

‘Nobody comes out with perfectly clean hands’:

An Analysis of the Synecdochic Implications of Hands as a Recurring Motif in the Literature of

Edith Wharton

by

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For my mother, who has never failed to provide a critical eye, a voice of reason, or a helping hand. She would appreciate the pun and, for that, I appreciate her.

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Lastly I thank Edith Wharton herself. Her achievements will never cease to amaze me, her prose will never cease to move me, and her rebellious streak will never cease to inspire me. I am privileged to have had the opportunity to study her in such depth.

Abstract

Literary critics frequently recognize and acknowledge Edith Wharton's skill as a social commentator in the context of her novels and short fiction. Among the many socially-entrenched themes that Wharton explores throughout her oeuvre, perhaps the most pervasive concerns the relationship between the individual and the society in which he or she operates. This relationship proves itself integral to my thesis, in which I consider hands as a recurring motif within Wharton's literature. This is ultimately a study of bodies, principally with regards to the interrelatedness of the literal human body and the larger abstraction of the social body. It is in this context that synecdoche, the link between the proverbial "part" and "whole," proves itself essential to my analysis. How do hands, as a part of the composite human body, correlate to representations of hands within the greater social body?

This thesis considers representations of hands in four of Wharton's novels: *The House of Mirth* (1905), *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), *The Custom of the Country* (1912), and *The Age of Innocence* (1920). These texts span Wharton's literary career and, as such, illustrate the significance of the hands motif throughout her extensive oeuvre. I examine hands in three primary contexts, each of which takes the form of its own unique chapter. The first chapter considers the appearances of the hands of Lily Bart of *The House of Mirth*, Undine Spragg of *The Custom of the Country*, and May Welland of *The Age of Innocence*. Each woman attempts to utilize the appearance of her hands as a means by which to either achieve (as with Lily and Undine) or maintain (as with May) leisure-class status. In spite of her efforts to maintain the pristine appearances of her hands, the manipulative tendencies of each woman are ultimately revealed by her hands.

Chapter two engages with the project's most explicitly synecdochic analysis. The chapter investigates the overly-reductive tendency to designate members of the working class—both domestic and within the public sphere—as "hands." In this capacity, the worker is stripped of his individuality and is, instead, identified by a mere appendage, the source of his work. Wharton criticizes this system through her depiction of domestic hands in *The Age of Innocence*, Lily Bart's social downfall in *The House of Mirth*, and, most evidently, through the underrepresented mill-hands in *The Fruit of the Tree*.

The third and final chapter of this thesis considers physical touch as a communicatory exchange between hands. Within this chapter, physical touch is considered in two primary contexts: social touch and medicinal touch. The former is analyzed in relation to *The Age of Innocence* through the contrasting forms of touch that characterize Newland Archer's relationship with Ellen, the woman he claims to love, and with May, his wife. Social and medicinal forms of touch are bridged by the character of Mrs. Heeny, a society masseuse, in *The Custom of the Country*. Finally, medicinal touch is considered in conjunction with *The Fruit of the Tree*, in which Nurse Justine Brent makes the controversial decision to euthanize her patient.

Structurally, *The Age of Innocence*, arguably Wharton's best-known work, provides a recurring point for analysis, appearing in each of the three chapters. The novel is then flanked within each chapter by two of the other texts under consideration. Taken in conjunction with one another, these chapters ultimately seek to provide an in-depth analysis of Wharton's nuanced representations of hands throughout her body of literature. Ultimately, I assert that Wharton's employment of hands as a recurring motif concretely unites the figurative social body with (a part of) the literal human body.

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INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the twentieth century, Edith Wharton was just beginning to make a name for herself within the American literary scene. Wharton had been a writer—if not by trade, than by practice—since childhood, and this period witnessed the publication of several of her early works. By 1900, Wharton had several titles to her name, including *Verses* (1878), a compilation of poetry; the well-received interior design guide *The Decoration of Houses* (1897), coauthored with her friend Ogden Codman; and her first novella, *The Touchstone* (1900). In 1901, Wharton garnered more mainstream attention when several of her shorter works were published in the December 1900-May 1901 edition of *Harper's Magazine*.

One of these works was a ghost story entitled “The Moving Finger,” in which a man commissions an artist to paint a picture of his wife only to desire that the artist alter the picture after the woman’s death so that her sustained perfection does not mock her husband as he ages.¹ The story explores two ways in which women may be possessed by men: through marriage, and through art. “The Moving Finger” caught the attention of Henry James, already a major literary figure, who would eventually become Wharton’s longtime friend, mentor, and colleague. James remarked,

[I] want to get a hold of the little lady and pump the pure essence of my wisdom and experience into her... If a work of imagination, of fiction, interests me at all (and very few, alas, do!) I always want to write it over in my own way, handle the subject from my own sense of it. That I always find a pleasure in, and I found

¹ Edith Wharton, “The Moving Finger,” Harper's Magazine, March 1901: 627-632.

extremely in the “Vanished Hand”—over which I should have liked, at several points, to contend with her.”²

James’ apparent confusion over the story’s title suggests that the name “The Moving Finger,” may have, in fact, served as one of the points of contention that he wished to discuss with Wharton. We might also take his malapropism as an indicator of how frequently hands were represented in public discourse during the period. Wharton herself would use the image again three years later, in another short story entitled “The House of the Dead Hand.”

Like its predecessor, “The House of the Dead Hand” is a ghost story that concerns itself with the representation of women in art, but from the perspective of this thesis, the similarities stop there. “The Moving Finger” makes little reference to hands outside of its title.³ “The House of the Dead Hand” is replete with descriptions of hands and their symbolic implications. The story takes place in Italy and centers on a young man named Wyant. During his travels, Wyant seeks out Dr. Lombard, an English expatriate in possession of a Bergamo Leonardo painting. Wyant learns that the painting was purchased for Dr. Lombard by his fear-stricken daughter, Sybilla, with the money that was to be her dowry. Unable to marry, Sybilla remains effectively imprisoned within the house with her father and his painting. Sybilla’s despair is personified by the titular hand, the story’s most explicit and significant symbol. Wyant encounters it when he sees

² Henry James, “Letter of Jan. 25, 1902,” Quoted by F.O. Matthiessen, The James Family, (New York, 1947), 512, cited by Bell, 626.

³ The name, “The Moving Finger,” is likely an intertextual reference to verse 51 of Edward Fitzgerald’s translation of the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*.

The Moving Finger Writes; and, not having writ,
Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it

Omar Khayyam, Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, Trans. Edward Fitzgerald (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1921), 51.

a doorway surmounted by a sallow marble hand. He stood for a moment staring up at the strange emblem. The hand was a woman's—a dead drooping hand, which hung there convulsed, helpless, as though it had been thrust forth in denunciation of some evil mystery within the house and had sunk struggling into death.⁴

The correlation that Wharton establishes in this passage between the hand and death underscores the depressingly stagnant nature of Sybilla's existence and, by extension, life within the Lombard home. This reading garners support through Wharton's further characterizations of the hand as being "drooped tragically above the entrance... it seemed to have relaxed into the passiveness of despair" (14) and, later, as "[reaching] out like a cry of an imprisoned anguish" (25). Though Wyant recognizes Sybilla's desperation, he convinces himself that she need only await her father's death in order to sell the painting and regain her freedom. Years later, however, he returns and finds Sybilla unable to part from the painting because of her father's ghostly presence. As a result, Dr. Lombard himself more fully reflects the story's title, as his dead hand ultimately forces his daughter's sustained confinement within the House of the Dead Hand.

While "The House of the Dead Hand" provides evidence for Wharton's recognition of the symbolic potential of hands, the question still remains as to why hands served as the subject of Wharton's fixation? Part of the answer may well reside in the realm of the visual arts, in which Wharton was impressively well-versed.⁵ Hands have long represented a fixture of the

⁴ Edith Wharton, "The House of the Dead Hand" (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), 3.

⁵ Wharton is even recognized as having had a hand in redefining art history. During her travels to San Vivaldo, Italy in 1894, her keen eye dated the monastery's terracotta figures of the Passion to the fifteenth century, two hundred years prior to the period in which they had previously been thought to have been created. She described the situation in an article in *Scribner's Magazine*,

artistic medium, serving as the focal point in historically celebrated works of which Wharton would not only have been aware, but would likely have seen in person during her many travels abroad. Such works of art include those which have been reproduced on the following two pages: Leonardo da Vinci's Figure Studies: Woman's Hands (1480); Albrecht Dürer's Hands; Two Studies (1508) and Praying Hands (1508); Michelangelo's The Creation of Adam (1511), the fresco painted upon the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in which God and Adam reach out and touch using the tips of their fingers; Hans Holbein the Younger's Studies of the Hands of Erasmus of Rotterdam (1523); Nicolas de Largillière's Sculptor Nicolas Couston in His Studio (1710-1712) and Study of Hands (1715); and, finally, Edgar Degas' The Bellelli Family, Detail of Hands (1858-1867). The prevalence of hands in the artistic medium speaks to the ability of the appendage to convey intimate details about an individual such as age, socioeconomic status or emotional state.

Still, in spite of the frequency with which hands have recurred throughout the visual arts over the course of history, they gain increased visibility in Wharton's own time period. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the widespread reporting of germ theories, the overcrowding of cities, and the prejudicial attitudes of some groups towards the growing African American and European populations in the United States rendered Americans, especially those living in urban settings, increasingly concerned with the maintenance of "proper" hygiene. While several industries manifested these attitudes in their advertisements, perhaps none did so with more success than the manufacturers of soap. Pears' Soap, one of the most popular and well-

which was reprinted in her 1905 book, *Italian Backgrounds*. Wharton notes that her discovery of the figures "[procured] for me the rare sensation of an artistic discovery made in the heart of the most carefully-explored artistic hunting-ground of Europe."

Edith Wharton, Italian Backgrounds (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905), 104-105.



Figure 1: Leonardo da Vinci, Figure Studies-Woman's Hands (1480), Windsor Castle, the Royal Library, Windsor.

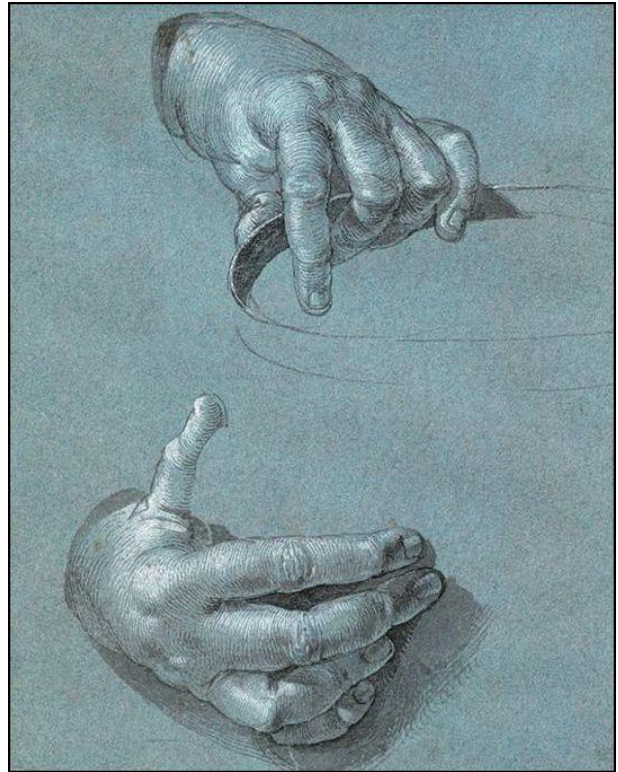


Figure 2: Albrecht Dürer, Hands; Two Studies (1508), Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Vienna.

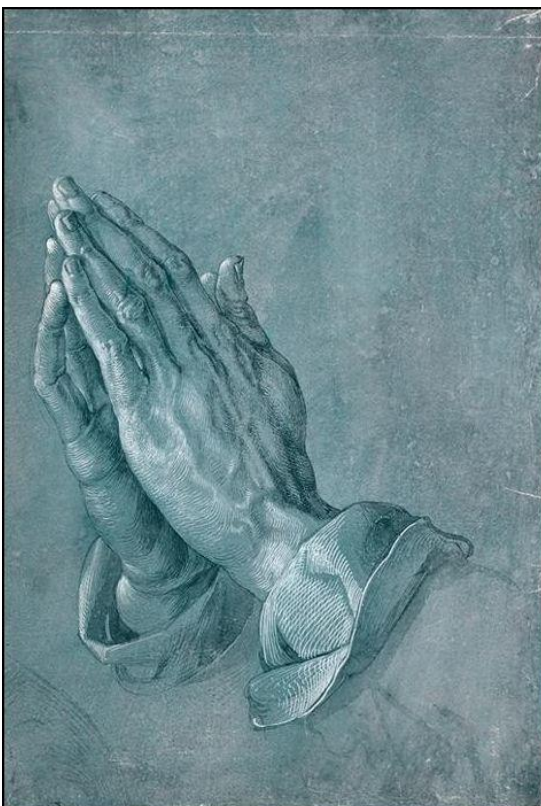


Figure 3: Albrecht Dürer, Praying Hands (1508) Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Vienna.



Figure 4: Michelangelo, Sistine Chapel (1508-1512), The Sistine Chapel, Vatican Palace, Vatican City.



Figure 5: Hans Holbein the Younger, Studies of the Hands of Erasmus of Rotterdam (1523) Musée du Louvre, Paris.



Figure 6: Nicolas de Largillière, Sculptor Nicolas Coustou in His Studio (1710-1712), Staatliche Museen zu Berlin—Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin.



Figure 7: Nicolas de Largillière, Study of Hands (1715), Musée du Louvre, Paris.



Figure 8: Edgar Degas, The Bellelli Family, Detail of Hands (1858-1867), Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

known brands of soap during the period, was certainly no exception. The aforementioned themes are evident within the two advertisements reprinted below.



Figure 9: “The White Man’s Burden,” Pears’ Soap.

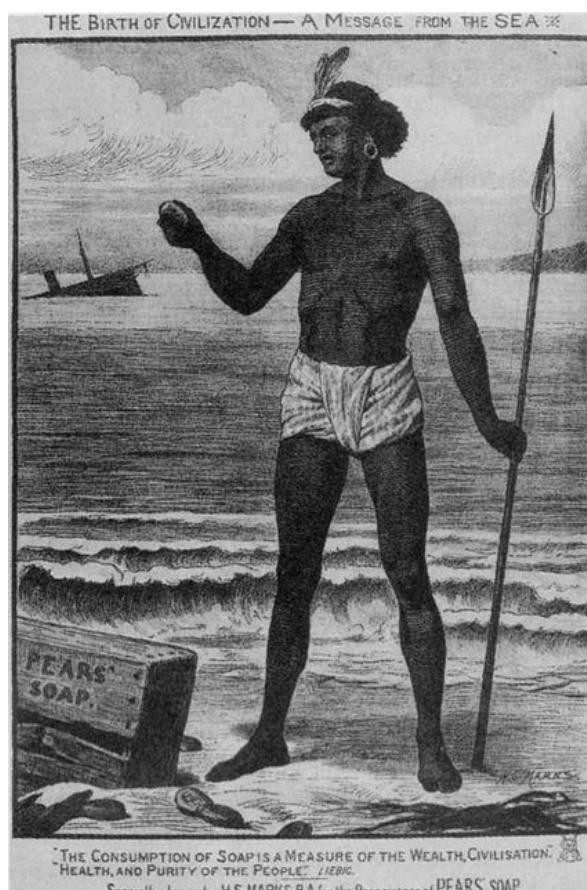


Figure 10: “The Birth of Civilization,” Pears’ Soap.

The image to the left, “The White Man’s Burden,” was first featured in *McClure’s* in 1899,⁶ while the image to the right, “The Birth of Civilization,” was featured in British magazines in 1887.⁷ Both of these advertisements provide a telling impression of the racial tensions displayed

⁶ “The Victorian Age, Victorian Imperialism,” The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Norton Topics Online, 1899

<http://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/nael/victorian/topic_4/illustrations/imbunden.htm>.

⁷ Kenneth Pomeranz and Steven Topik, The World that Trade Created: Society, Culture, and the World Economy, 1400 to the Present (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2006), 205.

throughout society in the late nineteenth centuries, as well as the ways in which soap advertisements played to the collective consciousness of the larger social body.

Pears' continued its promotion of the importance of hygiene (albeit to a less offensive extent) through its circulation of the advertisement featured below. Within the image, the hand appears to jut itself out beyond the confines of the page. As a result, the advertisement metaphorically pushed hands to the forefront of public discourse. In her book, *The Adman in the*



Figure 11: “Good Morning. Have You Used Pears’ Soap?” Pears’ Soap.

Parlor: Magazines and the Gendering of Consumer Culture, 1880s to 1910s,” Ellen Gruber Garvey discusses the correlation between the advertisement and hands.

The picture here makes the printed ad both a barrier to and a doorway into the reader’s life, something through which the friendly outstretched hand of Pears’ must cross to reach the reader. Just as the hand in this picture iconographically breaks the barrier between the printed paper and the reader,

bursting out of the ad and into your life, the

advertisement’s slogan also succeeded in bursting through the boundary of the ad, crossing into conversation and other spaces.⁸

In spite of the prevalence of the outstretched hand within the advertisement, nowhere in the image is there an illustration of Pears’ Soap. Rather than featuring a hand extending out of the ad

⁸ Ellen Gruber Garvey, *The Adman in the Parlor: Magazines and the Gendering of Consumer Culture, 1880s to 1910s*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 86-87.

while holding a bar of Pears', the image simply presents an outstretched hand with the words "Have you used Pears' Soap?" written beneath it. This curious method of advertising the product without actually displaying the product ultimately focalizes the hand, rendering it—and not Pears' Soap—the dominant aspect of the advertisement.

Beyond the confines of the print medium, we can also find moments when hands become a focus of public attention in the nineteenth and twentieth century, especially in New York City. In 1873, the Angel of the Waters fountain (also known as the Bethesda Fountain) was installed in Central Park as a memorial to Union Soldiers who had lost their lives during the Civil War. The statue of the angel positioned atop the fountain was not immediately embraced by New Yorkers. Initial public reaction, as detailed by *The New York Times*' article, "The Bethesda Fountain: Inauguration at the Terrace, Central Park—the Multitudes of Visitors," was less than enthusiastic. According to the article,

when the authorities, without any speech-making or declaration, withdrew the cloakings that shadowed the expected form of art, there was a positive thrill of disappointment. All had expected something great, something of angelic power and beauty.... From a rear view the figure resembles a servant girl... in the privacy of the back kitchen: from the front it looks like a nautch girl jumping over stepping-stones, while the wind drives back the voluminous folds of her hundred petticoats.⁹

Though the statue was initially denounced as a result of the angel's "common" appearance, it is this notion of commonality that underscores the angel's message of harmony and universal compassion. With one leg extended and her arm outstretched, she appears to be reaching out

⁹ "The Bethesda Fountain: Inauguration at the Terrace, Central Park—the Multitudes of Visitors," The New York Times (1 June 1873).

towards the fountain's spectators as though seeking to touch each individual. The placement of the Angel of the Waters fountain in the heart of Central Park ensured that the angel—and her outstretched hand—would be viewed by countless New Yorkers each day, a perpetual reminder of the unifying significance of touch in, as they might have said, a country formerly divided against itself.

Four years after the inauguration of the Angel of the Waters fountain in Central Park, another sort of statue would appear in New York, serving as a reminder of the significance of hands to all those who passed by. According to Ric Burns' New York: A Documentary Film,

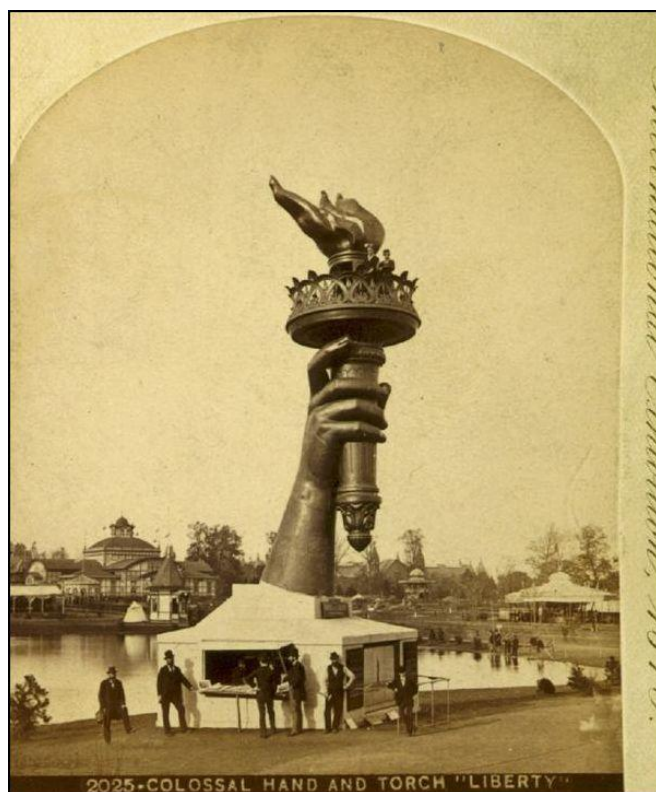


Figure 12: Centennial Photographic Co., The Torch and Arm of the Statue of Liberty (1876).

“One bleak February morning [in 1877], as the depression stretched into its fourth year, a curious sculpture—the giant, amputated hand of a woman—appeared on the West Side in Madison Square.”¹⁰ The “giant, amputated hand” belonged to the Statue of Liberty and had been sent by the French in advance of the other components of the statue. Though they were willing to offer Americans the statue itself, the French asked

that New Yorkers provide the funding for the pedestal upon which the statue would

stand. New Yorkers, still hurting from the Panic of 1873, refused and, as a result, the hand

¹⁰ Ric Burns, “Episode Three: Sunshine and Shadow, 1865-1898,” New York: A Documentary Film, 2004, DVD, PBS Paramount, 2004.

remained in place in Madison Square for five years. The article “The French Statue,” featured in *The New York Times*, derided the situation.

It would unquestionably be impolite to look a gift-statue in the mouth, but inasmuch as no mouth has yet been cast of the bronze Liberty, we may be permitted to suggest that when a nation promises to give another nation a colossal bronze woman, and then, after having given one arm, calmly advises the recipient of that useless gift to supply the rest of the woman at its own expense, there is a disproportion between the promise and its fulfillment which may be forgiven but which cannot be wholly ignored.¹¹

Burns cites another newspaper of the period, which exclaimed that the hand was “an embarrassment... to nursemaids and mothers, unable to explain to their young charges what the surreal sculpture, with its 8 foot index finger and 12 inch nails, was doing there” (Burns).

Whether considered a “surreal sculpture” or simply a marker of the financial discord between the United States and France, Lady Liberty’s hand must have had a striking effect on all those who came across it. As a result, the statue served to further foreground hands within popular (or unpopular, as the case tended to be perceived) culture.

These examples of hands in artistic, literary, and real world contexts illustrate the ways in which hands permeated cultural discourse. As both a consumer of such discourse and a producer of literature in her own right, Wharton dually engaged with hands in a broader social context. My thesis considers the synecdochic implications of hands in Wharton’s novels. This is, in essence, a study of bodies, principally with regards to the interrelatedness of the individual body and the larger social body. It is in this context that synecdoche, the link between the proverbial “part”

¹¹ “The French Statue,” *The New York Times* (29 September 1876), 4.

and “whole,” proves itself essential to my analysis. How do hands, as a part of the human body, correlate to representations of hands within the greater social body?

This thesis considers representations of hands in four of Wharton’s novels: *The House of Mirth* (1905), *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), *The Custom of the Country* (1912), and *The Age of Innocence* (1920). These texts span Wharton’s literary career and, as such, illustrate the significance of the hands motif throughout her extensive oeuvre. I examine hands in three primary contexts, each of which takes the form of its own unique chapter. The first chapter considers the appearances of the hands of Lily Bart of *The House of Mirth*, Undine Spragg of *The Custom of the Country*, and May Welland of *The Age of Innocence*. Each woman attempts to utilize the appearance of her hands as a means by which to either achieve (as with Lily and Undine) or maintain (as with May) leisure-class status. In spite of her efforts to maintain the pristine appearances of her hands, the manipulative tendencies of each woman are ultimately revealed by her hands.

Chapter two engages with the project’s most explicitly synecdochic analysis. The chapter investigates the overly-reductive tendency to designate members of the working class—both domestic and within the public sphere—as “hands.” In this capacity, the worker is stripped of his individuality and is, instead, identified by a mere appendage, the source of his work. Wharton criticizes this system through her depiction of domestic hands in *The Age of Innocence*, through Lily’s social downfall in *The House of Mirth*, and, most evidently, through the underrepresented mill-hands in *The Fruit of the Tree*.

The third and final chapter of this thesis considers physical touch as a communicatory exchange between hands. Within this chapter, physical touch is considered in two primary contexts: social touch and medicinal touch. The former is analyzed in relation to *The Age of*

Innocence through the contrasting forms of touch that characterize Newland Archer's relationship with Ellen, the woman he claims to love, and with May, his wife. Social and medicinal forms of touch are bridged by the character of Mrs. Heeny, a society masseuse, in *The Custom of the Country*. Finally, medicinal touch is considered in conjunction with *The Fruit of the Tree*, in which Nurse Justine Brent makes the controversial decision to euthanize her patient.

Structurally, *The Age of Innocence*, arguably Wharton's best-known work, provides a recurring point for analysis, appearing in each of the three chapters. The novel is then flanked within each chapter by two of the other texts under consideration. Taken in conjunction with one another, these chapters ultimately seek to provide an in-depth analysis of Wharton's nuanced representations of hands throughout her body of literature. This preliminary description of the chapters also allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the title of this thesis. In *The House of Mirth*, Simon Rosedale warns a ruined Lily Bart against blackmailing another woman as a means by which to reinstate herself in society. He reminds her that, "In a deal like that, nobody comes out with perfectly clean hands."¹² In a broader analytic context, Rosedale's comment carries many varied implications. With regards to the ladies in chapter one, for instance, though their hands are pristine, they are not "perfectly clean" due to the fact that they utilize their hands to manipulate others. The working hands depicted in chapter two quite literally do not have "clean hands," as a result of their day-to-day labors. Finally, the interconnected forms of touch depicted in chapter three carry the implicit connotation that all hands are culpable. These interpretations suggest that the individual hand is invariably linked to society at large. Indeed, throughout this thesis, I assert that Wharton's employment of hands as a

¹² Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1997), 225.

recurring motif concretely unites the figurative social body with (a part of) the literal human body.

CHAPTER 1

THE HANDS OF WHARTON'S MANIPULATIVE LADIES OF LEISURE

With a new sense of awe he looked at the frank forehead, serious eyes and gay innocent mouth of the young creature whose soul's custodian he was to be. That terrifying product of the social system he belonged to and believed in, the young girl who knew nothing and expected everything, looked back at him like a stranger through May Welland's familiar features.¹

The Age of Innocence

The upper world had vanished: [Ralph's] universe had shrunk to the palm of a hand. But there was no sense of diminution. In the mystic depths whence his passion sprang, earthly dimensions were ignored and the curve of beauty was boundless enough to hold whatever the imagination could pour into it.²

The Custom of the Country

Among the varied themes that recur throughout Edith Wharton's literature, one of the most pronounced concerns her characters' perennial awareness of the social dictates that regulate their societies, and often their lives. These dictates are especially prevalent within her novels of manners, *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country*, and *The Age of Innocence*, in which the apparent universality of the "laws" of New York City society is adeptly communicated.

Wharton's awareness of the propulsion towards normativeness among wealthy individuals likely

¹ Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* (London: Wordsworth Classics, 1994), 28.

² Edith Wharton, *The Custom of the Country* (London: Everyman, 1993), 133.

derives from her own upbringing as Edith Jones. As a member of the affluent and powerful Jones family (from whom, it is frequently suggested, the expression “Keeping up with the Joneses” originates),³ she would have been constantly immersed in to the sort of carefully constructed, elite environment that she so often details in her books. Indeed, a recent article in *The New York Times* described the Jones family as a “tiny but powerful New York clan all descended from old Dutch settlers or English merchants, who clung together, intermarried, set the tone and made the rules for society in Manhattan.”⁴ In this capacity, Wharton was not only exposed and susceptible to the “rules” of social decorum, but was, in fact, inextricably linked to their creation.

In addition to her personal history, Wharton may also have gained a deeper understanding of the paramount importance of social conformity by way of the social etiquette guides that were steadily gaining in popularity throughout her lifetime. Karen Halttunen, the author of *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, notes that “[b]etween 1830 and 1860, approximately seventy American etiquette manuals were published, many of which went through several editions.”⁵ These manuals stressed the importance of conformism in both the context of one’s behavior and one’s appearance, by providing a painstaking assessment of which mannerisms, styles of dress, and tastes were considered “proper” among the men and, especially, women of the upper- and middle-class. This distinction between men’s and women’s etiquette is more concretely established, for example, in Maude C. Cooke’s well-known etiquette guide, *Social Etiquette, or Manners and Customs of Polite Society*, widely circulated just nine years before the publication of *The House of Mirth*. *Social Etiquette* proclaims to “[furnish] rules of etiquette for all occasions

³ Hermione Lee, *Edith Wharton* (London: Vintage Books, 2008), 22.

⁴ Charles McGrath, “Edith Wharton’s New York,” *The New York Times*, 1 October 2004 <<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9A00E4DE1238F932A35753C1A9629C8B63&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=print>>.

⁵ Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 92.

[...] in all matters pertaining to social intercourse.”⁶ Cooke asserts that women not only function as vital members of the “leisure class,” but are, in fact, illustrative of it (358). This responsibility manifests itself in the appearances of women, to which Cooke almost wholly dedicates four chapters: “Art of Dress,” “Colors and Complexions,” “Dress for Special Occasions,” and the guide’s concluding chapter, “How to be Beautiful.” The latter spans seventeen pages, throughout which the author discusses such standard beauty fare as proper skincare, diet, and methods of styling one’s hair.

Of these seventeen pages, five—nearly one-third—are directly concerned with the care and maintenance of a lady’s arms and hands.

The ideal hand is white, certainly, but not dead white. It should have a dash of healthy flesh-tints. The tips of the fingers and the portions that surround the palm should be tinged with pink. The fingers should taper towards the nails, the most approved shape for which is the “filbert,” so called from its resemblance to the oval form of the nut of that name, and the similarity of the direction of lines on the nail to those on the wood of the nut. (504)

Emily Thornwell’s etiquette manual, *The Lady’s Guide to Perfect Gentility*, published forty years prior to the distribution of *Social Etiquette*, also devotes several pages to instructing women how to keep their hands white (a theme to be explored in this chapter) and their nails properly kept. Like Cooke, Thornwell places enormous importance on a woman’s hands, going so far as to assert that “some persons, especially gentlemen, make the hand the test of beauty, calling a lady pretty, however ugly she may be otherwise, if she can only display a beautiful hand.”⁷ The

⁶ Maud C. Cooke, *Social Etiquette, or Manners and Customs of Polite Society* (Boston: Geo. M. Smith & Co, 1896), 358.

⁷ Emily Thornwell, *The Lady’s Guide to Perfect Gentility* (Cincinnati: H.W. Derby, 1856), 54.

apparent validity of Thornwell's comment is established by the article "Fair Hands that Handle Millions" (reproduced on the following page), featured in the July 8, 1906 edition of *The Chicago Daily Tribune*. The article begins,

Millionaires are won by beautiful hands and there was never a millionaire whose wife had ugly fingers. When a man has a million dollars he looks for a nice pair of hands and he will not be happy till he gets them. A hundred instances can be pointed out to prove this assertion and a single case to the contrary is not known. Women who have caught millionaires have in every case had the most charming of hands. Sometimes the hands have been almost their sole claim to beauty.⁸

This striking preoccupation with the physical appearance of hands allows for a reinterpretation of the role that hands play in relation to both the human body and the social body, namely with regards to women. If ladies are indeed, as Cooke suggests, emblematic of the leisure class, perhaps then hands may be considered as emblematic of the ladies themselves.

This chapter explores the ways in which the principal female characters in Wharton's New York novels seek to manipulate the individuals in their lives in order to better their own situations. Lily Bart and Undine Spragg, of *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country*, respectively, attempt to manipulate others in an effort to overcome their "lesser" social status; in so doing, they each hope to distinguish themselves in society and *achieve* the status of a true lady of leisure. May Welland, of *The Age of Innocence*, manipulates both her husband and her husband's lover, May's own cousin, in an attempt to *maintain* her status as a lady of leisure. The characterization of these women as "manipulative" proves itself to be especially pertinent, as the

⁸ "Fair Hands that Handle Millions," The Chicago Daily Tribune, 8 July 1906: F2.

Fair Hands That Handle Millions



the million! And the hand must show some intellect as well as the face.

The hand of Mrs. Clarence Mackay is one of those hands you read about in novels. It is absolutely perfect in shape and the outline shows intellect. It is the one which kind of a millionaire. Mrs. Mackay's hand outside you of a marble hand. It is so white and so perfect. It is not small, but it is elegant in the most classic sense. It would be impossible for the owner of that hand to be commonplace or tame. Mrs. Mackay's hand is a miracle. It was described years ago by a historian who wrote up her success. Mrs. Kitty Dean, a belle of Washington's day.

Hand of Mrs. W. K. Vanderbilt Jr.

When Mrs. W. K. Vanderbilt Jr. caught a millionaire with almost as many millions as her own the comment was, "He fell in love with her hands." They are of the Hindu, poetic type, white and supple looking like the hands of a baby, and almost as plump. They are graceful, elegant, and malicious persons have accused Mrs. Vanderbilt of wearing gloves at night. "In an other way could she keep their color as perfect," they say. Her hands would be common bawls were it not for the shape of the fingers, which are heavy where they join the hands. When the fingers are heavy it denotes force of character and also a great disposition. The girl with beautiful hands should display them. They are her most effective weapons. She should show them off all that is possible, and if she is a wise girl she will cultivate the trick of having a little talk or stand or something convenient upon which to rest her arms. It gives one such a chance to show the hands.

The nice woman wears one ring upon each finger, but never two. One ring sets off the finger and gives it its shape and general appearance.

She Plans to Catch a Millionaire.

There is a girl in this town who sees a man of millions. She is a shrewd girl and she loves him for himself, not for his money. She also knows that the road will be a hard one. So she is studying up the hand matter. She is going to catch him with her hands and also is willing that he should keep his eyes wide open.



MRS. JOHN JACOB ASTOR



MRS. W.K. VANDERBILT

When he talks she listens. To do this she leans her head upon her hands. She has cultivated this until she knows how to make them frame her face. She does not speak her date for any reason, but she rests her head upon her finger tips. It is effective.

Sometimes, in a public moment, she rests her hand upon her bosom with the little naked fingers spread out, and this suggests every thing of the millionaire. Among other things he notes how deep a diamond ring would look upon that hand and what a chance there is for a diamond upon the third finger.

Perhaps he likes to talk and he enjoys being told a thing or two. In that case the pretty girl with the velvet hands will make a study of using her hands. She will know how to talk with them, and you can't imagine her ever overlooking a thing or two in the millionaire. Of course she never argues; she never better than to argue. And she never discusses, she never takes sides, and she never has views. But she chats and she gazes, and she listens, and she smiles, and she coaxes. And she does it all with her hands.

Lady Curzon Has Prettiest Hands in England.

Lady Curzon has the prettiest hands in England; they used to be the prettiest hands in America and for a while they were the prettiest hands in India. She could have "caught" a hundred millionaires. She could have "caught" a hundred millionaires. Her hands are of the Hindu, poetic type, white, smooth, and without a bone showing in them. They are hands to be worshipped.

"I wonder if she would let me hold her hand a minute?" breathed a lord at one of the exhibitions. "I would rather touch her hand than gaze upon the hands of any woman in these halls. I must know if they are cold like marble or warm and human."

The duchess of Marlborough has a professional assistance to take care of her hands. She characterizes her too highly to let them be handled by ordinary persons. The duchess is puffed back with bits of white scarf around a thin stick to keep the white scarf from slipping, and there are lockers and pedicure boxes and unguents prepared especially for these hands. And the duchess has the means. They are thin, soft and perfect. Her hands were never so exquisite in any form from a common aristocrat, for they are just not enough in the fingers to be beautiful, and the back is a perfect feat too, while the nails are as pinky.

Yvette Guilbert's Hands Are Distinctive.

Mrs. Yvette Guilbert has the most expressive hands in the world. One has to see her to appreciate it. But, once having seen her, there is little room for doubt. Mrs. Guilbert has a way of holding her hands like



LADY CURZON

When everybody wears short gloves she appeared in long and wrinkled white gloves. Now that the white glove is common she wears a pair of white gloves, but without, with an exception of stamp area showing above the glove. Her hands are very, tapered, and beautifully expressive. She need not say a word. Her hands speak for her.

Mrs. John Jacob Astor has the Philadelphia type of hands—the Greekish, suggestive hands. They have been in her family for 500 years, and her father was famous for them. They are royal hands. They are large and the veins are white, but the hand itself is fitted neatly upon the leg. It is not a heavy hand and it is not a hand that shows at all. It is an occasional hand, and it is the hand that millionaire like to marry. It is a hand that will not spend too freely. The millionaire's fortune is safe in such hands.

Countess of Warwick and Lily Langtry.

The hands that are millionaires, made from against cases, are the hands that can go pretty. If you know how to fit your hands in your bag, if you know how to rest them upon the arm of your chair, if you know how to pick up this and that, and how to use your fingers nicely, look you may feel certain that you have made that one who will win a millionaire.



DUCHESS OF MARLBOROUGH

Puzzling too is the favorite way to show the hands. Lady Birkbeck, now the Countess of Warwick, was famous and her fame for the beauty of her hands, which were "the white silver rings" hovering over the lip, runs. They were so pretty that you asked for nothing else just to see her pass the tea. Lily Langtry had her own hands, and it takes a reasonable firmness with slight to such message comes into them. They may be kept young and white. Hands show age so quickly, and easily.

Hands Age Rapidly if Neglected.

Constant care and attention is necessary. Without the most watched care the hands are certain to deteriorate. No part of the human body must cover the skin and wear that falls upon the hands, and no part deteriorates so rapidly when neglected. A few days of neglect and the skin, the complexion of the hands even the shape of the hands, show the ravages of age and age.

The hands age more rapidly than the face. When they are neglected the skin, the texture, the flexibility, the beauty of the hands reveal themselves even through gloves. Yet, despite the fact that they age so rapidly, no part of the body is so easily renewed as the hands. In partial beauty and so part, certainly, more the lines and color as well as the hands. Young, a careful manicuring, a few layers of steady rubbing with massage cream, will keep the hands even to fifty hands. Control it is that the hands have almost as good a power to change the masculine animal as the man. The soft, firm, tender hand, the velvet foot of the perfect hand perfectly kept, win men—and ideas—so soon.

MILLIONAIRES are won by beautiful hands, and there never was a millionaire whose wife had ugly fingers. When a man has a million dollars he looks for a nice pair of hands and he will not be happy till he gets them. A hundred instances can be pointed out to prove this assertion and a single case to the contrary is not known. Millions who have caught millionaires have in every case had the most charming of hands. Sometimes the hands have been almost like the skin of a baby.

Hands that have won millionaires have been given, expressive hands. The thin, very hand has few admirers. The practical hand is the one that wins out in the race of life.

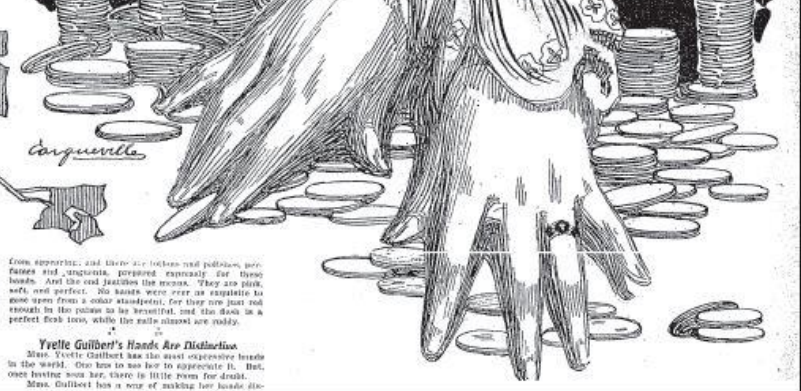
The ideal hand for a millionaire is the capable hand, it is the hand that can handle a million as well as win a million. It should be of medium size, in full proportion to the figure, and it should be well shaped. The fingers necessarily need not taper, but the nails should be long and short tapered. This hand—the plump, white hand, with its pretty pink nail—wins the hand that captivates. A man is willing to kiss it, and he generally goes on kissing it.

There is in the steel chisel hand, and it must be admitted that this is the hand that is most desirable, for it is so feminine. It is a little small in proportion to the body—it looks small on account of its shape—and it is sensitive.

Hands Must Be Infatigable.

The fingers are fat and they taper to a point where they are tipped with little pink, with silvery moons on the base. And the back of the hand is fat, with a row of dimples along the veins. There are no blemishes. In show of knuckles there is a line of dimples. This hand is lovely, particularly if it is soft and white. But it is not an infatigable hand.

The millionaire, when he goes with his hands, wants a woman of hands. She need not wear them in her common sense shoes and she need not slip them in a pair of expensive lace mittens, but she must have them just the way. Millionaires want hands that have any other form of ruin. It has taken hours to make a million, and now there must be brains to show



Carquenville

Figure 13: "Fair Hands that Handle Millions," The Chicago Daily Tribune, 8 July 1906.

word “manipulation” is rooted in the Latin *manus*, which translates to “hand.”⁹ In addition, *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines “manipulation” as “the making of hand motions.”¹⁰ It is in this etymological context that hands reveal their duality within the novels: though these women consistently seek the upper hand (as it were) in their respective situations, their machinations are subtly revealed by the physical appearances of their hands.

I. The Picturesque Hands of Lily Bart

The House of Mirth allows for an analysis of the synecdochic implications of hands in relation to the individual human body and the larger social body. Unlike the majority of Wharton’s protagonists, Lily Bart is not explicitly linked to a certain class within this social body. At the beginning—and, indeed, throughout much—of the novel, her status in society is ambiguous. An understanding of Lily’s precarious social positioning is necessary in order to conduct a more nuanced reading of her hands. Wharton writes of Lily’s adolescence, describing her father’s descent into financial ruin and the subsequent deaths of both of her destitute parents. These childhood events force Lily to assume the role of dependent to Mrs. Peniston, her wealthy aunt. Though lacking in her own personal fortune, Lily’s living situation places her in close proximity to the leisure class, enabling her to maintain high society comportment, if not actual status. Lawrence Selden, arguably the man who knows Lily best, notices that “to need such adroit handling, [Lily’s] situation must be desperate... He seemed to see her poised on the brink of a chasm, with one graceful foot advanced to assert her unconsciousness that the ground was

⁹ Douglas Harper, “Manipulation,” *The Online Etymology Dictionary* 10 October 2008, 4 January 2009

<<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?search=manipulation&searchmode=none>>

¹⁰ “Manipulation,” *The Oxford English Dictionary*, June 2008, 4 January 2009

<http://dictionary.oed.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/cgi/entry/00301234?query_type=word&queryword=manipulate&first=1&max_to_show=10&single=1&sort_type=alpha>.

failing her.”¹¹ Belonging neither to the upper- nor lower- class, Lily walks a very fine social line. She acknowledges that she desires to—and later, upon facing social ruin, “must” (*HOM* 208)—marry and marry well. This character trait is established early in the text, as Lily claims, “I am horribly poor and very expensive. I must have a great deal of money” (9). Lily’s comment reflects the relative fluidity of the social hierarchy in New York City in the 1890s, as a result of which individuals were able to ascend (and, in some cases, were forced to descend) the social ladder due, in large part, to their financial situations. Maureen Montgomery, in her wonderfully comprehensive analysis, *Displaying Women: Spectacles of Leisure in Edith Wharton’s New York*, emphasizes the importance of money by describing New York City as “a world in which material possessions increasingly connoted social status.”¹² Lily’s fervent desire to align herself with a man of both wealth and upper-class origins ultimately plays a pivotal role not only in her behavior, but also in the impression she seeks to present of herself.

Close consideration of Lily’s beauty allows for hands to be brought to the analytic forefront in both an abstract and material context. The more abstract implications of Lily’s hands derive from the fact that they are firmly associated with the larger social issue of feminine commoditization by society. Indeed, the novel contains several references to Lily’s status as a perceived social product. Selden, for example, thinks that Lily “must have cost a great deal to make,” while Wharton notes that Lily “had been fashioned to adorn and delight.”¹³ The words “make” and “fashion” suggest that Lily has been manipulated by society or, more pertinently, that she has been molded by the figurative hands of the social body within which she exists. This suggestion of Lily’s passivity is, however, deceptive. Rather than remaining a passive character,

¹¹ *HOM* 167.

¹² Maureen Montgomery, *Displaying Women: Spectacles of Leisure in Edith Wharton’s New York* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 4.

¹³ *HOM* 4, 264.

Lily consistently conducts herself as an actor. Not only does her manipulative behavior indicate that she has a figurative hand in every situation, but she also literally plays a part throughout most of the novel, attempting to convey the illusion that she is a well-to-do lady when, in fact, she is not.

This insight into Lily's actions echoes Montgomery's sentiments that, "Women had to work hard at displaying leisure and make sure that the display was noticed... [the display] required thought, planning, exercise of judgment, work, and the use of resources and skills."¹⁴ In the early chapters especially, Lily combats the ever-present threat of social obscurity by consciously working to promote a façade of wealth and leisure. Though her late mother "used to say to her with a kind of fierce vindictiveness: 'But you'll get it all back—you'll get it all back, with your face,'" Wharton's prose would suggest otherwise.¹⁵ In the two instances in which Lily surveys her own face, she fails to recognize its beauty and, instead, fixates on the "two little lines near her mouth, faint flaws in the smooth curve of her cheek" (*HOM* 25). These wrinkles ostensibly represent the physical manifestations of her concerns over her indeterminate social position. Still, other individuals acknowledge Lily's beauty, though rarely in the context of her face. Instead, much more attention is paid to Lily's lovely, unblemished hands.

The material significance of Lily's hands becomes apparent within the novel's first several scenes, when Lily prepares a pot of tea for Selden and herself. "[Lily] measured out the tea into a little teapot of green glaze... [H]e watched her hand, polished as a bit of old ivory, with its slender pink nails, and the sapphire bracelet slipping over her wrist" (7). The description is notable for Lily's staunch adherence to the purportedly "ideal" hand of a lady of leisure, delineated, for example, in the etiquette guides by Cooke and Thornwell. Indeed, Wharton's

¹⁴ Montgomery 11, 42.

¹⁵ *HOM* 25.

(and, by extension, Lily's) attention to detail is so pitch-perfect that the passage appears capable of situating itself just as well in *Social Etiquette* or *The Lady's Guide to Perfect Gentility* as it does in Wharton's novel. Unlike Lily's face, which has begun to display signs of age and worry, her hands remain exquisitely pristine, enabling her to completely outshine her picturesque teatime backdrop. In comparison to the green teapot, Lily's association with sapphire and ivory render her exotic and rare.¹⁶ These luxurious materials further underscore the degree of "work" that must have contributed to Lily's beauty; mined sapphires must be treated in order to enhance their clarity and luster, while ivory must be delicately carved from a larger piece and carefully buffered in order to maintain its sheen. The ornateness of Lily's hands reinforces the assertion that "she had been brought up to be ornamental" (252), implying that she has faced social (typically parental) pressure to maintain a certain standard of beauty, which becomes concretized through her hands. While such social pressures certainly are pervasive, Lily's own agency must not be discounted. After all, "[W]hen a girl has no mother to palpitate for her she must...be on the alert for herself" (19). Lily's alertness, in this context, is exemplified by the fact that she consciously works to maintain the appearance of her hands in order to promote the notion that she truly belongs among the leisure class.

¹⁶ Wharton's use of the word "ivory" is also significant in that it allows for an interesting comparison to be made to the descriptions of Isabel Archer, the protagonist of *The Portrait of a Lady*, written by Henry James. Sydney J. Krause, in her article "James' Revision of the Style of *The Portrait of a Lady*," details several revisions made by the author between his 1880 and 1908 editions of the novel. "In one New York revision, Isabel becomes 'as smooth to [Gilbert Osmond's] general need of her as handled ivory to the palm' (N, II, 11); originally, James had the cliché, 'as bright and soft as an April cloud'" (3B, II, 115). The revision reflects Wharton's hand motif (through James use of the word "palm"), and prompts a reassessment of Isabel's character. The inclusion of the word "ivory" not only emphasizes that Isabel is rare and beautiful (like Lily Bart), but also suggests a degree of resiliency that had, henceforth, not been so outwardly prevalent in her character. Whether Wharton was influenced by James, in this instance, remains a speculative and fascinating question. Sydney J. Krause, "James' Revisions of the Style of *The Portrait of a Lady*," American Literature 30 (March 1958), 70.

This specific depiction of Lily's hand may be further analyzed in conjunction with the sapphire bracelet that she wears. Selden imagines that Lily "was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate" (7). This ominous comment stands in opposition to the etherealness of Wharton's description of Lily's hand, establishing a striking contrast between the sensations of freedom and confinement that Lily experiences in society. Though she is technically "free" of an allegiance to any specific social class, this freedom is, somewhat paradoxically, all the more confining. Lily's lack of wealth and high birth deprive her of any true claim to membership in the upper class. As a result, she is forced to conduct herself in accordance with the rigid social dictates of the leisure class, embodied by the regular links of her bracelet, in an effort to gain acceptance.

The sapphire bracelet that Lily wears on her hand also provides insight into her relationship with Selden. Wharton's characterization of the bracelet as "chaining [Lily] to her fate" echoes Selden's thoughts of Greek mythology later in the novel. Selden likens himself and Lily to the mythical figures of Perseus and Andromeda, respectively. According to myth, Perseus rescues Andromeda from the clutches of a sea monster by freeing her from the mass of rocks to which she is chained. "[Selden] knew that Perseus' task is not done when he has loosened Andromeda's *chains*, for her limbs are numb with bondage, and she cannot rise and walk, but clings to him with dragging arms as he beats back to land with his burden" (140, emphasis added). Selden positions himself in the dominant role as the man who would free Lily from the "bondage" associated with the harsh regulations of the society in which she operates. Still, Selden's misogynistic comment fails to address *how* he plans to rescue Lily. Ironically, his reference to the story of Perseus and Andromeda fails to include one key detail: Perseus marries Andromeda after he rescues her. These events are detailed in Book IV of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*.

‘Oh!’ [Perseus] said. ‘These chains don’t do you justice;

the only chains that you should wear are those

that ardent lovers put on in their passion.’

...

At once the hero takes Andromeda

without a dowry, given that she herself

is sufficient to his labors.¹⁷

The italicized lines of this excerpt are mirrored in *The House of Mirth*, when Lily claims that “she could put her finger on every link of the chain drawing [Selden and herself] together.”¹⁸

While the Ovidian narrative underscores the strength of the bond between the “ardent lovers,”

Perseus and Andromeda, the chain that unites Lily and Selden appears to be far more brittle. In

this context, the fact that Lily’s bracelet is sapphire renders it increasingly significant, as an

intertextual analysis of Wharton’s work reveals that in each of the other three novels under

consideration, Wharton specifically notes that engagement rings feature a sapphire stone. Lily’s

sapphire (and, quite literally, Lily herself) anticipates this engagement, and yet it never comes to

fruition. At the end of the novel, a scandalized Lily attempts to romantically distance herself

from Selden. She dies without the sapphire engagement ring that she had once so actively

pursued.

Wharton’s description of Lily’s hands during her exchange with Selden is echoed later in

the text, to even greater effect, when Lily prepares tea for Percy Gryce while on the train to

Bellomont.

¹⁷ Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, Trans. Charles Martin (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), Book IV, lines 928-930 (emphasis added), 1034-1036.

¹⁸ *HOM* 57.

When the tea came [Percy] watched [Lily] in silent fascination while her hands flitted above the tray, looking miraculously fine and slender in contrast to the coarse china and lumpy bread. It seemed wonderful to him that anyone should perform with such careless ease the difficult task of making tea in public in a lurching train. (16-17)

Not only does this passage reinforce the significance of the “fine and slender” appearance of Lily’s hands in comparison to her banal surroundings, it also suggests that she consciously seeks situations which would best enable her to display herself to her fullest advantage. We can understand Lily’s behavior through the theories of spectatorship set forth by John Berger in his book, *Ways of Seeing*. “Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.”¹⁹ Just as hands serve as a focal point when Lily is being “watched” by Selden, so too do her hands “perform... in public” for Percy. Ultimately, as Lily looks at her hands, she sees them not only *through* the eyes of men, but also through the intense focus of etiquette that her class places on women’s hands.

This relationship between Lily’s hands and the men who admire them becomes compromised, after her rapid and scandalous social downfall. Though Lily seeks to maintain her composure in defiance of her greatly reduced circumstances, her loss of control in her social standing is reflected by her loss of control of her hands. Lily’s hand motions, formerly characterized by “careless ease,” gradually become increasingly erratic. In the latter portion of the text, Wharton describes Lily’s hands as “trembling” (101), “straying” (145), “listless” (248), and “restless” (252). These words convey a sense of unyielding agitation and posit themselves in opposition to the literal definition of “leisure,” implicit to the designation “lady of leisure.”

¹⁹ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1977), 47.

Unable to sleep or achieve any sort of relaxation, Lily becomes addicted to chloral, a drug used to alleviate insomnia. Lily's hands are only relieved of their restlessness in death, which is itself brought about by a figurative hand.

[Lily] lay very still, waiting with a sensuous pleasure for the first effects of the soporific. She knew in advance what form they would take—the gradual cessation of the inner throb, the soft approach of passiveness, as though an invisible hand made magic passes over her in the darkness. (282-283)

Though the invisible hand's "magic passes" do put an end to Lily's agitation, her own hands remain on display. Readers first "see" Lily's corpse through Selden's eyes. "Selden saw a narrow bed along the wall, and on the bed, with motionless hands and a calm unrecognizing face, the semblance of Lily Bart" (285). The fact that Selden remarks upon the appearance of Lily's hands even before describing her face suggests that, once again, we read meaning through her hands.

II. Undine Spragg's "Beringed" Hands

As in *The House of Mirth*, Wharton utilizes hands to provide insight into the inner-workings of society in *The Custom of the Country*. Like Lily Bart, Undine Spragg works to establish herself among the genealogically-distinguished members of the leisure class; unlike Lily, Undine is wholly devoid of any familial ties to the upper class. As the daughter of a newly wealthy business man who has reestablished his family in New York City, Undine is firmly positioned within a class of individuals known as the *nouveaux riches*. These individuals in possession of new money gained prominence in the years following the Civil War. Having rapidly made their fortunes in industry, the *nouveaux riches* flocked to Manhattan and sought to

assert themselves in the uppermost stratum of society. Maureen Montgomery charts their progress in New York City.

By putting their wealth on display through leisure, clothes, expensive entertainments, and houses modeled on European palaces, the *nouveaux riches* attempted to put as much distance as possible between themselves and their lower-class antecedents [...] In seeking to be included in the social elite, the *nouveaux riches* in New York were confronted by barriers placed against their entry by established members. The class struggle that ensued, involving as it did intense competition in the display of wealth between newcomers and the old elite, is a highly significant theme in Wharton's New York fiction.²⁰

Wharton, ever the social observer, once famously acknowledged, “[S]ocial conditions as they are just now in our new world, where sudden possession of money has come without social obligations, or any traditional sense of solidarity between the classes, is a vast and absorbing field for the novelist.”²¹ Indeed, the author features the *nouveaux riches* in several of her novels, including, for instance, the other two texts under consideration in this chapter. Simon Rosedale, of *The House of Mirth*, maneuvers his way up the social ladder based solely on his increasing finances, much in the same way that Julius Beaufort garners social esteem in *The Age of Innocence*. In the latter, members of the upper-class lament the notion “that New York was very much changed,” condemning the *nouveaux riches* as “strange weeds pushing up between the ordered rows of social vegetables.”²² In these two novels, Wharton's inclusion of *nouveau riche* individuals does not comprise the thematic foci of the texts, and it is in this context that *The*

²⁰ Montgomery 163.

²¹ Edith Wharton, *The Letters of Edith Wharton*, Ed. R.W.B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis (New York: Collier, 1988), 99.

²² *AOI* 161.

Custom of the Country distinguishes itself. Throughout *The Custom of the Country*, Undine marries (and remarries) as a means by which to gain financial security and increase her visibility in high society.

The ability of hands to function as a synecdoche for the *nouveaux riches* (and their desires to achieve leisure-class status) becomes apparent in the first line of the novel. “Undine Spragg—how *can* you?’ her mother wailed, raising a prematurely wrinkled hand heavy with rings to defend the note which a languid ‘bell boy’ had brought in.”²³ The description of the hand of Mrs. Spragg, Undine’s mother, underscores the conflicting outward physical manifestations of the past and present circumstances of individuals with “new money.” Mrs. Spragg’s “prematurely wrinkled hand” suggests that she has endured a life of hard work, an idea that is substantiated by Wharton’s description of her personal history. “Poor Mrs. Spragg had done her own washing in her youth... [and] had been kept busy by the incessant struggle with domestic cares” (CC 9). Mrs. Spragg’s wrinkles distance her “small mottled hands” from those of the ladies of the leisure class, for whom faultless hands represent not simply an ideal, but a social necessity (10). Cooke’s etiquette manual offers several remedies for women seeking to reduce the appearance of wrinkles or to improve the look and feel of “hands [which have] become rough *from any cause*.”²⁴ The latter portion of Cooke’s phrase, “from any cause” is ambiguous in its applications; still, it may be interpreted as a subtle reference to upward-social mobility, for whom the “cause” of rough hands would be labor endured while living amongst the lower classes. These pervasive attitudes towards appearance may serve to explicate Mrs. Spragg’s preoccupation with having her hands manicured, as well as her tendency to wear an (over-) abundance of jewelry. Throughout *The Custom of the Country*, several characters, nearly all of

²³ CC 5 (Wharton’s emphasis).

²⁴ Cooke 505 (emphasis added).

whom may be categorized as “*nouveau riche*,” are described as having lavishly ornamented hands.²⁵ Elmer Moffatt, the shrewd Wall Street man who serves as Undine’s first and fourth (Undine’s marital history suggests that one ought not to use the word “last” here) husband, is described as having a “dapperly gloved hand” and, later, as possessing a “plump hand adorned by a cameo” (85, 101). Likewise, Indiana Frusk, a childhood friend of Undine’s who has divorced and remarried in order to improve her situation, displays a “big bejewelled hand” (273). Ironically, though these individuals strive to prove their leisure class attributes through their hands, their overdone displays render them increasingly well-situated among the *gauche nouveaux riches*.

The hands of Mrs. Spragg may be analyzed in relation to those of her daughter when considered through the lens of social theory. After Charles Darwin published his seminal work *On the Origin of Species* in 1859,²⁶ several well-known biological doctrines related to the concept of inheritance were reinterpreted in a social context.²⁷ These ideas prove themselves to be recurrent in Wharton’s literature, as illustrated, for example, by the beginning of Chapter X of *The Custom of the Country*.²⁸ “Mr. and Mrs. Spragg were both given to such long ruminating apathy that the student of inheritance might have wondered whence Undine derived her

²⁵ The correlation between the *nouveaux riches* and ostentatious displays of wealth is not limited to *The Custom of the Country*. In *The House of Mirth*, social climber Simon Rosedale is described as possessing “plump jewelled fingers” (*HOM* 222, emphasis added), while Regina Beaufort of *The Age of Innocence* displays a “jewelled little finger” (*AOI* 12, emphasis added).

²⁶ Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (New York: A.L. Burt Company) 1859.

²⁷ In “Edith Wharton, 1862-1937: A Brief Biography,” Sheri Benstock confirms that Wharton had indeed studied Darwinian Theory after being introduced to Darwin’s works by her friend, the art collector Egerton Winthrop.

Sheri Benstock, “Edith Wharton, 1862-1937: A Brief Biography,” *A Historical Guide to Edith Wharton*, ed. Carol J. Singley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 28.

²⁸ Wharton more extensively considers the idea of inheritance in conjunction with eugenics in her lesser-known novel, *The Children* (1928).

overflowing activity.”²⁹ Still, Wharton’s inclusion of inheritance within her text is rarely so explicit, exemplified by her subtle treatment of the Spragg women and their hands.

The initial description of Undine’s hands, though brief, provides insight into her history and personal motivations. Wharton writes, “[Undine’s] one hand, almost as much beringed as her mother’s, drummed on the crumpled table-cloth” (28). The use of the word “beringed” to describe Undine’s hands echoes Wharton’s prior description of Mrs. Spragg’s hand as “heavy with rings.” This repetition illustrates the ways in which the relationship between Undine and her mother displays traits of Neo-Lamarckism, specifically regarding the theory of the inheritance of acquired characteristics. This theory is delineated by one of Wharton’s contemporaries, paleontologist Nathaniel Southgate Shaler, in his book, *The Interpretation of Nature*.

[Organisms] adapt themselves in an immediate manner to the peculiarities of their environment. Those conditions which surround them make an impression on their bodies which is transmitted to their progeny, and these influences, accumulating from age to age, become the precious store of influences which lead organisms ever upward to higher planes of existence.³⁰

Within *The Custom of the Country*, the “higher planes of existence” that Shaler references may be re-contextualized as “higher planes of society.” Just as Mrs. Spragg wears jewels on her hands as a means by which to indicate her elevated financial—and, subsequently, social—status, so too does her daughter. Their mutual desire to promote themselves among the upper class likely derives from the Spragg’s humble origins in Apex City, where “Mrs. Spragg and Undine had

²⁹ CC 94.

³⁰ Nathaniel Southgate Shaler, *The Interpretation of Nature* (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1893), 146.

followed from afar [the comings and goings of New York City socialites] in the Apex papers.”³¹ Still, Wharton also reveals that in their present (at the beginning of the novel) circumstances, “Mrs. Spragg had no ambition for herself—she seemed to have transferred her whole personality to her child” (9). This passage suggests that Undine has not simply inherited her mother’s ambitions, but has, in fact, subsumed them. Mrs. Spragg’s formerly ambitious tendencies have been concentrated in her daughter, a phenomena reflected by the appearance of Undine’s hands.

In addition to the theoretical implications of the description of Undine’s hand, Wharton’s use of the word “beringed” also provides an indication of Undine’s status in society. “Beringed” appears in neither the *Oxford English Dictionary* nor the *Dictionary of American Regional English* and, as such, appears to be of Wharton’s own invention. Though the author might certainly have utilized the word “bejeweled” to describe Undine’s hand (as she does in the aforementioned depiction of the hands of Indiana Frusk), the word lacks the strong marital undertones associated with “beringed.” Wharton’s word choice carries the implicit suggestion of multiple rings, which enables it to subtly foreshadow Undine multiple marriages and, by extension, her attempts to gradually ascend the social ladder. Even Undine’s second husband, Ralph Marvell, remarks that his wife’s hand is “one to be fondled and dressed in rings” (113, emphasis added). The fact that her hand is “almost as much beringed as her mother’s” also carries analytic significance. If Mrs. Spragg’s overabundance of jewels renders her gauche, perhaps Undine’s (relative) restraint in the number of ornaments she utilizes to adorn her hand reflects a studied, if preliminary, understanding of the ways in which ladies of leisure seek to present themselves.

³¹ CC 9.

Undine's efforts to emulate the leisure class by way of her hands become increasingly evident following her marriage to Ralph Marvell. While on their honeymoon, Ralph scrutinizes Undine's hand "as if it had been a bit of precious porcelain or ivory. It was small and soft, a mere featherweight, a puffball of a hand... The fingers were short and tapered, dimpled at the base, with nails as smooth as roseleaves" (113). This description bears resemblance to that of Lily Bart's hands, chiefly through the repetition of the word "ivory" in both characterizations. In so doing, Wharton reinforces the apparent ubiquity of white, soft hands among the women of (or, as the case may be, women seeking to become part of) the leisure class. Thornwell's etiquette guide alone describes three home-made concoctions—"paste for the hands," "brown almond wash-balls for the hands," and "musk soap, to soften and whiten the hands"—which the author deems "choice preparations for making the hands soft and white."³² Wharton's descriptions suggest that Undine, a woman who strives and yet consistently fails to gain acceptance among members of the leisure class, fully adheres to such prescriptions. The ladies of leisure themselves, however, frequently present physicalities that differ considerably from this purported ideal. Though Wharton describes the hands of relatively few upper-class women in *The Custom of the Country*, she does give considerable focus to the hands of Clare Van Deegen, Ralph's socialite cousin and closest confidante. Clare is described once as having a "thin brown wrist" and twice as having "thin brown hands."³³ Once again Wharton invokes the notion of a social façade. In spite of the fact that Clare's hands do not "look the part," Clare is, in fact, a recognized and respected member of the leisure class. Undine, in contrast, perfectly embodies—even down to her hands—the idyllic image of a lady of leisure, and yet her mannerisms ultimately distance her from the societal position to which she aspires.

³² Thornwell 55, 56.

³³ *CC* 143, 255.

Undine's inability to ingratiate herself within the leisure class may stem from the fact that she too fully personifies the idea of leisure. Ralph's description of Undine's hand as a "mere featherweight, a puffball" connotes not only a sense of inactivity, but also, a degree of uselessness. Her hands are not meant to act; they are meant to be looked at, and it is in this context that hands truly are representative of Undine as an individual. Ralph remarks that Undine's fingers "were inelastic and did not spring back far—only enough to show the dimples" (113). This digital inelasticity reflects Undine's lack of exposure to any sort of physical endeavor which would necessitate employment of her hands. When she sits among the family of her third husband, the Count (and later Marquis) Raymond de Chelles, for example, Undine remarks upon the stagnancy of her hands. "[The family's] interminable conversations were carried on to the click of knitting-needles ... as Undine sat staring at the lustrous nails of her idle hands she felt that her inability to occupy them was regarded as one of the chief causes of her restlessness" (407). The passage garners further significance through Wharton's suggestion that Undine's inability to act with her hands precludes her from conversing with true ladies of leisure. This idea extends back to Ralph's claim that Undine's hand is "not a speaking hand" (113). In spite of her attempts to improve upon her status through multiple marriages, Undine remains incapable, even after several years of exposure to the upper class, of overcoming her conversational shortcomings. "When Raymond ceased to be interested in her conversation she had concluded it was the way of husbands; but since then it had been slowly dawning on her that she produced the same effect on others. Her entrances were always triumphs; but they had no sequel (429). In this competitive and selective environment, appearances simply are not everything.

III. The Underhanded Behavior of May Welland

The final section of this chapter concerns itself with the physical appearance of the hands of May Welland of *The Age of Innocence*. May is immediately distinguished from Lily Bart and Undine Spragg due to the fact that she is, from the very onset of the novel, a member of the leisure class. Still, May's pre-determined (by birth) social status does not preclude her from having to work in order to maintain some sort of external façade. The distinction between the appearance of May's hands and those of the two other characters under consideration in this chapter derive from the *type* of façade that each seeks to maintain. Whereas the hands of Lily and Undine provide physical evidence of their endeavors to emulate ladies of leisure, May's hands reveal her attempts to conceal her manipulative tendencies. Such tendencies are epitomized in the novel by two principal actions: first, May marries her fiancé, Newland Archer, in spite of the fact that she suspects him of falling in love with another woman (her cousin, the Countess Ellen Olenska); and second, May contrives to separate the couple when she becomes more fully aware of their (emotional) affair. May seeks to guise her manipulative actions in order to better adhere to the aesthetic ideals of innocence and purity that characterizes the ladies of leisure. This desire to channel normativeness is ultimately revealed by her hands.

A comprehensive analysis of the ironic relationship between May and her (purported) innocence stems from the duality of the word "age" in the title, *The Age of Innocence*, which, like the overarching theme of this thesis, plays into the distinction between the human body and the social body. "Age" may be considered, in its most literal sense, as a reference to May and her personal development. This correlation is especially pertinent at the beginning of the novel, when she is still referred to by her then-fiancé (and future husband), Newland Archer, as a "young girl," rather than as a woman.³⁴ The word "age" might also refer to the development of

³⁴ AOI 4.

the Old New York society in which May plays an integral role. In either case, the notion of a distinct “age” of innocence carries the implicit suggestion of a bygone period, indicating that what was once innocent may no longer be characterized as such. Still, closer reading reveals that Wharton does not preoccupy herself with the potential transience of innocence, but, instead, seeks to question exactly what it means to be “innocent.” Rather than presenting a diminishment of innocence, May’s hands serve as an illustrative device by which Wharton presents a diminishment of passivity.

The quasi-parallel between May’s hands and the titular concept of innocence becomes evident from her introduction to the text. The novel opens with a performance of *Faust* at New York’s Academy of Music. During the opera, Newland watches as May “dropped her eyes to the immense bouquet of lilies-of-the-valley on her knee... [H]er white-gloved finger-tips touch[ed] the flowers softly” (5). May’s hands are closely associated with the color white, both in terms of her gloves and the lilies that she handles. A superficial reading of the appearance of May’s hands in this scene would suggest that purity and innocence may be regarded as her character-defining traits and, indeed, this is how she is *meant* to be read—if not by Wharton’s readers, than by those other characters in attendance at the opera. As her engagement has yet to be announced, May is thought (in this scene) to be romantically unattached. Her unmarried status excludes her from the wives of Old New York and, as such, she is relegated to an infantile position in society. This child-like status is reflected not only by the recurring reference to May as a “young girl,” but also by her appearance, which is evocative of the Romantic “cult of innocence.”³⁵ The “cult” looked to children, especially young girls, as the physical embodiments of virtue and incorruptibility.

³⁵ James Steward. Personal Interview. 6 February 2009.

May's prim and pristine hands function in accordance with this characterization, promoting the perception of her intrinsic innocence.

Still, May's innocence becomes questionable upon closer consideration of the lilies-of-the-valley that she holds in her hand during the first scene. Throughout the novel, there is a strong link between May and these flowers, as Newland supplies his fiancée with a daily bouquet. In her book *The Language of Flowers*, Kate Greenaway notes that lilies suggest "purity, sweetness, [and] a return of happiness."³⁶ By seeking to equate May with the innocence connoted by the lilies, Newland plays a part in propagating a stilted reading of his fiancée as a type, the ingénue. He employs lilies as a subtle means by which to promote the perception of May as an ideal "marriageable girl, with no past to conceal" (28). In so doing, Newland attempts to commodify May in much the same way (even nominally) that Lily is commodified in *The House of Mirth*. Wharton notes that Newland, upon surveying May, feels "a thrill of possessorship... mingled with a tender reverence for her abysmal purity" (5). Still, the description of May's purity as "abysmal" calls into question her passivity at Newland's figurative hands. According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, "abysmal" may be defined both as "of, pertaining to or resembling an abyss; fathomless," or as "in a weakened sense: of an exceptionally poor standard or quality."³⁷ Though both definitions contribute to an understanding of May's innocence, only the former seems to reflect Newland's sentiments. The latter suggests that May is not innocent but, instead, actively seeks to project an impression (and a poor one at that) of innocence. May's manipulative tendencies may be viewed in conjunction with the performance that she watches at the opera. Just as the play's protagonist, Madame Nilsson, "affected a guileless incomprehension

³⁶ Kate Greenaway, *The Language of Flowers* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1884), 28.

³⁷ "Abysmal," *The Oxford English Dictionary* <http://dictionary.oed.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/cgi/entry/50001000?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=abysmal&first=1&max_to_show=10>.

of [her lover's] designs" (5), so too does May "let [Newland] guess that she 'cared'" (5). Her underhanded tendencies ultimately posit her in the authoritative role in the relationship, even if she continues to maintain an appearance of subservience and loyalty to her fiancé. In the context of these ideas, when May touches the lilies-of-the-valley at the performance, she herself is performing. Knowing that Newland is watching her, she utilizes her hands as tools by which to manipulate her fiancé into believing that she is, ironically, innocence personified.

May's hands continue to gain significance in the novel after the announcement of her engagement to Newland. The couple visits May's grandmother, society matron Catherine Mingott, in order to procure her blessing. Upon examining the engagement ring, Mrs. Mingott remarks, "'Very handsome...very liberal... But it's the hand that sets off the ring, isn't it, my dear Mr. Archer'" (19). If, as Mrs. Mingott maintains, "the hand... sets off the ring," then it would appear that the ring and its owner may be analyzed in conjunction with one another. Wharton describes May's ring as "a large thick sapphire, set in invisible claws" (19). In its bold simplicity, the ring deviates from the traditional "cameo set in pearls" to which Mrs. Mingott is better accustomed (19). As a result, the very design of the ring provides a subtle suggestion of May's departure from time-honored marital norms. The ring's unadorned setting is also pertinent when analyzed in the context of May's character. The sapphire is held in place by "invisible claws"; though these structural devices may not easily be perceived, they are essential to the maintenance of the ring's form. May's hands ultimately function in much the same way as the claws, working behind the proverbial scenes to uphold her marriage to Newland. The link between May's hands and the claws of her ring is strengthened by the fact that the ring is, after all, May's *engagement* ring, which serves as a symbol of the couple's unification. In addition,

the sapphire that serves as the focus of the ring was thought, especially in the nineteenth century, to be indicative of “heaven, virtue, truth, constancy, [and] heavenly love.”³⁸

Certainly, each of these referents promises a harmonious matrimony, and yet, from the onset, May’s engagement to Newland is marked by disparities. Shortly following the announcement of their engagement, May senses Newland’s apprehension over their future together. She remarks that she has shown Ellen her engagement ring; May refrains, however, from mentioning that her action was likely motivated by a desire to assert herself as the only woman in Newland’s life. According to May, Ellen “thinks it the most beautiful setting she ever saw. There’s nothing like it in the rue de la Paix, she said” (54). Ellen’s purported fixation upon the ring’s setting seems dubious, as the setting is comprised of “invisible claws.” Rather, Ellen’s preoccupation with the imperceptible setting seems to reflect an attempt to divert her attention away from the sapphire, a near proclamation of marriage in and of itself. The very fact that May virtually forces Ellen—her presumed competitor for Newland’s affections—to acknowledge her ring highlights the ways in which she utilizes her hands to manipulate others into believing that her relationship is loving and fulfilling.

Mrs. Mingott’s comment also underscores the importance of appearances in the context of women’s hands. Her preoccupation with her granddaughter’s hands appear to extend from ideas similar to those that Cooke delineated, as set forth in the introduction to this chapter: not only are hands representative of a woman’s role as a wife (through the presence of engagement and/or wedding rings), but also of her status as a lady of leisure. In the context of her society’s aesthetic dictates, May proves herself to be a failure in both capacities. Mrs. Mingott notes that May’s “hand is large—it’s these modern sports that spread the joints—but the skin is white”

³⁸ William Jones, History and Mystery of Precious Stones (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1880), 93.

(19). May's large hands belie her attempts to embody the physical characteristics of ladies of leisure, whose small hands reflect their largely inactive lifestyles. In her book, *Success in Society: A Manual of Good Manners*, Lydia E. White writes,

The idea is prevalent that absolute smallness, without regard to proportion, is essential to the beauty of a woman's hand. This keeps many a young girl idle, lest by work it should become enlarged. The hand will undoubtedly increase in size by use; but if it only grows in proportion to other parts of the body, so far from this being ugliness, it will be, according to laws of taste, a beauty.³⁹

May's disproportionately large hands reinforce her characterization as a fervent athlete, and this athleticism provides insight into her underlying masculinity. Over the course of the text, May is repeatedly associated with the word "boyish," as Wharton notes that May has both a "cool boyish composure" (91) and a "boyish smile" (120). Her boyishness would appear to render her unsuited for the role of "ideal" society wife. The fact that May's sport-of-choice—the ostensible source of her large hands—is archery is all the more significant in this context. As an expert archer, May seems to embody the Archer name more fully than Newland himself. Her usurpation of his name hints at a role reversal in the partnership. Once again, May's hands subtly reveal that she maintains the superior, masculinized role in her marriage.

May's large hands further suggest her masculinity due to the fact that they hinder her from traditionally domestic (i.e., female) activities. Wharton remarks that May "was not a clever needle woman; her large capable hands were made for riding, rowing and open-air activities; but since the other wives embroidered cushions for their husbands she did not wish to omit this last link of devotion" (186). This comment directly suggests May's intrinsic separation from the

³⁹ Lydia E. White, *Success in Society: A Manual of Good Manners* (Boston: James H. Earle, 1889), 89.

“other wives” of Old New York, among whom needlework is frequently prioritized above physical exertion. When May does attempt needlework, it is clear that she is out of her element. Wharton writes that Archer could see May’s “elbow-sleeves slipping back from her firm round arms, the betrothal sapphire shining on her left hand above her broad gold wedding ring, and the right hand slowly and laboriously stabbing the canvas” (186). This scene may be read as an explication of the psychological makeup of May’s marriage, as well as a critique of the imbalance of power between husband and wife. Wharton suggests that May equates the cushion with her “devotion” to her husband, a man who, she recognizes, does not truly and completely love her. The aggressive act of “stabbing” the cushion may also be seen as an assertion of her frustration in her marriage, an idea that gains support through Wharton’s reference to both May’s engagement and wedding rings during the description of the stabbing process. In this context, May’s actions appear paradoxical: in an effort to maintain a guise of innocence, she must engage in an activity that embodies the very ideals of femininity and domesticity to which she cannot adhere.

IV. Conclusions

The turn of the twentieth century represented a time in which women faced intense social pressure to conform to normative standards of beauty set forth by society at large. Etiquette guides of the period propagated the notion that there existed but one aesthetic ideal to which all women should aspire. This ideal extended even to a woman’s hands. As described throughout chapter one, the beauty of a woman’s hand was gauged by three primary attributes: whiteness, plumpness, and robustness. These physical attributes predominate throughout the descriptions of the hands of millionaires’ wives, as delineated in the article, “Fair Hands that Handle Millions.”

The article also describes how a woman might attract a man's attention simply based upon the appearance and subtle gesturing of her hands. It reads, "Perhaps [a man] likes to talk and he enjoys being told a thing or two. In that case the pretty girl with the pretty hands will make a study of using her hands [...] She chats, and she gossips, and she banters, and she sallies, and she teases. And she does it all with her hands."⁴⁰ The passage suggests that "the pretty girl" ultimately uses her "pretty hands" as tools by which to manipulate the man. It is in this context that "the pretty girl" is rendered similar to the three characters studied within the first chapter of this thesis.

Chapter one considered the duality of hands relative to three of Wharton's female protagonists. Though each woman endeavors to utilize her hands to manipulate others, the appearance of her hands ultimately reveals her own manipulative tendencies. This is certainly the case in *The House of Mirth*, in which Lily Bart promotes the perception of her lovely hands in order to attract a husband of high social standing. Still, Lily's hands also reveal her awareness that she is perpetually on display, suggesting that she plays a part throughout most of the novel. Much like Lily, Undine Spragg of *The Custom of the Country* also strives to channel a high standard of beauty through her hands, in the hopes that her appearance will enable her to garner access to the leisure class. The similarities between Undine's hands and those of her mother, however, oppose these leisure class aspirations by subtly revealing her middle-class origins. Finally, in *The Age of Innocence*, May Welland's clumsy and athletic hands ultimately contradict the image of femininity and innocence that she strives to project. In each scenario, the woman seeks to concretely establish herself within the leisure class. Her hands, however, act in opposition to her efforts.

⁴⁰ "Fair Hands that Handle Millions."

CHAPTER 2

THE LABORING HANDS OF WHARTON'S WORKING-CLASS CHARACTERS

Mr. Welland's sensitive domesticity shrank from the discomforts of the slovenly southern hotel, and at immense expense, and in face of almost insuperable difficulties, Mrs. Welland was obliged, year after year, to improve an establishment partly made up of discontented New York servants and partly drawn from the local African supply.¹

The Age of Innocence

[JUSTINE:] '[Dillon's wife] must clean those uncleanable floors? She's not fit for it!'

[AMHERST:] 'She must work, fit for it or not; and there is less strain in scrubbing than in bending over the looms or cards. The pay is lower, of course, but she's very grateful for being taken back at all, now that [her husband is] no longer a first class worker.'

[JUSTINE:] 'She can't possibly stand more than two or three months of it without breaking down!'²

The Fruit of the Tree

¹ AOI 91.

² Edith Wharton, The Fruit of the Tree (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000), 14.

The turn of the twentieth century represented a period of incredible social and political change in cities throughout the United States. Chapter one began an exploration of these changes through its consideration of the emergence of the *nouveaux riches* in the aftermath of the Civil War. This increasing population of “new money” individuals embodied the newly (and, certainly, relatively) fluid nature of the formerly rigid hierarchical system that had demarcated society. Still, such changes were not limited to the wealthiest populations who, according to Nell Irvin Painter in her book *Standing at Armageddon: A Grassroots History of the Progressive Era*, constituted only 1% of the U.S. population in 1890.³ In her article “Those ‘Gorgeous Incongruities’: Polite Politics and Public Space on the Streets of Nineteenth-Century New York City,” Mona Domosh, Ph.D. notes that, “New York in the 1860s was a city characterized by extremes in wealth, by ethnic and racial diversity, by economic elites competing for political power, and by an unstable social-class system.”⁴ At the lower socioeconomic end of the extremes in wealth to which Domosh refers are the working class citizens⁵, upon whom the social reforms of the period arguably had a greater and more direct influence. Painter writes,

³ Painter identifies the “wealthy classes” as those individuals who earn \$50,000 and over (in 1890 dollars) each year. Of the 12,500,000 families in the United States at the time, only 125,000 (1%) could be classified, in these terms, as “wealthy.” Painter also identifies three classes in addition to the wealthy: the “well-to-do classes,” who earn \$5,000 to \$50,000; the “middle classes,” who earn \$500 to \$5,000; and, finally, the “poorer classes,” who earn less than \$500 annually.

Nell Irvin Painter, *Standing at Armageddon: The United States, 1877-1919* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), xv.

⁴ Mona Domosh, “Those ‘Gorgeous Incongruities’: Polite Politics and Public Spaces on the Streets of Nineteenth-Century New York City,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 88 (June 1998), 213.

⁵ In this thesis, the term “working class” will reflect the Marxian definition of the “proletariat,” in the sense that the members of the working class must sell their labor to produce a good, yet they own neither the final product nor the technology utilized as a means of production. This correlation between the working class and the proletariat, however, is not intended to imply that these laborers represented a uniform group, nor that they saw themselves as a monolithic classification. The composition of the laboring population was incredibly varied, drawing from

The reforms of the early twentieth century were many and varied: woman suffrage; prohibition; railroad regulation; the maximum hours of work; abolition of child labor; the initiative referendum, and recall; workmen's compensation; black civil rights; graduated income taxes; and banking reform. (Painter xxxiv)

These social reforms heavily influenced public discourse in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, exemplified by the following headlines featured in *The New York Times*: “LABOR MOVEMENTS: Coopers' Union; No. 6 Knights of Saint Crispin; Meeting of Brick Layers; Organization of a Plumbers' Union,”⁶ “SAYS THE EMPLOYES [sic] ARE ILL TREATED: Minister in Pullman Testifies to Their Wrongs—Reporters for Witnesses,”⁷ “WORKING THEIR YOUNG LIVES AWAY: Sweatshop Investigation Discloses Hard Taskmasters, Insufficient Pay, Filthy Icoms, and Abject Poverty,”⁸ and “SERVANT GIRLS' LOT: Thinks Rich Patronesses of Shirtwaist Strikers Fail to Consider It.”⁹ The headlines indicate a burgeoning social impetus to remedy the harsh conditions that plagued the working class. Indeed, these reformisitic inclinations often permeate the literature of the day, and, certainly, Wharton is no exception to this trend. Though her novels rarely focus upon members of the

both men and women of various ages and ethnicities (namely the Germans and the Irish). Although this pronounced variance within the populace yielded much conflict and turmoil, Wharton does not preoccupy herself with these themes and, as such, it is beyond the scope of this study.

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1906), 12.

⁶ “LABOR MOVEMENTS: Coopers' Union; No. 6 Knights of Saint Crispin; Meeting of Brick Layers; Organization of a Plumbers' Union,” *The New York Times* 14 May 1869, 8.

⁷ “SAYS THE EMPLOYES [sic] ARE ILL TREATED: Minister in Pullman Testifies to Their Wrongs—Reporters for Witnesses,” *The New York Times* 22 August 1894, 5.

⁸ “WORKING THEIR YOUNG LIVES AWAY: Sweatshop Investigation Discloses Hard Taskmasters, Insufficient Pay, Filthy Icoms, and Abject Poverty,” *The New York Times* 23 June 1895, 8.

⁹ “SERVANT GIRLS' LOT: Thinks Rich Patronesses of Shirtwaist Strikers Fail to Consider It,” *The New York Times* 4 January 1910, 12.

working class (the most notable exception being her widely-read novella, *Ethan Frome*), Wharton consistently features laborers throughout her body of literature.

Wharton's representations of the American working class encompass two situational extremes: the public sphere and the domestic sphere. The public sphere suggests any place beyond the confines of the home and, with regards to this time period, connotes the large industrial factories that had been increasing in number since the Civil War. Painter remarks,

From the point of view of workers, this increased use of machinery and the huge size of mechanized factories entailed what a member of the Knights of Labor called the degradation of labor: 'The men are looked upon as nothing more than parts of the machinery that they work. They are labeled and tagged, as parts of a machine would be, and are only taken into account as a part of the machinery used for the profit of the manufacturer.'¹⁰

In his book *Workers in Industrial America*, David Brody elaborates upon this idea of the objectification of laborers. Brody cites an observer who "watched the deadening task" of a woman who worked on a factory assembly line. The observer remarks, "One single precise motion each second, 3600 in one hour and all exactly the same. The hands were swift, precise, intelligent."¹¹ The latter portion of the quotation is rendered ambiguous by the commentator's use of the word "hands." It remains unclear whether the observer believes the workers themselves to be "swift, precise, intelligent" or whether these terms reflect the movements of the workers' actual, physical hands. This linguistic duality underscores the synecdochic significance of the factory "hand."

¹⁰ Painter xxxv.

¹¹ David Brody, *Workers in Industrial America: Essays on the Twentieth Century Struggle* (New York: Oxford University Press), 1980, 6.

In addition to the hands who worked within the public sphere, many members of the working class labored within the home. The fact that these hands worked within the domestic setting rather than a factory should not, however, downplay the hardships to which they were often exposed. In *Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America*, David M. Katzman stresses the sense of “limited freedom” that many domestic workers experienced. “Servants averaged about two more hours of work daily than other working women and long after the 5 ½ day workweek became prevalent, household workers continued to work seven days a week. For many domestics, the workday ran from before dawn until after nightfall.”¹² Like the factory workers, domestic workers were objectified and very nearly relegated to the role of a machine. Indeed, Brody remarks, “The factory worker became the servant of the machine... he himself became a part of the machine.”¹³ The relationship between the domestic hand and his/her master was such that the personal identity of the hand was not only unacknowledged, but, indeed, actively avoided. In their book *Everyday Etiquette: A Practical Manual of Social Usages*, Marion Harland and Virginia Terhune Van de Water describe

one of the most glaring faults of conversation—one of the most flagrant breaches of conversation etiquette among women of refinement. The hackneyed warning that the three *D*’s to be banished from polite conversation are Dress, Disease, and Domesticity, has not been heeded by the average housewife, so far as the last *D* is concerned.¹⁴

¹² David M. Katzman, *Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 110.

¹³ Brady 6.

¹⁴ Marion Harland and Virginia Terhune Van de Water, *Everyday Etiquette: A Practical Manual of Social Usages* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company Publishers, 1905), 301.

This desire to veritably ignore the servant class is reflected in *Social Etiquette*. Cooke notes that one should “[n]ever thank a servant for passing any of the dishes or wines; that is his business,” nor should a lady “look up in a waiter’s face while giving an order, refusing wine, or thanking him for any special service. This savors of familiarity, and should be avoided.”¹⁵ By refusing to recognize the distinct identities of their servants, members of the leisure class were able to equate their domestics with their hands, the source of their daily work.

Chapter two considers Wharton’s (often subtle) criticism of society’s utilization of the word “hand” as a referent by which to identify members of the working class. Rather than treat the working class in a condescending fashion, Wharton’s writing reflects the increasingly progressive and reformist nature of the social environment in which she both lived and wrote. This analysis of Wharton’s laboring hands—as well as, quite often, the hands of the laborers themselves—begins in the domestic sphere. In *The Age of Innocence*, a variety of household servants people the pages of the text, providing insight not only into the various roles that domestic hands play within the home, but also in the ways in which these hands are perceived by members of the upper-class. *The House of Mirth* bridges the domestic sphere and the public sphere, as Wharton engages with the gender dichotomy that manifests itself in the notion of “separate spheres” of existence for men and women. This popular nineteenth-century doctrine propagated the belief that it was the man’s responsibility to venture out into the public sphere, while the docile woman remained within the private sphere. Lily transgresses this separation following her social downfall, when she is forced to abandon her elite leisure-class inclinations and join the working class as a milliner’s assistant. Finally, in *The Fruit of the Tree*, perhaps the most obvious social critique in the author’s body of work, Wharton’s commentary is rooted in

¹⁵ Cooke 222.

the public sphere as she focuses on the inhumane treatment of factory hands. Though each of the novels presents a unique analysis of the working class, they are unified by the fact that they challenge the overly reductive tendency to synecdochically identify individuals solely based upon an appendage.

I. *The Age of Innocence's* Marginalized Domestic Hands

Within *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton offers an intricate and precisely detailed outlook on Old New York. If nothing else, the text provides one of the *oldest* impressions of Old New York in Wharton's oeuvre, having been set in the 1870s, 50 years prior to the period in which the author actually wrote her book. Wharton's primary focus throughout the novel certainly resides with the wealthy elite, namely the love triangle that ensues between Newland, his wife May, and the woman whom Newland truly desires, Ellen. In spite of this preoccupation with the upper classes, there are several occasions in which Wharton hints at the presence of pronounced social demarcations within the home. Though there are but a few direct textual references to working hands in *The Age of Innocence*, each instance is laden with analytic implications, reflecting the specific social and political climate that Wharton sought to encapsulate. Throughout the novel, the author portrays the more or less standard interactions that took place between the wealthy and their servants. Her subtle criticism of this system does not reveal itself, however, until she begins to describe the relationship between Ellen and her maid-servant, Nastasia. Unlike the "true" New Yorkers, who view their servants as little more than hands, Ellen reflects the European customs to which she was exposed during her adolescence abroad. She forges a relatively close relationship with Nastasia, treating her as a distinct person. Ellen's refusal to

demean her maid to the status of a hand contributes, in part, to society's perception of her as eccentric and bohemian.

Relatively early in the text, Wharton provides insight into the depreciatory attitudes that members of the leisure class typically held towards their domestic hands. Indeed, the very first description of servants in the novel does not focus on the individuals who comprise the servant class, or even on their individualized activities within the home. Rather, the hands are treated as a collective, nondescript entity, directly relegated to a position subservient to that of their employer. Wharton writes, "Mrs. Julius Beaufort... always gave her ball on an Opera night in order to emphasize her complete *superiority* to household cares, and her *possession* of a staff of servants competent to organize every detail of the entertainment in her absence."¹⁶ As domestic hands are integral to the "household cares," the comment suggests that Mrs. Beaufort also "emphasizes her social organizational skills as well as her superiority" over her employees. Additionally, Wharton's use of the word "possession" underscores the ways in which these workers are objectified and relegated to the status of mere commodities by their employers, to the extent that they are merely viewed as extensions of the house itself. The commonality of such attitudes towards domestic hands may be illustrated by the fact that they are also harbored (though less blatantly) by Newland. In spite of his attempts to differentiate himself from the other members of his class by outwardly promoting bohemian ideals (most notably, a woman's right to divorce), Newland displays a marked disregard for the domestic hands within his home. Upon entering his study one night, Newland notices that "[a] vigilant hand had, as usual, kept the fire alive and the lamp trimmed" (28). Within this direct synecdochic reference, Wharton's inclusion of the phrase "as usual" suggests that the servant is a fixture within the home,

¹⁶ AOI 12 (emphasis added).

performing the action on a regular basis. And yet Newland fails to attribute any sense of personal identification to the hand and instead treats him dismissively. Like Mrs. Beaufort, Newland holds to the idea that the hands are only as good as their work.

In spite of their overriding objectification both in the context of *The Age of Innocence* and the period of New York City society in which the novel is set, domestic hands were occasionally acknowledged as human beings. Still, this acknowledgement typically only occurred if the servants presented some sort of threat to their employers. Tensions between servants and their masters or mistresses were not uncommon and, indeed, could serve to derail an entire household. In a chapter entitled “Mistress and Maid” Harland and Terhune Van de Water offer a description of the “servant matter” characteristic of the period.

As matters now are, the maid sees in the mistress a possible tyrant, one who will exact the pound of flesh, and if the owner thereof be not on her guard, will insist on a few extra ounces thrown in for good measure. The mistress sees in the suspicious girl a person who will, if the chance be offered her, turn against her employer, will do the smallest amount of work possible for the highest wages she can demand; break china, smash glass, shut her eyes to dirt in the corners, and accept the first opportunity that offers itself to leave her present place and get one that demands fewer duties and larger pay. (301)

While these animosities represented significant hurdles to be overcome in order to maintain the employer-employee relationship, perhaps the foremost concern of wealthy individuals was the perpetual threat of gossip among the hands. Harland and Terhune Van de Water note that domestic servants are the mistress’ “severest critics. Each is, in her own way, a spy, but in her own interests... [Servants] will discuss and criticize you below-stairs and on ‘evenings out,’ and,

in the event of ‘changing their place,’ to the next mistress who will stoop to listen to them” (235). The “spying servant” became a more tangible threat, for example, during the highly-publicized divorce proceedings between Lord and Lady Colin Campbell, an aristocratic couple in London. The divorce was detailed in an article published in *The New York Times* on December 4, 1886 entitled “THE CAMPBELL SCANDAL: SERVANTS STILL TESTIFYING ABOUT LADY COLIN’S CONDUCT.” The first line of the article reads, “In the Campbell divorce case to-day O’Neill, the man servant, on cross-examination, repeated his declaration of yesterday, that, looking through a keyhole in the dining room door, he saw the plaintiff and Chief Shaw in a compromising position.”¹⁷ This comment emphasizes the (occasionally legitimized) worry that hands were consistently watching and waiting for their employers to step out of line. In this context, it would appear somewhat ironic for domestic servants to be identified as hands. Though hands certainly do represent the appendages most frequently utilized in day-to-day work, the eyes and ears of the servants often proved to be the more significant and, indeed, potentially damaging aspects of their physicalities from the perspective of their employers.

In *The Age of Innocence*, there are several instances in which Wharton conveys the sense of trepidation maintained by the wealthy towards the servant class. Mrs. Archer, for example, maintains a degree of apprehension to the domestic hands who work within her own home. When Newland exclaims during a dinner party that Ellen should seek out a divorce from her (presumably) unfaithful husband, Mrs. Archer appears to preoccupy herself less with her son’s declaration and more with the butler who she fears may have overheard it. “Mrs. Archer raised her delicate eyebrows in the particular curve that signified: ‘The butler—’ and the young man, himself mindful of the bad taste of discussing such intimate matters in public, hastily branched

¹⁷ “THE CAMPBELL SCANDAL: SERVANTS STILL TESTIFYING ABOUT LADY COLIN’S CONDUCT,” *The New York Times* 4 December 1886.

off into an account of his visit to old Mrs. Mingott.”¹⁸ Though women of the leisure class rarely deigned to recognize their servants (especially in the course of the nearly ritualistic mid-nineteenth century dining experience), Mrs. Archer’s direct acknowledgement of her butler illustrates the perceived threat that a gossiping hand may have upon one’s reputation.¹⁹ In a world in which an individual’s adherence to conventionalities comprises a considerable amount of his or (especially) her perceived value in society, even the slightest suggestion of impropriety could prove socially detrimental. These types of fears ultimately afflict virtually all members of Old New York. Wharton writes that “New York society was, in those days, far too small, and too scant in its resources for every one in it (including livery-stablekeepers, butlers, and cooks) not to know on which evenings people were free” (31). The passage communicates the anxiety that domestics provoked among their employers, while simultaneously reinforcing the idea that working people were relegated to the periphery of society. By bracketing the “livery-stablekeepers, butlers, and cooks” in a parenthetical aside, Wharton emphasizes that hands, too often discounted as the bottom-dwellers of society, are still veritable members of the social body.

The aforementioned analyses reveal the ways in which the author both recognizes and engages with the hierarchical and often discordant relationships between domestic hands and their employers. Wharton’s criticism of this reductive system only becomes apparent, however, when it is juxtaposed with the interactions between Ellen and her maid-servant. Unlike her relatives and their wealthy peers, Ellen does not treat Nastasia as an inferior. Ellen never once

¹⁸ *AOI* 26-27.

¹⁹ An intertextual analysis of this theme in *The Age of Innocence* and *The House of Mirth* reveals that, in the latter, Wharton had previously concretized the figure of the gossiping and menacing domestic hand. She features a character by the name of Mrs. Haffen, a cleaning-woman in Lawrence Selden’s apartment building. Mrs. Haffen attempts to blackmail Lily by threatening to publicize a packet of explicit love letters that she believes Lily sent to Selden during a torrid love affair. Though this threat never materializes in *The Age of Innocence*, the characters within the novel remain perpetually aware of such a possibility and (frequently) act accordingly.

refers to her as a “hand” or any other title which would strip Nastasia of any personal identification and relegate her to an inferior social position. Still, this quasi-equalization extends beyond mere social structure, as Wharton provides several correlations between the two women in terms of both their behaviorisms and their appearances.

As a result of these links, there appears to be an uncommon (at least in New York) degree of familiarity between Ellen and Nastasia. This (supposedly) skewed approach to the employer-employee relationship is described by Harland and Terhune Van de Water, who warn, “The mistress who, acknowledging [that the servant respects and trusts her], makes a confidante of her maid, is running a great risk. It is an unnatural state of affairs, and unnatural relations are never likely to be successful or happy” (303). These sentiments, however, reflect a strictly American approach to the servant class. This would appear to be unsuited to Ellen, who, though born in New York, was raised in Europe. As a result of her foreign upbringing, Ellen possesses a more Eurocentric mindset, which conflicts with that of New York society. In her book *Social Etiquette of New York*, Abby Buchanan Longstreet contrasts the treatment of hands in America with their treatment in Europe.

When a money compensation is given to the servant, too many mistresses convince themselves that they have fulfilled all their part of the compact, but they have not by any means, as they would soon discover they could be transplanted into the heart of some good Old World family [in England, France, or Germany], where the mistress is the maid’s protector and the man and maid are faithful servants, also loyal and respectful friends.²⁰

²⁰ Abby Buchanan Longfellow, *Social Etiquette of New York* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1892), 231.

Wharton spent a considerable portion of her life in Europe, frequently traveling abroad as a child and, ultimately, taking up residence there as an adult.²¹ Indeed, she even wrote *The Age of Innocence* while living in France and roaming in bohemian circles. This foreign exposure had a great influence on the author, even prompting her to write an analysis of the French culture entitled *French Ways and their Meanings*. Wharton herself adopted many European attitudes which she arguably channeled into the very bohemian character of Ellen Olenska. In this context, Wharton's establishment of parallels between Ellen and Nastasia reflects a European approach to the servant class, in which its constituents were respected as foundational members of society. She endows Nastasia with distinct personality traits, thereby precluding her from the overly simplistic designation of "hand."

The first parallel presents itself upon Nastasia's introduction to the text. Wharton provides a detailed description of Nastasia, which, in and of itself, represents a departure from Old New York's typical, dismissive approach to its domestic hands. Nastasia is characterized as "a swarthy foreign-looking maid, with a prominent bosom under a gay neckerchief, whom [Newland] vaguely fancied to be Sicilian. She welcomed him with all her white teeth, and answer[ed] his enquiries by a head-shake of incomprehension" (44). Nastasia's inability to understand Newland renders her similar to Ellen. Whereas Nastasia's speech is hindered by a language barrier, Ellen appears unable to fully communicate with Newland because of a social and cultural barrier. When she first returns to New York after separating from her husband, Ellen fails to understand the intricacies of the city's complex social web. She asks Newland, "Is New York such a labyrinth? I thought it so straight up and down—like Fifth Avenue. And with all the

²¹ After her divorce from her husband, Edward "Teddy" Wharton, in 1913, Edith Wharton took up residence in France and, occasionally, in Italy, for the remainder of her life. She only returned to the United States on a few occasions.

cross streets numbered!” (49). Certainly, this labyrinthine society would seek to marginalize Nastasia, not only because of her role as a servant, but also her status as an immigrant. Her similarities to and personal relationship with her mistress, however, enable Nastasia to avoid being demoted to a “hand,” allowing her to maintain her own unique identity.

In addition to this similarity, Wharton also likens the two women on the basis of their appearances. At one point in the novel, Newland remarks that Ellen “shrugged her shoulders, with a little movement like Nastasia’s” (84). Newland’s recognition of this similarity between Ellen and Nastasia reveals a subtle shift in his character, as, prior to this scene, he failed to acknowledge even his own servants as anything but “hands.” While Newland’s notice may be interpreted as a fascination with Ellen and her European approach to society, part of her bohemianism directly concerns itself with respectful and even friendly treatment of the working class. It may then be argued that Newland learns from Ellen, adopting (at least in part) some of her bohemian ideals. Ellen’s movement is also significant in the sense that Nastasia does not imitate Ellen, but, instead, Ellen imitates Nastasia. Whereas the former would play into the notion of superiority emphasized by members of Old New York in relation to working people, Ellen’s imitation of her maid underscores her perception of Nastasia as a person, rather than as a mere domestic servant. This idea is further evidenced by a later scene in the novel. After she receives a bouquet of flowers from an unwanted suitor, Ellen tells Nastasia to “tell the boy to carry them to the house three doors away [... the man’s] wife is ill—they may give her pleasure... The boy is out, you say? Then, my dear one, run yourself; here, put my cloak over you and fly” (104). Newland’s presence during this exchange allows for an interpretation of Ellen’s comments through the normative lens of Old New York. He notes that “[i]t was not usual, in New York society, for a lady to address her parlour-maid as ‘my dear one,’ and send her out on an errand

wrapped in her own opera-cloak” (105). Ellen’s behavior in this scene recapitulates her previous actions, treating Nastasia not as an extension of the house, but as a veritable member of the household.

II. The Inexperienced Laboring Hands of Lily Bart

Like *The Age of Innocence*, *The House of Mirth* engages with the role of domestic hands in New York society. The text deviates from *The Age of Innocence*, however, in that, over the course of the novel, Wharton’s commentary on the working class progresses from the private to the public sphere. It is this progression which allows for the analysis of *The House of Mirth* in this chapter to be so fittingly positioned between consideration of *The Age of Innocence*, which takes place almost entirely in the private sphere, and the analysis of *The Fruit of the Tree*, which is rooted almost entirely in the public sphere. Still, the very fact that the figure of the working class laborer is not a secondary character in *The House of Mirth*, but is, in fact, the protagonist herself, arguably foregrounds hands even more so than in the other two novels.

Chapter one discussed the ways in which Lily “works” throughout the novel to maintain a guise of wealth and aristocracy, especially through the appearance of her hands. She does so in order to assert herself among the members of the leisure class. Many of Lily’s comments reflect her indeterminate social positioning and her need to work so that she might continue to associate with the wealthy elite. At one point, Lily even laments that “she and her maid were in the same position, except that the latter received her wages more regularly.”²² Her work is also perceptible to others. Carrie Fisher, a wealthy divorcée who befriends Lily, describes her friend’s attempts to marry a rich man, noting that Lily “works like a slave preparing the ground and sowing her seed;

²² *HOM* 24-25.

but the day she ought to be reaping the harvest she oversleeps herself or goes off on a picnic” (164). Lily’s inability to adequately perform this type of societal “labor” ultimately prompts her transition from socialite to working class citizen. This study of *The House of Mirth* begins after Lily’s social downfall, when she is forced to actually join the workforce as a means by which to earn a living. The analysis concerns itself principally with Lily’s inability to situate herself within the working class, as well as with Wharton’s criticism of the harsh conditions facing working women in the early twentieth century.

Though Lily’s ostracism from upper-class circles forces her into the working class, her social exclusion does not (at least not immediately) oust her from the private sphere. Still, Lily is not perceived as a hand, in the same way that the majority of the domestic help were in *The Age of Innocence*, because she does not belong to the servant class. Her first wage-earning position, procured for her by Carrie Fisher, entails working as a sort of social coordinator. Lily is employed by Mrs. Norma Hatch, a wealthy woman who has recently divorced from her husband. Wharton’s descriptions of Mrs. Hatch echo those of the Spragg women at the beginning of *The Custom of the Country*, especially with regards to their respective living situations: while the Spraggs reside in the overly-ornate Hotel Stentorian, Mrs. Hatch lives in the equally gaudy Hotel Emporium. Additionally, just as Undine encounters difficulties in her attempts to enter the leisure class, so too does Mrs. Hatch, and it is ultimately this desire to assert herself among the wealthy elite that prompts her to hire Lily.

Mrs. Hatch was already aware of the heights of elegance as well as the depths of luxury beyond the world of the Emporium. This discovery at once produced in her a craving for higher guidance, for the adroit *feminine hand* which should give the right turn to her correspondence, the right “look” to her hats, the right succession

to the items of her menus. It was, in short, as the regulator of a germinating social life that Miss Bart's guidance was required. (241, emphasis added)

Lily's non-servant status precludes her from being categorized as a hand. This passage, however, suggests that she may be equated with the domestic help in that her work is dependent upon the skillfulness of her hand. After all, Wharton does not write that Mrs. Hatch requires "an adroit feminine *figure*" or even an "adroit feminine *perspective*," but rather, a hand. In this capacity, Lily's hand, as part of her physical body, proves itself invaluable to Mrs. Hatch's attempts to resituate herself within the larger social body.

In spite of the fact that working for Mrs. Hatch enables Lily to remain in an environment (somewhat) similar to that to which she is accustomed, she soon becomes disgusted with the lack of morality and discretion displayed by both her patroness and Mrs. Hatch's acquaintances. When Mrs. Hatch endeavors to become engaged to a wealthy young man, Lily senses the threat of a scandal and forfeits her position. In so doing, she also renounces her claims to the private sphere and is forced to look to the public sphere for more honest employment. This transition is manifest in the paradoxical manner by which Lily is both perceived and referred to by society. Lily abandons a position in the private sphere in which she successfully (both figuratively and literally) utilizes her hands, and yet she is not considered to be a domestic hand. She opts, instead, for a job in the public sphere, in which her inexperienced hands are not adept at the labor. Though her hands are unskilled, Lily's depreciated social positioning reduces her to the status of a hand.

Lily's transition to the public sphere represents a significant departure from the settings and, certainly, the themes that Wharton had previously depicted throughout *The House of Mirth*. The move not only illustrates the striking differences between the lives of socialites and those of

working class, but also brings the figure of the working woman to the literary forefront.²³

Though women had long been active members of the workforce, the proportion of American female workers in the public sphere increased considerably in the aftermath of the Civil War. In her book *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States*, Alice Kessler-Harris notes that prior to the war, in 1840, “About 10 percent of all women took jobs outside their homes... During the war large numbers of women—contemporaries estimated about 300,000—who might otherwise never have sought jobs entered the labor market.”²⁴ The census of 1870—the first to survey women in “Occupational Tables”—revealed that of the 13,070,070 females above the age of ten in the United States, 1,836,288 or approximately 14 percent worked for a living.²⁵ By 1900, five years prior to the publication of *The House of Mirth*, these numbers had again increased. The census of 1900 reported that

the number of women in [the] continental United States 16 years of age and over reported as breadwinners, or as engaged in gainful occupations, was 4,833,630.

The total number of women 16 years of age and over was 23,485,599. The proportion of breadwinners, therefore, among women of that age was 20.6 percent, or approximately 1 in 5. Among men of the same age the proportion was 90.5 percent.²⁶

²³ Women’s movement from the home to the workforce represented an impressive social and, subsequently, literary phenomenon. Wharton was certainly not alone in documenting this transition. For additional literary examples, please see such novels as George Gissing’s *The Odd Women* (1893) and Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1900).

²⁴ Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 47, 76.

²⁵ “1870 Census of Population and Housing,” [US Census Bureau 1 June 1870](http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/1870c-12.pdf) <<http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/1870c-12.pdf>>.

²⁶ “1900 Census of Population and Housing,” [US Census Bureau 1 June 1900](http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/00779830ch1.pdf) <<http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/00779830ch1.pdf>>.

The striking contrast in the proportion of men and women employed in the workforce underscores the sustained perception that women should not engage in labor, but instead, to reference Coventry Patmore's 1854 overly saccharine and clichéd poem, should be "angels in the *home*." This demeaning position, however, did not represent a viable (or desirable) reality for all women, especially those who, like Lily Bart, remained unmarried. -Harris writes that, "By 1883, one expert witness testified before the Commission on Capital and Labor of the U.S. Education and Labor Committee that since one-third of all women over twenty-one were not married, marriage was 'no longer a career for women, nor a means of support for them'" (98). When a woman had no man to ask for her hand in marriage, she had few choices other than to join the working class and become a hand herself.

The correlation between handedness and the role of female workers in the public sphere is further emphasized in *The House of Mirth* by Lily's choice of profession. Utilizing her talent to "give the right look to [Mrs. Hatch's] hats," Lily decides to look to millinery as a profession. Wharton describes the hands laboring in the workshop and notes that the women "were employed in a fashionable millinery establishment, and were fairly well-clothed and well-paid" (247). These purported benefits of the profession rendered it especially popular among working women at the turn of the century. According to the census of 1900, "Millinery is preeminently a woman's occupation, 94.4 percent of all the milliners being women. Only two occupations had a larger proportion of women—that of dressmaker, with 97.5 percent, and that of housekeeper and stewardess, with 94.7 percent."²⁷ The high proportion of female milliners reflects both the so-called feminine nature of the work (in terms of sewing and decorating), as well as the advertisements promoting the profession specifically among women workers. One ad for a

²⁷ "1900 Census of Population and Housing."

“School for Millinery and Dressmaking” encouraged women to “Be ready to fill a good position in an always increasing business,” while another promised “individual instruction, expert teachers, always a demand for experts who get good salaries.”²⁸

These rather glamorous depictions of millinery influenced many women who viewed the trade as a (to use Wharton’s own word) “fashionable” profession. Lily herself appears to fall prey to this idea, as she initially underestimates the responsibilities of her job. She believes that

[h]ere was...something that her charming listless hands could really do; she had no doubt of their capacity for knotting a ribbon or placing a flower to advantage. And of course only these finishing touches would be expected of her: subordinate fingers, blunt, grey, needle-pricked fingers, would prepare the shapes and stitch the linings, while she presided over the charming little front shop. (248)

This passage underscores the significance of hands relative to labor through Wharton’s personification of the appendages. Lily’s comment illustrates her belief in the superiority of her “charming listless hands” over the “subordinate fingers” of the women who have never had exposure to the leisure class. Though Lily claims to have “no desire that [the other women in the workshop] should recognize any social difference in her” (249), her hierarchical view of the profession suggests that she herself not only recognizes, but, indeed, revels in this distinction. She ultimately assigns herself to the (relatively) posh role of the shopkeeper who tweaks the hats, rather than to the role of the milliner who actually makes the hats. Lily’s presumptuous prediction of her role in the working class provides insight into her attitudes towards manufacturing and production. These ideas were considered in chapter one, which discussed Lily’s commoditization by society, and even in her reduced social state, this intrinsic sense of

²⁸ Newspaper advertisements qtd in Lorinda Perry, Susan Myra Kingsbury, Marion Parris Smith, Millinery as a Trade for Women (New York: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1916), 120.

production and value proves itself fundamental to her character. Lily does not appear to see herself as one of many hands working in a production line; instead, she more closely associates herself with the lovely end products of production. She not only appears to believe that she may improve upon the beauty of the completed hats by her application of “finishing touches” with her “adroit feminine hand,” but also by placing her own beauty in close proximity to the hats within the shop. In this context, Lily considers her hand less as a working-class means of production, and more so as a tool by which to promote beauty and luxury.

Upon actually entering the workforce, Lily’s understanding and perception of her role as a worker dramatically shift. Her desires to work as a fashionable shopkeeper are quickly dashed as she is relegated to the workroom to labor alongside the other hands. Wharton describes the women in terms as plain as the characterization of their “grey needle-pricked fingers.” Their faces are “sallow with the unwholesomeness of hot air and sedentary toil... the youngest among them was as dull and colorless as the middle-aged” (247). The poor physical condition of the workers reflects the surprisingly treacherous conditions to which women in the workshop were often exposed. Susan M. Kingsbury writes in the preface to *Millinery as a trade for Women* that millinery

does not yield readily to state regulation. Its hours of labor are oftentimes not limited; overtime is not restricted; sanitation, light, and ventilation are not insisted upon; the worker is not guaranteed comfort in the workroom as to seats, tables, and cleanliness; regularity of pay, permanence of contract, and due notification of dismissal are not required. (vii-viii)

In this environment, efficiency and, indeed, proficiency, trump all other concerns and it is in this capacity that Lily falters. Her pristine hands fail to impress the other workers and, in fact,

ultimately prove themselves detrimental to her working abilities. Accustomed to a life of (relative) leisure, Lily's "untutored fingers" (249) are placed at a disadvantage to the other women, whose "hands [had been] formed from childhood for their special work" (258). Ironically, the guise of wealth and luxury that she values in her hands at the beginning of the novel ultimately devalues her hands as a laborer by the novel's end.

III. The Plight of the Mill Hands in *The Fruit of the Tree*

If *The House of Mirth* provides preliminary insight into Wharton's perspective of laborers in the public sphere, then *The Fruit of the Tree* may be viewed as the author's comprehensive and socially conscious assessment of the working class. The novel distinguishes itself from the other texts in Wharton's oeuvre, in that it begins and ends with descriptions of working people rather than the author's typical subject matter, the social elite. *The Fruit of the Tree* is also rendered distinct through its setting. In lieu of New York City, the novel largely takes place in Hanaford, Massachusetts, an industrialized town that "in obedience to the grim law of industrial prosperity... [had lost its] lingering grace and spread out in unmitigated ugliness, devouring green fields and shaded slopes like some insect-plague consuming the land."²⁹ Though the lengthy novel is comprised of several overlapping plot lines and controversial thematic elements, Wharton's depictions of the Westmore Mills and the individuals who toil within the confines of its factories ultimately serve as the backdrop of the text.

Still, much like *The Age of Innocence*, *The Fruit of the Tree* is, at its core, a love triangle. John Amherst, the assistant manager of the mills, meets and falls in love with Bessy Westmore, a wealthy widow who had gained ownership of the mills after the death of her late husband. The

²⁹ *FOT* 24.

subsequent marriage between Amherst and Bessy is a turbulent one, marred (as marriages often are in Wharton's novels) by conflicts over social interests—whereas Amherst desires to invest his time and (his wife's) money in improving the condition of the mills, Bessy simply seeks to maintain the privileged lifestyle to which she is accustomed. Their differences gradually give way to a separation, during which time Bessy is injured in a devastating horseback riding accident. She is cared for by Nurse Justine Brent, Bessy's childhood friend who also provides a sympathetic ear to Amherst's charitable causes. Unable to endure her friend's suffering, Justine makes the decision to euthanize Bessy. She acts without informing Amherst, whom she later marries in an effort to promote their joint philanthropic desire to end suffering. The latter portion of the text especially preoccupies itself with themes more typical to Wharton's body of literature: the complexities of relationships and the ways in which these relationships fit into a broader societal context. In spite of this, *The Fruit of the Tree* remains fundamentally rooted in the social issue of factory reform and the status of its working hands.

In the nineteenth and twentieth century, the regulations of labor conditions in the United States were relatively lax, especially in the context of the factory setting. In the 1896 *Handbook to the Labor Law of the United States*, Frederic Jesup Stimson writes that in “nearly all” states, factories are “submitted to some kind of public inspection to see that [safety] regulations are in force, and in many states there are special inspectors appointed for the purpose; in others the matter is left to the state labor bureaus, the board of health, the local authorities, or the chief of police.”³⁰ He also notes that, “Accidents to employees in factories, etc. must commonly be promptly reported to the state inspectors above mentioned” (150). In the latter quotation especially, Stimson's use of the phrase “must commonly” underscores the contradictory nature

³⁰ Frederic Jesup Stimson, *Handbook to the Labor Law of the United States* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1896), 149.

of labor regulation. Ultimately, though such levels of inspection were ostensibly instilled to safeguard the working hands, the system could easily be circumvented by mill management in favor of financial gain. Wharton reflects upon this laxity in *The Fruit of the Tree*, through Amherst's exchange with Mr. Tredegar, the lawyer at the Westmore Mills.

‘Pardon my possible ignorance—’ Mr. Tredegar paused to make sure that his hearer took the full irony of this—‘but surely in this state there are liability and inspection laws for the protection of the operatives?’

‘There are such laws, yes—but most of them are either a dead letter, or else so easily evaded that no employer thinks of conforming to them.’³¹

As a result of this supervisory negligence, many factory hands were forced to endure deleterious working conditions. In 1914, seven years after the publication of *The Fruit of the Tree*, the New York State Department of Labor released its Annual Report to the Commissioner of Labor. The Report features several testimonies, detailing the dramatically substandard conditions to which workers were exposed. Supervising Inspector L.A. Havens acknowledges, “Conditions in the shoddy and batts factories require drastic action. These conditions have existed for years and apparently there has been no intelligent effort to correct them. The manufacturers, with few exceptions, do not try. Machinery is dangerous and overcrowded.”³² These types of issues manifest themselves in Wharton's representations of the problems plaguing the Westmore Mills.

In accordance with Wharton's reformisitic approach to her novel, *The Fruit of the Tree* opens with a description of Dillon, one of the factory's injured mill-hands. The first line of the

³¹ *FOT* 77.

³² L.A. Havens, “Dangerous conditions in shoddy and batts factories and child labor in brickyards are commented upon by Supervising Inspector L.A. Havens of District No. 5,” Thirteenth Annual Report of the Commissioner of Labor for the Twelve Months Ended September 30, 1913 (Albany: State Department of Labor, 1914), 45.

text reads, “In the surgical ward of the Hope Hospital at Hanaford, a nurse was bending over a young man whose bandaged right hand and arm lay stretched along the bed.”³³ This description foregrounds hands from the very onset of the text through Wharton’s sustained focus on Dillon’s injury. “His free left hand continued to travel the sheet, clasping and unclasping itself in contortions of feverish unrest. It was as though all the anguish of his mutilation found expression in that lonely hand left without work in the world now that its mate was useless.” The passage provides insight into the synecdochic essentiality of hands to factory worker. As a mill-hand, Wharton constructs Dillon’s identity around his hands—“the stained seamed hand[s] of a mechanic” (3)—and the work that he is able to achieve with them. Whereas Dillon’s one hand is made “useless” by injury, the other is also made useless by virtue of the fact that a worker must use *both* hands in order to accomplish his labor. If one hand (the appendage) cannot function without the other, then the hand (the person) is also rendered ineffectual. Once again, the notion of reducing a worker to little more than a laboring hand comes into play; after all, Dillon’s name, the most outward manifestation of his identity as a unique and complete individual, is not revealed until he is sought after by Amherst, the novel’s most active social reformer. In this capacity, the literature very nearly mirrors the social atmosphere in which the story is set.

If Dillon is identified within the social body by his hands, then the loss of his hand arguably correlates with a loss of identity. Wharton herself appears both cognizant of and repulsed by this means of social recognition. She includes a scene in the novel in which the mill-hands hang a strip of black cloth on the card in which Dillon’s hand was caught. When Amherst questions the men’s motivation for hanging the cloth, given that Dillon has not died, one man replies, “Might better ha’ been” (63). The workers convey the sense that, for a hand, the loss of a

³³ *FOT* 3.

hand is a fate worse than death. Without his hand, Dillon is unable to work or provide for his family. His situation is illustrative of the sad fates of many workers during the period. Indeed, even Amherst remarks that Dillon's situation "does come terribly pat as an illustration of some of the abuses I want to have remedied" (19). Beyond the confines of the novel, in 1915, Howard B. Woolston, the Director of the Investigation for the New York State Factory Investigating Commission, wrote an article entitled "Wages in New York." Woolston notes,

The New York State Factory Investigation Commission was appointed to recommend measures for safety. It soon found that dangers besides... fire hazard[s] menace the lives of factory hands. *Unguarded machines mangle fingers just a trifle slow*, dust and poisonous vapors clog the lungs and dim the eyes.³⁴

Injuries to the hands and arms in factory settings were so numerous, in fact, that the financial equivalents of these bodily components are delineated in the Workmen's Compensation Law of 1914. The law decrees, "In case of disability partial in character but permanent in quality, the compensation shall be sixty-six and two-thirds per centum of the average weekly wages and shall be paid to the employee for the period named in the schedule as follows..."³⁵ There then follows a list of appendages, encompassing all individual fingers (which depreciate in value as one moves from the thumb to the little finger), the hand itself, and the arm. The arm is valued most highly and equates to three hundred and twelve weeks on the schedule (245). This system of pricing not only directly objectifies workers, but also illustrates, in financial terms, that the hand quite literally is the most valued aspect of the hand. Wharton ultimately resists this derogatory

³⁴ Howard B. Woolston, "Wages in New York," The Survey: Vol. XXXIII: October, 1914-March 1915 (New York: Survey Associates, Inc., 1915), 505 (emphasis added).

³⁵ "The Workmen's Compensation Law," Thirteenth Annual Report of the Commissioner of Labor for the Twelve Months Ended September 30, 1913 (Albany: State Department of Labor, 1914), 244.

belief. By the end of *The Fruit of the Tree*, Amherst has remodeled the mills and Dillon, along with his family, has been made a landlord of one of the tenements. Though he is without a hand, he remains a functioning member of society.

Dillon's situation provides insight into the ways in which the hands of a mill-hand enable him to function within a social body, society at large. Still, synecdoche in *The Fruit of the Tree* may also be considered in conjunction with Wharton's portrayal of the factory as a body, both socially and literally. Socially, the factory unites men and women of various ages and backgrounds, obscuring their individuality by identifying them all under the umbrella-heading of hands. In a more literal sense, however, *The Fruit of the Tree* features several descriptions of the factory itself as a living, breathing entity. While walking through the mills with Bessy, Amherst

felt a beauty in the ordered activity of the whole intricate organism, in the rhythm of dancing bobbins and revolving cards, the swift continuous outpour of doublers and ribbon-laps, the steady ripple of the long ply-frames, the terrible gnashing play of the looms—all these varying subordinate motions, gathered up into the throb of the great engines which fed the giant's arteries, and were in turn ruled by the invisible action of quick thought and obedient hands. (56-57)

In spite of Amherst's humanistic desires to help the mill-hands, he subtly perpetuates their objectification in this passage. Indeed, his later description of the "meaningless machines, to which the human workers seemed mere automatic appendages" (59) furthers this idea. By viewing the "obedient hands" as an integral part of the factory body's physicality, Amherst demotes the individual workers to the very literal role of hands.

IV. Conclusions

Wharton's society novels are often read as studies of the wealthy elite and the ways in which such individuals live and operate within the upper echelons of the social hierarchy. The very term "society novel," however, suggests that the texts provide at least a preliminary survey of society at large, encompassing both the upper classes as well as the working-class citizenry. Though most of the author's works do, indeed, focus upon the leisure class—the class with which she herself was most familiar—Wharton consistently offers readers glimpses into the lives of the working class, both interior and exterior to the home. These individuals, the so-called "hands" of society, formed the basis for the textual analyses conducted within the second chapter of this thesis.

Chapter two engaged with the most overtly synecdochic implications of hands in Wharton's novels, in that these laborers are identified on the basis of an appendage. As a result of this designation, the individuals, whether within the domestic or public sphere, are not perceived as humans in their totality. Rendered nameless and faceless, these workers are effectively stripped of their individuality. Wharton contests this reductive treatment throughout her novels. In *The Age of Innocence*, Ellen's friendship with Nastasia endows the latter with a more fully-fledged character than the typical domestic hand. Lily's untutored hands ostracize her from the other hands in the millinery and contribute greatly to her sad fate at the end of *The House of Mirth*. And, most radically, Amherst's desire to enact reform measures within the Westmore Mills in *The Fruit of the Tree* reflects his (and, by extension, Wharton's own) dissatisfaction with the working conditions plaguing mill hands. These critiques reflect Wharton's inclinations towards social activism, as she appears cognizant of the fact that these

laborers, these hands, figuratively uphold the foundations of the very society in which she resides.

CHAPTER 3

THE MANIFESTATIONS OF PHYSICAL TOUCH IN WHARTON'S NOVELS

And her hands! When [Justine's] fingers met his [Amherst] recalled having once picked up, in the winter woods, the little feather-light skeleton of a frozen bird—and that was what her touch was like.¹

The Fruit of the Tree

[Ralph's] heart contracted as he looked at [Undine]. What sinister change came over her when her will was crossed? She seemed to grow inaccessible, implacable.... At that moment the touch of her hand was repugnant.²

The Custom of the Country

Chapters one and two sought to analyze the synecdochic significance of hands in a selection of Wharton's novels, assessing the status of the individual in relation to the larger social body in which he or she is situated. Chapter three, in contrast, focuses on the ways in which hands play into the interactions between individuals through instances of touch. The word "touch" functions as a sort of an umbrella term, encompassing several varying connotations. Such connotations may be figurative, in the sense that one individual has the capacity to emotionally touch another. In *The House of Mirth*, Simon Rosedale's "heroism" touches a ruined Lily Bart when he asks to visit her despite her working class dwellings.³ Ralph Marvell is

¹ *FOT* 615.

² *CC* 131.

³ *HOM* 257.

touched by Clare's willingness to invest herself in his quest to gain custody of his son in *The Custom of the Country*.⁴ *The Fruit of the Tree*'s John Amherst is touched by his late wife's decision to endow him with control of the Westmore Mills, in spite of the fact that his constant involvement in their operation had served as a point of contention during their marriage.⁵ And, finally, Newland Archer is touched by Ellen's simple desire to "feel cared for and safe" in *The Age of Innocence*.⁶

Additionally, the connotations of touch may be quite literal, suggesting actual physical contact. In conjunction with this thesis' focus on physical hands, this analysis will concern itself primarily with such tactile instances. The human hand may ultimately be considered the principal medium through which touch is established, in that it represents perhaps the most socially acceptable and frequently encountered contact point between individuals. Physical touch may be viewed in several contexts, of which two appear to predominate in Wharton's literature—touch in a social context and touch in a medical context. Socially, touch represents a powerful, yet often ambiguous, communicatory mechanism. The transmissive and receptive complexities of touch have very nearly precluded the sensation from much of the sociological and psychological discourse published prior to the twentieth century. In *Studies in the Psychology of Sex: Sexual Selection in Man*, Wharton's contemporary, the sexologist Havelock Ellis, notes,

The main characteristics of the primitive sense of touch are its... massive vagueness and imprecision of the messages it sends to the brain. This is the reason

⁴ CC 353-354.

⁵ FOT 437.

⁶ AOI 47.

why it is, of all senses, the least intellectual and the least aesthetic; it is also the reason why it is, of all the senses, the most profoundly emotional.⁷

The latter portion of this comment underscores the instinctive nature of physical touch. Ellis sets forth the idea that touch may be one aspect of the human persona that invariably remains beyond the individual's control. His remark that touch is the "least intellectual and the least aesthetic" of the five senses proves especially compelling when considered alongside the themes of the first chapter of this thesis. Chapter one considered three women who seek to manipulate others by way of their hands. They attempt to accomplish this goal (albeit to different degrees) by studying the members of the wealthy elite in order to emulate their appearance. In this capacity, the women's efforts to promote a social façade necessitate intellectual and aesthetic investments that, Ellis claims, are wholly distinct from physical touch. Indeed, Wharton's novels ultimately support this idea. Whereas the appearance of each woman's hands reveals her manipulative tendencies, the touch of her hands provides insight into her true character by rendering obsolete the social façade that she seeks to project.

An analysis of physical touch in a social context is further complicated by consideration of the linguistic origins of the word "touch." Lydia White writes in her etiquette guide, "The proverb, 'Some people's fingers are all thumbs,' describes those who lack that delicate quality called tact. The word comes from a Latin word meaning *to touch* and denotes the power of quickly perceiving and readily doing what is required by circumstances."⁸ This etymological link suggests that physical touch is implicitly entrenched in the normative customs dictated by society. In this capacity, there appears to be a contradiction between the way in which touch is

⁷ Havelock Ellis, Studies in the Psychology of Sex: Sexual Selection in Man (Philadelphia, F.A. Davis Company, 1905), 6.

⁸ White 52.

experienced and the way in which it is perceived by others. Ellis seems to reject this complex correlation between touch and social tact by describing touch as “primitive.” He also cites an article dating back to 1851 entitled “Women in her Psychological Relations,” which reads, “We believe nothing is so exciting to the instinct or mere passion as the presence of the hand.”⁹ The comment suggests that touch may be read as an impetuous display of primal human desires, rather than as a physical manifestation of social tact. This discrepancy allows for a reinterpretation of the social implications of physical touch within Wharton’s novels.

In addition to its social implications, physical touch may also be viewed in a medical context. In the context of this thesis, medical touch constitutes any sort of direct contact between the “patient” and the caregiver with the ultimate intent of relieving symptoms of discomfort or pain. In their recent article, “The Touch of Empathy,” published in the *Journal of Palliative Medicine*, Paul C. Rousseau and Gerald Blackburn describe the history of medical touch.

From the time of Hippocrates, touch has not only allowed the physician to discern, detect, and diagnose, but to also display an emotional posture of empathy and caring. In addition, touch has evoked a gentle form of unspoken communication that humbly proclaims, ‘I’ll take the time, I’m not in a hurry. Tell me your story, that’s why I’m here.’¹⁰

This description of medical touch is reliant upon the literal presence of a “healing hand.” Within Wharton’s novels, the healing hand acts either in a direct fashion (by stroking, caressing, or massaging the patient), or the hand may behave indirectly, providing pain relief through the administration of drugs. Like nearly all aspects of Wharton’s novels, the author’s inclusion of

⁹ “Woman in her Psychological Relations,” *Journal of Psychological Medicine* (1851) qtd. in Ellis.

¹⁰ Paul C. Rousseau and Gerald Blackburn, “The Touch of Empathy,” *Journal of Palliative Medicine* 11.10 (2008), 1299.

various types of medical touch is set against the backdrop of society at large. Characters offer frequent commentary on a variety of medical procedures, thereby providing an indication of their personal morality or ethics relative to the popular opinion of the period. As a result, the healing hand may also be interpreted as a means by which to further a reading of the role of hands within Wharton's literature.

Chapter three explores not only the correlation between hands and physical touch, but also the ways in which such exchanges influence the positioning of individuals within the social body. The analysis begins with *The Age of Innocence*, in which physical touch is viewed through a strictly social lens. Newland's tactual interactions may be analyzed in conjunction with the two women with whom he is romantically linked: Ellen, the woman whom he claims to love, and May, the woman whom he marries. The analysis then shifts to *The Custom of the Country*, which bridges the distinction between social and medical touch through the character of Mrs. Heeny, a manicurist/masseuse whose interactions with her high-society "patients" enable her to gain insight into the lives and mannerisms of the wealthy elite. Finally, in *The Fruit of the Tree*, touch is reconfigured in a decidedly medical context as Wharton explores the actions of the healing hand in relation to the controversial issue of euthanasia. In each of the three novels, touch ultimately serves as a means by which to identify interpersonal relationships and ascertain their function within a broader societal context.

I. Tactual Relations in *The Age of Innocence*

Throughout *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton displays an unerring preoccupation with historical accuracy, intricate cultural detail, and adherence to proper forms of etiquette. To an arguably greater extent than any of the author's other works, *The Age of Innocence* focuses on

the stringent set of rules that regulates the behavior of individuals within society. Indeed, Newland even acknowledges to Ellen that “New York society is a very small world compared with the one you’ve lived in [abroad]. And it’s ruled, in spite of appearances, by a few people with—well, rather old-fashioned ideas.”¹¹ As a result of the text’s integral sense of social awareness, the novel lends itself to an analysis of the relationship between social touch and tact. In the article, “Studies in the Psychology of Touch,” published in the 1894 edition of *The American Journal of Psychology*, F.B. Dresslar describes the correlation between an individual’s character and the way in which he or she engages in physical contact.

The chief purpose of... forms of tactual salutation is that of the expression of emotions, yet the fact must not be overlooked that a mere grasp of the hand often furnishes us with data concerning the character of a person not obtainable in any other way. The complex sensations of warmth, of firmness of grasp, of passivity, etc., etc., which we derive from a handshake, in no small way affect our opinion of a newly made friend.¹²

Within the passage, Dresslar stresses that tactual interactions play a pivotal role in the assessment of an individual’s character. His depiction of touch as yielding “data concerning the character of a person not obtainable in any other way” suggests that physical contact serves a revelatory function, allowing for a circumvention of superficial modes of appearance or behavior—that is, those traits which are perceptibly influenced by society. As a result, touch provides a means by which to evaluate the individual’s true persona.

¹¹ AOI 71.

¹² F.B. Dresslar, “Studies in the Psychology of Touch,” Ed. G. Stanley Hall, The American Journal of Psychology VI (June 1894), 323.

In the context of *The Age of Innocence*, physical touch garners further social significance when considered in conjunction with the two foremost romantic relationships within the novel: Newland and Ellen, and Newland and May. Dresslar takes a linguistic approach to his analysis of the physical implications of romantic couplings. He writes,

The words, *attraction*, *affection*, and the phrase, *attached to*, illustrate [the role that touch plays in the expression of the emotions of love]. As is readily seen, these words have for their fundamental meaning the notion of being bound in contact with the loved one, and so indicate that there is a desire in us for actual dermal contact in the expression of love. (322)

Though Dresslar makes a convincing case for the correlation between physical touch and love in his article, the idea is outwardly contested by Newland. When Wharton describes Newland's relationship with Ellen, she writes that, "He had known that love is fed on caresses and feeds them; but this passion that was closer to his bones was not to be superficially satisfied."¹³ In spite of this apparent denunciation of the significance of caresses, Wharton provides abundant textual evidence to suggest that physical touch serves as a better indicator of her characters' sentiments than either their words or their actions. This idea may be illustrated through the aforementioned caresses upon which "love is fed." At the beginning of the novel, though Newland proclaims his complete devotion to his fiancée, his tactual interactions with Ellen reveal a subtle shift in his romantic inclinations. While at the van der Luyden's dinner party, Ellen touches Newland's "knee with her plumed fan. It was the lightest touch, but it thrilled him like a caress" (*AOI* 42). The "thrill" that Newland derives from this exchange carries subtle sexual undertones which posit the relationship in opposition to Newland's engagement and, ultimately, to his marriage.

¹³ *AOI* 153.

Later in the novel, Wharton remarks that May rests “her hand upon [Newland’s] shoulder with one of her rare caresses” (198). The rarity of such displays of physical affection appears incongruent with the perception of marriage as a figurative and (with regards to sexual exchanges) literal union between two people. The behavior exhibited by both Newland and May suggests that they conduct themselves in a tactful manner by striving to convey the impression of an idyllic marriage in line with expectations set forth by New York City society. The couple’s efforts to maintain this façade, however, are ultimately undone by the lack of passion associated with their physical interactions.

The relationship between sexuality and physical touch within this strict social framework ultimately comes to represent one of the more predominant themes of the novel. In her biography of Edith Wharton, Hermione Lee remarks that, “The most troubling subject in *The Age of Innocence* is sex. It is talked round... But the novel is charged with sexual feeling.”¹⁴ These feelings are further evidenced in the text through the discordant “slips” of the hand that characterize Newland’s relationships. The first hand slip occurs during Newland’s visit to the van der Luyden cottage at Skuytercliff to see Ellen. When Newland spots the lecherous Julius Beaufort walking towards the cottage, his outcry prompts a physical response from Ellen. Wharton writes, “Madame Olenska had sprung up and moved to [Newland’s] side, slipping her hand into his.”¹⁵ This scene may be contrasted with another just one chapter later, after Newland has left Skuytercliff—and, more pertinently, after he has left Ellen—to reunite with May. After he kisses his fiancée, “A slight embarrassment fell on them, and her hand slipped out of his” (91). Much like the caresses, the action of slipping one’s hand into or out of that of another reflects an external display of internalized emotions through which characters attempt to defy

¹⁴ Lee 579.

¹⁵ *AOI* 86.

their instincts in favor of adhering to the rigid code of social decorum. Ellen's hand, for example, seeks to unite her with Newland through physical touch, though she attempts to socially distance herself from him for fear of societal repercussions. At the opposite extreme, the actions of May's hand suggest an underlying desire to physically distance herself from Newland, even as she resorts to manipulation and deceit in order to promote the pretense of their ideal marriage.

In addition to these slips of the hand, the discord that exists between physical desire and the regulated social decorum that is manifest in the notion of "tact" also presents itself through the opposing temperature sensations that Newland associates with May and Ellen. Throughout *The Age of Innocence*, Newland frequently experiences feelings of coldness in conjunction with May. Upon revealing to her husband that Ellen would soon be returning to Europe, for instance, "[May] went up to Archer, and taking one of his cold hands pressed it quietly against her cheek" (206). Later in the novel, after May has informed Newland of her pregnancy, he "...[holds] her to him while his cold hand stroked her hair" (216). Even when he kisses her, Newland notes that her kiss is "...like drinking at a cold spring" (91). These cold sensations suggest an underlying lack of passion, a likely result of the fact that their marriage is not only a façade, but a façade rooted in innocence and duty. Within this social context, sexual desires conveyed by physical touch and marital propriety represent mutually exclusive entities.

This disjunction between sexuality and propriety directly correlates to Ellen. She is ostracized from society (in large part) due to rumors of an affair with her husband's secretary. Mr. Letterblair, a prominent lawyer, discusses Ellen's divorce with Newland.

'My dear sir, I've no wish to extenuate the Count's transgressions; but—on the other side... I wouldn't put my hand in the fire... well, that there hadn't been tit for tat... with the young champion... This report, the result of discreet

enquiries... I don't say it's conclusive, you observe; far from it. But straws show... and on the whole it's eminently satisfactory for all parties that this dignified solution has been reached.' (209).

The validity of these rumors remains ambiguous even at the end of the novel, as Wharton provides few details of Ellen's actions prior to the events of the text. In any case, the rumors promote the perception of Ellen as a sexual being. Wharton herself appears to encourage this view of her character through recurring descriptions of the warmth associated with Ellen's hand. These descriptions serve to, once again, position Ellen in opposition to May. Indeed, just as Newland appears incapable of viewing May as anything more than innocence personified, so too is he unable to regard Ellen as anything but May's foil. Within this designation, the concept of sexual liberation is implicit. When Archer learns of Ellen's visit with Regina Beaufort after her husband's indiscretions are revealed, for example, "A mean desire not to have Madame Olenska seen at the Beauforts' door vanished as he felt the penetrating warmth of her hand" (194). Not only does the notion of "warmth" place her (from Newland's perspective) in stark contrast to May, but the word "penetrating" also provides an allusion to sexual intercourse. Still, in spite of the overtly sexual implications of this comment, Newland and Ellen never consummate their relationship. Instead, Newland has sex with his "cold" wife, resulting in their three children, Dallas, Mary, and Bill. In this capacity, May, Ellen and, especially, Newland each adhere to staunch social guidelines and the principles of duty that govern their lives, rather than pursuing the underlying passions that their hands so subtly reveal.

II. Mrs. Heeny's Therapeutic Touch

As in *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton foregrounds physical touch in *The Custom of the Country* in a predominantly social context. *The Custom of the Country* distinguishes itself, however, in that many of the instances of physical touch presented throughout the text also carry medicinal or therapeutic implications. The prevalence of touch in the novel derives principally from the character of Mrs. Heeny, whom Wharton describes as a “‘society’ manicure [sic] and masseuse.”¹⁶ Though she assumes but a secondary role within the novel, Mrs. Heeny’s integral presence within both the opening and concluding scenes of *The Custom of the Country* serves as an indication of the underlying importance not only of her character, but also of her profession. Mrs. Heeny’s role as a manicurist and masseuse necessitates that she preoccupy herself with the physical condition and feel of the hands of her “patients,” the majority of whom belong to the leisure class. It is in this capacity that she, as a character, bridges the social and medicinal aspects of physical touch.

The dual implications of touch in *The Custom of the Country* manifest themselves in Wharton’s descriptions of Mrs. Heeny throughout the novel. The author notes that, “Towards Mrs. Spragg and her daughter [Mrs. Heeny] filled the double role of manipulator and friend” (CC 4). Wharton’s use of the word “manipulator” in this context allows for parallels to be drawn between this analysis of Mrs. Heeny’s character and the study of the “manipulative” hands of Lily Bart, Undine Spragg, and May Welland conducted in the first chapter of this thesis. The hands of the female protagonists were deemed “manipulative” as a result of the characters’ shared desire to utilize their hands to promote a façade of luxury and leisure. In contrast, Mrs. Heeny’s manipulative tendencies stem from her employment of her hands as tools by which to physically manipulate the hands of her patients. Wharton appears to legitimize Mrs. Heeny’s

¹⁶ CC 4.

practice by noting that she was originally recommended to Mrs. Spragg by the latter's physician. In so doing, the author suggests that Mrs. Heeny possesses a certain degree of expertise in her medicinal field. Mrs. Heeny's role as a manipulator likely entails conducting forms of physical therapy similar to those delineated in the *Century Book of Health*. This guidebook, published in 1907, offers an eleven-page assessment of massage as a clinical practice. Throughout the text, Dr. John Henry McCormick, MD provides a detailed account of how "the hand of a strong, robust, healthy *manipulator*" conducts a proper massage.¹⁷ McCormick focuses especially on the placement of the masseuse's hands upon the patient, as well as on the varying degrees of pressure that the hands may apply.

Dr. McCormick's book ultimately suggests that the function of massage is twofold, serving as both a curative pain-reliever and a restorative beauty treatment. Throughout *The Custom of the Country*, Mrs. Heeny's massage therapy reflects both of these functions. Her utilization of physical touch as a means by which to alleviate pain and discomfort is subtly evidenced by Mrs. Spragg's descriptions of Mrs. Heeny's "soothing...grasp."¹⁸ Wharton also notes that Mrs. Spragg feels "quieter...as her hand sank into Mrs. Heeny's roomy palm" (CC 11). Physical touch takes on increasingly explicit medical implications through Mrs. Heeny's remark that she "mass'd [Mrs. Henley Fairford, a socialite] for a sprained ankle a couple of years ago" (8). These therapeutic endeavors, taken in conjunction with one another, suggest that Mrs. Heeny's care for her patients' physical bodies positions her in a clinical role within the larger

¹⁷ John Henry McCormick, Century Book of Health: The Maintenance of Health Prevention and Cure of Disease, Motherhood, Care of Feeding and Diseases of Children, Modern Home and Nursing, Accidents and Emergencies, Injurious Habits; A Complete Practical Guide (Springfield: The King-Richardson Company, 1907), 269 (emphasis added).

¹⁸ CC 10.

social body. This interpretation of Mrs. Heeny's inclination towards medicinal touch ultimately enables her character to prefigure that of Nurse Justine Brent in *The Fruit of the Tree*.

Still, Mrs. Heeny's work more frequently tends to be linked to maintaining the appearances of her clients' hands rather than helping them to assuage their pain. She frequently describes massaging and manicuring the hands of individuals for high-society events in which one's appearance may be susceptible to intense social scrutiny. While discussing the acclaimed portrait artist Claud Walsingham Popple, for instance, Mrs. Heeny notes that she "manicured him for his first society portrait" (5). As the artist's hands would necessarily have been on display throughout the painting process, Mrs. Heeny plays a significant role in the way in which Popple presents himself before society. In addition, Mrs. Heeny also regularly "rub[s] up [the] nails" of Mrs. Spragg during their meetings, enabling Mrs. Spragg to better convey her relatively newfound wealth and status (10). This correlation between physical touch and appearance becomes increasingly evident upon consideration of the article, "Fair Hands that Handle Millions," which describes the necessity of maintaining one's hands, chiefly with the aid of a manicurist and masseuse. The article reads,

Without the most watchful care the hands are certain to deteriorate. No part of the human body must endure the strain and wear that falls upon the hands, and no part deteriorates so rapidly when neglected... Yet, despite the fact that they age so rapidly, no part of the body is so easily restored at least to partial beauty and no part, certainly, repays the time and labor so well as do the hands. Massage, a careful manicuring, a few hours of steady rubbing with massage cream, will work wonders even to ugly hands.¹⁹

¹⁹"Fair Hands that Handle Millions."

Dr. McCormick offers similar advice in the *Century Book of Health* in a section entitled “Beauty massage: To make the hands and arms beautiful.” He writes, “To massage the hand and forearm for development and taper, place the elbow on a table with the hand elevated. Massage each finger separately, much after the fashion of working on a new glove. Continue this to the wrist.”²⁰

The prevalence of this type of “beautifying” massage therapy in the period in which Wharton was writing allows for a reinterpretation of the social implications of physical touch within *The Custom of the Country*. In his book *Mock-Nurses of the Latest Fashion*, published in 1900, Frederick James Gant, Vice-President of the Royal British Nurses’ Association, describes the ways in which the “masseur-woman” situates herself within the larger social body.

The manual dexterity, combined with firmness and lightness of touch, with which the hand of woman is endowed, and when perfected by practice, will enable any such feminine manipulator to exercise a mechanical art more effectively than most male competitors. And if, in addition, a naturally womanly character, coupled with the delicacy and refinement of culture, moves with the hand in the performance of her duties, the masseur-woman will be a valuable member of Society.²¹

Gant specifically emphasizes the social value of the hands of the masseur-woman, a theme which is also taken up by Wharton in her novel. Mrs. Heeny’s profession entails touching her clients in order to improve the physical condition—and, subsequently, the appearance—of their hands.

This rejuvenating form of touch benefits not only members of the wealthy elite in their attempts

²⁰ McCormick 277.

²¹ Frederick James Gant, Mock-Nurses of the Latest Fashion, A.D. 1900: Professional Experiences, in Short Stories, and the Nursing Question (London: Ballière, Tindall, and Cox, 1900), 160.

to sustain their appearances of leisure and privilege, but also the *nouveaux riches* who seek to emulate the leisure-class aesthetic.

Mrs. Heeny's work places her in close contact with members of both the leisure class and the *nouveaux riches*. The centrality of hands to Mrs. Heeny's profession enables her to ingratiate herself within these two worlds in which appearances, especially the appearances of one's hands, are thought to be essential. Mrs. Heeny's role as a masseuse also enables her to traverse the perceived demarcation between the two seemingly stratified classes. This societal exposure endows her with an awareness of the discrepancies between the wealthy elite and those individuals in possession of "new money." This awareness, in turn, renders her valuable to the Spragg women who solicit Mrs. Heeny for advice regarding leisure-class customs and behaviors. Mrs. Heeny does indeed prove herself beneficial to the Spraggs' social endeavors. In the novel's opening scene, for instance, she provides the naïve Spragg women with an interpretation of the dinner invitation extended to Undine by Ralph's sister. "When a young man *in society* wants to meet a girl again," she remarks, "he gets his sister to ask her" (6, emphasis added). Mrs. Heeny's inclusion of the phrase "in society" reflects the upper-most echelons of the social body—those "old money" circles to which Undine aspires. Wharton even notes that Mrs. Heeny speaks "omnisciently" to Undine and her mother (7), underscoring the Spraggs' perception of the masseuse as a purveyor of key social insights into a class from which she herself, as a working-class woman, is excluded.

The seemingly paradoxical nature of Mrs. Heeny's social positioning ultimately enables hands to be foregrounded, once again, in the text. Though the Spraggs are certainly wealthier and of a higher status than Mrs. Heeny, Wharton suggests that their societal ambitions are dependent upon the masseuse. In this capacity, Undine and her mother come to view Mrs. Heeny as a sort

of channel by which to ascend the social ladder. Wharton writes that Mrs. Spragg “was passionately resolved that [her daughter] should have what she wanted, and she sometimes fancied that Mrs. Heeny, who crossed those sacred thresholds so familiarly, might some day gain admission for Undine” (9). As Mrs. Heeny’s ability to “cross those sacred thresholds” between the classes is inextricably linked to the exposure she gains while conducting touch therapy, this comment underscores the significance of physical touch and, by extension, of hands within the novel.

III. The Function of the Healing Hand in *The Fruit of the Tree*

An analysis of medical touch within Wharton’s novels may be extended beyond *The House of Mirth* to *The Fruit of the Tree*, within which touch garners controversy, if not added significance. Whereas the touch established between Mrs. Heeny and her patients represents an unequivocal manifestation of both comfort and luxury, the medical touch that predominates in *The Fruit of the Tree* has far more contentious implications. Within the latter, Wharton engages in a discussion of euthanasia—that is, death by the *hand* of another individual. Euthanasia represented one of the most polemical and socially prevalent topics at the turn of the twentieth century. Still, the act of euthanasia itself was hardly groundbreaking, having been in practice since the dawn of modern medicine. Historically, the euthanizing of patients was typically done in secrecy, as a physician in pity of a long-suffering patient might give him/her one extra dose of painkillers in order to allow for an “easy death.”

During Wharton’s lifetime, however, these types of clandestine exchanges shifted to the public forum, as several well-known advocates of euthanasia openly espoused their views while urging for the legalization of the practice. Such advocates included heiress Anna S. Hall,

suffragette Lurana Sheldon, Volunteers for America cofounder Maud Ballington Booth, author Charles Eliot Norton, and poet James Russell Lowell.²² The legal battle surrounding euthanasia during the period is documented by Jacob M. Appel in his analysis, “A Duty to Kill? A Duty to Die? Rethinking the Euthanasia Controversy of 1906.”

While Americans openly and vigorously argued the merits of euthanasia at the turn of the twentieth century—a phenomenon that has all too often been overlooked—they did so with minimal reference to individual self-determination or personal autonomy; instead, most advocates and opponents of the practice spoke in terms of the collective welfare. (613).

The ultimate goal of working to benefit the “collective welfare” contributes to the idea that medical touch allows for a more nuanced understanding of how individuals interact with one another. In this capacity, the controversy surrounding euthanasia not only allowed for a requalification of the word “helping” in the term “helping hand,” but also for a reassessment of the positioning of such hands within the larger social body.

The correlation between medical touch and euthanasia in *The Fruit of the Tree* may first be considered in a figurative context. Wharton describes Dr. Wyant, the physician with whom Justine works throughout Bessy’s treatment, as being in possession of “professional skills [which] made him exquisitely tender to the patient under his hands.”²³ The phrase “under his hands” renders the comment awkward in its construction, as Wharton might have instead written “under his care.” The specific inclusion of the word “hands” allows the comment to be considered alongside the following Biblical quotation from the Book of Job: “In His hand is the

²² Jacob M. Appel, “A Duty to Kill? A Duty to Die? Rethinking the Euthanasia Controversy of 1906,” *The Bulletin of Historical Medicine* 78 (2004): 613.

²³ *FOT* 419.

life of every creature and the breath of all mankind.”²⁴ Just as Dr. Wyant maintains life “under his hand,” so too does God maintain life “in His hand.” In this context, hands serve as the basis for Wyant’s quasi-deification within the realm of science. As science and religion are typically thought to oppose one another, this link may seem paradoxical; the correlation, however, serves to illustrate the underlying similarities between the two with regards to euthanasia, as neither is in favor of mercy killing. Wyant remarks that in spite of her suffering, Bessy must be kept alive because “Science herself says so—not for the patient, of course; but for herself—for unborn generations” (402). His failure to even identify Bessy by name illustrates Wyant’s rapidly deteriorating perception of his patient; no longer able to view her as a complete woman, he sees her as “a case—a beautiful case” (419). A similar fate for Bessy is echoed by the Reverend Earnest Lynde, albeit operating under very different rationale. Lynde suggests that divine will allows for suffering “for the sake of the spiritual life that may be mysteriously wrung out of it” (407). Ultimately, Wharton presents a debate less fixated on what *ought* to be done for the individual and more so on what *must* be done for the collective. In so doing, her writing reflects the actual political climate to which she and her readers were exposed. Appel notes,

The turn-of-the-century debate surrounding euthanasia was primarily a battle over whether the practice should be legally sanctioned, and was decidedly not about whether mercy killing was moral or whether the laws prohibiting such interventions should be stringently enforced.... Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the 1906 debates is the relatively minor role that... moral absolutism played in the public dialogue.²⁵

²⁴ Job 12:10.

²⁵ Appel 627, 631.

Appel's comment emphasizes the staunchly legalistic lens through which euthanasia was perceived during the period. By refraining from a discussion of morality, politicians invariably over-simplified the issue, failing to recognize the true humanistic dilemma that healing hands, like Justine Brent, face. In so doing, the social body ironically undermines the authority of the individual human body.

Wharton herself deviates from this black-and-white approach by utilizing the character of Justine as means by which to communicate the moral complexities of euthanasia. Justine's experiences as a nurse have rendered her cognizant of the tremendous hardships that Bessy would likely face throughout her life as a result of her accident. "There had been cases, of course—Justine's professional memory evoked them—cases of so-called "recovery," where actual death was kept at bay, a semblance of life preserved for years in a poor petrified body... But the mind shrank from such a fate for Bessy."²⁶ Justine's ability to envision and sympathize with the bleak future that Bessy faces underscores her sustained perception of Bessy as a person, rather than as a case-study or a prototypic sick person awaiting religious salvation. Her incapability of fully maintaining either a science or religious approach to Bessy's future is epitomized, ironically, by a comment that Wyant makes while they are working together. He remarks, "With you to work with, I believe I could do anything. How you do back a man up! You think with your hand—with every individual finger!" (421). Wyant does not commend Justine for her ability to think with her head (i.e., to think rationally) or to think with her heart (i.e., to think pityingly). His fixation on her hands and fingers likely reflects their tool-like precision in accomplishing the medical tasks at hand. Indeed, Justine remarks that "he had commended her as the surgeon might commend a find instrument fashioned for his use" (421). In

²⁶ *FOT* 390 (Wharton's ellipsis).

spite of his remark, Justine's hands appear throughout the text to be anything but cold and mechanical. At the beginning of the novel, as Justine is interacting with the injured Dillon, "[h]er full young voice kept its cool note of authority, her sympathy revealing itself only in the expert touch of her hands" (4). She later attempts to comfort Bessy by "letting her fingers glide once or twice over the back of Bessy's hand" (409). In each of these instances, Justine's touch functions to convey her sympathetic approach to her patients.

This idea of conveying sympathy through touch is complicated later in the novel, as Justine's ability to "think with [her] hand" ultimately appears to motivate her decision to euthanize Bessy. Some weeks after Bessy's accident, Justine hears her patient moaning in pain. The moaning gradually alters itself until, before long, "It was no longer the utterance of human pain, but the monotonous whimper of an animal—the kind of sound that a compassionate *hand* would instinctively crush into silence" (431, emphasis added). The comment is illustrative of the aptness of Wyant's comment—though he misjudges what Justine's actions will be, he was correct in the sense that she is propelled to act by her hand. The very composition of this comment illustrates the dichotomous attitudes manifest in the term "mercy killing." Wharton's juxtapositioning of the words "compassionate" and "crush" provide insight into the moral dilemma intrinsic to Justine's decision to euthanize her friend. Still, Justine does appear to further convince herself of the appropriateness of her action through her recollection that "[i]n her hospital experience she had encountered cases where the useless agonies of death were mercifully shortened by the physician" (419). In *The New York Times* contemporary book review of *The Fruit of the Tree*, "Mrs. Edith Wharton's Latest Novel a Powerful Study in Modern Life—Expert Satire in Frosty Brilliance," the reviewer comments on Justine's classification of euthanasia as "merciful."

It is fair to suppose that Mrs. Wharton took pains to inform herself from some reputable source; but the flippant will make the comment that the doctor who told her that is a doctor to avoid: it seems obvious that from motives of policy alone no physician who thus “mercifully” sped his dying patients on their way would acknowledge it: a doctor who was known for a potential murderer would very soon be a doctor without patients or practice.²⁷

Once again, the review displays a marked lack of concern with the morality of the issue, preoccupying himself with the facts. Indeed, it is this morality that proves itself so integral to Justine’s decision. There exists a striking contrast between the description of physicians who euthanize their patients and that of Justine’s own desire to “crush into silence” Bessy’s whimper. Through Justine’s recollection of lives being “mercifully shortened” at the hands of a physician, Wharton suggests that Justine supports euthanasia as an appropriate medical treatment, well within the realms of a “caregiver.” When the responsibility is placed in her own hands, however, she grows increasingly aware of the violence associated with the act. Her eventual decision to carry out the mercy killing indicates a reevaluation of the term caregiver. By using her hand to “crush” the life out of Bessy, Justine ultimately saves her friend from an unendurable existence.

IV. Conclusions

In *The Age of Innocence*, Newland is astonished that “he should have stood for five minutes arguing with [Ellen] across the width of the room, when just touching her made everything so simple.”²⁸ His comment plays into the perception of touch as a medium of primal

²⁷ “Mrs. Edith Wharton’s Latest Novel a Powerful Study in Modern Life—Expert Satire in Frosty Brilliance,” *The New York Times* 19 October 1907, BR649.

²⁸ *AOI* 109.

expression through which one is liberated from social constraints. Still, consideration of physical touch as “so simple” is, quite ironically, deceptively simple in its implications. The analyses conducted throughout this chapter have sought to emphasize the ways in which physical touch constitutes a complex and nuanced form of interpersonal communication.

On a broader analytic scale, this chapter expands upon the themes presented in the first two chapters of this project. Whereas those sections preoccupied themselves with the hands of unique individuals (or, as was often the case in chapter two, with the hands of collective entities of similarly designated individuals), chapter three focused upon how physical touch *unites* the hands of Wharton’s characters. In this capacity, the chapter offered perhaps the most comprehensive analysis of the synecdochic implications of hands in this thesis. Each novel under consideration contributed to the overriding sense that physical touch ultimately complicates the way in which an individual is situated within the larger social body. The analysis of *The Age of Innocence* sees Newland struggling to reconcile his romantic inclinations, embodied by his passionate physical interactions with Ellen, with his need to adhere to social decorum, evidenced by his cool exchanges with his wife. In *The Custom of the Country*, massage therapy enables Mrs. Heeny, a member of the working class, to associate with the wealthy elite. Indeed, her touch renders her indispensable to these upper-class citizens, in both a social and medicinal context. Finally, *The Fruit of the Tree* offers perhaps the most contentious presentation of physical touch. Justine’s decision to reinterpret the task of a “healing hand” to include euthanasia leaves her, from the perspective of many members of society, with proverbial blood on her hands. These readings, taken in conjunction with one another, illustrate the ways in which the human hand may play a significant role in crafting the intricate societies in which Wharton’s works are set.

EPILOGUE

Critics frequently recognize and acknowledge Edith Wharton's skill as a social commentator in the context of her novels and short fiction. Such focus, however, tends to be centered upon the broader themes of the texts. Indeed, Wharton's representations of society on a macroscopic level provide insight into the construction of the social body in which the author herself was immersed. Still, more microscopic analyses, such as this study on the synecdochic implications of hands, shed light on the author's wonderfully intricate and detailed use of symbols throughout her novels.

Throughout this thesis, I have sought to more firmly establish the link between Wharton's characters and the societies in which they operate, uniting the microscopic with the macroscopic. Ultimately, the analyses of *The House of Mirth*, *The Fruit of the Tree*, *The Custom of the Country*, and *The Age of Innocence* that have been conducted throughout this thesis, though varied in their implications, have supported the assertion that hands function synecdochically, concretely uniting the figurative social body with the literal human body. Still, in spite of the specificity of the overarching topic of this thesis, as well as the individual chapters, my analyses are far from exhaustive. Hands remain a rich source of analytic discourse within Wharton's novels, including those which were not surveyed within this project. As an extension of this idea, I put forth a preliminary assessment of *Ethan Frome*, Wharton's novella which was introduced briefly in the context of chapter two. The text stands in stark contrast to the works surveyed in this thesis, all of which (excepting *The Fruit of the Tree*, which still largely takes place in high-society circles) feature New York City society as a complex social backdrop. Instead, *Ethan Frome* takes place in rural New England. Wharton details the love triangle that develops between

Ethan Frome, his invalid wife, Zeena, and Zeena's free-spirited young cousin, Mattie. The very fact that the hand motif lends itself to analysis in this novella as well as in, say, *The House of Mirth*, speaks to the universality of the synecdochic implications of hands.

Whereas the hands of Lily Bart, Undine Spragg, and May Welland are associated with an abundance of minute details, Wharton's first textual reference to Ethan's hand appears perfectly devoid of such nuanced descriptions. The author simply notes that Ethan "would climb stiffly into his buggy, gather up the reins in his left hand and drive slowly away in the direction of his farm."¹ The nondescript characterization of Ethan's hand appears to fit his social circumstances. Ethan is, after all, a resident of Starkfield, a town whose very name underscores the terrible bleakness and routine drudgery of his day-to-day existence. Still, Wharton does provide her readers with one significant detail in this passage—Ethan gathers his reins in his *left* hand. The historical implications of left-handedness reveal that the trait is well-suited to Ethan's character. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, left-handedness is associated with being "'ill-omened,' 'sinister,' 'underhand,' 'inferior.'"² These attributes allow for a dual analysis of left-handedness with regards to Ethan's character.

The ability to analyze *Ethan Frome* in several contexts is largely due to the fact that the novel is structured as a framed narrative. The story of Ethan as a young man represents the framed story and is told from the perspective of the narrator, a man who befriends the older Ethan years after the principal events of the text. This passage of time is significant, as it underscores the fact that the narrator was not present in Starkfield at the time at which the framed story is set; as a result, his account of Ethan's past must be, at least to some degree, fictionalized. Indeed, the narrator even alludes to this fictionalization himself. "It was that night

¹ Edith Wharton, *Ethan Frome & Summer*, (New York: The Modern Library, 2001): 10.

² "Left Hand," *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd Edition, 1989: 798.

that I found the clue to Ethan Frome, and began to put together this vision of his story..."³ The story is the narrator's "vision," and, as such, may be treated as his fictionalized account (within Wharton's own fiction) of the events, rather than a journalistic retelling. From this perspective, Ethan's left-handedness appears to connote "ill-omened" and "inferior." This interpretation of Ethan's hand prompts a reading of the novel as a tragedy, suggesting that Ethan is ultimately trapped in Starkfield by his repeated failure to act. His weakness as a character renders him inferior to the women in his life, namely his wife, Zeena, and, to some extent, his dying mother. In this capacity, Ethan does not have a figurative hand in the way in which his life is conducted and, as a result, he cannot escape his sad fate.

In contrast, Ethan's left-handedness may also be considered in conjunction with the words "sinister" and "underhand," which ultimately yield an interpretation of Ethan's character that stands in stark contrast to the aforementioned tragic reading. The fact that the narrator has befriended Ethan in the narrative frame suggests that he would likely empathize with Ethan before any other character. This highlights the significance of perspective in the text, particularly with regards to Zeena. She is portrayed as a monstrous human, and yet, closer analysis of Ethan's behavior towards her suggests that she too deserves readers' empathy. Indeed, when the narrator laments Ethan's fate, he often (likely inadvertently) reveals hardships in Zeena's life. Wharton describes the marriage, noting, "When she spoke it was only to complain of things not in his power to remedy; and to check a tendency to impatient retort he had first formed the habit of not answering her, and finally of thinking of other things while she talked" (42). Zeena's feelings of isolation and loneliness could only be exacerbated by the knowledge of her husband's love for her cousin, Mattie. This reading precludes an overly-simplistic interpretation of Zeena as

³ Ethan Frome & Summer 19 (Wharton's ellipses).

an underhanded character, suggesting that Ethan displays a marked cruelty towards his wife. Though his own life may be unhappy, Ethan himself has a figurative hand in making it so.

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