Voicing the 'Body in Pain': Suffering and the Limits of Language in Edith Wharton

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ABSTRACT

Edith Wharton’s writing exhibits an understanding of and fascination with the connections between pain and language. Her novel, *Ethan Frome*, is her first extended analysis of the cycle of silence and suffering into which her characters fall. She explores how these interests complicate the conflicting pressures of individual necessities and community responsibilities. She also attempts to find ways of breaking the silence of those in pain through the manipulation of physical material rather than verbal expression. World War I compels Wharton to return to the subjects she considered in her earlier novel. However, her understanding and attitude evolves as she begins to experience the awful realities of war.

In *Ethan Frome*, she disapproves of the sacrifice of his individuality for the community, but in most of her war writing, she views the sacrifice of millions of individuals as a horrible but necessary result of the defense of France. In her fiction and nonfiction, Wharton shifts between an insightful analysis of the use of cliché to manipulate and hide the truth, to the use of cliché to describe and glorify the war. However, despite this idealization, Wharton continues to recognize the pain and suffering war caused and looks for ways for war victims to express their inner minds. She details the translation of abstract thought into physical representations, which in turn help reduce a human need. Much of her focus in her war work is on the numerous ways the process of war destroys these physical expressions, and the ways people work against the destruction of these objects.
Edith Wharton recognized the difficulty and the necessity of expressing the physical pain of others through language, making it the focus of *Ethan Frome* and much of her World War I writing. She tracked the way cliché manipulates meaning and hides pain and truth even though she allowed herself to slip into the same trite expressions during the war. As she searched for the ways to express pain, she revealed how physical representations have the power to solidify an otherwise abstract idea. The same process of turning the intangible into the material allowed the French workers and soldiers to create objects and landscapes that expressed their inner thoughts. Wharton understood this expression as a necessary process of civilization and was particularly concerned about its destruction during the war. Wharton also struggled to balance the pulls of individual needs and community responsibilities. She understood the importance of both but could only see them as opposing forces. In her later war novel, Wharton related these issues to her definitions of the artists’ role during war. The artists’ need for expression and their ability to give voice to the unutterable experiences of others became an important problem for Wharton. As the main links between the abstract and physical worlds, Wharton recognized artists as particularly trained and useful in understanding such connections. Artists were able to combat the manipulations of truth that war produced.

The novels, stories and nonfiction this thesis will cover resulted in many insights into the process of war, civilization, pain and language. Wharton recognized the need for self-expression, and the pain that the silencing of that voice brought. She also saw the opposite when pain resulted in the silencing of a person’s voice. She understood the ways that cliché hid the truth of the subtleties of war and pain. Labor and the objects people produced were a form of self-expression when the war left many without a way to voice their needs or concerns. Wharton saw the similarities of self-expression between an artist’s work, and the work of the refugees she took in. Both found themselves deprived of the outward expression of physical effort during the war, which she alleviated by creating war charities that specifically provided work for refugees and orphans along with shelter and food. These occupations gave them a way to put their inner, inexpressible thought into the physical world, and even to alter that world. Many of Wharton’s concerns anticipated the concepts of several theorists who explore the dynamics between pain and language.

However, in some ways, Wharton also participated in the negative effects of war she helped reveal. In several of her earlier works written during World War I, Wharton utilized a clichéd and idealized language that simplified her and others’ understanding of the war. Given this, it is surprising that she anticipated the work of several later theorists by revealing the dangers of such language in *A Son at the Front*. She regarded the demise of culture in the war as part of the worst tragedy. In these works, Wharton charted what she viewed as the destruction of civilization. During the war she worked to help others understand the conflict’s negative effects and to find solutions to the cultural and ideological questions that both interested and misled her in her writing.

Chapter 1: Ethan Frome: The Beginning of Pain and Language
In chapter one I analyze *Ethan Frome* and introduce the themes Wharton returns to in her writing during the war. Through her main character, she attempts to work out the process behind pain and silence. She discovers a cycle in which pain increases silence, and silence increases pain. To find ways to represent her characters’ pain and emotion to readers, Wharton infuses seemingly ordinary objects with emotion and pain. Finally, Wharton details Ethan’s conflicts between his individual desires and the obligation he feels for the community. He eventually becomes a mangled symbol of the town’s identity, completely losing his individuality.

*Ethan Frome* represents Wharton’s first extended attempt to understand the processes of pain and language. In her analysis, she hits on ideas that are similar to those of a later theorist, Elaine Scarry. In Scarry’s theories and Wharton’s novel, pain takes away a person’s ability for expression. However, silence also has a role in the continuation of pain. Ethan’s silence increases his suffering when others withhold sympathetic words, or when he is unable to speak. There are many reasons that Ethan is silent, but the main reason is that he does not have the ability to express his inner self as well as most. Getting words out is a struggle for him—he wrestles with his inner thought only to spit out some reductive, ineloquent phrase. After the accident, Ethan is silent from the intensity of his physical and emotional suffering, finally caught in a cycle of pain and silence.

Using the difficulties of silence and suffering, Wharton also presents readers with Ethan’s struggle between his sense of responsibility toward his community, and his intense individual desires. The community manipulates Ethan’s uncertainty and he is unable to act. He becomes a symbol of their strength, their stolid nature, and their ability to endure silently. The community needs Ethan because he takes on the burden of their identity. The townspeople define themselves based on their suffering and their strength in the face of it. However, the truth and degree of their suffering seems uncertain and exaggerated to the outside narrator. To maintain their identity without experiencing the extreme suffering that defines it the community requires a symbol of their character. Ethan remains outside the town making it easy for them to ignore his plight, but he is present enough that he serves as the reminder of their defining characteristics. Wharton continues the theme in her war writing, where groups of French soldiers relinquish their individuality to become symbols of France.

**Chapter 2: World War I: The Loss of Meaning**

In chapter two, I look at the nonfiction Wharton wrote during the war. Her experiences during WWI caused her to expand and evolve the issues she introduced in *Ethan Frome*. In *French Ways and their Meaning* and *Fighting France*, her focus shifts away from the pain of individuals to the destruction of civilization and the importance of communal effort. She expands her understanding of the representation of emotion through objects to include the same process in every created object. Wharton sees the physical version of abstract human thought in the buildings, objects, and land that surround her. However, this shift allows Wharton to avoid descriptions of the individual injuries and deaths of the war. As a result, she idealizes the war and the transformation from individual to group symbol.
Wharton’s nonfiction shows her interest in the translation of thought into physical form, and her fear of the war’s destruction of these objects. Wharton sees objects such as buildings, walls or lampposts as signs of civilization, and the war as the source of their annihilation. Her descriptions of the ruins of homes, churches, and land take the place of the more common descriptions of injured or dead soldiers. Wharton worked to stop the destruction of meaning around her and began by giving refugees back the ability to create and shape the materials and world around them. Her charities focused on more than providing food, shelter, or medical care, giving women and children opportunities for work that let them shape and mold a physical world the war had transformed into something out of their control. They put their inner selves into outer manifestations of their minds.

In avoiding the descriptions of soldiers in pain, Wharton reverses the structure of *Ethan Frome*. She now values the community, and she almost encourages the loss of individuality as soldiers travel to the front. Wharton writes about the war in glorified and clichéd terms instead of the intense descriptions of Ethan’s pain. It is surprising that Wharton uses clichés in her writing considering her concern over the debilitating effects of war on language and culture. She also identifies the ability to understand the reality of the world as one of the more important French characteristics in *French Ways*. Cliché works against reality by concealing meaning beneath a thoughtless phrase. Her avoidance of soldiers’ pain and suffering allowed her to think of battle in clean, ideal terms. She participates in the destruction of meaning when she uses clichés of war that idealize the truth.

**Chapter 3: The Marne and A Son at the Front: Changing Views of the War.**

In chapter three, I focus on two of Wharton’s works of fiction, *The Marne*, written during the war, and *A Son at the Front*, written after the war. Both are more sophisticated and complex than her war nonfiction. However, her later novel provides a more balanced and detailed understanding of the author’s experiences during WWI. In both works Wharton returns to the concepts of language and pain, focusing on the ways the use of cliché works to manipulate and destroy meaning. In *The Marne*, she participates in the same process of cliché she critiques when she glorifies war. In *A Son*, she has a more expansive and nuanced perspective, and she avoids the idealization of war present in much of her other writing. She also revises the ways she portrays individual sacrifice in each novel. The more idealized work is closer to her nonfiction while *A Son* gives equal balance to each side of the dilemma between group responsibility and individualism. In her look back at the war, Wharton also attempts to understand the place artists have during war. She believes that as the translator of abstract thought to communicable form an artist is most able to combat the loss of meaning and destruction of civilization caused by war.

*The Marne* both critiques and makes use of cliché when discussing the war. Wharton’s descriptions of battles employ language that removes any hint of humanity. However, she also analyzes the use of stock phrases and clichés by the American rich, charity workers, and even her main character. The story also returns to the pull between individuality and community. However, she continues to encourage the sacrifice for community with little consideration of the results of that sacrifice. It is not until Wharton achieves a more distant perspective of the war that she is able to consider the negative results of individual sacrifice.
Wharton wrote *A Son at the Front* much later than her other war fiction, and her contemporaries criticized her for rehashing the subject at an inappropriate time. In the novel, Wharton focuses on her concerns about language and the ways it hides truth and allows people to trick themselves and others, as well as how the war alters people’s ability to speak out about suffering. Her character’s decision to fight for the good of the community rather than maintain his individuality is more realistic. She gives each choice and their effects equal consideration. The result is that her characters understand their sacrifice and choose it willingly.

Wharton also anticipates much of what Scarry writes about the use of war, and combines these ideas with her understanding of the role an artist has during such difficult times as war. The war generates clichéd language and symbols that hide the truth of pain or can be used for the gain of another person. The war also destroys the created objects of civilization, silencing people’s expression. Artists are best able to combat the loss of meaning and culture that war creates.

Between *Ethan Frome* and her wartime works, Edith Wharton’s novels represent a mind deeply involved with and empathetic to the fate and suffering of others. The war was a disruptive force Wharton wanted to understand. She eventually did so in *A Son*, but not without much error in her portrayal of war. Wharton’s work at this time indicates a desire to understand her responsibility as an author, and the forces that were changing her world. Her attempts to make sense of the war and her life sometimes had negative results, but they also helped her to reveal complex interactions between suffering and language, and the abstract and physical world. Though her vision was limited in some areas, Wharton illuminated the world in ways one cannot ignore.
ETHAN FROME: THE BEGINNING OF PAIN AND LANGUAGE

Ethan Frome (1911) reflects one of Wharton’s first attempts to understand some of her own fears and conflicts surrounding pain and language. By exploring the community of Starkfield she identifies and tracks the way pain and silence turn into a damaging cycle, eventually turning individuals into symbols. Pain reinforces silence, and the lack of expression allows pain to go unnoticed. Wharton attempts to reveal this cycle and break it by communicating her characters’ pain to her readers. However, expressing what her characters were unable or unwilling to express represents certain challenges that she resolves by using ordinary objects to convey feeling.

At first, the cycle of silence and pain seems an innocent effect of the community’s reticent disposition, but Wharton subtly reveals the ways the group manipulates and uses Ethan. His wife Zeena takes advantage of her illness through deliberate silence and carefully chosen words to wield power over him. The community’s language increases her control through clichés that hide and manipulate pain. As the novel progresses and Ethan’s control over his life disappears, it becomes clear that the community has a strong influence over him. As a reflection of Wharton’s conflicting impulses, Ethan struggles between the desire for individuality and the responsibility he feels toward the community of Starkfield. However, the structure and language of the community are powerful enough to keep Ethan loyal to Starkfield. He becomes a symbol of their identity, losing his individuality. Wharton clearly privileges the individual over sacrifice for the community. The infamous sledding suicide and its horrific results are her warning against the sacrifice of the individual for the good of a larger group.

After a short summary, I will first establish the way pain and language naturally turn into a dangerous cycle, looking at Wharton’s insights and possible solutions to the problem. Then, through Zeena’s example, I will detail the roles of silence, cliché and pain in the deliberate control of Ethan. Finally, the chapter will end with a discussion of Ethan’s conflict between individuality and community and his eventual transformation into Starkfield’s communal symbol.

The Novel

Readers receive the story of Ethan through Wharton’s narrator, a stranger in the cold, small, country town of Starkfield. When our nameless guide first arrives, he encounters a deformed man, “the most striking figure in Starkfield” but with a “careless powerful look”, that attracts his attention (3). The man is Ethan Frome, living in poverty due to a failing and outdated sawmill with two invalids at home. Our narrator learns only that Ethan was injured in a mysterious “smash-up” and has had a hard life (4). After hiring Ethan to drive him to the train station, the narrator learns more of the man’s ambitions and story, finally being forced in a
blizzard to stay at Ethan’s farm and learn (or infer) his whole story. At this point, the narration shifts to Ethan’s point of view, after a flashback many years into the past before the accident.

Ethan is young and healthy, the sawmill is relatively productive, though he is still poor, and his wife has turned sickly and complaining. The reality of her illness is never determined, though most assume that she makes up her symptoms for attention. Mattie, a cousin of Zeena’s, comes to help with the housework after both her parents die, leaving her with nothing. Mattie is young and shares Ethan’s interest in science and the outdoors. They inevitably fall in love, though their shyness and inarticulate nature keeps them from revealing their feelings. The tension increases until Zeena announces a trip to see another doctor, and Ethan and Mattie spend an evening alone. Even then, their emotions remain unspoken. Ethan is happy to imagine them happily married for at least one night. However, Zeena returns the next day to break up the illusion. She tells Ethan of her intention to send Mattie away to make room for a newly hired housekeeper, and he can do nothing to change her decision. He thinks about running away with Mattie and leaving Zeena to fend for herself, but cannot bring himself to abandon her. When the day comes to drive Mattie to catch the train, she asks Ethan to take her sledding and they end up mangled in an unsuccessful suicide attempt. The narration shifts back to the original narrator, and Ethan miserably presents a diminished Zeena and Mattie to the narrator as “my wife, Mis’ Frome. […] And this is Miss Mattie Silver…” (175).

A Silent Community: the Cycle of Pain and Silence

The first reviews and critical commentary on Edith Wharton’s Ethan Frome reveal the complex way that readers understand the novel and their ambiguous relationship with her treatment of suffering and silence. Reviewers went back and forth between loving the novel for its intense nature, and hating it for the same reason. One reviewer writing in 1911 believed it was “a cruel…compelling and haunting story…whose purpose is the infinite refinement of torture” (qtd in Killoran 50). Another reviewer wondered how “the spectacle of so much pain can be made to yield so much beauty” (qtd in Killoran 50). These comments highlight the major concern most readers have about the novel: Wharton’s vivid account of the extreme emotional, social, and physical pain experienced by the characters. An early reader decided that the problem with Ethan Frome was Wharton’s attempt to express “things too terrible in their failure to be told humanly by creature to creature” (qtd in Killoran 50). This comment hits on something fundamental to the novel. Wharton explores the ways silence and suffering interact with and reinforce one another.

Critics have also reacted negatively due to Wharton’s choice of topics. Lionel Trilling admonished Wharton for inflicting needless pain on her characters for no justifiable moral reason. Elizabeth Sergeant took offense at what she thought was an unflattering characterization of her native New England, and called the novel “a fine example of what hate can accomplish as creative inspiration” (83). She seemed to think that Wharton, in her dislike for New England and its people, projected that view onto her characters, who attempt suicide because they are so unhappy with the lives Wharton imagined for them. Bernard De Voto called Wharton’s New Englanders “literary” and stereotypical, claiming that she “had no thesis: she was practicing detachment” (92, 94). The critics who claim the novel’s only purpose was to inflict pain have missed an important part of Wharton’s message. However, they are also partially correct.
Wharton focused an intense microscope on the processes of pain and silence that magnifies their effects and leaves many readers uncomfortable. However, she does so to reveal the mysteries of the process.

The inarticulate community of *Ethan Frome* allows Wharton to delve into the results of silence and pain. In her introduction, Wharton speaks of her difficulties in representing her characters due to their “deep-rooted reticence and inarticulateness” (ix), as well as the intrigue such a challenge presents her. She calls the characters “my granite outcroppings; but half-emerged from the soil, and scarcely more articulate” (vi). The statement hints at a depth to the characters that they are unable and unwilling to express. Wharton chose inarticulate characters to explore what Cynthia Griffin Wolff believed was her fear of losing her voice. According to Wolff, Wharton feared silence because she saw that “to be ‘mute’ […] is to be vulnerable to pain” (25). Her emphasis on pain comes from her role in her husband’s poor health, as well as her own experiences with illness (Wolff 398-9). However, Wharton saw even further than Wolff indicates. She recognized a cycle surrounding the states of pain and silence, anticipating the works of theorists such as Elaine Scarry and Hannah Arendt.

In *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Elaine Scarry makes an argument that pain destroys language. Pain takes away a person’s agency, language, and sense of anything except his body in pain. The body takes over, making deliberate mental understanding and speech impossible. Because of the inarticulate nature of a person in pain, others are unable to recognize or understand their feeling, even when told by the person “I am in pain.” Therefore, we doubt the existence of pain, especially if the person is not visible to us. For the person experiencing the feeling, there is no denying pain. Thus, according to Scarry, “to have great pain is to have certainty; to hear that another person has pain is to have doubt” (6). According to Scarry, the lack of expression keeps the inner experience of another’s pain hidden. She points out that pain does not have a “referential content” (5) as other inner feelings do. We love someone, but we just *have* pain, not pain for someone, or about something. Because there is no outer physical receiver for pain, it takes considerable effort and imagination to convey the inner feeling to those outside of it. Pain “resists objectification in language” (5), destroys the language of the person in pain, and its mystery can help keep others from feeling empathy as well as from bringing relief (4-9).

Wharton understands and represents these disturbing connections between pain, language and silence in the novel. She interweaves their complex interactions, each alternately affecting and depending on the others. Silence is associated with illness, indicating the power of pain to destroy language. For example, Ethan’s mother “had been a talker in her day” (69) but after she falls ill, she is almost completely silent. Zeena’s reaction to illness serves as another example. When she nursed his mother she was talkative and joking, but the combination of illness and Ethan’s silence soon create the same effect in her. Ethan does not verbally acknowledge her claims of suffering because he thinks he can do nothing to help her. The result is that “she too fell silent” (72). However, it is never obvious if silence causes pain, or pain causes silence. It is clear that the community’s limited language exacerbates the process of pain and silence. Wharton often hints that it is the very nature of the isolated community to produce illness among its members. The narrator explains that Zeena’s illness “made her notable even in a community rich in pathological instances,” indicating that Zeena’s condition follows the trend of imagined pain that the community breeds (72). The language of the community works against the process Scarry identifies for revealing pain. Very rarely do the characters of Starkfield use metaphors to demystify pain. They are without the imagination required to find adequate language to express
their inner states, but it also benefits some to maintain a limited explanation of pain. The lack of expression leaves the community without a way to accurately verbalize their sense of pain. However, the language limitations also allow them to control others’ understanding of their illness. In Starkfield, real and imagined illnesses have social value. Members gain attention and sympathy depending on how well they use the limited language. A member might also gain authority according to their perceived knowledge of pain and its cures. Therefore, Zeena and Ethan remain trapped in suffering by a limited language, but Zeena learns to use her illness and silence as a source of limited independence and power within the community. However, most of the people who fall ill lose their already limited powers of expression. They are unable to make others understand their pain, keeping them from any relief the community might bring. As their illness increases, so does their silence.

Wharton’s Use of Objects to Convey Feeling

Although the language of the community resists detailed expression, Wharton had to find a way to communicate to her readers what was left unsaid. In particular, she was intent on creating an understanding of another’s pain. She does so through an intensification of feeling associated with certain objects that represent the inner feeling in an outward form. Nancy Bentley recognizes a similar pattern in Wharton’s society novels. She points out that Wharton wrote at a time when the concept of culture was changing and scientists and novelists became authorities over the invisible meaning beneath cultural objects and actions. Wharton’s detailed descriptions of social events, objects, rooms, and actions perform the same function as the anthropologist’s ethnographic study. She described the new language of culture and helped create it for readers as she revealed the powerful meanings of previously ordinary objects. The outside objects covered a secret meaning that was often violent and powerful (97-109).

Bentley describes Wharton’s use of material objects on a larger cultural scale. However, in *Ethan Frome* Wharton starts with objects as they represent her characters’ individual thoughts, although she eventually moves to their larger meanings in her war writing. In addition, because of the lack of clutter in Ethan’s life, Wharton does not exhibit the same catalogue of detail she does in the New York society novels Bentley describes. However, the sparse description of the objects of Ethan’s society makes those she does focus on intensely significant, increasing our understanding of the characters’ usually silent feelings. Mattie’s sewing becomes an electric connection between the two when Ethan touches it, and their painfully unspoken emotion finds vent through an object. The cloth becomes their extension. The ominous oak tree reminds us of the imagined sensation of their future suffering. Mattie projects her desire for Ethan onto Zeena’s pickle dish, which later becomes Zeena’s rage in material form. Each object carries the weight of emotion, putting it into a physical form much more understandable than Ethan’s or Mattie’s incoherent statements.

Scarry’s ideas about the expression of pain help explain how Wharton connects abstract emotion to a material form. She points out that part of the solution to the problem of representing pain is to create a visual metaphor that puts an inner feeling into the physical world. For example, to describe their feeling to another person, a patient might say, “It feels as though a knife is cutting into my skin.” This metaphor places the source of pain in an outside object, allowing those outside the body of the patient to understand it through a visual representation
By placing the idea of pain within the object of it, or “recognizing pain in the weapon” (16), we can convey an accurate sense of it to one outside of the experience. Before the weapon strikes the body, it already contains the pain it will produce in our imagination. Therefore, when we picture a knife, we think of a stab wound and imagine the feeling of pain it could cause. Throughout the novel, Wharton constantly connects the landscape and other physical objects with the emotion and pain of her characters. The land is stark, as are the people and their language. It is also cruel, as are their “troubles”. Ethan often puts his memories and feelings into what he sees. The places where he has experienced special moments with Mattie become warm and inviting in comparison with the rest of the cold, dreary landscape. The narrator places Ethan’s suffering into the landscape and the diminished farmhouse. These images help readers recognize thoughts that Starkfield normally keeps buried and unrecognizable.

In a similar way, Wharton brings up the idea of the accident and the elm as a danger from the beginning. As she points out in her introduction, we already know the violent climax of the story, and this knowledge stays with us as we read. Wharton also reminds us of the looming violence through hints and threats. Almost every time Mattie and Ethan discuss sledding, the elm is present in their thoughts. Wharton makes the tree a threat from the beginning when two of Mattie’s friends almost slide into its solid presence. Wharton transforms the elm into the instrument or weapon that contains the pain it will eventually cause. She describes it as “dangerous” (46), and “an ugly corner down by the big elm” (91). When Ethan and Mattie slide down the first time, it comes alive to “thrust out a deadly elbow” (162) in their direction. At the end of their second run, “the big elm shot up ahead, lying in wait for them” (169) and Ethan thinks that “it seems to know” (170) their intentions. The elm is the visual, almost sentient object that eventually causes their pain and it takes on the attributes of the future experience. As readers read about the elm with their prior knowledge, the experience of pain is transferred onto them. The numerous descriptions of the elm get readers to imagine the inevitable accident, and to place an immediate sensation of pain onto Ethan’s limp. Imagination brings readers closer to an understanding of Ethan’s pain.

Wharton does something similar with the language she uses to describe Ethan’s suffering after they hit the tree. She puts the experience into a visual description of “millions of fiery wires” (170) that convey his inner state. As he becomes aware of Mattie’s presence and the pain she is in, he begins “to feel it shooting through his own body” (171) in a chilling description that mirrors Zeena’s words for suffering. The pain manifests itself in the metaphorical shape of the elm and the wires, allowing us to imagine and experience it along with Ethan. The result is an intense feeling of empathy as objects repeated and interpreted convey the hidden suffering in their minds and bodies. Wharton’s descriptions break the cycle of silence and pain. Though Ethan and Mattie lose their power of speech and expression, Wharton speaks for them, and conveys their pain to her audience. Her use of the physical world to produce emotional understanding is a theme she returns to in her war writing with a greater sense of its import.

**Zeena’s Power in Pain and Language: a Symbol of the Community**

Although Wharton’s characterization of the community is not often directly accusatory, there are subtle hints that lay blame for the suffering of the main characters on the rules and structure of Starkfield. Zeena is the most deliberately manipulative character in the novel, and
her use of language and illness are a magnified version of the community. She stands for a representative for Starkfield as a whole.

As an expert in the area of suffering and its treatment and language, Zeena has considerable control over the manipulation of her illness. She has the greatest variety of expression for her pain, and uses it to her advantage. She has more imagination in the use of language than the others, although only as it pertains to her own suffering. Wharton does not allow us to make a straight decision about the truth or imaginary nature of Zeena’s illness. The narrator certainly does not give her claims any legitimacy, while Ethan is not always so sure. He usually regards her complaining as superficial, but he has poignant moments of doubt created by Zeena’s skillful control. Our and Ethan’s uncertainty are signs of Zeena’s manipulation of language to regulate the outer representations of her pain. Despite our doubt about the truth of her pain, we cannot doubt her manipulative control of Ethan. Zeena often controls Ethan through his inability to understand her pain and his uncertainty over its existence. The very nature of pain—intimately connected to the person experiencing it, but difficult to communicate to others—keeps Ethan uncertain about her truthfulness. When Zeena returns from the new doctor to tell Ethan her situation is serious, he has a sudden flash of doubt that she might actually be sick. Her claims “fell on his ear with a strange shock of wonder. […] what if at last they were true?” (108). Later, we learn that his “heart was jerking to and fro between two extremities of feeling, but for the moment compassion prevailed” (108). The mysterious nature of her illness keeps him guessing and under her control. He wishes to relieve her suffering, but she keeps its nature hidden so that he can only do as she tells him.

Zeena also makes extensive use of Starkfield’s words for pain. When she wants her suffering to take on a mysterious importance, she uses the less physical terms of the community such as “complications” (108). When she wants more sympathy from Ethan, her language becomes more specific and begins to place the idea of pain outside herself. When Zeena wants Ethan to be unsure of her condition, she says she felt “so mean I couldn’t sleep” (53), using an emotional state to describe a physical feeling, and keeping it sufficiently mysterious. Later, Zeena’s metaphors begin to work the same way Wharton uses objects to convey strong feeling. Zeena helps Wharton reinforce her insight into the power of physical objects to express inner thought. Zeena objectifies her pain to give it more power and legitimacy when she requires more sympathy from Ethan. When Zeena decides to visit the doctor and wants to convince Ethan to let her go, she tells him, “I’ve got my shooting pains” (62). Her statement hints at the weapon of destruction without entirely revealing it: an implied weapon that shoots and causes pain. When Zeena begins to think that Ethan is still not sympathetic to her plight, she makes her symptoms even more specific, locating them not only in an outside source, but on her body as well. The pains are “clear away down to my ankles now” (64). These declarations are convincing enough to remove all of Ethan’s doubts about the truth of her claims. Scarry’s argument points to the meaning behind Zeena’s expression. She believes that to adequately make someone believe in another’s pain, we “must both objectify its felt-characteristics and hold steadily visible the referent for those characteristics” (17). It is not enough to give the pain a physical manifestation in the weapon or a visible object; we must also remember who experiences the pain and where it is located. Thus as Zeena desires more sympathy, she changes her language to create a better understanding of her condition.

However, revealing too much would give Ethan access to knowledge about her pain and give him more control over it. Therefore, Zeena must also make use of silence to maintain power over her husband. Ethan is often sympathetic and wants to help his wife, but is never able
to do so. He explains his silence as the only reaction he was able to give her when she would “complain of things not in his power to remedy” (72). If he had known her exact sensations, or the cause of her pain he might have known how to relieve it and done so. His inability to control her sickness frustrates him, keeping him within her control, and her refusal to express her pain in a way that he can understand it keeps him from helping her. Ethan senses her manipulation, claiming, “her silence seemed deliberately assumed to conceal far-reaching intentions, mysterious conclusions drawn from suspicions and resentments impossible to guess” (73).

Silence becomes a way for Zeena to withhold information, keeping Ethan just sympathetic enough that he knows he cannot cross her without significant consequences.

The exchange between the two after Zeena’s trip to the doctor clearly reveals her power over him and places her manipulation of pain as the source. Once she has his sympathy, she makes it clear that he can do nothing to relieve her situation. She and an unquestionable doctor are the only sources of authority, and Ethan is unable to understand her condition, even with his brush with school and knowledge. When he questions the doctor’s authority, Zeena claims she is “losing ground every day. Everybody but you could see it” (109). Again, the expression reveals depths of pain but without placing them in any specific object, and this time it is only Ethan who fails to grasp her condition. Everyone else understands but him, putting him further away from authority and power. During the argument Ethan feels “suddenly weak and powerless” (117) as she holds her knowledge over his lack of it. Zeena is “a mysterious alien presence, an evil energy secreted from the long years of silent brooding” (118). It is her silence about her condition that creates this sense of mysterious malice and hinders Ethan’s action.

Wharton’s insights into the connection between pain and power anticipate later theories about the influence of pain. Scarry points out that pain becomes a source of power when someone controls an outsider’s understanding of another’s pain. She uses the example of governments that hide or manipulate our understanding of war or torture so that they may control others through pain without the empathy and subsequent outrage of their citizens interfering (Scarry 18). On a small scale, Zeena has control over the effect of her condition on others because she controls how they understand it. She allows only cursory glimpses into what she feels below the surface, but the import of the limited vocabulary turns her illness into something larger than anyone can openly question. Ethan is unable to act against her because he might cause her more pain, and he is never sure what will cause her pain. Ethan does not feel he could move with her to a bigger city because the identity she gains from her “complications” would have no social currency outside of the small town (108). By remaining in Starkfield, he allows Zeena to use her status to keep things exactly as she wants them. Because he does not understand what Zeena feels, he is also unable to relieve her or help her in any way. The pain is not tangible to him, and so he does not know how to control it. The guilt that comes from his helplessness also keeps him from leaving her. Although Zeena’s manipulation is not on the same level of deception Scarry cites, both work according to the same concepts. Later, Wharton tracks these broader uses of pain in her WWI fiction and nonfiction, developing the ideas Ethan Frome initiated.

Cliché and the Manipulation of Language
Although Zeena is the clearest example of the manipulation of the language of pain, the community and its language also play a subtle role in Ethan’s slow demise. Zeena’s outright manipulation serves to reflect the undercurrent of communal control in the novel. Again, language is an important part of the communal structure. In particular, Wharton recognizes the way that cliché alters and hides the truth, allowing the community control over Ethan. Although their control is not deliberate or organized, the general pervasiveness of the communal rules and needs smother Ethan, finally turning him into a communal symbol. The use of cliché to hide the reality of pain is part of that process.

The language at the command of the people of Starkfield contains very few words for pain, keeping it below the surface as well as importing much more significance to the words they do have. Thus, there are huge implications and connotations attached to the words “troubles” and “complications” in a town that values illness and stoic suffering. As Ethan points out, “almost everybody in the neighborhood had ‘troubles,’ frankly localized and specified; but only the chosen had ‘complications’” (108). While Ethan understands “complications” as a word “of exceptional import”, it is also one of considerable ambiguity (108). It hides instead of revealing the details of Zeena’s condition. The characters use other words to convey a sense of suffering, but these words often avoid a direct description. According to Harmon Gow, who is the most talkative of the town’s members next to Mrs. Hale, the cause of Ethan’s deformity was “his smash-up”(4), a phrase that gives an impression of great consequence, but keeps the details a mystery. The source of Ethan’s pain remains unresolved, even after the narrator asks Gow about it again when he found Mrs. Hale “unexpectedly reticent” (10) when it came to Ethan. All the driver tells him is that Mrs. Hale was the first to see them “after they was picked up” (11), again dancing around the subject and avoiding a physical description. Indeed, it seems that the best description the community can give the narrator is that, though they all had “troubles”, “all conceded that Ethan Frome’s had been beyond the common measure” (11). In Starkfield, there are troubles and greater troubles; the only difference in description a matter of degree. These repetitive phrases become clichés of the community, used as a way to hide their true thoughts, manipulate the truth, or remain ignorant of another’s suffering.

In her characterization of cliché in the Starkfield community, Wharton recognizes the same process that Hannah Arendt observed in Germany as she looked back on WWII. In her report on the trial of a Nazi official entitled Eichmann in Jerusalem, Arendt attempts to understand how a seemingly normal individual could cause the deaths and suffering of so many, yet deceive himself about his role. Eichmann expressed his knowledge and belief in moral standards, and though he clearly committed horrible acts against others, he did not believe he had done anything wrong. After much observation, Arendt realizes that “It was sheer thoughtlessness—something by no means identical with stupidity—that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period” (287). She concludes that there is a “strange interdependence of thoughtlessness and evil” (288).

Arendt links this explanation with the concept of language, specifically the clichés that Eichmann and the German populace as a whole used and repeated to deceive themselves about the facts of WWII. They used clichés because they had a need to believe in their morality, despite their action or lack of action in the war. Statements such as “he ‘would like to find peace with [his] former enemies’” became “a self-fabricated stock phrase […] devoid of reality” (53). A cliché allows the speaker to avoid thinking about the meaning behind it. Such phrases represent meaning without requiring any closer examination. Therefore, a person can claim to want peace with their enemies and effectively forget the atrocities they allowed, or even ordered
to happen to those enemies. On a much lesser scale, the language and stock phrases of the Starkfield community have the same effect. Calling suffering “troubles” or “complications” allows some people in the community to ignore the reality of another’s pain behind the overused phrases. Townspeople begin to doubt the reality of others’ pain, telling themselves it is imagined or falsified to gain attention. Instead of helping the people around them, they are able to focus on their own problems, which are numerous in a small town which new industry has left behind. Whether real or imagined, illness replaces money as a social indicator and has the potential to lead to social status in the town. Therefore, it benefits some members of the community to have the ability to control the language of pain but also to ignore the moral implications of their lack of help for others. Stock phrases like “complications” let them do both. Though the focus on cliché and empty language is not as clear in Ethan Frome, it is the source of a subject Wharton returns to in her war writings.

The Paradox of Individual and Communal Needs

Wharton connects her understanding of pain to a struggle between the individual and communal aspects of her and Ethan’s lives. Her indictment of Starkfield shows a rejection of the sense of individual sacrifice for the good of community in Ethan Frome. However, she rejects Ethan’s sacrifice with considerable uncertainty. The novella reflects the confusion and questions she felt about the problems she saw in the world around her, and that she experienced with her husband as he required more and more of her attention (Wolff 398-9). Blake Nevious suggests that Wharton carries on a theme in all her literature of wasted sacrifice and the morality behind responsibility (97). Although other critics have attempted to connect the novel to broader concerns, Wharton is more interested in the individual effects of language and pain. She remains limited by her individual viewpoint, but the war eventually forces her to see these processes on a much larger scale. Jennifer Travis sees the novel in a more general light, connecting it with current events that Wharton would have been aware of at the time. She claims that Wharton’s purpose is to show readers how to read suffering in a changing culture. According to Travis, Wharton tries to incite sympathy in an expanding industrial society where the increased distance between people, required it to “extend its capacity for feeling” (54). While Wharton was concerned with the more general ramifications of silenced voices and pain, the novel deals with the problems of individuals. Her focus on specific characters is likely a result of her personal difficulties with her husband’s illness and his family at the time she wrote. The novel is clearly not a direct link to Wharton’s life, but it is connected in the ways she looks inward toward her characters rather than outward at the larger results. It would not be until WWI that Wharton turned the questions and critiques she developed in Ethan Frome to a much broader sphere. Wharton was also intent on demonstrating the imminent consequences of not recognizing the pain of others. She showed how the inaction of the community resulted in the continuation of Ethan, Mattie, and Zeena’s excessive suffering. She also identified and questioned the conflict between individual desires and sacrifice for the community that formed Ethan into the master of indecision and silence he becomes. Her main concern falls on the resulting loss of individuality, not the negative effects on the community.

Wharton expresses her ambiguity and guilt toward her responsibilities and her individual needs through Ethan. Ethan remains paralyzed between dependency and independence, unable
to become a strong individual without sacrificing his family and community. He realizes that by taking advantage of his neighbors and leaving Zeena, he will hurt the community. His choice is between independence and the communal duty that requires him to relinquish individuality. At first, his desire for independence overtakes his pride. “How much did pride count in the ebullition of passions in his breast?” (140-1). But his sense of responsibility keeps him from any decisive action. Although Ethan wants to gain freedom from his community, he also understands the necessity of depending on the group. However, he resents any hint of aid from the town. His pride is most obvious when he asks Hale for an advance, or when Mrs. Hale’s concern for his situation causes him to give up what he sees as his only chance for escape. Ethan’s “manhood was humbled by the part he was compelled to play and by the thought of what Mattie must think of him. Confused impulses struggled in him as he strode along to the village” (139-40). Ethan knows that to be independent, he must take action that allows him to be successful and attain his desires but to do so he must first depend on the community he wishes to leave. He cannot reconcile the two impulses, and so remains powerless.

Ethan’s conflict is similar to the concepts Lori Jirousek cites in her use of E. Anthony Rotundo’s categories of “communal manhood”, and “passionate manhood” (52). She defines “communal manhood” as the recognition of one’s duty toward the community, while “passionate manhood” is the privileging of “competitiveness, combativeness, and emotional detachment” to attain a more individual, independent character (52). Jirousek uses the categories to identify similar conflicts in many of Wharton’s other novels, but Ethan Frome represents the same paradox. Ethan often seems to want both individuality and communal connection, but they seem mutually exclusive to him. He cannot reconcile his desire to marry Mattie and move west with his sense of responsibility for the community. Therefore, he remains indecisive and ambiguous about his relationship with Starkfield. Ethan’s struggle between his desire to be a strong individual, and his concern for and links with the community leads in part to his often self-enforced silence and isolation. However, the community approves his role, and keeps him there through language and silence.

Although Ethan’s scruples are his guiding force, the community exerts a subtle control over him. Of course, the members of Starkfield do not work deliberately, but the inner workings of their community do not favor the type of individuality that Ethan desires. The limit of their language and the way it hides meaning manipulates Ethan’s actions. Ethan’s poverty is his first hindrance. He must depend on the community before he can attain the individuality that Mattie symbolizes. However, his dependence also creates a sense of obligation in Ethan. Ethan is ready to leave the community, but cannot after his neighbor expresses sympathy for his hardships. Before, he had had no sense that the town cared about or appreciated his trouble, so he had no desire to care for their troubles. However, knowing at least one person felt his plight, he feels an obligation to them. His need for independence requires him to deny community so that he might succeed. When the consequences of his actions for those around him become clear he must sacrifice his independence. Zeena enacted a similar control over him as the one voice of sympathy and caring during his mother’s illness. Now the community expresses its sympathy through his neighbor and Ethan believes he must give in to what is best for Starkfield.

Linda Costanzo Cahir sees similar issues in the novel when she compares it to Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness. She claims that both writers use their characters to consider “masculine potency in disintegration, internal collapse, and moral ambiguity” as well as the problems with “extreme adherence to duty (duty to the ivory corporation or to the family)” (21). However, in her analysis both characters also try to understand if such duty “provides a pretext
for god-like control over the lives of others” along with “the complicity in human destruction that results from extreme self-reliance” (21). Both main characters are “self-reliant,” but this also comes from “self-absorption” making them insensitive to the needs of the people around them (22). Interestingly, Cahir sees Ethan’s silence as control over the people around him, allowing him to sacrifice both women to his own needs. Such a reading ignores Ethan’s helplessness and his struggle between two concepts of duty—to oneself, and to the community. Her analysis assumes that Ethan has decided on one course of action or another, but Wharton’s goal is to show how the community keeps him from any productive course of action.

**Ethan as a Community Symbol**

The ways Starkfield exerts its influence over Ethan are ambiguous, but when compared with Scarry’s assessment of the ways groups control language and meaning, they become more definite. The small community seems unaware of the unfolding dilemma within the Frome family, and after their injury, they avoid helping or talking about them. Orlene Murad comments on the lack of reality in the situation. How could such a small community be so unaware of the intense drama surrounding Ethan, Mattie and Zeena? Murad mistakenly labels the strange reaction of the town as a flaw in Wharton’s realism (93). Considering the amount of revision and time put into the novel, it is more likely a deliberate critique of the town. Wharton intended their convenient innocence about the situation to cast blame on the community. After they know the whole story, their silence and paltry help for the family further condemn the group. They express sympathy for the unfortunate family to the narrator, but all they do to alleviate their suffering is to send Mrs. Hale on a visit two times a year, and occasionally to give Ethan some middling work (such as the narrator’s need for transportation). Although it was Ethan’s reluctance to ignore his responsibility to Starkfield that led to his indecisiveness, it is clear that he has been sacrificed for the community.

Although the people of Starkfield are naturally inexpressive, they are not completely silent, except when the narrator asks about Ethan. Even the talkative Mrs. Hale avoids the subject. Their silence has a specific result. Not speaking keeps Ethan’s pain distant, as does his physical and emotional isolation. Because of their silence, the narrator does not understand the extent of the Fromes’ suffering. The narrator expresses surprise when Harmon Gow tells him to ask Ethan to provide his needed transportation. Gow explains that “he wouldn’t be sorry to earn a dollar” which causes the narrator to question the extent of Ethan’s poverty (12). Though he has inquired about him extensively, he is still unclear about Ethan’s situation. Earlier, the narrator claims that Gow “developed the tale as far as his mental and moral reach permitted” (7, emphasis mine). The community, if we base it on Gow’s attitude, seems to take Ethan as part of their everyday life, nothing to be excited about, and certainly nothing to change. They talk to him when they need to, and let him walk by unnoticed when they do not. Gow even seems amused by the narrator’s shock and interest in Ethan.

Gow is not the only Starkfield character that seems insensitive to Ethan’s plight. The last line of the novel indicates a callous attitude in Mrs. Hale that leaves the reader questioning such an unfeeling proclamation. In her final words Mrs. Hale proclaims, “the way they are now, I don’t see’s there’s much difference between the Fromes up at the farm and the Fromes down in the graveyard” (181). This is a statement a sympathetic reader would expect to precede kind,
sympathetic words. However, her final comment is, “’cept that down there they’re all quiet, and the women have got to hold their tongues” (181). The statement is difficult to understand after Mrs. Hale’s seeming sympathy with Zeena and Mattie, and it is certainly insufficient to encompass all their suffering. The only solution to their suffering she considers is a whispered confession to the narrator that things would be better if Mattie had died so that the other two could live (although we question the wisdom of this assumption—we know how unhappy Ethan and Zeena were before). It is a solution that requires no action from her or the community, and her final words are a harsh criticism of two women who have suffered through such horrendous events. Wharton clearly meant to place blame on the community. However, it is not immediately apparent why the members of Starkfield should want Ethan to remain in poverty. What purpose does it serve? The answer is in the group’s need to keep Ethan dependent and squelch his desire for individuality. They need Ethan as a communal symbol that gives their values needed permanency in the physical world.

The community ignores Ethan’s situation, but they also value his suffering as a force that strengthens him and the group. Because Ethan endures his poverty and pain, the community retains a sense of their identity as hard working, suffering people. This is certainly an important part of their image considering their vocabulary and the power given to those with “troubles” and “complications.” They are a community that values suffering, as the narrator points out. Such a set of values would justify their allowing Ethan to go on as he does to give them a permanent symbol of their ideology. The narrator’s descriptions of Ethan after his injury reveal his body’s symbolic nature. Everyone recognizes Ethan. The narrator even says that, “if you know Starkfield, Massachusetts, you know the post-office. If you know the post-office you must have seen Ethan Frome drive up to it […] and drag himself across the brick pavement” (3). A small town creates a small group of insiders who “know” the place, and Ethan’s disfigured body has become as established as the post office. The locals recognize him in his regular trips to town, and any visitor notices Ethan’s “careless powerful look” and his “lameness checking each step like the jerk of a chain” (3). The reference to chains hints at the town’s control over Ethan. He is trapped in the prison of his poverty and the limitations of his body. Since any newcomer must have noticed Ethan, he serves as a reflection of the town—an introduction to their values and ideology. His power in spite of his pain and poverty is the town’s power. His honorable, silent suffering reflects their honor.

Again, Wharton’s characterization of Starkfield anticipates Scarry’s theories. According to Scarry, ideology exists abstractly and needs physical proof of existence when an outside threat challenges a community’s values and assumptions. Ideology can find permanence through the physical pain of another’s body. In war, countries use the body and its alteration to make their ideologies permanent, physical. The body in pain gives substantiation to each ideology because those beliefs are the cause of pain, and because the sensation is an extreme form of physical alteration. Scarry points out that it is the actual altering of human bodies that makes injury important for war. The two ideologies of the opposing sides that clash and lead to war are not fixed in the material world. Thus, when they are in question (as they are during war), they need a strong material reality to fix them into place once one side has won. Injury certainly “has a compelling and vivid reality” (121). The dead bodies of soldiers become material carriers of the ideology—but only through their proximity to specific symbols of the state like a uniform or a flag. The injured bodies of soldiers remain after war to memorialize it, just as a body retains the culture of its country through physical memories such as a particular way of walking or a facial expression that marks one as American or English (111). The same process can also be
deliberately produced through war or through the actions of the community as it is in *Ethan Frome*. Ethan’s disfigured body holds up the community’s ideology of silent suffering and strength in the face of hardship.

**Conclusion**

In one of her earlier works of fiction, Wharton initiates innovative ideas about pain and language that are part of her writing and analysis of human nature. She tracks Ethan’s disintegration into a stark and painful symbol of communal identity, and the ways to stop the process. The novel is in part a result of Wharton’s personal problems with her own individual struggle against sacrificing herself to the needs of her ill husband. However, her involvement in WWI caused the ideas to resurface in her nonfiction and fiction work. As we will see in the next chapter, the shift from one man to entire armies led Wharton to alter her views considerably over the course of the war.
CHAPTER 2
WORLD WAR I: THE LOSS OF MEANING

Wharton’s nonfiction represents a change from *Ethan Frome* on many levels, although she continues to explore the ideas sparked from the contemplation of pain in the earlier novel. Wharton expands her interest in the physical manifestations of abstract thought and applies the concept to many of the problems of war in France. This focus leads to the recognition of the necessity of human creation and the similarities between physical and artistic labor. Wharton views both forms of expression as necessities that the war destroys. As she recognizes the connections between artistic and physical work in communal projects such as cathedrals, Wharton begins to reconcile the division between communal and individual ideals that troubled her in *Ethan Frome*. However, the paradox returns once she travels to the Front. Closer to war, Wharton begins to privilege the group rather than the individual—in part because of her use of cliché to idealize the war. Wharton’s reliance on cliché allows her to think of the war in idealized terms and remain so biased toward France’s enemies that she can only recognize the existence of pain and suffering on the French side of the line. Her idealization of the war also leads to her often contradictory views of the conflict that vacillate between fear of its destructive nature and near admiration for the positive effects war has on individuals. Eventually, the links between the processes of war and civilization become clear. Both have the power to turn individuals into symbols, and war seems to inspire what Wharton believes are some of the most noble and civilized feelings and actions of human beings. Wharton’s nonfiction is partially some of her most insightful writing on the processes of war and civilization, but also the most limited in its contradictions. She eventually revises the contradictions of these works in her later war fiction.

In this chapter, I will examine three of Wharton’s nonfiction works. *Fighting France* (1915) is Wharton’s account of France at war as she witnessed it during her trips to the front. She wrote *A Motor-Flight Through France* (1908) as a travel narrative well before the war, but it contains several of the same themes she explores later. In *French Ways and their Meaning* (1919), Wharton provides insight into the French character, revealing the importance of outward expression of abstract thought and the skill of reading others’ attempts at expression. Part of the goal of *Fighting France* and *French Ways* was to influence American readers with the hope that their sympathies with the damaged country would convince a neutral nation to help their allies. The books are much more than the war propaganda many critics have labeled them.

First, I will analyze Wharton’s descriptions and use of the themes of expression through labor, and the connection between physical and artistic work. Then I will show the significance her ideas have on her charity work and view of the war as well as the ways she attempts to solve her dilemma between the individual and the group. Next, I will explore Wharton’s conflicting understanding of war and its relationship with civilization. I will also detail the ways Wharton comes to value the group over the individual in her observations of the front due to her idealization of war. The chapter ends with a discussion of the limitations her experience of the war placed on Wharton, and their results.
The Translation of Abstract Thought into Physical Object

Some of the first descriptions Wharton includes in these three works of nonfiction relate to the use of objects and physical material to express abstract thought. Human expression through the seemingly mundane details of civilization is a necessity Elaine Scarry also recognizes. Scarry claims, “the human imagination has its collective expression in civilization” (244). She points out that human beings project their inner feeling onto outside objects, first through imagining the object, and then through creating the physical object. The object represents one’s inside sensations and extends the inner-self into the outside world (167-176, 254-256). Wharton’s interest in architecture, farming and ordinary objects and actions reveal her recognition of the same concepts.

In French Ways, Wharton compares language to physical labor—specifically the French talent for creating physical objects in direct proportion to their need. For example, a chair might be the exact size and shape needed to fit its purpose, and therefore translates the need to sit into a physical object that is proportional to the need. Wharton’s comparison reveals her understanding of labor as a kind of language that expresses the human mind in the same way as verbal language. One might say “I need to sit down,” or one might remain silent and make a chair on which to sit. Both actions represent the need to sit and convey an understanding of that need to others. Wharton also points to the foundation of the French Academy and its recognition “that language was the chosen vessel in which the finer life of a nation must be preserved” (49). The rules and use of language seem at first quite unlike what she had been describing before: art, the line of a woman’s hat, architecture. However, Wharton saw their common purpose in translating the abstract into a shareable message. Without guidelines and standards for language, it “speedily ceases to be one, and deteriorates into a muddle of unstable dialects” (50). Even on a lesser scale, Wharton sees the deterioration of language, taking English as her main example. She claims that one “need only note what that rich language has shrunk to on the lips” (50). However, Michael E. Nowlin understands her desire to “stabiliz[e] the English language” as “firmly rooted in colonial expansion” (444). Her assumption is biased toward a preconceived concept of civilization, but that prejudice does not negate her concern for the usefulness of language. Part of her objection is against any limitation of communication. This limitation is a result of what she called a lack of standards and the reduction of the complexities of language that normally allow for more detailed communication. Without a complex language, she believed, one’s thoughts remain unexpressed, hidden from others. Further, Wharton saw this same potential for complex language in the manual labor of farmers and other workers, an area where others might see simplicity and inexpressiveness. These links become clear in her nonfiction through her descriptions of farming, architecture and everyday activities and objects.

She begins several of her war nonfiction works with a comment about the countryside that reveals to her a close link with the land and the people who mold it to express the human mind. Individual citizens, silenced by war and government, alter the material around them to make their world closer to the workings of their minds. Their created world works for them, providing what they need to live, allowing them to extend themselves further into the world and make their presence known. They link themselves and their history with the material world, giving them permanence. One of the first images of Fighting France is of “thrifty sod and even furrow” which speaks of “the ceaseless vigilant attachment of generations faithful to the soil” (3). Wharton describes the soil as if it had taken on the characteristics of those who ordered it to
their minds—“thrifty” and “even” (3). Indeed, “the air seemed full of the long murmur of human effort, the rhythm of oft-repeated tasks” (4). Their work, repeated so often, is now part of the air they breathe, so that it doubles back, returns to them as sympathetic elements. The focus on soil molded by generations of communal effort to reflect the specific, individual needs of human minds is an image Wharton returns to often in her nonfiction writing about France.

In *A Motor Flight through France* Wharton begins the theme with a similar image in the beginning of the first chapter. She writes that the “agricultural landscape, disciplined and cultivated to the last point of finish, shows how nature may be utilized to the utmost clod without losing its freshness and naturalness” (4). She compares the image of French cultivated land to the wildness of American soil, and concludes that “one understands the higher beauty of land developed, humanized, brought into relation to life and history” (5). According to Wharton, “in France everything speaks of long familiar intercourse between the earth and its inhabitants” (5). Land “humanized” is land that has been shaped and changed by human hands, minds and thought. Their effort makes the land comfort and sustain human life, easing the act of living. Wharton’s preference for molded land speaks to her recognition of the benefits of being able to shape the world according to the inner mind of a person using a language which worked the same way language worked in an author’s writing, or a painter’s brushstroke.

As we see in her travel writing, even before the war, Wharton saw the expression inherent in even the most manual labor. In *French Ways*, Wharton continues the theme she began with her travel writing. The first hint comes in the preface, when she asserts, “most things in a man’s view of life depend on how many thousand years ago his land was deforested” (ix). She sees human character in the cultivation of land, and links cultivation with the French whom she contrasts with other “races still agrope for self-expression” (x). If one follows her logic, the first step toward self-expression is the alteration of the forests and surrounding landscape—the domination of human thought over the world. She understands the link between manual labor and the self-expression usually only recognized in artistic work. The insight allows her to connect the two seemingly opposite concepts.

**In Proportion: Art and Communal Effort**

Wharton extended her writing to encompass the link between manual and artistic work in the description of ordinary objects in *French Ways*. She admired the French for their belief that “there is no difference in kind between the curve of a woman’s hat-brim and the curve of a Rodin marble, or between the droop of an upholsterer’s curtain and that of the branches along a great avenue” (39). Each creation holds in common the transition from thought to physical object, whether it has a useful or an artistic function. The French “have instinctively applied to living the same rules that they applied to artistic creation” (40). Wharton defines taste as a sense of proportion, or in creating something perfectly designed to fulfill a function. “That a thing should be in scale—should be proportioned to its purpose—is one of the first requirements of beauty” (41). She describes the sculptures fitted into the corners of cathedral ceilings. Each, she claims, has its space, and fits perfectly into it (41-2). She believes that beauty lies partly in the object’s creator being able to translate a human need or thought into the correct physical form. A chair too small or too uncomfortable, holds less value and beauty than one perfectly designed to fit to a person’s body.
Wharton valued such attention to detail in her own life, as Millicent Bell points out. According to Bell, the author had a talent for creating the space around her according to her desires. Bell refers to the ways Wharton meticulously designed her homes, and quotes James who claimed “No one fully knows our Edith who hasn’t seen her in the act of creating a habitation for herself” (66). Apparently, her guests also noticed and “commented on the chilling perfection of the achievement” (66). Wharton focused such intense energies on the world around her that friends and strangers commented on the effects. She recognized the need for a world that reflected one’s mind and worked to mold the world around her to fit her complex ideas. The need in her life became part of her work. Art, the expression of human thought, and the translation of human need into an object are all intimately connected in Wharton’s writing.

The same links between manual and artistic labor are in Wharton’s first descriptions of the cathedrals she encounters before and after the war. The churches and cathedrals seem particularly important in Wharton’s descriptions. They stand as one of the more direct spatial links between the physical and spiritual worlds, and it is within their walls that Wharton often seems inspired or heartbroken at the destruction of human expression and life. The French built the cathedrals as expressions of their link with spirituality and of their needs and desires as they relate to religion and ideas higher than themselves. In Fighting France, the cathedral at Chartres seemed particularly to inspire Wharton to consider physical and abstract forms of thought. The architecture also allowed her to value the communal and individual work necessary for its creation. The peace and order of the cathedral tempt her to linger before she must delve into descriptions of the fall into war. The brightly lit colors and images of the “overpoweringly vivid” (4) upper windows receive all of the author’s attention until “one dropped one’s eyes from these ethereal harmonies” to “the dark masses of masonry below them” (5). Wharton understands the lofty windows as “ethereal harmonies” and the lower building as “life on earth, with its shadows, its heavy distances and its little islands of illusion” (5). However, her word choice evokes a comparison between the individual artist whose mind and effort created the dazzling windows and the workers whose toil created the foundation of the church that made the windows possible. In these descriptions, manual and artistic work depend on each other. One cannot get to the heights of the windows without first creating the repetitive masonry below them. In turn, the windows help to further the expression begun by the bricks below and could not expand without them. Both are extensions of the human mind into the outside world—a grasp for “ethereal harmonies” which must begin grounded on earth before attaining such heights (5).

Wharton also recognized these themes in cathedrals before the war, describing them in Motor Flight. In the book, she writes about the cathedral at Amiens, launching into her views of the building’s abstract meanings. She believes that such cathedrals have a use that “is not so much aesthetic as moral” (9). Wharton sees much more than the physical in the shape and architecture of the cathedral:

it has cost so much in faith and toil, in blood and folly and saintly abnegation, it has sheltered such a long succession of lives, given collective voice to so many inarticulate and contradictory cravings, seen so much that was sublime and terrible, or foolish, pitiful and grotesque, that it is like some mysteriously preserved ancestor of the human race. 10-11
The vision the cathedral represents is of the work and pain it took to create it—the labor of putting human thought into brick, metal and glass. Wharton makes this connection much clearer when she describes the cathedral at Beauvais, which looks “like some climax of mystic vision, miraculously caught in visible form” (16). The thought which produced it seemed so abstract and unlikely that when put into the physical world, it caused “the panic-stricken mason” to exclaim “to the entranced creator: ‘We simply can’t keep it up!’” (16). The cathedral is the result of attempting “to render metaphysical abstractions in stone and glass and lead” which is the goal of the gothic: “the utterance of the unutterable” (17).

In reading the above passage, Maureen E. St. Laurent concludes that Wharton “sees art as a cultural product, not solely a product of individual genius” (167). She reads the texts of Italian and French culture, but believes they are “self-authored” by the community instead of a work of individual creation by a remote artist (175). In cathedrals, Wharton finds the end result of the cultivation of land, the molding of material to human thought. The object communicates abstract thought to the outside world in the form of a cathedral, or a plowed field, or a visible symbol. Wharton clearly places a great amount of importance on these representations, and it is no wonder that she focuses so much on their resulting destruction in her descriptions of France at war. The destruction of civilization is the destruction of human thought, effort, and expression, the silencing of communication and human connection. Her observations eventually led to a better understanding of the communal and individual paradox that worried her in Ethan Frome.

Much later in French Ways, Wharton provides us with a negative example of the lack of harmony between the communal and individual. She uses the images of American industry as an example of the communal overtaking individual expression (44). Her objection does not seem to be against human progress in particular, but against progress that limits itself to industry, and does not allow for artistic creation as well as for the creation of physical necessities. When describing the French countryside, or praising their daily activities, she imagines an individual farmer, weaver, or artist instead of the faceless, inartistic industrial buildings she criticizes. However, her admiration is also in the French citizens’ combined efforts that lay deep roots. In industry, she seems to recognize that though many people work together, their product does not reflect their individual or collective minds. Someone removed from its actual creation designed the product and the workers are only part of the machine that materializes another person’s idea. The factory itself reflects nothing but efficiency and speed, not the needs of the workers or those who live near it. The farmer who tills his own land shapes it to his own needs and understanding on all levels—aesthetic as well as practical. However, this reconciliation of the two seemingly mutually exclusive ideas only works for Wharton in the world of art and labor. During the war, her opinion swings even further from Ethan Frome so that instead of privileging the individual’s independence from the community, she values the loss of the individual for the good of the community.

The Effects of the Loss of Work and Wharton’s Response

The processes of work and production are symbols of order and civilization for Wharton and the war forces everything to stop. The war is a destructive force, “burying under a heap of senseless ruin the patiently and painfully wrought machinery of civilization…” (9). Her choice of words here is important: “patiently and painfully wrought.” She describes civilization as a
machine constructed from the pain of human labor—a symbol and expression of our inner collective thoughts, expelled to lay its structure over the outside world in the form of “radiating avenues” and the patterns of Paris architecture and daily life (6). French citizens built homes, businesses, and cultivated land so that these unfamiliar surfaces reflected a world ordered around their needs. According to Scarry, this is the first thing that must occur before humans may focus their creative energies on the spiritual and artistic aspects of life (262). War destroys this expression, and molds the environment according to another idea. Instead of rows of plants, bombs explode the earth into large holes, making the land uninhabitable. War destroys the product of human pain and effort. Bombs rearrange, reshape and change their expression to make it mean something new. Because of her association of architecture and human labor with abstract thought, Wharton focuses her attention on the way that war disrupts these processes as one of its most tragic aspects.

Wharton mourns the same loss of the activity of civilization in a church turned hospital during the war. It is an interesting parallel with her cathedral descriptions. The resulting contrast is impressive, and it focuses attention on the lack of motion and employment inside. Instead of the results of human effort and creation, the image is of “the sick under their earth-coloured blankets, their livid faces against the pillows” (69). As the soldiers and nurses sing “sauvez, sauvez la France,” the wounded soldiers’ “bodies in the cots never stirred” (70). Wharton reiterates the point, writing, “more and more, as the day faded, the church looked like a quiet grave-yard in a battle-field” (70). This description is in stark contrast to the activity implied by the windows and foundations of the cathedral at Chartres, which, though devoid of human inhabitants, exhibited the fruits of their labor. Instead, people fill the church at Blercourt, but besides their singing, the building remains still and idle. War has halted their normal industry, negating their means of expression and control over the world.

Part of what made the alteration of the land and materials around Wharton so important was the need for permanence during an unstable period. Wharton understands the need of permanent change in civilization, just as Scarry understands its importance in war. Her characterization of the French reveals her belief that physical and spiritual work to create permanency. The French “preserve that which has been slow and difficult in the making” (31). Objects such as cathedrals, that take the most and the longest amount of labor, increasing the pain of creation, are the things the French value most. Wharton reveres farming and architecture because they are the result of layers of effort from generations of French men and women who did not destroy what came before them, but used it to continue to build. Wharton combats the newly emerging modern sense of progress, of plowing over tradition to move on to something newer and therefore better. This sense of faith in progress people placed in technology and in society arrived in conjunction with the war. Progress ruled in Germany, anything new or novel was prized, and industry was taking hold (Perloff 142). In both concepts of progress, human invention and creation takes precedence, but Wharton admires what she recognizes as the French respect for the labor that came before, and their reliance on what others had created.

In French Ways, Wharton also reveals the reasons these alterations to land and the French way of daily life were so violent. In Wharton’s biased opinion, the French are more civilized partly because they have maintained continuity from generation to generation, and so they have built their culture from deeper roots. This helps the French recognize “the power of sustained effort” to succeed (92). What Wharton seems to see in the French character is the need for deep alterations to human beings and their surroundings for permanent and productive change. What she dislikes about American culture is the praise of anything new—of any kind of quick
progress, which, though it briefly changes things, does not create any kind of deep change in the human character, and therefore does not permanently alter it. She uses yet another agricultural metaphor—“only children think that one can make a garden with flowers broken from the plant” (95). The true garden and the action that results in a permanent change in one’s surroundings is the one that takes effort and endurance during the act of creation. The quick fix does not require much effort, and therefore, she seems to say, it holds less of the person within the resulting object. The world the quick fix has altered just as quickly changes back to what it was before. It does not remain shaped to the creator’s mind. In contrast, the war makes its own permanent changes. Wharton continues to dwell on the ways the war reshapes the land in Fighting France, and she sees it begin to turn the land against its inhabitants. Instead of a people closely linked with the land around them, they learn to fear it. She writes, “it was as if the earth itself were the enemy, as if the hordes of evil were in the clods and grass-blades” that before had been safely molded and made to grow food (110). The war has successfully altered the familiar, and made it unsafe: the enemy. Wharton is particularly horrified by this transformation, as it seems to turn the Frenchman’s own mind against him.

Her fear of losing the power of expression and the power to alter the world around her leads Wharton to dwell on the ways the war eliminates those powers for others. The faces of refugees often show up in Wharton’s descriptions in Fighting France, and in them, she reads the daily activities the war violently interrupted. She imagines them “ploughing and sowing, spinning and weaving and minding their business” before the war halted their labor like “a great darkness full of fire and blood” (34). She hints at the atrocities she sees in their faces, and reflects on the “cot in a dormitory, a meal-ticket—and perhaps, on lucky days, a pair of shoes…” that replace their lives, work, and the environment they had shaped to their minds (35). Wharton tried to bring activity and creation back to their lives.

Because of her fear and attention to these losses, Wharton focused on providing work for refugees. Wharton’s charity work and the specific forms of relief she approved help identify what she believed were the biggest problems of a nation at war. The first needs are the obvious: shelter, food, and the necessities of life. Every charity worked to give refugees these things, and Wharton’s were no exception. However, in addition, she gave work and activity to the women who came to her for help. She created a sewing room whose members produced fine lingerie along with the necessities of shirts, clothing, and hospital bandages. Wharton writes about the experience in A Backward Glance (1934). She says “we decided to try for orders for fashionable lingerie, instead of competing with the other ouvriers by making hospital supplies” (1036). Their more individualized products fall in line with Wharton’s recognition of the women’s need to shape their world familiarly. Several women had made a living making fancy clothing, and she allowed them to continue to do so. Their creations “soon became well-known” according to Wharton, indicating the way their work let them remain individuals (1036). Alan Price writes about Wharton’s charity work, claiming, “no other artist did so much to alleviate suffering among the refuges” (Wharton 219). He also includes the author’s view of her contribution, taken from an interview: “it was impossible to confine my aid to seamstresses when typists and accountants, nursery governesses and dramatic artists, cooks and concert singers were all pleading for help” (Wharton 222). Wharton clearly saw the need for employment, and identified the people she aided by their occupation. She also remembered the “concert singers” or “dramatic artists” as she incorporated the arts into several of her undertakings. She held several concerts to raise money and provide work and an outlet for performance artists, and headed the production of The Book of the Homeless (1916), which included original works by numerous
artists, and whose profits went to her charities (Wharton 224, 231).

Price points out that Wharton also provided courses for orphaned children to teach them ways to make a living and mold the physical materials around them, including woodworking, sewing, and gardening (The End x). These activities allowed them to reshape the environment the war had deformed in another image, according to another’s thought. Cynthia Wolff also recognizes Wharton’s contributions along these lines. She recognizes the work Wharton offered the displaced people of the war and points out its less obvious uses. According to Wolff, their work helped them take care of themselves, but also let them empathize with refugees by creating clothes for people who had to leave theirs behind (252). Both these accounts recognize how a simple activity becomes a way for people left helpless by the war to create some power for themselves. However, despite Wharton’s efforts the war continued to threaten the order and country she valued.

**Symbolic Idealization: the Loss of the Individual**

One of the most impressive aspects of *Fighting France* is the way Wharton tracks the transformation of individuals into crowds and masses of people who come to symbolize the idea of France and its defense. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Scarry describes this attribute of war as well, describing the way countries use the alteration of a soldier’s body through wounding and death to give their ideologies a physical and permanent representation. The dead or injured bodies of soldiers become material proof of the ideology in question (118-121). Although Wharton recognizes the process, she also approves and participates in it through the idealization of the soldiers and battle sites she encounters. The war has widened the division between individuality and community, forcing Wharton to approve the loss of individuals for the good of France. However, the difficulty of her choice is obvious in the contradictory statements she occasionally includes.

As Wharton walks the war-darkened streets, she describes the way the fog and the lack of light work to diminish the individuality of the people she passes. The passage is a transition between the effect of war in Paris and the effect on towns closer and closer to the front. She passes a figure in the fog, commenting, “Man or woman? Impossible to tell till I overtake it” (30). The limited atmosphere means, “the faces one passes are indistinguishable” (30). The war first takes away their individuality, making them the same before it reshapes them into symbols. The faces of refugees reveal the process as well. Although the refugees’ “faces are unmistakable and unforgettable” they are all unmistakable in exactly the same way. They each have a “stare of dumb bewilderment” of “concentrated horror” which becomes “part of the look of Paris” (33). Later, she observes that the war “had hardened the poor human clay into some dense commemorative substance” that made them “look like memorial medals—idealized images of what they were in the flesh” (38-9). Instead of shaping the world, the war shapes these people into its own romanticized memorial. Wharton recognizes the idealization here, and seems to fight it by contrasting the memorialized faces with the more realistic, shocking faces of soldiers that are “burnt and twisted from their baptism of fire” (39). However, she even glorifies these proofs of pain by comparing them with sculptures in a museum. These war victims have first lost their individuality and then have been turned into idolized symbols of the larger group.

The loss of individuality and symbolic transformation is blatant when Wharton describes
the groups of soldiers she encounters. Wharton watches troops march in the north, and says in a tone of awe, “they seemed allegorically splendid” and “the vision of that army on the move grew more and more fabulous and epic” (140). Another characterization of troops engaged in marching exercises makes the transition from individual, real soldiers to symbolic, idealized soldiers complete. The troops “looked as black as silhouettes; and the cavalry galloping by in single file suggested a black frieze of warriors encircling […] an Etruscan vase” (171). Again, she returns to the troops in formation, riders who might have “been riding into the sunset out of some wild northern legend,” and buglers whose “call was like the call of Roland’s horn, when he blew it […] against the heathen” (176). Her eloquent description makes for an inspiring read, but reflects a severely idealized version of war. Wharton turns the formation of troops, an already significantly flattening force, into a silhouette that takes away the distinguishing characteristics of an individual soldier. They become more like the legends of history, and less like the easily harmed young men they are.

In a glorification of an ancient battle site, Wharton identifies the connections between wars past and the one she currently observes. She comes across a place in the country that had previously seen a battle, and which was marked by “wooden crosses in the fields” (108). The same site is marked by “a memorial shaft inscribed: Here, in the year 362, Jovinus defeated the Teutonic hordes” (108). The layers of history reveal the role of war, not only in French civilization, but also in all of human civilization. The marker is a sign of the necessity of remembering war, the way it inscribes itself into land and into memory, long after its scars have healed. The marker reminds those who view it that a battle altered their civilization. It serves as a physical proof of their ideology, part of which is their identification as a people who fought “the Teutonic hordes” (108). However, it does not remind us to avoid war. The memorial is not a warning, but a valuing of the battle and a reminder that war is glorious and justified. Wharton’s skillful layering of a recent battle with the ancient reminds us that WWI will have the same role as the battle did in the year 362. While Scarry focuses on the human body’s role in the memorializing of war, Wharton turns her attention to the other physical reminders of war.

Although Wharton describes the idealization and transformation of individual people into communal symbols, she also betrays her value for the individual. She does so by describing more unique acts of memorializing that allow soldiers and victims to remain visible and separate. In Fighting France, Wharton describes an “ideal batleground” of the history-books” where she happens upon a curé of the parsonage of a ruined church and the chapel he has turned into a tribute to the local fallen (114). He has constructed “candelabra on the altar […] made of ‘Seventy-five’ shells,” while “the Virgin’s halo is composed of radiating bayonets” and has generally decorated the rest with “German trophies and French relics” (114). Outside on the battlefield the man has marked and ordered the graves of the dead soldiers “with flowers and young firs,” and their “names and death dates” (115). Wharton calls him “a born collector, classifier, and hero-worshipper” who has gone from the collection of insects to collecting soldiers, “from the actual to the visionary Psyche” (115). The man has turned real soldiers into idealized legends in a way that allows his creation to stand out from all the other ideal battle sites.

Although the war has taken away his means of work and expression, the man has turned the materials of war into a means of expression. The symbols of religion are now made from the symbols of war—shells, bayonets, which are the implements of the young men’s deaths. War is now part of the act of creation for this man. He shapes the materials of war instead of wood, soil, or stone, the materials of everyday life. The soldiers are now part of the material of war.
Instead of the individuals they were before the war, the soldiers are only individualized by their names and times of death. From afar, they are a row of graves, each marked to memorialize the memory of battle and keep the scars of war visible. The village is a small one, whose “name is not yet intimately known to history,” although “in one man’s mind it already is” (113). His creations are meant to keep the memory of war, and the village’s particular losses, present in the minds of those who view them. His actions work to keep his home individualized against the equalizing force of war, but to do so, he must turn individual soldiers into communal symbols. Each transformation requires the idealization of soldiers and war. Despite her approval of his work, Wharton accurately conveys its contradictions.

When she moves among the soldiers closer to the front, Wharton finds similar acts of creation in the “Ambulant Artisans” near the front, who create their works of art from “the aluminium of enemy shells” (127). She describes a “ring with beautifully modeled fauns’ heads” and other “trinkets” that the soldiers create, “complete in every detail” (127). The jewelers turned soldier shape the material that has shaped their lives. The bullets are objects that reflect a mind intending to inflict pain on them, but the artisans reclaim their control and use them to create decoration—something harmless, something that reflects their minds. It is a rather direct way of controlling the message behind the pain of the soldier hit by the bullet. According to Wharton, the new message is “proof of the sureness of French taste” (128). Altered by French artisans, German bullets become signs of the ideal for which French soldiers fight. These instances of individuality among soldiers and civilians show Wharton’s indecision over the same division she struggled with in *Ethan Frome*. Although the war convinced her of the necessity of a communal effort, she never entirely approves the loss.

**Doubt and Contradiction**

Wharton is often conflicted by her perceptions of war. In *Fighting France* she sees it as a horrible, unspeakable event, but also sees how it makes its participants “calm, meditative, strangely purified and matured” which it achieves by “burning them down to the bare bones of character, the fundamental substance of the soul, and shaping that substance into something so strong and finely tempered” that they serve as examples to everyone else (41). War is horrific, but also strangely beneficial to the country through the noble characteristics it inspires, and the ways the threat to one’s country solidifies individuals as they fight together. She points out, without any seeming recognition of the statements ridiculousness, that “it is one of the most detestable things about war that everything connected with it, except the death and ruin that result, is such a heightening of life” (146). She sums up the destructive forces of WWI in a parenthetical statement: “except the death and ruin that result.” Her statement reveals Wharton’s need to justify the war to herself and highlights her conflict between individual values and communal sacrifice. She tries to work out these conflicts by observing how the war changes citizens and soldiers, revealing their honor and the best sides of their character, normally hidden by the comfort of peace. Her positive view of the war often turns more toward its idealization than a more realistic vision. However, her realist tendencies remain to contradict her strange need to romanticize the war, and Wharton cannot seem to reconcile one perspective with the other.
Wharton addresses the problem directly a little further into her text. She writes that war “is the greatest of paradoxes: the most senseless and disheartening of human retrogressions, and yet the stimulant of qualities of soul which, in every race, can seemingly find no other means of renewal” (53). Later she describes the idle troops and their need for a “great adventure to rouse the blood and wing the imagination,” by which one can only assume she means fighting (125). However, only two pages later, Wharton describes her shock as she witnesses a recently wounded and healed soldier telling his officer that he was heading back to the front. By her previous description she should be happy for the young man who will soon experience the “great adventure” she had imagined before. However, she does not recognize the contradictions of her statements.

Although Wharton does not focus as much on descriptions of the actual wounded bodies of soldiers, she does give vivid expression of the ways living soldiers become symbols for their country’s ideology. They carry their potential death with them, and thus, even when alive they are the physical proof of the abstract idea. However, she does not just attribute this influence to war—civilization often seems to have a similar effect, although the results are quite different. At the beginning of the group of essays, work, industry and production are symbols of order for Wharton, signs of civilization. She refers to it as the “machinery of civilization…” (9). Far from being individuals, the people who create the civilized order of the outside world form a single machine. Although war destroys this order and the communal influence of the machine of civilization, it does so by turning individuals into masses that alter the earth in a different way. It rearranges the outside world, reshapes and changes it to make it mean something new, but still changes people into communal symbols. In Wharton’s descriptions, the work of civilization and the work of war become frighteningly similar.

Wharton’s descriptions of the similarity between war and civilization reveal Scarry’s tendency to assume certain relationships between creation and goodness that does not always exist. The war does destroy the work of expression inherent in human development, but it is also another form of that expression. In a review of Scarry’s main work of theory, David B. Morris demonstrates this assumption in her argument. According to Morris, Scarry sees creation and imagination as opposing forces against the destruction of pain, but he points out that she has assumed that the presence of imagination and creation also implies compassion for others, when it often does not (152). For example, WWI brought creations and innovations in weapons and sophisticated techniques of killing masses of soldiers. Before the ambulant artists carved them, the bullets were a creative expression of their enemy’s mind, and were created to kill French soldiers. However, Wharton does not always view war negatively.

Wharton often links aspects of war with the characteristics of civilization, giving it a positive spin. In French Ways, she attempts to explain the difference of opinion between America and France about preserving the past, pointing out that with their isolated geography, Americans have not had to fight to maintain their way of life for a long time. The French have had to fight to exist (33). Wharton makes a connection between war and civilization that is quite surprising considering how much she would eventually deplore WWI. Without having to fight for their creations, the French would not have sought out their preservation from progress, and the labor that went into their traditions would have disappeared as new labor created new objects and ways of life. Wharton seems to say that war, the force that destroys the landscape, way of life, and tradition of a country, is also the reason for its preservation. War is part of what creates the “tenderness we feel for our own effort” (37). There are interesting moments in Fighting France when Wharton reveals similar contradictions in thinking. Although she resists the
connection, she cannot help pointing out the relationship between civilization and war. Her lack of experience and use of the clichés of war make it possible for her to blur the distinction in her writing.

**Descriptions of the French Character: Against Cliché**

Her knowledge of the use of cliché and its detrimental effect on understanding and meaning make it surprising that she would use cliché in much of her war writing. The most obvious exception to her use of cliché in other works is in *French Ways*. In the book, she talks of France’s “intellectual honesty” or the courage to test and analyze ideas—to find the true meaning instead of allowing oneself to remain ignorant (57). The French acquire things slowly, and by testing every new idea—therefore, there are not as many “quick cures for mental or physical woes” (74). The French believe “that every yard of the Way to Wisdom has to be traveled on foot, and not spun over in a joy-ride” (75). The worthwhile things take work, labor, and pain for their creation. Intellectual honesty is one of those worthwhile things, and it is strikingly opposite to the cliché and propaganda of the war.

Wharton continues her assessment of French character, stating, “wherever the fear of the thing it has created survives in the mind of any society, that society is still in its childhood. Intellectual honesty, the courage to look at things as they are, is the first test of mental maturity” (58). Her description of intellectual honesty is quite close to her critiques of certain characters in her war novels, and to Arendt’s view of cliché as it is used to hide the unpleasant truth. It also indicates the importance she places on understanding the things or events around one—such as a person in pain. She points out that until “a society ceases to be afraid of the truth in the domain of ideas, it is in leading-strings, morally and mentally” (58-9). According to Wharton, the French have an understanding of the outside world because they are not afraid to find out about that world, and see the necessity of doing so. Wharton makes a distinction between moral and intellectual courage. One might be morally courageous in defending an idea, without ever having the courage to examine and question the idea. According to Wharton, “the French always want to find out first just what the conceptions they are fighting for are worth” (59). One assumes that the French soldiers knew exactly what they fought for in WWI.

Intellectual honesty involves the acknowledgment of even the unpleasant things in life. Wharton brings up the things Americans “have agreed not to mention” but which the French take as “part of the great parti-coloured business of life” (60). Remaining silent about a subject does not equal intellectual courage—those who avoid subjects keep them away from their senses and their mind by ignoring them and remaining silent. The French “are not frightened by the names of things” (62) nor, it seems, the meanings behind them. Wharton also links their intellectual courage with their acceptance of pain as a part of life, and their belief that to avoid it would also be to avoid life. Without pain, the process of shaping a world to reflect one’s mind would not be permanent.

Wharton links the recognition of pain with the French “ability to express emotion when the Anglo-Saxons can only choke with it” (67). They “have a strong enough sense of reality to understand the part that grief and calamity play in life and in art” (68). Part of America’s problem, according to Wharton, is the lack of its own art, which they had not had a chance to develop. This is linked with the development of intellectual courage. Clearly, artists have the
ability to see and interpret reality in a way that others cannot. Because France is a country of artists, according to Wharton, they have the ability to see things more acutely. Every Frenchman “has the seeing eye” and “the hearing ear” (51). Wharton claims they “are a race of artists” (52). They recognize the need to teach and develop all the senses. Therefore, they see, accept and question the outside world with intellectual honesty. This line of thought is the beginning of Wharton’s later conception of the artists’ role during war.

In his examination of Wharton’s involvement in the war, Peter Buitenhuis describes her view of the artists’ responsibility during war in *A Son at the Front*. According to him, her conclusion is that the artist must “portray the reality of war and give lasting form to transient emotions” through a deliberately maintained “detachment” from the events around him (503-4). The message is certainly clear in the novel, but her nonfiction reveals her frequent failure to avoid many of the simplifications of reality created by the war and allied governments. The manipulative power of war and cliché is evident in Wharton’s writing. She understands the importance of seeing reality clearly and analyzing ideas, but when she uses cliché she is unquestioningly prejudiced against France’s enemies.

Wharton’s lack of experience and use of cliché worked against her powers of analysis while she wrote her reports of the war. The symbols of war become more numerous and idealized as Wharton moves closer to the front. She never breaks from her role as observer, and the result seems to be a close sympathy with the soldiers and an outsider’s view of their actions, but without the benefit of personal experience that might have changed her idealization of battle. An interesting difference between Wharton’s representation of the war, and that of many other authors of the time, is her general reluctance to describe more than the faces or general characteristics of the wounded. As John T. Matthews points out, Wharton describes the destruction of buildings more than she does the destruction of human bodies. He points out that Wharton “seeks to conquer doubt, moderate conflict, redeem loss” (227). Her lack of explicit atrocities and casualties allows her to keep an idealized view of their sacrifice, and keeps it memorialized like a statue in her mind and in the minds of her readers.

**The Cause of Bias**

Because Wharton idealizes the French, it seems that she must demonize their enemies. Every noble characteristic the war unearths is on the French side of the trenches, while every atrocious, soul-killing event of war comes from the German side of the trenches. She is completely unaware that the difference in interpretation might be only a result of one’s position on a particular side of the front line. Wharton’s shock and horror, when she is not marveling over the benefits of war, were not unreasonable. Of all the allied countries, France lost the most during the war (Brosman 166). However, Wharton allowed herself to fall in with the common prejudice of the time through her characterization of Germany as a nation that was fundamentally different from the French and Americans (Brosman 168).

According to Wharton, the war is not just a random and careless phenomenon. It is the result of an equally deliberate and expressive ordering of the world. She demonizes Germany, calling the destruction of towns and French land and soldiers as “a piously planned and methodically executed human deed” (98). Both the French and Germans mold and shape the world around them, but Wharton clearly and with prejudice connects the French with productive
and creative change, and the Germans with destructive change. She does not mention the atrocities visited on the German sides of the lines, or the destructive forces that the French must have used against them as well. Neither do we see the interrupted activities of Germany; the many small towns deserted, the destroyed lives, the noble characteristics adversity brings to its subjects. In *French Ways*, Wharton refers to divisions between what we now refer to as cultures, but which she calls “races” (ix). The word choice supports her assumptions that the German and French were fundamentally different and irreconcilable, and the word helps her justify her negative representation of Germany and German soldiers in her other works of nonfiction.

The one description of a German casualty is cold and unfeeling, a surprising contrast to her compassionate and empathetic descriptions of the French wounded and dead. She describes the soldier as “a grey uniform huddled in a dead heap” and her only thought is “it was almost a relief to find it was after all a tangible enemy hidden over there across the meadow” (134). She only identifies the German soldier by his uniform. He is an object, not a cause for pity or empathy like the wounded soldiers in the church earlier. He serves only to reassure Wharton that the enemy is indeed solid and therefore just as easily shot and killed as anyone else is. The lack of sympathy for the “dead heap” of a soldier is shocking, especially when a French watcher (just as unfeeling) tells her the body had been there for several days while his friends tried and failed to “fetch him away” (134). The author who dwelt on the fierce loyalty French soldiers exhibited toward their men cannot recognize the same in the enemy, even as she describes it for her readers.

Although Wharton recognized many insights into war, she remains limited by the assumptions of others, allowing her writing to fall into false meanings and propaganda. Many have commented on her surprising lapse. Buitenhuis points out Wharton’s idealization of the French, and the resulting view of Germans as evidence that her skills were “temporarily, but fully, eclipsed by her passionate engagement in the allied cause” (497). Claire M. Tylee provides an alternate view of Wharton’s lack of objective observation. She believes that Wharton wrote “the male-heroizing” type of fiction and nonfiction for an audience that expected the male-centered style (332). Tylee believes Wharton expressed her true feelings of the war in her short fiction dealing with women’s revised roles in war (332). However, Wharton’s obvious sincerity in books like *Fighting France*, which is a testament to her desire to understand and experience the war, make it unlikely that she was only writing this way to please popular audiences and kept her true feelings in her short fiction. Buitenhuis’ assumption that Wharton completely idealized the French and sentimentialized the war in her writing is also too absolute.

Critical response to *In Morocco*, another of Wharton’s travel narratives reveals possible explanations for her lapses during this time. Stephanie Batcos sees the book as a mix of travel writing and autobiography. According to Batcos, Wharton filters her reactions to the events she experiences through comparisons with history and “creates a living monument that rationalizes, then replaces, her initial horror” (179). Wharton does something quite similar when she views her experiences of the war through epic battles. Batcos believes this shift allows Wharton to remove the event from its specific context and put it into an already idealized legend of the past. Shirley Foster reads much of Wharton’s travel writing and interpretations of Europe as her attempts to possess it as the authoritative voice, the “confident and discerning judge of true excellence” at the same time she wishes to be possessed by a foreign culture (135). Nancy Bentley recognized a similar tendency toward mastery over characters and culture in Wharton’s fiction. It is perhaps this leaning toward control over her subjects and surroundings that leads to Wharton’s shortsightedness. She takes the role of imperialist in her interpretations, and so sees
nothing wrong with a country doing the same. Her preface to *Ethan Frome* suggests the same. She writes of her narrator, “the looker-on is sophisticated, and the people he interprets are simple” (viii). Despite the respect she shows her characters, it is clear she feels her and her narrator’s minds to be superior, just as she so clearly feels French culture to be superior to German or Moroccan culture. Although it is more often that Wharton uses her control over language to reveal pain to her readers, there are times when she also uses this control to hide the pain of others when the war or other events cloud her vision.

Wharton has clear moments of insight into the war, and though she often does idealize it, she also complicates the idealization in other statements. Her reasoning is complex, and it seems that she does not always understand how to feel about the war. To apply her views to an either/or statement is an oversimplification one should avoid. Perhaps the best explanation, or the beginning of an explanation, is what Scarry describes as “the way other persons become visible to us, or cease to be visible to us” (22). For Wharton, the Germans or Moroccans did not exist in the same way the French existed, and therefore she could not recognize their pain. The rhetoric of the war manipulated the expression of the enemy into something that served the allied cause instead of making Germany understandable to those outside its borders. Thus, countries that, though different in some ways, but were alike in many more, were unable to understand each other to the point that they felt justified in the other’s death. This manipulation is part of the process of war. Although it deeply influenced Wharton’s ideas, she was still able to understand parts of the process, just as she revealed the hidden aspects of her New York society.
CHAPTER 3  
THE MARNE AND A SON AT THE FRONT: CHANGING VIEWS OF THE WAR

Wharton’s war fiction gives a more sophisticated and complex look at the concerns she developed in Ethan Frome and her war nonfiction. The Marne (1918) represents the author’s indictments against cliché and the ways it manipulates meaning. However, the story is also part of Wharton’s continued use of cliché to idealize battle. Wharton also expands her complex understanding of the processes of war that turn individuals into symbols, using her fictional characters to give a more detailed description of the contradictions between individuality and sacrifice. However, the idealization of war in The Marne undermines her criticisms of cliché and continues to allow her to avoid accurately expressing the pain of war just as it does in her nonfiction. Wharton returns to the same subjects with a clearer perspective in A Son at the Front (1923), the novel she wrote after the war. The novel further reveals the many ways cliché reduces meaning and understanding, but Wharton avoids using cliché as a way to understand the war, finally recognizing her previous lapses. As a result, the novel is also one of her most detailed representations of an individual’s pain since Ethan Frome. Finally, Wharton attempts to look back at her role as an artist during WWI, working to define her concept of an artist’s responsibilities to combat the loss of meaning. She links these responsibilities to resistance against the process of war that both destroys the physical signs of human thought and uses cliché to manipulate meaning. In her exploration of Campton’s struggles Wharton comes closest to an understanding of these processes and her role as a writer.

Chapter 3 is split into analyses of The Marne and A Son at the Front. In the first section, I look at the ways Wharton critiques the use of cliché and at how she uses cliché to idealize the war. I then follow her close understanding of the processes of war. I begin with the transformation of soldiers into symbols of France and end with the confusion that her main character in The Marne feels between individual and communal needs. In the next section, I analyze the ways Wharton’s later war novel revises her understanding of the individual and communal paradox. Then I focus on her complex understanding of cliché, which leads to her conclusion regarding artists’ tasks in combating the destructive processes of war.

The Marne

In The Marne, we see France and the beginning of the war from the perspective of an idealistic young American named Troy Belknap. Troy understands and loves the French countryside, and is well versed in the French way of life and ideology by his young tutor, M. Gantier. When the war arrives, Troy is shocked and his beloved tutor leaves to fight at the front. Frustrated because he cannot join the army at age fifteen, Troy tries to content himself by reading the papers, watching the soldiers in the streets, and hating his parents’ rich friends for their attitudes toward the war. While Troy worries over the deaths of soldiers and the fall of France, his mother’s friends worry that their pearls might be stolen, or that they will not have a chance to leave France before the Germans arrive. To them, the war is a disruption of their life.
To Troy, it is a horrible travesty, but also a chance to be a hero. While touring the site of the battle of the Marne, Troy happens upon the grave of his beloved tutor, which leaves him much more angry about the war. After returning to America with his parents, Troy views a similar attitude of self-interested excitement in the country, which slowly changes as society moves on to the next new fashionable activity. When America finally joins the war, 19-year-old Troy convinces his parents to let him go to France as an ambulance driver. There he sees the terrible changes war brought to the country, and is able to provide relief to France. However, this is still not enough for Troy, who idealizes the war as an epic event. Finally, on a trip back to the Marne, his ambulance breaks down, and Troy decides to grab a gun and join a group of American troops going to the front. Unsure what to do, Troy eventually falls in an attempt to help another soldier and wakes up in a hospital. The story ends strangely. Troy remembers that when he fell he saw his dead tutor, Gantier, standing over him before he picked him up and took him to safety. The nurses tell him that an anonymous soldier carried him, but disappeared before anyone could identify or thank him. Troy, knowing the truth, predictably vows to fight for France again.

Cliché-the Critique

In the novel, Wharton returns to the dangers of cliché as I described in Chapter 2, again anticipating Hannah Arendt’s idea that there is a “strange interdependence of thoughtlessness and evil” (288). The clichés that Eichmann and the German populace as a whole repeated to deceive themselves during WWII are quite similar to those of the American rich. Both groups make use of “a self-fabricated stock phrase […] devoid of reality” (53). Wharton uses entertainers, soldiers, the American rich and Troy to show the selfish and sometimes dangerous results of cliché.

One of the more ambiguous instances of cliché in the novel comes from Hinda Warlick, the ridiculous singer from the Midwest. Wharton uses humor to reveal the lack of meaning behind Warlick’s songs and statements. Warlick repeats the same songs and the same meaningless words that remind the soldiers of home and help them forget the war. The songs also reaffirm the simplified idea of what the soldiers believe to be their real reason for fighting and allowing their bodies to be destroyed: their country and all the ideals associated with it. In her final scene, Warlick has had a revelation she wants to share with her admiring fans. When she first arrived in France, she believed the Americans needed to teach the French values and morality. However, Miss Warlick now knows that France is worth the fight without Americans showing the French how to live. To communicate this revelation, she breaks the spell and routine of her meaningless song by discussing the front: “They’re dying there, boys—dying by thousands, now, this minute” (297). The change in her performance is a shock of reality that highlights the meaninglessness of the songs. Instead of the lofty ideals of liberty, brotherhood, and every cliché she normally sings about, Warlick focuses on the more unpleasant realities of war. However, Wharton undermines the singer’s sincerity. After her speech, Warlick promptly returns to her clichés, thinking she has infused them with truth by talking about her experiences at the front. In what must be a painful accent, she exclaims “Veer la France!” and “the Marsellaze!” (298). Her comedic mispronunciations undermine her serious statements. The
error also brings our attention to the clichéd nature of the statements themselves and Warlick’s absurd attempt at sincerity.

In the charities, the barrier between the young Americans and the foreign refugees allows relief workers to ignore the meaning behind the refugees’ words. Although the refugees words are not meaningless in their mind, the Americans twist them into clichés, and view them as repetitions on the same theme they hear everyday. The differences in culture and language block understanding, as evidenced in the speed with which the Americans talk and how they pepper confused refugees with questions without listening to their answers. At one point, the mother of Troy’s old tutor, Madame Gantier, is in the clutches of an American woman whose “quick questions put her back and she had to begin all over again” (286). The length and care of the French woman’s explanations are contrasted with the quick questions from the American who did not even try to understand her responses to the first questions. The lack of understanding allows the young American, in France to “help” the war effort, to use the woman for her own needs.

The American rich in Paris serve as similarly silly examples of reliance on stock phrases. However, their repetitions are much more self-serving than Warlick’s use of song. Wharton portrays rich Americans as selfish and unable to see beyond their own discomfort and inconvenience. Troy’s disgust of their attitude toward the war is quite clear. He describes their appearance with “their jewel-boxes clutched in one hand, their passports in the other” (267). He believes they “regard the war as a mere background to their personal grievances” (266). They have also appropriated the language meant to help victims of the war and use it self interestedly. They are “keeping up a kind of continuous picnic on the ruins of civilization” (273). While they do not share France’s ideologies and wish to maintain their neutrality, they also feel the tug of responsibility. They have to create a way to believe they have morals. They do this through repetitive stock phrases and terms that cycle through the group. Once they are unable to leave the country, they complain that they “really spent enough money in Europe for some consideration to be shown us” (267). Once out of danger, they tell their friends “why, I just simply stayed in Paris…Not to run away was the only thing one could do to show one’s sympathy” (267-8). Later, when she receives praise for staying in Paris, Troy’s mother says, “we all owe so much to Paris […] I’m sure we can none of us ever cease to be thankful for this chance of showing it” (269). The ridiculousness of their self-serving statements finds emphasis in the sense of repetition Wharton gives to them. The phrases have clearly become part of their war vocabulary, despite (or because of) their inaccuracy.

Later it is quite clear that Troy understands the war only through cliché. Wharton layers his speech with contrived phrases that increase the closer he gets to the front. His inexperience and belief in the overused phrases eventually leads him into danger. When Troy drives his ambulance to the front during the second battle of the Marne, he connects with the American soldiers through the clichéd songs and exchanges. He finds comfort in the songs that glorify war without retaining any meaning. However, the songs and exchanges also reignite his drive for glory and battle, causing him to jump on the truck with them. His clichés were powerful and tempting when he was looking over an empty battlefield, but they soon become dangerous once he finds himself actually in the war. After years of idealizing soldiers from afar, Troy is now one of them and soon discovers the uselessness of his clichés. As the truck drives him closer to the front, he frantically tries to remember “snatches of military lore” and “odd bits of professional wisdom” that could show him what to do in the midst of the battle (303). In his fear and inexperience, he calls up the clichés of war and fighting, trying to find meaning in them. Later,
to help himself stop thinking about his fear he begins to chant, “‘We’re going toward a battle, […] toward a battle’” but realizes it has no meaning to him (303).

As Troy runs out of platitudes, he begins to think about his actions differently. He realizes that he deserted his ambulance, his job, and the suffering people who needed him. His guilt leads him to act rashly, and he volunteers for a dangerous scouting mission, telling himself “that the one chance to wash his guilt away” was to get into the midst of battle (305). The clichéd phrase, “wash his guilt away,” allows him to put a positive spin to it in his mind (305). After thinking the phrase, Troy wonders further: “was the funny old-fashioned phrase a quotation, and where did it come from?” (305). The cliché is something he attaches meaning to, so he can take action and think of himself as a brave soldier instead of a deserter who left his responsibilities to find his own glory. During the dangerous mission, they walk through a seemingly innocent field. Suddenly, the wheat seems to jump up at them and Troy is shot. His clichés have failed to protect him. Before he was shot, he had just reassured himself that “people are always afraid in their first battle. I’m not the least afraid, so I suppose this is not a battle…” (305). It is after this bizarre reliance on cliché that what he thought was a wheat field suddenly turns into “projectiles that seemed to spring up” at them (305). What he thought was an accurate assessment of the situation was actually false, but he allowed himself to believe the cliché. Many critics have misunderstood Wharton’s deliberate use of cliché. Stanley Cooperman comments on Wharton’s willingness to “repeat every political and military cliché” (qtd in Price, End 173). Although Wharton does sometimes fall into the glorification of war, as the next section indicates, she also uses cliché deliberately to critique the loss of meaning. In these instances, Wharton skillfully shows the terrible results of Troy’s reliance on an idealized version of war, even though she is not immune to making the same mistake.

**Cliché: Sincere Use**

The ways Wharton glorifies the war through cliché are less obvious than the ways she criticizes others’ use of the meaningless words. She uses cliché in her attempt to immortalize the battles and battlefields Troy visits, the dehumanized language she uses to describe the fighting and in the way she ends the novel. The sites of battle become part of the cliché and glorification of war. These patches of land take on an epic symbolism. Troy alternates between a sense of thrilling glory and devastating, tragic loss when he visits the Marne. She describes the actual battle in metaphorical and stock phrases that work to hide rather than express the pain of wounded soldiers. Instead of men, she describes “the advance of the gray masses across the plain” (270). These “masses” “rush” and are “repulsed, returning, repulsed again, and again attacking” (270). At the end of the battle, “the batteries” are “flinging back the gray battalions from the hillside into the marshes” (270). These descriptions dehumanize their subject, avoiding references to the details of all the pain and suffering involved in being “repulsed” by the enemy (270). Wharton participates in Troy’s delusion of the glory involved in war. In another description, Wharton allows the narrator to take over from Troy’s perspective and describe the reader’s first introduction to the famous battle site. The first exclamation exalts in memorializing the battle: “The Marne—this was the actual setting of the battle of the Marne!” (270). She expands on the glorified description of battle-scared landscape where “a name of glory and woe was attached to every copse and hollow, and to each gray steeple above the
village roofs” (271). However, the land does not seem to do justice to the events that took place there, so Wharton helps to place the battle on a pedestal, to imagine “scenes of anguish and heroism” in “some Titanic background of cliff and chasm” (170). The war Wharton describes is clean and easily reduced to the neat, ordered give and take of “repulsed, returning, repulsed again” (270). Compared to the intensity of Ethan Frome, Wharton’s description of war is tame.

During Troy’s first experience of fighting at the front, we see the negative effects of his reliance on maxims and expressions to tell him what to do. However, the end of the story almost negates these lessons in its bizarre patriotism and glorification of the war. Troy awakes in the hospital, feverish and guilty about his desertion and frantically trying to learn the consequences of his actions. However, when the fever subsides, the mood shifts back to an unrealistic view of Troy’s experiences. His friend tells him “‘Battle of the Marne? Sure you were in it—in it up to the hilt, you lucky kid!’” and the narrator follows the statement with “And what a battle it had been!” (307). Suddenly Troy is a seasoned warrior instead of the scared, inexperienced ambulance driver searching his memory for every war cliché he knew for advice. Everything is right in Troy’s world: “the Germans were back across the Marne, and he had really been in the action that had sent them there!” (307). Somehow, Troy has forgotten that he did not even fire his gun during his few seconds of glory. Then Troy reveals the mysterious sighting of his dead tutor standing over him after his fall and carrying him to safety. The nurses confirm his vision when they tell him that a soldier brought him in, but had disappeared before anyone could learn his name. An “emotional nurse” tells him “You must just devote the rest of your life to trying to find him” (308). Troy agrees, and vows, “he would do it on the battle-fields of France” (308).

Wharton ends the novel by returning to her glorification of war. Troy returns to his earlier reliance on cliché and his idealization of the war that had put him into such a dangerous position before. Troy vows to fight again instead of gaining a more complex understanding of the effects of war and the ways cliché simplifies those effects.

### The Process of War

Despite her reliance on glorified descriptions of war, Wharton complicates her observations of the ways war destroys the objects of civilization and the individual that she began to uncover in her nonfiction. Many of Wharton’s fictional observations of wartime France further reflect Elaine Scarry’s theories of pain, language, and power. Wharton’s treatment of the war and the youth who fight it greatly expand the understanding of the need for physical representations of ideology when something threatens a country or government. Their loyalty and willingness to die for a concept reflects Scarry’s identification of the need to represent and give proof of a spiritual, intangible ideology. The soldiers’ bodies and injuries, and the ruined towns, structures, and land become the physical manifestation of the idea of France.

She describes not only the physical destruction, but also focuses on its cultural meaning. The death of the physical landscape equals the death of the French way of life and their shared ideology. Her imagery places French ideology next to the wounds and deaths of the soldiers and the country, giving the abstract representation in the physical bodies and buildings. Wharton continues the ideas she began in her nonfiction and their anticipation of Scarry’s belief that it is necessary to give an abstract idea a physical presence in the world that people can understand. Troy associates the countryside with his tutor and the cultural ideas and ideals he taught him.
Instead of the images of people, towns, and houses visible in daily French life, Troy sees them turned inside out, ruined by war. It is clear that Wharton is still most concerned about the harm war does to the intangible, for which the tangible ruins of houses and people are representative. When Troy reads that the Germans took Gantier’s village, he fills his description of his memories with all the symbols that represent France, placed alongside the news of its destruction (265). Troy links France’s culture with the land and its ruin with the ruin of the soldiers just as Wharton does in her nonfiction. He describes “the great stretch of desolation spreading and spreading like a leprosy over a land so full of the poetry of the past, […] added to the crueler vision of the tragic and magnificent armies that had failed to defend it” (267). When he visits the battlefields with his mother, he realizes that “this was what war did! It emptied towns of their inhabitants as it emptied veins of their blood; it killed houses and lands as well as men” (270).

In The Marne, Wharton’s attention to the process of war reveals her fascination with the way it creates a symbolic object out of an individual soldier. Troy translates the devastation of the French landscape to that of the “motionless young bodies” which “must have the same unnatural look as these wan ruins, these gutted houses and sterile fields” (270). The switch indicates a direct link between place, people, and ideology, with the dead bodies of the soldiers, making their belief in those ideals permanent, proving their belief and dedication. Their still bodies make France’s ideology physical, gives it proof that it exists and that it is worth defending at even the cost they paid. Gantier’s grave links the sacrifice he made with his and Troy’s love for the idea of France. The freshly dug graves around him hold various inscriptions that link the soldiers’ death with France and the ideology their death helped preserve. Those without names are the most significant, as their owners are no longer individuals, but part of the larger effort, the larger ideology. On their graves, Troy reads “the date of the battle, with ‘Pour la France’ or ‘Priez pour lui,’ but on others names and numbers had been roughly burnt into the crosses” (271). Wharton also begins the story with a dedication, similar to the grave stone messages, for a dead soldier “who died for France” (261). Her dedication, and the often sentimental, clichéd language she uses add to these repetitious phrases linking French ideology with the physical representations of it. The existence of the book and its dedication link a soldier’s death with the country and intangible ideals that gain strength in the minds of people like Troy as the deaths and injuries of the men give them a physical representation.

To further make her point, Wharton contrasts the American attitude of neutrality with Troy’s new knowledge of war. When Troy and his mother arrive in America after the war begins, he notices a “fundamental unawareness of the meaning of the war” (273). The Americans do not see the need to back up the ideas and the soul that makes France what it is beyond environment and buildings and people. This attitude frustrates Troy, who understands the need to die for the spiritual and give it a physical representation. The money the American rich give is impermanent. While money might aid the suffering, it does not contribute to the effort to memorialize the war, or to the proof of an abstract France. It is only when Germany attacks America’s spiritual ideals that they understand this need and join the war.

The contemplation of the workings of war lead Wharton to return to the conflict between individuality and community which runs throughout Ethan Frome and her nonfiction. Wharton uses America as a detailed example of the transition from individual to communal symbol. When America enters the war, the American soldiers retain their individual identity until they begin fighting at the front. At first, the war turns them into symbols of their country. Americans soldiers fight for the American way of life, even though the battlefield happens to be in France. Their bodies and faces represent and make real American ideology, not that of France. The
American soldiers and nurses even plan to civilize the French and teach them American ideals and values. They want to change France’s ideology, and their rescue almost turns into a spiritual attack on the French. The Americans believed that “this was Liberty’s chance to Enlighten the World” (282). However, once they start for the war, Troy notices a change in attitude. Now they are “a force inexorable and exhaustless, poured forth from the reservoirs of the new world to replenish the wasted veins of the old” (290). They no longer represent a specific country for Troy, but simply a force against the same enemy the French fight. They are not separate, but mingled with France’s effort and soldiers, as the blood metaphor implies. As soldiers, the Americans lose their individuality, their specific complaints, and become part of the larger whole as they move closer to the front.

Because Wharton avoids any sustained, direct observation or expression of these soldiers’ pain, she is able to justify the process that eliminates their individuality as a necessary result of defending France. Individual meaning is lost, and a general, collective meaning takes its place. Troy both longs for and resists the loss of his individuality his uniform causes. He understands that “it was something—it was a great deal—to be even the humblest part, the most infinitesimal cog, in that mighty machinery” (292). However, Troy resists the sameness and the sacrifice of individuality that his role requires, wishing to be part of the action “at this turning point of history” (293). He wants the glory that comes from standing out as a hero among the sea of uniforms. However, his desire for individuality mixes with his desire to save France and fight with other soldiers to do so.

Wharton understands the pull between individual recognition and communal effort as well as of the results of cliché. Therefore, it is difficult to understand her justification and idealization of the war. Although she pokes fun at characters like the rich Americans and the young American singer, she also approves Troy’s desire to fight for France. Wharton questions the clichés she is able to see past, but makes use of others in her descriptions of war. Part of her reliance may have come from her lack of experience, which both Anne M. Fields and Julie Olin-Ammentorp believe bothered Wharton. Olin-Ammentorp shows how “Wharton seems to have a constant, almost nagging fear of missing out on some kind of ‘real’ or ‘genuine’ experience of the war” (Not Precisely 3). Fields points out the ways Wharton makes her inexperience a central question in much of her war writing. Female authors lost much of their authority during war. Women were unable to fight alongside the men, and therefore lacked the experience people assumed was necessary to write about the war. Fields points out that while France opened up Wharton’s voice, the war worked to silence her: “it simultaneously exacerbated her need to express herself while inhibiting her ability to communicate” (5). Wharton commented, “I’m inarticulate even when I want to be most affectionately expressive” (5). A cliché depends upon the experience of another to give it meaning, and so, at a loss to describe a battle, Wharton turns to clichéd and dehumanized descriptions of fighting. However, Wharton still recognizes the empty shells of such phrases even though she makes use of them. Descriptions in The Marne like the innocent wheat field that turns into the enemy represent her self-conscious uncertainty as she describes fighting. Here she understands that she has failed to describe reality, and instead attempts to describe how cliché keeps her and Troy from understanding the complexities of fighting at the front. However, at other times in the novel she is not so self-critiquing and represents an idealized war. As in her other war writing, she exhibits piercing insight into the failings and lures of clichéd language and propaganda, but reverts to ideals and cliché when patriotism for France and shock and terror over its destruction cloud her vision. After she looks
back at the war in *A Son at the Front*, she is able to question her use of cliché and represent the war more realistically and complexly.

*A Son at the Front: “to look at things as they are”*

In *The Marne*, Wharton establishes the themes of war and its effects. She turns a more discerning and inquisitive mind to them in *A Son at the Front*, published after the war in 1923. It is interesting to note that the contemporary reception of the novel was very similar to that of *Ethan Frome*. Critics complained that the novel was published too late—or too early in some cases—and asked, “why go back to all this business of the war, so painful to experience, so wearisome to remember?” (Conde 48). Wharton seems intent on bringing up such painful subjects and examining them in ways that her contemporaries seemed to find too revealing, their subjects too unpleasant. The novel is a fascinating reflection of Wharton’s understanding of wartime France and human nature.

Wharton returns to the detailing of individual pain she began in *Ethan Frome*. However, in her later novel the perspective of a war fought and won at an incredible loss makes it impossible for her to return to the same view of individuality she expresses in the early novel. Now Wharton details the conflict between the desire to remain an individual and the need to fight as part of a group for one’s country. She no longer allows herself to idealize war through cliché. Like the French, she has learned to have “the courage to look at things as they are” (*French Ways* 58). Her look at cliché in *A Son* demonstrates an impressive understanding of the numerous ways individuals used and depended on flimsy sayings and meaningless words during the war. The basic concepts remain the same, but Wharton is careful to avoid any thoughtless use of cliché. Wharton is also much more direct in the ways she forces her readers to witness the results of cliché used thoughtlessly and manipulatively. Finally, Wharton focuses on the tasks artists faced during the war. She believes they are particularly suited to combat the loss of meaning and created objects war causes.

**The Story**

The different perspective of her narrator makes her later novel significantly different from *The Marne*. We view the war through the mind of John Campton, an American artist in Paris who is trying to keep his French-born son away from the front. Therefore, the language of battle and soldiers is less apparent here than the language and concerns of the relief effort. Wharton still condemns the self-interested rich, but gives a more complex impression of the people who remained neutral. Campton struggles with these conflicts, often in the same thought, as he loves France and recognizes his debt to the country, but also refuses to allow the war to claim his only son. Campton also recognizes the links between language, silence, and meaning. His growing experience in charity work helps him understand what suffering and the self-interested can do to falsify words. However, as a painter, Campton is not fluent with words, but he understands the deeper links between the spiritual, intangible world, and the physical world. His art becomes the means through which he understands and interprets the war and France. He
sees the “war funk,” or the spiritual effects of the war on the faces of his clients, and reproduces it, making it visible to others (5). Campton questions his usefulness and the role he should play to help others, and to help France. He wishes to do so, but never makes the link between his ability to render thought in physical, visual form, and the need to keep the spirit that is France alive. Wharton seems concerned with the role of the artist during a war, but does not allow her character to understand that role until the end.

In the novel, Campton is a divorced portrait painter, now made famous through chance, talent, and inaccessibility. His son George becomes his main concern, and is the only link between him and his estranged ex-wife, Julia, now married to a rich banker. Campton remains jealous of Julia and her husband’s links with George, but especially resents their ability to give him any amount of money or luxury he desires. Now that he is famous, Campton plans to save until he can do the same for George. However, the war breaks up his plan, claiming George and taking away most of Campton’s business. Campton turns his attentions to keeping George in safe areas, which links him with Julia and her husband. After remaining distant from the relief efforts, Campton finds himself pulled in through a dying artist soldier. Then, thinking his son is safe, they receive news that George had secretly gone to the front and had finally been wounded. Campton’s security disappears, as he fears for his son’s life, and later hopes to revive his health. As George heals, the spiritual link between them becomes clear, especially when Campton realizes he really wanted George to go fight instead of remaining neutral, despite his fears of losing him. After a short time in Paris, a fully healed George returns to the front, only to fall again almost immediately. Though still alive, he is extremely weak, and a lively celebration over America’s declaration of war overstresses him and he dies.

**Campton’s Conflict between Individuality and Community Responsibility**

In the novel, Wharton details the reasons for her eventual privileging of communal responsibilities. Campton undergoes a transformation in attitude during the progression of the war. He first completely denies any ties with others, especially his son’s ties to the French military. However, as the effects of the war increase he begins to understand the reasons behind his son’s desire to fight for France. When the war begins, Campton does not accept the French army’s assumption that he owed France anything, least of all his only son. He remains neutral, and justifies his efforts to keep George away from the front by reminding himself that George is an American citizen and therefore not responsible for the welfare of France: “after all, we’re Americans; this is not our job—“ (18). He also makes a distinction between artists and what he thinks are the common men. The war does not differentiate between the two, but the artist does, as the spiritual is more important than the physical to him. Campton does not believe a sensitive artist should have to fight; he believes the war is the job of the common man. Without realizing the effects of the war on the importance of the artist, Campton views it in out dated terms. He believes the inner quality still matters. However, in war the inner individuality loses its meaning as the physical reality takes over.

Campton’s neutrality is not surprising, once his character is clear. Isolated by choice, Campton’s “rare moments of expansiveness” find expression through his friend, Dastrey, a fiercely loyal French citizen (9). Campton finds that other people get in his way, and force him out of his inner thoughts, but he “could never wholly isolate himself in his art, nor yet resign
himself to any permanent human communion that left it out” (40). Campton cannot mix his inner world with the outer world, except in his portraits, where he only had visually to understand and interpret the only real people involved. His relationship with his son is an exception to his otherwise solitary life. He is able to view people independently as an observer, but it is the personal connection relationships require that make him avoid them. However, he and George found a spiritual link, and Campton “had waked up to the practice of that other art, he was learning to be a father” (128). However, besides his link with his son, or because of it, it is not surprising that Campton vehemently denies his or George’s responsibility in France’s war. War is the most drastic, self-sacrificial event that unifies a country, which an individualistic artist is unlikely to accept. This view does not come without much self-doubt on Campton’s part. From the beginning, he questions his initial impulse to act according to his individual desires.

Campton attempts to reconcile what Wharton describes, in French Ways and their Meaning, as the American ideal of individuality and the French ideal of community and connection. According to Wharton, the French value common codes and community more than they do individuals, whereas Americans value the opposite (Bellringer 114). The two ideals have both imbedded themselves in Campton’s mind, and like Ethan he cannot find a way to value both. His first instinct is to protect his son and his own interests. However, as his understanding and experience with the war expand, and he recognizes his debt to France as his “spiritual home,” Campton begins to doubt his stance. Eventually, he comes to believe that he cannot “justify, or even make possible, an attitude of moral aloofness” (173). Not only is neutrality morally wrong for Campton, it is impossible once one understands the reasons for fighting, and the potential results of losing the war. For Wharton, the result is the loss of civilization, the annihilation of her (and Campton’s) beloved country. As Campton begins to realize the magnitude of the war, George’s whole, nearly healed body becomes a source of shame for the father. He thinks of “the invisible host of his comrades, the fevered, the maimed and the dying” (367) and believes he has not given enough in comparison to what others have. The neutral stance of America also becomes an embarrassment; especially after American ships were attacked, which gave him “the bitter taste of the national humiliation” (255). As Campton considers these conflicts, the reader gains a much more complex and complete understanding of Wharton’s view of neutrality and the loss of individual soldiers. George’s injuries and death show that Wharton does not avoid the contemplation of individual pain. She views these losses with horror, but envisions an even worse future if they do not fight against France’s enemies.

Revealing Cliché

Wharton is much more aware of the ways she presents cliché in A Son. She deliberately uncovers the dangers of its use, and the other themes of the novel do not undermine her condemnation of it as The Marne does. Wharton reveals how language often conceals and tricks its users through cliché, as well as the ways clichés control those without power, or the power of speech. Her sharp indictment of the American rich in Paris shows how they self-interestedly use language, and the appropriation of others' language and meaning. War and violence also have the power to take meaning from language, which allows some to recreate the meaning behind phrases and words for their benefit. However, her insights show her the possibilities of relief from suffering through the honest use of speech and acknowledgement.
Wharton critiques the deliberate and thoughtless uses of cliché behind the lines of battle in more detail. Much of the deliberate manipulations of language Wharton describes here came from her own experience with the American Red Cross. She knew first hand the dangerous effects of self-interestedness (Price, Edith Wharton 129). Much of the power of characters like Mayhew and Mme. De Dolmetsch comes from their skillful use of language and their ability to use clichéd words and phrases to their advantage. When used deliberately, people can take advantage of the lack of meaning behind a phrase and use it to deceive others and conceal the truth. The characters in Wharton’s novel also use stock phrases unconsciously. Campton repeats phrases that justify his neutrality to himself and others. Before the beginning of the war, we learn that Campton “did not ‘believe in the war’ (as the current phrase went)” (5). This overused phrase can only make sense to people as a cliché, for if they think about its meaning they reveal its absurdity. Whether they “believe” in it or not, the war existed. However, if repeated enough times, the phrase allows the speaker to avoid thinking, therefore, Campton could “note with perfect composure its agitating effect” (6). Both uses of cliché drain the meaning out of words, hiding and twisting the truth.

Like Wharton, Campton uses clichés despite his eventual recognition of their dangers. The nature of the seemingly innocent phrases Campton uses evolves as his needs change. However, as Campton becomes more aware of the realities of the war he begins to return meaning to the empty words. After three months of the war, the clichés move from directly denying the reality of the war to hiding it in more covert ways. According to Campton, “people were already beginning to live into the monstrous idea of it, acquire its ways, speak its language, regard it as thinkable, endureable, arrangeable fact” (111). They accept the reality of war as they move on with their every day lives, and through the repetitive language of the war, the meaning of it escapes them. Words that pretend to describe the war such as “the front,” and “trenches,” only hide their realities behind meaningless representations. The title of the book becomes a cliché as well, and Campton often repeats it to himself in horror at the idea, or in relief that George is not at the front. The language of the newspapers also reduces the reality into meaningless words such as “successfully repulsed,” “taken back,” “Progress,” “advancing,” “occupied,” and “reoccupied” (118). Each of these words puts the battles and the actions they describe in clean, safe, and unrealistic terms. Each word cannot carry the weight of what it means that the Germans had reoccupied a region, or that the French repulsed an attack. These realities remain hidden behind the conventional language of the newspapers. Campton alone is able to look past many of these clichés to the real meaning behind them. It is through him we understand that “Fallen on the Field of Honour” actually means, “young faces blotted out in blood, young limbs convulsed in the fires of that hell called ‘the Front’” (119). Although he falls under the spell of the clichés that serve his purpose, he slowly begins to see through many of the false representation of others.

Harvey Mayhew, Campton’s cousin, and the overly verbal survivor of a German prison, is the worst example of cliché used for self-serving purposes. He seems to begin innocently enough, as he tells Campton his unfortunate story. Finally, he indicates his intention “to collect the experiences of other victims of German savagery. Mr. Mayhew, in short, meant to devote himself to Atrocities” (141). His first intentions are to persuade people about the need to fight the Germans. However, as he repeats his story and others like it, they evolve into a performance that, although it convinces people to donate lots of money, mostly serves as a way for Mayhew to gain attention and power among the social elite of Paris. He does not know how to use the money and gives it to other charities. Campton finds that his cousin’s appeals are very effective,
as “doors […] flew open at the sound of Mr. Mayhew’s trumpet” and he left people “bedewed with emotion” and their pockets emptied (174, 175). Mayhew grows increasingly ridiculous as his fame and prestige rise, although most do not recognize it. He is so popular, the rich ask him to speak at their charity parties, and it is at one that Campton sees Mayhew at his most clichéd. A woman “leaned in an attitude of affliction” as he orated his atrocities and “without changing her attitude,” she “sang a few notes of lamentation” (202-3). Eventually Mayhew uses his power easily to take control of a war charity run by Campton’s friends. In attempting to defend his friends, Campton gives up after realizing that nothing he can say will be as persuasive as Mayhew’s speech, even though Campton speaks the truth and Mayhew distorts it. Mayhew has taken the realities of other peoples’ suffering, and molded it so that it no longer resembled the truth, using the same process as Scarry’s torturer who speaks for and misrepresents the prisoner, altering language so that it becomes the regime’s language. Mayhew’s actions seem harmless next to those of the torturer in Scarry’s example, but his manipulations work similarly. He uses the stories of the atrocities of war to give himself power.

**Conclusion: The Loss of Meaning and the Artists’ Role**

Wharton’s understanding of the destruction of meaning and created objects leads her to identify artists as particularly necessary to combat the less obvious losses of war. Artists are skilled at the representation of inner thought or feeling in an outward form. They translate abstract thought into understandable forms of communication that allow people to recognize the idea or feeling. A successful artist also has access to large groups of people and the ability to influence them. However, an unskilled or deceived artist quickly falls into cliché and false meaning as Wharton did in her earlier writing. Artists have the power, as language does, either to soothe or deny another’s suffering.

Campton and his friend Dastrey understand and worry about the loss of meaning, but neither knows how to fight the loss. Dastrey believes that “the meaning had evaporated out of lots of our old words” (187). The war changed the meaning behind words, but this did not necessarily change the common understanding of them. Even an intelligent man such as Dastrey cannot fully define a word like honor during war, and so for society as a whole, the meaning is so lost, they do not realize it is gone. They continue with the assumed meaning, while opportunists use the lack of meaning and these misconceptions to their benefit. Campton begins to work against these problems, but still views his art as useless while his son and others fight at the front. Campton becomes increasingly concerned about the useful work others put into the war effort, and his uselessness as an artist. As detailed in the previous chapter, Wharton saw the need for relief in the form of work as well as the basic shelter, food and care. Many of the charities she set up provided refugees or other unfortunates with training and work (Price, *End 16, 29*). Campton sees the same process at work in the comments of his suffering friends who find comfort in their work. Work allowed the relief workers and citizens unable to fight at the front to put their suffering into something creative.

Wharton details her solution to the problem in a return to the focus of her nonfiction war writing. She looks again at work as a form of the inner thoughts turned outward and the relationship between the spiritual and the physical. When Campton works on his portraits, he constantly gazes and reads faces, whether at work, or walking the streets. He can see the effect
of the war in their faces, and it is often this effect he records in his portrait. As an artist, Compton understands how to visually represent another’s inner knowledge, or an abstract ideal such as France or the war. In his translation, Campton also interprets events and ideals. Much like the battlefield and the dead bodies of soldiers render the ideologies of France in physical terms, Campton translates them in his paintings of soldiers. The Brants also sense this function when they urge Campton to memorialize George with a statue. Campton resists at first. He wishes to keep his spiritual connection with his son in his mind, but a friend explains to him that the Brants have never had that connection. All they have had was the physical connection, and Campton can translate the spiritual into the physical statue. As an artist, Campton makes the elusive meanings of the war manifest in a visual, understandable way. He has the ability to move away from the thoughtless phrases and representations of war that others rely on to satisfy their own needs. Wharton works to do the same in her writing.

Wharton’s solution to the artists’ problems and roles during WWI is linked with the issues that she detailed in Ethan Frome, expanded and struggled with in her nonfiction war writing, and finally resolved in the progression from The Marne to A Son at the Front. Ethan reflects a concern over the individual struggles with suffering and the ways language hides and controls pain. Wharton’s sympathies are with Ethan and his thwarted desires for individuality and independence from his communal responsibilities. She portrays the community as limited by their lack of language and manipulative in the ways they turn Ethan into a symbolic representation of their ideology. Wharton’s views of the individual/communal conflict change as she begins to write during WWI. Instead of the focus on the individual, she approves the way France’s youth become part of a larger collective force. However, her approval wavers, and it is not until A Son that she is able to finally reconcile the loss of individuality with the need to fight communally. She demonstrates a similar struggle between the critique of cliché and the use of cliché in her writing. In each of the works discussed, Wharton shows her understanding of the false and meaningless nature of cliché, but when the war begins, she falls into its use to describe what she saw and imagined. The devastating event kept her from maintaining a critical view of the war and her role within it. Once she regained a distanced perspective, Wharton returned to the subject with a clear view.
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