

A BACKWARD GLANCE: THEORIZING EDITH WHARTON'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SUBJECTIVITY

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ABSTRACT

This article will claim that beneath the restraint and detachment that characterize Edith Wharton's autobiography, *A Backward Glance* (1934), lies a self-imposed and consciously adopted subjectivity. Drawing on Michel Foucault's paradigm of self-formation that he defined as "technologies of the self" and on Toril Moi's more recent reworking of the critical category "woman," I will try to work out the theory of subjectivity that underlies Wharton's autobiography. Her text further shows to what extent her self-portrait derives from a voluntary subjection to self and social surveillance, while the self-censorship evident in the text does paradoxically intimate a number of private concerns of crucial importance to the author.

KEY WORDS: Subjectivity, technologies of the self, Toril Moi, Michel Foucault, self-censorship, autobiography, self-portrait, social surveillance.

RESUMEN

Este ensayo sostiene que bajo el decoro y distanciamiento que caracterizan la autobiografía de Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (1934), se encuentra una subjetividad autoimpuesta y adoptada conscientemente. Basándome en el paradigma de la autoformación de Michel Foucault, que él definió como "tecnologías del ser", y en la más reciente refundición de la categoría crítica "mujer" llevada a cabo por Toril Moi, intentaré articular la teoría de la subjetividad que subyace en la autobiografía de Wharton. El texto muestra además hasta qué punto su autorretrato se deriva de un sometimiento voluntario a la vigilancia social y personal, mientras que la evidente auto-censura paradójicamente sugiere cuestiones personales de importancia crucial para la autora.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Subjetividad, tecnologías del ser, Toril Moi, Michel Foucault, auto-censura, autobiografía, autorretrato, vigilancia social.

Critics took a long time to duly recognize the literary achievements of Edith Wharton (1862-1937), among other reasons because she was deemed merely a disciple and imitator of Henry James. Her literary reputation reached its peak in 1920 when she was granted the Pulitzer Prize for *The Age of Innocence*, but it dwin-



dled shortly afterwards. It was as late as 1953 that Blake Nevius produced the first full-scale study of her fiction. As Millicent Bell argues, “perhaps the slowness of the critics (...) to evaluate her as a candidate for the canon of American literature, is an index of the resistance of the canon to the intrusion of a major female novelist” (9). Still, even feminist critics were for a while reluctant to include Edith Wharton in their academic interests. No doubt, her upper-class origins and elitist leanings were a hindrance in her slow and wavering ascension to the throne of 20th-century “feminist” literature.¹ Nonetheless, it is important to note that after a more careful examination of her works, women critics began to detect nuances that could very well relate Wharton’s novels to other, perhaps more obvious and explicit, feminist texts. Her analyses of femalehood trapped in the constraints of social mores and patriarchal conventions were deemed worthy of serious reconsideration, and remarkable explorations of her oeuvre from a feminist perspective were eventually produced. Although feminist critics did not consider her a feminist writer, they could at least show to what extent Edith Wharton was aware of (and occasionally thwarted by) the gender ideology prevalent in her lifetime as it related to women and literature. In a number of essays feminist critics traced how Edith Wharton, albeit in her oblique style, gave voice to women who suffered a process of commodification of their lives and selves, thus making clear the gender subordination imposed on them. (i.e. Madame Ollenska, Lily Bart).

On the other hand, the data she provides in her official autobiography are seemingly superficial and concerned with the social aspects of her personality. Obviously, she projected a self that sought to protect her intimate life from public scrutiny. However, several biographies written by feminist scholars, mainly throughout the 1990s, reveal that beneath the apparent coldness hid a woman tortured by a sterile marriage and intensely worried about defining herself as a writer in a male-dominated world.² Thus, the disembodied self she disclosed in her autobiography has been construed as a mask to conceal private aspects and personal concerns.

¹ A clear line must be drawn between Wharton’s literary explorations of female psychology and her problematic “feminist” affiliation. I think we do a disservice to truth if we insist on turning Wharton into a feminist writer at any price. She never expressed any allegiance to the causes of women. On the contrary, her autobiography shows her indictment of the “‘monstrous regiment’ of the emancipated: young women taught by their elders to despise the kitchen and the linen room, and to substitute the acquiring of university degrees for the more complex art of civilized living” (60). Although she would eventually join the ranks of academic women, when she accepted an honorary degree from Yale University in 1923, Wharton seemed to despise women who did not know about what she called the “household arts”. It was very likely her education and upbringing that made her speak with such harsh words about university women. And yet, her novels reveal an intense concern for the plight of women, whether or not hers was a politically motivated concern.

² See especially the following titles: Gloria C. ERLICH, *The Sexual Education of Edith Wharton* (U of California P, 1992); Shari BENSTOCK, *No Gifts from Chance: A Biography of Edith Wharton* (New York: Scribner, 1994) and Cynthia G. WOLFF, *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton* (New York: Oxford UP, 1977).

Moreover, the recovery of her letters to Morton Fullerton in 1980 (with whom she had had a passionate love affair in 1908) and the opening of the Yale manuscripts and letters in 1975 contributed to the reappraisal of Wharton's supposed "asexual" nature and brought to light a woman who both suffered and enjoyed her sexuality. Wharton's autobiography evinces a fictional persona that was meant to cohere with her public role, but it was nevertheless one that she could not prevent from revealing a subjectivity uneasily forged against the social codes with which she grew up. As Judy Simons has observed: "(...) by its very attempt to give away as little as possible (Wharton's autobiography) discloses more than its author could have realised" (130).³ In other words, her refusal to openly deal with private issues reveals an inner conflict that betrays a process of self-presentation intended to show a unified, stable and coherent self, but which ultimately proves illusory. The writing "I" and the "I" which is being written about adopt two subject positions which are never equivalent. The confrontation of Wharton's public and private selves is an issue of central importance to the project I will be engaged with in the following pages: examining the theory of subjectivity present in *A Backward Glance*. A fundamental claim I will be making is that, although considered a text which typically proves the cold and elitist personality of Wharton, *A Backward Glance* lays bare, if read subliminally, other traits of the author that dismantle the myth of the "snob and aloof Wharton". I will pursue this topic in the light of two theoretical frameworks; first, the Foucaultian theory of "technologies of the self," into which I think Wharton's subjectivity fits; second, Toril Moi's more recent reworking of the critical category "woman," which finds in Wharton's autobiography an appropriate parallel.

In the foreword to *A Backward Glance* (1934) Edith Wharton somewhat confessed that her life story was uneventful and lacking in sensational material, thus apologizing for the supposedly scarce interest it would rouse in readers. The statement, while meaningful for understanding the author's personality, is also significant as far as the poetics of autobiography informing the text are concerned. She intimated that hers had been a humdrum life, in which friends and books had been the only exciting things. It is true that a great part of the book is best understood as a chronicle of English and American upper class society, as a novel of observation rather than an account of life events. Wharton rightfully chose to conceal a number of relevant facts about her life, of which there is not a single mention in the book. There is no reference to the psychosexual traumas she experienced throughout a

³ In her thorough analysis of Wharton's love diary, Judy Simons shows that Wharton used this private form of writing to make up for the social drawbacks that a too daring self-exposure would have implied for her. As she puts it: "Edith Wharton's love diary, the record of her passion for Morton Fullerton, contains a sexual directness which would have been quite unthinkable for public expression and which provides a heady counterpart to the controlled satires on contemporary society that formed the bulk of Wharton's published work. It shows the tensions that existed for her between the separate identities she created for herself, the authoritative *doyenne* of European society and the passionate solitary individual, aware of her own internal division" (17).



long period of her life: the painful relationship with her mother, who was not affectionate, and with whom she never identified⁴, and the sexual frustration her marriage at 23 brought her. She also fails to record the nervous breakdown she had in 1898, for which she was prescribed a rest-cure which resulted in a period of intense writing, culminating in the publication of her first collection of short stories — *The Greater Inclination* (1899). Her divorce in 1913, the sexual awakening she experienced with Morton Fullerton in 1908, and her lifelong love for Walter Berry, also go unmentioned in the book. And yet, on a closer reading and exhaustive analysis of her language, one finds numerous hints of Wharton's personal dilemmas and troubles. An example will suffice. The year in which her first volume of stories appeared (1899) she and her husband went to London, where she had achieved some popularity on account of her recent publication. For this reason she was compelled to stay there and meet other writers, something she was willing to do. Her husband declined, for “he was bored in London” and she had to acquiesce in his plans of leaving the city. The following extract records her reaction to this event:

The people about me were so indifferent to everything I really cared for that complying with the tastes of others had become a habit, and it was only some years later, when I had written several books, that I finally rebelled, and pleaded for the right to something better. (124)

Some things are worth commenting here. First, Wharton's careful choice of words in order not to sound offensive or rude. Second, the ambiguous way she had of referring to her anger toward those who treaded on her desires. And third, the lack of a clear exposition of the events so that her real feelings remained undisclosed. Actually, when she says “the people about me” she referred specifically to her mother and husband.⁵ Likewise, another word with a stronger effect such as “careless” or “inconsiderate” could replace “indifferent.” Similarly, the phrase “complying with the tastes of others” actually means “fulfilling the others' wishes” and, finally, her “rebellion” is a veiled reference to her divorce. In other words, Wharton's elegant and tidy expression served the purpose of hiding feelings and emotions she thought too personal to be exposed to public view. And yet, she did tackle private

⁴ It is quite significant that the picture of her mother simply highlights her physical beauty and elegance. She never refers to her as a tender or loving mother. The readers clearly detect that she was cold, stiff and reproving. By contrast, her nanny offered the degree of emotional contact and maternal affection that Wharton needed. Gloria C. Erlich has analyzed in detail Wharton's relationship with her mother and the psychological consequences to be elicited from it. See her “The Female Conscience in Wharton's Shorter Fiction: Domestic Angel or Inner Demon?”

⁵ Windy C. Petrie has analysed in detail Wharton's feelings toward both her mother and husband as intimated in her autobiography. Petrie construes Wharton's unsympathetic treatment of Lucretia Jones and Teddy Wharton as her attempt to “assign them to the realm of insignificance” (210), out of retaliation for their constant effort to thwart her self-fulfillment as a writer.

issues in her autobiography, no matter how indefinite or ambivalent she kept them. My intention is not, however, to survey the degree of truthfulness of Wharton's autobiography. I see the text both as the product of the writer's skill, that is to say, as a literary work, and as an exercise in self-presentation. Hence I will be concerned below with the data and ideas that do explicitly appear and which constitute the self-portrait the author deliberately intended to offer. I have assumed as a starting point that "autobiography (is not) a reflection of historical shifts in the ontology of the subject", but rather that it has "a constitutive role (...) in the production of subjectivity." In other words, "it is autobiography itself which produces the subject" (Radstone 203). It is no longer sensible to understand autobiography as an exact mirroring of the experiences of its author. This critical perspective on autobiography allows us to reconsider its philosophical features as a form of writing that promotes a given account of selfhood in a way that no other type of writing could ever do. By writing about one's self, the autobiographer constitutes his/her subjectivity textually and this self(textual)-constitution is preeminently an act of volition. Thus, any account of the self must be construed as resulting from a technique of self-representation that has been voluntarily employed, which elicits the textual inscription of the "I" in the terms desired by the author. Michel Foucault has theorized the individual's capacity to produce "subjectivity" (or "subjectivization") as "the procedure by which one obtains the constitution of a subject, or more precisely, of a subjectivity which is of course one of the given possibilities of organization of a self-consciousness" ("Return" 252-3). I suggest that this Foucaultian notion can be fruitfully applied to the way Edith Wharton presented herself in *A Backward Glance*. She could have resigned herself to being a society matron and hostess throughout her entire life but she strove hard to fulfill her literary vocation, despite the family's opposition. Thus, she became a writer through a process of self-transformation that culminated in the self-image of an ambitious, disciplined and autonomous woman. That she overcame the obstacles placed in the way of her self-determination is an indication of her strength, and in the course of writing about her life she produced her own subjectivity, at the same time practicing what Michel Foucault has called "technologies of the self," that is to say:

(...) techniques which permit individuals to affect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, their own souls, their own thoughts, their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, and to attain a certain state of perfection, happiness, purity, supernatural power. ("Sexuality" 367)

Wharton's status went through a process of transformation from that of an elegant upper class New York lady to that of a respected published author, and her autobiography traces this process. To achieve this goal she used several "techniques," as I will argue below. Writing her autobiography helped her shape and give coherence to the amorphous amount of material which was her life. Although Michel Foucault did not engage in analyzing contemporary technologies of the self, I claim that the writing of autobiographies conforms quite well to the scheme he devel-



oped, and Wharton's is proof of this.⁶ Self-writing can be approached as a technology of the self that helps subjects constitute themselves by means of a process of individualization meant to grant stability and immanence. Self-writing confronts the subject with him/herself and in so doing contributes to his/her coming to terms with the resulting life story. Thus, especially in the case of women, self-writing can be either liberating or constricting, depending on the goals achieved. As Margaret McLaren argues:

Autobiography can be either an exercise in subjection, if it produces the required truth about oneself, or it can be a process of subjectification, if one critically examines how one came to be as one is with reference to normalizing discourses. Autobiographies as projects of self-constitution are perilously poised between being an exercise in subjection and an exercise of subjectification. There are no guarantees that an autobiography will be an exercise of freedom.⁷ (152)

An important question emerges in the light of McLaren's formulation: What type of autobiography is Wharton's, an exercise in subjection or an exercise of subjectification? I would suggest that it does not fall completely into either category, but that it shows features of both. On one hand, it is an exercise in subjection in so far as Wharton has constructed a self-portrait that met the requirements of her social class regarding how a respectable society lady should conduct herself. As a member of the elegant upper class of old New York she could not depict anything that would disturb or offend the minds of relatives and acquaintances. Likewise, as a writer of novels of manners, neither could she shock her audience with unbecoming revelations. The resulting product is a most proper and conventional self-presentation.

On the other hand, Wharton's autobiography can be understood as an exercise in subjectification since we also hear the critical voice of the author commenting on crucial events of her life (her social debut at 17 and her decision to become a writer, for example). Hence, we can talk about a double-voiced structure or dimension in Wharton's self-portrait: The outer one, which recounts in an overtly detached tone aspects of her life she thought unproblematic and acceptable; and the inner one, which critiques some of the societal values to which she fell prey.

Throughout the book we come across different instances that can be said to illustrate the outer structure. Actually, the whole of it is seemingly dominated by this outer approach through which Wharton described people and places with distance and objectivity. Chapter 1, for example, deals with her ancestors, the origins of New York, the families that made up the New York aristocracy, her child-

⁶ See Foucault's essay "Technologies of the Self", especially pp. 18-21.

⁷ I am indebted to Margaret McLaren's use of Foucaultian theories for my analysis of autobiography, particularly chapter 6 of her *Feminism, Foucault and Embodied Subjectivity* (2002).

hood, parents and relatives, and so forth. More importantly, however, she takes pains to demonstrate the high degree of quality, civilization and “moral wealth” that the New York aristocracy had established in the country. As a matter of fact, she deplores that at the time of writing her autobiography there was a “great gulf” between the customs and social practices of her youth—the 1880s—and the present. She goes on to suggest that her sole motivation in writing the autobiography was to keep alive the memory of that historical period, which she deemed superior to the present one. Similarly, chapters II and III recount Wharton’s travels, the tours to Europe, the beautiful places she visited, constantly underscoring her aversion to “ugliness” and her attraction to classical beauty. She also stresses the solid manners learned during childhood, among them, “a reverence for the English language as spoken according to the best usage” (48), something she owed to her parents’ insistence on speaking good English. Actually, the first three chapters are better understood as a sociological account rather than a personal reminiscence of her life. Wharton also describes the occupations, values and ethical configuration of old New York society, commenting on their travels, dinners, and leisure activities.

Chapter V, “Friendship and Travels”, is concerned with precisely this topic, devoting significantly more pages to her friends than to her own husband. Actually, her marriage is not treated as an important event at all, she just recalls in an almost casual way that “At the end of my second winter in New York I was married” (90). From then on, the references to her husband are sparse. Obviously, Wharton did not want to give details about her distressed marriage. The account of her marriage, an event supposedly of major relevance in a woman’s life, is almost overlooked. By contrast, her life-long friends, such as Egerton Winthrop, Walter Berry and Henry James, did receive a good many pages; the very long chapter VIII, for example, deals in its entirety with Henry James. References to acquaintances, friends and other writers abound as well in chapters X and XI, where she gives a relation of every single person she had met or dined with in London and Paris.

But let us now turn to the analysis of the “inner” structure, which contains Wharton’s veiled critique of some of the gender and social assumptions that affected her personally. This inner structure is also the sphere where we can explore the theory of subjectivity that Wharton developed. It is of crucial importance to comprehend that these elements are not explicit in the text, but they must be searched for in the interstices of Wharton’s subtle language. Most are just hints or insinuations that the author did not want to make clear. In her effort to sound polite and respectful, Wharton never used words or expressions that might betray anger, frustration, satire, critique or sarcasm. And yet I will make the case that beneath Wharton’s impersonal style lies the indictment of patriarchal conventions and normalizing discourses that arrested the development of women. These criticisms are interspersed throughout the book and I will cite some examples.

In the first two pages of *A Backward Glance* Wharton recalls a scene from her childhood in which she, then a happy little girl, goes for a walk with her father. She is thrilled because, apart from having her father’s companionship, she is wearing a very pretty bonnet and other nice clothes. She qualifies the episode as follows:



It was always an event in the little girl's life to take a walk with her father, and more particularly so today, because she had on her new winter bonnet, which was so beautiful (*and so becoming*) that for the first time she woke to the importance of dress, and of herself as a subject for adornment—so that I may date from that hour the birth of the conscious and feminine me in the little girl's vague soul. (2, emphasis added)

The use of the 3rd person to refer to herself underscores the tone of detachment she aspired to impose, and we find here something of crucial importance for Wharton: The early recognition of the significance that being well dressed would have in her life. Actually, Wharton is consciously embracing her society's commodification of women as beings to be displayed and exhibited, provided they are properly *adorned*. She is presupposing that her identity will be based on being a "subject for adornment", that is, someone destined to be embellished for public view. Let us now recall Foucault's definition of the process of "subjectivization" as "the procedure by which one obtains the constitution of a subject, or more precisely, of a subjectivity which is of course one of the given possibilities of organization of a self-consciousness" ("Return" 252-3). It is important to stress that Foucault's notion implies the interaction of the self with other(s), thus yielding a twofold movement from the individual to the social domain and vice versa. Individuals do construct themselves but others likewise construct them. As Marie-Françoise Chanfrault-Duchet has observed: "To construct an identity, a subject takes up the models offered by society, as transmitted by culture, and shapes them into his or her own type, bringing into play a system of values" (61). As a woman born and bred into a fashionable New York family, Edith Wharton could not do without societal values and she seemed to accept them gladly, hence producing her own "subjectivity". In Foucault's terms, becoming a beautifully dressed girl was for Wharton one of the given possibilities for organizing her self-consciousness. Since this was sanctioned by her culture, she did not hesitate in complying with her society's system of values. While she was young she never questioned her mother's plans for her future, which basically consisted in marrying her off to the first appropriate suitor that came along. That was what all girls did and it never occurred to her that things could be otherwise. And yet, the description of her social debut at the early age of 17 sheds a new light on this issue. It is worth reproducing the paragraph in full:

(...) when I was seventeen my parents decided that *I spent too much time in reading*, and that I was to come out a year before the accepted age. The New York mothers of that day usually gave a series of 'coming-out' entertainments for débutante daughters, leading off with a huge tea and an expensive ball. My mother thought this absurd. She said her daughter could meet all the people she need know without being *advertised* by a general entertainment; and as my family kept open house, and as the younger of my two brothers was very popular in society, it was easy enough to *launch me* in this informal way. *I was therefore put into* a low-necked bodice of pale green brocade, above a white muslin skirt ruffled with rows and rows of Valenciennes, my hair was piled up on top of my head, some friend of the family sent me a large bouquet of lilies-of-the-valley, and *thus adorned* I was taken by my parents to a ball (...) To me the evening was a long cold agony of shyness. All



my brother's friends asked me to dance, *but I was too much frightened to accept, and cowered beside my mother in speechless misery* (...). (77-8, emphases added)

Obviously enough, Wharton did not welcome her being thrown to the social scene in such a way. The expressions “advertised,” “launch me,” “thus adorned” conspicuously convey her disgust with being commodified and publicly displayed. And although she clearly resented being treated like this, it is evident that the young and docile Edith was not able to overtly show her opposition against the process of sexual objectification to which she was being subjected. Perhaps it was because she only later became aware of the psychological costs this involved, or maybe because she was literally powerless to effectively counter her parents’ wishes. In any case, what can not be disputed is that she subjected herself to several forms of self and social surveillance. In this respect Wharton’s self-operations show the effects of what Michel Foucault called “panoptical” or “disciplinary” power. This form of power, typical of modern societies, is characterized by the individual’s willful participation in its schemes. Elements such as violence, coercion or physical punishment do not figure into this new constitution of power because its efficacy is ensured by the individual’s voluntary subjection to it, if unconscious. Edith Wharton participated in her own victimization probably because she did not consider it to be that. And yet in an early novel, *The House of Mirth* (1905), she dramatized the fate of a young fashionable girl who was not willing to subject herself to the game in which social relationships were approached as economic transactions. Maureen Montgomery has analyzed in detail how women belonging to the social elite of New York at the turn of the 20thc. were held up as arbiters and makers of refinement and good taste⁸. Drawing on Thorstein Veblen’s classic *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) she explores the role of women in imposing the notions of gentility, refinement, civilization, wealth and moral uprightness, by means of their public display of leisure activities such as going to art galleries, the theater, and the opera, and engaging in recreational activities and travel. The ostentatious possession of items such as houses, carriages, clothes, jewels and so on served the same end. This no doubt granted women some degree of social power, but, as Montgomery indicates, “it also brought (...) the disadvantages of sexual objectification and external surveillance and extended discourses of control aimed at disciplining the sexuality of young women” (168). Edith Wharton experienced these disadvantages, and while Montgomery is right to claim that “it was fiction that provided Edith Wharton with the discursive space in which she could challenge dominant discourses” (15-6), I would refine her statement by saying that Wharton’s autobiography also contains veiled commentaries on how she was personally affected by these discourses. Actually, when Wharton

⁸ Specifically, Montgomery’s book is concerned with examining how Edith Wharton’s fiction challenged dominant discourses about women. Literally, her project consisted in demonstrating that “(Wharton’s) literary work provides important insights into the predicament of New York’s high society” (16).



says that after the “first sad evening (of her debut)” many invitations to dinners and balls “poured in”, she is acknowledging her own sexual objectification. From that moment until her marriage six years later, Wharton went through the usual rituals any fashionable young girl of her position had to undergo: accepting invitations to dinners, lunches, the opera, walks, summer residences, and so forth. The negotiation of an advantageous marriage lurked beneath this social performance. As mentioned earlier, the Foucaultian notion of disciplinary power lies at the core of Wharton’s and many other girls’ consent to embark on this social career, designed especially for them. Wharton willingly succumbed to her culture’s plans because her social success depended on how well she was able to embody the notion of ideal respectable young lady. In the light of other statements found in her autobiography, as we shall see, it becomes clear that it was only after she had established a literary career that Wharton had courage enough to ignore social discourses. Becoming a writer granted Wharton the degree of self-confidence and determination she needed to achieve autonomy. Her literary career provides a fundamental insight into the process of her subjectification to the extent that it can be considered Wharton’s essential self-technology. In the pages that follow I will pursue the analysis of this theme.

Wharton described her tendency to make up stories while still a little girl as an impulse hard to resist: “The call came regularly and imperiously; and though, when it caught me at inconvenient moments, I would struggle against it conscientiously (...) the struggle was always a losing one. I had to obey the Muse” (35). She goes on to comment that she did not mind playing with other “nice” children her parents sought out for her, but that she “did not want them to intrude on her privacy” (35), so that she would not have anyone interfering in her making up habits. Wharton devotes quite a few pages to describing how her creativity developed and how she became a bookworm. This self-portrait already evinces the discrepancy between her inner, intellectual inclinations and the social prescriptions she was compelled to follow in the course of growing up. She states that her parents “were distressed by (her) solitude” and that they did not like her “reading too much” (35). Nevertheless, she continued to read extensively to the point that her childhood memories are set in her father’s library. Wharton’s literary vocation no doubt was problematic because “in the eyes of our provincial society authorship was still regarded as something between a black art and a form of manual labour” (68-9). Some things are worth commenting on here. First, Wharton’s qualifying her society as “provincial” (i.e. petty, trivial, superficial) implies that her society’s narrow-minded vision contrasted with her own wider and richer prospects. Second, she was perfectly aware of the class prejudices that her family and friends exhibited in a number of issues, among them, the literary profession. Engaging in literary matters was for the lower social class. Her own class, the leisure class, did not find it either appropriate or necessary. In pursuing her literary vocation, Wharton was making a serious blunder, but she was also subverting the gender codes of conduct which prescribed for women certain limitations of action and thought. By committing herself to reading and writing Wharton was consciously trespassing the boundaries established for young girls and this awareness impelled her to “keep her adventures with books with herself” (70) and to cherish “the secret retreat where (she) wished no



one to intrude” (70). So far, the contentious nature of Wharton’s literary vocation is plain, and it became more pronounced with time. Her individualized subjectivity was inextricably linked to her writing-self; this becomes evident in her reaction to seeing her first stories published in “Scribner’s Magazine”, which gave her “the pleasant flutter incidental to first seeing one’s self in print” (112). Significantly, she goes on to say: “I had as yet no *real personality of my own* and was not to acquire one till my first volume of short stories was published —and that was not until 1899” (...) (112) (emphasis added). Wharton’s words clearly emphasize the importance she conceded to her writing in the configuration of her individual identity. It was as a writer that she acquired the self-fulfillment of which she had been deprived when she was *launched* by her parents into New York society. And it was also as a writer that she could alleviate her personal anguish and misery. All this is to be surmised from her autobiography, lying within its inner structure, since did she did not express herself overtly on this matter. Edith Wharton’s self-constitution was made possible by means of her professional dedication to writing to the extent that she did not mind her friends’ disapproval. The following lines describe how she felt about this:

None of my relations ever spoke to me of my books, either to praise or blame —they simply ignored them; and among the immense tribe of my New York cousins, though it included many with whom I was on terms of affectionate intimacy, the subject was avoided as though it were a kind of family disgrace, which might be condoned but could not be forgotten. (...) At first I had felt this indifference acutely; but now I no longer cared, for my recognition as a writer *had transformed my life*. (144, emphasis added)

Wharton clearly resented her relations’ lack of interest in her books and her painful recollection indicates that her writing somewhat turned her into a sort of outcast. However, she was able to overcome the feeling of inadequacy all this provoked. Her words show a clear bearing on Michel Foucault’s definition of “techniques of the self” as reproduced above, and confirms that, if Wharton could “attain a certain state of perfection, happiness, purity, supernatural power” in anything, it was in her turning into a professional author. Her subjectivity was thus clearly circumscribed and determined by her writing career. The literary profession became the ultimate condition of Wharton’s life. Significantly, she titled “The Secret Garden” the chapter in her autobiography concerned with explaining her literary and technical views on writing. The inclusion of a theoretical chapter testifies to the importance that she conceded to her literary career for, as she said: “(...) no picture of myself would be more than a profile if it failed to give some account of the teeming visions which, ever since my small-childhood (...) have incessantly

⁹ Although she had published in 1924 *The Writing of Fiction*, a volume of essays where she spelled out her literary conceptions and artistic criteria.



peopled my inner world" (197).⁹ Her autobiography would be incomplete without the relation of her literary ideas, that were obviously of utmost consequence for her. Wharton the novelist cannot be extricated from Wharton the woman, hence the delineation of her subjectivity along the experiences she had as both.

Thus far, I have attempted to theorize Wharton's particular subjectivity on the textual evidence she provides us in her autobiography. I have claimed that after an early stage of acquiescence in societal norms about femininity, she then underwent a subjectivity-acquiring process that amounted to a technology of the self à la Foucault. Wharton's development as a human being paralleled her growth as a writer, this evolution being an integral feature of her maturation process. Against all odds, she became a writer and this transformation meant self-fulfillment achieved on her own terms. Thus, Wharton basically made use of two techniques of the self: first, the gradual dismissal of social prescriptions for women of her class; second, her firm and decisive dedication to writing. *A Backward Glance* is then the account of how she came to be what she considered herself primarily to be: a professional writer. Her autobiography makes one point manifestly clear: Wharton would eventually conduct herself as she chose, disavowing the norms and injunctions she found detrimental to her career. What her life story shows is that a woman's destiny is never wholly predetermined by gender alone, for her case proves that the constrictions placed on women's self-development can be overcome. In the last part of this article I would like to briefly show how Toril Moi's recent reworking of the critical category "woman" and her critique of current feminist theories of subjectivity based on the gender/sex distinction find an enlightening counterpart in Wharton's autobiography.

In *What Is a Woman?* (1999) Toril Moi raises an important issue: How can we rightfully answer the question of what a woman is in a given society without necessarily resorting to metaphysics, essentialism or biological determinism. In order to do so she proposes to reconsider the philosophical insights provided by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949). Moi claims that Beauvoir's book has not been properly discussed either in theoretical discussions or in women's studies courses. The French author's notions can help contemporary feminist theory recast some of its analyses that, according to Moi, remain encapsulated in the "exhausted categories of identity and difference" (VIII). Basically, Moi sets out to theorize women's subjectivity dispensing with the sex/gender distinction and starts with de Beauvoir's understanding of the body as a situation. Moi's reservations with the sex/gender distinction have to do with its incapacity to provide a theory of subjectivity valid for all cases and, as she points out, "Any theory of subjectivity that fails when confronted with a concrete case is not going to be able to tell us much about what it means to be a man or a woman today" (VIII-IX). And although it has been called into question by poststructuralist thinkers such as Judith Butler (who considers sex and gender to be similarly constructed) and Donna Haraway, the distinction remains a fundamental framework for feminist thinking. Nevertheless, Moi's intention is not to do away entirely with this concept. She rather holds that it is irrelevant "when it comes to producing a good theory of subjectivity" (6). The notions of sex and gender do not provide a sufficiently solid grounding for exploring subjectivity because other aspects such as class, race or nationality are left out of the



scene, and they are issues of abiding interest for a feminist analysis of selfhood. The case of Edith Wharton demonstrates nicely that her class and nationality played a central role in the configuration of her subjectivity in the same way as sex and gender. I have already shown to what extent her life was determined by social discourses and gendered norms of conduct. These rules, however, were not imperative for all women, only for those of the same social class. The concept of class is of vital importance in explaining the plight of Edith Wharton as much so as the concepts of sex and gender. Obviously, she saw herself involved in a set of social practices that were applied to her because she was, physically, a woman, but they were exclusively applied to women of her class. Toril Moi admits that biological facts do exist and that they play a fundamental role in women's lives, but not the same role and not in the same way for all women. She draws from de Beauvoir the idea that the effects of biology are not as pervasive as to determine the whole of a woman's subjectivity. She also concedes that gender configurations clearly bear on women's psychology and social agency (or lack of agency, for that matter), but theories of sex and gender "allow no opportunity for thinking that a woman's social class, race, nationality, or age might profoundly affect her way of being a woman" (57). The latter concepts have been totally subsumed under the sex/gender distinction but they deserve to be specifically addressed as crucial elements in their own right for an account of women's subjectivity. Hence she prefers to use the term "lived experience" to that of "subjectivity" because "it describes the way an individual makes sense of her situation and actions" (63). In this respect, Wharton's lived experience may certainly account for the kind of person she became and the actual circumstances that contributed to shape her personality. The sex/gender distinction leaves many questions unanswered when one uses it to understand, for example, why Edith Wharton remained married for so long to a man she did not love, or why she married him in the first place. Resorting to the notion of "lived experience", however, enables us to find feasible answers. As Toril Moi explains:

One aspect of that lived experience will be the way in which the individual woman encounters, internalizes, or rejects dominant gender norms. But this encounter is always inflected by the woman's situation, and that means by her personal and idiosyncratic history as this is interwoven with other historical situations such as her age, race, class, and nationality (...).(82)

Let's briefly analyse how each of the elements listed by Moi had a bearing on Wharton's subjectivity or "lived experience". To begin with, age; she was obviously too young to resist her parents' *launching* her into the marriage market of New York. She was confined to following the course predetermined by her parents, and she was not able to question, let alone oppose, their dictates. Being so young and unexperienced, Wharton had to internalize those gender norms and adapt to them as best as she could. She would eventually reject some of those norms, but it was a long time before she could rid herself of her family's influence. It should be noted that she sued her husband for divorce as late as 1913, when she was 51 and after 31 years of unhappy marriage.





Secondly, race and class, which are closely linked. Both contributed to her transformation into the fashionable lady of elegant society she became from the little creature born Edith Wharton Jones. Obviously, had she been poor and/or African-American, for example, her destiny would have been different. Her race and class had an important part in the shaping of her literary career as well. Wharton's novels are centered for the most part on women's experiences of her social class. Certainly, she wrote fiction which does not have this focus (for example, the so-called "New England novels"), but she elicited her literary subjects from the social settings she knew best. The characterization and language present in her novels do as well correspond to models she found in real life, that is to say, to real people she met in her social circle. On the other hand, Wharton's class affected her career in a more prosaic way, for her hectic social schedule did not allow her much time for writing. While it is true that Wharton can be considered a relatively prolific writer, one is to suppose that without having had to act as society matron and hostess, Wharton's literary output would have perhaps been far more extensive.

Finally, nationality; the fact that she was American was also determinant in her private and professional life. As affluent Americans, Wharton's parents could afford to make the tours to Europe which shaped the young Wharton's aesthetic taste, and which in turn influenced her literary style. It is well known that Edith Wharton extrapolated concepts typical of European classical art in her own literary endeavors. The construction of her novels is informed by classical notions such as form, design, order, proportion and balance.¹⁰ On the other hand, the fact that she preferred European standards of living and that she in some way looked down on American social life, determined her long sojourns in Paris and her extensive travels around Italy, Morocco or Germany, among other countries.

In Edith Wharton's lived experience a number of elements, such as race, class, age and nationality, interacted with those of sex and gender and contributed to mould her subjectivity in a specific way. Thus, the self-image she projected in her autobiography is quite in accordance with her own ethical, social and literary values. Whether or not this image mirrors the "real" Wharton should not concern us. My claim throughout has been that *A Backward Glance* discloses more about Edith Wharton than what she perhaps intended, provided that one is able to read subliminally. The coded meanings in the book are sufficiently telling as to theorize Wharton's subjectivity along the lines of a complex selfhood, predicated on a background that made the encounter with society's norms a conflictive, if eventually

¹⁰ However, her literary ideas underwent an evolution, which is traceable in a number of essays. Although this is not the main topic of my essay, I would like to briefly note that Edith Wharton's literary assumptions gradually changed from an initially rigid insistence on technique and form to a looser conception of the process of composition, emphasizing inspiration, spontaneity and naturalness in its stead. Her growing disagreement with Henry James, for example, is evident at different times in *The Writing of Fiction* (1925), where she charged that his method was too abstract and erroneously dependent on technique.

productive, event. She concludes her autobiography with “the world is a welter and has always been one” (379). One’s subjectivity is also a welter, I would add, and by writing her autobiography Wharton ordered somewhat the confusion within her life, yielding a self-portrait that was coherent at least with the self-narrative developed throughout the book.



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