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The Boorish Mr. Newell:
A Social Reader-Response Analysis of
Edith Wharton's "The Last Asset"

Edith Wharton was an American writer who lived and produced literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She was born into a privileged family and married into another (Auchincloss 8; Brookner vii). She lived in a world that many would envy. Instead of simply becoming a complacent snob, Wharton grew to be bored with, and critical of the world in which she lived (Brookner viii; Wharton, *Backward* 5-7). She used her talent for writing to expose the foibles of high society life through much of her fiction (Brookner viii). However, although the characters and situations found in Wharton's literature may have been similar in many ways to those of her own life, and those of people with whom she was acquainted, they were nonetheless components of fiction. Furthermore, the insider view of her world that Wharton provides is only part of the total experience of her literature. We, the readers of Wharton's literature, have preconceived notions about life among the aristocracy of the northeast United States of a hundred years ago, and even of Wharton herself—whether those perceptions are accurate or not. When we read Wharton's literature, our conception of her high society world is filtered through the lens of our own social experience and prejudices, and evolves into a picture that is uniquely Wharton's—and yet is uniquely our own.

I consider myself to be a representative of the American middle class, who is intelligent and perceptive enough to understand class distinctions above and below my own. I also belong to other social groups that are not associated with money or social class; I am male, caucasian, married, Christian, college-educated, politically conservative, and a musician—among other things. The unique combination of groups to which I belong helps to define who I am, and how I perceive the world around me. As defined by social groups, Edith Wharton and I have very little in common; I can, however, read her literature and interpret it according to my own social understanding.

I. Gender Bias

If I were to read literature from a New Critical perspective, I would consider only the text, and ignore the intentions of the author (Tyson 136). However, I find it extremely difficult to ignore what I know—or think I know about the author. Upon reading Wharton's short story, "The Last Asset," I found myself interpreting the text according to my personal and social bias—by the third paragraph. When I read Mr. Newell's declaration that "it's generally a woman who's at the bottom of the unexpected . . ." (64), my immediate reaction was that Wharton was making an assumption from the position of her own gender bias about how men regard women. My personally biased response was elicited by my own experience with *some* women, including my ex-wife, who claimed they always knew what I was thinking—and were rarely correct. My prejudicial response was reinforced by social interaction with other men, who have expressed the consensus that "women think they have us all figured out, but they really don't."

Ironically, *I* was the one who was guilty of the gender bias that I inappropriately assigned to Wharton. After reading the story, I realized that Mr. Newell was the *victim* and it was Mrs. Newell who was the *villain*. Mr. Newell had valid reasons to be cynical about women—based

on his experience with Mrs. Newell, who was apparently satisfied with him when he was a successful businessman and the money was flowing, but when Mr. Newell “had reverses [and] lost heavily on Wall Street, [he] . . . drifted abroad and disappeared from sight” (77). Upon evaluating the short story as a whole, I now believe Wharton was fair in the portrayal of the characters, without engaging in gender stereotypes.

II. Social Class Groups

Humanity, as a whole, is divided into a wide variety of socioeconomic class groups, which are perceived differently by different people. Marxists, for example, see only two groups—the “haves” and the “have-nots” (Tyson 58). I envision an infinite social class continuum from the multi-generational aristocracy to which Wharton and her family belonged, to the lowest possible social class of humanity, and all the subtle “shades of gray” in-between.

One of the many social class groups in this continuum consists of those who aspire to be or even perceive themselves as high class—but are not. They may have money, and they may associate with members of high society, but in reality, they are imposters. They do not have the sophistication that comes only from many generations of belonging to high society. This disparity is demonstrated in Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* in the depiction of the fictional communities of East Egg and West Egg, both of which are inhabited by the very wealthy. The families of East Egg are genuinely upper class and have been so for many generations, whereas the residents of West Egg represent the “new rich” who became wealthy quickly and their values are still those of the lower class of their upbringing.

Although much of Wharton’s fiction is critical of high society, it is apparent that she was also annoyed by those who believe that they are high class when they, in fact, are not. “The Last

Asset,” which Wharton wrote in 1908 (Brookner ix), is an example of her disdain for those who mistakenly believe themselves to be high class.

III. Poor Social Skills

In the short story, the first example of behavior that betrays unwarranted presumption of high class is when Mr. Newell speaks to the waiter in very poor French (64). Garnett concluded that “it was plain that [Mr. Newell] had lived many years in Paris, yet he had not taken the trouble to adapt his tongue to the local inflections, but spoke French with the accent of one who has formed his notion of the language from a phrase book” (65). Edith Wharton, who was well-educated and spoke French fluently (Brookner viii), was no doubt distressed by hearing the language butchered by Americans like Mr. Newell.

I do not speak French, or any language other than English, but I assume that substituting “silver play” for “s’il vous plaît” would be insulting to a native French speaker, and would reinforce the stereotype of the “stupid American.” This reminds me of my grandmother, who pronounced very common Spanish words like *tortilla* or *fajita* phonetically as if they were English words—exactly as they are spelled.

I am appalled when I hear *English* spoken poorly by native speakers who consider themselves to be sophisticated. When I worked for the State of Texas a few years ago, my unit supervisor, an African-American man with a master’s degree, had serious issues with subject-verb agreement and frequently used words such as “theyselves” when addressing his unit—both verbally and in written correspondence. Despite his positive qualities, I found it very difficult to take him seriously and follow his leadership. Because of my membership in the group of people who are college-educated, specifically those who have earned degrees in English, I am more

sensitive to poor language skills. When I read a fictional account in a work of literature about someone who speaks poorly, I project that bias into my interpretation of the literature.

In regards to the insufficient tip left at the table (64), I have worked in environments where a substantial portion of my income was dependent upon gratuity—including driving a taxicab. I have, on several occasions, taken passengers to their million-dollar homes and received a very small tip—or none at all. Failing to leave a tip or leaving an inadequate tip indicates a lack of basic social skills. When I read the account of Mr. Newell’s inadequate gratuity, my personal experience contributed to my impression of the character

Mr. Newell then lights a cigar while still seated in the restaurant. I grimaced when I read this because such an action would be considered very rude and socially offensive in 21st century America; then I considered the probability that it was not considered so in Paris a century ago. That does not change the fact that I hate the smell of cigar smoke—especially while I am eating. In this case, my contemporary social bias influenced my interpretation of the narrative, even though I knew that my perception was probably different than that of the setting of the story.

Not only does Mr. Newell light a cigar at the table, but he cuts it first, presumably with a cigar cutter, then “revolv[es] the cigar meditatively between his thin lips . . .” (64). Making a ritual out of smoking a cigar seems socially presumptive to me, and I infer from Wharton’s description that she had witnessed such a ritual and would have considered it out of place when performed by someone like Mr. Newell.

IV. The “Real” Mr. Newell

In fairness to the character, Mr. Newell’s boorishness is apparently superficial. He is beaten down by life; he lost his money, his family and his self-respect. The story does not tell us how he manages to support himself, but clinging to social rituals that no longer fit his lifestyle

serve as a defense mechanism to help him maintain some shred of dignity. He lives a simple, yet structured life, strictly adhering to a self-imposed schedule for mundane activities such as feeding the sparrows (78) or taking a nap (80)—regardless of pressing concerns. I have observed such behavior, but do not personally relate to it. I generally consider people who are slaves to their schedules to be quite banal and devoid of imagination.

V. Conclusion

I do not exhibit social behavior that is above my social class to impress anyone, or to bolster my self-esteem. I do, however, modify my social behavior to conform to that which is appropriate for the social setting I am in at any particular time. As an individual, and as a member of a wide variety of group identities, I read literature through the lens of my own experience. In my opinion, it is impossible not to do so. Any critical theory that denies the contribution of the reader to the overall experience of reading literature is not very realistic. It is human nature to interpret anything that we encounter, including literature, by the sum total of our life experiences. However, the process is not always a conscious one. When I read about Mr. Newell's behavior in the first few pages of the short story, I had the reactions I described earlier in real time as I was reading. It was only after taking a step back and analyzing my reactions for the purpose of this paper that I was consciously aware of the reasons for my reactions. There were, no doubt, subconscious factors from my life experiences, including my social identity that I am unable to identify—but affected my interpretation nonetheless.

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