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Physical Beauty of Edith Wharton

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Abstract: This paper focus on a selected works of Edith Wharton an American novelist, short-story writer and poet. This paper examines the novels *The House of Mirth, The Custom of The Country, The Reef, The Fruit of the Tree, and The Age of Innocence* with the Character effect from Pam Morries's *Realism.* This paper focus on relevance of the character effect on selected novels.
Key Words- Edith Wharton, Physical Beauty

True realism consists in revealing the surprising things which habit keeps covered and prevents us from seeing.
- JEAN COCTEAU

Realism is the art of portraying things truthfully without any speculation or supernaturality. Realism in literature refers to the representation of the mundane activities of day to day life without any sugar coating or artificialness. Edith Wharton incorporates in her works the late nineteenth century's realistic American life by focusing on the conventions and manners of the society. Pam Morris probes into Realism in literary works by focusing on three effects – Empirical Effect, Truth Effect and Character Effect. The present paper deals with the Character Effect described by Pam Morris in his book *Realism* as, "The 'character effect' is probably, for many readers, the primary means of entry into a fictional world of a novel, or at least the main vehicle for effecting the willing suspension of disbelief" (113). He further states that the Character Effect is achieved through the representation of physical beauty, individuality and the use of voice, focalization techniques.

Pam Morris elaborates further that realism through Character Effect is put forth through "physical beauty, dignity of demeanour, a somewhat high-minded, even puritan, disregard for ostentation of dress, the suggestion of moral seriousness connoted by the religious associations
. . ." (114) and its likeness. Physical Beauty is the physical attractiveness which can be a person's figure, features or complexion. It's everything about external beauty not internal. Physical beauty as a term applies to all things both living and innate. Realism is further perpetuated by individuality of a person. Pam Morris explains it as the, "characters schemes that support the notion of individuality that are produced and circulated by various artistic and cultural conventions" (114). Individualism is a focal point of American literary culture. The concept of individualism is originated from ancient Greek Philosophy, the religious Reformation and European Renaissance. Individuality is the congeries of grade, class, qualities and characteristics that distinguish one person or thing from the other. The word individuality, derives from 1650s medieval Latin word individual. It refers to the condition of existing as an individual or being an individual. Individualism as a term denotes the quality of being an individual or individuality. Individualism makes a person to hold on to one's own interests even amidst their social and private life.

The codes of physical beauty is explained and explored to bring out the realistic perspective of Edith Wharton's selected works. Physical beauty is the qualities of an individual that can be viewed by another person. It is the desirable attributes of an individual. Physical beauty is the degree of an individual's attractiveness that is pleasing in nature. In literature, physical beauty plays an important part of the characters. Physical beauty is important for making a literary work real. The researcher in the present paper points out how Edith Wharton uses physical beauty to ascertain realism in her works.

Edith Wharton in her book *The House of Mirth* introduces the protagonist Lily Bart and her relationship with Selden by stressing on her physical beauty. When Selden takes on Lily Bart along with him, the stress is on her beauty, "Miss Bart was a figure to arrest even the suburban traveller rushing to his last train" (3). Her beauty and speciality is highlighted by contrasting her with others:

> He led her through the throng of returning holiday-makers, past sallow- faced girls in

> preposterous hats, and flat-chested women struggling with paper bundles and palm-leaf fans. Was it possible that she belonged to the same race? The dinginess, the crudity of this average section of womanhood made him feel how highly specialized she was. (5)

Lily Bart's closeness with Selden makes him aware of her beautiful features:

> Selden was conscious of taking a luxurious pleasure in her nearness: in the modelling of her little ear, the crisp upward wave of her hair—was it ever so slightly brightened by art?—and the thick planting of her straight black lashes. Everything about her was at once vigorous and exquisite, at once strong and fine. He had a confused sense that she must have cost a great deal to make, that a great many dull and ugly people must, in some mysterious way, have been sacrificed to produce her. He was aware that the qualities distinguishing her from the herd of her sex were chiefly external: as though a fine glaze of beauty and fastidiousness had been applied to vulgar clay. (05-06)

By raising her in the pedestal of beauty Selden thinks of himself as lucky. Edith Wharton brings out the contrasts that existed in the society by describing the physicality of a common char – woman:

> There was no one in sight, however, but a char-woman who was scrubbing the stairs. Her own stout person and its surrounding implements took up so much room that Lily, to pass her, had to gather up her skirts and brush against the wall. As she did so, the woman paused in her work and looked up curiously, resting her clenched red fists on the wet cloth she had just drawn from her pail. She had a broad sallow face, slightly pitted with small-pox, and thin straw- coloured hair through which her scalp shone unpleasantly. (14-15)

By contrasting the common characters as sallow faces girls and flat chested, slightly pitted women with Lily Bart as one whose ears were modelled, hair that was waved and a beauty that must have been obtained by sacrificing many dull and ugly people, Edith Wharton brings out the contrast that existed between the common and the elite.

When Lily Bart is worried about her debt incurred because of her gambling, the sober mood is reflected in the description of her physical beauty as well, "As she sat before the mirror brushing her hair, her face looked hollow and pale, and she was frightened by two little lines near her mouth, faint flaws in the smooth curve of the cheek" (31). Her failure in gambling is reflected in the flaws of her beauty which is an indication of the passage of time and fortune. This seemed as an injustice for Lily Bart, "it seemed an added injustice that petty cares should leave a trace on the beauty which was her only defence against them. But the odious things were there, and remained with her" (32).

The relationship between Lily Bart's parents is brought out by Edith Wharton and the discrepancies that existed between them is laid out by contrasting their physical appearances:

> Lily Bart's first memories - Ruling the turbulent element called home was the vigorous and determined figure of a mother still young enough to dance her ball-dresses to rags, while the hazy outline of a neutral-tinted father filled an intermediate space between the butler and the man who came to wind the clocks.
>
> Even to the eyes of infancy, Mrs. Hudson Bart had appeared young; but Lily could not recall the time when her father had not been bald and slightly stooping, with streaks of grey in his hair, and a tired walk. It was a shock to her to learn afterward that he was but two years older than her mother. (33)

Lily Bart was brought up by her mother that physical appearance is all that mattered, "she had been brought up in the faith that, whatever it cost, one must have a good cook, and be what Mrs. Bart called decently dressed" (34). She was counseled and brought up stressing on the importance of beauty:

> To a less illuminated intelligence Mrs. Bart's counsels might have been dangerous; but Lily understood that beauty is only the raw material of conquest, and that to convert it into success other arts are required. She knew that to betray any sense of superiority was a subtler form of the stupidity her mother denounced, and it did not take her long to learn that a beauty needs more tact than the possessor of an average set of features.(39)

Even the acquaintances of Lily Bart are described contrasting their beauty:

> In reality, the two differed from each other as much as they differed from the object of their mutual contemplation. Miss Farish's heart was a fountain of tender illusions, Miss Stepney's a precise register of facts as manifested in their relation to herself. (142)

Lily Bart was cornered by her gambling debt and there was no escape for her. However the Dorset's invitation to move out of New York came as a blessing in disguise for her and she considers it a true beauty:

> How beautiful it was—and how she loved beauty! She had always felt that her sensibility in this direction made up for certain obtusenesses of feeling of which she was less proud; and during the last three months she had indulged it passionately. The Dorsets' invitation to go abroad with them had come as an almost miraculous release from crushing difficulties. (227)

Lily Bart's beauty attracted many and her employer Rosedale was smitten by her beauty. He wanted

favours from Lily Bart in exchange for financial helps. Lily Bart though she was in dire need of money didn't oblige to it. This reveals the inner beauty of Lily Bart as well. Rosedale was bound by her beauty and Edith Wharton explains it as:

> As she leaned back before him, her lids drooping in utter lassitude, though the first warm draught already tinged her face with returning life, Rosedale was seized afresh by the poignant surprise of her beauty. The dark pencilling of fatigue under her eyes, the morbid blue-veined pallour of the temples, brought out the brightness of her hair and lips, as though all her ebbing vitality were centered there. Against the dull chocolate-coloured background of the restaurant, the purity of her head stood out as it had never done in the most brightly-lit ball-room. He looked at her with a startled uncomfortable feeling, as though her beauty were a forgotten enemy that had lain in ambush and now sprang out on him unawares. (336-337)

In the end when Lily Bart's life came to an end, Edith Wharton describes her beauty to add in a realistic feel to the character of Lily Bart:

> Selden was hardly conscious of what she said. He stood looking down on the sleeping face which seemed to lie like a delicate impalpable mask over the living lineaments he had known. He felt that the real Lily was still there, close to him, yet invisible and inaccessible. (379)

Edith Wharton by describing the physical beauty of Lily Bart brings her alive in the minds of the readers. By describing her physical beauty, Edith Wharton has emphasized the Character Effect to ring in realism in her work *The House of Mirth*.

Edith Wharton's another novel *The Fruit of the Tree* also has ample evidences wherein she has used physical beauty to add depth to her characters. By contrasting the look of Becky during her work hours and later, Edith Wharton presents realistically the life of commons. Amherst saw Becky first during her work hour as a nurse and later finds her completely different after work hours:

> She was, in fact, as he now noticed, still young enough to dislike being excused for her youth. In her severe uniform of blue linen, her dusky skin darkened by the nurse's cap, and by the pale background of the hospital walls, she had seemed older, more competent and experienced; but he now saw how fresh was the pale curve of her cheek, and how smooth the brow clasped in close waves of hair. (6)

This highlights realistically the life of a common American woman and Edith Wharton points out that she is valued based on her looks. Amherst finds Becky as a good deal, "He glanced at her small determined profile under its dark roll of hair, and said, half to himself: "That might be a good deal"" (6). Edith Wharton uses physical beauty to describe the toils that one faces in life. Amherst's mother and the tough situations that life imposed on her is brought out by describing the lines in her face that marks her aging and experience as well:

> She was a wonderfully compact and active creature, with face so young and hair so white that she looked as unreal as a stage mother till a close view revealed the fine lines that experience had drawn about her mouth and eyes. The eyes themselves, brightly black and glancing, had none of the veiled depths of her son's gaze. Their look was outward, on a world which had dealt her hard blows and few favours, but in which her interest was still fresh, amused and unabated. (12)

Amherst's mother looked young but the hard blows of life that she had survived is depicted through the lines in her face.

Amherst was the manager of the Westmore Mills. The owner Mr. Westmore had recently passed away and his widowed wife Bessy Westmore came back from New York to look into the matters of the Westmore Mills. Bessy Westmore is described by Edith Wharton by emphasizing on her physical appearance:

> Miss Brent and Amherst approached; their advance was checked by a group of persons who were just descending from two carriages at the door.
> The lamp-light showed every detail of dress and countenance in the party . . . "Why, that must be her party arriving!" Miss Brent exclaimed; and as she spoke the younger of the two ladies, turning back to her maid, exposed to the glare of the electric light a fair pale face shadowed by the projection of her widow's veil. "Is that Bessy Westmore?" Miss Brent whispered. (10)

By describing the main character Bessy Westmore using her physical appearance, Edith Wharton brings to light the important role physical appearance plays in characterization. Even the vibes between Amherst and Bessy Westmore is described as:

> Mrs. Westmore's beauty was like a blinding light abruptly turned on eyes subdued to obscurity. As he spoke, his glance passed from her face to her hair, and remained caught in its meshes. He had never seen such hair—it did not seem to grow in the usual orderly way, but bubbled up all over her head in independent clusters of brightness, breaking, about the brow, the temples, the nape, into little irrelevant waves and eddies of light, with dusky hollows of softness where the hand might plunge. It takes but the throb of a nerve to carry such a complex impression from the eye to the mind, but the object of the throb had perhaps felt the

> electric flash of its passage, for her colour rose while Amherst spoke. (19)

Their initial feelings are vividly captured citing Bessy Westmore's beauty and the change in her color, her blushing acts as an affirmation to Amherst's looks.

The male protagonist Amherst is angered after spotting black pieces of cloth, a mourning emblem, tied to the cards in his factory. He raises the question to the workers and one of them discloses that the mourning cloth has been tied for the sake of a worker Dillon whose hand was badly injured after an accident at the factory. Edith Wharton at this juncture uses the physical description to mark the change in Amherst's reaction to the event and gives the description of the worker to give depth to the situation:

> Amherst had reddened to the roots of his hair. He knew in a flash what the token signified, and the sight stirred his pity; but it also jarred on his strong sense of discipline, and he turned sternly to the operatives. "What does this mean?" There was a short silence; then one of the hands, a thin bent man with mystic eyes, raised his head and spoke. (26)

Edith Warton portrays Bessy Westmore, the owner of the mill, as a woman who cares for the welfare of others. This quality is brought out by citing the pities evident in her eyes when she learns about Dillon's accident, "But Mrs. Westmore's face was close to his: he saw the pity in her eyes, and feared, if he checked its expression, that he might never again have the chance of calling it forth" (). Bessy Westmore not only pities for the worker Dillon but also goes to the hospital to check on him. On the way to the hospital Amherst on one hand notices the caring side of Bessy Westmore through her enquiries of Dillon while on the other end her beauty distracts him and he checks on his owner Bessy Westmore's features marking the relationship that is about to set the pace of the plot:

> Amherst left this inference to work itself out in her mind, contenting himself, as they drove back to Hanaford, with answering her questions about Dillon's family, the ages of his children, and his wife's health. Her enquiries, he noticed, did not extend from the particular to the general: her curiosity, as yet, was too purely personal and emotional to lead to any larger consideration of the question. But this larger view might grow out of the investigation of Dillon's case; and meanwhile Amherst's own purposes were momentarily lost in the sweet confusion of feeling her near him—of seeing the exquisite grain of her skin, the way her lashes grew out of a dusky line on the edge of the white lids, the way her hair, stealing in spirals of light from brow to ear, wavered off into a fruity down on the edge of the cheek. (43-44)

Edith Warton brings out the importance of the character to the plot through the description of their physical beauty. While the main character's physical beauty description gains prominence, the less important characters are depicted with fluid features aligning it with their importance in the plot. One such character is Justice Brent, a nurse in the novel. She is less significant and this is marked with her fluid and changing character which the narrator describes as:

> As she spoke, she stretched her arms above her head, with a gesture revealing the suppleness of her slim young frame, but also its tenuity of structure—the frailness of throat and shoulders, and the play of bones in the delicate neck. Justine Brent had one of those imponderable bodies that seem a mere pinch of matter shot through with light and colour. Though she did not flush easily, auroral lights ran under her clear skin, were lost in the shadows of her hair, and broke again in her eyes; and her voice seemed to shoot light too, as though her smile flashed back from her words as they fell—all her features being so fluid and changeful that the one solid thing about her was the massing of dense black hair which clasped her face like the noble metal of some antique bust. (58)

Another minor character Louis Duplain is also attributed with his appearance. The description of the daily activities through the description of physical beauty makes the characters even more realistic. Louis Duplain is an overseer who is boarding with Mrs Amherst. When Amherst brings Bessy Westmore and Mr. Tredegar to his house to meet his mother, Edith Wharton adds on the description of his daily chore like washing the utensils with an additional info on his arms which helps the readers to relate to and imbibe the scene:

> Duplain was in the passage; he had just come out of the kitchen, and the fact that he had been washing his hands in the sink was made evident by his rolled- back shirt-sleeves, and by the shiny redness of the knuckles he was running through his stiff black hair. (29)

In due course time, Amherst and Bessy Westmore get married. Once during their conversation Bessy Westmore argues that she didn't want to be treated like a naïve and the author establishes her supremacy through her stroking of her hair, "She started upright, the light masses of her hair floating about her like silken sea-weed lifted on an invisible tide. "Don't talk like that! I can't endure to be humoured like a baby" (). Another important character is Dr. Wyant who turns out as the blackmailer when he became aware of Becky's act regarding Bessy. Dr. Wyant is introduced as a person with deceptive features which is mentioned as:

> His gesture uncovered the close-curling hair of a small delicately-finished head just saved from effeminacy by the vigorous jut of heavy eye-brows meeting above full grey eyes. The eyes again, at first sight, might have struck one as too expressive, or as expressing things too purely

> decorative for the purposes of a young country doctor with a growing practice; but this estimate was corrected by an unexpected abruptness in their owner's voice and manner.

Bessy Westmore had a daughter Cecily from her first marriage and Cecily is described as, “The sun beamed full on their ledge from a sky of misty blue, and she had thrown aside her hat, uncovering her thick waves of hair, blue-black in the hollows, with warm rusty edges where they took the light” (118).

Once Amherst on an early morning accompanies Justine and his stepdaughter Cicely on their expedition to a distant swamp in search of a rare native orchid. After finding the orchids, the group take rest on the grass and have their picnic- jam and milk- and enjoy the natural scenery. The scenery is described along with mentions of the beauty of Cecily tomake it even more lively:

> The sun beamed full on their ledge from a sky of misty blue, and she had thrown aside her hat, uncovering her thick waves of hair, blue-black in the hollows, with warm rusty edges where they took the light. Cicely dragged down a plumy spray of traveller's joy and wound it above her friend's forehead; and thus wreathed, with her bright pallour relieved against the dusky autumn tints, Justine looked like a wood-spirit who had absorbed into herself the last golden juices of the year. (118)

Towards the end of his unexpected expedition and picnic with Justice and Cicely, Amherst observes Cicely, who is beckoning him to accompany her in following a squirrel. The scene as well as Cicely’s features reminds him of a three-year-old memory when he and Bessy tracked the grey squirrel under the snowy beeches and thinks how bitter the memory has turned now:

> As she crouched there, with head thrown back, and sparkling lips and eyes, her fair hair—of her mother's very hue—making a shining haze about her face, Amherst recalled the winter evening at Hopewood, when he and Bessy had tracked the grey squirrel under the snowy beeches. Scarcely three years ago— and how bitter memory had turned! A chilly cloud spread over his spirit, reducing everything once more to the leaden hue of reality. (119)

In the plot, Bessy Westmore met with a drastic accident. She went horse riding and got herself involved in a tragic accident. The aftermath of the goric accident is narrated by Becky who happens to be at Bessy’s sitting room still struck by the pitiful situation in which she finds Bessy in and the fear of how it may end. Justine is portrayed as shaking with fear for the life of Bessy who met with a horse accident and injured her spine:

> She knew the horror of it now—and she knew also that her self-enforced exile from the sick-room was a hundred times worse. To stand there, knowing, with each tick of the clock, what was being said and done within—how the great luxurious room, with its pale draperies and scented cushions, and the hundred pretty trifles strewing the lace toilet-table and the delicate old furniture, was being swept bare, cleared for action like a ship's deck, drearily garnished with rows of instruments, rolls of medicated cotton, oiled silk, bottles, bandages, water-pillows—all the grim paraphernalia of the awful rites of pain: to know this, and to be able to call up with torturing vividness that poor pale face on the pillows, vague-eyed, expressionless, perhaps, as she had last seen it, or—worse yet—stirred already with the first creeping pangs of consciousness: to have these images slowly, deliberately burn themselves into her brain, and to be aware, at the same time, of that underlying moral disaster, of which the accident seemed the monstrous outward symbol—ah, this was worse than anything she had ever dreamed! (150)

Through this passage Edith Warton sets in the mind of the readers the horridness of Bessy’s fate. Later Bessy dies and Becky marries Amherst. When she meets Dr. Wyant who threatens her that he knew that Bessy died of Morphine overdose, Becky is worried. Her worriedness is brought out in her mannerism as, “She roused herself, putting her hands to her hair. "Yes, I know—I forgot," she murmured, longing to feel his arms about her, but standing rooted to the ground, unable to move an inch nearer” (189).

When Amherst learns that Becky administered the morphine overdose on Bessy, he is enraged. To distance himself from her so that the Westmores aren’t enraged, he separates himself from her. Amherst meets Justine at a private hospital in New York. Meeting her for the first time after their estrangement, Amherst finds that Justine has become thinner than how she was when he first met her at Hope hospital:

> He noticed that she had grown thinner than ever, or rather that her thinness, which had formerly had a healthy reed-like strength, now suggested fatigue and languor. And her face was spent, extinguished—the very eyes were lifeless. All her vitality seemed to have withdrawn itself into the arch of dense black hair which still clasped her forehead like the noble metal of some antique bust. (240)

Amherst continues to observe the changes in Justine’s features as they sit down at the hospital to talk:

> The impossibility of giving free rein to his feelings developed in Amherst an unwanted intensity of perception, as though a sixth sense had suddenly emerged to take the place of those he could not use. And with this new-made faculty he seemed to gather up, and absorb into himself, as he had never done in their hours of closest communion, every detail of his wife's

> person, of her face and hands and gestures. He noticed how her full upper lids, of the tint of yellowish ivory, had a slight bluish discolouration, and how little thread-like blue veins ran across her temples to the roots of her hair. The emaciation of her face, and the hollow shades beneath her cheek-bones, made her mouth seem redder and fuller, though a little line on each side, where it joined the cheek, gave it a tragic droop. And her hands! When her fingers met his he recalled having once picked up, in the winter woods, the little feather-light skeleton of a frozen bird—and that was what her touch was like. (239-240)

As time passes, the couple are reunited and they return to Hanaford. The novel ends as Becky reunites with Amherst. They organise a function to open a recreational center for their mill workers and Becky studies her husband's appearance and compares it to their first meeting at Hope hospital. She wonders how much he has changed:

> He held himself straight, the heavy locks thrown back from his forehead, one hand resting on the table beside him, the other grasping a folded blue-print which the architect of the building had just advanced to give him. As he stood there, Justine recalled her first sight of him in the Hope Hospital, five years earlier—was it only five years? They had dealt deep strokes to his face, hollowing the eye-sockets, accentuating the strong modelling of nose and chin, fixing the lines between the brows; but every touch had a meaning—it was not the languid hand of time which had remade his features, but the sharp chisel of thought and action. (245)

Edith Warton in *The Fruit of the Tree* creates a link with the readers and makes them a part of it by realistically portraying the characters and the situation involved. The use of physical beauty as a description for characterization makes it realistic and relatable.

The next novel *The Reef* also provides ample examples to cite the use of physical beauty by Edith Wharton to add in realism in her fictional work. George Darrow, the male protagonist, recalls the character and physical attributes of his former lover Anna Leath's late husband Fraser Leath, while he is on his way to join her in France. He thinks about Fraser when he is

standing at the train station, not knowing whether or not to board the ship to France after he received a telegram from Mrs Leath telling him to not come now and wait for some more days:

> While he pushed on in the wake of his luggage his thoughts slipped back into the old groove. He had once or twice run across the man whom Anna Summers had preferred to him, and since he had met her again he had been exercising his imagination on the picture of what her married life must have been. Her husband had struck him as a characteristic specimen of the kind of American as to whom one is not quite clear whether he lives in Europe in order to cultivate an art,or cultivates an art as a pretext for living in Europe. Mr. Leath's art was water- colour painting, but he practised it furtively, almost clandestinely, with the disdain of a man of the world for anything bordering on the professional, while he devoted himself more openly, and with religious seriousness, to the collection of enamelled snuff-boxes. He was blond and well-dressed, with the physical distinction that comes from having a straight figure, a thin nose, and the habit of looking slightly disgusted—as who should not, in a world where authentic snuff-boxes were growing daily harder to find, and the market was flooded with flagrant forgeries? (4)

Edith Warton creates an estimation of Mr. Leath's character and paints his mind through his description of his former lover's late husband. Also, another character George Darrow gives a description of the physical appearance of Sophy Viner. In George Darrow's view point of Sophy Viner whom he accidentally met at the harbor seems familiar and while he is contemplating whether or not to proceed with his trip to France, Darrow finds Viner's face to be familiar to him but is unable to recall her identity or where and when he met her, "Her lifted face, fresh and flushed in the driving rain, woke in him a memory of having seen it at a distant time and in a vaguely unsympathetic setting; but it was no moment to follow up such clues, and the face was obviously one to make its way on its own merits" (06). Unsure of his further plans, he decides to help her find her trunk all the while trying to recall who she is and where he had met her before:

> He picked up his companion's bundles, and offered her an arm which enabled her to press her slight person more closely under his umbrella; and as, thus linked, they beat their way back to the platform, pulled together and apart like marionettes on the wires of the wind, he continued to wonder where he could have seen her. He had immediately classed her as a compatriot; her small nose, her clear tints, a kind of sketchy delicacy in her face, as though she had been brightly but lightly washed in with water-colour, all confirmed the evidence of her high sweet voice and of her quick incessant gestures. She was clearly an American, but with the loose native quality strained through a closer woof of manners: the composite product of an enquiring and adaptable race. All this, however, did not help him to fit a name to her, for just such instances were perpetually pouring through the London Embassy, and the etched and angular American was becoming rarer than the fluid type. (7)

Through this detailed description Edith Wharton makes the readers an active participant of the world she creates in her novel. George Darrow is a character who accesses the features of women on seeing them. Even during a common visit to a restaurant, his eyes feast and flirt with the women who appear therein:

> Miss Viner's vagrant trunk had finally found its way to its owner; and, clad in such modest splendor as it furnished, she shone at Darrow across their restaurant table. In the reaction of his wounded vanity he found her prettier and more interesting than before. Her dress, sloping away from the throat, showed the graceful set of her head on its slender neck, and the wide brim of her hat arched above her hair like a dusky halo. Pleasure danced in her eyes and on her lips, and as she shone on him between the candle-shades Darrow felt that he should not be at all sorry to be seen with her in public. He even sent a careless glance about him in the vague hope that it might fall on an acquaintance. (19)

This character of George Darrow is counteracted when Anna Leath judges George Darrow by accessing his appearance, "She looked at him and he faced her steadily. The light was full on his pleasantly-browned face, his grey eyes, his frank white forehead. She noticed for the first time a seal-ring in a setting of twisted silver on the hand he had kept on hers" (43). The author further elaborates on what goes on in Anna Leath's mind about George Darrow as she envisions a future with him:

> In some undefinable way she had become aware, without turning her head, that he was steeped in the sense of her nearness, absorbed in contemplating the details of her face and dress; and the discovery made the words throng to her lips. She felt herself speak with ease, authority, conviction. She said to herself: "He doesn't care what I say—it's enough that I say it—even if it's stupid he'll like me better for it..." She knew that every inflexion of her voice, every gesture, every characteristic of her person—its very defects, the fact that her forehead was too high, that her eyes were not large enough, that her hands, though slender, were not small, and that the fingers did not taper—she knew that these deficiencies were so many channels through which her influence streamed to him; that she pleased him in spite of them, perhaps because of them; that he wanted her as she was, and not as she would have liked to be; and for the first time she felt in her veins the security and lightness of happy love. (45)

Thus in the novel *The Reef* Edith Warton characterises George Darrow and Anna Leath through the description of their physical beauty.

Edith Warton begins the next novel in study *The Custom of the Country* with the depiction of the protagonist Undine Spragg's and his mother Mrs Spragg. The description of their hotel room in New York city in the novel's opening scene gives the readers a peek into the life and lifestyle of that period. The realistic, raw and absolute depiction creates an involvement in the readers:

> Mrs. Spragg and her visitor were enthroned in two heavy gilt armchairs in one of the private drawing-rooms of the Hotel Stentorian. The Spragg rooms were known as one of the Looey suites, and the drawing-room walls, above their wainscoting of highly-varnished mahogany, were hung with salmon-pink damask and adorned with oval portraits of Marie Antoinette and the Princess de Lamballe. In the centre of the florid carpet a gilt table with a top of Mexican onyx sustained a palm in a gilt basket tied with a pink bow. But for this ornament, and a copy of "The Hound of the Baskervilles" which lay beside it, the room showed no traces of human use, and Mrs.Spragg herself wore as complete an air of detachment as if she had been a wax figure in a show- window. Her attire was fashionable enough to justify such a post, and her pale soft-cheeked face, with puffy eye-lids and drooping mouth, suggested a partially-melted wax figure which had run to double-chin. (2)

Edith Warton continues her description of the protagonist Undine Spragg's physical features. At the Spragg's hotel room in the opening scene when they receive a letter from Marvell's sister Laura Fairford inviting Undine to dine with her, Undine turns around and Edith Warton expresses her youth by describing her physical beauty.

When Mrs Spragg learns from her husband that he met one Elmer Moffatt who was previously engaged to their daughter Undine in the city, she trembles, “"Oh, Abner!" A wave of almost physical apprehension passed over Mrs. Spragg. Her jewelled hands trembled inher black brocade lap, and the pulpy curves of her face collapsed as if it were a pricked balloon” (7). The protagonist Undine's physical beauty is further narrated Undine looks for a dress to wear to the dinner arranged by Laura Fairford. Donning one of her gowns with the help of her maid Celeste, Undine admires herself in the mirror and the narrator describes her features to the readers as:

> "You can go, Celeste—I'll take off the dress myself," she said: and when Celeste had passed out, laden withdiscarded finery. Undine bolted her door, dragged the tall pier-glass forward and, rummaging in a drawer for fanand gloves, swept to a seat before the mirror with the air of a lady arriving at an evening party. Celeste, before leaving, had drawn down the blinds and turned on the electric light, and the white and gold room, with its blazing wall-brackets, formed a sufficiently brilliant background to carry out the illusion. So untempered a glarewould have been destructive to all half-tones and subtleties of modelling; but Undine's beauty was as vivid, and -+
> 6almost as crude, as the brightness suffusing it. Her black brows, her reddish- tawny hair and the pure red andwhite of her complexion defied the searching decomposing radiance: she might have been some fabled creature whose home was in a beam of light.(8)

Furthermore Undine's features are further elaborated when she admires herself in the mirror and assesses her features. Through her Edith Warton brings out the fashion sense that was prevalent in that age:

> She therefore watched herself approvingly, admiring the light on her hair, the flash of teeth between her smiling lips, the pure shadows of her throat and shoulders as she passed from one attitude to another. Only one fact disturbed her: there was a hint of too much fulness in the curves of her neck and in the spring of her hips. She was tall enough to carry off a little extra weight, but excessive slimness was the fashion, and she shuddered at the thought that she might someday deviate from the perpendicular. (8)

Also the relationship between father and daughter and their conversation using their eyes is brought out when Undine announces to her father about the dinner invitation she received from Mrs Fairford and then Undine plunges her eyes in the eyes of her father in an attempt to persuade him to buy her a new dress to wear to the dinner, “Undine threw back her head, plunging her eyes in his, and pressing so close that to his tired elderly sight her facewas a mere bright blur” (11). The importance of beauty in the minds of the women of that age is brought out when Undine compares herself with another woman Miss Wincher and describes the features of her from her own point of view during their stay at a resort in Virginia during a summer vacation:

> Undine was much handsomer than Miss Wincher, but she saw at a glance that she did not know how to use her beauty as the other used her plainness. She was exasperated too, by the discovery that Miss Wincher seemed not only unconscious of any possible rivalry between them, but actually unaware of her existence. Listless, long-faced, supercilious, the young lady from Washington sat apart reading novels or playing solitaire with her parents. (19)

After Undine's marriage, when Ralph was waiting for Undine at their home after the latter missed their son's birthday party, he observes the dark street through the window and looks on either sides of their house for signs of his wife. Then he sees Undine coming in Peter Van Degan's car. Here Edith Warton mentions Undine through her physical beauty:

> By the light of the street lamp he recognized his wife as she sprang out and detected a familiar silhouette in her companion's fur-coated figure. Then the motor flew on and Undine ran up the steps. Ralph went out on the landing. He

> saw her coming up quickly, as if to reach her room unperceived; but when she caught sight of him she stopped, her head thrownback and the light falling on her blown hair and glowing face.(76)

Edith Wharton uses physical beauty to identify a person before their participation in the plot. When a minor character Clare Van Degan questions Ralph Marvell at the opera about whom he was speaking with, he addresses the unknown person as red-faced man who happens to be Elmer Moffatt, “"Who's the funny man with the red face talking to Miss Spragg?"(36). Also, when Chelles, who later marries Undine, meets her for the first time, as he doesn’t know her, he addresses her as the fair-haired lady, “Who's the lady over there—fair-haired, in white— the one who's just come in with the red-faced man? They seem to be with a party of your compatriots” (96). Also, it was the common practice to ascertain a person from their looks and this culture is evident when after the dinner at the Marvells’ residence after Ralph and Undine’s engagement, Undine assesses the appearance and actions of Laura Fairford’s friend Mr Bowen as:

> The party, therefore, consisted only of Undine and Ralph, with Mrs. Fairford and her attendant friend. Undine vaguely wondered why the grave and grey- haired Mr. Bowen formed so invariable a part of that lady's train; but she concluded that it was the York custom for married ladies to have gentlemen "'round" (as girls had in Apex), and that Mr. Bowen was the sole survivor of Laura Fairford's earlier triumphs. (33)

Edith Warton expresses the mood of the characters by describing their beautiful features. Undine is elated after Ralph agrees to take her to Switzerland when she complains that she can no longer stay in the stuffy hotel rooms in Europe. Her happy and elated mind is described by mentioning her features, “She was on her feet in a flash, her face alight, her hair waving and floating about her as though it rose on her happy heart-beats” (54). Thus in her work *The Custom of the Country* Edith Wharton uses physical beauty to describe a person, ascertain them and also to identify the unknown ones.

In her next novel, *The Age of Innocence*, physical beauty finds prominence. The novel begins as the male protagonist Newland Archer joins his friends at an opera box in the Academy of Music in New York. One of his friends, Lawrence Lefferts makes an exclamation and Archer’s eyes, which follows the direction of his friend’s glance, lands at a woman who entered the opera box of his fiancée May Welland’s relative Mrs Mingott. Archer observes the features of this lady, Countess Ellen Olenska, the female protagonist and her attire:

> Newland Archer, following Lefferts's glance, saw with surprise that his exclamation had been occasioned by the entry of a new figure into old Mrs. Mingott's box. It was that of a slim young woman, a little less tall than May Welland, with brown hair growing in close curls about her temples and held in place by a narrow band of diamonds. The suggestion of this headdress, which gave her what was then called a "Josephine look," was carried out in the cut of the dark blue velvet gown rather theatrically caught up under her bosom by a girdle with a large old-fashioned clasp. The wearer of this unusual dress, who seemed quite unconscious of the attention it was attracting, stood a moment in the centre of the box, discussing with Mrs. Welland the propriety of taking the latter's place in the front right-hand corner; then she yielded with a slight smile, and seated herself in line with Mrs. Welland's sister-in-law, Mrs. Lovell Mingott, who was installed in the opposite corner. (5)

After Archer and his friends spot the mysterious lady (Ellen Olenska), they are eager to know about her identity and they look eagerly at Mr Sillerton Jackson, an old man who is well known for having knowledge of all scandals and mysteries who is attributed as:

> In addition to this forest of family trees, Mr. Sillerton Jackson carried between his narrow hollow temples, and under his soft thatch of silver hair, a register of most of the scandals and mysteries that had smouldered under the unruffled surface of New York society within the last fifty years. So far indeed did his information extend, and so acutely retentive was his memory, that he was supposed to be the only man who could have told you who Julius Beaufort, the banker, really was, and what had become of handsome Bob Spicer, old Mrs. Manson Mingott's father, who had disappeared so mysteriously (with a large sum of trust money) less than a year after his marriage, on the very day that a beautiful Spanish dancer who had been delighting thronged audiences in the old Opera-house on the Battery had taken ship for Cuba. But these mysteries, and many others, were closely locked in Mr. Jackson's breast; for not only did his keen sense of honour forbid his repeating anything privately imparted, but he was fully aware that his reputation for discretion increased his opportunities of finding out what he wanted to know. (5)

That evening after the opera, Jackson goes to dine with the Archers at their house. Jackson, Newland, his mother Mrs Archer and sister Janey Archer, are sitting at the dinner table and the two ladies are trying to learn some gossips from Jackson. They speak about a lady, Lemuel Struthers, who marries one Beaufort, a man from their acquaintance. The Struthers are introduced to the readers by Edith Warton through the description of their physical beauty:

> "Then," Mr. Jackson continued (and Archer saw he was wondering why no one had told the butler never to slice cucumbers with a steel knife), "then Lemuel Struthers came along. They say his advertiser used the girl's head for the shoe- polish posters; her hair's intensely black, you know—the Egyptian style.

> Anyhow, he—eventually—married her." There were volumes of innuendo in the way the "eventually" was spaced, and each syllable given its due stress. (17)

Also, when Mrs Archer, accompanied by her son Newland, meets her cousin Mrs Louisa van der Luyden at the latter's house in Madison Avenue, the appearance of both the Mrs van der Luyden and her drawing room is depicted through their physical appearance:

> Mrs. van der Luyden's portrait by Huntington (in black velvet and Venetian point) faced that of her lovely ancestress. It was generally considered "as fine as a Cabanel," and, though twenty years had elapsed since its execution, was still "a perfect likeness." Indeed the Mrs.vander Luyden who sat beneath it listening to Mrs. Archer might have been the twin-sister of the fair and still youngish woman drooping against a gilt armchair before a green rep curtain. Mrs. van der Luyden still wore black velvet and Venetian point when she went into society—or rather (since she never dined out) when she threw open her own doors to receive it. Her fair hair, which had faded without turning grey, was still parted in flat overlapping points on her forehead, and the straight nose that divided her pale blue eyes was only a little more pinched about the nostrils than when the portrait had been painted. She always, indeed, struck Newland Archer as having been rather gruesomely preserved in the airless atmosphere of a perfectly irreproachable existence, as bodies caught in glaciers keep for years a rosy life-in-death. (24)

Edith Warton uses physical beauty to describe and ascertain minor characters. One such character is Mr Henry. When Mrs Archer finishes narrating her problem, her cousin Louisa sends for her husband Mr Henry to discuss the matter with him. Mr. Henry then enters the drawing room and Edith Warton describes him using his physical features, "The double doors had solemnly reopened and between them appeared Mr. Henry vander Luyden, tall, spare and frock-coated, with faded fair hair, a straight nose like his wife's and the same look of frozen gentleness in eyes that were merely pale grey instead of pale blue" (25).

When Newland is watching a play titled 'The Shaughraun' at the Wallack's theatre, he compares a tragic parting scene between two lovers, which is played by actors Harry Montague and Ada Dyas with his experience few days ago when he parted with his client Ellen Olenska:

> It would have been as difficult to discover any resemblance between the two situations as between the appearance of the persons concerned. Newland Archer could not pretend to anything approaching the young English actor's romantic good looks, and Miss Dyas was a tall red-haired woman of monumental build whose pale and pleasantly ugly face was utterly unlike Ellen Olenska's vivid countenance. Nor were Archer and Madame Olenska two lovers parting in heart-broken silence; they were client and lawyer separating after a talk which had given the lawyer the worst possible impression of the client's case. Wherein, then, lay the resemblance that made the young man's heart beat with a kind of retrospective excitement? It seemed to be in Madame Olenska's mysterious faculty of suggesting tragic and moving possibilities outside the daily run of experience. She had hardly ever said a word to him to produce this impression, but it was a part of her, either a projection of her mysterious and outlandish background or of something inherently dramatic, passionate and unusual in herself. Archer had always been inclined to think that chance and circumstance played a small part in shaping people's lots compared with their innate tendency to have things happen to them. (57)

When Archer was on his way to the Wellands' house at St Augustine, at the main street, he sees his fiancee May Welland standing under a tree and the couple proceed towards the garden to talk as there was still an hour left for the breakfast-time in the Wellands' household. During this meet, Archer admires May's beauty and this adds realism to the characters and the plot:

> Early as it was, the main street was no place for any but formal greetings, and Archer longed to be alone with May, and to pour out all his tenderness and his impatience. It still lacked an hour to the late Welland breakfast-time, and instead of asking him to come in she proposed that they should walk out to an old orange-garden beyond the town. She had just been for a row on the river, and the sun that netted the little waves with gold seemed to have caught her in its meshes. Across the warm brown of her cheek her blown hair glittered like silver wire; and her eyes too looked lighter, almost pale in their youthful limpidity. As she walked beside Archer with her long swinging gait her face wore the vacant serenity of a young marble athlete. (69)

Even after marriage, Newland Archer admires May his wife. Newland Archer observes May, who is now his wife, when she enters their drawing-room for dinner. May looks tired after returning from her grandmother's house where she was expecting Archer to come and pick her:

> When May appeared, he thought she looked tired. She had put on the low- necked and tightly-laced dinner-dress which the Mingott ceremonial exacted on the most informal occasions, and had built her fair hair into its usual accumulated coils; and her face, in contrast, was wan and almost faded. But she shone on him with her usual tenderness, and her eyes had kept the blue dazzle of the day before. (143)

Also, at the Wellands residence. Mr and MrsWelland receive an invite from Mr and Mrs Emerson Sillerton to a party organized by them. The Wellands description of the Sillertons and their previous parties makes the readers consider MrSillerton as a thorn in the side of the Newport society:

> No one in the Mingott set could understand why Amy Sillerton had submitted so tamely to the eccentricities of a husband who filled the house with long- haired men and short-haired women, and, when he travelled, took her to explore tombs in Yucatan instead of going to Paris or Italy. But there they were, set in their ways, and apparently unaware that they were different from other people; and when they gave one of their dreary annual garden-parties every family on the Cliffs, because of the Sillerton-Pennilow-Dagonet connection, had to draw lots and send an unwilling representative. (107)

Thus Edith Warton in her works uses physical beauty predominantly to make her works realistic and to make the readers a part of her fictional world.

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