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Drawing-Room Naturalism in Edith Wharton's Early Short Stories

Scott Emmert

EDITOR'S NOTE

Traduit de l'anglais par Lucie Brault et Frédéric Levilly.

- 1 In her biography of Edith Wharton, Cynthia Griffin Wolff discusses the ways in which the nineteenth-century upper-class girl was encouraged to deny her feelings, particularly sexual ones. As a young girl of that class, Wharton was pressured into early self-denial. One of the primary lessons Wharton learned was that "[s]ociety had decreed that 'nice' young women didn't really *have* feelings to be explained: if you did have feelings—well, then, obviously you weren't 'nice.' Lady-like behavior demanded the total suppression of instinct." As a reaction against her repressed upbringing, young Edith Jones turned to books and to "making up" stories. Her "lifelong love of words," Wolff insists, "sprang from her early emotional impoverishment," and nothing terrified young Edith more than the prospect of remaining forever mute, which was connected in her mind with the existence of "helpless" animals (Wolff 37, 27 and 25)¹.
- 2 The notion of being seen and not heard was applied especially to female children of Wharton's class. Wolff summarizes Wharton's training in proper gender roles with the simple infinitive "to be." Young women were meant to be looked at and admired, and they were not expected "to do" much more than fulfill that ornamental role. Independent action and opinion were not fostered in female children, and early on Wharton learned to suppress her "impulse 'to do'" (Wolff 42). Indeed, a portrait of Wharton done when she was five years old displays her in a luxurious blue dress and standing next to a vase of flowers; her long red hair drapes one shoulder, over which the girl gives the viewer a coy look. The painting freezes the child in a purely decorative posture².

- 3 The need to present a proper appearance oppressed Wharton. Her first short story, written when she was eleven, contains in its first paragraph the line: "Oh, how do you do, Mrs. Brown?" said Mrs. Tomkins. 'If only I had known you were going to call I should have tidied up the drawing room.'" When Edith's mother, Lucretia, glanced at the story, she returned it to her daughter with the acidic remark, "Drawing rooms are always tidy" (Wharton *Backward Glance*, 73). Her words are borne out by an 1884 photograph of the interior of Lucretia Jones's house on West Twenty-Fifth Street, shown in the R. W. B. Lewis biography of Wharton. The visible rooms are nothing if not rigidly ordered.
- 4 Wharton's literary rebellion against the stifling nature of these rooms results in what could be termed "drawing-room naturalism". Repeatedly in her short fiction, female characters are depicted in a variety of narrow spaces in which they suffer the restrictions of social decorum. Wharton made an explicit connection between the rooms of a large house and the psychology of upper-class women in "The Fulness of Life" (1893) when the protagonist muses:

"I have sometimes thought that a woman's nature is like a great house full of rooms: there is the hall, through which everyone passes in going in and out; the drawing room, where one receives formal visits; the sitting room, where the members of the family come and go as they list; but beyond that, far beyond, are other rooms, the handles of whose doors perhaps are never turned; no one knows the way to them, no one knows whither they lead; and in the innermost room, the holy of holies, the soul sits alone"(14)³.
- 5 The deterministic element in Wharton's fiction is social, and it is made concrete by her presentation of spaces such as drawing rooms in which formal requirements impinge upon a woman's individual needs and desires.
- 6 A careful student of the literary marketplace, Wharton first began publishing fiction during the development of literary naturalism in America. Although she eschewed the usual subject matter of naturalist fiction, several of her early short stories, those published around the turn of the nineteenth century, may be considered naturalistic because they present characters who are aware of the social forces arrayed against them, forces that prevent them from expressing original thoughts or becoming autonomous selves. These characters may wish to be realist characters in possession of an essential self, but they are pressured into living as naturalist characters subject to a tyranny of appearance that grants them limited agency. While realist characters are allowed a self-defining ability to act – permitted "to do" first in order "to be" themselves – Wharton's characters, especially her female characters, are often allowed merely "to be" passive constructions of external forces⁴.
- 7 Although the scholarship on Wharton's involvement in literary naturalism appears mainly in connection with her novels, a common property in all of her fiction is the dramatization of the inability to act or the insufficiency of action. That such a dramatization is especially clear in her short stories results largely from the greater sense of restriction the form allows. Wolff has identified Wharton's frequent use of "enclosed space" to suggest the limited options of her characters (60). But in addition to depicting a variety of enclosures – rooms in houses and compartments on trains, for example – Wharton's short stories become restrictive spaces themselves. Andrew Levy argues that Wharton took thematic advantage of the short story form, because "[a]mong prose genres, it is most like an enclosed space, most concentrated in form. Among *all* genres, it is most 'locked,' requiring the synthetic closure of an impact-filled beginning and a dramatic conclusion" (65).

- 8 The connection between form and deterministic theme is often stronger in short stories than it is in novels, and Wharton made effective use of this connection in her short fiction. As Philip Fisher and June Howard have noted, naturalist novels are frequently structured by plots of decline in which a character degenerates physically, socially, and even morally over an extended period of time. Such a plot served most obviously to give form to Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) and Frank Norris's *Vandover and the Brute* (1914) (Fisher 169-78; Howard 63-69). In addition to the plot of decline, Fisher finds the structure of naturalist novels to be dependent upon different "temporary worlds" through which characters carry their desires and seek their identities (138-53). Short stories, in contrast, cannot easily form narrative with the plot of decline or with a series of temporary worlds. Their length makes it nearly impossible to present the span of time needed to make plausible a character's gradual degeneration, and at best a short story may focus successfully on a limited number of settings. The short story form nonetheless provides advantages to naturalist writers. A story's limited length and formal compression allow for a keener dramatization of the oppositional forces arrayed against naturalist characters. Often the sense of restriction and entrapment felt by these characters is more dramatic and less ambiguous in short stories than in novels. While critics (e.g., Richard A. Kaye and Lori Merish) often identify certain of Edith Wharton's early novels as only partially committed to literary naturalism, in a number of her early short stories Wharton's commitment to extending naturalism to the social sphere is reflected by the unambiguous deterministic plight of her characters, a plight that is apparent both formally and thematically.
- 9 Wharton embraced the short story form, eventually producing nine story collections; furthermore, she admitted to struggling with the structural demands of the novel. She wrote, in a letter to Robert Grant in 1907, that the need to view a novel "more architectonically" required her to "sacrifice... the small incidental effects that women have always excelled in, the episodic characterisation, I mean." Appreciating the "smaller realism" made possible by the story form, Wharton confesses to possessing "the sense of authority with which I take hold of a short story" (*Letters*, 124). And, significantly, in chapter two of *The Writing of Fiction*, entitled "Telling a Short Story," Wharton elucidates a clear distinction between short fiction and the novel, demonstrating a cogent understanding of the short story's aesthetic requirements.
- 10 Among those requirements is the story's dependence on "situation" rather than "on the gradual unfolding of the inner life of its characters" to which the novel is devoted (*Writing of Fiction*, 48 and 42). Characters in short stories, then, will possess less of an individual "inner life" which must be sacrificed to the story's "situation." In Wharton's stories, that dramatic situation often centers on the ways in which characters are deprived of an inner life; thus the form of the story aids Wharton in enacting a principal theme: that is, the psychological confinement of her characters. Wharton writes that "the characters engaged" in short stories "must be a little more than puppets; but apparently, also, they may be a little less than individual human beings" (*Writing of Fiction*, 47). The ways in which her characters are puppets and not fully autonomous selves is central in many of Wharton's early short stories, which arguably makes them her most naturalistic fictions.
- 11 While recognition of the early influence of literary naturalism on Wharton's fiction is relatively recent, the critical case for such an influence now enjoys acceptance. Indeed, Donna M. Campbell has identified a naturalist impulse in Wharton's first published

short story, "Mrs. Manstey's View" (1891), which depicts an aging widow living a cramped and lonely existence in a small room. Mrs. Manstey fails to prevent the construction of a building extension that threatens the view from her single window. Often in her short stories, Wharton explores the illusion of independent action, and the dramatic use of this exploration is present in her fiction from the beginning. "Mrs. Manstey's View" ironically dramatizes the false belief in autonomy by presenting a protagonist who dies while under the delusion that her actions have been successful. Arguing for an analysis of Wharton as a writer "caught in the historical shift between local color and naturalism," Campbell discovers in this often overlooked story the threatening nature of the "landscape of naturalism", of an urban Hydra that recalls the fiction of Frank Norris and Stephen Crane (152-3).

- 12 Even though it indicates Wharton's interest in an ironic *donnée*, "Mrs. Manstey's View" does not reflect the aesthetic control of the more mature author. That literary maturity is reflected in other stories by a deft merging of irony with narrative voice to implicate the reader more closely in the realization of a character's limitations. As critics have noted, Wharton's best short stories require the reader's active, inferential engagement to "meet her halfway and fill in the gaps" of meaning (White 24). Wharton's frequent use of ellipses has been interpreted as an attempt to "entice the reader to enter into imaginative collaboration" with the narrator (Blackall 145), and her reliance in her stories on "situation" over complex plot emphasizes thematic significance more than action. In addition, her preference for the third-person limited point of view, strictly focalized through a central consciousness, tends to place readers immediately within an interpretive situation, instantly involving them with a single character's vision and, usually flawed, judgment. For Wharton the limited vision of the "reflector," the character from whose point of view the story is told, should be strictly enforced; as she wrote in *The Writing of Fiction*, a short-story writer should "never... let the character who serves as reflector record anything not naturally within his register" (46). Naturalist novelists, preferring omniscient narrators and making frequent use of authorial commentary, often create distance between a novel's characters and its readers, who are positioned as spectators⁵. Wharton's limited reflectors, in contrast, create kinship between protagonists and readers, for both find themselves in similar interpretive situations.
- 13 The limits of the reflector have thematic significance in the story "The Other Two" (1904), which is told from the point of view of Waythorn, a New York City stockbroker who has recently married a twice-divorced woman. The story's irony derives from the reader's growing awareness of Waythorn's limited understanding of his wife's past. He believes that he knows Alice even as his view of her changes, but as Barbara A. White notes, the story's frequent use of economic imagery makes apparent the "limitations of his vision" (17). Even though they tend to be as restricted as Wharton's female characters, her male characters are often deluded by their own sense of importance, a sense that is reinforced by their social and economic position⁶.
- 14 Secure in his position as husband and successful businessman, Waythorn is confident that he understands his new wife, an understanding the reader initially has no reason to doubt. He appreciates her stable personality and "perfectly balanced nerves". Early in the story, as Waythorn waits for Alice to come down to dinner, he stands before "the drawing-room hearth" thinking of her "composure," one that "was restful to him; it acted as ballast to his somewhat unstable sensibilities" (380). Although she has been

divorced from two men, Alice appears unperturbed by society's negative view of divorce. Waythorn admires her "way of surmounting obstacles without seeming to be aware of them," (381) but his admiration of her apparent mastery of external circumstances blinds him to the fact that Alice is adept at masking her own feelings. When she appears for dinner, Alice wears "her most engaging tea gown" but "she had neglected to assume the smile that went with it" (382). Concerned about her daughter's health and about a visit from the girl's father, Alice naturally cannot appear cheerful. Waythorn tells her "to forget" her concern, and he is later confident "that she had obeyed his injunction and forgotten" (382-83). In fact, as White points out, Waythorn may simply be accepting Alice's outward composure as a sign that she has indeed forgotten her maternal worries. But Alice, the story makes clear, is an accomplished pretender.

- 15 To make Waythorn happy, Alice pretends to be "serene and unruffled"; she works hard to appear like "a creature all compact of harmonies" (385, 386). At first, Waythorn is untroubled by Alice's previous marriages because he believes these relationships have left her unaffected. Alice's past intrudes upon Waythorn's harmony, however, when he must allow Haskett, the first husband, to enter "his" house to visit Lily, the daughter Haskett had with Alice – and when he has to begin a business relationship with Varick, Alice's second husband. In a significant scene, Alice mistakenly pours cognac into Waythorn's coffee, forgetting that it was Varick who preferred such a drink. Aware of Varick's preference, Waythorn begins to be disturbed by Alice's history: "He had fancied that a woman can shed her past like a man. But now he saw that Alice was bound to hers both by the circumstances which forced her into continued relation with it, and by the traces it had left on her nature" (393).
- 16 Waythorn's opinion of his wife is changed but not deepened by this revelation, for she simply becomes a different kind of possession to him. At first, he thought of her as a rare object "whom Gus Varick had unearthed somewhere" (381). He believes that her outward poise reflects her inner life, and he basks in the comfort of her attentions. After close association with her previous husbands, however, Waythorn scorns Alice, likening her to a common thing. "She was 'as easy as an old shoe,'" he thinks, "a shoe that too many feet had worn" (393). At this point for Waythorn, Alice no longer possesses an essential self: "Alice Haskett – Alice Varick – Alice Waythorn – she had been each in turn, and had left hanging to each name a little of her privacy, a little of her personality, a little of the inmost self where the unknown god abides" (393). Waythorn thus considers himself only a partial investor in Alice; he "compared himself to a member of a syndicate. He held so many shares in his wife's personality and his predecessors were his partners in the business" (393). From being an object that belonged to him exclusively, Alice has changed for Waythorn into a "third of a wife" in which he owns stock.
- 17 By perceiving of her as an object or an investment, Waythorn denies to Alice the possibility of an essential identity. Only his valuation of her matters to him, a valuation that she must constantly seek to maintain. "The Other Two" is not merely, as R. W. B. Lewis terms it, a "comedy of manners" (134); it is, rather, an indication of the ways by which a woman is divested of a coherent sense of self when she must always act in accordance with a man's expectations. White argues that "when she is viewed independently of Waythorn," Alice presents "an identity in shreds" (16).

- 18 Ironically, of course, a judgmental Waythorn is blind to his own limitations. He does not perceive the full meaning of Alice's reactions upon her meeting with both Haskett and Varick in the library. Surprised to see her ex-husbands in the same room with her current spouse, Alice betrays her emotions. Although she greets Varick "with a distinct note of pleasure," the sight of Haskett causes her "smile" to fade "for a moment" (395-96). She quickly regains her mask, however, and Waythorn remains oblivious to his wife's true feelings. Both Waythorn and Alice, the reader eventually discerns, are locked into fixed roles. They are not husband and wife but collector and possession. Waythorn has enough discernment to appreciate Alice's "value" to him, but his utilitarian viewpoint prevents him from appreciating any of her possibly unique qualities.
- 19 The terror of discovering oneself at the mercy of societal dictates afflicts both male and female characters in Wharton's stories. The male protagonist of "The Line of Least Resistance" (1900), for instance, discovers the social costs of divorcing an unfaithful wife and recognizes his lack of freedom. More often, however, Wharton's social victims are intelligent women who recognize society's deleterious effect on their personal development. Such is the case with Mrs. Clement Westall in "The Reckoning" (1902) who is stripped of legal identity and emotional security when her husband asks for a divorce in order to marry another woman. In an equally evocative story, Mrs. Vervain of "The Dilettante" (1903) is forced to confront her vacant sense of self.
- 20 For seven years, Vervain has been the subject of Thursdale's oppressive training in emotional reticence and equivocation. Thursdale prides himself on his apt pupil: "He had taught a good many women not to betray their feelings, but he had never before had such fine material to work with" (412). The story begins with Thursdale about to meet with Mrs. Vervain to discuss his fiancée, Miss Gaynor. Thursdale loves Miss Gaynor, in part because she cannot control her emotions. He has introduced his fiancée to his pupil and been delighted by the "naturalness with which Mrs. Vervain had met Miss Gaynor" (412). Of course, Mrs. Vervain's "natural" reaction was to suppress her own feelings, and Thursdale once again goes to her to continue their game. Upon entering the familiar house, Thursdale notes "the drawing room [which] at once enveloped him in that atmosphere of tacit intelligence which Mrs. Vervain imparted to her very furniture" (413). Introduced early as a metaphor for Mrs. Vervain herself, this room will be instrumental in her ultimate self-revelation.
- 21 "The Dilettante" has been interpreted as a "feminist revenge story" in that Mrs. Vervain succeeds by tricking Thursdale into revealing an undisguised emotion, and – perhaps – gains a triumph by ending his engagement with Miss Gaynor (White 59). Mrs. Vervain tells Thursdale that Miss Gaynor has come to visit a second time, and in his anxious desire to learn the outcome of that visit, Thursdale declares, "You know I'm absurdly in love" (414). Further twisting the knife, Mrs. Vervain confronts Thursdale with his sin of withholding a genuine affection from her. But although she informs him plainly that he "always *hated*... to have things happen: you never would let them," Thursdale, from whose point of view the story unfolds, misses her implication, considering her words to be "incoherent" (415). Mrs. Vervain tells Thursdale that Miss Gaynor has come to her to discover whether she and Thursdale had been lovers. When Mrs. Vervain tells the truth – that she and Thursdale have never had a sexual relationship – Miss Gaynor appears disappointed. She has apparently looked into Thursdale's "past" for evidence of a genuine passion, but having found none, Mrs.

Vervain intimates, Miss Gaynor will likely break her engagement. Naturally, Thursdale despairs until Mrs. Vervain offers a potential solution. She urges him to lie about their relationship, to suggest that they have indeed been lovers. She offers him, in short, her social reputation, and the offer momentarily strips away all pretenses: "It was extraordinary how a few words had swept them from an atmosphere of the most complex dissimulations to this contact of naked souls" (418). For once, they have shown their true feelings.

- 22 The ambiguous ending complicates the story, making it difficult to accept revenge as its subject⁷. It is not certain whether Miss Gaynor has in fact visited Mrs. Vervain a second time or whether she has sent a letter to Thursdale to break off their engagement. Mrs. Vervain could have fabricated the entire incident, and it is she who suggests that Miss Gaynor may have written to Thursdale. Nor is it certain that Thursdale intends to break the engagement himself, lest he turn Miss Gaynor into another Mrs. Vervain. Thus both the success of Mrs. Vervain's revenge and the possibility of Thursdale's moral growth are left in doubt.
- 23 A more obvious theme inheres in the story's last sentence, which occurs after Thursdale leaves: "The door closed on him, and she hid her eyes from the dreadful emptiness of the room" (419). Representing her inner self, the "empty" drawing room forces Mrs. Vervain to acknowledge her lack of individuality. The social propriety she and Thursdale have practiced has led Mrs. Vervain to suppress emotion and passion, to deny the expression of any personal desire that could make her unique. In her drawing room, a barren site devoid of warmth, Mrs. Vervain recognizes a confinement of spirit. By internalizing Thursdale's training never to betray an emotion, she comes to betray herself. Set within a single room that takes on metaphorical significance, "The Dilettante" deftly merges form and theme.
- 24 Wharton's highly praised "Souls Belated" (1899) is perhaps her best illustration of the social restrictions women and men encounter when they try to establish a relationship outside of marriage. The story's naturalism is evident, as both main characters, Lydia and Gannett, have their personal freedom curtailed by social decorum. The first story by Wharton to make extensive use of the "prison cell" metaphor (Lewis 87), "Souls Belated" presents a female character who desires an identity outside of the socially determined one, but who is ultimately imprisoned by social approval.
- 25 Lydia, whose lack of a last name figures her absence of identity (White 58), has been living with Gannett, a successful writer not her husband. Her divorce from Tillotson has just been granted, so she is presumably free to marry Gannett. But for Lydia, independence lies in not having to marry, in not having to follow the staid morality of society. She becomes angry when Gannett assumes that she will indeed marry him. Instead, she intends to pursue her version of personal liberty. Marriage to Tillotson revealed to her the dreary obligation of "doing exactly the same thing every day at the same hour" (106). Meeting Gannett relieves her of this "dull" life, and she revels in a new-found freedom, even though she pretends "to look upon him as the instrument of her liberation" (107) when in fact she recognizes that to be truly free she must leave Gannett. Lydia is fully aware that social propriety restricts her individuality, but she remains committed to living according to her own code. "Of course one acts as one can," she tells Gannett, "as one must, perhaps – pulled by all sorts of invisible threads; but at least one needn't pretend, for social advantages, to subscribe to a creed that ignores the complexity of human Motives – that classifies people by arbitrary signs,

and puts it in everybody's reach to be on Mrs. Tillotson's visiting list" (110-11). As this passage suggests, Lydia resists social determinism, its iron grip of propriety, its insistence on uniformity, and its desire to render people in the simplest of terms.

- 26 Although to express her autonomy Lydia refuses to marry Gannett, nevertheless she soon finds herself trapped in a naturalist environment. At the Hotel Bellosguardo, the other guests assume she is married to Gannett, and she does not disabuse them of that assumption. The hotel's social order is policed by Lady Susan Condit who presupposes that Lydia is Mrs. Gannett. Lydia's security is threatened, however, when Mrs. Cope tries to blackmail her into revealing what Cope's young companion, Lord Trevenna, has revealed to Gannett. Knowledge is the source of Mrs. Cope's power over her young lord; she needs to control him to ensure he will marry her once her divorce is final. Perceiving that she and Lydia are "both in the same box," (118) Mrs. Cope threatens to expose the truth that Lydia and Gannett are not married. Even after Mrs. Cope's threat is averted, however, Lydia realizes that she enjoys the security of respectability, even though having to pretend she is married belies her sense of freedom. Gannett again asks her to marry him, but she refuses, knowing that society will still reject her because she has been married before. To society she will appear to be a social pariah whom Gannett has rehabilitated.
- 27 The story's last section alters the point of view by narrating events from Gannett's perspective instead of Lydia's, one of the few instances in Wharton's short fiction of a change in focalization. The effect creates more distance between Lydia and the reader. But as we see her from the outside only, Lydia's restriction comes sharply into focus (White 59). As she tries to leave Gannett, he watches from a window while she retreats from the steam launch and returns to the hotel. Implying that they will be married, the story's ending intimates that Lydia will have to give up not caring about society's opinion, which has been the principal expression of her desire for a free will.
- 28 This last section of the story also allows the sympathy Gannett feels for Lydia to register keenly with the reader. Earlier in the story Gannett appears incapable of understanding Lydia's arguments for personal freedom; as the narration dryly notes, "Nothing is more perplexing to a man than the mental process of a woman who reasons her emotions" (111). But watching her from the window, Gannett perceives "the cruelty he had committed in detaching her from the normal conditions of life" (125). Gannett may certainly be taking too much credit for ending Lydia's marriage and severing her from "normal" social relations, but he does sympathize with her limited choices: "Even had his love lessened, he was bound to her now by a hundred ties of pity and self-reproach; and she, poor child, must turn back to him as Latude returned to his cell" (125). While aware that he and Lydia are "two separate beings," Gannett nevertheless recognizes the hard fact of their being "bound together in a *noyade* of passion that left them resisting yet clinging as they went down" (125).
- 29 The story's title implies the pathos of Gannett's and Lydia's "belated" attempt to live independently of social opinion, thereby possessing their souls. In the end, they will presumably travel to Paris to be married, for neither of them can resist society's pressure to conform. At one point early in the story, Lydia expressed their mutual contempt for conformity:

"We neither of us believe in the abstract 'sacredness' of marriage; we both know that no ceremony is needed to consecrate our love for each other; what object can we have in marrying, except the secret fear of each that the other may escape, or the secret longing to work our way back gradually – oh, very gradually – into the

esteem of the people whose conventional morality we have always ridiculed and hated?" (110)

- 30 Even in a hotel as remote as the Bellosguardo that "conventional morality" prevails, denying independent action and the prerogatives of self-definition.
- 31 In these stories, Wharton's social or drawing-room naturalism poignantly dramatizes the struggle of individuals to resist a socially constructed sense of self. That struggle for individuality occurs amid impersonal social forces that prevent self-definition. Confined in drawing-rooms and in the compressed space of the short story form itself, Wharton's characters are often abruptly stripped of their affected autonomy. As a result, her characters have more in common with the powerless naturalist character that Lee Clark Mitchell identifies than with realist characters who exhibit mastery over, or at least successfully negotiate, social forces.
- 32 Wharton understood, furthermore, that characters in short stories are by necessity more limited than characters in novels. Yet, for Wharton this requirement offers a thematic opportunity in that she is able to use her short story characters as symbols of socially determined lives. Recently, narrative theorists have argued that characters in short stories may be interpreted more readily as symbols than characters in novels. Charles E. May, for example, argues that characters in short fiction are often "symbolic projections" that serve aesthetic and thematic functions (66-7). These characters frequently act according to the needs of a story's plot and theme, becoming "stylized figures rather than 'real people'" (64). As a naturalist writer, Wharton is interested in portraying static, socially determined characters without an essential identity, figures of determinism. This portrayal is assisted by the short story's formal requirements vis-à-vis characterization⁸.
- 33 Social determinism remains a consistent theme in Wharton's stories throughout her career, as she continued to take advantage of the short story's compressed form to dramatize the limited inner lives of her characters and their inability to control personal destiny⁹. Wharton shared this struggle for autonomy with her protagonists, but she eventually discovered freedom in the creation of art. She found a way "to do" and not simply "to be". On the small canvas of much of her short fiction, however, Wharton's characters are arrested in passive poses while nonetheless offering an appeal to the reader's sympathy. Readers of these stories may share with characters such as Lydia and Gannett the disturbing recognition of an illusory free will, of the absence of hope for a unified selfhood.

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NOTES

1. . Shari Benstock provides a different view of Wharton's childhood and her mother's reaction to her desire to "make up" stories and to play as a "tomboy," 20-21.
2. . This painting, done by Edward Harrison May, hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in Washington D.C. It is dated 1870, but Benstock identifies Edith's age as five years, (13).
3. . Page references refer to volume one of R. W. B. Lewis's edition of Wharton's collected stories.

4. . Lee Clark Mitchell argues persuasively for the essential difference between autonomous and self-defining realist characters and passive naturalist characters whose sense of self is determined by external circumstance, 1-33.
 5. . See Howard and Rachel Bowlby on naturalist novels as spectacle.
 6. . On the self-importance of Wharton's male characters, see Elsa Nettels, 252.
 7. . Indeed, White ultimately rejects the revenge theme entirely, 59.
 8. . See also Suzanne Hunter Brown's theory that the "[t]echnical factors" of short stories "lead many short-story writers to project an individual's nature as an essential given," 199.
 9. . See, for example, the often anthologized "Roman Fever" (1934) in which a woman's actions, inspired by jealousy and hatred, result in a sudden realization that strips her of an assumed superiority.
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ABSTRACTS

En mettant l'accent sur le naturalisme de salon ou le déterminisme social, cet article établit les liens entre le fond et la forme des nouvelles d'Edith Wharton qui furent publiées au début du XIX^{ème} siècle. L'analyse de trois nouvelles représentatives de son œuvre, "The Other Two", "The Dilettante" et "Souls Belated" laisse apparaître un manque d'autonomie chez les personnages féminins auxquels on refuse tout privilège d'accomplissement de soi. Les personnages de Wharton mènent des existences souvent conditionnées par des circonstances sociales extérieures, et la mise en scène de ces personnages prenant conscience de ces circonstances aliénantes est servie par les exigences imposées par la forme même de la nouvelle. La longueur restreinte et la forme condensée caractéristiques du genre permettent à Wharton de théâtraliser, certains diront avec moins d'ambiguïté que dans ses romans, les forces inéluctables déployées contre ses personnages. De plus, de par le fait que l'intérêt dramatique de nombreuses nouvelles de Wharton écrites au début de sa carrière vienne de personnages qui, à défaut de s'affirmer, deviennent de simples "pantins", ces nouvelles devraient être classées parmi ses œuvres de fiction les plus naturalistes.

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