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In Between Cultures: Franco-American Encounters in the Work of Edith Wharton
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MARIA STRÄÅF

ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of how the American author Edith Wharton (1862-1937) in a number of novels and short stories written between 1876 and 1937 depicts cultural encounters between Americans and Europeans, mostly Frenchmen. Chiefly concerned with Fast and Loose, “The Last Asset”, Madame de Treymes, “Les Metteurs en Scène”, The Custom of the Country and The Age of Innocence, each of which articulates ideas relevant to the theme investigated, the thesis also contains a supplementary discussion of The Reef, The Glimpses of the Moon, The Mother’s Recompense and The Buccaneers. Borrowing terms and theoretical perspectives from Pierre Bourdieu and postcolonial literary criticism, particularly Homi Bhabha’s theories about in-betweenness, mimicry and otherness, the study contends through detailed analyses of single works that Wharton’s descriptions of Franco-American encounters are dynamic processes through which the parties involved are made aware of their own and “the other’s” distinguishing qualities and, in some significant cases, reach a heightened state of consciousness resembling Bhabha’s in-betweenness. Wharton’s cultural encounters often involve people with different levels of education and different economic and social positions, which justifies the use of Bourdieu’s method of analyzing the relationship between educational and social status in terms of different kinds of capital.

While in her early works Wharton merely intimates the contours of the cultural encounter, in mature works such as Madame de Treymes and The Age of Innocence she views it as a highly complex process the many stages of which are intimated through the use of subtle narratological techniques. Throughout her work Wharton makes intricate use of imagery and keywords, some of them testifying to her interest in anthropology, to suggest the manifold dimensions of the cultural encounter, which is seen as both tempting and repelling. Her accounts of the Franco-American encounter are complexly related to the different phases of the American political and social situation described in her novels. The American experience of the meeting of the ‘old society’ and the ‘new’ is rendered even more complex by being seen as the background against which Europeans and Americans negotiate transactions of symbolic and economic capital. In most of her works these lead to tragic or tragic-comic misunderstandings; only in her last, unfinished novel does she describe a full-fledged Euro-American identity, a successful fusion of American and European experiences.

Keywords: American literature; capital: economic, cultural, social & symbolic; cultural encounter; Edith Wharton; hybridity, in-betweenness, mimicry; narratology; nineteenth-century literature; twentieth-century literature; otherness; women’s literature.
Acknowledgements

Now as this project is almost finished – but not quite, and in this undefined zone between the inside and the outside of this book, I wish to extend my gratitude to the people who have seen me through this challenging, but always rewarding process, without whose help this project would never have come to a close.

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Linköping July 4, 2008.

MARIA
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Chapter One: Introduction

Cultural Encounters in Edith Wharton’s Works

Edith Wharton (1862-1937), one of the leading representatives of the generation of women novelists who were such a forceful presence in American literature in the early 20th century, spent much of her life in Europe and eventually settled in France, a fact reflected in the prominent position she gives Europe – and particularly France – in her writings. In many of her novels and short stories, which together cover the time span 1870-1920, she depicts encounters between Americans and Europeans, notably Frenchmen, in the process making varied use of events, settings, and characters deriving from her own experience of Franco-American encounters.

It is not surprising, then, to find that in almost every critical account of Wharton’s life and work one of the first things usually mentioned is her relationship with Europe. To give but a few examples, Hilton Anderson states in 1968 that with the exception of Henry James, Wharton has written “more fiction concerning Americans in Europe than has any other single author”;¹ Shari Benstock observes that the author’s “life story breaks almost too easily into two parts: America and Europe”,² while Hermione Lee in her biography describes Wharton as an American citizen in Europe,

passionately interested in France, England and Italy, but who could never be done with the subject of America and Americans. Over and over again, in a spirit of complex contradiction, she returned to the customs of her country, and to versions of herself as the daughter of her family and her country. Between 1897 and 1937 Wharton published at least one book almost every year of her life. In almost every one of them there is a cultural comparison, or conflict, a journey or a displacement, a sharp eye cast across national characteristics.3

There is concurrence, then, among Wharton scholars about the author’s long-standing, profound preoccupation with ‘the matter of Europe’. However, those who try to account for the nature of this preoccupation as evidenced in her work are often content with general characterization of her themes and techniques. In the above quotation from Lee’s biography, Wharton is seen as torn between her native and adopted continents, the literary result being “a cultural comparison”, “a conflict”, “a journey or displacement”, or simply “a sharp eye cast across national characteristics”. Other critics describe the theme primarily as a “quest for self-definition”4 or as a series of explorations of different cultural types5 or of categories6 of expatriate Americans. Issues of class and culture are examined though they are often seen as more important in Wharton’s American work than in her treatments of the “international theme”.

It is the contention of the present thesis that the discussion of Wharton’s treatment of the international theme can be refined considerably. To begin with, it seems to me that questions of class, money and power are equally relevant to those of Wharton’s works which are set in an international milieu and often involve a mediator (a re-


current figure in Wharton’s fiction who has not been given sufficient attention; the social position of mediators may vary but they are invariably involved in issues of class, money and power). Moreover, the displacements that Wharton’s characters undergo often result in subject positions whose most salient characteristic is their intermediate character, their *in-betweenness*, and the subtle (and sometimes less than subtle) negotiations that the characters (or their proxies) engage in involve experiences which, borrowing a term from Homi Bhabha, can be characterized as interstitial. The problematic nature of these negotiations is further compounded by the fact that the matter negotiated concerns the individual’s prospect of happiness through love, often in the face of conventions which serve the interests of the family not the individual. Throughout her work, and particularly in the fiction written after her move to France, Wharton represents versions of the cultural dimensions of this conflict, subtly intimating how individuals involved in cultural encounters have to question, modify, abandon or reaffirm their society’s values as they face the values of the cultural ‘other’. Some of Wharton’s Americans find themselves in a state of in-betweenness even in their own society because of such conflicts, a situation that is rendered even more difficult because it involves a cultural dimension.

While such predicaments are of course dissimilar in some vital respects from those described by postcolonial critics, there are also a number of striking similarities: *in-betweenness*, *hybridity* and *otherness* are terms which will be used here, needless to say, with proper precaution to assess the nature of those predicaments. To account for the nature of the social and cultural encounters described above, I will have recourse to ideas and perspectives borrowed from postcolonial critics, notably cultural theorist Homi Bhabha, but also from sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, especially where questions of power, class and different forms of capital are concerned. These terms and outlooks have been inspiring in a general sense so that they are sometimes present without being literally invoked.

The various subject positions described in Wharton’s novels and stories are usually subordinated to that of the narrator who in many cases exudes an aura of omniscience, even in the field of cultural
identity. However, Wharton is also a product of her times: to take stock of this assumed omniscience it is necessary also to subject Wharton’s narratives to a narratological analysis which in some cases is able to highlight the implied views on class, race, monetary and cultural capital which permeate her versions of the cultural encounter between Europe and America.

In her works Wharton explains the traits she examines in various ways. Sometimes she connects behavioral characteristics to nationality, seeing a certain way of acting as typical of French or American mentality; sometimes she sees a character’s actions as determined primarily by class, viewing them as due to an individual’s aristocratic, upper-class or nouveau riche background. She occasionally also talks about ‘race’, speaking for example of “the Latin races” (Madame de Treymes). However, her use of ‘race’ is ambiguous: in “The Last Asset” her use of the word ‘race’ suggests anti-Semitism. In my discussion of Wharton’s novels and stories, I will of course refer to her terms as a starting-point for my discussions of the meaning of her explanations and terminology. However, for my own purposes, I prefer to analyze the distinctions and peculiarities explored by Wharton in terms of cultural characteristics, using the word in a broad sense.

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7 Race is the imprecise concept used to describe “the divisions of mankind” on the basis of having certain “physical characteristics” and connected by a “common descent” (Joyce M. Hawkins and Robert Allen, eds., The Oxford Encyclopedic English Dictionary, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991, s.v. race). Wharton also seems to refer to other senses of race, especially in the senses 7 and 8: “noble race; separate in language and race” and in other contexts a class of persons with a certain common feature, e.g. “the race of poets”. Wharton’s use of the term is controversial but typical for her time, linking her texts to racist political doctrines. For a general discussion, see Jennie Kassanoff, Edith Wharton and the Politics of Race (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

8 Many different definitions of culture are available but I will rely on Edward Tylor’s classic definition from his 1871 Primitive Cultures which is nearing a neutral, not normative definition of the world of our cultural others as valid as ours. “Culture or civilisation [is] that complex whole, which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits achieved by man as a member of society” (Primitive Cultures (New York: J.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1920, 1). This anthropo-
Edith Wharton, Europe and In-Betweenness

Taking a closer look at the author’s life and work, we recognize a relationship between her fiction and her biography. Her work is not what might be defined as autobiographical in an obvious sense, but her experiences become resources for literary production: they reappear in her fiction, re-contextualized and blended. Themes, localities, time and social setting in her work come close to circumstances she had encountered in her life in some form. Her biography suggests conditions similar to those appearing in fictional interpretation of situations involving how interpersonal relationships and particular identities relate to the changing contexts of time, place and group. This motivates the sketching of the contours of her life in Europe.

Edith Wharton in Europe

The seed of Edith Wharton’s act of leaving America for expatriation in Europe was already present in the strictly defined circumstances of her youth. Her American background prepared her for a life in the upper crust of New York society, a small group careful not to mix with outsiders, making themselves exclusive. Although Wharton’s parents, Lucretia Rhinelander Jones and George Fredrick Jones, were not of colonial aristocratic descent, their New World roots could be traced back almost three hundred years. They descended from a long line of prosperous merchants, lawyers and bankers. Belonging to the ‘four hundred’ Old New York families also meant embracing the ‘isolationist’ class’s attitude towards the increased social pressure from the class of upwardly socially mobile industrialists working their way into ‘polite society’ during Wharton’s lifetime. Her experience of logical definition avoids the exclusive concern with elite ‘high culture’ vs. mass ‘popular culture’. For a thorough discussion of culture as “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language”, see also Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana Croom Helm, 1976), 76-82.

9 Wharton’s autobiography, *A Background Glance*, gives important clues to some of the ideas which underlie concepts specific to her world, where the basic function is to include or to exclude Americans in upper-class New York society; ‘defining out’
Europe as a child established her lifelong interest in and fascination with this continent. The economic depression following the Civil War forced her family to live in Europe for six years in order to economize in a manner still socially acceptable in their circles. Private letters as well as statements made later in life reveal how much she disliked coming back to New York; even as a child, she preferred Europe to America. By her seventeenth year she had lived one third of her life in Europe and spoke at least three languages. 

the upstarts who do not ‘belong’ to the established four-hundred families. Industrialization resulted in class mobility, social boundaries began to blur, the parvenus and their wealth were becoming increasingly difficult to exclude from the ruling class. In the following excerpt Wharton describes the language of the class on the rise as a social marker disclosing their background:

I cannot remember a time when we did not, every one of us, revel in the humours of slang; what my parents abhorred was not the picturesque use of new terms, if they were vivid and expressive, but the habitual slovenliness of those who picked up the slang of the year without having any idea they were not speaking in the purest of tradition. But above all abhorrent to ears piously attuned to all the inflexions and shades of rich speech were such mean substitutes as “back of” for behind, “dirt” for earth (i.e., a “dirt road”), “any place” for anywhere, and slovenly phrases like “a great ways”, soon alas to be followed by the still more inexcusable “a barracks”, “a wood” and even “a strata”, “a phenomena” which, as I grew up, a new class of the uneducated rich were reportedly introducing. (50-1)

Wharton invests considerable energy in defining the uneducated rich as separate from her own class. Language here serves as the shibboleth; the sign distinctive and ultimately determinative of a particular group; a function also behavior and values often take in her fiction. ‘Rich speech’, ‘snobbishness’ or ‘vulgarity’ reveals to Wharton’s set the members of the new class of the “uneducated rich”. See A Backward Glance: An Autobiography (1933) (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 50-1, hereafter cited as A Backward Glance.

10 As critics never tire of pointing out, this is the Jones family that gave rise to the expression keeping up with the Joneses. Shari Benstock notes the origin of the expression as the display of wealth by Wharton’s unmarried aunt Elizabeth Schermerhorn Jones when in 1852 she built a twenty four-room mansion, Wyndcliffe, on a Hudson River estate. See Benstock, Edith Wharton: No Gifts From Chance. A Biography of Edith Wharton (New York: Scribner’s, 1994), 26, hereafter cited as No Gifts From Chance.

11 Wharton writes in her biography that she “was always vaguely frightened by ugliness” and that on her return she was revolted by New York’s “deadly uniformity of mean ugliness”. See A Backward Glance: 28, 55.
Raised to be a society matron, at twenty-three she married Edward (Teddy) Wharton in 1885 in accordance with her family’s expectations. Making their home at Newport and traveling in Europe for part of the year took much of her time. It was in Newport she first met the French writer Paul Bourget (1852-1935) whose friendship would prove most valuable to her. This French writer and member of the French Academy had been commissioned to write a series of articles for *The New York Herald* on the United States. Staying for a month in 1895 in Newport, the summer resort of the wealthy, he describes it in his “fashionable watering place” article as being “exclusively, absolutely American”. During his visit he was invited to the Whartons’ for lunch which was the starting-point for their long friendship. Bourget’s articles compare American with French life; by asking a series of questions he aspires to “discern the American spirit”. In 1906 he introduced her to the intellectual and social circles

12 Wharton lived in Europe from her fourth to her tenth year (1866-1872) and her second extended tour of Europe began in November 1880 when she was eighteen, and ended in 1882. See Katherine Joslin & Alan Price, “Introduction” in Joslin & Price, eds., *Wretched Exotic: Essays on Edith Wharton*, 2-3.

13 She spoke English, German and French fluently and had a reading knowledge of Italian. Gianfranca Balestra accounts for Wharton’s knowledge of Italian in “Edith Wharton’s Italian Tale: Language Exercise and Social Discourse” in Claire Colquitt, Susan Goodman and Candace Waid, eds., *A Forward Glance: New Essays on Edith Wharton* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999). Balestra notes that the writer’s “extensive readings in Italian, her translations from Italian to English and her quotation of Italian words and authors, her playful coinage of Italianate words, all attest to Wharton’s knowledge and love of the language” (209). Only a few months before her death in a letter to Alfredo Zanchino, Wharton asked him to write her in Italian, if he preferred, “as I have known the language since I was a child”, but adding, however, that she was currently out of habit using the language (209).


of Paris, mainly those of Faubourg St. Germain. In 1907 she settled permanently in France where she lived and worked until her death in 1937.

It was in Paris that in the spring of 1907 Wharton met Morton Fullerton who became her lover in a passionate but troubled affair.\(^{17}\) Her new experiences of sexual passion, a sense of intimacy between lovers along with doubt of the other’s love, tinged with a sense of guilt is incorporated in her repertoire of subjects for literary interpretation. Her sense of guilt may have been compounded by the fact that her marriage, which had been strained for several years largely but not exclusively due to Teddy’s long history of mental illness, was not formally dissolved until 1913.

Though living in Paris at the same time as Hemingway, Stein, Joyce and Pound, Wharton avoided the British and American founders of modernism: she only met Scott Fitzgerald, whom she did not like.\(^{18}\) She also kept her distance from the journals which produced avant-garde work.\(^{19}\) Robert Martin and Linda Wagner note that her lover, Fullerton, attended Gertrude Stein’s Saturdays and that the address books of Stein and Wharton contained many of the same names.\(^{20}\) Moving on the fringes of, but never really in the modernist circles, she preferred to make friends in the most conservative French society where a similar regard for form and traditionalism as in her native New York society could be found. Wharton’s friends Rosa Fitz-James and Bourget were both conservative, and in Fitz-James’s salon they regularly gathered with other guests of a similar mind-set.

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\(^{17}\) Morton Fullerton, cf. p. 86, 60 and 151. Fullerton had several love-affairs along-side the one he shared with Wharton.


Wharton’s friends included intellectuals and artists such as Henry James and Bernard Berenson as well as rich patrons of the arts like Vicomte Charles de Noailles and his wife Marie Laure, who invited Wharton to the Château Saint-Bernard at Hyères, not far from her own palace-like residence, the Pavillon Colombe where they were also guests. The fact that Wharton gravitated toward conservative views and friends has also been acknowledged by Fredrick Wegener, who observes that she became associated with “many of those most directly engaged in promoting the expansion of the United States beyond its continental borders.” Millicent Bell argues that Wharton in a French conservative environment may have felt that she recovered a “superior version of rituals, a sense of ‘good form’ ”, which had been important in the Old New York of her childhood but which

21 The de Noailles funded modernist work such as Luis Buñuel’s and Salvador Dalí’s film *Le Chien Andalou* (1929), a surrealist film of the avant-garde movement of the 1920s (Lee, 537).

22 Fredrick Wegener, “ ‘Rabid Imperialist’: Edith Wharton and the Obligations of Empire in Modern American Fiction”, *American Literature*, 72.4 (2000), 785. In the year 1898 Wegener observes that she met people who together with Theodore Roosevelt, whom she met in 1898, were “leading proponent[s] both of war with Spain and of an imperially aggressive foreign policy” (785). As she moved to Paris she associated with several other propagators of American expansion. Between 1907 and the Great War the “zenith of imperial France”, she met people “affiliated with French colonial enterprise” (788). At the salon of Rosa de Fitz-James she met scholars, journalists and statesmen (e.g. the Ambassadors Jules Cambon and Maurice Paléologue, and the writers André Tardieu, André Chameix, Etienne Grosclaude and Victor Bérard). Her friend Paul Bourget also shared these views (788-9). Looking closer at the ideological climate in the circles of the people Wharton associated with, Wegener asserts that “the unanimity of their [Wharton’s friends’] beliefs regarding colonialism in France becomes more and more conspicuous” and that attitudes held in Wharton’s circle in Faubourg de Saint Germain were “socially and intellectually conservative” and its membership also came close to representing the entire pro-imperialist elite of the belle époque (791). Nancy Bentley, however, points out that Wharton “never justified European expansion in the name of progress” and that she complains in her travel account, *In Morocco* (New York: Scribner’s, 1920), that the European colonist does “harm” to “the beauty and privacy of the old Arab towns” (167). See Nancy Bentley, “Wharton Travel and Modernity” in Carol Singley, ed., *A Historical Guide to Edith Wharton* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
had been replaced by the new class of “vulgar plutocrats”. Bell considers that Wharton’s admiration for French customs “went beyond the reality of these traditions as they were lived out in ordinary households”.

Edith Wharton is often described as a lonely woman: her biography suggests experiences of coldness and isolation in her childhood. She experienced sexual passion only in her middle age and never formed a romantic bond with the man she loved most: her life-long friend Walter Berry. Disassociating herself from her family, and never raising one of her own, she instead carefully cultivated life-long friendships where she gave and received companionship, surrounding herself with “a floating court of friends”. She writes in her memoirs that her idea of society was “the daily companionship of the same five or six friends, and its pleasures based on continuity”. Her inner circle of friends was a group of seemingly disparate personalities with whom she regularly associated; a few have already been mentioned. Susan Goodman suggests that Wharton formed a link between her male friends and that the group did not necessarily exist separate from Wharton, but that the men gathered around her. Part of this international community of intellectuals, she “recasts herself as a

23 Bell, “Edith Wharton in France”, 69.
24 Bell, “Edith Wharton in France”, 70.
25 In Wharton’s words Berry was “the love of all my life”. See Benstock, No Gifts From Chance, 49. Berry and Wharton were great friends, though apparently they were never lovers.
26 Bell, “Edith Wharton in France”, 5.
27 Wharton, A Backward Glance, 224.
28 Susan Goodman names Howard Sturgis (author), Percy Lubbock (literary scholar), Henry James (author), Galliard Lapsley (expert in medieval constitutional history), John Hugh Smith (banker), Walter Berry (specialist in international law) and Bernard Berenson. Her female friends, Goodman notes, were Sally Norton, Daisy Chanler, Mary Cadwalander Jones, Beatrix Farrand and Elisina Tyler (Goodman, “Edith Wharton’s Inner Circle”, 56). See also Benstock’s No Gifts From Chance.
settled expatriate, a transformation that converts transatlantic travel into a form of dwelling, a rooted way of life.”29 In a letter to her friend Sara Norton in 1903 Wharton includes the much quoted sentence: “One’s friends are delightful; but we are none of us Americans, we don’t think or feel as the Americans do, we are the wretched exotics produced in a European glass-house, the most déplacé useless class on earth!”30 Placing herself outside of national categories, she aligns herself with other expatriates sharing her ideas of ‘not belonging’ within the American context, feeling, as Joslin and Price declare, “wretchedly displaced in a very elemental sense from culture and life in the United States.”31 She constructs herself as above national categories, which converges with the position of the narrator we find in her writings; clearly culturally omniscient and possessing knowledge of cultures, transcending specific nations and social categories.

Ambiguity seems to define Edith Wharton: a female author with a background in New York’s upper class at a time when wives were expected to be decorous, not practical, industrious or critical of the social roles available to them. This ambiguity of roles suggests difficulties uniting conflicting conventional demands with her art and her gender. Despite being conservative, Wharton believed that women had the same right as men to “realize their own creativity and ambitions much as privileged men, at least in theory, always had. Indeed, a central issue for Wharton, many scholars argue, was the intensity of her male identification as an artist.”32 The Touchstone (1900) focuses on a deceased female writer viewed from the perspective of her lover, whose feelings of inferiority had caused him to let her down in life,

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29 Bentley, “Wharton Travel and Modernity”, 165.
31 Joslin & Price, “Introduction”, 1. Wharton’s idea of herself as a supra-national expatriate is frequently commented on by critics; Goodman writes that she belonged to a group of friends “united by a shared sense of exile” in “Edith Wharton’s Inner Circle”, 49.
and who now also betrays her in death. Ammons identifies in the novella Wharton’s discussion of the conflict between being a woman and an artist; questioning whether it is at all possible as a woman writer to work within art, historically so reserved for men. In the ugly, unloved, dead but brilliant novelist Mrs Aubyn, Ammons locates the embodied “fears of the woman artist”, whose fate is “desexualization, rejection, and an early death”.

Ambiguity also describes her position in French cultural life, as well as her pose as an American in Europe during the war; her loyalty invested with France. Ambiguity further corresponds with the stance she formulates for herself in an indeterminable and fluid non-national identity. She seemingly hovers, in-between a number of positions.

Europe in Edith Wharton’s Era

During Wharton’s youth America was already traditionally described in contrast to Europe and Europeanness, the difference in turn defined America and Americanness. The notion of Europe prevalent during the period 1870-1920 as reflected in Edith Wharton’s work was not so much a political as a cultural concept based on mainly French ideas and norms of good behavior. Paris’ prominent intellec-

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33 Ammons, “Gender and Fiction”, 276.

34 The New World / Old World opposition had long served a role in American nation-building; the founding of a new country had urged national self-definition. Cushing Strout notes that a “dialectical antithesis” between America and Europe is constructed in the “mythologizing” process; the “legend” which casts America as “the land of the Future, where innocent men belong to a society of virtuous simplicity, enjoying liberty, equality and happiness; Europe is the bankrupt Past, where fallen men wander without hope in a dark labyrinth, degraded by tyranny, injustice and vice”, _The American Image of the Old World_ (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 19. Issues of self-definition have preoccupied several America writers; Nathanael Hawthorne (1804-64) is an early example and Henry James has already been mentioned. The pattern of describing Europe as corrupt and feudal is later transposed to America by Mark Twain (1835-1910). The east coast takes over Europe’s function, but in relation to the western states: the east represents society and connections whereas the west represents honest ruggedness and democratic values. These ideas can later be traced in fiction by Willa Cather (1873-1947) and Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940).
tual and artistic role in European cultural life as a cultural capital\textsuperscript{35} influenced the development so that Frenchness in a sense came to overlap with Europeanness; a way of stereotyping which excluded northern Europe and its peoples from the concept of Europe. Despite the fact that she traveled throughout Europe, intensely studying its art, architecture, and gardens; and especially despite knowing Italy well enough to write a book about it, Europe in Wharton’s work mainly refers to France.\textsuperscript{36}

In Wharton’s day the borders as well as the conditions of travel in Europe were rather different from those of today. Already following Napoleon’s defeat almost fifty years prior to Wharton’s birth, the Congress of Vienna in 1814-15 established the new political map of Europe, resulting in freer circulation and increased trade. Economic growth, the railway and the telegraph stimulated the emergence of tourism throughout Europe, increasing the demands on passport and visa systems. The trend in Western Europe to relax their travel restrictions continued: from 1850 onwards passport requirements in most European countries were lifted;\textsuperscript{37} a development which in-

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Walter Benjamin, the famous literary critic, called Paris “the Capital of the XIXth Century” (see his works published in German: \textit{Gesammelte Schriften}). Unter Mitwirkung von Theodor W. Adorno und Gershom Scholem hrsg. von Rolf Tiedemann und Hermann Schweppenhäuser. Bde. I-VII, Suppl. I-III (in 17 Bänden gebunden). 1. Auflage (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt am Main, 1972-1999). Similar ideas covering the time Edith Wharton lived in Paris are also put forth by Pascale Casanova, who refers to the historian Fernand Braudel’s (1902-1985) claims that “in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth, France, though lagging behind the rest of Europe economically, was the undisputed centre of Western painting and literature. . .”\textsuperscript{(11)}. In her book she tries to “restore a point of view that has been obscured by the ‘nationalization’ of literatures” of “a lost transnational dimension of literature that . . . has been reduced to the political and linguistic boundaries of nations” in \textit{The World Republic of Letters} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), xi.
\item Dieter Küster notes that Wharton’s love concerns the country [France] which she \textit{per se} regards as the embodiment of western culture [“Ihre Liebe gilt dem Land, in dem sie die Verkörperung westlicher Kultur schlechthin sieht”], \textit{Das Frankreichbild Im Werk Edith Whartons} (Bern: Herbert Lang, 1972), 224.
\item “Passet ur ett historiskt perspektiv”, \textit{Nationalencyklopedin 2008}, Nationalencyklopedins internettjänst, retrieved 30 April 2008. John Torpey notes that “passport requirements fell away throughout Western Europe, useless paper barriers to a world
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
increased the linguistic and ethnic diversity in the cities. Such larger territories of legal continuity, in a sense ‘borderless’, encourage identification based on notions more inclusive than ideas of nationality. It may be helpful to keep in mind that *Europe* and *European* partially may have denoted different meanings in Wharton’s time and milieu than they do today. The outbreak of the First World War, however, brought on renewed requirements for border surveillance, which led to the reintroduction of passport and visa regulations.

**The Matter of Europe in Wharton Criticism**

Many currents in theory and criticism mingle in the plethora of critical work and biographical materials on Wharton, as she seemingly foresees in her witty remark: “Fashions in criticism change almost as rapidly as fashions in dress”. To put my discussion of the in-betweenness produced in the cultural encounter between American and European characters in perspective, a survey of Wharton criticism will provide a basic context. In what follows I will give an account of Wharton criticism in general: a background taking its start in the shifting status her work has had, also attempting to round up the critical perspectives scholars have applied to her work. Next follow critical works dealing with Wharton’s treatment of American culture, motivated by the fact that she approaches her native country in a similar fashion and in much the same cultural terms as she does Europe. And last, follows the discussion of critical work which regards aspects of Wharton’s treatment of situations of cultural contact between Americans and Europeans.

A year after Wharton’s death Edmund Wilson notes his opinion that Wharton’s literary accomplishment had not been given the credit it

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The main complaint was that she was too aristocratic and that she was Henry James’s disciple. Early critics claimed that her upper-class background isolated her from the real world in addition to her readership. Vernon Parrington, for example, notes in 1921 that “her distinction” by her class is “her limitation” as an artist. He asks “why waste such skill upon such insignificant material?” further complaining that her writing about “rich nobodies is no less than sheer waste.” This kind of critical evaluation proved difficult to shake. Kristin Olsen traces in the reception of Wharton’s work “entrenched prejudices” which she calls the “fallacies” of the contemporary Wharton criticism.

Blake Nevius made in 1953 the first attempt to look at Wharton’s work as a whole. He explained the work against her life in terms of entrapment and imprisonment, from which she broke loose in becoming a writer. The 1960s and 70s brought a change: critics began

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39 Edmund Wilson, “Justice to Edith Wharton”, in Irving Howe, ed., Edith Wharton, A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1962), hereafter cited as Edith Wharton. Wharton herself complains in a 1904 letter to Brownell at Scribner’s about recent reviews comparing her to Henry James: “The continued cry that I am an echo of Mr. James (whose books over the last ten years I can’t read) much as I delight in the man, & the assumption that the people I write about are not ‘real’ because they are not navvies and char-women, makes me feel rather hopeless” (See R.W.B. Lewis & Nancy Lewis, eds., The Letters of Edith Wharton, New York: Collier Books, 1988, 91).


41 Parrington, 152-3.

42 As we have seen Wharton was considered a disciple of James’s, and was studied as a woman author either to her credit or to her detriment. She was regarded as “intellectual, detached, cold, pessimistic, a novelist of the French aesthetic tradition.” This was reflected in her critics being too conscious of her class; their regarding aristocratic old New York material as ‘hers’ and being less excited about the work set abroad (81). See Kristin Olsen Lauer, “Can France Survive this Defender”, in Joslin & Price eds., Wretched Exotic: Essays on Edith Wharton, 81. Lauer is also co-editor together with James Tuttleton of Edith Wharton: The Contemporary Reviews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
reading her work from a feminist perspective, her narratives were considered to convey women’s genuine experience.\textsuperscript{43}

An event that sparked interest in Wharton’s work was the opening of her sealed papers at Yale to R.W.B. Lewis. The appearance of his 1975 biography \textit{Edith Wharton} revived interest in her life and work.\textsuperscript{44} He gained access to her letters and private papers revealing unknown aspects of her marriage in addition to her extra-marital love-life. He also discovered a previously quite unknown document “the Beatrice Palmato fragment”: a pornographic text which prompted a re-evaluation of the image of Edith Wharton as a cold, puritanical and sexually ignorant person which had long circulated in critical works.

In 1977 Cynthia Griffin Wolff published \textit{A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton} which examined the writer and her work from the psychological model of Erik Erikson; how early emotional impoverishment affected her writing.\textsuperscript{45} Lev Raphael also takes a psychological approach when exploring the role of shame in Edith Wharton’s life and work, along with Gloria Erlich who draws on psychoanalytical theory.\textsuperscript{46}

Shari Benstock published the biography \textit{No Gifts From Chance: A Biography of Edith Wharton} as well as the critical study \textit{Women of the Left Bank} in which she positions Edith Wharton outside the expatriate group of female writers in Paris. She shows how Wharton chose a different life from other contemporary Americans, such as Gertrude

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{43} In her lifetime Wharton had steered clear of any political or feminist groups, including the suffragettes.
\item \textsuperscript{45} Cynthia Griffin Wolff, \textit{A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), hereafter cited as \textit{A Feast of Words}.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Lev Raphael, \textit{Edith Wharton’s Prisoners of Shame} (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), and Gloria C. Erlich, \textit{Edith Wharton’s Sexual Education} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). Erlich argues that Wharton in her work tries to gain the motherly love she was denied as a child by her biological mother; a love her nurse Doyley gave her instead, which caused a ‘division’ within the writer.
\end{itemize}
Stein, Djuna Barnes, Sylvia Beach and Natalie Barney.\(^{47}\) Susan Goodman considers in *Edith Wharton’s Inner Circle*, the author’s long-term friendships with Henry James, John Hugh Smith, Walter Berry, Galliard Lapsley, Robert Norton, Howard Sturgis, Percy Lubbock, Bernard Berenson and Paul Bourget.\(^{48}\)

There are a great number of biographical texts written about Edith Wharton over the years; already mentioned are the biographies by Benstock and R.W.B. Lewis. The latest addition to them is the 2007 biography by Hermione Lee.\(^{49}\) Some of the earlier biographical texts consist of Millicent Bell’s story of Wharton’s and James’s friendship published as early as 1965, as well as Nancy and R.W.B. Lewis’s edition of her letters.\(^{50}\) Alan Price accounts for Wharton’s extensive relief work in France during the First World War, detailing how she organized her fellow artists in trying to raise money for the war homeless to alleviate suffering among the refugees from Belgium and the northern French provinces.\(^{51}\) Mary Suzanne Schriber specifically addresses Wharton’s travel writing.\(^{52}\)

A number of critics address aspects of Edith Wharton’s oeuvre which relate to American culture and society. Ammons already in 1980


\(^{48}\) Goodman, *Edith Wharton’s Inner Circle* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994). Goodman has also written an essay by the same name (“Edith Wharton’s Inner Circle”), to which I have referred earlier (n. 28).

\(^{49}\) See n. 3.


viewed her work from a feminist and sociological perspective, discussing that Wharton’s argument with America concerned the issue of freedom for women. She traces the argument to the 1890s: it fuses sociological, economic, psychological and anthropological perspectives and reverses itself; grows conservative in the twenties and strangely comes to a rest in the early thirties. Nancy Bentley regards Wharton’s role as a cultural articulator in America. She argues that the culture consciousness expressed in the author’s work allows both for a critique and for preserving the late nineteenth-century elite class, which later serves to accommodate the social changes this class seemingly opposed. Dale M. Bauer relates Wharton’s later fiction, 1917 and onwards, to the political discourses of her age. Bauer finds that Wharton’s work “becomes increasingly critical of mass-culture and its evasion of the emotional, moral and spiritual concatenation of feelings that she referred to as the ‘inner life’ ”. The social world of


55 The texts are: *Summer*, *The Mother’s Recompense*, *Twilight Sleep*, *The Children*, *Age of Innocence* and “Roman Fever”, see Dale M. Bauer, *Edith Wharton’s Brave New Politics* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 8. Bauer finds that some of the discourses of mass culture Wharton takes part in are: discourses of reproductive politics such as birth-control/abortion, Taylorism, Fordism, the New Woman, Flappers, race, and eugenics. *Taylorism* refers to the cult of efficiency which became a social ideal (54). It fostered ideas of a controlled society. The most efficient worker would be created by controlling (regulating and rationalizing) the worker’s sexual life, in and outside the family. Briefly, *Fordism* is the corporate appropriation of private life. The *Flappers* assert a “new self-possession and authority and a violent individualism”, they show “excessive indulgence” (81). In the twenties they wore untraditional and provocative clothes, danced to jazz, used make-up, smoked and drank hard liquor in the time of prohibition: they were considered reckless and independent. A woman with authority, but without the excessiveness of the Flapper is the *New Woman*. A reaction against the Victorian cult of domesticity and politically interested, she wanted education and professional opportunities. She made her own decisions concerning marriage and reproduction. The objective of *eugenic* program was the improvement of the human race; by selective breeding hereditary traits would increase in the overall population resulting in more intelligent and healthier people. These
Edith Wharton’s time is well outlined by Maureen Montgomery who describes the social protocol, the conventions guiding the relationships between social classes and between the sexes.\footnote{Maureen E. Montgomery, \textit{Displaying Women: Spectacles of Leisure in Edith Wharton’s New York} (New York: Routledge, 1998).} In “Edith Wharton and the Issue of Race” Ammons addresses the rhetorical function of race in Wharton’s writing. She finds that in her letters Wharton agrees with the “standard, white, racist generalizations and stereotypes of her day” and that despite the Lewises’ protective editing of the letters, these still give a racist impression.\footnote{Ammons, “Edith Wharton and the Issue of Race”, in Bell ed., \textit{The Cambridge Companion to Edith Wharton}, 68.} Ammons relates to American conditions, discussing Wharton within the “multicultural U.S. literary-historical context.”\footnote{Ammons, “Edith Wharton and the Issue of Race”, 83.} Jennie Kassanoff notes how Wharton was invested in the logic of race, class and national identity. Her early fiction articulates several white, patrician anxieties of her time: that the “ill-bred, the foreign and the poor would overwhelm the native elite; that American culture would fall victim to the ‘vulgar’ taste of the masses; that the country’s oligarchy would fail to reproduce itself and thereby commit ‘race suicide’”.\footnote{Kassanoff, 3.} Kassanoff focuses pluralism along with racial questions in the American society of Wharton’s day.

Having considered texts mainly concerning the American condition, pertaining to Americans in America, I will now particularly examine a few discussions where critics make Wharton’s treatment of the cultural encounter between Americans and Europeans a main concern in their contributions. To begin with Christof Wegelin, he places Wharton within the tradition of ‘international fiction’, a “genre dramatizing ideas were supported by nativist ideas that the “lower orders” reproduced at a faster rate than the so-called “100% Americans”.}
the quest for self-definition in the confrontation with Europe.” He discusses her texts in relationship to James’s, a comparison which seems representative for Wharton criticism of the 1960s. In his overview he considers her fiction set in Europe, Madame de Treymes (1907) The Reef (1912), The Custom of the Country (1913), The Marne (1919), A Son at the Front (1923), The Age of Innocence (1920), The Glimpses of the Moon (1922), Twilight Sleep (1927), The Children (1928), The Gods Arrive (1932) (he leaves The Mother’s Recompense uncommented). But there is no mention of any short stories by name, although he states in a note that the “international theme” is limited to “a few early pieces” antedating her 1907 move to Paris. This, however, seemingly excludes any knowledge of “Les Metteurs en Scène” to which this dissertation devotes a chapter because of the centrality of intercultural issues. Wegelin argues that Wharton fled from the “ultra-modern situations” of her later novels starting with The Reef into a past with “familiar manners” as well as more distinct moral categories, in The Age of Innocence and The Buccaneers (1938), both set in the early 1870s. Quoting one of Wharton’s characters saying that there are no American manners left – just customs, that the Americans are denationalized, Wegelin holds this as Wharton’s indictment of the saga of American society, she having recorded the stages in its transformation. He continues by arguing that in the early text Madame de Treymes “French and American manners are distinguishable and operative”, and that in The Custom of the Country the relations between Undine and de Chelles are shaped by the differences between French and American manners. He concludes that in her novels depicting post-war life, manners dissolve “in a bath of promiscuous cosmopolitanism”. Wegelin’s article gives a brief over-view encompassing at least eleven of Wharton’s novels, continually compared to a number of James’s novels.

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60 Wegelin, 398-9.
61 Wegelin, 410, 412.
62 Wegelin, 417, 415.
63 Wegelin, 418.
64 Wegelin, 418.
The article’s mere twenty pages do not allow any thorough examination of all the novels, but prepare the ground for a discussion based on detail from close reading, which I propose to undertake.

Anderson traces Wharton’s ‘vulgar American’ through her fiction, concluding that “one finds that through her contrasting of the vulgar Americans with the proper ones Mrs. Wharton was quite critical of the majority”, the sympathy for her compatriots extending only to “sensitive, aristocratic women – women like Edith Wharton”.65 Anderson criticizes Wharton’s unsympathetic treatment of her compatriot women, who unlike herself, lack education or culture. Indeed, the sympathy may seem scarce in each particular instance, but her frequent return to this character shows curiosity about aspects of the ‘vulgar’ American. A cumulative reading of these seemingly flat types may reveal a more complex ‘vulgarity’ and their origin than Wharton’s descriptions of ‘vulgar’ Americans have hitherto rendered.

Dieter Küster’s *Das Frankreichbild Im Werk Edith Whartons* (1972) is a descriptive, empirical thematic overview which includes Wharton’s non-fictional material along with her fiction. The study investigates the content of the representation of France in addition to the function this representation has in her works; regards which may at first seem close to the project at hand. However, the German study conveys the idea that there are fixed American and French entities, an idea which conflicts with the notion of ongoing cultural negotiation resulting in fluid and changeable cultural products.66 (in this case identities) central to my claims. Although I have found no references to this study in critical sources written in English, its finds are quite similar, coinciding with general assessments made in English sources of Wharton’s Americans in Europe. For instance, in the conclusion Küster finds that the more mature France exerts an educational influence on Americans, and as a result Fanny’s, Miss Lambert’s and El-

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66 The meaning of the notion ‘cultural production’ is discussed on p. 39.
len’s personalities have become refined and accomplished.°7 Rather than regarding personal change as the outcome of influence exerted by a country on the individual, a central tenet of my discussion is the notion of change as prompted by complex situations of interaction where individuals, cultures and social contexts blend; moreover, that this process may be identified in Wharton’s fiction in varying degrees.

In 1985 Alan W. Bellringer claims in “Edith Wharton’s Use of France”, that much of Wharton’s perception of France and the French was based on W.C. Brownell’s 1889 study of French ideas. Brownell’s “advocacy of French ways is almost wooden in its partiality”, Bellringer notes, although “his grasp of ideas is thorough”.°8

Not until 1993 is Wharton’s treatment of Americans and French characters the main focus of an entire critical text again. Carol Wershoven attributes to Wharton the discovery of “a cultural type that survived cafe society in the twenties, became the jet setter of the sixties, joined the beautiful people of the seventies, and lived to lead the lifestyle of the rich and famous in the eighties. . . .that type, yesterday’s international glitterati, has become today’s Eurotrash.”°9 She categorises Wharton’s characters as ‘treasure’ or ‘trash’ characters, establishing what constitutes each character. But the process of change some characters go through in Europe is as yet unexplored.

Preston argues that Wharton constructs a binary cosmos of oppositions, within/without, done/not done, and accepted/outcast,

°7 Küster, Das Frankreichbild, 224. “Das reifere Frankreich übt auf Amerika einen erzieherischen Einfluß aus; es bewirkt in Madame de Malrive, Miss Lambert und Ellen Olenska eine Umformung, eine Verfeinerung und Vollendung der Persönlichkeit.”

°8 Alan W. Bellringer, “Edith Wharton’s Use of France”, Yearbook of English Studies 15 (1985). W.C. Brownell’s French Traits: An Essay in Comparative Criticism is divided into ten chapters under headings such as: ‘The Social Instinct’, ‘Morality’, ‘Manners’ and ‘New York after Paris’ (Bourget’s 1895 study of Americans which is arranged under similar headings, cf. n. 16.). Bellringer summarizes: “French morality, derived from a social instinct and taking a Catholic form, is concerned with common approval, honour, and sanity, not with heroic self-renunciation or sacrificial honesty” (113).

which in combination with Wharton’s American background provide the idea of tribe. Preston suggests that together this allows Wharton to frame principles as ‘outcasting’, ‘expatriatism’ and ‘transgression’.\(^{70}\) She formulates a principle of exclusion that she suggests pertains to females in Wharton’s world by the labeling of women according to the formula “\(x\)” = “niceness” and “not \(x\)” = “not niceness”.\(^{71}\) Subsequently, once society regards a woman as “not-x”, she becomes an outcast. Furthermore, Preston examines Whartonian expatriation as a result of the constant comparison of the new world with the old, leading to the

construction of a mythic America, a place of comedy and horror, of chaos, modernism, jazz, a place constantly producing ‘specimens’ who transport their doubtful national ethos to a quailing old world. This American mythography forced Wharton to meditate upon its difference from her adopted world, to consider the role of the stranger in the aboriginal world.\(^{72}\)

Additionally, Preston categorizes the American in Europe into a variety of types: “the coolly observant outsider, the ignorant, ‘vacant’ tourist, the buccaneer plunderer, the exile, and the assimilator – each of whom represents a distinct relationship to the Old World, a relationship comprising various elements of submission, immersion, rejection, and mastery.”\(^{73}\) Preston develops the idea by pointing out that “some expatriates go native in their adopted country; some retain their national traits; some invent a new identity that is unspecified, transatlantic”, as well as noting that the war “admitted Wharton to a citizenship which it was impossible ever to renounce.”\(^{74}\) She further suggests that Americans like Fanny are injured by Europeanization, in her case by the cruel choice between her freedom and the possession of her child. “Wharton’s Sophys, Fannys, Kates, and Ellens, all

\(^{70}\) Preston, *Social Register*, xiii.

\(^{71}\) Preston, *Social Register*, 2.

\(^{72}\) Preston, *Social Register*, 149.

\(^{73}\) Preston, *Social Register*, 149-50.

\(^{74}\) Preston, *Social Register*, 149-50.
upright and admirable Americans, are alchemically changed by cultural immersion, and are finally women without countries of their own, internal exiles in their adopted worlds, forever unfitted for American residence”. Indeed, they are characters in between cultures; they are not immediately unmistakably identifiable by any assigned typical national labels. This again leads to the question how Wharton illustrates their change, how she conceptualizes these complex characters’ process of ‘becoming’. Perhaps there are other aspects that adequately capture the situation of these Americans in Europe which extend beyond the taxonomy Preston offers? By challenging the prevailing conception of Wharton’s Americans perceived principally in terms of categories, while considering the relevancy of the idea of the encounter with new contexts as that interstitial energy which incites larger but subtle processes of change, thus in turn urging the invention of new transatlantic identities, I hope to refine the discussion regarding the writer’s treatment of Americans in Europe. Moving away from previous definitions where Wharton’s Americans emerge as types, fixed and stagnant, I here approach the idea of her portrayals of Americans as characterized by their transience, their in-betweenness, and by the ongoing negotiation of their subject positions in relation to dimensions of class, money and power in various combinations. An important role in the narratives dealing with the cultural encounter is that of the mediator. The cultural encounter in its more specific sense has not yet been made its own topic of investigation. The encounter between Durham and Madame de Treymes exemplifies such an encounter, the nuances of which I hope to demonstrate in a discussion aided by terms borrowed from post-colonial theory.

The Cultural Encounter and Wharton’s Hyperfabula

Integrating the expectations of society with individual desires to find happiness is a prevailing theme in Wharton’s writing. The adversity individuals come across when trying to make love thrive in the conventional social environment of Wharton’s Old New York also be-

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75 Preston, *Social Register*, 174.
comes important in the European-American cultural encounter: to combine a marriage endorsed by society with love is as problematic in New York as it is to Wharton’s Americans in Europe.76

Wharton’s preoccupation with the cultural subject matter can be traced throughout her works in cultural encounters in relation to each other. These works can be perceived as a long running greater narrative or a ‘hyperfabula’, each individual text serving as a version of a basic pattern or a ‘collective’ story-line. Her many takes on the subject matter result in numerous separate but related plots, which all individually range in duration as well as scope, but a number of basic elements with some variation circulate between them.77 When these recurring and variously contextualized components of the plots (disregarding temporal distortions on plot-level) are organized in chronological order they together make up a kind of narrative system: an abstracted idea of a greater narrative or hyperfabula, unified by its thematics.78 In this synthesis of plots the components appear in a

76 The general, more superior theme, the problem of uniting social demands with individual ones, often takes the form of love vs. social demands. It is the main form in the fiction part of this study. Nevertheless, it is thematically relevant in The Touchstone (1900) where art is added to love as an individual need which is also in conflict with conventional demands. This of course reflects the fact that Mrs. Aubyn is an artist, which makes her different from the women in the fiction included in this study. I have earlier touched on the ambiguity relating to Wharton’s social roles that suggests a similar situation of uniting conflicting conventional demands with her art and her gender. See also p. 11.

77 When discussing the hyperfabula I have chosen to understand plot in its ordinary meaning as ‘that which we are told’. This coincides with Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s term the text or Gérard Genette’s récit; which refer to the events ordered artistically in a text and which may contain certain distortions. Story is used as in Rimmon-Kenan and Genette, where it refers to the narrated events reconstructed in their chronological order: Rimmon-Kenan – story and Genette – histoire (see Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, Narrative Fiction, London and New York: Routledge, 2002, 3). When the distinction between plot and story no longer fills a function in relation to the hyperfabula, I will revert to the general use of plot and story, as exchangeable terms.

78 The model may bring to mind Vladimir Propp’s work on narrative structure in the Russian folktale; however the idea of a collective story-line is much less formalized and merely a help to recognize thematic unity in Wharton’s work.
certain chronological order.\textsuperscript{79} The story of the greater narrative or the hyperfabula ranges from youth to early middle-age. The \textit{social scene in America} and the \textit{departure to Europe} followed by the adjustments to the \textit{social scene in Europe} provide a background to \textit{courtship} and \textit{marriage to a European}. This is usually followed by \textit{unhappiness} and \textit{separation} (divorce or death). Additional events concluding this collective story-line are \textit{courtship by an American lover}, \textit{return to America} comprising a full circle journey, and the \textit{return to Europe}. \textit{Love} appears as requited or unrequited, made attainable or not by the rules of propriety.\textsuperscript{80}

However, just a plot element will not by itself automatically be regarded as part of the hyperfabula. The number of elements present in a plot depends on the plot’s scope, but the \textit{elements in combination with thematic aspects of the cultural encounter} maintain and secure a meaningful relationship between the plot element and the hyperfabula.

The plots included in this study depict European-American contacts as a significant dimension of each plot, where they appear as \textit{cultural negotiations, comparisons} or, minimally, \textit{descriptions} of Americans or Europeans. The challenges the American characters meet range from conforming to French family life to selecting for themselves an existence in the American expatriate society; in each case the degree of involvement may vary.

We also find a specific character function which recurs in several of the plots: the mediator, a kind of cultural gatekeeper. He or she moves freely in both cultures. Well-informed about both cultural codes the mediator is in control of information, arranging introductions for American ‘clients’ to promote them socially. Wherever there is a mediator there are cultures to bridge: so this kind of gatekeeper is specific to the cultural thematics.

\textsuperscript{79} In a plot, however, the sequence of how the elements are organized may or may not be a result of perspectival or temporal distortions. Variations in time and perspective become deliberate narrative strategies to achieve a certain artistic representation which aims to highlight different aspects of the story; thus the sequence of the elements in the plot and greater narrative will sometimes diverge from each other.

\textsuperscript{80} As a mere practical measure to make possible a comparison of the plots of the narratives a model is included in the appendix, cf. figure 2, p 289.
The setting of the cultural encounter is usually Europe; sometimes, however, it takes place on American soil, involving a European, or a Europeanized American, and an American. The plot component “the journey to Europe” is not required for the encounter to come to pass: in fact in this case the narrative draws on the tension of the encounter as an event prior to the story-present.

Viewing Wharton’s work as a collective story-line enables us to consider her preoccupation with the cultural encounter as a whole and highlight its different facets, despite the fact that in her many works significance varies. The model helps to show the thematic continuity of material which at the same time considers so many other questions, sometimes allowing the European-American issue to retreat into the background.

Having considered the various components of the encounter, its agents, its locality and the significance of the presence of Europe in relation to it as well as having fitted this into the notion of a greater narrative or hyperfabula, I will briefly present the texts to be discussed in this thesis. The time-scheme of the different texts reveals that Wharton has been mainly preoccupied with describing aspects of cultural encounters before 1920, even if she wrote the stories at a later date.

Figure 1: This image shows the duration of the respective narratives as well as their setting in time. In some fiction this is specifically stated, if not, I rely on critics’ estimations, and when no indications of time the year of publication will be used.
Wharton’s earliest work, *Fast and Loose*, her surviving juvenilia written in 1876, is set in Europe, its plot extending over approximately six years. Wharton wrote it in her teens, at a time when she had lived in America for a total of eight years, having returned there approximately five years before. At this time, she still chooses to set her novella in England and to people it only with Europeans. Setting the narrative in a part of the world she has not visited for five years suggests a particular interest in Europe: five years can be considered a relatively long period of time in a child’s life. The novella’s duration is approximately six years.

The short story “The Last Asset” (1904) takes place in France and portrays a blend of nationalities, including American expatriates. We find many instances of comparisons and comments on the European-American encounter, although the relationship and marriage between the young couple is not foregrounded. “Les Metteurs en Scène” (1908), another short story, also has a plot where the focus on the cultural encounter prevails throughout the story. This narrative extends over a few months’ time at the most, exploring the time period after the Americans have recently arrived in Europe, where they explore the economics of the marriage market.

The closest encounters in Edith Wharton’s work are the kind where characters change when exposed to another culture. *Madame de Treymes* (1907) considers gained cultural perceptivity as well as new perspectives for several of its characters. The duration of this narrative spans from spring to fall. Another work with a firm hold on the thematics of interculturality is *The Age of Innocence* (1920), where cultural negotiation co-exists with a number of other strong parallel themes. Despite its setting in New York with few European characters, the cultural encounter peaks in a conflict between European and American value systems. The way time is handled is more complicated in this novel: written in 1920, it is set in the 1870s, covering approximately two years, while the last chapter transports us almost thirty years ahead in time, the concluding conversation between father and son making some of the differences between the ‘old’ and the ‘new ways’ explicit. *The Buccaneers* (1938) also belongs to the group of plots where the outcome of the cultural encounter results in un-
derstanding. Written in the last years of Wharton’s life, published posthumously in 1938, the unfinished novel is set in the 1870s, extending roughly six years.

_The Reef_ (1912) is set in France and is consequently often regarded as one of Wharton’s European novels. Since all characters are Americans whose main concern is a troubled love story involving three of them, the plot never really engages with the cultural considerations of the encounter. Therefore, the novel is not of central importance in this dissertation, although I will discuss it briefly in the postscript. The action takes place in 1902 or 1903.\(^81\)

The plot of _The Custom of the Country_ (1913) investigates Wharton’s question of what may happen to an American exposed to European civilization. The main character’s response to such contact may be thought ‘inadequate’ as she demonstrates a different result of the cultural encounter than other American in Europe do. The narrative covers approximately eight years, of which a few depict the main character’s life in France while married to a French aristocrat.\(^82\)

_The Glimpses of the Moon_ (1922) is set in many places in Europe, its characters consist of different kinds of Americans as well as an Englishman. The plot contains elements a cultural encounter: it hinges on a moral connected to nationality. Begun already in 1916, the novel was not published until 1922. There are no references to the war, so the novel has been dated as set before the outbreak of the war.\(^83\) It

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\(^81\) Stephen Orgel, “Introduction”, in Edith Wharton, _The Reef_ (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), viii. Orgel dates _The Reef_ by the fact that the novel mentions the popular play _Le Vertige_ which opened during the 1901 season in Paris and was performed until 1903.

\(^82\) Neither the text nor critics supply any information about in which year the novel might be set, so in figure 1 I have marked it as contemporary with its time of writing.

\(^83\) The novel is dated as pre-war by Adeline Tintner. She notes that a Tiepolo ceiling fresco in the church of Scalzi was destroyed by an Austrian bomb in 1915. This painting is viewed by the characters Coral and Nick before the outbreak of the war in 1914. See Tintner, _Edith Wharton in Context: Essays on Intertextuality_ (Tuscaloosa and London: Alabama University Press, 1999), 170ff, hereafter cited as _Edith Wharton in Context_.

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spans a relatively short period of time, somewhere between six months to a year at the most.

_The Mother’s Recompense_ (1925) is set after the war in France and New York, covering about one year. It lacks European characters, but the members of the American community provide information about each other and the role Europe has in the lives of the expatriate Americans. Its structural similarity to _The Age of Innocence_ where a Europeanized character returns to New York contributes to the novel’s intercultural relevancy.

The main texts which will be investigated in this study are in chronological order the six works: _Fast and Loose_, “The Last Asset”, _Madame de Treymes_, “Les Metteurs en Scène”, _The Custom of the Country_ and _The Age of Innocence_. Europe is prevalent in many of Wharton’s texts, but is in those cases not the setting for a narrative where Euro-American identities are negotiated as in the texts subject for this study. Still, the three novels: _The Reef_, _The Glimpses of the Moon_, _The Mother’s Recompense_, each articulate ideas relevant to the theme investigated here. They are set in Europe, although no European characters are part of the narratives, but yet indirectly they concern my discussion. _The Buccaneers_ however, involves European characters, and is set in Europe, and will also briefly be regarded together with the three mentioned novels in the potscript.

**Terms, Theories, Perspectives**

**Aborigines and Their Others**

A discussion of the cultural dimension of the encounters occurring in Edith Wharton’s novels and stories might profitably begin with a consideration of Wharton’s own habit of considering such events in anthropological terms. Her anthropological interest takes two expressions: the one documenting class differences in America, and the other, that she articulates differences between Europeans and Americans in the cultural encounter, much earlier in her career. However, critics have mainly emphasized her interest in anthropology and her mission as a cultural explicator in relation to her work depicting the
American class-war between groups from different social origins, where she often refers to the relationship between the cultured, leisured upper class and the *nouveaux riches* in anthropological terms. *The Age of Innocence* is the novel most responsible for earning her a reputation as an anthropologically concerned author. Here her anthropological conviction is strong and the expression clear, in perfect arrangement, but this perspective may in fact also be found in an earlier work, *Madame de Treymes*.

Wharton’s systematic use of terms invoking anthropology in *The Age of Innocence* rarely goes unmentioned by critics who also discuss the same practice in *The Custom of the Country*, finding that the terms’ function is estranging in both novels. But as yet, no critic has noted that Wharton as early as 1907 introduced such a term in *Madame de Treymes*, the first instance of the use of *aborigine*. This is before the theme of the cultural encounter receded into the background of the social battle depicting the class mobility which we meet in *The Custom of the Country* and *The Age of Innocence*. Thus, Wharton apparently *first tried* using anthropological terms to describe the European-American cultural situation, these terms later finding their way into another and entirely American cultural context. The ‘anthropologizing’ technique for documenting the European-American encounter occurred rarely; perhaps Wharton found it better suited to show cultural difference between American groups, where the prevalence of anthropological terms is striking.

Since these terms appear in several of Wharton’s works they are of general importance; and since I consider how their meaning shifts between her texts it is necessary to maintain a continuous discussion. Therefore, for the duration of this topic I will anticipate my otherwise chronological presentation and analysis of each relevant text in consecutive chapters.

The first term up for discussion which signifies her American characters is *aborigine*. This word appears in *Madame de Treymes* and *The Custom of the Country*. In *Madame de Treymes* the terms *aborigine*, *clan* and *civilized* refer to the novel’s American and French characters: *aborigine* is used about the Americans, whereas *clan* and *civilized [people]* signify
the French characters. When Durham first meets Madame de Treymes, narration positions her as “a civilized spectator” against the Americans described as “aborigines”.

In the episode where aborigine is introduced the focalization is external to the story and closes in on Madame de Treymes, capturing in part her perspective of distance: her wonder, as she watches the Americans as though they were an “encampment of aborigines” (18). It is clear that this episode is a narrative passage, and that the term is used in a mixed point of focalization between the external anonymous narrator and internal focalizer, Durham. It is the complex, mixed narrative situation with the two inseparable perspectives which gives rise to the use of aborigine. The narrator interprets Madame de Treymes’ wonder as contempt. The narrator and Durham describe how Madame de Treymes observes the Americans with the “unblinking attention of a civilized spectator of an encampment of aborigines”. This passage reveals a partially reflexive element suggesting an interpretation of the situation, which expresses American


85 I will follow Genette’s accepted use of ‘focalization’ with the distinction between speaking and seeing; narration and focalization in the texts. See Gérard Genette, Narrative Discourse (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980). Focalization can be divided between the focalizer: the point from which the observations are made, and the focalized: the object of focalization. When it comes to levels of narration or focalization I find Mieke Bal’s positioning of the agent externally or / and internally to the story useful. Internal focalization locates focalization with an agent in the story: character-bound focalization. External focalization is when an anonymous non-character-bound agent situated outside the story functions as focalizer. This makes it possible to describe how focalization can shift between points of focalization even if the narrator remains constant: focalization can move between poles of focalization in a sentence, resulting in degrees of mixed focalization. See Mieke Bal, Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, [1997] 2004), chapter 7. For an overview see Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s chapter on narration: speech and representation in Narrative Fiction.

86 Wharton, Madame de Treymes, 18.
concerns of inadequacy; of appearing less civilized than the French Madame de Treymes.

As used in Wharton’s works, aborigine in contrast to civilized carries primitive as well as negative connotations. Layers of colonial history are invoked and made relevant when bringing into play the colonial positioning inherent in the Euro-American situation. The term aborigine refers to the Americans who once were the European invading settlers in America, and who clearly cannot qualify for the term in any sense of its use in the meaning of an indigenous people. The location of the encounter is Paris, where logically aborigine or indigenous people would refer to the French: the American ‘natives’ strangely meet the civilized in the centre of the empire – not in the periphery where French colonizers would meet their colonial others. Reversals and inversions destabilize the roles between the civilized and the aborigines.

Thirteen years later in The Custom of the Country, aborigine no longer has the same negative connotations, now referring more specifically to New Yorkers in contrast to the invaders (uneducated rich Americans from the territory). The connotations to aborigine are reversed and in this case become positive, more in line with what civilized [the French] signified in Madame de Treymes. Aborigine can thus be seen to have rather opposite meanings in the two novels. It is used in opposition to the invaders, who come across as the least cultivated group of all Wharton’s communities of people. In this context aborigine comes to signify the “vanishing denizens of the American continent doomed to rapid extinction with the advance of the invading race”.87 This is of course Ralph’s Old New York perspective; there is no doubt that aborigine in this context is positively charged with implications of civilization.88 It refers to Wharton’s aristocratic New Yorkers, part of the four hundred families.

88 Ralph Marvell of The Custom of the Country.
In *The Age of Innocence* the same contrast as in *The Custom of the Country* remains between Old New Yorkers and *invaders*, although *aborigine* does not appear. *Clan* and *tribe* in addition to a number of other terms invoking the primitive are used in connection to the Old New Yorkers, which will be discussed in chapter five. In short, *aborigine* first occurs in *Madame de Treymes*, where only national distinctions are made. Here it signifies Americans and is contrasted by *clan* and the *civilized*, both referring to the French. In *The Custom of the Country* Wharton distinguishes between two kinds of Americans; the Old New Yorkers are referred to by *aborigine* whereas the uneducated rich are referred to by the term *invaders*. In *The Age of Innocence* the distinction between Americans remains, but without the use of *aborigine*. Tracing how the term *clan* refers to both the Americans and the French we find that in *Madame de Treymes* it refers to the French, but in *The Custom of the Country* it is expanded to signify all three categories: Old New York families (the Marvells), the invaders (the Van Degens by Undine) as well as the French aristocracy (the de Chelles). In *The Age of Innocence*, however, *clan* refers only to the Americans (Old New Yorkers).

Jennie Kassanoff proposes that Wharton refers to American aboriginal identity as an original American identity which opposes an American identity stemming from colonialism. She relates this to how Wharton saw America as a world without traditions and stability. She considers Wharton’s writings on issues of origin as part of an ongoing American discussion as a way of dealing with anxiety concerning the “moral ambiguity and racial pluralism of American origins”. The background to American diversity she puts down to the legacy of the civil war, but America’s “accommodating welcoming of immigrants, workers, feminists and newly minted millionaires … put an end to Yankee rule”. The “‘egalitarian vision of citizenship’” was gone and “race became the essentialist axis orienting the patriarchate’s nostalgia for civic cohesion, social exclusivity and oligarchic perma-

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89 Kassanoff, 10-11.

90 Kassanoff, 10-11.
The idea of American heritage offers an alternative sense of continuity, and ‘Indian Play’ as a Euro-American tradition of racial impersonation going back to the Boston Tea Party spanning until the early twentieth century is a way of “claiming a fixed, non-European, and thus geographically specific national identity”.92 “If aboriginal American identity stood in self-conscious opposition to the derivative legacy of European colonialism, playing Indian itself enacted a form of racial cross-dressing that dramatized America’s anxious relationship to its own internal others.”93

Wharton’s use of *aborigine* in *The Custom of the Country*, where the term denotes the Old New Yorkers in New York, fits into the pattern Kassanoff discusses: the identity is constructed as ‘originally’ American, as opposed to deriving from European emigrant forefathers. But applying *aborigines* to the Americans visiting in France is confusing, because in relation to an older European culture, and on French soil, the word *aborigine* should refer to the native French population, but it clearly refers to the Americans. In these two contexts the term has opposite meanings: in the French context (*Madame de Treymes*) it functions as *uncivilized*, and in the American context (*The Custom of the Country*) it functions as *civilized*. Only this once Wharton uses *aborigine* in a European setting (*Madame de Treymes*); perhaps so because the metaphor loses its force when the fiction is not set in America.

Possibly for this reason, Wharton’s first attempt at using anthropological terms for the purpose of describing aspects of the relationship between America and Europe amounted to merely one instance in *Madame de Treymes*; nonetheless, it indeed proved to be a productive concept when analyzing American culture in her later works.

Instead, Wharton’s more productive approach depicting European-American differences shares some basic preoccupations with contemporary theorists who center on the characters’ in-

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91 Kassanoff, 10-11. The “egalitarian vision of citizenship” are the words of Eric Foner, whom Kassanoff quotes.

92 Kassanoff, 19.

93 Kassanoff, 20.
betweenness, hybridity, and sense of otherness. Her characters are frequently suspended in-between cultures, for example as expressed by Fanny de Malrive in terms of ‘belonging’ to her French family and their being ‘part’ of her. Wharton’s portrayal of their claiming Fanny, her sense of being claimed by them, as opposed to Fanny’s sense of security in familiar American contexts, captures the complexity of double cultural loyalties as part of the European experience. Her plots depicting the American in Europe propose versions of the American whose many coping-strategies result in various cultural production when engaging with France and the French.

Turning to contemporary cultural theory, letting its similarities with Wharton’s cultural preoccupations inspire a reading of her texts, we find that certain hybrid products (e.g. assimilators, or characters defined in terms of ‘part of something’) emerge in correspondence with her time’s essentialist ideals. While earlier criticism, which has considered the European-American encounter, has in some way addressed the end product of the cultural encounter, cultural criticism is able to access the very process of cultural production (change), where a multitude of results seem possible, not necessarily static, ‘finished’ or permanent; but rather fluid, impermanent and discontinuous. This approach relates well to my notion of how Wharton’s hyperfabula or long-term collective story-line retains general thematic continuity in an otherwise thematically diverse material, while at the same time allowing us to see how change is depicted in detail in every plot. While the narrative read as a collective story-line makes it possible to relate the change in the plots to the greater whole, the greater narrative or the hyperfabula in some sense accounts for how the author envisioned and portrayed change on a larger scale.

**Homi Bhabha and Cultural Theory**

Two theorists have proved especially useful, cultural theorist Homi Bhabha and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Bhabha’s perspective helps

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95 The notion cultural production is discussed on p. 39.
to give insight into how cultural encounters materialize; his theories are usually incorporated under the rather inclusive heading ‘post-colonial criticism’ which takes into account how the specific conditions of the colonial situation are expressed in literature. Even if the extreme situation of the colonial condition gave rise to post-colonial theory, the terms it has yielded may be useful outside of the traditional post-colonial situation. Although some of his key-terms fit my texts, I am also well aware that there are differences between the situation Wharton depicts and the colonial situation Bhabha’s theory originally describes. Power needs to be defined differently in the two contexts.

When asked in interviews whether he thinks his theories can be generalized, Bhabha replies that while he “was trying to work out a theory of the resistance to authority, and the subversion of hegemony, on certain colonial grounds”, he was “also addressing problems relating to other moments and locations of authority.”96 He was later asked whether his specific idea of an interstice “only applies to people coming from so-called ‘third-world countries’ and (now) living in the western metropolis” or if it can be “generalized so that it applies to practically all cultures?” In his answer Bhabha places his concern with this particular interstitiality in his “interest in the colonial text and context, but it addresses a more general question of how to address the problem of authority in situations where inequality and cultural difference are the foci of social hierarchy and hegemony.”97 While opening up his theory to other literary contexts, he sets the conditions for whether his theory is applicable or not to the presence of asymmetrical power relations and cultural difference in the specific situation.


The encounter depicted in Wharton’s work compares to the criteria Bhabha poses: the intercultural differences are found in the situation, but the moment in time and location of authority are the major difference. All of Wharton’s characters are in the intercultural situation because of their free will, whereas in the colonial situation, it is imposed on them.

When comparing the two situations we find that post-colonial criticism describes a colonial situation where power is exercised by a small group which comes into a country and dominates a larger group in a geographical ‘periphery’ as opposed to Europe as ‘centre’. The dominant group upholds an imposed order by military means, controlling the larger but politically weaker group. Power is asymmetrically structured as political and military authority, creating hierarchies between the colonizers and their cultural others that are based on possession of the tools for power. I will shortly return to the discussion comparing the colonial situation of authority with the situation Wharton depicts in connection with relating a few of Bourdieu’s con-

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98 In Wharton’s writings, these original power aspects of colonization are in the historical distance, which is why her work obviously depicts no colonial situation, but from it the Americans carry cultural fragments which are put into play on a symbolic level, resulting in ambiguous power relations between the French and Americans. Americans coming to Europe in a sense describe a reversed colonial process where the people of the periphery return to the centre, and the locus of the encounter is Paris instead of the periphery. The former colonizer (who left Europe to colonize the American continent) also becomes the colonized native, and returning to the historic locale and European origins, in a way meeting the society and the descendants that once caused their ancestors to leave Europe, they complete the journey, thus closing the circle. American upward class-mobility has resulted in Americans and French meeting on more equal terms; it is now possible to marry into the old European families and the cultural system which they as Americans once had rejected politically, by not having the European class-system. This expresses ambivalence toward European as well as American culture and institutions, but in returning to Europe, in some sense the Americans ‘reclaim’ European culture. There is an ambiguity in the categories ‘colonizer’ and ‘colonized’, making the roles instable, as are the power relations. The patterns of assigned superiority and inferiority do not follow the patterns of colonization, where the colonized ‘other’ is looked down on by the colonizer; here the Americans (‘colonizers’) experience a sense of inferiority to the French or Europeanized Americans in all texts.
cepts to this study. But despite the differences in the situations, the conditions of cultural encounters in combination with the unbalanced power situation give rise to related processes in both contexts which are worth studying more closely.

Translation, Difference, Incommensurability

In order to describe some of the processes involved in the cultural encounters in Edith Wharton’s work, a number of interrelated concepts developed by Bhabha, which investigate cultural translation in the colonial situation, help explicate the processes involved in the French-American situation. Next, I will provide an account of Bhabha’s ideas of how culture is enunciated in interplay with certain power relations; how a few key notions capture cultural production of meaning.99 This useful term appears throughout his writings; although not defined, I understand ‘cultural production’ in this sense to be an ongoing process of instances of ‘difference’ in comparison with something fixed. Ample examples are found in Wharton’s collection of characters where several are described as deviating from or conforming to expectations or norms which exist in different groups. The ‘difference’ destabilizes their meaning as a ‘cultural sign’, creating ambivalence and difficulties of interpretation. Such small changes in individuals, practices or values and beliefs can be understood as new cultural products.

Bhabha introduces the idea of cultural translation by describing his theory of culture as analogous to a theory of language, as “part of a process of translations” but not in “a strict linguistic sense as in ‘a book translated from French into English’, but as a motif or trope”.100 This compares to how translation of language is sometimes

99 Needless to say, this is to be kept apart from Bourdieu’s use of ‘cultural production’ which describes the field of culture where art, literature and esthetics are produced.

100 Jonathan Rutherford, “The Third Space: Interview with Homi K. Bhabha”, in Jonathan Rutherford ed., Identity: Community, Culture, Difference (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 210. The idea that cultural encounters could be understood in terms of work of translation became current in anthropology in the mid-twentieth century; the notion of cultural translation was introduced by Edward Evans-Pritchard. See
problematic when exact and corresponding meanings to ideas, beliefs and practices in one culture cannot necessarily be translated into another cultural framework. Bhabha explains the process: “Different cultures, the difference between cultural practices, the difference in the construction of cultures within different groups, very often set up among and between themselves an *incommensurability*.”¹⁰¹ Incompatible paradigmatic cultural systems and their respective classifications might produce unbridgeable cultural difference; lacking shared values on which the difference may be resolved generates unsolvable conflict across cultural difference. This unsolvability or *incommensurability* captures that which cannot be translated into another cultural system.

The ‘translation’, the new cultural product, is the result of a cultural situation which Bhabha explains in terms of a process. It is continually changing and never “finished”, thus placing the performative aspects of the encounter in the center. He suggests that “terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively” in a similar fashion to how identity is constructed.¹⁰² In suggesting the “negotiated iterability of identity, its constant repetition, revision, relocation, so that no repetition is the same as the preceding one”, he sees cultural production as occurring in a series of little steps.¹⁰³ This iterative model excludes any ideas of set “originary or initial subjectivities” which then become insignificant, because when regarding the “articulation of cultural differences”¹⁰⁴ as an iterat-

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¹⁰¹ Bhabha, “The Third Space”, 209.


tive process, the focus shifts from the ‘being’ to an ongoing process of ‘becoming’.

The Space In-Between

The aspects discussed above of how power is constructed differently in the colonial situation and in Wharton’s works entail that resistance also differs in the two contexts. The colonial situation where power is structured in a military form would motivate the colonial subject to find more conscious strategies of resistance to ensure survival: to oblige external domination would be to stay out of trouble, whereas in the situation described in Wharton’s works the motivation behind the encounter is different. The Americans choose to come to Europe; the element of free will together with the absence of military authority motivate less conscious strategies of how to relate to their cultural other. In Wharton’s texts, the actors meet on grounds more politically equal since the invaders are a new class with economic power, but the context they enter into in Europe defines power as culture and the Franco-European cultural code is regarded as a sign of prestige by both actors. Adaptation to another culture involves elements of conscious resistance and other more unconscious reactions to authority such as lack of knowledge, lack of capability or lack of understanding of the situation. The more conscious acts of resistance can be active or passive, which would make conscious passive strategies in the colonial situation a safer way to express resistance than active.

Articulations of cultural difference in such a situation of authority open up “in-between spaces [which] provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation in the act of defining the idea of society itself.”105 The third

space or the in-between is the productive space where culture is constructed as difference; it is the locus for negotiating the exchange of “values, meanings, and priorities” that “may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual and even incommensurable.” The space in-between is the locus of cultural production, generated performatively as repetition with a difference. Bhabha explains in an interview the interstitial perspective, which is not governed by any “recognizable traditions” from where we came; it is a space that is sceptical of cultural totalization, of notions of identity which depend for their authority on being ‘originary’, or concepts of culture which depend for their value on being pure, or of tradition, which depends for its effectivity on being continuous.

It is important to note that this process resists cultural universalist and essentialist ideas by subverting essentialist notions of cultural wholeness; the main focus is not on ‘the being’, but on ‘the becoming’. In-betweenness is a central notion when considering the cultural encounter between Europe and America as well as the most productive term most frequently used in this thesis. However, a few additional terms denoting similar conditions situations will be used: liminality and interstitiality will occur a few times; they will be discussed and defined in the context in which they occur.

Having located cultural production as ‘difference’ to the space in-between, Bhabha accounts for cultural change by means of three notions: hybridization, mimicry, and otherness, to which we will now turn.

Hybridity and Mimicry
Hybridization is the fusion of cultural forms involving inequality of power. Cultural hybridity as a social articulation of difference emerges in situations of historical transformation, negotiating the dominant

107 Thompson, “Between Identities: Interview with Homi Bhabha”, 190.
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power.  

Hybridization not only expresses the productivity of colonial power but marks the possibility of counter-colonial resistance. Hybridity describes how cultural power or authority is constructed “within conditions of political antagonism or inequity”.

At the point at which the precept attempts to objectify itself as a generalised knowledge or a normalising hegemonic practice, the hybrid strategy or discourse opens up a space of negotiation where power is unequal but its articulation may be equivocal.

Bhabha considers this negotiation as neither assimilation nor collaboration. Instead it makes possible the “emergence of an ‘interstitial’ agency that refuses the binary representation of social antagonism. Hybrid agencies find their voice in a dialectic that does not seek cultural supremacy or sovereignty.”

**Mimicry** is a hybrid strategy of rejection of authority. The subject ostensibly adopts the forced cultural expression of a dominant authority, but by covertly rejecting it, mimicry reveals a subversive potential. But it is not a matter of hiding, but to fit in: “colonial mimicry is [a] desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite.” Mimicry becomes a compromise between sameness as a translated and desired comprehensible version of the colonizer; a sign of the success of the civilizing mission; and difference which destabilizes the normalization

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110 Bhabha, “Culture’s in Between”, 34.

111 Bhabha, “Culture’s in Between”, 34. He argues that colonial discourse is hybrid in its nature and that it “displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination”, and explains that it “unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power” in “Signs Taken for Wonders” (1992) in *The Location of Culture*, 159-60.


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process. Mimicry is an ambivalent cultural articulation; on the one hand, a subordinating gesture, and, on the other, one of resistance which disturbs and disrupts the authority of the dominant culture. In an undecided area between mimicry and mockery this ambivalence produces excess, which transforms into an uncertainty which “fixes” the subject as a “‘partial’” presence which is both “‘incomplete’ and ‘virtual.’”113 In defining subjects as ‘less than whole’, and if ‘whole’ is defined by the colonizer and is the measure of the colonizing identity, then ‘less than whole’ offers a logic for dominance, evoking colonial tenets of white supremacy, subjugation and violence.

Social processes driven by power are at work in seemingly very different contexts. Conceptualizing multicultural subjects in situations of cultural difference in ‘parts of a whole’ is something we encounter in Wharton’s fiction as well: even though power never takes the form of physical violence, nevertheless there is violence, but on a symbolic level.114 Since power in Wharton’s fiction is structured as culture and not as military violence, the motivation behind the mimic behavior is to gain social prestige, not as in the colonial situation motivated by fear or resistance to authority. The concept is productive in a few cases so this is why it will not appear in more than a few chapters.

‘Otherness’

Otherness is a notion which underlies any comparison between cultures or groups of people. Wharton’s cultural and national comparisons would be impossible to make without her construction which presupposes two poles or positions: the self and the other; the American position and its opposite French position.

113 Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man”, 122-3. The “figure of mimicry....problematizes the signs of racial and cultural priority”, that between mimesis and mimicry a writing emerges, “a mode of representation, that marginalizes the monumentality of history, quite simply mocks its power to be a mode, that power that supposedly makes it imitable”(125).

114 I refer to Bourdieu’s notion of euphemized violence, to which I will shortly return. Symbolic power will be discussed in one case, in The Age of Innocence.
The concept of the ‘other’ is described as the “missing but significant opposite to a sign, person or collective identity”, based on ideas that an entity is partly made up of the other.\textsuperscript{115} Characterizing a group or an individual as ‘other’ is placing them outside the normality system of one’s own in a process of exclusion. Such exclusion by categorization is often central to ideological mechanisms. Mark Currie notes that the concept has three characteristics: firstly its sense of quasi-oppositionality, secondly its sense of implicit inferiority or secondaryness, and thirdly its sense of unknowability or ineffability.\textsuperscript{116}

Bhabha sees otherness as the object of colonial discourse; the stereotype as its major discursive strategy, a strategy of “discriminatory power.”\textsuperscript{117} He notes:

\begin{quote}
. . .the concept of ‘fixity’ is the ideological construction of otherness. Fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy, and daemonic repetition. Likewise the stereotype, which is its major discursive strategy, is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is already ‘in place’, already known and something which must be anxiously repeated. . .\textsuperscript{118}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{115} Mark Currie, \textit{Difference} (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 133-134.
\textsuperscript{116} Currie, \textit{Difference}, 95. He derives ‘alterity’ and ‘other’ from structuralism, psychoanalysis and from the work of Emmanuel Levinas. \textit{Other} when granted the capital letter relates to Lacan’s theory of the way the subject defines itself in “seeking confirmation in response to the Other”; see Raman Selden, Peter Widdowson & Peter Brooker, \textit{A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory} (London: Prentice Hall, 1997), 165. A related term, which I will not be using but nevertheless mention in this context, is alterity. This concept often refers to a kind of other-worldliness, to an ungraspable or ineffable quality of the other, especially where “racial otherness is often understood as incomprehensibility and hence unrepresentability of the native by a western coloniser, tourist or writer.” See Currie, \textit{Difference}, 94-5.

\textsuperscript{117} Bhabha, “The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism” (1992) in \textit{The Location of Culture}, 95, hereafter cited as “The Other Question”.

\textsuperscript{118} Bhabha, “The Other Question”, 94-5.
He acknowledges this ambivalent aspect of the stereotype as central describing ‘otherness’ as “at once an object of desire and derision, an articulation of difference contained within the fantasy of origin and identity” as a result of “the productive ambivalence of the object of colonial discourse”.

A general but central premise for my discussion regarding in-betweenness is that throughout Wharton’s European-American work cultural comparison presupposes a background of the familiar. It is against this norm that the strange, cultural ‘other’ emerges. In processes of othering the perceived ‘other’ is portrayed in varying and often, although not exclusively, denigrating terms, which serve to affirm the positive identity of that which is the ‘self’.

**Pierre Bourdieu and the Concept of Symbolic Power**

Returning to how power in Wharton’s world is located differently in comparison to the aforementioned colonial situation where authority is political as well as military, a few of Bourdieu’s concepts will help explicate how power is structured as cultural, economic and social capital in Wharton’s world. His notion of symbolic power concerns capital as accumulated labor in “diverse forms . . . which are not reducible to economic capital”. By putting economic terms to metaphorical use, he distinguishes between material wealth and the cultural assets of a particular class.

Positions and prestige are negotiated within Wharton’s European-American society based on the trade of symbolic and economic capital. Cultural tools help achieve a social position; to possess certain cultural behavior in a specific social context is to have power, which is reproduced within the group as well as between the generations. Capital is asymmetrically distributed between the Americans and the Europeans; consequently, there are continuous negotiations between them since both groups desire what they do not have. The economic

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119 Bhabha, “The Other Question”, 95-6.

capital is located with the Americans, the cultural capital with the French aristocracy or with those who know how to practice the codes of French refinement. Social capital in France is, as can be expected, situated with the French characters.

Bourdieu divides cultural capital into three forms: its embodied state, objectified state and its institutionalized state. The embodied state (cultivation, Bildung) presupposes an acquisition process where time is invested in the labor of inculcation by the investor. The process of embodiment presupposes a “personal cost”; time, but also of “privation, renunciation and sacrifice”: an investment that cannot be made “at second hand”.\textsuperscript{121} This embodied capital is converted into “an integral part of the person” or a ‘habitus’, which tied to its bearer “declines and dies” with him or her.\textsuperscript{122} Habitus is a “set of dispositions which generates practices and perceptions” becoming a “second sense’ or a second nature” to the agent.\textsuperscript{123} It can be described as a “‘feel for the game’, a ‘practical sense’ (sens pratique) that inclines agents to act and react in specific situations in a manner that is not always calculated and that is not simply a question of conscious obedience to rules.”\textsuperscript{124} When regarding people’s actions as unconscious, not being products of rational calculation, socialization becomes the way of transmission of cultural capital in its embodied form. This form of transmission is fundamentally different from immediate transmission of other forms of capital such as money, property or titles.

The second form of cultural capital is its objectified state in the form of cultural goods. Cultural capital in this form has “a number of properties which are defined only in the relationship with cultural capital in its embodied form. The cultural capital objectified in material objects and media, such as writings, paintings, monuments, monuments,
instruments, etc., is transmissible in its materiality”. Bourdieu exemplifies by the sale of paintings where legal ownership is transmissible but not necessarily the cultural capital or that which “constitutes the precondition for specific appropriation, namely the possession of the means of ‘consuming’ the painting”, or ‘understanding’ its immaterial value. In other words “cultural goods can be appropriated both materially – which presupposes economic capital – and symbolically – which presupposes cultural capital”.

The objectification of cultural capital in its institutionalized state is for instance academic qualifications. Academic qualifications in a sense separate the embodied cultural capital from its bearer, since a certificate of cultural competence academically sanctioned is legally guaranteed. (Education will not be discussed here but I mention it because Bourdieu links cultural capital in its institutionalized state to the third kind of capital.)

The institutionalized state of cultural capital is connected to social capital insomuch as it refers to an individual’s social network of “potential resources that are linked to a possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition”. The members of a group (e.g. family, class, tribe or school) provide each other with a “collectively-owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word”. The reproduction of social capital presupposes the members’ “unceasing effort of sociability, a continuous series of exchanges in which recognition is endlessly affirmed and reaffirmed.”

Bourdieu’s theory of how symbolic power as well as the workings of the field control its players helps shed light on the French-American relationship: it makes Wharton’s plot in its purest form seem like the perfect illustration of these ideas.

A social field can be defined as a system of relations between positions which are occupied by people and institutions struggling for something which is common to them both. It is an isolated, independent world with its own ways of admission, its own ways of estimating what should be considered a success or a failure, with its own forms of reward and punishment. The American and French actors in the social field which Wharton considers (high society) struggle to position themselves socially as well as economically in relation to each other. The Americans are economically secure, therefore able to a great extent to purchase cultural and social capital in some of its forms. Most accessible to them is cultural capital in its objectified form as objects (which they do not necessarily know how to ‘consume’ or ‘appreciate’). They appropriate it materially but not symbolically, since this presupposes cultural capital. Cultural capital in its embodied form, where immediate transmission cannot be made, renders them trouble, as this cultural form is closely tied to its bearer; or a part of him or her.

Social capital, as the social network of connections linked to an individual, family relations or contacts, is also difficult to establish for the Americans since its collective ‘credentials’ depend on the group’s recognition or acknowledgment continually ‘affirmed and reaffirmed’. This requires not only time and energy, but also a certain degree of reciprocity is necessary: the direction of the attention must be returned or the individual is ‘snubbed’, or *de facto* excluded. This embarrassing social scenario is often a part of Wharton’s fiction set both in Europe and in America: in a few cases the trip to Europe becomes the social counter move to such exclusion.

The boundaries of the social field end where the field’s effects cease to have a practical meaning; it is on this margin of social periphery we find Wharton’s most desperate players, ready to go to great lengths to secure a social position. The consequences for breaking the
'rules’ of the game\textsuperscript{132} are a form of symbolic or euphemized violence\textsuperscript{133} as punishment or exclusion, when a player is expelled from the field; this particular instance occurs as a significant scene in one novel.

Wharton has created a cultural mediator, very often a Europe-anized American who in the most typical case has a liminal position between the groups and the cultures. The mediators’ double cultural knowledge grants them a position from where they are able to negotiate deals between the Americans and the French: cultural capital for economic capital.

**Outline of the Present Study**

It goes without saying that in an account in which references to things European are so plentiful many passages containing such reflections do not get the attention that they perhaps deserve. My purpose in exploring Edith Wharton’s Euro-American universe is not to propose an exhaustive – and impossible – study of all of the references made to Europe in Wharton’s works, but to highlight the most salient, interesting aspects of the cultural encounter in each individual discussion.

\textsuperscript{132} In an interview, Bourdieu discusses the game metaphor, and its implications of an agent having drawn up the social contract, and that ‘game’ implies that there exist rules. He notes that reality is more complicated: “One can speak of a game in order to say that a group of people participate in a regulated activity, an activity which, without necessarily being the product of obedience to rules, obeys certain regularities. A game is the locus of an immanent necessity” and logic. An individual’s “sense of the game, which contributes to that necessity and logic, is a form of knowledge of that necessity and logic.” Bourdieu’s usage of rules as part of the game depends on his distinction between \textit{rule} and \textit{regularity}. He regards the social game as a “locus of regularities” within which “things happen in a regular way”. See Pierre Lamaison, “From Rules to Strategies: An Interview with Pierre Bourdieu” in \textit{Cultural Anthropology}, 1.1 (1986), 113-4.

It is the project of this dissertation to show that one major theme follows through Edith Wharton’s work; that in her texts she develops a variety of cultural contacts between Americans and Europeans in a specific situation in European civilization. My purpose is to illustrate and elucidate how we can understand her disparate material as unified, and perceive in it a sense of cohesion. I will investigate the form, prominence and importance of the cultural encounter in works published between 1904 and 1920, although I will also consider a text from 1876. More briefly will be considered a novel from 1912 and some later works from 1922, 1925 and 1938.\(^{134}\)

I also attempt to inquire into the nature of the cultural encounter; how Wharton conceptualizes the encounter between Europeans and Americans. I hope to explore the details of how Wharton envisions cultural change in the individual as well as its social implications on the group; furthermore to consider aspects of cultural ‘translation’ as Americans re-contextualize European cultural goods in various forms in America. This involves regarding the influences such dimensions as symbolic power, kinds of capital, interstitial subject positions and cultural production exert on Wharton’s universe, and their effects. A narrative analysis will also enable a discussion of cultural perspective in the narrative.

Of the chapters to follow, Chapter Two considers two texts neither of which has been much acknowledged by criticism. The starting point for her European-American theme we find in the novella *Fast and Loose*, where budding ideas point toward her interest in cultural comparison already in her early teens. In the same chapter we continue with “The Last Asset” in which Wharton introduces new literary ideas explicitly dealing with Americans in France. Some of these ideas she reworks into new texts, others are abandoned.

Chapter Three re-examines *Madame de Treymes*, in which the theme matures; Wharton’s mysterious and distanced French aristocrats mingle with straightforward Americans. The novella is considerably more frequently addressed in critical work than *Fast and Loose* or “The Last Asset”, although not enough attention has been paid the nature of in-betweenness or to what the cultural encounter entails with regard to the individual and the group.

Chapter Four on “Les Metteurs en Scène” focuses a story hitherto overlooked by critics, never closely analyzed. Consequently, many observations deserve to be made; here of course especially with regard to its European-American content as it relates to the economy of marriage and to the types of capital which make it possible.

In Chapter Five on *The Custom of the Country*, I discuss the short section of the novel focussing life in France; how issues concerning the cultural encounter are mixed with Wharton’s treatment of class issues directly related to her ongoing debate on the social re-stratification of the American upper classes.

Chapter Six deals with *The Age of Innocence*, a text often considered by critics. This reading investigates how Old New York’s conventionality, insecurity and its contradictory, ambivalent attitudes toward Europe impinge on the cultural translation of European influences into the American context.

Chapter Seven briefly discusses the role of in-betweenness and symbolic capital in *The Reef*, *The Glimpses of the Moon*, *The Mother’s Recompense* and *The Buccaneers* while also reviewing the main points of the earlier discussions in Chapters Two through Six.
Chapter Two: Two Early Versions of the Cultural Encounter

Although Wharton did not begin to publish fiction until the 1890s, it is well known that she spent many years preparing herself for a literary career. According to her autobiography, she was a very productive writer of poetry and fiction even in her childhood and adolescence, and a few pieces were printed while she was still very young; notably a volume of *Verses*, consisting of twenty-nine poems dating from 1875-78, was printed privately in 1878. Her European experiences are reflected in the early novella *Fast and Loose* (1876), which prefigures her later concern with the nature of the cultural encounter between Europeans and Americans.\(^\text{135}\) Set in England (with some occasional glimpses of Italy and Switzerland), *Fast and Loose* explores the difficulties of combining love with a socially advantageous marriage, and, in the process, implies the contours of a cultural encounter, although the encounter does not occur so much between the characters in the story as between the youthful author, already familiar with life in Europe, and the addressee, her American friend.

It was only in 1904 that Wharton produced a story, “The Last Asset”, that may be said to be her first mature version of the cultural encounter between Europeans and Americans.\(^\text{136}\) The immediate

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\(^\text{135}\) *Fast and Loose*, in Viola Hopkins Winner, ed., *Fast and Loose and The Buccaneers* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1993). References to this text will be made in parenthesis.

\(^\text{136}\) “The Last Asset” first appeared in *Scribner’s Magazine* in August of 1904, and was included in the short story collection *The Hermit and the Wild Woman* in 1908.
subject matter, though, is marriage between a young woman of the American middle classes and a French aristocrat. Issues of class are as important as the cultural encounter, and the story also contains two early instances of the cultural mediator, a type to be anatomized in more detail in later stories.

**Fast and Loose**

*Fast and Loose*, finished just before the author’s fifteenth birthday was written under the pseudonym David Olivieri for the ‘private enjoyment’ of Emelyn Washburn, six years Edith’s senior, the daughter of the rector of the Jones’s family church. Although it is still very much a young writer’s work, her knowledge of languages and literary genres is in evidence. Viola Hopkins Winner notes that it is a parody of English romances, its title taken from the novel *Lucile* by the English novelist Robert Lytton. 137 Parody is also present in the critical mock reviews Wharton herself wrote in 1877, in *The Saturday Review*, *The Pall Mall Budget* and *The Nation*.

Hermione Lee calls *Fast and Loose* a “highly literary concoction” in which Wharton veers between genres: “comedy of manners, pathetic tragedy, high romance, social satire”. 138 Benstock also traces satire in the narrative’s “contrived plots and stylized narrative modes”. 139 Winner argues that *Fast and Loose* disproves the “popular lingering myth” that Wharton was James’s disciple, because, “steeped in English and European literature” her earliest fiction was not yet influenced by American writers: and the novella proves that before meeting James she had already developed a literary voice of her own, clearly identifying “‘literature’ with the Old World”. 140 Whatever view we take of Wharton’s complicated relationship with James, it is

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137 Winner, “Introduction”, x.

138 Lee, 44.

139 Benstock, *No Gifts From Chance*, 35.

140 Winner, “Introduction”, xii- xiii.
obvious that a concern with European themes informs Wharton’s earliest specimen.

The situation depicted in *Fast and Loose* is that a young woman sacrifices romantic love for a marriage for money. Mainly set in England, the narrative explicates the particulars of aristocratic life in an English milieu. The heroine is eighteen-year old Georgina Rivers who is engaged to Guy Hastings, a “poor … extravagant [and] lazy” aspiring artist (8). Flattered by the proposal of the fifty-eight year old Lord Breton whom Wharton ascribes both cultural and economic capital, Georgie compares her suitors. Her conclusion is that the “real live Lord” with a deer-park, a house in London, “three fine houses, plenty of horses & as many dresses as I [she] could wear” along with the prospect of becoming “Lady Breton of Lowood; & the first lady in the country” outweighs the younger suitor’s offer; therefore she chooses Lord Breton (8). Jilted, the crushed Guy travels south, where he eventually marries another woman. But the Bretons’ marriage is unhappy, filled with arguments between husband and wife. After Lord Breton’s death, on the novella’s last pages, Georgie writes to Guy in Italy, begging to see him one last time before she herself dies. They meet again in a sentimental scene of regret and reconciliation, and having blessed his choice of wife Georgie dies during the following night ‘of a broken heart’.

This first novella does not describe a full-blown cultural encounter (though, as I have pointed out, the narrative situation mimics one). Except for a few episodes set in Italy and Interlaken, the action takes place in England and the characters are nearly all English.\(^{141}\) However, the many Italian and French phrases sprinkled through *Fast and Loose* establish her preoccupation with European life and culture as well as exhibit her language skills.

Moreover, frequent references to characters by prestigious titles convey a sense of unrestrained title consciousness; a concern with an

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\(^{141}\) The exception is the Italian girl Teresina whose tragic story includes sickness, death and desertion. She tells that against her family’s wishes she had married her love, Matteo. After the marriage he was unable to support her and the bambino, who later died of the fever (Chapter XII).
exotic European feature without equivalence in American society.\textsuperscript{142}

Wharton’s explanations of the English peerage system also by far exceed what we might expect in casual conversation between English characters familiar with the phenomenon. The narrator’s parenthetical clarification of a “Life-Guardsman (a Duke’s son)” seems exaggerated (46). The same can be said of the narrator’s words explaining the London season: “those busy rushing summer months that the Londoners call ‘the season’ ” (71); although this example has been worked into the running narration, aiming to explain something ‘typically’ English to the reader.

Another surprising reference outside the purported English and European context is the “Bohemian” misogynist Jack Eagerton, who compares the risks of starting a relationship with a woman to the risks of picking up a rattlesnake (28). Being the only explicit reference to America, it appears strangely out of place in the English milieu.

The odd appearance in the text of the American indigenous reptile appears almost accidental, but nevertheless indicates another cultural point of reference. Wharton’s sometimes over-explanatory statements about European (English) phenomena are due to the fact that 	extit{Fast and Loose}, written for an American friend, aims to fulfill a pedagogical function. These didactic comments suggest that there are elements in the story that need to be explained to an American reader. Furthermore, these narrative intrusions aimed at Wharton’s intended reader reveal that the narrator herself is aware that she possesses cultural knowledge extending beyond the culture she is describing.

Despite being a work by an immature writer whose primary objective was to amuse her friend Emelyn with English and to some extent Italian life in Europe, by endowing her narrator with a cultural consciousness extending outside of the culture being described (but which is not yet located in-between cultures), the teenage Wharton already in this literary experiment approaches the role of the cultural

\textsuperscript{142} A few examples are: Marquise, Viscount, Lord, Life-Guardsman (18) Duchess (73) and even the Princess of Wales (55).
explicator. As a literary attempt *Fast and Loose* bears witness to the influence of Europe on her life as well as on her literary output: it is prophetic and indicative of her cultural subject matter, still in gestation.

**An Early Brush with the European Theme**

In 1904, the same year “The Last Asset” was published, Edith Wharton was engrossed with impressions of French art, architecture and of French landscape, gathered during an automobile tour of France. The notes documenting the novelty of such an expedition by car resulted in a series of essays in American journals. Eventually collected in the travelogue *A Motor-Flight Through France* (1908), they are evidence of how France was at this time gradually becoming more important in her life and work.143

During this year she also worked diligently to finish *The House of Mirth*, begun the preceding year, scheduled for serial publication in *Scribner’s Magazine* beginning January 1905.144 Despite the workload she published *Italian Villas and their Gardens*, the short-story collection *The Descent of Man and Other Stories* as well as a few individually published short stories.145 In the collection we can for instance find thematic concerns such as divorce and remarriage in a comical narrative, “The Other Two”, which brings together a woman’s two previous husbands with the present one. In *The House of Mirth* we recognize the central subject preoccupying much of Wharton’s work, including fiction exploring the European-American differences, as we follow upper-class Lily Bart struggling to unify society’s conventional demands of prestigious marriage with her desire for love. When resisting marriage for other reasons than love, she plummets toward society’s bottom where she finally dies: poor, cold, hungry and alone.

The protagonist of “The Last Asset”, Garnett, fashionable society’s observer, reluctantly gets drawn into the life of American Mrs Newell; he passes from a position as a spectator on the fringe of Mrs Newell’s life into that of participant. An American newspaper correspondent in Paris, he is asked by Mrs Newell to find and convince her estranged husband to participate in their daughter Hermione’s wedding to a young French nobleman, Comte Louis de Trayas. The groom’s family reluctantly consents to the marriage, threatening to call it off unless the father attends the wedding. Garnett hesitates, but when realizing that Hermione and her fiancé are in love, he is motivated to help them. Mr Newell refuses to participate in his daughter’s wedding until Garnett brings word from Hermione saying that her father must not be coerced to appear, even if it jeopardizes her marriage. Her unselfish gesture convinces Mr Newell to change his mind. But as the marriage takes place, Garnett realizes that by displaying the freshness and innocence of the couple’s young love, Mrs Newell has succeed in extracting the necessary participation from all reluctant parties; and Garnett sees the full magnitude of Mrs Newell’s manipulation.

“The Last Asset” embodies both an existential and a cultural theme. Love is overshadowed by an opportunistic woman not shunning to exploit her daughter when attempting to restore her own slipping social status. Hermione’s marriage is the prerequisite for Mrs Newell’s social rehabilitation and the central event around which the story pivots. Most of the narrative space, however, is allotted to an account of the predicament of a disparate group of mainly American expatriates of varying backgrounds in Paris. Some of them live a life in moderation; others have to subsist on very limited means. The conspicuously rich who are on the social rise live at the Ritz, and in their entourage we find those in social decline who are chronically in need of money, awaiting the miracle of social rehabilitation.

The marriage between the American girl and a young French count brings us closer to the cultural theme. The plot unites the individual’s desire for love with her group’s ideas of a good match; accordingly, this American in Europe ends up, for all we know, very happily married into an old French family of the Faubourg. However,
the young couple’s perspective is not narrated; to gauge the dynamics and possibilities of this particular cultural encounter in progress or their grappling with each other’s cultures is not the ambition of this short story.

Instead the reader’s attention is directed toward the American expatriates. The cultural theme here takes several forms: the versions of Americans may be perceived as static stereotypes; however, at a closer look this impression needs to be questioned. They represent interstitiality as a result of a cultural in-betweenness as well as a social ness. Furthermore, the role of the cultural mediator appears in its early form and we see how Wharton employs metaphor to describe a few characters’ relation to culture.

Wharton transports to France the situation typical of the new American society of great social mobility, where fortunes are made and lost in a lifetime: a social structure where capital is organized differently than in Europe. She depicts an old European society, where, in Bourdieu’s terms, she ascribes cultural capital in its embodied state and economic capital to the French nobility; in the example of the Trayas family, giving little detail about them. Furthermore, she ascribes cultural capital in its objectified state and economic capital to American industrialists, as exemplified in the Hubbards; uneducated and conspicuously rich American expatriates. The Newells, another version, were once as well-to-do as their compatriots, but having lost their riches Mrs Newell tries to establish a better social position by affiliation to the French nobility. The main negotiation of capital is when Mrs Newell tries to attain a family bond to the French aristocracy, through her daughter’s marriage to a young nobleman: a negotiation for social capital, although Wharton does not specify what the French family hope to gain from the affiliation. Mrs Newell also negotiates for economic capital with the figure of Baron Schenkelderff, but mainly with Mrs Hubbard who is in need of social capital.

Not much critical work has been done on “The Last Asset”. On the whole, critics – in so far as they have dealt with the story at all – have commented on its autobiographical rather than its cultural aspects. Benstock discusses the plot’s wedding invitation in relation to
Wharton’s own real-life wedding invitation; Lee comments on the mother’s cynicism and on the father’s stoic realism. Perceiving an echo between the short story and a love poem to Morton Fullerton of 1908, Lee writes: “even in the most hard-edged of stories, there is a trace of her [Wharton’s] secret life”.146 A third critic, Barbara White, notes a “chief-cluster” of “marriage-for-money” stories between 1905 and 1910, grouping “The Last Asset”, and “Les Metteurs en Scène”, with “The Introducers”.147

Characters

Garnett

As the story is told from Garnett’s point of view it is pertinent to begin by examining the narrative technique and Garnett’s intricate relationship to the omniscient intelligence external to the story.148


147 She also discusses a number of other stories, set after the wedding, which treat the topic of ‘corrupt’ marriages. White refers in this context to stories in which the “roots” of the marriage are “contaminated” as well as when “the marriage has spread corruption . . . and other people have been harmed.” See Barbara A. White, Edith Wharton: A Study of her Short Fiction (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 77-79.

148 The narration provides that important general framework against which cultural judgements are made. The narrator and the internal focalizer, Garnett, imply the dense framework of taken-for-granted ideas of how the world is arranged. The background suggestive of ‘good’ or ‘bad’, ‘right or ‘wrong’, constantly impinges on characters’ actions in varying evaluative remarks. Some of the points I will be trying to make become visible only through a narratological analysis; a few terms can explain how the narrative agents position themselves in the text and from where in the text opinions originate, and how these are conveyed. Rimmon-Kenan writes that the ideology of the narrator-focalizer (external narrator) is taken as authoritative and other frames of reference are evaluated against this ‘higher’ position. She bases this on ideas of Boris Uspensky who refers to the “ideological facet of focalization” as “the norms of the text”, consisting of a “general system of viewing the world conceptionally”. Events and characters are evaluated according to this belief system.
That the anonymous omniscient narrator is the most authoritative instance in the story becomes evident from various comments on the internal character-bound focalizer Garnett’s consciousness.\textsuperscript{149} The close relation between the narrator’s and Garnett’s stances shows in the following comment from the external narrative position: “Garnett had \textit{always foreseen} that Mrs Newell might someday ask him to do something he should greatly dislike” (614, my italics).\textsuperscript{150} The narrator verifies Garnett’s intuitive first impression regarding Mrs Newell. We can see a similar pattern in the passage in which the narrator notes how Garnett might have described Mr Hubbard from a cultural perspective: “Garnett, \textit{if called on to describe him}, would have done so by saying that he was the American who always pays” (616). The narrator stating Garnett’s hypothetical opinion, instead of letting Garnett voice his own, cuts off the possibility of representing contradicting opinions in the same narrative: an opportunity Wharton will later make active and utilize when describing Americans and Europeans in contact. Garnett’s function, then, is quite limited; he takes little part in the action: his main role is that of an observer, and he expresses the narrator’s opinions.

In a few passages Wharton expresses Garnett’s cultural sensibility through metaphors of food; and a recurring location for Garnett’s and Mr Newell’s conversations is suitably a restaurant. This is where Garnett enjoys the older man’s company more than the meals he takes; he thinks that Mr Newell’s “conversation had the crisp and homely flavour of a native dish” for which the “exiled palate is \textit{supposed} to yearn” (my italics, 603).

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norms are presented through a single dominant perspective, of the narrator-focalizer, and if additional ideologies emerge in such texts they are evaluated from this higher position. See Boris Uspensky, \textit{A Poetics of Composition} (Berkely: University of California Press, 1973), 8-9, quoted and discussed in Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, \textit{Narrative Fiction}, 83. The nuances of the cultural encounter are subtly expressed. Cf. Rimmon-Kenan, 87.

\textsuperscript{149} Cf. also above Mieke Bal, n. 85.

\textsuperscript{150} “The Last Asset”, in Maureen Howard, ed., \textit{Edith Wharton: Collected Stories 1891-1910} (New York: The Library of America, 2001). References to this text will be made in parenthesis.

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Garnett, nevertheless, yearns for European civilization. A few months back Garnett has given up his dreary existence as assistant editor at a New York paper to become the London correspondent “(with the occasional glance to Paris)” to the New York Searchlight hoping to experience art, politics and pleasure, only to realize that he is expected to write gossip columns under the heading ‘Talks with Smart Americans in London’, his chief suggesting that he start with Mrs Sam Newell (606).

However, Garnett is disappointed in the kind of commentary on life in Paris that his editor requires him to present to the American public. His attitudes and expectations of coming to Europe are captured in the image of a cauldron containing “that high-spiced brew”, a “heady mixture” which “nowhere else” but in Paris, is “so subtly and variously compounded” (606). Wharton slightly expands the food metaphor suggesting Garnett’s desire to eagerly taste the mixture by the spoonfuls, although he knows that he will never “have the full spoon at his lips” (606-7). His disillusionment culminates in a passage when, with more than a tinge of irony, drawing on a play by Browning, he recalls a peasant girl who bragged of having eaten polenta cut by a knife which once had carved an ortolan, a rare delicacy: “Might not Mrs. Newell, who had so successfully cut a way into the dense and succulent mass of English society, serve as the knife to season his polenta?” (606-7).151 His sense of dissatisfaction, the discrepancy between Garnett’s idea of what is worth writing about and the estimation the paper makes of the reading public’s interests and tastes, in addition to the reference to Browning’s play indicate that his education as part of his cultural capital distinguishes him from the average reader of the New York Searchlight, as well as the American expatriates he is sent to interview in Paris.

The contrast between Garnett’s actual situation in Paris, reality, and his vision of that which he had hoped to encounter, ideals, can be said to mirror the contrast between the food Garnett actually ingests, an omelet, and the meal he envisions, the savoury, ‘high-spiced brew’ of

151 The reference is to Robert Browning’s play Pippa Passes, when the fourth girl in the fourth act, entitled III-Evening, speaks of the knife.
his imagination. Garnett’s choice of a ‘light meal’ instead of a ‘richer’ or more substantial one, among the available courses at a “good” restaurant, in a sense foreshadows his own slight, mediated encounter with France when he knows it could have been more satisfying. The metaphorics reveal in Garnett fears of cultural immersion: fears of inadequacy in not being sensitive enough – or perhaps, too sensitive – to the richness of Europe. This cultural insecurity expresses attitudes similar to the ones the narrator and focalizer criticize in Mr Newell. Despite craving European high-culture ‘Culture’ remains unattainable to Garnett.

**Mr Newell**

Mr Newell is a man whose past is shrouded in mystery. Having promised Mrs Newell to find him, Garnett learns of his obscure past from an Embassy secretary, whose father has had business relations with Newell. A formerly wealthy New York industrialist, Mr Newell has owned factories in western New York and his wife has led a hospitable grand lifestyle with expensive carriages in both Narragansett and Washington. But having lost his fortune on Wall Street, Mr Newell and his family drift abroad; husband and wife eventually separate, but never divorce. The young man does not know when they separated but he is sure “that the old girl hung on as long as there were any pickings” (618). Mr Newell turns out to be Garnett’s low-keyed mealtime friend of two years; they have never introduced themselves, although they regularly have eaten at the same restaurant. Later Garnett’s conviction that “there is no one on earth as idle as an American who is not busy” is renewed, a generalization by the narrator implying that Garnett has met others just like Mr Newell before him, and therefore recognizes in Mr Newell some general Americanness (603).

The liking Garnett feels for France and French culture is clearly not shared by Mr Newell. Neither Paris nor its cultural life have made

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152 Garnett has an omelet in the opening of the story (601); the image of a “high spiced brew” appears later (606).
an impression on him; the only interest he takes in France is based on
a trivial newspaper column which he reads as examples of “the per-
versity of mankind”, which provides him with the French bad exam-
ple (603). Wharton characterizes Mr Newell by a sense of impervi-
ousness, repeatedly describing him as unchanging. He seemingly
resists French influence as a result of his decision to rely on habit as a
way to eliminate the unforeseen from his life. He maintains the ex-
pected by eating in the same restaurant and feeding the sparrows in
the park each morning, on schedule. The narrator describes Mr Ne-
well in terms of unchangeableness; he has an intonation which is
“unbending”, and an “immovable face” (601, 627). When preparing
to leave for church he has “his usual imperturbable look” and later
betrays no unease or nervousness at the church (630). The only sign
of having embraced his daughter for the first time since she was small
is an “odder twist of his tie” (631). Wharton gives no indication of
Mr Newell’s inner reactions, although we might infer that it is a mo-
ment of great emotional perturbation. So on the surface Mr Newell
remains constant.

Mr Newell’s own perception of his situation is untold, his ex-
pression limited to bitterness and cynicism. Irony informs a series of
remarks by the narrator and Garnett on Mr Newell’s choices in life.
By not changing he isolates himself from French culture, preserving
what the narrator calls “that odd American astuteness which seems
the fruit of innocence rather than of experience” (603). Mr Newell’s
voice is described as having this ‘odd’ American ‘cleverness’ which
seems fitted to “emit sententious truths” (601). By describing him as
a ‘sage’ four times, the narrator’s and Garnett’s words suggest an
attitude of irony blended with respect for aspects of Mr Newell’s
character. But there is also irony in his portrayal as a person of wis-
dom and experience; the epithets “American sage” and “transatlantic
sage” mainly connect him to his American experience of having both
made and lost a fortune in America (603, 618). Mr Newell may be
described as an experienced man in relation to his American context,
but willingly isolated from the French framework, as is implied by the

153 Mr Newell is again referred to as a “sage” on p. 603, 620.
narrator’s criticism of his choices; he remains ‘culturally innocent’. The repetition of sage is important, clearly linking Newell and his lifestyle to philosophic perspectives such as cynicism, Schopenhauer and pessimism, and the human condition as fundamentally frustrating and agonizing. His choice not to interact with French life and pessimistic outlook inspire Garnett already in the opening episode to refer to Schopenhauer; although Mr Newell is not an educated man it is clear from his reply that he is familiar with the ideas (602).

Mr Newell’s innocence is more complex than it may initially seem, and the way he is portrayed reveals its several sides. He seems utterly frank and gives no pretence of appearing what he is not, in sharp contrast to the “flashy sophistications of the Parisian life to which Garnett’s trade introduced him” (603). Garnett appreciates this simple American whom fate has treated unfavorably. He now lives on the unfashionable side of town, in the rue de Panonceaux; he eats at a cheap but excellent restaurant (602), leaves small tips, wears shabby clothes and hires his dress suit, when he needs one. Initially, not yet knowing anything about Mr Newell, Garnett senses a contradiction in him, seeing “apprehension” lurking in his “guileless yet suspicious eye” (604). This description implies an opposition between, on the one hand sincerity and openness, suggestive of innocence, and, on the other, suspicion, pointing toward experience.

Another aspect of Mr Newell’s innocence is that he has not learned much French. He speaks French with a heavy American accent which the narrator describes as a “perfectly unbending American intonation”, exemplified by a stock tourist phrase when he asks for the check: “Gassong! L’addition, silver play” (601). Having lived in France for many years, the narrator informs us, Mr Newell yet has not “taken the trouble to adapt his tongue to the local inflections, but spoke French with the accent of one who has formed his notion of the language from a phrase book” (603).

The narrator’s interpretation of Mr Newell’s linguistic performance regards only that which is perceived as his inability to speak French. However, Mr Newell’s relationship to France is complex; therefore his language may also reveal a subversive behavior which is
never considered as a possibility by the narrator. Bhabha’s term *mimicry*, a hybrid strategy, on the one hand, a subordinating gesture, and, on the other, a gesture of resistance, seems applicable here as it is possible to read Mr Newell’s language-skills as his half-hearted assimilation and half-hearted rejection of French culture. Mr Newell clearly avoids French influence; but nevertheless, by adhering to French Mr Newell cooperates by doing that which is expected of him in France, while at the same time rejecting its authority when speaking French with a strong accent. Parisians will not understand his English but when pronouncing the necessary French phrases in ‘English’ – he produces something which is ‘third’ – not English, not French. In finding the least possible linguistic effort which still communicates his intentions, Mr Newell speaks French as little as necessary: language becomes a site of ‘resistance’, although not necessarily a product of his rational calculation. In contrast to Mr Newell’s position within the expatriate society, the narrator commenting on his language stands outside looking in. Together the narrator’s and Garnett’s comments on Mr Newell’s inability to produce a French which they find appropriate for an expatriate of many years reveal a certain degree of condescension. The view of Mr Newell’s inferior French pronunciation in itself presupposes the narrator’s and Garnett’s superior, self-congratulating attitude.

Mr Newell’s cultural capital determines his cultural competence. He can be understood to have a low proficiency of the adequate social code and language; to him French life presents itself as a daily flow of incomprehensible and unrelated elements specific to France, signifying little in themselves. His determination to avoid surprise and to keep the unforeseen in check is his way to make sense of France, his way of bringing chaos to order. He lacks the cultural competence to see beyond the cultural signifier, cannot access the signified, the meaning; in Bourdieu’s words, he is left in a “chaos of sound and rhythms, colors and lines, without rhyme or reason.”

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Achieving cultural competence involves ‘interpretation’ and ‘translation’ in some sense. Logical units of culture are created by systematizing and creating meaningful links between individual cultural elements. But if coherence in the situation cannot be constructed, and translation into something familiar fails, or is inadequate, connection to the entirety is wanting. Insufficient translation results in Mr Newell’s isolation, because disconnected from the whole picture Mr Newell creates meaning in what he does grasp: he obsessively clings to routine; he steers clear of surprises, and feeds the birds on time. When Mr Newell, as early as the second page, explains to Garnett how he eliminates all surprises and how this saves him “wear and tear”, Garnett replies “Doesn’t such a plan of life cut off nearly all the possibilities?” (602). The exchange suggests how Mr Newell experiences the unforeseen as threatening, confusing and demanding. His plan to save energy by eliminating surprise requires that he willingly puts on blinders, curtailing clear perception and discernment. A minimalist life-style and routine are his tools to manage life. Garnett, however, puts his finger on the restrictions of life this attitude will result in.

Despite the narrator’s portrayal and criticism of Mr Newell’s isolation, still France and its life seem to have influenced Mr Newell to a minor extent. Two instances document his changes as well as reveal a certain degree of cultural in-betweenness. Firstly, the narrator recognizes that Mr Newell has embodied French codes: his posture when sitting in his chair in the restaurant implies that “in a freer civilisation” he would have put his feet up, but respecting the French code he keeps them on the floor (618). Secondly, Mr Newell participates in negotiating the meaning of the degree of resistance the young Comte gives his parents, who are against his marriage to Hermione. Mr Newell and Garnett agree that what in the American cultural context would be considered ‘chicken-heartedness’, in the French context would translate into an “act of heroism” (627). The situation demonstrates a double cultural perspective in that Mr Newell responds to the situation according to the French framework, not the American one. Mr Newell is more complex than he may initially seem.
Mrs Newell

His wife, socially ambitious, migrates with the seasons between the fashionable spots of Europe. She gravitates toward that which is costliest and most conspicuous; she is in Garnett’s opinion the “most extravagant of women” (615). He knows that she is economically hard up, to the point of recently having borrowed five dollars from him, unable to pay her seamstress whom she has to dismiss. She is desperately in need to improve her social position; “her personality was a little tarnished: she was in want of social renovation” (607). And her last hope is her daughter’s affiliation with a French aristocratic family also connected to old English aristocracy.

She understands the workings of the social field perfectly, realizing that this affiliation would ensure a seemingly ‘firm’ connection to cultural capital, via her daughter. Mrs Newell has neither cultural nor economic capital herself; her social existence depends on keeping up a few connections with people with cultural capital. The newly arrived conspicuously rich Americans regard her as possibly able to introduce them into the fashionable circles of Paris, seemingly taking a role as a mediator the groups. She converts her social capital into economic capital, which is why Hermione’s marriage is imperative to Mrs Newell, because at the onset of the narrative her social capital is decreasing fast, whereas at the wedding it is clear that the situation has stabilized and even turned favorable, since old faces that had once deserted her have returned. Bourdieu’s idea of social capital as membership in a group, giving its members the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a ‘credential’ which must be confirmed and reaffirmed,\(^\text{155}\) raises questions about Mrs Newell’s position. It is a rather unilaterally, as yet unaffirmed new social position she (and the Baron) claim with the French aristocracy. Wharton does not explore the outcome but Mrs Newell’s past history indicates that her chances of being accepted are slim.

Despite her economic predicament Mrs Newell stays at the Ritz. Her reasons for doing so are conveyed through free indirect dis-

course\textsuperscript{156} seemingly addressed to Garnett. Although the narrator repeats her words, the pronoun shows that it is repeated speech; the direct question, the question mark and the quotation marks keep the aspects of direct speech, revealing a defensive attitude regarding her choice of hotel: “‘Did he see her in some grubby hole across the river? Or in a family pension near the Place de l’Etoile?’” (604).

\textit{Hole} appears several times, in its original meanings and in a transferred sense.\textsuperscript{157} Initially introduced by Mr Newell as a response to Garnett’s exclamation invoking the devil, it refers to Mr Newell’s idea that a woman generally is at the bottom of the unexpected, possibly in company with the devil (601).\textsuperscript{158} He compares the misogynist illustration of his fears to the situation common in nature in which two animals indigenous to the American continent, the owl and the prairie-dog, share a burrow to live in (601). The term is then used to describe the ‘grubby hole’ Mrs Newell refuses to live in; the third instance refers to how a narrative comment describes Garnett’s fears that Mrs Newell would force him into situations suggesting a dilemma or a fix from which he could with difficulty extricate himself. She would lure him into “holes so tight that there might not be room for a wriggle” (614-15). Mr Newell then describes the street where he lives as “an out-of-the-way-hole” (619). \textit{Hole} as a dilemma, a predi-

\begin{footnotes}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{156}The phenomenon of two voices or perceptions operating in one sentence, or the situation describing the relation between the external narrative- and the internal focalizing functions, coincides with free indirect discourse. On F.I.D. see Ann Banfield, \textit{Unspeakable Sentences: Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction} (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul), 1982.
\item \textsuperscript{157}The associations to the devil appearing in the short story are local and do not adhere to \textit{hole} in any of its original senses: “a hollow place, cavity, excavation” \textit{OED} 1.a) or in its transferred sense: “a small dingy lodging or abode; a small or mean habitation; an unpleasant place of abode; a term of contempt or depreciation for any place” (\textit{OED} 2.c) or: a “position from which it is difficult to escape; a fix” (\textit{OED} 3). The phrase “\textit{to be in the hole}” usually refers to financial difficulties (\textit{OED} III.11). See \textit{The Oxford English Dictionary}, second edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), s.v. \textit{hole}.
\item \textsuperscript{158}“Ah, it is generally a woman who’s at the bottom of the unexpected. Not … that that precludes the devil’s being there too” (601).
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotes}
cament with no last resorts expands in Garnett’s mind to abyss, threatening to swallow Mrs Newell: “so black and unfathomable appeared the abyss into which she must slip back if she lost her hold on this last spar of safety” (629). The rock-bottom social position is captured in Garnett’s glimpse of the rue Panonceaux out the window of the bridal carriage, where he sees a blind man led by a poodle and a “dishevelled woman” grinding coffee (629). They illustrate the inhabitants of the abyss – it seems possible to sink no further. This fragment of social reality works as a back-drop to the action. The terms hole and abyss illustrate the slippery slope to social degeneracy where no symbolic capital remains that can be converted into economic capital.

In Mrs Newell Wharton creates an American who ruthlessly uses everything and everyone around her. The illustration of her boundless narcissism, stopping at nothing, originates from both narrative layers. Garnett notes that in “defining that lady’s possessions it was impossible to trespass on those of her friends” (608-9). Her “capacity for extracting manna from the desert” describes her as insatiable, as consuming everything around her (608-9). Described by a military metaphor she moved “too fast: her position was as perilous as that of an invading army without base of supplies. She used up everything too quickly – friends, credit, influence, forbearance” (605).

_Abyss_ also is used concerning Hermione’s knowledge: “Garnett looked at the girl with a shock of awe. What abysses of knowledge did her purity hide?” (626). His remark reflects his opinion of Mrs Newell who without any regard for other people’s value selfishly uses them, indirectly also questioning how it is possible that the daughter is unharmed. The idea of goodness surviving evil returns in the very end of the narrative: nature can magically draw “fragrance from corruption” (632).

‘Thread-bare poverty is not a common theme in Wharton’s body of work. Of course there is Lily Bart’s downwards spiral through layers of society: from life with the conspicuously rich to the very bottom, and death in poverty by an overdose of laudanum. There is also the tragic story, “Bunner Sisters”. Set in the working class, it depicts how the sisters lose a promising position in society, and the short story ends in complete hopelessness. Her New England stories also depict social strata other than the upper classes. Wharton, “Bunner Sisters”, in Howard, ed., _Edith Wharton Collected Stories 1911-1937._
Mrs Newell profits from her understanding of how identities are interpreted by others. Bourdieu discusses how agents represent themselves by the “usurpation of a social identity which consists in ‘being’ by ‘seeming’ ”.\footnote{Bourdieu, \textit{Distinction}, 253.} Able to fashion her cultural identity Mrs Newell passes herself off in any of the forms within her repertoire, which, according to the narrator, ranges from “scrupulously English” to “artificially American”, which will result in her greatest social advantage, generating the most symbolic capital (606). She takes advantage of the fact that in the eyes of the rich American new arrivals she appears as someone who straddles the two cultures. Scorning anything American, she paradoxically exploits her native background, negotiating her own Americanness to fit her needs. Mrs Newell “had found out long ago that . . . it paid in London to be an American, and she had manufactured for herself a personality independent of geographical or social demarcations, and presented that blend of plantation dialect, Bowery slang and hyperbolic statement, which expresses the British idea of unadulterated Americanism” (606). The narrator simultaneously describes her methods, and society’s expectations, as well as adding a long duration narrative perspective by informing us that she has had this knowledge a long time. The tone is detached, and perhaps a bit distanced, but irony emerges when the narrator explains that for years she has had a “superfluous husband on the chance that he might some day be useful” which cynically casts Mr Newell as one of her life’s “waste material[s]”; also anticipating that the narrative will prove her knack at extracting symbolic value from ‘rubbish’ (615).

Mrs Newell is severely criticized by both the narrator and by Garnett, in agreement on her moral corruption. The short story’s opening line is Garnett’s exclamation when rereading Mrs Newell’s note, which even links her to the devil (which has been regarded in relation to the term \textit{hole}). Later he thinks of her letter as an “apparition”, which connects directly back to the statement describing Mr Newell looking “like a man who had seen a ghost”, suggestive of the
hardships to which her social ambition has exposed her husband (601, 604).

**Miss Newell**

Wharton contrasts mother and daughter in a light metaphor. Mrs Newell’s personality is described as so bright that Hermione’s more discreet and pleasant personality fades into nothing when next to her mother. Miss Hermione Newell is the neglected daughter whose “vague personality” burns at “best with a mild light”, making her “invisible in the glare of her mother’s personality” (607). The metaphor suggests that Mrs Newell’s overpowering presence has no comparison – no star can outshine the sun. But as we know, her brilliant radiance also consumes material as well as human value. Her husband has already been discussed as her ‘waste’ product.

Hermione is a mere object in her mother’s hands, one which Mrs Newell plans to convert into social currency. When Garnett realizes the hazard the girl runs of being ‘used up’ he decides to facilitate the wedding, so as to get her out of Mrs Newell’s immediate ‘range of light’. The narrator describes Hermione’s “unnoticeableness as the most conspicuous thing about her” (607). Mrs Newell describes her daughter as a “piece of furniture acquired without due reflection”, and is unable to find a “suitable place for her” (608). Hermione occupies “an intermediate office between that of lady’s maid and secretary” (608). Hermione is not described as a character between cultures but rather as a character between the social roles of her mother’s maid and ‘secretary’.

Garnett initially underestimates how much Hermione understands of her mother’s scheming. Nevertheless, it eventually becomes clear that she recognizes the nature of her parents’ history. As a character, her agency is limited, and given merely a small space in the plot, it is only when she needs to protect her father from Mrs Newell’s influence, that she breaks her silence in the narrative. She refuses to let Garnett pressure Mr Newell into appearing at the wedding, because she wants to spare her father the anguish of dealing with Mrs Newell, whom he has long avoided, costing father and
daughter their relationship. Her awareness of her parents’ relationship is the reason she risks her wedding by putting her father’s needs first.

Hermione is a fluke of innocence and goodness in her mother’s otherwise corrupt world; this is how she is linked to her father. But Mrs Newell finds a way to exploit this goodness too, when she asks Garnett to the Hubbard dinner so that he will be able to describe the couple’s happiness to her husband, in order to soften Mr Newell’s heart and make him appear at the wedding. The love between Hermione and Louis is described as real and fresh: far removed from Mrs Newell’s sordid affairs, it represents hope for renewal; their faces showing incorruptible “benevolence and simplicity” (617).

“The Last Asset” treats Hermione’s marriage into a French aristocratic family of cultural capital, but the detail of how important the French family considers the size of Hermione’s dowry is not told. It is therefore unclear if the wedding from the French perspective is a transaction of cultural capital for economic capital: a title for money. Some indication, however, of the dowry’s significance is the eagerness to help and provide Hermione with a dot and the bride’s wardrobe, by people who clearly have personal stakes in the union, but are not expected to supply either. Apparently important to the French family is the symbolic value of the appearance of an unbroken family façade, requiring the father’s presence during the wedding ceremony, without which it would have been called off. Mr Newell’s past and present role in Mrs Newell’s life calls attention to the title: no longer able to provide money or connections, he is useless but nevertheless turns out to be the last asset in a game played according to French rules of long standing.

Hermione herself has neither cultural nor economic capital in the senses discussed above. Nevertheless, Wharton invests in her a ‘moral capital’; in its centre Hermione’s innocence and unselfishness. This kind of ‘uncut American diamond’ quality in turn mobilizes among the Americans as well as the French a certain amount of social capital: connections and good-will extended to Hermione, a quality without which the wedding would not have taken place. These connections and good-will go beyond the ‘help’ given to her by people who
help her for their own sake: I here refer to Garnett’s concern, her father who returns her unselfish act by another and the French family who could have decided against the wedding, but who may have regarded the couple’s love for each other.

The Woolsey Hubbards

The Hubbards, an American couple and their young daughter from industrial Detroit, are newly rich but socially inexperienced. Lacking the necessary sophistication to be accepted in society but wishing to enter fashionable society, they convert economic capital into social capital by paying for acquaintances and connections by picking up the tab for the less wealthy Americans. When arriving in Paris, they check into the luxurious Ritz hotel with their entourage of hangers-on.

Mr Hubbard is the kind of man whom Garnett recognizes from his travels as “the American who always pays” (616). Mr Hubbard’s own sense of gentility is the “extent of a man’s capacity to ‘foot the bill’ ” (616). Garnett thinks the type is familiar: their distinctive pose being their hands in their pockets suggests an ironic tone as well as his preexisting stereotypical ideas about rich Americans in Europe.

Socially anxious Mrs Hubbard is in transition between positions of social class and for the moment frantically searching Paris for the ‘absolute’ and ‘correct’ social code which is more prestigious than that of the uneducated rich American. Described as a heavy blonde with a “disciplined outline [which] seemed the result of a well matched struggle between her cook and corset maker” (616). On the lookout for an equally disciplined social outline, nervously obsessed with correct form both in dress and in conduct, she speaks a great deal of what is the “‘the right thing’”(616). Not knowing either code in this particular society, she “seemed to regard” Mrs Newell as her “final arbiter on both points”: which suggests a kind of informal mediating position (616). Mrs Newell has “a good deal of experience” in handling the Hubbard type of millionaire, and knows the practices surrounding the kind and size of their sort’s contributions to a less economically fortunate fellow American. She knows that they will “go
very far in diamonds” and supply the wedding apparel, but will not put up the *dot* (616).162

The suggestion of Mrs Newell’s previous experience indicates that on a regular basis she plays a part in an exchange where rich Americans convert economic capital to social capital, as connections, or cultural capital in the form of guidance concerning style or taste. The transactions are merely implied, but in the text we can follow what Mrs Newell’s return is, because the Hubbards eventually provide the bride’s wardrobe; possibly regarding the ‘help’ either as payment for services rendered or as an advance payment for future favors.

**Baron Schenkelderff**

A European friend of Mrs Newell’s is Baron Schenkelderff, whose nationality is unspecified, but he is linked to London. Having lost his position in the London social set, due to his involvement in a money-lending scandal ending in suicide, he has come to Paris. Bankrupt both socially and economically in London, and now inconspicuous in Paris, he hopes to latch on to someone socially on the rise, before his reputation catches up with him. As desperate as Mrs Newell, he sees the potentiality in Hermione’s situation, and possibly bets his last *centime* when supplying the *dot* necessary for her marriage. A recent addition to Mrs Newell’s group, his “alliance with Mrs Newell was doubtless a desperate attempt at rehabilitation, a forlorn hope on both sides, but likely to be an enduring tie because it represented, to both partners, their last chance of escape from social extinction” (622). From Garnett’s American perspective the Baron appears as:

> a gentleman so glossy and ancient, with such a fixed unnatural freshness of smile and eye, that he gave Garnett the effect of having been embalmed and then enameled. It needed not the exotic-looking ribbon in the visitor’s buttonhole, nor Mrs Newell’s introduction of him

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162 Hermione’s dowry or *dot* is held to be the timely legacy of an obscure aunt in Elmira (611). However, the liberties Baron Schenkelderff takes while a guest in Mrs Newell’s hotel drawing-room, presumptuously adding a request for *fine champagne*, to his order of tea, convinces Garnett that the Baron is the real benefactor (614).
as her friend Baron Schenkelderff, to assure Garnett of his connection with race as ancient as his appearance. (613-14)

The Baron is declared other and different: his name and exotic button-hole ribbon are interpreted as sure signs of ancestry. Every detail about the Baron suggests long established traditions of aristocracy. The keeping up of a perfect façade is part of maintaining such a ‘tradition’: his repetition of habits, behavior and customs creates about him a sense of sameness, an illusion of permanence.

The use of the verb embalm implies that the Baron is in some sense ‘dead’; any natural processes of change in death are halted, while on the surface likeness to life is preserved. The Baron’s features are organized and fixed into a smiling grimace. His precisely mannered exterior is described as a hard and conserving mask, as suggested by the qualities of enamel such as shine, strength, hardness and its ability to withstand time. The ‘freshness’ describing Schenkelderff is fixed and unnatural; the word also captures something essential about Mrs Newell whose “appearance was brilliantly fresh, with the inveterate freshness of the toilet table; her paint was as impenetrable as armour” (607). The imagery describing their surfaces is analogous: Mrs Newell’s ‘brilliance’ parallels the Baron’s ‘glossiness’, and her make-up described as ‘armour’ is equivalent to his ‘death-mask’. Artificial freshness defines both of their surfaces, concealing their inward wickedness and corruption. The link between them is their morals rather than nationality or class. If we consider how Mrs Newell self-indulgently exacts from others what she needs, without ever giving anything herself, she is the opposite of Mr Newell in that he has a very ascetic and self-denying life style reduced to a minimum in every aspect – he is unsociable and lives a humble life. Despite this, his function is the giver’s, without expecting anything in return, whereas Schenkelderff gives only for the return he expects to be able to make.

In contrast to his appearance described as eternal and fixed, the Baron’s social position is fluid and unstable. He represents a kind of in-betweenness: he is in transition between spatial and social localities, as well as ‘between fortunes’ and ‘reputations’. Nationally un-
identified, his “faultless colourless English”, suggesting another mother tongue, reveals nothing about him; and apart from English he speaks perhaps half a dozen more languages with equal mastery which, in a sense, also situates him ‘between languages’ (614).

If Mr Newell’s rudimentary and heavily accented French is a result of ‘resistance’ to French cultural influence and in effect preserving something original, it also reflects his lack of cultural capital: languages and traveling have not been priorities in his education. The Baron’s cultural capital, fundamentally different from Mr Newell’s, bears witness to the opposite situation where languages are seen as an integral part of a gentleman’s education. If we understand ‘colorless’ as ‘accentless’ or neutral it suggests that he may have lost any ‘original national’ qualities. This is supported by the fact that his citizenship is not made explicit: the name Schenkelderff seems equally difficult to link with a specific nationality despite its Germanic ring.

Wharton makes an objectionable reference to the Baron’s “ancient race”, which today would intimate his Jewishness, also suggesting a connection to his shady business dealings in London, but she stops at the insinuation. Knowing Wharton’s anti-Semitism and that of her time, it is possible to understand this as enough evidence of Schenkelderff’s Jewish descent, but not without first acknowledging that at this time the term race did not automatically connote Jewishness. Instead the term was expansive and inclusive, as opposed to today’s usage connoting skin-colour. The term race had an elastic range and Jennie Kassanoff notes that it covered “national origin, religious affiliation and aesthetic predilection to geographic location, class membership and ancestral descent”. The term’s “protean possibilities” are also suggested by Susan S. Lanser who notes that in the 1880s and 1890s the “common nineteenth-century belief in three races – black, white and yellow each linked to a specific continent, was reconstituted so that ‘white’ came to mean only ‘Nordic’ or Northern European, while ‘yellow’ applied not only to the Chinese,

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163 Kassanoff, 3.
164 Kassanoff, 4.
Japanese, light skinned African-Americans, but also to Jews, Poles, Hungarians, Italians and even the Irish.”¹⁶⁵ These scholars’ words support the idea that simply Wharton’s reference to ‘race’ is not enough to claim with certainty that her use in 1904 signifies the conventional contemporary meaning of the word. The most convincing implication of ethnicity we find in the statement that the London business had excluded the Baron from society “most accessible to his race”, suggesting that marginalization and prejudice co-existed with the dishonor associated with the shady affairs (622).

Ethnicity is discussed in the essay “Social Oubliettes” by Lauren Lief, who writes that “Baron Schenkelderff is the only other Jewish figure in Wharton’s extensive canon” and “though his ethnic heritage is never directly addressed in ‘The Last Asset’, he is, like Rosedale, described with heavy racial stigma. The Baron is wealthy, yet just beyond the reach of society’s grace; also like Rosedale, he looks to a marriage as the ticket to acceptance” by attempting to marry Mrs Newell.¹⁶⁶ However, Wharton never mentions the Baron’s religion, whereas she explicitly refers to Rosedale in Rosh Hashanah.¹⁶⁷ Lief correctly points to this fact despite which she still claims with certainty that Schenkelderff is Jewish. Other critics also see him as the “unpleasantly caricatured Jewish ‘Baron Schenkelderff’”.¹⁶⁷

Lief also claims that Schenkelderff is the ‘only’ Jewish character other than Rosedale in Wharton’s works. But I will suggest at least two more who we may assume are Jewish despite the fact that Wharton avoids addressing this directly. Mr Fleischhauer who estimates the Boucher tapestries in The Custom of the Country¹⁶⁸ as well as Mr Beaufort with his shady affairs of The Age of Innocence. However,
Wharton in the latter case imbues both ‘race’ as ancestry and ‘race’ as social class with the possibility of ‘renewal’; the racial stigma of the parents are not transferred to the children since Miss Beaufort is able to leave both her parents’ problematic identities behind: her father’s Jewishness and obscure origin as well as her mother’s reputation as one of ‘those women’.

The French

The French groom’s aristocratic family of Trayas is kept off stage, but their expectations of form, style and propriety motivate the entire plot. Coming from a background where a family’s history of ‘respectability’ is important symbolic cultural capital, and in which religion teaches the indissolubility of marriage, they require that the father of the bride be present at the ceremony, or the wedding is off.

They participate in only one episode during the wedding when Garnett, as the observer in the church, studies the two groups of guests situated on opposite sides in the nave. The Trayas family and Mrs Newell’s eclectic group of friends emerge in opposition to each other. The homogeneity of the French group is contrasted to the heterogeneity of Mrs Newell’s friends; a group which is replenished by the return of acquaintances who once left her in times of decreasing social status, but are drawn back by Hermione’s marriage. The return of Mrs Newell’s friends is proof of her and Baron Schenkel-derff’s successful negotiations, having secured positions in the upper-class by establishing social capital by – however remote – affiliation to the French and – even more remotely – to the English aristocracy. The Americans present “every variety of individual conviction in dress and conduct” (613). The French guests are characterized: “the numerous representatives of the bride-groom’s family, all stamped with the air of having had their thinking done for them for so long

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169 Ann MacMaster discusses Beaufort the Jew and Fanny the colorful (or sexual) woman in relation to society’s fear of color. Their daughter Fanny’s marriage to Dallas Archer she sees as an act of assimilation after Fanny has been ‘blanched’ by society. See “Wharton, Race, and The Age of Innocence”, in Colquitt, Goodman & Waid, eds., A Forward Glance: New Essays on Edith Wharton, 199.
that they could no longer perform the act individually” (613). Con- 
trary to how Wharton depicts the Americans as complex individuals 
the French family remain a homogeneous group: collective aristocrat- 
ic European impulses are contrasted to American individual impulses. 
The titled Europeans represent their group, and the Americans 
represent themselves.

**Concluding Remarks**

Wharton’s earliest narrative, *Fast and Loose*, reflects the society of a 
time before the American industrialization. It is in Europe she finds 
the milieu and the social structure representative of a time before 
economic growth resulted in the social mobility we find portrayed in 
several of Wharton’s works set in America. She links cultural and 
economic capital to the aristocracy; at this time the world remained 
undivided in the mind of the fourteen year-old author-to-be: money 
was still ‘old’, and the order too. Economic capital as well as cultural 
capital she still locates in the same social class; as yet she depicts no 
class mobility.

Wharton’s second narrative on the theme of the cultural encoun-
ter, “The Last Asset”, transports an essentially ‘new’ American social 
situation defined by great social mobility to France, where she con-
nects cultural capital with the aristocracy and economic capital with 
the upstarts. The division of symbolic and economic power generates 
in Wharton’s fiction a situation where the groups negotiate this pow-
er between them.

Wharton does not create any situations of cultural encounters in 
her first novella. Nonetheless, her choice of setting it in England 
along with the indications that the narrator possesses a cultural know-
ledge which exceeds the range of the narrative’s cultural context 
(England), show the presence of a cultural encounter. But it is 
enacted between the writer and the addressee, rather than between 
the characters of *Fast and Loose*.

Conversely, in “The Last Asset” Wharton uses a number of ref-
ences to cultural features and characteristics that are subordinated
to a greater theme: the individual’s desire for love with demands of a socially appropriate marriage. I suggest that “The Last Asset”, as an early version of Edith Wharton’s cultural encounter, introduces several essential and productive ideas which she develops in more detail in succeeding plots. Mrs Newell is an early, or perhaps the first example of a type – an American woman in Europe – who will recur in later narratives. Her homelessness, the kind of priorities she makes, her fluidity of character and her disregard for things American suggest later characters. She also illustrates voraciousness rarely seen, and utterly corrupt, she heedlessly uses others.

Another important element of the short story is the occurrence of the uneducated rich, a phenomenon which is later re-contextualized in most of her texts dealing with the cultural encounter. Wharton also introduces the impasse some uneducated rich expatriate Americans face while struggling to make sense of another cultural context. An aspect of their course leading nowhere is that some of these figures come to represent a sense of isolation: physical as well as intellectual. Isolation defines Mr Newell who refrains from French language and life, sheltering him from a European experience, and in isolation, in a sense, he remains ‘American’.170

In “The Last Asset” the cultural matter takes several forms. The nuances of the cultural encounter are conveyed by subtle narrative maneuvering of focalization, in the stating of hypothetical opinions; and inherent in the narrator’s and Garnett’s perspective we find the main framework describing how the world is arranged: a belief system, with which events and characters are compared. In several processes of othering, the narrator’s and Garnett’s cultural and social positions emerge in relation both to Americans and Europeans. The Baron, whose ‘exotic’ details are emphasized, is declared both a cultural and a social other, which is also reflected by his several forms of in-betweenness. Mrs Newell is othered by stressing the differences in social and moral values in relation to the narrator’s and Garnett’s stance, and lastly, Mr Newell is criticized for failing to recognize the

170 This estimation of his mind does not take into account his wish to avoid his wife as part of the unexpected.
wonders of European culture (a critique which mirrors the fears of cultural inadequacy we see addressed in the food metaphors). These instances of othering or denigration serve to define positive characteristics in the narrator and the focalizer, making this perspective the cultural reference point of the narrative.

Most characters are in various ways linked to a sense of ‘in-betweenness’ or a cultural tension in some form. Mr Newell can be associated with central sets of contradicting ideas: change vs. permanence, innocence vs. experience. At first glance Mr Newell may seem like a rather uncomplicated American in Europe. At the bottom of the criticism directed at him is the narrator’s and Garnett’s idea that he is unable to acquire a life which satisfies their standards of an expatriate existence in Europe: Europe’s treasures are wasted on him, and his accent when speaking French is insufficient. On the one hand, Mr Newell is portrayed as stagnant, seemingly marooned between American and European culture, a representation of that which fails translation, an icon of cultural incommensurability: while on the other, in contrast to criticizing him for averting culture, the narrator provides indications of French influence in his behavior and opinions that are evidence of his potential for change.

Even less central characters such as Hermione and Mrs Hubbard are situated in-between positions, although not between cultures. Hermione is located between social roles, and Mrs Hubbard is linked to in-betweenness as a result of social transition.

Another kind of in-betweenness we find in Baron Schenkelderff who is difficult to place other than in his social class. He is undefined and uncategorized, in every way between classifications. We neither know his national nor ethnic origin (even though there are convincing indications suggesting Jewishness), since neither the language he speaks nor his accent give any clues away that in these respects would help placing him. Resisting categorization he belongs to Europe and is ‘European’ in the word’s vaguest and most inclusive sense: a cosmopolitan.

Mrs Newell exploits her position in between cultures, fashioning for herself the appropriate American role she considers each situation
requires. Deliberately drawing on stereotypical American identities, her temporary, contrived Americanness is readily accepted as ‘real’ by Europeans.

Garnett and Mrs Newell are two early versions of the figure of the cultural mediator. As a journalist Garnett occupies a mediating position between French and American culture as well as between Americans from different social backgrounds. However, the uninspiring task of having to regale a popular readership in America with the exploits of fashionable but uncultured Americans in Paris instead of providing ambitious accounts of French high culture has disillusioned him. Like Mr Newell he has had to settle for less than he had hoped. It is the nature of this reorientation that Wharton intimates through metaphors related to food and eating.

An ‘informal’ intermediary role is represented by Mrs Newell. The arrangement is not based on a reciprocal agreement; Mrs Hubbard assumes that Mrs Newell will advise her in questions of taste and style. This is the forerunner to the more ‘formal’ intermediary role appearing in some of Wharton’s later works, where the parties’ mutual agreement is founded on a deeper cultural competence and understanding on the part of the mediator, than Mrs Newell’s relationship to Europe suggests.

There is a movement in the narrative from an initially ironic tone and pessimistic, cynical world view in which the characters seem weary of the world. Regardless, toward the end a more hopeful attitude comes to dominate: Hermione’s happiness as a by-product of Mrs Newell’s successful attempt to re-establish herself in society is captured in the hopeful phrase: “After all … Mrs Newell’s schemes … could [not] ever unsanctify Hermione’s marriage. It was one more testimony to life’s indefatigable renewals, to nature’s secret of drawing fragrance from corruption” (632).

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171 This phrase from 1904 becomes “life’s divine renewals” in the love poem *Survival* in 1908, cf. n. 146.
The hopeful ending of “The Last Asset” looks forward to the plot of *Madame de Treymes*, leaving American Hermione newly and happily married, optimistic on the threshold to a life in the Faubourg Saint-Germain section of Paris. This is precisely the locus of *Madame de Treymes* where another American lady, Fanny de Malrive, older and less confident than Hermione, has lived since her marriage.
Chapter Three: The Cultural Encounter in Close-Up

Madame de Treymes

After providing a first and in some respects rudimentary version of the complexities of the cultural encounter in “The Last Asset”, Wharton goes on to investigate what marriage to a Catholic French aristocrat entails in *Madame de Treymes* (1907). Again she puts the direct cultural encounter between the husband and wife off-stage, but still captures particular aspects of the encounter indirectly in conversations, on the one hand, between the American expatriate woman and the American visitor, and, on the other, between the visitor and a member of the French family. Furthermore, the latter liaison competently conveys a direct, nuanced version of the fine distinctions of the cultural encounter between the participants.

*Madame de Treymes* first appeared in *Scribner’s Magazine* in serial form, beginning in August 1906 and was published in book form by Charles Scribner’s Sons in 1907. While writing it, Edith Wharton found herself in a period of transition. Most importantly, the Whartons had increasingly spent more time abroad and had recently decided to leave the United States for France, settling in Paris on a more permanent basis in 1907, the reason given being Teddy Wharton’s health. As a result, Edith Wharton was introduced to French society by friends like Paul and Minnie Bourget, who also lived close

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172 Benstock notes that Wharton began *Madame de Treymes* in the winter of 1905-6 (*No Gifts From Chance*, 153-4).
to the Whartons in the Faubourg district of Paris. This naturally affected Wharton as a writer. Her biographer, R.W.B. Lewis, writes that Madame de Treymes was the “fruit of her first long dip into Parisian society”. During a number of years to come other important changes were to take place which can be seen as results of processes in the writer’s life that were already begun at around the time of the novella’s composition. In the spring of 1907 at a social gathering Wharton met Morton Fullerton, a few years her junior, who in late October the same year visited the Mount, her Massachusetts home. He was an American journalist and writer working in the Paris office of the London Times. They became lovers some time in early April 1908, but remained friends as their affair declined and ended in 1910. Her marriage, which had long been crumbling, finally ended in divorce in 1913 after twenty-eight years of incompatibility. Her husband Teddy had become progressively more ill during the last ten years of their marriage, suffering from a condition which in those days was diagnosed as neurasthenia.

Madame de Treymes may reflect aspects of experiences such as these, divorce becoming a subject matter especially during the time she was considering it herself, but in particular Wharton’s own exposure to and closer understanding of another, new society as an expat-

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173 Lewis, Edith Wharton: A Biography, 164.
174 Wolff, A Feast of Words, 145-6, 148-151.
176 Biographic material conveys the image of a seriously ill man who experiences manic periods when spending large sums of his wife’s money as well as periods of depression. Neurasthenia was coined by George Miller Beard in 1869 and some of the symptoms described were chronic fatigue, anxiety and depression. Americans of the upper-class were especially prone to this condition, thought to be a result of stress. It became a popular diagnosis in the late 1800s and rest cures were prescribed. Beard wrote American Nervousness in 1881. “asthenia”, Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica Online, retrieved 16 May 2008. Edward M. Brown M.D., “An American Treatment for the ‘American Nervousness’: George Miller Beard and General Electrization”, presented to the American Association of the History of Medicine, Boston (1980), retrieved 27 June 2008, <http://bms.brown.edu/HistoryofPsychiatry/Beard.html>
triate American living in France. In her life as well as in Madame de Treymes two social systems conflict; the themes of divorce, extramarital affairs and impossible love are present in her fiction as well as in her life during these years. At the same time, the social system of Madame de Treymes has links to the world of her youth in Old New York, whose rigid structure and customs in many ways are reminiscent of the French aristocratic system. But in addition to the similarities between Old New York and the Faubourg in Paris, Madame de Treymes has an extra, cultural dimension.

The novella’s concern with French aristocratic mores was naturally commented on by its early critics, who noted the relationship to James’s The American (1877), “Madame de Mauves” (1873) and even to The Ambassadors (1903).177 Mary Moss is a case in point; she writes in a 1907 review that

the author fairly challenges comparison by choosing a theme almost identical with that of The American – the clash between a spirited outsider and the intangible resistance of Old World traditions and standards. And to be frank, her latest story excels Mr. James’s early one in the matter of probability…. Mrs. Wharton has written a short story which stands entirely above criticism.178

Her friend Henry James’s own response to the story was that it was “‘beautifully done’”, but he believed that her subject matter was in New York, not in Europe.179 It is interesting to note that James here seemingly claims the Franco-American subject-matter as his own.

177 Bell compares James’s The American and “Mme de Mauves” with Madame de Treymes in Edith Wharton and Henry James, 250-3.
179 Henry James in a letter to Edith Wharton, November 17, 1906, quoted in Bensstock, No Gifts From Chance, 158.
This is not the only incident when he tries to direct her literary efforts away from this subject.\textsuperscript{180}

More recent critics also seem to consider \textit{Madame de Treymes} as an important work though detailed analysis of the novella’s confrontation of French and American values has been rather scant. Among those who do touch on this aspect, Christof Wegelin dates Wharton’s “international beginning” to \textit{Madame de Treymes}. He relates the novella to her, then, recent decision to settle in Europe as well as to fiction by James rather than examining \textit{Madame de Treymes} in its own right.\textsuperscript{181} As I have argued in Chapter Two, Wharton’s ‘international beginning’ well preceded \textit{Madame de Treymes}. By the time of writing the novella she clearly already had prepared the ground for the international subject in earlier texts. However, Wegelin chooses not to study any of her short fiction, which leads him to consider \textit{Madame de Treymes} Wharton’s first international text.

Janet Beer Goodwyn discusses Wharton’s work by reference to her specific landscapes. She suggests that her novels are set in a variety of countries; that one landscape can “suggest another, illuminate another, enhance appreciation of another”, that it is a constant theme in her work.\textsuperscript{182} She argues that Wharton’s \textit{Madame de Treymes} is set “at the site of the commonest cultural confrontation, Paris, and in doing

\textsuperscript{180} Benstock notes in \textit{No Gifts From Chance} that as early as 1902 James had “admonish[ed]” Wharton toward the ‘American subject’ ” (188). Together with the recommendation in reference to \textit{Madame de Treymes} to stay away from the Franco-American subject and the mockingly ironic comments regarding her short story “Les Metteurs en Scène” where he tells her never to write in French again, he instructs her several times to keep off his turf and write only about Americans in America. Wharton, showing no indignation, tactfully refers to such incidents in her autobiography \textit{A Backward Glance}, as James’ irresistible “need to speak the truth, and the whole truth” (181). \textit{Madame de Treymes} is Wharton’s main work where the Franco-American subject is the central theme in her work. Cf. below p. 150.

\textsuperscript{181} Wegelin considers it truly Jamesian in subject, connecting it to the “‘classical international confrontation we find in early James’s ‘Madame de Mauves’ ” and also to \textit{The Ambassadors} (“Edith Wharton and the Twilight of the International Novel”, 400).

so imitate[s] the general experience”. The action never leaves the city since Durham is not allowed to take part in “real French life; the priorities of the natives lie outside Paris, and it is only when the Americans understand this that Wharton shows them able to reach some sort of personal maturity and self-realisation”. In my reading of Madame de Treymes, however, Durham matures a great deal in the cultural encounter where he learns to regard the other with an open attitude, as well as understanding his own culture as equal to those of others. This process is mirrored in the developments of both Madame de Treymes and Fanny.

Approaching the cultural theme from a different angle, Adeline Tintner argues that Wharton’s friend Paul Bourget was an influence on her work, which she shows by comparing Madame de Treymes with Bourget’s Un Divorce (1904). During an intense period of friendship between 1900 and 1908 several thematic ideas were swapped between Paul Bourget, Edith Wharton and Henry James. Tintner notes that “[d]uring this time, Edith Wharton, Bourget, and Henry James were writing stories on similar themes, as if they were all taking a writing course and a teacher told them to write on a specific theme, each one doing it differently”. Tintner points out important similarities between the narratives Un Divorce and Madame de Treymes and suggests that the latter story is a correction, a re-writing of Bourget’s Un Divorce. His novel presents the Roman Catholic position on divorce as a

183 Goodwyn, 29. She also draws parallels to this situation in Henry James’ The American (1877) and The Ambassadors (1903).

184 Goodwyn, 30.

185 Tintner, “Edith Wharton and Paul Bourget: Literary Exchanges” in Edith Wharton in Context, 93. Benstock notes in No Gifts from Chance that Bourget and Wharton’s friendship began in 1893, when Bourget on a trip to America gathered information for his book Outre-mer. He describes in his book the American ‘intellectual tomboy’, and Benstock notes that “we have long assumed that he used Edith as the model for the (unnamed) ‘intellectual tomboy’” (75).

violation of natural laws while *Madame de Treymes* brings the non-Catholic point of view to the fore. Dianne Chambers sees that “French culture provides certain freedoms for French and American women living within it”, adding that, at the same time, Wharton recognizes that “that very tradition exacts a price that runs counter to specifically identified American values of independence and individuality”. This is in line with Shari Benstock’s observation that the cultural traditions which Wharton admires and which have been sources of inspiration to her are denounced by the bitter stories *The Reef* and *Madame de Treymes*. She also notes that the novella’s protagonists prefigure several of Wharton’s later characters in *The Reef* (1912) and *The Custom of the Country*.

A slightly different approach to the theme of the cultural encounter has been taken by Lev Raphael who devotes six pages to the novella, touching on some of the issues which will be addressed. He writes that “the French are …less honourable” (than the Americans), and he connects this to shame and embarrassment as ultimate motivators of Wharton’s character’s actions. He chiefly considers the main characters and what motivates them. Yet another critic, Hilton Anderson in his article “Edith Wharton and the Vulgar American”, directs his interest toward the lesser American characters in *Madame de Treymes*. He devotes less than a page to the novella and, as the title suggests, his main focus is on the Boykins and other characters categorized as “vulgar” in her other novels. However, Wharton’s short stories are not included, which leaves several American characters relevant in the context to be discussed in this dissertation. Finally,

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188 Benstock, *No Gifts From Chance*, 159.

189 Benstock, *No Gifts From Chance*, 159.

190 Raphael, 62.

191 H. Anderson, 23.
Claire Preston recognizes in *Madame de Treymes* Wharton’s plainest examination of lack of communication in its “mixture of malice and sympathy”.\(^{192}\)

In sum, then: though critics have noted the importance of the cultural encounter described in *Madame de Treymes* and made some pertinent observations on aspects of this encounter, no one has devoted a detailed study to it. It is the aim of the present chapter to show how the story depicts in great detail the in-betweenness that is sometimes the result of encounters between representatives of different cultures and class, and how the encounter is underpinned by negotiations of symbolic capital. In this case Durham, Fanny and Madame de Treymes as representatives of their own cultural sphere and class meet, exchanging experience as well as knowledge.

The anonymous narrator and the focalizing instance in interplay reveal how the main characters’ cultural consciousness deepens as they finally reach a tragic but balanced, symmetrical narrative conclusion. The kind of agreement which we find in “The Last Asset” between the narrator and the focalizer, Garnett, is in *Madame de Treymes* manipulated in such a manner as to allow her to explore the potentiality of the cultural encounter in a more complex way. The narrator in *Madame de Treymes* has a unique standing. Being situated outside the story told, an impression of ‘objective’ authority is created, so the narrator appears trustworthy, since his/her consciousness at first comes across as equivalent to the character-bound focalizer, Durham. However, the reliability of the narrator is gradually undermined. As it becomes evident that the narrator knows more than Durham and the narrator despite this knowledge sometimes remains neutral, or even silent, questions are raised concerning the narrator’s perceived objectivity.

I will begin by clarifying the specifics of the narration; then follows a section discussing the three main characters as well as the minor American and French characters. I will then consider how a cluster of images and keywords intimate aspects of the cultural en-

\(^{192}\) Preston, *Social Register*, 152.
The Full-Blown Cultural Encounter

This is a story involving the tensions between the values of French aristocrats in the old Faubourg society and a group of culturally displaced Americans in Paris. John Durham goes to France where he falls in love with a childhood friend whom he used to know as Fanny Frisbee. She has been married to the Marquis de Malrive for fifteen years and has a son by him. As she is estranged from her husband, Durham hopes to marry Fanny, to bring her back to a ‘simple way’ of life. However, she knows that her Catholic family will refuse her divorce, which inspires Durham’s discreet inquiries. The negotiations between Fanny’s sister-in-law, Madame de Treymes, and Durham are portrayed in a series of dialogues: encounters which initiate change in them both. Toward the end of the story, Madame de Treymes precipitately confesses to Durham the family’s design to agree to divorce, then after the remarriage assert their rights to custody of the boy who is heir to the title and the estate. As the story ends, Durham prepares himself to inform Fanny about her choice between lover and child. Intermingled with considerations of cultural difference we find issues of class. Once more Wharton ascribes economic capital to the Americans, as suggested by events and in conversation, and cultural capital to the French nobility.

It may seem odd that Madame de Treymes, despite giving her name to the novella, remains shrouded in opacity. One factor adding to the mystification of the character is that she is introduced rather late in the sixty-page story, entering the action almost twenty pages into the novella. This postponement adds to her becoming an obscure, even paradoxical character, representing both deceitfulness and goodness; simultaneously a victimizer and a victim of the system she fights to uphold. Her elusiveness is enhanced by the fact that the reader is denied access to her mind: the closest we get is through the abundant dialogue in her discussions with Durham. Even if it is not possible to find out much about Madame de Treymes’ inner life, her
very central standing in the text calls attention to the unknown; the ‘other’ as a measure and means of understanding the self. The mystification of Madame de Treymes in what can be seen as narrative omissions is somewhat contradictory to the otherwise conventional narrative technique, with a narrator external to the plot holding the highest narratorial authority, responsible for ‘quoting’ and commenting on dialogue.

The Narrator’s Visibility
The sovereign narrative position is held by an anonymous, omniscient (and external) narrator, who is more knowledgeable than the characters, particularly in matters regarding cultural difference. The narrator comments frequently on the characters although there are very few instances where the anonymous narrator becomes visible in statements traceable directly back to him-/herself. I will instantly turn to two examples of how the anonymous narrator becomes visible. These are some of the few cases where an opinion about the French and the Americans clearly originates from the narrator, showing the narrator’s preconception about the French.

She had dropped her light manner as she might have tossed aside her fan, and he was startled at the intimacy of misery to which her look and movement abruptly admitted him. Perhaps no Anglo-Saxon fully understands the fluency in self-revelation which centuries of the confessional have given to the Latin races, and to Durham, at any rate, Madame de Treymes’ sudden avowal gave the shock of a physical abandonment. (33)

In the beginning of the excerpt, Durham is the character-bound focalizer, but focalization shifts in the second sentence to the narrator’s external perspective, who explains Madame de Treymes’ openness about her misery, thus providing the presupposition that the French (“the Latin races”) are more open about the problems of the heart than the Americans are, due to religious practices.

The following episode shows another of the anonymous narrator’s pre-formed ideas regarding nationalities. Madame de Treymes is focalized by Durham, and her smile
lit up the small ruin of her small, dark, face, which looked seared and hollowed as by a flame that might have spread over it from her fevered eyes. Durham, accustomed to the inward grief of the inexpressive races, was positively startled by the way in which she seemed to have been openly stretched on the pyre; he almost felt an indelicacy in the ravages so tragically confessed. (43-44)

Durham’s focalization is broken when the external narrator suddenly clarifies what Durham is accustomed to (“the inward grief of the inexpressive races”). Focalization then switches back to Durham again, to describe the reason for his surprise. An opposition is established in the text between the French and the Americans; these narrative comments introduce and further a pre-existing idea of “the fluency of the self-revelation of the Latin races” along with “the inward grief of the inexpressive races” (43-44). The phrasing of these statements refers to already formed, established pre-conceptions of what French and Americans are like.

Even if the narrator is rather imperceptible when expressing attitudes possible to connect to his or her agency, the narrative commentary about the characters is more obvious. Especially striking is the manner in which different characters are mentioned: the way the Boykëns are commented on with scathing irony, or how the Marquis de Malrivë is not referred to for that matter, contrasts with the way Fanëny or Durham are mentioned.

I will in subsequent sections in detail consider the different characters: how they are presented in the text while keeping the narrator’s role in their characterization in mind. Focalization generally shifts between the external narrator and the focalizing agent internal to the story. Sometimes these positions will be difficult to distinguish from each other since they are mixed, focalization shifting back and forth between the narrator and the focalizing agent.

The exploration of narrative comments or omissions leads to the observation that the distribution of narrative presence varies over the narrative. Essentially, narrative presence is greater in the beginning, and waning in the last chapters, as the narrative becomes more of a dialogue involving the two main characters. Here it is interesting to note that precisely at the final, high point of the novella, the narrator
abandons the narrating function; thus the episode of the very essence of the cultural encounter is not commented on by the narrator. This is not the only case of narrative silence, because a few further instances suggest distance between different characters’ and the narrator’s knowledge and/or opinions. This of course generates questions about the narrator’s reliability, seemingly sometimes withholding information.

John Durham is the central consciousness of the novella. He functions as an internal character-bound focalizer who is part of the action; his thoughts and interpretations of the world are supplied, as the only other perspective than the narrator’s. Narration may or may not involve both points of observation; the distance between Durham’s and the narrator’s knowledge, attitudes and point of view may vary. In instances of disagreement the narrator may represent an opinion not shared by Durham. Such discrepancy between the character-bound focalizer and the external narrator functions as a gauge of Durham’s emerging awareness of the European world and his understanding of experience itself. So while the gap decreases between the narrator and Durham in the last episodes, his grasp of Europe and his understanding of his own cultural position increases.

Characterization

**Durham**

As a character, Durham is strangely present but invisible in the text at the same time. Being the focalizer he is of course rarely the object of other characters’ conversation; his appearance is never described, in contrast to the careful portraits of Fanny and Madame de Treymes.

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193 One obvious case is when the highest level of narration displays a critical and bantering tone in reference to characters and there is no other opinion given in agreement or in disagreement with it. This is the case with Mr and Mrs Boykin. Certain marginal characters are treated just the opposite; they are commented on by other main characters and then left in narrative silence (Marquis de Malrive and the Prince de Armillac). This will be discussed later together with the respective character.
He is characterized mainly by his actions, behavior and opinions which make him come across as straightforward and frank. I will now consider a few aspects of his initial inexperience and show the growing intercultural consciousness which eventually defines him as an American in between cultures.

In the opening of the novel Durham is standing in the doorway looking out at Paris. In other words he is shown on the threshold to his “European experience”, about to acquire knowledge about Europe which will change his understanding of the world. Up to this point in his life, visits to Europe have been “infrequent enough to have kept unimpaired the freshness of his eye” (3). He compares Paris with New York, seeing them in opposite terms. New York is “lamentable”, but Paris fascinates him as perhaps the “most beautiful city in the world”: his opinion no doubt mirrors his feelings for Fanny (3). Durham has only a “vague knowledge of the world she lived in – knowledge mainly acquired through the perusal of yellow-backed fiction” (4). Wharton here establishes a contrast between fiction and reality; his idealized picture of Paris, his mistaking fiction for reality amount to his perception of Europe. The fact that he experiences Europe mediated through fiction is an indication of his naivety and lack of experience.

Durham’s attraction to Fanny is central; he finds Fanny de Malrive more attractive than Fanny Frisbee. He notices how Fanny has changed since their youth in New York. He is ambivalent about his simultaneous attraction to what he experiences as Frenchness, and his repulsion by some aspects represented by Madame de Treymes, such as her openness about her troubles and her sorrow. Fanny has absorbed behavior as well as speech from French culture, which Durham thinks is becoming and is able to organize into his perception of what an American woman should be.

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194 This comment originates from the external narrator, not with Durham. ‘Yellow-back’ fiction refers to the yellow illustrated book cover of cheap novels of the mid-nineteenth century, produced for the railway-passenger market. The stories were popular and the books affordable, see Anthony Rota, *Apart from the Text* (New Castle: Oak Knoll Press, 1998), 221-26.
Durham may construe Fanny as French and sophisticated on the surface, but he has difficulty understanding that her life in Europe has changed the way she perceives the world. The drama enacted is that of the individual’s interests pitted against the interests of the collective. Durham is troubled by Fanny’s intuitive feeling that “they [the Malrives] will never consent” to the divorce (12). His sense of independence and individualism limits his understanding of how Fanny expresses that the family has a collective influence over her; he is disturbed when noting that Fanny “spoke as though the interests of the whole clan, rather than her husband’s individual claim, were to be considered; and the use of the plural pronoun [they] shocked his free individualism like a glimpse of some dark feudal survival” (12). Doubting her estimation of the family’s collective intents regarding the divorce, he begins to suspect a “morbid fixity of ideas of her perpetual attitude of distrust”; therefore he decides to find out for himself (14). His distrust of her comprehension of her family’s belief-system, or in Bourdieu’s terms, her ‘feel for the game’, reveals his ethnocentric perception that straightforward arguments originating in his American beliefs will convince the Malrives, simply because he regards them as the only moral and valid ones: revealing his own perspective as the ‘correct’, superior one. Unaware of how religion within the two cultural frameworks is a major factor determining what is seen as right or wrong, he naïvely and gullibly expects that his inquiries about the possibilities for a divorce will be met with his American definition of candor; that divorce and remarriage are as plausible in a French as in an American context. His innocence is in a sense concentrated in his “dream of rescue and renewal” (41).

Confident about the righteousness of his ideas and his assessment of the situation, he decides to speak to Madame de Treymes himself and goes to tea at the Hôtel de Malrive. The episode neatly situated as the middle chapter holds both his epiphany – seeing the social system clearly with all its implications – as well as the plot’s peripeteia which marks his beginning development toward becoming an American in between cultures.

The episode at the Hôtel de Malrive deals with the cultural encounter. Durham realizes his own cultural limitations as he has com-
pletely misjudged the French context because he has evaluated it based on his own cultural experience. He also sees that there is no automatic correlation between American and French concepts. I will discuss how the cultural encounter is addressed indirectly in imagery, in a separate section of this dissertation, where it will be possible to connect to other aspects of the encounter in a wider perspective. Therefore, we here will continue by examining some of the consequences of the encounter for Durham.

From the point where he realizes his dependence on American values Durham gradually begins developing new ideas. Indicators of change are his different reactions at different points in the story to subjects that are taboo in his New York circles. Madame de Treymes draws a parallel between Durham’s love for Fanny and her own for her lover. Durham is shocked by the comparison because in his New York circles the subject is unspeakable, especially by a woman. At a later point Fanny speaks openly to him about the scandal involving the Prince, but this time Durham instead asks questions as well as proposes to offer Madame de Treymes his consolation in her difficult time. Together these two episodes indicate Durham’s increasing tolerance for an alternative cultural stance.

As Durham gradually begins to perceive a broader perspective extending beyond his own experience, he questions his previous habitual, ‘natural’ American viewpoint. An instance of this is during his last visit to the Hôtel de Malrive when he ponders on the difference in traditions; how Americans can be seen in Europe’s longer historical context; the “thought of what he must represent to the almost human consciousnesses which such old houses seem to possess, made him feel like a barbarian desecrating the silence of a temple of the earlier faith” (49). His originally American outlook is giving way to a new perspective.

195 A comparison can be made with how Mrs Boykin lets her husband speak about the affair, because it was inappropriate for her to admit to knowledge of such a liaison. Mrs Boykin’s attitude of feigned modesty connects her to New York principles of propriety. The aspect of taboo will be developed in the section about The French; cf. n. 202.
This more open, tolerant attitude leads to the inversion of Durham’s moral positions. He regrets once having refused to help pay Madame de Treymes’ lover’s gambling debts when he thinks that Madame de Treymes is helping Fanny to achieve a divorce, despite her own suffering. On learning that the scandal concerning Madame de Treymes’ lover has reached the papers, Durham sees his actions in a new, critical light; and he experiences guilt. Having previously seen himself as morally superior to Madame de Treymes, he reverses this position in chapter eight, “an involuntary readjustment”, now thinking he has been petty and small in refusing to help her (44).

As Durham gains European experience, becoming a character between cultures, his perspective merges with that of the narrator’s: the discrepancy between the perspectives having played out their roles. In the text this is noticeable in that narration is mainly restricted to declarative comments in the last chapters, giving all space to dialogue. The anonymous narrator is now superfluous; Durham as the focalizer, and as a figure in between cultures, embraces a double cultural perspective, which was earlier the domain of the external narrator. He has discovered that an American interpretation of the world is not the only one, but just one version. He realizes that France cannot be experienced through an American lens, but must be understood on its own terms.

**Fanny de Malrive**

Fanny de Malrive has lived in France for fifteen years and has not visited her American family during this time. Although equally familiar with the New York social code of her original family’s group culture as with the French aristocratic social codes of her husband’s family, she still feels and is treated as an outsider in some respects. When Durham asks her to marry him she tells him about her life in France and its restrictions. For a short while she believes that Durham can help her, but his efforts will show otherwise.

She is described as belonging to two worlds, as being culturally divided. She tells how the French family has control over her and how her life has come to an impasse. She describes the French family
as a mysterious invisible secretly powerful and unpredictable network, always able to arrange support wherever necessary, to which resistance is futile. By contrast, Fanny sees America as “beautiful, fresh, innocent and simple” and Americans as “good, sweet, simple and real” (5, 6). The division has a parallel in how Fanny describes her stake in her son and how Durham respectively describes his in her. In both cases this is done in terms of holding on to either her “half” of the son or Durham to his “half” of Fanny (10). This becomes palpable later on when she admits that the Malrives in the Faubourg have power over her, that they “are part of me, I belong to them” (13). Claire Preston fittingly claims that Fanny has become “a hybrid, neither French nor American” by “cultural immersion”, that she has “descended into some underworld which will never relinquish” her.\(^{196}\) Fanny herself apparently regards herself as French rather than American when telling Durham and his family that “[m]y sister-in-law was much interested; I believe you are the first Americans she has ever known” (19). She forgets that she too is American, that she at one point must have seemed similar to the Durhams in the eyes of her sister-in-law.

As the novella progresses her American identity becomes strengthened: she feels she becomes a better and better American every day, by meeting Americans again. Durham thinks that she has “regained, with her re-entry into the clear air of American associations, her own trustfulness of view” (48). Fanny seemingly floats between French or American cultural identities and spheres; the fact that several interpretations of her cultural identity exist prove her cultural competence.

Durham has known Fanny since his youth in New York; so seeing the change in her after fifteen years in France, he is fascinated. Questioning himself about the nature of his attraction he finds that “[i]t was because there were, with minor modification, many other Fanny Frisbees; whereas never before within his ken, had there been a Fanny de Malrive” (16). He cannot just accept her for what she presently is but compares the two versions: American and French,

\(^{196}\) Preston, Social Register, 172.
and in the comparison much of his attraction to her lies. In the following comparison between Fanny Frisbee and Fanny de Malrive Durham notes, “[s]he was the same, but so mysteriously changed! And it was the mystery, the sense of unprobed depths of initiation, which drew him to her as freshness had never drawn him” (16). The allure is the tension between his memories of Fanny Frisbee in the past, and his experience of Fanny de Malrive in the present; her degree of Frenchness is decidedly a factor explaining his feelings for her.

Nannie Durham’s interpretation of Fanny’s change is made in a prolepsis where focalization lies externally to the plot; her observation occurs in a direct quotation.

He had not hitherto attempted to define the nature of the change: it remained for his sister Nannie to do that when, on his return to the Rue de Rivoli, where the family were still sitting in conclave upon their recent visitor, Miss Durham summed up their groping comments in the phrase: “I never saw anything so French!” (16)

Miss Durham’s exclamation voices the collective American impression, whereas no French character states an opinion on Fanny’s Frenchness. Curiously and simultaneously present in the following passage are both Fanny Frisbee, existing outside the plot, and Fanny de Malrive.

Yes, it was the finish, the modelling which Madame de Malrive’s experience had given her that set her apart from the fresh uncomplicated personalities of which she had once been simply the most charming type. The influences that had lowered her voice, regulated her gestures, toned her down to harmony with a long dim background of a long social past – these influences had lent to her natural fitness of perception a command of expression adapted to complex conditions. She had moved in surroundings through which one could hardly bounce and bang on the genial American plan without knocking the angles off a number of sacred institutions; and her acquired dexterity of movement seemed to Durham a crowning grace. (16)

The description is made from the Durham’s point of focalization; however, this perspective is soon mixed with the narrator’s more objective view. Fanny’s gestures have been regulated; her “fresh
uncomplicated” American personality has been toned down. Her behavior is described as having become more mannered, as she has learned to conceal her Americanness to fit into the context of her adoptive country. Acting American would simply be too conspicuous behavior in her context in France.

She speaks quite “easily and naturally, as if it were the most commonplace thing in the world for them to be straying afoot together over Paris” (4). Durham, reading the situation by another social code, is concerned that walking together alone might be compromising, whereas Fanny is untroubled. Fanny’s speech is also altered, her voice is lowered; her present ability to manage pauses “with ease” is compared with how she would have nervously filled each pause with talk in her Frisbee days (4-5). During her fifteen years in France, in the terms of Bourdieu, she has accumulated cultural capital in its embodied form; the Durhams immediately identify her behavior, gestures and her way of speech as social and cultural ‘difference’.

Preston writes that “her real Europeanising is moral, not physical: despite her unhappy experience, she means to raise her boy as a Frenchman among his own people”. However, Fanny’s Europeanizing seems to have little to do with choosing to raise her son in France: the plot shows convincingly that there is no other option. On the contrary, many of Fanny’s changes are described as ‘external’, directly relating to appearance, behavior and style, whereas her ‘moral’ qualities appear compatible with those of Durham’s.

Honesty as a characteristic, Wharton represents by the idea of keeping one’s word. Fanny is explicitly described as a person whose word is to be taken seriously, which links her to another American, Durham. The Malrives regard Fanny as trustworthy; they know her word can be trusted. To her moral credit she does not say anything derogatory about her husband or any other character, except for a general remark about exile Americans complaining about America. When separating from her husband in order to gain control of her son, it was agreed that she should live in France; her promise to...
stay in France gave her custody of her son (7). Fanny conforms to French social expectations: it is significant that she is concerned not to cause a scandal; subsequently she is reluctant to request divorce. She therefore wants a promise that the family will accept her request for divorce.

Short of a positive assurance on this point, she made it clear that she would never move in the matter; there must be no scandal, no retentissement, nothing which her boy, necessarily brought up in the tradition of scrupulously preserved appearances, could afterward regard as the faintest blur on his muchquartered escutcheon. (14)

Despite wanting a divorce, she will never risk the Malrive reputation: “there must be no scandal, no retentissement”; the narrator’s report is phrased in the imperative. The last section of the quotation shows some of the narrator’s irony lurking behind the explanation of the importance of a flawless family past in the words: “scrupulously” and “faintest” (14). The narrator generally portrays Fanny favorably, but here reveals a less tolerant attitude towards adopting French values to outwardly preserve the required ‘traditional’ aristocratic respectability.

To sum up, Fanny is a character existing in-between cultures. Her cultural competence overlaps two codes and group cultures; she functions in both systems equally well. She is culturally protean, using her experience as a resource, adapting to the situation. She is not a mediator between cultures, in the professional sense that can be recognized from other Wharton stories, but she has a similar position of dual cultural knowledge and skills which is not surpassed by any other character in the story.

The portrayal of Fanny reveals no ‘resistance’. Her mimic or assimilating behavior may have little to do with her rational calculation. The figure of Fanny is what Bhabha would call an ambivalent cultural articulation destabilizing the Durhams’ conception of that which is ‘normal’. She is also conceptualized as ‘partial’, because when alone she is construed as French, but in company with Madame de Treymes she becomes American again. To the Durhams she stands out as the ‘most French’ they have ever seen. But in contrast with Madame de Treymes’ real, authentic Frenchness which Durham
thinks is too rich, intense, concentrated, or too threatening, she be-
comes all American again. In Durham’s eyes she is a desired compre-
hensible version of the French, which he bases on his initial transla-
tion of Frenchness into Americanness; ideas picked up in fiction
which are already a translation of something French. Durham’s wa-
tered down, non-threatening copy is his graspable version of French-
ness, which adds up to her being less than French, but more than
American.

**Madame de Treymes**

Madame de Treymes is the only French character present, embodying
that which is French in the narrative. She is portrayed by her actions,
by what she says, what other characters say about her, as well as by
narrative descriptions both by the narrator and Durham. In the sec-
tion where the title is discussed I have earlier addressed how some
aspects of narration shroud her in mystery. Descriptions of her result
in a negative portrayal; it is significant how narrative comments con-
tribute to her unfavorable presentation. When talking with Madame
de Treymes Durham experiences that she does not uphold ‘proper’
social distance when she gets too personal too soon in conversation.
The narrator describes that Durham is distressed by how she sudden-
ly becomes serious, that she admits him abruptly to “the intimacy of
misery” (33). In the clash between their respective group’s systems he
feels invaded by her confessions. Another description of Madame de
Treymes at the Boykin dinner further augments her unfavorable im-
age: she uses “her narrowed gaze like a knife slitting open the unsus-
picious personalities about her”; the simile suggesting a merciless
indifference to other people (31). Both descriptions reveal an unfav-
orably attitude and originate with the narrator.

Durham’s first meeting with Madame de Treymes has already
been considered in the introduction when discussing Wharton’s use
of anthropological terms. In the same episode we find Madame de
Treymes characterized in a dense accumulation of descriptions where
she is declared other. She is construed as an animal; with a “small
brown glancing face, like that of a charming little inquisitive animal . .
. nibbling at the hard English consonants like nuts” (18). Having “heard of her as a beauty” he was “surprised to find her, as Nannie afterward put it, a mere stick to hang clothes on (but they did hang!”) (18). Aspects of her beauty do not correspond to American expectations of beauty. Her beauty is ascribed to an accumulated effect of everything about her: “[s]he was a beauty, if beauty, instead of being restricted to the cast of the face, is a pervasive attribute informing the hands, the voice, the gestures, the very fall of a flounce and tilt of a feather”; and surrounded by an “aura of grace”, she moves in it as “a thin flame in a wide quiver of light” (18). In a shift from being the observer of Madame de Treymes to her object of observation, Durham senses something ominous in how Madame de Treymes interprets the Americans, that they are vulnerable to her eyes.

She imbibed her information in the air, she extracted it from Durham’s look and manner, she caught it in the turn of her sister-in-law’s defenceless eyes – for in her presence Fanny de Malrive became Fanny Frisbee again! – she put it together, in short, out of just such unconsidered indescribable trifles as differentiated the quiet felicity of her dress from Nannie and Katie’s ‘handsome’ haphazard clothes. (18)

The accounts of Madame de Treymes culminate in an exclamation of how different she is from Fanny de Malrive. Madame de Treymes’ presence is so dominant that in Durham’s eyes Fanny loses all the Frenchness he has ascribed to her in comparison with her sister-in-law. The variously negative descriptions of Madame de Treymes originate in fluctuating or mixed focalization between the narrator and the focalizing function; in the exclamation some of the directness of Durham’s original surprise has passed into the narrative.

As much as the Americans try to make sense of the French, the text also gives evidence of the same process being done the other way around. Madame de Treymes tries to understand what demarcates French and American customs. The Durham sisters especially seem to fascinate her. She inquires whether American girls are sometimes taken to the Boulevard Theatres. Her question topicalizes what French and American women can and cannot do, suggesting that it would be inappropriate to take French _jeunes filles_ to such places (19).
At the Boykin dinner she ignores other carefully selected guests for the Durham sisters who are the “special objects of Madame de Treymes’ observation”; Durham finds her during the dinner “still fanning in his sisters the flame of an easily kindled enthusiasm” (31-32).

The encounter between Madame de Treymes and Durham instigates change in them both. Durham is the character-bound focalizer which results in his perspective being the dominant one. Madame de Treymes’ thoughts remain concealed, making her change less noticeable than his. Madame de Treymes’ perspective is never represented, but her change during the novella is parallel to Durham’s in that she tries to understand the other too. She learns to do this by observing Fanny, Durham and his sisters. Evidence of her change are her words during their last meeting, “[o]h, we are different races, with a different point of honour; but I understand, I see, that you are good people – just simply, courageously good!” (52). She claims that her life has been “enlarged”; she admits that “I have understood you both. And that is something I would have been incapable of a few months ago” (52). She uses a language metaphor to describe that she can see French group ethics from a new perspective, which represents a moral perspective as seen from the moral centre of the novella. “If you only knew into what language I have translated life” (52). Her wider perspective now allows her to see their American point of honor. But in the last twist of the novella she still underestimates Durham’s unselfishness, when she truthfully confesses the family’s underlying motive to assent to the divorce. When preparing him for the consequences, she thinks that Durham will go ahead with the marriage, but be better able to deal with Fanny’s reaction to the loss of her son, than he would had she not informed him at all of the legal situation. She never expected that he would tell Fanny before it was too late. When she understands he will tell Fanny in time, and leave the decision up to her, she lies again, trying to save the plan. This act holds both the old and new person: it is clear that she has met her family’s expectations of her as member of it, but as a ‘changed’ individual, she regrets it. The incommensurability of two conflicting cultural systems results in her ambivalence.
The episode also reveals the French family as unstable, deceitful and threatening. Fanny describes to Durham that she never knows if they will say what they mean, that truth to them “is not a fixed thing; it’s not used to test actions by, it’s tested by them and made to fit in with them” (10). Durham learns in his last talk with Madame de Treymes that as early as their first meeting the family decision was taken to consent to the divorce, to let Fanny marry him, so custody should pass to the father, restoring the son to the family and that everything else they said or did was diversionary tactics. Even her looks and gestures are portrayed as unstable. Durham initially sees her as “a beauty”, but shortly after he revises his first opinion. Her looks are then described as deceptive; “he realized she looked much handsomer than she was, and she understood a great deal more than she betrayed” (18). The depiction of her body language also reveals Durham’s critical attitude: touching her breast with a “sudden tragic gesture” contributes to a negative image, suggesting that the gesture is exaggerated, theatrical or insincere (33). Madame de Treymes is described as a liar; saying one thing but having ulterior motives. But interestingly, in a sense, she herself disproves this in claiming honesty, because in certain respects she is open, and forthright, for instance regarding her love relationship. And her sincerity when expressing her understanding of Durham and Fanny’s “point of honour” cannot be misconstrued.

Madame de Treymes has several functions. She is the French example, representing that which is bad in Europe, but she also bravely challenges her antagonistic depiction by trying the other viewpoint. Reviewing herself, her motives and morals by a different standard, Madame de Treymes’ change challenges her main representation as corrupt and dishonest. Since Durham is the focalizer his development is at the centre of the narrative, overshadowing hers.

**Real Americans and Complainers**

Fanny’s international marriage and subsequent outwardly successful assimilation into a new cultural context is motivated in a passage describing her family during the time of her youth in New York. Both
the Frisbee and Durham families were back in those days part of “unsophisticated circles”, but compared to the Durhams, Fanny’s family used to hold a more socially prestigious position since “the Durham ladies had always quoted the Frisbees” who were “bold, experienced, enterprising: they had what the novelists of the day called ‘dash’ ” (16). This description suggests that open, curious and adventurous New Yorkers with social confidence would better than others qualify to take on the challenge of life abroad, to better resolve difference and develop bi-cultural competence: certain characteristics or attitudes which the narrator locates in dash predispose her to make a successful cultural adaption.

The Frisbees, the Durhams and young Fanny Frisbee are characters who are never realized within the story but link to the Americans’ common American history. They are all brought into the narrative in conversation, or as part of memories, supplying a history of the relationship between Durham and Fanny, making possible a comparative discussion of their families. An example is when Durham holds out Fanny Frisbee as the best example of “the fresh uncomplicated personalities of which she had once been simply the most charming type” (17). Fanny Frisbee basically functions as a nostalgic point of reference in Durham’s memory for assessing Fanny de Malrive’s change. To his mind, young Fanny is the original against which the refinement of the sophisticated Fanny de Malrive can be measured.

Americans in France with different relations to the country are the Durham sisters, John Durham, Fanny, Mrs Durham and Mr and Mrs Boykin. Early in the novella Fanny exemplifies two kinds of Americans in France: the ones she likes and the ones she dislikes. She sorts them into “real” Americans and the Americans abroad who complain of their native country: the complainers. The Durhams unquestionably fall in Fanny’s first category, the “real” Americans. She describes Mrs Durham’s talk of Europe as “ ‘charming, quaint ideas’ ” (6).

Even if Fanny a bit naïvely enjoys the Durhams’ company, Durham’s growing awareness of his own and his family’s provincial attitudes is beginning to show in the narration, as we shall see, primarily
in relation to his sisters. They function as important markers of Dur-
ham’s point of departure in the process of becoming an American in
between cultures, and in relation to them Durham’s change can be
measured in a succession of episodes.

**Real Americans: Nannie, Katie and Mrs Durham.**

Nannie and Katie spontaneously speak their minds with little self-
censorship, their enthusiasm being easily kindled. These qualities and
their absence of the kind of social manners which unite Fanny and
Madame de Treymes motivate the latter’s fascinated study of them at
the Boykins’ dinner. When the Durhams visit Fanny in the Faubourg,
Nannie remarks on the “pokiness of the streets and the dullness of
the houses” in a narrative summary (17). She sums up her impression
of the “small sober hotel in its high walled court” in the words: “Well
if this is all she got by marrying a Marquis!”, on which her sister Katy
pragmatically remarks “It must be simply freezing in winter” (17).
This exchange proves to their brother “how far he had already tra-
velled from the family point of view” (17). The next and last incident
which addresses this process is when Nannie is playing with the fu-
ture Marquis de Malrive. She chats “conspicuously with the little
Marquis, whom she could with difficulty be restrained from teaching
to call her ‘Aunt Nannie’ ” (43). Durham thinks her voice has “risen
unduly once or twice” during the visit and as he goes to the room he
finds that “the higher note of ecstasy had been evoked by the appear-
ance of Madame de Treymes” (43). The girls’ opinions in combina-
tion with their somewhat disproportionate, loud behavior remain the
same throughout the story. Functioning as a constant, it suggests the
contrast of French sophistication. The increasing critical distance
between the sisters and Durham suggests his changing attitude, his
becoming an American between cultures. In this episode initially
focalization and narration lie externally to the story. A note of dis-
tance toward Nannie’s behavior is suggested in both the narrator’s
and Durham’s attitude of reserve concerning her behavior. No other
characters speak about the Durham sisters.
The inoffensive middle-aged female, Mrs Durham, is allowed no voice in the novella, so she is conveyed through conversation and narrative accounts. The main passage about Mrs Durham is Fanny’s report in dialogue with Durham about her perception of his mother, heavily influenced by the immense nostalgic pleasure she takes in speaking of old friends, and about her old life with people who share her background. She tells Durham that she thinks Mrs Durham has an illusion of Europe as being there simply for the Americans’ shopping and other delights:

... old New York names kept coming up in your mother’s talk, and her charming quaint ideas about Europe – their regarding it as a great big innocent pleasure ground and shops for the Americans; and your mother’s missing the homemade bread and preferring the American asparagus – I’m so tired of Americans who despise even their asparagus! (6)

The narrator supports Fanny’s idea of Mrs Durham’s naïve view of Europe, “To Mrs Durham, with her gentle tourist’s view of the European continent, as vast as a museum in which the human multitudes simply furnished the element of costume, the Boykins seemed abysmally instructed and darkly expert in forbidden things. . . ” (21). However, her son does not share “her simple faith in their omniscience” (21). The narrator is distanced, pointing out that the son does not share his mother’s faith in the Boykins’ knowledge, the tone suggesting doubts similar to Durham’s.

Mrs Durham sees Fanny’s divorce as an “uncomfortable but commonplace necessity, like house-cleaning or dentistry”, but she would “doubtless have preferred that her only son, even with his hair turning grey, should have chosen a Fanny Frisbee rather than a Fanny de Malrive” (41). Mrs Durham’s American pragmatic view of Fanny’s divorce is at odds with the French Catholic position. Fanny outlines Mrs Durham as a naïve American, which is supported by the narrator’s opinion as well as Durham’s critique of his mother’s belief in the Boykins’ absolute knowledge of Europe.
The Complainers: The Boykins

We turn now to the less sympathetic Americans, Mrs Durham’s antithesis: Mr and Mrs Boykin who are the living example of Fanny’s other kind of American who ‘complains of American goods’. As characters they exemplify a bitter, hypocritical American, shunned by French high society, as well as by expatriates like Fanny. Lev Raphael aptly describes them as “a comic example of dishonesty and lack of insight into themselves and their situation.” 198 Belonging to Wharton’s uneducated rich, the Boykins resist Europeanizing: typically for their class their wealth in combination with little taste offers little guidance in how to spend it. Repeatedly, the Boykins are connected to things modern: American ideals of electric lighting and plumbing. Their home is also described as fashionably furnished with an “intensely modern Gobelin sofa”, their salon is described as a “glaring privacy of brocade and ormolu” (32). This stands in opposition to the kind of French privacy to be had in the garden of the Hôtel de Maître, defined as an “embowered privacy” indicating different conceptions of privacy, modern and traditional which Wharton ties to nationality (26). 199

The introduction of the Boykins is made in the least sympathetic way. The sometimes caustic, ironic tone becomes more pronounced than it has been earlier. At a closer look this is the attitude of the narrator who, when mentioning the Boykins, suddenly and uncommonly for the novella becomes perceivable, referring to him-/herself in the words “. . . one felt that she [Mrs Boykin] was . . .” (my italics, 20). However, generally the narrator is imperceptible.

Attitudes about the Boykins are communicated in two ways. Firstly, it is done by unambiguous narrative comments. Secondly, the Boykins immediately reveal themselves both in dialogue and by their actions, in a series of situations revealing their personalities. Mr Boykin is described gesturing to his face to indicate his “smile of experience” when he is about to tell noxious information about Mme de

198 Raphael, 63.
199 Cf. p. 263.
Treymes (22). The harmful aspect of the pretension involved sharpens the tone of the narrative criticism of Mr Boykin. The narrator’s evaluations regarding the Boykins’ direct speech, such as “Mrs Boykin interjected sarcastically”, and “her husband added, with an air of portentous initiation”, add to the cutting tone (23).

The following excerpt exemplifies the expatriates’ incessant insecurity and self-conscious need to impress the French community.

The national determination not to be ‘downed’ by the despised foreigner, to show a wealth of material resource obscurely felt to compensate for the possible lack of other distinctions-this resolve had taken, in Mrs Boykin’s case, the shape, or rather the multiple shapes-of a series of culinary feats, or gastronomic combinations, which would have commanded her deep respect had she seen them on any other table, and which she naturally relied on to produce the same effect on her guest. (31)

*Downed* implies another level of style, indicating the Boykins’ speech rather than the language and style of the narrator. This suggests that the expression is “re-contextualized”, adding to the narration the expatriates’ sense of feeling slighted by condescending French aristocracy.

The concept of American expatriates’ ossification is a recurring aspect throughout Edith Wharton’s work. Recalling unchangeable Mr Newell, Mrs Boykin is a case in point: “[t]he lines of middle age had given no meaning: as though whatever happened to her had merely added to the total sum of her inexperience” (20). The narrator here links non-change to physical traits. Her twenty-five years of cultural immersion amount to a discouraging combination of incomprehension, lack of meaning and isolation.

Another character in this novella with a similar non-experience is Mrs Durham, who is stunted in social growth but in a way which relates her to Old New York experience. These expatriate Americans’ situation is described as isolated both from the French aristocracy and from American society. Despite the changing American

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200 For women stunted in personal and social growth cf. p. 204.
CHAPTER THREE: THE CULTURAL ENCOUNTER IN CLOSE-UP

society, they preserve old prejudices, creating about them “a kind of phantom America where the national prejudices continued to flourish, unchecked by the national progressiveness: a little world sparsely peopled by compatriots in the same attitude of chronic opposition toward a society chronically unaware of them” (20).

Ignored and insulted, their remarks about the French are tinted with scorn which soon turns to exaltation over the prospect of actually hosting Madame de Treymes for dinner. Mr Boykin takes the opportunity to boast about his connection to Madame de Treymes. Having originally rejected life in the United States due to higher demands on “finish and decorum” than could be satisfied in America, by Americans, the Boykins’ demand for good manners and finesse is challenged by Mr Boykin himself by his crude mention of Madame de Treymes’ lover during dinner conversation (20, 31). To “Durham’s intense surprise” he begins to speak of her lover, but Madame de Treymes is not embarrassed but displays “a faint play of wonder, an under-flicker of amusement” (31). This observation is connected by the narrator to the remark that maybe “the crudity of the talk might account for the complexity of the dishes”, by some “odd law of social compensation” which conveys the idea of a direct relationship between two social expressions (31). Durham’s reaction is focalized, but any negative signal in thought or speech is lacking, so the criticism of the Boykins is produced entirely by the narrator.

The Boykins are said to have knowledge of “forbidden things”: the way Mrs Boykin avoids the awkward subject of Mme de Treymes’ affair with the Prince, turning the subject over to her husband, exposes her hypocrisy, and also defines the limit of socially acceptable knowledge for American women (21, 22). She feigns not knowing the specifics of the affair, but when later acknowledging gossip of the

201 Nettles discusses what is considered appropriate to American women’s knowledge, and what is unspeakable. She notes that words referring to sexuality or adulterous affairs were forbidden for both sexes to speak in fashionable drawing rooms. Women, however, Nettles points out, were doubly constrained: “the speaking of a word implied the knowledge that convention forbade” in Elsa Nettles, Language and Gender in American Fiction: Howells, James Wharton and Cather (London: Macmillan, 1997), 89. Also cf. below n. 373.
relationship she gives herself away. Another aspect of their knowledge is that Mrs Boykin pragmatically can inform Durham of the going rate for obtaining an invitation to tea in the Faubourg: the purchase of items amounting to two-thousand Francs from a bazaar stall will result in an invitation to tea with the French nobility (23). Mrs Boykin is also well informed about other American expatriates. She speaks about “silly” American women who are desperate enough to pay their way into French aristocratic circles. She exemplifies by Mrs Addison G. Pack, who has recently failed to receive an invitation to a social gathering, despite having spent a hundred thousand francs at Madame d’Alglade’s stalls; she was still invited to yet another charity event, with fees of admission (21-22).

As mentioned, the Boykins also know the rumors circulating about the Malrives. Revealing of Mr and Mrs Boykin is that they make sure to pass it on, as the only agents who gossip. They say about Fanny’s family that the “Malrive set is the worst in the Faubourg”, but when the opportunity arises they do not hesitate to invite them to dinner – a measure of their desire to socialize with members of the French nobility (21). The information regarding Madame de Treymes is typically second-hand information: with “conscious pride” Mrs Boykin accounts for the reliability of the source of her knowledge about the pawning of the family pearls; she has this information “straight” from her maid’s cousin, employed by Madame d’Armillac’s jeweler (22).

Interestingly, the narrator’s explicitly hostile attitude toward the Boykins is never shared by any other characters in the story, the Boykins being the only characters that are criticized by the narrator. The closest thing to a negative remark about the Boykins from a character is Fanny’s above-mentioned non-specific comment about how she was tired of Americans who complained about American products. The Boykins are characterized by their actions, by what they say, what they do, and by the explicit narrative criticism provided externally to the plot, which results in an unpleasant picture of them. The irony directed at the Boykins only originates from the narrator, and coincides with how other groups in society treat them, although these groups have not openly criticized them. The assimilated Americans
are ‘tired’ of them, the French avoid them and the only society left is the American group of expatriates. Recognizing something universally attractive about France, but essentially unable to acquire and integrate anything of the French cultural framework, along with having rejected that which is American, they are left depleted of any culture. While Mr Newell in isolation has remained American in some sense, the Boykins are cultureless. Isolated in a cultural and social vacuum, they are despised by all; by the Europeanized Americans as well as the French. As a result of inadequate assimilation – unable to realize the potentiality in their situation – the Boykins flounder. Unable to make any sense in a culturally fragmentary existence; they turn their frustration into bitterness and resentment toward everything around them, as a kind of cultural resistance.

Before moving on to the last French characters, we will look at some aspects relating to the characters discussed so far. Femininity in relation to Frenchness and Americanness is not only considered by the narrator and Durham, but also by the four versions of women themselves. The American women, middle-aged Mrs Durham and Mrs Boykin, the younger characters, Nannie and Katie, assess Madame de Treymes and Fanny. The activity of study is mirrored and maintained across national categories as Fanny and her French sister in-law assess Mrs Durham and her daughters. The comments made regarding these women indicate the implicit boundaries of American and French female roles, as well as the difference between these roles. Together these characters represent versions of female Americanness and Frenchness.

If Americanness and Frenchness in this context are seen as the result of interpretation, and the crossing between categories as its consequence, the observer’s evaluation of outside and inside criteria – the “looking like”, the “acting like” – determines the category for which a character will ultimately pass. The ability to pass as either French or American empowers or disempowers because constructing new identities for themselves enables subjects to cross social, cultural...
or national boundaries which exclude or oppress and allows access to explore new subject positions.

To sum up the Americans, Mrs Durham and Mrs Boykin are the middle-aged representatives of American women. Fanny sentimentally casts Mrs Durham as the good example of an American lady visiting Paris, who with the tourist’s vision regards Europe as a delightful American pastime. Mrs Boykin is rendered by the narrator as the bad example of an American lady in Paris, incapable of personal growth: after her twenty-five years’ expatriation she has not imbued any of the culture France has to offer. Her knowledge of France is limited to gossip, as well as to the exchange of charity-money for tea invitations in the Faubourg circles.

Nannie and Katie are assigned little space in the narrative but, contrasted to older, more sophisticated ladies, they convey impulsivity and shallowness, making them vulnerable as inexperienced Americans in Europe. Their presence explicates the outermost limits of French and American expectations of French or American ladies respectively, and their manners and dress delineate what can pass for an American but not for a French woman; in a sense their American outside corresponds to their American inside. They also suggest what Fanny Frisbee might have been like before becoming Fanny de Malrive, as well as identifying her as ‘French’. She fits their preconceived, American-bred idea of the French stereotype, an idea developed in America since they are no experienced travelers.

Contemplating the difference between the women, Durham in his mind sees Fanny foiled against his sisters on the one hand, and Madame de Treymes on the other. Compared to his sisters, Fanny epitomizes Frenchness but when put next to Madame de Treymes she “becomes” Fanny Frisbee (and American) again. He immediately notes that the social codes and the dress-codes differ between New York and Paris. He observes that his sisters’ clothing, which in New York is considered handsome, also contrasts with Madame de Treymes’; he thinks that unconsidered details such as Nannie and Katy’s “‘handsome’ haphazard clothes” are telling information to Madame de Treymes (18). Finally, there is little doubt in Durham’s
mind about the mysterious Madame de Treymes’ Frenchness. She is focalized observing the Americans, but her conclusions remain unnarrated, and in their absence Durham senses silent but valid interpretations and knowledge which he experiences as threatening. She knowingly reads in the Americans what is not meant to be told; signs that communicate involuntary and unintentional information. This is narrated in violent images of seeing; her eyes slit like knives disclosing American weaknesses.

The French: The Marquis de Malrive and The Prince de Armillac

As important contrasting pictures to the Americans we find the French characters: Madame de Treymes, her brother Marquis de Malrive who is married to Fanny, and the Prince de Armillac, Madame de Treymes’ lover. The way they are portrayed is a little different. The narrative space between the three French characters is very unequally distributed. Madame de Treymes is allotted most narrative space; she has a voice and takes part in the action. Much less space is given the Prince and the Marquis de Malrive; completely constructed in their absence from the narrative, they have no agency in the plot, both lacking voice and any part in the events. Considering what other characters and the narrative instance claim about them reveals important attitudes held pertaining to the French characters. The only information the narrative supplies about the French men are reports and value judgments originating solely among the other characters. Common to all three is that they are the subject of other characters’ unfavorable talk. All information given is based on hearsay, and the information passed on by the Boykins is defamatory. Other characters who mention the French are Fanny, Madame de Treymes and Durham. Narrative sources of information are strikingly lacking, so what we learn about these French characters takes on the quality of gossip.

The Marquis de Malrive is constructed by information provided by Mrs Boykin, Madame de Treymes and Durham. The most negative attitude regarding the Marquis is provided as second-hand gossip by Mrs Boykin when talking about the Malrive set as “the worst in
the Faubourg. Of course you know what he is; even the family for decency’s sake had to back her up, and urge her to get separation” (21). In a narrative summary Madame de Treymes informs us that Fanny’s husband no longer opposes his wife’s suit for divorce (38); in a later conversation it becomes apparent that his refusal was part of the family strategy, a front in order to supply a reason to deny divorce, while the family’s unofficial plan was not known until much later. In a court decision at the time of Madame de Malrive’s separation he is also held to be an unfit father, Durham reminds Madame de Treymes in conversation (55). The court refusing him custody of the child, repeated by Durham in conversation, reflects his unfitness as a father. The court’s opinion is in agreement with Mrs Boykin’s statement, whereas the single narrative summary supplies events, but significantly no attitude toward the Marquis.

The Prince de Armillac, Madame de Treymes’ lover, is not mentioned by the narrator, only by some of the characters. His relation to her and his connection to economic scandal makes it very risky to any character to mention him. References to the Prince violate the Old New York taboo against mentioning love-affairs, or scandals of any sort. As discussed earlier, Mr Boykin regrets during dinner that they unfortunately had been unable to “secure the Prince”, which is described as a breach of etiquette emphasized by the narrator (31). Madame de Treymes draws a parallel between Fanny and Durham’s love and her own love for the Prince, which provokes a noticeable reaction on Durham’s part: he “pushed his chair back with a sharp exclamation” (34).202 He cries out, because he is shocked by the comparison of an extramarital love affair to his and Fanny’s love, and because he considers it inappropriate for a woman to admit any knowledge of such a liaison. These topics being unspeakable in Old New York, even Mrs Boykin hides behind a feigned attitude of modesty, connecting her to New York principles of propriety. Later Fanny, however, speaks openly about the scandal, although this time

202 The matter of taboo overlaps with an earlier discussion about Durham’s change in this episode. The present references to the specific passage in the novella relate to taboos.
Durham shows no reaction of offence. Instead he asks to visit Madame de Treymes to console her (42). Apparently, Fanny has freed herself from the American taboo, and this also may point to Durham’s change. Sympathy is unacceptable, this Fanny explains, because acknowledging Madame de Treymes’ connection to the Prince is socially impossible; however, the socially acceptable act is to thank Madame de Treymes for her help.

Having discussed the social risk the Prince constitutes, we turn to how he is described. Mr Boykin provides the fullest portrayal of him in the words: “[w]ell, he is one of the choicest ornaments of the Jockey Club: very fascinating to the ladies, I believe, but the deuce and all at baccarat. Ruined his mother and a couple of maiden aunts already – and now Madame de Treymes has put the family pearls up the spout, and is wearing imitation for the love of him” (22). The gossip quality of this information is underlined when Mrs Boykin proudly confesses that she has this information “straight” from her maid’s cousin who works at Madame d’Armillac’s jeweler (22).

The Prince de Armillac is portrayed by a number of characters. Mr and Mrs Boykin contribute second-hand information, Madame de Treymes speaks of her love for him, and Fanny informs Durham about the scandal once it reaches the papers. Fanny and Madame de Treymes supply information about both French men, while the difference between Fanny and Madame de Treymes is that Fanny says nothing about her husband, while she verifies that the Prince is in economic difficulties and that he has left the country to escape arrest. Madame de Treymes says nothing about her lover, but admits to Durham that her brother is still unfit as a father. Narrative comments regarding the marquis and the prince are lacking; they would have constituted an important source for character evaluation as the narrative’s in a sense ‘objective’ moral center. The quality of the information supplied by the Boykins appears unreliable due to its resemblance to gossip, generating uncertainty concerning the two French characters. The information given is insecure, but adequate to result

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203 Mr Boykin also says that the Prince is an expert swordsman (fīne lame) (224).
in thoroughly unsympathetic characters. But once the sources are questioned, the representation must be questioned too.

The Anatomy of the Cultural Encounter

Generally, intercultural communication is represented by Wharton as a problematic activity. In her work we find descriptions of characters touched, or untouched, by the encounter. We find reports of characters’ dispositions prior to, and after, engaging with the ‘other’, but the subtleties of the actual encounter are not often captured. In Madame de Treymes we see that imagery becomes a resource; a way to approach the hard-to-render intangible, transient and elusive qualities of the cultural encounter itself. The images capture and suggest the many complicated aspects of the cultural encounter. The cultural resistance we find in “The Last Asset” mainly developed in the depiction of Mr Newell and his expatriate resistance to French, in Madame de Treymes is represented in metaphors of violence, and the expatriate resistance is found in military metaphors expressing Mr and Mrs Boykin’s cultural resistance.

In the narrative we find processes or aspects of the cultural encounter, which are indirectly addressed by related, interdependent images. However, imagery cuts straight through the narrative, which is why several examples from the text will be familiar from earlier discussions pertaining to the characters, where different aspects of the example are considered. I will continue by discussing the anatomy of the cultural encounter depicted in Madame de Treymes, the issues at stake, the problems involved and the in-betweenness it results in. The various stages of the encounter as intimated by the treatment of place, the lack of communication, national stereotypes, the problems (marriage and ‘mariage,’ and divorce), will be regarded as well as images of light and vision as well as narration and dialogue.

The Function of Place

If we look at the novella’s structure, representation of place and imagery we see how they interact and intersect when creating the dense

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narrative of the ten tightly constructed chapters. Features of locality, time and presence or absence of light both support the structure and define the thematics of the novella. The story-time begins in spring and ends in autumn, spanning from April through early September. The first two chapters are set outdoors: the moist spring bloom, horse-chestnuts, afternoon brightness and fragrance of lilac are invoked, all in line with Durham’s exhilaration, his expansive feelings of love. A sense of hope and infinite possibility saturates the narrative; the spatial limitation being the lightness of the gauzy sky. In contrast to the airiness of the first chapters, in chapters three and five, descriptions of the Hôtel de Malrive impose rigidity and weight, architecturally as well as metaphorically, thus replacing the potentiality present in the first two chapters by a sense of restriction. The remaining chapters are set in the confines of the indoors, either in the ancient Hôtel de Malrive or in the Boykin residence. The exception is the episode in the Malrive garden in chapter five, at the center of the story. The garden episode links to a long established literary convention where gardens and parks function as sites for lovers’ rendezvous. The Tuileries gardens of possibility and love are replaced by a small enclosed garden where Durham expects to get lost in Eastern bargaining but instead finds abrupt directness. His anticipating exotic negotiation prefigures the deal he is to be offered during the next meeting with Madame de Treymes; however he turns the transaction down. The two localities of the setting are described in opposite terms, whereas the Hôtel de Malrive is described as old, dark and confining, the Boykins’ residence is described as modern, and as having a ‘bright light’. The relation between the setting, imagery and limited potentiality peaks in the penultimate chapter which takes place during the morte saison, when the Hôtel is closed for the summer and is described as silent, dark and empty of life.

Lack of Communication

Safe - Afraid

The aspect of risk in intercultural confrontation remains problematic and the antithetical relation between security and insecurity illustrates
that the characters perceive the activity as critical and dangerous. Communication portrayed as a critical activity in the words, safe – afraid demonstrates this central notion; it recurs throughout the story. Both French and American characters negotiate this aspect of the encounter, drawing on the relation between the sense of safety and its opposite. Fanny directly addresses the riskiness involved in intercultural communication when she explains how the company of Mrs Durham and her daughters makes her feel secure: “I’m safe with them: as safe as in a bank!” (6, my emphasis). The same relation between security and its opposite is used when Durham reassures Madame de Treymes of the temporary stability of their communication in one of their talks, “[y]ou will be quite safe, unless you are so straightforward that you put me on my guard” (27). Another instance is when Mr Boykin inadvertently during dinner conversation oversteps the proper limit of subject matter, when the narrative comment defines his choice of topic as unsafe by stating that “conversation at once slid to safer topics” (31). Further, Mme de Treymes explains to Durham how the family had planned their actions concerning the divorce and its outcome, based on the fact that Fanny and Durham were unfamiliar with the French justice-system and had no way of predicting the trick they were being played by the family and that the Malrives thought they “were reasonably safe...” in assuming the Americans’ ignorance (54).

The word which in the text functions as the opposite of safe is afraid, which is used three times in the conversation between Fanny and Durham, when exploring her fear. It suggests an inherent general, undefined danger in the intercultural situation. Durham asks: “[w]hat obscurities, what mysteries, are you afraid of?”, to which Fanny replies: “I am afraid of everything!” (11-12). Durham then asks her to specify her fears: “[t]ell me exactly what you're afraid of” (11-12). Fanny eventually pinpoints her fear, vaguely attributing it to

204 There are other instances of the use of safe, but I refrain from discussing them here because the instances do not draw on the safe-afraid relationship described above.

205 There are other, less relevant, instances which I will disregard.
the family’s secret “power”, part of “that mysterious solidarity that you [Durham] can’t understand” (12). As an echo of this early dialogue a similar conversation takes place in the last chapter between Durham and Madame de Treymes, although this time Durham answers questions, instead of posing them (57). In the novella’s first chapters Durham self-assuredly says to Fanny: “You know Americans are great hands at getting over difficulties” but, toward the end of the narrative, unable to make sense of French codes, lacking comprehension and coherence, his earlier confidence and sense of control are replaced by fear which is captured in the images of “unformed fears gathering in a dark throng about him” and in “a throng of ugly phantoms” (12, 53, 55). The danger inherent in the encounter Wharton represents in so many ways, emanates in a sense of discontinuity, unpredictability and lack of cohesion resulting in the fear of the unforeseen.

**Negotiating Meaning**

Communication in the cross-cultural setting involves translation, in some sense, and Durham tries to interpret impressions according to his American frame of reference. This is highlighted in the text by the use of language as a metaphor for culture, an idea which is introduced already in the first chapter when Durham ponders on the meaning of Fanny’s use of *event*, “for what, in the language of any civilization, could that word mean….” (5). Durham again suggests translation when he says in the last chapter to Madame de Treymes: “Your French justice takes a grammar and dictionary to understand” (54). The first link between language and culture is established by drawing on the translation process in the narrower sense; that between two languages, which recalls Bhabha’s view of cultural translation. Madame de Treymes completes the metaphor when she speaks of what something meant in her old language, “the language I was still speaking then” (53). Language here signifies her French culture, code, values and opinions. This statement also makes evident that she has changed: it is implicit in the text that she has gained a new ‘language’ (an American cultural perspective), that she now has an additional way of understanding the world too.
To begin with, Durham expects that there are correlatives to American values in French culture. This suggests that he naively thinks there is only one ‘right way’ (his) of organizing the world, that French values therefore are organized like American values. Durham’s process of trying to find a cultural correlative shows that he needs to let go of his own cultural patterns of thought to embrace the other without prejudice, to understand it unconditionally. Initially, having understood only fragments of France, Durham begins to sense the whole, portrayed in images of structures, which come to represent the rigidity of French culture in its many forms: civilization, community, or class, groups (family). The following excerpt consists of two metaphors describing Madame de Treymes’ association with her community: a web metaphor describes the relations within the body of organization, and a crystal metaphor, making her an integral part of a monolithic whole, not an individual.

He was conscious, as she smilingly rejoined him, not of her points of difference from the others, but of the myriad invisible threads by which she held to them; he even recognized the audacious slant of her little brown profile in the portrait of a powdered ancestress beneath which she had paused a moment in advancing. She was simply one particular facet of the solid, glittering impenetrable body which he had thought to turn in his hands and look through like a crystal. . .

(25-26)

These metaphors describe the individual’s relation to the collective. The “myriad of invisible threads” convey the notion of the marionette manipulated by the puppeteer: the larger structure – culture. The metaphor reveals how Durham naively expects to handle the French family; to examine, understand and influence them. Durham refers to the larger structure by describing Paris as an “ordered spectacle” (3), and the Tuileries Gardens in his mind become an image of the civilization into which Fanny has been immersed; as they walk “between the symmetrically clipped limes” he senses through her nearness the “vast impersonal power, controlling and regulating her life in ways he could not guess, putting between himself and her the whole width of the civilization into which her marriage had absorbed her” (5).
Paris’ meticulously ‘manicured’ gardens and groomed trees, meeting the silent expectations of long traditions, have a parallel in the moderated version of Fanny, in how French convention shapes her. Such descriptions of the system betray American attitudes toward French culture: Fanny describes the relation between the family structure in relation to French society in the words: “that far-reaching family organization, which is itself a part of the larger system” (9). Durham describes it as an “organization into which she had been absorbed” and as “an organized and inherited system” (17, 25). The American descriptions emphasize what they regard as the oppressive aspects of incorporating the individual into something collective and much larger, and the French, on the contrary, in Madame de Treymes’ words, value the notion of family “unity” positively, which preserves inherited rights “in spite of every aberration of the individual” (55, 54-55). In the French aristocrat construction of collective – individual the collective interest supersedes the interests of the individual.

The web and the crystal image alike represent French society and family culture, also reflecting culture specific ideas concerning French principles regarding the standing of the individual versus the collective. The text shows how the American standard differs from the French. Durham’s trials and tribulations in trying to make sense of the parallel systems illustrate how complex and intertwined religious and class issues are with views on marriage and the position of the individual versus the collective. Simultaneously while struggling to make sense of the complex cluster of questions, Durham also engages in negotiations with Madame de Treymes. However, negotiations between them are fraught with misunderstandings. The negotiating aspects complicating cultural communication are emphasized by introducing the notion of the bazaar. It first appears as an event in the plot: simply to meet with Madame de Treymes to begin the divorce negotiations, Durham must spend at least two-thousand Francs, at a bazaar. The bazaar, as a keyword, establishes a link between bargaining as an exotic, foreign, and to Durham, obscure activity, and the exchange Madame de Treymes suggests: money for marriage. From
the American perspective it is unacceptable, and would desecrate Durham’s love for Fanny.206

National Stereotypes: ‘The American Type’
In recurring references American nationality is topicalized by specific mention. Other than repeatedly emphasizing the novella’s framing as a narrative of nationality, the activity contributes snapshots of an idea of a ‘generic American’. We also notice how the French architecture is rendered with focus on its ancient, ponderous and rigid qualities, suggestive of the cultural structure it is a part of. The anonymous narrator uses “the American” in a reference to Durham: “…it had been a surprise to the American to read the name of the house emblazoned on black marble over its still more monumental gateway…” (my emphasis, 24). Later in the same episode he suspiciously internally questions Madame de Treymes’ intentions behind the invitation: was it to “permit herself another glimpse of an American so picturesquely embodying the type familiar to French fiction?” (24) Durham’s concern links to a pre-existing stereotype of Americans in French fiction.

The next example stressing nationality is when Durham comes to the Hôtel Malrive during the summer. “[M]ore than ever in the semi abandonment of the morte saison, with reduced service, and shutters closed to the silence of the high-walled court, did it strike the American as the incorruptible custodian of old prejudices and strange social survivals” (49). This time the narrator directly links the architecture of the building to old and, to Durham’s mind, eccentric French cultural practices. In addition to the national focus the French traditional Hôtel is described as silent and secluded from the world, supporting how Durham understands Fanny’s change: once dashing and vibrant, she has been toned down into discretion as a result of having “moved in surroundings” where “one could hardly bounce and bang on the genial American plan without knocking the angles off a number of sacred institutions” (17). Socializing into the group

206 References to bazaar in Madame de Treymes appear on pages 21, 23, 24, 26, 27 and 29 (twice).
culture has demanded of Fanny that she show respect for their culture and the predominant role tradition and religion play in their lives. The silence of the French Hôtel is contrasted to the banging and bouncing which is connected to American characteristics. An example of a loud American making such national noise is Elmer Boykin, when he “returning rakishly from a Sunday’s racing at Chantilly, betrayed, under his ‘knowing’ coat and the racing-glasses slung ostentatiously across his shoulder, the unmistakable cut of the American business man coming ‘up town’ after a long day in the office” (20). Aspects of style both in manner and dress are communicated, and some of the connotations of rakish and dash overlap, linking Mr Boykin to the Frisbees as Americans.

Another reference to nationality explores the two contrasting versions of Fanny de Malrive and Fanny Frisbee: “the finish, the modelling, which Madame de Malrive’s experience had given her . . . set her apart from the fresh uncomplicated personalities of which she had once been simply the most charming type” (16-17). The fresh uncomplicated personalities in this case imply female Americans, the kind of American Fanny once was.

These examples function as snapshots of the preformed idea of ‘the American type’, but short of a unified portrait, they provide an array of opinions and expectations about Americans. The Boykin example teaches us that there is a special ‘cut’ or style to the American businessman, and it suggests his proper hobby. Moreover, it decontextualizes Mr Boykin, who, strangely suspended between categories, passes for an American business man (location: Paris), coming back uptown after a day in the office (he does not work, and ‘uptown’ locates him in Manhattan, New York City, not Paris). American and French behavior is different and loud and discreet captures their respective qualities. We also learn from the reference to Fanny that Americans or at least young American women are fresh, uncomplicated personalities.

But more than just being American portrayals, despite the fact that there are no similar generalized portrayals of the French, when Wharton refers in this way to ‘the American’ she solicits some pre-
conceived attitudes of what Americans are like; she invokes the stereotype and draws on its energy, thus sharpening the contour of French and American styles in national chiaroscuro.

**Marriage – ‘Mariage’, and Divorce**

This leads up to the central conflict which this story pivots on; two different culturally situated attitudes to marriage as religion differ in the French and American contexts. Catholic faith regards marriage as an indissoluble bond between a man and a woman; once consummated, it cannot be dissolved; only a separation is possible, which is why ‘divorce’ has no meaning in the context of Catholic marriage, whereas Protestant faith allows divorce. Since Fanny has never converted and since French law sanctions divorce, Durham underestimates the prescriptive impetus of the church, in believing divorce is possible.

The aspect of class brings additional force to family unity, which Durham does not fully recognize until the final chapters. For its duration, aristocratic proprietorship provides a regular income, securing the family’s life in leisure, as well as its social status. To preserve the state of affairs, male primogeniture secures that ownership stays within the family and is passed to the next generation undivided. In order to realize this material objective, it is supported by a nonmaterial legacy of a set of values organizing the collective interest as superior to the individuals’. Fanny describes her son’s, the Malrive’s heir’s, socialization into what Madame de Treymes later calls his “true place in life” by the church and family; she explains that the “American experience” holds nothing that corresponds to the “far-reaching family organisation” part of the “larger system” (9-10). In Fanny’s words Wharton expresses what Bourdieu would refer to as inculcation of the habitus: “this forming of the mind begins with the child’s first consciousness; it’s in his nursery stories, his baby prayers, his very games with his playmates!” (10). Moreover, she describes the result of the process, in Bourdieu’s terms, the dispositions, as the “network of accepted prejudices and opinions” into which her son was born is born as being
prepared in advance – his political and religious conviction, his judgements of people, his sense of honour, his ideas of women, his whole view of life. He is taught to see vileness and corruption in every one not of his own way of thinking, and in every idea that does not directly serve the religious and political purposes of his class. (9-10)

Collective interests invested in arranged marriages between members of families suitable in rank and wealth in order to augment and consolidate the legacy reduce individual concerns of romantic love as a significant element in marriage. In this context romantic love is incompatible with class, and divorce with the position of the Catholic Church. Subsequently, as long as the Malrive family risks scandal they will not favour divorce, despite the fact that the law allows it (as Fanny never converted).

The American urban middle class’s position is arranged diametrically opposite: individual interest is placed before the collective one, and romantic love is viewed as natural and in alignment with the concept of individual choice. Durham first assumes a correlative between American marriage and French mariage, but failing to find one, in the end he learns that the words each signify meaning specific to their cultural context.

Images of Violence, Light and Vision
Frequent references to Madame de Treymes’ activity of seeing or looking come to define her as a character of European experience; and knowledge, interest and curiosity in the other are reflected in her activity. But the activity’s negative rendering as surveillance suggests resistance: Madame de Treymes and the Americans are reciprocally wary.

The references to her seeing originate on a narrative level, in a mixed position between the narrator and the focalizer, Durham. She subjects her sister-in-law’s visitors to “critical observation” and “unblinking attention” (18). Nothing escapes Madame de Treymes who gives the Durham ladies a “last puzzled penetrating look” (19). Madame de Treymes “imbibed her information: she found it in the air, she extracted it from Durham’s look and manner, she caught it in the
turn of her sister-in-law’s defenceless eyes” (18). Her eyes are con-
trasted to Fanny’s vulnerable eyes as Madame de Treymes’ eyes be-
come a surgical instrument: her “narrowed gaze, slitting like a knife”,
taking whatever information she wants as by force (31). Another
instance is when Madame de Treymes’ “eyes fixed on his [Durham’s]
in a terrible intensity of appeal” (33). Words like unblinking, penetrating, terrible and intensity along with the knife simile generate threatening and disturbing associations in relation to Madame de Treymes. We can follow an escalation of the violent images up to the high point in the story’s mid chapters, when they culminate in the most aggressive metaphors found in chapters five and six; this fierce feature later decreases.207

Other conspicuous images, which further continue and advance the violent aspect of the images of seeing, are a set of military images representing resistance. In contrast to Madame de Treymes’ observations of the Americans in images of seeing, we find the Boykins defiantly in “active disapproval” of the French context about them “fixing in their memory with little stabs of reprobation innumerable instances” of what the French (foreigner) was doing (21). This reminds Durham of “persons peacefully following the course of a hor-ible war by pricking red pins in a map” (21), the military metaphor appropriately framing the “social battle that is to follow.”208 The next chapter opens with the Boykin attitude still reverberating through the text by positioning the French and the Americans as adversaries in war when the narrator refers to the French as the enemy. When Durham comes to tea at the Hôtel de Malrive, the narrator refers to Durham having been “admitted to the heart of the enemy’s country”, and the “threat of fighting divorce” denotes the enemy’s warfare strategy (24). In addition, Madame de Treymes appropriately uses “fencing” as a metaphor to describe her verbal exchange with Durham (27-28).

207 Other references to eyes or the activity of seeing in connection to Madame de Treymes are less violent, but still frequent. In Madame de Treymes’ and Durham’s talk toward the end of the narrative different references to eyes and seeing are especially dense and occur in almost twenty instances in the last chapter alone.

208 Raphael, 60.
A few expressions, less military but undoubtedly hostile, are the equivalent expressions “the abominable foreigner” and “the despised foreigner”, which both pertain to the French (21, 31). When Fanny refers to the Malrive family as “them” (13), and Madame de Treymes to the Americans by the words “your race” (33), they both communicate alienation and distance across the cultural divide.

Finally, the narrator describes Durham’s negative reaction to Madame de Treymes’ proposal which also evokes military associations through the terminology: forces, blood, revolt, surrender, pressure, compromise and parley. The intercultural space is now a combat zone where they battle for the interpretative prerogative, and any understanding or approaching between the two cultural positions is remote.

The tension inherent in the description of the way looks are exchanged well captures the sense of precariousness present in the intercultural circumstance, which also permeates Durham’s visit to the Hôtel Malrive. When first arriving, he is submerged in impressions.

All these amiable chatting visitors, who mostly bore the stamp of personal insignificance on their mildly sloping or aristocratically beaked faces, hung together in a visible closeness of tradition, dress, attitude and manner, as different as possible from the loose aggregation of a roomful of his own countrymen. Durham felt as he observed them, that he had never before known what ‘society’ meant; nor understood that, in an organized and inherited system, it exists full-fledged where two or three of its members are assembled. (25)

Studying the other guests and the building, Durham within ten minutes in the new environment has “his first glimpse of the social force of which Fanny spoke” (25). The aristocratic French community on the one hand, is defined by the links that unite the individual members: “closeness of tradition, dress, attitude and manner”, and the American group on the other, is defined by its lack of unity, as in a “loose aggregation”. The description of Americans by non-unity re-

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209 Both expressions originate in the external narrator in reference to the Boykins’ relation to the French.

210 “[A]ll the traditional forces of his blood were in revolt, and he could only surrender himself to their pressure, without thought of compromise or parley” (35).
calls “The Last Asset” where the American friends of Mrs Newell at the wedding are described similarly.

Durham experiences that the traditions, the prejudices of the larger system are realized as soon as two or three of its members are assembled. The allusion to the words of Jesus: “[f]or where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” describe a similar, although a contrasting non-threatening situation. The biblical chapter treats innocence, offences and forgiveness; its message foreshadowing the moral ordeal Durham approaches which also is the conclusion to the story. Jesus speaks to the disciples of the necessity to humble themselves, to become like children in order to convert and enter the kingdom of heaven. He declares that he who offends one child would be better if a “millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea” Preaching that life is full of trials – “woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!” – he advises “if thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off” because it is better to be maimed than mislead, or to mislead someone else.

The final test of Durham’s character is when Madame de Treymes in the eleventh hour confesses the family’s plan to first agree to divorce so that the court will give the father custody of the son. Madame de Treymes, who thinks she loyally prepares Durham for what is coming, tells him that Fanny will lose her son when remarrying Durham. So Durham in a sense ‘cuts off’ his temptation: his love for Fanny. By remaining silent he would have deceived her, but by the act of telling the truth he chooses not to mislead her (Fanny is innocent in this case), while at the same time he remains true to his ideals (uncorrupt). Madame de Treymes never anticipates that Durham’s loyalty will be with Fanny, putting her desire to raise her son

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212 Matthew, 18:6
213 Matthew, 18:7-8.
214 A different aspect of this episode is discussed above on p. 107.
before his own to marry her. When asked what truth is he replies, it is an “instinct”; he cannot live and be happy if the foundation for his happiness is built on a lie (57). Durham has proved to withstand the test of corruption: a moral triumph at the cost of a wife.

As early as when Durham and Madame de Treymes first appear in the narrative, Wharton signals their function as characters in-between. Durham is standing in a doorway looking out over Paris in the first chapter, on the brink of his European experience. When Madame de Treymes is first introduced in the text this takes place in a faded living room, its light coming through windows facing the “damp green twilight” of the garden (18). There is something undecided about the entire scene: Durham does not even notice Madame de Treymes’ presence in the room for quite some time: not until his family is gathered about Fanny’s tea-table does he become aware of the “dark lady loitering negligently in the background” (18). Her very existence seems uncertain, she is there – yet not perceived. She is in the ‘background’; on the very edge of, but not part of, the social activity of taking afternoon tea. Her ‘loitering’ is in itself a vague activity: she lingers, hovers undecidedly, in-between ‘staying’ and ‘going’. Indeed, the entire episode is emblematic of liminality: the time of day, the twilight, the transition between day and night together with the light traveling through the window.

The interstitiality of characters in-between cultures is suggested in their spatial positioning in liminal spaces:215 passageways illustrate

215 A few concepts of unclear boundaries, interstitiality and in-betweenness will be used interchangeably and refer to the metaphorical place for cultural production between cultures. Liminality may describe a space but may also refer to a human condition, to the state of being undefined, between categories, of being neither nor. Wharton describes a few of her characters in between cultures quite literally as standing on thresholds in the fiction and therefore the term seems especially apt when discussing aspects of their in-betweenness. Liminality comes from the Latin word *līmen*, meaning ‘a threshold’, describing situations where persons are in transitional stages between categories. They are ambivalently positioned ‘betwixt and between’ groups; no longer part of one but not yet a member of the next, suggesting a development from one state to another. In-between is not necessarily a place characters pass through and emerge from changed into something other. Seminal work on liminality is found in Arnold van Gennep’s *Rites of Passage* (1908) and in work by
the unfinishedness of their identities. Incomplete identities suggest limits and borders dissolved: the “exceeding the barrier or boundary – the very act of going beyond – are unknowable, unrepresentable”.  

We turn to the central episode when interstitial interpretation fails; a situation which develops the above characteristics of the novella. The very unrepresentability of going beyond familiar cultural boundaries is mirrored in the sensory confusion we find in the episode’s cultural encounter of Madame de Treymes and Durham. The sensorial metaphors in addition to the mental disorientation are strongly suggestive of the characters’ liminality: their in-betweenness. Durham, ultimately, gradually realizes his own cultural limitations; revising his preconceptions in the encounter. This is captured in images of light and vision.

The following episode describes Durham’s gradual understanding of how the limitations of his own traditions and beliefs impinge on his situation. References to seeing and light are dense; they add up to a kind of symbolic cultural blindness. Realizing his misconception, understanding that his American code has no meaning in a French framework, he is assailed by a series of confusing impressions, and he struggles to make new cultural sense as his idea of American cultural preference and superiority collapses.

Upon his sense of bewilderment, this sense of having entered a room in which the lights had suddenly been turned out, even Madame de Treymes’ intensely modern presence threw no illumination. He was conscious as she smilingly rejoined him, not of her points of difference from the others, but on the myriad of invisible threads by which she held to them; he even recognized the audacious slant of her little brown profile in the portrait of a powdered ancestress beneath which she had paused a moment in advancing. She was simply one particular facet of the solid, glittering, impenetrable body which he had thought to turn in his hand and look through like a crystal; and when

Victor Turner. However, I have borrowed it from Bhabha who also makes use of the term.

she said, in her clear staccato English, ‘Perhaps you will like to see the other rooms,’ he felt like crying out his blindness: ‘If I could only be sure to see anything here!’ Was she conscious of his blindness, and was he as remote and as unintelligible as she was to him? … For, after all he had some vague traditional lights on her world and her antecedents; whereas to her he was a wholly new phenomenon, as unexplained as a fragment of meteorite dropped at her feet…. (25-26, my italics)

The struggle is portrayed symbolically, images relating to vision capture how critical cultural communication in the encounter is represented as blindness. His seeing – understanding – only extends to the limit of his culture; and unable to see beyond it, unable to decode the other culture, he is blind. Recognizing his blindness is the first step toward change and greater understanding of the other culture and his own. But despite the negative descriptions of Madame de Treymes, an important development of cultural understanding is reached when Durham realizes that correlatives between concepts are not a matter of course, and French values are independent of American: that his understanding of another society is not reached in comparison to his previous own cultural experience, but on its very own terms. These realizations are the starting-point for his evolving new relative cultural perspective. Wondering if Madame de Treymes is as bewildered as he is, he considers that perhaps he, as an American, knows more about Europe, as he has “vague traditional lights on her world and her antecedents”, than the French would know about his country, and his compatriots, which are new phenomena to them (25-26). This does not imply a sense of his superior understanding, but rather Durham’s appreciation of European history and art as having no equivalence in American history. He expresses the traditional old world – new world opposition.217

Cross-cultural communication is clearly a critical activity, fraught with risk and peril for both parties; between Durham and Madame de Treymes a few parallels can be established. During a stressful situation they each find communication exceptionally difficult when they experience similar signs of confusion of their perceptive senses. Dur-

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217 Cf. Old World vs. New World, n. 34.
ham’s episode of experienced blindness in the middle chapter when visiting the Hôtel de Malrive already accounts for his perspective on the cultural encounter, but in this representation of the encounter Madame de Treymes is focalized too, her experience described in metaphor. The general context on this occasion is at the Boykin dinner when they each struggle to make sense of their conversation. Beginning with Durham, he experiences similar images relating to vision as in the earlier case.

The cry restored him to his senses by the long shaft of light it sent down the dark windings of the situation. He seemed suddenly to know Madame de Treymes as if he had been brought up with her in the inscrutable shades of the Hôtel de Malrive. (34, my italics)

The words light, dark and shades link to vision. Madame de Treymes’ experience, on the other hand, is described in the following excerpt:

She, on the other hand appeared to have a startled but uncomprehending sense of the fact that his silence was no longer completely sympathetic, but her touch called forth no answering vibration; and she made a desperate clutch at the one chord she could be certain of sounding. (34, my italics)

It is described in images relating to sound, and no less than four connections are made in one sentence: silence, vibration, chord and sounding. The lack of sound corresponds to Durham’s equivalent experience of lack of sight, their confusion illustrates their respective desperate negotiation with meaning. Cross-cultural communication is riddled with complication, and frustration for them both. Struggling for meaning, they lose their cultural bearings, the loss of perceptual powers representing a break-down in communication. It is also worth mentioning that the representation of their experiences in this episode is distributed unevenly: Durham’s troubles are represented more frequently, as well as being allotted more space in the narrative than Madame de Treymes’ experience.

218 In both excerpts the characters are described from a narrative position external to the story.
In the last chapter the conflict between Durham and Madame de Treymes is resolved, they see each other’s reasons for their previous actions, and their true objectives lie clear. There is symmetry as well as sympathy in their respective utterances “you poor good woman!” and “you poor good man!” (59). “Good” carries in each case the recognition of the change they see in the other and in themselves, as well as they both realize that they are part of their cultures and how this limits their options available. They see how their respective interpretations are as valid as the other’s. They have reached the ‘least common denominator’, or in Bhabha’s terms arrived at that which in a sense is incommensurable: the difference, that cultural excess which remains after a process of translation. Each having acknowledged the other’s situation relative to values of that culture, they are for a moment free from the obfuscating prejudices of their own culture: the completed intercultural encounter manifest between individuals. Intercultural communication where everything is translatable Wharton suggests is impossible.

To sum up, the representation of place correlates to images of confinement: the movement from the open, bright outdoor spaces to enclosed, dark, indoor spaces is mirrored in Durham’s gradual awareness of the confining conditions for the two married women in the narrative, as well as his increasing recognition of his own limited understanding of European values. A parallel to this development can be observed in the narration as well. The earlier ample narration and references to spatiality are replaced by more dialogue in the last two chapters: space becoming a metaphor for choice, and narration seemingly collapsing into dialogue. Consequently, narration as well has become so restricted in its expression that the narrator contributes little and has resorted to a mere recording of the verbal exchanges between Durham and Madame de Treymes in the last chapters. So, at the very end no choice remains. The characters are as paralyzed by the lack of choice as the narrator seems inactivate in the narration. The technique with narrative shifts in presence and absence, as well as the close relationship between the structure, imagery and narration just discussed, emanates from the anonymous narrator.
Concluding Remarks

Wharton develops the theme of the cultural encounter in *Madame de Treymes* in an in-depth depiction of the encounter using metaphors and keywords which convey aspects of the interstitial process. The space between the external narrator and the focalizing instance is more accentuated in the novella than in “The Last Asset”; Wharton manipulates this distance to record Durham’s changing cultural awareness.

One way to summarize this story is to say that nothing happens: Durham still cannot marry Fanny who cannot divorce, Madame de Treymes is just as caught in her situation. Love is problematic: it is returned but unattainable between the French lovers as well as between the American ones. Europe in Durham’s and Fanny’s case is connected with disillusionment, disappointment and pain. Despite being thwarted by social impasse, they have all learned about another culture; the action is psychological rather than driven by events.

Change versus non-change represents the outwardly discernable result of the intangible encounter, which is generated by the increasing understanding of the other and the participants’ mutual curiosity about each other. Both change and non-change are exemplified in the plot. All three main characters become each other’s catalysts for change. Beginning with Fanny’s transformation from an American girl into a French woman, she changes on the outside and partially on the inside; she acts like, looks like and passes for a French woman, at least in the eyes of the Americans. Fanny’s change is instigated by Madame de Treymes, being part of Fanny’s context prior to story-time. Change is reciprocally inspired in Fanny and Madame de Treymes, who admits to becoming “enlarged” after spending a good deal of time with her sister-in-law. Understanding Durham’s moral code also inspires Madame de Treymes’ change: she is thus doubly inspired by him and Fanny.

Durham is the character who goes through the most obvious change during the time of the story. He gradually becomes aware of moving further away from the family’s views. No character is directly
specified as the instigator of his change, but Fanny and Madame de Treymes both explain to him the workings of French family culture.

Durham together with his mother and sisters in turn influences Fanny to become a “better and better American” (6). He convinces her that he will be able persuade the family that divorce is a solution. He also inspires her temporary repossess of her former trustfulness, which results in her trusting Madame de Treymes, against her better knowledge, that divorce is an option. In this case Fanny disregards her warning voice of experience, based on her ‘feel’ for system. But she will abruptly be brought back to the reality of her hopeless impasse, as the novel closes.

Non-change, on the other hand, is represented by Mrs Durham and Mrs Boykin. Mrs Durham’s “mild unimaginative view” suggests her inability to understand the implications of divorce from a Catholic point of view (41). Mrs Boykin has also simply refrained from change and development, forever frustrated and isolated in exile. In contrast to the change of the three main characters, the non-change described is represented by the older American women, ossified in their female roles.

Change is a product of the cultural encounter which ultimately confirms a gradual approaching of the two cultures. It is the essential product of the characters’ constructive attitude of openness, curiosity, sensitivity, as well as their will to learn about the other culture’s values and ways of life. The independence of other cultures is recognized and is not interpreted against the background of their own, but on its own terms.

The transmission between economic capital and symbolic capital in some form is present throughout the novella, and the relationship between the French and the Americans is regulated by desire for that which the ‘other’ has. Bourdieu’s perspective elucidates how different forms of symbolic capital are closely interconnected, variously transmitted between the groups. Central in the play for what the other group has is the opposition in the absence and the presence of eco-
nomic capital: Durham has it; the French desire it. However, the French nobility’s real currency is cultural capital: tradition, titles and the environment associated with a French aristocratic lifestyle. Their old family estate is imbued with tradition, as well as mannered behavior in accordance with their class’s social code. This is what the Americans do not have, but consider prestigious; and therefore consciously or unconsciously strive to gain in some respect.

Beginning with the Durhams, we find that as early as in the New York days of Fanny’s and Durham’s youth the Durham ladies used to admire the Frisbees, who in turn admired the aristocracy so as to consider a marriage proposal to their daughter by a French Marquis a suitable match. Whether or not the unhappy Malrive marriage is one where American money is traded for a European title, although it is clearly indicated that the French do not waste time on Americans without money to spend, the connection between culture and money is suggested repeatedly. The Durham ladies are impressed with Fanny’s ‘Frenchness’, which they possibly amalgamate with her class-code. Durham wants to return to New York with his version of a European catch, conveniently his old love, now enhanced by an air of aristocratic refinement, titled the Marquise de Malrive. The Boykins who are related to the Durhams, have during twenty-five years not been able to establish themselves in Paris’ polite society; they are now exalted that Durham unexpectedly provides them with a social opening to the French aristocracy, a chance to increase their social capital. The transmission of capital is made very obvious in this case where American economic capital is converted into social capital, in Dur-

219 Madame de Treymes establishes a relation between money and access to her, since the American pays two thousand francs to charity for a one-time invitation to have tea and socialize in the same circles. Durham is wealthy, saying that he has “worked long enough, and successfully enough to take my ease and take it where I choose” (11). Madame de Treymes later tries to sell her influence and she negotiates money for marriage, but Durham refuses to mix the two – and the plan fails. By paying the prince’s gambling debts Durham is to buy the right to marry Fanny de Malrive. Madame de Treymes openly speaks her opinion of how Americans handle money in France: she thinks that they always pay more than what they are purchasing is worth.
ham’s charity money which directly results in an invitation to tea at the Malrives.

A series of terms carry this opposition between cultural capital and economic capital, emphasizing the differences between concepts Wharton connects to Frenchness and/or Americanness. Madame de Treymes simultaneously and antithetically represents tradition in that she both embodies aristocratic heritage in addition to something modern: “her intensely modern presence” (25). Although it is not stated that modern refers to her fashionable French clothes, or the style of her hair, we may infer that this is the case since Durham sees her against a portrait of an ancestress, recognizing in Madame de Treymes the older woman’s profile. The exact same phrase, “intensely modern”, is also used to describe the Boykins’ sofa (21). Nevertheless, other more traditional interior details can be found in the Boykins’ home. In one episode Durham and Mrs Boykin are “islanded” on the “wide expanse of Aubusson” (22).\(^{220}\) The mixture of modern and traditional furniture in Mrs Boykins’ living-room adds to the sense of ‘handsome’ haphazardness we recognize in earlier descriptions of the Durham sisters’ dress as American accidental style-effects. Even the somewhat contradictory effect of these disparate interior details seems underlined by the fact that they cause Durham and Mrs Boykin to sit talking in an equally contradictory and odd “state of propinquity without privacy” (22). The same contradiction is evident in Wharton’s description of American privacy as conspicuous and un concealed, as a “glaring privacy of brocade and ormolu” which suggests the opposite of the French kind to be had in the Malrive garden, evoking a lover’s meeting. The homes define both French and Americans in a sense. The French are suggested by dusk; their houses as well as gardens lack light, they construct private spaces; whereas the Boykin’s residence is characterized by the un concealing

\(^{220}\) Aubusson refers to a considerably sized hand-woven floor covering, produced in the area of the village Aubusson, in central France. These carpets were produced for the nobility and also had a special selection for the royal court which was not available outside the court. See “Aubusson carpet”, Encyclopædia Britannica, 2007, Encyclopædia Britannica Online, retrieved 10 Dec. 2007.
“hard bright light of American skies”, lacking spots for privacy (32). The French are characterized as private and discrete while the Americans are described as obtrusive and flamboyant.

Furthermore, Wharton mainly connects modern dwellings and furniture to the Americans; while linking the French to historical buildings, antique furniture, which in Bourdieu’s terms are objectified cultural capital which can be appropriated materially, sold, but also have a symbolical value which presupposes a cultural capital to appropriate (to appreciate or understand). The esthetic values inherent in the novella are not surprisingly in line with French style; ideas conveyed in that the Boykins, the uneducated rich Americans, sense status in French style, and consequently purchase a few proper symbols of French taste, appropriating these objects materially, but not symbolically. Although unable to appropriate cultural capital symbolically, they are completely certain about the prestige invested in those signs and the monetary value these objects translate into.

In the following some of the views, values and prejudices held by the narrator and the focalizer, will be considered together with the sources which supply the information shaping the characterization of the American and French figures: together these aspects contribute to how this text is culturally positioned.

Common to American and French characters is that the same sources construct, or characterize them. The external narrator, the internal character-bound focalizer and agents in the story, in different combinations, contribute information in varying degrees of quantity and quality. However, the distribution of narrative space differs, just as well as the reliability of the sources which supply information about the characters differs between the American and the French representations. This information is what the reader bases an evaluation on.

The largest narrative space and the most obvious positive portrayal are allotted to describing the Americans, as they are the greater number of characters. A positive portrayal of the Americans who have in some way incorporated something French into their perspec-
tive sets them apart from harsh narrative criticism of other expatriate Americans, which indicates that this as the main cultural perspective. The least criticized position is Fanny’s, being the most culturally knowledgeable position, which Durham also approaches in the last chapters. The only instance of disapproval directed at Fanny by the narrator is a tinge of irony when she places the collective interest before the individual: when she assumes a French pose, defending her French family’s reputation at the cost of her own happiness. This betrays an American positioning of the narrative perspective.

The negotiating aspect of the narrative is mainly portrayed as an American activity, showing Durham negotiating the French and American culture throughout the story. The process of working out Fanny Frisbee and Fanny de Malrive, on the one hand, and Fanny de Malrive and Madame de Treymes, on the other, is approached from the American perspective. Durham’s cultural blindness as well as the portrayal of Madame de Treymes’ elusiveness primarily comes to represent an American perspective of cultural confusion and incoherence, symbolizing failing communication.

The American perspective is manifest in a generally critical portrayal of the French as dishonest, which is matched by the Americans’ suspicion of them. In this respect Fanny’s experience is contrasted with Durham’s inexperience. Her initial misgivings about the divorce are a sign of her experience, but she is still tricked into believing it is a possibility; however, she is surprised that because she has never heard the Malrive family “declare themselves so plainly”, and her long habit of “looking for the truth always in what they don’t say” has made her suspicious (37, 39). Durham too doubts the Malrives, and when he learns that Fanny will get a divorce, he inwardly experiences “small signs of alarm” and the “pricking of an unappeased distrust”, although less consciously than Fanny who speaks of her doubt (38-39, 39). The indirectness of the French in comparison with the directness of the Americans contributes to a binary construction of the French as dishonest, suppressing the objectives to their actions, and the Americans as honest, spontaneous and a bit naïve. Having no deliberately concealed agendas, the Americans in the moral framework of the novella are in a sense truthful.
The story touches on American and French values surrounding the American taboo of extramarital relationships, but there is no discussion of any French taboo. The closest this narrative takes us to anything extremely disagreeable in French society is the relationship between Madame de Treymes and the Prince. It is not discussed openly, but Fanny and Madame de Treymes mention it in private confidence, whereas in an American setting the subject would be unspeakable. Wharton seemingly brings up analogous relationships; on the one hand Fanny and Durham’s and on the other, Madame de Treymes and the Prince’s. It is important in understanding the ethics of the Americans that they never contemplate a similar arrangement as the one between Madame de Treymes and the Prince de Armillac. Fanny and Durham try within the context of their culture to organize a socially acceptable arrangement where their love may be expressed, but Madame de Treymes has an extramarital affair, as divorce is not possible. The two relationships serve as each other’s opposites, and alternatives: one morally acceptable in America (the thought of divorce) but impossible in Catholic France, and an extramarital relationship possible in France, but unspeakable in America. Nevertheless, the sense of moral veracity never strays from the main American cultural perspective.

Although an American main cultural position is the most obvious on the text’s surface, textual evidence does not conclusively point to a singular and uncontested American main position in the text. I will continue by considering how Frenchness is constructed; how narrative silence results in a sense of narrative instability and how it reveals resistance against the main American position in the text.

In the wake of the comparatively positive portrayal of Americans, we can see Frenchness constructed by three narrative strategies. Firstly, the most obvious way is by American reference to the French; for instance when Fanny and Madame de Treymes describe the French and French life to Durham. Secondly, it is constructed by the depiction of one single French character in the story, Madame de Treymes. She is represented in direct speech; however, what she says
is repeatedly and disturbingly distorted. The instability of meaning becomes an index of how the Americans experience cultural translation, symbolizing their struggle to make sense of another cultural code and place. Incoherent and illogical, immoral and lying, illusive and ambiguous French characters ultimately epitomize cultural translation gone wrong, or having collapsed. Thirdly, off-stage characters construct Frenchness. Fanny’s husband, the Marquis de Malrives and Madame de Treymes’ decadent lover, the Prince, are never directly portrayed, but merely mediated by other characters in conversation. We never get first hand information, only indirect reports in the form of gossip or insinuations from a few unreliable sources. The choice to keep them off-stage, the lack of information about them in the narrative creates what Shari Benstock calls a “space of the unimaginable”.221 She discusses this as a narrative technique in the introduction to A Son at the Front, where the front is hidden from view, something talked about but never shown. She notes that Wharton’s “decision to keep the war off-scene was no doubt based on artistic grounds”, and “[i]nvoked by the phrase ‘at the front’, the war occupies a space of the unimaginable in Wharton’s text. On one hand, the war is described in euphemisms (‘that hideous barbarism’); on the other, its savagery becomes an ‘entertainment’ for charity events”.222 In Madame de Treymes the ‘other’ is kept off-stage, out of sight, his/her motives and actions unknown and omitted from the plot; the narrative void is fed by other characters’ gossip from an American perspective. The cultural bias reveals an unbalanced representation and an uncertain image of the French.

This novella offers a number of conflicting perspectives and a number of interpretations. The explicit and predominant perspective is American which on a surface level characterizes the French as deceitful opposites to the honest Americans. If we understand Madame

221 Benstock, “Introduction” in A Son at the Front (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1995), vii-xvi, xiii. The reader learns little about Fanny’s husband and her marriage. We find the same technique is used in The Age of Innocence depicting Ellen’s husband, Count Olenski and their marriage.

222 Benstock, “Introduction”, xiii.
de Treymes’ instability (lying and dishonesty) in symbolic terms, it can be connected with critical cultural communication where translation is lost, where meaning eludes both parties, not just the Americans. A perspective, resisting interpretation, surfaces as a critique of the American perspective by questioning the validity of the character construction: the bias of the American perspective has built into it its own critique. The foundations for the negative reports about the Marquis de Malrive and the Prince de Armillac are never challenged within the narrative, merely accepted. Narrative silence, neither supporting nor contesting the one-sided characterizations, destabilizes the external narrative position’s “implied” objectivity. So, from the American position the French characters emerge by unsubstantiated representation, based on scanty information, third hand or more, from a singular and undependable source (the Boykins), which in fact produces disreputable French aristocrats such as the Marquis and the Prince.

Put in context with the obscure but significant moral progress that I find in Madame de Treymes, it is interesting to notice that despite her dishonesty the development of the narrative proves she is capable of change, which is at odds with her otherwise harsh representation by external narrative comments. If we understand her change as a sign that she is not all bad, then why should the inadequate, unverified and untrustworthy characterization of the Marquis and the Prince as wicked in doubtful gossip, be taken for granted? The discord is just under the surface, raising questions about Madame de Treymes’ portrayal as corrupt as a result of a main American cultural position in the text.

On the one hand, when Madame de Treymes admits to change, to being enriched, she does so in accordance with American norms of ‘good’. When acknowledging the American point of view as moral, and by referring to French values as “my old language”, Madame de Treymes also recognizes American values as morally superior to French values; she adopts the general American cultural position, the moral framework of the novella in some sense as ‘true’. So Durham’s dream of rescue and renewal is not possible for Fanny, but renewal in some regard becomes possible for Madame de Treymes. In this sense
the novella may seem like it is comparing French values with American values, although French life is interpreted by an American agent, and the French interpretation of the American is not equal in scope. The novella is really a discussion of American notions of what the French may be like which in effect says more about American fears of the other than about French immorality.

On the other hand, the perspective of the novella is principally American, but there is an indirect undercurrent of resistance which comes up as a critique of the main perspective. Present in the narrative’s American cultural position is an inherent sense of moral veracity, endorsing values of right and wrong, good and bad and of truth and untruth which reflect on the narrator and the focalizer. The American positioning is questioned by the narrative itself when at the end of the novella this moral universe is ultimately questioned by Durham (who has to some degree taken over the external narrative function) arriving at (a completed intercultural encounter) an opinion where he and Madame de Treymes recognize the other’s values and guiding principles as equal to their own. They relativize these values to that other whole cultural context, and not to their own cultural experience. In other words, the fact that Durham in the end sees French culture polycentrically shifts the whole ethnocentric American perspective, questioning its validity.
Chapter Four: Staging the Cultural Encounter

Composed in America during the summer of 1908, “Les Metteurs en Scène” is the only piece of fiction Wharton wrote in French despite her excellent command of the language. In this particular case, Wharton received an “S.O.S.” from *La Revue des Deux Mondes* to the effect that the promised translation of one of her short stories which was to be included in the next issue of the periodical was not forthcoming. Wharton responded by offering to replace it by writing a story directly in French. The result, “Les Metteurs en Scène”, was published in the October issue of *La Revue des Deux Mondes*. The story was never translated into English during Wharton’s lifetime. The English version I use here (supplemented by quotations from

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223 Her other French publication is *Lettres à l’ami français* (a collection of letters between Edith Wharton and Lucien Bélugou during 1908-1930). It is unclear if this text has been translated into English at all; however it was reprinted in 2001. See Claudine Lesage, ed., *Lettres à l’ami français* (Paris: Houdiard, 2001).

224 Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 183


226 R.W.B. Lewis, ed., *The Short Stories of Edith Wharton* (New York: Charles Scribner’s sons, 1968), 555. It is worth noting that the translation is made into AmE, as is seen in the few examples: *color* (92) and *vice* (98), whereas Wharton herself adhered to BrE, and subsequently would have spelled the words *colour* and *vice* (see Brookner).
Wharton’s original French) is a translation made in 1968 by Becky Nolan, a graduate student at Yale, and later reprinted in 1989 in *The Stories of Edith Wharton*.

Shari Benstock notes in her Wharton biography that the story was written as a “lark”, but Henry James took it with “mock seriousness”, congratulating Edith on having “picked up every old worn out literary phrase that’s been lying about in the streets of Paris for the last twenty years, and managed to pack them all in to those few pages.” He also emphasized that “she must never do it again” (which she never did); criticism which Millicent Bell considers “no doubt, justified”. However, any traces of the clichés James refers to are missing, her French is crystal clear and alert, Philippe Romanski claims in a review of the 2001 French reprint of “Les Metteurs en Scène”. This was not the first time James instructed her about her writing. A few years earlier, in 1902, he admonished her for treading on his turf, advising her to write on the “American subject” and to leave the international subject for him. This shows how James took the liberty to dictate her literary scope, and Benstock points out that he admitted that he would like to “write her work ‘over in my own way’”, which reveals how he regarded her as a threat, both as woman and artist.

Benstock further notes that Wharton outwardly seemed to be working well during the early summer of 1908. But her life was becoming increasingly “difficult”, and as the summer progressed she finally stopped writing. The last piece of fiction before her respite was “Les Metteurs en Scène”. The tone of her business correspondence during this time was “comic and briskly energetic”, forming a striking

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227 Benstock, *No Gifts from Chance*, 188.


230 Benstock, *No Gifts from Chance*, 188.

231 Benstock, *No Gifts from Chance*, 188.
contrast to that of her private letters to her lover Morton Fullerton. An ironic but humorous quality can also be found in “Les Metteurs en Scène” seemingly forming a continuation of the tone present in business correspondence, as opposed to her private letters.

The topic of matchmaking and marriage for money was not new to Wharton; we find that “Les Metteurs en Scène” has much in common with “The Introducers”, first published in the December issue of Ainslee’s in 1905. Lee calls “Les Metteurs en Scène” her French translation of “The Introducers”. A variation on the same theme but set in an American context, it leaves all international considerations aside when a duo similar to Le Fanois and Miss Lambart, Mr Tilney and Miss Grantham, meet at Newport. They are the social secretaries of upstarts with new money but not yet a social standing to match their financial status. They scheme to marry each other’s charges, but ironically end up looking for new positions since their respective ‘prodigies’ beat them to the punch.

Very little has been written about “Les Metteurs en Scène”. Mentioned by a few scholars in order to discuss the fact that she wrote in French, commenting on her French proficiency, it is also referred to in relation to Henry James’s attitude to this work. But taking Wharton’s joke seriously and because I have surprisingly not found any thorough discussion of this text, it is especially interesting to consider this short story. I will fit “Les Metteurs en Scène” into her larger intercultural theme where it has a central standing as one of the few stories where she foregrounds the cultural encounter between Americans and Europeans.

Since the narrative is short there is little space to develop parallel themes, so in “Les Metteurs en Scène” we find it more undiluted by side themes than in other works. The concentrated narrative seems reduced to almost schematic Franco-American relations between the French character in between cultures, Jean Le Fanois, and in some respect Blanche Lambart as a Europeanized American and the Amer-

232 Benstock, No Gifts from Chance, 188.
233 Lee, 245.
icans, the Smithers. The narrative can be seen as constructed around two major oppositions, on the one hand between the absence of money and its presence, and on the other, between the presence of appropriate cultural code, education and connections, and their absence. This time Wharton ascribes the cultural capital to the characters positioned in between cultures, and the economic capital to the uneducated rich Americans. When the Smithers meet the French Le Fanois and expatriate American Miss Lambart, they meet their opposites. They engage in a trade of cultural competence and connections for money; a transmission of symbolic capital to economic capital.

“Les Metteurs en Scène”

Of humble background but recently rich, Americans Mrs Smithers and her daughter Catherine arrive in Paris. Snubbed by the New York elite, they hope for better luck in Parisian society. Fresh off the steamer they are taken care of by the Europeanized American Blanche and her French friend Le Fanois who have collaborated for four years as promoters of American *nouveaux riches*. When they learn that Mrs Smithers wants to find an aristocratic husband for her daughter, Blanche and Le Fanois instantly set about marrying Catherine off.

Le Fanois, a nobleman, has for ten years purchased antique collectables for his charges, having also acted as their marriage-broker. As a token of the appreciation of the local antique dealers, he receives large sums of money for the clients he brings, is offered good prices on what he buys for himself, and has acquired a nice little house with his own antique collection. He promises Blanche to find a suitable husband for her, because she wants social and economic security. While they are busy making Catherine’s match, Catherine to their surprise falls in love with Le Fanois who agrees to marry her. But shortly thereafter she catches pneumonia and dies. After the funeral, Mrs Smithers asks Le Fanois to go away with her to rest. On their return he learns from Blanche that Catherine on her deathbed has given Blanche one million dollars, and she is now free to choose whom she wants to marry. Le Fanois and Blanche silently care for each other, but since they together have not been able afford a life
style acceptable to their standards, neither has regarded it as a possibility. When Le Fanois learns about Catherine’s legacy he grows tense, and the story ends with his embarrassed confession that he is engaged to marry Mrs Smithers, whom he despises.

Tone

“Les Metteurs en Scène” is narrated from an anonymous external narrative position which is more knowledgeable than the characters, particularly in matters regarding cultural difference. The narrator supplies information on the main characters, only little of Blanche although considerably more about Fanois. Le Fanois is the character-bound focalizer internal to the story; focalization shifts between these positions, sometimes fusing and difficult to tell apart.

From the onset of the story the narrator’s tone betrays values in line with those of Blanche and Le Fanois. They share an ironic and derisive attitude toward the rich Americans in quest of a social career. No sooner have we found out that Le Fanois decides to marry Catherine than she falls ill with double pneumonia, dying a few days afterwards.234 From then on the caustic edge of the earlier ironic stance is much less noticeable, if not lost altogether. In part four the tone shifts which can be connected to the development of the plot. The change in tone may have been due to a feeling on Wharton’s part that the narrative from a functional point of view would have worked less well, had the ironic comments continued to be made about the dying girl and her bereaved mother. As the girl dies the caustic tone appropriately vanishes from Blanche and Le Fanois, but nevertheless lingers with the narrator until the last is said of Mrs Smithers. An example is when the narrator summarizes the events surrounding Catherine’s death, pointing out that Mrs Smithers thought she could “save her by sheer force of money [la sauver à coups d’argent]” showing her “for the time the impotence of her millions [pour la première fois

234 Textually, this information is consecutive. The third part ends with the knowledge that Catherine and Le Fanois will marry, to be immediately succeeded by part four (beginning with the narrator’s summary of the passing of six weeks’ time), the episode during Catherine’s illness (92 [702]).
... l’impuissance de ses millions)” (94 [704]). Mrs Smithers questions over and over “what more could I have spent? [qu’est-ce que j’aurais pu dépenser en plus?]” (94 [704]). The narrator’s disapproval is even clearer when relating the specifics concerning the funeral; how the fact that Parisian high society was “bent on attending the funeral [avait tenu à assister aux obsèques]” consoled her, along with her purchase of a hundred copies of the Paris Herald to send to friends in America (94 [704]). The initial sympathy in the phrasing of how Mrs Smithers “spoke of hiding her sorrow, in spite of the fact that the social season was at its height [elle parlait d’aller cacher son deuil, bien que la saison mondaine y battit son plein]”, is reversed in the narrative summary that follows, elaborating on her itinerary of the fashionable resorts, Cannes, Barcelona and San Sebastian (94 [704]).

The development of the plot is somewhat unexpected since the narrative’s onset, with a quick, sarcastic and humorous dialogue, seemingly does not prepare for the development of a tragic ending. Therefore, in order to make the narrative hold the development of the plot, it was necessary to diminish the critical tone, or the irony directed at human suffering would have caused a morally lop-sided narrative.

Characters

The story’s specific and recurring mention of nationality suggests that characters represent more than themselves: that they also in some degree represent their national category. Almost immediately following the introduction of each of the two characters, the narrator turns them into general representations of a Parisian and an American, imbuing them with narrative scope beyond their individual destinies. Wharton continues to draw on the energy of the stereotype, providing snapshots of already established images of Americans or Parisians, emphasizing certain differences between the Americans and the French.

235 The English translation seems to have left out “first” which occurs in the French original text: “for the [sic] time the impotence of her millions” (94 [704]).
Le Fanois: The Parisian

The narrator establishes a distance to Le Fanois when describing him critically. His suit is described as an “impeccably tailored frock coat [sa redingote de coupe irreprochable]” (83 [692]). Then the narrator continues by stereotyping him as Parisian. Le Fanois is linked to his class and to Paris rather than to his nationality in the words “he had the knowing and the slightly impertinent air of the aristocratic Parisian [il avait l’allure narquoise et légèrement impertinent du Parisien de bonne famille]”, the narrator casts him as “the Parisian club-man [clubman parisien]” (83, 86 [692, 695]). Both these statements suggest an attitude, a general preconception of what a French aristocrat is like, and what a Parisian club-man is.

Le Fanois has been promoting the social career of nouveaux riches in Paris for ten years, and for the past three or four in a ‘silent arrangement’ with Blanche. Since gambling debts have depreciated his modest fortune he has become progressively involved in an idle, luxurious life with frantic diversions. This situation motivates him to accept substantial kickbacks from art dealers pleased with the business he supplies in the form of rich Americans. There is irony in the narrator’s description of Le Fanois’ advisory role as regards the Americans through a religious metaphor: he served as an “advisor extraordinary to foreign pilgrims quickened by the pious desire to spend their millions for the benefit of idle Parisians [et devint le conseiller attitré des pèlerins d’outre-mer qu’anime le pieux désir de dépenser leurs millions au profit des oisifs Parisiens]” (87 [696]). Le Fanois himself defines his function as that of “the role of ‘metteur en scène’ [son rôle de metteur en scène]” (87 [696]).236 There is also a great deal of reproach in the narrative description of how Le Fanois uses other people’s gullibility for his own purposes, and he is described as a “luxury-craving boy [garçon affamé de luxe]” (85 [695]). He is portrayed as a self-serving, conceited and condescending man. However, his exposure to Catherine’s ‘goodness’ and ‘trustfulness’ inspires a change in him; he is ashamed of having been dishonest about his

236 The phrase Metteur en scène is emphasized differently in the English translation.
feelings for her before she died. He is also ashamed of the fact that he first got engaged to Catherine, then to the mother; twice putting money before his love for Blanche. His greediness and addiction to a luxurious life is the reason for their romantic impasse and their unhappiness.

**Blanche: The Europeanized American**

Blanche is first seen from Le Fanois’ perspective; it is clear that he is waiting for her. And much in a similar fashion as Le Fanois is introduced to the narrative, as a stereotype (Parisian), when she appears she is described in terms of national stereotype; she is presented as a self-reliant, competent person, with “an intelligent forehead [un front intelligent]” (83 [692]). She walks with “the confident air, the serenely audacious carriage of the young American used to making her own way in life [la mine confiante, le port de tête tranquillement audacieux, de la jeune Américaine habituée à se frayer elle-même un chemin à travers la vie]”; her “naïve air of independence characteristic of her compatriots was tempered in her by a nuance of Parisian refinement [l’air d’indépendance un peu naïve qui caractérise ses compatriotes était adouci chez elle par une nuance de raffinement parisien]” (83 [692-693], my italics). This statement does two things: it presupposes an American stereotype (“the young American”), and it contrasts this perspective with a Europeanized version of an American in France; it takes for granted what a young American in France is typically like. The narrator observes simultaneous American and French characteristics exemplified in Blanche’s attitude, because modified by cultural immersion in Parisian life, she has still retained some positive ‘original’ characteristics, recalling Bhabha’s notion of how a synthesis between cultural forms, often is represented as partial or incomplete presence. We are informed that she lives alone and receives callers with the “independence of a married woman [l’indépendance d’une femme mariée]” (89 [698]). This recalls the first instance of reference to independence, again linking her to national stereotype.

Another reference to the American stereotype originates in Le Fanois’ ponderings over Blanche’s reasons for coming to Europe,
whether they are aligned with many other Americans’ reasons for coming to Europe:

Was it the taste for luxury or the need for perpetual motion that so often motivated her fellow-countrymen? Did she come from one of those small towns whose sad, monotonous atmosphere be had heard described, where the women die of boredom in idle solitude while their husbands pile up a fortune that neither of them can enjoy? [Était-ce le goût du luxe, ou le besoin d’agitation continuelle qui anime si souvent ses compatriotes? Sortait-elle d’une de ces petites villes américaines dont on lui avait décrit l’ambiance triste et monotone, où les femmes se morfondent dans une solitude oisive, tandis que leurs maris s’acharnent à amasser une fortune dont ni les uns ni les autres savent jouir?] (87 [697], my italics)

Le Fanois considers Blanche’s possible American background, recalling stories he has heard of Americans making more money than they know how to spend. The excerpt demonstrates that his ideas are based on stereotype, information he has heard repeated, which make up part of some general French conception of what Americans and American life is like.

The reader learns little of Blanche’s understanding of her position in relation to the two cultures; there being no access to her thoughts. We learn little of her background, other than Le Fanois’ impression of her “fine intelligence [air d’intelligence fine]” (87 [696]), sensing that she is of a “more refined stock than most Americans who try to storm Parisian society. Everything about her betrayed a careful education, an abundance of social graces, the habit of moving in elegant circles [elle avait une origine plus distinguée que la plupart de ceux qui tentaient l’assaut de la société parisienne. Tout en elle décelait une éducation soignée, une facilité mondaine très grande, la fréquentation habituelle d’un milieu raffiné]”, and he soon guesses that “like himself she lived at the expense of people she despised [elle vivait, comme lui, aux dépens de gens qu’elle méprisait]” (87 [696]). He surmises that she is “a casualty of New York society, too poor to resist the luxury that surrounded her, yet too proud and particular to tie herself down to a second-rate marriage [une des épaves de la grande existence mondaine de New-York, trop pauvre pour lutter avec le luxe qui l’environnait, trop fière et trop difficile pour
s’astreindre à un mariage mediocre” (87-88 [697]). Whether or not she has come to Paris to avoid an unhappy but socially appropriate marriage is never confirmed. But tired of her parasitic existence, she wants to marry for security. She speaks with a tinge of jealousy about the “awful power of money [pouvoir effrayant de l’argent]”, of how Catherine’s wealth gives her the option to choose her husband (89 [699]).

**Cultural Translation: Mediators**

The story’s setting is in the world of luxury hotels, more precisely the Hôtel Nouveau-Luxe in Paris, described as a noisy, exotic environment of spacious lounges and fashionable cabarets. It is peopled by conspicuously rich Americans who, snubbed by the American social elite, New York society, instead seek admittance to Parisian high society with ambitions to marry a count or marquis. The hotel situates the Smithers in the same category of Americans as the Woolsey Hubbards of “The Last Asset”.

This is the milieu where expatriate uneducated rich Americans meet the mediators who are going to introduce them to extravagant Parisian life. Both Le Fanois and Blanche straddle social and national categories. Having the cultural know-how but lacking the capital necessary to realize such a lifestyle for themselves, they have to settle for the ambiguous circumstances of living a life in luxury dependent on other people’s money; in a sense holding a position between friend and employee. This role the sociologist Erving Goffman calls a “go-between”, defining it as a “discrepant role”. The go-between “learns the secrets of each side and gives each side the true impression that he will keep its secrets; but he tends to give each side the false impression that he is more loyal to it than to the other.” In the case of the “theatrical agent, the go-between may function as a means by which each side is given a slanted version of the other that


238 Goffman, 149.
is calculated to make a closer relationship between the two sides possible” and in the case of the marriage broker, “the go-between may serve as a means of conveying tentative overtures from each side to the other which, if openly presented, might lead to an embarrassing acceptance or rejection.” As a constituent part of the two teams, in their presence, the go-between is forced into a difficult situation resembling “a man desperately playing tennis with himself”, an activity which for the individual is “bizarre, untenable, undignified, vacillating as it does from one set of appearances and loyalties to another.” These conditions constitute their stage as well as their roles as cultural mediators. Le Fanois’ ambiguous position between the two groups is described:

His family ties and charming personality had enabled him to remain in contact with the exclusive social circles that keep their distance from the madding crowd; Le Fanois acted as intermediary between the renegades from this milieu, each of them tormented by a craving for luxury and movement, and the explorers from the New World who longed to penetrate their closed society [Ses liens de famille, et sa personnalité fine et charmante lui avaient permis de rester en relation avec le vrai monde, celui qui se tient à l'écart de l'existence cosmopolite; et Le Fanois jouait le rôle d’intermédiaire entre les transfuges de ce milieu, ceux que tourmente la soif du luxe et du mouvement, et les explorateurs du Nouveau-Monde qui aspiraient à pénétrer dans leur société fermée]. (87 [696])

Their customers have the money necessary for an elaborate lifestyle, but lacking the adequate cultural code they cannot purchase the right attributes enabling them to pass as the social category to which they aspire.

The general function of the cultural mediator is to facilitate translation of the cultural code, to guide their ‘prodigies’ toward new, prestigious behavior, preferences and lifestyle. They help fashion

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239 Goffman, 149.
240 Goffman, 149.
241 The reference to “explorers from the New World” again indicates the reversal of terms describing the original Euro-American colonial condition.
people; arranging for them the identity and life they desire. Le Fanois and Blanche are to ‘translate’ the Smithers’ into the French ‘code’, so that they may be perceived as potential spouses for French aristocrats. Their double cultural coding gives them the power to arrange, to set the stage for cultural transaction to take place (in marriage). The more exact value of belonging to the French aristocratic group culture can readily be translated into dollars: a dot.

Suspended in a position in-between American and French cultures the mediators recognize cultural group markers; that which is necessary to pass as a member of a social and cultural category. They help make perceptible that which normally is unnoticed and ‘natural’ to a person within a culture. Pierre Bourdieu writes about taste functioning as a marker of class, when culture is regarded in the narrower sense as ‘highbrow’: “all cultural practices (museum-visits, concert-going, reading etc.), and preferences in literature, painting or music, are closely linked to educational level (measured by degrees or length of schooling) and secondarily to social origin.”

Cultural consumption (reading, viewing art or listening to music) in this context he sees as a stage in a communicative process to decipher or decode a message, which presupposes the mastery of the cipher or code. “A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded.”

This becomes especially pertinent in reference to the uneducated rich. All activity being culturally coded, these expatriates aspire to acquire not only highbrow tastes, but need to attain an entire lifestyle: behavior, opinions, hobbies, friends, and an appropriate neighborhood to live in. Wharton’s professional mediators fill this need: they give them a complete cultural makeover.

Goffman notes that aspects of individual’s self-presentations have varying degrees of intentionality. On one hand, self-presentation becomes a message about how the self wishes to be interpreted by others: a performance is an activity which serves to influence other

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participants. But on the other, the individual will chiefly express her-
or himself in a certain way because the traditions of his group or her
social status require this kind of expression. This means that the
uneducated rich Americans such as the Hubbards and the Smithers
are highly motivated with a high level of intentionality; their decision
to change is a result of rational calculation. Blanche and Le Fanois
can assist the Americans with the superficial, outwardly apparent and
perhaps more conscious aspects of translation into Frenchness. But
what causes confusion in the French-American relations is the rup-
ture in the shiny surface of the ‘show’; the complications of non-
intentional behavior. The decidedly more difficult part of the assign-
ment for the mediators of culture is to ‘teach’ the Americans another
group’s habitus. Bourdieu’s notion of habitus is explained by Ales-
sandro Duranti as a “system of dispositions with historical dimen-
sions through which novices acquire competence by entering activi-
ties through which they develop a series of expectations about the
world and about ways of being in it.”

The short story mocks the practice among the newly rich Ameri-
cans of using introducers to smooth their way into other social
groups, abroad or in New York. Since cultural capital is slowly ac-
cquired in socialization, by participation in social practices, where dis-
positions are inculteated that in turn cause certain behaviors and per-
ceptions in the individual, which are not necessarily the result of cal-
culation, any constructed crash-course in style is likely to fail. In this
context Wharton’s mediator’s task seems unrealistic and naïve; merely
resulting in an outward appearance of Frenchness. When describing
successful American assimilators she undoubtedly regards time as a
factor in the cultural acquisition process.

Madame de Treymes testifies to a more realistic plan, where moral
values pertaining to customs, fashions, matters of taste, politeness
and decorum are something we see in Fanny de Malrive’s second

244 Goffman, 6.
245 Alessandro Duranti, *Linguistic Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University
Press, 1997), 44.
culture learning, which has taken fifteen years. Blanche and Fanny are versions of Wharton’s characters between cultures, who both have come to embody a cultural capital which Wharton ascribes to the French. What makes Fanny’s position so unique is her ability to share, as well as understand, both the French and the American culture, which is supplied by the reader’s access to Fanny’s thoughts. She is a hybrid embodying perhaps that which Wharton considers the best of American and French culture.

Betwixt and Between

The mediators are clearly portrayed as characters between cultures. When they are first introduced in the narrative Wharton emphasizes their interstitiality by positioning them in conventionally liminal spaces. Le Fanois is standing in the doorway between the drawing-room and the spacious lounge at the Hôtel Nouveau-Luxe, waiting for Blanche, who as she enters the stage, appears on the threshold of the same lounge, in-between two spaces.246 This situates them as occupants of the interstice, of spaces in-between cultures linking them to liminal characters earlier discussed in Madame de Treymes. Homi Bhabha remarks about the liminal place:

The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end from settling into primordial polarities. This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy.247

The ambiguousness and undecidability of the liminal state offers freedom from the restrictions of the conventional and offers openness to something new.

However, the account of Le Fanois and Blanche as in-between cultures is different from Wharton’s earlier account of Durham and

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246 The exact wording is: “on the threshold of the lounge [le seuil du hall]” (83[692]).
Madame de Treymes. The difference consists in that the metteurs\textsuperscript{248} are being depicted as a result or output of the process from an outside position, whereas Wharton’s account of Durham and Madame de Treymes pinpoints the actual process of engaging culturally with the other from an interstitial perspective. As the complete opposites of the metteurs we find the first glimpse of the Smithers as a representation of the raw material or that which goes into the process, before any translation of Americans has yet commenced.

\textit{Americans in Europe: The Smithers}

In the depiction of the Smithers Wharton returns to the uneducated rich American, seemingly catching them from another angle this time: at an early stage in their European careers. They are indirectly depicted as opposed to the Newells and the Boykins, not yet embittered, still hopeful about their life in France.

Mrs Smithers, allotted neither agency nor voice, is constructed by Blanche’s, Le Fanois’ and the external narrator’s sarcastic comments. They are in ironic consensus about her up until Catherine’s death, when the characters begin to speak more respectfully of her, although the external narrator’s sarcasm does not abate.\textsuperscript{249}

The derisive tone is especially obvious when Blanche clarifies their reason for coming to Paris. She explains how Mrs Smithers wants to achieve social standing quickly, and how she has been unable to do so in New York whereas society in Paris does not question their background “provided they are wealthy and come from far enough away [il suffit que les gens soient riches et viennent d’assez loin]” (85 [694]). Blanche explains that Mrs Smithers “wanted to establish ties with the French aristocracy, since her own aristocratic tastes made life in a plebeian society unbearable [qu’elle désirait se lier avec l’aristocratie française, ayant elle-même des goûts aristocratiques

\textsuperscript{248} I here refer to a process of cultural change in which Blanche becomes Europeanized and Le Fanois is influenced by American culture.

\textsuperscript{249} They are in ironic consensus, the only exception being Blanche’s statement: “she is good at heart [Au fond c’est une bonne femme]” (92 [702]).
This statement catches the complex situation where the French aristocrats are willing to tolerate eccentric, or ‘other’ social behavior if the actor is rich and from far enough away. In other words, ‘outsider’ manners and mores can be tolerated if they may be rationalized as ‘foreign’, i.e. American, whereas if the group is not from ‘far away’ (i.e. a French group), the difference might not be acceptable. In need of money, the French refrain from asking questions that may break the illusion of marriageability, and the Americans use the confusion for their social advancement: both sides profiting from the ambivalence between the categories class and nationality. In a situation new both to the French and the Americans, where the boundaries of class and nationality become ambiguous and muddled, association across social classes between different nationalities becomes possible.

Catherine is the character with the least agency, and no voice. The narrator conveys Le Fanois’ friends’ opinion about her as a “‘nice girl’ [‘bonne fille’]” (88 [698]). Blanche appears bitter on one occasion when in a fit of jealousy she refers to Catherine’s hand as a “pudgy paw [grosse patte rouge et épaisse]”; Le Fanois is harsher calling Catherine “brainless [petite sotte]” (89, 91 [699, 700]). The external narrator adopts the same superior attitude toward the Smithers as Le Fanois and Blanche.

Catherine wants to go to the races and the theatre; longing to display her lovely outfits at the American colony’s dances, she has few other ambitions (88/697). The narrator specifies the kind of qualities which makes up Catherine’s naïvety:

[In spite of her awkwardness, her twangy voice, her ear-splitting laugh, she projected such freshness and youthful radiance that her lack of savoir-faire was soon forgotten. She was a ‘nice girl’ and her naïveté and joviality were much appreciated [Malgré sa démarche brusque, sa voix nasillarde, son rire assourdissant, il y avait en elle une fraîcheur, un éclat de vie et de jeunesse qui faisaient excuser son manque d’éducation sociale. C’était une ‘bonne fille’, et on lui savait gré de sa naïvité et de son humeur joviale]. (88 [698])}
Le Fanois refers to her as a “child [enfant]” in opposition to all the American “designing women [ces intrigantes souples et adroites]” he has attended to earlier, adding that “her very faults will help us to marry her off [ses défauts mêmes nous aideront à la caser]” (698).

The term naïve is used repeatedly to describe American characters in “Les Metteurs en Scène”. It occurs five times and is used in the first instance by the narrator about Blanche, linking her to Americans as stereotype, claiming that she has about her “the slightly naïve air of independence characteristic of her compatriots [l’air d’indépendance un peu naïve qui caractérise ses compatriots]” (693). In the second instance Blanche speaks about the Smithers; she offers her first impression which later is confirmed in the fourth instance. She says: “[t]hey still seem quite naïve to me . . . but one always has to be on one’s guard. The naïve ones are sometimes the most distrustful [‘Je les crois bien naïves encore . . . mais il faut toujours se tenir sur ses gardes. Les plus naïfs sont parfois les plus méfians’]” (693). The naïve and distrustful emphasizes the tension between possible meanings of naïveté. Blanche exemplifies by referring back to an earlier incident when they as metteurs en scène had almost been fooled by the naïve and pretty widow in Trouville. Her naïveté consisted in thinking that it was possible to pass herself off as a widow while still having a husband in America; and that the truth would never be found out. Blanche asks Le Fanois:

Do you remember that pretty widow in Trouville – you know from last year? If you’d been willing to present her to the Duchess of Sestre, what a marvelous trick you would have played!

The young man shrugged slightly. ‘She was simply asking too much’, he returned. ‘And then – and then was she really a widow as we understand it here, or had she simply mislaid her last husband? Your country is so vast that such accidents must be common.’ [Souvenez-vous de la jolie veuve de Trouville, – celle de l’année dernière, vous savez? Si vous aviez voulu la présenter à la duchesse de Sestre, le tour eût été joué.]

Le jeune homme haussa légèrement les épaules. ‘Elle était vraiment trop exigeante’, dit-il. ‘Et puis, – et puis, – était-elle bien veuve, veuve comme on l’entend chez nous, ou bien avait-elle simplement
The last two instances of *naïve* occur when the narrator confirms Blanche’s first impression, that indeed “Mrs Smithers and her daughter were naïve souls [Mrs Smithers et sa fille étaient des âmes naïves]”, and that Catherine’s lack of social graces, tact and refinement corresponds to aspects of *naïve* (88 [696]).

While drawing on the word’s opposing pejorative and positive connotations, Wharton restricts the use of *naïve* to depicting Americans. Possible meanings of the word seem to range from the downright silliness or folly of the pretty widow in Trouville, to the occasionally tactless, although sincere, artlessness of Catherine. To Blanche, however, adheres the more positive nuances of the word; she comes across as free, unrestricted and as frank, which suggest an altogether different meaning of *naïve.*

### Love

A parallel can be made between the protagonists’ view of Parisian life which is described as “tiresome [assommante]” (85 [695]). Both Blanche and Le Fanois indicate that they have reached satiation of what life in the circles of the *nouveaux riches* has to offer. Le Fanois has had a couple of years of empty, boring social life together with extremely wealthy American expatriates. He inwardly asks himself what circumstances have put Blanche in her present situation. The first time they meet, Le Fanois interprets her situation to be such that “like himself she lived at the expense of people she despised [elle vivait, comme lui, aux dépens de gens qu’elle méprisait]” (87 [696]). In conversation Blanche later admits: “Very well, then. I’ve worn out, I’ve had enough. But I’ve lived too long among the rich and happy . . . . Believe me, I’ve had enough! . . . . How much do you think I

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250 Naïve: “[n]atural, unaffected, simple, artless” (*OED*, 1.a.); “[n]ot having previously had a particular experience” (*OED*, 2.). Naïveté: “[a]n instance or case of artlessness; an artless action, remark etc.” (*OED*, 1.), and the “quality of being naïve . . . the absence of pretense or conventionality”: “sort of naïveté or openness of demeanor” (*OED*, 2), See *Oxford English Dictionary.*
would need to find a suitable husband? [Eh bien, oui, soit! Je suis lasse, lasse. J’ai trop vécu parmi les riches et les heureux . . . . Ah ! j’en ai assez, allez! . . . . Combien me faudrait-il, croyez-vous, pour trouver un parti convenable?]” (90 [699-700]) Blanche confesses that she needs to make a good marriage-match herself to keep up her lifestyle;\(^{251}\) she wants what girls with dowries can get, “security for life and the heart of a respectable young man [pour cueillir un beau nom, une belle situation, et le cœur d’un honnête garçon!” (89 [699]) In relation to Blanche’s difficult situation, Catherine’s generous gift has a \textit{deus ex machina} quality, but Blanche’s newly attained independence is not realized within the narrative, so by the end of the story the issue regarding her independence remains unresolved.

Le Fanois and Blanche are in love, but this is never expressed, merely inferred from conversations between them and narrative observations of the outward signs of their emotional reactions. Their feelings are communicated silently by indirect narrative comments and by hints in bantering dialogue and remain just beneath the surface. The narrative comment which comes the closest to directly mentioning their feelings for each other relates how Le Fanois had “never spoken to her of love [jamais il ne lui avait dit un mot d’amour]”, and how he thinks she has an “indefinable gleam [lueur indefinissable]” (88, 90 [697, 699]).\(^{252}\) Le Fanois also promises to

\(^{251}\) It is worth noting that when Miss Lambart succeeds in her job, i.e. successfully provides a good match for one of her protégées she also puts herself out of a job. Miss Lambart’s female charges are described as successfully and finally handled when she marries them off. Conversely, the clients of Le Fanois need his services on a long term basis. Evidently, the needs for social introduction are different for rich American women than for American men. This situation makes Blanche’s economic situation instable, being one of the reasons she wants to marry. There are indications of Blanche’s and Le Fanois’ attraction to each other, but it is in conflict with their modest economic situations. In their minds they are an ‘impossible’ match because they both need to marry somebody rich to give them the financial security they want.

\(^{252}\) The relevant pages where this development can be followed will be supplied in this note in order to maintain the flow of the text. Bantering dialogue (e.g. p. 84), and recurring blushing occurs: “[s]he blushed a little [[elle rougit légèrement]]” (90 [700]); “[a]sudden rush of color inflamed Blanche Lambart’s cheek [Une vive rougeur baigna le visage de Blanche Lambart]” (92 [701]); “[s]he raised her head slowly and looked at
make a fine match for her, to find a man who adores her, a statement which does not exclude himself. His contorted lips when he learns from Blanche that Catherine wants to marry him, not the prince, betray his conflicting emotions about the choice he has to make between love and money. After Catherine’s funeral and the return from abroad Blanche wants to approach Le Fanois: “... [or the first time in her life, she seemed unafraid to take off the mask of irony [. . . que, pour la première fois, de sa vie elle osait soulever le masque d’ironie]” (95 [705]). Le Fanois thinks she “never looked prettier [jamais elle n’avait été plus jolie]”; when he guesses what Blanche is about to tell him he pushes back his chair (96 [706]). When she finally tells him about the gift he flushes crimson. Suspecting something is wrong, Blanche’s eyes fill with tears, and he seizes her wrists in a vise-like grip, just before admitting that he has engaged to marry the mother. Hence, their love remains undeclared. Instances like these communicate their unspoken love continuously on the verge of being told. Glances, averted eyes and blushing are frequent by which Wharton expresses the characters’ emotional turmoil under the surface.

**Change: Loss and Gain**

In “Les Metteurs en Scène” Wharton illustrates change in the characters who engage in the cultural encounter, but she also describes their respective change as interdependent. The narrator notes that contact “with another civilization had affected her [Blanche] in a totally different way than it had Le Fanois; she had gained, in this cosmopolitan exchange, as much as he seemed to have lost [Le contact d’une autre civilisation avait produit chez elle un tout autre effet que chez Le Fanois: elle avait gagné, à ce commerce cosmopolite, autant que lui paraissait y avoir perdu]” (83 [693]). Wharton establishes symmetry between Le Fanois’ loss, on the one hand, and Blanche’s gain of culture, or symbolic capital on the other.

him, blushing [[elle-ci leva lentement la tête et la regarda en rougissant]] (97 [708]); and “crimson [[en] rougissant]” (97 [708]). Other indications are: “adores [adore]” (90 [700]), “contorted lips [une contraction nerveuse de ses lèvres]” (91 [701]); “never looked prettier [jamais elle n’avait été plus jolie]” (96 [706]) and “vise-like grip [lui saisit les poignets]” (98 [708]).
Blanche’s development depends on qualities in her background: she “came from a more refined stock than most Americans who try to storm Parisian society [qu’elle avait une origine plus distinguée que la plupart de ceux qui tentaient l’assaut de la société parisienne]” (87 [696]). Her social context seems to have equipped her with better raw-material, making her more susceptible to refined French culture, and especially inclined to assimilate cultural difference, which suggests that on some Americans the same measure of culture would be wasted. Wharton ascribes to Fanny Frisbee and Blanche the same feature which preconditions their cultural change: a particular American quality which improves by contact with French culture.

The winner on the exchange is the character with the most potentiality, Blanche. She gains cultural capital, while gradually and successfully maturing in the French environment. In opposition, Le Fanois is the loser on the exchange which is mirrored in his boredom. The lives of his rich American friends are described as “a completely empty existence, devoid of fixed occupations or stable relationships [une existence absolument vide, sans occupations fixes ni relations suivies]”, hiding its “yawning emptiness under the appearances of frantic activity [le vide profond sous les dehors d’une activité effrénée]” (86 [695]). This lifestyle Wharton portrays as in some sense draining La Fanois of symbolic capital; she outlines the conversion process by describing its more pleasant aspects as that of saving money, acquiring a house and filling it with antiques as compensation for his cultural loss.

Le Fanois in a sense represents cultural decline. The notion that when confronted with American culture, he loses that which Blanche gains in contact with the French culture, suggests an underlying pessimism regarding the French individual, rather than French culture as such, as well as it suggests an optimism regarding the quality of the American individual, rather than of American culture as a whole.

Whereas Le Fanois converts his symbolic capital into economic capital, we can note a similar process among the Americans, although the flow of capital moves in the opposite direction. This is suggested over the course of the narrative in that American superficial qualities
subside, or weaken. Therefore, modified American features in the Smithers can be understood as a measure of ‘successful translation’ by the mediators. The narrator first accounts for the most noticeable external qualities, accentuating the differences between the characters in between cultures and the Americans. The Smithers, when just arriving, are described as ostentatious dressers; the narrator derogatively begins by portraying Mrs Smithers as:

. . . a large woman with pale puffy features and a complicated coiffure, on which was poised a hat laden with the remains of an entire aviary of exotic birds . . . . her shoulders weighed down by a magnificent silver fox coat, her movements impeded by the folds of a lavishly embroidered dress, trailing in her wake a tall rosy girl. Dressed with the same exaggerated elegance as her mother, the girl held in her hands a sable muff, a gold purse set with precious stones and a diamond-studded lorgnette, and her incredibly blond hair was crowned with a floral abundance as varied as the ornithological trimmings of the maternal bonnet. [. . . .une grosse dame aux traits pâles et bouffis, surmontés d’une coiffure compliquée, sur laquelle se balançait un chapeau chargé de la dépouille de toute une volière exotique . . . . les épaules écrasées sous un superbe manteau de renard argenté, la démarche gênée par les plis d’une robe lourde de broderies, et traînant à la remorque une jeune fille, grande et rose. Celle-ci, qui était habillée avec la même élégance exagérée que sa mère, tenait à la main un manchon de zibeline, un porte-monnaie en or serti de pierres précieuses, un face-à-main en brillans, et ses cheveux, d’un blond invraisemblable, étaient couronnés d’une flore aussi variées que la garniture ornithologique du chapeau maternel.] (85 [694])

The narrative draws on the stark contrast between on the one hand Miss Lambart’s “understated elegance [d’une élégance sobre]” and on the other, Mrs Smithers and Catherine’s “exaggerated elegance [la même élégance exagérée]” (83, 85 [692, 694]). This suggests that notions of ‘taste’ and ‘style’ are linked to the characters in between cultures. Bourget puts his observations of the American tendency for over-embellishment down to his idea that the “American spirit does not understand moderation”,253 while concluding that the American ladies’ fashion, as well as the American drawing-room, equally have

253 Bourget, 47.
“that indescribable something too much”.\textsuperscript{254} In his analysis of how the \textit{nouveaux riches} overdo it Bourdieu observes that they are haunted by how others perceive them and the judgment they make of their performance. Constantly “[overshooting] the mark for fear of falling short”, the \textit{nouveau riche} reveals his/her insecurity and anxiety about “giving the impression that he/[she] belongs”.\textsuperscript{255} The social and cultural confusion apparent in the first glimpse of Mrs Smithers and Catherine, Le Fanois seemingly sums up by his sigh: “Oh, those poor people . . . those poor people! [– Ah ! les pauvres gens, – les pauvres gens!]”(85 [695])

Indicative of the Smithers’ changing style preferences is that no fantastic hats are mentioned again, supported by Blanche’s comment that Mrs Smithers, when dressed in mourning, in combination with her own genuine hair color, is more attractive than before (95/706).

While the acquisition of symbolic capital can be followed in the weakening of Mrs Smithers’ exaggerated exterior, there are indications of Le Fanois’ moral improvement. Toward the end of the narrative he experiences shame, suffering a guilty conscience for telling Catherine lies of love before she died. He also feels ashamed when Miss Lambart finds out that he is now engaged to marry the mother instead. In the subtext lies the fact that he for the second time values money over love, and having let Blanche down twice, he is embarrassed. Le Fanois’ equivalent can be seen in Madame de Treymes, whose ‘enlargement’ as a person matches his moral improvement in contact with the Americans in Europe. There is irony in the fact that Catherine on her deathbed makes marriage possible between Le Fanois and Blanche, by donating a million dollars to Blanche. However, Le Fanois finds out too late, by then already having promised to marry Mrs Smithers, about whom the only thing he respects is her money.

\textsuperscript{254} Bourget, 51.

\textsuperscript{255} Bourdieu, \textit{Distinction}, 253.
Roles and Narratives

When illustrating how identities are constructed on the intercultural scene, Wharton very deliberately draws on the language of the stage, a rhetorical maneuver she shares with Erving Goffman. In his dramaturgical theory of the presentation of self in every-day life he describes how individuals stage and perform their parts to audiences; how the performances come off or fall flat; exploiting the very same conceptual framework of the stage, suggestive of illusion, as does Wharton in “Les Metteurs en Scène”. But, as Goffman emphasizes, a “character staged is not in some ways real . . . but the successful staging of either of these types or false figures involves use of real techniques – the same techniques by which every day persons sustain their real social situations” In Wharton’s successful staging of her intercultural drama, we can see how she illustrates these real techniques but in fiction form.

In a few references to plays, other than the reference in the title, Wharton keeps the idea of staging vivid. Blanche points out that Le Fanois is not “speaking in character [vous sortez de votre rôle]” and Le Fanois asks Blanche what “role” he “is supposed to play [Expliquez-moi . . . quel est au juste le rôle que je dois jouer]” before meeting Mrs Smithers (84 [694, 693]). This suggests that there are many roles available and many available narratives to tell; however at a closer look, Wharton’s framework somehow does not permit certain roles, or combinations of roles in which nationality plays a part. Hence certain narrative outcomes are not possible within her framework.

The complications concerning marriage in “Les Metteurs en Scène” indicate that the narrative vitality of each of the presumptive marriages is explored. A parallel between Blanche and Catherine is that marriage is discussed in relation to both of them, but neither of them actually marries. Le Fanois is a potential husband to all women, but the least likely marries him. Dale Bauer discusses a related idea which she finds in Wharton’s early fictions. She writes that Wharton’s

256 Goffman, 254-55.
women “come to be indistinguishable from each other” when in an unexpected way they are transformed into each other, resulting in the narrative effect that they seem the same.\(^{257}\) Bauer suggests that the women become each other, but in the case of this short story it is more a matter of their stepping into the same role consecutively. Catherine first replaces Blanche as the woman in Le Fanois’ life; Mrs Smithers then replaces Catherine as the future Mme Le Fanois instead of her daughter. First, the reader is led to believe that Le Fanois and Blanche are in love; despite this notion Le Fanois promises to assist Blanche in finding her a husband, yet he himself ends up marrying instead. Second, Mrs Smithers comes to Europe so the daughter can marry, but when Catherine dies the mother ends up marrying her would-be son-in-law; the mother acquiring the role of the marriageable female in her daughter’s place. A mother marrying her deceased daughter’s fiancé is a disturbing motif with an incestuous strain.\(^{258}\) Blanche and Le Fanois discuss this at an earlier point in the narrative, when Blanche says that the mother has no ambitions “to replace the daughter [à remplacer sa fille]”, but this is exactly what ultimately happens (92 [702]). In their conversation it is treated as a misunderstanding, but in hindsight, Blanche’s statement functions as an amorcé, or a foreshadowing, that the marriage between Le Fanois and Catherine will not occur.\(^{259}\)

Wharton’s further exploration of the vitality of Catherine’s and Blanche’s respective narratives is suggested in the symmetry established by the illnesses, and the similarities between them. Blanche has

\(^{257}\) Bauer exemplifies with *Ethan Frome* and *The Fruit of the Tree*. Zeena is transformed into Ethan’s mother (the invalid) as Mattie is transformed into Zeena; and in *The Fruit of the Tree* Justine becomes Bessie to Amherst. See Dale M. Bauer, “Wharton’s Others: Addiction and Intimacy”, in Carol Singley, ed., *A Historical Guide to Edith Wharton*, 137. See *Ethan Frome*, in Cynthia Griffin Wolff, ed., *Novellas and Other Writings*, and *The Fruit of the Tree* (New York: Scribner’s, 1907).

\(^{258}\) An inversion of this motif can be found in Wharton’s *The Mother’s Recompense* (1925), where the mother’s old lover marries the daughter. See “The Mother’s Recompense” in Cynthia Griffin Wolff, ed., *Novellas and Other Writings*.

\(^{259}\) Rimmon-Kenan, 48.
influenza; Catherine has “double pneumonia” with “raging” fever, stemming from what had been “a neglected cold” (93/703). But what are possibly defined in both cases as colds at their onset, is exaggerated in one case, and underrated in the other, resulting in fatality. In this inversion Blanche claims to be sicker than she really is; exaggerating her influenza so she can extend her present visit in England. Catherine, by contrast, is more ill than anyone thinks – she actually dies from the neglected cold no one has taken seriously.

The marriage between Catherine and Le Fanois is problematic; as a result the narrative is unable to hold it, since it would create ‘moral’ imbalance according to the inherent values of the narrative. Catherine is an American innocent whose feelings of romantic love cannot be coupled with Le Fanois’ concern with money: true love and greed seem incompatible. The arrangement between Le Fanois and Mrs Smithers is fair: he supplies nobility and style, she wealth. There is parity between their respective contributions to the marriage, as well as reciprocity in values regarding the conversion of capitals. Within the framework of Wharton’s French-American economy the second marriage is possible, while the first one is not, the reason being Le Fanois’ tendency to value money more than love.

“Les Metteurs en Scène” reveals an emergent conceptual framework which suggests ‘possible’ and ‘impossible’ combinations of moral, national, cultural and economic properties in characters. Wharton seemingly experiments, testing different combinations of features which make up her characters. She then attempts matching them with each other and three narratives emerge; Le Fanois may marry any one of three women. However, when considering these narratives she discards two as ‘impossible’ before arriving at the ‘possible’ alternative.

260 Blanche explains Catherine’s condition to Le Fanois: “[t]he poor child has double pneumonia, and her fever is raging. [l]a pneumonie a gagné l’autre poumon, et la pauvre petite a une grosse fièvre.”(93 [703])
On an abstract level, Wharton establishes a relationship between the characters’ inner life and their appearance in “Les Metteurs en Scène”. The outward features of the characters in between cultures are simple; their understated way of dressing represents their class’s sophistication. As their opposites we find the more complex outward features of the Americans, whose social innocence in relation to the French background is expressed as loud behavior and dress. Their lack of manners and style: Catherine’s “ear-splitting laugh” and their gaudy fashionable American outfits are effectively contrasted with the low-keyed and understated Parisian elegance of Miss Lambart and with Le Fanois’ well tailored attire. The Americans’ extravagant clothes are an index for wealth, but they also lack a particular style; ideas Wharton conveys by descriptions of fantastic hats and of a haphazard style. Elegance and taste as a result of long time cultivation, Wharton equates with moderation: too much decoration, or too bright colors or combinations, disparate in style, occur as signs of unsophisticated taste.

Wharton portrays the inner life of the intermediate characters as complex. They represent culture in the form of French aristocratic cultural capital, in its embodied form of dispositions: values and beliefs, and in its institutionalized form as education. This results in sophisticated manners, and in the more extreme case Le Fanois’ corruption. The inner life of the Americans, however, represents simplicity, which in a sense corresponds to nature as that which is not cultivated or refined. Honesty, lack of savoir-faire, naïvety, – and even stupidity or folly at the extreme – are some of the properties exemplified by the characters Catherine and the pretty widow in Trouville.

Through the narrative we follow how Wharton explores her conceptual framework, finding its rules by trying out and rejecting certain narratives as inconceivable. Catherine’s almost childlike innocence is not combinable with Le Fanois’ sophistication and dishonesty, neither is Blanche regarded as a possible mate for him. Having discarded the impossible narratives, the last and conceivable narrative remains: in the affiliation between Le Fanois’ cultural capital and Mrs Smithers’ economic capital Wharton finds a balanced and equitable exchange. “Les Metteurs en Scène” can be seen as a key to her treat-
ment of her intercultural subject, and several of its considerations will reappear in subsequent work.

Concluding Remarks

The moral framework of the narrative, the sense of cultural perspective from which right and wrong is viewed, coincides with the narrator’s and the mediators’ position as one in-between cultures. The irony and superior attitude present in the first description, which constructs the Smithers’ difference, also imply a positioning of the narrative instance as interstitial.

The narrative instance constructs the characters, and in dialogue it becomes apparent how they in turn align themselves with or against each other. The narrator disapproves of the Americans, but Le Fanois and Miss Lambart also receive their share of disapproval. However, the narrator is decidedly more critical of Le Fanois’ lax conscience, his habit of helping himself to other people’s luxuries, than of Blanche. Le Fanois is described as having lost what Blanche has gained on the cultural exchange, resulting in a partial portrayal; less than French and less than American, whereas Blanche is being described as less than French but more than American.

The narrative space is unevenly distributed; Blanche and Le Fanois are allotted most of it, they are also represented by direct speech. There is direct representation of neither Mrs Smithers nor Catherine; both are constantly interpreted and ‘told’ by the narrator, Le Fanois and Blanche.

The plot arrives at a final and balanced ‘fair’ agreement between Le Fanois and Mrs Smithers, where the Americans and the French agree on the conversion of capitals between them. Mrs Smithers’ pragmatic idea of trading money for culture is a view which links her ideologically to Le Fanois. Catherine as the innocent American is not viable

261 She is also ideologically connected to the American invader Undine Spragg of The Custom of the Country.
in Europe at all. Having the least agency, she is underrated throughout the narrative: she never speaks for herself, she is summarized by the narrator or by the mediators and is not taken seriously.262

Blanche, originating in American culture is given the more optimistic prognosis for the future. Americans from a certain background can develop and become a synthesis of the best of the two cultures. But this is not completely unproblematic since the positive version of the American assimilator and the hope she inspires, is contrasted by a less attractive feature. She derides the Americans when speaking to Le Fanois, which is noted in a few narrative remarks concerning her tone being ‘malicious’. In this context it seems ironic that the independence she so covets is provided by the people she regards with contempt. As the story closes Blanche is paralyzed in her situation knowing that she now has the money, but the man is no longer available.

What is less obvious is the position of the French character in between cultures. Criticized by the narrative instance, Wharton conveys a rather bleak future for this character type, because although Le Fanois has gained some ‘moral awareness’ in contact with the Americans, he still makes a cynical choice. As Le Fanois’ ethics become obvious, there is a reversal in the function of the metteur en scène: in the first part of the narrative Le Fanois has an active function as a mediator between the two worlds; he is instrumental in constructing alliances between Americans and Frenchmen. If there is not a complete inversion of his function, at least his agency is somewhat reduced. From the end of the third episode, when Le Fanois has agreed to marry Catherine, he is relatively passive in comparison to his earlier degree of participation in the events. The temporal aspect of the narrative is accelerated; the narrator condenses by repeatedly stating time and summarizing events. In barely four pages a series of episodes takes place: Catherine’s illness, Le Fanois’ lie, Catherine’s death and funeral, the return from Mrs Smithers’ recuperating trip, and his

262 Henry James’s Daisy Miller is another character who is not taken seriously in Europe and she, too, catches fever and dies (other characters do not think she is innocent despite her being so).
admission of shame (92-95 [702-706]). From behind the scenes the *metteur en scène* has taken a step onto the stage, and in becoming a character in his own play, his agency is reduced, the narrative collapses, and the play is over. In fact Fanois is the last we see of the French character in an intermediary position between cultures, in Wharton’s fiction dealing with the cultural encounter.

We can choose to regard “Les Metteurs en Scène” as a fluke, as its author proposed, but sometimes accidents are most telling. Several elements from this short story reappear in later works and the uneducated rich occur both before and after this story. But for the first time in Wharton’s fiction we find the specific narrative sequence made explicit: the exclusion from New York society, followed by the trip to Europe in order to be accepted by international society instead. Casting a backward glance to “The Last Asset”, it is reasonable to deduce, judging from the portrayal of Mrs Newell, that she had exhausted her American friends’ every asset, thus emphasizing the need to make new acquaintances one of several possible objectives for coming to Europe. However, “The Last Asset” does not make the causal connection between the rejection in New York and the trip to Europe explicit, as does “Les Metteurs en Scène”. The uneducated rich Americans also make the confusion between the French and the American codes, and socio-economic codes, a strategy for social mobility, which results in marriage outside of their social class.

Another element introduced in “Les Metteurs en Scène” is the cultural gatekeeper of a more ‘professional’ status. By developing the role of Mrs Newell, Wharton here establishes the expert’s function, who in exchange for economic compensation, practically arranges for the social introduction and reception of the Americans who cannot by themselves enter society.

An element Wharton abandons with this story is the character Catherine. So what is it about her that makes her such an ‘impossible’ narrative? Catherine is affiliated with upstarts from the territory, without potentiality, who lack that certain quality necessary to evolve into a sophisticated Fanny or Blanche. But a sign of Catherine’s honesty is the fact that she falls in love – so, her double and paradoxical
connection with both ‘good’ Americans such as Fanny, and with the shallow upstarts – is what makes her narrative impossible. At the same time Catherine encompasses Fanny’s traits: she is good and morally innocent, but also some of Undine’s properties: she just wants to enjoy herself. She is naïve, shallow and lacks the background of the better ‘stock’ of Americans who in Wharton’s fiction are ‘Europeanizable’, capable of attaining the necessary social code. Catherine is the fluke – the inconceivable narrative – that in some sense serves as raw-material and makes the progression from Fanny to Undine Spragg of The Custom of the Country.
Chapter Five: The Cultural Encounter
Manqué

The Custom of the Country

The Custom of the Country was begun as early as 1907 and finally published in 1913.\(^{263}\) Wharton’s process of writing the novel, Benstock claims, was interrupted by a “love-affair, extensive travel, changes of residence, illnesses and a disintegrating marriage”.\(^{264}\) During this period she began the novels The Reef and The Fruit of the Tree, which she finished before the completion of The Custom of the Country. During the novel’s five year gestation her own marriage was at the end of its tether; she was considering divorce despite the fact that it was not socially accepted in her group. The marriage was dissolved the same year The Custom of the Country was published. Divorce is under sharp criticism in the novel; the incidence of divorce rose significantly in America during Wharton’s life span and can be seen as a measure of changing times. Between 1867 and 1929 the divorce rate went up 2,000 percent.\(^{265}\)

The Custom of the Country is different from Wharton’s previous texts in that her heroine’s absolute ambition and lack of scruples make her quite unsympathetic. This American woman in Europe is a


\(^{264}\) Benstock, No Gifts From Chance, 283.

new type of American in comparison to her earlier characters; ambitious, she achieves the ‘ultimate American dream’ available for women: she becomes nobility. Her success story examines the situation of an American girl of little cultural capital, but with a significant economic one. Originating in the American territory, Undine Spragg’s social and geographical trajectory takes her from the city of Apex via New York’s upper crust society to Europe and an ancient hôtel particulier in the Faubourg section in Paris where she is confronted with Europe and the values of French aristocracy.

The novel is set both in America and Europe. Most scholars focus the novel’s social criticism of American society. For example, Wolff and Ammons both agree that the novel’s main objective is to question the leisure class’s value that marriage and divorce are means of bartering. Criticism also discusses Undine’s role in regard to the American society of the time; if Undine is a victim of the system or the perfect result of it.

But the novel also arranges a meeting between a new kind of American and Europe. The novel’s backgrounded theme of Undine’s European marriage and its cultural complications are visible in the chapters describing Undine’s marriage to the French count, Raymond de Chelles and are in some manner briefly mentioned in most critical readings of the novel, but not explored in great detail. The cultural aspects of their marriage appealed more to Henry James than the social upward mobility causing the re-structuring of New York’s upper class which dominates the chapters set in America. Despite James’s ardent earlier instructions that Wharton stay away from the transatlantic subject, she incorporated part of it as a minor theme in *The Custom of the Country*, represented in the marriage between Undine and de Chelles. Wharton writes in her biography, *A Backward Glance*, that this time James admonished her for the exact opposite: for not making the cultural subject her main subject in the novel. He argued, “But of course you know – how should you with your infernal keenness of perception not know? that in doing your tale you had under

your hand a magnificent subject, which ought to have been your main theme, and that you used it as a mere incident and then passed it by”.\textsuperscript{267} Edith Wharton explains James’s point: “the chief interest of the book, and its most original theme, was that of a crude young woman such as Undine Spragg entering, all unprepared and unperceiving, into the mysterious labyrinths of family life in the old French aristocracy”.\textsuperscript{268} Wharton responded that she was “chronicling the career of a particular young woman, and that to whatever hemisphere her fortunes carried her, my task was to record her ravages and pass on to her next phase” upon which James declared “Then, my dear child, you chose the wrong kind of subject”.\textsuperscript{269} However, James’s inconsistent advice seems not to have affected her stories; nevertheless, she thought his comments important enough to reveal in her biography many years later.

Undine transgresses her boundary of class and nationality when marrying into the French nobility. Despite ample critical readings of Wharton’s depiction of class aspects of the American society as portrayed in \textit{The Custom of the Country}, I will give the novel another look, but this time mainly considering the ‘mere incident’ James had pointed out: namely the issues specifically raised by the cultural confrontation between the American woman and the French family.

We will find that aspects of class will overlap with the cultural aspects; I will discuss how they sometimes are connected as well as link to European-American dimensions of Wharton’s other texts. Since the novel follows the heroine for approximately ten years through various strata in American society and traces her situation in different national settings, the cultural aspects are more prevalent in certain episodes of the narrative. However, despite the focus of the

\textsuperscript{267} Wharton, \textit{A Backward Glance}, 182-3. James’s comment that Wharton should have concentrated on one subject matter, the “magnificent subject” of life in the old French aristocracy, and their “competitiveness” has also been noted by Susan Goodman in \textit{Edith Wharton’s Inner Circle} (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 58.

\textsuperscript{268} Wharton, \textit{A Backward Glance}, 182-3.

\textsuperscript{269} Wharton, \textit{A Backward Glance}, 182.
depictions of the cultural encounter and the events in Europe, Europe’s dialectic relationship with America is significant. The rendering of Undine’s life in America creates a backdrop to her experiences in France: France and her European experience emerge in contrast to America. Therefore, I will in relevant parts also discuss Undine’s life in America insomuch that it relates to the cultural conflict between the de Chelles family and Undine. This chapter also considers how the anonymous narrator contributes to the tone of the narrative and how this conveys cultural bias. As part of the greater narrative where Wharton tests her Americans abroad, she has chosen to depict Undine and her husband and their values as so different that they fail to establish a common place in-between cultures, which Wharton had earlier struggled to construct in her narratives with the same cultural potential.

A New Kind of American

In The Custom of the Country, Edith Wharton illustrates a fundamentally American condition during a certain point in the country’s history of industrial growth and the expansion of the west; a time giving rise to many self-made men like Elmer Moffatt. Their new wealth suddenly set them apart from the life-style in which they had been raised. Socially as well as economically ambitious, they made efforts to make a social career to match their business career, destabilizing the existing social-class limits.

This new kind of an economically ruthless American, with ambitious drive, has a set of values aligned with an entrepreneurial spirit and industrial expansion rather than with traditions designed to ultimately preserve family property and mores. Making up part of a mobile class society, their fortunes were often gained in less than a generation; their traditions and values staying in line with the values of the economic class they were outgrowing. The newly rich Americans try to gain entrance into New York society and further into European society and use their money to facilitate it. The upwardly mobile parvenus are persons from indistinct backgrounds, coming from western towns to the eastern cities trying to make a social career, placing significant distance both geographically and socially between themselves
and their background. Described as social invaders, their efforts to gain entry into established society are met by resistance, resulting in a class struggle. Wharton labels the group standing in opposition to the invaders the *aborigines*: the old-money New York families vanishing “with the advance of the invading race”.270

The epic of Undine Spragg’s career falls within the tradition of the American money-novel which had in its focus the tycoons in business, trade or financial speculation. The lives of several of the contemporary rich industrialists like Vanderbilt, Morgan and Gould were fictionalised in novels within this tradition.271 A money-novel usually portrays men on-the-make, but *The Custom of the Country* shows a career route for women. In a social system without business opportunities for women, Undine takes the only career open to her: she marries for success. Scrupulous and ambitious, she marries different new men as she climbs the social ladder. Preston suggests that Wharton creates a female money-novel, that Undine collects “husbands and patronymics the way Moffatt collects art.”272

Ascending socially, Undine Spragg moves between several settings: Apex, New York and Europe, as well as between many relationships with different men. She also encounters cultural conflicts on several levels. The clash between Americans consists of the social differences involving the prestigious Old New York family, the Marvells, and the Spraggs from the territory. Mr Spragg has just made his first fortune, so in order to put distance between themselves and their

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271 Preston gives in *Social Register* a background to the money novel about “getting rich” as a subgenre to the economic novel, and provides a literary context for the money novel. The earliest specimens were written in the 1870s while the later ones were written in the 1920s and 30s. Examples of such novels are Mark Twain’s *The Gilded Age* (1873), and William Dean Howell’s *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) (94). This is also noted by Ammons in *Argument*, 109.

272 Preston, *Social Register*, 129.
IN BETWEEN CULTURES: FRANCO-AMERICAN CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS IN WORK OF EDITH WHARTON

simple background they move to New York.\textsuperscript{273} The novel shows Old New York society disintegrating under the pressure of the invaders of the vague Midwestern locale Apex.\textsuperscript{274} By naming the Spraggs’ and Moffat’s place of origin, Apex, Wharton’s ironic playing on the Latin meaning of ‘summit’ – the highest point of someone’s desires – also suggests the kind of predatory ambition the novel illustrates in the characters from this place. But despite its name, Apex is geographically situated in such a way that its water is poisoned. Through the cracks in the ritzy surface of Undine’s life we catch glimpses of very real sacrifices made by the people of the territory: children drinking putrid water, dying of typhoid fever. Ambitious drive is what propels Undine and Elmer toward success – and away from the town with the high-aspiring name so misrepresentative of its actual conditions of life. Human suffering lurks on the flip side of the coin of success. Having lost her two siblings in early childhood Undine survives: nature selecting only its most viable specimens.

A text giving an interesting contemporary perspective to the novel is Thorstein Veblen’s \textit{The Theory of the Leisure Class} written in 1899, where he discusses precisely the situation of economic growth in American history which Wharton addresses in her novel: a new class on the rise; people caught up in the making of money in the expanding American economy. He coined the phrases \textit{conspicuous leisure} and \textit{conspicuous consumption}. The man of conspicuous leisure shows off his leisure because he can have servants that perform subsidiary duties for him. Consumption becomes “an evidence of wealth, it becomes honorific; and conversely, the failure to consume in due

\textsuperscript{273} Montgomery also notes that by displaying wealth through leisure and by their ostentatious lifestyle, the \textit{nouveaux riches} attempted to put as much “distance as possible between themselves and their lower-class antecedents”, 163.

\textsuperscript{274} Between the two American cultures, Apex and New York, the same kind of difference is established as between European societies and America: i.e. the idea that the more eastern a location is, the more civilized and cultured the inhabitants are: culture is connected to eastern locations, and innocence in some meaning (as opposite to culture) can be connected to western ones. The idea of innocence versus culture is a convention and can be connected to other writers e.g. Willa Cather and Scott Fitzgerald.
quantity and quality becomes a mark of inferiority and demerit.”

Expensive gifts and costly entertainments are given, competitors and friends consume for the host, at the same time serving as witnesses to the consumption of the excesses, and to the host’s facility in etiquette. The society woman’s role was to enhance the husband’s success by public and vicarious consumption of valuable clothes as well as jewelry and to be a hostess at the parties. Veblen’s term ‘conspicuous’ consumption refers to the “waste” of money and resources by people in order to display greater wealth, which was seen as prestigious by the rest of society. Conspicuous leisure refers to the “waste” of time by people which also results in a higher status. The Custom of the Country seems like a schoolbook example of Veblen’s subjects, but in narrative form.

A great deal of recent critical work focusing The Custom of the Country is concerned with aspects of class in the American society. Maureen E Montgomery describes in her book Displaying Women Spectacles of Leisure in Edith Wharton’s New York the highest crust of society and its mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. The terms leisure class, “haute bourgeoisie”, bourgeois elite or social elite all denote the highest social status in New York during 1870-1920. She links her discussion to Bourdieu’s terms of cultural and economic capital; seeing Wharton’s use of aborigines and invaders as signs of the class struggle between the established Old New York families and the newcomers. One of the overriding principles of the leisure class was to “provide a spectacle of wealth”, to “see and be seen” and “in seeking to claim social distinction for themselves the nouveaux riches emulated both the lifestyle of Old New York and that of the European aristocracy, their immediately superior reference groups.”


277 Montgomery, 163.
Narrative Structure and Technique

The novel is structured in five books which correspond to larger phases of Undine’s career.278 The books divided into chapters show different characters’ perspectives, by several positions of focalization. Different from the previously studied texts is Wharton’s use of several character-bound points of focalization as opposed to basically one character-bound focalizer in the earlier texts. The shifts between the consciousnesses of the character-bound focalizer and the anonymous narrator external to the story offer the reader different vantage-points. Undine and Ralph hold an internal character-bound perspective at different times: even Paul Marvell is the focalizer in the last chapter.279 However, the main narrative position is that of the ano-

278 Book one covers up until Undine’s and Ralph’s honeymoon. The second book shows the development of their marriage, a gap between chapters thirteen and fourteen allows three years to pass, the son Paul is born, and the book ends with Undine’s forgetting Paul’s birthday. The third and fourth book deal with Undine’s and Ralph’s separate perspectives on their life apart and their divorce. Book four ends with Ralph’s suicide. The last book focuses on Undine’s life in France; she marries de Chelles and later remarries her secret first husband, Elmer Moffatt.

279 Paul is used as an internal character-bound focalizer, permitting the otherwise rare child’s perspective in Wharton’s fiction. Having forgotten his biological father Ralph Marvell, Paul remembers only his “French father” (1006). Confused between his previous existence in France with de Chelles and his present one in New York, he thinks about his new American home (a copy of the Pitti Palace, received by his mother as a wedding gift on her marriage to Elmer Moffat) as the “new hotel” (1003). Symbolic for the boy’s disorientation, cultural and spatial, he wanders during the episode, drifting through the enormous palace desperately in search of a sense of continuity: looking for anything familiar. Missing his French father, looking for, but unable to find his “old things”, he identifies with a sad boy in a painting, wearing grey velvet, looking as lost as Paul feels (1004). He is lonely, defining the hotel repeatedly as strange and empty. He finds the library and discovers, bewildered, that The Literary Classics of the United States cannot be read since the books are locked up. Used to solitude, he has a “passion for the printed page”, but cannot find any reading material. Seldom seeing his mother, he learns about her whereabouts by reading Mrs Heeny’s newspaper clippings from the society columns. Undine and Elmer Moffat return home, and Moffat tries to impress the boy with the de Chelles tapestries. Finally recognizing something familiar, but so terribly out of place and learning from Moffat that purchasing them had been like “drawing teeth” from the previous owner, the boy bursts into tears (1011). Completely uncomprehending,
nymous, external narrator commenting on events and characters and from whose perspective things are seen. The narrator’s presence is stable and perspectival shifts between internal character-bound focalizers occur. Rather than the narrator explaining characters to the reader, characters disclose themselves in their own actions, speech and thought (when focalizers).

The narrative technique changes from the use of one main internal character-bound focalizer in earlier narratives in this study to the use of several focalizers in *The Custom of the Country*. Undine’s extreme egocentrism being her main character trait makes her an untrustworthy character. As a protagonist she could with difficulty carry focalization alone; her only and narrow character-bound point of focalization would produce a very different narrative result compared to what this novel generates. Beth Kowalesky-Wallace argues in an analysis based on reader-response theory that the narrative is structured so that the reader is not allowed to sympathize with Undine, thus making the reader’s cathexis problematic: the reader’s frustration concerning the difficulty to identify with the character underlies the massive criticism directed at Undine as a character.280 When discussing characters I will return to the negative criticism Undine has inspired in scholars.281

In this novel the narration differs in tone compared to the earlier narratives we have considered. By giving a few examples I will illustrate that the narrative instance does not engage in scornful irony, but rather behaves consistently toward the characters. In the following it is my intention to make a few general narratological points, interesting in themselves but not necessarily directly related to Undine’s encounter with Europe and its values. But together with obser-

Moffat tries to soothe Paul by telling him that someday he will be “the richest boy in America” (1011). Moffatt’s missing the mark illustrates that Paul in this respect simultaneously shares Marvell’s old New York values and de Chelles’ French aristocratic values.


281 Cf.p. 197.
vations of narrative irony in Wharton’s earlier text the following points show a shift toward a milder narrative tone, which reflects on the narrator’s attitude’s toward American and French characters.

By telling less and showing more, the narrator lets the reader draw subtle conclusions based on the provided information. An example is how the “Looey” suite at the Stentorian where the Spraggs are staying is described by the narrator without explicit evaluative remarks or irony; allowing the description of the luxuriously overwhelming interior to speak for itself. “The Spragg rooms were known as one of the Looey suites, and the drawing-rooms walls, above their wainscoting of highly varnished mahogany, were hung with salmon pink damask and adorned with oval portraits of Marie Antoinette and the Princess de Lamballe” (623). The remark that the rooms show “no other traces of human use” than The Hound of the Baskervilles on a table is also open to interpretation, but implies that the people inhabiting the suite leave few personal traces in their wake (623). Defined by their absence the Spraggs’ deficiency also suggests the opposite and positive value inherent in the narrative comment: the actual layers of knowledge invested in such traces of human activity. Some of these traces Wharton locates in art; she writes in correspondence that she finds poetry more than feeling; it is “an art as exact & arduous as playing the violin . . . [presupposing] long training & wide reading, & a saturation in the best that the past has to give.”

The same principle is applied to the characters revealing themselves in thought, speech and actions. A narrative summary, interspersed with Mrs Spragg’s language and quotes relates a conversation between Ralph and Mrs Spragg about her background in Apex City. The narrator’s and Ralph’s focalizing perspective sometimes blend in a diplomatic mix of criticism and praise of the upstarts. On the one

282 This corresponds with Paul’s observation of the Pitti Palace copy as in a sense ‘empty’, despite its being fully furnished; signaling its function as a display of a prestigious context to the Mofatts, rather than a home which to some degree is shaped by the human activity taking place there.

hand, the Spraggs are discussed from a superior perspective; by a consciousness seizing the right to categorize them as simple people, and on the other praising them for not giving any “retrospective pretence of an opulent past”, which other invaders are said to be in the habit of doing (675). The Spraggs are described as “‘plain people’ ” not yet having “learned to be ashamed of it”; the narrator/focalizer wondering, “how long would their virgin innocence last?” (675). The narrator also attaches a positive value to the straightforwardness of Mrs Spragg in that her ideals are frank as the Dagonet values. This episode where Ralph meets Mrs Spragg neither betrays any ironic edge from the narrator’s nor from the focalizer’s angle. Neither is there irony when Undine frets over how to answer Laura Fairford’s dinner invitation: showing Undine rather than describing her. The narrator provides the reader access to her thoughts and decision process, letting the reader draw the conclusions (633-4).

Other parts of the narrative betray traces of irony in certain narrative passages but it appears to have been toned down. An example of this is a narrative summary of a companion of the upstarts Harvey Shallums. They arrive “fresh from Paris, dragging in their wake a bewildered nobleman vaguely designated as ‘the Count’, who offered cautious conversational openings, like an explorer trying beads on savages. . .” (749-50). The narrator’s words seem more mellow, less judgmental, than in earlier descriptions of the rich Americans in “The Last Asset”, Madame de Treymes and “Les Metteurs en Scène”. A similar case is a mild form of criticism emanating from the narrator when describing how Undine’s acquaintance Madame de Trézac, formerly Miss Wincher of Potash Springs, capitalizes on the exoticism of her American background in French society.

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284 The Dagonet family is one of the novel’s oldest and most prestigious old New York families.

285 This simile also relates to the earlier discussion of aborigines, where Europeans are ‘perplexed’ (Madame de Treymes) or ‘bewildered’ (The Custom of the Country) in the company of Americans.

286 Wharton, The Custom of the Country, 635. The quote is discussed below on p. 195 in another context.
The narrator also relates ironic remarks, but attributes them to characters within the novel. An example is the following narrative remark: “Mrs Beringer kept (as Laura Fairford said) a house for stray opinions” (749). Such episodes where characters are attributed value judgments, re-told by the narrator, show how Wharton has gone to great lengths to relieve the external narrative function from responsibility for the kind of offensive, scathing and ironic remarks characterizing the narrator of “The Last Asset”, “Les Metteurs en Scène” and Madame de Treymes. Compared to Wharton’s earlier texts where the narrator uses irony more freely, she has seemingly made concessions in The Custom of the Country, trying to keep the narrator ‘impartial’ without giving up the possibility of delivering ironic value judgments, thus achieving a sense of a more disinterested and trustworthy narrative agent.

French and American Manners
In the following discussion of French and American manners we will find that the aspects of class and nationality merge. We will also see how Wharton exploits her keen sense of how style and certain beliefs relate to group; she connects social codes and sets of values to place. To distinguish one group from another, Wharton emphasizes the differences in values between the groups and shows that ideals held in the nouveau riche group are sometimes in opposition to those of the established group (i.e. beliefs involving marriage and divorce, professions’ different status in different groups, as well as the different value of old and new in the respective groups).287

She examines the different meanings of marriage in the three groups, obviously letting values of class and nationality overlap. On the one hand she compares the two American groups: upstarts and

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287 Among the upstarts marriage is seen as a way to climb socially, and divorce is common. The professions stock-broker and dentist hold different, inverted values in Apex and in New York. Moreover, Mrs Heeny informs Undine that in old families old stones are rubbed up and given as engagement rings, when Undine is outraged that her rings are not new from Tiffany’s. These are the same family relics she will later have re-set to the outrage of the Marvells (762).
the Old New York upper class, with each other, emphasizing class aspects; on the other she makes a cultural comparison of the American groups and the French aristocratic group, taking into account both class and cultural aspects.

We see that in the Apex group marriage is a way for women to make a career: to marry a successful man who can provide them with the necessary money for their social ascent. If a socially more advantageous marriage becomes possible, divorce is an acceptable way to arrange for a better match. Divorce is not considered a social disaster, whereas in Old New York society it is unthinkable despite the fact the law allows it. In Catholic France divorce is no possibility, which is why Undine discusses annulment, but Ralph’s timely suicide makes marriage to de Chelles possible.

To the invaders everything has a price; all values can be translated into currency. Wharton’s money-makers live by this credo and it is reality to Undine. She clearly sees her beauty as an asset directly linked to economic value. Depending on her beauty in order to succeed in society and measuring people in material terms, Undine exploits this notion to her maximum gain. This is as evident in Undine’s relation to Old New York as it is in her relation to France. Ralph, the member of Old New York society, thinks of the social invasion from the classes below in economic terms as well; he ponders: “The daughters of his own race sold themselves to the Invaders; the daughters of the Invaders bought their husbands as they bought an opera-box. It ought all to have been transacted on the Stock Exchange” (673). The economic metaphor also describes the situation in France. American new money is invested in the ancient de Chelles’ Hôtel following the marriage between Raymond’s younger brother and an American heiress. The very tangible result of the conversion of capitals in this case is the installation of electric light and heating in the Hôtel de Chelles, while the American girl receives institutionalized social capital in the form of a title.

Not only values but language is specific to the groups. In her memoirs Wharton explains that already as a child she learned to tell the parvenu apart from her own group by their speech only; clearly
early aware of language as a social marker. Wharton was brought up by parents and governesses who emphasized the “best language”. It is clear that ‘Good English’ to Wharton, equalled good breeding.

The Spraggs, however, display a different cultural knowledge as compared to the groups Undine tries to enter. During the dinner-parties with Ralph’s family several differences are explored. Undine’s sociolect compared to the Marvell’s is emphasized as well as their different choices in topics for discussion, or their different choices of literature for reading. The language of the New Bourgeoisie contains more informal English, and more slang than the language of the Old New York. “Ain’t”, the phrases “I don’t care if I do” as well as “I would not wonder” are used by characters of Apex and serve as markers of their social class (643).

Americans in Europe

In the text we find a number of versions of Americans in Europe. The narrator describes the Americans in the international set in Europe in the phrases “drifting hordes of . . . compatriots” (859) and as “the spring mob of trans-Atlantic pleasure-seekers” (872), as well as the “westward-bound nomads” (853) indiscriminatingly lumping all Americans together. These phrases are used with ironic edge, which is limited to the choice of horde, mob and nomads.

The Americans characters have their own expectations of what an American expatriate in France should be like. Undine learns that there are several American women who have married into the French aristocracy. Miss Wincher of Potash Springs, an old acquaintance from a background similar to Undine’s, has also made a transatlantic marriage; she is now Marquise de Trézac (855). Gradually learning the ropes of the Faubourg, she passes her new-found knowledge on to Undine. Madame de Trézac has lately gleaned that the

288 Cf. n. 9.

289 “Ain’t” is used by the characters Mrs Heeny, Mr and Mrs Spragg, the painter Popple, and Moffatt throughout the novel: but not by Undine. The narrator informs the reader within a parenthesis that “sweet” is Undine’s “word for friendliness” (643).
proper attitude for the American married abroad was that of militant patriotism; and she flaunted Undine Marvell in the face of the Faubourg like a particularly showy specimen of her national banner. The success of the experiment emboldened her to throw off the most sacred observances of the past. She took up Madame Adelschein, she entertained the James J. Rollivers, she resuscitated the Creole dishes, she patronized negro melodists, she abandoned her weekly teas for impromptu afternoon dances, and the prim drawing-room in which dowagers had droned echoed with a cosmopolitan hubbub. (941)

A certain degree of irony is obvious in the anonymous narrator’s tone, but the biting edge we recall from the narrator’s descriptions of the Boykins is missing. The manner in which Madame de Trézac exploits her American background recalls Mrs Newell’s habit of efficiently capitalizing on a variety of American eccentricities. Despite Madame de Trézac’s display of her Americanism, she says that “a woman must adopt her husband’s nationality whether she wants to or not. It is the law, and it is the custom besides” (942).

The Princess Estradina and her mother, the old Duchesse de Dordogne, regards American women from a French perspective; the latter says about Madame de Trézac: “‘but she’s an American – she’s divorced,’ the Duchess replied, as if she were merely stating the same fact in two different ways”; the narrator clarifies the statement in a detached tone (879). The younger woman comments on Undine’s marriage: she remarks that the fast Americans are the “only innocent women left in the world”, that they are extraordinary because after marriage they get caught up in “domestic bliss” and never wonder “what’s going on outside” (962, 961). Raymond de Chelles also explains how he conceives American women: “[y]our young girls look so experienced, and your married women sometimes so –unmarried”, which echoes Bourget’s impressions of how the roles of American girls and women overlap in comparison with the roles of French females (805).290 Undine responds in the way she thinks appropriate,

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290 Bourget questions the difference between American young girls and young married women, because chaperoned, girls can go to every social function a married woman can. They dress, read and do the same things as married women. See Bourget, 80.
her demeanor to de Chelles is that of “the incorruptible but fearless American woman, who cannot even conceive of love outside of marriage, but is ready to give her devoted friendship to the man on whom, in happier circumstances, she might have bestowed her hand” (888). The narrator describes this scenario, again in a matter of fact way. Undine’s manipulation of the matter is clearly expressed, but in a detached and neutral manner.

**Undine**

As a character Undine is of a different kind than Wharton’s earlier heroines. She is both a victim of the system as well as someone who abuses it and takes advantage of it. The secret of her survival in new milieus is her talent to adapt to and assimilate in new situations. She relies on this ability both when moving up the American social ladder and when entering the French aristocracy. Her partial ‘socialization’ into a new social class is made perceptible by her growing embarrassed of her old friends in an episode at the opera, narrated from her point of focalization (664). The embarrassment which in a sense defines her remarriage to Moffatt after her life in Europe when comparing him with the refinement of de Chelles also points in this direction.

Undine’s guiding principle is that “It’s better to watch than to ask questions” (664). Susan Goodman notes that Undine’s “keen sense of business, her lack of emotional coloration, her ability to plan and focus long-term goals, her social instinct, imitative ability, and singular lack of altruism should guarantee her the type of success and power her father chases on Wall Street”.291 Undine models herself on people she meets and the “isolation or solitude at the centre of the novel, based exclusively on a false self, borders on the pathological”.292 Both Ralph and de Chelles speak of this capacity for change, which she has in common with her first husband, Elmer Moffatt.

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Killoran discusses the novels’ allusions to mythical creatures of change: “creatures with a capacity of metamorphosis: undines, lamias, basilisks, toads, and satans.” This talent makes it possible for her to conquer the Marvells, to conquer Old New York, and to travel to Europe and to be able to marry into the French aristocracy. As a female buccaneer her drive is to conquer and vanquish what she wants for the moment, not considering if she is hurting people or disrespecting their values in the process.

To consider Undine as character requires mentioning a few words on her treatment in criticism as a problematic character; because an unusually self-centered main character, she clearly does not arouse much sympathy. Much criticism has discussed this: Edmund Wilson calls Undine the “prototype in fiction of the ‘gold-digger’, of the international cocktail bitch”. Several critics have agreed with his opinion that Wharton did not like her own heroine. Wilson is not


294 Critics refer to Undine as a buccaneer; a ruthless speculator or adventurer, an invader of American society (see Preston, chapter 3 on buccaneers in *Social Register*). Of course, Wharton’s 1938 novel titled *The Buccaneers* also prepares for this use. The term ‘buccaneer’ refers to the marauders of the New World: pirates preying on Spanish settlements and shipping during the second half of the 17th century in the Caribbean and the Pacific seaboard of South America. They were sometimes commissioned by the British. In their own day the buccaneers were called privateers. The early buccaneers were escaped servants or former soldiers. “They exercised a democratic discipline among themselves ... electing their captains, marooning mutineers, arranging for the equitable distribution of shares of plunder, and drawing up elaborate insurance schemes for injuries suffered” (see “buccaneer” *Encyclopædia Britannica, 2007, Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, retrieved 2 Aug. 2007). Adeline Tintner explores the presence of a reprint of the Dutch writer John Esquemeling’s book *The Buccaneers of America* (1678) in Edith Wharton’s Literary Classics of the United States; how it appears to have inspired the title and the idea of the novel about the “invasion into society of a band of gentle pirates”; she writes that the “young American beauties exacted a revenge on the seventeenth-century buccaneers who invaded the Western hemisphere by repeating their conquests in reverse and invading England as their predecessors had invaded America” (151-2). See “Consuelo Vanderbilt, John Esquemeling, and *The Buccaneers,”* in *Edith Wharton in Context: Essays of Intertextuality*.

295 Wilson, 24.
alone in considering Undine a dislikeable figure; many critics take a reserved opinion of Undine, the harshest one by Janet Malcolm in the New York Times review of *The Custom of the Country* with the provocative title “The Woman who Hated Women”, claiming that Wharton’s dislike of women is taken “to a height of venomousness previously unknown in American letters, and probably never surpassed”. In response to this article Beth Kowalski-Wallace locates the misogyny not to the intention of the writer but in the act of reading, which “metaphorically positions the reader as a child in the relationship to Undine’s failed maternity”, more specifically to a “cluster of negative ideas and attitudes” to women; in hatred of women as well as in anxiety about women’s “‘otherness’”. She argues that critics have often investigated misogyny in Wharton’s work by regarding the fictive characters as representations of her attitudes, when they instead should be regarded as “the projected site of the reader’s identification and investment”, because whether we recognize it or not, we as readers, despite gender, are “entrapped by an ideology which persistently fails to recognize what it is that we demand of ‘woman’ as ‘other.’”

Millicent Bell seems to be one of the few who regard Undine with some ‘compassion’, when she notes that Undine is “no sensitive overseas observer, but an invader from the American Middle West who begins with a marriage to a refined New Yorker but exchanges him for a French nobleman.” Wharton is ethnologically detached which allows “pity for her crude American who finds herself a virtual prisoner in a world she cannot understand”. It is the descriptions of Undine in a French world incomprehensible to her that encapsulate the cultural encounter. Wharton constructs her failure to adjust


297 Kowalski-Wallace, 45.

298 Kowalski-Wallace, 52-3.

299 Bell, “Edith Wharton in France”, 71.

300 Bell, “Edith Wharton in France”, 71.
to French culture as a result of nationality, even if class is an integral part of why she fails. Undine neither corresponds to what the narrative sets as norm for being a woman in America (she is a woman but of the wrong social class, furthermore, she behaves ‘unwomanly’ according to the norm implied) nor does she qualify to fit the norm for a woman in France.

Social Incoherence

Christof Wegelin calls The Custom of the Country Wharton’s best international novel, because it “arrests one of the last moments when the international ‘mixture of manners’ received the serious attention of a first-rate American artist.” In his article, Wegelin claims that neither Marvell nor de Chelles fits the mould for “Nature’s Nobleman” (James’s The American) nor for the “effete and wicked marquis.” 301 The quintessential American is represented by Elmer Moffatt. 302 Wegelin notes that Henry James was reassessing his earlier work in retrospect around the time when The Custom of the Country was written and “prophesised that in time the ‘social incoherence’ which had supplied him with so many subjects would give way to ‘social fusion,’ a ‘consensus of the educated,’ even more interesting to the psychological novelist.” 303

We find this kind of social incoherence twice during the course of Undine’s social career, when she advances into unfamiliar new social territory which she has difficulty making sense of. In Bourdieu’s terms, her lacking the appropriate habitus can account for her inability to understand the values of her respective husbands. In turn we will look at the comments by her second husband, Ralph Marvell, as well as her third husband, Raymond de Chelles, on how they expe-

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301 Wegelin, 407.
302 Wegelin, 407.
303 Wegelin, 408. Wegelin does not cite his sources for the quotations from James.
perience the situation in a similar way. Ralph notices that the upstarts and his own class have difficulty understanding each other. The following passage is a mixed perspective between Ralph and the narrator.

Surveying the march of civilization from a loftier angle, he had early mingled with the Invaders, and curiously observed their rites and customs. But most of those he had met had already been modified by contact with the indigenous: They spoke the same language as his, though on their lips it had so often a different meaning. Ralph had never seen them actually in the making, before they had acquired the speech of the conquered race. (382)

These words describe Ralph’s experience of the rising class before his marriage to Undine, which explains why he makes a general reference to the invaders as a group: Undine is the first invader he knows individually. In her marriage to de Chelles the main confrontations regard her pragmatic view of money and her, from his perspective, inability to grasp how economic value can be tied to tradition. De Chelles speaks of the same experience of incoherence in more affected words than Ralph’s, when Undine suggests that the family sell a few expensive things to afford the keeping of the estates. He is horrified at the thought, and Undine says, “In America we’re not ashamed to sell what we can’t afford to keep…you could get anything for those tapestries. And you stand there and tell me you’re a ‘pauper’ (969). Undine refers to the idea that cultural capital in its objectified state easily is transmissible in its materiality, whereas de Chelles is horrified because in such a conversion of capitals the symbolic value which re-

304 Undine’s husbands are numbered differently in secondary sources depending on if her first marriage to Moffatt is counted or not. The reader learns about this toward the middle of the narrative since the Spraggs try to obfuscate its existence, in order to keep Undine’s reputation intact. Ralph is officially her first husband.

305 Each major episode in the novel culminates in the destruction of customs and values when Undine’s pursuit of social mobility comes in conflict with the traditions she does not comprehend. The resetting of the Marvell family jewels destroys the identity and the tradition they contain. This drama is repeated, but on a larger scale in her marriage to de Chelles. The tapestries that are sold “represent the preserved accumulation of aristocratic culture”. See Bentley, “‘Hunting for the Real’”, 63.
lates to cultural capital in its embodied form, is not taken into account. Undine knows how to appropriate cultural goods materially, which requires economic capital, but she is unable to appropriate cultural goods symbolically since this presupposes cultural capital (which relates to habitus). The symbolic capital invested in these tapestries is of course an example of the “angles” of the “sacred institutions” referred to, but never defined in Madame de Treymes, which bouncing and banging on “the genial American plan” would threaten to knock off. In these words following the heated exchange about selling objects to cover the keep of the chateaux, Raymond de Chelles captures the same spirit of social incoherence as previously Ralph has done:

‘…that’s you all feel when you lay hands on things that are sacred to us! . . . And you are all alike…every one of you. You come among us from a country we don’t know, and can’t imagine, a country you care for so little that before you’ve been a day in ours you’ve forgotten the very house you were born in – if it wasn’t torn down before you knew it! You come among us speaking our language and not knowing what we mean; wanting the things we want, and not knowing why we want them; aping our weaknesses, exaggerating our follies, ignoring or ridiculing all we care about – you come from hotels as big as towns, and towns as flimsy as paper, where the streets haven’t had time to be named…and the people are as proud of changing as we are holding on to what we have – and we’re fools enough to imagine that because you copy our ways and pick up our slang you understand any of the things that make life decent and honourable for us!’

(981-2)

De Chelles explains what differentiates him and his wife in terms of national categories, even though class is also an aspect to consider. He constructs Americans as ‘other’, placing them outside his normality system in a process of exclusion directing his words at Undine as an American, whereas Ralph emphasizes class. Moreover, Undine considers her reciprocal experience of incoherence, but less elegantly

306 Wharton, Madame de Treymes, 17. Cf. also above p. 126.

307 This passage is frequently quoted: Nettles also notes that de Chelles and Ralph communicate similar concerns to Undine. See Nettles, 107.
than her husbands do. Raymond’s younger brother, just having married an American heiress, is to be given the premier apartment, despite the fact that it would traditionally be considered Raymond’s by seniority. By giving up his right to the apartment, he gains a thorough renovation of the Hôtel paid for by the bride’s father. Infuriated, and feeling side-stepped, Undine reflects, “He seemed to be speaking a strange language in which familiar sounding syllables meant something totally unknown” (952). Undine and de Chelles meet in complete incomprehension, where familiar words cannot be decoded into something understandable. They flounder in the incommensurability between their different world-views. In the interstice no understanding between them is reached and no common cultural understanding is gained. But from de Chelles’ perspective Undine ‘mimics’ to him familiar cultural forms, ultimately destabilizing the cultural sign. Social incoherence is the result of the confusion between the ‘copy’ and the ‘original’; the new cultural product expanding and blurring established boundaries of that which is ‘French’. The destabilizing of the ‘original’ creates a subject which is “almost the same but not quite”; the anger, frustration and alarm in de Chelles’ words express that he finds the result disturbing and inappropriate. Wharton lets Ralph and Raymond’s words about Undine illustrate incommensurability between national cultures as well as between different social groups within the same nationality.

Bowen: The Real vs. The Artificial

Wharton envisions American upstarts, Old New Yorkers and the French aristocracy in milieus which represent their values and lifestyle. She links the upstarts to impersonal luxury hotels which provide a public stage for the display of their wealth; a space which stands in sharp contrast with the personal and specific places where Old New Yorkers and the French aristocracy are found – in the novel exemplified by the private homes of the Old New Yorkers as well as the de Chelles’ Paris residence and St Désert property.

The novel opens in one hotel, the New York Stentorian, and later on, a few episodes are set in another, the Hôtel Nouveau Luxe, in Paris. By emphasizing the *general* quality of hotels; that one can be exchanged for another, Wharton suggests that the upstarts live in a ‘traditionless’ void which holds no ‘traces of human activity’. At dinner-hour the parvenu guests are engaged in the display of conspicuous extravagance, and quite some irony is directed at the hotel as well as its guests. Mr Charles Bowen, the social observer, is described by the narrator:

During some forty years’ perpetual exercise of his perceptions he had never come across anything that gave them the special titillation produced by the sight of the dinner-hour at the Nouveau Luxe: the same sense of putting his hand on human nature’s passion for the factitious, its incorrigible habit of imitating the imitation. (802)

The narrator twice refers to the Nouveau Luxe as a ‘spectacle’. As the dining-room at the Hôtel is filled with Americans Bowen recognizes “A phantom ‘society’ with all the rules, smirks, gestures of its model, but evoked out of promiscuity and incoherence while the other had been the product of continuity and choice” (802-3). His friend, de Chelles, recognizes it as an American construction and comments, “We owe America the gratitude for inventing it!” (803). Later in the conversation Bowen adds that what happens at the Nouveau Luxe is fake and “[n]othing ever goes on! Nothing that ever happens here is real” (803).

Writing about the rich and famous in Edith Wharton’s work in her essay “Edith Wharton’s Discriminations: Eurotrash and European Treasures”, Carol Wershoven distinguishes between ‘treasure’ and ‘trash’ characters. The first category consists of characters that reject material prizes being set over human values; if the character can see the human beneath the material they comprise a character of

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309 Cf. discussion above on ‘traces of human activity’, p. 190.

310 A “spectacle” (803), and “the fantastic spectacle of the Nouveau Luxe” (804).
IN BETWEEN CULTURES: FRANCO-AMERICAN CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS IN WORK OF EDITH WHARTON

treasure.\[311\] The expatriate Americans Wershoven names ‘Eurotrash’ can be found in the Palace hotels, in the Nouveau Luxe Hôtel and in the Lidos which are portrayed as “sham societies” and where the guests are “imitating the imitation” (802-3). Wershoven regards Undine as a ‘trash’ character; representing “obliteration of inner spirit” presenting a public self as the only self that matters in the public arena of the luxury hotels: the places for moral destruction in Wharton’s fiction.\[312\] Those characters who love the hotels “love the imitation, because in these places nothing is real. The social upstarts, parvenus know nothing about the “real” value of what it is that they imitate.”\[313\] Wershoven argues: “Eurotrash cannot distinguish false from true. This collection of aristocrats without heritage, climbers without culture, has so blurred the line between genuine value and market price that it has lost all guidelines.”\[314\] Her distinctions pertain to the moral decline of the Americans in the expatriate society.

Critique of the American Marriage
In writing about the American experience describing people of simple background, like the Spraggs, Wharton captures some of the psychology of the immigrant nation and connects it to her critique of the American marriage. In a land of immigrants, length of settlement decides social acceptability. Ruth Brandon explains that recent immigrants focus their social ambitions on their children: the first generation gains foothold, the second perhaps makes money, and the third gains social acceptance.\[315\] Mr and Mrs Spragg have worked hard to

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313 Montgomery, 164.


supply the money Undine needs to establish herself socially, never attempting a social career themselves. Undine, socially supple, utilizes marriage and divorce for her social advancement. Through the character Bowen, Wharton criticizes this American system where marriage has become an acceptable means for social advancement. A social observer, he functions as an analyst of what the problem is with the American marriage. He is the character with the most knowledge of both the French and American society, whose knowledge coincides with the external anonymous narrator’s. The critique of the American marriage is only really possible to give against the backdrop of something ‘other’ so he speaks of the different ways that American and French male society relate to women.

By contrasting the American and the French marriage, Bowen describes the differences by arguing that the average American looks down on his wife, the proof being that the Americans have not taught their wives to take an interest in their work. The custom of the country bids that the husband slaves for the wife, and that the “money and motors and clothes” make up the “big bribe she is paid to stay out of some man’s way”. He continues, “in this country the passion for making money has preceded the knowing how to spend it, and the American man lavishes his fortune on his wife because he doesn't know what else to do with it” (758-9). He also claims that the emotional centre of gravity is not the same in the two hemispheres, “[i]n the effete societies it is love, in ours it is business” (758-4). He calls Undine the “monstrously perfect result of the system: the completest proof of its triumph” (759). The narrator continues the thought: “. . .it was impossible” for “Undine to understand a social organisation which did not regard the indulging of woman as its first purpose . . .” (980). As an opposite to the American woman Mr Bowen sets the “European woman who interest herself so much more in what the men are doing. Because she’s so important to them that they make it worth her while! She’s not a parenthesis, as she is here – she is in the every middle of the picture” (758). Showalter writes that

316 The title of the novel points to Wharton’s main criticism of the American system which Bowen argues encourages such a relationship between women and men.
this is Wharton’s inscribed critique against the society which debars women from a place in business.\textsuperscript{317} In Showalter’s view there rightly seems little evidence in the novel that the French woman has a place in business.

Instead Wharton argues this in her cultural critique \textit{French Ways and their Meaning} (1919): “The French woman rules French life and she rules it under a triple crown, as a business woman, as a mother, and above all as an artist”.\textsuperscript{318} She claims along with other writers that the American society fosters a division between men’s and women’s worlds, which results in a lack in American social life.\textsuperscript{319} She considers the “French ‘Salon’ ”, the “best school of talk and of ideas that the modern world has known, [which] was based on the belief that the most stimulating conversation in the world is that between intelligent men and women who see each other often enough to be on terms of frank and easy friendship”.\textsuperscript{320} She describes the interference between men’s and women’s worlds as “‘real living’ which. . .has its roots in the fundamental things, and above all in close and constant and interesting and important relations between men and women.”\textsuperscript{321} This difference between women’s and men’s functions in American and French society, she argues, results in her impression that French women are “grown up” while American women are still in kindergarten.\textsuperscript{322} She also points out a reverse order of social importance in French and American women’s lives in her day: unmarried American women are comparatively independent in social life, whereas in


\textsuperscript{319} Goodwyn notes that several writers of the age (among them Henry Adams to Sinclair Lewis) were concerned that the American men were absent from society and only present in commercial and political life, leaving for the women to be “creators and arbiters of the social scene” (4). See \textit{Edith Wharton: Traveller in The land of Letters}.

\textsuperscript{320} Wharton, \textit{French Ways and their Meaning}, 117.

\textsuperscript{321} Wharton, \textit{French Ways and their Meaning}, 102.

France their status increases when they marry.\textsuperscript{323} American women, on the other hand, when they marry are “cut off from men’s society in all but the most formal and intermittent ways”: left without social significance or “‘withdrawn from circulation’”.\textsuperscript{324} As regards money it is also a reversal of situations: American women can have their own property, but French women cannot, seemingly at odds with the kind of social independence Wharton attributes to French women.\textsuperscript{325}

\section*{Life in France}

After the marriage to de Chelles Undine’s life changes but her expectations of life in France are not fulfilled. Undine is “dismayed to find herself cut off from the very circle” of the expatriate Americans at the Nouveau Luxe in Paris she has meant to establish herself in (940). Her own expectations conflict with those of the de Chelles family. They expect her to spend ten months in the country chateau, which she despises, where she thinks everything smells of dampness, to spend only the remaining two months of the year in Paris.

The narrator dramatizes by use of indirect free discourse the family’s opinion of Undine’s and Raymond’s life after their marriage. The narrator delivers in indirect style the collective opinion of the family. It is not possible to determine which characters are responsible for the words the narrator indirectly quotes. But it is possible to say that these questions answer or comment on Undine’s opinions

\textsuperscript{323} Bourget claimed in 1895, that unmarried American girls if chaperoned could go to any social function a married woman could. See Bourget, 80 ff.

\textsuperscript{324} Wharton, \textit{French Ways and their Meaning}, 115-116.

\textsuperscript{325} The legal status for a woman married in France meant assumed community of property – but the husband had the sole right to administer the joint estate. He could take “possession of the wife’s property, although this did not apply to real estate, of which he could only take the usufruct”; and the wife could not sell her real estate without the husband’s consent. By legal separation the only right she gained was to decide where she wanted to live while he retained full control of the children. Should he die, she could only act with the consent of his two nearest relatives. As a widow she had custody of the children but it was up to the family council to decide whether she could re-marry or not and whether she would be allowed to keep her children. See Brandon, 84.
(which are known because she is the internal character-bound focalizer in the chapter), despite the fact that the questions have not been posed. There is no dialogue; no questions pave the way for the answers given. However, the question marks left in the text suggest some of the original qualities of speech despite the narrator’s indirect reproduction of the rhetorical questions of the original discussion: the answers presuppose questions.

Since wedding-journeys were the fashion, they had taken them; but who had ever heard of travelling afterward? What could be the possible object of leaving one’s family, one’s habits, one’s friends? It was natural that the Americans who had no homes, who were born and died in hotels, should have contracted nomadic habits; but the new Marquise de Chelles was no longer an American, and she had Saint Désert and the Hôtel de Chelles to live in, as generations of ladies of her name had done before her. (959)

Since the narrator expresses de Chelles’ opinions as well as Undine’s, the narrator remains impartial, letting irony fall equally on de Chelles and Undine. The family’s opinions, we know, are exactly the opposite of Undine’s desires to travel, to socialize with the fast crowd at the Nouveau Luxe, and to spend as little time as possible at Saint Désert. Her new family see themselves “as minor members of a powerful and invisible whole, the huge voracious fetish they called The Family” (960). These words are perhaps more the words of the narrative instance than Undine’s as internal focalizer; and since the entire phrase seems slightly out of (Undine’s) character it suggests a synthesis of the narrator and the family’s combined opinion. The de Chelles expect her and her son to adjust to their way of life. After de Chelles’ sisters suggest that Paul’s influence on their children might be “contaminating” he proposes that Paul’s education be turned over to an abbé, as was the traditional education for a boy in his position (966). However, Undine refuses, instead preferring to send him away to a boarding-school, but the cost prevents her.

Disappointed in her life, Undine tells Moffat about her impression of marriage in France; she describes marriage as a “business contract’ . . . ‘They think so differently of marriage over here. As long as a woman doesn’t make a show of herself no one cares” (999).
French marriage is permanent with little possibility for annulment, but Undine intimates a great deal of freedom within it, anticipating Wharton’s discussions of French versus American marriages in *French Ways and their Meaning* in 1919.

**Concluding Remarks**

*The Custom of the Country* is a critique of American society’s materialism and of its newly rich actors, condemned to an empty existence in a cultural system they do not understand. The portrayal is discouraging, giving the uneducated rich bleak prospects of ever understanding the magic pull Europe’s cultural wonders exert on so many of Wharton’s Americans. In the form of Undine she shows that their surface can metamorphose convincingly, ‘aping’ behavior, but that their inner life is stagnant, inflexible, without hope of change. This continues her idea that cultural translation takes time; the process of gaining habitus through socialization is slow. Wharton gives them little faith in either relating to other cultures with a sense of openness to other ways of life, or understanding their own. Her American *nouveaux riches* do not understand the symbolic values invested in the traditions of the Old New York four-hundred families, or the Parisian aristocracy. They chase the semblance of tradition in its outer form, never understanding the contents: the values and the meaning of the traditions they try to emulate. Her culturally innocent Americans take over the form, unknowingly destroying the values it contains, never capturing the real thing. This can be exemplified in Bourdieu’s terms as the invader’s inability to appropriate cultural objects (i.e. the de Chelles tapestries) in any other form than materially, since she lacks the cultural capital necessary to appropriate the symbolic capital connected to a cultural object. Undine’s appropriation of cultural forms such as behavior or sociolects renders her a social capital, because acting according to the code, grants her initial access to the group.

Interestingly, in *The Custom of the Country* a link between groups is established by class rather than by nationality. De Chelles’ French aristocratic ideals have much in common with the attitudes of Ralph’s Old New York, sharing certain customs, beliefs and values. These
beliefs are part of upholding similar cultural practices; mainly to preserve family traditions and property within the group itself, both societies showing strong collective tendencies. Artifacts as well as manners are a result of tradition and heritage. The invaders acquire artifacts and behavior for prestigious purposes which serve as entry-codes or as a shibboleth into the stratum of society just above them.

In *The Custom of the Country* the upwardly mobile Americans are represented as corrupt when appropriating the old traditions of American as well as French society. Wharton contrasts upstart values of materialism with aristocratic standards of tradition; the ostentation of the rich uneducated American expatriate which we see in a public setting is contrasted with the privacy and discretion of Old New York society or the French aristocracy. Principles relating to duration and continuity are contrasted with ephemeral values and discontinuity, such as: old – new, sentimental value – market value, heirlooms and family treasures – material consumption and marriage – divorce.

As Undine and the newly rich Americans are no carriers of high culture or refined tastes they make do with the semblance of culture, usurping cultural form only. But somewhere both Undine and Elmer Moffatt sense there is more to life than the materialistic, and aspects of this knowledge are mirrored in the insatiability they both show, especially how Undine in the very last sentence of the book is left coveting what she can never have. On some level this pining for yet undefined pleasures captures their vague sense of lack of the values or meaning connected to the forms of the ever changing goals they strive towards attaining. “Even now, however, she was not always happy. She had everything she wanted, but she still felt, at times, that there were other things she might want if she knew about them”(1012). Despite Moffatt’s generosity, Undine is beginning to find his presence grating; his roughness and loudness in behavior “jarred on perceptions that had developed in her unawares” and she has begun to compare him to his predecessors, to Moffat’s disadvantage (1012). Is this to be understood as a small indication that Undine actually has changed a little bit in her marriages to Ralph and Raymond, or is her irritation at Moffat just another sign of her voraciousness? Wolff describes *The Custom of the Country* as the “American
Dream turned nightmare”; that Undine’s desire ultimately “consumed her”. Undine’s insatiability suspends her in time, perpetually wanting that which she can never have; vaguely sensing there are unspecified desires she will want as she learns of them.

**Cultural Translation and Cultural Bias**

The cultural translation we find in this novel is constructed in negatively value-laden terms indicating usurpation or cultural theft. It is a translation unsatisfying to the narrative consciousness, not meeting the demands of what is perceived as a ‘good’ translation; the moral consciousness describes the process in terms of ‘original’ and ‘copy’: ‘original’ denoting the cultural products of Old New York or French aristocracy, and ‘copy’ the upstarts’ product.

Those of Wharton’s Americans in Europe who, in opposition to the uneducated rich, have changed and acquired an understanding of values and ideals connected to the adequate outer cultural forms, critics refer to as assimilators: indicating a ‘good change’ whereas mere ‘superficial’ adjustments are ‘bad’, or at least insufficient. Nevertheless, there is substantial cultural re-contextualization going on; the uneducated rich selecting cultural expressions from what they perceive as prestigious sources. Moreover, Undine is a new cultural product, having incorporated certain new cultural material, even if (she is) unsettling to the narrator’s consciousness and the beliefs embraced by that consciousness. Inner change is regarded as ‘good’, and whether the narrator recognizes Undine’s kind of accommodation in positive or negative values, Undine assimilates other cultural material, simply because the uneducated rich are not completely inflexible: only their minds are, distancing them from cultural content (the culturally signified) not from the form, the cultural sign. Wharton’s Americans in Europe all change; it just does not seem culturally correct to ‘adapt’

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327 Preston identifies Fanny, Sophy, Anna, Kate and Ellen as assimilators; see *Social Register*, 172-4.
the way Undine’s kind does – which is why this change is not recognized as meaningful by the narrator’s belief-system.

In *The Custom of the Country* irony seems diffused throughout the narrative; the criticism is aimed at most groups, French and American aristocrats and American upstarts alike. However, a fair amount of criticism is directed toward people like Undine: the *nouveaux riches*, at home and as American expatriates in Europe, for sponging on another culture’s traditions and the values held by them. Society, responsible for giving rise to the upstarts, does not escape scrutiny, although the social mechanisms shaping and preserving the aristocratic community appear off the hook, this time around.328 This corresponds with the impression that the narrator’s sentiments, or the central moral consciousness is in line with Ralph’s, de Chelles’ and Charles Bowen’s attitudes. Bowen’s opinion places him as society’s critic in the moral centre of the novel corresponding to its framework of taken-for-granted knowledge about the world.

**Intercultural Potentiality**

In the framework of the ‘greater narrative’ Wharton in *The Custom of the Country* portrays how her version of the uneducated rich American expatriate in Europe, in the shape of Undine Spragg, is hindered from engaging culturally with the other, which might have instigated the character’s inner change. She has within her reach the possibility to gain significant understanding of another culture and of her own; but lacking the openness of mind, she does not regard cultural difference as an incentive for growth. According to the novel’s given moral framework Undine lacks the necessary quality of an open mind; as a character she fails to activate the intercultural potentiality of ‘her’ own plot, never engaging in the kind of cultural production the narrative regards as valuable. In a sense her inflexible mind sentences her to eternal ethnocentrism, isolating her.

It is significant that the marriage between Undine and de Chelles does not result in any increased cultural awareness in either of them.

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328 The highest crust of society comes under scrutiny in *The Age of Innocence*.
This is revealed a few years later, as Undine by chance meets Moffatt, in her resentful remark that the French aristocrats “all” despise Americans (992). None of the characters in *The Custom of the Country* reaches any understanding of the other or the self, in that sense portraying a not very optimistic cultural encounter between the French and the Americans. In terms of gained cultural understanding the otherwise hopeless ending of *Madame de Treymes* is far more encouraging than the conclusion of *The Custom of the Country* where the prejudices between the French and the Americans rather are re-enforced. Therefore, the depiction of the Americans and the French seems less complex than is the case in *Madame de Treymes*.

The main change actually going on in *The Custom of the Country* is Undine and Moffatt acquiring the outward necessary code to enter the class above them. Undine and the invaders outwardly display familiarity with the other cultural code and language, but it is never linked to the other group’s meanings; it remains superficial, not as in *Madame de Treymes* where knowledge of the other code actually instigates change also in values. To Wharton’s parvenu the code merely becomes a means of gaining social territory. The fact that they invest a different meaning in the code than the ‘aborigines’ of New York or the aristocracy in Paris do themselves complicates understanding and corresponds to cultural incommensurability between the groups. It is also the new cultural production instigated by the newly rich situated in-between social categories. However, this kind of change the narrative world-view does not regard as development in any positive sense, but the narrative agents describe it as cultural regression, as destruction of cultural values. Nevertheless, this is engagement in cultural production – but with the ‘other’ at home. Undine engages in cultural production from an American class perspective. She mimics because it is her desire to fit in, first into the Old New York society, and later into the French aristocracy. When comparing Undine’s and Mr Ne-well’s ‘resistance’, he adjusts no more than necessary, resisting certain French influence; whereas Undine’s non-engagement appears to be more a result of her limitations.
Cultural Mediation
The requirement for a cultural mediator is the ability to understand more than one culture from the inside and as a member be able to represent these groups. There are no cultural mediators in this novel, as we know them from earlier novels: it is significant that the discontinuities in Undine’s social and national trajectory cannot be bridged, the narrative lacking the appropriate character function to do it.

However, the closest function to a cultural gatekeeper is Mrs Heeney who from her limited perspective translates Old New York’s code to Undine up to a certain point in Undine’s career. She explains to Undine the traditions of the Marvell set, and those of the European aristocracy.\(^{329}\) This situates Mrs Heeny in an outside position showing that she has got some grasp of the signs and the practices of the Marvell set but the meanings they attach to them elude her as well. The only character with a dual cultural knowledge similar to that of earlier mediators is Mr Bowen, the minor character with the important function of an analyst rather than that of a translator. He has an intermediate cultural position, well informed of both the American and the French cultures; he has a cultural vision close to that of the anonymous narrator.

Wharton herself considered *The Custom of the Country* one of her favorite novels. Claire Preston agrees that despite being “probably her greatest work, this much-admired novel has never had quite the same following as *The House of Mirth* or *The Age of Innocence.*” She explains some of the resistance the novel has met in her estimation: “it seems to destroy the very territory with which Wharton is most associated – the terrain of old money, gentility, and carefully maintained social traditions” and concludes that it is “Wharton’s ruthless and at the

\(^{329}\) She explains about “ancestral jewels” and that in the American “aristocracy” these are buffed up at Tiffany’s and used for engagement rings. She also speculates about why the French call their houses hotels; concluding that perhaps the reason is because they “let out part of ‘em” (943). She reappears in the last chapters awkwardly trying to fill the gap in Paul’s understanding of his new situation in life, retracing his mother’s activities by the help of her ‘clippings’.
same time utterly exuberant indictment of the way we live now.”330 In 1927 Wharton was nominated for the Nobel Prize: art historian Kenneth Clark confessed in his memoirs that “indeed The Custom of the Country was considered so cynical by the Nobel Committee that they finally refused to give her the Nobel Prize for literature.”331 Thematically the novel adumbrates The Age of Innocence (1920) where the extinction of the Old New York society of her youth is one of the major themes alongside the theme of the cultural encounter which I will continue tracing in the next chapter.


331 Kenneth Clark, Another Part of the Wood: A Self-Portrait (London: John Murray, 1974), 204.
Chapter Six: The Full Circle Cultural Encounter

The Age of Innocence

In *The Age of Innocence* (1920) Edith Wharton investigates the complications of how an American family perceives and receives one of its members on her return from Europe, having escaped what the Americans regard as European degeneracy and corruption. She has acquired a way of life which intrigues and repels her American hosts equally, and their initial admiration soon turns into suspicion, as at the same time the woman’s anticipations of Americans and American life are disillusioned.

The ambiguities of the cultural encounter between Europe and America are signaled by the novel beginning with a central scene from Charles Gounod’s opera *Faust* (1859, revised ten years later), so popular during the eighteen-seventies in New York that each opera season opened with a performance of this work. In this particular scene as the young, naïve heroine Marguerite proclaims over her bouquet of daisies that she loves Faust, it is clear that she has finally succumbed to his trickery and the audience understands that she is lost. This occurs while Faust himself is listening at her window, without her knowing. A parallel is established between Faust and the main character, Newland Archer, as he looks over at the Mingott opera-box which holds, modestly placed away from the immediate public

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332 Helen Killoran discusses allusions in Wharton’s work; the Faust reference being a structural allusion, one among several kinds of allusions she finds in *The Age of Innocence* (56).
eye, his betrothed May Welland. With her eyes transfixed on the singing heroine on stage, May is linked to Marguerite by the fact that she also is completely unaware of being watched, and like Marguerite she holds in her hands as a symbol of purity, a fresh bouquet of flowers.333

Another connection between the girls is the subject of Marguerite’s song which is analogous to May’s having admitted only a few hours earlier that she “cares for” Archer. The anonymous narrator is careful to explain that care for in this context and in this age is a paraphrase for love. The narrator tells us that, while watching her, Archer in his imagination feels a “thrill of possessorship” and reverence for her “abysmal purity” (1020).334 These thoughts fit poorly with provocative ideas that women should be as free as men, which he will later launch in Ellen’s defense. Abysmal purity refers to the taboos for women in Archer’s world; restricted knowledge (but less than their actual knowledge, no doubt) deemed appropriate for women involving sexuality and anything vaguely alluding to it. Archer, in his capacity as Faustian American connoisseur of European myth, will explicate Faustian experiences to May. He inwardly contemplates that it will be his “manly privilege to reveal” the masterpieces of literature to her and “he pictured her at his side in some scene of old European witchery”; witchery becoming a metaphor for a mix of European high culture, education, and sexual knowledge (1020).335 He is to deliver her from innocence and perform the rites of her initiation to

333 May’s flowers are lilies-of-the-valley.
335 One way to understand Archer’s reference to European witchery is to see it as his mind’s representation for European culture which he considers prestigious and imbues with a “magic” quality. But inherent in magic is also the idea of the fantastic, incomprehensible and perhaps ominous: qualities which compensate for any cultural gaps Archer needs to bridge, when making sense of European civilization in his own American terms. So the “magic” corresponds both to the cultural leap he has to make in constructing meaning in his American context, and to the thrilling idea that the activity in itself is valuable and good, but possibly dangerous. When Archer translates European culture into his American context, in some sense, it involves a magic trick.
European ideas, literature, art and sexuality; knowledge paradoxically imbued with both danger and wonder. May is certain not to have any sexual knowledge, Archer thinks, but it later becomes evident that aspects of her innocence are feigned; a general practice in Archer’s society. As Archer continues to watch May, into the box steps her cousin from Europe, the Countess Olenska in strikingly stylish “Josephine look” with “close curls about her temples held in place with a narrow band of diamonds” (1021). She also wears an unusual gown in the same style of Napoleon’s Josephine with high-rise Empire cut, and is completely unaware of the attention she attracts. The fact that she is unconscious of her stunning appearance connects her to innocence; despite the attention her European good looks are drawing.

The drama of innocence versus corruption which this scene prepares for is multilayered. One aspect is that Archer’s American society fosters double standards for both men and women. Another aspect of the opera scene which will prove to be central in the novel is May’s cousin Ellen Olenska’s European experience: she was married at a young age to an effete and degenerate European count, from whom she has escaped, back to her family in New York. The idea of Europe and America as each other’s opposites is important and runs through the narrative. The Americans experience the idea of Europe as cultured and enticing and simultaneously potentially dangerous or even ultimately corrupting, as opposed to America as unsophisticated, straight and innocent, an idea I will later develop.

‘Translation’ is another important theme introduced by the opera. As already mentioned in the introduction, Bhabha’s concept of cultural translation in a wider sense is fundamental to the discussion of how European elements are reinterpreted and understood in a modified way in a different context and subsequently absorbed into Americanness. On a surface level well-to-do New Yorkers consider European influence as basically benign and prestigious which comes to permeate society, but certain European influences are seen as threatening. The translation process applies to individuals as well,

336 May is sexually innocent, but knows more than Archer suspects. Cf. below p. 247.
although this time Wharton depicts the cultural products, the results of change, not the process itself.

An important overture to how translation is thematized in this novel is found in the noteworthy quote below, when the narrator makes ironic comments on a cultural translation concerning the changes in form (from text to song) the Faust story has undergone before being performed as an opera. This is done already in the novel’s first pages as the narrator with a measure of irony sets the note for the significance of such practice by commenting the language in which Christine Nilsson sang:

She sang, of course, ‘M’ama’, and not, ‘he loves me,’ since an unalterable and unquestionable law of the musical world required that the German text of French operas sung by Swedish artists should be translated into Italian for the clearer understanding of English-speaking audiences. (1018)

Usually translation is an activity between languages to illuminate semantic content to speakers of another language. But in this case the narrator’s jesting emphasizes how he regards the automaticity of the translation as slightly absurd, and its result dysfunctional, since the Italian language most likely clarifies meaning neither to most Swedish sopranos, nor to most English speaking audiences. So in this particular case, translation between languages is made conventionally, consistent with operatic tradition. Moreover, according to the narrator, translation obfuscates rather than clarifies, since most members of English-speaking audiences perhaps do not master the Italian language.

The opera is a product of translation in a wider sense between time, place, form, language and social layers. The original German folklore legend based on a real Faust figure was passed on in several versions, orally. Eventually collected in written form these versions have inspired subsequent interpretations of the myth. In the course of its trajectory from legend to opera it also crosses several languages, from German to Italian: written by a French librettist, sung by a Swedish singer to an English-speaking audience. It has also traveled through the social layers, having been lifted from its original popular
oral tradition, eventually absorbed into high-culture music enjoyed in New York’s opera-house by the social elite.\(^{337}\) This quote approaches translation in a wider metaphorical sense, suggesting that it is going on within the group of Americans. It also captures the quintessence of the community’s unquestioned good opinion of European art, in a sense prefiguring the development of the novel’s cultural state of affairs; concert and assimilation although in some cases discord and resistance.

The scene at the opera introduces many elements important in relation to cultural differences. It also exemplifies how European culture is converted to an American context and is readily absorbed because Americans regard it as prestigious. The scene is no doubt carefully chosen to give an insight into the group-norms, the relationship between the Americans and into the complex interplay between American and European materials. The critic Edwin M. Moseley acknowledges the reference to Faust, seeing Archer as a “mock Faust in that rather than initiating May, our Margaret, it is she who tightens the hold of society on him . . . . Somehow our Margaret, maintaining the outward appearance of innocence, has managed to emasculate our Faust!”\(^{338}\) Archer’s delusion is part of the irony of the novel, but with its similarities and despite its differences from the original European Faust legend Wharton’s opening, for my purposes, is powerful in establishing the connection with the drama between innocence and experience, expressed in the cultural confrontation between that which is American and that which is European in the novel.

It is occasionally pointed out that Wharton experienced longing for the time of her childhood and *The Age of Innocence* is to some extent sometimes understood as a result of nostalgia. Since Wharton had remained in France during the war, loyal to her adoptive country, she had seen its horrors in close-up and in comparison to living in the war zone of Europe, her old life in New York must have seemed very

\(^{337}\) The small opera-house symbolizes this class’s effort to exclude certain social groups from their own.

organized, safe and uncomplicated. But her novel shows how life in New York, in Ellen’s words, is not “so straight up and down – like Fifth Avenue” (1076). It is only simple as long as its members stay within the boundaries of their culture’s expectations. Her concern for how the rules of convention control people’s lives and the struggle between classes shows her interest in anthropology, and this novel is not her only work at this time displaying her fascination with the subject.

Nearing the end of the war, in 1917, she had traveled to Morocco and the result of the trip was a travel-book, In Morocco. In 1919 she published her cultural criticism of the French, French Ways and their Meaning, which was a number of essays intended to explain France to the American soldiers who went there at the end of the war. In Morocco was published the same year as The Age of Innocence, in 1920, and a comparison between the travel book and the novel shows how she made significant use of the voice of the anthropologist describing both her Moroccan adventure as well as her native Old New York.

The novel captures the early stages of the influx from the invaders into the society ‘the Four-Hundred’ families ruled: these classes beneath her community ultimately changed the social scene permanently. These families were even regulated by documents; Ward McAllistair’s list of ‘the Four Hundred’, and the New York Social Register both endeavored to separate “aristocrat from the parvenu”. The Age of Innocence both documents, and in writing preserves the community and its mores and manners; it invites an anthropological reading of Wharton’s youth.

She portrays the period 1870-1920 in American history; in this model of society the relationship between heritage and economic capital is dissolving, and can no longer be maintained. Industrialization produces a new class of rich Americans without the kind of cultural capital needed to enter New York ‘aristocracy’. However, the

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339 Most American expatriates returned to America, a behavior she criticizes in her war novels, The Marne (1918), and A Son at the Front (1923).

340 Quoted in Lee, 53.
plot and its characters reveal that the class-mobility is not recent; it began with matriarch of the Mingott clan, Catherine. Beaufort’s marriage to Regina is also an arrangement based on the exchange between economic capital and symbolic capital: social and cultural. The marginal figure of Mrs Struthers is also representative for class-mobility; she increases her social capital over the narrative, by diligently arranging social events. In the fringe character Ned Winsett, Wharton illustrates a man who has little economic capital but is a cultured man of letters.

Critics have mentioned Wharton’s play with scientific terms and in her article Nancy Bentley accounts for “the ethnographic turn” in Wharton’s fiction, how the professional study of culture was established in the disciplines of anthropology, sociology and social psychology during approximately 1890-1910. Scholars searched for what they called “real”, looking for it in the conventional: manners, habits and folkways. Influenced by science, Wharton approaches her subject-matter as a “drawing room naturalist”; she fuses the role of the author and the ethnographer by “anthropologizing” the novel.341

Distance through ethnographic estrangement is created by the choice of a vocabulary used to describe foreign structures of ‘primitive’ societies from a western perspective; she maps her characters’ behavior, what the group experience as normality, as well as what constitute deviances from that condition. Furthermore, Wharton also establishes how her subjects of study rank within the group and how they determine authority, as well as uncovering rules of inclusion and exclusion. She illustrates a scene of expulsion from Old New York society, set fifty years prior to its time of writing.

It was the old New York way of taking life ‘without diffusion of blood’: the way of people who dreaded scandal more than disease, who placed decency above courage, and who considered that nothing was more ill-bred than ‘scenes,’ except the behaviour that gave rise to them. (1282)

341 Bentley, “‘Hunting for the Real’”, 51.
The framing of Ellen’s farewell-dinner as a sacrificial rite exemplifies how Wharton links the prestigious New York society of her childhood to the primitive by the use of anthropological terms.342

Class and the Cultural Encounter

The cultural aspects are not foregrounded, but they are there as a stable feature; instead the main theme and focus of *The Age of Innocence* is society’s change, and Old New York’s resistance to the social invasion from the classes below. The cultural encounter is often touched on in analyses of *The Age of Innocence* which mostly are socially oriented readings of the novel addressing the foregrounded theme of class. Much criticism has concentrated on the novel’s focus on times past and the change New York society underwent during Wharton’s lifetime. Ellen is understood as the outsider who upsets the delicate balance within a tight social system of unspoken rules and norms. She functions as a catalyst for Archer, not to major change, but to instigate his growing awareness of the restrictions his world has on his life. This development has been described by R.W.B. Lewis as “the losing struggle between the individual aspiration and the silent, forbidding authority of the social tribe”.343

Wharton’s interest in the anthropology of a civilization’s extinction concerns Nancy Bentley: a small minority’s last battle against the outside world, and how this world eventually caves in, surrendering to new ways.344 Treating class as the primary focus of this novel, however, makes the important discussion of Euro-American aspects disappear behind concerns associated with class. But Hermione Lee’s interesting Wharton biography acknowledges both aspects of the novel: “*The Age of Innocence* is obviously a novel about America, but it


344 Bentley, “‘Hunting for the Real’”, 47-67.
is just as much a novel about America’s relationship with Europe”, and points out how “New York measures itself against Europe, at the same time as it distrusts it”.\(^{345}\) She exemplifies Archer’s “consciousness of cultural alternatives”: European opera, Beaufort’s ostentatious house New Yorkers gladly flaunt to visitors from Europe, and European furniture, art and fashion details.\(^{346}\)

This chapter will reverse the order of importance between class and Euro-American relations; Wharton adds to the American issue of class international aspects, thereby creating another version of her American in Europe. Critics have often examined issues of class and, in doing so, have left many important cultural concerns in the background.

This chapter will instead consider the backgrounded theme of interculturality while considering how Wharton renders the complex relationship between America and Europe against the backdrop of a number of interacting elements. These can together with the narrator’s position in the text be related to a several-layered cultural ‘conflict’ and enable critique of America and Americans to a fundamentally American readership. I will begin by examining the different narrative functions and especially discuss their relation to opinions present in the text. Next, Wharton’s very specific use of language which helps thematize the cultural aspects in the novel will be examined. The denseness of European presence: the cultural translation of Europeanness as practices, art or products to New York life will then be considered, and how certain European goods (objects and ideas) evoke attraction along with resistance in the New Yorkers. Then I will look into how the fictional characters negotiate the complex cultural situation, and how they relate to its inherent duality of in-betweenness.

\(^{345}\) Lee, 572.

\(^{346}\) Lee, 572.
Narrative Levels and Cultural Understanding

The highest narrative position is the omniscient anonymous intelligence external to the story, taking no part in the story other than relating it. This instance is more knowledgeable than any character, and comments both on the plot, and characters. A strong narrative presence is detected in how Wharton organizes narrative comments temporally out of sequence in relation to the plot’s events. The quote, “the appearance in Fifth Avenue of a golden-haired lady in a small canary-coloured brougham with a pair of black cobs . . . would also doubtless be thoroughly gone into” (1083), testifies to the manipulation of time by the narrator’s proleptic summary of gossip before the actual conversation has taken place. The narrator also criticizes the New York group as an outsider, from a thoroughly Europeanized perspective, while simultaneously and fully understanding the workings of the New York community codes; the narrator is able to see values and weaknesses within each culture. Moreover, the narrator has complete and balanced knowledge of both the American and the European cultural dos and don’ts, ensuing in a narrative perspective holding the ‘moral of the text’, or the ‘truth’ of the narrative.

This becomes evident when the narrator takes an eternal perspective when describing ‘the Four-Hundred’. The narrator is well informed that only three families can claim aristocratic origin in the real sense of the word. These are the Dagonets of Washington Square who come from an English family allied with the Pitts and the Foxes: the Lannings, who had intermarried with the Count de Grasse, and the van der Luydens; direct descendants of the first Dutch governor of Manhattan, and related by pre-revolutionary marriages to several members of the French and English aristocracy (1054-5). The narrator’s irony concerning the New Yorkers’ fixation on pedigree among people without one is obvious when van der Luyden come to inform the Archers that his own guest, the Duke of St Austrey, had gone with Ellen to the parvenu Mrs Struthers’s. This indicates that van der Luyden thinks it slighting and disturbing that his European aristocratic guest prefers to socialize with classes below the highest rank in New York, seemingly impervious to the decorum his host’s social
preeminence called for. Mr van der Luyden also refers to how the community creates a hierarchy systematically excluding groups of lower social rank, referring to it as a “republican distinction”, which demonstrates his familiarity of Europeans paying less attention to rank, than the Americans do. Mr van der Luyden, a descendant from a republican, has the regard of a “monarch of New York”, and it is his approval society ultimately seeks as the van der Luydens are regarded the “Arbiters of fashion” and the “court of last appeal” (1087, 1059). 347 He has, in Bourdieu’s terms, inherited social capital symbolized as a great name. 348 The suggestion of the ‘King of New York’ holding court and himself paradoxically referring to New York customs as republican distinctions holds subtle irony.

Pamela Knights has aptly described the anonymous narrative consciousness as a disembodied entity present everywhere in the text and in the characters. She writes that a social body within its own collective, even physical, identity is at large in the text. Some of the effect is built up by the rhetoric which speaks of ‘tribe’ and ‘clan’ but more substantially by a myriad of small references to an entity which can recoil with a collective shudder at the unthinkable, draw a breath of relief when it retreats, assume one voice on what ‘was generally agreed,’ and assemble in a ‘silent organisation’ to act on it. Its interests, reactions, and mechanisms of surviv-

347 Mr Van der Luyden is also what Bourdieu refers to as the “pater familias”, the eldest and most senior member, entitled to speak on behalf of the family: see “The Forms of Capital”, 251. When Mrs Archer appeals on behalf of the Mingott’s, for Ellen, Van der Luydens responds by inviting Ellen to their exclusive dinner-party, as a direct reproach to society. Such “institutionalized delegation ensures the concentration of social capital” which works both ways: he can step forward to speak for the weakest member of the family, extending to them the shelter of the group, as well as expelling or withdrawing from embarrassing members to shelter the group. See Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital”, 251. Social rank becomes evident in who speaks on behalf of whom: Ellen is snubbed, but the Welland family, responsible for the invitations, is really the injured party. Mrs Archer appeals to Van der Luyden because her son is engaged to May Welland, Ellen’s maternal cousin.

al go beyond those of any single member of the group but are variously focused for us in vivid individual figures.

She speaks of the American community as an entity in itself. I would like to develop these ideas while discussing this narratological feature from a cultural standpoint.

The narrator’s opinion is cleverly and typically never made completely explicit in the subsequent example, as he distances himself from society’s opinion when describing a kind of New York collective delusion. Consider the following: “[p]eople 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’. . . .” (1118). But the proposition in that the people “always” had “been told”, and that they “believed” what they had been told suggests a critical stance in the narrator’s voice, despite the fact that this information has to be inferred. But the narrator’s omitting his or her own opinion can be interpreted as mute criticism of the generally acknowledged ‘truth’, and how the New Yorkers naïvely, and without discrimination yield to formulaic rules of good taste and style, as long as they are thrust upon them from the established authoritative source, Mr van der Luyden.

The narrator’s function has changed in some measure from *The Custom of the Country*. The role seems to have expanded from quoting instances of hearsay from a given source, into voicing a collective opinion in *The Age of Innocence*. In the following illustrative example the narrator surrounds Beaufort with mystery. The narrator asks a rhetorical question; undoubtedly the kind of question members of society have repeated, and by emphasizing *was*, some of the original quality of speech is kept: “Who *was* Beaufort?” (1030). The answer given provides speculation rather than fact; the narrator’s words seemingly recycle the tittle-tattle, this time around imbuing it with the greater credibility on the narrator’s part. It becomes a kind of ‘laun-

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dered gossip’, whereby the narrator functions as a reporter of the talk of the town, and in its even flow of rumor’s repetition it is enriched into what comes across as ‘facts’. The narrator’s dodging to supply his own opinion, leaving the reader uninformed, adds ironic tension to the narrative between what the narrator seems to mean and the rumors the narrator perpetuates by repetition. This quality of the narration can also be connected to the growing interest in gossip columns, and in how the activities of the upper class were increasingly under surveillance by society journalists.\footnote{The novel is set at a time when social journalism was still in its infancy. Montgomery writes that before 1870 little of social life made it into newspapers, since most social events (débuts and weddings) took place at home (64).}

The general opinion is sometimes also accounted for within a parenthesis. Let us look at the following words of Beaufort’s mistress, and the topic of the gossip:

\begin{quote}
[T]he appearance in Fifth Avenue of a golden-haired lady in a small canary-coloured brougham with a pair of black cobs (for which Beaufort was generally thought responsible) would also doubtless be thoroughly gone into. Such “women” (as they were called) were few in New York, those driving their own carriages still fewer, and the appearance of Miss Fanny Ring in Fifth Avenue at the fashionable hour had profoundly agitated society. Only the day before, her carriage had passed Mrs Lovell Mingott’s, and the latter had instantly rung the little bell at her elbow and ordered the coachman to drive her home. “What if it had happened to Mrs. Van der Luyden?” people asked each other with a shudder. (1083)
\end{quote}

New York’s ‘general opinion’ in this novel comments not only on characters associated with Europe or characters typically representing something American, but as the novel principally examines American Old New York society, remarks are firstly directed toward it, as seen above. But this society can not tolerate characters in-between cultures like Ellen or Beaufort, connected with Europe; the disapproval can be seen in the narrator’s parenthetically added information that Beaufort was “generally” thought responsible for a brougham of distinct color, and in that it is society’s collective circumlocutory description of Beaufort’s kept mistress who has so agitated society, that its mem-
bers shudder at the possibility of her passing the most prestigious lady in New York in her brougham, during the fashionable hour of the day. In the last comment of reproach in the same quote, the narrator also refrains from stating openly what is wrong with the Americans, instead he exemplifies with the New Yorker’s collective opinion: that it was shocking and an inexcusable breach of code, passing a lady of higher rank in her coach. The citation is in direct speech, the quotation marks left in, sending the aggravating question reverberating throughout the community. The narrator’s attitude is difficult to separate from society’s general opinion, or rather: the general opinion has become masked in the narrator’s voice. Somehow there is no explicit account of the narrator’s opinion; the criticism becomes most evident in the silences between the voice of the general opinion and the narrator’s remarks that are slightly tinged with irony. The cultural standpoint in the text results from the contrast between the narrator’s citing of the general opinion seen in relation with the subtle criticism implied by the fact that the narrator, by remaining silent, avoids positioning him/herself in relation to this general opinion. Sometimes the narrator can be observed making an ironic comment, sometimes he/she refrains altogether from disclosing his opinion, thus imbuing the situation with the possibility of unspoken criticism. The narrative comments in *The Age of Innocence* are on American customs, in an American society. If we recall the American expatriate couple the Boykins, the narrative criticism was scathing, and only directed at them. So common to the criticism is that it is directed at Americans, and either originates directly with the narrator (as in *Madame de Treymes*, where the narrator plainly states what is wrong with the Boykins) or that the narrator attributes it to other individual characters (in *The Custom of the Country*), or that the narrator as in *The Age of Innocence* attributes it to ‘the general opinion’.

Newland Archer is the only internal character-bound focalizer of the story. Between the focalizer and the external anonymous narrator is a significant distance, displaying the naiveté of the young American in the light of the more experienced narrator who is situated in between cultures and can see both perspectives. This distance facilitates the
perception of Archer as an untrustworthy or naïve character. “If he had probed to the bottom of his vanity, (which he sometimes almost did). . . .” (1020) certainly convinces us that the narrator has substantially more knowledge than Archer does, from whose perspective the novel is written. His understanding of what New York society knows is limited, which becomes evident at the end of the narrative in connection with the tribal rally, where Ellen is sent back to Europe. No earlier than during the farewell dinner did it become evident to him that the New Yorkers believed that Ellen and he were lovers. In fact Archer was the last to understand that he was falling in love with her, while this was entirely obvious to the world around him. His perspective’s limitation is never completely explicit, and his delusion that he is well informed about love, art and life sustains his opinion of himself throughout the narrative.

Archer is a victim of convention, and everything he does, he does according to the New York standard. His behavior is so deliberate that we sense premeditation: he arrives at exactly the right time for the height of the opera-performance; even his love for May (she is the perfect match in New York) seems calculated, which connects him in some respect to Faust, but the “little brown Faust-Capoul” (1018) on stage, we are told, is somehow inadequate for the part, just as Archer is inadequate for his, in that he does not develop in any real sense and dares not defy convention, and in his underestimating May.

There seem to be differences between ‘authentic’ European elegance and cultivation, and Newland Archer’s version of what is European. This becomes evident in the distance between what Archer considers European refinement and the narrator’s slightly distanced description, showing a critical stance toward Archer’s view. Levels of cultural understanding are established, and Archer’s world’s version is artificial, we sense, and flawed in representation. Archer’s impression of May as merely a reproduction of her culture’s expectations, and only as a naïve, one-dimensional and inexperienced person, reveals his naïvety and inflated opinion of himself. However, Archer gradually learns about her social experience, but does not reach full comprehension of his wife until years after her death. The narrator from a more informed position in turn speaks of Archer’s and the entire
community’s innocence, discloses Archer as somewhat culturally deluded and his society as an artificial and misrepresented model of the original: Europe.

Despite the fact that the narrator has established a greater social and cultural competence as regards the European and American contexts, he/she sometimes ascribes more knowledge to Archer than can reasonably be expected of him, especially if considering his naïvety, his own actions, along with what the plot has in store for him. The narrator tells of complex aspects of society making connections Newland as a character is unable to make, ending a comprehensive exposition of the matriarch old Mrs Manson Mingott’s life with the phrase: “Newland, Archer, as he mused on these things, had once more turned his eyes to. . .” (1026, my italics). A similar account of Ellen’s aunt Medora Manson is ended alike: “These things passed through Newland Archer’s mind a week later as he watched the Countess Olenska enter. . .” (1063). And yet again, after a several pages long description of old-fashioned New York’s social structure, the narrative voice furnishes Newland Archer’s consciousness as the origin of the reflections with an eternal perspective in the words: “Newland Archer had been aware of these things ever since he could remember. . .” (1097). Nevertheless, as readers we know that this kind of knowledge belongs to the narrator; that Newland may consider such things, but not quite at the detailed level that the narrator is able to. Knights explicates on the same point: “we meet objective narrative commentary, often at the start of a chapter, which suddenly relocates itself in Archer’s focalizing vision”, and that “public and private, personality and surroundings, begin to fuse, as New York’s consciousness and Archer’s emerge in the text together.”

Furthermore, yet another example of the merging of perceptions is how the narrator informs us that Archer is capable of mind-reading, indicating how members of society are one in mind and spirit: how well and closely they know, and stick to New York convention. While discussing something different with his future mother-in-law Archer “knew what Mrs Welland was thinking: ‘It’s a mistake for Ellen to be seen, the very day after her arrival, to be

351 Knights, 21.
parading up Fifth Avenue at the crowded hour of the day with Julius Beaufort’ ” (1040). This is written within quotes as though it were direct speech, again pointing toward the complex relationship between the narrator and the focalizer, this time including public opinion. Wharton neither maintains a clear-cut distinction between the narrator’s and Archer’s perceptions, nor between Mrs Welland’s and Archer’s; moreover the narrator’s knowledge and public opinion conflate as well.

Gossip circulates; it is unclear who knows what. The chatter of society when mediated by the external, anonymous narrator is enriched and charged with a stronger fact-like authority than such talk is in earlier novels; the narrator is partially voicing the gossip of the town. So, on the one hand the narrator in citing the general opinion imbues it with a narrator’s credibility, but on the other refrains from commenting the very gossip he promotes. This gap of silence between the narrative comments and an otherwise active and verbally agile narrator seems out of character; the abstaining from explicit opinions becomes a divergence from an established pattern of the otherwise strong presence of an authorial voice. It becomes a deviation within the narrative system. To keep the semblance of the narrator’s opinion neutral, or sometimes just implied, makes it possible to address sensitive topics indirectly; we can see how the form chosen for narration in part may be explained by Wharton’s life-long interest in cultural difference in combination with her need to write about her unresolved relation to America and Europe. At the time of publication she had already lived in France for thirteen years; it is a precarious position to have her major readership in America while residing in France herself, and at the same time to criticize American society without provoking her readers. As an expatriate American in Europe, she was no doubt taking a risk criticizing Americans who also made up her readership. So her narrative construction in The Age of Innocence may be understood as a cautious narrative strategy making

352 My reference to the ‘earlier’ narrator refers to the narrator of The Custom of the Country who attributes gossip to a named character.
it possible to indirectly communicate a risky message concerning America to Americans.

**Languages and Cultures**

Having discussed the narrator we turn to how language and culture are used to capture the complicated relationship between America and Europe. First I will return to, and develop, another aspect of Wharton’s use of anthropological vocabulary as a language strategy emphasizing and constantly reminding the reader of the cultural conflicts: the class-conflict, as a result of new times, and the relations between Americans and Europeans. These terms mainly function as means of estrangement and, by using them, Wharton makes relevant the contextual resources of American history where the same words have been used to describe past civilizations. This language reverberates from its use in previous contexts, it echoes historic events when the Europeans first arrived in America, and Manhattan was inhabited by Native American Indian tribes; thus a parallel between the theme of the American European encounter and the first European invasion of New York is established. Consequently, three layers emerge: the Native Americans invaded by the Europeans whose descendants in due course become part of ‘the Four-Hundred families’, who in turn later resist the offensive of the *nouveau riche* who represents something new and American. The layers are linked by the terms of anthropology, each one shedding an explanatory light on the other, when passing part of its earlier context on to the next, when implying earlier meanings. The American Indians become indelibly connected to the Old New York society, as ‘native’ population; they are the grandchildren of the first invaders of American Indian land, but now they become the subjects of a second invasion from two fronts. Firstly, Europe invades from the east again: Ellen’s progressive European ideas are naïvely dismissed by ‘the Four-Hundred’ families: the only

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European ideas they have willingly absorbed are conservative and copy the old European class-order. But the final invasion which will cause their culture’s extinction comes from the social tier beneath; the American uneducated rich. The Old New York community is unable to bar them from their society, but they eventually give way to modernity and the *nouveau riche* Americans. So, Wharton’s anthropological terms bring with them into the discussion previous contexts where the same words have once described another civilization and similar processes in a detached and scientific way.

The second language approach is to give certain words a keyword function. *Foreign* works as a keyword, linking the story to the Euro-American relations alluding to how Europeans differ from Americans. *Foreign* in different forms occurs no less than thirty-five times and can in eighteen instances be linked to characters. As expected, Ellen is most frequently referred to by this term. Her grandmother is also to some extent characterized by *foreign*, as well as Beaufort. Catherine was an outsider to the community but married into the Old New York Mingott family. She came from middle-class origins from Staten Island, and her father, Bob Spicer, was a wayward man who ran away with a ballet-dancer to Cuba and has never been heard from since. This background is given as the reason to account for the view inside the community that Catherine is foreign, eccentric and willful. Ellen’s behavior is partly explained by her relation to Granny Mingott, and the name Spicer still represents something strange and undomesticated. Catherine is freer from convention than most New Yorkers, daring but has never exceeded what was thought appropriate. She has married her two daughters well: one to an Italian marquis and the other to an English banker. She has “moral courage”, and her “haughty effrontery... was somehow justified by the extreme decency and dignity of her private life” (1025). Her husband had died when she was only twenty-eight and the

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354 Foreign is used nine times about Ellen; Mrs Catherine Mingott, five; Beaufort three, and Medora Manson one time. In the remaining cases references are made in a looser sense and refer to a number of disparate things: places, moods etc.
bold young widow went her way fearlessly, mingled freely in foreign society, married her daughters in heaven knew what corrupt and fashionable circles, hobnobbed with Dukes and Ambassadors, associated familiarly with Papists, entertained Opera singers, and was the intimate friend of Mme. Taglioni; and all the while (as Sillerton Jackson was the first to proclaim) there had never been a breath on her reputation . . . (1025)

Catherine as *foreign* in some respect can be allied to both the lower classes as well as to Europe, and between Catherine and Beaufort there is a “kind of kinship in their cool domineering way and their short-cuts through the conventions” (1037). *Foreign* also suggests sexual relationships outside of marriage which in the community were typically characterized by taboo. During Ellen’s farewell party it occurs to Archer that to all of the guests “he and Madame Olenska were lovers, lovers in the extreme sense peculiar to ‘foreign’ vocabularies” (1282). Toward the end of the novel *foreign* is connected to where Regina Beaufort in great likelihood will be spending the rest of her days, in “some shabby foreign watering-place for bankrupts” (1221). Subsequently, initially *foreign* tends to describe something positive, exciting and attractive, but gradually it also comes to illustrate the path toward the dilapidated existence of the ostracized social rejects.

Paradoxically, Europe functions as a unifying force in society as well as a dividing one. It is unifying as the order of prestige which this level of society rally round: Europe as a place which they travel to, from which high-status European ideas and artifacts originate, and to which they gladly refer. It is divisive in that the people who are European in some sense are freer and dare go beyond convention, as do Catherine, Ellen and Beaufort. The only character capable of a perfect balance between moral freedom and convention is Catherine (helped by aspects of her ugliness and her impeccable reputation, as the narrator informs us).
Another word which clearly has a thematic keyword function is *heaven*.

Linda Wagner notes that “the New York world is termed ‘heaven’ many times, by Ellen early in the book. Similarly, Newland describes Ellen’s existence with the Count (about which he knows very little) as ‘hell’.”

To this can be added that *heaven* makes up fourteen instances and on five occasions *heaven* is used in direct speech by Ellen, as a reference to Old New York. Catherine too, uses it once in the same capacity, implying that life in heaven is less exciting than in Europe, underpinning the linkage between Ellen and Catherine as degrees of independent women. Against this is posed *hell*, occurring three times in Archer’s speech, twice referring to when Ellen came from Europe, and once as the narrator comments on Archer’s thought and the two positions merge.

A third way to refer to Europe in this novel is the frequent code-switching from English to other languages, as means of thematizing the intercultural issues in *The Age of Innocence*. This occurs thirty-four times. The narrator makes the most frequent code-switches between English and French – in twenty-eight instances French occurs. This places the narrator in between cultures, thoroughly knowing what needs to be expressed in an English-speaking setting, but with the

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355 Heaven: 1029, 1073, 1077, 1120x2 and 1279. Ellen says: “I’m sure I’m dead and buried, and this dear old place is heaven” (1029); “[h]ow do you like my funny house?” she asked. ‘To me it’s like heaven.’(1073); “[d]oes no one cry here, either? I suppose there’s no need to, in heaven” (765). “What a poor thing you must all think me! But women there seem not – seem never to feel the need: any more than the blessed in heaven” (1120), and “[d]oes anything ever happen in heaven?” (1120). The last reference to *heaven* is made by Catherine Mingott “... Olenski’s a finished scoundrel; but life with him must have been a good deal gayer than it is in Fifth Avenue. Not that the family would admit that: they think Fifth Avenue is Heaven with the rue de la Paix thrown in. And poor Ellen, of course, has no idea of going back to her husband” (1249). The remaining instances of *heaven*, unaccounted for above, just occur as part of exclamations, in expressions such as, *good heavens, in heaven’s name, heaven knew, merciful heaven, thank heaven and heaven’s sake.*


357 *Hell*, three times: used by narrator (1144) and by Archer in direct speech (1143 and 1187).
more precise expression in French, frequently giving in to his urge that some things are better said in French. Mrs Archer uses French twice and Mr Welland once and considering how little of the direct speech they are responsible for it is significant that they do so at all. M Rivière is European and uses French expressions twice, as well as Medora Manson who is connected with Europe and uses French once. Both of them are visiting New York and participate in relatively little dialogue. Italian turns up in a quote from the Faust libretto, and Natascha, Ellen’s Italian maid, speaks it four times (Archer misunderstands her), and Ellen too switches to Italian once. Latin occurs once originating with the narrator, and once with Archer. There is seemingly a connection to France and French but also to Italy and Italian and to other European countries (Poland through Ellen’s husband, however the Polish language is never mentioned).

Cultural Translation

Recalling Bhabha’s concept of translation in a wide sense, the novel shows abundant examples of cultural translation, by which something European is re-contextualized in an American framework. The novel accounts for several routes that European influence may take when entering this particular American community. But first we need to recall Wharton’s key illustration to the process of translation; i.e. the Faust legend’s trajectory to opera; its various and multilayered transformations on its way, and will then consider the other varieties of European cultural dominance, which penetrate society in an array of shapes. The Euro-American cultural translation of goods appears in material as well as ideological form. Bourdieu’s terms help make the distinctions: the cultural capital invested in the goods involved in the Euro-American cultural translation is cultural capital in its objectified state (literature, paintings etc), the material side of cultural capital, and tied to it is the symbolic side of cultural capital, which is the embodied capital necessary to ‘consume’ the texts, for example, or to play the instrument. Part of the old meaning or function remains, but when re-contextualized the cultural goods become altered and new; when made relevant in an American context they may be adapted in new and American forms. These elements are direct references to
European high-culture such as music, literature, art or architecture which add little to the plot, their presence seemingly denoting little else but a conventional and unquestioning admiration for things European. Throughout the narrative such instances of cultural translation are scattered, each one making up an example in a stream of similar references. Nevertheless, together they link to intercultural relations and lie as a continuously sounding drone throughout the text; underpinning the theme of cultural negotiations when these are directly depicted in the storyline, as well as serving as signs referring back to the theme when the Euro-American situation sometimes recedes into the background.

The major exception to the claim that these European elements are of little consequence is already mentioned: the Faust dimension of the plot is integral, as if it were thrust upon us. This is established in the first chapter internally to the story as entertainment within the plot and also on a narrative level externally to the story by the narrator as part of the plot, when establishing the parallels between Archer and Faust which Archer has never made himself. The other reference to European theatre, of less significance than Faust, is to an Irish comedy melodrama, *The Shaughraun* by Dion Boucicault (1820-1890) was running at the Wallace theatre in 1874-1875. James Gargano has studied *The Shaughraun* and the scene of renunciation when the hero lifts the heroine’s ribbon and kisses it, leaving without her even knowing he was present in the room. Oddly, there is no reference in the *Shaughraun* script to this interpretation of the particular scene of renunciation, and as Gargano concludes, Wharton’s novel – *The Age of Innocence*, along with one photo of the actors – preserves this scene.

Both the play and the opera work on a structural level, and based on Gargano’s observations I will make a few narratological comments. In his article Gargano notes three references to the melodrama. The first one is the farewell scene in Ellen’s house (chapter 12),

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358 Wharton saw this play with her parents at the age of thirteen. See Lee, 41.

where Gargano sees a parallel in the kissing of Ellen’s cold and lifeless hands and of Ada Dyas’s ribbon (1105). If we accept the allusion Gargano sees, it is then constructed on an external narrative level, because at this point in the novel Archer and Ellen have neither seen *The Shaughraun*, nor has the play yet been mentioned, and the scene is adjacent to the episode at the Wallack’s theatre. But the second reference occurs when they actually are at the theatre watching the very play (chapter 13), and Ellen links the scene on stage back to the earlier farewell episode in chapter 12. During the tender leave-taking on stage she asks if Archer thinks that the actor Montaigne will send the actress Ada Dyas flowers the next day (1109). The third scene is the beach scene at Newport (chapter 21), where Archer at a distance watches Ellen on the pier. Archer, as the internal focalizer, in his mind recalls the Shaughraun ribbon scene. He remembers Montaigne lifting Ada Dyas’s ribbon to his lips without her knowing he was in the room; in that moment deciding that he would leave, without letting Ellen know he was there, unless she turned around before a boat had crossed the bay.

Gargano then goes on to account for four scenes where the ribbon scene is repeated in variations; arguing that Wharton “appropriates *The Shaughraun* incident and adapts it”, without an actual reference to the Dyas-Montaigne parting. But since these scenes are not explicitly textually bound in any way, by comments of the focalizing or narrative instances, I will not develop this further.

To conclude, we can see that the first reference to *The Shaughraun* is made on a level external to the story, the second is made on an internal level of the story, by the characters when they are watching the play, and the third reference is made by Archer as the story’s focalizer. Consequently, European influence appears in three layers in the text: by the narrator, in dialogue and by the focalizer.

Another form cultural translation takes is when the Americans duplicate European style. (Relative to Bourdieu’s concepts, cultural capital

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360 Gargano, 8.
in this case remains in its objectified form.) The matriarch Mrs Manson Mingott has reinterpreted European architecture when building her house, which was thought to have been modeled on the private hotels of the Parisian aristocracy, with French windows instead of sash windows (1025). She had also arranged a swap between her bedroom and reception-room due to the burden of her flesh. The narrator notes that Mrs Mingott’s 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. That was how women with lovers lived in the wicked old societies, in apartments with all the rooms on one floor, and all the indecent propinquities that their novels described... (1037)

As far as the architecture is concerned, the translation from the European is acceptable to the New-Yorkers but the connotations the rearrangement of the room gives disturb them, suggesting sexual freedom and moral degeneration which is treated as a taboo in their society. The veritable smorgasbord of different unrelated European architectural styles that some of the buildings display are American interpretations of what constitutes European design, but this mainly remains the concern of the narrator. It expresses an American frenzy for European design; revealing that these elements in the process of translation have become utterly de-contextualized and assembled in their new context rather indiscriminately.

Another loose instance of appreciation of things European, perceived as unthreatening by the New Yorkers, each case seemingly independent of each other, and unimportant to the plot, is that Mrs Archer reads Ouida’s novels solely to get the sense of the Italian atmosphere (1042). Ouida’s popular fiction satisfies Mrs Archer’s fancy for Italian ambience, but whilst seeking ‘authenticity’ she bargains for an Italy previously translated into a British-European mind-frame. The fact that Mrs Archer seeks ‘genuine’ Italian atmosphere and un-

361 This, of course, supports this position as the one consciousness completely omniscient in the European and American cultures. The houses referred to are Mrs Mingott’s, and the van der Luyden’s Scuytercliff house.
knowingly ends up with an English cultural translation of Italy, is mildly ironic, giving resonance to the very same dimensions of appreciating interpretations of details of detached architectural styles brought together in the same edifice; each instance separated from its context.

European intellectual goods are also subject to cultural translation, but New Yorkers regards this with much less tolerance. Mrs Lemuel Struther’s imitation salons or “French Sundays” were seen as potentially bohemian and therefore risky to be seen at, but gradually grew in acceptance by society. Merchandise from Europe is seen as less hazardous. Archer’s boxes from London containing the most recent books from the publishers were Herbert Spencer and Daudet’s “brilliant tales” and “a novel called Middlemarch” (1125); neither is described as subversive to ideas held by the New York community, but Eliot’s novel connects thematically to The Age of Innocence, treating a community, but in an English setting. Another volume of Archer’s newly acquired books is the volume with a title which had inspired Archer’s purchase: The House of Life. Its “enchanted pages” nurture his unrealistic love for Ellen, chasing her “vision” through the night, but the reality of the morning light deflates his romantic dream (1125-6).362

The New Yorkers also purchase European fashion. But at least as far at the ladies’ fashion went, the translation from European to American was a matter of time. The Boston ladies laid the French dresses aside for two years, not to be too fashion-forward (1221).

The novel’s references to European culture which to some extent can be related to form (container/surface/‘the outside’); such as

362 Thematically the two texts The Age of Innocence and The House of Life (1870-1881) are connected by their temporal concerns. The House of Life is written by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, a collection of sonnets that is his poetic masterpiece. Expressing concern with time and its loss it ends with the poet’s “acceptance of time and death; but before arriving at that conclusion, the poet makes many attempts to conquer or evade the temporal and its painful destructions.” See George P. Landow “Rossetti’s Concern with Time and its Loss in The House of Life”, retrieved 29 June 2008, <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/dgr/dgrseti14.html.>. As a parallel between the texts, Archer too accepts the changing times and his part of the process.
certain practices, art or products, which the New Yorkers perceive as non-threatening and are enthusiastically translated into their code, and assimilated in their lives. However, as the narrative will show, there will be conflict concerning any essential cultural translation, which in some regard affects the individual’s ideas (content/depth/‘the inside’), inspiring in him thought questioning the majority group’s existing ideology, or behavior which the group interpret as an outward sign of opinions deviating from theirs, and perceive as ominous. Society rids itself of such elements. The way Europe pervades America results in an all new interpretation of Europe and a re-contextualization of its goods and ideas which results in a new and American cultural product. Subsequently, as long as translation concerns cultural capital in its objectified state, it is relatively uncomplicated; because translations concern the same aspects of the object that is transferable in its materiality, into economic capital. The complications occur as translation regards the aspects of cultural capital (as ideas) which relate to its embodied form (habitus), which in turn require cultural capital to appropriate.

**In-Betweenness**

The standard organization of a novel exploring cultural difference is, of course, that an American travels to Europe. However, in *The Age of Innocence* we notice the opposite: a reversal of the plot set-up. So instead of Americans rushing off to Europe, becoming tantalized and captivated with European civilization, Wharton turns the screw of the plot once, letting us follow a Europeanized American woman on her return from Europe; completing a full circle trajectory. Now seeing America with a European gaze – and able to re-evaluate it – she instigates in a fellow New Yorker the process of becoming conscious of his own society. To the Americans, she is the familiar made strange, and she becomes a series of contradictions.

There are several versions of Ellen which take their origin in both her American background and in her more recent one in Europe. She is at the same time the daughter of the community; once Archer’s playmate and a woman with ‘a past’, possibly having been the mistress of the man who assisted her escape from her husband.
Simultaneously, she is Ellen and the Countess Olenska: an American woman as well as the exotic object of the vague expectations the New Yorkers may have of titled Europeans. With delighted enthusiasm they enjoy introducing her by her title, so as to emphasize her Europeanness: the aristocratic background and the European-sounding name. The New Yorker’s ambivalence toward the several versions of Ellen is caught by the narrator when describing her as the woman who has left her “immensely rich Polish nobleman of legendary fame, whom she had met at a ball at the Tuileries, and who was said to have princely establishments in Paris, Nice and Florence, a yacht at Cowes, and many square miles of shooting in Transylvania”, and that after her marriage to Count Olenski she “disappeared in a kind of sulphurous apotheosis” (1063). The narrator’s distanced remark on the curious mix of admiration in the catalogue over Olenski’s property, coupled with a sense of abstract danger of the European experience turning into corruption, is well captured in this paradoxical assertion. Society’s appreciation of her post-marital rank is stated in hyperbole, but her elevation by popular consent to a god-like state quickly twists into something negative, downgraded by the acidity sulphurous (envious gossip?) suggests. Sulphurous suggests some other staged version of Faust and a conjured up Mephistopheles appearing and disappearing in puffs of smoke for dramatic effect; further connotations to pyrotechnics and volatility ultimately recall Milton’s fierce, infernal fire and smell of hell, in several references to sulphur in Paradise Lost.363 The American’s vague dread of Madame Olenska’s Europeanness and the fear of her unspecified knowledge correspond to their culture’s ignorance and predilection for taboos, because part of Ellen’s experience is forbidden and unspeakable for Old New York. She threatens them because she is not easily categorized. Knights calls her the unsettling Other, she is not “married, single, divorced or

363 References in John Milton’s, Paradise Lost (1667) are “ever burning sulphur unconsum’d”, “sulphurous hail”, “work of sulphur” (Book I), “[t]artarian sulphur and strange fire” (Book II), “sulphurous and nitrous foam” (Book VI) and “sulphurous fire” (Book XI) (John Milton, Paradise Lost, Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, ed., Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).
mistress”.364 To this should be added that she is the cultural other; she resists national and social categorization: is she American or European (French, Polish?)? Is she an aristocrat or not? Is she one of ‘us’, or is she one of ‘them’? The dual possibility of passing as either European or American, and the possible identification with either civilization is central to the understanding of what in-betweenness entails in this novel.

When Ellen and Archer a few times each leave their own habitual perspective and, unprejudiced, try to see the other; when no interpretation of the other has priority, a mental arena in-between cultures is constructed where the two perspectives, and their representatives meet on equal terms. The cultural encounter begins to take form but ends without consequence since a certain degree of reciprocity is necessary to establish a place in-between. Archer is too bound to his community, and too paralyzed by convention to let go of his own, and invite something new. It is a tragic vision where any meaningful cultural encounter or any increased understanding or fusion remains impossible.

Knights notes that in the turn-of-the-century writings by, for example, William James, Charles Horton Cooley, or George Herbert Mead, there are “early explorations of the idea that, to use Ian Burkitt’s helpful summary, ‘personality develops within discourse’, that is... ‘self’ and ‘mind’ are formed within the ‘communicative activity of the group’ ”.365 She continues that for Mead the “self developed through language ... in the very process of thinking, grounded in an inner dialogue with the social group”.366 This dooms Archer’s ambiguous project to change into something more modern and to make women “as free as we are”, rendering it futile. Despite his, in comparison to his peers, being affected by up to date European ideas, he cannot withstand the centripetal forces within his society, demanding

364 Knights, 32, 39.
366 Knights, 21.
his adjustment and his relinquishing such plans. His irritation at May’s increasing practice of hazarding her own interpretations of the poetry he reads aloud, instead of regurgitating his, shrinks his once so enthusiastic plans to reveal the magic of Europe to her, reading Faust together, to silent reading of Michelet’s conservative ideas of men’s and women’s life. The echo of Faust and how he hopes to gain fantastic, but dangerous knowledge and power in exchange for his soul is paralleled in how modern European ideas indeed are hazardous in Archer’s world. His disappointment in May recalls his earlier inward vision, while watching the Faust performance, of a scene of old European witchery, representing her initiation.367 Archer’s naïvety feeds his fantasies of actually leaving his wife for Ellen, but he must learn of life from Ellen, and ironically from the underrated and socially skilful May, constantly a step ahead of her unsuspecting husband.

For Archer to live against the grain of society and its expectations involves a break with the safety of the group, and who he is. He needs to access the space in between cultures to attain a change, which he fails to do. Ellen, however, relates actively to her destiny – she makes decisions, acting on her given circumstances; Archer is passive and merely lets things happen, unable to break with convention.

Conflict or Assimilation

In *The Age of Innocence* Europeans are in a minority situation on American territory, when in the other instances the reverse is depicted. We see the Americans’ dual attitudes of attraction and repulsion of what is European permeating society, and how Ellen’s European values are at odds with the constricting New York life her family expects her to embrace. The expectations the Americans and Ellen have of each other differ and the fear of the other lessens their respective tolerance: Ellen’s oversteppings of the New York social code gradually lead up to her ostracism. Wegelin argues that Ellen, by “giving up things” in order to spare others disillusion, “preserves her American

367 Archer’s sense of disappointment echoes Faust who feels short-changed by the devil.
goodness” and by sparing New York the cheapness of Europe she “remains American-even in exile”. A discussion of being either American or French does not seem to correspond to Ellen’s identity, the explanation being unable to contain a complex character in between cultures. It seems that Wharton’s characters frequently are more and less than just American or European. Her characters vacillate between the national categories, evading the nationally defining labels, so tempting to apply. Her characters seem to be fluid, waver ing between positions, and using their identities depending on the place and the circumstances. She shows us modern identities: more and less than we expect, fluid and momentary, all at once.

Innocence and Experience

An important part of the cultural confrontation is the tension found between innocence and experience. Several discussions about innocence and experience are available and in agreement on how Archer and the rest of New York come to the wrong conclusions about Ellen. Anne MacMaster notes that Wharton subverts the convention of paired heroines by making the fair May turn out more knowing than Archer realizes, and the dark Ellen to be more naïve, vulnerable and moral than he expects. Candace Waid, however, emphasizes Ellen’s erotic experience which represents everything that has initiated her, everything that she cannot give up to return to her mother country. Helen Killoran asks to what extent the theme is satirical and who is innocent of what. She deems May sexually inexperienced, but less so than Archer imagines, yet socially experienced. She notes that Ellen is socially innocent in America, and sexually less experienced than Archer thinks, as well as guiltless of the accusations of having been M Rivière’s mistress: had this been the case, the count would hardly have sent him as his emissary. She also considers Archer sex-

368 Wegelin, 413.
369 Anne MacMaster, 191.
ually as well as socially naïve. He is “innocent of understanding social reality, so that May can manipulate the system dexterously while Newland is blind to her maneuvering”. Killoran argues that Archer, by living in “dreams, chivalric fictions and books”, misses the ability to live awake and fully, like other innocent Americans. On a general level, innocence is thematized in Marguerite’s childlike virtuousness. It also relates to the cultural confrontation in that the Americans are the ones considered innocent: Archer is portrayed as naïve in overestimating his own experience in art, life and love. May also represents a certain American form of feigned innocence shaped by society’s expectations of niceness, and what women are supposed to admit to knowing. Ellen represents to the New Yorkers the result of European exposure, and naïve in her expectations of America, a returnee from Europe, she learns about her New York community.

In The Age of Innocence, inexperience not only captures aspects of characters’ awareness, and understanding, but society too, is given such traits. In the 1870s new times and new ways are gradually gaining foothold in the New York community and America. Modernity’s entry in America can in a social reading be seen as an aspect of the

371 Killoran, 60.
372 Killoran, 61.
373 Carefully cultivated artifice in contrast to Ellen’s integrity and how she covets truth and honesty cf. p. 262. Elsa Nettles has written about feigned innocence, and explains the effects of the hieroglyphic world where convention restricts language. This is a phrase Archer uses by which he means that the real thing is never spoken; but members of society still understand what is meant; this has been much commented on by critics. Politeness and self-restraint has degenerated into prudery and evasion which summarises the problems of niceness in speech in Archer’s New York community. The expectation of what is, and what is not possible to say excludes words such as “mistress, sex, bastard, and adulterer” which were taboo in polite society (90). Nettles explains how women were “doubly constrained”, when the “speaking of a word implied the knowledge that convention forbade” (89pp). She continues, “[b]ut when women owed the sense of identity to their position in a society that demanded their conformity, when they instilled in their daughters allegiance to the code they had internalized and when they ostracized women who violated it, then women appeared to be the agents, not victims of the system (90).” See Nettles. Also cf. above n. 201.
movement from innocence toward experience for society as a whole. Asphalt signifies modernity; the cobblestones of New York were soon to be replaced by “smooth asphalt, such as people reported having seen in Paris” (1036). The novel is written from the perspective that modernity comes from the direction of the old world, from Europe to America and not yet the other way around.

The prevailing figure of thought in the New York community about the effects of the American and European encounter is that the influence of Europe consumes American individuals. The richness of European civilization is thought of as degenerating, and one, to the New Yorkers, observable loss Ellen has made in the cultural exchange is that “It was generally agreed in New York that The Countess Olenska ‘had lost her looks,’ ” (750) and that she looked ‘worn’ and older than her age (1062). Immersion into culture causes decay of the outside signs of purity, in this case youth. The narrator is dominant; as the reporter of the talk of town he voices the consensus that contacts with intense European culture and its potential vices wear people out and that purity perishes there. American culture, on the contrary, is viewed as considerably gentler, and as a pendant and balancing idea, we find the notion that America conserves people in a fatal vacuum of sameness and boredom. Archer thinks of Louisa van de Luyden as “having been gruesomely preserved in the airless atmosphere of a perfectly irreproachable existence, as bodies caught in glaciers keep for years a rosy life-in-death” (1056). New York is also described as hermetically sealed; after Archer opens the window to let in fresh air May asks him to shut it: “[y]ou’ll catch your death’ . . . . ‘Catch my death!’ he echoed; and he felt like adding: ‘But I’ve caught it already. I AM dead – I’ve been dead for months and months” (1250-1). Accordingly, in the best case Europe introduces Americans to European culture, schools of thought and a European experience where people mature into something ‘more than American’, but at the same time over-exposure to Europe will cause the Americans to spoil.

374 The other reference to asphalt is an asphalt edge of the lake at Skuytercliff (1118).
The Community and Some of its Members

Benstock and Lee agree that Wharton draws on friends and family to fill *The Age of Innocence* with characters, linking people in Wharton’s life to the characters of *The Age of Innocence*. For example she has written the mother of her first fiancé into the novel as Mrs Struthers, who gives musical evenings on a Sunday, like her real life model, Mrs Paran Stevens who introduced to a shocked New York, Sunday night soirées. Wharton’s mother, Lucretia Jones, appears in three of society’s matrons, Mrs Welland, Mrs Archer and Louisa van der Luyden. Wharton’s great aunt Mary Mason is dramatized in Catherine Manson Mingott, who inherits all of the voluminous bulk, the preference for French detail in houses and the audaciousness of her original, and a businessman of questionable ethics is August Belmont, appearing as Julius Beaufort. People part of Edith Wharton’s childhood and youth are recycled as compositional material in her work.

If we try to delineate the kind of society which was theirs, the society she writes of, it is not possible to say that they make up any group representative of Americans, but rather a small exclusive community of well-to-do Americans in New York City. As a group the Old New York society see themselves as Americans, but more importantly they set themselves apart from the rest of the Americans in a sub-culture because they have distinguished Anglo-Dutch heritage, linking them to Europe and to each other. The group corresponds to the community in which Edith Wharton grew up, modeled on a community outside of literature. They are ‘the Four-Hundred’, which also defines the community’s outward limit. Benedict Anderson notes that a national community “is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know the most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”

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of Americans is imagined; most members know of each other and of their individual genealogies, which as we can see, in such a limited group frequently interconnect.

Wharton describes an old member, Sillerton Jackson, as the custodian of the family lineage. He is the authority on ‘family’, even if the rest of society has forgotten how the families are interrelated. Community is held together by heritage, common values and conceptions of European civilization. The members regard certain European practices, intellectual goods as well as merchandise as prestigious; willingly translating and adopting them into their society. These European goals are highly esteemed and admired cultural ambitions, but only at a surface level. Any real and substantial contact with the ‘other’ is kept at a distance because it is experienced as a threat to the group. This attitude makes it possible for them to enjoy all things European but they are wary not to get too close to aspects of the European experience that have tainted Ellen and made her foreign.

The members each have their place within the social organization. A few distantly related to European nobility, the rest have a simpler background. Having made their money in business and having married into the community, some define its margin. Staring from the social bottom of the elite New York society, Wharton describes it as “a small and slippery pyramid”, whose base was made of “‘plain’” people: the Spicers, Leffertses and the Jacksons, having risen above their level by marriage into one of the ruling clans (1053). The ruling clans: the Mingotts, Newlands, Chiverses and Mansons, made a wealthy and dominant small group, who were believed to be the very apex of the pyramid: the New York aristocracy, but they themselves knew they are not. Their great-grandfathers are “respectable English or Dutch merchants, who came to the colonies to make their fortune and stayed “because they did so well” (1054). Some of them have even signed the Declaration, or been a general on Washington’s staff. The only New Yorkers who could claim aristocracy were the van de

377 This information is partly Mrs Archer’s and “common opinion” as well as the anonymous narrator’s.
Luydens, who lived in exclusivity. This society is clearly molded on the European one, where people of lesser class but with money, marry into the aristocracy, even if New York society is not equivalent of European aristocracy.\textsuperscript{378} But despite seeming like a closed, contained community there is certain fluidity within it.

An example already mentioned of class-mobility is old Mrs Mingott, whose habits render her a description as foreign by the rest of the community.\textsuperscript{379} Julius Beaufort is another illustration, only just tolerated. Having married a wife from a well connected family certainly helped his entry into society, and the annual Beaufort ball he generously and conspicuously throws contributes to solidify his social position.\textsuperscript{380} But his dishonorable business practices the community is unable to stomach, causing the final break with society.

Pamela Knight claims that members of the social group only marry other members and that Fanny Beaufort’s “multiple parentage” provides a foreign marriage from within the “safety of the endogamous group” where the modern is safely combined with the ancestral. “The narrative brings back its exiles and incorporates them into the social structure.”\textsuperscript{381} This is true, in part, and this gesture of reconciliation between the generations does unify that which society was unable to accept at an earlier point in time. However, this phrasing emphasizes the sameness when at a closer look the group will appear less monolithic, and difference and pluralism appear as a salient and

\textsuperscript{378} Cf. above p. 226, for an earlier discussion of society’s structure where it illustrates aspects of the narrative function.

\textsuperscript{379} Cf. above p. 235, for a discussion of the term foreign.

\textsuperscript{380} Women function as repositories of social value. Mrs John King Rensselaer notes that “a woman marrying ‘down’ can elevate her husband to her own social rank, but a man who marries beneath him, acquires the caste of his wife” in The Social Ladder (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1924), 16-17, as quoted in Preston, Social Register, 34. Beaufort differs from Catherine Mingott in that he not only moves between classes, but between continents as well; as far as we know he is European of possible Jewish descent. Beaufort is discussed from a cultural perspective cf. p. 254.

\textsuperscript{381} Knights, 40-1. Fanny was raised by her mother Fanny Ring, Beaufort, Ellen Olenska and Mrs Jack Welland.
rather typical feature for the community. As time passes the group will become less endogamous, as the social invasion from below increases. In her recent biography Lee agrees that in society’s rigid structure “a good deal of accommodation” was going on to the “infiltration of new money”, and that the community at once gave the impression of “rigidity and exclusivity” and of giving way to change.382

Archer is the typical member of society. Knowing his community’s social codes well, he has always met its expectations. When meeting Ellen he sees his world from a different and new perspective. On the one hand she inspires him to challenge some of the views of his society, and on the other, to set in motion a series of actions enmeshing him deeper in society by marrying May, convention personified, ahead of plan. He oscillates between actions toward conformity and actions of rebellion. An aspect of his naïvety is that no earlier than during Ellen’s farewell dinner does the risk they have taken when seeing each other become obvious, as he understands that society thinks they are lovers.

The novel is often described as a Bildungsroman: Archer has the potential for change but only makes it to the point of questioning his own culture; he never dares any substantial change. Singley accounts a considerable classical influence on The Age of Innocence and that Ellen like a “philosopher-queen” fashions her dialogues with Newland on Socrates.383 This view requires that Ellen knows much more than she actually betrays. Archer thinks of himself as superior to others who lack his experience in books, travel and love, and Ellen’s questions stimulate Archer to question what he has taken for granted all his life. A change is initiated but withers, or in Singley’s words his “wings fail to carry him to the soul’s upper regions.”384 So Archer does not

382 Lee, 52.


384 Singley, 182.
change as much as he might have in the meeting with the other, fail-
ing to meet the potentiality of his plot; it was no option in his society. But he comes to an understanding of how it regulates him. Unable to act, this knowledge remains still resonant toward the end of the novel when Archer reconciles his loss of the “flower of life” with the gain of his son Dallas. The choices Archer never had are Dallas’s to make (1291).

Another important member of this community, but yet an out-
sider who has already been mentioned, is Julius Beaufort. He is a parvenu banking tycoon with a nebulous past in Europe. Initially New York society very unwillingly mingled with him, displaying their suspicion of Europe and of foreigners. Despite his disadvantage, over the years he becomes part of society and is accepted, because as pointed out earlier, he marries inside the group, with a high status woman, and because he is immensely rich. The principles behind the conversion of capitals in “Les Metteurs en Scène” are repeated in the case of Beaufort’s marriage to Regina; with the difference that Beaufort is European from the beginning, so what he desires is the collective social capital, the connections and credentials and to be able to draw on the solidarity which exists between the members of such a group. The same dynamic explains the vulnerability people outside the group experience, in a sense, in-between groups, and lacking social capital.

Beaufort holds a position in-between European and American cultures, which he shares with Ellen. Their common European ex-
perience connects them, and already on the day after her arrival Ellen is seen “parading” down Fifth Avenue with Beaufort, which vexes the rest of the community. Beaufort intermittently turns up like Jack-in-the-box casting shadows of doubt on Ellen’s credibility. Archer sus-
ppects Ellen’s romantic involvement with Beaufort and in a jealous fit he internally classifies Beaufort. Feeling inferior, in his thoughts a strain of contempt is curiously mixed with envy. He thinks that Beaufort has an advantage over the other men in his circle, namely,

his habit of two continents and two societies, his familiar association with artists and actors and people generally in the world’s eye, and his careless contempt for local prejudices. Beaufort was vulgar, he was
uneducated, he was purse-proud; but the circumstances of his life, and a certain native shrewdness, made him better worth talking to than many men, morally and socially his betters, whose horizon was bounded by the Battery and the Central Park. How should any one coming from a wider world not feel the difference and be attracted by it? (1124)

Archer is painfully aware that Beaufort better than he “understood every turn of her dialect, and spoke it fluently” and the narrator reports that Ellen said to Archer that “he and she did not talk the same language” (1125). Language here also comes to stand for cultural code. He later breaks out, “[y]ou like Beaufort because he is so unlike us. . . . We’re damnably dull. We’ve no character, no colour, no variety” (1207). When Beaufort’s bankruptcy is a fact, all of New York swiftly cringes on account of his dishonorable business deal, which they considered the greatest crime against Form and Taste “Unblemished honesty was the noblesse oblige in old financial New York” (1233). The last information we learn of Beaufort is that after bankruptcy and his wife’s death he marries his mistress and vanishes to Europe. Next, his daughter reappears in New York and marries Archer’s oldest son Dallas; the quarter of a century-old scandal regarding her father’s bankruptcy seems forgotten.

Knights sees Beaufort as Archer’s double: a man who offers multiple selves and refashions himself by “money, women, languages, foreign places, and new careers”, and Archer is connected to him several times but Archer cannot “become the figure of Beaufort” and Beaufort is expelled from the narrative and Archer is “reintegrated” into society.386

385 The same kind of language metaphor Wharton uses to describe cultural code in Madame de Treymes (Mme de Treymes and Durham) and in The Custom of the Country (Undine and Moffatt). As several critics have pointed out, Beaufort, Moffatt and Rosedale (of The House of Mirth) are related by their nebulous pasts and their ambition. As upstarts they gain access to the social tier above by means of money and marriage. Beaufort and Rosedale are possibly also connected by their religion.

386 Knights, 39.
Other characters on the margin of the New York community who have connections that threaten established society, either by being dangerously in between European and American cultures, or attracted to ideas or people that associate with bohemians also deserve mentioning. Medora Manson, like Ellen is American from the start, but after a long time in Europe and several marriages now calls herself a Marchioness. She is eccentric and returns at intervals to New York, mourning another husband, staying at a cheaper house each time. Both Medora and her friend Dr Carver are connected to the bohemian crowd at the Blenkers’. Of Dr Carver little is known, other than that he is the founder of the Valley of Love Community. Another link leading to the bohemians and the Blenkers is Professor Emerson Sillerton, also on the very edge of the New York society.

**Ellen: The Product of Europeanization**

In this novel Wharton explores her concerns regarding the European experience, and how an American in contact with Europe relates to its various influences, by investigating the cultural gap a returning American woman may have to first identify, and then bridge, in order to re-assimilate to an earlier life-style. Shari Benstock calls Ellen Olenska Wharton’s most brilliant portrait of “expatriated womanhood” which draws on elements of both Madame de Treymes and Fanny de Malrive.\(^{387}\) An alternative reading of *The Age of Innocence* is Anne MacMaster’s where Ellen Olenska not only represents the threatening ‘other’ from Europe, but also a racial ‘other’ within the American nation. She suggests that Wharton’s work registers the fundamental dilemma of American identity and locates it to a paradox situated at the “intersection of several ironies: the history of slavery in a land of the free, the fear of the foreign in a land of immigrants, the drive toward conformity behind the creed of individualism.”\(^{388}\) She finds at work in the narrative that which Toni Morrison identifies as ‘American Africanism’, or the ‘Africanist presence’ in American lite-

\(^{387}\) Benstock, *No Gifts from Chance*, 159.

\(^{388}\) MacMaster, 188.
CHAPTER SIX: THE FULL-CIRCLE CULTURAL ENCOUNTER

She finds that Wharton makes racial doubling into a narrative strategy, and fits Ellen, Catherine, and their servant women (the swarthy Natasha, and the mulatto maid) into a configuration of characters that aligns darkness with “resistance to conformity, with passion, courage and vitality”, and that references to dark complexion work as a “metaphorical shortcut” to suggest the erotic. She also finds instances where the Africanist character functions as a surrogate for Ellen: the mulatto maid or Natasha sometimes appears in Ellen’s stead, when Archer counts on meeting Ellen. The Africanist presence paradoxically serves as a marker of both white male privilege and as white female defiance.

Ellen Olenska is given surprisingly little space in the narrative and the picture the reader gets of her is New York’s perception of a Europeanized woman. The rather indirect depiction of Ellen excludes access to her thoughts; she is portrayed through Archer’s consciousness, and to some extent through the narrator. How to represent Ellen and her experience had occupied Wharton’s mind to the point of having written no less than three plans for different versions on this theme, where she gradually retreats from foregrounding Ellen’s experience. In showing Ellen’s life in Archer’s and New York’s

389 Macmaster supplies Morrison’s definition of Africanist presence, which refers to the characters of color created by white writers, that embody the “blackness that African peoples have come to signify” in the European-American imagination (Quoted from Morrison, Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991). The Africanist presence in a text both records and questions the construction of whiteness at a certain point in history. See MacMaster, 188.

390 MacMaster, 192-94.

391 MacMaster, 195-6.

392 Kathy Miller Hadley writes that Wharton had structured the novel carefully and had outlined three plans for the novel. In the first version May and Archer break off their engagement and Ellen suggests, on Archer’s proposal, that they spend a few weeks together to be sure of their feelings for each other. They marry, but Ellen leaves Archer because her “soul ‘recoils’ from the prospect of an old New York marriage”. She returns poor and lonely to Europe where she has a “real life”, and Archer returns to his mother’s house. The second plan has a more conventional plot: Archer and May marry; Archer has an affair with Ellen who then returns to Europe.
conceptions Wharton captures much of the complexity surrounding Ellen’s return home. She presents the idea of the potential danger Ellen poses to society, and the precariousness in her position as displaced and not belonging in any culture, which becomes evident in the rendering of her return to New York as the completion of a cultural full circle journey. The departure and the return serve as reference-points to her Europeanization, and refers to the situation when an American, after years in Europe returns to America and is able to review it from a European perspective.

Old New York’s combined memories of Ellen as a girl give the picture of a child who differs from the average, and she is never described as American before her first departure. Having lived in Europe with her parents, returning to America after their death, she was already as a young child described as ‘other’, as a little gipsy (1062). Mrs Welland sums Ellen up from a New York perspective:

‘I am afraid that Ellen’s ideas are not all like ours. She was barely eighteen when Medora Manson took her back to Europe – you remember the excitement when she appeared in black velvet at her coming-out ball? Another of Medora’s fads—really this time it was almost prophetic! That must have been at least twelve years ago; and since Ellen has never been to America. No wonder she is completely Europeanized.’ (1130)

This plan was safer instead of the first one where Wharton was insecure whether her readership would tolerate a heroine who (in Wharton’s own words) broke up the “engagement of a nice girl, suggested trial marriage, and then abandoned her husband” because New York’s seasonal social life bored her (262 ff). The third plan, seems similar to the second, Archer and May marry but Archer’s affair with Ellen has longer duration and is suspected by everyone but May. The final dinner, much discussed as a ritual of social ostracism, is in versions two and three a farewell dinner. But in the last version, which also made it to print, the dinner has a different role: Ellen is reduced to a less important figure, and Archer has become the main character. See “Ironic Structure and Untold stories in The Age of Innocence”, in Studies in the Novel, vol. xxiii, no23.2, (1991), 262-72.

Characters who have made a full circle journey are Kate Clephane and Chris Fenno, of The Mother’s Recompense.
As an adult, however, she is described as quiet in her movements (1064), which echoes Fanny in Madame de Treymes as another character in between cultures. Ellen’s years in Europe have influenced her and in the minds of the New Yorkers she comes to epitomize all of what New York interprets as European. It is not long before Ellen gets tangled in a web of sometimes socially and culturally contradicting codes. But eventually she falls from the good graces of her family and “as Mrs Welland said they had simply. . .

‘let poor Ellen find her own level’ – and that, mortifyingly and incomprehensibly, was in the dim depths where the Blenkers prevailed, and ‘the people who wrote’ celebrated their untidy rites. It was incredible, but it was a fact, that Ellen, in spite of all her opportunities and her privileges, had become ‘Bohemian.’ (1223)

The indignation and finality conveyed by Mrs Welland’s words make any reconciliation with New York impossible. Another sort of inevitability is mirrored by Count Olenski’s emissary M Rivière, who believes that it would be impossible for Ellen to return to her old life in Europe and certain European practices would even be “unthinkable” (1218) to the American family had they only known what they were. The details of what this might be are never specified. Having seen her in a European and now in an American context, he understands something about her sense of morals which he never realized in Europe: despite being considered corrupted, her integrity is absolute.

The novel draws on the stereotypes of Europe and European life to fill out descriptions of the European, and Ellen is perceived as mysterious and exotic by the New Yorkers. In strange opposition to these expectations, she is presented as the most honest of all the characters, honesty being an American trait. After having run away from her morally corrupt husband, she returns from Europe for the first time in more than a decade, in the words of her aunt Medora, leaving behind, roses “acres of them, under glass and in the open. . . terraced gardens in Nice! Jewels – historic pearls: the Sobiesky emeralds – sables . . . . [p]ictures, priceless furniture, music, brilliant conversation . . . Her portrait has been painted nine times” (1143-4), only to seek “rest and oblivion among her kinsfolk” (1063). Medora de-
scribes unfathomable wealth and celebrity, but what abhorrent actions committed against Ellen lurk behind the unconventional aunt Medora’s words?

What does Ellen do that so threatens the New Yorkers? Apart from the lesser offences, such as going to the Metropolitan opera in a dress straight out of a Parisian fashion house and to top it off, without a tucker, she arrives rather late to a dinner at the prestigious van der Luydens with “one hand still ungloved, and fastening a bracelet around her wrist . . . yet without any sign of haste or embarrassment” (1063). A sense of spontaneity convention cannot hamper connects her to Fanny de Malrive who also emerges gloveless into the street. Both Durham and Archer experience a similar attraction to the sense of impulsiveness that the parallel episodes communicate. On Ellen’s late arrival she also gets involved in a conversation with the guest of honor before he had paid his respects to the ladies in a higher rank than hers. These transgressions New York is willing to overlook, this time. However, when she suggests divorcing her husband, because she no longer intends to be a wife to him, New York recoils. When understanding that she, from society’s perspective, jeopardizes her family’s reputation, she retreats. These actions are her own and undermine her position but what increasingly becomes more problematic for Ellen, as the novel progresses, is her affiliation to the Beauforts, the Bohemians and Archer, which will cast so much doubt on her that she is ultimately ostracized from the community. We have already seen how Ellen’s affiliation with Beaufort compromised her in Archer’s eyes, and even Beaufort’s wife, Regina, becomes a liability jeopardizing Ellen’s reputation. Her damning social move is that despite knowing that Regina has been cut by society, Ellen, upright, still takes her grandmother’s carriage to Regina’s house when she needs consoling, openly showing society that a member of the Mingott family is visiting the Beaufort residence. Regina’s high position in

394 Wharton, Madame de Treymes, 3.
society and her family ties can not help mitigate the fall; she is ostra-
cized by society.

“Bohemians” are thought suspicious in Old New York. Ellen is
connected to bohemians by her parents who traveled and by her
relative the Marchioness Medora Manson who raised her after her
parents’ death in Europe. Medora brought her to visit her New York
relations dressed as a gipsy foundling in crimson silk and merino
pearls, and later, as mentioned, she allowed Ellen to wear black at her
own coming out ball, which is considered to be inappropriate. Fur-
thermore, Ellen’s Eastern European last name, choice of house in the
‘not-so-nice’ part of town, and her Sicilian maid as well as Ellen’s way
of arranging her house add to the impression. The ease with which
she associates with foreigners and people who write, i.e. Beaufort and
her bohemian neighbor, Ned Winsett, augments her position as a
source of potential corruption for the New Yorkers. There are also
other connections outside the immediate and close social set, which
socially discredit her.

Ellen attends the Struthers’ Sunday evening parties for a bohe-
mian crowd: “people who write”, painters and dramatic artists. The
Struthers and the Blenkers are industrialists and upstarts, wanting a
social career to correspond with their income. Ellen says to Archer
that the Struthers “interest me more than the blind conformity to
tradition-someone else’s tradition—that I see among our own friends”,
and that Beaufort “understands” (1206-7). Ellen visited the Struther’s
before they had been accepted by society and later on “[e]verybody”
got to Mrs Struther’s Sunday evenings: “once people had tasted of
Mrs Struther’s easy Sunday hospitality they were not likely to sit at
home remembering that her champagne was transmuted shoe polish”
(1222). The same dollar-principle that worked for Beaufort’s benefit
in attaining social tolerance, also eventually does for Mrs Struthers;
wealth combined with sociability and generosity are difficult to
refuse. The humorous narrative remark and explicit link between, on
one hand, economic capital, and on the other, cultural and social
capital, recalls the Boykins’ dinner (Madame de Treymes) where the lack
of manners is compensated by the number of dishes.
The last affiliation which risks Ellen’s position in society is to Archer, which has become perilous. The Mingotts and the Wellands see that a romantic relation is imminent between them, believing their affair is at a more advanced stage than it is. So behind Archer’s back they conspire and arrange for Ellen’s return to Europe, and Archer, earlier having assumed that Beaufort and Ellen were amorous involved, ironically, gets a taste of the same medicine, when it suddenly dawns on him during Ellen’s farewell-dinner that the entire community believes that he and Ellen were lovers, in an “extreme” foreign way. Ellen’s association to Archer actually leads to her ultimate expulsion from New York. From Ellen’s first minute on the New York stage she transgresses her group’s social code. Initially, Ellen breaks the rules of convention unwittingly, but progressively her inner standard of truth, honesty or decency demands that she holds to her beliefs, even if compromising the security of her own position. Since the collective carries the responsibility of its members her family is reproached by the rest of society. Their own position threatened, they can no longer stand by her, and in order to restore harmony to the community Ellen is sacrificed: an act controlling and containing the disruption that otherwise threatens the group from within. Her removal from New York society is desirable and necessary for group survival. These forces of tribal discipline within culture Pierre Bourdieu refers to as “symbolic or euphemized violence”.395 Bentley notes that its power lies in the “collective denial that any coercion is taking place, making direct resistance inappropriate or even absurd.”396

Aside from her affiliation to individuals or groups which jeopardize her position in society, Ellen’s quest for truthfulness and candor further undermine her standing with her family. She deflates a number of central collective untruths in the community. Among them is that which Archer criticizes so vehemently: that the real thing is rarely spoken, and which he calls the hieroglyphic world of New York, where a set of arbitrary signs stand for something which is

396 Bentley, Ethnography of Manner, 110.
never said. Ellen notices the inclination to lie rather than telling the truth, and how the New York women avoid the “unpleasant” and that no one wants to “know the truth” (1077). The concept of innocence is complex and Wharton connects such lies to aspects of female innocence criticized in the novel and disclosed as utter fake and falsity, not related to honesty or frankness, which has earlier been discussed. Elizabeth Ammons calls May’s helpless femininity “America’s answer to Chinese foot-binding.” Mrs Welland exemplifies middle-aged innocence where youth no longer is an extenuating circumstance for lack of experience and is Wharton’s example of “middle-aged invincible innocence . . . that seals the mind against imagination and the heart against experience” (1130). This kind of blind innocence is equated with ignorance and illustrated with the metaphor of the “Kentucky cave-fish” which have ceased to develop eyes because they have no use for them (1081). Archer describes his wife posthumously as “lacking in imagination, so incapable of growth, that the world of her youth had fallen into pieces and rebuilt itself without her ever being conscious of the change” (1292). Social convention requires such intellectual maiming of its daughters, taboos regulate what is permitted knowledge, but it is evident that female knowledge supersedes what society allows them to mention. This practice of feigned innocence stands in sharp contrast to Ellen’s integrity and honor.

397 He criticizes society’s double standards, women’s feigned innocence and the pretence of niceness, for instance never mentioning and pretending that adultery does not exist. Women’s innocence is discussed in chapter 3 in *The Custom of the Country*.


399 Cf. above p. 206, the discussion on Wharton’s essays on France and how Wharton perceives French women as different from the American women. Feigned innocence in American women should be compared to the discussion in *French Ways* about how in American society women and men do not share life in society. In *French Ways and their Meaning* “real living” refers to the “close and interesting relationship between women and men” (102). Archer voices similar opinions of “real living” when saying to Ellen: “You gave me my first glimpse of a real life, and at the same moment you asked me to go on with a sham one. It’s beyond human enduring—that’s all” (1208).
Ellen searches for complete sincerity; as part of it she wants the freedom of a new beginning. Admitting to wanting to rid herself of the memories of the past she says: “I want to be free; I want to wipe out all the past” (1102). The new beginning she cries for recalls the great numbers of European immigrants for whom America comprised great hopes for renewal and a second chance in life. She also questions never before addressed issues, perceptively putting her finger on the “general shiver” about the van der Luydens, to some relief for Archer (1073). As mentioned in another context, an important step toward honesty for Ellen is to divorce her husband. She knows the American laws allow it; however when she realizes that the whole family is against it because it would damage the family’s reputation: the Archers, the Wellands as well as the Mingotts, she settles for separation. In her mind she also gives up Archer because she cannot build her happiness on someone else’s misery, she cannot hurt those who have helped her rebuild her life. She tells Archer that she has re-evaluated what was important in her life in the words: “It was you who made me understand that under the dullness there are things so fine and sensitive and delicate that even those I most cared for in my other life look cheap in comparison” (1207).

Her change has come about after her return to New York and the fine things she refers to is consideration for others. Her new striving for honesty is founded on respect for others in order to preserve respect for the self. The same kind of unselfish sense of honesty toward others can be found in other characters in-between cultures, bringing to mind honest John Durham and Fanny de Malrive.

The French

As the utmost European character Count Olenski figures as an image of the cultural other. He is described by Mr Lefferts, the one member of society who has met him in Nice as “one of the very worst [of awful brutes]. . . . A half-paralysed white sneering fellow . . . when he wasn’t with women he was collecting china. Paying any price for both” (1027). He is portrayed in the stereotype of a weak degenerate, womanizing aristocrat, who, according to Mr Jackson, never lifted a
finger to get his wife back. Since no other information is given to oppose this view, in the end it is the Americans’ conjectures that stand as the uncontradicted version of what the count was like. But despite this we learn that indeed he sent M Rivière as his emissary, making Ellen an offer to continue the marriage. According to Mr Letterblair, he also returned some of the money Ellen brought with her into the marriage, even though this was not the custom or the laws in France. As we can see, two versions of the count emerge, one slightly less unsympathetic than the other. Mr Lefflerts also provides information about the other European, M Rivière, and that Ellen “bolted” with him while he was Count Olenski’s secretary (1027). He turns up later in the narrative, during Archer’s and May’s European honeymoon, looking for a break in the new world. He asks Archer to help him find a position in New York. May, however, dismisses him, with a superior attitude in the words: “The little Frenchman? Wasn’t he dreadfully common?” (1175) M Rivière also meets Ellen as an emissary for her husband in Boston, and sees Archer in New York. Both Olenski and Rivière as minor characters (Olenski takes no part in the action, he is just referred to by other characters) function to spread suspicion of corruption about Ellen.

Concluding Remarks: The Role of Time

The novel depicts a community in a period of transition due to demographic change, illustrating how Old New York society eventually gives way to modern times. Wharton sets the novel back in time to her childhood, the early seventies, thus making the characters contemporary to her parents’ generation and their social circles. She knew this group from the inside well, and its struggles to exclude invaders pushing up from the strata below. The novel begins in the opera house, the sociable old Academy of Music, which demonstrates the social battle of inclusion or exclusion. The building is conveniently small enough for fashionable society to provide a physical restriction to exclude people on its outside, but society could not prevent
the influx of the parvenu. In such a precise sliver of society, the recognition of, and adherence to convention, become the shibboleth for membership.

The novel covers a couple of years of the main character Newland Archer’s life during which he gets engaged, marries and also grows increasingly unhappy in his marriage. After a twenty-six-year break in the narrative the rest of his life is told in retrospect. Archer’s life is reflected in his son’s and it is evident that the hold Old New York society once had on its members has loosened. The choices his son Dallas is able to make, which were never options in the time of Archer’s youth – the age of innocence – thus complete the social transition to modern times this novel illustrates.

As a comment on the changing times Ellen pin-points in the Metropolitan Museum how entire cultures can be lost and concentrated in a few remaining objects when she views a display of “small broken objects – hardly recognizable domestic utensils, ornaments and personal trifles . . . made of time-blurred substances” and comments: “It seems cruel. . . that after a while nothing matters . . . any more than these little things, that used to be necessary and important to a forgotten people, and now have to be guessed at under a magnifying glass and labelled: ‘Use unknown’ ” (1262). This functions as a prediction of society’s development over the next generation. The last pages of the book bear witness to how the values and the social codes important to New York society during the 1870s have become obsolete: the next generation already having forgotten the reasons why Ellen is ostracized and sent back to Europe.

Wharton wrote this novel in hindsight as the obituary of the world she grew up in: the values of the past are being scrutinized through the eyes of a later date. Two parallel value-systems, separated by time, are simultaneously at work in the novel. The values of the story world correspond to the time to which Wharton antedates her

400 Lee writes about the battles of social dominance in the realm of the cultural. The Metropolitan was built to solve the size problem of the Academy, sponsored by the newly rich Rockefeller, Gould, Whitney, Morgan and Vanderbilt. It opened in 1883, and the Academy closed in 1885. See Lee, 55.
novel and conflict with those held by the narrative functions tempo-
 rally located in the time period of the last chapter: twenty-six years
 later, approximately somewhere between 1896-1900. This temporal
disjunction in the narrative closes as Dallas and Archer speak about
the past: the former tension between two parallel value systems is
stabilized as the two temporal perspectives converge in the conversa-
tion between father and son: the past catching up with the narrative-
present.
Chapter Seven: Postscript

My curiosity about the subject examined in this thesis was instigated by the discovery of a striking omission. Although the importance of Europe and in particular France to Edith Wharton is frequently pointed out in scholarly works on her fiction, no thorough and detailed discussion of the topic has been published to date. In this study, dealing with the Franco-American cultural encounter as depicted in her works, I suggest that Wharton during her career persistently returns to explore yet another angle of the subject of the cultural encounter. In her first attempts she gradually approaches it, but later manages to portray it as a dynamic process where the involved subjects change in contact with their cultural others, while learning something about themselves and the other. The most notable, successful encounter is exemplified by the exchanges between Madame de Treymes and Durham. In critical works the cultural change Fanny embodies is pointed out, although her change is already a fact at the onset of the story (which still is interesting to study), whereas the depiction of Durham and Madame de Treymes, for the purposes of this study, reveals as the novella’s major achievement a completely new and different angle on the encounter. We see in their interaction cultural production in the making; a process forming their cultural identities which can be interpreted from a contemporary perspective as being performatively formed. But also in earlier attempts to portray characters, described as stagnant and fixed, we notice evidence of small steps of change.

Edith Wharton spent a large portion of her life in Europe. Not surprisingly, the great social and political changes in the US and Europe which she experienced first-hand are reflected in her works,
forming the greater context into which the thematic configuration referred to here as the ‘hyperfabula’ is inserted. This ‘hyperfabula’, which is based on a conflation of all her relevant texts dealing with the Franco-American cultural encounter, forms a general story-line put together of elements derived from all her plots. Taking into account the different scopes of the plots she produced throughout her career, the ‘hyperfabula’ is a ‘total narrative’ which examines the different facets of the individual’s chances of personal development and self-understanding within the perimeters of the cultural encounter. We may infer, from Wharton’s process-oriented approach, that she never came to regard the problematics of the cultural encounter as resolved, since the theme persistently re-surfaces in her oeuvre throughout her career right up to her unfinished novel *The Buccaneers* (published posthumously in 1938). It is particularly important in her work during the period 1904-1920 when it provided the subject matter of the short stories and novels which have been scrutinized in this thesis.

Although according to this thesis Wharton’s fullest and most complex exploration of the nuances of the intercultural encounter are to be found in the exchanges between Durham and Madame de Treymes in the novella with the same name (1907), in the snap-shots ‘before’ and ‘after’ the changes brought on by the encounter with the other culture in “Les Metteurs en Scène” (1908), and the subtle pitting of the collective opinion against the views of the narrator and the internal focalizer in *The Age of Innocence* (1920), Europe and European civilization continue to loom large in Wharton’s later work texts as well. However, although Europe is treated with great reverence and its formative importance for many Americans is taken for granted in these novels, in her later work Wharton does not attempt to effect a fusion of American and European identity through cultural encounters of the kind highlighted in most of the major works written during the period 1904-1920. Still, some comments on *The Reef* (1912), *The Glimpses of the Moon* (1922), *The Mother’s Recompense* (1925) and *The Buccaneers* (1938) and the intermittent glimpses of in-betweenness that
they afford are necessary.\footnote{401} As regards the first three novels, it must be pointed out that no Europeans appear in these narratives (save for Strefford in *The Glimpses of the Moon*); however, as they are all set in Europe and as each novel expresses some degree of concern with the cultural encounter, they are at least *indirectly relevant* to the main topic of this thesis. The fourth and final novel, *The Buccaneers*, stands out from the rest in these respects; it is set in Europe and depicts for the first and only time in Wharton’s oeuvre a successful cultural encounter between Americans and Europeans. Not only is American identity fused with a European identity here: Nan, the main character, is allowed personal happiness. Thus, the novel functions as a marker of a successful ‘new’ Euro-American identity fusing both kinds of experience. However, the relevance of this work to my discussion is somewhat limited by the fact that the European identity examined here is English, not French. In a sense, then, this final novel looks back to *Fast and Loose*, Wharton’s earliest preserved novelistic attempt, which is also set in England.

*The Reef* (1912) was written in the span between “Les Metteurs en Scène” and *The Custom of the Country*. Despite the novel’s French setting all characters are American expatriates. Henry James criticizes her choice of setting, because other than the “superficial” references to “milieu and background” he thinks the novel is “unrelated” to France.\footnote{402} Bellringer considers that *The Reef* treats the “awkwardness of remarriage” and the “complications which the elevation of free choice in Protestant culture tends to overlook”; it “supposes in 1912


a kind of modern love among consciously liberal Americans abroad.”

The circumstances in *The Reef* concerning Darrow, the male protagonist, and Anna Leath, the love of his youth (who has lived in France since marrying a Europeanized and degenerate expatriate), recalls the relationship between Fanny and Durham. A few peripheral characters are portrayed in terms that bring to mind expatriates of earlier narratives. Miss Painter, who has lived in France for more than thirty years in “contemptuous protestation”, is hostile toward France and the French (466). She speaks fluent French “with the purest Boston accent” (503-4) and is described by Anna as more “American than the Stars and Stripes” (467). The narrator imparts that she “always applied to the French race the distant epithet of ‘those people’” (505); and in direct dialogue Miss Painter refers to the French as “nasty foreigners” (467), and expresses contempt for “the creed and customs of the race” (466). Her contempt unites her with Mrs Boykin, and in view of Darrow’s opinion of her mind as a “big blank area...so vacuous for all its accumulated items, so echoless for all its vacuity” also with Mrs Welland in *The Age of Innocence* (506). The narrator takes a critical stance to Mrs Painter.

Anna says about her mother-in-law, Madame de Chantelle, that since her second marriage to a French nobleman, she has “identified herself with Monsieur de Chantelle’s nationality and adopted French habits and prejudices” (466). Bellringer considers that the lady’s opinions “feebly filtered through a type of American faddishness, represent the only residual standards of conduct in *The Reef*”. This suggests that her views correspond to an American’s idea of what French aristocrats should think.

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403 Bellringer, 121, 123.

404 But the similarities stop on surface level. In short: Durham has an affair with Sophy (an American working-class girl), who Anna hires as a governess. This results in the engagement between Anna’s stepson and Sophy. However, I will look past these complications and consider the aspects relating to the cultural encounter.

405 Bellringer, 123.
In Stephen Orgel’s biographical reading of *The Reef*, the novel is Wharton’s way to deal with her new status as a divorcée in France. Identifying her with Anna focuses his observation on the drama acted out between Darrow, an opportunistic hypocrite, Sophy: “trapped by her circumstances and makes the most of them”, and Anna: “outwardly shy and conventional but inwardly passionate and deeply and idealistically romantic”.

Interpreting the characters as “versions of the Wharton of 1912”, he describes them as “distinctly unflattering versions, Americans who have remained basically untouched by the culture that surrounds them”, and he sees no potentiality for the cultural encounter. While he finds the insularity of the expatriates’ lives in France epitomized in the parodic figure of Miss Painter, he also suggests that she represents “the basic moral clarity of her [Wharton’s] American gaze”, since her “analytical powers are considerable” and after all, her advice to her fellow Americans is good.

The post-war novel *The Glimpses of the Moon* (1922) does not mention the Great War at all, whereas *The Mother’s Recompense* (1925) set after the war, in France and New York, spanning approximately one year, deals with it metaphorically, in terms of reconciliation. These novels do not address the Europeanizing process directly; no comparisons are made between Europeans and Americans. The reclaiming of Old New York morals which *The Glimpses of the Moon* hinges on, and Kate’s (*The Mother’s Recompense*) incomprehension of the American face, presupposes in the first instance, the loss of these morals, and in the second, the loss of the key of interpretation, suggesting that life in Europe has inspired these characters to change.

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406 Orgel, viii, vii.
407 Orgel ix.
408 Orgel, x.
409 The dating of *The Glimpses of the Moon* cf. above n. 83.
Americans are depicted as rootless, denationalized individuals drifting around Europe. The narrator describes the cosmopolitan group Suzy lives in as “denationalised”; where people “taken for Russians generally turned out to be American, and those one was inclined to ascribe to New York proved to have originated in Rome or Bucharest” (40). They are described as having “inter-married, inter-loved and inter-divorced each-other over the face of Europe, and according to any code that attempts to regulate human life” (40).

The situation is similar to that of “Les Metteurs en Scène”, with the difference that the American newlyweds Suzy and Nick Lansing (hangers-on to rich American expatriates in Europe) make a provisional marriage until either one of them gets a better offer of marriage, meanwhile living off their wedding gifts and rich friends. But life as social parasites requires that they in a pragmatic way ‘manage’ the compromise between moral integrity and economic comfort. This sometimes involves supplying shady favors, such as lying on behalf of their sponsors. Resisting these (to the reader sudden) demands, Nick leaves Suzy to become a social secretary to the Hicks. Love is in conflict with money and only when Suzy accepts an independent middle class existence in line with the narrator’s and Nick’s values – the taken for granted sense of right and wrong – does it become possible. This suggests that Suzy resolves the main conflict in the novel by recommitting to American Old New York moral principles.

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410 Preston notes that in the novel of the 1920s Americans marry Americans and beginning with *The Glimpses of the Moon* there is little “interaction between Americans and anything or one genuinely European.” See Preston, *Social Register*, 161. Ammons also observes changes in Wharton’s writing in the books of the 1920s, where she detects a decline in quality and a conservative change in Wharton’s argument with America on the subject of women, which she suggests is a reaction to the war. See Ammons, *Argument*, ix and chapter 6.

411 Meanwhile, Suzy declines an offer of marriage (an “incredible prize”) from the English Lord of Altringham (because he disappoints her morally) despite the “freedom, power and dignity” it would provide (174, 136).
The Mother’s Recompense (1925) is a post-war novel, one of whose central themes is remembrance and forgetting. The novel deals with how Americans abroad cope with the political and social changes after the war. It is about coming to terms with the past, and integrating it (whatever it may hold of pain, regrets or suffered injustices) into the future, by means of reconstructing the memory, in denial, or by trivializing parts of the past as having happened a long time ago. The narrator condenses the idea in the description of Mr and Mrs Merriman’s approach to the past.\(^{412}\) The narrator and the focalizer collaborate in creating the sense of vagueness and inexactness on the narrative level that the expatriates themselves employ, when creating euphemisms or an alternative truth to their actual lives. The expatriates are portrayed as sharing a collective delusion, living in a “chronic state of mental inaccuracy”, pretending to have a full schedule (568, 762). The war brings all Americans together against a common enemy, offering Kate and other expatriates a way to repair their problematic social positions in America.\(^{413}\) In isolated expatriotism America’s social wreckage in a permanent “need of concealment” (568) collaborate in a collective delusion, generously accepting each other’s fibs and euphemisms in order to save face, and to manage to present themselves in a better light.

The novel is structurally related to The Age of Innocence, which motivates a comparison. Kate Clephane returns to New York, eighteen years earlier having eloped with her lover, acting on an impulse to leave her restrictive and loveless marriage. Tormented by self-critical, unforgiving inward honesty for having deserted her child, on her return she rehabilitates her relationship with her grown daughter, Anne. The tragedy of the story is that Kate’s past, as European expe-

\(^{412}\) “And they [the expatriates] all knew of each other’s stories, or at least the current versions, and affected to disapprove of each other, and yet be tolerant; thus following the example of Mrs. Merriman, who simply wouldn’t listen to any of those horrors, and of Mr. Merriman whose principle it was to ‘believe the best’ till the worst stared him in the face, and then say: ‘I understand it all happened a long while ago’ ” (23).

\(^{413}\) Preston sees them as a “discharged” population; “socially disabled,” by “drugs, crime, matrimonial and professional failure”. See Preston, Social Register, 64.
ience, is irreconcilable with her future, as life in America. Her past puts happiness out of reach: love as well as a relationship with her daughter; therefore Kate, like Ellen before her, is forced to return to Europe. Shocked to realize that her daughter means to marry Kate’s own old love, Chris – the only man she loved and the most important part of her European experience – she sacrifices her relationship to Anne, in order to spare her daughter “sterile pain”. Echoing “Les Metteurs en Scène”, mother and daughter are in a sense rivals for the same man, although the brides in the plots are inverted. Kate faces an impossible situation; if she tells her daughter the truth about Chris, she would lose her, as well as ruin Anne’s happiness. By not telling, Kate would have to live with, and in proximity, to her lie; to avoid this she chooses to return to her empty existence in Riviera hotels. Returning to Europe is also Kate’s renunciation of happiness, because it makes a life with her old New York friend, Fred Landers, who proposes marriage, impossible.414

Out of touch with American life in America, no longer able to decode American behavior, Kate experiences Americans as having generic qualities: young American men look alike, reminding her of young men in magazine ads – their appearances merging into a “collective American Face” (592). In a series of similar generalizing descriptions of American men as individually indistinguishable, but yet having typical traits uniting them as a group, Wharton captures the effects of Kate’s Europeanizing.415 Kate evaluates the Americans from

414 Raphael argues that Kate’s return is motivated by “internalized, unconscious shame” having “cripple[d] her emotional development” and “poison[ed] every one of her relationships”, in Prisoners of Shame, 41.

415 Their otherness is captured in words describing the “sameness of the American Face” encompassing her “with its innocent uniformity” (608). She ascribes to the New Yorkers a certain kind of “universal straightness”, they all are “so young” and “so regular” making her feel as though she is in a “gallery of marble master-pieces” (609). They are further described in the words: “[h]ow many of them it seemed to take to make up a single individuality! Most of them were like the miles and miles between two railway stations. She saw again that one may be young and handsome and healthy and eager, and yet unable, out of such rich elements, to evolve a personality” (608).

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a European perspective, which becomes evident in the description of the Americans as ‘other’. To Kate they lack personal expression and she surmises that they cannot mature into individualities; to her they have become generic types. Her Europeanizing is implied in descriptions of how she has become disconnected from America.

Lastly, in *The Buccaneers* Annabelle St George, Nan, begins her life as a young uneducated rich girl of Midwestern industrialists, the “‘new’ coal and steel people” (157). The narrative reiterates elements of earlier plots which recur in *The Buccaneers* in some form. The English setting and the play with the names of her main characters from *Fast and Loose*: Georgie – Annabelle St George, and Guy as the hero’s name in both narratives, give her collective narrative a circular composition and a sense of closure. But it also answers some questions raised by earlier narratives. After having been snubbed by New York society, the young American sisters are brought by their governess, Laura Testvalley to Europe, where they quickly become popular in the circles they aspire to penetrate. Nan eventually makes an international aristocratic marriage like Undine and Fanny. Unhappy in her castle, Nan contemplates leaving England to go back to New York, but comes to the conclusion that

> [a]t least a life in England had a background, layers and layers of rich deep background, of history, poetry, old traditional observances, beautiful houses, beautiful landscapes, beautiful ancient buildings, palaces, churches, cathedrals. Would it not be possible, in some mysterious way, to create for one’s self a life out of all this richness, a life which should somehow make up for the poverty of one’s personal lot? (425)

In Nan’s words, Wharton finally manages to unite the ‘impossible’ combination of the American cultural heritage of the uneducated rich

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416 The unfinished novel was found in Wharton’s estate after her death in 1937 along with the writer’s handwritten outline for the unwritten chapters. We must assume that to the perfectionist Wharton, *The Buccaneers* was far from a finished work ready for print. It is a comedy and its narrator describes both Americans and English in a compassionate, good-natured, tone.
and a sense of genuine regard for the cultural treasures of Europe. But Nan also raises democratic issues, when she questions the fairness of a social structure of which she has become a part, by expressing social concerns about the welfare of the tenants (371).

In evidence of her success as a Europeanized American in Europe, love suddenly becomes possible between Nan and the English nobleman Guy Thwarte. This, in its turn, almost forces us to ponder the question if Wharton finally concludes that cultural encounters are more likely to be successful between people who share the same language. Guy, like Nan, is “between two worlds” (384). Having lived in the New World in South America, on his return, he completes a ‘full circle’ trajectory.

Nan is exempt from the impasse which often thwarts most of Wharton’s Americans in Europe. However, the price for Nan’s happiness is paid by people close to her: Laura, when helping the couple elope (which causes a scandal), is renounced by the man she loves, Sir Helmsley, Guy’s father; Guy forfeits his relationship with his father and the link to his heritage and inheritance (Honourslove) when choosing Nan. In the context of the greater narrative of the ‘hyper-fabula’ The Buccaneers solves the ‘inconceivable’ narrative of Catherine’s; Wharton creates a ‘new’ character in supplying the traditionless Undine with the sensitivities to assimilate European values and giving her the ability to find happiness. As a new character equipped with a combination of little cultural capital, a great deal of economic capital,

417 Wershoven has noted that The Buccaneers “breaks off with an emblem of hope”, in “Discriminations”, 125. Preston, on the other hand, considers the relationship between Guy and Nan damaging to the traditions of England: “Nan’s attempt to achieve the best of Englishness and England is a failure”, in Social Register, 170. Margaret McDowell argues that The Buccaneers is an old theme with a new hope, and that the union between Nan and Guy “seems symbolic as a kind of union of two societies, American and English, and as a strong new fusion of the forces of tradition and change”, and that the hope in the novel lies “less in the influence of Americans on the English than in that of a new kind of young people in both nations who value tradition and art at the same time that they seek change in social patterns”, in “Edith Wharton”, in Twayne’s United States Authors Series Online (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1999).
ability to love and to incorporate European values, Nan resolves Catherine Smither’s impossible narrative.

Having followed Edith Wharton’s career full circle, having surveyed her oeuvre in its entirety, I now wish to retrace my steps in a somewhat different way, recapitulating some of my most important findings under thematic headings.

The drama of THE CULTURAL ENCOUNTER as depicted by Edith Wharton in her work between 1876 and 1937 unfolds when subjects enter an unfamiliar cultural sphere, where their ideas of what is customary or expected in certain situations no longer are valid. Values and conceptions of what is ‘normal’ or what is morally ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ are challenged: the naturalness or what has been taken for granted about the ‘way the world is arranged’ is questioned. Value systems, usually unnoticeable, suddenly become perceptible when in relief to each other. In such cultural confrontations the naturalness of value systems dissolve, thus creating a space between cultures, a site for negotiation of cultural meaning between the subjects. Subject positions otherwise experienced as ‘givens’ by the subjects, are liberated from such imperatives and mobility between cultural poses is made possible, engendering innovation of identities. The space in-between can be understood as the interface between cultures where cultural knowledge can take new forms unhampered by expectations. Characters engage in cultural production and new identities, which resist categorization, come into being; the process and the positions subjects take are transitory and unfixed. Participants lose and gain in this transaction; the familiar becomes strange and the strange familiar. A productive outcome is if the process results in a new understanding of the other culture, and a new outlook on the subject’s own culture.

Wharton’s characters struggle to resolve the problem of how unite happiness with a Franco- or Euro-American hybrid-identity which further complicates cultural identification. The individual’s possibility to reach personal fulfilment, happiness or love within the framework of society’s expectations intersects, as we know, with much of her writing. While exploring the limits of conventional social roles, the
cultural encounter, as such, offers an opportunity where the trying out of social roles is accepted, because *change* and *difference* are inherent in the cultural situation, but perhaps not within the frameworks of a conventional society. The cultural encounter provides a situation where it is *safe* to perform social identity experiments, it is a situation where it is less risky to be thought of as acting out of character with one’s designated social role, because a transgression could be *explained* by the situation. The cultural encounter as such offers amnesty from any accusations of breaking the norms, as bad behavior, or as (women’s) knowledge. In fact, in *Madame de Treymes* the *riskiness* of cultural encounters is communicated by repeated references to *safety* and its opposite. This may explain the productiveness of the theme within her writing.

The cultural ‘energy’ flowing through Wharton’s work we have seen takes several expressions, and the cultural encounter is variously distributed in Wharton’s fiction: the nature of the change it produces and its function differ throughout the texts, and over time. On the one hand we see the encounter expressed in the dynamic process of change, involving subjects struggling to make sense of each other’s conceptual systems, in closest detail in *Madame de Treymes* as a representation of the *actual process* of change. Modification of characters is sometimes documented by descriptions that account for change which fixates the character in time as an American figure ‘before’ and another ‘after’ the change, best exemplified in Fanny de Malrive, Nan, and also to an extent Mrs Smithers, while Kate’s change is implied. On the other hand we see the cultural encounter represented in how European subject matter (material or non-material such as ideas) is re-contextualized in an American framework, best exemplified in *The Age of Innocence* (*The Custom of the Country*). Wharton also describes her characters in-between cultures by describing their experience as being full circle, an idea which not surprisingly is introduced at a late stage of her writing. Wharton works with the idea in 1920 (*The Age of Innocence*) but does not conceptualize it until 1925 (*The Mother’s Repcompense*). Ellen and Kate may have little in common, but having lived in Europe, they share the same trajectory: they have come “full cir-
The term covers the situation when an American returns to America after years in Europe; and is able to review it from a European perspective. Not only do they arrive from Europe trying to take up life in New York, but they both fail at it, and return to Europe again. The similarities between their stories are structural, because Ellen’s and Kate’s relationships to Europe fundamentally differ. We sense that Ellen takes part in a European context, whereas Kate’s experience of Europe is limited to an enclave of isolated American expatriates in a Riviera hotel in a completely artificial world seemingly suspended between cultures.

Most of Wharton’s characters are in between cultures in some respects. Those who have learned about their cultural other are portrayed in positive terms. Having adjusted to a life in Europe, the ‘superior’ hybrids are part of both cultures (having gained, but not really lost anything), as exemplified in Fanny, Blanche, Ellen and Nan; the ‘inferior’ kind having lost – but not gained – is the French figure, Le Fanois, who has lost both cultures.

A few characters such as Baron Schenkelderff are not linked to any nationality. He is an early example of Wharton’s nationally indistinct cosmopolitans of Europe, who belong nowhere and anywhere. By portraying a diluted international character rather than an American or a European nationality, Wharton refers to people beyond their nationality. The narrator of *The Glimpses of the Moon* describes how one nationality is mistaken for another; they are described as ‘denationalised’. This tendency to generalize continues in *The Mother’s Recompense* when Kate experiences the Americans in America as incomprehensible.

Turning now to the depiction of ECONOMIC and CULTURAL CAPITAL, the texts examined in this study show that Wharton begins with an unproblematic relationship where economic capital is ascribed to the established upper-class, or European aristocracy. But the traditional unity between heritage and wealth eventually breaks up, and extreme

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418 “Full circle”, see *The Mother’s Recompense*, 620.
wealth becomes linked to uneducated, socially aspiring Americans of simple background. These developments mirror the specific American political and social situation, triggered by economic expansion as the result of industrialization: the social effects of which we see reflected in the writer’s narratives. In *Madame de Treymes* it is suggested in the negotiations between the Americans and the French characters, whereas in “Les Metteurs en Scène” the parameters upper-class and money no longer remain linked; rather the cultural capital of the aristocracy is framed in opposition to the economic capital of the upstart. The short story captures the American experience of the industrialization and its resulting class-mobility when the given social order of the established class is challenged by the parvenu. In “Les Metteurs en Scène” this American pattern where the old society meets the new is transposed to Europe; Wharton’s newly rich in a sense reduce culture to commercial goods to be acquired in a business transaction. In *The Glimpses of the Moon* trading is an essential part of the plot; the suddenly righteous Nick leaves Suzy and the situation of trading morals for money for another position as a social secretary, which instead involves the trade of cultural capital for economic capital. Other expatriates who engage in trade, Wharton terms “moral parasites”; they are wealthy Americans who “[prey] on the pauper” (*The Glimpses of the Moon*, 120-1). The parvenus, Violet Melrose and Ursula Gillow, translate money into culture they do not understand, but realize is prestigious. By each promoting a so far undiscovered artist: a painter and a violinist (both American), these women purchase a visible place at culture’s side. To the moral parasite, ‘possessing’ culture in some sense by means of sponsoring it, replaces art appreciation or any understanding of art, according to the narrator’s estimation. Melrose and Gillow are unable to appropriate the symbolic capital of art, because they lack the cultural capital to do so; but this relationship to culture is reversed in Nan when Wharton shapes an American of the same background who is able to integrate symbolic capital, and the synthesis between the two is the marker of a successful hybrid. Laura is driven from the English households of the aristocracy, where they sometimes have had difficulty paying her salary, by the need to make more money. The Governess agency informs her that the new class
of Americans will pay “almost anything for the social training an accomplished European governess could impart”: Wharton specifies, Laura is promised 80 dollars a month at the very ‘new’ St Georges (158).

In many of her texts Wharton makes intricate use of IMAGERY and KEYWORDS to suggest the complex dimensions of the cultural encounter, although more prominently in certain texts. In “The Last Asset” food is linked with culture; the ‘native dish’ is compared with what Europe offers: a “high-spiced brew” in a cauldron. In The Age of Innocence European culture reappears as ‘magic’, evoking simultaneous feelings of attraction and repulsion in her characters. The movement from food to magic is suggested by associations to a witch’s cauldron holding a potentially wicked and poisonous cultural concoction, ambiguously tempting and repelling. Evasive and difficult to capture, the intercultural encounter is represented in metaphors describing several of its aspects as critical or threatening. The kind of in-depth depiction of the cultural encounter between individuals we find in Madame de Treymes does not return in Wharton’s later works. Metaphors of warfare and of light connect the Americans Mrs Newell and Mrs Boykin.

In Madame de Treymes imagery becomes a way to capture the cultural encounter. The wariness of the subjects involved in the encounter is expressed in violent images escalating into military, hostile images, and their experience in the interstice grappling for meaning, is expressed in confusion of their senses, visually and audially. The riskiness of cultural encounters is negotiated by both French and American characters in references to the sense of safety and its opposite. Communication in the situation of the cultural encounter is a matter of translation and Durham finds that there are no correlatives to his American values in French culture, but that meaning is culturally specific.

419 Cf. above p. 244.
In *The Age of Innocence* anthropological terms emphasize the cultural encounters, on one level the class-conflict as well as that between Europe and America, and invite an ethnologic perspective; a western culture is studied and named in the same terms and in the same fashion that scientists have studied distant and ‘primitive’ cultures. The term *foreign* functions in the text as a keyword which centers on practices of ‘othering’. *Heaven* and *hell* work as thematic keywords denoting life in Europe and in America, and finally, code switching is another language device which captures the relationship between Europe and America.

EUROPE, and FRANCE in particular, Wharton regards highly in many respects, although as an idea, and ideal, it is not only attractive: mainly representing something generally inspirational and positive, Europe also has another side which Wharton links to the complex relationship some expatriate Americans have with Europe, America, and with their situation as Americans in Europe. The more pessimistic representations of the less alluring aspects of expatriate life in Europe are most perceptible in her later novels, and take almost physical form in the Riviera hotel and its air of hopelessness (*The Mother’s Recompense*). However, *The Age of Innocence* names this ‘problematic space’ “the miserable little country”, which is paralleled by how the term *foreign*, linked to Europe, in some sense gradually comes to carry more negative connotations in the novel, while earlier novels merely allude to such a situation.

*The Mother’s Recompense* opens and closes depicting, what Wharton, while drawing on her own travels in France, once experienced as an empty life in a Riviera hotel. The expatriates in this novel need to limit their expenses. Kate’s Europe is no longer a place for inspiration to the Americans and is not imbued with any of the magic Archer sees in it, nor is it his utopian place where “categories like that” (he refers to the category *mistress*) do not exist, nor does it hold the splendors or the intellectual challenge Ellen finds in it: it rather re-

sembles her “miserable little country” for runaway lovers, as well as the place evoked by the phrase “shabby watering-place for bankrupts”, which essentially captures the same implications (1245-6, 1221). Kate’s little Riviera hotel seems sadly synonymous with this place.

As early as in “The Last Asset” Wharton hints at the kind of places where people are destitute, showing a glimpse of Mr Newell’s street from the bridal carriage. In Madame de Treymes Europe’s flipside is represented by the affair between Madame de Treymes and the prince, involving his gambling loss, and her pawning of the family pearls in a desperate attempt to ward off the scandal. The illustration in the last chapter of The Reef of Sophy’s sister’s predicament, also proposes a miserable situation. To Suzy, initially this place (The Glimpses of the Moon) was a life in relative poverty (as exemplified by the Fulmers’ life), in comparison to the conspicuous existence in luxury. But as Suzy’s development causes her to reverse this opinion, she chooses it as a lifestyle. Europe to the expatriate community in The Mother’s Recompense becomes a place where Americans seek social amnesty and oblivion, a place where they hide from the condemning eyes at home. Exiles tend to forget the embarrassing specifics of their past and Europe offers refuge from social judgment. Perhaps Europe is less romanticized and less tantalizing to Americans after the war? In The Buccaneers Europe is enticing, but also holds some social realities, such as disease and poverty.

It is finally time, after subjecting Wharton’s fiction to the thought of two of today’s most radical thinkers about issues of culture and class, to address a question underlying many of the issues examined in this thesis: was Wharton entirely a product of her time or do her novels articulate experiences relevant to today’s world (and so ahead of her time)? It is possible to discern in Wharton’s work depictions of change (cultural production) in her characters, alongside traditional notions of inherent national traits, which correspond to her time’s essentialist ideas. For instance, by drawing on national stereotypes in her depiction of characters, by describing them in certain American
and French fixed traits, and by describing Mr Newell as unchangeable; when looking closely, however, we find that at the same time she captures small, barely noticeable differences, in comparison to the earlier more static portrayal of the same character. Bell comments on Wharton’s and Henry James’s cultural comparisons: “Of course, the cultural comparison Wharton and James were constantly making seems curiously antique today [1993].” 421 And yes, the phrasing belongs to their time and generation; their speaking of national ‘traits’ or ‘race’ invoking nationalist rhetoric is disturbing. Nevertheless, cultural difference is just as topical in our times; current discussions of ethnicity, cultural identity, multiculturalism and complications of cultural conflicts with concomitant issues of socioeconomics and integration recur in media. The fiction embodies her unwavering interest in timeless questions such as (inter)cultural and sociological differences between groups in society. It shows her finely tuned awareness of the mechanisms for group inclusion and exclusion; as well as it shows that situations of imbalance of authority between dominant and dominated groups (as in the particular sense in her novels), give rise to similar processes set apart by time or space. The acuity with which Wharton probes issues of social and cultural difference indicates her lifelong determination to come to grips with processes of change – which feels remarkably modern. On the one hand, she struggles with her time’s essentialist claims to cultural identity, on the other she illustrates change in a series of little steps (as performativity), seemingly discrediting the monolithic idea of culture which underlies the stereotypical ideas of Americanness and Frenchness with which she started out. Though her preoccupation with “the complex fate of being an American” may seem dated today, as Bell suggests, paradoxically her dogged explorations of her preferred theme resulted in a number of insights which are pertinent to contemporary experiences of the nature of the cultural encounter. 422 I

421 Bell, “Edith Wharton in France”, 63. In the same essay Bell notes that the paradox of her expatriation, as with all expatriation, was that she never ceased to comment what on France and America was, and was not.

422 Henry James, quoted in Bell, 62.
find that Wharton in the texts regarded in this thesis articulates fresh universal experiences relating to cultural and social difference that transcend time, place and context.
Appendix

The black arrow collapses plot and story (plot reconstructed in chronological order): it gives a rough representation of what the reader learns, but does not distinguish if the events are directly narrated, or made known to the reader, more indirectly e.g. as a memory or in a conversation.

Figure 2: ‘Plot’ and ‘story’ in chronological order.
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