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The Divided Conflict of Edith Wharton's Summer

by CAROL WERSHOVEN

WHEN Bernard Berenson complimented Edith Wharton on her latest novel, *Summer*, and expressed admiration for its predominant male character, Lawyer Royall, Wharton replied, "of course *he's* the book."¹

Wharton's statement has been largely ignored by critics who view the book as Charity Royall's story, and who classify Lawyer Royall as an old windbag, a pompous drunkard, or worse.² The popular interpretation ignores not only Royall's central position in the plot, but Royall's central role in the novel's subtle and unfolding themes. For *Summer* is not just Wharton's variation on the old seduced-and-abandoned theme; it is a story of *two* protagonists, both of whom must come to terms with their destructive illusions in order to lead adult lives.

The ability to "look life in the face,"³ to confront reality without flinching or evasion, was, for Wharton, an essential quality in mature conduct. She repeatedly traced the conflicts of characters faced with the choice of escape through evasion or a more painful but adult recognition of things as they are. In the majority of her novels, Wharton chronicles this conflict through the use of an outsider heroine, one who exposes the reality of situation and self in confrontation with a weak male. This male figure, unable to face the truths the heroine reveals, rejects her. Such is the pattern of Ellen Olenska and Newland Archer in *The Age of Innocence*, of Lily Bart and Selden in *The House of Mirth*, as well as of Wharton's lesser known novels.⁴ What is unusual about *Summer* is, as Wharton herself noted, that a man, Royall, is at the center of the book, that the conflict between suffocating illusions and painful but liberating reality is not expressed through Wharton's customary plot structure.

Granted, the traditional elements of a Wharton novel—ineffective and evasive male and outsider female—are here, Lucius Harney qualifying as the first⁵ and Charity Royall as the second. But in *Summer*, Wharton departs from her usual pattern by splitting the character and conflict of the intruder into

1. R. W. B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 397.

2. See, for example, Elizabeth Ammons, *Edith Wharton's Argument with America* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1980), p. 138; Geoffrey Walton, *Edith Wharton: A Critical Interpretation* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 86, 88; John W. Crowley, "The Unmastered Streak: Feminist Themes in Wharton's *Summer*," *American Literary Realism: 1870-1910*, XV, 1 (Spring 1982), 87-90. Exceptions to the general opinion are Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *A Feast of Words* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), pp. 270-95; and R. W. B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton*, p. 397.

3. A term used in *The Age of Innocence* to describe the ideal way to act.

4. Among them: *The Reef*, *The Custom of the Country* (where several heroes are drawn to an intruder heroine but reject what she reveals), *The Valley of Decision*, *New Year's Day*.

5. This is noted by R. W. B. Lewis, p. 397.

male and female, and by resolving the conflict through a union of the two. It is a union which not only satisfies the requirements of plot, but which delineates what, Wharton felt, an adult marriage must be. *Summer*, Wharton's most uncharacteristic book, is both Charity and Lawyer Royall's story, a dual conflict and, more importantly, a dual growth achieved through "looking life in the face."

As Blake Nevius has noted,⁶ Charity Royall and her guardian Lawyer Royall are twins. They share certain characteristics which set them apart from, and above, the stifling environment of North Dormer. Both are rebels, rejecting the restraints of village life: Royall, by his drunkenness and dissipation, Charity, in her affair with a city gentleman. Both are village outsiders: Charity, because of her ties to the Mountain; Royall, because he is too large a figure for small town life. They share a desire for more of an existence than North Dormer provides, and, in seeking that life, both resort to fantasies which are destructive and essentially paralyzing.

Trapped in a society they scorn and in lives they despise, Royall and his ward resort to a common consolation: the fantasy of escape. In a new place, they feel, they will become new persons. Royall laments his diminishing law practice and his own degeneration, but blames them both on his environment; had he stayed in Nettleton, he reasons, he would be a bigger man. He camouflages his own self-hatred by surrounding himself with younger men, men like Harney, in whom he sees his own wasted potential, and young drunkards, who will flatter him through their inferiority.

Charity has her own fantasies of escape—to Nettleton, to a larger world with Harney as guide, even to the Mountain. Anywhere is better than North Dormer, for Charity has "a childish belief in the miraculous power of strange scenes and new faces to transform her life and wipe out bitter memories."⁷ Royall and Charity both evade change from within, believing that a new place will make them new persons.

Charity's fantasy of escape from self by a change of place is paired with an even more destructive fantasy—the dream of deliverance through romantic love.⁸ Her affair with Harney is grounded on the classic feminine fantasy of romantic submission, on an abdication of will (and self) through absorption into the loved one. From their initial meeting, Charity feels inferior to Harney, and senses "the sweetness of dependence" (p. 23) on him. After her sexual initiation, Charity chooses a masochistic, servile role in Harney's life: "she could imagine no reason for doing or not doing anything except for the fact that Harney wished or did not wish it. All her tossing contradictory impulses were merged in a fatalistic acceptance of his will" (p. 175). Rather than resolve her conflicts and develop an adult identity through painful yet free choices, Charity hides in her dream of a self defined by her lover: "her own life was sus-

6. *Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1953), p. 170.

7. Edith Wharton, *Summer* (1917; rpt. introd. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 157. Citations in the text are to this edition.

8. Geoffrey Walton notes that Charity seeks a "fairy prince" in Harney, and that for her "escape and social adjustment are dreamed of as identical." *Edith Wharton: A Critical Interpretation*, p. 87.

pendent in his absence" (p. 184). Their relationship becomes the stereotypical romance of patriarchy; Harney, the superior guide, educating, dominating, forming his inferior mistress, who has sold all sense of self in exchange for his protection. It is no wonder that Wharton associates Harney with a musty "vault" of a library (p. 14), with decayed and empty houses, with man-made enclosure in the midst of natural, open beauty. For Harney, not Royall, represents the dangerous paternal power opposed to Charity; he fathers her child, thus making her a prisoner of her body. More importantly, he reduces her to the status of a dependent, both a child, relying on him for her very identity, and a prostitute, selling her emerging self for the security of his indulgent and patronizing care.

This destructive fantasy of love is shared by Royall. He, like his ward, seeks a way out of the prison of isolation through the avenue of romantic love. The love he envisions is, essentially, the same kind of love chosen by Charity, a relationship of master/slave, of woman submitting to man's superior will. His fantasy is expressed, grotesquely, in his drunken assault upon Charity one lonely night, yet the model of love it expresses is, at bottom, the model of Charity and Harney's romance. The paternal lust of the father for the child only parodies the dynamics of Harney, representative of money, old New York and its suffocating superiority, seducing the poor and adoring country girl.

The subtle and hidden plot of *Summer*, then, is the revelation of these fantasies to the two main characters. It is a gradual exposure of destructive illusions accomplished, by Wharton, through the use of mirror images. Charity and Royall, twins in their weaknesses, must come to terms with themselves by repeatedly confronting one another. When Royall makes his sexual advance upon Charity, for example, she forces him to face himself, in shame. "How long is it since you've looked at yourself in the glass?" she asks (p. 34), and she mocks his appearance, his age, his lecherousness. Similarly, Royall repeatedly shatters Charity's dream of Harney. When Royall refuses to board Harney any longer, suspecting Harney's motives regarding Charity, Charity surreptitiously observes her lover, and sees "a look of weariness and self-disgust on his face: it was almost as if he had been gazing at a distorted reflection of his own features. For a moment Charity looked at him with a kind of terror, as if he had been a stranger under familiar lineaments" (p. 103). Royall's action exposes Harney to himself and to his lover.

Two major episodes highlight the use of mirror images. The first is the Fourth of July celebration, where Harney and Charity, who is intoxicated by the fireworks, the crowds, and her first lingering kiss, meet Royall, drunk, on the arm of the local prostitute, Julia Hawes.⁹ When Royall calls Charity a whore, she has "a vision of herself, hatless, dishevelled, with a man's arm about her" (p. 151), a whore confronted, ironically, by a whoremonger. The further irony is, of course, that while Royall calls her a whore, Harney will make her one.

9. John Crowley ("The Unmastered Streak: Feminist Themes in Wharton's *Summer*," p. 91) notes the mirror image here.

And still the illusions persist, for Charity continues to believe in her deliverance through an all-consuming love, and Royall, though repeatedly shamed by Charity, undergoes no radical change of character. It is not until near the end of summer (the season and the book) that Royall, facing himself, reaches out to Charity, to force her to face herself.

The scene is the Old Home Week festivity,¹⁰ a time when North Dormer gathers to celebrate its sense of place and to welcome those who have left the village back "home." The keynote speaker for the occasion is Lawyer Royall, and his speech, delivered to the entire town, is symbolically directed at only two people—himself and Charity. It is an oral resolution of his own conflicts, an acceptance of his own shortcomings, and a plea to Charity to "come home" to reality, to abandon her fantasies and accept herself.

In a masterful speech of reconciliation, expressing his own dignity and courage, Royall confronts himself, exhorting his listeners with Wharton's favorite theme: "let us look at things as they are."

Some of us have come back to our native town because we've failed to get on elsewhere. One way or other, things have gone wrong with us . . . what we'd dreamed of hadn't come true. But the fact that we had failed elsewhere is no reason why we should fail here . . . even if you come back against your will—and thinking it's all a bitter mistake of Fate or Providence—you must try to make the best of it, and to make the best of your old town; and after a while . . . I believe you'll be able to say, as I can say today: "I'm glad I'm here." (p. 194)

For both Charity and Royall, who so closely associate self with place, the return "home," for "good," as Royall specifies (p. 194), represents the return to one's self, an acceptance of one's self and of one's limitations. Royall, having faced himself, can only appeal to Charity to do likewise, to seek growth and identity in the real world of "home," rather than to escape into dangerous illusions.

Eventually, Charity does come home, to North Dormer and to herself. She begins to face the suffocating and deathlike nature of her romance: "she felt as if they were being sucked down together into some bottomless abyss" (p. 211); "she had lost all spontaneity of feeling, and seemed to herself to be passively awaiting a fate she could not avert" (p. 214). Finally, pregnant, alone, deprived of the fantasy of a world of love apart from the real world, Charity seeks one last escape, one last place—the Mountain. It is Royall who must bring her down from the horror of the primitive place, and bring her home. And he brings her love, not particularly romantic love, not particularly passionate love, but a love that will allow her to be free of illusions and free to redefine herself.

Much has been said about the vile nature of Charity and Royall's marriage.¹¹ It has been called sick, incestuous, and, superficially, it does signal Charity's return to the prison of North Dormer, where things never change, where peo-

10. Ironically, the prostitute, Julia Hawes, seeing her former neighbor (Charity) on July 4th, called the encounter "old home week."

11. See, for example, John W. Crowley ("The Unmastered Streak: Feminist Themes in Wharton's *Summer*," p. 95); Geoffrey Walton (*Edith Wharton: A Critical Interpretation*, p. 84); and Elizabeth Ammons (*Edith Wharton's Argument with America*, p. 133).

ple just get used to them. What such interpretations dismiss, however, are the changes which have taken place within the protagonists, and the subtle yet positive signs Wharton distributes through her final scenes. For what Wharton describes is not the incestuous marriage of father and child, the paradigmatic marriage of old New York, but a union of equals, of adults who have grown through confrontation and acceptance of themselves and of each other.¹²

The marriage is, first of all, the marriage of two people who will never become model citizens of North Dormer. The pregnant girl has already scandalized the village, and the man who weds her knows full well that he is violating village norms. Both Charity and Royall will always be "too big" to fit comfortably into North Dormer, which Royall calls "a poor little place," but, as he said in his homecoming speech, a place which can become bigger "if those who had to come back . . . wanted to come back for *good*" (p. 194). Rather than get used to North Dormer, Charity and Royall can work to change it.

Unlike the union of Harney and his society fiancée, Annabel Balch, the marriage of Charity and Royall is not incestuous. Charity is no innocent child-bride, no ornament to be displayed and broken by New York aristocrats. When Royall offers Charity his name and his life, he does so with sensitivity and compassion, so that Charity may salvage her dignity and pride from the shambles of her pain.

The man who had attempted to rape his ward sleeps in a rocking chair on their wedding night, and exhibits delicacy and tact by asking no questions about her pregnancy. He gives Charity money to spend as she wishes, and in Wharton's world, where money represents male power and female submission to that power, the incident is noteworthy. When Charity chooses to spend that money to preserve the memory of her summer with Harney, Royall makes no comment. At home, Charity has always ruled in Royall's house¹³ and she will continue to do so. Spared the sexual violation of the traditional wedding night, spared the enslavement of economic control, Charity is given the liberty of a different kind of marriage. The young girl who "had never known how to adapt herself," and "could only break and tear and destroy" (p. 220), has broken herself and her romantic dreams. Now, like Royall, she must rebuild herself and must learn when to adapt, never forgetting when to rebel.

The young girl trapped in loneliness can change, and fight for good, with a new partner. Even Charity, in her misery, can see a new Royall, one from whom "all the dark spirits had gone out" (p. 284), and for whom she now feels "a stir of something deeper than she had ever felt" (p. 284). In the marriage of Charity and Lawyer Royall, Wharton proposes a new and radical union: not of father and child, but of adults, coming together without illusions but with tolerance and compassion, with appreciation of the others' strengths and ac-

12. Geoffrey Walton (*Edith Wharton: A Critical Interpretation*, p. 92) does concede that, "as far as it goes," the marriage is "the kind of compromise that Edith Wharton thought was the essence of marriage and all satisfactory human relationships."

13. "Lawyer Royall ruled in North Dormer; and Charity ruled in Lawyer Royall's house." *Summer*, p. 23.

ceptance of weaknesses. The marriage is nothing like a surrender to the status quo of Harney and old New York, but a coming home to a union built together out of loneliness and pain and shame, and dedicated to working together, as equals, for *good*.

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