

“That Little Atrophied Organ”: Edith Wharton as Neo-Lamarckian Novelist

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I must protest, & emphatically, against the suggestion that I have “stripped” New York society. New York society is still amply clad, & the little corner of its garment that I lifted was meant to show only that little atrophied organ – the group of idle & dull people – that exists in any big & wealthy social body.

Edith Wharton to William Roscoe Thayer 11 Nov. 1905 (*Lewis Letters* 96-97).

In a letter to her formidable and brilliant friend Sara Norton dated 5 June 1903, Edith Wharton decries her own physical unfitness as a displaced, expatriated American. Invoking her wandering compatriots, she claims how “we are none of us Americans, we don’t think or feel as the Americans, we are the wretched exotics produced in a European glass-house, the most *déplacé* & useless class on earth!” (*Letters* 84). She would reproduce this image of the hothouse exotic most notably in the character of Lily Bart two years later in 1905, and her characterization of New York society as a body with an atrophied organ demonstrates how one of the most sophisticated social groups in American history can be culturally eviscerated and reduced to biological and specifically Lamarckian terms. The fact that Wharton can depict her compeers as experiencing the effects of organic disuse also indicates that while Darwinism could be socially layered on top of the lower classes, Old New York, despite its traditional power and wealth, is constructed by her as physiologically deteriorating rather than competing among the biologically fitter. These heartier and more productive individuals can be fruitfully examined by the questions of the contemporaneous sociologist Lester Frank Ward, who asks “why may we not learn to select on some broad and comprehensive plan with a view to a general building up and rounding out of the race of human beings?” (71). Ward provides a rather odd example of a family of circus acrobats whose hard work and practice render each subsequent generation all that more competitive. By extension, then, genius, talent and ability increasingly improve via inheritance, and since these constitute internal and not external qualities, natural selection does not necessarily influence them (70). Whereas traditional Lamarckism functioned as an evolutionary model that explained how organisms transmitted acquired physical characteristics, neo-Lamarckism privileges an artificial selection that can be consciously controlled and manipulated to develop desirable physical traits which are then passed along to offspring. Ward thus distinguishes between Darwinian natural selection as “the chief agent in the transformation of species and the evolution of life” and “artificial selection” as that which “has given to man the most that he possesses of value in the organic products of the earth.” Artificial selection thus serves as “an instrument in the hands of intelligence for the working out of human destiny” and thus “it is the right and duty of an energetic and virile race of men to seize upon every great principle that can be made subservient to its true advancement” and “fearlessly to apply it.” Ward thus concludes by asking, “May not men and women be selected as well as sheep and horses?” (71). Neo-Lamarckism thus provided a hands-on approach to evolution by exploiting a predictable artificial selection in order to bypass the randomness of natural selection. Human beings rather than nature are in control Ward

implies and, given the social complexity of the late nineteenth century, neo-Lamarckians believed in a robust form of Social Lamarckism to rein in increasingly volatile forces. Of course, the ugly side of Ward's rhetoric suggests an emergent eugenics that could be used to obliterate those considered socially undesirable but, more significantly for Wharton's contemporaries, it exposed the very real threat of their own extinction. As historian of science Peter J. Bowler explains, the Neo-Lamarckians remained unconvinced by Darwinian natural selection. Although evolution by natural selection seems a scientific given to us nowadays, much doubt surrounded Darwinism in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The proponents of Lamarck thus concluded that "all lines of evolution are ultimately driven towards 'racial senility' as a prelude to extinction" (*Mendelian* 54).

Wharton highlights her vast knowledge of evolutionary biology by claiming that she had read "Wallace's 'Darwin and Darwinism,' and 'The Origin of Species'" as well as "Huxley, Herbert Spencer, Romanes, Haeckel, Westermarck, and the various popular exponents of the great evolutionary movement" (*Backward* 94). Hermione Lee, Wharton's most recent biographer, also states that Wharton was "steeped in Darwin, Spencer, and Lamarck" (200), and although Wharton's awareness of late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century evolutionary biology seems a critical given, more criticism that reads Wharton through the lens of neo-Lamarckism would further elucidate the scientific context in which Wharton immersed herself. Neo-Lamarckism was a fundamentally American school of scientific thought, its main adherents were all American scholars, and it historically coincides with the beginning and peak of Wharton's literary career between 1890 and 1914. Wharton's example of an atrophied organ as a result of disuse in her letter to her editor suggests the neo-Lamarckian emphasis on an increasing specialization that, according to the neo-Lamarckists, can potentially culminate in the extinction of whole species. Prominent neo-Lamarckist Alpheus Hyatt proposed a theory to account for how a highly specialized species becomes extinct through a process of acceleration and retardation: "Characteristics belonging to adults of a maturing species became embryonic in the next higher species" and these advanced traits facilitated "still other gains which then became hereditary." Thus "when the vital powers [...] began to wane, the process reversed itself and increasingly degraded characteristics were inherited until the genus passed away completely" (156).

Whereas Lamarck did posit a *telos*, the organism's constant buffeting against environmental forces prevented it from achieving this perfection, yet the neo-Lamarckist model of the linearity of developmentalism leading to specialization also functions as the *telos* in Wharton's writing. In other words, her wealthy characters build and maintain their houses in conscious and complex ways; they orchestrate social settings and arrange marriages to maintain desirable hereditary lines and preserve immense wealth in certain families; and, most significantly, they are highly specialized though ineffective products that, according to Wharton, are the problem in her society, since their very beings perpetuate and transmit those qualities that do not lead to Ward's vision of social perfection. Wharton attributes this inefficacy of her generation to the "lassitude in the descendants of the men who first cleared a place for themselves in the new world," and theorizes the cause of this intellectual laziness as the "too great prosperity succeeding on almost unexampled hardships" endured by their Dutch forbears that subsequently "produced, if not inertia, at least indifference in all matters except business or family affairs" (*Backward* 55-56). A product of this society yet objective about it, Wharton as novelist and cultural critic scrutinizes her compeers to show her more general readership (since the implication is that her fellow élites whom

she condemns did not read her novels) that their own simpler and more industrious lives enact much greater social consequences than those of the little atrophied organ.

In this article, I argue that Wharton literalizes her interest in houses and interior decorating by demonstrating how her characters are products of their immediate domestic environments, especially when these settings are intentionally sculpted by them. In so doing, she also shows how this relationship between bodies and houses instantiates the interaction of the corporeal and the cultural as it plays itself out in Old New York society. While their prestigious Dutch pedigree defines them domestically and socially, it also renders them ineffective in all worlds except the hermetically confined boundaries of their own history and ancestry. As a result, these highly specialized and ineffective characters grow increasingly obsolete as they are replaced by more vigorous, aggressive, and productive beings, such as urban professionals, the working classes, and European immigrants, to the point that Old New York eventually implodes upon itself. In particular, the memory of *The Age of Innocence* exemplifies this kind of social extinction by recollecting the antiquity of the 1870s-1880s upon being published in 1920.

In the first section, I connect Wharton's *The Decoration of Houses* (1897) with Charles Eastlake's *Hints on Household Taste*, published in America in 1872. Eastlake, whom I consider the first English interior decorator of note, wishes to refine taste while perpetuating the Gothic Revival ideal that grew popular earlier in the nineteenth century. This attempt at fashioning taste is the most conscious and aggressive manipulation of the domestic environment, and the significance of the American publication really lies in the introduction by editor Charles C. Perkins, who adapts Eastlake to an American audience and provides the most significant information for these readers. In the second section, I read *The House of Mirth* (1905) as fulfilling what Wharton defines as the "purely decorative mission" in the novel (235), since Lily Bart, while she fumbles and becomes victimized by her social circle, is clearly too refined and cultivated to survive, and her unceremonious death that ultimately and, quite simply, ejects her from the novel signals the highly specialized creature's inability to adapt. In the last section, I show how, in *The Age of Innocence* (1920), the house makes the man, or, in most cases, the woman, since Wharton invariably defines Countess Olenska's extended family by their houses in her initial descriptions of them. In this sense, the obesity of Mrs. Mingott, for example, grounds her quite literally to the first floor of her lavish mansion, and the relative isolation and grandeur of her home somewhat entombs her. Although the narrative voice pilots a mild admiration for Mrs. Mingott, Wharton firmly establishes that the home and its atmosphere, its ambience, feeling and even its mood, have palpable physical effects on the body. Homes for these human beings become their last imposing refuge as a new social order dawns that heralds their extinction.

Imbued with a New Spirit: The Natural Selection of Furniture

In his preface to the American edition of Charles Eastlake's *Hints on Household Taste*, editor Charles C. Perkins explains how Eastlake "rightly thinks that the public taste is corrupt," and that "he finds a lamentable want of demand for really well-designed objects of household use" since "fashion rules" and "few are shocked by sham and pretension" (vi). This morality of furniture invokes fashionable threats that don't privilege objects that are useful, beautiful, and edifying, and which would really benefit the inhabitants of a home. According to Perkins, Eastlake maintains that items that are both faddish and gaudy violate the integrity of a Ruskinian architecture and decoration that conjure humility, awe, and a kind of sectarian sacredness in the home and family.

This anxiety surrounding how the house and its contents influence its inhabitants, and how they live their lives, grows even more pressing, since the gaudiness and excesses of monstrous Gilded Age houses tend to cover much interior decoration with tacky gold paint. Perkins thus calls for professional tastemakers who, like the Greeks, achieve unity among variety in interior decoration, but this unity is merely an extension of the human body. "The body is the dwelling-place of the soul," Perkins explains, "which, though agitated by divers passions and interests, acts with a certain uniformity of purpose, and forms what we call a man's character" (x). The Gothic house that elicits and induces certain feelings and thoughts in its inhabitants also functions as a physicality or a kind of surrogate body. "Now let us reason from the man to his dwelling," Perkins continues, "which we may call his artificial body, as every part of it has its special ends and appointed uses." This harmony is an organic unity of the family and the house in which physical correspondences or indices of the occupants exist in the architecture, furniture, and objects of the home that encases them and signals their physical presence to the wider world. Perkins' representative man is thus known and judged by what he displays in his home, for when he "voluntarily surrounds himself with ugly shapes we know that he is ignorant, or that his taste is bad" (x).

This architectural idealism that recalls the past must be "imbue[d] [...] with a new spirit" (xi), since "slavishly" copying older styles can do no good. Yet this "new spirit" that Perkins discusses also resurrects the feeling of the home or, as the influential theologian Horace Bushnell characterized it in 1847, "the silent power of a domestic godliness" (207). So there are good homes and bad homes, houses with protective *lares* and *penates* and those that are haunted, which foster a psychic connection with those sensitive inhabitants who either feel at home, alienated, or even frightened by their domestic structures. The materialism of architectural styles is a manifestation of geographic and temporal "peculiarities, habits, and modes of thought [...] reflecting as they do the spirit of the people who developed them" (xi). This sense of spirit or thought invested in the home is both ideological and personal, and the house serving as an extension of the physical body will prove to be among Wharton's greatest concerns, since these structures function as surrogate bodies for her characters and everyone else. Perkins' emphasis on the physical or material is also a matter of Darwinian natural selection. "If the theoretical law of 'natural selection' could have operated upon furniture," he explains "we should now have a *résumé* of all its best forms in those which surround us. Whether such a law regulates human evolution it is not our business to inquire; but even if it be an imaginary law, we may follow it in developing our own creations, and arrive at harmonious perfection through voluntary selection" (xii). Perkins' inaccurate understanding of natural selection as a *telos* to perfection is understandable, since by the 1870s natural selection still wasn't fully understood. While this may not entirely qualify as neo-Lamarckian, his recommendation is one of artificial or "voluntary" selection. Perkins also privileges the antebellum belief that domestic environments train people to virtue though his understanding of Darwinism casts it in much more materialist terms: "The law of natural selection, to which we have just referred, works, if it works at all, unconsciously, while, if we work, we must work consciously, with a full knowledge of good and evil" (xiii). It seems somewhat obvious that if the home is not initially the site of moral education, then it is very unlikely that any other venue will prove to be so.

Yet Perkins' characterization of a benign natural selection that can be manipulated (even though he's really talking about artificial selection) demonstrates that creating and decorating homes is part of the biological or botanical sciences, for interior decoration, especially in the "modern sterility" of an America that hasn't yet

developed or acquired a "national taste," must take as its model those plants which are "peculiar to America" (xiv): "Our plants, for instance, when we have learnt how to study them, will suggest ideas born of the soil. Only the other day we entered a greenhouse and there saw a species of lily [...] whose conventionalized form would make the gas-burner, that most prosaic of all household objects, poetical." This lily, in other words, with its delicately crafted structure, provides an architectural model in its perfection, such as its "long narrow pendent flower-leaves" that resemble "flying buttresses" (xiv). Interior decoration turns the dull or useful into something beautiful, and in its ability to make the gas-burner poetical, the lily is a way to make domestic architecture literary and uplifting. Of course, this implementation of nature into architecture is nothing new, as Neo-Classicism long ago incorporated acanthus leaves into columns, for example. But the difference here lies within the use of natural models for beautifying the nineteenth-century home and edifying its inhabitants. Moreover, this process crafts natural selection into a benevolent practice that has ramifications for art and industry that will necessarily lead, for Perkins at least, to an evolutionary perfection: "Who can deny the possible development of an original school of art which shall imprint itself upon American architecture, sculpture, and painting, and upon the industrial products of the country, the value of which must eventually depend in a great measure upon the extent to which they have been influenced by those arts whose aim is beauty?" (xv). Perkins nationalizes the reciprocity between the domestic gas-burner and the greenhouse lily by his suggestion that architecture and other fine arts can make even ugly industry palatable. The biological model of individual development thus functions as the basic template for the progress of a more general humanity.

In their respective interior decoration guides, then, both Eastlake and Wharton (as the first English and American interior decorators of note) illustrate how what Eastlake refers to as "the effect of every room" promotes both affective and intellectual responses in the individual that, by implication, mould this representative human being (xxvii). Gaudy and fashionable objects that form part of daily existence may be useful but not beautiful, since "the commonplace taste [...] pervades and infects the judgment by which we are accustomed to select and approve" these domestic trappings. This tacky and uninformed taste thus "crosses our path in the Brussels carpet of our drawing-rooms; it is about our bed in the shape of gaudy chintz [...]. It sends us metal-work from Birmingham which is as vulgar in form as it is flimsy in execution. [...] It lines our walls with silly representations of vegetable life," and we "furnish our houses [...] with no more sense of real beauty than if art were a dead letter" (2). This ability to furnish expensively but gauchely that eventuates from revolutions in industry must be corrected by self-appointed Arnoldian tastemakers such as Eastlake and Wharton, whose own educations and social status license them to do so. Yet the alarmist note in their rhetoric can be construed as less of an impending or present social crisis and more of a threat to individual bodies that daily confront the sordid atmospheres of rooms that, in extreme cases, might even endanger their inhabitants' lives. Eastlake's American editor Charles Perkins thus points our attention to "the evil effects" in certain green wallpaper containing arsenic, as Dr. Frank W. Draper describes it in his study for the Massachusetts State Board of Health (18-57), and, as Alisa Boyd explains, Wharton "later condemned as insanitary" the damask covering the walls of her first house, Land's End (82). Eastlake also notes how taste is somewhat a matter of gendered inheritance, since "the faculty of distinguishing good from bad design in the familiar objects of domestic life is a faculty which most educated people – and women especially – conceive that they possess" (7). Though the acquisition of this ability remains ambiguous, Eastlake suspects that "it is the peculiar inheritance of gentle

blood, and independent of all training," and challenging a woman's taste on this topic is "sure to offend" (8).

Vernon Lee, the pseudonym of Violet Paget, was a true aesthete whose taste in architecture and interior decorating as a "woman especially" Eastlake would find beyond reproach. More than a sophisticated, Ruskinian tour guide, or a Paterian critic quipping "art for art's sake," Lee theorized the aesthetics of ambience, atmosphere, and even a kind of architectural empathy – in other words, she understood, like Wharton, how architectural settings make us feel. According to Suzanne W. Jones, Wharton met Lee in Italy in 1894, and their friendship helped Wharton "to articulate this early and abiding sensitivity to her surroundings. Influenced by William James, Lee was especially interested in delineating the 'bodily sensations' which people had 'no clear notion of' that accompanied aesthetic response" (180). In the theoretical essay on "Beauty and Ugliness," published the same year as *Decoration of Houses* in 1897, Lee claims that "the act of perception includes, besides the intellectual recognition which remains mysterious as ever, elements of bodily alteration far beyond any chemical or muscular change in the eye." Aesthetic perception includes palpable physical responses, such as "adjustments of breathing and balance" as well as a "sense of bodily tension" (550, 551). The observer can experience both pleasure and pain given the nature of the media, and Lee provides a striking example of confronting a white void in the form of a blank wall. "The space in front of us," she explains, "seems to come forward as if to swallow us up. We feel as if our profile were flattened, and as if [...] we had lost identity. [...] Breathing takes place very low down in very short weak breaths [...]. Our temperature is lowered, we feel depressed" (553). Anyone who has walked in an English garden or stayed in a low-budget motel certainly knows this difference in feeling between exalted and depressed. Although interior decorator Ogden Codman Jr. is nominally listed as co-author of *The Decoration of Houses*, correspondence between him and Wharton strongly suggests that she wrote the bulk of the book (Benstock 85), Wharton naturally defines the matter of taste as inhering in the structural elements of the house that function as a living being in possession of its own organic unity. She thus objects to the "superficial application of ornament totally independent of structure" in favor of employing "those architectural features which are part of the organism of every house, inside as well as out" (1). Of course, this process requires the close collaboration of architect and interior decorator, or an architect who is also an interior decorator; but she advocates this cooperative effort because the occupants of a home are influenced by inherited desires that no longer accord with the ways rooms are now used. As Wharton explains, "every one is unconsciously tyrannized over by [...] the wants of dead and gone predecessors, who have an inconvenient way of thrusting their different habits and tastes across the current of later existences. The unsatisfactory relations of some people with their rooms" results from this strange genetic phenomenon, since "they have still in their blood the traditional uses to which these rooms were put in times quite different from the present" (18). This bizarre explanation captures the complex relationship among inheritance, blood, bodies, interior decorating, and domestic spaces that pervades the home and its palpable effects on its inhabitants. As strange as this assertion seems, however, Wharton explicitly subscribes to what Herbert Spencer defined as "unconscious or organic memory" (I: 452). Laura Otis helpfully points out that the idea of organic memory is a purely Lamarckian one, since memories are acquired characters that also enter the bloodline and are transmitted to later generations. "Nineteenth-century organic memory theory," she explains, "proposed that memory and heredity were essentially the same and that one inherited memories from ancestors along with their physical features... just

as people remembered some of their own experiences consciously, they remembered their racial and ancestral experiences unconsciously, through their instincts" (2, 3).

Wharton's emphasis on the classical aspects of symmetry and harmony, and the house as a living organism, mirror Eastlake's trope of the house as an extension of the human body. Even the most insensitive inhabitants of their home possess an unconscious "sense of restfulness and comfort" that is "produced by certain rooms," and this ambient ease "depends on the due adjustment" of a room's "fundamental parts" (19). A home's architecture also plays itself out microcosmically in the human body; and ugly, uncomfortable, or even haunted rooms make its occupants feel not at home, and guests wish to flee or not visit at all. Of course, a home's most sensitive inhabitants, and those for whom developmental issues are essential, are the children. Towards the end of her handbook, Wharton patiently unpacks the importance and influence that the schoolroom and nursery have in terms of the child's upbringing. Critics scoffed at the inclusion of this chapter on schoolrooms and nurseries, for what could a bachelor interior decorator and a profoundly childless society matron know about children? (Wilson 157). Despite this lack of offspring, Wharton confidently contends that the careful decoration of this part of the house is necessary in order to avoid inflicting pain upon the child. "The aesthetic sensibilities wake early in some children," she says, "and these, if able to analyze their emotions, could testify to what suffering they have been subjected by the habit of sending to school-room and nurseries whatever furniture is too ugly or threadbare to be used in any other part of the house" (173). Instead of functioning as a catch-all for superfluous furniture, the room dedicated to the child's physical and intellectual development should act as a little museum where the purpose is to cultivate his taste and surround him with beauty. Otherwise, his moral education is a dangerous failure: "To teach a child to appreciate any form of beauty is to develop his intelligence and thereby to enlarge his capacity for wholesome enjoyment," and "to teach a child to distinguish between a good and a bad painting, a well or an ill-modelled statue [...] will at least develop those habits of observation that are the base of all sound judgments" (174). A child's intelligence and ability to discern among good and bad choices must be developed by the availability of beautiful objects in the home, but this education is not merely an empty exercise in dilettantism, since art cannot be considered "a thing apart from life." In effect, Wharton implies that "a house full of ugly furniture, badly designed wall-papers and worthless knick-knacks," as well as "poor pictures, trashy 'ornaments' and badly designed furniture" actually stymie the child's development and render him incapable of functioning successfully in the wider world because of a daily and steady diet of cold rooms stocked with haphazard and garish contents (175). This latent power of Wharton's domestic spirit permeates "the child's visible surroundings" to "form the basis of the best, because of the most unconscious, cultivation" that "indirectly broadens the whole view of life" (183). Being surrounded by the best interior decoration thus makes children better people, productive citizens, and happier individuals. Parents may effect their child's successful development merely by the conscious manipulation of the nursery and schoolroom environments.

Wharton thus provides literal blueprints for achieving the perfect balance between the architectural and the physiological, but her programme appears as if it would work mostly on a more modest level. Her instructions are paradoxical at best, since the kinds of houses she designs are expensive but the feeling of the home she wants to capture ultimately sounds more suitable to a middle-class home populated with small children rather than the mansions and sea-side cottages her characters inhabit. As her first book and a non-fictional one, however, *Decoration of Houses* is published in 1897 and is generically most unlike the fiction that follows. Within less than a decade,

Wharton's sharp and scientific eye studies her society through an anthropological lens that quickly reveals to her an increasing inability to adapt that confronts her contemporaries.

A Better Drawing Room, A Better Woman: The Highly Specialized Lily Bart

When Lily Bart makes her ill-fated visit to Lawrence Selden's bachelor pad at the beginning of *The House of Mirth*, she confesses to him the dissatisfaction she experiences while living with her sober relation, Aunt Peniston. Feeling at home nowhere, Lily says, "If I could only do over my aunt's drawing-room I know I should be a better woman" (8). This seemingly throwaway line speaks volumes about one of Wharton's most famous heroines, as well as one of her most popular novels. Lily Bart, as much as she might appear a victim of the New York society to which she belongs, is inextricably linked not only to that society, but also to the places where she lives, stays, or sojourns. In this section, I argue that Lily, as the highly specialized product of the society in which she has been born and raised, must necessarily be viewed in relation to the houses, hotels, and boarding houses where she subsequently resides, since Wharton produces her protagonist as influenced not by the naturalistic world, as other turn-of-the-century authors such as Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser were fond of doing, but by the built domestic environment. In this sense, Wharton's characters can be interpreted most fruitfully through the lens of a neo-Lamarckian artificial selection, but Lily's increasing specialization that also leads to her social and physical extinction can be more compellingly viewed if we consider the body of scientific writings with which Wharton was in fictional dialogue. Ultimately, *The House of Mirth*, for all its condemnation of Wharton's "frivolous society" (*Backward* 207), is really about domestic environments serving as indices to Lily's biological failure rather than exposing the vicious and vengeful machinations of a harpy such as Bertha Dorset, or the bestial sexual aims of a satyr such as Gus Trenor, whose primordial power enable them both to compete successfully in the arena of the survival of the fittest.

Sharon Kim also posits a Lamarckian reading of the novel, though she stresses a more philosophical rather than biological approach to suggest the possibility that "the individual finds transcendence when it ceases to be a self-contained unit, like a little geocentric universe, and joins the race in its vast extension across time through descent." "In Wharton's version of Lamarckism," she continues, "physiological inheritance includes not only the transmission of physical characters but also the acquisitions of behavior in the context of culture, with cultural achievement as the highest spiritual expression. Just as memory forms the ligature for a coherent, individual self, heredity as memory provides the necessary biological, cultural, and historical continuity for the construction of a 'real' self" (188). While Kim does echo Lester Frank Ward's uncertain sense of a Social Lamarckism, her emphasis on both "transcendence" and "the construction of a 'real' self" bespeak an idealized and Kantian-inspired sense of an antebellum American Transcendentalism rather than the gritty purview of *fin de siècle* New York. My critique, however, is not meant to discount Lily's growing sense of identity because of her personal struggles. Given the symbiosis between a domestic environment and its occupants that both Eastlake and Wharton have developed in their respective interior decorating manuals, Lily increasingly comes to realize her contrast (though also eventual comparison or equation) with Gerty Farish. Somewhat envious of Gerty's ability to live alone in a "cramped flat, with its cheap conveniences and hideous wallpapers," Lily reflects that "she was not made for mean and shabby surroundings, for the squalid compromises of poverty" (23). Her sense of having "not been made" to be poor really highlights how the quality of domestic

surroundings actively sculpt her, though the subtlety of the home's power feels like a passive phenomenon to her. As the spectre of not having enough money, or any money at all, haunts Lily, she is constantly aware of a pervasive dinginess, cramped staircases, and bad interior decorating for which she fears she may be destined. Her highly specialized nature demands an appropriate setting, since "her whole being dilated in an atmosphere of luxury; it was the background she required, the only climate she could breathe in" (23). In terms similar to mine, though focusing more on "the politics of race" rather than evolution, Jennie A. Kassanoff explains how "Lily's evolutionary advantages are evident. Her vulnerabilities, however, are equally so. Despite the appearance that Lily belongs to the 'same race' – the human race – Wharton will gradually insist that Lily represents an exclusive albeit imperiled race, at once superior and fatally overspecialized" ("Extinction" 62-63). Furthermore, "as a figure for whiteness, class pedigree, western European origin and incipient nativism, Lily articulates a central set of early twentieth-century patrician anxieties [...] that the country's oligarchy would fail to reproduce itself and commit 'race suicide'" (*Politics* 38). Setting, atmosphere, background, and climate attest to the environmental focus that Wharton tracks here, yet, again, this narrative interest does not simply align her with Maggie of the streets or Carrie Meeber, though they are very close literary companions. Lily is the product of her environment, but not just any environment. As Wharton has previously stated in the *Decoration of Houses*, these homes are constructed and decorated with certain ends in mind and with certain effects to be achieved, and these domestic organisms have a palpable influence on their inhabitants. Being in a better drawing-room would, in Lily's case, make her a better woman, and could even ensure her survival.

The crux of Lily's problem was engendered in the house where she grew up. A site of chaos and disorder, "the turbulent element called home" is run by "the vigorous and determined figure of a mother still young enough to dance her ball-dresses to rags" and supported by "the hazy outline of a neutral-tinted father" who "filled an intermediate space between the butler and the man who came to wind the clocks" (25). Absence rather than presence defines the Bart household, and this marriage of convenience that seems to have benefited mostly Mrs. Bart is both emotionally and almost literally bankrupt. The fear of dinginess always dogging Lily comes from Mrs. Bart's "worst reproach to her husband" which "was to ask him if he expected her to 'live like a pig'" (26). Lily's disgust with living like a pig is the quasi-moral and aesthetic objection to existing as a rather simple and direct animal that lacks the complexity and beauty of a more highly specialized being consciously bred to live as such. This disgust with uncensored bodily needs, the dinginess of a spinster flat, and her repulsion to Gus Trenor's sweaty body and Bertha Dorset's omnivorous sexuality, handicap Lily as she grows increasingly incapable to run with her set, play by its rules, and simply to survive. While her gradual but steady descent functions as a kind of environmental determinism, the environment that dooms her is domestic rather than geographical. Her upbringing permits her to inhabit only the most rarefied of atmospheres, as obviously attested by her flowery name and hothouse conditions of her existence. Despite being a victim of circumstances, Lily believes that to live like a pig is a matter of choice – a fissure in one's moral education – and that dinginess and despair are one's own stupid fault. "Lily knew people who lived like pigs," Wharton explains, "and their appearance and surroundings justified her mother's repugnance to that form of existence. They were mostly cousins, who inhabited dingy houses with...slatternly parlour-maids who said 'I'll go and see' to visitors calling at an hour when all right-minded persons are conventionally if not actually out. The disgusting

part of it was that many of these cousins were rich, so that Lily imbibed the idea that if people lived like pigs it was from choice, and through the lack of any proper standard of conduct" (26-27). These "dingy" and "disgusting" cousins who are not "right-minded" suffer moral failures because of their personal slackness, and Lily can't justify why, though rich, they would choose to live this way. Part of Lily's own domestic education has taught her to live lavishly, but her excess isn't simply a matter of being casual about or careless with money. It contributes to her own highly specialized nature upon which the narrative voice dwells at length, since she is similar to no one else. Although her uniqueness sets her apart from the colourless existences of others, in the end it renders her non-adaptable and extinct.

Beauty provides the strongest opposition to dinginess, especially in the form of Lily's awareness of her own good looks, which function as a kind of cultural transmitter that will improve the existence of her fellow dingy beings as she acts as tastemaker: "She liked to think of her beauty as a power for good, as giving her the opportunity to attain a position where she should make her influence felt in the vague diffusion of refinement and good taste" (30). Lily somewhat adopts and adapts the nineteenth-century's emphasis on home influence and fuels it in the direction of increasing popular taste that is also the goal of Perkins, Eastlake, and Wharton in her interior decoration manual. She construes her upbringing as having a larger purpose, and instead of being rendered obsolete or non-adaptive, she actually performs a greater environmental function. Lily's purpose is frustrated, however, by the fact that dinginess "is a quality which assumes all manner of disguises" (31), and despite the "opulent interior" of Aunt Peniston's home, Lily discovers that dinginess "was as latent in the expensive routine of her aunt's life as in the makeshift existence" of the drab watering-holes to which she and her mother were reduced. Aunt Peniston's existence strikes Lily as meagre because her aunt exposes the guts of the house, and she is dismayed by the annual cleaning sprees and soapy water on the stairs that betray the fact that a house doesn't run itself. For Lily, being immaculate is a state that should sustain itself at all levels, and a house that demonstrates a domestic weakness by displaying its dependence means that those who inhabit it are necessarily incomplete as well. Despite being dependent on her aunt, Lily possesses many advantages that stymie her and pull her down into the terrible state of dinginess: "She knew that she hated dinginess as much as her mother had hated it, and to her last breath she meant to fight against it, dragging herself up again and again above its flood till she gained the bright pinnacles of success which presented such a slippery surface to her clutch" (33).

Wharton characterizes Mrs. Peniston's annual cleaning as "the domestic equivalent of a religious retreat" (78), and the equation of cleaning with soul-searching magnifies the significance of domestic environmentalism here with the implication that the conditions of one's home matter for one's spiritual as well as physical existence: "She 'went through' the linen and blankets in the precise spirit of the penitent exploring the inner folds of conscience; she sought for moths as the stricken soul seeks for lurking infirmities," and "as a final stage in the lustral rites, the entire house was swathed in penitential white and deluged with expiatory soapsuds." Mrs. Peniston's rites of purification render her house a place that has become infected, and the bad spirits must be ritually driven out via this annual, anthropological practice. This sense of a domestic infection or disease is most acutely illustrated after Grace Stepney sabotages Lily by telling her aunt about Lily's scandalous behavior, and "Mrs. Peniston felt as if there had been a contagious illness in the house, and she was doomed to sit shivering among her contaminated furniture" (100). The assumption that the home, left tenantless since the last social season, has become plagued is naturally sensed by the sensitive Lily.

Setting the house in order again strikes her as a very bad sign: "As was always the case with her, this moral repulsion found a physical outlet in a quickened distaste for her surroundings. She revolted from the complacent ugliness of Mrs. Peniston's black walnut, from the slippery gloss of the vestibule tiles, and the mingled odour of sapolio and furniture-polish that met her at the door" (78). (The black walnut furniture of Lily's own bedroom recalls the makeshift environment of the children's nursery Wharton objected to, since it has been imported from the deceased Mr. Peniston's bedroom and not personally selected by her.) Though Lily "usually contrived to avoid being at home during the season of domestic renewal" (79), her decreasing social options force her to stay with her aunt in the "tomb" of her house, so that she feels "buried alive in the stifling limits of Mrs. Peniston's existence." The house, described as in a "state of unnatural immaculateness and order," requires too much time and effort to work properly. Lily wants her aunt's house to form the background of her social victories, and, if only she could do her Aunt Peniston's drawing-room over, Lily would exude nothing but her essence: "She could not figure herself as anywhere but in a drawing-room, diffusing elegance as a flower sheds perfume."

Wharton repeatedly emphasizes how Lily is intricately constructed, and the metaphoric power of Lily as a rare and delicate flower transcends the traditional nineteenth-century trope that equates women with flowers, as demonstrated by J. J. Grandville's *Les Fleurs Animées* and its first American translation published simultaneously in 1847, as well as other famous flower girls of American fiction such as Daisy Miller. Most significantly, Grandville captures the essence of the beauty of the lily as well as its noxious influence when confined to the home. "Beauty, dignity, exquisite fragrance, are the inheritance of this majestic flower," he explains. "In the open air the odor of the Lily is delicious, but it is dangerous in confined apartments. Not only is it unpleasant in its effects upon the animal economy – it is sometimes sufficiently powerful to produce asphyxia" (26). Lily's inability to be at home anywhere seems to stem from her aversion to those places available to her, and in her revulsion to these limited and disagreeable options, she tends to flee, even as far as Alaska with the Gormers at one point. Exacerbating this problem, Lily is of course very expensive, and she discerns how her complex being cashes in on the socially dross and undesirable: "Such existences as hers were pedestalled on foundations of obscure humanity. The dreary limbo of dinginess lay all around and beneath that little illuminated circle in which life reached its finest efflorescence, as the mud and sleet of a winter night enclose a hot-house filled with tropical flowers. All this was in the natural order of things, and the orchid basking in its artificially created atmosphere could round the delicate curves of its petals undisturbed by the ice on the panes" (119). Again, according to Kassanoff, Lily figures as a "hyperevolved specimen whose purity demands a life sheltered from the encroaching dinginess of American democracy. The hothouse with frosted windows thus perfectly captures her evolutionary dilemma: once breeding has become a rarefied art, akin to the skilled horticulture of lilies and orchids, the well-bred can no longer survive in the chill air of a potentially heterogeneous world" (*Politics* 44). Dustin Valen explains how "historians of environmental building systems regard the glasshouse as a crucial laboratory where methods of ventilating and heating buildings using steam, water, and air were developed before being adapted for use in buildings to solve issues of human comfort and health" (403). In this sense Wharton thus condemns the artificiality of the hothouse as unnatural, noxious, and unhealthy given the textual irony that Percy Gryce's father made his fortune by inventing a device that keeps fresh air out of hotels.

The similarity to nineteenth-century hothouse culture, the presence of botanizers with their portable Ward boxes in which to cultivate plants, and the comparison between Lily and the tropical flower compound the method of artificial selection in both Lamarck and Darwin, but it is also significant to realize that the "orchid basking in its artificially created atmosphere" can exist only within the most contrived or artificial of environments. Lily does experience a social fall, is banned from her society and reduced to its edges, but the neo-Lamarckian emphasis on the highly specialized and non-adaptive variation recuperates Lily from the merely prosaic interpretations that view *The House of Mirth* as an exercise in environmental determinism. Simon Rosedale, whom Lily perceives as dim-witted and despicable, actually understands Lily better than any other character in the novel, and he posits a marriage proposal to her as a business arrangement in which she will reign as the lavish queen of his household and the crowning beauty that will outdo the anti-Semitic society matrons who also shun him for his newly acquired wealth. In many ways, the capital of the recently rich functions as a superb example of Lamarckian transmission, since the acquisition of this wealth literally changes or even creates the domestic environment and will be inherited by offspring who, barring a great loss or scandal, are also fundamentally altered by this characteristic. Rosedale tells Lily that he desires "a woman who'll hold her head higher the more diamonds I put on it," and the "kind of woman" who "costs more than all the rest of 'em put together. [...] I should want my wife to be able to take the earth for granted if she wanted to" (140). Rosedale appraises Lily as even more expensive than all her social circle just as Lily realizes that her existence enriches the dingy lives of those beneath her. This exotic and expensive flower thus occupies a biological site that is rarified because of the exquisite cultivation it requires.

These literal and metaphoric senses of inheritance also affect Lily directly as she expects to inherit the bulk of Aunt Peniston's fortune after her death. But the fact that Lily is disinherited because of her perceived scandalous behavior while yachting with the Dorsets dislodges Lily as one of the beautiful people and installs her dumpy cousin Grace Stepney as heiress to what Lily always assumed would be hers. This role reversal further renders Lily an increasingly dingy nobody who must form the foundation for the social class which has outcast her: "Lily stood apart from the general movement, feeling herself for the first time utterly alone. No one looked at her, no one seemed aware of her presence; she was probing the very depths of insignificance. And under her sense of the collective indifference came the acuter pang of hopes deceived. Disinherited – she had been disinherited – and for Grace Stepney!" (174). Wharton thus uses "Lily's disinheritance [...] to underscore and consolidate the permanence of her racial inheritance, effectively reworking the amorphous possibilities of class and gender into a seemingly inviolate teleology of the blood" (Kassanoff *Politics* 38). Wharton literalizes this sense of inheritance in Lily's confession to Gerty Farish that her aunt disowned her because her "faults," as part of Spencer's idea of organic memory, are "in my blood" that she received "from some wicked pleasure-loving ancestress, who reacted against homely virtues of New Amsterdam, and wanted to be back at the court of the Charleses" (176). The "ugliness of failure" will reduce Lily to a boardinghouse while Grace Stepney emerges from a boardinghouse to take residence in Aunt Peniston's mansion, the door of which shuts on Lily "taking a leave of her old life. The future stretched before her dull and bare as the deserted length of Fifth Avenue, and opportunities showed as meagerly as the few cabs trailing in quest of fares that did not come" (177, 180). In the interim, Lily takes up with those of questionable repute as she lives a whirlwind life mostly in hotels and still dependent upon others. In the first hotel

she inhabits she finds herself in a set of "rooms with their cramped outlook down a sallow vista of brick walls and fire-escapes" and taking "her lonely meals in the dark restaurant with its surcharged ceiling and haunting smell of coffee" (193). Lily's survivability dwindles in direct proportion to her environments, and her highly specialized nature renders her completely non-adaptive. She's also physically affected by her domestic surroundings, since her sensitivity to the way rooms look and feel is consistently compromised and offended. No feeling of being at home anywhere exists for Lily, and the neo-Lamarckian emphasis on the influence of the environment on an organism rises to a crescendo as Lily increasingly lives in those elements most unlike her nature.

Despite her exquisite nature, Lily is increasingly forced to ascend those narrow staircases of life frequented by dull and dingy people, and the poverty of her surroundings has visible and palpable effects on her physical being. The "ever-revolving wheels of the great social machine" that now sweep by her lonely figure make Lily "more than ever conscious of the steepness and narrowness of Gerty's stairs, and of the cramped blind-alley of life to which they led" (205). Lily's social ostracism and lack of money throw into relief how the physical environment to which she is accustomed really depends on having wealth that builds, shapes, and manipulates the domestic scene – to live well, or to live like Lily, means money in the bank from either inheritance or husband. This further limitation for Lily also underscores how she barely survives in the millinery marketplace as a single woman fashioning hats badly. The bodily responses that one's surroundings induce are themselves subject to the fluctuating variable of cash since the fortunes of all her former cohorts grow or shrink depending on the stability of the stock or rental market. The misery of her surroundings causes Lily to conclude that "dull stairs" are "destined to be mounted by dull people: how many thousands of insignificant figures were going up and down stairs all over the world at that very moment – figures as shabby and uninteresting as that of the middle-aged lady in limp black who descended Gerty's flight as Lily climbed to it!" (205). In Lily's world, a few people exist who matter but the rest of humanity is literally made up of negligible thousands who do not because of the drab domestic environments that they inhabit. Interior decorating equals destiny.

Lily finds temporary shelter from the horrors of this realm of insignificance as she takes up as a kind of secretary to the social-climbing Mrs. Hatch, and she luxuriates in the Emporium Hotel even among its "excesses of the upholstery" and "restless convolutions of the furniture" (212). Lily is unfamiliar with the denizens of hotel life who live in a permanent state of semi-homelessness: "The environment in which Lily found herself was as strange to her as its inhabitants. She was unacquainted with the world of the fashionable New York hotel – a world over-heated, over-upholstered, and over-fitted with mechanical appliances [...] while the comforts of a civilized life were as unattainable as in a desert" (213). It is a make-believe domestic world of "torrid splendour" peopled by "wan beings as richly upholstered as the furniture [...] who drifted on a languid tide of curiosity" from place to place (213). Hotel beings that are synonymous with their rented rooms are like the pieces of furniture in these rooms that have fixity yet merely signify domestic life since they do not adorn a real home. This vagueness of place still offers a garish comfort that the boardinghouse does not, but, of course, she is not meant to stay with Mrs. Hatch for long after being drawn into another compromising social situation. The biggest defeat for Lily is really the tragedy of interior decoration, for the boardinghouse into which she descends provides her with nothing more than a makeshift hall bedroom, like something out of one of Jacob Riis' cramped tenements. Lily "dreaded her return to her narrow room, with its blotched

wallpaper and shabby paint; and she hated every step of the walk thither through the degradation of a New York street in the last stages of decline from fashion to commerce" (225). Her situation is shocking to Rosedale, but Lily grows wearily accustomed to it and recognizes her quasi-extinction: "Since she had been brought up to be ornamental, she could hardly blame herself for failing to serve any practical purpose" (232). The dinginess that Lily has always dreaded, and that her mother commanded her to outstrip, now infects Rosedale, who "in the peacock-blue parlour, with its bunches of dried pampas grass, and discoloured steel engravings of sentimental episodes [...] looked about him with unconcealed disgust, laying his hat distrustfully on the dusty console adorned with a Rogers statuette." John Clubbe's assessment of this scene emphasizes the socially dangerous eclectic world Lily now inhabits: "Throughout the novel, Rosedale has embodied vulgar taste; if these articles appall him, they can appall us. They suggest the nadir of décor. Indeed, the garish peacock blue and the dried pampas grass, further vestiges of 1890s aestheticism, indicate taste badly outdated. The Rogers statuette, once a common adornment in middle-class Victorian homes" is "now even more passé than the pampas grass" (558). The parlor isn't only tacky but dirty, and Lily, always fastidiously neat and clean, with her dislike of being touched and having to confront sexualized bodies, now sits resignedly among the mass-produced and trashy bric-a-brac that Wharton formerly cautioned the readers of her interior decoration manual to avoid.

Lily's ornamental status that is bolstered or repressed by her domestic environment is really a biologized function curiously at odds with the social situations in which she has long played a part: "Inherited tendencies had combined with early training to make her the highly specialized 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?" (235). Though the rose and hummingbird might be construed in these aesthetic terms, many of these traits ensure their survival and characterize reproductive capability. The use-value of Lily's beauty has never been put to any real test. She has used it to manipulate others, but it hasn't guaranteed marriage or children. Elaine Showalter observes how "whereas childbirth and maternity are the emotional and spiritual centers of the nineteenth-century female world, in *The House of Mirth* they have been banished to the margins. Childbirth seems to be one of the dingier attributes of the working class; the Perfect Lady cannot mar her body or betray her sexuality in giving birth" (46). The closest she gets to childbirth is the hallucination of Nettie Struther's baby in the confused dreamscape preceding her death. The narrative recognition of this disjuncture thus affirms the non-adaptive nature of Lily's indexical status: "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?" (235). Acting as a kind of surrogate mother to Nettie's baby also demonstrates Lily's responsibility for its existence. Because of her generosity to the girls of Gerty's women's club, Lily's money cleared the course for a happy life for Nettie, left alone and pregnant by one man yet cared for and married by another. Lily experiences the pleasure of her good work while sitting in Nettie's small apartment which is nonetheless immaculate: "It was warm in the kitchen, which, when Nettie Struther's match had made a flame leap from the gas-jet above the table, revealed itself to Lily as extraordinarily small and almost miraculously clean. A fire shone through the polished flanks of the iron stove [...]" (244). This survival of Nettie, who has not been the fittest,

is reified by the cleanliness of the kitchen, the support of a good man, and the hope embodied by the baby – a small life and a little body that Lily is not afraid to touch.

If Lily were to be saved by the love of a good man, it would require her to be sexually active and shed her position as “some rare flower grown for exhibition [...] from which every bud had been nipped except the crowning blossom of her beauty” (247). Joan Lidoff characterizes Lily as “a creature of beauty and sensual charm” for whom “sexuality is not an acceptable part of her self-image” (249). Additionally, “no image of Lily as wife is possible in the imaginative world of the novel” since “marriage [...] is a symbolic affirmation of maturity. Lily cannot marry because she is incapable of love” (251). Lily’s death is thus “necessary because she cannot live. A grown and beautiful woman, she can no longer exist as a child, but neither can she become an adult. We feel the pull of human character in Lily, a growing sympathy and self-knowledge, but society cannot support her development” (255). Marrying for love rather than money would provide stability in opposition to the chaotic and zigzag past of her rootless 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 of 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” (248). Domestic interiors and psychological interiority are interchangeable in terms of human development in both biological and philosophical senses, and they also provide Lily with “her first glimpse of the continuity of life” that “had come to her that evening in Nettie Struther’s kitchen.” This ultimate emphasis on Lily’s boardinghouse existence as surpassing bodily concerns is punctuated by Selden’s realization as he stands near her dead body, that, aside from some small “traces of luxury” Lily has managed to preserve, he discerns “no other token of her personality about the room, unless it showed itself in the scrupulous neatness of the scant articles of furniture” (254). For Wharton’s characters, existence is tied to and even depends upon domestic architecture and its interiors, and this link Wharton triumphantly perfects in *The Age of Innocence*, in which houses and their inhabitants become interchangeable.

Philosophically Remaining at Home: Memory’s Furniture in *The Age of Innocence*

Although Wharton’s framework for *The Age of Innocence* is more anthropological than biological, the complex genealogies, kinship rituals, and the distrust of Countess Olenska’s foreignness underscore the presence of ancestry, offspring, and inheritance that permeate practically every page. Judith P. Saunders explains how as “an exact contemporary of Franz Boas, Wharton immersed herself enthusiastically in the many reports of archaeological discoveries, the ethnographic field studies, and the ambitious works of theoretical synthesis published during her lifetime” (86). This socio-genetic awareness is initially embodied in the character of Sillerton Jackson, who functions as Old New York society’s preeminent genealogist, since “he knew all the ramifications of New York’s cousinships; and could not only elucidate such complicated questions as that of the connection between the Mingotts (through the Thorleys) with the Dallases of South Carolina [...] but could also enumerate the leading characteristics of each family” (7). The “forest of family trees” that Sillerton Jackson ambles so ably through also reminds Wharton’s readers of the inheritance of good and bad physical traits, such as “the insanity recurring in every second generation of the Albany Chiverses, with whom their New York cousins had always refused to intermarry” (8, 7). The inheritance of physical characteristics, whether perceived as acquired or organic, figures as

prominently as the inheritance of money and property, and the neo-Lamarckian subtext that informs this cultural situation is most readily perceived in the way Wharton constructs many of the major characters as extensions of their houses. In other words, the symbiosis of character and domestic environment again points to Wharton's continued interest and belief in the way that home conditions that are intentionally manipulated determine character. In this section, I argue that *The Age of Innocence* betrays a neo-Lamarckian hereditarian rhetoric as it trades in the ideas of acquired inheritances, both materially and bodily, as well as the reciprocity that exists between bodies and houses. As ideas about heredity begin to shift after the turn of the twentieth century, Wharton sets the novel during the 1870s and 1880s, and this cultural and personal memory continues to privilege more traditional beliefs about biological inheritance and human development.

The first and best example of this equation of person with dwelling is Mrs. Manson Mingott, whose obesity restricts her to the first floor of "a large house of pale cream-colored stone...in an inaccessible wilderness near the Central Park" (9). As big as a house (or as big as her house), Mrs. Mingott "philosophically remained at home" in her mansion that stands "as a visible proof of her moral courage; and she throned in it, among pre-Revolutionary furniture and souvenirs of the Tuileries of Louis Napoleon [...] as placidly as if there were nothing peculiar [...] in having French windows that opened like doors instead of sashes that pushed up" (9). This blend of furniture inherited from Dutch ancestors and collected during her time abroad mark her as a potential foreigner, since two of her daughters married Europeans and her granddaughter Ellen Olenska married a Polish count. But the impeccable reputation of her blameless family guarantees her own royal status among Old New York society, and her house, though oddly composed to some, figures as a testament to her morality. In contrast to Mrs. Mingott and her house of morality stands the questionable Julius Beaufort, whose house compensates for any lack of respectability. Most impressive to his peers is the fact that "the Beauforts' house was one of the few in New York that possessed a ballroom [...] and at a time when it was beginning to be thought 'provincial' to put a 'crash' over the drawing-room floor and move the furniture upstairs, the possession of a ballroom that was used for no other purpose, and left for three-hundred-and-sixty-four days of the year to shuttered darkness [...] was felt to compensate for whatever was regrettable in the Beaufort past" (13). The Beaufort mansion thus has a kind of rejuvenating effect since it recuperates any ambiguity regarding Julius Beaufort's past. The house also renders Mrs. Beaufort younger and more beautiful because she has nothing to do except reign in it: "She was indolent, passive, the caustic even called her dull; but dressed like an idol, hung with pearls, growing younger and blonder and more beautiful each year, she throned in Mr. Beaufort's heavy brownstone palace, and drew all the world there without lifting her jewelled little finger" (14). Doubtless the Beauforts figure as representatives of American royalty though it is an aristocracy predicated on conspicuous consumption rather than European bloodlines and titles.

This sense of constructing a necessarily American royalty also recovers the fear of the foreign that Old New York society partially distrusts in the imposing figure of Mrs. Mingott. Because she is too large to go upstairs, her bedroom is on the ground floor rather than the second floor, and "her visitors were startled and fascinated by the foreignness of this arrangement, which recalled scenes in French fiction, and architectural incentives to immorality such as the simple American had never dreamed of" (19). Because too big to move, Mrs. Mingott simply stays at home while the world comes to see her, and the largeness that she shares with her house make them synonymous. Wharton characterizes her as more of a geological rather than domestic

phenomenon, however: "The immense accretion of flesh which had descended on her in middle life like a flood of lava on a doomed city had changed her [...] into something as vast and august as a natural phenomenon" (18). She is the victim of volcanic forces, since the changeability of the body that is gradual but all-encompassing also converts her into a geological monument, and the body sculpted by fat is still recognizably a body that renders her a kind of family memorial that is visited and regarded reverently. At the same time, this "venerable ancestress" emerges as a comic figure who seems content with the joke. Her "almost unwrinkled expanse of firm pink and white flesh, in the center of which the traces of a small face survived as if awaiting excavation" is accompanied by "a flight of smooth double chins" that "led down to the dizzy depths of a still-snowy bosom" and "with two tiny white hands poised like gulls on the surface of the billows" (18, 19). Mrs. Mingott's tremendous body presents a physical challenge to be scaled or confronted, and the glorious mansion she built in the middle of relative isolation is the most apt setting to magnify her demanding obesity and formidable presence.

The beauty of Countess Olenska that contrasts with her grandmother's obesity nonetheless is not sufficient to assuage the ill effects of her "eccentric bringing-up" by her capricious aunt, Medora Manson. Medora's unpredictability and foreignness are in stark contrast to the "Archer-Newland-van-der-Luyden tribe, who were devoted to [...] horticulture" and "cultivated ferns in Wardian cases" (22). This conscious and careful cultivation in the home of Mrs. Archer naturally invests Newland with a domestic and personal perfection, so his gradual attraction to Countess Olenska is all the more dangerous as he strays from his (seemingly) virtuous tribe. Yet Newland also understands that the simplicity of his betrothed, May Welland, is also an "artificial product" hereditarily determined. This "creation of factitious purity, so cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers and long-dead ancestresses" 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" (30). Countess Olenska's exotic independence and mysterious ways appeal refreshingly to Newland who grows unenthusiastic about May's boring vapidness, yet it seems that the Countess had always figured as a unique and strange being to him since their childhood together: "She was a fearless and familiar little thing, who asked disconcerting questions, made precious comments, and possessed outlandish arts, such as dancing a Spanish shawl dance and singing Neapolitan love-songs to a guitar" (38). The Countess' very strange nature that exiles her in Old New York society also invests her with those qualities that Newland finds so appealing. His reading of the books on "Primitive Man" have permitted him to pierce both the banality and surface of this tedious society that now annoys him (29). The neo-Lamarckian basis to the Countess' being and behaviour has all to do with the foreign environment in which she grew up and the erratic upbringing given her by her aunt after being orphaned. As a result of her unorthodox childhood, "the little girl received an expensive but incoherent education, which included 'drawing from the model,' a thing never dreamed of before, and playing the piano in quintets with professional musicians" (38). In her youth, May Welland would never have been found even remotely close to a nude model, and though not necessarily unheard of, this invariable fact only confirms May's blandness to Newland and makes Countess Olenska appear all that more attractive.

These differing ways that commend Countess Olenska to Newland are also part of a training provided by her foreign experiences and backgrounds. Although she had "lost her looks," she possesses "a mysterious authority of beauty, a sureness in the carriage of the head" and a "movement of the eyes" that appear to Newland as "highly

trained and full of a conscious power" (38, 39). Countess Olenska also strikes Newland as "simpler in manner than most of the ladies" because "she was so quiet – quiet in her movements, her voice, and the tones of her low-pitched voice." The overly adorned, exaggerated, and uptight behavior of most of the women Newland knows results from their own kind of hothouse training that he now perceives as unnatural and suffocating – that the environmental conditions of his own background can mould individuals into disagreeable beings. The Countess, long outside her own society, liberates and readjusts Newland's view of his own people, and the foreignness that his peers mistrust renders her an agreeable product now that she is back in America and unfamiliar with its ways. Both the Duke of St. Austrey and Countess Olenska unconsciously break the rules of New York drawing rooms while at the Lovell Mingotts, and she leaves the Duke to approach Newland to speak with him: "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" (41). Like Lily Bart's dread of dinginess, the members of Old New York society fear contamination by foreigners, though they will readily marry their daughters to them in a monetary exchange for a title. Strictly following the rules of etiquette thus functions as a cleansing ritual that maintains tribal purity, shared conduct, and social integrity.

The house that she and Medora Manson have hired, and that the rest of her family do not want her living in, says most about her character, yet its simplicity is unlike the novel's sprawling mansions. While waiting for the Countess, Newland experiences "the faded shadowy charm of a room unlike any he had ever known" (44), and "the atmosphere of the room was so different from any he had ever breathed that self-consciousness vanished in the sense of adventure" (45). Like the parlour of Lily Bart's boardinghouse, this house has its requisite tacky pampas grass and Rogers statuettes, but Countess Olenska also possesses Lily's knack for interior decorating, and "by a turn of the hand, and the skilful use of a few properties," she converts the room "into something intimate, 'foreign,' subtly suggestive of old romantic scenes and sentiments." Interior decorating transforms the feared foreignness into something wholesomely domestic and attractive that also plays itself out through the language and placement of "only two Jacqueminot roses (of which nobody ever bought less than a dozen)" that "had been placed in the slender vase at his elbow" (45). Beauty results here from an individual simplicity rather than too many roses all in a bunch or too much furniture stuffed into an elaborate and gigantic house. This domestic environment affects Newland most palpably, and he feels as if he literally has entered another realm, foreign or otherwise. He also feels this pleasure most acutely, since he really isn't anticipating his life with May in their new home where the only consolation provided him will be "his library [...] which would be, of course, [furnished] with 'sincere' Eastlake furniture, and the plain new bookcases without glass doors" (46). This rented house that is synonymous with Countess Olenska also contributes to Newland's satisfaction as he is "being too deeply drawn into the atmosphere of the room, which was her atmosphere" (49). Foreign, exotic, quaint and cozy, this room in her "funny house" that seems to her "like heaven" figures suddenly for Newland as his domestic ideal even though the Countess doesn't seem like a woman he or any other of his set would likely marry (47).

Newland figures this discrepancy between May and Countess Olenska in Lamarckian terms as he ponders his impending marriage that entails "his task to take the bandage from this young woman's eyes, and bid her look forth on the world" (52). May is the consummate product of her biological and social inheritance since "many generations of the women who had gone to her making had descended bandaged to the

family vault." Newland recalls "some of the new ideas in his scientific books" and wonders if May, once her eyes are opened, may be blind to the world about her because she has lost the sense of sight because of disuse. Newland compares her situation to "the much-cited instance of the Kentucky cave-fish, which had ceased to develop eyes because they had no use for them" (52-53). In neo-Lamarckian terms, while the cave fish has adapted to its environment, the loss of its eyes from exceedingly gradual generational disuse also renders it an unnatural organism not readily recognizable among other species of fish. The novel's emphasis on environment does not eviscerate the sense of instinct, however, and though the fish swims blindly, it still possesses an innate ability to survive. Wharton also pushes this rhetoric a step further by introducing the concept of instinct. She crafts instinct here as a kind of biological focal point that results from a process of behavioural accretion. According to Peter J. Bowler, "Spencer's belief that races would develop instincts related to their environment was based on the Lamarckian assumption, expounded in his *Principles of Psychology* as early as 1855, that long-established habits are eventually inherited as instincts" (*Non-Darwinian* 138). In other words, instinct is a reflexive behavior that is the sum of previous generations, exactly as Newland thinks of May and himself as "he saw that he was saying all the things that young men in the same situation were expected to say, and that she was making the answers that instinct and tradition taught her to make" (53). Their collective behavior determined by tradition and social rules is also biologically based as genetically and culturally transmitted over the years. Countess Olenska's foreignness and novelty are a refreshing break to Newland, since it shows that modifications of one's environment shatter a dusty tedium and cultural expectation that make Newland feel as if the highly specialized nature of May is neither biologically hardy nor culturally interesting. As a result, "a haunting horror of doing the same thing every day at the same time besieged his brain" (54).

Newland's sense of Countess Olenska's novelty that opposes May's instinctual upbringing springs from his belief that "chance and circumstance played a small part in shaping people's lots compared with their tendency to have things happen to them" (73). This Darwinian natural selection that contributes to the Countess' complexity contrasts with the neo-Lamarckian artificial selection of so many arranged marriages within Newland's social set that is cast here teleologically, for he thinks her "exactly the kind of person to whom things were bound to happen, no matter how much she shrank from them and went out of her way to avoid them. The exciting fact was her having lived in an atmosphere so thick with drama that her own tendency to provoke it had apparently passed unperceived" (73). The atmosphere that surrounds Countess Olenska is charged with destiny and drama, and she figures as a complex being whom biological and cultural conditions uphold and privilege much as the hothouse flower status of Lily Bart. Indeed, the floral imagery that binds the two characters and possesses obvious metaphoric value is also an overdetermined metonymy that translates into a convenient shorthand speaking volumes about these flower girls.

The Countess also experiences a truly defined sense of the possibility of being her "self" while entombed in the chilly home of the patriarchal van der Luydens at Skuytercliff. This *faux* Italian villa "loomed up rather grimly," and "even in summer it kept its distance" (82). Although Mr. van der Luyden has land and interest enough for the horticultural techniques that antebellum architect Andrew Jackson Downing made famous in this region of the Hudson, the house seems amputated from or immune to the more domestic aspects of nature, since "the boldest coleus had never ventured nearer than thirty feet from its awful front." The house strikes Newland as a "a mausoleum" as "the surprise of the butler who at length responded to the call was as

great as though he had been summoned from his final sleep" (82). This cold and cheerless house that rejects any sense of life still seems to run itself, and its incessant functioning irritates Countess Olenska who feels that American homes stage themselves too much in contrast to the foreign privacy of her odd rented house. "One can't be alone for a minute in that great seminary of a house," she complains to Newland, "with all the doors wide open, and always a servant bringing tea, or a log for the fire, or the newspaper! Is there nowhere in an American house where one may be by one's self?" (83). This public invasion of her quiet ways dramatizes the visibility that Old New York has thrust upon her, and she is always already open, foreign, and up-for-grabs because of her scandalous ways. An "American house" also supplies the stage and scenery for the expected and acknowledged public performance that her social peers perform, as the ritual of *tableaux vivants* in *The House of Mirth* also demonstrates, so a domesticity which is supposed to be private and personal explodes into a public sphere not very conducive to having a private family life and raising one's own children. Hence, May Welland serves as the epitome of the programmed automaton that this society successfully and consistently produces. Despite Newland's mental revolts, he marries May Welland only to live in the memory of Countess Olenska once his marriage prevents continued intimacy with her. Unlike her grandmother's obesity that equates Mrs. Mingott with her house, or renders her metaphorically "as big as a house," Countess Olenska provides Newland with a spiritual house or memory palace, since "he had built up within himself a kind of sanctuary in which she throned among his secret thoughts and longings" (159). Newland lives literally in his mind while May happily goes about living in the palpable physical world of their home and society where "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 room." Domesticity for Newland becomes literally interiorized as the only life he really comes to live in the novel remains confined to his psyche.

The dinner held in Countess Olenska's honour as she returns to Europe, sinisterly arranged and manipulated by May in order to oust her competitor once and for all, signals the final break between Newland and the woman he loves. The novel concludes many years later with the Archers' children now grown up, May buried in the Archer family vault, and one last chance for Newland to see Countess Olenska. Of course, this fantasy never materializes, so the novel also ends with a note of interior decoration that sums up the narrative arc nicely. Newland's library, which increasingly became the site of his mental and literal life consisting of his memories of Countess Olenska has been redecorated by his architect son Dallas "with English mezzotints, Chippendale cabinets, bits of chosen blue-and-white and pleasantly shaded electric lamps," as well as "the old Eastlake writing-table that he had never been willing to banish, and [...] his first photograph of May, which still kept its place beside his inkstand" (208). The Eastlake writing table which initially figured as a benchmark of taste and a sign of sincerity is the most important object in Newland's library if not his life. While it is touching that the photograph of May has its permanent place in Newland's domestic realm, Newland recalls that he has lost "the flower of life" once represented by Countess Olenska and the superabundance of flowers sent her by many admirers that she used to decorate her own small home. The Countess, who represents the home in which Newland has lived a significant part of his life, emerges finally as the sincere writing table that embodies Newland's dutifulness and loyalty to the complexities of a social status he was unable to shed. The life of the mind rather than the body figures for him as the ultimate goal. "It's more real to me here than if I went

up," he says as he ponders seeing the Countess for one last time. This rich mentality that becomes the most satisfying sanctuary for Newland to inhabit is typical of both Wharton's and James' characters, for any sense of power they achieve comes "only through submission to, and identification with, the greater laws of human behavior," according to Sarah Luria (316). Characters such as Newland, she further explains, "must resist the intense urge to seize the object of their desires, to cross the line of 'civilized' behavior; by resisting, they achieve a superior noble status." Ultimately, for Wharton and James, "what we imagine is, in the end, all we really possess" (324).

Edith Wharton's familiarity with turn-of-the-century developments in biology, evolutionary theory, and physiology provide a useful lens through which to view a highly sophisticated society that seems to be a cultural rather than a natural pinnacle. Her emphasis on domesticity and interior decoration in her *Decoration of Houses* transforms what might seem mundane concerns of the house into a complex study of physical development in which the influence of the environment shapes their inhabitants for better or worse. While neo-Lamarckism with its emphasis on a benign artificial selection implies a teleological progression, we ultimately see in Wharton's writings that this form of cultural assertion can be destructive if wielded unwisely or if one becomes its victim. The instinct to procreate life is thus thwarted even though there might be good intentions, and instead of a steady increase in the species, we are left with only extinction from *The House of Mirth* and profound and eternal loss in *The Age of Innocence*.

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