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Traditionalism in the novels of Edith Wharton, Ellen Glasgow, and Willa Cather as controlled by their personalities

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TRADITIONALISM IN THE NOVELS OF
EDITH WHARTON, ELLEN GLASGOW, AND WILLA CATHER
AS CONTROLLED BY THEIR PERSONALITIES

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of English
College of the Pacific

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Margaret Aldridge
...
May 1956

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Edith Wharton, Ellen Glasgow, and Willa Cather are often mentioned together as traditionalists, the supposition being that their common interest was inspired by similar forces: all women, all of the same era, all greatly appreciative of many of the same values, and all doing most of their outstanding work during their middle and late years.

It has become a convenience of criticism and scholarship to consider authors as belonging to certain schools. It has also been a convenience to study the origins of these schools as social phenomena having more to do with the direction of society as a whole than with the individual psychological forces within each author. Such an approach may be adequate for a movement that rises to its apex and dwindles to a shadow all within one generation--as did the extreme Naturalism of Norris--, but it is not sufficient for traditionalism which has repeated itself several times throughout literary history.

It is, therefore, the purpose of this study to investigate the lives and works of Edith Wharton, Ellen Glasgow, and Willa Cather in order to demonstrate the different forces tending each towards vastly different

tradition-influenced work, specifically novels. In such treatment, each author can be presented individually in a brief biographical study, and then her novels can be discussed with her own psychological framework and the whole field of traditionalism kept in mind as a balance. The emphasis here will be upon the diverse influences in their lives and the extremely varied work these differences motivated.

Traditionalism will not be exactly defined because this paper has been undertaken with the hope of broadening rather than limiting the concept of "traditionalism." It is the intention here to investigate and evaluate both the intent and extent of the various degrees and elements of traditionalism as they appear in the bulk of these authors' novels.

In order that the role of traditionalism in the American novel can provide a background for the individual studies of these three authors, a chapter is devoted to a survey of traditionalism. This second chapter is a glance at traditionalism as it shows itself in a number of guises: homeliness, romance, sensationalism, and realism.

Edith Wharton is presented first because she is more nearly associated with the nineteenth century, although she did no really significant work until the century had come to its end. Also, an effort is made to establish a certain progression of concept from Edith Wharton to

Ellen Glasgow and, finally, to Willa Cather. Edith Wharton has been studied as a traditionalist largely influenced by her background; Ellen Glasgow as influenced both by temperament and environment; and Willa Cather as influenced almost exclusively by emotional need.

Just as the survey of traditionalism in the American novel is intended to provide a broad background for the discussions of individual authors, biographical material pertinent to each author's preference for traditional beliefs and manners is presented before each discussion of the traditional elements appearing in her work. This particular arrangement allows for the greatest facility in developing the theses.

A consideration of three more or less prolific authors makes it almost mandatory that certain limits be set upon the primary source material covered. There is a limit to the number of novels that can be read, assimilated, and noted thoroughly and accurately, as well as a limit to the usefulness of repetitious reading. The most successful method of controlling the primary sources proved to be the establishment of certain goals in the research, and therefore of certain qualifications that must be met by the selected material. One goal has been to gain as realistic and as whole a picture of Edith Wharton, Ellen Glasgow, and Willa Cather as persons as is possible by

reading all available biographical and autobiographical materials. Some of the impressions of Edith Wharton and Ellen Glasgow have been pieced together from critical essays and informal sketches because there is no definitive biography for either of them. It might be noted here that selection of biographical sources was no problem. If data were available, they qualified.

The important goal in selecting primary source material has been to gain a broad, rather than a detailed, knowledge of each author's work in the field of the novel. Readily acknowledged critical estimates have been invaluable in the selection of just which novels must and/or ought to be read. All of the novels figuring in evaluative controversies have been read with special attention given to their relationship to this thesis.

It is of immediate relevance to this dissertation that all of the more important works of each author can be shown to be those most greatly influenced by tradition. When an author is writing at his greatest potential, he is also writing that which is closest to him, to his ideals, his beliefs, his message, and his needs. It is hypothesized, although there does not appear to be a collective study of the type needed to prove such a theory, that the author is actually doing his best work because he is working on material and in levels dearest to him. Admittedly,

this theory, for lack of definite proof, is argued in a circle; but as it is elaborated and illustrated in the paper, it will develop substantial authority.

CHAPTER II

THE ROLE OF TRADITIONALISM IN THE AMERICAN NOVEL

Traditionalism has never been a fire brand in American letters; it has never cut a brazen swathe across the land or led an exciting movement. It has, rather, kept warm a cheery spot beside the fireplace. Its contribution has not always been great, but it has been representative of an influential core of American thought. Here an investigation of traditionalism as a separate entity will be presented; once the fiber of its solid force is established, traditionalism will be studied in a side-by-side comparison with other trends in the American novel and a step-by-step picture of its development.

Traditionalism has long been a solid reassurance of tested, respected modes of life, of a belief in an attitude toward life, of a set conclusion. It is the mass of ideas or beliefs that the past hands down to the present. It has a fixed or static quality. This "fixing" occurs, as Walter Greenwood Beach states in his Growth of Social Thought, when beliefs mark out a "way of life"; and, once they are "approved and sanctioned, and having gained such approval, they become solidified socially and are sacred."¹

¹Walter Greenwood Beach, The Growth of Social Thought, p. 8.

It is thus that the sacred aura of tradition precludes critical or investigative knowledge.² Beach pictures this a continuous struggle between the "authority of tradition" and the "emergence of new understanding,"³ this "new understanding" being the natural enemy of the "belief" and "order" that go hand in hand in hand with tradition.

The question naturally arises as to how completely this definition can be applied to literature and, then, to the American novel. Literary traditional elements may be considered those which an author has inherited from the past rather than those which he has invented,⁴ whether they be of style, form, or content. It would be well to keep in mind, however, that traditionalism, especially in literature, is not an absolute.⁵ Those who accept the gods of their ancestors do not necessarily accept the ways of their ancestors.

A distinction should be made between the fundamentally traditional literature defined above and the transient tradition appearing at the finish of each literary

²Ibid., p. 9.

³Ibid., p. 10.

⁴William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard, A Handbook to Literature, p. 436.

⁵Lewis Mumford, Faith For Living, p. 129.

cycle. The theory that tradition occurs in this way is presented by F. L. Pattee, in his comprehensive History of American Literature Since 1870, as an alternating current. Pattee shows that whatever other elements and trends are involved, there is a constant but gradual turnover from romanticism to traditionalism.⁷ A new, freshly inspired group of innovators arises to declare the old forms lifeless and outworn. These well established forms and conventions are carved up and fed to the young lions, much to the horror of the elders. The revolt triumphs and, inevitably, the years harden its ideas into the rules of art, and its spent vitality becomes an obedience to the letter rather than to the spirit. In this way we can see traditionalism as the natural termination of every new trend.

A concise study of traditionalism in American culture has been somewhat complicated by the relative youth of the country. The short span of years has tended to prevent generalities and, sometimes, to delegate great importance to small matters.

The opportunity to fall back on nice, comfortable traditions has not been prevalent in America. The attractions toward forward movement have always been relatively

⁷Fred Lewis Pattee, A History of American Literature Since 1870, p. 17.

irresistible to the spirit of the American people. Further democratization has been the aim, total expansion the cry! He who hesitated or turned back was in danger of being trampled, and the least that could happen was estrangement and public disfavor.

Are America and tradition incompatible, as it would seem? Is there no meeting ground? Van Wyck Brooks suggests a compromise in what he calls the "American Tradition": the tradition of the American Revolution; of the great democratic and revolutionary leaders: Paine, Jefferson, Crèvecoeur; of the Round-heads of the British Civil War.⁸ It is the tradition of Emerson and Whitman and Huckleberry Finn, "that paean of the inborn goodness of men," that is the only American tradition.⁹

This, however, does not appear to fit the above definition of "tradition." But this definition of tradition is not traditionalism itself. By definition, tradition is a static abstract, but what it is, now, as established static abstract, was once an unrelated mass of individual, developing strands, each with a similar but separate history. The founder of a tradition is a pioneer, a trail

⁸Van Wyck Brooks, The Confident Years, 1895-1915, p. 597.

⁹Ibid., p. 596.

blazer, such as Whitman. The pioneer is followed by many who recognize the significance of his discoveries and who adjust and modify his original idea to suit the many who seek to accept the way of life suggested by the pioneer. Then there are those for whom this tradition is not adequate; it is not part of their fortune in life to be of this said tradition. They must turn away from the future and stand aside from the present and seek a tradition that to them represents a philosophy, i.e., a way of life that promises the answers to the perplexities of existence.

As this nation is now in what appears to be a political transition period from the expansion and democratization of America to the probable socialization of the United States and to international integration, the "American Tradition" is either taking off to conquer new vistas or abandoning its glorious promise, depending upon one's frame of reference. There is probably justification in the prediction that a school of traditionalism is about to develop, very likely to be opposed by an equally vigorous school of forward looking romantics. There will be much "mourning" at the bar of the lost frontier and much heralding of rockets to the moon.

This "American Tradition" did not spring full-grown from the forehead of Benjamin Franklin or Thomas Jefferson. Its development was indeed a long, laborious process. In

discussing "The Americanization of the European Heritage," Leon Howard uses the figure of grafting foreign ideas and literary interests onto characteristically native ways of thinking.¹⁰ It is interesting that Howard assumes that this indigenous tree was hardy enough to bear the grafting of these four ideas: (1) rationalism of the French philosophers, (2) transcendentalism of the Germans, (3) grotesque romanticism of the Gothic, (4) solid realism of scientific investigation.¹¹ The native ways of thinking were not in any way pseudo-intellectual; they require rather concrete adjectives to describe them: hard-headed, realistic, and pragmatic.

Emerson exemplifies this grafting process by combining Transcendentalism with a thorough and genuine love of nature.¹² He was able to couple a devotion to the spirit of nature with a glorious enjoyment of its sight and fragrance and feel. Thoreau achieved the same combination of the freedom of the spirit and a practical intimacy with nature.¹³

¹⁰Leon Howard, "The Americanization of the European Heritage," The American Writer and the European Tradition, Margaret Deenz and William H. Gilman, p. 78.

¹¹Ibid., p. 79.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid., p. 82.

Howard presents his own thesis in neat contrast:

Yet if Emerson is compared with Carlyle, Hawthorne with William Godwin or George Eliot, or Whitman with Robert Browning, the English authors appear noticeably more inclined toward the Continental tendency to ask that their experience make sense in terms of some ideology. The literature of America lacks the formal intellectual quality which so consistently characterizes that of Europe and, to a lesser degree, that of England; but it does not lack an individual intellectual vigor which comes from the attempt to reduce an accepted doctrine to a personal belief. It is this unconventional flavor of individualism which keeps these literary fruits of American ingenuity . . . fresh.¹⁴

Before the Revolution, the American spirit had been set against a home literary product. The culturally minded had looked to Britain for literature and for critical appraisal.¹⁵ The earliest settlers had brought with them a rigorous determination to educate their young. There would be no barbarous colonists in the wilderness!¹⁶ This very conservation of European culture was greatly responsible for maintaining a high level of civilization in the movement toward the West. The settlers even clung to the Renaissance ideal of an aristocratic society governed by

¹⁴Ibid., p. 89.

¹⁵Lillie Deming Losche, The Early American Novel, 1789 to 1830, p. 1.

¹⁶Louis B. Wright, "The Renaissance Tradition in America," The American Writer and the European Tradition, ed. Margaret Denny and William H. Gilman, p. 3.

learned gentleman.¹⁷

But the Revolution, or rather the forces motivating the Revolution, changed this dependency on Europe. The newly confederated States began life with a strong bias against tradition. Strident American nationalism implied hostility toward established patterns in art as well as in government.¹⁸

There was not, of course, a clean, definite break with British art. The "silver cord" retained a high degree of magnetic attraction, and there were many frayed ends. Nor should it be supposed that the ideologists of artistic Revolution were the dominant voices or controlling factor in early American literary history. But the ideas had been formulated, put into print and widely discussed.¹⁹ This conflict used poetry and non-fiction for its battle field in the pre-Revolutionary days. But directly after the war, the infant novel entered the lists.

The earliest American novels were anything but promising. In fact, any number of otherwise objective

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Henry Nash Smith, "Origins of a Native American Literary Tradition," The American Writer and the European Tradition, ed. Margaret Denny and William H. Gilman, p. 63.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 64.

literary historians choose to overlook the first thirty-two years of the novel's history and to proclaim Cooper's The Spy as the starting point in its development. This is in 1821, however, and the novel had already made a brave start as far back as 1789, with The Power of Sympathy by William Hill Brown.²⁰

One would suppose that these first novels--and there were many of them--would be over-burdened with traditional elements. They were thin, fantastic episodes strung together by artificial devices, to be sure; and they were soggy with manufactured-in-Britain sentimentality; but the novel form had, of necessity, to oppose and win out over two of the strongest forces in Colonial society.

The actual conception of a novel in America was in itself anti-traditional. The early American spirit was set against a home literary product.

And, then, too, John Calvin shook a foreboding finger at all the lighter forms of literature--especially the novel.²¹ Alexander Cowie's definition of Puritanism emphasizes the need for security, for absolute good and evil, for a clear line of distinction between the elect and the

²⁰Losche, op. cit., p. 4.

²¹Ibid., p. 1.

damned.²² Is not that the safe security of a traditional authority?

Early novelists usually forestalled the pulpit critics by prefacing their novels with remarks explaining the great moral message contained therein that would serve to direct rather than to mislead the "young mind."²³ Their's was a moral code similar to that of present-day Hollywood, one in which the limits of evil are boundless as long as the evil-doers are killed off with bloody thoroughness on the final day of reckoning.

These early novelists added domesticity to the sentimentality and didacticism borrowed from England. It was a formula used by Richardson but pushed aside by the fantastic antiquity of the Gothic novel then reaching its nadir in England.

It is of perhaps inconsequential interest to note in passing that America really owes the novel form to the ladies.²⁴ Was the attraction toward an opportunity to hold forth at greater length and entangle lives in a myriad of illogical circumstances too irresistible to the feminine heart? Whatever the motivation for the women novelists,

²²Alexander Cowie, The Rise of the American Novel, p. 6.

²³Losche, op. cit., p. 2.

²⁴Ibid., p. 6.

they took full advantage of these particular opportunities.

As mentioned above, these early novels were strongly influenced by English authors. Although the eighteenth century was a period of great English novelists, Humphrey Clinker, the last outstanding novel of the century, was published in 1771.²⁵ This was eighteen years before The Power of Sympathy was published in 1789. The American novel began, then, at a rather inauspicious moment. It was drawing inspiration from a dry, almost polluted well.

The Power of Sympathy is representative of the general run of these early novels. It has sentimentality and didacticism galore around a hair-raising story of seduction, suicide, death, poison, near incest, and kidnapping--all within the confines of the American domestic scene.²⁶

Despite the efforts of the many early American novelists, however, the form went into a slump in America. With Americans looking to Britain for both literature and criticism to guide their taste and with American publishers pirating British novels, the small demand for the home product did not justify the output.²⁷

²⁵Ibid., p. 4.

²⁶Cowie, op. cit., p. 10.

²⁷Losche, op. cit., p. 82.

One striking exception to this dearth is Charles Brockden Brown, who, with his Wieland, has won the merit of having his worth debated by students of the serious novel. His form was the Gothic, the chain-clanging, castle-decaying, ghost-riddled Gothic of Walpole and Radcliffe. The Gothic form had never established its roots in American soil for three rather obvious reasons. The Gothic presented no ethical front, no underlying moral purpose; America lacked suitable aristocracy, a discouragingly small number of crumbling castles and maddened marquises; and America had entered the field too late--the fight had been won almost single handedly by Mrs. Radcliffe and perhaps should have been conceded.²⁸

Brown overcame these handicaps by the sheer intensity of his novels. He found mansions an adequate substitute for castles and psychological abnormality a substitute for the supernatural.²⁹ His adjustment of the Gothic form to the American scene is not as important to this study, however, as his use of realism and the influence of tradition on his works. Brown's realism is the realism of

²⁸Cowie, op. cit., pp. 21-22.

²⁹Losche, op. cit., p. 50.

manners and setting,³⁰ but his tradition is the tradition of romance. It was weird romance but romance none-the-less. And many found an excitement and an assurance in Brown's dramatization of heroic destruction of the demoniac.

With Cooper, American novelists discovered the optimistic romantic tradition. The American novel might be said to have re-established itself after it tried and failed to build an American audience.³¹ Cooper was definitely influenced by Scott with his humble characters, localized or national tales, and romantic landscapes. In the romances of history written by Cooper and his many followers and imitators, there is a strong feeling of respect for what "has gone before."

Cooper had successfully solved the problem plaguing American letters at that time. Most authors were caught in a quandary. If America abandoned European art forms, what would replace them? Reason was a fine basis for government, but what of imaginative, creative literature?³² Those trying to write as if they were Europeans found that

³⁰Ibid., p. 56.

³¹Ibid., p. 82.

³²Denny and Gilman, op. cit., p. 64.

literary modes did not ship easily across the Atlantic. And those trying to deal with American experience found their materials unalloyable with European literary forms.³³ Take for example, Daniel Bryan's Miltonic epic about Daniel Boone that invoked heavenly and hellish councils to prepare for the hero's combat against the Cherokees in Kentucky.³⁴ Cooper and several others, less distinguished, found the answer in nature. Both European eighteenth-century philosophical thought and America's own geographic riches led Americans to "turn to the fertile conception of nature."³⁵

Although Emerson was in no way a novelist, his influence in that field was great. As spokesman for the Transcendentalists, Emerson commended, with dogmatic assurance, reliance on self and on nature. He deplored literary reliance on Europe:

We all lean on England; scarce a verse, a page, a newspaper, but it is writ in imitation of English forms; our very manners and conversation are traditional, and sometimes the life seems dying out of all literature, and this enormous paper currency of Words is accepted instead.³⁶

³³Ibid., p. 65.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid., p. 64.

³⁶Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes, (ed.), Journals, p. 308.

Hawthorne's works present a clear-cut contrast to Cooper's. While Cooper sought the romantic past for its adventure value, Hawthorne had an almost neurotic concern for Puritan morality. He, like Poe, was out of his element in an America bent upon industrial expansion at the expense of the cultural arts.³⁷ Hawthorne was baffled by the disparity between American experience and literary tradition. To conquer this dilemma, Hawthorne combined romantic fantasy with psychological realism. Hard-headed dependence upon individual experience anchored his flights of romantic fancy to the firm reality of his observations upon life and upon the nature of man.³⁸

Melville was involved in a romantic will to believe, in the traditional European fashion, and a realistic demand to be shown.³⁹ Both Melville and Hawthorne sought out the "secrets of the universe and the nature of man" through a fictional theme.⁴⁰ They were "spiritual equals" and shared a "tragic vision of human life."⁴¹

³⁷Cowie, op. cit., p. 327.

³⁸Denny and Gilman, op. cit., p. 83.

³⁹Ibid., p. 84.

⁴⁰Cowie, op. cit., p. 363.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 380.

It might be said that in seeking after universal truths they were "magnificent" traditionalists, their goal the goal of a messiah. Hawthorne and Melville proved the measure of their greatness by "invoking the transcendental maxim that nature is the symbol of spirit."⁴²

Pattee describes the era of Emerson, Hawthorne, and Melville as the New England Period.⁴³ It was dominated by Brahmins and Bostonians who looked inward and cherished the English influence. Their solution to the dilemma of European form versus American experience was not available to the country as a whole because it "presupposed two centuries of New England theological background."⁴⁴ Poe is the one who missed this background, as he was something of a socially misplaced person. He hunted for roots in Boston, Baltimore, and Richmond, but ended in borrowing personalities from Byron, Coleridge or Keats. Because Poe lacked the substantial footing of the New Englanders, he lost himself in the European heritage rather than absorbing it into a solid American base.⁴⁵

⁴²Denny and Gilman, op. cit., p. 66.

⁴³Pattee, op. cit., p. 397.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 66.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 85.

This New England Period was followed by the daughters of these Brahmins rather than by their sons. They developed something of a school in the mid-nineteen-hundreds which might well be called the "Feminine Fifties."⁴⁶

It is not judicious to discuss Mrs. Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin in its literary framework alone, for this book takes a very important place in American history--a far more important place than its literary excesses would allow. Perhaps it is best to keep in mind George Sand's appraisal of Mrs. Stowe:

I can not say she has talent as one understands it in the world of letters, but she has genius, as humanity feels the need for genius,--the genius of goodness, not that of the man of letters, but of the saint. Yes--a saint!⁴⁷

It was this "genius" ^{who} that became a literary celebrity for the Abolitionist cause. She was the fine, compassionate, conservative person who decried the sensationalism of the ordinary novel, ^{the person} who belonged to the "genteel tradition" of Longfellow and Whittier.⁴⁸ Mrs. Stowe was a romantic of the commonplace, a realist of everyday life.⁴⁹ She was

⁴⁶Pattee, op. cit., p. 221.

⁴⁷Cowie, op. cit., p. 329.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 461.

⁴⁹Ibid.

as much a traditionalist as she was crusader. Joel Chandler Harris wrote of Mrs. Stowe's masterpiece:

The real moral that Mrs. Stowe's book teaches is that the possibilities of slavery anywhere and everywhere are shocking to the imagination, while the realities, under the best and happiest conditions, possess a romantic beauty and a tenderness all their own.⁵⁰

The best of these women, such as Sara Orne Jewett, developed beyond the sentimentality of Mrs. Stowe and the Europeanized culture of their fathers and established a school of traditional realists.

Pattee says of Miss Jewett that

She would preserve all that was finest in the New England that was passing, and put it into clear light that all might see how glorious the past had been, and how beautiful and true were the pathetic fragments that still remained.⁵¹

This was only so much breath holding, however, in preparation for what was to come. For with the close of the Civil War, America discovered her tremendous literary potential. The Civil War and the great Western expansion are given equal credit for shocking American writers into realizing the vast opportunities of America. In about 1870 American authors began to exploit the native riches in characterization, setting, and incident.⁵² It should be

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 117.

⁵¹Pattee, op. cit., p. 233.

⁵²Grant Overton, An Hour of the American Novel, p. 14.

stressed that there was little or no traditionalism in this movement. It was romantic, as are all new literary trends, and it was realistic. It produced a type of literature that was neither romantic nor realistic, but was characterized by "a blending of both methods, a romanticism of atmosphere and a realism of truth to the actual conditions and characters involved."⁵³ This era belonged to Twain and Eggleston and Harte.

This was the era of the short, sectional, humorous tale. The new Western movement was intellectually naive; it had no creative force within itself necessary to produce a great literary work of its own; but, in its new vigor, it did have the power to make European literature seem foreign and out of place.⁵⁴ In finding genuinely American roots for its inspiration, fiction discovered the romantic American past. Hawthorne had established the theory that America was barren of literary material and discouraging to romance. But the excess of realism in the 1880's, assisted by a rebirth of patriotism and interest in war resulting from the Spanish American fray, brought about a romantic reaction.⁵⁵

⁵³Pattee, op. cit., p. 23.

⁵⁴Denny and Gilman, op. cit., p. 78.

⁵⁵Pattee, op. cit., p. 403.

F. Marion Crawford attained a unique position in the new romantic movement. Although Crawford was superficially at home in almost any civilization of the past and although his romances were conventional, popular novels, his influence on the new group of writers was significant. He believed in and encouraged others to recognize the importance of art for its own pure beauty. Crawford's many novels were enormously popular with the reading public, and his popularity helped to establish the novel. He devoted himself to the novel form and thereby contributed to its development and success.⁵⁶

The regionalism that had been stimulated by the optimistic gambol with realism disappeared slowly as attention was diverted to the romantically historical novel. This return to history was led indirectly by Robert Louis Stevenson, but it was motivated by the attractions of America's emerging traditional cultures: the Spanish Mission period, the French Dominion in New Orleans, and the Chivalry of the Old South.⁵⁷ These varied traditions are represented by Jackson's Ramona, Cable's many novels, and Catherwood's The Woman in Armour.⁵⁸

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 389.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 245.

⁵⁸Ibid.

In the meantime the serious young journalistic novelists were crying for truth, truth, truth.⁵⁹ It was a violent realism in which tradition had no part.⁶⁰ Ideologically, it was heralding Truth as the Savior and it had a vigorous, graceless, sweeping style. Some of these Zola realists died early. Pattee suggests that it was no great loss to literature as they--especially Norris and Crane--had done their best work as very young men.⁶¹

The role of traditionalism in the American novel is often faint, so faint in fact that it sometimes disappears; just as often, however, it stands up proudly with force and imagination. The turn of the century was such an era. Howells was preparing the way for James with his concentration on the standards of style, finish and perfect English.⁶² Howells was a traditionalist. He treasured the conventions of society and disregarded the fantastic and improbable that marked the progressive realists of his day. Howells

⁵⁹There were Stephen Crane's Maggie; Frank Norris' Mc Teague and The Octopus; Charles Gilman Norris' Zelda Marsh; Jack London's many naturalistic novels and Upton Sinclair's Jungle.

⁶⁰Pattee, op. cit., p. 396.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 397.

⁶²Ibid., p. 217.

shared a deep reverence for the past with Booth Tarkington.

F. J. Hoffman presents the two opposing forces of the twentieth century as being James with his perfection of the art of fiction and the Naturalists with their concern for social relevance of the novel's subject matter and for the novelist's social responsibility.⁶³

James is discussed by F. L. Pattee as being a "reaction" from the vigorous New England school of Romantic Classicism--the school of Hawthorne, Melville, Emerson, and Lowell. James' was the Realistic Classicism, classic enough for Boston and realistic enough for the newly awakened reading public. What Pattee says of James he also says of Mrs. Wharton. They both concerned themselves with the art of the novel, studied intensely the older models, and presented subtle analyses of American social customs and moral character rather than a message.⁶⁴

It would appear that for the first time there are two definite trends running side by side in the same era. For it was during the height of James' influence that Dreiser was probing the morbid irregularities of the Ameri-

⁶³Frederick J. Hoffman, The Modern Novel in America 1900-1950, preface.

⁶⁴Pattee, op. cit., p. 187.

can scene. Overton credits Dreiser with introducing a new candor to the American novel--especially in so far as sex is concerned.⁶⁵ Canby in his American Memoir speaks of this candor as the "death of the Iron Virgin" and lists four influences: (1) the natural process of democracy in which woman herself recognized her equal position and relinquished the "glamour of invalidism," (2) the Freudian influence, (3) the recognition that total characterizations were never possible when sex life, at least one fourth of a woman's life, was omitted, (4) "the ancient rancor against the sexual tyranny of wife or mistress which men had been forced to leave unexpressed in print since the seventeen hundreds."⁶⁶ Another strong talent on Dreiser's side of the fence is Sinclair Lewis, whom Overton catagorizes as a "photographic realist."⁶⁷ Van Wyck Brooks praises Lewis highly as an artist and as a novelist; but he does find that Lewis, along with many of his generation, lacked a certain "enamoured localism," which he defines as an affection for the land they were eager to "reprove and chas-

⁶⁵Overton, op. cit., p. 105.

⁶⁶Henry Seidel Canby, American Memoir, p. 327.

⁶⁷Overton, op. cit., p.

tise."⁶⁸

It is Willa Cather who revelled in the American tradition. She is perhaps America's finest singer of the lost frontier. Miss Cather's novels were elegaic in feeling, lyric in quality.⁶⁹ One can picture her as Emily Dickinson's little "debouche of nature," leaning once more against the sun before it goes down.

This takes us up to the post-World War I era of the disillusioned young concerning whom so much has been written. The three novelists treated in the following chapters wrote in and during this era, but they were not of it. Wharton, Glasgow, and Cather were in mid-career by then, and they had already set their sights on past values, previous answers. But this happens to every writer. It is the law of what Overton calls an author's "vital era." We can ask no more than that the author depict life with perfection during the ten or twenty years when the world was at its "most vivid and his own life ran most strongly."⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Brooks, op. cit., p. 504.

⁶⁹ Granville Hicks, The Great Tradition, p. 223.

⁷⁰ Overton, op. cit., p. 126.

CHAPTER III

EDITH WHARTON

I. EDITH WHARTON: TRADITIONALIST OF SOCIAL BACKGROUND

Any attempt to scrutinize Mrs. Edith Newbold Jones Wharton closely is a difficult task. Although she herself published an autobiography and her close friend Percy Lubbock did well at capturing the essentials of her personality, the lady remains an enigma. Blake Nevius suggests this difficulty when he complains that there has been a conspiracy on the part of her friends to secrete the basic facts and much of the psychological data on Edith Wharton.¹

This study of early psychological influences on Mrs. Wharton is further hampered by her own conviction that nothing really important happened to her until she was thirty-five or forty years old. She discovered her soul when her first volume of short stories was published and accepted both by the critics and the public; and from that point, work and soul became interdependent. It is logical to suppose, however, that this did not just happen; it had to be the fruit of seeds planted many years

¹Blake Nevius, Edith Wharton; A Study of Her Fiction, p. 6.

previously. Because of the scarcity of pertinent psychological details, it is necessary to approach a study of the influences on Mrs. Wharton from another angle. As Mrs. Wharton's social background is believed by her biographers and critics to be the essential force among the known influences in her life, it will be discussed first and presented as of major importance.

Once the quality and importance of this social background have been established, a brief look into Mrs. Wharton's life will be attempted. This will be followed by a consideration of the important relationships in her life and the controversies these relationships aroused. Emphasis will then be placed upon Mrs. Wharton's development as an artist and upon her personality. These latter two sections will demonstrate the extent of influence exercised by her background upon her person and her actions.

Background of Edith Wharton

From the available data, it is evident that the greatest single force influencing Edith Wharton toward the conventional and the traditional was her social-economic environment. The New York of the 1880's and 1890's was there, always surrounding and supporting, forming both the breadth and limits of her life. It is, therefore, to

reminiscences of this greatly controlled and finely aristocratic society that the student must look for the source of her very traditional personality and work.

This same New York that controlled much of her life and work was presented in literature by Mrs. Wharton with perfection. Her world of the 1880's and 1890's was too highly cultured and too subtle in its infinite sophistications to be captured in anything less than her own finely drawn novels of manners. For it was not the brogans and surreys, the gas lights and coal-oil burners, the brownstone mansions and country estates that distinguished her special world. These were shared by rich and wealthy and moderately wealthy alike; for the well-to-do of various classes, they were common to the era. It was the basic, inclusive attitude of class consciousness that distinguished this "leisure class" from those who "went to business."²

Mrs. Wharton's entire circle was composed of those who enjoyed a "middling prosperity" because of the rapid rise in value of inherited real estate. It was the custom to devote oneself to friendship and travel; of this Mrs. Wharton says:

²In differentiating one class from the other, Mrs. Wharton reports that only one of her near relatives and not one of her husband's was "in business."

. . . when I hear that nowadays business life in New York is so strenuous that men and women never meet socially before the dinner hour, I remember the delightful week-day luncheons of my early married years, where the men were as numerous as the women. . . .³

This was also a society that admonished a young lady: "'Never talk about money, and think about it as little as possible.'"⁴ Having money was not vulgar; it was working to earn it and considering its value when one spent it that was vulgar.

It would be difficult to look at Edith Wharton in her native background without dealing with the concept of "snobbishness." Whether she was more or less snobbish relative to others of her society is not easy to judge. But an important part of the serious business of being upper-class was the maintenance of certain special privileges. It was a necessary job, and Mrs. Wharton did her share. Although she criticized her circle greatly for not upholding its standards, she seems not to have questioned those standards. Her attitude is seen the more clearly in A Backward Glance, in which she saves her greatest condescension for those who do not accept those standards.

An instance of Mrs. Wharton's superior attitude is

³Nevius, op. cit., p. 6.

⁴Ibid., p. 57.

found in a section of her autobiography in which she attributes her easy facility with words to her parents. Her mother, especially, met all incorrect, pretentious, or careless speech with a very derogatory smirk or lifted eye-brow. But what she abhorred most was ". . . the habitual slovenliness of those who picked up the slang of the year without having any idea that they were not speaking in the purest tradition."⁵

Mrs. Wharton shows a marked satisfaction in observing her social class going through the motions of gathering culture. This probably reflected the self-satisfaction of the group as a whole, as did the bulk of her attitudes. In speaking of her father's inherited library, Mrs. Wharton comments on the sets of French and English classics:

". . . in their stately calf bindings. Were these ever read? Not often, I imagine; but they were there; they represented a standard; and perhaps some mysterious emanation disengaged itself from them."⁶

It is much as if one gained a special merit in owning and ignoring a fine library. She goes further:

From my earliest infancy I had always seen about me people who were either just arriving from "abroad" or just embarking on a European tour. The Old New Yorker was in continual contact with the land of his fathers . . . (although he) did not, perhaps, profit

⁵Ibid., p. 50.

⁶Ibid., p. 52.

much by the artistic and intellectual advantages of European travel.⁷

Perhaps there is even more merit in neglecting advantages one actively seeks.

Mrs. Wharton describes the social pattern of these European travels and allows us to observe one of Old New York's niceties of behavior:

It was thought vulgar and snobbish to try to make the acquaintance in London, Paris, or Rome, of the people of the class corresponding to their own. The Americans who forced their way into good society in Europe were said to be those who were shut out from it at home; and the self respecting American on his travels frequented only the little 'colonies' of his compatriots already settled in the European capitals, and only their most irreproachable members!⁸

Mrs. Wharton saw clearly the folly of such insular behavior and used it as a minor theme in some of her stories.⁹

Another evidence of Old New York's isolation was its unfriendly attitude toward writers. Of all the authors of superior birth and varying literary prestige, only Washington Irving and Longfellow were considered socially

⁷Ibid., pp. 261-262.

⁸Ibid., p. 62.

⁹In House of Mirth, Mrs. Wharton uses the covert behavior of a shallow group of European travelers to heighten the desperate circumstances surrounding Lily Bart. And in the short novel, False Dawn, the author shows the social ruin of Lewis Raycie who looked for companionship and social entertainment in Europe with Europeans.

acceptable. Mrs. Wharton attributes the reluctance of the upper classes to receive most authors to an "awe-struck dread" of the intellectual effort that might be required of them rather than to snobbishness.¹⁰ And this may very likely be true, for Mrs. Wharton alluded often to the fact that her close friends and family group did not tend toward intellectual or brilliant conversation.¹¹

Of her own literary renown, the Whartons and the Joneses, the Newbolds and the Old Vander Yorkers had nothing to say. Her old friends were puzzled and embarrassed. The situation created a kind of constraint between her and the various branches of her family:

None of my relations ever spoke to me of my books, either to praise or to blame--they simply ignored them . . . the subject was avoided as though it were a kind of family disgrace.¹²

Brief Study of Edith Wharton's Life and Friendships

The attitudes of the society into which she was born and in which she lived for almost forty years are

¹⁰Ibid., p. 69.

¹¹Mrs. Wharton says of dinner party conversation in A Backward Glance that "Small parochial concerns no doubt formed the staple of the talk. Art and music and literature were rather timorously avoided (unless Trollope's last novel were touched upon . . .) p. 61. And actual authorship was regarded "as something between a Black art and a form of manual labor." p. 69.

¹²Edith Wharton, A Backward Glance, pp. 143-144.

supposed in this study to be the determinants of the rich, low murmur of the past as it appears in The Age Of Innocence and Old New York and other of her better works.

However, Mrs. Wharton's life history is not to be shunted aside as not bearing on this study. Not only is her life history and a sketch of her personality essential to this study as a whole, Mrs. Wharton's very circumspect life is the greatest body of evidence supporting the earlier contention that her traditionalism was primarily controlled by her social environment.

One of two very definite, solid facts that are known about Edith Wharton's very early years is that she was an avid reader. Her instinct for reading was so intense and so natural that her driving genius must surely have been part of the Genius that first created language. For it would take a driving genius of Edith Wharton's integrity to surmount a wilderness of ignorance and to provide the first tools for the first thinkers to transcribe their thoughts. Certainly, as a child, Edith received no encouragement in that intellectual Philistia in which everyone knew the best wines and viands, the best vases and Orientals, the best jewels and furs, the best every thing, in fact, but the best ideas and theories. Edith had to "clear" everything she read through her mother, who

said, "No," to everything not bound in a set and thereby labeled a "classic." She read English and French and German novelists and philosophers. She herself expresses gratitude that all but the finest works were denied her; it strengthened her natural discrimination.¹²

In glancing back, Mrs. Wharton counts the birthday she awoke to find beside her bed Buxton Forman's great editions of Keats and Shelly as the most momentous of her life. "Then the gates of the realms of gold swung wide, and from that day to this I don't believe I was ever again, in my inmost self, wholly lonely or unhappy."¹³ She speaks also of long "music-drunken hours on . . . (the) . . . library floor, with Isaiah and the Song of Solomon and the Book of Esther."¹⁴

This desire of Edith's to spend many hours reading and studying was so foreign and worrisome to her parents that the Joneses brought their daughter out at seventeen, a year early.¹⁵

Mrs. Wharton's great fondness for travel is also

¹²Ibid., p. 69.

¹³Ibid., p. 71.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 70.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 77.

well substantiated. Ever since she was very young, she had gone with her parents every year or so to Europe. She reports that she became a seasoned traveler before she was five and that she continued her almost yearly journeys to France and Italy until she gave up returning to America altogether and remained permanently overseas.

Enjoyment of travel was one of the strongest bonds she shared with her husband. Percy Lubbock, in his very helpful book, Portrait of Edith Wharton, discusses this facet of their life and describes their life together before Mrs. Wharton became a writer. Before she began thinking of writing, she led a "fashionable" life. It was a life made up of entertaining and visiting, travel and gossip, gardening and gardens. She was not, at this time, suppressing or sublimating a desire to write; she simply had not realized that she could write or that it could bring many enriching rewards.¹⁶

As Mr. Wharton's role in Edith's life is something of a problem to biographers, he should be studied, if only briefly. He appears to have had little influence on her life and work. Mrs. Wharton scarcely mentions him in her autobiography, and never does he figure in revelations of her developing and ripening spirit and mind and

¹⁶Percy Lubbock, Portrait of Edith Wharton, p. 24.

soul. This is saved for Walter Berry, Egerton Winthrop, Vernon Lee, George Cabot Lodge, Clyde Fitch, Henry James, and Howard Sturgis.

Percy Lubbock feels that the Whartons were as happy as any other couple of their opposite temperaments: he a lover of the country and animals; she a devotee of intellectual pursuits. Later in their married life "something" seems to have happened to Mr. Wharton. On this point, there seems to be a large amount of shilly-shallying and needless beating around the bush by Mrs. Wharton's friends. Anne Fremantle, who is numbered among Mrs. Wharton's friends, speaks plainly of his "melancholy" and then of his eventual "madness;" she uses innuendo to hint at even greater mysteries.¹⁷ Because Mrs. Wharton had signed her fortune over to him and because his "madness took the form of certain irresponsibilities with money," she was therefore "obliged to divorce him, in order to save her considerable fortune."¹⁸ Lubbock explains Wharton's derangement as an "unreasoning anger over trifles."¹⁹ And he considers the finality of the sale of The Mount, for many

¹⁷H. C. Gardiner, ed., Fifty Years of the American Novel, p. 17.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Lubbock, op. cit., p. 62.

years their Lenox home, and their move to Paris to be the greatest blows to Wharton's equilibrium. While the move was fortunate for Edith, it robbed her husband of his favorite pursuits--animals and land. In Paris he was lost, unsuited and uninterested.²⁰

The name of Walter Berry is often coupled with the mystery of Mr. Wharton's mental health. Although the intensity of his relationship with Mrs. Wharton has long been in question, it is known that she relied heavily on his advice and criticism. In A Backward Glance Mrs. Wharton begins by under-playing Berry's role in her life, mentioning him as one of several interesting friends. But as references to his helpfulness increase, she explains her feelings more fully:

I suppose there is one friend in the life of each of us who seems not a separate person, however dear and beloved, but an expansion, an interpretation, of one's self, the very meaning of one's soul. Such a friend I found in Walter Berry.²¹

Later she says of Walter Berry:

I cannot picture what life of the spirit would have been to me without him. He found me when my mind and soul were hungry and thirsty, and he fed them till our last hour together. It is such comradeships, made of seeing and dreaming, and thinking and laughing together, that make one feel that for those who have shared them

²⁰Ibid., pp. 62-64.

²¹Wharton, op. cit., p. 115.

there can be no parting.²²

It is in the shadow of such eulogies that no mention whatever of Mr. Wharton as companion to mind or soul appears to indicate that the marriage was less than fulfilling.

Miss Fremantle states that Walter Berry wanted Edith Jones to marry him soon after she "came out." But gossip whispers that he was not a brilliant enough match for the young heiress and that he was refused. They later became so close that she:

" . . . left instructions that she was to be buried beside him, and on her grave, according to her own instructions, a cross was placed, upon which the words O Crux, ave, spes unica were carved."²³

Fortunately, for this study, the material pertinent to the hypothesis that the greatest, single force influencing Edith Wharton to explore the backward-facing stratum of Old New York society was her physical environment is thoroughly chronicled by many critics and her very verbal portraitist, Percy Lubbock, and substantiated by Mrs. Wharton.

The Development of Edith Wharton into an Author

Percy Lubbock speaks of Edith Wharton as "essentially the daughter of New York." He means, of course, the

²²Ibid., p. 119.

²³Gardiner, op. cit., p. 17.

Old New York into which she and her circle were born.

Then he adds:

But she was a singular young woman. Though she was pleased with her place, well content to keep and adorn it, and never had the least indication to flaunt the law under which she was born, she was determined to have a great deal more than the mere good portion prescribed for Edith Jones.²⁴

It is this "great deal more" that Mrs. Wharton discovered within her person and within the limits of her talent. It is this something "more" that Mrs. Wharton had in mind when she referred to herself--as she was fond of doing--as a "self made man."²⁵

Mrs. Wharton records only one incident as being important to her development as a person prior to the publication of her first volume of short stories. This was a four-month cruise that she took with her husband and another friend on the Mediterranean. In making the cruise, they had gone against the wishes and advice of family and friends, who were extremely conscious of the unconventional and dangerous aspects of the trip. But these criticisms were minor compared to the Whartons' own realization that they could not afford the journey! Fortunately, a miserly old uncle died and left them enough to cover the expenses

²⁴Lubbock, op. cit., p. 12.

²⁵Ibid., p. 11.

more than adequately. This taught her that she must never distrust her star when the chance came to do something "difficult and wonderful."²⁶

Otherwise, besides her many intellectual friendships, reading habits and European travels, Mrs. Wharton did not find much to interest her in her life before 1899, when her first volume of short stories was published. Of this event she says:

I had written short stories that were thought worthy of preservation! Was it the same insignificant I that I had always known? Any one walking along the streets might go into any bookshop, and say: 'Please give me Edith Wharton's book', and the clerk, without bursting into incredulous laughter, would produce it, be paid for it, and the purchaser would walk home with it and read it, and talk of it, and pass it on to other people to read!²⁷

The development of Mrs. Wharton into an author of stories happened quite naturally as the out-growth of her physician's suggestion that she try writing to assist her recovery from a nervous breakdown.²⁸

Edith Wharton came very close to never writing at all. When she did, however, she can truly be said to have "found" herself; and, while she did not give up any of the social attitudes of her circle, she gathered renown and

²⁶Wharton, op. cit., p. 100.

²⁷Ibid., p. 113.

²⁸Gardiner, op. cit., p. 18.

great talent around her and rose above the limits of an exclusively "fashionable" life.

The Personality of Edith Wharton

Although great pains have been taken to emphasize that Mrs. Wharton's bent toward traditionalism was most forcibly influenced by her physical and cultural environment, there has been no attempt entirely to remove the possibility of personality influences. But as it cannot be ascertained with enough certainty what these inner conflicts may have been, it would be best to study the outward manifestations of these emotions--her behavior. Such a sketch will also serve to strengthen the supposition that she was the product of her class both as a writer and as a person.

Mrs. Wharton appears to hold a concept of personality somewhat different from the one usually held. For her, personality seems to mean her work and intellectual comradeship and recognition. Of this she says:

What is one's personality, detached from that of the friends with whom fate happens to have linked one? I cannot think of myself apart from the influence of the two or three greatest friendships of my life, and any account of my own growth must be that of their stimulating and enlightening influence.²⁹

²⁹Wharton, op. cit., p. 169.

Fortunately, others have been able to see Mrs. Wharton as quite an individual--clear cut and well made. Lubbock again is the source for this description of Mrs. Wharton as she sits up-right and straight-backed--her habitual position--:

And her face, not a young face at all, rather worn and reticulated in spite of the youth of her figure and movement, and not a striking or a strongly marked face, nor one that told much of herself.³⁰

And C. L. Hinds quotes an unidentified English woman as describing Mrs. Wharton:

. . . brown hair, exquisitely dressed, a finished manner, and an air, oh, you know the kind of air that glides about European letters and arts and looks startled when anyone mentions America.³¹

This attitude was undoubtedly the reflection of her rather "chill" personality. Although Mrs. Wharton claims to have been shy and although Percy Lubbock does his best to assume that she is correct, her behavior lead everyone--including Lubbock--to think otherwise. He says:

. . . it will be vain . . . to pretend that she was always sweetly and mercifully kind. . . .
. . . nobody can rightly picture her as she was who does not see her capable at times of marked--and often apparently quite uncalled for--asperity.³²

³⁰Lubbock, op. cit., p. 3.

³¹Charles Lewis Hinds, Authors and I, p. 308.

³²Lubbock, op. cit., p. 29.

This was probably partly caused by her disposition, but it was also the result of a very strong will. For as Lubbock says:

. . . you could bind the unicorn to harrow the valleys as soon as you could fasten this woman by any will that isn't hers.³³

This rather imperious trait was combined with the "merciless perfection" of which Van Wyck Brooks speaks. This was reflected in the lack of spontaneity, and lack of humanity in her houses, her taste, and her gardens of clipped greenery that precluded blossoms.³⁴

Her strength of will and hauteur of personality appear to have been strongly integrated with another unattractive trait which can only be described as "snobbishness." Brooks reports that she was always ready with cold stares for anyone who encroached upon the small "caste prerogatives" that she valued highly.³⁵

Mrs. Wharton's strong dislike of children was part of the same picture. Miss Fremantle suggests that children "were an interruption of the well-ordered life" she lived.³⁶

³³Ibid., p. 10.

³⁴Van Wyck Brooks, Confident Years: 1885-1915, p. 294.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Gardiner, op. cit., p. 17.

Her habit of always sharing her attention in company exclusively with the most brilliant and renowned to the noticeable discomfort of lesser persons is also another facet of this same attitude. Lubbock says, ". . . she wasn't in the habit of delving into shyness, she was accustomed to see gifts laid before her . . ."37

Lubbock, although denying that he is qualified to explain this hauteur, does a very fine job of it:

Perhaps the neatly rounded world in which she was bred was not very good for her in this respect. It was small--and she couldn't be unaware that she was the cleverest person in it; it was small--and so it was quite clear who were outside it, and they could be kept outside; it was small--and it might look small in comparison with other worlds, if its worth weren't unmistakably asserted by its bearing.³⁸

It is unfortunate that critics have tended to emphasize the rigidities of Mrs. Wharton's personality. This has been done, of course, to explain the author's preference for an aristocratic circle and rejection of the common American dream. But there are other facets of her behavior, an understanding of which are important to a well-rounded picture.

Mrs. Wharton had an active, intensely intellectual fervor. Percy Lubbock's Portrait is an effort to capture

37Lubbock, op. cit., p. 9.

38Ibid., p. 29.

the atmosphere of gay wit and intellectual force that she created in and demanded of her circle of expatriates. His first chapter is devoted to a breathless account of her brief "flashes" upon England, which were "heralded by what Henry James called 'urgent and terrible signals.'"³⁹ If Mrs. Wharton were prone to reserve and asperity in certain groups, her easy response in her own circle of cultured literari demonstrated that she was selective rather than unresponsive.

A comparison of Lubbock's Portrait with Mrs. Wharton's own reminiscences makes one thing very evident: Edith Wharton's avenue to other personalities was through the mind. The "game of conversation" delighted her.⁴⁰ Lubbock describes her response when he says:

There was no trifling when serious fare of the right kind was on the board. I don't know whether she fell on it more avidly when it was talk about people or talk about books; but in any case the tone, remember, must find and keep its height . . . the talk runs with a swing and a lift in it, throwing itself forward from point to point: talk that flings out and glances wide, not peers or burrows. And when it ends as it began, in an explosion of fun, none of the highest, in which decorum is blown out of window, all the more surely it is the talk of Edith Wharton enjoying herself among her friends.⁴¹

³⁹Lubbock, op. cit., p. 1.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 56.

⁴¹Ibid., pp. 56-57.

In the preceding passage, Mrs. Wharton explains the importance to her of intellectual companionship. And because she was a person of great wit and humor, she often gained inter-personal communion for herself with shared laughter and recognition of a fine jest.

Lubbock is regretful for the many whom Edith Wharton shut out of her companionship; but, as her friend, he seems to feel that those who did gain her friendship were richly rewarded.

II. THE TRADITIONAL ELEMENTS IN THE NOVELS OF EDITH WHARTON

This study of Edith Wharton as a traditionalist will of necessity be an incomplete picture of the author's total contribution. Whereas Glasgow and Cather are evaluated favorably on the strength of their belief in certain lasting and revered values, Wharton wins praises as a stylist, an author for whom structure and form, words and word arrangement are of primary importance.

The reason Edith Wharton is not strongly representative of the traditionalists must be investigated. Such a study more or less defines the limits of the remainder of this chapter. Once the limits of Edith Wharton's traditionalism, physical, mental, and psychological,

have been established, the material presenting the extent to which she is traditional will be discussed. The importance of cultural advantages will be examined first, for they provide the background which is of primary importance both to Mrs. Wharton and to her characters. Against this background Mrs. Wharton present several serious ideas. These ideas are the themes that she develops in her significant works. The discussion of theme as handled here can best terminate with the traditionally influenced philosophy of The Age Of Innocence and the four short novels grouped together in the Old New York collection. An evaluation of Ethan Frome seems essential, especially since the novel is highly regarded by many critics; some praising it over and above The Age Of Innocence. Finally, characterization is strongly interwoven with Mrs. Wharton's two themes, demonstrating her basic traditionalism.

Traditional Background

As a traditionalist greatly influenced by her background, Edith Wharton is distinctly restricted. For Mrs. Wharton is at heart a critic, a very agile, clever, and witty critic. Edmond Wilson, in his illuminating study, "Justice to Edith Wharton," says that "at her strongest and most characteristic, she is a brilliant example of a

writer who relieves an emotional strain by denouncing his generation."⁴² She is prevented from being an eulogistic traditionalist because she is a critic; and her criticism, while strong in itself, is weakened by the significance of the material that she has at hand to criticize.

James Gray writes that she aimed at unmasking the vulgar idiocy of her smart world. It was, as Gray interprets it, a trivial task; Edith Wharton turned her "canon on gnats."⁴³ Gray's criticism is motivated by his extraordinary enthusiasm for Mrs. Wharton's greatly flexible and graceful style, her witty epigrammatic flair, and her "sly insight," which he feels have been wasted.⁴⁴ Lily Bart's clever analysis of the guests at one of the numerous dinners in House of Mirth is an example of the waste Gray means:

She looked down the long table, studying its occupants one by one, from Gus Trenor, with his heavy carnivorous head sunk between his shoulders, as he preyed on a jellied plover, to his wife, at the opposite end of the long bank of orchids, suggestive, with her glaring good-looks, of a jeweler's window lit by electricity. And between the two, what a long stretch of vacuity . . . Carry Fisher, with her shoulders, her eyes, her divorces, her general air of em-

⁴²Edmond Wilson, "Justice to Edith Wharton," New Republic, XCV (1938), 209-213.

⁴³James Gray, On Second Thought, p. 86.

⁴⁴Ibid.

bodying a "spicy paragraph"; young Silverton, who had meant to live on proof reading and write an epic, and who now lived on his friends and had become critical of truffles; Alice Wetherall, an animated visiting-list, whose most fervid convictions turned on the wording of invitations and the engraving of dinner-cards; Wetherall, with his perpetual nervous nod of acquiescence, his air of agreeing with people before he knew what they were saying; Jack Stepney, with his confident smile and anxious eyes, half way between the sheriff and an heiress; Gwen Van Osburgh, with all the guileless confidence of a young girl who has always been told that there is no one richer than her father.⁴⁵

This passage is probably one of Mrs. Wharton's most brilliantly written summaries of her circle, but it is by no means the only one. Such descriptions abound in The House of Mirth. They appear so often that the reader begins to wonder if these people are worthy of anything at all, even the story they are enacting. Mrs. Wharton not only turns her "canon on gnats"; the splendor and accuracy of her canon shrinks the gnats to microscopic antibodies.

Significance of Mrs. Wharton's Frame of Reference

As Mrs. Wharton continued to write and was challenged by the rise of the Naturalists, she found that the critics were deserting her. In A Backward Glance, she speaks for the traditionalists:

Novelists of my generation must have noticed, in

⁴⁵Edith Wharton, The House of Mirth, pp. 87-88.

recent years, as one of the unforeseen results of "crowd-mentality" and standardizing, that the modern critic requires every novelist to treat the same kind of subject, and relegates to insignificance the author who declines to conform. At present the demand is that only the man with the dinner pail shall be deemed worthy of attention, and fiction is classed according to its degree of conformity to this rule.⁴⁶

Mrs. Wharton seems to have been very aware that her subject --"fashionable New York"--seemed to fall most completely "within the condemned category":

There it was before me, in all its flatness and futility, asking to be dealt with as the theme most available to my hand. . . . The problem was how to extract from such a subject the typical human significance which is the story-teller's reason for telling one story rather than another.⁴⁷

Edith Wharton's own answer was that:

. . . a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideals.⁴⁸

Certain critics, drawing evaluations from their own standards and, perhaps, crowd mentalities, have their own explanations for Mrs. Wharton's failure to win their approval. Granville Hicks is unimpressed with her effort to picture the dramatic significance of her fashionable circle because she did not attempt "resolutely" to discover why

⁴⁶Wharton, A Backward Glance, p. 201.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 207.

⁴⁸Ibid.

the monied classes did not conform to her aristocratic ideals nor to question the whole concept of an aristocracy in the United States.⁴⁹ Helen and Wilson Follett find that "the truth of life is here, but not the meaning of truth."⁵⁰ Blake Nevius, who appears to be objectively partial to Mrs. Wharton, regrets that her stories are no longer being included in the latest anthologies. They are not placed among "dubious immortals" such as O. Henry and Hamlin Garland:

The implication, I suppose, is that she can no longer hold her place by virtue of her craftsmanship alone and that her subject for the most part has been better handled by Henry James.⁵¹

Mrs. Wharton's limited frame of reference can not be emphasized too much. For it must be clearly understood that although she criticized and was dissatisfied with almost everything in fashionable New York life, it was her world; and she could also defend it with great zest. In order to clarify her dilemma, it would be well to quote from Van Wyck Brooks' comparison of Mrs. Wharton to one of her most successful heroines, Lily Bart:

It was the weakness of Edith Wharton that she was too deeply involved in this world which, as Lily Bart

⁴⁹Granville Hicks, The Great Tradition, p. 219.

⁵⁰Helen and Wilson Follett, Some Modern Novelists, p. 295.

⁵¹Nevius, op. cit., p. 3.

said, it was "easy to despise," while it was as difficult for her as for Lily "to find any other habitable region,"--a region that might have given her a standard and a scale.⁵²

Mrs. Wharton wisely did not often attempt to depict that which she did not know. The difficulty lies rather with her choice to acquaint herself as little as possible with America or Americans. Brooks suggests that no one would ever have guessed from reading Mrs. Wharton that the West Willa Cather wrote of even existed. This whole vast region was merely a:

. . . world of Baptist church-suppers, black mailers, realtors, drummers and shady deals. It was part of the dim dingy waste in which, for Edith Wharton's mind, the humbler classes carried on their vague existence, --the "fat man with his stomach and soft pale lips" and the waitresses with their "port faces" and brazen eyes.⁵³

Fashionable New York

What, then, did Mrs. Wharton choose to capture with her art? It is misleading to suppose that the author concentrated wholly upon fashionable New Yorkers in New York. For Mrs. Wharton, who eventually became a full-time expatriate, gave her stories much of their meaning by creating a trans-oceanic society that travelled from con-

⁵²Brooks, op. cit., p. 297.

⁵³Ibid., p. 286.

continent to continent with easy facility. In finding fashionable New Yorkers too good for America, she says one thing; and in finding them not good enough for Europe, she says another. And both of these statements combine to become the one essential quality that stamps Edith Wharton as a traditionalist.

In New York. Fashionable New Yorkers, vacuous as they may be and as Edith Wharton pictures them, are too good for America because they represent a level of good breeding, education, and culture above that of the average American. Indeed, the average American may not even dream that such a level exists. The culture that is obtained and appreciated by Mrs. Wharton and dozens of her heroes and heroines is an adopted culture. It is in no way indigenous to America and seems to transplant poorly. Mrs. Wharton is marked as a traditionalist because she sets her circle and its perceptive enjoyments above the bustling progress on the truly American scene.

In Madame de Treymes, Durham's thoughts upon his arrival in France indicate America's inferior rung on the cultural scale:

His European visits were infrequent enough to have kept unimpaired the freshness of his eye, and he was always struck anew by the vast and consummately ordered spectacle of Paris; by its look of having been boldly and deliberately planned as a background for the enjoyment of life, instead of being forced into grudge-

ing concessions to the festive instincts, or barricading itself against them in unenlightened ugliness, like his own lamentable New York.⁵⁴

Durham, of course, does not really mean his New York; he means America's New York.

Actually, there is little direct evidence in Wharton's work that fashionable New Yorkers are too good for America. Mrs. Wharton, in her subtlety, chooses rather the indirect method. As Van Wyck Brooks states:

She could neither do with contemporary America nor could she do without it, in the phrase of an English critic who knew her well: she could never approach the subject "without a slight rise in temperature," --she could "neither," in her feeling for America, "forget or forgive."⁵⁵

Mrs. Wharton was not, at all, "at ease when she left the small magic circle of her old New York."⁵⁶

In Europe. However, Mrs. Wharton demonstrated more directly fashionable New York's ineligibility for equality with the best Europe had to offer. She considered European culture to be up in a high rarified atmosphere. It was unattainable for the groups that flocked to Europe for the grande tours. These Americans learned the traditional

⁵⁴Edith Wharton, Madame de Treymes, p. 1.

⁵⁵Brooks, op. cit., p. 292.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 286.

European humanities as they learned their multiplication tables. Englishmen and Frenchmen learned their culture as part and parcel of their familiar experience in life.

Henry Sedgwich, writing of Wharton's Americans in Europe, says that they wore their culture as a banner, to display their adventures in learning. They looked upon their accomplishments as bad investments until they were able to exhibit dividends.⁵⁷ False Dawn provides an excellent example of just this type of thing. The elder Raycie sends his son Lewis to Europe to gather culture as he may, sow a few discreet wild oats, and pick up several Old Masters. Lewis meets an eccentric young Englishman, presumably John Ruskin, and they investigate the as yet undiscovered Italian Primitives together. When Lewis returns with a collection of these Primitives instead of Old Masters, he is disowned by his father and laughed to scorn by fashionable New York. He is, unfortunately for him, considerably in advance of the guide books and the lectures. Lewis Raycie is the rare member of his society; he had the genuine knowledge and appreciations to profit fully from European travel.

In making the Lewis Raycies, i.e., the ones cultivated enough to gain deeply from European associations,

⁵⁷Henry Dwight Sedgwich, The New American Type and Other Essays, p. 68.

her heroes, Mrs. Wharton again proves herself a traditionalist. She is a traditionalist because her heroes and heroines, and they alone, possess the special qualities necessary for an appreciation and understanding of the true meaning and depth of European culture.

Helen and Wilson Follett, writing of Edith Wharton's strong affinity for Europe, say that "the eyes that see are American; but the discrimination that criticizes is Continental."⁵⁸ They speak of her understanding of America coming by way of France and of Italy. And Miss Anne Fremantle credits Edith Wharton with describing four cultures from the "inside": Italian, French, English, and American.⁵⁹ Brooks finds that her knowledge and appreciation of Italian history, literature, architecture, sculpture, and painting were remarkable.⁶⁰ She was able to evoke the spirit and invoke the atmosphere of pre-eighteenth century Italy:

She had only to think of a scene to whisk one there,
 . . . Her unusual gift of the pictorial phrase matched
 her gift of the atmospheric . . .⁶¹

In other words, Mrs. Wharton is, as Anne Fremantle writes,

⁵⁸Follett, op. cit., p. 298.

⁵⁹Anne J. Fremantle, "Edith Wharton: Values and Vulgarities," Fifty Years of the American Novel: 1900-1950, pp. 22-23.

⁶⁰Brooks, op. cit., p. 289.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 290.

a "novelist of civilization."⁶²

Mrs. Wharton's Two Themes

Mrs. Wharton had one idea that pervaded her work and deeply reflected her own situation in the fashionable society of New York and Newport. Blake Nevius divides this idea into two main parts and presents them as Wharton's two "complex and basically unresolvable themes": one showing a generous, enlightened nature trapped into consanguinity with a meaner nature; and the other defining the limits of the individual's responsibility "to determine what allowance of freedom or rebellion can be made for her trapped protagonist without at the same time threatening the structure of society."⁶³

The trapped enlightened nature. Nevius feels that the generous, enlightened nature is trapped by circumstances ironically of his own devising into the unfortunate relationship with the meaner nature. To illustrate this point, Nevius gives such examples as Ethan Frome wedded to Zeena, Ann Eliza Bunner shackled to Evelina, and Anna Leath to George Darrow. These examples are not taken from Mrs. Wharton's most typical novels, however, and do not tell

⁶²Fremantle, op. cit., p. 22.

⁶³Nevius, op. cit., p. 9.

the whole story. Where do Ellen Olenska and Lily Bart fit into this picture? These two are not only typical of Wharton, they are her finest. Rather than being bound to a meaner nature they are trapped in a sea of meaner natures. It is probable that Nevius chooses to particularize the relationships to support a theory of his that Mrs. Wharton was bound to just such a meaner nature; but the internal evidence, at least, does not prove such a charge.

It would perhaps be more accurate to state that Mrs. Wharton's main, controlling theme is that of the tragedy of a sensitive, enlightened person trapped in a society blind to the true meaning of culture and unable to live keenly and appreciatively within its own conventions.

In House of Mirth, Mrs. Wharton suggests that the finest products of this New York-to-Newport society are the few who have the insight and the courage to renounce it. Lawrence Sheldon stands quietly at the periphery of the novel as an example to Lily of a member of the fashionable set who has renounced it in favor of a position in the professions. Mrs. Wharton sees to it that the two never really get together because, as she knows, it would never have proved a satisfactory solution. Lily has to come to disillusionment with her circle by herself and to make the break by herself. When Lily, rather undeterminedly,

takes an over-dose of sleeping pills, her death is not a tragedy; it is merely the end. Her life and its waste are the tragedy.

False Dawn shows an equally mournful picture of the sensitive spirit caught in the society of wasted cultural opportunities. When he sends Lewis off to Europe, Mr. Raycie has high hopes:

Mr. Raycie had himself travelled in his youth, and was persuaded that the experience was formative; he secretly hoped for the return of a bronzed and broadened Lewis, seasoned by independence and adventure, and having discreetly sown his wild oats in foreign pastures, where they would not contaminate the home crop.⁶⁴

But Lewis returned as pale as ever, having spent his days in cathedrals and museums instead of on the tennis courts, and all of his wild oats had been intellectual. He gained nothing that could be displayed on the present market; and when he attempted to show his collection of Italian Primitives, he and his wife were "so laughed at . . . that they went away and lived like hermits in the depths of the country."⁶⁵

In most of her novels, Mrs. Wharton shows the insensitive groups to be largely selfish and stupid and conventional rather than deliberately cruel. In Madame de

⁶⁴Edith Wharton, False Dawn, p. 46.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 139.

Treymes, however, Mrs. Wharton describes the evil done by deliberate, cold-blooded scheming. American values and standards, as represented by the usual hero and heroine, are displayed to advantage against the unscrupulous subtlety of Madame de Treymes, who is forcing the unfortunate American wife of her brother to remain married for the sake of "family." Here the American emphasis upon the individual is praised in contrast to French regard for the family group. There is, of course, hardly any hope that Durham and Madame de Malrive will be able to escape from the influence of this far more sophisticated world.

The limits of individual responsibility. Mrs. Wharton's second major theme, as defined by Nevius, applies to the two Americans in Madame de Treymes. To what limits can a mother go to find personal happiness? Can she risk losing her child? The answer is obvious; she can not. For she would not only "threaten the structure of society," she would forfeit all claim to any real happiness and peace of mind. She must stay in France, accept Madame de Treymes' protection, and find what fulfillment she can in assisting her son to grow up as the heir to a wealthy French family.

Mrs. Wharton's examination of the individual's responsibility to society is the same theme referred to by some critics as her concern for moral values. Overton,

in his sketchy study of the author, writes:

Mrs. Wharton's ideal of morality has much in common with that of Henry James . . . in her view moral conduct is a personal rather than a social matter. She offers no philosophy of life, but only a code.⁶⁶

The conflict comes, then, between those who commit all manner of philosophical crimes but keep their behavior within the code and those who would reject the code because it is not sufficient to their enlightened needs. Boynton, writing of Wharton's interest in this important struggle, speaks of both May and Ellen in The Age Of Innocence as being victims of "Mrs. Grundy": May because she has not been allowed to grow up with a well developed personal philosophy; and Ellen because, having let her grow up, Mrs. Grundy can not tolerate her.⁶⁷ Ellen's emotional desires must in the end be superseded by her moral conviction that everything must be kept as it is. A code that requires a man to stay with a woman unsatisfactory to his needs is an unfortunate code; but society is structured around it and therefore it must be protected and honored. In an angry outburst, Ellen accuses Archer, "You, you, you! . . . Isn't it you who made me give up divorcing--

⁶⁶Grant Martin Overton, An Hour of the American Novel, p. 99.

⁶⁷Percy Holmes Boynton, Some Contemporary Americans, p. 99.

give it up because you showed me how selfish and wicked it was, how one must sacrifice one's self to preserve the dignity of marriage . . . "68

Ellen, returning to New York after many years abroad, finds that pleasures enjoyed freely in Europe are hidden as unacceptable in New York. She further discovers that if she is to remain there and derive comfort from proximity to her lover, Archer, she must take an active role in the great conspiracy.

Mrs. Wharton's Best Years

Mrs. Wharton wrote many novels of the pre-World War I era of fashionable New York society, but they were all somehow less excellent than the great promise that she had shown. By 1920 when The Age Of Innocence was published, Hicks suggests that Mrs. Wharton:

. . . had apparently decided that she could not desert good society, and she had discovered that it was more and more difficult to apply her sense of moral values to the contemporary scene . . . 69

She turned then to the past where, presumably, her moral values were of more consequence. Commager says that:

. . . she was fascinated by the impact of the clash

⁶⁸Edith Wharton, The Age Of Innocence, p. 169.

⁶⁹Hicks, op. cit., p. 218.

of cultures on traditional moral standards, and like her contemporary, Ellen Glasgow, she who began as a rebel against those traditional standards ended as something of an apologist for them.⁷⁰

Mrs. Wharton explains her momentary journey into a previous era by telling of her heavy spirit and the grief she suffered following the war. Then the idea for Son At the Front took shape in her mind. But, she remembers:

. . . before I could settle down to this tale, before I could begin to deal objectively with the stored-up emotions of these years, I had to get away from the present altogether, . . . I found a momentary escape in going back to my childish memories of a long-vanished America, and wrote Age of Innocence.⁷¹

Comedy of manners. Overton is of the opinion that The Age Of Innocence and the Old New York series display Mrs. Wharton's very robust vitality.⁷² Vitality, he writes, has little to do with detail and structure and "everything to do with the artist's feeling for what he is modelling, painting or writing about."⁷³ It is this quality of really being at last completely at home with and completely in the elements of her basic theme that is found in these novels published between 1920 and 1924. It is because

⁷⁰Commager, op. cit., p. 145.

⁷¹Wharton, A Backward Glance, p. 369.

⁷²Overton, op. cit., p. 304

⁷³Ibid., pp. 304-305.

the best and most representative of her works go back several decades to a time when the conflicts she dramatizes were more strongly felt that Mrs. Wharton is a traditionalist rather than simply because the bulk of her work uses fashionable New York for a background. For, as Overton says, "Who can read The Age of Innocence, or the four novelettes . . . and doubt that it is a return to old loves?"⁷⁴

Hoffman, including The House of Mirth in this group, feels that:

Once she had made up her mind to accepting the decline from decorum of her world, Mrs. Wharton was able to provide her public with a number of novels which extended the comedy of manners and added to its details. In short, the purpose of both The House of Mirth (1905) and The Age of Innocence (1920) is to provide a mild and sophisticated comment upon the social comedy of that decline.⁷⁵

Tragedy of manners. Whatever Hoffman's definition of "comedy of manners" happens to be, it is likely that many students will agree with Edmond Wilson, who finds her endings as cruel, her stories as tragic, hopeless, doom laden, and pessimistic as Hardy's or Maupassant's.⁷⁶

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 405.

⁷⁵Frederick J. Hoffman, The Modern Novel in America 1900-1950, p. 16.

⁷⁶Wilson, op. cit., p. 209.

There is certainly considerable evidence to support a suggestion that Wharton wrote "tragedy of manners." For, in the fashionable New York circle, convention controlled behavior so severely that even tragedy had its patterns.

These New Yorks were:

. . . the generation brought up in unwarmed and unlit houses, and shipped off to die in Italy when they proved unequal to the struggle of living in New York!⁷⁷

Ethan Frome

When the matter of tragedy in Wharton's work is being discussed, Ethan Frome can not be overlooked. This certainly the most difficult of Edith Wharton's books to evaluate within the premises of this paper. It is not that Ethan Frome is lacking Wharton's two basic themes; they are presented perhaps more dramatically than in any of her other novels. Ethan, while not the most enlightened of her heroes, is shackled to the meanest of her antagonists, Zeena; and pitiful, long abiding hopelessness is his punishment for seeking to escape the limits of his responsibilities. But Ethan Frome obviously does not fit into the fashionable background proposed in this study as Mrs. Wharton's motivation for supporting traditional

⁷⁷Edith Wharton, New Year's Day, p. 7.

values. This would not otherwise be a problem--i.e., an apparent contradiction--if numerous critics did not consider it Mrs. Wharton's best work or, at least, equally as good as The Age Of Innocence.

Overton places Ethan Frome unqualifiedly above The Age Of Innocence and the Old New York series.⁷⁸ James Gray also ranks it as her best because it is compressed, direct, and powerful.⁷⁹ And E. A. Bjorkman, writing in Voices of Tomorrow, feels that Wharton reaches the status of "social art" with Ethan Frome and that she dramatizes the mundane tragedy of the Berkshire small farmer.⁸⁰

Brooks, in his detailed study of what he calls the New England Indian Summer, disagrees vehemently. He goes so far as to say that:

Ethan Frome, good as it was, could not compare with the best of Miss Wilkins. Its plot was factitious, and it had the air of a superior person surveying the squalid affairs of these children of fate.⁸¹

Brooks takes a rather extreme view, but his critique serves to demonstrate the decided divergence of qualified

⁷⁸Overton, op. cit., p. 304.

⁷⁹Gray, op. cit., p. 87.

⁸⁰Edwin August Bjorkman, Voices of Tomorrow, pp. 290-304.

⁸¹Van Wyck Brooks, New England: Indian Summer p. 464.

opinion.

Upon the strength of this evident disagreement, this thesis would like to propose yet another side to the argument. Ethan Frome is neither Wharton's best nor second best. It is, to all intents and purposes, not Wharton at all. Ethan Frome is not only without the background common to Wharton's better novels, it is without epigram, wit, and the exquisite sense of a highly manner society that are the special stylistic qualities of Edith Wharton. Ethan Frome lies completely outside the pattern of her main body of work. It is a mood piece, a tragic legend, and should not be compared with her other works.

Mrs. Wharton's Characters

Edith Wharton's feeling for tradition manifests itself in the very personal guise of character study. As the discussion of Wharton's basic themes indicated, her characters are strongly motivated by inner forces, e.g., rebellion against or acceptance of the code. Mrs. Wharton's characters, their make-up and their actions, form a definite underlying bulwark of her traditionalism.

These persons that Mrs. Wharton has created must be studied with her own evaluation of them kept ever in mind. Her heroes and heroines are what give her fiction its significance because, as she has said, the society and the

world of manners she wrote of are significant only through what they destroy. And it is Mrs. Wharton's characters that are the losers.

Mrs. Wharton's very approach to her characters is restrained and may be interpreted as conservative. Blanche Williams, in discussing the Wharton short stories, explains this approach as a matter of intellect rather than emotion. Mrs. Wharton lived through one-half of her brain, and through the other half she civilized it.⁸² Mrs. Wharton's aloofness is that of an aristocrat respecting the reticences of her characters as she would those of a friend or a social contact. This in part explains her distance from her story and the change in point of view that she often manages.⁸³ She observes a person or an event from afar, to protect it from stark revelation and too personal a scrutiny.

Joseph Collins considered this distance from her characters to be the result of Mrs. Wharton's lack of sentimentality. As Collins writes, if she awakens an emotion in the reader, it is a legitimate one; ". . . and she

⁸²Blanche C. Williams, Our Short Story Writers, pp. 337-356.

⁸³The beginning of New Year's Day and the end of False Dawn are two interesting examples of this.

accomplishes it through her art, not through parade of her own feeling . . . Her intelligence vibrates in her novels, but not her heart."⁸⁴

Mrs. Wharton's restrained rendering of her characters is, of course, closely allied to the characters themselves. They are, as has been stated previously, of a very special class. Katherine Fullerton Gerould, writing in Appleton's official publisher's critical study, defines their appeal much as Mrs. Wharton might have:

She did not abandon her civilized and sophisticated folk, for any length of time, to deal with rustics . . . the people who have leisure to experience their own emotions, and the education to show them how the emotions fit into the tradition of the race, are more interesting in themselves than the people whose emotions are bound to be on a more nearly animal plane. It is less interesting, morally, to the average man to know how the sub-average man conducts himself than to know how the super-average man conducts himself. It does not in the least matter to the average intelligent citizen . . . how the characters in certain modern novels behave, because these characters are not the real fruit of civilization. They are, at best, it sorry by-products.⁸⁵

Overton relates her characters closely to Mrs. Wharton by quoting from The Old Maid:

. . . she was herself one of those sensitive souls who "in those days were like muted key boards, on which Fate played without a sound," who found them-

⁸⁴Joseph Collins, Taking the Literary Pulse, p. 54.

⁸⁵Katherine Fullerton Gerould, Edith Wharton, A Critical Study, pp. 6-7.

selves inextricably and by no means unhappily enmeshed in a cautious world built up on the fortunes of bankers, India merchants, ship-builders and ship-handlers, "a world where everybody lived in a genteel monotony of which the surface was never stirred by the dumb dramas now and then enacted underneath."⁸⁶

The personal conservatism of Mrs. Wharton's Characters is evident in all her works. In The Age of Innocence the entire conspiracy to keep the young women innocent and the family name above reproach is an example of such personal conservatism. Often it seems that Mrs. Wharton's characters act most decisively and successfully away from life. Certainly this is true of Archer when he begs May Welland to marry him very soon in order to remove the temptation of Ellen and of freedom from his horizon.⁸⁷ Archer's small, trivial actions and reactions are all controlled by the highly mannered society in which he lives. This provides him a pattern so that when he strongly questions the rightness of the pretense and the rigid expectation that all is as it should be he cannot really break free of it; and Ellen, although not a product of this

⁸⁶Grant Martin Overton, Cargoes for Crusoes, p. 305.

⁸⁷This point is also very amply illustrated in Ellen's final parting from Archer, Lily Bart's burning of the blackmail letter, and by Ethan Frome's nightmarish sled ride with Mat. Ethan's suicide attempt is unsuccessful, true; but it is very much away from life.

society, finds herself rather impressed by the code.

This discussion of the conservatism of Wharton's characters would be incomplete without a re-emphasis upon the close interdependence of Mrs. Wharton's basic themes and her characters. As her principal ideas concern the relationship of individuals to society, these individuals naturally bear the responsibility for presentation of her basic themes. By investigating the limits that they dare contemplate, Lily Bart, Archer and, even, Ethan Frome find the limits very narrow indeed and their power to break them down exceedingly small.

There appears to be almost nothing that these trapped individuals can do. Mrs. Wharton herself escaped, mercifully, with a small coterie of expatriated intellectuals and artists of similar calibre. But she seems to have retained a certain melancholic compassion for the ones who could not escape with her.

CHAPTER IV

ELLEN GLASGOW

I. ELLEN GLASGOW: TRADITIONALIST OF DUAL FACTORS

If Edith Wharton can be said to be a traditionalist of environment, then Ellen Glasgow can be designated a traditionalist of environment tempered by psychological forces. For Ellen Glasgow writes freely of many conflicts that made of her an anti-traditionalist before she returned to the hearthside of her fathers. It is pertinent to this study to discover what these forces were that pulled her first one way and then back again.

Miss Glasgow has been of inestimable help by writing an autobiography with emphasis on the very spiritual and emotional factors that must be examined. Woman Within, is especially important to this study because Miss Glasgow saw the problem of environment much as this student does: it is the inter-personal relationships that really constitute environment, while physical surroundings take a minor role.

This sketch of Miss Glasgow will give equal emphasis to her life, which was a struggle to overcome illness, family tragedy, and her own ultra-acute and sensitive imagination, and to her intellectual life, which was an incessant flashing of opinion. And just as Miss Glasgow herself tried to present the Woman Within, this will be

an attempt to get to the woman within the writer.

In attempting to search out the forces that influenced Ellen Glasgow's eventual surrender to traditionalism, this study would have been sadly incomplete without the valuable assistance of Miss Glasgow herself. She is the one among her biographers who has seen the necessity of reconstructing the psychological pattern of her life. Woman Within is especially important to this investigation as it supports much this study would like to hypothesize and, perhaps, prove.

Ellen Glasgow's Emotional Nature

In order to trace the influence of emotions on the creative force of a highly intellectual artist, it is necessary to see the strong connection between emotions and intellect. In Ellen Glasgow they formed a single strand and could not be separated. She says:

So closely were they intertwined that I could not tell where one began in pure feeling, and the other ended in pure speculation. I have lived to the fullest of my nature in thought and in emotion, and I have lived my own personal life as it seemed good to me--or, if not good, at least compelling.¹

These intertwining strands were quickly established as determinants in her personality. Although an active

¹Ellen Glasgow, Woman Within, p. 56.

anti-Freudian, as are both Mrs. Wharton and Willa Cather, Miss Glasgow gives credence to the theory of early influence. She says that ". . . my predispositions were formed and the deepest impressions made on my mind, in the earliest years of my childhood--certainly before I was eight years old."² This mind of which she speaks was to receive deep-scaring impressions all her life. She was to suffer with an acute, thinly veiled and controlled imagination that plagued her waking hours with fearful images and terrorized many a sleepless night. Her imagination was "vulnerable" to the weird pictures that swooped upon her like blindly seeking, colliding bats. She lived a great deal of her life in this tender world.

It was in this imaginative world that she re-lived a scene, in which she saw an old, helpless Negro carried off to the poor house greatly against his wishes, until it formulated a supreme commandment for her: "I began to think or to feel, that cruelty is the only sin."³ Although as a child, Ellen felt the presence of the underdog, it was not

²Ibid., p. 54.

³Ibid., p. 10. *This abhorrence of cruelty was probably somewhat responsible for Miss Glasgow's dislike of modern United States Naturalism. Also it is possible that the lack of cruelty in her own works led her to believe that they were more sanguine in tone than they actually were.

until later that she became its champion. She explains that:

. . . life, in my imagination, was divided, the stronger and the weaker, the fortunate and the unfortunate. Either by choice or by fate I had found myself on the side of the weaker.⁴

Later her greatest compassion came to be spent on the lady or the gentleman who was trapped in the toils of Southern ideals and traditions.

Ellen Glasgow's Childhood

Ellen's life as a child was anything but a romp, but she remembers many of its little pleasures best. She remembers tramping around Richmond, Virginia, with her Mammy, into the gardens, onto the greens, over the hills and grave-yards. Ellen and her Mammy walked hand-in-hand in search of the first robin and the sweetest smelling flowers. Nor were they to be trusted not to splurge on current buns--denied Ellen because of very delicate health--and to hide in some secret place the better to enjoy the feast. They treasured many such secrets--real and imaginary. But the fun had to come only when Ellen was not suffering from some one of her headaches or colds or other infirmities. Her frailty was a great problem always, but in

⁴Ibid., p. 59.

childhood it took the form of shutting her away from the outside, vigorous games and fun of the other children.

Her many losses. As long as Mammy was with Ellen, she could "play away" her disappointments with indoor fancies; but when Ellen was seven Mammy was sent away:

This was the first real sorrow of my life. It was the beginning of that sense of loss, of exile in solitude, which I was to bear with me to the end. Choking back my tears, I watched the carriage roll down the street, while it tore my world apart, and left a great jagged scar on the horizon.⁵

Miss Glasgow was to be injured by several more withdrawals from her intimate circle, by death; but this first one established the pattern of her suffering.

In her autobiography, the author speaks constantly of the illness and fear and tragedy that shadowed her life. There was, for instance, her mother's death. It served to dramatize the feeling of being deserted by her mother that grew more and more acute as Miss Glasgow retreated before the anguish of mental illness. An impressive number of Miss Glasgow's dearest family members were to die tragically, but her mother's death with all of its miserable implications must be accounted the greatest loss. This loss, never resolved in her heart or her spirit, had a great influence on her work. When Ellen Glasgow turned, in the

⁵Ibid., p. 30.

last analysis, to defend rather than to ridicule the Southern tradition, it was her mother's South she came to believe in. Van Wyck Brooks, who knew Ellen Glasgow for many years, says that she was drawn to the pleasure-loving side of Virginians. He quoted her indirectly as saying that Southerners were distinguished from Northerners in believing that pleasure was worth more than toil and certainly a great deal more than profit.⁶ It was this gay, life-loving quality that Ellen Glasgow loved in her mother and the South. And it is more than likely this same love for her mother that--when the last vestiges of the genteel South were disappearing--swayed the mature artist.

Her happiness. The large Glasgow family--nine children--spent their winters in Richmond and their summers in the country on a near-by farm--until Mr. Glasgow sold it. These summer escapes were balm to Ellen's sensitive mind. She badly needed refuge from "school and fear and God altogether"--which she counted as hostile forces. On the farm, she says, "I was free, I was alive within, I even knew happiness."⁷ She elaborates on that happiness:

⁶Van Wyck Brooks, Confident Years: 1885-1915, p. 384.

⁷Glasgow, op. cit., p. 51.

Then I was happy. I was happy with that strange, secret, hidden happiness that belonged to myself alone. A happiness so shy that it would start and flee before a shadow, yet so fearless that it would rush, singing, into the very heart of the storm.⁸

In a beautiful passage, Miss Glasgow describes her wild, joyous response to a storm. She would rush out into the wind and the thunderous sky:

The things I feared were not in the sky, but in the nature and in the touch of humanity. The cruelty of children, the harshness of health and happiness to the weak, the blindness of the unpitiful--these were my terrors. But not the crash of the thunder overhead, not the bolts of fire from the clouds.⁹

These words of her own choosing picture the fears and the release from fears of Ellen Glasgow.

Her unhappiness. But this joy was of the summer. When winter came she:

. . . crept back into the cold darkness, where there were set tasks I could not do, where nightmares came in my sleep, and sinister apprehensions stayed by me in daylight.¹⁰

Small wonder that this child learned "that an artificial brightness is the safest defence against life."¹¹ She used this defence against the little daily fears and against the major tragedies: the madness and death of her mother; her

⁸Ibid., p. 54

⁹Ibid., p. 53.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 54.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 67.

brother Frank's hopeless reserve and final suicide; the lonely death in New York of her brother-in-law who had long been her only intellectual champion within the family; the burden of the lingering cancer and death of his widow, Carrie, who had taken over the task of guiding Ellen's intellect; and the sad deaths of several dogs whom she greatly loved.

In the face of her grief she had only one prop:

My only prop, a strong one, was a kind of humane stoicism. I could bear what I had to bear, but I could not pretend it away. I could not pretend that my life had not been blighted before it had opened.¹²

Ellen Glasgow's Deafness. This blight Miss Glasgow refers to is her deafness. As deafness came on, she was terrified and suffocated by melancholy; the very word itself--"deafness"--would send "chills of horror, like crawling beetles along . . . (her) . . . nerves."¹³ It is not easy to resist the temptation to quote Miss Glasgow at length on her handicap. She says:

If only anyone in the world could know! That I, who was winged for flying, should be wounded and caged.¹⁴

¹²Ibid., pp. 138-139.

¹³Ibid., p. 119.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 139.

Her deafness, the hope of curing it, and the fear of losing the battle, was immensely crippling to her spirit. "For my sensitive shyness, my fear of betraying an affliction, was in itself, an incurable malady."¹⁵ The author records many situations in which she sat, or stood, dumb with humiliation, lest her deafness become noticeable or the object of comment. She even attributes her lack of feeling for babies to her deafness:

. . . the maternal instinct sacred or profane, was left out of me by nature when I was designed. I sometimes think that a hollow where it might have been filled by the sense of compassion . . . it would have seemed to me an irretrievable wrong to bring another being into a world where I had suffered so many indignities of the spirit. After my deafness, this became a moral conviction.¹⁶

It is interesting to compare Miss Glasgow's testimony of her own sensitiveness to her affliction with the observations of an outsider. Henry S. Canby reports his first meeting with her and seems to have received an entirely contrary impression:

Ellen Glasgow was very deaf and, and this in a day when corrective instruments were in the experimental stage. Hers was a sound contrivance on a long chord, which she would move from place to place on the table where the conversation looked promising. When it plopped down before me, I talked alternately to the

¹⁵Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 108.

disk and to her with not very satisfactory results.¹⁷

The Rebellion of Ellen Glasgow

It is not difficult to understand why Ellen Glasgow, having lived a unique inner life, should reject the Southern tradition of belles lettres when she decided to write. She was greatly a rebel. In fact, she claims the cloak of a rebel for her seven-year-old self:

. . . I was born with an appreciation of the best, and an equal aversion from the second best. I was, even at that age, a social rebel. I cannot recall when the patterns of society, as well as the scheme of things in general had not seemed to me false and even malignant.¹⁸

Early influences. She rebelled against Southern gentility no more than she rebelled against Northern realism. She had been acquainted with the typical romances of the Confederacy since childhood when she had received one every Christmas from an aunt. A gallant Northern officer of superior rank and social bearing must protect the virtue and rescue the person of a spirited yet clinging belle.

These books:

. . . had added fuel to a slowly kindling fire of revolt. I could not believe that war was like that. I had never been young enough to believe it.¹⁹

¹⁷Henry Seidel Canby, American Memoir, p. 305.

¹⁸Glasgow, op. cit., p. 42.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 11.

When as a child she had wanted a doll with real hair, she couldn't have one because "everything had been lost in the war." Of this she says, "A war in which one had lost everything, even the right to own a doll with real hair, was not precisely my idea of a romance."²⁰

Although highly imaginative, Ellen Glasgow was never interested in fooling herself. She had always sought reality and truth. In fact, much of her youth was devoted to a search for the truth. She says of this search:

I was looking for a purpose, for a philosophy that would help me to with stand a scheme of things in which I had never felt completely at home. The truth was . . . that I still needed a religion. Though I was still a sceptic in mind, I was in my heart a believer.²¹

She apparently needed religion but could not accept any of the practiced forms. Her search was primarily for truth, and she could not find it in religion.

It is probable that this search for reality in the world about her and in the heart and mind of man was an escape from her own fearful imagination. At any rate, she sought reality in her writing as conscientiously as she sought truth in her intellectual environment. Miss Glasgow states her case well in her book of forewards and criti-

²⁰Ibid., p. 12.

²¹Ibid., p. 140.

cisms, A Certain Measure:

I was, in my humble place and way, beginning a solitary revolt against the formal, the false, the affected, the sentimental, and the pretentious, in Southern writing. I had no guide. I was, so far as I was then aware, alone in my rejection of a prescribed and moribund convention of letters. But I felt, 'Life is not like this.'²²

She was not led to this revolt through the reading of criticisms; her reading in works of fiction merely demonstrated the need for this revolt. She was actually led by an inner realization that life is not a romance! Her rebellion was reinforced by her early repulsion from cruelty:

I revolted from sentimentality, less because it was false than because it was cruel. An evasive idealism made people insensitive; it made people blind to what happened.²³

Romance versus Realism in Ellen Glasgow

As if one rebellion were not enough, Miss Glasgow also pictures herself as striking a blow against the "severely regimented American realism" of Howells and his followers. She says, of this, "I had not revolted from the Southern sentimental fallacy in order to submit myself to the tyranny of the northern genteel tradition."²⁴

²²Glasgow, A Certain Measure, p. 8.

²³Glasgow, Woman Within, p. 104.

²⁴Glasgow, A Certain Measure, p.14.

The situation is not quite as clear cut as all these quotations and statements about revolt and truth and realism make it appear. There is the element of "romance" to consider. Stuart Sherman has put it this way:

Ellen Glasgow is bent on romance with blood in it; therefore she uses the fighting edge . . . Northern critics haven't known exactly how to take her. She disappoints their settled expectations. What they expect of Southern writers is a rapt contemplation of the embossed and beribboned antique world built of romance. She gives them the edge.²⁵

His figures concern blood and swords, but the subject is romance. Miss Glasgow herself admits that romance of a type was unavoidable:

If I dealt with romance it was because one cannot approach the Confederacy without touching the very heart of romantic tradition. It is the single occasion in the history of the world, when the conflicts of actualities was profoundly romantic. For Virginia, the Civil War was the expiring gesture of chivalry.²⁶

In addition to this physical traditional environment there is the psychological environment to deal with. Ellen herself was greatly enamoured with the ideal of romantic love. This romantic ideal she sees as an intellectual sublimation of the usual youthful sex investigations and says it becomes "as possessive as, and certainly more

²⁵Stuart P. Sherman, Critical Woodcuts, p. 73.

²⁶Glasgow, The Battle Ground, pp. viii-ix.

profound than, a natural instinct . . . the illusion of romantic love was an ancient antagonist."²⁷

Equipped thus with the sword of Realism, and slightly restrained by a childlike faith in romantic love, Ellen Glasgow proceeded to expose the pretenses of the genteel tradition. She did this simply by writing of honest situations and genuine characters. Henry S. Canby credits her with single-handedly rescuing Southern fiction from the Lost Cause.²⁸ And Stuart P. Sherman considers that Glasgow proceeded Dreiser onto the field of realism.²⁹ It is also Sherman who quarreled with her publishers because they advertised Barren Ground, in 1925, as bringing realism "at the last" across the Potomac. Quite the contrary, Sherman states, "Realism crossed the Potomac twenty-five years ago, going North!"³⁰

J. D. Adams compares Ellen Glasgow to the Naturalist--greatly to her advantage. She believed, Adams says, in hope and courage; she is a realist but keeps a vision of "something evermore to be."³¹

²⁷Glasgow, Woman Within, p. 56.

²⁸Canby, op. cit., p. 505.

²⁹Sherman, op. cit., p. 76.

³⁰Sherman, Critical Woodcuts, p. 76.

³¹J. D. Adams, Shape of Books to Come, pp. 114-30.

Of all this, Miss Glasgow, anything but unassumingly, says:

The chief end of the novel, as indeed of all literature, I felt, was to increase our understanding of life and heighten our consciousness. To do this, writing must not only render experience, it must interpret and intensify the daily processes of living. I saw a fertile, an almost virgin, field ahead of me, and I knew that I lacked only the necessary art to make it yield a rich harvest.³²

A great deal of artistic integrity is involved here. Miss Glasgow held out against the urging of many, including editors, to write differently on different subjects. One publisher with an eye on the market asked her why she did not write an optimistic story about the West. She is reported to have answered that "if there was anything she knew less about than the West, it was optimism."³³

It is also reported that Miss Glasgow found it difficult to get along with writers' groups. It was a definite shock to her to discover that when writers met together, they talked of prices and markets rather than of techniques and themes.³⁴ In an interview given to Joyce Kilmer she said of the matter:

I don't know which is the more tragic, the fact that a desire for this sort of literary pabulum exists,

³²Glasgow, A Certain Measure, p. 30.

³³Adams, op. cit., p. 116.

³⁴James Gray, On Second Thought, p. 151.

or the fact that there are so many writers willing to satisfy that desire.³⁵

In 1917 Joyce Kilmer spoke at length with Miss Glasgow concerning modern literature. She found modern writers guilty of "evasive idealism." She felt that there were no real characters, no attempt to portray a real, genuine human being, there were only a "number of picturesque and attractive lay figures, . . . one of which develops a whimsical, sentimental, and maudlingly optimistic philosophy of life."³⁶ Genuine optimism, she felt, is realistic and robust. She named the great English optimists, Austen, Fielding, Galsworthy, whose realism stems from a recognition and understanding of facts rather than from an evasion of them. Such theorizing was not merely literary with Miss Glasgow; she considered realistic optimism as an ally of democracy:

Democracy does not consist in the belief that all men are born free and equal or in the desire that they shall be born free and equal. It consists in the knowledge that all people should possess an opportunity to use their will to control--to create--destiny . . .³⁷

Ellen Glasgow Returns to the Tradition of the South

In the preceeding material on Ellen Glasgow, several

³⁵Joyce Kilmer, Literature in the Making, p. 231.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid., p. 234.

definite impressions have been presented. She has been found to have been a helpless victim of her own fearful imagination. Instances of cruelty have left indelible marks on her sensitive mind and spirit. So deeply has the cruelty of man toward man and beast affected her that she has turned against Southern tradition largely because they existed at the expense of a great many "underdogs." She appears to have ennobled herself in her tragic life and to have carried defeat with the bravda of a Cyrano. Her final answer to life has been: Life without delight, but life nonetheless.

When studying Miss Glasgow through her own autobiography, it is difficult to escape the conviction that her greatest battles were fought within herself--against her fear and her trembling. She was so taken up by inner foes that the outside held few fears for her. This may account for the hard protective shell that she needed against criticism in her single-handed assault on Southern belles lettres.

It might be said that she had no real backing. Being sickly, she had few outside stimulations and friends to support her fervor. And her family, similar to Mrs. Wharton's, was terribly upset by her success as an author. "Nice girls" did not even know about "bastards" let alone

write about them! But Ellen informed herself and then shared her knowledge and understanding with all who cared to read.

This sensitive and rebellious spirit has also proved herself to be very strongly opinionated. She had no qualms about proclaiming her opinions to the world. Her literary opinions she was willing to broadcast, excluding from the charmed circle of "Literature," almost all but her own work. But this in itself is not unusual for any author. Henry Canby states that Miss Glasgow found her own writing to be her favorite topic of conversation. Such vanity, he says, is an occupational disease with writers--"it is the vanity of the parent for the child."³⁸

Much material has been presented establishing Miss Glasgow's rebellion against the Southern tradition of life and literature. This has been done for two reasons. First, because that is the facet of her career most widely commented upon by Miss Glasgow and critics; and secondly, because an appreciation of the intensity of her personality and her rebellion is essential to this treatise. It was, in the end, the psychological forces within her, influenced by the soci-environment of her family circle, that controlled her life and that led her back to tradition. It

³⁸Canby, American Memoir, p. 305.

was her rebellion that made her special and above the other Southern writers that accepted without a sign of struggle the rose-colored glasses handed down from generation to generation. When Miss Glasgow returned to realize the spirit and intent of the Southern tradition, she had investigated the other side of the street with satisfying thoroughness.

By her own account, Miss Glasgow matured late as an artist:

I grew slowly; I matured late; and my earliest novels were the result of intuitive understanding alone . . . It is not sufficient to test life; one should consume and assimilate it before one attempts to cast fresh experience into permanent form.³⁹

She feels that her earliest works might well have been left unpublished, although, of course, the writing of them was necessary to her growth as an artist. Miss Glasgow finds that in spite of very poor health her later years were her best. Of her last six books, Barren Ground, The Romantic Comedians, They Stooped to Folly, The Sheltered Life, Vein of Iron, and In This Our Life, the first five are easily her best. Miss Glasgow speaks of Barren Ground as having been "gathered up, as a rich harvest, from the whole of my life,"⁴⁰ when in actuality, it touches none of

³⁹Glasgow, A Certain Measure, p. 27.

⁴⁰Glasgow, Woman Within, p. 270.

her outer life pattern: it represents instead her conviction that the triumphant of this world are those who learn to live without joy.

Presumably, part of Miss Glasgow's joi de vivre escaped when she returned to the fold and recognized the value of many of the traditions she had thrown over.

II. THE TRADITIONAL ELEMENTS IN THE NOVELS OF ELLEN GLASGOW

Ellen Glasgow can not be classed as a traditionalist either of environment or of emotional need. These two forces amalgamated almost equally to produce her special brand of traditionalism. These two forces combined in such a way as to produce a gradually developing philosophy of traditionalism. As with any development, a chronological study is practically imperative here.

Miss Glasgow was so intense and so articulate that it is not at all difficult to trace through her work her feeling for traditional values as they changed. Her theme appears to be foremost in her mind and is certainly ever in the thoughts of her characters. In fact, this author's habit of turning her characters into talking propaganda leaflets and her preference for repetition have provided ample primary source material. This study, therefore, will

lean heavily on Miss Glasgow's own words, spoken both directly and indirectly through dialogue.

Two Themes in the Novels of Ellen Glasgow

It would seem that there are two important themes in Glasgow's work. And although elements of each are in all of her novels, there is no strong relationship between the two. Miss Glasgow's basic theme is, in actuality, her developing philosophy of tradition. Her theme is not based on traditional values as Mrs. Wharton's is; rather it is tradition itself. This theme is interpreted variously, of course, and is treated to many innovations along the way; but basically it remains the same from The Battle-ground through to her last novel, In This Our Life.

Van Wyck Brooks terms this basic theme a conflict between two regimes: the agrarian regime in its twilight hour against the rising industrial system.⁴¹ In outlining her own purpose, Miss Glasgow writes:

In this interpretation of the life with which I was familiar, I wished to include the more static customs of the country as well as the changing fashions of the small towns and cities.

And so in The Battle-ground, I attempted to treat the Civil War as one of several circumstances that moulded not only the character of the individual Virginian but the social order in which he made a vital, if obscure, figure. There was, I knew, rich

⁴¹Brooks, op. cit., p. 350.

and deep material buried beneath the memorial wreaths of tradition.⁴²

Hoffman, in his critical work, The Modern Novel in America 1900-1950, compares the importance of Glasgow's theme to those of other early twentieth century women authors. Hers was a theme:

. . . (or succession of themes) richer in body and in possibilities than that available to Willa Cather, richer even than the substance of the social history to which Edith Wharton had attended.⁴³

Ellen Glasgow's other large theme was one much more limited in scope and, apparently, very personal to the author. Stuart P. Sherman believes that it is Glasgow's main theme. He says that she has been insisting for twenty-five years that the average woman is wrong in believing that the sexual attraction which draws her to her mate in mating season is enough in what should be her supreme and sufficient affair with life. There ought to be something more permanent in life than love for one to live by.⁴⁴

Discussion of subsidiary theme. These two themes are not dependent one upon the other as are Wharton's, nor

⁴²Ellen Glasgow, The Battle-ground, p. vii.

⁴³Frederick J. Hoffman, The Modern Novel in America 1900-1950, p. 67.

⁴⁴Sherman, op. cit., p. 81.

are they contradictory, as are Cather's. They are two distinct entities, running through most of Glasgow's work. This second, subsidiary, theme was perhaps the stronger of the two until the author finally wrote it out of her system with Barren Ground.

In Rebels and Ancestors, M. D. Geismar presents a comprehensive survey of this theme: Geismar finds that from the very beginning in her work the love relationships seem quite unsatisfactory, that they "led almost always to the renunciation of pleasure, and to the building of an armored personality that finally forbids even the possibility of pleasure."⁴⁵ There is a distinguishable pattern in the development of this forfeiture of love theme: a single, brief, tragic love affair followed by a lifetime of suffering and constricted emotion. It is much as if the "body must perish in order to have the spirit triumph."⁴⁶

Miss Glasgow was quoted in the first half of this chapter as saying that Barren Ground had been gathered up as a rich harvest from the whole of her life. Its importance is largely due, then, to the final perfecting of the pattern of denial of passionate love. The pattern begins as Dorinda, the heroine, discovers love as one coming

⁴⁵Maxwell David Geismar, Rebels and Ancestors, p. 249.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 235.

unawares upon a miracle:

All around her people were pretending that insignificant things were the only important things. The eternal gestures of milking and cooking, of sowing and reaping! . . . Not one of them had ever betrayed to her this hidden knowledge, which was the knowledge of love.⁴⁷

When the object of this awakened love betrays her, Dorinda can not forget without denying herself almost all emotion:

Her love was dead; and her regret clung less to the fact that love had ended in disappointment than to the supreme tragedy that love ended at all. Nothing endured. Everything perished of its own inner decay. That, after all, was the gnawing worm at the heart of experience. If either her love or her hatred had lasted she would have found less bitterness in the savor of life.⁴⁸

And over and over again throughout the latter half of the novel, Dorinda says of love and passion, "I am done with all that."

In connection with Miss Glasgow's denial of love, it is interesting to note her emphasis upon family relationship. Every one of her characters is a member of a family. These people are not necessarily representative of strongly lovable, affectionate, or loyal relationships. Family membership is just fact. All of Glasgow's characters are first a father, a daughter, or a mother before they are

⁴⁷Ellen Glasgow, Barren Ground, p. 27.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 305.

anything or anyone else. Their understanding of life comes through daily living with the family.

It is natural that the critics who consider the forfeiture of love to be Glasgow's primary theme would also consider Barrer Ground her finest or, as Overton expresses it, her most "substantial" novel.⁴⁹ This may be partially true if one particular novel is to be set above the others. But Glasgow's work tends to be rather even, with her last five novels standing, about equally, somewhat above the bulk of her work. Her best work is done in her best style: comedy of manners. Barren Ground stands by itself with all of Miss Glasgow's wit and pervasive humor deliberately restrained to maintain a total effect of tragedy.

This strong theme of denial of love develops independent of her primary theme and appears to be the single thing Miss Glasgow had to say regarding one's relationship to oneself. Her other ideas, of which there are many, all deal with more social relationships and constitute the steps in her developing philosophy of traditionalism.

Discussion of primary theme: developing philosophy of traditionalism. In The Battle-ground, Miss Glasgow

⁴⁹Grant Martin Overton, An Hour of the American Novel, p. 118.

began recording the social history of Virginia. She attempted to "portray the last stand in Virginia of the aristocratic tradition."⁵⁰ Although this early novel is a definite break with Southern literary tradition, it is very romantic in feeling. Its heroes are cavaliers, its heroines ladies of great beauty and important families. Major Lightfoot is a gouty old swashbuckler, loud in answering injury with insult and passionately eager for a war; he is personalized but he is also typical of the Southern spirit that beguiled away the obvious facts of war by counting heroic victories. Betty Ambler is a charming heroine, personifying the "spirit that fought with gallantry and gaiety, and that in defeat remained undefeated."⁵¹ And young Beau, the hero, is a perfect Virginia cavalier with "clothes on his mind and murder in his blood."⁵²

Miss Glasgow, writing many years later, says of this early romanticism:

And since I was still in my middle twenties, it was inevitable, no doubt, that these volumes should reflect a romantic idealism. With my next two books, the idealism began to be flavoured with irony, until

⁵⁰Ellen Glasgow, A Certain Measure, p. 13.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 5.

⁵²Geismar, op. cit., p. 229.

gradually, or so it seemed to me, I escaped entirely from the undue influence of ancestor worship.⁵³

Miss Glasgow's gradual introduction of irony into her work took hold in The Voice of the People, which Overton credits with establishing her niche, in 1900.⁵⁴ In examining this success, he writes;

To this end she has used an honesty that is not afraid of dullness, a wit that shapes itself into epigrams, and an irony that serves art.⁵⁵

Van Wyck Brooks writes that even though Ellen Glasgow was the first realistic Southern writer, the first to take the South out of the South, and the first to give Southern literature a "touch of the universal, . . . she felt the charm of the Old South and even conveyed it herself with far more actuality than earlier writers."⁵⁶ There seems to be little doubt that although Miss Glasgow's revolt was genuine and successful, for many years she was always dependent upon the "roots which were deep and strong, and nourished by both the poetry and prose of tradition."⁵⁷

⁵³Glasgow, op. cit., p. 21.

⁵⁴Overton, op. cit., p. 115.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Brooks, op. cit., p. 352.

⁵⁷Glasgow, op. cit., p. 28.

Miss Glasgow herself felt very strongly about the need for a literary philosophy of letters within the Southern tradition:

. . . the South needed blood and irony. Blood it needed because Southern culture had strained too far away from its roots in the earth; it had grown thin and pale; it was satisfied to exist on borrowed ideas, to copy instead of create. And irony is an indispensable ingredient of the critical vision; it is the safest antidote to sentimental decay.⁵⁸

Once Ellen Glasgow had overcome her own early romantic illusions and had introduced, as she says, irony into her style, she wrote the bulk of her work in revolt against the old Southern traditions and institutions. These novels served as the social history that she had intended them to be. She became the chronicler of the decline of the Old South and the rise of the New. Commager, in evaluating her attitude towards the Old South during her years of rebellion, finds her relatively passive. The patrician Old South was already

. . . decadent, its interests artificial, its standards meretricious, its defences palpably vulnerable: she did not need to attack it but could regard its lingering pretensions and its inevitable collapse with ironic detachment . . . ⁵⁹

Despite her deliberate, conscious break with South-

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Henry Steele Commager, The American Mind, p. 145.

ern literary tradition, Geismar also believes that Glasgow remained at heart a member of her class and era. For instance, she presents plebeian heroes as ugly and somewhat pitiable, aristocrats as oppressed rather than victorious in the plantation system, negroes as comic and noble, and plebeian girls as the victims of easily given love.⁶⁰

Hicks also regards Glasgow as essentially a traditionalist even in the years of revolt. He feels that her revolt was actually a struggle within herself to break with Southern tradition and that this struggle tended to decrease her creative force. But gradually and at last she returned "to that outcast from the machine civilization, the well-bred person."⁶¹ She allies herself with this well-bred outcast and further establishes her kinship by failing to question or to discover why he is outcast.⁶²

Miss Glasgow's Best Work

Geismar agrees with Hicks and Commager (in fact, most of the critics agree with Miss Glasgow's own evaluation) that her last novels were her best. She did her best work between her fiftieth and fifty-fifth years. It was in this

⁶⁰Geismar, op. cit., pp. 232-233.

⁶¹Granville Hicks, The Great Tradition, p. 226.

⁶²Ibid.

"late blooming Indian Summer" that she broke through the "double armor of culture and temperament" to realize her full potential.⁶³

Commager finds that Glasgow's distaste for the vulgarity and emptiness of Modern life first became evident in Barren Ground. There could also be noticed "grudging appreciation of the virtues to be found in the old."⁶⁴ Both Dorinda's brother and lover are products of the new civilization. Their interest lies in what they can get and how far they can go. They take no responsibility for the havoc they have created. Dorinda, and presumably Ellen Glasgow, finds herself drawn intellectually to those of sterner, more meaningful intent. She discovers that her roots are in the land, and the land becomes a symbol to her. She revitalizes the parched, mineral poor soil of the family farm to keep the past from dying.

Evidence in Glasgow's novels and in her autobiography would indicate that she began to feel that the Old South, so long the perpetrator of the underdog, had become the underdog. She came round at last with newly released creative powers to speak for the Old South. Her campaign was double-edged. She defended the Old South with mounting

⁶³Geismar, op. cit., p. 223.

⁶⁴Commager, op. cit., p. 145.

appreciative eloquence, and she attacked the New South with ever increasing vehemence.

This is not to say, of course, that Miss Glasgow traveled blindly down a one-way street. Her vigorous sense of humor remained with her; and, even in her last novels, when her return to traditional values and her rejection of the new were strongest, she was able to take sly pokes at the old regime and to give occasional bouquets to the modern viewpoint.

The Sheltered Life and The Age of Innocence. The restrictive code of the ladies and gentlemen of the Old South nettled Miss Glasgow, especially in The Sheltered Life. This novel might make an interesting companion piece to The Age of Innocence. General Archbold is not too unlike the Newland Archer of Mrs. Wharton's classic; he is extremely conscious of the inroads being made on his personal freedom by the code of manners that he is expected to use. The General ponders his restricted life:

. . . after thirty years of heroic fidelity in an age when marriage was an invisible prison, he had been obliged to sacrifice that fading glimmer of happiness. Supported by his daughters, who demanded that he should be faithful to a wife he had never loved, supported by public opinion, which exacted that he should remain inconsolable for the loss of a woman he had married by accident.⁶⁵

⁶⁵Ellen Glasgow, The Sheltered Life, p. 33.

Later, while musing on the strength of the code that he has lived by and that perhaps has dictated a useless life for him, General Archbold remembers a situation many years before when scrupulous attention to the social conventions of a certain family had saved a careless member from prosecution for murder:

Gossip had buzzed on as loud as a deafened ear; but the Goddards, who were connected with all the best people in Queenborough, had united in the heroic pretence that plain murder was pure accident. By force of superior importance, they had ignored facts, defended family honor, shielded a murderer for the sake of saving a name, turned public execration into sympathy, and politely but firmly looked the law out of countenance.⁶⁶

The social code. In a lighter vein, Miss Glasgow demonstrates the fibre of the minds that keep the code in good working order. General Archbold's daughter says to her daughter:

It is natural that young people should like the excitement of touring cars, but I cannot imagine, even if they are made safe, that motors will ever be used for church or for social occasions.⁶⁷

And General Archbold speaks to himself words that Newland Archer knew instinctively:

If only she would tell him nothing! After all,

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 98.

there was wisdom in an era that smothered truth in words. For truth, in spite of the stern probings of science, is an ugly and a terrible thing.⁶⁸

Miss Glasgow is still to produce a sympathetic modern in The Romantic Comedians: the often married and many times scandalously divorced, Edmonia Bredelbane. Edmonia is probably a favorite of Miss Glasgow because they are both realists and because, as Van Wyck Brooks says, she is "a proof that the so-called bad when they are strong often do less harm than the so-called good when they are soft."⁶⁹ At any rate, Edmonia is openly a seeker of pleasure; and when she advises the young Annabel to go ahead and marry the elderly judge, she says, ". . . it will be improper, but thank the Lord that you live in an age when you can be improper without having to go abroad . . ."⁷⁰ Edmonia knew exactly what she was talking about; she had been shipped off to Europe in disgrace so many times that it had become reflex action with her.

The Final Development of Miss Glasgow's Primary Theme

The largest amount of Miss Glasgow's final work,

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 131.

⁶⁹Brooks, op. cit., p. 351.

⁷⁰Ellen Glasgow, The Romantic Comedians, p. 141.

however, is devoted to a dramatization of the theory that she stated in a short essay, "On Decay From Within":

We have refused to acknowledge that the disintegration of character is the beginning, not the end, of defeat, or that this weakening moral fibre is first revealed in the quick or slow decline of human relationships, and in the abrupt conversion to a triumphant materialism.⁷¹

The youth of the New South. Miss Glasgow's primary quarrel is with the youth of the New South. The youth rebel against the code of manners, but they do not really have anything worthy of their rebellion to replace it. As N. Elizabeth Monroe suggests, their radicalism is a projection of their inner disorganization onto the world about them; for them, the universe exists as an extension of self.⁷² The young people in In This Our Life and The Sheltered Life are typical of Ellen Glasgow's young moderns. They are loud, lost and inept. In following their own selfish needs, the quartet in In This Our Life destroys itself in holocaust fashion, denying conventions and moral restraints. The older generation of Asa and Lavinia live by the restraints and honor the conventions of the code. Theirs are unhappy, starved lives, but they live inwardly.

⁷¹Ellen Glasgow, "On Decay From Within," The Treasure Chest, ed. J. Donald Adams, p. 292.

⁷²N. Elizabeth Monroe, "Ellen Glasgow: Ironist of Manners," Fifty Years of the American Novel: 1900-1950, p. 54.

The younger generation lives an outwardly destructive life and therefore is destroying the world.

Although both sides of the picture are anything but bright, Miss Glasgow's sympathy obviously lies with Asa's. She allows Asa one hope, an unfulfilled dream of happiness. He does not taste every pleasure as it occurs to him. He exercises the self-denial and discipline of his training. He at least has hope that his dream might come true. On the other hand, Miss Glasgow's young people try everything and end with nothing; they have not even hope.

As Jenny Blair Archbold is striving forward in a triangle love affair that she does not half understand, she justifies herself:

Since it was useless to deny her love, she could only remind her conscience (near enough to the nineteenth century to make scruples) that she did not mean the slightest harm in the world.⁷³

And Jenny Blair's ignorance of what she is doing is not nearly as disturbing as her willfulness. Writing in Woman Within, Miss Glasgow laments the passing of the era in which young women had been prudent and gracious:

Its finest creation, a code of manners, has been ridiculed and discarded. Insolent youth rides, now, in the whirlwind. For those modern iconoclasts who are without culture possess, apparently, all the courage.⁷⁴

⁷³Glasgow, The Sheltered Life, p. 279.

⁷⁴Glasgow, The Woman Within, p. 140.

Annabel does not balance well on Miss Glasgow's scales either as she suffers the scalding pain of rejection by her young lover:

"It is having to sit still and bear it that I can't stand!" she wailed. "I could get over it so much quicker if I could only hurt him as much as he hurt me." And more in the same morbid vein, which was deplorably human, and remote from all the best Virginian traditions of true womanliness. Lovable, no doubt, but insufficiently civilized.⁷⁵

When John Welch, the still small voice of objectivity in The Sheltered Life, says to Jenny Blair that "people who have tradition are oppressed by the lack of it--or by whatever else they put in its place . . .," he is more than likely expressing Miss Glasgow's indecisive wavering between the two alternatives.⁷⁶ Commager marks The Sheltered Life as one step forward in Miss Glasgow's appreciation of tradition rather than the more complete switch achieved in Vein of Iron, The Romantic Comedians and In This Our Life.

The last pleasant weighing of the New against the Old. In The Sheltered Life General Archbold can still imagine that good might come from the introduction of a new social philosophy:

After all, class consciousness, like his arteries, was not all that it used to be. Like every other superstition, he supposed, it was doomed to decay.

⁷⁵Glasgow, The Romantic Comedians, p. 97.

⁷⁶Glasgow, The Sheltered Life, p. 295.

Perhaps new blood, new passions, and new social taboos were the only salvation of a dying order.⁷⁷

Miss Glasgow seems to be, at this juncture, upset with the ugliness of the new order rather than with its moral decay. General Archbold:

Could remember when Queenborough (Richmond, Virginia) had the charm of a village; but now, wherever he looked, he found ugliness. Beauty, like every other variation from type, was treated more or less as a pathological symptom. Did Americans, especially Southerners, prefer ugliness? Did ugliness conform, he pondered fancifully, to some automatic aesthetic spring in the dynamo?⁷⁸

The Sheltered Life represents the height of the author's appreciation of tradition and her willingness to find humorous fault with it. As Geismar wrote:

The "great tradition" was summed up in the portrait of the dying General Archbold, "still faithful to a creed he had forsaken."⁷⁹

When reconsidering this novel in A Certain Measure, novelist Glasgow becomes critic Glasgow and reads rather earth-shaking hindsight into it. She compares The Sheltered Life to Barren Ground. Both novels are set in communities in which the "vital stream was running out into shallows."⁸⁰ The declining aristocracy of the one and the thinning

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 102.

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 144.

⁷⁹Geismar, op. cit., p. 273.

⁸⁰Glasgow, A Certain Measure, p. 155.

stock of the pioneers of the other were both passive, were both cultures dying. For the one, "evasive idealism," the "philosophy of heroic defeat" replaced the spirit of adventure; and for the other, "fortitude had degenerated into a condition of moral inertia."⁸¹ Here, Miss Glasgow finds the beginning and, she is "tempted to add, the end of American democracy."⁸²

While General Archbold had been able to muse upon the shifting scene and find good and bad in both cultures, Judge Honeywell and Mrs. Upchurch, the traditionalist protagonists of The Romantic Comedians, find infinite protection in their code. Mrs. Upchurch, stung into thought (an uncomfortable activity with which she seldom burdened herself), by an accusation from her daughter Annabel, weighs the Old against the New.

Was it true . . . that not duty, but the fear of living, had held back youth in the past? In the earlier generations, how many girls had married men old enough to be their fathers or grandfathers, and yet nothing disastrous had come of it, nothing, at least, with which husbands, aided by duty or the fear of living, had not been able to deal. Women had known then how to live without love, just as they had known how to live without beauty or happiness; but she realized now, watching Annabel's bleak despair, that it had been because they had something else to put in its place. Something abstract and ultimate! Something

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²Ibid.

as unalterable and as everlasting as the Rock of Ages! Even if duty were merely a symbol--well, a symbol, Mrs. Upchurch decided, is better than an abyss to fall back upon.⁸³

Although Judge Horneywell is attracted to the younger era, he is very content with his father's code of conduct. It is an especially valuable crutch as he pretends to be unaware that Amanda, his contemporary, and the whole of Queensborough expect him to propose marriage:

From Amanda herself . . . he knew that he should have nothing to fear. The women of her generation had known how to suffer in silence. What an inestimable blessing was this knowledge, especially when it had passed into tradition!⁸⁴

Judge Horneywell accepts the comfort and assurance of this rigid code. It has kept him tied to an unhappy marriage for many years, and he was not the man to question greatly a system that he had served long and faithfully. He tends to agree with his father, who said shortly before he died, "If there is anything wrong with the Episcopal Church or the Democratic Party, I would rather die without knowing it."⁸⁵

But the Judge does not serve as the philosopher in

⁸³Glasgow, The Romantic Comedians, p. 300.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 55.

⁸⁵Ibid., p. 9.

The Romantic Comedians; he has a few aged wild oats to sow before he joins General Archbold on the park bench. Mrs. Upchurch, as she stands by helplessly, is surrounded with evidence that things are going badly:

If the world continued to grow away, not only from God, but from good breeding as well, what, she wondered despondently, could be trusted to keep wives contented and the working classes in order?⁸⁶

Miss Glasgow's bitter traditionalism. In This Our Life represents the climax of a complete change in Miss Glasgow's work. She changes from a defence of the Old Moralities to an attack upon the New Immoralities.⁸⁷ Asa Timberlake is the philosopher here. He regrets the passing of the beauty of the earlier era.⁸⁸ This sorrow for deteriorating standards of beauty is only a melancholy response. Asa is, as is Miss Glasgow, more upset with the decay of thought and conduct. His daughter Stanley's selfish and destructive behavior sets the theme for the novel. Geismar says that "the sway of her power in the story was intended to convey the final corruption and decay of this entire group of middle and ruling class

⁸⁶Ibid., p. 194.

⁸⁷Commager, Ibid.

⁸⁸e.g., "They will never again build like this, he thought. Dignity is an anachronism." Ellen Glasgow, In This Our Life, p. 8.

Southerners."⁸⁹ Relatively early in the novel, before Stanley has begun her terrible spin to destruction, Asa has seen:

His code of conduct flatten out and shrivel up as utterly as a balloon that is pricked. And yet the denial of one's nature, he told himself, is not the worst. The worst is to feel that the moral universe, the very foundation of all order, has trembled, has toppled over, has vanished.⁹⁰

Asa's world trembles as often as Miss Glasgow can contrive for three women to shake it severely. His wife is a querulous neurotic, living her life out as an invalid, no help to Asa or her daughters. His daughter Roy is strong and able; but she fastens her life to modern standards and precepts; and they fail her utterly. Stanley is almost symbolic in her innocence and selfish evil force.

As a tragedy, In This Our Life can be compared to The Sheltered Life. Whereas Eva Birdsong, the darling of aristocratic traditions, brings destruction upon herself and her husband, Stanley destroys others in such a way as to escape herself. Stanley elopes to Baltimore with Roy's husband and stays with him and loves him until he takes his own life in hopeless desperation. She is remorseful, of course; but there is always another man to

⁸⁹Geismar, op. cit., p. 278.

⁹⁰Glasgow, In This Our Life, p. 51.

beguile her with gifts and attentions.

The final nightmare of manslaughter and false blame is the harshest of all Glasgow's tragedies. She relentlessly gives everyone, directly or indirectly, a share of the blame and a portion of the tragedy. Asa and Roy--the least selfish and irresponsible of the family group--are made to suffer the most. Asa must eventually consent to the framing of the innocent Negro Perry; and Roy, miserably disillusioned and confused by her generation's failure, wanders the streets in a dismal rain, finishing the night and her youth in the apartment of a strange young man.

Miss Glasgow did not have the opportunity to re-write In This Our Life. Perhaps, if she had, she might have soft-pedaled her bitter attack upon the modern world. But it is highly unlikely. In This Our Life became Miss Glasgow's final indictment of modern society and realization that the past had far more to offer in its conservative standards and polished manners.

Miss Glasgow, ever intense and given to seeing things as all black or all white, ended her career as a strident traditionalist--at the pole completely opposite from her early rebellion.

CHAPTER V

WILLA CATHER

I. WILLA CATHER: A TRADITIONALIST OF EMOTIONAL NEED

Willa Cather's need for a tradition was an intense emotional drive. Her family and her home did not provide the wealthy background of Mrs. Wharton's or the easy acceptance of gentility of Miss Glasgow's. But then the world of expensive good breeding was not that which Miss Cather sought. Her quest for the things that were passing away was based on a need for something she had never had rather than a fear that the good things in her life were being sullied.

Willa Cather's search was for values that she felt to be truly American rather than European. She actually glorified in the European immigrants' successful experience in the Western United States rather than in American expatriates' integration in European culture.

Willa Cather's interest in the past was a strong desire to become part of it. It was a humorless search made in dead earnest. For her, there was no relief in ironic or satiric pictures of the present. She sought emotionally rather than compared intellectually. Hers was a need to find the past.

The Young Rebel

In this sketch of Miss Cather as an individual with highly personal motivations towards tradition, her role as a rebel will stand out. As a child in Virginia and as a girl in Red Cloud, Nebraska, she rebelled against the socially convenient restrictions that kept individuality at a minimum and encouraged "sameness." She was against this always, even as a child. It will also be noted that Willa Cather learned the rudiments of classic tradition before she truly appreciated and clung to the fruits.

When dealing with psychological factors in the study of an author, the attention is continuously drawn to the early, formative years. Although Miss Cather herself has not been generous with autobiographical data, it was her opinion that it is the years from eight to fifteen in which an author "unconsciously gathers basic material. He may acquire a great many interesting and vivid impressions in his mature years, but his thematic material he acquires under fifteen years of age."¹ Katherine Anne Porter in speaking of Cather's work draws the line upon the important developmental years much earlier:

I have not much interest in anyone's personal history after the tenth year, not even my own. Whatever one was going to be was all prepared for before that. The rest is merely confirmation, extension, develop-

¹Edward K. Brown, Willa Cather, p. 3.

ment. Childhood is the fiery furnace in which we are melted down to essentials and shaped for good. I remembered a sentence from the diaries of Anne Frank, who died in the concentration camp in Bergen-Belsen just before she was sixteen years old. At less than fifteen she wrote: 'I have had a lot of sorrow, but who hasn't at my age?'²

In Virginia. It is interesting that Miss Cather emphasizes the importance of the eighth to fifteenth years-- the exact ones that she lived in and grew up in Red Cloud. And Miss Porter overlaps babyhood with pre-adolescence and then stops. This clearly includes Willa's eighth year-- the one in which her family moved from Virginia to Nebraska. In her work this trip appears only briefly in My Antonia as Jim Burden's trip:

There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks, or trees, no hills or fields. If there was a road, I could not make it out in the faint starlight. . . . I had the feeling that the world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it. . . . If we never arrived anywhere, it did not matter. Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out. I did not say my prayers that night: here, I felt, what would be would be.³

But it is supposed that this move and the preceding years had a strong influence on her life. E. K. Brown in his fine critical biography, Willa Cather, from which this sketch will draw much of its information, considers these

²Katherine Anne Porter, The Days Before, pp. 63-64.

³Willa Cather, My Antonia, pp. 7-8.

years to have been very important to her subsequent development. Brown says that she was born into and lived for a while in . . . "a state which had the traditions of continuity and stability as far as they could exist in this country, and in a class which more than any other is always stubbornly devoted to the old ways of doing things."⁴

There, in Virginia, the little girl roamed the hills and the fields with her personal servant, Margie, and learned literature and writing from her grandmother. Here, too, she became the listener who later gathered material from the Scandinavian and Bohemian immigrants and who fashioned these reminiscences into novels. Even as a child in Virginia, Willa could be found huddled under the quilting forms listening to the stories and the gossip of the mountain women who came at quilting time.⁵

Here, too, on the family "place" in Virginia, she established a reputation as a social rebel and began her rejection of ordinary sanctioned behavior. The story is often told in Willa Cather's family of how, when an old gentleman caller was stroking her curls and voicing a few playful platitudes, she sized him up and turned him away with the remark: "I's a dang'ous nigger, I is!"⁶ This

⁴Brown, op. cit., p. 4.

⁵Edith Lewis, Willa Cather Living, p. 10.

⁶Brown, op. cit., p. 5.

irritation, by much that was accepted in the ordinary sense of the word, became greater and more active as she grew into conscious behavior. E. K. Brown draws on information from Dorothy Canfield (a friend of Miss Cather's during their years in Nebraska) and Edith Lewis (with whom Miss Cather lived for many years) when he considers the actual move from Virginia to be of crucial importance. It was a period of heartbreak, for the child loved the Southern countryside and her associations there passionately. There are, unfortunately for this study, too few details on this section of her life generally and the move particularly; but friends remember Miss Cather speaking of Virginia with great affection. She remembered it better than any other place she had ever lived, although she was even more likely to rhapsodize about Navajo villages or French cathedrals. It can be supposed, however, that the sensitive, vulnerable child was greatly affected by the move.

In Red Cloud. In Red Cloud, Nebraska, where Willa Cather grew from childhood to young womanhood, it is doubtful that any of those remaining of the approximately one thousand members of the community would fail to remember her. She made herself exceptionally obvious and most certainly never got lost in a common teen-age identity. There was a rumor abroad in Red Cloud that there was "some-

thing queer" about a girl who preferred conversation with old men (who were somewhat queer themselves) to the pleasures of the other girls and boys of the town, who was reputed to hold "dangerous" ideas about religion and who enjoyed cutting up animals.⁷ She wore boyish clothes: a starched shirt, tie, cap; her hair was shingled shorter than that of many boys. There were not many female youngsters of the nineteenth century who conducted dissecting and embalming experiments and planned to be doctors when they grew up.

Whatever emotional needs this flamboyant dress and unconventional behavior filled, they did little to appease "Willi's" mounting curiosity. It was two-fold. In a community that virtually ignored the foreign emigrants that populated the surrounding farm lands, Willi was a young "curiosity shop." She rode for miles and miles into the country to visit and to talk with these people. She came to be as one of them and, later, from her heart found a tongue to speak their language to the world of literature. And it was on their behalf and in sympathy with them that she resented the shrewd young men who turned "the space, the colour, the princely carelessness of the pioneer" into

⁷Brown, op. cit., p. 48.

petty economies and profits.⁸

Young Miss Cather's curiosity was also highly intellectual. How amazing and yet how natural it is that this brilliant girl with an avid mind should find tutors in music, Latin, literature and experimental science in Red Cloud! She learned so much of classical language and literature that she was very critical of her college courses and gave up formal study in favor of summer intervals with the Red Cloud intellectuals.⁹

Criticism and pressure from Red Cloud citizens were so great against the youngster when she graduated from high school that she delivered an address at commencement entitled "Superstition versus Investigation." This is a truly remarkable document and a thinly veiled retaliation to the critics of her experiments:

Scientific investigation is the hope of our age, as it must precede all progress; and yet upon every hand we hear the objects to its pursuit. The boy who spends his time among the stones and flowers is a trifler, and if he tries with bungling attempt to pierce the mystery of animal life he is cruel. Of course if he becomes a great anatomist or a brilliant naturalist, his cruelties are forgotten or forgiven him; the world is very cautious, but it is generally safe to admire a man who has succeeded.¹⁰

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid., pp. 21-37.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 42-46.

At the university. It was but a step from defying a large portion of Red Cloud to defying Lucius A. Sherman, head of the Department of English at the University of Nebraska. His contribution to American scholarship had been a systematizing of everything that had to do with literature.¹¹ It is only natural that he and the highly individual Willa Cather would come to blows. Brown relates an incident of a certain exam, given objectively, on "Coriolanus," in which the question was asked, "What did the noble matron Volumina say then?" To which Willa answered, "The noble matron Volumina then said 'Bow Wow'."¹²

The Mature Person

As this is not a study of the influence of exact life situations on the works of the author, there will be very little more biographical material. It is of greater import to this dissertation to trace Miss Cather's personality development in the early years and to give a picture of the woman during her productive years.

Henry S. Canby describes Willa Cather as a personable woman with finely cut features and a mind with the precision of a scholar, the penetration of a critic, and

¹¹For example, he systematized the vowel for pain, o, and found its best supporting sounds to be g, hard, r and w. Brown, op. cit., p. 54.

¹²Ibid., p. 55.

the warm intellectuality of a creative artist.¹³ Her mind was regarded as remarkable by all who met her. Elizabeth Sergeant says of her that, "She is enough of a Puritan idealist to take fidelity to disillusion as a sort of penance."¹⁴ Everything that is said of Willa Cather represents strength. Miss Porter (who has based her study on a reading of Cather's work rather than on criticism) speaks of her character and her mind as practically one and the same:

. . . rock-based in character, a character shaped in an old school of good manners, good morals, and the unchallenged assumption that classic culture was their birthright; the belief that knowledge of great art and great thought was a good in itself not to be missed for anything; she subscribed to it all with her whole heart, and in herself there was the vein of iron she had inherited from a long line of people who had helped to break wilderness and to found a new nation in such faiths.¹⁵

To a stranger meeting Willa Cather for the first time, it was her warmth of personality that was most remarkable. Edith Lewis says that she had a warm, eager interest in people. She never made a "perfunctory" approach to anyone; she got immediately beneath the surface

¹³Henry S. Canby, American Memoir, p. 303.

¹⁴Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, Fire Under the Andes, p. 269.

¹⁵Porter, op. cit., p. 63.

to find each person's real self.¹⁶ "It was something more," Miss Lewis says, "than good manners, or even charm. Perhaps it was her instant recognition of their common humanity, of the fact that their claim on life was equal to her own."¹⁷

In spite of this quick contact with almost every human, Willa Cather preserved the anonymity she felt was essential to the artist. She avoided becoming an official personage by declining to join societies, to recommend books and to review. And she always preferred, and used, the real reason for a refusal to a polite excuse.¹⁸ A portion of the privacy she needed was devoted to what Miss Sergeant calls "food for her spirit": Wagnerian opera, Merimee and Turgenev, walks in Central Park, French wine and French cooking.¹⁹

Looking on one side of her nature, Willa Cather is seen as greatly human and composed of spirit. This is not the total picture, however. She was also greatly rigid of personality.

¹⁶Edith Lewis, Willa Cather Living, p. xiii.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 135

¹⁸Brown, op. cit.

¹⁹Sergeant, op. cit., p. 263.

Adaptibility, either feminine or urbane, was not in her; Miss Sergeant reports of the nature of the artist that:

The greater part of the people, the ideas, the aims, the social amusements that crossed her path were alien to her, and she made no bones of refusing them as unassimilable and unimportant.²⁰

If tempered by statements of Miss Cather's closer and better informed friends, Miss Sergeant's opinion appears to have over-stated the case. It is more than likely that Willa Cather opened her heart and spirit to all who sought a share but that she also kept her judgement free to operate. For as Miss Sergeant also states, "She was vigorous and single-minded and thoroughly unaccommodating in temper . . . the clear-cut resistant woman nature that is associated with primitives."²¹ A loathing for cheap success gave her an extraordinary power of rejection. Miss Sergeant believes that although Miss Cather's creative endowment was no greater than that of many others, she had "more certainty of aim."²²

E. K. Brown also discusses this conflict in her nature:

Willa Cather was unyielding--sometimes belligerently so--in her refusal to accept change. Yet by some curious alchemy of the spirit her inflexibility was

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid., p. 262.

transmuted into the very core of her art . . . it is understandable when we think of her,--as a kind of monolith of rugged individualism, an exalter of the pioneer and the builder.²³

It is interesting--and irresistible--that many of her admirers have sought to describe this rigidity in beautiful and quotable passages. Miss Porter has this to say:

Freud had happened; but Miss Cather continued to cite the old Hebrew prophets, the Greek dramatists, Goethe, Shakespeare, Dante, Tolstoy, Flaubert, and such for the deeper truths of human nature, both good and evil . . . Stravinsky had happened; but she went on being dead in love with Wagner . . . The Nude had Descended the Staircase with an epoch-shaking tread but she remained faithful to Puvis de Chavannes. . . .²⁴

It is difficult to know positively which came first: the rejection of the new or the veneration for the old. It is most likely, however, that Miss Cather discovered the past after having quarreled with the present. It is one of the fundamental paradoxes of psychology that the infant must be saturated in the fulfillment of a specific need in order that the adult may be independent of that need. Be reasoning in reverse it is evident that since she sought after the past--i.e., a solid, untroubled bulwark--these essentials were somehow denied her in her infancy. Brown credits the past with giving Willa Cather a

²³Brown, op. cit., p. 331.

²⁴Porter, op. cit., p. 71.

"sense of consorting with the heroic men, a sense of clarity and order undiscoverable in the rushing present."²⁵

When Miss Cather says in My Antonia that "happiness" is to be dissolved in something complete and great, it rings true to theorize that she is stating her own need. She had three idols and, as a hero worshipper of Nebraska, Europe, and the cosmopolitan artist, she actively sought to become complete with each of these forces. As will be seen later, Nebraska and the cosmopolitan artist are almost directly contrary forces. By seeking both, Miss Cather created a severe conflict for herself.

This conflict is obviously an enigma to critics and biographers. It is almost as if she were in active retreat from some threatening object, possibly within herself.

James Gray, cryptic author of On Second Thought, a book of very up-to-date criticism, in comparing Willa Cather to Ellen Glasgow says that their novels are "monuments to the classic tradition" and that they don't express anything of the spirit of "our time."²⁶

Gray compares these two authors in a detailed figure that helps picture much of this feeling for the past:

Yet, though they worked, like good housewives of

²⁵Brown, op. cit., p. 332.

²⁶James Gray, On Second Thought, p. 142.

their art, to eliminate a great deal of the rubbish from the furnishings of the novel, neither of them wished to change it from its classic design. They were rather like people who have lived with dignity and self-respect in very old houses. The spacious rooms were kept as they had been in the splendid days of a more leisurely era. The old hangings were dry cleaned and replaced because their owners had taste enough to realize that the materials were superior to the machine-made product of our time. The old family portraits still hung on the wall. Only the sentimental Victorian intrusions were eliminated--the sculptured clasping hands, the pallid little girls in marble with every button on the high shoes faithfully reproduced.²⁷

Veneration for the Past

Perhaps there has been too much emphasis on Willa Cather's backward look without enough explanation of just what she was seeing and finding there. Although Willa Cather's dependence on established forms and institutions will be studied in the section dealing exclusively with traditional elements in her novels, it is well to understand her preference as an important facet of her personality. For it is well known that when she stopped trying to write and began to "remember", Willa Cather became an artist.

The Divide. Most of her remembering was of the Nebraska plains which she often referred to as the Divide. Its farming immigrants represented the nobility and beauty

²⁷Ibid., pp. 141-142.

of life; and her desire to exalt these things was her life. Henry Steele Commager quotes Willa Cather as saying:

It's a queer thing about the flat country, it takes hold of you or it leaves you perfectly cold. A great many people find it dull and monotonous; they like a church steeple, an old mill, a waterfall, country all touched up and furnished, like a German Christmas card. I go everywhere. I admire all kinds of country. I tried to live in France. But when I strike the open plains, something happens. I'm home. I breathe differently.²⁸

There is repeated biographical evidence that the Divide remained her spiritual home and that she longed after it until her death.

Europe. Even a brief study of Willa Cather's life and personality--especially one dealing with her feeling toward tradition--must touch on her European travels. From the larger body of her work one would never guess the importance of Europe to her personally and to her artistic spirit. Europe became something of a "habit" for her, formed when she was sent over several times by McClure, who believed his editors needed yearly rest and rejuvenation. Her many, many subsequent trips were a re-establishment of her first trip, of which Miss Lewis writes:

This first European journey was, of course, a great imaginative experience. For an artist, who lives intensely in ideas, for whom all the important adventures happen in the mind and spirit, there is nothing quite like that first encounter with European culture on its

²⁸Henry Steele Commager, The American Mind, p. 150.

own soil, in its age-old stronghold--it is a homecoming more deeply moving and transfiguring than any homecoming to friends and family, to physical surroundings, can ever be.²⁹

It is the same discovery of one's own spirit that Claude Wheeler experienced in One Of Ours.

Bank Street. For many years, between summers in Red Cloud and trips to Europe, Miss Cather lived in 5 Bank Street with Miss Edith Lewis. It is in this atmosphere that most of her friends have wished to remember her: the large rooms, the generous coal fires, the warm colors in the rug. They were all representative of her life and of her outlook upon it. Once the two women had furnished the apartment in mahogany period pieces and Orientals, they gave no more thought to acquiring new things. What money they had they "preferred to spend on flowers, music, and entertaining . . ."³⁰ They had a very French cook, Josephine, whose strong personality was credited with giving the apartment the feeling of a French household even to the extent of speaking the language because the cook refused to learn English. Miss Lewis feels that this atmosphere contributed quite definitely to the tone of

²⁹Lewis, op. cit., p. 55.

³⁰Brown, op. cit., p. 181.

Death Comes for the Archbishop and of Shadows on the Rock.³¹

Conflict of Ideas

It is probably the greatest sadness of Willa Cather's life that she saw nobility only in terms of the uncorrupted pioneer of the open plains whose innocence was destroyed by the town and the city and that she was the artist only in terms of city life--the intellectual mecca. Although there does not seem to be any valid criticism supporting or refuting the theory, it appears to be obvious that Miss Cather never resolved this conflict for herself. She never really pulled these two main themes together. Although destruction of original innocence lurked in the city, final fulfillment for the artists was worn like a golden crown by the highest office buildings and cathedrals. And when her artist finds spiritual resuscitation in the earth--as did Thea Kronborg--it is an interlude preceding great triumph in the city rather than realization of false aims or values.

Her years in Pittsburgh and as editor of McClure's in New York were tedious for Willa Cather. Except for the few years she taught English, it was not until she retired that she had time to write and to mature as an artist.³²

³¹Lewis, op. cit., p. 332.

³²Brown, op. cit., p. 92.

It is most fortunate that she chose Arizona for her vacation spot before she began to write in earnest. She felt that she had come home to the "great hearted adventurers" of previous generations.³³ After the rigorous stint with McClure's this must have been especially refreshing.

Withdrawal

Towards the end of her life, Willa Cather experienced a decided withdrawal from the world. E. K. Brown feels that she was always somewhat bothered by an "inner malais" that caused her to swing backward, ever, to the more enduring values. To her, looking forward was, essentially, an acceptance of the "ephemeral things of daily life" and the "inevitable wear of the decades."³⁴ Brown quotes Miss Lewis' passage:

The struggle to preserve the integrity of her life as an artist, its necessary detachment and freedom, cost her something--cost a considerable expenditure of nervous energy, for it meant a steady exertion of her will against the will of the public. But it was not disdain for the tributes people wished to pay her, or a feeling of superiority or indifference, that caused her to withdraw more and more from the world. It was self-preservation.³⁵

³³Ibid., pp. 169-70.

³⁴Brown, op. cit., p. 332.

³⁵Ibid., pp. 238-39.

In 1922 Willa Cather joined the Episcopal Church. This is further evidence of the seriousness with which she was examining the world within her sphere. Although Brown states that he believes her motive for joining the Episcopal Church was an intellectual withdrawal so that her life could become essentially "retrospective, creative, and speculative," he says further that Miss Cather came to avoid intimate relationships, "knowing well that once she entered upon one of these, her imaginative and sympathetic nature could not be held in check."³⁶

Creative Theorist

Just as Miss Cather became increasingly captive to the past in her own psychological life, so she became dependent upon it artistically. When she began writing, she found that she was influenced by James to such an extent that her work was restricted. Van Wyck Brooks says that she followed James because she was strongly attracted to Turgenev, whose preference for perfection over depth or force suggested an emphasis on form and formal method. She was soon to discover, however, that James' world and method "were remote indeed from the world of her imagin-

³⁶Ibid., p. 289.

ation."³⁷ Much later in her career, Miss Cather wrote in the introduction to a new edition of her first novel to be printed in book form, Alexander's Bridge, that it did:

not deal with the kind of subject matter in which I now feel myself most at home . . . Everything is new to the young writer, and everything seems equally personal. That which is outside his deepest experience, which he observes and studies, often seems more vital than that which he knows well, because he regards it with all the excitement of discovery.³⁸

Although Miss Cather probably came to her knowledge of the greatness of her talent by herself, she received a strong hint from Sara Orne Jewett, in a widely quoted letter:

Of course, one day you will write about your own country. In the meantime, get all you can. One must know the world so well before one can know the parish.³⁹

Willa Cather knew this, of course; but she must not have integrated it until after she had written and published some poetry, short stories and one novel. Basically, she felt that the artist should give himself to the situation he chose, following its nuances rather than shaping it to preconceived effects.⁴⁰ Her theory, always the same,

³⁷Van Wyck Brooks, Confident Years: 1885-1915, p. 535.

³⁸Lewis, op. cit., p. 77.

³⁹Maxwell David Geismar, Last of the Provincials, p. 157.

⁴⁰Canby, op. cit., p. 303.

was strengthened by reading the many conventional, unpublished MSS that came across her desk as managing editor of McClure's. She felt a true writer would submit to his subject and by submitting to it arrive at a form that was ideally suited to it.⁴¹ She expressed this theory, indirectly, when still a student at the University of Nebraska in a Shakespeare paper:

I don't think Shakespeare had any definite purpose even in writing "Hamlet" . . . He probably read the legend, felt sorry for the young prince and as an expression of his sympathy wrote about him. . . He gradually grew into the play as he wrote it. . . .⁴²

In turning from the technical influence of James, Miss Cather proved herself a creative theorist and artist. Canby states that he knows very few authors who wish to discuss the craft of good writing with only the most indirect reference to their own work, as did Willa Cather:

She wished to know how the great ones achieved, not to imitate them.⁴³

⁴¹Brown, op. cit., p. 148.

⁴²Ibid., p. 56.

⁴³Canby, op. cit., p. 304.

II. THE TRADITIONAL ELEMENTS IN THE NOVELS OF WILLA CATHER

In the above study of Willa Cather's life, there was a pointed emphasis upon her need for the security of long-established values. This need was greatly different from that of Mrs. Wharton and Miss Glasgow, both of whom sought expression within the substantial cultures of their fathers. For Miss Cather, it was not a matter of escaping from the hubbub of modern life back into the cushioned seclusion of an older, more genteel, comfortably patterned circle.

The Past

Granville Hicks, in his study The Great Tradition, speaks of Miss Cather's search as a retreat into a refuge, as an escape from the sterility of contemporary life. He is critical of her because hers is not an expression of "some perception of the relation of the past to the central issues of the present," because "she could do nothing but paint pretty pictures."⁴⁴

Miss Cather was much more emotionally involved than a popular genre painter might be. Her pictures were far more than pretty. When Miss Cather ends My Antonia with

⁴⁴Granville Hicks, The Great Tradition, pp. 225-26.

the feeling that "whatever we had missed, we possessed together the precious, the incommunicable past," she is sharing her understanding of what these pretty pictures really represented.⁴⁵ This was, to Miss Cather, an expression of her own exaltation in the experience of sharing the past, of her own critical evaluation that her work became important when she stopped trying to write and began to remember is of value here. For Miss Cather's remembering encompasses far more than the limits of a personal, individual life knowledge. Her memory was a spiritual force, to which the ancient Cliff-Dweller communities, European Gothic cathedrals, and the Nebraska Divide had much immediate significance. It is this spiritual affinity with the distant past that is presented as evidence that Willa Cather sought completion of herself in the memory of cultures other than her own.

Rebecca West has been especially aware of Miss Cather's absorption in several cultures. Miss West feels that Miss Cather is successful because she is the "most sensuous of writers."⁴⁶ Of Miss Cather's method, she says:

Willa Cather builds her imagined world almost as solidly as our five senses build the universe around us . . . She has within herself a sensitivity that

⁴⁵Willa Cather, My Antonia, p. 371.

⁴⁶Rebecca West, Strange Necessity; Essays, p. 233.

constantly presents her with a body of material which would overwhelm most of us, so that we would give up all idea of transmitting it and would sink into a state of passivity . . .⁴⁷

In "Two Friends," the thinly disguised story of two of Red Cloud's vanishing race of pioneers, Miss Cather speaks for herself as directly as a novelist can. She says:

Even in early youth, when the mind is so eager for the new and untried, while it is still a stranger to faltering and fear, we yet like to think that there are certain unalterable realities, somewhere at the bottom of things. These anchors may be ideas; but more often they are merely pictures, vivid memories, which in some unaccountable and very personal way give us courage. The seagulls, that seem so much creatures of the free wind and waves, go back to something they had known before; to remote islands and lonely ledges . . .⁴⁸

It is not difficult to understand why Willa Cather remembered, that is to say, wrote of, several different cultures. For her talent was in capturing the inner values of a certain civilization rather than telling a story to offset or illustrate the background.

In evaluating My Antonia, E. K. Brown says:

Every thing in the book is there to convey a feeling, not to tell a story, not to establish a social philosophy, not even to animate a group of characters. The feeling attaches to persons, places, moments: if one were to pin it in a phrase it might be called a mourn-

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Willa Cather, Obscure Destinies, p. 193.

ful appreciation of the precious, the incommunicable past . . .⁴⁹

When Willa Cather says in My Antonia that it is happiness to be dissolved in something complete and great, she gives staunch support to the argument presented above. Certainly, she is stating her own need. That which Brown refers to as "mournful appreciation" is probably much nearer a desire to be dissolved in either Nebraska or Europe or, ultimately, the universal church.

The Divide. The Nebraska country of Willa's early youth, close to the Great Divide, was her first and probably greatest love. She had what Vachel Lindsay calls an "instinct for the horizon" and a "passion for the skyline."⁵⁰ There is little doubt that, as Edith Lewis says, " . . . no one had ever found Nebraska beautiful until Willa Cather wrote about it."⁵¹ Miss Lewis continues:

A new convention had to be created for it, a convention that had nothing to do with woods and waterfalls, streams and valleys and picturesque architecture. It has not the austerity of the desert nor the majesty of mountains and rivers. There it lay; and it

⁴⁹E. K. Brown, Willa Cather, A Critical Biography, p. 206.

⁵⁰Van Wyck Brooks, Confident Years: 1865 to 1915, p. 538.

⁵¹Edith Lewis, Willa Cather Living, p. 17.

was as new, as unknown to art as it was to the pioneer.⁵²

O Pioneers!, My Antonia, and Song of the Lark are products of this early love. These novels, although not her very first work, established the significance of her artistry. These three novels, with Death Comes for the Archbishop, are probably her finest long works, a critical judgment which tends to emphasize the importance of Miss Cather's search for completeness on the Nebraska plains.

There is something of awe in the novelist's pleasure in Nebraska. When she came as a child of eight to the country surrounding Red Cloud, she was overpowered by its vastness, its untouched stretches, if Jim Burden's thoughts can be taken as her own:

There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. If there was a road, I could not make it out in the faint starlight. There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made . . . I had the feeling that the world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it, and were outside man's jurisdiction.⁵³

Jim apparently felt outside God's jurisdiction too, for he adds:

Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out. I did not say my prayers that night: here, I felt, what would be would be.⁵⁴

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Cather, My Antonia, p. 7.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 8.

The Cliff Dwelling: The land of the pioneer was not totally sufficient to Willa Cather, however. For as she says: "In Nebraska there was no past unless one was geographically minded; everything that had not happened yesterday had happened the day before."⁵⁵ For her, an American and a Southerner, Nebraska had no history. But the great Southwest held a treasure in Arizona: the Cliff Dwellings of an ancient Indian race. Thea feels the discovery to be "a lengthening of one's past as an American, especially if one were a Western American, an enlarging of one's frame of reference."⁵⁶ In Song of the Lark Miss Cather uses an incident in her own life to mark the turning point of Thea Kronburg's. After two years of stalemate in Chicago, Thea yields to the spell of the ruins and the silent testimony of forgotten races, and she fortifies her vision of the power and importance of art.⁵⁷

Commager feels that Willa Cather returned to the frontier again and again because it "simplified, clarified, and dramatized universal moral problems . . ." for her.⁵⁸

⁵⁵Brown, op. cit., p. 171.

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Harlan Henthorne Hatcher, Creating the Modern American Novel, p. 67.

⁵⁸Henry Steele Commager, The American Mind, p. 151.

A study of "Willi's" eccentric rebellion as she grew to young womanhood in Red Cloud would not lead one to expect her to search out these years for tranquility's sake when she needed a refuge from the tensions of the present. But her eccentricities were more than likely the passing fad of a very intense adolescent, and her absorption in the pioneer life was an experience of lasting force. These were the years dominated by the pioneers, the European immigrants, who had come to America to find a place in which to grow and prosper; these were the great decades.

France. The great decades of the heroic pioneer women, the Antonias and the Alexandras, are destroyed by the encroachments of little minds squeezing financial rather than natural benefits from the land. Claude Wheeler in One of Ours finds himself utterly lost in the plains country now that the greathearted adventurers are gone. He is rescued from a life of wretched loneliness by the great war to end all wars. He is allowed by this convenient catastrophe to go to Europe and to find the soil of his fathers. He is very like Willa Cather herself; in fact, he probably is Willa Cather. Claude goes to the Church of Saint-Ouen at Rouen as she must have done and finds that it is France:

Life was so short that it meant nothing at all

unless it were continually reinforced by something that endured; unless the shadows of individual existence came and went against a background that held together.⁵⁹

As a whole, critics are unenthusiastic about the part of One of Ours that deals with Claude's experience in France. It is not Cather at her best. It seems to suggest somewhat confusedly that when a sensitive, inarticulate American is frustrated by the barrenness of his inter-personal relationships at home he seeks fulfillment in Europe.

As was stated in the introduction to this study, an important premise of this dissertation is that work that does not come up to the author's highest level of artistry is, therefore not to be considered representative of the author's matter or essence. The European sequences of One of Ours are just such an instance. Although Miss Cather traveled often and pleasurably in Europe, especially in France, and desired to "remember" its substantial past, she was unable to reproduce it when handled as an integral part of her story.

She is much more successful when recounting the apparently true experiences of the Bohemian immigrants,

⁵⁹Willia Cather, One of Ours, p. 215.

such as the Shimeradas and the Neighbour Rosicky, or the French priests and early settlers of Quebec. There is a meanness and squalor in their memories of Europe that do not exactly harmonize with Miss Cather's idealization of Europe's culture. Things were so bad, in fact, that they all came to America. Miss Cather may have been forced to wear blinders when she approached Europe as a vital scene for her novel of the present day and when she wished to present Europe as the answer to Claude's problems and the home of his spirit.

Miss Cather was much more at home, and therefore much more successful, when Europe remained a nostalgic memory, as it did in Shadows on the Rock. Willa Cather lived in Paris, on the Left Bank, in 1920, before she finished One of Ours. She used no letters of introduction and became absorbed in the past of the city, acquiring impressions of the older Paris. She gained what Brown calls "a feeling of the meaning of French civilization and culture as a whole."⁶⁰ This experience was inspirational to the mood of Shadows on the Rock.

The Southwest and the Church. But before Miss

⁶⁰Brown, op. cit., p. 217.

Cather used her impressions of the older Paris in Shadows on the Rock, she had still another field of description for her feeling for the people of France. She wrote Death Comes to the Archbishop. E. K. Brown states that

The essential story of the Southwest, she had come to believe, was neither that of its ancient Indian civilizations nor that of the Spanish explorers and martyrs: it was that of the French missionaries in the nineteenth century.⁶¹

It is also probable that Willa Cather's desire to work in the style of legend--absolutely the opposite of the dramatic treatment--added greatly to her determination to write the Archbishop's story. Edith Lewis says of Death Comes for the Archbishop and Shadows on the Rock that

Willa Cather never got so much happiness from the writing of any book as from the Archbishop; and although Shadows on the Rock is of course altogether different in conception, in treatment, and in artistic purpose, it may have been in part a reluctance to leave that world of Catholic feeling and tradition in which she had lived so happily for so long that led her to embark on this new novel.⁶²

Perhaps the strongest conflict in Death Comes for the Archbishop is the manner in which Latour reconciles his own Old World cultivations with those of the New

⁶¹Ibid., p. 251.

⁶²Ibid., p. 282.

World. His encounter with Kit Carson, in whom he recognizes a common appreciation of standards and loyalties and a shared code, is a very adroit dramatization of this conflict.

Latour and the warm-hearted Vaillant keep the delights of their French heritage ever with them, however. They are pioneers, but they are also lovers of the beautiful patterns man has found to enrich his life.⁶³

In discussing the interesting diversity of the traditions attractive to Miss Cather, Commager says that

Better than any of her literary contemporaries, she represented the force of tradition in twentieth-century America--the tradition of the artist, the tradition of the pioneer, the tradition, eventually, of the universal church.⁶⁴

Commager might have said "ultimately" as well as eventually" because Willa Cather seems to have reached the apex of her search there. Francis X. Connolly, contributing the chapter on Cather to Fifty Years of the American Novel, the volume of criticism by outstanding Catholic men of letters, considers Death Comes for the Archbishop and Shadows on the Rock to be the culmination of her develop-

⁶³This is especially evident in their elegant pleasure in food and fine drinks. Auclair shares the same enthusiasm for the cultivating influence of the dinner table.

⁶⁴Commager, op. cit., p. 155.

ment. Lucy Gayheart and the other novels and stories that followed these two were regressions to previous themes.⁶⁵ Granville Hicks supports this popular critical evaluation. Having found less success in her work of the early twenties, Willa Cather returned to an earlier frontier. These novels of the pioneering churchmen were concerned with the heroic qualities and colorful setting that had been important in her Nebraskan childhood:

Thus her problems were solved: a theme to match her interests and talents, and a faith to serve as bulwark against her own sense of futility.⁶⁶

Further critical evidence placing Death Comes for the Archbishop at the summit of her work is found in Connolly's essay. He considers My Antonia, The Professor's House and Death Comes for the Archbishop to be the crucial books in Willa Cather's development. He traces their "progress from one level of meaning and value to another; from the level of nature to the level of mind, and from the level of mind to the level of spirit."⁶⁷

Connolly, in evaluating Miss Cather's position in American letters, finds that she failed to become the

⁶⁵Francis X. Connolly, "Memory as Muse," Fifty Years of the American Novel 1900-1950, ed. H. C. Gardiner, p. 74.

⁶⁶Hicks, op. cit., p. 225.

⁶⁷Connolly, loc. cit.

greatest American novelist of her time because she did not understand that Death Comes for the Archbishop and Shadows on the Rock fell short of being complete because they did not reach the even higher levels of spirituality nor sound the depths of suffering:

. . . had she been less content with her ideas of things and with the esthetic gratification of those ideas; had she, in other words, felt fire as well as seen it . . .⁶⁸

she would have been better qualified presumably to speak for the Catholics as well as of them.⁶⁹

Quebec and the Church. Shadows on the Rock is less a novel than a catalogue of the pioneer types that settled Quebec, the early French colony. The church looms large in the picture, as it undoubtedly did in actuality; the

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 87.

⁶⁹Although not essential to this discussion of the various traditions that influenced Cather's work, F. X. Connolly's argument for her failure to capture these highest levels is interesting: ". . . Miss Cather had never properly understood the Christian spirituality which is the informing principle of Death Comes for the Archbishop and Shadows on the Rock. Her 'idea' of Christianity was perhaps too esthetic, too historical, too French, an admiration of Christian art and manners, its order and decency, its culture and its moods. She tried to remember what she had not experienced and perhaps found that her response, that of the culturally starved Protestant, to the greatness of the past, her noble desire to participate in an aristocracy of spirit, did not suffice to capture the reality she aimed at.

colony is a mission of economic conversion among the Indians. That is, the Church converts them and the trappers trade with them for big stores of pelts.

It is a book of beauty and nobility. It voices, perhaps more than any other of Miss Cather's novels, her veneration for and belief in the importance of cultural foundations. M. Auclair, the main character, keeps constantly before him the desire to return to France and often recalls to mind the highly civilized and intellectually challenging life he plans to lead soon again. He keeps his standards of culture in his day-to-day living at all times:

Dinner was the important event of the day in the apothecary's household . . . his dinner Auclair regarded as the thing that kept him a civilized man and a Frenchman.⁷⁰

As Madame Auclair lay dying:

She would think fearfully of how much she was entrusting to that little shingled head (the Auclairs' daughter Cecile); something so precious, so intangible; a feeling about life that had come down to her through so many centuries and that she had brought with her across the wastes of obliterating, brutal ocean. The sense of "our way"--that was what she longed to leave with her daughter. She wanted to believe that when she was lying in this rude Canadian earth, life would go on almost unchanged in this room with its dear (and, to her, beautiful) objects, that the proprieties would be observed, all the little shades of feeling which

⁷⁰Willia Cather, Shadows on the Rock, pp. 16-17.

make the common fine.⁷¹

Shadows on the Rock is so completely the case of an author's desire to immerse himself in a culture other than his own, other than American modernism, that the question arises as to why this is true. E. K. Brown develops the theory well and clearly that this novel, the one that travels farthest from Red Cloud, "drew most of its emotional power from her memories of her life there as they flooded her mind during the years when that life had finally to take its place in the irrecoverable past."⁷²

Virginia. Sapphira and the Slave Girl does not rank with Miss Cather's best work. It is here discussed because it illustrates yet another facet of the author's search into traditional cultures. Sapphira carries Miss Cather into Virginia, the home of her very early years. Miss Cather was aging and had suffered the loss through death of her parents and several very dear friends when she decided to undertake one more novel. "She had missed the sense of unity and purpose a long fiction (Brown's

⁷¹Ibid., p. 29.

⁷²Brown, op. cit., p. 280. Brown argues that the parallels between the Red Cloud of her youth and the early Quebec settlement are very significant: both communities had approximately 2,000 population; the pioneering spirit was similar in both; the settlers came from far away, diverse places, bringing their own gods with them.

term for a novel) gave to (her) life, and the happy companionship with creatures of memory and imagination."⁷³ She had long meant to write from her memories of Virginia. Also she had promised her father that she would not leave Virginia unremembered. But, perhaps the most significant of these motives was Miss Cather's increased interest in her own earliest years. Although during her many years on Bank Street, in New York, she had very seldom spoken of Virginia and it had not seemed "to belong to her imaginative life," the deaths of her parents and her own approach to the last years led her to dwell with "ever increasing pleasure and preoccupation on small incidents in the life of her childhood."⁷⁴

Plot and Theme

As Willa Cather is what might be called a conscious traditionalist--that is, conscious of her own search for a way of life in the past--her work should be examined and evaluated with her purpose in mind. The necessity to Miss Cather of a substantial bulwark of tested and proven patterns of civilization has been presented. To dramatize this need, Miss Cather created a number of persons to live out

⁷³Brown, op. cit., p. 308.

⁷⁴Ibid.

their lives within various communities of these past eras. The behavior of these recreations served as both plot and theme in her novels.

It is impossible to separate plot from theme in Cather's work. Her fiction is completely without contrivance and coincidence. When a character in a Cather novel acts, his behavior is the result of serious thought, the weighing of standards and a recognition of the possible outcome. His behavior is always an expression of himself, an extension of his values, the codes of behavior, that become the themes or rather the arguments of the novels.

The natural level. It is probable that Miss Cather was not conscious of beginning a search when she wrote O! Pioneers and My Antonia. She was, largely, remembering, with few worries as to where she would go next. This was the era and these were the novels of the "natural level." F. J. Hoffman finds two themes outstanding in Miss Cather's early novels of pioneer life: the hardness of the land, and the creative artist in sympathy with the "complete self."⁷⁵

The hardness of the land was such that it visited disappointment and disaster upon the farmers. It was an

⁷⁵Frederick J. Hoffman, The Modern Novel in America 1900-1950, pp. 56-60.

immense challenge to character that only the strongest could overcome. It took pioneers of exceptional vision and courage and faith to succeed, pioneers of Alexandra's and Neighbour Rosicky's strength. For them, fighting meant enduring in an almost trackless plain. And faith came, at last, with identification with the Land. Neighbour Rosicky expressed this oneness with the land on his return ride from the doctor's where he has been told of rapidly approaching death; he stops beside the country graveyard and muses:

It was a nice graveyard . . . sort of snug and home-like, not cramped or mournful,--a big sweep all round it . . . And it was so near home. Over there across the cornstalks his own roof and windmill . . . And it was a comfort to think that he would never have to go farther than the edge of his own hay field. The snow, falling over his barnyard and the graveyard, seemed to draw thing together like. And they were all neighbours in the graveyard, most of them friends; there was nothing to feel awkward or embarrassed about.⁷⁶

Although there is no hint, of course, of a death wish about Rosicky's thoughts; it is evident that he is content that he should end this way, that he should find himself as one with the earth.

Commager finds the same challenge of the earth in Cather. He writes that she believed that

⁷⁶Cather, Obscure Destinies, pp. 18-19.

"The pioneers had a special relationship to the soil and drew from the soil strength and courage; they came not merely to make money but to live, and they built not merely an economy but a civilization, and there was integrity and dignity and piety in their work and their lives."⁷⁷

Commager also suggests that Miss Cather's assertion is not wholly supported by historical fact; but, he adds, it is a mark of Miss Cather's triumph that she made nature and history to conform to her art.⁷⁸

Miss Cather progresses from absorption in the rural farmer with a few lyrical references to the spiritual barrenness of the city, in O Pioneers!, to a partial reconciliation with the small town in My Antonia. There is almost a romantic glow, and certainly a sanguine one, in the section that deals with the casual, warm-hearted fun in the Harlings' kitchen, the dances in the park on Saturday evenings, and the lovely walks at night under the cottonwoods.

The artist. Miss Cather's other theme as distinguished by Hoffman, the artist in the pioneer life, is difficult to pin down. It would appear that when Cather came to write a long work on the unusually talented artist, she became self-conscious. She is able to leave the

⁷⁷Commager, op. cit., p. 152.

⁷⁸Ibid.

artist who performed for pleasure, such as Mexican Johnny, in his environment. But he is in no way to be confused with the great artist who has a destiny to meet. Thea Kronborg is encouraged, as was "Willi" herself, to leave her small home town and to seek further education and stimulus in the great city.

It is not apparent whether or not Miss Cather felt the inconsistency of her argument: on the one hand, the town and small village were developing the evil appendages of civilized group living, were beginning to be rigid, self-seeking, and petty; on the other hand, the artist must seek the even larger city in which to find fulfillment.

There is a reason for this conflict, although not an answer, in Miss Cather's personality. She needed both directly contrary elements. Her sympathies lay equally with Neighbour Rosicky and Thea Kronborg. An important half of her sought the uncorrupted, incorruptible plains.

The other part of Miss Cather was a highly articulate, intellectual being. She found as soon as she had come into any appreciable contact with the literary arts at the University of Nebraska, that she was a writer of considerable promise. And, as rewarding as they were to the greater being, the plains were quite inadequate to

the needs of the literary artist. The plains were verdant soil for the embryo Willa, Thea, and Lucy Gayheart, and served to resuscitate drained spiritual resources; but they did not and could not provide most important, the audience which Miss Cather felt the artist needed.

Miss Cather's truly gifted stars needed the large metropolitan area in which to shine. Did the great city, then, become less mean than the small village in which Ivy Peters worked and schemed? Miss Cather does not deal directly with this problem. For her artists from the small places go to the city to mix with others from the same sort of places, with others who have already made their reputations. Her artist is propelled by the motives of purest self-expression. He is idealistic and idealized. He knows nothing of ego and getting ahead and making money. Miss Cather's artist is the rare genius devoted to the creation of classics and classic performances.

What the land is to the greathearted adventurers of the plains, the dingy studio is to the artist. That Miss Cather's attitude is less than purely objective can be seen by the liberties she grants her artists, by the total selflessness of their sacrificial struggles, and by their complete identity with art. But there are also

artists of almost insane temperament, with an experienced eye on the box-office receipts, and/or capable of deep communion with other humans, even those of the opposite sex, on the physical, mental, and spiritual levels.

It is hypothesized here that Miss Cather represents the artist as herself. She and her artists seem strangely above common passions and desires. Thea, to be sure, loves and marries an affable, intelligent beer manufacturer. But her realization of her spiritual attachment to the past, not her marriage, is the crucial event in her life.

Many have wondered how the coldness and withdrawn attitude of Fremstad, the great Metropolitan Opera diva, whom Miss Cather used as a model for Thea Kronborg, affected her. Brown says that none of this mattered, that Willa Cather believed that the

artist is not amenable to standards by which other folk may rightly be judged. For mastery of an art . . . a fearful tax is levied on the entire personality of the artist . . . Imaginative understanding of the artistic process should bring . . . a deep compassion for what the personality of the artist undergoes, if not homage for his acceptance of his destiny.⁷⁹

Willa Cather felt that art depended upon the artist's ability to find beauty and understanding in the world about him. She herself depended upon what she ob-

⁷⁹Brown, op. cit., p. 187.

served or divined. Of this Brown says:

If there had been no people within her experience in whom personal life flowed richly she felt that as an artist she might as well have lived in an igloo. Sometimes, as she looked about her in the years after the First World War, she wondered if there would be much lost if she did elect the igloo.⁸⁰

Two themes reconciled. Some critics have attempted to reconcile Miss Cather's two themes by comparing their similarities. Both Hoffman and Commager do well with this approach. But as Miss Cather has been presented here as a person with a deeply complicated need to establish herself among the values of past traditions, it would be more consistent with that theory to look for the welding force within herself. This force is one of the commonest of psychologically isolated drives: the desire for recognition through identification. Willa Cather sought herself more than any other one thing, or combination of things, in the past and in the artist's success. Her artistic efforts were devoted to an effort to justify the person that she was and to explain the support from the past that she needed.

Here is where the two conflicting themes come together: in her need to justify the importance of the com-

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 227.

fortable, unclamoring past and the sacred destiny of the artist. Her faith was in the specialness of herself and other artists, and her hope was in the past. Substantial as this faith and this hope were, they were never taken for granted or seen with the discerning eye of the insider. One has only to compare Cather's novels with those of Wharton or Glasgow to see the difference in approach between an insider's assurance to criticize with discretion and Cather's idealized poetry.

If viewed with this concept in mind, Miss Cather's two themes become more nearly one. Miss Cather complicated things by imagining that her emotional needs were intellectual choices openly arrived at. Her mind was more involved in explaining the way she had come than in choosing the turns. She went, in an almost inevitable pattern, from unquestioning appreciation of the past to an attack on the present and future.

Willa Cather's primary theme, stated positively, is one of search in the past traditions; stated negatively, it is one of gradual rejection of the modern American scene and its people.

Gradual Disillusion

Willa Cather's gradual, but apparently complete, disillusionment with the present is clearly seen by a

chronological study of her novels up to her historical books. The largest portions of My Antonia and On Pioneers are devoted to lyrical appreciations of what Brown refers to as the Great Decades. But there are a few contrary suggestions even in the earliest of her reminiscences.

In My Antonia, Cather's slight dissatisfactions have to do with people. The town's people are seen through the eyes of the hired girls, the daughters of immigrant farmers, who came to Black Hawk to work as servants, or through those of their companion and champion, Jim Burden:

Those girls had grown up in the first bitter-hard times, and had got little schooling themselves. But the younger brothers and sisters, for whom they made such sacrifices and who have had "advantages," never seem to me, when I meet them now, half as interesting or as well educated.⁸¹

In one often quoted passage, Miss Cather compares the hired girls from the country to their Black Hawk contemporaries:

The Black Hawk boys looked forward to marrying Black Hawk girls, and living in a brand-new little house with best chairs that must not be sat upon, and hand painted china that must not be used . . . The country girls were considered a menace to the social order. Their beauty shone out too boldly against a conventional background. But anxious mothers need have felt no alarm. They mistook the mettle of their sons. The respect for respectability was stronger than any desire in Black Hawk youth.⁸²

⁸¹Cather, My Antonia, p. 198.

⁸²Ibid., p. 202.

This paragraph shows, especially, Miss Cather's distaste for the small town conventions that she had found critical and oppressive in her own eccentric, experimenting youth.

Immediately following these two novels, Willa Cather's attitude became noticeably more negative towards the present. She found in One of Ours that the glory had departed from the plains and that her hero, Claude, was lost without it. One of Miss Cather's greatest antagonists, the machine, stands out as a veritable villain in this novel. It is ever the symbol of disaster. It is a gasoline motor truck that frightens the mule team so that they throw Claude against the barbed-wire fence. Later, the failure of Claude's marriage to Enid Royce is symbolized by her driving about the country for hundreds of miles in her black electric, spreading prohibition leaflets while Claude sits at home picking at a lonely meal. The American machine is used for self-expression by those who have been corrupted by modernity.

Granville Hicks writes that after two novels of the Great Divide, Willa Cather's reminiscences had run low and that she was forced to deal with baffled hopes and empty lives because they were all she saw in the world about her.⁸³ Even a superficial study of One of Ours and The

⁸³Hicks, op. cit., p. 224.

Professor's House would appear to substantiate Hicks' general opinion although he states it in rather exaggerated terms.

The Lost Lady. At this juncture in her career, Miss Cather wrote a very fine novel, completely outside the main line of her development. It dips back in time to stand between My Antonia and One of Ours. It is negative and tragic, where her other work had been positive, even to the point sometimes of bravado. She wrote The Lost Lady to detail the passing of the Old West. In many aspects, this is Cather's finest work; and certainly many critics judge it to be her very best. The principle of the best work of an author being most representative and that which he was meant to write must be proven in the converse here. That is to say, because The Lost Lady is very much a novel written from Miss Cather's heart--rather than her memories--and because it avoids the difficulties and mistakes of her other novels, it is probably her best work.

In describing Marian Forrester's inability to keep the standards of her husband after he was gone Willa Cather expresses the real regret of her own life. Marian is debased by hardship and poverty and by loss of wealth. Her fastidiousness and refinement can not withstand deprivation. She is a member of the lost genera-

tion that allowed the glory to slip from the great decades.

The passing of the Old West was a great personal loss to Willa Cather, and it seemed to carry everything of beauty and value with it. Miss Cather felt this far more truly than she knew Old Quebec or the Southwest missionaries. While actually allowing herself to acknowledge it only once or twice (The Lost Lady and The Professor's House), Willa Cather's was a negative philosophy. It spoke of failure to find a congenial place in the present. Therefore, Willa Cather's most structurally perfect novel is also most in harmony with her basic theory.

Final Novels. Of Willa Cather's last works, four were important. Two, Death Comes for the Archbishop and Shadows on the Rock, while not historical in the popular sense, are, nonetheless, far enough removed from the modern American scene to be free of her bitterness. But the other two, The Professor's House and Obscure Destinies --which comprises the three long stories "Old Mrs. Harris," "Neighbour Rosicky," and "Two Friends,"--supply her final indictment of the present.

The Professor's House is the one novel in which the positive and negative elements of Cather's one struggle are somewhat melded. There is a question, however, as to whether the two elements in the story are joined at all.

Tom Outland's is the story of a highly sensitive temperament, seeking meaning for itself in the discovery of the Cliff-Dwellings. This discovery brings, as it did to Thea, a new dimension to American life, a beauty of pure and noble design, without the clutter and ornament and ugliness of contradiction. Miss Cather has set this story into the framework of the professor's own story. The professor and Tom are certainly similar in personality, in the essential symbols of the novel. The professor, however, has not the bulwark of an ancient civilization to support him. Commager pictures this novel as practically a morality play. The characters clearly represent virtues or vices. The professor and Tom represent spiritual integrity; the women in their family represent worldly success. Prof. St. Peter's comfortable old house is a symbol of artistic and moral values; the new one, the one the women have clamored for, symbolizes pretentiousness.⁸⁴ The professor's devotion to scholarship and Tom Outland's passion for his mesa are thwarted by the family's social ambitions and by commercialism.⁸⁵

⁸⁴St. Peter's distaste for his new house is interestingly similar to that of Asa Timberlake in In This Our Life: "He had reached the new house, which was like a house on a stage, unreal, insubstantial, two-dimensional, and utterly without character. It might have stood anywhere in the world . . .", Ellen Glasgow, In This Our Life, p. 32.

⁸⁵Commager, op. cit., p. 155.

Willa Cather has no need to be especially symbolic in the three shorter works of Obscure Destinies; her displeasure with the small town is very direct. Neighbour Rosicky's life, for instance, is a triumph of the "good life" over the getting ahead tactics of some of his neighbours and most of the city dwellers:

In the country, if you had a mean neighbour, you could keep off his land and make him keep off yours. But in the city, all the foulness and misery and brutality of your neighbours was part of your life. The worst things he had come upon in his journey through the world were human,--depraved and poisonous specimens of man.⁸⁶

Rosicky congratulates himself that he left Europe and came to America:

Suppose he were still in a tailor shop on Vesey Street with a bunch of pale, narrow-chested sons, working on machines, all coming home tired and sullen to eat supper in a kitchen that was a parlour also; with another crowded, angry family quarrelling just across the dumb-waiter shaft, and squeaking pulleys at the windows where dirty washings hung on dirty lines above a court full of old brooms and mops and ash-cans . . .⁸⁷

Rosicky is a kindly old gentleman, however, and he is not given to bitterness and invective. He is, rather, counting his blessings and thanking the Lord that he is leaving his fences in good order. It is Dr. Ed who has the discernment and finely trained intelligence to speak Cather's words, to resent the death of artistic feeling and spirit-

⁸⁶Cather, Obscure Destinies, p. 59.

⁸⁷Ibid., p. 41.

ual co-hesiveness in the small city. Dr. Ed looks at the neighborly, rustic graveyard and realizes that it is:

a really beautiful graveyard. He thought of city cemeteries; acres of shubbery and heavy stone, so arranged and lonely and unlike anything in the living world. Cities of the dead, indeed; cities of the forgotten, of the "put away."⁸⁸

Elizabeth Sergeant prefers Cather's earliest novels because she is distressed by:

. . . the later ones where the ugliness, the complexity of middle or old age pierce through. It is as if this "modern life" from which Willa Cather had tried to protect her writing had "got in at" her after all. She does not want to probe its depths, and its surfaces wound her.⁸⁹

Characters

If plot and theme can be said to be one and the same in Cather's work, then plot and theme and character can also be considered as one. For Cather appears to have seen plot in a novel as a progressive awareness by the characters of the TRUE values or as an active realization of them. Miss Cather completely spurns any hint of chance or co-incidence or outside calamity. All action is generated by willfull force from within the character. Therefore, actions become plot, and ideas become theme.

Willa Cather betrays herself so often in her heroes

⁸⁸Ibid., pp. 70-71.

⁸⁹Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, Fire Under the Andes, p. 279.

and heroines that they all have characteristics in common. Margaret Lawrence, writing from an admittedly British point of view, says that Cather created heroes, great shining heroes. They are all under the influence of some great ideal or faith.⁹⁰ Cather believed very deeply in the importance of ideals. She said:

Ideals were not archaic things, beautiful and impotent, they were the real sources of power among men.⁹¹

Certainly, she did not write of trivial, unimportant people. She believed in their greatness and communicated that greatness to the reader. Cather was, quite definitely, a romantic.⁹²

J. D. Adams speaks of Cather's characters as "warriors against circumstance" and emphasizes their will toward life, a romantic impulse of courage.⁹³ This is true, of course, in the novels in which she sought the past except that it suggests that the "circumstances" are, rather, the state of things as they are, as they surround the hero. These "circumstances" are the Divide as it is challenged by Alexandra and Antonia, New Mexico as challenged by

⁹⁰Margaret Lawrence, We Write As Women, p. 287.

⁹¹Commager, op. cit., p. 151.

⁹²Lawrence, loc. cit.

⁹³James Donald Adams, Shape of Books to Come, p. 125.

Latour and Valliant, and Death as challenged by Claude Wheeler.

Margaret Lawrence, in defining this quality of heroic triumph, writes that Willa Cather "has nurtured herself upon the spiritual realities of America."⁹⁴ It is interesting, although probably not too unusual, that Miss Lawrence, a foreigner, should find such a quality in Cather's work. It is paradoxical that a member of American society who seemed to alienate herself from the group appeared to an outsider to be not only one of the group but chiefly representative of that group.

The natural level. Cather's heroes are on the three different levels of her expression. Antonia is a heroine of superb moral and physical courage. It is the very theme of the novel that the warm, freely-giving farmers inherit the greatest of God's riches: love and trust and courage. And Antonia, perhaps the strongest of Cather's heroines of the Divide, is the epitome of the type. Everything she says seems to come right out of her heart. When Jim Burden sees her after many, many years of separation, of a sophisticated life for him, of motherhood and physical toil for her, he realizes Antonia's value. He has known

⁹⁴Lawrence, op. cit., p. 291.

so many women:

. . . who (had) kept all the things that she had lost, (her teeth, her hair) but whose inner glow was faded. Whatever else was gone, Antonia had not lost the fire of life. Her skin, so brown and hardened, had not that look of flabbiness, as if the sap beneath it had been secretly drawn away.⁹⁵

The mental level. Professor St. Peter, on the other hand, fights his battles in the mind. He is a hero--i.e., his sacrifices are made--on the mental level:

He would willingly have cut down on his university work, would willingly have given his students chaff and sawdust--many other instructors had nothing else to give them and got on very well; but his misfortune was that he loved youth--he was weak to it, it kindled him. If there was one eager eye, one doubting, critical mind, one lively curiosity in a whole lecture-room full of common place boys and girls he was its servant. That ardour could commend him.⁹⁶

The spiritual level. In the Archbishop, Willa Cather finds her almost perfect hero. He is a hero of the spirit, which is, in Cather's terms, the ultimate. Brown writes that the Archbishop appealed strongly to Miss Cather because of his lack of inner conflict:

The Archbishop is the great example in her fiction of a personality extra-ordinarily fine and cultivated finding on the Western plains the ideal circumstances for his life.⁹⁷

⁹⁵Cather, My Antonia, p. 336.

⁹⁶Willa Cather, The Professor's House, p. 22.

⁹⁷Brown, op. cit., p. 254.

Cather had been torn for so many decades between the Divide and Red Cloud on the one hand and the great Metropolitan areas on the other that she probably received "an intense if somewhat sad pleasure in contemplating a life that was not torn but was a seamless unity."⁹⁸

This heroic, spiritual calm is considered by some to be a fault. Hoffman criticizes Death Comes for the Archbishop and Shadows on the Rock largely on the premise that the characters are static and two-dimensional.⁹⁹ It is probable that this lack of inner conflict makes them difficult to perceive rather than dull. Father Latour is deeply moving in the greatness of his spirituality. Hoffman feels that his life had the meaning, and his death as well, which a religion literally accepted and believed in confers upon a man.¹⁰⁰ The men of faith in these two novels are what might be called Willa Cather's most traditional personalities because their lives are most in harmony with the values Willa Cather earnestly seeks for them.

Willa Cather Returns Home

After completing her survey of the heroic past, Miss Cather turned to her girlhood home in Red Cloud. At

⁹⁸Ibid.

⁹⁹Hoffman, op. cit., p. 61.

¹⁰⁰Ibid.

the time that her parents were dying, Willa Cather rediscovered them as literary material. The three long stories that she anthologized in Obscure Destinies are as apart, in a number of ways, from the main body of her work as was The Lost Lady. The works are almost plotted in the conventional sense, and each is centered around a definite idea. Neighbour Rosicky is not sorry to die because he has raised a fine family and has, in the end, brought his new American daughter-in-law to see the superiority of the "good life" as he has lived it. This story is an almost direct statement of Miss Cather's belief. She was dealing again, as in The Lost Lady, with something that could be said dramatically and with a direct, natural approach. And it is without the forced justification, the spiritual compensation of the longer works.

There is much of the same quality in another of these later works: "Old Mrs. Harris." The story is that of the elderly, widowed Southern woman's place in the household and of the Western community's indignation at her neglect. Grandma Harris is an unpaid housekeeper. She believes that the young matrons of Skyline (Red Cloud) make a mistake in doing their own cleaning. She can not imagine such a circumstance in her daughter Victoria's home:

To Mrs. Harris that would have meant real poverty, coming down in the world so far that one could no longer keep up appearances . . . she certainly valued

respectability above personal comfort, and she could go on a good way yet if they always had a cool pleasant parlour, with Victoria properly dressed to receive visitors.¹⁰¹

This is quite obviously the Cather's own home, with Mrs. Harris really "Willi's" Grandmother Boak. Mildred Bennett writes that it is:

. . . a bitter account of the indifference of young people to the very old in which Willa, clearly "Vicki" in the story, indicts herself perhaps more scathingly than she does anyone else.¹⁰²

Although the daughter, Victoria, was a wilfull, selfish child (even into her sixth pregnancy) who took full advantage of Grandma, it is Old Mrs. Harris who maintains the status quo as a moral obligation and with a very special kind of reverent joy. As she lay dying,

Grandmother was perfectly happy. She and the twins were about the same age, they had in common all the realest and truest things. The years between them and her . . . were full of trouble and unimportant. The twins and Ronald and Hughie were important.¹⁰³

In mature retrospect, Cather seems to chide herself for not realizing that Grandma was far more than a household drudge; she was a symbol of the strong, uncomplaining women who sacrifice much to bring comfort, harmony,

¹⁰¹Cather, Obscure Destinies, pp. 134-135.

¹⁰²Mildred R. Bennett, The World of Willa Cather, p. 22.

¹⁰³Ibid., p. 184.

well-being, and culture to their families. While still a youngster "Willi" actively involved herself with the Antonias and Alexandras and took her grandmother very much for granted. But in "Old Mrs. Harris," her last really fine work, she finds heroic depths in this old woman. It is very much as if Miss Cather finds at least one household safe from the scourge of provincial Red Cloud. It was saved by the moral^m courage of this old woman, who is, after all, idolized and valuable.

Willie Cather came to the end of her life and writing career still exploring and justifying her need for the past and the bulwark of tradition.

CHAPTER VI

BRIEF SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

It is not especially difficult for critics, looking back and studying them in retrospect, to consider Edith Wharton, Ellen Glasgow, and Willa Cather as traditionalists. But these three authors did not take such a stand for granted. Their fiction shows that they were searching, ever searching--separately--for the values that would give meaning to life. For each, it was a personal struggle. They did not communicate one with the other; each found and treated tradition for and by herself. This lends considerable authority to and puts greater emphasis upon the personal aspects of traditionalism. It provides a personal answer to a distinctly individual problem.

Traditionalism is, by its very nature, a school rather than a movement or a force. Throughout literary history, it has gathered unto itself a group of persons who, for one reason or another, do not choose to look ahead. They cling to standards and a way of life that served their fathers before them.

The one question that arises from this side by side comparison of Edith Wharton, Ellen Glasgow, and Willa Cather is just how their traditionalism will affect their eventual standing in literature. It is a debatable ques-

tion, of course. For one thing, artists of any sort can not necessarily rely upon their own individual superiority. There are many extenuating circumstances. Here, for instance, there is the matter of applicability; to what extent and how accurately do these three traditionalists interpret America? For Edith Wharton was correct when she stated that American critics accept only certain literature as truly American. Present day critics are naturally influenced by present day events: politics, economics, and what-have-you. Social expedience dictates much of what they believe. But just as critics writing and analyzing now are able to judge artists of past eras with a dispassionate intellect, so critics of the future will be able to judge Edith Wharton, Ellen Glasgow, and Willa Cather with objectivity and honesty.

The years will undoubtedly wear well upon these three. Artists who capture and hold values that have been important for many decades and may be slipping away are likely in the end to speak with the most authority. These authors will be left to stand upon their own individual merits, unencumbered by issues of the passing moment.

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