

“PENDULUM WOMAN”: EDITH WHARTON'S STRATEGIC FORMATION OF TRIANGLES IN REAL-LIFE RELATIONSHIPS

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***Abstract:** The present paper concerns Edith Wharton's strategic formation of triangular relationships in her real life. As the reticent wife of an upper-class renowned family, Wharton used all she had to make male acquaintances that would enhance her intellectual stimulation and deepen her insight as a writer. Including her husband Teddy in her social circle, she skillfully entertained guests by creating a private space in her automobile and her mansion in Lenox. In this paper, her rather “strategic” methods to establish these relationships will be examined in detail.*

***Keywords:** automobiles, Edith Wharton, the Mount, Teddy Wharton, triangular relationships*

1. Introduction

The present paper concerns Edith Wharton's strategic formation of relationships with several men in her social life, which contributed in no small measure to the successful establishment of her career as a renowned female writer in the early 20th century. As a prominent writer at the turn of the century in the United States, Wharton undeniably led a life that was as dramatic as her fiction. A number of Wharton's biographical studies confirm this. The present paper will extract relevant parts from several biographical studies focusing on Wharton's way of constructing her real-life relationships nurtured through her life, in which we find the same pattern: her attempt to triangulate human relationships when making male acquaintances. Her way to build and nurture friendships with some intelligent, cosmopolitan men like Henry James, helped to enrich her personal life and career, and eventually influenced the very contents of her oeuvres, where protagonists agonize over and learn from their own entangled, triangular relationships, deliberately constructed by the author.

Triangles formed in Wharton's real life, unlike those depicted in her fiction, do not necessarily involve “love” affairs. On occasion, the relationships might look romantic, but all of them, except for that in which Morton Fullerton was involved, had nothing to do with sexual intercourse as far as her real life was concerned. Rather, the triangles discussed here simply mean groups of “three”, usually two men and Wharton.

Before we begin to analyze these triangles, we must note that Wharton's career as a writer was achieved not only with her pure devotion to writing, but also with her ceaseless effort to upgrade her cultural surrounding by making the

acquaintance with cosmopolitan, educated men, from lawyers to writers, who inspired her in her work. If Wharton, a woman, was to be as active a writer as a man in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it must have been important for her to obtain necessary information and stimulation from male peers.

Thus, Wharton developed close friendships with a large number of men outside her own social circles after her marriage, expanding her knowledge and building her career through her interactions with them. If there is one rule in her way of doing this, it is that her friendships are never one-to-one closed relationship, but one-to-two, or “triangular” relationships that are always open, leading to other promising encounters in the future, eventually to form what Susan Goodman (1994: 3) called, “Wharton’s inner circle”.

As the reticent wife of an upper-class renowned family, Wharton, so as to avoid any possible scandals, was deliberate in approaching the targeted men, always making her relationship with them rather conspicuous; she successfully attained sources of her writing materials through them, all of which inevitably contributed to making her into an established female writer. How could she manage to do this? Here, her rather “strategic” method of establishing these relationships will be examined in detail. As no scholars have so far mentioned this tendency in Wharton, it would be worthwhile to give some thought to it, which will, hopefully, enable us to read her works from a new perspective.

2. Walter Berry and Henry James

Let us consider two men to start with - Walter Berry and Henry James, who stand out as the most influential figures in Wharton’s life. Both got acquainted with her either before or during her marital life. This means that they inevitably shared a considerable amount of time with her husband Teddy, especially while they were invited to the couple’s country house in Lenox, the Mount. Berry, an international lawyer, met Edith Wharton for the first time in 1883, the same year when Teddy Wharton met her, and soon became one of the most frequent visitors at the Mount at the beginning of the 20th century. Judging from several biographical studies, we can state that Berry was the first to be involved in the series of triangular relationships of which Wharton was the center. As Berry and Teddy got along very well, there was no trouble between the three, and thus Wharton succeeded in forming the first triangle. Lewis (1975: 278) notes that “... Berry was ... a pleasant male companion with whom Teddy could exchange jokes and stock-market tips.”

Undeniably, the most important male figure in Wharton’s life was Henry James, with whom she had craved for a fruitful friendship, for the sake of her own career. She clearly states in her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*: “Henry James was perhaps the most intimate friend I ever had....” (Wharton 1998: 173). In order to make contact with him, Wharton fully took advantage of Teddy from the beginning. She had made various attempts since the late 1880s to get access to this literary giant, who was 20 years older than her. Notably, it was Teddy’s cooperation which enabled Wharton to meet James; she got her first opportunity to meet James in the house of an old friend of Teddy’s:

The encounter took place at the house of Edward Boit, the brilliant water-colour painter... Boit and his wife, both Bostonians, and old friends of my husband’s...asked us to dine with Henry James. I could hardly believe that such a privilege could befall me, and I could think of only one way of deserving it to put on my newest Doucet dress, and try to look my prettiest! (Wharton 1998: 171-172)

As a young lady in her 20s, Wharton tried to impress James by wearing a pretty dress, which simply failed. However, the next time she had the opportunity to meet James, Wharton seemed not to have learned her lesson:

A year or two later, in Venice (probably in 1889 or 1890), the same opportunity came my way. Another friend of my husband's, Ralph Curtis of Boston, had the happy thought of inviting us to meet Henry James.... Well this time I had a new hat; a beautiful new hat! (Wharton 1998: 172)

The above two episodes can be read as a comical recollection of Wharton's youthful shallowness in thinking that she could attract James with her femininity. Her feminine attempts failed, as James never recognized her.

Then, more than ten years later, she visited him at his house, where she went by car, with Teddy beside her. Lewis states:

If Henry James always associated Edith Wharton with a shiny and resplendent new motorcar, it was because she and Teddy first appeared before the door of Lamb House in just such a vehicle. This was in May 1904, and by that time the car had already covered a great miles. (Lewis 1975: 128)

Here, the car functions as her new battle suit, which has been enlarged by changing its materials from fabric to steel, and even incorporating her husband as a companion. Teddy's role as husband is very important here. To James, the presence of her husband by her side has the effect of making the visitor's genuine intentions even clearer. As a young, beautiful, but novice writer, Wharton was not there to flirt, but to have him get in her automobile, both physically and figuratively, in order to create a new triangle of friendship. Certainly, Wharton is fully aware that, in order to win James' attention, their relationship has to begin as an open and triangular one, with Teddy included. The semi-private space in her automobile is a symbolic pre-invitation to her life journey. Obviously, Wharton's meticulously calculated strategy worked, as James got in the couple's motor-car, and eventually became her best friend.

3. How Wharton utilized her automobile

Let us examine Wharton's relationship with the automobile in detail here. In the early 20th century, when Wharton first purchased her automobile, it functioned as a leisure product, unique to the upper-class. In addition to the unpaved road conditions at that time, the automobile was still too fragile a machine to be fully trusted. Moreover, it did not serve as a means of transportation just as the horse-drawn carriage did. Nevertheless, Wharton preferred the automobile because, unlike the train, which was a public vehicle that ran on a fixed route at a fixed time, the automobile user was in control of the time and destination of the car, and one could have the same private space in the car as in a carriage, as stated in the opening of *A Motor-Flight Through France* (Wharton 1991: 1).

The automobile, which serves as the ultimate movable private space, is not, however, completely cut off from the public space. Unlike horse-drawn carriages, it is physically difficult for the driver and other passengers in a car to be invisible while driving on public roads. Even if privacy can be maintained to the extent of the content of conversations in the car, a car on a public road is much more

exposed to the public eye than a living room in a building, in the sense that passengers are visible. Furthermore, if the car is like a huge garment that embodies the person who owns it, the visibility of not only the owner of the car, but also of the passengers will become important as an indicator of the owner's value and status.

Wharton's preference for the automobile over the carriage is mainly justified by the car's showy aspect, with its publicly visible design. Let us refer to Scharff's writings on the design of automobiles, with female passengers seen at the turn of the 20th century. Scharff writes:

...the open vehicles of the day, built chiefly by carriage-makers, were high-riding, sometimes doorless affairs that exposed all passengers to public scrutiny, and women seemed particularly to be on display. (Scharff 1992: 24)

As she states, women in automobiles were very eye-catching at that time, when cars were still a rarity. For Wharton, the automobile was the embodiment of a bloated self that could best display her wealth and modernity. The self she wanted to show to the passersby during her drive was a figure outside of the private space, in which women have traditionally been confined. At the same time, it can also be said that the design of an "open vehicle" required Wharton to maintain a one-to-many rather than a one-to-one interpersonal relationship for public perception. As long as there was Teddy the husband, or, more than two men sharing the same space in the car, the risk of bothersome prying eyes from the outside world was reduced. Wharton must have instinctively recognized that the automobile, the state-of-the-art vehicle of the day, had both public and private characteristics which other alternative conveyances did not have. She, then, skillfully used them to overcome her disadvantageous and inconvenient position as a married woman and to establish triangular "friendships" with several male friends.

After successfully impressing James by driving him in her private car to his house, Wharton invited him to the Mount, her newly-constructed mansion in Lenox, where, with other guests and Teddy, they enjoyed more driving. Wharton (1998: 153) writes: "I remember in particular one summer night when Henry James, Walter Berry, my husband and I sat by the roadside till near dawn while our chauffeur tried to persuade 'George' to carry us back to the Mount". This is one of the adventurous episodes of her favorite friend set - James, Berry, and the Whartons - struggling through the night to repair "George", their automobile, on their way back to the Mount. In those days, automobiles broke down quickly and therefore were unreliable compared to horse-drawn carriages as a means of transportation. But Wharton insisted on riding in an automobile rather than a carriage, even if it meant nothing but inconvenience. Being modern was valued more than being practical, and personifying the automobile as "George" indicates she fully enjoyed the trouble as an adventure, forgetting that the vehicle was actually a means of transport. In another episode, after enjoying the drive, they encounter the hardship of getting out of the ruts and searching around for a blacksmith to repair the broken-down automobile:

...there was inexhaustible delight in penetrating to the remoter parts of Massachusetts and New Hampshire..., and coming back, weary but laden with a new harvest of beauty, after sticking fast in ruts, having to push the car up hill, to rout out the village blacksmith for repairs, and suffer the jeers of horse-drawn travellers trotting gaily past us. (Wharton 1998: 153)

Note that Wharton writes that they "suffer the jeers of horse-drawn travellers trotting gaily past us," mentioning the curious looks from other ordinary travellers. Wharton herself was fully aware that her driving around in a stylish, but useless new car, with male cosmopolitan intellectuals, was an uncommon event.

And how did James view Wharton, who was so dynamic, and tactful in dealing with several male friends in a modern automobile? Or more clearly, how did Wharton perceive herself evaluated by the adored literary giant? With nostalgia and pride, Wharton recalls how James enjoyed his days at the Mount with her:

On his first visit, however, he was still in fairly good health, and in excellent spirits, exhilarated (at first) by the novelty of the adventure, the success of his revolt against his own sedentary habit (he called me "the pendulum-woman" because I crossed the Atlantic every year!), and, above all, captivated by the new experience of motoring. ...and this mode of locomotion seemed to him, as it had to me, an immense enlargement of life. (Wharton 1998: 177)

In James' eyes, Wharton must have been the embodiment of mobility itself. "Pendulum," "locomotion", and "motoring" were all new to James' life; it was this mobility of the younger Wharton that influenced him. The word James chose to describe Wharton, "pendulum", suggestively is suggestive of more than just her physical movement between two continents, but also of her way of making male friends, as she moved from one man to another.

4. The Mount and more triangles

As seen in the case of Berry and James, Wharton's formation of heterosexual relationships before divorce involved Teddy, who was almost always included in the triangles Wharton created. And his role as a mediator is probably symbolized by the layout of the bedroom floor in the Mount.

The Mount, which Wharton herself designed, purchased, and lived in, was completed in 1902 in the suburb of Lenox. After settling in, the Whartons gradually began inviting friends to their home in 1903, and finally succeeded in inviting James as well in 1904.

Teddy is often spoken of in a negative way as a husband, especially by feminist critics. Wolff (1977: 215-216), for example, points out the contrast between Teddy, the unemployed and mentally ill husband, and his wife Edith, who makes money as a writer and is financially independent. In Fraiman's (2011: 501) viewpoint, "*Decoration* and the Mount functioned in advance of the law to grant Wharton a de facto divorce – a critical distance from marriage, in keeping with the ethos of her novels", suggesting that the years spent at the Mount were a prelude to her divorce, which eventually led to prepare for a new phase in her later life as a successful, independent woman writer in Europe. While it is universally acknowledged that the Whartons did not always have a happy marriage, it is clear that Teddy was still of considerable importance in Wharton's life, at least, at the beginning of the 20th century, supporting her career. Besides behaving in a positive and friendly manner, enabling Wharton to form friendships with acquaintances of the opposite sex, Teddy also played an important role when the couple decided on Lenox as the place of settlement. In other words, the Mount would not have been purchased without Teddy, whose family home was located in the same region, as Lee (2007: 138) explains: "Why did Edith choose Lenox? Proximity to the

Wharton family...was not an incentive for her, though it would have been for Teddy". The fact that the couple ultimately decided on Lennox indicates that Teddy's right to speak was valid, and that for Edith, Teddy, at that time, was still a life partner, whose opinion was eligible enough for consideration.

Perhaps Teddy's significance and indispensability as husband is best reflected in the layout of the third floor where there were the bedrooms, the most private part of the house. In the Mount, Edith had two corner rooms on the north side, at the end of the floor, whose west side was her office, and east side, the bedroom across from the bathroom. These two rooms could be completely separated by closing the door on the corridor side. Teddy's bedroom, on the other hand, was located in the center of the building section, on the east side, to "command a fine view of the gardens, pond, lake, and mountains", indicating that he was the head of the mansion, responsible for managing the entire property and the farm (*Edith Wharton Restoration* 1997: 100). Between Edith's and Teddy's rooms was a dressing room shared by the couple, through which they had access to each other. In fact, only he and the servants had access to Edith's room, as "Edith's bedroom across the hall from the boudoir remains a somewhat unknown quantity, since no photographs survive; except for servants and Teddy occasionally, no visitors were allowed" (Wilson 2012: 92). This indicates that, although Wharton invited many male guests to the Mount and shared meals and entertainment with them for extended periods of time, the bedroom, her ultimate private space, still remained a place where Teddy, her husband, alone could enter. James stayed in the largest and best of the three guest rooms, the only one facing the garden, located next to Teddy's room. In other words, Teddy's room served as a spatial barrier between James and Wharton. Given that the Mount was designed by Wharton herself, it can be inferred that the triangular relationship between the Whartons and their guests found in the third-floor layout was a style of friendship that Wharton had deliberately planned long before the building was actually completed. As a married woman of the upper class, Wharton never neglected her husband (at least publicly); and this floor plan shows a smart, calculating, and shrewd side of Wharton, who attracted and fed male guests in order to advance her career.

In addition to Berry and James, there were several other male friends with whom Wharton was close, according to Wright's (1998) meticulous research on Wharton, in her *Edith Wharton A to Z*. Characteristically; they were almost always brought in either by Teddy or by other male friends. Paul Bourget, a French novelist and critic, was introduced to the Whartons by a relative of Teddy's mother. Even before the Mount was built, Bourget had visited them at their home, where he was hosted and entertained by Teddy. After the couple's divorce, his association with Wharton still continued until he died in 1935. George Cabot (Bay) Lodge, a poet, was introduced by Berry in 1899, and later became a regular visitor to the Mount. Once James was on the list, he would also introduce her to various people on Teddy's behalf. Howard Overing Sturgis, a novelist, was brought to the Mount by James for the first time in 1904, and became a regular visitor there. Morton Fullerton, a journalist with whom Wharton later fell in love, came to visit the Mount in 1907, with James' introduction. Although only Fullerton went so far as to have an affair with her, John Hugh Smith, a banker, is also known as Wharton admirer. He stayed at the Mount with Lapsley and James in 1911.

Even car trips in mixed gender companion could be easily arranged as long as there were at least three members. Gaillard Lapsley, a historian who first became acquainted with Wharton in 1904, traveled by automobile through France

with Wharton and James in 1907. Percy Lubbock, one of Wharton's biographers and regular visitors at the Mount, traveled by car with Wharton and Lapsley in Africa in 1914. Indeed, the space in the car must have served as a second salon, with the additional intimacy and privacy ensured by being in a different continent. However, since Wharton was taking this car trip with three or more people, it was also crucial that this shared space should not be too intimate or too private. Moreover, for Wharton, sharing this space and time with her male friends was never just a recreational vacation. Her travel journals would later feed her writings and bear fruit as *A Motor Flight through France* (1908) and *In Morocco* (1920).

The triangular friendships Wharton formed here and there with her male friends undoubtedly broadened her literary horizons and range of activities, which was not something Teddy could have provided alone. Nevertheless, Teddy's presence at one end of the triangle could balance the power relations between the couple and their invited guests and this is how Teddy, though suffering from neurasthenia, could find his place at the Mount, where his wife had created her ideal world with intellectual people that shared her interests. The couple tried to maintain their marriage life in the most decent way until 1907, when Wharton encountered Morton Fullerton. With his emergence, the stability of the triangles, as far as Teddy was concerned, was broken. Lewis explains the clear difference Teddy sensed between Wharton's male friends such as Berry and James, and Fullerton, who visited the Mount for the first time with James's introduction:

For a number of years, meanwhile, he [Teddy] had witnessed his wife's heightened enjoyment in the company, first, of Walter Berry, and then of Fullerton. He seems to have been aware that Berry was no real threat.... But Teddy could not have failed to detect, in the Paris winters of 1908 and 1909, that...Morton Fullerton was playing a role in her life very different from that of the others. (Lewis 1975: 278)

Besides that, Teddy's family in Lenox and especially his mother-in-law, Nancy, was not happy about Wharton's heterosexual associations, as Gilder points out:

The problem, in her mother-in-law's eyes, as well as many Lenox observers, was Edith's behavior. As an emerging celebrity author, she was sidelining Teddy for her adoring circle of intellectual male friends - Howard Sturgis, Walter Berry, Henry James - to say nothing of disappearing to Paris for an affair with Henry James's journalist friend Morton Fullerton. (Gilder 2017: 37)

Both Lewis's and Gilder's references to Teddy's side clarify that, as Wharton's friendships expanded, his place in them was gradually lost, resulting in an irretrievable collapse of the balance of the triangles.

As it was sexual, the relationship with Fullerton should naturally have been a more private and intimate, one-on-one male-female relationship, different from the other love triangles she had established in the past; yet, in reality it was not. It seems that no matter how intimate and private their relationship was, Wharton could not help but share it with someone else; and in this case, it was James who took Teddy's place in the triangle, playing the role of intermediary. To cite Powers:

...by that autumn [of 1908] she had unburdened herself by the double confession that marriage to Teddy was growing unsupported and that she had accepted Fullerton as her lover. James immediately extended his full sympathy and emotional support to her in her affairs of the heart. (Powers 1990: 84)

Powers, elsewhere, also states that James was also actively involved in Wharton's new male friendships and enjoyed playing a part in the triangle:

The association with Wharton's dalliance with John Huger Smith and later, if less obviously, with the calmer and more discreet Robert Norton clearly gave James a good deal of stimulation and gratification; it "completed" the special relationship he enjoyed with Edith Wharton. That relationship - the marriage of true minds, sympathetic companionship, frank and intimate confidence and trust - was rounded out by the safely controlled but invigorating element of the erotic. (Powers 1990: 17-18)

Note that Powers describes the relationship of James and Wharton as "marriage of true minds," not excluding the erotic elements. The fact that Wharton confessed to James about her love affair with Fullerton can be interpreted as the best proof of the unwavering trust and intimacy that had been established between Wharton and James.

Meanwhile, as Wharton's romantic relationship with Fullerton was nearing its end, her old friend Berry made an appearance and brought stability to her heart, as Lewis (1975: 285) states: "Berry's temporary establishment in her household marked the start of his gradual replacement of Fullerton in her deepest affections". Indeed, Walter Berry was Wharton's oldest male friend, and their friendship continued after her divorce from Teddy and even after James' death. Berry was so special to Wharton throughout her life that it is not at all unreasonable to say that their friendship sometimes may have included romantic feelings, which even enabled him to function as a replacement for Fullerton when necessary. It is no wonder, therefore, that Berenson's jealousy was stirred by Berry's presence, when, as Lewis notes:

Edith, Walter Berry, and Berenson were together frequently, Berenson observing that "we make a good trio, and have got to terms of real affection." But he had it fixed in his head that Edith's emotional commitment was exclusively to Berry.... (Lewis 1975: 294)

From the discussion above, it is quite right to conclude that, for Wharton, heterosexual friendships were never formed between two people, but among three or four, to keep a balance between herself and the men involved.

5. Conclusion

As a married woman with an upper-class background, Wharton used all she had in order to gain acquaintances who would enhance her intellectual stimulation and deepen her insight as a writer in the restrictive environment of her time. Of course, she also made sure to include her husband Teddy in her social circle, and she entertained guests by creating a private space in her automobile and her mansion in Lenox. It is clear from this examination that she avoided one-on-one relationships and always tried to maintain balance by establishing a triangle or circle of relationships that included her husband. Even after the demise of her marriage, however, Wharton skillfully exploited this triangular relationship. In her private life, James and Berry were always present and involved in the trios she formed.

After observing Wharton's way to form friendships with male figures, we are likely to find in her fictional works many triangles that are sometimes complexly entwined. Perhaps the first well-known work which tackles this motif is *Ethan Frome*. Agonizing in the middle, the protagonist Ethan wavers between Mattie, the young, attractive girl, and Zeena, the old, jealous wife. The triangular relationship depicted here overlaps that of Wharton's in real life, where she struggles between Fullerton the lover, and Teddy the husband, to whom she is legally bound. Six years later, Wharton writes *Summer*, which illustrates two triangles. In the main triangle, the heroine Charity wavers between Harney the lover, and Mr. Royall, her foster father, whom she reluctantly marries. In another triangle, Harney is the center figure, with Charity the abandoned girlfriend, and Annabel, the future wife on each side. In *Twilight Sleep*, we find three triangles, resulting from the heroine Pauline's repetitive divorces and marriages, with the incestuous relationship between brother Jim and sister Nona. Likewise, in *The Children*, in *Mother's Recompense*, in *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton never fails to depict protagonists suffering in the labyrinth of love triangles.

But the most important work which deals with triangles is *The Custom of the Country*, in which the protagonist Undine Spragg repeatedly marries, divorces, and remarries among three men. Unlike other works, where two women fight over one man, or one man suffers between two women, Undine's triangles are very similar to those of Wharton in that they are more practical and mobile. To apply James' words, Undine can also be a "pendulum woman", swinging back and forth between multiple men across the Atlantic Ocean. This presumably indicates that, for Wharton, heterosexual relationships are never confined to a male-female pair. There is always room for one more, and this is where Wharton begins her stories.

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