

The Problematic “Play of Perception”

*Observation and Objectification
in Three Novels by Edith Wharton*

by

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Abstract

This thesis will discuss how the dominant mode of communication presented in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, *The Age of Innocence*, and *The Custom of the Country* can be labeled a “play of perception.” Perception in these novels is portrayed as a “play,” where men and women of New York's nineteenth-century “Society” or the leisure class have distinct roles to act out. The processes of observation and objectification influence the lives of the literary characters of these novels, where the woman is being observed, while the man is the one watching the woman's spectacle of self. Perception is portrayed as a relational, creative process in Wharton's fiction, where the male gaze may help establish the woman as symbol and object, but she also objectifies herself, by consciously planning her appearance. The creative process of perception will be treated both structurally and thematically in this thesis, as Wharton's narrative technique underscores her thematics. She, for instance, uses male focalizers who struggle to understand the object they observe, and her literary technique thus also reflects a “problematic play of perception.”

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1 Introduction

Sandra Rosenthal argues in an article about Charles Sanders Peirce, that the concepts of seeing and perception are creative processes: “All knowledge begins with perception, but perception is not the having of brute givens. Rather, there is a creative element in perceptual awareness, an interpretive creativity brought by the perceiver” (193). This is what I want to focus on in this thesis, how Edith Wharton in her novels *The House of Mirth*, *The Age of Innocence*, and *The Custom of the Country* both thematically and structurally portrays perception as an unfolding creative process, which defines and reveals traits of the perceiver, the perceived, and society, establishes a relationship between the perceiver and the perceived object, as well as reveals a particular communicative mode. I want to discuss how Wharton portrays what I will call the “play of perception.” The word “play” emphasizes inventiveness and creativity, connotes display of self as on the stage, alludes to a relationship between participants that either watch or partake in the “play,” as well as reflecting communication. This is because playing is often a communal activity, where each participant holds a particular function or role.

1.1 The Process of Perception

It is Pamela Knights who briefly mentions the phrase “play of perception” in *The Cambridge Introduction to Edith Wharton* (30). Maureen E. Montgomery's book *Displaying Women: Spectacles of Leisure in Edith Wharton's New York* has also informed this thesis, as it links the portrayal of identity in Wharton's novels to the world of the stage, and a game or “play” by invoking Erving Goffman's theories (13). Perception involves taking on or being given certain roles, as someone does the seeing and perceiving, while someone or something is the object of the perceiver's gaze. After all, *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines perception as “the process of becoming aware or conscious of a thing or things in general,” and/or “the process of becoming aware of physical objects, phenomena, etc., through the senses; an instance of this.” In this thesis, therefore, I want to portray how Wharton often casts the man as the perceiver and observer, and what he observes is the woman, who becomes the observed object. This role division is portrayed as a relationship where the male gaze creates the woman as object, or vice versa, where the object attracts the male gaze and cements her role as observed object, objectifying herself. Whether one or the other, or both, perception

involves observation and objectification, which govern the perceptual processes and mode of communication in Wharton's novels, something this thesis will show.

How you perceive or see is based on certain traits of the object you observe, as well as the creativity you bring to the process of observation. John Berger argues this when he says that “We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves. Our vision is continually active, continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are” (*Ways* 9). The process of perception then, is based on relations, and by that not only between the observer and the observed, but also between the individual and society. We relate what we see to ourselves and our understanding of the world, and our understanding of the world is based on the customs of the society that we are part of. Customs are indoctrinated and learned, and we adapt to the roles that society and its customs expect us to fulfill. These roles and customs become ingrained in our character and govern our way of perceiving, communicating, and relating to the world. As society and its customs govern our mode of perception, so is it responsible for the roles given to men and women in the play of perception, and the perceptual process. I want to show that Wharton portrays the customs of a particular society, namely the upper echelons of New York's nineteenth-century society, what can be termed the “leisure class,” or “Society” with a capital S. It is Society with a capital S, because it consists of people and customs so influential and particular, that the rest of society wants to emulate them. It is an exclusive society on top of the social ladder. Wharton portrays how the customs of Society govern the perceptual abilities, as well as designates the perceptual roles, of her literary characters. The “perceptual powers” or abilities wielded by Wharton's protagonists are reflective of their status in New York's nineteenth-century Society, as well as its customs. Both the perceiver and the perceived object are influenced by the leisure class's customs, and relate to their role in the way Society dictates. Thus, this thesis will argue that Wharton's portrayal of perception reflects how “The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe” (Berger, *Ways* 8).

If perception is, as Berger argues, a creative process based on customs, it is implied that it is a mutable process, as customs are susceptible to change. This is because customs are “rules” created by human beings to control and make the relationship between the individual and society easier. Since customs are socially determined upon, they are also arbitrary and mutable. As Nancy Bentley argues in her article “‘Hunting for the Real’: Wharton and the Science of Manners”: “the reality of social convention, Wharton recognized, is always both

essential and equivocal. For although there is no human life outside of a web of mutual relations, still no *particular* social feature – this form of marriage, that division of labor or gender roles – is in itself either necessary, unalterable, or permanent” (51; italics in original). That customs are arbitrary is shown by different groups of people having different sets of customs. Therefore, since customs govern perception, and customs are mutable, the process of perception must be susceptible to change too (Bentley 55). Various customs call for various perceptual processes and modes of communication. I want to show how Wharton portrays the play of perception, i.e. the dominant communicative mode of New York's nineteenth-century Society, in order to reflect that this perceptual process can change and should do so. Wharton focuses on the perceptual customs of *one* particular society, and thus shows the arbitrariness of customs, as other societies do not communicate in the manner that this society does. Also, I will argue that in the three novels analyzed in this thesis, Wharton shows that it is possible to transcend Society's boundaries and go “beyond” its customs.

Many of Wharton's works have been classified as “novels of manners,” and Gary H. Lindberg has dedicated an entire book to Wharton and her treatment of this genre. Manners imply not only customs, but also gestures and a symbolic mode of communication. Gestures can be seen as a type of “sign language,” are relevant to the perceptual process, and affect the communication portrayed in Wharton's novels. As Lindberg argues, not only do manners shape *how* and *what* we perceive: “The contents of the mind—not only the details perceived but the very categories within which they are recognizable—lie, in turn, almost entirely within the purview of the community” (53). They also decide the mode of perception:

Manners are those patterns of behavior that have their origins and their significance within a specific social order. They are real or implied actions—in gesture, speech, decoration, dress—that provide forms for individual expression, and *within* the social order these forms quicken public feelings by summoning up unspoken meanings and beliefs; they make up, in Edith Wharton's phrase, “a kind of hieroglyphic world.” (Lindberg 3; italics in original)

This “hieroglyphic world” is mentioned in *The Age of Innocence*, where Newland Archer gives New York Society this label, and feels that, “In reality they all lived in a kind of hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs” (29). These “arbitrary signs” are gestures, customs, and manners, as well as objects of dress and clothing, as mentioned in Lindberg's quote above.

I want to show that the symbolic language of New York Society influences and constitutes the communication presented not only in *The Age of Innocence*, but also in *The*

House of Mirth, and *The Custom of the Country*. Furthermore, this thesis will discuss how Wharton portrays this mode of communication as problematic in all three novels. A language based on visual symbols and gestures creates distance, as it emphasizes the visual over the spoken and direct. It causes distance between the observer and the observed object, as they try to read and understand the other, causes misunderstanding due to the overemphasis on interpretation, and prevents direct conversation. As Blake Nevius argues in *Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction*: “The real drama is played out below the surface—the impeccable, sophisticated surface—and communicates itself, if at all, to the observer by means of signs which only the initiate can read . . . By and large, however, the acquired manners of old New York lend themselves to what Edith Wharton termed ‘an elaborate system of mystification’” (182-183).

This introduction has now mentioned several ways in which this thesis will focus on Wharton's portrayal of an elaborate system of perception. Still, what I want to show in this thesis is not only how Wharton treats this theme thematically, but also structurally, as I experience her treatment of perception, and by that observation and objectification, as all-pervading. This is because the process of perception not only affects her thematics, but the form and narrative structure of her novels as well, as she uses narrative techniques that underscores her thematics (Knights, *Introduction* 41; Dixon 211; O'Neal 274). Wharton takes us on a journey where we get insight into and become part of the process of perception. We, as readers, become part of the perceptual mode presented in Wharton's three novels in that we follow the line of vision of the observer and focalizer. Thus we come to observe the object like he does. Just like Wharton's literary characters are given the roles of observer and the observed, so does the reader become a spectator and observer. In this way, Wharton's use of narration and focalization frames our reading experience. She in practice comes to demonstrate the perceptual process that she portrays (Nevius 62; Knights, *Introduction* 41).

1.2 Instrumental Influences

Two scholars in particular have been instrumental in informing this thesis about perception and the factors of observation and objectification. These two are, as mentioned above, Maureen E. Montgomery and John Berger. Berger discusses perception and the act of seeing in general, relating this process to the dichotomy man versus woman, and how seeing takes on different aspects depending on which gender you are (*Ways* 47):

To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men. The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under such tutelage within such a limited space. But this has been at the cost of a woman's self being split into two. A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. (*Ways* 46)

Berger made it possible for this thesis to treat the processes of observation and objectification as part of the play of perception, and see perception as a creative process.

Montgomery, contrastively, relates the concepts of observation and objectification to Wharton and her fiction in particular. She is indebted to Berger and his treatment of perception as she invokes his theories on seeing and gender, as well as Erving Goffman, who on a general level talks of the presentation of identity as play (Montgomery 13). Montgomery portrays the play of perception as it relates to the world of New York Society and the leisure class. She describes Wharton's New York Society as a world where daily life is an act, and an act of performing and portraying the class one belongs to, namely the well- to- do leisure class. Life consists of being on display: "What was on display was not simply an array of objects but also lifestyle and social status. Wealthy New Yorkers advertised their wealth and performed 'class acts' in laying claim to high social status" (122). The word "display" shows that the life of the members of Wharton's New York Society was a performance, which again reflects a creative process. It is creative as you can choose how to display yourself.

Particularly women in Wharton's fiction, as this thesis will argue, display themselves and take pride in their self-portrayal:

Yet though leisure was an area of contestation between men and women, it may nevertheless be argued that New York society women were able to explore new ways of expressing their femininity through leisure. At the turn of the century, the increased emphasis on appearance opened up to women a whole realm of activities, specialized knowledge, and skills where choices could be made. (Montgomery 11)

Through an excessive display of wealth and beauty, the leisure class established itself as a society based on the visual, where appearance is everything according to Montgomery (8-9).

As the discussion above exemplifies, there is such a thing as a "leisure class" and Wharton is said to describe this group of people. Montgomery and other Wharton scholars who are concerned with Wharton's treatment of New York's nineteenth-century Society are indebted to Thorstein Veblen's coining of the term "leisure class" and his definition of this group of people (Ammons, "Edith" 347-348; Knights, *Introduction* 63). In my thesis, I will use the term leisure class, as well as New York Society, when referring to the particular group

of wealthy people who are on the top of society's hierarchy in Wharton's fiction. This Society, then, is what Veblen calls the "leisure class," in his pivotal work *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, first published in 1899. Here, he explains the life and customs of America's equivalent of the European aristocracy, a select and close-knit group of individuals and families, whose main concern and "job" it is to represent and symbolize wealth. This "American aristocracy" if you like, he names the "leisure class," thus dispelling the myth of America's classless society. It is a class, because it is the upper class, a class that is different from any other due to its vast wealth, and peculiar customs.

The word "leisure" to Veblen, "does not connote indolence or quiescence. What it connotes is non-productive consumption of time. Time is consumed non-productively (1) from a sense of the unworthiness of productive work, and (2) as an evidence of pecuniary ability to afford a life of idleness" (Veblen, *Theory* 33; "Conspicuous" 264). Veblen's argument may at first glance seem contradictory, as he argues that this class does not live an idle life, while simultaneously arguing that this group spends their time non-productively to show that they can afford a life of idleness. What he means by this is that the leisure class *seemingly* lived a life of idleness, because unlike industrial tycoons and the later nouveau riche business owners, they did not produce any merchandise or do anything that resulted in tangible products (Veblen, *Theory* 33-34; "Conspicuous" 265). Due to inherited wealth or family fortunes, not to mention status and titles, the leisure class could afford not to work. Their "job," then, was (not unlike the aristocracy) to "effortlessly" represent wealth. This was done in order to cement their status as belonging to a strata above the average man and to show that they did not have to labor in order to survive. It was important that the leisure class *seemed* to do things effortlessly, because everything else would make it look as if they worked. When I say "seemed," it is because even though the leisure class did not work in the traditional sense of the word, they worked hard at portraying leisure and wealth. Therefore, Veblen can say that leisure does not imply "indolence" (Veblen, *Theory* 33, 42; Montgomery 11-12). This is something this thesis will argue, as Lily Bart works hard to portray wealth and maintain her status, but cannot show it (Ammons, "Edith" 347-350). Neither does May Welland reveal the activity she is part of, and she hides her true nature.

So, if the leisure class worked at portraying leisure and wealth, how did they do this? They did it by "putting on a show," or what Veblen terms "Conspicuous Consumption." It was consumerism which enabled the leisure class's display culture. As this class did not produce anything, it instead consumed. In order to show off wealth, members of the leisure

class were consumers of luxury articles and wares, which they then used to show off and display their wealth (Veblen, *Theory* 50-53). It was considered the woman's "job" in particular to showcase wealth, and particularly the wealth of her husband. The wife was considered the husband's property and an extension of him, thus the manner in which she displayed wealth, showcased his pecuniary strength and status. An investment in the clothing and apparel of your wife was an investment in the status of your household and yourself. Veblen portrays the leisure class woman as an "object of display," who's task it is to display her husband's wealth. This was actually the only "role" open to women of the leisure class, as dictated by the prevailing customs (Veblen, *Theory* 50-53, 118-120). In the three novels that this thesis will analyze, this is considered both problematic and inviting, as it gives opportunities for a materialistic display of self, but is unfortunately not a sufficient outlet for one's mental capabilities.

Veblen goes on to argue that the female choice of apparel in particular showcased the representational role of the leisure class. Under the heading "Dress as an Expression of the Pecuniary Culture," Veblen links the display culture of the leisure class to perception, as clothing is considered symbolic, thereby requiring interpretation. If the way one dresses gives off a certain expression, this expression must in turn be interpreted and recognized. This process of perception requires an agent that actively chooses a garment to wear which reflects the expression one wants produced, and another agent which interprets the impression that this particular garment produces. This is seen when Selden interprets Lily's presence, and Archer May's, as will be argued in the first chapter. By giving clothing representational value, Veblen implicitly casts the leisure class woman as a creative inventor of her own identity by choosing what to wear. Her choice of clothing must give off the wanted expression, and produce the right impact on the interpreter of her apparel (Veblen, *Theory* 113-114). This is something this thesis will discuss: how Wharton's female protagonists showcase themselves, as well as being showcased by Wharton, through their choice of clothing, jewelry, and surroundings, not to mention that their roles as object creates both opportunities and limitations. When Veblen explains the representational ability of the clothing of the leisure class, he also links the process of perception to customs. Not only is it customary for leisure class women to wear expensive, impractical clothing, rendering them unfit to work (*Theory* 113-114). Costly dresses also become linked to the leisure class, as only these people can afford such apparel. The expensive and impractical dress becomes associated with the Society

woman, and customs teach one to perceive this type of dress as a symbol of wealth, status, and a “leisurely” life.

Wharton would probably, along with Veblen, have known that life in the leisure class was all but leisurely, particularly if you were a woman under the constant scrutiny of the male gaze and the equally critical gaze of other women. Therefore, I would like to suggest that Veblen's term “leisure” also connotes play and activity, as in “leisure activities,” where one has time to be creative and play games. After all, as mentioned above, the members of the leisure class partake in a play of perception and “work” hard at signifying leisure (Smith qtd. in Montgomery 11-12). What characterizes this play is that it is to be perceived as effortless. Supposed idleness may be what distinguishes the perceptual mode of the leisure class from that of other groups. This is what Wharton reveals so vividly in her three novels: the irony that life within Society is to be perceived as leisurely, when it in fact involves vast amounts of creativity and energy (for the women), as well as pecuniary strength (for the men) (Ammons, “Edith” 347-350).

Veblen's theories have shaped research on Edith Wharton and her “novel of manners.” These theories can also be linked to semiology, the study of the meaning of signs. This is because Veblen sees the married leisure class woman as a symbol of her husband's wealth. Thus the theories of the leisure class may be linked to the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, who sees language as symbolic and arbitrary (Normand 99). Also, the theories of Charles Sanders Peirce are relevant to Veblen's theories, as Peirce discusses the meaning of the symbol and the process of representation. Both these scholars' theories help explain the communicative process of the leisure class, where communication is based on a “hieroglyphic” language of signs and gestures. Arguably, these two theorists' partly contradictory views on the nature of the sign will not be the main focus of this thesis. Yet I felt their views should be included here, as they help underscore a perception of women as symbols, emphasizing either her representational ability and/or her physicality.

Ferdinand de Saussure is famous for his distinction between *signifier* and *signified*, which helps explain how the leisure class woman is perceived as an object reflecting wealth and status. The *signifier* is according to Chris Baldick and his *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* “the concretely perceptible component of a sign, as distinct from its conceptual meaning (the signified)” (308). By this is meant a sound, a gesture, or a written word. These are all signs in turn, as a sign is defined as “A basic element of communication, either linguistic (e.g. a letter or word) or non-linguistic (e.g. a picture, or article of dress)” (308).

This way Saussure's theories become linked to the leisure class and their “hieroglyphic” mode of communication, as it is not only words which can signify (Joseph 61). The *signified* contrastively, is defined as “the conceptual component of a sign, as distinct from its material form, the signifier” (Baldick 308). In the real world of Veblen and the literary world of Wharton, the *signifier* may be Lily Bart showing off her sapphire bracelet and “playing” the part of the leisure class woman through her gestures, while the *signified* may be Selden's interpretation of Lily as displaying wealth and performing the role of the leisure class woman.

Arthur Asa Berger implicates Saussure in the world of Wharton's leisure class when he links Saussure's theories to the portrayal of self through various symbols:

My point is that there are many different ways in which to take on certain identities or play with signifiers in creating identities. **Semiotics** tells us that we are always sending messages to others about ourselves based on matters such as our hairstyles, our body decorations, our clothes, our shoes, our use of language, our body language, and our props. And others are sending messages about themselves the same way. Sometimes the messages we send others about ourselves are not correct in that they are not the message we think we are sending. That's why people reading is an art, not a science. (*Seeing* 24; bold in original)

The reason for this is because Wharton's female protagonists create an image of themselves through the use of clothing, accessories, and gestures, which they hope the observer will interpret as reflecting wealth and status. Their display is often presented as successful in Wharton's fiction, as the observer is able to draw the connection, being taught to do so by the customs of the leisure class. The display of self, as portrayed by Wharton and explained by Berger, showcases perception as a creative process where both the woman as symbol, and the male observer, must assert their “perceptual powers”; the woman in her choice of display and the man in his interpretation of it (Berger, *Seeing* 26). Lily Bart's tableau vivant in *The House of Mirth*, for instance, reflects how this visual communication is problematic for the object and observer alike.

Peirce is also concerned with perception as a creative process. He indirectly describes the mode of communication presented in this thesis when he explains the relations governing, and the factors involved in the process of representation. According to Peirce's theories, “Representation is triadic: it involves a sign, an object, and an interpreter” (Misak 8). Thus he operates with three components in the process of perception, unlike Saussure, who only mentions two. Peirce includes the actual object and physical referent in the perceptual process, and not just the sign and the conception of it (Baldick 308). This might bring his take on representation closer to Wharton's portrayal of it. Wharton often portrays the relationship

between the leisure class man and woman, as consisting of three components. These are: the actual physical woman (i.e. the object), her gestures or clothing that needs to be interpreted (i.e. the sign), and the man that observes her/the idea he forms of the object during his observation (i.e. the interpretant, which will be explained in the next paragraph). The physicality of the observed woman is for instance emphasized when Archer watches Ellen at the opera, or when Trenor and Van Alstyne see Lily at her tableau vivant. However, as will be seen, Archer changes his view of Ellen. He eventually comes to see her as a symbol more in keeping with Saussure's definition.

Whether or not Peirce sees the actual observer as the third factor in his triadic relation, or if he focuses on the concept formed in the mind of the interpreter, what Peirce scholars dub the *interpretant* is much debated, as Peirce revised his theories (Misak 9; Short; 214-215; Skagestad 242, 244). However, this distinction to me seems a bit irrelevant, as one cannot have one without the other. A thought cannot be formed without a physical person forming it, as the mind is the vessel of the thought process, just as perception is made possible by an observation made by an actual observer. Thus, *interpreter* and *interpretant*, may be two sides of the same coin, portraying perception as a creative process. Both the process itself and the actual interpreter, are portrayed by Wharton through the mental and physical processes where the focalizer observes the object. The first chapter will discuss this, how Selden observes Lily in *The House of Mirth*, Archer observes Ellen and May in *The Age of Innocence*, and Ralph observes Undine in *The Custom of the Country*.

Furthermore, this thesis will argue that the leisure class woman as portrayed by Wharton can be understood as a symbol, because the observer's understanding of her is based on tradition and so is the understanding of a symbol (Misak and Peirce qtd. by Misak 9). The connection between the symbol and its meaning is arbitrary, and must be learned (Normand 99). A leisure class woman signifies wealth simply because Society's customs have decided that this is what her appearance represents, and she is recognized as an object displaying wealth by the observer, because these customs govern his perceptual process. Also, she is a symbol because New York Society's and the leisure class's customs dictate that this is her role. As Cheryl Misak argues, since the interpretation of a symbol is based on custom, its interpretation is shared within a community (or maybe one should call it an *interpretive* community): "A symbol has pragmatic meaning because if the utterer knows how interpreters habitually interpret a sign, she can use the sign to cause a specific effect in the interpreter" (9). This opens up opportunities for the leisure class woman. She can influence the process of

perception by portraying herself in accordance with what is expected, something May Welland expertly does. Thus, the play of perception of New York Society and the leisure class is presented in *The House of Mirth*, *The Age of Innocence*, and *The Custom of the Country* as a creative process for the observer *and* the observed object. But, there are limits to this creativity, as the perceptual process is framed by Society's customs.

1.3 Practicalities and Structural Layout

I have now given an account of how I will treat and discuss the concept of perception in three novels by Edith Wharton, as well the theoretical background informing my research. What will now be explained is firstly why Wharton and her works were chosen as a topic of study, and secondly the layout and other “technicalities” of this thesis. Wharton and her works were chosen as the topic of study for this thesis because after being introduced to her works for the first time in 2012, I realized (after some research) that not many Norwegians have written about her literature. I therefore saw this thesis as an opportunity to make a small contribution in bringing Wharton's fiction to the forefront. Or, perhaps I should rather say to the “center stage.” The reason why the process of perception was chosen as the main theme of this thesis is because Wharton's novels treat perceptual processes not only thematically, but also structurally. A focus on perception, then, would allow for an analysis which combined a structural and thematic reading. It was Pamela Knights who suggested to me this “double take” on Wharton's fiction, when she writes that “Seeing, attending, reflecting: from the beginning, Wharton's work demonstrates her prescriptions in practice” (*Introduction* 41). For instance, Wharton portrays the objectification and observation of women by using male focalizers, something this thesis will discuss in detail.

We all to a certain degree play roles in our everyday lives and actively portray our sense of self to the world. The staging of self in Wharton's fiction, however, is particularly elaborate, and the extent to which this “play” governs the life of the protagonists is intriguing. It seems to permeate their lives, influencing what they say, do, who they associate with, and even how they communicate. Wharton's protagonists are “players,” actors in a play they cannot totally control. They may think they are in control, but in fact their actions are on a thematic level partly governed by Society, and on a structural level by the narrator and author, all three powerful instructors.

As mentioned above, this thesis will focus on *The House of Mirth*, *The Age of Innocence* and *The Custom of the Country* in particular. This is not only because these are

arguably Wharton's most recognized works, but because they deal centrally with the portrayal of New York's leisure class and the mode of communication which governs this society. *The Age of Innocence* and *The House of Mirth* were chosen because they are fairly similar both in style and theme, as regards the treatment of perception, thus readily allowing for a comparison. *The Custom of the Country* is perhaps the “odd one out,” as it differs from the other novels, particularly in its treatment of the female protagonist, Undine Spragg. However, this means that it can more readily be contrasted with the two other works.

The layout of this thesis will consist of this introduction, in addition to three main chapters, and a conclusion. I have chosen to structure this thesis thematically, meaning that each chapter will discuss a particular theme of perception, as presented in all three novels, simultaneously. This way, I hope to be able to thoroughly compare and contrast the three novels. As is inferred from this explanation, my method when writing and constructing this thesis will be comparative analysis, and I will base my discussions on a close reading of each of the three novels, with ample reference to the primary texts and secondary sources. As mentioned, in each chapter, all three novels will be analyzed. Yet, as I progress from one work to another, they will not be discussed in the order in which they were first published. Admittedly, each chapter will start by discussing *The House of Mirth*, which was the first of these works to be published. However, I will then move on to *The Age of Innocence* and not *The Custom of the Country*, despite the latter being published first. This is because *The Age of Innocence* is fairly similar to *The House of Mirth* in both form and content, and it is more convenient to compare these two novels if they follow each other structurally.

The first chapter will focus on observation and objectification, and perception as traditionally a gendered process. Montgomery argues that “Seeing and being seen are not mutually exclusive, but in *The Age of Innocence*, these two activities are represented as distinctly gendered—it is men who do the seeing and women who are seen” (133). I want to show that this observation is relevant for *The House of Mirth* and partly *The Custom of the Country* too. In this chapter, the emphasis will be on how men observe and perceive women as objects, reflected by Wharton's narrative technique and her use of male focalizers. The woman is both literally and figuratively “framed” by the narrator, focalizer, and reader, i.e. the narrative, and the narrative technique governs how we see her. Both the concept of the play of perception, where there is a relationship between observer and the observed, and perception as a creative process, will be explained in the first chapter. I will show how these concepts are treated both thematically and structurally by Wharton, and in a varying fashion

in the three novels. As Wharton herself indicates in *The Writing of Fiction*, theme and style go hand in hand: “As every tale contains its own dimension, so it implies its own manner, the particular shade of style most fitted to convey its full meaning” (114).

In the second chapter, I want to continue the discussion of the play of perception, but this time shift my focus from the focalizer and observer, to the woman that is being observed. I will discuss how Wharton's female protagonists stage themselves as an object of observation, and actively use articles of clothing, precious stones, mirrors, and other artifacts and opportunities to attract the male gaze. In this way, they have “perceptual powers” to assert, and are compared to the objects they surround themselves with. Put differently, this chapter will show how women use objects to objectify themselves, and how Wharton by her attention to detail, portrays this process of objectification as reflective of the customs of New York Society (Town 44; Montgomery 70). *The Custom of the Country's* Undine Spragg, relates to herself in a different manner than the female protagonists of the two other novels. Therefore, the second chapter will show how Undine can be seen as a subject, too, and not only an object.

The third chapter will deal with the “hieroglyphic” language of gestures and customs, that govern the process of communication as presented in *The House of Mirth*, *The Age of Innocence*, and *The Custom of the Country*. I will look at how the emphasis on visual language influences the process of perception, and makes it difficult for the characters to figure each other out. I would suggest that the emphasis on the visual aspects of communication impedes close conversation, and direct and close contact between men and women. Furthermore, this chapter will portray that a new mode of communication between men and women of the leisure class is presented as possible, particularly outside the realm of New York Society. This implies that there is an outside, and a way of getting “beyond” the current customs of Society and changing them. Wharton conflates the physical process of being inside with the mental process of being stifled by Society's customs. Contrastively, being physically outside is portrayed as mentally and physically liberating one from Society. The third chapter will discuss this outside versus inside dichotomy.

The conclusion will be concerned with linking my close and limited analysis of *The House of Mirth*, *The Age of Innocence*, and *The Custom of the Country* to a wider scope of literature. As already mentioned, some would argue that Wharton is a representative of the novel of manners, some argue that her novels are both realistic and sentimental, while others may see elements of naturalism in her fiction. I will try to navigate the field of literary labels

and genres, and complicate this categorization of Wharton's fiction. Wharton and her works have also been labeled “misogynist” by the critic Janet Malcolm in her article “The Woman Who Hated Women.” The conclusion will therefore discuss whether Wharton's treatment of women is misogynist or not.

An explanation of the names this thesis will apply for Wharton's literary characters is also in order here. The female protagonists will appear with their first name, such as Lily, May, Ellen, and Undine. This reflects how they are mainly seen in the novels, i.e. either through the male spectator who knows them intimately on a first-name basis (as in *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*), or through the narrator who explains the female protagonist's own point of view (as in *The Custom of the Country*). The male protagonists will in contrast be called by their last names, such as Selden and Archer, as this is what the narratives themselves mainly do, reflecting perhaps the customs of Wharton's day and age. One exception to this rule, however, will be *The Custom of the Country*'s Ralph Marvell. He could have been called Marvell for sake of consistency, but this seemed forced, as he is mostly seen through the eyes of Undine who simply calls him Ralph. The narrator at times also calls him this, portraying perhaps how one becomes intimately acquainted with him as “poor” Ralph. It may also reflect the dominance of Undine, and how she (as will be argued below) turns the tables on the traditional roles of men and women. The “choices” that needed to be explained (as regards the technicalities of this thesis) have now been elaborated on. So has the structure of this thesis, as well as my reasons for deciding to write a thesis on Wharton's fiction. Now, I will turn my attention to the literary analysis of *The House of Mirth*, *The Age of Innocence*, and *The Custom of the Country*.

2 Problematic Perception: The Observer's Focalization of the Object

This chapter will deal with how the observer and the observed object relate to each other, as presented in *The House of Mirth*, *The Age of Innocence*, and *The Custom of the Country*. All three works have male focalizers, who either represent the novel's main point of view or a contrastive point of view. The perceptual processes of the male focalizers are presented as problematic, because they misinterpret or project their own preconceptions onto the observed object. Wharton's use of narrative technique reflects the visual processes and relations revealed, making her narration in keeping with her thematics, as this chapter will explain in detail.

2.1 A Traditional Yet Transcendent Tableau

This sub-chapter will deal with observation and objectification and how these two processes are portrayed in *The House of Mirth*. The male observer will be the main focus and how he perceives the observed object. It has already been mentioned that perception is a creative process, and this section will argue how the male focalizer, Lawrence Selden, has his own personal and individual understanding of Lily. It differs from that of other male focalizers, as he attempts to see Lily as more than a sexual object and a woman in search of a husband. However, his view of Lily is still influenced by the customs of the leisure class and his own background.

From the opening line of *The House of Mirth*, Wharton establishes perception as a creative process and a process that influences the lives of her literary characters: "Selden paused in surprise. In the afternoon rush of the Grand Central Station his eyes had been refreshed by the sight of Miss Lily Bart" (HM 5). Here Wharton introduces Lawrence Selden and immediately casts him as the dominant focalizer and spectator of Lily Bart. Thus a (visual) relationship has been established between the male and female protagonists, where Selden is the observer, and Lily the observed object attracting his gaze (Town 47). That perception is portrayed as a creative process is emphasized by Wharton's use of the word "refreshed." By using this word, she indicates that Lily stands out, draws attention to herself, and that her visual appearance is in stark contrast to other visual impressions Selden registers. That Selden's vision is affected by Lily's appearance, emphasizes creativity on his part, as he is able to recognize her as a leisure class woman, separating her from the common crowd.

Other travelers at Grand Central Station also perceive Lily as something out of the ordinary: “One or two persons, in brushing past them, lingered to look; for Miss Bart was a figure to arrest even the suburban traveller rushing to his last train” (HM 5). Knowing that observation traditionally is a gendered process (Montgomery 133), Wharton shows the male, Selden, as the main observer of Lily. Yet, as mentioned, other travelers are also able to recognize Lily's striking presence and see her as a visual object. Laura Mulvey is the one who pinpointed the implications of the male observer versus female observed object dichotomy for the visual arts, and argues that this distinction is the result of a society based on gender inequality:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. (61; italics in original)

However, as will be argued later, Selden does not necessarily see Lily as a sexual object. Then again, there are other male observers who do. Furthermore, this quote from Mulvey downplays the object's own agency. In *The House of Mirth*, Lily is actually presented as a participant in the play of perception, who knows how to portray herself as an object of display (Town 48). The male gaze may nurture the object's self-presentation, but she also behaves according to what is expected of her. Thus, the observer creates the object *and vice versa*.

The scene at the train station reflects this dual relationship. Here Lily is recognized as an object and a symbol, i.e. the leisure class and Society woman, due to customs internalized by the onlookers who can differentiate between visually ordinary and visually extraordinary women:

He led her through the throng of returning holiday makers, past sallow-faced girls in preposterous hats, and flat-chested women struggling with paper bundles and palm-leaf fans. Was it possible that she belonged to the same race? The dinginess, the crudity of this average section of womanhood made him feel how highly specialized she was. (HM 6)

Symbolic meaning is arbitrary and must be learned, and so must the interpretation of Lily as a visual impression, representing leisure. The observer projects an understanding of Lily as a symbol onto her, due to tell-tale signs that she elicits, making one draw this conclusion. Thus, Lily herself is complicit in the process of objectification by deliberately staging herself so as to draw attention, and be conspicuous: “Selden had never seen her more radiant. Her vivid head, relieved against the dull tints of the crowd, made her more conspicuous than in a ball-room, and under her dark hat and veil she regained the girlish smoothness, the purity of tint,

that she was beginning to lose” (HM 5). By using the term “conspicuous,” Veblen's theories of the leisure class's symbolic role of representing wealth and beauty is invoked, as he claimed the members of this group to be representatives of “Conspicuous Leisure” (“Conspicuous” 264). This way, the elements of the play of perception are presented as a theme by Wharton early on in the novel.

Furthermore, Lily's choice of apparel shows that she herself knows how to present herself as a leisure class lady, and she also has perceptual powers she asserts. Lily is aware that she must stage herself as a symbol, and that the understanding of her as such is based on how she physically presents her appearance. Without the proper frame, i.e. the right signifier, the idea and concept, i.e. the signified, will not be conveyed, something Lily understands all too well: ““a woman is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself. The clothes are the background, the frame if you like”” (HM 12). It is Peirce's conception of the creative process of perception that is emphasized in the presentation of Lily here, as her physical presence and apparel is crucial to the understanding of her as a symbol of leisure. Selden recognizes Lily as someone whom an observation is not only projected onto. She also deliberately attracts the male gaze (O'Neal 278-279). Thus, he forces us to acknowledge Lily' own agency: “She stood apart from the crowd, letting it drift by her to the platform or the street, and wearing an air of irresolution which might, as he surmised, be the mask of a very definite purpose” (HM 5).

Even though Lily herself adheres to the role as object, Selden also helps to objectify her by establishing himself as her spectator and focalizer: “As a spectator, he had always enjoyed Lily Bart” (HM 6). Lily becomes Selden's project and experiment. He believes he can test his own perceptual abilities and figure out whether Lily is truly only a self-conscious object of display, or something different all together: an outstanding beauty with perceptual abilities that can make her transcend Society. Whether Lily is one or the other, a type (a leisure class woman) or an individual, will be shown by her either marrying a leisure class man and choosing a privileged life, or by refusing marriage, thus choosing individuality. Lily thereby becomes doubly objectified. Firstly, by being subjected to the male gaze. Secondly, by being cast as the object of Selden's quasi-scientific project of perception (Dixon 212, 214, 219): “From whatever angle he viewed their dawning intimacy, he could not see it as part of her scheme of life; and to be the unforeseen element in a career so accurately planned was stimulating even to a man who had renounced sentimental experiments” (HM 55). The word “sentimental” connotes emotional involvement, and this is involved in the process of observation whether we like to or not. The “objective observer” may be a scientific concept,

but an inexact one at that, as there is no such thing as true objectivity or detachment. This is shown when we find what we are looking for by projecting our own ideas onto the object observed. Not to mention that we can only understand and “find” what our framework of perception allows us to. Being interested in social anthropology, Wharton most likely had knowledge of this (Bentley 47), and through Selden's focalization of Lily she may very well have tried to portray the limitations of perception. The process of perception may be creative, but this creativity is limited by our categories and customs, influencing how we see things. These categories are hard to overcome, as this thesis will show. Selden for instance, cannot stay truly detached in his focalization of Lily, being part of the observer versus observed object dichotomy governing the life of the leisure class (Lindberg 91). To truly see Lily, Selden must realize his own perceptual role, something he does not do until it is too late. Eventually he realizes that he has been influenced by other people's view of Lily, as well as his visual impressions, making him misinterpret her behavior. This makes him unable to sustain a true reading of Lily, and permanently communicate with her on an intimate level, as the last chapter will argue.

Roslyn Dixon argues that Selden is a detached observer, who does not involve himself in Lily's life (214, 219). I disagree. As the novel goes on, Selden moves closer to Lily both mentally and physically, something I will discuss later. Though Selden is not an entirely detached observer, he is at least a more detached observer than the other male focalizers. He is able to recognize Lily's psychological abilities, and not only her physical, while others only see her body and what she symbolizes. Selden understands that Lily has moral values, and wants to partake in his “republic of the spirit”: “You think me horribly sordid, don't you? But perhaps it's rather that I never had any choice. There was no one, I mean, to tell me about the republic of the spirit” (HM 55). Additionally, he is able to partly distance himself from the customs of Society and its (sexual) objectification, when he platonically values Lily's transcendent beauty at the scene of the tableau vivant. Cynthia Griffin Wolff argues that Lily is “the sum of the impressions she has made upon other people” (*Feast* 109). This is what this novel does: through Selden's point of view in particular, it portrays the impression one gets of Lily through various moments of display. Neither Selden, nor the reader can “hold on” to Lily when we experience her through short visual glimpses. This is fitting, as the experience of her as a visual representational object is contingent on her physical presence. The moment she disappears, so does the experience of her as an aesthetic object. Lily is ambivalent herself about her role, thus one only experiences her true self, void of her role as object, fleetingly.

One of these moments is Lily's tableau vivant, and there will be others to come, like the garden scene, which will be described in the last chapter. However, while the tableau scene portrays only Lily's visual appearance, the garden scene shows her verbal presence too (Miller 11-12). For now, though, let us turn our attention to the tableau, which shows Selden's contradictory focalization of Lily.

At the scene of the tableau vivant, Selden watches Lily impersonate a Reynolds painting. Here there is a live performance, where Lily engages in role play, as she pretends to be Mrs. Lloyd: “the unanimous ‘Oh!’ of the spectators was a tribute, not to the brushwork of Reynolds's ‘Mrs Lloyd’ but to the flesh and blood loveliness of Lily Bart” (HM 106). Selden believes that he can see the “real” Lily at the tableau, a Lily that does not have to play the role of object: “Its expression was now so vivid that for the first time he seemed to see before him the real Lily Bart, divested of all the trivialities of her little world, and catching for a moment a note of that eternal harmony of which her beauty was a part” (HM 106). It is ironic that Selden fancies the tableau vivant can show the real Lily, as it is linked to the display of women within the leisure class (Montgomery 10), making his focalization somewhat unreliable. The tableau vivant was considered a form of entertainment and display of wealth, where women could showcase their representational abilities and role as a symbol. It is connected to Veblen's concept of “Conspicuous Consumption” (“Conspicuous” 264), not only in that the leisure class woman here can portray herself as a visual object of representation, but also in that it represents consumerism and commodification. At the time of the setting of *The House of Mirth*, shopkeepers had mock tableaux vivants in their shop windows in order to display goods and attract customers (Montgomery 122-123). In the same fashion, the leisure class woman is presented as an object for “sale” and commodified, when she, like Lily, is displayed at the tableau to attract the male gaze and a potential husband. As a single woman, the tableau is an opportunity for Lily to display herself as a symbol to the single male onlooker. Married leisure class women, on the other hand, would have used the tableau to show off their husband's wealth, thus reflecting “Conspicuous Consumption” (Orlando, *Visual* 90-91). Just as an article in a shop window is literally framed by the window frame, so is Lily literally and figuratively framed by the tableau, as it places her within the tradition of male observation and female objectification. Selden is ignorant when he feels the tableau represents a Lily free from the customs of Society, as the tableau is steeped in the traditions of the leisure class. It does not make Lily transcend Society, but instead establishes her as part of it.

Furthermore, the tableau perfectly portrays the objectification of Lily and how she executes her role as a leisure class woman. Her role is namely to make Selden believe that he sees the real Lily, and create an illusion in the mind of the observer, i.e. the “audience,” reflecting the play of perception:

Like actors in the theater, individuals in “real life” want to convey a certain definition of themselves and their context. Within the realist/naturalist tradition at least, actors want the audience to believe that they are a particular character, and to be consistent with this projection they affect appropriate gestures and postures and wear appropriate costumes. There is a high degree of conscious intentionality in their performance, which is accepted as real by the audience as long as the illusion is sustained. (Montgomery 13)

Selden is so influenced by the customs of Society and its ways of seeing, that he fails to realize its impact on his observation of Lily. He does not see that Lily is a “social actress” who executes her performance so flawlessly, that men cannot differentiate between her real self and the role of object she takes on (Bruce Michelson qtd. in Town 48-49). This is why the process of perception of the leisure class is a performance, because the object plays a role and can trick the male observer (Montgomery 12-13). In addition, Selden does not recognize that he plays a role as well, namely that of the observer and audience (Lindberg 91). Selden forgets what he noticed in Grand Central Station: that Lily's role is to make a lasting impression on the onlooker, to represent, and that this is intentionally done.

Still, there may be some truth in Selden experiencing the real Lily at the tableau:

She had shown her artistic intelligence in selecting a type so like her own that she could embody the person represented without ceasing to be herself. It was as though she had stepped, not out of, but into, Reynolds's canvas, banishing the phantom of his dead beauty by the beams of her living grace. (HM 106)

He sees Lily as a transcendent beauty, who does not let herself be overpowered by the image she impersonates. Thereby, the tableau places Lily within yet outside Society simultaneously, as she has exceptional personal abilities making her radiate her own nature despite the surroundings trying to contain her within its frame. It is as if Selden can see into the core of Lily's being, and how she is more than the role she enacts. Lily admits that Selden has a privileged position of observation, differentiating him from the other male onlookers: “and for the moment it seemed to her that it was for him only she cared to be beautiful” (HM 108). That Lily wants to go beyond Society will be argued further in the next chapter. However, the tableau reflects a transitory connection between the two, as Lily as quickly as she has shown her ephemeral, true self to Selden, turns to the other observers a different face, as will be argued below. While Lily and Selden visually connect at the tableau, they are still within the

confines of Society. Only outside it can they truly go beyond the play of perception, something the final chapter will discuss in detail: “It was as though her beauty, thus detached from all that cheapened and vulgarized it, had held out suppliant hands to him from the world in which he and she had once met for a moment, and where he felt an overmastering longing to be with her again” (HM 107).

Selden's focalization of Lily is also exceptional in that it is contrasted with that of the other male observers. Their observation connotes sexual interest in Lily, and how she as mentioned above is displayed as a (sexual) commodity: “‘Deuced bold thing to show herself in that get-up . . . and I suppose she wanted us to know it’” (HM 106). Lily's presentation to them suggests nudity, as they react to the way her draperies cling to her body, revealing her outline: “Her pale draperies . . . served only to relieve the long dryad-like curves that swept upward from her poised foot to her lifted arm” (HM 106). Selden distances himself from this view of Lily, and how the other men appreciate her body, as opposed to her outstanding beauty. To him, they reduce her to a (sexual) object, while he wants them to understand how extraordinary she is:

It was not the first time that Selden had heard Lily's beauty lightly remarked on, and hitherto the tone of the comments had imperceptibly coloured his view of her. But now it woke only a motion of indignant contempt. This was the world she lived in, these were the standards by which she was fated to be measured! Does one go to Caliban for a judgment on Miranda? (HM 107)

Selden is also someone who is outside yet inside Society when his creative process of perception seeks to transcend the traditional views of the male observer, yet is simultaneously framed by Society's and his own customs (Ammons, “Edith” 352). While Selden recognizes Lily for herself, the others do not, reflecting John Berger's take on the objectification of the naked woman in art: “To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude. (The sight of it as an object stimulates the use of it as an object.) Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display” (*Ways* 54). Here the observers seemingly create the experience of the object as sexual object, but Lily has also chosen this display of self.

While Selden tries to put Lily on a pedestal, making her transcend the customary leisure class observation of her, his perception nevertheless becomes just another way of objectifying her. He creatively constructs Lily's appearance to be in accordance with his own inherited sense of beauty (Ammons, “Edith” 352): “his views of womankind in especial were tinged by the remembrance of the one woman [his mother] who had given him his sense of

'values'. It was from her that he inherited his detachment from the sumptuary side of life" (HM 121). In addition, his view of Lily as a transcendent beauty can be seen as part of a tradition and custom of art (Wolff, "Lily" 321-325). This is the tradition of the creed "vita brevis ars longa"—life is brief, but art everlasting, preserving an image of a female beauty within art for eternity. When Lily represents Mrs. Lloyd, but also herself, she becomes a beauty that has remained unchanged through a visual image, being observed by generations of onlookers.

The narrative technique reflects the difficulties of perception, as there are various understandings of Lily's performance at the tableau. There exists points of view to rival Selden's, portraying how his focalization might be unreliable, or at the very least not completely objective. The narrator's point of view intervenes when Selden believes Lily performs only for him, stating that: "if Selden had approached a moment or two sooner he would have seen her turning on Ned Van Alstyne and George Dorset the look he had dreamed of capturing for himself" (HM 108). Lily's point of view also underscores that she is acting: "Not caring to diminish the impression she had produced, she held herself aloof from the audience till the movement of dispersal before supper, and thus had a second opportunity of showing herself to advantage" (HM 107). Lily is an illusionist, in that she makes the idea of a true self appear and disappear (Town 44), as fits her ambivalent view of her own role as object. She is constantly analyzing the situation to present herself in the manner she thinks the observer would like to see her (Montgomery 132). Perception is thus a creative process for the observer and observed object alike. Mainly, *The House of Mirth* presents us with three points of view: Lily's, Selden's, and the narrator's. The use of contrastive focalizers within one scene reflects how the mode of communication of the leisure class is a deceptive game, as the actors in this play, the observer and object, experience the same situation differently. This might indicate how a communicative mode based on observation is difficult (Bruce Michelson qtd. in Town 48-49). It can cause misinterpretation, as one is once removed from the object observed and viewing it from a distance. The final chapter will discuss this further.

Wharton's use of three points of view reflects her own view of narration (Dixon 211):

The difficulty is most often met by shifting the point of vision from one character to another, in such a way as to comprehend the whole history and yet preserve the unity of impression. In the interest of this unity it is best to shift as seldom as possible, and to let the tale work itself out from not more than two (or at most three) angles of vision. (*Writing* 87-88)

Various points of view are needed, according to Wharton, when one character has a limited understanding of a situation: “The only possible rule seems to be that when things happen which the first reflector cannot, with any show of probability, be aware of, or is incapable of reacting to, even if aware, then another, an adjoining, consciousness is required to take up the tale” (*Writing* 88). This is the case with Selden. By using contrastive “angles of vision,” the reader gets a better understanding of the communicative process that governs the life of the members of the leisure class.

Still, there are limits to the reader's insight into the play of perception, and particularly our understanding of Lily, the object of our observation. This is because Wharton deploys a third-person narrator, a narrator that is outside the narrated events and does not partake in them. Using a third-person, heterodiegetic narrator makes for a more objective perception of events than Selden's, as the narrator is detached from the happenings of this literary universe. Yet the narrator is not omniscient, and does not allow us to fully understand Lily (Knights, *Introduction* 64-65). At the end of *The House of Mirth*, at Lily's death scene, this becomes particularly obvious, as neither the narrator, the reader, nor Selden, knows whether Lily commits suicide or not. Just as Selden has a limited view of Lily, so does the reader, through the use of the third-person narrator (O'Neal 277). The question then becomes why does Wharton deploy this narrative technique? She could just have used a first-person narrator and let Lily tell her own story. To answer my own question, I believe it is because Wharton wants to demonstrate the communicative process of New York Society and the leisure class in practice (Knights, *Introduction* 41; Dixon 211). By using a third-person narrator who observes Lily and by letting the reader follow this narrator's limited line of vision along with Selden's, we experience how Lily becomes objectified (Dixon 211, 214; O'Neal 274). We in fact partake in the objectification of her ourselves, through this method of narration (McCarthy 88, 95). This may be Wharton's point: to objectify Lily through her narrative technique in order to portray how a communicative mode based on the visual causes limited understanding of the object. Complete understanding is difficult, when our way of seeing is influenced by constraining customs. Also, when the object observed is self-conscious of her role, the perceptual process can be manipulated.

Even though Lily can influence the perceptual process and make Selden believe he sees the real her, she cannot *totally* control it. She is objectified whether she wants to be or not. This is not only shown by the tableau vivant, but also by the scene when Lily dies. Here the reader, the narrator, as well as Selden define Lily, trying to make sense of her death

(Hoeller 124). However, several critics make Selden into a villain who speaks *for* Lily, as he tries to figure out her final words (Mayne 4, 15): “He knelt by the bed and bent over her, draining their last moment to its lees; and in the silence there passed between them the word which made all clear” (HM 256). Elaine Showalter even compares him to Dracula, “draining” Lily of life (“Death” 361). This comparison I find questionable, as Selden has little sexual interest in Lily. Also, he rather tries to *give* her life, by making her picture a life outside the leisure class. Still, critics are right in that Selden partially defines Lily by perceiving her last word to be ““Beyond!”” (HM 122). However, they forget why he does this. To me, he does it to establish a dialogue and make Lily more than a mute visual object. In the tableau vivant “the beams of her living grace” makes Lily transcend the “dead beauty” of Mrs. Lloyd. This is what Selden tries to do at Lily's deathbed too: make her transcend Society's limitations by assuming her final word to be her creed ““Beyond!”” (HM 122). Selden has lost his connection to Lily when she dies, a close *verbal* communication (as will be argued in the last chapter), and tries to re-establish this. While some believe Lily's death represents the objectified, dead beauty as depicted in art (Orlando, *Visual* 75, 171), I feel that Selden tries to make this “tableau” *mort* into a tableau *vivant* again. His focalization here seeks not to reduce Lily, but is rather an imperfect attempt at resurrecting her. After all, if Selden simply wants to limit Lily, why is he allowed to be the dominant focalizer of her? Rather, his point of view must serve as a contrast to other more constrained views of Lily, as he at the very least *attempts* to see her for who she truly is.

2.2 “Opaque” Observation

In *The Age of Innocence*, the observer watches two objects, who are established as dichotomies. This sub-chapter will argue that this is the result of Society's categories, as well as the object being consciously conspicuous. While Newland Archer is unable to perceive the reality of his fiancée May Welland, he goes from seeing Ellen Olenska as a physical exotic object to valuing her representational qualities. Thereby, Archer's perception is limited yet simultaneously creative when he moves from Peirce's understanding of the symbol to Saussure's, valuing the immaterial over the physical.

Wharton continues her use of a male focalizer who observes and passes judgment on the female in *The Age of Innocence*. This time, it is Newland Archer who is the spectator of not one, but two women, namely May and Ellen. In contrast to *The House of Mirth*, where we follow the rise and fall of Lily as observed by Selden and told by the narrator, the main

character of *The Age of Innocence* is the observer himself. The male focalizer is established in the opening pages, when Archer scans the audience at the opera in search of May: “Newland Archer, leaning against the wall at the back of the club box, turned his eyes from the stage and scanned the opposite side of the house” (AI 4-5). When Archer visually searches the audience for May, he establishes her as a spectacle of the male gaze and one to arrest it:

‘The darling’! thought Newland Archer, his glance flitting back to the young girl with the lilies-of-the-valley. ‘She doesn't even guess what it's all about.’ And he contemplated her absorbed young face with a thrill of possessorship in which pride in his own masculine initiation was mingled with a tender reverence for her abysmal purity. (AI 5-6)

The perception Archer has of May is that of an innocent creature, who knows little of the workings of the (masculine) world. He fancies that he himself is experienced. As time will show, though, Archer is mistaken in his assumptions and perceptions of May. Just like Selden, he is influenced by the customs and conventions of the leisure class he is part of. Not to mention that he is tricked by the play of perception and its gender-specific codes of conduct. It is Archer who comes to be the innocent and ignorant one, when he fails to see May for who she really is and only sees her as an object.

At the opera, May's and Archer's relationship is reflective of that of the observer and the observed object, and the visual communication of the leisure class resembling a play. This is because May, like the actress on stage, is able to create the illusion of innocence, which Archer takes to be reality. As the actress only pretends to be innocent and tricked by Faust, so does May play the role of the female object of the leisure class and feigns innocence (Jessee 49). Archer fails to realize May's role play, because like Selden his role is to be tricked by this female illusion. Archer may think that he is Faust, who can fool his female object of affection. In fact *he* is the one who is tricked, when May realizes his fascination for her cousin Ellen and he believes she is ignorant of it. May, through her choice of demure apparel and gestures, knows she symbolizes the innocent leisure class woman and stages herself in order to create this impression in the onlooker (Jessee 44, 46). Like Lily in *The House of Mirth*, May is conscious of her role. She knows how to play the object, something Archer does not perceive (Jessee 43). Thus *she* is the initiated one who knows the play of perception by heart, while Archer is the uninitiated one with regard to “women's wiles.” May literally follows the “rules of engagement,” as she through her display of innocence lands Archer as her fiancé: “a warm pink mounted to the girl's cheek, mantled her brow to the roots of her fair braids, and suffused

the young slope of her breast to the line where it met a modest tulle tucker fastened with a single gardenia” (AI 5).

That Archer is fooled by May is shown when he goes to see her in Florida to hasten their wedding: “he was too much disappointed at the vanishing of the new being who had cast that one deep look at him from her transparent eyes” (AI 94). Here Archer believes that May's eyes are transparent and that he can discern her thoughts, which to him are that she is afraid of what the family will say when he wishes to hasten their marriage. The truth is that May has realized that Ellen is in the picture, and that Archer wants to marry her sooner than planned, because he is afraid he will fall for Ellen instead. Thus, not only are May's eyes not transparent in that she understands what is going on, but she hides this knowledge from Archer, making herself doubly opaque and impenetrable. Also, Archer fancies that May's eyes are filled with tears of joy: “he saw that her eyes were full of happy tears” (AI 94), because *he* decides to not hasten their marriage after all. This perception is misguided, as May probably cries in order to play to Archer's protective instincts and cause him to relinquish his “marriage” quest.

May is playing a role, pretending to cry to disguise her true emotions. She is being an illusionist like Lily, and Archer falls for it. That May's eyes are wet works as a disguise on a physical level too. This is because tears function as a veil or glaze that disguises the eye, yet simultaneously makes it appear clear and not opaque, reflecting May's ability to hide her true self while simultaneously making Archer believe he can read her like an open book (Jessee 43). Tears also make a wet, glazed surface of the eye, acting like a mirror in that you can see your own reflection in it. When Archer imagines he can see the truth in May's eyes, this is what happens; he sees the image he himself has created of May, i.e. his own reflection. Archer's reflection is the idea of May as a naïve, leisure class woman, an idea that he has projected onto her (Hadley, “Ironic” 267). In the same manner that Lily reflects Selden's projections (Mayne 4), so does May reflect Archer's perceptual understanding of her and its limitations. To further cement the concept of May's eyes representing something else than Archer believes them to, Wharton makes them “wet with victory.” This is when May has gotten rid of Ellen, a potential threat to her marriage: ““And you see I was right!” she exclaimed, her blue eyes wet with victory” (AI 206). May's wet eyes portray experience then, not innocence, and her ability to deceive the male observer (Fracasso 47).

Archer creates May in his own image, and sees her as customs have taught him to see leisure class women, i.e. as someone ignorant of all but her representational role:

But how many generations of the women who had gone to her making had descended bandaged to the family vault? He shivered a little, remembering some of the new ideas in his scientific books, and the much-cited instance of the Kentucky cave-fish, which had ceased to develop eyes because they had no use of them. What if, when he had bidden May Welland to open hers, they could only look out blankly at blankness? (AI 52-53)

Here, Archer misreads May's signals, or as I have argued, she consciously wants him to misunderstand her, reflecting how perception is a creative process for both the observer and the observed. This process may cause misunderstandings, as we bring our own interpretative strategies to the table, reflecting individuality as well as communal customs. Being part of the leisure class, Archer can only perceive May within its framework (Lindberg 137, 157). So steeped is he in the customs of New York Society, that he sees May as a type, not an individual. She is just another object to him (Orlando, *Visual* 190): "Perhaps that faculty of unawareness was what gave her eyes their transparency, and her face the look of representing a type rather than a person; as if she might have been chosen to pose for a Civic Virtue or a Greek goddess" (AI 115). To Archer, May represents a classic beauty, like Lily does to Selden. Archer is partially right in his observation, as May does emulate this ideal. But his perception is misguided when he cannot see that goddesses have powers to assert. The Greek goddesses had powers to trick (male) mortals and gods alike, just like May fools Archer and asserts her perceptual powers when she discerns his fascination for Ellen. That Archer misperceives May in this way is due to the leisure class's view of women as passive objects. Archer is very aware of this tradition of objectifying women, shown by him wanting to "initiate" May. Still, what he does not see is that this process of objectification causes limited understanding for him, too.

Archer cannot refrain from objectifying May at their wedding, and continues to see her as a type here. He in fact objectifies her to the point where she becomes an illusion, a mere outline with no substance, reflecting perhaps an empty ritual and symbol. He sees tulle, which represents the bride, but not the actual bride herself: "The music, the scent of the lilies on the altar, the vision of the cloud of tulle and orange-blossoms floating nearer and nearer" (AI 113). To put it differently, May is a "vision in white," a figment of Archer's perception. Archer's vision is blurred, all he sees is white, portraying how May is just an object and type symbolizing innocence, as he cannot see her as an individual at all. To me, this scene portrays how May is a representational object to Archer. It is immaterial which leisure class woman he marries, when he cannot distinguish one from the other. Marriage is not presented as a close union between two individuals in this scene, where you anxiously await the arrival of *a*

particular person. Rather, it shows a union of families, customs, communal values and a tradition that blinds one to the potential of the individual. Archer is so colored by this that the bride could have been anyone, it needed not have been May (Lindberg 80-81). There is no intellectual intimacy here, but distance between the observer and the object. The only attachment portrayed at the wedding is attachment to custom, and its way of casting people in roles, male observer and female object, husband and wife.

May is not the only woman Archer observes. At the opera, his searching gaze finds Ellen as well. She is established as an object by the male gaze, too, but is viewed as the exact opposite of the innocent May. As Archer spots Ellen, we see how the male gaze has been taught not only to seek out and recognize the perfect object of display, the leisure class woman of New York's Society, but also the object which deviates from this standard. Like Selden, Archer has learnt to distinguish one female object from another. But what he cannot do completely is see beyond the categories of female object and male observer, something this novel as well as *The House of Mirth* reflects. Immediately Archer sees that Ellen represents experience and exoticism, as he can spot that which deviates from the norm of irreproachable beauty. Also Ellen displays herself as this deviation. She shows herself as the Countess she is, making herself a conspicuous object of display through her choice of dress (Jessee 44, 46). Her apparel is immediately recognized as exotic, due to its variation from what is traditionally recognized as the couture of the American leisure class woman: "The suggestion of this headdress, which gave her what was then called a 'Josephine look,' was carried out in the cut of the dark blue velvet gown rather theatrically caught up under her bosom by a girdle with a large old-fashioned clasp" (AI 7). Ellen's "European style" is unrecognizable as American apparel, thus she symbolizes foreignness and European aristocracy. She becomes recognized as a symbol to the male onlooker, even though the connection between her dress and what it signifies holds no meaning in the American tradition (or if it does, it is as a "femme fatale" showing too much bosom). This is because it holds meaning in the European tradition, and the connection between the signifier and signified is understood as such. The male perception of Ellen is at the opera presented as triadic, reflecting Pierce's take on the process of perception. Ellen's physical presence is what draws the eye, making her the physical referent of the symbol. Her apparel is symbolic and signifies exoticism, and the perceiver draws this connection, making Ellen the signifier of eccentricity.

Ellen's eccentricity is connected to her being seen as somewhat promiscuous, and a fiery, passionate “femme fatale” with real life experience:

But they [the yellow roses] did not look like her [May]—there was something too rich, too strong, in their fiery beauty. In a sudden revulsion of mood, and almost without knowing what he did, he signed to the florist to lay the roses in another long box, and slipped his card into a second envelope, on which he wrote the name of the Countess Olenska. (AI 51)

May contrastively represents ice, with her cool and composed exterior (Lindberg 132): “and arched above snow that shone like splintered crystals. It was the weather to call out May's radiance, and she burned like a young maple in the frost” (AI 51-52). The two women are dichotomies, then, fire versus ice, and represent the objectification of women as either whore or Madonna, innocent or experienced (Jessee 44). Casting May and Ellen in these roles represents tradition, and how Archer's view of women, just like Selden's, is shaped by the customs of Society. However, as Archer eventually will discover, both women are more than the ostensible dichotomy they represent. As the quote above suggests, there is fire beneath May's cool collected exterior, as she is described as “burning.” May is like a “snow-capped volcano” which suddenly erupts, when she to Archer's great surprise gets rid of Ellen. Also, May is not crystal clear but opaque, and as mentioned hides her intentions. Just as ice may sparkle and radiate, because it reflects light, so does May reflect what is projected unto her, i.e. Archer's perception of her. Ellen, too, turns out to be more than the initial impression she makes. She is not purely physical presence and allure. In fact, these attributes come to be what Archer appreciates the least in Ellen.

By presenting Archer's casting of Ellen and May in the binary terms of fire and ice, Wharton portrays Archer's focalization and visual process as limited. To define the world in binaries is limiting, and Archer forgets the danger of thinking in dichotomies, namely that categories are not absolute entities, but customs to be broken. He will realize this as he comes to know Ellen, and has a final epiphany concerning May's perceived innocence. As Robert Frost says in his poem “Fire and Ice,” both these categories “would suffice” in a process of destruction. The two opposites presented by a dichotomy are actually two sides of the same coin, i.e. the process of categorization. This is the case in *The Age of Innocence*, when both May and Ellen are objectified by the male observer. Even though Archer's perception of them may be wrong and limited, Wharton portrays the perceptual process realistically. She shows how the play of perception of the leisure class is affected by customs, and its tendency to define objects in terms of dichotomies resembles any type of perceptual process. As Berger

argues, Saussure taught us that signs only have meaning in relation to other signs, explaining our love of binary categories:

Meaning, then, is determined not by content but by relationships. As Saussure (1966:117) suggests, as far as concepts are concerned, 'their most precise characteristic is in being what the others are not.' This explains why our thinking tends to be so binary, so connected to oppositions—because that's the way language requires us to make sense of things. (*Seeing* 56)

This is exactly what Wharton portrays: how the perception of the observed object is based on its relation to other objects, the observer, and Society's customs, and that this is problematic. It is problematic, because one is only partly in control of one's own observations.

While Archer's view of Ellen and May is shaped in part by Society's categories (Lindberg 53), he is at least creative in his perception in that he attempts to see women as more than objects: ““Women ought to be free—as free as we are”” (AI 27). As time will show, he is more successful in his understanding of Ellen than of May, as they come to converse on an intimate intellectual level. May contrastively remains an object Archer believes he has figured out, until their son reveals her true nature. Archer is fooled by May, because he cannot acknowledge her as an astute observer. This means that Archer remains within the intellectual boundaries of the leisure class, yet he tries to transcend them with Ellen. Like Selden, he is both inside and outside Society, as I shall return to in the final chapter.

Even though Archer's perception of Ellen at the opera underscores her physicality, he eventually comes to see her more in accordance with Saussure's understanding of the symbol. Ellen's physical and actual appearance is removed from the equation, and she becomes what Janet Malcolm terms “almost pure sign” (12), making only the signifier and signified part of the perception of her. This is seen when Archer experiences Ellen not only as a symbol, but as a synecdoche or *pars pro toto*. She is seen as body parts and fragments, that are supposed to represent her entire being: “he had time to imprint on his mind the exact shape of her other hand, the one on her knee, and every detail of the three rings on her fourth and fifth fingers” (AI 70). Archer objectifies Ellen as he fixates on her hands, shoes, or parasol. He sees them as a representation of her (Orlando, *Visual* 179), when he uses objects of her body to create a “vision” of her: “He sat bowed over, his head between his hands, staring at the hearth-rug, and at the tip of the satin shoe that showed under her dress” (AI 107). He sees Ellen as parts, and her individual physical being is lost, being only valued for what she represents (Orlando, *Visual* 179). This to me reflects how Archer values the idea of a relationship with Ellen, a

psychological, reciprocal relationship, that he himself creates in his mind more than an actual consummated sexual relationship. This is shown by him choosing to physically distance himself from Ellen at times when he could have been physically near her. He has established a close mental relationship with her, though, which can sustain him: “The figure [Ellen] at the end of the pier had not moved . . . Archer, as he watched, remembered the scene in the *Shaughraun*, and Montague lifting Ada Dyas' ribbon to his lips without her knowing that he was in the room” (AI 132). This visual objectification process, like Selden's, is more “innocent” in that its intention is not to create a sexual object. Rather, it is intellectual intimacy and close communication that Ellen can offer Archer, as the final chapter will argue. Ellen's sexuality sometimes even scares him, shown when he tries to protect May from her physical influence: “It was annoying that the box which was thus attracting the undivided attention of masculine New York should be the one in which his betrothed was seated . . . and for a moment he could not identify the lady in the Empire dress” (AI 8).

Arguably, the way Archer fixates on parts of Ellen's body can be seen as fetishistic. As Emily J. Orlando argues by quoting Valerie Steele: “Fetishism is a perversion or variation of the sexual instinct, involving a desire for only a part of the body or even an article of clothing that functions as a substitute for the loved person” (*Visual* 179). In my opinion, though, sexual desire is, as argued above, not what causes Archer to make a synecdoche of Ellen. Archer is only fetishistic in that he is once removed from the actual object of his desire, and derives a sense of contentment from his psychological vision of Ellen, which is a substitute for an actual relationship. It is psychological intimacy rather than physical intimacy Ellen's fragments are supposed to create, although Archer is admittedly attracted to Ellen.

The closing scene of *The Age of Innocence* perfectly embodies Archer's perception of Ellen as a synecdoche. He sits outside her apartment in Paris and refrains from going up to meet her, while he fixates on her awnings as if they were a part of her (like they are an extension of her apartment), imagining what goes on inside: “Archer sat down on the bench and continued to gaze at the awninged balcony” (AI 217). From this distance he imagines Ellen, and admits that he is content with the image he has created of her: “It's more real to me here than if I went up” (AI 217). This means that Archer chooses the idea of Ellen, instead of the actual realization of her and a consummated relationship. Unlike her physical being, the psychological entity that is Ellen's representation stays fixed, unaltered in Archer's memory. By not meeting Ellen in the dark apartment shielded from the sun by the awnings, she is kept in the dark, and so is Archer, adhering to his image of Ellen.

Still, Archer is not kept completely “in the dark” in the city of lights. A minor light “goes on” in his head, and he has an epiphany. This epiphany does not make him feel called to action, but sparks the imagination. Archer is told by his son, that May knew that he sacrificed his relationship with Ellen for the sake of their family (AI 214). His image of May as ignorant is shattered. At the same time, this validates his choice of a life in keeping with the customs of New York Society. Archer realizes that he has built his entire life on valuing the symbolic and representational rather than the actual, and a platonic love rather than one based on sexual desire. Also, he understands that his imaginative, interior life will trump the actual and external. If he goes up to Ellen, it will make a mockery of the life he has lived (Wolff, *Feast* 329-333). Archer realizes he has lived life like Plato's cave dwellers. What he perceives as real is just a figment of the creative process of perception (Singley 175):

Plato explains that what is commonly called “real” is, in fact, only an imitation of or incomplete substitute for the truly real, which is forms and ideas. His cave dwellers see mere reflections on the cave walls and believe them to be real; only a rare and intrepid seeker of truth ventures outside the cave to apprehend true forms, not shadows of images. (Singley 170)

Unlike Selden, Archer has become aware of the limitations of his focalization of women, and that it is partly governed by customs. He is in the end a self-proclaimed cave man, in contrast to Selden who tries to hide his true nature or at the very least is ignorant of it. In the end, Selden pretends to be close to Lily when there is still distance, trying to hide his disappointment by creating a dialogue with her. Archer, however, accepts his defeat by choosing to keep Ellen once removed from him.

Wharton's narrative technique underscores Archer's objectification of May and Ellen. Archer is the main focalizer in the novel, and the little knowledge we have of the two objects we get presented from his point of view or through conversations they have with him (Hadley, “Ironic” 266-267). This makes Ellen and May even more observed objects than Lily, who is partly allowed to present her own point of view. The result is that Ellen and May become enigmatic objects to the reader as well as to Archer, and we partake in his process of observation, as we did with Selden. Still, there is one significant difference of narration in the two novels, being that the third-person, heterodiegetic narrator in *The Age of Innocence* is less intrusive, and less overt, than the narrator in *The House of Mirth*. She does not inform us of Archer's ignorance in the same manner as we saw the narrator of *The House of Mirth* do with Selden, and there is no point of view following immediately after Archer's observation to rival his perception. There is only the use of words connected to blindness in the descriptions of

Archer's experiences, which informs us that his focalization is faulty: "Little as he had actually seen of Madame Olenska, he was beginning to think that he could read her face" (AI 86). The reader learns about Archer's misinterpretation as events unfold. Thus we share his ignorance to a much greater extent than we did with Selden. There are fewer "angles of vision" presented in *The Age of Innocence* that can correct Archer's point of view. Thus the reader must assert his own perceptual powers, trying to figure out what happens by analyzing May's and Ellen's words and actions. We must cling to their every word, and carefully read the narrator's description of events to infer what will happen: "But none ever *can* happen now, can it, Newland, as long as we two are together'?" (AI 114).

A reason for using this narrative technique may be to create suspense, so that the epiphany Archer has of his utter ignorance of May will be shared by the reader and protagonist alike. Archer's limited perception of May is after all the main event of the narrative, and if we were informed early on of his misperception, the suspense would be killed. Also, the point of *The Age of Innocence* seems to be to portray how the play of perception affects the male observer, and how this process causes misunderstandings. The focus here is how the customs of the leisure class cause Archer to misread the object and are therefore problematic. In *The House of Mirth*, the observed object is the focus of the narrative and the devastating effect observation has on her. As Wharton's focus shifts from the perceived to the perceiver, it is not strange that her narrative technique changes in order to reflect this change. When portraying the problems of the object, you must show her point of view, but when portraying the ignorance of the observer you cannot. In this way, Wharton is once again able to portray in practice the actual visual and perceptual limitations resulting from the play of perception. She lets Archer, the focalizer with a "misguided gaze" (Orlando, *Visual* 171), inform us of the observed objects, and thus only allows us to partly see them (Orlando, *Visual* 9-10).

2.3 The Object as Orchestrator

As the title of this sub-chapter suggests, the object is presented very differently in *The Custom of the Country* than in the two works discussed above. While Lily, May, and Ellen mainly assert their perceptual powers indirectly through a conspicuous display of self, Undine Spragg is direct in her communication with the observer. Therefore, this sub-chapter will portray a dominant object partly controlling the observer, reversing the customary roles within the

leisure class, as Undine's role becomes more like that of an active subject. The narrative technique reflects this change of dynamic, as Undine becomes the main focalizer too.

As mentioned above, Wharton portrays the concepts of observation and objectification differently in *The Custom of the Country*. First of all, and most noticeably, there is no male focalizer between the reader and the female protagonist and observed object, Undine Spragg. This is a significant change, which illustrates how Undine is in control of her role as object, does not let a man define her (at least not for long), and may even be seen as an orchestrator of events and an active subject rather than an object (Montgomery 133). Undine is only an object in that she desires to display wealth and status. She wants to be visibly noticed by others and constantly seeks a scene for her striking visual appearance. Thus Undine casts herself as a visual object, not really seeking to abandon this role (Berger, *Ways* 47; Montgomery 117-118; Orlando, *Visual* 90-91). Additionally, as Undine is the one male wealth and energies are lavished on she inadvertently becomes a recipient, i.e. an object. Yet Undine can still be seen as a subject as well, because she works hard and actively to influence the male observer and become the one his wealth is lavished on.

We first encounter Undine in the opening pages of the novel as she makes herself heard loud and clear having an argument with her mother: “Miss Spragg, with a turn of her quick young fingers, possessed herself of the missive and withdrew to the window to read it. ‘I guess it's meant for me,’ she merely threw over her shoulder at her mother” (CC 3). Even at this early stage, *The Custom of the Country* stands out from the two other novels, when Undine, unaided by the male gaze, makes herself the “dominant figure of the scene” (CC 24). The two opening words of the novel demonstrate Undine's dominance, being the name “UNDINE SPRAGG” capitalized. Visually and figuratively, they show the force of Undine, and how she manages to stage herself as the object of male observation (Orlando, *Visual* 90-91). It is Undine who is the main focalizer in *The Custom of the Country*, and we get insight into her way of thinking directly through her point of view. Following her consecutive marriages and divorces, we learn about Undine's greed, how she feels entitled to grandeur and luxury, and constantly schemes to move up in the world. When asked about what she wants, she proclaims: “‘Why, *everything!*’” and it is the man's job to give it to her: “Out in Apex, if a girl marries a man who don't come up to what she expected, people consider it's to her credit to want to change” (CC 61). This reflects Undine's self-perception. She is both subject and object, by actively pursuing the man she wants yet expecting him to provide for her.

That Undine demands to be shown off, and to be the ornamental symbol of wealth and power, portrays how she desires to be a leisure class woman. Undine may belong to the class of the nouveau riche, and a family who has made their fortune through business, but she still wants to emulate the leisure class. By marrying Ralph Marvell, she becomes part of this world:

Now at least she was having what she wanted—she was in conscious possession of the ‘real thing’; and through her other, more diffused, sensations Ralph’s adoration gave her such a last refinement of pleasure as might have come to some warrior Queen borne in triumph by captive princes, and reading in the eyes of one the passion he dared not speak. (CC 63)

Here Undine is presented as the one in power, as she is the queen set off by her surroundings, i.e. Ralph’s status. She seems to be in possession of *him*, and not the other way around. Ralph’s function, then, is simply ornamental, he is to furnish Undine and “set her off.” Undine is just as much the focalizer of the men she surrounds herself with, as they are of her. Not only does she attract men and their gaze, but she possesses them and sees them as a representational object too: “Undine noticed the delicacy and finish of her companion’s features as his head detached itself against the red silk walls. The hand with which he stroked his small mustache was finely-finished too . . . She had always associated finish and refinement entirely with her own sex” (CC 45). This is in stark contrast to the other novels, where the male is the dominant focalizer defining the object. In *The Custom of the Country*, Undine actively uses Ralph to define herself. Men are to Undine secondary characters, vessels used in order for her to get what she wants (Ammons, *Argument* 121). They may be working subjects, but subjects controlled by her (at least partially), something which underscores a view of Undine as subject. Undine is not always a passive recipient, but also one who contributes to the accumulation of wealth. If not physically, then at least mentally by influencing the purchases of her husbands: “to embody something of the rareness and distinction she had always considered she possessed; and she reflected that if she had still been Moffatt’s wife he would have given her just such a setting, and the power to live in it as became her” (CC 343). The word “setting” shows how Undine stages herself as a symbol through her choice of the “proper” background and apparel to symbolize wealth (Montgomery 11). It also reflects how she sees Moffatt as a facilitator who simply sets the stage, while she is the actress taking center stage and “calling the shots.”

As mentioned in the quote above, Undine demands “everything.” There is a change from a subtle silent object in *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*, to a forceful

woman in *The Custom of the Country*. This change may be reflective of a change in Society's customs, as Undine Spragg represents a different figure of Society than May and Lily. She belongs to the nouveau riche, and has not been initiated into the symbolic role of the leisure class woman. The nouveau riche began to infiltrate the world of the leisure class by emulating their ways, and like Undine, marrying into it. As America became increasingly commercialized and industrialized throughout the nineteenth-century, there was money to be made in business, and wealthy business owners and entrepreneurial families integrated themselves in New York's Society. They brought with them money to spend, like the wealthy Elmer Moffatt, and with more power to buy comes increased commodification and commercialization. As one possessed more objects, and more wealth, the display culture became more dominant, and Undine simply reflects this change; with increased objectification and commodification comes a more powerful object. Or, one could say an active subject emerges (Montgomery and Smith qtd. in Montgomery 11). The arrival of the nouveau riche, along with the development of the American consumer culture, created greedy possessive women as well as men, and the play of perception changed. Defined roles of observer and observed were altered. Women took part in the new consumer culture, deciding how best to spend money and how to flaunt it. The increased emphasis on a display of wealth allowed women to actively make decisions on behalf of themselves and the household (Montgomery 11, 163, 168): "To have things had always seemed to her the first essential of existence, and as she listened to him [Elmer Moffatt] the vision of the things he could have unrolled itself before her like the long triumph of an Asiatic conqueror" (CC 337). For Undine becoming a leisure class wife to secure her role as object or to be "owned" by someone else in order to achieve financial stability is not her objective. She wants to own objects of wealth herself, and possess males that will literally give her what she wants.

Even though Undine is the main focalizer in the novel, there exist male points of view which establish Undine as an object in the tradition of the leisure class Veblen describes. In *The Custom of the Country*, too, the male is tricked by the sight of the object, projecting his emotions onto her, making her a figment of his imagination (Wolff, *Feast* 236). This is particularly the case with Undine's husband Ralph Marvell. He is so infatuated with Undine, that he cannot see her for who she really is, which eventually becomes his downfall. Ralph, like Selden and Archer, is not a detached observer. This becomes obvious on his honeymoon: "reaching out for the hand on her knee. She let him have it, and he drew it closer, scrutinizing it as if it had been a bit of precious porcelain or ivory" (CC 88). Undine, like Ellen, is reduced

to body parts representing her entire being, making her a synecdoche sparking the imagination. She is Ralph's muse, as he contemplates writing poetry, and Ralph like Archer forgets the powers of the goddesses. Undine is not just a beautiful creature. She has the power to raise havoc, as her name evokes a beautiful yet dangerous sea-creature of old (Wolff, *Feast* 233). The image Ralph has of Undine is misguided and an illusion. Wharton deliberately tells us so by naming Undine after a monster of ancient myths, stories where women were seen as embodying dual aspects (beauty versus fury), and having uncontrollable natures. This way, Wharton objectifies Undine herself, and places her in a tradition of objectifying women. Ralph also does this, as his perception is part of the custom of viewing women as sources of inspiration (Orlando, "Crude" 75, 77). By having a conception of Undine that rivals Ralph's, Ralph's point of view is presented as unreliable. Ralph's misguided perception is emphasized by him not realizing that his view of Undine is hopelessly romantic. It is presented as a cliché, with him seeing her in his own image and projecting his emotions onto her. He may see Undine as a water sprite, forgetting her dangerous, dubious nature: "the glimmering submarine light of the ancient grove, through which Undine's figure wavered nereid-like above him. 'You never looked your name more than you do now', he said" (CC 90). Ralph may have no choice but to create this artificial intimacy and romantic conception of Undine, as she refuses him real intimacy, as I will discuss in the final chapter.

That Ralph only understands Undine as a projection of his own fantasies is evident from his vast collection of photos of her. He has made a shrine of them, where he worships Undine like a goddess through his own liturgy and perception: "The walls and tables were covered with photographs of Undine: effigies of all shapes and sizes, expressing every sentiment dear to the photographic tradition" (CC 212). As the quote explains, Undine is an effigy to Ralph, something that resembles the real thing, but in fact is not. It is a hollow, man-made substitute Ralph worships through the photos, namely the idea of Undine and not the actual woman. What he really worships is himself and his own semi-narcissistic perception of Undine, projecting his own desires unto her. Despite the photos being icons, resembling the real person presented by the image, and being exact miniature replicas of Undine, Ralph is not able to see anything but his romantic conception of her (Wolff, *Feast* 237). To him, Undine is a symbol, who represents the object of display that needs to be taken care of.

When Undine is in Europe and basically abandons her husband and son, he is still unable to face his misperception. To Ralph, Undine remains the beautiful object, which is why he removes the photos of her. In this way, he does not have to be reminded of the illusion

he has lost, and come face to face with it: "It was impossible to go on living with her photographs about him . . . He began to replace the pictures one by one" (CC 213). The images also remind him of his physical separation from Undine, never mind the psychological void between them, and he finds new ways of imagining her close to him: "Sometimes the mere act of holding the blue or mauve sheet and breathing its scent was like holding his wife's hand" (CC 192). In the end, Ralph is so in love with the perception he has projected unto Undine, that he refuses to live without it, being unable to face Undine's treacherous true self. He may have Undine in a frame, but she has framed and objectified him in turn by controlling media's perception of him and announcing their divorce. This contributes to Ralph's suicide (Montgomery 160-161). Like Archer, Ralph is one of Plato's cave dwellers, worshipping the ideal rather than the real (Singley 170). One sees this when he uses the metaphor of a cave to explain his secluded way of living. Undine when entering the cave alters Ralph's illusory life, becoming its main component: "Yet if the light of the cave was less supernaturally blue . . . it was still a thronged and echoing place when Undine Spragg appeared on its threshold" (CC 50). In contrast to Archer, Ralph refuses to accept that his life is based on a "lie." He will not come to terms with the realization that his perception is misguided (Wolff, *Feast* 237-238; Kowaleski-Wallace 50-51). Ralph's epiphany kills him in the end, whereas Archer uses it to validate his life.

I would argue that Ralph's perception of Undine is the most misguided one, as compared to Selden's and Archer's observations of their respective love objects. Ralph is "very" creative in his perceptual process, when he imagines Undine as an innocent beauty. This is because, unlike Lily and May, Undine is no illusionist. She is honest about what she expects from a man and does not hide her true self. Ralph thus makes a victim of himself. Undine cannot be blamed for this, as he should have seen it coming, but she can be blamed for their lack of intimate communication. Yet there are some redeeming factors which may help explain Ralph's ignorance. He has been taught to live the carefree life of the leisure class bachelor and has never had to venture out for himself. When he meets Undine, he is not prepared for this "street smart" woman, who treats marriage as a business (Ammons, *Argument* 121). Although Ralph is capable of thinking "outside the box" of the leisure class, as the final chapter will discuss, he has not learned to recognize a dominant female, because in his world they do not exist. We can only recognize what we know Saussure argues, as the connection between the sign and its content is arbitrary and must be learned. Therefore, Ralph's blindness is excusable, since Undine is a symbol he has not been taught to read.

Secondly, his view of Undine is understandably an illusion, because who could love the “real” Undine Spragg? Ralph is not the first person blinded to the faults of a loved one.

Ralph's inability to see Undine as anything but the symbol he has made of her is emphasized by the narrative technique. Wharton namely deploys several other male focalizers of Undine to rival Ralph's perception. One of them is Peter Van Degen, who is also first to be captivated by Undine's beauty and her ability to display wealth. Not unlike Archer, he sees the object of his affection as a dichotomy, where Undine is the exotic opposite of his blonde wife: “‘She'd show up splendidly as a *pendant* to my Mrs. Van Degen—Blonde and Brunette . . . Night and Morning’” (CC 46; italics in original). It may be the artist Popple who argues this, but Van Degen probably shares his evaluation, as he pays for the artwork. Van Degen may, due to his fascination with Undine's beauty, see her as a symbol at first. But he quickly realizes that her gestures do not fit her appearance as a leisure class woman (Hadley, *Interstices* 51). The signifier does not fit the signified, as actions speak louder than words. When Van Degen understands that Undine will not leave Paris to see her sick husband Ralph, he understands that she is not a moral woman, but an unscrupulous gold digger. Indiana Frusk implies as much, when she says that: “‘It's not that any one has turned him against you’. . . ‘It's the way you acted to your own husband’” (CC 225).

Another male focalizer, Charles Bowen, arguably the most detached observer of Undine, as he is not romantically involved with her, supports Van Degen's realization. He calls Undine “a monstrously perfect result of the system” (CC 131). By this he means that she is the result of a nation's custom of objectifying women and displaying them, making their only outlet for their energies their own self-display. This means that American men have themselves to thank for Undine, as she is a product of the observer versus observed object dichotomy. Furthermore, to cement the perception of Undine's selfish nature and Ralph's perception as misguided, Wharton uses a third-person, heterodiegetic narrator, who distances herself from Undine. The narrator ironizes over her and partially ridicules her in order to counteract Undine's self-perception and point of view: “‘She had found out . . . that she was in the case of those who have cast their lot with a fallen cause, or—to use an analogy more within her range—who have hired an opera box on the wrong night’” (CC 121). This may also be done in order to make the reader keep on reading, because as a reviewer for *The New York Times Book Review* once wrote: “‘Undine Spragg is the most repellent heroine we have encountered in many a long day’” (CC back cover). Had the tone of the narrator been forgiving, we would probably not have managed to follow Undine's path of exploitation, as

this is a woman who uses her child to bargain with. The ironic distance also indicates that Undine is a type taken to the extreme to prove a point (Nevius 152). Through the use of a third-person narrator, contrastive male focalizers, and the reading process, Undine is objectified. This is one, or rather three perceptual processes she cannot influence, and the reader is not fooled by Undine's good looks. Here the tradition and distinction of observer versus observed object is maintained, but we do not experience Undine as the victim of this objectification. She is rather the villain and the men she leaves in her wake the victims, though partially self-created ones (Wolff, *Feast* 235).

An interesting creative process of perception is revealed in *The Custom of the Country*. We continue to watch Undine's exploits, and cannot refrain from watching her:

The final outcome of having spent so much time taking in conspicuous displays of wealth and luxury is that readers become compulsively voyeuristic and complicity participate in the consumption of this status-based pornography. With Lily Bart they cannot stop watching to see if she will be saved and with Undine Spragg they keep watching to see who she will destroy. In either case, no one—not the reader and certainly not the other characters that populate these novels—can look away, even for a moment. (McCarthy 88)

The reader is complicit in the process of objectification, as with Lily. This time, though, it is through a sense of repugnance mixed with glee, as we see Undine as unsatisfied in the end (McCarthy 93-95). It is the narrator and the reader who have the upper hand, as Undine's dominance has no effect on us. We can watch from a (safe) distance how she captivates men, using them to facilitate her desires. Then again, according to Bowen and Veblen, American custom dictates that this is the role of the male observer. As the last chapter will argue, to prevent the creation of more women like Undine, the American man must change his view of the American woman. After all, the “monster” staring back at him is a product of his own perception.

3 “Mirror, Mirror”: The Object's Self-Perception and Appearance

This chapter will discuss how the object relates to her role. The female protagonists of *The House of Mirth*, *The Age of Innocence*, and *The Custom of the Country* define themselves through a multitude of relations. Among these are the relations to themselves, to other women, to the male observer(s), and to New York Society. This chapter will also discuss how Wharton links the symbolic role of the leisure class woman to that of precious gemstones, which is why the sub-chapters are named after the types of gems characterizing Lily, May, and Undine.

3.1 The “Cut” of the Sapphire

Lily Bart has an appearance which should have secured her a position as the ultimate status symbol. Yet, as this sub-chapter will argue, she is unwilling to do what it takes to maintain a flawless façade and is ultimately discarded by Society. When Lily is given the “cut,” her sense of self is lost, eventually leading to her death. This outcome could have been avoided, if she had found permanent value in an existence beyond a conspicuous display of self, as Selden tries to tell her. Then again, what is a girl to do when the only role she has been taught is available to her is that of the visual object? All she can do is to play her part until curtain call.

In *The House of Mirth*, Lily is depicted as being ambivalent towards her role as object (Knights, *Introduction* 49, 65). She may execute her role flawlessly, and *seems* to do this effortlessly, yet there is a lot of work involved in staging oneself as the object (Ammons, “Edith” 348). Lily's ambivalence is noticeable from the start of the novel, as seen by the conversation Lawrence Selden conducts with her in his apartment. Here she mentions how being a leisure class woman frames her entire life, as she must find a man to marry to secure her position in Society: “Isn't marriage your vocation? Isn't it what you're all brought up for?” She sighed. ‘I suppose so. What else is there?’ (HM 10). Being the observed object causes Lily to have to act in a certain way. She must appear passive, if not she will scare her suitors away, while simultaneously striving to attract the male gaze and a potential husband. Charlotte Perkins Gilman argues how this is a ridiculous contradiction: “Marriage is the woman's proper sphere . . . *But*—she must not even look as if she wanted it! She must not turn her hand over to get it. She must sit passive as the seasons go by, and her ‘chances’ lesson

with each year” (291). In this sense, Laura Mulvey is right in that there exists a stereotypical view of the observed woman as passive (within art and the leisure class alike). However, as far as Lily is concerned, this is a *perceived* passivity. Lily, as Gilman mentions above, must secure her role as object by marrying before she is too old. After a “certain age,” a flawless façade becomes difficult to maintain (Lewis 155; Knights, *Introduction* 67): “‘I’ve been about too long—people are getting tired of me; they are beginning to say I ought to marry’” (HM 10). This pursuit is what Lily despises, yet simultaneously cherishes, as being a beautiful object is the role she is made for (Wolff, “Lily” 324).

The role as visual object gives Lily a sense of self-worth. Yet she is aware of how precarious this state is (Fetterley 202), as it is dependent on her playing her role as the perfect object of display to a tee. If there is even a small crack in her perfect surface and exterior and she does not behave in accordance with her role, her future will be ruined: “Why must a girl pay so dearly for her least escape from routine? Why could one never do a natural thing without having to screen it behind a structure of artifice?” (HM 15).

Appearances are key in New York Society. If Lily cannot sustain the illusion of herself as perfect, if anyone can detect that she is not who she sets out to be, then she will be discarded (Town 44). Selden, in contrast to Society, finds Lily's ambivalence and sensibility intriguing, and to him she is more valuable because of it. Even he changes his opinion of Lily, though, when she appears not to act in accordance with his vision of her. When Selden sees Lily leave Gus Trenor's apartment, his view of her as being more than a sexual object is broken and his belief also in her wanting to break away from being an object of male desire. Selden believes Lily is having an affair with Gus, and therefore leaves her alone for a while. One's actions must be in accordance with what one tries to project. If one is to be unlike any other leisure class woman to Selden, i.e. the anomaly, one cannot be seen exiting a married man's house alone at night: “and two figures were seen silhouetted against the hall-light. At the same moment a hansom halted at the curb-stone, and one of the figures floated down to it in a haze of evening draperies” (HM 127). Lily was the one with the potential to evolve past the current customs and change her life, but her actions make Selden lose faith in her: “She was beginning to have fits of angry rebellion against fate, when she longed to drop out of the race and make an independent life for herself. But what manner of life would it be?” (HM 33).

Even more importantly, Lily is shunned by Society in general when Bertha Dorset launches a “preemptive strike” against her, making everyone believe Lily has had an affair with her husband to draw attention away from Bertha's own affair. The survival of the fittest,

the one most adapted to Society, is the one rule that matters, and Lily simply does not want to play this game anymore. She is tired of the play of perception, and refuses to be part of it, which is probably why she does not use the incriminating letters she has revealing Bertha and Selden's affair in order to destroy Bertha and maintain her own reputation. One could argue that she does this in order to save Selden, but he would probably not have been too damaged by it, as he is a go-between that can be part of the leisure class when he wants to, and escape it if he pleases. Lily chooses to let Bertha's view of her dominate how she is perceived by the rest of Society, or perhaps rather lets Bertha win by default, as she has no strength left to fight with.

Women, then, must not only perform their role as object to other men, but it is equally important that they seem flawless to other women. Other women are your competitors in the game of attracting the male and maintaining or gaining status, and your loss is their gain (Fetterley 203): “And the other women—my best friends—well, they use me or abuse me; but they don't care a straw what happens to me” (HM 10). This is what Lily dislikes. By refusing to stoop to Bertha's level, she is perhaps exceptional, and has more moral fiber and guts than all the other men and women of the novel combined. After all, the men just sit idly by as events unfold and the women are afraid of getting on Bertha's wrong side. Lily tries to save face in Monaco when Bertha gives her the “cut” by discreetly exiting the premises (Knights, *Introduction* 61): “The faint disdain of her smile seemed to lift her high above her antagonist's reach” (HM 170). Lily is outstanding, then, not only for her beauty and representational abilities, but for her personal ethics, which includes her reluctance to frame others even though they have framed her (Fetterley 209-210). Yes, Lily may seem to give up towards the end of the novel and passively accept her fate (or actively escape it by committing suicide, depending upon one's stance). Still, her *quiet* resignation takes a lot of courage, and there is something to be said for the dignity with which she picks up the pieces of her life, pays her final debts, and basically lies down to die (Fetterley 210). Lily knows that her time as a leisure class woman is at an end. As this is the only role she knows how to perform, it is sadly the end of her existence as well. She has been a public spectacle all her life, and in a final refusal to be so anymore, she dies alone. Others would probably have gone down kicking and screaming, at least when they are innocently accused. Bertha Dorset, for instance, would arguably have done so and would have taken as many people as possible down with her in her fall as she could. Compared to Bertha, who seems to have the upper hand and to be the winner of the charade of appearances, Lily is the true champion.

There is a discrepancy between how the reader and Selden experience Lily, and how Society sees her. We may experience Lily as the “moral victor” (Town 50) transcending Society's customs by refusing to play its game. So, partly, does Selden, imagining Lily going “beyond” when she dies. However, Society sees Lily as a failure. As she relates her sense of self to her appearance within the leisure class, it is hard to see Lily's death as solely victorious. When her mask as the perfect object is shattered, she no longer has value to the members of the leisure class. As she explains herself, she is “thrown out into the rubbish heap” (HM 240). Yet Lily still has value to the reader, and Selden, as one person's “trash” is another person's “treasure.” Even though Lily is temporarily discarded by Selden, too, this is for moral reasons. He believes Lily debases herself by being a sexual object, when he thought she was above such actions, being a moral character. He eventually realizes his misperception, rushing to Lily's side again. Society, however, permanently gives Lily the “cut,” only because her appearance is now flawed. In the play of perception it is not the truth that matters, but what is perceived as the truth. This is why Bertha can have an actual affair and get away with it, as she draws attention away from herself. While Lily's value as a leisure class object decreases (to the point of being almost worthless) when she is given the cut, she increases in value to the reader and Selden. As with the sapphire she will be compared to below, being cut makes one more precious. It is the cut that makes a gemstone's façade flawless, just as Society shunning Lily makes her an unassailable moral entity, placing her “high above” the other characters.

Lily enjoys but at times also dislikes putting on a flawless show for the male spectator (Ammons, “Edith” 348-350). That is why she is not able to marry any of her potential suitors, as she knows this will permanently cement her role as object and cause her to relinquish her individuality for the rest of her life: “She had been bored all the afternoon by Percy Gryce . . . but she could not ignore him on the morrow, she must follow up her success . . . must be ready with fresh compliances and adaptabilities, and all on the bare chance that he might ultimately decide to do her the honor of boring her for life” (HM 23). Lily finds it problematic that a woman's only outlet for her energies is her own self-display. The negativity towards her role is what Selden detects in Lily, and is why he comes to see her as his experiment. Selden can notice a small but not insignificant crack in Lily's surface, which is that she wants more out of life than to be a participant in the play of perception. She wants to be part of his imaginative “republic of the spirit,” where one is free from the constraints of Society: “How alluring the world outside the cage appeared to Lily, as she heard its doors clang on her! In

reality, as she knew, the door never clanged: it stood always open; but most of the captives were like flies in a bottle, and having once flown in, could never regain their freedom” (HM 45). It is a self-imposed captivity, then, that Lily experiences. If she really wanted to, she could have escaped. No one has made Lily aware of there being other roles open to her before Selden lets her see herself and her surroundings in a different light (Dixon 213): “That was the secret of his way of readjusting her vision. Lily, turning her eyes from him, found herself scanning her little world through his retina: . . . How dreary and trivial these people were! . . . Lily smiled at her classification of her friends. How different they had seemed to her a few hours ago!” (HM 45).

It is not so strange that Lily knows little of other roles than that of the object. Only Selden, can live within Society and yet transcend its boundaries, as customs have created a less restricted role for him than for a woman. Lily can only exist within the framework of the leisure class, as her role as symbol only has value here. The male, who has an education and profession to fall back on, has more options open to him: “the personal profit of women bears but too close a relation to their power to win and hold the other sex. From the odalisque with the most bracelets to the *débutante* with the most bouquets, the relation still holds good, —woman's economic profit comes through the power of sex-attraction” (Gilman 290). Lily would have learnt that “matters of mind and spirit” are supposed to be the domain of men. *She* belongs to the “republic of the body,” as her physical appearance is what is valued and her beauty and grace are her appreciated attributes. The *tableau vivant* is, as mentioned, a good example of this, where Lily's physicality is under scrutiny, determining her representational abilities. After all, if you are not beautiful you will not draw the male gaze, and if you do not, you are worthless to a potential husband as an object to display his wealth.

The world of New York Society is a highly materialistic world. It may display wealth indirectly, through a female proxy, but this cannot hide the fact that it is materialism it displays. Even though Lily's *tableau* is symbolic, displaying wealth once removed, the conception the object emulates is still monetary strength. Also, this concept would be impossible to perceive without Lily's physical appearance; her “flesh and blood loveliness” (HM 106). Thus, the importance of the physical component and referent of the symbol cannot be downplayed, as materialism is emphasized over spiritual value. Lily finds value in this display of self: “No other *tableau* had been received with that precise note of approval: it had obviously been called forth by herself” (HM 107; italics in original). Then again, this is the only type of self-gratification she has been taught to appreciate. Selden attempts to remove

Lily from a materialistic view of self, as seen by his perception of her at the tableau. He, by emphasizing the spirit, shows Lily that there is value “within,” rather than in a conspicuous display where you see yourself reflected in the eyes of others. Although he appreciates Lily's “artistic” qualities too. By simply wanting to escape Society, Lily has the prerequisites for valuing the concept of the spirit. However, she can only transcend her present state of existence by relinquishing a material view of herself and her surroundings, something Selden argues: “‘My idea of success, he said, is personal freedom’ . . . ‘Freedom from worries?’ ‘From everything—from money, from poverty . . . from all the material accidents’” (HM 55).

Still, materialism continues to be a problem for Lily, as it is ingrained in her way of being. In order to be seen as an individual and not a symbol, she must relinquish her love of precious objects, wealth, and status, i.e. all the elements of life that she has previously valued. Understandably, this is something she is reluctant to do. Lily does not know how to live any differently than in luxury and dreads living “simplistically,” like her cousin Gerty Farish: “‘she has a horrid little place, and no maid . . . I should hate that, you know’” (HM 8).

Lily's relation to herself as a leisure class woman becomes evident at a wedding party. Here, she uses the precious objects of white sapphires and what they symbolize to explain her own role and how she wants to be perceived. Lily feels that the sapphires given as a wedding gift by Percy Gryce, the man she could have married, perfectly embody her own sense of purpose: “More completely than any other expression of wealth they [the sapphires] symbolized the life she longed to lead, the life of fastidious aloofness and refinement in which every detail should have the finish of a jewel, and the whole form a harmonious setting to her own jewel-like rareness” (HM 72). It is no wonder that Lily uses the symbol of the sapphires to explain her existence, as this is an object used to represent wealth and beauty just like her. White sapphires in contrast to the “common” blue ones are rare, alluding to Lily's uniqueness. A sapphire literally and figuratively radiates, and so does Lily. The sapphire sparkles when light is projected onto it. It symbolically radiates wealth, status, and beauty, because customs dictate that this is what precious gems symbolize. We project meaning unto the sapphire and it reflects our projected perception. As mentioned, this is Lily's role too. She figuratively reflects leisure as the male perceiver and Society projects this perception onto her, but she literally reflects it as well due to her deliberate appearance which draws the gaze. Like the sapphires she compares herself with, the understanding of Lily as a status symbol is linked to Society's customs. By comparing Lily to a sapphire and letting an inanimate object and a living human being share character traits, Wharton's narrative technique portrays how

“objects have become personified and people objectified” (Town 44). This is a characteristic of the “material world” of New York Society and the narrative technique thus reflects the novel's thematics (Knights, *Introduction* 41; Dixon 211; O'Neal 274).

From the moment the reader experiences Lily up close, sapphires are used to explain her state of existence (Town 47): “She was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her [sapphire] bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate” (HM 8). This quote echoes Gilman's above and her “odalisque with the most bracelets.” Lily's hankering for beautiful objects drags her down and chains her to an existence as object, showing how there is a discrepancy between what one desires and what one needs. In addition, as the sapphires are a symbolical representation of Lily, their dragging her down becomes an image of how she is destroyed by her (self-imposed) role as object. Eventually, this is what kills her, and the chains of custom governing her role is what keeps Lily from floating freely, “drowning” her: “without anything to which the poor little tentacles of self could cling before the awful flood submerged them” (HM 248). Instinctively Lily knows this, which is why she refuses to marry Percy Gryce. He would have made her the ultimate object, the white exclusive sapphire, devastating her. Lily therefore refuses to be a rich man's prized possession (Ammons, “Edith” 348-350; Knights, *Introduction* 63, 67).

When Lily compares herself to sapphires, she objectifies herself (Town 48). It is the same at the tableau vivant, when Lily decides to be part of this spectacle. Through her use of apparel and sapphire bracelets, Lily knows how to play the leisure class object (Town 44). This self-consciousness is what characterizes the object's part in the perceptual process according to Berger:

One might simplify this by saying: *men act* and *women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. (*Ways* 47; italics in original; Berger qtd. in Montgomery 117-118)

It is no wonder that Lily is able to have a meta-perspective of her own role, then, as this is the nature of being a woman. Wharton's choice of narrative technique also helps to objectify Lily and adds to the objectification process by meticulously describing the objects of Lily's dress and jewelry. Through the use of the sapphire bracelet and this being one of the very first objects directly connected to Lily, Wharton cleverly deploys the portrayal of objects to show Lily's objectification. In a culture based on the visual instead of the verbal and the display of

character instead of the explanation of it, what better way to present the female protagonist than by *showing* us who she is instead of simply *telling* us: “If a novelist finds him or herself unable (or unwilling) to simply *tell* us what a character is . . . and if the characters themselves are inarticulate, bewildered, or mistaken, then the things surrounding them must do the work instead” (Town 44; italics in original). Once again, Wharton lets her narrative technique reflect the actual world she portrays, allowing her narrative to be as materialistic and objectified as the Society she depicts (Knights, *Introduction* 41; Dixon 211; O’Neal 274).

Despite being the object, Lily has perceptual powers to assert, as Berger argues in the quote above. Lily is a master of reading the situation and her own reflection in the surveyors eyes, and can turn almost any situation into an advantageous display of self according to Selden: “haven’t I told you that your genius lies in converting impulses into intentions” (HM 54). The concept of the mirror and Lily’s actual use of this object in *The House of Mirth* portrays Lily’s relation to herself as object and woman and how she constantly checks how she is perceived by others (Montgomery 132; Wolff, *Feast* 128). Lily uses the physical object of the mirror as an aid for introspection (Knights, *Introduction* 42). She simultaneously checks on her physical and psychological appearance (Town 50), as her self-worth is tied to her looks and role as a visual object: “She rose, and walking across the floor stood gazing at herself for a long time in the brightly-lit mirror about the mantelpiece. The lines in her face came out terribly—she looked old; and when a girl looks old to herself, how does she look to other people?” (HM 142). Lily knows that it is not what *she* sees that matters, but how *others* perceive her and most importantly the male observer. As Lily stares at her own reflection in the mirror, this process mimics how she herself experiences being reflected in the eyes of others. The mirror is a metaphor for Lily’s and the woman’s dual nature as object, where she must observe herself internally and externally: “And so she comes to consider the *surveyor* and the *surveyed* within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman” (Berger, *Ways* 46; italics in original).

Lily is the surveyor of herself while being the surveyed of her own scrutiny, as well as that of others. She must check that her appearance is in accordance with her role as object, and must foresee the repercussions of her own actions, something she despises. This is why Lily is taken aback when she sees the char-woman staring at her as she leaves Selden’s apartment, because she knows she is breaking the rules of Society by going to a bachelor’s flat unchaperoned: “Lily felt herself flushing under the look. What did the creature suppose? Could one never do the simplest, the most harmless thing, without subjecting one’s self to

some odious conjecture?” (HM 13). The image Lily sees of herself reflected in the char-woman's gaze is that of the female object abandoning her proper role. Thus she can lose her status according to the leisure class's rules of the perceptual game. What Lily perceives as the incriminating gaze of the char-woman, then, simply mirrors that of her own self-perception. Additionally, it reflects the scrutiny she expects the members of Society would make her undergo, had they been the ones to see her. However, as the final chapter will argue, Lily may deliberately be pushing Society's boundaries here in an attempt to change them.

3.2 Flawless Diamond Façades and Russian Matryoshka Dolls

This sub-chapter will discuss how May Welland is able to maintain a diamond standard of appearance. She never takes off her mask of innocence to Archer, making it her son's task to reveal her true colors. Ellen Olenska contrastively is like the Russian Matryoshka Doll. She partly reveals her true self to Archer, letting him see the American Ellen Mingott behind the layers of foreign exoticism. Both May and Ellen are masqueraders (Jessee 47); May more so than Ellen, when she actively works behind the scenes to make her cousin leave New York.

In *The Age of Innocence*, May and Ellen are defined by Archer's gaze, but as already mentioned in the previous chapter, they know exactly how to stage themselves as objects and demand the attention of the male observer. May is perhaps the ultimate leisure class actress, as she never breaks out of character (or at least Archer is not able to perceive that she does), and sustains the illusion of herself as innocent. Actually, May embodies her role so completely that she dies as a visual object to Archer and one he believes he has figured out. May is so consistent in the way she presents herself, both privately with Archer and in public, i.e. “on” and “off” the stage (Goffman qtd. in Montgomery 13), that Archer cannot see that she is more than she pretends to be. It is their son Dallas's task to *resurrect* May as an active agent, and I use this word intentionally, as May only becomes an informed observer to Archer *after* she is dead. She goes from being the observed to the observer and their (power) relation shifts posthumously. They are now “equals” who understand each other. Archer finally acknowledges May as an astute observer, as he rightly should, when he realizes that May knew him better than he knew her and how much he had sacrificed. Both gave up the concept of “true” love for a greater good, namely family values and morals, sacrificing individual desires for communal consistency. Archer understands that May sacrificed something too, as she knew her husband loved someone else, but chose to respect him for valuing family over romantic love: ““She said she knew we were safe with you, and always would be, because

once, when she asked you to, you'd given up the thing you most wanted” (AI 214). It is probably not coincidental that it takes twenty-six years for Archer and May to be equals, and May's death as well, as her openly acknowledging Archer's love for Ellen while she lived would have made coexistence difficult. Equally, Society has changed during this time, as evinced by Dallas's frank dialogue with his father (Wolff, *Feast* 331). As the final chapter will argue, the mental intimacy and conversations Archer never had with May, he can now have with his children. This change is probably a result of the problematic restrictions Society placed on May's and Archer's generation (as seen by the difficult play of perception), causing the next generation to break with Society's categories and create new customs of their own (Wolff, *Feast* 332): ““The difference is that these young people take it for granted that they're going to get whatever they want, and that we almost always took it for granted that we shouldn't”” (AI 212).

Archer, as well as the reader, hardly ever sees May actively instigating events, or how she wields her abilities of perception, as May is only seen through Archer's focalization of her (Hadley, “Ironic” 267). It is only at Ellen's farewell dinner that May's perceptual abilities and her lack of innocence are fully revealed. May is normally a concealed observer, shown by her actions often being told of after the fact. There is also ellipsis where her actions should have taken up space in the narrative. May reads the situation and behaves accordingly, making us only share in the results of her actions, not the execution of them. The farewell dinner is an exception to this “rule.” Even here, though, May's physical presence and activity are downplayed. She still seems to maintain some of her innocence, being able to send Ellen away ““without effusion of blood”” (AI 201). The outcome of the dinner is also a given before Ellen enters the premises, shown by her deflated look as she enters the Archer residence: “She was excessively pale, and her pallour made her dark hair seem denser and heavier than ever” (AI 199). May gets rid of Ellen without causing a scene and with her dignity intact. She is proactive, while simultaneously making it look as if she has done very little. May actively seeks out Ellen to tell her about her perceived (at this point it is not confirmed) pregnancy (Jessee 46-47): ““You know I told you we'd had a long talk one afternoon—and how dear she was to me’ . . . ‘Did you *mind* my telling her first, Newland?’ . . . ‘But that was a fortnight ago, wasn't it? I though you said you weren't sure till today”” (AI 205; italics in original). The meeting of the two women is conveniently left out of the narrative, probably to reflect Archer's limited view of these women and to portray how May wants to be perceived. She does not want to be associated with the “removal” of Ellen, and she cannot in order to

maintain her image of innocence. That she tells Ellen she is pregnant and admits as much to Archer, revealing how she has actively kept Ellen away from their lives, is totally in keeping with her role. A pregnant woman would be expected to fight to maintain her man and has the right to do so. Whether she knows she is pregnant or believes to be so, May's behavior is understandable and a testament to how much she values the concept of family.

Through May's actions towards Ellen, we are able to see that women observe each other as much as men and women do. The conventional object of the male gaze perceives other women as a potential threat, particularly if that person possesses qualities you do not have yourself. One could argue that since Ellen is the exotic, May is even more adamant in portraying herself as the innocent. This role is what gives her value in Archer's eyes and makes her represent the traditions that he appreciates too. Ellen cannot compete with May here, being a married woman and a potential divorcée. By keeping up her appearances, May makes it difficult for Archer to choose Ellen, because she is not valued by Society in the same way May is (Ammons, *Argument* 147). If Archer is to be with Ellen, their relationship will only have value to them. They will also most likely have to leave Society to achieve this union, as the final chapter will consider more in detail. This may be the reason why Ellen says they should “look, not at visions, but at realities” (AI 174). Reality has it that if they consummate their relationship, they will both be outcasts. Archer would have to abandon the customs that have validated his life. Eventually he chooses Society's values, as he abstains from a physical relationship with Ellen, gaining some sense of pleasure from maintaining the lifestyle he has been taught to cherish: “Say I'm old fashioned: that's enough” (AI 217). However, as the final chapter will argue, he may have no choice but to find a sense of purpose in his “old-fashioned” lifestyle. May, like Lily, is able to read the situation, and knows that as an object she must relate herself to other objects, the observer, and Society. The difference is that May is excellent at the play of perception, and the interpretation of its many complicated relations. She is able to maintain her façade and fights for its upkeep, unlike Lily, as it gives her unnoticed influence. May could perhaps be seen to degrade herself in our eyes by doing so, and to be immoral by half-lying about her pregnancy. Then again, what is she to do in order for her life and everything she believes in to be maintained? Not to mention that by Society's standards, her behavior is condoned. By keeping Archer, May not only saves her own reputation, but Archer's and his family's as well.

It is only at Newport during the women's archery competition, that we see May engaged in physical activity. Yet archery was not considered strenuous physical exercise to

the leisure class, it was just another display of leisure. Here the female could showcase her posture and elegance, i.e. her physical fitness (Thompson 346): “The attitude was so full of a classic grace that a murmur of appreciation followed her appearance, and Archer felt the glow of proprietorship” (AI 128-129). May is seen as a physical visual object and it is her posture that is praised. It is a paradox that May becomes a physical object of display, having her physical attributes scrutinized and valued, whereas her active physical abilities are simultaneously ignored. Even with a bow in hand, May is perceived as unthreatening and innocent. This is shown when the spectators exclaim that: “‘Gad,’ Archer heard Lawrence Lefferts say, ‘not one of the lot holds the bow as she does’; and Beaufort retorted: ‘Yes; but that’s the only kind of target she’ll ever hit’” (AI 129).

Today, we tend to equate one with the other, but here, physical strength is removed from physical activity. It is May's grace and static posture that are valued. To a twenty-first century reader, the belief in physicality without activity probably seems like a contradiction, something which shows that it is custom which dictates how we interpret a sign, making symbolic meaning alterable. Any type of sport is today recognized as activity. Archery, especially, is associated with outstanding visual and perceptual abilities, requiring a highly conscious performer. I use the word performer here, as May is not an athlete, but a woman performing her role as symbol and object. It is likely that the text alludes to May being a representative of the “modern” perceptual performer, despite the fact that she is viewed as innocent by the observers. Time and again, we learn that May is more knowledgeable than she lets on, and there is a discrepancy between how she is observed and what she is really like, caused in part by May's ability to camouflage her actions. After all, May is the one who literally and figuratively hits the bull's eye, being able to perceive what goes on around her (Orlando, *Visual* 190). May rightfully wins the prize for best performer, as she executes her role flawlessly. Just like the archer makes the arrow hit the target almost imperceptibly, making the end result more noticeable than the actual performance, so does May.

Not unlike Lily, May objectifies herself by orchestrating her own appearance. Through her use of a white “innocent” dress and a green sash reflecting “inexperience” (AI 128), May stages her own look at the archery competition. Despite her emulating the goddess Diana (AI 129) who is a hunter and thereby a killer, she seems innocent (Ammons, “Cool” 437). Even when killing Archer's love for Ellen, or the possibility of consummating it, May remains on her pedestal as the protector of virtue and values (AI 115). When there are signs which to the reader reveal cracks in her surface, May still remains flawless from Archer's perspective. By

reading Archer's perception of her, May can see how to execute her plans without being found out. Society functions as a mirror for her as well, when she sees her appearance appreciated by the male audience. They give her clues to Archer's relations with Ellen as well, making May adjust her own façade accordingly.

The narrative leaves the question of May's true nature open, as we only see her with the mask she puts on. We only learn of May's insight after her death, when she cannot tell her own tale. Then Archer is free to make a saint of her, as she dies taking care of their youngest child, and he learns that she valued his sacrifice: "May had suddenly died—carried off by the infectious pneumonia through which she had nursed their youngest child—he had honestly mourned her" (AI 208). The image of May one is left with is May as the epitome of "the age of innocence." She is a representative of an era valuing the moral woman's fight for innocence. This is the image Archer seems to nourish as well, as he conjures up a "tableau mort" too, an image of May created after her death: "There [in Archer's library] his wife, nearly twenty-six years ago, had broken to him, with a blushing circumlocution that would have caused the young women of the new generation to smile, the news that she was to have a child" (AI 206). Despite realizing that May knew a lot more than she let on at the time, the narrator, narrative and Archer frames May as Joshua Reynolds's painting entitled "The Age of Innocence." By naming the novel after this painting (Ammons, "Cool" 436; Wolff, *Feast* 312), one immediately goes in search of who could be cast as the innocent. Naturally, due to Archer's labeling her as such, and her own self-portrayal, May seems the obvious choice. The question, then, becomes whether the narrative and reader imposes this label on May, or whether she truly *is* the innocent? Could it not be Archer, who is unaware of his wife's machinations, or Ellen, the victim of Society's banishment, or May again, but for another reason: because she is being mentally cheated on?

However one looks at it, it is difficult to escape the thought that May *is* Reynolds's innocent, and she herself and the narrative relates to her in this manner. Admittedly, she is not a child, but as with children, someone else often speaks on her behalf, whether it be the narrator or Archer. The true nature of May is found in the silences, the gaps, the ellipses, as her gestures and appearance speak a language that camouflages her knowledge. Silence speaks louder than words, and one must take a step back and readjust one's vision in order to see May as more than the innocent. The narrative seems to want to trick us, make us share in Archer's ignorance of May. This may again be done in order to create suspense, but perhaps more importantly to make us share in the process of perception. When having preconceived

notions of something, one tends to see only what one wants to see. That is why we, along with Archer, have an epiphany at the end. However, these epiphanies vary in content. The reader might start to question labels and titles, and the effect they have. Archer rather seems to become more confident in his conception of May. Strangely, it is when Archer should be in for the shock of his life, when he realizes that May knew he sacrificed his love for Ellen, the moment he should be most displeased with his deceased wife, is the moment he comes to really appreciate her. Before, he thought of his wife as uninteresting. But now in death she is made intriguing. So controlling is May of her façade that she even on her death-bed keeps her mask on for Archer, and only takes it off for her eldest son. May's conception of her own identity, then, seems to be inextricably linked to her role as the unassailable innocent. Ironically, it is May without her mask that Archer truly needed: "It seemed to take an iron band from his heart to know that, after all, someone had guessed and pitied. . . . And that it should have been his wife moved him indescribably. . . . To the boy, no doubt, the episode was only a pathetic instance of vain frustration, of wasted forces. But was it really no more?" (AI 214). Archer answers his own question. May's knowledge makes a world of difference to *him*.

By shrouding May behind a veil of innocence, *The Age of Innocence* becomes more realistic as we experience May the way Society and the observer would. Portraying May as innocent is also consistent with how this character seems to view herself and her role. May is not ambivalent about her role as object. Instead of just limiting her the innocent versus experienced dichotomy rather allows her to exert influence unnoticed (Jessee 43), a role May appears to be more than content with.

The metaphor of ice explains how May expertly puts up a front, as mentioned in the previous chapter. By this I do not only mean the substance frozen water, but also the other potential meaning of ice, namely diamonds or "ice." May is described as radiant and her happiness as "shining through like a light under ice" (AI 118), alluding to her diamond-like qualities. Like Lily resembles a sapphire, so is May a diamond, the hardest substance in the world. This explains her impenetrability, how one never knows what goes on beneath the surface she presents. When May during the talk of hastening their marriage, actually tells Archer directly that she is more knowledgeable than he believes her to be, Archer is still unable to see behind her façade: "'You mustn't think that a girl knows as little as her parents imagine. One hears and one notices'" (AI 93). Archer can only see his own reflection projected back to him (Jessee 43), and the image he has constructed of May. Where there are cracks in Lily's polished surface, which allows her to show herself as ambivalent, e.g. "The

glare from the jeweller's window, deepening the pallor of her face, gave to its delicate lines the sharpness of a tragic mask” (HM 167), there are hardly any, except the incident mentioned above, as far as May is concerned. If they exist she smoothes them over, like at Ellen's farewell dinner, making her appearance seem flawless still: “The two young women clasped hands; then May bent forward and kissed her cousin” (AI 204). While Lily becomes a discarded gemstone to Society (as mentioned above), May keeps her value intact. She is the perpetual ice queen, who never breaks the illusion she has created of herself, making her donned mask of innocence inseparable from who she really is. She actually seems to *be* the role she plays, except for the fact that she *actively* takes action in her life. This is something the observer fails to see, because he is so dazzled by her diamond standard of appearance (Tseelon qtd. in Jessee 43).

Even though May is the diamond, sapphires are associated with her too, as her engagement ring consists of one: “a large thick sapphire set in invisible claws” (AI 19). May loves this ring for what it symbolizes, but to her the sapphire represents something other than it does to Lily. While Lily aspires to firstly *be* like the sapphire, and secondly to possess it, May first and foremost wants to *own* the sapphire ring. This is because the ring symbolizes a union with Archer and being part of his family. The sapphire represents May's aspirations to be a leisure class wife, especially Archer's. This is proven by her insistence on keeping him and the flaunting of her ring in front of Ellen: ““Oh, did I tell you that I showed Ellen my ring?”” (AI 53). Through her concealed actions and “invisible claws,” May clings to Archer like the setting does to the sapphire, showing how May wants to set Archer off and reflect his status. Lily, contrastively, has purely vain reasons for being attracted to the sapphire's qualities. To her it represents the future of being promised to *any* leisure class man, something she ultimately refuses. May's sapphire ring connotes the values of “old” New York and its “royalty,” with its traditions and families of great status, just like another Diana's sapphire ring about a century later represented traditions of British royalty and the observed object. It still does, as precious gems survive their owner. They increase in value by the death of their possessor, making a gem forever keep its “façade,” while its owner may not. As with Lily, an object is used to portray the objectification of May, but this time how she happily relates to her role. This is hardly a coincidence, as Wharton saw her literary characters as a product of their surroundings: “[T]he bounds of a personality are not reproducible by a sharp black line, but . . . each of us flows imperceptibly into adjacent people and things” (Wharton qtd. in Joslin 335; Hoeller 25). As the quote suggests, May and Lily are not reducible to just one

factor, even though the observer tries to “pin them down.” However, they are at the very least reducible to the sharp outline of a precious gem. Their sense of self is fused to the object representing it, reflecting how women are objects just like the artifacts they choose to surround themselves with (Agnew 144, 147).

I have chosen to focus on May when portraying how the female object relates to her role in *The Age of Innocence*. But there is another woman who makes her presence known in this novel, namely the conspicuous Ellen Olenska. As her surname suggests, Ellen deliberately displays herself as the exotic Countess Olenska, through her apparel of fur coats, flamboyant dresses, and the surroundings of her fragrant apartment. She is the multilayered Russian Matryoshka doll that can take on many appearances. Ellen is probably the most multifaceted of all the women described in this thesis, being able to live as a semi-emancipated “liberal” in Paris (this is how Archer sees her), a “conservative” American, and a controversial European aristocrat. Ellen is very adaptable and able to live on her own, making her seem as the inventor of her own life, only taking on the role of object when she wants to. Still, the initial perception of Ellen is that of the distinctly recognizable exotic (Eastern) European. She is born an American, and is only European by marriage. When leaving her husband, one would expect her to relinquish his habits and outer trappings. Yet after her arrival in America, she still sometimes chooses to play the alluring exotic.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, though, Ellen's role as visual (sexual) object is not what Archer values the most about her. When they are at Skuytercliff in winter, Archer observes Ellen in a red cloak being followed by a dog. Instead of perceiving her as a figure from a European fairytale (Knights, “Forms” 37), the active Little Red Riding Hood slaying the wolf (Ellen figuratively kills her predatory husband when she leaves him), Archer sees her as the juvenile he once knew: “he caught sight of a slight figure in a red cloak, with a big dog running ahead . . . the red cloak made her look gay and vivid, like the Ellen Mingott of old days” (AI 82). Now she is Ellen and not Countess Olenska. I would argue that while it is Ellen's exoticism that attracts Archer's gaze, it is the glimpses of Ellen Mingott that keeps him interested, turning desire into love. Ellen at times allows Archer to see cracks in her surface. He can see into the core of her being, that tiny little composite doll within the many layers of empty exterior. One could argue that by seeing Ellen in this way, Archer reduces her to an innocent too to make her less threatening to rival May. After all, he has to make more of Ellen than a sexual object and an experienced divorcée for her to be in accordance with his system of values. Ellen must represent an ideal, a conception of virtue. This would explain why he

sees her “abstractly” (Orlando, *Visual* 192), because she is a concept: “when he thought of Ellen Olenska it was abstractly, serenely” (AI 208). She may represent true untainted love and communication. Had his attraction to Ellen been simply physical and not also psychological, it would not have caused him to abstain from other women (Fryer 125): “That vision, faint and tenuous as it was, had kept him from thinking of other women” (AI 208). Beaufort, who is an intruder in the leisure class set, probably sees Ellen differently, as innocence is not what he values in women. Ellen's connection to Beaufort is what causes Archer to flee Skuytercliff (Knights, “Forms” 37-38), and may be used as an argument to support Archer's perception of Ellen as an imposed innocence.

However, the way Ellen relates to herself is that she allows for showing signs of vulnerability. She presents a self without a mask, setting her apart from May. Remember, Archer only fully appreciates May when he sees her as unveiled too. He finds Ellen the most beautiful when others would see her as a shadow of herself. The “ugly” Ellen, he knows, is an Ellen without her “face on,” without the mask she shows Society: “her face looked lusterless and almost ugly, and he had never loved it as he did at that minute” (AI 199). To Archer, it is an intimate moment of connection that he experiences, as he sees Ellen ungloved. He catches a glimpse of the flesh and core of her being: “Madame Olenska put her hand on his arm, and he noticed that the hand was ungloved . . . All the beauty that had forsaken her face seemed to have taken refuge in the long pale fingers” (AI 200). Archer loves an extension of Ellen, her fingers, like he loves the conception he has created of her. This extension makes him able to abstain from consummating a relationship with her. Archer has learnt to value the part and concept, more than the actual thing itself. This is likely the result of living in a “hieroglyphic world,” where it is the meaning the symbol elicits that is appreciated, not necessarily the symbol itself.

Even though Ellen lets Archer in behind the façade, she still keeps him at arm's length. No wonder, as she knows the difficulties an intimate relation with Archer would cause for her as a married woman and May's cousin (Nevius 188): “I knew you were there; when you drove in I recognized the ponies. So I went down to the beach . . . To get away from you as far as I could” (AI 143). Even though Ellen lets Archer see her without her mask, literally unveiling herself on their boat ride at Boston Common, he just sees the color of her face, not its details, indicating how Ellen remains close yet remote: “She had wound a long veil about her hat, but it left her face uncovered, and Archer was struck by the tranquil gaiety of her expression” (AI 145). It is not only Archer who abstains from a relationship, but Ellen as

well. There is something to be said for the manner in which she treats her relation to Archer, as she could have eloped with him. Instead she retreats, respecting May's relation to Archer and her pregnancy. Ellen understands that duty sometimes trumps love, and she sacrifices her own love for Archer: "her face, . . . was flooded with a deep inner radiance . . . he felt that he had never before beheld love visible . . . 'No, don't come any farther than this', she cried" (AI 188). Ellen keeps her dignity intact from a moral standpoint at least, even though Society perceives her as adulterous like Lily. Society gives May the upper hand, seeing her as the victim of an affair and the moral victor for standing by her husband. From a purely personal point of view, though, Ellen is equally victorious, as she gives up the love of her life. Admittedly, Ellen should not have involved herself with Archer at all. Neither by today's nor the leisure class's standard of values is this acceptable behavior, as Archer is a married man. However, Ellen shows great will-power when she lets her mind overrule her heart, as just a word from Ellen would have made Archer leave May: "'If it were only to see her hand again I should have to follow her—'" (AI 200). Still, Ellen leaves Archer with something: namely the experience of mental intimacy despite the physical distance separating them, a topic the next chapter will discuss further.

3.3 Revolutionary Rubies

Nothing is subtle about Undine Spragg. Neither is her relation to herself. This sub-chapter will argue that what matters the most to Undine is ultimately herself. Undine compares herself to other women, constantly striving to upstage them through a forceful display of self. In this process Undine acquires the rubies of Marie Antoinette. However, she fails to see that this materialistic spectacle is in bad taste, perhaps calling forth a "second" American Revolution.

In *The Custom of the Country*, we encounter a woman who relates to her role as visual object in a completely different manner than the women of the aforementioned novels. First and foremost, Undine is linked to a fairly aggressive type of self-display (Orlando, *Visual* 90-91), where she actively works to set things in motion and attract potential suitors. I have already argued that Undine is clear about what she wants. If there is anyone who is not ambivalent about her role as visual object, it is Undine. While May's actions are hidden to the reader and Archer alike, Undine's intentions are out in the open, as she moves from one man to another, in constant pursuit of the next item to accumulate. While Lily and May work imperceptibly, Undine does not, and her nature and activity seem to exhaust the men she is with. Her energy and persistency is connected to the accumulation of money and objects

(Wolff, *Feast* 232-233), and Undine's reason for relating to men is for them to materially give her what she desires. It starts with Undine in the opening pages of the novel pestering her father about box seats at the opera and ends with Elmer Moffatt, the quintessential capitalist, starting to question his wife's actions and her complaining about *his* lack of drive: "If you had a spark of ambition, that's the kind of thing [to become an ambassador] you'd try for" (CC 372). This is a paradox: that even two "wolves of Wall Street," her father and Moffatt, arguably the two most hard-working men in the novel, who wish to give Undine "the world," cannot comprehend her insatiable desire for accumulation or keep up with her pursuits. Once again, this makes Undine more of a subject than an object in that she does not "work" effortlessly as the traditional object should. But she follows "tradition," though, when she remains at least partly dependent on the men she surrounds herself with. She also continues to insist on being a beautiful spectacle and symbol much in the same manner as Lily, making the label of visible object at least partly fit Undine's appearance and behavior.

The manner in which Undine relates to the men in her life, however, far from reflects the behavior of the traditional female object. How Undine acts around her husbands is in stark contrast to how May, for instance, acts around Archer. Men are not interesting to Undine from a romantic perspective or from a perspective of values such as family and responsibility. The men she marries do not even seem to be physically attractive. Ralph is described as a tiny, strange man and Moffatt is fat and red-faced. Being excessively beautiful herself, Undine would have no problem finding suitors who at the very least have a pleasing countenance. Sexual desire is left out of the equation for Undine (Wolff, *Feast* 241) and men seem to be attractive to her solely based on their status or money and are thus "fiscally" attractive. Eventually, status yields to money, as Ralph and her French husband Raymond de Chelles are discarded because they cannot financially keep up with Undine's wants. Undine is devastated when she realizes that Ralph, whom she thought was rich, really is not all that affluent, and that she cannot break her engagement to him, as it would ruin her reputation: "It was enough to ruin a girl's chances if she broke her engagement to a man in Ralph Marvell's set" and "With a magnificent gesture she tore Marvell's ring from her finger. 'I'll send this back this minute. I'll tell him I thought he was a rich man, and now I see I'm mistaken—'" (CC 79). When Undine finally has ensured financial "stability" by the end of the novel and knows she can be furnished with whatever her needs may be, she wants what money cannot buy, namely status. That is partly why she wants to be an ambassador's wife, but also because she does not want anyone to be entitled to something she is not, and especially other women.

Undine's view of herself is always relational, and she relates her sense of self to other women in particular. The male observer seems to be just a means to an end for her. The end is not that of being a wife, but that of being the envy of other women: "the public triumph which was necessary to her personal enjoyment" (CC 344). In this way, Undine's sense of self is not linked so much to how the male perceives her, but how she perceives herself, reflected in the eyes of other female objects (Hadley, *Interstices* 36). She and Lily are somewhat alike in that Lily also values herself in relation to other women, and occasionally sees herself as better than them. One example is when Lily realizes Percy Gryce likes Evie Van Osburgh: "The youngest, dumpiest, dullest of the four . . . daughters" (HM 72). Both Lily and Undine may be said to embody the concept of glamour and a desire to be glamorous. This is because Berger sees this concept as relational and being contingent on eliciting the feeling of envy in others (*Ways* 147-148).

Undine, more than Lily, finds it insufficient to just be appraised and valued for her appearance and her sense of self-contentment depends on the envy of other women. One could argue that the male observer is of primary importance only in that Undine needs him to fulfill her object in life. Materially, then, the man is of crucial importance, but not psychologically. It is not in relation to the male that Undine gains the most satisfaction from her display of self, but from the women she feels she can upstage. This is why Undine is dissatisfied when she learns that the plain-looking Mrs. Driscoll can be an ambassador's wife, and not she, a multiply divorced woman: "Jim Driscoll—that pitiful nonentity, with his stout mistrustful commonplace wife! It seemed extraordinary that the government should have hunted up such insignificant people" (CC 371-372). Undine also seems to value her accomplishments in relation to Indiana Frusk, her fellow former Apex resident. As Indiana rises on the social ladder, so must Undine: "She might as well have married Millard Binch, instead of handing him over to Indiana Frusk!" (CC 79). That women compete with each other can, as mentioned, be seen as a result of their roles as object. Having Undine participating in this competition, then, may thus help support a view of her as a visual object. Still, Undine desires to be the woman who stands out from all the others and is ruthless in her conspicuous play. She at the very least can be seen as striving to get the role as subject and "head-line act" amongst her fellow objects and actresses. Lily, may like Undine want to display herself as the most prominent spectacle and representational object, but she never truly acts on this impulse. When pressed to perform perfectly in order to save her social life, Lily rather backs down. Undine, on the other hand, is determined to be the "queen" in

command. She, would never settle for the part as the humble servant and the defeated. It is not coincidental, then, that it is precisely Undine who acquires Marie Antoinette's rubies, as will be argued below.

Even though Undine lives a relational life, the most important relation to her is the one she has to herself. Ultimately, it is her view that is the decisive one. It is irrelevant if the male is content with her, if she is not. This is shown when Moffatt looks at the impressive spectacle of his ballroom which represents his achievements with a “complacent eye” and Undine does not share his satisfaction (CC 371). One could even argue that Undine competes with former versions of herself. As she constantly checks herself in the mirror, she always wants more than what she can see reflected back to her at that particular moment: “her reflection bloomed out like a flower from the mirror that faced her” (CC 188). It may be towards a future self that Undine strives, one she can only see glimpses of in the mirror. Once the present state of self is accomplished, a new struggle to attain a new future self begins and a problem arises when that potential self is out of reach: “She turned to give herself a last look in the glass, saw the blaze of her rubies, the glitter of her hair . . . But under all the dazzle a tiny cloud remained. She had learned that there was something she could never get . . . She could never be an Ambassador's wife” (CC 372).

Even in the mirror, Undine's sense of self is attached to the objects she possesses. They give her a sense of accomplishment and what others will see when she wears them, namely status and wealth. The mirror does not allow for any soul-searching for Undine, as it did with Lily, as there is no soul or untouchable moral entity to search for (Wolff, *Feast* 233). Undine's conception of herself seems totally connected to her physical being, and she does not distinguish between a moral or psychological self and a physical one. When Lily looks in the mirror, her appearance reflects her inner self. When she has been seen leaving Gus Trenor's, her appearance is disheveled. Her break down is mental *and* physical, reflecting that when she is discarded as a visual or moral object, her sense of self is lost too. When there is a crack in her appearance and mask, her “true” psychological state will reveal itself. As Undine has no understanding of morality, the mirror can only reflect what she herself is able to perceive. Thus it only reflects her physical being and how she imagines her physical presence will be interpreted by others (Hadley, *Interstices* 35-36). The only psychological aspects Undine is able to see in the mirror are related to her physical being and materialism. Firstly, as mentioned above, when seeing her reflection in the mirror, it reveals a potential greater self. Secondly, it reveals the emotion of envy and awe she wants her physical presence to invoke in

others. Thirdly, it gives her a sense of satisfaction to watch her own appearance: “she walked up to the mirror above the mantelpiece and studied the image it reflected” (CC 371).

The newspaper and its Society columns is another mirror from which Undine gleans pleasure from her own self-display. Here she can flaunt herself to other women in particular, as they were the ones to take most interest in these pages. The newspapers give one fragments or glimpses of Undine, which she uses to enhance her sense of self (Montgomery 161). Undine needs to keep her façade flawless in the papers, in relation to Society, and initially to the male observer she wants to attract, but not after marriage. In contrast to May, who always keeps her façade, and Lily, who struggles to maintain hers, Undine ends up showing her true colors to her husbands. She openly demands things and complains and sulks if she does not get what she wants. Undine seems uninterested in keeping her husbands interested in her and will not keep her initial mask of attraction on for long. Once Undine is married, she is secure, as the male cannot divorce her simply on the grounds that she is a materialist.

An actual physical and psychological relationship between husband and wife seems unimportant to Undine. The relation between Undine and her husbands resembles that of provider and receiver: “pushing at his side through blazing theatre-lobbies, answered to her inmost ideal of domestic intimacy” (CC 318). Undine only feels a close connection to Raymond de Chelles in public, when their relationship can be validated by other women and their envy in seeing her married to such a handsome man. He is the exception, being good-looking, but Undine only marries him for the wealth and status she thinks he will provide. A sense of gratification is the only emotional aspect she values about her marriage. It is once again other people who elicit this feeling. It is the legal union of marriage which is important to Undine, as it will allow her to get what she desires. The system of values that surrounds marriage is completely uninteresting to her, thus she does not care how her actions affects the relationship to her husbands. There being a crack in her surface and her turning out to be demanding is not detrimental to Undine's existence, except when she is initially to attract the male. This is shown when Van Degen discards her, because he realizes she does not care about her sick husband Ralph. If one is to represent the values of an entire nation, though, as an ambassador's wife, a flawless façade is needed to sustain scrutiny. Undine's divorces speak of too much experience, and nations with different customs and values may find her immoral. From a moral perspective, Undine is certainly not flawless, although her appearance often is, and it is not until she wants to become an ambassador's wife or marries into a French family that this has serious consequences for her.

Revealing her true character is problematic only when there is a clash of interests and values. Then the problem does not so much seem to be that Undine reveals herself, but rather that what is beneath her mask is a very selfish person. One could argue that Undine has no system of values, and that the only thing she does value is wealth. This becomes increasingly problematic when encountering men who set family, honor, and tradition above financial gain. Ralph is one of these men, but he is so mild that Undine can easily overpower him. It is not until she meets Raymond de Chelles, that she encounters a man who can stand up to her. His family's heritage and its codes of conduct are so ingrained in his being that he feels entitled to tell his wife that duty should trump materialism, making her curse “the huge voracious fetish they called The Family” (CC 322). But even here, Undine is relatively safe in her position as wife. The men value the vow they have pledged, despite it causing them unhappiness, something Undine does not. Roles are reversed in *The Custom of the Country*. It is not the woman who works to maintain a flawless façade, but the man, as Undine tries to divorce him. Divorce seems more detrimental to the men of this novel from a moral standpoint, and from the point of view of appearances, as they belong to societies where divorce is not condoned. To Undine, the materialistic world she believes in and the codes of business she adheres to, getting away from what keeps you from evolving in the material sense of the word, is understood and encouraged. Still, even Moffatt who is Undine's “perfect match,” as he shares her materialistic aspirations, starts to question her actions. Undine does not represent any type of virtue, making her husbands eventually devalue her. But this is not as detrimental to Undine's sense of self as it would have been to Lily or May, as she values herself first and foremost. Ultimately, it is only *her* opinion that matters, and only she who can condone and sanction her behavior: “In all her struggles for authority her sense of the rightfulness of her cause had been measured by her power of making people do as she pleased. Raymond's firmness shook her faith in her own claims, and a blind desire to wound and destroy replaced her usual business-like intentness on gaining her end” (CC 330).

Undine lacks sensibility, which makes her less sympathetic than Lily, May, and Ellen. Still, Undine is in possession of one trait that makes her exceptional like Lily, but for different reasons: self-confidence. She is ruthless in making others respect her for who she is and she will not play a role forever to keep any man. In this way, Undine is perhaps the one who is most true to herself. Even though she will not win any moral prizes for it, she is at least honest. Unlike May, who wants to be a wife and mother and believes in maintaining traditions, Undine cries when she becomes pregnant, as it will make her miss seasons of self-

display. This indicates how Undine believes that a life as mother will reduce her existence. Instead of being an active participant in the play that is her grand scale self-display, she will be confined to a passive existence as pregnant. She will no longer be a subject controlling her own performance and be allowed to perform (Montgomery and Smith qtd. in Montgomery 11), but will have to sit idly by the sidelines and read about other women's spectacles of self in the press. Undine does not value concepts that do not bring a tangible reward. Thus she finds no gratification in the upkeep of moral values and family-relations, i.e. elements that serve a higher purpose than immediate satisfaction: "She lacked the adventurous curiosity which seeks its occasion in the unknown; and though she could work doggedly for a given object the obstacles to be overcome had to be as distinct as the prize" (CC 227). While May and Archer gain a sense of self-worth from their children, Undine does not. It is not for Undine to live vicariously through others or to be removed from the object she desires (like Archer). She values the material world within reach, not the world of ideas. This is reflected in her love of objects, replacing perhaps an intimate psychological relationship with human beings. The only entity not within immediate reach that Undine seems to understand is that of a future self. Then again, this is within her range of vision and will eventually become achievable. It is incomprehensible to Undine that not everything can be achieved, as she only believes in the actual and immediate: "She had learned that there was something . . . that neither beauty nor influence nor millions could ever buy for her" (CC 372).

Undine seems to relate to objects in the same manner that she relates to people. They have no value to her except to show her off and reflect wealth or status. There is no sentimental value attached to objects for Undine, only the monetary, as is shown when she resets her engagement ring from Ralph, a family heirloom that to him represents family history and tradition. Only material aspects are comprehensible to Undine. Thus an antique ring is made into a modern one, representing the only standard of beauty Undine knows, her own. Unlike the leisure class, which values the intangible and the representational, and where the physical and actual is downplayed, Undine represents the exact opposite. She marries men for the physical objects they can give her, and relates to her son in the same opportunistic way. Undine only wants to physically possess her son in order to use him to gain a divorce from Ralph. The one person she should have fought for, and the one relationship that should have been natural to her, namely that between mother and child, is not. Undine has no intimate connection to her son, something even Moffatt finds strange (Kowaleski-Wallace

48): “‘Is it because your mother hadn't time for you? Well, she's like that, you know . . . If we two chaps stick together it won't be so bad’” (CC 369).

Wolff argues that Moffatt is morally worse than Undine, as he chooses to be a ruthless capitalist, whereas she has no other outlets for her energies being a woman (*Feast* 250; qtd. in Showalter, “*Custom*” 90). I partly agree, as Moffatt is the one who tells Undine to use her son to get a divorce. Then again, he seems more connected to the boy than she does, and he also relates to the objects he possesses in a different way than her. The objects Moffatt owns actually have sentimental value to him, and he takes pleasure in collecting art for art's sake, not solely for monetary purposes (Showalter, “*Custom*” 94; Hadley, *Interstices* 57): “she saw that the things he looked at moved him in a way she could not understand, and that the actual touching of rare textures—bronze or marble, or velvets flushed with the bloom of age—gave him sensations like those her own beauty had once roused in him” (CC 353). He also relates to Undine's son as if he might have been his own and is capable of emotional attachments that Undine seems not to be. Then again, Undine has no sentimental view of herself either, “selling” herself to the highest bidder, so how could she have one of others?

Undine's utter ignorance of the immaterial aspects of her self-portrayal and the objects she possesses is seen by the precious gems she chooses to have display herself as an object. It is not any set of gems that Undine is connected to, but the tiara and necklace of rubies that once belonged to Marie Antoinette: “His gifts to the bride are a necklace and tiara of pigeon-blood rubies belonging to Queen Marie Antoinette” (CC 367). Montgomery argues that “Wharton decorated her fictional houses with an eye to detail, linking character traits to the accumulation and display of material objects. These objects evoke a multitude of meanings: taste, style, social status, cultural knowledge, and history” (70). So, if this is the case, Undine would share some traits with the former Queen of France, and Undine owning her jewels would say something about her cultural knowledge. I believe that a comparison between Marie Antoinette and Undine is in order, as the narrator, from the first pages of *The Custom of the Country* in the suite at the Stentorian invokes the image of this queen (Lindberg 93): “The Spragg rooms were . . . adorned with oval portraits of Marie Antoinette” (CC 3).

As queen, Marie Antoinette was simultaneously both an object and a subject. She had a representational role to fill as a symbol of wealth and status, but also exerted power by being the head of state and by having servants. Undine mimics this dual role when she becomes exceedingly rich by marrying Moffatt, and attempts to control her surroundings by influencing and commanding her husband. Undine also resembles Marie Antoinette in that

she is a larger than life character, who becomes the poster-child of everything that is wrong with the United States. Just as Marie Antoinette is associated with a juvenile ignorance and an unsustainable lifestyle, so is Undine. “Let them eat cake,” is something I imagine she would have said if a hungry mob was at her door too, no matter how apocryphal this quote may be. The French Court represented inconceivable excess, and so does Undine portray a display of wealth that probably will be her downfall. Her demise is hinted at when she cannot be an ambassador's wife, and so is her cultural ignorance, one that the French Court must have shared, as they failed to foresee the anger of the people. Undine exhibits little understanding when she wears the tiara of the beheaded Queen of France and simultaneously contemplates being a diplomat's wife. The French could find this headdress offensive, as it reflects everything the nation of France is not. Its principles were founded in direct opposition to royalty and a conspicuous display of wealth, not to mention the very person whose tiara Undine is wearing. It is no wonder that she cannot be an ambassadress, as her cultural ignorance would offend an entire nation. On the other hand, if Undine is the perfect example of the “custom of the country,” why should she not represent the United States? What better person to send as an envoy, than the embodiment of the nation's capitalist values? If Undine is the epitome of the United States, then Wharton portrays this country as awaiting another revolution. A nation priding itself on the ideas of freedom cannot aspire to French royalty, as hereditary powers was the very concept it was founded against.

Undine's red rubies not only signal the “bloodshed” that perhaps is to come, or that of the French Revolution and its former owner, but also Undine's lack of taste. While Lily and May are associated with sapphires and diamonds, reflecting purity, light, and classic beauty, Undine is associated with the muddled and “impure” color of blood red. This probably reflects her immoral nature, greed, and ambition. Rubies may be precious gems, but their previous owner is not someone one should wish to be associated with. Just as the hall of mirrors at Versailles was used to intimidate its visitors, reflecting the grandeur of the French Court, the ultimate stage of perception, so does Undine try to intimidate others by her spectacle of self (Montgomery 163). In this regard, May, Lily, and Ellen have nothing on her. Compared to Undine, they have scruples in abundance. After reading *The Custom of the Country*, one is not unsure about how to define Undine's character. May's, Ellen's, and Lily's natures are contrastively only partly defined by the end of the works they figure in. The gaps in these narratives reflect the restraint ingrained in their being, just as the detailed narrative of Undine reflects the opposite, making one wish one knew a little less of her.

4 Clandestine Communication: Transgressing Society's Spaces and Categories

While the previous chapters have discussed how the observer and observed object relate to their roles, this chapter will take a look at how the play of perception affects communication. I will argue that close communication and mental intimacy is difficult to achieve when one has a distinct role to fill within New York Society. Still, honest and real communication is possible if one goes “beyond” Society, establishing a place (be it mental and/or physical) where clear cut categories do not exist. At the very least, they seem to dissolve for the time being, and the communicative abyss between observer and object can be temporarily bridged. Wharton expertly conflates metaphorical and literal understanding. As this chapter will show, there are actual and figurative barriers separating men and women in *The House of Mirth*, *The Age of Innocence*, and *The Custom of the Country*. These obstacles may be self-imposed or created by external factors difficult to overcome. At times, the characters do not want to breach these barriers at all, as proper communication is not valued in and for itself.

4.1 “Beyond” the Bourgeoisie

That communication based on visual appearances creates misunderstandings is meticulously portrayed in *The House of Mirth*. Lily Bart desires to be valued for more than her role as object and attempts with Lawrence Selden to go beyond the limits of the bourgeoisie. As this sub-chapter will show, Lily and Selden are unable to sustain a mode of communication completely separated from the customs of the leisure class. However, they vacillate between moments of profound, intimate, verbal communication and moments of distant visual impressions. The concept of physical and psychological space is conflated here in that one particular place facilitates a particular mode of communication. Lily and Selden can converse in his apartment, at Bellomont, and in a New York garden, because these are “clandestine” spaces “separated” from Society. As this section will discuss, crossing an actual threshold makes one transcend a mental barrier too; the result being that the physical and mental separation of observer and object is experienced as (temporarily) bridged.

As previously mentioned, *The House of Mirth* portrays how Selden cannot fully comprehend Lily. The scene of the tableau vivant, for instance, depicts in detail how hard it is to figure the other person out, knowing that he or she has a role to play within Society. There is a mental as well as physical distance between Selden and Lily, which is never completely

overcome, created in part by the emphasis on visual over verbal communication. That distance characterizes the communication between Selden and Lily is seen when Selden observes Lily from afar at Grand Central Station. He passes judgment on her without seeing her up close or intimately engaging in conversation with her: “There was nothing new about Lily Bart” (HM 5). Selden changes his view of Lily when he later on moves closer to her mentally and physically, portraying how his first impression was a misinterpretation:

Selden was still looking at her, but with a changed eye. Hitherto he had found, in her presence and her talk, the aesthetic amusement which a reflective man is apt to seek in desultory intercourse with pretty women. His attitude had been one of admiring spectatorship, and he would have been almost sorry to detect in her any emotional weakness which should interfere with the fulfillment of her aims. But now the hint of this weakness had become the most interesting thing about her. (HM 55)

Another example of the problem of relying too much on visual communication is portrayed when Selden sees Lily leave Gus Trenor's apartment at night (Ammons, “Edith” 349). His perception of Lily is here based on visual impressions alone. Without seeking confirmation from her, he assumes her to be having an affair. There is some terrible symmetry in that the judgments of Lily's character are made from afar, once removed from her. After all, she is an object of display and her visual appearance is valued above her actual personality. It is what she represents that matters, as the observer wants a performer, creating a (mental) distance between the observer and object in the process. When Ned Van Alstyne talks to Selden about Lily's nightly exit, his comment seems to be a double entendre reflecting the communicate problems of a play of perception: “appearances are deceptive—and Fifth Avenue is so imperfectly lighted” (HM 127). Firstly, he adopts the creed of male comradeship and concealment of indiscretions: “speak not of what you see.” Secondly, his comment alludes to the potential of being wrong while observing, as the only source used to shed light on the situation is your own perceptual process. Selden admits that there are factors influencing one's perception making an objective view difficult: “It was pitiable that he, who knew the mixed motives on which social judgments depend, should still feel himself so swayed by them. How could he lift Lily to a freer vision of life, if his own view of her was to be coloured by any mind in which he saw her reflected?” (HM 126).

Physical distance and observation causes a void of genuine communication and dialogue which is problematic here, creating a mental distance that needs to be bridged. This is something Lily and Selden try to do, as they converse intimately despite the mental and physical gap separating them. One sees this in Selden's apartment, where he for the first time

can talk privately with Lily. Here Wharton conflates psychological and physical concepts of space. When Lily crosses the actual threshold into Selden's flat, she crosses a mental one too: "Lily sank with a sigh into one of the shabby leather chairs. 'How delicious to have a place like this all to one's self! What a miserable thing it is to be a woman'" (HM 8). As mentioned previously, she is not supposed to be here according to the customs of Society, but is so regardless. This may indicate that the only intimacy conceived of between men and women was of a sexual nature, and that this was a sordid assumption which needed to be eliminated. Lily herself terms this assumption an "odious conjecture" (HM 13). To get away from Society's watchful eye, Selden must take Lily away from the train station. However, by entering his apartment, they will be the subjects of even more promiscuous conjectures. There is a discrepancy between how Selden and Lily experience their meeting and how Society perceives it. While they see his apartment as a mental and actual place "outside" Society, where they can engage intimately in conversation, unlike at Grand Central, Society would see this as a clandestine space reserved for actions that its customs would not permit.

In part Society is right, but not for the reason one would think. Selden's flat *is* a space for clandestine encounters, but for clandestine encounters of an intimate, *verbal* nature that Society does not "make room" for. Lily fights off the inner voice telling her to refrain from going to Selden's apartment, as she knows she is doing nothing wrong from her own moral point of view. This break with Society's customs of decorum is actually for the good, as it allows her to experience, albeit briefly, the untapped potential in relationships between men and women of the leisure class which would otherwise have remained undiscovered. The (self-) scrutiny Lily has to go through after this encounter is unfair. After all, Selden's flat allows for the physical and mental distance between observer and object to be bridged, paving the way for a "meeting of minds." It only takes one, or rather two, to make a difference. When the perceptions of Society do not reflect reality change should come. This may be why Selden is proud of Lily for entering his flat. By crossing his threshold, she shows that she understands that relations between men and women can be conversational and not only carnal: "In truth, he had never liked her as well as at that moment. He knew she had accepted without afterthought: he could never be a factor in her calculations, and there was a surprise, a refreshment almost, in the spontaneity of her consent" (HM 7). Selden is not Trenor. Crossing his threshold is safe, despite Society perceiving the bachelor as more of a sexual threat than the married man. Therefore, by literally and metaphorically breaking the boundaries of Society, Selden and Lily challenge its categories.

It is in Selden's flat that one sees the potential for a new type of connection being instituted between observer and object. Lily and Selden can communicate as equals here, as none of them expect any financial or sexual “favors” from the other. There is no pretense, and Lily can joke about her role as object to Selden: “‘It's part of the business [going to parties] — you forget! And besides, if I didn't, I should be playing *béziq*ue with my aunt at Richfield Springs.’ ‘That’s almost as bad as marrying Dillworth’, he agreed, and they both laughed for pure pleasure in their sudden intimacy” (HM 12). Admittedly, there is a play taking place here too. However, this is based on humor and each party knows exactly what to expect from the other. It is the start of an honest friendship that is depicted at Selden's. Lily needs a friend who expects close communication: “‘Don't you see’, she continued, ‘that there are men enough to say pleasant things to me, and what I want is a friend who won't be afraid to say disagreeable ones when I need them? Sometimes I have fancied you might be that friend . . . you are neither a prig nor a bounder, and that I shouldn't have to pretend with you’” (HM 9).

It is as at Bellomont that Selden and Lily cement their perception of each other. A close intellectual connection is created here, as they both break away from their roles of observer and object: “But it was one of those moments when neither seemed to speak deliberately, when an indwelling voice in each called to the other across unsounded depths of feeling” (HM 58). As Hildegard Hoeller argues by invoking Elaine Orr: “when Wharton speaks about the ‘indwelling voice’ between Selden and Lily, ‘the author employs it to institute a new mode of male/female friendship. This ‘calling’ depicts the laws of gender and sexual division as transgressable, and not just irony or jest’” (104). There is a connection of souls, a silent mental communication not based on the visual, resembling the bond of Ellen and Archer, “something throbbed between them in the wide quiet of the air” (HM 58). At Bellomont, the invisible psychological barrier separating Lily and Selden is temporarily removed. This connection comes to have great value and is what Selden clings to after Lily is dead. It is an untainted human understanding, that is sullied neither by Society's customs nor a sexual relationship: “this fleeting victory over themselves, which had kept them from atrophy and extinction; which, in her, had reached out to him in every struggle against the influence of her surroundings, and in him, had kept alive the faith that now drew him penitent and reconciled to her side” (HM 255-256). Sadly, a mental connection is not enough to sustain Lily in the material world she lives. She admits this to Selden, portraying their honest mode of communication: “‘Why do you do this to me?’ She cried. ‘Why do you make the things I have chosen seem hateful to me, if you have nothing to give me instead?’” (HM 58).

This sub-chapter has now argued the case of the mode of communication of the leisure class being problematic and there being instances where Lily and Selden can overcome these obstacles. What has not been explained are the individual preconditions which make this intimate connection possible. Why is it exactly Lily and Selden who can transcend their roles? One answer is that they are both exceptions: Lily by being ambivalent about her role and Selden in being a man who is somewhat asexual. The two of them exist within and yet outside Society in that both are influenced by its customs, but neither of them have a cemented place within it.

Selden in particular is different from the average bachelor in that he enjoys Lily the most when she is *not* playing her role as (sexual) object. It is with her mask *off* that Selden finds Lily the most fascinating and can perhaps even be said to love her at these moments. When Lily seems disheveled to herself and others, her outline is the clearest to Selden, as then he can experience her true sensibilities. Like Archer is with Ellen, Selden is drawn to Lily because of the flaws making him see into the core of her being: “He had come on her that morning in a moment of disarray; her face had been pale and altered, and the diminution of her beauty had lent her a poignant charm. *That is how she looks when she is alone!*” (HM 55; italics in original).

What Lily establishes with Selden is more than a skin-deep relation. While Lily may decrease in value to other observers as her looks and “sex-attraction” diminish, she remains valuable to Selden. Because Lily lets him in, and because he does not value her for her looks alone, they are able to intellectually connect. It is this honest communication Selden appreciates. While looks vanish, the feeling of being loved and understood will last: “But at least he *had* loved her—had been willing to stake his future on his fate in her—and if the moment had been fated to pass from them before they could seize it, he saw now that, for both, it had been saved whole out of the ruin of their lives” (HM 255; italics in original). Lily and Selden revise the roles traditionally given to them, transcending Society's boundaries in the process. For now, though, their intimate mental communication is conditioned on them not having a consummated relationship. In a world beyond such categories, it may have been different. This is shown when Selden and Lily, in a mental and physical place “outside” Society, come close to having a romantic and erotic encounter, as we will soon see.

Lily's and Selden's understanding of each other is possible, because Selden is not a potential suitor. He is the “exceptional” bachelor: “his course lay so far out of her orbit that it amused him to be drawn for a moment into the sudden intimacy which her proposal implied”

(HM 6). Lily can relax around him: “I shouldn't have to . . . be on my guard against you” (HM 9), making it possible for them to bridge the gap created by their roles. Unlike potential partners of the leisure class, they can escape the play of perception. Selden does not have to worry about Lily being a gold-digger, while Lily does not have to keep up appearances: “and you can't possibly think I want to marry you” (HM 9). That Selden's and Lily's connection is exceptional is shown by comparing it to her relation to Trenor. Selden and Trenor experience Lily at similar moments when she visits them both alone. However, these clandestine communications have very different outcomes. Wharton cleverly creates a contrast between the two men, as Trenor is sexually attracted to Lily. When Van Alstyne comments on Lily's body, ““Talk of jewels—what's a woman want with jewels when she's got herself to show? The trouble is that all these fal-bals they wear cover up their figures when they've got 'em. I never knew till tonight what an outline Lily has”” (HM 109), Trenor wants Lily's looks for himself. Contrastively, Selden values Lily's beauty and not her sexuality. While Selden has nothing to give Lily financially, he can offer her a mental and physical space where she can be valued for herself. So, when he answers Lily ““No, I have nothing to give you instead'. . . 'If I had, it should be yours, you know”” (HM 58), he is only partly right.

This comment may allude to how Selden is not a reliable companion to Lily, but also, as mentioned above, how mental support is not enough in a material world. Lily and Selden are not truly able to sustain the connection they experience in his apartment, or at Bellomont, making the experience of bridging the abyss between them transitory. They vacillate between close and distant intellectual encounters due to an ambivalence in them both. Their vacillation reflects the difficulty of sustaining a close mental union in a society based on visual appearances, as their connection is dependent upon them abandoning the roles they have been taught to play. Even though Lily and Selden are exceptions, they are still influenced by their surroundings, making it hard to maintain a frank mode of communication. There are certain contingency factors which limit the permanent creation of an intimate intellectual connection. First and foremost, to be able to hear each other's “indwelling voice,” they must not put up a mental façade, but let the other in. Secondly, they must follow their own mental compass and not adhere to the judgments of others. Only by doing this will they create a mental space “outside” Society. The experience of this intellectual space is contingent on them being physically outside Society too. It is only on their own, that Selden and Lily engage in honest dialogues.

Still, while Selden and Lily may find clandestine retreats to communicate, they are not able to sustain the mental state created here outside this physical place. This is because they are incapable of permanently leaving their roles or judging for themselves. One example is when Lily dons her sapphire mask again after her debacle with Trenor, making it impossible for Selden to closely communicate with her: “The change [in Lily's beauty and appearance] had struck Mrs. Fisher as a rejuvenation: to Selden it seemed like that moment of pause and arrest when the warm fluidity of youth is chilled to its final shape” (HM 149). Selden has abandoned Lily due to the supposed Trenor affair (Wolff, *Feast* 126), and as a defense mechanism she closes in on herself. As mentioned above, Selden chooses to believe what he sees, distancing himself from Lily mentally and physically. He also does this to protect himself emotionally. As he is not open with her, he recreates the gap between them, being unable to fully bridge it again: “There had never been more than a little impalpable barrier between them—and yet he had suffered it to keep them apart! And now, though it seemed slighter and frailer than ever, it had suddenly hardened to adamant, and he might beat his life out against it in vain” (HM 253). Because of Selden's and Lily's inconsistencies, they cannot permanently transcend Society, and the play of perception gets the better of them. Just like the soft substance graphite can be a hard diamond by a realignment of carbon atoms, so does the breakable barrier between Selden and Lily become impenetrable by a realignment of Society's categories. When they go back to being observer and object in keeping with custom, true communication becomes impossible. Sadly, like adamant, this “distant” communication is what Society values.

The barrier between Selden and Lily may be like the organic adamant. Still, this is an unnatural way to communicate, as portrayed by Selden's frustrations. The play of perception and Society's categories are inorganic. Society's labels and mode of communication seem enforced, which is portrayed by nature being cast as Society's opposite and enabling close communication. Nature is metaphorically and literally outside Society, as it is not man-made, but a force of its own. It is outside in nature that Selden and Lily have their most intimate encounters. One example is at Bellomont. Here, as mentioned, they are able to bridge the abyss between them, and this takes place outside in a park. Also, their most intimate connection happens in a New York garden. One could argue that a park and a garden are human constructions. At the very least, though, they are presented in *The House of Mirth* as liminal spaces where nature and humanity interacts to create a physical and mental space facilitating close communication. Here, one can transcend the literal and metaphorical

boundaries of Society by being outside Society in more ways than one. When Lily crosses the threshold into a garden after her tableau, a contrast is created between the house she steps out from and the garden she enters. While the interior of the house reflects how Lily is steeped in Society's customs, performing her role as a leisure class object, the garden portrays how she can transcend this role. Even though Selden, as mentioned previously, sees Lily as partly transcending Society's boundaries at the tableau, the garden presents a different mode of communication. While Selden struggles to understand Lily inside at the tableau, basing his communication on visual input alone, he outside in the garden verbally communicates with her. There is actual mental and physical intimacy here: “‘The only way I can help you is by loving you’, Selden said in a low voice . . . ‘Ah, love me, love me—but don't tell me so!’ she sighed with her eyes in his” (HM 109).

Pamela Knights argues that in Wharton's works “interior spaces are often doubled (looking outward to catch the note of social realities, and inward to the psyche).” Wharton thus conflates a physical move with a psychological one, and the threshold is one metaphor she uses to portray the figurative and literal conception of space (*Introduction* 42). This is what happens as Lily and Selden enter the garden: they experience a mental and physical change simultaneously. When Wharton links Lily to the sapphire, as argued in the previous chapter, she does this both on a literal and a metaphorical level. By doing so, the narrative technique becomes as multilayered as the person and communication she portrays. The garden reflects a different mood, being a clandestine space where one can be alone together: “she hardly noticed where Selden was leading her, till they passed through a glass doorway. . . and stood suddenly in the fragrant hush of a garden. Gravel grated beneath their feet, and about them was the transparent dimness of a midsummer night” (HM 108). This space is vastly different from Selden's apartment or Bellomont in that it seems like a vacuum or a liminal place. Like Selden and Lily themselves, it is inside yet outside Society simultaneously, creating a bridge between different worlds and the present and future. It portrays the present in that Selden's and Lily's role revision in the garden is contingent on this exact place and moment in time. As they step into the house again, they go back to the play of the leisure class, reflecting how close communication is limited within New York Society in this place and time: “she had turned and slipped through the arch of boughs, disappearing in the brightness of the room beyond . . . He [Selden] knew too well the transiency of exquisite moments to attempt to follow her; but presently he reentered the house” (HM 109). Still, their clandestine communion shows that close communication is possible. In this way, the garden

creates a connection to the future in that one day close verbal dialogue within the leisure class will hopefully not be contingent on any factors, but a given natural way to communicate.

Not only do Lily and Selden connect on an intimate intellectual level in the garden, but on an intimate physical level too. Here, mental and physical intimacy is simultaneously possible, emphasizing how the garden represents a future state of mind and interaction: “her face turned to him with the soft motion of a flower. His own met it slowly, and their lips touched” (HM 109). The reason why Selden can intimately converse with Lily has previously been because he is sexually unthreatening. However, within this magical, liminal realm categories and boundaries can be transgressed. The garden scene is reminiscent of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where Lily and Selden have had love drops put in their eyes, causing them to readjust their vision and see each other without their social roles. Still, Lily seems mindful of the fact that this state of affairs is not sustainable. Outside this place, Selden cannot be attracted to her *and* experience mental intimacy with her, thus she tells him to love her but not tell her so (HM 109). It is as if Lily asks Selden to love her in spirit but not in the flesh, echoing Ellen's plea to Archer.

The scene in the garden is described in terms of fantasy, being seemingly unreal: “Selden and Lily stood still, accepting the unreality of the scene as a part of their own dream-like sensations” (HM 108). This could be used as an argument against Lily and Selden being able to transcend Society's boundaries here, and that fancying they can is a utopian illusion. Also, it can be argued that this garden is really a conservatory (Wolff, *Feast* 126) and hence artificially created. Regardless or perhaps for this exact reason, the garden to me portrays a liminal place. It is a haven literally and figuratively framed by Society, boxed in by its customs and space. Lily's and Selden's intimate communication is thereby conserved within this contained place. In addition, I feel the meeting in the garden is “unreal” to Selden and Lily, because it portrays a fleeting, instantaneous moment. The mode of communication and role revision they experience here cannot be sustained, making the moment real but transitory:

Scarcely three months had elapsed since he had parted from her on the threshold of the Brys' conservatory; but a subtle change had passed over the quality of her beauty. Then it had had a transparency through which the fluctuations of the spirit were sometimes tragically visible; now its impenetrable surface suggested a process of crystallization which had fused her whole being into one hard brilliant substance. (HM 149)

As stated above, the garden's space reflects a mode of communication that has yet to be fully achieved (Bentley 51, 53). Thus, it belongs to a future reality that for now is unreality.

4.2 Bridging the Barrier

While the momentary close connections Lily and Selden experience seem unreal, *The Age of Innocence's* Newland Archer believes he has a sustainable intellectual connection with his wife May. However, as this sub-chapter will argue, it is Archer's belief in complete communication that is an illusion, being contingent on the perceived innocence of May. Archer and May only seemingly bridge the barrier between them when they communicate through a “hieroglyphic” language, as May does not convey all she knows. Only by learning of May's experience after her death can Archer truly connect with her on a psychological level. With Ellen, in contrast, he is able to create a sustainable mental connection transcending the physical, by finding a clandestine psychological and physical space outside Society.

In *The Age of Innocence*, there is also a mental and physical distance separating the observer and object, particularly portrayed through Archer's and May's mode of communication, but also Archer's and Ellen's. Archer is not able to fully understand May, caused in part by his limited view of her and her playing her role as object perfectly. Thus the play of perception can be seen as detrimental to intimate and close communication, as May remains an enigma to Archer when she dies, even though he imagines he knows all about her. As Archer says, New York's nineteenth-century Society is a “hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs” (AI 29). This implies communication once removed, creating distance between what is meant and what is inferred and making “room” for misinterpretation. Hieroglyphs need a code to be deciphered, making them a roundabout mode of communication where one does not get to the core of the message immediately. Archer and May, however, both know the codes of the leisure class and can decipher its hieroglyphs. Therefore, Archer believes he can bridge the gap created by May's supposed ignorance and their roles of observer and object, as they share a common language. To him they communicate intimately:

“and you must be sure to go and see Ellen,” she added, looking him straight in the eyes with her cloudless smile, and speaking in the tone she might have employed in urging him not to neglect some irksome family duty. It was the only word that passed between them on the subject; but in the code in which they had both been trained it meant: Of course you understand that I know all that people have been saying about Ellen . . . I know you mean to see Ellen when you are in Washington, and are perhaps going there expressly for that purpose. (AI 161-162)

Here the narrator explains the silent communication between May and Archer, and what Archer infers from the conversation and May's imperative. In order for the reader to understand what would normally have been revealed through gestures, Archer's interpretation of May's utterance is narrated. From one simple sentence a well of meaning is inferred. To an uninformed audience not well versed in "hieroglyphs," May's imperative would just be a nice gesture towards her cousin entreating her husband to pay her a visit. Instead it becomes a command and a thinly veiled threat. It is only because Archer shares May's coded language, that he can understand what she implies. Thus the (mental) distance that visual communication normally would create is bridged, as he watches May watching him, trying to decipher what she knows.

Long dialogues between May and Archer are not that frequent in *The Age of Innocence*, showing how Wharton lets her narrative technique reflect the actual mode of communication she portrays. Descriptive passages are more abundant, portraying how New York of the 1870's bases its communication on the visual, *showing* the reader what goes on. This is what Wharton does with Lily too, letting her appearance *show* us her character. Only on occasion, as in the quote above, are we *told* what to perceive. The narrator must do so, too, for the reader to understand what goes on, and Wharton disliked using dialogue for this very reason. She saw dialogues as an "adjunct" to descriptive passages (Wharton, *Writing* 72-73), because they must be explained to be understood. By doing so, one undermines a narrative based on perceptiveness and implications, as well as making indirect communicative practices direct. It is no wonder that the narrator only occasionally explains what is inferred from Archer's and May's dialogues, as in the example above. If she did this more often, she would attribute a direct language to them both that the narrative does not support. Not to mention that it would undermine the representation of how one communicates in practice:

Another argument against the substitution of dialogue for narrative is the wastefulness of and round-aboutness of the method . . . The reason is inherent in the method. When, in real life, two or more people are talking together, all that is understood between them is left out of their talk; but when the novelist uses conversation as a means not only of accentuating but of carrying on his tale, his characters have to tell each other many things that each already knows the other knows. . . their dialogue must be so diluted that with irrelevant touches of realistic commonplace, with what might be described as by-talk, that, . . . it rambles on for page after page before the reader, resignedly marking time, arrives, bewildered and weary, at a point to which one paragraph of narrative could have carried him. (Wharton, *Writing* 74-75)

Wolff argues that May's and Archer's silent mode of communication is filled with meaning. She believes that where Archer experiences innocence and silence, there is really deep understanding on May's part, creating a harmony of communication: "Their relationship is filled with a profound silence, but the very limitations of the code that governs their marriage fill the silence with meaning" (*Feast* 321). She goes on to state that, "It is true, as Ellen has observed, that old New Yorkers don't like to talk about 'unpleasant' things. But what a wealth of shared knowledge their reticences permit!" (*Feast* 322). I only partly agree with this, as Archer and May (as shown in the quote above) *are* able to glean knowledge from silence due to their common upbringing within New York Society. However, it is only if one looks at Archer's and May's mode of communication from May's perspective that it allows for complete communication. She uses a silent communicative mode to keep Archer in the dark and get rid of Ellen, while Archer is unconscious of it. Seen from his point of view, their indirect hieroglyphic language is constraining (although it takes him time to realize it), actually preventing proper communication.

I believe the purpose of this novel is to show the very limits of this mode of communication, and the danger in believing it is complete. This is because Archer believes that he as an observer has figured his wife out, due to the common code they share: "The result, of course, was that the young girl who was the center of this elaborate system of mystification remained the more inscrutable for her very frankness and assurance. She was frank, poor darling, because she had nothing to conceal, assured because she knew of nothing to be on her guard against" (AI 29). It is this false belief in a complete system lacking limitations which causes miscommunication and fails to reveal what is really happening. Archer is fooled, when he supports a system of communication based on perception (Kottaras 10, 12). It does not facilitate profound communication, but rather masks distance as intimacy. As the observer has come to value the object's mask, conflating it with her real self, so does he mistakenly conflate a symbolic language with (intellectual) intimacy.

In addition, while Archer seems to value May's innocence, he also calls it an "abysmal purity" (AI 6), indicating mental distance between the two (Jessee 39). Their relationship seems to be missing something. As he gets to know the outspoken Ellen, he becomes increasingly aware of this. With Ellen there is little pretense. She speaks directly, allowing him to do the same, something he experiences as liberating: "Her tone was so natural, so almost indifferent . . . 'I think you're the most honest woman I ever met!' he exclaimed" (AI 173). Ellen opens up his eyes, making him realize that Rivière is right when he says "'good

conversation—there's nothing like it, is there?’” (AI 122). Archer tries to do the same with May, to be direct and make them communicate on more than matters of family, obligations, and customs. However, she will not engage in a direct mode of expression:

‘May—’ he began, standing a few feet away from her chair, and looking over at her as if the slight distance between them were an unbridgeable abyss. The sound of his voice echoed uncannily through the homelike hush, and he repeated: ‘There is something I've got to tell you . . . about myself . . .’ She sat silent, without a movement . . . ‘Madame Olenska—’ he said; but at the name his wife raised her hand as if to silence him. (AI 193-194)

This experience of distance may be why Archer starts to devalue May and wants to elope with Ellen. However, he cannot leave a pregnant May behind. Thus he stays, and must force himself to find value in their hieroglyphic mode of communication again. Still, as mentioned in the previous chapters, it is only when Archer sees behind May's façade long after she is dead, that he truly appreciates her. Only then is the mental barrier between them truly bridged. Unlike Selden's partly unsuccessful attempt to regain mental intimacy with Lily after her death, Archer is able to do this with May through the medium of his son. For this to happen, an intimate direct dialogue must take place, where what has previously never been talked of, his love for Ellen, will be discussed: “‘Dash it, Dad, don't be prehistoric. Wasn't she [Ellen]—once—your Fanny?’ Dallas belonged body and soul to the new generation. He was the first-born of Newland and May Archer, yet it had never been possible to inculcate in him even the rudiments of reserve . . . But Archer, meeting his eyes, saw the filial light under their banter” (AI 213). Fittingly, May's silence is broken by a proxy acting on her behalf. Her knowledge about what Archer sacrificed for his family is revealed in a manner she would have supported, once removed. However, Dallas, their son, delivers the news directly to Archer. This mode of communication reveals intimacy, a close connection that May's and Archer's “hieroglyphs” have never been able to achieve. As Dallas says himself: “‘No. I forgot. You never did ask each other anything, did you? And you never told each other anything. You just sat and watched each other, and guessed at what was going on underneath. A deaf-and-dumb asylum, in fact’” (AI 214). Finally Archer is able to create sustainable mental intimacy with his wife, through the medium of their son, and he does not just perceive that he is intimately connecting with May.

Wolff sees the ending of *The Age of Innocence* as a victory for Archer, who comes to accept who he is: “In the end he has gained more than he has lost” (*Feast* 333). She is partly right in that Archer has gained a close relationship to his children. They seem to have a secret language of their own, somehow atoning for the intimate communication he missed out on

with May. However, that Archer and his children communicated behind May's back even while she was alive indicates that the hieroglyphic mode of communication was insufficient. It must have created distance instead of intimacy, as Archer has a close connection to his children by *not* adhering to the codes of old: "Her incapacity to recognize change made her children conceal their views from her as Archer concealed his; there had been, from the first, a joint pretense of sameness, a kind of innocent family hypocrisy, in which father and children had unconsciously collaborated" (AI 208).

Communication on an intimate intellectual level was one thing Wharton herself truly believed in (Fryer 139-140). To her, love should be a "sharing of all!" (Wharton qtd. in Nevius 189). Due to the role division between men and women, however, she felt American Society lacking in this respect: "Real living, in any but the most elementary sense of the word, is a deep and complex and slowly-developed thing . . . It has its roots in fundamental things, and above all in close and constant and interesting and important relations between men and women" (Wharton qtd. in Ammons, *Argument* 146). The relation between May and Archer can be said to reflect an absence of this constant relation, when Archer creates an intimate companionship with his children instead. Therefore, when Archer comes to value his "old" communicative system in the end, a system that is revealed to be incomplete, it shows perhaps acquiescence rather than victory. Accepting what has happened to him is a defense mechanism. Only by being "prehistoric" and owning it is Archer's life justified. He must hold on to the past in order to not lose himself. One can argue that Archer decides to not be with Ellen out of fear, a fear of confronting face on the communicative system that hitherto has framed his life. By entering Ellen's apartment, he risks realizing how insubstantial his life with May has really been, never communicating about the "real thing." That he is "old-fashioned" is not a sufficient explanation for why he refuses to cross Ellen's threshold, as he has crossed it once before, but now retraces his steps. He is simply afraid of there being too much mental distance between them, and of his vision of her being shattered (Hadley, "Ironic" 270): "More than half a lifetime divided them, and she had spent the long interval among people he did not know, in a society he but faintly guessed at, in conditions he would never wholly understand. During that time he had been living with his youthful memory of her; but she had doubtless had other and more tangible companionship" (AI 216). Also, Archer's intimate communicative connection with his children shows that he is not old-fashioned. I would argue that Archer has not necessarily "gained more than he has lost." What

he has done, though, by a great effort of self-restraint is to be able to cling to his sense of self despite great changes.

While Archer's relation to May could be seen to reflect the limitations created by a play of perception, his communication with Ellen may portray the opposite. Archer has a direct dialogue with Ellen, as mentioned above, which is not hieroglyphic. Because they can converse directly, there is a mental intimacy created between the two which is actual and not illusory. It portrays communication based on profound understanding, and not only the sharing of common values and a belief in an insufficient system. After all, May's and Archer's communication is based on a language supported by the customs of Society and its categories. This is seen at the opera, where a sharing of common values make them both, by a single glance at one another, decide to announce their engagement earlier than planned (Wolff, *Feast* 321): "It was something of a satisfaction to find that May Welland shared this feeling. Her eyes fled to his beseechingly, and their look said: 'Remember, we're doing this because it's right!'" (AI 16). While May's and Archer's language is limited by custom, Ellen's and Archer's seeks to transcend these categories (Bentley 54-55). Therefore, one does not need to decipher their language, nor does the narrator need to explain what is inferred from it, as their mode of communication is transcendent by being direct instead of symbolical: "I want—I want somehow to get away with you into a world where words like that—categories like that—won't exist. Where we shall be simply to human beings who love each other" (AI 174).

This sub-chapter has hitherto argued that Ellen and Archer are able to bridge the communicative gap that separates May and Archer, but not yet said anything about how their intimate intellectual communication is achieved. Like Selden's and Lily's relation, it is dependent on several factors to successfully transcend the play of perception. First and foremost, what characterizes Ellen's and Archer's mode of communication is that it is based on sexual restraint and physical distance, what Blake Nevius labels a "chaste barrier" (188). If Ellen and Archer had had an intimate, sexual relation, they would have submitted to Society's categories and been reduced to adulterers (Knights, *Introduction* 109-110; Bentley 54-55): "We're near each other only if we stay far away from each other. Then we can be ourselves. Otherwise we're only Newland Archer, the husband of Ellen Olenska's cousin, and Ellen Olenska, the cousin of Newland Archer's wife" (AI 175). If they are to create mental intimacy, they cannot see each other as sexual objects: "Don't let us be like all the others!" she protested" (AI 187). For their union to be different from May's and Archer's, it needs to be asexual. After all, Archer is physically intimate with May, but this does not make for an

intimate mode of communication. There is still a mental barrier between them. Ellen, despite the physical distance separating her and Archer, is mentally closer to him than May ever was, reflecting how the leisure class's mode of communication is based on the wrong kind of intimacy. Like Lily and Selden, Ellen and Archer cannot experience both sexual and mental intimacy simultaneously.

That physical intimacy is replaced by intellectual intimacy is shown by one of Archer's and Ellen's private encounters. They are also dependent upon an actual physical space that is experienced as transcending Society to communicate. However, while Selden and Lily can only maintain the mental connection they establish *within* this clandestine space, Ellen and Archer are able to sustain their connection *outside* it too. While a physical space set apart from Society facilitates the creation of a mental space beyond Society's limitations, it does not contain it. Ellen and Archer are able to create a sustainable mental connection that diminishes the void of physical intimacy, bridging the physical gap between them.

This sustainable mental connection, though, is contingent on them meeting up in a clandestine physical space where they can communicate intimately without their roles. One such place is the Metropolitan Museum. This is a liminal space not unlike Selden's and Lily's garden, being both inside and outside Society. It is within the physical boundaries of New York, yet, when Archer and Ellen enter the building, they find a space transcending boundaries on multiple levels. The museum is a space where the past, present, and future are laid out before them, the limit of time resembling a wide expanse to be bridged. They can view artifacts from bygone times, reminding them that the customs now keeping them physically apart one day will be obsolete (Bentley 55): “‘It seems cruel,’ she said, ‘that after a while nothing matters . . . any more than these little things’” (AI 186). However, they cannot step “directly” into the future and are not able to have a romantic encounter and also connect intellectually here, like Selden and Lily do in the garden. The museum becomes a metaphor for their lives, portraying how an intellectual union (unlike a sexual one) is sustainable. Here they discuss the potential for having an erotic encounter, making the museum a place they can intimately communicate.

Yet, Ellen by discussing the difficulty of being with Archer just “one” time, portrays how a sexual encounter would contaminate their connection. It would affect the life outside the clandestine space in which they decide to meet. The moment they step outside their designated clandestine place, Society's categories will find them, making the physical intimacy they experience there unsustainable. Ellen is afraid of a sexual connection, seen

when she backs away when noticing lust in Archer's eyes: "walking hurriedly away down the long room, as if the reflected radiance in his eyes had frightened her" (AI 188). In comparison, the intimate (sexual) discussion they are having in the museum will be discontinued when they leave the museum's confines. The communicative intimacy experienced here, however, will not be contained within it. Ellen and Archer experience a role revision at the Metropolitan Museum, which unlike Selden's and Lily's is only partly transitory. After all, Ellen and Archer are able to maintain their intellectual connection, or at least Archer is, who keeps his image of Ellen for decades. Archer realizes that this intellectual union is for the best, although he has entreated Ellen to come "see" him: "'If I were to let her come', he said to himself, 'I should have to let her go again'. And that was not to be imagined" (AI 187). He spends the rest of his life nurturing their intellectual connection, abiding by Ellen's words "'I can't love you unless I give you up'" (AI 107), echoing Lily's "'Ah, love me, love me—but don't tell me so!'" (HM 109). Even when the future hinted at in the museum is here, and there exists a "space" in Paris where they can be both lovers and mental partners, Archer "prefers not to." He is perhaps afraid that he is still too "old fashioned," not having evolved enough to be both confessor and lover to Ellen or that he will become the man reflected in Ellen's frightened eyes decades earlier. This is sad, as his relation to his children tells us he has changed. Archer chooses to put "mind over matter," keeping the mental connection with Ellen that to him bridges the physical gap between them: "He had known the love that is fed on caresses and feeds them; but this passion that was closer than his bones was not to be superficially satisfied. His one terror was to do anything which might efface the sound and impression of her words; his one thought, that he should never again feel quite alone" (AI 148).

As mentioned previously in connection with *The House of Mirth*, Wharton establishes an inside versus outside dichotomy on both a physical and a psychological level. Only rarely, like at the Metropolitan Museum, is being physically inside a building equated with being psychologically outside Society. It is not often that a space located indoors facilitates a transgression of roles, making intimate direct conversation possible. Normally, being indoors confines one both literally and metaphorically within the boundaries of Society, as is seen with Lily's tableau and her encounter with Gus Trenor at his house. The inside of his house represents how he on a physical level tries to confine Lily within Society, and on a psychological level tries to make her unable to escape Society's categories: "'But, by gad, that ain't playing fair: that's dodging the rules of the game' . . . He rose, squaring his shoulders

aggressively, and stepped toward her with a reddening brow” (HM 114). Trenor tries to contain Lily as a sexual object through psychological and physical constraints. This goes to show, that a clandestine place does not in itself facilitate close communication. Clandestine communication transcending Society is only possible if the space facilitating it is remote on *both* psychological and physical levels. Trenor's house is only clandestine in that no one can see what goes on inside it. However, the members of the leisure class can perceive it! In *The Age of Innocence*, Archer experiences the interior of his house as constraining too, representing Society through the psychological limitation it imposes on him. His house keeps him figuratively captive, only supporting the hieroglyphic language he shares with May: “The mere fact of not looking at May, seated beside his table, under his lamp, the fact of seeing other houses, roofs, chimneys, of getting the sense of other lives outside his own, other cities beyond New York, and a whole world beyond his world, cleared his brain and made it easier to breathe” (AI 178). Thus Archer's house involuntarily “shelters” him from the world outside by steeping him in the customs of Society (Hadley, “Ironic” 269).

It is being outside in nature that often creates an environment making one transcend the limitations of the leisure class. One can experience mental liberation here, making close communication possible. Nature, as mentioned above, supports organic communication. This is seen through Ellen's and Archer's encounter at Newport. The physical distance separating them seems bridged when they communicate across a vast distance, both fixing on the same horizon within this exact expanse of time. Their close mental connection atones for the physical distance between them, creating a mute dialogue based on intellectual intimacy and not custom: “The lady in the summer house seemed to be held by the same sight. Beyond the gray bastions of Fort-Adams a long-drawn sunset was splintering up into a thousand fires, and the radiance caught the sail of a catboat” (AI 132). The same is seen in Paris, when Archer is walking the city's streets feeling nature collaborating in bringing Ellen closer to him: “Archer knew that Madame Olenska lived in a square near one of the avenues radiating from the Invalides; and he had pictured the quarter as quiet and almost obscure, forgetting the central splendor that lit it up. Now, by some queer process of association, that golden light became for him the pervading illumination in which she lived” (AI 215). These instances portray two levels of space, how “the landscape is at once internal and external” (Knights, “Forms” 37).

Almost the same can be said for the small house at Skuytercliff. It is an external place creating an internal space in which Ellen and Archer can converse honestly. This is a clandestine place, being set within the grounds of an estate. By being physically situated

within the limits of a space owned by a family of the leisure class, but simultaneously being separated from it by being seen as a novelty, this too is a liminal place like the museum. Also, the house seems to represent a natural, old-fashioned way of living, where one is in both physical *and* close psychological proximity to one another. As Knights argues: “The house itself occupies multiple levels of space—psychological, social, and historical—and . . . becomes a . . . fantasy of privacy and escape” (“Forms” 37). Thus it might be Ellen's and Archer's equivalent of the New York garden, where they can imagine a complete relationship. According to May, Ellen sees the house as “the only place she's seen in America that she could imagine being perfectly happy in” (AI 116). This house is an exception, too, being a physical space inside which facilitates a move beyond Society's limits: “there were moments when he felt as if he were being buried alive under his future. He heard nothing of the Countess Olenska, or of the perfect little house” (AI 87). This is a “house of mirth” embodying the elements of human communication that Archer's home in New York cannot:

he lit on a small volume of verse . . . *The House of Life* . . . and found himself plunged in an atmosphere unlike any he had ever breathed in books; so warm, so rich . . . he pursued through those enchanted pages the vision of a woman who had the face of Ellen Olenska; but when he woke the next morning, and looked out at the brownstone houses across the street . . . his hour in the park of Skuytercliff became as far outside the pale of probability as the visions of the night. (AI 87)

Still, Wolff sees this house as an embodiment of the customs of Society, since Archer spends his wedding night with May here (*Feast* 315). To me, this rather indicates how May encroaches on Ellen's and Archer's space physically but not mentally. While May probably consummates her relation with Archer here, this physical union is less substantial than his spiritual connection with Ellen. May may move into the house for a night, but in the house of Archer's mind Ellen stays forever. Therefore the house at Skuytercliff can serve as a metaphor for the sustainable, transcendent, clandestine communication of Ellen and Archer.

4.3 “Customary” Communicative Complications

In *The Custom of the Country*, communication between men and women is presented in a different manner than in the two other novels. For instance, Undine is vocal about what she wants. Thus understanding her is not difficult. One would think that as Undine belongs to the “new” New York of the nouveau riche, the mode of communication she represents would be different from that of Lily's and May's generation. However, though Undine speaks a direct language that is not “hieroglyphic,” there is still a mental and physical distance separating her

from her husbands, complicating close communication. While there are several factors preventing intimate communication in *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*, this sub-chapter will argue that Undine herself can be held responsible for the lack of psychological and physical intimacy in *The Custom of the Country*, admittedly with the “help” from American society, as Undine can be viewed as its product.

I will mainly use Undine's marriage to Ralph Marvell to portray how *The Custom of the Country* reveals communicative complications. This is because their marriage shows how Ralph tries to connect with Undine on a physical and psychological level, but she refuses to reciprocate. Ralph's and Undine's marriage reflects a union that has the potential for being very different from the ones presented above, as they both differ in character from Selden and Lily, Archer and Ellen, or Archer and May. Firstly, Undine is not born into the leisure class, but must be introduced into it. She does not have to be an object of display, but partly decides to be so. There is a clash of cultures and especially values, that are experienced when Undine marries Ralph and she for the first time is introduced to the inner circle of the leisure class: “Mr Dagonet's handsome eye-brows drew together. ‘A divorce? H'm—that's bad. Has he been misbehaving himself?’ Undine looked innocently surprised. ‘Oh, I guess not. They like each other well enough. But he's been a disappointment to her. He isn't in the right set, and I think Mabel realizes she'll never really get anywhere till she gets rid of him’” (CC 60). Ralph, in contrast, is born into the leisure class. It would be easy, then, to just blame him for their lack of close communication, labeling him the “average” husband incapable of seeing his wife as more than an object. Ralph *is* partly ignorant due to his upbringing, as argued in the first chapter. However, he is not the “typical” observer. Ralph is a kind character who tries to initiate Undine into an unknown world, has sympathy with her ignorance, and tries to instill in her some sense of obligation. He does all this while adoring his wife. Also, Ralph himself is willing to give up everything for Undine to have it all. He works tirelessly at the office to provide for his family, causing himself great physical and mental distress. As he comes to lead a working life, Ralph is no longer a poster-child for leisure. He does not look or act the part anymore: “People left him to his sorrow as a man is left to an incurable habit, an unfortunate tie: they ignored it” (CC 266).

If there is one couple in these three novels who could have had an intimate connection both mentally and physically, and been able to communicate without participating in the play of perception, it is Undine and Ralph. She must learn to play the part as object while Ralph is

the exception, seeing his wife as an equal partner whom he can share both “bed” and “business” with:

If any one had prophesied before his marriage that he would find it difficult to tell this [that they are exceeding their income] to Undine he would have smiled at the suggestion. . . . But his marital education had since made strides, and he now knew that a disregard for money may imply not the willingness to go on without it but merely a blind confidence that it would somehow be provided. If Undine, like the lilies of the field, took no care, it was not because her wants were as few but because she assumed that care would be taken for her by those whose privilege it was to enable her to unite floral insouciance with Sheban elegance. (CC 93)

Times have changed, shown by Ralph's and Undine's union being possible. Now a mismatched couple from opposite ends of the nation, both physically and psychologically, can unite. Their union could potentially have represented the best of old and new traditions. While the couples in the other novels could not be communicative partners *and* intimate physical partners, there is no reason why Undine and Ralph could not be both. Except for Undine herself, and the “new” materialistic Society she reflects, as will be further discussed below.

Ralph desires to be both physically and mentally close to Undine, seen by him trying to create intimacy between them. When Undine is absent on a literal or metaphorical level, he tries to bridge the gap between them. This is what he does when he conjures up a vision of Undine that is not in accordance with reality. He does this to create the intimacy she is incapable of giving him. Being a man of honor, it is unconceivable for him to leave her like she leaves him. Therefore, he establishes an imaginary partnership as a survival tactic. When Ralph cannot satisfy Undine's materialistic desires, she divorces him. But when she cannot meet his emotional needs, he tries to find a way to make it work: “Only, as he looked back, he was struck by the evanescence, the lack of substance, in their moments of sympathy, and by the permanent marks left by each breach between them. Yet he still fancied that some day the balance might be reversed, and that as she acquired a finer sense of values the depths in her would find a voice” (CC 114). Ralph is a reliable companion, thus one cannot really blame him for the void of communication between Undine and himself. It seems as if Ralph's sense of purpose is connected to communication, and that this is his “vocation.” He wants to pass on his story, shown by him seeking refuge in his son and his writing when Undine refuses him intimacy: “His two objects in life were his boy and his book. The boy was incomparably the stronger argument, yet the less serviceable in filling the void” (CC 265). When these two purposes are “taken” from him as well, Ralph commits suicide. He dies of loneliness, of an all consuming void due to lack of communication and intimacy (Kowaleski-Wallace 51). To

Ralph, it is imperative to share oneself with others, and not only in the sense of distributing one's wealth. Unfortunately, as for Lily and Selden, the barrier separating him and his wife cannot be bridged and hardens to adamant instead. Like Lily, Ralph dies because he is the exception who does not solely find value in the traditional role, being just a provider and not a mental partner too.

Undine like Lily is compared to the lilies of the field and their effortlessness (CC 93, Ammons, "Edith" 348). Yet Ralph is the one who is supposed to work hard without revealing to his wife how much her upkeep requires of him. Undine too abides by the hieroglyphic language of the leisure class. This is because she does not want "the real thing" to be "said or done" (AI 29), refusing to listen to financial communication, assuming "that care would be taken for her" (CC 93). She abides by this language and code at times, as it conveniently allows her to refrain from sharing in her husband's financial problems. Only here is ignorance bliss to Undine, as will be discussed further below. When it comes to herself, everyone should know *explicitly* what she has to deal with: "I understand that you care for all this old stuff more than you do for me" (CC 330). It is the conception of the male as a facilitator of his wife which causes miscommunication and intellectual distance in *The Custom of the Country*. There is a change of roles here, where it is the observer Ralph who worries about his role and state of existence, struggling like Lily to stay afloat in Society. While he is really the exception, Undine does not want to hear about it, deciding to not see her husband as a communicative companion, only a financial facilitator. This is portrayed through Charles Bowen's and Laura Fairford's dialogue addressing the "communicative state" of the nation:

'Take Ralph, for instance—you say his wife's extravagance forces him to work too hard; but that's not what's wrong. It's normal for a man to work hard for a woman—what's abnormal is his not caring to tell her anything about it'. 'To tell Undine? She'd be bored to death if he did!' 'Just so; she'd even feel aggrieved. But why? Because it's against the custom of the country. And whose fault is that? The man's again—I don't mean Ralph, I mean the genus he belongs to: homo sapiens, Americanus.' (CC 129)

Ralph becomes the example portraying the destructive powers of Society and its inability to recognize something good when it is present. As Wharton herself argued: "a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys" (Wharton qtd. in Wolff, *Feast* 109). Thus it kills Ralph and Lily, while nourishing Undine.

Even though the "custom of the country" is the supposed culprit preventing intimacy between Undine and Ralph (Nevius 152), I would argue that Undine herself is also to blame for the situation. After all, Undine *decides* to play the role as object of display, despite being

given other options. She does this, because it is convenient. By sometimes reducing herself to a “silent partner,” she can excuse herself when things go badly and divorce her husbands. She claims her title as object, so that when her husband cannot provide the means for the public display she desires, she can leave him according to her own and America's creed of materialism: “and if she had only had the means to live up to her opportunities she would have been perfectly content with life, with herself and her husband. She still thought Ralph ‘sweet’ when she was not bored by his good advice or exasperated by his inability to pay her bills. The question of money was what chiefly stood between them” (CC141). If Undine emotionally involves herself with Ralph or truly communicates with him on financial matters, she must share his fiscal limitations too. By distancing herself instead, she can let her sense of self-entitlement to the role as object rule undeterred, avoiding any self-scrutiny: “it was admiration, not love, that she wanted. She wanted to enjoy herself, and her conception of enjoyment was publicity . . . the crowd . . . and the sense of walking among them in cool security. Any personal entanglement might mean ‘bother’, and bother was the thing she most abhorred” (CC 140). Undine is happy to tell her husbands how best to give her what she wants. In this respect she is never a silent partner. When it comes to sharing in the responsibility for her family's financial situation, though, she refuses to talk about it.

However, it is difficult to escape the fact that Undine is a “type” proving a point. As Charles Bowen argues, while Ralph is the exception proving the rule of the “custom of the country,” Undine is the perfect example: ““No—she's [Undine] a monstrously perfect result of the system: the completest proof of its triumph. It's Ralph who's the victim and the exception”” (CC 131). By being a type, a woman representing a materialist Society, Undine can somehow be excused for her actions (Nevius 152). There exists one major redeeming factor for her, which is that Society has conditioned her to become who she is. That she cannot appreciate Ralph's exceptionality (like Archer values Ellen's or Selden Lily's) is because she is the product of a new generation of Americans, who seem to devalue intimacy, supporting materialism and mental and physical distance instead (McCarthy 96). No one has taught Undine to value human relations above material possessions, except for Ralph. When he comes into the picture, it is too little too late. Undine has become like the “Kentucky cave-fish” Archer mentions in *The Age of Innocence* (53), which has lost its eyes because it had no use for them. She has evolved into a “monster,” because her environment has facilitated this, teaching its women to let go of their communicative faculties beyond those of attraction, display, and in Undine's case giving commands. Thus Undine cannot recognize something of

substantial mental value, like her relationship to Ralph, even when it is right before her eyes. This is unnatural, yet natural. Unnatural because having meaningful, verbally communicative relationships is what makes us human; natural because Undine is only a product of her environment (Wolff, *Feast* 230). According to Judith Fryer, “Speech—words—are quite literally at the core of the community Wharton would build. Undine's language disability separates her from other human beings . . .” (114). It is no wonder that Undine resembles a monstrous mutation, then, as her dislike for intimate communication renders her inhuman.

That Undine is a type serving the purpose of example is shown by her one-dimensional character (Nevius 152). Her reaction pattern is limited, making her almost a caricature. How she relates to communication reflects this, as Undine does not vacillate between close communication and being distant. Undine is consistent in her mental and physical aloofness, making close communication impossible. One sees this on her honeymoon with Ralph, where she creates a mental and physical barrier between them: “he felt another meaning in her silence, and perceived that she intended him to feel it. He met it by silence, but of a different kind; letting his nearness speak for him as he knelt beside her and laid his cheek against hers. She seemed hardly aware of the gesture; but to that he was also used” (CC 95). Undine's child-like grasp on the world is highlighted here, as she shuts Ralph out when he does not give her what she desires.

Communication is to Undine a means to an end (like her marriages); a way for her to get people to see her point of view, or to work on them to get what she wants. She is a master manipulator, shown by her faking intimacy with Ralph when she believes he is on to her connection with Van Degen: “‘Ralphie—’ she began; a soft hand on his arm. He stopped, and she pulled him about so that their faces were close, and he saw her lips curving for a kiss. Every line of her face sought him . . . but for the first time it did not pass into his veins” (CC 140). Undine does not care for dialogue, or conversations that can make her see the world differently. Unlike Archer, who values good conversation, or Lily, who values the insight Selden can bring to her own existence, Undine favors monologue. She prefers monologue in that she (figuratively speaking) turns every conversation into one, adhering only to her own voice. Conversation for her is a one-way mirror only, reflecting her own ideas, as she refuses to listen to diverging opinions. Unlike May, Lily, or Ellen, who use conversation as a mirror to gain insight into their surroundings and how they themselves are reflected by them, Undine only sees herself when conversing: “She shrugged away his [Ralph's] hand . . . ‘I don't believe an American woman needs to know such a lot about their [the European aristocrats'] old rules.

They can see I mean to follow my own” (CC 101). I have previously argued that Undine can be seen as a subject, too, and it is strange that Undine's frankness and direct communication does not lead to intimacy. Instead she uses her role as subject to become increasingly self-centered. She is simply uninterested in a true partnership, be it communicative or physical. Then again, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the most important relation to Undine is ultimately the one she has to herself. Thus she has no need of an intimate mode of two-way communication, as long as her commands are effective and provide her with the objects she wants.

Undine stays self-centered throughout the narrative. Even when finding herself in a place that is mentally and physically outside Society, she is uninterested in close communication. This is seen on her honeymoon, as mentioned above. Here she is in a remote space in Europe beyond the boundaries of American Society. Still she avoids intellectual and physical intimacy, imposing limitations on herself. Intimate communication and bridging the gap between husband and wife should be possible here, being away from the constraints of Society's customs. As if this was not enough, a honeymoon is also the one actual and metaphorical space in which physical and mental intimacy is expected. However, Undine abstains, showing that it takes two to make a sustainable communicative relation. There exists no space outside Society's categories in which Undine and Ralph can unite. This is because Undine decides to stay within the frame of American Society, as this is a comfortable life void of responsibility. Another one of Undine's marriages also shows this, namely her marriage to the Frenchman Raymond de Chelles. Although Undine finds herself physically and psychologically situated in France, she refuses to follow French customs, maintaining her American creed of being the decorative object. France may be the “republic of the spirit” Selden dreamed of, as an intellectual *and* consummated partnership is possible within French Society. French husbands see their wives as equal partners, sharing in the burdens of family life. De Chelles wants Undine to be an equal partner in body and spirit, and wants to have a dialogue with her. Once again, Undine refuses to comply: “At first he tried—as Ralph had done—to tell her about what he was reading or what was happening in the world; but her sense of inadequacy made her slip away to other subjects, and little by little their talk died down to monosyllables” (CC 317). According to Nevius, what fascinated Wharton about French Society was its capability of seeing women as intellectual partners: “To her mind, the chief recommendation of the *salon* was that within its charmed circle women were regarded not merely as ornaments or as objects of conquest but as the social and intellectual peers of

the men who frequented it" (82; italics in original). Undine's French husband wants her to be exactly this, his equal sharing in an intimate communicative union. Sadly for him, Undine is uninterested in the proposition.

If Undine is the product of an American Society influenced by increased materialism (Nevius 152), then she will only change if Society does too. Women like Undine will only cease to exist, if Society prevents their development. She is a monstrosity partly created by the men who facilitate her financially, whom Charles Bowen label "homo sapiens, Americanus" (CC 129). This implies that if American men cease to view their wives as receivers of wealth, and rather as communicative partners, women like Undine will eventually become "extinct." It is ironic how the United States, a nation known for its political system of "checks and balances," which does not allow one governmental body to become too powerful by having it "checked" by the others and vice versa, allows Undine's behavior to go on unchecked. According to Bowen again, men seem to have forgotten that, as they control the purse, they also control their wives. As the American woman feels entitled to a display of self, however, simply "cutting her off" will not do. This is shown when de Chelles imposes financial limitations on Undine. Only by viewing their wives as equal partners can the "customary" communicative complications between the American husband and wife be solved. Ralph attempts this, and the French have already implemented this system of equal balance. Still Undine cannot be "checked," except by the narrative technique which ridicules her. Undine cannot recognize intangible qualities and does not want the intimacy true communication creates. Her favoring monologue over dialogue reveals a lack of "social interest," as close communication reflects community and not individuality (Rollo May qtd. in Fryer 115). American society must change its system of values to prevent the development of more "Undines." A future United States is the only space "beyond," where sustainable intimate communication between men and women will be possible.

5 Conclusion

This conclusion will look at how *The House of Mirth*, *The Age of Innocence*, and *The Custom of the Country* can be connected to a wider scope of literature, as there have been many literary labels attached to Wharton's fiction and the writer herself. For instance, *The House of Mirth* can be seen as realistic, naturalistic, and sentimental all at the same time. This may not be all that surprising, as there sometimes exist almost as many interpretations of a text as there are interpreters. The field of literary criticism may therefore reflect how perception is a creative process where one brings one's own theories and perceptual mode to the table. It is also a process that is governed by customs or literary "trends." One tradition is to see Wharton as a representative of the "novel of manners," something this thesis can be said to do as well, by arguing the case for how customs affect the perceptual processes portrayed in three of Wharton's works. In addition, the influence of customs and traditions on human interaction has been treated thematically and structurally in all the novels that have been analyzed above. Yet the most provocative label that I find has been attached to Wharton and her works is the label "misogynist." It is the critic Janet Malcolm who accuses Wharton's fiction of "misogyny" (11), portraying women as awful human beings. This conclusion therefore seeks to discuss whether the three books analyzed by this thesis portray a misogynist view of women or not. The discussion of literary genres and how they relate to Wharton's novels will be used to either support or argue against Malcolm's accusations. Malcolm's labeling of Wharton's novels and the placement of Wharton's fiction within various literary traditions, both represent two sides of the same coin, namely categorization. While Malcolm's point of view represents a narrow definition of Wharton's literary works, connecting Wharton's novels to different literary genres shows a broader definition of her literature.

Malcolm builds her argumentation mainly on the fact that it is women who are solely responsible for the destruction of other women in Wharton's works. One example is from *The House of Mirth*, when Bertha Dorset destroys Lily Bart (11). She also uses *The Custom of the Country*'s Undine Spragg as an example of how "Wharton takes her cold dislike of women to a height of venomousness previously unknown in American letters, and probably never surpassed" (11; qtd. in Showalter, "Custom" 95). Admittedly, Malcolm is partly right. After all, Bertha is not a kind character, and Lily mentions how her girlfriends do not treat her nicely. Selden is potentially Lily's only true friend, in addition to her cousin Gerty. Yet, Gerty's selflessness in aiding Lily when she is truly jealous of her relation to Selden shows that women are not only portrayed as mean and vindictive: "Ah, it needed no deliberate

purpose on Lily's part to rob her of her dream! To look on that prone loveliness was to see in it a natural force, to recognize that love and power belong to such as Lily, as renunciation and service are the lot of those they despoil" (HM 132). In addition, Lily is shown as Bertha's opposite. She may be vain and self-centered, but Wharton makes a point out of how Lily sacrifices her own existence in Society, revealing a precious spirit and not just a precious façade. Lily is made to be the flawless sapphire. Yet, she reveals her individuality by not adhering to Society's rules and the game she has been taught to play, when she burns Bertha's incriminating letters. The portrayal of an individual's beliefs battling against the communal values of society is a hallmark of sentimental fiction (Hoeller 25, 105), reflecting how one can see Lily as a "good" character. We as readers come to have sympathy with Lily's fate, and if Wharton truly detested her protagonist and what she represented, she would probably not have made such a sad spectacle of her death (Lindberg 128). While Wharton possibly could have "killed off" Undine by the end of *The Custom of the Country* without the reader shedding a tear, the same cannot be said for Lily. That Lily must die while Bertha lives on is a shame, and her death thus seems wasteful and unnecessary (Nevius 55). Lily's death reveals sentimentalism, because she dies trying to correct her wrongs (Fetterley 210). She is a lost soul attempting to find her way, but fails in the process, partly due to circumstances beyond her control. Lily is a victim of the sins of humankind, as well as her own, and the novel shows this: "'But I am bad—a bad girl—all my thoughts are bad—I have always had bad people about me. Is that any excuse? I thought I could manage my own life—I was proud—proud! but now I'm on their level—'" (HM 131).

That Lily has to die and is unable to escape her role, or create a sustainable life for herself outside the leisure class, shows how this novel reflects traits of naturalistic literature too. Going against a natural order is portrayed as futile, even being described in terms of nature and what is considered natural and unnatural (Nevius 55-57). Before Lily dies, she is portrayed as an uprooted flower. As a flower cannot survive without its roots, neither can Lily without being anchored to New York Society, the only existence she is fashioned for (Ammons, "Edith" 350). Then again, she does not really have a place reserved for her in this world either, being an orphan without a fortune of her own, subjecting her to the will of others. This makes one feel sad *for her*, instead of making one repulsed *by her*: "And as she looked back she saw that there had never been a time when she had had any real relation to life. Her parents too had been rootless, blown hither and thither on every wind of fashion, without any personal existence to shelter them from its shifting gusts" (HM 248). This is to

me an important distinction, as one cannot truly hate a person one is inclined to empathize with, thereby probably out ruling deliberate misogyny on Wharton's part.

While Lily may be seen as a “good” character, it is hard to argue against Malcolm when she debates how Undine is a horrible human being. What one may disagree with, though, is how Malcolm rests her case on the assumption that a portrayal of such a terrible anti-heroine must indicate misogyny in her creator. To Malcolm, the specific use of a negative female protagonist equals a general antipathy towards women. I strongly disagree. Undine is, as my thesis has shown, partly to blame for her self-centeredness, but she can also partly be excused for her actions, as she is the product of the society that has created her. This means that it is not necessarily Undine that Wharton's implied author dislikes, but rather the society that has produced Undine (Nevius 152). It is American society and American men that have facilitated Undine's exploits, thus the antipathy portrayed in *The Custom of the Country* must be directed towards these two influences.

Although Undine is admittedly a very cruel and cynical character, it is hard to take her seriously. She is so one-dimensional in her egotism, that she at times becomes “unbelievable.” She is only made believable as a type and caricature. Thus Undine is perhaps made utterly repulsive, so that there will be no doubt as to where our sympathies should lie, namely with Ralph and her son (Kowaleski-Wallace 48; Hadley, *Interstices* 39). If Undine had shown even the tiniest bit of remorse, one could have sympathized with her. If one sympathizes with Undine, though, one may fail to see the trouble women like her creates for the coexistence of men and women within Society, and the unhappiness she leaves in her wake. Malcolm is right in that, “Wharton is an artist from whom we shrink a little” (12; qtd. in Showalter, “*Custom*” 89), when she makes it impossible to sympathize with Undine. Then again, is it really misogyny to portray women as mean when men have been cast in the role as ruthless for centuries? The only misogyny it reveals to me is “literary” misogyny, as Undine is not completely believable as a real life character. The narrator at times ridicules Undine, delivering ironic if not even sarcastic comments about her: “The habit of meeting young men in sequestered spots was not unknown to her: the novelty was in feeling any embarrassment about it. Even now she was disturbed not so much by the unlikely chance of an accidental encounter with Ralph Marvell as by the remembrance of similar meetings, far from accidental, with the romantic Aaronson” (CC 68-69). This could be seen as misogyny, indicating hatred towards the character. However, this may also be “comic relief” to make us stomach the horrible Undine. She is, after all, an extreme personality, making her somewhat

laughable and ridiculous in the process (Nevius 152, 159). If Undine is made too believable, Wharton's novel risks not being seen as a work of fiction, but rather as a doctrine of morals. This is something most writers of fiction would like to avoid, remembering that satire stops being funny when it hits too close to home.

Instead of revealing misogyny, this conclusion will suggest that it might be another issue entirely, that Wharton wants to focus on in her fiction, namely equality. Rather than painting a sentimental picture of how women are “all good,” true equality is to present women in the same manner as men, revealing the good, the bad, and the ugly. This is partly what Wharton does. Undine's one-dimensionality and negative traits may actually be seen as a positive contribution to the literary tradition, creating a stark contrast to how women have traditionally been portrayed as sacrificial Christ figures. According to Candace Waid, it was important for Wharton to distinguish herself from the sentimental tradition and “what Hawthorne called ‘the damn mob of scribbling women’” (qtd. in Hoeller 7). The “dark-side” of May, for instance, unveiled as she gets rid of Ellen, portrays how one is mistaken in judging her only as an innocent, powerless woman. One could argue that it is misogyny to show May's conniving nature, then again she only exploits the role given to her and the observer's ignorance. That women are hostile to one another reflects the real life situation they are part of. When they are given no other outlet for their energies than their own self-display, they compete for the same limited opportunities and men. As Showalter argues by invoking Wolff, women like Undine cannot use their ruthlessness for useful purposes such as business, making their inter-personal relations competitive instead (“*Custom*” 89-90). This could make one see Wharton as a realistic writer, a writer who portrays the real situation for women of the leisure class in the late eighteenth hundreds and into the turn of the last century, and how they were a product of the society they were part of (Hoeller 25).

If Wharton's texts reveal misogyny, then, it is more likely the misogyny behind the customs of New York Society than her own attitude. This is portrayed when Lily openly rebels against the society that has made her a beautiful object, and only that. Lily's frustrations about her situation in life reveal how *The House of Mirth* supports both sentimental, naturalistic, and realistic readings. Even though Lily can be seen as a sentimental character, she stands out from this tradition too. She is multifaceted rather than one-dimensionally “good,” having a selfish mean-streak too her nature as well. This is shown by how she looks down on Gerty, taking advantage of her kindness when it is convenient and patronizing or ignoring her otherwise. Whether one interprets Wharton's fiction as sentimental, naturalistic,

or realist, or all three combined, none of these literary labels seem to mix well with accusations of misogyny. This is because all these literary traditions contain an inherent critique of society, or at the very least an elaboration on the relation between society and the individuals it is comprised of. The misogyny Malcolm accuses Wharton of, then, may simply be a presentation of how a misogynist society relates to women.

As the discussion above has indicated, Wharton does portray a discrepancy between the lives of men and women within New York Society. The men are, for instance, much freer in their role as observer, and they have more options open to them than the women. Yet Malcolm seems to want to establish a complete separation between the two, as if Wharton favors the men above the women: “There are no bad men in Wharton's fiction. There are weak men and there are foolish men and there are vulgar New Rich men, but no man ever deliberately causes harm to another person; that role is exclusively reserved for women” (11). I disagree with this distinction, as the men are not just presented in a positive light. Elmer Moffatt, who by critics is seen as, in certain respects, being better than Undine, actually tricks Ralph Marvell into a bad business deal (Wolff qtd. in Showalter, “*Custom*” 89-90). He also tells Undine to take her son away from Ralph, making Undine's “business of destruction” a “joint venture.” Selden is also a flawed character when he shows himself as an unreliable friend to Lily (Ammons, *Argument* 54). Wharton herself actually called him “a negative hero” (Wharton qtd. by Lewis in Ammons, *Argument* 54). What about Newland Archer, one might ask, as Malcolm sees him as a positive protagonist? (12). In my opinion, he can join the crew of Wharton's many hopelessly romantic and “pathetic” male bachelor figures (Nevius 92-93), as he fails to comprehend his wife, while clinging desperately to an illusory, “perfect” past. He is admittedly a kind character, like most of the male protagonists, although somewhat misguided in his perceptions.

One might accuse Wharton of objectifying her literary women by using male focalizers and third-person narratives that keep them at a distance. The perceptual process Wharton portrays structurally and thematically is frustrating not only for the women, but the men as well. The play of perception allows the men to be fooled by the women, and the women to be misjudged by the men. It is men and women both that are victims of the perceptual processes of the leisure class, as it limits their interaction and causes misunderstandings. Wharton's narrative technique simply reflects this problematic dynamic. Selden misjudges Lily's appearance, while Archer misinterprets May, and Ralph cannot understand Undine. There is no winner here, or any gender that in my opinion comes out on

top in *The House of Mirth*, *The Age of innocence*, or *The Custom of the Country*. The only champion is Society and its customs, when true equality must be found in a place beyond its categories.

As this thesis has shown, the play of perception establishes the dichotomy observer versus observed object. However, I hope my discussion has shown that there exist “grey areas,” and that this distinction is not absolute. Men may be cast as the main observers and focalizers in Wharton's works, but the women, as mentioned, know that they are being watched. Thus Wharton portrays the danger of creating absolute categories and dichotomies, making Malcolm's use of the definitive label “misogynist” misguided. Malcolm may have forgotten that the world is rarely black and white. If it is, it is because our creative process of perception makes it so. Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote that “to be great is to be misunderstood.” One should keep in mind that neither this thesis nor any other analyses reveal absolute truths about Wharton's works, but instead portrays a particular process of perception in practice.

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