market culture problematizes the bonds between people and nature. And she reveals how this problematic relationship paves the way for not only the destruction of certain social customs, but for profound ecological damage as well.

Pastoral Propagation

Wharton’s analysis of the human-nature relationship focuses on the pastoral-consumer. These figures may be poets, businessmen, lawyers or husbands, but they all share a common desire to consume and idealize both nature and women as natural objects. Directly or indirectly, these male characters promote and shape ideologies and actions that aim to strip women of agency and extract both spiritual and material wealth from the earth.

Certainly the pastoral trope is nothing new, and Wharton draws on these ideas, as well as romantic and transcendental associations to illuminate a troubling tendency in many of her male characters, a tendency Wharton began revealing early in her career. In her 1899 short story “A Cup of Cold Water,” the main character Woburn renders his beloved Miss Talcott in highly botanical terms. In a passage closely aligned with Woburn’s thinking, Wharton writes of Talcott, “[h]er ideas had the
brilliant bloom and audacious irrelevance of those tropical orchids which strike root in
air. Miss Talcott's opinions had no connection with the actual; her very materialism
had the grace of artificiality” (62). In these two sentences Wharton establishes a male
sensibility that informs many of her larger works of fiction. This sensibility is one
which seeks to define the female love interest in natural terms, terms that aim at ideal
beauty, and often at passivity.

Like Woburn, Lawrence Selden, Ralph Marvell, and John Amherst all exhibit
this tendency toward idealization and consumption, though in varying degrees. In the
following chapters I will examine three major novels by Edith Wharton which have as
their apparent focus the issue of marriage. I intend to illustrate how these novels
exemplify Wharton’s perceptions of the changing relationship between people and
nature, and her serious concerns about where this changing relationship might lead.

In order to do this, my thesis will work within the critical tradition of
ecocriticism, a tradition divided along a number of contentious lines. One issue
fundamental to my analysis is the question of ecocritical engagement with critical
theory. As a general trend, many ecocritics dismiss or even deride theory. This move
against theory tends to ignore the enormous complexity of the very issues the ecocritic
seeks to address, namely literature and ecology.

As Dana Philips argues in his 2003 work Truth of Ecology, I believe that “a
satisfactory account of literature’s relation to nature and culture can only be offered
from a theoretically adventurous and conscientiously interdisciplinary perspective”
(ix). While it is understandable that ecocritics balk at the idea of nature as a purely
cultural construction, when they argue the opposite (that nature exists completely
independent of culture) they ignore the long history of human ideologies and interventions which have shaped the current state of the natural world both ecologically and intellectually.

My work as an ecocritic operates in what Cheryl Glotfelty (Burgess) calls the “third phase of ecocriticism.” In this third phase, ecocritical analyses “raise fundamental questions about the symbolic construction” of nature and question “the dualisms prevalent in Western thought” (xxiv). She goes on to suggest that works concerned with gender and ecology tend to fall under the “hybrid label ‘ecofeminism’” (xxiv). Despite my interest in both, I am hesitant to accept the label of “ecofeminist.” Unlike some ecofeminists, I can see no reason to think of women as inherently more connected to nature than men despite the enormous amount of cultural work that has gone into cultivating this concept, a concept which is central to my reading of Wharton’s novels.

Over the course of this investigation, I will show how Wharton acknowledges the American transition of thought which, while never fully relinquishing any one concept for another, transforms the primary identity of nature from ideality to commodity. I contend that Wharton’s ultimate ecological vision is a dark one, in which those characters most deeply aligned with the natural world are made to suffer at the hands of a culture in the process of devouring and devaluing nature.

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2 Glotfelty believes that ecocriticism follows the same model Showalter uses to describe the developmental stages of feminist criticism.
3 I recognize that the concept I resist here is not the default position of contemporary ecofeminism. Nevertheless the intensity of my resistance to this concept is such that I hesitate to accept the label ecofeminist, regardless of my very strong agreement with many of the theory’s central arguments and concerns.
This thesis charts the transition over the course of three novels. Chapter one, “The Plight of the Flower-Woman in The House of Mirth,” focuses on Wharton’s use of botanical language to illustrate the social cultivation of Lily Bart for consumption. This chapter describes Wharton’s development of Selden as a pastoral-romantic consumer of both nature and Lily Bart. In this capacity, Selden embodies an understanding of women and nature that adores as it devours. I contend that this sensibility under-girds Selden’s capacity to take pleasure in the consumption of Lily Bart even after she has died.

Chapter two, “Drained Marshes, Pollution, and Purity in The Fruit of the Tree,” explores Wharton’s scathing look at the pastoral-consumer through her development of John Amherst. While Selden’s consumption of Lily Bart amounts to little more than abstract philosophical ideals and sulking inaction, Amherst’s pastoral-romantic tendencies impact a wide circle of characters as he devolves from reform-minded mill manager into masculine egotist. This chapter closely examines Amherst’s consideration of natural beauty as equivalent with moral goodness.

Finally, Chapter Three, “Un-natural Catastrophes in The Custom of the Country,” explores Wharton’s somewhat modified consideration of the pastoral-consumer. Although her sympathetic description of Ralph Marvel may seem nostalgic, I contend that Wharton’s portrayal of Ralph and his relationship to nature, women, and poetry establishes him as a character imperiled by his own commitments. Unlike Selden and Amherst, whose pastoral-consumption consists mainly of moral abstractions, I believe that Ralph, like many of the romantic poets, views his relationship to nature as reflecting his deepest personal commitments. In this capacity
Wharton aligns him at least symbolically with the natural world. In this chapter I argue that as commodification intensifies and dominant social standards push the pastoralist’s values further to the periphery, the romantic’s misperception of and commitment to nature becomes damaging for him.
Figure 1: “Lys” from *Les Fleurs Animees* (1847)
Figure 2: “Camelia”
from Les Fleurs Animees (1847)

Figure 3: Periwinkle from Les Fleurs Animees (1847)
Figure 4: *Lily*. From *The Flowers Series*. (1898). Color lithograph. 105.5 x 43.3.
Figure 5: *Fruit* (1897). Color lithograph. 66.2 x 44.4 cm.

Figure 6: *Ruby*. From *The Precious Stones* Series. (1900). Color lithograph. 67.2 x 30 cm.
Chapter One: The Plight of the Flower-Woman in *The House of Mirth*

Although apparently focused on the role of upper-class women in turn-of-the-century society, nature is a central trope in *The House of Mirth*, Edith Wharton’s first major novel (1905). The subtly constructed, yet persistent, relationship between women and nature permeates this text.

In this novel, Wharton emphasizes how characters understand nature and their relationship to nature. Environmental descriptions do not dominate the text but when present they reveal the cultural associations shared by many of the characters. Readers exploring these associations can discern a basic world-view regarding how gender inflects the human-nature relationship in Wharton’s world. The novel reveals this basic view not only in passages related to nature, but also through passages wherein the language of the text suggests natural phenomena even when “nature” is not the focus. These passages occur with considerable frequency, forming a pattern that highlights the pervasiveness of the theme.

This reading focuses on what I call the flower-woman ideology. From the outset, Wharton presents the reader with language that illustrates this conceptual relationship between heroine Lily Bart and nature. Although Lily is not a farmer, woods-woman, nor pioneer, she is connected to nature in a way that is both symbolic and intentional. Endowed with a botanical name, like a flower she is expected to bear a correlation to nature predicated upon beauty and passivity. Furthermore she is, like all women of her age and class, intended for consumption.

Wharton’s two main characters in this novel, Lily and Selden, disclose much about Wharton’s consideration of the natural world and its relationship to culture.
Through their interactions with each other and the world around them, Wharton reveals a range of conflicting pressures and ideologies which ultimately destroy Lily, who I believe operates as a viable icon of the natural world in this novel. Symbolically tied to nature, through her botanical name and her “ornamental” value, she like nature is controlled and ruined by a patriarchal market-culture that idealizes even as it destroys.⁴

In this novel, Wharton evinces her dystopian vision regarding nature and “natural-identified” characters through the consumption and destruction of Lily Bart. This plot trajectory reveals the impossibility and impracticality of a woman being a perfect “lily.” The novel comments on the bitter realities of patriarchal and commercial life, but it also addresses the cultural associations that bind the identities of nature and women together, as well as how these associations result from a limited understanding of both on the part of those who dominate Wharton’s world.

**Cultivating and Consuming Lily**

Wharton textually joins the consumption of Lily Bart as a natural aesthetic object with the careful cultivation of her “natural” identity, which is to say that there is

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⁴ Embodying the flower–woman by meeting such rigid social codes would take monumental effort and self-policing to fulfill, as Elizabeth Ammons suggests in the critical work *Edith Wharton’s Argument With America*. Ammons turns the reader’s attention to the biblical roots of Lily’s name. She cites Luke 12:27: “why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field…they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon…was not arrayed like one of these”. Ammons then writes, “Lilies may not spin but they certainly toil, and toil constantly (albeit invisibly, just like Wharton’s Lily…); or they die” (30). This sensibility that Lily is linked with nature is a critical issue, since Lily is not, no matter how much her name might suggest it, a flower.
nothing innate about this particular identity. Although Wharton draws upon the wide
cultural sensibility which ties femininity to nature, she also provides the reader with
evidence of the ways in which the characters that populate Lily’s social sphere work to
reaffirm her role by describing her in terms of naturalness.

Language of cultivation used on several occasions indicates the work Lily must
do in order to make a good matrimonial match. For example, Carrie Fisher in a
conversation with Selden says, “That's Lily all over, you know: she works like a slave
preparing the ground and sowing her seed; but the day she ought to be reaping the
harvest she over-sleeps herself or goes off on a picnic” (147). This passage frames
Lily in agricultural and botanical terms. The ambiguous phrase “her seed” allows the
reader to consider these seeds as metaphorical extensions of the flower-woman herself
rather than something distinct or separate. While this phrasing grants Lily some
agency, it is worth noting that Carrie Fisher, like many of the other women in this text,
invests herself in promoting Lily’s presence and success among the social elite. In this
capacity, Fisher cultivates and exhibits Lily for consumption. While not insensible to
Lily’s personhood, Fisher is aware that Lily’s value in their social set is determined
not by her humanity, but by those traits most desirable to the men of their class. In the
same conversation with Selden, Fisher states, “it's Lily's beauty that does it,” a
statement that indicates the woman’s beauty is her prime asset (147).

The theme of Lily’s cultivation for consumption runs through the novel.
Nearly every friendly female character in the text works in some way to propagate
Lily.⁵ In descriptions of Miss Bart’s youth, Wharton shows the reader that this has been a life-long condition for the main character. Not only does Lily’s mother “foster her naturally lively taste for splendour” but she also becomes fixated on Lily’s beauty and the power it might have (29). Mrs. Bart straddles the line between cultivation and consumption. Although she promotes Lily in the marriage markets of Europe, she watches Lily’s beauty “jealously, as though it were her own property and Lily its mere custodian” (29).

Other women consume Lily in a variety of ways. She is an ornament to enhance the parties of the rich, to draw attention to their tables while abroad, and to help the newly wealthy make connections with those in higher social positions. Of those women who cultivate and consume Lily, consider the rather complicated role played by Gerty Farish in the text. While the other women in the novel are interested in cultivating the flower-woman along the lines of beauty and sexuality through their focus on the marriage match, Farish is interested in the spiritual idealization of Lily. Wharton expresses this interest in a number of passages where Gerty presents her vision of Lily as contrary to the prevailing view. In the scene preceding the tableaux vivants, for example, Gerty describes Lily as “dear” and “wonderfully kind” while telling Selden how Lily has visited with the Club Girls and contributed money to their cause (105).

This interest in the spiritual uplift of Lily seeks to cultivate her along the lines of beauty and purity, not unlike Selden’s idealizations although his also contain an

⁵ A fact that even Selden acknowledges stating “Isn't it what you're all brought up for” (10)
undeniable element of sexuality. In my view, Selden is the primary pastoral-consumer in The House of Mirth. I contend that Wharton makes clear the dismal reality of Lily’s existence, and by extension the dismal situation faced by nature, by beginning and ending the novel with Selden. Although Selden has been often considered a sort of “spokesperson” for Wharton’s own sensibilities, I believe, as Cynthia Griffin Wolff contends, that “Selden is the final object of [Wharton’s] sweeping social satire” (338). From beginning to end, both Lily and nature are under the gaze of a masculine culture which finds both nearly as appealing dead as they were alive.

What makes Selden’s acts of consumption most troubling is the underlying fact that he does, in his own way, love both nature and Lily. While he is not the only character consuming Lily, his element of adoration reveals the simple truth that a glorification of women and nature does not necessarily benefit either. While the reader may easily be repulsed by characters like Gus Trenor, who overtly desires sexual consumption, and Bertha Dorset, who uses people to her advantage and then disposes of them, it is easy to be wooed by Selden perhaps because his romantic ideals are so deeply entrenched in western thought. Nevertheless, his “love of nature” is toxic because it is a love based on unattainable ideals, incomplete comprehension and sulking inaction.

His passivity is part of his literary type. Like many bachelor characters, Selden is represented as a spectator. Early in the novel, Wharton establishes a pattern of

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6 Gerty later comes to comprehend the sexual element of Selden’s “Lily,” when after the night at the Brys she recognizes Selden’s attraction to Lily. Despite her disappointment over this realization Gerty still views Lily in botanical terms, “everything about her was warm and soft and scented: even the stains of her grief became her as rain-drops do the beaten rose” (133).
visual consumption and private contemplation which remain fundamental to Selden throughout. Wharton begins the novel with Selden being “refreshed” by the sight of Lily Bart in Grand Central Station. She writes:

It was a Monday in early September, and he was returning to his work from a hurried dip into the country; but what was Miss Bart doing in town at that season? If she had appeared to be catching a train, he might have inferred that he had come on her in the act of transition between one and another of the country-houses which disputed her presence after the close of the Newport season; but her desultory air perplexed him. She stood apart from the crowd, letting it drift by her to the platform or the street, and wearing an air of irresolution which might, as he surmised, be the mask of a very definite purpose. It struck him at once that she was waiting for some one, but he hardly knew why the idea arrested him. There was nothing new about Lily Bart, yet he could never see her without a faint movement of interest: it was characteristic of her that she always roused speculation, that her simplest acts seemed the result of far-reaching intentions (5).

Brief as this passage is, it is saturated with the interpenetrations of nature and culture. The language of the passage, even when not directly addressing nature, is suggestive of nature and also suggestive of Lily’s role as a natural commodity. Selden’s shock at seeing Lily in the station “at that season” carries the connotation of cyclic vegetation. For Selden, Miss Bart is like a botanical commodity out of season in this particular place. The passage then entertains Selden’s more acceptable notion that Lily be “in the act of transitioning between one and another of the country-houses which disputed her presence.” While this may seem to reestablish Lily as a social being, it is important to recognize that even in these “country-houses” Miss Bart functions as an ornament to enhance the atmosphere at gatherings hosted by her wealthier friends.

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7 Considered alongside the Lily-nature link, this tendency toward visual consumption becomes not only emblematic of the male gaze in sexual terms, but also in the terms of consuming nature as aesthetic pleasure.
As the passage continues, Wharton repeats the use of the word “air” to describe what might otherwise be called Lily’s manner or behavior. This choice further aligns Lily with the natural and heightens what Selden perceives as her separation from the crowd. The simple fact that Selden is described as “refreshed” by the sight of Lily suggests that he is invested in a world-view that ascribes a spiritual value to beauty, the culturally determined province of both women and nature. This world-view is further explicated by Selden’s pastoral, leisure class relationship with the “country.” His return from a “hurried dip into the country” suggests that for him nature is a place apart from everyday life, a place for escape and renewal – both physical and spiritual – an idea which emphasizes the relationship between Lily and nature since she too has the capacity to “refresh” him when viewed against the bustling urban backdrop of Grand Central Station.8

Indeed, the sight of Lily is more important to Selden than the substance of her. Wharton makes this clear in the statement, “[t]here was nothing new about Lily Bart,” yet Selden cannot help but feel that there is great significance in seeing her. This further suggests Selden’s pastoral persuasions: an idealizing and artful interest in nature (and women) devoid of any real comprehension of or concern about the functions of the natural world. Wharton’s description of Selden’s pleasure in viewing both Lily and nature, along with his moralizing and critical detachment, stand in place

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8 Gus Trenor is also described as being refreshed by Lily. In the passage where Lily meets him at the station Wharton writes, “contact with her freshness and slenderness was as agreeable to him as the sight of a cooling beverage” (64). Furthermore Gerty Farish in describing Lily’s visit with the club girls states, “One of them said it was as good as a day in the country just to look at her” (105).
for a whole patriarchal system of thought in which nature and Lily become symbolic of significance without being significant in their own rights.

Selden is aligned with the dominant culture that sustains him, and he looks with a hypercritical eye at Lily’s negotiations of nature and artifice. It is not difficult to sense the imperious moralistic overtones of these observations. Though attracted to what he considers “natural” in Lily, Selden is scornful about what he perceives as Lily’s “artifice.” To Selden, Lily is a master of her art. Within the first few pages of the novel, Selden perceives both the brightness of Lily’s hair and the timing of her blush as “art” (7). In describing the scene when Lily leaves the Benedick, Wharton writes:

She paused before the mantelpiece, studying herself in the mirror while she adjusted her veil. The attitude revealed the long slope of her slender sides, which gave a kind of wild-wood grace to her outline—as though she were a captured dryad subdued to the conventions of the drawing-room; and Selden reflected that it was the same streak of sylvan freedom in her nature that lent such savour to her artificiality (12).

This perception, closely aligned with Selden’s point of view, acknowledges in its language both the natural beauty of Lily and the way it interacts with elements of artifice. Selden’s perception privileges the artificial, by having the natural lend “savour” to Lily’s “artificiality.” Furthermore, his acknowledgement of the natural is coded as he also overlays the “wild-wood grace” of her form with the significant cultural imagery of the “captured dryad subdued.” This coding impresses upon the reader the depth of Selden’s culturally mediated conception of women and nature.

In the *tableaux vivants* scene, an episode which is defined by Selden’s point of view, the concept of Lily as “dryad” is restated. Wharton writes, “Her pale draperies, and the background of foliage against which she stood, served only to relieve the long
dryad-like curves that swept upward from her poised foot to her lifted arm” (106). Here Selden’s view of Lily is more sensitive. Although the language of art and nature still mingle in this passage, the focus is on Selden’s perceptions and glorifications of Lily’s “naturalness.” The passage continues, “[t]he noble buoyancy of her attitude, its suggestion of soaring grace, revealed the touch of poetry in her beauty that Selden always felt in her presence” (106). This language intensifies Selden’s escalating idealization. Here it is clear that for Selden, Lily is most beautiful when she is consumed as “natural.” Furthermore, it is obvious that for Selden “nature” is idealized, magical, and pure.

Ironically, in this scene Lily is at the height of her artificiality, yet Selden is sure that “for the first time he seemed to see before him the real Lily Bart” (106). Wharton goes on to describe what this “reality” entails, a Lily Bart “divested of the trivialities of her little world, and catching for a moment a note of that eternal harmony of which her beauty was a part” (106). This vision, Selden feels, allows him to acknowledge “the whole tragedy of her life” which he considers the cultural and social trappings which “cheapened and vulgarized” her beauty (107).

As the two characters leave the party for the terrace garden the reader might expect that some genuine connection will be attained, but close reading of the passage reveals more of the same aesthetic consumption of Lily. Wharton writes,

Selden had given her his arm without speaking. She took it in silence, and they moved away, not toward the supper-room, but against the tide which was setting thither. The faces about her flowed by like the streaming images of sleep: she hardly noticed where Selden was leading her, till they passed

9 Selden is not alone in this conviction. Gerty Farish who is at his side also feels that they are seeing the “real Lily” (107).
through a glass doorway at the end of the long suite of rooms and stood suddenly in the fragrant hush of a garden (108).

Wharton’s language here reverts again to natural metaphors. The image of the two moving “against the tide” seems hopeful. The faces flowing and streaming also seems on the verge of undoing those social constraints which have thwarted the possibility of connection between Selden and Lily. Quickly, however, Wharton introduces the image of the dream, and it must become clear that what is about to transpire does so outside of the realm of reality. The passage goes on to intensify this, describing, “emerald caverns in the depths of foliage” which render the garden a “magic place” in which Selden and Lily accept “the unreality of the scene as a part of their own dream-like sensations” (108). This acceptance complete, “Lily withdrew her hand, and moved away a step, so that her white-robed slimness was outlined against the dusk of the branches” displaying herself as a blossom (108). This botanical verisimilitude is replicated a moment later when “her face turned to him with the soft motion of a flower” (109). This phrasing not only reinforces the flower image, but removes agency from Lily as a person. This brief exchange between Lily and Selden, although on the surface both lovely and sympathetic, is profoundly problematic in that it once again positions Selden as a consumer, aligned with patriarchal privilege and a powerful pastoral impulse to glorify beauty and nature as ideals, or ultimate realities, at the expense of authentic understanding. Despite the sensitivity and beauty of the tableaux vivants and garden scene, Lily remains a stranger to Selden. No longer perceiving Lily as artificial, Selden is moved by the “beauty” and “poetry” of nature contained in Miss Bart. Nevertheless, he is unable to reconcile that with the circumstances of their
actual lives. When Lily slips “through the arch of boughs, disappearing in the brightness of the room beyond” Selden is unable to follow her.

When he re-enters the house he is reabsorbed into the realm of the dominant culture which places a high sexual value on the flower-woman. The language of the passage indicates this transition through a focus on architecture and distinctly masculine details such as the cigars in “silver boxes invitingly set out near the door” (109). Further illustrating and ironizing Selden’s alignment with the dominant culture is the fact that the two people he meets as he is leaving the party are Ned Van Alstyne and Gus Trenor.

These two men on the surface may seem the polar opposites of Selden, certainly Selden does not see himself as part of their type, but is clearly opposed to it, especially in the earlier viewing of the tableaux. In this earlier scene Selden describes Ned Van Alstyne as evoking “indignant contempt” and compares him to Caliban (107). Nevertheless, this final episode at the Brys reveals a good deal about the similarities Selden shares with these men. In their parting conversation Van Alstyne says “Hallo, Selden, going too? You're an Epicurean like myself, I see: you don't want to see all those goddesses gobbling terrapin” (109). While Selden would never put his feelings in such simple language, the fact remains that rather than suffer the compromise of Lily as an ideal, Selden flees the scene. His tenacious will to preserve nature as a thing apart, a sacred beauty, ultimately opens the way for the events which most profoundly initiate Lily’s demise.

Selden’s pastoral consumption of Lily and Gus Trenor’s will to sexually consume her are not finally opposed so much as serving each other’s ends. Selden
cannot compromise his pure vision and so Gus is given the room to make his attempt at acquisition. This attempt and the consequences it sets in motion press Lily to the brink and in Lily’s death Selden is able to gratify himself with the perfection of her “real” presence.

_The Pressed Flower: Resistance and Resignation_

Throughout the novel, Lily’s “naturalness” is both her strength (her beauty and personality) and her downfall (her will, her inability to submit to the social codes that would control her). The cultural constructions of her relationship with nature allow for only two possibilities, one tied to sexuality and fertility, yet bound by the social codes of marriage, and the other linked to ideals of purity and virtue. Both of these possibilities rely heavily on beauty and submission. By refusing to marry, Lily destroys her value as a reproductive being and by the natural process of aging her “ornamental” value likewise declines, a fact that she is deeply troubled by throughout much of the text.

Indeed, part of what makes Lily Bart so compelling and sympathetic is her acknowledgement of the dire situation she is in, and the constructed “flower-woman” idealizations that have put her there. Throughout she vacillates in her response to the flower-woman identity, at times embodying the role and other times bitterly albeit futilely resisting. Part of her resistance to the role is rooted in the problem of agency. Her struggle with the prescribed passivity of the flower-woman is evident in her early instances of “bad behavior.”
The novel opens with one such instance, and while the contemporary reader may see no harm in the transgressions Lily makes, Wharton clarifies these transgressions by having Lily watched by the charwoman on the stairs of the Benedick and then describing the confrontation with Simon Rosedale. In the wake of these events Lily’s reaction is to ponder why one could “never do a natural thing” (15). Here Wharton illustrates how Lily is caught between her own impulses – her nature – and the expectations which society has for her, expectations which are fixated not on nature but on idealizations of nature that serve specific social functions. In going to the Benedick Lily acts with agency. She chooses her company and her location, something unacceptable for a woman of her class.

This same problem of agency recurs at Bellomont when Lily goes for a walk with Selden instead of to church with Mr. Gryce (51). In this instance Lily’s misbehavior, by forsaking the botanical loveliness and passivity expected of her, ironically leads to a scene in which her own perception of her connection to nature is explicated more fully.

In this passage where Selden and Lily sneak off together from Bellomont, Wharton allows the reader to glimpse the psychology of her two main characters especially their response to nature. This passage, for the first time in the novel, moves the reader away from gardens and glass-houses into “the glitter of...autumn” a world of “thickening tufts of fern” and “asters and purpling sprays of bramble” (51). Wharton writes, “Lily … could be keenly sensitive to a scene which was the fitting background of her own sensations. The landscape outspread below her seemed an
enlargement of her present mood, and she found something of herself in its calmness, its breadth, its long free reaches.”

Beyond Bellomont, Lily senses the environment as an extension of herself. Although deeply anthropomorphic and self-centered, this sensibility supports the socially constructed sentiments about kinship between women and nature, a relationship powerfully exploited in art and commerce through a proliferation of images in which women, flowers, and bowls of fruit all seem to work as interchangeable symbols of beauty, fecundity, nourishment, and pleasure. Beyond Bellomont Lily embodies these cultural expectations and becomes part of the scene, willingly something more for Selden to consume.

With regard to Selden, Wharton writes “[h]e had no wish to make her talk; her quick-breathing silence seemed a part of the general hush and harmony of things. In his own mind there was only a lazy sense of pleasure” (51). The reader can see that Selden easily accepts Lily as kin with the landscape rather than distinct from it. Even her breathing is part of the “harmony” of the environment which evokes a “lazy sense of pleasure.” Like the garden scene which follows the tableaux, this passage contains a dream quality, yet here the description does not tend toward illusion in the same way. Unlike the more pointedly romantic and sensual description of the Brys’ garden scene, the description of the voyage outside of Bellemont tends toward the edenic. Images of an “orchard” and “spangling fruit” intensify this expectation while the upward motion of the character’s voyage also increases the suggestion of a movement toward perfection, so that not only are the characters escaping from the constraints of society, but they are also rising above them (51).
Nature in this moment fulfills the fantasies of both Lily, who consistently thirsts for freedom and beauty, and Selden who is seeking, at least in theory, some higher plane of being than that found at Bellomont. The description of Lily stresses how, the experience allows her to draw “deep breaths of freedom and exhilaration” finally allowing the prisoner within her to fade away as “the free spirit quivered for flight” (52). This equating of nature with escape and leisure recurs throughout the text but becomes ironic as the social constraints of the flower-woman persona bear down on Lily.

Although the walk outside of Bellemont seems an easy acceptance of her tie with nature, Lily’s recognition of her nature identity also exhibits a willful performativity of her flower-woman persona. This is especially the case in the tableaux scene. Wharton writes,

She had shown her artistic intelligence in selecting a type so like her own that she could embody the person represented without ceasing to be herself. It was as though she had stepped, not out of, but into, Reynolds's canvas, banishing the phantom of his dead beauty by the beams of her living grace. The impulse to show herself in a splendid setting--she had thought for a moment of representing Tiepolo's Cleopatra--had yielded to the truer instinct of trusting to her unassisted beauty, and she had purposely chosen a picture without distracting accessories of dress or surroundings. Her pale draperies, and the background of foliage against which she stood, served only to relieve the long dryad-like curves that swept upward from her poised foot to her lifted arm (106).

If Selden is sure that he is consuming the “real Lily,” Wharton illustrates for the reader how constructed this representation of Lily is. From the start the phrase “artistic intelligence” grounds the reader in the reality of the tableaux image as a production intended for visual consumption. The word “selection” further emphasizes the creative control utilized by Lily in the manufacturing of the image. Wharton complicates the
correlation between Lily’s willful performativity and passive acceptance of her flower-woman identity through the use of words like “impulse” and “truer instinct” which may suggest some essential internal drive toward the “dryad” figure, but further development of the passage hinges on Lily’s “purposely chosen” display.

This interplay of concepts --instinct, choice, selection, impulse—exhibits the tension Lily experiences in negotiating her “botanical” social role. It is one of the major ironies of the flower-woman predicament that in order to be the flower which society would most like her to be, Lily must utilize artistic choice. This is suggested in the third chapter of the novel when Wharton informs the reader that, “Lily understood that beauty is only the raw material of conquest, and that to convert it into success other arts are required” (30). Although conscious of this fact, the use of these arts is not something Lily necessarily desires. Numerous instances in the text suggest that the freedom to be natural is what Lily most craves.\(^\text{10}\) For Lily the desire to be “natural” – to act in accordance with her own will without much regard for social codes – is powerful, yet it is prohibited, and despite her ample innate gifts (beauty, charm, wit) she is unwilling to wield them to the ends which society demands. She performs the botanical role established for her only occasionally, and at her own command.

For the most part, Lily considers her botanical image a detriment. Her awareness of the flower-woman dilemma often manifests itself in her anxieties which gradually intensify as the novel develops. Although she is unwilling to be consumed in either the marriage arrangements designed by her friends, or the frank sexual advances

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\(^{10}\) This is to suggest that she desires to be human/animal. An issue of animal nature is raised throughout the text and presented in opposition to the expectations had for Lily.
of Gus Trenor, Lily is deeply invested in her ornamental value. Described as proud of her looks, Lily begins to fret over her appearance early in the novel. While these concerns may not seem more than simple vanity, it is interesting that physical appearance becomes a way for Lily to metaphorically express her horror once the intricacies of the Trenor situation are revealed. In her post-assault talk with Gerty, Lily’s explanation of her emotional state pivots on appearance.

"I am not frightened: that's not the word. Can you imagine looking into your glass some morning and seeing a disfigurement—some hideous change that has come to you while you slept? Well, I seem to myself like that—I can't bear to see myself in my own thoughts—I hate ugliness, you know … I am bad—a bad girl—all my thoughts are bad—I have always had bad people about me. Is that any excuse? I thought I could manage my own life—I was proud—proud! but now I'm on their level----"…Sobs shook her, and she bowed to them like a tree in a dry storm.

In this passage appearance and botanical metaphor mingle. Having resisted the dominant social order and tried to “manage” her own life, Lily’s disappointment formulates itself in a move away from agency and self-possession back into compliance with the laws of the prevailing worldview. Failing to escape the sex/marriage market, Lily’s language equates “disfigurement” with moral “ugliness” placing value on both of the competing flower-woman ideologies — beauty and purity— and claiming horror over the failure to meet either. Wharton’s description of Lily bowing “like a tree in a dry storm” serves to maintain the botanical connection while illustrating the extent to which Lily’s outrage and resistance are futile.

Interestingly, these anxieties are frequently expressed alongside language of technology, which may suggest Wharton’s concerns not only about the dangers of cultural ideologies, for both women and nature, but technological perils as well. Language of machinery generally occurs at foreboding moments.
Although Lily is able to recapture some moments of splendor in the second half of the novel, her power to use the flower-woman ideology performatively begins to suffer. As her life begins to deteriorate further and further into poverty, Lily’s reflections pointedly regard her link with nature and her inability to function outside of her specialized niche. Interestingly though, Lily’s contemplations of her connection with nature persistently resist the strictures of the botanical persona. Wharton writes:

She could not hold herself much to blame for this ineffectiveness, and she was perhaps less to blame than she believed. Inherited tendencies had combined with early training to make her the highly specialized product she was: an organism as helpless out of its narrow range as the sea-anemone torn from the rock. She had been fashioned to adorn and delight; to what other end does nature round the rose-leaf and paint the humming-bird’s breast? And was it her fault that the purely decorative mission is less easily and harmoniously fulfilled among social beings than in the world of nature? That it is apt to be hampered by material necessities or complicated by moral scruples (235)?

Here Wharton allows both Lily and the reader to contemplate the astonishing complexity of Lily’s relationship with nature. The passage, which is closely aligned with Lily’s point of view, exposes how far from nature society is, and how unfit for the world Lily is as a being who has been made by “inherited tendencies” and “early training” to fulfill a “purely decorative mission.” This mission of course is a social construction, not unlike the “material necessities” and “moral scruples” which trouble her ability to succeed. The passage also states that Lily is a “product” but then immediately resists this classification by redefining her as an “organism.” It is also an

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12 The use of the term “specialized” here is a definite example of Wharton’s interest in biological sciences
13 According to Paul Ohler, Lily’s impoverished urban existence strips Lily of her “proper” setting. Ohler describes this recognition and Lily’s resulting death as “the moment when Lily’s true self emerges completely into her hostile environment, and …she abandons her adherence to social order” (82).
act of resistance that the organism chosen is a “sea-anemone.” While not a completely agentive choice, the sea-anemone at minimum classes Lily with animals, and not with plants.

Although in her last meeting with Selden Lily relinquishes all connection with nature by transforming herself from “a sea-anemone torn from the rock,” into “a screw or a cog in the great machine,” her later meeting with Nettie Struther mitigates this technologic dystopia (239). In the meeting with Nettie Lily restates her animal resistance to the flower-woman ideal. In her final contemplation of the nature question Lily holds Nettie’s daughter and reflects upon:

the clutch of solitude at her heart, the sense of being swept like a stray uprooted growth down the heedless current of the years… the feeling of being something rootless and ephemeral, mere spin-drift of the whirling surface of existence, without anything to which the poor little tentacles of self could cling before the awful flood submerged them (248).

The botanical passivity of the terms “uprooted” and “rootless” seem to initially suggest that Lily accepts her place among the plants. But the next description however moves her out of the botanical and into the elemental by associating her with a “spin-drift”, yet this too is resisted with the zoological suggestion of “tentacles.”

Like the “sea-anemone,” Lily’s image of herself is as an animal, albeit one low on the evolutionary scale. As her contemplation continues, zoological language dominates. Wharton writes:

Such a vision of the solidarity of life had never before come to Lily. She had had a premonition of it in the blind motions of her mating-instinct; but they had been checked by the disintegrating influences of

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14 As James Manchor describes in his attention to the Nettie Struther episode, there is a sense that the urban-pastoral, the harmonious union of nature and city, is profoundly fragile, and unlikely.
the life about her. All the men and women she knew were like atoms whirling away from each other in some wild centrifugal dance (248) This suggests that while Nettie Struther is human and animal, something which Lily too might have attained through the “blind motions of her mating-instinct,” Lily’s capacity to achieve full humanity was “checked by the disintegrating influences of the life about her.” This passage reduces the world around Lily, the society which trained her to be “purely decorative” to the atomic level.

The passage which follows describes Nettie’s life in zoological metaphors, portraying her home as a “bird's nest built on the edge of a cliff” (248). While this comparison of persons with animals may seem degrading, its scientific aptness and innate agency establishes it as preferable over the inaccurate and impossible flower-woman ideology which Lily has been subjected to. As her time at Nettie’s ends the image of the plant returns, but is used to describe human sentiments, not people themselves specifically, and not Lily.

Nevertheless, although Lily resists the flower-woman persona to the end, Wharton does not allow her death to become anything more than a tragedy. Lily’s demise does nothing to reorder the world that created her or even Selden’s perceptions of her. Even while dead, Lily, like a pressed flower, remains a natural beauty fit for viewing. Wharton describes the scene in which the body is discovered in a way that draws attention to Selden’s impulse to aestheticize. Wharton writes “irresistible sunlight poured a tempered golden flood into the room, and in its light Selden saw…Lily Bart” (252). Without a doubt, much of the final scene is centered on Selden’s gaze. After “sternly compelling himself” to look away from Lily’s body, he goes through the contents of her room, an act which while framed as a means to
safeguard Lily’s reputation, also allows Selden to continue visually consuming through contact with her “intimate” and “precious” belongings.

Most troublingly revealing of Selden’s relationship to Lily is that when “looking down on the sleeping face” of Lily’s corpse, Selden feels “that the real Lily [is] still there, close to him” (253). As in the tableaux scene, Selden’s perception of the “real Lily” seems to be predicated upon his capacity to consume her beauty with limited interruption. In death, Lily serves as “purely decorative” and it is a moment that Selden drains “to its lees,” a phrase that disturbingly highlights the act of consumption.
Chapter Two: Drained Marshes, Pollution, and Purity in The Fruit of the Tree

In 1907, Wharton offered a more scathing look at the pastoral consumer in her novel The Fruit of the Tree. This novel, considered too complicated by many critics, explores a number of American social issues. The story follows the life of John Amherst, a reform-minded manager in a New England textile mill. Amherst becomes a force at the mill when he falls in love with and marries Bessy Westmore, the widowed mill owner. Their troubled relationship comes to an end when Bessy is horribly wounded in a riding accident and her childhood friend and nurse, Justine Brent, decides to end Bessy’s pain with a lethal dose of morphine. Later when this act of euthanasia is revealed Justine’s relationship with Amherst is ruined.\(^\text{15}\) While it is true that this novel does draw on a wide range of issues: mill reform, euthanasia, the “new woman,” the novel most strongly centers on a close examination of John Amherst and how his actions as a pastoral-consumer not only degrade the lives of his wives, but also his own credibility as a reformer.

This novel draws on several of the character patterns established The House of Mirth. Bessy, while certainly not the same as Lily Bart, invests her identity in an

\(^{15}\) It likely comes as little surprise to a seasoned Wharton reader that maturity is a central issue in this novel. According to Elizabeth Ammons, in her assessment of the novel, issues of maturity in this text center around Bessy Westmore, whom Ammons contends is “the adorable blonde from “The Valley of Childish Things” brought to life ten years later…She is the precocious child-woman preferred by men and therefore valued… over her adventurous adult sister” (52). While this reading is indeed insightful, I contend that not only Bessy but John Amherst as well, suffers from a lingering immaturity which is powerfully evinced in his approach to both women and nature.
ideology not unlike the flower-woman persona which binds Lily. Throughout most of the novel, Wharton portrays her as passive, beautiful and feminine. She is also perceived and consumed as “natural” by many of those around her, especially John Amherst. In this capacity, Amherst bears a strong similarity to Selden in his role of pastoral-consumer. Like Selden, John Amherst resists or claims to resist many of the dominant patterns of social thought while simultaneously relating to both women and nature in a way that formulates both as products for consumption. The character who offers the most challenge to these modes of being, Justine Brent, provides readers a glimpse of a way rooted in mature respectful interactions with people and nature, a way which in Wharton’s dark worldview cannot survive. Just as the flower-woman, and nature are imperiled, so too are those characters who seek to connect with the natural world, and thus move against the grain of a society dominated by mechanization and profit.

*The Oblivious Progress of John Amherst*

If Selden represents the object of Wharton’s satire in *The House of Mirth* then Amherst must be said to occupy the same position in *The Fruit of the Tree*, for in many regards Wharton describes him as a fool, albeit an ordinary one. As Ammons suggests in her analysis of the novel, John Amherst by the end of the text embodies “masculine egotism” through his “assertion of authority over…Justine, his deluded memorialization of…Bessy, and his retreat from radical reform” (54). Despite the intensity of his progressive claims, Amherst’s propensity for “masculine egotism” should not shock the reader since he exhibits these tendencies early in the novel.
Wharton establishes this personality trait in Amherst through her development of his pastoral-consumption of nature and women as nature.

Early in the novel, Wharton gives a lengthy description of Amherst and his thoughts as he considers his physical surroundings. The tone of Amherst’s environmental impressions reveals a profound difference in focus compared with the botanical and scientific views suggested in Justine Brent’s passages. Like Selden, Amherst’s relationship to environmental nature is bound with a number of moralistic and ideological attitudes. While Selden claims interest in “the republic of the spirit” Amherst sees nature, particularly when it is beautiful, as linked with moral goodness, youth and purity.

Wharton’s description of the mill town through Amherst’s point of view reveals this connection. She begins by alluding to images of human poverty and ecological debasement. She describes, “the poor monotonous houses, the trampled grass-banks, the lean dogs prowling in refuse-heaps, the reflection of a crooked gas-lamp in a stagnant loop of the river” (22). Like similar images described in her short story “Mrs. Manstey’s View,” these descriptions draw the reader’s attention to “refuse,” but unlike the short story, this passage does not dwell “on the pleasanter side of the prospect” but rather begins to associate the morality of the place with its lack of beauty. While looking at this scene Amherst, “asked himself how it was possible to put any sense of moral beauty into lives bounded forever by the low horizon of the factory” (22).
This suggestion that physical loveliness and moral goodness are related is troubling, but it is a consistent element in Amherst’s assessment of both people and places. The passage continues:

The Moosuc River valley, in the hollow of which, for that river's sake, the Westmore mills had been planted, lingered in the memory of pre-industrial Hanaford as the pleasantest suburb of the town. Here, beyond a region of orchards and farm-houses, several "leading citizens" had placed, above the river-bank, their prim wood-cut "residences," with porticoes and terraced lawns; and from the chief of these…the grim mill-village had been carved (23).

In this passage, Wharton imbues Amherst with a tone of bitter self-righteousness. The passage uses mixed metaphors to describe industrial and natural elements of setting, perhaps to highlight how interrelated the two have become. The mill and its residential apparatus are both “planted” and “carved” into and out of the landscape. The tone and language here seems to suggest that Amherst senses the exploitation of nature as part of Westmore’s physical and moral wasting, a wasting that he quickly links to greed as he reflects on how the largest manor, “Hopewood” is intended for sale once real estate prices rise.16

While this intellectual recognition of connection between human and ecological exploitation is logical and perhaps admirable, the intense romantic-pastoral streak in Amherst’s vision cannot be overlooked. Wharton writes, “[w]henever Amherst's eyes were refreshed by the hanging foliage above the roofs of Westmore, he longed to convert the abandoned country-seat into a park and playground for the mill-

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16 Another unusual instance of this cross-description occurs when Mr. Langhope describes the out-dated décor Hopewood as, "getting to be as rare as the giant sequoias" This insinuation transfers the value of rare natural wonders onto works of art.
hands” (23). Here Wharton revives the image of man “refreshed” by nature, and
provides the reader a glimpse of Amherst’s not-so-radical idea of progress.

While there is nothing inherently wrong with a park, the presence of a park
would in no vital way resist “the grim law of industrial prosperity” which Amherst
considers himself in conflict with. Although from his point of view these grim laws
are spreading out “in unmitigated ugliness, devouring green fields and shaded slopes
like some insect-plague consuming the land” his pastoral vision is not that different
except that it might preserve as a token some lawns and occasional trees (23).

Although Amherst articulates an intense bitter assessment of the mill
conditions, and even implies some concerns about the ecological damage the business
causes, he is in the end, unable to effect lasting change for the operatives despite
having complete control of Westmore Mills. Like his imagined solutions, his
culminating actions are not mature, radical, progress but are instead a glaze of
beautification.17

This end result seems a damning condemnation of pastoral-consumerism. Like
Selden, and other pastoral-consumers, Amherst is “refreshed” by nature, but it is
critical to note that his sense of refreshment also contains a certain youthful property.
As Amherst perceives nature associated with purity this further linkage with childhood
logically follows, and is especially interesting in light of Ammon’s claim about
Bessy’s immaturity. Bessy may indeed be the “child-woman preferred by men” as
Ammons suggests, but Amherst’s desire for her may spring from his own perception

17 As in “The Valley of Childish Things,” Amherst has spoken with his wives “of the
work they meant to do”. Like the dull boy talks of “building bridges and draining
swamps and cutting roads through the jungle” Amherst too has grand plans which he
cannot bring to fruition.
of youthfulness as morally good. Wharton evinces this complex connection by permeating many of Amherst’s nature passages with the language of childhood.

This pattern begins early in the text, as Wharton describes John Amherst during what he believes will be his “last Saturday” at Westmore “a shining afternoon of late February, with a red sunset bending above frozen river and slopes of unruffled snow” (127). On this day he spends hours with the mill boys “coasting… skating and playing hockey on the rough river-ice” (128). Wharton writes, “the glow of movement, the tumult of young voices, the sting of the winter air, roused all the boyhood in his blood” (128). Although the passage then touches on some concerns about the future of the mills, this allusion to boyhood exuberance is reasserted when Amherst sees Bessy approaching, a fact which again places Bessy in the same category as the winter air. Consuming the “red sunset” and Bessy “saturated with heavenly fires” have the same youthful effect on Amherst, a fact that is further developed by their childish exploits together that evening (129).

Being “refreshed” in this way, Amherst plunges into deeper immaturity with regard to his mill commitments. The change in Amherst is obvious in looking at a few key passages, as for example when Wharton describes Amherst during his first few weeks of talking with Bessy, she writes:

Amherst was far from being one of the extreme theorists who reject temporary remedies lest they defer the day of general renewal, and since he looked on every gain in the material condition of the mill-hands as a step in their moral growth, he was quite willing to hold back his fundamental plans while he discussed the establishment of a nursery, and of a night-school for the boys in the mills (110).

While this passage suggests that Amherst sees “a nursery” and “a night-school” as low level mill improvements, a view which seems reasonable enough, the fact remains that
by the end of the novel modest ideas like a night-school represent some of the most radical changes Amherst is able to implement. One can witness the effects of Amherst’s pastoral-consumerism on the shift in his radicalism as early as the Christmas party Bessy throws for the mill-hands. Wharton writes:

The time had passed when Amherst might have made light of such efforts. With Bessy Westmore smiling up, holly-laden, from the foot of the ladder on which she kept him perched, how could he question the efficacy of hanging the opening-room with Christmas wreaths, or the ultimate benefit of gorging the operatives with turkey and sheathing their offspring in red mittens? It was just like the end of a story-book with a pretty moral, and Amherst was in the mood to be as much taken by the tinsel as the youngest mill-baby held up to gape at the tree” (122).

In this passage Amherst is all but infantilized by his visual consumption of Bessy draped in foliage. Although her efforts are something he would have “made light of” in the past, he is won over by the sight of “Bessy Westmore smiling up, holly-laden, from the foot of the ladder.” His sense of radical reform is reduced to “the end of a story-book with a pretty moral.”

Even when the relationship between Amherst and Bessy is strained, his pastoral consumption of her continues to prompt a certain immaturity in Amherst. Wharton writes:

the beauty about him filled him with sudden repugnance, as the disguise of the evil influences that were separating his wife’s life from his.

But with her entrance he dismissed the thought, and tried to meet her as if nothing stood in the way of their full communion. Her hair, still wet from the bath, broke from its dryad-like knot in dusky rings and spirals threaded with gold, and from her loose flexible draperies, and her whole person as she moved, there came a scent of youth and morning freshness. Her beauty touched him, and made it easier for him to humble himself.
This image of the “dryad” redeems Bessy in Amherst’s mind by rendering her as connected with both nature and divinity. Beauty, no longer a disguise, becomes an extension of all good things, emanating “youth and morning freshness.” Once cast in this mold, Bessy’s “dryad-like” image becomes a power which allows and encourages Amherst to “humble himself.” His habit of pastoral-consumption once again evokes immaturity and erodes his resolve.

Even in the company of the more mature and scientific Justine, Amherst finds himself returned to boyhood by his experiences in nature. While out on his trek with Brent and Cicely, Amherst is described as realizing that the “boyish wood-craft which he had cultivated … came to life in this sudden return to nature” (301).

This confusion of immaturity, goodness, beauty and nature prompts Amherst’s devolution. As the novel progresses Amherst not only becomes an ordinary “masculine egotist,” but also a pathetic figure so self-deluded that he cannot see what he has squandered.

His work at the mill is nothing more than a pastoral extension of the paternalism he had once hoped to quash. His memorializing of Bessy and treatment of Justine lose their connection to the actual, and become chauvinistic abstractions. His habit of pastoral-consumption loses even the hint of poetry it previously contained.

*The Blossom and the Botanizer*

The common 19th and early 20th century image of women as gardeners or appreciators of nature recurs in a number of Wharton texts. In “Mrs. Manstey’s View,” Wharton presents the reader with a female character who is deeply invested in
the natural world, and who tends a small window of house plants as one of her only pleasures. In *The House of Mirth*, there is a minor character of this type, Lady Cressida, who is ridiculed by Judy Trenor as “the moral one… a clergyman's wife, who wears Indian jewelry and botanizes” (35). Like her fellow nature-lover Mrs. Manstey, Lady Cressida is presented in less than flattering terms. This characterization may seem surprising, especially when one considers Wharton’s own gardening practice and her close relationship with her niece – botanist and landscape designer – Beatrix Farrand, but this characterization of gardening and botanizing women as on the fringes of high society may not be far from the truth.

In the context of *The House of Mirth*, Lady Cressida provides a sharp contrast to the amoral and consumption based world of Judy Trenor, a world in which gardens exhibit wealth and provide pleasure but otherwise do not become part of the characters’ lives and consciousness. Trenor’s gardens and glasshouses are tended by others and hold the same place as living jewels or gowns, part of the conspicuous display of wealth. In Bessy Westmore and Justine Brent, Wharton brings together two women who embody these opposing garden-personalities introduced in *The House of Mirth*. Bessy and Justine represent two different visions of womanhood, displayed not only in their appearance and employment but also in their relationship to the natural world. Like Judy Trenor, Bessy Westmore’s dominant interests consist of her own pleasure and access to luxury. Justine Brent on the other hand, like Lady Cressida, is genuinely interested in life and science. She is a nurse and an amateur naturalist who has supported herself, and maintains a certain moral vigilance.
Bessy Amherst, like many of the women in *The House of Mirth*, is a darling of the upper-class. Her appearance and manner are in line with the expectations of her society, and her relationship to the natural world is one of leisure-time consumption, and symbolic similarity, shaped through the male gaze. John Amherst, as this novel’s primary pastoral-consumer, plays a crucial role in shaping this symbolic relationship. The moment he meets Bessy, he begins to describe her in idealized natural terms. He wastes no time in transforming her from human to demigoddess with the suggestive natural language one might expect from a pastoral-romantic male. Wharton writes:

Mrs. Westmore's beauty was like a blinding light abruptly turned on eyes subdued to obscurity. As he spoke, his glance passed from her face to her hair, and remained caught in its meshes. He had never seen such hair—it did not seem to grow in the usual orderly way, but bubbled up all over her head in independent clusters of brightness, breaking, about the brow, the temples, the nape, into little irrelevant waves and eddies of light, with dusky hollows of softness where the hand might plunge (42).

This initial set of images evokes the language of water with hair that “bubbled” forming “waves and eddies.” Later Amherst reflects that her “look was like sunshine on his frozen senses” (93). As the two characters begin to have more opportunity to meet and converse Bessy is further described as an intoxicant to Amherst. Wharton writes, his “own purposes were momentarily lost in the sweet confusion of feeling her

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18 Amherst tries at times to resist his own romantic transfigurations of Bessy, which he senses are tied to both appearances and sexual attraction, but this effort is unsuccessful. Furthermore, despite the language of glorification, Amherst is distrustful of women and part of his attraction to Bessy is predicated upon his sense that she is childlike. Wharton describes one of their early conversations “She listened with her gentle look of trust, as though committing to him, with the good faith of a child, her ignorance, her credulity, her little rudimentary convictions and her little tentative aspirations, relying on him not to abuse or misdirect them in the boundless supremacy of his masculine understanding”
near him” she goes on to describe how this sensation is the result of Amherst’s seeing “the exquisite grain of her skin” and the “spirals of light from brow to ear, wavered off into a fruity down on the edge of the cheek” (105) . This fruit imagery is continued in a later passage where Amherst thinks “[h]is recurring conferences with Mrs. Westmore formed, as it were, the small surprising kernel of fact about which sensations gathered and grew with the swift ripening of a magician's fruit” (108). Although there is no one natural image which John Amherst is able to adhere to in his descriptions of Bessy, his tendency to revert to nature when describing her is long lasting.

Providing powerful contrast to Bessy’s type of womanhood, Justine Brent, Wharton’s most fully developed “botanizer,” stands apart from her “child-woman” friend. Unlike other characters of the botanizing type who are either pitiful or mocked, Brent is a smart vital woman who possesses knowledge and skill unmatched in her areas of expertise. Although Wharton does not provide many passages dedicated to Brent’s botanical pursuits, those she does supply are well developed and illustrate Justine’s primary interests and the commanding presence of Justine in the field.

The novel’s first reference to botany occurs in Justine’s meeting with Mrs. Ansell. This passage serves to set Justine ideologically further apart from the other women in her world. Already unlike the “flower-women” represented by Bessy and Mrs. Dressel, Justine is here contrasted with a type of woman whose identity is fused with industrial and economic prowess. To illustrate this tension between Justine and Mrs. Ansell, Wharton applies scientific and technologic language to a casual outdoor
meeting which one might expect to be dominated by botanical phrases. Wharton writes:

"Dear Miss Brent! I was just wondering how it was that I hadn't seen you before." Mrs. Ansell, as she spoke, drew the girl's hand into a long soft clasp which served to keep them confronted while she delicately groped for whatever thread the encounter seemed to proffer. Justine made no attempt to evade the scrutiny to which she found herself exposed; she merely released her hand by a movement instinctively evasive of the mechanical endearment, explaining, with a smile that softened the gesture: "I was out with Cicely when you arrived. We've just come in."

"The dear child! I haven't seen her either." Mrs. Ansell continued to bestow upon the speaker's clear dark face an intensity of attention in which, for the moment, Cicely had no perceptible share. "I hear you are teaching her botany, and all kinds of wonderful things."

Justine smiled again. "I am trying to teach her to wonder: that is the hardest faculty to cultivate in the modern child" (209).

The language of the “thread” presented early in this description of Mrs. Ansell harkens to the textile industry and is part of an ongoing metaphor Wharton establishes at the opening of the chapter, a metaphor which features Mrs. Ansell as “picking up threads” upon her return from Europe (207). Not only is Mrs. Ansell tied to the world of industry through the language of the passage, but also to social behaviors that mimic industrial technology. Justine, who is linked with botanizing, is “instinctively evasive” of Mrs. Ansell’s “mechanical endearment.” When the issue of botany is raised as part of Mrs. Ansell’s “scrutiny,” Justine asserts that teaching botany to Cicely – Bessy’s daughter from her first marriage – arises from a desire to teach Cicely “to wonder” a trait Brent considers “the hardest faculty to cultivate in the modern child.” This phrasing seems to pit modernity and the language of cultivation in opposition to one another.
Later in the novel, Wharton provides the reader with a description of Amherst joining Miss Brent and Cicely as they set out for “a distant swamp where rumour had it that a rare native orchid might be found” (298). Initially this passage seems to put Amherst and Brent on nearly equal footing, Wharton writes, “Cicely…discovered that her step-father knew almost as much about birds and squirrels as Miss Brent did about flowers” (298). Although this choice, ascribing botanical knowledge to a woman and zoological to a man, is right in line with turn-of-the-century ideas regarding the sexes and the sciences, the passage soon illustrates the failings of Amherst’s “woodcraft.”

Wharton writes:

Amherst, as became his sex, went first; but after a few absent-minded plunges into the sedgy depths between the islets, he was ordered to relinquish his command and fall to the rear, where he might perform the humbler service of occasionally lifting Cicely over unspannable gulfs of moisture (299).

Wharton goes on to describe Justine’s leadership and the superiority of her skill in the wood:

Justine…guided them across the treacherous surface as fearlessly as a king-fisher, lighting instinctively on every grass-tussock and submerged tree-stump of the uncertain path. Now and then she paused, her feet drawn close on their narrow perch, and her slender body swaying over as she reached down for some rare growth detected among the withered reeds and grasses; then she would right herself again by a backward movement as natural as the upward spring of a branch--so free and flexible in all her motions that she seemed akin to the swaying reeds and curving brambles which caught at her as she passed (300).

This passage, although describing Brent in natural terms, differs from the types of natural descriptions applied to women elsewhere. Here Wharton grants not only an animal metaphor, but one tied to a rather masculine trait in the words “fearlessly as a
king-fisher.” Although she is reinterpreted botanically soon after — her movements described as “natural as the upward spring of a branch” and “akin to the swaying reeds and curving brambles”— this botanical language differs from the typical fruit and flower imagery generally applied to women by pastoral-consumers.

As the experience in the woods continues, Amherst begins to exhibit his attraction to Justine. Wharton cues the reader into this by having Amherst perceive Justine as merging with the natural and supernatural. Wharton writes:

The sun beamed full on their ledge from a sky of misty blue, and she had thrown aside her hat, uncovering her thick waves of hair, blue-black in the hollows, with warm rusty edges where they took the light. Cicely dragged down a plumy spray of traveller’s joy and wound it above her friend’s forehead; and thus wreathed, with her bright pallour relieved against the dusky autumn tints, Justine looked like a wood-spirit who had absorbed into herself the last golden juices of the year (302).

This passage renders Justine in the characteristic style of the pastoral-consumer. By opening with a description of the sun and the sky Wharton allows Amherst’s mind and eye to begin merging Justine with the environment. The “misty blue” of the sky is echoed in the “blue-black” of her hair. The child’s flower wreath relieves Justine’s “bright pallour” through contrast with its “dusky autumn tints,” thus rendering Justine “a wood-spirit who had absorbed into herself the last golden juices of the year;” a phrase which highlights Amherst’s imagined merging and “absorbing” relationship between woman and environment, as well as reviving his tendency to relate to women in consumable botanical terms through the image of “juice.”
Although this rendering of Justine is much more typical of the female-nature relationship, Wharton does not allow Amherst’s interpretation of Justine to be the final vision of this relationship. Wharton writes:

She was in one of the buoyant moods when the spirit of life caught her in its grip, and shook and tossed her on its mighty waves as a sea-bird is tossed through the spray of flying rollers. At such moments all the light and music of the world seemed distilled into her veins, and forced up in bubbles of laughter to her lips and eyes. Amherst had never seen her thus, and he watched her with the sense of relaxation which the contact of limpid gaiety brings to a mind obscured by failure and self-distrust. The world was not so dark a place after all, if such springs of merriment could well up in a heart as sensitive as hers to the burden and toil of existence (303).

This passage seems to combine both Justine’s sense of herself as “a sea-bird…tossed through the spray of flying rollers” with Amherst’s response to her “springs of merriment.” At the close of the chapter, Justine, although glimpsed by the pastoral-consumer as a “wood-spirit,” retains a closer connection with birds and with the wild plants of the marshes, a fact which makes the ending of the novel all the more tragic when Amherst turns to her, quite pleased with himself and says “Dear…let us go out and look at the marsh we have drained” (633).

In the final chapter which details the opening ceremony of the pleasure-house at Hopewood – a building based on a design Amherst mistakenly believes Bessy developed for the enrichment of the Westmore operatives – Wharton makes clear how profoundly Justine’s life has been altered by her relationship with Amherst. The chapter is rendered in a point of view closely tied with Brent’s. Through the eye of the botanizer, Wharton presents great attention to the physical environment. Brent’s perception offers the “young maples,” “the grass-bordered streets,” and “well-kept turf” as evidence of the town’s improvement. Wharton writes:
In the bright June light, behind their fresh green mantle of trees and creepers, even the factory buildings looked less stern and prison-like than formerly; and the turfing and planting of the adjoining river-banks had transformed a waste of foul mud and refuse into a little park where the operatives might refresh themselves at midday (622).

These changes for Justine are evidence of the town having “risen from its grave” (622). Although these passages suggest that Justine has retained her commitment to botanical life and social reform, it is difficult not to notice how far from her marsh expeditions and hospital work her relationship to Amherst has taken her. During the philanthropic dedication of the pleasure-house Justine is reduced to a shadow in the background of the scene. She listens indignantly as her husband creates “out of his regrets a being who had never existed” and ascribes “to her feelings and actions of which the real woman had again and again proved herself incapable” (628). Although Justine yearns to tell the true story of the pleasure-house, when the ceremony ends, she is unable to break Amherst’s delusion.

This final turn of the novel highlights not only the destructive depths of Amherst’s egotism but its relationship to his role as a pastoral consumer. In a phrase that harkens back to Selden’s final moment with Lily Bart, Amherst asks Justine, “You want to drain this good day to the dregs, as I do?” (632). He then goes on to speak of their orchid hunts in the swamps, a topic which surprises Justine because he had not for a long time “referred to the early days of their friendship” (632). As he goes on he asks her:

Do you remember how we said that it was with most of us as it was with Faust? That the moment one wanted to hold fast to was not, in most lives, the moment of keenest personal happiness, but the other kind--the kind that would have seemed grey and colourless at first: the moment when the meaning of life began to come out from the mists--when one
could look out at last over the marsh one had drained (633)?

He does not remember that it was he who said this, not her, and when she reminds him, he suggests that she must have felt it too. Amherst ends by patronizingly kissing her hands and saying, "Dear…let us go out and look at the marsh we have drained" (633). While his tone is triumphant, the reader must feel how swallowed Justine’s character has become. Amherst’s adherence to the masculine pastoral-consumer trajectory muddies his values, limits his ability to reach his stated goals, and pollutes his relationship with Justine, and Justine’s relationship with the world. The novel closes:

He turned and led her through the open doorway to the terrace above the river. The sun was setting behind the wooded slopes of Hopewood, and the trees about the house stretched long blue shadows across the lawn. Beyond them rose the smoke of Westmore (633).

The marsh, symbolic of Justine’s freedom and authority has been “drained,” leaving in its wake a highly anthropomorphic landscape dominated by the contaminating smoke of Westmore Mills.
Chapter Three: Un-natural Catastrophes in *The Custom of the Country*

Published as a complete novel in October 1913, shortly after her own public divorce, Edith Wharton’s *The Custom of the Country* has been described as “Wharton’s tour de force on the marriage question” (Ammons 97). This novel probes gender relations, female autonomy, and the marriage market, and develops the human-nature relationship in a way unlike those featured in earlier works.

Female beauty, although still prized and consumed, is complicated in this novel by a voracious and terrifying will to devour. The main character Undine Spragg is neither a flower-woman, nor a botanizer, but rather a storm sweeping out of the west and swallowing everything in its path. This reinterpretation of the human-nature relationship exposes a dark side of women’s new power in the marriage market.

While Wharton could not have been opposed to divorce as a necessary option in dire situations Undine seems an icon for destruction. As the novel’s emblematic storm of consumption, Undine possesses traits which are typically acceptable in male characters: self-promotion, avarice, ambition. While I would not argue that this gender-swap is problematic, the qualities Undine exhibits are themselves troubling. Wharton’s choice to seat them in a female character simply exhibits the scale of the crisis.

This crisis is multi-faceted. On the face of it the novel explores the crisis of leisure class marriage as a profession, this issue alone a product of social, economic and gender ideologies predicated upon destructive models of proprietorship.19

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19 What Ammons calls “the most lucrative one available, for a woman seeking status and power in American society” (97).
Furthermore, representations of consumption and nature in this novel touch upon a pervasive American tendency toward devouring resources. Undine, a western girl bent on having “the best” and willing to employ any means of achieving her goal, bears a relationship both concrete and metaphoric to the un-natural catastrophe of environmental destruction wrought by humanity throughout the American landscape.

Relating to Their Environment: Inspiration, Extraction and Inundation

In The Custom of the Country, significant differences in how individuals approach the environment expose deep personality traits. The two primary visions of environmental relationship in this text are conservative/pastoral and consumerist: the first set of values expressed by Ralph Marvell, and to a lesser extent by Claire and Raymond, and the second worldview embodied in the Spraggs, Moffat, and to some extent Peter Van Degen. Images of water are especially rich with meaning in regard to these two world-views. On the one hand, the Spaggs profit from the manipulation and commodification of water, while on the other hand Ralph sees water as deeply spiritual and tied with his innermost vision of himself and the world.

This older pastoral vision leaves Ralph ill-equipped to deal with his wife and her family. Indeed through much of his marriage Ralph is essentially quoting poetry to the cyclone that is sucking him away. Much like Selden in The House of Mirth, Ralph glorifies beauty in women and nature. Like Amherst, he habitually infuses physical beauty with positive spiritual and emotional attributes regardless of whether or not such attribution is deserved. But unlike these two earlier characters, Ralph’s love of nature guides his action in the world.
Even before the marriage, Wharton develops this intensely poetic vision in Ralph. She describes “the world of wonders within him”, which he relates to a boyhood experience of finding a sea-side cave “between tides” (46-7). The passage describes the cave as “a secret inaccessible place with glaucous lights, mysterious murmurs, and a single shaft of communication with the sky,” which he keeps hidden from his cousins and friends because “good fellows as they all were, couldn't be expected to understand” (47).

This passage illustrates how entwined Ralph’s visions of spirit and nature are. Moving from a physical description of the tidal sea-side cave, the language of the passage becomes increasingly magical. Phrases intensify this sensibility as they progress from “secret inaccessible” to “mysterious” and then present the image of “communication with the sky” (47). This physical location and actual experience are then transformed by the passage into a metaphor for Ralph’s “inner world.” Wharton writes, “so with his inner world. Though so coloured by outer impressions it wove a secret curtain about him, and he came and went in it with the same joy of furtive possession. One day, of course, some one would discover it and reign there with him--no, reign over it and him” (47). The reader must at this moment begin to sense how devastating a bond between cyclonic Miss Spragg and young Marvell will be. This passage’s final expression of romantic submission to love, while certainly in tune with Ralph’s pastoral vision, can only amount to a thorough loss of self in the twisting grip of a woman aiming for material acquisition and social ascension.

The passage continues with more maritime language: “he most wanted …to learn and to do--to know what the great people had thought, think about their thinking,
and then launch his own boat: write some good verse if possible; if not, then critical prose” (47). Here equating his desires for thought and poetic expression with sea-travel. Ralph ironically paints a complete picture of the things he will find stripped from him by his matrimonial experience.

The irony continues as Ralph waxes poetic over the beauty of the Italian country-side and his new wife during their time in Sienna. In this honeymoon scene the reader is even more enlightened about the profound gap between Ralph’s sense of nature, and Undine’s. While Ralph finds “the Sienese air…not only breathable but intoxicating,” Undine complains it is “too hot” (85).

While there is not much direct reference to water in this passage, there are ample allusions to “wateriness.” As Ralph appreciates his surroundings he most strongly focuses on the sky, which he describes as “wine-blue and bubbling with stars” (86). He also gives attention to his own emotional reaction to setting which he renders in specifically watery ways. Wharton writes:

As he lay there, fragments of past states of emotion, fugitive felicities of thought and sensation, rose and floated on the surface of his thoughts. It was one of those moments when the accumulated impressions of life converge on heart and brain…He had had glimpses of such a state before, of such mergings of the personal with the general life that one felt one's self a mere wave on the wild stream of being (86).

Phrases such as “rose and floated,” and “wild stream of being” not only illustrate Ralph’s poetic and pastoral sense, but also infuse the passage with aquatic language.

A similar pattern of pastoral impressions and “watery” language develops as the newlyweds recline on the Sienese hillside. Wharton describes Ralph’s examination of Undine’s hand:
He turned the hand over and traced the course of its blue veins from the wrist to the rounding of the palm below the fingers; then he put a kiss in the warm hollow between. The upper world had vanished: his universe had shrunk to the palm of a hand. But there was no sense of diminution. In the mystic depths whence his passion sprang, earthly dimensions were ignored and the curve of beauty was boundless enough to hold whatever the imagination could pour into it. Ralph had never felt more convinced of his power to write a great poem; but now it was Undine’s hand which held the magic wand of expression (87).

This passage reiterates Ralph’s capacity to mix physicality with spirituality. As in the sea-side cave description, Ralph’s mind moves from physical experience such as “the wrist” and “the rounding of the palm” to increasingly magical visions of that experience, as in “his universe had shrunk to the palm of a hand” prompted by the “boundless” beauty of Undine. From there Ralph’s thoughts make a smooth transition to poetry. For Ralph the desired trajectory of life is spiritual glorification of the physical followed by artistic expression of that veneration.

In this episode, as in the sea-side cave passage, watery allusions persist beyond the physical presence of water. The intentional description of “blue veins” recalls the “supernaturally blue” light of his cave. The veins themselves being bearers of blood also imply a watery connection metaphorically suggesting a union between the tides of the circulatory system with the oceans and rivers of the world. The description of “mystic depths” directly recalls the image of the sea cave, while the word “sprang” seems to evoke the bubbling of a spring. This watery feeling is intensified by Ralph’s insistence that “earthly dimensions were ignored” because Undine’s beauty could “hold whatever the imagination could pour into it.” The concept of pouring evokes liquidity in Ralph’s unearthly realm.
Even as their relationship progresses and Undine increasingly “turns away” from Ralph – a motion which reiterates her cyclonic force – he continues to perceive her in poetic terms. During the scene where Undine states her desire to leave Europe Ralph perceives her cold-shoulder as “remote and Ariel-like, suggesting…the coolness of the element from which she took her name” (93). Even as Ralph begins to see the dark side of his wife he is still bound by his poetic allegiance to beauty.

After Undine leaves Ralph, he continues to have a deep pastoral relationship with the natural world. Even his bought of illness following news of the impending divorce contains vivid aquatic language. In a passage closely aligned with Ralph’s consciousness Wharton describes the illness as pressing him “down into a dim deep pool of sleep.” A pool from which he, “gradually floated to the surface” and “floated, floated, danced on the fiery waves of pain” (206). As the illness diminishes, the maritime language intensifies. Wharton depicts, “[c]harmed intervals of rest, blue sailings on melodious seas.” She also describes Ralph sensing his body as transformed into “a leaf on the air, a feather on a current, a straw on the tide, the spray of the wave spinning itself to sunshine as the wave toppled over into gulfs of blue” (206). This transcendence even in sickness is a powerful reminder of how deeply committed Ralph is to the idea of nature as spiritually bound with his identity.

It is logical then that in his initial effort to recover from his wife’s betrayal, Ralph travels to the country. Wharton describes Ralph sitting “on the balcony of his

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20 During the first phase of their marriage Ralph glimpses the tornado in Undine and slowly begins to realize that she is sucking the joy from his life, but despite this realization he is trapped by the poetic allure of her beauty. In an early instance of this realization Wharton writes, “Even in his recoil from what she said Ralph felt the tempestuous heat of her beauty”.
little house above the lake, staring at the great white cloud-reflections in the water” and paddling his canoe “through a winding chain of ponds to some lonely clearing in the forest” where he would “lay on his back in the pine-needles and watched the great clouds form and dissolve themselves above his head” (205). For Ralph contemplation of the water and close contact with nature help him to at least achieve an “insensibility to the small pricks and frictions of daily life” (206). As he further recovers from the disenchantment of his failed marriage the language of water continues to describe his experience. Wharton writes, “[t]he smothered springs of life were bubbling up in Ralph” (260).

This recovery, however, is brief and illusory. Like many of Wharton’s nature aligned characters, indeed like Lily Bart, Ralph is crushed by the society he lives in but cannot reconcile himself with. Wharton highlights the forces that destroy Ralph in the passages that lead up to his suicide. She writes:

He stood at the corner of Wall Street, looking up and down its hot summer perspective. He noticed the swirls of dust in the cracks of the pavement, the rubbish in the gutters, the ceaseless stream of perspiring faces that poured by under tilted hats.

He found himself, next, slipping northward between the glazed walls of the Subway, another languid crowd in the seats about him and the nasal yelp of the stations ringing through the car like some repeated ritual wail. The blindness within him seemed to have intensified his physical perceptions, his sensitiveness to the heat, the noise, the smells of the dishevelled midsummer city; but combined with the acuter perception of these offenses was a complete indifference to them, as though he were some vivisected animal deprived of the power of discrimination (287).

The intense darkness of this passage is simply haunting when the reader considers the profound way in which nature and beauty comprise Ralph’s sense of self. This passage begins with an image of Wall Street in summer. This beginning highlights the market
a place and concept antithetical to Ralph’s pastoral vision. Further description reveals “swirls of dust in the cracks of the pavement,” an image that not only recalls the cyclonic force of Undine through the word swirl, but also buries nature under society’s sidewalks. Further burying follows in the description of the subway, a place that seems to represent the dark double of Ralph’s sea-cave. If the sea-cave was a place where Ralph came into possession of his “world of wonders within,” the subway both blinds and spiritually eviscerates him so that the passage closes with an understanding of Ralph’s sense that he is like “some vivisected animal.”

Even words that might suggest the healing influence of water in this very arid passage are literally and figuratively polluted, the gutters filled with “rubbish,” the “stream of perspiring faces that poured by.” The reader at this point must sense how dark the future is for Ralph Marvell. In his dying statement (“My wife...this will make it all right for her...”) Wharton illustrates the irony that through Ralph’s obliteration Undine will achieve her goals just as the Spraggs have achieved their ends through the destruction of nature.

Early in the novel, Wharton states that the Spraggs “had made little progress in establishing relations with their new environment” (7). This statement while expressing the social inability of the Spraggs to thrive in New York, is also suggestive of a central issue in the Spragg family, their relationship to physical surroundings. In this novel, Wharton exposes the material details of the Spragg fortune with a clarity she does not often employ with regard to such issues. This attention to detail is no doubt intentional and designed to highlight the intensity of the Spragg will to succeed along economic lines. For this family, wealth results from intensive extraction of
natural resources. Spragg commodification of the natural environment manifests through real-estate speculation, and the development of a water works. These two operations also become entangled in the development of the Eubaw Mines after Elmer Moffat essentially blackmails Abner Spragg.

The Eubaw Mines, while not specifically a Spragg venture, bind many of the market-centered characters together through a web of mutual, sometimes shady seeming, associations. This centrality intensifies the images of a market system built around extraction. Wharton does not give extensive attention to the Eubaw Mines, but rather inserts allusions to the mines at places in the text that seem out of sync. For example, the first reference to the Eubaw Mines occurs in a passage about Undine’s first trip to a hotel, a trip that she deceives her parents into by having “secretly sucked lemons, nibbled slate-pencils and drank pints of bitter coffee to aggravate her look of ill-health” (33). In this passage Wharton states that Undine, “made the acquaintance of a pretty woman from Richmond, whose husband, a mining engineer, had brought her west with him while he inspected the newly developed Eubaw mines” (33).

Wharton then inserts talk of the mines into the opera house when Undine sees Elmer Moffat during one of her dates with Ralph. Upon seeing Undine speaking to “a funny man with [a] red face” the group tries to determine the identity of the stranger. Peter Van Degen is able to provide some information about Moffat, stating, “Saw him in old Harmon Driscoll’s office the day of the Eubaw Mine meeting. This chap’s his secretary, or something. Driscoll called him in to give some facts to the directors, and he seemed a mighty wide-awake customer” (63). This statement not only reveals Van

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Spragg may derive from the word sprag which is a term for a piece of mining equipment.
Degen’s seeming approval of Moffat, but also his knowledge of the Eubaw mines. This pattern of mentioning the mines in locations that seem out of sync with the realm of mining serve to remind the reader of what activities undergird the world luxury these characters live in. While money making, like mining is often done out of sight, and erased from scenes of metropolitan opulence Wharton’s choice to include this information not only increases the reader’s focus on ecological exploitation but also encourages a sustained symbolic reading of the exploitive tendencies evinced by characters like Moffat and Undine.

This focus on mining adds a sinister element to the metals and jewels presented in the text. The “twisted silver ring” and “twist of pearls” are two obvious examples. Another example is Elmer Moffat’s wedding gift to Undine, a “necklace and tiara of pigeon-blood rubies belonging to Queen Marie Antoinette” (358). These rubies seem especially ominous in the paragraphs of the novel when, after learning that she cannot be an Ambassador’s wife, Undine is described as follows:

She turned to give herself a last look in the glass, saw the blaze of her rubies, the glitter of her hair, and remembered the brilliant names on her list.

But under all the dazzle a tiny black cloud remained. She had learned that there was something she could never get, something that neither beauty nor influence nor millions could ever buy for her. She could never be an Ambassador's wife; and as she advanced to welcome her first guests she said to herself that it was the one part she was really made for (364).

This passage couples the image of the rubies with obvious meteorological and avaricious language. Wharton makes clear that to the very end Undine is still storming for more.
But perhaps this behavior is to be expected from a child who has come into being as a result of ecological and interpersonal exploitation. Although Abner Spragg seems scrupulous about business matters, the foundation of the Spragg family fortune is not as sparkling as the name “Pure Water” might suggest. First described through the filter of Leota Spragg’s consciousness, the “Pure Water Move” is what financially enables the Spragg family to leave Apex behind in hopes of giving Undine a life where “she should have what she wanted” (8).

During Ralph Marvell’s first visit to the Spragg home, Mrs. Spragg entertains her guest by telling him the history of the family fortune. She describes for Ralph how her “husband…had come to Apex as a poor boy” and how “[t]wo of their three children had died of typhoid in the epidemic which devastated Apex before the new water-works were built; and this calamity, by causing Mr. Spragg to resolve that thereafter Apex should drink pure water, had led directly to the founding of his fortunes” (49).

She further explains that the water works were developed by inundating some land that had previously been owned by her father. In her words, Abner “had taken over some of poor father's land for a bad debt, and when he got up the Pure Water move the company voted to buy the land and build the new reservoir up there” (50). While Ralph’s reception of this information is nearly as naïve as Mrs. Spragg’s assessment, the reader must wonder about the family dynamics of dispossessing a

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22 For example, Abner is hesitant to reveal information about a former business partner to Elmer Moffat. When Moffat suggests that they both might profit by sharing information about Representative Rolliver with Harmon B. Driscoll Abner’s first reaction seems to border on horror (80).
father of his land.\textsuperscript{23} This ability to turn a profit at the expense of family hints again at the cyclonic bond between father and daughter (80).

This similarity however is nowhere near as analogous as the relationship between Moffat and Undine. While Abner Spragg is rather fittingly sunk by “New York's huge waves of success” submerging “instead of floating him,” Moffat’s business ventures prove successful (344). Moffat explains to Undine the intricacies of his Apex Consolidation, and because she cannot comprehend these business moves, the reader is left to guess the details. Nevertheless, one can safely assume that such a consolidation project would involve heavy interest in Eubaw mines, the Pure Water Move as well as “all the street railroads” (79). By continuing to tap the ecological wealth of the west, Moffat has succeeded where Spragg failed.

During this meeting with Undine, Moffat listens to her story of how she tried to turn a profit through marriage in France. After a moment he says “it's a downright shame you don't go round more,” a suggestion not only of his interest in seeing her but also of his commitment to cyclonic acquisition (329).

The ideological conflict between the novel’s two primary visions of environmental relationship – conservative and consumptive – is perhaps best expressed by Undine’s third husband Raymond de Chelles. When he learns of his wife’s intentions to sell his heirlooms he rages against her saying “you come from hotels as big as towns, and from towns as flimsy as paper, where the streets haven't

\textsuperscript{23} Wharton describes Ralph’s perception of the story in the following terms: “he understood no more than she the occult connection between Mr. Spragg’s domestic misfortunes and his business triumph. Mr. Spragg had "helped out" his ruined father-in-law, and had vowed on his children's graves that no Apex child should ever again drink poisoned water--and out of those two disinterested impulses, by some impressive law of compensation, material prosperity had come” (50).
had time to be named, and the buildings are demolished before they're dry” (354). Indeed the disposability of Undine’s world is difficult to deny. Coming from Apex and then from the Stentorian, Undine has indeed emerged from “towns as flimsy as paper” and “hotels as big as towns.” In her personal life she has acquired and discarded a string of friends, lovers, and husbands to her advantage. She has used her own son as a bargaining chip unfettered by familial feeling or tradition. Furthermore she descends from a line of people who have dispossessed family members for lands, flooded lands for fortunes, excavated for riches, and abandoned homes, towns, and business ties to promote their own agendas.

_The Cyclonic Miss Spragg_

As in the case of Lily Bart, the suggestive quality of Wharton’s character names extends to Undine Spragg. In his article “Undine Is Us,” scholar Peter Hays points to Undine’s initials. Notable also is the name Undine itself. While interpretive variations exist, the word “undine” was coined by alchemist Paracelsus. According to Paracelsus, an undine was an elemental spirit of water.

This watery elemental force is central to many of the descriptions that establish Undine’s metaphorical relationship with nature. Throughout the text Miss Spragg is described in meteorological terms. These terms are especially vivid in passages where Undine is attempting to make some sort of acquisition. Early in the novel language of the storm relates to Undine’s “nervousness.” Wharton writes:

They had counted a great deal on the Fairford dinner as a means of tranquillization, and it was a blow to detect signs of the opposite result when, late the next morning, their daughter came dawdling into the sodden splendour of the Stentorian breakfast-room.
The symptoms of Undine’s nervousness were unmistakable to Mr. and Mrs. Spragg. They could read the approaching storm in the darkening of her eyes from limpid grey to slate-colour, and in the way her straight black brows met above them and the red curves of her lips narrowed to a parallel line below (25).

As in *The House of Mirth*, the language of nature often subtly pervades passages that do not directly address nature. In the first paragraph leading up to the meteorological explication of Undine, words such as “blow” and “sodden” evoke the language of the storm that is about to be made visible. The ability of the Spraggs to “read the approaching storm,” a talent that may be attributed to their youth in tornado alley, in no way influences their skill at handling such an event. The map of Undine’s face, complete with latitudinal demarcations, and color coded warnings, does nothing to diminish her capacity to acquire. Furthermore, Undine’s “nervousness” and her “dark moods” often foreshadow descriptions of stormy activity.

Mr. Spragg is also occasionally defined in similar terms. For example, Wharton describes his face as “the barometer in which [Mrs. Spragg] had long been accustomed to read the leave to go on unrestrictedly, or the warning to pause and abstain till the coming storm should be weathered” (11). This similarity may indicate some of the capitalistic ambitions shared by father and daughter since both tend to “storm” around issues of ownership and commerce. The difference however is that Undine is both the warning system and the weather.

Although less bluntly put in meterological language, Undine’s tendency to twist may evoke the catastrophic and hungry tornados of her western origin. The image of Undine twisting is persistent and is introduced in the first pages of the novel:

Undine Spragg…swept round on the speaker with one of the
quick turns that revealed her youthful flexibility. She was always doubling and twisting on herself, and every movement she made seemed to start at the nape of her neck, just below the lifted roll of reddish-gold hair, and flow without a break through her whole slim length to the tips of her fingers and the points of her slender restless feet (5).

This passage might suggest a number of things about Undine. As explicitly stated, the passage reveals her “youthful flexibility”, but the deep exaggeration of this twisting that “always” typifies Miss Spragg’s movements, and “flows without break” like a wave or current, is strongly suggestive of something cyclonic.

The image of Undine twisting her body repeats itself throughout the text.

Wharton writes:

Now, however, she could yield without afterthought to the joy of dramatizing her beauty. Within a few days she would be enacting the scene she was now mimicking; and it amused her to see in advance just what impression she would produce on Mrs. Fairford's guests.

For a while she carried on her chat with an imaginary circle of admirers, twisting this way and that, fanning, fidgeting, twitching at her draperies, as she did in real life when people were noticing her. Her incessant movements were not the result of shyness: she thought it the correct thing to be animated in society, and noise and restlessness were her only notion of vivacity (15).

In this passage Wharton reveals additional information about Undine’s motivation for habitual twisting. Undine’s desire to do “the correct thing” by being “animated in society” is part of her plan for social climbing, an ascent which is based on a hunger for increased material luxury. The final sentence heightens her association with the
cyclonic through the reference to noise, a concept that is echoed in the name of the hotel – the Sentorian – where the Spraggs live.\(^{24}\)

Images of the “twisted” also play a role in Wharton’s description of Undine’s early sexual exploits. Wharton describes one such exploit:

> Sometimes, in her dark moods, she blamed her parents for not having given it to her. She was so young... and they had told her so little! As she looked back she shuddered at some of her escapes. Even since they had come to New York she had been on the verge of one or two perilous adventures, and there had been a moment during their first winter when she had actually engaged herself to the handsome Austrian riding-master … she had pledged herself to him, and bestowed on him her pink pearl ring in exchange for one of twisted silver (17).

In this passage Undine’s “dark moods” are again alluded to along with a story of one of her near acquisitions. What is significant here is the exchange of “a pink pearl ring” for a “twisted” one. This moment may mark Undine’s transition from romantic illusions – sea based and similar to those held by Ralph Marvell – to a more cyclonic personality.

After her betrothal to Ralph, the word “turn” becomes more prominent than “twisting” in descriptions of Undine, but the underlying association of stormy acquisitiveness remains.\(^{25}\) Wharton uses “turn” to illustrate how Undine exploits her physical proximity to Ralph in order to broker for power in their relationship. Early on in the courtship scenes Wharton writes, “[s]he was already beginning to resent in

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\(^{24}\) Etymology of the word Stentorian exhibits a link not only to noise, but to weather as well. Online Etymology Dictionary states : ““of powerful voice,” 1605, from Stentor, legendary Gk. herald in the Trojan War, whose voice (described in the *Iliad*) was as loud as 50 men. His name is from Gk. stenein "groan, moan," from PIE imitative base *(s)ten-, source of O.E. þunor "thunder."”

\(^{25}\) “Turn” also becomes prominent in discussions of business at this point in the novel. So while the men may “make a turn” on Wall Street, Undine uses her body to draw in that which she desires and to spit out the rubbish when she is done.
Ralph the slightest sign of resistance to her pleasure; and her resentment took the form – a familiar one in Apex courtships – of turning on him” (61). She also uses this turning as a positive way of drawing Ralph in. Wharton describes Undine as having “turned to him gaily” (107).26

This turning becomes especially stormy and disturbing to Ralph in the scene where he learns of her pregnancy. While attempting to console her he realizes that he is only making her angry. With clear meteorological allusions, Wharton describes the scene: “He knew it by the quiver that ran through her like the premonitory ripple on smooth water before the coming of the wind. She turned about on him and jumped to her feet” (113).

Undine uses this method not only with Ralph but with all other men from whom she seeks to extract. In her relations with Peter Van Degen – who ironically gives her a “twist of pearls” – Undine is described as having “sighed a little, and turned her head away. She flattered herself that she had learned to strike the right note with Van Degen”(176). This cyclonic tendency toward the “turn” as a gesture of both seduction and repulsion persists throughout the novel.

The tornado persona of ruthless avarice is not limited to Undine. Close examination of the text reveals the same habitual twisting and turning is attributed to Elmer Moffat.27 This association is not surprising. Both Undine and her first husband

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26 In a talk with Van Degen she uses a “turn of the neck that shed her brightness on him” (106).
27 Interestingly the name Elmer Moffat also contains symbolic elements. The name Elmer - “Royal” and the last name Moffat, Scottish is origin, bears the motto “I aspire to greater things”. Furthermore the colors of the Moffat tartan are black, grey and red, suggestive of storms and violence.
Elmer are young hungry westerners bent on acquisition and success in the East.²⁸ Passages that describe Moffat often contain references to twisting. In the first appearance of Moffat he is described as “twisting his small stiff moustache with a plump hand” and then “twisting his fingers about the heavy gold watch-chain that crossed his waistcoat” (78, 81). During his meeting with Ralph Marvell, Wharton writes “Moffatt twisted his moustache between two plump square-tipped fingers” (275). Both Moffat and Undine highlight their assets in their twisting. For Undine, the twist must ripple through her entire body, but Moffat is able to assert the same cyclonic force through twisting the symbols of his power, his moustache – announcing his sex, and his gold announcing his wealth.

Wharton also utilizes twisting in the language of Ralph Marvell’s illness. As his marriage begins to fall apart Ralph is described as experiencing “a spiral pain … twisting around in the back of his head, and digging in a little deeper with each twist” (195). This clear demarcation between those who twist and those who suffer from the twisting is further illustrated by the two opposing ways in which these groups relate to the environment.

²⁸ Regional association with the twist is also suggested by the word turn in the following passage: “In the south, if you had a grudge against a man you tried to shoot him; in the west, you tried to do him in a mean turn in business”
Conclusion: Wharton’s Dark Poetics of Environmental Commodification

In Edith Wharton’s fiction, the culturally constructed relationship between people and nature comprises a complex set of issues. The issues of gender and nature which dominate the first two chapters of this thesis hinge upon a well established limited scope of gender appropriate relationships between women and the natural world which existed in Wharton’s time (1862-1937). The lady as embodiment, gardener, and appreciator of nature were all promoted and valued. Many people believed that “[p]roper understanding of and receptivity to nature could help forestall not only women’s but society’s fall from grace” (Norwood 8).

This fits in well with the connections between nature and morality promoted by the pastoral-consumers in these novels. This connection between natural beauty and moral goodness is especially keen in the ideologies of Selden and Amherst. Selden, and his republic of the spirit, are abstract disembodied versions of the mill reforms John Amherst hopes to incorporate. Both of these characters fixate on natural beauty as “right” in a moral sense.

This perception is somewhat modified in the third novel. By 1913, Wharton’s vision of the dominant class necessarily shifts away from both abstract idealism and dreams of reform to focus on a new type of power player. This new type, invested directly in ecological extraction, has no room for concerns about nature as goodness. Non-economic concerns about the human relationship to the natural world are then pushed to the periphery. While this novel retains a male pastoral-consumer, he is of an altogether different sort. Although he understands ecology and women no better than
his predecessors, his attraction to nature is highly personal to the point that he himself becomes the human representative of nature in the text.

This understanding of Ralph Marvell as a character who “represents” nature highlights my philosophical break with mainline ecofeminism. Over the past fifty years feminists and feminist critics have made numerous persuasive claims regarding the consumption of women as sexual and aesthetic objects. While I do not dispute these claims, nor the claims of ecofeminists which suggest women and nature have suffered a shared oppression, I am certain that the destruction of the earth supercedes all other forms of oppression because it imperils all people. By exhibiting how market-driven ideologies and actions destroy Ralph, Wharton too seems to suggest the enormity of the threat consumptive devouring of nature represents.

This analysis of Wharton therefore is not centered on what her texts may disclose about the treatment of women, so much as what they reveal about the social valuing of nature. As Wharton’s novels reveal changes in the status of nature, they also reveal how idealizations of nature fulfill specific social functions. When controlling women is paramount, nature signifies passivity and femininity. When promoting reform is the main concern nature represents goodness and moral uplift. When acquisition and abundance attain centrality nature is nothing more than a storehouse of riches to ransack and rifle through.

The current ecological crisis has been born out of these ideologies and the actions they prompted. The Custom of the Country seems to offer an especially clear

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29 It should be no surprise however that there is an overlap between the consumption of women and nature. The cultural construction that seeks to conflate the two aims at the same final position for both, passivity in the face of exploitation.
vision of negative human interventions in ecology. These representations of wealth building through extraction should not be dismissed as a side-note in a marriage novel. While many theorists have examined this novel’s biographical associations with Wharton’s divorce, few have looked at the ecological moment in which she wrote, and considered how this too may have influenced her artistic choices. In his 1998 article “The Wealth of Abner Spragg” Gerard M. Sweeney explores a possible biographic source for the Pure Water Move. According to Sweeney, Wharton’s relative by marriage, Joseph Wharton had conceived of a similar venture to provide drinking water for the typhoid stricken city of Philadelphia (51). Between 1876 and 1890 Joseph Wharton “acquired nearly a hundred thousand contiguous acres of Pine Barrens land” with the intention of constructing thirty-three shallow canal-linked reservoirs there (McPhee qtd. in Sweeny 51). The state of New Jersey denied Wharton the right to proceed with his project, and it is interesting to note that the land Joseph Wharton had intended to submerge now bears his name and is considered to be one of the most biologically diverse locations in the state (49). Although his plan was never put into action it is a matter of public record and may have been a source of inspiration for this detail in Wharton’s novel (50).

Other possible sources of inspiration exist. In New York City, where the majority of this novel is set, the need for clean water was a major topic during the years in which Wharton wrote this text. Furthermore in 1911 national attention was focused on the flooding of Hetch Hetchy canyon. Whatever the inspiration for the Pure Water Move, Edith Wharton has preserved in this text an important element of her historical and ecological moment. Land speculation and reservoir building provide
a profound example of human interference in the biological processes of an area. Human history is certainly implicated in natural history by Wharton’s inclusion of this activity.

Although Wharton is not typically viewed as a political writer, her inclusion of such information, as well as her dismal vision of humanity’s interaction with the natural world, suggests a serious concern about the connections between people and nature. These concerns can be traced back to her earliest published work of fiction, “Mrs. Manstey’s View” published by Scribner’s Magazine in July 1891.

The story, which tells of an elderly widow living in New York City begins, “[t]he view from Mrs. Manstey’s window was not a striking one, but to her at least it was full of interest and beauty” (117). As the title suggests, this view constitutes the central joy in Mrs. Manstey’s life. Although aware that her view is one “which the most optimistic eye would at first have failed to discover anything admirable” she finds “much to admire in the long vista” (117). Wharton explains that Mrs. Manstey in her youth “had cherished a desire to live in the country, to have a hen-house and a garden,” but since this had not come to fruition, Mrs. Manstey had grown into an “uncommunicative old woman” with “tenderness for plants and animals” (117).

In this story, Wharton provides rich detail regarding what Mrs. Manstey sees from her “lightly projecting bow-window where she nursed an ivy and a succession of unwholesome-looking bulbs” (117). In the first passage dedicated to a description of the view, Wharton depicts human poverty and waste as well as images of struggling natural beauty. Wharton writes:

[s]ome of the yards were, indeed, but stony wastes, with grass in the cracks of the pavement and no shade in spring save that afforded by the
intermittent leafage of the clotheslines. These yards Mrs. Manstey disapproved of, but the others, the green ones, she loved. She had grown used to their disorder; the broken barrels, the empty bottles and paths unswept no longer annoyed her; hers was the happy faculty of dwelling on the pleasanter side of the prospect before her (118).

What is perhaps most striking about this introduction to the cherished view is the preponderance of disorder and garbage. If Mrs. Manstey is able to overlook the “broken barrels” and “empty bottles” by “dwelling on the pleasanter side of the prospect before her,” Edith Wharton cannot, nor does she wish for her reader to.

While her descriptions of nature are as tender as those feelings she imparts to Mrs. Manstey, this passage introduces the reader to Wharton’s dark view of the human-nature relationship. A relationship defined by increasing waste, consumption, and destruction of both the ecological world and those characters most allied with nature. In this short story Mrs. Manstey’s allegiance sides – albeit in ways that are often overly optimistic and consumptive – with the natural world.30

She tends her meager houseplants, she revels in the sweet “breath of a neglected syringa, which persisted in growing in spite of the countless obstacles opposed to its welfare” (118). When she notices a neighbor’s parrot being neglected by a maid “Mrs. Manstey, in spite of her gouty hand…penned a letter, beginning: "Madam, it is now three days since your parrot has been fed,”” (118). Wharton writes that, “Mrs. Manstey’s real friends were the denizens of the yards, the hyacinths, the magnolia, the green parrot, the maid who fed the cats” (118).

This world, dominated by the yard and comprised of “meditative moods” and “tenderer musings,” shatters one day in April when Mrs. Manstey learns that Mrs.

30 Her love of her view is not purely a natural fixation although nature is “the front rank”.

Black—whose very name seems foreboding—intends to build an extension on her boarding house, an extension that will obliterate Mrs. Manstey’s view. At this point Wharton begins to unravel the utter hopelessness of the nature-lover’s plight.

Although Mrs. Manstey tries to talk Mrs. Black out of building the extension, and even offers to hand over her life savings of two-thousand dollars, Mrs. Black dismisses the woman as “crazy” (121). When building commences the very next day, Mrs. Manstey becomes even more determined to halt the extension project. Wharton writes:

Having slipped a bundle of wooden matches into her pocket she proceeded, with increasing precautions, to unlock her door, and a few moments later she was feeling her way down the dark staircase, led by a glimmer of gas from the lower hall….A gust of cold wind smote her as she stepped out and groped shiveringly under the clothes-lines. That morning at three o’clock an alarm of fire brought the engines to Mrs. Black’s door…The wooden balcony at the back of Mrs. Black’s house was ablaze, and among those who watched the progress of the flames was Mrs. Manstey, leaning in her thin dressing-gown from the open window (122).

This act, of what would today be called eco-terrorism, constitutes Mrs. Manstey’s last real exertion of agency in the text. Diagnosed with pneumonia and given no chance for recovery, a nurse and land-lady carry Mrs. Manstey to the window so she can look out at her view. From her chair the dying woman gazes upon “a jubilant spring dawn”.

The final passage lingers for a moment on the beauty of her view then states “Mrs. Manstey’s head fell back and smiling she died. That day the building of the extension was resumed” (122).

Thus, despite her monumental efforts, endangering her health, her reputation and her freedom, and paying with her life, Mrs. Manstey cannot stop the building which this story describes as “a disease, like drink” (119). In this text, Wharton
illustrates with stunning clarity a vision of the world primarily populated by those either hostile toward nature, such as Mrs. Black, or oblivious to it, such as the landlady, who “did not know that there was a magnolia in the next yard,” or the workers, one who “picked a magnolia blossom and, after smelling it, threw it to the ground” and another who because he was preoccupied in moving a load of bricks “trod on the flower in passing” (121). This dark vision of nature as imperiled recurs in much of Wharton’s fiction, and often appears in works that seem unconcerned with natural phenomena.

Ecocriticism, like many branches of literary analysis, has a stake in contemporary politics. While there are some theorists who wish to keep political aspects of criticism out of their work, in my opinion, ecocriticism springs from a deep concern about contemporary issues. My own interest in this theoretical framework begins with my acknowledgement of a current global ecologic crisis which, being anthropogenic in origin, I contend must have a roots in human history and culture. Just as feminist and queer scholars have examined literature for the ideological basis of actual oppression, so too may ecocritics look to literature for a record of those ideas which shaped environmental history as well as current policy.

While some contend that the ecocritic looks for and exposes the “voice of nature” this is not my focus. I believe that the voice of nature cannot be found in any human artifact, but what can be found, is evidence of how our species values and interacts with nature. These interactions, predicated upon these values form the root of the current ecological state. In the works of Edith Wharton, which represent the
ideologies of America’s ruling social class, an ecocritic may chart a shifting cultural evaluation of nature.
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