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EDITH WHARTON AND CHILDREN

Guest Co-Editor
Elizabeth Lennox Keyser

Versions of these four essays on Edith Wharton and children were presented at the 1994 Modern Language Association annual meeting in San Diego, the topic having been proposed at the previous MLA. The original suggestion was a panel of papers on Wharton's somewhat neglected novel The Children, *but, as editor of the annual* Children's Literature, *I suggested expanding the topic to include children as they appeared anywhere in her life and writings. The subtitle of the panel, "A New Turn of the Screw," derives from Henry James's* The Turn of the Screw. *My first thought was that the topic gives a new turn to the screw of Wharton criticism, one involving children, but had I myself written a paper for the panel it would have dealt, as Gianfranca Balestra's does in part, with Wharton's debt to and difference from James in her portrayal of children and childhood.*

When the expanded topic was first proposed, the immediate response was what children — outside the novel of that name. But as we started talking in that 1993 Wharton Society meeting, we began coming up with more and more. Jean Blackall was almost immediately struck by the significance of absent *(missing, anticipated, or imagined) children, the subject of her essay. And many of us began to see that Wharton's fictional world was more densely populated with children than we had at first realized. They do not appear, perhaps, as major figures in the best-known fiction, but they are frequently a haunting, sometimes a haunted presence, not only in the published work but in unpublished manuscripts. Perhaps we had missed them because, as the editors of the newly published* Infant Tongues: The Voice of the Child in Literature *(Wayne State UP) write, "Within the institution of criticism itself, the child in adult literature tends to be benignly neglected . . ., like some domesticated Other" (2). But this benign neglect seems unlikely to continue. The fourteen excellent proposals I received in response to my paper call, the prevalence of essays and papers on cross-writing (texts that blur the conventional boundaries between adult and children's literature) in journals and at conferences, and the publication of* Infant Tongues *itself all indicate that children in texts for adults are making their presence known and their voices heard.*

(continued on page 2)

Jean Blackall's essay, "The Absent Children in Edith Wharton's Fiction," paradoxically gives a sense of their ubiquity, at least as tropes. And her essay, like Julie Olin-Ammentorp's, also demonstrates how an attention to the child figure, even of authors seemingly uninterested in children for their own sake, can generate fresh readings of familiar works (the lightly regarded Sanctuary in Blackall's case). But the children she discusses are for the most part silent, often presented in tableaux to be interpreted by adult characters, suggesting that Wharton was more comfortable treating children as objects of adult consciousness. Gianfranca Balestra, on the other hand, analyzes Wharton's early effort to employ what James, in his Preface to What Maisie Knew, calls a "light vessel of consciousness." Whether Wharton failed to complete Disintegration because the child protagonist shared too many features of her own childhood, as disclosed in the also fragmentary "Life and I," or because she became discouraged with her attempt to use a child reflector, she nonetheless, as Balestra demonstrates, places her child victim "in the foreground of a large and complex social picture."

The child figures discussed in Elsa Nettels' "Children as Readers," while frequently portrayed as convalescents, are not simply passive victims. Rather, male child and adolescent characters replicate Wharton's own childhood experience of becoming what she calls "active readers." Like Balestra, whose reading of the fragment Disintegration throws light on the later novel A Mother's Recompense, Nettels shows how the uncompleted manuscript Literature anticipates Hudson River Bracketed. She also raises questions as to why Wharton's female child and adolescent characters fail to become active readers – or subordinate their love of reading to their desire to serve others. Cases in point are Terry and Judith Wheater in The Children. But while only Terry may be a reader, and while all the children, like Val in Disintegration, can be viewed as victims of a corrupt society, the little Wheaters are anything but passive and silent. And while they pose a conundrum for the hero, Martin Boyne, they never remain still long enough to function as a tableau. Julie Olin-Ammentorp explores the implications of placing Martin Boyne's relationship with the children, rather than the love triangle of Martin, Rose, and Judith, at the center of the novel, and concludes that Boyne is motivated by his longing to share their "warm animal life" as much as by fear of committing himself to Rose or by desire for Judith.

Contemporary novelist Mary Gordon, who has written much about the "warm animal of life of children" as well as an introduction to Ethan Frome (Bantam, 1987), writes in "Having a Baby, Finishing a Book," "Often childless women write the most interesting things about mothers and children" (Good Boys and Dead Girls 217). Prior to this MLA panel, I would not have thought of Edith Wharton in connection with Gordon's claim, but the sheer number of texts cited in these essays and the new insights generated by examinations of Wharton's fictional children suggest that Gordon might well have had Wharton in mind. In her essay on Wharton and Ethan Frome, Gordon reminds us that "it is possible for a writer to write far outside the experiential range of his or her own life" (Good Boys 30). In the case of children Wharton, like James, appears to have done so.

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The Absent Children In Edith Wharton's Fiction

by Jean Frantz Blackall

Edith Wharton was a childless woman. Neither did she share experiences in childhood with siblings near her own age, as George Eliot and the Brontës did. Edith was ten years old when her elder brother's daughter Trix was born, and her first close girlfriend was nineteen years old when Edith met her (Lewis 27). Wharton's own adult interests were oriented toward the drawing room and library rather than the nursery. How, then, did she attempt to integrate children, that is, pre-adolescent characters, into her fictions without artificiality or falsification?

There are many answers to this question. The most obvious is that, having herself been a solitary child with an inquiring mind, Edith Wharton could retrospectively scrutinize and contemplate that child and her experiences from the perspective of an adult. We see her doing so not only in *A Backward Glance* but also at the beginning of her career as a novelist, in Part One of *The Valley of Decision (1902).*[1] Here Odo Valsecca, a lonely boy, lets his imagination play over murals and landscapes just as Edith Wharton's own childish imagination was nurtured by illustrated books (Lewis 18). "The chapel of Pontesordo was indeed as wonderful a story-book as fate ever unrolled before the eyes of a neglected and solitary child" (*VD* 4). "So familiar had he grown with the images on its walls that he had a name for every one: the King, the Knight, the Lady, the children with guinea-pigs, basilisks and leopards, and lastly the Friends as he called Saint Francis" (*VD* 8). Here Wharton causes the adult narrator to record the images that pass through a child's mind and the values he assigns them. Saint Francis becomes Valsecca's imaginary friend. Wharton again resorts to this strategy of describing the thoughts of a lonely child wordlessly confronting a painted image in *The Custom of the Country,* where Paul Marvell discovers his *alter ego* in Van Dyck's "Grey Boy": "The boy's hand rested on the head of a big dog, and he looked infinitely noble and charming, and yet (in spite of the dog) so sad and lonely that he too might have come home that very day to a strange home where none of his old things could be found" (*CC* 578).

Elsewhere Wharton symbolizes the idea of a child. This practice may take the form of a passing metaphor, as when a disappointed poet in "That Good May Come" cries out that he is sick of his poems. His friend replies: "'Don't say that....It's like disowning one's own children'" (*CSS* 1:22). This early, uncollected story also illustrates the symbolizing strategy in a more explicit way. The young girl in this tale is repeatedly presented in a *tableau* effect, under scrutiny by her older brother. He assigns her meanings, interprets her character, according to his own reflections. "He came abruptly upon the figure of a young girl, seated in an attitude of tragic self-abandonment" (*CSS* 1:27). "Her face was pale, with the candid pallor of an intense but scarce-comprehended emotion. She sat bolt upright, in a kind of Pre-Raphaelite rigidity which accorded with the primitive inexpressiveness of her rapt young features and the shadowless chalk-like mass of her [Confirmation] dress and veil" (*CSS* 1:35). In her brother's reflections Annette's character emerges as one compounded of devoutness and vanity, but she herself remains a *tabula rasa* upon which abstract meanings are inscribed. She *scarcely comprehends* her own emotion. Her features are *primitively inexpressive.*

Throughout her career Wharton inscribes meanings upon

mute or relatively inarticulate children from the point of view of an observer character or a detached narrator. But she achieves greater subtlety than in this early tale. In *The House of Mirth,* for example, the narrator records Lily Bart's reading of a confrontation between Simon Rosedale and Carry Fisher's little daughter: "she could not but notice a quality of homely goodness in his advances to the child ....Something in his attitude made him seem a simple and kindly being compared to the small critical creature who endured his homage. Yes, he would be kind –" (*HM* 195). Thereafter, Nettie Struther's infant represents domestic fulfillment and the bond of trust between its parents. At the end of the novel this infant becomes the imaginary child that Lily cradles in her arm during her final sleep. "She did not know how it had come there, but she felt no great surprise at the fact, only a gentle penetrating thrill of warmth and pleasure" (*HM* 251). It may symbolize Lily's aspirations or the road not taken. But the image speaks for itself; in this later instance the reader is not dependent upon the narrator to ascribe such meanings.

In this paper I shall be primarily concerned with the *absent* children in Edith Wharton's fiction, with the children who are not there, who do not speak, who are not seen, who exist as ideas rather than characters, such as the imaginary creature Lily Bart cradles in her arm. These absent children include the unborn, the dead, the lost children; unacknowledged children, hidden away; and those who appear only silently and fleetingly in fictions over which they nonetheless exert an influence. By translating the character of the child into an assertive but unseen or mute presence, a motivating force or idea, a pawn in adult games, Edith Wharton frequently avoided the problem of verisimilitude in the representation of children. She simply redirects our attention as readers to the complexity of adult responses to the fact that children must be reckoned with.

In her upward social trajectory Undine Spragg's prehensile imagination gives rise to "the vision of herself as the mother of the future Marquis de Chelles" (*CC* 503), and the absence of a child is the key to her inability to exert power in her marriage into the French nobility. Undine perceives that "her continued childlessness was regarded by every one about her as not only unfortunate but somehow vaguely derogatory to her" (*CC* 508). The Princess Estradina points the moral: "'It's a thousand pities you haven't had a child. They'd all treat you differently if you had'" (*CC* 515). Unborn children are also a motivating force in both *Summer* and *The Age of Innocence.* Charity Royall seeks refuge on the Mountain, consents to a marriage with Lawyer Royall, and uses his wedding present of money to reclaim her blue brooch, all with her unborn child's best interests in mind. She is first concerned with the child's blood identity, later with its nurture, and finally, with preserving the bond with the father through a symbolic object. The existence of Charity's unborn child causes the mother to achieve her own maturity. Likewise, Newland Archer yields his desires to his responsibilities when an unborn child is in question. The description of Archer's elder son and his siblings as children is relegated to a few retrospective paragraphs in the epilogue (chapter XXXIV), and Dallas Archer enters the novel as a young adult.

Elsewhere, absent children are either manipulators or pawns in adult games. The impossible Jane's "Mission" in the story by that name is to unite her ill-suited parents through a bond of "tired heroism" (*CSS* 1:379) in coping wtih her obs reperousness. The reader witnesses this process from the father's point of view. Jane herself remains offstage, and her development and behavior are rendered in a generalized summary until she has reached adulthood. In "The Other Two" the absent Lily, sick in bed upstairs, governs the dynamics of the relationships between her mother and her mother's present and ex-husband. Other children who are marginal to their stories nonetheless become pawns in adult games played for high stakes. Madame de Treymes's failure to remarry and Ralph Marvell's suicide in *The Custom of the Country* are events brought about, respectively, by the wish to retain custody and the loss of custody of a beloved son.

Concealment motivates other parents. In "The Young Gentlemen" a man's whole life – and also Edith Wharton's story – is structured about the concealment of his retarded dwarf sons. They appear only fleetingly at the end of the tale, as withered adults playing with blocks before the nursery fire (*CSS* 11:397). Again, there is a *tableau* effect, as if a curtain were raised at the end of the story. And just as Ralph Marvell committed suicide upon the loss of his son, Waldo Cranch in "The Young Gentlemen" drowns himself when his own sons are revealed: "'He rushed out and died sooner than have them seen, the poor lambs; him that was their father, Madam. And here you and this gentleman come thrusting yourselves in....[EW's ellipses]'" (11:398). Another concealed child, put up for adoption after his illegitimate birth, is the motivating force for the quest story entitled "Her Son." In this tale Mrs. Stephen Glenn fruitlessly pursues her lost boy into his adult years, and the mother's quest is deflected onto the adult story of how charlatans dupe Mrs. Glenn into believing that she has found her grown son.

Collectively, we see that Wharton repeatedly invokes certain interacting strategies to deal with what was for her the problem or the challenge of representing children. These include the postponed entry or total absence of a child from

a tale within which he is nevertheless a presence to be reckoned with; the representation of a silent child as a spectator of a painting that presents some relationship to himself; the attribution of a symbolic meaning to a child or the idea of a child; and, perhaps most important, the *tableau vivant* efffect. In the *tableau* effect the child is present but is speechless or limited to inconsequential remarks. He is scrutinized and interpreted by an observer character or by the narrator or by the reader rather than speaking or acting in self-revealing ways. For instance, in *The Old Maid,* Charlotte Lovell's illegitimate daughter Clementina is seen only once as a little girl, in a day nursery where Delia Ralston seeks her out. "Teeny" is dressed in remnants of her mother's clothing, "in a plaid alpaca frock trimmed with imitation coral buttons that Delia remembered. Those buttons had been on Charlotte's 'best dress' the year she came out" (*ONY* 99). This child is a sort of emblem of her mother's poverty and shame – like little Pearl in *The Scarlet Letter,* a symbol rather than a developed, articulate character. With her "brown curls [growing] in points on her high forehead, exactly as Clement Spender's did" (*ONY* 99-100), Teeny also manifests her father's identity. But she herself is silent and unknowing; she merely stands in Delia's lap playing with her gold watch chain. We saw that the girl in her white Communion dress in "That Good May Come" is used in a similar fashion, as an emblem to be interpreted by her older brother. To him she represents both devoutness and vanity. Later, in *A Backward Glance,* Wharton contemplates herself in just this way, as an object to whom the retrospective adult ascribes meanings. Of her infant self in her pretty new bonnet (1), and herself kissed on the cheek by her Cousin Daniel, she remarks, "it will be seen that I was wakened to conscious life by the two tremendous forces of love and vanity" (3).

Edith Wharton's early *nouvelle, Sanctuary* (1903), is remarkable for its employment of several of the strategies enumerated so far. This whole tale is structured around a sequence of absent children: first, *a drowned infant;* then *an imaginary child;* and finally, *a remembered child.* This *nouvelle* has been much criticized as being composed of two disjointed parts, but it is perfectly integrated if one regards it as a story centered in the idea of the nurture of children. It is a more subtly crafted work than interpreters have remarked.[2]

In Part One, Denis Peyton commits a moral breach of faith against the widow and child of his deceased elder stepbrother by suppressing his knowledge that the woman was in fact legally married to Arthur Peyton. The results are that Arthur Peyton's fortune succeeds to Denis and the bereft widow drowns herself and her infant. Kate Orme, Denis's fiancée, is horrified when she learns of his behavior and resolves to terminate their engagement. But then, in an excruciating moral cerebration, Kate envisions the child Denis might father hereafter if he went on to marry some other woman unsuspecting of what Kate regards as the moral taint in his blood:

> through the blur of sensations one image strangely persisted – the image of Denis's child....the vision of the child whose mother she was not to be....He would marry a girl who knew nothing of his secret – for Kate was intensely aware that he would never again willingly confess himself....And with this deception between them their child would be born: born to an inheritance of secret weakness, a vice of the moral fibre, as it might be born with some hidden physical taint which would destroy it before the cause should be detected....[EW's ellipsis] Well, and what of it? Was she to hold herself responsible? Were not thousands of children born with some such unsuspected taint? . . . [EW's ellipsis] Ah, but if here was one that she could save? What if she, who had had so exquisite a vision of wifehood, should reconstruct from its ruins this vision of protecting maternity? (*S* 138-39)

This is the moral imperative with which Part One of *Sanctuary,* its "Prologue," concludes. And this passage is in effect a gloss on the story Wharton created: the metamorphosis of an "exquisite . . . vision of wifehood" into one of "protecting maternity." The imaginary, tainted child of Denis Peyton that Kate Orne envisioned in the prologue is transformed in the main body of the tale into the morally tested adult son of Denis and Kate. Just as the prologue fixed on crises of moral decision in both of the parents, so the tale focuses on a similar crisis of moral decision in the son. It dramatizes the fruits of Kate's self-sacrificing labors over years to atone for the drowned infant and its mother. Will her son Dick Peyton succumb to temptation, as his father did before him, and tacitly integrate the architectural designs of his deceased friend into his own work? If so, Dick has every prospect of winning a competition and, thereby, an ambitious fiancée who sets store by that test of his future prospects. At this climactic moment, as Kate agonizingly watches the battle of parental influences warring in her son, she invokes the vehicle of a remembered child, her son as a boy undergoing a crisis of fever, as a counterpart to the spiritual battle that now convulses him. This is Wharton's way of accentuating the spiritual battle, by rendering it in

a physical counterpart: Will a second child be lost to the hereditary weakness, the complacent opportunism, in the Peyton family?

> Once she had felt the same silence, once when Dick, in his school-days, had been ill of a fever, and she had sat up with him on the decisive night. The silence had been as deep and as terrible then....She had before her the vision of his room, of the cot in which he lay, of his restless head working a hole in the pillow, his face so pinched and alien under the familiar freckles. It might be his death-watch she was keeping: the doctors had warned her to be ready. And in the silence her soul had fought for her boy.
>
> (*S* 195)

Sanctuary is a moral fable, treating an Everyman figure in each of two generations, Denis and Dick Peyton each forced to choose between greed and rectitude. In the prologue, the death of an innocent child is the price of Denis Peyton's choosing wrongly. In the main body of the tale, the drowned child of the prologue is superseded by the remembered child who survived a crisis of fever, counterpart to the spiritual crisis that the adult Dick Peyton is now experiencing. Kate Orme's self-sacrificing choice has worked. The imaginary, the unborn, child whose cause she embraced in marrying Denis Peyton, is becoming the morally sound adult that Kate strived to create. Then, in the very last lines of the *nouvelle* the doomed child resurfaces in a metaphor, as Dick Peyton says to his mother: "'I want you to know that it's your doing – that if you had let go an instant I should have gone under – and that if I'd gone under I should never have come up again alive'" (*S* 202).

In sum, there are three absent children in *Sanctuary.* The first never appears in Wharton's story; its death by drowning is reported to Kate Orme and to us as readers, and later its presence gives point to Dick Peyton's tribute to his mother at the end of the tale. The second child exists only as Kate Orme's "vision," rather like Lily Bart's vision of a child protectingly cradled in her arm. It is a cypher, a symbol of possibilities as yet undefined. Kate fears for Denis's child yet to be born unless she should intervene in its fate. The treatment of the third child is foreshortened, the feverish boy relegated to a single paragraph of his mother's retrospect. But this passage vividly illustrates Wharton's *tableau* effect: the feverish boy's restless tossing objectifies the spiritual crisis he is now enduring as an adult. From a technical point of view, Edith Wharton has transformed the freckled boy of his mother's retrospect into the adult young man, whose activities she can more assuredly render in a fiction.

Emerita (Williamsburg, VA)

NOTES

1. Parenthetic citations of texts by Wharton are identified as follows: *CSS – The Collected Short Stories of Edith Wharton, BG – A Backward Glance, CC – The Custom of the Country, HM – The House of Mirth, ONY – The Old Maid, S – Sanctuary, VD – The Valley of Decision.* Initial and terminal ellipses are omitted in quotations. Edith Wharton's own ellipses are identified in brackets.

2. See, e.g., R.W.B. Lewis: "The story breaks in two, each part turning on an intricate moral dilemma" (123), or the contemporary review by Frederic Taber Cooper, who doesn't see much connection between the two parts of the story. Otherwise, modern critics are dismissive of *Sanctuary* for reasons that have to do with the moral tortuosities of the *nouvelle.* See Lev Raphael for a brief résumé (34). I concur with Raphael in thinking that *Sanctuary* has "unappreciated strengths" (34) as well as weaknesses but feel that its ending is a fitting conclusion to the work, as he does not. The case for a reassessment of *Sanctuary* within the Wharton canon is a matter to which I will return hereafter.

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What The Children Knew: The Manuscript Of *Disintegration*, An Unfinished Novel.

by Gianfranca Balestra

At the beginning of her career Wharton seems to have paid special attention to the emotional life of children, whose prevailing sense of deprivation has been generally connected to her own childhood experience. *The Valley of Decision* (1902), her first novel, started with a neglected child – the cadet of a noble family brought up by peasant foster parents – who "suffered in a dumb animal way, without understanding why life was so hard on little boys" (7). *Disintegration,* her planned second novel, was to portray the plight of a little girl after her mother abandons the family and marries another man. Wharton worked on this project in 1902, but never completed it. As Cynthia Griffin Wolff first pointed out (99), she reworked it in 1925 into *The Mother's Recompense* with a series of thematic and technical reversals. This late novel has recently received a great deal of critical attention, both as an ambivalent treatment of the mother/daughter relationship and in its autobiographical connotations. I would like to focus, instead, on the text of the unfinished manuscript of *Disintegration,* now at the Beinecke Library, which consists of seventy-four typewritten and seventeen hand-written pages.[1] *The Mother's Recompense* will be only briefly approached for some final considerations.

The headnote to Book I of *Disintegration* reads: "Was hat man dir, du armes King, gethan?" ("What have they done to you, poor child?"), foreshadowing the central role of the child as victim. In fact, the little girl, Valeria, with her loneliness and sense of deprivation, seems to be the emotional center of the novel (Wolff 99) as well as the initial narrative focus. In the first two chapters she is the reflector, the point of view through which the world is perceived. Wharton was embarking, early in her career, on a difficult narrative enterprise, trying to solve the technical problem of how to represent the rather limited consciousness of a child. Later on, with *Ethan Frome* (1911) and *Summer* (1917), she would address a somewhat similar question, focussing on characters limited by their inarticulateness and lack of education rather than by age. She would successfully meet the challenge, by introducing a narrative frame in the first case, and adopting subtle ways of rendering a "sensuous apprehension of reality" in the second. Wharton considered particularly appropriate the structural device of *Ethan Frome,* both in her 1922 introduction to the novel and in *A Backward Glance* where she maintained that "it was not until [she] wrote *Ethan Frome* that [she] suddenly felt the artisan's full control of his implements" (941). Jean Frantz Blackall has brilliantly demonstrated the sophistication of her technique in *Summer.*

In 1902, however, Wharton was still searching for form and "mastery over her tools," experimenting rather tentatively in her "secret garden." She had the example of James's *What Maisie Knew,* published in 1897, to work with, and move away from (the initial situation and angle of vision are too similar to be accidental), but evidently Wharton wanted to elaborate on the subject, introducing her own technical and thematic variations. In spite of her admiration for the Master, she would never completely appreciate his experimental style and complexities, and thought he tended to sacrifice to theories and geometical designs "the spontaneity which is the life of fiction."[2]

In *Disintegration,* then, Wharton starts from the situation of a sensitive girl who is traumatically affected by the

abandonment of her mother. The story is first told from the little girl's point of view, but later on the father's point of view is introduced, as well as that of a family friend. Switching the point of view makes it possible to communicate some information not available to the child, but breaks the structural and psychological unity of the text.[3] Wolff rightly suggests that "Wharton's inability to chose between [two possible foci of interest] – to select one coherent set of problems and to resolve them – may have been the ultimate cause of her suspending work on the novel" (99). Her variations on the lesson of the Master were probably meant to represent the disintegration of a whole society, but her uncertainties in the early phase of literary apprenticeship prevented her from sustaining her effort. Moreover, I would like to suggest, some very personal issues and acutely sensitive nerves were exposed in this manuscript and contributed to its interruption, for the text had too much of the "long shriek" written "at the top of her voice," as she said of some early stories she preferred not to collect in a volume.[4] I will try now to demonstrate my surmise, concentrating on the representation of the child and its autobiographical undertones.

The opening scene of *Disintegration* introduces Valeria while walking along Fifth Avenue with her nurse Noony. The episode has immediate autobiographical reverberations, evoking Wharton's own promenade up Fifth Avenue, which constitutes her very first memory, recollected at the beginning of *A Backward Glance* (777). The little girl "that bore [Edith's] name" is there seen walking with her father, but we know from her own words the importance in her life of her beloved Doyley:

> How I pity children who have not had a Doyley – a nurse who has always been there, who is as established as the sky and as warm as the sun, who understands everything, feels everything, can arrange everything, and combines all the powers of the Divinity with the compassion of a mortal heart like one's own! Doyley's presence was the warm cocoon in which my infancy lived safe and sheltered; the atmosphere without which I could not have breathed. It is thanks to Doyley that not one bitter memory, one uncomprehended injustice, darkened the days when the soul's flesh is so tender, and the remembrance of wrongs so acute (804).

This eulogy of Doyley bears significant analogies with the characterization of Noony, who was "one of the fundamental facts of life" (2), and whose qualities, "unmatched within the range of Val's experience," are worth quoting at some length:

> her power of sustained attention while pages of 'story-book' were poured into her ear in the monotonous shout of infancy; her familiarity with the wants and habits of puppies, rabbits, squirrels, and other small mammals; her tolerance of messy live things in basins, and her unfailing readiness to 'tidy up' the nursery after those holiday afternoons, which, to most children, are dimmed by the impending obligation of having to put things away. Noony was as full of moral axioms as a copy-book; but there was a genial discrepancy between her principles and conduct, and most of her rules were no more meant for use than the Sunday silk which she kept in the bottom of an old brindled trunk in the attic. On essential points she was inexorable; but Valeria knew that the *malum prohibitum* of dabbling with ink or wading in a clean frock was divided by the whole width of her nurse's cheerful tolerance from the *malum in se* of meanness or falsehood. Noony had the Irish gift of evading a moral, and her ingenuity in finding reasons for overlooking Valeria's infraction of nursery laws kept pace with her charge's versatility in breaking them (2-3).

The connection between Doyley and Noony goes obviously beyond the assonance of names and implies a similar protective function, underlined by the imagery. In fact, "Noony, at that time, was the ocean bounding her world; the continent 'Mamma' forming an outer region of wonder and fable, dreamed of rather than lived in" (3-4). This beautiful geographical metaphor functions like the "warm cocoon" in the autobiography, and defines the relationship between child, nurse, and mother in similar terms. It is important to notice that also in Wharton's case, her nanny occupies the foreground of the picture, her mother the background as an elegant woman with beautiful clothes "and all the other dim impersonal attributes of a Mother, without, as yet, anything much more definite" (804). The image of her mother as distant and inaccessible is more explicitly presented in a negative light in "Life and I," an earlier version of her memoir.[5] In the unfinished novel, the already distant mother becomes literally absent.

Gloria Erlich has offered a provocative study of the effects of surrogate mothering on young Edith Wharton, contending that substitution of the first attachment figure with another may initiate an obscure sense of deprivation, perceived as abandonment (6). The split-mother phenomenon results in what she considers "a prototypical pattern – adoration of the nanny at the expense of the mother" (12). Erlich explores the ways in which double mothering shaped Wharton's imagination and surfaced in her work. I think the manuscript of *Disintegration,* not included in her analysis, is one of Wharton's most explicit stagings of the theme. The psychological sense of maternal deprivation is here rewritten in a script of real abandonment.

When, in the opening scene of the novel, Val sees her mother ride by in a carriage, she is dazzled by the "forbidden enchantment of her sight," and thinks her "the beautifullest mother in the world" (2). This is an unusual attempt to reproduce childhood speech on the part of a writer who, as Benstock points out, "as a child spoke like an adult, as do the children in her stories" (37). Val's appropriately infantile questions about why she is not supposed to look at her mother or talk about her meet with no satisfying answers, because her protective nurse cannot explain to her the cause of her mother's desertion (the reader will be informed later, by a conversation among adults at which the child is not present, that she has eloped with a rich man). However, as the narrative voice explains, Noony's pacifying talk is seen through by Val, who understands her "dialectical weakness" and is reduced to silence only because she "scorned the tame diversion of arguing with routed opponent" (2). Obviously the little girl perceives and understands more than her nurse realizes, but she has to make deductions from incomplete data, figuring out the gaps and interpreting images. So she "had known, since the cataclysmic day when the nursery fire remained unlit, and there were no lessons, and her supper was forgotten – that some change had come over that part of her universe known as Mamma" (3). As the narrative voice points out, "the changes were mainly geographical" (3), her tangible losses perceived through her senses; the faint violet scent, the door-bell ring, the pastries, "the bedtime vision of a glittering lady" are some of the scents, flavours, sights and sounds now missing in her world. As was customary in upper-class families, the mother's role in the daily care of the child was negligible, so that "of more personal changes the child remained unconscious, and after the first day she hardly noticed an absence which affected none of the fundamental laws of nursery life" (3).

On the day of her mother's departure, Val's relationship with her father undergoes a sudden change. Until then Mr. Chephane had been even more remote than Mrs. Clephane, although gentler. Now for the first time the girl is allowed to eat with him at the dinner table, where "she felt she was 'entertaining' him, as mother entertained the gentlemen who came to tea; a feeling increased by the discovery that her being allowed to do so was somehow distinctly connected with her mother's being away" (6). The daughter was substituting, as it were, for her mother: no wonder that "that dinner remained one of the most vivid pictures of Valeria's childhood" (5). The first chapter significantly ends with the little girl who offers to take care of her father, and sidles "ecstatically closer" to him, announcing: "Oughtn't I *always* to dine downstairs, then – so that you'll *never* be alone?" (7) The oedipal character of this attachment is very frankly depicted,[6] and seems to reflect the family dynamics delineated by Gloria Erlich, and other critics. However, the girl's "intimacy with her father" (15) ends shortly because of his illness and is not restored by his return to health: "Val was no longer his companion: she had gone back to being his little girl. To a child of her susceptibilities the change was humiliating: it robbed her of the one advantage her mother's going had seemed to give" (15). There will be only a few other scenes of intimacy, when Valeria is older and Mr. Clephane will talk of their lonely life together as "a kind of honeymoon" (63).

As she slowly becomes aware, the illness and subsequent decline of the father is imputed by the whole household to the mother's desertion. The text follows very closely Valeria's growing understanding of her family situation, through visual and other sensory perceptions, direct scenes and innuendos, as well as the narrator's comments. The second chapter starts in fact with the narrative voice summing up her impressions for her, defining "her mother's departure as the first in a series of eliminations, of subtractions from the total of existence" (8). Her sense of exclusion is marked by the shutting of real and metaphorical doors, which keep her away from her father and from the desired information in a sort of conspiracy of silence ("They all slammed the same door in her face," 10). In spite of this, Val comes to realize that her mother's absence is permanent, while at the beginning she had interpreted it as temporary, something like the going away of summer which punctually returns. She collects more fragments of knowledge while playing with her little cousin Betty, who informs her that nobody visits her mother anymore because she is "improper." The scene is revealing on different levels: characteristically, Val doesn't like to play with dolls, but resigns herself to her cousin's preference with intermittent flashes of rebellion; the game is chiefly "connected with the social life of dolls" and includes "an accurate reproduction of the conversations

overheard in the drawing room" (10-1); she doesn't know what "improper" means, but "the word was more dreadful for its lack of precise meaning" (12) and causes her furious reaction. This episode is probably Wharton's most successful representation of the life of children, their socialization and language learning processes. The psychological impact on Valeria's mind is aptly described, and culminates in "a secretion of dread . . . about her mother's name," so that she "dared not speak it, even to herself" (13).

The "unshared mystery" about her mother generates more terror and suffering than a delicate attempt to explain the situation to the child would have. At one point she even suspects her dead, before she starts seeing her mother around in all her magnificence, "dazzling, sumptuous, remote, enclosed in an *aurea* of light and fragrance" (14). This apparition has the effect of turning the woman into a sort of divinity: "in Val's mind the maternal image was slowly entering on its apotheosis" (15). Characteristically, the little girl has inherited her mother's "taste for the external finish of life," and she begins to feel ashamed of her own old-fashioned clothes, of the narrow mean house she and her father have moved into. In "an unformulated childish way" (15), she becomes aware of changes, but she doesn't have the moral directions necessary to evaluate those changes: the conflict between morals and manners, appearance and reality, creates confusion in a crucial phase of her development. The role models she is presented with are totally unsatisfactory, and her allegiances oscillate between a distant stylish mother and a sensitive, ineffectual father. The situation appears like an extreme dramatization, almost a caricature, of Wharton's family constellation, anticipating other variations on the same theme in some of her most famous books. We can only guess at how damaging these childhood experiences will be for Val, since the story is interrupted before the full consequences can be drawn: when we last see her, she is fifteen, with the shyness and tremors of adolescence.

The last part of the text concentrates on the decline of Mr. Chephane and his household, marking the general collapse of old values and the consequent disintegration of society — another central theme in Wharton's fiction. Valeria reappears as a reflector in chapter five, when she is thirteen and can look back "with a certain contempt on her earlier state of innocence" (41), when she used to tease her nurse with questions about her mother. Now she knows all the facts concerning her, although "it would have been hard to say how these inklings of knowledge had been acquired: they lurked as much in the evasions of the discreet as in the admissions of the imprudent" (41). In Val's perspective now, "it was to Mrs. Clephane that everything depressing in [her] life was due" (42). But her feelings of dejection coexist with a capacity for enjoyment; her intense visual sensibility and rich imagination are now accompanied by a thirst for knowledge which can be satisfied by "an unchecked exploration of her father's library" (41).

To her father, Val seems already grown up, and he regrets her having been robbed of her infancy (51). She appears to him as one of the victims not only of the family breakdown, but of the collapse of a whole society. If she were not his own child, she could become a case history in the study he has been planning but will never find the energy to write: "It's to be a study of the new privileged class — a study of the effects of wealth without responsibility. Talk of the socialist peril. That's not where the danger lies. The inherent vice of democracy is the creation of a powerful class of which it can make no use — a kind of Frankenstein monster, an engine of social disintegration" (64). His tirade continues, to become one of Wharton's strongest indictments of the changes in American society. This is what she had in mind with *Disintegration* and will accomplish in her future masterpieces. The child as victim is here in the foreground of a large and complex social picture.

Mrs. Clephane, instead, is always in the background. She is the object rather than the subject of focalization, that is, she is observed from far away and talked about — by her daughter, husband, different members of society who first ostracize and then rehabilitate her, but she never becomes a 'reflector,' she is never allowed the expression of her feelings, ideas, reasons. In *The Mother's Recompense,* she becomes the center of consciousness, in a major reversal that helps redefine the whole plot, while reflecting Wharton's own development. I cannot possibly conduct here a comparative analysis of the two texts, but it is interesting to note that Wharton gives voice in the 1925 novel to the plight of the mother, who returns to the daughter she had deserted eighteen years earlier. In so doing, Mrs. Clephane is allowed to experience briefly the belated pleasures of motherhood, but at the same time to enjoy being mothered by her daughter, in an ambivalent rewriting of the mother and daughter plot.[7]

In conclusion, I would like to underline the importance of the unfinished manuscript of *Disintegration* on various grounds: as Wharton's first effort to "do New York" before James's admonition to do so; as a subtext to *The Mother's Recompense*; as a fictional reworking of her personal conflict with her mother; as an attempt at solving narrative problems of point of view. But above all, I think it offers one of Wharton's most cogent and moving representations of a little girl, her perceptions and feelings on the way to knowledge and maturity.

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[1] I am grateful to the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, for permission to quote from the manuscript of *Disintegration*.
[2] She expands on this in *A Backward Glance:* "I was naturally much interested in James's technical theories and experiments, though I thought, and still think, that he tended to sacrifice to them that spontaneity which is the life of fiction. Everything, in the latest novels, had to be fitted into a predestined design, and design, in his strict geometrical sense, is to me one of the least important things in fiction. Therefore, though I greatly admired some of the principles he had formulated, such as that of always letting the tale, as it unfolded, be seen through the mind most capable of reaching to its periphery, I thought it was paying too dear even for such a principle to subordinate to it the irregular and irrelevant movements of life" (926). As Bell points out in her illuminating study, Wharton "could not read" James's works of the decade 1894-1904 (221).
[3] In *The Writing of Fiction* Wharton would elaborate on her preference for a multiple point of view over a single reflector in the novel, which would "presuppose, on the part of the visualizing character, a state of omniscience and omnipresence likely to shake the reader's sense of probability. The difficulty is most often met by shifting the point of vision from one character to another, in such a way as to comprehend the whole history and yet preserve the unity of impression. In the interest of this unity it is best to shift as seldom as possible, and to let the tale work itself out from not more than two (or at most three) angles of vision, choosing as reflecting consciousness persons either in close mental and moral relation to each other, or discerning enough to estimate each other's parts in the drama, so that the latter, even viewed from different angles, always presents itself to the reader *as a whole*" (87-8).
[4] Edith Wharton. Letter to Edward L. Burlingame, July 10, 1898. *Letters*, 36.
[5] In "Life and I" she confesses, among other things: "I was never free from the oppressive sense that I had two absolutely inscrutable beings to please – God & my mother – who, while ostensibly upholding the same principles of behaviour, differed totally as to their application. And my mother was the most inscrutable of the two" (1074). Reading this and other autobiographical passages throws a revealing light, by contrast, on the moral and emotional security offered by the fictional nurse. Wharton's biographers and critics have elaborated on Wharton's relationship with her mother (see especially Lewis, Wolff, Goodman 1990).
[6] Katherine Joslin, however, in a rare examination of *Disintegration*, believes that "there is little of the Electra impulse in their relationship" (115).
[7] Joslin points out that reading *Disintegraton* and *The Mother's Recompense* together is enlightening because "they suggest a progression in Wharton's thinking. She moves from daughter to mother or from the concerns of youth to those of middle age, and from husband to wife or from the paternal to the maternal point of view" (115). What is interesting, though, is that in spite of this development, the grown woman still positions herself as the one seeking nurturance and emotionally becoming the child. In Erlich's analysis, the protagonist of *The Mother's Recompense* "yearns to attain and preserve a symbiotic mother-daughter relationship, but with the roles reversed, so that she is the cosseted object of her nurturing daughter's care" (144). On *The Mother's Recompense*, and the mother and daughter plot, see also Tintner, Beppu, and Goodman.

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Children and Readers in Wharton's Fiction

by Elsa Nettels

In *A Backward Glance*, Edith Wharton identified reading as the most vital activity of her childhood, the hours spent in the "kingdom of [her] father's library" as the time most important to her intellectual growth. "Whenever I try to recall my childhood it is in my father's library that it comes to life" (68). Even before she learned to read, she recalled, merely turning the pages of a book and feeling the "richness and mystery" of the black type and white margins stimulated her imagination, which from her earliest childhood had compelled her to make up stories. "From those mysterious blank pages I could evoke whatever my fancy chose" (34). Books not only "fed [her] passion for 'making up'"; reading created a private world secure from intrusion, a "secret retreat" where she could listen to "words and cadences [that] haunted it like song birds in a magic wood" (70).

In her childhood, Wharton showed little interest in reading about children or writing about children's activities. "The doings of children were always intrinsically less interesting to me than those of grown-ups" (*A Backward Glance* 33). The statement is true of Wharton the novelist with one qualification. Children's reading, although not a prominent feature in any of Wharton's novels, in three of her major works has a greater importance than the space allocated to it would suggest.

In *The Children*, Terry Wheater, aged eleven, is set apart from his six brothers and sisters by his fragile health, his intelligence, and his love of reading, the sign of his rare quality which is recognized by everyone who knows him. The protagonist Martin Boyne immediately perceives the difference between Terry and his twin sister Blanca, sensing in her "something obvious and almost vulgar" but knowing that "her brother could never be anything but distinguished" (9). Boyne's initial impression is verified by Terry's hunger for education, by his passionate appeal for a tutor to teach him Greek and Latin. The poetry of Browning, which Wharton, in *A Backward Glance*, called "one of the great Awakeners of my childhood" (66), creates a bond linking Martin Boyne, Rose Sellars, and Terry, to whom Rose gives a book of Browning's poems. The poem "A Grammarian's Funeral," from which Boyne quotes the passage beginning "All the peaks soar, but one the rest excels" (149), underscores the dedication to learning best exemplified in the novel by the child.

The power of a child's reading to define his relationshop to the adults closest to him is most vividly represented in a brief scene in *A Son at the Front*. One of John Campton's most poignant memories is of visiting his son George, a schoolboy sick in bed with a fever but so absorbed in George Borrow's *Lavengro* ("reading with his very finger-tips") that Campton perceives with a pang that his son "regarded the visit as an interruption" (29). What Campton feels most keenly is his sense of exclusion from the boy's life, fed by the bitter knowledge that his son's stepfather has provided the books to satisfy George's "latent hunger" (29). The boy, one infers, finds in reading the kind of "secret retreat" so precious to Edith Wharton in her own childhood. In later years, the boy's reading creates the strongest bond between father and son, whose common fascination with the transformation of life into art becomes "the subject of their interminable talks . . . Campton, with a passionate interest, watched his son absorbing through books what had mysteriously reached him through his paint-brush" (30).

Lavengro depicts the adventures of Borrow's early years, including his travels with his father's regiment and his rapturous childhood discovery of *Robinson Crusoe.* Such a book is an appropriate choice for the boy in Wharton's novel, for he will fight heroically in the First World War and die from wounds received at the front.

In *Hudson River Bracketed,* Wharton dramatized in fiction her own momentous initiation into the world of great literature. The protagonist Vance Weston, who discovers Romantic poetry in the library of a century-old house in upstate New York, is nineteen, no longer a child, but his innocence of high culture and his status as an outsider convalescing from typhoid fever make him seem childlike, vulnerable and dependent on others. The first words he reads – " In Xanadu did Kubla Khan" – open to him the enchanted secret world of Wharton's own childhood, here, too, conveyed in imagery of music: the "great undulation of sound" is music to which "the hidden chords of his soul at once vibrated" (63). Here again a personal relationship is defined through a shared response to an experience of reading. Halo Spear, destined to be Vance's lover and eventually his wife, materializes at that moment, as if summoned by his ecstatic response to the poetry.

Important scenes and characters in *Hudson River Bracketed* are foreshadowed in the manuscript titled *Literature,* the novel Wharton began writing before the First World War but never completed or published.[1] In this narrative, Wharton most fully re-created her own experiences as a child reader. The first words of the first chapter, "The most decisive event in Richard Thaxter's life," introduce the generative scene. Here the child, aged seven, listening in church to his father's sermon, hears the "celestial syllables" (2) that awaken him to the transfiguring power of words: "O, my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom" (2). What enthralls him is not their meaning but their sounds, which "joined together" create his "secret retreat," and "enchanted island of sound to which is fancy could put off at will' (17).

Like Wharton, he finds the quickening words, not in children's books, which he scorns, but in "the grown-up ones" (17) in his father's library. In particular, his reading of Browning "loosed all the sleeping ardours of his soul" (46). Like Wharton, inspired by printed pages to make up her own stories, the child Dicky Thaxter one day "found himself reading aloud a story of his own from one of the other people's books . . . the story grew out of the book . . . it overlay the other like a palimpsest" (22).

The climax marking the end of his childhood, when he is twelve, occurs when he discovers a volume of Whitman's poetry, shelved near Darwin's *Origin of Species* in his father's library. Late that night he is transported as never before when he reads the opening lines: "Out of the cradle endlessly rocking." "Never had words shaken out such wild lights, beat on him in waves so multitudinous" (58). When his candle burns down and his matches are gone, he goes to the window to read by moonlight a poem which invokes the mockingbird, "the singer solitary," whose song inspires within the child in the poem his own songs, "awaked from that hour." Wharton's scene is a rite of passage in which reading and creation become one; the child's destiny as an artist is affirmed by his response to Whitman's poem, which itself celebrates the birth of the poet's soul. As Kenneth Price observes, Wharton, her character, and the poet he reads merge in one identity: "the chain of substitution and transformation is made explicit with Wharton writing herself into the role of the male child and the male child melting into Whitman's identity" (390).

From these works a pattern emerges significant for the gender differences it represents. In Wharton's fiction, most of the ardent readers are male. (The group also includes Hayley Delane in "The Spark," although the narrator concludes that his development stopped at the age of nineteen.) Wharton's two most memorable child-women – Charity Royall (*Summer*) and Judith Wheater (*The Children*) – share an antipathy to books and reading. To Charity, the Hatchard Memorial Library, of which she is custodian, is a "prison-house" (14) filled with books she has no desire to read. Soon after they meet, Judith Wheater tells Martin Boyne, "'I don't suppose I shall ever care much about reading'" (50); then she rejects his proposal that she persuade her parents to send her "to a good school, if only to be able to keep up with Terry" (50). Later he notes that "Her attention always had a tendency to wander at the mention of books" (150).

Young female readers are not absent from Wharton's fiction, but they are subservient to men; their intellectual powers are put at the service of male figures. The main role of Halo Spear, Wharton's most memorable female reader, is to serve as a guide and muse to the young male artist Vance Weston. Fulvia Vivaldi, aged sixteen, is described as a "prodigy of female learning" (148) when she first appears in *The Valley of Decision.* But she has devoted herself to the career of her father, a philosopher and university professor, as if she were a "vestal" serving the priest (149). Paulina Anson, in "The Angel at the Grave," reads her grandfather's works with proud delight, in her childhood. But reading does not give her entrance into a world of her own. She becomes the custodian not only of her grandfather's house but of his philosophical writings. Her reading "fatally determined" (I, 248) the form of her ideas, and she remains a prisoner of the past, from which no lover can free her.

In her 1903 essay, "The Vice of Reading," Wharton contrasts what she terms "mechanical" and "creative" reading. "Mechanical" readers have an ulterior purpose: they read to improve themselves, to "keep up," to impress others, to appear virtuous. Such activity, Wharton believed, "is no more reading than erudition is culture" (513). She illustrates the "vice of reading" in "The Mission of Jane," by the unbearable child who lectures her father on the "evils of desultory reading" (I, 373) and whose "young mind remained a receptacle for mere facts" (I, 372). Wharton gives a more sympathetic portrait of the "mechanical" reader in *Twilight Sleep,* in the lawyer Dexter Manford, who chafes at his ignorance and decides "to start in on a course of European history" (58) but at night he is too tired to read.

The "creative reader" is the "born reader" who "reads as unconsciously as he breathes" (513), not for reward, but because he must. Seeking nothing, he receives the creative power and the joy in self-forgetfulness that reading gives. Terry Wheater, George Campton, and Dicky Thaxter are such readers. Not surprisingly, the first is an invalid; the second is recovering from a serious illness. Thus, both are excluded from the boy's world of school and sport. (One thinks of British counterparts in the tradition, such as Philip Wakem in *The Mill on the Floss* and Colin Craven in *The Secret Garden,* as well as James's Morgan Moreen in "The Pupil.")

Why did Edith Wharton portray no young female reader like herself? Why did she assume the identity of a male child in representing her own discovery of the enchanted secret world that reading creates? One answer is suggested by Cynthia Griffin Wolff's observation that Wharton apparently had few books of her own, that the site of her childhood reading was "Father's library," that she made her other discoveries among the books brought home from school by her brother (44). To convey only the creative joys of reading, not the pain of deprivation and exclusion, Wharton would naturally have made her youthful reader male, not female.

Another answer may be found in the literary works quoted or named in *The Children, A Son at the Front, Hudson River Bracketed,* and *Literature.* Each work celebrates a male artist or scholar – Browning's grammarian; Borrow, the philologist-traveller; the emperor-creator Kubla Khan; and the poet Whitman – yet another instance of Wharton's consistent identification of the highest creative achievement with the male artist.

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[1] I am grateful to the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, for permission to quote from Edith Wharton's manuscript *Literature.*

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Martin Boyne and the "Warm Animal Life" of *The Children*

by Julie Olin-Ammentorp

Previous criticism of Wharton's *The Children* (1928) has focused almost exclusively on the novel's "love triangle." Martin Boyne, the novel's central character, has planned to marry Rose Sellars, a recently-widowed woman of his own age; travelling from South America to Italy to propose to her, however, he encounters fifteen-year-old Judith Wheater and her clan of younger siblings and step-siblings. While attempting to help keep this group of children together despite the claims of warring parents and step-parents, Martin gradually finds himself falling out of love with Rose Sellars and into love with Judith Wheater.

Critics have varied dramatically in their interpretations of Martin's behavior and actions. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, for instance, sees Rose as someone who lives in "a wilderness of evasions and courtesies" (385), and thus argues that Boyne's rejection of her is appropriate. At the opposite end of the spectrum, Elizabeth Ammons sees Rose not as evasive but as mature. Ammons pairs Rose and Judith to suggest that "Figuratively . . . Boyne does not choose between two women but between two stages of development in woman, as he perceives her: the child and the grown-up" (175). In Ammons' view, his preference for "the child" clearly marks Boyne as yet another Whartonian male who is incapable of accepting fully adult women. A third argument is put forward by Judith Sensibar, who suggests that Martin Boyne's inability to marry either Rose or Judith represents a flight from adult heterosexuality, and that Martin Boyne is actually a repressed homosexual who uses heterosexual expectations to hide from his own unacknowledged sexuality.

Martin's attraction to Judith – which he himself is among the last to recognize consciously – is undoubtedly one of the central tensions of the novel. Yet the incessant critical focus on this attraction has prevented critics from noting exactly what Wharton focuses on in her title – the *children* in the book, including Martin's pull toward the children as a group. Focusing on the relationship between Martin and the children not only illuminates aspects of the novel that have often been overlooked, but also sheds some light on the Martin-Rose-Judith triangle as well. Putting *The Children* in the context of other Wharton novels, and in the context of Wharton's later life, further emphasizes the importance of the children in this work.

In *The Children,* Martin often thinks about and interacts with Judith's many siblings and step-siblings. Although Martin first notices Judith walking up the gangway to the steamer, it is Judith carrying Chip; that is, from the moment he first sees and admires her she is already part of the group of children. His first real connection to Judith comes when she hands the sleeping Chip over to him so as to chase one of the other children; holding "that heap of rosy slumber" (14) is his induction into the affairs of the group of seven children. On their voyage together to Italy a change is effected:

> . . . during the gay and clamorous expeditions ashore, and the long blue days on deck, he had been gradually penetrated by the warm animal life which proceeds from a troop of happy healthy children. (38)

Martin's sense of physical comfort, of "warm animal life," re-emerges at other points during the novel. After a few days away from them, for instance, Martin feels a sense of

"liberation" when he returns to them: "It was like getting back from a constrained bodily position into a natural one"; being with them gives him a "sense of being himself, being simply and utterly at his ease" (198). As he "resume[s] his half-fatherly attitude toward the group" he feels as if he were "getting home after a long and precarious journey during which he had been without news of the people he loved" (198). Even on a day when Judith is absent, he is impressed with the warm animal nature of the children:

> How healthy and jolly they all looked! And how good they smelt, with that mixed smell of woollen garments, and soap, and the fruity fragrance of young bodies tumbled about together. As Boyne looked back at them he thought how funny and dear they were . . . (221)

Even when Boyne has renounced his short-lived dream of marrying Judith — and adopting all the other children as part of the bargain — he focuses not just on leaving Judith but on leaving the other children as well. Half-asleep on the boat to Brazil, he daydreams the picnic he had promised them at Versailles. Though a part of his fantasy is an image of himself and Judith wandering off into the greenery, this setting proves "ghostly"; they return to the sunshine where "the children came storming toward them, shouting, laughing and wrangling." This imagined scene concludes with Boyne thinking, Little "devils — as if I could ever leave them!" (271). This fantasy, finally, is at least as much about the "warm animal life" of the children as it is about his attraction to Judith.

Previous critics have stressed Boyne's sexual attraction to Judith; I want to stress here his more general attraction to the children as a whole. Child development experts speak of the "bonding" that parents are supposed to achieve with their infants soon after a child's birth;[1] Martin's sense of physical comfort and closeness to the Wheater children seems to replicate such bonding. This is a very positive, nurturing feeling, one healthy for children and parents alike and, psychologists argue, necessary for children to develop a sense of well-being and self-worth. Boyne's experience illustrates how beneficial it is for adults as well.

Boyne's attraction to Judith is clearly more sexual in its nature and thus, because of their age difference, more troubling: Martin is forty-six, the approximate age of Judith's father, and Judith is fifteen — nearing the end of adolescence, but not yet fully an adult. His initial response is to her unconvential beauty ("Jove — if a fellow was younger!" he thinks when he first sees her); his second response is to his realization that she *is* still quite young. Seeing her carry the heavy infant Chip, he reflects "Lord — the child's ever so much too heavy for her. Must have been married out of the nursery: damned cad, not to —" (5). Yet when he believes momentarily that she is his old classmate Cliffe Wheater's new wife, he reflects "half-enviously" on Wheater's economic ability to marry and remarry younger women at will.

Wharton wrote that a novel's whole plot should be suggested by its opening pages,[2] and such is certainly the case here. From the outset, Boyne vacillates between his sexual attraction to Judith and his fatherly desire to protect her. This mixed motivation pervades his relationship to her, though she never perceives him as anything else than "elder-brotherly" or "half-fatherly." Nevertheless, his attraction to her is based not entirely on her sexual appeal, but also on his admiration for her devotion to the various siblings and step-siblings under her care. Her "resolve" that the children never be separated again "thrilled Boyne like the gesture of a Joan of Arc" (39). To Boyne — who both longs for and fears adventure — Judith is a semi-heroic figure.

Moreover, as the novel progresses and Martin adopts Judith's determination to keeping the children together, Judith is the only person who really understands and sympathizes with him; they become equals in their concern for the children's well-being. Under Rose Sellars' scrutiny of the situation, Martin admits that "his position with regard to the Wheater children . . . was unreasonable, indefensible," yet he concludes by defending himself: "but it was also human" (192). When he suggests to Rose that he and she adopt the children, she is taken aback; her eventual suggestion that they adopt the twins, Terry and Blanca, does not satisfy Martin because it fails to achieve his goal — keeping all the children together (202). Hence it is not the adult Rose but the young Judith he turns to for discussion of the conduct, health problems, educational concerns, and precarious legal situation of the children in the group. Even while Martin tries to shield Judith from some of the problems caused by the various parents of the children, he sees from Judith's troubled face "that she had been treading the wheel of the same problems as himself" (244). In this way they are each other's equals, so that his "pledge" to look after the children eventually takes precedence over his pledge to marry Rose Sellars.

Another perspective on Martin's attachment both to Judith and to the children as a group has to do with the novel's reiterated question of age. Martin is forty-six, "middle-aged" as he sometimes admits. Yet the novel plays almost incessantly not only with questions of Judith's age (and of Rose's age)[3] but with Martin's sense of his own age. Martin sees Judith at many moments as "a child," occasionally even calling her a "baby"; he rarely admits anyone's

description of her as a young woman or young lady, and finds it impossible to identify her in a porter's description of her as "a lady." There is little doubt that a large part of his inability to accept her relative maturity is his attempt to screen his own sexual attraction to her by insisting (as he does repeatedly) that she is just one of the children. But he vacillates almost as frequently on the question of his own age. In moments of realism, he describes himself (and Rose) as "middle aged" – but he constantly questions what this means. To be in the middle is to be neither one place nor another, neither young nor old – so that he does not have the excuse of old age (Grandmother Mervin's excuse [243]) for not taking on the responsibility of the children, while at the same time he is lured into thinking he is still young – perhaps young enough to start a family with Rose (221) or to marry Judith (250-54). Rose even, in one instance, suggests that he is childish, telling him pointedly that he is "a child [him]self" if he thinks he can resolve the little Wheaters' family problems. More positively, Martin later congratulates himself on fitting so well into the group of children:

> "The fact is, we're none of us grown up," he reflected, hugging himself for being on the children's side of the eternal barrier. (199)

Martin is experiencing what we would call today a mid-life crisis. But that term connotes something puerile, ridiculous; Martin's experiences suggest the seriousness of what it means to be in the middle of life and to ask whether one is still young or whether in fact one is getting old. Martin attempts to confirm his youth in his attraction to Judith, in his marriage proposal to her, and in later taking on a strenuous engineering job originally intended for a younger man. But the results of these efforts suggest his increasing age, as we see when Judith simply thinks he's joking when he proposes, and when, at the novel's end, he is ill and visibly aged as he returns from his job in South America three years after the conclusion of the main action of the book. Judith is waltzing around ballrooms; he is convalescing. Nevertheless there is something heroic rather than ridiculous in his efforts to establish himself at forty-six as the guardian of a large family of children, in his attempt not to give up on his life before he has something of permanent value in it.

As I mentioned earlier, critics' views of this novel tend toward the extreme, some seeing Boyne as corrupted and/or ridiculous, others as pathetic. I tend to agree with Cynthia Griffin Wolff's assessment that "This is the saddest novel that Wharton ever wrote" (383). Wolff (381) notes that in Wharton's original plan for the novel's conclusion, Boyne marries a sad, frightened Judith almost against his desire (an ending that would echo that troubled marriage between Charity and Lawyer Royall at the end of *Summer*).[4] The novel as it stands may be more "realistic" – Judith seems unlikely to marry Boyne – but it is equally sad in a different way. It reflects a sense of the permanence of time and fate, a sense of one's inability to change one's life. Martin is too old to marry Judith, too old even to marry Rose – who in turn is too set in her ways by her own previous life. For Martin, a part of the children's attraction derives from his sense that, through attempting to provide them a stable home, he is able to recapture his own warm animal past, his "real home," – "the warm cluster of people, pets, and things called home" (39) that he recollects from his youth. This is a home the nomadic Boyne has never recreated for himself as an adult, a home that he is finally unable to recreate permanently for the children or for himself. There is a deep homesickness and nostalgia, a *nostalgie* as the French use it, that Wharton expresses in this novel.

Given Wharton's own life and successes in her mid-forties – the publication of *The House of Mirth* in 1905, when Wharton was forty-three; her increasing financial, popular,

Wharton's New England

Seven Stories and "Ethan Frome"

Edith Wharton

Barbara A. White, editor

Although Edith Wharton is usually identified with the "old New York" of such masterworks as *The Age of Innocence* and *The House of Mirth*, she spent ten years living and writing in New England, a setting that appears in two novels, a novella, and fully a quarter of her short stories. In these works Wharton turns from portraying the monied and the mannered to probing inscrutable psyches and souls. The New England of these tales—which range from light comedy to horror—becomes a metaphor for fierce poverty, cultural barrenness, and an oppressive Puritan heritage that both fascinated and repelled Wharton. Barbara A. White's insightful introduction suggests that in these stories Wharton "seems to have projected onto New England aspects of herself that she most feared: repression, coldness, inarticulateness, mental starvation, and even lack of high culture."

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and critical success; her rejuvenating affair with Morton Fullerton, a man somewhat younger than herself – the negative outcome of the story about a man in his forties may be surprising. But she wrote this novel in her mid-sixties, completing it after the profoundly saddening death of Walter Berry. This, as some critics have noted, helps to account for the novel's sense of mortality, of partings which cannot be mitigated.

Further, as Wharton aged, she became increasingly interested in some of the children of her friends, and increasingly fond of some of the younger men in her social circle. In 1914 Wharton wrote to her niece Beatrix Jones on the occasion of Beatrix's marriage that

> Blessedness gives such bloom even to chairs and tables . . . Fasten with all your might on the inestimable treasure of your liking for each other and your understanding of each other . . . And if you have a boy or girl, to prolong the joy, so much the better. Be sure it's worthwhile. *And times come when one would give anything in the world for a reason like that for living-on.* (Benstock, 290)

Wharton took on legal responsibility for "the upkeep and education" of four brothers in the wake of the Great War (Benstock 342-43); she may well have reflected on finding, Boyne-like, a ready-made family late in her life. She may even have imagined what "might have been" (but could never be) if only she had been a few years younger when she met some of the younger men who were her friends in later life. Her young friend, Philomene de la Forest-Divonne, recalled a pleasant afternoon during which the elderly Wharton brought out an album of "clippings of critical articles about her first writings" and "shared her earliest memories": "on that afternoon," she concluded, "I felt what Edith *could have been for the children she never had*" (Ammons 169).

The sadness of the end of *The Children* is further emphasized by a comparison to other Wharton novels. Boyne's fantasy of an adopted family is one that Susy Lansing lives out in *Glimpses of the Moon;* indeed, it is her prolonged responsiblity for a group of children that both brings Susy to adulthood and, ultimately, allows her own (previously childless) marriage to succeed. In the late fiction Wharton's children often play a redemptive role: Halo Tarrant and Vance Weston are reunited during Halo's pregnancy in *The Gods Arrive;* Grace Ansley's dully conventional marriage in "Roman Fever" is redeemed by her vivacious daughter Barbara; the illegitimate Tina is both pang and solace to her mother Charlotte in "The Old Maid"; Dallas is a consolation to his father Newland Archer in *The Age of Innocence.* Similarly, the loss of a child is depicted as wrenching in novels as different as *The Mother's Recompense* and *A Son at the Front.*

In this context, Wharton's treatment of Boyne suggests the depth of what he has missed as well as the importance of what he has attempted to grasp. *The Children* is structured like *The Age of Innocence* in that the main action of the novel ends in the penultimate chapter; the final chapter is an epilogue that occurs some years later. The epilogue of *The Age of Innocence* is profoundly redemptive; indeed if one were to stop reading the novel at the end of the second-to-last chapter, one would see Newland Archer in an Isabel Archer-like marriage, trapped by a spouse cleverer and less admirable than himself. But the epilogue redeems his decision to stay with May, and thus redeems his life – because of his son Dallas. Dallas is able to do what he wants, say what he thinks, and marry whom he likes – to do, in short, what his father had not been able to do. If Newland has missed "the flower of life," he has seen it burst forth in his son because of his own renunciation.

But there is no such redemption at the end of *The Children* because – although there is a renunciation (Martin's renunciation of Judith) – there are no children. More precisely, the group of "happy healthy children" that so warmed Martin has altered profoundly, and no longer exists as a group. In the final chapter an aged and ill Martin stumbles upon the Wheaters – or some of them – in Biarritz. But he finds that Zinnie has become a "hotel child" whose main entertainment is popping up and down in the elevator; the Wheaters have divorced, and Joyce Wheater has become stout and complacent; the Italian "steps" Bun and Beechy are with their new stepmother in Italy; Blanca is being educated in a Paris convent, Terry in Switzerland; and sturdy little Chip has died. The children Martin and Judith tried so hard to keep together are dispersed. Though Martin gets a good look at the ever-lovely Judith, she is separated from him literally by a pane of glass and figuratively by the increasingly obvious difference in their ages – she is still young and blooming at eighteen, he is aged and ill at forty-nine.

Considering Martin's interest in all the children, and considering the role of children in other Wharton novels, Boyne's vacillation between Rose and Judith becomes, I would argue, less sexually charged and less redolent of the mature man who prefers immature women, much less the crisis of a repressed homosexual. Martin Boyne is a middle-aged man coming to terms with his own mortality, a man who looks to the children he does not have for an immortality he can only wish to achieve.

Le Moyne College

NOTES

1. See, for example, Penelope Leach's rather eloquent description of this process: "If you can let it, your body will start loving the baby for you even before he is properly a person. Whatever your mind and the deeply entrenched habits of your previous life may be telling you, your body is ready and waiting for him. Your skin thrills to his . . .

"If you can revel in the baby physically, you will speed up the time when he can join in this essential business of loving" (34).

Leach very accurately describes the kind of deep, satisfying physical response Boyne has first to the toddler Chip and later to the children as a group. His time with them allows him to leave behind some of the "deeply entrenched habits of [his] previous life" and feel, at least for a time, that he is beginning anew.

2. *The Writing of Fiction*, p. 51. Wharton says of the short story that every subject "has its conclusion *ab ovo*" and notes "The rule that the first page of a novel ought to contain the germ of the whole[.]"

3. Though I have not gone into the issue here, it is worth noting that, through Boyne's perspective, Wharton plays with Rose's apparent age nearly as much as she does with Judith's and Boyne's.

4. See Wolff, p. 381, for a fuller summary of the ending Wharton originally planned.

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