# *FEMALE WRITERS AND THE GENDER ISSUE IN EDITH WHARTON'S "WRITING A WAR STORY" / ESCRITORAS Y LA CUESTIÓN DE GÉNERO EN "EL ARTE DE ESCRIBIR UN RELATO DE GUERRA" DE EDITH WHARTON*[1]

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***Abstract**: The Great War brought about important changes in the way society perceived gender roles and norms. Women entered the public sphere because their contribution was needed to the war effort; they were assigned various jobs, which allowed them to become more independent than ever before. Stereotypes and patriarchal bias were still common, and women writers tried to use literature as a medium to propagate feminist ideas. It is the case of Edith Wharton who, although not a declared feminist, attempted to challenge patriarchal power. Her short story "Writing a War Story" introduces the reader to a plot that becomes subversive to male authority.*

***Keywords**: Edith Wharton; gender; modernism; politics; WWI.*

***Resumen**: La Primera Guerra Mundial provocó cambios importantes en la forma en que la sociedad percibía los roles y normas de género. Las mujeres ingresaron a la esfera pública porque era necesaria su contribución al esfuerzo bélico. Varios trabajos fueron asignados a las mujeres, lo que les permitió volverse más independientes que nunca. Los estereotipos y los prejuicios patriarcales todavía eran comunes, y, por esta razón, las escritoras intentaron utilizar la literatura como medio para propagar ideas feministas. Es el caso de Edith Wharton quien, aunque no era una feminista declarada, intentó desafiar el poder patriarcal. Su cuento "Writing a War Story" ("El Arte de escribir un relato de guerra") introduce al lector en una trama que se vuelve subversiva para la autoridad masculina.*

***Palabras clave**: Edith Wharton; género; modernismo; política; Primera Guerra Mundial.*

## 1. Introduction

This paper represents an effort to highlight the idea that one of the literary outcomes of the Great War was the way in which female authors turned to express their feminist views by means of challenging gender norms. Historically, women's experiences were either excluded, or made secondary to those of men and, although many literary works took *Woman* as their subject matter, they usually replicated the biases and prejudices entrenched in pre-war society. World War I amplified the irrelevance of women's experiences since men were the ones fighting the war. The paper attempts to explore Wharton's feminism by taking one of her less commented short stories as a subject matter. Unlike other female writers such as Virginia Woolf or Elizabeth Robins, Wharton was not very vocal, and she did not associate herself with the feminist movement. Nevertheless, her works echo feminist themes, such as male criticism and the deprecation of women who wanted to break social conventions. The analysis is framed with a discussion of the implications of patriarchal power in relation to women writers, taking as a case study Wharton's short story, *Writing a War Story*, which bears thin sarcasm to male authority and experiments with irony in an attempt to deal with the male gaze and to disregard patriarchal power.

Gender is a social construct imbued with stereotypy that is carried across society through the use of social practices, literature, arts, various traditions, and collective mentality, in general. Before WWI, many pieces of literature provided comprehensive descriptions of gender role patterns, mostly from a male viewpoint, which amplified the

[1] Corina MITRULESCU, "Nicolae Balcescu" Land Forces Academy of Sibiu, Romania, corina.mitrulescu@yahoo.com

division of male and female spaces. Through literature, male authors delivered messages to wide audiences, thus forming opinions and perpetuating gender stereotypes.

It has long been suggested that female and male writers have a different approach to writing because of their distinct life experiences; as a result, male authors cannot accurately depict female perspectives or feminist ideals and the other way round. Art is considered to be a reflection of life; therefore, literature is expected to depict aspects in which gender roles correspond to those in the real world. Although it is difficult to dispel gender roles, some authors have attempted to view life from the point of view of the opposite sex.

In her essay "On Female Identity and Writing by Women", Judith Kegan Gardiner bases her gender theories on the idea that life experiences are different for men and women as a result of sex differences. She notes that "women's experiences differ from men's in profound and regular ways." (Gardiner, 1980: 178) She further explains that "[I]n a male dominated society, being a man means not being like a woman. As a result, the behavior considered appropriate to each gender becomes severely restricted and polarized." (Gardiner, 1980: 189). Consequently, according to the author, these differences in experience will be evident in literary compositions by male and female authors. Gardiner points out that women's writing differs from that of men not only in the imagery that they employ but also in the way they depict characters. She concludes that "female identity is a process" during which their personality gets to develop; this, in turn, will influence women's writing.

On the other hand, there are theorists such as Claridge and Langland who suggest that it is difficult for men to seem feminist in their writing due to patriarchal constraints. In their book, *Out of Bounds: Male Writers and Gender(ed) Criticism*, the authors emphasize that writing against patriarchy as a male "does not necessarily result in writing for liberation of gender bondage, a primary aim of philosophical and practical feminism. 'Feminist' tends to imply a political agenda" (Claridge and Langland, 1990: 3).

Annis Pratt points out that women's development is overpowered by that of men and that "Women's fiction reflects an experience radically different from men's because our drive towards growth as persons is thwarted by our society's prescriptions concerning gender." Pratt observes that the oppression that patriarchy had encapsulated in gender roles throughout centuries is mirrored by literature as well. Referring to novels written by women, she adds that there can be noticed a "clear sense that we are outcasts in the land, that we have neither a homeland of our own nor an ethnic place within society." (Pratt, 1981: 6) One could infer that Pratt meant to say that literature written by male writers would not depict the awareness of a male-dominated society simply because men's real lives have not been impacted negatively. Adversely, women's works, even though they frequently show the injustices endured by women, are also conveyors of hope. According to Gardiner, women writers commonly develop their identities in a manner distinct from that of men; women readers can typically relate to the type of personality presented because, women writers use "their text, particularly one centering on a female hero, as part of a continuing process involving her own self-definition and her emphatic identification with her character." (Gardiner, 1980: 187)

During World War I literature was not only meant to entertain but, in a time when communication devices were scarce and largely unavailable, it also became a source of information and knowledge. As men have always been seen as possessing the ultimate logic and experience, women authors were often perceived as though they were inadequately equipped to produce valuable pieces of writing. It is the case of Wharton's *Writing a War Story*, where this stereotype becomes damaging to the reputation of the female protagonist who becomes the target of a male writer's ridicule.

Wharton could be considered a reliable author since many of her war writings draw on her own experiences during the war. Her writings offer both a feminine and a feminist perspective of the Great War while trying to deconstruct patriarchal ideologies. Wharton was never vocal about feminist ideas, nor did she participate in any actions organized by the feminist movement. Nevertheless, she describes in her works women's deprivations and aspirations while displaying an implicit feminism. Her female characters are usually presented in relation to or even in contrast to male characters and sometimes with the whole patriarchal society, which was meant to control and dominate. Wharton "subtly juxtaposes women whose behaviour is traditional with those whose behaviour challenges social expectations." (McDowell, 1974: 521). Analysing this type of literature is of interest because it provides an excellent source for the study of gender development and women's culture during the Great War.

## 2. Historical Context

Both men and women are taught from a very early age what type of behaviour is appropriate for each gender. The traditional social order implies that men are breadwinners while women are homemakers. The Great War changed this perception since women had to fill in the gaps left by the men who were fighting on the battlefield.

The war brought about important changes regarding societal attitudes and norms; women were allowed to enter the public sphere while the social constraints were lessened and relaxed. However, during the Great War, women could not perform any type of job they wanted; their choices were limited mostly because social norms gave men control over what alternatives could be offered to women. This, in turn, led to a constant pressure that women had to undergo because of the discrepancy between women's actual capabilities and the level men who were overseeing their work considered they should perform at. This happened because it was presumed that women were not disciplined enough to be able to work together to help the war machine function properly and that they did not belong on the battlefield, which was formulated as a masculine space *per se*.

American women's history during the Great War is intricate since it covers two continents and many forms of work. Nineteen-twenty represents a pivotal year in the U.S. women's history because it is the moment when the suffrage movement finally succeeds, culminating with women acquiring the right to vote. In the middle of a war-torn world, women's newfound autonomy also led to changes around gender and women's independence, which were reflected through women's literature about the war. The heroines in these writings embrace the ideas of the Progressive Era and the standards of the New Woman, performing a series of activities in support of the war effort, thus becoming role models for the young women who were just discovering their self-determination.

American women, as much as they wanted to make a contribution to the war, were mostly confined to the home front. The war began in 1914, but the United States entered it in 1917. During this time of neutrality, many women took initiative and formed hundreds of charitable organizations aimed at helping European soldiers and civilians. Some American women even served in Europe as journalists or members of the Red Cross. Some authors such as Hamilton-Honey and Lewis (2020) suggest that "25,000 is a low estimate for the number of American women overseas, and tens of thousands more worked in wartime industries at home" (8).

American women were a part of the war effort, not only assisting but also replacing men in various industries. While armed forces were mobilized and the U.S. sent men overseas, women found ways to serve, forming their own small-scale armies of nurses, physical therapists, doctors, and caretakers.

Despite this progress, women found themselves to be frustrated because of the military bureaucracy. Hamilton-Honey and Lewis point out that both the civilians and the military personnel showed contempt towards the idea of changing gender roles. Newton Baker, the Secretary of War, made it very clear that he was against women in the armed forces, and he sought to prevent them from joining the army. The British had already allowed the formation of women's armed forces, namely the British Women's Army Auxiliary Corps. Nevertheless, the Americans were reluctant to allow women in the military. Both Baker and the U.S. Congress refused to grant military ranks to army nurses, denied benefits to Signal Corps female veterans, and used bureaucracy to deplete the Women's Land Army of America of its resources, thus playing an important part in disassembling the organization.

The changes brought about, during and after the war, allowed women to expand their educational and professional opportunities, at the same time altering and, in some ways, incrementing their societal status. The choices that women made were very deliberate and "their concerns with wages, opportunity, and job experience reflect women who were shrewdly cognizant of their own economic situations and well aware of the professional and financial advances that war could provide for them." (Hamilton-Honey & Lewis, 2020: 9)

In the years that followed the Great War, American women were able to surpass the fixed conventions that governed their lives and move toward positions of relative independence. They did this by questioning the validity of women's submission to rules and principles dictated by a male-oriented society, which was only remotely interested in the welfare of women as beings entitled to both responsibilities and privileges. The result was a more flexible social order and a fluidity regarding traditional gender roles that allowed women to participate as active agents of the social dynamic.

Women writers had trouble finding a place in the literary world before the war and long after it. They often had to prove their competence and the significance of their literary works because they were categorized as less worthy of the act of literary creation than men. Consequently, many women felt the need to publish their works under pseudonyms, not as a form of artistic expression as it was the case for men, but rather as a tool to conceal their true identity, in a male dominated world. Although the Great War had brought about significant changes in the definition of gender roles, women writers still had to face male criticism and a lack of gender equality in the literary community.

The Great War offered women the freedom to leave the confinement of the private sphere and enter the male dominated public sphere, where they had to face male aversion and rejection. Men's writings obviously dominate the literature about WWI with authors such as Ernest Hemingway and Wilfred Owen publishing their acclaimed works which promoted a literary understanding of the first "total war". Women who served in the war did not have firsthand experience of trench warfare, therefore their works have been largely ignored and deemed irrelevant. A study into women's war writing can add to the comprehension of gender issues, especially to the relationship between gender and power and how this shaped the world that we live in.

### 3. Wharton's Works in the Context of Women's Wartime Service

War writers have long been challenged by issues related to gender, authority, and witnessing the horrors of war, and many of them have been able to transpose their self-reflections on these topics into their writings. Edith Wharton managed to demonstrate her ability to reflect on unsettling war matters and to foster her satire aimed at her position both as a female author and a witness to what happened on the battlefront.

Most war literature is written by men, and it tackles topics related to disillusion and despair while offering a pretext for reflection, self-exploration, debate, and even irony. Wharton's literary pieces stemmed from her experiences in a country at war and enabled her to explore private problems. Along with "other members of the older generation, Wharton amply fulfilled the task of turning out pro-French propaganda designed to encourage American intervention in the war." (Tylee, 1997: 327-328)

Edith Wharton was an American writer whose novel *The Age of Innocence* made her the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize in Literature. She was born during the American Civil War, into a wealthy family, and spent her early years in New York. Edith became acquainted with European culture and languages during her travels with her family in France, Germany, and Spain. From an early age, she exhibited an attitude of rejection toward the well-established gender norms; she wanted to become more educated than her family would allow. She used her father's library extensively to expand her knowledge in various domains even though she was forbidden to read novels by her mother. Oftentimes, Wharton expressed her disagreement with the standards imposed on young girls and refused to comply with the expected etiquette. Wharton shared her love for travelling with her husband, but when their marriage started to deteriorate, she decided to move to Paris.

When the Great War broke out, she refused to leave and, for four years, she tirelessly supported the French war effort. She opened a workroom for unemployed women in her Paris apartment and helped set up accommodation and raise money for Belgian refugees. During the war, Wharton had the opportunity to travel to the front lines and visit the trenches, which prompted her to write articles that were published by *Scribner's Magazine*. Throughout the war, not only did she work in charitable efforts to help those affected, but also advocated for the necessity of the U.S. to enter the war. She devoted a lot of time and resources to her endeavours to make Americans aware of how important it was to support the European war effort. Thus, Wharton reported for *The New York Times* and edited *The Book of the Homeless*, a collection of poetry, essays, and art by major European and American artists, with an introduction by Theodore Roosevelt, in which he was urging the Americans to assist with the war.

She continued to write short stories, novels and poems, which reflected some of the issues that were occasioned by the conflagration. Some of the common themes in Wharton's writing include repressed sexuality, social mores and social reform, confinement and freedom.

### 4. Gender Issues in *Writing a War Story*

While it is true that popular fiction usually advanced the idea that women's status came as something intrinsic to their societal condition determined by male authority, the same cannot be affirmed about war fiction, which raises questions related to gender and autonomy. Many female writers authored fiction in which they discussed the status of women, which is why their works represent important cultural artefacts in women's history and culture. It is also the case of Wharton, who used her fiction to question and challenge men's attempts to subordinate women.

*Writing a War Story* is one of Wharton's stories hardly mentioned by commentators. Published in the year that followed the Armistice of 1918, this short story puts on the mask of fiction to discuss women's status in times of war, imagining a female protagonist whom the author ridicules at times. Although the story seems to have been written by a male narrative voice, it envisions a plot that becomes subversive to male authority.

McDowell suggests that Wharton's feminist philosophy is somehow difficult to pin down because "her characters do not always speak for the author", "her attitudes

toward women and their problems changed throughout her long career", and because she displays an ambivalence toward her characters that pendulates between "satiric detachment" and "human sympathy." (McDowell, 1974: 523) However, in the writings published during and after the war, Wharton's readers can notice a change in the way she used to depict female characters, and it is safe to say that it was the Great War that generated this change.

Tylee explains that Wharton's short fiction was characterized by an "increasingly ironic stance" which was prompted by "women's wartime independence". The author points out that Wharton switches from the "male-heroizing she clearly felt bound to display in the propaganda novel and journalism she produced for the Allies" to "nullifying male authority". At the same time, the story exemplifies how difficult it was for women to produce war fiction because they lacked the experiences given to men by their proximity to the firing lines (Tylee, 1997: 332-333). Women lacked the primary sources of information about the war and therefore their writings become highly fictionalized and romanticized.

Wharton's *Writing a War Story* was prompted by an incident reported at second hand. It was generally ignored until Gilbert and Gubar (1998) mentioned it in Volumes I and II of *No Man's Land*. For them, the story represented Wharton's attempt to "dramatize her hostility to women writers with gleeful wit" and that the author's intention is that of accepting traditional clichés about the status and functions of women by using stereotypes and traditional categorization of gender roles. However, one can argue that this judgment misses the fundamental idea of the story, which relies on the author's contempt, directed not at women writers, but precisely at the males who seem to think that they can patronize women. At a first reading, the story indeed gives the impression that it was written in a condescending tone and that it portrays the main female character in a derisory manner. However, a more attentive reading allows for a complex interpretation and an in-depth understanding of the text. The story should be read against a larger cultural and historical background that was established by World War I. Working as a journalist and a voluntary helper in a war hospital suggests that Wharton's protagonist, as a woman, played only an adjacent role in the war effort. This happened because the most difficult tasks were carried out by men on the battlefield, while women acted as support instruments, and accomplished their duties on the home front.

At the same time, if one considers literary modernism as a frame of reference for interpreting Wharton's work, then it can be argued that some researchers find Wharton's work outdated and this happens mainly because the pinnacle of her success was achieved before the critical dates by which we tend to identify modernism as a literary movement. Nevertheless, her story occurs at a time of ideological changes that were generated by new ideas regarding gender roles. The profession of writing also mirrored these developments and women had to somehow find a way to reconcile their status as subordinate members of a male-dominated society and their new-found voice as fully established writers and authors. Haytock, commenting on Gilbert and Gubar's *Sexchanges* (volume II of their three-part series *No Man's Land*), argues that "male writers of the 1920s felt emasculated by the horrors of World War I and threatened by women's new power." (Haytock, 2008: 15) And Wharton's story discussed here allows precisely for such interpretations.

In *Writing a War Story*, Wharton uses her wit and irony against her protagonist, Miss Ivy Spang, an aspiring minor poet who is struggling with writer's block. Miss Ivy is asked to contribute to a publication dedicated to convalescent soldiers, but she finds it difficult to meet the deadline. Wharton's irony effortlessly permeates in the following passage:

> She, Ivy Spang, of Cornwall-on-Hudson, had been asked to write a war story for the opening number of *The Man-at-Arms*, to which Queens and Archbishops and Field Marshals were to contribute poetry and photographs and patriotic sentiment in autograph! And her full-length photograph in nurse's dress was to precede her prose; in the table of contents she was to figure as "Ivy Spang, author of *Vibrations: A Book of Verse*." (Wharton, 1968: 360)

The story is told by an impersonal narrator who ridicules the female protagonist. Ivy Spang is a young and pretty woman who had published a slim volume of verse during the war and who acts as a voluntary helper at the Anglo-American hospital in Paris where she pours out tea to the wounded. Although Miss Spang's poems attracted the attention of an avant-garde journal, they did not prove to be interesting enough for the public, so she went ignored. The narrator notes that while working at the hospital, Ivy is introduced to the editor of *The Man-at-Arms* magazine who invites her "to contribute a rattling war story" that "was to bring joy to the wounded and disabled in British hospitals." The editor is very clear about what is expected of Ivy: "a good rousing story", "a dash of sentiment, of course, but nothing to depress or discourage", "a tragedy with a happy ending". (Wharton, 1968: 360) This is clearly an indication of male authority; Ivy is not allowed to develop a story in her particular manner, but she must comply with predetermined regulations. Ivy, who acts as an epitome for women authors, has to mold her own views to fit those prescribed by male standards.

This commission flatters Ivy and she takes leave to be able to focus on her writing. She goes to Brittany, where she takes lodge with her former governess, but she finds herself experiencing difficulty in writing the story despite the fact that "she knew so much about the war." It is precisely this "plethora of impressions" that makes it difficult for her to find a subject to start from (Wharton, 1968: 361). While taking a walk on the beach in an attempt to find Inspiration, Ivy comes across a literary magazine that, in desperation, she brings back home to consult in detail. Almost convinced that she would not be able to carry out her task to a satisfactory end, Ivy writes to the editor of *The Man-at-Arms* and asks him if she could contribute a sonnet instead of a short story. When she receives a negative response, Ivy is so disillusioned that she is determined to tell the editor she has become ill and cannot finish her story. It is the old French governess, who comes to the rescue; while working in a military hospital, she decided to note down the stories that the wounded soldiers used to tell. She hands Ivy the copybook and the young poet starts flipping through it to find a subject she could use for her story. Miss Spang eventually manages to develop a military tale hoping that "if you pretended hard enough that you knew what your story was about, you might end by finding out toward the last page." (Wharton, 1968: 362) Although we are told that she struggled with writing an appropriate story and that she almost gave up, Ivy eventually finds her inner strength to complete the task. Again, Wharton uses irony towards her main character when she suggests that Ivy's determination to continue with the story was prompted by the photograph that the editors wanted to publish along with the story. Ivy found that the photo was so flattering that it should not be wasted. Her decision to finish the story has nothing to do with literary sentiment or the desire to become a better writer, but with the vanity that stemmed from her good looks: "The photograph was really too charming to be wasted and Ivy, feeling herself forced onward by an inexorable fate, sat down again to battle with the art of fiction." (Wharton, 1968: 364)

*The Man-at-Arms* finally publishes Ivy's story next to an artistic photo of her. However, the author becomes mortified when she realizes that the patients in her ward, for whom she has written the story in the first place, show more interest in her photo than in the story. Wharton employs irony to suggest that her main character struggles to reconcile her double identity as a woman and an author. After seeing the magazine, the

officers in Ivy's ward ask her the favour of framing her photograph and taking it home. The scene is risible because there is a lot of confusion regarding the photo; while Ivy thinks that it is her story that the officers are praising, she comes to understand that none of them has actually read it:

> The lance-corporal became eloquent.
> "To remember you by, and all your kindness; we want to know if you won't give one to each of us –"
> ("Why, of course, of course," Ivy glowed.)
> "– to frame and take away with us," the lance-corporal continued sentimentally. "There's a chap here who makes rather jolly frames out of Vichy corks."
> "Oh –," said Ivy, with a protracted gasp.
> "You see, in your nurse's dress, it'll always be such a jolly reminder," said the lance-corporal, concluding his lesson.
> "I never saw a jollier photo," spoke up a bold spirit.
> "Oh, do say yes, nurse," the shyest of the patients softly whispered; and Ivy, bewildered between tears and laughter, said, "Yes."
> It was evident that not one of them had read her story. (Wharton, 1968: 367-368)

Moreover, the famous novelist Harold Harbard, who served during the war and was now recovering from injury in one of the rooms at the hospital, finds Ivy's story to be a great joke: "You've got hold of an awfully good subject . . . but you've rather mauled it, haven't you?", he tells Ivy in a frank tone (Wharton, 1968: 369). Here, again we can recognize an autobiographical note. Wharton herself struggled with giving a definite form to her ideas and she felt that her execution was weak. In a letter addressed to Robert Grant, in 1907, Wharton was complaining about the fact that she was unable to articulate "like a man" the subjects she chose for her works:

> I am beginning to see exactly where my weakest point is. – 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 effects that women have always excelled in, the episodical characterization, I mean. (Lewis and Lewis, 1989: 56-57)

Miss Spang feels offended not by Captain Harbard's honesty but by his desire to have a photo of her. The readers are told that she disguised her anger under the mask of cold politeness to which the captain responds: "You were angry just now because I didn't admire your story; and now you're angrier still because I do admire your photograph. Do you wonder that we novelists find such an inexhaustible field in Woman?" (Wharton, 1968: 370)

This is a clear example of one of the devices used by men to silence women. Ivy becomes but an object of the male gaze. By trying to overcome the limits that befit a lady, she becomes the subject of Harbard's ridicule, and she is reduced to the enigmatic figure of "Woman". Here, the reader can recognize an autobiographical element, since Wharton herself was regarded by male authors such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, or the critic Vernon Parrington as an author who did not present an accurate reality in her works since she was writing mainly about the upper class and the purposeless lives of those who populated it. Wharton's heroine is also a woman who belongs to the upper class (we are told that her family hired a French governess when she was a child), and who has no first-hand experience of the war. This could explain Harbard's remark that Miss Spang's story had an interesting subject (the story of a soldier wounded on the battlefield) that was utterly butchered through Ivy's interpretation. This kind of disaster is anticipated earlier in the story, as Wharton prepares the reader for what is to come next: "Ivy decided to add a touch of sentiment to the anecdote, which was purely

military, both because she knew the reader was entitled to a certain proportion of "heart interest," and because she wished to make the subject her own by this original addition." (Wharton, 1968: 364)

Wharton's usage of irony makes the reader sceptical in regard to the true value of the literary piece produced by Ivy Spang. We do not know whether her story was indeed of poor quality, or if Captain Harbard's remarks are gratuitous. One can consider that they might originate from his deep anxiety, as a male author, about the changes related to women's status and what these meant for masculinity.

The message of the story is related not to women, but to men's limitations and their inability to both fathom the resourcefulness of women and to surmount the conventions and roles that society has set in place for both genders. If read from Gilbert and Gubar's point of view, then the male narrative voice is obvious, and the story could be seen as a caustic criticism addressed to women authors. However, if the reader remembers that Wharton herself is a woman, then the story may be seen as an attempt to set up a female literary discourse that men refuse to authenticate. Then, indeed, their inability to see beyond the Woman concept, seen as a "Mélisande-Nightingale" (Wharton, 1968: 364) mishmash, can be scornfully laughed at. Tylee suggests that the story should be read from the point of view of a neutral omniscient author, a "gender-free narrator" that acts as a "disguise ironically adopted to distance the author from both the male gaze and the woman constructed by it." (Tylee, 1997: 336)

The concept of the 'male gaze' was hypothesized by Laura Mulvey, in her 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". Although her study analyses the male gaze in film and cinema, this concept can be effortlessly extended to literature and other fields of study as well. Mulvey has identified two distinct modes of the male gaze: *voyeuristic* and *fetishistic*. The first one refers to women as images to be looked at, whereas the second implies an underlying psychoanalytic fear of castration. If we are to adapt these two types of gazes for literature, then we could assert that the first one belongs to the author (and it is coming from outside of the text), while the second is represented by the gaze of the men in the narrative (in our case that of Captain Harbard and the other patients that Ivy tends for).

Mulvey suggests that the male gaze reduces a woman to a "bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning", i.e., the collective patriarchal consciousness somehow manages to lessen women's worth in terms of their intellectual capabilities and the things they can accomplish outside the private sphere to which they were normally confined in their role of homemakers. Mulvey goes on to say that "[I]n a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly" (Mulvey, 1975: 4). Nevertheless, the male gaze should not be understood strictly in the sense of objectifying women for the pleasure of the male viewer. As the cultivation theory suggests, people will start to accept that something is significant and valid the more they see that particular thing. Mulvey observes that these frivolous depictions would eventually encourage women to begin to emulate those characters' actions.

Wharton's short story tackles the issue of the male gaze and female objectification, as well as the effects it has on the female protagonist. The resulting conflict is settled in a typical patriarchal manner: the woman hides her revulsion under a mask of cold politeness while the man does not even realize his affront to the woman. The patriarchal pattern of male domination-female submission is repeated here as it is one of the fundamentals on which western society has been constructed over the centuries. One condition of the male gaze is that the female body is treated as an object; the woman is the passive receiver while she is also dehumanised. The male gaze in Wharton's short story is a bit atypical in the sense that men do not simply look at Ivy's

physical appearance and objectify her. This could be regarded as a third type of male gaze that refers mainly to spectatorship. It can be argued that it creates an *indirect* exposure since all the male characters objectify Ivy's photo in the magazine, which acts like a substitute for the real, palpable female body. The reader is also in the position not only to imagine but also to judge Ivy's looks. Her photo is indeed a very flattering one and Ivy herself ponders over her graceful appearance:

> […] the "artistic" photographer to whom she had posed for her portrait sent home the proofs; and she saw herself, exceedingly long, narrow and sinuous, robed in white and monastically veiled, holding out a refreshing beverage to an invisible sufferer with a gesture halfway between Mélisande lowering her braid over the balcony and Florence Nightingale advancing with the lamp. (Wharton, 1968: 364)

According to the objectification theory formulated by Fredrickson and Roberts, women are "typically acculturated to internalize an observer's perspective as a primary view of their physical selves." (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997: 173) Ivy's worth is not measured in terms of her intelligence and creativity, but by her looks. Thus, socio-cultural biases and gender roles that determine women's place in society are obvious here; women must be passive and dependent, while men dominate and control them. Therefore, by its very nature, the traditional patriarchal society proposed a schema in which the female body could be sexualized by the male gaze, regardless social status or age.

Wharton's story thus provides a framework that allows the readers to understand how it feels to be targeted; the male gaze represents a "tactic of power" (Quinn, 2002: 398) that allows men to dominate women. At the same time, *Writing a War Story* exemplifies how it must have felt to be a woman in a time when only things done by men mattered. At the same time, the story puts forward the idea that society was still guided by the belief that separate spheres should be maintained for men and women. Ivy serves tea to the wounded, and she excels at performing her task and at keeping the patients in high spirits; this implies that female domesticity was celebrated as essential to "True Womanhood". This contradicted the idea of a "New Woman" illustrated in the text by Ivy's desire to become a new authorial voice. Thus, Wharton suggests that "she and her culture had come to see these roles as being largely at odds with one another" (Chambers, 2009: 26).

## 5. Conclusions

In her revolutionary work, *The Second* Sex, Simone de Beauvoir argues that the world was designed based on dualisms and according to patriarchal norms. This means that society had been divided into two spheres that correspond either to males or to females; the male/female polarity is correlated to other dualisms: transcendence/immanence, active/passive, objective/subjective, rational/nonsensical. These dichotomies bestow men with dominance and authority; they are the rational and, by extension, the ones able to perform the complicated tasks of governing the world and setting its rules, while women should not attempt to rise above their condition of passive (immanent) beings. Or, if they do, it should be done on men's terms. That is precisely what Wharton suggests in her story: Ivy tries to access a domain that was traditionally reserved for men; her attempt to become a writer sets her out of the box and leaves her defenceless in front of Captain Harbard's remarks. Ivy Spang cannot break the walls that confine her to performing the traditional female role; by trying to prove that she can do more than tend to the wounded soldiers, she exposes herself to male derision. It is not a woman's place to innovate; she must follow the path that men had long ago established. Ivy is mocked because of her attempt to emphasize the technique, not the

subject. The Queen of Norromania, who also contributed to the magazine, is not mocked because she produced a meek piece of writing on some dull domestic topic, a piece of prose "oddly built out of London drawing-room phrases" (Wharton, 1968: 365), which is precisely what was expected of a woman. Innovation is men's prerogative; women are mere imitators.

When handed the notebook by the governess, Ivy remarks that her notes went on and on, without paragraph, "a good deal like life". This is Wharton's way of connecting Ivy's problems to modernist preoccupations related to the subjective experience and perception of time and reality. The governess had written down all her thoughts and impressions, without logical order, just as they came to her, a modernist literary technique that came to be known as the stream of consciousness.

Cultural norms referring to gender were so ingrained within society that they were not even noticeable because they were expected. A woman writer was frowned upon, and especially one who tried to establish herself as an authentic voice. Ivy's attempt to innovate and employ a new literary technique in her short story was seen as ridiculous as long as men were not willing to give it credit. In the end, she understands that if she wants to be accepted in the male-dominated, closed circle of literary authors, she must play by men's rules. Wharton succeeds in presenting the way women had to deal with the social pressures placed upon them, with "the rigid expectations of others with respect to them, and the complex choices which confront them" (McDowell, 1974: 523). Ivy's attempt to prove her value does not succeed. In a society where women lack authority and are not presented with opportunities to evolve, they will never find a complete victory.

The Great War triggered significant ideological changes, and the larger cultural and historical background against which Wharton produced her works make her a particularly interesting author for examination when it comes to gender and women's authorship.

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**Corina Mariana MITRULESCU** is an Assistant Professor of English at the Land Forces Academy of Sibiu, the Department of Applied Social Sciences and Humanities. She holds a doctoral degree in Philology from the University of Alba Iulia, a master's degree in European Studies, and a B.A. in History and English Literature. She is a Fulbright alumna, and her research interests include modernist literature, gender studies, historical fiction, medieval history, military discourse and terminology, and media literacy. She authored two books: *Politics and Poetics of Gender in the early 20th Century: Case Studies in Romania and the UK* (Berlin: Peter Lang Publishing House, 2022) and *Using Story-Telling to Teach English* (Craiova: SITECH, 2022); translator from English into Romanian: *Păcatele familiei Borgia* (Sarah Bower, *Sins of the House of Borgia*, Bucharest: Nemira, 2013) and *Pretorianul* (Simon Scarrow, *Praetorian*, Bucharest: Nemira, 2014).

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