Edith Wharton's Dialogue with Susan Warner

Sharon Kim

Far from the drawing rooms of Old New York lived a woman who would wake up at 4:30 in the morning, then write for hours to make ends meet. Her farmhouse sat atop the ruins of a Revolutionary War barracks on the Hudson River, scant of luxury though rich in history and natural beauty. Mostly forgotten today, her novels seem as different from Edith Wharton's as the farmhouse differs from a mansion. Yet Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905) shows a distinct engagement with this writer, Susan Warner. Elaine Showalter, Jeanne Boydston, and Hildegard Hoeller have studied different angles of Wharton's relation to sentimental fiction, whether in subversion, affinity, or dialogue. Hoeller, for example, discusses Wharton's simultaneous dialogue with the limits of both realism and sentimentalism in her works. This dialogue explored by Hoeller assumes particularly precise focus in *The House of Mirth* through Wharton's consideration of Susan Warner. Wharton's portrayal of two characters, Lady Cressida Raith and Gerty Farish, represent Wharton's interaction with the religious vision and sentimentalism of Warner's writing.

Susan Warner was the literary celebrity of Wharton's mother's generation. Born in 1819, she grew up in New York amidst "crimson cushions and tall mirrors" (A. Warner 171). Her father was a successful lawyer; her mother came from one of the prominent families in fashionable Hudson Square (Foster 20). After 1837, however, the Warners suffered financial losses similar to those of the Barts in *The House of Mirth*. They sold their mansion on St. Mark's Place and began to live in an old farmhouse on Constitution Island, near West Point. The change in their lives was a hard one. As her sister Anna recalls: "From waiter and coachman and cook to the skill of our own hands (chiefly) was a broad step; oars and saw and hatchet succeeded our frisky black ponies; while from dainty silks and laces, we came down to calicoes, fashioned by our own fingers; and from new bonnets with every turn of the season, to what headgear we could get" (176). For the young Susan who enjoyed society, a harder loss soon followed, according to

Anna: "If you have 'nothing to wear,' few want you; while some think it kind not to invite you, because of course (in such case) you cannot want to come! And for a good while we had little to do with visits or visitors" (177). In such social and geographical isolation, Warner became a devout Christian and wrote her first novel, *The Wide, Wide World*, which scholars have discussed as the "Ur-text" of the sentimental novel.[1]

Published in 1850, *The Wide, Wide World* tells the story of ten-year-old Ellen Montgomery, whose dying mother must send her to live with a mean aunt on a farm. Ellen is taken from home and placed in a harsh setting for which she is unprepared. Yet she soon meets Alice Humphreys and her brother John, who encourage her through various problems and adventures, teaching her how to grow into a woman and become a true Christian. Ellen's story follows the pattern identified by Nina Baym in her seminal study, *Woman's Fiction* (1978). Avoiding the label "sentimental," Baym explains the recurrent plot line of woman's fiction, in which a young girl, often orphaned, loses her normal supports but still manages to overcome hardship. In her essay "Reclaiming Sentimental Literature," Joanna Dobson also identifies the affectional bond as a central feature of sentimental fiction, with "separation" as the principle tragedy (267; 263-88). The importance of the affectional bond, along with the grief of separation, certainly characterizes Warner's novel.

The Wide, Wide World was one of the first run-away bestsellers, second only to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Baker 54) in the nineteenth century. And this was at a time when people from good homes, like Lucretia Rhinelander (Wharton's mother) and Warner herself, weren't always allowed to read novels. Warner's second novel, *Queechy* (1852), also met with success, even finding its way into the libraries of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and George Eliot. In fact, among young girls polled in 1886, Warner's novels were read more often than those of Eliot, Thackeray, and Charlotte Brontë (Salmon 528). All told, Warner wrote nearly thirty novels, many of which went into more than ten editions. Warner did not really profit from them, however, having signed away her rights for needed cash. She never regained her status within New York society. She never married. She lived with her sister on Constitution Island until her death in 1885, mending her own clothes, chopping her own wood, and holding Bible studies for cadets at the United States Military Academy across the river.

Critics praised Warner for her skill as a regionalist writer, capturing the landscape, dialect, and manners of the Hudson Valley.[2] Like the Hudson River School of painters, Warner depicted places along the Hudson in works such as *The Wide, Wide World*, *Queechy*, *The Hills of the Shatemuc* (1856), *Daisy* (1868),

and *Pine Needles* (1877). Warner also shares with some of these artists a tendency to use Biblical typology to locate a spiritual reality within a specifically American context. The hills along the Hudson River, for example, invoked the presence of God as seen in passages from the Bible, such as Psalm 121, quoted in *The Wide, Wide World* (443): "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the LORD, which made heaven and earth" (Ps. 121:1-2). In common with visual artists inspired by the same region, Warner portrayed the fulfillment of a Biblical type within the particularities of the Hudson River landscape.[3]

As a well-read woman, Edith Wharton couldn't help but know of Susan Warner. In fact, Wharton's satire occasionally targets Warner's writing, providing indirect confirmation of her familiarity with the earlier novelist's work. In the short story "Full Circle" (1909), Wharton titles the best-seller of a mediocre, verbose novelist *Diadems and Faggots*, a jab at Warner's *Sceptres and Crowns* (1874), and in "Expiation" (1904), she names another sentimental writer "Mrs. Fetherel," a diminishing of Warner's pen-name, Elizabeth Wetherell. In *The House of Mirth*, Wharton may satirize Warner through her pen-name again, when she writes: "The Wetheralls always went to church.…and Mr. and Mrs. Wetherall's circle was so large that God was included in their visiting list" (43).

Wharton's more detailed response to Warner begins in *The House of Mirth*, however, with Lady Cressida Raith, a houseguest of the Trenors. Lady Cressida embodies in compressed form all the traits of a Warner character: an unusual name, a love of botany, a connection to the aristocracy, a clergyman husband, and a life of mission work among the poor. No single Warner heroine has all of these traits, but the satire clearly targets the ideals distinctive to Warner's works.[4] *Queechy*, for example, has a religious heroine named Elfleda, who marries into the English aristocracy and also has an impressive knowledge of flora indigenous to New York State, marine plants in distant oceans, and more than twenty-three varieties of roses. The same qualities compressed into Wharton's portrait of Lady Cressida appear in such Warner novels as *The Old Helmet* (1863), *Diana* (1877), *My Desire* (1879), *The End of a Coil* (1880), *The Letter of Credit* (1881), and *Nobody* (1882). Wharton also shows her familiarity with this character type when she has Lady Cressida express surprise that the party will take an omnibus to church instead of walking across the park. After glancing at her companions' heels, however, Lady Cressida agrees to be driven. This glance at the others' impractical shoes, while not a direct allusion to Warner, aptly recreates a Warner-style point of view. A Warner narrative often contrasts a fresh, practical heroine with the various victims of wealth and fashion. True to Warner's independent and active

heroines, Lady Cressida won't wear fashions that hinder her freedom of movement or exertion. She's refined but not a priss. She walks about in the fresh air, Liberty silk and ethnological trinkets and all.

While everyone respects Lady Cressida's title, her interests are so alien to those of Lily's set that she becomes something of a nuisance. What can be done with a woman who has the right blood but chooses to live her life in such an idiosyncratic way? She's an aristocrat, but she is also, as Judy Trenor puts it, "a clergyman's wife, who wears Indian jewelry and botanizes!" (35). She thus presents a constant culture shock. She doesn't just wear *Indian* jewelry; she overturns the cultural expectations for how a relative of the Duchess of Beltshire should behave. She actually wants to go to church on Sunday morning. While touring the greenhouse, she actually takes an interest in the plants. When she decides to walk home from church, the others are forced to walk with her (53). She thus disrupts the smooth social machinery of the Bellomont set. Since it's impossible to eject her, Judy Trenor can only complain:

> But she is boring all the men horribly. And if she takes to distributing tracts, as I hear she does, it will be too depressing. The worst of it is that she would have been so useful at the right time. You know we have to have the Bishop once a year, and she would have given just the right tone to things. I always have horrid luck about the Bishop's visits" (36).

Through Lady Cressida, Wharton imagines what would happen if a Warner character would show up in New York society. Such a personage would look comic. Her name says it all, Lady Cressida Raith—archaic, spiritual, spooky, weird. Wharton's satire, however, is a double-edged sword. Lady Cressida's oddness highlights the impoverished values of Lily's set. Judy Trenor's complaint reveals a world where people don't care about God, just the social duty of entertaining a bishop; where people don't take an interest in learning about the natural world, just the pride of having greenhouses; and where people invite others to stay with them not because they like them but because they want to make use of them, or at least snatch them away from their social rivals. Originally, Judy invites Lady Cressida purely for the triumph of getting her away from the Van Osburghs.

Through Lady Cressida, Wharton considers the religious and cultural ideals of Warner's work. To focus on the moral and sentimental dimension, Wharton turns to Gerty Farish, who, perhaps like Warner, comes from the right class but is "fatally poor and dingy" (71). The name "Gerty" may come from the heroine, Gerty Flint, of Maria Cummins' *The Lamplighter* (1854), which scholars have identified as a direct descendent of *The Wide, Wide World*. Just as Gerty Farish is

a far more nuanced character than the eccentric Lady Cressida, Wharton seems to find more to take seriously in the moral and sentimental aspects of Warner's fiction than in its conceptions of religion and class.

Gerty Farish demonstrates the moral perspective central to a Warner narrative. It is not just that she won't gossip or cut a friend (175). She has a "theory of values" (205) in which virtue is better than money, and caring for others is better than self-seeking. In Gerty's world, as in Warner's, hardship leads to a moral awakening that transforms the individual, a dream Wharton describes as "renovation through adversity" (205). In *The Wide, Wide World*, Ellen's sufferings in the countryside lead her to look to a God beyond her local context. For many of Warner's characters, the awakening is often a religious conversion seen in a change of heart. Ellen, for example, recognizes the authenticity of her faith when she can see the "change" (352) that her heart, mind, and actions have undergone. In *The Old Helmet*, another character describes her conversion: "I was cold at heart to religion. I was not happy.… One night I sat up all night, and gave the whole night to thoughts of it.… And the dawn came into my heart. I cannot tell you how—I seemed to see everything at once. I saw what a heaven below it is to know the love of Christ" (576). In the Warner novel, wrongdoing comes from moral blindness, so once the eyes are opened the character finds renewal. Warner's characters show increasing concern for others, including those of another class or race.

Gerty has similar views. When Lily begins to visit the Girls' Club, "She [Gerty] supposed her beautiful friend to be actuated by the same motive as herself—that sharpening of moral vision which makes all human suffering so near and insistent that the other aspects of life fade into remoteness." As Wharton further explains: "Gerty lived by such simple formulas that she did not hesitate to class her friend's state with the emotional 'change of heart' to which her dealings with the poor had accustomed her; and she rejoiced in the thought that she had been the humble instrument of this renewal" (119-120). Wharton's description of Gerty echoes the language common to this religious sentimentalism, from the phrase "change of heart" highlighted in quotation marks to words like "humble instrument," indicating that the person was used by God and refuses to take credit for any good accomplished. This humility, as well as the rejoicing in being such an instrument, also appears in Warner's work. In *The Wide, Wide World*, for example, when Ellen shows how deeply she appreciates Alice, Alice is quick to shift the credit to God: "If I have done you any good, don't forget it was he brought me to you yesterday afternoon" (167). With Gerty, however, Wharton is not focusing on the religious aspect of inner change. She's focusing on the individual's altered moral horizons and her relationship to others. Warner's perspective includes the

idea that suffering leads to moral renewal and that moral awakening leads to sympathy and compassion for others. But Wharton describes these as "simple formulas," primitive, reductive ways of understanding the world. Whereas both Warner and Gerty believe in the universal applicability of that moral vision, Wharton distinguishes between Gerty's psychology and Lily's, which she describes as "incapable of such renewal" (119). Lily's eyes are opened to her faults, but what she sees does not change or redeem her character. It simply makes her afraid to sleep at night.

As part of its moral perspective, the Warner narrative often involves a test of character in which the protagonist must choose between a strong personal desire and what is morally right. In *Diana*, for example, the heroine must renounce a passionate love in order to remain faithful to her husband. She shows her heroism by making the right decision no matter how painful it is. In *The House of Mirth*, Wharton brings Gerty to a similar test. Gerty is in love with Selden but realizes that Selden loves Lily. She thus begins to hate Lily. But when Lily comes to Gerty in tears, confessing her debasement and asking if Selden would understand her situation and help her, Wharton writes: "[Gerty] knew the hour of her probation had come, and her poor heart beat wildly against its destiny. As a dark river sweeps by under a lightning flash, she saw her chance of happiness surge past under a flash of temptation" (132). Gerty could say "no," thus crushing Lily's hope and keeping her away from Selden. But Gerty speaks what she thinks is true. Her assessment of Selden isn't entirely accurate, but she believes it to be: "'Yes: I know him; he will help you,' she said" (132). And though Gerty still feels the pain of disappointment, she offers Lily the compassion and the warm, enfolding arms that Lily needs (118;133). This compassion is Gerty's dominant trait, part of the sentimental tradition she imports into the novel. She's full of heart and likes to show that she cares. When they were children, Lily rebuked Gerty for showing too much affection, but it's Gerty's tenderness, loyalty, and concern that makes her a comfort to Lily when all her other friends abandon her. Although Gerty doesn't have to work, she spends her time helping women of the lower classes. And when poor Miss Jane Silverton loses her money because of Ned's gambling, who does she go to for help—Gerty.

As Carrie Fisher puts it, "Gerty's a trump, and worth all the rest of us put together," but neither Carrie nor Lily wants to be so plain, dingy, and poor (181). Lily views Gerty as hopelessly unmarriageable and can't imagine how anyone of their class could succumb to such bad interior décor. Several times her thoughts on Gerty contain the adjective "irritating," and she seems to view Gerty as limited (71, 205): "Dear Gerty, how little imagination you good people have!" she

exclaims (176). Lily is convinced that Gerty could never really understand her true situation, that Gerty, by virtue of being Gerty, would be cognitively incapable of understanding it. Wharton, to be fair, sees more to Gerty than Lily does. Gerty is capable of perception and growth. She recognizes, for example, the naïvete of her simplistic view of Lily: "Gerty could smile now at her own early dream of her friend's renovation through adversity: she understood clearly enough that Lily was not of those to whom privation teaches the unimportance of what they have lost" (205).

Yet despite these concessions, Wharton never lets Gerty become the ideal in *The House of Mirth*. She is not recreating the Warner novel. As Wharton writes, "perhaps only a friendship like Gerty's could be proof against such an increasing strain. Gerty's friendship did indeed hold fast; yet Lily was beginning to avoid her also" (230). Wharton does not question the reality of Gerty's friendship or the sincerity of her values, but she shows how Gerty is simply inadequate to the needs of Lily's personality, which craves a high degree of splendor or cultural fineness. Whereas in Warner's novels, virtue coincides with beauty, refinement, insight, happiness, and true friendships, Wharton's novel denies that wholeness. Wharton presents Lily with a choice: "To be herself, or a Gerty Farish." Her fate is clear from the very beginning (23).

Ultimately, Lily must reject the life that Gerty has chosen: to live frugally, independently, and philanthropically. In rejecting Gerty, however, Lily also must forfeit the female independence, affectional community, and chance at rehabilitation that Gerty provides and which was the hallmark of sentimental fiction. Feminist critics have already explored these aspects of the sentimental tradition, some in direct connection to Warner. Tompkins, for example, writes of the strong communion between Alice, Ellen, and the elderly Mrs. Vawse, whose mountaintop house provides a space of female independence—material, emotional, and spiritual—in *The Wide, Wide World* (*Designs* 163-67). Gerty could help Lily live in way that would free her from the house of mirth. Yet while Lily does acknowledge that Gerty is "free" and that she is not, Lily knows that she cannot be a Gerty Farish (8). She wants the freedom and the friendship, but she has to have the splendor too. Although Wharton displaces Gerty from the central principles of *The House of Mirth*, something of her does rub off on Lily. Toward the end of the novel, Lily arrives at an excruciating test of character, in which she, like Gerty, makes the difficult but right decision: she repays her debt to Gus Trenor, even though she thereby impoverishes herself. Unfortunately, she ends up dead. Unlike the Warner orphan, Lily finds no help, no grace, no redemption.

Through Gerty Farish and Lady Cressida, Wharton reconsiders different

dimensions of Warner's ethos and narrative patterns. Through Gerty, Wharton acknowledges the strong affectional center of the sentimental tradition, which supports the moral vision of virtue over wealth, renewal through trials, and female independence. Yet she finds these virtues inadequate to the refinement and brutal complexity of turn-of-the-century New York society. Through Lady Cressida, Wharton notes the oddness of Warner's mixture of overt, evangelical Christianity, botany, aristocracy, and social work. Yet she also uses this satire to mock the social values that would construe Lady Cressida as odd. In *The House of Mirth*, Wharton is engaged in a multileveled dialogue with her predecessor Susan Warner and with the tradition Warner represented, a dialogue commensurate with the precision with which she worked out her own theory of fiction and her relation to other writers. By creating a space within her novel for Warner's character types and ideals, Wharton moves beyond the literature of a previous generation while maintains with it a respectful, though sometimes ironic, continuity.

Notes

1. Jane Tompkins calls it the "Ur-text of the nineteenth-century United States" (Afterword 585), and Nine Baym discusses it as one of the original patterns for woman's fiction. I believe that Warner doesn't quite fit into the category of sentimentalism, but Wharton would have understood her primarily as a sentimentalist. Wharton does not name Warner directly in her writings.
2. The Warner House Collection, housed at the Constitution Island Association at West Point, includes a scrapbook of such reviews, compiled by the Warner sisters along with copies of letters written to the Warners. For more recent remarks on Warner's depiction of particular landscapes, see Foster.
3. For a more complete discussion of Warner and typology, see Kim.
4. This satire is of a sophisticated order, since it aims at the deep, often implicit ideals in Warner's works, such as the linkage of social and spiritual nobility.

Works Cited

Baker, Mabel. *Light in the Morning.* New York: The Constitution Island Association Press, 1978.

Baym, Nina. *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America: 1820-1870.* Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1978.

Boydston, Jeanne. "'Grave, Endearing Traditions': Edith Wharton and the Domestic Novel." *Faith of a (Woman) Writer.* Ed. Alice Kessler-Harris and William McBrien. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1988. 31-40.

Cummins, Maria. *The Lamplighter.* Boston: J.P. Jewett and Company, 1854.

Dobson, Joanna. "Reclaiming Sentimental Literature." *American Literature* 69 (June 1991): 263-88.

Foster, Edward Halsey. *Susan and Anna Warner.* Boston: Twayne Publishers, [1978].

Hoeller, Hildegard. *Edith Wharton's Dialogue with Realism and Sentimental Fiction.*

Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000.

Kim, Sharon. "Puritan Realism: *The Wide, Wide World* and *Robinson Crusoe*." *American Literature* 75 (December 2003): 783-811.

Salmon, Edward G. "What Girls Read." *The Nineteenth Century* 20 (October, 1886): 5215-529.

Showalter, Elaine. "The Death of the Lady (Novelist): Wharton's *House of Mirth*." *The House of Mirth*. Ed. Elizabeth Ammons. New York: W.W. Norton, 1990. 357-72.

Tompkins, Jane. Afterword. *The Wide, Wide World*. By Susan Warner. New York: The Feminist Press, 1987.

-----. *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*. New York: Oxford UP, 1985.

Warner House Collection. Constitution Island Association, West Point, New York.

Warner, Anna. *Susan Warner*. New York: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1909.

Warner, Susan. *Daisy*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lipincott and Co., 1868.

-----. *Diana*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1877.

-----. *The End of a Coil*. New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1880.

-----. *The Hills of the Shatemuc*. New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1857.

-----. *The Letter of Credit*. New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1882.

-----. *My Desire*. New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1879.

-----. *Nobody*. Robert Carter and Brothers, 1883.

-----. *The Old Helmet*. London: Frederick Warne and Company, n.d..

-----. *Pine Needles*. Robert Carter and Brothers, 1877.

-----. *Queechy*. New York: George P. Putnam and Company, 1852

-----. *Septres and Crowns*. New York: R. Carter and Brothers, 1875.

-----. *The Wide, Wide World*. New York: The Feminist Press, 1987.

Wharton, Edith "Expiation." *Collected Stories 1891-1910*. Ed. Maureen Howard. Vol 1. New York: Library of America, 2001. 476-498.

-----. "Full Circle." *Collected Stories 1891-1910*. 758-781.

-----. *The House of Mirth*. Ed. Elizabeth Ammons. New York: W.W. Norton, 1990.