Incestuous Wharton: A consideration of the theme

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Incestuous Wharton: A consideration of the theme

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University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 1991
INCESTUOUS WHARTON:
A CONSIDERATION
OF THE THEME

By
Laura Kathleen McBride

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MA
in

English

English Department
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
December, 1991
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University of Nevada
Las Vegas, Nevada
December, 1991
Abstract

Five of Wharton's novels and three of her unpublished fragments incorporate subtly incestuous themes. "Incestuous Wharton" explores cultural attitudes toward incest during Wharton's lifetime, and argues Wharton's use of incest reflects contemporary scientific and philosophical ideas.

Nineteenth century anthropologists had identified the development of incest taboos as the dividing line between savage and civilized human beings. A regression into incestuous behavior indicated a descent into animalism, and the repression of incest became intimately linked to maintaining social order. In England and America, social debates about tenement reform reflect a fear of incest. Sigmund Freud expanded on these early anthropological notions of incest in identifying incestuous desire at the heart of human sexuality.

In *The Reef* and *Summer*, Wharton toys with these scientific ideas about incest; the radically different way that *Summer* incorporates incestuous tension echoes Freud's more complex assumptions. In *The Reef*, Anna Leath upholds social order by rejecting her own sexuality. In refusing to marry Darrow, she takes a stand against the destabilizing forces of incestuous longing but loses her own chance at sexual fulfillment. In *Summer*, Charity
Royall's decision to marry her foster father allows her to create a stable social environment for her child and to participate in a potentially fulfilling adult relationship. Incest can be savage, as it is on the Mountain; it can also be the beginning of sexual maturity.

Three of Wharton's late novels, *The Mother's Recompense*, *Twilight Sleep*, and *The Children*, also incorporate incestuous tension, but largely as a means to entice the general public to read them.
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Edith Wharton died in 1937. She had written and sold more books than F. Scott Fitzgerald, Willa Cather, and Henry James combined, but her death ushered in a sort of literary silence about her works. She is known to have wondered what would happen to the body of her writing. "As my work reaches its close," she once remarked, "I feel so sure that it is either nothing, or far more than they know. And I wonder, a little desolately, which?" 1 Wharton probably did not intuit the problem that her work would present to later literary historians, for she walked a wobbly fence between popular fiction and literature. An educated woman who honored artistic integrity in others, Wharton was herself a curious amalgamation of hard-bitten businesswoman and literary ingenue. Wharton cherished literature but valued commercial success. She prided herself on being a shrewd negotiator, and she treated her work like a commodity for sale.

Amy Kaplan has suggested that Wharton is "at the intersection of the mass market of popular fiction, the tradition of women's writing, and a realistic movement that developed in an uneasy dialogue with twentieth century modernism." 2 In recent years, there has been a marked increase in critical attention to Wharton's writing, but few critics have matched Kaplan's astuteness in identifying her place in
a literary tradition. Feminist critics have searched Wharton's writing for signs of a woman-centered life view. Their interpretations are undermined by Wharton's unequivocal denunciations of her American sisters and her ambivalence about the women's movement of her own era. Likewise, some critics view Wharton's lifelong friendship with Henry James as an indicator of her desire to write in a similar vein. In doing so, they ignore Wharton's detailed remarks on the nature of fiction writing, in which she distances herself from James and chronicles her distaste of his late style.

Wharton marketed her books as if they were pulp novels. To make more money, she serialized her novels in magazines. She sacrificed unity, tension, and economy of language for speed and royalties. Wharton's novels should not be confused with the mass-produced pabulum that sustained so many magazines of her day. But there is much to be learned in recognizing that her novels shared an audience with this kind of work. As a businesswoman, Wharton wrote to make money. To make money, she wrote to please large numbers of readers.

Wharton's interest in the taste of the common reader colored the choices that she made about characterization, plot, and theme. The influence of popular prejudices, ideas, and fears permeates her novels. It is pellucid in any consideration of the incestuous tension
which underlies some of her widely-read books. To millions of turn-of-the-century American and English citizens, any hint of incest immediately evoked a set of shared cultural beliefs. These beliefs hinged on the notion that incest belonged to humankind's savage origins, and that the regression into incestuous behavior indicated a decline in social order. Sometimes called a novelist of manners, Wharton wrote of her characters' subtly incestuous desires because these desires reflected the individual beneath the social guise, and hinted at the pressures of maintaining a mannered world.
Preface Notes


4 In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton wrote that the "New Women" were a "monstrous regiment" of emancipated young women taught by their elders to despise the kitchen and the linen room, to substitute the acquiring of university degrees for the complex art of civilized living" (60). In *French Ways and Their Meaning* (1919) she stated: In circles where interesting and entertaining men are habitually present the women are not expected to talk much. . . Women (if they only knew it!) are generally far more intelligent listeners than talkers. . . for intelligent women will never talk together when they can talk to men, or even listen to them (25).

5 Louis Auchincloss, in *Edith Wharton: A Woman in Her Time* (New York: Viking, 1971), notes that Wharton never found solace in the woman's movement. Her "attitude in these matters was always ambivalent. For all her force of character, she never shook off the firm sense of propriety of old brownstone New York imbued in her by her mother and grandmother" (97). In 1912, Wharton was asked to write an article on the feminist movement. She declined, saying that she did not "feel prepared to deal with the question" (Joslin 201). For further comment on the controversial portrayal of Wharton as an early or even unconscious feminist, see Julie Olin Ammentorp.


7 Wharton was a stringent businesswoman when it came to the publication of her works. She insisted that her novels be published in magazines before they were published in book form, because serialization guaranteed a greater income. When her longtime publisher, Scribner's, could no longer afford to give her large royalties, she switched her allegiance to Appleton, a publisher who shared her bottom-line perspective on the market. See Lewis' biography, "Finances."

8 As early as 1925, critics began charging Wharton with a certain crass commercialism. Arguing that the plot of *The Mother’s Recompense* was predictable, one reviewer wrote that "no American writer, perhaps, has more thoroughly mastered the technique of turning out a best-seller." C. E. "Sterile Pain," *Forum* LXIV (July 1925): 154-155. Also, R. W. B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), pp. 506-509, and Marilyn French, "Muzzled Women," *College Literature* 14 (1987): 219-229. French contends that Wharton's contributions to war relief reduced her income and forced her to write novels which "she had to know were not her best work" in order to support "herself, her sister-in-law, and her many retainers in the style to which they had become accustomed" (224).
"A deep, instinctive understanding of animals;"

The Structuring of Passion and the Pull toward Incest

No conflict more succinctly captures the Wharton essence than the struggle between individual desire and social imperative, between the chaos of passion and the order of refinement. The many themes which critics have found in Wharton's life and work—the larger personality trapped by a smaller one, the woman writer in opposition to the genteel lady, the individual struggling to rise above social conformity—are all share a tension based on a tug-of-war between opposites. They seek a balance between passion and judgment, between sensuality and refinement, between raw experience and training.

Edith Wharton personally experienced sexual passion and its creative potential late in life. For more than a decade after her affair with Morton Fullerton, she gravitated toward the power of anti-social primitivism and reveled in the artistic possibilities of anarchic emotions. At the same time, she was compulsive about order. She spent her life designing interiors, creating impeccable gardens, arranging and rearranging the artifacts of her elegant world. Biographer Cynthia Griffin Wolff suggests that Wharton's quest for
order may have been the "most ardent passion" of her life; she describes Wharton's love for creating order as a "hard-won adult joy." During World War I, Wharton organized work houses, relief missions, shelters, and orphanages in a super-human effort to bring order to a ravaged country. "Order the beauty ever of beauty is" was the motto she chose for her book The Writing of Fiction.

In the long run, Wharton, a classicist by nature or experience or choice, sided with the need for a monolithic kind of social restraint over uninhibited emotional and physical freedom. Yet her finest writing explored the struggle in all its complexity. Again and again, she experimented with worlds and characters that struck new balances between the two.

During the forty years of Wharton's professional career, she explored the tension created by the socialization of an individual in a variety of ways. In The Age of Innocence, Newland Archer only partially chooses to conform to conventional mores. He is also trapped--by his Hamlet-like self-doubts and by Mae's well-bred patience with his procrastinations. Before he can act on his decision to run away with Ellen Olenska, he discovers that Mae is pregnant, and in the face of this much more profound social obligation, he acquiesces to tradition. In The Custom of the Country, Undine Spragg savagely trades husbands for social advantages, leaving behind a trail of forgotten children, suicidal lovers, and debts. She is a threat to social values, even as she embodies the plasticity of the social order. In five novels, The Reef, Summer, The Mothers
Recompense, Twilight Sleep and The Children, and three unpublished fragments, "Beatrice Palmato," "Desert's Edge," and "Cold Green House." Wharton uses incest to highlight this familiar tension. Because it was singularly reflective of the conflict between the raw individual and the cooked social being during her era, incest was a particularly elegant device for Wharton to choose. Incest spoke immediately and profoundly to European and American audiences at the turn of the century. It was a mystery which held the secrets of human nature. As such, it revealed volumes about the turn-of-the-century soul.

Unmentioned in contemporary discussions of her works and absent from the major criticism prior to the publication of Lewis' biography, incest as a theme in Wharton's writing has been treated by scholars only during the last fifteen years. Most of these recent studies echo an argument initially suggested by Wolff in her psychobiography of Wharton, A Feast of Words. Wolff believes that the incestuous implications in Summer and "Beatrice Palmato" are linked to Wharton's repressed childhood desires for her father. She draws on autobiographical fragments, biographical information, and echoes in the texts to argue that Wharton's aloof relationship with her mother created an unusually strong fantasy attachment to her father. By contrast, Wolff believes that the incestuous theme in The Mothers Recompense and Twilight Sleep reflects intergenerational conflict. Viewed from the perspective of the parent rather than the
child, incest in these works primarily reflects Wharton's concerns about aging and change (379).

Wolff's argument is both sensitively rendered and compelling. As such, it has influenced the general perception of the incest theme in Wharton's writings. It may be the primary reason that critics dealing with this subject invariably choose either to support Wolff's contention that the presence of incest is linked to Wharton's personal sexuality or to reject the notion that incest is the subject at all. No critic considers other possible factors for the presence of incestuous implications in her work.

During Wharton's lifetime, the incest taboo was widely perceived as the dividing line between primitive and civilized societies. Far more than a simple, if potent, moral transgression, the act of incest defined one's status as a human being. At stake when one raised the question of incest was nothing less than the right of societies to govern, the principle of the good of the group, and the control of violence.

Edith Wharton, as a novelist of manners and an upholder of a social system which had brought her wealth, prestige, and relative freedom, was particularly attuned to the underlying tensions surrounding the discussion of incest. At the same time, she was a sensitive woman who believed that her own late-blooming sexuality had profoundly altered her life and writing. In an unpublished biographical fragment, "My Life and I," Wharton wrote:
I always had a deep, instinctive understanding of animals, a yearning to hold them in my arms, a fierce desire to protect them against pain and cruelty. This feeling seemed to have its source in a curious sense of being somehow, myself, an intermediate creature between human beings and animals, and nearer, on the whole, to the furry tribes than to homo sapiens. 6

Wharton's fanciful description of herself as something between human and animal is remarkable considering the potency of the cultural ambivalence which swirled around this subject during her lifetime. In the post-Darwin age, the distinctions between human and animal were fraught with tension. At the heart of the issue were the scientific, political, and social debates about the meaning of incest in human history. For Edith Wharton, as for many of her contemporaries, incest symbolized the struggle between the raw, passionate, and idealistic individual and a monolithic, restrained, and history-preserving social order.
Chapter One Notes

1 Blake Nevius, *Edith Wharton* (Berkeley: U Cal P, 1953) was the first to recognize the themes of the larger personality trapped by the smaller and of the individual's conflict with social obligations. Cynthia Ozick, "Justice (Again) to Edith Wharton," *Commentary* (Oct 1976): 48-57, has contributed original ideas about Wharton's conflict as writer and socialite.


3 Wolff describes the incestuous implications of "Desert's Edge" and "Cold Green House" in *A Feast of Words*. Both works are available in the Beinecke Rare Book Library at Yale University.

4 Wolff draws the connection between what Wharton presents as her earliest childhood memory --- a walk with her father in which her hand "lay in the large safe hollow of her father's bare hand; her tall handsome father, who was so warm-blooded that in the coldest weather he always went without gloves" --- and the name (always significant in Wharton's fiction) which she gives to the father in her incestuous fragment, Mr. Palmato. Wolff describes this not as overt desire for the father, but the faint tracings of a core fantasy emerging in "Beatrice Palmato," (307).

5 Critical attention to the incest theme in Wharton is still a short list. In addition to Wolff, the following critics have recognized the theme: Adeline Tintner, "Mothers, Daughters and Incest in the Late Novels of Edith Wharton," *The Lost Tradition* (New York: Ungar, 1980), has written the only critical article directly aimed at incest. She describes the implications of incest in *The Mother's Recompense* and *Twilight Sleep* but adds little to the debate about its meaning or origin. First to publish the incestuous "Beatrice Palmato" was R. W. B. Lewis. Like Wolff, he attributed incestuous implications to Wharton's childhood fantasies. Wolff and Lewis shared notes during the writings of their contemporaneous biographies; Lewis, who was not particularly interested in the issue, may simply have assimilated Wolff's more carefully-considered argument. Sandra M. Gilbert, "Notes Toward a Literary Daughtersonomy," *Critical Inquiry* 11 (1985): 355-84 and Alan Henry Rose, "Such Depths of Sad Initiation," *New England Quarterly* 50 (1977): 423-39, have noted the presence of

6 The Wharton Archives, Beinecke Library, Yale University, New Haven CT, 22. Quoted in Wolff, p. 11.
The dividing line: Incest and the Human Animal

In the 1870's and 1880's, John Ferguson McLennan and Henry Lewis Morgan studied marriage laws in primitive cultures. McLennan, Morgan, and other early anthropologists associated incest with the creation of carefully defined social groups. They theorized that incest lay at the nexus of civilization and that incest taboos distinguished man from animal. In 1901, Emile Durkheim published his still-standard *Incest: The Nature and Origin of the Taboo*. This book legitimated early anthropological theories and linked them to large social questions about religion and human behavior.

Although these works were intended for the scientific community, the implications of their ideas quickly spread throughout society. This was due in part to a prevailing belief that scientific research could define ultimate truths ¹ and to what French philosopher Michel Foucault has described as the manipulation of science for the purpose of social control during the nineteenth century. Simply put, what was proven by scientific method carried enormous weight. The relatively obscure findings of
a small group of anthropologists became excellent fodder for cultural promulgation.

Early anthropological conclusions were publicly compelling in their absolute neatness: *all* human cultures passed through an early totem stage which initiated the concept of a family group: *all* cultures developed some form of incest taboo: the incest taboo was *the most* elemental factor separating man from animal. One historian of cultural attitudes toward incest during this period defines the prevalent beliefs this way:

Everything went back ultimately to the incest taboo. Before it, there was raw nature; after it, there was culture. Incestuous man was truly in a state of nature; post-incestuous man was removed "d'un seul coup" from nature. But the possibility of incest always lurked, like the red lantern of Prevert's poem, to tempt him back into his cultureless state. ²

One great reader of anthropology, and perhaps the most influential theorist of his age, was Sigmund Freud. Fascinated by the notion of incest as fundamental to the human condition, Freud began to evolve theories which linked incest to the psychological development of the civilized adult. By the early 1900's, Freud's theories of infantile sexuality argued for incest's absolute centrality in the formation of the human psyche. An individual's ability to live a civilized life was rooted in the resolution of infantile incestuous desire. By 1913, Freud had explicitly linked his psychoanalytic theories to anthropological studies; in *Totem and Taboo*, he
imaginatively recreated the psychological dilemmas of the first human family.

The popular impact of Freud's ideas was immense. 3 His works were translated into every major language; his theories were quickly popularized. Religious leaders incorporated his theories into sermons or delivered sermons vehemently denying them. In the early twentieth century Freud's theories were the regular subject of such commonplace American magazines as New Republic, Current Opinion, Scribner's, Forum, and Popular Science. 4 Edith Wharton once begged Bernard Berenson "not to befuddle" her friend Philomene "with Freudianism and all its jargon. She’d take to it like a duck to--sewerage." 5

Freud's theories amounted to a radical new understanding of human nature through the prism of sexuality. And not just any sexuality. In a way, Freud forced a recognition of incest on the American and European masses. Like concentric circles emanating from a rock dropped in a pond, Freud's ideas spread to people who did not know his name, to issues that had nothing to do with the medical treatment of neuroses, and to social structures which Freud himself had never considered. In the late 1800's and early 1900's, the fear of incest helped to change the course of tenement housing reform, a social problem which had plagued English and American reformers for decades.

In England, parliamentary lords, civil servants, and social reformers publicly proclaimed incest as a major social problem and
called for immediate housing reforms to help prevent its spread. As early as the 1860's, prominent civic leaders like Sir John Simon, medical officer of health to the City of London, and Lord Shaftesbury were descrying the prevalence of incest before special committees of Parliament. Simon reported families "styed together . . . in the promiscuous intimacy of cattle" whose acts were "ruffianly and incestuous." 

Shaftesbury spoke eloquently before Parliament:

> It is impossible, my Lords, to exaggerate the physical and moral evils that result from (living in single rooms no larger than eight feet by nine feet). . . . I would not for all the world mention the details of what I have heard, or . . . seen, in these scenes of wretchedness. But there are to be found adults of both sexes, living and sleeping in the same room, every social and domestic necessity being performed there; grown-up sons sleeping with their mothers, brothers and sisters, sleeping very often, not in the same apartment only, but in the same bed. My Lords, I am stating what I know to be the truth, and which is not to be gainsaid, when I state that incestuous crime is frightfully common . . . .

The English managed to assemble an impressive array of evidence for the link between tenement housing and incest. Over the next twenty-five years, the City Corporation, the Privy Council, Parliament, the 1882 House of Lords Select Committee on the Protection of Young Girls, the 1884-85 Royal Commission on the Housing of the Working Classes, and the 1888 House of Lords Select Committee on the Sweating System all heard testimony linking incest to overcrowding. John Horsley, chaplain of the Clerkenwell Prison, testified in 1882 that incest was "common." The Reverend Andrew Mearns published a reform tract, *The Bitter Cry of Outcast*
London, which asserted that "incest is common and no form of vice or sexuality causes surprise or attracts attention." 9

Slowly, this mounting body of evidence, systematically presented as within the domain of civil responsibility, reversed the cherished Victorian notion that government should not intrude in private homes. 10 By the turn of the century, the National Vigilance Association (NVA) and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) had found the key to turning debate into legal action. Linking anti-incest legislation to the politically acceptable cause of protecting young children, the NVA and the NSPCC pushed hard for a law prohibiting incest. In 1908, Parliament passed the "Punishment of Incest Act," which formally removed incest from the courts of the Church of England and into the realm of civil law. To prevent incest's encroachment, the English compromised a centuries-old ethic against using legal jurisprudence in private family matters. Similar requests for legislation had been rejected by Parliament in 1899-1900, 1903, and 1907. 11

In America, Jacob Riis, an amateur photographer turned activist, spent years touring, photographing, and describing the people and places which made up New York City's immigrant neighborhoods. In 1890, he published How the Other Half Lives, a book-length diatribe against slums and landowners. In the book, he called for practical reform and kept a systematic count of people, square footages, windows, and beds; often he referred to the "darkened bedrooms of the poor" and ominously to the consequences
of herding masses of people into inhuman sleeping arrangements. Riis alarmed a previously unimpressed public. He, and journalists like him, forced upper middle-class landowners in New York to institute housing reforms.

Incest, as a moral issue and a social problem, was not invented during the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. Nonetheless, the way in which incest was understood and manipulated reveals a historically specific perception of humanity. The catalyst for the reform of tenements lay in a compelling need to define and guard the borders which separated humans from animals. The force behind the interweaving of incestuous desire and social reform lay in the belief that the difference between the modern age and primitivism was the social and legal control of primitive sexual desire.

The language of social activists provides evidence for the link between incestuous acts and sub-human behavior. Archbishop Ireland wrote that "the strongest hold which animalism has over the race lies in sexual passion," and a medical officer of health, A. W. Blyth, reported that "in a great city there must and always will be produced a number of degraded forms deficient in intellect, relapses to wild man, possessing of all ... the moral obliquity ... of savages." Beatrice Webb tied social conditions to the deterioration of one's individual humanity:

The fact that some of my workmates—young girls, who were in no way mentally defective, who were, on the contrary, just as keen-witted and generous-hearted as my own circle of friends --- could chaff each other about having babies by their fathers and brothers, was a gruesome example of the effect of
A fascination with incest dominated scientific, social, and political debates in Europe and America throughout Wharton's life. Not satisfied with reports of incest taboos in distant cultures or incestuous liaisons in their own slums, anthropologists, explorers, and social historians sought out further examples. By the 1920's and early 1930's, when three of Edith Wharton's best-selling novels revolved around the unmistakable allure of incestuous desire, incest had also become standard fare in artistic circles. "The Oedipus complex," wrote D. H. Lawrence in 1921, "was a household word, the incest motive a commonplace of tea-table chat." In 1923, a French play, La Fille Perdue, went so far as to celebrate the elopement of a father and daughter to an island to where no one would know them. Although at least one reviewer complained that the ending was "abnormal, impossible and revolting," even he noted that "no protest of any kind was raised." By 1927, the French theater was reveling in Paul Ginistry's comedy, L'Ile Lontaine, which glorified incest among a family stranded on an island as a happy primitivism. In the 1920's and early 1930's, Faulkner published The Sound and the Fury (1929), Lawrence published Sons and Lovers (1922), Anais Nin wrote "The House of Incest" (1936), and Celine's Voyage au bout de la nuit (1932) appeared.
1 Thomas Laqueuer, "Orgasm, Gender and the Politics of Reproductive Biology," *The Making of the Modern Body* (Berkeley: U Cal p, 1987) describes the scientific method in the nineteenth century as "science being used to constitute social realities."


3 Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (New York: Random House, 1974) argues that the intimate connection between Freud and his culture is frequently misunderstood. The link between the cultural study of Freud and incest is tightened by her analysis of Freud's ideas within the context of the world about him.


9 Mears (London 1883), qtd in Twitchell: 140.

10 Even Lord Shaftesbury, whose fight for housing reform had frequently caused him to detail the horrors of incest, had rejected the notion that a solution could be found in legal action. "The evils you state are enormous and indisputable," he once replied to a social reformer's plea, "but they are of so private, internal and domestic a character as to beyond the reach of legislation, and the subject would not, I think, be entertained in either House of Parliament" (quoted in J. Pinchbeck and M. Hewitt, *Children in English Society*, 11 (1973), 622, cited in Wohl: 202).


12 Quoted in Wohl, pp. 202-203.


14 In 1915, an American scientist published an article on incestuous practices among early Mormon settlers (Theodore Schroeder, "Incest in Mormonism," *The American Journal of Urology and Sexology* 11 (1915): 409-416). Relying on standard anthropological methods, he catalogued the incidences and laws regulating intrafamilial marriages and quoted ministers sermonizing on the importance of Mormons marrying Mormons. In a tribute to the influence of Freud's ideas, he concluded that the practice of incest among Mormons represented a "fixation of psychosexual attitudes at the pre-adolescent level." He compared Mormon teachings to the "fables of primitive people" and described their religious belief as "manifestations of infantile sexuality." Despite his obvious debt to Freud, not to mention Durkheim or Darwin, the author cites none of these people as authorities. Testimony to the currency of the idea that incest marked the line between primitive and civilized lifestyles is the author's assumption that his conclusions were based on commonly-held beliefs.

Undercurrents of desire: Wharton's Particular Conception of Incest

Edith Wharton's world flexes just below the surfaces of her texts. The cultural imperative to understand the individual as an animal locked in a struggle between nature and nurture emanates from her work. It is perhaps nowhere more perfectly demarcated than in her use and manipulation of incestuous desire.

Integrated into novels as patently divergent as The Reef, which Henry James described as having a "psychological Racinian unity, intensity and gracility," 1 and Summer, a quick hot romance set in rural New England, incest maintains certain distinctive qualities throughout Wharton's canon. A prevalence of parent-child desire, rather than the sibling passion romanticized by poets like Shelley and Byron a century earlier, hints at the revelations of Freud and his ideas about infantile sexuality. A de-emphasis on blood ties and an absence of reference to genetic deformities recognize anthropological theories which linked incest taboos to socialization rather than biology. In Wharton, incestuous situations frequently de-stabilize traditional social and family structures. Similarly, nineteenth century anthropologists linked the development of the incest taboo to
the need to protect certain social orders. Again and again, Wharton tags subtly incestuous situations with prose which is uncharacteristically passionate, and which is rife with physical sensations and anarchic echoes.

In 1935, two years before her death, Wharton wrote Bernard Berenson that she "had an incest donnee up her sleeve that would make (the rest) look like nursery rhymes." In all probability, she was referring to the most shocking and explicitly erotic piece she ever wrote, the controversial "Beatrice Palmato" fragment. Written about 1919, "Beatrice Palmato" oozes sensuality. It graphically depicts the consummation of a love affair between a father and his daughter. "Beatrice Palmato" opens in a room "softly lit by one or two pink-shaded lamps" with a "lustrous black bear-skin rug on which a few purple velvet cushions had been flung." The attention to sensuous details—to fleshy colors and black hair, to the textures of objects—leads one to the immediate revelation of actual sex: "her burning lips were parted by his tongue. . . . his hands softly parted the thin folds of her wrapper."

Images of heat pervade. There is a fire in the room; hers are "burning lips," his are "fiery kisses." Her body is said to quiver "hotly" and his touch is "so fiery that already lightnings of heat shot from that palpitating centre." His penis is a "strong fiery muscle" and a "crimson flash." The heat images weave together Garden of Eden allusions in which he is the snake and she a flower. His tongue is "like a soft pink snake" which parts her lips and "insinuates itself"
between her teeth." His arm "had slipped under her back and wound itself around her;" his hand began to "slip up the old path." He tells her that he will "reap (the) fruit" of her husband's deflowering. Her clitoris is described as the "secret bud of her body and "that quivering bud" which "bursts into bloom." His fingers force her "tight petals softly apart" and she feels his tongue "pressing apart the close petals."

The fragment is only one thousand words long. It builds slowly and persistently to penetration. Subtle clues to the long history of the erotic relationship between father and daughter, to the daughter's unhappy experience with her husband, and to the reason why penetration has never before taken place are used to increase the sense of rising passion. Their familiar intimacy has been heightened by a long period of "privation" and by the fact that they have never seen each other in the light before. It is irresistibly erotic, and it is incest.

Unrelentingly passionate, "Beatrice Palmato" forces the reader to confront the traditional stereotype of Wharton as a cold and intellectual woman. Her lover, Morton Fullerton, once begged a would-be Wharton biographer to "seize the event, however delicate the problem, to dispel the myth of your heroine's frigidity." 4 Wharton herself may have wanted to dispel the myth. Intensely private during her lifetime, and careful to organize her private papers before she died, 5 she deliberately left "Beatrice Palmato" for posterity.
And yet, despite the heartbreaking sensuality of the fragment, Wharton's attitude toward incest is characteristically complex. The fragment was preserved with an outline of a longer story in which a family is destroyed by the father's incestuous seduction of his daughters. This macabre outline disturbs the unconventional beauty of the erotic fragment. However sensuous the act of incest is for father and daughter, the consequences to the family--symbolically the social order--are severe.

It is fitting that Wharton's use of incestuous desire mirror her age. She took pride in being *au courant* on the issues of her day. Her closest friends included such luminaries as Bernard Berenson, Henry James, Walter Berry and Robert Norton. She had read widely in Darwin, Huxley, and Haeckel in the late 1880's, and her thinking was particularly influenced by sociological theorists like Spencer and Durkheim. Wharton might have known about the debates over tenement housing: her family had extensive real estate holdings in New York City at that time, and she had traveled widely in England. She would certainly have read Tennyson's *Locksley Hall: Sixty Years After*, in which the lines, "There the smouldering fire of fever creeps across the rotted floor / And the crowded couch of incest in the warrens of the poor" appear.

Wharton was sensitive to the incest theme in artistic works. She complained of Moravia's inadequate treatment of incest: "Faulkner and Celine did it first, and did it nastier." She passionately admired George Sand's pastoral works, including *Francois le*
Champi, the story of the love between a young boy and his foster mother. She lamented a performance of The Barretts of Wimpole Street which deleted the incest motif, and she once considered writing a narrative based on the life of Lizzie Borden, with incest as the underlying motive.

Incest in literature rears its provocative head in strange and different ways; in Wharton, it surfaces as the focal point of an inevitable struggle between an individual of fine sensibilities and the social milieu which bore him. During Wharton’s lifetime, incest served as a cultural base point from which human social identity and progress could be measured.

Although a number of Wharton’s published novels incorporate incestuous implications, incest is never a theme in the sense that it is presented as the motivating force behind the novel’s denouement. In part due to Wharton’s astute sense of the publishable—of “Beatrice Palmato” she once explained that “business is too bad to publish such Berquinades nowadays” --the subtle manipulation of incest as an unrecognized desire echoes Freud’s perception that incestuous longing is the first and most deeply repressed human emotion. In keeping with Freud’s symbolic conception of incest as a primal, sublimated desire, Wharton disguises the incestual longings of her characters. With the exception of the Beatrice Palmato fragment, incest is never consummated between a biological father and his daughter; instead, it occurs between men and women who symbolically act out these parts with each other.
Chapter Three Notes

1 Quoted in Lewis, p. 322


3 Lewis contends that "Beatrice Palmato" was probably written in 1935, but he gives no reason for this date. By contrast, Wolff devotes a long appendix to the process which led her to consider 1919 the probable year that the fragment was written. Largely reliant on handwriting analysis and echoes in other other texts, Wolff's argument for the 1919 date is convincing.

4 Quoted in Lewis, p. 322. Intriguingly, Wharton's relationship with Fullerton involved a bit of incestuous scandal. Unbeknownst to Wharton, Fullerton was engaged to his cousin Katherine Gerould during their affair. Gerould had been raised by Fullerton's parents and believed herself to be Fullerton's sister until she was in college. Shortly after learning she was his cousin, they commenced a love affair in which Fullerton engaged himself to her. After years of waiting for their marriage, the young Gerould extracted herself from the relationship.

5 Wharton destroyed all correspondence between her and Walter Berry. She also left a packet (mostly concerning her divorce) labeled "For my Biographer." She then sealed her papers until 1968.

6 Lewis, p. 56.


8 Letter to Berenson, above.

9 Lewis writes of Wharton's passion for George Sand's life and work, which she shared with Henry James, and of Wharton's three pilgrimages to Sand's home in Nohant, pp. 169-178. Jean Gooder, "Unlocking Edith Wharton: An Introduction to The Reef,"
Cambridge Quarterly 15 (1986): 33-52, also writes of Wharton's fascination with Sands' pastoral novels.

10 Lewis, p. 525.

11 Letter to Berenson, above.
The Reef: The Triumph of Cultural Values

The Reef is the first novel in which Wharton explores the incest issue. Tightly organized and intricately plotted, it defies succinct paraphrase. It revolves around Anna Leath, an American widow living on her husband's French estate with her daughter Effie and her step-son Owen; George Darrow, an American ambassador who courted Anna as a young girl and who re-establishes the relationship after her husband's death; and Sophy Viner, a young American woman of limited means. The novel opens with a misunderstanding between Anna and Darrow; he interprets a curt telegram to mean that she is no longer interested in re-kindling their relationship. Hurt and angry at what he perceives as Anna's "hesitations and reserves" (29), her "glazed and curtained consciousness" (30), he drifts into a brief affair with the naive but life-loving Sophy Viner. A year later, Anna and George patch up their differences and decide to marry. George goes to visit Anna at her estate and to announce their engagement to the children; to his chagrin, he discovers that the forgotten Sophy has become governess to Anna's daughter and fiance to Anna's son.
Critical attention to *The Reef* has generally focused on the moral historicism which damns Sophy for the affair but not Darrow, 3 on Sophy as a character who should have been the heart of the novel, 4 and more recently on justifications of Anna as a character considerably more complex than Darrow realized. 5 Although not widely recognized as significant, understanding the role of incest in *The Reef* is useful in unravelling the ambiguity of its controversial conclusion. *The Reef* fully demonstrates Wharton's distinctive use of incest, and the novel is intimately connected to the sociological and psychological perceptions of incest which dominated the day. The equation of passion with nature, the tension between established order and individual desire, and the use of incest as a metaphor for exploring social obligation are all present in *The Reef*. The "incestuous" relationship between Sophy and Darrow threatens Anna's family relationships in the same way that contemporary anthropologists theorized incest had threatened early tribal relationships. Moreover, Wharton posits several blunt hints indicating that incest is at work.

George Darrow and Sophy Viner attend a performance of *Oedipe*; in fact, it is the decision to stay and see the play which keeps Sophy in Paris another night and which facilitates the unanticipated affair. And although the unsophisticated Sophy may not have any "literary or historic association to which to attach her impressions" of the play (60), she nonetheless responds to it.
(she feels) the ineluctable quality of the tale, the dread sway in it of the same mysterious 'luck' which pulled the threads of her own small destiny. It was not literature to her, it was fact: as actual, as near by, as what was happening to her at the moment and what the next hour held in store (60, my italics).

Darrow, almost a generation older and infinitely more sophisticated, treats Sophy as his young protege. He spends the early days before the consummation of their affair taking her to museums and plays and the opera; he is enchanted by her eagerness to learn from him even as he is disappointed by her naivete and immaturity. He notes that "in spite of the experiences she must have had, and of the twenty-four years to which she owned, she struck him as intrinsically young" (48). She is also penniless. He gallantly pays for her hotel room after she is stranded in Paris; he continues to pay for it after forgetting to forward her request for shelter to nearby friends. For the duration of their romance, his ability to pay for her vacation is integral to her seduction.

His age, his money, and his comparative cultural sophistication all point to him as Sophy's father-figure during their affair. Later, the entanglements that would make him her step-father, legally and socially, reinforce the subtly incestuous dynamic that has drawn them together. Sophy's reaction, when she realizes that he will marry Anna, her fiance's stepmother, is equally telling. She finds that she has not loved Owen at all. Her passion for Darrow returns.

I'd been trying to forget how you looked," she tells him, "now I want to remember you always. I'd been trying to not hear your voice; now I never want to hear any other. I've made my choice --- that's all; I've had you and I mean to keep you (260).
Fully aware that she means little to Darrow, and with no intention of literally trying to "keep" him, Sophy gives up Owen and her future because she cannot accept the different kind of love that her contemporary offers her. Sophy's feelings for Darrow are rooted in repressed infantile desire. Almost successful in transferring her affections to a contemporary, the presence of Darrow throws Sophy back into a childlike state. For his part, Darrow recognizes his symbolic paternity long after their affair. He tells Sophy that his former relationship with her gives him "the right to intervene for what I believe to be your benefit" (172).

The relationship between Anna and her adult stepson Owen takes on vague incestual tones because of Sophy and Darrow's affair. Anna and Owen are exceptionally close. Anna sometimes "fancied that Owen Leath’s response was warmer than that of her own child (99)," and she shares with him an unspoken communion:

> There were so many things between them that were never spoken of, or even indirectly alluded to, yet that, even in their occasional discussions and differences formed the unadduced arguments making for final agreement (100).

Anna "embraced both children in the same passion of motherhood" (99), yet she also refers to her relationship with Owen as sibling-like. Owen speaks to her with "odd elderly-brother note" (103), and she tells Darrow that they "have always been on odd kind of brother-and-sister terms" (114).

The ambiguous nature of Anna and Owen's tie is clouded by Sophy and Darrow; Anna had intended to leave Effie with Sophy and
Owen after their dual marriages. Had she done so, her step-son would have become "father" to her daughter while her husband's former lover would have been not only her daughter, but her "sister" and her daughter's "mother" as well. Toying with the established social relationships among family groups is precisely what contemporary anthropologists considered the source of the incest taboo; such ambiguity destabilizes primitive societies in the same way that it ultimately destabilizes Anna Leath's world.

The links between the subtle incestuousness of *The Reef* and the social perception of the incest taboo as culturally definitive exist on an imagistic level as well. Just as incest is equated with raw nature and the incest taboo with the advent of civilization, so sexuality is closely linked with nature in *The Reef*. Like Beatrice Palmato, Sophy "Viner" is a plant: described as a "shallow flower-cup" (19), a "dryad in a dew-drenched forest" (35-36), and "one of the elemental creatures whose emotion is all in their pulses" (262). Her face is "like a shallow-petalled rose" (19), which "danced like a field of daisies in a summer breeze" (23), and her hair is "like the flit of a brown wing over flowers" (31). Darrow sees her in a new dress and thinks, "She came forth looking as if she had been plunged into some sparkling element which had curled up all her drooping tendrils and wrapped her in a shimmer of fresh leaves" (36). Later, "she hung before him like a leaf on the meeting of cross-currents, that the next ripple may sweep forward or whirl back" (72).
Likewise, Anna's ventures into a sexuality which she had never before allowed herself are linked to nature. Overjoyed with the thought of marrying Darrow, she runs through her garden.

The earth seemed actually to rise and meet her as she went, so that she had the feeling, which sometimes came to her in dreams, of skimming miraculously over short bright waves. The air, too, seemed to break in waves against her, sweeping by on its current all the slanted lights and moist perfumes of the failing day (100-101).

When she and Darrow walk together, nature is described in distinctly sensual terms: "over everything lay a faint sunshine that seem dissolved in the still air, and the smell of wet air and decaying leaves was merged in the pungent scent of burning underbrush" (126-127). And again:

the delicate frosting of dew gave the grass a bluish shimmer, and the sunlight, sliding in emerald streaks along the tree-boles, gathered itself into great luminous blurs at the end of the wood-walks, and hung above the fields a watery glory like the ring above an autumn moon (109).

Where women and sensuality are the stuff of nature, Darrow is never quite able to leave the stuffy interiors of his past; for all his frustration with Anna's hesitations, he loves her for her elegance and tact:

His imagination was struck by the quality of reticence in her beauty. She suggested a fine portrait kept down to a few tones, or a Greek vase on which the play of light is the only patter (127) . . . He reflected with satisfaction that she was the kind of woman with whom one would like to be seen in public. It would be distinctly agreeable to follow her into drawing rooms, to walk after her down the aisle of a theater, to get in and out of trains with her . . . (130).
Where Anna is celebrating the birth of raw sensuality in her life, and thus thinks of their relationship in natural images, Darrow is settling into an established and prosperous middle age with a socially impeccable woman. He describes Anna in terms of cultural artifacts—a portrait, a vase—and imagines their life together in drawing rooms, theaters, and train stations. Darrow found Sophy's flower-like presence sensuous. He says that she was an "extraordinary conductor of sensation; she seemed to transmit it physically, in emanations that set the blood dancing in his veins" (51), but he does not equate this feeling with love or marriage. Darrow, much more than Anna, is trapped on the culture side of the nature/culture conflict.

Paradoxically, Darrow's affinity with culture rather than nature betrays the incestuous quality of his desire for Sophy. In contrast with Anna, Wharton portrays him as a man who is comfortable in the shadows and who prefers artificially lit evening hours to full daylight. 6 Except in the midst of sensuous exchanges with Sophy or Anna, Darrow is almost always indoors. If he is outdoors, he is under an umbrella, or seeking refuge from the weather in a garden gazebo. While "winding through the pale gold of narrow wood-roads" with Anna, Darrow finds a "little old deserted house," a "mouldy Temple of Love" (127). Even in the midst of raw nature, Darrow gravitates to that which is the product of a civilized society. The repression of his natural self makes Darrow particularly vulnerable to the illicit call of incestuous desire.
The tell-tale sign of the incest underlying the passion Darrow feels for Sophy is his later inability to remember why he was attracted at all. By the time he encounters Sophy at Anna’s home, he has all but forgotten who she is. Wharton deliberately shrouds Darrow’s attraction to the girl in mystery. Sophy asks him, "I wonder what your feeling for me was?" and Darrow keeps returning to the question in his thoughts (260). The answer remains just out of his conscious mind; all he can remember is that he had not meant for it to happen, but then "she had tossed off her hat and tilted back her head like a cuckoo" (261). He had kissed her and his caress had "restored her to her natural place in the scheme of things . . . Darrow felt as if he had clasped a tree and a nymph had bloomed from it" (262). The nearest Darrow comes to recognizing that his desire for Sophy springs from some elemental passion --- from nature rather than the reasoned consideration with which he chose Anna as his future wife --- is to blame the affair on the fact that it rained for three days. "Perhaps but for the rain it might never have happened; but what was the use of thinking of that now" (263). Darrow, who consciously chooses cultural values, represses his desire for Sophy; because he does not recognize his animal desires, he can no longer remember why he had wanted her.

Although the incest theme is lightly drawn throughout *The Reef*, its presence points to the underlying dynamics of the novel and unravels the ambiguity of its strange ending. *The Reef* is about the need for some kind of social structure, and the penalty that
individuals must pay to maintain order in the face of raw passion. Ultimately, this complex novel chooses cultural values over individual desire. The marriages do not take place, the incestuous ties are not consummated, and the raging passions are confined. In an odd final scene, Anna encounters Sophy's older sister, Laura Viner. Laura shocks Anna. A "larger, blonder, heavier-featured" (365) version of Sophy, she lies in bed feeding caramels to a "powder-puff" of a dog.

Laura Viner is Sophy turned away from the natural; the sordidness of her existence is reflected in her artificially-lit room, her unnatural caramel diet, her many-ringed fingers, and her excessive make-up. Her gaudy existence personifies a degradation of the social order. For Anna, it represents the result of choosing passion over tradition. Anna has longed to meld her genteel life with her emerging adult sexuality, but she cannot accept Darrow's complicity in the perversion of social values. What Gargano has called Laura's "world of easy accommodations"(48) is the world which waits for Darrow and Sophy. The near-mockery that their peccadillo makes of Anna's family echoes the threat which incest makes to the social order of both primitive tribes and civilized societies. It costs her what she most desires, but Anna gives up Darrow. She chooses tradition, culture, order. She chooses the incest taboo. 7

Jean Gooder has said of The Reef that:

behind its controlled structure and moral sophistication is the nearness of what most imperils civilized codes of living--the absolute disruptiveness of natural passion. . . . Edith
Wharton's understanding of the power of the anarchic, of the current of instinct beneath the formal surface, is to be found at such rare moments in her writing (52).

Wharton may finally side with the need to uphold the social order, but she is terribly tempted by raw desire. Just as Ellen Olenska is the most vivid personage in *The Age of Innocence*, so Sophy Viner and Anna Leath are more vivid that George Darrow. All of these women share an unstructured quality which shimmers with the possibility of dizzying emotion, of physical abandonment, of sexual euphoria. They each choose to allow order to dominate--Anna sacrifices Darrow, Sophy leaves France, Ellen Olenska abandons New York--but the sense of lost individuality is acute.
Chapter Four Notes

1 Critically, incestuous implications in *The Reef* have received almost no attention. Fryer lists it among novels which incorporate the incest theme but does not discuss it (161). Tuttleton notes that "although the blood relations between these characters are utterly discrete, it is not accidental that Darrow and Sophy attend a performance of *Oedipe* in Paris" (465). James Gargano names the beast, saying that "a suggestion of incest, reminiscent of *Oedipus*, poisons the altered relationship of Darrow to Anna's family; after all, he has slept with the girl who may be his step daughter-in-law" (43). No other critic, including Lewis and Wolff, makes any connection at all.

2 Written immediately after Wharton's affair with Fullerton, and reviewed by him during its creation, *The Reef* is one of the most controversial of her works. Lewis included it in a collection of four novels recently re-published (Edith Wharton, *Novels*, ed R. W. B. Lewis, New York: Literary Classics, 1985), and he considered it her most autobiographical work (326). Blake Nevius described its ending as "the most regrettable passage in Edith Wharton's fiction" (140). Wolff discussed *The Reef* as the first stage in Wharton's journey to understanding her own sensuality, but dismissed it as "tantalizingly imperfect" and rejected out-of-hand Wharton's choice of a narrative voice (205-220). Henry James thought *The Reef* Wharton's finest novel; his supporters have frequently described it as the most Jamesian. Wharton herself seemed ambivalent. "I put most of myself into that opus," she once wrote, although she also told a friend, "It's not me, though I thought it was when I was writing it" (Quoted in Lewis, p. 326).

3 Blake Nevius' *Edith Wharton* was considered the classic work on Wharton prior to her "rebirth" in the late 1970's. Nevius was struck by "the gross unfairness" of Wharton's harsh treatment of Sophy; he argued that Wharton's inability to sympathize with Sophy lay in class distinctions.

4 Wolff says that "the interest in the work lies almost entirely in Wharton's provocative conjuration of Sophy Viner; its failure lies in having declined to deliver Sophy directly." She describes Sophy as "a glimmering, dancing jewel, a shaft of sunlight . . . furtive, flaunting, spontaneous, designing, feral" (210). While Wolff's description of
Sophy adds much to one's sense of her unique presence in *The Reef*, lamenting the fact that she is not the heart of the novel is a bit like wishing Shakespeare had named his play "Falstaff." Tuttleton writes acerbically of this sort of criticism of *The Reef*: "nowadays . . . any negative treatment of a young woman who wants to 'seize life' may automatically lead to condemnation of the book as a failure of a work of art" (470).


6 For a more detailed explication of the light and shadow imagery which pervades Anna and Darrow's relationship, see Maynard.

7 James Gargano was the first to see in the ending to *The Reef* the inevitable struggle between individual desire and social responsibility. He speaks of the threat to "the fragile and constantly imperiled socio-moral structure" which Anna recognizes, and argues that the decision to give up Darrow is not a failure to accept sexual maturity or ambiguity, but a compelling choice to stand up against social degradation.
A few years after writing *The Reef*, Wharton returned to the animal sexuality of Sophy Viner and to the incestuous implications of the near-marriages; this time, she was not so subtle or so delicate. In *Summer*, Wharton faced the full implications of what are still only shadow issues in *The Reef*: the desire of the father for the child, the conflict between infantile primitivism and adult civility, and the ceaseless push-me pull-you of nature and culture.

Written during World War I, when she was immersed in war activities, *Summer* (1917) gave Wharton an opportunity to mentally distance herself from the chaos and destruction which surrounded her. In *A Son at the Front*, Wharton describes wartime as unexpectedly and perversely festive; a sense of shared destiny, of camaraderie, of temporality invades the streets; lovers and sons venture off with a bravado that heightens one's sense of one's surroundings; it all begins so differently from how it ends. So perhaps the war helps to explain the rocketing, bursting, gleeful sensuality of Wharton's most erotic published novel. She herself described the writing of it in this way:
I began to write a short novel, "Summer," as remote as possible in setting and subject from the scenes about me, and the work made my other tasks seem lighter. The tale was written at a high pitch of creative joy, but amid a thousand interruptions, and while the rest of my being was steeped in the tragic realities of the war; yet I do not remember ever visualizing with more intensity the inner scene, or the creatures peopling it. 1

A simple story set in Western Massachusetts--Wharton once described it as a "grim place, morally and physically" where "insanity, incest and slow mental and moral privation were hidden away" 2 --Summer is the tale of young Charity Royall's sexual emergence. Charity's coming of age parallels the season: ripe with the promise of spring in the opening pages, she ends the novel both older and wiser with the first winds of Fall. Charity is the foster daughter of North Dormer's prominent but reclusive Lawyer Royall; when she was five, he rescued her from a strange colony of outlaws who live up on "the Mountain." Now eighteen, Charity is the rarely diligent village librarian.

Charity meets Lucius Harney, an architect from a larger town, when he comes to the library to research local homes. Attracted to him, but shy and still afraid to face the realities of sexual desire, Charity gradually befriends Harney. She becomes his guide through the small hillside villages and, though she allows herself to fantasize about marrying him, it is a long time before their relationship becomes sexual. At one point, Charity recognizes what would happen if she ever came to Harney alone; "since the day before, she
had known exactly what she would feel if Harney should take her in his arms: the melting of palm into palm and mouth on mouth, and the long flame burning her from head to foot" (106). But Charity does not go to him. Not until much later, when Lawyer Royall has flown into a jealous rage upon discovering her with Harney and accused her of being a "damn whore," does Charity's resistance break down. She and Harney become lovers.

Their short weeks of love are blissfully unreal. Until they are discovered by Lawyer Royall, the real world is "suspended in the void" (105) and "all the rest of life became a mere cloudy rim about the central glory of their passion" (175). Harney leaves after Lawyer Royall discovers their affair. Soon after, Charity discovers that she is pregnant. Dimly hoping to escape the opprobrium of North Dormer, Charity flees to the Mountain where she was born. She arrives in time to see her mother's corpse lying "like a dead dog in a ditch" (250) and to witness the poverty and brutality of her outlawed ancestors. Shocked by this encounter with savagery, she returns to the village and marries Lawyer Royall. Although Charity has resisted this marriage, partly in fear of Royall's advances, he spends their wedding night in a chair. Charity wakes and sees him there:

As she continued to watch him ineffable relief slowly stole over her, relaxing her strained nerves and exhausted body. He knew, then . . . he knew . . . it was because he knew that he had married her, and that he sat there in the darkness to show her she was safe with him. A stir of something deeper than she had ever felt in thinking of him flitted through her tired brain (284).
While the incestuous implications of *Summer* are overt—Charity marries her foster father --- incest does not intrude into the novel itself. Charity's marriage to Lawyer Royall is clearly intended to preserve Charity's reputation and to create a home for her coming child. It is not scandalous. Nevertheless, there are subtle indications of the incestuous desire lurking between Charity and Lawyer Royall early on. When Charity is fifteen, an elder woman of the town suggests that Charity go to boarding school for reasons Charity is "too young to understand" (26); Charity chooses not to go, recognizing in some mysterious way that "Mr. Royall's too lonesome" (26). When Charity is seventeen, Lawyer Royall does come to Charity's bedroom, but Charity contemptuously turns him away; the incident, in shaming him, gives her power in his household.

When Charity first begins spending time with Harney, she fears that the townspeople will tell Royall:

Charity was instinctively aware that few things concerning her escaped the eyes of the silent man under whose roof she lived; and in spite of the latitude which North Dormer accorded to courting couples she always felt that, on the day when she showed too open a preference, Lawyer Royall might, as she phrased it, make her "pay for it" (62).

Indeed, Lawyer Royall first asks Charity to marry him when he realizes that she is attracted to the younger Harney.

The dominant traits of Wharton's incest novels are most clearly presented in *Summer*. More openly sensual that *The Reef*, *Summer* heightens and extends the images, circumstances, and tensions underlying Anna Leath's struggle to meld desire and responsibility.
Like Sophy Viner, Charity Royall is akin to raw nature. Her sensuality is described in what has become Wharton's special "language of love": a communion between the lover and the earth, a hyper-reality filled with sights and smells and sounds. Also like Sophy, Charity lacks the education and experience which would allow her to appreciate cultural artifacts: "she was blind and insensitive to many things, and dimly knew it; but to all that was light and air, perfume and color, every drop of blood in her responded" (21). The images of heat which reign in the erotic "Beatrice Palmato" pervade *Summer*; Wharton once dubbed the book "Hot Ethan." 3

Frequently outside, Charity's unconscious sensuality is mirrored in the world about her:

> All this bubbling of sap and slipping of sheaths and bursting of calyxes was carried to her on mingled currents of fragrance. Every leaf and bud and blade seemed to contribute its exhalation to the pervading sweetness in which the pungency of pine sap prevailed over the spice of thyme and the subtle perfume of fern, and all were merged in a moist earth-smell that was like the breath of some huge sun-warmed animal (54).

Likewise, the imagery of Charity's affair with Harney echoes *The Reef's* reliance on images of light and shadow. Harney absorbs Charity in the same way that "lying in the grass and staring up too long at the sky" fills her eyes "so full of light that everything about her is a blur" (175-76). Charity connects sensuality to light, and the loss of love to darkness:

> the only reality was the wondrous unfolding of her new self, the reaching out to the light of all her contracted tendrils . . .
she had always thought of love as some thing confused and furtive, and he made it as bright and open as the summer air (180).

And yet, "the first fall of night after a day of radiance often gave her a sense of hidden menace; it was like looking out over the world as it would be when love had gone from it" (183).

In *Summer*, Wharton dares to make explicit the connection between incestuous desire, sensuality, and raw nature. The imagistic echoes between *The Reef* and *Summer* point to the underlying theme which unites them: the passion of individual desire at war with the inflexible responsibilities of civilized living. Just as it did for contemporary psychologists and sociologists, incest stands at the heart of this struggle.

Because *Summer* is more overtly incestuous, many critics have recognized the implications of Charity's marriage to Lawyer Royall. For the most part, critical interest in *Summer* has centered on the debate between feminist critics, who read Charity's marriage as a fate damning her to perpetual adolescence, and psychoanalytic critics, who see the novel as a *Bildungsroman* of Charity's initiation into adult responsibilities. Just as early twentieth century anthropologists would see the development of civilized societies from primitive cultures as a progression into a more "adult" social structure, so psychoanalytic critics see Charity's marriage to Lawyer Royall as a progression into adulthood.

Sandra Gilbert agrees with those critics who argue that *Summer* is the tale of a girl's move from primitive individualism into the
social order, but she disagrees that this is a process of growth.  
Calling Charity a "representative of nature bewildered by culture,"  
Gilbert locates the essence of the plot in a nature/culture struggle:  
  Wharton's romance . . . explores events that are situated in  
the margins of society, where culture must enter into a  
dialectical struggle with nature in order to transform 'raw'  
female reality into 'cooked' feminine sex roles (366).

Where contemporary anthropologists would have perceived incest as  
the antithesis of culture, Gilbert argues that "father-daughter incest  
is a culturally constructed paradigm of female desire" (372). Women  
are taught to love men like their fathers; in doing so, they consign  
themselves to eternal daughterhood. As for Harney, he is "culture's  
heir" (368). He mediates Charity's acceptance of her adult role as  
wife and mother. A "vivid and vital Phallus," Harney "seduces the  
daughter into the social architecture from which she would  
otherwise have tried to flee" (368).

Gilbert's argument points to the fundamental difference between  
the outwardly similar treatments of incestuous desire in The Reef  
and Summer. The Reef fits neatly into the nature/culture dichotomy  
as described by Durkheim and early anthropologists. Incest  
represents unbridled individualism; attractive to all, it must be  
sublimated in order to achieve social harmony. Thus Anna rejects  
the Sophy/Darrow affair and rescues her symbolically charged  
family from the threat posed by ambiguous sex roles and relations.  

Summer, so like The Reef in language and imagery, defies neat  
explanation, for in Summer, Charity's acceptance of adult
responsibilities and civilized living is contingent on her acceptance of the incestuous relationship with her foster father. In essence, Wharton's understanding of the implications of incest in the nature/culture debate has become more radical. Anna's flat rejection of Darrow does protect her from the chaos of raw desire; it also prevents her from realizing her adult sexuality and encloses her in an artificial world of gentility and tradition.

Charity's choice—to accept the inevitability of incestuous desire underlying human sexuality—allows her to have both social order and physical desire. Charity and Lawyer Royall are the two most intelligent and perceptive people in North Dormer. Each has the ability to see beyond convention and to take risks for his or her own fulfillment. Although their marriage begins inauspiciously, Wharton hints at their mutual suitability. Lawyer Royall's sensitivity on their wedding night causes Charity to "feel something deeper than she had ever felt" for him before (284). Where even the most romantic reader must accept the impossibility of a happy union between Charity and the sexually appealing but immature Harney, the possibility of love and sexual union between Charity and Royall exists.

It is not incest as it presents itself between Lawyer Royall and Charity which threatens civilized living in Summer, but incest as it exists in the primitive outlaw community on the Mountain. Charity's brief visit to the Mountain initiates her into a world of unimaginable savagery. The family relations between the outlaws
are immediately called into question. Charity has the sense that she shares bloodlines with some, but she is unable to determine how or with whom: "they seemed to be herded together in a sort of primitive promiscuity in which their common misery was the strongest link" (259). No one has prepared a coffin for her mother's body, and the village minister's prayer over her corpse elicits an argument about the dead woman's belongings. Dumbfounded, Charity can only compare this biological family to "nocturnal animals" (248).

The essential dialectic between civilization and primitivism remains consistent from The Reef to Summer, but the debate has become more complex and subtle. Just as Freud's theories of infantile sexuality represent a sophisticated leap from early anthropological notions of the incest taboo as the springboard to culture, so Wharton's manipulation of the incest theme in Summer is a radical re-evaluation of its role in The Reef.
Chapter Five Notes


4 For feminist interpretations which take the position that Charity is doomed to perpetual childhood by her marriage, see Ammons *Argument with America*; Virginia L. Blum, "Edith Wharton's Erotic Other-World," *Literature and Psychology* 33 (1987): 12-29; John W. Crowley, "The Unmastered Streak: Feminist Themes in Wharton's Summer," *American Literary Realism* 15 (1982): 86-96; Sandra M. Gilbert, "Life's Empty Pack;" Alan Henry Rose; Barbara A. White. For critical reviews which see the marriage as an acceptance of adult responsibilities, see Marilyn French, "Introduction" to *Summer* (Berkeley: U Cal P, 1981); Carol Werschoven; Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "Cold Ethan and Hot Ethan," *College Literature* 14 (1987): 230-45 and *A Feast of Words*. 
"Rats feet over broken glass:"

The Deflation of Incestuous Tension in the Late Novels

Wharton will return to the incest theme in three later novels, but never again will she address the question with the vigor and intellectual acuity of *The Reef* and *Summer*. *The Reef* and *Summer* exemplify Wharton's artistry during her finest period. They reflect Wharton's own burgeoning physicality and her late arrival at sexual maturity. Although Wharton toyed with incest in *The Mother's Recompense*, *Twilight Sleep*, and *The Children*, one senses that the issue no longer holds her attention; it has become a convention, a tool that the commercial Wharton is ready and willing to manipulate.

The fact that incest remains an element in the late novels speaks to the cultural force of the incest question in general. By the 1920's, Wharton's work had a hackneyed quality; the war had taken much of life's joys, and old age had taken many of her dearest and most stimulating friends. Wharton knew how to write a best-seller, she liked writing popular novels and she was dependent on the huge income that her works generated. By the time of her late novels,
Wharton wrote novels for the masses, and the masses still responded to incest.

The Mother’s Recompense, Twilight Sleep, and The Children share the distinctive qualities which mark incest in The Reef and, to a degree, in Summer. In all five novels, incest is subtle. It remains metaphoric for the conflict between individual passion and social responsibility, but it has changed.

In Summer and The Reef, incestuous tension represents a real struggle between opposing goods. The sunlit beauty of Wharton’s love language, with its homage to raw, primitive nature, counterbalances the solemn graciousness of social order. Neither choice is clearly preferable; Wharton may consistently choose order over chaos, but she does so with a sense of beauty lost, of perfection recognized as unattainable. In the later novels, much of this tension has disappeared. As in The Reef and on the Mountain in Summer, incest symbolically threatens the social order. There are, however, no more "bubbling of sap and slipping of sheaths and bursting of calyces" to takes one's breath away. The love language is mute. Nature as a fluid, growing, irresistible force has been taken off stage. In its place remain only the grim consequences of anarchy.

In The Mother’s Recompense, Twilight Sleep, and The Children, incest attacks tradition and integrity but offers little glimpse of the euphoric innocence hinted at earlier. The powerful but naive sexuality of Charity Royall and Sophy Viner has been replaced by sexually-identified but jaded women like Lita in Twilight Sleep and
Lilla in *The Mother's Recompense*, or by innocent but still not sexual girls like Judith Wheater in *The Children*. *Summer* and *The Reef* forced the reader to sacrifice idealism for realistic compromise, but *The Mother's Recompense*, *Twilight Sleep*, and *The Children* leave the reader flat.

Nineteenth century anthropologists argued that the development of a universal incest taboo had nothing to do with the fear of genetic abnormalities. Rather, ancient cultures had identified incest as a threat to social stability because of its negative impact on the creation of tribal alliances. Throughout human history, the establishment of the incest taboo marked a commitment to group order over individual desire. Of all the many connections to be made between the scientific and sociological views of incest dominating at this time, the late novels demonstrate most clearly the problem of destabilizing the social order. All three novels involve a chaotic restructuring of traditional family relationships; in no case is this restructuring seen as positive or viable.

*The Mother's Recompense* (1925) is the story of a middle-aged woman's return to the daughter she had abandoned twenty years earlier. Unable to accept the strictures of her conservative husband or his family, Kate Clephane had run away to Europe with a man and left behind her two-year-old daughter, Anne. For twenty years, she drifted through Europe; at thirty-nine, she had a passionate affair with a much-younger man who deserted her. In her mid-forties, Kate receives a telegram from her daughter, inviting her to
come home. Once there, Kate discovers that her daughter has fallen in love with the same man who had been her lover years earlier. Kate tries to force Chris Fenno away from Anne, but fails. She resigns herself to their marriage but returns to her solitary life in European hotels.

Initiated by the mother who has abandoned her child, *The Mother's Recompense* is filled with family relationships which shift and double back on each other and refuse to fit traditional patterns. When Kate returns, Anne "mothers" her, and Kate, who "had had to order herself about: to tell herself to rest and not to worry, to eat when she wasn't hungry, to sleep when she felt staring wide-awake," likes nothing better than "to be 'mothered' in that fond, blundering way the young have of mothering their elders" (59).

The Anne, Chris, and Kate triangle creates a variety of subtly incestuous relationships. Kate and Chris's relationship had hinted at mother-son incest before Anne's arrival. Chris is much younger than Kate, and Wharton highlights the significance of this difference in an early scene. After receiving the telegram from Anne, Kate tries to compute her daughter's age. The question inevitably draws forth images of Chris:

...then little Anne must be nearly twenty...why quite twenty, wasn't it? But then how old would *that* make Chris? Oh well, he *must* be older than he looked...she'd always thought he was. That boyish way of his, she had sometimes fancied, was put on to make her imagine there was a greater difference of age between them than there really was...And of course, she'd never been that dreadful kind of woman they called a "baby-snatcher" (11).
Later, when Kate decides to accept Chris and Anne's marriage, she thinks:

After all, why not? Legally, technically, there was nothing wrong, nothing socially punishable, in the case . . . Chris Fenno was a young man --- she was old enough to be, if not his mother, at least his mother-in-law (275).

Reminiscent of the social and legal stamp that would have been placed on Sophy and Darrow's affair had the marriages taken place in *The Reef* are the social and legal implications of Anne's marriage for Kate. Again, the marriage would only formalize what had been the emotional dynamic from the start.

Mirrored by the mother-son implications of Kate and Chris are the father-daughter implications of Chris's marriage to Anne. After all, Chris is much older than Anne, and he has slept with her mother. Reverberating in slightly paler ripples from this central conflict are the hints of sibling incest between Chris and Anne, and the even stranger mother-daughter implications for Anne and Kate. One twist in this increasingly chaotic structure is presented by Anne's former guardian, who asks Kate to marry him. Rather than marry the steadfast Fred Landers and take her place in society as Chris and Anne's mother, Kate chooses to leave. Had she not done so, her marriage to Fred Landers might have restored some of the social order. There is something appropriate and respectable in Anne's "father" marrying her mother.

Although not recognized as a story about incest in the framework of the action, *The Mother's Recompense* is far more direct in its
incestuous hints than is *The Reef* or *Summer*. Kate’s room in Anne’s house is decorated with a painting of Beatrice Cenci. At one point, Kate asks herself if incest is the source of her turmoil:

A dark fermentation boiled up in her brain; every thought and feeling was clogged with thick entangling memories. . . . Jealous? Was she jealous of her daughter? Was that the real secret of her repugnance, her instinctive revulsion? Was that why she had felt from the first as if some incestuous horror hung between them? (279)

Far more telling than Kate’s reiteration of the question are the many clues which indicate Kate’s continue attachment to Chris. Kate is tormented by her unrequited desire for her daughter’s lover. When Kate comes upon Anne and Chris embracing, she feels a "furious flame of life" rushing through her; "in every cell of her body she felt that same embrace, felt the very texture of her lover’s cheek against her own, burned with the heat of his palm as it clasped Anne’s chin to press her closer" (278). On the morning of Anne’s wedding, Kate finds that "all the excuses, accommodations, mitigations, mufflings, disguisings, had dropped away from the bare fact that her lover was going to marry her daughter, and that nothing she could do would prevent it" (303). In the end, Kate cannot overcome her own sexual desire for Chris. Rather than risk telling Anne the truth, she runs away again.

The jumble of family relationships presented in *The Mother’s Recompense* resurfaces in *Twilight Sleep* (1927) two years later. Unsuccessfully satiric and unjustifiably bitter, *Twilight Sleep* is one
of Wharton's most blatant attacks on the modernization of the world she had known as a child. Deeply critical of American lifestyles and particularly of American women, *Twilight Sleep* is a confusing novel from an author who had long before ceased regular contact with her American roots.

The destabilization of the social order is represented by the family of Pauline Manford. Pauline and her first husband, Arthur Wyant, divorced when their son, Jim, was small. Pauline remarried Dexter Manford, who reared Jim and his own child, Nona. Although Dexter and Jim have a father-son relationship, Jim is still close to his father Arthur. Moreover, Nona and Arthur are good friends, and Pauline continues to visit her former husband out of a sense of civic duty. Arthur suffers from a severe nervous condition, and is nursed by a cousin with whom he has had a long affair. Dexter, out of respect for his step-son's, his daughter's and his wife's relationship with him, pays for Arthur's vacations and retreats.

*Twilight Sleep* is bluntly incestuous in the consummation of a brief affair between Dexter and his step-son's wife, Lita. It is subtly reminiscent of the incest debate in its examination of modern alienation and its somewhat weak attempt to create a primitive natural world as a counterbalance. Faint echoes of the tension which colored *The Reef* and *Summer* can be heard, but the struggle has dissipated.

Like Sophy Viner and Charity Royall, Lita Wyant is described in images of nature. She is "spun of spray and sunlight," and her long
lines made her seem in "perpetual motion, as a tremor of air lives in certain trees" (35). Her body is "a long branch of silver blossoms" (84), her face "a small still flower on a swaying stalk" (85), her movements "like a weaving of grasses under a breeze, a looping of little waves over the shore" (85). Unlike Sophy and Charity, Lita is neither sexually innocent nor attuned to nature. Already married and the mother of Jim's son, Lita was a member of a mystical quasi-religious group which advocated nude dancing and other exotic rituals before her marriage. Lita loves late nights and parties; she wants to divorce the adoring but staid Jim and make movies in Hollywood. She decorates her home in plastics, metals, and hothouse flowers; her bedroom is painted black.

If Lita is a kind of re-visualization of a naive Sophy Viner, Pauline Manford is a grotesque re-creation of Anna Leath. Loved for her good heart and sympathetic in her barely-admitted longing for Dexter's attention, Pauline is nonetheless Wharton's parody of wealthy, foolish, and alienated American women. Constantly busy, but without focus, Pauline gives a speech on motherhood one day and leads a rally in support of birth control the next. She falls under the influence of one phony faith-healer after another; she is ever on the lookout for a "moral tonic" which will narrow her hips and smooth her wrinkles while improving her mental attitude.

Dexter drifts into the affair with Lita in a vague recognition of the extreme alienation that Pauline's lifestyle evokes:
The philanthropy was what he most hated: all those expensive plans for moral forcible feedings, for compelling everybody to be cleaner, stronger, healthier and happier than they would have been by the unaided light of Nature. The longing to get away into a world where men and women sinned and begot, lived and died, as they chose, without the perpetual intervention of optimistic millionaires, had become so strong that he sometimes felt the chain of habit would snap with his first jerk (190).

Dexter is entranced by Lita's "animal sincerity" and her inability to "fix her attention on any subject beyond her own immediate satisfaction" (190). He calls Lita a "misguided child"; she is attractive because she is child-like. The incestuous underpinnings of his desire for her are reinforced in the equation made between her and nature.

Dexter's desire for a more natural lifestyle also causes him to think longingly of his mother:

He had a vision of his mother . . . saw her sowing, digging potatoes, feeding chickens, saw her kneading, baking, cooling, washing, mending, catching and harnessing the half-broken colt to drive twelve miles in the snow for the doctor . . . Wasn't that perhaps the kind of life Manford himself had been meant for? . . . Using his brains, muscles, the whole of him, body and soul, to do real things, bring about real results in the world, instead of all this artificial activity, this spinning around faster and faster in the void . . . (79)

In the end, Dexter's incestuous affair with Lita symbolizes not only the degeneration of the family order but the irreparable loss of one's natural self. Dexter, Pauline and Lita cannot find the sensual world that was Charity's by birthright and Anna Leath's by maturity; it exists only in memory. What is left is the hollow shell of its owner, the act of incest without the beauty of its release.
Wharton’s 1928 novel, *The Children*, again satirizes chaotic family relationships, but like *Summer*, incest is not clearly an outgrowth of degeneracy: it may even be part of the resolution. A wildly improbable tale of seven loosely-related children adrift in Europe, *The Children* has been praised by Lewis and Wolff for its psychological insights. It is nonetheless absurd, and the queer bunch of savage yet wise children strains credulity. 2

Fifteen-year-old Judith Wheater is rarely described in natural images, yet her relationship to the story’s adult couple, Martin Boyne and Rose Sellars, identifies her as Sophy Viner’s parallel. Like George Darrow and Anna Leath, Martin and Rose have rekindled a childhood attraction and have become engaged since the death of Rose’s husband. Rose Sellars closely mirrors Anna Leath in *The Reef*: both women are genteel and sensitive, both see their coming second marriages as a chance to attain a long-delayed sexual emergence, and both are loved by their suitors for their refinement, dignity and old-fashioned decorum. In action which mirrors the initiating action of *The Reef*, Boyne meets Judith on his way to visit Rose. Although they never have an affair, Boyne wraps himself up in the problems of the solitary band. By the time he arrives at Rose’s door, he has all seven children in tow and is hopelessly in love with the unsuspecting Judith.

The seven children, related by a complex series of marriages among their parents but not necessarily by blood, are united in a desire to stay together. All have been tossed from one new parent to
another and dragged throughout Europe on the heels of their
cosmopolitan guardians. Entrusted to a governess for the summer,
their primary goal is to find someone who will adopt them all and
then convince their various parents to release them.

Judith tags Boyne as the possible solution to their problems.
While he is falling in love with her innocence, her energy, and her
fierce loyalty to her brothers and sister, she is busy turning him into
the children's new father. Totally immersed in his desire to please
Judith, Boyne actually visits the children's parents and agrees to be
named their temporary guardian. From then on, Judith thinks of
Boyne as their new father.

Boyne represses the desire he feels for Judith. He becomes
incensed when he imagines that another older man wants her. He
tells Rose that "I never could stand your elderly men who look at little
girls" (215). He continues to fight the obvious attraction he has for
Judith until Rose releases him from their engagement. Then
overwhelmed with the feel of the young girl sobbing in his arms, he
proposes to Judith:

Darling, I'll never desert you; I'll stay with you always if
you'll have me; if things go wrong, I'll always be there to look
after you and defend you, no matter what happens, we'll
never be separated any more. . . (308)

Unfortunately, Judith misinterprets his words:

Her eyes still bathed him in their radiance. "My darling, my
darling." She leaned close as she said it, and he dared not
move, in his new awe of her nearness--so subtly had she
changed from the child of her familiar endearments to the
woman he passionately longed for . . . "Darling," she said
again: then with a face in which the bridal light seemed
already kindled, "Oh Martin, do you really mean you're going
to adopt us all, and we're all going to stay with you forever?"
(309).

Judith is too young to perceive Boyne's desire for her. He tries again
to make her understand--"what if, after all, a word from him could
wake the sleeping music" (312)--but her grown-up absorption in
"mothering" the younger children is not matched by any grown-up
perception of herself as a young woman. Heart-broken, Boyne
eventually abandons the children and lives out his life, "a lonely
man" (347).

Although Wharton's characterization of Boyne and Rose is
compelling in its subtle understanding of the complexities of passion
and love, the incestuous longing of Boyne for Judith seems little more
than a psychological tease, a toy to sell novels. Judith Wheater has
none of the multi-faceted depth of Sophy Viner or Charity Royall.
Obviously meant to become a woman of infinite possibilities, she is yet
a girl.

_The Children_ posits the civilized world of Rose Sellars against the
savagery of the children's absurd family structure. Like _Summer_,
the consummation of the incest desire seems to hold out the
possibility of restoring social order rather than destroying it.
Perhaps in this fantastic world, Martin and Judith could have reared
the younger children; perhaps if Judith had been ready to move into
adult sensuality, she would have evolved from sister to mother. The
point is almost moot, because _The Children_ possesses none of the life-
and-death tension which compelled the reader's attention in _The_
Reef and Summer. Incest has become a tired theme. Still echoing the cultural view of incest as somehow related to the struggle between the individual and the group, it does so out of perfunctory habit and astute commercialism.

* * *

Of the last three novels, only Kate Clephane attempts a kind of resolution of order and disorder. After her return to Europe, Fred Landers continues to ask her to marry him. Kate resists his pleadings. Despite her lonely life, Kate takes satisfaction in having made a private stand for order over disorder. In this way, she affirms her social standing as Anne's mother and guards the sweet memory of having once been allowed a second chance to be such:

Perhaps no-one else would ever understand; assuredly, he would never understand himself. But there it was. Nothing on earth would ever again help her--help to blot out the old horrors and the new loneliness--as much as the fact of being able to say to herself, whenever she began to drift toward uncertainties and fresh concessions, that once at least she had stood fast, shutting away in a little space of peace and light the best thing that had ever happened to her (342).

Edith Wharton was in her late sixties when she wrote The Mother's Recompense, Twilight Sleep, and The Children. She had been devastated by the war and the deaths of many of her dearest
friends. Her long-time companion, Walter Berry, died in 1927, and her desolation at his loss was acute. Perhaps for her, the raw exhilarating beauty of uninhibited passion had been swallowed up in the realization of its destructive potential. The shimmering joy of a Charity Royall in perfect tune with the natural life about her or the beauty of a slight airy Sophy Viner has been forgotten. In its place are the sordid Mountain encampment of Charity’s birth and the sickly pink bedroom of Laura Viner. Wharton came to despise much about the country of her birth; her caustic depiction of its excesses, its artificiality, and its alienating commercialism made the presence of an innocent sensuality in her later novels impossible. Only Judith Wheater retains a youthful freshness, and she is not yet sexually aware.

Wharton always chose tradition and responsibility over unmarred joy. Late in her life, the choice was no longer a necessary concession to human needs, but the fierce disavowal of all that was chaotic and animalistic and raw in human nature. Like Kate Clephane, Wharton shut away the beauty of her early sensuality” in a little space of peace and light.” Shortly before she died, Wharton wrote wistfully of all that she had lost to time:

Everything that used to form the fabric of our daily life has been torn in shreds, trampled on, destroyed: and hundreds of little incidents, habits, traditions, which, when I began to write my past, seemed too insignificant to set down, have acquired the historical importance of fragments of dress and furniture dug up in a Babylonian tomb.
The world had changed drastically in the course of Wharton's life. Before she died, she would have learned of the events in Germany which were to ravage her beloved Europe for the second time. Always so much a part of the world about her, Wharton hated being left behind. Her late bitter tales of America and Americans reflect the sorrows of a woman who had once been intimately connected to all that happened about her. Her novels were shaped by and in their turn shaped the curious, boisterous, volatile world of her lifetime. Such a charge was impossible for the fierce and vital Wharton to give up. She simply would not go quietly into that good night; if her late novels lost their spectacular intimacy with the cultural pulse of her time, they retained at least their hold on the popular imagination.
1 Lev Raphael contends that the "Beatrice Cenci portrait and incest motif have been read too literally by many critics" (197). Calling the incestuous implications a metaphor for shame, Raphael links Kate's horror over Chris and Anne's marriage to her own debilitating guilt over having abandoned Anne as a child. While Raphael is correct in pointing out that incest has not actually occurred among the characters, it is difficult to dismiss Wharton's life-long use of subtly incestuous implications as anything but a statement about the nature of desire itself. Human sensuality in Wharton, as in Durkheim and Freud, is somehow inseparable from the incest conflict.

2 Perhaps the most insightful examination of The Children, and the only one which convincingly argues for giving the novel more critical consideration, is Judith L. Sensibar's, "Edith Wharton Reads the Bachelor Type: Her Critique of Modernism's Representative Man," American Literature 60 (1988): 575-590. Sensibar considers Martin Boyne a composite of Henry James and Walter Berry and argues that his inability to love the adult Rose Sellars hints at homosexuality. Where some critics will challenge Sensibar's conclusion, her careful reading of Boyne's character sheds light on a slew of Wharton men, including Newland Archer, George Darrow, and Lawrence Selden.

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