

Names in the Fiction of Edith Wharton

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THE GREAT ATTRACTION that names held for Edith Wharton is shown by a passage in her autobiography: "I had always maintained," she wrote, "that in the choice of an itinerary one should be guided by the sound of names, and that in doing so I had never been disappointed."¹ In the composition of her fiction, Mrs. Wharton seemed to find names just as necessary:

...my characters always appear with their names. Sometimes these names seem to me affected, sometimes almost ridiculous; but I am obliged to own that they are never fundamentally unsuitable. And the proof that they are not, that they really belong to the people, is the difficulty I have in trying to substitute other names. . . . Only gradually, and in a very few cases, have I gained enough mastery over my creatures to be able to effect the change. . . .²

Occasionally, Mrs. Wharton went on to say, the name came first, sometimes sticking in her mind for several years before it was matched with a character.

In examining Mrs. Wharton's statement on the prominent role played by names in the genesis of her fiction, the reader should carefully note that she herself acknowledged changing certain names. This qualification makes her statement easier to reconcile with Blake Nevius's observation on actual name changes in the manuscripts, including such important alterations as Ethan Frome for the original Ethan Hart and Lily Bart for the earlier Juliet Hurst and Lily Hurst.³ Even allowing for considerable inaccuracy, Mrs. Wharton's generalization would seem to promise that a systematic examination of her fictional names might yield considerable insight into her creative processes and provide another focus from which to examine her successes and failures as an author.

¹ *A Backward Glance*. New York: Appleton-Century, 1934, p. 105.

² *Ibid.*, p. 201.

The names of Mrs. Wharton's books themselves tell a good deal about her attitudes and interests. Her appreciation for tradition is shown by the number of titles drawn from literature and the Bible. Long ago Robert Morss Lovett pointed out how Mrs. Wharton drew two titles from Scripture:⁴ the name of *The Valley of Decision* coming from Joel III,14, "Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision: for the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision"; and the name of *The House of Mirth* coming from Ecclesiastes VII, 4, "The heart of the wise *is* in the house of mourning; but the heart of the fool *is* in the house of mirth." The latter title also exhibits Mrs. Wharton's fondness for irony, for Lily Bart finds the society symbolized by the house of mirth to be grim indeed. Incidentally, as noted by R. W. B. Lewis in a penetrating introduction to *The House of Mirth*, the novel had two earlier titles in the manuscripts: *A Moment's Ornament* and *The Year of the Rose*. Into the Biblical group also should go *The Fruit of the Tree*, the novel so oddly split between the labor question and the morality of euthanasia.

American literature as well as the Bible supplied titles for Wharton's books. Arthur Hobson Quinn⁵ has noted how the name of the novelist's autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, reflects her admiration for Whitman, deriving as it does from Whitman's late prose essay, *A Backward Glance O'er Traveled Roads*. Likewise Quinn pointed to the Emersonian source of the title of the late novel, *The Gods Arrive*, specifically coming from the poem, "Give All to Love." The name of yet another Wharton novel, *The Mother's Recompense*, was derived from a forgotten story-teller, as witness this unusual acknowledgement on its dedication page: "My excuses are due to the decorous shade of Grace Aguilar, loved of our grandmothers, for deliberately appropriating, and applying to uses so different, the title of one of the most admired of her tales."⁶

Probably two of Wharton's titles may be credited to her interest in science. Marilyn Jones Lyde suggests that the name of *Crucial Instances*, an early collection of short stories, is taken "from Bacon's

³ Blake Nevius, *Edith Wharton*. Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1953, p. 131.

⁴ Robert Morss Lovett, *Edith Wharton*. New York: Robert M. McBride, 1925, pp.16-18.

⁵ Arthur Hobson Quinn, *American Fiction: An Historical and Critical Survey*. New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1936, pp. 571-573.

⁶ *The Mother's Recompense*. New York: Appleton, 1925.

classification in the *Novum Organum* of those instances which are of most importance in the interpretation of phenomena.”⁷ And it is clear that the name of the opening short story, “The Descent of Man,” which lends its name to the volume, *The Descent of Man and Other Stories*, is borrowed from Charles Darwin.

Yet another of Mrs. Wharton’s titles came from her abiding interest in houses and their decoration, an interest which first turned her to the making of books. This work is *Hudson River Bracketed*, the title of which is derived from a book on landscape gardening by A. J. Downing, an American, who divided architectural styles into the Grecian, Chinese, Gothic, the Tuscan or Italian villa style and the Hudson River Bracketed.⁸

In brief the names of Mrs. Wharton’s titles show her seriousness, her fondness for irony, and her interests in science, literature, and the decoration of houses. In Louis Auchincloss’s judgment, Mrs. Wharton’s titles also reflected the decline of her creative powers after World War I: “The very titles of her later books betray the drop of her standards; they are flat and ugly: *Human Nature*, *The Mother’s Recompense*, *Twilight Sleep*, *The Glimpses of the Moon*.”⁹

Akin to her actual titles are the scores of titles for non-existent literary works that Mrs. Wharton had to invent for the characters in her books, many of whom were authors or at least dabblers in authorship. These imaginary titles often show considerable resemblance to the titles of Mrs. Wharton’s own books. For example, *Diamonds and Faggots*, an imaginary novel in the short story “Full Circle,” printed in *Tales of Men and Ghosts*, has a title derived from Emerson’s “Days,” just as the title of Mrs. Wharton’s own novel, *The Gods Arrive*, comes from Emerson’s “Give All to Love.” Ralph Marvell’s essay, “The Rhythmical Structures of Walt Whitman,” mentioned in *The Custom of the Country*, shows the same Whitman interest that manifested itself in the title of Mrs. Wharton’s autobiography *A Backward Glance*. Likewise the epoch-making *Arrival of the Fittest* in the short story “The Debt” included in *Tales of*

⁷ Marilyn Jones Lyde, *Edith Wharton: Convention and Morality in the Work of the Novelist*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1959, p. 32 [footnote].

⁸ *Hudson River Bracketed*. New York: Appleton, 1929, page preceding the title page.

⁹ Louis Auchincloss, “Edith Wharton and Her New Yorks” in *Reflections of a Jacobite*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961, p. 22.

Men and Ghosts reminds the reader of Mrs. Wharton's borrowing from Darwin her own title, *The Descent of Man and Other Stories*. The fictional "Pomegranate Seed" of "Copy" in the volume *Crucial Instances* was actually employed later as the title of one of Mrs. Wharton's ghost stories printed in *The World Over*. Titles of non-existent poems and books of poetry also serve to remind the student that Mrs. Wharton wrote poetry and that she wrote much of it in the Genteel Age before Sandburg's *Chicago Poems* and Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*.

In these imaginary titles as elsewhere in her writing Mrs. Wharton's waspish satire manifests itself. In the short story "Expiation" in *The Descent of Man* the Episcopal Bishop of Ossining (Episcopal clergymen are sometimes handled roughly) has authored both *The Wail of Jonah*, twenty cantos in blank verse, and *Through a Glass Brightly; or, How to Raise Funds for a Memorial Window*. In keeping with much of the rest of Mrs. Wharton's work, her imaginary titles in the later books seem to show more strain. *Hudson River Bracketed*, for example, has among numerous others *The Rush Hour*; *Colossus*; *The Puritan in Spain*; *Voodoo*; *The Corner Grocery* (it sounds a bit like Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*); *Instead*; *Price of Meat*; *Egg*; and *Omelette*. At the peak of her genius, though, Mrs. Wharton made deft use of imaginary titles in characterization. In the *Custom of the Country* crass young Undine Spragg read *When the Kissing Had to Stop*; and in *Ethan Frome* peevish Zeena Frome perused *Kidney Troubles and Their Cure*.

The invented names of the magazines and newspapers in Mrs. Wharton's fiction display her bent for satire and sarcasm even more plainly than the names of the imaginary literary works. Apparently her disdain for the press was great. In any event the great majority of the fictitious newspapers and magazines are supplied with names that proclaim their blatancy: *Sunday Investigator*, *Flashlight*, *Sunday Searchlight*, *Spy*, and *Amplifier*. In *Twilight Sleep* the ineffectual ex-husband of Pauline Manford, Arthur Wyant, sits reading *Prattlers* and *Listeners*. Several times, however, as in the *Bettsbridge Eagle* of *Ethan Frome* and the *Apex Eagle* of *The Custom of the Country*, grandiloquent names are used in place of gossipy ones. Other fictitious periodicals have names that suggest an artificial coziness: *Hearth-fires*, *Radiator*, and *Inglenook*. The short story, "The Descent of Man", probably contains Edith Wharton's extreme

attempt in this direction when she invented "Scientific Sermons" for the Round-the-Gas-Log column of *The Woman's World*.

Like newspapers, hotels and apartment houses generally receive ugly or pretentious names. *The Custom of the Country* alone contains mention of the Mealey House, Persimmon House, Malibran, Pactolus, and Hotel Stentorian. *The House of Mirth* adds The Benedict and the Emporium Hotel; the long tale *The Bunner Sisters* adds the Mendoza Family Hotel. As with the hotels so with the clubs. The club of the short story, "Xingu," famous for its misadventures, is called simply the Lunch Club, but other fictional cultural organizations by their names show twisted aspirations and abysmal provinciality. These groups include the Women's Psychological League of Peoria, the Higher Thought Club, the Pellerin Society of Kenosha, the Maplewood Avenue Book-Club, the Palimpsest Club of Omaha, the League for Discovering Genius, and the Militant Pacifists League.

Many of the preceding categories of names invented by Mrs. Wharton bear a curious resemblance to the fictional names of Sinclair Lewis, a relationship that makes clearer Lewis's dedication of *Babbitt* (1922) to Mrs. Wharton. The relationship seems to have been a reciprocal one with the younger novelist being influenced by Mrs. Wharton and in turn influencing her in a late novel like *Hudson River Bracketed*, in which Mrs. Wharton had to write a number of chapters dealing with the unfamiliar Middle West. Mrs. Wharton's names for commercial products have the authentic Lewis flavor though most of them antedate *Main Street* (1920). The Magic Mangle comes from *A Son at the Front* (1923), but Grew's Secure Suspender Button and the Mystic Super-Straight, a best selling corset, are to be found in short stories collected in *Tales of Men and Ghosts* (1910). And as early as 1913, with almost his entire career before him, Lewis could have read in *The Custom of the Country* of Abner E. Spragg's all-night questing that at long last brought forth the name of Goliath Glue.

Mrs. Wharton also can certainly share with Lewis the peculiar accomplishment of having created some of the most repulsive personal names in twentieth-century literature. She liked the effect of an opening *O* in a Christian name, and her Orma Fry of *Summer*; Ora Brand of *Here and Beyond*; Orba Clapp of *Twilight Sleep*; and Ora Prance Chettle of *The Custom of the Country* will match Ora Weagle of Lewis's *Work of Art*. Like Lewis, Mrs. Wharton was fond of the

consonants *g*, *k*, and *f* that can halt a name with an impact like a car hitting a concrete embankment. One may garner from her works such monstrosities as Eudora Skeff, Eldora Tooker, Coral Hicks, Indiana Frusk, Leota B. Spragg, and Hinda Warlick. Nor did Mrs. Wharton's gift entirely fail in her old age; for the late, unfinished *The Buccaneers*, which showed such a curious revival of her powers in other ways, also produced Lady Idina Churt, surely as nauseating a name as one can find in all the Wharton roll call.

It is interesting to match Mrs. Wharton's and Lewis's arts of ugly namesmanship. Long before Lewis's strange *Z's* – Zoe, Zora, and Zeta, the Zebra girls of *Cass Timberlane* – Mrs. Wharton had created the names of Zinnia Lacrosse of *The Children* and Zeena Frome (full name, Zenobia). Like Lewis, though with more restraint, Mrs. Wharton could wield the gaudy brush of alliteration, especially for weak and foolish characters. An alliterative list would include Gladys Glide, Taber Tring, Daisy Dolmetsh, Medora Manson, Laura Lou, and Mrs. Parley Plush. Another Lewis trick, that of giving a flower name, ugly because of its excessive effort to be pretty, was also well understood by the earlier novelist. Besides Daisy Dolmetsh and Zinnia Lacrosse already mentioned, Mrs. Wharton's "garden" would include Mrs. Violet Melrose and Lotus Mennenkoop. Because of the objections of her lover to this kind of name, Violet Southernwood of *The Gods Arrive* changed her name to Jane Meggs.

Like most American name creators on a large scale, Mrs. Wharton drew freely on the classical, Biblical, and Puritan traditions, occasionally giving them a satirical twist if necessary to her purpose. Apex City, for example, in *Glimpses of the Moon* is reported as having an Aeschylus Avenue. Among her classical first names are Honorius Hatchard and Lucius Harvey in *Summer*; Galen Dredge, a scientist in the short story "The Debt"; Hercules Loft and Hector Robinson in *The Buccaneers*; and Orestes Anson (probably modeled on the name of the actual New England thinker Orestes Brownson in the short story, "The Angel at the Grave"). Ranging over the entire body of Mrs. Wharton's fiction, one could muster a phalanx of Horaces, most of them rather inconsequential characters: Horace Betterly, Horace Ambrose, Horace Pursh, Horace Bridgeworth, Horace Fingall, Horace Ansley, and Horace Maclew.

Besides being the source of several titles, the Bible also furnished Mrs. Wharton with a number of Christian names. These Biblical

names are frequently used to enhance an atmosphere of village life and old-fashioned ways. An instance of such use occurs in the short story, "Bewitched," set in the bleak Ethan Frome country, which has among its names Saul Rutledge, Hannah Cory, and Hiram Pringle. *Ethan Frome* naturally enough has several Biblical names besides Ethan: Jotham Powell and Eliza Spears. Harmon Gow of the same tale was a Biblical Hosea Eddy and a Harmon Eddy before assuming his final onomastic form.¹⁰ Possibly the obviousness of the device or perhaps the close association of Hosea with Lowell's Hosea Biglow might explain this change. Among the other distinctively Biblical names that might be mustered from Mrs. Wharton's fiction are Hezron Mears, Ezra Spain, Abner Spragg, Aaron Brail, Ezra Truscomb, Hannah Oast, Lemuel Struthers, Judith Wheeler, and Azariah Dobree, the last of which is the object of considerable humorous speculation in *The Children*. Among the peculiar Puritan names, much related in their general effects to the Biblical names, are Prudence Rutledge in the short story, "Bewitched," and Charity Royall in *Summer*. Grimmiest of these names is the one Ethan Frome saw on the tombstone of an earlier Ethan Frome, one of his ancestors: "SACRED TO THE MEMORY OF ETHAN FROME AND ENDURANCE HIS WIFE, WHO DWELLED TOGETHER IN PEACE FOR FIFTY YEARS."¹¹

In his perceptive study, Blake Nevius has commented upon another feature of Mrs. Wharton's names: "The names of the men and women in her novels whom we can trust have a certain aristocratic distinction — Lawrence Selden, Ralph Marvell, John Amherst, Justine Brent, Anna Leath . . ." ¹² If one makes additions to this list, such as George and John Campton and Martin Boyne, the generalization is still valid. The aristocratic effect is evidently achieved partly through the simplicity of traditional Christian names — George, John, Martin, Anna — matched with a brief but distinctive surname; not a one-or two-syllable Smith, Jones, or Johnson, but a one-or two-syllable Leath, Brent, or Amherst. Incidentally Boyne, Campton, and Amherst have place-name associations, which, if not too common, impart an aristocratic flavor. In addition to being brief and unusual, Marvell evokes the shade of Andrew Marvell the

¹⁰ Nevius, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

¹¹ *Ethan Frome*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939, p. 80.

¹² Nevius, *op. cit.*, pp. 76–77.

poet, thus emphasizing poor Ralph Marvell's sensitive temperament and literary ambitions. From another point of view the aristocratic names of the trustworthy characters with their pronounced class flavor may afford some ammunition to those critics who attack Mrs. Wharton for the limited range of her sympathies and the narrowness of her America.

In passing from Mrs. Wharton's aristocratic names to a consideration of her satirical personal names, one observes that Mrs. Wharton, often disdainful of subtlety, was noticeably fond of a type name for a type character. Perhaps this tendency is inevitable in any free-slashing satirist, at least in one intending to be read widely. The kind of name illustrated by the Hotel Stentorian and the *Sunday Searchlight* is also visible in the personal names of her fiction. The well-known short story, "Xingu," provides a happy illustration of caricature in names. Here are Mrs. Leveret, timid and fearful as a leveret or hare; Mrs. Plinth, heavy and immobile as a plinth; Laura Glide, who glides on and on with arty word froth; and Miss Van Vluyck, who clucks. The Hicks of *Glimpses of the Moon*, though not without some admirable traits, are hicks. Yet one more illustration: "Duration," printed in the short story collection *The World Over* and numbering among its principal characters the nonentity, Martha Little, alludes to "those remote and negligible Littles whose name gave so accurate a measure of their tribal standing."¹³

Not all, of course, of the personal names in Mrs. Wharton's fiction have a meaning that lies on the surface, though it is true she did not ordinarily attempt involved symbolism. Indeed with her classical love for order and lucidity, she would have despised much of the cloudy symbolism and imagery in vogue today. Nevertheless, a name like that of Ethan's beloved, young Mattie Silver in *Ethan Frome*, does probably have the value of silver suggested by Kenneth Bernard: "The supreme light image is Mattie Silver, as her name implies. She is in contrast to everything in Starkfield."¹⁴ The name of Ethan Frome himself also merits closer attention. New England is clearly built into Ethan Frome through associations with the historical Ethan Allan and Hawthorne's Ethan Brand. Frome, close to the chilly words *frore* and *frost* fits in well with the exterior and interior

¹³ *The World Over*. New York: Appleton-Century, 1936, p. 283.

¹⁴ Kenneth Bernard, "Imagery and Symbolism in *Ethan Frome*," *College English*, 23 (1961), 180.

winter of that long tale. Another important Wharton character, Newland Archer, the protagonist of *The Age of Innocence*, likewise seems to have something of his story inserted into his name. The *new* may suggest the newer attitudes which pull him one way, and Archer may well suggest the conservative – and stronger – counter pull. And Newland is a better name for an indecisive, esthetic person than a more masculine George or John.

In her fictitious place-names Mrs. Wharton's relation to Sinclair Lewis again calls for comment. Her Apex City of *The Custom of the Country* preceded his Zenith of *Babbitt* by a decade. Though not as prolific and meticulous as Lewis in working out imaginary place-names in his state of Winnemac and in the Gopher Prairie, Wheat-sylvania, and Grand Republic areas, Mrs. Wharton nevertheless staked out a forlorn realm of considerable extent in Massachusetts in *Ethan Frome*, *Summer*, and the short story, "Bewitched." This region contains an Eagle County and a Hemlock County, a Cold Corners and a Starkfield, bleak names appropriate to cheerless narratives. Before Lewis, Mrs. Wharton was intent on naming jerk-water towns, inserting a Hinksville into the very early short story, "A Cup of Cold Water," part of the volume *The Greater Inclination*, and dropping a Phalanx, Georgia, and an Opake, Nebraska, into the pre-World War I *The Custom of the Country*. In *Madame de Treymes* (1907) there is mention of John Durham's married sister who spends her summers at the Kittawittany House on Lake Pohunk, evidently an unenlightened resort.

If Mrs. Wharton's earlier volumes furnished Sinclair Lewis with ideas for fictitious place-names, her later volumes seem to contain echoes of the younger man's work in this field. In the shadowy Wharton Middle West of *Hudson River Bracketed* there may be found an Euphoria, Illinois; a Pruneville, Nebraska; a Hallelujah, Missouri; and an Advance, apparently also in Missouri. Perhaps several of these names were inspired by actual communities. A village named Advance exists in southeastern Missouri. Conceivably Euphoria, though obviously related to the common noun, might also have been suggested by Emporia, Kansas, for there is a further parallel: a fictitious College of Euphoria appears to match the actual College of Emporia. Advance by apheresis yielded the first name of Vance Weston, the hero, christened in honor of the city of his birth.¹⁵ The

¹⁵ *Hudson River Bracketed*, p. 4.

collection *Here and Beyond* adds its own Gopher Prairies in Clio and East Lethe, New York; and Meropee Junction, Georgia. *Twilight Sleep* has a Delos, Minnesota, and an Exploit, the state not being named; *The World Over*, a Rapid Rise, Oklahoma.

Sometimes Mrs. Wharton tried to get her effects of narrowness by using odd-sounding names of actual small cities, such as Peoria and Kenosha, already mentioned in connection with the names of clubs. A passage in this vein occurs in the war-time novel, *The Marne*. Writing of American soldiers in France, Mrs. Wharton recorded their opinion that "There was a good deal more doing back home at Podunk or Tombstone or Deposit."¹⁶

Both place-names and personal names, one might conclude, supplied Mrs. Wharton with a good many of the effects she sought in fiction. Her best names display a striking appropriateness, such as that shown in the name of Elmer Moffat of *The Custom of the Country*, a ruthless speculator from the boondocks. By his Christian name and unchristian behavior, Elmer Moffat brings to mind a man of similar morals, though of a different occupation, one Elmer Gantry. Even if this similarity should prove fanciful, there are enough others existing between Mrs. Wharton's and Sinclair Lewis's names that one must end by numbering among her achievements in this field the stimulation of Lewis in name-making. If her own fictitious names sometimes have faults, they are probably those of unnecessary oddity (Halo Spear and Laura Testvalley), or of strained facetiousness (Bee Linden; Lohengrin College, Texas). Nevertheless, for Ethan Frome, Elmer Moffat, Zeena Frome, and a number of others, the observation Robert Morss Lovett made about the chief character of *The Custom of the Country* would also apply: ". . .but it must be said that Undine Spragg owes part of her immortality to her name."¹⁷

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¹⁶ *The Marne*. New York: Appleton, 1918, p. 78.

¹⁷ Lovett, *op. cit.*, p. 28.