CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION
Mrs. Wharton had her own field to cultivate and her greatest affinity with James lies "in their fundamentally similar concern over a precisely formulated moral evaluation of their subjects — moral, as distinguished from social, political or economic." 2

The literary relationship between James and Wharton is too complex and critics too often over-estimate her reliance on James. Wharton's comments in her autobiography that James "belonged irrevocably to the old America out of which I also came," and that he "was essentially a novelist of manners, and the manners he was qualified by nature and situation to observe were those of the little vanishing group among whom he had grown up.," 3 have tempted even such a scholarly critic as Q.D. Leavis to call her "the heiress of Henry James." 4

Strikingly enough Wharton regarded herself as permanently indebted to James. With her aversion to the new fictional experimentalists, she considered him as the model of artistic conscience and selflessness. It was mainly from James that she derived her notion that the composition of a novel should not be a loose outpouring of emotions, but a craft to be studied and mastered. In her view he was the only novelist who formulated his own ideas about his art. But such an indebtedness can not be mistaken for slavish discipleship. The technical theory of James was rather an inspiration for her and occasionally, in her practice, she out-grows its limitations.
Nevertheless, there are marked evidences of Jamesian influence in her earlier stories. Both the novelists, at least in their initial works, were mostly concerned with the comedy of social manners. But James sooner captured new pastures as his novelistic material and became something more than a mere delineator of social manners. Mrs. Wharton, on the other hand, remained to be the delineator of manners till the end, but it is her own personal vision of the importance of manners in preserving the human culture that we value in her novels. Perhaps, as Irving Howe observes, it may be "the lesser James that influenced the lesser Wharton."  

Intellectually as well as emotionally, Wharton was far from James. Though James was born in the 'same old America' of Wharton, he had his nourishment in the intellectual background of New England and he bathed in its philosophical idealism. The later formative influences in James' sensibility was alien to her and this sufficiently accounts for her inability to respond to James' later and more important works.

Barring The Reef and to some extent The Custom of the Country, no definite influence of James can be traced in Wharton's fiction. The modern readers interest in The Custom of the Country lies not in the Jamesian element in it but in the author's direct observation how the custom of the country has deteriorated from the accepted standard of traditional morality. Wharton's best three novels, The House of Mirth, The Age of Innocence and The Custom of the Country are invariably different from both the earlier and later novels of James.
The technical excellencies of her novelettes, *The Summer*, *Ethan Frome* and *Old New York* are quite alien to James, both in its setting and in its characterization.

Edmund Wilson titled his essay, written soon after the death of the Mrs. Wharton in 1937 as "Justice to Edith Wharton". The implied suggestion of Wilson is that during her lifetime Wharton did not get justice at the hands of her critics. Even now first rate criticism of Wharton's fiction is rare. Cynthia Ozick wrote an essay in 1976 again with the title "Justice Again to Edith Wharton" (published in commentary, 1976) with the contention that justice has not come to Wharton as late as 1976.

The reasons why Wharton was neglected by literary critics, whereas lesser talented writers found a permanent place, are many. First of all she had to be freed from the over-estimated influence of Henry James. Secondly, her allegiance to her own class and its values had been so disheartening to the critics that they described her in the colourful hyperbole of a golden eagle totally out of touch with the real America. Thirdly, Wharton was a novelist of manners following the lines of Jane Austen and Balzac than that of Hawthorne and Mark Twain. She did not attach herself to any peculiarly American philosophy such as transcendentalism, as James did. And lastly, there had been a marked decline in the quality of her work during the last seventeen years of her life and this tempted even the later
critics to ignore her more serious works. Therefore Wharton's position among the American literary practitioners, remains problematic.

The impact of the over-estimated influence of Henry James upon Wharton's fiction has already been noted. Q. D. Leavis goes even to the extent of suggesting that the "American novel grew up with Henry James and achieved a tradition with Mrs. Wharton." It is true that in The House of Mirth she depicted the fashionable life of the New York of her early married life "in all its flatness and futility," but in doing so she was not taking up the unfinished work of Henry James, as Leavis believes. Wharton was an independent and clever artist, in certain respects, cleverer than James himself.

Mrs. Wharton has been a writer of limited scope. The historic period of her major fiction is limited to the late nineteenth century America. The social range of her novels is also confined to a segment of American society that formed the traditional aristocracy. Yet with a certain amount of fairness we can say that she is the only American novelist who successfully dealt with the feudal remainder of this traditional aristocracy which hardly survived in the early 20th century. More important is the fact that in chronicling the history of her little class she made a contrast between the old culture and the new one. No other novelist of her generation was successful in depicting this major aspect of American social history through dramatized conflicts between
the old and the new traditions.

There are several writers who have attempted to portray this society, but they fail to make a lasting impression on us. The reason why Wharton succeeded where others miserably failed is that in addition to her gifts as an artist, she had a firm grasp of what constituted society. Her over-sensitive eyes carefully scrutinized the finer gradations that constituted her society in such a way that, as Louis Auchincloss points out, "nowhere else can the social and economic history of this period be seen as in the pages of Edith Wharton." She was well aware of the social change that was taking place in the small group to which she belonged. The new mercantile class 'invaded' the traditional aristocracy and the impact of such an assault was that traditional aristocracy lost its spiritual balance and complacency. When the traditional aristocracy lost its spiritual values, the tilt was more towards the mercantile plutocracy, and money began to exert its value over the hitherto cherished norms of morality. When the social norms of the traditional aristocracy was, thus, being adjusted with that of the new mercantile class Mrs. Wharton emerged as its strongest spokesman. There was nothing she disliked more than the pretensions of money unaccompanied by the necessary social and moral grace.

Wharton was a born aristocrat and till her death she remained an aristocrat to the core. She was much too critical of the loose standard which governed the action of most of the Americans. In the post-assault era, pecuniary success was
considered to be accepted standard of social morality and it
provided a protective umbrella under which no heinous action
was considered to be a sin. It is this demeaning attitude
of society that Wharton criticizes most in The House of Mirth
and in The Custom of the Country.

But The House of Mirth and The Custom of the Country
are not merely social satires. Superficially Wharton relies
upon social manners to unfold her story, but, clothed in
manners and morals she evidences the eternal truth that no
individual human being can successfully digress the accepted
standard of values.

Robert Morss Lovett concludes his study of Wharton's
fiction saying that Wharton "remains for us among the
voices whispering the last enchantments of the Victorian age."
He conveniently sums up her theme in three sub headings:
Culture, Class and Morality. But this is the result of a
superficial reading of her novels. Lovett even agrees with
Fielding's view that the upper class forms a thin soil for
the novel. He accuses Wharton for having limited her
novelistic vision to the thin soil of upper class society.
He writes:

Mrs. Wharton can stand outside of her world
to criticize - not to create. She lacks the
power of imagination to follow the leadings
of her experience and the phenomena of her
environment into other fields, to transpose
the themes of her chamber music into larger
harmonies and discords of the full orchestra."

Lovett's conclusion of Wharton's achievement is typical of her generation's cold attitude towards her. It is true that Wharton is successful most when she writes about old New York society, but her vision is not limited within itself. When she tries to reproduce in fiction the intimate circumstances of her compact community, she illustrates its various oppressions and its impact upon individual human beings. From the very beginning, her foremost concern has been to scrutinize this society. But she has also studied other communities besides New York and has attempted to depict its socio-economic problems as well as the psychic complexities of its inhabitants. For instance, in *The Fruit of the Tree* the milieu is the provincial New England. In *The Valley of Decision* she has depicted the religious-minded Italy of the eighteenth century and in *Madame de Treymes* and *The Reef* the milieu is its modern counterparts. *The Reef* and *The Custom of the Country* are international in their setting and the actions are spread over two continents. The accusation that the world outside New York is alien to Wharton is, thus, baseless.

However, in all these novels the upper segment of the society forms Wharton's milieu. Though the place and the period in history vary from novel to novel, the 'class' is the same and there runs a common theme in all of them—"a sense of human beings living in such intimate solidarity that no one of them may vary from the customary path without in some fashion breaking the pattern and inviting some sort of disaster."10

Lovett's second accusation that 'the upper class society
forms a thin soil for fiction needs further elaboration. It is a moot point whether the 'real America' was constituted by the poverty-stricken multitude or by the civilized community. That Wharton mainly writes about the upper segment of the society is somewhat true. But here again an unbiased reader has certain reservations to write off Wharton as a mere delineator of a society unknown to the real America.

Even though Wharton had been flying briskly through the 'pure, upper air' of American society, at times she was unconsciously affected by the fumes which rise from below, as Henry Dwight Sedgwick notes. She could imaginatively reach as far back as to the poverty-ridden New England to tell the story of Ethan Frome and Charity Royall. Wharton's three novellas, Ethan Frome, Summer and Bunner Sisters give an answer to those critics who argue that Wharton knew nothing about the life of the poor American inhabitants. In Ethan Frome she has recreated the gratuitous human suffering in a New England village reaching tragic proportions. Summer is a more complex writing, displaying Wharton's intimate knowledge of the suffering of the inhabitants of North Dorner village. Bunner Sisters gives an account of the sufferings of two poor women in New York whose dreams are thwarted by an unscrupulous lover. The fact that Wharton abandoned her familiar milieu to depict life in its stark simplicity and reality, does not lessen the artistic merit of these novellas. In fact they are the most popular and anthologised of Wharton's short novellas. Compared even to her masterpiece New York novels,
Ethan Frome enjoys more popularity and a wider range of readers. Carl Van Doren's comment "Not since Hawthorne has a novelist built on the New England soil a tragedy of such elevation of mood as this", sufficiently proves its artistic merit.

Critics often point out that there is a marked deterioration in the quality of Wharton's later works especially after 1920. After the First World War Wharton felt civilization disintegrating and the old values losing their ground. In the post World War generation life was more complex and problematic and in appropriation to the changed attitude Wharton selected more complex themes for her novels. The constant cry that Wharton lost her creative genius after the writing of The Age of Innocence is largely based on the fact that she refused to repeat her earlier success. She was in constant search for new themes and new methods and many of Wharton's critics could not bear it.

No sensible reader will doubt the general acceptance of The House of MIRTH, The custom of the Country and The Age of Innocence as the best novels of Wharton and Ethan Frome as her best novella. All these novels were written before 1920. Those novels written after this period cannot claim the excellence of the earlier ones, but they are also almost as good, especially The Old New York group of novellas and and The Hudson River Bracketted and its sequel, The Gods Arrive.

Technically, Wharton stood aloof from the new wave writers, but this is no reason to ignore her creative genius.
She was a formal writer and tried for classical perfection in art. Yet, despite her coolness to the modern experimentalists, Wharton was a restless writer, for ever searching for new themes and forever pining for new modes of expression. She seldom troubles to repeat a success. She perfected the traditional novel form and extracted its full possibilities subject to her virtuosity.

In spite of her professed happiness in her autobiography, Wharton has never been a satisfied woman. Her unhappy marriage with Teddy which finally ended in divorce left a melancholic impression upon Wharton's psyche. She always wanted adult human experiences but her partner in life took delight only in the superficial aspects of life. Walter Berry would have been a better match for her, and later in her life Wharton painfully regretted for not having disclosed her love for him. Not only emotional union but even physical union between Edith and her husband was missing. Her short romantic affair with Morton Fullerton was so heartwarming that she felt elevated to a high state of existence. In her poem "The Mortal Lease", obviously addressed Morton Fullerton (the phonemic similarity of 'Morton' and 'Mortal' is noteworthy) she writes:

All, all is sweet in that commingled draught,
Mysterious, that life pours for lovers' thirst.
And I would meet your passion as the first
Wild woodland woman met her captor's craft.
Or as the Greek whose fearless beauty laughed
And doffed her raiment by the Attic flood;
But in the streams of my belated blood
Flow all the warring potions love has quaffed.
How can I be to you the nymph who danced
Smooth by Ilissus as the plane tree's bole,
Or how the Nereid whose drenched lashes glanced
Like sea-flower through the summer sea's long roll-
I that have also been a nun entranced
Who night-long held her Bridegroom in her soul?\textsuperscript{13}

Wharton had been 'a nun entranced, who night-long held her
bridegroom in her soul', and new romantic streams flowed
through her 'belated blood' only when she enjoyed physical
and emotional union with her lover. Elsewhere she describes
her togetherness with Fullerton as the union of 'body upon
body and soul upon soul'. Such elevation of \textit{mood} and
enjoyment of experience she could attain only in her belated
age and that too was short-lived. Because of life's intense
frustrations the dominating mood in Wharton's mind was
melancholic, though she ostensibly looked satisfied and happy.
This was the hidden tragedy in her life and she proudly veiled
it even from her intimate friends. Only after the release of
her private papers from the Beinecke library of Yale University
in 1968 was this veil lifted. But even this could not remove
it completely. In her autobiography she was highly reticent
to disclose her personal emotions and frustrations and we know
only those aspects of her life which are most indispensable for
understanding her novels.

Because of the veiled melancholic temper of her psyche,
most of her novels are cast in an aura of discontentment and
doom. E.K. Brown observes this point when he writes:
Somehow Edith Wharton, both in her life and
in her work seemed to have missed happiness.
Something tense and thin and a little sharp marked
both. Even in her poetry there is a lack
of fullness, warmth and freedom.

May be, Wharton might have, like Newland Archer, missed
"the flower of life". Only once was she able to experience
it - in those moments of her togetherness with Fullerton.
As a result of Wharton’s frustrated emotions consciously
or unconsciously she traces women’s heroic but doomed journey
toward self-fulfilment. Elizabeth Ammons suggests that
Wharton had a public argument with America that women’s
heroic journey towards freedom and emotional maturity
always ends in doom. Wharton’s stories, she concludes,
"is both a record of a brilliant and intellectually independent
woman’s thinking about women and a map of feminism’s former
and failure in America in the decades surrounding the Great War.

Her own experiences taught Wharton that being a woman
was painful in the decades surrounding the twentieth century,
especially for the exceptional ones. Every attempt to break
away with the limitations deliberately imposed upon them is
thwarted either by men or by the combined pressure of
convention and social morality. The final conviction that
we get after reading her novels is that life is a prison
or a trap or even a wasteland. Frustration and abasement and
sometimes undue surrender are the universal fate for those who
are trapped in the prison of life.

Blake Nevius identified her primary subject as the
immersion of a larger and generous nature into a meaner and
and stronger nature by the conspiracy of circumstances in which they are trapped. It is a matter of doubt whether, Wharton even created a fully generous character. Blake concentrates on Ethan Frome and The Fruit of the Tree in analysing his concept of 'trapped sensibility'. Of course the characters in these novels, as well as in others, are trapped within their immediate surroundings, but the generous nature Blake attributes to Ethan and Justine Brent is little doubtful. Had Ethan been generous to the core, he would not have cherished the idea of coasting (fatally) with Mattie, an action which would leave his sickly wife alone in this world only to die in poverty. Yet Blake's observation leads us to the central theme of Wharton— the universal sense of human waste. It is as an impartial delineator of the bitter themes of victimization and self betrayal, waste, sickness, spiritual desolation and marital obsessions that Edith Wharton seeks her admission among the American novelists.

In her life Wharton was a lonely woman. She could not enjoy a lovely family atmosphere either in her childhood or after her marriage. Her womanhood was not blessed with off-springs and she did not experience what maternal love is. As a result, in most of her novels the strong sense of family life is lacking. The children of her imagination were the only objects of her love other than her few literary friends. Perhaps the only period in her life when she experienced love for fellow beings is when she was working for the poor, wounded soldiers. Her emotional breakdown with her husband psychologically
prepared her to view the orphaned children of the war as her own and she loved them with a love she never experienced before.

After her war experience Wharton's concept of woman changed considerably. In her fiction written after the war, she began to endorse the importance of family in social life, but, since she did not have enough experience in the family line they are earnest failures. She could prove her genius best when she wrote about the problems of marriage (not of family), extra-martial affairs and divorce.

Wharton's unquestionable place among the moralists of America is generally accepted. In this regard she is second only to Henry James. But Wharton's attitude towards American social morality is ambivalent. She was highly critical of her society, even while she loved it dearly. She disdained many of the conventions and attitudes of the old New York society and its paralysing effects. But she never ceased to admire the tradition-bound matriarch of Washington Square and Madison Avenue which expressed itself through a network of cousins and relatives.

In her best two novels The House of Mirth and The Age of Innocence she shows her opposing attitude towards her society's norms. In the former, the predominant mood is of disdain and in the later it is of admiration. Because of her changing attitude towards the role of morality, Wharton has been accused
of inconsistency. The fact is that Wharton never arrives at a conviction and that she leaves for the readers to find out the validity of human actions in the given circumstances. She portrays a set of characters truthfully and the truth of their life and their relation to their environment. The truth is always there, but she voluntarily refrains from pointing out the meaning of that truth because it may vary from person to person.

H.T. Follett and W. Follett, in their short but illuminating essay makes a considerable point of departure from the accepted standard of Wharton criticism. They begin their essay by Henry James' often-quoted comment on Wharton, identifying her chief temperament as "the masculine conclusion tending . . . to crown the feminine observation." The authors contend that a specialized variant of this maxim will be helpful in understanding the central and definite quality of Wharton's realism. They write:

It seems to us that her writing is fundamentally sexless, as that of few women and of no man has been. Fundamentally, we say: for her superficial qualities are on the whole of masculine order. We would be understood here as assuming no deep-rooted and inalienable difference between the minds of the sexes; it may or may not exist. For the momentary purpose, let the masculine qualities be those which men have most commonly exhibited, and the feminine those which women have most commonly exhibited. Speaking, then, in these conventional and provisional terms, we think we discover this about Mrs. Wharton: that in some superficial ways she achieves masculine qualities of mind and art, not primarily to escape the traditional limitations of her own sex, but to escape those of both sex itself. . . . The masculine quality of Mrs. Wharton, her protective coloring against the merely feminine, is her tone of irony; that fine "asperity" toward her characters and toward all her material, which the criticism already cited has named the "masculine conclusion"—
a little oddly named, we think asperity being
in itself so inconclusive a quality, and
Mrs. Wharton's habit of thought having so
little to do with conclusions of every sort. 18

But this is only a secondary or incidental quality, they
assert. The primary quality is to be found in her balance,
her detachment from points of view, her very inconclusiveness."

It is a mere critical stupidity to consider Wharton as an
ironist or as a satirist:

... her role of ironist is her way of
escape from the tyranny of intuition without
criticism; it is an agency and not an end.
Essentially, she is an ironist not at all,
and still less is she a satirist or a
sentimentalist. Essentially, she is a
votary - among Americans the first, the most
consistent, and by all odds the most
important - of the realistic spirit. Her
irony is a more or less conscious rejection
of false gods and half-gods; but her full
spiritual allegiance is to something
beyond, that denies irony even as irony
denies sentimentalism - the scientific
spirit of modern realism. 19

This is, indeed high praise; somewhat an exaggeration. But
the authors make a considerable point towards a better and
exact appreciation of her genius. Hitherto Wharton has been
estimated on wrong grounds. Sometimes she is praised to
the skies for her technical excellence and at other times she
brought to ground for portraying the trivial doings of the
trivial people. Most of her critics were dumb about her,
impersonal detachment from her theme and the objective treatment
she gave to it.
Perhaps, the modern reader's interest in Wharton's fiction lies in the fact that she possessed, in abundant measure, what Keats termed as the 'negative capability'. She does not identify with any character, however dear he may to her heart, but always keeps a certain distance. Like Newland Archer, she views the show of life objectively without identifying with any character or committing to any point of view.

This point is most obvious in *Summer*, *The House of Mirth* and *Ethan Frome*. There is no sense in probing whether *Summer* has a happy or unhappy end. It is both and neither. No one will believe that Charity's life with Royall after their marriage will be better than the life she lived as his ward. But under the existing circumstances of the novel, and within Charity's scope, no better life would have been possible for her. Wharton does not sympathise with Charity who broke the convention in the hope of escaping from the limitations of North Dormer. Neither does she insist that the remedy for (social) sin is punishment and repentance.

Thus, when Wharton is at her best, she goes against her own theory that the novelist must bring her subject to a moral conclusion. It is typical of Wharton that her conclusions are inconvulsive. Perhaps this may be because there is no such moral conviction worthy of arriving at within the limited scope of her subject.

Mrs. Wharton was an artist in and out. In the very
atmosphere of most of her stories there is a pervading sense of art, literature and culture. In not less than a dozen of her short stories the hero is by profession an author as in "The Muses Tragedy", "Souls Belated", "Full Circle", "Expiation", "The Legend" and "The Touch Stone". In "The Portrait", "The Recovery", "The Rembrandt", "The Moving Finger", "The Letters" and "The Verdict" the heroes are artists by profession. The list of such characters can be amplified to any extent. Even in her longer works a few of her protagonists are artists. In a sense it is possible to view Lily Bart and Ellen Olenska as artists whose medium is their own life. In Hudson River Bracketted and its sequel, The Gods Arrive, Wharton traces the epistemology of the artist through Vance Weston's development from youth to maturity.

The difficulties that the artist faces in his encounter with the world was one of the questions that vexed Wharton's mind. She longed for perfection in artistry and adhered strictly to the classical modes of expression. Conscious art was the bases of all she wrote. In this respect she resembled Hawthorne and Henry James.

Mrs. Wharton was prolific and versatile writer. She wrote essays, criticism, travelogues, short stories, novellas and novels, so many in number. But a vast amount of them are ephemeral. One of the reasons why readers are not interested in Wharton is that much of her writings is mere rubbish, barely
superior to Ladies' Magazine fiction. Some of them are total failures.

George Vidal in his introduction to Edith Wharton Omnibus pays a tribute to her. He says that Wharton is one of the three or four 'major' writers of America and that because of her sex and class, she is denied her proper place in the 'near-empty pantheon of American literature'. He continues:

Traditionally Henry James has always been placed slightly higher up the slop of Parnassus than Edith Wharton. But now that the prejudice against the female writer is on the wane, they took to be exactly what they are; giants, equals, the tutelary and benign gods of our American literature.20

This is perhaps an over-estimation. Even the strongest supporter of Edith Wharton will not claim that she is a great writer, equal to Henry James. Though Wharton inherited the literary tradition of Hawthorne and James she is not as gifted as they are. She lacks Hawthorne's moral inclusiveness and infinite perception. Likewise James' infinite probing of the inner recesses of human psychology is lacking in Wharton.

The most sensible critical judgement upon Edith Wharton seems to be that of O. D. Leavis. "She was a remarkable novelist if not a large-sized one, and while there are few great novelists there are not even so many remarkable ones that we can afford to let her be overlooked."
This is the truth about Edith Wharton. She is a remarkable novelist, if not a great one. But because of her sex, class and period in history, she did not get due recognition.