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The Post-World War I Civilization as a "House on Fire" Modernity, Womanhood and Incest in Edith Wharton's *The Mother's Recompense*

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Abstract

Although Edith Wharton did not conceptualize her literary production as modernist, her work partakes of some of the ideas most commonly associated to this movement, among which is the traumatic impact of World War I. As was typical of her methodology, she employed an architectural metaphor to describe the psychological state associated with wartime and post-war civilization – that of a "house on fire". In a world where societies are like "houses on fire", previously repressed desires and hidden secrets get exposed: this is the case of the incest theme, which characterizes *The Mother's Recompense*. The prominent role ascribed to this topic in the novel creates the opportunity to address and represent the consequences of the crisis engendered by the crumbling of traditional values and the subsequent, at times desperate, search for stability and new values that marked the post-war era.

Keywords: Edith Wharton, Gender Equality, Incest, *The Mother's Recompense*, World War I

The present essay explores Edith Wharton's construal of the historical, sociological and ethical fracture caused by the Great War, due to which, as Willa Cather famously put it in the preface to her collection of essays *Not Under Forty*, "the world broke in two […]" (1970, v). It is, in fact, my contention that some of the works Wharton composed in the late 1910s and in the 1920s constitute an attempt to capture and portray the effects of the conflict that traumatically ushered the world into the modern era. In particular, she focused on the crisis engendered by the gradual disintegration of those beliefs and principles that had been typical of the restrained and inflexibly ordained nineteenth-century society. In that respect, a case in point is her novel *The Mother's Recompense*, published in 1925, in which Wharton represented

the dramatic changes in gender and family relationships that characterized the progression of modernity – with special reference to the shifting construction of the notion of womanhood – by tackling a traditionally culturally-tabooed subject such as incest.

1. Edith Wharton and Modernism

Edith Wharton has long been the object of a critical controversy regarding her position within the tradition of American letters. As Michele S. Ware duly asserts, she "simply doesn't fit into any category in a satisfactory way, and the broad range of her writing in a number of genres makes classification a perilous activity" (2004, 17). The crux of the matter is that, as Franca Balestra notes – partially quoting the title of Wharton's 1934 autobiography – "although she published most of her work in the twentieth century, she is often perceived as oriented towards the nineteenth century, as 'looking backward' " (2012, 10). Accordingly, while some scholars see her as a "resolutely traditional" (Lewis 1975, ix) nineteenth-century figure (Delbanco 1993, 31) who, in Alfred Kazin's harsh terms, "could do no other" (1982, 77), more recent contributions have taken a completely different direction, by discussing "not if, but to what degree, her work exhibits the characteristics of Modernism" (Ware 2004, 18). Feminist criticism has, in fact, properly captured the modernity of Wharton's oeuvre by calling attention, among other aspects, to her portrayal of "issues of gender, desire and creativity" (Beer and Horner 2009, 69), above all to "her critique of the commodification and exploitation of women at the turn of the century" (Balestra 2012, 10) – what Elizabeth Ammons calls, in stronger terms, the "immoral and wasteful oppression of women" (1980, 184). It should, therefore, come as no surprise that, for instance, Carol Singley views Wharton as "a modernist innovator in her own right" (1998, 7), with other critics confirming this opinion (Miller Hadley 1993, 4; Ware 2004, 18; Toth 2016, 227) by emphasizing what they believe to be the "subversive" (Whitehead 2012, 25) tendencies of her narrative style.

As for Wharton herself, it is worth noting that she did not conceptualize her literary production as modernist. On the contrary, she seemed to have a rather negative opinion on the phenomenon, especially on the formal experimentation that characterized high Modernism. First of all, she viewed the movement as a disruptive force, the result of a "distrust of technique and the fear of being unoriginal […]", which, in her opinion, led to "pure anarchy in fiction" (Wharton 1925b, 14). Secondly, she had particularly strong reservations on some of the most representative achievements of the era, especially *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*, as she made clear in a letter to Bernard Berenson, in which she famously defined Joyce's masterpiece "a turgid welter of pornography (the rudest schoolboy kind) & unformed and unimportant drivel" and concluded that "the same applies to Eliot" (Wolff 1977, 372). Some scholars astutely saw her diffidence (Wegener 1999, 128) as a "defensive posture" dictated by the "awareness of her own waning popularity and power in the literary marketplace" (Ware 2004, 18) as opposed to other writers' growing recognition on the international cultural panorama. As Richard W.B. Lewis, in fact, states in his biography of Edith Wharton, in the 1920s the artist reflected on

> her own relations, as a woman in her sixties who had come to literary fruition twenty years before, with the younger writers who were appearing on the postwar scene to varying acclaim. Writing to the twenty-six-year-old William Gherardie, the twenty-nine-year-old Scott Fitzgerald, the thirty-five-year-old Sinclair Lewis, what she stressed in each case was her assumption of an unbridgeable gap between herself and them and her joy at discovering that the distance could be overcome. (1975, 465)

With all this in mind, it is plausible to affirm that, although Wharton did not openly and fully embrace Modernism, her work – especially in the late years of her career – does show an

attempt to "establish some sort of contact with the American authors of the new generation and their new ways of doing things" (Lewis 1975, 465). In so doing, it addresses some of the themes most commonly associated to the movement, one of which is, I argue, the shocking impact of World War I on the individual and society.

2. The Post-bellum Civilization as a "House on Fire"

As emerges from her oeuvre, Edith Wharton conceived of the Great war as a devastating historical rift. Writing in retrospective, in her memoir *A Backward Glance*, she, in fact, described the "last years of peace" as a "bough so soon to be broken" (1934, 320), an expression which emphasized her perception of the conflict as a fracture in the history of civilization. This idea finds further confirmation in the concluding chapters of said book, entitled respectively "The War" and "And After" (321, 336, 361), the juxtaposition of which conveys the impression of an irreparable chasm that separated the two eras.

As Julie Olin-Ammentorp effectively put it, the years of the war "shaped Wharton's own particular creative imagination" (2004, 5), thus marking a turning point also in her fictional production. In 1919, she wrote a letter to Charles Scribner in which she apologized for failing to complete a novel titled *Literature*, which she had begun before the war:

> in the first relief from war anxieties I thought it might be possible to shake off the question which is tormenting all novelists at present: 'Did the adventures related in this book happen before the war or did it happen since?' with the resulting difficulty that, if it happened before the war, I seem to have forgotten how people felt and what their point of view was. (Lewis and Lewis 1988, 425-26)

As was typical of her methodology, which was characterized by an "architectural imagination"[1] (Benert 2007, 19) stimulated by her experiences in Europe as a little girl and by her readings of John Ruskin and James Fergusson (Wharton 1987, 91), Wharton perceived the war in concrete terms, as a "place, a locus of systematic physical destruction" (Benert 2007, 176). In this light, it comes as no surprise that she employed an architectural metaphor to express what she believed to be the consequences of the conflict:

> The world since 1914 has been like a house on fire. All the lodgers are on the stairs, in dishabille. Their doors are swinging wide, and one gets […] revelations of their habits […] that a life-time of ordinary intercourse would not offer. Superficial differences vanish, and so (how much oftener) do superficial resemblances; while deep unsuspected similarities and disagreements, deep common attractions and repulsions, declare themselves. (Wharton 1997, xvii-xviii)

She, therefore, set out to represent them by focusing less on the military developments at the battlefront than on "the separate terrors, anguishes, uprootings and rendings apart involved in the destruction of […] human communities" (Wharton 1918, 58). As she, in fact, wrote in 1915,

> 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 monster in scenes to which the mind has always turned for rest. (200)

[1] For a thorough analysis of the conjunction of literature and architecture in Edith Wharton's opus, and particularly her custom of relating novelistic form to architectural design, see Stephenson 2010.

3. The Mother's Recompense *and (perceived) incest*

In a post-war world where societies end up like "houses on fire", previously repressed impulses, desires, and hidden secrets eventually come to light, often dramatically disrupting the *status quo.* This phenomenon is portrayed in several of Wharton's writings from during and after the war, which "[…] vividly portray the plight of rootless and ephemeral people […], cut adrift from their moral moorings, ignorant of the social connections that enrich life, falling back finally on the frantic, meaningless pleasures of the moment" (Tuttleton 1972, 568). Interestingly, some of these works are also characterized by a marked interest in a traditionally culturally-tabooed subject such as that of incest. The most striking example is the posthumous fragment entitled "Beatrice Palmato" – a series of notes for a story that Wharton started writing in the early 1920s and left unfinished – which focused, in very explicit terms, on a case of incest between a father and his only daughter. As far as her published work is concerned, it is worth to mention *Summer*, a novel completed in 1917, as the author, herself, explained, "amid a thousand interruptions, and while the rest of my being was steeped in the tragic realities of war" (Wharton 1987, 356). The story centers around a disadvantaged young woman's last-resort choice to marry her stepfather in order to spare her unborn illegitimate child a life of poverty and sacrifice. With respect to the subject in question, though, her most interesting and sophisticated achievement is, in my opinion, *The Mother's Recompense* (1925).

The protagonist, an attractive middle-aged divorcee named Kate Clephane, finds out that her past lover, a much younger man for whom she still has feelings, is also her daughter's present fiancé – a triangle that she conceptualizes, as we will see, as an "incestuous horror" that will dramatically alter the course of her life. Although the novel was published to great commercial success in April 1925 (Lewis 1975, 466), the reception deeply disappointed the author, who vented her feelings in a letter written to her old friend Mrs. Chanler on June 9 of the same year:

> Thank you ever so fondly for taking the trouble to tell me why you like my book. Your liking it would be a great joy, but to know why is a subtle consolation for densities of incomprehension which were really beginning to discourage me. No one else has noticed 'desolation is a delicate thing' or understood that the key is there. The title causes great perplexity, but several reviewers think it means that the mother was 'recompensed' by the 'love of an honest man'. One enthusiast thinks it has lifted me to the same height as Galsworthy & another that I am now equal to Scott Fitzgerald. And the Saturday Review (American) critic says I have missed my chance, because the book 'ought to have ended tragically'– *ought to!* – You will wonder that the priestess of the Life of Reason should take things to heart; & I wonder too. I never have minded before; but as my work reaches its close, I feel so sure that it is either nothing, or far more than they knew… And I wonder, a little desolately, which? (Auchincloss 1991, 58)

While, to Wharton's frustration, the coeval critics mainly misinterpreted the denouement, failing to address the transgressive potential at the heart of the novel, reviewers writing on newspapers did focus on the core themes, by emphasizing, for example, "the horrible thing impending" in the story, the "revoltingly incestuous" love triangle, and the mother's "sexual jealousy" toward her ex-lover and her daughter (Beer and Horner 2009, 73-74). Yet, I contend, what the contemporary critics failed to see, prompting Wharton to write that "reading most reviews of her book" was like "watching somebody in boxing gloves trying to dissect a flower" (74), is how the prominent role ascribed to the topic of incest in the novel creates the opportunity to address and represent the consequences, on individuals and institutions, of the crisis engendered by the progressive crumbling of traditional values and the subsequent, at times desperate, search for "stable structures of meaning" amid the "unsettling cultural change"

(Singley 2003, 9) that marked the postwar era. This aspect, I argue, has been overlooked also in more recent criticism, which has mostly focused on the novel's technical (Joslin 2002; Balestra 2012) and thematic (Raphael 1988; Heller 1997; Singley 2003) representation of womanhood, with a focus on the mother/daughter relationship (Tintner 1980; Hirsch 1989; Gavioli 1994; Killoran 1996 e Hoeller 2000).

4. The Victorian World and the Post-bellum One: Sentimentalism vs. Modernism

It is my opinion that Wharton expresses what she deems to be a deep ethics gap between the Victorian world and the post-bellum one first of all indirectly, through the epigram at the beginning of the novel, which refers to Grace Aguilar's 1855 best-seller *The Mother's Recompense*: "My excuses are due to the decorous shade of Grace Aguilar, loved of our grandmothers, for deliberately appropriating, and applying to uses so different, the title of one of the most admired of her tales. E.W." (Wharton 1925a, n.p.). In that respect, it is important to point out that Wharton used to put older types of sentimental narratives to new and unprecedented uses (Beer and Horner 2009, 32) in order to suit her own narrative purposes. In this particular case, not only does she deliberately inscribe "the narrative within an established, popular literary tradition", but she also "ironically undermines it" (Gavioli 1994, 69) in order to emphasize the progressive dissolution of the nineteenth-century *status quo*.

Despite having been written by a British author, Aguilar's text "fits aesthetically and ideologically into the American tradition of sentimental fiction in the nineteenth century" (Hoeller 2000, 177). Domestic and infused with theological zeal, it centers on the portrait of an "ideal" mother, Mrs. Hamilton, the "epitome of the 'angel in the house' " (Killoran 1996, 94) promoted by Coventry Patmore's immensely popular narrative poem. In her symbolic capacity as the household "deputy of an evangelical God" (Valman 2007, 102), the righteous lady patiently guides her three daughters through an arduous material and moral journey to spiritual and religious maturity. In the case of her firstborn, the beautiful and vivacious Catherine, the aforementioned existential path is typical of the "classically sentimental seduction plot" (Hoeller 2000, 78), i.e. fraught with worldly temptations and snares, among which is the young woman's quasi-elopement with a secretly married libertine. This is no less than a *via crucis* for the saintly Mrs. Hamilton, an ordeal which eventually culminates with Catherine's repentance and morally unscathed return to the familial fold. In that respect, the reference to a motherly recompense mentioned in the title takes on its full significance in the final part of the novel, as Mrs. Hamilton's ever exemplary moral conduct is indeed rewarded with a large brood of grandchildren that ensures the proverbial happy ending:

> Do you not think to see my children, as I do now around me, walking in that path which alone can lead to eternal life, and leading their offspring with them, bringing up so tenderly, so fondly their children as heirs of immortality, and yet lavishing on me, as on their father, the love and duty of former years? Is not this a precious recompense for all which for them I may have done or borne? (Aguilar 1855, 498)

Where the book's closure is concerned, it is worth to note that, as Hoeller astutely observes, Aguilar's "plot defies all probability in order to construct a large family and to celebrate domesticity […]. Indeed", concludes Hoeller, "the narrative is predominantly involved in such a construction so that the book ends in an excess of incestuous overdetermination". The characters "call each other more than sisters and more than brothers, and they fall in love with 'almost sisters' or 'almost brothers' " (2000, 179).

In nineteenth-century sentimental novels, nearly incestuous situations such as these are less the exception than the rule (Habegger 1985, 235): as Hendler, in fact, maintains after examining a wide array of works, ranging from the 1850 groundbreaking best-seller by Susan Warner *The Wide, Wide World* to Maria Susanna Cummins' 1854 *The Lamplighter*, all the way to Louisa May Alcott's 1872 novel entitled *Work*, "collapsing the voluntary affinities of sympathy with the compulsory ties of kinship, the recombinant families that resolve the narratives carry within them the internal limit of incest" (1991, 689). As Hoeller aptly explains, what makes possible "a collapsing of such elements" in the genre is "sentimentality's repression of the physical as different from the emotionally passionate" (2000, 34). In Aguilar's book, concludes Hoeller, "the quasi-incestuous relations" fulfill the purpose of bringing "the community more tightly together" and give rise to a "functioning, fertile moral economy in which everyone is amply recompensed" (*ibidem*).

As for Wharton's *The Mother's Recompense,* to say that it puts Aguilar's title "to uses so different" (Wharton 1925a, n.p.) is, I argue, a witty understatement to say the least. The novel focuses, in fact, on the "ironic antithesis" (Valman 2007, 102-03) of the paragon of sentimental motherhood evoked by the British writer: the protagonist, Kate Clephane is, by nineteenth-century standards, an unnatural mother who, in her early twenties, finding herself unable to bear the "the prison of her marriage" (Wharton 1925a, 73) in the high society of the Old New York, abandoned her husband and young daughter to run away to Europe with tycoon Hylton Davies:

> She had left Anne when Anne was a baby of three; left her with a dreadful pang, a rending of the inmost fibres, and yet a sense of unutterable relief, because to do so was to escape from the oppression of her married life, the thick atmosphere of self-approval and unperceivingness which emanated from John Clephane like coal-gas from a leaking furnace. (16)

After ending her two-year long affair with Davies, Mrs. Clephane repeatedly tried to get custody of her child, but her husband's powerful family strictly forbade any contact on the grounds of the woman's allegedly immoral behavior. Having been forced to definitively give up her daughter, Kate permanently settled overseas with the only company of her maid. At thirty-nine, she fell deeply in love with Chris Fenno, a fellow expatriate fourteen years her junior. A self-styled writer with a "restless mind and capricious fancy" (55), Fenno cynically justified his dissolute life of gambling, drinking and philandering with the claim that "an artist had to have excitement" (19). The relationship with him, who "loved her and waked her" (*ibidem*), turned out to be "the central fact" of Kate's "experience" (53) and infused her with new life:

> For the first time, when she met him, her soul's lungs seemed full of air. Life still dated for her from that day […] he had yet given her more than he could take away. At thirty-nine her real self had been born; without him she would never have had a self […] And yet, at what cost she had bought it! […] He had caught her up into an air she had never breathed before. (18-19)

Yet, at the beginning of the Great War, Chris, who had initially proclaimed the "duty" of " 'artists' or 'thinkers' to ignore the barbarian commotion", "mysteriously" changed his "attitude" on the grounds that "after all a fellow couldn't stand aside when all his friends and the chaps of his own age were getting killed […]" (55). Whatever the real reason for his change of mind, which Kate suspected was his intention to leave her, Fenno went on to enlist in the armed forces and disappeared from her life. The separation "inflicted on her the bitterest pain she had ever suffered" (18).

After many lonely years on the Riviera, in 1925 Mrs. Clephane receives a telegram from her daughter – now a woman of 21 – who, having lost her father and her paternal grandmother, invites her to come back to New York. Kate readily accepts the offer and returns to a post-bellum nation in the full swing of the Jazz Age. Still riddled with guilt for having left her then three-year-old child to pursue freedom and personal happiness, she finds out, to her great surprise, that World War I and the advent of modernity have greatly softened the upper-classes' traditional views on morality. What is particularly shocking to her as a woman who, as Wharton herself put it, still "belongs to the day when scruples existed" (Lewis and Lewis 1988, 480), is the extent of the Clephane clan's tolerance, especially in the case of her once famously intransigent sister-in-law Enid Drover and her audacious daughter Lilla. Though "after eighteen years" Enid seems "alarmingly the same – pursed-up lips, pure vocabulary, and all", it turns out that she has modernized her moral standards to the point that "she could sit beaming maternally across the table" at her flapper daughter, "that impudent stripped version of herself with dyed hair, dyed lashes, drugged eyes, and unintelligible dialect" (Wharton 1925a, 64). In this light, it is no wonder that an analogously broad-minded attitude is reserved to Kate as the proverbial "prodigal mother". The members of her family and social circle, in fact, seem oblivious to her tumultuous past: as far as they are concerned, "Anne's mother" was "born again […] on the gang plank […] that […] brought her home" and, in this capacity, she is fully rehabilitated, so much so that the whole clan is "delighted" (71) to welcome her back. The implication of this phenomenon is, I argue, that Mrs. Clephane's identity is now solely defined by motherhood – precisely one of the roles from which she had felt the irresistible urge to escape two decades before. As a consequence, while her previously mentioned "rebirth" with Fenno marked the awakening of her sexuality, this one entails exactly the opposite, i.e. the repression of her most intimate womanly desires and needs in favor of the restrained and asexualized quality traditionally ascribed to the mother figure.

Initially, Kate genuinely believes that she can effortlessly comply with the requirements of her new position in society, and repress her individuality to immerse herself "in the blessed anonymity of motherhood" (81). Indeed, she deludes herself that, at the first encounter with Anne after twenty years, "her own past" has "fallen from her at the girl's embrace", thus sparking "an instant understanding on the part of each" (193). Yielding to the aching desire of her "starved and world-worn soul" (87) – a soul, I contend, still suffering from the affective void left by Chris years before – Kate lets her attachment to her newly found daughter escalate to a "morbid intensity" (103). As she settles into her new life, she, in fact, starts entertaining the fantasy of a symbiotic dyadic mother-daughter relationship, as if "they were two parts of some delicate instrument which fitted together as perfectly as if they have never been disjoined – as if Anne were that other half of her life, the half she had dreamed of and never lived" (75-76).

Kate's illusion of blissful motherhood finds a "psychic metaphor" (Killoran 1996, 198) in architectural terms – more precisely, in the family mansion on Fifth Avenue, which stands as "a museum of the past" (Wharton 1925a, 80) in pleasant contrast with the rest of "Babylonian New York" (36):

> Incongruously enough – in that fluid city, where the stoutest buildings seemed like atoms forever shaken into new patterns by the rumble of Undergrounds and Elevateds – the house was the very one which had once been Kate's, the home to which, four-and-twenty years earlier, she had been brought as a bride. (39-40)

Yet, as announced by the epigraph "Desolation is a delicate thing", a quote from Percy Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, Kate's happiness is destined to be short-lived. In Shelley's terms, "desolation" is conceived as "the potential turning point that can wreck an existence", and is

therefore synonymous with "disappointment in the classical sense, […] the frustration of hope, ambition and desire" (Quinney 1999, 75). Wharton's reference can be further explained with the British poet's assertion that "incest is very poetical", which is also the principle on which he founded his 1819 tragedy *The Cenci* (Erlich 1992, 146). In this light, it should come as no surprise that the rest of the story is symbolically anticipated by Kate's rediscovery, in the very home that seems so welcoming to her after her long absence, of an old family piece, a copy of Guido Reni's famous portrait of Beatrice Cenci in the guise of a Sybil. The Italian noblewoman, after enduring incest at the hands of her father, was tried and executed for his murder in 1599, at only 22:

> There hung the same red-eyed Beatrice Cenci above the double bed. John Clephane's parents had travelled in the days when people still brought home copies of the Old Masters; and a mixture of thrift and filial piety had caused John Clephane to preserve their collection in the obscurer corners of his house. Kate smiled at the presiding genius selected to guard the slumbers of married visitors […]. (Wharton 1925a, 45)

As Louise K. Barnett aptly puts it, "Kate smiles patronizingly at John Clephane's ignorance of Beatrice Cenci, but her own lack of self-knowledge has more serious consequences than his lapse of taste" (1980, 183). It will not, in fact, be long before she finds out, to her uttermost shock, that Anne has gotten engaged to none other than Chris Fenno – now a highly-regarded war veteran – whom she met some time before, after he was "invalided home" (Wharton 1925a, 131). In that respect, let's consider the novel's climactic scene:

> The young man's arms were around the girl, her cheek was against his. […] They were looking at the dress; but the curves of their lips, hardly detached, were like those of a fruit that had burst apart of its own ripeness. Kate Clephane stood behind them like a ghost. It made her feel like a ghost to be so invisible and inaudible. Then a furious flame of life rushed through her; in every cell of her body she felt that same embrace, felt the very texture of her lover's cheek against her own, burned with the heat of his palm as it clasped Anne's chin to press her closer. 'Oh, not that – not that – not that!' […] A dark fermentation boiled up into her brain; […] Jealous? Was she jealous of her daughter? Was she physically jealous? Was that the real secret of her repugnance, her instinctive revulsion? Was that why she had felt from the first as if some incestuous horror hung between them? (278-79)

Kate Clephane's irrational construal as an "incestuous horror" (279) of a very unfortunate but certainly not unprecedented occurrence in the era of "the new tolerance, […] a millennium where the lamb of pleasure lay down with the lion of propriety" (62-63) – reveals the magnitude of her shock and sense of loss. First of all, what emerges from the scene is that her innermost self is suffering the restrictions imposed by the socio-familial milieu. Lurking behind the pretense of the restrained and selfless mother is, in fact, her still devouring sexual desire for her former lover and prospective son-in-law, a repressed longing that violently bursts to her consciousness upon seeing the couple together for the first time. This epiphany sets Kate's inner world on fire, threatening the fragile foundations of her "new life" (86) in the apparent safe haven of motherhood. Indeed, the circumstances confirm her status as the polar opposite of Aguilar's protagonist. While Mrs. Hamilton is depicted as an "angel in the house", the heart and soul of the family, Mrs. Clephane is cleverly portrayed as a "ghost" in the house, an "invisible" and "inaudible" (278) figure, whose roles in life – those of a love partner and a mother – conflate and eventually implode under the pressure of perceived incest.

The extent of Kate's reaction also exposes the depth of her residual attachment to Chris, by revealing that she probably still views him in terms of a spousal figure. In so doing, she considers the relationship between him and her own daughter as an intolerably "incestuous act" (Tintner 1980, 150). This dynamic finds confirmation in a later scene, in which becomes

evident that, in Kate's confused and somewhat traumatized mind, past and present overlap to the point that the image of her ex-husband, Anne's father, has entirely been replaced by that of Chris Fenno: "Nothing was changed […]. Now, as then, a man's hat and stick lay on the hall table; on that other day they had been John Clephane's, now they were Chris Fenno's. That was the only difference" (Wharton 1925a, 279-80).

As a consequence, the situation figuratively sends up in flames also Kate's impression of the family's ancestral mansion, thus turning what she had initially perceived as the bastion of her illusorily blissful "new life" (86) into a locus of disturbing ambiguity. As Mrs. Clephane is driven home late one night, in fact,

> […] she seemed to be reliving all her former anguished returns there, real or imaginary, from the days when she had said to herself: 'Shall I never escape?' to those others when, from far off, she had dreamed of the hated threshold, and yearned for it, and thought: 'Shall I never get back?'. (177)

Indeed, Kate finds out that "every gesture, every act, denoting intimacy with that house, or the air of permanence in her relation to it, would also have been impossible" (218). Through Kate's agony, I contend, Wharton captures the dissolution of one of the main cultural pillars of the nineteenth-century civilization, a traditional value such as that of the home, which, in the post-war era, ceases to be a safe haven against the dangers of the public sphere. Portrayed at the Clephane dinner table in the company of many guests, Kate, in fact, is overwhelmed by "the feeling of sitting in a railway station, waiting for a train to come in" (*ibidem*).

Tormented by the painful "psychological ghost" (Killoran 1996, 97) of incest, Kate tries to persuade Chris to break the engagement. She, in fact, deludes herself that "he would understand that in the end he would have to give up Anne because she herself would never do so" (Wharton 1925a, 244). Yet, their discussions and negotiations have the only effect of reopening her old wounds, leaving her emotionally exhausted. It soon becomes evident, in fact, that she cannot even think about Fenno as a potential son-in-law without recalling his previous role as a lover: "Chris Fenno was a young man" – she reflects – "she was old enough to be, if not his mother, at least his mother-in-law. What had she ever hoped or expected to be to him but a passing incident, a pleasant memory?" (275). In this light, it is no wonder that her repeated entreaties with him invariably overlap with their past conversations as a couple:

> She stretched out her hand as if to catch him back. 'Chris – no, stay! You can't! You can't! You know you can't!' He stood leaning against the chimney-piece, his arms crossed, his head a little bent and thrust forward, in the attitude of sullen obstinacy that she knew so well. And all at once in her own cry she heard the echo of other cries, other entreaties. She saw herself in another scene, stretching her arms to him in the same desperate entreaty, with the same sense of her inability to move him, even to reach him. Her tears overflowed and ran down. (222)

In a painful replica of what happened years before, Kate finds herself powerless against Fenno's steel resolve. First of all, he is confident that she would never have the courage to jeopardize her burgeoning rapport with Anne by telling her the truth. Secondly, thanks to his honored service in the Great War – for which he received "the Legion of Honour and the D.S.M. […]" (132) – he has been welcomed with open arms into the Clephane family, which believes him to be a noble hero and, in so doing, has turned a deaf ear at Kate's reservations on his character. Consequently, despite her pleas and threats, he goes through with his plans. Chris and Anne set the date and start preparations for an imminent winter wedding.

In the meantime, Mrs. Clephane's highly idealized relationship with her daughter is put to the test of reality. When Anne invites her to visit the Horace Maclew Library together,

Kate claims to be busy in order to avoid Chris, who works as Maclew's private secretary. To her mother's courteous but firm refusal, Anne nonchalantly replies: "Of course you must do exactly as you please. That's the foundation of our agreement, isn't it?" (139). Her reference to "an agreement" tellingly points to her perception of Kate not as a mother in the traditional sense of the word – a role model and a beacon to her children such as, for instance, Aguilar's Mrs. Hamilton – but, more in line with the modernity of the era, as a friend and companion, in her terms one of "the two most perfect pals that ever were" (*ibidem*). Indeed, Kate's naïf illusions of a symbiotic union with Anne are definitively dispelled when the latter gets wind of her mother's interference in her engagement. The young woman's vehement reaction, which indirectly drags up Kate's past desertion, reveals the depth of her childhood wound:

> 'You don't know me; you don't understand me. What right have you to interfere with my happiness? […] It was my own fault to imagine that we could ever live together as mother and daughter. A relation like that can't be improvised in a day'. (202)

Notably, in a later confrontation, Anne gets dangerously close to guessing her mother's hidden motives: " 'You don't hate him? But then you're in love with him – you're in love with him, and I've known it all along!' " (285). In this case, it is only Mrs. Clephane's power of dissimulation – an ability she has been honing to perfection since her recent repositioning in the role of "Anne's mother" – that averts a disastrous disclosure.

Finding herself at loss in a milieu she perceives as a "mad world beyond the abyss" (254), Kate begins a desperate search for a moral compass. In so doing, she turns to Dr. Arklow – the Rector who is set to celebrate the wedding – for advice. His initial reaction to her story – which she pretends belongs to a third party – is one of shock and disgust, to the point that, speaking "with the firmness of a priest", he brands the situation as "an abomination" (270). Yet, upon further reflection, "the man" takes over, eventually conceding that, at times, "adjustments" might be necessary "in the balance of evil". In more explicit terms, he concludes that, if the mother "has the courage to keep silent – always", she might spare her daughter what he calls the "sterile pain" of the bitter truth (265-66).

After much painful consideration, Kate eventually vows to never reveal her secret, because "to destroy Anne's happiness seemed an act of murderous cruelty" (274). Initially, she even toys with the idea to

> accept […] Anne's marriage, […] cease her inward struggle against it, and try to be in reality what she was already pretending to be: the acquiescent, approving mother… After all, why not? Legally, technically, there was nothing wrong, nothing socially punishable, in the case. (275)

Yet, on the morning of the wedding, she realizes that "all the excuses, accommodations, mitigations, mufflings, disguisings, had dropped away from the bare fact that her lover was going to marry her daughter […]" (303). Painfully aware of her inability to accept the union between Anne and the man she still perceives as her lover, Kate comes to the conclusion that, by remaining at the family home in New York, she is "forfeiting" her "last shred of self-respect" (205). Eventually, she resolves to leave her new life behind. After turning down a marriage proposal from her longtime friend and Anne's former guardian Fred Landers, she returns to her old life in Europe, once again with the only company of her maid.

Conclusion

It is my contention that *The Mother's Recompense* aptly captures the rupture caused by the First World War, especially the crisis of values that followed the dissolution of a rigidly structured milieu such as that of the nineteenth century. In the strictly regulated and asexualized Victorian universe portrayed in Grace Aguilar's book, the aforementioned quasi-incestuous relations represented a cohesive factor aimed at reinforcing family ties. On the contrary, in Wharton's post-bellum fictional universe, where, on the one hand, families are "too lost" and "too distant […] to provide any actual connective tissue" (Benert 2007, 208) and, on the other hand, the deepest and darkest desires are no longer repressed, "tribe and taboo, social strength and stricture have either disappeared entirely or become internalized into a private code that no one but the protagonist knows about" (206). As a consequence, in Wharton's *The Mother's Recompense,* the danger of incest, though present only in the main character's subconscious, releases its full "transgressive force" (Cantor 2010, 143), eventually separating the family and leaving the mother "homeless" (Wharton 1925a, 204) again. What could have partly restored the typical nineteenth-century social order would have been Kate's repositioning under the new and certainly highly regarded identity of Mrs. Fred Landers. Yet, in this "altered" (54) postwar world, to comply with the rules "imposed by the institution of motherhood as fashioned by patriarchy" (Gavioli 1994, 77) is no longer the only viable option. Kate, in fact, bravely takes the proverbial "road less traveled" and for her that makes all the difference:

> Nothing on earth would ever again help her – help to blot out the old horrors and the new loneliness – as much as the fact of being able to take her stand on that resolve, of being able to say to herself, whenever she began to drift toward new uncertainties and fresh concessions, that once at least she had stood fast, shutting away in a little space of peace and light the best thing that had ever happened to her. (Wharton 1925a, 342)

In so doing, Kate deliberately chooses her "recompense", which I believe is a blend of self-respect and peace of mind. She refuses to keep up the pretense of "domestic, sentimental motherhood" (Hoeller 2000, 195), preferring, instead, to remain faithful to her own sense of self, on the one hand by treasuring the memory of her love for Chris – which she still believes to be "the best thing that had ever happened to her" (Wharton 1925a, 342) – while, at the same time, making up for the past by giving her daughter a chance at happiness.

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