2006

Mary Johnston, Discoverer, and Edith Wharton, Citizen in a Land of Letters

Rhonna Jean Robbins-Sponaas
MARY JOHNSTON, DISCOVERER, AND EDITH WHARTON, CITIZEN IN A LAND OF LETTERS

By

RHONNA JEAN ROBBINS-SPONAAS

A Dissertation submitted to the Department of English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Degree Awarded:
Summer Semester, 2006

Copyright © 2006 Rhonna Jean Robbins-Sponaas All Rights Reserved
The members of the Committee approve the dissertation of Rhonna Jean Robbins-Sponaas defended on 28 March 2006.

Dennis D. Moore  
Professor Directing Dissertation

Elna C. Green  
Outside Committee Member

Anne E. Rowe  
Committee Member

W. T. Lhamon, Jr.  
Committee Member

Approved:

Hunt Hawkins, Chair, Department of English

The Office of Graduate Studies has verified and approved the above named committee members.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When I first began this project, I did so with the intention of focusing on Edith Wharton. My reasons were varied and many, but not the least of those was that I find the “bridge” period of American literature—that period between the usual academic divisions of early American and modern American literature—particularly interesting. As a writer working in the craft today, the period of turning and shaping what had come before into the foundation of what we have now fascinates me. A second reason was that Wharton was, in her own way, a pioneer in both the industry and the craft, and I was intrigued by her achievement. She was an unusual woman doing the unexpected during a time when conformity was the rule rather than the exception and writing was a still often considered a less than socially acceptable occupation for a woman.

As I began to delve deeper into the subject, however, I found myself with a heartfelt itch to complicate my subject matter with an area I had made a point of including in my earlier studies: the literature of the American South. The problem, of course, was that I was not entirely certain how to go about doing that. I felt rather like a kid who had been handed a fifty-dollar bill and turned loose in a Willy Wonka-style chocolate factory; the choices were overwhelming. For inspiration, I turned to my ever-tolerant outside committee member who just happens to focus on the South—Dr. Elna Green of the Department of History with The Florida State University. In her usual graceful and non-directive fashion, Dr. Green pointed me toward separating the toffees from the creams and I came away with a reminder of a writer I had already touched upon under her direction. For that creative nudge I shall always be grateful. The journey I have taken since then has been a challenging one, but one I value greatly.

I knew little about Mary Johnston when I began the project, and was not entirely certain that I could find enough material about this lesser known writer, particularly given that I was trying to gather that material from overseas. Had I known about the difficulties inherent in conducting research on a little-researched American subject from half a world away, I do not
honestly know that I would have pursued it. Certainly I would have approached the task much differently, but the advantages of hindsight are indeed many. Without the benefits of that knowledge, however, I plodded my way through, stumbling over language barriers, differences in educational systems and library formats, copy and loan costs increased in proportion to the increased distance, and a sheer lack of access to necessary resources. While I took a few scrapes and bruised a knee or two in the journey, I could not have reached this final destination without the aid of a host of helping hands along the way.

Among them I must mention first Christopher Scott Forster, a doctoral student with the University of Virginia who carefully photographed a host of primary materials in the Mary Johnston collection, then went above and beyond the call of duty by noting peculiarities within the collection and deciphering library notes, coding, and file organization. Without his assistance, I would not have been able to obtain a fraction of the materials which went into this project and will be used for future projects. I owe special thanks to Gregory A. Johnson, Ann L. S. Southwell, and the rest of the library staff in the Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library at the University of Virginia for providing microfilms of Johnston’s diaries and other research aid, Lucy Patrick in the special collections of Strozier Library with The Florida State University for providing assistance with a rare Wharton text, Dr. Dale Flynn of the Edith Wharton Society for providing back copies of the *Edith Wharton Review*, Dr. C. Ronald Cella for encouraging words and confirming some of my information about Mary Johnston, Anita Firebaugh for her willingness to share her own Johnston information and insight, and Katherine Stolz Barber with the Three Hills Inn for answering questions about Mary Johnston’s old home. Thanks also go to Kristin Sponaas, librarian with the Norges Tekniske-Naturvitenskapelige Universitet (NTNU) at Dragvoll in Trondheim, Norway—and her colleagues—for her immeasurable help in obtaining those resource materials which could be obtained within the Scandinavian system. I owe a special word of thanks to Kjell Erik Pettersson for allowing me after-hours access to the Stjørdal library and his carefully tended microfilm reader in order to read the Johnston microfilms.

Special thanks go to my committee for their quiet support—even when I am certain they wondered whether I had fallen off the planet. While Dr. Dennis Moore performed as key
administrative contact, Dr. Anne Rowe, Dr. Rip Lhamon, and Dr. Elna Green stood ready to provide feedback, guidance, and encouragement through the usual messy chaos that comes with writing a doctoral dissertation. Nor, however, may I forget Dr. Rick Straub, who began the journey with us but, because of a tragic accident, was not able to be here at the end. He has indeed been missed.

Last, and far from least, I owe a special thanks to my friends, family, and husband. Wendy McLallen and Elizabeth Trelenberg—both of whom understand the peculiar obstacles associated with distance and isolation—and I formed our own support group and shared resources, anxieties, and small triumphs. Dr. Jason Nolan provided server space and answered software questions for a dissertation blog in order to make that sharing process simpler. Most especially, my mother and stepfather have shipped pound upon pound of books and research materials to me, and a more thoughtful receiving and shipping point one never had. My husband has endured the usual burdens that come with having a spouse in another country for semesters at a stretch, has uncomplainingly mended computers and software to provide me with the necessary tools, served as chauffeur between libraries and home, fetched one mail parcel of books and resources after another, provided meals during critical periods, all even while I am certain he sometimes wondered—as did I—if the goal would ever be achieved. To all of them, I am eternally grateful for their faith and confidence, and their never-ending support.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ..................................................................................... viii

I. INTRODUCTION ........................................................................ 1

The Environment ....................................................................... 1
The Writers ................................................................................. 9
A Brief Overview of Works and Writing History ....................... 11
Current Status of Both Writers and Academic Resources .......... 14
Project Scope ............................................................................. 22

II. BIOGRAPHICAL OVERVIEW: LIFE AND WORKS .................... 26

Edith Wharton
Family and Background ................................................................. 26
Childhood and Education .............................................................. 30
Travel and Marriage .................................................................... 33
Writing Identity: Citizenship in a Land of Letters ....................... 37

Mary Johnston
Family and Background ................................................................. 43
Childhood and Education .............................................................. 45
From Teens to Adulthood ............................................................. 46
Writing Identity: Discoverer in the Realms of my own Being ........ 49

III. A CASE EXAMPLE: AUTHORIAL IDENTITY AND WHARTON'S “WRITING A WAR STORY” .................................................. 55

IV. WAR WRITINGS ................................................................. 75

Edith Wharton ........................................................................... 75
Book of the Homeless ................................................................. 76
Fighting France ....................................................................... 80
The Marne .............................................................................. 85
A Son at the Front .................................................................... 89
On the Periphery ...................................................................... 91

French Ways and their Meaning ............................................. 91
“The Refugees” ....................................................................... 92
V. SOAP BOXES AND STUMP PREACHERS: WOMEN ABOUT WOMEN ............ 108

The Messengers: Personal Perspectives ............................................. 108
The Messages: Applied Perspectives and the Written Word .................... 124

VI. A CASE EXAMPLE: PERSONAL CONVICTION AND JOHNSTON’S
THE WANDERERS ........................................................................... 134

An Overview: The first “third” ....................................................... 137
The second “third” ................................................................. 140
The last “third” ......................................................................... 150

VII. CONCLUSION ........................................................................ 157
Looking Back ........................................................................... 157
Looking Forward ...................................................................... 161

APPENDIX .................................................................................. 165

NOTES ....................................................................................... 166

WORKS CITED ......................................................................... 182

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH ............................................................ 193
ABSTRACT

This text focuses on Edith Wharton and Mary Johnston, with special emphasis upon the latter writer. Both Johnston and Wharton were actively writing during the same period, although in different parts of the world. Wharton spent most of her professional career writing from Europe, particularly France, and carried her Old New York heritage with her until she died. With the exception of short periods in New York, Johnston remained close to her childhood home near Warm Springs, Virginia, and considered herself very much a Southerner. While they shared a common goal in most of their writings—that of influencing their audience and generating change—their methodology differed radically. In essence, they operated from opposite ends of the writing spectrum. The majority of Wharton’s texts fall under what we today classify as literary fiction, but Johnston’s writings crossed a number of genres, including but certainly not limited to historical romance, historical adventure, and historical fiction. A large percentage of her writings fall within the scope of sentimentalism and romance literature, genres Wharton typically made a point of avoiding. This text provides a critical discussion of the two women’s war writings, an overview of their work, and an in-depth analysis of Edith Wharton’s “Writing a War Story” and Mary Johnston’s *The Wanderers*. It considers the two women as they attempted to influence the world around them via their writing, and how their respective identities are reflected in their texts.
I. INTRODUCTION

The Environment

At the time when Mary Johnston and Edith Wharton were active, the nature of writing in America was undergoing drastic change. While Hawthorne’s “damned mob of scribbling women” (Reuben) may have held sway in the publishing industry prior to the mid-1800’s, they lost considerable ground toward the turn of the century. Nina Baym notes that close to half of the literature published by Americans in the period between the War of 1812 and the Civil War was written by women. It is certainly the case that, in its own time, this writing was taken seriously and women writers were respected as well as successful. Their subsequent removal from the record is part of the literary history of a later day when exponents of various literary movements—especially post-Civil War realism and post-World War I modernism—found it convenient to allegorize women authors as exemplars of all that was wrong with literature, all that the new writers were committed to correcting and erasing. (305)

Increasingly realism, especially that which was espoused by William Dean Howells, took center stage and women’s writings, which included sentimentalism, regionalism, and romance, were pushed further into the wings. If the leaders of the writing community determined that “realism” was based on scientific observation and logic—terms which they typically described as masculine—then women had no place in the new market because, after all, such mental endeavors were foreign to their natures and dispositions. Based on that definition of realism, society did not expect women to be in touch with or have any true understanding of “reality” since that reality existed outside the home and, therefore, outside the feminine sphere.¹ That which was inside most women’s worlds, even those who were able to successfully combine
public and private personalities and endeavors, was simply not “real” in the more masculine
global sense of the term. If “realism” was the craft of portraying that which was “real,” and
portraying it realistically, how, then, could women write in this new genre? That they tried to
compete is not in question, but by the turn of the twentieth century, there were considerably
fewer women writers, and even fewer who were able to compete outside of the more “feminine”
sentimental, romance, or historical romance genres. Edith Wharton was one of those, and the
attitude about women’s writings greatly informed and helped shape her own. In short, she
determined that she would not be one of those scribbling women, but rather that she would be
one of those who would “save fiction in America” (Letters 445).

Mary Johnston occupied the other side of the literary house and held court in the space
that Wharton preferred to avoid. She was, perhaps, something of a throwback to the period and
style of writing Wharton was determined to fix. While she had no intention of finding herself
lumped into Hawthorne’s petticoated mob, the majority of her works are exactly what the late
nineteenth- or early twentieth-century critic was labeling “feminine” and therefore rejecting.
Interestingly, historical fiction is very much a socially and academically accepted genre today;
fictional novels set during World War I, for instance, carry no truly negative stigma. Historical
romance, however, is part of popular romance, and suffers the same denigration as the rest of that
genre. For a solid introduction to the origins of historical romance, see George Dekker’s The
American Historical Romance. Dekker begins the text by confirming that the historical romance
was and continues to be popular to such an extent that “[n]o other genre has even come close to
the consistent popularity enjoyed by historical romances from The Spy in 1821 down to Gone
with the Wind and Roots in recent times” (1). He then continues his discussion of the
development of the genre in terms and concepts which Johnston would have recognized, but may
not necessarily have agreed with. He begins by noting that Sir Walter Scott created the genre (1)
with stories such as Waverly, Rob Roy, and Ivanhoe, and that historical fiction bases itself in a
historical place or moment in time. For Dekker, “historical” is a flexible and practical measuring
stick since “[f]or a fiction to qualify as ‘historical,’ what more can be required than that the
leading or (more to the point) determinative social and psychological traits it represents clearly
belong to a period historically distinct from our own?” (14) While Dekker and most scholars
argue that the Scott tradition heavily endorses historical accuracy in the text, they also seem to give writers a fair amount of flexibility, and Johnston might have found that maneuvering room disconcerting. For instance, Dekker determines that in order to avoid an over-abundant use of imagination, “historical romancers use various tactics, often in combination, of two basic kinds. First, they appeal to certain widely accepted and even ‘scientific’ explanations of reversions to type, of ‘repeats’ in history. Second, where the recurrences involve departures from historical probability or natural law too wide to be covered by such explanations, historical romancers so manipulate point-of-view or testimony that only a provisional faith is required of their readers” (336). In other words, while the writer’s goal is to remain truthful to the period, event, or place, she has the freedom to manipulate any of those elements in order to produce a stronger story, provided she does so believably. The moment the reader can no longer suspend disbelief, then the historical fiction fails; it loses its historical foundation and becomes simply fiction.

Emily Budick tackles that sense of flexibility at its root by approaching the genre from the perspective that history is a memory vulnerable to personal interpretation and outside influences, but that “[i]n the tradition of American historical romance even a world remembered is still inarguably a world. What distinguishes the historical from the fictive imagination is that historical consciousness trains its subjectivity on a world that is, at whatever remove, decidedly not its own creation and not a replication of itself. In historical romance the reality of the past is verifiable through agencies outside the single perceiving self. What the self imagines, therefore, must always meet the test of someone else’s evidence” (ix).

For Johnston, “meet[ing] the test of someone else’s evidence” was a critical consideration, and the reason why she spent an intensive period researching her story backgrounds, particularly for her two Civil War novels. While she presented her texts with some degree of bias, she made sincere efforts to also present them honestly and with accuracy. As some critics have noted (e.g., Robert Lively), sometimes the faithfulness to the accuracy of history became a weakness in the creative development of the story itself.

To some extent, Johnston represents the battle between the modern literary critic and the reading public. Romance and sentimental fiction have never truly gained critical acceptance; while it has become acceptable to study sentimental novels, academic tendency is still to consider
these works inferior. The problem is that one must clearly define what that means. They are inferior to what? To what purpose? In what way? To what other writings? In what context? The answer, of course, is that they have historically been judged, largely by scholars, according to a predominantly white male canon of literary fiction and, Susan Harris suggests, devalued according to those standards (44). It is not, however, strictly an academic perspective. Literary fiction writers since the advent of the concept of literary fiction (perhaps more clearly since the advent of realism) have derided genre writers in similar terms; literary authors and critics have typically considered genre “easy” to write, fluff, and poor quality in both craft and content, while they have considered literary fiction complex, more finely crafted, and rich with many nuances of meaning. For their part, genre writers have replied that they prefer to write “real” fiction which is accessible to and useful for the common man rather than “lit-ra-choor” which may have great prose but no point. While the two have not merged, at least there are signs of a growing recognition within the writing communities of both the strengths and weaknesses of both types of creative writing. Genre writers are increasingly creating richly developed characters, and literary fiction writers are remembering that a story in which something actually happens—a story which has a plot—is more likely to hold the reader’s interest as well as make the text marketable to a much larger population. Only in the past decade or two have academic programs begun to include studies of non-literary fiction texts, such as detective fiction and science fiction. Interestingly, while Mickey Spillane, Captain Kirk, and Buffy the Vampire Slayer have made their debut into the university classroom, the romance genre still places as a sort of “also ran” in the critical world and has come to show a sharp demarcation along gender lines in its reading population. While both men and women read Johnston’s romances, the readership for contemporary romances is largely women. Despite the shift in demographics, the reasons for reading romance today may well echo the reasons Johnston’s readers might have offered in the early 1900s, including escapism, voyeurism, an introduction to different or exotic places or environments and periods of time, and exposure to new and unfamiliar language, ideas, or concepts. Cathy Davidson reminds us that scholars must keep the sentimental novel in context:

That last literary adjective [sentimental] carries, in contemporary discourse, a heavy load of negative connotations and suggests self-indulgent fantasies bearing
little relationship to real life. Yet the private and nonfunctional commentaries of the time suggest a contiguity between the sociology of the early American family and the plots of the sentimental novel that is easily overlooked by the contemporary reader. . . .

The sentimental novel spoke far more directly to the fears and expectations of its original readers than our retrospective readings generally acknowledge. Conveniendy divorcing the novel from the social milieu in which it was originally written and read, recent critics easily condemn as clichéd and overdone the plight of the assailed, sentimental heroine hovering momentously between what seems a mechanical fall (seduction) on the one hand and an automatic salvation (marriage) on the other. Yet for her and her reader the choice was desperate. Moreover, if the right decision would not necessarily assure her happiness, the wrong one would guarantee suffering in abundance. So the contemporary critic literalizes and thereby trivializes what the contemporaneous reader took symbolically and thus seriously.

Style, too, has changed since the late eighteenth century, and the language of sentiment interposes itself between the modern reader and the eighteenth-century text. In our lean and antirhetorical time, the very excesses of the novel’s sentimental “effusions” (a term derogatory in our vocabulary, not theirs) call the sentiments thereby expressed into question. (199–200)

While Davidson is focusing on the sentimental novel of nearly two centuries prior to both Wharton and Johnston, it is important to recognize that this is the tradition from which they emerged, and one to which both writers responded. Johnston used the sentimental tools of message delivery in her historical romance and mystical texts, her language often echoing the earlier sentimental writers even as she inverted the form. For instance, Davidson notes that “[s]eduction novels are fixated on female sexual expression” (37). In Johnston’s texts, however, female sexual expression does not result in seduction, but either empowerment or oppression, depending on the message of that particular text. As an example, while some of the stories in The Wanderers result in oppression (e.g., tribal men beat the tribe’s women down in the same
manner as the slave women), others result in empowerment and freedom (e.g., Thekla joins with Eberhard and the two share an equitable and harmonious relationship). For Wharton, using the sentimental form in her fiction would have violated most of her writing convictions and what she believed herself to be. She does utilize it in some of her war texts when she feels that it will serve a purpose (see, for instance, the introduction to *Book of the Homeless*). As a general rule, however, she chose to reject that methodology and instead deliver her message via the oppositional paradigm of realism.

The academic debate about sentimental fiction took on new energy when Ann Douglas published *The Feminization of American Culture* in 1977. Douglas’s primary argument was that sentimental fiction developed into a consumer product for an emerging middle-class population and that the shift was ultimately detrimental to the nation as a whole and its developing literature. Put bluntly, Armstrong saw absolutely no redeeming value in sentimental fiction and mourned the power the genre influenced over traditional Puritan and Calvinistic values and schools of thought. In 1985, Jane Tompkins responded to Douglas’s propositions by posing an argument of her own: that sentimental fiction was indeed valuable and did not destroy the values Douglas prized so highly, but rather found alternative and subversive ways in a particularly female mode of expression to create new sermons and moral messages. Since then, scholars have complicated Douglas’s and Tompkins’s arguments; they find accuracies in both. For instance, Cindy Weinstein suggests that Douglas is proved at least partially correct in her assessment of sentimental texts as examples of bad literature when “new texts are added to the canon, which then are read primarily for their political failings” (2). Weinstein also points out that there is an absence of commentary “on some of the most widely read sentimental writers” (4), and complains that a discouragingly high percentage of the “criticism on the subject of sentimentalism seems incapable of considering this body of literature for its aesthetic qualities” (5). Rather, criticism seems to focus on the effectiveness of the novel’s treatment of political issues instead of as creative works of fiction. Weinstein believes that sentimental fiction questions the structure and validity of the family form by breaking it up, then by reshaping it using stronger or improved values or ideals (9). In order to fully understand what that means, she pushes for an examination of an increased number of texts rather than the seemingly popular few,
and emphasizes her belief that such examination must take place in “a sustained consideration of the language of these texts. In not attending to the specifics of language, critics have missed the ways in which sentimental novels are fascinated by the material implications of words and figures, including pronouns, possessives, characters’ names, analogies and euphemisms, and, as a result, have simplified (and homogenized) the genre” (5).

Janice Radway’s fascinating study of the Smithton romance readers obviously focuses on a different period (1970s–80s), a different readership, and a different style of romance, but the motivations and reader commentary she uncovers during her research could just as easily have come from Johnston’s readers and reinforce the historicity of romance as a genre. As an example, a letter written to the Johnston estate in 1951 commended Johnston’s work—specifically To Have and To Hold—to her sisters:

I have liked this book so much, and have read and re-read it many times since 1922, when my dear grandmother gave it to me. Its plot is beyond comparison, and its characters are as real and life-like as life itself. In fact, I feel that I have met and known Ralph Percy and Jocelyn (Leigh) Percy, and others. Have lived thru those days and nights of danger. . . .

I guess I ‘fell in love’ with Jocelyn (I was twenty-two then). And my admiration for the brave and accomplished Percy was very high. The ‘Pirate’ scenes are vivid and breathtaking. . . . The whole book has a ‘something’ absent from so many highly rated novels — atmosphere! The style, the faultless choice of words, the delicate portrayals. . . . The exquisite love scenes. . . . Passages bring tears to my eyes, and my emotions are carried to heavenly heights. . . . My heart beats as Ralph Percy’s. . . . Jocelyn, a woman transcending the highest womanhood — matchless, adorable, the perfection of the almost unattainable. . . .

(Westervelt)

Mr. C. C. Westervelt of Flint, Michigan lived Johnston’s text in the same way that the Smithton readers lived their romances when they read, and fell in love with the heroine in the same way that the Smithton readers loved the hero in their favorite romance novels.
Miffling published *To Have and To Hold* in 1900, Westervelt received it from his grandmother 22 years later, wrote about it 29 years after that during a time when Johnston’s writing was certainly even more out of vogue than when he received the text, and Radway’s subjects echoed his sentiments another 30 years later. While romance, as with any genre, has had waves of popularity, it is, I think, important to note that although the critical reception and mass-culture population of romance—current or turn-of-the-century—has historically tended to be very negative (indeed, still does as Davidson notes above), readers like Westervelt, his grandmother, and the Smithton women have persisted in their reading, enjoyment, and admiration for these texts. The push for Howellsian realism and literary rather than sentimental fiction never fully converted these readers; Westervelt’s affection and appreciation for Johnston’s text presumably lasted longer than three decades and well into a period of time when such texts were not considered quality literature. While Wharton very much wanted to rescue American fiction from this style of writing—and by so doing reform readers like Westervelt and the Smithton community as well—the simple fact is that Johnston’s less mystical works sold, and generally sold very well. People wanted to read her historical romance and adventure stories; *To Have and To Hold* was enormously popular and remained so for several years, selling somewhere upwards of half a million copies (Blain, Clements, and Grundy 585).

That type of popularity was problematic for Wharton and other writers who rejected romance and sentimental writing in favor of realism. Wharton believed that if she were to write as did the romance and sentimental writers, she would not be writing differently, but rather writing down to both her audience and her skills. For Wharton, texts such as *To Have and To Hold* represented not only what literature and the country should be growing out of, but what writers were leaving behind in their maturation process. Again, the argument between literary and genre has not changed much since Wharton’s and Johnston’s time, but it is important to recognize that the sentimental and romance genres met (and indeed still meet) a need present in the reading public. Contextualizing that need—whether representation of social concerns and fears or simple escapism—inevitably contextualizes the texts, but also helps contextualize the writers.
The Writers

Wharton was born into the upper-class society of New York and had all the advantages that came with being a part of the social elite. As a child, her family traveled regularly, and her sense of beauty, distinction, and culture was ultimately shaped more by the older and perhaps more polished images she found overseas than by her newer and perhaps more roughly clad America. Travel continued to play a large role in Wharton’s life as an adult, and both her nonfiction and fiction texts alike reflect much of those journeys. Her own personal financial standing (barring the inroads her husband, Teddy, made on her personal finances, particularly during his periods of illness) and the success of her writing enabled her to build first The Mount in Massachusetts, then later own her own homes in both France and England. While Wharton married, the match was not a happy one and she finally divorced her husband in 1912, after nearly thirty years of troubled marriage. She had no children, but remained close with her family all her life.

While Wharton was very much a Yank, Johnston was born and raised in Virginia shortly after the Civil War, and her Southern and Virginia heritage was very much a part of her identity in the same way that Old New York was an integral part of Wharton’s. The stories and images the Civil War left with her and her family often worked their way sharply into her writing, particularly her two Civil War novels, The Long Roll and Cease Firing. Johnston was of the South, and the codes, values, and history of her family are reflected in her writing, yet her relationship with her native region was much the same as Wharton’s with Old New York: each loved even as she recognized and criticized the flaws of the society she called home. Like Wharton, Johnston was born into a certain degree of financial security. While they were far from Edith Wharton’s standards, her father’s family was comfortable enough for him to study law and, after the Civil War, to finish his studies and continue into practice. That wealth did not last, however, and when the family’s economy began to suffer while she was in her mid-twenties, Johnston turned her hand first to helping her father and then to writing in order to help support the rest of her family. By the time she was thirty-five, she had spent sixteen years assuming responsibility for her brothers and sisters, ever since her mother’s death in 1889. When her father died in 1905 her sense of family responsibility certainly did not decrease, and based on her
earnings from her writing, she built a new family home—Three Hills—in 1912, some ten years after Wharton’s The Mount. While Johnston’s circumstances were more limited than Wharton’s, one should not assume that she spent her life in rural Virginia with no exposure to the culture that so influenced Wharton. By the time she was 41, she had toured France, Scotland, Ireland, England, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Sicily, and Egypt. Johnston never married, perhaps in large part because of her need to provide for her siblings, and in part because of her own poor health. While Wharton’s sense of beauty was decidedly more European and based on European models, both women had keen eyes for detail and imagery; they appreciated beauty and were sharp observers of the natural world.

One lingering question is whether Johnston and Wharton ever read each other’s works. They were alive and writing at the same time, and each woman was an eclectic reader. I would be surprised to find they had not read something by the other. At a minimum, I would have thought that Johnston had read The House of Mirth and a few of the other major publications, perhaps especially those which were first published in serial format. Likewise, I could have expected that Wharton had at least seen the serialized version of Johnston’s To Have and To Hold, and may well have read the two Civil War novels: The Long Roll and Cease Firing. Given the stir that Hagar created at its publication, Wharton may have seen that text as well, although I doubt that she would have bothered to read it. The text has a clearly feminist agenda, and Wharton was notoriously impatient with both the suffragists and those who took up the “woman question” in public debate.

As I read through Johnston’s diaries, however, I noticed that, like Wharton, she indicated what she was reading at the time, but I have not found any clear indication of Wharton’s presence on Johnston’s shelves. Likewise, I can find no trace of correspondence between the two women. That does not mean that such correspondence and notations do not exist. Rather, it means that the question regarding these writers’ familiarity with each other’s works may grudgingly need to be shelved until there is opportunity to scour all of their personal correspondence and journals, a daunting prospect which would require no small outlay in both time and funds. Both women were as prolific with their correspondence as they were with their professional writings, and there is a figurative mountain of material. While most of Johnston’s materials currently reside in the
University of Virginia’s special collections library, Wharton’s materials are divided between several storage locations (notably Yale, Indiana, Texas, and Paris). Obviously there is no guarantee that, even given the protection of these collections, one can find correspondence or diaries which address the issue; such materials may not exist and it is entirely possible that this question may remain unanswered.

Finding the answer would indeed be interesting simply because it would allow us a deeper insight into the attitudes these two women held toward other female writers of their period and the work they were producing. We gain such hints in their correspondence and diary notes as they indicate what they like about certain texts, or what they anticipate or think about an upcoming meeting with another writer, or their attitudes toward the issues about which they wrote, however, and can therefore draw a few tentative conclusions.

**A Brief Overview of Works and Writing History**

In 1999, Karin Garlepp Burns indirectly posited an interesting “us versus them” concept of Edith Wharton. Specifically, she suggested that as part of the attempt to justify fiction as an art form—and themselves as serious practitioners of that art—female writers found themselves in the awkward position of modifying their writing voices to a deeper register. Burns presents a fascinating discussion about the conflicts women writers encountered in trying to craft their works for a male-defined genre while still presenting their own concerns and perspectives, often with brilliantly subtle subversiveness. The essay argues that women who adopted the male-defined voice of realism rather than the also male-defined “feminine” voice of sentimentalism not only had a better chance at survival within the industry, but that the industry perceived them as those who took both the genre and their craft seriously. In essence, they became more viable parts of the writing community and while contemporary critics did not necessarily consider them on par with their male counterparts, they granted the women some modicum of respect according to their perception of the women’s skill levels. These female writers were the insiders. Those women, however, who remained outside the masculine realistic realm—those who continued to write in a sentimental tradition, who wrote romance, or wrote regional literature—fell in Hawthorne’s ranks of “scribbling women,” and while they occupied the majority, they also
occupied the lower rung of the literary social ladder, or were pushed off altogether. They became the outsiders.

Whether insider or outsider, Burns notes that

An important difference marks the female from the male novelists’s objectivity in their stories, however. . . . To overcome the lower status accorded their sex in a well-established patriarchy, women must resort to prevailing male practices as their only access to power and credibility. Female realists, in particular, had not only to face charges against fantastic fiction, but to be accepted as equals in the elite literary milieu continually threatened from the outside by their own sex, in the guise of female “scribblers” comprising the majority of popular novelists. (28–29)

For better or for worse—and there is indeed some of both—Edith Wharton and Mary Johnston exemplified those two positions. Edith Wharton is a prime example of Burns’s shift to the “masculine” side of the realm, and that shift allowed her to identify with the masculine literary world and separate herself from the feminine. Richard Brodhead suggests that because she accomplished that transition in identity so well, her “works sold as literature. She demonstrates the stabilization . . . of a new literary category of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: serious writers made commercially successful on the basis of its quality as serious writing” (478). Johnston, on the other hand, is very much a solid example of the feminine and what Hawthorne, Howells, James, and Wharton herself might have termed a “scribbler.” Wharton and Johnston operated during a time when the natures of both writing and the nation were in a state of flux, and their works as well as their writing identities reflect those uncertainties and changes.

Interestingly, while the two women tended to occupy opposite sides of the writer’s court, they shared common goals and visions—although they might have been hard pressed to find anything in common had they ever met in person. Yet, Wharton and Johnston did indeed have much in common with each other. They were born within a few years of each other and died a year apart. Wharton made her publishing debut with a small collection of poetry in 1878 but then had a long dry spell until she published Decoration of Houses with Ogden Codman twenty years later. Her first major fiction publication occurred in 1899 with the collection of short stories
under the title of *The Greater Inclination*, while Johnston’s first major work of fiction, *Prisoners of Hope*, had appeared the year before in 1898. Both Johnston and Wharton published writings about gardens. Johnston had a variety of dogs as pets, and her sister notes her fondness for them and her grief at the loss of each; Wharton had a series of Pekingese and was equally attached to the little dogs. The two women loved nature and the visible world around them, and reflect that affinity in their writings.

Despite their similarities, Wharton and Johnston were very different women and writers, and the texts they produced necessarily reflect those differences. For instance, Wharton’s characters often find themselves in a social trap or conflict, and the story leaves them there. Rarely is there a happy ending or satisfactory resolution that offers any sense of freedom or release; instead, the characters are doomed. One of the few exceptions is the ending of *The Glimpses of the Moon*, but it too is laden with certain difficulties, not the least of which is that the domestic environment in which Wharton displays Nick and Susy at the end of the text is neither truly domestic nor their own (an issue which does not seem to be adequately addressed in criticism).

Johnston’s characters take the reverse approach. While the stories demonstrate the difficulties, dilemmas, and downright injustices of the systems in which the characters dwell, Johnston often found a way to allow her characters to illustrate the possibility of freedom or a changed order. The most radical of those was *Hagar*, in which the leading male character recognizes and commends Hagar’s public identity, then does the then-unthinkable by deciding *not* to accept engineering jobs that would take him too far away from the woman to whom he has just committed himself. Hagar retains her own autonomy, and it is the male character who changes his life in order to fit into Hagar’s world rather than the other way around—an ending which critics of the day greeted less than positively.

That is not to say that Johnston did not punish those of her characters that violated the accepted social order—she did. There seems, however, to be a sharper, potentially more sentimental presentation of the characters’ innocence and victimization than in Wharton’s texts. Wharton is much more subtle in this effect than Johnston, and her criticism tends to be slightly more diffused; she spreads it almost equally upon the character and upon the society which has
created the environment and therefore the possibility for disaster. In short, most of Wharton’s characters do not die. Instead, they live; they must live within the framework of a corrupt system, and in that way, perhaps Wharton forces the penalties for transgression or social ineptitude to carry extra weight. Wharton’s work is much more dismal than Johnston’s in this aspect; she offers very little hope for either society or her characters. Johnston offers the hope and then, in effect, tells the reader that “this is what it could be; d’you see what you’re missing? And isn’t it a shame that we haven’t come this far yet?”

While both writers had different views about the issues of the time, and handled those issues differently in their texts, they were both working for the same basic goal: a transformation of society. Each in her own way looked toward a day when women would have the freedom to choose their own paths without the existing social limitations and built-in penalties and would pay for their mistakes with more appropriate coin than exile or death. It is fascinating that Wharton disapproved of the suffragists yet became an unwilling and possibly unwitting role model of the right to make her own choices and control her own options in her own life. For Johnston, assuming responsibility for her siblings may have created more space in this area than Wharton had the opportunity to experience until much later in her life; at age 19, Johnston was making decisions for her younger family members and helping her father in his practice, and she felt the burden of her assumed responsibilities with a keenness Wharton would not experience until World War I.

**Current Status of Both Writers and Academic Resources**

Edith Wharton and Mary Johnston were prolific writers. Johnston’s 66 years of living left behind some twenty-three novels of various genres, one full-length play for the stage, a large collection of short stories, at least one historical nonfiction book, a variety of speeches and editorials, and a small collection of poetry. Wharton, over the course of her 75 years, produced fourteen novels, eight novellas, ten nonfiction book-length works, a number of articles, translations, and prefaces, a host of short stories—many of which were what she called “ghost stories”—and a much shorter list of poetry.
Obtaining copies of the Wharton texts is a relatively simple matter since the majority of her writings are now in print or can be bought used, and a large portion of her letters and journals have already been collected and made accessible to the general public. Obtaining a copy of the Johnston texts is, unfortunately, much more difficult. Far too many of Johnston’s works are out of print or were reprinted in such limited runs that they are much harder to locate.

Both Edith Wharton and Mary Johnston are again finding a place in literary and academic discourse, but Wharton is still the front runner in this arena. Wharton is experiencing a solid surge in academic studies within the classroom both nationally and internationally, and there is a growing wave of published material about both the writer and her writing. Johnston, on the other hand, is very much an unknown in international circles, and while she is gaining American attention, she is still very rarely studied. Rather, she is in a constant state of rediscovery. For instance, just three years after Johnston’s death, Johnston had fallen so far below the reading public’s radar that Caroline Sherman wrote that Johnston was being rediscovered. Sherman’s claim was optimistic, and Johnston was again forgotten. While academia and mass media publication have turned a considering eye on Johnston at irregular intervals, she remains shrouded in obscurity.

Given Edith Wharton’s greater visibility, it is perhaps logical to address Wharton issues of scholarship first. Like many women writers, Edith Wharton’s texts hovered on the dusty shelves for a number of years while a predominantly male canon formed and, like a growing number of other texts by women writers, have since been rediscovered. In addition to Wharton’s own autobiography, A Backward Glance, there are currently a number of different biographies in print, including Louis Auchincloss’s Edith Wharton (1971); R. W. B. Lewis’s Pulitzer-prize winning Edith Wharton (1985); Eleanor Dwight’s Edith Wharton: An Extraordinary Life – an Illustrated Biography (1994); Shari Benstock’s No Gifts from Chance (1994); Edith Wharton’s Inner Circle by Susan Goodman (1994); Edith Wharton, A to Z: The Essential Guide to the Life and Work by Sarah Bird Wright (1998); and Edith Wharton by Janet Beer (2002).

In addition to the biographies, a comfortable percentage of Wharton’s correspondence has been collected and published in both book-length works and individual articles. Perhaps the
most notable book-length works are *The Letters of Edith Wharton*, published by R. W. B. and Nancy Lewis in 1988 hard on the heels of Lewis’s biography; Lyall H. Powers’s collection of Wharton-James correspondence in *Henry James and Edith Wharton. Letters: 1900–1915* (1990); and Daniel Bratton’s *Yrs Ever Affly: The Correspondence of Edith Wharton and Louis Bromfield* (2000). In addition to the longer texts, there are a host of shorter essays, such as Mia Manzulli’s intriguing essay about Wharton’s correspondence with her niece Beatrix Farrand about gardens and letter-writing. There are also, of course, essays which discuss individual and previously unpublished letters, such as David Porter’s discussion of Wharton’s thoughts about her own mortality in a letter to Le Roy King. In short, Wharton’s correspondence has been a healthy part of Wharton critical discourse—and therefore available to the general public—for nigh well two decades and promises to continue to be so.

The one area of original source material which has, understandably, not been reproduced is Wharton’s diaries. All of the biographies and a number of other texts mine the diaries extensively, however, and several clearly note the conflict between Wharton’s own claim in *A Backward Glance* that she kept no diary until she was 55 and the physical presence of the diaries themselves. While the diaries have not been reproduced in their own right, large sections of their texts appear in the other source materials so those scholars who may not have access to the original diaries themselves do gain some acquaintance with the texts via the secondary biographies and other materials.

There is, therefore, no shortage of material available for study and now no shortage of criticism on those materials. The *Edith Wharton Newsletter* (now *Edith Wharton Review*) published its first issue in 1984 when Wharton studies were slowly escalating, and the MLA bibliography shows a healthy, growing inventory of critical publication since the 1970s. While the *Review* only publishes semi-annually, articles about Wharton’s life and works regularly appear as the subject of books and essay collections, and in articles in leading literary journals such as *American Literature* and the *Journal of American Studies*. As an indication of the trend, an “Edith Wharton” search of the MLA bibliography archives for articles published during the seven-year period between 1963 and 1970 produces some 43 English-only citations, while that same search for publications between 1970 and 2006 returns a listing of 845 citations—an
increase from roughly 6 texts per year to a little over 23 texts per year. Additionally, for the seven years between 1963 and 1970, the bibliography lists 11 doctoral dissertations or Master’s theses as opposed to 216 covering the 36-year period between 1970 and 2006. Those numbers do not include texts published in other languages, or whose international publication does not appear in the MLA bibliography (e.g., there were four Master’s level theses published in Norway between 1978 and 1989). In other words, there is considerably more research being conducted on Wharton than the MLA has thus acknowledged in its own bibliography, and while the numbers above are only a portion of the scholarly activity, they do at least provide some indication of the growing interest in Edith Wharton.

Nor has there been a limitation of what aspects of Wharton’s texts scholars have studied. While certain pieces have received more attention than others—notably Ethan Frome, House of Mirth, Age of Innocence, and Custom of the Country—her shorter works and other novels are receiving increased attention, especially the “Old New York” collection, The Children, The Fruit of the Tree, Wharton’s “ghost” stories, her travel writings, and her critical and nonfiction works.

As Wharton has acquired a degree of prominence in literary studies, the tone of criticism has changed noticeably. Rather than describe Wharton’s texts as self-indulgent women’s writings, simple examples of regionalism, or worse yet Jamesian wanna-be’s, current criticism fluctuates between praising both text and writer as examples of near-perfection, and granting the appropriate accolades while still recognizing the weaknesses. More recent critical writings often take to task earlier critics who were less than charitable to either Wharton or her texts. In short, Wharton criticism has swung in a pendulum arc from heavily critical to overly flattering and is finally coming to settle in a more balanced—but still generally very positive—middle ground.

Just as tone has changed, so too have subjects. Critics have utilized the gamut of theoretical approaches, and there is currently a growing and eclectic body of scholarship available on Wharton’s life as well as her writings. Perhaps, however, the most interesting recent discussions have been those that examine Wharton’s identity in her travel writings and as part of the creation of identity those travels influenced—and then consider how her concepts of race, gender, class, and culture influenced her formation of a personal and professional identity. A second ongoing and fascinating topic of discussion is Wharton’s own perspective of gender as it
interacts with her sense of person in her role as author, and her attitude about the “woman question” in general.9

While there is no shortage of criticism, there is very little that addresses Wharton’s writing as an entire body of work. The majority of the secondary sources currently available are critical analyses which are very tightly focused on one or two texts. The majority of book-length works are biographical in nature. For instance, while an excellent resource, Alan Price’s text about Wharton and World War I dwells on Wharton’s wartime activities; he discusses her writing only as part of those activities and does not focus on the texts themselves. Having said that, the book is valuable in that it so clearly shows Wharton’s concerns for the war-affected women and children and gives a hint toward her general attitude about women’s abilities. Price is not alone in his approach. Other similar texts include Elizabeth Ammons’s *Edith Wharton’s Argument with America* (1980), Janet Beer Goodwyn’s *Edith Wharton: Traveler in the Land of Letters* (1995), and Donna Campbell’s *Resisting Regionalism* (1997). All three studies are excellent resources for background information and help to contextualize the development of Wharton’s identity as a writer.

Regardless of whether one focuses on secondary or primary texts, the growing volume of materials makes researching Wharton relatively straightforward. Even as secondary academic resources increase, so too does access to primary works. Virtually all of Wharton’s book-length works are still in print and available in both new and used editions. Publishers change at regular intervals, but the texts are still fairly easy to acquire. Wharton’s ghost stories are collected in at least two different editions, the Library of America has gathered all the shorter works into a two-volume set, and Frederick Wegener has collected many of Wharton’s critical essays in a single volume. In 1993, Marion Mainwaring undertook the task of completing Wharton’s last and unfinished text, *The Buccaneers*, and that version is now essentially the only one available for purchase unless one is able to locate a used copy of the original or reprint edition. That is, of course, problematic for the Wharton scholar who wishes to examine the original text without the influence of a second writer, particularly with no clear demarcation of which words are Wharton’s and which are not. On the other hand, the reader can now see what ideas and issues engrossed Wharton around the time of her death. More recently, Louis Auchincloss published
the previously-unpublished journal of Wharton’s 1888 Mediterranean tour aboard the yacht, *The Vanadis*. In addition, some of the texts are available in electronic libraries. For instance, Project Gutenberg’s inventory ([www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org)) includes *The Bunner Sisters*, a variety of collections of short and ghost stories, *Madame de Treymes*, *The House of Mirth*, *Age of Innocence*, *Custom of the Country*, *Ethan Frome*, and an eclectic gathering of other fiction and nonfiction texts. In other words, a student of Edith Wharton need not go far or spend much to obtain these primary sources.

While Edith Wharton is now highly visible, Mary Johnston has nearly vanished from the literary stage. Johnston’s output is certainly respectable, even when compared to Wharton’s prolific record. Despite her presence on the best-seller lists of the 1800s and the quantity (and indeed quality) of her production, however, Johnston has yet to be reclaimed by academia. Her work is rarely present in literature courses and is entirely unknown outside her country of origin.

While Wharton’s fiction—apart from her ghost stories—tends to fall consistently within the currently recognized genre of literary fiction and use core characters which have something in common with her own background, Johnston’s fiction is a bit more diverse. Her novels run the range from historical fiction to romance, from feminist literature to much more transcendental or spiritual and philosophical pieces, and that variation has caused no small furor in the critical community. Few critics have dealt with Johnston’s texts as a single body of work. Rather, they have traditionally divided the works into their various genres and compartmentalized them—and therefore the author. The main critical focus has typically been a close reading or cultural criticism of Johnston’s historical fiction rather than her later and more spiritualist or transcendental novels. The general consensus of the criticism has tended to be that while not perfect, Johnston’s historical romances are her strongest works. Put bluntly, critics have long wondered what to make of the latter period in Johnston’s writing and, aside from an occasional article or dissertation, have tended to ignore these particular texts, unfortunately therefore also ignoring the identity and development of the woman behind the texts. The texts which scholars have examined most often have been Johnston’s *To Have and to Hold*, *The Long Roll*, and *Hagar*. The latter text has been a natural source text for those who chose to consider Johnston’s
feminist agenda and those scholars typically considered it in the light of her suffrage activities and feminist convictions.

Johnston criticism, however, has not exactly been prolific. In the nearly seventy years since Johnston’s death, the annual bibliographic publication *American Literary Scholarship* and the MLA bibliography show a combined grand total of some 28 critical citations for Mary Johnston. Three of those are either Master’s-level thesis or doctoral dissertations, and only a small portion of the remaining texts focus entirely on Johnston; the majority of them focus on Southern issues or themes (e.g., presentation of the southern concept of Cavalier in fiction) and include Johnston in the discussion. Publication history has necessarily included long gaps in attention focused on Johnston. For instance, of the above citations, three occur in the 1940’s, twice that number in the 50’s, only two in the 60’s, six again in the 70’s, seven in the 80’s, three in the 90’s, and only a couple since the turn of the century. There are, obviously, critical texts which have slipped below the radar of both the MLA bibliography and *American Literary Scholarship*—specifically smaller articles which focus on individual works—but the numbers serve as indicators of the opportunity for research on this author. In other words, available criticism on Mary Johnston’s life and works is severely limited. Aside from those few more frequently discussed texts, virtually any work done on this writer is liable to be new territory.

Criticism is not the only area of Johnston studies that has been sparsely inhabited. While Wharton has at least seven biographies or pseudo-biographies and one autobiography available, there is currently no full biography of Mary Johnston. Johnston kept a limited diary of her own, parts of which her sister editorialized as preparation to writing a biography of Mary after her sister’s death. Unfortunately, Elizabeth was never able to complete the work. Currently, the most thorough summary of Johnston’s life is C. Ronald Cella’s small but excellent volume published for *Twayne’s United States Authors Series* in 1981. As is true of the other volumes in the Twayne series, the text covers the most important events in the writer’s life, provides an overview of the writer’s work, and offers some helpful background material. Perhaps one of the most valuable resources in the text is the annotated selected bibliography of Johnston secondary sources: a listing of 19 sources, several of which appeared in print during Johnston’s lifetime, and is as comprehensive a listing of pre-1981 Johnston resources as is currently in existence.
Additionally, Cella’s text is literally the only source which provides an overview of Johnston’s life—and it is no longer in print. One can still find a very few used copies and many of the larger academic libraries have a copy, but a Johnston scholar will have an increasingly difficult time laying hands on this particular text if it does not undergo a reprint. In view of the lack of other biographical resources and the increased interest in Johnston, it is imperative that this particular text at least be republished, if not updated.¹⁰

Like Wharton, Johnston left behind a wealth of correspondence, most of which is currently housed in the protected collection at the University of Virginia’s Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library. Unlike Wharton, none of this correspondence has yet been collected and made available to the general public.

While the bulk of Wharton’s texts have returned to print often enough that most of them are again or soon will be available in one format or another, academia has yet to fully reclaim Johnston’s works. Several of her major texts have undergone short printing bursts in the recent past, and a few of them are scheduled for new releases in 2006 and 2013–16. One can still locate the occasional random copy of a first publication, but they are naturally growing more difficult to find. Interestingly, there has been a sudden surge in republication of Johnston’s texts over the past two years. In 2003, only four texts were available in reprint. As of the time of this writing, however, thirteen texts are still in press in either digital or print formats, in addition to an earlier collection of short stories. While that number is less than half Johnston’s total book-length output, it contains an intriguing fact: eight of the titles were published in 2005. Somewhat surprisingly, some of Johnston’s works are now available online thanks to Project Gutenberg efforts. Fascinatingly, it is neither Johnston’s Civil War historical fiction nor Hagar—the texts which scholars tend to study most often—which have first come to the growing online library. Rather, Gutenberg offers access to the texts which were among the most popular: To Have and to Hold (1900), Audrey (1902), Sir Mortimer (1904), Lewis Rand (1908), Foes (1918), Pioneers of the Old South (1918), and 1492 (1923).

That these texts have made the transition to Gutenberg first is fascinating simply because of the nature of the texts themselves. To Have and to Hold, Audrey, and Sir Mortimer are all romance novels, or what Cella calls “Romances of Adventure” (32). Lewis Rand is an historical
novel which moves Johnston from her earlier genre to “a more realistic form” (Cella 55). Foes is one of the mystical novels, while Pioneers of the Old South is a nonfiction historical text published for Yale University’s The Chronicles of America Series. 1492 takes the journeys of Christopher Columbus as a focal point and is a curious blend of historical, mystical, and romantic genres. These are the texts which first captured Johnston’s public; they are the leaders in her best-sellers, and except for Foes and, to a lesser extent, 1492, were generally very well received.

Today’s reprints and the electronic availability of some of the texts are good indications of the growing level of interest in Johnston’s work. While part of the interest may be a natural element of the attempt to rediscover and reclaim women’s writings, historical and cultural explorations are supplementing the literary discussions, as is the expansion of the literary canon and what academics consider worthy of examination.

**Project Scope**

Despite the personal differences between Johnston and Wharton, and the differences between their texts and subjects, the two women shared one very real goal: They wanted to change the world; they wanted to make a difference. Whether literary studies verbalize it or not, that desire to make a difference is very much a part of every writer’s existence, regardless of genre. It takes different forms and can be present in different degrees, but the desire is nevertheless present. Some writers express it as a wish to entertain or to lighten the reader’s daily load. For others, it may be a need to inform, to educate, to present ideas, or examine issues. Neither Wharton nor Johnston was an exception to that rule.

While her ghost stories are perhaps (and debatably) more geared toward entertainment than her other writings, Wharton’s texts are very much a discussion and criticism of social conditions, and her critical eye is very tightly focused indeed. Typically, she presents a portrait of difficult social issues, although she does not solve them. With few exceptions, her texts editorialize about the society with which she is most familiar, and her role is that of a social critic.
Johnston performs similarly, but she tends to push her texts much further and not only presents the issues that concern her—often to a greater degree of blatancy than does Wharton—but suggests ideal images in contrast. While Wharton tends to use a much narrower gaze, Johnston’s is wider and often much more focused on the issue itself rather than the individual character; her vision more often encompasses humanity rather than a single aspect of society.

It would, of course, be natural for a critic to question the value of discussing Johnston since she falls so far outside the literary canon as it stands today. Yet, that question is equally valid for every critical discussion of every writer. Academia and other writers examine some authors’ works in part because of the brilliance of their prose, but that certainly cannot be the only reason for critical analysis. Other texts provide material for consideration because of the social messages they carry, and certainly neither Wharton nor Johnston is unique in this quality. Some writers, however, deserve study for other and equally important reasons. As with archaeology, these texts and the writers who created them provide insight into a past and the people who dwelled there. In Johnston’s case, we can look for clues beyond her skill and subject to explain why her works were present on the best sellers lists, why she captivated a nation, why critics vehemently disliked certain other works, and why, even when critics did not like a text, some of the most serious found themselves respecting the author who had presented it.

Connecting Johnston and Wharton in a discussion provides some insight into the publishing industry of the period given that the two women published from opposite ends of the fiction spectrum. More importantly, however, it creates a dialogue between those two opposing positions and allows us to consider a few of the ways in which they shared similarities and common goals. In this case, we are able to consider the Northern literary fiction writer who lived most of her career as an expatriate overseas in conjunction with her Southern romantic fiction counterpart who, while she traveled overseas, always called Virginia home and discover that while there are considerable differences between the two, there are also some very real similarities.

In the search for common ground, this project will consider the presentation of writing identity within selected texts. It is inevitable that a writer present a certain amount of herself
within her creative text, and neither Johnston nor Wharton are exceptions to that rule. Their writings reflect not only who they are, but to some degree, their own convictions about writing and writers. Wharton’s “Writing a War Story” is a superb example of an author’s presentation of the writer she may have been as well as the writer she does not wish to become.

In addition to writing identity and as part of the consideration of Wharton’s and Johnston’s treatment of social issues, this text will also take up the question of their war texts. For both women, war was a pivotal influence in both their lives and their writings. These texts do not occupy a large portion of their respective bodies of works, but they are absolutely critical to understanding the authors’ identities. For Johnston, the war in question was largely the Civil War. She was born shortly after the War and lived in the South during the period of Reconstruction. The Civil War left its mark on her family and was a part of life she saw on a daily basis. While the Civil War influenced Wharton’s family, she was much less directly affected than Johnston. She did not live in its shadow. In fact, one could say that the Civil War had a positive effect on Edith Wharton. Wharton’s family, because of the sudden dip in fortunes as a result of the war, chose to travel, and young Edith spent a significant portion of her childhood overseas. It was a formative period and provided the foundation for the woman and writer shoe would eventually become. The war that did affect her, however, was the first World War, and that influence was dramatic, particularly given her first-hand experience. Each woman put her individual experiences and beliefs in writing, and those writings do much to reflect their unique identities.

The social changes Wharton and Johnston desired tend to be linked to gender and social construction of gender roles and gender identity. Each writer’s texts present goals of gender transformation toward autonomous identity, often as a means of exploring their own attitudes and hopes for women in their respective societies. The primary methodology of this project will, inevitably, be close reading of the primary sources, but I shall contextualize my own readings with those of other critics. For Johnston, that process will be much more limited since there is a notable lack of secondary source material. At this point, the most critical secondary texts for Johnston are Cella’s brief biography, George Longest’s Three Virginia Writers, and Watson’s The Cavalier in Virginia Fiction. The first source provides virtually the only available
biographical information currently available on Johnston while the latter two, with varying degrees of success, work toward providing literary and historical context for the writer and her works.

Aside from the war writings, it makes sense to discuss Wharton’s and Johnston’s works in terms of the gender performances and expectations within the stories themselves, considering both male and female characters and the possibilities for which their creators intended their presence in the texts. For instance, Wharton described Selden in *The House of Mirth* as a negative hero, but some criticism (e.g., Joseph Coulombe’s “Man or Mannequin?”) has suggested that he is, instead, a much more positive character. While Wharton may have women’s issues on her heart, her texts are far from myopic; it is impossible to examine issues of women’s placement and role in society without also considering her male characters, even if it is only to consider how one views the other. There are a number of questions in this section, not the least of which concerns recognition of the issues each writer points toward, suggested images or ideals, means by which one may achieve those goals, and the possible repercussions of either accepting or rejecting the message.

The discussion of gender in Johnston’s works is accented by her strong movement into metaphysical, philosophical, and theosophical concepts in many of her later writings. Religion and philosophy are rarely an element of Wharton’s texts, although it does appear in her last writings after serious health problems in the last years of her life. There is some speculation that the change occurs as a result of a renewed sense of her own mortality, but the arrival of both writers at a spiritual place in their writings is an aspect that should be considered. It is entirely possible that the shift in their texts demonstrates a change in their sense of their social responsibilities and roles as authors; that rather than criticize the existing system, they chose instead to offer images of hope (or hopefulness) even as they celebrated the feminine.

In short, like all writers, Edith Wharton and Mary Johnston—while their methodologies were radically different—shared a common goal: They were out to change their worlds and, in the process, left behind texts which offer fascinating insights into both authors as writers, women, and members of the societies they inhabited.
II. A BIOGRAPHICAL OVERVIEW: Life and Works

A Prefatory Note

It is not my purpose in this section to repeat the work of other scholars. As I noted in the introductory chapter, there are several excellent biographies available about Wharton, and Cella’s overview of Johnston certainly goes further into depth than I have room for in the confines of this short section. Rather, the purpose of the chapter is to lay out a brief overview of the realities of both women’s lives in order to put them and therefore their writing identities in context with each other.

Edith Wharton (1862–1937)

Family and Background

Edith Wharton was born Edith Newbold Jones on January 24, 1862 to Lucretia Rhinelander and George Frederic Jones in New York, and into the wealthy, upper social strata of what she termed “Old New York” society. She was the youngest of three children and the only daughter. At sixteen and twelve respectively, her two older brothers, Frederic and Henry, were already either solidly in or entering their teens when their sister arrived, and there was considerable speculation about the propriety of such a maternal event so late in Lucretia’s life and so long after the births of the two boys. The general consensus among literary critics is that the birth was an unexpected and somewhat embarrassing surprise to the established matron. There were, however, two rumors concerning her birth which Wharton heard and investigated to some limited degree later. The first was that she was actually the product of an affair between Lucretia and her brothers’ English tutor. Shari Benstock notes that Wharton did a little research on this possibility but was unable to resolve it fully since it was decidedly not a subject she could discuss with her mother, and that when she did attempt to trace the tutor, she found little more
than that he had died (11). The second rumor was that Lucretia had had an affair with the Scots baron of Brougham, Henry Peter Brougham, the year before in 1861 but, as Sarah Bird Wright notes, Brougham would have been 82 at the time, “which makes it unlikely” (98).

That the rumors were present is not surprising given three factors: there were no close relatives who had demonstrated the socially less-than-commendable tendency toward literary aptitude; the timing of the birth fell so much later than the one before it; and Lucretia’s position in society was that of a mature matron of the upper class. To an extent, those rumors naturally intrigued Wharton. Her relationship with her mother was far from ideal and certainly provided no support when she first began and later continued writing. Rather, Lucretia seemed to create an emotional distance between herself and her daughter, and while she performed the necessary maternal duties such as being certain her child was properly clothed, trained in the social and public graces, and that she received an appropriate measure of education for a girl of her position and social status, she certainly never served as friend or confidante. Wharton herself notes two prime examples of their relationship when she speaks about her first effort at a novel at age eleven. When she attempted to share it with her mother, she found both it and herself facing a rather cold reception. The novel began with one character telling another that if “only I had known you were going to call I should have tidied up the drawing-room” (BG 73). “Timorously I submitted this to my mother,” Wharton continues, “and never shall I forget the sudden drop of my creative frenzy when she returned it with the icy comment: ‘Drawing-rooms are always tidy’” (BG 73).

The second example is perhaps even more telling and occurred when Wharton tentatively asked her mother for insight about what was to happen on her wedding night. The request for information about sex mortified Lucretia, and Lewis records a conversation which, today, would have scandalized parent training groups. Lucretia’s response was to tell her daughter that she had “never heard such a ridiculous question,” and that surely, if Edith had noticed the anatomical differences presented by artists in statues and paintings, then “[y]ou can’t be as stupid as you pretend” (53). Lewis believed that the couple did not consummate the marriage for three weeks and that while the reticence about sex was typical for other New York society mothers of the
time, it was responsible for a sort of bottling up of Wharton’s own sexuality for an indefinite period, indeed until her affair with Morton Fullerton in 1908 (53).

While her relationship with her mother was a chilly one, Wharton’s relationship with her father was one she held dear. The first memory she records in her autobiography is that of going for a walk along Fifth Avenue with her father. She recalls the memory in terms that almost idealize her father; he is her “tall handsome father, who was so warm-blooded that in the coldest weather he always went out without gloves, and whose head, with its ruddy complexion and intensely blue eyes, was so far aloft that when she walked beside him, she was too near to see his face” (BG 2). She speaks of the way her hand rested “in the large safe hollow of her father’s bare hand” (BG 2), and the reader comes away understanding that not only does this little girl respect and admire this tall creature who is intimately connected with her, but she feels protected and perhaps even cherished in her own right. These strolls, she says, “were always an event in the little girl’s life” (BG 2), and the clear sense is that they were so because of the companion as much as the happening itself. Indeed, the language she uses to describe her father in this one glimpse of memory is the same throughout the rest of her memoir.

It was through her father that little Edith Jones began to explore literature, and his library provided her with her first contacts with books well before she could read. It was her father, in fact, who taught her to read while they were in Paris during 1868 or 1869 at about age six, and from that point forward books became an integral part of Wharton’s life. Perhaps this is one of the reasons she seemed to connect more strongly with this parent—a connection she could not make with the other. Wharton recalls her father as an avid reader with a fondness for poetry, particularly Tennyson. In her memoir, she writes that her “mother’s matter-of-factness must have shrivelled up any such buds of fancy,” and suggests that “his rather rudimentary love of verse might have been developed had he had any one with whom to share it” (39). While there is a touch of condescension in Wharton’s use of “rather rudimentary,” she does not intend it to be denigrating. Rather, it seems to be the result of the way she perceived her family’s attitude toward literature. In this case, however, Wharton believed that not only was her mother not someone with whom her father could share a poetic spirit, but one who seemed to encourage his
turning away to the travel literature which inspired his own imagination and sense of adventure, and perhaps provided a bit of escapism from an otherwise contained life.

When Wharton’s father became seriously ill in 1880, doctors suggested that a different climate might help him recover from his illness, so the family returned to Europe. Unfortunately there was little change, and after a winter in which he deteriorated and was eventually paralyzed, George Frederic Jones died in the spring of 1882 at Cannes. Wharton records the period before this time as one in which she drew close to her father, and the reader can clearly see how much she valued that time both then and later. In her memoir, she says that she is “still haunted by the look in his dear blue eyes, which had followed me so tenderly for nineteen years, and now tried to convey the goodbye messages he could not speak. Twice in my life I have been at the death-bed of someone I dearly loved, who has vainly tried to say a last word to me; and I doubt if life holds a subtler anguish” (88).

Wharton never uses such language to speak about her mother; indeed, she never mentions her mother’s death at all in her autobiography. Lewis writes that “Edith spoke conventionally of the loss of ‘my poor mother’” to Sara Norton, and that “to Brownell, she only mentioned the event after acknowledging the receipt of nine pounds and ten shillings from John Murray” (100–01). Rather, she seems to attribute a certain disconnectedness and ambiguity to the position of mother when compared to her father. She describes them both as “the tall splendid father who was always so kind, and whose strong arms lifted one so high, and held one so safely; and my mother, who wore such beautiful flounced dresses, and had painted and carved fans in sandalwood boxes, and ermine scarves, and perfumed yellowish laces pinned up in blue paper, and kept in a marquetry chiffonier, and all the other dim impersonal attributes of a Mother” (BG 26). In other words, while the qualities she associates with her father have to do with personality and character—he is kind, strong, and represents safety—those she associates with her mother tend to be impersonal, surface characteristics only: she remembers her mother’s beauty. Once Wharton reached young adulthood, her mother played an increasingly smaller role in her life.
Childhood and Education

When Wharton was four, her father’s fortunes suffered a downturn during the post-Civil War real estate depression, and he determined that it would actually be cheaper to lease the stateside residences and take the family overseas than to maintain the houses and necessary staff. From 1866 to 1872, the family toured Italy, Spain, France, and Germany, and Wharton spent a very formative part of her childhood exploring landscapes and architecture of a very different nature than that to which she was accustomed. Young Edith was entranced by the new environment, and this six-year period made a critical impression on her. Those early years of travel created such a foundation for Wharton’s own sense of beauty that when she returned to New York in 1872, she wanted nothing more than to leave again. She found herself wondering what “New York [could] offer to a child whose eyes had been filled with shapes of immortal beauty and immemorial significance? One of the most depressing impressions of my childhood is my recollection of the intolerable ugliness of New York . . . How could I understand that people who had seen Rome and Seville, Paris and London, could come back to live contentedly between Washington Square and the Central Park?” (BG 54–55).

In 1870, while the family was staying at a resort in the Black Forest, Edith contracted typhoid. She grew seriously ill, and the few remaining physicians—those who had not been drafted into the military as a result of the Franco-Prussian War—were unable to provide any relief. Her chances for recovery were slim. By chance, a noted Russian physician arrived at the resort to treat another patient and the Joneses were able to convince him to see their youngest child as well. While Lucretia was unable to bring herself to follow the recommended treatment of dunking the child in ice water, she did provide a fair improvisation of wrapping her daughter in sheets soaked in cold water. Wharton survived, but that near-death experience and period of high fever had a very real impact on an already active imagination. She herself credits this period with an early fear of ghosts and the darkly fantastic, a fear she later used during her writing years to create what she called her “ghost stories.”

Wharton’s childhood illness so frightened her parents that they prescribed the type of recuperative treatment typical of the period; they did not allow her to do anything potentially taxing—physically or mentally—for a very long period afterward. For a child who was so
strongly addicted to books and reading, the limitation was more than a little frustrating. Eventually, they allowed her to return to a normal level of activity, and any book which chanced within reach ultimately wound up within her grasp. The one exception to this practice was the novel. Because Wharton’s grandmother had not allowed her daughter to read novels, Lucretia saw no reason for her own daughter to have a different experience, even though she certainly read them as an adult. Lucretia established the firm policy that Edith must first submit for approval any book she wished to read, then promptly saved herself the extra effort of examining the texts by choosing to deny most fiction. Wharton credits this attitude in part to her mother’s own experience with literature, but she also argues that a large part of the reasoning behind the policy was her mother’s dedication toward pure English. Novels, Lucretia argued, were generally poor examples of the English language not because the writers were incapable of writing proper English, but rather because they simply did not know any better (BG 51). She had no desire for her daughter to acquire those particular weaknesses in language.

While her parents, particularly her mother, were passionate about proper English, they were less concerned about their daughter’s education on other fronts. Edith learned the usual social skills, but her governesses focused her learning opportunities on language skills. By age ten, she had good to fluent control over French, German, and Italian as well as English. Her reading, however, aside from the usually prohibited popular fiction and novels, was eclectic and remained so for the duration of her life. While it was disorganized and certainly not pedagogically programmed, and while Wharton as a child had a tendency not to finish the book she had begun, her reading did indeed help to fill in some of the holes created by a lack of a formal education. The ban on popular fiction pushed her back to the classics, and she argues that “by denying me the opportunity of wasting my time over ephemeral rubbish my mother threw me back on the great classics, and thereby helped to give my mind a temper which my too-easy studies could not have produced. I was forbidden to read Whyte Melville, Roda Broughton, ‘The Duchess’, and all the lesser novelists of the day; but before me stretched the wide expanse of the classics, English, French and German, and into that sea of wonders I plunged at will” (BG 65–66). She recalls her father’s library shelves with “Swift, Sterne, Defoe, the ‘Spectator’, Shakespeare, Milton, the Percy Reliques—and Hannah More” (BG 65), and lists a veritable
Who’s Who of historians, philosophers, critics, poets, and explorers. Her early reading history was peopled with Longfellow, Milton, Pope, Gray, Byron, Scott, Burns, Wordsworth, Corneille, Racine, Lafontaine, Sainte-Beuve, Thierry, Lacroix, Coleridge, Addison, Lamb, Macaulay, Washington Irving, and the Bible (BG 66–67). One of the repercussions of this literary approach, however, was that she developed a preference for that writing which followed in the tradition of the European classics. Wharton herself acknowledged that tendency and, to some extent, recognized her own preference for European rather than most American writers and writings. That tendency created an odd conflict between her personal preferences of style and the aftermath of a period when the country focused on creating a uniquely American literature.14 Because that focus was at least still marginally present at the time Wharton began writing, she found one way of responding to the political desire was to set much of her fiction in the American landscape with which she was most familiar: Old New York.

Interestingly, while Wharton in her adult life spoke disparagingly about the education she had received, she was no fan of higher education. She earnestly desired a classical education for children, but the increase in numbers of women attending college and university brought her no joy. Rather, she complained that the ancient curriculum of house-keeping which, at least in Anglo-Saxon countries, was so soon to be swept aside by the “monstrous regiment” of the emancipated: young women taught by their elders to despise the kitchen and the linen room, and to substitute the acquiring of University degrees for the more complex art of civilized living. The movement began when I was young, and now that I am old, and have watched it and noted its results, I mourn more than ever the extinction of the household arts. Cold storage, deplorable as it is, has done far less harm to the home than the Higher Education. (BG 60)

Nevertheless, in June of 1923, Wharton was pleased by Yale University’s desire to grant her an honorary doctorate of literature. While she initially refused the request, Lewis suggests that her motivation for doing so was not because she was opposed to the idea but rather that the prospect of returning stateside to an environment which would have changed radically from her last pre-war visit and in which she would be deluged by a wave of demands upon both her time and
her person was an intimidating one (451). In a letter to her friend Bernard Berenson, Wharton admitted that the degree was “the one sort of honour I have ever imagined that [could] please me, because I have so loved Letters all my days” (Letters 466).

Eventually, however, she recanted her position based upon the simple argument that such a thing had never before been done; Edith Wharton was the first woman to receive a Doctorate of Letters from a major institution, and she felt herself obliged to accept when she realized that the university was creating a precedent by doing so. On June 20, Yale conferred the degree with all the pomp and circumstance Wharton could have wished for such a solemn occasion and much more than she expected. “As for Yale,” she wrote Berenson afterwards, “the ceremony was really impressive; the last thing I expected it to be! It was a sort of mediaeval pageant, but a real, not a got-up one; & it remains a mystery that the straw-hatted pot-bellied ‘homme moyen’ of the modern U.S. should demand such a show, & know how to create it” (Letters 468).

Travel and Marriage

Some of the restrictions Wharton experienced while she was under her parents’ roof eased or disappeared altogether when she married Edward (“Teddy”) Robbins Wharton of Boston in 1885. While there was much that was problematic and even disastrous about their marriage, the first several of their 28 years of marriage allowed Wharton to indulge in one of the joys she had developed as a child and which had influenced all her other experiences and perceptions: travel. It was during this period that the couple developed a habit of spending part of each year traveling through Europe. Wharton was able to reconnect with the earlier childhood memories, and the love affair she began with Europe as a child matured along with her. Her understanding of beauty, sophistication, and civilization was increasingly founded in European models, and that perspective found correspondingly little of value in her own country. In 1907 she and Teddy rented a flat in Paris and began spending winters overseas, presumably to avoid the negative effects of the New York winters on Teddy’s health (BG 257). In 1911, Wharton made Paris her permanent home, and while she did not go so far as other American expatriate writers of the time and change or renounce her citizenship, she spent increasingly little time in
the country of her birth. When she accepted the Yale doctorate in 1923, she had not been stateside in ten years, since before the advent of the first World War.

Aside from travel, Edith and Teddy had little in common. Teddy preferred sports and outdoor activities, and while Edith enjoyed the country and took pleasure in being surrounded by nature and her own gardens, she craved intellectual activity, which was something her husband neither encouraged nor shared. One of the few pleasures they did share throughout their married years was traveling, and as much as possible, they took every opportunity to do so. Unfortunately, a lack of common interests was not the only problem with the marriage. Lewis believed that the couple was not sexually compatible, indeed that their relationship was nearly asexual, and that this gulf provided the foundation for Edith’s two-year affair in 1908–1910 with Morton Fullerton, a writer with the London Times. While the couple probably could have survived Edith’s affair—and Lewis suggests that Teddy eventually knew about it (278)—it could not survive Teddy’s own failing mental health. Between 1900 and 1913, Teddy’s behavior, infidelities, and mismanagement and embezzlement of Edith’s finances grew increasingly troubling, and all of Wharton’s biographers note that there were points where she even feared for her own safety. Lewis notes that nevertheless, in the final days of Wharton’s life, while her words about Teddy were sad, they were far from recriminating (531). Benstock suggests that Teddy was bipolar (262), and while that may never be fully determined, all the biographers and Wharton’s own memoir and letters record Teddy’s rapid decline and the toll it took on Edith. In desperation, she divorced him on the grounds of adultery in 1913.

The marriage cost Edith in more ways than one. Wright notes that Teddy “had spent at least $50,000" of Edith’s money (257) and that because of his mismanagement, economic need forced Wharton to allow Teddy to sell the home she had designed in Lenox, Massachusetts: The Mount. Finally, Wharton suffered her own share of health problems. Frequent colds, influenza, and bronchitis marred a large portion of her young adulthood and the first half of her marriage. While her childhood battle with typhoid lent grist to the mill for her ghost stories, her later collapses were very probably aggravated by stress, possibly as a result of Teddy’s own increasing mental illness.
The move overseas, while it began the final two years of her marriage to Teddy, was a very positive event in Edith’s life. While she very much missed The Mount and her gardens there, she finally had the opportunity to surround herself with those things which had been most a part of her own identity since she was a child. She felt herself more at home in the “old” environment and, despite her reserve and awkwardness with new acquaintances, made friends of her own, unrelated to family or husband. She gained control over her own finances, came into her own negotiating publishing contracts, and most importantly, was able to surround herself with friends and acquaintances of similar interests. Henry James is one of the most recognized of those, and the friendship they had shared since the late 1880s simply traded continents. Wharton’s autobiography is less a telling of what happened over her life than it is a record of the people she knew, and that circle of names grew considerably when she began spending a larger portion of her life overseas.

Aside from the differences in culture and environment, one of the most important changes Wharton found in Paris was that she was no longer a rather odd and out of place social exception. In her memoir, she observes that her literary success puzzled and embarrassed my old friends far more than it impressed them, and in my own family it created a kind of constraint which increased with the years. None of my relations ever spoke to me of my books, either to praise or blame—they simply ignored them; and among the immense tribe of my New York cousins, though it included many with whom I was on terms of affectionate intimacy, the subject was avoided as though it were a kind of family disgrace, which might be condoned but could not be forgotten. Only one eccentric widowed cousin, living a life of lonely invalidism, turned to my novels for occasional distraction, and had the courage to tell me so. (BG 143–44)

While her literary success was problematic for her New York “tribe,” it was something she found worked to her advantage in Europe:

At first I had felt this indifference [her family’s attitude toward her writing] acutely; but now I no longer cared, for my recognition as a writer had transformed my life. I had made my own friends, and my books were beginning to serve as an
introduction to my fellow-writers. But it was amusing to think that, whereas in London even my modest achievements would have opened many doors, in my native New York they were felt only as a drawback and an embarrassment. (BG 144)

Paris, like London, shaped itself into a welcome oasis for Wharton, simply because of the difference in attitude about her career choice. She observed that “[i]n Paris no one could live without literature, and the fact that I was a professional writer, instead of frightening my fashionable friends, interested them” (BG 261). Her home became a gathering place for friends and family as well as a springboard for her frequent visits to England and her other travels.

It was also from Paris that Wharton experienced World War I. While the advent of the war itself caught her by surprise, it was not long before she was enmeshed in one activity after another trying to meet the needs she saw around her. Like many, Wharton had first believed that it was impossible that such a war should actually occur, and when it did, she was of the equally strong opinion that it could not last long. Who, after all, could possibly want such a horrific and destructive event? Until roughly fourteen months after the entrance of the United States into the war and the subsequent appearance of the American Red Cross in Europe—an appearance which usurped the majority of already running charities and programs, often to the detriment of those programs (Price xi–xii)—Wharton did virtually anything and everything. She started her own sewing workrooms, founded refugee houses and orphanages, began employment programs for adults and training programs for children, opened medical clinics, created tuberculosis sanatoriums, traveled to the front on fact-finding missions and to deliver supplies, and fought, begged, and pleaded for donations and funding for them all. It was a period of frenzied activity and one which frequently drove her to exhaustion. France recognized her efforts by awarding her the French Legion of Honor and Belgium performed similarly with the Belgian Queen Elisabeth’s medal.

Wharton gave her own writing a lower priority during this period, but she did turn out several war-related pieces that deserve more attention than they have received. When the war was over and Wharton was able to return to a normal life, she moved from the chaos of Paris to the quieter Pavillon Colombe not far outside the city. Here, she was able to return to her writing, and
her life resumed some degree of order. During these last two decades of her life, Wharton lost a number of her friends, family, and long-time employees, and perhaps during this period more than any other she began to acquire a sense of her own mortality. Half her travels during this time seemed to have been related to funerals and deaths, and despite her own growing frailty and general exhaustion, she continued to write. In June of 1937, Wharton suffered a stroke milder than the serious one she had had six years prior, but which was potentially more frightening since this stroke partially blinded her for a short period and her powers of recovery seemed to be much more limited. It was indeed an omen of what was to come; she died two months later, in August.

Writing Identity: Citizenship in a Land of Letters

The creative spark appeared early in Wharton’s life, and her memoirs and papers record “making up” well before she could read. Indeed, she writes that she “cannot remember the time when I did not want to ‘make up’ stories,” she notes, and then follows with imaginative scenes of herself as a young child striding seriously across a room, a book she was “reading from” in one hand, its indecipherable pages lending impetus to her creative muse (BG 33). The need to create stories drove her and never left her. When the rest of her life grew chaotic or distressingly grey, her writing became not only her work but her solace. She used it as a place to which she could retreat; the labor was often difficult, but it was generally one she embraced. There are times when she speaks of writing being a chore, such as during the war and the latter years of her life when she argued most often with her publishers, but only rarely do her letters and memoir indicate even a hint of considering retirement. Had her later finances not necessitated the need for an income in order for her to maintain her standard of living, her production might have been considerably less and perhaps more selective, but it is difficult to conceive of Wharton retiring her pen with any degree of finality. She had too much she wanted to say.

Wharton’s first publications were modest, but they gave her confidence. She published her first poem in the Atlantic Monthly in 1878 (not counting the small volume of poetry, Verses, her mother published privately), one year before her mother brought her out into society. Between 1878 and the publication of The Decoration of Houses with Ogden Codman in 1896, there was a long dry spell when she only published a small cluster of poems, an isolated short
story or two, and a critical article about the San Vivaldo terra-cottas. That period, however, did not go to waste; it was a time of experiment and research, and a large portion of the work she did for *The Decoration of Houses* would be useful later in *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* and *The Valley of Decision*. Before them, however, would come the crucible event: the publication of the collection of short stories under the title *The Greater Inclination*.

That volume of short stories served as the catalyst, and from that point forward, Wharton regularly published major works until 1909. In 1910, she published the collection *Tales of Men and Ghosts*, and the novella *Ethan Frome* in 1911. She published one book each year for the next two years before World War I forced an interruption but still managed to produce smaller pieces and *The Book of the Homeless*, the proceeds of which she intended to support her wartime efforts. From 1919 until 1934, Wharton again produced at least one title per year. Her publication history in the last four years of her life was thinner than her wont, but given the state of her health, that was certainly to be expected; she was still working and writing until the few months before her death in 1937; Appleton-Century brought out *Ghosts* (a collection of ghost stories) two months after her death and published the unfinished version of *The Buccaneers* the following year.

The majority of Wharton’s fiction tends to be social criticism, with a very heavy layer of irony and satire, and this is the approach most critics use in discussing those texts. The ghost stories, however, deserve mention in their own right, if only because they deviate from much of her other work. The conditions surrounding Wharton’s early childhood illness lent an extra edge to her imagination and gave it a slightly more gothic twist. She became superstitious and terribly fearful about the supernatural, and it was an anxiety which did not leave her until she was well into adulthood. Nevertheless, she made good use of her private fear of ghosts by writing short stories about the supernatural and gothic. In the preface to her last collection of ghost stories, Wharton observes that “the teller of supernatural tales should be well frightened in the telling” (*Ghost Stories* 11). Wharton used her own earlier fear to write the tales, and there may be both positive and negative repercussions to that approach. The positive, of course, is that that which frightens one person is often something which would frighten another; fear can be a very universal element and a writer of perception—which Wharton undoubtedly was—can make good
use of that. The drawback is that a writer may allow her own fear to so influence her storytelling that she overlooks the critical pieces which would sufficiently frighten her reader; her own fears so affect her that she neglects the necessary nudges to her reader’s.

Public reception varied wildly from enthusiastic to critical, such as one reader who “scathingly said it was hard to believe that a ghost created by so refined a writer as Mrs. Wharton would do anything so gross as to ring a bell” (BG 126). Shortly after the publication of “Pomegranate Seed,” one of Wharton’s more recognized tales, her readers deluged her with mail asking about the meaning of the title or how a ghost could write a letter (Ghost Stories 8). Wharton’s response to such queries tended to be impatient; she could not understand how a reading public had managed to escape an education which included the classical references and allusions she sometimes used in her stories, or how they could possess so little imagination. Indeed, she believed that she had “made the depressing discovery that the faculty required for their [ghost stories] enjoyment has become almost atrophied in modern man,” and that that faculty for appreciation was “being gradually atrophied by those two world-wide enemies of the imagination, the wireless and the cinema” (Ghost Stories 8).

There was little critical examination of the stories for a very long period; academics preferred the more serious Ethan Frome and House of Mirth. More recently, that trend has shifted in the never-ending search for new territory. Current criticism ranges from overwhelmingly enthusiastic to a much more even-handed (and realistic) response. The reality is that the stories are often of variable quality. Interestingly, her better ghost stories are the longer ones, where she spent more time developing character and plot, although they often sacrifice something of their tension with the increased length. The shorter stories, however, often feel unfinished, as if she had forgotten to tie loose ends together, flesh out details, or offer motivations. Given what we know about Wharton, her level of craftsmanship, and her attention to detail, the idea of having forgotten to do anything is more than a little farfetched. In other words, the stories are what she intended them to be.

I believe those stories fall short of their potential. Wharton admired Walter de la Mare, the author of “Seaton’s Aunt,” and dedicated her 1937 publication of Ghosts to him. She also had access to and read Edgar Allan Poe’s work. Unfortunately, her own work falls short of
achieving that same level dark tension. The weakness here is not in the subject matter, for the stories themselves each have great potential. Rather, the weakness is in the craft and telling of the tale, and I find myself wondering if indeed Wharton’s own fear did not blind her to some of the small matters which would have pushed the stories into true excellence.

While she started her career tentatively, the isolation she felt about her choice of careers and her growing need to handle her own business affairs in the light of Teddy’s and her other stewards’ and attorneys’ ineptitude forced her to adopt a much stronger position than she might have found necessary had her trustees themselves filled a stronger and more positive role. She learned to develop a “masculine” approach to the business of writing as well as the business of the business itself and deliberately adopted that more critical and reasoned tone in order to separate herself from other female writers. While there were some female writers she openly supported, such as George Eliot, Wharton was often critical of other women writers, particularly regionalists and those who wrote sentimental fiction. They were, she felt, too unrealistic (and therefore too feminine). She very much wanted to separate herself from the “rose-colored spectacles of [her] predecessors, Mary Wilkins and Sarah Orne Jewett” (BG 293). While she suggested that women were not capable of critical writing and questioned her own ability to do so when her publisher put her to the task of creating *The Writing of Fiction*, she did believe that they should do more than write romance. Rather, she wanted the popular novelist to examine not only the writing, but the subject:

My impression is that, among English and American novelists, few are greatly interested in these deeper processes of their art; their conscious investigations of method seldom seem to go deeper than syntax, and it is immeasurably deeper that the vital interest begins. Therefore I shall try to depict the growth and unfolding of the plants in my secret garden, from the seed to the shrub-top—for I have no intention of magnifying my vegetation into trees! (BG 198)

Wharton certainly did not turn her “vegetation into trees,” and any possibility of doing so vanished when she took Henry James’s early advice to “Do New York,” a sentiment he first voiced in 1900 and later echoed in 1902 immediately after the publication of her first novel,
In short, James told her to write about what she knew and to focus on her own back yard, and the bulk of Wharton’s fictional works thereafter did indeed do so. However, because of the similarity in subject matter and perhaps even a certain similarity in approach and style in the first years, Wharton critics during this period often connected her work with that of James, and not necessarily favorably. The comparison irked her terribly, and rightfully so, particularly during the period of James’s writing when she found herself not in favor of his work. In a letter to William Crary Brownell in 1904, after she thanks him for sending the reviews of her third collection of short stories, *The Descent of Man*, she writes that “the continued cry that I am an echo of Mr. James (whose books of the last ten years I can’t read, much as I delight in the man), & the assumption that the people I write about are not ‘real’ because they are not navvies & char-women, makes me feel rather hopeless. I write about what I see, what I happen to be nearest to, which is surely better than doing cowboys de chic” (*Letters* 91). Later observations in her memoir suggest that she may have been more receptive to those works in the last ten years of her life than in the early 1900s at the time of this letter. While critics today no longer accuse Wharton of (poorly) mimicking James, there is still a considerable body of critical work connecting the two writers, in part because of their close friendship. Given the intimacy of their relationship, it is inevitable there be a certain amount of influence between the two, but few essays have addressed the possibility of a reversal of influence.15

Wharton was, in many ways, a proverbial round peg in a square hole. She spent a frightening portion of her life feeling as if she did not quite belong to her environment. When she returned from her childhood travels overseas, she felt distinctly out of place in New York. Indeed, while that was home and she identified herself with the Old New York of her memory, it was still often a foreign place and herself merely a guest. That sense of foreignness reappeared in the later decades of Wharton’s life as she spent less and less time in America. The few trips she did make in the later years were often hurried ones; it was not the place she most desired to be. In June of 1903, she wrote a reply to a letter from her close friend Sara Norton which, perhaps more than any other, so clearly voices her feeling of being out of place in the land of her birth:
Your letter glowing with the reflection of the National Gallery came yesterday, & made me feel more acutely than ever the contrast between the old & the new, between the stored beauty & tradition & amenity over there, & the crassness here. My first few weeks in America are always miserable, because the tastes I am cursed with are all of a kind that cannot be gratified here, & I am not enough in sympathy with our “gros public” to make up for the lack on the aesthetic side. One’s friends are delightful; but we are none of us Americans, we don’t think or feel as the Americans do, we are the wretched exotics produced in a European glass-house, the most déplacé & useless class on earth! All of which outburst is due to my first sight of American streets, my first hearing of American voices, & the wild, dishevelled backwoods look of everything when one first comes home! You see in my heart of hearts, a heart never unbosomed, I feel in America as you say you do in England—out of sympathy with everything. And in England I like it all—institutions, traditions, mannerisms, conservatisms, everything but the women’s clothes, & the having to go to church every Sunday. (Letters 85)

It was not just a question of feeling out of place in place, but of feeling emotionally and intellectually out of place. Her family and social equals of the Boston and new York crowds never truly accepted her writing; she was different. Moving abroad helped alleviate some of that as she was able to change her social circles, but the true change occurred just before the turn of the century when she finally found her own identity in writing. This, finally, was the place where she felt she belonged, and at home:

I never questioned that story-telling was my job, though I doubted whether I should be able to cross the chasm which separated the nouvelle from the novel. Meanwhile I felt like some homeless waif who, after trying for years to take out naturalization papers, and being rejected by every country, has finally acquired a nationality. The Land of Letters was henceforth to be my country, and I gloried in my new citizenship. (BG 119)

Had Wharton felt at home in any of the other environments, it is possible that this realization may have been less the epiphany than it ultimately became. Instead, however, the publication of
her first collection of short stories, *The Greater Inclination* in 1899, very vividly challenged her sense of not belonging. This is the point when Wharton suddenly felt she had found her place and even found an identity. Her comment in her autobiography is telling on this point as she considers that she “had as yet no real personality of my own, and was not to acquire one till my first volume of short stories was published—and that was not until 1899” (*BG* 112). For Wharton, finding this sense of identity and “citizenship” was crucial, and the rest of her development as a writer hinged on her conviction that finally she had found a “place” where she truly belonged—and which belonged to her.

**Mary Johnston (1870–1936)**

**Family and Background**

Mary Johnston was born on November 21, 1870, in the little town of Buchanan, Virginia to Elizabeth Dixon Alexander and Major John William Johnston. She was the eldest of what would eventually become a moderately large family of six children. Socially, the Johnstons were part of the upper-middle class, or lower upper class. While they were certainly not in Edith Wharton’s economic realm, the family was at that time financially secure and intent on survival after the setbacks and economic difficulties associated with the end of the Civil War. Johnston’s father held a number of jobs, beginning with resuming his legal career—a career the War had interrupted—when the War finished. He was a former member of the Virginia legislature, served as president of the James River Kanawha Canal Company, worked with a number of other rail companies, and was president of the Georgia Pacific Railroad Company (Cella 16). When work required his presence in Alabama or New York, the family or a portion of it moved to be with him, but they always returned home to Virginia.

While there is little reference to her father’s background, Johnston notes that her mother’s background was Scots-Irish and that her great-grandfather converted from the Scottish church to Baptist during a visit to Sweden. She later implies that he emigrated to the United States for reasons of religious freedom, and the reader comes away from her diary with the sense that she took a certain amount of satisfaction in her grandfather’s pursuit of that which he believed was right. Indeed, Johnston took a certain pride in most of her family’s background. As Cella notes,
“[w]hile she was distantly related to James Madison and Patrick Henry, she wrote proudly and most frequently about less well known pioneer ancestors whose courage and endurance had helped settle the western part of Virginia” (15). Her family and family heritage was important to her, and that importance remained with her for her entire life.

In the summer of 1888, the youngest of the children, Elizabeth, was born, and the following March, her mother died unexpectedly. That loss was cataclysmic for Johnston and her family and was potentially the biggest formative event in the first half of Johnston’s life. The death of their mother when Johnston was seventeen obviously changed the household dynamics, and Mary set herself the task of filling the void as much as possible. Johnston’s aunt Marianne Nicole, her father’s sister, came to live with the family and provide an adult female presence in the household, but Mary’s notes clearly indicate that she felt she had the ultimate responsibility and that her aunt encouraged her to occupy that emotional space. Her memoir records a humble transition from child to adult, but more importantly it shows the value she placed on her family and her sense of priorities:

When I recovered from the first shock of that grief it was to find my life all changed, and the path it was my duty to pursue stretching quite plain before me. I had been a dreamy, self-centered child and girl, with vague aspirations for a life that should be all books and going from one beautiful place to another; now I found myself a woman, with an almost broken-hearted father to minister to, with five brothers and sisters younger than myself to care for with a large household to keep in running order. . . . I tried to do my duty from the first as I saw it, though I know with many failures and shortcomings. . . . I tried to fill, as far as it was possible to fill, my mother’s place, to comfort my father, to be a good sister to the other children, to make home comfortable and happy. If I have been even measurably successful I care more for that success than I shall ever care for any other.

Johnston’s priorities never changed. Indeed, she spent the bulk of her life trying to provide her family with both security and comfort, often to the detriment of her own health. The family remained a very close one, living and traveling together for the larger part of their lives. As a
case in point, Walter, the next youngest child, developed pneumonia after the flood of 1877, and Mary records her youngest brother as contracting “infantile paralysis.” He survived, but Cella notes that Walter “required special care because of his childhood illness” (Cella 16). Mary provided that care for the rest of her life.

**Childhood and Education**

Johnston’s childhood was not a healthy one. She writes that “I do not remember when I began to be an ailing child, but it was very early. I have no rememberance [sic] of good health.” She remembers having the usual childhood illnesses, but also contracting “diptheria [sic] and pneumonia, and for several successive summers chills and fever.” Perhaps equally problematically, she suffered from headaches which “were intolerably frequent and severe,” a problem which was probably due to the difficulty she had with her eyes. She underwent eye surgery in 1901 which probably resolved a significant portion of her earlier headaches.

As a result of her poor health, Johnston received very little regular schooling. Grandmother Johnston served as the children’s teacher until she died in March of 1878, when Mary was eight years old. Johnston remembers that the older woman was fond of flowers and had a green thumb. While flowers and nature were very important to Mary at all stages of her life, the biographical notes provided by Elizabeth and based on Mary’s diaries emphasize one other point; they note that Grandmother Johnston “had been a beautiful woman. All her people had good minds, and a strong love of books, and she herself was well read.” Johnston very much identified with this ancestor, but not because of any perception of beauty. Rather, the connection with flowers and books was a bond they shared and one of the ways she chose to remember her grandmother; for Johnston, she was “a strong and beautiful nature, a woman of many sorrows but of much courage.” After Grandmother Johnston’s death, Mary notes that “Auntie” took over teaching the children and that she was often out ill from these lessons. The “school” and lessons were with the rest of the children in the room she called “the office” at the family home, but she notes that she was often too ill to participate. When she was able to read, like Wharton, Johnston was a voracious reader. Her reading and independent studies provided the bulk of her education:
Regular schooling was forbidden. When I was fairly well I studied, but my lessons were never compulsory. Now and again all books were prohibited: at times I was not even to be read aloud to, and then I thought that I had indeed fallen on evil days. . . . Ordinarily, however, while I was kept out of the school room, I was allowed free way with books. I suppose it was thought a blessing that so ailing a child should be fond of reading and so could amuse herself. While reading helped, Johnston’s health seemed to fail her most during the winter, and she later wondered if this was not why she tended to associate happiness with summer and winter with its reverse.

Aside from some questionable degree of traditional studies, Johnston also took music lessons, a pursuit for which she describes as not having “the least aptitude. It was a great waste, —but in those days every little girl must learn the piano.”

In 1886, Major Johnston’s job required his presence in Birmingham, Alabama, while he worked on the construction of the Georgia-Pacific railroad “between Atlanta and the Mississippi. To be with him the family removed from Virginia to Birmingham.” The following year, the Johnston sent Mary and her sisters to an all-girls boarding school in Atlanta. That period was short-lived, however, because within three months she had grown so ill that she had to return home. Her sisters were able to remain at school, but for Mary, “[t]hen and there was finished my formal education.” Despite the shortness of her stay, that three-month period provided one very critical event in Johnston’s life: her teacher told her that she could write and that she believed Mary possessed talent. That event provided the seed for something which would happen five years later.

From Teens to Adulthood

The winter after her mother’s death, Mary’s father grew ill, and the doctor recommended he go abroad. The memoir and Mary’s diary entries do not clearly identify the illness, but it was obviously severe enough that the family felt the travel expenses and the time away from work were necessary. Since he could not travel alone, Mary traveled with him while her aunt stayed with the rest of the children. She notes that they “sailed for Harve [sic] in late February,” and
there is a quick record of their subsequent travels. The memoir notes that they spent ten days in Paris, traveled to Haute Combe, Chambéry, Annecy, Geneva, and Aix. They spent a month in Italy, then traveled to England and spent three weeks in London, some time in Edinburgh, traveled through Ireland, and returned home. That trip overseas allowed her to spend time with her father, and the time was precious to her. While her relationship with her father had always been a positive one, the death of her mother and her father’s illness combined to strengthen that bond even further. Perhaps equally importantly, the journey gave Mary the opportunity to see Europe in a way which would allow her to show it to her siblings later.

Two years later when Mary was 21, Major Johnston’s work took him to New York, and again Mary went with him. The cold weather and climate change seem to have aggravated her physical weaknesses, however, and she found herself largely confined to bed. Since she could not exercise or be physically active, she found the time oppressive and turned to reading and studying. She also began writing, and this was when her Atlanta teacher’s words began to finally bear fruit. She wrote quietly, often leaving home and finding a quiet bench in Central Park or, when the weather was bad, in a nearby museum, and did not yet dare raise the subject with her family. This was a period of exploration and experimentation; it would be another three years before she would actually begin to work with serious intent at the craft.

In the meantime, Mary continued to accompany her father when travel became necessary and serve as his assistant and secretary as much as possible. After she began publishing, the family moved permanently to Richmond and began spending winters in Nassau. Johnston then had the means to allow them to travel throughout Europe, providing cultural opportunities they might not otherwise have been able to afford; she made three other tours of Europe with at least some of her siblings in 1904, 1907, and 1909. Of her siblings, only one sister, Anne, married; the family was still very much a tightly knit unit. Cella records Anne’s death on “April 3, 1901, after giving birth to her third son, who died nine months later” (148 n8). Anne’s death grieved Mary deeply, but it was the death of her father four years later in 1905 which truly laid her low. The loss combined with her own physical frailty and was so devastating that doctors fully expected she would not survive. As her sister Elizabeth notes in her addendum to Mary’s memoir, Johnston “loved two things most in life: Truth and Father.” Just as Wharton’s illness
gave inspiration, so too did Johnston’s, and the latter found her pen turning toward metaphysical and spiritual topics in her later writings.

Mary Johnston never married. Instead, she spent the bulk of her life working to be certain her family was financially secure and safely housed and otherwise had what they needed for both survival and comfort. Just as Wharton built The Mount, Johnston used the proceeds of her writing to build Three Hills, a large home just outside of Warm Springs, Virginia. The house later turned into something of a white elephant, and upkeep became so difficult during the Depression and economically lean years that the sisters had little alternative but to take in boarders. Eloise and Elizabeth handled the domestic side of affairs while Mary wrote, Elizabeth also serving as Mary’s typist. After Johnston’s death, the maintenance of the property simply proved too much, and Three Hills passed out of the family. Today, after a series of economic ups and downs, the house and grounds have been partially restored, very heavily renovated to bring them up to standard, and are in use as a high-end bed and breakfast and conference center, thus returning Three Hills to an earlier point in its history. The current owners take great pride in Johnston’s association with the property, and while there may be little of Johnston remaining about the house and gardens aside from their original construction and design, the owners celebrate Johnston’s history in the Three Hills Inn publicity and information.

Johnston was, by all records, a shy, soft-spoken, gracious woman, but she was passionate about her own convictions. Through Ellen and Cary Glasgow, she found herself involved in the suffrage movement, and because of her publishing success, received numerous invitations to speak at one event or to one group after another, including the Virginia legislature. Intimidated by the concept, she began taking speech lessons in order to help her do that which she felt was necessary. She was instrumental in the formation of the Equal Suffrage League of Virginia and found herself spending an increasing amount of time arguing the cause. She would spend six very active years writing and speaking on suffrage issues before she found herself needing to reclaim her writing and studying time. During World War I, she quietly took up her position not as “pacifist,” but as “humanist.” Indeed, the position of “humanist” stayed with Johnston for most of her life, and she dedicated much of her studying and reading in the last twenty years of her life to exploring religious and philosophical issues. If we judge Johnston based on her
writing, we must also recognize that she was inherently honest and not afraid to voice her beliefs. Voicing those convictions and exploring those beliefs in her writings, however, moved her from the best-seller lists to a position of bare recognition, and while she had begun to regain some of her readership toward the end of her career as she learned to modulate her voice and acquired better control over her craft, her career never recovered from the earlier shift.

Mary Johnston, affectionately called “Day” when she was a child, died on May 9, 1936, after almost a year of serious illness now recognized as the last stages of nephritis and kidney failure.

**Writing Identity: Discoverer in the Realms of my own Being**

Like Wharton and most creative children, Johnston recalls an interest in story telling in her early childhood memories. At age six or seven, Johnston distinctly remembers what she calls her “first conscious moment of composition,” and being “pleased as Punch” about it. “I had,” she says, “created something. The statement [‘Therein my love lieth.’] had no special meaning to me, but the words seemed to be entirely beautiful, and so extraordinarily my own!” That pleasure in her ability to create prompted further activity, and she recalls writing a short ballad only a couple of years later. Unlike Wharton, who found fairy tales uninspiring, Johnston remembers being “very fond of telling fairy stories to any one who would listen.”

Johnston was not interested only in fairy tales, however; she was an avid reader, and enjoyed being read aloud to—a practice which continued throughout her life. After her three months in Atlanta, her reading merely intensified. She notes that she “read and read and read—much that was inferior but much, too, that was not so.” Her early reading seems to have been fairly unlimited, and she covered everything from history to philosophy, religion, legend, poetry, and mythology. Her reading list included Marcus Aurelius, Pascal, Bunyan, *The Arabian Nights*, Greek myths, *The Faery Queen*, *Morte D’Arthur*, Shakespeare, and Shelley. Unlike Wharton, Johnston’s parents allowed her to read novels and took it as a matter of course that she did so. She remembers being enthralled as a child by Charlotte Yonge and Grace Aguilar, and in a visit to Cary and Ellen Glasgow in June of 1906, talking “of the very remarkable trash we all
read, *The Wide, Wide World, Children of the Abbey, Home Influence*, and *Mother’s Recompense.*”

A number of different influences fueled Johnston’s early imagination, but her memoir points to three very specific items. The first is water:

> Water and the power of water have always exercised a strong influence upon my imagination. I dream of it, of rivers and seas, floods and tidal waves, and I think of it in many ways. Fire has not half the hold upon my imagination. It is purely, I think, in both cases the effect of association. I have never seen a great fire, or been in any alarm from one. But as a child the flood in the James took strong hold of my mind and I have had other water experiences to stress the fancy.

In 1877, the James River and the nearby canal flooded, forcing Buchanan residents to higher ground, including Mary’s family whose Oak Hill property backed onto the river. At least twenty people died in the flood, and there was a fair amount of loss of property, including Fanny and Fountain’s little house on the riverbank, from which the couple had to be removed almost forcibly at the eleventh hour. Johnston’s memory of the flood is dramatic, and she remembers a day of watching “roofs of houses, trees, fencing, chicken coops, once a dog, howling mournfully, on the top of some lumber, and once a bed nicely made with ruffled pillows and bolster primly in place” float by. The family could not return home for a number of days, and she recalls that they kept the fires burning in order to dry out the house, “but the dampness must have remained for that spring Grandmother Johnston died of pneumonia and Walter and I were desperately ill with it.” Johnston did not know that her grandmother had died, nor that her youngest brother was deathly ill and that the family did not expect him to survive until she was almost well. Fortunately, Walter survived, but the event—coupled as it was with the economic repercussions, the death of her grandmother, Walter’s near death, and her own terrible illness—made an understandably dramatic impression on a young child’s heart.

The second influence is connected to water, but while the flood of 1877 was a negative one, Johnston’s memories of the six summers the family spent on Cobb Island off the Virginia coast in the first half of the 1890s are pleasant ones associated with the warmth of summer and the freedom of the marshes, sea, and boat. While living conditions were primitive, she apparently loved the place. This period meant a great deal to her, and the island itself was
important, perhaps in largest part because of the natural aspects; she notes the influence it had on her writing and the places where it reappears in her texts. The family’s summers at the island stopped when the island suffered a series of natural disasters: a series of storms beginning in 1895 caused considerable damage, a hurricane in the middle of October the following year battered the remains, and another hurricane ten days later all but obliterated the small island. Aside from a temporary occupation by a Coast Guard station in the early 1930s, the island was never again inhabited.

The third strong influence Johnston recognized on her writing was nature. Some of her earliest recorded memories are of the natural world, trees, plants, and flowers, and she recalls with precision the flower garden divided among the children, each child having his or her own plot, and the flowers that child chose to grow. Her diary entries are full of observations about the natural world around her, and those same observations appear in often more detailed form in her fiction. It is an affinity she acknowledged in her letters and diaries, and she did not hesitate to name it a passion.

There is one other influence upon Johnston’s writing which she did not necessarily name as such, but which she did recognize: the Civil War. A number of the male members of her family participated in the war, her father lost his family home to it, and her local community told tales of it and their experiences for years afterward.

When Johnston finally began to write, it was during the period she spent with her father in New York, and largely out of the simple need to do something which was not physically strenuous. Her early attempts were at poetry, and as she would do for the next few years, she kept her writing secret. For the first three years of her writing career, she focused on short stories, unsuccessfully. She may have lacked technique, but she most certainly lacked confidence; she summarily burned every rejected short story upon its return, and never with a question that the editor may have been mistaken or that the story may have been more appropriate for a different magazine, or even that revision with an eye to the needs of that particular magazine might make it acceptable. Rather, she blindly accepted the opinion as not only expert but universal. And she did it all in private. She did not confess her attempts to the rest of her family or circle of friends.
In 1895–96, she found herself pressed to take seriously both the craft and her attempts to earn from it. The family’s finances crashed with the rest of the country, and in the period of a week they found themselves having gone from “living comfortably in an easy Southern fashion in New York” to something much more grim. There is a pragmatic realism in her voice when she writes that “[t]here was a sharp need of retrenchment and even when retrenchment was accomplished need remained.” Once again, survival became a question, and in response, Mary put herself on a schedule and began writing in earnest. This was the period when she often wrote at Central Park, or the Metropolitan Museum, then returned home to continue writing. She finished her first novel, *Prisoners of Hope*, in January of 1898 and sent it off to Houghton Mifflin, then waited calmly for what she fully expected to be yet another rejection letter. Much to her surprise, Houghton Mifflin accepted the novel. The following morning she told her father what she had done and was very pleased that he “seem[ed] gratified.” Her joy at his satisfaction provides us with a sense of her close relationship with her father; it was a joy she would be able to share with him only three more times before he died six years later.

Johnston’s writing career had officially begun. Over the next six years, she produced three more novels, one every other year, before her own serious illness in 1905 only months after her father’s death. These first novels were by and large historical romance and were popular with the general public. Her next work, however, would begin a period of departure from her beginnings. *The Goddess of Reason*, published in 1907, is a blank verse play about the French Revolution. It was a work which she wrote largely during her recuperation and with which she found herself struggling as she attempted to return to some semblance of a writing routine. In 1908, 1911, and 1912, Johnston published *Lewis Rand* and her two Civil War novels—*The Long Roll* and *Cease Firing*—honoring her father and family. In 1913, she again deviated from what she had done thus far, and *Hagar* marks the point where she began writing about her convictions and beliefs in earnest. She published roughly one book each year for the next seven years, including one nonfiction history for the Yale series. With exception of the nonfiction, Johnston’s publications during this period gradually weaned her audience away even as they increasingly explored or preached social issues and mystical philosophy. While critical reviews of these texts varied, the general public much preferred the earlier texts, and that preference showed in sale
numbers. Disheartened and fearful that she would lose Three Hills, Johnston retooled her writing and attempted to return to some degree to the historical aspects that had made her earlier works popular. Slowly, she began to find ways to incorporate her beliefs and convictions into her works a little more subtly, and by gradual increments her own control over the craft grew stronger. In the last decade and a half of her life, Johnston published seven more books and found homes for a number of short stories in magazines.

Johnston’s work is often irregular and inconsistent. A large part of that is quite probably due to the fact that she pushed herself to work, regardless of how she felt and whether she was physically strong enough. Sir Mortimer is a good example of that, and she notes that it “was to me, because of increasing ill health, a most difficult, painful, and unsatisfactory work.” Had Johnston not felt the need to provide for her family so keenly, she may have found the quality of her work improved with the freedom to work at a pace more suited to her body’s needs. It was a difficulty she recognized and one which her sister, Elizabeth, commented on as well when she noted that “when Eloise was ill Mary feverishly wrote short stories—not her metier but they brought in ready money—to pay for her every care and comfort.” Johnston enjoyed and perhaps even loved writing, but the pressure of producing an income for her family’s survival also made her hate it at times. It became a job which she must do rather than a passion or joy, and her diaries record times when she wished she could write what she wanted on her own schedule.

While Johnston never suffered the “out of place” feeling Wharton speaks of, she very similarly expresses her moment of epiphany when she realizes that she will become a writer as finding a place of one’s own:

One evening in New York I was dressed for dinner and walking up and down the room for a few minutes before it should be ready. I suppose I was thinking of some book I was reading—I do not remember. But suddenly, as such things come, with a sense of space and atmosphere and significance, my mind filled with a conviction. I also shall write books.

It came with full prophetic power, with a sense of enlargement and realization of my own nature. I dare say all of us know such moments, however rare they be. The Self comes into some increment of its own. It finds that it has a
bank account. Wheat is in its barns, honey is in its hive. It beholds a Use that can be made of it all. It ceases to be only receptive; it becomes emissive [sic], creative. It is aware of its own will, it is conscious. Such moments are the reward of years of dumb and blind effort. Hence, the sense of wonder, often of awe, the deepening and the exaltation, the conscious stretch of capacity, the breath of new life. It is in itself True Discovery, and it bears the thrill of it. So with me that winter evening in New York. I was Discoverer in the Realms of my own Being, and I felt the thrill of it.

In Johnston’s case, the epiphany forecasted an attitude she would take increasingly over the writing years as she delved into her own possibilities and explored the newly recognized Realm of her own self.
III. A CASE EXAMPLE:

Authorial Identity and Wharton’s “Writing a War Story”

For Wharton, the question of authorship was a serious one. In part it reflected her own passionate sense of finally belonging, but it also reflected a complete set of issues which have to do with gender. Specifically, even though Wharton embraced and indeed identified herself as part of the masculine world of literature and authorship, she found herself fighting for her own writing existence. She felt increasingly pushed aside as the next generation of writers began to take the stage, but probably never quite realized that she was not alone. As Elaine Showalter notes, between the 1920s and 1930s women writers were increasingly marginalized; they were slowly being pushed out of the literary world in an attempt to define American literature according to masculine precepts or culture (825). Indeed, by Wharton’s death in 1937, academia had purged even Wharton from academic (masculine) literary identity when, [“i]n 1935, the first edition of a standard college textbook, *Major American Writers*, included no women at all” (Showalter 840). In the interim, however, Edith Wharton wrote of the female popular fiction writer or poetess in generally scathing terms and maintained a sometimes uneasy alliance with male-defined precepts of literature.

First published in *Woman’s Home Companion* in September of 1919, “Writing a War Story” follows Miss Ivy Spang of Cornwall-on-Hudson through the process of writing her first piece of fiction and its subsequent publication. Ivy wrote and published a “little volume of verse” (247) roughly two years before the war and had received a certain amount of notice, the most significant of which was from an editor at *Zig-zag*, “the new ‘Weekly Journal of Defiance” (247). While that recognition was somewhat dubious and definitely limited, it was enough to make her feel “that at last she had been understood” (247). Two years into the war as she is pouring tea on her weekly visit to the Anglo-American hospital in Paris, the editor of *The Man-
at-Arms magazine, a British publication placed in hospitals as reading material for the wounded, solicits Ivy Spang for the American contribution for a “rattling war story” (248). Already scheduled for leave, Ivy agrees to the request and decides to use her vacation to write the story. The problem, however, is that she cannot come up with a story. After requesting and being denied an extension from the publisher, she confides the problem to her old governess. The older woman speculates that perhaps Ivy need only decide upon her subject and that, regardless of where the story itself originates, Ivy’s writing of it would be her own “treatment” (252), thereby making the story hers as well. Ivy is perplexed, and Madsy explains that in the past year while she has been working at the hospital, she has managed to observe and hear many stories. Perhaps one of them might be appropriate for Ivy’s use. Ivy thinks the idea is a splendid one and borrows the governess’s little journal to review her stock of stories and decide which would be best for her own purposes. The photographer takes Ivy’s full-length photograph, she ultimately writes the story, and the magazine with the story finally appears. Ivy goes through the usual case of nerves as the magazine makes its debut, but is puzzled when she observes that no one seems to have noticed it. Finally, she takes a dozen copies with her on her next visit to the hospital and shyly distributes them herself. The next week away from the hospital is a long one for Ivy, but she uses the time to examine the other writings and photos in the magazine, including one by the Queen of Norromania, and reassure herself that “neither Ivy’s portrait nor her story would suffer by comparison” (255–56). When she returns to the hospital a week later, she finds Harold Harbard, “the novelist . . . who wrote the book they made such a fuss about” (256), among the ranks of patients, and his neighbors asking for her autograph. Unfortunately, her elation is temporary and lasts only until she realizes that the other men want her autograph because of her photo—indeed, none had read the story—and Harbard gives her less than positive feedback.

Most critics place Wharton’s “Writing a War Story” with the rest of her war writings, and that choice is reasonable given the story’s setting. The story, however, is not really a war story. If we read the text as such, then we cannot help but find it to be thin; there is actually very little of the war in the story. Instead, this story is about gender roles and authorial identity—and authority—rather than war. Specifically, it is about Wharton’s convictions about her own identity as a writer. We have a few hospital scenes, but Wharton has not drawn them in any
particular detail and gives them very little significance. They serve only to stage the rest of the story. The patients in their beds are nameless and faceless; they are the unidentifiable background crowd at a football game. The only patient for which Wharton gives the reader a name is the novelist, Harold Harbard, and while she has named him, Wharton has not necessarily clearly defined him. We have no explanation for his presence in the hospital other than that he is a newly arrived patient. We know that he has the rank of Captain, but the senior nurse only says that “he’s rather down on his luck” (256) which, of course, could mean any number of things and is an odd statement to make under the circumstances. Certainly being wounded in battle, assuming that was the case, is not an event one would generally consider as one’s greatest fortune or particularly lucky—and no more lucky or unlucky than the men lying in the beds beside him. There is a clearer sense of the writer as a person during his conversation with Ivy at the end of the story, but even then the entire focus is upon Ivy Spangle, a once-a-week volunteer tea-lady who happens to write.

Where Wharton has thinly or even barely drawn the other characters, Ivy is considerably more substantial. She is, however, something of a type. She is also a very clear emblem of something from which Wharton spent most of her professional life trying to separate herself: Hawthorne’s scribbling women. The reader first meets Ivy Spang in slightly general terms. We have no idea how old she is, but we do know that she is single, and since her old governess is still alive and amenable to both a visit and playing the part of Dragon-at-the-door in order to ward off interruptions, we can guess that she is probably younger than middle age. The narrator describes her as “pretty” (247) and she is young enough that her photograph in the magazine catches the soldiers’ attention. It is possible for the reader to interpret the presence of the governess, the solitary travel to the home of the governess, the maidenly blushes, and Ivy’s own sense that she had never been truly understood until the editor of Zig-zag, a complete stranger, gave her a mild compliment to suggest that Ivy has never been married. Certainly they suggest that she has not had or is not now in a serious romantic relationship. Perhaps most importantly, however, the narrator gives the reader the overall impression that Ivy is young. She has very few opinions of her own, and those she does formulate tend to be based on sources where she felt herself appreciated. That is, of course, an entirely human and natural process, but once she has
formulated that opinion, she does not seem to be able to question it or necessarily even maintain it. She shows no evidence of critical thinking or being able to examine either herself or her position in any depth. There is a sort of all-or-nothing approach to her attitudes, and when she receives feedback which contradicts the earlier opinion, she finds herself embarrassed for believing the first and hastily jettisons that earlier opinion. Even more significantly, her apparent youth evidences itself most strongly in her lack of both experience and knowledge.

For instance, Ivy knows very little about writing. She publishes that first volume of poetry based on “the urgent request of ‘friends’ in exposing her first-born [writing] to the public gaze” (247). The reader, however, suspects that the poetry may not be of a particularly high quality when the narrator notes that the “public had not gazed very hard or very long” (247) and that the only critical reception the book receives is a small but “flattering notice by the wife of the rector of St. Dunstan’s” in the local newspaper (247). It is also significant that the notice is anonymous; the rector’s wife does not sign the notice with her real name, but rather as “Asterisk” (247), in keeping with the tradition of women not writing for public consumption under their own names, and the language she uses is slightly archaic and flowered. Asterisk writes “a graceful and lady-like tribute” to the “brilliant daughter of one of our most prominent and influential citizens, who has voluntarily abandoned the primrose way of pleasure to scale the rugged heights of Parnassus” (247). Both the language and the narrative phrasing suggest that the rector’s wife’s sense of high literature may be slightly dated. The familiarity with Ivy’s family and the esteem Asterisk obviously holds for Ivy’s father may also suggest a hesitancy to criticize the esteemed man’s daughter. Yet, she does level a soft critical word when she “gently deprecate[s]” the “somewhat unconventional sentiment of the poems” (247) and, perhaps even more subtly, indicate that Ivy is climbing Parnassus, the Greek home of the Muses; she has not yet arrived at their home but is rather in the process of making that ascent. In keeping with the stereotypical image of a conventional rector’s wife, Asterisk is looking for the conventional, and the poems fall short. Again, the observation speaks volumes about the rector’s wife’s expectations, but the most interesting facet is that Ivy does not truly register the criticism. What she remembers, emphasizes, and quotes verbatim is the flattery.
Similarly, Ivy’s feedback from the editor of *Zig-zag* is mixed. Ivy recalls that he “hinted that there was more than she knew in Ivy Spang’s poems, and that their esoteric significance showed that she was a *vers-librist* in thought as well as technique” (247), which of course flatteringly indicates that Ivy’s poetry was worth more than she herself had thought. Having said that, he “added that they would ‘gain incom-measurably in meaning’ when she abandoned the superannuated habit of beginning each line with a capital letter” (247), an older poetic tradition which is now generally only seen in the work of the inexperienced or childish poet. The reader also recognizes that “esoteric” is not necessarily a good thing for a writer; if work is to be read by a general audience, then one wants it to be accessible to that audience, as opposed to an esoteric text which would only be accessible to a select or elitist few. While the title of the journal (“the new ‘Weekly Journal of Defiance’”) and the note about its age remind us that this is not a mainstream or yet popular journal, Ivy takes the editor’s words very seriously and to heart. When he sends her a “heavily-marked copy” (247) of her poems, she feels nothing but flattered, and that “at last she had been understood” (247). She does not evaluate the marked copies as a publisher’s critical feedback or consider that having one’s text “heavily marked” generally means that the text has weaknesses and flaws which the editor intends for the writer to consider in her next work.

Ivy’s inability to interpret response is a recurring image in this text, and we see it again if perhaps more subtly when she finally finishes the requested war story and carefully mails it and the accompanying photograph to the publisher. In return, she receives “a courteous note” acknowledging receipt of the package (254). She is, however, disappointed; “she had secretly hoped for more enthusiasm” (254). Again Ivy’s lack of experience prohibits a more insightful grasp of the events. The publisher had been very enthusiastic when he had met her in person and requested the story; had he been truly pleased with what she had sent, he would have been no less enthusiastic when he acknowledged the receipt of the story. Instead, his response foreshadows the patients’ response to the story and raises questions about whether his original enthusiasm was because of his pleasure at finding an American contributor for his magazine or simply because Ivy was “pretty.”
At long last she receives her complimentary copies of the magazine. She opens the package “with trembling fingers” and finds her story, “beautifully printed on the large rough pages” (254). Her excitement and nervousness are entirely natural, but again Wharton has imposed a flat note in the descriptions in order to show the reader the publication: the pages are “rough.” This is not fine parchment or high-quality paper; it is wartime paper: rough, useful, and cheap. Ivy, however, does not see the paper; she only sees her first story finally in print and therefore “beautifully printed.”

In addition to being unable to judge her own work and the feedback she receives, Ivy knows very little about the process of writing; she does not understand the craft itself either as a process or as a profession. While that development may come in the future if she persists in her writing, she has not yet arrived at that point for the telling of this particular story. Instead, Ivy is following what she believes to be the footsteps of great writers. We cannot know where she gathered her impressions, but they are typical stereotypes, and she follows them carefully in the same way that a novice playwright might choose to use a feathered quill pen similar to the one typically portrayed in portraits of Shakespeare. Interestingly, Ivy takes her role-model fantasy a bit further than her child counterpart. She not only mirrors what she believes to be the behavior of great writers, but she identifies herself with them. She does not use that quill pen because Shakespeare did so, but rather because “we” do. In Ivy’s mind, she is a part of the “great writers” community; she is one of them and she does not see herself as standing on the outskirts. Rather, the “them” in her thinking are those who are not also great writers. Ivy suffers from the stereotypical novice-trying-to-break-into-the-industry attitude; she considers herself among the greats and that she is simply not yet discovered by the general public.

That arrogance is a part of Ivy’s attitude—despite her own confusion—for almost the entirety of the story, and we see it very clearly in her responses to her old governess. When Mademoiselle asks, “Have you found your plot?,” Ivy’s response is both condescending and patronizing:

Ivy tapped her gently on the wrinkled cheek. “Dear old Madsy! People don’t bother with plots nowadays.”
“Oh, don’t they, darling? Then it must be very much easier,” said Mademoiselle. (250)

The moment not only shows us a concrete example of Ivy’s identification with writers—and her exclusion of her old governess as one of those writers—but it also suggests that perhaps the older woman has a better grasp on the problem than does her former charge, even though neither of them would make such an assumption. A similar moment happens later in the story when Mademoiselle suggests that Ivy begin by “thinking of a subject,” only to have Ivy respond in a similar note:

“Oh, my dear, the subject’s nothing!” exclaimed Ivy, remembering some contemptuous statement to that effect by the editor of Zig-zag. (252)

Again, Ivy has clearly assumed she knew more about writing a story than those around her, including her old governess who recognizes that “in writing a story, one has to have a subject” (252). Regardless of the quality of the feedback she received from the editor of Zig-zag, she has shaped his opinion into her own in part because she has no other experience to go by, and in part because he was possibly the first person who not only responded, but responded somewhat positively to her writing; she felt herself understood, and it is human tendency to align ourselves with those we feel best understand and empathize with us.

Once Ivy agrees to write the story, she takes advantage of her vacation time by going off to “a quiet corner of Brittany, where she happened to have an old governess, who took her in and promised to defend at all costs the sacredness of her mornings—for Ivy knew that the morning hours of great authors were always ‘sacred’” (248–49, my emphasis). Ivy does not yet know what type of writing schedule might work best for her; it has not even crossed her mind to consider whether she would find herself better able to write in the latter part of the day instead, or whether she would need to stagger her schedule. She only knows that “great authors” supposedly write in the mornings, and since she believes herself to be or aspires to be one of that community, then she must write in the mornings as well.

The difficulty, of course, is that Ivy has never truly written seriously. One has the impression that Ivy jotted down her poems in quick bursts and quiet moments or that they were part of school exercises, but that she had never dedicated herself to a writing task, much less a
schedule. As a result she finds that the process of writing is much “less exhilarating than she had expected” (249). Writing is not magical bursts of inspiration which come so fast that nimble fingers can barely keep up, or the flush that can come in the phrasing of a particularly keen insight or well-crafted image. While those moments do happen, the dull reality is that writing is a labor which is, instead, often downright tedious.

The first thing Ivy must do is decide upon her story, and this proves problematic. Part of Ivy’s problem is that she knows “so much about the war” that she cannot quite figure out where she should start; “she found herself suffering from a plethora of impressions” (249). Wharton’s choice of narrative phrasing, however, is interesting here, because it suggests that Ivy knows about the war in a large picture or general framework, rather than that she knows many specific events which would make good stories. Neither the magazine editor nor the story assignment asked her to describe or define the war, and in her schoolgirl way, this is her first approach to the task. Phrasing Ivy’s starting chaos in this way, however, also reminds the reader of Ivy’s position: she serves tea once a week at the local hospital. We find that she has been to Rheims once, but her exposure to the singular moments which might have helped her create that “rattling war story,” or to experiences which would have taught her how to interpret and weigh those moments, may have been fewer than she needs.

In any event, Ivy simply does not know how to begin. The entire concept of a story having a definite beginning, middle, and end perplexes her. The more she thinks about the matter, the more confused she becomes, and she grows so disturbed that she decides to slip away quietly for a walk and leave her governess guarding the door while she thinks through her dilemma. She spots a few people she knows as she walks along the beach, but again her misconceptions about who writers are and how they write interferes and she avoids contact for fear that “they should frighten away her ‘Inspiration.’” She knew that ‘Inspirations’ were fussy and contrarious, and she felt rather as if she were dragging along a reluctant dog on a string. ‘If you wanted to stay indoors, why didn’t you say so?’ she grumbled to it. But the Inspiration continued to sulk” (249). The imagery in these few lines is entertainingly brilliant; there is not a writer alive who has not felt as if she is having to pull a text along at one time or another. Again, however, the phrasing points to Ivy’s lack of understanding that sometimes writing must be
pushed: One cannot wait for inspiration. Teachers of high school English and college First Year Writing programs today see this conflict in their own students. They often hear students in writing classes complain that they have to be in the mood or inspired to write. It is difficult for them to grasp the idea that they are more liable to be inspired or “get in the mood” if they will simply begin writing.

Because she was waiting for the hand of Inspiration upon her shoulder, Ivy does not talk to her friends about the problem. Had she done so, she might have found that actually talking over the problem helped prompt inspiration. Instead, she isolates herself in yet another misconception about writers and writing and settles on the beach to think. While the act of writing itself may be a solitary task, it is not a process one completes in isolation. A writer must engage with events, people, and other texts, and those influences feed back into her own writing. An isolated writer, more often than not, can only find herself trying to draw from a dry well.

As Ivy sits in her self-imposed isolation, she finds a battered copy of *Fact and Fiction*, a magazine dedicated to writing, and yet another of Ivy’s perceptions kicks in gear: a writer should not allow herself to be influenced by other texts. Instead, “[s]he had heard a good deal about not allowing one’s self to be ‘influenced,’ about jealously guarding one’s originality, and so forth; the editor of *Zig-zag* had been particularly strong on that theme” (249). As with her other beliefs about writing and writers, there is a certain amount of truth in the idea; one generally does want to avoid copying someone else’s approach or intent. That rule, however, is not engraved in stone, and there are times when imitation is an excellent way to learn. Had Ivy studied and imitated the methods and approaches of a variety of other writers and texts in order to teach herself the craft, then she would not have been in her current predicament. There is also a distinction between copying someone else’s work and being influenced by that work. We are inevitably influenced by that which we read in the same way that we cannot exist in isolation. The difficulty—and necessity—is to recognize the influence and determine how we will make use of it. By the same token, had Ivy simply paid attention to what she was reading and made a point of reading finely crafted material, she would have had a better sense of the construction of a short story. Having said that, Ivy was also correct; one must be careful and not accidentally echo or repeat someone else’s text. If we are not aware of our own writing and reading processes, we
can find that we have inadvertently mirrored someone else’s thoughts as our own. For Ivy, avoidance and isolation may have been a simpler alternative since she had never learned to be aware of her own writing and knew even less about the process.

It is also significant that Wharton uses the narrative to tell the reader that the editor of *Zig-zag* had emphasized this issue. He must have made the comment in the “heavily marked” copy of Ivy’s poetry, which in turn suggests that he felt that Ivy’s poetry was being influenced. Her subject matter may have been somewhat unconventional according to the rector’s wife’s standards, but the implication is that Ivy’s poetry, while it possessed potential, was not as original as it perhaps should have been.

When Ivy finds the magazine, she initially hesitates because of her fear of being influenced but ultimately opens the magazine and begins to browse a few of the stories’ beginnings. The first story catches her attention because it is “signed by a name great in fiction, one of the most famous names of the past generation of novelists” (249–50). Again, Wharton is allowing the narrator to slip the reader an important tidbit: the famous name belongs to the past generation; the material is not current. When Ivy reads the opening sentence—“In the month of October, 1914” (250)—she recognizes that the line is dated. It is a dry opening, very rational, and nearly lecture-like. The second story begins with dialogue which places the reader in the middle of a moment of melodrama: “‘My God!’ roared the engineer, tightening his grasp on the lever, while the white, sneering face under the red lamp . . .” (250). While Ivy likes the fresh energy of this opening better, she feels that it, too, is “beginning to be out of date” (250). The third story, however, has an opening she likes even better: “Lee Lorimer leaned to him across the flowers. She had always know that this was coming . . .” (250).

Whether or not the opening lines are indeed as dated as Ivy feels, it is interesting that she chooses a more feminine style and content. The first story begins with a dryer, more reasoned and therefore more masculine approach and does not succeed in catching her attention, despite the author’s greatness. The second story begins with a curse, machinery, and the raw vividness and language one would typically associate with a boy’s action story. The last opening, however, is the softer scene of a girl as she leans across a table toward a young man she believes is about to propose (or break up). It certainly could not be more stereotypically feminine. All three
openings are extremes—the scholar, the rough action, the soft love story—and Wharton deliberately sets them in opposition to each other, helping the reader notice that while none may be perfect, Ivy prefers the feminine opening which probably has the least relevance to her task at hand.

Ivy’s study of the opening lines only yields more confusion. Even though she considers the tales and carefully examines the first sentences, she still cannot quite figure out how a story should start. She concludes that “you must begin in the middle, and take for granted that your reader knew what you were talking about” and that “if you pretended hard enough that you knew what your story was about, you might end by finding out toward the last page” (250). While beginning in medias res is certainly one technique for starting a story, the writer clearly must know what the story is about. If she does not know, then neither will the reader and the story will not be a story at all. It is true that many writers work their way through a story as a process of discovery, and that some may not know precisely how the story will end until they reach the ending, but they begin with a clear concept of the story they want to tell. If they do not, then the tale is disorganized, unclear, even confusing.

Knowing that she must start somewhere, Ivy determines to simply begin, in the assumption that the story would find itself along the way. She writes her first sentence and then finds that which she had feared has indeed happened; she has been influenced by the stories in Fact and Fiction. Her first sentence is identical to the first sentence of the last story in the magazine, and the discovery mortifies her, particularly when—as with many novice writers—she cannot imagine a revision to the sentence; she can only see it as she has written it. Interestingly, what disturbs her most is not that she began with a cliché (“A shot rang out—”), but rather that she used the same opening as the writer the editor has positioned last in the magazine and whose name clearly indicates that she is less gifted than Ivy herself. That the story comes last in the journal, she reasons, “showed what the editor and his public thought of that kind of an opening, and her contempt for it was increased by reading the author’s name. The story was signed ‘Edda Clubber Hump.’ Poor thing!” (251) Certainly “Edda Clubber Hump” is a name which does not raise images of greatness or graceful elegance, but the important element here is that Ivy feels the story worthy of contempt—and therefore the author worthy of pity. Even though she begins her
own story in exactly the same manner as the now-scorned Edda, she is determined that had Edda’s story not “polluted” (251) her own writing process, then certainly she would have come up with a much better beginning. It does not occur to her to think that it is impossible for every story or article to be placed first. Nor does she recognize that while the editor may or may not have preferred the other stories, he had chosen to publish Edda Clubber Hump’s story—something Ivy has yet to achieve.

Eventually, Ivy realizes that she has landed herself in a predicament and discusses the matter with her governess. The impending deadline, now less than three weeks away, fills her with despair, and Wharton injects a note of gendered scorn when Ivy tells her governess that “[i]t’s all so sudden” in the same demure murmur she might use “as if she were announcing her engagement” (251). Ivy is helpless and without direction. Her governess, however, is not. While her governess may not believe in her own worth as a writer except in order to support and encourage her former pupil, she does recognizes that stories must have subjects and that there must be some sort of plot. Perhaps most importantly, she recognizes a story when she hears it. For the past year, the little governess has been writing down the stories she has heard during her work at the hospital, and when Ivy agrees to garner one of the stories for her own tale, she asks herself “why she should not seize on one of these artless tales and transform it into Literature” (252). It never occurs to her that her governess has created Literature, or at least a literature of her own. Instead, as she browses through the governess’s little book, she

smil[es] at the fact that the narrative, written in a close, tremulous hand, covered each side of the page, and poured on and on without a paragraph—a good deal like life. Decidedly, poor Mademoiselle did not even know the rudiments of literature! (253)

Of course, Mademoiselle clearly has a better idea of literature than does Ivy, and as Ivy works on the story, it is Mademoiselle who “gave the tale a certain consecutiveness, and kept Ivy to the main point when her pupil showed a tendency to wander” (253). Unfortunately, while she has a better sense of story than her former charge, she too is limited, and the language the story finally emerges with is “the language that a young lady writing a composition on the Battle of Hastings would have used in Mademoiselle’s school days” (253).
All may have been well, or at least not an undeclared disaster, had Ivy stopped at that point. Instead, however, Ivy “decided to add a touch of sentiment to the anecdote . . . because she knew the reader was entitled to a certain proportion of ‘heart interest,’ and because she wished to make the subject her own by this original addition” (253). The addition caused her no small amount of editorial problems, and Wharton gives us the sense that the tale would have been better without it. Indeed it would have been better had Ivy told the story in the soldier’s “rustic speech” (253) Mademoiselle had originally used to record the tale.

The turning point in the process of writing the story is not Ivy’s final success in forcing all the pieces to work together and crafting a well-told tale, but rather that the photographs she had had taken to accompany the story arrive. They are, she observes, “really too charming to be wasted” (253), and rather than lie to the editor and claim illness—and therefore avoid turning in the story—she decides that she simply must use the photos, regardless of the story. Somehow Ivy has lost her perspective. The important thing now is not that the magazine’s readers have the opportunity to experience her creativity (dubious though it may be), but that they have the opportunity to see the photograph.

That increased motivation allows Ivy and Mademoiselle to finish the story. When Mademoiselle reads the final version, she tells Ivy “[y]ou’ve written a very beautiful story, my dear,” while “Ivy modestly agreed that she had” (254). Neither woman seems to be able to recognize that Ivy has not really written a story in the sense Mademoiselle indicates here, but rather that she and Mademoiselle have together worked on one of the tales Mademoiselle has garnered during her own experience at the hospital. It is Mademoiselle who provided the foundation material, who ensured that the tale moved forward, and who helped correct the language (even though that correction created a dated voice). In truth, it is Mademoiselle’s story and voice—not Ivy’s—but the governess’s own near-Victorian humility denies her this role in the creation process. Perhaps most importantly and equally unfortunately, Ivy’s own concept of herself as a writer both denies Mademoiselle’s role and denies Mademoiselle her role in the project.

The day finally arrives when her copies of the magazine arrive and Ivy sees them “beautifully printed.” Considering the rest of the stories and photos in the magazine does not
dull Ivy’s perception of herself as a member of the writing elite. She focuses, however, on the Queen of Norromania’s essay and photo and determines that neither her story nor her photo “would suffer by comparison with the royal contribution” (255). Ivy’s focus on the Queen’s entry rather than any of the other items creates an odd contradiction but serves as evidence of her own understanding and misconceptions about the craft and the community she claims as her own. One can only assume that Ivy considered the Queen’s entry her real competition, but unless the Queen had a writing background—a situation which would be rare indeed—Ivy’s preoccupation with the Queen’s essay and photo in contrast to her own is problematic. If she was concerned with how she stood up to the competition, then she should have been more focused on the other texts, texts by experienced writers and against which she might more accurately measure her own skill. Instead, she determines that the magazine

was made up in equal parts of tired compositions by people who knew how to write, and artless prattle by people who didn’t. Against such a background “His Letter Home” began to loom up rather large. (255)

While the appearance of her story in the magazine initially intimidates her, it does not take her long to decide that the other contributions paled in comparison. Had we not already discovered that Ivy has no real understanding of her own control of the craft, we might be tempted to believe that she is making an honest assessment or that the magazine is perhaps not the highest quality production. Since Wharton has taken pains to show us that Ivy’s assessment of writing—her own as well as others’—is not to be trusted, however, we have to believe that Ivy is overestimating her own presentation and underestimating her fellow writers’. If the magazine is indeed of lower quality, then that realization carries even more negative weight.

As with her poetry, Ivy’s story does not receive the recognition she believes appropriate. In fact it receives no recognition at all, and there is rarely anything more humbling than complete dismissal. Ivy, however, believes that she has simply been overlooked. She is perplexed that while the magazine is highlighted in bookshop windows, none of her friends seem to possess it, a situation which raises questions about the nature of her friends and their literary preferences (e.g., they may simply prefer a different type of literature), or about the quality of the magazine. That it is prominently displayed suggests at least that it is not of the worst quality, although alternate
reasons for its emphasis may be also the nature of the magazine, availability of other materials, and the shop owners’ desire to support their boys at the front. Nevertheless, when “a long and laudatory article” positively reviews the magazine, Ivy considers it an “odd accident” that the article mentions neither her nor her story (255). Instead, the bulk of the article discusses the aspect of the magazine on which Ivy had first focused and then deemed no competition: the Queen of Norromania’s essay. Of course, the reader knows that a part of the reason for the emphasis is because the author is, after all, a Queen, and a Queen who consents to write a personal and “domestic” (254) essay is newsworthy.

When Ivy returns to the hospital the week after she has distributed copies of the magazine among the patients, her attitudes about writing and her placement in the community of writers have not changed despite the lack of attention her story receives. She mentally derides the nurse who cannot recall the title of Harold Harbard’s book as a “poor fool” who cannot even “remember the title of ‘Broken Wings”’ (256), and the reader recognizes Wharton’s play upon Henry James’s 1902 publication of Wings of a Dove, thus also making inferences about Harold Harbard’s personality and writing talent. Nevertheless, despite Ivy’s arrogance, she is shocked and apprehensive when she realizes that one of the copies of the magazine she had delivered the week before is in Harbard’s room, even while she is offended that Harbard must share a room with a common polo-player who is “uninterested in anything but his specialty” (256). She is not worried about how the other patients will have received the story; she is nervous but confident that they will have enjoyed it. In fact, she delays delivering Harbard’s tea in part to give herself time to mentally prepare herself, and the means by which she chooses to do so is to give the other patients the opportunity to compliment her on her story. She observes that the young men seem to have all read the magazine and that her favorite lance-corporal is engrossed in the pages. She is pleased to see that they are happier than usual to see her, and when she serves tea to the lance-corporal “who was usually the spokesman of the ward on momentous occasions” (256) he expresses the ward’s delight that she shared the magazine with them. It is telling that Ivy considers this a “momentous occasion”; it is clearly and understandably important to her, but the language is blown up, even a bit grandiose for what should simply be a compliment.
The compliment, of course, is not that they liked the story, and it takes several moments for Ivy to realize her mistake. In the meantime, she “taste[s] her highest moment of triumph” (257). It is, however, a triumph short-lived, and when even the shyest of patients echoes the rest of the ward’s request for an autographed photo to be framed by one of the other patients using Vichy corks, Ivy is torn “between tears and laughter” as she realizes that “not one of them had read her story” (257). Instead, what caught their attention and what impressed them was her photo—a photo which had been “too charming to be wasted” (253) and was now going to be surrounded by a hand-made frame of corks from bottles of mineral water.

At this point, the reader expects that Ivy would have at least begun to question her own craft, but that is not the case. Her conviction of her own superiority instead convinces her that “it was absurd to have imagined that the inmates of the ward, dear gallant young fellows, would feel the subtle meaning of a story like ‘His Letter Home’” (257–58). They may be brave, but she does not consider them to be particularly insightful. Literature, she reasons, is above the simple soldier, and she sees no irony in the conflict between her belief that the soldiers are incapable of understanding the story and the fact that it was from a soldier just like these that the story had originally come. In short, she reckons that they simply do not know any better. Harold Harbard, however, will be a different matter, and while she is nervous, she is convinced that he, like the editor of Zig-zag whom she felt had understood her, will have done a better job of understanding this story as well.

The final scene of the story is that of the conversation between Ivy and the novelist, and where the entire story has a nearly Shakespearean comedy-of-errors feel, we find the culmination of the comedy here. As comedy should, the scene begins with laughter. Specifically, Harold Harbard’s “hearty, healthy laughter” (258) catches Ivy’s attention as she pauses in the doorway. She is suddenly apprehensive, but she “determine[s] to carry off the situation with a high hand” (258), which is perhaps a reflection of the way in which she has approached life itself. Interestingly, she begins their conversation by asking if he is “laughing at the way the Queen of Norromania’s hair is done” (258) rather than simply asking what he is laughing at. It is an odd beginning and, like much else about Ivy, does not quite match the event. Harbard’s laughter was strong and loud; it is doubtful that he would have had such a laugh about the hairstyle of a
woman in a photo, perhaps especially when that woman was a Queen. Instead, the question echoes Ivy’s own position; she believed the Queen’s hairstyle to be unfortunate, particularly in comparison with her own photograph. Ivy’s attitude about the hair only reflects her opinions about the two texts.

When Harbard confesses that he was not laughing at the Queen’s hair, but rather at the story which followed—Ivy’s story—he is disconcerted and embarrassed to realize that the author of the story which caused him so much amusement is standing before him:

“It was the next thing, what’s it called? ‘His Letter Home,’ by—” The review dropped abruptly from his hands, his brown cheek paled, and he fixed her with a stricken stare.

“Good lord,” he stammered out, “but it’s you!”

She blushed all colors, and dropped into a seat at his side. “After all,” she faltered, half-laughing too, “at least you read the story instead of looking at my photograph.”

He continued to scrutinize her with a reviving eye. “Why—do you mean that everybody else—”

“All the ward over there,” she assented, nodding in the direction of the door.

“They all forgot to read the story for gazing at its author?”

“Apparently.” There was a painful pause. The review dropped from his lax hand. (258–59)

While there is much we can fault Ivy for, we are drawn to her in this scene. She is honest, even to her own embarrassment, and simply likeable. Similarly, we gain a very human glimpse of the writer and his own chagrin. When Ivy finally gathers her determination and asks him to tell her what specifically he was laughing at, their mutual discomfort and honesty compels him to admit that he is not entirely certain that he can explain it:

“[I]t’s queer—it’s puzzling. You’ve got hold of a wonderfully good subject; and that’s the main thing, of course—”

Ivy interrupted him eagerly. “The subject is the main thing?”
“Why, naturally; it’s only the people without invention who tell you it isn’t.”

“Oh,” she gasped, trying to readjust her carefully acquired theory of esthetics.

“You’ve got hold of an awfully good subject,” Harbard continued; “but you’ve rather mauled it, haven’t you?” (259)

While Harbard may not be able to explain precisely where the story has gone wrong, he does recognize that it has gone wrong, and while his diplomatic skills may be weak, this moment is an important one for Ivy. Suddenly she has come face to face with the opinions she garnered from people like the editor of Zig-zag and other sources along the way, and she begins to realize that they were not necessarily accurate. She has never questioned them before, and neither does she do so now. Instead, she simply accepts the new opinion and jettisons the old, and ultimately the reader is not certain how much of an impact the new epiphany will have on her other perceptions of writing and writers.

In addition to reconsidering her concepts of the craft, Harbard has forced Ivy to reconsider her perception of her own writing, and it is not a comfortable process. In fact, her feelings are hurt, and when she lets slip two tears, Harbard is irritated that, after having asked for his opinion, she would be so upset. He lowers his voice and asks if she is truly angry with him:

“No, of course not,” she declared with a stony gayety. [sic]

“I’m so glad you’re not; because I do want most awfully to ask you for one of these photographs,” he concluded. (259)

Ivy’s embarrassment, for the first time in the story, prompts her to be less than honest here as she attempts to hide her feelings. Likewise, we as readers are torn between wondering whether Harbard was just like the other patients in wanting a photo, or if he asked for it because it was the one thing about which he could honestly compliment her and which might serve as a way of mollifying her hurt feelings:

“A photograph? Of course—with pleasure. And now, if you’ve quite finished, I’m afraid I must run back to my teapot.”
Harold Harbard lay on the bed and looked at her. As she reached the door he said, “Miss Spang!”

“Yes?” she rejoined, pausing reluctantly.

“You were angry just now because I didn’t admire your story; and now you’re angrier still because I do admire your photograph. Do you wonder that we novelists find such an inexhaustible field in Woman?” (260)

In this closing moment, Wharton has injected the scene with two fascinating comments. The first is that “we novelists” is gendered male and therefore raises issues of authorship. Novelists are men; they are rational and reasonable, not being angry at one thing in one moment and then angry at another in the next. For Wharton, this separation was an important one; she took pride in considering herself a “masculine” exerciser of the craft both as an art and as a profession rather than one of Hawthorne’s Ivy Spang scribblers.¹⁹

The second important issue in this scene is that Woman is “an inexhaustible field” and the subject of Harbard’s male gaze.²⁰ She is a thing to be studied in microscopic examination, and a curiosity to be written about. For Wharton, both of these issues were relevant to her professional life and heavily influenced how she both perceived and attempted to shape her career.

Certain elements of the story echo Wharton’s own life, but she has not used them to elaborate upon the dignity of the professional writer. Instead, she uses them to increase the irony and inject a hint of sarcasm. It is the editor of The Man-at-Arms who requests a “good rousing story, Miss Spang; a dash of sentiment of course, but nothing to depress or discourage. I’m sure you catch my meaning? A tragedy with a happy ending—that’s about the idea” (248). The idea of a “tragedy with a happy ending” is a phrase which comes directly from Wharton’s own life; it is a phrase she remembered W. D. Howells saying after he accepted her invitation to go see the play production of A House of Mirth. Wharton believed that the play would not be successful because the American audience wanted the heroine to survive or, as Howells put it after the play, they wanted “a tragedy with a happy ending” (BG 147). In this case, Ivy is being asked—like Wharton—to write such a story. In Ivy’s case, however, it is not the general public but rather her prospective publisher who is requesting the formula.
Similarly, Wharton’s own writing schedule was a morning one, and while she did not necessarily hold it “sacred,” she did work hard to protect her writing time. While she would definitely have labeled herself as a well-known and respected writer, her own sense of manners would not have allowed her to call herself one of the “great” writers Ivy associated who held their morning writing routines sacred.

As Barbara White argues, Ivy Spang represents a version of what Wharton may have been in the youth of her writing career, and there are definite autobiographical elements in the text (such as the writing schedule). The text, however, goes far beyond mirroring what Wharton was or could have been had she not matured. More importantly, it demonstrates what she wanted to avoid in her professional adulthood in the same way that her autobiography establishes her as a part of the community of great writers Ivy Spang wants or imagines she is a part of; it is less about events and what happens in her life than it is about the circles of writers and publishers who comprise her writing community. Unlike Wharton, Ivy has not yet acquired her citizenship in the land of letters. Perhaps she never will, but she must first learn to recognize the nature of the country to which she wishes to belong. Writing a war story has been, perhaps, one step in the right direction simply because it provided a learning experience she may not have otherwise experienced—even if we as readers must walk away from the tale not entirely knowing whether Ivy has truly learned anything or whether she will take those lessons into future writing endeavors.
IV. WAR WRITINGS

While many critics have noted that Wharton’s life was “bracketed by wars” (Price ix), the same would certainly be no less true for anyone else living during this period, including Mary Johnston. Edith Wharton was born during the close of the Civil War, lived during the Spanish-American War and the First World War, and died when the world was on the brink of the Second World War. Mary Johnston was born five years after the Civil War but lived with its memory and shadow all her life; she experienced it in a way Wharton never could, particularly since Wharton spent most of the Reconstruction period overseas. On the other hand, Wharton experienced the front lines of World War I while Mary Johnston held herself in quiet reserve against it in the relative safety of the United States. Both women died just a few short years before the next major war broke out. Neither woman approved of war, but they each took their own approaches to address the wars in their lives.

Edith Wharton

For Edith Wharton, the critical war was the first World War. Wharton returned to Paris in time to find hostilities had already begun and that war was indeed on her doorstep. It was a turn which caught her slightly by surprise, and a development which deeply dismayed her. She spent the bulk of the next five years creating, developing, administering, working with, and finding funding for a host of charities and rescue programs. She wrote very little fiction during this period—Summer would be the exception—but she produced four texts specifically associated with the war and which deserve attention.
Book of the Homeless

Of the four texts, two were fiction, one was nonfiction, and another—The Book of the Homeless (Le Livre Des Sans-Foyer)—was an anthology; the four texts served distinctly different purposes. Wharton published the first text of this period, The Book of the Homeless, in the middle of the war in January of 1916.22

Wharton intended the book to raise funds to support the American Hostels for Refugees and the Children of Flanders Rescue Committee, two of her wartime rescue and relief programs. It was an exhausting project and one in which she participated at all levels. With help from her sister-in-law Mary Cadwalader Jones, who also served as her stateside secretary, Edith sent out the call to the international community of artists, poets, and writers requesting their contributions to the book. She was able to contact some artists via others and simple word of mouth advertisement helped her in her efforts, but she also made personal contact with a large percentage of the contributors, even if it was simply to send a thank you letter for the contribution. The majority of artists and writers she contacted agreed to participate in the effort, but there were naturally a few who did not—such as Rudyard Kipling23—and those abstentions both disappointed and occasionally annoyed Wharton. The amount of work which went into the production of the book was massive, and Wharton was involved in that process on all levels. She recommended cover designers, solicited contributions, passed judgment on a contribution’s appropriateness, provided instructions regarding both the publication of the books and the later auction of the original materials, and translated all but one of the contributions which she received in Italian and French into English.

Contributors to the book are a veritable Who’s Who of the art and writing communities at the time, and included Henry James, Theodore Roosevelt, Auguste Rodin, Paul Claudel, Thomas Hardy, William Dean Howells, William Butler Yeats, Charles Dana Gibson, John Singer Sargent, Claude Monet, Joseph Conrad, Paul Bourget, Stravinsky, along with a number of others.

Wharton designed the text as a gift or coffee-table book and published it in three different editions. Scribners printed roughly 2000 trade paperbacks for a price of $5 each, roughly 150 copies of a deluxe, higher quality edition for $25, and a smaller quantity of a high-end grand deluxe edition volumes on handmade paper for $50, “all of which sold immediately” (Wright
“Immediately” is, of course relative; Price records an April 1916 letter from Scribner reporting that while all the trade and grand deluxe editions had sold, roughly half of the $25-dollar deluxe versions still remained (79), a number of which were still in Scribner’s stock a year after publication. While the majority of the books sold relatively quickly, the returns on the project were a disappointment for Wharton. Had they been able to meet their original publication schedule—a schedule which was admittedly unrealistic—the pre-Christmas production would have considerably helped sales. Instead, delays in the printing process, receiving the necessary translation of submitted texts, and the administrative triangle between Wharton, Updike’s printing house, Scribner’s, and Mary Cadwalader Jones as Wharton’s stateside contact pushed production back. To complicate matters, unexpected and increasing costs associated with producing a book of such high quality also made a severe dent in the book’s revenues. After costs, *The Book of the Homeless* only generated some $1,500 for the charities. It was the auction of the contributions after publication which raised an additional $8,000 and ultimately made the difference (Price 202–03 n11).

The book is significant for a number of reasons. First, it shifted Wharton from her usual authorial position to that of editor managing all the administrative chaos that comes with working with a variety of authors and personalities, all of which was exacerbated by the decentralized, global locations (and therefore communications and transportation) of publishers, editor, and contributors. That Wharton managed the book as well as she did, and still handled her numerous and growing charities, as well as her other responsibilities and travels, is a tribute to her own determination and the strength of her sense of the need surrounding her.

The second issue was Wharton’s own conviction about the war. While she was passionately opposed to war, she was equally disappointed that the United States had not yet declared its own involvement. Daily, she saw evidence of the destruction of the things she loved and associated with her concept of beauty; the war irrevocably changed and in some cases utterly destroyed cultures, landscapes, and architecture. Far too often she found herself picking up the pieces in a very literal fashion. Wharton felt that U.S. intervention would have brought the war to an end much more quickly and thus helped limit some of the terrible destruction.24
Because the United States opted to remain uninvolved—it would be another seventeen months after the publication of the book before the Americans entered the war—Wharton felt a need to make up for, as it were, her home nation’s failure. Her desire to respond to the human tragedy surrounding her and her need to show Europe that at least one American did indeed care what was happening beyond its own shores therefore heavily prompted her charity work. The charities, however, were often in dire need of funds, and Wharton learned fairly quickly how to touch her countrymen. She generally avoided offering sentimental or emotional images as much as possible, but she needed the *Book* to sell and sell well. As a result, Wharton’s preface to the text does that which she typically preferred to avoid: she gives the readers an image which would tug at their hearts and hopefully their wallets. In fact, she gives them two.

The Preface begins with a haunting image of a “little acrobat from a strolling circus. He was not much more than a boy, and he had never before been separated from his family or from his circus. . . . and he himself was a mere mote of the lime-light, knowing life only in terms of the tent and the platform, the big drum, the dancing dogs, the tight-rope and the spangles” (*BoH* xix). Wharton explains how, while difficult, they found “a corner for this little figure” by placing him in a hotel as a page, “and told to be a good boy. He tried . . . he really tried . . . but the life was too lonely” (*BoH* xix). The little acrobat, like Wharton in her own early years, could not find his place; he did not belong and could not find a way to make it so. In the end, Wharton explains that the lad stole some items from the trunks stored in the attic for a few of the wealthy lodgers. The locals ultimately caught him, “and the things he had stolen were produced in court. They were the spangled dresses belonging to a Turkish family, and the embroidered coats of a lady’s lap dog” (*BoH* xix). Only the most obtuse of readers could miss the connection between the acrobat’s heartache for the place where he belonged—a place and life the war had ripped away from him—and the spangled and embroidered items; they were, to him, representative of all that he had lost and may never again find. They were the home to which he may never be able to return.

In the event that story is not enough to wake the sympathy of her reader, Wharton includes one more of a different type, and no reader could come away from her second image feeling as if the victims were unworthy of help because they had made a bad decision. The last
image is of the arrival of the first group destined for the Children of Flanders Rescue and begins with a lovely portrait of the house the government granted them for the purpose, the park surrounding it with its old trees, the view, and the rolling landscape. Wharton describes summer weather, mown lawns, miniature haystacks, “glowing” roses, and carefully tended flower beds (BoH xxi). Then, into this pastoral image she pours the flood of “crippled and infirm old men, then a dozen Sisters of Charity in their white caps, and lastly about ninety small boys, each with his little bundle on his back” (BoH xxii). Their entrance is a striking one:

They were a lamentable collection of human beings, in pitiful contrast to the summer day and the bright flowers. The old men, for the most part, were too tired and dazed to know where they were, or what was happening to them, and the Sisters were crying from fatigue and homesickness. The boys looked grave too, but suddenly they caught sight of the flowers, the hay-cocks, and the wide house-front with all its windows smiling in the sun. They took a long look and then, of their own accord, without a hint from their elders, they all broke out together into the Belgian national hymn. The sound of that chorus repaid the friends who were waiting to welcome them for a good deal of worry and hard work. (BoH xxii)

Not even Hollywood could have done it better, and much as Wharton opposed sentimental writing, her own skill at using it in these two stories would have satisfied even the most fervent of dime novel readers. Indeed, while she may not have liked the comparison, Wharton’s pleas for funds and assistance necessarily bridged the gap and put her, at least temporarily, in the camp of Hawthorne’s “scribbling women.”

The Book of the Homeless was, in a very real sense, part of Wharton’s effort to change the world around her and to involve others in that change. Its publication generated funds which would directly affect the lives of those refugees sustained by the American Hostels for Refugees and the Children of Flanders Rescue Committee, two of Wharton’s wartime charity programs. On a secondary front, Wharton intended that its publication and the obvious support of the celebrities within its pages subtly nudge a seemingly indifferent American public and its politicians into recognizing the difficulties of the war in the hope that they would involve
themselves on at least a financial level. The book may not have affected a huge change, but it did attempt to create some positive change.

**Fighting France: From Dunkerque to Beport**

The second book in Wharton’s wartime writings was *Fighting France*. This nonfiction text chronicles most of Wharton’s tours of the front during the first year of the war. Literally, it is a collection of essays describing Wharton’s front-line journeys between the end of July in 1914 and August of 1915. In early 1914, with Wharton already beginning to be involved in wartime charities and, more importantly, in possession of a car, the French Red Cross asked her to tour the areas just behind the front lines to see what medical supplies they needed and to deliver what was available. Wharton agreed, and toward the end of February made her first official trip. What she found shocked her, and suddenly the war acquired a whole new reality. She realized that if what she saw was able to affect her so significantly—she who had been in the presence of the war already—then perhaps Americans stateside might be even strongly influenced if she could provide them with clear images of her own experiences. *Scribner’s Magazine* and the *Saturday Evening Post* ran the essays as she wrote them, then later collected them into a single volume under the *Fighting France* title in 1915.

The essays are perhaps Wharton’s strongest nonfiction. Some critics have considered them travel literature, but they deviate wildly from that standard. It might be more accurate to describe them as a form of personal essay which happens to use a travel motif. The difference is that the emphasis in the essays is not the place but rather the event. The focus is on Wharton’s perception of the people and place, with the emphasis being on the war which frames them all. The writing in these essays is clear, frank, and honest, and while there is a strong dose of sentiment, it is not generally overburdened. The reader comes away seeing Wharton’s own emotion and being moved without finding herself mired. That does not, however, mean that the text is neutral; indeed, it most certainly is not.

*Fighting France* accomplishes three primary goals. First, it paints a picture of what Wharton herself sees during these journeys in an attempt to show those images and insights to the American reader. Some of the images are of destruction and loss, others of simple beauty.
Second, the text also attempts to portray the honor and courage, the sheer nobility, and the humanity of those who are involved. Third, it attempts to prod an American conscience out of its inactivity. To accomplish that last goal, the text uses a fair degree of sentimentalism as well as a certain amount of scorn and derision for those who sit unmoved on the sidelines. Wharton’s personal opinions are quite clear in these essays, and even as she works to accomplish those three objectives, she allows herself the freedom of expressing her own sorrow, frustration, and sheer outrage.

Wharton’s sense of detail and imagery are vivid in these writings; there are times when the text is nearly poetic. She creates small snapshots of beauty in the midst of the darkness, such as her observations in La Panne in June of 1915:

> The exercises of the troops had begun again, and the deploying of those endless black lines along the beach was a sight of the strangest beauty. The sun was veiled, and heavy surges rolled in under a northerly gale. Toward evening the sea turned to cold tints of jade and pearl and tarnished silver. Far down the beach a mysterious fleet of fishing boats was drawn up on the sand, with black sails bellying in the wind; and the black riders galloping by might have landed from them, and been riding into the sunset of some wild northern legend. Presently a knot of buglers took up their stand on the edge of the sea, facing inward, their feet in the surf, and began to play; and their call was like the call of Roland’s horn, when he blew it down the pass against the heathen. (FF 176)

In other places, she injects a small touch of humor in the midst of the detail, allowing her respite, however brief, from the seriousness of her topic, such as when she recalls traveling on a quiet road, encountering couriers on motorcycles and “hideously hooting little motors carrying goggled officers in goat-skins and woolen helmets” (FF 47–48). Her subject, however, is deadly serious, and while she occasionally creates a tiny breathing space in order to avoid overwhelming the reader, the heart of the essays has to do with loss and struggle, valor and determination.

The descriptions of the towns and encampments are keen and evocative, and for Wharton the destruction is more than the simple redistribution of a few bricks; it is a mortal wound to
something indescribably precious. In June of 1915, they passed through Ypres, and the image
she portrays is one of the death of a living creature rather than a desolate heap of rubble:

We had seen evacuated towns—Verdun, Badonviller, Raon-l’Etape—but
we had seen no emptiness like this. Not a human being was in the streets.
Endless lines of houses looked down on us from vacant windows. Our footsteps
echoed like the tramp of a crowd, our lowered voices seemed to shout. . . .

We had seen other ruined towns, but none like this. The towns of Lorraine
were blown up, burnt down, deliberately erased from the earth. At worst they are
like stone-yards, at best like Pompeii. But Ypres has been bombarded to death
and the outer walls of its houses are still standing so that it presents the distant
semblance of a living city, while near by it is seen to be a disemboweled corpse.
Every window-pane is smashed, nearly every building unroofed, and some house-
fronts are sliced clean off, with the different stories exposed, as if for the stage
setting of a farce. In these exposed interiors the poor little household gods shiver
and blink like owls surprised in a hollow tree. A hundred signs of intimate and
humble tastes, of humdrum pursuits, of family association, cling to the unmasked
walls. Whiskered photographs fade on morning-glory wallpapers, plaster saints
pine under glass bells, antimacassars droop from plush sofas, yellowing diplomas
display their seals on office walls. It was all so still and familiar that it seemed as
if the people for whom these things had a meaning might at any moment come
back and take up their daily business. And then—crash! the guns began . . .

The singular distinction of the city is that it is destroyed but not abased.
The walls of the Cathedral, the long bulk of the Cloth Market, still lift themselves
above the market place with a majesty that seems to silence compassion. . . .

So we left Ypres to the death-silence in which we had found her. (FF 151–54)

There are a number of remarks throughout the text which, while they detail the destruction, also
contain a sharp bitterness, such as when she describes the ruins of Clermont-en-Argonne. “One
can,” she says, “see it from so far off, and through the torn traceries of its ruined church the eye
travels over so lovely a stretch of country! No doubt its beauty enriched the joy of wrecking it”
These comments show Wharton’s own sense of beauty and her outrage at the damage around her. For her the destruction was more than senseless; it was evil incarnate—indeed, at one point she refers to a German plane as a “Bird of Evil” (FF 121)—and something which both angered and grieved her throughout the duration of the war.

While most of the images are of loss and destruction, others inspire, such as when she describes passing by “a small cluster of villas” where they had spoken to a pair of sentinels who had been faithfully holding watch for the past year:

In one of those villas for nearly a year, two hearts at the highest pitch of human constancy have held up a light to the world. It is impossible to pass that house without a sense of awe. Because of the light that comes from it, dead faiths have come to life, weak convictions have grown strong, fiery impulses have turned to long endurance, and long endurance has kept the fire of impulse. In the harbour of New York there is a pompous statue of a goddess with a torch, designated as “Liberty enlightening the World.” It seems as though the title on her pedestal might well, for the time, be transferred to the lintel of that villa in the dunes. (FF 177–78)

It is impossible to overlook Wharton’s respect for the sentries in that small villa or her jab at America’s presumption to hold the title of a role model of liberty when the country refused to participate in liberty’s survival overseas.

There are odd incongruities in the text, contradictions which raise images of war as a spectator sport. For instance, there is her casual description of their accidental blundering into sight of enemy lines in August of 1915, thereby endangering a nearby artillery post. “We retreated hurriedly and unpacked our luncheon-basket on the more sheltered side of the ridge” (FF 200), she writes, and the image is reminiscent of certain Civil War accounts where the spectators gathered with their picnic baskets on nearby hillsides to watch the spectacle of battle. Yet, there are also keen insights, such as the one which immediately followed their relocation to “the more sheltered side of the ridge” when she observes that in the midst of the normal sounds and sights of the forest, and in the warmth of the sunshine, “the pressure of the encircling line of death grew more intolerably real. It is not in the mud and jokes and every-day activities of the
trenches that one most feels the damnable insanity of war; it is where it lurks like a mythical
to which the mind has always turned for rest” (*FF* 200).

While we clearly see the images Wharton offers in these essays and understand her purpose for offering them, we also find moments of insight into Wharton herself and her opinions about women, social order, class structure, and her own values. For instance, in an exasperated foreshadowing of the stereotypical female need to “shop till you drop,” she describes the Parisian woman six months after the war is solidly underway:

> But after six months the pressure of normal appetites has begun to reassert itself—and to shop is one of the normal appetites of woman. I say “shop” instead of buy, to distinguish between the dull purchase of necessities and the voluptuousness of acquiring things one might do without. It is evident that many of the thousands now fighting their way into the great shops must be indulging in the latter delight. At a moment when real wants are reduced to a minimum, how else to account for the congestion of the department store? . . . [T]here is no explanation . . . except the fact that woman, however valiant, however tried, however suffering and however self-denying, must, eventually, in the long run, and at whatever cost to her pocket and her ideals, begin to shop again. She has renounced the theatre, she denies herself the tea-rooms, she goes apologetically and furtively (and economically) to concerts—but the swinging doors of the department stores suck her irresistibly into their quicksand of remnants and reductions. (*FF* 36–37)

Interestingly, Wharton does not include herself in this discussion; her comments are relatively neutral observation, and she makes them from the vantage point of trying to obtain medicated gauze, which is a purely wartime-related sense of shopping, and therefore a curious blend of both anti-feminine and feminine. Yet, while these lines are somewhat derisive commentary about the nature of woman, she is still very positive about the nature of French women and comments late in the text that while French women “are perhaps less instinctively ‘courageous,’ in the elementary sense, than their Anglo-Saxon sisters,” that once the French woman is “convinced of the necessity of heroism . . . she is fit to go bridle to bridle with Jeanne d’Arc” (*FF* 235–36).
Other small observations are equally noteworthy. We find one of the few negative comments about the French public servant’s sense of public duty when she encounters her own difficulties gaining access to funds out of the country or in sending and receiving telegrams. We also see her sense of class culture when she is oddly surprised to find her preferred restaurants filled and has difficulty acquiring a table, and in that same moment we see a touch of her snobbery of class and breeding as she observes that “there seems to be no rank distinction in this happy democratic army, and the simple private, if he chooses to treat himself to the excellent fare of the Haute Mère-Dieu, has as good a right to it as his colonel” (FF 51). Similarly, after observing a military tournament the city of Thann provided for their entertainment, she notes that she has “seen nothing, in [her] wanderings along the front, more indicative of the good-breeding of the French than the spirit of the ladies and gentlemen who sat chatting with the officers on that grassy slope of Alsace” (FF 194).

While the war created a real need for Wharton to earn money in order to support both herself and her charities, she wrote Fighting France for more than pecuniary reasons. Rather, she intended the essays to share the reality of the war with a seemingly unmoved audience, to move that audience, and hopefully persuade it toward involvement.

The Marne

In 1918, Wharton had begun, not always willingly, to shift a percentage of her charity work to the parental organizations which were rapidly taking over the privately run wartime activities, specifically the American Red Cross. While free time was still at a premium, she was slowly finding time to focus on her own writing again. She had managed to produce a novella, Summer, the year before, and The Marne in the latter half of 1918.

Wharton dedicated this novella and the last of her war writings afterward, The Son at the Front, to Captain Ronald Simmons, a young friend and colleague. Lewis records Simmons as having graduated from Yale and gone to “Paris to study painting” (Letters 409). He had joined Wharton in her tuberculosis work the year before but enlisted in the military the moment the United States had entered the war. Wharton was fond of him, and his death of “double pneumonia” in a hospital in Marseilles that August hit her hard. She wrote Bernard Berenson the
day after she received word that “[t]his breaks me down to the depths. I really loved him dearly—and he had a great sort of younger brotherly affection for me—and we understood each other so completely!” (Letters 490). Simmons’s death occurred in a period when Wharton had lost a number of friends and colleagues, including Henry James three years earlier, and the loss of yet another of her younger friends to the war was heartbreaking.

_The Marne_ is a story of a young man’s experience of the war. Troy Belknap comes from an upper-class, wealthy family and is accustomed to traveling throughout Europe, with his family and tutor, a young Frenchman named Paul Gantier. When war breaks out, Gantier is naturally concerned about his own family and country and returns to France. Troy receives a certain amount of mail updating him on events in France and the Gantier family whom Troy had had the opportunity to meet, but eventually the mail stops. When he is able to travel to the region where the Gantier family lived, he finds that the war had already devastated the area. He also finds his tutor’s grave. Back in America, Troy follows the political developments and social rhetoric of isolationism with a growing impatience, his own loss keenly felt and slowly reshaping itself into a growing anger. When he finally reaches his eighteenth birthday, he persuades his parents to give him a trip back to Europe as his birthday gift. The remainder of the story is about his wartime work driving ambulances and his simultaneous search for the Gantier family.

Eventually, Troy stumbles over Paul’s mother and aunt in Paris and in dire straits. His own self-consciousness and immaturity prevent him from truly helping them at a time when he could have made the difference in their survival. The two elderly women disappear in the chaos of the war, and Troy never sees them again. In his eagerness to become involved, Troy is lightly wounded helping another fallen soldier. When he comes to and finds himself in the hospital, it is with a fuzzy memory of an older French soldier with Paul Gantier’s face bringing him in for medical help and the joy that he had been a part of the Battle of the Marne.

The story is perhaps not as fully developed as Wharton’s other novellas such as _Summer_ and _Ethan Frome_. For instance, one of the biggest weaknesses of the text is the drop of the hunt for the Gantier family. Having stumbled over them once, why did Troy not look again? Especially when he knew they were in such dire need? The story generates a strong empathy for the Gantier family and for Troy’s desire to help the surviving family of his former tutor.
Troy does not conduct further search for the Gantiers, the reader can only wonder about the sincerity of Troy’s commitment to the memory of his tutor, and with a sense of an anticlimactic finish. We recognize that his recollection of Paul Gantier and his pride in having helped drive the Germans back from the area should provide closure and a sense that Troy has done what he set out to do, but the ending does not necessarily do what it intends. Rather, it does not do so strongly enough to satisfy the reader that Troy was not simply an immature, however well-intentioned, and weak-spirited youngster running on emotion rather than sense.

Likewise, some of the material feels as if it may be a preliminary study for the upcoming *A Son at the Front*. There are, however, two very large differences between the two texts. The first is that the son lives in “The Marne” and dies in *A Son at the Front*. The second is that the son in *A Son at the Front* is not what this tale is about. Indeed, he is offstage for the majority of the text. He is certainly central to the text in that what will or will not happen to him serves as catalyst for a large portion of the events, but Wharton is not telling his story; he is simply a tool to tell a story about the destructiveness of war and the pathetic chaos in the lives of the people who must live with it. While “The Marne” is not about the son in that tale either, this son does play a much larger role in the text. He too serves as a vehicle for the telling of a story, albeit a different story than in *A Son at the Front*. This story is that of France’s spirit, followed by the slowness of Americans to recognize it.

Wharton uses her own experiences, and there is no small amount of criticism in the story. This is perhaps one of the strongest criticisms of the work: that Wharton wrote what ultimately amounted to propaganda rather than a proper story, and there is some truth to it. Wharton’s criticism of the laggard Americans in this tale is not in the least subtle. Many of Troy’s thoughts and the images she describes reflect events and circumstances Wharton herself surely must have seen, thought, or heard. For instance, when the population of Americans in Paris finds itself at least temporarily trapped in France, Wharton describes the scene in caustic terms:

Mrs. Belknap, in her horrified surprise at seeing her plans again obstructed, lost all sense of the impending calamity except as it affected her safety and Troy’s, and joined in the indignant chorus of compatriots stranded in Paris, and obscurely
convinced that France ought to have seen them safely home before turning their attention to the invader.

“Of course I don’t pretend to be a strategist,” whimpering or wrathful ladies used to declare, their jewel-boxes clutched in one hand, their passports in the other, “but one can’t help feeling that if only the French government had told our Ambassador in time trains might have been provided . . .”

“Or why couldn’t Germany have let our government know? After all, Germany has no grievance against America . . .”

“And we’re really spent enough money in Europe for some consideration to be shown us . . .” the woeful chorus went on. (267)

While Wharton’s tone here is more than just mildly critical—it is almost downright snide—she does create a saving breath in the next paragraph:

The choristers were all good and kindly persons, shaken out of the rut of right feeling by the first real fright of their lives. But Troy was too young to understand this, and to foresee that, once in safety, they would become the passionate advocates of France, all the more fervent in their championship because of their reluctant participation in her peril. (267)

She has heard the comments and seen the behavior she records here, but she has also seen these same women work, for whatever reason, afterward.

Wharton could have had any number of motivations for writing this text, but it is not naive to believe that, in this last year of the war, she was still feeling America’s delay keenly, even acerbically. While it is not her strongest war text, it certainly deserves better commentary than Claire Tylee gives it. The story mirrors some of her own experiences at the front and echoes bits and pieces of the human stories she encountered in her charities. It would be understandable to think that she needed to vent her frustration and describe events one last time, even though it would not be her last war writing.

Tylee offers a discussion of women’s memory-making process for war, particularly World War I, in her *The Great War and Women’s Consciousness*. While she focuses specifically on British authors, she makes a number of salient points regarding women writers and their
involvement during the war, the opportunities the war created for them in previously male-dominated areas of society, and the nature of women’s writing and cultural myths. Interestingly, in a chapter labeled “Women’s Pacifist Novels,” Tylee writes that

[I]ess original writers and thinkers [than D. H. Lawrence, Henry James, Conan Doyle, etc.] did try to make novels out of the War, revealing the poverty of the Victorian and Edwardian models. Their failure was not due to ignorance. Leaders of women’s opinion like Mrs Humphry Ward, May Sinclair and Edith Wharton all had first-hand experiences of conditions in the war-zone. They wrote chivalric romances about it such as . . . Edith Wharton’s *The Marne* (1918). (103)

Aside from the fact that Wharton would have cringed at being listed in league with Ward and Sinclair, Tylee’s argument here falls slightly short. While *The Marne* may be chivalric in the sense that the protagonist evidences a desire to help or even come to the rescue of his friend’s family, it is a failed chivalry. Troy ultimately does nothing to help his dead tutor’s relatives even when he stumbles across them. Nor could the novel—or Wharton—be named pacifist; while she opposed the war and war in general, she argued vehemently for American involvement.

Wharton’s argument in this text is that if the war is inevitable, then the battle must begin *now* and with all the available resources at hand in order to avoid as much of the destruction such as Troy witnesses and experiences as possible. Because American forces have not participated, she suggests, there can only be more Gantier tragedies. Similarly, Wharton’s last war story was neither chivalric nor romance.

**A Son at the Front**

Published in 1923, five years after the end of the war, Wharton’s last serious writing about the war was *A Son at the Front*. In essence, the entire story is about John Campton’s extreme measures to keep his son, George, out of the army. Because George was born in France, he is vulnerable for the French draft. John appeals to his ex-wife and her new husband, Julia and Anderson, who agree and lend their efforts to his. Unfortunately, George takes measures into his own hands and secretly enlists. When they find out, they turn toward trying to have him safely posted in a staff position away from the front, and George’s letters allow them to believe they
have succeeded. All that changes when they receive word that George has been injured, and they rush off to the military hospital. In contrast to Troy in “The Marne,” George dies at the end of the tale. Throughout the course of the story, John spends an incredible amount of time determining how he will or will not use his art, observing the people around him in the midst of the war chaos, and examining his own condition.

Wharton began *A Son at the Front* in 1917, and her correspondence indicates that she was thinking about its publication as early as 1919. Appleton’s publishing house told her that there was no market for war writings in 1921. In the end, Scribner’s published it in 1923. The delay was, in part, responsible for a mixed bag of responses when the novel finally did make its debut; a number of reviews argued that Wharton was, in essence, banging the drum long after the parade had gone by. Other reviews felt that Wharton had written the quintessential war novel.

The novel does not just treat the question of relationships (familial and otherwise) during wartime, but also focuses on French society and the charities and fund-raising environment, all of which Wharton was intimately familiar with given her own work. It is a much graver and denser work than some of the other “war stories,” but it is not totally without its flaws. One weakness is the propaganda element in the text. Coming as it did after the war, those elements sound slightly out of place. One explanation for this might, of course, be that Wharton began the text during the war; it still contains Wharton’s earlier arguments and convictions about the need for American involvement at a much earlier stage. A larger and more critical weakness, as a number of critical texts have noted, is that one comes away from the story not entirely certain about the final benefit. In George’s death, should we find a greater purpose? Or believe that his father has an epiphany which will help him find his own place in the world, or a purpose for his art? While there are signs of positive, forward movement, is it truly enough? And is it genuine? There is an ambiguity here which leaves the reader slightly confused, and while Wharton has finely crafted the text and generally fully drawn the characters, there remains a final uncertainty that is difficult to resolve.
On the Periphery

There are two other texts which need mentioning in this period of Wharton’s writing. One is a nonfiction collection of essays, and the other a short fiction. Appleton published the first, *French Ways and Their Meaning*, in 1919. The United States government originally commissioned the book for the purpose of helping American military members understand the French environment, culture, and people during the war. Unfortunately, the text came out the year after the war was over and was too late to serve its original purpose. The U.S. Navy, however, deemed the book still useful and ordered a copy placed in each of its ships’ libraries (Wright 89).

*French Ways and Their Meaning* received mixed reviews, in part because the text tends to speak considerably more positively about the French than about its allies and neighbors. Wharton’s bias is clearly evident in the book, and that bias offended a fair number of critics in both the United States and England. Equally problematically, the text does not really deal with practical issues a rank-and-file soldier would have encountered in his first visit to France, particularly in a period of war. Rather, the text seems to argue social issues which would more quickly concern the upper echelon or social traveler.

For instance, one often-discussed chapter (“The New Frenchwoman”) deals specifically with the position of women in French society in contrast to that of women in the United States. It is fascinating in that it not only discusses Wharton’s France (and her perception of American society by means of reflection), but it offers a good insight into her attitude toward gender politics in the land of her birth. In this particular chapter, Wharton argues that American women are simply less mature than their French counterparts. In attempting to define the French woman, she begins by asking what makes them different, what sets them apart and makes them “as different as possible from the average American woman”:

Is it because she dresses better, or knows more about cooking, or is more “coquettish,” or more “feminine,” or more excitable, or more emotional, or more immoral? All these reasons have been often suggested, but none of them seems to furnish a complete answer. Millions of American women are, to the best of their ability (which is not small), coquettish, feminine, emotional, and all the rest of it;
a good many dress as well as Frenchwomen; some even know a little about cooking—and the real reason is quite different, and not nearly as flattering to our national vanity. It is simply that, like the men of her race, the Frenchwoman is grown up. (FW 100)

Wharton then goes on to explain that American women are not “grown up” in large part because they have only themselves for an audience and that they do not participate in the daily lives of the men around them. They are isolated, separated from business and the depths one gains during the process of interactive living. In contrast, French women participate in business, are responsible for carrying their weight in intellectual discussions, and serve as the heart of both French culture and the lives of the men around them. Wharton argues that American women lose the equality of the French the moment they pass from childhood; they begin life on par with their male counterparts but when they begin the shift toward adulthood, society places them in a protective and silencing cocoon. It is a practice of American society which is detrimental not only to the women but to men who cannot then benefit from the advantages of a “grown up” partner, and to society in general. Until that habit of “withdraw[ing] from circulation” (FW 115) changes, Wharton suggests that American women will always remain immature and will never be “grown up.”

As a soldier’s guide to France, the book would have been informative (assuming he could separate bias from fact, which would be doubtful for the young, greenhorn soldier) but not necessarily helpful. Rather, the changes this text attempt to encourage are a greater understanding—or possibly simply acceptance—of French culture on a social level and, in response, a reform of American social practices and perspectives.

The second of Wharton’s writings during this period was the short story, “The Refugees.” *The Saturday Evening Post* published the text in January of 1919 and the story deviates slightly from the seriousness of Wharton’s other war texts. “The Refugees” is about a quiet American professor of romance languages, Charley Durand, who had been on sabbatical touring Belgium and Flanders, and now finds himself suddenly in the wrong place at a very wrong time of the war. The flood of refugees from Boulogne sweeps him up in its wake and, with his luggage mingled with the other refugees’ baggage, Durand feels he has no choice but to follow it to
England. Once there, he stands on the platform waiting for the chaos to lessen before he attempts to make his way to London to “bury his nose in the British Museum” (“Refugees”). At Charing Cross, Audrey Rushworth mistakes him for a refugee and scoops him up. She is determined to bring a refugee home to the manor and thus contribute her part to the war effort and is frankly terrified of her sister-in-law and their set who competitively “collect” refugees. Durand, however, mistakes her for a refugee and initially assumes that he is the rescuer. When he realizes his mistake, he attempts to correct the error by giving her his card but finds that he gives her the French version with his position at the Université de la Salle rather than the English version, which simply elevates his position as refugee. He tries again to set Rushworth straight later, but his stammering interferes, and he finds he is too embarrassed to do so when Rushworth is around other people who clearly belittle her. He is also intrigued and a bit excited by the adventure, and the opportunity to see living English history in the form of a baronial hall and its nobles is too much for him to resist. He goes with Rushworth, and at the moment when he is on the edge of blurting out the secret, the youngest of Rushworth’s nieces, Clio, prevents him from doing so. Clio cares deeply for her aunt, and explains that as is typical for most unmarried women of her generation, the family often overlooks her aunt Audrey; acquiring her refugee was literally the only thing that had ever happened to her. Clio promises to get him safely away without blowing his cover or her aunt’s illusion, and Durand agrees to participate in the charade until then. The story closes with the two meeting several months later and Durand’s discovery that Aunt Audrey has grown into something much stronger than the faint and tremulous creature he had thought himself rescuing.

“The Refugees” is an engaging, humorous story that is actually downright funny in places. In fact, it is much lighter than the bulk of Wharton’s work, and speculations for that difference vary. Some critics suggest that Wharton was attempting to return to the popular market. Others believe she was simply burned out by the emotional and physical drain of her charities and the wartime environment and that the war threw her creative energies far enough out of synch that she never quite recovered. Lewis writes that the story is “more substantial and amusing” than “Writing a War Story” (422). Suzanne Raitt and Trudi Tate indicate their own puzzlement when they write that “The Refugees” is “a curiously unsympathetic story about
people who helped refugees during the war” (17n37). The expectation would be, one assumes, that if Wharton writes a story about refugee helpers, then the story would present those persons in a much more positive light, given her own experiences.

In reality, while the story is indeed entertaining, it is also a sharply critical observation of human nature. Again, Wharton’s own experiences with the generally well-intentioned but often naive, egotistical, or simply misguided upper-class helpers she encountered in her daily work show through, and one cannot simply dismiss those experiences. While not all helpers were like Audrey Rushworth’s sister-in-law Caroline, there were enough that Wharton found herself exasperated at regular intervals. Finally, besieged by one too many society mothers whose daughters wanted to travel to France to help in the effort—daughters who had never truly had to endure difficulty and had no concept of the conditions under which they would be working and who, most significantly, could not speak French and yet fully expected to be able to communicate in an environment where French was the native language—she delegated part of the process of interviewing helpers to her sister-in-law in New York.

While the plot of “The Refugees” and the story’s setting are wartime, calling it a “war story” creates a certain confusion. Its purpose is not to relay a story about the war. Rather, as is true of most of Wharton’s work, its intent is to cast a reflection of society back upon its members in the hope that that society might, somehow, see itself more clearly. If society can do that, then perhaps it can change.28 Neither Wharton nor Johnston was fond of war. They were, in fact, vehemently opposed to it. For Wharton, war was a necessary evil, however, and while she disliked the repercussions and was grieved by the overwhelming destruction and loss, she supported American involvement in the same way that proponents of nonviolent solutions might support development or possession of long-range missiles or nuclear weapons as a military deterrent. Wharton was only a single voice in the American writing community attempting to persuade the United States of not only the need for involvement, but of its moral obligation to do so. Her American citizenship more actively shamed her during this period than not; being an American overseas did not create a buffer for her in the sense that she might have been able to say that it was not an American’s war. In truth, Wharton had not felt at home in the United States in many years, and while she retained her American citizenship, she felt herself more a
member of an international community. That community was, in this case, housed in France. Wharton—as did many other expatriate artists—passionately believed in the need for American involvement and worked feverishly to present that need to an American readership. It was a job writers such as Wharton and Henry James took very seriously, and while the texts sometimes seem to encroach upon propaganda, their works reflect their commitment for both their craft and their convictions.

Mary Johnston

While World War I was the war which most influenced Wharton, Mary Johnston’s personal battleground was the Civil War. Mary Johnston was born five years after the end of the Civil War, but it would be both naive and inaccurate to say that the events of the war no longer affected her. While she did not share Wharton’s first-hand experience of war, she grew up hearing the men of her family talk about their experiences, she walked the battlefields, and she listened to the men and women who had lived it, particularly during the years she spent researching The Long Roll and Cease Firing. Her own imagination and sensitivity was such that she indeed felt the experience on a visceral level, and it is probable that her strengthening abhorrence for war during this period helped nudge her into some of her more philosophical contemplations both in her personal life and in later texts.

For all practical purposes, Johnston lived in the shadow of the war, and it left an indelible mark on her life. For instance, her diaries note that the family home in Buchanan was not originally the one she remembers—Oak Hill—but her father’s old home which Federal forces burned during the war. After the war, he purchased Oak Hill, which is where he and his new wife moved upon their marriage some few years later. Johnston’s father fought in the war and, during their travels later in his life, pointed out scenes and locations of battles and wartime memories for her. She recalled her uncle Edgar who died when she was young, and the characteristic which most stands out in her mind during that recollection is the empty sleeve; he had lost his arm during the war. When the family moved from Buchanan to Moorefield, Johnston recalls that they “yet lived in a veritable battle cloud, an atmosphere of war stories, of continual references to the men and to the deeds of that gigantic struggle.”
Johnston’s writings often included war or a battleground setting, particularly her historical romance novels, but it would be accurate to say that her primary war writings consisted of two novels in particular: *The Long Roll* and *Cease Firing*. Published three years after *Lewis Rand* in 1911, *The Long Roll* was Johnston’s sixth book. The story begins just prior to Virginia’s declaration of secession and continues through the battle at Sharpsburg, Maryland.

Part of the novel follows the major characters, Richard Cleave, Judith Cary, and Maury Stafford. In the beginning of the text, we find that Richard loves Judith but has not expressed it because Maury Stafford had in essence told him that Judith loved him instead. Maury gives that impression to others as well and continues to woo Judith. The war comes and both men enlist as officers, and much of the story here is battle action and background suspense. Roughly midway through the novel, Richard finds that Judith loves him and is not committed to Stafford. He confronts Stafford with the earlier lie when next they meet, and Stafford, already antagonistic to Cary, plots his competitor’s downfall. The opportunity comes when he delivers orders from Stonewall Jackson to Colonel Winder, and Winder asks him to relay those orders to Cleave further down the line. The orders are to hold position on their side of the creek but send out small and quiet scouting parties. Along the way, Stafford runs into Steven Dagg, the stereotypical villain, who also dislikes Cleave. Stafford, recognizing Dagg’s character, tells Dagg the correct orders, has him repeat it to him, then—although the reader does not see it in the story—they devise a contradictory set of orders. Stafford leaves delivery of the modified orders to Dagg and returns to Jackson.

Cleave, when he receives the false orders from Dagg, has a slight doubt, but sounds of battle convince him to follow the orders rather than check on them for fear that he might cause a critical battle plan to fail. The 65th Virginia walks into a heavy gathering of Federal forces and the company is decimated. Cleave manages to save some of his men, but the commanding officer brings him up on charges and, based on the false testimony of Stafford, the court martial finds him guilty. Colonel Winder dies in action—and is therefore unable to provide a missing piece of the puzzle or refute Stafford’s story—and Dagg is also presumed dead and unable to testify, although the reader finds later that he has simply deserted again. The army summarily
strips Cleave of his rank and cashiers him out, then places the 65th under new command and leaves it to rebuild itself.

Judith learns most of the story of the disaster and Cleave’s dismissal from her uncle Fauquier, but does not know about Stafford’s involvement, and does not think to ask the name of the officer who should have relayed the message. She ultimately finds out near the end of the novel and, remembering Stafford’s threats about Cleave, makes one of her own. Johnston leaves the reader with the impression that Judith is about to make Stafford’s life hellish.

Cleave disguises himself as gunner Philip Deaderick and enlists in the army under the alias. Jackson discovers him eventually and agrees to allow him a court of inquiry should he request one after the war is over. The book winds down with Cleave’s return to his unit after a night of thinking on the One Tree Hill near Judith’s home (and an incidental meeting with Judith), Judith has just discovered that Maury Stafford was the officer responsible for Cleave’s disgrace and is currently a prisoner of war in one of the Federal jails, and the battle at Sharpsburg is over. Finally, the story ends with the death of Jackson from friendly fire and his dying assertion that Richard Cleave is to have his court of inquiry if he wants it.

*The Long Roll* is a long, complicated work which covers an incredible scope. Johnston conducted exhaustive research for this text and the subsequent one, *Cease Firing*. Most of that research involved first-hand accounts of family members and other veterans who fought in the battles, including her father. She recalls her father pointing out one battle scene after another as they traveled by train between Virginia, Birmingham, and Atlanta when she was younger, and as part of the research for these two texts, Johnston physically walked many of those sites. She wanted to see for herself where the land rose and fell, where troops may hide or find themselves exposed, where batteries positioned their guns, where there was opportunity for either courage or cowardice. A large part of the motivation for writing these two novels was in honor of her father and family, but it was not a task she took pleasure in. Her diary of August 24, 1908 records both her determination and her dread when she “wrote this morning a tentative page or so upon the first chapter of the war story. I want to do this story, chiefly for Father’s sake, but I abhor war,
and I foresee that I’ll be weary and disheartened enough before this two year’s piece of work is done.”

The novel follows three interwoven lines: the primary characters, Thomas Jackson, and the war itself. The first two elements, however, are the wheels for the third. The real story of this novel is Jackson and the war itself, unlike Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* whose fictional characters both form the basis of the story and generate the story’s forward movement. The two texts are entirely different species and cannot easily be compared. Indeed, Jones quotes Mitchell as saying that she “couldn’t possibly write anything on my own book. I felt so childish and presumptuous for even trying to write about that period when she [Johnston] had done it so beautifully, so powerfully—better than anyone can ever do it, no matter how hard they try” (qtd. in Jones 183–84).

Aside from the romance element, the primary character focus of *The Long Roll* is Stonewall Jackson, and that character is relatively well developed. Johnston researched the man as thoroughly as possible and presented him as accurately as possible. Her portrayal, however, was not without controversy;’s wife was less than pleased with the image of her husband in the novel. She strenuously objected to the frontispiece, which portrayed Jackson on his little sorrel, or the way Johnston seemed to emphasize some of Jackson’s small peculiarities. “It is passing strange,” Mary  ’Anna Jackson writes, “where the author obtained all her information concerning the wonderful peculiarities and eccentricities of this man, who won honor and fame in spite of them all, or how she could keep her mind and pen in such constant exercise exploiting his ‘old forage cap,’ ‘the jerking of his hand,’ and his everlasting ‘sucking of lemons.’ The two last peculiar habits which she airs in such excessive detail were unknown to me” (Jackson SM7). Johnston faced such complaints quietly, and instead replied that she had portrayed the General from the perspective of the average solder—this was, she insisted, what the rank-and-file saw. It was not a reply which satisfied Mrs. Jackson, and she condemned Johnston’s novel and its portrayal of the General vehemently. Instead, she told her audience, they should read British Army’s Lieutenant Colonel G. F. R. Henderson’s account in “Stonewall Jackson and the American Civil War.” “Col. Henderson,” Jackson argues, “visited all the battlefields of Virginia
and made an exhaustive study of the war and its leaders. His book has only to be read to prove the justice and fairness with which he deals with his hero and his campaigns.”

Aside from Jackson, the other characters tend to be fairly flat, and the fictional characters are often types, but that is almost inevitable in a work this large (683 pages in this edition) that covers such a large a scope. The romance between Judith and Richard is a secondary thread in a much larger fabric. Of the two, Richard is perhaps better defined; as one anonymous reviewer notes, “Judith has a character of untiring gentleness and beauty. She seems to be what Northerners have long considered as a type of the best of the war-time women of the Southland.” In contrast, Johnston depicts Jackson as human, complete with quirks and failings (e.g., the lemons and the peculiar arm movement). While Johnston realistically portrays the other historical battle figures such as Jeb Stuart and Robert E. Lee, she does not fully develop the secondary characters; indeed, she often uses them as foils for Jackson.

The general consensus among critics today is that the strongest element of this novel is the historical. Johnston’s research is clear, and she worked hard to portray the grime, weariness, and ugliness of war. While the love interest characters are fictional, there is a host of historical figures, and Johnston has faithfully tried to follow both the route and events of the war. The strength of the novel, however, also lends to its weakness. There is a huge amount of description and exposition in this text; the novel is more historical than novel, so to speak, and the plethora of characters, historical and otherwise, can be overwhelming. One can understand why a critic thought the historical elements overburdened the story itself, but when we consider such works today, we must also address the purpose and the genre of the text. Were this novel written today, it would certainly have been trimmed and pruned, and the characters fleshed out, but today’s form of historical fiction is not the same as it was when this text was originally printed. For that matter, neither is the craft of storytelling in general.

On a technical level, structure and plot are still a bit problematic here and there, and pronouns and sentence structure create muddy spots. Yet Johnston also has her typical moments of beauty, acute description, and keen insight, although the need to share the historical may create less opportunity for those moments than in some of her other texts. Finally, the novel ends with the distinct feeling that it is only one of a larger series, and the “cliffhanger” ending looks
forward to what should happen in the next. What comes next is *Cease Firing*, the sequel to *The Long Roll*. Johnston published the book in 1912 after a hard year’s work. The novel picks up the primary characters of the earlier text and continues the story of the war itself. As with the first novel, the protagonist of the novel is actually the war itself rather than the characters it contains, and that story takes an even stronger precedence here. There is less story-telling in this text than in the first, and it attempts to cover roughly twice the ground. The fictional characters are almost postscripts to the story; they are simply an admission that the readers want to know what happened to the characters they met in the first tale. Unfortunately, they too are flat rather than round, and Johnston kills off many in the story of the war, or drops them along the wayside, leaving the reader without answer for their outcome.

Nor does Johnston draw any of the historical figures in depth or follow their progress to the extent that she followed Jackson in *The Long Roll*. As with the first novel, however, Johnston researched the characters heavily and, as much as possible, used the words of the players themselves in direct quotes from journal and memoir, newspapers, and historical records. The difficulty is simply that the canvas for this tale is massive and does not have room for much else. That wide-angle lens and extreme compression create a certain amount of confusion not really present in the earlier novel. Specifically, the novel introduces so many historical faces and places in a rush that the reader sometimes loses track of them.

Part of the problem associated with this novel is that Johnston had not originally intended it to be a single volume. She had conceived of the Civil War story as a series of three separate books, as her diary of May 25, 1909 clearly notes:

> My plan, now, is not one war volume, but three—a trilogy. It is impossible to put everything into one book. The first would close with Chancellorr’sville and Stonewall Jackson the dominant historic figure. The second would be the struggle further south—Chickamanga [*sic*], Vicksburg, Dalton to Altanta, etc., and Cousin Joe Johnston the leader. The third back to Virginia, the Wilderness, Petersburg, etc., Appamattox. Lee the dominant. Four years work, perhaps, and I don’t enter on it with a light heart.
Once Houghton Mifflin produced the first volume, the company decided that there should be only two volumes. That demand drastically changed her approach, with the result that she was unable to create the depth of historical character in the second book as she had in the first. Rather, the book emphasizes the dirtiness, the heartache, the sacrifice, and the ugliness of war, even as it notes small moments of beauty and heroism. Johnston is quick to note the superiority of supplies and equipment for the Federal forces, and the ultimate desolation and complete lack of those same items on the part of the Confederate forces.

The novel ends with an image of the last vestiges of the Confederate army trudging wearily from one point to another, knowing that there is no hope but still resolved to attempt something, even as the reader knows that they will ultimately fail. There is no closing scene of capitulation or surrender; properly said, the story has no real ending. Rather, there is a sense of darkening a stage even as the actors are still in motion. I do not think Johnston had the heart to write the close, but I suspect she did not feel the need to do so since the reader already knew the ending. Instead, she simply allowed the story to fade to black and the reader to fill in the closing scenes on her own.

Johnston does not denigrate the blue forces. Although she makes a point of noting Sherman and Hunter’s habit of burning the buildings as they passed, when she does speak of the Federal forces she generally does so with the full sense that these too were honorable men. She even includes that argument at a number of points within the characters’ dialogue. Her focus, however, is on the Southern forces, and she tells the story from that perspective. One comes away from the text with a clear and immediate sense of Johnston’s own love of and pride in her Southern heritage. Nowhere, however, does Johnston handle the war as being good or positive. Repeatedly, the characters and omniscient narrator speak against the war and war in general.

There are a number of noteworthy elements in this novel, as with its predecessor. One is Johnston’s borrowing of friend and family names for characters in the text, and the realization that Johnston has embedded some of her own family in the tale or, rather, that she has chosen to tell their tale. The two most obvious examples are General Joseph Eggleston Johnston (great uncle on her father’s side) and Major John William Johnston (father). That Johnston included their stories, and had first hand access to those stories, is critical and is not something critics
should discount. Those sources help put some of the other events in the novels in context. For instance, Johnston deliberately argues for General Johnston’s fitness as a leader for the conditions under which the Confederate army was operating, and the insensitivity of Jefferson Davis’s decision to replace him with General Hood at that critical moment in time (337–38, 374).

Other life-echoing elements appear in the text, such as the burning of the Cleave family home, which clearly mirrors the loss of Johnston’s father’s family home. Another prime example is the wounded soldier who complains of something stuck between the fingers of his amputated arm. His comments are direct echoes of Mary’s own memories of her uncle Edgar. Her memoir records that:

uncle Edgar died when we were yet small children. I remember him most plainly by his empty sleeve—he had lost an arm in the war. I remember his telling us that sometimes the buried arm hurt him—that sometimes he felt something between the fingers that were no longer his.

Compare that memory with her description of a scene in Cease Firing where Judith and Unity are on duty at the hospital:

A man whose arm had been torn from the socket fell to crying softly because there was a piece of shell, he said, between his fingers and he could not get it out.

“Nerve ends?”—Yes, Doctor, maybe so. . . . Then, don’t you reckon the nerve ends in my arm out there in the Wilderness are feeling for my shoulder? Oh, I feel them feeling for it!” (111)

For Johnston, war was never acceptable. Both The Long Roll and Cease Firing, while they speak of war, actively condemn war in no uncertain terms. We see Johnston’s convictions not only in her pastoral descriptions of countryside and people untouched by war as compared to those who have been caught in struggle, but we hear her voice in the words of her characters. Sometimes the words come from the lowly foot soldier with little education and no position in society:

“The guns echo so. Here they come! And God knows I am sorry for them—for Abner here and Abner there! Martin, I hate War.”

“It ain’t exactly Christian, and it’s so damned avoidable.” (42)
At other times, they come from the officers of the upper class.

“Strange! That’s the thing about the universe I think of most at night—how queer it is!”

“Unity! That’s what they teach—all the philosophers! And yet a unity that tears its own flesh—”

"Sometimes unity does that very thing. I’ve seen a man do it."

“Yes, when he was distraught!”

“That’s what I say. You can nearly go mad at night, thinking how mad we all are!”

“Don’t think. At least not now. You can’t afford it.”

“I agree with Cary. There’s a time to think and a time not to think. The less the soldier thinks the better.”

“Think!” said Fauquier Cary. “No one ever thinks in war. The soldier looks at his enemy, and then he looks at his murdering piece, and then instinctively he discovers the best position—or what seems to him the best position—from which to fire it. And then he reloads, and he looks again at the enemy, and instinct does the job for him once more—and so on, *ad infinitum*. But he never *thinks*.” He rose and stood, warming his one hand. “If he did that, you know, there’d be no war!” (289)

Regardless of the station of the speaker, there is a unified front in these texts: war is an unnecessary evil. Johnston’s sister Elizabeth records Mary’s feelings on the subject in her own addendum to the memoir she was compiling:

War and the End of War was to my sister an ever-present passion. All people, nearly, claim to hate war and to wish its end, but there are only a few who hate it as Mary Johnston did. “I know war,” she would often say. “I have lived with it,” thinking of *The Long Roll* and *Cease Firing* “for four long years. I have fought it with the Generals and the Colonels and the Majors and the Captains—but, mostly, with the rank and file. I know the feel of it, and the smell of it, and the taste of it,—and I hate it!” She had a quaint, original idea about war, that if the human
race laughed at it long and hard enough maybe it could be laughed out of court. Few things and people, can stand ridicule, she claimed, and ridicule might put war in its place as purile [sic] and absurd. . . .

Certainly Mary Johnston was of the Quaker persuasion when it came to war. I have often heard her say, “Every war to its fighters is a Holy War. But there is no such thing as a Holy War.” Quite characteristically, she took no part in the First World War, and declared herself, if asked, a Conscientious Objector. She never liked the term Pacifist, which was more used then. It seemed to her too negative. She was living quietly in the country at Three Hills throughout that war—and I think she was glad of it, glad to be away from the turmoil and the shouting. She died before World War II, but she heard its distant rumblings and was deeply distressed when the Japanese invaded Manchuria.

The Long Roll and Cease Firing were, aside from Mary ’Anna Jackson’s condemnation of Johnston’s portrayal of her husband, very successful with the general public, and most critics still consider these to be her strongest works. There is a teetering balance between historical characters and details and the craft of storytelling. Sometimes the slide slips more heavily to the historical elements and the storytelling suffers, but the overall judgment is that the novels are worth studying—and worth reading.

Mary Johnston and Edith Wharton were both, as Alan Price phrased it, “bracketed by wars” (ix). Perhaps more important than being framed by war in the sense that their lives began and ended during periods of war, however, they were interpreters of war. Wharton had the opportunity to actually watch battle. She had the advantage of immediacy during her visits to the front line, to see the men in the medical tents, to guess at the dark spots which might hide an enemy sniper. Yet her experience is not more valid than Johnston’s. It is simply different. While Wharton lived in close proximity to the war during the war years, her time with the war ended shortly after the war was over and she transferred responsibility of her charities to other organizations. Johnston did not see battle, and the wounded she encountered were not fresh from the battlefields of either the Civil War or World War I. Yet her experience, while different, was
no less weighty. Like Wharton, she could point to the empty places where friends, family, and acquaintances normally sat. Perhaps most significantly, Wharton lived with war for only a few years; Johnston lived with it for the entirety of her life. She grew up under its shadow, lived with its effects from childhood, listened to her elders talk about it with vivid memories. It followed her every step and, during her research for *The Long Roll* and *Cease Firing*, made her feel as if she had lived it. In a way, she had. For Johnston, there was never a break from war and nor did the first World War erase the Civil War; it simply compounded it. Regardless of the physical immediacy of their experiences, Wharton and Johnston were both involved in war in one way or another, and that involvement influenced their lives immeasurably. How they chose to handle those influences differed dramatically, and the texts they produced varied even further.

Wharton’s war texts are, as is true of most of her work, very much character-driven; they are what we today term “literary fiction.” She tends to focus on a single character or couple of characters, fully develop those characters, and then move the story forward based on their behaviors and inner lives. She uses very few, if any, historical characters, but draws the settings and descriptions of the soldiers and people she met from her own observations gathered during her motor tours to the areas.

Johnston’s texts, in contrast, are marked by romance and still follow a sentimental tradition. She lacks Wharton’s character development, grammar and syntax are often almost Jamesian, and the other technical aspects of the craft sometimes slip out of her control. Nevertheless, while the technical aspects present a certain weakness, her need to honor those who were involved and to do so as accurately as possible still clearly drives the novels. As with Wharton, the settings are entirely historical and Johnston draws them based upon her own observations from walking the scene as well as from the accounts of the men who fought there. She uses historical characters, and as much as possible, their own words.

These texts, however, raise critical questions about a writer’s authority. Some critics—perhaps particularly during the period of these texts—considered war unspeakable for women writers, and because they were not combatants, what little speech they might garner had no authority. The inability to voice that which they could not experience, therefore, created a necessary “muteness” in their texts. Unfortunately, such argument negates creative ability (“we
can only write about what we know and have experienced”), but it also negates other experiences of the war and those perceptions as they differed from the male soldier’s perspective. It presumes that the only perception worth discussion is that of the soldier in the front line and that all other experiences, regardless of gender, status, or placement, are irrelevant and contain both less authority and value.

The women wrote what they knew and from their own experience. While they may not have actively picked up a gun and fired it at an enemy, they experienced war in very real and significant ways. Both women experienced the concern and sense of loss that comes with any tragedy. They were active in wartime activities. Wharton was at the front of her war, while Johnston gained her information from those who had been there, then toured the areas herself. Arguing that someone who does not actually do the thing cannot talk about it is both arrogant and naive because it denies the other’s experience. It also denies the writer’s own mission and ability to write about subjects which may not be entirely familiar. If writers could not use their imaginations and empathies in this way, then there would be very little fiction available to the world at large, and stories such as Melville’s Moby-Dick and Louise Erdrich’s Love Medicine would not exist.

In a similar vein, I find myself unable to agree with Raitt and Tate’s argument that writers such as Edith Wharton and Gertrude Stein “side-stepped the issue of the relevance of art to war by undertaking their own projects of relief and assistance” (9). The question of whether Wharton dealt with art in its relationship to war is a grey one, but given all that she wrote and the manner in which she presented the war in her own art, that statement is perhaps a bit simplistic. While she designed much of her war writing to raising funds, she wrote much that was not, such as the Fighting France essays, and much which she published later, such as A Son at the Front. Likewise, she produced The Book of the Homeless, a coffee-table book of art, photos, writings, and poetry, and while she did not write that text, editing at this level and under these conditions is certainly no less a use of one’s art. Can one say that an artist is not relating war to her art if she uses her art to portray that war? It is impossible to separate the use of one’s craft from the products of that craft, and this type of criticism raises the question of how we define art. Can we say that a text such as Ethan Frome is art while the Fighting France essays are not? Doing so
indicates some degree of separation or bias; we divide an artist’s work into two stacks: that which we deem worthwhile (i.e., art), and that which is not (i.e., not art). Understand that I do not mean to indicate that every scribble and scratch constitutes art, although I have seen some scribblings I would have gladly owned as art. Rather, I mean the artist’s final products as a unified series. In this sense, the reality is that the entire production is art, even though the qualities—and how well those individual works may meet our expectations—may differ.
V. SOAP BOXES AND STUMP PREACHERS:

Women about Women

The Messengers: Personal Perspectives

One of the recurring themes in both Wharton’s and Johnston’s writings is the question of gender roles, and perhaps here we see their efforts to create change most strongly. As in their war writings, both writers approach the topic in radically different ways and with decidedly different voices. For Wharton, the differences rarely worked against her career as a writer. Johnston’s career, however, suffered and, in conjunction with other issues she felt compelled to address, never quite recovered.

A large part of that difference in career paths is because of the conflict in their approaches. Elizabeth Ammons’s insightful observation about Wharton puts it most succinctly when she says that “[a]t her best she was a critic not a visionary” (156). While Wharton was not a visionary, Mary Johnston was, and when vision and writing craft overlapped, her popularity suffered. For that matter, so did her craft. For Johnston, looking forward to a better future was a way of life, and she could not help but reflect it in her writing. In her addendum to Johnston’s drafted memoir, Elizabeth records that:

Many thought it unfortunate that [unreadable] religion, [unreadable], it got into her writing, and, financially, it was. But she would say, “I can’t write one thing and be another. I must be myself both ways.”

Johnston’s steadfast integrity and belief that she must be the same person in all facets of her life was the catalyst behind her more liberal writings. She felt, as her sister records, that she simply had to share her insights. The easiest way for her to do so was via her writings. It is possible to preach a message and share one’s vision in a text without the text’s becoming a stump sermon, but to do so requires that the writer also learn how to embed that message rather subtly so that it
does not overwhelm either the text or the reader. While Wharton learned how to speak *sotto voce* regarding her earlier wartime writings in order to raise funds for her charities, Johnston never quite learned that technique. She presented herself, her beliefs, and her convictions in each writing at largely the same decibel level. For Johnston, that decibel level was both loudest and at its clearest when she was writing about the issues she felt most passionately about, and for a long period, the Woman question occupied center stage as she used her writing in an attempt to make a difference in the world around her.  

Johnston first became involved with the suffrage movement in the fall of 1909 through the influence of her friends, Lila Valentine, Ellen Glasgow and her sister Cary. It was not a development Johnston planned; her diaries suggest that she felt she had quite enough on her plate and that she would be happier avoiding the high-profile, high-octane environment of group activity. She was, in fact, a shy and retiring woman. Nevertheless, the group inexorably drew her in and asked her to play the awkward role of spokeswoman; the popularity of her earlier novels made her enough of a celebrity that the local organizers felt her inclusion would be a major draw to others. Aside from the personal hesitations, Johnston’s memoir indicates that she also had her own reservations about the movement:

> I will not say that I at once acclaimed their movement. In any active intellectual life there are apt to be great tracts to which the mind, lacking just the needed stimulus or preoccupied with other regions and provinces, has simply not yet turned. It was so with me. But I will say for myself that I have always been ready to study and ponder a thing when it is brought really and vividly before me. I began now to read and think from an angle which I had not before taken. The result was that very quickly I threw in my lot with the women of this country who are striving to obtain political independence.

Once she determined that participation was the morally correct choice, Johnston’s aversion to half-hearted attempts came into play. Since suffrage was a cause she believed in and which she felt increasingly important, she decided—as she would about most of life—that anything worth doing was worth doing properly and to the best of her ability. In order to help her accomplish that goal, she took speech lessons. They helped her gain the confidence she lacked in speaking to
larger groups, and she learned how to project what was normally a soft voice beyond the first few rows.

In 1909, the women of Richmond formed the Equal Suffrage League of Virginia, and Johnston spent most of the next four years as an officer and member of the organization. She recalls the period with a certain sense of disbelief:

If this time last year anyone had told me what I should be doing this time this year I should have said, “You are mad!” Woman Suffrage speeches before the Virginia House of Delegates, before the house of Governors, before the churches, before civic organizations; an article for the *Atlantic*, “The Woman’s War,” organizing with Lila Valentine Woman Suffrage Leagues all over Virginia, and braving with her now unbelievable slander; marching in Washington and New York in Equal Suffrage parades!

When Johnston considered what she had actually endured and accomplished, she was genuinely amazed. Her poor health and her quiet personality would not, she would have believed, have encouraged this level of activity and public performance. Johnston, however, had an astonishing ability to persevere. Nevertheless, she was a bit amused, even bemused, and found it unbelievable that she had become so active a participant, but she was in no way embarrassed about her activity. Rather, there is a sense of accomplishment in her diary notes as she describes what she has done.

As Cella so astutely observes in his overview, Johnston “developed closely reasoned arguments to demonstrate that demands for equal rights for women were neither ridiculous nor immoral” (25). In part, she intended that methodology to give herself more confidence about approaching her subject matter, but it was also an attempt to help her avoid the type of abuse and slander she records in her earlier memoir note, and which Elizabeth mentions in her commentary about Johnston’s suffrage activities:

. . . there was a sinister [side] too. The opposition, the antis, fought back with a viciousness and a bitter whispered campaign against personal integrity that is, today, when Woman Suffrage is taken as a matter of course unbelievable! My sister, since she, as a writer, was already in the public eye, became their target, so
Mary Johnston received most of the poisoned arrows. But it did not greatly disturb her equanimity for she took it as part of the day’s work, though deploring the depths to which her sisters would stoop;—and brothers, too, for many of the antis were men.

While Johnston and her colleagues still found themselves on the receiving end of such abuse, it is entirely conceivable that her reasonable and rational approach lessened the quantity and quality of hostility. Of course, the opposing argument that people respond even more violently when they feel themselves threatened by that which they had deemed safe could have been equally true, and the “arrows” the opposition directed at Johnston were more heavily laced because of her approach. It is, after all, much easier to dismiss someone as an extremist if her method of presentation is illogical, sensational, and emotionally charged. When one structures and voices the argument using respected methodology (i.e., masculine reason and logic), the familiar suddenly becomes unfamiliar, and therefore doubly threatening. Regardless of the final result, it was certainly Johnston’s intent to present a calm, rational, and logical discussion—a masculinely reasoned argument.

For instance, in the extended opening of the Atlantic’s publication of “The Woman’s War” article, Johnston describes the little house where she attended one of the Equal Suffrage League meetings in Richmond. She remembers the environment vividly, and the details she chooses to present in that single paragraph are a blend of domestic and political rhetorics:

The meeting of which I speak, and which is in my mind because it was only yesterday, and because, too, I think it typical of what is occurring in a hundred quiet places removed from the central current of ideas, this meeting was held in a small, old time parlour rented by the League for the nursery of their Idea. Over the chimneypiece and the open fire hangs a time-yellowed engraving of Pocahontas wedding John Rolfe. On the opposite wall is Columbus Demonstrating the Theory of the New World. There are the old gilt candelabra with swinging prisms that most of us have in our parlours and there are some pieces of china from Monticello. The author of the Declaration of Independence helped himself to sugar out of that sugar bowl. Outside the window is the street...
up and down which marched the armies of Lee and of Jackson, up which once marched the army of Grant.

There were present, perhaps, twenty-five women. . . . It was late in the afternoon, and the room was not brightly lit. In one place there would be a glow from the fire, in another shadow. A few of the women were young, one or two were elderly, but the most were in the middle of life, moving with the moving hours across that high plateau of sun and shade. All sat in a circle around the room, in the firelight and the shadow. There were reports . . . here and there, out of the red brown shadow, a woman spoke, diffidently, keeping her seat, somewhat confused, for in the South we are not used to women’s speaking—not, certainly, upon the present subject.

For all the Indian maiden over the mantle shelf, and the Genoese admiral upon the wall, and the china that had been Jefferson’s, the scene, in that twilight hour, looked like an interior by Rembrandt. It had, that small gathering in the old-fashioned parlour, a simplicity, a homeliness, a pathos, a touching and spiritual and, yes, a rugged beauty! It was like a Rembrandt, and it was like a Millet. It was lovingly touched, a shadowed picture of the beginning of things.

These three paragraphs combine a number of visual images. Johnston deliberately places the reader in a humble parlor, one which could easily resemble the reader’s own and is filled with furniture and decorations he might recognize as a reflection of his own home, such as the candelabra. It is a familiar scene, a “homey” scene, and therefore a safe scene. For the anti-suffrage reader, the text places woman within the domestic environment he wants to maintain. For the reader in favor of the suffrage movement, however, it does something different: it tells her that she need not necessarily leave that domestic environment in order to achieve her goals; her desire to vote will not destroy her home parlor. Rather, she is still an integral part of the scene; she still occupies the space of her home hearth, and while the subject under discussion may not be the normal parlor chat, her presence has not really changed. She is graceful, feminine, modest, and even Southern. Speaking about suffrage issues has not transformed her
into a loose or immodest woman; the desire to vote will not suddenly transform her into a sexual harpy of Greek mythology.

As Johnston deliberately draws the women and the environment to work together and dampen the sense of conflict between environment and subject matter, so too does she use the different items in the room to support the idea that the talk of suffrage activities is not an act of treachery. Instead, she connects the women and their discussion to very specific examples of the rhetoric of freedom, growth, and exploration. The sugar dish is not merely any sugar dish, but rather the dish Thomas Jefferson used. It is an image which places freedom eating from the bowl of domesticity in a very literal manner and suggests that the sugar bowl, as a representative of the feminine world, supports, encourages, and nurtures freedom. The presence of the Monticello dishes serves a similar purpose, but more importantly, that they are present in other homes such as the reader’s connects the reader in an even closer context; it is not merely “those women” or even women in general, but rather we who have a domestic connection to freedom. It is women who use the dishes so tightly connected to the author of the Declaration of Independence and therefore to freedom; it is women who serve, in multiple senses of the word, freedom. If women serve freedom, then their own lack of freedom creates a moral contradiction, and society must first grant them freedom in order for them to serve it appropriately.

The engraving of the wedding of Pocahontas and Rolfe, while politically problematic on many levels for readers today, would then have represented the romantic image of the union of man and woman, nature and civilization, and the growth and support of one for the other. It too was an image many Virginians might have had in their own homes since Rolfe ranked as one of the First Families of Virginia. Johnston, scholar of history that she was, would have also known Pocahontas’s history; she would have known that Pocahontas was not the stereotypical bride but a victim of a political maneuver to negotiate the freedom of white hostages her tribe had taken. Knowledge of the truth behind the myth creates a subversive undercurrent of meaning that connects Pocahontas with the women in the parlor; had Pocahontas been free to choose her own course and control her own life, she might have been better able to help those around her, both her own people and the new European community she had befriended. Nor is it likely she would have spent the latter part of her life in a form of exile in a foreign country where she died of what
was probably a European illness, after the politics of the day had used her as a demonstration of a “tamed-savage” publicity program. Similarly, if the women gathered around the portrait were free, they might have the opportunity to influence the world around them and do what Pocahontas could not: control their own destinies. Such thinking would, of course, be a new exploration, and not even Columbus could find a more challenging New World to explore. While it is a given that Johnston did not create this parlor scene out of her own imagination and that it most certainly existed as she described and experienced it, there is equally no doubt that she understood the ramifications of her own descriptive technique. She was a discerning reader of both text and people.

Once the essay has the reader placed in this mixed environment, it then goes on to refute the charges against the woman’s movement. Johnston specifically addresses the opposition’s claims against the movement and women in general. This essay is, in the truest sense of the word, a rebuttal. Interestingly and perhaps most noticeably, it is also much more emotional than “The Status of Women.” Johnston’s language in “The Woman’s War” is active, energetic, and decidedly more emotionally charged, and one cannot help but wonder if perhaps those “arrows” her sister Elizabeth mentions did not strike more deeply than Elizabeth acknowledges.

For instance, one of the charges which Johnston addresses is that the movement was “a piece of foolishness to be dismissed by a caricature.” After she lists a series of historical moments a less than astute observer might have caught in caricature—a list which includes Ferdinand and Isabella in the Inquisition, Columbus, Martin Luther, and Christ—she goes on to say:

Do you not know that the higher the Idea the more certain the pillory or stocks?
Ridicule is a weapon that any fool can pick up. Indeed it is the only weapon that can be at once rotten and effective. (emphasis mine)

When she discusses the idea that the woman’s movement is “retrograde and sinister,” she argues that those who think so also believe that any forward movement is sinister and do not realize that they must choose either to go forward or go back; they cannot choose to stand still. Attempting to do so indicates that they “are constitutionally myopic. . . . They themselves would walk like the crab backward, and force the same regression upon the whole wide, onward spinning earth.
Or say they, ‘we would stand still’—and do not know that nothing ever stands still. There is progression and there is regression, but there is never immobility.”

Johnston addresses the fear that women are claiming not equality but rather sameness, and in a fairly logical order debunks that concept. She addresses the question of women’s lack of morality, or that women are lawless. She reminds her reader that men and women cannot replace each other, and argues that men are by and large responsible for the position in which women find themselves. She also bluntly states that those who are opposed to the concept of women’s freedom are those who gain by not granting it, such as “the militarist, the employer of cheap and of child labour, the bribed politician, the contemnor of education, the liquor interest, the brothel interest, and every interest that sets its face against reform from the milk supply to the disarmament of the nations is opposed to the political liberty of women.” Those in favor, she indicates are the “biologist, the political economist, the statesman, the sociologist, the eugenist, the physician, the educator, the student and the moralist” and, she suggests, that crowd is growing.

The essay progresses through a dozen pages to address the opposition’s primary arguments, but Johnston’s language is much stronger in this essay than we have seen in many other texts. She speaks very bluntly, such as when she indicates that any fool can pick up ridicule, or that those who oppose the movement are corrupt, but she also comes very near to swearing now and then, and draws God into the text in a number of places. For instance, when she speaks of the tendency of some women to manipulate the men in their lives in order to get what they want, she argues that women’s “indirect way” of getting what they wanted “is a grave fault—perhaps their gravest. But in the name of God, who is responsible for it? Today, from half the pulpits of the land, by the press, by whom not, she is told ‘Continue as you are!’” (emphasis mine). In other words, men have created this problem by not allowing women power and are reinforcing it by telling them that they should not change.

The final page attempts to return to the logical argument with which the essay began. It argues that women only have “antiquated” weapons with which to fight their battles and that those who suggest that society has given women “an ancient arquebuse called ‘Virtual Representation’” should think again:
Virtual representation? There is no such thing in the field of Law, nor, I should imagine in any other field. The elector is directly represented by the man he sends to the Legislature. An army corps “virtually represented” on the battlefield sounds somehow like something out of Alice in Wonderland. The arm the women want is the standard one of tested efficiency. It is called the Ballot.

In today’s world of the Internet, online worlds and virtual realities, a virtual army might indeed have an impact. In Johnston’s world, however, a world not long finished with the Civil War and nearing the start of the first World War, such an army has all the effectiveness of a morning fog, and the concept only serves to obscure the reality.

The article is not one of Johnston’s stronger writings. Indeed, the tone and occasional slips into storytelling or soapbox passion detract somewhat from the weight of the essay. It is clear, however, that she has attempted to organize the essay logically and that she has made it as responsive as possible to the charges forwarded by the opposition. Yet the essay she published the year before in the Richmond *Times-Dispatch*, “The Status of Women,” may be stronger if only because it is calmer.  

In essence, Johnston spends a half dozen pages arguing against the idea that liberation for women also means the removal of women from the home environment and that acceptance of the first would generate a sort of emigration from the home. The bulk of the essay focuses on ancient civilizations, even hunter-gatherer or near-prehistoric modes. She notes women’s tendencies and roles in the early family clusters, that “family” meant mother and child, and that men’s roles had little to do with that concept. Instead, she suggests that desire for sex and/or procreation generated their involvement with women. She also notes that men’s roles in the family were still (as of the time of the writing) of both less value and less significance than that of the mother. The historical discussion serves as a prelude to *The Wanderers*, a collection of short stories which would come out eight years later, in 1917. Once she lays out all the history, her argument comes to a fairly quick close. If women who had considerable freedom in the earlier development of the species did not abandon family and home then why should anyone think they may do so now? That fear, she says, is a male creation.
While the essay is emotionally quieter, it is also subtly darker and potentially more threatening. Johnston suggests that the “stone” of oppression women carry is finally visible as “a mere enormous top-heavy mass of conventions, senseless restrictions, sentimentalities, mock-modesties, sequestration from healthful activities, premiums on mental indolence, a world of bricabrac and filagree teachings, a vast incubus of discriminating laws, taboos, taxes, vetoes and general miscomprehension” and that it is man who put the stone on woman’s head, aided by woman’s share in man’s ignorance and lack of wisdom. When Johnston considers this image, then relates it back to the old cave-mother who controlled her life and provided for her family, she decides that

what chiefly angers the old cave-mother is that most vain and shallow imagination of her sons, or of her daughters when their brothers have whispered it to them, that the battle which she fights for a loftier-roofed home and for a family more worth the raising will, in some occult fashion, destroy her interest in either. It is purely a masculine fear. The drone in the hive might say as much to the queen bee—but I don’t like to think of the fate of the drone.

While Johnston may not like to think of the fate of the drone, she has certainly raised its image in her readers’ minds, and it is not a cheerful picture. Whether she intends it or not—and I believe she does—she raises the suggestion that women cannot much longer be convinced that their desire for a better life is destructive to the reasons for which they fight for that life, and that attempting to continue to do so will ultimately result in the destruction of the male “drone.”

While that note may be a dark one for her to sound in an otherwise calmly pragmatic essay, it hints at something which would be more clearly obvious in the coming years. Johnston’s attitude toward feminist issues quickly turned to an overarching perspective of humanity. While she continued to work on behalf of women’s issues, her understanding of the core problems themselves came to be of a more universal nature. In essence, if women were not free to live their own lives and up to their own potential, then humanity as a whole would suffer; women were not the only victims. While she wrote her diary entry some four years after the event and therefore has the advantage of hindsight, demonstrates the shift of her perspective, and indicates the direction her view of life would take:
The Equal Suffrage League of Virginia was formed in November of 1909, with an initial membership of twenty. I joined it within a few weeks, and I have been now for four years an officer and a fairly active worker. In this four years I have continued to read and study along the more general lines of the Feminist Movement, a moment at which the struggle for the franchise is but a part, as the feminist movement, itself, is but a part of the general human movement. While I am a suffragist, I am not simply suffragist; I am a feminist rather than suffragist. And while I am a feminist, I am not simply feminist; I am humanist rather than feminist.

The emphasis on humanist rather than feminist was important to Johnston and was a clarification she raised again during World War I when she rebelled against the “pacifist” label.

Wharton was, in sharp contrast to Johnston, decidedly not a supporter of the woman’s movement and suffragists. Yet we cannot catalogue Wharton’s convictions in such simple terms. In many ways she was a complex series of seeming contradictions, and her perspectives appeared to change according to her own circumstances, moods, or sense of status. A fair portion of her response to women’s issues do indeed link to her relative sense of security as a writer. As many critics have noted, Wharton based her sense of authorial identity in a masculine connection to logic, reason, and rationale. Yet, as Frederick Wegener notes in his excellent introduction to Wharton’s critical writings, she was not entirely able to separate her sense of gender from her sense of writing identity. Specifically, she doubted her own ability to perform as a literary critic. Moderately early in her career, when she thought that she might like to write an essay about the “three Francescas,” she wrote William Dean Howells that she “had thought of offering the article to the North American, but as I do not know Mr. Harvey, & am not sure if he condescends to such frivolities as a dramatic criticism by a woman, I venture to approach him obliquely by begging you to transmit my suggestion if you think such an article would be acceptable” (Letters 62). Apparently Harvey thought the idea entirely acceptable, and Lewis notes that the article appeared in the July edition of the journal (Letters 62, n5). While she did ultimately write a considerable body of criticism, her hesitation about her own critical abilities haunted each effort,
and she never quite brought herself to believe that it was worthwhile. That doubt echoed the conviction she felt about women in general performing in such capacity. While she was acquainted and even friends with several female writers who were also very solid literary critics, such as Violet Paget (otherwise known as Vernon Lee), she never publicly supported their critical work, and on occasion spoke somewhat denigratingly about it. She very rarely spoke positively about another woman’s critical writing, and on those occasions could, as Wegener indicates, be rather “grudging” with her commendation (UCW 48, n16). She was convinced that criticism, and by implication critical thinking, was an activity which fell within the male rather than female province.

In some ways, this question of skill exhibits itself in Johnston’s “Woman’s War” and “The Status of Woman” articles. Toward the end of “Woman’s War,” Johnston flatly states that men will probably always be better at these types of skills than women, but she suggests that reason is because the male does not need his creative energy for the more important matters of family and child-rearing. The primary difference between Johnston and Wharton in this matter is, interestingly, in their starting attitudes. Johnston believed that while men may excel, certainly women should at least make the endeavor if they had the desire and inclination to do so. Nor does she suggest that they cannot do so effectively; she simply suggests that men have the opportunity to do so better. Wharton, on the other hand, does not truly believe that women can do so effectively, and therefore she hesitates to suggest that they even make the attempt.

While Wharton does not believe that women were capable of becoming good critics, neither does she believe that education was the road to accomplishing that task, and again her attitude is complex. Her memoir criticizes her parents, specifically her mother, for not providing her with what she perceived to be a proper education, yet she does not approve of higher education for women. Shari Benstock writes that Wharton was opposed to educating women for the professions. At Ogden Codman’s request, she endowed a $500 scholarship for a student at the Paris division of the newly organized New York School of Design (later the Parsons School): she specified that the recipient be a male. When asked to contribute to a fund for travel scholarships for women, she sought Minnie’s advice about whether it was
“worthwhile.” She was “not much interested in travelling scholarships for women,” she wrote, “or in fact scholarship, tout court!—they’d much better stay at home and mind the baby.” . . . (No evidence exists to show that Edith contributed to this scholarship fund.) (388)

Wharton had an interesting conflict in that while she expected herself to perform in the masculine arena of literature in a masculine manner both in terms of her own writing and in terms of professional performance, and separate herself from the local colorists and regional writers, she did not hold those same expectations for other women. Rather, she expected them to behave “like women,” even though she deplored the behavior. For instance, in 1918 she wrote Minnie that her friend Lizzie (Elizabeth Cameron) was

behaving like a mad-woman—sometimes I feel like saying simply, “like a woman”!—I can’t understand it, at over 50. I should think the hard drubbing of life wd. By that time have had its effect. But the “enfant malade” prevails to [the] end, with most. (Letters 408)

The female of the species, in Wharton’s opinion, far too often behaved like a “mad-woman,” and her perception of the reasoning behind that behavior was that society had never asked the American woman to grow up. Instead, she still operated in a childlike mentality and a rosy haze of irresponsibility.

American women, Wharton felt, were not the only ones to suffer from that rosy haze. Rather, she believed that the local color writers worked from that same perspective, and it is one she argues against in her own writing. For instance, her memoir speaks about her writing of Ethan Frome:

For years I had wanted to draw life as it really was in the derelict mountain villages of new England, a life even in my time, and a thousandfold more a generation earlier, utterly unlike that seen through the rose-coloured spectacles of my predecessors, Mary Wilkins and Sarah Orne Jewett. (BG 293)

Jewett’s death in 1909 did indeed rank her as one of Wharton’s predecessors, but Mary Wilkins Freeman was still alive and active until her death six years before Wharton’s own death, even though the bulk of her publications appeared in the earlier half of Wharton’s career.
Of course, a much smaller factor of Wharton’s condescension toward women writers still working in other literary modes or genres, particularly those writing sentimental, romance, or local color fiction, is simply that Wharton was something of a snob. While she was at heart a kind person, she had a certain class consciousness which allowed her to be intensely critical of those who fell outside her circle. She recognized her own tendency to criticize, but interestingly did not seem to be concerned about it. In 1928, she wrote a letter to Roger Jewett refusing a project requested by the Will Hays motion picture company. The company’s plan was to produce a film entitled *Woman Marches On*, which would include major women figures since 1900. The proposal included Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, Dr. Florence Sabine, Mary Pickford, and Kathleen Norris. Whitney was a sculptress, Dr. Sabine was a name of importance with the Johns Hopkins Medical School, Mary Pickford was an actress and feminist, and Norris was a writer of romance and sentimental novels. Wharton’s response was that she “should not be greatly flattered at being associated with some of the ladies named in the list” (515), and while it would be hazarding a guess, it seems logical to assume that Wharton’s objections probably fell chiefly on the artists rather than the scientist in the group.

Just as Wharton found the local colorists antithetical to her concept of writing identity, she found the suffragettes problematic on other levels. Lewis notes that she avoided meeting May Sinclair at least twice, despite strong invitations to do so (*Letters* 9). Her letter to Sarah Norton in December of 1908 certainly suggests that the avoidance was intentional:

*Today I was to have gone to tea with Miss May Sinclair, whom I met here one evening, but I could find no other time to go to the Duchess of Sutherland, whom I like, & who is in London only for two days or so; so I shall try to see Miss S. another time. (Letters 168)*

The phrasing does more than simply say that she needed to change her social schedule. Rather, the inclusion of the idea that she likes the Duchess of Sutherland creates a corresponding suggestion that she does not like May Sinclair. In a later letter to John Hugh Smith in 1925, that faint sense of antagonism is considerably stronger when she replies to Smith’s appreciation of her story, “The Mother”:
It is, of course, what an English reviewer (I forget in what paper) reviewing it jointly with Mrs. Woolf’s latest, calls it: an old-fashioned novel. I was not trying to follow the new methods, as May Sinclair so pantingly & anxiously does; & my heroine belongs to the day when scruples existed. (*Letters* 480)

It is impossible to tell whether Wharton’s aversion to May Sinclair is the result of her style of writing, or her political perspectives. Yet we cannot simply say that Wharton was unilaterally antagonistic to the Woman’s Movement, because here too we find contradiction. In May of 1915, Wharton wrote a eulogy for Jean du Breuil de Saint-Germain, who died in battle only a couple of months before. While he had not been part of her intimate circle, she had met him several times, had spent time with him, and clearly respected him. Wegener notes that he was a sociologist and that he was strongly interested in feminist issues (*UCW* 200). In part of her commentary about Saint-Germain’s feminist views, Wharton speaks positively about his ability to consider the question logically. She notes that his argument for granting the vote to women had nothing to do with the population of privileged women, nor was it based on “chivalrous” motives, nor for reasons of an intellectual order, that Jean du Breuil asks that women be enfranchised in France: it is because there are, in this beautiful country “where they always talk of women’s grace and charm, and never of their rights,” several million women, widowed or single, who depend solely upon themselves, and whose wages do not exceed an average of 450 francs per year; and that, among these women, there are large numbers working at home who scarcely earn an average of 0 fr 90 per day! Jean du Breuil had ascertained the horror of that situation, he had been haunted by the vision of the woman of the people, “at first a young girl, then married, then a poor old woman, but always filled with bitterness, soundly beaten and dying of hunger,” and he understood that the only practical way to come to her aid was to obtain for her the right to vote. One must read his admirable paper; “Woman’s Social Misery and Suffrage,” to see with what lucidity of mind and by what diverse means he conducted the inquiry that led him to this conclusion.
It is Jean du Breuil who opened my eyes to a question of which—I admit it to my shame—I had not until then understood the immense social implications. In a few words, he made me see that the only thing that matters, in the feminist movement, is the fate of those women “whom the brutal economic law of big-city life waits to devour,” of those poor hard-working women who accept their long misery with an animal fatalism because they do not know that they have a right to a more humane existence. In short, one would be tempted to say that women who argue for the right to vote could very well do without it, but it is necessary for those women, so much more numerous, who do not even know what it is, or why others are demanding it in their name! (UCW 200–01)

As Wegener suggested it might, this eulogy considerably complicates the frequently written opinion that Wharton was simply anti-suffrage. While she was clearly not about to attend the next suffrage meeting or join the next march, it indicates that she has begun to question the validity of her earlier opinions and perhaps see that there was indeed a need. Given that she wrote the letter a year into her involvement with wartime activities and her charities, it is entirely conceivable that seeing and attempting to meet the needs of the refugees may have softened her to this issue. Recognizing the difference between her own established standard of living and the desperate poverty the war suddenly imposed on otherwise average families had to have been an eye-opening process and one which reminded her that, while she was intellectually aware of the less economically advantaged classes, perhaps she had not truly recognized their existence or their position. The war, whether she recognized it or not, made the middle-class and poor very real to her. Likewise, the issue of economic independence and class had always been major issues in Wharton’s texts, and it is equally possible that Jean du Breuil had simply phrased the issue in such a way that Wharton was able to connect it with her own convictions. He allowed her to transfer the hypothetical and dim awareness of Lily Bart’s final days in The House of Mirth to real and tangible segment of the population, one she was only now truly coming into contact with.
The Messages: Applied Perspectives and the Written Word

While Johnston was the more radically outspoken of the two regarding gender issues, Wharton was far from silent. Again, however, she directed her voice in the channels of social criticism and generally focused on scenes of the near past. Johnston, in contrast, may have set a tale in the past, but her vision tended to look forward to what she wanted the world around her to become, and that message underlies much of what she wrote. Nevertheless, Johnston was also at her weakest in the sheer craft of writing. For instance, while Johnston created male characters in her texts, they are often stereotypical and much flatter than her female characters. That in itself is not a negative factor, because we do see a similar flatness in Wharton’s men. In Johnston’s case, however, there is a distinct difference in her historical and fictional males; the historical characters are often stronger. As a case in point, Johnston presented Stonewall Jackson in The Long Roll as completely human, with strengths, weaknesses, quirks, and foibles. While Mrs. Jackson objected vehemently to that portrayal, it must nevertheless say something of Johnston’s skill that the General’s wife found the resulting image offensive; were it not believable, she would not have cared. Part of the reason for the relative strength of the historical figures may well be the result of Johnston’s research; she was able to use first-hand accounts and historical records in order to flesh out the character. She did not have to make it up from scratch and fill in all the blanks herself; the character was already in existence, and she “simply” had to put it into play.

The fictional characters fare less well, but we can see a clear attempt to create a fully rounded character in some of her texts. One is Captain Ralph Percy in one of Johnston’s earlier texts, To Have and to Hold. As is true of most of the tales where the protagonist is male, Johnston makes a very solid attempt at showing the character in the round. The syntax of the writing is stiff and often twisted as she attempts to keep it true to the period, but the images are clear nonetheless. For instance, it is impossible to come away from the opening scene where Percy’s friend encourages him to hie himself down to the town and claim one of the new shipment brides without a clear sense of Percy’s previous existence but also a sense of Johnston’s humor in the small touches. Quietly and simply, she shows us Percy’s “sudden dissatisfaction” with his “own stained and frayed apparel” (Hold 6) and his amusement at the
sheer thought that he might actually follow Rolfe’s advice. Then, however, she gives us a clear insight into the character, as well as a bit of back history to provide context, by showing us the disheveled environment around him and his own impulsiveness when he decides in jest to allow the dice to determine his course of action:

With an impatient sigh, I swept the litter from the table, and, taking from the shelf that held my meagre library a bundle of Master Shakespeare’s plays (gathered for me by Rolfe when he was last in London), I began to read; but my thoughts wandered, and the tale seemed dull and oft told. I tossed it aside, and, taking dice from my pocket, began to throw. As I cast the bits of bone, idly, and scarce caring to observe what numbers came uppermost, I had a vision of the forester’s hut at home, where, when I was a boy, in the days before I ran away to the wars in the Low Countries, I had spent many a happy hour. Again I saw the bright light of the fire reflected in each well-scrubbed crock and pannikin; again I heard the cheerful hum of the wheel; again the face of the forester’s daughter smiled upon me. The old gray manor house, where my mother, a stately dame, sat ever at her tapestry, and an imperious elder brother strode to and fro among his hounds, seemed less of home to me than did that tiny, friendly hut. To-morrow would be my thirty-sixth birthday. All the numbers that I cast were high. “If I throw ambs-ace,” I said, with a smile for my own caprice, “curse me if I do not take Rolfe’s advice!”

I shook the box and clapped it down upon the table, then lifted it, and stared with a lengthening face at what it had hidden; which done, I diced no more, but put out my lights and went soberly to bed. (7–8)

While Percy may have considered his behavior capricious, the reader also gains a very clear sense that the character has integrity. We have to recognize that Percy places great store in his own word, and that while the roll of a pair of dice may dictate his action, he will not willingly break that oath. When the dice do the unexpected and roll ambs-ace, or snake eyes, he does not do as many others would have done and cried, “Best two out of three!” and recast. Instead, he
made the promise and now obligates himself to fulfill it, however complex his seeming lack of
desire may be.

Once she has laid the groundwork for the character, the story then takes over, and
Johnston may not spend as much time as perhaps she should on further development.
Nevertheless, the reader has at least a solid sense of Captain Ralph Percy. Other characters do
not make such an impression. For instance, Richard Cleave in *The Long Roll* is a much flatter
character and much more a stereotype. He is present only to help move the story forward, and
while we gain some insight into his personality at the beginning of the text, we never truly see
him in the round. We can even predict what his actions will be simply because we recognize the
type.

In an interesting opposition, Johnston’s female characters tend to be strong, independent
women. Again, they are often flatter than they might be; if Johnston had fleshed them out, the
stories they inhabit would be exponentially more effective. Nevertheless, her sympathy is
generally with the female character, and these are the characters we tend to see as “real” people
in her writings. There are, of course, exceptions; far too many of the characters—as is true with
many writers, including Wharton—are beautiful, intelligent, and generally superb examples of
femininity. Désirée Gaillard of *The Long Roll* is a prime example. When we first meet her, she
is in a heroic pose on the top of the Cape Jessamine levee, at night and in the middle of a storm:

> She was standing high, beneath her heaped logs, behind her the night. She had
clasped around her throat a soldier’s cloak. The wind raised it, blew it outward,
the crimson lining gleaming in the torchlight. All the red light beat upon her,
upon the blowing hair, upon the deep eyes and parted lips, the outstretched arm
and pointing hand, the dress of some bronze and clinging stuff, the bent knee, the
foot resting upon a log end higher than its fellows. (*LR* 12)

While the next few lines deliberately note that Désirée would not have labeled herself saintly,
genius, or heroic, Johnston has equally deliberately painted an idealized heroic portrait, and
Désirée’s own denial of such qualities only reinforces that image. Throughout the text, the
character holds true to this portrait. In the spirit of Ruth, she follows love and later her husband,
Edward Cary, from one battleground to the next and, toward the end of the story, Johnston ultimately sacrifices her in the story’s message about the harshness and ugliness of war.

Johnston’s female characters, despite their relative flatness or roundness, illustrate Johnston’s own perspective about women in general. Not until Hagar, however, does Johnston recognize this own facet of her writing. Previously, she had written female characters one could imagine she herself would like simply for their intelligence and strength, but her memoir observes that Hagar is the first time she consciously puts her message into the character. Specifically, she observes that “Hagar is the first novel in which I embody something of what I think and feel regarding more than one movement of the century—and especially in regard to the great human movement which we call the Woman Movement.” It was a practice she was to continue throughout the rest of her career.

For Wharton, the presentation of gender is a complex issue, in large part because she had her own personal conflicts with the question. Her unpublished fragment of autobiography Life and I suggests that her marriage remained un consummated for the first two weeks (in contrast to Lewis’s suggested three weeks), and not until her affair with Morton Fullerton some thirteen years later did she actually experience her own sexuality. She did not approve of homosexuality or lesbianism, although there is a question of whether she was actually able to recognize it in her own friends and acquaintances and whether she deliberately or unconsciously chose to turn a blind eye to it. For instance, Lewis suggests that Vernon Lee—a woman Wharton greatly admired—“was indeed lesbian in her inclinations” and that Wharton “was probably unaware of this” (72). Similarly, Lewis suggests that some of Wharton’s favorites among her younger male followers in Paris may well have been homosexual, but that again Wharton was either oblivious to the fact or chose to pretend it did not exist. Interestingly, he observes that “Wharton’s attitude toward homosexuality showed a sort of predictable inconsistency” (443). While Wharton was both “less discerning and less tolerant” of lesbianism, she seemed to have a much more mellow attitude about the group she referred to as “The Brotherhood” (443). Sex and gender, then, were complex issues for Wharton and laden with personal baggage and her writing identity. Yet Wharton believed strongly in the need for social change. If society does not change, her fiction suggests, women will never have the opportunity to truly thrive. The majority of Wharton’s
writings tend to reflect women within the confines of social structures, and most of it is easy to read from the economic and sociological perspectives.

For instance, in “A New Year’s Day: The ‘Seventies’,“ Lizzie Winters’s father, a rector, lands himself and his family in a scandal and relocates the family to the outer reaches of society and into relative obscurity. After Lizzie’s invalid mother dies, Lizzie returns to New York with a family friend, Mrs. Mant, who reintroduces the young woman to society as a protegee. Unfortunately, Mrs. Mant soon tires of her latest charity, and the two women eventually clash. Partly in retaliation, and partly in need to escape, Lizzie marries Mant’s favorite nephew, Charles Hazeldean. They have six years before Charles’s heart problem forces him to stop working and their financial situation takes a downward slide. Lizzie then begins an affair with Harvey Prest, a businessman who falls below Lizzie on the social scale, and a year later friends and relatives see her and Prest as they exit a hotel at a run with the other occupants during a fire. Charlie eventually dies. Lizzie goes overseas to visit her father and then returns to New York. Mrs. Mant invites her in, but it is a venomous environment, and the reader can only feel sorry for the young woman who is now almost totally isolated from any possibility of a nurturing relationship. When Lizzie receives a request from Prest for a meeting, Mant encourages and even pushes Lizzie to agree to the meeting and arranges that it take place two days after she has left for her own travels in order to avoid accountability for either the decision or the outcome. Prest meets with Lizzie, who reveals that she had the affair with him solely for the purpose of the money he gave her. That money, she explains, allowed her to pay bills and make necessary purchases without asking for charity or going hat in hand to the family, and therefore kept financial worries from Charles. In other words, the money for which she prostituted herself allowed her and her husband to survive until his death. She also argues that the reduction in stress allowed her to care for Charles during his last year and even gave him that last year by keeping him from worrying. She refuses Prest’s proposal and turns him away. The death of her father and the abandonment of Mrs. Mant ultimately cuts Lizzie off from “proper” society, but since she still needs to be active, she fills her days with what social activity she can garner. She finally tells her story to the narrator, and he remains her friend until she dies. The image the narrator provides of Lizzie, especially toward her last years and days as she returns to the religion she once knew, is
both commendable and pitiable. There is, in this short story, a harsh criticism of both society in general and the way in which both men and women manipulate it in order to achieve their own ends. Like a series of dominoes, one disaster creates another and, in the end, Lizzie must spend her days ostracized from society. The only positive voice in the entire story is that of the unnamed narrator.

Interestingly, Wharton’s writings tend to include the notion of marriage and family and often focus on marriage, but rarely present marriage in a purely positive manner. In the previous story, there is no doubt that Lizzie loves and wants the best for her husband, but certainly becoming another man’s mistress is not a perfect solution. Wharton’s critique suggests that while it may not have been a good decision on Lizzie’s part, nor was it a defensible behavior on Prest’s part. Even more problematically, if scandal is enough to ostracize family, then social mores need a serious reconsideration. Part of Wharton’s focus on marriage could indeed be because her own was so disastrous and writing stories which addressed issues of marriage provided a necessary if not always useful catharsis, but it is more likely that Wharton sincerely believed in the institutions of marriage and family. The difficulty is that she did not believe they were working properly.

For instance, *The Glimpses of the Moon* is one of the few texts which has a hint of a happy ending. Nick and Susy, two socialites who seem to have no other purpose in life but to survive on the outskirts of a chaotic and perpetually shifting social cluster, decide to marry. By doing so, they reason, they can spend a year or so vacationing around with their various friends and associates in honeymoon status and thus not worry about surviving the financial dilemma of at least that coming year. They marry with the understanding that they are free to part if a better opportunity comes along (i.e., a more economically sound marital prospect), and that understanding lurks throughout the text. They begin the marriage as a temporary arrangement rather than a permanent commitment, but both characters underestimate the emotional impact even a fraudulent marriage can generate. When Nick learns that Susy has allowed herself to be a tool in a friend’s lie to her husband, he determines that her morality is suspect; if she would support someone else’s lie, how would she lie to him? Perhaps somewhat childishly, he decides he needs to spend time away from her in order to think and so joins the Hickses mad travels.
Susy, upset that he neither understands nor truly allows the opportunity to discuss the problem, rambles about and ultimately takes a job watching over the Fullmer children while their parents go to Sicily for a long-awaited vacation. Nick determines that divorce is the best alternative for them both, and the proceedings begin. Nick schedules a meeting with a willing woman of questionable reputation in order to provide the reason of adultery as grounds for the divorce. Susy prepares to go to stop Nick from having the affair and meets him on the doorstep. They reconcile and take the children to Fontainebleau as part of a celebration. The closing scene shows the couple’s reconciliation, and the picture is that of the reunited couple.

Critical reviews of this story typically focus on Susy’s transformation into maternal figure and tend to focus on the scene in which Nick first sees Susy in that light:

Almost immediately the door opened; and there stood Susy, the light full upon her, and upon a red-cheeked child against her shoulder. The space behind them was dark, or so dimly lit that it formed a black background to her vivid figure. She looked at the errand-boy without surprise, took his parcel, and after he had turned away, lingered a moment in the door, glancing down the empty street.

That moment, to her watcher, seemed quicker than a flash yet as long as a life-time. There she was, a stone’s throw away, but utterly unconscious of his presence: his Susy, the old Susy, and yet a new Susy, curiously transformed, transfigured almost, by the new attitude in which he beheld her.

In the first shock of the vision he forgot his surprise at her being in such a place, forgot to wonder whose house she was in, or whose was the sleepy child in her arms. For an instant she stood out from the blackness behind her, and through the veil of the winter night, a thing apart, an unconditioned vision, the eternal image of the woman and the child; and in that instant everything within him was changed and renewed. (Glimpses 260–61)

Here, Wharton presents Susy in a Madonna tableau, and Nick cannot help but resonate on an emotional and near spiritual level. Harriet Gold argues that previous critics have found themselves caught in this image in the same way as Nick and that Susy is not the key to the story. Rather, she suggests, Nick Lansing is a statement of Wharton’s belief in love and marriage, and
is her first “positive hero” (17). Gold intriguingly argues that the focus of this story is on Nick and his change—his recognition of the importance of love, family, and marriage—rather than on Susy, her change, and the emphasis of motherhood as a feminine role. The difficulty, of course is that while Nick may be a relatively positive hero, he is far from a truly positive one. Haunted by doubts, he would sooner remove Susy from the children than enter into a triangular relationship with them—a relationship which necessarily and naturally divides her attention between child and husband. He accepts her commitment to the children and her sense of responsibility because he has no choice, and not because he feels a similar commitment or passion. If he is to regain Susy, he must do so on her terms. It is a capitulation we see here rather than a like-mindedness.

The ending of the novel reinforces the earlier domestic image of Susy framed in the doorway holding the child, but this time it is both Nick and Susy in the picture. Nick has removed their baggage to the adjacent hotel while Susy has put the children to bed. When she joins him afterward, they have the opportunity to confess their various wrongs. After they finally communicate in a novel filled with miscommunication, false communication, and noncommunication, the ending creates an image of the two of them against an outside world:

She rose; but as she moved away to turn on the light he caught her hand and drew her to the window. They leaned on the sill in the darkness, and through the clouds, from which a few drops were already falling, the moon, labouring upward, swam into a space of sky, cast her troubled glory on them, and was again hidden. (297)

That closing image is not entirely one of bliss—the moon is “troubled,” the world outside is dark, and it has begun to rain—but it does suggest that the two have finally found their place together, and that regardless of what comes next, they will stand together.

In contrast, Adeline Tintner’s earlier and intriguing article suggests Wharton has deliberately cast the closing scene of the novel to resemble Tiepolo’s “The Transportation of the Holy House”; an Austrian bomb destroyed the fresco in 1915, seven years before the book’s publication. Tintner questions Wharton’s lack of explanation of the fresco, even though Wharton clearly refers to it at an earlier point in the text and describes it in her *Italian Backgrounds*. Tintner suggests that because the fresco is not widely known, and few pictures of it exist, most
critics have overlooked the significance of the novel’s ending: that it is a blessing of home and family. She contrasts her argument to the explanation that Wharton provided a happy ending to the novel in order to satisfy the publisher. The difficulty with this argument, however, is that while Nick and Susy have indeed found themselves, they are not under the same protective roof as the children, the children are not theirs, and the building they are in is neither a house nor theirs. They are in a borrowed space, a hotel room, completely separated from the children, and not in an angel-delivered home.

The reality is that Nat and Grace Fulmer and their chaotic but happy brood, rather than Nick and Susy, represent the true family and happy marriage in this story. The Fulmers become the role model for Nick and Susy, and the closing of the tale leaves the reader with the question of whether the younger couple will manage to achieve even a fraction of the other couple’s happiness. While they may have come far to reach this point, they certainly have much further to go.

Even though The Glimpses of the Moon seems to indicate an approbation of marriage and family, it still critiques social issues, particularly the problem of the idleness of the social elite. Wharton suggests that they are bound by rounds of parties and visits, social intrigue, and financial necessity to keep up those standards or else fall out of the circle. While Nat and Grace Fulmer prove that living outside that circle is both possible and desirable, the social implications for those who do not have that stable foundation are disastrous, and the story provides an early example of one young socialite who commits suicide because she can see no other alternative.

Wharton, as usual, draws her characters fairly solidly and fleshes out both Nick and Susy equally. The characters may not necessarily be as strong as those in some of her other novels, but they are considerably more than flat types, and the story is decidedly character-driven—even if it does not necessarily convince us that the characters have made the necessary reforms.

Both Wharton and Johnston held strong views about the nature of women, their rights and placements, their roles in society, and the need for social change. Each in her own way, they attempted to influence society with a view toward improving the conditions of women.
Wharton’s methodology was that of social criticism, while Johnston opted for a visionary approach in which she granted full play to her “historical sense.”

Part of Johnston’s conviction that women were capable of more than society generally allowed may well have had to do with her own early experiences when she took on the household and family responsibilities after first her mother’s and then her father’s deaths. While necessity may be the mother of invention, it also has a tendency to show us what we are capable of. Wharton’s defining challenges came much later in her life. Her most difficult challenge was her marriage and the growing mental instability of her husband, and she was ultimately able to escape that terrible situation. Johnston never married, but she was responsible for an entire family nonetheless, at a period when Wharton was still being cared for, or needed only to care for herself and her husband. In short, Johnston learned via first-hand experience that she was capable of doing what she was encouraging society to allow other women the freedom to accomplish, and more.
VI. A CASE EXAMPLE:  
Personal Conviction and Johnston’s *The Wanderers* 

Wharton firmly believed that one of the marks of a good novel was that the novelist sought his material by “plung[ing] his hand into the thick of average human nature” (*UCW* 178). In the process of that plunge, however, she argues in one of her critical essays that many writers have lost that focus. More importantly, perhaps, she suggests that the new generation of writers has forgotten to evaluate stories in terms of what we today call “the why factor,” or whether or not the story was worth telling. When she makes that argument, she is not talking about a moral or pedagogical goal but rather what the writer “tried to represent, and how far has he succeeded” (*UCW* 126). This is, in Wharton’s perspective, the proper way to judge a novel. If a writer deviates from this approach, she can find herself creating a mediocre text, such as when the writer

wishes to get a wide hearing for his ideas, and a remunerative market for his prose; if he asks himself in what form his works will reach the largest public, the obvious answer is: in the form of a novel. This was discovered long ago by the pleaders of special causes—Harriet Beecher Stowe, Charles Reade, Mrs. Gaskell, for example—who produced (often with immensely remunerative results) that unhappy hybrid, the novel with a purpose. (*UCW* 175)

“The novel with a purpose,” Wharton suggested, was not truly a novel or, in any event, not a successful one although it may reap financial rewards, such as did Harriet Beecher Stowe with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. There is, of course, a certain irony here since some of Wharton’s writings and specifically her war texts have such a strong sense of purpose that some critics understandably called them propaganda, but it is equally interesting to note that Wharton tends to gender writers as male rather than female in her critical discussions.
Johnston would have, I believe, agreed with Wharton that “novels with a purpose” can be problematic creatures (*UCW* 175). Yet despite the generally cool reception critics and public alike often give such novels, Johnston wrote a number of texts that were deliberate expressions of her own convictions and which used the novel form in order to share those concerns and questions with her readers. Many of these texts fall in the category of gender issues, something Johnston was passionate about for a number of years. For Johnston, writing her passions was a matter of course; her own personal integrity and what-you-see-is-what-you-get type personality refused to allow her to do much else. A long period of her writings in the middle of her career fall in this category and, in general, were not particularly popular. In fact, they may have done more to damage her popularity with the general public than anything else. Had Johnston’s own skills and control over her craft been stronger, she might have better weathered this period in her career. Instead, however, her opinions and beliefs often drove the story and characters rather than the reverse. Had Johnston learned how to make those opinions a more subtle element, she would have strengthened the novels and made their message more effective. Instead, the reader comes away with the sensation of being smashed over the head with a literary two-by-four when a gentle nudge would have done the trick.

Two examples of Johnston’s use of the novel in order to relay her convictions are *Hagar* and *The Wanderers*. They are radically different books with very different approaches, although *Hagar* is certainly the better known of the two texts today. Houghton Mifflin originally published it in 1913, the University of Virginia Press reprinted it in 1994 and the novel is still in publication. Folcroft Library Editions has scheduled it for reprint in June of 2013, which means that the novel will remain in publication for several more years.

*Hagar* is a novel about a young girl from the South, raised in an old plantation environment, who ultimately breaks free by finishing school, moving to New York, pursuing her reading and writing, exploring different philosophies (e.g., socialism), and developing into a well-recognized writer and speaker of women’s issues. The ending of the novel provides a reversal which was radical at the time and still not altogether common today: Hagar’s fiancé agrees that Hagar should continue her work, that he will encourage her in it, and that he will give up a portion of his own work building bridges in order to be closer to her. The reader has the
sense that he is joining her in her battle rather than expecting her to change her life and join him in his. At the time the novel came out, the story provoked a party line response, perhaps in large part because of the ending. Those critics who were active supporters of the suffrage movement spoke positively about the novel; those who were not chalked it up as propaganda and focused instead on the technical flaws of the story. As Cella so accurately observes, however, the novel is not about women’s right to vote (82). Rather, it is a discussion about the condition of women in society in general and issues society needs to address in order for that status to change. *Hagar* marks the shift into Johnston’s series of what Wharton would call “novels with a purpose,” which is where we find *The Wanderers*.

Houghton Mifflin published *The Wanderers* in January of 1917 and the book has never been reprinted. It would not be likely to sell to today’s readership unless it was an audience specifically interested in Mary Johnston or women’s issues and literatures of the period. It is radically different from the other novels of its type in Johnston’s repertoire, largely because Johnston constructed it as a series of short stories, and each short story has a distinct message. There are nineteen chapters to this book, and each chapter is an independent short story. The book defies the traditional concept of a novel in that it does not have a single plot which follows a primary character or set of characters from cover to cover. Having said that, it is possible to justify the term if one agrees that the chapters are all related in that stories sometimes include fragments of each other, and the primary characters often seem to be reincarnations of each other.

Each of the nineteen chapters or stories takes place in different historical periods. The stories are arranged chronologically from the pre-historic to the modern, and are an airing of Johnston’s attitudes and beliefs about women’s rights and the nature of relationships between men and women. While it would be easy to say that the stories are a progressive demonstration of woman’s loss of status, rights, and power, that would not be true. Johnston has subtly divided the volume into unequal thirds.
The Wanderers: first “third”

The first story, “The Forest,” begins in a prehistoric period where the characters more accurately seem to resemble monkeys than people and spend their lives living in the trees. A mother and child leave the main group because the mother suddenly finds herself critical of the others. Feeling a need to be alone or to explore for herself a little more of the world under the blue sky she can glimpse through the tree tops, she gathers up her baby and sets off. In the night, a storm blows up, lightning strikes, and she has the opportunity to see fire in action. Specifically, she has the chance to hold the stick which has fire on it and see herself manipulate it. When the wind blows the fire toward her, she panics, drops the branch, and flees with her baby, but the branch is in a strategic position for a moment which comes shortly after, when she must use the branch to defend herself and her child from a predator. The entire scene is Johnston’s way of imagining the cultivation of fire, but it is significant that she gives it to woman first rather than man. Her “woman first” method of development will linger throughout the bulk of the book, and this story lays the groundwork for that expectation as well as the next event, which is the destruction of that claim.

When the female in this first story discovers that she can use the bare stick as an extension of her own arm, she is thrilled. Suddenly she can pound a snake on the ground or knock fresh fruit off a limb which would otherwise have been too high for her to reach. She shares this discovery with a male who arrives on the scene, only to have him take the stick from her. The narrator notes that while “[t]here was much wood upon the ground, but he could not conceive that any other piece would serve. She had the only stick” (11). When she attempts to take it back, his greater strength defeats her, and he forces her to retreat and watch him experiment with the tool she had discovered. When he finds he can move a rock with it, she can bear it no longer but jumps up and attempts to snatch the stick away from him, finally succeeding in a moment when his guard is down:

He sprang to his feet and seized it again. She screamed at him and held it stubbornly—a good, thick piece of wood it was! The other kind [the male], now in a violent passion, tugged and wrenched until he got it from her. Then, with suddenness, he found yet another use for a piece of wood. He knocked her down
with it, and when, with a cry of fury, she rose to her feet, he repeated the action.

(12)

This layout is typical for the rest of the stories in this part of the novel. There is success or insight, followed by battle of some sort and then by loss and reduction. There are only occasional breathing spaces, such as the one in chapter two, “The Cave.” Even these quieter pieces, however, have a purpose.

Chapter two takes place in the age of cave dwellers and again Johnston shows the reader a mother and child relationship with the mother as both provider and protector. A male who has wandered far from his own range in the search for food during a lean year unexpectedly assists her during a wolf attack, and the story closes with his acceptance as part of the family, overcoming his obvious doubt about the presence of the children. Here, Johnston has deliberately allowed the reader to catch her breath after the violence of the first chapter, but by allowing the male to decide that it is much nicer to be in a warm cave with a woman than on his own out in the coming winter, she has installed the male as a part of the household in such a way that we expect to see him as an integrated part of woman’s life in the upcoming tales. She has, in other words, created the family unit.

Chapter three, “Big Trouble,” puts a twist in the expected theme in that the male does not take power from the female, but rather the female gives knowledge to the male. Yet it is not a giving up as much as it is a sharing. In this chapter, Johnston portrays society as matriarchal and posits that “[w]omen, the makers and possessors of children, the original devisers of houses and clothes and such things, the earliest lawgivers and gatherers of people into societies, were yet, through the grater range of matters, the authoritative sex. They were the mothers, the instinctively turned to even after childhood, the dimly deified. But men were powerful encroachers, and they encroached” (32). The difference in power between men and women, Johnston suggests in this fictional society, lies in large part in the reproductive ability of women. When Aneka, the village wise-woman, asks Haki if his newly-devised One Other god can make children, Haki’s anger nearly explodes in his desire to strip Aneka’s power. Furiously, he acknowledges that reproduction “was the wall that towered before the male’s assertion of equality. Nothing with the masculine pronoun could do that! The people of the long houses
knew all about mating. They had words in plenty for that. But they had no word like ‘father.’ Haki uttered a gutteral sound, half despair, half anger. . . . Then revolt again raised its head. ‘One other will find out how!’” (43). And indeed, Haki’s “One Other” finds out “how” when the female protagonist of the story speaks Truth while she is in a trance and tells the community that creation of children is not purely a female power but is rather a shared power. Against the background of tribal politics and the decision of a jealous male in the community to replace the tribe’s female god Great Turtle with a superior male God—the One Other—the revelation of this truth suggests a relinquishment of power and foreshadows an opportunity for a shift of power in the future.

Chapter four, “Property,” returns to a theme of violence when the tribe’s men return from a raid with a group of female prisoners to serve as slaves. It is the first time that women have been placed in this position, and when the men find themselves denied access to the slave women by the women of the tribe, they grow angry and decide to change the tribe’s power structure. They see no reason the tribal women should be any different than the slave women and, as in the first story, assert that claim via physical force.

Chapters five and six, “What’s in a Name?” and “The Prophet,” raise issues of inheritance, lineage, and spiritual power. “What’s in a Name?” questions the traditions of inheritance; until now, Johnston speculates, society linked children to their mothers rather than their fathers. It considered children as descendants of their mothers and gave children their mother’s name. When the mother died, the children inherited her property. Because they had no legal connection to the father, however, society distributed their father’s property to his relatives rather than his children. Concerned that her children will not inherit her husband’s considerable wealth upon his death, the mother encourages the tribe’s elders to consider the question of inheritance. The community eventually decides that in order for the children to inherit, they must be made a part of the father’s family rather than the mother’s; they must take his name. In “The Prophet,” jealousy prompts a male prophet to deliver a false prophecy in order to remove his female counterpart from her position of leadership. In both chapters, women lose position and rank in ways that will have long-reaching results. They first lose their status as head of the lineage, then their rank as spiritual leader.
Johnston portrays the repositioning of women as a gradual slide from equal (or even tribal leader) to subject, with each stage of the evolutionary journey losing yet another aspect of power or leadership. There is often a thematic building from one story to another, particularly in this first section. Like dominoes, each loss leads logically to the next, and the reader can see Johnston working her way through an imaginative reasoning of the process by which women came to be in their current position. While some of the loss is a sharing of information or a deliberate choice to allow the other half of the species into the female circle, Johnston portrays those moments as footholds which males in subsequent stages of social development abuse to their advantage. She does not show the female choice as weakness but rather as moments of vulnerability and generosity. For instance, when the cave mother in chapter two invites the man to join the lives of her and her children, it is not entirely because she wants his help, although she does recognize that two people hunting have better chances of success than one. Rather, it is because he is different from the other men—he is not “fierce”—and because she herself has “an aching desire for companionship” (29). Her desire for someone to share her life makes her vulnerable, and the need for a partner on an emotional, spiritual, and physical level generates that moment when she creates the opportunity for him to become a part of her life.

*The Wanderers: second “third”*

The second third of the book, chapters seven through sixteen, reflect a peculiar sort of status quo. These chapters do not so much portray a decline in position and power as a solidification of that loss and gradual shifts which turn subjugation into a perpetual state of existence. Johnston uses the first third of the book to lay the groundwork and the second portion of the book to show the ramifications of those earlier losses and to explore the results of that which went before. These eleven chapters cover a gamut of scenarios.

In chapter seven, “The Amazon,” a neighboring king captures an Amazon princess and takes her as a slave. When the local priest demands that she renounce her faith in the god of her people and she refuses, the priest demands her sacrifice to his own god. He convinces the king that if she is not sacrificed, then the kingdom will suffer and the king will lose his wealth, friends, and family as punishment for his relationship with the Amazon woman. Ultimately, the
king bows to the priest’s will and the priest sacrifices the Amazon. It is a dark chapter, but Johnston has deliberately used it to reflect on the dogmatic approach religion may take. The female god which chapter three’s male society contests so hotly echoes in the female god of this chapter and suffers a very different outcome: the male society of this chapter overthrows the female god in a figurative sacrifice by literally sacrificing one of her worshippers and then replaces her with their own male god, completing the circle that there is nothing divine or holy about the female. God, according to this male priest and the generations of dogma which precede him, cannot be female.

That identification of a male deity continues in the next chapter, “The Priestess of Marduk,” but this story takes the deification process one step further. If god cannot be female, the chapter speculates, then god must be male, and in a paraphrase of the vernacular, manliness is next to godliness. Johnston builds a number of disturbing images into this chapter, not the least of which is that every woman must, at the point when she becomes an adult, fulfill her “duty” to Mylitta. On a day of her choosing, the young woman cleanses and purifies herself, dresses in her best, and goes to sit in the court beneath the palm trees. There she remains until a man comes along and drops a silver coin in her lap. It does not matter who the man is. At that point, she must “rise and go away with the man and pay her debt to Mylitta, keeping the silver piece ever after to show clearance” (162). If a man does not claim the woman the first day, then she must return day after day until she is. While the text does not spell it out, the reader recognizes that the transaction is a sexual one and that society expects the woman to prostitute herself in a version of the old laws of king’s right. If the reader is in doubt, Johnston makes certain that the reader knows that it was not the women who made this rule by the negative way in which they consider the requirement. It is a performance which, “[a]fter all, even though we are told it is a high duty, a woman wants the day behind her and out of mind!” (162). It is a thing they dread then finally perform because they must, at which point they can forget it happened—or they could if the rules did not require them to hold the prostitute’s payment as evidence.

The heart of the story in this chapter, however, focuses on a young girl whose parents give her to serve in the temple. After a time, the leaders choose Iltani to serve as representative for the goddess Sarpanit, who is spouse to the god over all gods, Marduk. She spends at least the
next six months in a tower room with no human contact aside from the elderly women serving as her attendants. Her friend served the period before her, and Iltani’s thoughts of her are positive when she remembers the other girl. Since the story never shows the return of the other girl or makes any further mention of her, we finish the tale with an uneasy sense of doubt about what happened to her.

The imagery in this portion of the story is a fantastic blend of metaphor and literal, with sexual overtones that suggest that the unseen leadership is preparing the novice as a sexual offering to a human representative of the male god, but which do not altogether eliminate a stereotypical virginal sacrifice. The novice’s experience during this period is intensely spiritual but also clearly an indoctrination into a set of beliefs, and the demarcation of reality is increasingly fuzzy. In the process, the image of the god merges with the image of man in such a way that the masculine is also the deity:

“With man and woman man was highest always—man was highest—Lugal-naid said it, Ramtû, Ina-banat, Belatum said it! Man was highest—man to woman was as god to votary!” (176)

The final sense of sacrifice as Iltani bows in ecstasy and terror before the image of the arriving god leaves the reader uncertain about Iltani’s ultimate fate. We cannot quite determine whether the temple has brainwashed her into a physical, mental, spiritual, or intellectual sacrifice and whether that sacrifice will be fatal or if, for instance, she will serve as concubine to the god or his representative. Regardless of the outcome, this story emphasizes that the god is male, man is on par with god, and woman exists to serve man.

The sense of service is now, Johnston suggests in her next story, fully embedded in society. She sets chapter nine, “Glaucón and Myrina,” in ancient Greece and uses the story to explore the idea of a double standard. Glaucón is a statesman, Myrina a courtesan. When Cleita, Glaucón’s wife, complains that she feels bored and trapped—a fate which she believes his mistress surely does not share, given her considerable freedom—her husband impatiently replies that this is her lot in life:

“The gods, Cleita, have parted one way of life to women and another to men. Will you deny the gods wisdom? All of us, at times, know discontent. The
soldier thinks his life hard, the statesman often would lay down his cares, the mechanic grumbles, the servant repines. But the gods have willed degrees and duties. If women—if Athenian wives and mothers—went abroad from the house, if they were seen by all men everywhere, if we met them in the streets, the marketplace, the theatre, the school, the palestra, where not, there would arise in the state great confusion! In a short while we should be no better than barbarians! But the gods have set comely bounds for women, as they have given to men freedom under the sky. Strive not against the decrees of the gods! Cease this hungering and fretting for what is not good for you. There is impiety, O my Cleita, in your discontent!” (187–88)

His reply suggests that woman is the source of confusion, that only by adhering to a divinely-sanctioned structure can society protect itself from the chaos and degradation which would result if women possessed the same degree of freedom as men. While Glaucon uses his position as politician to argue for justice for other segments of the population, he cannot see the need for it in his own home. Instead there is a clear division between wife and mistress, with limitations and standards for both. For instance, he demands that Myrina not see anyone else but rather that she refuse all other benefactors and see only him in a type of commitment one typically associates with marriage. He, however, sees both Myrina and Cleita, and while he respects his wife, it is Myrina he seems to love. Yet again there is a conflict because he determines that a man’s love is a just and honorable thing, while he derides woman’s love by calling it “craft—it is sold for ease! Love from the snake—love from the fox” (196). While he speaks the words in anger and may have otherwise tempered them had he not felt she challenged his pride and sense of possession, they reflect the idea that woman’s love is treacherous, a tool she can use only to gain her what she wants, and never a thing a man can trust; it is not honorable but it is tainted from the time of the first sin. Ultimately, woman forsswears freedom while man keeps his.

Chapter ten, “The Pearl of the Deep,” reinforces the idea that woman’s love is not stable, but also that woman herself is a tool. In this story, Johnston creates a seraglio environment enmeshed in palace politics between the favorite and next-favorite concubines. Sadyattes tricks Aryenis, the favorite, into jealously killing her Egyptian rival Nitetis, Nitetis’s son, and her own
master whom she loves. Nitetis, dying, kills Aryenis’s son. The deceit is doubly treacherous because Sadyattes comes from Aryenis’s own country and was friends with Aryenis before Marene took her as his concubine. Deliberately, Sadyattes has used that former friendship and the kinship of country to manipulate Aryenis into believing that Marenes meant to harm her and their son in favor of the Egyptian rival and that son—and thus into murder. The plot of this tragedy is darkly Shakespearean and vaguely reminiscent of a cross between *Hamlet* and *Othello*. The only victor in the final outcome other than a distant and unseen king is Marenes’s duke, Sadyattes, who will become satrap after his master’s and heir’s deaths. For Sadyattes, Aryenis is only a woman and thus a means to an end. Despite their common history and connections, she is nothing more than a tool.

Chapter eleven illustrates the concept of coverture, or that woman has no identity outside of that of her husband’s or the authoritative male figure in her life, but it goes one step further by declaring that a wife is responsible for any evil which may befall her husband. In “The Banks of Jumuna,” Zira is a part of the merchant caste until her husband falls ill three years after her marriage and wanders off in a fever when she falls asleep on nursing duty. The community assumes that he is killed by the tiger they knew was in the vicinity. In response, the community of which she was once a viable member turns Zira into a local charwoman, physically and mentally abuses her, and ultimately discards her. She hovers on the faint edge of their communal consciousness, and “[w]hen she was regarded at all it was as a drudge who was justly paying. Women were not widowed unless they had sinned” (232). It is a definition Zira does not contest; she herself believes she is to blame for her husband’s death. Madhava is gone for six years, recovering a bit of memory at intervals while he serves a holy man in the jungle. When he finally remembers everything, he leaves the holy man and returns home to find Zira, old before her time, at the creek in her never-ending washing. The physical contrasts between the two are large; Madhava is still an attractive man, but Zira’s hard life since his disappearance reflects on her body and in her face. Madhava grievingly notes that widows have a very hard life, and there is a bitter note in Zira’s voice when she calls his name.

The story closes with an image of the two walking hand in hand toward the house, and the implication is that her life will change for the better now that her husband has returned and
she is no longer a widow. It is not an entirely satisfactory ending, however, and Johnston leaves
us with a few questions we cannot quite answer. For instance, when the two begin to talk,
Madhava’s first response is that he wishes the tiger had killed him after all. Certainly that is not
precisely the “honey, I’m home” response a wife who had believed herself responsible for her
husband’s death would want to hear. Nor is the bitterness in her voice when she calls his name a
tone which would make that missing spouse feel loved, welcomed, and desired. Yet there is a
hint of hope in the way Madhava first notes that Zira has aged, and then thinks that perhaps she is
more beautiful than she was. There is also a closing suggestion of growth in the way the two
echo each other in saying that they have suffered, but they have grown, and they are yet a part of
each other. Obviously their life together will not be what it would have been had Madhava not
fallen ill, and they will have to learn to know each other again. Perhaps the biggest obstacle will
be Zira’s readjustment from the position of widow, a woman who must have sinned and therefore
lost the blessing of a husband, to wife. It is not an adjustment which will come easily and which
may still carry with it a penalty, for while she is no longer a widow in punishment, the memory
of six years in that position is permanent. Like a prisoner who has served her time, she re-enters
society with the convict’s stigma.

Chapter twelve, “Valerian and Valeria,” continues the discussion of politics and women’s
position, and again women are a large portion of the collateral damage of the games. Valerian, a
general, promises his baby daughter, Flavia, to the temple in return for a successful career. When
he reaches the point where he deems himself to have accomplished that goal, he turns Flavia over
to the temple in high ceremony. Iras, the freedwoman who owns a flower shop and who was
Valerian’s mistress before Flavia was born, also has a daughter by him, Lais, who takes up
dancing. When Caesar’s friends manipulate his jealousy of Valerian’s popularity into
condemning his general as a traitor, politics doom Valerian and Valeria and the downfall
ultimately also spells doom for his friends and closest family. Flavia is accused of being
unchaste and therefore violating her vows and is buried alive. At a dinner party when Lais
dances for Caesar, the assembled guests see the resemblance between Lais and Valerian and
guess the relationship. She is killed, presumably raped and tortured first. The two mothers
discover the danger to their daughters and attempt to rescue them or plead their cases, but arrive
too late; Iras finds Lais’s abused corpse in a streambed outside the walls, and the guards capture Valeria before she can plead for her daughter. The story closes with the joint execution of Valerian and Valeria.

As dark as this story is, Johnston has embedded small hints of hope or possibility which suggest the opportunity for change in the distant future. For instance, when Valeria argues that the concept that all men are equal includes women, their elderly philosopher friend, Faustus, supports her. Valerian is in clear disagreement, but argues instead that while slaves and servants deserve goodness, men should grant women “goodness and love” (247). Faustus is the first male who suggests that women are on par with men and that all of humanity should exist on a level playing field. It is clear, however, that Faustus, like Valeria, stands outside the dominant male philosophy, and while he may argue for equality, it is not a position which is either popular or acceptable by those like Valerian who believe that such ideas are only “theory! It has never been, nor will it ever be. As we cannot free the slaves, so women cannot walk equal with men” (247).

Fascinatingly, Johnston creates a subtle link to the status quo using the character names in this text. While “Valerian” was a Roman province, “valerian” is also a type of plant with sedative properties and an ingredient in a tranquilizer. Valerian’s attempts to sedate or tranquilize his wife are only partly successful, and the evidence of her passionate thinking and Faustus’s conviction that all people are created equal—completely aside from the implications of knowledge associated with the philosopher’s name—suggests that there will come a time in the future when women and the communities of which they are a part will throw off the sedative and live fully awake.

From politics, Johnston moves to the next major movement of possible control: religion. The church has begun to find a foothold in chapter thirteen, and saving the life of a local king gives a small group of missionaries permission to build a church in the neighboring forest. While the missionaries know they cannot convert the king, Tereig Oak, they do try to convert his son, Alaran. When they find they cannot make headway there, they begin intensive talks with Alaran’s wife, Alleda. If they can convert Alleda, they can use her to influence both her husband and her father-in-law, the king. The chance to convert the king never comes, for he dies before
the missionaries can make real headway. However, when Alleda nearly dies in childbirth and the head missionary saves her, Alaran converts out of gratitude.

In this chapter, Johnston has internalized the idea that while women are the temptress, they are also the spiritual and emotional power in a relationship. They can influence their men and make them “better”; they are the moral ingredient which can help a man be a better man. Unfortunately, they are still tools, or means to an end, and never an end in themselves. The missionary’s reason for bringing Alleda to Christianity has nothing to do with the salvation of her own soul; that is only a fringe benefit, and he recognizes his own duplicity in the spiritual courting of the Prince’s wife. The important element is that she can influence her husband, and therein lies her entire value.

Johnston continues her discussion of religion in chapter fourteen, “The Hermits,” in which we see a monk and a nun in self-imposed exile, on opposite sides of an oasis. They recognize the presence of the other, but because of their vows, they make no attempt to contact or interact with each other. That situation changes when Dorotheus’s dog leads Dorothea to his master. The monk is deathly ill and will certainly die without help. Dorothea nurses him through the illness despite his protests that the church has forbidden her to touch or be near him, and reassures him that as soon as he can walk to the spring to draw his own water, and can make his own food, she will leave. His healing is not a quick process, and the two come to know each other better. When he is fit enough, however, she does as she had promised and leaves, but they find that they miss each other’s contact and therefore begin to meet at the midpoint between their two humble dwellings. Eventually friendship turns to love, and the two cannot reconcile their religion with their feelings; they separate, one heading east and the other west, never to see each other again.

The story is one of the softer texts in the collection, with tiny touches of tenderness and quiet moments of insight as the two come to know each other and recognize the depths of both their own souls and their beliefs. Unfortunately they are bound by dogma to believe that no pairing or equality between sexes and service to their church is possible; the two mutually exclude the other. This text, however, does something the previous stories do not: it shows the sacrifice of both man and woman. The attitude about woman’s lack of worth damages not only
the female protagonist in the story, but the male as well; both are lost. It is an image which suggests that women are not the only casualty in a society which denigrates one half of its population. Rather, both halves suffer and will continue to do so until there is an understanding which can bring them together rather than separate them.

Johnston revisits this loss by both men and women in chapter fifteen, which she appropriately titles “The End of the World.” The heroine’s grandfather, the owner of a troupe of entertainers, sells his soothsayer granddaughter Gersonde, knowing that she will eventually return because of the strength of her ties with his wife and children; they are her family. He has sold her before and has no qualms about selling her again in the same way that a man might sell a horse knowing that the horse will always escape and return to its own barn. About a month later, as he expected, Gersonde begins her journey to find the others, and she uses her gift of prediction to help her earn food and shelter. A musician, Gerbert, befriends her along the way but they are separated during a local ruler’s raid on a neighboring enemy. Unfortunately, she falls afoul of a religious movement which has convinced the general population that the world is about to come to an end. When the locals ask her to soothsay, she predicts that it will not happen just yet. Eventually, a fanatic charges her as a heretic for prophesying that it is not yet the end of the world and, because the theatrical motions the manager had trained her to make when she prophesied (and which have become habit) are perceived as witchcraft, the fanatic and community charge her as a witch. They burn her at the stake just as Gerbert unknowingly enters town looking for her. When he sees her dead, he immediately dies of a broken heart.

Religion is again the setting in this story, but Johnston has a few other blades she wants to grind here as well. For instance, the issue of arranged marriage and ownership of one’s own body is a thread which reappears throughout the text. Gersonde is sold, and the narrative voice makes a point of saying that “Black Martin sold his granddaughter’s body and agreed that it should be found at such an hour in such a place” (321, emphasis mine). He is not selling her soul, and he knows that; he knows that her heart is with his wife and the other children. Nevertheless, there is no question about his right to sell her body, and even Gersonde accepts it with a certain quiet pragmatism.
A second issue Johnston raises in this story is the question of who will champion women. In the middle of Gersonde’s story, there is a long sub-story about Ermengarde, a lady whom a local noble has charged with evil of some sort and who has taken refuge in the nearby convent of the Blessed Thorn. She has sent a messenger for someone to come and take her part in the argument, and the text clearly indicates that the charges against her are false. Yet the narrator also gives the equally clear impression that no one will come or, if they come, they will not arrive in time. She is angry that her education did not teach her the skills she deems necessary to defend her own honor, and that she must instead sit quietly and decorously in the parlor of the convent and wait for the men outside the walls to determine what they want to do with her or, more accurately, by what means she will die. When the abbess asks Gersonde to soothsay for lady Ermengarde, Ermengarde asks if Gersonde can tell her who will be her champion. Gersonde complies and says that “[h]er champion is in herself” (335). There is, Johnston suggests, no one who can champion women better than women. Alternatively, another reading could be that there is no one who will champion women other than or better than women. Regardless of gender, there is a stark truth to the idea; if we have a hope of surviving the chaotic and often unjust life which surrounds us we must, at least to some extent, serve as our own champions.

This section of the book ends with chapter sixteen, “Moonlight.” Like “Hermits,” this story is a softer one but carries smaller messages. Beatrix is the wife of a baron who has left the family alone while he goes to battle. During his absence, she attempts to maintain the keep and lands, but his absence has also provided the opportunity for the local war lords to attack the keep. They prove to be stronger, and when Prince Tanneguy joins his forces with hers and drives the others off, they find that they were unable to save the keep itself. The Prince moves Beatrix and her children to a home in his own town so that he can protect them until the baron returns. As the reader might expect, the two fall in love. Eventually, the baron decides he has no intention of returning but rather needs to solidify his newly-won dukedom, and so summons his family to join him in what he describes as a much more luxurious environment and with wealth they could not have otherwise enjoyed. The son, he says, he will foster out to learn the skills of knighthood, and he will marry the daughter to his neighboring knight in a political maneuver to cement the men’s
relationship. Beatrix obeys because she feels she must, and her departure separates the lovers
forever.

Again, neither children nor wife have a choice in what will happen to them; their “owner”
decides their fates. Interestingly, however, Johnston uses this forum to talk about the education
of women. She draws scenes of Beatrix as she teaches her daughter everything possible, and her
determination that Yolande be able to “leap and run, toss and catch again, ride and swim and
draw a bow. She would have her look and know and think, perceive, divine” (353). When a
Discoverer visits to tell his stories, he suggests that she send the daughter away and summon her
son:

“Lady, bring your son to listen, who, when he is grown, may do more than
listen! Your daughter must listen to that which will content her with women’s
world.”

But Beatrix said: “Worlds melt into one another. I would have her listen
to that which will discontent her!”

Whereat the old Discoverer laughed, and said that he had himself found
discontent valuable. (354)

Discontent makes one ask questions. In this case, Johnston firmly believed that women—and
men—needed to question their positions in society. If they do not, she argues, then there will be
no change, and others will still control men’s and women’s lives in a social system which can
never allow for equality.

_The Wanderers: last “third”_

The last three chapters of the book offer glimpses of hope. In this section, there is
typically both a male and female protagonist, or a female protagonist and a primary male
character. Regardless of structure, Johnston deliberately gives the two characters a strong
relationship with one another. The stories tend to end with a reaffirmation of that relationship in
a stronger sense of equality, sometimes requiring a certain shift on the part of the male character.
The last two stories of the collection have for their protagonists male characters who preach
freedom for women and women’s equality with men. The shape of the entire novel resembles a U: there is the downhill fall, then a “bottom of the valley” leveling, then a hint at a slow rising.

The beginning of the “rise” appears in chapter seventeen, “Thekla and Eberhard,” which tells the story of an old scholar’s daughter. The old scholar has educated his daughter, Thekla, as if she had been a man, and while her father supports her liberal ideas, the young men who come to visit the old man scoff at her. The exception is Eberhard, an artist, and the two soon develop a strong friendship. When Elsa, Thekla’s sister, decides that she made a bad decision consigning herself to a nunnery and now wants to escape the monastic confines, Eberhard supports Thekla’s decision to help her sister. Thekla and a family local to the convent help the younger woman escape, and she remains free with Thekla after their father’s death. When Thekla and Eberhard marry, they keep with them the orphan girl who had helped Thekla nurse the sisters’ father, and Elsa returns to her own home in the next town, safe now from the legalities of running away from the convent and able to live her life as she chooses.

Martin Luther features heavily in the story, and Johnston describes the scholars’ reactions to Luther’s break away from the church, but she describes the events and Luther himself in terms of how they relate to the male society. While Johnston writes positively of much of Luther’s speeches and convictions, she also credits him with a speech which echoes Glaucon’s commentary to Cleita in chapter nine, and Valerian’s speech to Valeria in chapter twelve, and very strongly opposes women’s rights. Rather, she says, Luther “swung his great lantern, and now there was light, and now its light was darkened. But he had huge influence to determine minds that were not self-determined” (387). Thekla and Eberhard clearly do not share Luther’s position on women, and the story closes with a visual image of the couple safely ensconced in their own nest of light and enlightenment, considering the darkness of the world outside.

These stories heavily echo Johnston’s belief that men and women are all part of a single unit and cannot be divided without cost to the other parts. When some young scholarly friends comment that Thekla and Eberhard fit “like two halves of an apple” (384), the young couple is nonplussed. For both Thekla and Eberhard as well as Johnston, such reasoning falls short. “To talk in terms of halves—how strange that must seem in a world where one says, ‘Lo, an apple!’” (388). They, like all men and women, are not halves, but are rather part of one larger whole.
Chapter seventeen, “The Right of Kings,” pushes a version of the Eberhard character one step further, and he is manifest in a more missionary-minded character named Richard Osmund. Osmund’s mission is to challenge the “right of kings”—men’s domination over women—and he does so with quiet speeches in the manner of a sedate stump preacher. Literally, he preaches education and equality for women. As is usually the case, the locals run him out of town, and it is the thatcher’s cousin, Miriam Donne, who steps forward and drives the crowd back, at least momentarily. She challenges the men for their cowardice, then calls shame on women as well for being even greater cowards. Men, she says, enslave, but women allow themselves to be so. “Never,” she cries passionately, “were souls enslaved, but those souls enslaved themselves” (405). The rabble beats the couple and it is the local constable, who would rather have not been involved at all but decides he has no choice but to step in and finally disperse the crowd, who ultimately rescues them. The two pick themselves up, dust themselves off, and decide that they have enough in common that they will journey together from this point forward, starting with a trip to a family of Friends in a nearby town.

This is the first chapter in the entire book in which a male character takes an active part in advocating women’s rights. Other male characters such as Eberhard, the philosopher Faustus, and Beatrix’s prince Tanneguy favor women’s autonomy, but only here, in the penultimate chapter, do we see a male character who actively endorses autonomy and education. While positive male involvement in women’s welfare is new, Johnston’s delineation between body and soul is not, and this story is no exception; she has raised this issue throughout the entirety of the book. When she accuses the women of allowing themselves to be enslaved, she accuses them of apathy and inaction, of “watching harm done and unstirring” (405). Although Johnston has given examples of times when women’s bodies were enslaved, it is not the body she claims as the object of slavery here but rather the soul.

The last story in the novel is a logical extension of the one before it. Chapter nineteen, “Jean and Espérance,” takes place in Paris in 1791. Jean and Espérance Merlin preach freedom at a time when society was not willing to risk new ideas and “strangeness” (414). Their speech begins with “the Freeing of Women” (415) but ultimately becomes “Freedom of Man and Freedom of Woman” (415). Johnston slips Mary Wollstonecraft into the crowd to endorse the
message and encourage the messengers. Eventually, the story shows the Merlins sitting in a
courtyard while the city riots around them, and we leave the text not really knowing whether the
couple will escape the riots or even if they try. This story is perhaps the weakest of all the
stories, in part because it is little more than a long series of speech snippets. The loss of plot and
increase in monologue is increasingly present in these last three sections as Johnston speculates
over need for change and her desire or vision to see it happen.

The progression in the texts is important, and the division or weight of each section is
telling. The first third is roughly a third of the entire text as Johnston suggests ways in which
women have fallen, but the middle third occupies so much space because it demonstrates the
status quo. It is the status quo which has dominated history, she suggests, and her text addresses
those failings in social, political, and religious environments. In contrast, the last third
speculates. It represents the voices crying in the wilderness, and Johnston argues in these last
three chapters that there are still too few of those voices. They are the visionaries, the outcasts
who plead the cause, but it is a cause which, while ages old, society is still only beginning to
address. Three pairs of voices, she suggests, cannot alone undo centuries’ worth of subjugation.

When we step back and consider the text as a whole, we find that the nineteen stories are
not entirely disconnected. For instance, as Cella and a few other critics have noted, reincarnation
is a minor but recurring theme in the stories. While it grows considerably stronger over the
course of the text, it is still fairly subtle, and Johnston uses small indicators to draw the reader’s
attention to the possibility of recurring lives, and therefore recurring social patterns. As an
example of one of those small ticklers, an unrealistic percentage of the female protagonists are
redheads, most noticeably in the first portion of the text where Johnston establishes the thread of
progression. This is not merely an aesthetic choice; Johnston knew her craft and audience well
enough to know that red hair, particularly before “Clairol” and “hair color” became household
words, would stand out to her 1913 readers and that those readers would draw the necessary
connections. Aside from the women’s hair color, however, there are other signals. A rooster
which appears in “Hermits” carries the same name (“Welcome”) in “Thekla and Eberhard.”
Character names for primary characters often have phonetic similarities, such as Gerbert and
Gersonde, Valerian and Valeria, Alleda and Alaran, Aryenis and Marenis, and indicate not only a connection between the characters, but a recurring pattern between the stories.

Reincarnation appears in other ways, however, including blatantly in conversations and observations either by the protagonist or between the female protagonist and her leading male character. Interestingly, that aspect appears most heavily in the last half of the book, or the chapters where the characters have gained insight and wisdom, and can thus look back on their respective lives to see that they have shared these trials before, and what they might have learned, then share those recollections. Zira hints at having suffered before this life (237), Iltani recalls living in a forest although she has never been in one (169), Myrina dreams that she is using fire to fight a wild animal (189), Valeria realizes that she and Valerian “are greater than we know, and have been together longer than we remember” (265). Beatrix and Tanneguy have a long discussion about memories of living in a cave, then a forest, fighting each other, being separated, learning, finding, and rediscovering (355–56). Thekla and Eberhard recognize that they have known each other for a very long time (373–76), and Thekla muses that they have known each other for “[t]he longest time . . . I think that we live always and only fail to remember” (374). Richard Osmund and Miriam Donne wonder first where they will go, they “who never met before to-day and have met thousands of times before to-day” (408). And last, Jean and Espérande Merlin share their distant memories of past times, places, and struggles (417–22).

The strength of these recollections falls ultimately in the way they multiply as the book progresses and in the way they increasingly signal that man and woman have journeyed together as fellow travelers and that not until men and women understand this concept will they truly begin to have freedom. This concept of humanity as a unified entity was important to Johnston and became increasingly so during her later writings. It is a part of what prompted her anti-war rhetoric and why she later objected to being labeled as a feminist in the same way she objected to the term “pacifist”; she felt herself a “humanist” above all else and that an intangible but unbreakable web knit everyone and everything together.

As with the other texts, Johnston’s control over her own craft tends to vary. The language, particularly dialogue, is often stiff, archaic, and formulaic in those places where she writes of old civilizations, but is more aesthetically pleasing in the stories she places closer to her
own period. Interestingly, while technique is sometimes problematic, the language is at its strongest when she writes about the early stages of development such as the tree people, the foragers, and hunter-gatherer stages, quite probably because she has no stereotype or preconceived ideas of what the language of the period may have sounded like. Sentence structure and pronouns are still often twisted, but they seem to be at their worst when she tries to imitate what she imagines to have been the formal prose speech of ancient civilizations such as those of Greece and Rome.

There is, of course, a strong bias in these stories. Both sympathy and empathy clearly lie with the female characters. Johnston often portrays male characters as arrogant, scheming, willful louts who behave like schoolyard bullies when they find themselves crossed or, worse, find that the female character has or will have something the male character wants. It is very much an exercise in teeter-totter social behavior, and not until the last three stories in the series does she show the male in a positive if somewhat unrealistic light. Nevertheless, she does not always portray women positively; there is often a sense of arrogance or power rather than a sharing. For instance, chapter three’s wise woman seems to embody the concept that the ability to bear children is the most important and powerful of all abilities. She believes that not being able to do so suggests incompleteness, and while the story progression later reverses that sense of lack and turns it into a source of weakness and a duty rather than a privilege, at this moment it is that which determines whether or not a god is male or female and who has the right to lead.

Cella notes that “the book was not well received” (27), a statement which might have been putting the case somewhat mildly. Such a book would be problematic even today because it is so very clearly didactic. While purpose is necessary to fiction, it can inhibit the craft of storytelling if it is blatantly present. That is much the case here; the text is one long parable, and is neither cheerful nor necessarily uplifting. It is, in fact, downright depressing and a bit emotionally tiring to read.

The problematic nature of the text itself is important as an indicator of something else: Johnston’s courage and the strength of her convictions. She was far from a foolish woman. She was instead an intelligent, observant, insightful, and determined personality. She surely would have known that The Wanderers would not have made the best-seller list—especially after
attempting and failing to place the stories serially—but felt so strongly about the subject matter that she chose to write and publish the book anyway. The character of Mrs. Green in *Hagar* may best sum up Johnston’s need to point the way through her texts and to rebel against social standards and what often happens when one does:

“‘There’s lonelier and deeper ways of rebellin’. You don’t get killed with an army cheerin’ you, and newspapers goin’ into black, and a state full of people, that were ‘rebels’ too, keepin’ your memory green,—what happens, happens just to you, by yourself without any company, and no wreaths of flowers and farewell speeches. They just open the door and put you out.”

“Out where?”

“Out by yourself. Out of this earth’s favor. . . .” (35)

Novels such as *Hagar* and *The Wanderers* seriously depleted Johnston’s following, and she recognized the loss as well as the need to try and recoup those losses in later texts. She was never fully able to recover her readership and regain her popularity, but the works which she wrote in the face of public opposition—while they are not necessarily always good examples of the craft, or even good examples of Johnston’s craft—are important examples of Johnston’s convictions about life.
VII. CONCLUSION

Looking Back

Edith Wharton and Mary Johnston lived and wrote in a time when the face of literature was changing, but perhaps most importantly, they were active at a time when expectations for literature were changing as well. Those changing expectations helped shape their careers; Wharton rode the wave of that change for the bulk of her writing career, while Johnston began in the quiet waters of the established genres and then attempted to find her own wave. Each woman was very popular at certain points in her career; each was on the best seller lists, each received honorary academic awards—William and Mary College made Johnston a Phi Beta Kappa in 1920, Yale awarded Wharton with an honorary doctorate in 1923—and Wharton won the Pulitzer in 1921 for her novel, The Age of Innocence. Maintaining the popularity they had achieved, however, proved to be problematic. It was a more troublesome question for Johnston than for Wharton. For Johnston, writing was a very public extension of self, and the public expression must necessarily mirror the private reflection. Her beliefs heavily influenced her work in ways that her reading public found difficult to understand or to access and created a remarkable conflict between the very private person she presented herself as in real life (and indeed was) and the passionate voice of philosophy and ideology she presented in her very public writings. For Wharton, the dilemma was a different one in that, during the later years, she believed herself unable to “write down” to what she felt the average reader wanted (Letters 571). Her time overseas had also made her less aware of what was happening on her home soil and, as a result, she far too often dismissed, overlooked, or simply did not see shifts in literary movements or in the economics of the writing industry.

While Wharton and Johnston were radically different both as women and writers, they aimed for a common goal. They wanted to create change and, as clichéd as it may sound, to make the world a better place. For Wharton, the means to that end was often a matter of pointing
out social failings; she painted vivid pictures of where she believed society and its inhabitants had gone or were going wrong. In a sense, she followed the problem-solving approach which says that if one can identify the problem clearly enough, one can then attempt to rectify that problem. Her critical eye tended to maintain a very tight gaze; her work critiques women’s roles and social expectations and practices, perhaps focusing most especially on the white middle and upper classes. Johnston, on the other hand, tried to take the process one step further and envision what society could be like; she dreamed of utopia, and her focus was broader than Wharton’s. She did not limit the changes she hoped for to Wharton’s social changes but rather included religious, philosophical, and political aspects as well. Her target was humankind as a whole, starting with her American readership. In contrast to Wharton, Johnston did not want to settle for criticism and doing so would have, I believe, violated a very basic tenet of her personality. If Johnston felt the need to be critical, she also felt the need to point toward the solution; criticism is, in and of itself, of limited use if one does not also suggest a way to fix the problem. Instead, Johnston looked forward with a prophetic eye.

Of the two women, Wharton’s writing was undeniably the stronger. Certainly neither produced flawless texts, but Johnston’s writing suffered from techniques and weaknesses Wharton had long ago overcome, including simple questions of syntax and grammar. Structurally, Wharton’s stories show stronger craftsmanship, but one must also keep in mind the differences between their writing genres. Wharton was working solidly in literary fiction, while her southern peer was beginning in a more romantic tradition and then moving on to what Wharton called “novels with a purpose” (UCW 175). Johnston’s writing is, admittedly, inconsistent; some texts are cleaner, stronger, and more finely crafted than others. Yet there are also understandable reasons for that inconsistency.

Perhaps the most critical reason behind Johnston’s inconsistency was the instability of her own health. While Wharton suffered a very serious bout of illness as a child, had bronchial problems into adulthood, and suffered from at least one nervous collapse, she was by and large healthy. Most of Wharton’s illnesses, particularly after she grew out of the worst of the bronchial flare-ups, had to do with sheer physical exhaustion and stress. Particularly during the wartime years, she had a distinct tendency to work herself to the brink of collapse, take a break which was
never quite long enough or restful enough, and then return to repeat the process. For Johnston, however, health was never a matter of choice. In her 1906 diary, Johnston writes that “[i]f I could only work with enthusiasm, work would be play, but I don’t think I ever wrote an entire page without experiencing an intense weariness, listlessness and discouragement. I suppose it is a knowledge of one’s limitations plus physical weakness.” Johnston did indeed recognize that her own physical condition affected her writing and that there were times when she pushed through the writing because she felt she had no choice, but when she was also physically suffering and not at her mental best. That physical weakness seemed to create a corresponding sense of insecurity about her own craft, and it is a doubt which echoed frequently in her memoir and diary entries. For instance, after she had finished Lewis Rand, she noted her own sense that she never wrote anything easily in her diary. There is a hint of both sadness and weariness when she records that “I am reading the book through and seeing where I could have made it better—and that’s a full and melancholy operation. I wish I knew—a great many things I don’t know.” Had Johnston known more, had she—like Wharton’s Ivy Spang—had better control of her craft, she might have had an entirely different and much more successful career, and her works might have been more even.

A secondary and equally important reason for Johnston’s inconsistency is that lack of knowledge she complains about. Johnston spent a huge portion of her childhood and school-age years in the relative cocoon of a sickroom. Her own diaries note that she lacked the opportunity of a normal education and that there were times when her parents forbade school and classes because of her frail health. While Wharton may not have had the education her memoir says she wishes she had, she was able to attend tutoring sessions, study with her governesses, or participate in reading and study programs with friends. Her education may not have had the fullness she desired, but there was at least some degree of structure and rigor to her studies. She herself focuses most heavily on the benefits of the language training she received from her parents and considers that in hindsight, it was perhaps her greatest inheritance. In contrast, Johnston’s education was more of a free-for-all program based on her health on any given day. She recalls that she read anything she could get her hands on, and there does not seem to have been even a fraction of the degree of quality control Wharton experienced in reading materials.
Those earlier readings naturally influenced her writing, and at least to some extent, she internalized the genre and language formats of her readings. Today we encourage writers to read the very best of their chosen field in order to help them internalize the structures, formats, and levels of language. Johnston read whatever was available and internalized both the best and worst of her readings. She gained a strong sense of story and a feel for creating tension, and both tend to be very present in her writings.

Aside from the technical and aesthetic differences, Wharton and Johnston began writing for very different reasons. For Wharton, writing began as a need to belong and a need to express herself. Later her writings were necessary to help her maintain her wartime charities and the style of living to which she was accustomed. Johnston’s reasons were much more pragmatic. While she enjoyed writing and the exploration that came along with it, the economic realities of life during the Depression years and the need to support a family of siblings were her primary motivators. The frank need for money, however—a need she very much recognized as a driving factor behind her activity—did not prevent her from using her work for her own purposes. Rather, while Wharton’s emphasis was on finding a place to belong, a place she could call home and a space which was uniquely her own, Johnston’s focus was on self-development and self-exploration. Her eye often turned inward. She already belonged; she had her citizenship. Instead, her goal was to discover the means by which she could be the best citizen possible and help others toward their own personal best.

I can, at this moment, find no hard evidence that the two women ever met or corresponded. One of the first possible connections appears in Johnston’s summer of 1904 diary entries which cover her trip to Europe and include her visit to London. Wharton was in London until June 1904, when she and Teddy had to return to the Mount in a hurry in order to avert a domestic staff crisis. In May or June of 1904, Wharton attended a function with some 250 other writers (Benstock 141). Depending on when Johnston actually arrived, it is possible that Johnston was in this gathering as well. The literary group was small enough that there would have been concentric and overlapping circles of introduction. Wharton’s circle of acquaintances and friends included most of those on Johnston’s list of new acquaintances. Even if Wharton met the individual after Johnston, or vice versa, mutual friends and colleagues may well have
mentioned either woman during the course of a discussion with the other. In short, while they may never have met, it is more than likely that they would not only have heard of the other in more intimate environments than the latest *New York Times* or *Bookman* reviews and best seller lists, but might have been a topic of discussion among the friends and acquaintances they had in common.

Nevertheless, I am inclined to doubt that they would have, at least initially, enjoyed meeting each other. They possessed certain similarities and interests, such as a strong affection for animals, especially dogs, plants and gardens—indeed, both women published on the subject—were both strongly visual, and very much appreciated nature. Those similarities, however, would not have been enough. Wharton would never have approved of Johnston’s writings and did not seem to speak positively of the South in general; several letters and memoir notes suggest that the concept of Southern chivalry was an exercise in Southern egoism and entirely a fictional idea. Johnston, on the other hand, very much believed that if one had found something valuable and potentially helpful to one’s fellow, one was obligated to share that insight—as she did with her writing. Likewise, the heritage of a chivalric ideal as she perceived it to be evidenced in her own life and the lives of those around her was very real to her and certainly no figment of imagination or made-up ideal. Johnston would, I suspect, have been much more tolerant of her northern colleague than Wharton would have been of Johnston. Had they ever had opportunity for a long talk and been able to move beyond their basic personality and professional differences, however, the resulting conversation would have simply been fascinating.

**Looking Forward**

Edith Wharton scholarship is alive and well and is gaining international focus. Now that academia has rediscovered her, it is unlikely that she will fall off the academic radar at any point in the near future. While nearly all of her writings are now in print, there is still a fair amount of unpublished material, primarily correspondence, which is scattered between two continents. It would be natural to assume that, as interest in Wharton continues to grow, scholars will bring
those remaining fragments to light and publish other collections of letters to supplement the two primary collections currently in print.

Mary Johnston, on the other hand, has barely managed the first blip on the academic radar. As academia rediscovers and reclaims women writers, one can hope that she will be one of those who gain increased attention. It is promising that many of her works are either in press, scheduled for future printings, or were published recently enough that used copies are still available, but it is not enough. While there have been a few theses and dissertations, there has been no marked increase in Johnston scholarship over the past twenty years. Susan Harris’s article in the March 1991 *American Literature* raises the question of whether previously unexamined women’s writings remain in the shadows because they do not deserve to be examined or because they are being examined by invalid standards. “Is it any good?” was a question which was echoing throughout academia, and which we still hear today when we speak about a little-known writer. Harris argued that we need to find new ways to evaluate women’s writings because the old ones are geared toward the dominant dead white male canon and inherently devalue the women’s writings (44). Instead, she pushed for a holistic approach. Mary Johnston is in the shadows not because her writing is not any good, even though it is admittedly uneven. While that unevenness has probably contributed markedly to the lack of scholarship, the larger reason is probably that she is simply so difficult to categorize. Part of her works belong purely to the genres of romantic, sentimental, or historical fiction, and those are genres which academics have only in recent years begun to explore and, to an extent, reclaim. Perhaps more importantly, much of her writing, because of the emphasis of her own ideologies, slips between the organizational lines which make academics so comfortable; academia simply has not quite known what to do with Johnston and has therefore not done anything.

If scholars are ever to understand Johnston’s life, works, vision for the future, and impact on the society around her or her perspective of that society, we must first retrieve her from the archives in which she is buried. First and foremost, Johnston deserves a proper biography, and without excavation of those primary materials, there is little hope that Johnston will ever receive the necessary attention. There have been rumors and mentions of biographies, but none have ever been completed, and that task is growing increasingly difficult with each passing year as
many of the people who may have had first- or second-hand contact with Johnston die. It is disturbing that the only existing overview of Mary Johnston, Ron Cella’s Twayne volume, is no longer in print. While an update of the text is desirable, the reality is that the lack of scholarship on Johnston has kept the volume from being outdated; updating the bibliography would generate only a few new entries, and any current scholarship must necessarily return to Cella. In a recent e-mail exchange, Dr. Cella indicated his expectation that there would be no interest in a reprint of the text, although he would indeed be willing to make the attempt should that opportunity arise. After further communication, he agreed that perhaps there was still a need for the text and would take the first steps toward offering it to the University of Virginia Press. Given that the Johnston Collection is housed at the University, it is logical to believe that the book would find a good home under its collective roof. If the University of Virginia Press turns down the opportunity, then academia will lose the best—indeed the only—existing biography of Mary Johnston unless Dr. Cella can find a home for it elsewhere.

Second, no one has ever put Johnston’s vast collection of correspondence into print, and here too is a wealth of information waiting to be mined. Significantly, this information is not only about Johnston but also about other writers such as Ellen Glasgow and can be useful in other scholarly studies.

Third, while an increasing percentage of Johnston’s works are in print, there still remains a massive amount of unpublished or unfinished text which begs for examination. Those works, too, need to be excavated and put into context.

Fourth and last, while we know that Johnston’s writings received critical as well as public attention and reviews, that information is still waiting for collection (again, aside from secondary source material in Cella’s research). Critical responses for Johnston’s texts need gathering in the same way that scholars have gathered the critical responses for other writers into single volumes (e.g., Cambridge’s Edith Wharton: The Contemporary Reviews). Without those resources, understanding the tenor of the reception and relative success or slump of her work will be considerably more difficult.

The question is not and indeed should never be whether Mary Johnston’s writing is good enough to be brought out into public examination, but rather—as is true for the study of any other
writer—what we might learn by doing so. While her writing is certainly worth studying from the perspective of craft, the greatest gain from a study of Johnston may well be the insight we would acquire into an entire generation who valued her work both in the United States and in Britain (not including the realm of influence caused by translated texts), and the issues and questions which concerned them. Certainly not least of value would be the insight we would gain into a quiet Virginia woman who believed she could change her world with her pen and that she was obligated at least to make the attempt. She was, as was Edith Wharton, a remarkable woman, and while they operated at opposing ends of the literary spectrum, we certainly have no less to learn by examining the lesser studied.
APPENDIX

Abbreviations

BG = Wharton, Edith.  *A Backward Glance*
BoH = Wharton, Edith.  *Book of the Homeless*
CF = Johnston, Mary.  *Cease Firing*
FF = Wharton, Edith.  *Fighting France: From Dunkerque to Belport*
FW = Wharton, Edith.  *French Ways and Their Meaning*
Glimpses = Wharton, Edith.  *The Glimpses of the Moon*
Hold = Johnston, Mary.  *To Have and to Hold.*
UCW = Wharton, Edith.  *The Uncollected Critical Writings.*  Frederick Wegener, ed.
NOTES

1. The discussion of gendered spheres of influence is not a new one in literary studies. Most recently, Monika Elbert’s *Separate Spheres No More* as well as Cathy Davidson’s *No More Separate Spheres* have fueled the discussion about whether realms of masculine and feminine influence are quite as clearly delineated as scholars and historians may have believed.

2. I have been fortunate over the past ten years to work in a professional capacity with creative writers operating in all genres as well as academic writers. As a result of that activity and corresponding participation in a variety of writers’ communities, I have had the opportunity to see the slow transformation in both types of writing. The historical divide between literary genre fictions still exists within academic programs, but both halves of the writing community have come a long way toward recognizing their counterpart’s strengths and weaknesses. Increasingly, I hear creative writing instructors in academic programs admit—albeit grudgingly sometimes—that quality genre fiction requires no less skill than quality literary fiction. In counterpoint, several years ago I was fortunate enough to hear the representative of a major New York publishing house remind students of Florida State University’s creative writing program that no matter how brilliantly drawn and developed the character in literary fiction, *something needs to happen in the story*. It is a sentiment I have seen echoed by other publishers, editors, writers’ guidelines, and writers’ communities. Similarly, one need only compare recent popular genre publications to publications in that same field twenty years ago to find that, by and large, genre writers are crafting increasingly complex characters and story motivations. Two good examples are George R. R. Martin’s wildly popular *Ice and Fire* fantasy series, or virtually any Mary Higgins Clark mystery novel.

3. As a case in point, Florida State University offered a creative writing course in writing detective fiction in the late 1990s. On the other side of the globe, Norway’s second largest university offers a literature course focusing on the American detective novel. One need only talk to First Year Writing instructors throughout the United States to find courses which focus on all genres of popular literature, and in May of 2004, The Slayage conference gathered nearly 400 academics from all over the world for a discussion about “Buffy the Vampire Slayer.” However, I have not yet seen a romance writing course offering at an academic institution. Certainly they exist in non-academic environments, but the stigma of the genre is still patently difficult to overcome elsewhere. Susan Strehle and Mary Paniccia Carden’s *Doubled Plots: Romance and History* is also useful for this discussion. Strehle and Carden differentiate between the use of “romance” in literary terms via the unbelievable or fantastic and in popular terms via a love story (xiv). They connect the popular romance genre with the literary romance and suggest that
denigration of the popular romance has its root in the dismissal of the literary romance during the development of the novel:

While love is a perennial literary theme, narratives of the lover’s quest took on special vitality only with the rise of the novel, in part because of the emphasis on individuated and plausible characters and realistic events that was typical of the novel genre and in part because of the increasing readership among middle-class women (Watt 32–34, 42–44). Yet, ironically, some early novelists and many critics and historians of the novel—including Watt himself—define the novel in opposition to the romance: novels were a boldly “new kind of writing,” that constituted “a break with the old fashioned romances” (9–10). By the eighteenth century adventure-romance was already old, backward-looking, passé—in sum, conventional, while the novel aimed to be boldly new. At the same time, romance came to be associated with women, while the brave new world of novels belonged to men. So Richardson’s Mr. B. imputes to Pamela an over-indulgence in fancies born of an over-indulgence in reading romance: “I never knew so much romantic invention as she is mistress of. In short, the girl’s head’s turned by romances, and such idle stuff, to which she’s given herself up” (92). By 1739, writing what some would consider the first novel, Richardson has already formed the dismissive connection between “girls,” “romances,” idle stuff,” and forms of behavior in which men—sensible, worldly men—believed they had no part. The impulse to distinguish novel (as realistic history) from romance (as sentimental fantasy) and then to attach the romance derisively to women—and women derisively to romance—has led critics to denigrate the genre of romance and to lose its intimate connection to the novel. (xiv–xv)

Rather than separate the development of the novel and romance, they argue for a simultaneous consideration, and that “romance and novel are effectively intertwined, reshaping each other in a continuing productive interchange. Indeed, most fiction includes romance elements, and many canonical novels are romances” (xv). Likewise, rather than suggest that popular romance is supportive of patriarchal values and produces misguided and potentially dangerous images of women, they believe “that romance reflects both the patriarchal oppression of women and women’s strength in resisting, in forging appropriate forms of heroism” (xviii).

This later argument coincides with the author interviews in Mussell and Tuñón’s text. Many of these writers label themselves as feminist, and deeply resent the idea that the stories they produce may be patriarchal or oppressive. Rather, as Strehle and Carden suggest, they believe they are producing models of heroism.

4. For a fascinating look at popular romance authors’ perspectives on the genre, see Mussell and Tuñón’s North American Romance Writers.

5. For an excellent summary of the Douglas-Tompkins debate, also see Laura Wexler’s “Tender Violence: Literary Eavesdropping, Domestic Fiction, and Educational Reform.” For resources aside from the Douglas-Tompkins debate, see also Shirley Samuels’s The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America, particularly the introductory pages which note that sentimentalists were often accused of not addressing the issues of the emerging nation, but also defended for lacking the power or ability to
do so (3), and that “[s]entimentality is literally at the heart of nineteenth-century American
culture” (4), a phrase which is picked up and repeated in other critical works.

See also Mary Louise Kete’s excellent Sentimental Collaborations. Kete places
the rhetoric of sentimentality within modern parameters. In a fascinating study, Kete suggests that
the language of sentimentality is alive and well in American discourse, particularly in politics
and public rhetoric, and is a vital element or marker of the middle class.

6. By way of demonstration, a random sampling of some of the excellent Wharton resources
available as of the past decade shows an overwhelming number of articles, not counting those
published by the Edith Wharton Review. Book-length critical texts about Wharton and her life
include Sharon Dean’s Constance Fenimore Woolson and Edith Wharton: Perspectives on
Landscape and Art; Eleanor Dwight’s Edith Wharton: An Extraordinary Life: An Illustrated
Biography; Gloria Erlich’s The Sexual Education of Edith Wharton; Susan Goodman’s Edith
Wharton’s Women: Friends & Rivals Jennie Kassanoff’s Edith Wharton and the Politics of
Race; Helen Killoran’s The Critical Reception of Edith Wharton; Julie Olin-Ammentorp’s Edith
Wharton’s Writings from the Great War; Carol Singley’s publication of The Age of Innocence
which includes historical and critical essays; Linda Wagner-Martin’s The Age of Innocence: A
Novel of Ironic Nostalgia; Candace Waid’s Edith Wharton’s Letters from the Underworld;
Deborah Lindsay Williams’s Not in Sisterhood: Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, Zona Gale, and
the Politics of Female Authorship; Sarah Bird Wright’s Edith Wharton Abroad: Selected Travel
Writings, 1888-1920. Teaching materials or resources for study include Linda Wagner-Martin’s
Prospects for the Study of Edith Wharton and Melissa McFarland Pennell’s Student Companion
to Edith Wharton.

7. For example, chapter four of Judy Simons’s Diaries and Journals of Literary Women from
Fanny Burney to Virginia Woolf focuses on Wharton’s diaries during the Fullerton affair but
makes a strong point of addressing the purposes of the diaries as part of her discussion. Simons
notes the contradiction between Wharton’s claim and the existence of the diaries themselves (or
mention of them elsewhere).

8. For example, see Stephanie Batcos’s fine article about Wharton’s travels in Morocco. Batcos
examines Wharton’s In Morocco in terms of an autobiography. She argues that while it adheres
to the forms and traditions of the travel writing genre, Wharton makes it uniquely her own by
writing herself within the text in the same way one would an autobiography, showing the
questioning and redefining of her own identity as she questions and examines what she sees.
Alternatively, Justin D. Edwards provides an intriguing discussion in his own study of the
eroticism presented by the viewing of the “other” in travel literature.

9. See, for instance, chapter four in Janet Beer Goodwyn’s excellent book. Goodwyn takes a
biographical approach to consider the “development of the writer in her craft” (and incidentally
as a person) as she analyzes Wharton’s texts, her developing identity as a writer, and her claim to
“the land of letters” as her new home. As part of that discussion, chapter four expands beyond
Wharton and includes the nature or role of women in society at the time in order to explain
Wharton's need to find a home of her own, and some of the extreme sarcasm in Wharton’s writing as well as her development as a writer.

10. While it may be somewhat unusual to suggest a reprint of a 1981 critical text, there simply is no other text currently available on Johnston of this level of importance. As of this writing, Cella’s text is the seminal work on Johnston. It would, of course, be desirable to update the bibliography and introduction, but in view of the sheer lack of Johnston studies over the past twenty-five years, the update would include only a scant handful of new entries. Given a choice between allowing the volume to remain out of print or reprinting it as it stands, the benefits of returning the book to circulation would outweigh any limitations associated with the current bibliography.

11. I have deliberately chosen not to delve too deeply into the metaphysical, philosophical, or theosophical concepts in Johnston’s writings, or their influence in her life. Johnston’s sense of the world as a single unit, a whole of which she was but a small part, heavily influenced her personal beliefs. She explored theosophy and the Eastern religions to some extent, but ultimately selected and then kept those elements which she believed supported her own convictions about the unity and value of life. Johnston presents those convictions in her texts in the hope that her reader will gain some degree of spiritual and philosophical insight. This tendency is, I believe, part of the reason why Johnston remains academically neglected; scholars simply are uncertain about how to classify those writings, or quite what to do with them. While critical work of those texts and the influences which generated them is well worth doing, it is too large for the limitations of this particular project, and I have chosen to set them aside for a later discussion.

12. Most criticism recognizes the Jones family’s financial and social standing and Wharton’s own privileged status, but there are a few texts here and there which suggest Wharton was born into and part of the middle class rather than the more social elite. For example, see the introduction to Raitt and Tate’s Women's Fiction and the Great War. For some of these texts, the “lowering” of social status seems to be the result of an academic atmosphere which subtly frowned upon discussion of the social elite or upper class. It is clear that while there were times when Wharton was less financially stable than she would have liked (e.g., the 1888 Mediterranean trip aboard the Vanadis occurred at a point when the couple certainly could not afford it; incompetent advisors and attorneys damaged Wharton’s inheritance from her mother’s death; marital problems and Teddy’s financial mismanagement brought about the sale of The Mount), she was certainly never impoverished, and never a part of the middle class. Wealth may be relative, but for the most part, Wharton had enough to grant her a remarkable amount of personal liberty and the freedom to go, come, hire, or buy as she chose.

13. For discussions about “American literature,” see Cathy Davidson’s Revolution and the Word; Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky’s essay, “The Early American Novel”; William Hedges’s “Toward a National Literature.” For a text which espouses an earlier perspective (i.e., that American literature was, in essence, both badly done and questionably American), see Henri Petter’s The Early American Novel. All of these sources provide a discussion of the political and social
pressures on the young nation to artistically separate its identity from that of England by creating its own literature.

14. See George Ramsden’s *Edith Wharton’s Library: A Catalogue*. Wharton's will decreed that her library be divided in half; the “literature” portion should go to friend Sir Kenneth Clark in trust for his son and her godson, Colin, while the other portion should go to William and Elisina Tyler, the latter of whom was her executrix. Ramsden was able to acquire Colin’s portion in roughly 1985, mostly intact but for a few losses to an earlier fire. The Tylers stored their portion, however—some 1600 books—with a number of their other belongings in London during 1940 while they were in the United States. November of 1940 saw the destruction of the entire storage, presumably during a World War II bombing raid. The Tylers received less than £900 for their loss, a sum which certainly could not compensate for the history, artefacts, and heirlooms included in that portion of the library. Ramsden’s book is a professional catalogue of the Clark portion of the library and those books he was able to search out later. He has included not only publication information about each volume but also origin if available, current location, and a notation about any notes, comments, or inscriptions. Stone Trough published the book in very limited quantity, but the text is valuable for the insight it gives into the depth and breadth of Wharton’s reading and interests.

15. One exception to the rule is Jerome Loving’s “The Death of Romance: The Portrait of a Lady in the Age of Lily Bart.” Loving discusses James's *Portrait of a Lady* in relationship with Wharton's *House of Mirth*. Specifically, he notes that the usual argument of James's writing influencing Wharton's reverses itself in this case and argues that James revised his first publications of *Portrait* (1880-81) for the 1908 publication as a result of *House of Mirth*'s influence in 1905.

16. Johnston’s memoir does not clearly identify this aunt, and I am unable to determine if this is her Aunt Marianna Nicol Johnston—Mary’s father’s sister—who came to live with them after Mary’s mother’s death, another blood-related aunt, or the former nurse they called “Aunt Fanny.” Johnston notes that her early household consisted of her parents, John William and Elizabeth Dixon Alexander Johnston; the children (from eldest to youngest: Mary, Eloise, Anne, John, Walter, Elizabeth); Grandmother Johnston; Fountain Fisher (“Uncle Fountain”; former slave of great-uncle Judge Edward Johnston); Fanny Fisher (“Aunt Fanny”; Fountain’s wife; father’s former nurse); an unnamed housemaid; and a nurse (identified later as Molly Ann Jeeter). Marianna Nicol Johnston definitely became a permanent part of the household after the death of Grandmother Johnston.

17. Probably Le Havre, France, a port city where ocean liners were accustomed to dock.

18. Cella records Johnston’s death certificate as showing “cancer of the kidney” as the cause of death (148 n20), which suggests that much of her earlier illness—including this terrible year—could be the cause of the existing nephritis.
19. Literary criticism often notes the desired (and desirable) use of a masculine approach in a
text. For example, Karen Burns provides an excellent discussion of this phenomenon in her
ey essay, as does Brooke Allen in a comparison of masculine and feminine writing styles between
Wharton and Henry James. Similarly, Deborah Lindsay Williams’s *Not in Sisterhood* provides
an excellent discussion of precisely this issue as she considers authorial identity in the works of
Wharton, Willa Cather, and Zona Gale. Additionally but certainly no less importantly, it is
critical to remember that writing in a masculine tradition is a distinction which the reading public
both recognized and prized. For instance, among the letters of the Mary Johnston collection is a
fascinating letter from Frances Gordon Pym. Writing on 18 April 1900, Pym congratulates
Johnston on *To Have and to Hold*. The letter begins:

My dear Miss Johnston:

You write like a man. And despite our much vaunted pride in “womanliness” this
must ever be the highest compliment one can pay to a woman writer.

While this is only one letter, it is certainly not an isolated opinion, as evidenced by Wharton’s
own pride in her “masculine” performance. Ironically, Johnston’s fiction is much less masculine
than Wharton’s or than her own professional correspondence. Johnston’s professional
correspondence, while always polite and diplomatic, is much more direct than her fiction, both in
message and syntax.

20. See, for instance, Laura Mulvey's seminal article introducing the concept of the gaze in film
criticism and which was quickly taken up by feminist scholars in other disciplines. Her
positioning of the gaze as male (and woman as the objectified recipient of that gaze) was
elaborated upon and complicated by later scholars, and indeed by her own later work. Perhaps
two of the most valuable essays responding to Mulvey are those by Ann Kaplan who questioned
whether the gaze was male, and Nalini Paul who suggested that the gaze could indeed be female.

21. Potentially the best resource currently available describing Wharton’s wartime days is Alan
Price’s *The End of the Age of Innocence: Edith Wharton and the First World War*. No other
source provides the same in-depth and detailed examination of Wharton’s life during this period.
Price’s book contains information not found in other texts and corrects a number of minor errors
(e.g., the publication date of *Book of the Homeless*) in other sources.

22. Lewis writes that “the book was given simultaneous October publications by Scribner’s in
New York and Macmillan in London” (*EW* 379), which is not entirely accurate. That was indeed
the original plan, but production delays pushed the publication date back until January 22, 1916.
On April 17, 1916, Wharton noted in a letter to Barrett Wendell that “‘The Book of the
Homeless’ did not reach this side of the world till two or three weeks ago” (*Letters* 373), which
suggests that the plans for simultaneous publication failed as well.

23. Lewis records Kipling’s reason for refusal to contribute to the book as being “unable to write
during the war” (*EW* 380). Price writes that Kipling “claimed in a note to Henry James that he
was too busy with nonliterary work to take up his pen for Wharton’s charities” (Price 59), and
Wright concurs with that reason (Wright 29). Kipling was the primary refusal for contributions
to the book’s content, and Wharton was both disappointed and perhaps offended by his decision.
Her own memoir records her work in acquiring the necessary contributions and that she “appealed right and left for contributions, and met with only one refusal—but I will not name the eminent and successful author who went by on the other side” (BG 349). While she did not name Kipling in the memoir, her letters most certainly do.

24. Wharton was certainly not alone in her sentiment. Alan Price’s extraordinary documentation of Wharton’s wartime experience clearly indicates the general attitudes of Wharton’s peers and compatriots as well as those Americans with whom Wharton came into regular contact. Henry James’s change of citizenship in 1915 is probably the most extreme example, but nevertheless serves as a gauge of the group’s intense feeling.

25. One of the most interesting and persuasive articles discussing Fighting France as an example of the travel writing genre is Mary Suzanne Scribe’s “Fighting France: Travel Writing in the Grotesque.” Scribe argues that Wharton intended the reader to read the text with the usual travel writing expectations but that she inverts the sights, sounds, and insights in such a way—even as she adheres to the form and parallels Motor Flight with Fighting France—that the reader experiences a travel of the grotesque. Scribe notes that it is Wharton’s hope that the resulting conflict between expectation and realization will prompt the American reader to action.

26. While these images are now stereotypes, they are based in reality. One excellent case in point is the first Battle of Bull Run, or first Battle of Manassas. Local residents, believing the battle would be a short one, gathered with their picnic baskets to observe. The Manassas National Battlefield Park website provides an overview of the two battles.

27. For instance, Alan Price calls “The Refugees” the middle satirical stage of “a progression from the propaganda story” (32) toward regaining her usual irony after the exhausting years of charity and wartime activity. Sarah Bird Wright’s A to Z provides an excellent contextualization of the story in light of Wharton’s return to the work of writing.

28. Elizabeth Ammons contends that Wharton’s wartime texts fall short of their potential and that the “relative failure of these books has to do with the fact that although, finally, the First World War affected Edith Wharton more deeply and radically than any other experience in her life, it did not change her immediately and it was not in her fiction about the war that its influence was felt. Instead, the impression that the war made on her was delayed and appears in her fiction about civilian American life in the 1920s” (129).

29. See, for instance, Robert A. Lively’s discussion about Johnston in Fiction Fights the Civil War: An Unfinished Chapter in the Literary History of the American People. Lively examines 512 historical novels—focusing on the Civil War historical fiction—in order to determine their value (and influence) as historical documents as well as artistic or literary creations. He lists his top 15 choices—“A Selection of the Best Civil War Novels” (which includes Ellen Glasgow’s The Battle-Ground)—as well as 30 “Other Representative Civil War Novels,” the latter of which includes Johnston’s The Long Roll and Mitchell’s Gone With the Wind (12–13). His general feeling is that while there were literally hundreds of Civil War novels published, only a fragment
of them are worth their paper, and he distinguishes between the historical “romance” and historical “novel.” The latter grouping follows Scott’s approach of keeping historical fact present and factual in the text. He includes Johnston in this category and argues that while her works are historically accurate, that same level of historicism detracts from the story itself by limiting character development and dimension.

30. For an excellent discussion of the conflict between publisher and author, see Sarah Gardner’s “Every Man Has Got the Right to Get Killed?” Gardner makes a point of discussing the conflict in expectations between author and publisher, and notes in particular the publisher’s desire for a happy ending and a less grim product (14).

31. Some critics sadly underestimate or overlook this first-hand source material. See, for instance, Richie Devon Watson, Jr.’s The Cavalier in Virginia Fiction. Watson takes Taylor’s Cavalier and the Yankee: The Old South and the American National Character text and applies it to Virginia and Virginia writers as a case example. He argues that the Cavalier model both began and was at its strongest in Virginia. He finds Johnston’s earlier works “shallow” (164) and prefers the two Civil War novels for their battle reality but does not make note of Johnston’s immediate access to first-hand battle source information via her father and cousin. While doing so might not change his opinion of the texts, it is an element one must consider in order to understand Johnston’s perspective and motivation.

32. For instance, see Lawrence G. Nelson’s “Mary Johnston and the Historical Imagination”; Sheldon Van Auken’s “The Southern Historical Novel in the Early Twentieth Century”; C. Ronald Cella’s Mary Johnston; Edward Wagenknecht’s The World and Mary Johnston.

33. The use of the term “literary fiction” in order to differentiate from “genre” is very much a commonplace within the creative writing communities. By and large, however, we tend to explain it to our students by identifying genre as any of the traditionally plot-driven story types, such as westerns, popular romance, fantasy, science fiction, mystery, or detective fiction. In those texts, the reader reads in order to find out what will happen. Literary fiction, however, generally falls outside those genres, and is very much character-driven. The character’s development propels the story forward; the reader reads to see how the character will grow, learn, mature, or change during the course of story. Increasingly, I see a blurring of distinction between genres. Genre writers are placing heavier emphasis on character development, thus prompting genre texts which, did they not focus on a topic which automatically classified them as genre, would indeed be considered literary fiction. I am convinced that this trend will increase, and while standard genre fictions will never disappear, we may find ourselves having to coin new terms such as “literary fantasy” or “literary western” in order to describe the phenomenon. Until that happens, however, any modern creative writing handbook will continue to provide students with a practical contextualization of “genre” and “literary fiction.” Two excellent examples are Jerome Stern’s Making Shapely Fiction and Janet Burroway’s Writing Fiction.

34. See, for instance, Anne M. Fields’s “‘Years Hence of These Scenes’; Wharton’s “The Spark” and World War I.” Fields notes the difficulty women writers encountered in having their
war writings accepted or even taken seriously. The essay attempts to locate “The Spark” in Wharton’s repertoire of wartime writings. Fields argues that Wharton’s war writing—most especially “The Spark”—reflects Wharton’s own inability to express or voice that which was the war. She notes that women of all arts and letters were generally discounted when it came to their art or writing about the war, that regardless of how close they were to the front, they cannot write about that which they have not experienced. She argues that Wharton shows a muteness and silence in her work that is the direct result of her inability to express what she saw and experienced. She also suggests that part of Wharton’s conflict was one of artistry versus reality.

35. For contextualization of the “Woman question,” see: Elizabeth Ammons’s essay “Gender and Fiction”; Elizabeth Coleman’s “Penwoman of Virginia’s Feminists”; Ellen Carol DuBois’s *Woman Suffrage and Women's Rights*; Elna Green’s *Southern Strategies: Southern Women and the Woman Suffrage Question*; and Karen Hunt’s *Equivocal Feminists: The Social Democratic Federation and the Woman Question, 1884–1911*. Johnston used the phrase interchangeably with “Woman Movement.” See note 40 below.

36. *The Atlantic Monthly* published “The Woman’s War” in April 1910. Cella correctly notes that publication date in his bibliography. For the purposes of this discussion, I have instead used the copy of the text located in the Johnston Collection at the University of Virginia in order to gain access to Johnston’s own editorial notes and corrections. The note page attached to that copy indicates that Johnston was sending the manuscript to someone after its publication date. She writes that it “is a more [unreadable] and soiled copy than I thought. Perhaps, however, you can make it out.” Prior to this page, the library has placed an additional page or two trying to locate the document’s framework, but is itself not certain of the publication date, and have scribbled out the note indicating that the manuscript may have been sent to or received from Ray Costello (“English suffrage worker—who travelled with [unreadable] Howard Shaw in interest of suffrage”). These small details are of interest primarily because there is a conflict between the appearance of the essay in the April 1910 edition of the *Atlantic Monthly* and the text itself. Johnston indicates that a woman had won the Nobel Prize “this year,” the organization does not list a woman in the Nobel alumni for 1910. Rather, Marie Curie won her second Nobel prize in 1911. One can only assume that Johnston received the news of the upcoming award before she submitted the essay to the journal, but had anticipated that either the essay would be delayed until the following year, or that Curie would receive the award that year, in 1910. For a list of Nobel alumni, see: [http://nobelprize.org/search/all_laureates_y.html](http://nobelprize.org/search/all_laureates_y.html)

37. Disney’s production of “Pocahontas” generated a fascinating ripple of publication, particularly on the World Wide Web; web sites sprang up almost in protest against the idealized story. In particular, teachers at the secondary as well as college levels found an excellent opportunity to give their students a hands-on critical thinking exercise by allowing them to compare the historical information against Disney’s presentation. Two very solid online sources for information about Pocahontas are those of The Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities and the Henrico Country, Virginia web sites.
38. See also Edgar MacDonald’s essay, “Mary Johnston and Henry Sydnor Harrison.” MacDonald discusses the relationship between the editor of the *Times*, Henry Sydnor Harrison—the paper to which Johnston submitted this letter—and Mary Johnston. Johnston had already formed an encouraging, nearly mentoring relationship with Sydnor, and perhaps because of that relationship was comfortable enough to submit the letter for publication. Harrison notes that the letter is far longer than he would normally accept, but because he supported the cause and liked and respected Johnston, he published it in its entirety (3).

39. Conversely, Mary Johnston’s memoir notes that she met Sinclair in her 1904 tour to Europe and includes a photo of herself with Sinclair and Margaret Meredith, wife of William Meredith (the son of writer George Meredith). Her notation is that she “saw something of English writers,” and one comes away from the journal feeling as if Johnston was pleased with that memory.

40. Martha Patterson’s dissertation argues that the ambivalent presentation of the trope of the “new woman” via the Gibson Girl model in the texts of Margaret Murray Washington, Pauline Hopkins, Edith Wharton, Sui Sin Far, and Mary Johnston is demonstrative of their awareness of their own socio-political and economic positioning, and the roles they—and their new rhetoric—play within those respective communities. She uses Hagar as an example of that ambivalent presentation but does not take up the discussion against Johnston’s other female characters. Her argument does not seem to place much weight on Johnston’s own feelings about the character, the shift in Johnston’s writing from her previous texts, or Johnston’s own philosophical changes during the period in which she was writing *Hagar*. Rather, Patterson excerpts the character of Hagar from the rest of Johnston’s career and discusses the text in isolation in chapter 5. Nevertheless, the discussion is both thought-provoking and convincing, and her 2005 publication of *Beyond the Gibson Girl* is a more polished version of that discussion.

41. *The Glimpses of the Moon* ran serially in the *Pictorial Review* before Appleton published it in book form in 1922. Wharton had begun the work at least three years before, and notes in a 1921 letter to Bernard Berenson that she had “interrupted it last winter to write ‘The Old Maid,’ . . . It’s called ‘The Glimpses of the Moon,’ & tries to picture the adventures of a young couple who believe themselves to be completely affranchis & up-top-date, but are continually tripped up by obsolete sensibilities, & discarded ideals.—A difficult subject, which of course seemed the easiest in the world when I began it” (*Letters* 446). The general public loved the book. Lewis records that “[t]he new novel was a runaway best seller, the bookstores in America and England disposing of more than 100,000 copies in the first six months. To the $17,000 for the serialization, Appleton added another $28,000 in royalties, and the film rights went for $13,500 more. Before a year was out, Edith Wharton earned nearly $60,000 from *The Glimpses of the Moon* and some $10,000 from several short stories and the novella *False Dawn*, which the *Ladies’ Home Journal* took for $5,500” (444).

In contrast, the majority of the critics disliked the novel for exactly the same reasons the public enjoyed it: its sentimentality, the culmination of which appears in the surface reading of the ending. While Wharton received one glowing review from Katherine Fullerton Gerould
(cousin to her friend Morton Fullerton), other reviews were brutal. Burton Rascoe wrote that the novel was “the story of the triumph of true love over the forces of evil. Mrs. Wharton, doubtless, would expire of shock at so cheap and common a description of her novel; but that is, precisely, what, from one point of view, it is. It is perhaps a little quaint to find a moral in a book by a novelist who is conspicuously lacking in moral fervor” (310). Rascoe argued that this inconsistency between moral fervor and the text strengthened Wharton’s normal detachment to such an extent that “we are as likely to be as little concerned, personally, with Mrs. Wharton’s characters as she is herself. . . . Mrs. Wharton’s emotions are not at all engaged by Nick and Susy Lansing” (311), and that “the story becomes frightfully repetitious” (311). A New Republic critic wrote that Wharton had “done no more, in fact rather less, than she has done before” (312). Rebecca West wrote for New Statesman that “[e]very now and then some writer—either critic or novelist—announces that the novel is an art-form that is played out. . . . But one can understand the mood of despair that makes people declare that all is up with the novel when one reads Mrs. Wharton’s Glimpses of the Moon” (313). Alice Sessums Levoy felt that Wharton’s willingness to give her reading public “such poor fare” was “a distinct and unpleasant shock. It is rather a sad spectacle always to watch a fine artist becoming an indifferent one” (315). Like Rascoe, she believes that Wharton is not interested in her own characters, and that disinterest generates an increasing boredom in the reader. Gilbert Seldes argues that the novel promises something Wharton does not deliver, and indeed does not deliver badly (317). Ruth Hale reports that “Edith Wharton has no business to be writing such trash” for Bookman (318), and Current Opinion echoes that sentiment when the writer complains that “[i]t is difficult to understand how this sort of writing can be of any value to any human being” (319). Across the board, the critics rebel against what they describe as the incredible, unbelievable, fantastic, romantic, or unrealistic presentation of Nick and Susy, but particularly the closing scene. They simply do not believe the ending (which is admittedly flawed), or accept the final discussion. It is the sentimental they object to, which is precisely the thing the public seemed to enjoy.

The conflict between critic and average reader is certainly not a new one, but is always an interesting one. In this case, modern critics still find the novel problematic. Specifically, the ending Tintner attempts to visualize in the destroyed fresco seems laden with conflict. Remembering Wharton’s understanding that what the public wanted of a tragedy was a happy ending, that she wrote very few happy endings, that she had begun to feel that she was the forgotten matriarch of the literary world, and that the income of this year would have been a welcome boost after the previous lean years, one can understand the earlier critics’ subtle hint that she may have written the ending in order to both regain an audience and earn money.

42. Once again, creative writing and the study of literature overlap, as they inevitably must. “The why factor” is a common verbal expression within the writing communities of all form and genre. When we use the term, we literally mean that writing has a purpose, and that when the reader comes to the end of the text, she should not find herself wondering why the writer bothered to write that particular story, and therefore why she bothered to read it. If she does find herself asking that question, then the text has not included or satisfied what we informally and somewhat loosely call “the why factor.” (Also known as “passing the why test,” and any other variation which uses “why” and makes sense.) For contemporary examples, see journalist Chip Poynter’s “why” list, or the University of North Carolina’s Writing Center guidelines for writers.
43. There is much about Hagar which echoes Johnston, but there is also much which is different. During her own research into Johnston, Anita Firebaugh noted that Johnston’s nephew was “very adamant that Hagar was *not* autobiographical” (Firebaugh). Reviewers, critics, and readers often raised the question, particularly shortly after the novel’s publication. For instance, Johnston was herself interested in socialism to the extent that she often thought of herself as a socialist. She never joined the socialist party or any of the local organizations for several reasons, but perhaps two were foremost in her mind. First, she did not believe the organization needed her physical presence. While she had been a member of the local suffrage league chapter for a period of time, she had actually been drawn into the process by the Glasgow sisters and was of its development and leadership. Once she felt the organization could survive without her, she withdrew to pursue the issues in her own way via her writing. Similarly, Johnston incorporated her attitudes about socialism into her writing in the same way as her other philosophies; she did not feel the need to belong to the organization in order to advocate improved conditions for mankind in general. Rather, she tended to work outside the organizations via her writing—fiction and otherwise—and speeches. Certainly organizational membership should not a measure of commitment; even today organizations are filled with members who are on the rolls for the benefits of the association, but have no interest in working for the cause. Political and religious organizations still stand as good examples of that unfortunate condition. Likewise, how committed must one be before one can be called committed? Is an individual uncommitted if he does not sacrifice everything or die for the cause?

As with all commitments, one must achieve some degree of balance, and Johnston worked hard to do so. This, of course, was her secondary reason for not joining the organization. While Johnston was an idealist in many ways, she was also enough of a realist to recognize that membership would hurt her career—a career that currently supported herself and her family. Nevertheless, preaching her message for change cost her a very large portion of her readership; in the latter years of her life, the family took in boarders and refinanced the mortgage to help meet costs of living. It was not enough; the family lost Three Hills after Johnston’s death.

44. Cathy Davidson offers an excellent discussion of coverture in chapter six of Revolution and the Word. While Davidson discusses the concept in terms of sentimental fiction of the late 1700s and early 1800s, and Johnston penned her story a century later (and set her story an indeterminable number of centuries earlier), it is still possible to consider the two texts together. Indeed, it is still possible to hear echoes of Davidson’s observations in today’s society. While coverture may no longer be a legal reality within the United States (although I would argue that it is still far too often an emotional or spiritual reality), Johnston was writing at a time when women had gained some degree of independence. They could own property, manage their financial affairs to some extent, conduct their own businesses albeit with some limitations, and choose their own partner. They participated in civic, church, and local community service organizations, although they had little say in government and no vote. As with Davidson’s period of study, however, a woman’s choice to remain single was still problematic. For Davidson, “spinsterhood hardly embodied a respectable option in the society of the time. On the contrary, the spinster was an object of pervasive cultural ridicule” (198). That aspect of society was still very much present in Johnston’s day. While Johnston surely had several reasons to remain unmarried, she certainly would have both felt and seen the pressure to marry in her own
life, in the lives of those around her, and in society in general. That pressure, although it has softened, still exists today, as virtually any woman who did not marry before she turned eighteen can testify. Only recently have legal precedent and banking policies changed so that women can obtain loans, including business loans, in their own name and without the benefit of a husband or father, although even that shift is not universal and a single woman of means will still find it difficult to obtain a mortgage or business loan far too often.

In other words, while Davidson is focusing on the turn of the nineteenth century, and Johnston writing in the twentieth, the issues both these women address still remain discouragingly valid.

That validity creates a fascinating echo when we compare Davidson’s chapter against Janice Radway’s book, *Reading the Romance*. While Radway conducts a survey of popular romance readers in the 1900s, many of her observations and the readers’ comments are visible in Davidson’s chapter. For instance, Davidson’s observation that Foster “casts The Coquette as more of a woman’s story than a man’s” (186) echoes one of the Smithton readers’ criteria for popular romance or that “a romance is, first and foremost, a story about a woman” (Radway 64). While Davidson’s studies are obviously not focusing on popular romance and naturally do not include the distinction Radway’s readers make about romance—that it must be a love story rather than a story about love (64)—her observation about Foster’s narrative shift and later critique of the story forecasts the modern reader’s interest in perspective and desire not just to see the events but to feel “what it feels like to be the object of” romance (64). “The point of the experience,” Radway discovers, “is the sense of exquisite tension, anticipation, and excitement created within the reader as she imagines the possible resolutions and consequences for a woman of an encounter with a member of the opposite sex and then observes that once again the heroine in question has avoided the ever-present potential for disaster because the hero has fallen helplessly in love with her” (65). Certainly that happy ending does not appear in Foster’s text, but Davidson finds the equivalent in her study when she observes that “by portraying dashing roués, sentimental novelists still allowed women to vicariously participate in a range of relationships with diverse suitors and to imagine what the aftermath of marriage to different men might be like” (189).

Interestingly (and rather sadly), the women of Radway’s study often felt equally guilty for reading their novels as did those of Davidson’s study. Davidson notes the social pressure for women at the turn of the nineteenth century to limit their reading (at least of novels) and direct their energies into more visible productive activities, even to the point where they felt they must justify or excuse their reading in their private writings (190). In a contemporary parallel, Radway relays Dot’s story about one of her customers who “had gone out and secured a job in order to pay for her books. She added that this is not uncommon because so many of her customers have to justify book purchases to husbands who resent the expenditure of ‘their’ money on an activity that has no clear function or use, at least as far as they are concerned” (102). Later, as Radway, Dot, and the Smithton group discuss husbands’ resistance to their wives’ reading, Dot tells her women “that if you can hang in there for three years, [the fact that they are threatened] goes away as such.” When she [Dot] recounted her theory, she added, “it’s true. It is weird. And before long, they get to the point where they’re thinking, ‘Oh well, you know my wife reads x amount of books a week.’ And they’re braggin about it.” If they can shift perspectives, in other words, and rather than see romance reading as a
pointless activity with no utilitarian purpose, consider the ability to read many books both an achievement in itself and a way to learn, they can then justify their wives’ book expenses. Some of these men can even be persuaded that the form is interesting if their wives decide to try their hand at romance writing themselves. . . . Romance reading can be justified to others, then, if the reader learns to stress the books’ educational function, if she can demonstrate the extraordinary adeptness and speed with which she reads, or if she can turn the whole process around and write her own romance to be read and, of course, bought by others. (112)

For Johnston, chapter eleven of *The Wanderers* vividly recreates Davidson’s observation that “woman’s function was to be socially possessed or dispossessed” (185). Zira was first socially possessed by her husband, and then socially dispossessed by her society when her husband wandered off and signs indicated that he had been devoured by a tiger. Zira’s dispossess is extreme, however; it is expulsion. She was, as Davidson notes similarly about the *feme covert*, invisible (194). Not until Madhava returns does she again become possessed, but that possession only shades her degree of invisibility; it does not eliminate it. The community will have to reacquaint itself with her presence as a man’s wife, but she still has no identity outside of that definition. Indeed, only Madhava’s return gives her life any significance for the community. Davidson argues that the “negation of the female self—her freedoms, her possibilities—forms the basis of the sentimental plot, just as it informed the lives of a vast majority of the sentimental novel’s readers” (228). Zira’s entire existence has been a negation, and we cannot expect any change in the future. For Johnston and her readers, the negation of their lives was certainly not as extreme as Zira’s, nor quite as intense as that experienced by the readers in Davidson’s study, but it was an experience they shared, despite the difference in degree. For characters and readers of all three periods, the ultimate desire was the right and freedom “to establish their own destinies” (Davidson 221).

45. While it does not detract from the award, it is interesting background to note that the text originally under consideration for the Pulitzer that year was Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street*, but the Columbia leadership deemed it too controversial. Wharton’s novel was chosen instead. In response to his letter congratulating her on the award, she wrote Lewis that when I discovered that I was being rewarded—by one of our leading Universities—for uplifting American morals, I confess I did despair. Subsequently, when I found the prize shd really have been yours, but was withdrawn because your book (I quote from memory) had “offended a number of prominent persons in the Middle West,” disgust was added to despair.—Hope returns to me, however, with your letter, & with the enclosed article, just received.—Some sort of standard is emerging from the welter of cant & sentimentality, & if two or three of us are gathered together, I believe we can still save fiction in America. (Letters 445)

The idea of “saving” American fiction provides interesting insight into Wharton as a writer, and reforming American fiction was a vision she felt Lewis shared. She generally respected and approved of his writing, appreciated him as an individual (an October 1923 letter to Margaret Terry Chanler described him as “delightful” [Letters 471]) and indicated that she admired his “steady balancing . . . over the sloppy abyss of sentimentality” (Letters 455).
The committee considered Lewis again in 1923 for *Babbit*, but Willa Cather’s *One of Ours* took the prize instead. In 1926, his novel *Arrowsmith* won the Pulitzer, but he chose to refuse the award. He finally won and accepted the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1930.

46. There are those who might suggest a comparison between Mary Johnston and Alice Adams, but such a comparison is problematic; the two women had little in common. Adams was born a scant decade before Johnston's death and wrote during a period when the face of literature had completed its shift away from the more romantic and sentimental modes employed by Johnston. Adams was a child of divorce; Johnston's parents maintained a healthy and apparently happy marriage. Adams's relationship with her mother was a strained one; Johnston was close to her mother. Adams married, divorced, and was a mother in her own right; Johnston never married and had no children. Adams was relatively healthy until the later years and her death as a result of heart problems; Johnston was never healthy, and ultimately died of an illness which had probably plagued her for most of her life. The one point where Johnston and Adams might have found common ground is that they were both born in Virginia. Even that, however, is complicated by the attitudes of the writers themselves; Adams recognized her Southern heritage, but was not wedded to it. Indeed, Adams left the South to take up residence in New York, Paris, and San Francisco. Johnston, on the other hand, considered the South her home for the entirety of her life. Nor is it feasible to compare one writer's ability to work despite illness with another; every individual's response to illness is unique and dependent upon a host of other factors, not the least of which is personality, stamina, other medical considerations, and environment. The one time when we could rationally make such a comparison would be when two individuals suffered from the same illness to the same extent. That, however, is not the case here. For information about Adams, see Julie Amberg’s essay in *Contemporary American Women Fiction Writers*, Barbara Herman’s overview in *Contemporary Fiction Writers of the South*, and Christine Ferguson’s “Alice Adams” in *American Short-Story Writers since World War II*.

47. Encouraging writers—particularly novice or developing writers—to read quality work in (and out of) their chosen genre is commonplace in writing communities. Every creative writing class, every writing workshop, every book about developing one’s craft, and every writing advice column reinforces this concept. There are several reasons for the emphasis we place on the practice. First, whether we necessarily wish to or not, we naturally tend to internalize part of what we read, even if it is only portions of the vocabulary, or language styles, or syntax. Any writer who reads quality writing, regardless of genre, will inevitably strengthen her own writing skills. Similarly, writers who spend their time in poorly written texts will find themselves unintentionally acquiring some of those weaknesses. Second, reading in one’s genre informs the writer about what is currently available, and what the publishers are printing at the moment. It allows the writer to determine who might publish her work, or whether the theme of her current (or past) project is marketable. Third and equally importantly, reading in one’s genre helps a writer recognize the characteristics of that particular genre. While it will not prevent problems, knowledge of the publishing trend will help a beginning writer avoid some of the biggest pitfalls (e.g., creating a plot-driven romantic western set in outer space in which the heroine dies is not liable to win readers in the romance, western, or science fiction communities). For additional
resources, one might see author Carol Berg’s interview online, Vanessa Harless’s “Writer’s Block” articles with OregonLive.com, author Lucy Monroe’s advice FAQ,
WORKS CITED

All quotations and references directly attributed to Mary Johnston (and her sister Elizabeth) come from Mary Johnston’s diaries, letters, and other unpublished works currently located in the Mary Johnston Collection (accession #3588) housed with the Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, Manuscripts Department, Mary Johnston Papers at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia.


—. “Re: Mary Johnston.” E-mail to the author. 6 Jan. 2006.


—. “Re: Mary Johnston.” E-mail to the author. 10 Aug. 2005.
<http://www.co.henrico.va.us/manager/pokeypix.htm>


<http://www.emb.gov.hk/FileManager/EN/Content_238/essay_guide.doc>


185


—. Pioneers of the Old South. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1918.


Manzulli, Mia. “'Garden Talks': The Correspondence of Edith Wharton and Beatrix Farrand.” Colquitt, Goodman, and Waid 35-48.


Westervelt, C. C. Letter to Mary Johnston Estate. 5 November 1951.


Rhonna J. Robbins-Sponaas earned her Master’s in English (Creative Writing) from The Florida State University in 1997 and realized, after a pause, that a doctoral degree in American literature had as much to offer her own creative writing as her writing might offer to the degree. Currently residing in Norway, she teaches writing and literature to Norwegian and American students at the university level, both online and face-to-face. Rhonna serves as a member of the Board of Directors for the enCore Consortium, a nonprofit and largely academic organization dedicated toward improving and making accessible the online learning environment software, enCore. She has served as executive director for Project Achieve, a large and international academic MOO, and as editor-in-chief for a recognized online literary journal. Recent publications include articles about MOO, and a translation from Norwegian to English of an coffee table book which focuses on the historical images of the Stjørdal, Norway region. Married to a native Norwegian, she has learned to knit, ski (but not yet stop), and complain about the ice at regular intervals. She maintains her own website and blog at http://rhonna.net.