Edith Wharton’s relationship to German literature: a study in creative affinity

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Abstract

Wharton’s cultural relationship to Germany has so far remained neglected. The vastness of her reading in this subject is well documented and mentioned in various critical works, but the subtle and creative use she makes of her readings of German authors has so far been largely overlooked. Moreover, there are interpretatively revealing affinities between Wharton’s work and the German novel tradition. This thesis is, then, less a study in demonstrable influence than in creative overlap. By far the most important German influence on Wharton’s life and work is Goethe’s. Her great admiration for Goethe is evident from the numerous references to his works recurring in her fiction and letters throughout her life. Goethe was a constant and shaping influence in Wharton’s existence and her philosophy of life owes much to his. He also constitutes a literary antecedent for her writing as the highest representative of the classical Bildungsroman tradition. Chapter I therefore studies the relationship of some of Wharton’s most important novels to seminal German texts such as the Lehrjahre and the Wanderjahre and to Faust. Moreover, this chapter tries to situate Wharton’s fiction in terms not only of the Bildungsroman but also of other literary genres such as the historical novel, romance, the naturalistic novel and the novel of manners, in order to highlight Wharton’s original use of them. The exploration of her use of romance and of elements of fantastic literature is continued in Chapter II, where a comparison of Wharton’s The Valley of Decision and Schiller’s Der Geisterseher brings out likenesses of characterization and narrative technique. In Chapter III Wharton’s most important novels are read alongside Fontane’s, in order to highlight stylistic and thematic affinities between the two authors. This chapter focuses in particular on their treatment of the problem of the condition of women at the end of the 19th century, which leads Wharton and Fontane both to the criticism of a specific society, and to a wider philosophical consideration of the relationship between convention and morality, society and the individual, socialisation and personal freedom. In relation to these thematic concerns, the similarities between Wharton’s work and Thomas Mann’s are also considered. Finally, constituents and techniques of narrative in Wharton and Fontane are analysed by means of narratological tools as illustrated in the theoretical studies of Gérard Genette.
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Dedicated to

Andrew and Edwin Rosta

and to the memory of

Francesco Alfonso Maria Mercuri

(1965 – 1997)
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Because there is no available standard edition of the works of Edith Wharton, I have, wherever appropriate, quoted from the Virago reprints or other editions, as indicated in the bibliography. The page reference given after each quotation is preceded by the initials of the title and always refers to the edition used, which is mentioned in brackets in the bibliography after the original Scribner’s or Appleton edition. Thus for example (FT, 624) stands for p. 624 of the Virago edition of The Fruit of the Tree.

Similarly, as far as secondary sources are concerned, quotations are followed by the year of publication of the edition or translation I used, by the year of publication of the original text (in square brackets) and by the page reference, thus: (Genette, 1980 [1972], 25) stands for: p. 25 of the 1980 English translation of Discours du récit, originally published in 1972. In the bibliography texts are listed in the chronological order of their year of first edition.
Introduction

Edith Wharton is one of the American writers most indebted to the cultural heritage of Europe. In fact, her upbringing was very European. At a very early age (she was born in 1862) her parents brought her to Europe, where between 1866 and 1872 they all travelled extensively in England, France, Spain, Italy and Germany. Between 1880 and 1882 she again travelled in France and Italy with her parents. After her marriage in 1885 her trips to Europe became regular and Italy was at first at the centre of her personal as well as professional interest. Later Paris became first the place where she established her winter residence, and then, from 1909, her definitive choice of home. But long before becoming an expatriate de facto she had been a cultural expatriate. Belonging as she did to a wealthy minority of New Yorkers with strong cultural ties with Europe, all her life she felt at odds with her native country. Her increasing psychological withdrawal from it is expressed in all her fiction and in her private papers as well. Returning from one of her yearly visits to the Old Continent, she for example wrote to a friend: “My first weeks in America are always miserable, because the tastes I am cursed with are all of a kind that cannot be gratified here, & I am not enough in sympathy with our “gros public” to make up for the lack on the aesthetic side. One’s friends are delightful; but we are none of us Americans, we don’t think or feel as the Americans do, we are the wretched exotics produced in a European glass-house, the most déplacé & useless class on earth!” (Letter to Sara Norton, 5 June 1903).

The childhood years Wharton spent in Europe left an indelible trace on her. This peripatetic upbringing opened her eyes to a variety of cultural influences. It was during her periods of residence in Paris, Rome and Florence that Wharton learnt French and Italian. And whilst at Bad Willibald in the Black Forest, the eight year old Edith started to learn German with the help of a German governess. Their reading text was the New Testament and she later claimed “I was nourished in infancy on a German Bible & don’t to this day know what the disciples said in English” (letter to Sara Norton on 11 May 1905). These early studies were resumed when, at the age of thirteen, during one of her summers in Newport, Wharton made friends with Evelyn Washburn, and the two girls plunged enthusiastically into the study of German. Evelyn, who was ten years older than Edith, managed to persuade Edith’s mother to let her daughter read Goethe’s works, until then forbidden, and the two girls even sold some
translations of German verse to a magazine (Coolidge, 1964, 34). In Newport Edith was also given German tuition by Anna Bahlmann, who was later to become her own much loved governess, and then her friend, secretary and literary associate for the rest of her life. Wharton refers to her in her autobiography as “Fräulein Bahlmann, my beloved German teacher, who saw which way my fancy turned, and fed it with the wealth of German literature from the Minnesingers to Heine” (1934, 48). And in a letter to Mrs. Winthrop Chanler (25 September 1903) Wharton says “She [Anna] even inspired me with a passion for Novalis, not to speak of the Nibelungen-Lied in the original Old High German”. The interest in German culture Anna Bahlmann inspired in the young Edith was to be lifelong.

Wharton’s ability to read, as well as speak fluently, several languages, and to have therefore first hand access to their literatures laid the basis of her formidable erudition. On this R.W.B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis, who edited a selection of her letters, observe: “The learning displayed in Edith Wharton’s letters – the close acquaintance with texts literary, artistic, scientific, historical, philosophic, religious, in five languages, from medieval to modern, from European to American – is of sometimes awesome proportions. [...] Edith Wharton read whatever book fell into her hands, from whatever source and whatever vintage; but what she retained from her reading tended to gather into patterns. Her relation to German literature was characteristic” (1988, 18-19). The German references recurring in this collection of 400 letters – one tenth of the available collections of Wharton letters – are myriad and indicate that her interest in German culture, and in some German authors in particular, never ceased or slackened. She constantly reread German poetry, from Walther von der Vogelweide (a great favourite of hers) to Stefan George and Hugo von Hofmannstahl. “At one time or another in her published work or in her correspondence she also mentions reading or knowing [...] Lessing, Heine, Novalis, Heinrich von Kleist’s Die Marquise von O., Goethe’s Werther, Rilke’s Duineser Elegien, and Hofmannstahl’s Elektra” (Lawson, 1974, 120). She also kept abreast of contemporary German literature, including such explicitly socially critical texts as Clara Viebig’s Das tägliche Brot, which she considered very remarkable and, significantly, which she read in 1907, when she was finishing her own The Fruit of the Tree, the only novel in which she tackles the subject of the exploitation of factory workers. Her very accurate 1902 translation of Hermann Sudermann’s drama Es lebe das Leben also shows an interest in German ‘radical’ literature that is at odds with the conventional view of Wharton as the ‘aristocrat’ of American literature. And
perhaps her work on Sudermann left traces in *The Fruit of the Tree*, but to my mind not so much in the superficial element of the blackmail present in both works, as Richard Lawson believes (1974, 25), as in the fact that both seem to suggest that the individual finds his ultimate *raison d'être* in serving society. Her only other translation work is also from the German and also deals with the life and fate of working class characters: in 1914 she translated with Anna Bahlmann Gottfried Keller’s *Romeo und Julia auf dem Dorfe* and numerous similarities in narrative technique, theme and imagery have been noticed between this work and Wharton’s *Ethan Frome* (see Puknat, 1969). She also much admired Keller’s *Der Grüne Heinrich*, which she mentions in her *The Writing of Fiction* as an example of the category she defines as “enchanting hybrids”: a work which is neither a novel of manners, nor a “philosophical romance” nor an adventure novel, but one in which “fantasy, romance and the homeliest realities are so inimitably mingled” (1925, 67).

Wharton seems to have been interested in all aspects of German culture and to have fed her interest with all possible stimulations, from books to conversation to lectures to social events. For example, a recurring name in her letters is Wagner’s: her interest in him is evidenced not only by her attending the Ring-cycle in Bayreuth with Bernard Berenson in 1913, but also by her avid reading of Wagner’s *My Life* and of the translation of the Edda sagas which had inspired him to write the *Ring*. Her philosophical interests were profound and pursued with continuity over the years through reading programmes including even such ponderous compendia as Kuno Fischer’s *Geschichte der neueren Philosophie* (1897–1904), which she read shortly after its first appearance, as well as, of course, primary sources. She seems to have enjoyed Schopenhauer and to have reflected on his work from 1901 onwards. She greatly admired his prose, though she did not always relish some of the “metaphysical lumbering” in parts of *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (Lewis, 1988, 56). She defined Goethe and Schopenhauer as “the two authors with whom I always take refuge when everything else becomes meaningless” (Benstock, 1994, 232). But Schopenhauer’s influence on her pales by comparison with that of Nietzsche, whose complete works she read in 1907–8 (but had known probably since 1902). This was the period when she started her love affair with the journalist Morton Fullerton and it is clear that this personal experience had prepared her to embrace Nietzsche’s ideas as liberatory. She admired Nietzsche’s ability to break through conventions and shared his convictions that Christianity, by its separation of body and soul and its denial of the wholesomeness of natural impulse, had impoverished human
Nietzsche's influence is evident in the poems 'Life' and 'Ogrin the Hermit'. There is also a short story published in 1910, 'The Blond Beast', in which, however, the Nietzschean reference in the title is to be taken as ironical, because the protagonist, who sets out with exploitative intents, in the end abandons the gains made thanks to his strength and ruthlessness.

But by far the most important German influence on Wharton's life and work is Goethe, whose *Wilhelm Meister, Faust, Dichtung und Wahrheit*, poems and plays she had read in the original by the age of fifteen (Killoran, 1993, 367). In 'Life and I', an unpublished autobiographical manuscript, she remembers her first reading of *Faust* as “one of the ‘epoch-making’ encounters for me” (Wolff, 1977, 44). Both *Faust* and *Wilhelm Meister* remained among her favourite texts throughout her life. Other works of Goethe's are referred to by her as archetypes of literary genres: In *The Writing of Fiction* she mentions *Werther* as “the link between the real novel and the autobiography in novel-disguise” (1925, 80) and *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* as the most famous “novel of situation” (126), a type of fiction in which, in her view, the author’s interest lies more in the construction and development of the drama than in a deep analysis of the individual character’s psyche. Her great admiration for Goethe is obvious from the numerous references to his works recurring in her fiction and letters throughout her life. Goethe was a constant and shaping presence in her existence, and her philosophy of life seems to me to owe much to him. They share the idea of the necessity of renunciation and of submission to the demands of the practical world, a conclusion to which most of Wharton’s characters seem to come at the end of their formative period or of their existential crisis. Goethe constitutes also a literary antecedent for her writing, because, although she makes original use of the conventions of this genre, it is above all the Bildungsroman that provides the underlying structure of Wharton’s most interesting novels.

It is always interesting to investigate the literary and philosophical interests of an educated creative writer, but this is particularly true in the case of Edith Wharton, “one of the most brilliant, scholarly American authors in recent history” (Killoran, 1993, 365), and one for whom reading was an essential part of life, both in the sense that much of her time was taken up by this occupation, and because her reading had a deep and lasting influence on her mind and on her work. Helen Killoran, who has made an extensive study of Wharton’s reading habits, traces literary allusions in her work and draws up a 3,000 item bibliography of her reading in French, German and Italian. She has remarked that books “were as much part of Edith
Wharton’s psychology as any aspect of her life, and just as complexly influential to her work. Consequently, indirect influences are far less easy to quantify, and will probably never be as fully understood as the direct ones already noted by a number of astute critics” (Killoran, 1993, 369). Wharton always had the deepest awareness that books are made of other books that preceded them, that creativity in art is adaptation and development of formulas, and that, to quote one of her many favourite Goethean principles, “Those who remain imprisoned in the false notion of their own originality will always fall short of what they might have accomplished” (quoted in The Writing of Fiction, 1925, 34).

It is now universally accepted that Wharton is much more than the “literary aristocrat” (Parrington, 1921) of American letters, “Henry James’s heiress” (Leavis, 1938) or even the “social historian of Old New York” (Tuttlelon, 1979). Indeed, she is now more and more widely recognized as a highly thoughtful, original and sophisticated artist. For example, a recent study (Singley, 1995) contextualises Wharton’s work in the orbit of American philosophical and religious thought. The European intellectual tradition represents however, in my view, a more potent influence on her work than its American counterpart. Some work has been and is being done concerning Wharton’s cultural relationship to Italy and France, but the influence of German literature on her work remains insufficiently explored. The only critic who has devoted an essay and various articles to this subject is the already mentioned Richard Lawson, author of Edith Wharton and German Literature (a book more interesting for the number of ‘connections’ it lists than for the use it makes of them, but I shall have frequent occasion to acknowledge it). As Lawson says, “It is perhaps the image of the Gallicized Edith Wharton of post-World War I that is responsible for the almost complete absence of critical attention to her close relationship to German literature and philosophy” (1974, 15). This still holds true twenty years later. Even though Wharton’s interest in and connection with particular German authors is mentioned in various critical works, the subtle and creative use she makes of her reading in German authors has been largely neglected. For example, Cynthia Griffin Wolff mentions that “The Age of Innocence is Wharton’s most significant bildungsroman. […] Her master was Goethe, whose work she was once again rereading in this postwar period. […] [Newland Archer’s] ordeal by love teaches him the lesson that Wilhelm learned — acceptance of reality and dedication to generativity” (Wolff, 1977, 314–15). This connection is well worth exploring in more detail and it should also be noted that this is not the only Wharton novel which functions as a Bildungsroman: others gain by being read in the
light of the Bildungsroman tradition because such a reading highlights the issues of their structure and their characterization.

I base my understanding of the Bildungsroman tradition (German and non-) mainly on two fascinating studies: *The German Bildungsroman from Wieland to Hesse* (1978) by Martin Swales, and *The Way of the World. The 'Bildungsroman' in European Culture* (1987) by Franco Moretti. The most important characteristics of the Bildungsroman seem to me to be the following: First of all, it is a genre concerned with the inner development of one central character. This development occurs in strict adherence to the laws of causality: external events (such as travels, work, involvement in social life) and psychological adventures (such as readings, studies, religious crises, emotional involvements) all contribute to shape the protagonist. The numerous changes of scene and the episodic structure would suggest an affinity between Bildungsroman and picaresque novel. However, the 'picaro' does not change: he is by definition unselfconscious and nondeveloping. The protagonist of a Bildungsroman is young: the genre is about growing up; it relates the passage through youth into maturity. It follows the central character through his/her period of formation. It leaves him/her at the point when he/she has acquired some social awareness and is ready to take on a function and a place in society. Its arrival point is therefore a threshold, and, therefore, another starting point. And throughout the process of development each attainment is shown as precarious. The development is not linear and univocal. The hero/heroine does not move from one defined self to another, but gropes his/her way between several, sometimes simultaneous, selves. This is because youth is necessarily a period of open options and of experimentation. The protagonist learns through trial and error. It follows that he/she must be a character remarkably open to new impressions; even hesitant, uncertain, sometimes oscillating to the point of ambiguity; and perhaps, in his/her eagerness to try out all sorts of different things, he/she tends to be a dilettante. He/she is a bunch of yet unresolved potentialities. Moreover, he/she is constantly interrogating him/herself about the meaning of the experiences he/she is undergoing and constantly debating ideas, stances and choices with him/herself and with others. This reflecting hero/heroine, whose personality is always a work-in-progress, also becomes a sort of structural device which permits the insertion in the narrative of theoretical discussions of various kinds as part of the unfolding reflectivity of the central character. Characteristic is also the attitude of the narrator towards the hero/heroine: the narrator views with amused superiority and more or less benevolent irony the sometimes
pathetic attempts of the hero/heroine at making sense of their own experiences, of finding out the direction of their own development, of influencing their learning and of shaping their life.

As I hope to show, all these elements will prove important in the discussion of Wharton’s most intriguing novels — *The Valley of Decision, The House of Mirth, The Fruit of the Tree, The Age of Innocence, Hudson River Bracketed* and its sequel *The Gods Arrive*. Chapter I of this study is therefore devoted to a reflection on the structural importance of the Bildungsroman element in these works. And I also analyse the meaning that some particular features of Goethe’s symbolism (for example, the ‘Mothers’ or the drained marshes in *Faust*) acquire in these novels, because these symbols have an important contribution to make to the overall import of the texts. It is my contention that a study of the relationship of these novels to Goethe’s masterpieces enriches our understanding of Wharton’s work. And I want to stress that it is noteworthy that Wharton’s allegiance is particularly to the Goethean model of the Bildungsroman — and not to later, more problematic versions of the genre. Even so, however, she is manifestly aware that this Goethean legacy is under challenge in an age when Naturalism propounds doctrines of materialistic determinism, and when contemporary taste is fascinated by the oscillation between the fashionable poles of decadence and vitalism. Wharton’s engagement with the Bildungsroman tradition is critical and creative, and not merely antiquarian.

In Chapter II, a comparison of *The Valley of Decision* and Schiller’s *Der Geisterseher* brings out interesting likenesses between protagonists, plot and technique. This is not a case of documented knowledge of a text on the part of Wharton, but I think that one can legitimately presume that a mind like hers, well stocked with multifarious reading and well acquainted with Schiller’s poems and plays, would be interested in reading even his juvenilia. On starting her first long prose-work Wharton, exactly like Schiller with *Der Geisterseher*, aimed at producing a best-seller. As James Hart (1950) has shown, historical romance was at the time an extremely popular genre in the States, and, on writing *The Valley of Decision*, a historical romance with Gothic overtones, she may well have derived inspiration from that remarkable specimen of fantastic literature that is *Der Geisterseher*.

A study of stylistic and thematic affinities seems to me particularly fruitful in the case of the Wharton – Fontane relationship and therefore Chapter III of the present work is entirely dedicated to this comparative study. My objective is not a study of influences in the traditional sense but a discussion of the communality of thought, aesthetic principles, themes and technique between Wharton and Fontane. A direct influence, though again not
documented, is certainly also possible. Wharton had the time, leisure, money, stamina, desire and ability to find out the best that was known and thought in her day and it seems to me highly unlikely that she would not have been aware of the work of a writer with whom she shared, to a remarkable extent, themes, concerns, philosophical outlook, tone and technique. In any case, it is particularly illuminating to read Wharton’s most important novels alongside Fontane’s, not least because these two authors share a keen interest in the question of the situation of women, which, just at the end of last century, was undergoing momentous changes.

The agitation on behalf of women, which had originally developed from progressive movements such as Chartism in England and abolitionism in America, had become one of the salient questions in the social life of the western world. The new generation of women who believed in women’s suffrage, in the elimination of the double sexual standard, in the reform of divorce and marriage laws, in educational and professional opportunities for women, is mirrored by a new type of literary heroine who is determined to seize existential opportunities until then precluded to her sex, who seeks self-fulfilment and sexual freedom and often wilfully defies authority and conventional morality. Female figures who share traits of the “New Woman” – as she was called by the novelist Sarah Grand in an 1894 article (Drabble, 1985, 697) – appear also in the novels of Wharton and of Fontane. It must be stressed however that not all the causes and concerns of the women’s movement are present in Wharton’s work: she was for example no supporter either of women’s suffrage – in fact, she had a profound antipathy for suffragettes – or of formal education for women. And she certainly did not believe in an absolute right for the individual to flout social conventions in order to pursue personal fulfilment. But all her work is a criticism of a culture which demands marriage of respectable women in exchange for social status and the means of livelihood; of the institution of marriage with its division of roles, which condemns men to shoulder all the economic burden and women to be nothing but consumers; of the hypocrisy of a code of sexual behaviour which is different for men and women, and even admits a differentiation between married and single women. The novel in which Wharton gives her most interesting and complete portrayal of a New Woman is *The Fruit of the Tree*, in which I believe we can also perceive the cultural reverberation of Ibsen’s problem plays.

For the section devoted to the exploration of techniques in Wharton and Fontane I draw on Gérard Genette’s *Discours du récit* (1972; English translation *Narrative Discourse*,...
1980), a theoretical study still unsurpassed for its brilliance and clarity. This chapter also contains a brief consideration of the thematic similarities between Wharton’s work and Thomas Mann’s, a subject already explored by Lawson. Both writers study the effect the decline of the upper bourgeoisie has on the younger generations, and, according to Lawson, the two writers even use a similar technique: characters “are heavily weighted in the direction of personal ineffectiveness owing to hereditary defects” (1977, 289). This is not, in my view, applicable to all of Wharton’s characters, but is true to some extent of early characters such as Odo Valsecca and Lily Bart, and becomes relevant also in the case of Ralph Marvell in *The Custom of the Country*, the novel in which the decline of an old family and the ascent of the vulgar rich is described most thoroughly. Because a discussion of the thematic overlap between *The Custom of the Country* and *Buddenbrooks* involves topics dealt with in relation to Fontane’s works, I have included my brief remarks on Mann at the end of Chapter III.

Let me repeat a point I made earlier: Except in the case of *Wilhelm Meister* and *Faust* I do not claim that Wharton was specifically indebted to or influenced by German works. As regards the other German authors studied in this thesis – Schiller, Fontane and Mann – I have not been able to come up with any specific acknowledgement of them on Wharton’s part. It cannot, therefore, be too strongly stressed that my intention is to highlight themes and concerns Wharton shares with some important German writers, because such a study enriches and sharpens our overall comprehension of Wharton as a writer; and the materials I draw on are primarily the conventional ones of her published works. In particular, the comparison with *Wilhelm Meister* and *Geisterseher* shows how inventively and originally she could adapt models to serve for her own purposes, whilst the analysis of the themes she shares with Fontane and Mann shows her in her true character as a European realist. Thus, leaving aside the matter of Wharton’s documented knowledge of some German authors or works, an exploration of the ‘German connection’ constitutes a new way of reading Wharton which helps to answer some of the questions posed by her texts. This thesis is a study in affinity rather than influences. Moreover, as I have shown in the case of Schiller’s *Der Geisterseher* and Fontane’s *Irrungen, Wirrungen*, reading Wharton in the context of selected works of German literature sometimes offers a two-way illumination, because it highlights elements of the narrative structure and the characterization in the German works as well as in Wharton’s.
Wharton has been very popular in the last two decades. Several of her works have been filmed, with various success, for cinema and television, and at least two have been recently made into remarkable films ('Ethan Frome', directed by John Madden, with Liam Neeson, Patricia Arquette and Joan Allen, in 1992; ‘The Age of Innocence’, directed by Martin Scorsese, with Daniel Day-Lewis, Michelle Pfeiffer and Wynona Rider, in 1993) which have managed to be endorsed by Wharton scholars, acclaimed by film critics and popular with audiences. Moreover, and also thanks to her now being a filmed author – which must be tantamount to canonization – her books continue to sell very well and even her most neglected ones have been reprinted or republished and are available in non-specialist bookshops. Last but not least, her life as much as her work has stimulated a flood of literary criticism, which was mainly feminist in the 1980s and is now starting to be more varied. Her writings have been approached from the perspectives of gender, sexuality, class and race; sociology, anthropology, psychology and psychoanalysis have been drawn upon to interpret her life and work. At the end of the Nineties, however, as Millicent Bell puts it, “The time seems to have come around to reconsider her writing in whole and in part, restudying problems of intrinsic content and literary form and to evaluate her artistic success or failure. Biographical interpretation of her fiction may have done its work.” Criticism is now trying “to come to terms with the nature of Wharton’s artistry, her place in literary tradition, and, above all, her use of literary genres” (Bell 1995, 15–17). I should like to think that this thesis can offer a contribution, however tentative, to this new perception of Wharton as, to quote Bell again, “a major writer whose work derived from complex inspirational sources”.


Chapter One
Goethean legacies in some of Wharton’s novels.

1.1. *The Valley of Decision* (1902)

The composition of *The Valley of Decision* began in January 1900. In August Wharton wrote to her publisher, Scribner, that she had become so engrossed in the story that she had been forced to lay aside the volume of short-stories on which she had been working (and which was later published in April 1901 under the title *Crucial Instances*). After this impetuous beginning, however, work proceeded more slowly, and only on January 7th, 1902 could Wharton enter in her diary, with evident relief, that she had reached “the end at last!”

The publication of this novel – her first long piece of fiction – had crucial importance in Wharton’s career as a writer and in her private life as well. *The Valley of Decision* was greeted with great acclaim by critics and reading public alike and established Wharton as a major American writer both in the States and in Europe. Not only did she find herself transformed at a stroke into a professional author: she was also acclaimed as an expert on the art, the history and the landscape of Italy. One of the consequences of this was the invitation given her by the magazine *Century* to write a series of articles on the architecture of the Italian villa. In January 1903 she therefore went as an art student and researcher back to Italy, where she had travelled extensively both as a child and on her annual visits to Europe after her marriage. The articles were collected in 1904 in the volume *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*, which was followed in 1905 by the companion volume of articles and essays *Italian Backgrounds*. The publication and success, in this same year, of *The House of Mirth*, and in 1907 of *The Fruit of the Tree* made of her a fashionable authoress in the literary salons in Paris and London, treated as a friend and a colleague by such distinguished contemporaries as Henry James and Paul Bourget.

An account of the plot of *The Valley of Decision* can give only an inadequate idea of this 650-page work. In writing it Wharton had set herself many objectives. In the first place, she wanted to give an exhaustive picture of a neglected period of Italian history hitherto completely unknown in the United States. She proudly remarked in a letter to her publisher that an analysis of the situation of Italy in the period immediately preceding Napoleon’s invasion had never been attempted in any fictional work (Lewis & Lewis, 1988, 58). In fact, as William Vance
points out, eighteenth-century Italy had already in 1831 been used by James Fenimore Cooper as a setting for his romance *The Bravo* (Vance, 1995, 172).

To prepare for this task, Wharton plunged into the reading of an impressive pile of erudite works illustrating practically every aspect of the Italian Settecento and availed herself of the guidance and advice of scholars such as the Harvard art historian Charles Eliot Norton. She also engaged herself in a sort of dialogue with various literary archetypes: she mentions in her autobiography *A Backward Glance* her “repeated wanderings guided by Goethe and the Chevalier de Brosses, by Goldoni and Gozzi, Arthur Young, Dr. Burney and Ippolito Nievo, out of which the tale grew”. The result is that in *The Valley of Decision* we can find all the elements we mentally associate with the Settecento: a swarming of *abati*, charlatans, *castrati*, *cicisbei*, gypsies, jugglers, vagrant dentists, pedlars, strolling *commedia dell'arte* players, musical automata, lackeys, turbaned blackamoors, bourgeois who meet in cafés to discuss politics, noblemen constantly engaged in their card-playing, ladies with monstrously voluminous wigs and skirts, *cavalier serventi*, starving peasants ill with malaria, scheming Jesuits, *cognoscenti* interested in the recent excavations of Pompei and Ercolano, powder, chocolate, Bologna lap-dogs, pet-monkeys, litters and coaches, open sewers, Italian gardens, the Venetian Carnival, the *villeggiatura* in Palladian villas, the journey by barge up the Brenta...All the most important personalities of the time are mentioned: Vico, Galiani, Gravina, Filangieri, Giannone, Verri, Beccaria, Scopoli, Spallanzani, Volta, Fontana, Concini, Laura Bassi, Gaetana Agnesi, Carlo Maratta, Salvator Rosa, Goldoni, Parini, the Jesuit poet Cevi and Vittorio Alfieri, who is one of the characters. In *The Valley of Decision* we constantly find our expectations of Italy confirmed: ceilings are decorated with frescoes by Tiepolo, landscapes are “worthy of a Salvator Rosa”, an actress must be called Mirandolina and come from Chioggia, the English lord is an eccentric and the French Count a libertine. The yearning for verisimilitude and completeness is also evident in the numerous and detailed descriptions. Wharton visualises the landscape extremely well and describes the architecture of the buildings and their interior decoration in loving detail. *The Valley of Decision* is a great fresco and not only metaphorically: Wharton wanted “to picture Italy” and actually succeeds in producing a vivid visualization of its landscape, art and architecture. This is also achieved through the numerous explicit references to artists and works of art.\(^1\)

But we must not forget that in *The Valley of Decision* Wharton also intended to give a survey of the old and new ideologies which made up the philosophical and political debate of
that troubled period, when, as she herself says in the already quoted letter to her publisher, “all the old forms and traditions of court life were still preserved, but the immense intellectual and moral movement of the new regime was at work beneath the surface of things” (Lewis & Lewis, 1988, 58). She also wrote to a friend: “I meant the book to be a picture of a social phase, not of two people’s individual history, and Fulvia & Odo are just little bits of looking-glass in which fragments of the great panorama are reflected” (Lewis & Lewis, 1988, 57).

However, this elaborately constructed setting remains a magnificent background, always described by the narrator and only rarely seen through the eyes of the characters or arousing in them feelings and impressions. One has the sense that in this work history is being used for decorative purposes and to add picturesqueness and adventure to the private dramas of the characters, instead of showing how millions of private dramas blend together to constitute historic events. The historical novel is based on the belief, as Georg Lukács (1977, [1936], 182) says, that the personality and the behaviour of each man is at any time determined by and expressive of the characteristics of their epoch, and that the moral life is largely dependent on the social basis, of which we are shown the evolution. In the words of Lev Tolstoy, “Man lives consciously for himself but unconsciously he serves as an instrument for the accomplishment of historical and social ends” (1987 [1869], 718). In *The Valley*, however, one looks in vain for this sense of history as the sum total of the actions of individual human beings working out their more than individual destiny.

*The Valley* cannot in other words be seriously considered a historical novel. It is worth remembering that Wharton defined this work as “‘not a novel at all, but only a *romantic chronicle*’” (Walton, 1970, 36; Italics mine). This definition rightly stresses its romantic quality, also acknowledged by Elizabeth Ammons when she defines it as a “historical *romance*” (1980, 19; Italics mine). Ammons also sees in Wharton’s choice of matter and genre the precise intention of an ambitious beginner to write a best-selling novel (19). Some scholars have criticised Wharton for being too much influenced by the prevailing literary fashion (and indeed, throughout her career this kind of influence played some role in her choice of matter and manner). Thus, Blake Nevius dismisses *The Valley of Decision* as a mere concession to “the stock romantic pattern of the costume novel that had ruled popular taste in fiction for a decade” (1953, 41). Geoffrey Walton is also of the opinion that with this book “Edith Wharton probably merely tried to do her best in what she accepted as a standard literary mode” (1970, 37). And William Vance not only resolutely places *The Valley* in the category of Italian
romances like The Bravo and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Agnes of Sorrento (1862), but also underlines Wharton’s “shameless indulgence in the genre” (1995, 185).

Having conceded that opportunistic consideration may have played a part in Wharton’s literary debut, and also that The Valley of Decision does present some features characteristic of the popular romance, it must still be stressed that Wharton’s serious preparatory research makes of The Valley a historical romance which is a remarkable achievement. It is also important to note that the book deals with a number of important moral and philosophical concerns, and that they are deeply and sincerely felt. In fact, in this book for the first time Wharton expresses her conception of history and her fundamental theme – the conflict of individual will, needs and rights against social laws, culture and tradition – which will recur in all her subsequent works.

The protagonist, Odo Valsecca, is the vehicle for Wharton’s ideas about the conflict-laden relationship between individual and society and for her conception of history. Wharton conceived Odo as a mirror of his age, the eighteenth century: in his mind are reflected the various and contrasting philosophical doctrines of the time, to each of which in turn the young man gives his allegiance. Significantly, many of the first reviewers of The Valley defined it a philosophical romance à la Walter Pater, noticing how the absorbing interest of the book was Odo’s personality and its development (Tuttleton et al., 1992, 49–67). It is worth remembering at this point that Wharton regarded her favourite among Goethe’s works, Wilhelm Meister, as a philosophical romance. (She does not distinguish between the Lehrjahre and the Wanderjahre and she never uses the term “Bildungsroman” – probably because, as Richard Lawson says, from the point of view of literary criticism, she remained essentially in the anglosaxon tradition). In any event Wilhelm Meister did play an important part in Wharton’s conception of her first long fiction. It is clear that Wharton cherished Goethe’s novel – and the narrative tradition of which it is a key example – on several grounds. Above all else she was appreciative of the complexity and subtlety with which the German novel explores and handles the psychological processes of growing up. In so doing, it takes the episodic energy of the picaresque novel, and deepens it by linking the comings and goings of the secondary figures to the panoply of potential selves within the psyche of the protagonist. The Bildungsroman has much to do with what Michael Bakhtin calls the chronotope of the road (Bakhtin, 1979, [1937 – 38], 249) which concerns chance meetings and adventures on the road. Moreover, it also, within its governing psychological concern, pays particular attention to moments of philosophical reflection and artistic creativity. In this sense the Bildungsroman truly does
investigate an extensive range of mental and inward life, and it asks how far that complexly unfolding inwardness can be reconciled with outward circumstances and practical affairs (see Hardin, 1991, and Kontjie, 1993).

1.1.1. Plot

At a superficial level, *The Valley of Decision* relates a story dense with incidents: it is the story of Odo Valsecca from the age of nine to the age of thirty-nine. We follow him through countless changes of place and situation. We encounter him first as a destitute and lonely little boy neglected by his aristocratic parents; we see him acknowledged by his mother after his father’s death, and brought to live with her in her family’s ancestral castle, then sent to live in Turin to attend the military academy. He then becomes heir to the throne of Pianura, he goes on the Grand Tour, he succeeds the Duke...etc. etc. We follow all his adventures, are introduced to all the individuals and circles he encounters and witness his moral and intellectual development. He is constantly the focus of narration.

In this sense *The Valley of Decision* certainly unfolds like a typical Bildungsroman, in that we see Odo’s character emerge through the action of various agents: experiences, encounters, cultural stimuli, personal reflections and perceptions, and innate tendencies. The series of his experiences have a psychological correlative. His human potential takes shape (or rather, as we shall see, *shapes*) through a process of cumulative education. All the places, individuals and groups he comes into contact with have some influence on him and teach him something. His initiation to life takes the forms of: an *aesthetische Erziehung* (the childhood memory of Luini’s frescoes in the castle of Donnaz – the cabinet of Count Benedetto Alfieri – the sightseeing during his Grand Tour – the group of *cognoscenti* at Sir William Hamilton’s – the various works of art he sees, like the “Venus” by Georgione that the Duke is supposed to have destroyed); an *education sentimentale* (Momola, his childhood friend – Countess Clarice to whom he pays a formal courtship as her *cavalier servente* – Mirandolina (to whom I suspect he owes his sexual initiation) – Maria Clementina (with whom he goes first through a romance and then through a marriage of convenience) – Fulvia (who brings in his life passion and love as well as spiritual and intellectual companionship); and, last but not least, a political education that goes through well defined phases marked by the meetings with Alfieri and the *philosophes*, with Carlo Gamba and radicalism, with the *abate* (abbé, abbot) Crescenti and his organic
conception of history, with the circle of the Honey Bees and their progressive scientific views, with the abate de Crucis and political and philosophical conservatism, and that ends in a reactionariness stimulated by the impact of the French Revolution.

1.1.2. Characterization

The stages of Odo’s progress are clear cut and well defined in time and place (indeed the chronology of The Valley of Decision is very precise both in terms of internal coherence and in reference to historical events like the Terror or Napoleon’s invasion of Italy). However, Odo’s development is not linear. And we come here to the problem of characterization in The Valley, which I want to tackle in two separate sections, namely: features of secondary characters and characteristics of the protagonist.

Many critics have felt that Wharton’s preoccupation with the background has resulted in her neglecting the portrayal of her characters. Nevius says explicitly: “The setting was what absorbed her; the characters and story had to get along as best they could” (1953, 47). “Lifeless and abstract” (40) is the way he defines Odo and Fulvia. “A wooden quality” is what Walton finds in them.

I would be inclined to accept this criticism as far as the character of Fulvia Vivaldi is concerned. She represents in the novel revolutionary passion pushed to excess, the libertarian spirit bordering on fanaticism. We don’t know much even of her love for Odo, or of other feelings, or thoughts or perceptions she may have: she is never a focus of consciousness, except in the scene when she reflects on the shame she feels for being the duke’s mistress; but even this feeling is explained by the narrator not in terms of individual psychology but by telling the reader explicitly that in this Fulvia is representative of the bourgeoisie and its puritanical moral code. Her function in the novel is essentially to embody one of the two ideological positions between which the protagonist Odo Valsecca oscillates. Thereby The Valley of Decision conforms to the pattern of the Bildungsroman, where the characters with whom the protagonist comes into contact “exist, so to speak, not in their own right but for the educative benefit of the hero: [...] they are significant in so far as they are underwritten by a potentiality slumbering within him. [...] [Their] raison d’être is to be found in their relatedness (in a sense that can vary from the literal to the metaphorical) to the hero” (Swales, 1978b, 8).
Characteristic is also the “providential scenario of symbolic patterns and recurrences” of which these secondary figures are an element. The universe of the Bildungsroman, for all its seeming extensiveness, is an exceedingly small one and in *The Valley of Decision* too Odo keeps running into known faces; not only that, at some point the characters are shown to have complicated relations to Odo and to one another. For example, every time Odo chances into a company of vagrant actors, he meets Mirandolina di Chioggia: in 1765, in 1774 and in 1778. Finally, she reappears in Pianura in the last period of Odo’s reign as Marquise de Coeur-Volant, wife of an old friend of Odo’s! Fulvia too he meets at every corner: he notices her strolling with her father in Turin in 1774, and the following day he unexpectedly finds out she is Professor Vivaldi’s daughter when he visits her father; he runs into her at Ivrea; he sees her ghostly apparition at Pontesordo; he hears from Alfieri of her life in Milan; she turns out to be his “blind date” in Venice; finally she puts herself under his protection in Pianura. The very important “recurrences” of de Crucis I shall deal with in next chapter. But there are other “coincidences”: for example, the girl who lives with Carlo Gamba turns out to be Momola, Odo’s childhood friend, Cerveno’s mistress and probably the woman who infects with her ague the Duke and the little Prince; and Carlo Gamba turns out to be Cerveno’s bastard brother, and so a kinsman of Odo’s. Odo moves in a strangely rarefied, protected atmosphere.

I turn now to the analysis of the character of the hero, that is, to the element which most of all seems to me to justify my reading of *The Valley of Decision* as a Bildungsroman.

I shall start with a quotation showing to what extent Odo and Fulvia are each other’s foil. “With Fulvia, ideas were either rejected or at once converted into principles; with himself, they remained stored in the mind, serving rather as commentaries on life than as incentive to action. This *perpetual accessibility to new impressions* was a quality she could not understand, or could conceive of only as a weakness” (VD, II, 222–3; Italics mine). This passage well expresses Fulvia’s “flatness” as well as a very important feature of Odo’s character: that receptivity calculated to make of him a representative of his age – a “reflecting consciousness” in more than one sense. His contradictoriness and waverings have often irritated critics who have taken them as proofs of insufficient, inconsistent or careless characterization, without realizing the value his receptivity has as a structural device. Odo has to be a wavering, fluid character because he is not a dynamic, active novel hero: he does not develop in a succession of selves which emerge in a linear sequence. Experiences happen to him in chronological order, but their psychological effects coexist in his mind simultaneously, so that, to use Swales’s
terms, instead of a *Nacheinander* of selves we have a *Nebeneinander*, a “one-beside-the-otherness” of selves, a “clustering of many possibilities” (Swales, 1978b, 9). Yet, at the same time there is an intensity to Odo’s experience. His eager openess to new impressions is only possible because each of them, initially, far from coexisting with those already present, effaces them and takes their place: “As was usual with him the impression of the moment had effaced those preceding it” (VD, I, 69). Odo is susceptible to the stimulus of the moment, but immediacy always gives way to reflectivity. In the long run different and even opposite ideas coexist in his mind for years, without resolving themselves into a dialectic synthesis. (The conflict between reaction and radicalism that goes on in his mind is, for example, dramatised in the silent and never-ending struggle between de Crucis and Fulvia for the possession of his soul).

Odo hesitates among different options and, as Fulvia perceives, ideas to him cannot become incentives to action. His “inclination towards the *subtle duality* of judgement” becomes a “stealing *apathy* of the will” (VD, II, 164; Italics mine). We find him perpetually ruled by this “stealing *sense of duality* that so often *paralysed* his action” (VD, II, 238; Italics mine). He is fundamentally a weak man, who soon falls “into the habit of running with the tide” (VD, II, 57). Even his actions are often nothing but reactions. Already as a child he has an irritating propensity to embrace an idea only if and when somebody else opposes it: he needs this opposition to understand what it is that he wants to do. The doubts expressed by somebody on the opportunity of some course of action invariably give him the certainty that it is the right and indeed the only possible one.

A good example of the way in which this exasperating characteristic manifests itself is in the episode of the signing of the Constitution – a crucial event that precipitates the catastrophe. This Constitution had been the dream of his life and had been conceived by Fulvia and himself as the jewel in the crown of his reforms. Later Odo comes to be far from sure that, given the general political situation, it is advisable to grant the Constitution now. Moreover, he has started to entertain serious doubts on the possibility of promoting a real improvement of the condition of his people through reforms that all the classes in his State do not understand and disapprove of. Nevertheless, as soon as Fulvia voices the same doubts, he instantly recovers his revolutionary zeal: “Odo felt a slow cold strength pouring into all his veins. It was as if his enemies, in thinking to mix a mortal poison, had rendered him invulnerable” (VD, II 273). But this resolute mood is, as usual with him, ephemeral. At the very moment of signing the
Constitution he realises that his ministers had suddenly relinquished their hostility to the scheme, and immediately he feels his will vacillate!

He had counted on the goad of opposition to fight off the fatal languor which he had learned to expect at such crises. Now that he found there was to be no struggle he understood how largely his zeal had of late depended on such factitious incentives. He felt an irrational longing to throw himself on the other side of the conflict, to tear in bits the paper awaiting his signature, and disown the policy which had dictated it. But the tide of acquiescence on which he was afloat was no stagnant back-water of indifference, but the glassy reach just above the fall of a river. The current was as swift as it was smooth, and he felt himself hurried forward to an end he could no longer escape. He took the pen which Trescorre handed him, and signed the constitution. (VD, II, 258)

Odo constantly needs to have somebody to lean on, to model his behaviour on, to imitate or to oppose. His life is therefore always determined by external factors. Even at critical moments he can only act on the spur of the moment, under the influence of the events. Let us consider his behaviour during the climactic scene of the popular revolt and Fulvia’s killing. The “fatal inertia” (VD, II, 283) to which he is normally prey is momentarily dissolved by the sight of the rioting mob: he then feels invigorated by the feeling of having something to oppose and react against. Then comes the shock of Fulvia’s death: she screens him with her body and receives the bullet destined for him. This event destroys his benevolence and good will towards his people and the following day he withdraws the Constitution. He now regards the enlightened faith he had shared with Fulvia as “sentimental verbiage” (VD, II, 289). Ill, he retires to a cloister and is assisted by de Crucis. It is de Crucis who presses the reluctant Duke to go back to his duties. After two years of lethargy during which he has let Trescorre rule the State, when the principles in which he had believed seem about to triumph in Italy too “and his surest hold on authority was to share openly in their triumph” (VD, II, 305), Odo, characteristically, turns back: “tranquilly, resolutely, he took up the policy of repression”. Dethroned, he leaves for Piedmont to serve under Victor Amadeus against the invading Napoleon. He feels “the strength of the old associations, which, now that the tide had set the other way, were dragging [...] him back to the beliefs and traditions of his caste” (VD, II, 308).

At each stage of his development Odo has had the impression of having reached his goal, of having found the key to the enigma of life. But that “light of truth which we must follow at any cost” (VD, I, 183) takes on at every turn the most different forms and shapes, as religion, art, literature, a new theory of government, love...The reader follows bemusedly this erratic and contradictory progress, to be, like the protagonist, constantly disappointed in his
search as the long-expected goal of moral certainty disappears once again in the distance. Even the end of *The Valley of Decision* is open: Odo is now thirty-nine, in his maturity, with no ties whatsoever, and when he gallops away into the sunrise, a new country, with new possibilities and new adventures, stretches in front of him as before the hero of a western movie. After all, it is not the first time he has had to flee Pianura, and we have no reasons to believe that he will hold tight to his current feelings and convictions, any more than he did with those he held in the past! An enthusiastic reviewer of *The Valley* expressed the hope for a sequel to the book. And a sequel would indeed be very possible, because the reader can very reasonably doubt that this is Odo’s final self. This very lack of a plausible, acceptable and clear-cut solution is also typical of the Bildungsroman, and understandably so. If the growth of the self never ceases as long as there is life, a work of art aiming at telling the story of this *werden* can hardly give a definite answer to the riddle. Concerned with the “elusiveness of selfhood” (Swales, 1978b, 18), the form itself of the Bildungsroman ends up being problematic and elusive. Odo’s extreme susceptibility to objects, places, people, ideas, events, his continuous oscillations and his elusiveness is also a conventional feature of the Bildungsroman hero, whose character is a concentration of potentialities, from which, at the end of a phase of youthful development, one of the possible selves should emerge. In his inconclusiveness and in his constant groping for a centre of gravity Odo somewhat reminds of Wilhelm, who, to quote Swales again, “is, as it were, overgenerously endowed with possible existences: hence his characteristic receptivity and indecisiveness. He is unable to choose, to be the decisive arbiter of his own life” (1978a, 73). As Swales and Moretti (1987) point out, already Schiller had noticed the tentativeness with which Goethe describes Wilhelm’s development towards wholeness, tentativeness due to the fact that his character remains open to constant redefinition. This potentiality is in constant struggle with the external, real world, and yet, at the same time, incessantly defined by it. “The representation of a successful *Bildung* requires a pliant character [...] who leaves to others the task of shaping his life” (Moretti, 1987, 21). Wilhelm has his future decided for him by the Society of the Tower, Odo takes the road traced for him by the Catholic Church.

As we shall see, the theme of the self that must come to terms with the world by accepting the limitations and constrictions of social morality and social conventions is a major theme of Wharton’s fiction, and one which she shares with Theodor Fontane. It is true that in Wharton’s novels the description of the forces that oppose the hero’s self fulfilment is much
more realistic than in the classical Bildungsroman. Nevertheless, it seems to me that Goethean legacy is omnipresent in Wharton’s work.

1.1.3. Wharton’s historical determinism.

Notwithstanding Odo’s pliancy and contradictory choices, at the end of the novel, which takes the reader up to Odo’s maturity, one Weltanschauung does triumphantly emerge: human nature cannot aspire to unconditional individual freedom, but must fulfil itself only within a stable social hierarchy and the ancestral traditions of a consolidated culture.

This thesis is based on a view of history which, in The Valley of Decision, is first expressed by the abate Crescenti. Odo is immediately struck by Crescenti’s idea that “the germ of wrongs so confidently ascribed to the cunning of priests and the rapacity of princes” is in actual fact to be found in “the social and political tendencies of the race” (VD, I, 260). According to Crescenti, the revolutionaries who attack present institutions because they find them faulty when compared to the imaginary ones of Plato’s republic would be better advised to study their origins. They would thus find out that feudalism originated from the necessity, for the peasant, to find some form of protection from the barbaric invaders from the North, and that kings had acquired their power thanks to the role of mediators they had played between the great feudal lords and the city-states. Moreover, according to Crescenti, historical events mould the character of a people, whose national conscience is but the sum total of its traditions. This heritage, handed down from generation to generation, somehow becomes part of the genetic heritage of a people.

In the second part of the novel this idea is further stressed and developed by another man of the cloth, the abate de Crucis: “‘Our economists in praising one state at the expense of another, too often overlook those differences of character and climate that must ever make it impossible to govern different races in the same manner’”. And, taking as an example the Neapolitan people, de Crucis expresses his conviction that “‘the most enlightened rule would hardly bring this prompt and choleric people, living on a volcanic soil and amid a teeming vegetation, into any resemblance with the clear-headed Tuscan or the gentle and dignified Roman’” (VD, II, 17–18). This theory is again expressed by de Crucis in his talk with the English Traveller, who relates: “‘He declared that in his opinion different races needed different
laws; and that the sturdy and temperate American colonists were fitted to enjoy a greater measure of political freedom than the more volatile French and Italians” (VD, II, 202).

It appears therefore that Odo’s attempts at improving his people’s conditions by fighting poverty, superstition and ignorance, by reforming institutions and by attacking the political and economic power of the Church were doomed at the start by a historical past which had, as it were, become inscribed into the very genetic continuity of his people. At the end of the novel, Odo’s experiences lead him to conclude that “the ideal state was a figment of the brain. The real one, as Crescenti had long ago pointed out, was the gradual and heterogeneous product of remote social conditions, wherein every seeming inconsistency had its roots in some bygone need, and the character of each class, with its special passions, ignorances and prejudices, was the sum total of influences so ingrown and inveterate that they had become a law of thought” (VD, II, 292). Moreover, he comes to believe that only the Catholic Church has understood the essence of this racial determinism and conformed to it. Her power, “patient as a natural force”, has stooped to take on the most various forms and has come to permeate every aspect of the life of the people. The authorial voice expresses the idea that the mistake made by Odo as by other would-be reformers like him is that they could not understand that the religious feeling of the people had by now become “a habit of thought so old that it had become instinctive, so closely intertwined with every sense that to hope to eradicate it was like trying to drain all the blood from a man’s body without killing him” (VD, II, 168). The narrator sternly condemns the French revolutionaries, defined as those “city demagogues theorizing in Parisian coffee houses on the Rights of Men and the Code of Nature” (VD, II, 166) whose foolish attempts at solving “at a stroke the problems of a thousand years” had merely resulted in an unleashing of “all the repressed passions which civilization had sought, however imperfectly, to curb” (VD, II, 299).

The final vision of the French Revolution that the narrator presents is truly apocalyptic:

The new year rose in blood and mounted to a bloodier noon. All the old defenses were falling. Religion, monarchy, law, were sucked down into the whirlpool of liberated passions. Across the sanguinary scene passed, like a mocking ghost, the philosophers’ vision of the perfectibility of man. Man was free at last – freer than his would-be liberators had ever dreamed of making him – and he used his freedom like a beast (VD, II, 303).

The conception of history that emerges from The Valley of Decision is therefore a heavily organicist and deterministic one. The argument seems to run as follows: there is in each people a set of psychological characteristics which is the direct result of the geographical and climatic conditions in which this people lives, and of its particular history. Through the slow
labour of the centuries, these characteristics become innate and manifest themselves in each generation as customs, beliefs and attachment to particular institutions. The particular social and political institutions that each people sets up for itself are the most appropriate to its circumstances. Every attempt at subverting these institutions and beliefs rapidly and violently and to foist on a certain people other, alien institutions and beliefs is doomed to fail. Moreover, institutions, law, religion, traditions, allegiance to the past, are the only protective barriers from feral instincts. Their violent, sudden or radical upheaval will cause anarchy and pose a threat to civilization, and it will also prove ineffectual, because only gradual historical changes are effective in producing new societies. These are the ideas that the central character ends up embracing, and that the narrator — whom we can safely identify as the author’s voice — supports throughout the novel. (More or less at the same time of the writing of The Valley, Wharton will express her belief in “racial psychology” and “racial traits” in her article “The Three Francescas” (1902), written in praise of Francis Marion Crawford’s Italian romances, and in particular of his characterization of Italian figures).

It is worth remembering at this point how much Wharton’s conception of history was indebted to that of Hippolyte Taine, who she calls one of her “awakeners” (the others being Darwin, Spencer and Lecky). This is how Katherine Joslin describes Taine’s influence on Wharton:

She traced her own philosophical determinism through male European intellectual thought that fixes the individual in a social, cultural, historical context as opposed to the romantic selfhood of American colonial thought that places the individual outside society. Hippolyte Taine, who in his famous introduction to the History of English Literature (1863) argued that literature itself is the product of race, milieu and moment, especially won her respect. For him the novel had become the scientific study of the effects of these factors on character. “Whether the data are physical or moral makes no difference”; he claimed, “they always have causes; there are causes for ambition, courage, truthfulness, just as there are for digestion, muscular movement, or animal heat.” [...] It is difficult to find a philosophy closer to Wharton’s own. (1991, 42)

Reading The Origin of the Species at the age of twenty-two was for Wharton one of the intellectual milestones of her life. She went on reading current philosophical and scientific essays all her life, and even became very interested in the new science of anthropology. Through her complete absorption of this intellectual background “she found a literary stance, a perspective from which to view the social drama surrounding her. What she saw in such
theories about the shaping force of biology and especially environment was a substantiation of her own view, one she knew first-hand from the social, economic and political world of Old New York (Joslin, 1991, 42).

It is significant that in The Valley society is frequently alluded to through the metaphor of a slowly developing natural organism, the product of a slow, organic growth. As Gary Lindberg observes, this metaphor is used by Wharton “whenever she voices her great admiration for continuity and tradition”.

The individual being [...] is rooted in the past and in social tradition through habit, association, and feeling. As his bodily structure has evolved in response to his physical needs and surroundings, his psychological structure and feeling have developed in close connection with his social activities.

[Wharton uses the organic image] to express the natural continuity and development of the inherited forms themselves. By cutting off his complex attachment to these forms, the individual damages his own feelings, severely limits his understanding of human experience, and becomes a danger to others (Lindberg, 1975, 38).

The final, crucial lesson Odo learns is that “human development follows no such direct line of advance, but must painfully stumble across the wastes of error, prejudice and ignorance, while the theoriser traverses the same distance with a stroke of his speculative pinions” (VD, II, 260). And his final submission is similar to the conclusion at which, as we shall see, Justine Brent arrives in The Fruit of the Tree (1907), another novel in which the organic metaphor is repeatedly used, and in which the protagonist in the end must recognise that

life is not a matter of abstract principles, but a succession of pitiful compromises with fate, of concessions to old traditions, old beliefs, old charities and frailties. That was what her act had taught her – that was the word of the gods to the mortal who had laid a hand on their bolts. And she had humbled herself to accept the lesson, seeing human relations at last as a tangled and deep-rooted growth, a dark forest through which the idealist cannot cut his straight path without hearing at each stroke the cry of the severed branch: “Why woundest thou me?” (FT, 624)

It is worth mentioning that George Eliot, an author greatly admired by Wharton and who was also steeped in German thought, also shares an instinctive “reluctance to see traditions change” (Ashton, 1983, 67). And Eliot’s highly appreciative review of the first two volumes of the historian Wilhelm Heinrich von Riehl’s Naturgeschichte des deutschen Volkes als Grundlage einer deutschen Sozialpolitik proves that she too accepts an organicist conception of history, and in fact makes even use of what I called the “organic metaphor”. This is how Eliot sums up von Riehl’s ideas:
He sees in European society incarnate history, and any attempt to disengage it from its historical elements must, he believes, be simply destructive of social vitality. What has grown up historically can only die out historically, by the gradual operation of necessary laws. The external conditions which society has inherited from the past are but the manifestation of inherited internal conditions in the human beings who compose it; the internal conditions and the external are related to each other as the organism and its medium, and development can take place only by the gradual consentaneous development of both. [...] The nature of European men has its roots intertwined with the past, and can only be developed by allowing those roots to remain undisturbed while the process of development is going on, until the ripeness of the seed which carries with it a life independent of the root (Pinney, 1963, 287-88).

Eliot contrasts “that reverence for traditional custom, which is the peasant’s principle of action” (281) with “the abstract theorizing of educated townsmen” (284); and she agrees with Riehl that “the more deeply we penetrate into the knowledge of society in its details, the more thoroughly we shall be convinced that a universal social policy has no validity except on paper, and can never be carried into successful practice” because the social conditions of a given country are completely different from those of others (289).

This might be one of the many ways George Eliot exercises an influence on Wharton, especially in this first phase of her career. Incidentally, *The Valley of Decision* has been often compared with *Romola*, which also was an exceptionally well researched historical romance set in Italy (albeit in a different epoch) with very prominent philosophical and moral concerns. And the complexity and richness of both *The Valley* and *Romola* deserve in my view better critical fortune than they have encountered so far.

Thus, behind the metaphor of society as wood or forest we can trace some of Wharton's most important ideas: the idea that the past lives in the present, enriches and determines it, that social evolution is a process of organic growth that cannot be either interrupted or accelerated, and that the “idealist” who, ignoring all this, aspires to complete spiritual self-determination, disregarding the accumulated wisdom of the ages, compromises the delicate balance of the social organism. The organic metaphor proves to be the most adequate to convey this naturalistic determinism. This obviously permeates not only her conception of society but that of the individual as well. All Wharton's characters will be presented as the product, to some extent, of shaping environmental influences, against which they strive to assert their right to self-determination and self-fulfilment, only to recognise in the end that they can only fulfil themselves by giving up their freedom and becoming part of a whole. In Odo's case, as we shall...
see in Chapter II, not only environmental, but even genetic factors are seen as playing a part in the formation of his complex and contradictory character.

As I have already indicated, such deterministic notions in respect of the interplay between the individual and the culture to which he belongs are not part of the Bildungsroman tradition. Quite the reverse: the Bildungsroman often seems to be hugely indifferent to social and cultural conditioning. But equally, it has to be stressed that Odo constantly debates these issues; they are not so much a given truth as part of the reflectivity of his character as it unfolds. In this sense, even ideas that in themselves are hostile to the Bildungsroman tradition can be incorporated, as discursive material, into that tradition.

1.2. \textit{The House of Mirth} (1905)

The deterministic terms in which Edith Wharton conceives the development of society correspond to the way in which – especially in her early fiction – the development of the single human being is described. In \textit{The Valley} the individual, like society, appears very much as a pre-ordained entity. This quasi-naturalistic bias combines in \textit{The Valley} with a pedagogical intent that makes of the central character to some extent a vehicle of Wharton’s philosophical conceptions. The result is a figure whose psychology remains somewhat blurred and abstract.

Although this strain of naturalism is present – as Larry Rubin (1957) has observed – also in other Wharton novels like \textit{The House of Mirth} (1905), \textit{The Fruit of the Tree} (1907), \textit{The Custom of the Country} (1913) and \textit{The Age of Innocence} (1920), in these four works Wharton manages to depict characters who are much more individualised than in \textit{The Valley}. Her second novel, \textit{The House of Mirth}, represents therefore from this point of view a considerable qualitative improvement on her first. Indeed, it is generally regarded as one of Wharton’s most significant works and even singled out as her best. I want to suggest that this is due to the fact that Wharton allows her central character – Lily Bart, a fashionable socialite in the New York high society of the turn of the century – to move in a direction that challenges the deterministic premises and to undergo a real inner development. Lily, therefore, is not only the product of circumstances, the result of environmental influences and the victim of an inexorable monster called society. Her social downfall is paralleled by a growing self-awareness and acceptance of personal responsibility. She becomes increasingly poor and lonely, her surroundings become dingier and dingier, she is progressively divested of the character she had impersonated in the
elegant drawing-rooms of her friends; and yet, while she loses materially she gains spiritually, because she comes to understand that in no moment has she been compelled to make the questionable choices she has made, and that, to a great extent, her situation is the product of her fundamentally wrong moral attitude. Thus, though the novel ends with Lily’s (in my view accidentally) taking an overdose of morphine, she dies as a being more deeply human than the elegant and fastidious young woman we encounter at the beginning of the work. In the words of Blake Nevius, “near the end of the action [...] as a result of suffering she experiences the self-realization which is the condition of any moral growth” (1953, 57). Thus the novel, whilst chronicling the social fall and material impoverishment that Lily experiences during the last two years of her life, also relates her progressive unfolding into a richer human being. In this sense, *The House of Mirth* conjoins the strategies of the realistic novel and the Bildungsroman.

Lily’s problem is that, though well born, she is poor, and she can remain in her social milieu only as long as she is found likeable by the wealthy friends and relatives who constantly support her. She is therefore under pressure even greater than usual to find a rich husband who can give her financial independence, and, being already in her thirtieth year, she knows she is running out of time. Lily is the highly specialised product of a long evolutionary process resulting in an exquisitely beautiful and graceful creature whose function is purely ornamental. She is the classical victim of the “custom of the country”, that is, of the custom – typical, according to Wharton, of the American upper class – of bringing up women to be mere decorative objects, luxury goods, expensive commodities and living proofs of their husbands’ economic success. The whole concept is admirably expressed by the millionaire social climber Simon Rosedale in his marriage proposal to Lily:

> I wanted money, and I’ve got more than I know how to invest; and now the money doesn’t seem to be of any account unless I can spend it on the right woman. That’s what I want to do with it: I want my wife to make all the other women feel small. I’d never grudge a dollar that was spent on that. But it isn’t every woman that can do it, no matter how much you spend on her. [...] What I want is a woman who’ll hold her head higher the more diamonds I put on it. [...] That kind of woman costs more than all the rest of them put together” (HM, 180).

Rosedale’s coarse candour precisely bears out the speculations of the cultivated and detached Charles Bowen in *The Custom of the Country*, whose philosophical view on the subject of marriage in America is that “in this country the passion for making money has
preceded the knowing how to spend it, and the American man lavishes his fortune on his wife because he doesn't know what else to do with it” (CC, 118). It is worth noting that this idea of Wharton's is substantiated by the economist Thorstein Veblen in *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899).

Lily is so completely the product of her upbringing that she seems almost incapable of making independent choices. She is seen as a helpless organism with no control over her existence and this is emphasised by the imagery that is repeatedly associated with her. Her very name is that of a flower, and the original title of the novel – which chronicles her gradual social fall during this last two years of her life – was “The Year of the Rose”. The passages in which she is compared to an animal or plant are numberless: “She could not figure herself as anywhere but in a drawing room, diffusing elegance as a flower sheds perfume” (HM, 103); she is “a rare flower grown for exhibition, a flower from which every bud had been nipped except the crowning blossom of her beauty” (HM, 324); “a waterplant in the flux of the tides” (HM, 55); “the orchid basking in its artificially created atmosphere” (HM, 154); tears become her as “raindrops do the beaten rose” (HM, 171). The naturalistic determinism presiding over the creation of this character finds full expression in the following, frequently quoted passage:

She could not hold herself much to blame for this ineffectiveness, and she was perhaps less to blame than she believed. Inherited tendencies had combined with early training to make her the highly specialised product she was: an organism as helpless out of its narrow range as the sea-anemone torn from the rock. She had been fashioned to adorn and delight; to what other end does nature round the rose-leaf and paint the humming-bird’s breast? And was it her fault that the purely decorative mission is less easily and harmoniously fulfilled among social beings than in the world of nature? That it is apt to be hampered by material necessities or complicated by moral scruples? (HM, 304)

Lily herself, while talking to Gerty Farish – Selden’s unworldly cousin, who is a social worker – makes use of the naturalistic argument to explain her behaviour:

“Why, the beginning was in my cradle, I suppose – in the way I was brought up and the things I was taught to care for. Or no – I won’t blame anybody for my faults: I’ll say it was in my blood, that I got it from some wicked pleasure-loving ancestress, who reacted against the homely virtues of New Amsterdam, and wanted to be back at the court of the Charlees!” (HM, 228–9)

Gerty accepts this justification: “‘She can’t help it – she was brought up with those ideas’” (HM, 273). Likewise when Selden suggests to Lily that she could, if she wanted, choose
the independent life Gerty has made for herself, he himself is immediately struck by the irony of such a suggestion: “She was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate” (HM, 9).

But, although she strongly feels that she is made for the life of luxury she leads in the homes of her wealthy friends, there is also in Lily’s nature the capacity to feel ashamed of this parasitical existence as well as of the only other alternative she can think of, selling herself to a rich husband. This finer strain in her nature is also explained in strictly naturalistic terms: whilst her mother had belonged to the class of *nouveaux riches* of which she had embodied the materialistic values, Lily’s father had been a member of the “Old New York”, that upper class of European origin that had long preserved “aristocratic” traditions, habits and aspirations. This curious mixture has produced a being with a divided personality, who, like Odo, perpetually hesitates between two opposite types of life: freedom, fulfilment of one’s innermost self and poverty on one side, and money, status and the meanness of a mercenary marriage on the other.

The influence of her family and social environment and of genetic heredity is seen as so strong in determining the character and behaviour of an individual that Lily’s weak attempts at escaping from the gilt cage of her world to find citizenship in Selden’s “republic of the spirit” would seem to be doomed to fail. Her good intentions are not sustained by moral strength and self-discipline. Moreover, she lacks that sense of *belonging* to a culture, a society, a class, a set of people or ideas that could be a prop for a vacillating will or faith. She has nothing to fall back on in her moment of trial, nothing and nobody to believe in or to live and die for, and it is this dislocation and this rootlessness – due to the duality of her nature and of her origin – that causes and gives poignancy to her drama.

At first sight, then, *The House of Mirth* is the chronicle of an inevitable destruction and an illustration of the thesis that, in every society, the individual with moral scruples is the organism least fit for survival. As in Dreiser’s and Zola’s novels, Darwin’s theories are transferred to the social field. Society is a universal tyrant; inexorable like nature, it creates and destroys human beings. These, for their part, are nothing but the combined effect of their genetic inheritance and of the particular historical and social circumstances in which they happen to live. But in *The House of Mirth* there is not a complete acceptance of the deterministic idea. As Blake Nevius says, “Edith Wharton never rode determinism as a thesis. Her view was conditioned by a faith in moral values that collided head on with the implications of determinism” (1953, 58).
Wharton clearly shows that Lily’s destruction is also the result of a moral attitude that Lily knows to be wrong. She knows there are other worlds beyond high society. Selden, for example, offers the example of a different way of living. An impoverished member of the Old New York, he must earn his living working with a legal firm. He does not envy his friends’ standard of living and, though continuing to be in his social set, he keeps himself detached from if and manages to preserve his independence of judgement. His cousin Gerty’s life is not only independent but also socially useful. She has accepted her destiny and made her existence meaningful by devoting it to alleviating other people’s sufferings, “breaking down [...] the bounds of self” and letting her personal feelings melt “into the general current of human understanding” (HM, 272). In this she is very much like John Amherst and Justine Brent, the two protagonists of The Fruit of the Tree, whose social commitment is stimulated by “that sharpening of the moral vision which makes all human suffering so near and insistent that the other aspects of life fade in remoteness” (FT, 155). By contrast, as the narrator observes, “Lily’s nature was incapable of such renewal: she could feel other demands only through her own” (HM, 154) (here again we can draw a parallel with another character in The Fruit of the Tree, Bessy Langhope, self centred and childish).

Throughout the novel Lily is given the chance to choose, to a certain extent, her own destiny. She is strongly attracted to Selden, could accept his marriage proposal in Chapter 6 and for a moment even seems to be accepting it, but then she cannot give up the hope of “landing” a rich marriage. She could choose not to play cards for money, and, when she loses, not to borrow money from Gus Trenor, because “in her innermost self Lily knew that it was not by appealing to the fraternal instinct that she was likely to move Gus Trenor; but this way of explaining the situation helped to drape its crudity” (HM, 85). In Chapter 12 she again gives in to her feelings for Selden (and even lets him kiss her! with all the implications this had in the Old New York) and yet in Chapter 13, the following morning, when she wakes up to find Selden’s note “her first movement was one of annoyance: this unforeseen act of Selden’s added another complication to life. It was so unlike him to yield to such an irrational impulse! Did he really mean to ask her to marry him?” (HM, 142). Once again she loses him. She goes on a cruise with the Dorsets “perfectly aware from the outset that her part in the affair was [...] to distract Dorset’s attention from his wife. That was what she was ‘there for’; it was the price she had chosen to pay for three months of luxury and freedom from care” (HM, 230). She keeps making mistake after mistake, compromising her real happiness as well as her social standing. Only
when she is left alone does Lily begin to acquire some self knowledge and to rearrange her priorities. Through poverty and loneliness she learns to listen to her better self. There is a series of dialogues with various characters (George Dorset, Simon Rosedale, Lawrence Selden) through which the slow change she is undergoing is shown. In each she is confronted with a choice: for example, Dorset will marry her if she gives him the proofs of his wife’s infidelity, and Rosedale if she regains — through blackmail — her standing in society. In both cases Lily now manages to refuse to act in a way her soul finds instinctively repugnant. Selden warns her of the false position in which she is putting herself by living with Mrs. Hatch, a social climber of dubious character, and Lily leaves, even though this means that she will have to earn her living as an apprentice in a milliner’s establishment. She decides to use her legacy to discharge her debt to Trenor, rather than to establish a business that would give her a living, not to borrow money from Rosedale and not to trade on Selden’s past adulterous affair. She has forgotten her pride and sense of superiority and has left her previous scheming and dissimulating self so far behind that she gives in to the need to talk spontaneously and sincerely to people, to explain her reasons and see her motives recognised, as she does in her last meetings with Rosedale and in the final, important scene with Selden, in which she shows a new self in the clarity with which she analyses her behaviour and in the candour and directness with which she admits her errors: “Once — twice — you gave me the chance to escape from my life, and I refused it: refused it because I was a coward. Afterward I saw my mistake — I saw I could never be happy with what had contented me before. But it was too late: you had judged me — I understood. It was too late for happiness — but not too late to be helped by the thought of what I had missed. That is all I have lived on [...] I remembered your saying that such a life could never satisfy me [...] That is what I wanted to thank you for” (HM, 311). She is now capable of reciprocating a man’s feelings: “Something [...] leaped up in her like an imperishable flame: it was the love his love had kindled” (HM, 313).

The novel ends with Lily’s death. But she does not die as yet another victim of heredity and environment, as the insignificant and discarded cog of a big mechanism, as the helpless prey of the inexorable monster Society. She dies as a new and better human being and the extent of her maturation is measurable not only in the scene with Selden — in which, by burning the letters that compromise him, she obtains the greatest victory over herself — but also in the immediately following meeting with Nettie Struther. This is in my view an important episode, the meaning of which has been overlooked. Nettie, a ‘lost’ girl who had been helped by Lily’s
careless bounty to recover her health, has had the strength to rebuild her life and is now happy with her husband and child, “alive with hope and energy: whatever fate the future reserved for her, she would not be cast into the refuse-heap without a struggle” (HM, 316). The lesson of Nettie’s struggle for survival is not lost on Lily, who reflects upon it during her last night. The glimpse of happiness she has caught in Nettie’s kitchen reveals to her “inner destitution”; it gives her an understanding of the deep impoverishment she suffers due to her lack of roots:

It was the clutch of solitude at her heart, the sense of being swept like a stray uprooted growth down the heedless current of the years. That was the feeling which possessed her now – the feeling of being something rootless and ephemeral, mere spindrift on the whirling surface of existence, without anything to which the poor little tentacles of self could cling before the awful flood submerged them. And as she looked back she saw that there had never been a time when she had had any real relation to life. [...] In whatever form a slowly accumulated past lives in the blood – whether in the concrete image of the old house stored with visual memories, or in the conception of the house not built with hands, but made up with inherited passions and loyalties – it has the same power of broadening and deepening the individual existence, of attaching it by mysterious links of kinship to all the mighty sum of human striving (HM, 322–3).

Thus The House of Mirth does document a progression of the central character towards better understanding of life and of self. There is a big difference between the Lily Bart of the beginning, with her proud sense of superiority over the people around her, her conscious ability to manipulate them and her well-bred disdain for unpalatable truths, and the Lily of the end, who has come fully to grasp the reality of her situation and can speak of it with utter sincerity and simplicity: “I was just a screw or a cog in the great machine I called life, and when I dropped out of it I found I was of no use anywhere else” (HM, 312). And not only has Lily learnt through her experiences, she also perceives that she has learnt. In particular, she feels the epiphanic importance of the meeting with Nettie: “Her first glimpse of the continuity of life had come to her that evening in Nettie Struther’s kitchen. [...] [She] seemed to Lily to have reached the central truth of existence” (HM, 323). It also seems that Lily can draw from this episode new courage to cope with her life, and that it can therefore take on the meaning of a turning point: “As she reached the street she realised that she felt stronger and happier [...] She did not mean to pamper herself any longer, to go without food because her surroundings made it unpalatable. Since it was her fate to live in a boarding house, she must learn to fall in with the conditions of the life” (HM, 320). In my view Lily’s death does not negate her progress. She
does not die as a character defeated and destroyed by Society or Fate, because her death is not deliberately chosen but accidental:

She must take a brief bath of oblivion. She put out her hand, and measured the soothing drops into a glass; but as she did so, she knew they would be powerless against the supernatural lucidity of her brain. She had long since raised the dose to its highest limit, but tonight she felt she must increase it. She knew she took a slight risk in doing so [...] But after all that was but one chance in a hundred (HM, 326).

Lily dies imagining she is holding Nettie's baby in her arms: the baby to whom she herself has, in a sense, given life, because, without her "spasmodic benevolence", it could never have been born. The child, by melting in Lily "the frozen currents of youth" (HM, 324) has somehow reconnected her to the flow of life and awakened in her a sense of kinship with loving and suffering humanity. Her last conscious thought is "that there was something she must tell Selden, some word she had found that should make life clear between them" (HM, 327).

In Selden's case too can be seen a victory of the imponderable, unpredictable elements of individual consciousness over the forces of heredity and environment. Selden too achieves a victory over his old self, with his prejudices, mistrust and fear of personal commitment, and in the last chapter we see him going towards Lily's lodging "thrilling with a youthful sense of adventure". He has decided to let his feelings for Lily have the upper hand over his Old New York conventionality and emotional frigidity. "He had cut loose from the familiar shores of habit, and launched himself on uncharted seas of emotion; all the old tests and measures were left behind, and his course was to be shaped by new stars. [...] Nine o'clock was an early hour for a visit, but Selden had passed beyond all such conventional observances. He only knew that he must see Lily Bart at once -- he had found the word he had meant to say to her" (HM, 327-8). Both Selden and Lily have each found for themselves "the word which made all clear" (HM, 333). The fatal accident that causes Lily's death prevents them from uttering it, and yet this does not diminish the importance of "this fleeting victory over themselves". Circumstances and fatality have conspired to keep them apart, but the last page of the novel does not unequivocally assert the predominance of material and social conditions over the self; with characteristic Whartonian ambivalence, the passage also contains the recognition of the possibility of the self to fight and overcome social conditioning and of the moral victory Lily and Selden have won:

He saw that all the conditions of life had conspired to keep them apart; since his very detachment from the external influences which swayed her had increased his spiritual fastidiousness, and made it more difficult to live and love
uncritically. But at least he had loved her — had been willing to stake his future on his faith in her — and if the moment had been fated to pass from them before they could seize it, he saw now that, for both, it had been saved whole out of the ruin of their lives.

It was this moment of love, this fleeting victory over themselves, which had kept them from atrophy and extinction; which, in her, had reached out to him in every struggle against the influence of her surroundings, and in him, had kept alive the faith that now drew him penitent and reconciled to her side (HM, 333).

Thus it could be argued that *The House of Mirth* — that at one level can be read exclusively as the study of “the victimizing effect of a particular environment on one of its more helplessly characteristic products” (Rubin, 1957, 182) — presents to some extent the features of a Bildungsroman, that is, of a novel concerned with spiritual apprenticeship. The episodic structure of *The House of Mirth* lends itself to the description of the different stages of the heroine’s Bildung. The particular events occurring in this last phase of Lily’s career, though trivial in themselves, acquire significance if viewed as stations of her progress towards completeness. Each futile episode triggers a reaction in Lily’s soul and has therefore import. Thus her external adventures have inward correspondents, and this, in my view, accounts for the compelling and lasting interest of *The House of Mirth*. It must be stressed, however, that we are concerned here with one of Wharton’s “adaptations” of the genre, in the sense that *The House of Mirth* has some of the spirituality of the Bildungsroman, but is essentially grounded in a moral vision. Lily’s growth is moral in character, more than is the case with the classical Bildungsroman. Her development within the novel leads her to attain an ethical dimension that would equip her for a new life; but we are far from the *Lehrjahre* model, in which the conclusion shows a socially integrated Wilhelm, who has established links to the Society of the Tower and to a group of friends, who has a child and almost a wife and is ready to take active part in social life. Even so I do not subscribe to the view expressed by Nevius that the “persistent vitality” of Wharton’s novel is due to the quality it shares with Dreiser’s novels, that is, that fascination deriving from the contemplation of “the spectacle of a lonely struggle against the forces of environment” that is undiminished by the certainty of defeat (Nevius, 1953, 59).

To me this view seems to overlook the novel’s concern for the inner potentiality of the central character and the importance of ‘crucial instances’ like the Nettie Struther episode, thus misunderstanding the tension in the novel. Wharton gives dignity to her subject — life in a luxurious, idle, conventional and utterly materialistic little world, and the petty misadventures
befalling one of its members – by showing the significance these trivial occurrences have for the heroine’s inward development, just as “the Bildungsroman, with its concern for the Werden of an individual, is able – in Hegel’s and so many theoreticians’ terms – to redeem the prosaic facticity of the given social world by relating it to the inner potentialities of the hero” (Swales, 1976, 23). And, just as in The Valley of Decision Wharton blended the Bildungsroman model with elements of naturalism – and with other literary genres, like the historical and philosophical romance – in The House of Mirth we find an equally original and complex mixture of elements.

1.3. The Fruit of the Tree (1907)

The Fruit of the Tree, Wharton’s third novel, is one of her most neglected works. It had never been republished until Virago Press in 1984 made an offset edition from Scribner’s 1907 edition, and it has never received much attention from scholars. It is generally mentioned in the most important general studies on the fiction of Edith Wharton, but, apart from the 1907 reviews, there are only a few articles specifically on this novel (Stein 1979; Carlin, 1992; Tuttleton, 1995) which, though all interesting for the diversity of their approach and the insight they show in to different elements of The Fruit of the Tree, in my view do not do full justice to the variety and complexity of this work.

While planning The Fruit of the Tree Wharton wrote to her publisher, Scribner, that her new book was going to deal with “life in New York and in a manufacturing town, with the House of Mirth in the middle of the block, but a good many houses adjoining”. And, as Scribner confessed himself tired of the comments he was always hearing about Selden, Wharton promised: “As for the hero, he’s going to be a very strong man” (Bell, 1965, 264). Critics have always been somewhat disconcerted by Wharton’s choice of subject for this novel: the conditions of workers in one of the textile factories that were proliferating in Massachusetts in the second half of the 19th century. The subject seems uncongenial to a socially privileged writer who had an intimate knowledge of the American upper class, which she had successfully described in the best-selling The House of Mirth, but knew and must have cared nothing about the working class. It is generally thought that she must have intended to try her hand at another commercially successful genre, the popular realist novel with muckraking overtones. The fact that there was at the time a crusade for the improvement of the conditions of life and work of
factory operatives automatically insured the popularity of any fiction dealing with this subject. According to Grace Kellogg, (1965, 175) Wharton’s choice of the second theme, euthanasia, also shows her determination to write a best-seller because also “‘problem-novels’, so called, were at the height of their popularity”. But Wharton’s mention of the ‘House of Mirth’ in her letter to Scribner indicates the third theme she deals with in The Fruit of the Tree: the question of the role of woman in the American upper class and, consequently, the problem of the relationship between the sexes. This topic was also extremely likely to grant her a large audience, because, as Elizabeth Ammons remarks,

The Woman Movement by the turn of the century, in addition to having yielded some socially and politically influential organizations and symbols [...] was stimulating a new literature in America. In the imaginative realm, fiction about the New Woman burgeoned: emphatically modern heroines such as Hamlin Garland’s Rose of Rose of Dutcher’s Cooly (1895) or Gertrude Atherton’s Patience of Patience Sparhawk and Her Times (1895), or even Harold Frederic’s glamorous Celia in The Damnation of Theron Ware (an 1896 best-seller) [...] are typical of the first run of fictive New Women (1980, 26-7).

They had been followed by the more complex and troubling heroines of Theodore Dreiser and Kate Chopin, whom the American public had found less appealing. (In this group belongs also Wharton’s heroine Lily Bart, who too had been accused of immorality by many readers). The Fruit of the Tree was thus bound to rise a stir by tackling simultaneously several hotly debated issues of the day. The novel was appreciated by the public, sold comparatively well and also received favourable reviews, some of which declared it even superior to The House of Mirth (Lewis, 1975, 180).

There is a general consensus that the multiplication of thematic issues causes a lack of focus in The Fruit of the Tree. Henry James was the first to criticise what he called the “strangely infirm” (Bell, 1965, 259) structure of this novel and later critics seem to have accepted his judgement. And, admittedly, The Fruit of the Tree could not be farther from James’s idea of what a novel should be, i.e. a minute analysis, conducted from every conceivable point of view, of one central situation. However, in The Fruit of the Tree Wharton respects the Jamesian principle of the limited number of ‘reflecting consciousnesses’ to be taken as the points of view creating the narrative perspective, and of the strict interrelationship which must exist among them. The reflecting consciousnesses in The Fruit of the Tree are essentially two: Amherst and Justine. Less frequently, Bessy is the focal character. Justine and
Bessy are childhood friends; Bessy becomes John’s first wife and Justine his second. However, Wharton does not subscribe to the view that, once the focal characters are chosen, the writer must limit him/herself to exclusively relate what they think, feel, perceive and experiment. As in most of Wharton’s fiction, we have in this novel an “omniscient”, third person narrator who constantly exposes and clarifies the thoughts and feelings of the characters, explaining, making remarks, speculating on the motivations of the characters and the causes of their reactions, and therefore expressing, directly and indirectly, his own\(^3\) point of view. Thus, the personality of the characters is revealed both through their actions and through specific analysis of their state of mind. And the narrative structure is designed to embody the development of the characters, and to present them with crucial moral choices which bring their whole personality into play.

In my view, therefore, Wharton succeeds in linking together the three strands – the issue of industrial reform, the morality and social acceptability of euthanasia, the woman question – by making them appear as different aspects of one major moral theme: the problem of the responsibility each individual has towards other individuals and towards society as a whole, and of how compatible socialisation is with moral and intellectual autonomy. It is the interlocking of characters, plot and moral theme that makes of this novel, in the last analysis, a coherent whole. Wharton makes the moral dilemma emerge from events in the plot which are triggered by the characters’ choices, and these choices are presented as fully compatible with the psychology of the characters. Therefore, I intend here to suggest that the novel gains in meaning and even in structural coherence if viewed as the story of the spiritual development of two central characters, Justine Brent and John Amherst – and, in a way, of the lack of development, leading to self destruction, of a third character, Bessy Westmore.

It is principally through the character of Bessy, wealthy socialite and owner of the Westmore factories, that Wharton pursues in *The Fruit of the Tree* her criticism – already started in *The House of Mirth* – of the “custom of the country”, of the way American women belonging to the upper middle class were brought up to be ornamental objects, luxuries, costly goods that, the more expensive and superfluous they were, the better could witness their husbands’ – their owners’ – wealth and success. No sense of individual or social responsibility was fostered in them. They were allowed to grow up lazy and ignorant and were trained to believe that their only goal was to get as rich a husband as possible, that they had no duties and that it was the privilege of their sex to be irrational and utterly unable to solve practical
problems or to deal with money matters – this was “business”, and seeing to it was a male prerogative.

The result of this way of conceiving woman’s role, Wharton maintains, must necessarily be the kind of woman embodied in *The Fruit of the Tree* in Bessy: not evil, and capable of genuine feelings, but childish, superficial, selfish, constantly in need of other people’s attention, affection and approval, incapable of catering for other people’s material or spiritual needs, and, therefore, incapable of being a reliable, responsible and useful member of society.

Bessy and Justine are each other’s foil (the psychological contrast is highlighted by their physical appearance: Justine is dark-haired, Bessy is absolutely blonde – a well-known *topos* of nineteenth century English and American fiction). More importantly, if the principle of growth governs Justine’s function as the protagonist, Bessy is on the contrary remarkable for her incapacity to grow, change, evolve, develop in a spiritual sense. Her incapacity for spiritual regeneration can be compared to physical immobility and confinement, and this is explicitly done in Justine’s reflection: “There could be no imprisonment as cruel as that of being bounded by a hard small nature. [...] She could imagine no physical disability as cramping as that” (FT, 228). Amherst too feels that Bessy had at first loved him for bringing fresh air into her “cramped and curtained” life” (180). And, as in a Dantesque *contrappasso*, later Bessy will suffer the complete paralysis of the lower body as a consequence of a fall from her horse.

Wharton’s working title for this novel was “Justine Brent” and Justine does preserve her preeminence in the finished work: *The Fruit of the Tree* is very much her story, and, in the opinion of most critics, a story of failure and defeat. Universally acknowledged as one of the most charming of Wharton’s female characters, she is generally seen as a woman who is prevented by circumstances from achieving complete fulfilment. In the opinion of many critics, hers is a fate of profound physical and psychological frustration due to a disappointing marriage. Blake Nevius, for example, sees in *The Fruit of the Tree* the first of Wharton’s novels dealing with the theme of the “trapped sensibility”, that is, “the baffling, wasteful submission of a superior nature to an inferior” (1953,107–8). In *The Fruit of the Tree* this situation would recur twice: in Amherst’s marriage to Bessy, during which his humanitarian programme is hampered by her incomprehension, and in his second marriage to Justine, in which he would take up the role of the “inferior” nature, whose limited moral view threatens Justine’s happiness. In the end

the larger nature of Justine, which has argued consistently for the freedom to act on her most generous impulses, has been betrayed by the smaller natures
surrounding it — by Wyant, Bessy, Mr. Langhope, but particularly by Amherst, who cannot penetrate to the clear moral atmosphere in which her decisions are formed. What follows, for Justine, is the usual expiation (Nevius, 1953, 116).

Feminine criticism has largely endorsed this view. According to Elizabeth Ammons, Justine, “a New Woman of exceptional appeal” (1980, 25), is the victim of a society which does not allow women to fulfil all their aspirations: she can choose freedom and solitude or marriage and loss of independence, but cannot have both. Thus for Ammons too the end of the novel shows a Justine who, from a strong and self-sufficient woman, has been transformed by her husband’s incomprehension into a passive and resigned creature, thus reversing the Sleeping Beauty myth. Margaret McDowell also maintains that “Justine, the bright and compassionate ‘new woman’, unconvincingly loses her strength and independence after Amherst condemns her for having administered the fatal medication” to Bessy, and his behaviour is exclusively due to her proving to be “too strong and decisive to be a satisfactory wife for him”. He therefore conjures up an ideal image of his first wife who replaces Justine, and she ends up as “a submissive woman who devotes herself to Bessy’s child in seeming penance for a guilt she doesn’t feel” (McDowell, 1976, 54–55). Carol Wershoven, for whom Justine is one of the many “female intruders” in Wharton’s fiction — a heroine who “disrupts the society she has entered, usually by representing an attractive yet dangerous alternative to it” (1982, 124) — also believes that Amherst rejects Justine because she, with her independence of thought, upsets the balance of power in their marriage, and that Bessy’s idealised memory becomes for him a solace.

As far as the character of Amherst is concerned, he has been generally considered morally disappointing because, as Nevius says, “in the domestic impasse with Justine he reveals the inadequacy of his moral sensibility when it is not being applied to broad abstract social problems” (1953, 107). Even Louis Auchincloss, who refers to Amherst as “the vigorous, uncompromising social reformer [...] of blunted sensitivity but of passionate heart and loyalty” declares him to be, in the last analysis, just another of Wharton’s heroes, “men of good taste, good manners, and attenuated will power” (Auchincloss, 1971, 66–67) destined to disappoint their women’s expectations. However, in a recent article James Tuttleton (1995) has reassessed both The Fruit of the Tree and its main characters. He rejects the feminist critics’ view of the novel as a tale about “the victimisation of women by men” (164). He convincingly argues that “a misconceived admiration for Justine has produced a false view of Amherst as a misogynist and a false view of the novel as an attack on marriage” (163) and that the novel in reality does
not endorse Justine’s idealism and does not present Amherst as a “sexist pig who cannot tolerate moral autonomy in a woman” (163). He rightly concludes that “At the heart of the book is their [Justine and Amherst’s] descent from abstract idealism into a fallen awareness of the contingency of all moral action. [...] And the marital adjustments that she and Amherst finally make, far from enslaving her to him or to the institution of wedlock, define the complexity of living, both in and of itself and certainly in the estate of marriage” (165–6). Through “Justine’s fall into knowledge of good and evil” Wharton expresses her “pragmatic view of ethics as a continually shifting question involving one’s own immediate relation to life” (167). I totally agree with all the points Tuttleton makes in his article (except his view of The Fruit of the Tree as “not a successful novel” and “broken-backed”). My view is that Amherst is a contradictory because dynamic figure, who, like Justine, changes and evolves throughout the story. And it seems to me that the evaluations of many feminist scholars do no justice to the complexity of the character of Amherst, mistake the nature and direction of Justine’s transformation and show a superficial reading of the final scene of the novel.

As remarked upon by many critics, Justine is a unique female figure in the canon: she is Wharton’s interpretation of the new type of woman that was emerging, in society and in literature, at the turn of the century. Though belonging by birth to an impoverished family of ‘Old New York’, she has embraced a profession – that of trained nurse – and gained financial independence. She thus combines the best characteristics of her social milieu – intellectual refinement, manners, education, fidelity to traditional values – with others that make her a thoroughly New Woman – spiritual independence, training, commitment to a profession, economic self-sufficiency and social activism.

It is well known how important Ibsen’s plays were in moulding the new figure of the end-of-the-century liberated heroine. And there are various elements in The Fruit of the Tree – some superficial and some more substantial – which remind one of Ibsen’s themes. A reviewer of the novel highlighted for example the similarity existing between its central situation and that of Rosmersholm (1885). In both works there is a sentimental triangle, formed in the play by Rosmer, “an idealist and would-be reformer”, by his wife Beata, an invalid (dead at the beginning of the action) who was always “incapable of sympathizing with his high purposes”, and by Rebecca West, a friend of Beata’s and a woman of great personal charm, “who has become a member of the family, has developed an intimacy with the husband, and is fully in sympathy with him” (Woodbridge, 1907, 514). A year after Beata’s
death Rosmer finds himself in love with Rebecca and asks her to marry him. She then
confesses to him that she had used her influence over Beata to convince her to kill herself in
order not to be any more an obstacle for her husband. As Woodbridge underlines, both
Rebecca and Justine share great charm (almost mesmeric, in Rebecca’s case) and a great
power of persuasion. “Whom could you not bewitch, if you put your mind to it!” (Ibsen,
[1885] 1980, 85) Rebecca’s antagonist Dr. Kroll says to her. “There’s nothing you can’t make
people believe, you little Jesuit!” (FT, 477) says Amherst to Justine. He recognises that
Justine’s motive is, unlike Rebecca’s, unselfish. However, “the outcome is the same that
Rebecca planned. Like Rebecca, Justine conceals her share in the wife’s death as long as she
can. Amherst distrusts the woman he loves, as Rosmer does, when she makes her confession”.
Certainly, Justine is, like Rebecca, a deeply passionate woman; like Rebecca, she is a strong
and independent person, who can come and go as she pleases and is tied to her man only by a
bond of love (when Justine leaves her husband she refuses, like Nora in A Doll’s House, any
financial help from him). Moreover, although her free thinking does not go so far as to
prompt, like in Rebecca’s case, the immorality of malignant manipulation and deceit, Justine
is certainly a person completely free from prejudice. In this she perhaps reminds the reader
also of Mrs. Alving, the protagonist of Ghosts (1881): they both come to question the
morality of social mores, and to wonder whether an individual is justified in renouncing the
right to follow one’s conscience and letting society dictate norms of behaviour. Mrs. Alving
has come to reject the idea that life must be dominated by “ghosts”, and be lived according to
“all sorts of old dead ideas and old dead beliefs” (Ibsen, [1881], 1982, 62). Justine on the
contrary comes to the conclusion that life consists of “concessions to old tradition, old beliefs,
old charities and frailties” (FT, 624) and that “too often one must still grope one’s way
through the personal difficulty by the dim taper carried in long-dead hands...” (FT, 526). In
both works it is evident how strong a hold the dead have on the living; and John Amherst’s
dedication of the Hanaford library to the memory of his late wife Bessy has the same function
as Mrs. Alving’s dedication of the orphanage to her husband: they both are trying to exorcise
a ghost. Finally, the topic of euthanasia is another link between Ghosts and The Fruit of the
Tree and caused both works to be much reviled by some sections of the public.

The generous, unselfish and caring side of Justine’s personality is presented in the very
first pages of the novel and then continually insisted upon. She has a great capacity for putting
herself in other people’s emotional or existential situations and is eager and able to alleviate
other people’s sufferings, be they of the mind or of the body. She can’t conceive of her life as of something unrelated to other people’s existence. It is because Justine is so unprofessionally sensitive to suffering, so generous and so spiritually independent that she gives Bessy an overdose of morphine: this act is in a way the ‘objective correlative’ of her character. This aspect of her nature – her desire “to do her part in the vast personal work of easing the world’s misery” (147), her character of ministering angel, her professional competence and her compassion – is presented in the very first lines of the novel. When Book II opens, however, we see another aspect of her personality. Three years of solitude have gone by, and in this moment of her life what prevails in her is not the sense of duty but the irresistible youthful yearning for a life fulfilling for the mind as well as for the body: “She wanted happiness, and a life of her own, as passionately as young flesh-and-blood ever wanted them”; “a life in which high chances of doing should be mated with the finer forms of enjoyment” (223). Harmony of body and spirit is for Justine the necessary precondition of happiness. Her intelligence and sensitivity coexist with a frank animal nature. The “naturalness” of this character is repeatedly and successfully conveyed through the two sets of images associated with it. Precisely this aspiration to wholeness, to a full realization (in both senses of the word) of the self, recalls one of the cardinal preoccupations of the Bildungsroman.

Justine’s warm humanity, energy and vitality are underlined by the imagery of light and warmth with which she is always, even in her surname, associated. For example, this is how the narrator describes the years, happy notwithstanding poverty, that Justine had spent with her mother:

Growing up, she had helped to clear a space in the wilderness for their tiny hearth-fire, when her own efforts had fed the flame and roofed it in from the weather. A great heat, kindled at that hearth, had burned in her veins, making her devour her work, lighting and warming the long cold days, and reddening the horizon through dark passages of revolt and failure; and she felt all the more the chill of reaction that set in with her mother’s death (FT, 146; italics mine).

Metaphors of light and warmth best express the natural ardour and immediacy of her feelings:

Emotions flashed across her face like the sweep of sunrent clouds over a quiet landscape, bringing out the gleam of hidden waters, the fervour of smouldering colours, all the subtle delicacies of modelling that are lost under the light of an open sky. And it was extraordinary how she could infuse into a principle the warmth and colour of a passion! (FT, 336; italics mine)
Significantly, this last reflection is Amherst’s, from whose point of view we often see Justine: he finds in her an ardour like his own (FT, 335); physically, she appears to him “sunned-over” and “luminous” (FT, 455); she strikes him as a being whose “emotions are as clear as thought, [...] thoughts as warm as emotions” (FT, 559); even at the time of their friendship he feels attracted to “the warmth of personality” in which she moves (FT, 450); he observes with joy “her bright head, with her flame-like play of meanings” (FT, 473). Justine feels her youth “flame” in her (FT, 147); her reading is a “flame-like” devouring of the page (FT, 319); and, just as Amherst’s ebbing spirit is revived by her enthusiasm, the thought of Amherst, even at the time of their friendship, gives her a feeling of warmth, because “any sympathetic contact with another life sent a glow in her veins [...] she was thankful to warm herself at any fire” (FT, 370).

Even a physical description of Justine seems unachievable without invoking the metaphors of fire and light:

Justine Brent had one of those imponderable bodies that seem a mere pinch of matter shot through with light and colour. Though she did not flush easily, auroral lights ran under her clear skin, were lost in the shadows of her hair, and broke again in her eyes; and her voice seemed to shoot light too, as though her smile flashed back from the words as they fell (FT, 143; all italics mine).

There is another set of images with which Justine is often associated: metaphors linking her to the natural world, especially to plants, that very aptly express her vitality and her seemingly boundless capacity for growth, renewal and regeneration: “Justine was always saved from any sense of self-compassion by the sense, within herself, of abounding forces of growth and self-renewal, as though from every lopped aspiration a fresh shoot of energy must spring” (FT, 318). She feels completely at ease when in contact with nature, and her “sylvan tastes” bring her to seek this contact whenever her numerous duties allow her some free time. While she is staying at Lynbrook with Bessy she escapes that artificial and corrupted world, immersing herself in nature. She often goes for a walk in the woods with Bessy’s daughter Cicely. The first of these excursions is dealt with at length and is of particular interest for three reasons. Firstly, a particular aspect of Justine’s personality – her profound affinity with nature – is stressed and underlined by the use of similes and metaphors: she moves “as fearlessly as a king-fisher”, stopping to reach a plant and then righting herself up by a backward movement “as natural as the upward spring of a branch-so free and natural in all her motions that she
seemed akin to the swaying reeds and curving brambles” (FT, 300), etc. Secondly, the episode marks a turning-point in her relationship with Amherst (who meets them by chance and joins them) and starts the iterative series of their morning excursions with Cicely. Thirdly, the episode constitutes a valuable clue for the interpretation of the final scene of the novel.

Until now, although their relationship has gradually grown in intimacy, Justine has been for Amherst merely the “nicest” girl he has ever met, a person with whom he could speak of his work and whom he could occasionally use as a means of communication with his wife. Now, wreathed with flowers and surrounded by autumn colours, she looks like “a wood spirit who had absorbed into herself the last golden juices of the year” (FT, 302).

She was in one of the buoyant moods when the spirit of life caught her in its grip, and shook and tossed her on its mighty waves as a sea-bird is tossed through the spray of flying rollers. At such moments all the light and music of the world seemed distilled into her veins, and forced up in bubbles of laughter to her lips and eyes. Amherst had never seen her thus (FT, 303–4).

Their conversation reverts to what makes one happiest. This, and the circumstance that they happen to be in a swamp where they have been looking for a rare orchid, leads their thoughts to Faust.

Amherst smiled. “Ah, there it is – one never knows – one never says, This is the moment! because, however good it is, it always seems the door to a better one beyond. Faust never said it till the end, when he’d nothing left of all he began thinking worth while; and then, with what difference it was said!”

She pondered. Yes-but it was the best, after all – the moment in which he had nothing left...” (FT, 304).

In the epilogue Amherst will explicitly refer to this conversation and will use Faust once again to express his feelings about that particular moment of his and Justine’s life. To the implications of these references to Faust I shall return later.

A very deep change is caused in Justine by the circumstances of Bessy’s death. The stress and sorrow of Bessy’s artificially prolonged agony make Justine rebellious against the decree that human life is sacred. Her growing doubts and revulsion towards what she comes to regard as senseless cruelty mount up in her conversations with the doctor, the pastor and the family lawyer – three, so to say, official and authorised representatives of society and its ethics. But her mercy-killing of Bessy, though she will always think it justified, triggers a transformation that reminds of that undergone by Donatello in Hawthorne’s The Marble Faun. Donatello, the “faun” of the title, has preserved primeval freshness and innocence, a profound
and mysterious link with the natural world and an intact capacity for enjoyment – all qualities that are characteristic of the “Golden Age” and that mankind lost in the progress of its civilization. After the murder, he loses these prelapsarian characteristics but acquires in exchange a deeper capacity to feel, love and suffer, more awareness of the world and self, a new maturity that gains him Miriam’s love. Justine too becomes more fully human and womanly as a result of her act. A few months after Bessy’s death, nothing is left of the “wood spirit”. A psychological maturation has occurred, and once again it is Amherst who realises it:

In spite of Justine’s feminine graces, he had formerly felt in her a kind of elfin immaturity, as of a flitting Ariel with untouched heart and senses: it was only of late that she had developed the subtle quality which calls up thoughts of love (FT, 449).

Amherst, who like Justine cannot conceive of his Ego as of something separated from the rest of mankind, seems born to be her partner. Significantly, he has a physical likeness to the young Schiller, the poet who, like him, burnt with humanitarian passion and revolutionary spirit. Like other Wharton heroes, he is a learned man, who reads and thinks and feels a great deal; unlike any of them, he is a strong-willed man, an idealist who can nevertheless set concrete targets for himself and is determined to attain them. He shares with Justine the impoverished Old New York background and the pride that has made him choose, after his law studies, a profession (that of factory manager). Like her, he is endowed with filial piety and the yearning to help and alleviate suffering. He has devoted himself to the cause of the improvement of the working and living conditions of factory workers.

Their marriage is what they had wished for, a complete mental and physical communion. Such is their happiness that Amherst fears the envy of the jealous Gods, and, superstitiously, welcomes sacrifices as a protective “ring of Polycrates” (the reference is obviously to Schiller’s poem). And Justine shares his feeling: “Her husband’s analogy of the ring expressed her fear. She seemed to herself to carry a blazing jewel on her breast – something that singled her out for human envy and divine pursuit” (FT, 475). This fear makes her undergo a new change: she is no more the psychologically strong and morally independent woman who could defy social laws and taboos. All she wants is to hold on to her happiness, and, when faced with the threat that the mercy-killing be disclosed to Amherst, she lets herself be blackmailed. After a first, purely emotional reaction of horror towards Justine at the
discovery of the mercy-killing, Amherst understands and fully justifies his wife's behaviour and
decides to stand by her, even at the price of leaving Westmore and his chosen work.

Both he and Justine learn through their experiences and are spiritually changed by them.
Amherst starts by being merely a social enthusiast, single-mindedly dedicated to his task of
alleviating the workers' lot. Then he meets Bessy and his sentimental and spiritual education starts: he falls passionately in love with her, marries her, shares with her the sorrow of losing a child, and then gradually comes to realise the extent to which he had misunderstood her character and to see how naive he had been in taking for granted that she would share his work and his ideals. Bessy is a prisoner of her inability to empathise with other people's feelings and emotions and she has a devitalising effect on her husband. He sees his marriage fall apart, the work of his life jeopardised and himself constrained in the roles of the "prince consort" and of the socialite. He becomes an embittered man, with no outlet for his energies, and can only escape his situation by leaving his wife. Their marriage constitutes an example of the theme of the "trapped sensibility" which, as Blake Nevius (1956) maintains, is so prominent in Wharton's fiction as well as in that of writers who had a great influence on her: Balzac, James, and, once again, George Eliot. And it is especially the relationship between Tertius Lydgate and his wife Rosamond that comes to the mind on reading *The Fruit of the Tree*. Lydgate, like Amherst, is an intelligent, well educated, talented, professional young man of genteel extraction, who wants to reform and rationalise the exercise of his profession. In both men personal ambition blends with an instinct for efficiency and with sensitiveness to the sufferings of others. They both marry beautiful women who have fierce social ambitions and who cannot understand their husbands' ideals. Amherst, however, demonstrates his moral strength breaking the tie when he accepts a job in South America and leaves his wife. Lydgate, in order to give his wife the wealth and respectability she craves, ends up sacrificing his ideals and becoming a fashionable doctor for the rich. Rosamond is by him compared to the basil plant that, in Boccaccio's tale, grew from a man's brain. Amherst escapes this fate and later on finds in his union with Justine that intimate fusion of profound personal feelings and of devotion to social duty which is also enjoyed by other couples in George Eliot's works: Daniel Deronda and Mirah, Adam Bede and Dinah, Felix Holt and Esther, and also Dorothea Brooke and Will Ladislaw. The theme of the conflict between love and duty — which is present in all of Wharton's fiction, although perhaps most clearly expressed in *The Age of Innocence* — is a recurrent one also in George Eliot's works. The two writers also share a concern for "the
specific question of what women should do and what they can do, and [...] the general issue of which it is a part, namely that of the [...] possibilities for the individual to act on, and change, society” (Ashton, 1983, 69). This is an important theme in The Fruit of the Tree, in which, as Henry James rightly pointed out to Wharton in a letter, she had been “George Eliotizing a little more frankly than ever yet” (Bell, 1965, 258–9).

Amherst’s second marriage leads him “to the blissful discovery that woman can think as well as feel” (FT, 559) and gradually his relationship to Justine reveals to him a side of his character – the emotional one – which had always been in the background. But only during the period when she has left him not to be in his way does he fully realise how much “every particle of his being” needs her:

She had been at once the partner of his task, and the pays bleu into which he escaped from it; the vivifying thought which gave meaning to the life he had chosen, yet never let him forget that there was a larger richer life outside, to which he was rooted by deeper and more intrinsic things than any abstract ideal of altruism (FT, 587).

Amherst is by no means the fanatical idealist, the monomaniac philanthropist insensitive to other people’s needs described by some critics (see Auchincloss, 1961; Wolff, 1977; Stein, 1979); nor the chauvinistic male who is repelled by Justine’s autonomy of thought and action, as described by others (see McDowell, 1976; Ammons, 1980; Wershoven, 1982). His very hesitations and changes of feeling make him more credible as a character. The narrator expresses very clearly the reasons why Amherst, after his discovery of Justine’s mercy-killing of Bessy, feels a barrier rise between his second wife and himself:

It seemed to him, as he looked back, that the love he and Justine had felt for each other was like some rare organism which could maintain life only in its special element; and that element was neither passion nor sentiment, but truth. (FT, 609)

In the end, however, although he and Justine can no longer regard their relationship as the perfect union of two minds, they will find a new starting point: as often happens in Wharton’s fiction, the protagonists, after a series of painful experiences through which they have achieved a better understanding of themselves and each other, resume their life together, although with less sanguine expectations.

Whilst Amherst is drawn by his relationship to Justine to look inside himself and comprehend his personal feelings and emotions, the lesson his wife needs to learn goes in the
opposite direction. Justine is, so to say, pushed outside herself and comes to realise the extent to which a decision she thought of as merely personal has affected other people’s lives, and that each individual life is inextricably linked to those of other beings because “man can commit no act alone”. An independent and strong-minded young woman, Justine is drawn by circumstances to question the assumption that one must “be content to think for the race”, relinquishing the hope of “lifting one’s individual life to a clearer height of conduct” through the exercise of one’s own free will. Later she learns that every challenge to the authority of tradition calls into play, even for the most enlightened human beings, “emotions rooted far below reason and judgement, in the dark primal depths of inherited feeling” (FT, 526). She is gradually led to reflect on the social and moral implications of her mercy-killing of Bessy, an act which, at first, she had regarded as merely individual, as a personal decision concerning exclusively her conscience. In the end, though still refusing to hold herself to blame, she comes to the conclusion that

life is not a matter of abstract principles, but a succession of pitiful compromises with fate, of concessions to old tradition, old beliefs, old charities and frailties. That was what her act had taught her — that was the word of the gods to the mortal who had laid a hand on their bolts. And she had humbled herself to accept the lesson, seeing human relations at last as a tangled and deep-rooted growth, a dark forest through which the idealist cannot cut his straight path without hearing at each stroke the cry of the severed branch: “Why woundest thou me?” (FT, 624)

Thus they both come closer to the achievement of an equilibrium between inner and social self.

The last chapter (XLII) of the novel presents a new stage of Justine’s and Amherst’s spiritual growth, a new development in their relationship and a fresh start for their marriage. It proposes a plausible denouement, which it is worthwhile examining in some detail, since on its interpretation is based the evaluation many scholars give of the entire work. This chapter comes after an ellipsis (“Fourteen months had passed since her return…”, p. 621), and constitutes one narrative articulation entirely set in Hanaford. It is Cicely’s tenth birthday, and the day of the inauguration of a recreational centre intended for Westmore operatives and dedicated to Bessy’s memory. With characteristic irony, Wharton shows Amherst completely absorbed in the delusion that the blueprint he had found among her papers was an evidence of her philanthropic nature: Justine and the reader, on the contrary, well know that it is the plan of the luxurious and
expensive gymnasium Bessy had intended as a challenge to her husband’s exhortations to parsimony. This apparently ludicrous episode therefore acquires the value of a Whartonian “crucial instance”: it is a test of great psychological import for the two protagonists. For Justine this is the last, supreme ordeal: by refraining from undeceiving her husband, she feels that “it was now at last that she was paying her full price” (FT, 632). As for Amherst, “it struck her that he too had the look of one who has laid a ghost” (FT, 632): feeling guilty for having abandoned Bessy, he had unconsciously come to practise self-deceit regarding her real nature and to idealise her memory. His public tribute to Bessy is therefore an expiatory offering.

The conclusion of this scene shows that, notwithstanding Justine’s bitter feeling that the “secret inner union” (FT, 623) which had existed between Amherst and her had become an emotionally sterile comradeship, her husband’s feeling towards her had merely gone through an incubational interval and he is now ready to go back to her. Their rapprochement starts with their recollection of the orchid-hunting expedition to which I have already referred. Amherst mentions it explicitly and goes on to remind Justine of their talk about “the one best moment in life – the moment when one wanted most to stop the clock” (FT, 632). The import of this reference is not lost on Justine: “The colour rose in her face while he spoke. It was a long time since he had referred to the early days of their friendship – the days before...” Amherst continues:

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

A tremor ran through Justine. “It was you who said that,” she said, half-smiling. “But didn’t you feel it with me? Don’t you now?” “Yes – I do now,” she murmured.

He came close to her, and taking her hands in his, kissed them one after the other. “Dear,” he said, “let us go out and look at the marsh we have drained” (FT, 633).

Far from agreeing with Richard Lawson that in Wharton’s works quotations from, and allusions to Faust are to be considered “more decorative than substantial” (1974, 120), I think that this reference to Faust offers a valuable clue to the interpretation that we are to give of this final chapter and of the novel. In the first place, it is an indication of a resumption, on the part of the Amhersts, of their relationship on a footing at least similar to that of the period when there was between them complete trust and understanding. Secondly, it is important that the reference
is to *Faust* rather than to any other of the great works they both have read. In my opinion, this underlies the fact that the complex and arduous process of inner development these characters have undergone has resulted into social development, greater awareness of the world, participation in the flux of life. They no longer regard their relationship as the perfect union of two minds, but they have found out that they need each other, that their common interest in Westmore's welfare is a basis on which they can rebuild their life together and that their common work for the welfare of others is worth some degree of personal suffering: “However achieved, at whatever cost of personal misery and error, the work of awakening and freeing Westmore was done, and that work had justified itself” (FT, 622). They have thus discovered that happiness cannot be true in a purely personal dimension. They have passed from the little world of private emotion to the great world of unremitting endeavour and activity.

In conclusion, there is in *The Fruit of the Tree* a re-affirmation of several of the most important themes of *Wilhelm Meister* and also echoes of the philosophy of that other Bildungsroman that is *Faust*. Insofar as the novel is the story of a spiritual journey leading to a clearer understanding and to an acceptance of self and of social demands, it is a Bildungsroman in the sense of spiritual apprenticeship. But it also evidently shares the themes of the *Wanderjahre*, which are thus summed up by Ehrard Bahr: “die Entsagung, das Verhältnis von Individuum und Gesellschaft, das Problem von Arbeit und Bildung, die Industrialisierung und die sich entwickelnde moderne Technologie, Verelendung der Arbeiter und Auswanderung nach Amerika sowie Religionskritik” (1982, 557).

The theme of *Entsagung* is presented mainly through the character of Justine. She defies society and the novel shows the actual and possible consequences of her conduct. In the end she has to relinquish her self-determination in favour of socialisation, or rather to recognise that the sacrifice of intellectual and moral autonomy demanded by society is justified. This renunciation is painful to her, and we are therefore far from the situation of the classical Bildungsroman in which, in Franco Moretti’s words, “one’s formation as an individual in and for oneself coincides without rifts with one’s social integration as a simple part of a whole” (1987, 16). There is also the *Entsagung* consistent in the loss, permanent or temporary, of a loved one: Amherst leaves Bessy and then loses her forever, Justine leaves Amherst for a year, and when they are united they have had to renounce many of the enthusiastic delusions the had on themselves, on each other and on their marriage. But, to quote Bahr again, “Nur derjenige, der auf privates Glück verzichtet, kann soziale Ziele verfolgen. Bei Goethe ist die Entsagung weder
Moreover, unlike *The House of Mirth, The Fruit of the Tree* documents a moral growth that does not happen only, as it were, at the level of interiority, but that is linked to, and made possible by, a strong sense of commitment to a task which is fulfilling in itself from a professional point of view, and is at the same time a way of doing one’s duty towards society. Amherst solves the problem, typical of modern, industrialised societies, of the dichotomy between profession and vocation: Westmore is his chosen work, to which he feels attracted because of his innate talent, his professional training and his compassionate nature, and the job he does for a living. He is lucky enough to be able to do as a paid professional what he would anyway do even for free, and in fact he continues to spend all his time in the management and reform of the mills even when he becomes their owner. To all this he can finally add the privilege of sharing the task with the person he loves, and in finding therefore in the shared task an enhancement of their personal relationship. He seems therefore to have achieved to some extent that ideal of wholeness and harmony – between the various sides of the self, between the self and society – which is the goal of *Wilhelm Meister*.

The structure of the Bildungsroman allows, in the last analysis, a synthesis of the three main themes of *The Fruit of the Tree*, which, as already mentioned, are the industrial question, the morality of euthanasia, and the critique of marriage. Each of these themes is strictly linked to one of the main characters – John Amherst, Justine Brent and Bessy Langhope – in the sense that they are not dealt with in the abstract but emerge naturally in the narrative as consequence of plot developments motivated by the psychology of the characters. These three thematic strands are in fact explorations of the same major theme: the question of the moral responsibilities people have, of their obligations towards those immediately related to them and towards society as a whole, and of the extent to which those obligations are compatible with self-fulfilment. This ethical problem is the real thematic centrepoint of this novel and also, it can be argued, of the whole Wharton *corpus*. 
1.4. *The Age of Innocence* (1920)

*The Age of Innocence* is unanimously considered one of the best of Wharton’s novels, or even the best tout court. It deals with two years (arguably the most important) in the life of Newland Archer, a representative of the Old New York of the 1870s. Newland is throughout the focus of narration. Indeed, the consistency with which the text expresses his feelings, thoughts, ideas, emotions and perceptions is striking. The rigour with which the principle of the Jamesian restricted point of view is here applied certainly contributes to the compactness and power of the novel. Incidentally, this is only one of the elements that echoes Henry James in *The Age of Innocence*. There are also a few implicit references to *The Portrait of a Lady*: Newland shares his surname with Isabel Archer, is referred to by Ned Winsett as “the portrait of a gentleman” and, like Isabel, falls in love with a Europeanised, “experienced” American. The theme of American innocence (alluded to in the title of Wharton’s novel) vs. European experience, which is of course one of James’s favourite themes, is however ironically twisted by Wharton, because the Europeanised Ellen loses out to the innocent American girl May, who proves to be more manipulative than her and, unlike her, supported by the conventions of an established social group.

As in *The House of Mirth*, Wharton is here interested in writing a new type of novel of manners, a social novel enriched by the complexity of inner life, which fruitfully engages the Bildungsroman model.

On the surface of it, nothing much happens in this work. The events that occur are exclusively adventures of the mind: outwardly, the incidents are mundane, only important because of the resonance they have in the mind of this intelligent, well read and highly sensitive protagonist. Two people meet a few times and fall in love. The man marries another woman out of a sense of duty. The two still love one another, meet a few more times but never become lovers. Society, however, takes it for granted that they are lovers and manages to expel the woman. She goes back to Europe and they never see each other again. The adultery almost takes place, but she backs out at the last moment. He has resolved to follow her against her will, but is prevented from carrying out this escape from his world. Thirty years later, he – now free – chances to be in Paris and could meet her again, but contents himself with contemplating her window from afar. Nothing more happens. As in many of Theodor Fontane’s novels, what
matters here is not so much the events of the plot, but the way they are told. I shall return to this novel later in the context of an extended comparison of Wharton and Fontane. In this present context I want to look at the relationship of The Age of Innocence to the Bildungsroman tradition.

Notwithstanding their outward uneventfulness, these almost two years are clearly crucial in the life of Newland Archer because they transform him into a particular social persona. They are instrumental in making him choose, among all his possible selves, the one he will be for the rest of his life and the one which is ethically most acceptable in the universe of the novel. It is the experience of meeting and loving Ellen Olenska, a Europeanised American expatriate, that starts the change. Book One of The Age of Innocence relates what happens to Archer during the two important months following their meeting. The beginning of this period is clearly identifiable: a January day in the early Seventies. The novel opens with a performance of Gounod’s ‘Faust’ attended by the three characters. The day is marked by two events, one which will have great consequences for his external, social life (his engagement to May Welland) and the other which will be crucial for his inner, spiritual development (his first meeting with May’s cousin Ellen Olenska). Book One ends on an evening in early March at Ellen’s place. Again two events, important for Archer, have taken place on this day: May has telegraphed the date of the wedding, and Archer and Ellen have confessed their mutual love. During this first period they meet nine times, and each meeting marks a further step in their relationship and acts as a sort of catalyst of Archer’s process of spiritual growth. They also become stimuli to Archer’s actions: every time he feels Ellen’s power growing stronger over him, he tries to pressurise May into an early wedding and thus to avoid the threat to his comfortable life. In the end he obtains what he has asked for (and, ironically, with Ellen’s help) just at the moment when he understands that it is Ellen that he wants. So the cumulative effect of his ‘action’ has been his entrapment. His undoing is his own doing, the result of his lack of self knowledge, of his scant experience of the world and of his incapacity to ‘read’ other people.

The development that Ellen starts in Archer is not straightforward and gradual, but spasmodic and full of contradictions. It is a series of ebbings and flowings, of attempts at compromising between the inner and the outward reality.

At the beginning Archer, though intelligent, educated and endowed with artistic tastes and intellectual pretensions, is a thorough New Yorker. He may smile at the provinciality and narrow-mindedness of his ‘tribe’, grow impatient and even scornful at the obsessive celebration
of its rituals, patronise them with the superior smile of the intellectual who is not unfamiliar with the newly-founded science of anthropology, but nevertheless he is so conventional himself that he wouldn’t dream of really defying even the most insignificant of the unwritten rules that preside at every aspect of the life of the ‘Four Hundred’. Doing so would be blasphemy, an offence against ‘Taste’, “that far-off divinity of whom ‘Form’ was the mere visible representative and vice-regent” (AI, 16). Among the unwritten rules is the aloofness from the economic and political life of the nation prescribed to the gentleman. So, though Archer may clearly perceive the limitations and provincialism of American society, regret its total closure to intellectual interests, try desperately to keep up with European culture by ordering books from London and Paris and spending all his holidays in Europe, he is nevertheless not prepared to make any attempt at changing the status quo in New York. His position on the cultural-political issue emerges from the conversation with the journalist Ned Winsett in Chapter 14. Winsett, who represents Archer’s link with the Bohemian (by New York standards) world of artists and ‘people who write’, is an interesting figure epitomizing the fate of the intellectual in the America of the time and also in a way anticipating the figure of Vance Weston. Archer smiles a smile of superiority at Winsett when he urges him to go into politics: it is unthinkable for Archer – at this stage – that a gentleman can risk his clean linen in an attempt to save the country from “the bosses and the emigrant”, and Winsett’s suggestion simply shows the “unbridgeable difference” between his world and Archer’s. And yet, later on he will remember Winsett’s words:

Culture! Yes – if we had it! But there are just a few local patches, dying out here and there for lack of – well, hoeing and cross-fertilizing: the last remnants of the old European tradition that your forebears brought with them. But you’re in a pitiful little minority: you’ve got no centre, no competition, no audience. You’re like the pictures on the walls of a deserted house: ‘The Portrait of a Gentleman’. You’ll never amount to anything, any of you, till you roll up your sleeves and get right down into the muck. That, or emigrate...God! If I could emigrate...(AI, 106–7).

From the start the narrator stresses that Newland’s life is moulded on social conventions which he has come to consider a natural fact. Time and again this feature of his character is satirised. Another important characteristic is also immediately and unequivocally stated: “he was at heart a dilettante, and thinking over a pleasure to come often gave him a subtler satisfaction than his realization” (AI, 8). (In this too perhaps Newland is a sort of Bildungsroman hero. Wilhelm too preferred fantasy to reality. And dilettantism is in a way a
necessary part of every apprenticeship because it implies experimentation, tentativeness, openness to all possibilities, exploration of one's own potentialities in search of a niche). Newland is an aesthete and feels he is the superior of his circle in matters intellectual and artistic, but he would never dream – at this stage – of taking an independent stance on moral issues.

May, his betrothed, has clearly been chosen because her faultless and Olympian beauty satisfies Newland's aesthetic sense and masculine vanity, whilst her purity and total ignorance of life will give him ample opportunity to give free rein to his pedagogic instinct and Pygmalion-like attitude. She has been moulded to be an adoring and submissive wife, the priestess of the cult of 'The Family' and the custodian of Old New York values of decorum, sobriety, propriety, honesty, fidelity, allegiance to the tribe etc. Newland's feelings for May, his perception of her personality and his expectations are immediately clear.

During the performance of 'Faust' Archer's reflections reveal his initial immaturity and the complacency and 'Pygmalionism' that make up his present attitude towards May. He contemplates her during the 'garden scene' and gloats at the thought that her innocence prevents her from understanding the seduction which is going on under her eyes.

'The darling!' thought Newland Archer, his glance flitting back to the young girl with the lilies-of-the-valley. 'She doesn't even guess what it's all about.' And he contemplated her absorbed young face with a thrill of possessiveness in which pride in his own masculine initiation was mingled with a tender reverence for her abysmal purity. 'We'll read Faust together...by the Italian lakes...' he thought (AI, 10).

Newland and May belong to the same world, a world of "faint implications and pale delicacies" (AI, 18) which avoids open dialogue and frank explanation. At the beginning of their relationship the very fact that they need no words to communicate and to understand one another seems to bring them closer. That May is so completely a representative of Old New York is to Newland – at first – one of her major attractions: "Nothing about his betrothed pleased him more than her resolute determination to carry to its utmost limit that ritual of ignoring the 'unpleasant' in which they had both been brought up" (AI, 25).

At this performance May's cousin Ellen Olenska, just returned to New York after the failure of her marriage, makes her first public appearance. This starts the action in two ways. At the external level, it prompts the public announcement of Newland and May's betrothal: Newland feels it his duty to help May's family to support Ellen. He thus engages himself
irrevocably. At the inner level, the arrival of this interloper and the rumours about her past (she has allegedly eloped with her husband’s secretary and lived with him for some time) immediately puts Archer in contact with the ‘seamy’, unpleasant side of life which he had been accustomed to ignore. This triggers a series of startling reflections. Newland is led to question the validity of social norms he had taken for granted, such as for example “the hypocrisy that would bury alive a woman of her age if her husband prefers to live with harlots” (AI, 39) and that refuses the wronged wife the right to rebuild her life. As a representative of ‘The Family’, he is compelled to explain to Ellen that divorce may be legal in the States but is not sanctioned in Old New York high society, and to advise her against it. He must, in so doing, stifle his growing pity and sympathy for Ellen. His personal feelings come therefore for the first time in total contrast with the tribal code, and he begins to chafe under its restrictions. “Women ought to be free – as free as we are,” he declared, making a discovery of which he was too irritated to measure the terrific consequences” (AI, 39). Here we see the surfacing of one of Wharton’s most important and recurrent concerns: the critique of the double sexual standard. (This is another of the many themes she shares with George Eliot, whose heroines are too ignorant of the reality of life and of sexual life in particular to be able to have satisfactory relationships with men).

These reflections on women’s sexual rights and self-awareness are intensified and made more disturbing by his situation as a man who is about to be married. He now confronts with some dismay that miracle of female innocence which has been concocted for his pleasure:

He felt himself oppressed by this creation of factitious purity, so cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers and long-dead ancestresses, because it was supposed to be what he wanted, what he had a right to, in order that he might exercise his lordly pleasure in smashing it like an image made of snow (AI, 42).

The double sexual standard in a way puts every husband in the position of a seducer. It is evident from his reflections that Archer’s change is now well on the way and that he is already different from the contented young male, who, at the beginning of the narrative, we saw watching May at the performance of Gounod’s ‘Faust’, and positively gloating at the prospect of ‘debauching’ her both metaphorically – by reading and explaining Goethe’s Faust to her – and actually. He is also well aware that it is to Ellen that he owes the “uncomfortable persistence and precision” (AI, 42) with which these reflections torment him. Ellen is also unconsciously instrumental in tightening his relationship with May’s clan. A few days later, the
Mingott's invitation to a dinner given to the élite of New York in honour of their scandalous relative is unanimously refused. Newland counteracts bringing the case to his relatives, Mr. and Mrs. Henry van der Luyden, who represent the summit of Old New York and still retain great social influence. Nobody dares to refuse the ‘little dinner’ they give a week later and to which Ellen too is invited. This is Newland’s second meeting with her, and he has now the opportunity to observe her social ease, her charm and the facility with which she captivates her host and his guests. He cannot but notice her ‘foreignness’ as well: every simple gesture of hers is a breach of the very rigid rules that govern the behaviour of ‘nice women’ in Old New York society, as for example when she rises and walks the whole length of the drawing room to go and sit next to Newland: “Etiquette required that she should wait, immovable as an idol, while the men who wished to converse with her succeeded each other at her side. But the Countess was apparently unaware of having broken any rule” (AI, 56). Or when she asks Newland whether anybody “arranged” his marriage to May, and candidly remarks on the dullness of the guest of honour (an English Duke, and a cousin of the van der Luydens!). It is with little touches such as these that Wharton manages to convey Ellen’s alienness and the impossibility of her dream of becoming “a complete American again”. She is and will remain an intruder who cannot ‘read’ the world she wants to belong to and who is betrayed by her desire to find this world good, innocent and simple in juxtaposition to the corruption of the European world she comes from. It is the classic American dream. But Ellen too, like Newland, will learn the true nature of Old New York.

Ellen invites Newland to visit her at home the following day. Even her choice of abode is unusual: a quarter inhabited by “small dress-makers, bird-stuffers and ‘people who wrote’” (AI, 59). The interior of her house offers to Newland and the reader a fascinating insight into her personality: he finds himself in “the faded charm of a room unlike any room he had known” (AI, 61), “intimate, ‘foreign’, subtly suggestive of old romantic scenes and sentiments” (AI, 62). There are also books in this drawing-room, “a part of the house in which books were usually supposed to be ‘out of place’” (AI, 89). He cannot but compare it to the kind of interior he is likely to spend his married life in. May has unquestionably inherited all her parents’ habits and tastes and will certainly recreate in her home the kitsch, Victorian, over-ornate type of interior Edith Wharton criticised in her very first book, The Decoration of Houses (1896). “The young man felt that his fate was sealed [...] and his only comfort was to reflect that she would probably let him arrange his library as he pleased” (AI, 63). In Wharton’s novels space and
objects have a metonymic function: they imply a great deal about the people who inhabit that space and own those objects, to such an extent that things become an emanation of their personality. Newland's present reflections give already a glimpse of his future relationship to his wife and of the symbolic value his library will have.

Newland realises what effect Ellen is having on him, and when she expresses her desire to be guided by him in her discovery of New York, he tells her that she is opening *his* eyes to things he had ceased to see for having looked at them too long. At the same time he perceives how dangerous this new insight can prove for his peace of mind. This hour spent together in a room so profoundly hers has drawn them into a "momentary intimacy" (AI, 81): he reacts by trying to press May to flout conventions and shorten their engagement. In the following two weeks he only sees Ellen once at the Opera, she becomes "a less vivid and importunate image" (AI, 80) and May resumes her legitimate place in his thoughts. He then must speak to Ellen in his capacity as attorney because she intends to divorce Count Olensky. The reading of Ellen's private documents is a further 'opening of the eyes'. Like all the young men of his age and condition, he has so far gone through his love affairs "with an undisturbed belief in the abysmal distinction between the woman one loved and respected and those one enjoyed – and pitied". It now dawns on him for the first time that in other communities, "in the complicated old European communities", sentimental and sexual matters may be viewed in a different way, and that a lonely and sensitive woman like Ellen may become a 'woman with a past'. Newland is led to think so by the accusation contained in a letter of Ellen's husband, accusation which later on Ellen will absolutely reject. But what now matters is that this episode leads him to understand "for the first time [...] how elementary his own principles had always been" (AI, 83) and is therefore a further step in his maturation.

Newland is however still too much of a New Yorker not to recoil at the prospect of a divorce case, also because he makes the mistake of taking for granted that Count Olensky's accusations are founded. As a lawyer and prospective member of the Mingott-Welland clan it is therefore his duty to make Ellen aware of how *unpleasant* the gossip and the attention of the newspapers would be for 'The Family'. During their meeting he cannot find the courage and the words to articulate his suspicions, but he succeeds in dissuading Ellen from her plan. "A week or ten days later" they meet at the theatre, and, although they only exchange a few words, this sixth meeting is an important step forward in their relationship because it shows the silent communication now existing between them. She thanks him for his advice; he perceives her
loneliness and isolation. He also notices a certain agitation in her, which he cannot explain; and because we constantly view both Ellen and May exclusively from Newland’s point of view, these two characters remain to a large extent mysterious and unfocussed. The reader however does manage to perceive those growing signs of attachment in the Countess which Newland in his naivety – or self-deceit – seems not to understand. But when, on receipt of her enigmatic message, he follows her to Skuytercliff, where she is spending the weekend with the van der Luydens, he goes with a dim but thrilling sense of expectation. He is almost waiting to be seduced. By chance they have a few minutes’ privacy in the old house of the ‘Patroon,’ the Dutch ancestor founder of the fortunes of the van der Luydens.

The words stole through him like a temptation, and to close his senses to it he moved away from the hearth [...] Archer’s heart was beating insubordinately. What if it were from him that she had been running away, and if she had waited to tell him so till they were alone together in this secret room? [...] For a long moment she was silent; and in that moment Archer imagined her, almost heard her stealing up behind him to throw her light arms about his neck (AI, 114).

While he waits “soul and body throbbing with the miracle to come” another of Ellen’s admirers materialises in the snow and the magic moment flies away...Jealous, Newland goes back to New York and four days later, after receiving a new note from Ellen, he flies to May and again implores her to hasten their wedding.

In these circumstances May reveals a new side of her nature. She shows herself to have an intuitive understanding of Newland’s secret motive to advance the wedding and she manages to articulate her fear: “Is it – is it because you’re not certain of continuing to care for me?” She also senses that there must be another woman, although she mistakes her identity. And, by offering to release him from his engagement so that they don’t build their happiness on a wrong done to somebody else, she shows herself to possess both the old fashioned, Old New York fairness and nobility, and an unsuspected awareness of sexual matters: “You mustn’t think that a girl knows as little as her parents imagine. One hears and one notices – one has one’s feelings and ideas” (AI, 126). She appears to Newland during this talk – the first open one they have had – grown “in womanly stature and dignity”; but she remains all the more inscrutable to him for this show of feelings and thoughts he would never have credited her with. “In another moment she seemed to have descended from her womanly eminence to helpless and timorous girlhood” (AI, 127), and Newland is simply left to marvel “at the mystery of young girlhood”. It is almost a miracle that May can have found the courage to entertain such unorthodox views and an even
greater one that she has for once found the vocabulary to express them, but never again, even in their married life, will the two of them speak this openly to one another. Only at the end of the novel, thirty years later, will Newland find out that his wife had after all known of his love for Ellen, understood the greatness of his renunciation and silently pitied him. Like Ellen, May remains a largely unfocused and ambiguous character, and this is due to the novel being constructed on an extremely rigorous focalization.

After this meeting with May Newland chances upon Ellen at her grandmother’s, where he has gone to enlist the old lady’s backing in his attempt to advance the wedding. Ellen invites him to visit her the next evening at her house. This ninth meeting is the crucial one when the pair throw off the mask. He relates to Ellen the talk with May, and then goes on to confess that May has guessed the truth, that there is another woman, and that Ellen is the woman he would have married if it had been possible. She retorts that he himself has made it impossible by persuading her not to divorce Olensky. Then a telegram from May arrives, announcing that her parents, under the combined pressure of Ellen and of the grandmother, have consented to an early wedding. It is checkmate for Newland Archer. The Old New York criteria have proved inadequate as a means of decoding the world. He has misunderstood Ellen’s reasons for stopping her divorce proceedings, thinking this was due to a guilty conscience while she was doing it solely to avoid inflicting a scandal on him and May. His hatred of ‘the unpleasant’ and his inarticulateness have prevented him from having an earlier frank talk with Ellen. He is betrayed by his youthful incapacity to understand his own feelings and other people’s, to read their faces, their gestures, their blushes and their silences. And even now that he thinks he understands his and Ellen’s situation, he must learn that she too has changed since they first met. She says: “You haven’t yet guessed how you’ve changed things for me [...] You hated happiness bought by disloyalty and cruelty and indifference. That was what I’d never known before. [...] I can’t go back now to that other way of thinking. I can’t love you unless I give you up” (AI, 145–46). Ironically, Archer must now suffer the consequences of the actions of his previous self, the self who had preached to Ellen on the notion of duty to one’s family and to Society, and who three days previously had entreated May to advance their wedding. At home he finds May’s telegram that leaves him one month of bachelorhood, and on his hysterical laughter Book One ends.

Book Two opens after an ellipsis of one month, on Newland and May’s wedding day. We perceive the whole show through the medium of Newland’s bewildered brain. He goes
through the entire performance like an automaton; sights, sounds, sensations mingle confusedly for him. His abstraction and detachment are not only the result of the shock and nervous strain he has undergone, and of the emotional numbness he has worked himself into. His reaction gives the measure of how changed he is from the young man who, only two months ago, used to attach a great importance to all the minutiae of social rituals. “He suddenly recalled that he too had once thought such questions important. The things that had filled his days seemed now like a nursery parody of life [...] Yet there was a time when Archer had had definite and rather aggressive opinions on all such problems, and when everything concerning the manners and customs of his little tribe had seemed to him fraught with worldwide significance” (AI, 153). It is the experience of knowing and loving Ellen that has made the difference. She has opened his eyes to the true nature of Old New York’s innocence, “the innocence that seals the mind against imagination and the heart against experience” (AI, 123). She has also shown the fundamentally derivative nature of its culture and the small-mindedness of its unquestioning fidelity to a ‘tradition’ which is, after all, “somebody else’s tradition”. She has helped him to see the ‘Four Hundred’ for what they are: a provincial, narrow-minded and inwardly focused group.

Newland and Ellen haven’t met in the last four weeks (she left abruptly for Washington after their meeting) and he has succeeded in working himself into a state of acquiescence to his fate and reached a precarious equilibrium which can however be unsettled by the mere mention of her name. And another shock is in store for him: he finds out that it has been arranged for him and May to spend their wedding night in the old Patroon’s house at Skuytercliff, a house which for him is so fraught with the memory of Ellen.

The next chapter (Chapter 20) shows the couple honeymooning in London after an interlude of several months (it is now autumn). Newland has found out more about his wife and can guess what their life together is going to be. Europe – which had represented for Newland a possibility of escape from the anti-intellectualism of his native land – is to her merely an opportunity to order their clothes, to mountaineer in the Alps, swim on the Norman coast, walk, ride, play tennis... Newland, who had originally contemplated a honeymoon in Italy – reading Faust to May! – has wisely and tacitly struck it out of their programme. During their married life, only once will the Archers go back to Europe: after the graduation of their son Dallas. Archer’s present attitude is summed up in his reflections during their ride to South Kensington: “Archer had reverted to all his old inherited ideas about marriage. [...] There was no use in trying to emancipate a wife who had not the dimmest notion that she was not free” (AI, 164).
Nevertheless, his esteem of her good qualities is unchanged. He knows that “she would always be loyal, gallant and unresentful; and that pledged him to the practice of the same virtues. [...] She became the tutelary divinity of all his old traditions and reverences” (AI, 165). He foresees that “his artistic and intellectual life would go on, as it always had, outside the domestic circle”, but that May would always be a pleasant companion within it. “And when they had children the vacant corners in both their lives would be filled” (165). So, nothing exciting, but the typical, decent New York marriage. His mood, however, is significantly gloomier during their ride back. Their quasi-altercation about the French tutor they have met underlines their widely diverging attitudes towards culture and intellectuals and prompts in Archer more sombre considerations about his marriage: “He was beginning to fear his tendency to dwell on the things he disliked in her. [...] May’s pressure was already bearing on the angles whose sharpness he most wanted to keep” (AI, 170–71). The result of this pressure is visible in the next chapter, which opens after a gap of nearly a year: it is August and the Archers are at Newport spending the summer at May’s parents’. This mere fact is an indication of Archer’s resignation and acquiescence to May’s tastes, as had been his acceptance of the house bought for them in New York by May’s parents. He feels bitterly that he has now become a mere son-in-law, swallowed up by May’s clan. (On only one thing has he been able to keep firm: the arrangement of his library: there, surrounded by his books, he can be his real self and there the most important events of his life will take place).

Outwardly Archer has resumed all the normal occupation of a New Yorker of his class and condition and thereby established “a link with his former self” (AI, 173). Inwardly he has dulled himself into an acceptance of this life as an “inevitable sort of business” (AI, 173). “As for the momentary madness that had fallen upon him on the eve of his marriage, he had trained himself to regard it as the last of his discarded experiments. The idea that he could ever, in his senses, have dreamed of marrying the Countess Olenska had become almost unthinkable, and she remained in his memory simply as the most plaintive and poignant of a line of ghosts” (AI, 174). A year and a half have gone by since their last meeting. Then, by mere chance, they happen to be in the same house. Newland, sent to fetch Ellen on the beach, avoids a meeting and contents himself with watching her from a distance, but this is sufficient instantly to destroy the false security of his systematised existence. “Now it was the Welland house, and the life he was expected to lead in it, that had become unreal and irrelevant, and the brief scene on the shore, when he had stood irresolute, half-way down the bank, was as close to him as the blood
in his veins” (AI, 183). After an aborted attempt at meeting Ellen, he follows her to Boston and they have a whole day together. It is a very poignant meeting because Archer has now put aside his Old New York reserve and achieved enough articulacy to spell out his misery: “I’m of your making much more than you ever were of mine. I’m the man who married one woman because another told him to [...] You gave me my first glimpse of real life, and at the same time you asked me to go on with a sham one. It’s beyond human enduring – that’s all” (AI, 202–3). They part on the understanding that Ellen will not go back to Europe until she feels she is becoming a temptation for him, “a temptation to fall down from the standard they had both set up” (AI, 206).

Next chapter (Chapter 26) opens on Thanksgiving Day (25 November), four months later. After her refusal to go back to her husband Ellen is no longer in the good graces of her American family, who have cut her allowance and are plotting her expulsion. Even more important is the change which has occurred in Newland’s inner life:

He had built up within himself a kind of sanctuary in which she throned among his secret thoughts and longings. Little by little it became the scene of his real life, of his only rational activities; thither he brought the books he read, the ideas and feeling which nourished him, his judgements and visions. Outside it, in the scene of his actual life, he moved with a growing sense of unreality and insufficiency, blundering against familiar prejudices and traditional points of view as an absent-minded man goes on bumping into the furniture of his own room (AI, 220).

In the end he feels unable to continue to accept the terms of his agreement with Ellen and proposes elopement to her. They have a last meeting at the Art Museum. Newland has come to the point that he can not only recognise but even explicitly state his sexual need of her, and they part with the promise of a tryst the following day.

Chapter 32 relates the conclusion of this love story. It opens in the setting of the Opera House, where, once again, Gounod’s ‘Faust’ is being sung. The association is inevitable with the performance with which the novel and the story start. Archer himself cannot but recall that evening of nearly two years ago. Ellen is not there, but May is, very pale, dressed in white as on the earlier occasion; moreover, as Newland notices, she is wearing her bridal gown for the first time since the wedding. It was the custom in Old New York for ladies to wear their wedding dress on important social occasions. The fact that May is doing it on this evening, when her husband’s mind is full of thoughts for another woman – a fact of which, as it will be revealed later on, she is fully aware – is obviously significant. On looking at her and remembering these
past two years Newland is seized by the uncontrollable impulse to tell her the truth, to “throw himself on her generosity, and ask for the freedom he had once refused” (AI, 268). But at home his wife tells him that Ellen is sailing for Europe the following week.

The final scene is May’s farewell party to Ellen Olenska, a stately occasion in which not only ‘The Family’ but also the most important members of New York high society take part. Once again Newland is an uninvolved spectator, until he suddenly realises the meaning of this ‘tribal rally’:

It came over him, in a vast flash made up of many broken gleams, that to all of them he and Madame Olenska were lovers, lovers in the extreme sense peculiar to ‘foreign’ vocabularies. He guessed himself to have been, for months, the centre of countless silently observing eyes and patiently listening ears, he understood that, by means as yet unknown to him, the separation between himself and the partner of his guilt had been achieved, and that now the whole tribe had rallied about his wife on the tacit assumption that nobody knew anything, or had ever imagined anything, and that the occasion of the entertainment was simply May Archer’s natural desire to take an affectionate leave of her friend and cousin (AI, 279).

For the entire evening Newland and Ellen are not allowed to exchange anything but small talk. He sees her go out of his house and of his life. Later, when he is about to tell May that he wants to travel in Europe (which means, as they both well know, that he wants to leave her and follow Ellen) she counteracts telling him that she is pregnant. (In fact, Newland understands that this is the card May has already played with Ellen to make her leave). Here terminates the part of the text which I call a Bildungsroman: the narrative concerned with the decisive – from an emotional point of view – experiences of the twenty-seven years old Newland Archer, which follows him up to the moment of a vital existential choice. This is the moment when Newland chooses a specific mould for his personality and a specific pattern for his life; when he renounces experimentation with his potential selves in favour of the realization of one particular self; when he passes from youth into maturity.

The last two chapters constitute an epilogue set thirty years later. We see what the outcome of Newland Archer’s life crisis was. We are shown, in a way, a new character: a Newland who is now fifty-seven and a widower, and who, on taking stock of his life, evinces in the process an outlook which is in many respects different from that of his youthful self. He did stay with his wife after all; he did opt for duty and family continuity, was a faithful husband and a loving father who enjoys the love, friendship and trust of his three children. He also did
something unusual for a man of his generation and class: he tried to be a good citizen by going into public life and getting constantly involved in cultural, civic and philanthropic projects. He did his best to understand the changes that came over during his lifetime and not to close his eyes in front of realities, however unpleasant they might be. All this counts greatly in his estimation of gains and losses. "When he remembered to what the young men of his generation and his set had looked forward – the narrow groove of money-making, sport and society to which their vision had been limited – even his small contribution to the new state of things seemed to count" (AI, 288). He has learnt to accept the limitations of his personal destiny and to be thankful that his days were usefully filled. Loving Ellen has been the great adventure of his life, because their relationship was the crucial element that transformed him into the sadder but more aware and socially responsible man he is. On the other hand, Ellen has become for him the symbol of what he knows he has irrevocably renounced: "the flower of life". And the feeling that Newland’s has been, in the last analysis, to some extent a starved life is brought home to the reader with even greater force in the following and last chapter. Newland and his son are in Paris on business and about to meet the Countess Olenska. It is Newland’s first visit to Europe since his honeymoon – May had disliked travelling – and Paris immediately gives him the feeling of all the beauty and intellectual stimulation he has thirsted after and missed, and which Ellen has on the contrary enjoyed for a lifetime. In the end he asks his son to go and meet Ellen alone, preferring his memories to the reality of a new encounter. Thus Archer takes definitively his place among Wharton’s ‘Entsagenden’.

Both in The Fruit of the Tree and in The Age of Innocence the end shows the protagonists giving up their freedom in exchange for what Moretti calls ‘the socialization of marriage’. Moreover, in both novels Wharton stresses a particular aspect of the Bildungsroman: the maturation of the hero as not only personal growth but as development into social activity. In both therefore she manages to convey the recognition “that the practical reality – marriage, family, career – is a necessary dimension of the hero’s self-realization, albeit one that by definition implies a delimitation, indeed, a constriction, of the self’ (Swales, 1987a, 29). Nevertheless, we are far from the feeling of harmony and conciliation contained in the conclusion of the classical Bildungsroman, which, according to Moretti, solves the problem of the dichotomy between “the ideal of self-determination and the equally imperious demands of socialization” (1987, 16) by showing that the conflict is but apparent. It seems to me that in Wharton’s novels – and, as we shall see, in Fontane’s – the conflict is very real and the tension
between these two poles remains somewhat unresolved, because of the keenness with which the complexity of inward life is perceived. In *The Age of Innocence* – as in *The Fruit of the Tree* – the note of resigned renunciation does therefore coexist with the message that some degree of personal unhappiness does not constitute failure, if life has brought along a measure of social commitment, of pursuit of one’s duties, of dedication to the welfare of others. Thus, we are left with the contradictory feeling that, though the story of Newland’s life has all the poignancy of unfulfilled desire, his ordeal has transmuted his experience into something valuable because it has helped him find his vocation and taught him to function in his world and his time.

1.5. **Hudson River Bracketed** (1929) and *The Gods Arrive* (1932)

The novel *Hudson River Bracketed* and its sequel *The Gods Arrive* constitute Wharton’s attempt at describing and accounting for the unfolding of the creative genius. They tell the story of the apprenticeship of Vance Weston, a young man from the Midwest who succeeds in becoming a New Yorker and a writer. The focalization is not exclusively restricted to the protagonist, the other focus of narration – especially in *The Gods Arrive* – being Helo Spear, his “awakener”, mentor, tutor and later mistress and (presumably) wife. Given the subject, Wharton draws on the narrative possibilities of the Bildungsroman tradition to tell her tale. And, once again, in both books she resorts to that source of powerful symbols, *Faust*, both to pinpoint the stages of development of her artist and to represent the way artistic genius operates. As Penelope Vita-Finzi summarises, “*Hudson River Bracketed* shows Vance’s journey away from his own roots towards a wider culture; *The Gods Arrive* shows also his journey down towards an understanding of what he has learned, and of the source of inspiration” (1990, 61).

At the beginning of *Hudson River Bracketed* Vance is a very naive boy of nineteen, a raw, uncouth youngster struggling against the insufficiency of his vocabulary, whose only claim to cultural distinction is his strange fascination with words – a detail which reminds one of Heinrich Lee in Keller’s *Der grüne Heinrich*. Vance certainly does not owe to his family background his peculiar love of words, which manifests itself very early in his predilection for the language of the King James Bible and his instinctive admiration for the rich English spoken by his neighbour Mr. Delaney, a decayed gentleman from the South. When we first encounter him, Vance has just graduated from the College of Euphoria, Illinois, had some experience as editor of the college magazine, fallen in love, been jilted and, like most Americans, founded a
new religion. He already nurtures vague literary ambitions, but so far he has only associated ‘literariness’ with a job on a newspaper or magazine.

The turning point comes with his first sentimental disappointment, which, being followed by a serious bout of illness, causes his being sent to recover at the home of some relatives near New York. And here his spiritual awakening and intellectual maturation start. Hudson River Bracketed succeeds in showing the slow process of growth through which an untutored mind slowly comes to stock itself up with ideas and develops into creativity. It shows, in the last analysis, how books are born of books.

So far Vance has been a typical citizen of Euphoria and has identified stability with stagnation. At Paul’s Landing he finds out ‘the Past’ with all its elusive richness. The Past comes for him to be materially represented by a house, The Willows, a bizarre 1850 construction in the Hudson River Bracketed style from which the novel derives its title, and about which Wharton writes the following ironical epigraph: “A. J. Downing, the American landscape architect, in his book on Landscape Gardening (published in 1842) divides the architectural styles into the Grecian, Chinese, Gothic, the Tuscan, or Italian villa, style, and the Hudson River Bracketed”. The Willows is therefore a house that only to an American could appear ancient or beautiful. But for Vance, who has only known the brand new reality of the Midwest, the incessant pursuit of the latest fashion or technological innovation, with consequent abandonment or destruction of buildings or objects that have lost novelty or usefulness, this house is a revelation. “It was his embodiment of the Past: that strange and overwhelming element had entered into his imagination in the guise of these funny turrets and balconies, turgid upholsteries and dangling crystals. [...] This absurd house [...] was to him the very emblem of man’s long effort, was Chartres, the Parthenon, the Pyramids” (HRB, 338).

At The Willows Vance has the revelation of a (to him) completely new existential dimension, of a new conception of space and time: he sees for the first time a house which has been inhabited by several generations of the same family, whose members have spent their lives within those walls religiously preserving the traces left by the preceding generations and in their turn leaving tangible and spiritual bequests to their heirs. The house gives therefore an impression of stability and permanence, of life lived at a different pace from that Vance has known so far. As he will explain to Halo Spear (later Halo Tarrant): “From the first day I set foot in this house I got that sense of continuity that we folks have missed out of our lives – out where I live, anyway – and it gave me the idea of a different rhythm, a different time beat; a
movement without jerks and breaks” (HRB, 345). For him, who has so far only known a relentless pursuit of the brand-new, of the modern, of the efficient – be it in matters of religious doctrine or in the latest plumbing – this is a new definition of time.

This idea of continuity, stability and roots is further articulated in a particular room of the house: the library. It is the first time Vance sees a private library, a family library, which several generations have preserved and added to. The library has a particular magic for many of Wharton’s male intellectual characters: for Newland Archer, Ralph Marvell, John Amherst it is a sanctum sanctorum, a refuge, a source of solace, their vital space, the environment where their inner and therefore most authentic life takes place. But whilst for these characters books and libraries are an indispensable but normal part of their upbringing, their heritage and their daily life, Vance has only known the library of the college and public libraries. He has never owned books and never imagined that they can be for some people treasured possessions. Yet, he and not those “gentlemen”, will become a creator of books.

The library of The Willows is where Vance’s real intellectual and emotional life starts. He discovers Coleridge, Lamb, Marlowe, Beddoes, Marvell, Ford, Milton, Bacon...It is his first glimpse of the literary civilization of Europe. He ransacks the “magic shelves” for more. He makes the connection between ‘the Past’, culture and Europe. He understands that “what he needed, no doubt, to enter that world, was education” (HRB, 117). Thus starts his intellectual apprenticeship.

His Beatrice in this new Paradise is Halo Spear, a member of the Lorburn family which owns The Willows and whom he meets by chance. She is a representative of the Old New York tradition, her family are cultured people, she is fluent in several languages and widely travelled, having spent her childhood in Europe (very much what was the case with Wharton herself). Her home, Eaglewood, which goes back to the Pilgrim Fathers’ time, is another symbolic place. There Vance’s connection with Western culture is reinforced. “Every word, every allusion caught at the Eaglewood lunch table had opened new vistas of conjecture. [...] Vance had known instantly that the language, the intonations, the allusions of Eaglewood [...] embraced, though so lightly flitting, great areas extending not only to New York and beyond, but backward through this mysterious past which was so much newer to Vance than any present” (HRB, 117–18).

Halo also initiates Vance into the realm of non-English literature, introducing to him Faust.
I was only going to quote something from *Faust* – you’ll read it some day – but now just listen to the sound:

\begin{quote}
‘Die Sonne tönt nach alter Weise
In Brudersphären Wettgesang.
Und ihre vorgeschriebene Reise
Vollendet sich mit Donnergang.
Ihr Anblick giebt den Engeln Stärke
Wenn keiner sie ergründen mag,
Die unbegreiflich hohen Werke
Sind herrlich wie am ersten Tag.’
\end{quote}

“Isn’t that beautiful to you, just as mere music, without any meaning? Besides, that whole question of *meaning* in poetry…” (HRB, 85).

As an illustration of the passage, she also takes Vance to see for the first time the sunrise on the hills, thus initiating in him also the contemplation of natural beauty.

So *Faust* somehow presides over the beginning of Vance’s literary education. But only years later will he read this work and incorporate its powerful symbolism – or, at any rate, his personal interpretation of it – into his intellectual make-up.

When Vance leaves Paul’s Landing a few months later after a row with his relatives, he heads straight for New York determined to start his literary career. He spends the whole of his time at the public library reading incessantly in a fervour of ascetic and single-minded resolve to make up for his newly-discovered lack of education. “Drifting from dream to dream, eating daily less, studying daily for longer hours, he entered into the state of strange illumination which comes to ardent youth when the body hungers while the intelligence is fed” (160). Then his money runs out and he is forced to go back home and take a job on a newspaper. Behind he has left a short-story, “One Day”, written at the time of his love disappointment, which has been accepted by a literary magazine. Unburied three years later by a new editor who invites him to collaborate on the same magazine, this raw but heartfelt piece of writing will constitute the start of his career as creative writer.

When he lays his second siege to New York Vance Weston is thus 22. Immediately he compromises his career by saddling himself with a beautiful but sickly and ineffectual child-wife who has inspired him with a sudden and violent passion. At an intellectual level he is now very different from the naive Midwest boy encountered at the beginning of the novel. Halo, who is now the wife of Lewis Tarrant, his editor, renews their old friendship and immediately notices the progress he has made on the path of knowledge since their first meeting: he is now
studying philosophy and Italian so as to be able to read Dante in the original, and she offers to help him with these studies. His maturation impinges on his writing, which is now no more the simple outpouring of personal feeling. His new work is “Unclaimed”, a soberly told World War I story.

Vance’s life in New York is the story of a struggle very strongly reminiscent of *New Grub Street* and also a little of the disappointments and hardships endured by Ned Winsatt, the literary critic-turned-journalist of *The Age of Innocence*. Vance must also soon open his eyes to the reality of his marriage. “To live in New York with Laura Lou would be a costly if not impossible undertaking. She was as much of a luxury as an exotic bird or a flower: that she might help him in wage earning or housekeeping had never entered his mind. He had simply wanted her past endurance, and now he had her; and exquisite as the possession was, he was now abruptly faced with the cost of it” (HRB, 239). But his job on *The Hour* and his fame as a promising young writer introduce him into the world of intellectual coteries and literary prizes, where he can at least debate the literary issues which absorb him and, even through allusions and passing references made by people more cultured than him, continue his self-education (see for example his rushing to Halo to get Tolstoy’s, Chekov’s and Dostoyevsky’s works after catching a mere mention of “the Russians” at “The coconut tree”). He has found out that reading can take the place of experiencing, and that intellectual adventures, if intensely lived, can be more real than reality. “Everything that appealed to his creative instinct always seemed to become a part of his experience” (HRB, 159). Nothing can impair his ravenous search for knowledge, his incessant and avid accumulation of new notions and concepts. This process of hoarding up emotions and data is shown as central to his character. It is an “irreducible core of selfness” (HRB, 259) which has existed since childhood, is unmodifiable by external circumstances (poverty, marital difficulties, illness etc.), will be strengthened through the years and, in the last analysis, will prove to be the distinctive quality of the artist. This “hidden cave in which he hoarded his secretest treasures as a child hoards stony dead fish” is his mind, both his conscious and his unconscious self.

He starts chafing at the double yoke to which he has bent his neck: the obligation to support his ailing wife and that to fulfil his contract, which chains him to the production of monthly articles as well as short stories and a novel. He and his wife have been compelled to move in with her mother at Paul’s Landing, and commuting itself is an impediment to his enjoying the stimulating New York atmosphere. However, this also leads him back to the
seclusion and comfort of The Willows, and once again the old absurd house acts as a catalyst on his imagination and gives new impetus to his spiritual and artistic development. In the library, so full of memories of the last inhabitant of the house, Miss Lorburn, he writes his first important work, the historical romance Instead, inspired by the life of this 19th century spinster who to him appears “remote and poetic as the crusaders or the wars of Alexander” (HRB, 342). It is Halo who, with her intimate knowledge of the period, helps him recreate it as background for the story. She supplies the details about the customs, the mentality, the interior design, even the clothes and the way they influence people’s physical movements and mental attitudes, and Vance contributes the creative genius which fuses these elements together into a background on which Miss Lorburn’s private destiny can be successfully evoked. Thus their passion for literature once again brings them together. As often happens in Wharton’s novels, the sentimental involvement of the characters is a consequence of a shared enthusiasm and a shared work. But, although Vance soon ceases to see Halo as a “disembodied intelligence”, a new sense of responsibility and an obscure perception of the meaning of the marriage ties keep him bound to his wife. It would therefore seem that the young artist has acquired some degree of emotional maturity: this new love for Halo does not grow out of physical passion and has very deep roots in Vance’s fundamental interests and most profound emotions.

After a gap of a year, we find Vance become a fashionable and lionised author after the publication of the much acclaimed Instead. Towards his wife, whose incapacity to share his inner life is now to him an acknowledged fact, he only feels a protective pity. He must still wrestle with material difficulties alone, and to the usual problems of poverty are added the typical difficulties of his trade: not only have his publishers tied him up with a miserly contract, he now also suffers from a lack of inspiration. And yet write he must, or starve with his wife. In ways reminiscent of many Bildungsroman heroes, he often interrogates himself on the meaning of his experiences, trying to understand the sequence of events that has made of his life the lonely, overburdened misery it is, and, through understanding, to achieve some control over events: “How could a fellow tell beforehand where each act would lead, and what would be the next to grow out of it?” (HRB, 387) Is life a “blind labyrinth,” a “disconnected muddle”? he asks himself disconsolately. Halo he hasn’t seen for the last year, but now his intellectual isolation and spiritual loneliness draw him back to her. Once again the ostensible reason for their meetings is Vance’s new work in progress, Loot, a novel of New York life. At her house he starts mixing again with that New York elite he wants to portray, and finds these encounters
nourishing and stimulating for his starved mind. Once again we are shown how the creative imagination cannot operate in the void, but must feed on the data education alone can furnish. "The air was electrical, if not with ideas at least with phrases and allusions which led up to them. To Vance the background of education and travel implied by this quick flashing back and forth of names, anecdotes, references to unseen places, unheard-of people, works of art, books, plays, was intoxicating in its manifold suggestions" (HRB, 402). On one of these occasions, his train of thoughts shows how far the process of "hoarding up", of stocking his mind with emotions and ideas, has gone, as well as the rudiments of reflection on the devices of the creative process: "Then these people had never heard that footfall of Destiny which, for Vance, seemed to ring out in the first page of all the great novels, as compelling as the knock at Macbeth's gates, as secret as the opening measures of the Fifth Symphony". In contrast with normal people (and even with the successful author to whom he is talking), Vance is shown as reflecting on the craft of fiction: "I mean, how does the thing germinate, spread itself above and below the surface? There's something so treelike, so preordained...I came across something in Blake the other day that made me think of it: 'Man is born like a garden already planted and sown. This world is too poor to produce one seed'. That just hints at the mystery..." (HRB, 401).

The schizophrenic quality of Vance's much hampered life is very well stressed in the novel. To a certain extent, every human being's life is torn between two conflicting exigencies, that of being free to fulfil one's potential, whatever it is, and that of coming to terms with reality, of living in society and satisfying its demands and one's own material needs. Vance, being an artist, must however experience a further complication: in him the need for self expression is much stronger and more focused than it is for other human beings. He cannot be content with finding companionship and solace in books and art, as Newland Archer did. He must create new beauty. He can only make sense of reality by writing other books. So he lives life at two levels, an inner, spiritual one, revolving around literature, and with which his still platonic love for Halo can integrate, and a second, external level, constituted by his financial bondage to the review and by a marriage that has not even satisfied his "primitive craving for a home, children, a moral anchorage" (HRB, 411).

In the end he breaks down, reveals his love to Halo, destroys the first chapters of the unfinished Loot, which he has come to hate, leaves New York and buries himself in the countryside. He gets more and more wrapped up in his dreams and visions, his wife is ill with
TB but he hardly notices the symptoms and a new callousness starts manifesting itself in his character, while at the same time his perception of the creative energy at work in himself and his instinctive reliance on its strength become more forceful and distinct. It is a sort of channelling of vitality, a progressive focusing of vision which leaves little space for everything else. It is a hardening and crystalizing of personality thanks to which he can forget external circumstances and snatch moments in which he can still be happy, “happy as if he had been taken into the divine conspiracy and knew the solution of all the dissonances” (HRB, 491). The price he pays is a certain detachment from common human reality and suffering. Later, when they are together in Europe and their relationship is going through a stormy phase, Halo will reflect with sadness and envy on the capacity of Vance – and of the artist in general – to transform his painful experiences into literature, to sublimate his suffering into writing and thus free himself of it, to justify pain by making it a stimulus for his creativity, while poor humanity is left to endure a meaningless pain. “He had suffered thus agonizingly – as she was suffering now – but by pouring his suffering into a story [“One Day”] he had been able to cleanse his soul of it. Ah, happy artist! No wonder they were careless of other people’s wounds, when they were born with the power to heal their own so easily…” (GA, 329).

Wharton always describes the operating of creative imagination in highly metaphorical terms and with symbolic images, like that of the autumnal apple-tree which causes in Vance a new and sudden surge of inspiration, that “mute swinging wide of the secret doors” (HRB, 483). “As usual with him now, the sudden seeing of the apple branch coincided with the intensely detailed inner vision of a new book. In the early days that flash of mysterious light used to blot out everything else; but with the growing mastery of his craft he noticed, on the contrary, that when the gates swung open the illumination fell on his daily foreground as well as on the heavenly distances. Mental confusion ceased for him the moment when the inner lucidity declared itself, and this sense of developing power gave him a feeling of security, an inviolable calm in the heart of turmoil…” (HRB, 484) Even whilst nursing his dying wife this sense of power does not abandon him, and the long vigils even add new impetus to his imagination. This time of great physical and emotional stress is clearly shown as a turning point for the developing writer.

He knew, as never before, the rapture of great comet flights of thought across the heaven of human conjecture, and the bracing contact of subjects minutely studied, without so much as a glance beyond their borders. Now and then he would stop writing and let his visions sweep him away; then he would return with renewed fervour to the minute scrutiny of his imaginary characters. There
was something supernatural and compulsory in this strange alternation between creating and dreaming (HRB, 517).

He nurses his wife conscientiously during the winter. After her death “all he was certain of was that, after all, no great inner change had befallen him” (HRB, 527). She had long since receded into a background, remote from the level where his real spiritual experiences take place. Even when Halo, who has, thanks to an inheritance, gained financial independence and left her husband, comes to offer him this independence and the chance to start a new life with her, that strange detachment still remains. “And when at last he drew her arm through his and walked beside her in the darkness to the corner where she had left her motor, he wondered if at crucial moments the same veil of unreality would always fall between himself and the soul nearest him, if the creator of imaginary beings must always feel alone among the real ones” (HRB, 536).

Thus, at the end of the ten years covered in *Hudson River Bracket*, Vance Weston seems to have reached very important goals: a mastery of his craft and a belief in his creative power; a published and successful novel; a stable relationship with a woman who is his intellectual equal, his superior in education and knowledge of the world, his proven friend and his literary associate even before becoming his mistress; and, thanks to her, even some financial independence that will allow him to tackle his next book with some peace of mind. Why then did Wharton feel the need, several years after the publication of *Hudson River Bracketed*, to write a sequel to it in *The Gods Arrive*? One wonders whether she was not following, even in this, the *Wilhelm Meister* example. At the end of *Lehrjahre* Wilhelm too has achieved important goals: a wife, a child, friends, a place in a society, some degree of self-awareness and knowledge of the world. His apprenticeship is over, and yet the journey must continue, because the Society of the Tower lays on him the task to learn by experience through some years of travel. In the same way, at the beginning of *The Gods Arrive* we find Vance Weston completely convinced that “his apprentice days were over” (GA, 16) and embarked with Halo on a steamer heading for Europe. The first two chapters recapitulate, somewhat perfunctorily, the events that occurred at the end of *Hudson River Bracketed* as well as between that Spring evening and this September day. Vance, at work on the novel *Magic*, which had had such a promising start at the time of his wife’s death, had found himself in the midst of a crisis of inspiration and realised that Halo was “the one medium in which his imagination could expand” (GA, 16). So the two had decided to leave together even though Halo had not obtained her divorce yet. They spend a
year in Spain, visiting Cordova, Granada and then Cadiz, where in three months Vance writes his second novel, *The Puritan in Spain*. Then they go to Paris, where he is introduced into the literary circles and makes numerous friends. They then move to the French Riviera, where Vance starts planning *Colossus*. From here he travels alone to London. After their break the pair travel separately back to America, and meet again and are reunited at The Willows, which is now Halo’s home.

In this new phase of their relationship Halo’s role of nurturer of Vance’s genius is even more apparent. She has consciously made it her mission to “educate” Vance and thus to contribute to the creation of his books. She is erudite but uncreative, loves and appreciates literature but can only write books by proxy. He is a maker of literature but needs to be led by the hand in the labyrinth of European culture and traditions and in his search for the past. So their roles in this partnership are well defined, and yet their situation is complicated by their being emotionally involved with one another. Thus the journey will turn out to be for Vance also a sentimental education.

At a first glance Halo would appear in this sequel to share with Vance the role of reflecting consciousness. In reality, not only does Vance’s point of view appear nearly twice as often as Halo’s, but also Halo’s reflections are always centred on Vance, his feelings for her, the meaning of his behaviour, his health, his whereabouts, the development of his ideas, and above all, his work, his production rhythm, the nature and quality of this work. She doesn’t seem to have perceived the change that has occurred in Vance, a change of which he is fully aware and which is clearly stated at the beginning of *The Gods Arrive*: “What he needed was not her critical aid but her nearness. His apprentice days were over; he knew what he was trying to do better than any one could tell him, even Halo” (GA, 16). So, although in *The Gods Arrive* we’ll see Halo being useful to Vance in his studies and in his discovery of Europe, Vance’s most important development will continue to take place as solitary self-discovery. It will be through loneliness, bereavement, disillusionment and sorrow that he will reach some (provisional) conclusion about the meaning of life and of his art.

In this search he is somehow helped by a very potent symbol – that of the Mothers in *Faust II* – which had fascinated him since his first reading of this work in the library of The Willows. The discovery had then given him the possibility of articulating the reasons of his instinctive dissatisfaction with the successful works of the period. Although, as a young author
still in search of his matter and of his style, he had at first felt tempted to imitate these critically acclaimed novels, he had soon realised that

they all left him with the sense of an immense emptiness underneath, just where, in his own vision of the world, the deep forces stirred and wove men’s fate. [...] [He] had felt the hollowness underfoot, and said to himself: ‘No, life’s not like that, people are not like that. The real stuff is way down, not on the surface.’ When he got hold of Faust at the Willows, and came to the part about the mysterious Mothers, moving in subterranean depths among the primal forms of life, he shouted out: ‘That’s it – the fellows that write those books are all Motherless!’ (HRB, 320-21)

This symbol helps Vance to become conscious of how different his artistic goal is from those of his fellow writers: “verbal gymnastics” and “the staccato enumeration of physical aspects and sensations”\(^9\) (HRB, 320) are not what interests him: he wants to express the deep-seated forces that motivate and activate human beings, that make people what they are. These forces seem to him to reside in people’s cultural and personal past. Exploring them means to look for roots and to go back to the womb. “I don’t know how to explain... but I think I see a big subject for a novel – different from the things the other fellows are trying for. What interests me would be to get back into the minds of the people who lived in these places – to try and see what we came out of. Till I do I’ll never understand why we are what we are...’ (HRB, 325; Italics mine). His first book, Instead, represents a first attempt to search for a historical and cultural Past, and also a first attempt Vance makes to understand himself, whose reality is so different from Miss Lorburn’s.

So the Mothers replace The Willows as a symbol of the Past: that rich, nourishing historical and cultural Past from which Vance feels cut off by his rootlessness and in which he is trying to place himself. His predicament is in a sense that of all Americans – who are, as Henry James put it, the disinherit of culture. And like many other Americans he pursues his quest in Europe. However, the Mothers are such a powerful symbol because they sum up many meanings. Vance is reminded of them during his visit at the cathedral in Cordova:

They began to walk down one of the aisles. Farther and farther away in the heart of the shadows they left the great choir and altar; yet they seemed to get no nearer to the door. Halo stood still again. ‘No – this way,’ she said, with the abruptness of doubt. ‘We’re going in the wrong direction.’ Vance remembered a passage in the Second Faust which had always haunted him: the scene where Faust descends to the Mothers. ‘He must have wound round and round like this,’ he thought. They had turned and were walking down another low-vaulted vista toward a glow-worm light at its end. This led them to a door bolted and barred on the inner side, and evidently long unopened. ‘It’s not that.’

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They turned again and walked in the deepening darkness down another colonnade. Vance thought of the Cretan labyrinth, of Odysseus evoking the mighty dead, of all the subterranean mysteries on whose outer crust man loves and fights and dies. The blood was beating in his ears. He began to wish that they might never find the right door, but go on turning about forever at the dark heart of things. They walked and walked. After a while Halo asked: 'Are you really tired?' like Eurydice timidly guiding Orpheus back to daylight" (GA, 23).

The richness of the references springing in Vance's mind in this passage gives a good idea of how far he has progressed from the youth who, a decade ago, had for the first time heard Halo recite some lines from Goethe's poem. In this haunting vision Vance sees the Mothers related to the image of labyrinthine and subterranean mysteries, of darkness, the underworld, the bowels of the earth. Richard Lawson is obviously right in seeing in 'the Mothers' a symbol of the unconscious, and so is Penelope Vita-Finzi in considering them the mystical source of the creative genius, related to primordial forces which are accessible to all humanity. Because the Mothers are also the cave of Vance's childhood vision, where he still hoards up impressions, feelings, emotions, notions and thoughts to be some time and somehow transformed into literature. The artist can only create out of intensely lived and lastingly stored life. Many times will Vance remember the advice given him by George Frenside, the literary critic who, in the two novels, voices Wharton's aesthetic theories: "Well, now take hold of life as it lies around you; you remember Goethe: 'Wherever you take hold of it, it's interesting?' So it is — but only in proportion as you are. There’s the catch. The artist has got to feed his offspring out of his own tissue. Enrich that, day and night — perpetually" (HRB, 377).

The Mothers are what is authentic in one's mind, the ultimate reality, the inner self. They are what an artist must keep faithful to if he wants to produce real, lasting works of art. This symbol recurs every time Vance evaluates his work: the touchstone of its validity is the degree of sincerity and effort he knows he has put into their making. A year after leaving New York he has a second successful novel, *The Puritan in Spain*, published, but he does not share the general enthusiasm for this work. "The thing had come too easily; he knew it had not been fetched up out of the depths. [...] When he was alone he recalled the passionate groping conviction with which he had written 'Instead', and the beginning of the unfinished book, 'Magic', and the feeling returned that those two books had been made out of his inmost substance, while the new one sprang from its surface. [...] ‘Who am I writing for, anyhow? Only the Mothers!’ he thought savagely’" (GA, 72–4) “He recalled the old days of his poverty and obscurity in New York [...] and he knew now that those hours had been the needful prelude to
whatever he had accomplished since. ‘You have to go plumb down to the Mothers to fish up the real thing,’ he thought exultantly. (GA, 121)

If for Vance as an artist the descent to the Mothers is the necessary prelude to the creation of enduring beauty, this probing into the self is necessary to him also as a simple individual who is trying to make sense of life in general and of his personal experiences in particular. Among these, his European travels naturally have a major impact on him. Yet Europe does not seem to impress him so much with her artistic and architectural treasures: not one painting, for example, is mentioned as particularly striking to Vance; he feels oppressed in the cathedral at Cordova and fails to respond to the sight of Chartres cathedral with the rapturous enthusiasm Halo expects. It is the general atmosphere of great European cities like Paris and London, and, in particular, the cultural life of these capitals that Vance responds to. To a person like him - word-intoxicated and with a ravenous desire for knowledge - the literary and artistic circles of young intellectuals with cosmopolitan experience prove particularly stimulating and mind-expanding. He himself is fully conscious of the change that has happened in him: “He seemed to himself a totally different being from the young ignoramus who had left New York with Halo Tarrant a year previously” (GA, 73). He is now supercilious towards the literary coterie he used to mix with in New York, “the clever young writers [...] [who] had read only each other and ‘Ulysses’” (GA, 74), and who, he now feels, used to feed him “raw lumps of ignorance” (GA, 73). His new friends are “scholarly, analytical and intellectually curious”.

What interested Vance, however, was less the nature of their views than the temper of their minds. He felt in all of them the fine edge of a trained intelligence - the quality he had always groped for without knowing what to call it or how to acquire it. Now, wherever he went, he seemed to meet it; as though it were as much a part of Paris as the stately architecture, the beauty of streets and river, and the sense of that other accumulated beauty stored behind museum walls. All through this great visual symphony he felt the fine vibrations of intelligence, the activity of high-strung minds (GA, 78).

The “social immensities of London” are a further opportunity for learning. “With his first step on English soil had come the sense of being at home and at ease. The feeling of sureness and authority underlying the careless confidence with which life was conducted, soothed his nerves, and put him quietly yet not unironically in his place” (GA, 271). His way of savouring the city is different from Halo's relentlessly planned sightseeing. “His first days were spent in wandering about the streets, alert yet dreaming, letting the panorama of churches,
museums, galleries, stream through his attentive senses " (GA, 272). Here too he meets writers and painters, attends concerts and ballets, goes on bicycle rides in the countryside and enjoys the long talks with his male intellectual friends which have long replaced the old communion with Halo (It is worth remembering that, although they are openly living together, the double sexual standard prevents Halo from joining Vance in his social and cultural life: he, as the young male author, is forgiven sexual escapades; she, as the adulteress, is ostracized). He feels now that she does not and cannot understand or even perceive the forces he absorbs during his conversations with his friends and his solitary wanderings and musings. "He was beginning to discover that he no longer needed a companion in his explorations of the depths; what he most wanted then was to be alone" (GA, 79).

In the London artistic community Vance meets different types of artist with different philosophies of life and art. On one hand there is Tolby, the painter, completely wrapped up in his art and constantly at work, for whom "This is life; the rest is simply hygienics". Then there is Octavius, the writer who has never produced his book, but who will always passionately pursue the occupation of dreaming this unborn masterpiece, without ever finding the courage of undergoing the "agony of exteriorizing", but feeling perfectly fulfilled in this single-minded pursuit of the ultimate literary perfection. A third, sad alternative is offered by the alcoholic Chris Churley, another would-be writer who cannot steel himself into activity but does not have the asceticism and absorption of Octavius, and who therefore ends up in self-destruction. Vance, though committed to his art, feels that he cannot at present detach himself from Life, ignore its allurements and pursue his task with complete absorption and self-isolation. His relationship with Halo is under heavy strain both for professional and emotional reasons, and, having met by chance the sweetheart of his youth, his lust for her is instantly rekindled. He abandons Halo only to be soon rejected by Floss. Colossus – an eight hundred page book he had written under the influence of the several literary fashions of the day and completely disregarding Halo’s advice – turns out a commercial failure and, what is more, a work of which he himself feels the inauthenticity. He represses as he can his feeling of guilt towards Halo, but the thought of her persists as a torment. Like his hero Faust, Vance is an intellectual who pays a heavy price for his seduction and abandonment of a woman in terms of forfeiting of inner life, of aesthetic, intellectual and, by implication, also erotic stimulation. His remorse towards Halo coexists beside his complex feelings towards Floss: a mixture of physical desire and spiritual
loathing. It will be useful at this point to spend a few words to underline the contrasting characterization of these two women.

Halo Spear and Floss Delaney represent in the novel the antithesis of amor sacro e amor profano. Floss is a more modern version of Undine Spragg, in the sense that she has thrown away even the appearances of morality and does not even feel the need to marry the men she uses for her social climbing—until she finds one who, with an aristocratic title, gives her the opportunity to dazzle society. She has a remarkable sexual appetite and is absolutely free in her sexual behaviour and unashamedly cruel; she has different lovers at the same time (she starts her career having simultaneous liaisons with Vance and his grandfather) and dumps them without the least warning. She makes no mystery that she is, first and uppermost, a business woman: unlike Undine, she has a talent for making money, not only for spending it, and, as the times have changed, she can make her fortune in the same way men have always done it, with the additional advantage of being able to use sex as a means to enslave them. “She had held the socially ambitious Shuntses through the boy’s letters; she had forced them to buy up her land at her own price through their dread lest the heir to their millions should marry her. By this simple expedient she had attained fortune and liberty at a stroke” (GA, 405).

Halo is Vance’s friend and companion, his teacher and fellow-student, his severest literary critic and his inspirator, his mentor in the discovery of Western culture. She is a good judge of literary value but can only exercise her talents vicariously, as nymph Egeria first of her husband, the editor Lewis Tarrant, and then of Vance Weston, the creative writer. In our time she would be a successful career woman; in Wharton’s novel she can only achieve independence thanks to an inheritance. She is a passionately idealistic woman, incapable of trading sex for power and totally governed by her love for Vance: she elopes with him when he needs her even though she knows that this will make her divorce proceedings more difficult; she refuses the divorce when her husband offers it to her because Vance would then feel in duty bound to marry her and would thus lose the freedom he needs; and only after Vance has left her she implores her husband to divorce her, even though Tarrant has offered her to take her back and love the child as if it were his. In her desire to stand on her feet and be a lone single mother she is also, in a way different from Floss’s, a modern female figure.

Torn between these two women, Vance finds refuge in the solitude of the mountains, determined to learn how to be himself, “solely and totally himself, not tangled up in the old deadly nets of passion and emotion” (GA, 414). The contact with nature, physical exercise and
solitude have a healing effect both on his nerves and on his spirit, and he feels again the urge to write. He feels “nearer than ever before to the inner sources of inspiration” and his new book starts shaping itself “in a mood of deep spiritual ardour such as his restless intelligence had never before attained” (GA, 416).

For the first time he finds himself remembering and comprehending his grandmother’s last words: “Maybe we haven’t made enough of pain —”. And, by chance, he starts reading a book that had belonged to her, the Confessions of St. Augustine. The two combined messages — that of the dead woman who had loved him, and of a man who had also yearned for chastity and self-control — have a potent and illuminating effect on him: they clarify for him the meaning of the stage he has reached, which consists in the moment of passage from youth to maturity, from the tumult of experiment to the calm of experience: “The food of the full-grown — of the full-grown! That was the key to his grandmother’s last words. ‘Become a man and thou shalt feed on Me’ was the message of experience to the soul; and what was youth but the Land of Unlikeness?” (GA, 418)

This is again a moment when Vance can feel and say that his apprenticeship days are over. What is certain is that the novel presents this moment as a significant turning-point in the story of the hero, although not necessarily the final stage of his development. His sojourn in the mountains is presented as a spiritual regeneration, and this is highlighted by the symbolism of the landscape and of the turn of the seasons. In the winter Vance rambles out in a storm, loses his way in the night and falls seriously ill; he recovers from his unconscious, feverish state at the first intimations of spring. He dies to be re-born, he goes to sleep to wake up again and look out “with eyes cleansed by solitude on a new world” and feeling at last “ready to taste of the food of the full-grown, however bitter to the lips it might be” (GA, 419). He has learnt to accept that sorrow, defeat, loss and pain are part of life, and can be survived and transmuted into something valuable and endurable. He leaves behind youth as a phase in which to explore countless roles and imagine countless futures, as a time of boundless possibility and continuous experimentation. Perhaps it is just in his desire to grow up, to come down from the mountains and grapple with life, “to fly from his shielded solitude and go down again among the lion-tamers” (GA, 421) that Vance proves that he is a true artist and not a dilettante.

When he leaves the camp on Lake Belair – the ‘Camp of Hope’ – Vance finds that he has nowhere to go: his grandmother’s death has severed any residual link with Euphoria and his family of origin, and to Halo he does not want to go yet because he feels that he cannot yet
be of any help to her. Once again, he feels attracted to The Willows, whose picture “seemed to close the chapter of his youth” (GA, 426). Only by chance therefore he finds Halo preparing the house to receive her and their child. He goes back to her but still feels ‘like a child who has just started to walk’ and tells her so. Thus, having definitely lost her role of mentor, Halo regains a new one in Vance’s life as mother to him and to his child. This is not unexpected because throughout the novel it has been made clear that, besides being an intellectual, Halo is also an extraordinary home-maker, and that her love for Vance has more than a trace of maternal solicitude. Elizabeth Ammons has seen in Halo's fate – a fate she shares with other female characters in Wharton post-war fiction – a reactionary endorsement of motherhood which sacrifices women's fulfilment to the role of preservers of civilization (Ammons, 1980).

To me Halo's motherhood simply appears as a physical embodiment of Vance's mystical "descent into the womb" in search of 'the Mothers'. There is a new sacralility in her gestures and worship in Vance's attitude in the final scene of The Gods Arrive:

With a kind of tranquil gravity she lifted up her arms in the ancient attitude of prayer.
For a moment his brow kept its deep furrows of bewilderment; then he gave a start and went up to her with illuminated eyes.
"You see we belong to each other after all," she said; but as her arms sank about his neck he bent his head and put his lips to a fold of her loose dress.

The conclusion of Wharton's Künstlerroman offers therefore no definitive statement: this is probably not his final stage of maturation. New intellectual adventures are before him – he is planning a new book – and Halo is carrying their child. Still, a new self has already been born out of the numerous experiences Vance has gone through. He has achieved the necessary cultural implements of his chosen craft and a moral anchorage in his commitment to his work, in the obscure but powerful feeling that “something precise and productive must come out of each step in his life” (GA, 415). His comprehension of the culture of the Past has given him the sense of 'where he comes from' and his yet unborn child is giving him a future. The Willows is not any longer the emblem of 'the Past' but is full of the aching memories of his own, personal past: his intellectual discoveries, his love for Laura Lou, Halo’s companionship, their friendship, their love, their discovery of his vocation, his first book, his self-doubts, struggles, despair; and now the house is going to be their home and the birthplace of their child. He himself is now a link in the chain connecting Past and Future and has situated himself in time and space. His personal “descent to the Mothers” has brought forth acceptance of continuity and
generativity and commitment to art and to life. In ways that are constantly reminiscent of the German Bildungsroman, the psychological growth as depicted in *The Gods Arrive* is one that is inseparable from an intense reflectivity on philosophical and aesthetic matters.
Chapter Two

A comparative reading of Wharton’s *The Valley of Decision* and Schiller’s *Der Geisterseher.*

Hitherto I have been concerned to suggest that there is a measure of affinity between Edith Wharton’s fiction and the concerns (both thematic and stylistic) of the German Bildungsroman tradition. In this chapter, by contrast, I wish to explore the similarity between a particular text by Edith Wharton and a particular text by a German writer; moreover, what is at issue here is less an overlap of general outlook and creative disposition than a quite specific – and, in my view, striking – resemblance of theme, character and plot.

*Der Geisterseher,* Friedrich Schiller’s only prose-work, was published in instalments between 1786 and 1789 in *Neue Thalia,* the journal Schiller had founded. Although it found great favour with readers, the romance remained unfinished because of the growing lack of interest its author came to feel towards it. In his letters to his friend Körner, Schiller repeatedly states that he had undertaken the writing of this work not because he felt a genuine interest in his subject, but merely in order to satisfy the prevailing taste for Gothic literature.

*Der Geisterseher* is the history of the corruption of a soul, a corruption deliberately caused by means of a complex intrigue. The protagonist is Prinz von **, a member of the royal family of one of the little principalities into which eighteenth century Germany was fragmented. The king’s son and an uncle precede the prince in the line of succession to the throne so that “als der dritte Prinz seines Hauses hatte er keine wahrscheinliche Aussicht zur Regierung” (78). A sudden *coup de théâtre* eliminates the heir presumptive, so that “ein Oheim unsers Prinzen, gleichfalls ohne Erben und ohne Aussicht, welche zu bekommen, stand jetzt allein noch zwischen diesem und dem Throne” (81).

The second part of *Der Geisterseher,* which Schiller never wrote, would have shown how the prince, by now completely corrupted, would have had recourse to murder to eliminate the last obstacle between himself and the throne.

In a similar way, at the beginning of *The Valley of Decision,* the protagonist Odo Valsecca is third in the line of succession of the dukes of Pianura, an imaginary little principality in central Italy. The reigning duke is his cousin. The duke’s heirs are his son Ferrante, a sickly child, and the Marquess of Cerveno, another cousin. Odo, like the prince,
experiences an unforeseen change of fortune: Cerveno’s sudden death leaves “but one life, that of the sickly ducal infant, between Odo and the succession to the throne of Pianura” (VD, I, 73).

There is similarity not only between external circumstances but also between the characters of Odo and the Prince. Even as a child Odo shows a tendency to lead a dreamlike existence out of touch with reality. The “world of untroubled beauty” (VD, I, 42) that, as a child, he had perceived in the faded frescoes of the castle of Donnaz is a nostalgic memory to which “[his] fancy always turned” and which allows him to evade an increasingly repugnant and incomprehensible world. Similarly, the narrator of Geisterseher says of the prince: “Mitten in einem geräuschvollen Gewühle von Menschen ging er einsam; in seine Phantasienwelt verschlossen, war er sehr oft ein Fremdling in der wirklichen” (78).

Moreover, Odo is an easily influenced person, a chameleon who moulds his behaviour and ideas on those of some stronger person. His stands are always determined by external agencies, because he needs to clash his views with somebody else’s in order to understand what he really feels and wants. Of the Prince the narrator says, simply but acutely: “Niemand war mehr dazu geboren, sich beherrschen zu lassen, ohne schwach zu sein. Dabei war er unerschrocken und zuverlässig, sobald er einmal gewonnen war, und besaß gleich großen Mut, ein erkanntes Vorurteil zu bekämpfen und für ein anderes zu sterben” (78).

These two characters also have in common a neglected education. Odo’s studies only start when he enters the Military Academy in Turin: he then reads the philosophes and Rousseau and associates with the liberal group meeting at Professor Vivaldi’s. As he is simultaneously under the influence of his own, extremely reactionary environment, and as he lacks a good general culture that could mediate among these contrasting influences, his mind becomes totally confused and he experiences “that sense of bewilderment, of inability to classify the phenomena of life, that is one of the keenest trials of inexperience” (VD, I, 119).

The prince is a self-taught person, painfully conscious of the deficiency of his education, and has diligently tried to remedy it; but he cannot escape the consequences of his initial lack of guidance and intellectual discipline: “Alle Kenntnisse, die er nachher schöpfte, vermehrten nur die Verwirrung seiner Begriffe, weil sie auf keinen festen Grund gebaut waren” (79).

In both characters this lack of culture prepares the ground for religious superstition; the bigotry of the environment in which they grow up leaves indelible traces on their minds. There are remarkable similarities between the ways their religious upbringing is described in the two
books. For example, in both books it is stressed that it is with the full approval of their parents that the two children are subjected to a repressive educational system. Of Odo’s childhood the narrator says: “Under the instruction of the Countess’s director the boy’s conscience was enervated by the casuistries of Liguorianism and his devotion dulled by the imposition of interminable ‘pious practices’” (VD, I, 111). Similarly, in the prince’s case: “Alle Lebhaftigkeit des Knaben in einem dumpfen Geisteszwange zu ersticken, war das zuverlässigste Mittel, sich der höchsten Zufriedenheit der fürstlichen Eltern zu versichern” (142).

Both children undergo a process of continual spiritual coercion aimed at stifling their juvenile instincts. They both develop a superstitious terror of the Divinity that they will try in vain to shed as adults. Odo

trembled in God’s presence almost as much as in his grandfather’s, and with the same despair of discovering what course of action was most likely to call down the impending wrath. [...] His confessions tortured him and the penances which the chaplain inflicted abased without reforming his spirit (VD, I, 43).

Side by side with this we may place the following extract from Geisterseher:

Sein Gott war ein Schreckbild, ein strafendes Wesen; seine Gottesverehrung knechtisches Zittern oder blinde, alle Kraft und Kühnheit erstickende Ergebung. Alle seinen kindischen und jugendlichen Neigungen, denen ein derber Körper und eine blühende Gesundheit um so kraftvollere Explosionen gab, stand die Religion im Wege (142).

So, although both Odo and the Prince are fanatically religious as adolescents – the prince, says the narrator, had been a “religiöser Schwarmer”; Odo had wanted to become a monk – both later go through a phase of indifference and scepticism.

Another interesting similarity is the following: the first narrator, Count von O***, says of the prince that “Religiöse Melancholie war eine Erbkrankheit in seiner Familie” (142); similarly, religious mania is also the form under which spiritual inertia manifests itself among the Valseccas, and of which Odo himself becomes a conscious victim after Fulvia’s death. However, while Schiller stresses the importance environmental influences have in fostering this tendency in the child (“die Erziehung, welche man ihm und seinen Brüdern geben ließ, war dieser Disposition angemessen”), Wharton has, as we have seen, a more naturalistic, genetico-deterministic point of view on the subject, and describes Odo’s inclination towards metaphysics as “but another form of the fatal lethargy that hung upon his race” (VD, II, 298).
Notwithstanding the sceptical phase following this period of youthful religious enthusiasm, both Odo and the prince will end back in the arms of Holy Mother Church, and the events that put them on the path to Rome are surprisingly similar in the two romances. Der Geisterseher is the story of the plot hatched by a mysterious secret society to corrupt the prince and induce him to convert to catholicism. The threads of the plot are firmly held by a singular personage endowed with extraordinary powers of psychological penetration that allow him to perceive every nuance of the character of his victim and to take advantage of his every weakness to push him inexorably towards the appointed goal. In order to actuate the plan this uncanny character, who is also endowed with great magnetism, appears under various disguises: first as the mysterious fortune-teller who, dressed as an Armenian, approaches the prince in St. Mark’s square to inform him of the death of his cousin; then as the Russian officer who joins the prince’s retinue during a trip on the Brenta; then as the officer of the Inquisition who interrupts the séance and unmasks as a charlatan the Sicilian conjuror. Later, in the tale of the Sicilian, this Unknown is presented as a Being endowed with supernatural powers and immortality; in the tale of the Marquess of Civitella he appears, more enigmatic than ever, as participant in a silent love scene. And in the end he appears in his real identity of Jesuit and spiritual guide of the prince after his conversion.

There is no doubt that Schiller, on writing his romance, was influenced by recent events in the duchy of Wurttemberg, where several members of the family of the heir presumptive had either converted to Catholicism or manifested interest in occultism. These circumstances had caused great sensation and engendered the fear that behind them was a Jesuit plot aimed at compromising the protestant succession to the throne. The potency of the Society of Jesus continued even after Pope Clemens XIV had decreed its suppression in 1773. It was even rumoured that the sudden death of this Pontiff in 1774 was the revenge of the Jesuits – a detail mentioned both in The Valley of Decision and in Geisterseher. Though expelled from many European States, the Jesuits still preserved great influence among the aristocracy and in the Courts of Europe. As Wharton says in The Valley, they had invented a religion whose complex rituals were particularly addressed to the aristocracy, of whom, moreover, “they represented the spirit of religious and political conservatism against which invisible forces were already felt to be moving” (VD, I, 110). They continued to be regarded as an occult power branching everywhere and perpetually plotting.
The Jesuits were very good teachers: their educational system produced men of great intellect and culture. Such is, in *The Valley of Decision*, the abate de Crucis. Like the 'Armenian' in *Geisterseher*, he is a complex, mysterious, multiform character. He appears for the first time during the séance at the court of Pianura, when he plays exactly the same role as the Armenian in the analogous séance that has such importance in *Der Geisterseher*. Like the Armenian, on this occasion de Crucis appears as an officer of the Inquisition who has been charged with unmasking the German adventurer, soi disant conjuror and healer. Odo is immediately struck by the voice and the appearance of de Crucis, by the superhuman detachment he exudes, by "a singular distinction that seemed to set the man himself above the coil of passions in which his action was involved" (VD, II, 4). Even in these characteristics there is a strong similarity with the figure of the Armenian, of whom count von O*** says that "nichts war übrig als der stille, durchdringende Blick eines vollendeten Menschenkenners" (87).

Two years later, at the beginning of Book III of *The Valley*, de Crucis reappears in Naples in the guise of a cognoscente belonging to Sir William Hamilton's circle, and again Odo feels immediately attracted to him. De Crucis's origins are ambiguous and cosmopolitan like the Armenian's: although born in Austria, he is "of mingled English and Florentine parentage". He admits having been a Jesuit himself and feeling still faithful to the Society. Now secretary to the Papal Nuncio, he introduces Odo into the Roman aristocracy and then disappears. Later Odo hears that he has been appointed tutor to the heir of Pianura (VD, II, 59). It is de Crucis who brings Odo the news that the duke has appointed Odo regent, and makes him understand that the appointment is the result of the great influence he, the abate, has come to have on the duke. This announcement is accompanied by a further evidence of de Crucis's omniscience and omnipotence: he knows that Odo is taking Fulvia to safety in Switzerland, and that not even his hopes for the succession to the throne would make him leave her in danger; he has therefore obtained from the pope a safeconduct for the girl, which leaves Odo free to go back to Pianura and take on his new duties.

I now turn to examining the treatment of the supernatural in *The Valley of Decision* and in *Der Geisterseher*. The supernatural is one of the most important themes of fantastic literature, whose generative principle is the collapse of the boundaries between spirit and matter, subject and object, consciousness and physical world (Todorov, 1981 [1970]). In *The Valley* the supernatural is present mainly in the episode of the séance in Book II, Chapter XV. It is elaborately described and is in perfect conformity with the rituals of the occult sciences as we
find them described in so many gothic romances. The conjuror, known as Count Heiligenstern, wears a long black robe and a mitre and holds a wand. He professes to be an adept of the ancient Egyptian religion. We have the entire paraphernalia of a conjuration: a room wrapped in darkness, black silken drapery, cabalistic signs, tripods and braziers breathing vapours produced by mysterious substances, conjurations in Greek, Latin and Hebrew, the crystal globe in which only a pure soul, initiated to the mysteries of Isis, can read the future. Suddenly, a group of ecclesiastics accompanied by de Crucis burst into the room, and the abate reveals that the Holy Office has charged him with enquiring into the activities of a subversive sect which has been active in the German principalities. He has found out that one of the most famous adepts of this sect of atheists and libertines - the self appointed Count Heiligenstern, who is in reality a mere German adventurer of humble origins - has founded a lodge in Pianura. De Crucis has come to unmask him and hand him to the Inquisition.

In Der Geisterseher a séance takes place, in the presence of the Prince, of his retinue and of a group of fellow travellers, among whom is a mysterious Russian officer. The conjuration is suddenly interrupted by the officers of the Inquisition, of which the Russian proves to be an agent. It is he who has denounced the supposed magician, who turns out to be a Sicilian adventurer whose activities had been known to the Inquisition for some time. At this moment, by observing him closely, the prince and his friends suddenly recognise in the Russian the puzzling Armenian: “Der Prinz erkannte in ihm ohne Mühe die Züge seines Armeniers wieder [...] Lautlos und unbeweglich starnten wir dieses geheimnisvolle Wesen an, das uns mit einem Blicke stiller Gewalt und Grösse durchschaute” (97).

The similarity between these two scenes is so striking that one would almost hypothesise a derivative relationship. At any rate, here Wharton is certainly making lavish use of important elements of the Gothic romance: occult sciences, the Tribunal of the Inquisition, and the character of the charlatan.

Both Schiller and Wharton seem to have modelled their charlatans on the historical figure of Cagliostro. This is more evident in Der Geisterseher, where the magician is a Sicilian adventurer, while Wharton’s impostor is of German origin. It is however worth remembering that it was in Germany, in Mitau in Kurland, that Cagliostro’s career had begun: here in 1779 he had founded a masonic lodge of Egyptian rite, where alchemy and occult sciences were taught. It was especially among the nobility that Cagliostro, passing himself off as cabalist, magician and thaumaturge, had proselytised. Unlike the other masonic lodges, Cagliostro’s was open also
to women, and even the duke's sister, Elisa von der Recke, belonged to it. This lady subsequently wrote a venomous account of Cagliostro's activities in Mitau which caused much sensation and was obviously known not only to Schiller but also to Goethe, who always had a special interest in the soi disant Count. (Cagliostro also inspired the figure of the charlatan Count Rostro in Goethe's comedy Der Groß-Cophta, written and performed in 1791, which also contains an "Erscheinungsszene").

It is interesting to note the different use Schiller and Wharton make of the supernatural. Schiller, staunch follower of the Enlightenment movement, shows that the series of extraordinary events that the prince witnesses is a mere imposture aiming at undermining, together with his faith in the supernatural, the entire system of his moral and religious beliefs. The charlatan's tricks are therefore thoroughly explained in a rational way. Wharton, by contrast, describes events that are genuinely outside the natural order of things: the images little prince Ferrante glimpses in the crystal sphere are a foreboding of his impending death, which will actually come to pass. And the other scene the child sees in the sphere — the beautiful naked woman appearing suddenly out of the picture of the Last Judgement in front of which his father habitually prostrates himself — also refers to real occurrences: as Odo finds out years later, the real object of the duke's worship was a splendid Giorgione Venus hidden behind the gloomy representation of the torments of the damned. The child's ingenuous description of the vision unmasks the real nature of the duke's religious practice; and, as there is no other way the child could have known his father's secret, we must conclude that the crystal sphere does have magic properties.

We encounter another supernatural event in The Valley: when Odo and the duchess meet in the hunting-lodge, they both catch sudden sight in the mirror of Fulvia's face. It would be tempting to interpret this episode in psychological terms, and to think that her sudden appearance at the moment when her lover is courting another woman is but the material representation of a repressed memory that floats back to the surface of Odo's consciousness. However, this interpretation is undermined by the fact that the duchess too sees the face: hence we have to accept that this apparition is a supernatural event, not a message from the Unconscious; a foreboding of a future occurrence (Odo and Fulvia will, years later, meet at the lodge and become lovers), not the symbol of a psychological conflict. Unlike what would be the case in, for example, Mrs. Radcliffe's romances, in The Valley supernatural incidents remain unexplained in rational terms.
Another point of contact between the plots of the two romances is the role of Fulvia Vivaldi in The Valley and of the supposed Greek woman in Der Geisterseher. In the first place, there is a curious analogy between the circumstances in which Odo meets Fulvia again and those in which the prince sees the Greek woman for the first time. In both cases, the meeting takes place in Venice, on the Giudecca Island and in a religious context. The prince finds the Greek woman — whose heavenly beauty strongly reminds him of a Madonna which had previously profoundly struck him — deeply immersed in prayer. The Greek woman is presented as very pious; and Fulvia is a nun whom Odo helps escape from the convent where she had been shut up against her will.

Moreover, both women end by becoming embroiled in and falling victim to the plot aimed at bringing Odo and the Prince to the Catholic Church. Fulvia dies during a popular uprising instigated by the clergy, who feel threatened by the liberal reforms Odo has promoted under her influence. The Greek woman dies of poison in mysterious circumstances. Her figure remains ambiguous in Schiller's romance, not only because the work is unfinished, but also because Schiller was uncertain whether to make of this character a mystifier who willingly participates in the intrigue in order to contrive the Prince's conversion, or whether to present her as a woman in love, who becomes an unconscious instrument of the Armenian and is in the end sacrificed to the success of the plot. At any rate, the death of his beloved is for the prince undoubtedly the final push towards conversion.

Similarly, Fulvia's death kills in Odo every trace of the liberal ferment and instantly transforms into hatred the benevolent feelings he had until then entertained towards his people. He becomes a reactionary and withdraws the Constitution. During the last years of his reign he suppresses any liberal ferment and succumbs to the hereditary predisposition towards religious mysticism. He now falls completely under the influence of de Crucis, which Fulvia had fought against, and of "the beliefs and traditions of his caste" (VD, II, 308).

The Valley and Der Geisterseher both make use of a technical device which is typical of fantastic literature: the tale within the tale. Der Geisterseher is essentially a memorial written by Count von O***. It relates the events that led Prince von ** to conversion and to murder. This narrative contains two second level narratives: the tale of the Sicilian, and the letters of the Baron von F**, written to the Count and informing him of the Prince's whereabouts. The Count's account, therefore, incorporates ten letters written by the Baron. The seventh letter contains the tale of the Marquess of Civitella (third level narrative). Then the Count intervenes
again and explains that the Baron’s letters had been intercepted and that for three months he had not heard from his friends in Venice, until he had received an alarming message from the Baron mentioning the financial difficulties and the intrigues in which the prince had become entangled. The count had immediately gone to Venice. Here a brief message from the Baron informed him of the Prince’s conversion. “An dem Bettes meines Freundes erfuhr ich endlich die unerhörtte Geschichte” (206): with these words, introducing a flashback (or ‘analeptic’, in Genette’s terminology) narrative, *Der Geisterseher* ends. Unfortunately Schiller never completed it.

We find various narrative levels also in *The Valley of Decision*. The ‘History of Mirandolina’, in Book II, Chapter VIII, is an example of tale within the tale, and so is the *Unpublished fragment from the diary of Mr. Arthur Young* in Book IV, Chapter V, which exposes the political and economic situation of the duchy of Pianura six years after Odo’s accession under the form of a memorial by an imaginary English traveller.

Both *The Valley of Decision* and *Der Geisterseher* belong to the tradition of fantastic literature. In both cases Schiller and Wharton employ the romance not only to appeal to popular taste but also for certain didactic purposes. However, their aims differ in an important respect. Schiller, in conformity with the principles of the Enlightenment, wanted to show in *Der Geisterseher* the disastrous consequences of an aberrant pedagogical system, the moral degeneration which results from the imposition of a bigoted and repressive religiosity, and the mental unbalance caused in man by the artificial separation of biological and psychological imperatives. His romance represents therefore his first attempt at formulating a moral philosophy not based on religion. He consequently offers subtle and penetrating reflections on the nature and tendencies of the Prince and on the impact of the pedagogical methods which had been applied in his upbringing. Moreover, skilfully employed dialogue reveals the slow psychological changes that are taking place in the Prince.

Wharton, by contrast, is not interested in Odo as an individual character. She herself wrote to a friend: ‘I meant the book to be a picture of a social phase, not of two people’s individual history, & Fulvia & Odo are just two little bits of looking-glass in which fragments of the great panorama are reflected’ (Lewis & Lewis, 1988, 57). She did not intend to create individual figures, plausible in their motivations and in their development, but stereotypes embodying principles, mirrors of the contrasting ideologies of the time. Odo’s stands on political, social and economic questions are not organic elements of the narrative and of the
psychological growth of this character. Odo is a mere vehicle for Wharton’s thesis. Through him she conveys her criticism of the French Revolution, of the Enlightenment and of every liberal doctrine, which, to her, were merely destructive forces. The French philosophes, she says, had meant ‘to solve at a stroke the problems of a thousand years’ with the result that they had unleashed ‘all the repressed passions which civilization had sought, however imperfectly, to curb’ (VD, II, 300). The Valley of Decision shows Odo embracing de Crucis’s conviction that Christianity ‘‘has come nearer to solving the problem of men’s relations to each other than any system devised by themselves’’ (VD, II, 294), and that human nature cannot aspire to absolute individual freedom, but must accept that it can only realise itself within the boundaries of a stable, historically established society, of its ancestral traditions and consolidated culture. This fundamental scepticism of Wharton’s, which we see expressed for the first time in The Valley of Decision, will be a recurrent theme in the whole of her work; it will be particularly in evidence in the New York fiction, to which I now wish to turn.
Chapter Three

The New York fiction of Edith Wharton
and the Berlin novels of Theodor Fontane

Both Wharton and Fontane are often associated with the cities – New York and Berlin – which provide the setting for most of their novels. In this section I want to explore the two groups of novels in question. There are, in my view, striking affinities of theme and style between Wharton and Fontane. Both writers perceive the processes of social and cultural change by which the pre-eminence of the old families and upper classes is challenged by an emerging new order. Both writers are wonderfully attentive also to the shifts in mentality and psychology that articulate these processes of change. In narrative terms, both sets of novels work with modes of indirection and understatement, constantly relying on symbolic hints and intimations rather than on explicit confrontations and spectacular happenings.

3.1. The two cities

Among the great European capitals Berlin stands out as unusual because of its relatively short history. Although founded in the thirteenth century, it remained for centuries a remote and obscure town. The turning point in its history came in 1685: following the revocation by Louis XIV of the Edict of Nantes, a great many French Protestants were forced to abandon their country to ensure their safety and preserve their freedom of worship. On 29 October the Great Elector of Brandenburg Frederick Wilhelm issued the Edict of Potsdam, whereby he offered these proscribed Huguenots full protection and political asylum in his domains. The economic and cultural life of the country received a powerful and fresh impetus from the arrival of the refugees. Many settled in Berlin, and this started the fortunes of the city. Their industry and their skill, in particular in silk-weaving, made an important contribution to the economy of the city. Both the nobility and the bourgeoisie, the army and the civil service profited from their presence. They formed a populous colony, numbering in 1700 a fifth of the total population (20,000 people) of the city. Although this proportion subsequently sank as the city grew, 'die Kolonie' retained its prestige and an original identity even in the nineteenth century.
Nevertheless, their integration continued unabated: “In zweiter und dritter Generation waren manche Söhne und Töchter einstiger Franzosen bereits berlinischer als die Berliner. Obwohl die Muttersprache ihnen nicht verlorengegangen war und ihre Kinder darin unterrichtet wurden, beherrschten sie die Mundart, die zwischen Spittelmarkt und Spandau, Hasenheide und Halensee gesprochen wurde, in einem Maße, daß Fremde darüber staunten” (Roch, 1961, 10–11). Their influence seems to have been felt in various fields: economy, manners and customs, language and culture, and, last but not least, cuisine (apparently, it is due to them that fresh vegetables were incorporated into the staple diet of the Berliner!). When Napoleon revoked the decree of expulsion in 1806, very few among the descendants of the refugees went back to France.

The ‘small town’ beginnings of Berlin are reflected in the traditions and manners of its inhabitants, in that “mixture of provincial proud and drastic metropolitan wit” (Garland, 1980, 3) characteristic of many figures in Fontane’s novels. Notwithstanding its great university, Berlin also suffered from a certain cultural provincialism. “In the eighty years between the Romantic movement in the first decade of the century and the coming of Naturalism in the last, it lacked, except at the rarefied level of Hegelian philosophy, any special cultural distinction” (Garland, 1980, 3).

The first Fontane, or Fontaine, as the family were called at the time, arrived in Germany in 1690, enrolled at the Faculty of Medicine, became secretary to Queen Louise and married within the French colony. He was the grandfather of Theodor Fontane, whose mother, Emilie Labry, was also of Huguenot descent.

Wharton too descended from the pertinacious stock of French Protestants. One of her great-great-grandfathers was a Huguenot come to America from the French Palatinate to take part in the founding of New Rochelle. On both sides her ancestry went back for three hundred years, and her ancestors on both sides identified their fortunes with those of New York since almost their arrival in the New World.

First settled by Dutch colonists as New Amsterdam, New York was taken over and renamed by the British in 1664. Unlike the political and religious reformers who settled in Massachusetts, New York colonists were bourgeois who were, as Wharton says in A Backward Glance, her autobiography, “more interested in making money and acquiring property than in Predestination and Witch-burning.”

Colonial New York was mostly composed of merchants and bankers; my own ancestors were mainly merchant ship-owners. [...] My mother, who had
a hearty contempt for the tardy discovery of aristocratic genealogies, always said that Old New York was composed of Dutch and British middle-class families, and that only four or five could show a pedigree leading back to the aristocracy of their ancestral country. These, if I remember rightly, were the Duers, the Livingstons, the Rutherfurds, the de Grasses and the Van Rensselars (descendants, these latter, of the original Dutch "Patroon"). (1934, 9–10)

Three hundred years of strict adherence to the tradition of European culture and of observance of its standards of conduct, manners and education would transform this small group of bourgeois colonials and their republican descendants into an aristocratic elite, a separate, well defined group of families ('the Four Hundred') who felt umbilically linked to the Old World. They were merchants, bankers and lawyers, but in time they became largely a leisure class. By the time Wharton was born, they had lost any interest in money-making: "The group to which we belonged was composed of families to whom a middling prosperity had come usually by the rapid rise in value of inherited real estate, and none of whom, apparently, aspired to be more than moderately well-off" (1934, 56). Nothing was left of the pioneers' spirit. Their descendants were only interested in preserving the status quo and shrank from any kind of risk and innovation in economic as in social matters.

It was a small, provincial and culturally stagnant world, living in mortal fear of originality and unconventionality and it was therefore distrustful of authors, artists and all kinds of long-haired bohemians. Once the urge to acquire wealth disappeared, there were not many occupational outlets left for young men. They read law after college, but seldom practised it, and even when they joined a firm the contribution they gave was mainly due to the prestige of their family names. As 'gentlemen' they were not expected to acquire real knowledge or skill in any professional field. Some involvement in philanthropic work was admissible, but not the taking on of civic duties or political commitments. As far as entertainment was concerned, Wharton relates that in the evening her parents "went occasionally to the theatre, but never, as I remember, to a concert, or any kind of musical performance, until the Opera, then only sporadic, became an establishment entertainment [...] Their most frequent distraction was dining out or dinner giving" (1934, 57). "Art and music and literature were rather timorously avoided" (1934, 61) and the only admitted topics of conversation were food, wine, horses, and the planning of the long European travels old New Yorkers were perpetually engaged in.

Young people with the cultural interests of a Newland Archer (or of an Edith Wharton) could only cultivate them thanks to books imported from Europe in Winter and to the annual
long sojourns there during the Spring and Summer. When in New York they were barred from contacts with the people – artists, literary people, journalists, singers – who shared their interests, because these ‘bohemians’ were excluded from good society, and because there was no trace, in New York, of that laudable institution, the literary café, which figured so prominently in the cultural life of Berlin.

These were one of the many innovations due to immigrants. “Daß auch in Berlin endlich ein Paar Literatencafés entstanden, Lesekonditoreien, Treffpunkte für junge Lyriker, Schauspieler, Journalisten, unzufriedene Bürger und informationshungrige Intellektuelle aller Schattierungen, ist in erster Linie drei Schweisern zu verdanken: Stehely, Josty, Sparpagnani” (Roch, 1961, 36). Fontane loved their atmosphere and frequented them assiduously: “Er war nicht nur ein Wanderer durch die Mark, sondern auch ein Wanderer durch die Berliner Cafés” (44). The exchange of information and ideas was not, however, completely free: if in New York there was social censorship, in Berlin there were the sharp eyes of the Prussian police. If in New York attending ‘bohemian’ circles could mean social ostracism, in Berlin “ein einziges unbedachtes Wort konnte Verhaftung und Gefängnis zur Folge haben” (37).

3.2. Colonial antecedents of Wharton and Fontane.

Wharton had at first a rebellious attitude towards the New York of her parents. Even her literary ambitions were a challenge to a world which “stood in nervous dread” of writers who were not “gentlemen”. She started off her literary career with a book, The Decoration of Houses, that contained a radical criticism of Old New York “taste” in the matter of interior design, and, implicitly, of its entire way of life. She articulated her objections very clearly in her subsequent books, both of essays and of fiction. She finally rejected New York and America altogether when she decided that Europe was more congenial to her interests and her vision of the world. Nevertheless, she always maintained an ambivalent attitude towards Old New York and at the end of her life considered it with a sort of wistful nostalgia and with a new appreciation of its merits. Those colonial Americans had been, after all, the heirs of the old tradition of European culture to which she herself had remained faithful. Towards them she therefore felt an affinity that she could not have felt towards her contemporary America, which had completely rejected that tradition. Moreover, in the rampant materialism of “The Gilded Age”, she remembered that the social organization which had once seemed to her so inadequate
had at least upheld “two standards of importance in any community, that of education and good manners, and of scrupulous probity in business and private affairs” (1934, 21).

Although Fontane did not have much interest in or knowledge of French literature (he admired English literature much more, and of the French only appreciated Zola and the Goncourt brothers) and had neglected the practice of the French language, he preserved a strong sense of continuity with the culture of his forebears. After all, his French roots were many and deep:


This multicultural identity may have served to foster in these two writers a supranational *forma mentis* and an open-minded attitude towards the cultures of countries other than their native ones. It added a different quality to their observation of the social scene and their understanding of the historical events they witnessed, because, when describing the American scene or the German scene, they had at the same time the knowledge of the insider and the detachment of a non-committed observer.

### 3.3. The New York novels.

Wharton’s fiction gives a picture of the social changes which took place in America in the fifty years between the Civil War and the 1930s. The series of her studies of New York social life begins with *The House of Mirth* (1905) and includes *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), *The Custom of the Country* (1913), *The Age of Innocence* (1920), *The Glimpses of the Moon* (1922), the four
novellas in the collection *Old New York* (1924), *The Mother's Recompense* (1925), *Twilight Sleep* (1927), *The Children* (1928), *Hudson River Bracketed* (1929), *The Gods Arrive* (1932), and also, at least as regards Book I, her posthumous and unfinished novel *The Buccaneers* (1938) — that is to say, most of Wharton’s long fiction. (As far as her short-stories are concerned, I know only two that deal explicitly with the theme of Old New York: ‘Autres Temps’ and ‘After Holbein’, whilst ‘The Long Run’ and ‘Roman Fever’ contain passing references to it).

The order of publication of these novels does not correspond with the chronological order of their contents, according to which they should be listed as follows:


Wharton’s fiction covers therefore the crucial years from the Reconstruction to the New Deal. And yet, the political events of these decades go completely unrecorded in her novels, and the only politician she mentions is Theodore Roosevelt. A personal friend of Edith Wharton’s, who admired him greatly, he appears in *The Age of Innocence* as Newland Archer’s friend and the person who stimulates him into taking an interest in civic matters and even going into politics for a while.

The ‘Old New York’ described in *The Age of Innocence* and other works consists of the narrow geographic area within the boundaries of Washington Square, Central Park and Fifth Avenue. It is the citadel of the ‘Four Hundred’, the descendants of the first Dutch and English colonists who had established there a flourishing commercial centre and, through an intelligent investment of their profits into real estate, had provided their descendants with a large income.

This upper bourgeoisie led a sober and quiet life, without wastefulness or ostentation, banning novelty, fleeing the unpleasant, mistrusting all that was outside the norm and not consecrated by tradition. It was a society devoid of cultural interests and suspicious of intellectuals, who were marginalised and generally considered disreputable company. The only interest, outside business, was the typically anglosaxon enthusiasm for sport, in which women also shared. (Hence May Welland’s continuous practice of archery, tennis, climbing, swimming
in *The Age of Innocence*, and Bessy Westmore’s expert and obsessive horsemanship in *The Fruit of the Tree*).

Family was the foundation of this little society, whose entire life unfolded in the respect of traditional values. Individual happiness was ruthlessly sacrificed to the interests of the group. On the other hand, family was also a support: only the manifest approbation of the clan ensured social integration for the individual. Social rules were rigid and nearly ritualistic: all the important circumstances of human existence – birth, marriage, death – were accompanied by rites to which each member of the group must conform, under pain of falling into disfavour with the group or even of being ostracised. The ‘unpleasant’ – not dignified, not decent, embarrassing – was excluded with particular care. Human relationships of any kind – even intimate ones – were conducted with great delicacy, discretion and even reticence. Even between people bound by the strongest links there was little open communication, but only an understated dialogue presupposing a sharing of the same mental and behavioural codes.

This élite was determined stubbornly to resist any change and could prove remarkably compact and solid when a ‘strange body’ (like Countess Olenska in *The Age of Innocence*) had to be expelled, or ‘infiltrations’ had to be resisted: the little band of rich Middle West girls who in *The Buccaneers* invade New York hunting for a good match come to the conclusion that success is easier among the English aristocracy than among New York upper bourgeoisie. One is reminded of Professor Schmidt’s observation in *Frau Jenny Treibel*, “In eine Herzogsfamilie kann man allenfalls hineinkommen, in eine Bourgeoisfamilie nicht” (VII, 156).

But, notwithstanding their resistance, they too become slowly and sometimes unconsciously involved in the social change. Wharton sees the two wars – the Civil War and World War I – as the turning points in this process. The Civil War was the start of a feverish money-making in the whole nation. In the eighties both Wall Street and Park Avenue started feeling the repercussions: “The first changes came in the eighties, with the earliest detachment of big money-makers from the West, soon to be followed by the lords of Pittsburgh. But their infiltration did not greatly affect old manners and customs, since the dearest ambition of the newcomers was to assimilate the existing traditions. Social life, with us as in the rest of the world, went on with hardly perceptible changes till the war abruptly tore down the old framework” (1934, 6–7). “The catastrophe of 1914” represented the culmination of the upheavals that destroyed Old New York.
No social group could have escaped the massive social fluctuations taking place in America after the Civil War.

A predatory class of capitalists emerged as ultimate victors of the Civil War and the westering spirit of pioneers. The class that made and owned the machines was the class that set standards. It moved men into cities; it controlled working hours, pay, and living conditions; it dictated what crops could be grown and how they could be marketed; it even established a national code of ethics and new standards of culture. Charles Francis Adams said the postwar years had witnessed ‘some of the most remarkable examples of organised lawlessness under the forms of law, which mankind has yet had an opportunity to study’ (Hart, 1950, 158).

Mark Twain called this era “The Gilded Age”. But in the same year when The Gilded Age was published the country was afflicted by the first in a series of economic depressions. Jay Cooke’s great banking house crashed in the summer and the repercussions were felt also in the Eastern cities, where in the next four years banks and business houses crashed, people were driven out of jobs, wages were lowered and bread lines became longer and longer. In 1875, while Newland Archer agonised over his broken love-dream, New York’s prisons housed 250,000 homeless. Another financial crisis was to strike the nation in 1893. The effects of periodic depression were obviously not felt in the same way in all the strata of the population: simply, the rich grew richer while the poor grew poorer. “By 1896 seven-eighths of the nation’s wealth was in the hands of one-eighth of its people, of whom 1 per cent owned more than the other 99” (Hart, 1950, 180).

The crisis is only weakly felt in the Old New York described by Wharton, but an echo of it in The Age of Innocence is represented by the bankruptcy of Julius Beaufort which causes horror and panic in Newland Archer’s entourage and further wrecks Countess Olenska’s fortune. In The House of Mirth shoddy financial practice has become the rule and permeated morals as well, the drawing-rooms of Fifth Avenue are open to plutocrats with no pedigree and no manners, and even Jewish financiers like Simon Rosedale – previously held at bay by tacit Anti-Semitism – can aspire to be received in them.

In this period of rapid economic growth the nouveaux riches, who have made their fortunes in the far away towns of the West and the Mid West, invade New York ready to buy social recognition, status and admission into the upper class. In The Age of Innocence the process of erosion is still in its first stages, and the last chapter, which constitutes an epilogue set thirty years later than the main action, shows the positive aspects of the new world. The ugly
face of change is shown in novels such as *The Custom of the Country* and *The House of Mirth*. In the first one, Old New York is now a mere 'reservation' where a small group of 'aborigines' threatened with extinction continues to celebrate their tribal rites, a citadel under siege from huge hordes of invading barbarians. In the second, we see the new society resulting from the fusion of 'aborigines' and 'invaders', which is but a degradation of 'Old New York'.

The invaders seem to have brought no positive values. On the contrary, they have simply made manifest and more aggressive the materialism which, under the veneer of sobriety, distinction, dignity was the real foundation of the old élite, for whom, after all, just as for the parvenus, social prestige was based on the solidity of the bank account. And it was this common fund of materialism which made this fusion possible. The result is a world where, for example, the old family solidarity has been replaced by a kind of complicity. The acceptance of an individual on the part of his family group does not implicitly guarantee his worth but simply means that people are indifferent to standards of conduct. Whilst male infidelity was ill tolerated in Old New York, and families united to protect the wife, the children and the institution of marriage, in the new age infidelity only matters when it involves a substantial deviation of funds from the wife to the mistress. The hypocrisy of the old world succeeded at least in protecting, with the institution of family, its weakest members, the children. In the Gilded Age nobody feels any duty towards them. The total disintegration of family and social values, the loss of any sense of personal commitment and of cultural roots which represent a further stage of this degeneration are even more evident in the late New York novels. In *The Mother’s Recompense*, *The Children*, *The Glimpses of the Moon*, *Twilight Sleep*, *Hudson River Bracketed*, *The Gods Arrive*, set in the Twenties and Thirties, Wharton describes crowds of wealthy Americans who have completely lost a sense of self as well as a sense of belonging to any place or culture. They spend their lives oscillating between the Old and the New world, divorce and remarriage, bovine inertia and frantic and aimless activity. And amidst their trivial pursuits and busy emptiness they can find no time for their children, who are forced into premature adulthood while their parents indulge in a perpetual mental childishness. In *The Children* the little band of step-siblings – the result of various intricate marriages and re-marriages – group around the 13-year-old Judith who mothers them and swear never to separate, no matter what divorces their parents may be planning for the future. The young Nona Manford in *Twilight Sleep* struggles to keep some semblance of unity in her family, while her
father is completely absorbed in his affair with his daughter-in-law and her unaware mother divides her time between committee work and the pursuit of physical rejuvenation.

In the post-Civil War period the inferiority complex of the nouveaux riches manifested itself in the desire to possess culture through wealth and in the attempt to claim caste and distinction. Hordes of Americans very different from genteel New Yorkers of the Wharton or James type invaded Europe in pursuit of a smattering of ‘old’ culture, of new architectural styles for their mansions and – for the very rich – of aristocratic sons in law. There were glamorous international marriages every year from the seventies through the nineties. “The year 1895 marked the high point, with the weddings of Consuelo Vanderbilt to the Duke of Marlborough, of Anna Gould to Count Boni de Castellane, of Mary Leiter to the Marquess Curzon of Kedleston, and of Pauline Whitney to Sir Almeric Paget, Baron Queenborough” (Hart, 1950, 181–2). These transatlantic unions are reflected in Wharton’s novels. Among others, Undine Spragg in *The Custom of the Country* marries the French Count des Chelles, Floss Delaney in *Hudson River Bracketed* becomes Duchess of Spartivento and, in particular, the quartet of girls in *The Buccaneers* all land titled English husbands. In this novel, set almost entirely in England and resuming Henry James’s ‘international theme’, the story of Nan St. George, who becomes Duchess of Tintagel, reminds one of the unhappy marriage of Consuelo, 9th Duchess of Marlborough.

Another way of purchasing gentility was the search for patrician ancestors. “In a brief decade men now moved from shirt-sleeves to coats of arms, aided by societies ostensibly called forth by the series of patriotic centennials that began in 1875. In 1890 alone, there came into being The Sons of the American Revolution, The Daughters of the American Revolution, and The Colonial Dames of America, all products of ancestor worship. That year also saw the creation of a colonial Order of the Crown for descendants of Charlemagne, and there was soon an Order of the Crown of America for those ostensibly related to other royalties” (Hart, 1950, 181). The country was simultaneously celebrating the birth of the Republic and of its democratic institutions, and trying to forget the humble origins of its citizens. A fictitious national past was being invented to meet the needs of intense social snobbery. The upper class was using the criteria of birth and long inherited wealth – which in the old world had served to define an aristocracy – in an effort to carve a niche for itself apart and above not only the millions of new proletarian immigrants, but also a too wide middle class: “The basic aristocratic criterion of descent could, however, be adapted to define a relatively large new upper-middle-
class elite. [...] Though the ostensible object was to distinguish native white and Protestant Americans from the mass of new immigrants, in fact their object was to establish an exclusive upper stratum among the white middle class” (Hobsbawm, 1983, 292).

Meanwhile, the majority of the population, not having enough money to make the Grand Tour, marry dukes or search for titled ancestors, consoled itself with escapist literature. The cult of sentimentalism and the need to find solace from the harsh reality of daily life fostered an interest in romantic stories set in distant, exotic places and in the remote past, and, as already mentioned, historical romance became the most popular literary genre in America between 1880 and 1910.

3.4. The changing role of women in the New York novels.

Wharton’s other most important theme – and it is inseparable from that of the evolution and degeneration of ‘Old New York’ – is that of the role of woman in American society. This is undoubtedly a central concern in Wharton’s fiction, and it is repeatedly dealt with in all its aspects not only in her novels but also, most interestingly, in her short fiction. We can refer to this issue as to the question of the ‘custom of the country’, borrowing the expression from the title of one of her novels (a title in its turn borrowed from the play by Fletcher and Massinger).

In her autobiography Wharton gives a crisp definition of the elements constituting life for the women of her mother’s generation: “Child-bearing was their task, fine needlework their recreation, being respected their privilege. Only in aristocratic society, and in the most sophisticated capitals of Europe, had they added to this repertory a good many private distractions” (1934, 16).

May Welland, in The Age of Innocence, is the epitome of femininity in Old New York, nurtured to embody and transmit the values and customs of that little social group. She is materially, intellectually and morally dependent and absolutely incapable of thinking autonomously. She has no real education and no experience of the world outside, but she does not feel this as a limitation, is perfectly contented with the life she leads within those extremely restricted boundaries and convinced that the same principles and social models she has been brought up with will do for the next generation. Sexually she is obviously immature: it is one of the ‘musts’ of Old New York that, at the moment of marriage, the bride should have everything to discover and the groom many wild oats to hide. Her awareness of her family responsibilities
and respect for the social values she has inherited give her an instinctive dignity, an innate sense of decorum and an unshakeable fidelity to the duties of her role: to her husband and children she is a tower of strength.

Bessy Langhope, in *The Fruit of the Tree*, is a debased version of the ‘child-woman’, in whom only selfish childishness remains. This version is destined for further degeneration in the figure of the flapper of the Roaring Twenties – the frivolous, superficial and utterly disengaged woman, frantically busy in pursuing her own interests and pleasures and convinced that she has freed herself from any social bond. Several flappers appear in Wharton’s late novels: all the women in *The Children*, Lilla Gates in *The Mother’s Recompense* and Lita Wyant in *Twilight Sleep*. They all have in common – apart from affluence and social status – a shallowness of feeling that makes them completely indifferent to legal and emotional ties: hence the facility with which they alternate marriage and divorce and their cruel neglect of their children. According to Wharton, however, the emancipation of this type of woman is but a delusion, because even her sexual freedom is merely one of the characteristics men now require of their new feminine ideal. Thus these women’s behaviour is still ruled by male expectations.

In many of her works Wharton stresses very clearly the importance of the economic aspect of the ‘woman question’. It is economic dependence that prevents her female characters from making the choices which would further their intellectual and moral self-fulfilment. This dependence is the direct consequence of a misguided upbringing, which simply does not aim at making women emotionally and economically self-sufficient by developing in them a sense of responsibility and some professional ability. Marriage becomes therefore for them the only option. And Wharton shows very well, in some of her stories, the crude materialistic basis of marriage and indeed, sometimes, even of adultery. Halo Spear marries a man she does not love because this is the only means she has at her disposal to repay him for the financial help he has given her parents. Lizzie Hazeldean in ‘New Year’s Eve’ (one of the novellas in *Old New York*, 1924) takes a rich lover only because she wants to help her sick husband and has no skills to sell. Impoverished gentlewomen such as Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*, Mrs. Ansell in *The Fruit of the Tree*, or even, twenty years later, Susy Lansing in *The Glimpses of the Moon*, could only survive by making themselves tactfully useful to their rich friends. But women who find themselves deprived of or are unwilling to accept male support generally face destitution in Wharton’s works – unless they are saved by some unexpected inheritance, as are Ellen Olenska and Halo Spear. Once dismissed by Zeena, Mattie Silver in *Ethan Frome* has simply nowhere
to go and finds escape only in her suicidal pact with Ethan. Once pregnant, Charity Royall in *Summer* must accept the (slightly incestuous?) offer of marriage from her adoptive father or opt for prostitution. And another unmarried mother, Charlotte Lovell in ‘The Old Maid’ (*Old New York*), is forced by circumstances to give up her child to her rich and respectable cousin Delia. But, if for these women sexuality is a curse entailing bitter choices, for other Wharton heroines it becomes a means to social climbing. Undine Spragg in *The Custom of the Country* and Floss Delaney in *The Gods Arrive* evince in the administration of their physical assets the same lack of scruples men show in financial speculations.

The only type of paid employment open to a middle class woman was the traditional one of working as a governess in a rich or aristocratic family, but this option implied the possession of some degree of education, and, significantly, in Wharton’s fiction only the European Laura Testvalley avails herself of it. Charity work was another field of activity for an upper class woman, and exceptionally, as in the case of Gerty Parish, the social worker in *The House of Mirth*, could become a means of support. Gerty represents a new type of social worker: far from being the Victorian type – the philanthropic and condescending lady – she is a working woman involved in an organised activity aiming at helping other women. Working Girls’ Clubs like the one she has set up were well known at the time and a simple mention of it would be sufficient for Wharton’s readers to understand the nature and purpose of her activity. Her club is decidedly a symptom of changing times and of the new urban reality in which women operate: “The clubs were places where overworked, underpaid shop-girls, typists, stenographers, and other young female laborers could congregate, make friends, and share grievances. They were, in effect, safe harbors for young women employees without friends or family in the city” (Ammons, 1980, 40).

But Justine Brent, the nurse in *The Fruit of the Tree*, is, as the only trained professional, even more an exception in Wharton’s fiction. By the end of the century nursing had become a respectable activity thanks to the pioneering work of Florence Nightingale in England and Clara Barton in the United States, who had introduced the concept of the necessity of serious scientific training for professional nurses. The first university programme in nursing was introduced in the States in 1899, and American nurses had their national professional association from 1896. Recruitment was high, also because nursing schools offered students free board and lodging – an attractive proposition for young women who did not have the capital necessary to train for a secretarial job. Nursing, which was often the object of articles in
the American press (female and non-), appeared now as an occupation combining the new incentives of scientific study, vocational training and financial independence with the caring instinct, the abnegation and the sense of duty traditionally associated with women. In her choice of profession Justine represents therefore a link between old and new, just as she belongs simultaneously to the genteel tradition of Old New York – always an important point with Wharton – and to the new world of options and opportunities. But, although no other Wharton heroine is as thoroughly a New Woman as Justine, aspects of the New Woman are embodied in other female characters as well: in Halo Spear, for example, who, once pregnant, refuses both to marry her lover and to go back to her husband and is ready to embrace single motherhood; and even in her antagonist Floss Delaney, to whom new social conventions allow the exploitation of her innate financial acumen and who takes on with the greatest ease a role as a ruthless business-woman.

It is worth stressing again that Wharton also clearly shows that men are – no less than women – victims of the roles society decrees for them. The idea of the ‘inadequate male’ as the typical Whartonian hero has been greatly exaggerated, because, although it is true that Wharton’s works often present men who are incapable of understanding, helping and standing by their partners, it is also true that Wharton’s female characters often prove themselves ‘inadequate’. The fact is that, to Wharton, human beings are very much the result of a combination of external circumstances, of social background and upbringing as much as of character and personality. Men are – just like women – the product of their environment. Wharton’s resentment is against the ‘custom of the country’, which degrades both men and women, and this resentment is, in turn, only an aspect of a kind of suppressed bitterness against the inherent and insoluble contradictions at the heart of the human scheme.

3.5. The Berlin novels.

The author of seventeen works of fiction, Fontane was sixty-one when he started his career as a novelist. Among his novels and novellas, eleven are set partially or entirely in Berlin and constitute an ample and detailed study of social life in the capital at various stages of its history. These works are, in chronological order: Vor dem Sturm (1878), L’Adultera (1882), Schach von Wuthenow (1883), Cécile (1887), Irrungen, Wirrungen (1888), Stine (1890), Frau Jenny
Treibel (1892), Effi Briest (1895), Die Poggenpuhls (1896), Der Stechlin (1899), Mathilde Möhring (1906).

The chronological order of their content is the following:

Schach von Wuthenow: Spring – August 1806.

Vor dem Sturm: Christmas 1812 to May 1813 (plus Epilogue).

L'Adultera, Irrungen, Wirrungen, Stine, Mathilde Möhring: 1870s.

Cécile: 1884–85.

Effi Briest, Frau Jenny Treibel: 1880s.

Die Poggenpuhls: 1888–89.

Der Stechlin: late 1880s.

The time span covered by these novels is that of five reigns. Schach takes place during the reign of Frederich Wilhelm III; there are references to King Frederich Wilhelm IV in Cécile and Der Stechlin; and the other novels are set in the Bismarck era (1862 – 1890), which covers almost the whole of the reigns of Wilhelm I (1861 – 1888), Frederich III (1888) and Wilhelm II (1888 – 1898).

The complex social structure of Berlin is presented in remarkable detail. The picture is persuasive because the description highlights the gradual but continuous changes this society is undergoing.

At the centre of the picture is always the minor aristocracy, which, with a fringe of the upper middle class, constitute ‘Society’ in Bagehot’s definition: “the union of people for amusement and conversation” (Garland, 1980, 190). Like New York’s ‘Four Hundred’, it is a restricted and static minority group governed by “a rigid and ritual code of honour”, which manages nevertheless to influence a larger sphere of bureaucrats and financiers. Unlike New York “aristocracy”, it does have contacts with other social strata. A particularly interesting “contact” is the type of relationship which often developed between male members of the aristocracy and young women of the lower orders. In Fontane’s novels there are many examples of young officers of the Guard and elderly aristocrats, who, not being able to satisfy their sexual appetites within their own social class for fear of scandal, have stable affairs with young women of a lower social class, who accept this situation to escape poverty. Botho’s friends Serge, Pitt and Balafré all keep mistresses; another character in Irrungen, Wirrungen, Frau Dörr, was in her prime the mistress of an old count, as is Pauline in Stine. And Stine, on telling Waldemar her
sister's sad story, illustrates very eloquently the purely economic reasons which motivated these women in their choice of trade.

The military took pride of place in Berlin's social life. The militaristic orientation of the Prussian aristocracy is clearly shown in Fontane's novels, in which many characters have chosen the army as their profession: Schach, of course, Botho von Rienäcker, his friend Captain von Czako, Waldemar von Heldern, Woldemar von Stechlin, not to speak of Leo and Wendelin von Poggenpuhl, who belong to a military family that has given several heroes to the Fatherland. Also Count Barbi has passed from the prestigious Regiment des Gardes du Corps to the diplomatic service. In general, however, retired army officers and other aristocrats seem to prefer the highest ranks of the civil service as occupational fulfilment: von Innstetten, von Ladalsinski, von Rex. Apart from these, there do not seem to be other possibilities, except, of course, that of spending their lives in complete idleness and dissipation, as Botho's father seems to have done.

Outside the capital, in the provinces, there is of course the very important class of junkers, the Prussian country squires of the March to whom Fontane seems to show much sympathy: Berndt von Vietzewitz, Uncle Osten, General von Poggenpuhl, but especially Dubslav von Stechlin, "'der Typus eines Märkischen von Adel, aber von der milderen Observanz'", as Fontane wrote (Garland, 1980, 260) a man who, though attached to the ideas and traditions of his class, has learnt not to consider them everlasting and to come to terms with the inevitable changes. By contrast, Baron Osten has the simple politics of a hot anti-Bismarckian: to the army, and not to Bismarck, goes the credit of having founded the Empire, and the Emperor and his Chancellor should in any circumstances support the agrarian aristocracy, which provides the officers of the army and therefore the real support of the state. Whilst part of the Conservative aristocracy justified their opposition to Bismarck on the grounds of his despotism, his ruthlessness in crushing opponents, the Kulturkampf and his policy toward the working class, others - like the disgruntled anti-Bismarckians of the St.Arnaud circle - blame their personal failures on the Chancellor.

St. Arnaud - a nobleman and an ex-officer - typifies the déclassé aristocrat: following his marriage to a woman of dubious reputation, he has lost his place in society, and must now be content to surround himself with embittered misfits. He is - like Innstetten - a thorough representative of Prussian militarism and of the Prussian aristocratic code of honour, so absurd to modern mentality and already anachronism in Fontane's time. Both characters fight fatal
duels, and the duel was "the most dramatic and notorious" among the conventions regulating aristocratic society. Although the duel was forbidden by the criminal law and ranked with murder even in Germany, the pressure to conform with this particular convention remained extremely strong because fighting a duel was paramount to affirming one's belonging to the aristocracy and the military. "From one significant point of view the German population was divided into two categories, a minute fraction which was qualified to fight a duel (satisfaktionsfähig) and the vast majority which was not (satisfaktionsunfähig). To be in the former category conferred prestige, to be in the latter was an admission of inferiority" (Garland, 1980, 187). And to possess this privilege and decline to exercise it meant to run the risk of being considered a coward and of being "dishonoured". As society openly sanctioned this breach of the criminal law, to reject the "duel mystique" meant to renounce society. Thus, even the cosmopolitan von Gordon – a civil engineer who has spent a long time abroad and is used to standards different from those of the Prussian aristocracy – finds out, once returned to Germany, that his independence of mind is purely illusory and that he cannot subtract himself to the conventions and rituals of his caste. He accepts St. Arnaud’s challenge and falls victim to a code of honour in which he does not believe. Even Crampas – who, one might have thought, would not take either morality or conventions too seriously – responds to the summons with "wehmütige Resignation" (VII, 377). The duel-theme recurs very significantly also in Irrungen, Wirrungen. When Botho, who is trying to come to a decision as regards his liaison with Lene, or rather, to steel himself into marrying his cousin Käthe, goes for a ride on the Jungfernheide, he comes across the monument commemorating Ludwig von Hinkeldey, who, though a Chief of Police, had fought and died in a duel on that spot. "Und warum? Einer Adelsvorstellung, einer Standesmarotte zuliebe, die mächtiger war als alle Vernunft, auch mächtiger als das Gesetz, dessen Hüter und Schützer zu sein, er recht eigentlich die Pflicht hatte. 'Lehrreich'. Und was habe ich speziell daraus zu lernen? Was predigt dies Denkmal mir? Jedenfalls das eine, daß das Herkommen unser Tun bestimmt. Wer ihm gehorcht, kann zugrunde gehn, aber er geht besser zugrunde als der, der ihm widerspricht" (III, 171). This need to belong to one's group, even at the cost of sacrificing one's deepest feelings and of negating the possibility and the right to choose for oneself, to be an individual and to pursue happiness in one's personal way, is admirably expressed in Innstetten's often quoted conversation with Wüllersdorf, which expresses to the highest degree the regressive aspect of the human need for rules and regulations.
The aristocracy is certainly the social class in which Fontane, even though with ambivalent feelings, is most interested. Below it there are other strata, the boundaries of which are less easily definable, also because, in the fluctuating situation of the Gründerjahre, fortunes were rapidly made and unmade and people moved up and down the social ladder. The upper bourgeoisie of financiers is very marginal in Fontane’s novels. It appears very peripherally for example in *Die Poggenpuhls*, in which Manon and Sophie von Poggenpuhl are befriended by a rich Jewish family, the Bertensteins. Their brother Leo also hopes to make his fortunes by marrying a rich Jewish girl and trading his name and social acceptability in exchange for her financial means. Notwithstanding the antisemitism of the Prussian aristocracy, this is obviously a period when rich Jews were becoming rapidly acceptable and could set themselves higher standards. As Manon explains to Leo: “Die Wünsche beider Eltern, auch Floras selbst, gehen unzweifelhaft nach der Adelsseite hin, aber doch sehr mit Auswahl, und wenn beispielweise bei Frau Melanie – die sich ihrer und ihres Hauses Vorzüge sehr wohl bewußt ist – die Entscheidung läge, so weiß ich ganz bestimmt, daß sie’s unter einem Arnim oder Bülow nicht gern tun würde”. (IV, 348) On the contrary, in this new world families of the small nobility like the Poggenpuhls, who have just managed to keep their heads above water living on military salaries and pensions, are destined to go to the wall.

There seems to be a very large middle class, to which belong for example Professor Schmidt and his friends, Kommerzienräte like Treibel and van der Straaten and lower civil servants like Hugo Großmann. This is for many reasons the most interesting class, because it numbers members of the lower orders who “have made it” like Frau Jenny as well as people whose wealth and “distinction” is a bit older like her husband, who is much less of a go getter than Jenny, the greengrocer’s daughter. Typical is also the interesting figure of the landlord in *Mathilde Möhring*, an erstwhile poorly paid civil servant who has made his money in the property development of the Seventies and is now the owner of several houses. (Likewise, the Poggenpuhls’ landlord, now “a man of independent means”, used to be a bricklayer’s foreman and made his money after the war).

Below this class, there is a huge crowd of people with different activities and very small income: servants, like Frau Schmolke (who is, however, the widow of a policeman and therefore would appear to have belonged to the lower middle class), and destitute people like Roswitha; manual workers: the washerwoman Frau Nimptsch, seamstresses like Lene and Stine, factory workers like Gideon Franke (who, as a supervisor, is, however, a step higher),
subletting landladies like Frau Möhring, the widow of an accountant, whose daughter, however, manages to better herself through her marriage to a civil servant and then by qualifying as a teacher.

The world of factory workers is only briefly glimpsed. They exist and are mentioned, but always kept in the background, like the workers in the glass factory at Stechlin ("die Glassower"), whom Dubslav regards with feelings of feudal, paternal benevolence. Another example is the group of seemingly happy factory workers whom Botho encounters immediately after the above mentioned ride in the Jungfemheide. It is significant that, in the mind of this Prussian aristocrat, the workers, who are shown having lunch with their wives and children, offer the picture of that contented, industrious, natural and well-ordered existence which he craves and which, he decides, is only possible within the boundaries and "order" of conventional marriage. However, the importance of the working class as a social group which, through their party, is acquiring voice and weight in society, is unmistakably clear. In Der Stechlín there is ample echo of the political debate of the time, and it is clearly shown how pervasive the ideas of the Social Democrats had become: Pastor Lorenzen and even Woldemar von Stechlin have marked liberal opinions. Fontane was well aware of the growing strength and of the political maturation of the proletariat. As he wrote to his wife: "Millionen von Arbeitern sind gerade so gescheit, so gebildet, so ehrenhaft wie Adel und Bürgerstand...Alle diese Leute sind uns vollkommen ebenbürtig...Sie vertreten nicht bloss Unordnung und Aufstand, sie vertreten auch Ideen, die zum Teil ihre Berechtigung haben und die man nicht totschlagen oder durch Einkerkerung aus der Welt schaffen kann" (Roch, 1961, 226). In actual fact, Fontane shows sympathy and genuine respect for the lower classes throughout his work. They are consistently portrayed as more capable of being faithful to the inner truth, more direct and outspoken, more frank and firm, more hardworking and reliable than the upper class. They are simple and natural and can see straight into the heart of the matter. There is no patronizing attitude towards the poor in Fontane’s work, nor are they in any way idealised: he always shows, together with their virtues, their intellectual limitations, their comical traits and the pettiness and meanness which is sometimes the result of the incessant daily struggle to keep body and soul together. Nevertheless, Fontane must be the creator of some of the most sensitive and realistic portraits of plebeians in the whole of western literature, especially as far as female characters are concerned: people like Pauline, Frau Schmolke, Roswitha, Mathilde Mohring,
Together with this appreciation of and respect for the proletariat came a growing disillusionment as regards the aristocracy and a marked aversion towards the bourgeoisie. He remained attracted to the characteristics of the nobility of the Mark embodied in Dubslav von Stechlin but despised what he called the “Borussismus” of the Junkers, its parasitism, its anti-spiritualism, its narrow-mindedness and its historic inadequacy. He likewise despised the ignorance, greed and “Strebertum” of the bourgeoisie, but even in this scorn, as in his dissatisfaction with the nobility, there was an element of ambiguity of which he was well aware. “Ich haße das Bourgeoisgefühl mit einer Leidenschaft, als ob ich ein eingeschworener Sozialdemokrat wäre. [...] Das Bourgeoisgefühl ist das zur Zeit Maß gebende, und ich selber, der ich es gräßlich finde, bin bis zu einem Grade von ihm beherrscht. Die Stromung reißt einen mit fort” (letter to Mete of 25 August 1891; Reuter, 1970, 353). He was also well aware of the increasing radicalization of his political thought: “Ich werde immer demokratischer und lasse höchstens noch einen richtigen Adel gelten. Was dazwischen liegt: Spießbürger, Bourgeois, Beamter und ‘schlechtweg gebildeter’, kann mich wenig erquicken” (letter to Mete of 29 January 1894; Reuter, 1970, 372).

It is remarkable how completely Fontane’s political opinions changed in his old age. The great admiration he had had for Bismarck became first a sort of qualified contempt and finally utter rejection. On May 1st, 1890, a few weeks after Bismarck’s resignation, Fontane wrote to Friedlaender: “Bismarck hat keinen grösseren Anschwärmer gehabt als mich, [...] die Welt hat selten ein grösseres Genie gesehen, selten einen mutigeren und charaktervolleren Mann und selten einen grösseren Humoristen. Aber eines war ihm versagt geblieben: Edelmut; das Gegenteil davon, das zuletzt die häßliche Form kleinlichster Gehäßigkeit annahm, zieht sich durch sein Leben... Es ist ein Glück, daß wir ihn los sind...” And seven years later this judgement had simply become “Ich bin kein Bismarckianer, das letzte und beste in mir wendet sich von ihm ab, er ist keine edle Natur”. (Letter to Friedländer, 6 April 1897, Reuter, 1970, 342–3).

His initial enthusiasm for the young Kaiser Wilhelm II also turned into delusion when it became apparent that Bismarck’s dismissal would not bring any real breach with the past and change of policies. Fontane observed with growing criticism the development of German militarism and colonialism. In the meantime also his attitude towards Social Democracy...
changed totally: whilst in 1889 he had expected and feared the revolution, in his last years he came to wish for it and to fear its failure. Even his view of the 1848 revolution he had witnessed changed retrospectively after the publication of the memoirs of General Prittwitz, who admitted that the victory of the counterrevolutionary troops had been neither inevitable nor easy. This led Fontane to change his earlier assessment and to conclude that “a popular cause, if widely supported and deeply felt, is bound to prevail in the long run” (Robinson, 1976, 26). Fontane’s new creed and hopes are fully expressed in this passage from the letter to James Morris of 22 February 1896:


The Wilhelmine Age saw a systematic attempt at inventing a new past and new traditions fit for the German Empire. As E J Hobsbawm observes, all modern nations derive their legitimization from the claim of “being the opposite of novel, namely rooted in the remotest antiquity” and of being “natural” rather than constructed communities (1983, 14). The creation of invented traditions is indispensable to the establishment or legitimization of a new institution, to the promotion of social cohesion and to the inculcation into the population of a new system of values. It is per se an indispensable and innovative historical process. In his novel Vor dem Sturm Fontane had described with sympathy the process of formation of a German national identity in its first, liberal-patriotic phase, at the time of the anti Napoleonic insurrections. At the same time, Vor dem Sturm also shows, in my view, the germs of an aggressive and expansionistic nationalism. I want now to look briefly at this novel.

Vor dem Sturm deals with the political situation in Prussia in the aftermath of the French withdrawal from Russia. On 30 December 1812 the Prussian General Yorcke signed — without the King’s authorisation — a convention of neutrality with the Russian General Diebitsch. Thus the Prussian contingent received quarter and further decisions were left to the King of Prussia. The King, who still feared the power of the French, hesitated at first to begin a war against them, and this hesitation enraged the German patriots who would have liked to get immediately involved in the fight for the restoration of the independence of Prussia. In
May 1813 the War of Liberation against the French actually broke out – probably one of the very few episodes of spontaneous insurrection in German history – and Yorcke, who had been suspended by the King and then reappointed to his post, was one of its leaders. In the novel, which covers the period Christmas Eve 1812 to May 1813, Berndt von Vitzewitz takes the momentous decision not to wait for the Government’s orders after Yorcke’s capitulation and to attack the French wherever they can be found, be they garrison troops or shattered remnants of the Grande Armée returning from Russia. The description of life in the Vitzewitz circle during that winter offers a picture of anti-French feelings prompting the discovery of a cultural as well as a military patriotism. In the first place there are the descriptions of the meetings of the literary circle ‘Kastalia’, of which Berndt’s son Lewin is a member. The club allows Fontane to show the literary interests of young liberals at the beginning of the century. The Romantics – La Motte Fouqué, Tieck, Novalis – are particularly admired. Lewin has a predilection for ballad writers and admires Bürger’s “Lenore” and Bishop Percy’s Reliques of Ancient English Poetry. One of the members of the club, Hansen-Grell, introduces Lewin to the poetry of Hölderlin, who continued to be almost unknown even in Fontane’s time. Later on, Lewin’s literary horizon further widens with the visit to Dr. Faulstich, who acquaints him with the work of the most important Protestant hymn writer, the Baroque author Paul Gerhardt.

An example of the importance of the cultural heritage in the establishment of patriotic feelings is the scene that takes place between Berndt and his sister Amelie, who is totally frenchified and has the utmost contempt for all things German. After a performance of a ‘Guillaume Tell’ by a second rate French author, Lemierre, she compares this work to Schiller’s ‘Wilhelm Tell’, to the detriment of the latter. Berndt reacts very energetically, extolling the stirring quality of Schiller’s drama, calling him “der Dichter seines Volkes, doppelt jetzt, wo dies arme niedergebrühtene Volk nach Erlösung ringt.” (1, 265) He accuses the Countess of not caring about the German people and of being on the side of the enemy. When she replies that she is on the side of the peoples who are culturally superior to the Germans, he compares German culture to a tree on which fruit seldom ripens, and ‘Tell’ to a fruit so much more precious because of its rarity.

In Vor dem Sturm however we discover also another aspect of this construction of a national identity, consisting in the creation of a usable past through selective processing of history. One of the minor characters in the novel is Prediger Seidentopf, who is defined as an
archäologischer Enthusiast" who "sammelte nicht, um zu sammeln, sondern um einer Idee willen. Er war Tendenzsammler" (I, 75). He has devoted his life and his research to prove that "die Mark Brandenburg nicht nur von Uranfang an ein deutsches Land gewesen, sondern auch durch alle Jahrhunderte hin geblieben sei. Die wendische Invasion habe nur den Charakter einer Sturzwell gehabt, durch die oberflächlich das eine oder andere geändert, dieser oder jener Name slawisiert worden sei. Aber nichts weiter. In der Bevölkerung [...] habe deutsche Sitte und Sage fortgelebt. [...] Alles, was zugleich Kultur und Kultus ausdrücke, sei so gewiß germanisch, wie Teut selber ein Deutscher gewesen sei.” (I, 75). His interpretation of his finds is contrasted by his friend Justizrat Turgany, who in his youth had enthused with Seidentopf over “Germanicity” and Hermann the Cheruscan, but who has later converted to panslavism. It seems to me that here we can already see an example of a defective and biased historical memory at work to create an exclusive, in this case anti-slav myth. (It is also interesting to notice that in Effi Briest, set in the 1880s, we find another ecclesiastic, Kantor Jahnke, who has archaeological interests and believes in the idea that the “reine Germanen, von denen wir alle abstammen” (VII, 414) had preceded the Wende in the settlement of Schwedisch-Pommern). In all this I see the myth of blood and soil at work to justify the conquest of the eastern territory taken from the Slavs. It is an example of the way the concept of German tradition became narrowly defined and distorted. This involved a selective processing of the history of Germany leading to a constructed and manipulated idea of heritage based on criteria of race, place and culture. Only what was usable of its past was retained. What did not fit into the scheme was ignored or denied. This reconstruction of the past shows a biased and defective memory at work to create a reactionary and exclusive – rather than liberal and inclusive – myth of the German nation which served the purposes of the creation of the Second German Reich by Bismarck and Wilhelm I. It was necessary to forget that Germany had been for centuries a collection of politically and economically insignificant little principalities culturally dominated by France. The German people had to be fused together into one nation and the Empire had to appear as the realization of their supposed secular national aspirations and even as the continuation of the First German Empire created by Otto I, crowned imperator augustus in 962. This project presented some problems:

It could be linked to modern nationalism only by two devices: by the concept of a secular national enemy against whom the German people had defined their identity and struggled to achieve unity as a state; and by the concept of conquest or cultural, political and military supremacy, by means of which the German nation, scattered across large part of other states, mainly in central and eastern
Europe, could claim the right to be united in a single Greater German state (Hobsbawm, 1983, 274).

Thus the militarism, imperialism and Kriegspolitik that Fontane condemned were a necessary constituent part of the new Germany created by Bismarck and Wilhelm.

The need that the German people had to be fused together into one nation is not unlike that felt at the same time in the United States, a country that, as Hobsbawm observes, after the Civil War also had the problem of creating a national identity through the assimilation of an enormous, constantly increasing and heterogeneous mass of citizens. In the attempt to differentiate and distance themselves from the huge immigrant population, some Americans, as we have seen, created for themselves a past as colonial 'aristocrats', trying to forget that the Greatest Nation in the World had started its history as a dumping site for convicts and rejects, and had afterwards become the promised land of millions of illiterate and semi-civilised peasants and proletarians.

3.6. The woman question in the Berlin novels.

This larger process of historical change in the post-1870 era is reflected in the stories of many of Fontane’s characters who are in different ways representative of their age. Their stories document the shift in values entailed by the establishment of Wilhelmine Germany. If the creation of a ‘usable’ past and of a national identity was an operation engineered by the authorities, it would seem that, at the same time, the entire German population was engaged in carrying out this same process at an individual level. In the Berlin novels set during the Gründerzeit we can follow the recreation of a personal past in various characters belonging to different social classes.

A typical representative of the Gründerjahre, and for more than one reason, is the protagonist of Frau Jenny Treibel, a novel in which Fontane gives a satirical portrayal of the Gründerzeit, the new era of rampant materialism barely masked by social affectation and false idealism. "'Fontane will die lügnerische Phrasenhaftigkeit, den leeren Hochmut, das Hartherzige der Bourgeoiswelt zeichnen, die Herrschaft des Geldsacks und der Geldsacksgesinnung, die ständig den Anspruch auf das "Höhere" erhebt, vom Schönen, Guten, Wahren redet und im entscheidenden Augenblick, die Maske werfend, das goldne Kalb umtanzt'" (Conrad Wandrey; quoted in Robinson, 1976, 154).
The story centres on the contrast between the two households of Treibels and Schmidts and the tragi-comical conflict that briefly threatens the good relationships between them when the penniless Corinna Schmidt succeeds in entangling the rich Leopold Treibel in an engagement disapproved of by his mother. Frau Jenny is a typical representative of the class of nouveau riches who prospered in that period of economic boom and industrial development following the defeat of France and the payment of considerable sums as reparations from the French. Fontane loathed the worship of money and possessions typical of this new class of upstarts, their vulgarity and pretentiousness, and the hypocrisy of those of them who masked their materialism with an affected interest in culture and in spiritual values. Such a hypocrite is Frau Jenny Treibel. In a way, she unconsciously enacts in her private life that recreation of the past that was going on in Germany at a collective, national level: just as the nation as a whole was trying to remove the memory of the centuries of political division, economic backwardness and foreign oppression and cultural imperialism, she pretends to herself that she has always been wealthy, genteel and spiritually refined. In reality, she is a greengrocer’s daughter who, now married to an industrialist, has effaced every trace of her origins from her appearance, her manners, her speech and, most notably, her self-awareness, but who remains intrinsically plebeian in her motivations, aspirations, choices and actions. Although the only thing she really respects is money and the social standing it brings, she feels it her duty to her social position to put up a semblance of cultural sophistication, fine feelings and contempt for worldly wealth.

Affectation, as Fielding says, is the source of all comedy, and it is precisely Frau Jenny’s endeavour at covering up her essentially materialistic nature that makes her ridiculous. Both in her essential and unconquerable materialism and in her hypocritical attempt at denying and concealing it she is a true representative of the era. Her affected admiration for ideas and ideals does not deceive Professor Schmidt, who has known her since their childhood and was once her suitor. She rejected him long ago in favour of the rich Treibel, who raised her to her present upper-middle class status from which she looks down on the Schmidt household. As Wilibald Schmidt says, “Jenny Treibel hat ein Talent, alles zu vergessen, was sie vergessen will. Es ist eine gefährliche Person und um so gefährlicher, als sie’s selbst nicht recht weiß und sich aufrichtig einbildet, ein gefühlvolles Herz und vor allem ein Herz ‘für das Höhere’ zu haben. Aber sie hat nur ein Herz für das Ponderable, für alles, was in Gewicht fällt und Zins trägt” (VII, 71) And Professor Schmidt includes the other
Treibels in the same judgement: “Sie liberalisieren und sentimentalisieren beständig, aber das alles ist Farce; wenn es gilt, Farbe zu bekennen, dann heißt es: ‘Gold ist Trumpf,’ und weiter nicht” (VII, 71). He bears her no grudge for her desertion, but his friendly feelings toward her do not prevent him from making fun of her affectations, her sentimentalism, her proclaimed unworldliness and her newly acquired vocabulary, which only barely disguise her old nature.

“‘Unentwegt,’” wiederholte Wilibald, als er allein war, “Herrliches Modewort, und nun auch schon in die Villa Treibel gedrungen...Eigentlich ist meine Freundin Jenny noch gerade so wie vor vierzig Jahren, wo sie die kastanienbrauen Locken schuttlelte. Das Sentimentale liebte sie schon damals, aber doch immer unter Bevorzugung von Courmachen und Schlagsahne. Jetzt ist sie nun rundlich geworden und beinah gebildet, oder doch, was man so gebildet zu nennen pflegt [...] Nun ist das Puppchen eine Kommerzienratin und kann sich alles gönne, auch das Ideale, und sogar ‘unentwegt’. Ein Musterstück von einer Bourgeoise.” (VII, 14).

Professor Schmidt, a Gymnasium teacher and classicist, represents the traditional values and cultural interests of an older, professional middle class, whose standard of living is necessarily much more modest than that of the Treibels. The contrast, however, is also one of culture and level of education, and it comes out in the chapters Fontane devotes to the schoolmasters’ gathering at Professor Schmidt’s and to the dinner party the Treibels give in honour of Mr. Nelson, which take place simultaneously. Both occasions are customary events in the two households. Schmidt and six of his colleagues have formed a small circle and hold weekly meetings at his house, where they have dinner, discuss books and ideas, exchange school gossip, philosophise, indulge their taste for pedantry and show off their erudition as much as they can. Their conversation is varied and effortless and the atmosphere is relaxed and good-humoured. Wilibald is the soul as well as the host of these evenings and does most of the talking. Notwithstanding his limitations as a pedantic Prussian school-master, he represents in the novel a mentality antithetic to that of the Treibels. He is for classical culture and “die höhere Weltanschauung” (VII, 56) instead of the modern ones of greed, pushiness and pretentiousness.

“Das Klassische, was sie jetzt verspotten, das ist das, was die Seele frei macht, das Kleinliche nicht kennt und das Christliche vorahnt und vergeben und vergessen lehrt [...] Das Literarische macht fici...” (VII, 158-59). He distances himself from the dominant climate also when he ridicules the “Urgermanism” that is all the rage and that is particular irksome to a mind steeped in the wisdom of classical antiquity. He extols the politeness of his Jewish colleague Friedeberg and criticises German uncouthness in terms that refer to the well known nationalistic cult of
"Hermann der Cherusker". "Diese schreckliche Verwandtschaft zwischen Teutoburger Wald und Grobheit ist doch mitunter störend" (VII, 56). He never doubts that Corinna sooner or later will come to her senses and understand that she is too good for Leopold, and he considers the whole ridiculous "Treibelei" as nothing but a stage of her "Werdeprozeß".

At her soirée in honour of Mr. Nelson we see Frau Jenny in all her splendour. "Frau Jenny präsentierte sich in vollem Glanz, und ihre Herkunft aus dem kleinen Laden in der Adlerstraße war in ihrer Erscheinung bis auf den letzten Rest getilgt. Alles wirkte reich und elegant; aber [...] was ihr mehr als alles andere eine gewisse Vornehmheit lieh, war die sichere Ruhe, womit sie zwischen ihren Gästen thronte" (VII, 23). (She makes one small gaffe when she monopolises Fräulein von Bomst’s attention until "ein leises Augenwinkern Treibels" reminds her of her duty to address her other table neighbours as well. Treibel shows a shade more of refinement in his manners than his wife).

The elaborate dinner is accompanied by contrived talk on irrelevant subjects, like the whereabouts of the royal family and its collateral lines, which particularly fascinates Frau Jenny. These parties follow a ceremonial which the guests, who are invited regularly, know and submit to, however bored they may be, for fear of not being invited any more. An important part of this ritual is the invitation to Jenny to sing the song Professor Schmidt had written for her, which must conclude every evening. The song always offers her the opportunity to indulge once more in her sentimentalism and to give a speech to condemn material values and to extol the life of the spirit. Much is false and hypocritical in these parties, which are a full expression of the personality of the lady of the house. The contrast between the Treibels’ environment and the Schmidts’ is repeated in the two different female types, Jenny and Corinna.

Leopold’s engagement to Corinna proves the touchstone of Jenny’s character. Faced by the prospect of gaining a penniless daughter-in-law, Jenny forgets her sentimentalism and does not stop even for a moment to discuss Leopold’s feelings or prospects of happiness. She shows that marriage is for her an economic union, but the words she uses to make her total opposition clear still cloak her materialism in an absurd affectation of gentility. The effect is hilarious because she refers to the Treibel family as if they were aristocrats and Leopold were about to stain their pedigree. She threatens her son with his father’s opposition as well as hers, because “in den Fragen, wo die Ehre seines Hauses auf dem Spiele steht, ist Verlaß auf ihn” (VII, 127). It is however clear that the real reason why she cannot accept Corinna is her comparative poverty. When she exhorts Leopold not to renounce “die Fundamente, die das
Leben tragen und ohne die es kein rechtes Glück gibt” (VII, 127) she is referring to nothing else but money.

Kommerzienrat Treibel has more common sense than his wife and a more realistic conception of what ‘being a Treibel’ actually means. He takes her down a peg or two in their conversation. He is a fourth generation bourgeois, that is to say he has not made but inherited money. In him we can therefore see the process of refinement of the go-getter into moneyed gentleman. His political pursuit is an instance of his desire to progress on the social ladder, but his business acumen and his realism contrast with the futility of his political ambition. It is evident that social promotion is still far from him.

Treibel’s first reaction to the threat of this “Skandal” is different from his wife’s. His common sense allows him to perceive immediately how ridiculous Jenny’s attitude is and he does not hesitate to define it with words that remind her of her own humble origins: “Alles, was du da so hinschmetterst, ist erstens unsinnig und zweitens empörend. Und was es außerdem noch alles ist, blind, vergeßlich, überheblich, davon will ich gar nicht reden...” Jenny war ganz blaß geworden und zitterte, weil sie wohl wußte, worauf das ‘blind und vergeßlich’ abzielte” (VII, 130). He ridicules her affront at the prospective “Unehre”: “Wer sind wir denn? Wir sind weder die Montmorencys noch die Lusignans [...], wir sind auch nicht die Bismarcks oder die Arnims oder sonst Märkisches von Adel, wir sind die Treibels, Blutlaugensalz und Eisenvitriol, und du bist eine geborene Bürstenbinder aus der Adlerstraße” (VII, 131). And yet, notwithstanding this snub Jenny knows her husband better than he himself. She holds her tongue and waits for him to think the whole thing over, because she knows that, however foreign it may be to him to cover up his opposition to the match by calling it a blot on his escutcheon, he still is too much of a bourgeois not to notice that this marriage cannot be considered an appealing business proposition. And Treibel proves her and Professor Schmidt’s opinion of him to be right: “Der gute Treibel, er war doch auch seinerseits das Produkt dreier im Fabrikbetrieb immer reicher gewordenen Generationen, und aller guten Geistes – und Herzensanlagen unerachtet und trotz seines politischen Gastspiels auf der Bühne Teupitz-Zossen – der Bourgeois steckte ihm wie seiner sentimentalen Frau tief im Geblüt” (VII, 132).

Frau Jenny is in for another dose of plain speaking when she goes to reproach Corinna for her premeditated assault on Leopold. The scene between the two women is a satirical masterpiece and builds up to a wonderful crescendo in which “das Schmidtsche” in Corinna
finds its full expression: “Verlangen Sie, daß ich bei Begegnungen mit Ihrem Sohne wie eine Nonne dasitze, bloß damit das Haus Treibel vor einer Verlobung mit bewahrt bleibe? [...] Erlauben Sie mir, Ihnen zu sagen, daß ich das nicht bloß hochmütig und höchst verwerflich, daß ich es vor allem auch ridikül finde. Denn wer sind die Treibels? Berliner-Blau-Fabrikanten mit einem Ratstitel, und ich, ich bin eine Schmidt” (VII, 140; italics mine). The effect of Corinna’s boasting about her name – a very common one – as if it were illustrious is absolutely irresistible. As is her roguish father’s unashamed mockery of Jenny when, on seeing her out, he deplores that it fell to “unserm Hause” to cause her such grief. And he attributes the causes to the wicked spirit of the time, that fosters in people aspirations above their station. “Alles will über sich hinaus und strebt höheren Staffeln zu, die die Vorsehung sichtbarlich nicht wollte” (VII, 142). Jenny, obviously, does not see the ironical allusion to herself, the very type of the social climber.

Jenny is perhaps more the type of the petit bourgeois than of a bourgeois: she is a person who has just picked herself up from the gutter and has not been rich long enough to be able legitimately to start forgetting her modest origins, or even to understand fully the limitations of her new position. Her daughter in law Hélène, who looks down on her husband’s family and on her mother-in-law in particular, is, with her exaggerated family-pride, manic anglophilia, pro-Hamburg chauvinism and rejection of anything that has to do with Berlin, another caricature of the bourgeoise, one with a background of older, more established wealth. Although these two women have been for years conducting a silent struggle for the control of the Treibel house, in reality they have a lot in common: they are domineering, narrow-minded and without a sense of the ridiculous, they respect money and social status only and have an absurd notion of the illustriousness of their families. They soon find this out when Corinna’s threat looms at the horizon and quickly form a coalition against her, scheming to invite Hildegarde to stay with the Treibels and so compel the spineless Leopold to get engaged to her.

In *Frau Jenny Treibel* Fontane shows the strictly materialistic reasons that can motivate a woman’s choice of a husband. Jenny may have been infatuated with Wilibald, but in the end opted for the suitor with a better social position, more wealth and better career prospects. She now seems somewhat disillusioned with her husband, whom she totally dominates – as she dominates everybody else in their household – because of his insufficient ambition and lack of initiative in improving their social position.
The same materialistic considerations are valid for the next generation represented by Corinna, and also by Hélène, and her sister Hildegarde. Corinna is very frank and explicit about her ambition: “Ein Hang nach Wohlleben, der jetzt: alle Welt beherrscht, hat mich auch in der Gewalt, ganz so wie alle anderen,” (VII, 49) she says to her cousin Marcell, who has noticed her manoeuvres to entangle Leopold in her net. It is repeatedly stressed in the novel that this lust for wealth is a characteristic of the times. Marcell, her would-be lover, comments with distress on what is “äußerlich und modern” in her, on “wie veräußerlicht sie ist und wie die verdammte neue Zeit sie ganz in Banden hält” (VII, 69).

Corinna wants to marry into property because she feels she is entitled to a better, easier and more affluent life. Unlike Jenny, she is frank in admitting her desire to acquire material wealth but does not confound this with status. She is intelligent and witty and has too acute a sense of the ridiculous to fall into Jenny’s absurd snobbery and pretentiousness. She is also absolutely unsentimental and very matter-of-fact, and disdains to put up any mask, especially that of tearful sentimentality. Nevertheless, she is not above a certain amount of scheming: neither Frau Jenny nor Marcell fail to notice that she brought about Leopold’s declaration by flirtation with Mr. Nelson and adroit talk to Leopold. She, however, boldly defends her right to make use of her wit and charm in order to influence events to her advantage. The very freedom and “Emanzipation” she has enjoyed in her upbringing give her the ruthlessness to abjure the liberal values and the style of living of her father in favour of a loveless marriage to a wealthy but insignificant man, a thing that horrifies her cousin Marcell and is condemned by the upright Frau Schmolke. However, the story concludes happily with Corinna’s marriage to Marcell, after she has learnt, as he says, to accept and respect the way of life and the values she was brought up in, and has put ‘Modernität’ for ever aside. And also after she has experienced the truth of her father’s maxim that “In eine Herzogsfamilie kann man allenfalls hineinkommen, in eine Bourgeoisfamilie nicht” (VII, 156).

According to A. R. Robinson “Corinna Schmidt belongs to the younger generation of Berlin womanhood during the last two decades of the nineteenth century, already on the threshold of social emancipation” (1976, 146). However, for all her intelligence, wit and even education, she is “durchaus kein emanzipiertes Frauenzimmer” (VII, 47), as she herself admits. She is not a real ‘New Woman’: the way she tries to achieve economic security is the same as that of the previous generations, that is, through marriage to a man who is rich, or, at least, a good provider (as Marcell is after his appointment as Gymnasium-Oberlehrer). The real social
innovation of the time was the working woman, the woman who could economically stand on her own feet, and can therefore start disentangling economic from sentimental motivations in her personal relationships. In Fontane’s novels there are several very interesting figures of working women, taken from different social strata: Melanie van der Straaten in L'Adultera, Mathilde Möhring and the proletarians Lene (Irrungen, Wirrungen) and Stine.

Melanie starts her career as “reicher Leute Kind” (IV, 7), “das verwöhnte Kind” (IV, 8), child-wife of a very rich husband who is twenty-five years her senior. With him she has lived the life of a fairy-tale princess, but at the beginning of the novel she is now twenty-seven, has already been married for ten years and is very different from the orphan who accepted van der Straaten’s proposal in total ignorance and for lack of other opportunities. It is clear that her dissatisfaction dated long before Ebenezer Rubehn appeared on the scene. In appearance she is absolute mistress of her house and every her wish is satisfied, but “sie dominierte nur, weil sie sich zu zwingen verstand; aber dieses Zwanges los und ledig zu sein blieb doch ihr Wunsch, ihr beständiges, stilles Verlangen” (IV, 37). She therefore particularly welcomes the summer months, which she habitually spends in her husband’s villa with her two daughters and friends, while her husband remains in town and visits them occasionally. There may be a tinge of sexual dissatisfaction in Melanie’s feelings, but what divides her from her husband is, more than the discrepancy in their ages, the wide difference in feelings, tastes, manners and education.

Van der Straaten is bad-mannered and “absolut unerzogen” (IV, 30) and well known to be so in the small circle of his friends. His behaviour, of which we are given examples during the farewell dinner preceding Melanie’s leave for the country, often embarrasses his wife and offends her sensitivity. He makes no effort whatsoever to restrain his talk or mend his manners because he prides himself on what he considers his lack of prejudice and his outspokenness. His fortune is inherited but recent – it was made by his father and much increased by himself. He has all the arrogance of the rich man who thinks he must please no one and is used to being humoured and flattered. The result is that “an der Börse galt er bedingungslos, in der Gesellschaft nur bedingungsweise” (IV, 7). Therefore the van der Straatens live in relative social isolation, excluded from the circles to which their money might have given them access and confined in the same group of friends van der Straaten had frequented as a bachelor, a group to which Melanie and her sister Jakobine von Gryczinski and her husband have simply been added. Melanie therefore has also been starved of social contacts, and does not even seem
to have any female friends apart from the elderly Friederike von Sawatzki and Anastasia Schmidt, who habitually visit her and spend the summer with her.

Van der Straaten “typifies much of the parvenu spirit of Berlin during the ‘Gründerzeit’ in the last decades of the 19th century” (Robinson, 1976, 88). He reminds one of Halston Raycie in Wharton’s Old New York novella ‘False Dawn’. They have numerous features in common: like van der Straaten, Mr. Raycie has a great financial acumen which has allowed him to multiply the family fortune; he has an attitude of general arrogance towards everybody, caused by the awareness of his great wealth and by an enormous egocentricity. This manifests itself in overpowering behaviour towards his guests and family, who are all ready to accept his lack of consideration for other people out of fear and even to excuse and justify it on account of his wealth. Dinners are the setting in which he, like van der Straaten, appears in all the splendour of his self absorption: he does the lion’s share of all the talking, rarely gives up the floor and holds forth unremittingly in the conversation. Both men are tyrannical and patronising towards their women, tend to see them as dolls to be adorned and enjoy the women’s economic dependence on them. Their culture is second rate and superficial, not much more than a smattering acquired to season their conversation with quotations. Mr. Raycie got his from Half-hours with the Best Authors by Knight, Van der Straaten is a reader of a dictionary of quotations – Bückmann’s Geflügelte Worte (1864) – which was famous at the time and often quoted in conversation. They are both vehement and peremptory in the expression of judgements on cultural issues of which they have heard but about which they understand nothing: van der Straaten criticises Wagner who is a great passion of Melanie’s, Raycie contemptuously dismisses his son’s interest in Edgar Allan Poe and other new American authors. In both cases the rejection of cultural interests they do not share is a way of reasserting their power on individuals who are dependent on them. They both entertain the notion of being connoisseurs of the visual arts and have the ambition of setting up a collection, but in reality have no real aesthetic judgement, knowledge and independent taste and regard art more as an investment than anything else: all they want is to collect specimens of artists who are universally acknowledged as Great Masters, which have the double function of supporting their pretensions to cultural sophistication and of hanging on the walls of their homes as tangible evidence of their wealth. They take an immoderate pride and derive enormous satisfaction from whatever belongs to them: their town homes, their summer villas, their pictures, their credit, the members of their families, but they also have the social ambitions of upstarts. Van der Straaten
“proves himself an arriviste, who dances inwardly for joy when invited to sit on a government committee” (Garland, 1980, 63). Raycie, for all his boasting the superiority of American democratic institutions, “believed in primogeniture, in heirlooms, in entailed estates, in all the ritual of the English ‘landed’ tradition” (ONY, 23) and has the ambition of “founding a Family” along the lines of this tradition. In all these aspects they are perfect caricatures of bourgeois pretentiousness.

Like his pictures, Melanie too is for her husband a decorative element in his house and a possession to be proud of: “die junge Frau war fast noch mehr sein Stolz als sein Glück” (IV, 8). He cannot be completely happy in his possession of her because there is a fundamental pessimistic streak in his nature that makes it impossible for him to believe that this marriage can really last forever. At the same time, though fearing the blow, he does his best to provoke it. The purchase of the copy of the Tintoretto has a very clear symbolic meaning remarked on by Melanie: it is a way of tempting fortune and also probably a tacit acknowledgement of the estrangement that has taken place between them during the years. The invitation to Rubehn to join their household is at the very least a way of soliciting gossip, at worst a deliberate way of courting disaster and putting himself out of his misery. It is, in any case, like the purchase of the picture, an indelicate act towards Melanie, who, in both cases, has not been consulted, who he knows will feel that the picture is inappropriate and who explicitly protests against Rubehn’s inclusion in their household. It is as if van der Straaten were assigning his wife a role to play. There is contempt in this fatalistic assumption of his, which he expresses during their talk while they are unpacking the picture, that Melanie, sooner or later, must inevitably end up an adulteress.

Melanie has outgrown the relationship with her husband and developed a latent antagonism and almost a mistrust towards him which expresses itself openly more and more often. She says about the picture: “Es steckt etwas dahinter. Sage, was hast du gegen mich? Ich weiß recht gut, du bist nicht so harmlos, wie du dich stellst.” She is aware of the change her feelings and attitude towards her husband have undergone during the years since she was “ein halbes Kind” and did not yet know him and the present situation: “Jetzt aber kenn ich dich und weiß nur nicht, ob es etwas sehr Gutes oder sehr Schlimmes ist, was in dir steckt...” (IV, 13). Her sensitivity has always resented her husband’s grossness and she must inevitably become even more sensitive to it when she compares Rubehn’s manners and education with van der Straaten’s lack of consideration and ignorance. When van der Straaten, during the trip to
Treptow and Stralow, makes mocking and contemptuous remarks on women’s modesty, Melanie notices Rubehn’s displeasure, and this increases her own: “Melanie sah es, und das Blut schoß ihr zu Kopf wie nie zuvor. Ihres Gatten Art und Redeweise hatte sie, durch all die Jahre hin, viel Hunderte von Malen in Verlegenheit gebracht, auch wohl in bittere Verlegenheiten, aber dabei war es geblieben. Heute, zum ersten Male, schämte sie sich seiner” (IV, 56). Thus van der Straaten’s careless talk at the same time expresses and increases the gap between the spouses and the affinity between Melanie and Rubehn. When his subjects become even more embarrassing and inappropriate, and she tries to put a stop to them, he virtually accuses her of prudishness and hypocrisy: “Ich hasse Prüderien und jene Prätentionen höherer Sittlichkeit, hinter denen nichts steckt. Im günstigsten Falle nichts steckt. Ich darf das sagen, und jedenfalls will ich es sagen, und was ich gesagt habe, das habe ich gesagt” (IV, 57). In this way he almost deliberately offends his wife, casting doubt on her morality and sincerity, and this is the act that makes the breach between them unbridgeable. He virtually throws her into Rubehn’s arms. During the journey back Melanie, alone in a boat with Rubehn, gives vent to her resentment against her husband, and he for the first time betrays his feelings for her.

Even Van der Straaten’s forgiveness in their last scene together, however noble it may appear, is in fact further proof of how much he misunderstands and underestimates Melanie, and the change that has taken place in her. Because he still regards her as a spoilt and luxury-loving young thing, and because he is deeply cynical, he cannot help ridiculing her love and her desire to start a new life, and considering these feelings simply as a new and passing phase. Melanie by contrast believes that she has a chance to attain maturity in different circumstances and with a different companion, and in the end she proves herself correct. At first she seems to have simply exchanged a rich and doting husband for another, but she gives proof of moral strength and determination after Rubehn’s bankruptcy, giving up their elegant flat and comfortable life, offering him encouragement and moral support and even setting him the example of getting a job. With her teaching and with her courage she contributes materially and morally to the success of her second marriage. She does start a new life, as she had said she would. “Die Möglichkeit, arbeiten zu können, wird für sie zu einer Form der Auferstehung [...] Erst über die Arbeit findet Melanie ihre volle, ihre erwachsene Identität. Ihre Mitarbeit garantiert [...] das Glück der Ehe, wird zur Voraussetzung des ‘neuen Lebens’” (Mende, 1980, 139). But Melanie’s regeneration through work is only possible because she has got something she can sell (apart from herself): she has some education and she can give language lessons,
As we have seen, this opportunity seems not to be open to Wharton’s upper class women, for whom marriage is the only economically viable opportunity. When this fails, safety lies in a private fortune, as in the case of Ellen Olenska, or in an unexpected inheritance, as in the case of Halo Tarrant, who can therefore escape life with their estranged husbands. The only exceptions, as already mentioned, are Justine Brent, Gerty Farish and Laura Testvalley, and of them only Justine is endowed with feminine charm and attains a fulfilling love relationship. In fact, Justine recalls Melanie also because in her Wharton for the first time depicts a character with a strong and conscious sexuality, whose happy marriage is founded not only on a great emotional and intellectual affinity with her husband, but also on a strong mutual physical attraction. The importance of sexuality in Melanie’s spiritual growth is just as evident as in Justine’s. “Fontane’s purpose is to show how the awakening of Melanie’s deepest sexual instinct matures her character to the point that she quits the artificial society in which she has always lived and enjoys a new and stable marriage based on the cooperation of two mature, independent, working partners. It is a remarkable ending for the year 1880” (Garland, 1980, 62).

In *Mathilde Möhring* Fontane shows another woman achieving emancipation and moral growth through education and work. The story of Mathilde, who belongs to the lower middle class, is an example of climbing of the socio-economic ladder which seems impossible to New York women (even though in *The House of Mirth* there are glimpses of young women earning their living). In Mathilde’s case, as in Melanie’s, the transformation does not entail any loss of femininity but is on the contrary helped by the encounter with a man and a harmonious marriage. Hugo Grossmann, the law student whom Mathilde marries and helps to pass his exams and become Bürgermeister, belongs to the professional middle class and is her superior not only socially but also from the point of view of education, manners and general outlook. Mathilde, intelligent, clear-headed and determined, marries him precisely because she knows that she can exert a good influence on him and that by helping him she can help herself to a better life. After his death, however, she realises how much she herself has been changed and has gained from their relationship. Hugo had “standards of behaviour and outlook which the intelligent Thilde can respect and live up to. In a curious way *Mathilde Möhring* is a small-scale example of a double Bildungsroman, in which each party educates the other” (Garland, 1980,
Her innate intelligence, good taste and common sense allow her to slip without difficulty into her new role as wife of a First Citizen and her social climbing does not therefore transform her into a caricature like the insincere, purse-pride and shallow Frau Jenny Treibel. And, after her brief marriage, though remaining a dutiful daughter, she is now too different from her former self not to notice her mother’s meanness, narrow-mindedness and grossness of feelings. Nor can she automatically resume her former social station and way of life. Hence her decision to keep her husband’s name and to become a trained teacher, instead of opting for a second marriage or accepting the offer of living as ‘reader’ with an old count, as her mother would like her to do. Like Melanie (and like Wharton’s Justine Brent), Mathilde embodies an important aspect of the end of the century New Woman: the determination to attain economic independence through education and training.

Further down on the social ladder, lack of access to education denies women the possibilities which are open to Melanie and Mathilde and leaves them exposed to a sort of economic corruption. In *Irrungen, Wirrungen* and *Stine* the subject is the liaisons between representatives of the aristocracy and working class girls. These relationships were in most cases motivated by sexual need in the case of the men and economic pressure on the women. Serge’s mistress ‘Konigin Isabeau’ in *Irrungen, Wirrungen* and Pauline Pittelkow in *Stine* are decent, commonsensical women who have struck a bargain to survive and scrupulously fulfil their obligations, but who would rather do something else for a living and look forward to “retiring”. Frau Dörre (*Irrungen, Wirrungen*) is the ex-mistress of a count, who has realised this aspiration and concluded her career with a respectable bourgeois marriage. This social comment concerning the sexual exploitation of proletarian women is important in both novels but especially in *Stine*, in which the protagonist frankly tells her sister Pauline’s story to Waldemar von Osten. Left a widow with a child, Pauline had had no choice but to become the kept mistress of Waldemar’s old uncle. She is not proud of what she does but she sees it as a way of earning “das tägliche Brot” and she remains “arbeitsam und ordentlich und ganz ohne Passion.” Stine’s choice of life is however completely different from her sister’s: she supports herself through her work as seamstress and has promised her mother on her deathbed to be chaste. Her relationship to Waldemar starts as a friendship and remains platonic. When Waldemar decides that he wants to marry her and go with her to America, Stine refuses out of respect for those class prejudices that the dying Waldemar has left behind; and he, too weak to insist and to continue to live without her, kills himself.
In *Irrungen, Wirrungen* too there is, besides the mercenary relationships of Pitt, Serge and Balafré, the genuine love between an aristocrat and a seamstress. Lene Nimptsch is another ‘ordentlich’ and industrious working girl, intelligent, proud, economically and emotionally independent. Unlike Stine, who does not seem destined to survive her lover, and although her love for Botho is true and strong, Lene can and will live and make the best of her life as it is, even after Botho leaves her to get married. She takes full responsibility for all her actions, including her sexual relationships, confronts her fate with open eyes and, putting aside regrets, takes what happiness she can by accepting to marry a man she can trust.

To the female members of the Poggenpuhls family, who represent the lower, impoverished and financially doomed aristocracy, even the customary outlet of marriage is closed off for lack of dowries. The three sisters are resigned to this, and to the fact that every financial resource the family can muster must be directed to help their two brothers Wendelin and Leo to live in conformity with their rank of officers and, hopefully, in time to marry money. Given the strong military traditions of the Poggenpuhls, it would be impossible for the young men to choose any other career and for the young women to resist the mystique of patriotism, nationalism and family pride. However, Sophie and Manon, the two younger sisters, show some initiative and a new entrepreneurial spirit. Thanks to her artistic talent, and to the commissions Manon finds for her among her rich Jewish friends, Sophie is actually able to make some modest contribution to the family finances. Manon even plans a marriage between Leo and a Jewish friend of hers, and Leo himself would have no objections whatsoever to a marriage with a rich Jewess – supposing any of them would be willing to take anything less than an Arnim or a Bismarck! In fact, as a consequence of their rising financial fortunes and growing social standing during the Gründerjahre, many rich Jewish commercial families intermarried with the highest rank of the Prussian aristocracy. The new spirit of this new generation of aristocrats is also shown in the story of Herr von Klessentin, who, though belonging to an old family, has embraced the profession of actor (as does Hans von Rybinski in *Mathilde Möhring*). “These characters signal approaching social change, representing the attraction of Bohemianism to those too confined by a straitlaced society, whether aristocratic or middle class” (Garland, 1980, 235). Old General Poggenpuhl senses that his world is nearing its end and accepts this reality, while his niece Therese, the eldest of the sisters and the custodian of the family traditions, makes herself ridiculous with her preposterous and anachronistic pride (the different mental attitude of these two characters is exemplified in
their opposite reactions to the story of von Klessentin). Although the death of the general and his wife's generous provision for the Poggenpuhls improve their financial situation, it is clear that in the long run they do not stand a chance in this new, aggressive and acquisitive world. Their standard of life is already that of a lower middle class and the value and role of the aristocracy is already questioned by urban workers like the hall porter Nebelung.

If the urban aristocracy shows clear signs of decline, aristocrats living on their country estates still enjoy a position which appears secure, at least for the time being. And to this more stable condition corresponds a completely traditional view of woman's role and destiny. In Effi Briest, for example, marriage is a woman's only option, the only way she acquires and exercises a social role. Frau von Briest considers marriage as a bargain, a contract bringing to the woman certain social and material advantages, and this is the view she inculcates into her daughter. As a young woman she may have been very fond of von Innstetten, but, as he was an obscure officer, she opted for a more practical marriage to the landowner von Briest, showing herself thereby to be governed, notwithstanding her pedigree, by similar ambitions to those of Frau Jenny Treibel. Twenty years later the same Innstetten, who has become a successful civil servant and has considerably improved his financial position as well, has now established his credentials to become her daughter's husband. In the words with which Frau von Briest recommends the match to Effi there is more than a touch of envy and of regret for not having played her own cards well: "Er ist freilich älter als du, was alles in allem ein Glück ist, dazu ein Mann von Charakter, von Stellung und guten Sitten, und wenn du nicht nein sagst, was ich mir von meiner klugen Effi kaum denken kann, so stehst du mit zwanzig Jahren da, wo andere mit vierzig stehen. Du wirst deine Mama weit überholen." (VII, 180)

She takes on herself the task of making preparations for the wedding and buying what items are needed for Effi's future home in Kessin: "das handelte Frau von Briest mit ihrem Schwiegersohne". Effi's wishes are consulted and sometimes dismissed as childish and poetical. The mother seems well aware of Effi's extreme youth and does question her on whether she is really happy about her impending marriage and loves her fiancée; and her doubts about the suitability and future of the match persist and are revealed in the conversation she has with her husband after the wedding. She judges Effi's as an infantile, passionate and emotional nature which, however, is romantic only in a superficial way and has profited from her mother's example and influence enough not to take love too seriously: "sie gehört nicht zu denen, die so recht eigentlich auf Liebe gestellt sind, wenigstens nicht

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auf das, was den Namen ehrlich verdient” (VII, 199). At the same time, however, Frau von Briest also considers it “wohl möglich” that in the future love and romance may come into Effi’s life. She is also fully aware that a real danger lies in Effi’s inability to withstand boredom, and in Innstetten’s inability to understand her need for diversion, amusement, novelty and excitement: “Das wird eine Weile so gehen, ohne viel Schaden anzurechnen, aber zuletzt wird sie’s merken, und dann wird es sie beleidigen. Und dann weiß ich nicht, was geschieht. Denn so weich und nachgiebig sie ist, sie hat auch was Rabiates und läßt es auf alles ankommen.” (VII, 200). The only positive point is that Innstetten, a “Karrieremacher”, will certainly satisfy Effi’s social ambitions: but this, as she herself says, “ist erst die Hälfte”.

In conclusion, as Frau von Briest has so correctly assessed the present situation and anticipated future problems, it is therefore likely that she continued to pursue such an obviously unsuitable match for her daughter out of some strange, vicarious need to fulfil her own suppressed wishes. In Frau von Briest Fontane gives a masterly portrait of a contradictory female psyche. She sincerely loves her daughter but she sacrifices her to find a compensation for her own sentimental and social disappointments. She feels tenderly towards Effi and is often moved by her childlike, affectionate nature, but at the same time she seems to feel a sort of pitiful, patronising scorn for the childish aspects of her character. She judges Effi’s character correctly, but underestimates its potentialities and forgets that her lack of maturity can be the consequence of youth. She is dimly aware that she is not entirely blameless as regards Effi’s marriage, but she unhesitatingly and without appeal bans her daughter from her home as soon as the adultery is discovered. She had probably trusted that self-repression would be sufficient to keep Effi on the straight and narrow, as had happened with her, and that Effi could live without happiness, since her mother had. The whole issue of the relationship between Frau von Briest and her daughter illustrates Wharton’s belief that, to some extent, women are “cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers and long-dead ancestresses” (AI, 42).

Effi seems to have fully assimilated her mother’s ideas about marriage and sounds almost completely unsentimental when questioned about it. “Ich bin für gleich und gleich und natürlich auch für Zärtlichkeit und Liebe. Und wenn es Zärtlichkeit und Liebe nicht sein können, [...] dann bin ich für Reichtum und ein vornehmes Haus” (VII, 193), she says to her mother. She has clear if stereotyped ideas about what the “ideal man” should be “Jeder ist der Richtige. Natürlich muß er von Adel sein und eine Stellung haben und gut aussehen” (VII,
182). Her definition excludes any reference to feelings or similarity of character or interests, therefore from her point of view as from her mother’s Innstetten is the right man: “Geert ist ein Mann, ein schöner Mann, ein Mann, mit dem ich Staat machen kann und aus dem was wird in der Welt” (VII, 195). In her naivety she does not hesitate to be explicit even with her husband: “Du glaubst gar nicht, wie ehrgeizig ich bin. Ich habe dich eigentlich bloß aus Ehrgeiz geheiratet” (VII, 238).

Effi shares with Wharton’s heroines an upbringing aimed at making women well placed in the marriage market. Once married, the woman’s function was prevalently that of social ornament, of displayer of the husband’s wealth and facilitator – through her tact and skills as a hostess – of his career. This function Effi is ready to fulfil, as she will prove in her Berlin period. During these seven years she comes into her own as Geheimrätin, popular hostess, intimate friend to the wife of the Minister who is Innstetten’s superior, dame of honour to the Empress, noticed and addressed by the Emperor at court balls. She becomes in every respect the wife Innstetten needed and whom he can love. His pedagogic inclination had made it necessary for him to get himself a woman as young and influenceable as possible. This explains his strange proposal of marriage to a seventeen-year-old he has barely seen once and whose habits and mentality are completely alien to his: “she will be malleable enough to be shaped into the decorative and submissive wife of which he dreams. [...] For this Pygmalion the younger his Galatea the better.” (Garland, 1980, 175). He shares the Pygmalion attitude with Wharton’s men, who rejoice in the true or supposed innocence and inexperience of their affianced brides because they anticipate the pleasure of opening their eyes to the realities of life, of educating them, of instructing them taking them abroad, of guiding their readings, and of slowly transforming them into the ideal woman they have in mind.

If on one hand Innstetten wants to mould Effi, he on his part is completely moulded by what he calls “society”, which to him means the restricted aristocratic circle to which he belongs. He conforms so completely to the code of behaviour of this exclusive minority that he completely abjures the right/duty to make his decisions according to his own conscience and inclinations – and, as the Satisfaktionsfähigkeit, as we have seen, was a defining element of his class, he cannot contemplate not fighting the duel. His speech to Wüllersdorf is a fascinatingly clear and complete expression of a doctrine of social conformity which deprives human beings of personal responsibility and suppresses individuality. As Robinson says, “The characters in
Effi Briest tend to be direct products of their environment. In their conformity with the ethos of their caste they suggest analogies with primitive tribal society and its multiplicity of taboos as well as its dire retribution for all those who flout them” (1976, 175). This trait Fontane’s characters have in common with Wharton’s. In particular, Effi recalls Lily, who is also the perfect product of her environment, raised to be an ornament of society and a living symbol of the wealth and status of a husband. The product of loveless marriages in which the father is a secondary figure, they are both manipulated by their disappointed mothers into accepting a specific social model. They are both destroyed by their adultery—true in Effi’s case, only supposed in Lily’s—and are punished with the exclusion from their world. Once their social role is lost, they find that their life is deprived of activity of any kind and that therefore it loses meaning and value. Effi knows too well that her old world, including the beloved parental home of Hohen-Cremmen, is forever closed to her, as her mother had written to her in the letter announcing her disgrace, and she makes no attempt at re-entering it. She would like to help assist children of the lower class in the kindergartens set up by charities, but knows that the charitable ladies who run them would never allow a sinner like her to come in contact with children. Having no training and no abilities, there is no way for her “sich nützlich [zu] machen”: “Und das ist das schrecklisch, daß einem die Welt so zu ist und daß es sich einem sogar verbietet, bei Gutem mit dabei zu sein.” (VII, 401) She has the problem of filling long, useless days: “Was Tun? Sie las, sie stickte, sie legte Patience, sie spielte Chopin” (VII, 400). She has nobody to talk to except Roswitha, the old doctor Rummschüttel and later Rollo, her dog. She embraces painting with enthusiasm “weil sie nun eine Beschäftigung hatte” (VII, 402). When she tries to resume her role as mother the failure of her meeting with Annie wounds her to the quick. The only possibility of still enjoying a brief happiness comes when she is offered by her parents the possibility of returning to live with them. In her last year therefore Effi reverts to her role as daughter and only child, to her life as it had been before her sudden engagement, and to the only condition that had given her unalloyed happiness. Lily Bart too is ostracised by friends and family and made to understand what an insignificant cog in the immense social machine she had been. “Society did not turn away from her, it simply drifted by, preoccupied and inattentive, letting her feel, to the full measure of her humbled pride, how completely she had been the creature of its favour” (HM, 265). She comes to miss the thousand little trivialities of which her former life had consisted: “How pleasantly such obligations would have filled the emptiness of her
days!” When she tries to earn a living working in a milliner’s shop, she finds that she is completely unable, for lack of training, to perform any task however simple, and that it is too late for her to learn. Her situation is even more critical than Effi’s, because Effi in her exile is still supported by her parents, while Lily is in dire financial straits and has nobody to turn to, and moreover because Lily has no home, material or spiritual, to go back to.

Thus both Effi and Lily are too weak to create for themselves a meaningful life outside their original environment. For this they would have needed a “continuity of moral strength” that their upbringing has not developed. They die at thirty, Lily taking a chance with her drug in her desperate need for sleep, Effi catching cold when contemplating the starry sky for too long. They almost drift into death for sheer lack of the will to live, both craving rest and experiencing death as liberation and happiness. Both achieve through their suffering greater self-awareness, and also the realization of how completely the individual self is dependent on society – a foregone conclusion for both Fontane and Wharton. This is expressed in Effi’s last conversation with her mother: she is now convinced that Innstetten was justified in all he did, including the murdering of Crampas and the way he influenced Annie against her mother. “Was sollt’ er am Ende anders tun?” An individual who lives exclusively as a social persona, and for whom adherence to the conventions of aristocratic society is a kind of duty, failure to conform would have meant moral suicide. And Lily Bart is another individual totally dependent on society, who has experienced what it means to fall out of it. She explains her situation very lucidly in her last conversation with Selden: “I can hardly be said to have an independent existence. I was just a screw or a cog in the great machine I called life, and when I dropped out of it I found I was of no use anywhere else. What can one do when one finds that one only fits into one hole? One must get back to it or be thrown out into the rubbish-heap” (HM, 312).

Another mother who bears great responsibility for the unhappy destiny of a daughter is Cécile’s. “Frau von Zacha lachte, wenn sie hörte, daß ihre Töchter doch etwas lernen müßten. [...] Es stand fest für sie, daß eine junge schöne Dame nur dazu da sei, zu gefallen, und zu diesem Zwecke sei wenig wissen besser als viel. Und so lernten sie nichts.” (IV, 254). At sixteen the beautiful Cécile was seen by an old prince who without difficulty arranged with her mother for Cécile to move into his castle with the official function of reader to the princess. After the princess’s death her reader had simply stayed on as the widower’s official mistress, and when the prince had died she had been inherited, together with the castle and
the estate, by his nephew, after whose death Cécile had gone back to her mother’s. She represents therefore an even more extreme case than Effi and Lily, who were brought up to be the wives of affluent men, to be queens of society and not to have a head too much encumbered with ideas and culture, but whose mothers would never have even remotely contemplated the idea of selling their daughters as concubines. Moreover, Cécile’s ignorance is perhaps even more extreme than that of Lily and Effi: it is so great that it is immediately noticeable to anybody who comes in touch with her. Gordon is immediately intrigued by her naivety which in his eyes adds to her mystery and her attraction. He writes to his sister Clothilde, whom he wishes to find out more about this singular woman: “Was durchaus frappieren muß, ist das naive Minimalmaß ihrer Bildung. Sie spricht gut französisch (recht gut) und versteht ein wenig von Musik. [...] Was nicht in französischen Romanen und italienischen Opern vorkommt, das weiß sie nicht. [...] Überhaupt voller Gegensätze: Dame von Welt und dann wieder voll Kindersinn” (IV, 170-1). So, after all, she can only imperfectly fulfil the task of being a social ornament because, as she does not understand cultural references, she cannot be involved in a conversation dealing with other than personal matters. She has been reared to be admired for her beauty and to perform sexual duties, and she fulfilled these obligations, but she cannot go beyond these limits. In this she resembles Undine Spragg, the protagonist of Wharton’s *The Custom of the Country*, who finds out that her beauty is not enough, in cultivated Parisian circles, to sustain either the initial interest and admiration it invariably raises at all her first appearances in a group, or the love of the men who fall for her.

Cécile is, like Lily Bart and Effi Briest, the victim of environmental influences and a helpless organism destroyed by the relentless social machine. Although she is a woman with a past, she has managed to keep herself strangely pure. She possesses, as Gordon recognises, “eine vornehme Haltung und ein feines Gefühl, will sagen ein Herz” (IV, 170). Her spirituality, her religious concerns and her remorse for her past life and for its tragic consequences are genuine; it is clear that her mistakes were due to her extreme youth and inexperience and the lack of any kind of moral guidance. For society, however, she remains a woman who has sinned and must therefore be ostracised. Even for Gordon, who loves her and seems at first capable of understanding and pitying her, she is somehow cheapened by his discovery of her past: she becomes in his eyes automatically less worthy of respect, perhaps even more sexually available. Society gives her no comprehension, no tolerance and no love, and in the few words Cécile
writes before committing suicide she refers to the disreputable part of her life as the only period when she received from anyone "Liebe und Freundschaft, und um der Liebe willen auch Achtung" (IV, 284).

*Der Stechlin*, Fontane's last novel, is a *Zeitroman* exploring the signs of change in Prussian society. Although this is in a profound crisis, the presence of new ideological ferment is undeniable. They are evident even in the old protagonist, Dubslav von Stechlin, in whom "the limitations and weaknesses of his class are offset by solid virtues and a humane tolerance which seem to point forward to the possibility of a new and finer role in society for the coming generation, symbolised by his son Woldemar. By upbringing Dubslav instinctively stands for the old Prussian values of 'Königtum, Luthertum, Adel und Armee', but in the serenity of old age he opens his mind to new ideas and, like Fontane, is prepared to question the validity of everything in the world around him. [...] In his relationship with his servants and other representatives of the humbler classes Dubslav is a paragon of natural courtesy and goodwill. [...] The same tolerance on principle is extended to other races and confessions as well as to other classes." (Robinson, 1976, 176–7) Another important sign of change and progress is also the liberalism of Pastor Lorenzen, shared by Woldemar. They believe in a more dynamic society, where the value of an individual is determined not by birth and inherited social position but by the level all individuals find for themselves. The old Prussian aristocracy is shown to be incapable of adapting to the new era because they are wrapped in the delusion of being indispensable and eternal.

It is another important sign of change that Lorenzen’s ideas – which are Fontane’s – are expressed in a conversation with Melusine von Barby, one of the two female protagonists, an unconventional young aristocrat who shows independence of mind an interest and understanding of social and political matters. For all her charm and intelligence, of which all the men who come in contact with her are well aware, Melusine is not however the woman Woldemar von Stechlin will choose as his bride: after considerable wavering between the two sisters, he decides in favour of Armgard. His choice is not dictated by economic considerations but by a careful judgement of her character and by his realization that, whilst there is an affinity between him and Armgard, there is not a real one between him and Melusine. Indeed, among Fontane’s female characters Melusine is in my view the one who best embodies the elemental, *Naturkind* quality Alan Bance (1982) finds in them. It is impossible to escape the suggestions contained in her name, that of the creature who was half
woman and half serpent, suggestions which are somewhat reinforced by a few other elements of her characterization: she is charming and vivacious and perceived by the other characters as an embodiment of the life-spirit itself; she is passionate and impulsive and has in her speech and opinions the ardent quality of the fire-works she loves, but at the same time she is as cold as other water-women, as is proved both by her marriage to an Italian count, – which, apparently, did not survive the first hours of honeymoon! – and by her admission that she is not made for the matrimonial status; finally, she explicitly declares her love for paganism. All this contributes to making her a being strictly connected to nature and to elemental forces, both in a positive and in a negative sense. She is clearly meant as a foil for her younger sister Armgard, pale, selfless, innocent, charitable and who will unwaveringly strive to follow in her life the example of the saintly and by her admired Elisabeth of Thuringia. As Bance remarks, “Fontane is making use of a very well established Romantic motif when he makes Woldemar choose between the two women: a conflict between the claims of the imagination (promising both genuine insight and also the possibility of fatal confusion) and those of common reality” (1982, 207). By choosing Armgard Woldemar wisely opts for a woman who can share the life to which he feels attracted and is most suited, who can be a companion to him and a partner in the tasks he has decided to embrace (he wants to resign his commission, leave Berlin and settle permanently in the country to lead the life of the landowner). His choice of wife decides what kind of man he is going to be, and his situation is therefore similar to that of Newland Archer in Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence*, who, torn between Ellen – the poetry of life – and May – the claims of reality – opts for the second.

Woldemar’s harmonious, promising choice echoes the marriage of Lewin von Vitzewitz and Marie Kniehase in Fontane’s very first novel, *Vor dem Sturm*. In this novel marriage has always to do with love, never with materialistic considerations. Renate loves Tubal, Lewin and Marie love one another, Othegraden loves Marie and proposes to her even though she is merely the daughter of a wandering performer who has been adopted and brought up by the mayor of the village – therefore, certainly not a great match from a social point of view. Marie refuses Othegraden because she knows she is not in love with him and nobody reproaches her for it. Berndt von Vitzewitz, who loved his wife and worships her memory, understands the feeling his son Lewin has for Marie, makes no objection to their marriage and receives Marie as a ‘princess’ destined to bring new fortune to their house. Everybody understands and respects the reasons that move both the commoner Referendär Othegraden and the aristocratic Lewin to
propose to Marie, and General Bamme, a friend of Bernd’s, makes a very significant speech in which he too, like Berndt, sees Lewin and Marie’s marriage as a sign of new and better times, of hope and renewal. Thus both Berndt and Bamme, though members of the old order, show that they can understand and approve of the changes they see occurring in society.

Even the proud and ambitious Kathinka gives all for love: she runs away with a Polish Count, whom her father has rejected as her suitor, and abandons her family, home, social position, country and religion for his sake. Only Tante Amelie regards marriage in the cold light of economic and social convenience, and consequently tries to orchestrate a double match between her nephews and nieces, matching Lewin and Kathinka and Renate and Tubal. Both these apparently neat arrangements will fail. But Tante Amelie represents in the novel a discredited past: a past of subjection to and unquestioning assimilation of the alien French culture, which appears completely anachronistic in the context of the War of Liberation against Napoleon, and of the effort to create, together with a German political identity, also a German literary and cultural tradition.

Also in Schach von Wuthenow marriage is viewed by the protagonist as a move in the social game, whilst the two women involved – Victoria von Carayon and her mother – are straightforward, upright characters capable of strong and genuine feelings and intense loyalty towards one another, even though they are both in love with Schach. This affectionate mother/daughter relationship and the way the two women put personal feelings above every other consideration contrasts sharply with masculine values in the novel. Schach is attracted to both but they are not rich and marriage to either of them would be a liability from the social point of view. This type of consideration is paramount with him. He is ambitious, a careerist endowed with physical but no moral courage (he shoots himself rather than stand ridicule). Like Innstetten and St. Arnaud, he is a victim of the Prussian military concept of honour. It is doubtful that we are meant to espouse completely Bülow’s opinions and in particular his judgement of Schach. Nevertheless, it is difficult not to agree with him when, in his letter relating Schach’s suicide, he sees Schach as an embodiment of this false principle of honour and of that “Welt des Scheins” which in his view is the ultimate cause of the destruction of Prussia.

It will be useful, by way of concluding this brief analysis of Fontane’s treatment of female characters, to summarise some interesting remarks Alan Bance makes on this topic. He sees Fontane’s women as representatives of the poetic in the bourgeois, male-dominated and
prosaic world which keeps them marginalised. "Females are at the heart of Fontane’s social criticism. They are natural standard-bearers of the poetic, if for no other reason than that they are excluded from the world of independent action, heroic or otherwise, and dependent upon the man-made rulers of their age. This very dependence adds to their charm, even if it results in ignorance (the normal condition of women, even in good society, relative to their male counterparts) or childishness. [...] Women possess an irresponsibility related to the irregular position of the writer himself, in opposition to bourgeois gravity and calculation, essentially the male preserve” (1982, 30–31). Sometimes their very exclusion from the active world and from power fosters nonconformist attitudes in matters of morals and of thought. Moreover, “they do possess an elemental quality” and “their very existence as Naturkinder [...] argues the supremacy of natural justice against the distortions of the man-made variety” (1982, 31). Bance does recognise that “Fontane’s Naturkind heroines are as fully conditioned, as fully implicated in social convention as are his male characters” (1982, 71), but he rightly stresses an important difference between the position of men and women in Fontane’s world:

Females are not the active principle in society, and they therefore fall more readily into the role of victim. There is a margin of affectionate imagination allowed to them because they have even less room to manoeuvre than the males, so that the limitations under which females suffer are less clearly self imposed. Whereas in the case of Fontane’s males unrealised potential is usually presented in a manner which is critical of them, in the case of his heroines it is seen both as a criticism of society, and the product of a particular historical moment which tragically curtails their development. (1982, 72).

As already indicated, Wharton adopts a similar stance: she fully describes the limitations and inadequacies of her unheroic heroes, whilst at the same time showing that men, like women, are the product of historically determined social conditions, and as such subject to some extent to the limitations of the roles and rules prescribed for them by society. Within these limits, however, men do have more options open to them than women have, as even Lily Bart appears aware of, when she compares her situation to Selden’s in the first pages of The House of Mirth.

Thus far I have been concerned to trace thematic affinities between Fontane’s Berlin novels and Wharton’s New York fiction. In the closing phase of my argument I wish to shift the focus of attention to questions of literary mode and technique. To this end, I wish to concentrate on two particular novels: Irrungen, Wirrungen and The Age of Innocence.
3.7. A study of *Irrungen, Wirrungen* and *The Age of Innocence*

There are great similarities between *Irrungen, Wirrungen* and *The Age of Innocence*. They can be subsumed under the following headings: 1. the central situation and theme; 2. the dating of the story; 3. the construction of the text; 4. the characterization of the male protagonists and of the two pairs of heroines.

3.7.1. The central situation

In both novels there is a male protagonist belonging to the upper class of his society and involved in a romantic triangle. This is formed in *Irrungen, Wirrungen* by Botho von Rienäcker, his cousin, then wife, Käthe von Sellenthin and his mistress Lene Nimptsch. In Wharton's novel the triangle consists of Newland Archer, his fiancée, then wife, May Welland, and Ellen Olenska, whom everyone believes to be his mistress. Both men are genuinely and profoundly in love with the 'wrong' woman but end up marrying the one they are bound to by social reasons.

Botho is a member of the aristocracy and a captain of the Guards, one of the most prestigious (and expensive) military corps. He lives in an elegantly furnished apartment and has the tastes of an art connoisseur. Unfortunately, his father squandered most of the family patrimony and he himself, Botho, lives beyond his means. His only way to repair his and his family's fortunes is to marry money. Naturally, in his case money would only be acceptable if accompanied by pedigree, and his choice has already been made for him by his family, who want him to marry his rich, young, beautiful and blonde cousin Käthe. When the novel opens, there is already a kind of tacit engagement between the two cousins, which has existed since they were children. Due to the desperate economic situation of the Rienäckers, Botho now finds himself urged to marry quickly both by his uncle's visit and by his mother's eloquent letter. He has the obligation to keep up the family's name, to improve its financial situation, to provide for his younger brothers, to keep his word to his cousin and to ensure, through his children, the continuation of his house. His marriage is much more than a personal matter, it is a duty to be fulfilled, and it is a proof of allegiance to the rules that govern social relationships in his class. The reason why he hesitates to do what he feels he ought to do is that he is deeply in love with Lene, with whom he has lived a summer of total bliss. She is perfectly aware that there is no
future for their love, does not for one moment question his motives for marrying and tries to make the break as smooth and painless as possible. They never meet again after his marriage and finally Lene marries too.

When *The Age of Innocence* opens, Newland Archer has just got engaged to May Welland, a young girl belonging, as he does, to New York's upper class and whom he has known all his life. May is absolutely perfect as a prospective wife. She is rich, young, beautiful and blonde, belongs to his social class, shares his values and traditions and is certainly going to be a dutiful mother of healthy children. That same night he meets Ellen. He then rapidly falls in love with her. When he finds out that she reciprocates his feelings, he finds himself incapable of breaking his promise of marriage to May, and is urged by Ellen not to destroy the happiness of May, of her family and of Newland's family, who all expect and rejoice in the match. After his marriage she resists his attempts to initiate an affair and finally goes back to Europe.

### 3.7.2. Setting and time-span

Both novels are set in the 1870s. *The Age of Innocence* starts "On a January evening of the early seventies" (AI, 7). As Newland Archer receives, in his shipment of books from London, a copy of the newly-published *Middlemarch*, we can easily date the beginning of the story at the beginning of 1873. Book One covers the period January–March, the crucial weeks when Newland falls in love with Ellen while simultaneously committing himself to an early marriage to May. Book Two starts with their wedding and then shows their honeymoon in Europe throughout the summer and autumn, Newland's first misgivings about his relationship to his wife and his resignation to the life he has chosen. Chapter 21 opens after a gap of nearly a year and we find the couple in August at Newport, where Newland by chance sees Ellen again. They have a few fleeting meetings during the winter, and Newland decides to break up his marriage and follow Ellen to Europe. Chapter 32 shows the second performance of 'Faust' – exactly two years after the fatal first one – and Chapter 33 describes the party May gives in honour of Ellen, who's going back to Europe, and May's announcement of her pregnancy. Chapter 34 constitutes an epilogue set thirty years later: Newland Archer remembers his past and tries to make sense of his life and of his renunciation.

The chronology in Fontane's novel is even more precise. *Irrungen, Wirrungen* starts "in der Mitte der siebziger Jahre", "die Woche nach Pfingsten" (III, 95) therefore in June 1875. It is
the zenith of Lene and Botho’s love story, a story which, as Lene tells Frau Dörr, has started a few weeks earlier, “den zweiten Ostertag” (III, 104), after a chance meeting on the Spree. A week later Botho is summoned by his uncle to dine with him, and receives a reprimand for his hesitations concerning his marriage. The following day he and Lene and Frau Dörr go for a walk to Wilmersdorf and a few weeks later the trip to Hankels Ablage takes place. The following morning Botho receives his mother’s letter dated 29 June 1875. The following day he and Lene meet for the last time. About two months elapse, then Chapter Sixteen opens with the announcement of the wedding: “Mitte September hatte die Verheiratung auf dem Sellenthinschen Gute Rothenmoor stattgefunden” (III, 176). The young couple honeymoon in Dresden for two weeks and “zu Beginn des Oktobers” come back to Berlin and take possession of the elegant apartment chosen and furnished by Käthe’s mother. “In die dritte Oktoberwoche” Lene, unseen, sees Botho and Käthe together and receives such a shock that she and her mother immediately move to another part of the town. After a gap of two and a half years, Chapter Seventeen shows at first the situation in the third year of Botho’s marriage (“Drittehalb Jahre waren seit jener Begegnung vergangen”, III, 182) and then tells about the new life of Lene and Frau Nimptsch and the appearance on the scene of Gideon Franke, a new admirer and prospective suitor for Lene. Chapter Eighteen brings us back to the main action: “Nun war Juni 78” (III, 189). On the 24th Käthe leaves for Schlangenbad, baths being supposed to cure infertility. At the end of the month, when she is about to return, Botho is visited by Gideon Franke and must confront again his memories of Lene. The result is his visit to Frau Nimpstch’s grave and the burning of his mementos of Lene: a symbolic definitive burial of his love. The symbolism is reinforced in the last chapter of the novel (XXVI), when Käthe on her return gives the ashes a second burning! The novel ends with her reading the newspaper announcement of Lene’s wedding to her embarrassed husband.

3.7.3. Construction

The development of the relationships within the two triangles is presented in phases which are very similar in both novels. A first part (Book One in The Age of Innocence, Chapters I – XV in Irrungen, Wirrungen) is occupied by the description of the love-story between the man and the ‘wrong’ woman, and terminates with its apparent end. The second part opens with the wedding
to the ‘fair’ woman and contains the description of the honeymoon, with the man’s first dismay at the discoveries about his wife’s character.

A gap follows in both novels, and the reader is then presented with a portrait of the marriage in its first period. Both men have relegated the woman they loved to a corner of their memory and try hard to make the best of the existence they have chosen.

Then a crisis ensues, brought about by the reappearance in the life of the protagonist of the ‘dark’ woman: it is a physical return in *The Age of Innocence*, in which Newland and Ellen secretly meet a few times; a spiritual one in *Irrungen, Wirrungen*, where Botho receives the visit of Lene’s prospective husband. This crisis ends with Newland’s and Botho’s definitive loss of the woman they love: Ellen goes back to Europe, Lene gets married.

Although Botho has made his choice in a spirit of complete resignation and determined to make the best of his lot, already during the honeymoon, as he starts making his wife’s acquaintance, some aspects of her personality jar somewhat on his nerves: “An allem ergötzte sie sich und allem gewann sie die heitre Seite ab. [...] Botho freute sich mit und lachte herzlich, bis sich mit einem Male doch etwas von Bedenken und selbst von Unbehagen in sein Lachen einzumischen begann”. (III, 176-7)

Botho loves art, and during their two weeks in Dresden they visit the city’s famous galleries and churches. This is far from being to Käthe’s tastes, who finds all this sightseeing tiring, and when her husband asks her what she liked most in Dresden, her answer shows her to be empty-headed and completely devoid of cultural tastes – which does not promise much soul-kinship in their marriage. And this conversation leaves Botho a little nervous and uneasy: “Und damit brach auf Minuten hin ihr Gespräch ab, daß in Bothos Seele, so zärtlich und liebevoll er zu der jungen Frau hinübersah, doch einigermassen ängstlich nachklang” (III, 178).

Botho has married for money, and his financial dependency is suggested in subtle ways. The young couple, for example, goes to live in a flat chosen, bought and furnished and decorated by Käthe’s mother. It is to his credit that, notwithstanding his new affluence, he does not give up his commission in the army but continues to pursue his military career – the duties of which at any rate only engage him in the morning.

In Chapter XVII we are shown the couple three years later, now settled down in the routine of married life. “Der Frohmut der Flitterwochen war geblieben, und Käthe lachte nach wie vor” (III, 182). They have had no children, but she does not care about it, and declares that
she is happy to leave to Botho’s brother – who is now in a position to marry – the task of perpetuating the name of the Rienäckers.

Botho sah es anders an, aber auch sein Glück wurde durch das, was fehlte, nicht sonderlich getrübt, und wenn ihn trotzdem von Zeit zu Zeit eine Mißstimmung anwandte, so war es, wie schon damals auf seiner Dresdner Hochzeitreise, vorwiegend darüber, daß mit Käthe wohl ein leidlich vernünftiges, aber durchaus kein ernstes Wort zu reden war (III, 183).

She seems unable to take anything seriously and is always incorrigibly superficial in whatever she says and does, “als ob sie der Fähigkeit entbehrt hätte, zwischen wichtigen und unwichtigen Dingen zu unterscheiden.” What is more, she regards this trait of hers, of which she is fully aware, as a gift and a distinction, does not want to change and ridicules Botho’s disapproval. Inevitably, Botho – and the reader – are reminded by contrast of Lene, whom Botho has relegated to an obscure corner of his memory.

Lene mit ihrer Einfachheit, Wahrheit und Unredensartlichkeit stand ihm öfters vor der Seele, schwand aber ebenso rasch wieder hin, und nur wenn Zufälligkeiten einen ganz bestimmten Vorfall in aller Lebendigkeit wieder in ihm wachriefen, kam ihm mit dieser grösseren Lebendigkeit des Bildes auch wohl ein stärkeres Gefühl und mitunter selbst eine Verlegenheit (III, 183).

Nevertheless, Botho cannot be considered an unhappy man, nor does he regards himself as one. Both he and his wife, as the narrator says, “hattten nicht Ursache, ihre Wahl zu bereuen, am wenigsten Botho, der sich jeden Tag nicht nur zu dem Dresdner Aufenthalt, sondern vielmehr noch zu dem Besitze seiner jungen Frau beglückwünschte, die Kapricen und üble Laune gar nicht zu kennen schien” (III, 176).

However, by the time Käthe leaves for the spa (nearly three years after the wedding) Botho is starting to show that he has had nearly enough of his wife’s perpetual merriness and unremitting chatter. This has by now become evident to his friends, as it appears the evening before her leaving, when Wedell, Serge, Pitt, Balafre and young Osten are invited to dine with the Rienäckers. “Botho, den das enorme Sprechtalent seiner Frau zu genieren anfing, suchte durch kleine Schraubereien ihrer Schwatzhaftigkeit Einhalt zu tun” (III, 192). While going home with Pitt, Serge expresses his disapproval of Botho: what can he have against such “reisende kleine Frau?” The more perceptive Pitt sums up the problem: “She is rather a little silly. Oder wenn du’s deutsch hören willst: sie dalbert ein biißchen. Jedenfalls ihm zuviel.” (III, 194) So far, however, the marriage has brought nothing unbearable for Botho, and he has also successfully repressed the memory of Lene. Gideon Franke’s visit, however, brings “das alles
wieder vor seiner Seele” and prompts a reflection about his whole life since the end of their relationship. Feelings he had long kept at bay come back to stir his mind. The false peace of mind in which he has lived the last three years is suddenly shattered. The narrator expresses these emotions in words full of humane sympathy. In fact, Botho’s grief is shown, rather than described, in brief and poignant dramatic images. While he is going to visit Frau Nimptsch’s grave, he hears a song sung in the street and recognises tune and words.

Es war dasselbe Lied, das sie damals auf dem Wilmersdorfer Spaziergange so heiter und so glücklich gesungen hatten [...]
Botho, die Stirn in die Hand drückend, warf sich in die Droschke zurück und ein Gefühl, unendlich süß und unendlich schmerzlich, ergriff ihn. Aber freilich das Schmerzliche wog vor und fiel erst ab von ihm, als die Stadt hinter ihm lag und fern am Horizont im blauen Mittagsdämmer die Müggelberge sichtbar wurden (III, 211-12).

The intensity of this sorrow gives the measure of the self-repression Botho had exerted since his marriage.

Back in his apartment he is haunted by the thought that his wife is due back shortly, perhaps even now travelling back without notice to give him a surprise. He feels suffocated, trapped, he finds himself praying to God that she does not come back today, and irresistibly drawn to remember Lene and their last days together, “die letzte schöne Stunde”.


This is an admission that the memory of Lene is at the bottom of his unrest and of his unvoiced dissatisfaction with his marriage. He burns Lene’s letters, thus sacrificing “seinen besten Schatz” to the search for peace.

The following day he is still intent on coming to terms with his past and his present, trying to make sense of his feelings and being at the same time fully aware of their contradictoriness. “Unser Herz hat Platz für allerlei Widersprüche...Sie dalbert, nun ja, aber eine dalbrige junge Frau ist immer noch besser als keine” (III, 217). But, remembering his farewell to Lene three years earlier, he must confess that he has sacrificed his real chance of happiness.

Nevertheless, in his conversation with Rexin – which is the real epilogue to the love-story, and its epitaph – Botho defends the choice he made, and prefers it to the alternative his younger friend would like to opt for (that is, live with his mistress without marrying her in order not to break with society). Such “Mittellkurs” is still for Botho out of the question. Giving up “Stand und Herkommen und Sitt” means giving up one’s identity and becoming, in the long run “ein Greul und eine Last”. A relationship outside society cannot thrive and is doomed to end up in a split.

At a certain point he seems to be speaking of his own case, of what the consequences of his love story with Lene are for his present life:

Es fällt nie zum Guten, auch wenn außerlich alles glatt abläuft und keine Verwünschung ausgesprochen und kaum ein stiller Vorwurf erhoben wird. Und es kann auch nicht anders sein. Denn alles hat seine natürliche Konsequenz, dessen müssen wir eingedenk sein. Es kann nichts ungeschehen gemacht werden und ein Bild, das uns in die Seele gegraben wurde, verblaßt nie ganz wieder, schwindet nie ganz wieder dahin. Erinnerungen bleiben und Vergleiche kommen. (Ill, 221-2).

Here Botho seems almost to regret having met and loved Lene. Her image cannot be deleted from his soul and he cannot help comparing her to Käthe. Although she never asked anything of him and never reproached him she nevertheless bound him irrevocably to herself. “Ob ich nun frei bin?…Will ich’s denn? Ich will es nicht. Alles Asche. Und doch gebunden.” (III, 215) The turmoil caused by Gideon Franke’s visit has made him become aware of his situation.

Newland Archer’s honeymoon and early married life goes through stages very similar to those described in Botho’s. To start with, Archer, who, during the courtship, had pictured himself reading Faust with May on the Italian lakes, must soon realise that his wife has no interest whatsoever in Italy, in art, in culture and in all that Europe represents for him.

They had not gone to the Italian lakes: on reflection, Archer had not been able to picture his wife in that particular setting. Her own inclination (after a month with the Paris dressmakers) was for mountaineering in July and swimming in August. [...] In London nothing interested her but the theatres and the shops; and she found the theatres less exciting than the Paris café chantants (Al, 164).

He quickly resigns himself to the idea that “his artistic and intellectual life would go on, as it always had, outside the domestic circle”. And, for him as for Botho, the hope remains that, one day, there will be children to fill the gap between him and his wife and to give meaning to
their marriage: “When they had children the vacant corners in both their lives would be filled” (AI, 165). Already in the first months, however, he begins “to fear his tendency to dwell on the things he disliked in her”. He perceives with “a flash of chilling insight” that in the future much of his life will be decided on by his wife and organised according to her needs and wishes; and feels that “the worst of it was that May’s pressure was already bearing on the very angles whose sharpness he most wanted to keep” (AI, 171).

However, it cannot be said that Newland feels unhappy in his marriage.

He could not say that he had been mistaken in his choice, for she had fulfilled all that he had expected. It was undoubtedly gratifying to be the husband of one of the handsomest and most popular young married women in New York, especially when she was also one of the sweetest-tempered and most reasonable of wives (AI, 174).

Back home after the honeymoon, the young couple settle down in the house bought for them by May’s parents, furnished by her as a faithful reproduction of her parental home and in which she clearly expects Newland to play the same role as her father: that of the revered and pampered lord and master, whose every wish is to be obeyed, but who is not expected to wish for anything his womenfolk do not wish for.

Although Newland, in contrast to Botho, is financially well off and has not married for money, he still comes to find himself in a position of dependence on May’s parents, who are very generous towards their only daughter. They, and May too, take it as a matter of course that the marriage simply means that their family has acquired in Newland a new member who is expected to conform to their rules and accept their routine. After the gap, we find the young couple in August as guests in the Wellands’ Newport summer house. Newland has been completely appropriated by them and has lost the strength to react. “There was something about the luxury of the Welland house and the density of the Welland atmosphere, so charged with minute observances and exactions, that always stole into his system like a narcotic” (AI, 183).

“What am I? A son-in-law’ Archer thought” (AI, 181). This desolate flash of self-insight on the part of Newland reminds of a similar passage in Irrungen, Wirrungen, in which both the narratorial comments and Botho’s self-analysis highlight his sense of powerlessness and of inadequacy:

Es stand nicht gut mit dem Rienäckerschen Vermogen, und Verlegenheiten waren da, die durch eigne Klugheit und Energie zu heben er durchhaus nicht die Kraft in sich fühlte. “Wer bin ich? Durchschnittsmensch aus
der sogenannten Obersphäre der Gesellschaft. Und was kann ich? Ich kann ein Pferd stallmeistern, einen Kapaun tranchieren und ein jeu machen” (III, 169).

In Archer’s world – in contrast to Botho’s world – it is taken for granted that a man must have an occupation. In his case therefore there has never been any doubt that he would continue to practise the law even after his marriage. His duties, however, are not much more exacting than Botho’s, and his is only the semblance of a professional life. In both cases these self-imposed duties serve to keep up a pretence of social usefulness and of individual purpose in their lives.

Like Lene for Botho, Ellen is now only a memory for Newland. “As for the momentary madness which had fallen upon him on the eve of his marriage, he had trained himself to regard it as the last of his discarded experiments” (AI, 174). For him as for Botho, marriage is a serious contract implying the severance of all previous liaisons.

Newland’s precarious emotional balance is however irremediably broken the moment he finds out that Ellen too is in Newport on a brief visit. He is drawn to her again and starts arranging clandestine meetings which obviously do not go unobserved. His perception of his marriage changes: he is struck by the “deadly monotony” of his and May’s life, and feels an impetus of rebellion against the routine she has imposed on him. “She had spent her poetry and romance on their short courting: the function was exhausted because the need was past. Now she was simply ripening into a copy of her mother, and mysteriously, by the very process, trying to turn him into a Mr. Welland” (AI, 246). In a scene reminiscent of the one in Irrungen, Wirrungen which I have discussed, Newland, reflecting that his life seems to have already taken a final and irrevocable shape, experiences a sudden feeling of suffocation and rushes to the window to find physical and psychological relief in the cold winter air and in the vision of a waste of chimneys and roofs which remind him that there is, after all, still a world beyond the narrow horizon of his own.

Newland’s final renunciation is justified in the concluding chapter, where we are shown the good that has come of it and made to understand that the meaning of that episode at the beginning of his married life is that it made a good man of him. Still, “Something he knew he had missed: the flower of life” (AI, 289). It is impossible not to feel that, in those days when he was struggling to believe that another, different existence, with Ellen and in another country, was still possible for him, Newland was actually fighting for dear life, fighting to keep faithful to his real self. By opting for a constricted life with May, he has inevitably resigned himself to become a Mr. Welland – although a more intelligent and socially committed one. Ellen
becomes again and forever an idealised image, "the composite vision of all that he had missed" (AI, 289), the unfulfilled promise of a larger life. And his final decision not to meet Ellen in Paris is also due to the feeling of personal inadequacy he experiences when he reflects on how richer and more stimulating a life than his Ellen must have led in the thirty years of their separation.

Newland’s loss however seems compensated by the impending birth of his child. His love story ends therefore on a note of hope and the last chapter shows him justified in the choice he made and satisfied with the life he has led. The fact that this epilogue is set thirty years after the main events allows the reader to see that, although the New York of Newland’s youth has faded, a new world has risen from the ruins, and to that new world he has established a link through his children. Archer therefore illustrates the possibility of human happiness and goodness within the rigid boundaries of social life.

In Irrungen, Wirrungen too there is a chapter (XXIII) where the protagonist in a way evaluates his experience. In his talk with Rexin Botho defends his choice and exhorts his friend not to look for happiness outside the frame of social values, because that would simply lead him to break his own heart and others’. In the following chapters, with Käthe’s return, we see Botho, having passed a personal milestone, settling down once again to enjoy what happiness his marriage can offer him. We might speculate that, with the relics of the past disposed of, and with Käthe’s return from a cure that was supposed to help conception somehow, Botho too can look forward to paternity and a semblance of harmonious family life. This, however, is not in the text. What is left to Botho is a handful of dust, a wreath on a grave and an announcement in the newspaper which prompts his wife’s hilarity and on his part, a reply that is a confession not only of inadequacy but also, I think, of defeat: "Was hast du nur gegen Gideon, Käthe? Gideon ist besser als Botho" (III, 232).

Both Irrungen, Wirrungen and The Age of Innocence pose in very clear terms the dilemma of the dualism of self and society and both solve it in favour of a socially integrated existence. In both works it is made absolutely clear that the love that tied Botho to Lene and Newland to Ellen was genuine, profound and rooted in a kinship of feeling and interests of which they are conscious. But in the last resort both protagonists obey the rules of the social game; they succumb to the conviction of not being able to function outside social boundaries; in consequence their self-confidence is undermined, and they are unable to develop the possibilities latent in their character. Yet both novels suggest that the full development of all
latent possibilities is simply unachievable by any human being, that it is impossible to unfold and expand in all directions and that we must renounce a part of our soul in order to survive with what is left. Renunciation is central to both novels; but there is an important difference in the way they express this doctrine of renunciation. In *The Age of Innocence* the solution to the dilemma is expressed in less ambiguous terms and Wharton comes out more decidedly in favour of the moral order of the world. She shows that the self can effect a union with the surrounding world without completely effacing itself; in fact, that an equilibrium with the world and with others is necessary to reach an equilibrium with ourselves. The meaning of Newland’s renunciation is clear and his balance sheet of gains and losses is on the whole positive, whilst in Botho’s case his renunciation only brings about material gains for him and his family, not the warmth of family life, resignation, but not serenity. But perhaps the most striking difference is that, although his marriage preserves for Botho his social role with all his privileges, he nevertheless appears fundamentally disconnected and displaced, the typical representative of a class that has become superfluous because it no longer performs a useful social function. Newland, on the contrary, has, through his love affair with Ellen and his renunciation of it, discovered a *vocation*, the very modest but unequivocally useful one of being an actively good citizen, a good husband and a father deeply involved in the education of his children. During his life he has kept himself busy at home and abroad and done his best within the limited sphere allotted to him. It is impossible therefore not to see in the conclusion of *The Age of Innocence* the influence of *Wanderjahre*, not only with its theme of “Entsagung” but also to some extent with that of the necessity for the self to become “accommodated” in society by choosing an activity or a profession which is useful and meaningful in the service of society.

### 3.7.4. The female characters

In *The Age of Innocence* the point of view remains rigorously that of the male protagonist, Newland Archer. There are no incursions into Ellen’s and May’s mind. The reader may however perceive something of their true feelings by interpreting signs that the self-absorbed Newland sees without understanding. The narrator is detached and ironical, takes his distance from the focal character and sometimes even makes open fun of him. In *Irrungen, Wirrungen* most of the story is told from Botho’s perspective, with the exception of some chapters in which Lene is the focus of narration. The sympathetic narrator intervenes to support the reader’s
observations, confirm the perceptions of these characters and clarify their feelings, but never in an obtrusive way. Here too, however, there is a significant omission: the character of Käthe remains unexplored, and for its interpretation we can only use snatches of dialogues as a clue.

In both novels the contrast between the ‘good’ woman and the ‘bad one’ is underlined by the fact that both May and Käthe have golden hair, whilst Ellen is a brunette and Lene an “Aschenblondine”. In Irrungen, Wirrungen the contrast is perceived by Serge and Balafré who use it as motive for a joke: Käthe is a “wundervolle Flachsblondine mit Vergißmeinnichtaugen”, but unfortunately for him Rienäcker is “in einen andren Farbenton und zwar ins Aschfarbene gefallen” (III, 132). Käthe’s blondness and good looks are insisted upon because they are emblematic of her character: “Sie lachte den ganzen Tag über und so leuchtend und hellblond sie war, so war auch ihr Wesen” (III, 176). She is continuously defined as “reisend” both by the narrator and by Botho and his friends, and appropriately so, because this adjective sums her up quite well, meaning, as it does, “lovely, charming, enticing”, but with the second implication of “irritating”. She is a sparkling, lively being with a scintillating gift for chatter, which, unfortunately, never stops and can at times be a real trial for her husband’s nerves. She does not seem to have one serious thought in her head nor troubles of any kind. As we shall see, however, it is quite possible that this luminous appearance hides in reality more perceptiveness than her husband – and the reader – are at first inclined to attribute to her.

‘Fairness’ – in both its senses – is an important aspect of May Welland’s physique as well as of her character. Her very blonde hair, very blue eyes, statuesque proportions and classic features make her a recognised beauty in her world, a woman who, at any time, can make her husband thrill with the “glow of proprietorship”. She always appears surrounded in a halo of magic light. “The sun that netted the little waves with gold seemed to have caught her in his meshes. Across the warm brown of her cheek her blown hair glittered like silver wire; and her eyes too looked lighter, almost pale in their youthful limpidity” (AI, 120). Her radiance has an unearthly and divine quality. This brightness and the “limpidity” of her gaze are also a symbol of her innocence and purity. Quite naturally, both Newland and the narrator often compare her to the goddess Diana. This, however, underlines also May’s not-human-ness: there is something vaguely sinister in her luminous perfection and in the imperturbable serenity of her vacant eyes. Newland feels with unease that he has never really plucked the heart of her mystery. “What if ‘niceness’ carried to that supreme degree were only a negation, the curtain dropped before an emptiness? [...] He had the feeling that he had never yet lifted that curtain” (AI, 178).
In the final chapter the narratorial voice sums up May’s character and attitude to life as it has shown itself during her married life. She hasn’t apparently changed from how she was as a girl. She has remained to the last “generous, faithful, unwearied; but so lacking in imagination, so incapable of growth, that the world of her youth had fallen into pieces and rebuilt itself without her being conscious of the change. This hard bright blindness had kept her immediate horizon apparently unaltered. Her incapacity to recognise change made her children conceal their views from her as Archer concealed his; there had been, from the first, a joint pretence of sameness, a kind of innocent family hypocrisy, in which father and children had unconsciously collaborated” (AI, 290). It is worth noting, however, that, if the voice is narratorial, the point of view is decidedly Newland’s. These are not objective remarks made by the omniscient narrator but reflections inspired in Newland by the contemplation of his dead wife’s picture: “His eyes [...] came back [...] to his first photograph of May. [...] And as he had seen her that day, so she had remained” (AI, 289–90). But was May really so cold, so blind and so narrow-minded as her husband believed her to be?

This picture of May is contradicted by the words her son Dallas casually drops in the last chapter, and which to Newland are a revelation of feelings he had not suspected in his wife. After revealing that he knows everything about his father’s relationship to Ellen, Dallas mentions May’s dying words, said to him alone. “She said she knew we were safe with you, and always would be, because once, when she asked you to, you’d given up the thing you most wanted”. This comes to Newland as a revelation. “It seemed to take an iron band from his heart to know that, after all, someone had guessed and pitied... And that it should have been his wife moved him indescribably” (AI, 297).

May emerges from this little episode as a person capable of perceiving other people’s feelings and of sympathizing with them. And as a wife she seems to have had more understanding of her husband’s mind than he had of hers. Of course, in obedience to the unwritten social code of their class, she never expressed her feelings and perceptions and never showed her compassion and understanding to her husband. But in this as in all the rest her behaviour was always perfectly consistent with the principles that had been inculcated into her and which she upheld to the last. She had offered Newland his freedom back when they were only engaged, but she held him fast to his promise after the marriage and when she was pregnant, thus obeying the Old New York rule of putting the family before everything else. To
this law she had inflexibly sacrificed him, just as she later serenely gave her life in the effort of saving her youngest child from infectious pneumonia.

It appears, then, that this couple went through thirty years of fundamental inarticulateness, and the elderly Newland proves to be still as unperceiving and self-engrossed as he had been in his youth. For thirty years he has concentrated on fulfilling his duties to his family and to society, and never really come to know the woman with whom he was sharing those duties. He never lifted that curtain, and, because what we know of May comes filtered through his perceptions, neither can we readers lift it up, if we do not piece together details Newland has registered but not paused to interpret. For example, it is clear that May immediately sensed the threat Ellen represented for her married bliss. She catches him lying to her about his going, and then not going, to Washington on business, and she is clearly hurt when he finally leaves to meet Ellen at the ferry at Jersey City: “Good-bye, dearest,” she said, her eyes so blue that he wondered afterwards if they had shone on him through tears” (AI, 237). Nor is this the only time May appears vulnerable and, notwithstanding her self-control and respect of forms, desperately trying to reach her husband:

Their eyes met, and he saw that hers were of the same swimming blue as when he had left her to drive to Jersey City.

She flung her arms about his neck and pressed her cheek to his.

“You haven’t kissed me today,” she said in a whisper; and he felt her tremble in his arms (AI, 264).

May’s suppressed and never articulated emotions reveal themselves only through the transparency of her complexion and of her eyes. Newland always notices her face pale or flush and her eyes become wet, but his interpretation of these signs is always coloured by his own feelings, as when, on noticing her languor, he asks himself whether she too is not succumbing to the dull monotony of their life. So wrapped up is he in his passion for Ellen that he does not notice the premonitory signs of pregnancy. Nor does he realise until the last that his wife, like the rest of their entourage, believes him to be an adulterer – a conjecture which is not, after all, entirely wide of the mark.

In Irrungen, Wirrungen too there is a the portrait of another marriage made of silences, things half said, hidden thoughts and repressed emotions. Here too the characterization of the wife is ambiguous. In the first place, Käthe is certainly the classic ‘child-wife’, young, pretty, empty-headed, rich, lazy, spoilt, unwilling and incapable of taking on any duties, used to have all her whims satisfied, to be adored and petted etc. etc. She reminds one of Dora Spenlow, the
first Mrs. Copperfield, with whom she has also in common talkativeness, blonde hair and blue eyes. She is always in unalterable good mood and her sense of humour manifests itself in a predisposition to find absolutely everything “komisch”. However, there is more to her character than this.

We encounter Käthe first as she is travelling home with her husband after their honeymoon. We have seen the dismal effect their conversation has had on Botho, but we are immediately told that of this unease his wife has not the slightest suspicion. “Die junge Frau selbst indes hatte keine Ahnung von dem, was in ihres Gatten Seele vorging” (III, 178). It is already clear that the Dresden trip has set the tone for their future life, and that there will always be much in Botho’s soul that his wife will be unable to share. And yet, a moment later we see Käthe silently studying her husband while pretending to sleep, in an attitude that has something stealthy, feline and vaguely threatening in it: “Aber sie schlief nicht und sah zwischen den Wimpern hin nach dem geliebten Manne hinüber” (III, 178). It is clear that this young woman has powers of observation which one would not credit her with, given her general carefree attitude.

Her emptiness and aversion to commitment are evident in the way she leads her life. Her lack of maternal instinct, and even repugnance to the idea of introducing a disturbance in her ménage show her selfishness and her determination to keep to herself her husband’s affection and undivided attention.

Was andere junge Frauen vielleicht betrübt hätte, daß das Paar einfach ein Paar blieb, wurde von Käthe keinen Augenblick schmerzlich empfunden. Sie lebte so gern und fand an Putz und Plaudern, an Reiten und Fahren ein so volles Genüge, daß sie vor einer Veränderung ihrer Häslichkeit eher erschrak, als sie herbeiwünschte. Der Sinn für Familie, geschweige die Sehnsucht danach, war ihr noch nicht aufgegangen (III, 182-3).

Under her debonair manner she hides an uncanny ability to read her husband’s mind. A conversation which occurs “im ersten Sommer” (therefore, less than a year after the wedding) shows some awareness of Botho’s past love affair(s), or a dim perception of the deep impression one of these “old stories” has made on him. After remembering her first ball, to which she went without her mother’s permission, she goes on with comments that cause Botho’s perceivable embarrassment:


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It is impossible not to conjecture that she has sensed something about Botho’s affair with Lene, because this does not remain an isolated hint and she continues to probe the wound with growing frequency: “Solche Geschichten ereigneten sich häufiger und beschworen in Bothos Seele mit den alten Zeiten auch Lenens Bild herauf” (III, 184; Italics mine).

More of these “hints” are contained in the conversations Botho and Käthe have after her return from Schlangenbad. More than conversations, they are monologues of the garrulous Käthe. Her talk is always ironical and self-ironical and she is always playfully chiding Botho or openly mocking him, but in this case the jokes contain a warning. After suggesting that they go for an outing to Charlottenburg in the afternoon, she continues: “Und wenn man aus der Natur kommt, so wie ich, so hat man das, was ich die Reinheit und Unschuld nennen mochte, wieder liebgewonnen. Ach Botho, welcher Schatz ist doch ein unschuldiges Herz. Ich habe mir fest vorgenommen, mir ein reines Herz zu bewahren. Und du mußt mir darin helfen” (III, 228). As the conversation had hinged on the “conquests” she has made at the spa, her boast that she has nevertheless preserved her innocence and resolved to keep her heart pure sound like a taunt towards her husband: could he boast of his purity of heart? Whether Käthe suspects that Botho is unfaithful or not does not matter: she has intuited that she is not sovereign in her husband’s heart, and is warning him that she needs his support to keep virtuous.

On their return from the trip that evening another little incident occurs: she notices the little heap of ashes in Botho’s fireplace and immediately divines what has produced it:

Im selben Momente trat Botho wieder ein und erschrak bei dem Anblick, der sich ihm bot. Aber er beruhigte sich sogleich wieder, als Käthe mit dem Zeigefinger auf die Asche wies und in ihrem scherzhaftesten Tone sagte: "Was bedeutet das, Botho? Sieh, da hab ich dich mal wieder ertappt. Nun bekennen. Liebesbriefe? Ja oder nein?”

"Du wirst doch glauben, was du willst."

"Ja oder nein?"

"Gut denn; ja."

She makes Botho own up that he has been burning love letters, approves of it and declares that now she can feel at rest, but she insists on carrying out the symbolic ceremony of the reburning of the ashes. The gesture is as clear as May Archer’s wearing her wedding dress at the second performance of *Faust*. Both couples communicate in an indirect, oblique way which is the one allowed to people of their social class. Their conventions prevent a direct expression of their personal feelings. As Dallas Archer says to his father, “You never did ask each other anything, did you? And you never told each other anything. You just sat and watched each other, and guessed at what was going on underneath. A deaf-and-dumb asylum, in fact!” (AI, 297).

Käthe obviously has very precise notions of what is due to her as a wife. She also knows very well how she wants to lead her life: it must be a life of leisure, comfort, pleasant conversation and complete absence of commitments of any kind. She is fully equipped to play the part of the charming wife and hostess, she can be relied upon to be always ornamental and entertaining and she will not step beyond these limits. Her egocentricity is in total harmony with the social custom of her time and country, which wanted women to be decorative and nothing more. She is perfectly happy to conform to the stereotype of the precious doll and makes it quite clear to her husband:

> Und ihre liebenswürdige Koketterie war klug genug berechnet, und er umarmte sie, wobei sie sich seinen Liebkosungen überließ. Und nun umspannte er ihre Taille und hob sie hoch in die Höh’. “Käthe, Puppe, liebe Puppe.”


The two “mistresses” in the triangles, Lene Nimptsch and Ellen Olenska, are remarkable, unconventional women with a clear intelligence and considerable moral strength. They are aware of their situation in all its aspects and they show themselves better able to understand the character of their men than they do themselves, and to have correctly evaluated the forces at work in their situation.

Lene knows that Botho, however in love he may be, will not have the strength to reject what he sees as his duty and turn his back on Society. She answers with lucid objections her lover’s protestations of love and fidelity.

“Ach, Lene, du weißt gar nicht, wie lieb dich habe.”


Lene is well aware of the social distance between her and Botho and knows well that relationships like theirs sooner or later must end because the male members of the aristocracy, who often choose their mistresses in the working class, could not even contemplate marrying outside their own class. She repeatedly tells him that she has no regrets and is happy to have had that summer with him. Nevertheless, however self-controlled and clear-sighted she may be, she cannot avoid feeling and sometimes showing a touch of bitterness and regret, which shows itself, for example, during their trip to Hankels Ablage. She reminds him of their meeting on Easter Day and insists on hiring a boat for a row on the Spree. When they pick their boat up and Botho asks her whether she wants the ‘Forelle’ or the ‘Hoffnung’, she replies: “Natürlich die Forelle. Was sollen wir mit der Hoffnung?” and Botho perfectly understands what she is alluding to. “Botho hörte wohl heraus, daß dies von Lene mit Absicht und um zu sticheln gesagt wurde, denn so fein sie fühlte, so verleugnete sie doch nie das an kleine Spitzen Gefallen findende Berliner Kind”. (III, 145-6)

The whole Hankels Ablage episode is full of little incidents like this which have a symbolic meaning and make it a turning point in the story. It is also a very melancholy episode because they enjoy there some of their happiest hours – indeed Botho has never seen Lene abandon herself so completely to happiness – and yet at the same time they both feel that separation is imminent.

The sudden arrival of Serge, Pitt, Balafré and their mistresses immediately shows how precarious Botho and Lene’s joy had been. No matter how deep and sincere Botho’s love for Lene is, at the sight of his friends he immediately takes on his society mask and his habitual charades again and introduces Lene as “Mademoiselle Agnes Sorel”. By doing so he puts his relationship to Lene on the same level as those of their friends to their paid mistresses, and so degrades her and himself. However loving and caring to her Botho can be, however
scrupulously kind and considerate towards all his social inferiors he is, he remains the aristocrat throughout, with a clear perception of what he owes to his class or to the honour of the regiment (for example, he never wears his uniform when he is with Lene). He sits with his friends and engages himself in the usual playful conversation, while Lene is packed off to stroll with the other ‘ladies’. This brings home to Lene once for all that the relationship has no place in the real world and is in fact fast coming to an end.

It is characteristic of Lene to react with firmness and decision in all circumstances and to be always straight and direct. When Botho goes to see her after having written to her that that is definitely their last meeting, she receives him with serenity and behaves throughout the ordeal with noble dignity and yet without hiding her love and her sorrow. She takes her full responsibility in the relationship. She has acted of her own free choice, has nothing to regret and gives Botho nearly a formal acquittal: “Du hast mir kein Unrecht getan, hast mich nicht auf Irrwege geführt und hast mir nichts versprochen. Alles war mein freier Entschluß. Ich habe dich von Herzen liebgemacht, das war mein Schicksal, und wenn es eine Schuld war, so war es meine Schuld” (III, 174). She reacts with promptness after the traumatic event of the meeting with Botho and his wife and moves to another part of the town, thus completely separating her life from Botho’s. And when Gideon Franke wants to marry her, she does not hesitate to give him a full account of her affair with Botho and of another one that had preceded it. With the marriage she takes the chance of human happiness and usefulness life has given her, and we know that, if necessary, she is stoical enough to live “ohne Glück”.

Although Lene is a working class girl and Ellen is a wealthy New York expatriate married to a fabulously rich Polish count, they have a thing in common: they are both alien to the world of the men they are in love with. Ellen only slowly understands that her being “Europeanised” makes the little New York world, her friends and even her family regard her as an intruder. She is perceived as different because, with her clarity, honesty, directness of speech and capacity to look reality in the face she is completely at odds with the conventionality, artificiality, hypocrisy and narrow-mindedness of Old New York. And, like Lene, Ellen is powerless against the coalition of relations and family friends who conspire to keep Newland to the straight path. She knows Newland will simply be unable to be himself once he fails to fulfil his social obligations. And she herself urges him to keep his engagement to May because she does not want “happiness bought of disloyalty and cruelty and indifference” (AI, 145). She has never any delusions about the chance of survival their relationship would have were they to cut
off the ties with their families and their social milieu, and, whilst Newland fantasies about starting life anew in another country, or rather, in some imaginary country where only love matters, she gives him the realistic picture of social drifters living in moral squalor in a world not very different from the one they have fled. Her clarity of vision is that of a woman who knows life in some of its dingy aspects and does not hesitate to face the truth. It is part of her honesty to be explicit in matters of sex, to be capable of unconventional gestures (like escaping her husband’s tyranny by eloping with his secretary) and to be ready to defy public opinion by trying to get a divorce regardless of the consequences for her reputation. After Newland’s wedding they do not meet for about eighteen months. When they do meet, and he finds himself again irresistibly attracted to her, she exhorts him not to fall away from the moral standards they both uphold. And when he refuses, she decides to remove all temptation for him and leaves for Europe, severing every link between their lives.

It is somewhat strange that Ellen, like Lene, cooperates in this way with a society which frames human beings in the rigidity of an inhuman system of values, but in both characters this is consistent with their sense of duty and their need to live their lives in an open and unambiguous way.

Both Fontane and Wharton are remarkable in the unsentimentality of their character portrayal. They explore the limitations and strengths of both men and women alike. And in the process, they suggest – most remarkably perhaps in the case of May and Käthe – that, although they are seemingly limited, superficial figures, they have a capacity for some measure of perceptiveness and insight. In other words, even heavily socialised lives are not bereft of human dignity. That compassionate yet astringent moral vision is central to the greatness of Fontane’s and Wharton’s art.
3.8. Techniques in Wharton and Fontane.

3.8.1. Narrative.

I propose to examine narrative discourse in Wharton and Fontane from a narratological perspective. My aim is to highlight similarities and distinctive features of technique in the two authors. My analytical method is the one proposed in Gérard Genette’s *Discours du récit* (1972; English translation *Narrative Discourse*, 1980). I shall focus briefly on three points: the narrating voice (the question of *who tells*), focalization (the question of *who sees*) and the anachronies (as Genette calls the forms of discordance between *histoire* and *récit*). First of all, however, I wish to clarify the meaning of some of Genette’s terms and concepts and to state why, as far as the question of focalization is concerned, I apply Genette’s terminology with some hesitation. Genette distinguishes between *internal*, *external* and *zero* focalization. We have internal focalization when the narrator speaks for the characters. If events are told from the point of view of only one character the focalization is *fixed*; if events are told from the point of view of several characters the focalization is *variable*; if one event is told from the point of view of several characters the focalization is *multiple*. External focalization is the situation we have when the narrator shows the characters acting but does not clarify what their motivations are, thus hiding information from the reader: a technique typical perhaps of detective fiction, but widely used by all authors for the surprise effect it ensures in the final *dénouement* (as for example in *Our Mutual Friend*, in which only at the end is it revealed that Mr. Boffin has only pretended to have become mean and avaricious).

Narrative with zero focalization, or nonfocalised narrative, is the formula chosen by Genette (1980 [1972], 189) to call the “classical” type of narrative, which used to be known in Anglo-Saxon criticism as narrative “with omniscient narrator” or “told in the third person”. I am not completely convinced of the possibility of “nonfocalization”. Genette himself recognises that the distinction between non focalization and variable focalization is not that clear because “the nonfocalised narrative can most often be analysed as a narrative that is multifocalised *ad libitum*” (1980 [1972], 192). But my main reason for doubting the need or usefulness of the category of nonfocalization is that it seems to me that no narrative can be nonfocalised, even when told by a heterodiegetic, third person narrator: in fact, when a
heterodiegetic narrator is not voicing a character’s thoughts, he is, in his commentary, voicing his own; and in so doing he is expressing a distinct point of view, which may or may not be reliable. (There are narratives in which the heterodiegetic narrator deliberately misleads the reader, for example perverting the course of his enquiries through the withdrawal of vital information). Moreover, it is easy to see how each narrator has distinctive voice, manner, persona, so much so that every commentary contains an implicit self portrait. It is for example possible to say that Walter Scott’s heterodiegetic narrators are genial, courteous, tolerant, compassionate, prone to reminiscing, loquacious, a little pompous, very erudite, with a marvellous command of English etc., and in this way we would be describing them very much in the way characters are. It seems to me that no narrator is really outside and above the story he tells, even though he is not a character in the story. After all, as Genette says, “when we are dealing with a narrative of fiction [...] the role of narrator is itself fictive, even if assumed directly by the author” (1980 [1972], 213). And if “L’énonciateur putatif d’un texte littéraire n’est donc jamais une personne réelle, mais ou bien (en fiction) un personnage putatif” (1991, 22), why should we consider the parts of the narrative which are focused through the consciousness of the narrator differently from those focused through the consciousness of the characters, i.e., as absence of focalization? It seems to me that the expressions “absence of focalization, or “non-focalization” or “zero focalization” better describe the situation we have in those texts or parts of texts in which we are told what the characters do but not what they – or the narrator – think and feel about the events, and which Genette defines as external focalization (1972 [1980], 190). In conclusion, I would emend Genette’s focalizations scheme from this:

**ZERO FOCALIZATION/** “impersonal, floating observer” (192)

**NONFOCALIZATION**

- **a) fixed**  The Ambassadors
- **b) variable**  Madame Bovary
- **c) multiple**  The Ring and the Book

**EXTERNAL FOCALIZATION**  “Hills Like White Elephants”
into this:

1. **FOCALIZATION**
   - a) fitted
   - b) variable
   - c) multiple

2. **NONFOCALIZATION**
   - “Hills Like White Elephants”

with the narrator: 1. in each case considered as voicing his own, distinctive point of view every time he is not expressing that of a character, sometimes resorting to nonfocalization when he wants to hide the motivations of a character; or, more rarely, 2. choosing not to express either the character’s point of view or his own throughout the narrative.

Wharton’s narrators are heterodiegetic, that is, external to the story they tell, and they tend to stay within a stable and carefully circumscribed narrative role. We rarely find in Wharton attempts at establishing a direct relationship with the reader. Nor do we find passages in which the narrator expresses emotional reactions prompted by the events he is telling. The narrator succeeds almost always in keeping himself above and outside the story and limits himself to making occasional and often ironical remarks on the events, or, much more often, to voicing the characters’ ideas, emotions, thoughts and evaluations of the events. Sometimes, however, he intervenes with the full authority of his omniscience to offer, together with a character’s self-analysis, the clarification of what their real but yet unconscious feelings are. In such cases, the narrator’s point of view corrects the interpretation of the events given by the characters, or clarifies the psychological import, as yet impenetrable to them, of an event. This is, for example, what the narrator of *The Fruit of the Tree* says of John Amherst’s feelings during Justine’s absence: “He now told himself that the perpetual galling sense of her absence was due to this uneasy consciousness of what it meant, of the dark secrets it enveloped and held back from him. *In actual truth, every particle of his being missed her, he lacked her at every turn*” (FT, 587; italics mine). In the same way, the narrator intervenes with this comment after one of the first conversations between Amherst and Justine: “So these two, in their hour of doubt, poured strength into each other’s hearts,
each unconscious of what they gave, and of its hidden power of renewing their own purposes” (FT, 278). Frequently, the narrator’s open comments are crucial to the understanding of the psychology of a character: “Poor Lily, for all the hard glaze of her exterior, was inwardly as malleable as wax. Her faculty for adapting herself, for entering into other people’s feelings, if it served her now and then in small contingencies, hampered her in the decisive moments of life. She was like a waterplant in the flux of tides, and today the whole current of her mood was carrying her towards Lawrence Selden” (HM, 55). Very often, however, the narrator’s commentary is implicit, indirect and expressed through the irony of the tone, irony sometimes bordering on sarcasm, as in many passages in which men’s delusions and exaggerated expectations about women are satirised: “He contemplated her absorbed young face with a thrill of possessorship in which pride in his own masculine initiation was mingled with a tender reverence for her own abysmal purity” (AI, 10); “He had argued that, being only a lovelier product of the common mould, she would abound in the adaptabilities and the pliances which the lords of the earth have seen fit to cultivate in their companions. She would care for his aims because they were his. During their precipitate wooing, and through the first brief months of marriage, this profound and original theory had been gratifyingly confirmed; then its perfect surface had begun to show a flaw” (FT, 179).

Among the functions of the Whartonian narrator, the one Genette calls “director’s function” figures hardly at all: we usually do not find explicit references to the organization of the tale, to the way the text comes to be organised, of the type we find in the early Fontane: “Der Lauf unserer Erzählung führt uns während der nächsten Kapitel...” (I, 115). Only in one of Wharton’s early novels, The Fruit of the Tree, have I found a similar instance: “He came two days after the talk recorded in the last chapter...” (FT, 594; italics mine).

The last and most important among the extranarrative functions of the narrator, the ideological function, is to some extent taken on by the central characters. Through them the narrator, when he does not explicitly intervene in the ways we have seen, expresses his Weltanschauung. In each Wharton novel there is a small group of characters, no more than two or three, who are the foci of narration and who are, up to a point, the narrator’s mouthpieces: characters such as Newland Archer, Ralph Marvell, John Amherst and Justine Brent, Nan St. George and Laura Testvalley, Vance Weston and Halo Spear, Nona Manford, Martin Boyd, Sue Lansing etc. However, the Whartonian narrator does not relinquish his function of commenting, clarifying and interpreting the events and constantly intervenes as a
chorus to the action. In fact, it is worth remembering that in *The Writing of Fiction* Wharton explicitly criticises Henry James's tendency, in his last works, to treat the novel as a theatrical piece, in which nothing or little should be *told* and everything should be *shown*. She objected to that "kind of hybrid novel [...] the novel written almost entirely in dialogue" which is attempted in "the oddly contrived ‘Awkward Age’" (1925, 70–1). She would not abdicate the clarifying function of the narrating voice and the opportunity it gives of transcending the meaning of the specific story at hand into broad philosophical and moral reflection. "The immense superiority of the novel for any subject in which ‘situation’ is not paramount is just that freedom, that ease in passing from one form of presentation to another, and that possibility of explaining and elucidating by the way, which the narrative permits" (1925, 72).

As the Whartonian narrator is so constantly engaged in the expression of feelings, perceptions and reflections of the central characters, rendering them not directly, but through a description containing his own clarifications, comments and speculations, we can see that these omniscient narrators offer, directly and indirectly, their own point of view, as well as that of the central characters. And, indeed, sometimes there is no clear cut transition from a character's thoughts to the analysis the narrating voice offers by means of considerations, speculations and hypothesis. Take the following passage from *The Fruit of the Tree*:

 [...] her tormented thoughts, perpetually circling on themselves, reverted once more to their central grievance - the failure of her marriage. If her own love had died out it would have been much simpler - she was surrounded by examples of the mutual evasion of a troublesome tie. [...] But it was the torment of Bessy's situation that it involved a radical contradiction, that she still loved Amherst though she could not forgive him for having married her. Perhaps what she most suffered from was his too prompt acceptance of the semi-estrangement between them. After nearly three years of marriage she had still to learn that it was Amherst's way to wrestle with the angel till dawn, and then to go about his other business (FT, 264–5).

Here Bessy Amherst's thoughts flow into the narrator's commentary ("After nearly three years of marriage she still had to learn..."), speculations ("Perhaps what she most suffered from ...") or hypotheses ("If her own love had died out...").

Wharton considered the question of point of view - the problem of which character(s) must be the focus of narration - one of the two "central difficulties in the novel" (the other being that of the description of the passage of time). In order to preserve the "unity of impression" whilst at the same time giving a comprehensive narrative, Wharton maintained
that the point of view should be shifted as little as possible and that it was necessary “to let the tale work itself out from no more than two (or at most three) angles of vision, choosing as reflecting consciousnesses persons either in close mental and moral relation to each other, or discerning enough to estimate each other’s part in the drama, so that the latter, even viewed from different angles, always presents itself to the reader as a whole” (1925, 87-8). We have already seen that *The Age of Innocence*, in which the point of view is rigorously that of Newland Archer, is a notable exception to her rule. Otherwise there is in Wharton’s novels an interplay of zero focalization (when the heterodiegetic narrator intervenes and speaks for himself) and internal variable focalization (when the narrator speaks for the characters): that is, a perfectly traditional technique. The use of the interior monologue is completely ignored in Wharton (in fact, she contemptuously defines the extensive application of it in the fiction of the Twenties “the reversion to a discarded trick of technique”; 1925, 154)), but of free indirect speech we can find significant examples in her texts. For example, there are passages in which the reflections of the characters are rendered with immediacy, as in these sudden and unmediated incursions into the consciousness of Bessy and Justine in *The Fruit of the Tree*: “Appearances! He spoke as if she had been reproaching him for a breach of etiquette...it never occurred to him that the cry came from her humiliated heart!” (FT, 267) “And what if it were true? What if her unconscious guilt went back even farther than his thought dared to track it? [...] No! Her motive had been normal, sane and justifiable – completely justifiable” (FT, 525)

External focalization – the type of narrative in which the main character acts without the reader being allowed to know his or her thoughts, feelings, motivations etc. – is also rarely used by Wharton, but as an example of it we can mention the references, in *The Custom of the Country*, to the “other and more pressing reasons” (CC, 10) which occasioned the “rather precipitate departure” of the Spraggs from Apex City and their settlement in New York. The event that prompted this important decision, and which occurred before the beginning of the diegesis, is never explained to the reader by the narrator, who must of course be as aware of it as the characters themselves are. The purpose of this voluntary infraction of the prevailing code of the narrative is that, after numerous hints, the sudden discovery of this obscure element in Undine’s past (she, the supposed fresh and naive virgin, has had a complex erotic past) prompts her husband Ralph’s suicide, her marriage to the French Count de Chelles and the transfer to Europe of this picaresque tale.
As far as the construction of the action is concerned – I mean the relationship between the order of the narrative and the order of the story – Wharton’s use of narrative anachronies is also largely traditional. There are quite a few external analepses (Genette’s technical term for those parts of the text relating past events which have occurred before the beginning of the story, and are therefore external to it). They are to be found especially at the beginning of her narratives, when characters are introduced through a rapid summary of their past career, temperament and sometimes physical appearance. See for example the analepsis with which Countess Olenska’s past history is summarised in *The Age of Innocence*:

She had appeared there first, in Newland Archer’s boyhood, as a brilliantly pretty little girl of nine or ten, of whom people said that she ‘ought to be painted’. Her parents had been continental wanderers, and after a roaming babyhood she had lost them both, and been taken in charge by her aunt, Medora Manson. [...] For some time no more was heard of them; then news came of Ellen’s marriage to an immensely rich Polish nobleman of legendary fame. [...] Then came the news that Ellen’s own marriage had ended in disaster, and that she was herself returning home to seek rest and oblivion among her kinsfolk (AI, 52-4).

Most of the analepses are however internal, that is, they deal with events subsequent to the starting point of the story, and they can be used to fill in the gaps. One thinks, for example, of the moment when Undine reviews one of the least successful episodes of her career: “Sometimes the events of the past year, ceaselessly revolving through her brain, became no longer a subject for criticism or justification but simply a series of pictures monotonously unrolled. Hour by hour, in such moods, she re-lived the incidents of her flight with Peter Van Degen” (CC, 206).

There are in Wharton’s texts few prolepses (explicit references to future events), and they are generally anticipations of future emotions about events being narrated, like the following passages in which John Amherst’s and Ralph Marvell’s future feelings about the dazed happiness of the first weeks in their marriages are anticipated: “Amherst could never afterward regain a detailed impression of the weeks that followed” (FT, 108); “He remembered afterward that at that moment the cup of life seemed to brim over” (CC, 84). Such short remarks, made at crucial moments in the lives of these characters, indicate that these are brief interludes which the characters will remember with sad wisdom at a later stage, and they create a poignant effect almost comparable to that of Proust’s anticipatory flashes.
Wharton also makes subtle use of what Genette calls *amorce* ("bait"), a barely noticeable anticipation of future events, a sort of hint whose importance in the story is recognised by the reader only *a posteriori*. An important example of *amorce*, which triggers the development of the plot, is the following conversation between Justine Brent and John Amherst in *The Fruit of the Tree*:

"I know what I should do if I could get anywhere near Dillon – give him an overdose of morphine, and let the widow collect his life-insurance, and make a fresh start".

She looked at him curiously. "Should you, I wonder?"

"If I saw the suffering as you see it, and knew the circumstances as I know them, I believe I should feel justified" (FT, 15)

This is the first mention of euthanasia in the novel, and it will be the memory of precisely this conversation which will make Justine decide for the mercy-killing of Bessy. This is a typical example of Wharton’s complex use of connected “advance mention” and internal analepses.

Fontane’s narrative mode is frequently sustained by dialogue, dialogue that sounds realistic in its social and psychological particularity and fully expresses the personality of speakers of various socio-cultural backgrounds. The proportion of the text taken up by dialogue is unusually large – at least half in most of his novels (Garland, 1980, 275) – and it increases in later works, particularly in *Der Stechlin*. Given the quantity and the quality of this dialogue and the multiplicity of its functions, it is easy to overlook the importance of the narrative voice in Fontane’s novels.

Fontane did not subscribe to the ‘theory of objectivity’ expressed by Friedrich Spielhagen in his novel *Blatt Land* (1879) as well as in his theoretical work *Beiträge zur Theorie und Technik des Romans* (1882), a theory advocating the disappearance of the narrator and the complete suppression of narrative commentary. Fontane defends the role of the narrator in a letter of 14 January 1879 to his publisher Wilhelm Hertz. In it he refers to a discussion of the novel as a genre by Eugen Zabel in the literary magazine *Mehr Licht*, as well as to Spielhagen’s "Prinzip der Objektivität":

Person hat für mich einen außerordentlichen Reiz und ist recht eigentlich das, was jene Ruhe und Behaglichkeit schafft, die sich beim Epischen einstellen soll. Die jetzt modische „dramatische“ Behandlung der Dinge hat zum Sensationellen geführt (Pniower & Schlenther, 1925, I, 405).

He maintains this same stance seventeen years later in a letter to Spielhagen himself, in which however Fontane qualifies his defence of the narrator by admitting that his interventions must be rare, but observing acutely that it is sometimes hard to determine where the intervention of the narrator actually begins.


Substantially, therefore, Fontane shares Wharton’s views on the advantages presented by the use of the traditional type of narrative. As in Wharton, in Fontane too narrators are external and unemphatically reliable, and the points of view from which the story is told – excluding the narrator’s point of view – are those of the main characters, who number no more than two or three in each novel. As already seen in Wharton, the passages with zero-focalization – those in which, as already said, we hear the voice and comment of the heterodiegetic narrator – alternate with those with internal variable focalization – in which we hear the voice of the narrator expressing the thoughts etc. of one of the characters – in such a way that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between the narrator’s comment and the character’s reflections (as Fontane rightly points out in the above quoted letter, and as Genette too admits). The one flows into the other, as in the following passage from Mathilde Möhring: “Thilde nahm ein Stück Zucker und brach es zweimal durch und sah nun auf die vier Krümeln, die da vor ihr lagen. In den vier Krümeln hatte sie wieder ihr Leben, und die Mutter, die noch kein Wort von dem armen guten Mann gesprochen hatte, rechnete schon wieder, was es gekostet habe. So nüchtern sie selber war, das war ihr doch zuviel” (VI, 303). Here the bitter reflections on the mother’s hardheartedness and the comment about poor Hugo’s unlamented death could be either the narrator’s or Mathilde’s.

There are in Fontane’s novels some interesting instances of external focalization. In the first place, sometimes the description with which a novel opens is done from the point of
view of a hypothetical observer, positioned somewhere in the street and who sees a character arrive or depart in a vehicle, or observes from the outside the building where a character is or lives. It is a very cinematographic technique: it is as if a camera slowly moved towards the building, gradually focusing on the details of its façade, on the door opening and on the movements of the characters.

In Vor dem Sturm, for example, we see a sleigh glide down the Klosterstraβe and stop in front of a two storey building and the driver get off and disappear into the open door. Then the “camera” takes a closer look at the sleigh and the horses. Five minutes later a light appears in the entrance, an old woman puts her head out of the door, the driver reappears carrying luggage and followed by a young man of pleasant appearance, whose clothing is described. We hear him say good bye to the old woman and speak to the driver. The horses gallop away towards the Frankfurter Tor. The narrator takes over the observation and description: “Ein leiser, aber scharfer Ostwind fuhr iiber das Schneefeld, und der Held unserer Geschichte, Lewin von Vitzewitz...” (I, 6) In Frau Jenny Treibel the observer describes the progress of the landau “vom Spittelmarkt her in die Kur – und dann in die Adlerstraβe”, the old fashioned, ugly house in front of which it stops, the two ladies who get off. We follow Frau Jenny up the badly lit stairs up to a door with the name “Professor Willibald Schmidt” on it. Here the lady stops to take breath and reminisce and focalization becomes internal: she remembers her childhood and youth spent in that same street. “Ach, waren das Zeiten gewesen!” Then she rings the bell and the narrator resumes his observation and description. In Stine there is another variation of this technique: first we are shown the windows at the first floor of No. 98e in the Invalidenstraβe, where some very unusual cleaning is being performed, then we hear the grumbling of an old neighbour who mentions the name of the protagonist, Pittelkow; then we go back to the point of view of the external and unknown observer, who describes “eine schwarze, schöne Frauenperson” who is energetically performing that cleaning at the window. The “observer” describes the woman disappearing from the window to fetch the letter the postman has just delivered, and then reappearing to read it in the light. The letter seems to make her angry. At this point the narrator unobtrusively takes on the tale: “Aber sie war keine Person, sich irgendwas auf lange zu Herzen zu nehmen...” (III, 236) and the “observer” disappears.

This very theatrical technique has the effect of creating curiosity and expectation in the reader, who is brought into the middle of the scene and made to find things out by himself
little by little. It is not always easy to piece the fragments together. In Cécile, for example, the first scene immediately whets the reader’s curiosity: who are the elderly man and the beautiful young woman who are boarding the train to Thale and what is the relationship between them? In this case, external focalization creates an atmosphere of ambiguity and mystery which is absolutely necessary to the structure of this novel. Once we have ascertained that the couple are Major St. Arnaud and his wife, the narrator continues to withhold from the reader essential information about them. There are numerous hints to a hidden past which would explain Cécile’s incongruous personality and occasionally odd behaviour, little episodes like the following; “Cécile schwiegs und ließ sich, wie gelähmt, in einen in einer tiefen Fensternische stehenden Sessel nieder. St. Arnaud, der wohl wußte, was in ihr vorging, öffnete den einen der beiden Flügel und sagte, während die frische Luft einströmte: ‘Du bist angegriffen, Cécile. Ruh dich’” (IV, 165). Thus the reader experiences the same curiosity as one of the characters, Gordon. Only in Chapter IX do we see Gordon setting about solving the mystery by writing to his sister to ask about Cécile. Clothilde’s answer however is not reported until Chapter XXI. Her letter reveals Cécile’s troubled past and becomes an important element in the plot because Gordon, shocked, angry and jealous, immediately feels that with Cécile he can brush aside the conventions that regulate the behaviour of a man towards a respectable woman, thus provoking St. Arnaud to challenge him. As in The Custom of the Country, therefore, external focalization becomes in this novel a vital instrument, almost as important as in murder stories like Ellernklipp and Unterm Birnbaum.

Narrators in Fontane always maintain an informal, friendly and tactful tone. In Vor dem Sturm and in Cécile this informality modulates into a tendency towards digression, even prolixity. I refer in particular to the initial part of Vor dem Sturm, which tells the story of the von Vitzewitz family, of the fate that weighs on it and of the supposed prophecy of redemption, and in Cécile to the chapters narrating the holiday in the Harz: this part is essential because it is in this period that the mutual attraction between Cécile and Gordon is formed, but the many details about the trips and the excursions smack too much of travel book and distract from the central situation. In most of the Berlin Novels, however, and particularly in the best, the narrating voice exercises control and restraint in everything and operates with great economy of means.
Fontane’s narrators are in a sense more reticent than Wharton’s: they express the characters’ thoughts, emotions and knowledge in a less direct and explicit way, trusting, as we shall see, to their conversations with other characters for a full exposition of temperament and moods. The speaking voice seems almost reluctant to sit in judgement on the characters, and when it does express its point of view on their behaviour or their psychology, these interventions, even in their circumspection, and also because of their rarity, sound particularly important and worthy of notice. Typical is the following passage from Effi Briest, in which, with couched expressions, the narrator tells the central episode of the novel, Effi’s adultery, and remarks on her nature:

Sie litt schwer darunter und wollte sich befreien. Aber wiewohl sie starker Empfindungen fähig war, so war sie doch keine starke Natur; ihr fehlte die Nachhaltigkeit, und alle guten Anwendungen gingen wieder vorüber. So trieb sie denn weiter, heute, weil sie’s nicht ändern konnte, morgen, weil sie’s nicht ändern wollte. Das Verbotene, das Geheimnisvolle hatte seine Macht über sie.

So kam es, daß sie sich, von Natur frei und offen, in ein vestecktes Komödienspiel mehr und mehr hineinlebte. Mitunter erschrak sie, wie leicht es ihr wurde. Nur in einem blieb sie gleich: sie sah alles klar und beschönigte nichts. [...] Es ging aber doch weiter so, die Kugel war im Rollen, und was an einem Tage geschah, machte das Tun des andern zur Notwendigkeit. (VII, 315).

The narrator has clearly no delusions about Effi’s character: it is her fundamental moral weakness and immaturity that prompt her adultery with a man with whom, as she will say, she is not even in love. And yet there is sadness in the tone as well, because the narrator recognises that there is in Effi’s nature also much that is good – her instinctive honesty and openness. But these qualities are at this moment overshadowed by her instinct for self-preservation that makes her fear discovery above all else. The reluctance to probe into Effi’s feelings leaves a central question in the novel unanswered: why did she commit adultery? Because she is bored, because she wants to escape her marriage (one of Crampas’s letters refers to her request that they elope together), because she is resentful towards her husband for trying to scare and manipulate her into submission with the story of the Chinese? As in the case of Ellen Olenska, and notwithstanding the fact that Effi is here the central character, the feelings and motivations of the heroine remain unexplored. Those of the male figures, however, are also not always fully expressed: we know for example what motivates Innstetten to challenge Crampas to a duel, but we never know for sure why he decides to
marry, and to marry the adolescent daughter of his ex-first love, although we can infer, from his subsequent behaviour and from what Crampas tells Effi about him, that the educative instinct is strong in him and that he wants a malleable woman amenable to instruction. But isn’t there perhaps also a touch of revenge in his making the woman who had rejected him as a husband accept him as a husband for her daughter? And, as far as Crampas is concerned, he is never the focus of narration, and his view of the affair with Effi is only presented through a few passages from his letters. Of his thoughts, feelings and motivations we know absolutely nothing. Crampas knows Innstetten well as a man who is unlikely to let pass an offence to his honour, and also knows how dangerous it is to take the code of honour lightly — he has already been maimed in a duel. Does Crampas therefore have a deathwish and is he courting self-destruction while courting Effi? As in the case of The Age of Innocence, where the point of view was throughout that of Newland Archer, one could sometimes wish for a wider range of perspectives to illuminate the tale. On the other hand, one has to acknowledge that Fontane’s narrators all share a tendency to circumspection and reticence in their telling which corresponds to their reluctance to be judgemental about the characters, and in Fontane’s novels, as in Wharton’s, what is unsaid is almost as important as what is said. There is also an inescapable element of ambiguity inherent in a narrative technique like Fontane’s, which, though allowing interpolations from the narrator, relies mainly on scenes to unfold the tale: events, especially at critical moments, unroll in front of the reader who is invited to interpret them. (For instance, one cannot help thinking it very bizarre that, in order to bind Annie’s wounded forehead, Johanna decides to force open the bedside table of the lady of the house, who is away. “Das Schloß ist Spielerei”, she says: how does she know? If we consider that Johanna has never shown much liking for Effi and is clearly in love with Innstetten, it is possible that the discovery of Crampas’s letters is more than a chance or ill luck. But all this simply remains open to conjecture, because we never get a glimpse of what goes on in Johanna’s mind, neither directly through free indirect speech nor indirectly through a comment of the narrator.)

There are a number of “sensational” events in Fontane’s novels: adulteries and affairs, suicides, duels, dramatic occurrences that stand out in the long narrative of quiet, uneventful daily life. But these dramatic circumstances are narrated with the bare minimum of emphasis, and, in most novels, the story continues to unfold after the point of crisis, thus showing that life goes on after any catastrophe, and thus reestablishing the pre-eminence of the normal and
the quotidian over the sensational and glamorous. People go on living and grappling with their problems after the crisis. In fact, crisis in a Fontane novel – as well as in a Wharton novel – is any event that brings to one of the characters a degree of self-awareness, or that reveals a hidden truth about other people, or that throws a sudden light over the past.

Fontane’s narrators differ from Wharton’s in the tone more than in everything else. In Fontane the speaking voice sounds always friendly, and only gently ironic. There is in Fontane much tolerance for human folly and frailties. He sympathises with his characters, especially with his heroines, and is always able to draw attention to the good which, in human beings, is always inextricably blended with the bad. Nevertheless, as Robinson says, “His gently ironical tone often conceals a streak of profound pessimism in the author himself” (1976, 193) In Wharton, on the contrary, there is more of the moralist, and her fundamental pessimism and impatience with the lot of women is sometimes expressed with real bitterness, a bitterness which is directed at both the men and the women who constitute society and who blindly work to perpetuate laws and customs which stifle individual souls.

In all the Berlin novels location is very clear and specified throughout and at the very beginning of the first chapter the place of abode of one of the characters is usually shown: “Möhrings wohnten Georgenstraße 19 dicht an der Friedrichstraße”; the first scene of Schach is set “In dem Salon der in der Behrenstraße wohnenden Frau von Carayon und ihrer Tochter...”; “Der Kommerzienrat van der Straaten, Große Petristraße 4, war einer der vollgültigsten Finanziers in der Hauptstadt”; Pauline Pittelkow lives “In der Invalidenstraße...in Nummer 98e” on the first floor; Lene lives in a small house “an dem Schnittpunkte von Kurfürstendamm und Kurfürstenstraße, schräg gegenüber dem ‘Zoologischen’”; the Poggenpuhls live in a flat in a new building at the corner of the Großgörschenstraße; Professor Willibald Schmidt lives in a flat in an old, unfashionable house in the Adlerstraße. The addresses of all the other main characters are carefully given in the rest of the narrative, so that from all these indications it is perfectly possible to put together a map of the Berlin of the time. Berlin is the alpha and omega of all these narratives, even when the characters are shown leaving the town to go on holiday, as in Cécile, which opens at the station where the St. Arnauds board the train to Thale, and in Vor dem Sturm, which starts in the Klosterstraße where Lewin von Vietzewitz, who normally resides and studies in Berlin, begins his journey to his father’s house. The exception is Effi Briest, which opens and closes in the garden in front of the old house at Hohen-Cremmen.
All these indications are highly significant and it is very appropriate that they are given at the very start of the narratives. Fontane’s novels fully belong, of course, to European Realism and a key aspect of realistic literature is the detailed description of environment, seen as a major influence in the development of character. This is perhaps particularly true of Fontane’s and Wharton’s characters, whose private and public selves are so interrelated that there does not even seem to be a chance of survival for their characters outside their particular social sphere. And the place of abode is a fundamental part of the social persona of an individual: it denotes the incorporation into a socio-economic stratum and, consequently, it signifies occupations, tastes, habits, sometimes personal history and emotional attachments. In short, the home and its location are metonymic of an entire way of life. It is significant, therefore, that the impoverished Poggenpuhls, once they leave Pomerania, find a new home in Berlin in a street that reminds them of the illustrious military past of their family: it is a way of clinging to a piece of their identity (even though the narrator informs us that the choice was also determined by the cheapness of the rent...). The fact that Professor Schmidt lives in an unfashionable street and in the old flat where he had lived with his parents denotes that he belongs to the professional middle class which is being superseded by the nouveaux riches, represented by the Treibels and especially by Frau Jenny, who used to be the daughter of a greengrocer in that same Adlerstraße. The description of the interior highlights the “oldness” of his roots, which go back to the Huguenot “Kolonie” of the city: as Frau Jenny says, one of his ancestresses “war ja eine Charpentier, Stralauer Straße”. In the same way, Ralph Marvell’s Old New York roots are highlighted by the fact that he lives in a house which has belonged to his family for generations, in as secluded and unfashionable a part of the town as Washington Square. By contrast, the rootless and nomadic existence of the “invaders” takes place in hideously huge, over-decorated and perfectly anonymous hotels like the ‘Stentorian’. The vulgarity and lack of cultural roots of the upstarts of the previous generation is made monumentally evident in The Age of Innocence during Selden’s walk up Fifth Avenue, where each house “is a typical rung in the social ladder”: from the one which is a complete architectural salad, in which no style is omitted, to the copy of the Trianon, destined to prove that the owner has been to Europe and has at least settled on one particular style.

Fontane’s topography is so precise that it is even possible to trace the routes characters follow to go from one place to the other: we see Frau Jenny’s carriage driving to
Professor Schmidt's, Botho driving to visit Frau Nimptsch's grave, many guests walking home after various dinners in various novels, and every time we are told exactly where they turned, which bridge they crossed, at which corner they separated etc. It is obvious how important this precision is in creating an almost solid, visible environment, a real setting for the common tragedies of real people. But sometimes location also becomes an agent in the story: it is because Berlin is so inescapable that the flat where Botho starts his married life looks towards Wilmersdorf, the village where he used to walk with Lene; and it is because Botho and Lene are almost neighbours that she undergoes the tremendous shock of running into him and his bride. In order to change her life she must move home.

Wharton succeeds almost as well in conveying her New York, which comprises chiefly but not exclusively the narrow, exclusive area within the boundaries of Central Park and Fifth Avenue, with the old Academy of Music, the Opera House, the Museum of Art, later Metropolitan Museum, the drawing rooms of Madison Avenue and Park Avenue, the suburban estates on the Hudson and all the other places where the affluent meet. It also includes the noise and confusion of streets “degraded from fashion to commerce”, the stifling heat of the afternoon rush at the Grand Central Station, the combined hideous din of trams, wagons and the “elevated”, the dinginess of poor working class streets, the dusty waste and sultriness of the city in the summer, and its bitter cold in the winter. “Beyond the aristocrats, the moneyed established society, and the invaders, Edith Wharton depicts the cheap restaurant patronised by secretaries and music students, the dingy boardinghouse, the scrubwoman supporting her invalid husband, the small factories that depend on the exploitation of labour, and the slums with the sickly people” (McDowell, 1976, 48).

Both Fontane and Wharton are very precise in indicating not only the location but also the time of their stories. In the Old New York stories and novels Wharton generally indicates the decade – the 1840s, the 1850s etc. – becoming more precise at the beginning of The Age of Innocence (“On a January evening of the early seventies...”). The novels set a generation later, such as The House of Mirth and The Custom of the Country, are set in time by references to the new inventions which had become part of modern life – “motors”, telephones, electricity, five-days transatlantic voyages. The novels of the Jazz Age are dated through references to the great, terrible watershed of World War I, which completely destroyed Wharton’s world: events mentioned in those novels divide into what happened before and after that watershed. Fontane is sometimes as meticulous in giving the dates for
his stories as he is in giving his characters’ addresses: Vor dem Sturm is a story “aus dem Winter 1812 auf 13”, Schach takes place between the Spring and Summer 1806 and concludes with Victoire’s letter from Rome dated 18 August 1807, Irrungen, Wirrungen takes place “in der Mitte der siebziger Jahre”. The chronology of most of his novels is however to be inferred mainly from the conversations of the characters with their references to the politics of the day, and from narratorial references. As already said, the “watershed” is of course 1870.

Fontane’s use of analepses is not, like Wharton’s, the typical, ‘traditional’ one of nineteenth-century fiction. In his novels a summary of past events – within or without the diegesis – is customary when linking and filling gaps between important phases of story which are narrated in detail through scenes, but not so much in order to introduce major characters: Fontane fulfils this task by entrusting it to his characters rather than to his narrators, and the reader learns about the hero and heroine by eavesdropping on their conversations with other characters, or other characters’ conversations about them. In Irrungen, Wirrungen for example, we come to know Lene and Botho’s situation through the talk between old Frau Nimptsch and her neighbour Frau Dörr while the couple are out for a walk towards Wilmersdorf, on a lane where they do not risk being seen. We learn that Botho is an aristocrat and Lene is Frau Nimptsch’s adoptive daughter, we hear Frau Dörr’s praise of Lene and Frau Nimptsch’s fears that the girl is starting to “build castles in the air”, to hope too much, until Frau Dörr sees them arrive and describes their farewell, remarking that Botho is wearing civilian clothes. In the second chapter, the irrepressible Frau Dörr manages to engage Lene in conversation while she is ironing and to extract from her the story of her first encounter with Botho, of how their relationship has developed since and of the happiness she derives from it. Frau Dörr takes the opportunity to warn her against “das Einbilden”, Lene assures her that she has no false hopes, but at this point the reader has established the central problem of the novel: this relationship, which would have been quite normal and acceptable if it had been a purely mercenary one (like the one Frau Dörr had with her old count) becomes potentially tragic if it implies real emotional attachment, as in Lene’s case. (It is noteworthy that Wharton too, at the beginning of The Age of Innocence, uses the comments of some gossiping minor characters to introduce Countess Olenska, when she has made her entrance into the Mingotts’ box at the Opera. This has in large measure to do with her choice of maintaining Newland Archer throughout as the focus of narration.)
This technique of introducing themes and principal characters through dialogues is typically Fontane’s, but he does also employ the more conventional technique of sketching a portrait by describing the character’s background. In *L’Adultera*, for example, the whole of the first chapter is an analepsis introducing van der Straaten and his wife and relating the first “zehn glückliche Jahre” of their marriage. In *Mathilde Möhring* there is an interesting variation of this method. In the first chapter the narrator briefly describes the events in the life of mother and daughter following the death of the father. This is necessary to establish their socio-cultural background and explain why they find it necessary to sub-let part of their flat. But the information given by the narrator is interspersed with the remarks made by Schulze, the Möhrings’ landlord, on Mathilde and her mother. His opinions are reported as direct speech addressed to his wife, and, as he thinks quite highly of Mathilde, the favourable portrait of the protagonist thus established in the very first pages has a much greater ‘objective’ quality to it than if her praises had been sung by the narrator. Mathilde is immediately introduced, in Schulze’s words as “manierlich, bescheiden, gebildet.[…] Immer fleißig. […]Ein sehr gebildetes Mädchen” (VI, 224). Moreover, Schulze’s wonder at the ‘refinement’ of his lodgers immediately points at the fact that her intelligence and industriousness lift her above her present station in life and make her a potentially upwardly mobile person. This complex external analepsis, consisting in the narrator’s and Schulze’s remarks, covers the span of time between the death of Mathilde’s father and the arrival of Herr Großmann, when the diegesis begins: “Das war nun schon wieder sechs Jahr her, und Mathildchen war nun eine richtige Mathilde von dreiundzwanzig” (VI, 224).

Fontane does not seem to use prolepses (explicit anticipations of future events) but makes instead wide use of anticipatory hints (the already mentioned amorces), telling little, apparently insignificant facts which take on their full meaning only in hindsight. For example, a reader who wonders at Effi’s inconsiderate ingenuousness in keeping for years her lover’s letters may recall that at the beginning of the novel the narrator mentions the importance letters have always had to her: after their betrothal Innstetten has to promise her to write her one every day “da sie seit Jahren nichts Schöneres kannte als beispielsweise den Empfang vieler Geburtstagsbriefe” (VII, 183). Effi does not like writing letters herself but treasures those she receives (which, incidentally, makes it an ill omen that she is not very eager to open and read her fiancé’s letters).
Another instance of *amorce* is contained in the games Effi plays with her friends in the last hours of her childhood, before Innstetten’s arrival. She is a real child in that she is imaginative enough to make any insignificant object an element of her play: so she improvises a sort of Viking funeral for the heap of stones of the berries she has been eating with her friends and consigns them to the water with a strangely grim little ritual: “‘Hertha, nun ist deine Schuld versenkt’, sagte Effi, ‘wobei mir übrigens einfällt, so vom Boot aus sollen früher auch arme unglückliche Frauen versenkt worden sein, natürlich wegen Untreue.’” (VII, 177) It is strange that the text should contain a mention of adultery at such an early stage; and it is moving that Effi should be speaking with pity of the fate of unfortunate women, which she herself will – metaphorically speaking – one day share.

There are other references to adultery in the first four chapters – for example the dismissal of Inspektor Pink due to his affair with the gardener’s wife – which all contribute to build up a feeling of uncertainty about the desirability of the impending marriage. And the much quoted “Effi, komm!” episode also constitutes a sort of literary *amorce*, not in the sense of being an ‘advance mention’ of a future event, but because of the inevitable symbolic meaning it takes on: it is a call to Effi from her young friends who want to continue their play, and as such it is a reminder of her youthfulness, indeed of the childishness of what have been her pursuits until a few minutes ago, and hence of the absurdity of plunging her so unprepared into the duties of adult life. It is a warning against the union and a foreboding of impending disaster and this interpretation is reinforced by the fact that Innstetten himself not only notices the simple episode but is profoundly struck by it: “Er glaubte nicht an Zeichen und Ähnliches, im Gegenteil, wies alles Aberglaubische weit zurück. Aber er konnte trotzdem von den zwei Worten nicht los, und während Briest immer weiter perorierte, war es ihm beständig, als wäre der kleine Hergang doch mehr als ein bloßer Zufall gewesen” (VII, 183).

A final example from *L'Adultera* will show the importance of the symbolism of these pre-announcements. The diegesis starts with the arrival of the copy of the Tintoretto painting called ‘L’Adultera’ which van der Straaten has ordered. This picture has two functions: its mention in the text – in fact, in the very title – immediately establishes the subject of the novel and pre-announces the most important development of the plot – Melanie will become an adulteress; as an object, it has a heavy symbolic value which is evident to the characters themselves. “Daß du gerade das wählen mußtest!” says Melanie. And her husband admits
that, although she has never given him any reason to be jealous, he wants the picture always under his eyes as a *memento mori*. She reminds him then "daß man den Teufel nicht an die Wand malen soll". Like Effi, Melanie has words of pity for the adulteress, and she finds the picture encouraging: "Und daß ich dir’s gestehe, sie wirkt eigentlich rührend auf mich. Es ist so viel Unschuld in ihrer Schuld...Und alles wie vorherbestimmt" (IV, 12-13). Melanie’s Calvinistic upbringing makes her particularly prone to see the force of predestination in human actions, and in so far as this seems to limit the possibility for man to choose or not to choose a course of action, it also limits man’s responsibility and culpability. The picture is stored out of sight in the gallery, but in fact it has initiated the process of detachment between husband and wife and is therefore an agent in the plot.

3.8.2. *Conversation as a mode of sociological characterization.*

For Fontane as well as for Wharton, man is a social animal in the sense that he cannot exist without the protection and the regulatory discipline of society. "Seine Gestalten sind Gesellschaftwesen, mit allen Fäden ihres Seins an bestimmte Vorurteile gebunden oder über bestimmte Vorurteile hinaus" (Roch, 1962, 254). The individual is defined, to a very large extent, by his social role and society is unthinkable without the discursive context of community. It is through civilised conversation that the essence of socialised individuals is best expressed.

As we have seen, dialogue is pivotal in Fontane’s particular approach to characterization. Main characters are introduced with brief biographies, which are extensively elaborated through dialogue, the narrator’s comments and the comments of other characters. The psychological portrait is deepened by the use of free indirect speech, and by the insertion of private letters and pages of diaries. Minor characters often portray themselves through their speech, with virtually no comment by the narrator (see for example the figures of landlords in *Mathilde Möhring*, *Stine* and *Die Poggenpahls*). In the case of the main characters, their personality must be reconstructed by the reader using all the information gathered from all the different informants, among whom are the characters themselves, who consciously and unconsciously give themselves away in their words. The reader is therefore called to play a very active role in the interpretation of the personality of the central figures, and the portraits that will emerge are multifaceted and frequently ambiguous. The result is fascinating,
because, as Garland comments, “Uncertainty or even mystery can result from the use of this technique” (1980, 282)

As it is well known, Fontane was a master of the reproduction of conversational exchanges. He himself was well aware that in this lay one of his strengths:

Wie soll man die Menschen sprechen lassen? Ich bilde mir ein, daß nach dieser Seite hin eine meiner Forcen liegt, und daß ich auch die Besten (unter den Lebenden die Besten) auf diesem Gebiet übertreffe. Meine ganze Aufmerksamkeit ist darauf gerichtet, die Menschen so sprechen zu lassen, wie sie wirklich sprechen. Das Geistreiche (was ein bisschen arrogant klingt) geht mir am leichtesten aus der Feder, ich bin – auch darin meine französische Abstammung errathend – im Sprechen wie im Schreiben, ein Causeur, aber weil ich vor allem ein Künstler bin, weiß ich genau, wo die geistreiche Causerie dahingehört und wo nicht.” (To his daughter on 24/8/1882).

When Fontane says he wants to let his figures speak as they would really speak, he is not however advocating some kind of mechanical reproduction of daily speech: in his fiction he always applied his key-concept of “Verklärung”, of artistic transfiguration and creative selectivity, which he opposed to the idea of “faithful” reproduction of reality of the Naturalistic movement. As Garland says, “In his dialogue Fontane is a poet in that he enables each of his characters to achieve the optimum quality of speech which his or her personality and background will allow” (1980, 282). His efforts aimed not at reproducing reality but towards “an artistic quintessence of that reality” (Robinson, 1976, 187). Commentators agree on his extraordinary ability to give each character the manner of speech which is most appropriate not only to their personality but also to their cultural and socio-economic background and to their geographical origin, so that they appear at the same time as full personalities and as types representative of a specific class and area. (In this respect he was probably influenced by his much-beloved English novelists, and in particular by Walter Scott.) His approach to the use of dialect – which he explains in a letter to Emil Schiff of 15 February 1888 – is characteristic of his transfigured realism:

ungeschickt, so daß ich vielfach mein Falsches wiederherstellte. Es war immer noch besser als das “Richtige” (Pniower & Schlenther, 1925, II, 447).

A realistic and plausible rendition of the spoken language is in fact more effective in giving an idea of what dialogue sounds like, than a scientifically exact reproduction of real speech manages to be. In the same letter Fontane goes on to acknowledge the numerous factual errors which had been found in his novels, and recognises “daß auf jeder Seite etwas Irrtümliches zu finden ist”. Nevertheless he maintains “Und doch bin ich ehrlich bestrebt gewesen, das wirkliche Leben zu schildern” and what really matters is to reach this overall impression of reality: “Man muß schon zufrieden sein, wenn wenigstens der Totaleindruck der ist: “Ja, das ist Leben.” Fontane’s documentation on factual details, though accurate, may have fallen short of Naturalistic standards, but he stands by his belief that an artistic interpretation of reality is more faithful to its essence than the mere reproduction of reality.

But dialogue in Fontane also has another function besides that of revealing the characters: its extensive use endows his novels with the aspect and quality of drama. This is another successful peculiarity of Fontane’s narrative technique: dialogue becomes a structural element in his fiction in that it causes the novels to be organised in scenes which generally occupy one chapter, but sometimes take up even a group of chapters, each of which focuses on one phase of the scene.

These scenes very often concern the presentation of social gatherings, and among them it may be useful to distinguish those taking place in interiors from those taking place in the open air, with which I shall deal at the end of this section.

The descriptions of dinner-parties and drawing room conversations are a speciality of Fontane’s: in them his mastery of conversation finds its fullest application and his technique of characterization through dialogue is used to its fullest advantage. In conversation the principal characters consciously and unconsciously reveal a great deal of themselves, and their behaviour and their motives are further illuminated by the comments the other guests make on them both during the gathering and afterwards, in personal exchanges. In *L’Adultera*, for example, the chapter ‘Bei Tisch’ is followed by ‘Auf dem Heimwege’, in which we follow some of the guests on their way home. Three conversations unfold simultaneously: one on the carriage of Major von Gryczinski between the coachman and Elimar Schulze, who is sitting with him on purpose to extract from him the latest gossip about the van der Straatens; and one inside the coach between the major and his wife, who is
Melanie’s younger sister and who expresses her sympathy for Melanie (van der Straaten has made one of his scenes at table) and her worries about her. Then we follow two other guests, Duquede and Reiff, who have known van der Straaten since his youth and have always been sceptical about his marriage. They too talk about their host’s antics at table and have no hesitation in condemning him, Melanie, her sister and Gryczinski. The cumulative effect of these exchanges is that the reader not only gains insight into the van der Straaten marriage but also into their milieu: the mediocrity and social marginality of the people which constitute their circle of friends becomes evident.

The remarks made during social occasions also contain references to the socio-political situation of the time in which the novel is set, mentions of historical figures and events, anecdotes and gossip, and thus help create the historical setting. And they create the geographical setting as well, because the conversational exchanges Fontane reports have all the flavour of Berlin. “Solche Dialoge, wie sie in seinen Büchern geführt werden, waren nur in Berlin möglich; es ist eine ganze spezifisch Berlinische Art von Causerie – scharf, Sarkastisch, aber nie eigentlich frivol, nie die Grenzen des guten Geschmacks überschreitend” (Roch, 1962, 254).

As Robinson notes, “Not only is the external appearance of streets and buildings used in order to provide a milieu for his [Fontane’s] characters, but the interior furnishings of their homes frequently give a useful indication of their tastes and interests, telling their own story of the inhabitants and the various influences on their lives” (1976, 195). The objects with which the characters surround themselves speak of their habits and way of life and of their frame of mind, and so do their hobbies: Botho’s small collection of paintings reveals fastidious tastes and the inability to keep within his budget; van der Straaten’s gallery reveals lack of taste and education and the tendency to regard art collecting as a form of investment.

Fontane’s sensitivity to spoken language, his versatility in adapting it to each character not only set him apart from contemporary novelists, but ensure him a quite special place among authors. His talent, which he always consciously cultivated, is remarkable. Wharton did not exhibit the same mastery. Neither, however, did Wharton need to exercise it to the same extent, because nearly all the characters that appear in her New York novels belong to the same milieu, the upper class. When more humble figures appear, it is only for brief if significant incursions, as with Nettie Struther in The House of Mirth, and their language is not as distinctive and rich in flavour as Fontane’s dialect is: “I don’t know as you
remember I did type-writing in a big importing firm – and – well – I thought we were to be married: he’d gone steady with me six months and given me his mother’s wedding ring. But I presume he was too stylish for me – ” (HM, 318)

Within the upper class milieu, however, Wharton is in my view successful in the creation of speech which is distinctive of the characters’ personalities. As in Fontane, the quantity and quality of narrative commentary a character receives is proportional to its importance in the novel: so minor characters are portrayed exclusively through their speech, whereas more important characters are illuminated additionally through explanatory remarks from the narrator. Main characters are granted most of the attention of the narrator, who is clearly privy to the most intimate thoughts and emotions (even when he chooses not to reveal them). Dialogue scenes are therefore very often charged with irony: when minor characters, usually members of the leisure class which constitutes the milieu of the protagonists, reveal their shallow personalities, Wharton can give full expression to her satirical vein (irony, however, and even sarcasm, are used at the expenses of all her characters). So for example in The House of Mirth Mrs Trenor only appears in two scenes which have the double function of presenting her as the quintessence of the hostess – the woman who lives to organise dinners and parties, and for whom the greatest tragedy would be to find that another society lady can entice more interesting guests than she can – and of clarifying to the reader the developments in Lily’s precarious situation: she has set out to ensnare Percy Gryce and this time she must pull it off (Chapter (IV); she lets herself be diverted by her interest in Lawrence Selden and lets Percy Gryce slip through her fingers (Chapter VII). We continue to hear about Mrs. Trenor, who remains a social force, but do not encounter her directly any more. In the same way, all the other minor figures exist only in their scenes with Lily. A more important character such as Gerty Farish – who represents the only way of life which Lily could embrace as alternative to a mercenary marriage, or to marriage in poverty with Selden – is granted some attention in Chapter XIV, in which her personal feelings towards Lily and Selden are analysed. Selden receives the same treatment – we gain occasional access to his mind – but most of the narrative focuses rigorously on Lily.

Scenes of social interchange are vital in Wharton because either they provide clarification of points of the plot, or they document changes in feelings or perceptions in the principal characters, or they constitute climaxes of the action, moments when something important happens. This “something” is not outwardly sensational: Wharton’s characters duel
only with cutting words, stab each other with understatements, destroy other people’s lives with innuendos. They are always giving and taking hints, bending meanings, reading between lines, answering unsaid words. Bertha Dorset does not accuse Lily Bart of adultery with her husband, she simply informs her guests that Miss Bart is not coming back to the yacht, but everybody present understands that this is tantamount to a social execution.

Wharton’s ideas concerning the role of dialogue and of narrative commentary were very precise:

The use of dialogue in fiction seems to be one of the few things about which a fairly definite rule may be laid down. It should be reserved for the culminating moments. [...] The contrast [between narrative and dialogue] enhances the sense of passage of time for the producing of which the writer has to depend on his intervening narration. Thus the sparing use of dialogue not only serves to emphasise the crises of the tale but to give it as a whole a greater effect of continuous development (italics mine; The Writing of Fiction, 73).

Like Fontane, Wharton also uses interior decoration as a very important clue to her characters’ personality and style of life. The objects surrounding a person have an almost metonymic function and both the reader and the other characters perceive them as embodiments of their minds. Selden’s bachelor quarters fully express his refined cultural tastes, his Old New York origins and his comparative poverty. Amherst’s books – almost his only possession – just like his clothes, speech and manners betray his intellectual tastes and an upper class background which is at odds with his identity as salaried employee. Ellen’s little house reveals to Archer much more than her tastes in interior decoration: the objects she surrounds herself with speak of her foreign upbringing, her culture, her originality, her refinement, her unconventional tastes in art and bring the echo of a completely different society from New York’s, a society where daily intercourse with creative artists is an indispensable part of social life.

Sometimes the reactions a character has at the sight of certain objects documents a change of feeling and helps to mark the passage of time. Bessy’s luxurious environment and Lily’s exquisite dresses and personal belongings convey their ornamental function and consumeristic nature. Selden’s immediate response to Lily’s exquisite elegance is the reflection that she must have cost a great deal to make. Amherst on the contrary starts off simply adoring Bessy and admiring her surroundings, where every trifling object has been chosen to satisfy “the minutest requirements of a fastidious leisure”, as the fitting frame for her beauty. Later, however, when the marriage is in crisis, he comes to realise from Bessy’s
bills that "no commodity is taxed as high as beauty" (FT, 283) and to hate the objects his wife surrounds herself with because he now knows her dependence on material possessions.

Wharton excels not only in the description of intimate scenes between two or three characters, scenes centred on important dialogues between them, but also in the depiction of great social scenes, where society as a whole is shown celebrating its rites. Scenes such as the evening at the opera, the Beaufort ball, the van der Luydens salon and the big dinner "with Roman punch" in _The Age of Innocence_, the party with tableaux vivants at the Wellington Brys' in _The House of Mirth_, the scenes at the opera in _The Custom of the Country_ bring back life in patrician New York with wonderful precision and brilliance. They also palpably show the society on which Wharton's character are so totally dependent as to dread expulsion from it more than everything else. Such scenes portray the characters showing themselves and viewing others, the comments, the gossip, the chit chat, the class distinctions, the pass-words, the vocabulary of exclusion and inclusion, the reputations and matches made and unmade, and, last but not least, the finery, jewellery and all the appurtenances of a refined, fastidious and luxurious way of life which tangibly represent the economic power of their owners. They show the basis on which marriage in the American leisure-class was built: woman as the conspicuous consumer described by Thorstein Veblen in the already mentioned _Theory of the Leisure Class_.

Of the various social occasions, excursions, walks and trips to the countryside are especially important because it is when far away from their normal environment that Fontane's and Wharton's characters tend to feel less constrained, to talk more freely and to show their emotions. A natural setting is liberating for them because when they are thrown together in a non-man-made environment, they can – at least in part – forget their inhibitions. That is why many of the emotional crises and turning points in Fontane's and in Wharton's novels take place away from drawing rooms and dinner parties. So, on one side there are the scenes where "Society" is shown in all its splendour and power; on the other the scenes set in the solitude of a natural environment, where characters can be more truthful (even though it must be stressed that nature in the two authors is usually the humanised and man-made landscape of places of recreation, not a romantic wilderness). It is in the Patroon's house, buried in the snow, that Newland Archer finds himself most vulnerable to Ellen's charm and indeed ready to be seduced. It is in the forest, under snow-dripping trees, that John Amherst finds the courage to declare his love for Bessy. The drama of _Ethan Frome_ is entirely set in a
snow-clad landscape and it is in the forest that Ethan and Mattie confess their love for each other and conclude their suicidal pact, while in Summer Charity Royall’s season of love is all set in the sun-drenched countryside. Lily and Selden’s walk in the fields is the only moment when they almost succeed in shedding their artificial self, confessing their mutual love and making and accepting a marriage proposal. Corinna and Leopold’s engagement takes place during the trip to Halensee, when the post-prandial walk allows them to escape Frau Jenny’s surveillance. The trip to Hankels Ablage is the zenith of the relationship between Botho and Lene, whilst that to Stralauer Wiese marks the nadir of the marital relationship in L’Adultera, and the return journey in the boat starts off Melanie and Rubenh’s affair. This will be consummated in the hothouse, an environment which, with its hot atmosphere and its luxurious and exotic vegetation, is a fit theatre for the manifestation of intense passion. Effi gets closer to Crampas during their rides on the beach, he starts to seduce her during their sleigh-drive back from Stettin and their adulterous encounters take place on the dunes near the cemetery.

Apart from trips and walks connected to love scenes, the contact with nature can be powerfully and decisively soul-cleansing, in such a way as to herald a new phase in life. Levin von Vitzewitz’s journey back in the snow after being jilted by Kathinka, in a frantic frame of mind and a feverish physical condition brings forth his illness, from which he wakes up a new man, and in love with Marie, in the peace of the winter landscape. Vance Weston’s life crisis occurs during the winter of total isolation, meditation and illness he spends in the mountains, after which he can go back to Halo and try to start life and their relationship afresh.


As Lukács says, Fontane was the first German writer to analyse the decline of the bourgeois class and its socio-political manifestations, a question central to all the European literature of his time (1979 [1956]). In his steps followed Thomas Mann with Buddenbrooks. The theme of this novel – the decline of the upper bourgeoisie in the second half of the nineteenth century – is also the theme of Wharton’s ‘Old New York’ fiction. Like Mann’s Lübeck, Old New York is an anachronistic and doomed microcosm. Mann shows that the Hagenströms – who will
succeed the Buddenbrooks not only as most important family in the town but even as owners of their very house in the Mengstraße which has such significance to them – are parvenus without traditions and without scruples. In Undine Spragg, protagonist of *The Custom of the Country*, Wharton describes a typical representative of the ‘horde’ of wealthy upstarts from the Midwest. Ruthless in her vitality, implacable in her iron determination to obtain ‘the best’, and with a brain not excessively encumbered with intelligence, culture or moral scruples, she is however endowed with great physical beauty and enormous energy. And energy is what the ‘aristocrats’ – and their characteristic exponent Ralph Marvell – most obviously lack. While Mann shows the gradual decadence of the Buddenbrooks through four successive generations of the family, Wharton only describes the final stage of the same process in the Marvell family. Their income comes from real estate and has been steadily decreasing. It is, however, still sufficient to allow them to maintain their social position as one of the oldest and most distinguished families of New York, because frugality and economy have always been traditional virtues in their social set and extravagance and conspicuousness of any kind are still seen as incompatible with gentility. But their modest means and quiet way of life cannot satisfy the voracious appetites of the “invader” Undine Spragg, and when Ralph Marvell marries her, he seals not only his personal but also his family’s fate. He ends up losing his wife, his health and his son and he finally commits suicide, while his family see all their assets disappear in the attempt to gain custody of his child. Similarly, the various marriages in *Buddenbrooks* also seem to hasten the family’s economic ruin and social decadence.

Ralph perceives that his set is a small, entrenched and besieged community that stands no chance against the ruthless determination of the new rich. The “aborigines”, the descendants of the colonists, whose entrepreneurial spirit had laid the basis of the prosperity of their families, have gradually lost the vitality and the intellectual and moral energy they would need in order to cope with the challenges of the new era. Nothing is left them but to admit, as Marvell does, the inadequacy of the ‘Four Hundred’ as the ruling social group, and to accept the loss of their privileges. Marvell is perfectly aware that he is witnessing the twilight of his world and can do nothing but let himself drift. The ‘invaders’ penetrate the ‘reservation’ by corrupting the ‘aborigines’: Ralph succumbs to Undine’s charm, his cousin Clare to that of Van Degen’s millions. Moreover, Ralph at first feels fascinated by the freshness, vitality and lack of inhibitions and rules displayed by the newcomers. When he finds out the destructive
implications of their mentality he rediscovers his allegiance to the way of life of his own group, even though he knows, more than ever, that they are doomed.

If Ralph Marvell is a typical exponent of the upper class, Undine Spragg is a personification of the energy, vitality and ruthlessness of the invading upstarts. An important element of Undine’s characterization is her name, which therefore deserves some discussion. As Richard Lawson says, “it may [...] prove fruitful to illuminate the range of allusiveness of this name – and that of its bearer too – by reference to a work of German Romanticism with which Edith Wharton seems to have had some connections: Fouqué’s *Undine*.” Lawson’s suggestion of a “parallelism of theme” in *The Custom of the Country* and *Undine* (“social alienation as the price of leaving one’s element”) is ridiculous. Nevertheless, Wharton had of course read *Undine*, of which she owned a copy (Killoran, 1993), and I am sure that in naming her heroine she was thinking of Fouqué’s character. But the characterization of Undine Spragg gains from Wharton’s ability to play on the ambiguity and elusiveness of the *Urflüssiges*, whose personifications include Fouqué’s tender, graceful creature anxious to conquer a soul for herself and full of love and abnegation as well as the much more sinister female figures which had preceded it (including the protagonist of Fontane’s story *Oceane von Perceval*). The reader soon learns that Undine has more in common with the Loreleys, the Melusines, the women-fishes and women-snakes who deceive, ensnare and destroy men, than with a water-nymph à la Fouqué. Her husbands, however, tend – at least at first – to see in her a sweet, fresh and pure daughter of nature, ingenuous, innocent and ready to give herself unconditionally and to embrace her husband’s world.

Ralph Marvell is the most harrowing victim of this delusion: he is destroyed by his failure to see the real Loreley underneath the apparent Undine. He falls in love with Undine Spragg because she is extremely beautiful but undoubtedly also because of the suggestions of her name, which cannot fail to enflame his book-fed, romantic and highly imaginative nature – suggestions of which, however, both Undine and her parents, ignorant and uneducated upstarts, are absolutely unaware! The first time Ralph, already besotted by Undine, is alone with her mother, he cannot refrain from complimenting her on her choice of name: “It’s a wonderful find – how could you tell it would be such a fit?” Her answer illuminates the cultural level of the Spraggs: “Why, we called her after a hair-waver father put on the market the week she was born – ' [...] It’s from undoolay, you know, the French for crimping’” (CC, 48). Instead of being put on his guard by this discovery, Ralph persists in his wrong
etymological association and continues undeterred to identify Miss Spragg with a Nereid or Naiad. During their honeymoon in the Sienese countryside he still perceives his wife in terms of aquatic imagery: “‘You are as cool as a wave’” (CC, 82) “His eyes [...] absorbed in a last glance the glimmering submarine light of the ancient grove, through which Undine’s figure wavered Nereid-like above him. ‘You never looked your name more than you do now’” (CC, 84). The narrator too makes massive use of water-related imagery to describe and define Undine, even as she is first introduced: “She was always doubling and twisting on herself, and every movement she made seemed to start at the nape of her neck, just below the lifted roll of reddish-gold hair, and flow without a breakthrough her whole slim length to the tips of her fingers and the points of her slender restless feet” (CC, 7); her marvellous auburn hair is always “waving and floating about her” (CC, 90); after trying on her lace wedding dress she rises “Venus-like above its folds” (CC, 53); her response to her husband’s caresses suggest “the coolness of the element from which she took her name” (CC, 88); the symptoms of her impending rage are “the premonitory ripple on smooth water before the coming of the wind” (CC, 107); the atmosphere of the Nouveau Luxe is reviving to her like water to a flower; and lastly, her husband comes to regard their marriage as a drowning: “They were fellow-victims in the noyade of marriage, but if they ceased to struggle perhaps the drowning would be easier to both” (CC, 129). And during his illness after being abandoned by Undine he has the constant impression of being pulled under water and drowning: a clear symbolic image of the marriage which is gradually killing him.

The phrase “divers et ondoyant” (“various and wavering”) which come to Ralph’s mind when thinking of Undine derives, according to Helen Killoran, from Montaigne’s essay “By Various Means we Arrive to the Same End”: “The complete statement is: ‘Certes, c’est un sujet merveilleusement vain, divers et ondoyant que l’homme. Il est malaise d’y fonder jugement constant et uniforme.’ But the correct translation provides more irony: ‘Truly man is a marvellously vain, fickle, and unstable creature, on whom it is difficult to found a certain and uniform judgement’” (Killoran, 1996, 53). The two adjectives with which Ralph defines Undine point at some of the positive qualities he sees in her: her freshness, youth, pliancy, her profound diversity from the rigidity and stuffiness of his decrepit and decaying Old New York. They also obviously refer to her “watery” nature. But at a subliminal level, the Montaigne quotation might provide a subtext expressing Undine’s lack of defining characteristics, the fluid contour of her nature and her consequent tendency to model herself
on always new models: as water takes the shape of its container, so her opinions, aspirations and behaviour are shaped through imitation. “Undine was fiercely independent and yet passionately imitative. She wanted to surprise everyone by her dash and originality, but she could not help modelling herself on the last person she met, and the confusion of ideals thus produced caused her much perturbation when she had to choose between two courses” (CC, 14).

This deeply imitative and chameleon-like nature is an important trait that she shares with Mann’s Felix Krull. An aspect of it is their ability to be, when necessary, extremely pliant, so that they can ingratiate themselves to those who can be useful to them. This, of course, makes of both the perfect confidence tricksters. Further evidence of this extreme capacity to imitate successfully is their peculiar facility for languages: they both learn to speak perfect, even phonetically perfect French. But there are other significant points of contact between Undine and Felix. They have no scruple in taking advantage of the lack of stamina and of the corruption of the upper class and exploiting them for their advancement. They have exceptional physical beauty and sexual attractiveness, and this becomes their major weapon in their rise. They both show some oddity in their sexual behaviour: Undine is repelled by her men, and they in their turn end by becoming indifferent even to her great physical beauty; Felix seems to be attracted to pairs of people rather than to individuals, falling in love simultaneously with a brother and a sister, a mother and a daughter, the Scottish lord and the Birmingham girl. They both are peripatetic people: in fact, both The Custom of the Country and Felix Krull can be said to be structured according to the conventions of the picaresque novel, following as they do their protagonists through their adventures in two worlds and under various incarnations: Felix Krull, Armand Kroull, Marquis Louis de Venosta; Undine Spragg-Moffatt-Marvell-Marquise de Chelles-Moffatt. Undine ends up exactly as she started, confirming herself a heroine of the ‘picaro’ type rather than, as Lawson (1974) would have it, the protagonist of a Bildungsroman. Of course she has changed and learnt during the years: but the knowledge she has accumulated merely consists of having picked up French, polished up her manners, learnt how to dress, how to do her hair, how to deal with men... But no moral growth has taken place in her and in the last chapter the narrator shows that she is still the same cold, vain, self-centred and eternally dissatisfied being she was in the first. She is as hard and cruel to her little boy now as she used to be to her parents and to her husbands in the past. If a conclusion to her ‘Bildung’ can be
pointed out it can only be a purely ironical one, in that she finally finds out the one thing she really covets and cannot obtain: she cannot become an ambassadress because she is a divorsee.

Wharton's treatment of the fall of the Marvell family and of the old order has naturalistic overtones (also due to the fact that, when describing the decline of Old New York both in The Age of Innocence and The Custom of the Country, she makes large use of terminology derived from the reading of anthropology texts and of Darwin). Ralph himself personifies the weakness of the old system. He is the organism destined for extinction because unfit to survive. He, like Hanno Buddenbrook, is a degenerate scion of a once healthy race. Their physical and spiritual weakness also shows in their artistic inclinations – music for Hanno and literature for Ralph (who, incidentally, bears the surname of the poet Andrew Marvell).

The idea of degeneration and genetic inheritance was already present in The Valley of Decision: the inherited tendency to religious melancholy of the dukes of Pianura. In this Wharton was influenced by Paul Bourget, a close friend, as much as by the cultural climate of the time in general. Positivism linked moral decadence with organic, physiological decadence. The transformation of the bourgeois into 'artist' is seen as a disease – the consequence of a pathological refinement of the nervous system. This concept is present in Mann – who had read Bourget and Zola as a young man – as well as in Wharton: for example, in Old New York, the massive Mr Raycie sires a puny son with artistic inclinations, incomprehensible to the father. This son, Lewis, in turn can only generate a sickly daughter destined to die in childhood, and with her the family is extinguished. Thus the 'Raycie Collection' disappears, transformed into pearls and Rolls Royces by a frivolous distant relative. Lewis's daughter's physical weakness is evident in her portrait and is perhaps inherited from her consumptive mother Beatrice. Hanno Buddenbrook is also troubled by frequent illnesses: rotten teeth (inherited from his father Thomas), fevers, nightmares. Even his love of music, which at the same time expresses and contributes to his highly strung nature, is an inherited trait: his mother Gerda and her father are accomplished violinists. Hanno is mortally afraid of his father, as Lewis is of his. Also in The Valley of Decision there is a clear physical as well as moral decline in the ducal family clearly expressed in the comparison between the medieval, warrior ancestor, founder of the dynasty, and the last occupiers of the throne. In this novel too the heir, Prince Ferrante, dies in childhood, and so does Odo's child.

Between Wharton and Mann there are also great similarities in the treatment of the theme of the family-ethic. Tony Buddenbrook feels in duty bound to sacrifice herself to
maintain and enhance the prestige of her family. She feels ‘a link in the chain’ of her family history, and in her desire to do her share to consolidate and improve the position of her family she renounces her love for Morten Schwarzkopf and submits to marry the man her father has chosen for her, and who seem to promise a commercially advantageous connection for the Buddenbrook firm. Ironically, Tony’s marriage will be a failure from every point of view and her dowry will be swallowed up by her husband’s bankruptcy, thus contributing to the family’s losses. In *The Age of Innocence* Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska also sacrifice their love out of their duty to their family, to which they feel inextricably bound. But, because their aim is to safeguard Newland’s marriage and the welfare of his unborn child, rather than the materialistic one of increasing the family’s fortune and its social standing, their renunciation is shown to have brought – at least in Newland’s case – a reasonable amount of happiness.

Like Mann, Wharton seems to continue to believe in the repressive values of bourgeois society as the foundations of civilization. Mann found confirmation of this in his reading of Freud. For Wharton, the human aspiration to freedom and individual fulfilment can lead to personal and social disaster. Human passions, when unleashed, become a threat to civilization: she sounded this note in her first novel, *The Valley of Decision*, and substantially maintained it throughout her work. World War I represented for Wharton the catastrophe ensuing from the refusal of the collective values of western civilization. Mann, who had described in *Der Zauberberg* the crisis of that civilization and the forewarning signs of the catastrophe, lived to see its full extent with World War II.

### 3.10. Summary

Although Fontane’s and Wharton’s concrete ‘fields of research’ are precisely localised in terms of space and time and they re-create very different worlds in their art, there exists between them a remarkable affinity of aesthetic principles and technique, philosophy and themes.

It is interesting to note that both Wharton and Fontane share a theory of realism based on an aesthetic of selectivity which entails a mistrust of Naturalism and (in Wharton’s case) of Modernism. They subscribe to the realistic tenet that characters should be portrayed as the product of particular material and social conditions, which is certainly a fundamental Realistic and Naturalistic principle. However, Wharton refused to accept the idea that fiction should be an *unselective* reproduction of all aspects of reality, including the most sordid. It is
not enough to accumulate facts and details in a fictional work, or to relate certain events and deal with certain subjects just because they can be encountered in daily life. A creative intelligence tries to disengage significant moments from the confusion of human existence, to find those “crucial instances” which can illuminate the human condition. This is to her the only real way of rendering life in fiction. “The wide creative vision, though no fragment of human experience can appear wholly empty to it, yet seeks by instinct those subjects in which some phase of our common plight stands forth dramatically and typically, subjects which, in themselves, are a kind of summary and fore-shortening of life’s dispersed and inconclusive occurrences” (1925, 28–29). To her creative vision the *tranche-de-vie* approach is senseless, because the art of fiction consists essentially in the capacity to present to the reader those *illuminating incidents* which clarify the inner meaning of each situation. For the same reasons she was deeply averse to the Modernist technique of the stream of consciousness, which, basing itself on Freudian principles, seemed to her to leave aside the conscious mind in order allegedly to explore and record the unconscious. Such techniques, moreover, appeared to Wharton not even original or innovative: she defines them as “a discarded trick of technique” just because, as Katharine Joslin says, “she saw its link to earlier Naturalistic experiments with ‘slice of life’ and Realist depictions of ‘stream of consciousness’ within more traditionally drawn novels” (1993, 352).

Fontane’s reproduction of reality was not the photographic-cum-scientific one of the Naturalistic movement. He strongly approved of that aspect of their practice consisting in the detailed depiction of life of all social strata, but rejected a concentration on the squalid aspect of life which seemed to him too exclusive, in favour of a selective artistic presentation of reality. Already in his 1853 essay “Unsere lyrische und epische Poesie seit 1848” Fontane contrasts his idea of realism with the false one which he calls naturalism and introduces his central idea of “Verklärung”. To Fontane realism in art cannot be a mere reproduction of the quotidian in all its pain and squalor. This kind of realism, Fontane says, is one that needs a refining process to become gold. The mimetic approach must be tempered by a process of artistic transfiguration. The creative imagination must go beyond the real in order to depict the true. Thus Fontane shows himself to be in sympathy with the writers of the movement called “Poetic Realism,” for whom, as Müller-Seidel says, “Verklärung” and humour were important programmatic tenets. Indeed, he will remain faithful to this programme even decades later.^[2]
Both Wharton and Fontane are interested in exploring the position of the individual within society and the possibility of happiness and self-fulfilment within society. The individual finds himself invariably in some conflict with society and its written and unwritten rules but discovers nevertheless that it is impossible to go through life without the support of the social framework. Society limits but also defines. Happiness derives from the possibility of reconciling personal inclination and social duty, a combination all too rare. In order to survive the individual must therefore inevitably sacrifice part of himself and accept the crippled existence ensuing from the sacrifice. Survival is impossible without acquiring renunciation and resignation, as well as the ability of deriving a little happiness from the little, insignificant, quotidian things of life. In this theme we can perhaps see the influence on both authors of the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer. I have already said how much Wharton admired him and how often she re-read his works. Fontane too was struck by his thought. His attitude towards his characters – his acceptance, his forbearance, his sympathy – is perhaps partly based on his understanding of Schopenhauer’s concept of *Mitleid*. “Schopenhauer hat ganz recht,” he wrote on 24 August 1898 in a letter to his daughter Mete, “‘Das Beste, was wir haben, ist Mitleid’.” These sentiments are echoed by the character of Fräulein von Sawatzki in *L’Adultéra*. Davis (1983, 35) observes however that this was in fact in a way a misunderstanding of Schopenhauer’s thought, because *Mitleid* was to the philosopher a step towards the renunciation of the will, the abdication of judgement, the vanishing of the ‘I’, the nirvana: a conclusion which seems quite far from Fontane’s genial and rational humanism. Notwithstanding his fundamental pessimism, Fontane still maintained that we need to believe in the possibility of positive feelings and that a denial of them causes de-humanisation.

This broad philosophical issue is explored in the specific context of the upper classes in Germany and America in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Both Fontane and Wharton show the clear contradiction existing between the obsolete principles and prejudices of the upper classes and the principles that should rule a decent, human existence. The elemental, vital instincts of these people who are not completely devoid of sensitivity and individuality must clash with the omnipresent social context of their lives, without, however, their being able to abjure the prejudices of their class. In order to still remain accommodated within their class, they have to ‘break’ themselves morally, because their social essence has ceased to be a source of moral strength. This struggle produces inadequate people: people unable to successfully cope with life. This inadequacy is particularly evident in male characters, because men are supposed
to play an active role in social life, while circumstances do not allow them to develop the qualities necessary to live up to these expectations.

This issue of the inadequacy and sterility of the upper classes at the turn of the century is central to the fiction of both Wharton and Fontane – as indeed to much European literature of the period – and links their work to that of Thomas Mann – particularly, of course, to his novel Buddenbrooks. However, Wharton’s criticism of ‘Old New York’ is as ambivalent as is Fontane’s criticism of the Prussian Junkers. Aware as he is of their limitations and faults, he still retains an ethical and aesthetic predilection for the ‘good’ exemplars of this class, like Botho. The same, and more, can be said of Wharton, who has been accused of not being able even to conceive positive characters who are not of genteel origin.

To their aristocratic propensities both Fontane and Wharton added, however, an understanding of, and interest and admiration for, the other strata of society. They give sympathetic portrayals of members of the lower classes: Lene, Gideon, various servants; the Bunner sisters, Ethan, Nettie. These people are closer to the realities of life, and the simple, good things that make up happiness are more within their reach. Their feelings are more genuine and natural; they have more human warmth and vitality; they are morally healthier. But they too cannot escape their destinies, and they do not even try, because they have no delusions and no false hopes and take the world for what it is. In Mann too characters from the lower classes appear simpler and less repressed than the bourgeois (even less intellectually repressed, like Morten Schwartzkopf). In Fontane and in Mann these people may allow the upper bourgeoisie and the aristocracy a glimpse of unimagined happiness, until the repressive order calls them back to their ‘duty’. In Wharton the two worlds are kept even more separate and any mésalliance with a member of the lower (i.e. poorer) classes is out of the question.

Wharton and Fontane share, moreover, an interest in the problem of the changing social role of woman – one of the most important developments of that period – and this interest results in singularly perceptive and sympathetic portrayals of female characters in their novels and in an extremely rich and detailed analysis of what still was, both in Fontane’s time and in Wharton’s, women’s special sphere of interest: the institution of family. This interest in marriage inevitably leads both Wharton and Fontane to focus with some insistence also on the issue of marriage breakdown and its causes.

Predominant themes in Fontane are love, marriage, mésalliance in its double sense (social and moral), adultery, suicide as a way of escaping unbearable unhappiness, and the
duel. These elements may appear sensational but, because the plot is only a means of revealing the psychology of characters and because Fontane plays down dramatic events in favor of the normal routine of daily life, climactic episodes are dealt with in a quiet, discreet and almost reticent way. All of these, except the duel, can be found in Wharton’s fiction as well. Marriage is an area of experience which she, as R.W.B. Lewis points out, “was perhaps the first American writer to make almost exclusively her own” (1988, ix). Lewis also rightly remarks that this choice underlines “the resolutely traditional cast of Mrs. Wharton’s imagination”. It also perhaps underlines her European cultural roots, because this question, ignored by nineteenth-century American writers, had, as he says, “provided the theme of themes for a whole galaxy of English, French and Russian writers.” She explored the marriage question in all its aspects – courtship, married life, children, sexual relation, extramarital relationship, divorce, remarriage – in all her novels and in almost half of her short-stories, and transformed this issue into an instrument to explore the human condition. “The whole domain of the marriage question was the domain in which Edith Wharton sought the truth of human experience; it was where she tested the limits of human freedom and found the terms to define the human mystery” (Lewis, 1988, x).

Both Fontane and Wharton trace one of the causes of marriage failure to a fundamental incompatibility between the spouses. In Fontane’s this incompatibility is often caused – or augmented – by a difference in age (L’Adultera, Graf Petöfy, Cécile, Effi Briest), but more often by a clash of personalities due to different sensibilities, levels of education and general Weltanschauung. The difference in social class and wealth does not necessarily imply the impossibility of love; on the contrary, there is a genuine and strong feeling between Botho and Lene, Waldemar and Stine, Lewin and Marie. On the whole, however, the unions which are shown as most successful are those where there is a clear harmony of character, outlook and temperament between the spouses (and this harmony can obviously be facilitated by a similarity in social background and in age): Lewin and Marie, Melanie and Rubehn, Mathilde Möhring and Hugo Großmann, Waldemar von Stechlin and Armgard von Barbi, Corinna and Marcel all achieve happiness and fulfilment in marriage. There are moreover many loving marriage relationships amongst the older characters – Berndt von Vitzewitz, Dubslav von Stechlin, Count von Barby, the two Frau von Poggenpuhls and Frau Schmolke all loved and mourn their consorts. Even the elder Treibels and the von Briests seem to have reached some modus vivendi and at least a unity of purpose and a common commitment to family, property and society, and
this can be considered as some kind of success in marriage, at least by Fontane’s characteristically moderate standards. It would therefore appear that Robinson’s remark “There is a surprising lack of normal, stable marriage relationships in his [Fontane’s] tales” (198) is not strictly correct and that the number of reasonably happy marriages balances the number of the unhappy ones.

Although adultery is explicitly dealt with in several of Fontane’s novels – L’Adultera, Unwiederbringlich, Effi Briest, Graf Petőfy – and never occurs in Wharton’s works – with the already mentioned exception of ‘New Year’s Eve’, in which the adultery is motivated by financial straits and is therefore purely technical – Wharton takes a bleaker view of love and marriage. Social life being a constant pitiful compromise, marriage too can hardly be anything but a perpetual piecing together of broken fragments, and successful unions are rarer in her works than in Fontane’s. Happiness in marriage is the condition reached after all passion is spent, all reciprocal delusions are overcome, self-awareness is reached and a common ground of duty towards family and/or society is found. Under these respects the marriage of May and Newland Archer appears retrospectively successful to Newland and to the reader; the marriage of Justine and John Amherst appears still vital and full of promises and the union of Vance and Halo appears to have acquired a firmer basis at the end of their separation. Like Fontane, Wharton sees similarity of cultural background and communality of purpose – mutual devotion to a shared duty, commitment to a common enterprise, to the building of something – rather than romantic passion, as the elements that can somehow bind two different individuals together.

It is worth noting that in their treatment of the ‘marriage question’ Fontane and Wharton take a similar stand which may be usefully contrasted with Ibsen’s. Ibsen rejects any marriage which is not founded on love and he tends to take the part of the individual against society. To him the self is not relational, the individual is an entity that can exist separate from its community. Fontane’s and Wharton’s attitude is more respectful of the social order and more ‘realistic’, in the sense that they believe that people are social beings, that their essence is largely determined by their social roles, and that they risk to go adrift when they break loose from their world. Effi Briest dies accepting the social law she has broken and submitting herself to it. In L’Adultera, on the other hand, Melanie van der Straaten breaks every bond, leaves husband and children, gives up her entire life for the sake of her lover and is rewarded with happiness, a husband closer to her in age and mentality and a new family. In Wharton too there
is this same contradiction. In general her characters do not thrive when they sunder their social bounds and uproot themselves from their natural environment: Lily Bart even dies of it. However, in *The Buccaneers* Nan St. George finds in a new love the strength to break her unhappy marriage, and because, like Melanie, she leaves to be faithful to herself, to be herself again, she rebuilds her life on firmer foundations. And Kate Clephane (*The Mother's Recompense*), who has spent eighteen years in Europe following her elopement with a lover, finds, on her return to New York, that during her exile she has built up a new identity for herself which makes it impossible for her to accept the marriage proposal which would ensure her reinstatement in New York society. She therefore opts for Europe, independence, solitude and her new self.

We can say, in conclusion, that both Wharton and Fontane believe that the individual is shaped and developed by their community, and that to leave one’s community is to lose one’s self and is therefore a hazardous step. However, they are not satisfied with the identity society forces on individuals, especially on women, and show that occasionally, very occasionally, it is possible for a woman who has flown in the face of social convention to develop a new self albeit within new bounds.

At the core of Fontane’s and Wharton’s fiction there is in conclusion a philosophical concern: the question of how to find a satisfactory synthesis between free will, individual liberty, personal aspirations and concerns on one hand, and social rules, collective interests, the inherited wisdom of the past on the other. The human yearning for happiness often clashes with the obligations each individual has as a member of society, and the choices we think of as individual choices have in fact heavy consequences for other people as well, because ‘no man is an island’ and each individual life is inextricably linked to others. All Fontane’s and Wharton’s characters must, sooner or later, tackle this dilemma. The conclusion they come to is that life is not merely a matter of abstract principles and that a compromise between individual and social morality must be reached, even by paying a heavy personal cost.
Conclusion

I began this thesis indicating the extent and nature of Wharton’s indebtedness to European culture generally — and to German literature in particular. I claimed that that indebtedness informed her literary creativity in a number of ways. I was concerned, not to propose a process of demonstrable, conscious influence, but rather to suggest affinities, affinities that mean it is helpful to read Wharton’s work with certain German texts in mind. Essentially, I have sought, through close analysis, to suggest that the dimension of reflectivity in the German Bildungsroman (and particularly in Goethe) and the characteristic thematic and stylistic mode of Fontane’s fiction can help us more accurately to comprehend Wharton’s achievement. That achievement derives its richness, then, from the confluence of the Bildungsroman and the Fontane-esque realism. It combines in equal measure an intense concern with and for the inner life of men and women and an abundant sense of the constraining dimension of practical social living. The upshot is a group of novels that acknowledge both the interiority and the exteriority of human life — and, above all, the interplay between the two. Viewed in this light, Wharton’s oeuvre is a decisive contribution to the modern novel.
Notes

Chapter One.

(1) Gianfranca Balestra (1992, 12-14) - who is one among the many Italian scholars who have, of late, celebrated Wharton’s ability to portray a forgotten Italy in *The Valley* - sees this extensive use of pictorial metaphors and similes as the central structural device of the book. It seems to me that Wharton’s descriptions of landscapes in *The Valley* show one of the many traces of Mrs. Radcliffe’s influence on this work. Both writers, for example, take Salvator Rosa as a model: cf. “a scene such as Salvator might have painted” (*The Valley of Decision*) and “This was such a scene as Salvator would have chosen, had he then existed, for his canvas” (*The Mysteries of Udolpho*).

(2) The popularity enjoyed by romance in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century and in the first years of the twentieth is a consequence of socio-economic phenomena. In this age of materialism on the rampage, with all its accompanying evils, a large part of the reading public sought refuge in imaginary worlds. This escapist mood expressed itself in the choice of fictional works set in remote times and places, such as Lewis Wallace’s *Ben Hur* (1880) whose enormous success started the publication of numberless romances with edifying content and set in Rome and in Palestine. But for the American reading public Europe too was exotic and the secular customs and traditions of her aristocracy held an immense fascination for those who looked for respite from life’s daily struggles just as much as for the new rich who felt the need to acquire social status and some form of culture. James Hart (1950) notices that the extraordinary success of *The Prisoner of Zenda* in 1894 “started a fad that lasted for more than a decade, for nearly every year saw the publication of romances about an imaginary kingdom, costume pieces filled with flashing swords, swishing cloaks, daring intrigue, and beautiful highborn heroines” (192). In its turn, Anthony Hope’s romance owed much to Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Prince Otto*, which in 1884 had anticipated the taste of the public. *The Valley*, although much more ambitious than most romances, has some characteristics of the genre. In fact, there are some curious resemblances between *The Valley* and *Prince Otto*, which would be surprising if this cultural climate of the period were not taken
into account. In the first place, the name “Odo” sounds similar to “Otto”, and both are variants of the Germanic “Ottone”. Like Odo, Otto likes playing the role of Haroun-al-Raschid, secretly leaving his palace by night and under disguise, in order to mix with his subjects and know their minds. Like Odo, Otto is dethroned by a revolution aiming at establishing a republic, and with which both works end. Like Odo, Otto has a difficult relationship with his wife, princess Amalia Serafina, who, like her counterpart Maria Clementina, is said to have an affair with the Prime Minister (Gondremark in *Prince Otto* and Trescorre in *The Valley*). Both Gondremark and Trescorre are unscrupulous double dealers who weave their obscure plots by manipulating the liberal groups of the two principalities. Lastly, in both romances is inserted the Narrative of an English Traveller: in *Prince Otto* it is “‘On the court of Grünewald’, being a portion of the traveller’s manuscript” (Book II, Ch. II, p. 62–9); in *The Valley* it is the Unpublished fragment from the diary of one Arthur Young, in Book IV, Ch. V. These inserted narratives describe the political-economic situation of Grünewald and Pianura.

(3) (p. 46) Following the convention whereby God is referred to in English by masculine pronouns, I shall use the same method to refer to narrators. I wish to stress that I do this merely for simplicity and in a gender-neutral way.

(4) (p. 57) Indeed, the very title of *The Fruit of the Tree*, with its obvious reference to *Genesis*, reposes the already mentioned “organic metaphor” – society as a continuously developing tree, human beliefs and traditions as slowly ripening fruit – and underlines a further symbolic meaning of it. Justine solves her moral dilemma – whether to kill Bessy or not – by turning onto it “the full light of acquired knowledge” (FT, 526); she takes a human life, the fruit of the forbidden tree, thus defying social and religious laws; her disobedience causes her “loss of Eden”, of the perfect happiness she had acquired with her marriage.

(5) (p. 59) I am here thinking of Nicholas Boyle’s following definition of *Faust*: “Like *Wilhelm Meister’s Years of Apprenticeship* – completed in 1796 – *[Faust]* is a work in which attitudes and beliefs which were once intended to furnish the key to the whole are preserved, as in amber, in the final version, where they appear as only partial interpretations, or even as pathological deviations, as stages along the route to a final goal, which itself may only be provisional” (Boyle, 1987, 19).
It often happens in Wharton novels that a male character imagines a woman as a cold and inanimate Galatea waiting for his vivifying touch. In *The Reef*, George Darrow reflects that, if Anna had married him when they were young, he “would have put warmth in her veins and light in her eyes: would have made her a woman through and through... A love like his might have given her the divine gift of self-renewal” (R, 29). We have seen how Newland Archer anticipates the joy of “enlightening” and transforming May into a woman of society. Like him, Ralph Marvell dreams of initiating his bride to the treasures of art and literature during their Italian honey moon. Undine seems to him a frail and fascinating creature whose inexperience and purity expose to the dangers of a corrupted society: “He seemed to him like a lovely rock bound Andromeda, with the devouring monster Society careering up to make a mouthful of her; and himself whirling down on his winged horse – just Pegasus turned Rosinante for the nonce – to cut her bonds, snatch her up, and whirl her back into the blue...” (CC, 50). The same mythological imagery rises to Selden’s mind when he thinks of Lily and of her incapacity to free herself from the vulgar environment where she lives and to follow her noble impulses: “But he would lift her out of it, take her beyond! That Beyond! on her letter was like a cry for rescue. He knew that Perseus’s task is not done when he has loosened Andromeda’s chains, for her limbs are numb with bondage, and she cannot rise and walk, but clings to him with dragging arms as he beats back to land with his burden. Well, he had strength for both – it was her weakness which had put that strength in him” (HM, 162). This “Pygmalion instinct”, as Juliet Montgomery (1972) calls it, is a mixture of aesthetic sense and desire to master which urges them to create a perfect being who can simultaneously be superior to them because ideal creature and inferior to them because created by them, but in no case equal to them.

“Something he knew he had missed: the flower of life” (AI, 289; Italics mine). The words in which Archer’s thoughts old themselves well express his sense of having irrevocably missed the poesy that only Ellen’s presence could have given his existence. In them there may well be an echo of Wallenstein’s lament at the death of Max Piccolomini (*Wallenstein’s Tod*, p. 112; Italics mine):

> Die Blume ist hinweg aus meinem Leben,
Und kalt und farblos seh ich’s vor mir liegen.
Denn er stand neben mir wie meine Jugend,
Er machte mir das Wirkliche zum Traum,  
Um die gemeine Deutlichkeit der Dinge  
Den goldnen Duft der Morgenröte webend –

(8) (p. 79) It seems to me that the narrator, in order to explain Vance’s sense of individuality, is once again making use of an image from Faust. The metaphor of the “hidden cave” used to convey “the irreducible core of selfness” must inevitably remind the reader of the section “Wald und Höhle” in Faust I. Here Faust addresses the “Geist der Erde”. He thanks the Spirit for granting him the power to feel and enjoy “die herrliche Natur”, but also the possibility to withdraw when he wishes into a “sichem Höhle”, his inner self, whose secret and profound wonders open to him. The antithesis ‘Walde’ (forest) and ‘Höhle’ (cave) is clear in these lines:

Und wenn der Sturm im Walde braust und knarrt,  
[...]  
Dann führt du mich zur sichern Höhle, zeigst  
Mich dann mir selbst, und meiner eignen Brust  
Geheime, tiefe Wunder öffnen sich.  
(Faust. Der Tragödie erster Teil, p. 97).

and obviously expresses the irreducible uniqueness of the self, which cannot completely resolve itself into the external world. It is a very important and recurrent dualism in Wharton’s works. This metaphor of the self – and particularly of the artist’s self – as a secluded place full of secret delights is used by Wharton also in another instance, that of the would-be writer Ralph Marvell in The Custom of the Country:

As a boy at the seaside, Ralph, between tides, had once come on a cave – a secret inaccessible place with glaucous lights, mysterious murmur, and a single shaft of communication with the sky. He had kept his find from the other boys, [...] because he felt there were things about the cave that the others, good fellows as they all were, couldn’t be expected to understand, and that, anyhow, it would never be quite his own; after he had let his thick-set freckled cousins play smuggler and pirate in it.

And so with his inner world. Though so coloured by outer impressions, it wove a secret curtain about him, and he came and went in it with the same joy of furtive possession (46).

(9) (p. 85) Wharton is here expressing her scorn for contemporary literature and for the stream of consciousness technique in particular. When Vance Weston writes Colossus trying to apply in it all the literary theories he has heard about, he fails miserably to satisfy both his readers and critics and himself.

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The metaphor of ‘the Mothers’ is “a striking cover emblem [...] of her [Wharton’s] consistent refusal to explore, or even approach other than superficially, the subconscious” (Lawson, 1974, 106).

“The Mothers, as the archetypal images of the eternal and the limitless, are related to personal inspiration of the artist through the necessity for him to reach deep into the roots of his own being which lie both in his own past and in the universe as a whole” (Vita-Finzi, 1990, 60).

Chapter Two

Gothic literature, a strongly protestant genre, often presents the ill-famed Tribunal as a typical embodiment of the obscurantism and tyranny of catholicism. The Inquisition is an important element in classics like The Monk and The Italian, and also in Melmoth the Wanderer, whose author Charles Maturin had written various sermons against the “errors of the Catholic Church”.

It is easy to recognise in this another topos of fantastic literature, that of the portrait that comes to life. It recurs for example in The Castle of Otranto, Melmoth the Wanderer, Uncle Silas, The Oval Portrait, and in The Picture of Dorian Gray (where it is obviously related to the Doppelgänger theme). In The Monk the portrait of the Virgin in front of which Ambrosio prostrates himself in a sort of idolatrous fervour which inadequately hides sexual passion has the same corrupting function as the heavenly seductive Madonna of Der Geisterseher: both pictures are meant to kindle the lust of sexually timid men who so far have never shown much interest in women.

This too is another typical element of Gothic romances. Cf. for example The Monk, The Italian, Melmoth the Wanderer: the story of the young man or woman compelled to enter a monastery or a convent against their will. Even Fulvia’s elopement from the convent with Odo reminds us of the macabre abduction of the “Bleeding Nun” in The Monk.
Incidentally, it is worth mentioning that Fulvia’s surname, ‘Vivaldi’, reminds readers of Gothic literature of his namesake in Mrs. Radcliffe’s *The Italian*.

**Chapter Three**

(p. 123) The problem of what exactly one means by the German nation and German unifying characteristics had been raised first during the Sturm und Drang period but emerged again naturally much more sharply during the years of Napoleonic occupation and of the Wars of Liberation. In fact, we can say that the idea of German nation owes its emergence to the fact that the obsolete Holy Roman Empire, which held together hundreds of tiny states and principalities, had been destroyed by Napoleon, who had created in its stead the Confederation of the Rhine.

During the French occupation the idea of a German heritage and individual culture began to emerge. Patriots started looking backwards to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, when a common and rich indigenous city culture had flourished all over Germany – the culture celebrated in Wagner’s *Meistersinger* – and even to go back to a semi-legendary past beyond historical continuity which came to be embodied in the myth, so important in the 19th century, and frequently alluded to in Fontane’s novels, of ‘Hermann der Cherusker’. Hermann, prince of the Cheruscans, defeated in AD 9 a Roman army led by general Varus in the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest. (What the Hermann-enthusiasts often forgot was that this defeat was avenged by general Gaius Julius Caesar Germanicus at Idistaviso on the Weser in AD 16, where Arminius was defeated and killed and that his wife and son were given to the Romans as hostages and paraded as captives in Germanicus’s triumph the following year.) The battle was the subject of Klopstock’s *Die Hermannsschlacht* (1769), a war-song in the manner of Germanic bards. During the anti-French struggle Hermann became a symbol of the resistance of the German people – cf. Kleist’s *Die Hermannsschlacht* (1808). Later on, throughout the century he and his wife Thusnelda were the subjects of many paintings, for example C.D. Friedrich’s *Graves of the Fallen Warriors of Liberty* (1812), and *Thusnelda in the Triumphal Procession of Germanicus* by Karl von Piloty (1873), which is alluded to in Fontane’s *L’Adultera*. Hermann was of course also a favourite subject of monuments. The Battle of the Teutoburg Forest is the subject of the north pediment of the Walhalla, built by Leo von Klenze on the Bräuberg near Regensburg (1830–42), and in 1838–75 Ernst von
Bandel erected a huge commemorative column, the Hermannsdenkmal in the Teutoburg Forest itself.

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