"Teaching Edith Wharton's Summer: Gender, Choice, and Consequence"
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Abstract: The essay discusses teaching the novel to undergraduates, with an emphasis on gender theory, through a range of theoretical frameworks, including psychology, historical context, and social class. The essay provides suggested secondary source readings to accompany the novel, as well as the ways in which the writer uses those readings to illuminate specific points and tie the different approaches into a broad gender reading. Student thesis statements are included to illustrate the ways in which they have reacted to this pedagogical approach. Sample questions as well as a diagram illustrating Kane's "garden of forked paths" are attached in an appendix.

Keywords: Edith Wharton, Summer Novel, Gender in Literature, Courtship in Literature, Guardians in Literature, Social Class in Literature, Pregnancy in Literature, Novels of American Realism, Abortion in Literature, Small Towns in Literature.

I teach Edith Wharton's 1917 short novel Summer regularly, both in upper-level courses like ENG 4790: Modern American Literature, 1914-1960 (a 400 level course in other systems), and in our ENG 3000: Approaches to Literary Study (a 300 level course in other systems), both classes at a regional comprehensive university. Because my university uses a rental-text system and emphasizes keeping purchasing costs low for students, I usually use the Dover edition of the novel, the most affordable of the paperback versions. In each section, students complete daily reading quizzes, which encourages students to keep up with the reading and rewards them for doing so, a midterm and final exam that includes the novel's key characters, plot events, and major themes, and at least one research paper, including secondary sources. I emphasize a gender and cultural theory approach, drawing upon a range of those secondary sources.

The novel follows Charity Royall, a girl taken from very poor origins into the decaying middle-class family of Mr. Royall, a widower whom the novel carefully notes "was her guardian, [but who] had not legally adopted her" (Wharton 9). Charity feels trapped in the small and stultifying town of North Dormer, before falling in love and sleeping with visiting young architect Lucius Harney. Pregnant by him, although without his knowledge, he ultimately leaves her for a girl of higher social class. She is simultaneously pursued by her guardian, Mr. Royall, who wishes to marry her. As one might guess from this summary, the novel's strongly romantic and ethical conflicts, heightened by its issues of sexual autonomy
and harassment, elicit lively discussion in the classroom. They also engage students in a way that encourages them to examine their own assumptions about life, and the novel's relatively short length makes it suitable for interpreting within a concise series of interpretive frameworks, as well as giving students a strong sense of their own capacity to analyze a work in its entirety. In addition to grounding the novel through an overview of theoretical readings, we often contextualize and discuss the novel through a number of secondary topics: the nature of small-town life in early twentieth-century America and its critics, the gender role ideals prevalent in the era, and the novel's own implied or explicit definitions of love, free will and choices. I often ground our discussions in the basic analytical concepts of binaries, oppositions, and tensions, which serve as a common linchpin for a variety of theories and offer an easy interpretive avenue for students that nonetheless can facilitate complex discussions.

Accordingly, I ask students to identify tensions between various elements, characters, and themes as they read their way into the novel, foregrounding this idea with simple examples like actions versus thoughts, light versus darkness, happiness versus unhappiness, a protagonist versus an antagonist, and so on. This basic New Critical idea of "tensions" and "oppositions" (Lynn 45-47) is immediately foregrounded by Charity herself, as she stands in the doorway of "lawyer Royall's house," looks out at North Dormer, notes the presence of Harney for the first time in its streets, judges the reflection of her face in a mirror as "small" and "swarthy," and murmurs "'How I hate everything!'" (Wharton 1). As students note, the reader is immediately whirled through a series of similar tensions: Charity versus rival Annabel Balch, Charity versus the townspeople, Charity versus the part-time library job she hates, Charity versus the books in the library she dislikes as part of that job, Charity's desire for the more glamorous town of Nettleton versus the North Dormer life she is told she should be grateful for, as a foundling brought down from "the Mountain," and then Charity versus Harney himself, who criticizes her negligence in doing her job and caring for the books. Other tensions continue to appear, as students note: Charity versus her origin on the Mountain ("Harney shows her this new world, but always in a way that establishes her [humble] origin") and between Charity and Julia, the North Dormer girl who turns to prostitution in Nettleton after being similarly seduced and abandoned ("Charity
realizes that she is doing what Julia did, and that it may have negative consequences”). In each of these instances, other theoretical and thematic framings emerge from the simple binary construct. Students can note historical gender dynamics in the way that Charity’s choices are limited, contemporary psychology in the way that her own adolescent characteristics constrict her ability to forge an autonomous self through self-denial rather than sheer insistence, and New Historicism in the way that Harney’s interest in "old" architecture quickly foregrounds the destructive nature of change in a provincial setting where tradition also offers no avenue to an autonomous self for young women. The very foregrounded element of social class and its underpinnings in economic status invites an economic or Marxist reading in the way that the town expects her to be grateful for her "salvation" from the Mountain’s "perpetual background of gloom" and sub-working-class primitivism by Mr. Royall (Wharton 3).

With an eye towards encouraging students to examine their own beliefs and preconceptions about all these elements, I often continue our discussion of the novel by asking students for a page of daily writing with the following question: "Select three passages that serve to define Charity’s character in the first four chapters of the novel. Do you find yourself more sympathetic to Charity, less sympathetic, or indifferent in terms of your own individual response? What do you think is shaping your response, in terms of the text or your own beliefs?" Although English majors usually disagree with Charity’s revulsion for books and libraries, many other elements evoke their sympathy: the depiction of Charity’s hometown angst, her dislike for her part-time job at the town library, her attraction to a more exciting town, Nettleton, with its "shops with plate-glass fronts," and perhaps above all, her sense that life is forcing her to make a series of irrevocable choices (Wharton 2). An outsider supposedly privileged by Mr. Royall's social status as a lawyer, Charity nonetheless feels pinned under the town's critical scrutiny, a common adolescent experience with peer groups. Her vague hopes to use her salary as a way to escape North Dormer prompts Mr. Royall’s first marriage proposal, and serves as a further connection to student anxieties about their occupational futures and prospects. As we note each of these elements, the novel connects students in a visceral way to the limits that also entrapped small-town residents, and women in particular,
as well as contextualizing some of those limits they may feel operating in their own lives (Wharton 11, 12).

I often alternate or amend the "Charity's characteristics" assignment above by asking students to focus on those passages which emphasize Charity's youth in the early chapters of the novel, which begins to foreground the ways in which she makes her choices, and the psychological factors which shape those choices. When Mr. Royall conveys Miss Hatchard's criticism of the books that Charity has neglected in her library job, she quits impulsively: "'I'm glad I'll never have to sit in this old vault when other folks are out in the sun!'" (Wharton 15). Her immediate and detailed interest in Harney is likewise evocative for memories of first crushes: "she had liked the young man's looks, and her short-sighted eyes, and his odd way of speaking, that was abrupt yet soft, just as his hands were sunburnt and sinewy, yet with smooth nails like a woman's" (Wharton 8). Even Charity's youthful resentment of those who tell her that she should be grateful for the life she currently leads strikes an empathetic chord, as does the way that her relationships immediately and paradoxically both constrict and enlarge her life.

Although I usually center our discussion around gender theory, that approach can draw upon other theories as students work their way through its early pages. The novel dwells in considerable detail on Charity's perceptions of the unattractive qualities of North Dormer, for instance. For this element, I have students locate and analyze any three passages which indicate Charity's reaction to the details of the town. Such passages abound, but students often note that for Charity, the town is "a weather-beaten sunburnt village of the hills" (Wharton 2) [with] lives that went on drearily, without visible change, in the same cramped setting of hypocrisy" (Wharton 45). I give students a historical context for Charity's estimation of the village's distinct lack of charm with excerpts from "Chapter 6: Apotheosis of the Small Town" in Richard Lingeman's 1980 Small Town America : A Narrative History, 1620 - The Present, which analyzes the increasingly skeptical literary view taken by writers during the late Realist and Modernist periods about small towns and the constraints they placed upon the individual. Lingeman's article includes several pages on courtship and sex, including the observation that "American girls had to be more wary" than Europeans, having "lost the protection of arranged marriages," a section which can
provoke lively discussion and debate about the advantages and disadvantages of various historical forms of romantic and sexual relationships (Lingeman 266-270).

At the heart of the novel's plot lies the older Mr. Royall's sexual and marital interest in his teenaged ward, which immediately engages and polarizes students in a work they might initially dismiss as a slight tale of domestic conflicts. As students immediately note with some surprise, the novel takes on a distinctly modern feel when Mr. Royall tells the seventeen-year old Charity "'I'm a lonesome man,'" tries drunkenly to push his way into her bedroom one night (Wharton 11), and is repulsed. Charity instead feels a romantic and sexual attraction to young Mr. Harney: "[she] saw herself as a bride in low-necked satin, walking down an aisle with Lucius Harney" (Wharton 15). Initially, this triangle seems to map readily to contemporary concepts of courtship versus sexual harassment for students: a lecherous older man versus a no-strings attached sexual affair between two young people. Students are understandably disturbed by Mr. Royall's interest in Charity, and inclined to sympathetically interpret the youthfully romantic aspects—the "parental opposition," the "meet-cute" initial stages, the clandestine meetings—of the younger couple's entanglement.

Like the novel itself does, I point out complicating elements to this interpretation of simple villains and romantic heroes, often by asking students to make a simple "for and against" case for each of Charity's two possible romantic choices, leaving aside for the moment the option that students often find more attractive, of "neither." The "for" case for Mr. Royall is usually summarized as his willingness to marry Charity, while Mr. Harney offers age-appropriate youth and physical attractiveness, while "against" for Royall notes his sexual aggressiveness and age, and for Harney his evasiveness on any possible future together with Charity. The consensus thus usually settles on Mr. Royall as a clear antagonist to Charity's romance with Mr. Harney. As I note to them, however, Carol Wershoven observes in her 1985 article "The Divided Conflict of Edith Wharton's Summer" that Wharton herself responded to a compliment about her characterization of "Lawyer Royall" with "'of course—he's the book'” (5). Although Charity is very much the most clearly delineated and emphasized protagonist, Wharton's emphasis suggests the usefulness of discussing his character in that light as well, as possible protagonist rather than antagonist,
or more complexly, by breaking down such binaries themselves, a process that begins and models our own classroom deconstruction and elaboration of at least some of the binaries we've thus far constructed. As Wershoven argues, "the love [Mr. Royall] envisions is, essentially, the same kind of love chosen by Charity [with Harney], a relationship of master/slave, of woman submitting to man's superior will. His fantasy is expressed, grotesquely, in his drunken assault upon Charity one lonely night, yet the model of love it expresses is, at bottom, the model of Charity and Harney's romance" (Wershoven 7). Wershoven's article can thus usefully form the basis of such an apparently contrarian reading of the text, and a reevaluation of the courtship dynamics and Mr. Royall's role within them.

Wershoven's article also serves as a useful discussion point after students have made their initial judgments and arguments about the nature of the love triangle because her argument rather parallels the nature of Wharton's text itself, which also problematizes simple interpretations: the seemingly more attractive and sympathetic Harney is primarily interested in the casually sexual aspects of an affair that severely imperils Charity's middle-class status and reputation in North Dormer. In pointed contrast, Mr. Royall is repeatedly depicted as more serious in his marital intentions: "'For all your sneers and your mockery you've always known I loved you the way a man loves a decent woman'" (Wharton 49). He offers to marry her and take her away from North Dormer entirely to start a new life elsewhere. Most notably, he unselfishly if patriarchally acts against his own interests to try to protect Charity's reputation, even offering to force Harney to marry her after that affair has been consummated: "'He's soft: I could see that. I don't say you won't be sorry afterward – but, by God, I'll give you the chance to be, if you say so'" (Wharton 50). As the text repeatedly foregrounds, neither man's interest in Charity could be described as primarily selfless, however, and both seek to shape her destiny according to her own desires, encouraging students to move past simple ideas of villainy.

Although students are aware of the general idea that women were in a more difficult position in many ways in terms of their own autonomy a century ago, their ideas of the ways that courtship has changed since then are often quite unclear. After having students explore the nuances of those changes and those difficulties with Beth L. Bailey's chapter "Calling
Cards and Money” from her 1988 *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America*, which further clarifies how Charity’s relationship with Harney skirts the formal protections for women which a more conventional mode of traditional courtship arguably offered at the time, we compile a whiteboard list of the various factors involved in both of Charity’s possible relationships as well as her options for a life independent of both men, and usually wind up with additional items distinct from our previous “for and against” courtship assignment, including economic dependence and independence, lack of job training, lack of available jobs for women, Charity's own distaste for the sorts of jobs she might be able to get, exemplified through her minimal library work, the difficulty of moving to a larger town, and so on.

With Mrs. Royall dead before the novel begins, Charity's relationship with Harney is even more problematic, since "women largely controlled social life," including the courtship of their daughters, and "unmarried men [were] subject to this social-status ritual" (Bailey 15). Mr. Royall, despite his own uneasy position as Charity's guardian-turned-suitor, views Harney, apparently correctly, as a sexual predator, noting that when he turned the younger man out of their house, "'I guess he's the kind that's heard the same thing before [. . .] if he'd wanted you the right way he'd have said so’" (Wharton 48, 49). Because Charity is well aware of Mr. Royall's own intentions, however, she can even more easily dismiss any objections about the dangers of her relationship with Harney. The novel's 1917 publication date positions it at precisely the position before the "New Woman" of the 1920s would begin fundamental shifts in the nature of such conventional ideas about the position of women in both courtships and the family as a whole, a contrast which can illuminated with excerpts from Sylvia D. Hoffert's 2009 *A History of Gender in America: Essays, Documents, and Articles* and its chapter "The New Woman and the New Man at the Turn of the Century (1890-1920)." As I point out to students from this chapter, the "New Woman" was "single, well-educated, independent, self-sufficient, and strong-willed," and we note that Charity fails to meet two of these criteria that prove to be insurmountable obstacles, education and self-sufficiency (Hoffert 283). We also consider the differences between Lucius Harney and Mr. Royall in terms of Hoffert's assertion that "the role of husband as patriarch began to decline and a more
egalitarian model for married couples emerged" (Hoffert 285).

Examining the novel in terms of the dynamics of her two suitors begs the question of what exactly Charity, Lucius, Mr. Royall, and we, would define as "love," a suitably large topic for lively discussion, primed by another short in-class paragraph writing assignment. We then take up Charity's situation in the light of Ronald de Sousa's 2015 Love: A Very Short Introduction. Viewing Charity as a proto-feminist is further problematized given her own view of her love affair as a surrender of her own will to Harney's own desires and wishes: "Since that evening in the deserted house she could imagine no reason for doing or not doing anything except the fact that Harney wished or did not wish it" (Wharton 76). Both men express love for Charity, but a love that may also function as a trap. Concise excerpts like de Sousa's introduction (de Sousa 1-4), which notes the classic Greek definitions of types of love, particularly the terms "storge" and "eros," which apply readily to Mr. Royall and Harney respectively, although not in unproblematic ways, map out their definitions. The later sections "Is love freedom, or bondage?" (12-15), and "What does the lover want?" (36-38) provide a useful basis for analyzing the male approaches to Charity herself, and her response to each man's interest.

At the same time that the idea of love is complicated by the text, Charity's struggle for autonomy seems undermined by her own sexual desires, "the melting of palm into palm and mouth on mouth, and the long flame burning her from head to foot" (Wharton 45). For this purpose, I have students identify and analyze passages where Charity expresses her interest in Harney, and her feelings about Mr. Royall, as well as trying to distinguish sexual from romantic desires, a difficult task in an era where such things still tended to be coded. An entertaining and useful sense of the way that contemporary female desire was viewed as exotic and transgressive but also titillating and attractive can be illustrated through excerpts from Project Gutenberg's collection of vastly popular contemporary works now seldom read, like Elinor Glyn's controversial 1907 Three Weeks ("'love is a purely physical emotion,' she continued"), E. M. Hull's 1919 blockbuster bestseller The Sheik ("it went now far past his mere physical beauty and superb animal strength") and Joan Conquest's 1921
potboiler *Leonie of the Jungle* ("she suddenly awoke to the passion of the man looking down upon her, and responded to it"). Charity's own passionate self-abandonment to Harney's wishes offers no viable path towards autonomy within the framework of her time and Harney's own social-climbing nature, and clearly defines the way in which her own nature responds almost helplessly to stimuli: lying in the grass on a hillside alone, "to all that was light and air, perfume and color, every drop of blood in her responded" (Wharton 7). When, after a brief attempt to avoid meeting him again after their first kiss (Wharton 71), Harney persuades her to their first sexual coupling in that abandoned house, his phrasing evokes domination rather than selflessness: "'Did you really think you could run away from me? You see you weren't meant to'" (Wharton 71). Students in an era firmly shaped by the awareness of the nature of "stalking" quickly note these and similar instances where Harney's own passion for Charity shifts into a purely selfish interest for casual sexual encounters, in an era where very little could be "casual" in a sexual encounter for a fertile young woman.

The novel dwells in considerable detail on Charity's emotional states, an emphasis which offers a strong example of a relatively fully-voiced female character. Charity's own heightened emotionality seems to imply a contrast between Harney's apparent manipulation of those emotions. Using that idea as a binary opposition provides another opportunity for students to generate daily writing or a class list of passages. At the same time, and regardless of Harney himself to a large degree, the affair, before her pregnancy, seems to bring Charity great happiness and fulfillment. Seduced by her own "drops of blood" (Wharton 71) as well as by Harney's "boy's gaiety" (Wharton 76), Charity returns quite precisely to that early "hill" passage, in a coupling that suggests that their affair was predestined by the very nature of her character itself: "all the rest of life had become a mere cloudy rim about the central glory of their passion [and] she felt as she sometimes did after lying on the grass and staring up too long at the sky" (Wharton 78). The ecstatic language describing Charity's emotions is quite remarkably focused on the female experience of love, and contrasts sharply with her conventionally maternal feelings once she becomes aware of her pregnancy: "her child was like a load that held her down, and yet like a hand that pulled her to her feet" (Wharton 116). During this section of the novel, we often discuss the role
that unplanned pregnancies played both in women's lives and the literature of the Comstock Act era, which also highlights the destructive power a single individual like Anthony Comstock could have on human lives. At the same time, we discuss the fact that a reasonably sophisticated young man like Harney would presumably have access to the thriving underground trade in condoms, but does not use them, which places his behavior with Charity into an even more reckless light (Tone 455).

Because Charity's passionate nature and the choices shaped by that and her gender are so strongly emphasized, the novel invites a contextualizing classroom discussion of the idea of free will itself, albeit on a necessarily concise level given the enormous breadth of the concept itself. Robert Kane's 2005 *A Contemporary Introduction to Free Will* offers a useful overview in "Chapter 1: The Free Will Problem," and his illustration of a "garden of forking paths," which illustrates a single line breaking into subsequent branches as each choice or possible choice is made (7), as well as "Chapter 2: Compatibilism" and "Chapter 3: Incompatibilism" if time is available, can illustrate to students in just which ways Charity's choices about every aspect of her life in North Dormer influence and constrict her subsequent options (Kane 7).

With students considering the historicized economic, gendered, and cultural elements of the setting as well as their interpretation of the psychological natures and motivations of the characters, Kane's "garden of forking paths" is particularly useful as a xeroxed sheet for students to fill out as an individual assignment and then compile into a class version. As such, it can serve to foreground essential questions: which of Charity's choices seem most "free"? Which seem most pre-determined, and if so, by what or whom? Students usually find they agree on some elements of the "garden" while disagreeing on others. Both responses serve to further discussion of historical, psychological, and gendered interpretations of the novel. The crux of her conflict between her sense of entrapment by the town and her own passions seems to come to a climax in the scene where, after learning that Annabel Balch is engaged to Harney (Wharton 95), she feels "the uselessness of struggling against the circumstances" and that she has "never known how to adapt herself; she could only break and tear and destroy" (Wharton 96). Feeling herself "too unequally pitted against unknown forces," she writes a letter to Harney urging him to act.
"right" and "marry Annabel Balch if you promised to" (Wharton 97). Charity's choices are once again emphasized in her subsequent flight away from both men to the Mountain. Harney has briskly removed himself from the scene and to a more socially advantageous marriage, or at least to a more insistent sedueree. At this point, Charity seemingly surrenders her free will again, apparently in a state of physical exhaustion and shock, to Mr. Royall's final marriage proposal and the lesser of all possible evils in order to find protection for herself and Harney's impending child (Wharton 121-123). At each stage, students can be encouraged to consider Charity's possible choices and ask what, if anything, she might have done differently, and with what subsequent complications and probable outcomes.

Charity's choices also bring into focus issues of social class, a theme which first-generation college students in particular often notice: she is a foundling from the Mountain near North Dormer, whose people are regarded as lower-class savages by the town, and has been precariously raised into the middle-class by being taken in and raised by Mr. and Mrs. Royall. Asking students to generate a list of passages in groups is often a useful approach to this theme in particular, since while most students will notice issues of gender and sexism, fewer seem to notice issues of class. The irony of Charity's situation is heightened by Harney's insistent interest in exploring the architecture of one of their houses, and what Charity views as "poor swamp-people living like vermin in their lair," the sort of sweeping judgment on the Mountain folk as illiterate, brutal, shiftless and unpleasant which the novel itself rarely seems to question or critique in any but the mildest way, but instead simply endorses, in contrast to some of its more progressive framing of the issues of female autonomy (Wharton 36). We discuss the novel's simultaneously direct and yet oblique treatment of social class as a vital yet seemingly unchangeable issue in some depth: is Charity's own distinctly non-intellectual nature meant to reinforce such ideas, for instance?

As a middle-class young woman carrying on an affair with a man unwilling to marry her, she is perilously balanced in a way that conflates her sexual reputation with her economic status; like all middle-class women of her era, even in a moment when gender roles were slowly shifting, her virtue is her capital, and her determined rejection of that valuation in the eyes of her small town, particularly in her attempted flight away from both
Harney and Mr. Royall, and thus back to poverty and indeed squalor with her mother's people on the Mountain, represents in many ways her most pronounced form of rebellion against the constrictions of her life, a rebellion strongly linked to her own passionate response to Harney's attractions and her rejection of a colder logical estimation of social costs and benefits that might devalue her sense of her love in the same way that the town does.

To further complicate a gender reading of the novel, I also have students identify and analyze passages in which Charity interacts with women rather than men. Although other women play a seemingly small role in the novel, given its focus on the central love triangle with the two male characters, Charity is also placed within the context of female relationships. Strikingly, those relationships largely emphasize division rather than solidarity. Charity, for instance, seems to deliberately place herself apart from other women as much or more than they exclude her, and female networks seem to operate largely in a mutually destructive fashion throughout, as students often note. Older women repeatedly fail to protect or guide Charity; in addition to the absence of Mrs. Royall, when Charity turns to elderly spinster Miss Hatchard, she realizes that the older woman is too immature to confront Charity's domestic situation: "she would have to fight her way out of her difficulty alone" (Wharton 11), and when, in an effort to confirm her pregnancy, Charity consults Nettleton abortionist Mrs. Merkle, with "false teeth," "false hair," and a "false, murderous smile," she takes Charity's brooch, a gift from Harney, in hock against the payment of a $5 consultation fee (Wharton 99).

When Charity returns at last in despair to the Mountain, hoping to find her mother, she finds only her mother's squalid funeral in progress (Wharton 109). Her female peers serve as foils to highlight Charity's fierce pride, and to thwart or frustrate Charity's own ambitions, rather than as any source of support: she refuses to confide in her only friend, Ally Hawes, rival Annabel Balch is the rich girl with better clothes, who is "the sort of girl it would be natural for [Harney] to marry, and Ally's older sister Julia serves as the absent example of a village girl gone wrong (Wharton 45). While each of these elements seem to present an anti-feminist reading of the novel, we discuss ways in which Charity's relationships with other women are themselves shaped not only by her own personality and
the nature of small-town life and social competition, but also the patriarchal structure that allows the men to behave with greater freedom than the women, and encourages women to turn on one another in search of the social and financial rewards that competing within that system doles out.

A number of additional key scenes are worth noting in any discussion of the novel. Charity's recollection of Mr. Royall drunkenly knocking on her door (Wharton 10-11) as well as their repeated mentions of that moment as pivotal (Wharton 11, 13, 49, 73, 90), and Mr. Royall's repeated offers of marriage (Wharton 12, 49, 117) serve to illustrate the nature of their developing relationship. Charity escorting Harney to visit a Mountain house highlights the class differences between her origins and his own (Wharton 33-37). Charity's trip to Nettleton with Harney (Wharton 53-66) and her first kiss with Harney, who rather tactically seizes the moment immediately after the climax of fireworks to do so (Wharton 64), drives home the exploitative nature of Harney's sexual interest in her. Her immediately subsequent encounter with a drunken Mr. Royall, who calls her a "whore" repeatedly (Wharton 65-66) and the confrontation between Mr. Royall and Harney in the abandoned house where Harney meets her (Wharton 88-92) further complicates any attempt to place Mr. Royall into the role of either villain or savior. Charity's trip to Dr. Merkle, a female abortionist (Wharton 98-99), her attempt to flee to the Mountain and her unknown mother with her pregnancy intact, her subsequent arrival at her mother's funeral (Wharton 104-115), and Mr. Royall's final arrival to bring her back from the Mountain, down to Nettleton, and into marriage with him (Wharton 123) combine to delineate the way in which Charity's options are reduced one by one. Their honeymoon night together at the hotel, when Mr. Royall sleeps in a chair to reassure Charity that he will not importune her unduly or prematurely, encourages students to reconsider the conclusions they may have drawn about the black-and-white nature of that relationship and Mr. Royall's character as well (Wharton 124).

In short, Summer both initially invites and then frustrates the relatively simple interpretive choices that students, particularly students of traditional college age, might be tempted to make. Wharton's narrative seems to explore these issues of gender in ways that emphasize the entangling and often frustrating nature of power and relationships. Ultimately, Charity finds herself forced back to the protection for her unborn infant offered by
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marriage to the persistent Mr. Royall. The narrative, which has been apparently moving to redeem Mr. Royall throughout Harney's seduction of Charity, continues to do so here, without in any fashion indicating that Charity is returning to him as bride rather than stepdaughter out of anything other than privation and fear, a denouement that forces students and readers to reevaluate the choices that each made throughout the novel: do Mr. Royall's attempts to protect Charity from Harney represent jealousy, or selflessness, or both? And, perhaps above all else, given the novel's clear depiction of Charity within a web of constrictive circumstances, including her own personality, could she have made any choices other than the ones she has? A sampling of student topics from research papers provides an insight into how my approach to teaching Summer translates into student learning: Charity's inability to bond with a maternal role model and that influence on her sexual activity, a detailed defense of Mr. Royall's courtship, nature as a metaphor for Charity's curiosity and sexual awakening, Charity's sense of shame as the key element in her decisions, the novel as Wharton's critique of a society that both fetishizes and denounces female sexuality, and a complex analysis of male expectations of female gratitude. The ways in which students grapple with these questions of gender, power, and relationship dynamics make the novel a useful one not only in their academic careers but also perhaps in the lives they live outside our classrooms.


Wershoven, Carol. "The Divided Conflict of Edith Wharton's *Summer.*" *Colby Quarterly*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1985, pp. 5-10.

Discussion, quiz, or test questions:

(Novel as a whole)

1. Where is Charity Royall from originally?
2. Why was she named "Charity"?
3. What private event in the Royall house shapes her view of Mr. Royall?
4. Why does Lucius Harney come to town?
5. Name one reason why Charity falls in love with Lucius.
6. What public event results in Mr. Royall's embarrassing Charity?

(By chapters)

Chapters I-VI Quiz

1. Where does Charity first meet and speak with Lucius Harney?
2. Why does Charity want to earn money by working there?
3. What does Lawyer Royall reprimand Charity about, after Miss Hatchard's complaints?
4. What does Harney claim he actually told Miss Hatchard?
5. What does Charity wind up going around the countryside doing with Harney, up through Chapter V?
6. Which Charity "secret" is revealed to Harney in Chapter VI?

Chapters VII – XI Quiz

1. What "dinner-table" surprise does Mr. Royall spring on Charity in Chapter VII?
2. What does Charity wind up doing when she goes away from the house that night?
3. What does Mr. Royall offer to make Lucius Harney do after the fallout from Charity's evening in question 2?
4. When and where does Harney first kiss Charity?
5. What makes Mr. Royall's attack on Charity immediately after this somewhat ironic – who's he with himself?

6. What decisive event occurs after Charity tries to run away from home?
Kane's "Garden of Forking Paths" in blank diagram form.

Note that this diagram can be easily reproduced on a blackboard or whiteboard, and filled in from any point within the novel, starting from the left in order to allow enough space for whatever degree of depth an instructor chooses.

Figure 1 Diagram source: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Kanes-illustration-of-a-garden-of-forking-paths-2005_fig1_309411137

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