

Wharton motivated by the 1969 unsealing of her papers at the Beinecke Library in Yale. R.W.B. Lewis and Cynthia Griffin Wolff, for example, explored the intricate dimensions of Edith Wharton in two massive biographies which challenged the critical assumptions that had haunted Wharton all of her career (her lack of «femaleness,» her lack of passion, her literary elitism) while giving concluding evidence that she was a major American writer. Cynthia Griffin Wolff noticed an emotional change in Wharton's *oeuvre* after 1910, a change that R.W.B. Lewis corroborated as a result of Wharton's affair with the journalist Morton Fullerton.⁴ R.W.B. Lewis also enlarged our perception of Edith Wharton by providing insights on the forces that shaped her complicated literary and personal worlds.

Although studies such as these have been crucial to change Wharton's position in the canon, her image as a writer both unsympathetic to and separated from the efforts of other literary women still persists. It is true that feminist critics have been pioneers in noticing the writer's consistent concern with women's issues. Elizabeth Ammons, Wendy Gimbel and Annette Zilversmit, for instance, have written extensively about Wharton's heroines in studies that portray the complexity of her female characters in an equally complicated world. Examining issues of femininity, writing and experience, these intelligent analysis have tended to see Wharton's heroines in isolation and as primarily competitive. More recently, Susan Goodman's recent essay has contrasted some of the previous views by exploring Wharton's personal relationship with other women (her mother and Sara Norton mainly) and by portraying her heroines in connection with other women.⁵ Crucial as they are, these studies have not addressed the question of whether and how Wharton was influenced by other women writers. With the exception of Candace Waid's recent, fascinating reading of Edith Wharton in relation to Mary Wilkins,⁶ critics have not really undertaken the task of exploring the importance of other female authors to her work. Only Henry James seemed to have been aware that there were «resonances, even striking echoes» between her and George Eliot, since he once praised her by remarking that she displayed the «fine

article on the subject, «Edith Wharton and Henry James: The Literary Relation,» *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 74, Dec., 1957, pp 619-37.

4. See Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *A Feast of Words. The Triumph of Edith Wharton* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), and R.W.B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton. A Biography* (London and New York: Constable and Company, 1975).

5. Susan Goodman, *Edith Wharton's Women. Friends and Rivals* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1990).

6. See Candace Waid, «Wharton and Wilkins. Rereading the mother,» *Edith Wharton's Letters from the Underworld* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

benevolent finger-marks of the good Eliot –The echo of much reading of that excellent woman here and there, that is sounding through.»⁷

The aim of this paper is to explore some of the connections between Edith Wharton and George Eliot, especially the resemblances between Wharton's heroine in «The Angel at the Grave» and Eliot's Dorothea in *Middlemarch*. Using these two works as a microfield for analysis, the article will attempt to show literary parallelisms between both writers, not only in their treatment of the self-effacing woman but also in their poignant, subtle critique of masculine knowledge and authorship. The discussion will hopefully enlarge our perception of Wharton as a writer at odds with patriarchal values while challenging her apparent «misogyny.» By exploring analogies between the two novelists, we shall be able to place Edith Wharton within a female literary undercurrent⁸ shared by several women writers whose common interests, anxieties, concerns, etc. have not been fully acknowledged.

Edith Wharton herself hinted at this submerged literary tradition by expressing on several occasions her personal admiration for George Sand, Anna de Noailles, George Eliot and Vernon Lee (Violet Piaget). During her Italian years, Wharton spent hours with Vernon Lee, whom she described as «the first truly cultivated woman I have ever encountered.» When in Paris, a little-remembered early nineteenth-century novelist, Hortense Allart, was added to Wharton's growing list of talented women, headed by George Sand. Wharton admired Allart's literary craft to some degree (despite her lack of «long vibrations») but what really appealed to her was Allart's unconventional behaviour—she was the mistress of Chateaubriand and Bulwer-Lytton among others—and the candor with which she discussed her experiences in her letters. Similar admiration awoke in her the figures of Anna de Noailles and George Sand, two women with immense talent and irregular private lives. Wharton's frequent visits to Nohant, the former country house of George Sand, have now been well documented by Lewis and it is also known that she admired the intensity and the personal charm of Anna de Noailles, whom she often met in the literary *salon* of the Comtesse Rosa de Fitz-James.

R.W.B. Lewis has also remarked how Wharton's sense of kinship for these writers is unmistakably drawn from the depths of her own situation, as a woman and as a writer at the turn of the century.⁹ Like Sand or de Noailles, Wharton had violated the code of her time, not only by becoming a professional writer but also by breaking

7. Henry James to Edith Wharton, Lamb House, Rye, December 4th, 1912. MS Yeal, Box 27, folder 826. Printed with permission from the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Yale University.

8. The phrase is Elaine Showalter's in *A Literature of their Own. British Women Writers from Bronte to Lessing* (London: Virago, 1978).

9. R.W.B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton. A Biography*, p. 169.

a conventional marriage and by going through a passionate love affair with Morton Fullerton. She too had written some vividly pessimistic novels which conveyed the unhappiness of her condition, and an erotic story whose possible literary source is Alfred de Musset's (Sand's lover) *Gamiani*. And with George Eliot, Edith Wharton shared a number of intellectual and personal goals. Like Eliot, Wharton had a precarious relationship with her mother and a strong attachment to her father and to other father-surrogates. She too travelled and read widely, spoke several languages and achieved an extraordinary learning relatively early in life. And like Eliot, Wharton was much more interested in scientific and literary issues than in feminism. Other analogies can be found in their mutual enthusiasm for German culture and literature (especially for the works of Goethe, on whom they both became experts), their interest in science and the supernatural and the anecdotal fact that Henry James used to call Edith Wharton the «Angel of Devastation,» an ambiguous epithet that recalls George Eliot's pen-name, Angel of Destruction.

Indeed, Wharton shared Henry James's lifelong interest in George Eliot, and she often quoted her in her works and private letters. Above all other writers, she esteemed Eliot, to whose novels Wharton herself was passionately addicted.¹⁰ Always high among her list of favourite works was *Middlemarch* and she was grimly fond of the comment by Dorothea Brooke: «Marriage is so unlike anything else –there is something even awful in the nearness it brings»–, which she paraphrased in an early story, «Souls Belated» (1899). It is also revealing an article on George Eliot that Wharton wrote a propos of Leslie Stephen's biography of the English novelist. Wharton began by defending Eliot against the charge of an inappropriate interest in nonliterary fields, like scientific knowledge. And since Milton and Goethe were also students of the sciences, Wharton suggested: «It is because these were men, while George Eliot was a woman, that she is thus reprov'd for venturing on grounds they did not fear to tread?»¹¹ By the time Wharton wrote this defense of Eliot (a year after the publication of «The Angel at the Grave») she had not yet violated the moral code of her time but certain impulses and resentments of a private kind were implicit in this generous understanding of George Eliot's situation and its twisted reflection in her work.

Personal affinities apart, there are certainly literary analogies between Eliot and Wharton, two writers equally concerned with the dilemma of the trapped sensibility, the theme of self-sacrifice and the conflict between the claims of duty and self. Much

10. In fact, her literary admiration for Eliot was maintained until her final years –in 1905 she expressed her enthusiasm for her (together with Balzac, Stendhal, Jane Austen, Tolstoy and Thackeray) and in *The Writing of Fiction* (1924) she returned again to the same cluster of names, stressing the craftsmanship of the English novelist.

11. Edith Wharton, «Review of George Eliot by Leslie Stephen,» *Bookman*, 15, May, 1902, pp. 243-52.

of Wharton's early work is devoted to explorations of this quality, focussing on issues such as entombment, atrophy, deceit and entrapment, issues which—we can speculate—recorded the author's personal misery and also the tragedy of women's situation as she had come to see it: the waste, the crippling, the curtailment. Let us remember that between 1890 and 1905 Wharton was suffering the depressing effects of a frustrating marriage to Teddy Wharton and the lack of intellectual stimulus of the older world she had been born into. At this stage, what might be called the more heretical side of her nature was beginning to reassert itself as she debated between following her own personal and artistic aspirations or assuming demands that made her life both sterile and stifling. Like Eliot, Wharton returned again and again to the subject of feminine immolation and, according to Jean Turner, «occasionally her condemnation of the futility of self-sacrifice carried the ring of personal vindication.»¹²

Indeed, the «finger-marks» to which James refers can be found in Wharton's «The Angel at the Grave» (1901), whose plot and narrative patterns expand the contradictions of Dorothea's fate with Casaubon, with an ending just as ironic. In a way, it is as if Wharton had undertaken to explore a path that George Eliot had insinuated but never fully confronted in *Middlemarch*: what would have happened if Dorothea had agreed to Casaubon's pretensions and had consecrated herself to his work after his demise? In «The Angel at the Grave» Wharton offers an interesting exploitation of the situation, using an angelic figure whose suicidal overtones recall Eliot's lifelong fascination with the theme of feminine renunciation or, more precisely, with what Gilbert and Gubar would call the «angel of destruction.»

By the time «The Angel at the Grave» was written, Edith Wharton was feeling trapped in an unhappy marriage and a frustrating environment. Therefore, it is possible to suggest the value for her of some of George Eliot's images in *Middlemarch*. Although the true value of this and other writings would be more apparent in later moments in Wharton's career, «The Angel at the Grave» provides material for answering the debated point of whether and how Wharton was influenced by other women writers. For in this miniature story Wharton undertakes to revise a constant issue in George Eliot's fiction, and in this respect the story of both heroines—angels inhabiting equally curtained, stifling spheres—reads very much alike.

Not unlike Dorothy Brook, Pauline Anson, the grand-daughter of a Transcendentalist writer, has elevated ideas, a sense of mission and a keen desire to serve. Like so many of other Wharton's and Eliot's heroines, she is not a rebel but rather a woman who needs more than conventional attitudes would be ready to grant her: a kind of St. Theresa in search of an outlet for her passions and talents. Described as «a child compact of enthusiasms, and accustomed to pasture them on the scanty herbage

12. Jean Turner, *The Ideology of Women in the Fiction of Edith Wharton. 1899-1920*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1975.

of (the) social soil,»¹³ she submits to the role of scribe and custodian of her grand-father's works. Because she bears the stamp of a patriarchal education based on «the centripetal force of the grand-father's greatness» («Angel» 1172), Pauline shapes herself into the rather uncongenial image of «the guardian of the family temple,» which implies abdicating her own life for the sake of becoming his «custodian angel» and literary executrix. Her altruistic immolation to the dead writer recalls Dorothea's devotion to Casaubon, the sexagenarian teacher-husband, who she expects «would give her the freedom of voluntary submission to a guide who would take her along the grandest path.»¹⁴

Both Eliot's and Wharton's characterization of the self-effacing woman is communicated through the use of biblical imagery that stresses the visionary quality of the heroines' immolation. In Wharton's short story, the house, always written with a capital letter, is «the temple, ...the sanctuary,» where Pauline, its «young priestess is to be the interpreter of the oracle» («Angel» 1173). Her vestal task is assumed as «a sacred duty» to guide «the lost sheep straying in the wilderness» («Angel» 1176). Similarly, in George Eliot's novel, Dorothea sees herself as «a lamp-holder,» «a neophyte about to enter on a higher grade of initiation» (*Middlemarch* 67).

In both cases, the imagery is connected with the cultural values of their time, which glorified abnegation and devotion to the home as major props to the notion of «the superior woman.» Eliot was ultimately ambivalent over the ideal of female service, as a number of critics have shown.¹⁵ But in «The Angel at the Grave» Wharton expands the ironies of Eliot's story by depicting the cost of feminine submission and by fully exposing the futility of living a vicarious existence. After devoting her life to writing her grand-father's biography, Pauline learns from the publisher that the reading public is no longer interested in Orestes Anson. The manuscript in which she had lain «all her dreams, all her renunciations» is envisioned now as «a dead bundle» and Pauline allows herself to feel fully the horror of her waste: «She sat in the cold thinly-furnished interior and it seemed to her that she had ...kept vigil by a corpse.» «Her own unprofitable sacrifice» («Angel» 1178) parallels Dorothea's gratuitous

13. Edith Wharton, «The Angel at the Grave,» *Crucial Instances* (1901), in Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (NY: Norton and Co., 1985), p. 1172. Subsequent references to this work will be annotated in the text and will refer to this edition.

14. George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (London: Penguin Classics, 1965), p. 51. Subsequent references to this work will be annotated in the text and will refer to this edition.

15. See, for example, the chapter «Captivity and Consciousness in George Eliot's Fiction,» in S. Gilbert and S. Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) and Caron Christ, «Aggression and Providential Death in George Eliot's Fiction,» *Novel*, winter 1976, pp. 130-40.

immolation to an emotionally sterile marriage and her wasted commitment to a work which she comes to perceive as valueless.

Edith Wharton not only shares here a tragic vision of woman's destiny with her predecessor, but she also develops many aspects of her technique. Images of paralysis, confinement and death accumulate in both works articulating a devastating view of human sacrifice. In *Middlemarch*, instead of the much long-hoped horizons, Dorothea finds «ante-rooms and winding passages which seemed to lead nowhither» (*Middlemarch* 228). Like Milton's daughters, Dorothea had learned to read the Greek alphabet to help the writer but it is a mechanic, incomprehensible activity that carries no meaning or insight. As the guardian of man's library, Dorothea, like other Wharton's heroines (for example, Pauline and Charity Royall in *Summer*) cannot interpret the texts: they are dead tomes in a dead space. And instead of «work which would be directly beneficent like the sunshine and the rain» (*Middlemarch* 516), she finds herself «locked ... in a dark closet of his verbal memory.» Equally frustrating turns out to be Dorothea's husband («lean, dry, ill-coloured»); his house, «of greenish stone,» eventually becomes «a virtual tomb» (*Middlemarch* 519, 229). Similar images appear at «The Angel at the Grave,» where the library ends up as a tomb and the grandfather's works, «effigies of dead ideas» («Angel» 1178). It seems clear that Wharton used Eliot's novel as a source of inspiration to create in Pauline another modern Antigone, a lonely creature whose act of loyalty is invariably suicidal. Her rhetoric of renunciation sheds light on the contradictions behind the cultural stereotype of the self-effacing woman. Like in so many other of Wharton and Eliot novels, we find here the familiar discrepancy between the heroine's aspirations and the texture of reality. The tension between desire and their role in society typifies the frustrations of educated women in a world that encouraged renunciation as their only avenue for self-expression.

And yet, the story not only puts into question the redemptive potential of self-sacrifice; it also explores the nature of a woman's problematic relationship to the male literary tradition she feels she has been appointed to carry on. Surely it is no coincidence that Wharton chooses Transcendentalist thought as target of her satire against a male, individualist culture. Academia and the great masters are treated here with malicious mischievousness. Like George Eliot's pedantic Casaubon, Orestes Anson has the aspect of Milton domesticated and diminished. Though majestic in his metaphysical pedestal, at home he is a pretentious character with a ridiculous jargon. From his «sonorous periods, his mystic vocabulary, his flights into the rarefied air of the abstract» to «the guttural cluck that started the wheels of speech» («Angel» 1173), Orestes Anson –like Edward Casaubon– is indeed a skilfully subversive portrait of male authority for, as George Eliot writes, «even Milton, looking for his portrait in a spoon must submit to having the facial angle of a bumpkin» (*Middlemarch* 110).

It is useful to recall Gilbert and Gubar's identification of Casaubon with the more androcentric aspects of western civilization –with Rome, with the English

clergy, with Greek and Roman classical texts.¹⁶ For as a faded member of a solipsistic generation, Orestes Anson has also come to embody the intellectual bankruptcy of masculine knowledge and authorship. And indeed his is an obsolete dried-out culture, symbolized in the dust piled «about the mute lips of the Sphinx» («Angel» 1178), «the bare desk, the faded portraits, the yellowing tomes» («Angel» 1174). His portrait looks «like the ghost of an ancient,» just like Casaubon himself, who is a sort of Prince of the Underworld, inhabitant of gloomy Lo-wick, where he lives literally «buried in dusty volumes with grey-paper backs» (*Middlemarch* 172) and «indifferent to the sunlight» (230). If Orestes Anson is already dead, Casaubon is indeed «no better than a mummy... a sort of parchment code» (*Middlemarch* 94).

A similar interpretation can be drawn from the two men's writings. Again Gilbert and Gubar have explained how Casaubon's *opus*, *The Key to All Mythologies*, embodies the dangerous attempt to reduce the richness of a plural mythological past to a single source. Like patriarchal culture itself, Casaubon's work is egocentric and ethnocentric as it «perpetuates a hierarchical genealogy whereby an original Text fathers forth subsidiary and subordinate texts.»¹⁷ In this respect, Orestes's «thin discoloured» manuscript, the *amphioxus*, humorously reminds us not only of Casaubon's pedantic and sterile expectations but also of Tertius Lydgate in his search for a key to all living things. Indeed, Orestes's *amphioxus* —«a cartilaginous vertebral column» («Angel» 1181), a kind of animal compendium of *all* the rest— seems very much like a dark parody of Lydgate's «primitive tissues from which life begins» (*Middlemarch* 150). Forgotten the pamphlet under «dusty documents,» the key that supposedly unlocks the drawer of Orestes's greatness is inextricably linked with Casaubon's and Lydgate's. And the three men's obsession with origins is but another instance of a reductive culture caught —to paraphrase Borges—in a tautological circuit of beginnings about to begin.

The fact that Pauline's life revolves around three masculine categories further highlights the story's critique against patriarchal beliefs. While the grand-father, his disciples and publishers control the outside world, women remain at home, «in cells that left the central fame undisturbed» («Angel» 1172). Yet, by the end of the story, home has become a tomb-like prison and a frail refuge from a world more frightening than any prison. It is no longer the sacred place where woman radiates her beneficial influence but a «bleak temple» and «the cold, inhospitable hearth» («Angel» 1172) where she languishes and fades as if in a pantheon. Like Dorothea's entombment in the shrunken landscape and the stale interiors of the bridal house, Pauline's sense of failure and claustrophobia at the end of the story reverses the archetypal image of the

16. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic. The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, p. 501.

17. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 502.

angel in the house and confers the idea that to be the guardian of the family temple is not to choose a meaningful life but rather to opt for a *rigor mortis* isolation.

After a deep examination of the previous considerations my conclusions are that Edith Wharton did have a female literary predecessor in the figure of George Eliot. Indeed, the two works we have been dealing with show us that there are important analogies between them, both in imagery and in shared subject matter. With a language full of common images and textual strategies, they address the issue of feminine renunciation and the deathly dangers of the «eroticism of inequality»¹⁸—the male teacher and the adoring female pupil, the male author and the acquiescent female scribe. By identifying male authorship, books, knowledge and authority with entrapment, tombs, dryness, frigidity and sterility, Eliot and Wharton have written two interesting indictments of the violence resulting from men and women inhabiting a culture defined as masculine. In *A Room of their Own*, Virginia Woolf argued that Jane Austen, the Brontës and George Eliot could not have written without forerunners such as Aphra Behn, and the same holds true for Edith Wharton. The striking similarities found between the subplot of Dorothea's marriage and «The Angel at the Grave» remind us that Wharton was not so much a woman among men as a woman writer who sought value for her life and her work in relation with other women writers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very grateful to the Spanish Ministry of Education for the fellowship that supported this work and to the Princeton and Yale University Libraries for access to the research facilities. I am particularly indebted to Professor Pilar Hidalgo for her valuable suggestions, which provided the original impetus of this work.

18. I take the expression from Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 506.