The Ordering Style of The Age of Innocence

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That Edith Wharton's style has received little critical attention\(^1\) could mean merely that it is undistinguished or that in comparison with the main interest of her work—her rich social observation informed with her well-developed ethical sense—it is unimportant. More likely, however, it has not been given its due because it lacks the eccentricities usually associated with an individual style, for example the suspensions of the Jamesian parenthesis or the startling dislocations of syntax typical of Faulkner's prose. And indeed her writing shows little evidence of her having wrestled with language to make it do more than it apparently can: her diction and syntax more than meet the requirements of clarity and precision prescribed by English I textbooks, but do not call attention to themselves. Even her imagery is conventional in that, unlike Proust, Woolf, and the later James in whose writings metaphor and symbol largely replace straightforward description, Mrs. Wharton follows the traditional novelist's method of describing characters, action, and setting. Nevertheless, though her writing does not lend itself to parody—the sure sign of a mannered style—it is both distinctive

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\(^1\) Blake Nevius, *Edith Wharton, A Study of Her Fiction* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1953), makes occasional comments on style—for example, he calls *The Age of Innocence* "a triumph of style" (p. 185)—but does not elaborate on them. The following also refer to style only incidentally: Robert Morss Lovett, *Edith Wharton* (New York, 1925); Percy Lubbock, *Portrait of Edith Wharton* (New York, 1947); Joseph Warren Beach, *The Outlook for American Prose* (Chicago, 1926). Mrs. Wharton's style is ranked above George Eliot's by Q. D. Leavis, "Henry James' Heiress: The Importance of Edith Wharton," *Scrutiny*, VII, 274 (Dec., 1938). But Mrs. Leavis does not develop the ramifications of her remarks on style. (Mrs. Leavis echoes Henry James. In a letter to Mrs. Wharton he wrote: "There used to be little notes in you that were like fine benevolent finger-marks of the good George Eliot . . . . But now you are like a lost and recovered 'ancient' whom she might have got a reading of . . . . For, dearest Edith, you are stronger and firmer and finer than all of them put together." *See The Letters of Henry James*, ed. Percy Lubbock, London, 1920, II, 295.) The only work, to my knowledge, containing a separate discussion of style is E. K. Brown, *Edith Wharton, Étude Critique* (Paris, 1935). Dividing Mrs. Wharton's style into three "manners," Brown makes perceptive comments on each, but the brevity of his chapter and the breadth of his subject precluded more than a cursory treatment of it.
in itself and effective as an instrument for conveying the complexities of the cultural values embodied in her novels. Because *The Age of Innocence* illustrates her style at its best, an examination of how language—syntax, diction, and imagery—works in this novel will throw into relief the qualities peculiar to her style and its contribution to the over-all meaning of the novel.\(^2\)

“Order the beauty even of Beauty is,” the epigraph of Mrs. Wharton’s *The Writing of Fiction*, can also serve as a motto for an analysis of her style and of her moral sense. For her fiction shows her deep and essential commitment morally to a traditional, aristocratic society, structurally to the controlled and perfectly formed work of art, and stylistically to the balanced, chiseled, polished sentence. But if this reverence for order sometimes degenerates into mere fastidiousness, at the same time she carefully distinguishes between arid conventions, on one hand, which wither the feelings and imagination or close the mind to all but the trivial and, on the other hand, a code of behavior that allows for the cultivation of mind and heart. Thus, reviewing his life, Newland Archer at the age of fifty-seven both “honoured” and “mourned” for his past. “After all, there was good in the old ways.” But he had missed the “flower of life” in doing his “duty,” for “the worst of doing one’s duty was that it apparently unfitted one for doing anything else” (p. 354). Though he had been a responsible father, a public benefactor, and a friend of Theodore Roosevelt, he is a mere shade of a man, like Marcher in “The Beast in the Jungle,” one “to whom nothing whatever was to happen.” The price of morality and social conformity, Mrs. Wharton makes us feel, is high; for Archer, no less than his very selfhood. Yet undoubtedly she would have us believe that of the two evils, the disintegration of the social order is worse than the death of the spirit.

Order, then, is the clue to Mrs. Wharton’s aesthetic and cultural ideals, but it is arrived at dialectically through a dramatized conflict between individual self-fulfilment, identified with reality, and social responsibility. Responsibility to society is of course a real obligation,

\(^2\) A study of stylistic traits apart from their effects in a work of art seems of little value. Stylistic analysis should contribute to an interpretation of “content.” For a discussion of the use of stylistics see René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York, 1949), pp. 177-190.

but society itself rests on false appearances. This discrepancy between what is and what is professed or assumed to be is revealed through irony in expression and incident. Irony, which only an additional twist would make tragic absurdity, underlies the central relationships. Ellen renounces Newland, thus forcing him to marry May, on the very grounds that he had used earlier when trying to dissuade her from divorcing her husband: “The individual, in such cases, is nearly always sacrificed to what is supposed to be the collective interest: people cling to any convention that keeps the family together—protects the children, if there are any” (p. 110). When May announces that she is to have a child, the door of escape for Newland is irrevocably locked; his earlier words are flung back at him with a double intensity. Furthermore, Newland first realizes at the farewell dinner given by his wife for Ellen that everyone assumes he has been having a love affair with Ellen, though in fact their love was not consummated. Finally, Newland’s remaining faithful to May patches the rent in the social fabric, but, as becomes clear when it is revealed in the last chapter that his son is engaged to Beaufort’s “bastard,” Fanny, the fabric itself has disintegrated.

But that irony is a condition of Edith Wharton’s intelligence, and an expression of the tensions in her vision of moral and aesthetic order is nowhere better demonstrated than in her style. We need look no further than the intricately developed opening passage for an illustration of style as a reflection of her dedication to order and as a finely forged weapon in her attack on the weaknesses of New York society.

On a January evening of the early seventies, Christine Nilsson was singing Faust at the Academy of Music in New York.

Though there was already talk of the erection, in the remote metropolitan distances “above the Forties,” of a new Opera House which should compete in costliness and splendour with those of the great European capitals, the world of fashion was still content to reassemble every winter in the shabby red and gold boxes of the sociable old Academy. Conservatives cherished it for being small and inconvenient, and thus keeping out the “new people” whom New York was beginning to dread and yet be drawn to; and the sentimental clung to it for its historic associations, and the musical for its excellent acoustics, always so problematic a quality in halls built for the hearing of music. (p. 1)
Here, where the intention is to make ironic definitions and discriminations, the highly ordered, balanced sentence is the chief instrument. Though paragraph organization is important, especially in the achievement of climax or anticlimax, the balancing of parallel elements or, more exactly, the varying and modifying of co-ordinates within each sentence, serves to make fine distinctions and to mask subtly sharp thrusts without blunting them.

The pattern of the third sentence illustrates the way in which balanced sentence structure helps to create ironical effects. The “world of fashion” is neatly and authoritatively divided into three groups: the “conservatives,” the “sentimental,” and the “musical.” The importance of this exact arrangement and parallelism can be judged if the sentence is rewritten to contain exactly the same information with changes only in connectives and word order.

The sentimental clung to it for its historical associations, and the musical for its excellent acoustics, always so problematic a quality in halls built for the hearing of music, and because of its being small and inconvenient and thus keeping out the “new people” whom New York was beginning to dread and yet be drawn to, the conservatives cherished it.

When embedded in the middle of the sentence, the pleasant paradox that halls built for music may not have good acoustics becomes blurred, and the crispness of the distinctions among the classes is lost when a periodic sentence order is introduced and the specific order of the co-ordinate clauses is re-arranged. (That the music lovers should be placed last is in itself a satirical comment.) Serving a purpose similar to that of the varied refrain in a poem or song, the formal arrangement calls attention to the variations of thought within each parallel group; the parallelism itself creates a rhythmical pattern analogous to the metrical pattern of poetry. Excessive formality is avoided and a conversational tone maintained by skilful variations in structure. “For being small and inconvenient” is balanced with “thus keeping out the ‘new people,’” but “whom New York was beginning” introduces an irregularity: with the concluding antithesis “to dread and yet be drawn to,” order is restored. The brevity of the next clause, “the sentimental clung to it for its historical associations,” changes the pace and gives emphasis to the last classification, the “musical.” Its satirical intention thinly veiled in
the guise of an appositive to “acoustics,” the phrase “always so problematic a quality in halls built for the hearing of music,” with a mellifluence arising from the repetition of I’s, rounds off the sentence and paragraph.

Another example of the ironic final phrase is:

[If Archer] had probed to the bottom of his vanity (as he sometimes nearly did) he would have found there the wish that his wife should be as worldly-wise and as eager to please as the married lady whose charms had held his fancy through two mildly agitated years; without, of course, any hint of the frailty which had so nearly marred that unhappy being’s life, and had disarranged his own plans for a whole winter. (p. 5)

The bite of the phrase owes a great deal to the exact parallel arrangement of the two clauses, “life” contrasting with “plans for a whole winter”; the shock value of “for a whole winter” would be lost if, for example, it were placed before “had disarranged.”

Not all of Mrs. Wharton’s flashing ironies are traceable to a “last line” device. For example:

People had always been told that the house at Skuytercliff was an Italian villa. *Those who had never been to Italy believed it; so did some who had.* The house had been built by Mr. van der Luyden in his youth, on his return from the “grand tour,” and in anticipation of his approaching marriage with Miss Louisa Dagonet. (p. 128. My Italics.)

Here, the wry, epigrammatic judgment is embodied in the middle of the paragraph, an illustration of the casualness of her wit. Though the epigram is the hallmark of her style in satirical passages, she does not use the novel as a showcase to display her cleverness: the witticisms spring naturally from the situation, and though they sometimes have a general applicability, usually they are at the expense of the characters and mores of the society depicted in the novel. Her ridicule of the absurd in human, and specifically American, nature is understated, offhand, and enmeshed in the context.

So far we have seen how sentence structure and ordering of sentences within paragraphs produce a style of flashing thrust and unperturbed recovery; of formality and regularity tempered with easiness and studied disorder, a felicitous style for exposure of pretentiousness and complacency. But diction also contributes to the highly written but conversational quality of her writing. (Of
course, only for the purposes of analysis are diction and syntax considered as two separate aspects of style.)

Thus, the method of contrast is not always dependent on parallel sentence structure, as we can see by returning to the first passage quoted. The new Opera House (which we recognize as the present Metropolitan Opera House) is contrasted with the old academy. Abstract and slightly pejorative, “costliness” and “splendour,” characterizing the Opera House to be built in the unsought future, are opposed to the concrete “shabby red and gold boxes,” which evoke a sense of substance and immediacy, an image of tarnished gilt and worn velvet. The academy is valued for its very decay of splendor, for its insularity, even provincialism; the old academy is “sociable,” of course, only if one is a member of the “world of fashion.”

Mrs. Wharton’s ironical evaluation of the social world, moreover, is expressed not only through the epigrammatic sentence but also through overstatement. Thus, Mrs. Mingott’s having her reception rooms upstairs and her bedroom on the ground floor is in “flagrant violation of all the New York proprieties” (p. 25). While “flagrant violation” conveys Mrs. Mingott’s daring as judged by her peers, its excessiveness in referring to “proprieties” slyly mocks the social legalism and timidity of this society. Similarly, in the following paragraph, the hyperbolic “honourable” is used instead of a more neutral phrase such as “socially acceptable”; less fraught with satirical implications, the advantage for departure of taking a Brown coupé is “immense”; and “masterly intuitions” appears where a heavier hand might have inserted “shrewd guesses”:

It was Madame Nilsson’s first appearance that winter, and what the daily press had already learned to describe as “an exceptionally brilliant audience” had gathered to hear her, transported through the slippery, snowy streets in private broughams, in the spacious family landau, or in the humbler but more convenient “Brown coupé.” To come to the Opera in a Brown coupé was almost as honourable a way of arriving as in one’s own carriage; and departure by the same means had the immense advantage of enabling one (with a playful allusion to democratic principles) to scramble into the first Brown conveyance in the line, instead of waiting till the cold-and-gin congested nose of one’s own coachman gleamed under the portico of the Academy. It was one of the great livery-stableman’s most masterly intuitions to have discovered that Americans want to get
away from amusement even more quickly than they want to get to it.
(pp. 1-2)

To create a double vision—that of the author's in conjunction with the character's—the serious word is used for trivialities, the word with moral overtones for conventions. Two specimens of this device are: to use “two silver-backed brushes with his monogram in blue enamel to part his hair” is Newland’s “duty” (p. 2) and “this undoubted superiority [having a ballroom] was felt to compensate for whatever was regrettable in the Beaufort past” (p. 16).

Her satirical strokes are in some instances very light, but nevertheless telling. Members of the monde “scramble” into public carriages. Others wait for the gleam of the “cold-and-gin congested noses” of their coachmen. And while the frequent shortening of “New York society” to “New York” may have been simply a habit of speech with Mrs. Wharton, the abbreviation flickers with mild irony. As far as the New York elite are concerned, why, they are New York.

Clichés are used occasionally, especially in expository and descriptive passages, to render the flavor of the social milieu. Of special significance are the habits of setting off with quotation marks such phrases as “above the Forties,” “new people,” “Brown coupé,” and of parenthesizing others as, for example, “with a playful allusion to democratic principles” in the passage above. The very frequency of this practice suggests that the author intends more than merely to apologize to the reader for employing well-worn phrases. And, indeed, words so emphasized usually stand for accepted attitudes and fashions or customs of the 1870's which were no longer current in 1920, the publication date of the novel. Sometimes, as when the voice of the present comments on the past, the quotation marks become a factual intrusion into a fictional world, especially if they merely point up the quaintness of old New York. But in most cases the device is used skilfully to project the voice of the society of which Newland Archer is both a reflection and a reflector.

The voice we hear in general is that of a knowing, sympathetic but critical, spectator-member of that society. The writing never seems slangy or racily colloquial, in spite of clichés, because though the style is conversational, the conversations providing the norm would be overheard in the drawing rooms of New York, not
in the parlors of Sauk Center, Minnesota. Therefore, a glance at the "cold-and-gin congested nose" suffices; the graphic details of a naturalistic close-up would be in bad taste and, besides, irrelevant. Moreover, the winding elusiveness of a Proustian sentence or the free-floating imagery of James's later novels would be as out of place as naturalistic detail because the point of view is always from the outside in, rather than from the inside out. That Mrs. Wharton was personally both an insider and an outsider—a New York expatriate in France—is reflected in the point of view and stylistic devices. The point of view is mainly Newland Archer's, but the novel is not narrated through his consciousness. His mind and perceptions are not the filter, as Lambert Strether's are in The Ambassadors, through which the "action" is strained. We are not allowed free entry into his mind; we are told what he feels and thinks, even though, remaining well behind the scene, the author never intrudes or visibly dangles the proverbial puppet-characters. From first to last we are aware of her controlled, well-bred voice and of her thoughts about Archer's thoughts.

Thus, since it is through the eyes of a spectator, detached but intimately familiar with it, that the world is seen, it is primarily the outside world, the visible gestures and habits, which is bodied forth. The "real" world is in fact so completely furnished that we cannot escape visualizing and feeling its three dimensional solidity. For example, we first see Newland Archer entering the opera house fashionably late:

There was no reason why the young man should not have come earlier, for he had dined at seven, alone with his mother and sister, and lingered afterward over a cigar in the Gothic library with glazed black-walnut bookcases and finial topped chairs which was the only room in the house where Mrs. Archer allowed smoking. But in the first place, New York was a metropolis, and perfectly aware that in metropolises it was "not the thing" to arrive early at the opera; and what was or was not "the thing" played a part as important in Newland Archer's New York as the inscrutable totem terrors that ruled the destinies of his forefathers thousands of years ago. (p. 2)

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4 See John Harvey, "Contrasting Worlds: A Study of the Novels of Edith Wharton," Études Anglaises, VII, 190-198 (April, 1954). According to Harvey, the contrast between New York and Paris provided the basis for her satire.
And Ellen Olenska’s first appearance, also at the opera, is in a gown revealing “a little more shoulder and bosom than New York was accustomed to seeing” (p. 12).

This introduction to these two characters illustrates Mrs. Wharton’s practice throughout the book. Her rationale for creating detailed background was that “the bounds of a personality are not reproducible by a sharp black line, but . . . each of us flows imperceptibly into adjacent people and things.” And certainly her use of detail never degenerates into mere reporting or local color. Their library characterizes the Archers; Ellen’s décolletage as well as the reactions to it at the opera “places” for us dramatically both Ellen and New York society and reveals important shades of differences in taste and custom that presage further conflict and complications. Like the fabrics and household objects in Dutch paintings, the interiors and details of dress of Mrs. Wharton’s New Yorkers are richly suggestive of the inner life of their owners.

The descriptive detail, moreover, constitutes in itself a kind of imagery; for example, May’s wedding dress is first of all a costume of blue-white satin and old lace. The fact that, like the other women of her set, she wears her wedding dress for the first year or two of marriage is a concrete detail adding to our picture of this frugal, essentially bourgeois upper class. Finally, May’s torn and mud-stained wedding dress becomes symbolic of the stains on her marriage made by Archer’s passion for Ellen.

The actual verbal imagery also reflects the New York world and mode of speech. Mrs. Wharton’s writing is not studded with striking, extended, or violent metaphors. Sometimes her writing even suffers from excessive reliance on faded or tired metaphors and similes such as are not uncommon in conversation: a word falls “like a bombshell” (p. 38); bandages are taken off eyes; Newland did not have a “blank page to offer his bride in exchange for the unblemished one she was to give him” (p. 43); if he had been as sheltered as she had been “they would have been no more fit to find their way about than the Babes in the Wood” (p. 44); Catherine “slept like a baby” (p. 274); Ellen’s words “fell into his breast like burning lead” (p.

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6 Edmund Wilson, *The Wound and the Bow* (Boston, 1941), p. 201, calls her “the poet of interior decoration.”
More neatly finished but no less conventional is the comparison of marriage to a haven: “Marriage was not the safe anchorage he had been taught to think, but a voyage on uncharted seas” (p. 40). As one would expect of a traditionally educated person, the well-known classical myths are alluded to casually. Jane “hovered Cassandra-like” (p. 83); Ellen’s actions followed her emotions with “Olympian speed” (p. 164); May is frequently referred to as “Diana-like.” More specific literary allusions usually have a source in Newland’s reading or in plays he has seen. For example, he makes the connection between van der Luyden’s determined protection of Ellen and the zeal of the main character in Le Voyage de M. Perrichon in clinging to the young man he had rescued.

While some of the imagery is so neutral as to be unnoticeable, several types of recurring images mostly governed by Newland’s point of view call into question the values of the world which he had heretofore taken for granted. The “anthropological” image, for example, drawn from recent books Newland has been reading, appears on the second page and permeates the novel. “What was or was not ‘the thing’ played a part as important in Newland Archer’s New York as the inscrutable totem terrors that had ruled the destinies of his forefathers thousands of years ago.” New York families are constantly referred to as “tribes” or “clans.” The New York wedding was “a rite that seemed to belong to the dawn of history” (p. 179). “Concealment of the spot in which the bridal night was to be spent [was] one of the most sacred taboos of the prehistoric ritual” (p. 180). “He saw in a flash that if the family had ceased to consult him it was because some deep tribal instinct warned them that he was no longer on their side” (p. 254). May’s dinner for Ellen was “the tribal rally around a kinswoman about to be eliminated from the tribe” (p. 337). This pervasive “tribal” imagery is one means by which Newland’s little world is seen in perspective, its ethnocentrism exposed, and its “civilization” shown to be unflatteringly primitive.

Another important group of images by which this world is judged clusters around the van der Luydens, the Pharaohs of the pyramidal New York social structure. Mr. van der Luyden seats himself “with the simplicity of a reigning sovereign” (p. 51) and speaks “with a

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*These banalities are signs of the “dégénérescence” of Mrs. Wharton’s mature style that E. K. Brown finds evident in The Glimpses of the Moon (1922).
sovereign gentleness” (p. 55); Mrs. van der Luyden considers his “least gesture as having an almost sacerdotal importance” (p. 51) and beams on Mrs. Archer “with the smile of Esther interceding with Ahasuerus” (p. 55). Dining with the van der Luydens when their cousin the Duke was their guest had “almost a religious solemnity” (p. 59). Though ludicrously self-conscious of their “sovereignty,” the van der Luydens are good, kind, gentle—and dead. “She always, indeed, struck Newland Archer as having been rather gruesomely preserved in the airless atmosphere of a perfectly irreproachable existence, as bodies caught in glaciers keep for years a life-in-death” (p. 50). Van der Luyden’s eyes have a “look of frozen gentleness” (p. 51); the life-in-death image echoes in the words “cold,” “chilly,” “frozen,” “icy,” which crop up almost always in conjunction with this august name. And there are still other “death” images: their “large shrouded room” was to Archer “so complete an image of its owners” (p. 52). The tinkle of the door bell at Skuyter-cliff “seemed to echo through a mausoleum; and 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” (p. 129).

Neither the death nor religious imagery is confined to the van der Luydens, though the sovereign-priestly combination is. The elevation of good taste to a biblical commandment is briskly mocked: “Few things seemed to Newland Archer more awful than an offence against ‘Taste,’ that far-off divinity of whom ‘Form’ was the mere visible representative and vice-regent” (p. 12). “Etiquette required that she should wait, immovable as an idol” (p. 61). “On the far side of the ribbon, Lawrence Lefferts’s sleekly brushed head seemed to mount guard over the invisible deity of ‘good Form’ who presided at the ceremony” (p. 182). Sometimes the religious imagery conveys appreciation for the sacredness of the old values: the first few hours of engagement “had in them something grave and sacramental” (p. 21). May “became the tutelary divinity of all of his [Newland’s] old traditions and reverences” (p. 197).

While Mrs. Wharton was hardly a true romantic and “of the devil’s party without knowing it,” Ellen Olenska thinks New York is “heaven,” which “struck Newland Archer as . . . [a] disrespectful way of describing New York society” (p. 15). It is heaven indeed, for it is a world in which no one has any need to cry (p. 76), or
any of the needs of flesh and blood, “any more than the blessed in heaven” (p. 131). “Does anything ever happen in heaven?” (p. 131), Ellen asks; and other images support this view of New York as a deadly, “heavenly” place. Newland feels he is “being buried alive under his future” (p. 138). “The silence that followed lay on them with the weight of things final and irrevocable. It seemed to Archer to be crushing him down like his own grave-stone” (p. 170).

The sight of “busy animated people on the Beaufort lawn shocked him as if they had been children playing in a grave-yard” (p. 208). When Newland heard the talk disposing of the Beauforts after their financial ruin, “a deathly sense of the superiority of implication and analogy over direct action, and of silence over rash words, closed in on him like the doors of the family vault” (p. 339).

If New York is like heaven to Ellen, what she left behind was a “hell” with traditional connotations. When May remarks that Ellen might after all be happier with her husband, Newland rebukes her—he had called her his “dear and great angel” (p. 23) when they were first betrothed—

“I don’t think I ever heard you say a cruel thing before.”

“Cruel?”

“Well—watching the contortions of the damned is supposed to be a favourite sport of the angels; but I believe even they don’t think people happier in hell.” (p. 218)

We have seen how the social data create the solidity and tangibility of Newland’s world of appearances and how some types of images tend to qualify and evaluate this world. But all of the imagery is not on the side of individual self-fulfilment. One type which must be mentioned speaks in this debate between self and society for stability of the clan, for “duty.” Frequently, the precariousness of Newland’s position in relation to the social world is rendered through images of falling, sinking, and drifting. “He felt as though he had been struggling for hours up the face of a steep precipice, and now, just as he had fought his way to the top, his hold had given way and he was pitching down headlong into darkness” (p. 174). During the wedding ceremony, Newland “became aware of having been adrift far off in the unknown” (p. 186). “‘Darling!’ Archer said [to his bride]—and suddenly the same black abyss yawned before him and he felt himself sinking into it, deeper and deeper”
(p. 187). Listening to the Count’s emissary reporting on the efforts of the Mingotts to force Ellen’s return, Archer had “the sense of clinging to the edge of a sliding precipice” (p. 254). In Boston to see Ellen, “he had such a queer sense of having slipped through the meshes of time and space” (p. 231), and in his interview with her, “his imagination spun about the hand [Ellen’s] as about the edge of a vortex” (p. 245).

This imagery of precipice, abyss, and vortex seems a psychologically crude method of expressing an emotional state, but it does effectively suggest the dangers of Newland’s alienation from the social world. To step out of the established order, to seek reality in a relationship outside its pale, is to step into the void, the dark abyss. The social framework which provides control, form, and order in the lives of those whom it supports may be based on conventions and outworn ideals, but the person dispensing with the framework runs the risk of self-extinction; what one is depends to some extent on one’s real and recognized relationships with others.

Thus, the tension between the rebel and the traditionalist is heightened both by the imagery and by the epigrammatic sentence. On the one hand, images sustain the criticism of convention developed through the traditional fictional means of incident and characterization, and on the other hand, they underscore the dangers of lawless self-gratification. The finely balanced, neatly turned sentences lash with a whip the inanities of the social order while reflecting in their very firmness, polish, and economy the amenities and uprightness of that vanished world. Edith Wharton’s style, compared to Hemingway’s or Meredith’s, is unmannered, but as this analysis of patterns of syntax, diction, and imagery has tried to show, her prose is not only marked by her personal stamp but admirably suited to her satiric yet tender view of *The Age of Innocence*. 