“The Simple Complexity of the Slamming of the Door”

Little do we know that the simplest tasks and experiences in life are the slightest hints of life that Edith Wharton writes about. Edith Wharton writes to enlighten her reader and provide us with the “scattered hints” of life (Fullness of Life, 700). Wharton’s “hints” and revelations are “like the scent of earth which comes to one sometimes far out at sea” (Fullness of Life, 700). We are in the middle of the sea and throughout our lifetime we are stranded with our puzzlement on the meaning of life. It is the simplicity that Wharton reveals through her writing and through this gives us a blurred indistinct form of the complexity of our lives.

The “scattered hints” are presented through the characterization of characters in Wharton’s stories. The characters are very ordinary, mundane characters that we might most of the time discount as just or only when we encounter them in our daily lives. It is this inevitable ignorance that leads us to stereotype these people. This stereotyping occurs in the stories and is done intentionally. Wharton is the reader’s accomplice on judging the characters in the story. She turns this view around and gives our encounter with the characters full of meaning.

In “Mrs. Manstey’s View,” Mrs. Manstey is an old woman who sits at her window and may be similar to an old man who sits on the park bench for countless of hours. “For many years she had cherished a desire to live in the country…; but this longing had faded with age…. It…made her cling so fervently to her view from her window, a view in which the most optimistic eye would at first have failed to discover
anything admirable” (117). This shows us that Mrs. Manstey’s life is unfulfilled because she did not get a simple yearning in her life, which was the sight of the countryside. Despite this tragedy, Mrs. Manstey was able to find beauty in her back view, which “The view from Mrs. Manstey's window was not a striking one, but to her at least it was full of interest and beauty” (117). Perhaps through Mrs. Manstey’s radical view and desperation to see part of nature, she had manipulated her eyes to see the beauty in the facades of the brown apartment buildings.

Something that is “not a striking one” can easily deceive us and for one second in seeing that old man in the park or Mrs. Mans tey, forces us to emote on their situation: “Poor old [wo]man, sitting there, doing nothing.” However, in reality the pity should go to us because of our misled feelings and no second thought given to them that perhaps they are enjoying or even the possibility that we are blind not having their artistic eye. The brown buildings might be like a work of art.

It is the readers who were ignorant to casually say, “work on the extension is to begin next week” (119). Mrs. Sampson the indifferent property owner of Mrs. Manstey who said this, clearly represents the readers—the readers who do not fully understand that by creating an extension it is Mrs. Manstey’s livelihood that we are taking away. By creating an extension not only Mrs. Manstey’s life is blocked, but also the visual “scents” of her life are cut off from her…the “intermittent leafage of the clothes-lines…. the broken barrels, the empty bottles and paths unswept” (118). What seems to be disorder completes the portrait of Mrs. Manstey’s vision.

Similarly, the readers’ cynicism and quick judgment with the abet of Wharton surfaces in “The Verdict.” “I had always thought Jack Gisburn rather a cheap genius --
though a good fellow enough so it was no great surprise to me to hear that, in the height of his glory, he had dropped his painting, married a rich widow, and established himself in a villa on the Riviera” (689). This is an image of a man who we are quick to conclude from news headlines or television as one who is greedy and eager to uphold his reputation “in the height of his glory.” However, it would later be revealed that there was a more insightful reason for Gisburn to quit—not for the money, the rich widow, but for something deeper for the sake of contentment in life.

It is this that Wharton does, which evokes meaning. At first, our cynical view blinds us from seeing the possibilities behind the people that Wharton portrays. However, in the end, Wharton turns this stereotypical view of the characters and gives meaning and insight into their reasons for their situation. It is the situational irony that creates a revelation to the characters themselves and impressed on the readers. This method that Wharton employs in her works is a very powerful force creating an impact on the reader’s self-awareness.

Gisburn quit because he realized from his last assignment that he painted for some unwanted reason. At that point of realization his “‘technique’ collapsed like a house of cards” (The Verdict 693). There has been something unfulfilling in what he was doing, which he did not notice until he was painting another dead painter who showed him the real him. This resulted in his “regard of himself as the imperfect vehicle of the cosmic emotion” (The Recovery 470). His brushstrokes were all of a sudden useless and pointless. There was no point for him to continue painting. He tried to ignore the signals by applying his methodical approaches to painting: “I dashed at the canvas furiously, and
tried some of my bravura tricks” (The Verdict 693). Gisburn was in denial thinking if he could escape the scrutiny and the ugly truth he was facing—he was not doing it right.

Gisburn realized that he did not “have full command of his means of expressions” (The Recovery 470). This is the reason for his resignation. The cynicism that we possessed in the beginning with the speaker of the story saying of Gisburn’s “cheap genius” is refuted with the real reason for his retirement.

More importantly, the way to Gisburn’s revelation is crucial to consider. His path to the light was a picture painted by his subject. “It was a sketch of a donkey -- an old tired donkey, standing in the rain under a wall” (The Verdict 691). This simple visual “scent”—a painting, which was “not a striking one,” not a masterpiece, changed Gisburn’s view. Before coming to paint the subject, (the dead man named Stroud) it was a routine assignment where for him “there was only one way he knew” (The Recovery 477) how to paint. Nevertheless, after his attempts of painting Stroud, he gave up and realized with the sight of the donkey that he must not continue painting the dead man.

As Gisburn saw the painting, “fresh fear fell on” (The Hermit and the Wild Woman 156) him because of the donkey’s allegorical meaning in his life. Gisburn throughout all the years has been in denial as a painter. He has hidden his true feelings through his techniques and “his house of cards.” The donkey reflected Stroud’s “years of patient scornful persistence in every line” (The Verdict 693). Through this Stroud spoke to him as “he just lay there quietly watching, and on his lips, through the gray beard, [he] seemed to hear the question: ‘Are you sure you know where you're coming out?’” (The Verdict 693). Stroud’s “scornful persistence in every line” was Gisburn. Gisburn thought that eventually, he would end up a dead man like Stroud where his last sketch of
the donkey had a symbolic meaning of his listlessness in his life. Evidently, Wharton shows this revelation in Gisburn through this important simple sighting of the sketch in his realization. This created an impact in Gisburn that made him reconsider his path in life and career as a painter.

Why does Wharton give us these “scattered hints” on the meaning of life and show this through the simplicity of it? Perhaps her purpose is to address humanity’s confusion in life. This confusion is addressed in her stories as part of the process into giving meaning to the characters’ discoveries. For instance, in “The Recovery” the wife of the painter Keniston is disillusioned by her husband’s painting. “Her disillusionment she even allowed herself to perceive that if he worked slowly it was not because he mistrusted his powers of expression, but because he had so little to express” (470). This “disillusionment” of why he painted so slowly and uneasily despite the painter’s popularity and respect in the art world hung in his wife and the reader’s mind. Keniston’s reticence represented his loneliness and a gap that seemed to exist within him.

When Keniston visited his “ancestors” (his fellow masters in painting) in the Louvre he discovered that he was doing something wrong with his techniques. After sitting all day staring at the masterpieces of the greatest painters of all time, “Keniston had passed from inarticulateness to an eager volubility” (473). He was all of sudden rejuvenated, where before he saw painting as a chore instead of an artistic endeavor to support his family. He conceded that it took him a while to understand what the artists were trying to tell him (similar to Gisburn’s encounter with Stroud). It was forceful that it overwhelmed Keniston to change his path.
The “scattered hints” that came to Keniston was “not a striking one.” It was by looking at the paintings of his colleagues from the past, considered as great painters were the vehicle to his figuring out that he was doing something wrong. As the purpose of Wharton is accomplished to provide us with these hints, Keniston experienced what Wharton wants the readers to experience—to apply what we have learned from these hints, to make sense of them and reconsider our path in life. “At first I couldn't make much out of their lingo -- it was too different from mine! But gradually, by picking up a hint here and there, and piecing them together, I've begun to understand…." He declared” (477). Keniston took hints by looking at the paintings and sitting there and finally realizing their message. Perhaps if we sit down and look at our current situation, might we find fulfillment in our lives. Through our senses and surroundings can we find satisfy longings and contentment.

This “disillusionment” can also be an obsession in our lives that prevents us from seeing the “scattered hints” that Wharton tries to convey. The “disillusionment” in “The Fullness of Life” is when the woman who at the brink of her death was elated and glad that she was dying “and that she should never again hear the creaking of her husband's boots -- those horrible boots -- and that no one would come to bother her about the next day's dinner . . . or the butcher's book….” (699). It seems that the woman was happy to die and leave the world expecting a better prospect in the after-life. To a certain extent, the woman got what she wanted where she was given a man who was like her. The man enjoyed the classics—very much like her.
However, when the woman was given a choice as to whether to stay with this man fabricated by the Spirit to the standards of the woman, she was surprised to choose her husband.

“But you said just now,” said the Spirit, “that you did not love him.” “True,” she answered, simply; but don’t you understand that I shouldn’t feel at home without him? It is all very well for a week or two – but for eternity! After all I never minded the creaking of the boots…he was always sorry when he had slammed the door….Why he wouldn’t even know what novels to read” (704).

This shows the simple complexity of life’s most mundane things. She realizes that the most menial parts of her life played such a big role in her life and her satisfaction in it. The audible hints of the “creaking” and “slamming,” the woman ignored because of her obsession about the classics. She was too concentrated on finding the ideal, best fit man for herself. The “Fullness of Life” was not behind her of “verse of Dante or of Shakespeare” (701).

In “The Hermit and the Wild Woman,” the Hermit was in a state of disillusionment, because of his obsession with being a holy hermit. Trying to get away from the evil in his town, he was immensely traumatized that he chose to lead a life of solitude and holiness. When he encountered the woman, who was a fugitive in the town because of running away from the nunnery the Hermit could not get rid of this fact, misleading him from seeing the true Wild Woman who was helping others.

The Hermit was like the Wild Woman where they prayed together, observed feasts. However, despite their relationship as time progressed, the Hermit cannot help himself to constantly think of the deeds of the Wild Woman when she ran away from the nunnery. The sole reason for this is because of the Wild Woman’s passion to take a bath, which was forbidden for nuns. During the Hermit’s first encounter with the Wild
Woman his “first motion was to drive the woman forth, for he knew the heinousness of craving for water…yet remembering the lust that drew him to his lauds, he dared not judge his sister’s fault too harshly” (152). The Hermit was guilty for staying with the Wild Woman, but at the same time felt that he was too critical towards the woman.

The obsession that the Hermit had with his religion prevented him from seeing the Wild Woman who helped others. The Hermit was confounded with his deep beliefs not realizing until her death at the pool, immersing herself with the taboo of being water that “all his clergy had fallen on their knees about the pool…. But fresh fear fell on the Hermit, for he had cursed a dying saint, and denounced her aloud to all the people…” (156). The Hermit’s quest for holiness went too far in realizing that the woman’s only fault was not becoming a nun, which was not a sin, and most importantly, the Wild Woman’s simple yearning for water.

Through the stories, Wharton provides us with simple characters who are representatives of a larger macrocosm on the meaning of life. It is important to see the simplest things in life and how this simplicity can aid us in our disillusionment whether it is loneliness or discontentment in our lives. To have an “artistic eye” like Mrs. Manstey, not only applicable to the visual sense, but also to our other senses will make our existence full. It was in the woman’s (in “The Fullness of Life”) unconscious that “The Fullness of Life” was in her husband’s “creaking of the boots” and “slamming of the door.”

It is no coincidence that all of the stories involve the characters themselves and how they interacted with their “not such a striking” environment: Mrs. Manstey’s back view, Gisburn’s revelation through the sketch of the donkey, Keniston’s view of other
paintings, the Wild Woman’s yearning for water and the woman’s husband whose boots creaked. Therefore, it is up to us to uphold the idea that we should make the most out of what seems to be as not striking. It is through this that we can start to piece together the “scattered hints” to solve our confusion and find our fullness in life.
Works Cited


