



## “SLENDER FIRM STROKES OF THE PEN”:

The Unspoken Words of Women Writers in  
Edith Wharton’s Fiction

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People crave stories—simple words on a page—voices that explore, encourage, and encounter life. There’s something inherently powerful in gaining knowledge, whether it’s the knowledge of new ideas, the knowledge and comfort of a shared experience, of newly discovered opportunities, and books have always provided this knowledge. Access to books in the 19th century, especially access to personal libraries, reveals wide economic, social, and gender disparities in who has access to this knowledge. When Lily Bart enters Lawrence Selden’s library in *The House of Mirth*, she represents a multitude of women who have been ignored, underestimated, and marginalized within their own stories, as Wharton reminds readers how men have predominated in the academic, professional, and literary spheres. A library, full of books and knowledge, is the perfect image to juxtapose men’s literary privilege and women’s lack of literary opportunity.

Throughout Edith Wharton’s writing, many of her female protagonists are avid readers and letter writers. Edith Wharton herself emerged as a “woman novelist” during a time when society dictated that a woman’s role was confined to the home. Wharton and others challenged the status quo as agents of change and power. Women writers in Wharton’s fiction are

mold-breakers, both in their own fictional plots, and as symbols of a 19th century shift in power.

The characters of Lily Bart (*The House of Mirth*, 1905) and Anna Leath (*The Reef*, 1912) share a connection—their fate can be determined and shaped by a single letter. These writing women are plot catalysts who reveal and challenge the lack of opportunities for 19th century women. Through writing and letters, the female characters are able to have an active role in making life choices rather than passively accepting their fates. With a few exceptions (Susan Warner and Harriet Beecher Stowe in the 1850s, Louisa May Alcott in the 1860s-1880s), it wasn't until the late 19th, early 20th century that a significant number of American women writers—foremost among them, Wharton—began to emerge.

When women writers did start publishing and circulating their work, they were often categorized as “sentimental,” lacking the authority of male writers. Eminent man of letters Nathaniel Hawthorne called the influx of American women authors a “damned mob of scribbling women” (Letter to Ticknor, 1855). The phrase struck a chord, and many women authors were viewed as illegitimate producers of work that was dismissed as unintelligent (Hoeller). Even Wharton herself had a rather critical view concerning other women's works: “All of Wharton's references to American women writers imply the taint of unacceptable sentimentalism. For Wharton, whose views of women writers reflected her views of women's lives in general, it was as women writing for women that they were most disadvantaged” (Waid, 8).

By using her novels to portray women in a realistic light, Wharton tried to break the sentimentalist stereotype. A closer examination of her own personal letters illustrates that she longed to be differentiated from Hawthorne's “damned mob of scribbling women.” Wharton's letters and fictional works show that she was particularly concerned with literary realism and the idea of portraying the truth (Waid). She yearned to be taken seriously and as Lynnette Carpenter comments, she possessed

“[an] awareness of a gender dimension to the relationship between letters and power” (68).

Letters as avenues for change are explored in Wharton’s 1905 novel, *The House of Mirth*. The social events that set up the novel’s structure are told through the alternating narration of Lawrence Selden and Lily Bart. The novel’s female protagonist, Lily Bart, is the main voice of the novel and yet seems to have the smallest say over what happens in her life. The opening scene in Selden’s library sets the stage for a novel that is very much defined by the role of writing within it. Women’s interactions with books and libraries reveal much about how they were considered intellectually inferior. Lily’s tentative examining of Selden’s bookshelf shows her own hesitancy concerning literature, and embodies women’s widespread apprehension to truly embrace their right to the academic world. “. . . She [Lily] lifted now one book and then another from the shelves, fluttering the pages between her fingers, while her drooping profile was outlined against the warm background of old bindings . . . ” (11). Lily’s status as a single, poor, marriageable woman without a husband or dependable family is drastically outlined against Selden’s extravagant independence. The discouraging image of her “drooping profile” is further accentuated by the “warm” bindings, representing Lawrence Selden’s many options for a bright future.

The dimness of Lily’s story is never more apparent than when compared with Selden’s. As Lily sits in Selden’s library surrounded by books, Lily not only represents her own story—but Edith Wharton’s and Eudora Welty’s and the stories of many other women who struggled to be heard and to be acknowledged as having an individual artistic identity. Gradually new spheres—writing and academics—opened to women, who were no longer confined to the “tidy drawing rooms” that epitomized the genteel and idle lives of women (Kaplan). By sharing in the realm of authorship, women writers in the early twentieth century had the chance to embrace new opportunities that were previously reserved for men, as well as incur the same risks of celebrity authorship (Kaplan). Opportunities for

Wharton would include a Pulitzer Prize for Literature for her 1912 novel, *The Age of Innocence*.

Each of Wharton's characters have contrasting interactions with writing which reveal the widespread disparity between women's opportunities and men's privilege. As Lily's dialogue with Selden continues, readers hear undertones of Selden's subconscious sense of entitlement. Even his casual attitude about buying books represents the prevalent 19th century idea of male privilege. Most women in the late 19th century didn't have a sense of entitlement when it came to writing, and instead of confidently choosing a book to read, Lily "flutter[s] the pages between her fingers" (11). As the conversation continues, Lily's questions further show how Selden's decision to marry is an option based on pleasure, while Lily's decision to marry is a necessary, nonnegotiable key to her survival.

She drew a sympathetic breath. "But do you mind enough—to marry to get out of it?"

Selden broke into a laugh. "God forbid!" he declared.

"Ah, there's the difference—a girl must, a man may if he chooses." (12)

Wharton's language reveals a sharp dissatisfaction over compulsory marriage for women's economic survival. Selden's library full of books and room of his own, symbolize his choices; he has the entire world at his fingertips, and his biggest dilemma seems to be choosing what he wants. The best chance Lily has at a promising future comes later in the novel, when she buys a bundle of letters from Mrs. Haffen. While the introduction of incriminating letters in *The House of Mirth* suggests that Lily is trapped, Wharton also uses letters to represent her potential escape. When Mrs. Haffen presents the love letters to Lily under the mistaken assumption that she wrote them, Lily gets her first chance to choose exactly what she wants. Although she eventually burns the letters for Selden's protection, there is a moment in *The House of Mirth* where Lily's main concern could have been herself.

Not only can Selden's future be changed by these letters,

“wrapped in dirty newspaper,” but Lily’s future can be changed as well. The blackmail letters metaphorically level the field; suddenly, Lily has almost the same freedom that Selden does. Candace Waid agrees, “Lily’s possession of the letters gives her a power which may be the source of . . . fear” (22). Once Lily buys the letters, she has a means of clearing her reputation and starting over. Her story is in her hands, and the ending depends on her course of action. While, ultimately, Lily chooses to destroy the letters, their role in *The House of Mirth* is undisputedly important; letters both reveal the accustomed lack of opportunities for women and symbolize the possibility of hope for a better future. Just as Wharton wrote that her own personal letters were a way of telling her side of the story, Wharton incorporates letters into her fictional works to illustrate the untold story of struggling women. Wharton uses letters to portray realistically the impact that women’s words, whether spoken or unspoken, have on their own destinies. Letters continue to play an important and similarly strong role in Wharton’s 1912 work, *The Reef*.

Wharton’s novel *The Reef* is much like *The House of Mirth* in the sense that letters shape the entire plot of the novel. Anna Leath’s opening telegram to her fiancé is what sets the story in motion: “Unexpected obstacle. Please don’t come till thirtieth. Anna” (1). Anna’s request for George Darrow to come home later changes her entire future. “. . . the train had hammered the words of the telegram into George Darrow’s ears, ringing every change of irony on its commonplace syllables” (5). When Darrow reads Anna’s words his attitude changes, and he decides to spend the day with Sophy, a woman he met on the train; the rest of the novel revolves around the aftershocks from this telegram. The life of Anna Leath, much like Lily Bart, is shaped and changed by letters. Anna, however, writes her own letters; it is her own words, and not the letters of another, that change her future. Through her letters, Anna is more vocal about what she wants than almost any other of Wharton’s female protagonists.

Even from the beginning of the novel, Anna seems to be

more in control of her future. Her correspondence with George Darrow and Sophy Viner sets the pace of the novel from the very first letter. The arrival of a character's letters set an implacable time frame that keeps the novel's plot moving forward. While *The Reef* has a thick plot, it mostly revolves around mental and psychological factors; the world Anna and Darrow inhabit is a delicate interpersonal and relational ecosystem that can be easily shaken. In the world of *The Reef*, even the smallest gesture, delay in action, or open door holds a host of narrative meaning.

When Anna first writes to her fiancé George Darrow to ask him to arrive home later, Darrow interprets her letter as communicating coldness. Feeling shunned, he takes advantage of the attention that Sophy gives him. Darrow convinces Sophy to stay in the city with him and telegram her future employer to let them know of the delay.

“But I must let them know I'm here. I must find out as soon as possible if they can have me.” She laid the pen down despairingly. “I never could write a telegram!” she sighed.

“Try a letter, then, and tell them you'll arrive tomorrow.”

This suggestion produced immediate relief, and she gave an energetic dab at the ink-bottle; but after another interval of uncertain scratching she paused again. (37)

This scene gives readers a telling glimpse into the representation of Sophy as a letter writer—and as a woman who is powerless over her own situation. Sophy's position as a governess is the only employment opportunity she has, which is why she is desperate to protect it. To satisfy her employers and remain in their good graces, all she has to do is write a telegram—but she cannot even manage to do that: “Oh, it's fearful! I don't know what on earth to say,” she reflects (37). As a woman who rarely writes, Sophy has no distinct voice of her own. She does not know what to say or how to say it, and that tells more about her upbringing and social standing than any words ever could. Later Sophy even says, “I wish I weren't such an idiot about

writing: all the words get frightened and scurry away when I try to catch them” (37). In contrast to Anna’s sure letters, sense of control, and financial stability, Sophy’s words are scattered. In this passage, Wharton creates the image of a young woman trying to run after letters—and opportunities—that she will never fully catch.

George Darrow observes Sophy’s struggles and “smile[s]” at her. He doesn’t offer any help or present a solution; in fact, he seems amused by her anxiety and poor writing abilities. Carpenter explains that, “the theft of women’s language by men is a crime that returns to haunt Wharton’s fiction” (68). By not helping her write or reassuring her abilities, Darrow gloats in his male privilege. The passage has strong echoes of Wharton’s own feelings of helplessness at being regarded as a “blundering little girl.” The character of Sophy has traces of Wharton’s own feelings of powerlessness, once again accentuated by the privilege of Wharton’s male characters.

Much like Lawrence Selden, Darrow has many options for his future. He could marry Anna or Sophy, or he could easily remain single; much like Selden, his biggest dilemma seems to be deciding what he wants. Similar to Selden’s sense of entitlement regarding his library, Darrow does not realize how much he takes his own independence for granted. Both men have the space to explore freely and celebrate their intellectuality. The library represents the idea that Selden and Darrow’s words are important; just as they have a place to keep their books, the world at large has a place for their ideas. By juxtaposing Sophy and Darrow, Wharton highlights the oppression of women’s voices by exposing men’s overt privilege.

Darrow ponders the differences between Anna and Sophy while Sophy anxiously despairs about her writing. Instead of trying to help her craft a telegram, he stands afar and passively observes her palpable insecurities.

She was really powerless to put her thoughts in writing, and the inability seemed characteristic of her quick impressionable mind . . . He thought of Anna Leath’s letters, or rather of the few he had received, years ago, from the

girl who had been Anna Summers. He saw the slender firm strokes of the pen, recalled the clear structure of the phrases . . . (38)

Again, Sophy's loss for words foreshadows her lack of a future. In a novel in which the plot revolves around letters, Sophy's inability to put her thoughts into writing leaves her in the margins of the action. For the rest of the novel, choices are made for her and not by her. Unlike Anna's "slender firm strokes of the pen" that symbolize certainty and "clear structure of the phrases"—Sophy is completely malleable and "impressionable." Her desires are continually discouraged or manipulated by the words of Darrow; his words nearly always overpower her own.

Unlike Sophy, Anna is not uncomfortable with letters. She writes well and maintains her own sense of power throughout actions that could have easily made her the victim. When Darrow ignored her letters, was unfaithful, and broke his promise of engagement, Anna still wanted to know about his actions:

In Mrs. Leath's hand was the letter which had opened her eyes to these things, and a smile rose to her lips at the mere feeling of the paper between her fingers . . . She felt, saw, breathed the shining world as though a thin impenetrable veil had suddenly been removed from it. (69)

Anna Leath would rather know the truth about Darrow's infidelity than maintain the facade that nothing is wrong. Although this letter holds devastating truth, it doesn't provide a perfect escape for Anna Leath—it simply provides her with enough knowledge to make her own decisions, another example of Wharton's eschewing sentimentalism.

Edith Wharton's commitment to realism is perhaps most significantly seen in her rejection of stereotypical, contrived endings. As she writes in a personal letter to Barrett Wendall in 1899, ". . . I don't mind being called 'cynical & depressing' by the sentimentalists, as long as those who see the 'inherences' recognize my ability to see them too" (Lewis, 39). Wharton's words imply that it did not make sense to write frivolous fiction



that other women could use as a means of escapism, while she thought the greatest act of escape was found in confronting the truth about women's lack of opportunities. Wharton challenges women readers to view reality and make decisions that are in their best interests, refusing to delude readers with a happy ending since most of them would have no such luxury. These characters are simple representations of a much more complex issue concerning a male-dominated society that supported the oppression of women in intellectual, literary, and professional spheres.

Although letters do not save Lily Bart, Anna Leath, or Sophy Viner, they provide them with sufficient knowledge to make their own decisions. While Wharton refuses to write sentimental fiction, the realistic letters of her female characters help shape their fates. Thus, Wharton portrays words as having the potential to rescue. The letters of her characters and Wharton's own letters reveal the stories of women who long for their voices to be heard. After being silenced and marginalized for so long, 19th century female readers and writers alike deserved to realize finally the power hidden within their own words.

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