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**The Lost Meaning of Things:  
Edith Wharton, Materiality, and Modernity**

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**The Lost Meaning of Things:  
Edith Wharton, Materiality, and Modernity**

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**Report**

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## **Abstract**

### **The Lost Meaning of Things:**

### **Edith Wharton, Materiality, and Modernity**

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Critics of Edith Wharton frequently discuss the material culture that pervades her work, but the trend in doing so has been to rush past the things themselves and engage in abstracted conversations of theory. I would like to suggest that a closer scrutiny of the individual objects being presented in Wharton's novels can highlight Wharton's own theoretical approaches to material culture. Working from Bill Brown's distinction between objects and things, I want to argue that Wharton firmly situates the material culture in *The Age of Innocence* in the background of her characters' lives as *objects* which they utilize as extensions of the self; but she brings the *thingness* of material culture to the forefront in *Twilight Sleep*, where the material culture in the novel alternately stands out and malfunctions, as characters attempt—and fail—to construct coherent and livable identities for themselves in the face of a 1920s New York that Wharton depicts as a paradoxically over-furnished wasteland. I will ultimately argue that things, problematic as they are, become a matter of survival strategy for her characters in *Twilight Sleep* when they utilize them to reconstruct the social relations that have become increasingly threatened from the world of *The Age of Innocence*.

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*These fragments I have shored against my ruins.*  
-- T.S. Eliot

### **The Object Matter of Wharton's Literature**

The year after *The Age of Innocence* (1920) was published, Edith Wharton wrote to her friend and sister-in-law Mary Cadwalader Jones about the potential dramatization of her intricately detailed novel. Considering the translation of its many physical objects to the props and costumes of the stage, Wharton told Minnie, "I could do every stick of furniture & every rag of clothing myself, for every detail of that far-off scene was indelibly stamped on my infant brain" (Wharton *Age* 225). As Hermione Lee observes, Wharton was "keen to make an authentic picture" in writing *The Age of Innocence*, and she cared deeply about the proper types of buttonhole flowers, height of hats, and choices of shoes that would represent her childhood setting (569). That these objects remained "indelibly stamped" on Wharton's brain some fifty years later characterizes them with a marked quality of fixity and steadiness. The detailed material culture of Old New York forms for Wharton a coherent and stable picture of society—a picture that contrasts sharply with the unsettled "modern N.Y." she describes in the 1920s (Wharton *Age* 225). As scholars have begun to recognize, Wharton's own insistence on the exact historical detail of the objects in her novel reveals the primacy of material culture in her writing and justifies, if not demands, a scholarly attention to those same objects.

Frequently highlighting material signifiers of conspicuous consumption, Wharton criticism often engages with issues of commodification and material culture. This scholarship largely focuses its attention on the social milieu Wharton depicts rather than

examining in detail the physical qualities of the objects on display in her novels.<sup>1</sup> Such criticism has tended to use the material objects in Wharton's novels as a quickly bypassed point of departure for analysis of class, gender, and other social issues. For example, Gary Totten addresses the concern that an "emphasis on the social meaning of material products within Wharton's acquisitive culture" may be read negatively as a reduction of Wharton to "a novelist of manners"; instead, he views material culture in Wharton's work as "the metaphorical manifestation of ideology, evidence of deep engagement with intellectual, philosophical, and moral issues" (5). Thus, in his defense of her materiality, he immediately abstracts her material objects into metaphors. Even as he supports a study of the material, Totten remains tied to its signification of "social meaning" and ideology. I would argue, like Totten, that a close study of material culture certainly does not reduce Wharton's work as a novelist; but I would also like to pause and suggest that a closer scrutiny of the individual objects presented in Wharton's novels can bring to light important shifts in Wharton's theories of material culture.

Beyond the question of what specific ideologies given objects make metaphorically manifest, or what "social meanings" those objects carry, I wish to argue

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<sup>1</sup> For example, a number of critics, including Jennie Kassanoff, Nancy Bentley, and Judith Saunders, have explored Wharton as anthropologist in her treatment of old New York culture as an extinct civilization in *The Age of Innocence*. These thorough investigations of anthropology rarely examine the specific objects so often indicated in discussions of old New York's antiquities. In fact, very few of the readings of *The Age of Innocence* within the past decade have directly explored the objects Wharton presents in her novel. Martha Banta's "Wharton's Women: In Fashion, in History, out of Time" is nearly an exception to this trend, as she argues that, of the "wide range of material markers" in Wharton's novels, the fashions "remain foremost" (58) in *The Age of Innocence*. Maureen Montgomery's *Displaying Women* (1998) makes passing mentions of clothing in her analysis of women's positions in society, but her work more broadly exemplifies the consistent focus on the role of architecture and spaces in Wharton's texts. Speaking of the material culture of Wharton's New York, Montgomery writes, "What was on display was not simply an array of objects but also lifestyle and social status" (122), thus looking past the "array of objects" to focus on issues of class.



that the very function of objects in Wharton's fiction—and in the social worlds her fiction portrays—shifts significantly depending on the historical period she seeks to represent. That is, not only do individual objects carry different meanings in texts focused on different historical or social contexts, but, more significantly, the very way in which objects carry meaning—indeed, even the possibility that an object *can* carry a stable and legible meaning within a given community—shifts. Examining Wharton's engagement with material culture even in two novels written only seven years apart unveils significant shifts in her treatment of those “stick[s] of furniture” and “rag[s] of clothing” mentioned in the letter to Mary Cadwalader Jones with which I began. Objects, for Wharton, move from conveying relatively stable social meanings in Old New York to pointing towards what Wharton saw as a desperate abyss of meaning in the post-World War I city.

Considering the span of Wharton's career, it is important to note that many material culture-oriented explorations of her work focus on earlier novels and have largely ignored novels written after *The Age of Innocence*. In one such novel, *Twilight Sleep* (1927), Wharton makes extensive use of objects, ranging from Cubist sculptures and ubiquitous clocks to shiny bathrooms and a tellingly absent gun. That scholarly attention to materiality in this text remains thin is especially remarkable considering the crisis it reveals in Wharton's conception of the place of the material in the wake of World War I, a crisis to which I will return later in this paper.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Gary Totten's edited collection of essays about Edith Wharton and material culture does feature an essay on *Twilight Sleep*, though Deborah Zak's analysis focuses on the female body rather than on the numerous physical objects in the novel. In her essay, “Building the Female Body: Modern Technology and Techniques at Work in *Twilight Sleep*,” Zak explores the varying ways Pauline, Nona, and Lita use modern

The general trend in Wharton criticism to privilege her earlier works, such as *The House of Mirth* (1905), *The Custom of the Country* (1913), and even *The Age of Innocence* over her later novels, including *A Mother's Recompense* (1925), *Hudson River Bracketed* (1929), and *Twilight Sleep*, places considerable emphasis on these earlier, and arguably more realist, works of fiction. Indeed, Wharton's position in relation to modernism is complicated. Though frequently read as a realist and even classified by some as an anti-modernist, Wharton's years of publication coincided with a number of prominent modernist writers.<sup>3</sup> An investigation of Wharton's theorizing of material culture could enrich and extend our understanding of Wharton in relation to modernism.

In seeking to define "material culture," Totten points to Jules David Prown's widely accepted definition of material culture as the "manifestations of culture through material productions" (3). In *A Sense of Things* (2003), Bill Brown contends that literary criticism in the early twenty-first century "has hardly begun to bring material culture into full view" and that "the identity of objects has hardly been voiced as a question" (17).

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technology to manipulate their bodies. But for all her attention to the female body, Zak gives no time to the things these characters put onto the body.

<sup>3</sup> See Irving Howe's introduction to *Edith Wharton: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1962) and Nancy Bentley, "Realism, Relativism, and the Discipline of Manners," in *The Ethnography of Manners: Hawthorne, James, Wharton* (1995) for examples of these arguments. T.J. Jackson Lears also characterizes many modernist writers as antimodernist, and in *No Place of Grace*, he includes Wharton in a collection of authors who "express antimodern sentiments," noting that "antimodernism was most prevalent among the better educated strata of the old-stock ruling class" (313). Scholars such as Dale Bauer and, more recently, Jennifer Haytock have considered Wharton in a modernist context, though their conclusions typically juxtapose Wharton's political views with those of other modernists, highlighting difference over similarities, and situating their arguments more in a political conversation than an aesthetic one. For example, Dale Bauer's influential *Edith Wharton's Brave New Politics* (1994) examines *Twilight Sleep* within the discourse of eugenics, medicine, and women's rights (87). Jennifer Haytock has recently explored Wharton's relationship to modernism in *Edith Wharton and the Conversations of Literary Modernism* (2008), though Haytock remains less interested in characterizing Wharton as a "modernist" than she is in pointing out alignments in social issues (marriage, birth control, French Impressionist painting, gender relations, and World War I) explored both by Wharton as well as canonically modernist writers.

Exploring “the dynamics by which objects become replete with meaning” (118), Brown distinguishes between “things” and “objects” in a move that can provide a useful lens for approaching Wharton’s portrayal of material culture.<sup>4</sup> Describing the relative unobtrusiveness of objects compared to the arresting quality of things, Brown writes:

To the degree that the “thing” registers the undignified mutability of objects, and thus the excess of the object (a capacity to be other than it is), the “thing” names a mutual mediation (and a slide between objective and subjective predication) that appears as the vivacity of the object’s difference from itself. (“Secret Life” 398)

Thus, whereas an *object* quietly remains “itself,” a *thing* stands out for both its difference from the everyday object (its “mutability” and “vivacity”) as well as its oblique aura of existence (“between objective and subjective,” it resists being pinned down). *Objects*, he explains, are facts we can look through; they become *things* when we notice them, when “their flow...has been arrested” (“Thing Theory” 4). Employing this “new idiom” he has established for cultural studies and literary criticism, Brown analyzes “the physical *object* world, the effort to establish a genuine sense of the *things* that comprise the stage on which human action...unfolds” (*Sense* 3, my emphasis). This language of staging echoes Wharton’s preoccupations with how the objects in her novels would be foregrounded and represented on stage as props and costuming; indeed, Wharton seems to anticipate Brown’s very objective by thinking so carefully about the distinctive, oftentimes prominently featured, and sometimes malfunctioning things in her own novels.

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<sup>4</sup> In *A Sense of Things*, he uses a number of Wharton’s friends and contemporaries as subjects of his case studies. Despite his attentive examination of things in nineteenth-century American literature, Wharton’s most notable work for Brown remains *The Decoration of Houses* (1897). Describing Wharton as one of the “arbiters of taste” (148) of the 1890s, he observes that she and Ogden Codman “anticipate the modernist attack on...kitsch” (143). Despite this recognition of Wharton’s privileging distinctive, selective things, he does not address the status of these objects in her fictional work.

Also concerned with materialist studies in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American literature, Thomas Otten draws attention to the “disciplinary mandate” that “stipulates that material details need to be brought forward *but not for too long*” and argues instead for a “newly concretized critical practice” (xix, original emphasis). In his close readings, Otten maintains particular attention to the way abstract ideas are “embedded within and sustained by those objects’ very grains and textures” (40). I would like to emulate these approaches to things in my readings of Wharton’s work, maintaining both Otten’s magnification of the “grains and textures” of Wharton’s valued objects and Brown’s pursuit of how these objects (or, sometimes, things) become filled with meaning.

Objects become particularly meaningful in Wharton’s writing through their close relationship to the idea of a self. In *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), a book Wharton herself recalls admiring in *A Backward Glance*, Madame Merle and Isabel discuss the boundaries of the self in relation to the material world. Arguing that things not only influence but also compose the self, Madame Merle says,

It overflows into everything that belongs to us—and then it flows back again. I know a large part of myself is in the clothes I choose to wear. I’ve a great respect for *things*! One’s self—for other people—is one’s expression of one’s self; and one’s house, one’s furniture, one’s garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps—these things are all expressive. (223, original emphasis)

Madame Merle’s speech describes a self that flows in and out of the object matter around it; still, there remains a clearly defined self at the core. The things to which Madame Merle refers may supplement the self, but they do not supplant it. Wharton engages with Madame Merle’s question about the boundaries of the self in her essay, *The Writing of*

*Fiction* (1925), when she asserts that “the bounds of a personality are not reproducible by a sharp black line...each of us flows imperceptibly into adjacent people and things” (10). Rather than describe a distinct entity moving back and forth, Wharton (in 1925, notably a period in between the two texts I examine in this essay) envisions an indistinct essence that inhabits exterior things. Wharton pursues the dynamic of the self/thing relationship further in *Twilight Sleep* with characters such as Pauline, whose tenuous sense of self becomes indistinct amidst the many things she layers upon it.

Analyzing the flow between the self (if indeed that self is present) and the things surrounding it, the objects that interest me most in Wharton’s engagement with material culture appear on or near characters’ bodies: the articles of the toilette. Often these articles articulate the private to the public because of the spatial isolation—the socially granted zone of self-intimacy—of the toilette; and the resulting intimacy from which they emerge mediates a character’s subjectivity in relation to the performance of the self. Such objects include items found during the processes of grooming and dressing: brushes, jewelry, makeup, and articles of clothing, and even bathroom fixtures such as plumbing and mirrors. By focusing my attention on these particular objects, I hope to explore Wharton’s understanding of the close and troubled relationship between the thing and the self.

In both *The Age of Innocence* and *Twilight Sleep*, objects of the toilette particularly speak to this query. Not only are these novels rife with attention to objects, but they also form an interesting temporal arc that can inform our understanding of Wharton and material culture in relation to modernism. Both realists and modernists

have been famously attentive to object matter in their writing. Henry James, writing on Balzac, admired the ability of the objects in his writing to carry meaning and communicate ideas about his characters and their world.<sup>5</sup> In “The Art of Fiction” (1884), James turns this admiration into craft mandate, claiming “solidity of specification” as a novel’s “supreme virtue” (*Art* 173). What attracts Wharton to writing about 1870s New York is that same “solidity of specification” that has caused the objects from her childhood to remain “indelibly stamped” on her brain; in writing about her youth, Wharton works to produce a cohesive picture of a meaningful social structure. The status of objects, then, in a realist context, occupies a position of stability and firmly-rooted signification.

On the other hand, modernism’s preoccupation with the lost meaning of things is well noted.<sup>6</sup> T.S. Eliot donates a memorable image to the modernist crisis of meaning in the barren landscape of *The Waste Land* (1922). His wasteland abounds with fractured and hollow things, from the “heap of broken images” to the “empty chapel,” and the poem’s haunting gesture towards a strained salvation in the closing stanza, “These fragments I have shored against my ruins,” resonates strongly (if surprisingly) with Wharton’s *Twilight Sleep*. A novel whose 1927 publication situates it as a contemporary of Eliot’s work as well as other works of high modernism, *Twilight Sleep* faces the same barren territory of lost meaning, especially the lost meaning of the thing. Working from Brown’s distinction between objects and things, I want to illustrate how Wharton firmly

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<sup>5</sup> See “Honoré de Balzac” in *The Art of Criticism*, pages 73 and 75-6.

<sup>6</sup> See also Douglas Mao’s *Solid Objects* (1998) and Bill Brown’s *A Sense of Things* (2003). In Bill Brown’s analysis, modernist writing was particularly preoccupied with “things and their thingness” (*Sense* 12), a trope he explores in American modernism’s realist precursors.

situates the material culture in *The Age of Innocence* in the background of her characters' lives as *objects* which they utilize as extensions of the self; but she brings the *thingness* of material culture to the forefront in *Twilight Sleep*, where the material culture in the novel alternately stands out and malfunctions, as characters attempt—and fail—to construct coherent and livable identities for themselves in the face of a 1920s New York that Wharton depicts as a paradoxically over-furnished wasteland.

### **An Age Indelibly Stamped**

In *The Age of Innocence* Wharton calls upon objects to establish a sense of social stability in the upper-class world of Old New York circa 1870. Within this carefully demarcated and tightly bound community, Wharton's characters utilize objects to convey stable meanings of social status and conventions. In this "hieroglyphic world," as the character Newland Archer describes it, "the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs" (29). Though the connection between specific signifiers (objects) and their meanings are necessarily arbitrary, which means that errors and even deception may always occur, members of Archer's community usually have little trouble reading the "hieroglyphic" language of objects such as gowns, jewels, and calling cards. Indeed, the objects that circulate within this closed circuit of society repeatedly convey meanings that appear anything but arbitrary to its members, who believe in and reinforce their meanings.

Situating Archer in a position of privilege and wealth, Wharton introduces him as a man for whom material objects reinforce the base of his class identification. He

possesses a set of “silver-backed brushes with his monogram in blue enamel,” which Wharton identifies with the “conventions on which his life was moulded” (4). The brushes’ silver decoration and monogrammed detail allude to the wealth Archer’s family enjoys, but the physical effects of a hairbrush on the human head disclose even more telling qualities of Archer’s life. Considering that brushes confront a disordered tangle of human hair and smooth it into neatness and uniformity, the brushes highlight the atmosphere of order and stability in which Archer thrives. Furthermore, the physical sensation of a hairbrush against the scalp produces a pleasing feeling; thus, these brushes remind us that order—particularly for Newland Archer—feels good. That Wharton frames Archer’s use of these brushes as a “duty” bespeaks the integral role they play in his class position; that their use is a “natural” duty indicates the seamlessness with which these objects exist in Archer’s life (4). Rooting his identity in the solid matter of brushes, Wharton portrays Archer as an upper-class New York society man with a solidity of specification that firmly molds her character into a particular reality.

Similarly rooted in a contextualizing bed of objects, May and Ellen first appear in the novel covered in an array of objects that evoke for readers a museum collection of remnants from 1870s New York: a tulle gown adorned with the proper evening gardenia, white gloves encasing hands, ornate jewels bedecking styled hair. The objects with which Wharton introduces her two female protagonists speak specifically to the moment in time Wharton revives and contribute to the tightly drawn picture of society she crafts. Even the exotic style of Ellen’s clothing, including a “large old-fashioned clasp” (7) on her dress and the “huge fan of eagle feathers” (12) she frequently carries, contributes to



the tableau of old New York. Martha Banta describes Ellen's style as "retro avant-garde" because it "draws inspiration from the past and calls attention to itself in ways unacceptable to the present standards of New York society" (54). Wharton's marked othering of Ellen through the objects she wears presents such a sharp contrast to the rest of society that, in its pronounced departure, Ellen's style brings that of typical old New York into sharper relief.

But Wharton is more than a simple historian of objects; she shows how both Ellen and May use objects in the articulation of their selves. Drawing from a rich store of jewels and dresses, these characters freely add objects to (and shed them from) their bodies to express a self that remains independent of the material addition. These additions for May act as costume pieces in a theatrical performance of her social role. Montgomery expresses May's utilization of fashion as staged artifice, explaining that, like theatrical performers, "individuals in 'real life' want to convey a certain definition of themselves" and that to "be consistent with this projection they... wear appropriate costumes" (13). Banta similarly asserts that for May, articles of clothing serve as props she uses to solidify her social position. May has a clear idea of what role she wants to secure in life, and she is aware that she must play a part in which "she did not threaten the male world of achievement" (Montgomery 167). The feigned ignorance May presents to Archer, manifested in her behavior and evoked in her pure white attire, is crucial to performing what Montgomery describes as the "acceptable public image of the society woman" (167).

May's appearance from the opening scene of the novel invokes the ideals of purity and innocence that society expects her to embody and that she actively perpetuates. She first appears as "a young girl in white" (5) and later wears a white dress with a gardenia on it and holds an "immense bouquet of lilies-of-the-valley" in her "white-gloved finger tips" (5). These objects convey to Archer an image of "abysmal purity" (6)—a phrase that plays on both the depth of May's purity and the suggestion of an appalling perfection that will compel Archer to pursue Ellen. Throughout the novel, May invokes this style of dress to reinforce her position as an innocent, pure, eligible young woman. In the tradition of old New York society, the white May once wore to the debutante ball signifies "virginity in the traditional manner" and "feminine delicateness" (Montgomery 50). At the van der Luydens' dinner she wears a "dress of white and silver, with a wreath of silver blossoms in her hair" (42), and two years after the opening scene of the novel, she appears again at the opera "all in white" (192), this time in her wedding dress. The continual signification of purity attached to the white objects May utilizes underscores the stability these objects possess in conveying meaning.

Selecting her wedding dress to wear two years later at the opera, May calls upon multiple levels of the object's signification; beyond its ability to convey purity, May utilizes the dress as a sign of the matrimonial bond she and Archer forged together. Subtly responding to his feelings for Ellen and playing upon the value he places on the "dignity of a duty" (208), May wears her wedding dress as a "surprise" (192) to reassert her claim on Archer. May's subtle design eventually out-maneuvers him as she moves from objects to words in her fight for her husband. Once May reveals that she has

informed Ellen she is pregnant and that Ellen has decided to return to Europe, Archer's thoughts unravel, and his impulse to break his vows to May diminishes. As May transitions from clothing to words in her assertion of her self, Wharton demotes May's dress, which becomes "torn and muddy" (195) on the ride home from the opera. By soiling May's dress, Wharton shifts the locus of power from May's material interface to her command of language, as she covertly convinces Ellen to leave New York and Archer's life. May's self, it is important to note, remains intact even when her clothing does not. This existence of the self at the core of the objects surrounding it contrasts markedly to the indistinguishable enmeshment of self and thing in *Twilight Sleep*. In one such contrast, during a scene in *Twilight Sleep*, Wharton refers to Lita as herself a discarded dress, "a festal garment flung off by its wearer" (299).

In addition to her dress, May uses her engagement ring in the extension of her personality. The blue color of the sapphire subtly hints at the blue eyes of its wearer, personalizing the ring specifically for May, but instead of sitting firmly around May's finger, the ring is detached from her body and passed around in the hands of her family, as old Mrs. Mingott, "lifting the stone to her small bright orbs," examines it before "returning the jewel" to May (19). This ring can be displayed as an extension of her body (signifying her status as married), but it can also be detached from it, unlike, as we will see, the glasses Wharton welds to Mrs. Swoffer in *Twilight Sleep*. In the relationship between May's hand and her engagement ring, both Wharton and her characters conceive of the human form as the dominant entity: "it's the hand that sets off the ring" (19), old Mrs. Mingott explains to Archer, indicating that the ring could not function without the

hand to support and display it. Even the prospect of May's fingers potentially enlarging beyond the ring's circumference demands an adaptation not from May but of the ring. For, in the case that the joints in May's already large hand should spread out further, Mrs. Mingott expects that Archer will "have it done" (20) into a cameo. The adaptation of objects to suit the body indicates their status as largely under human control.

Only Archer's treasured image of Ellen remains unmolded by time. He imagines Ellen in the final chapter of the book with "a long thin hand with three rings on it" (217) because, as he imagines her, she never changes. Unlike Mrs. Mingott and, presumably, May, Ellen does not need her rings reconstructed into a broach, because she remains a frozen image in Archer's mind, unchanged (and unreal) for nearly thirty years.

Ultimately, though, Wharton is keenly aware that the society on display in her novel will change, and beneath the detailed portrait of New York, she leaves subtle clues indicating that such change will inevitably set upon society and, in fact, is already quietly at work.

Wharton's characters look *through* rather than *at* the objects that fill *The Age of Innocence*. Their tacit acceptance of the signification attached to objects—even when the meaning these objects carry is misleading—makes these objects stable referents. When Mrs. Beaufort intends to send a message to society, she selects an object to display in the hyper-public space of the opera. Amidst the swirling reports of gossip regarding the Beauforts' economic peril, Mrs. Beaufort produces a "new emerald necklace" (162) to quell the rumors that had preoccupied society. The sight of this object, which signals Beaufort's ability to maintain wealth, drives any thought of financial ruin from the minds of onlookers, and collectively "society drew a breath of relief" (162). The power objects

have to communicate a message to all of New York's society by virtue of their very existence asserts their power to resonate definite meaning in this world. The necklace Mrs. Beaufort wears is very much a "real thing" (29), made of precious metal and emerald stone and is thus, as Skaggs describes it, a signal of "wealth and power...permanency and stability" (59). The possibility of forgery could call into question the necklace's declared authenticity and genuine value; nonetheless, it remains a concrete, visible counteraction to the rumors Mrs. Beaufort battles and operates as an effective tool for her communication in the hieroglyphic language of New York society.

Of course, Julius Beaufort will very shortly declare bankruptcy and attempt to escape his creditors. In fact, as Skaggs notes, the emerald necklace has done nothing but create "an illusion" (59) of financial stability and is ultimately, like May's clothing, a "deceptive device" (60). May's dress, as we've seen, sends a clear message of innocence and purity to Archer despite the fact that we know May to be savvier than Archer suspects. In this world, even when meaning turns out to be misleading, the characters can still use objects as signs and successfully convey a clear meaning. Still, as Wharton continues to build her world around a collection of objects, she simultaneously points to the incapacity of these objects to have lasting stabilizing power. Again, we sense that change is inevitable and that this society, though beautifully set in all of its exquisite detail by Wharton's description, is transient.

Glimpses of the malfunctioning thing remind Wharton's readers that this tightly drawn society balances precariously at a precipice, for, try as she may, Wharton cannot keep intimations of post-war modernity entirely out of the novel. Through its

malfunctioning and the subsequent attention drawn to it while Archer attempts to fix it, Wharton depicts Archer's stylographic pen as a powerful *thing* that gestures towards a potential sexuality that has the capacity to shatter the family home.<sup>7</sup> Wharton's language in this scene notably sexualizes Archer's interactions with this pen as he cajoles it back to usability for Ellen. Taking out the pen, he tells Ellen that he will "get the pen going in a second" (143), an overture reminiscent of the foreplay required to stimulate the male organ before intercourse. The sexual conceit continues as Wharton playfully places an excited and nervous Archer in the spotlight of performance. In his bout of tension, Archer ardently "bang[s]" the hand holding the pen against the bench before commenting, in a suggestive choice of vocabulary, that the motion is "like *jerking* down the mercury in a thermometer" (143, emphasis mine).<sup>8</sup> Archer's subtly sexual interaction with the pen constitutes arguably the only moment of sexual intercourse in the novel. For, once he gets his thing ready to perform, Ellen successfully "beg[ins] to write," fulfilling the purported objective in an "unwonted sight" in the park (143). The difference between the sexual potential in this scene and its fully realized counterpoint of transgression in *Twilight Sleep* is that, in *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton's characters remain bound by social codes. Objects that fill Archer's life, such as May's "dark blue brougham (with the wedding varnish still on it)," signify his matrimony and assert May's

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<sup>7</sup> In *Twilight Sleep*, Dexter's liaison with Lita echoes the same decorum-breaking, family-shattering nature of Archer's advances towards Ellen.

<sup>8</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary identifies the first documented usage of both "banged" and "jerking" as sexual euphemisms in the *Partridge Dictionary of Slang* (1937), so Wharton's intensions in utilizing these terms remain inconclusive though not entirely out of the realm of possibility. In fact, Hermione Lee points out that "Wharton was thinking a great deal about sexuality and how to write about it in these years" surrounding the publication of *The Age of Innocence* (585).

position of wife even in her absence (171). The brougham, an object of family and propriety, reinforces Archer's status as a married man, and the "reminder that they were in his wife's carriage" ultimately repels Ellen from his advances (172).

Wharton, writing *The Age of Innocence* the year after World War I ended, tried to preserve in this novel an idea of society, even if such a portrayal was wistful and untenable. In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton declares that "the world I had grown up in and been formed by had been destroyed in 1914" (369-70). Looking back to a world in which objects had a different function from her post-World War I perspective, she invests her conception of that earlier period with an element of longing for the relative certainty and solidity, wherein her future seemed "happy and safe," that become so glaringly absent from her life after the war (*Backward* 337). Though Wharton's desire to return to a moment when objects conveyed meaning may be pure fantasy, she nonetheless attempts to recreate such a moment in *The Age of Innocence*. Even though the novel recognizes the precarious position of the objects that fill it, those objects remain something around which society can organize. In this sense, *The Age of Innocence* could be read as a modernist novel in its very desire to look away from the lurking loss of meaning that will soon beset those things.

### **Fragments Shored against the Ruins**

The characters and plot of *Twilight Sleep* demonstrate just how ephemeral a setting *The Age of Innocence* portrays. *Twilight Sleep* tells the story of a wealthy family living in the jazz-imbued, hectic New York City of 1927. Pauline, the matriarch of the

family, flits from one social event to the next, displaying such little discrimination in selecting activities that her daughter describes Pauline's zeal for making engagements as "promiscuous" (11). Meanwhile, Dexter, Pauline's husband, nurses increasing sexual feelings towards his step son's wife, the quintessential flapper figure, Lita. Dexter and Pauline's daughter, Nona, watches her family with a critical and concerned eye on the manifold modern encroachments upon their well-being. Amidst "this killing New York life" (11), Wharton presents objects as having been dislodged from the social order of old New York and highlights instead the "fetishistic overvaluation or misappropriation" that situates them as *things* (Brown "Secret Life" 399).

In this novel, those things found in the bathrooms and dressing rooms of Wharton's characters become "handles of reality" (307) they use not merely to extend or express their identities (which remain fragmented) but to constitute a coherent or recognizable identity as such. Within a chaotic modernity, deeply affected by the trauma of World War I, material objects also afford graspable "handles" that can help to anchor reality itself. When they do grasp these "handles," Wharton's characters actively confront, in a small way, the distasteful realities that permeate their lives, but at the same time they avoid the more traumatic real of chaos and destruction associated with the war and the historical changes it helped usher in. Finally, although, the novel begins by thoroughly mocking a string of objects characters rely upon in hopes of effortlessly altering their lives, as the plot approaches an enigmatic vortex of unrepresentable horror, which strips meaning away from objects, Wharton will ultimately suggest that things may in fact allow for the reconstruction of a broken self and thus become analogous to the



fragments Eliot shores against modernity's ruins.

This later work of Wharton's explores a deeper and more dangerous threat to her characters than the vague instability addressed in *The Age of Innocence*. A framework particularly well suited to discuss this heightened threat in relation to the characters' daily lives is Phillip Barrish's distinction between "reality" and the "real" in *Twilight Sleep*. After noting that "bottom-line 'reality' is most explicitly up for grabs" in this novel, Barrish identifies "various uncomfortable realities that all but one of the novel's characters—Nona—either do not or will not acknowledge" (99, 107). In his analysis, these "realities" include childbirth, aging, religious conflicts, and even human defecation. Underneath these conflicting and disquieting realities, he articulates the existence of a more "devastating real" (107). Even as the novel's characters consciously try to steer around the unpleasantness both of bodily functions and of quotidian arguments and conflicts, the characters also use these distasteful "realities" as screens to mask a painful, virtually unrepresentable "real" of violence, loss, and meaninglessness—a nexus that only Nona even attempts to confront directly.

In my own analysis, I would like to utilize Barrish's most inclusive understanding of the real as a destructive force resulting in the utter nothingness of a wasteland. This real is far more sinister and threatening than any "real thing" considered in *The Age of Innocence* (29). The realm of the destructive real and the tragedies of World War I occupy the same space. Wharton presents this association most apparently in *Twilight Sleep* when Nona's thoughts, turning dangerously close to her family's dark secret of father-daughter incest, manifest in an image of trench warfare. The real lurking at the

bottom of *Twilight Sleep* can be understood, through its associations with the Great War, to be deeply troubling. This painful real also abounds with sadness, which Pauline works tirelessly to avoid and which Wharton herself endured during her experience with the war and its aftermath.

In addition to the “irony” and “satiric thrusts” attributed to her novel by its 1927 *New York Times* book review, there remains an undeniable presence of events saturated by the sobering trauma of Wharton’s own life, rooted in references to World War I.<sup>9</sup> Hermione Lee describes Wharton as “haunted by the dead,” “changed by the war,” and deeply affected by the “struggle to find a meaning” following the war (518). Citing a 1914 letter Wharton wrote to Gaillard Lapsley, Lee characterizes Wharton’s view of the war as “somehow an inevitability, a product of a decaying civilization” (456-7). Behind Wharton’s satirical scenes of life that abound in *Twilight Sleep*, the looming shadow of this decay maintains its presence. In the novel’s early pages, the introduction of “bewildered disenchanted young people who had grown up since the Great War” attests to the powerful disillusionment the war casts on both Wharton and her characters. This underlying darkness reminds readers that a crisis of meaning fills the novel’s pages of satire and humor and that it is not always funny when a character does not want “to believe in” something (12). In the face of life’s uncomfortable realities, and in the shadow of forces more troubling, Wharton’s characters attempt to manipulate objects in

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<sup>9</sup> In his 1927 book review, “Mrs. Wharton Tilts at ‘Society’: Her New Novel Satirizes New York’s Fashionable World,” Percy Hutchison writes of “irony far from dull...seldom has she whetted it to such sharpness as in the present book.” He further comments that “ ‘Twilight Sleep’ is the most satirical of all Mrs. Wharton’s novels” thanks to characters such as “the amusing Pauline.” Hutchison also notes that the novel abounds in “passages of infinite delight.”

an effort to alter or evade those realities.

To the novel's characters, material objects often seem to have the power of altering reality, and Pauline, more than anyone, ardently dedicates herself to this effort. A character with as many conflicting social roles and competing realities as Pauline must rely on a type of material shape shifting to unite appropriately with each of her disparate groups through efforts unseen in *The Age of Innocence*. Whereas May manipulates things to create a consistent, unified self, Pauline pushes the notion of identity-formation to the point of ridicule in her excessive attempts to shape and reshape herself through the use of things. Accordingly, Wharton depicts Pauline as frequently dismantling her attire and reinventing herself with clothing, jewelry, and makeup intended to transform not only her appearance but also her identity.<sup>10</sup> In these scenes, Wharton directs a sharply satirical narrative voice at Pauline's efforts to force the things to do what they cannot: create a self where none exists.

In preparation for a Mothers' meeting, for example, Pauline must adjust her daily wardrobe to align herself with "the type of woman" (97) who attends such meetings. For Pauline, becoming this type of woman involves stripping herself down and rebuilding her image with a specifically designed set of things. She begins by "slipping off her street-dress" and calls for her maid's "readjustment of her ruffled head" (96). Echoing the

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<sup>10</sup> This role play would be different from the performativity Judith Butler describes in *Gender Trouble*. As Butler clarifies in her introduction to *Bodies That Matter*, she understands performativity as "the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names," rather than a more performance-oriented "act by which a subject brings into being what she/he names" (2). Pauline's conscious performances align more with the "singular or deliberate 'act[s]'" that Butler differentiates from performativity, though her daily manipulation of objects to affirm her existence does resonate with Butler's notion that "the materiality of sex is constructed through a ritualized repetition of norms" (x), and this constitution of the self through material things is an idea I will explore later in the paper.

notion of a costume designed to create a particular role, Pauline wears a dress specifically “prepared for the meeting” to ground her identity on this occasion (96). The dress, “rich, matronly and just the least bit old-fashioned” (96), distinctly appeals to an older generation of women who are not familiar with urban life or Pauline’s typically updated fashion. Pauline consciously dates herself for the purposes of the small-town community and the “moral simplicity” (97) she reads onto her audience. She still wears her “usual” (97) rings and bracelets that no doubt give testament to her wealthy status as hostess, but for this occasion, Pauline adds a “jeweled ‘Motherhood’ badge” (97) to solidify her identity as a Mother. This sparkling trinket radiates from her body, literally labeling her and thus firmly situating her in a performance she has herself created by virtue of her financial and hosting skills. As we will see below, however, even the “Motherhood” badge fails to achieve a stable internal or external identity for Pauline as an old-fashioned “Mother.”

In later scenes, Pauline continues to select her clothing with the same careful attention to the role she will be playing. When she prepares to dine at the Rivingtons’ home, Pauline chooses attire that would make her appear “distinguished and exclusive-looking” (159). Wharton describes these things as they appear to Pauline in her boudoir: “Through the dressing-room door she saw the maid laying out the silver moiré, the chinchilla cloak, the pearls...” (160, ellipsis in text). This trusty costume, selected to solidify Pauline’s place on the social ladder of New York, appears frozen in space when Dexter suddenly cancels the dinner and renders the dress, cloak, and necklace obsolete. The ellipsis that trails the description of Pauline’s clothing suspends the items in a space

of disuse because the character they were meant to costume will no longer be making her appearance. Now preparing for a different scene, a night alone with her husband, Pauline selects different things for her adornment, substituting in place of the silver moiré and pearls a more comfortable and alluring “mauve tea-gown, the Chinese amethysts, and those silver sandals that made her feet so slender” (168) that she hopes will attract her husband to her.

Things occupy an important space of distinction as the props that aid Pauline in constructing her performances, but Wharton also demonstrates that the things attached to her characters in *Twilight Sleep* can unify and define them in a more ingrained relationship to their identity. Wharton portrays the otherwise nondescript Mrs. Swoffer as having “rambling features held together by a pair of urgent eye-glasses” (117). These eyeglasses do not supplement her identity, as May’s ring or Ellen’s feathered fan do; rather, they form the basis of her existence. The urgency assigned to the eye-glasses shifts the implied power of her character from within to without, locating it in the thing on her face. Accordingly, Mrs. Swoffer is deeply engrossed in surfaces, and the first action she takes when she meets Pauline is to look at her. Throughout their meeting together, Wharton depicts Mrs. Swoffer’s emotions through her eye-glasses. When she first tells Pauline about Alvah Loft, Mrs. Swoffer’s “eye-glasses flashed with inspiration” (119), and the glasses, rather than Mrs. Swoffer’s own eyes, “follo[w] Pauline’s thoughts as they formed” (119-120). Persuading Pauline to visit Alvah Loft, Mrs. Swoffer’s glasses “seemed to suck Pauline down as if they had been quicksands” (120).

As Mrs. Swoffer’s glasses demonstrate, things can hold a character together, and

they may even come to define a character metonymically. After Nona regrets that Arthur Wyant has missed the spectacle (pun intended: “rows of bewildered eye-glasses” [96] stare at Pauline as she reads her speech) of the Mothers cheering for Pauline, Jim remedies the disconnect by recreating Mrs. Swoffer for his father. To do so, he adopts a pair of Arthur’s glasses, Mrs. Swoffer’s defining characteristic, to get into character. During Jim’s impression, Wharton describes the glasses as “clinging” (139) to his nose, attaching themselves to his features with the same strength with which Mrs. Swoffer’s glasses dominate her personality. This powerful object temporarily transforms Jim, and only when he removes them do his facial features return “to their normal cast” (140).

Mrs. Swoffer, however, does not remove her eye-glasses; they remain instead the firmly rooted anchor of her self. The only time that she does take them off, Wharton links the lenses of the glasses to her inner emotions, further entangling the glasses with their wearer: Wharton describes Mrs. Swoffer’s taking of Pauline’s hand as, “a flower she wanted to gather in the way. A rose with the dew on it—she took off her glasses and wiped them, as if to show where the dew had come from” (117-118). Mrs. Swoffer’s wiping of her glasses as if the dew were a literal throb of respect, tear of admiration, or sweat drop of awe, indicates that emotional stimuli manifest themselves through the thing with which Wharton associates her rather than directly through her person. In fact, the dew seems to emanate directly from her detachable glasses instead of originating in her own body from a core self.

The entwined relationship between Mrs. Swoffer and her glasses recalls that imperceptible flow of personality from people to things that resurfaces in Nona’s

rumination about the tangle of human and object relations. Nona repeatedly ponders where “one’s own personality end[s], and that of others, of people, landscapes, chairs or spectacle-cases, begin[s]” (201). It is interesting that Wharton again utilizes the language of eye-glasses, including the container of glasses in this list of entangled things and people. The glasses that characterize Mrs. Swoffer have inextricably entangled themselves in her selfhood, fused themselves to her face in a way that both unites and defines her. But these glasses function as more than a mere extension of her personality (recall May’s engagement ring); rather, Mrs. Swoffer’s glasses operate on a more critical level, holding her together at her very core. As Pauline actively layers things onto her body and Mrs. Swoffer appears permanently bespectacled, both women’s relationships to things play critical roles in defining and maintaining their realities.

In the modern wasteland of broken images and empty meaning, Wharton points out that the things her characters utilize cannot sustain a meaningful, permanent reality. Even Pauline’s most careful consideration of her toilette does not guarantee that her roles will play smoothly. An embarrassing slippage occurs, for instance, when Pauline—fully costumed, as described above, to host a meeting in support of old-fashioned motherhood and to deliver the keynote speech—absent-mindedly begins instead to deliver a speech favoring birth-control, which she has meant to use in a very different context. Although the costume she has donned for the Mothers’ Meeting is “very different from the one designed for the Birth Control committee” (96), Pauline fumbles, momentarily confusing two of the different identities through which she has sought to consolidate a sense of her self.

This loss of “self-control” (98), as she terms it, reveals the incapacity of her clothing to act entirely for her in creating a particular role. In this scene in the novel, Wharton demonstrates both her characters’ excessive reliance on attire to prepare them for social role-play and the incapacity of those things to master a role, to create a sustained, coherent identity, when characters fetishize them to a point of overvaluation. Even when characters fully commit to their roles, as I will later discuss with Pauline’s emergency wardrobe, the things they use do not have the unmitigated power to alter reality because these characters lack a core self to be made meaningful. Ultimately, the things Wharton’s characters utilize can at best form transient identities that disappear when not reflected back by other characters. As Pauline recovers her motherhood speech, only the “applause and admiring exclamations” (98) of the crowd, not something she wears, have the power to reinstate her momentarily in the persona of model “mother.”

The need for these affirming reflections of identity arises frequently, and when they do not exist in the eyes of other characters, literal reflections can be found in the large mirrors that appear throughout the novel. If Wharton’s characters make themselves up, dress, and examine themselves in mirrors to look their best for other characters, then the many physical mirrors Wharton positions in her text can serve as barometers of success for her characters’ transformations. A traditional element of the toilette, mirrors originally sat on top of the “toilet-table” from which the modern word originated. The mirror produces an image of reality, a copy similar to, while separate from, the actual thing. Though an image in the mirror is a step removed from the material world at hand, only by looking into a mirror can characters visualize the effects of their manipulation of



objects. Significantly, mirrors project two-dimensional images, copying only the surfaces of their objects. It is perhaps another of Wharton's ironies, then, that in this novel mirrors (both the physical objects and appearances "mirrored" in the appraisals of other people) reveal a depth which reaches beyond the surface of things and touches the real.

Dexter's sexual drive frequently manifests itself in mirrors when he evaluates his image as the women around him would see it. When the novel begins, and the force of Dexter's desire is still latent, his encounters with mirrors relay his concerns about his age. The first time he looks into the mirror at his office, Dexter "mustered his image impatiently" (51). Dissatisfied with apparent signs of aging, Dexter laments that he looks "ten years older than [his] age" (52). Similarly, the mirror reveals a sort of impotence when Pauline visits him to persuade him to drop his case against the Mahatma. Unpleased with his overly genial facial expression, Dexter makes "an attempt to recover" its sternness, but the mirror reveals that attempt to be unsuccessful (58).

In a later office scene, noticing that his secretary flirts with and openly "ogle[s]" him, Dexter cannot resist "stud[ying] himself critically in the mirror over the mantelpiece" (102). Even though he rationalizes such an action as "silly" (102), his kindled sexual drive compels him to evaluate his appearance. As his drive builds, so too does his confidence in his appearance. In this vein, he considers his reflection carefully in the presence of Lita. As they drive to Cedarledge, Dexter, especially buoyant at the prospect of their vacation together, feels "like her elder brother; and his looking-glass told him that he didn't look much too old for the part..." (216, ellipsis in text). Once

Dexter's sexual drive has kicked in, the mirror reflects this force, and his reflection exhibits the incestuous sexual drive that threatens to consume not only him but the rest of the family as well. This reflection speaks to the faithfulness of mirrors to depict the real, even as Wharton's narrative (note the ellipsis in the above quote) continues to suppress it.

Pauline looks in the mirror as well and is disappointed in varying degrees by what it shows her. It is not surprising that a woman so allured by surfaces and appearances has "tall threefold mirror[s]" (23, 239) in both her Manhattan and Cedarledge homes. The extra-large size of these mirrors reflects the entire body in multiple perspectives, and Pauline frequently looks into the "tall triple glass" (27) examining the imperfections of aging visible on her face. After her evening with Dexter ends on an empty note instead of the romantic one for which she had hoped, Pauline "attentively scrutinize[s] herself" (176) in the mirror. In this scene, her reflection takes a more sobering tone than in her past fancies. Looking at her thin lips, no longer vivid with rouge and now featured in "unbecoming" lamplight, Pauline sees herself as "a little drawn" and concludes, after a long pause of self-reflection, that her image in the mirror is an "unpleasing sight" (176). This reflection strips away the layers of makeup that typically cover her face and provides a momentary glimpse of the real pain that hides in her life.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Makeup appears recurrently in the novel as a thing that will, on the surface, cover up a character's fear of the real. Early in the novel, Pauline's "discreet cosmetics" mask the "unexpressed fear" of the Mahatma's conviction that lives "[s]omewhere in the depths of her" (24). After the incident at Cedarledge, Pauline once again wears "a skillful make-up" (307) that restores the freshness of her face until Nona lures her into a conversation in which the real resurfaces, causing "distress and amazement [to break] through every fissure of her paint" (315). Historian Kathy Peiss describes makeup as an incredibly modern and powerful device. She argues that "self-proclaimed 'moderns' leaped into the culture of beauty with determination and viewed making up as a bold act of cosmetic self-fashioning" (Peiss 183). Cosmetics do not detract from the ominous real, but they can temporarily alter the surface of Pauline's face, creating the effect of her looking so much "younger and fresher" that it seemed as if "she had just been born again" (307).

If we consider the characters in terms of things—and in this novel Wharton so frequently treats them as such—the characters themselves can become mirrors for one another. Recalling Brown’s distinction between an object as that which one looks through and a thing as that which arrests your attention, Wharton depicts Pauline as a mere object for Dexter, who looks directly through her as though “she was no more to him...than a sheet of glass through which he was staring” (175-6, ellipsis mine). When Dexter’s eyes fail to reflect back her beauty, the failure of the things with which she has adorned herself (the tea-gown, the amethysts, the sandals) is made manifest. Unlike the objects in *The Age of Innocence*, which reliably convey meaning to the social network in which they are embedded, the things characters draw upon in *Twilight Sleep* exist outside of any stable nexus of signification. The resulting “changed...subject-object relation” Brown describes is evident primarily in each individual character’s nullity of self but also through the schisms between Pauline and Dexter and, furthermore, among all of the characters in *Twilight Sleep*, who repeatedly fail to connect with one another (Brown “Thing Theory” 4).

Scholars of *Twilight Sleep* generally agree that Nona is a beholder of privileged knowledge, and her insights from the mirror indicate this recognition of the real.<sup>12</sup> Given her status as the character in the novel with “privileged insight,” Nona’s reading of her mother’s face in the mirror provides a particularly interesting view of Pauline (Barrish

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<sup>12</sup> Phillip Barrish writes that Nona is given “privileged insight” (101) and that her “distinction [at the end of the novel] derives from her hard-won ability to, as it were, include traumatic emptiness within her own daily, domestic ‘fold’” (126). Deborah Zak, citing and agreeing with Barrish’s argument, writes that Nona “occupies an important position in the novel’s resolution of modern social concerns” and “is the only character who recognizes the way in which [Dexter’s] incestuous affair with Lita threatens his patriarchal authority and the social order” (129).

101). Watching Pauline in her dressing room at Cedarledge, Nona regards her “dauntless profile” and considers the underlying strength of her mother’s constitution. Nona expresses a confidence in Pauline’s intrinsic “physical courage” and a faith in her mother’s ability to act “fearlessly” in the face of disaster (261). Pauline’s aversion to suffering, Nona observes, does not result from an inability to confront it but rather stems from her inculcation in a culture of consumption that has eroded her “moral muscles” to such a degree that, Nona feels, only “some great shock would restore their natural strength” (261). Wharton thus situates Nona’s understanding of her mother as prophetic in light of the great shock soon to come in the form of Pauline’s discovery of Dexter and Lita’s relationship.

Despite Pauline’s continued engagement with these things, Wharton has demonstrated their ineffectiveness to serve at anything more than a superficial level. In the novel’s enigmatic, climactic scene at Cedarledge, when Pauline and Nona finally uncover Dexter and Lita’s incestuous liaison, Pauline again turns to objects associated with the body in a time of crisis (in this scene, responding to the home’s security alarms). The final thing to betray Pauline is the “emergency garb” upon which she relies to adequately suit her for any “nocturnal alarms” (297). She wears a “fillet-shaped cap of silver lace” and a “‘rest-gown’ of silvery silk” to prepare herself for such alarms (297). The silver color of these things evokes the metallic sheen of authentic armor, though silk and lace provide little in the way of material shielding. Still, these things become Pauline’s equipment—“she was equipped in an instant” (297)—as she rallies her housekeeping troops and heads towards the domestic battlefield. But the real weight of

the event encroaches upon her plan, and instead of building an invincible warrior, Pauline's clothing characterizes her as "something ghostly, disembodied" (298) as she moves through her home. When she finally reaches Nona, who has been mysteriously shot (probably by another recklessly out-of-control father figure, Arthur Wyant), the symbolic "safety and repose" the clothing had promised Pauline is undone by Nona's "blood," which splatters its "silvery folds" (299). The luxury of Pauline's silk gown and the reassuring belief that she is dressed for a disaster can neither erase nor heal the damage she encounters; Nona's blood flows without regard for the specific attire her mother has selected. Whereas May's strategically selected wedding dress provides the successful backdrop for her securing of Archer, Pauline's clothing lacks even a momentary ability to aid her.

In this same climactic scene, Wharton compares Lita herself to a piece of discarded clothing, "twisted and emptied, like a festal garment flung off by its wearer" (299). Lita's now "shattered" (303) form indicates an act of materialization from her formerly ethereal substance of spray and sunlight; she exists now as a solid body, and her material form has broken. This description indicates a thingified status as well as a relegation to a new part of the family dynamic: Lita, once treated as a sexualized thing, becomes merely a broken thing, a disempowered prop to accompany Jim to Europe. No longer pursuing freedom, personality, and personal enjoyment, the performer inside of Lita, who rouged her lips and danced in "insufficient scarves" (96) like a movie star, has been destroyed. Once more, Wharton argues that the alternate realities her characters attempt to create, as well as the things that accompany their creation, are untenable in the

face of real tragedy.

This notion of real tragedy characterizes the modern era for Wharton and most distinctly separates *The Age of Innocence* from *Twilight Sleep*. Written under the shadow of World War I's conclusion, *The Age of Innocence* contains intimations of a changing society that will one day know the anguish of war, but *Twilight Sleep* directly engages the question of how one can function in a world after war, after one has experienced what Wharton described in a letter to Charles Scribner as "overwhelming horrors" (Sait 162). Wharton may satirize her characters for relying too heavily on things in their quotidian routines, but, drawing again on Barrish's distinction, there remains a realm of the destructive real that Wharton recognizes as too painful for her characters to endure. Even the narrative voice refuses to give utterance to this "real" in *Twilight Sleep*, substituting ellipses to fill the space of the unthinkable badness. When Pauline initially senses Dexter's attraction, she thinks of "a woman who attracted him...why, Lita even..." (101, ellipses in text), and in the midst of the calamitous event, Nona cannot even pronounce the word "bullet" or the name of the gun's handler, equivocating instead, "All right...only winged me" (299, ellipsis in text). After the event itself, the narration fades into ellipses rather than describe it, as reflected by "the Cedarledge midnight..." and Nona's inclination to "sometimes shut things out..." (307, 311, ellipses in text). Wharton includes this narrative technique far less notably in *The Age of Innocence*, a novel where things, characters, and plot maintain an underlying essence of stability absent from *Twilight Sleep*.

The power of the "real" that Barrish identifies, and only Nona embraces, the

terrible “real” aligned with World War I’s tragedy, turns Pauline, during her encounter with it, into a ghost. As Nona recollects the image of her mother the night of the Cedarledge incident, she describes her as a “haggard and stricken apparition” and as a “disheveled spectre” (307). Not only do Pauline’s things prove useless against the real’s emotional vortex, but, even more threatening, she herself becomes immaterial in its presence. In the face of this destructive real, wrenching the characters and even the words of the text from their materiality, it becomes increasingly evident that things can play a vital role in the reconstitution of a self that has been shattered by the real.

Thinking back on her mother’s appearance as a disembodied, immaterial specter, Nona attaches, with some qualified applause, a “sort of ironical admiration” (307) to her mother’s ability to grasp the material things in front of her (in this case, Nona’s broken arm). These “handles of reality” (307), physical things that provide concrete grounding in the midst of a vortex, allow Pauline to function as her best self. Nona ruminates in this same bed-stricken scene upon the various selves her mother displays, but she reacts the most positively to the aforementioned Pauline who grasps “handles” of reality, who displays calm and cool in response to a problem. To a lesser degree, the affectionate recreation of Pauline’s motherhood speech that Nona and Jim enact for Arthur Wyant calls upon this same ability to “seize on [life’s] immediate, its practical, sides” (307). Nona describes Pauline’s recovery of the speech in language that echoes the image of grasping handles: “then round she jerked, *grabbed hold of her last word* and fitted it into a beautiful new appeal to the Mothers” (138, italics mine). That Nona views this Pauline as “stern and disciplined” (307) also evokes the vision she has of her mother as a

pioneer's wife fearlessly nursing her family in the face of disease and wilderness.

But in the end, Wharton depicts a more two-dimensional version of Pauline who appears at Nona's bedside in the novel's final scene with reenergized satire. This Pauline does not grab onto the three-dimensional handles of reality, such as Nona's very real and very material broken arm. Instead, she ignores whatever is "out of sight and under ground" and attends strictly to the visible, ignoring the arm as soon as it heals (307). Nona criticizes this version of Pauline as morally "atrophied" (261) due to a life filled with consumption and avoidance, "buying off suffering with money, or denying its existence with words" (261). The moral atrophy Nona earlier credits to Pauline's insistence on avoiding pain can be, in light of this quote, linked to the consumption that saturates urban modernity. Rather than live in the wilderness where Pauline would be without her "concave tiling" (55) and "polished pipes" (23), she lives in a world which she wrongly believes allows her to "de-microbe life" (55). But if things have contributed to Pauline's insistence on avoiding the real, Wharton illustrates that things can also provide a coping mechanism when that real inevitably asserts its presence.

A scene occurring early in the novel, where Wharton positions Pauline in her dressing room (the inner sanctum of her toilette), reveals the comfort a thing can provide. Pauline sits in "her kimono...before her toilet-table" (28, ellipsis mine) unadorned by any of the things in her costumed wardrobe, covered only by a delicate garment never intended for public view and utilized only as a transition between dressings. In this uncostumed state of existence, bare and alone with her own thoughts, Pauline is soon beset with worries—a push of the real intruding into her life—and feels "unlike herself"



(27). This scene demonstrates Pauline's intense need for the security of her adornment, the presence of things flowing into her personality, and the affirmation that things such as her jeweled buttons, rings, and dresses give her, to feel like "herself." In fact, the relationships characters such as Pauline have with things create the possibility for those characters to come as close to the "secure sense of self" (144) that Jennifer Haytock reads as absent from the novel as the modern times allow.<sup>13</sup>

Pauline's ability to put her world back together after it has been shattered, to cover her face with a layer of makeup that rejuvenates it, and to continue with her performance maintains her own physical and emotional existence. Even Nona, after approaching some amount of admiration for Pauline, incorporates her mother's techniques in her own brave envelopment of the real. Nona materializes the thought of her father, replete with sexuality, incest, and family betrayal, when she encases the thought of him in her heart as a pair of hands would hold an object, the same way Pauline grasps handles and presses Nona's body to hers. Wharton's parallel of Nona's heart, "folded like two hands around the thought of him" (313), with Pauline's grasping of reality lends a tone of validation to Pauline's otherwise caricatured self.

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<sup>13</sup> Haytock recognizes the difficulty that Wharton's characters have establishing a sense of self in *Twilight Sleep* and attributes what she views as the characters' failure to develop "a strong sense of identity" (144) to modern society and its tendency towards disinfecting and looking outward rather than inward. Haytock's argument remains firmly situated in a discussion of the institution of marriage, but her points about interiority and looking outward rather than inward can equally apply to the things Wharton's characters place on their bodies. Similarly, in her essay, Deborah Zak analyzes the ways Pauline, Lita, and Nona use and shape their bodies for positive ends. Zak's analysis concludes that Wharton does not reject modern engagement with the body; rather, she asserts, Wharton's novel "encourages them to consider carefully how [their bodies] can be used without threatening positive self-development and agency" (131). Though Zak does not apply her analysis to the things Wharton's characters place on their bodies, I would argue that the same cautionary sanction holds true for their interactions with things.

Wharton so deeply disapproves of the “two-dimensional” Pauline who blissfully believes “in the general security of things” (307) because those things (both material things in the Bill Brown sense and life’s circumstances in the broadest definition) can be, as *The Age of Innocence* intimates and *Twilight Sleep* emphasizes, highly insecure and unstable. Nevertheless, the ability to rally around them, to grasp their handles as Pauline does Nona’s arm, prevents Wharton’s characters from fading away like the ghosts of World War I. The emptiness of the war, the same emptiness of Dexter’s betrayal, is essentially untenable. Nona comes closest to embracing it, and though she maintains a unique distinction, it also physically wounds her, leaving her temporarily immobile in her bed at the novel’s close. Things, problematic as they are, become a manner of survival strategy for those who choose to use them and a way of reconstituting the social relations that have become increasingly threatened from the world of *The Age of Innocence*. By the time she writes *Twilight Sleep*, things for Wharton ultimately serve as Eliot’s fragments, those pieces grasped and collected to shore against the ruin of modernity and rebuild some semblance of lost meaning.

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