CHAPTER V

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Art is the path that leads the reader to the inner realm of Mrs. Wharton's fiction. The fact that she was a curious student of the artistic techniques of other writers is manifest in the various critical essays she published in contemporary magazines. No novelist of any importance, past or future, escaped her careful scrutiny. The striking aspect of Mrs. Wharton's study of the techniques of other writers is that she received from all what she wanted without being the imitator of any.

Wharton's art is antagonistic to the art of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf and the stream of consciousness school. Her aim was not to experiment with new forms but to "pour new wine into the old pot" - i.e., the traditional form of the novel. She disliked the artificial plot of the mid-victorians and repudiated the no-plot concept of the so-called moderners. Her art lay somewhat midway between that of Henry James and William Thackeray.

The Writing of Fiction (1925) is very important in understanding Mrs. Wharton's theory of fiction. At least two chapters in it, "Constructing a Novel" and "Telling a Short Story" are of primary importance to the readers of Edith Wharton because in it she evidences most of her critical theories. However, in considering Wharton's fictional technique no better starting point can be found than her essay, "The
Criticism of Fiction." It is in this essay that she defines the formula for a sound criticism of fiction. She writes:

"There seem to be but two primary questions to ask in estimating any work of art: what has the author tried to represent, and how far has he succeeded? - and a third which is dependent on them: was the subject chosen worth representing - has it the quality of being what Balzac called 'vrai dans l'art?'

These three questions, if properly answered, will solve the aesthetic problems of the novel. For the first question Wharton adheres to Henry James' definition of novel as the 'personal, direct impression of life.' Thus the real subject of the novel is the author's impression of life. 'Impression' is different from 'criticism', since criticism involves a certain degree of didacticism. Wharton does not approve didactic purpose of fiction; for her novelist is not and can never be a preacher. Her method is to show life as she sees it and to depict her own direct impression of it. Artist's impression of life should be personal and at the same time new. It is in this new vision of life that an artist can be original.

Although the personal impression of life is of utmost importance, the novel as a form is different from autobiography or personal confessions. It has been a general tendency among Wharton's critics to relate her fictional incidents with her own personal experiences. Louis Auchincloss, for example, has called Vance Weston (Hudson River Bracketed) as the alter ego of the artist Edith Wharton. Some others see autobiographical elements in Justine Brent. Yet another
group of critics traces personal elements in Newland Archer, though the sex is imaginatively inverted.

It is true that Hudson River Bracketed traces the development of Vance Weston as an artist and that there are many things common to both. But it is too much to suggest that Vance Weston is a portrait of the artist Edith Wharton. This is true of Justine Brent and Newland Archer. This chameleon type nature of Wharton - giving something of her personal colour to the characters without totally identifying - shows the kind of artist she is.

Wharton was very much sensitive to the personal implications of her characterization and plotting and resented those readers and critics who traced autobiographical elements in it. In The Writing of Fiction she argues against the autobiographical nature of fiction and says that "the autobiographical (natural) gift does not seem very closely related to that of fiction."² (Parenthesis mine) Novel is not a dramatized autobiography but it is an objective interpretation of subjective experiences. It is the absence of objective faculty that "sets apart the born novelist from the authors of self-confessions in the novel form".³ Often autobiographical books become masterpieces, but "if by the term 'art of fiction' be understood the creation of imaginary characters and the invention of their imaginary experiences and there seems to more convenient definition - then the autobiographical this is not strictly a novel, since no
objectively creative effort has gone into its making.

The relationship between emotions experienced and experiences objectified and narrated, is further exemplified in *Hudson River Bracketed*. When Vance Weston's short story enjoys immediate success because of its emotional intensity, Histo observes:

If he goes on relating the successive chapters of his own history, as they happen to him, they will be raw autobiography, or essays disguised as novels; but not real novels and he probably won't be able to keep it up long.

Fictional incidents must have their roots in personal experiences and the novelist must possess the extra-ordinary power to objectively recreate these experiences. Wharton possessed tremendous skill of transfiguring men and events with the power of her imagination into the realm of art. She could easily transform her private experiences into universal patterns.

Wharton directs her scathing attack on the so called modern experimentalists who consider the traditional form of novel as over-used and hence obsolete and who dread the traditional form for fear of losing originality. In *The Writing of Fiction* she writes:

True originality consists not in new manner but in a new vision. That new, that personal, vision is attained only by looking long enough at the object represented to make it the writer's own; and the mind which would bring
this secret germ to fruition must be able
to nourish it with an accumulated wealth
of knowledge and experience.

It is this new vision of life which emerges from the artist's
experience and imagination that an artist can be original.
Though Wharton's aversion to the stream of consciousness
method is not fully justifiable her concept of the originality
of an artist is quite sound.

For the second question - how far has he succeeded? -
much has to be said. For convenience' sake it shall be
discussed at a later time. The third question which is
dependent on both - was the subject chosen worth representing? -
Wharton's answer seems to be that it depends upon the
intensity of the impression. Put in simple terms it means
that the artist's impression of life must be worth-representing.
Since the artist is a person of better perception than the
average reader, his impression of life, if truly depicted
will always be worth-representing. Higher the perceptual
power of the artist, more valuable the work of art will be.

An application of these principles to the novels of
Mrs. Wharton will reveal both her strength and weakness.
The impression of life that she derives from her rich
experience is direct, personal and intense. But her view
of life as limited to her immediate world. She was a born
aristocrat and lived her life in luxury and did not experience
want. Since she was born and brought up in the aristocratic
circle her view of life is limited within the well-demarcated boundaries of that world. But, like Richardson and Jane Austen, she makes a virtue of her limitation and presents a segment of life which is intimately known to her rather than a vast world outside her experience.

Robert Morss Lovett observes that there are three major principles which determine Wharton's novelistic pattern: "morality, culture and class."¹ No one will question the fact that Mrs. Wharton's principal concern is with morality, culture and class, though she has written about myriads of subjects. Even while analysing the cultural, moral and class values of her generation, she restricts herself mainly to the upper class society of New York, its class conflicts and cultural deteriorations.² This particular segment of society, into which Wharton was born and from which she got her nourishment was intimately known to her and she was well aware of each and every detail of its manners and morals. Most of her principal characters are born aristocrats and it is when she describes the aristocratic life that she is at her best.

The House of Mirth is basically the story of the downfall of Lily Bart, a born aristocrat. Lily inherits aristocratic tradition but she lacks enough money to sustain her life in aristocratic circles. Her conflicting mind refuses to come to terms with the corrupt society and she perishes in her struggle with the social morality and class values.
In all the stories of Edith Wharton, except in
*Ethan Frome*, *Summer* and *Bunner Sisters*, the aristocratic circleorms the milieu. Throughout her life she had to suffer the cold criticism that she was a gold fish living in her high-built palace and peeping over the life below. It is true that Wharton moved in the upper layer of society, but this is no justification to say that she did not experience real life. Born aristocrats lived a life alien to the common multitudes and no satisfactory answer has been given to the vexed problem whether the upper class society makes a thin soil for fiction.

Wharton is sufficiently justified in selecting the upper class society for the setting of her novels because she believes that the upper class society formed the most complex attitude towards life and the most intricate personal relationships. She writes in "Tendencies in Modern Fiction":

... and in America, for instances, our young novelists are praised for choosing the "real America" as the scene of their fiction as though the chief intellectual and moral resources of the country lay among the poor masses of the Appalachians or their counterparts in other regions... It is obviously much easier to depict rudimentary characters moved into the grave by the same, unchanging human instincts and prejudices, than to follow the actions of persons in which education and opportunity have developed a more complex psychology.

Thus, in selecting the upper class society Wharton thinks that she is dealing with the "more complex" psychology of her characters which is much more complex by morality, class
and conventions. In other words Wharton's novels deal with the psychological complexities of living in a complex society which is governed by a handful of conventions and class prejudices.

It has been a fashion among Wharton's critics to compare her with Jane Austen, who also dealt with her limited world. Both the writers possessed similar powers of observation coupled with masterly use of irony. But the superiority of Jane Austen is apparent for the simple reason that the upper class society Jane Austen dealt with was stable, self-perpetuating and permanent. But the New York society which Mrs. Wharton inherited was "transitory, imitative and sterile." Thus Jane Austen's society was universal in its application while Wharton's New York was limited to a particular moment in history which has become non-existent.

The subject of the novel having selected, the novelist's next task is to give expression to his vision. In The Writing of Fiction she gives certain suggestions as to how the artist can express his vision successfully. The answer to the question - How far has he succeeded? - depends upon the artist's ability to transform his vision to the readers in such an inspiring way that it becomes real. All art is a representation, a creation of the mind, but in conscious form of the shapeless surroundings of emotions and "the novelist works in the imagination of what the object he is trying to render is really like." Those who are concerned with soul analysis
and the writer has to use "the signs which soul uses to express itself." 12

What are the signs that the soul uses to express itself? How can the author get into contact with the psychic process of his characters. Obviously it is possible through the imagination of the artist, but the problem is how can the artist express his imaginative perceptions in concrete terms. The answer is closely related to Wharton's concept of technique. In "Criticism of Fiction" she writes:

The fundamental difference between the amateur and the artist is the sense of technique; that is in the broadest meaning the necessity of form. 16

Elsewhere she defines form as:

The order, in time and importance, in which the incidents of the narrative are grouped, and style as the way in which the incidents of the narrative are presented, not only in the manner sense of language, but also, the manner in which they are grasped and coloured to form reality, the narrator's mind, and given inside his words . . . Style in the sense of the most personal ingredient in the combination of which any work of art as a whole.

Wharton's notion that a relationship between form and style is quite noteworthy. As to an arrangement of incidents in time and sequence Wharton's fundamental objection to the stream of consciousness method lies in this particular fact that an event is not necessarily arranged giving least respect to order.
Wharton is a formal writer in the full sense of the term. She firmly believed that it is the duty of the novelist to select and arrange certain incidents rather than to present life in a chaotic manner. In her own lifetime the novel form had undergone a thorough change and the less talented writers tried to put anything they wanted under the title of novel. The novel form has become the easiest medium for the widest hearing for the artist's ideas and a remunerative market for his prose. Thus the novel in the most serious form has become a sort of anthology of the author's views.

To the generation nurtured on James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, even the age old definition of novel as a work of fiction containing a good story about well-drawn characters, has become unacceptable because it is, they believe, pitifully simple. Modern novel is marked for its absence of a story and a well-knit plot construction. The principal objection they raise against the traditional form of novel is that it is worn out because too many people have used it.

Mrs. Wharton contends that the novel has a fixed form, though not a static one, and it has been "unceasingly and irresistibly modified by having new life poured into them". The originality of the artist consists in the "incassant renovation of old types by new creative action." In the Criticism of Fiction she argues:

The novelist may pick as much as he pleases for the form of a novel, the unemphasized rotation of a certain stretch of a certain runnel of the stream of things but why has he chosen that particular runnel?"
The simple answer to this question is that it reflected more things he thought worth reflecting. Even those novelists who are averse to the organic composition of novel will exercise this selection in choosing a subject. If so, Wharton asks, "why not push it to the last point of its exquisite powers of patter-making, and let it extract from raw life the last drop of figurative beauty?" Modern fictional method, in her view, has gone back to the French realists who invented the once famous 'slice of life' — or the "exact photographic reproduction of a situation or an episode, with all its sounds, smells, aspects realistically rendered, but with its deeper relevance and its suggestions of a larger whole either unconsciously missed or purposively left out." She equates the slice of life to the stream of consciousness method but with one difference. Unlike the former, the latter has the advantage of noting down mental as well as the visual reactions, but both resemble in "setting them down just as they come, with a deliberate disregard of their relevance in the particular case, or rather with the assumption that their very unsorted abundance constitutes in itself the author's subject." Both the 'slice of life' and the stream of consciousness writers are using the novel form in the most artless manner, says Wharton. He is enchanted by the new pictures in the artistic use of fiction but he is least concerned with its architechttonics and the ultimate significance that comes out of such modelling. The modern novelist is eager
to use all the colours at his disposal and he puts them
together in the most reckless manner. According to Wharton
when the artist is in possession of the stuff of a work of
art, the need to teach him how to model becomes all the more
absolute.

Wharton's novels on the whole follow a set pattern
and enjoy technical perfection. Her fiction forms an organic
whole rather than loosely connected episodes. In this
connection it is worthy to remember her famous dictum that
the last pages of her fiction are apparently evident in
the first few pages. Most of Wharton's critics agree that
her novels follow this rule. Irving Howe, for example,
concludes that for Wharton "the novel is essentially a
fixed form, a closely designed, if somewhat heavy container
of narrative the presence of which we are never invited
to forget." 21

This formal perfection is most conspicuously evident
in The House of Mirth. In the beginning scene of the story
we see Lily Bart paying a visit (innocently) to Selden's
bachelor apartment - an act of digression from the accepted
social convention. To hide her visit she is forced to tell
a lie to Simon Rosedale and from this moment onwards Lily's
good name is in peril. The subsequent plot of the story
directly proceeds from this and finally Lily is doomed on account
of baseless scandals.

How can an author achieve such an organic wholeness
of incidents. No doubt, it is possible only through careful selection. The modern experimentalists like Conrad and Faulkner try to pack each and everything in novel form. But Wharton believes that "no bag is big enough to contain the whole universe and the content of the biggest bag is only, in the last resort, a selection." The creative intelligence of the artist has to sort out his constructive system and an artist must have a conviction to guide him in doing so.

That Wharton's theory of the art of fiction is far remote from the typical practice of contemporary English and American novelists. Though the English fiction has many distinguished and worthy qualities, it lacks the sense of form. The modern tendency has been towards a loose agglomeration of incidents and characters centering around the hero. On the contrary Wharton's novels have finely-knit plot construction and she happily accepts, at least in this respect, Henry James as her master.

However, Wharton gains this artistry at the expense of spontaneity. In her fiction we come across numerous instances of chance incidents. No doubt, life is composed of chance experiences but when so many of them are crowded within the limited range of a novel's time span, it is natural that one may doubt the author's deliberate hand behind it. For example, it is mere chance that the easily believing Aunt Peniston turns out to be the guardian of Lily. Lily's encounter with Simon Rosedale when she came out of Selden's bachelor apartment is not sufficiently accounted for.
More obvious of its kind is the sudden emergence of the
sweeper woman from nowhere just to take notice of Lily.

In The Fruit of the Tree Mrs. Westmore, the owner of the
Westmore Mills, happily turns out to be a childhood friend
of Justine Brent. More important is the sudden and unexpected
entrance of Dr. Wyant exactly at the moment when Justine
was administering an overdose morphine to Mrs. Westmore.

Why on earth did Ethan and Mattie find the empty coast
awaiting them at that fatal moment? Such chance occurrences
are the part of the author's intricate design and it hinders
the smooth flow of spontaneity in the sequence of incidents.

Though Mrs. Wharton was not a technically audacious
writer who clung to her conservative views about the
technique of fiction and who resisted the literary experimentalism
of her contemporaries, she realized its thematic and ironic
possibilities more than most of her contemporaries did. In
her novels she employed an exacting standard of technical
perfection unknown to her contemporaries. Although the
general pattern of her fiction remains to be same - the well
wrought-out plot construction - she makes use of various methods
to unfold her stories.

In the course of which the story is told through a series
of short intesnely plotted episodes, one logically leading to the
other and finally reaching in the catastrophe. It is a brilliant
success in the organic unity of these and structure with a
clearly defined beginning, middle and end. In the opening
movement of the novel the murder scene and psychic
problems are clearly outlined. The Yelverton family attitude
her modesty in the middle of the story can be viewed as the
climax of the story and thereafter the story naturally moves
towards the inevitable catastrophe.

In *The Fruit of the Tree* the short episodes give place
to the long-arm method in order to depict the fortunes of
the hero and the heroine and their relations to each other
and to the society. She gained necessary immersion in her
material and equally important detachment from it. But
one cannot claim *The Fruit of the Tree* as a technical success.
The introduction of a secondary theme - the validity and
justification mercy-killing - is quite unusual in Wharton's
fiction and it hinders the reader's involvement in the main
theme. The hero's and heroine's shared desire to improve
the working condition of the labourers and the complex
marital relation between the two are put subsidiary and the
reader's perception of the moral validity of their actions
wavers inconsistently. Above all the change in Amherst's
attitude towards Justine when he comes to know Justine's
role in administering morphine in the name of mercy-killing
is not sufficiently accounted for.

In *The Custom of the Country* Wharton makes an effective
use of irony. Undine Spragg's earlier relation with Elmer Moffatt
is concealed from the readers and it provides a little sense
of mystery. In *The Age*, the most Jamesian of Wharton's novels,
concealment takes the other form. Much of the earlier relations
of the characters are made known to the readers but they are
only gradually understood by the characters. The remain
adventure of Sophie Viner and George Darrow is portrayed at full length in the beginning of the story. Although the readers become aware of the full significance of their relationship, the other characters in the novel stumble in the darkness of ignorance. Similarly the engagement of Darrow and Anna Leath is concealed from Sophie and that of Sophie and Owen Leath from Darrow. Each revelation leads to further complication and every incident is arranged brilliantly symmetrical. One weak point in this novel is that after the final revelation of the hitherto hidden facts, the story goes underground and the author fails to sustain the reader's interest in the subsequent course of action.

The Reef is the most elaborately wrought of Wharton's novels. The characters sometimes retreat into the background but Wharton's art is most conspicuous here, especially in the organic treatment of scenes. Henry James praised it for its psychological unity and intensity and compared it to the classical drama. Like a classical drama The Reef is divided into five equal books and each scene organically develops from the preceding one and naturally results in the succeeding one. Though the novel lacks in dramatic power and verisimilitude, in it Wharton has achieved the classical unities of time, place and action and a remarkable precision and compression of theme.

It is true that Wharton achieved classical perfection in The Reef, but it was at the cost of the ultimate significance
and the author's moral vision of the novel. In *The Age of Innocence* she compensated all what she could not achieve in *The Reef*. It is the most consistently articulated novel ever written by Wharton. The point of view in this novel is narrower than either *The House of Mirth* or the *Custom of the Country*, but in it she exerts a superb control over her subject. As Margaret B. McCullough rightly observes:

Seldom has her mastery of technique been equaled in a twentieth-century novel; and she reveals her abundant resources as a novelist most remarkably in marshaling the incidents of her plot, in writing dialogue with infinite nuances, in conceiving fully wrought characters in controlling the point of view and in maintaining a complex tone composed of irony and enthusiasm.23

*The Age of Innocence* is a masterpiece in plot construction. Though the complication in the thematic design is not strikingly ingenious, the novelist has succeeded to keep a firm grip over the readers and sustain their interest to the last degree. She achieves this rare feat by arranging a well-knit sequence of scenes. As Joseph Warren Beach observes, with a very few exceptions each chapter presents only one scene and each scene is important in the general plan of the central action.24 Every scene has Archer as its focal point and it is through his eyes that we see most of the action.

*Newland Archer* is the point-of-view character in the novel. But Wharton does not limit herself to her theory that there should be only one point-of-view character and the entire action must be unfolded through his analysis. Though Archer is the main point-of-view character in the
novel, he is a man of limited intelligence and, therefore, he has to be reminded of the standards to which he has given a rather shallow interpretation. On several occasions Archer's view is supplemented and given its tragic dimension by Ellen's precise and honest observations. Frequently Archer's perspectives are compared with that of May and Ellen. Significantly she has even utilised the viewpoints of secondary characters like Catherine Mingott, Sillerton Jackon, Larry Lefferts and Monsieur Réviere, though they are relatively uninvolved in the principal action. Above all Wharton makes excellent use of the writer's own interpretations of the importance of the standards by which the society moves. Thus in *The Age of Innocence* her concern with maintaining a single point of view is less absolute than in *The Reef*. Inspite of all her theorising Wharton seems not to be rigid regarding the concept of limiting the point of view to a single character.

If the artist possesses the necessary perceptive power to choose his subject and the technical skill to select and arrange in a general pattern there arises another serious problem, "the particular lack of proportion between the powers of vision and expression."25 How good the subject be, if the author lacks the necessary expressive capacity all his efforts will amount to nothing. The plot within itself must contain all the characters as well as author's particular vision of them. This is precisely what Eliot means when he says that *Hamlet* is an artistic failure. Shakespeare's vision
of Hamlet was much more than the plot of the story could contain. As a result he failed to convey the full significance of his perception to the readers. The only remedy for such discrepancy between powers of vision and expression is to "narrow one's vision to one's pencil." This simply means that the writer's power of vision must be in proportion to his technical skill of expression. A novelist may have the power of perceiving life in its totality but if he lacks the necessary expressive power his perception will have an abortive end, as a "gold mine is worth nothing unless the author has the machinery for extracting the ore." Thus each subject must be considered first in itself, its significance in human life, and then its relation to the novelist's power of extracting from it what it contains.

Mrs. Wharton, for the most part, thoroughly adhered to the principle of narrowing down her vision in proportion to her expressive skill. There are a few exceptions, but mainly she wrote about the people with whom she lived and whose life she carefully studied. She was every inch in touch with them, their manners, way of behaviour and characterial complexities. She was a brilliant student of character analysis and brooded over her subject for months before starting to write. This meditation and brooding over the people of her imagination enabled her to narrow her vision within the reach of her expressive talents. This is particularly true of those novels written between 1910 and 1925. *The Valley of Decision* and *The Fruit of the Tree*
suffered a set back mainly because the author was not intimate with her subject. In *The Valley of Decision* she tried to re-capture the Italian background, but failed because she did not have the necessary immersion in her subject. The purpose of writing *The Fruit of the Tree* was to keep the large audience she got after the success of *The House of Mirth* and in it she tried to depict the industrial and economic problems of the day, a theme which was unfit for Mrs. Wharton. The theme of these two novels out-grew Wharton's talents. Barring them all her novels enjoy a proportionate balance between the author's perceptive vision and her expressive capacity.

**Characterization**

There can be no gainsaying to the age-old dictum that the characters in a novel must be living. Since the novel deals with life and certain characters the inexplicable relation between the two is above dispute. Though Mrs. Wharton has some reservations regarding the 'living character' concept in short story she pleasantly accepts it when applied to the novel. "The technical difference between the short story and the novel," she emphatically declares, is "that situation is the main concern in a short story, character of the novel". In short stories the main effect is produced by the dramatic rendering of a situation. The characters may not be mere puppets, but they are little less than individual human beings. Hence in a short story the action is more important than the characters. The form of the novel is best suited for the unfolding of a personality. His character is complex. 
and his progression through a succession of changing circumstances. In Wharton's longer tales we find the characters getting an upper hand over the situations in which they are presented. This is not to suggest that Wharton's novels are devoid of exacting situations and attracting circumstances; but that the chief interest in her novels centres around her characters.

The House of Mirth, for example, deals with a society that has ceased to exist. Modern readers of the novel may not be interested in the milieu she has depicted. But what gives life to The House of Mirth is the complex character of its heroine, Lily Bart. Wharton has given universal significance to the particular instance of Lily Bart and she finds a permanent place in American literature even among the people by whom The House of Mirth has been forgotten. Likewise The Age of Innocence finds a permanent place among the American classics on account of its brilliant characterization especially of Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska and their mutual self-denial. It is true that the sacrifice is forced upon them by the combined pressure of conventions for the sake of society and its continuum, but, ironically their sacrifice results in a better understanding of each other. In the end they come to the painful recognition that they can love each other only by giving up each other.

It seems that the superiority of Edith Wharton over her contemporaries lies in her skill in making her characters dominate the situation. The situations, on the other hand,
are so conspicuously presented that they, in their turn, illuminate both the past and future of the respective characters. Her characters behave like real flesh and blood beings and they are active, potent forces in changing their courses of life. Fulvia Vivaldi sacrifices her love for Duke Odo and sends him back to his duty and Madame de Treymes whole-heartedly betrays her family for the sake of an ideal. Ann Eliza Bunner turns down her only chance of romance for the sake of her sister and Sophie Viner vanishes from the scene when her presence would have given her a future though at the cost of others!. The striking example of the moral courage of Wharton's characters comes when Lily Bart puts down her temptations for rehabilitating herself for the sake of her lover and when Ellen Olenska renounces Archer and sends him back to May. In all these situations, the other course of action than the chosen one would have changed the entire course of their life. But these characters prefer to retreat into oblivion than to eke out a life at the expense of others.

Comparatively, Mrs. Wharton's heroines are better portrayed than her heroes. The only exception to this is Ethan Frome. This may be because of the fact that Wharton's view is largely feminine and that while creating a female character she partially identifies with them. This is not to suggest that Wharton's heroes are lifeless puppets or mere types. To be sure, there are fully drawn male characters like Newland Archer, Lawrence Selden, Ethan Frome, Duke Odo
and to a lesser degree John Amherst, George Barrow, Vance Weston. But even these heroes are, to a certain extent, controlled by more consistent feminine characters.

In depicting the major characters Wharton follows the lead of George Eliot and her psycho-analytical method. In the fully developed characters of her novels she exerts a voluntary control over their mental process. For the minor characters she adopts the rapid, impressionistic method. In both the cases she reveals the inner complexities of her characters in a flash of insight. Robert Mores Lovett observes in this connection:

In bringing the characters together in attitudes of significant opposition, in grouping them with effective stage-craft, Mrs. Wharton displays highly conscious artistry, the complex result of her predecessors and contemporaries, English and French. Of dramatic scene, in which the characters are kept alive before us by speech, gesture, action, absorbing our attention by significant touches, she is a master. Like a playwright she makes effective use of tension when a single person is thrown into opposition to a united group. 28

This is high praise, indeed. But one is tempted to agree with Lovett when reads The House of Mirth, The Custom of the Country, The Reef and The Age of Innocence. Undine Spragg's social reception at the Dagnots and the expatriate Ellen Olenska's social rehabilitation in New York and among the members and relatives of her family are portrayed in brilliant strokes. The superb example of such successive confrontation and its artistic rendering is to be found in The Reef where
George Barrie's "The Viper of the Wirdes" and his "Viner, Anna Leath," Owen Loop and Wee Hey Chantilly family receive the effect of dramatic climax.

USE OF DIALOGUE IN FICTION.

In The Writing of Fiction Wharton remarks:

The use of dialogue in fiction seems to be one of the few things that should be fairly definite. A rule may be laid down that it should be reserved for the climactic moment, and regarded as the spray into which the great wave of narrative breaks in outgoing towards the watcher on the shore. The running and scattering of the wave, the cascading of the spray, even the material right of the page broken into short, uneven paragraphs, all help to reinforce the contrast between such climax and the smooth effaced gliding of the narrative intervals, and the contrast enhances that sense of the passage of time for the producing of which the writer has to depend on his intervening narration. The sparing use of dialogue not only serves to emphasize the crisis of the tale but to give it as a whole a greater effect of continuous development.

Wharton is not in favour of too much use of dialogue in narrative, but she believes that its artistic use in the proper place and in proper manner will always heighten the dramatic effect. Dialogue in a novel is a precious adjunct and it should be nothing more than an adjunct. The artist must skilfully and sparingly use it and if properly used, it will act 'as the drop of condiment which flavours the whole dish.' She is well aware that too much use of dialogues creates a sort of round-aboutness and an air of artificiality.
Mrs. Wharton is a grand master in the art of depicting human speech in its most intricate rhythm. Her dialogue is so condensed and so accurate that we do not feel it out of place. Sometimes she mixes up dialogue with narration in order to provide a better understanding of the situation. The following citation from The Reef is a fine example of such mixing-up:

She looked up, and their eyes exchanged meanings for a minute. Her Gaze was as clear as a boy's.

"Oh, it is not that," she exclaimed, almost impatiently: "It's not people I'm afraid of. They've never put themselves out for me - why on earth should I care about them."

He liked her directness as he had never liked if before. "Well, then what is it? Not me I hope?"

"No, not you; I like you. It's the money. With me that's always the root of the matter. I could never yet afford a treat in my life."

"Is that all." He laughed, relieved by her naturalness.

The author's own comment incorporated with the short dialogues of the characters is highly effective and it throws side light into the character's inner-most feelings.

A few of Wharton's critics consider that the point she most brilliantly plays in her novels is the episode. Wharton herself has objected to it as she regarded episode as one of the many links in the commentation of the plot of novel, though in a short story it is the form and the substance and the very thing itself. Some others consider
Wharton's brief and exact dialogue as the strongest point in her game. There is another group of critics who prefer Wharton's own observations and comments which are intermingled with the dialogue. Still others prefer the dramatic rendering of situations and incidents. To an unbiased reader a careful reading of Wharton's novels reveals that all these elements are inextricably interwoven and they together contribute to the fineness of her fiction. Her novels are a group of episodes artistically rendered, she uses pithy and witty dialogues in order to heighten the dramatic interest in the episodes, and she makes her own comments and observations to heighten the complexities of characters and situations.

Although Wharton takes special care to avoid round-aboutness in dialogue, sometimes her favoured characters talk too much in her own epigramatic style. No doubt, the dialogue explicates the meaning of the situation more convincingly and it charges the dramatic scene with the significance of artistic design. But such a feat is achieved at the cost of realism.

However, Wharton never puts sermons and orations into the mouth of any of her characters. Her dialogues are short and to the point and worthy of the situation. In other words Wharton's dialogues are the artistic representation of actual conversations.

Wharton has been a brilliant student of human dialogue
and she wonderfully mastered the speech variations of class to class and person to person. She introduces slangs and other vernacular speech rhythms and other variations whenever the situations demanded so. She was well aware of the natural rhythm of formal utterances of the denizens of the New York aristocracy, and the redolent slang of the philistines. This knowledge helped her to create an air of realism in dialogue.

Wharton holds the view that there are two central difficulties in the construction of a novel. The first is verisimilitude and the control of the narrative point of vision and the second is to "produce on the reader the effect of the passage of time." She believed that the subject in itself must contain the point of vision in the novel. Once the novelist has chosen his subject the difficulty he faces is to decide to which of his characters the episode in question happened. Individual human experience will be different from person to person and the same experience could not have happened in a particular way to more than one. To comply with this difficulty the usual practice the novelists adopt is to shift the point of vision from one character to another. However, Wharton opines that the point of vision must be shifted from one character to another as seldom as possible and the depiction of the point of view should be in appropriation to the register of the intelligence of that character.
Her avoidance of the first person narrative technique may be the result of such a belief. She knew that a character, how-so-ever intelligent he may be, cannot enter into the deeper recesses of his own heart and efforts to analyse one's own emotions always receive subjective colouring.

In spite of her theorising Wharton seldom observes this rule rigidly. As mentioned earlier, in *The Age of Innocence*, her most technically perfect novel, Archer is the central point of view character, but his observations are supplemented with what that of Ellen, May, and the comments of the author. Her short stories on the whole observe this rule.

As has already mentioned in her fiction situations and characters are inextricably interrelated and the central point of view if limited to that particular character in that particular situation. She writes:

In the birth of fiction, it is sometimes the situation, the 'case' which first presents itself to the mind, and sometimes the characters who first appear, asking to be fitted into a situation. I have often speculated on the condition likely to give priority to one or the other, but I don't if fiction can be usefully divided into novels of situation and of character, since a novel, if worth anything at all, is always both at once, in inextricable combination. I can only say that in my own case a situation sometimes occurs to me first and in others a single figure suddenly walks into my mind... - though perhaps in short stories the situation, in novels one of the characters, is most likely to appear first.34

Wharton's theory that in her fiction the characters 'first
appear, asking to be fitted into a situation, sometimes proves to be faulty. In her fictional practice the characters and the situations in which they are presented are inseparable and thereby the point of view of that character is best fitted in that particular situation. But a novel is composed of so many characters and so many situations. The concept that the point of view of a single character must be kept all-through the novel seems to be faulty.

The second difficulty that the novelist faces is to keep a firm hold on the passage of time and to communicate its effect on the readers in such a way that "the modifying and maturing of the characters shall seem not an arbitrary sleight-of-hand but the natural result of growth in age and experience." This is the greatest mystery of the art of fiction. The novelist has to keep a firm hold on the lives of his characters that they "emerge modified and yet themselves from ripening or disintegrating years."36

*Ethan Frome* is an ideal example in producing the effect of time on characters and at the same time keeping the main lines of the characterial growth. Lockwood, the engineer narrator of the story gathers the tale of Ethan bit by bit and narrates it for the readers. This main action of the story happened thirty years before the narrator enters Starkfield. The passage of time as well as the development of the characters of Ethan, Mattie and Zeena are very tactfully conveyed to the reader. The difference between the present and the past is emphasized by introducing the narrator and the details of each and every incident is reduced to a minimum.
Perhaps the most difficult task of the novelist is to select the opening incident which would naturally lead to further complications. In Mrs. Wharton's case a note of inevitableness is always sounded at the very beginning of her story and the characters simply move forward to their inevitable doom. The fate of the characters is settled beyond rescue. Once the story begins the characters move inevitably to their destiny and the author becomes merely a spectator and a recording instrument. She despises those writers who change the fate of their characters in order to comply with the wish of the readers. "What then was their relation to their subject?", she asks. The note of inevitability must be pre-planned and it must culminate in the final few pages of the novel. "About no part of a novel should there be a clearer sense of inevitability than about its end; and any hesitation, any failure to gather up all the threads, shows that the author has not let his subject mature in his mind." In order to strike this note of inevitability the novelist, at every stage, has to depend on the 'illuminating incident.' The aim of this illuminating incident is to throw light into the inner meaning of each situation. Wharton explains this illuminating incident as the most 'personal element' of the author's vision and "direct proof of the quality of his imagination." In the end of the novel the illuminating incident should send its ray backward, 'a long enough shaft to meet the light cast forward from the first page'. This is another way of saying that the end of the novel must remind us the earlier incidents from the very beginning.
THE SHORT STORY.

Wharton's essay, "Telling a Short Story" makes a considerable point in the standard of distinction between a short story and a novel. As mentioned earlier the situation is the main concern in a short story and character in a novel. A novel is characterized by the gradual unfolding of the inner life of the characters whereas a short story mainly depends upon the significance of a particular situation. Since action is more important in a short story it can be viewed as the direct descendant of the epic or the ballad.

The chief obligation of the short story writer is to give the reader a sense of security. Every phase should act as a signpost and it should lead the reader to where the author wants him to reach. Once the confidence of the reader is gained the author must take special care not to distract and splinter his attention.

A careful selection of the subject is all the more important in a short story than in a novel. A short story is not, and can never be, a condensed novel and it is the story writer's essential gift to find out whether the particular subject is suited for the proportion of a short story or a novel. Wharton is well aware that a hard and fast rule can not be formulated in this regard; but she gives certain tentative suggestions to be used as the guiding principle. As suggested earlier, the novel form is appropriate when the development of the character's
inner complexities has to be dealt with. The short story, on the other hand, concentrates rather on the moral drama at its culmination, and the single retrospective flash should sufficiently light up the hidden recesses of the character. If the subject is so complex and each successive phases so interesting as to show the duration of time and the growth of the character, then the novel form is more appropriate.

In writing a novel the most difficult task of the writer is to end his story, suggesting a sense of inevitability.

On the contrary, in a short story the writer's main concern is how to begin the story in the most appropriate manner.

"The rule that the first page of the novel," Wharton writes," ought to contain the germ of the whole is even more applicable to the short story, because in the latter case the trajectory is so short that flash and sound nearly coincide."

Since the situation is more important in a short story it is all the more difficult to situate the story in the proper place. A good deal of meditation is necessary before selecting the situating incident. The narrator must brood on his subject until it becomes a part of himself and then he must recreate it with as minimum strokes as possible.

The real task of a short story writer is to "suggest illimitable air within a narrow space."

Wharton's story "The Dilettante" is a very good example of her craft of introducing an exact situation. The story is
very short and the episode is presented in the form of a dialogue. Since the nature of the dialogue does not explain the central situation which finally leads to the climax, Wharton retains a reflector, the other requirement of a short story, in the person of the central character, Mr. Thursdale. He is at the centre of the action. The choice of Thursdale as the reflector is ideal because his field of observation is within readily identifiable limits. Though he exactly comprehends the situation he only insufficiently serves the center of consciousness. Much of the action of the story is controlled by Verian. Yet "The Dilettante" exhibits an artistry more intact which is seldom found in American literature.

Stanley J Kozikowski, in making a comparative analysis of Wharton's "The Dilettante" and Henry James' "The Two Faces" observes:

"Its ("The Dilettante") central metaphor pointing to its central technique, the story, as a "science of evasion," signals the finally effectuated paradox of its special artistry, its capacity, more so than James' story, to reveal what it most conceals."

It is this "suggesting what it conceals most" that mainly constitute Wharton's art in short story.

"The Other Two", which R.W.B. Lewis considers as the most neatly perfect story of Wharton, also centres around a particular situation. Waythorn, the third husband of Alice, in a dramatic scene meets both of her former husbands. But here, as in some of her other best short stories, Wharton's
artistry is more subtle and imaginative than her theory would lead us to expect. Her theory, that the selection of the crucial incidents from the general experience of life as the most important aspect of the short story, is at times put aside and she shows more skill, to borrow Margaret B. McDowell's words, "in recognising and interpreting such moments of significance." In "The Other Two" there is not a single stroke or a single phrase that the reader would afford to be changed. It is "a masterpiece of its kind, and a deliciously ironical apotheosis of conventionalism."

"A Journey" offers one of the strongest and bewildering situations that Wharton ever depicted. A woman, bringing her invalid hasbad home all on a sudden understands that her husband is lying dead in his berth. Fearing to be put off from the train, she hides the fact from others by pretending that he is too ill to be disturbed. The crucial moment arises when the train reaches her destination and the woman breaks down under the strain. The greatness of the story, as Cooper observes "depends upon the trick of choosing all details of structure with the idea of making each in turn add its share to the poignancy of the situation."

Although Mrs. Wharton strictly adheres to the rules laid down by her predecessors, she is one of those exceptional writers who cared little for the conventional rules of length and breadth of a short story. Her short stories are sometimes as long as a novelette and her novelettes can be easily expanded into full length novels. No hard and fast rule can be laid
down regarding the length of a short story, it simply depends upon the scope of the theme. Apparently Wharton writes to suit herself and she does it as it comes to her.

Technically Wharton belongs to that group of writers who strive for the classical ideal of perfection in artistry. She has evidenced her concept of the growth of an artist in the character of Vance Weston. In detailing the growth of Vance Weston from youth to maturity and from cultural rootlessness to a sense of continuity expressed in the concept of tradition, Mrs. Wharton's aim is to show that if the artist has to grow he must have his nourishment in a complex and traditional society.

The similarity between Wharton's concept of the ideal artist in Vance Weston and her artistic theory scattered in her critical writings is such that Louis Auchincloss happily identifies Vance as "an extension of Mrs. Wharton's vision of herself, freed from the impediments of her sex, generation, background and perhaps more importantly, freed of her own preoccupation with the details of decorating the physical world."47

Because of her inclination to tradition and continuity Wharton felt little sympathy with the new experimentalists. Though she had her own excellencies as a formal writer it was highly unfortunate that she turned a contemptuous eye on those new-wave writers who experimented with the stream-of-consciousness technique and the impressionistic method during the first half of the twentieth century.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION