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Wharton's Double Voices in *The House of Mirth*

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The elect would understand; the crowd would not; and his work would thus serve a double purpose.

Edith Wharton, "The Descent of Man"¹⁾

I

On the 17th of March 1905, Eleanor Roosevelt married Franklin D. Roosevelt, with a large bouquet of lilies of the valley in her hands. Since Eleanor lost her parents in her childhood, her uncle, Theodore Roosevelt, attended the wedding ceremony in place of her father. It was just after the reelection of his presidency, so that New York was in uproar with the excitement of celebrating St. Patrick's Day, the coming of the president, and the wedding of a prestigious new couple; so much so that even many of the wedding guests had difficulty in reaching the house because of the parade which blocked the streets.²⁾ Five days later, Edith Wharton finished writing her first best-seller, *The House of Mirth*.³⁾ It was published in serial form in *Scribner's* from January to November and in book form in October that year. There is no knowing whether this wedding fever had anything to do with the book-sale, but this first story about upper-class society

1) Edith Wharton, *The Descent of Man and Other Stories, The Complete Works of Edith Wharton*, (Kyoto: Rinsen Book Co., 1988), Vol. 4, p. 225.

2) Eleanor Roosevelt, *This is My Story* (New York: Doubleday & Com., Inc., 1961), p. 99.

3) Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth, The Complete Works of Edith Wharton*, vol. 6 (Kyoto: Rinsen Book Co., 1988) All subsequent references will be cited in abridgment *HM*, and page numbers in parenthesis.

written by an authentic "lady" achieved an enormous and instantaneous success which became an "element in the publishing-house lore."⁴⁾

Without parents, Eleanor led such a brilliant career that she was even called the "first lady of the world." On the other hand, the protagonist of *HM*, Lily Bart, who also lives in New York society without parental support, is ruined and dies young in the denouement. In the democratic society of America, the aristocratic class has been the object of admiration and envy. Therefore *HM* functioned as an inside story which gratified the voyeuristic interest of the general reader. Furthermore, it was not the ascent but downfall of the privileged which would have solicited them. It is quite understandable that Lily's failure and death gained sympathy, while the success of vicious Caroline Meeber in *Sister Carrie* (1900) was totally ignored.

Another element which appealed to readers must have been the image of Woman that Lily represents. Traditionally, the flower imagery of a lily is "unearthly purity" and "chastity." It was repeatedly used in the fine arts in the late nineteenth century. Bram Dijkstra points out that one of the concepts prevailing among middle-class women in the late nineteenth century was that "... she must transfer the essence of her well-being, symbolically her 'jewel,' the fragile lily of her virtue, to her chosen mate to help revivify his moral energies."⁵⁾ Just as this image testifies, Lily dies in the novel, as a woman of beauty, youth, moral righteousness, self-sacrifice, and maternal affection. Here we have a complete list of virtues of the ideal woman in the Victorian era. Of course new types of women appeared at the end of the era, yet as a whole, this traditional idealized woman was well received by the masses.

Since the publication of *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* in 1859, Darwinism had such a great impact upon

4) R. W. B. Lewis & Nancy Lewis eds., *The Letters of Edith Wharton* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988), p. 54.

5) Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siecle Culture* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986), p. 30.

the people that it revolutionalized the fundamental patterns of their thinking. This was especially so in America, and Richard Hofstadter calls the United States of America during the last three decades of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, "the Darwinian country."⁶⁾ In *Galaxy* it is said, "Not only does all physical research take color from the new theory, but the doctrine sends its pervasive hues through poetry, novels, history."⁷⁾ Wharton was not an exception and she refers to Darwin as "ranked foremost among my Awakeners" in her youth. Her third collection of stories, *The Descent of Man and Other Stories*, was published a year before *HM*. Inevitably its title reminds us of one of Darwin's controversial books, *The Descent of Man*. Wharton's version of "The Descent of Man" is the story of the distinguished microscopist, Prof. Linyard. As a serious scientist, he is disgusted with the popular science fad and in ridiculing its trends, he writes a skit, titled "The Vital Thing," which surprisingly becomes a great commercial success.

In this story, Wharton caricatures the people's light-headed tendency to believe any fact once it is given a scientific flavor. However, her satire is not only directed at people, but also at Prof. Linyard himself. Behind his success, there exists a best-seller maker, Mr. Harviss, who knows thoroughly the knacks and tricks of the publishing business. Soon after perceiving a slacking of the booksales, he advises Prof. Linyard to write another book; "...write another like it — go it one better: you know the trick...you want to make yourself heard again before anybody else cuts in."⁹⁾ By publishing the pseudo-science book, Prof. Lynyard becomes involved in the business world where time and money are the decisive elements. He is forced to make a contract to write another popular book in a few months, while

6) Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), p. 4-5.

7) Donald Pizer ed., *The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism: Howells to London* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1995), p. 28.

8) Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985), p. 72.

9) *The Descent of Man and Other Stories*, p. 240.

giving up his professional research. He thinks that although this new book is causing delays to his academic work, the money earned by the book will help his research in the long run. Dazzled by money and pressed by the demands of time, he needs to justify himself in this manner. But in effect, he is forsaking his "intellectual sincerity," and in this sense he is a self-deceiver. Here the word "descent" doesn't mean "lineage," but ironically the degeneration or decline that Prof. Lynyard embodies.

This short story supplies two significant keys for interpreting the next novel, *HM*. One is that this story depicts the danger many of the people in this era confront. Living in an age permeated with the gospel of progress, people are entangled in a mercenary society and obsessed by a desire to go forward at a bewildering speed. Even scientists who are supposed to pursue the truth are not exempt from this obsession. Wharton acutely criticizes their futile struggle with time, and exhibits the pitfalls of self-deception hidden behind worldly success. The other point is that it discloses the double functions that narratives may have. By writing a popular science book, Prof. Lynyard recognizes that the writer can communicate with two types of readers and fulfill a double purpose, as is shown in the epigraph. It is a new discovery for him, for he has written genuine academic works for a limited circle till then. This recognition is suggestive, for Wharton must have realized its importance since her readers are not specialists but many and varied. In *HM*, she treats the same theme, but with a more familiar female motif, marriage, and with her home-ground setting, New York society.

Sandra Gilbert suggests that we should note Wharton's "evocations of what is illicit, what is secret, what is silent."¹⁰⁾ Just as Lily is unable to rise above the "word-play and evasion" which is the convention of lady-talk, Wharton's narrative is also full of allusions, which evade direct expression of meanings. By shifting the emphasis

10) Sandra M. Gilbert & Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1989), p. 156.

or by not giving enough information, the narrative is constructed so as to provide double voices. With one voice, Wharton appeals to general readers, and here she makes good use of a conventional woman's story, featuring the beautiful tragic heroine as mentioned above. With another voice, she offers a more cynical view of the heroine who fails to survive because she lacks a sense of time. It is my present task in this paper to investigate this latter hidden implication, through which I hopefully indicate Wharton's particular attitude toward time.

II

The novel begins at the Grand Central Station where Lily Bart is at a loss, having missed the train for visiting the Trenor's. Without parental assistance and economic stability, she is now searching for a suitable husband who would let her lead a prestigious, luxurious married life. The sole asset she has is her beauty. Her distinguished beauty, compared to the throng around her, is observed by Lawrence Selden thus; "Was it possible that she belonged to the same race? The dinginess, the crudity of this average section of womanhood made him feel how highly specialized she was"(6). In like manner, her physical attractiveness gives "centripetal pull" to the story throughout the novel. Her object in visiting the Trenor's this time is to extract a proposal from Percy Gryce, the rich bachelor. However, at the crucial moment she whimsically refrains from sticking to the plan, and loses her chance. There remains a question whether they would marry, if it were not for her folly, but at least this episode functions so as to prove that Lily is still on the marriage market. Her matchless beauty and social "tactics" which she has nurtured through her long experience in society are repeatedly emphasized.

But on the other hand, we must keep in mind that she is in a critical situation. She is now twenty-nine years old and has been in society for the past eleven years. If we look at some of the other heroines in Wharton's works, we find that May Welland in *The Age of*

Innocence marries at the age of twenty-two; Delia Lovell in "The Old Maid" marries at twenty; Hermione Newell in "The Last Asset" is twenty-three and said to be too long on the marriage market. In the actual world, Eleanor Roosevelt got married at the age of twenty-one, and Edith Wharton at the age of twenty-four. Concerning Wharton's marriage, R. W. B. Lewis comments that it was "... dangerously close to the age beyond which the young women of her set became steadily less marriageable."¹¹⁾ Therefore girls in the upper-class could generally be said to marry in their early twenties, a few years after their debut.¹²⁾ So what will become of an unmarried woman at the age of twenty-nine, eleven years after her debut? It is not too much to say that there's no prospect, that it is a mere losing game. Characterizing the heroine in such a desperate situation but describing her beauty elaborately; this contradiction becomes the source from which springs forth the ensuing deceptive narrative.

Lily is ignorant or not willing to see the real situation she is in. In the conversation with Seldan at the beginning of the story, she defines herself as one of the "poor, miserable, marriageable girls" (9) and discriminates herself from her unmarriageable friend, Gerty Farish. After the failure to catch Gryce, Lily, who is still hoping to amend this relation, says, "There are ways —." But Mrs. Trenor cynically rectifies this; "There *were* ways — plenty of them!... But don't deceive yourself —" (121). Both of Lily's comments exemplify that she attaches little importance to the passage of time and deceives herself that time is reparable. And Mrs. Trenor gets precisely to the point. The self-deception is her means not to confront the fact that there is no time left.

This deceptive tendency is not only found in Lily, but also in the narrative voice of *HM*. At the end of the novel when Lily is dying from overdosing a soporific, it is explained thus; "She saw now that

11) R. W. B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton: a Biography* (London: Vintage, 1993), p. 52.

12) According to the almanac, the female median age at first marriage in 1890 was 22, and 21.9 in 1900. Crandall Shifflett ed., *Victorian American, 1876 to 1913* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1996), p. 75.

there was nothing to be excited about — she had returned to her normal view of life. . . She had been unhappy, and now she was happy — she had felt herself alone, and now the sense of loneliness had vanished”(522). Although what is written might be the subjective temporal reality for Lily, readers should guess her objective situation which is entirely opposite to what is written. On very rare occasions, the narrator takes an authorized and omniscient position to give a detached remark on characters, but more often, the voice of the narrator inseparably overlaps the introspections of the characters inseparably, which makes it difficult to discern their real situation. It could even be argued that this ambiguous narration is used as a device for the writer to treat the plot which contains the fundamental contradiction. As great emphasis is given in the narration to her beauty and her tactics, her desperate situation is blurred and her terror of the threat of time has less impact on readers.

As she has spoiled her chance of making a proper upper-class marriage, she seeks another source to cope with her impending need of money: she secretly asks Mr. Trenor to invest her money to speculate on Wall Street. She pretends that it is a kind of business transaction though she knows that it is a dubious “deal” with no risk to herself. The money she earns will be used for buying costly clothes and playing cards that are thought to be indispensable expenses to prove that she is still marriageable. She is so confident of her maneuvering Mr. Trenor that when he loses his patience and demands reciprocity in the deal, she becomes totally dismayed. The narration says, “There was a great gulf fixed between today and yesterday. Everything in the past seemed simple, natural, full of daylight — and she was alone in a place of darkness and pollution. — Alone!”(239) This exclamatory statement can be interpreted as Lily’s introspection or the narrator’s voice, but in either case it heightens the effect of making her seem a poor victim, almost falling a prey to male carnal desire. Her desperation as a sufferer is so immense in this scene that the forsaken, lonesome Lily, seeking for help from Farish, makes a strong

impression on the readers' mind.

At the same time, however slighted, the fact that Lily is not just a victim is also delineated. She definitely plays the active role and it is Lily who begins the game. The quarrel with Mr. Trenor is a legitimate outcome which is easy to anticipate from the beginning. So even the desperate exclamation cited above sounds theatrical or childish. Lily's demand for an enormous sum of money might be just an excuse for her looseness concerning money. It is not always true that the people of upper-class society are as loose as Lily. For example, Eleanor Roosevelt was brought up under strict discipline. Even after marriage, the first thing her husband taught her was how to keep the household accounts. She followed his advice, and she imparted this economic discipline to her daughter. As to the rule about gifts in her girlhood, she says, "You never allowed a man to give you a present except flowers or candy or possibly a book."¹³⁾ Then, the fact that Lily secretly receives nine thousands dollars and spends it ungrudgingly is out of question for a respectable girl in society at that time. Lily sometimes repents her behavior, but only to return to her self-complacency that she is not to be blamed, and keep considering herself a victim. Here, contrary to the sympathetic tone of the exclamatory statement cited before, the narrator objectively points out that she keeps her appearances to herself and avoids seeing the true nature of the problem; "Her personal fastidiousness had a moral equivalent, and when she made a tour of inspection in her own mind there were certain closed doors she did not open"(131). Therefore, on the one hand, Lily is characterized as a passive, miserable girl, who is in great pecuniary straits. But on the other hand, she is imprudent and shrewd enough to take advantage of Mr. Trenor with her physical attractiveness.

The *Tableaux Vivants* is the occasion in which Lily's beauty most intensely attracts the attention of society. But at the same time, this scene illustrates that their image of Lily is different from her own.

13) Eleanor Roosevelt, p. 88.

The *Tableaux Vivants* is one of the topical social entertainments, here given by the Wellington Brys, where a dozen pictures of the real New York beauties are exhibited. Lily is one of the models and she tries to demonstrate her appropriateness as an ideal marriageable girl in her simple beauty and moral virtue. She receives overwhelming admiration from the spectators and feels "the completeness of her triumph." Still, despite her satisfaction, there is some ambiguous implication in the people's response. The first comment made by a connoisseur is, "Deuced bold thing to show herself in that get-up; . . . there is n't a break in the lines anywhere, and I suppose she wanted us to know it!" (217) Furthermore, their appraisal is described as, "At such moments she lost something of her natural fastidiousness, and cared less for the quality of the admiration received than for its quantity" (219-220). This expression is dubious enough to have us wonder what kind of admiration she has received. The praise must be for her physical and sexual attractiveness as a mature woman. By then, the suspicious relationship between Mr. Trenor and Lily has been rumoured, and this must have affected the impression of the people. Selden realizes this gap but it is beyond Lily's recognition. Therefore this episode emphasizes her distinguished beauty more than any other scene, but it also represents her self-complacency as overwhelming so that she cannot see the real response of the audience.

After the quarrel with Mr. Trenor, Lily goes cruising to Europe with the Dorsets, in defiance of her aunt's opposition. It is nothing but an escape from the complications in New York, but her regained beauty and popularity in Europe are minutely explained. However, this trip has a fatal effect on her life afterwards because of two incidents: the break-up with Mrs. Dorset, a profligate society matron, and the failure to inherit her aunt's fortune. Deprived of both mental and economic supports, Lily is mercilessly thrown out of privileged society.

III

The novel begins in September and ends in April two years later.

During these seventeen months, the passage of time is clearly drawn by a changing set of new-comers in society with whom Lily makes contact. In the beginning of the novel, a Jewish financier Simon Rosedale and the Welly-Brys are the new-comers. They are not yet accepted by upper-class society, and rudely scorned and despised. However in the meantime, the aggrandizement of their mercenary power becomes too great to ignore so that they are finally admitted into society. They are old-fashioned compared to their successors, for they try to assimilate themselves into existing manners and customs of society. At the next stage, the Gormers come into the picture. They are quite "new," for they have no social existence at the time when the story begins. They have their own freer custom and manners, but still are conservative enough to be interested in keeping company with the established. The newest type in society is Mrs. Hatch, whose manners and values are entirely heterogeneous. Although she has a huge fortune like others, her life is in complete disorder, with no definite obligations nor time schedule. These drastic changes in manners and way of thinking have all happened during these seventeen months, and it represents how rapidly time brings forth changes in society. There always exist those who are newly involved in society and those who are eliminated from it. It is difficult to determine whether this change is an evolution or a devolution, but its vicissitude is undeniable.

Among these ever-changing sets of people, the relationship with Rosedale reveals the characteristics of Lily's struggle most eloquently. After being ostracized from association with the "right" people, she is allowed to associate with only the marginal new-comers as mentioned above. She has an earnest desire to return to the inner circle of society, and the only way left to her is to consent to marry Rosedale, who has already proposed to Lily just after the *Tableaux Vivants*. Yet their social situation has been reversed, and now it is Rosedale who refuses its possibility. He candidly explains the reason. "Now, what has changed in the interval? Your situation, that's all . . . if I married

you now I'd queer myself for good and all, and everything I've worked for all these years would be wasted" (412-413). For Rosedale marriage is not a matter of love, but a kind of business transaction in which the appropriateness of give-and-take is calculated. Lily is now considered as nothing but an encumbrance for his social ascent. But at the end, he advises Lily to revenge herself on Mrs. Dorset with his support as a backing. He secretly obtains the information that Lily happens to possess Mrs. Dorset's love-letters to Selden. He emphasizes that this action needs urgency; "All the letters in the world won't do that for you as you are *now*" (Italics mine, 418). Though moved by his proposition, she cannot accept the idea of being an accomplice in the base blackmailing "business." Sacrificing the welfare of marriage and fleeing from the temptation of vice, she finally decides to discard the unrepeatable opportunity of "now."

But some suspicion remains here. While she reflects upon the way she should take, the narration says, "He would marry her tomorrow if she could regain Bertha Dorset's friendship" (417). In order to marry Rosedale, she thinks that the blackmailing has become an indispensable course of action. However, this indirect statement is a clear example of the ambiguous narration. It is Rosedale who declares he will help her as a "big backing." But we must take notice here that Rosedale never uses the word 'marriage.' Does his proposition of blackmailing really imply their matrimonial relationship in the future? As an efficient businessman, Rosedale is a perfect realist who comprehends thoroughly that you cannot undo the past. With due regard to this characteristic, one would likely regard this prospect of marriage as Lily's hopeful anticipation instead of objective information from the narrator. It might be her optimistic day-dream, which takes little consideration of the significance of passing time and her own careless behaviour in the past. From this ambiguous expression, two interpretations can be drawn. On one hand, she is characterized as a woman of virtue who sacrifices her possibility of marriage for moral righteousness. But on the other hand, she deceives herself that

the unrealistic marriage will still come true.

At the final stage of the novel, a similar incident occurs which discloses her self-deception more clearly. Lily works as a private secretary to Mrs. Hatch, and after that, resigning from this parasitic life at last, she begins to work as a milliner. Rosedale, who cannot overlook the impoverished situation of Lily, offers to lend her money. Instantly after she refuses this offer, she decides to carry out the blackmailing, this time with her own will. For she thinks this is the sole means to retrieve her honor and marry Rosedale. Yet when she meets Selden, she loses the courage to blackmail lest she should put him in trouble. She destroys Mrs. Dorset's love-letters, and dies from an over-dose of chloral.

In order to save Selden, she sacrifices her only possibility of marriage. The virtuous image of the heroine is intensified by her final death. In addition to this, the last part of the novel is loaded with many incidents which contribute to make the picture of an ideal tragic heroine complete; recognizing the "central truth of existence" in a humble family-life, having her maternal affection awakened, paying back the money she owed Mr. Trenor, an intimation of reconciliation between Lily and Selden after her death. Although she fails to return to society and dies finally, these favorable elements help to give an impression that her defeat is a sort of moral triumph. It proves that she is too pure and good-hearted to be involved in this decadent society, and she is rightly called a genuine "*last lady in New York*."¹⁴⁾

But the last encounter with Rosedale also enables us to find another way of reading. Rosedale, who has happened to meet Lily working at the millinery, asks to meet her again. Though Rosedale never utters the word 'marriage' here, the first idea that comes to her mind is the possibility of marriage: "She was quite sure that he would come and see her again, and almost sure that, if he did, she

14) Elaine Showalter, *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing* (New York: Oxford UP, 1994), p.87.

could bring him to the point of offering to marry her on the terms she had previously rejected" (478). Because she has worked under the Hatch's, her reputation is degraded much lower than before. She does not understand that she is not in the same situation "on the terms she had previously been rejected" and is still confident of her capacity to coax him to marry.

When Rosedale visits her as he has promised, she feels a sense of triumph. The description which follows represents her in the extremity of self-consciousness:

In the silence Lily had a clear perception of what was passing through his mind. Whatever perplexity he felt as to the inexorableness of course — however little he penetrated its motive — she saw that it unmistakably tended to strengthen her hold over him. It was as though the sense in her of unexplained scruples and resistances had the same attraction as the delicacy of feature, the fastidiousness of manner, which gave her an external rarity, an air of being impossible to match.... Lily, perceiving all this, understood that he would marry her at once, on the sole condition of a reconciliation with Mrs. Dorset; (484-485)

She believes that even her unreasonable denial of receiving money will become an enticement to Rosedale. This insistent reference to her own attraction functions more to illuminate her senseless pride than her rare supremacy. Her sole attention is on how she looks, and her excessive self-complacency leads her to the conviction of imminent marriage.

Rosedale is a man of straight words, always expressing himself in candid terms. Enraged at seeing Lily in a miserable condition, Rosedale says exasperatedly, "My goodness — you can't go on living here! . . . It's a farce — a crazy farce" (482). In contrast to him, Lily's expression is always a bluff, a decorum of self-restraint, from which

she can speak out neither her inmost agony, her desperation, fear, chagrin nor lonesomeness. To his words, Lily answers with a smile, "I don't know why I should regard myself as an exception—" (482). In fact, however, her words painfully indicate that she believes in her exceptionality. She speaks like a decent lady as she used to be, and she applies this pretentious rhetoric in interpreting his words. His offer to lend money as a "plain business arrangement, such as one man would make with another" (483) is taken as a proposal. Her self-aggrandizement prevents her from seeing his real intention and her real situation.

If the possibility of marrying Rosedale is only her illusion, her misunderstanding of his words, then her behavior can be interpreted in completely different terms. Her misunderstanding arises from her total inability to look the situation straight in the eye. Having the dream of a profitable marriage in her mind, she resists seeing her own age, her present situation, her own future. The denouement of the story is the culmination of this deceptive process, in which she fancies that she has annulled the marriage of her own will, has saved Selden without letting him know the truth, has prevented herself from being involved in blackmail. Lily must have regarded herself as a demi-god of virtue, yet it is a rootless assumption if it were not for the possibility of marriage.

In order to perceive her situation, a sense of time is the most crucial element. Her discordance with time is explained at the end of the story thus: "One of the surprises of her unoccupied state was the discovery that time, when it is left to itself and no definite demands are made on it, cannot be trusted to move at any recognized pace. Usually it loiters; but just when one has come to count upon its slowness, it may suddenly break into a wild irrational gallop" (489). This is Lily's reflection before venturing into blackmail. But it elaborately explains her whole life in which she cannot adjust herself to on-going time. Staying far behind time, she begins to rely on her inner time-sequence which has stopped at a certain period of her life.

Because of this, she frequently calls herself a "girl," though twenty-nine years old. Because of this, she obstinately relies on the possibility of marrying Rosedale, ignoring the passage of time and the successive failures she has made during this period. With her second voice, Wharton tells us the story of a doomed woman who lacks a sense of time.

IV

At the turn of the century, telephones, motor cars, wireless telegraphy, street-cars, bicycles, and many other modern devices appeared. These innovations not only made modern life more convenient, but also accelerated its rhythm. In America, where incessant change was one of the fundamental characteristics of society, the speed of this change grew faster and faster. The concept of time has become secularized and regarded as something that human beings can control by themselves. In 1884, standard time was officially instituted at the Prime Meridian Conference. It was originally necessitated by the rearranging of the time-tables of the railways, but the introduction of this system strengthened the relation between time and the business world in general. Furthermore, owing to the introduction of the time-recorder, or the stop-watch measuring system, Frederick W. Taylor pursued maximum efficiency in factories. It undoubtedly contributed to the increasing of profits, yet it has brought forth a disparity between those who control time and those who are controlled by it. Therefore, how to relate to time is the decisive factor in indicating one's position in society.¹⁵⁾

In the New York society portrayed in *HM*, there are two types of sets: those who are abreast of the time, and those who are not. The former set occupies the main stream of society, and Rosedale is its representative. Not only new-comers like him, but many of the older

15) For detailed descriptions concerning 'time' at the turn of century America, see Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983), Michael O'Malley, *Keeping Watch: A History of American Time* (New York: Viking, 1990)

members of the upper class likewise are included here. They are cruel enough to choose the fittest moment to attack their rivals. They are adroit enough to catch the chance of a fat job. The latter set, represented by people like Seldan and Farish, stands aloof from society in a material and spiritual sense. Refusing to be involved in the survival game, they try to maintain peaceful tranquility of mind. Lily belongs to neither of these types but hangs halfway between. She cannot keep pace with time successfully like those in the former set, but cannot endure pecuniary "dinginess" like those in the latter. In other words, she has not any definite principle as to how to behave toward on-going time, as I have explained above. This is a fatal defect for people living in this era. The fact that Wharton could delineate such a heroine with cold detachment suggests that Wharton possesses her own strategy toward time, in contrast with Lily.

Though brought up in the same New York society, Edith Wharton and Eleanor Roosevelt present a striking contrast in their opinions concerning the speedy change of society. Roosevelt regards the instability of society as a fundamental characteristic of democratic America. She thinks those in the leisure class should not regard their privilege as permanently fixed; "It is only luck and a little veneer temporarily on the surface, and before very long the wheels may turn and one and all must fall back on whatever basic 'quality' they have."¹⁶⁾ For her, the vicissitudes of society are a part of the natural cycle from which nobody can escape. What was important to her is not inherited property nor lineage, but flexibility which enabled her to overcome hardships, such as her husband's affair and illness, and to fulfill her responsibility as a wife of a navy officer, governor and president, and also of her own career as a teacher, lecturer, social worker and a delegate of the United Nations. She praised her husband for possessing a sense of timing, saying the right thing at the right moment, which she assumed to be one of the essential qualities for a

16) Eleanor Roosevelt, p.268.

17) ———, *This I remember* (New York: Doubleday & Com., Inc., 1961), p.17.

politician.¹⁷⁾ But this must be the quality she herself had, and she began to work like a political partner of her husband after he became handicapped.

On the other hand, Wharton's concept of time is not cyclical but linear, and she deplors the fact that change is nothing but retrogression; "Inheriting an old social organization which provided for nicely shaded degrees of culture and conduct, modern America has simplified and Taylorized it out of existence, forgetting that in such matters the process is necessarily one of impoverishment."¹⁸⁾ She considers that the changing of society brings forth degeneration in both mental and physical senses. In many of her works, she portrays the life of "old New York" and the conservative, upright, conformists who belong to it. However, her actual attitude to life was not such a simple backward glance, missing good old days with sentimental affection. She had a clear perception that she was under the threat of time, and dared to face it. One of Wharton's favorite hobbies was travel, and during trips she frequently used a motor car after 1903. She first enjoyed driving while on a research trip in Italy. Frustrated with the inconvenience of trains by then, the luxury of a car, which enabled her to look around the sites with speed and freedom, was exclaimed on thus; "...we did — we did with a vengeance!"¹⁹⁾ The tone of this exclamation shows her joy at being freed from the inconvenient time-table and her grudge against the oppression of time. A car was an up-to-date tool to save and manage time for her. Her later way of life, living in France and writing to America, was another distinct method to control time. Aloof from both America and France, she held an ideal distance in time and space from society. But her most important revenge on time may be through her works.

In *The Custom of the Country*, the old New Yorkers are called "aborigines" and likened to "those vanishing denizens of the American

18) Edith Wharton, *Edith Wharton; The Uncollected Critical Writings*, Frederick Wegener ed., (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996), p.154.

19) *A Backward Glance*, p.137.

continent doomed to rapid extinction with the advance of the invading race.”²⁰⁾ It cynically describes the doom of the dying tribe of her set. But at the same time, by calling them “aborigines,” they are certificated as original inhabitants and given a legitimate right to claim ownership of the land. It may sound paradoxical, but by stating that they are vanishing, it stabilizes the fact that they have once existed. Old New York itself is only an equivocal existence, and the demarcation between Old New York and New New York is not definitive. But dramatized in her novels, it is given a solid image. In America, where equality is the fundamental principle of society, Old New Yorkers are no more than exceptional outsiders in democratic society. But in the novels, they are given a fixed existence with customs and manners of their own. By writing, she succeeds in reconstructing the past, and in this sense, she becomes the manipulator of time, instead of one manipulated by time.

Hitherto, I have inferred that there are two narrative voices in *HM*. They can be defined as one of the examples of Wharton’s vengeance on the oppression of time. One voice brings forth an ideal tragic image of the heroine, who sacrifices her happiness for her lover. Though frivolous and rude sometimes, Lily still possesses moral nobility. It represents Wharton’s pride as one of the members of this society. On the other hand, the second voice comes out between the lines. However hard she may try, Lily falls into the labyrinth of self-deception. Wharton well understands the cruel doom that awaits such a heroine, who lacks the sense of time. It is a “cold determinism,”²²⁾ derived from Wharton’s sharp observation of her society and people.

20) Edith Wharton, *The Custom of the Country* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1913), pp. 73-74.

21) Cynthia Griffin Wolff says that old New York had begun to be displaced before the Civil War (*The Introduction of HM in Penguin edition*, viii), and Nina Bayms says it was dead before 1830 (*Woman’s Fiction*, p. 46). It is doubtful whether the society Wharton experienced in her youth should be called authentic old New York. Alexis de Tocqueville says, “... although there are rich men, a class of the rich does not exist at all...” and calls the American upper-class a “business aristocracy” and distinguishes it from that of Europe. (*Democracy in America*, p. 557).

22) *The Descent of Man and Other Stories*, p. 225.

At odds with the changing situation, Lily is just another example of Prof. Linyard, but more tragic.

By portraying this unskillful Lily, Wharton skillfully combines the double voices by means of equivocal narration. As a professional writer, she calculates to put sentimental factors in the novel and suppresses the tone of the second voice so as not to bewilder the general readers. What makes this sensitive manipulation possible is her sense of timing, saying the right thing at the right moment in the right manner. Because of this quality, she achieved the success as one of the greatest best-selling writers at the beginning of the twentieth century. As did Eleanor Roosevelt, in her social and political field.