December 1982

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Colby Quarterly

Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 18, no.4, December 1982, p.241-248

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The Desolation of Charity Royall: Imagery in Edith Wharton's Summer

by LINDA MORANTE

NOT UNTIL the remains of Old New York life perished in the havoc of World War I, did Edith Wharton regard the society of her birth as constituting a genuine social order. Previous to the war she contended that America lost her rightful cultural inheritance when she broke with her fatherland. Bereft of this legacy she became a country without a past or heritage.  

In The House of Mirth, a novel dramatizing the perils of life in this traditionless America, Wharton’s heroine, Lily Bart, discovers that: “In whatever form a slowly-accumulated past lives in the blood . . . 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.” 2 Because there is no usable past, Lily, unprovided with a centralizing focus, surges to her destruction “like a stray uprooted growth down the heedless current.” 3 Wharton believed that America’s lack of a cultural heritage had a disastrous impact upon the American self. In her novels Ethan Frome, Summer, and The Custom of the Country, as well as The House of Mirth, she depicts the self living in a land-of-no-past, stunted by deprivation and entrapped in isolation.

In her unpublished autobiographical fragment, “Life and I,” she censures her own childhood and youth in culturally desolate America as an “intellectual desert.” 4 But even more dismal than Old New York, was rural New England: “the snowbound villages of Western Massachusetts were . . . grim places, morally and physically: insanity, incest and slow mental and moral starvation were hidden away behind the paintless wooden house-fronts of the long village street, or in the isolated farm-houses on the neighboring hills. . . .” 5 In the uncultured “vast field” 6 of America, it was the most barren region of all.

4. Edith Wharton, “Life and I,” (1902) Za 7, MS., p. 36. This and all other manuscript material cited is in the Wharton Archives, Beinecke Library, Yale Univ., New Haven, Conn.
Wharton’s association of cultural aridity and the desert or wasteland develops into the controlling imagery and symbolic center of *Ethan Frome* and *Summer*, her nouvelles of New England life. In these nouvelles she creates a barren scene to speak for characters whose perceptions and articulateness have been limited by this very environment. The composing of the poetic fabric of landscape images becomes her principal technique for revealing and developing character as well as meaning. *Ethan Frome* pictures those who, having spent “too many winters” in the culturally destitute New England village of Starkfield, are ice-bound. The stunted, undernourished plant growth, for example, the orchard of starved apple trees “writhing over a hillside among outcroppings of slate,” signifies the starved, barren lives of the protagonists. Similarly, in *Summer* the wasteland imagery describing the landscapes of North Dormer and the Mountain functions to symbolically express the conditions of Charity Royall’s, the nouvelle’s heroine’s, life.

Wharton employs images of isolation to express the land’s separation from any meaningful social framework. North Dormer, situated in a “lonely valley” is “left apart by railway, trolley, telegraph, and all the forces that link life to life in modern communities.” “No shops, no theatres, no lectures, no ‘business block’” bring together its inhabitants (S, 125). There is no social life, only solitary existence.

In Wharton’s view, without a cultural tradition to sustain vital human needs, human life disintegrates, decays, disappears. “Abandoned of men,” the town is an “empty place” (S, 125, 124). Deserted, falling-to-ruin old houses blemish its countryside. “Faded” “cheerless and untended” dwellings deface its streets (S, 132). In its musty library “cobbwebby volumes” “moulder[ed] undisturbed on the damp shelves” (S, 128, 125). Worms feed upon these rotting books, these symbols of a carrion of culture.

The asphyxiating atmosphere of this “old vault” or “mausoleum” of a library manifests North Dormer’s stultifying atmosphere of cultural deprivation (S, 146). *Summer*, as Edith Wharton once referred to it in a

7. See Edith Wharton, *Intro.*, *Ethan Frome* (New York: Scribner’s, 1911), p. vi. She maintains that her characters are “granite outcroppings; but half-emerged from the soil and scarcely more articulate.” Kenneth Bernard, “Imagery and Symbolism in *Ethan Frome*,” *College English*, XXIII (1961), 178-79. Bernard notes that Wharton solves the problem of the characters’ inarticulateness by imagery and symbolism which he divides into three parts: character and setting, uses of light and dark, and sexual symbolism. He maintains that the setting parallels Ethan’s condition and serves to illuminate it. R. Baird Shuman, “The Continued Popularity of *Ethan Frome.*” *Revue des Langues Vivantes*, XXXVII (1973), 257-63, notes other landscape features, for example, barreness.

8. Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, p. 7. In *Ethan Frome* the lonely and mute, barren and stunted, frozen and still land mirrors the social and cultural isolation, the starvation, and the imprisonment of the characters. As several critics (for example Bernard) have examined the relationship between the imagery and the characters and theme in *Ethan Frome*, this article will study *Summer*.


11. Note that as in the quoted passage, which connects isolation and emptiness, the image patterns interlock.
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letter to Gaillard Lapsley, is truly a "Hot Ethan" in which the heat suf-
focates as thoroughly as the burying cold. The town "lies high and in
the open, and lacks the lavish shade of the more protected New England
villages" (S, 123). In this "weather-beaten sunburnt village" the sun
beats down unrelenting rays and the close air stifles (S, 125).

Only "one street" lines North Dormer (S, 123). The town is the en-
closed, restrictive place its name suggests: like the view from the narrow
windows usually found in bedrooms, North Dormer affords a sleepy,
limited vista of life. Its windows face north, death-wards. In this torpid,
by-passed village, life is as tedious as the prison or the grave. As Charity
tells Harney, a visitor, "things don't change at North Dormer: people
just get used to them" (S, 184).

The features of this cultural desert, the interlocking image patterns at
the symbolic heart of Summer, function as metaphors of Charity's life
and character. Like North Dormer, she is isolated; alienated from tradi-
tion, estranged from the people closest to her. Just as the town is a sun-
scorched and stifling place where nothing flourishes, so do her dreams
wither and disintegrate. And as the land is enclosed, so is she ultimately
trapped.

Edith Wharton's study of cultural deprivation is interwoven with her
exploration of her adolescent heroine's sexual and emotional self-dis-
cover, creation of dreams, and initiation into disillusionment when
these aspirations perish. Summer recounts the aborted attempt of a
young girl to set forth from the "country" and journey to the "city" of
cultural plenty. Dreams of self-development kindle her longing to leave
North Dormer and settle in a larger town like Nettleton, Springfield, or
Boston. Harney, the architect from Springfield who even has contact
with New York, could become the vital link to the experience and oppor-
tunity of metropolises. Even her post as librarian, if she would read the
books she neglects, could provide a bridge to other worlds. Charity
never escapes the "lifeless circle" of the barrens environing her (S, 243).
Summer becomes a story of enclosure, of failure; of ultimate con-
 traction rather than unfolding, and withdrawal rather than stepping out.

"The first page of a novel ought to contain the germ of the
whole," Wharton asserts in The Writing of Fiction. Accordingly Sum-
mer's initial words, "A girl came out of lawyer Royall's house, at the
end of the one street of North Dormer, and stood on the doorstep," pic-
ture Charity about to depart from her home (S, 123). Before she can
cross the threshold, she spies a stranger attired in "city clothes" (S,
123). Sensing his relation to urban living and culture, she emotionally
recoils and physically retreats: "Her heart contracted a little, and the

shrinking that sometimes came over her when she saw people with holiday faces made her draw back into the house” (S, 124). Gazing critically into her mirror, she wishes she were Annabel Balch, a girl whom she also associates with bigger things and places. Once she visited one of these bigger places, Nettleton, to attend a lecture on the Holy Land, a locality with roots as deep as North Dormer’s are shallow. This visit, offering vistas broader than North Dormer’s narrow view, awakened her sense of privation. Afterward she read fervently, seeking to discover channels to other lands. But soon, as it intensified her feelings of destitution, she ceased reading. Now, similarly, she withdraws into the house, because “the sight of the stranger . . . revived memories of Nettleton, and North Dormer shrank to its real size” (S, 125). The end of her story, her fate, is inherent in this initial scene. As she reenters Royall’s threshold here, so does she reenter it in the nouvelle’s denouement, trapped by her deprivation.

For Charity regional—and national—isolation mean personal loneliness. Living with her guardian, Royall, “lonesome” Charity “had sounded the depths of isolation” (S, 133). From her lover, Harney, a “gulf” of privation separates her: “education and opportunity . . . divided them by a width that no efforts of hers could bridge” (S, 231, 159). She struggles ineffectually to arch this gulf and establish lasting personal connection.

When she meets Harney, who smiled “as if he knew lots of things she had never dreamed of,” an immediate barrier divides them (S, 131). Her inability to comprehend him stimulates her sense of inadequacy: “the weight of her ignorance settled down on her again like a pall” (S, 129). With him, her already “narrow world” seems more constricted (S, 131). Even thinking of him she emotionally contracts, overwhelmed by a sense of deficiency:

“It’s no use trying to be anything in this place,” she muttered to her pillow; and she shrivelled at the vision of vague metropolises, shining super-Nettletons, where girls in better clothes than Belle Balch’s talked fluently of architecture to young men with hands like Lucius Harney’s. (S, 140)

Their sexual passion eventually spans the chasm of her ignorance. He temporarily transports her “away into a new world” of communication and connection (S, 215). Here, she blossoms sexually and emotionally; there happens “the wondrous unfolding of her new self, the reaching out to the light of all her contracted tendrils” (S, 214).

But the ever-threatening shadow of Annabel Balch, who “represented all the things that Charity felt herself most incapable of understanding or achieving,” becomes substance (S, 235). Though Charity had given Harney “all she had,” she was limited in what she had to give (S, 223). When he departs for New York leaving but promises of his return, she recognizes that “the gulf between them was too deep, and that the
bridge their passion had flung across it was as insubstantial as a rainbow" (S, 231). She perceives that she can never cross the cultural abyss. Despite Charity's pregnancy—the baby to be born would bond her to Harney—"there stood between them, fixed and upright... the indestructible figure of Annabel Balch" (S, 240).

Charity's origins from the lawless Mountain, as well as her upbringing in traditionless North Dormer, exclude her from Harney and encompass her in loneliness and privation. In her depiction of the pastless, institutionless Mountain, Wharton creates another metaphorical barren land to express her heroine's plight. This mountain's "scarred cliff" forms a "perpetual background of gloom" to North Dormer (S, 125). It looms in the nouvelle's background and flashes repeatedly to the foreground of Charity's consciousness.

Charity, never having revisited the place of her birth, has no apprehension of its desolation. She has only heard that it is a "bad place" compared to which North Dormer enjoys "all the blessings of the most refined civilization" (S, 125). Though the shadow of her "tainted origin" casts over her life when she discovers herself deserted and pregnant and faced with the options of abortion, life as an unwed mother in North Dormer, or forcing Harney to marry her, she believes the Mountain her sole alternative (S, 152). As she surveys the physical scene from her home in North Dormer, images of death and entrapment express her predicament:

... she looked out on the dark and empty scene; the ashen houses with shuttered windows, the grey road climbing the slope to the... cemetery, and the heavy mass of the Mountain black against a rainy sky... She had looked out so often on that lifeless circle, and wondered if anything could ever happen to anyone who was enclosed in it... .

Almost without conscious thought her decision had been reached... She supposed it was something in her blood that made the Mountain the only answer to her questioning... At any rate... she understood that now at last she was really going there. (S, 243-44)

As she pilgrimages to the Mountain top she travels geographically and metaphorically farther from Harney. On her ascent the first snow falls, the wind blows fiercely, and the air becomes increasingly chilled. The desolation of the scenery, the isolation and sterility, derangement and decay, signifies the cultural and spiritual destitution of its inhabitants. The land is bleak, barren, starved: she passes "fields of faded mountain grass" (S, 248). On the Mountain's "lonely hillside" a few houses "lay in stony fields, crouching among the rocks as if to brace themselves against the wind" (S, 248). These dwellings, ramshackle and disordered, resemble the lives they house. "Hardly more than sheds," they are "built of logs and rough boards, with tin stove pipes sticking out of their roofs" (S, 248).

The scene enacted in the most devastated of these shanties, where
Charity's mother lies dead, dramatizes Wharton's nightmarish vision of the squalor and degradation of traditionless life. For Edith Wharton men not molded by civilization and restricted by social institutions were ignorant, coarse, beast-like: Rousseau's noble savage is her "naked ape." Inside the lightless, dirty shed listless people sprawl about. The corpse does "not look like a dead woman":

. . . she seemed to have fallen across her squalid bed in a drunken sleep, and to have been left lying where she fell, in her ragged disordered clothes. One arm was flung above her head, one leg drawn up under a torn skirt that left the other bare to the knee: a swollen glistening leg with a ragged stocking rolled down about the ankle. (S, 250)

At closer scrutiny she resembles a "dead dog in a ditch" (S, 251). The others also, seeming "nocturnal animals," appear less than human (S, 250). Their utterings barely sound like human speech. During the funeral ceremony, a pandemoniac travesty of ritual, their drunken outbursts, curses, and arguments ironically counterpoint the preacher's prayers. Afterward, in cold pitch-darkness, Charity's mother is buried, like an animal, coffinless in the frozen earth. Without a rooted framework of social custom and mores, communal and personal relationships degenerated until people were merely "herded together in a sort of passive promiscuity in which their common misery was the closest link" (S, 256).

Unable to establish any relation to the "miserable herd" on the Mountain, in the "icy cold" morning Charity steals away (S, 257, 258). On her descent the "denuded" countryside she passes mirrors her divested dreams:

Forty-eight hours earlier, when she had last traversed it, many of the trees still held their leaves; but the high wind of the last two nights had stripped them . . . . A few days of autumn cold had wiped out all trace of the rich fields and languid groves through which she had passed on the Fourth of July; and with the fading of the landscape those fervid hours had faded, too. (S, 263–64)

She feels no kinship with anyone; she feels alone, "a mere speck in the lonely circle of the sky" (S, 259). She ponders the alienation of someone "enclosed" in the "lifeless circle" of North Dormer and the Mountain (S, 243). Harney, her avenue to other cultures and larger worlds, has proved impassable and the Mountain, the rootless place of her birth, has proved more desolate than she had imagined. There remains nowhere for her to go but back to North Dormer, to its single street.

Overcome with loneliness, she agrees to wed her guardian, Royall. In more than one sense, they are kinsmen: he too has dreamed of and con-
tacted larger worlds than North Dormer, he too has failed to insure the vital connection and has returned to the town, his aspirations thwarted. Still her marriage to him means the death of her dreams of escape, of fulfillment. Her wedding threshold is the threshold over which she had retreated in the nouvelle's beginning. Her final act is again one of contraction, of defeat. Charity returns to the red house with Royall because she is imprisoned, because she has no other place to go.

*Summer's* penultimate words, “Late that evening, in the cold autumn moonlight, they [Charity and Royall] drove up to the door of the red house,” ironically echo its initial sentence (S, 272). The nouvelle and its heroine have come full circle. For Charity it is a “lifeless circle.” Imagery of desolation continues to reveal the silent desolation of her fate. These final words repeat the nouvelle's beginning with significant imagistic differences. Now, she arrives at the red house “late” in the “evening” in a “cold autumn moonlight” that forecasts winter nights. The afternoon of the first chapter has become night; the sunlight, darkness: the spring, fall. Her human drama has been played out according to a drama of seasons whose finale looks forward to winter.15 She ends, not unlike her brother Ethan Frome, in the cold—in nights without love, in days without dreams.

In *Summer*, as in *Ethan Frome*, Edith Wharton creates a tapestry of wasteland imagery to portray the isolation, deprivation, and entrapment of the self in a culturally destitute New England hill town.16 In these works this poetic fabric becomes the essential key to character analysis as well as thematic interpretation. As this imagery of desolation indicates a central polarity in Wharton's thinking and art—that between cultural aridity, the wasteland and America, and cultural plenty, the flower garden, and France—its significance surpasses her New England nouvelles. America is a “vast field”; France a “flower-garden” of “arts

16. Wharton began, but never completed four other nouvelles or novels of New England life, entitled “The Cruise of the Fleetwing” (Za 69, TS.), “Mother Earth” (Za 122, MS.), “Logic” (Za 112, MS.), and “New England” (Za 127, TS.) which reinforce her picture of New England in *Ethan Frome* and *Summer* as a region of cultural impoverishment.

Of these manuscripts, “New England” most effectively portrays a stark, barren landscape that mirrors the emotional and cultural starvation of rural New England. The reader views the “lonely” and “remote” Highridge through the eyes of Alida Gage, one of its inhabitants who has been living near Boston and who has traveled in Europe (NE, 9). Her travels have opened “new perceptions” and she now apprehends the crudity, isolation, lack of communication, and barrenness characterizing New England life (NE, 11).

But Alida is not the only character who has experienced and been influenced by culture in “New England,” for Lucius Torrey has attended college at Amherst and worked in a law office in Springfield. Like Ethan, his cultural experiences were cut short when his father’s death forced him to return home. Still Springfield has influenced him, has “refined the lines of his strong reddish-brown profile, eliminated certain roughnesses from his speech...” (NE, 7). As AEda summons his distant memories of urban life, he notes that Highridge is “lonely” and “empty” and he envisions the hustle of urban life (NE, 17). Moreover, like Ethan, he tries to escape this isolation and loneliness and he reads history and studies horticulture. But he too remains imprisoned, imprisoned in Highridge and in his relationship with his wife and child.
and graces." Ultimately, like her friend and fellow artist Henry James, she embraced expatriate life in the garden of France; the shallow soil of America was too thin; Edith Wharton's "secret garden," her art, would flourish in France's "deep soil."  

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17. See Wharton, *French Ways*, p. 38. This metaphorical association between France and the garden is elaborated in many of Wharton's works. For example, *A Motor-Flight Through France* (New York: Scribner's, 1908), and three unpublished technical pieces entitled "A French Riviera Garden in the Spring" (Za 170, MS. and TS.), "December in a French Riviera Garden" (Za 168, MS. and TS.), and "Gardening in France" (Za 173, MS. and TS.) create a vision of France as a horticultural heaven.