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Make It Short: Edith Wharton's Modernist Practices in Her Short Stories

Sarah Whitehead

- 1 Critical dissonance over Edith Wharton's modernist practices has intensified over the last decade, and although few view her nowadays as the "literary aristocrat" Parrington had firmly ensconced in the nineteenth century (153), Wharton's relationship with modernism and modernist writing continues to be an increasingly fertile area of scholarship. Whereas Peel concluded in 2005 that she was "apart from modernism," later studies, including those by Wagner-Martin, Haytock, and Beer and Horner identify distinctly modernist features in Wharton's narrative style. It is in recent critical appraisals of her short fiction in particular, a literary form closely associated with the "new" writing of the twentieth century, that scholars have found Wharton's poetics "experimental" (Ware 17), "subversive" (Whitehead 54), and "modernist" (Campbell 5), noting her innovative manipulation of traditional forms. Indeed, there is much to suggest that the enforced brevity of the genre and the confining nature of magazine publication (the format in which almost every short story of this era appeared [Chan xix]) prompted Wharton to produce her most impressionistic and, to use her own 1925 term, "renovat[ive]" (109) narratives. Rather than stories in the nineteenth-century tradition of the novel in miniature, Wharton's short fiction is more akin to those of the following century in her use of unreliable narration, gaps, epiphany and, above all, in her expectation of an active reader.
- 2 Wharton's enduring relationship with the short story is mirrored by its popularity with many modernist writers; Hanson notes that it is in this era that it "came to have for the first time in its history, a status almost equivalent to that of a novel" (56). The ephemeral, fragmentary and fleeting nature of the predominantly magazine short story appealed to the new wave of twentieth-century writers who relished the paradoxical freedom this particular literary form of enclosure offered with the single criteria that it should "take fifteen minutes to read out loud" (Wells viii). Indeed, rather than

restricting the writer, H.G. Wells argues that it presented a certain freedom not to be found in a novel, concluding that “this world is not for the weary and in the long-run it is the new and variant that matter” (vii). In his study of her short fiction, Levy notes that it was also this paradoxical freedom and enclosure that attracted Wharton to the form, arguing it was particularly well suited to her representations of similarly confined female experience (124). Wharton evidently felt both comfortable and secure within this genre and as early as 1907 she confidently wrote of her “sense of authority” in the form (Lewis 124). This confidence is reflected in the experimental poetics of her stories, and it is here, in what is arguably the most iconic modernist form, that she employs various techniques which now bear striking similarities to the “new” modernist fiction which she ridicules in her own fiction and critical writing. Indeed in “Writing a War Story” (1919) she satirizes Pound’s injunction to “make it new” by presenting her readers with a fictional editor not unlike Pound himself, who at the time was the editor of *The Little Review*, a magazine which under his leadership took on the motto “Making No Compromise with the Public Taste.” Wharton makes “diabolical fun [of the] posturings . . . of modernism” (Wegener 118) by having her editor advise a young writer to abandon “the superannuated habit of beginning each line with a capital letter” (247). Yet Wharton herself was not immune to using her own rules of punctuation in her narratives; the *Atlantic Monthly* felt compelled to publish her 1912 story “The Long Run” with an apology for the deviant punctuation,¹ and in his 1948 article “The Psychology of Punctuation,” Thorndike singles out Wharton as an example of the modern “mania” for ellipsis points, ascribing her excessive usage to a “fondness for novelty” (223, 225).

- 3 Despite the various affinities between Wharton’s work and modernist writing, Wharton emphatically distanced herself from the new authors and their fashionable “Kodak” school of writing, likening Joyce’s prose to the unmixed ingredients of a pudding in a 1923 letter to Bernard Berenson (Lewis 461). However the judgements in her critical essays present various self-contradictions; Wegener notes, for example, how Wharton’s hostility towards stream of consciousness writing becomes less straightforward when she draws the “misleading connection” (32) between this and the naturalistic “slice of life” practised by writers such as Chekhov. Such lack of clarity is further confounded by her own predilection for internal monologue, frequently presented in terms of a “mental wrestling match” (Blackall 150-151). Thus, whilst I refer to Wharton’s critical writing in the following discussion of four of her stories, this article will follow Lawrence’s advice to foremost ‘trust the tale’ rather than the artist (31).

Wharton’s Narrators and Narrative Vision

- 4 In her discussion of narrative vision in the short story Wharton employs the Jamesian term “reflector” and recalls his principle that a writer should choose a mind with “the widest possible view” (WF 36) when deciding by whom the tale will be told. Indeed, James’s narrators often present a further viewpoint in addition to that of a focalizer’s experience or vision, endowing his impressionistic accounts with an element of nineteenth-century omniscient narrative traditions. Whilst not completely reliable themselves, James’s narrators often signal the potential unreliability of a focalizer’s perspective and nudge the reader towards considering the wider view of the events narrated. James’s urbane narrator in *Daisy Miller* (1878) neatly indicates the insensitive

and immature Winterbourne's many *faux pas* and fatal lack of concern in a text liberally seasoned with erudite French and Italian expressions which are notably absent from the focalizer's own idiolect. However, despite Wharton's praise for James's technique, there is a distinct absence of stabilizing, implicitly authorial presence in her own short fiction. Her stories, by contrast, remain firmly positioned within a single, often narrow-minded narrating consciousness, and rather than offering some reassuringly reliable narrative yardstick against which to assess a focalizer's point of view, are themselves a testament to the idiosyncrasies of perception. Indeed, as she states in "Telling a Short Story," "exactly the same thing never happens to any two people" and "each witness of a given incident will report it differently" (WF 35).

- 5 Wharton states that once the narrator of a tale has been decided upon, the writer should stay firmly within this mind and register, and not include any event, language or judgement from outside this character's vision. She writes:

Never [...] let the character who serves as reflector record anything not naturally within his register. It should be the story-teller's first care to choose th[e] reflecting mind deliberately [...] and when it is done, to live inside the mind chosen, trying to feel, see and react exactly as the latter would, no more, no less, and, above all, no otherwise. (WF 36)

- 6 As a consequence Wharton's narratives are limited by their narrators and are often fragmentary and ambiguous, presenting further questions for the active reader in a manner not dissimilar to Chekhov's "interrogative" style so admired by Mansfield, who once wrote to Woolf in 1919, "What the writer does is not so much to solve the question but to put the question" (qtd. in Hunter 72). Indeed, as early as 1899, this creative use of gaps and absence had already been noted by her critics, with "F.J.G." writing in the *Book Buyer*:

Each tale is mainly told between the lines. By a touch here and a touch there you are enabled to construct a prelude for yourself, and when you come to the last page you have no difficulty in carrying on the action to its remote possibilities, or to its inevitable subsequent proceedings. Mrs. Wharton makes you wonder again at the truth of the old axiom that, after all, there is nothing so eloquent as silence. (Tuttleton *et al.* 15)

- 7 Wharton's interest in imperfect, incomplete vision is evident not only in her poetics but also the content of her stories. Titles such as "Mrs. Manstey's View" (1891), "The Lamp of Psyche" (1895), "A Glimpse" (1932) and "The Eyes" (1910) demonstrate the importance she gives to the onlooker. Many of her narratives rest upon a misreading of a situation or even object, including a misread picture in "The House of the Dead Hand" (1904), a misread book in "The Descent of Man" (1904) and a misread diagnosis in her 1930 story of the same name. Such interest in perception and its relation to meaning align her writing with what has since been regarded as the "essentially modernist concern" of the nature of perception and the psychology of the perceiver (Stevenson 27). Furthermore her use of imperfect vision, the incomplete or absence signals a refusal to offer authorial judgement and her expectation that the reader will recognise inconsistencies and ironies and so, fill in the gaps of her often fragmentary narratives.
- 8 An active reader of this type is courted in Wharton's 1899 story, "The Pelican." The narrative concerns a widowed Mrs. Amyot who lectures on various "cultured" subjects, from Shakespeare to Greek art, to support her young son, Lancelot. The title itself bears an indirect, symbolic relation to the story, which the reader is left to deduce alone, rather like the titles of her other three stories "The Lamp of Psyche" (1895), "After

Holbein" (1928) and "Pomegranate Seed" (1931), the last prompting letters from readers who were not able to make the implicitly signalled link.² The pelican is traditionally represented as a selfless creature, frequently depicted piercing her breast with her beak so that her offspring can eat her own flesh and blood when food is scarce. In medieval times artists often placed the bird with its nest on top of the cross; Thomas Aquinas (who is mentioned later in the story) uses the pelican in his hymn *Adoro te Devote*, as does Shakespeare (also referred to in the story) in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*.³ In fact, the bird beats its bill against its chest to get macerated food out for its young, which, against its white feathers, creates the startling illusion it is harming itself. The implicit link between the pelican of the title and Mrs. Amyot suggests that the "actual suffering" (79) she claims she must go through by speaking in public for the sake of the baby, is a fallacy rather like medieval notions of the bird's self-sacrifice. This is confirmed in the final scene of the story, by which time her son is a grown man with his own children who angrily demands to know why she continues this pretence. By this point the question the reader asks is not whether she really needs to give lectures, but why she actively chooses to do so.

- 9 Wharton's narrator in this story is a wealthy man whose unreliability is signalled from the very outset of the narrative; his denunciation of her inept attempts to tackle demanding subjects and his account of his manoeuvres to avoid her clutches are belied by the fact he has spent the last few decades closely following her career and even helping her with her research. The attraction he feels for this woman is apparent from the opening sentence: "She was very pretty when I first knew her, with the sweet straight nose and short upper lip of the cameo-brooch divinity; humanized by a dimple that flowered in her cheek" (76). Suitors are referred to, and the narrator muses that if she had married, classical figures such as Plato might have escaped her "treatment," adding "but I handed over Plato as a hostage and escaped on the afternoon train" (81). Unable to acknowledge or admit his own interest in Mrs. Amyot, his unreliability is further reinforced by his need to go south on a rest cure (a technique Wharton also uses to signal an unreliable male narrator in "The Triumph of the Night" [1914] and "Miss Mary Pask" [1925]). Thus the "vast machinery of fraud" (86) that the narrator believes he has put in motion by helping Mrs. Amyot write a lecture on the reconciliation of science and religion and by using his contacts to promote her talks, is mirrored on a further diegetic level in his own self-deception as to the true nature of their connection.
- 10 Dillard notes the particular suitability of the "crank" narrator to modernist ends, commenting that this type of narrator is modernist in its distance and irony (210-211). Wharton's irony here is twofold, manifest first in the ironic nature of the narrator's witty discourse, in comments such as "There was nothing she did not remember—wrongly" (77) and then in the irony that, supposedly repelled by this woman's lack of intellectual rigour, he has spent decades charting her lecturing career and has composed his story around her. Peel cites Wharton's abandonment of the reassuring figure of the reliable narrator as one of the factors that make *Ethan Frome* (1911) her most modernist pre-1914 work and discusses how this contributes to the inherent uncertainty about the story itself (153). "The Pelican" demonstrates how she was using this technique twelve years earlier to create a story with multiple layers of meaning and irony on different diegetic levels, so typical of modernist fiction.

- 11 The story culminates in a puzzling lack of closure when the adult Lancelot angrily confronts his mother in front of the narrator. He accuses her of making him party to fraud—a concept which has by now become a central theme in this story—and lists the unnecessary gifts she buys her grandchildren, “lace christening dresses and life-size rocking-horses with real manes! The kind of thing children can’t do without” (94). His mother does not defend herself and her reasons for lecturing remain an unclosed narrative gap. After Lancelot’s dramatic departure from the room, the narrator’s actions defy his words of the last twenty pages and he tenderly holds out his hand to her. She takes it and tearfully ends the story with the words “I sent his wife a seal skin jacket at Christmas!” (94). Wharton’s seemingly incongruous, certainly inconclusive final sentence links Mrs. Amyot’s financial independence with female materialism and commodification, an association Huysen finds typical of twentieth-century representations of women (47). By focusing on what were later to be seen as modernist anxieties around the rapidly evolving material culture at the turn of the century, Wharton cleverly intertwines traditional resistance to a female independence with contemporary concerns over female self-commodification. Indeed this final narrative gap allows for this narrative to be read as either a Victorian warning about the dangers of allowing women to acquire a taste for earning an income or as a modernist lament about the way women are duped by a commodity culture into squandering their growing financial independence on unnecessary and even unwanted products.
- 12 “The Pelican” can be read as either a “gently ironic account of a rattlebrained woman who lectures” (Lewis 81), or as a damning portrait of a society that would not let a woman do something “unless it could be done in the name of maternal sacrifice” (Wolff 97), depending on whether one accepts the narrator’s version or considers Mrs. Amyot’s perspective. Wharton’s creation of contradictory narratives, an ambiguity reinforced by the final sentence of the tale, poses more questions than it answers via her artful use of narrative gaps for ironic purposes. Indeed much of her “refusal to share information” beyond her narrator’s powers, which Dessner regards as “undue privateness, even selfishness in [her] narrative procedure” (60, 57), results from her use of irony, that is, the gap between what is said and what, perhaps, is meant. However, as Singley notes, such instances of irony often run the risk of being overlooked (232).

Wharton’s Narrative Gaps, Ellipses and Absences

- 13 Introducing a final narrative gap in the last sentence of a story is a technique Wharton uses in various short fictions, including her early story “A Journey” (1899). From the outset this nineteenth-century narrative has the impressionistic, fragmentary tone that was later to be associated with modernist writing. Wharton writes:
- As she lay on her berth, staring out at the shadows overhead, the rush of the wheels was in her brain, driving her deeper and deeper into circles of wakeful lucidity. (65)
- 14 The theme of darkness and what is hidden therein is continued throughout the narrative, and the reader is prompted to consider what secrets lie underneath this story of facade and pretence. “A Journey” is the story of a woman on a three day train trip who must conceal the fact her husband died during the second night so as not to be

asked to leave the train with the corpse before she arrives at her destination. The woman's name is never given, but the reader is told that she is a school teacher who married late in life only to have the promised prosperity and adventure offered by a spouse marred by fatal illness. The train journey is to New York, where the wife can be with her family while her husband dies. Focused on the woman's experience alone, the narrative is infused with the wife's bitterness at the cards she has been dealt. Wharton writes "life had a grudge against her" (66) as she remembers the doctors' "accustomed treacheries" (67) and is repulsed by her husband's emaciated state, watching him "as she might have watched a strange animal" (66).

- 15 On the night her husband dies his wife is lying in her own berth, when she believes she hears him call, but when she listens again she realises that it is the "greasy sound" of another man snoring (68). She lies down again, yet sleep evades her. At this point the narrative slips into free indirect discourse:

She lay down and tried to sleep . . . Had she not heard him move? She started up trembling . . . the silence frightened her more than any other sound. He might not be able to make her hear—he might be calling her now . . . What made her think of such things? (68)

- 16 Wharton's account of the woman's thoughts, her use of dots and dashes to indicate the woman's tentative, anxious state of mind and question marks to signal her confusion creates a narrative suggestive of unmediated thought. The ellipses add uncertainty and a dreamlike element to the passage as the woman begins to fall asleep. Blackall notes Wharton's tendency to signal a narrative shift towards "inner, subjective and reflective material [via a] prolifera[tion] of ellipses" (149). And it is this use of ellipsis, deemed an "icon" of modernist writing (Henry 151), combined with a mix of third person realism and stream of consciousness writing, which creates an impressionistic, uncertain narrative thread quite distinct from the Victorian writing traditions of the nineteenth century.
- 17 After her husband's death the woman must convince the other passengers and porter that he is sleeping in order not to be ejected from the train at the next station. She spends a fretful day near the berth, having pinned the curtains together so nobody will look in, too afraid even to visit the luncheon car in the fear her duplicity will be discovered. By the afternoon she is in a state of nervous exhaustion, and falls fitfully in and out of a dreamlike state, finally slipping into a nightmare reminiscent of Virgil's description of Aeneas' descent into the underworld, into a "darkness of death [...] a black whirlwind on which they were both spinning like leaves, in wild uncoiling spirals, with millions and millions of the dead" (75).
- 18 The woman is abruptly woken by the movement of her fellow passengers as the train approaches New York station. The mythical, fragmentary, ellipsis-ridden account of her dream is in direct contrast to the heightened realism with which the people around her are described. She notices the sickly ivy plant a woman with false braids is holding, the Christian Scientist she had met earlier reversing his cuffs and hears the clicking sound of the conductor's gadget as tickets are checked. The juxtaposing of these two distinct forms highlight the two selves—the inner, perhaps unconscious self and the public persona driven by social convention and routine in an essentially performative existence. The reader is encouraged to excavate the latter in search of the former and look for the symbolic value of the details Wharton has chosen to relate: the false hair, the dirty cuffs, the sickly plant. The insistent, annoying clicking of the metal machine

suggests the irritating nature of social coexistence—everything reflects the woman's dissatisfaction with life, the pretence (including hers) of living, the thwarted dreams. A similar use of evocative physical description by the positioning of impressionistic thoughts next to a realist detail is found by Levenson in Conrad (*The Genealogy of Modernism* 2), and is later described as precursive to the development of realism into symbolism by Lodge, who adds that it can also be found in Joyce's *Dubliners* (*Modes of Modern Writing* 42). Indeed Kaplan and Simpson also note the significant use of detailed commonplace for symbolic purpose in Joyce's iconic modernist text, *Ulysses*.

- 19 Wharton's use of "detailed commonplace" is a prevalent feature in her short stories, from the stained wallpaper and shabby books in "Mrs. Manstey's View" (1891) to the radio left on in "All Souls" (1937). Such details serve symbolic purposes; motifs such as a door knocker in the form of a dead hand and a pomegranate design in a carpet in "The House of the Dead Hand" (1904) are often employed to reinforce an allusion already present in the text. More significantly associated with what has since been regarded as modernist poetics, however, is Wharton's use of *absence* in her description of everyday surroundings, such as the lack of an inscription on a tomb in "Mr. Jones" (1928), a space on a wall where a picture used to be in "Pomegranate Seed" (1931), or some inserted asterisks or ellipses in a letter in "The Muse's Tragedy" (1899) to erroneously signal that something has been taken out. Indeed, rather than simply using commonplace detail for symbolic purposes, Wharton frequently uses "commonplace absence" to add layers of meaning to her texts. The missing inscription is not only a forgotten wife, but one who is deaf and dumb, imprisoned in a stately home which is to become a living tomb. The space on the wall is left by the removed portrait of a first wife who haunts her husband's second marriage and the asterisks in "The Muse's Tragedy" reveal the awful truth that there was nothing to hide in the first place.
- 20 Returning to the final section of "A Journey," the details that the woman notices define her character: the performative, artificial, even deceptive quality of her surroundings mirrors her own performance, particularly in what she predicts will be her next act—that of feigned shock when she "finds" that her husband is dead, as she tries to wake him. There is no such performance; the story ends in ambiguous darkness, a feature Lodge finds typical of modernist writing (*Modes of Modern Writing* 46). The final sentence reads: "She flung up her arms, struggling to catch at something, and fell face downward, striking her head against the dead man's berth" (75).
- 21 It is unclear whether the woman lives or not and the reader must search through the significant absences in the text to find closure. The husband speaks only six words; little is given of his experience, implying it holds little interest for her; no mention whatsoever is made of their courtship; and the insertion of "of course," after the statement "she still loved him" (66), suggests she is as much a slave to convention as her fellow passengers on the train, as does her clichéd, narrow-minded vision of the situation, when she laments that she has been denied the chance to "spread her wings" (66) at last. What operates on one level as a realist adventure story of sorts—will she be able to keep up the pretence her husband is asleep until they arrive in New York?—is made irrelevant by the ambiguous, "interrogative" final paragraph. The earlier moments of impressionistic narration, free indirect discourse and symbolic use of detailed commonplace foreshadow Wharton's decision not to provide a neat conclusive ending in the Victorian tradition.

Wharton's Epiphanies

- 22 Three years later Wharton presents a split narrative voice in “The Reckoning” (1902). Her reflector, Julia Westall, is first presented in the symbolic cigarette haze of the Van Siderens’ living room, attending a talk given by her second husband on being true to oneself and remaining married only if one actively wishes to. Her eyes rest on the daughter of the house and she wonders if the young Una Van Sideren should be listening to such matters, and decides someone really ought to speak to the girl’s mother. The internal dialogue continues and she asks herself why, at the ripe age of twenty-six, Una is still single, and then berates herself for such an old-fashioned, regressive question. Wharton writes:

It was as though someone else had been speaking—a stranger who had borrowed her own voice: she felt herself the dupe of some fantastic mental ventriloquism. (456)

- 23 “The Reckoning” is the story of Julia’s search for her identity, somewhere between the two selves in the narrative. For the reader it is apparent that Julia is deceiving herself when she believes she supports her second husband’s unconventional views about marriage and divorce, and his progressive creed that one need only be faithful to oneself. Her true, traditional self is displayed by the way she needed social approval to be able to take the step of divorcing her first husband, Arment. Wharton writes: “Everyone was ready to excuse and even defend her. The world she adorned agreed that John Arment was ‘impossible’” (460), but no concrete reason or explanation of his “impossible” nature is given. It is only when her second husband asks to be released from their marriage, to marry the young Una, that Julia has some understanding of how her first husband felt when she left him. She also finally recognises his kindness in giving her the freedom to remarry by agreeing to the divorce.
- 24 Wharton creates an epiphany when Julia goes to her first husband to ask his forgiveness. Wharton writes: “their eyes met in a sudden shock of comprehension; a veil seemed to be lifted between them” (474). Arment is about to say something important as Julia is leaving and takes an impulsive step forward, but stops himself when a footman arrives to open the door. It appears he is as much ruled by convention and his public self as his former wife. Julia is therefore left to walk out into the darkness of the street alone. Julia’s epiphany ends in the clear vision that she is alone in literal and figurative obscurity. “The Reckoning” begins in a cigarette haze of confusion and ends in the crisp, cold paradoxical clarity of darkness, as Julia acknowledges both the suffering she has caused and the tempting emotional security of conventional marriage.
- 25 Thirty years later, Wharton portrayed the search for identity and inner conflict differently in “Joy in the House” (1932). In this story Christine Ansley must decide between two unsatisfactory men: her lover and her husband. Allowed by her husband Devons to have a trial marriage with another man, on the understanding that if it is over within six months she will be accepted back into the family home, Christine Ansley decides to return two weeks before her time is up. Even as she packs her clothes for her week-long journey back to America, she is still not completely decided. Although also written in the third person, Wharton’s presentation of Christine’s conflicting thoughts is different from that of Julia Westall’s mental struggle in “The Reckoning.” Using a wide range of punctuation to “jolt” the narrative, Christine’s

struggle is disjointed, piecemeal and reaches no real conclusion. Once back in the family home again, Christine is still unsure whether she has made the right decision.

Wharton writes:

She put her hands up and hid her face in them for a moment. . . . Why this perpetual pendulum swing? Jeff—Devons, Devons—Jeff, backward and forward in her brain? (634)

- 26 Rather than hearing a second voice or rather a second self, as Julia does in “The Reckoning,” Christine’s thoughts are the sum of two incomplete, conflicting points of view, neither perhaps her own. As she muses over the two men, her thoughts are self-contradictory, and her opinions, her husband’s:

Poor Jeff! He would never be anything but a roamer . . . With whom would he roam next, she wondered? But that speculation did not detain her long. She wanted to turn her thoughts away from Jeff, not to follow him through his subsequent divagations. . . . She supposed all artists were like that; he said they were. Painters especially. . . . Not that she had ever thought of him as a great painter—not *really*. . . . (633)

- 27 The use of the third person urges the reader to consider not only Christine’s dilemma, but Christine herself. Her lack of self-knowledge and clarity of vision is demonstrated by her continued reliance on her husband’s opinions, in this case his claims about the unreliability of artists.
- 28 When Christine learns that Jeff has committed suicide she finds a new, much darker meaning to the banner, “Joy in the House,” which her husband had put up for her arrival. Her first reaction is a need to escape, which is then counteracted by remorse now that Jeff can no longer take her away: “But the hand which had opened the world to her was dead, was stiff in the coffin already” (651). She orders the banner to be taken down and walks wearily upstairs to see her son, for whom, she tells herself, she has decided to remain. There is no moment of understanding, no inner strength achieved by new knowledge and no clear definition of Christine’s character, merely evidence of her reliance on her husband and Jeff. Christine’s epiphany hovers outside the text, and rather like the reader of Mansfield’s “The Prelude,” the reader is left with a disturbing lack of anticipated closure.
- 29 When she does include them, Wharton’s epiphanies are often moments when characters previously fettered by the narrow vision with which they are initially introduced—mirrored by the restraining nature of the short story form itself—have moments of clarity, of insightful re-envisioning of their situation. Such an epiphany occurs in “The Lamp of Psyche” (1895), when Delia Corbett realises that the man she had married and worshipped for many years had been too cowardly to fight in the Civil War. This moment is “a milestone in her existence” (41); the past itself has not changed, only the wife’s vision of it, like the awful revelation referred to in the title. In her study of Wharton’s use of epiphany, Kim describes it as a “substantive feature of her work” (150) and notes that Wharton’s epiphanies are in relation to a public self, and that such moments of perception acknowledge a wider context—that of social and often material dimensions. In *The Writing of Fiction* Wharton states that an “explicit awareness of the eternal struggle of man’s contending impulses,” that of public duty and private desire, is needed for the short story to reflect human experience (14, 36). Such blurring between subjective vision and wider social experience, does not, according to Kim, set Wharton apart from modernism, who adds that such combinations of narration of interior and exterior experience are employed by Joyce in

Stephen Hero and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In these two examples she argues that Joyce's epiphanies do not reveal a transcendent truth, but serve to focus the spiritual eye, to "highlight [...] a subjective consciousness linked to aesthetic vision" (151). In a strikingly similar manner, Wharton's epiphanies illuminate not simply a character's understanding of their own experience, but throw light on the relationship between human nature and the material and cultural forces within which it functions.

Wharton and Literary Tradition

- 30 Peel writes that Wharton's belief "that there should be order in art" and her admiration for traditional forms set her apart from modernism (278). Certainly, her work does not have the modernist "chaotic, random, fluid[ity]" (Peel 278) of Joyce's *Ulysses*, but neither does *Dubliners*. The modernist experimentation that was taking place at the turn of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth was firmly rooted in a literary tradition in its "allusion to or imitation of literary models" (Lodge "Language of Modernist Fiction" 481). In his study of the modernist short story, Head cites Joyce's mimicking of the tripartite structure of a learning or initiation plot in "A Little Cloud." Here the central character, Chandler, an aspiring writer, after meeting up with a successful friend returns home to his nagging wife and crying child, in a "cruel parody of enlightenment and decisive action" (Head 187). Wharton's short stories are often reworkings, frequently subversive in character, of traditional plots and structures in a strikingly similar manner. Thus, instead of meeting a woman who turns out to be a ghost, Wharton has a narrator meet a ghost who turns out to be a live woman in "Miss Mary Pask" (1925), and writes a story about a thoughtful, altruistic woman who gives up everything—her money, her suitor, her business—so that her sister can be happy, to be rewarded not by a neat felicitous conclusion, but poverty-stricken loneliness in "Bunner Sisters" (1916). Furthermore her reworkings of classical narrative, which I have identified in "Demeter Forgiven" (2010), further align her writing with the works of various modernist writers including Woolf, Pound and Eliot. Wharton certainly did not disapprove of innovation, it was the junking of past literary tradition, which Peel conceives as "the connection between art and wider society" (99), that she found unacceptable. In her chapter on Proust (a writer who is widely regarded as modernist in his use of subjective narration) in *The Writing of Fiction*, Wharton describes his style as "renovat[ive]," and celebrates the fact that he had taken "the next step forward in a developing art without disowning its past" (WF 109). Wharton's writing follows the same philosophy of building on and developing or "renovating" established narrative traditions. In her short stories in particular, she delights in subverting literary (and social) norms; her predilection for withholding closure, creating unreliable narrators, and so frequently centering her narratives around absence offer a decidedly modernist challenge to past traditions without dismissing them.
- 31 Wharton's belief in the importance of structure and order does not set her apart from modernism. Eliot coined the term "mythical method" to describe the technique contemporary writers were employing in their use of myth to create order out of the chaos of modern existence. His subsequent definition of the term is not with reference to the fondness displayed by various modernist writers for classical myth, but rather the importance of structure and order. The "mythical method" was, he states, "simply

a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” and such structuring was a “step toward [...] order and form” (177-178). Often regarded as worlds apart from Wharton and her writing, Eliot’s creative philosophy has much in common with that of this grande dame of American literature. Indeed her vision of the novels of the past as “counselors” (WF 19) appears to be echoed in his pronouncement that “the most original talent is [...] bound within a tradition” (Bell 15). Recent rethinking of modernism itself, with debate prompted by such seemingly “unmodernist” practices as Joyce’s “highly conventional” (Boscagli and Duffy 133) publicity photos on the front page of *Time* magazine and Faulkner’s compliant response to editorial demands to redraft his fiction for mass market publication (Stevick 8-9), indicate that much of the new writing of this era *did* make compromises with public taste and was not as radical as authors professed. In his book *The Paradox of Modernism*, Scholes calls for a long overdue undoing of absolutes such as Pound’s defence of originality in order to properly understand modernism (218), and, indeed, Pound’s injunction to “make it new” belies the distinct past literary traditions upon which much modernist writing is based.

- 32 Peel argues that it is also Wharton’s vision of the purpose of art—that is, that it has “an important role to play in the good society”—which ultimately excludes her from the modernist canon (278). I would question whether Wharton’s technique of presenting the wider social significance of a personal epiphany is completely contrary to modernist ideologies. Halliwell (2001) and Kim (2006) certainly see social significance in modernist epiphany. In terms of the “good” society Peel refers to (278), Wharton’s attitude towards the moral value of a story is an ambiguous one. Some of her critical writing, such as her comment that a reader’s first response to a story will be “What judgment on life does it contain for me?” (1925 23) suggests a belief that literature has some moral purpose, yet other comments, such as her description of Woolf and Joyce’s fiction as “that unhappy hybrid, the novel with a purpose” (Wegener 175) suggest the opposite. I believe that her lack of clear authorial assertion, the ambiguity of her texts, and the often contradictory meanings they contain suggest that her narratives are not Wharton moralizing—questioning perhaps—but certainly not dictating. Therefore by giving her epiphanies an explicitly social frame, Wharton is commenting on society, but not necessarily postulating what is needed for a *good* society. Wharton’s “The Pelican” reflects changing attitudes towards female agency and economic self-sufficiency; and whilst some sympathy is shown for her female protagonist, Mrs. Amyot is certainly not an idealised vision of the benefits of female independence and learning.
- 33 In “The Vice of Reading” Wharton complains of the “mechanical” reader, who, brought up on a diet of “cinema obviousness” (Wegener 96), makes little attempt to read between the lines of her stories, or assign meaning to the various subtle, often ironic, signposts she plants in her texts. Here we encounter another self-contradictory statement in her critical writing when it is evident that her short stories were written for an active reader who would discern her multiplicity of meaning, her subtle ironies, her artful use of absence and rejection of an absolute, single truth. Much progress has been made in decisively moving Wharton out of the Victorian era (in which she wrote for only nine of her forty-six writing years) and acknowledging her place in the twentieth-century canon. Now under the modernist microscope, Wharton’s short stories indicate the need for a timely recognition of the distinct similarities between the poetics of her short fiction and those of the “new” writing she so vehemently

dismissed. Indeed, it is in the short story that we find Wharton at her most experimental, her most “renovative,” and her most modernist.

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NOTES

1. "The Long Run" (1912), published in *Atlantic Monthly*, was placed alongside the following statement: "In this story certain divergences in spelling and punctuation from the established practice of the *Atlantic* are made at the request of the author—The Editors."
2. Wharton writes in her preface to *Ghosts* that when "Pomegranate Seed" first appeared in a magazine "I was bombarded by a host of enquirers anxious, in the first place, to know the meaning of the story's title" (Wegener 1996 : 271). I am surprised she did not receive a similar reaction to her 1928 story "After Holbein," also published in *the Saturday Evening Post*, in which the title and the title alone, refers to a series of woodcuts depicting both the inevitability and universality of death. (No reference is made to the woodcuts in the magazine publication of the story.)
3. "Pie Pelilicane, Jesu Domine,/ Me immundum munda tuo sanguine." (verse 3)
("O loving Pelican, O Jesu Lord,/ Unclean am I but cleanse me in thy blood")
In *Hamlet*, Act IV, Scene V, lines 145-147, Laertes says to the king:
"To his good friends thus wide I'll open my arms, And like the life-rendering pelican, Repast them with my blood"
In *King Lear*, Act III, Scene IV, Lear describes his daughter as "Those pelican daughters" (line 72).

ABSTRACTS

Edith Wharton a formulé des critiques véhémentes à l'encontre des écrits aujourd'hui considérés comme modernistes. Pourtant, certaines de ses nouvelles portent l'empreinte des techniques narratives introduites au début du XXe siècle. Dans sa première nouvelle, "The Pelican" (1899), la présence d'un narrateur peu fiable, l'absence de clôture et le refus de formuler clairement la position de l'auteur annoncent la conception de Joyce d'un artiste invisible, présent à l'intérieur, derrière ou au-delà de son œuvre. L'épiphanie que l'on retrouve dans "The Reckoning" est une caractéristique aujourd'hui étroitement associée à l'écriture des modernistes, de même que l'emploi du monologue intérieur dans cette même nouvelle et dans "Joy in the House" (1932). Mais c'est surtout par le rôle qu'elle attribue au lecteur de ses nouvelles que Wharton s'apparente à ses contemporains modernistes : le lecteur doit être actif, capable d'identifier ses reprises des récits traditionnels, de comprendre l'ironie et de combler les vides laissés dans ces textes souvent fragmentaires.

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