THE FRUIT OF THE TREE: EDITH WHARTON'S DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE ON SOCIAL AND MORAL CONFLICTS

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Abstract: Critics have categorised Edith Wharton, first and foremost, as a novelist of manners, and her most famous novels are, indeed, about the world she knew best: drawing-room Old New York. There are plenty of social and moral conflicts hidden there, behind the unruffled curtain of appearances.
But The Fruit of the Tree (1907) is an interesting departure from Wharton's most successful novels, like The House of Mirth (1905) or The Age of Innocence (1920). Its two major themes, social reform and the morality of euthanasia, fit into the pattern established as the focus of my research, but they represent an exception from Wharton's usual choices of plot, setting and characters. Critics agree that, while it is overall a good novel, the two separate themes give the impression that the book is actually made up of two stories brought together rather artificially. The author clearly wanted to write about events that were very much topical in the early 1900s and, indeed, the labour movement was gaining social and legal ground, while euthanasia, after much debate, remained outside the law. What she lacked was a deeper insight into these two issues, the kind of understanding she had of upper-class New York.
The aim of this paper is to go beyond the negative criticism of this novel and to focus on its main themes, social and moral, which make up Wharton's story, since this is the only one of her novels which deals with the two explicitly. In the process, I will show that, despite its inconsistencies, The Fruit of the Tree manages to provide the reader with a deeper knowledge of the author's principles and literary agenda: those which prove that there is an underlying social and moral conflict in each character's life and, by extrapolation, in all human existence.

Keywords: social conflict, moral conflict, reform, euthanasia, Edith Wharton

1. Introduction. The Critical reception of *The Fruit of the Tree*

Critics have not rated *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907) favourably, mainly because of its broken structure due to Wharton's treatment of two major themes (social reform and euthanasia), her superficial knowledge of the subjects and her declining sympathy for her characters (especially Amherst) through the novel. It stands out, like *The Valley of Decision* (1902), as more of a literary experiment, partially failed in comparison to Wharton's masterpieces because, despite of her attraction to the subject of reform, she didn't quite manage that insight on the true nature of the working class. She was not one of them and she was in favour of a more conservative approach in giving power to the people.

The author's own social status influenced her views on the American economic development and the relationship between social classes. The upper, educated class was to continue to lead the way to modernity, hence both Amherst's and Justine's leisure class origins. The novel also allows Edith Wharton to express "her pragmatic view of ethics as a

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continually shifting question involving one's own immediate relation to life."[1] In Justine Brent's own words, "life is not a matter of abstract principles, but a succession of pitiful compromises with fate, of concessions to old tradition, old beliefs, old charities and old frailties."[2]

Blake Nevius thinks that, like some other "second-rate productions,"[3] *The Fruit of the Tree* is to a high degree "characteristic and revealing of its author."[4] In other words, it not only allows expression of Wharton's views on social order and ethics, but it also shows her own self through Justine Brent, who becomes the leading character in the novel. Nevius qualifies *The Fruit of the Tree* as "an earnest, rather dull and unsuccessful novel,"[5] but he praises the depiction of Justine as an exponent of the author's personal traits:

> "Justine, on the other hand, is singularly aware of herself both as she is in fact and as she appears to others; she provides her own firm center of belief. She has, I repeat, all the traits which are apparent to a marked degree in her creator. She confronts life stoically and expresses her view of it ironically. We are told that she 'felt with her brain,' and this is the objection most frequently voiced by critics of Mrs. Wharton. She has the same independent spirit that enabled Edith Wharton to make a career for herself in opposition to her family and her class."[6]

Indeed, Justine is a far more successful character than Amherst. She ties the two plots together and gradually becomes the focus of the novel. In the end, she alone realizes that Bessy's building plans were not intended for Westmore and decides to reconcile with Amherst since she now knows that compromise lies at the basis of both life and marriage. She never feels guilty for what she has done, and recent critics, like Elizabeth Ammons, Deborah Carlin and Susan Goodman have shifted the moral issue away from euthanasia to Amherst's reaction to it. The fact that Justine did not feel bound to seek his approval for the euthanasia after they become a couple is a critique of the institution of marriage and Amherst's reaction is seen as unjustified. So, instead of social reform and euthanasia, the novel is seen to be really about the victimization of women by men. But this seems to me rather far-fetched. And so is the idea that the moral analysis in *The Fruit of the Tree* is rigid and absolutist. In fact, Wharton stresses that both absolute freedom for factory workers and absolute moral principles cannot really be put into practice because society will not accept them as a general rule. As Tuttleton puts it, "Edith Wharton had, in fact, immersed herself in the skeptical sciences, especially in evolutionary Darwinism, and she understood both manners and morals to be evolved products of slowly altering social and ethical conventions."[7]

The title of the novel appears thus as the gaining of knowledge about good and evil in the context of those complex human relationships. Social life and moral life are sometimes so different in practice from what one learns in theory that the realization of such discrepancies can prove to be destructive. After working with titles like " The Cup of Mercy," "The Shadow

[1] Tuttleton, *op. cit.*, 167.
[2] Edith Wharton, *The Fruit of the Tree* (New York: Scribner's, 1907), 188.
[3] Blake Nevius, *Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 104.
[4] Nevius, *Idem*, 104.
[5] Nevius, *Idem*, 99.
[6] Nevius, *Idem*, 104-105.
[7] Tuttleton, *op. cit.*, 165.

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of a Doubt," "The Chariot of the Gods" and "Justine Brent," Wharton decided on the Biblical association with the original sin. Justine failed to see that even though what she had done was perfectly justified by the circumstances, a person like Amherst, who might have agreed with her in theory, may still be subject to old conventions of feeling when dealing with the killing of his own wife.[8]

In the end, regardless of the other novels, an overall look at the *Fuit of the Tree* tells us that, even though the inconsistencies and contradictions that Wharton's literary critics have signalled in terms of plot and characterisation are present, dividing the book between the two major themes, it is also indicative of the author's ability to "capture the contradictory responses to characters involved in complex situations as well as her official stance in relation to the possibilities of changing a system structurally grounded in inequality."[9] In fact, Wharton herself criticizes the construction of her novel in her personal correspondence: "I conceive my subjects like a man – that is, rather more architectonically & dramatically than most women - & then execute them like a woman; or rather, I sacrifice, to my desire for construction & breadth, the small incidental details that women have always excelled in, the episodical characterisation, I mean."[10] This confession leads us to believe that even though she may have failed in terms of construction and plot, Wharton had at least succeeded in defining her style and incorporating the realities of her time, the constant interplay between morality and its social interpretation and offering a hint of where the author stands in relation to them.

2. Wharton's Social Theme

In writing a labour novel, Edith Wharton followed a long line of popular realist fiction dealing with industrial problems like W.D. Howells' *Annie Kilburn* (1889), Elizabeth Stuart Phelp's *The Silent Partner* (1871), H.F. Keenan's *The Money-Makers* (1885), Lincoln Steffen's *The Shame of Cities* (1904), Mary Wilkins' *The Portion of Labour* (1901), and Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906). And for someone known as a chronicler of drawing room society, Wharton had also dealt quite extensively with poverty and its effect on the human spirit.

For Wharton, writing is a form of social action through its critical approach. In a letter dating from December 5, 1905, she states: "[T]he more I have considered it [my trade], the more has it seemed to me valuable & interesting only in so far as it is 'a criticism of life'… Social conditions as they are just now in our new world, where the sudden possession of money has come without inherited obligations, or any traditional sense of solidarity between the classes, is a vast and absorbing field for the novelist."[11] The author, just like her character, Amherst, obviously thinks in favour of the factory owners' responsibility towards their employees, but all to a certain extent.

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[8] Tuttleton, *Idem*, 166.
[9] Teresa Tavares, "New Women, New Men, or What You Will in Edith Wharton's The Fruit of the Tree" *Edith Wharton Review*, No. 1, Volume XXI, Spring 2005, 2.
[10] apud Clare Colquitt, Susan Goodman, Candace Waid, eds. *A Forward Glance: New Essays on Edith Wharton* (Cranbury, N.J: Associated University Presses, 1999), 17.
[11] apud Teresa Tavares, "New Women, New Men, or What You Will in Edith Wharton's *The Fruit of the Tree*" *Edith Wharton Review*, No. 1, Volume XXI, Spring 2005, 2-3.

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In her book, *Edith Wharton's Politics of Race*, Jennie Kassanoff analyses *The Fruit of the Tree* in terms of Wharton's "class-based strategy of social control."[12] She starts from the premise that Wharton feared the "ill-bred," "foreign" and poor would overwhelm the upper-class elite and destroy the country's well-established, tradition-based moral and social codes. In this light, "her third novel is singularly concerned with the reproduction of a natural elite capable of dominating America's rising proletariat and newly ascendant middle class."[13] Indeed, the issues concerning the poor workers at Westmore are presented in relation to characters of genteel origin who sympathise with them through constant proximity rather than personal experience.

The emergence of monopolies was much criticized in American history. Workers were not only in danger of losing their lives, but also their jobs. "The possibility that workers would soon be displaced by a newly mechanized industrial order controlled by newly rich capitalists was, of course, the source of widespread concern in Wharton's lifetime."[14] But however difficult it was to do business outside monopolies and however sympathetically is Dillon's case presented in *The Fruit of the Tree*, Wharton found the concentration of power in the hands of the working class "an intolerable prospect."[15] A friend of Theodore Roosevelt's, she shared his belief that a strong hand was needed to steer the American economy. Both the workers and monopolies were not fit to serve the nation and his criticism mainly turned against the middle-class industrialist, characterised by the greed for profit.Wharton saw in Roosevelt a great leader and she shared his distaste for the corporate nouveau riche. "Like the President, she believed that a well-chosen (and therefore well-born) executive could rein in the greedy machinations of a middlebrow corporate elite. Only a powerful patriciate could control the excesses of America's unregulated market place."[16]

So even if Wharton made a self-conscious effort to portray working-class problems (like the small wages, lack of education and leisure opportunities, the feeling of helplessness) in novels like *The Fruit of the Tree*, *Ethan Frome* (1911) or *Summer* (1917), she was bound by her own leisure class origins and the general feeling is that she didn't succeed in capturing the essence of the poor, or rather that it shows that she wasn't good at it. Claire Preston states that "Wharton's writing about this group generally has the brittleness of a banker taking his typist to dine,"[17] thus making it "a mere excursion out of one's class,"[18] since there is always that comforting thought at the back of one's mind that, at the end of the day, one goes back home to the old ways.

After a first look at *The Fruit of the Tree*, one may argue that it is not really a novel about social reform, though the first chapters are definitely concerned with it, because it lacks the insight in the real life of the workers, their thoughts and emotions and the realistic description of their lives. There is no actual rendering of a visit to their homes, no dialogue among Dillon's peers and no depiction of the factory life through their eyes. In this light, we

[12] Kassanoff, *op. cit.*, 69.
[13] Kassanoff, *Idem*, 69-70.
[14] Kassanoff, *Idem*, 66.
[15] apud Kassanoff, *op. cit.*, 66.
[16] Kassanoff, *op. cit.*, 68-69.
[17] Claire Preston, *Edith Wharton's Social Register* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 53.
[18] Janet Flanner, "New York Letter," *New Yorker*, 2 March 1929 (Yale) apud Preston, *Edith Wharton's Social Register*, 53.

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may hardly say that Wharton had actually seen any industrial town. Indeed, the only description is that of the interior of the mill during Bessy's visit, when she learns that factory owners crowd the space to obtain more profit, and it is clear from there that the author's input is just that: an opinion based on a short visit rather than deeper knowledge gained through close contact and personal experience. Due to her own financial and social status, Wharton couldn't have had any other perspective on things. And this shows in the construction of her plot and characters.

It is worth mentioning that she felt the need to endow both Amherst and Justine with genteel origins. This justifies their lack of true communion with the workers, since it is only based on close contact rather than personal experience. This limited perspective on the social component leads us to doubt about the rendering of the social theme here. Instead, what Wharton manages to bring forth in this novel is some understanding of the relationship between owners and workers and the failure of the former to see the whole picture and pursue the matter further. Indeed, some reforms are put into practice (like building bigger homes for the workers, a hospital and a gymnasium and even enlarging the factory building), but they are constantly delayed and some are even abandoned, not only because Bessy refuses to spend her money on them, but also because even Amherst and Justine often linger in the serenity and comfort of upper-class life. Much as they criticize the upper-class ways, it seems they always manage to shut out anything unpleasant. "If the company was dull," muses Justine, "it was at least decorative; and poverty, misery and dirt were shut out by the placid unconsciousness of the guests as securely as by the leafy barriers of the garden."[19] For a nurse dealing with incessant suffering, this is like an analgesic for the mind. Throughout the novel, at times of hardship and suffering, they both long for the easy life they have accused Bessy of living.

Bessy's family is an exponent of the entire upper-class' attitude towards money and their source. As long as they can live comfortably and fund their "conspicuous consumption,"[20] they are not to be bothered with pecuniary issues. "It was part of the modern code of chivalry that a lovely woman should not be bothered about ways and means."[21] And, for a leisure class man like Mr. Gaines, the proposed innovations at the mill were to be regarded as "new fashions in mill management" and "to be adopted for the same cogent reasons as a new cut in coat-tails."[22] In other words, Bessy's family and friends may agree to some improvements only to satisfy their ego as fashionably charitable people. But in doing so, they would not consent to any reduction in their usual monthly income. The likes of Westy Gaines, Blanche Carbury and even Bessy Westmore live the kind of life that is based on conspicuous consumption, a pleasure-seeking, comfortable and fashionably luxurious lifestyle that is sometimes appealing even to John and Justine. However, it is also completely ignorant of all evils in the world. This is the same type of society that Wharton criticizes in all her novels and this is the world she knows best. Its members had never been asked to think about the poor, except for some occasional charity work, and thus the subject is unpleasant and even

[19] Wharton, *op. cit.*, 44.
[20] Thornstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).
[21] Wharton, *op. cit.*, 53.
[22] Wharton, *Idem*, 34.

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annoying to them: "No one could expect me to come here now – could they, Mr. Tredegar?" Bessy enquires. "It all depends", he replies, "how large an income you require."[23]

It seems that the upper-class owners need constant reminders of their duty towards the source of their money. At the beginning of the novel, the relationship between owners and workers is practically non-existent. Bessy had never even visited the mills and we are inclined to think that the deceased Dick Westmore had only done so when hiring the manager, Mr. Truscomb. As long as the mills were managed properly, that is they brought good profits, no further contact between the two was needed. Indeed, "all the mean desolation of an American industrial suburb"[24] was as common at Hanaford as it was anywhere else (except for those few places that had recently adopted the new reforms), but a known fact about the upper-class was that it resisted to the sort of change that would upset their comfortably laid lives. Their detachment from the unpleasant is evident in all the talks Amherst has with Bessy, Mr. Langhope or Mr. Tredegar and "business" is the word to cover anything that is ugly or uncomfortable.

In fact, it is Amherst himself who summarizes the type of relationship established between the master and his workers:

> "John Amherst was no one-sided idealist. He felt keenly the growing complexity of the relation between employer and worker, the seeming hopelessness of permanently harmonizing their claims, the recurring necessity of fresh compromising and adjustments. […] The disappearance of the old familiar contact between master and man seemed to him one of the great wrongs of the new industrial situation. That the breach must be farther widened by the ultimate substitution of the stock-company for the individual emloyer – a fact obvious to any student of economic tendencies – presented to Amherst's mind one of the most painful problems in the scheme of social readjustment."[25]

In other words, Amherst (like Wharton) was not a socialist, he was not keen on giving full power to the people, but he rather wanted the master to treat his subjects with more compassion and to act upon a sense of duty. "The novel makes it clear early on that this new management clearly cannot be in the hands of the workers. Dillon, the mill worker who lost his hand, is symbolically castrated and rendered impotent politically in the very first chapter."[26] A tighter relationship did not mean reversed roles, but rather a way to bring the master "closer to his workers. Till he entered personally into their hardships and aspirations – till he learned what they wanted and why they wanted it – Amherst believed that no mere law-making, however enlightened, could create a wholesome relation between the two."[27] Unfortunately, the Westmores are so ignorant of the current social developments and so keen on not upsetting the established state of affairs, that the only hope Amherst has to make them aware of things is through an appeal to their compassion.

[23] Wharton, *op. cit.*, 13.
[24] Wharton, *Idem*, 8.
[25] Wharton, *Idem*, 17.
[26] Robin Peel, *Apart From Modernism: Edith Wharton, Politics and Fiction Before World War I* (Cranbury, NJ: Rosemont Publishing and Printing Corp., 2005), 73.
[27] Wharton, *op. cit.*, 17.

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The final chapter does, however, bring some closure to the novel of reform and the relationship between John and Justine. Compromise is the key to both. With the inauguration of the new "pleasure-palace – gymnasium, concert-hall and museum – for the recreation of the mill-hands,"[28] at Hopewood, we get the feeling that most of Amherst's ideas have been (to a smaller scale at least) put into practice. The results now confirmed that "however achieved, at whatever cost of personal misery and error, the work of awakening and freeing Westmore was done, and that work had justified itself."[29] And now, finally, the workers are humanized to some extent, since they "were beginning to understand the meaning of their work, in its relation to their own lives and to the larger economy."[30] Kassanoff notices that "the factory workers in the novel are metonymically referred to as the 'mill hands' or simply 'the hands'."[31] Up to this point, Wharton doesn't mention anything about their thoughts on the reform, but it seems that they finally come to see Hanaford as their home for the future.

3. The Euthanasia Debate

Euthanasia refers to the practice of intentionally ending a life in order to relieve pain and suffering. Two elements are to be taken into account when defining euthanasia: the existence of suffering and of intentionality (for a merciful death.) In a medical context, the term was first used by Francis Bacon in the 17th century to refer to an easy, painless, happy death, during which it was "a physician's responsibility to alleviate the physical sufferings of the body."[32] Then, in 1870, Samuel Williams, who was a politician in the United States House of Representatives, was the first person to suggest the idea of using anaesthetics and morphine to deliberately end a patient's life.

Edith Wharton introduced the issue of euthanasia in *The Fruit of the Tree* for two main reasons. It had become quite a subject for debate during that time and it was in fact one of her friends, Charles Eliot Norton, a Harvard professor, who was asked by Anne E. Hall to write an article in favour of mercy killing. A rich Cincinnati widow and the daughter of an Arctic explorer, she had watched her mother die after a prolonged battle with cancer. In 1905, Hall intended to put a resolution before the American Humane Association in Philadelphia requesting their approval of the practice of physicians to administer an anaesthetic in the cases of hopeless suffering. Norton's mother had also died in similar circumstances and he, too, supported euthanasia. The resolution went down in defeat, but it didn't mark the end of this debate.

Even though Wharton herself insisted to Scribner's that her latest novel was not a thesis for or against euthanasia, her private letters disclose her feelings about the topic when refering to similar cases of long suffering in her circle of family and friends. In fact, her belief was that a peaceful death "is infinitely better than a gradual failure of body and mind."[33]

In *The Fruit of the Tree*, Wharton not only argues that suffering must be ended through euthanasia, but also that prolonging the patient's life through the use of drugs which

[28] Wharton, *Idem*, 187.
[29] Wharton, *Idem*, 188.
[30] Wharton, *Idem*, 188.
[31] Kassanoff, *op. cit.*, 65.
[32] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Euthanasia#Beginnings_of_the_contemporary_euthanasia_debate
[33] letter to John Hugh Smith, March 9, 1910 apud Kassanoff, *op. cit.*, 77.

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strengthen the body, and thus allow for even more pain, is unacceptable.Wyant personifies the malefic doctor who sacrifices his patient in the name of science. He sees Bessy as "a beautiful case" but, since he is a drug addict, his opinion is questionable. On the other hand, Justine's relationship with the patient, combined with the absence of both Mr. Langhope and Amherst, increase the emotional strain and the effect of Bessy's suffering on her. After seeing such cases of prolonged suffering among her family and friends, Wharton has no doubt about the question of euthanasia, and nor does Justine. Throughout the text, she insists that she wouldn't have done it differently. Both the author's and Justine's conviction comes from direct experience, while Amherst's is rather artificial and idealistic.

As she admits several times in the novel, Justine Brent never questions the righteousness of her deed. That is because she has not administered the fatal dose of morphine on an impulse, but based on a long-established belief that, in such cases, death is better than incessant suffering. But Justine seems to be searching for a confirmation that her opinion is justified. At some point, there is a discussion between Wyant, Miss Brent and Tredegar which sheds light on the three main points of view in this case. On the one hand, there is the ambitious doctor who strives to keep this "beautiful case" for as long as science permits it. Wyant's passionate description of the case and his efforts focused on prolonging life indefinitely is the opposite of what Justine, as a nurse, and even Mr. Tredegar think. The two realise that, in Wyant doing so, increasing pain hardly justifies a few more weeks of life. However, when asked about death being preferable, the lawyer does not hesitate in his answer: "Human life is sacred! […] Society decreed it – not one person. […] It's the universal consensus – the result of the world's accumulated experience. Cruel in individual instances – necessary for the general welfare."[34] Mr. Tredegar already knows what Justine has yet to find out: life within a social group means one has to obey its rules, regardless of their failure to apply in certain cases and not even if the patient itself required it. Indeed, even Bessy herself "once or twice […] turned her dull eyes on Justine, breathing out: 'I want to die'."[35] but, at the same time, "there were no signs of contact with the outer world"[36] and we must ask ourselves if she was really conscious when making this request.

But Justine's final argument is indirectly offered by Amherst himself. She finds some of his notes on a book and, given their discussion in the first chapter, she takes them as an assurance: "La vraie morale se moque de la morale… We perish because we follow other men's examples… Socrates used to call the opinions of the many by the name of Lamiae – bugbears to frighten children…"[37] she reads. It is interesting to notice that the first quotation is somehow different from the following two. Basically, it says that real life challenges the abstract rules of morality, a conclusion Justine will also reach at the end of the novel. The other two justify Amherst's way of life and his permanent struggle with the social conventions of the leisure class. Thus, we may interpret the three notes as following: real life may not be a matter of abstract principles, as there are a lot of exceptions to the rule and dilemmatic situations, but the fact is that human beings necessarily live within a community which will judge one's actions according to the same abstract moral code.

[34] Wharton, *op. cit.*, 122.
[35] Wharton, *Idem*, 124
[36] Wharton, *Idem*, 124.
[37] Wharton, *Idem*, 126.

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As a consequence, Justine's act can be perfectly reasonable: "No! Her motive had been normal, sane and justifiable – completely justifiable."[38] but, in the eyes of the society, abstract principles cannot be bent, at least when somebody else but themselves is to blame. The fact that Justine is afraid to tell John the truth shows that, deep down, she knows he is just like anyone else: "Her fault lay in having dared to rise above conventional restrictions, her mistake in believing that her husband could rise with her."[39]

An article which appeared in the *New York Times* shortly after the novel's publication indicates that the public opinion, inoculated with the same moral code as everyone else of Wharton's readers, cannot perceive Justine's act as something understandable and even representative for the type of character that she is:

> "but when she tries to make us believe that any young woman, above all a woman of Justine's Brent intellect and temperament, could do the thing she is represented as doing, Mrs. Wharton offends the mind, and something else, deep-seated within our little citadel of self. […] The idea is abhorrent, and all Mrs. Wharton's genius cannot make Justine's affable self-justification other than abhorrent. It may be that she meant to make of Justine a study in human responsibilities and human ideals of duty; but to the plain mind the question needs no study and admits of no argument."[40]

The criticism is in radical terms and indeed shows that the euthanasia debate, though popular at the time, was not to be given a favourable vote from the general public. In choosing this theme for *The Fruit of the Tree*, we have to wonder what Wharton's plan was after her success with *The House of Mirth*.

Indeed, Wharton's final message in the book is, as Justine realises, that life is not a matter of abstract principles but a succession of compromises with fate. I must share James Tuttleton's opinion that this is a story about a woman eating the fruit of the tree and understanding the complexity of life and human relations.

4. Conclusions

Overall, Wharton achieved her purpose to depart from the drawing-room society she grew up in and wrote about in *The House of Mirth*, and she turned her attention towards some controversial topics in her time. But in doing so, she also moved away from her usual acuteness of perception and mastery of the literary means. In my opinion, Justine Brent is the most successful character in the novel, not Amherst (like some of her critics proclaimed), but this in itself is not enough to rescue the entire composition. Wharton's depiction of social and moral conflicts is most successful when it is only implied and not overtly ridiculed. Her irony is usually hidden under the mask of perfect conventionality. In the case of The *Fruit of the Tree*, she is not convincing because small-town industrial America is not her place to be.

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[38] Wharton, *op. cit.*, 157.
[39] Wharton, *Idem*, 157.
[40] "'The Fruit of the Tree.' Mrs. Wharton's Latest Novel a Powerful Study in Modern Life – Expert Satire in Frosty Brilliance. Central Element Repels. Euthanasia as a Moral Problem Appears as New Element in Fiction." Editorial. *New York Times* Oct. 19 1907, http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F10D14FB3B5A15738DDDA00994D8415B878CF1D3

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Of the two major themes, I think that the morality of euthanasia is better illustrated. The first chapter of the novel starts well with the social component, but the relationship between leisure-class Bessy and former gentleman turned assistant manager Amherst quickly takes over the scene. Labour issues become secondary. In this respect, the moral component and its impact upon human and class relations is better illustrated and followed through. However, the last chapter of the book brings the social theme back into the reader's attention, but, this time, through Justine's eyes. She is happy to see all the improvements her husband had managed to put into practice, but there is also that personal regret that their earlier communion, both in business and in feelings, was lost.

In the end, the particularity of Wharton's novel stands in her personal views on the two topics and in the way she chose to illustrate them through her characters. She was definitely a moderate advocate of social reform because she saw the need for well-bred educated leaders to guide the lower classes through the social and political changes of that time. And she was also experienced enough to see that people's perception of morality may be relative, but it is still the weapon used by society to safeguard its status quo. The novel is thus an expression of what the author believed in and a reflexion of the way society changed in the early years of the 20th century.

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