“ACROSS THE THRESHOLD”:
QUEER PERFORMATIVITY AND LIMINALITY IN EDITH WHARTON’S SUMMER

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ABSTRACT

This project explores the connections between identities and spaces in a close reading of Edith Wharton’s novella *Summer*. Analyzing the various ways in which the three main characters, Charity Royall, Lucius Harney, and Mr. Royall, interact with one another, and how space and place determine these interactions, I find that identities are formed and deformed in relation to borders and liminal or “interstitial” spaces. I argue that Charity is a queer character that helps to disrupt the heteronormative structure represented by Mr. Royall, ultimately revealing his and all identities as neither original nor natural. In addition, particular places that Charity inhabits contain references to Wharton’s experiences within a queer community and in effect become places that further elucidate identity as having no original “natural” essence. The novella is an anomaly in Wharton’s oeuvre in its depictions of queer characters, especially Charity, and its allusions to Wharton’s own comrades. Therefore, I suggest that *Summer* is a rather disruptive text, which may account for its scant and conflicting scholarship. Finally, although the ending of *Summer* appears to imprison Charity in a lifeless marriage, I contend that the delegitimized union and Charity’s queer and liminal identity may be the continuing impetus for resistance to both Royall and her village, North Dormer. Partnered with *Summer*’s spatial and identity constructions, the ending itself is left open and thus entertains the possibility of the text as potentially queer.
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to two fabulous and inspirational women: my mother, Garde S. Parson, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.
Edith Wharton began writing her novella *Summer* in 1916 at a “a high pitch of creative joy,” cleverly referring to it as her “hot Ethan” (qtd. in Lee 508). While *Ethan Frome* (1911) takes place in the winter, *Summer*, as its title suggests, occurs in the summer and transitions into fall by its finale. Like *Ethan Frome*, *Summer* explores the remote countryside of New England and examines its “poverty and harsh conditions” (Lee 207). Published in 1917, *Summer* differs from Wharton’s well-known novels because its settings take place outside the realms of wealthy echelons and, somewhat contrary to Wharton’s novels of manners, the novella is a brooding narrative in its discussion of promiscuity, poverty, and incest. Moreover, the novella contains intense sensuality both in imagery and plot, which suggests that Wharton’s description of *Summer* as her “hot Ethan” carries a double meaning (qtd. in Lee 508).

In her biography, *Edith Wharton*, Hermione Lee asserts that *Summer* “was one of [Wharton’s] most erotic books, and one of her most troubling treatments of a sexual mismatch” (585). Kathleen Pfeiffer, in “*Summer* and Its Critics’ Discomfort,” argues that the novella is “Wharton’s most explicitly passionate fiction” and that some of Wharton’s own friends admonished the novella, while yet others extolled it (141). Current scholarship, Pfeiffer suggests, has “been either scant or conflicted,” perhaps out of a “discomfort” with *Summer*’s “departure from the novel of manners” or in its explicit discussion of passion (142). Scholarly discussion of Wharton’s novels has eclipsed *Summer*, with the primary focus usually on *The House of Mirth* (1905) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920), even though these novels also treat the similar theme of a “modern woman” trapped by circumstances. Pfeiffer proposes that *Summer* is
an anomaly in Wharton’s opus, which may account for the novella’s comparatively sparse critical reception (142).

In early 1975, scholar Cynthia Griffin Wolff discovered a fragment entitled “Beatrice Palmato,” a highly erotic piece that explores the sultry yet disturbing relationship between a daughter and her father. Lee calls the fragment an “experiment in taboo-breaking” and an “exercise in writing sexual fantasy” (Lee 589), while biographer R.W.B. Lewis considered it “elegant pornography” (qtd. in Lee 588). *Summer* similarly involves themes of literal and figurative incest as well as erotically charged imagery, and “Beatrice Palmato” became linked with *Summer* in its overt portrayal of unsanctioned desire and exhibitionism (Lee 588-89).

Wolff psychoanalyzed both “Beatrice Palmato” and *Summer* as autobiographical narratives in which Wharton developed expressions of a “flaming, consuming love for her father” (qtd. in Lee 588). Elizabeth Ammons concurs and reads *Summer* as a “protest” novel against an “unhealthy and incestuous . . . father-daughter model of sexuality favored by patriarchal society” (qtd. in Pfeiffer 141). Indeed, as Lee notes in her biography, psychoanalytic critics speculate that Wharton was “probably an incest-victim in early childhood,” although no evidence has been found to substantiate these interpretations (588).

Others have departed from psychobiographical interpretations of *Summer* and instead have focused on how Wharton depicts her female protagonist under patriarchy. In “Becoming a ‘Good Girl’: Law, Language, and Ritual in Edith Wharton’s *Summer*,” Rhonda Skillern approaches the text from another perspective and suggests Charity symbolizes a liberated woman. She reads “Charity’s budding sexuality . . . [as] an aspect of the feminine that may be present but cannot be publicly recognized or inscribed in discourse without being violently distorted by the available modes of (male-referenced) signification” (294). Discussing the
relationship between Charity and her guardian, Lawyer Royall, Skillern asserts that Charity begins an “initiation into ‘The Law of the Father,’” which both elicits female independence and sexuality and denounces its potential” (296). Skillern concludes that although Summer ends with another loveless marriage, the union “signals both Charity’s capitulation to the Law of the Father and her subversion to it” (304). Skillern reads the ending of Summer, then, as potentially hopeful as Charity seems to have “preserved a space within herself” that Royall cannot “invade” (304). Lee also suggests that the ending of Summer “can be seen as a realistic adjustment” on both Charity and Royall’s part, where Charity “feels reassured and secure” and Royall “becomes grave and kindly and forbearing” (512). Because Charity is pregnant by her former lover, Royall can then be seen as accepting the situation rather than as exploiting Charity, and Lee further posits that “Royall’s acceptance of Charity and her baby could be read as . . . bravely introducing into self-protective small-town America a necessary new influx of strange ‘blood’” (512-13).

However, Christine Rose’s “Summer: The Double Sense of Wharton’s Title” emphasizes that the “trappings of a happy ending” are not as they seem:

[They] may be in evidence, but the conventional rescue of the damsel in distress is turned on its ear, and the legitimacy, stability, reputation and security that Royall can provide for the next generation is paid for at too high a price for Charity: the loss of youth and hope and sexuality. Her rescue is her entrapment, and the “good” for which she returns to North Dormer is not all good. (18)

An early scene in Summer in which Royall attempts to seduce and perhaps rape Charity renders his proffered security as questionable. Rose concludes that “[a]lthough we may sympathize with [Royall’s] loneliness and need, we must despise him both for the threat of rape he represents and for his view of Charity as his possession” (18). For Rose, any hope in Summer disappears and
ends tragically. Linda Morante, in “The Desolation of Charity Royall,” also analyzes the theme of imprisonment in *Summer* to describe Charity’s story as a tragic defeat. She sees “Wharton’s study of cultural deprivation” as “interwoven with her exploration of her adolescent heroine’s sexual and emotional self-discovery, creation of dreams, and initiation into disillusionment when these aspirations perish” (286). The ending of *Summer* “becomes a story of enclosure . . . [and] of failure” because of Charity’s imprisonment in the village of North Dormer, as well as in her final act of marriage to her guardian (Morante 290). Lee also argues that *Summer* may represent “a depressing and sinister immolation of youth and hope in a hypocritical (and quasi-incestuous) social compromise” (512).

These scholars insist that these contradictions in *Summer* reveal Wharton’s own concealed feminism and her war against patriarchy, and Pfeiffer thinks *Summer* “reverberates with strong feminist anger” (152). Indeed, Charity often seems to embody a feminist disposition as she struggles to resist the external forces perpetuated mainly by Royall. Charity is aware of her budding sexuality and seeks to explore and use it on her own terms. However, Donna Campbell argues in “‘Where are the Ladies?’ Wharton, Glasgow, and American Women Naturalists” that Charity must surrender to those outside forces, including patriarchy, that render her defenseless and stagnant. Jennifer Fleissner maintains that determinism represents the inevitability of the perils of the “New Woman,” and that Charity’s desires must be thwarted (qtd. in Campbell 154). However, Lee contends that *Summer* “is one of the few Wharton fictions in which a love affair is acted out rather than being denied or deferred,” and that Charity’s romance with her lover Lucius is “fulfilled” (508), although Rose would argue that Charity’s fulfilled romance is “too high a price” to pay (18).
Pfeiffer posits that interpretations of *Summer* are inconsistent and controversial “because [the novella’s ending] both rectifies and validates the incestuous impulses staggered throughout the novel,” and that the conclusion’s position in the novel corresponds with the space in which it occurs (151). After Charity and Royall are married, they return to their house in North Dormer, and Charity will then have to cross the “threshold which had initially offered” a beginning for her but that has now “become a place of finality” for Charity (151). The threshold was originally one that Charity used to assert her independence; however, at the end of the novella, the threshold becomes a symbol of dependence and translates into the literal marriage threshold that stabilizes Charity’s sexual identity and forever defers possibilities for further passion. The threshold becomes significant, then, as a structure that Royall uses to reinforce his own authority “of the old and established and decidedly male power structure” (Pfeiffer 151).

Wharton’s use of architectural structures, such as the threshold, in her texts is well-known, but this topic is rarely discussed in connection with Wharton’s characters. In *Edith Wharton as Spatial Activist and Analyst*, Reneé Somers acknowledges that spaces and the characters who inhabit them are linked, and that Wharton demonstrates this connection specifically in her non-fiction work *The Decoration of Houses* (1897):

Wharton suggests that spaces can sometimes be active forces that impose upon us as much as we impose upon them. More thoroughly, she posits that architectural interiors and exteriors can alter, sometimes dramatically, our ways of thinking as well as our behavior. The idea that people are affected by their surroundings and that they can even become creatures of their environment would later become one of the core philosophies of *The Decoration of Houses*. (86)
In fact, Somers suggests that “Edith Wharton firmly believed that an environment’s characteristics directly affected those inhabited its spaces” (152). She further theorizes that spaces for Wharton were “gendered,” and that Wharton used spaces in her texts both as places for subversion as well as representations of patriarchal restrictions (9). In her examination of how Wharton “explore[d] how space creates meaning” as well as the criticism of “the boundaries resulting from that meaning” (3), Somers fails to mention Summer even once.

Yet Christine Rose observes that in Summer “the spaces which [Wharton’s] characters occupy and move through are significant. Houses, public buildings, fences, porches and all manner of structures often constrict the movements of her characters, functioning thereby as reminders of their moral paralysis” (16). Rose reads Summer as “rich in architectural detail” and cites by way of example that Lucius Harney is an architect. Her article centers on Royall as the “summer” of Summer’s double meaning, an architectural term to describe “a large horizontal supporting beam or girder, such as a lintel” (16). As the “support” of the novella, Royall as provider at the end of Summer corresponds to previous interpretations. However, Rose also mentions that Royall still influences the actions of Charity and Lucius “by his mere existence. Royall buttresses Charity in the end” (17). Royall then is “the book,” as Wharton once commented, in that he functions as structure of the narrative (qtd. in Rose 18), figuratively and literally. Nevertheless, critics have not discussed the connections between identity and space. Specifically, the trope of the threshold, its variations, and spaces have yet to be explored in Summer as noteworthy themes that form, transform, and deform identity.

The threshold appears to constrict as much as it constructs and fortifies Charity’s and Royall’s identities. Wharton also uses the threshold to represent Charity’s sexual awakening and the final marriage scene between Charity and Royall. Moreover, the threshold represents borders
between the spaces and places within and outside North Dormer that Charity, Lucius, and Royall inhabit. When Charity crosses the boundaries of North Dormer she enters into marginal spaces where she is free to move. Royall also uses thresholds and space to restrict Charity’s movements, strengthening his own power over her. Furthermore, his very identity “is inextricably connected to maintaining” control (Pfeiffer 145). As a lawyer and thus the representative of the male power structure in *Summer*, Royall uses thresholds and spaces that Charity attempts to occupy in order to preserve his authority.

The OED defines “threshold” as “[t]he piece of timber or stone which lies below the bottom of a door, and has to be crossed in entering a house; the sill of a doorway; hence, the entrance to a house or building,” and as a “[b]order, limit (of a region); the line which one crosses in entering. . . . In reference to entrance, the beginning of a state or action, outset, opening.” In fact, the word “*limen* . . . signif[ies] ‘threshold’ in Latin,” linking thresholds with liminality (Turner 94). In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha describes a liminal space as the “interstitial passage between fixed identifications [that] opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (5). Bhabha’s description of liminality follows Victor Turner’s attributes of the liminal space and person in his anthropological study of rituals, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Turner says that “threshold people” are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. (95)
Considering the connections between interstitial spaces and liminal people in Bhabha and Turner, themes of crossing become more apparent in _Summer_ as identity and space reinforce each other’s ambiguity. Current gender and queer theorists have focused on similar crossings in many of Wharton’s works. For example, in her article “‘Queer Myself for Good and All’: _The House of Mirth_ and the Fictions of Lily’s Whiteness,” Lori Harrison-Kahan analyzes how Lily Bart and Simon Rosedale queer the boundaries of gender, sexuality, race, and class in relation to each other (34-5). Scholars concurrently review Wharton’s texts in relation to her identifications with men. Monika M. Elbert discusses “gender crossings” in Wharton’s short story “Bewitched” in “Wharton’s Hybridization of Hawthorne’s ‘Brand’ of Gothic: Gender Crossings in ‘Ethan Brand’ and ‘Bewitched’” in connection to Wharton’s identifications with primarily male writers (223). Moreover, Gregory Woods interprets Newland Archer in _The Age of Innocence_ as a “potentially queer figure,” calling attention to the artifice and language in the novel as defining a “European scene that challenged American social tradition,” especially the queer male Parisian scene into which Wharton was integrated (qtd. in Califano 489-90). Richard A. Kaye, in “Edith Wharton and the ‘New Gomorrah’ of Paris: Homosexuality, Flirtation, and Incestuous Desire in _The Reef_,” directly links Wharton’s relationships with men who blurred sexual identities to themes of “ambivalence,” artifice, and queer Parisian cultural landscapes in Wharton’s works (860). He claims that although there remains “a crucial connection between the homosexual social context of Wharton’s Paris and the indecisive males of the author’s fiction,” scholars have avoided this theme because they seem to find these subjects in defiance of “existing analytical categories” (860-61).

An unpublished dissertation from 2007 illustrates how Wharton scholarship can benefit from further examination of these themes. In “The Comradeship of the ‘Happy Few’: Henry
James, Edith Wharton, and the Pederastic Tradition,” Sharon Kehl Califano notes that Wharton created “for herself a ‘fraternity of male writers,’ a brotherhood or band of brothers who bonded together due to a shared sense of otherness, [of] queerness” (488). Califano claims that Wharton assumed an “interiorized masculine identity” and gained an authorial voice among a queer male literary community, and she conjectures that if Wharton “threads careful references to queer culture throughout her texts, then her fiction requires reexamination” (488, 490). In light of the connections Califano makes, her suggestion for further inquiry and criticism from the angle of queer theory deserves consideration.

Although “the term ‘queer’ was, at best, slang for homosexual, at worst, a term of homophobic abuse,” it has now “come to be used differently, sometimes as an umbrella term for a coalition of culturally marginal sexual self-identifications” (Jagose 1). In her book Tendencies, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick observes that “queer” means across, transverse, and to twist, and that it can “spin . . . outward along dimensions that can’t be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all” (xii, 9). Gloria Anzaldúa, for instance, uses queer in such a way as to call attention to the “interpenetration of many borders,” including the geographical and spatial (L. Hall 28). Anzaldúa’s theories on the “border person” align with Victor Turner’s “threshold person,” and in her works she deploys the term “‘mestiza consciousness’ to identify the plurality of subjectivities that an individual embodies. Occupying a space of ‘perpetual transition’ and ‘cultural collision’ involves a struggle to resist limiting and confining borders” (L. Hall 28). Queer, then, can “connote . . . a crossing of boundaries” as well as “a certain failure to live up to expectations” (qtd. in W. Turner 35, 134). David Halperin suggests that queer

does not name some natural kind or refer to some indeterminate object; it

acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm. Queer is by
definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant.

There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. (qtd. in W. Turner 134)

In fact, queer “may be better understood as promoting a non-identity—or even anti-identity—politics” (Jagose 130). Curiously, the OED links the word “threshold” to the word “difference,” and “difference” is defined as “distinct, without essence,” or pertaining to a “non-identity.” Charity, for instance, is “at odds with the normal” and crosses boundaries (thresholds), and when she meets Lucius Harney, her future lover, he recognizes her as different, and it is then that she and Lucius embark on their boundary crossings and effectively become “border people.” Thresholds and spaces simultaneously function as markers of limitations and as sites of mobility in relation to identities. Judith Butler’s theories on performativity and identity help to illuminate identity formations in Summer. In her works, Butler describes performativity as a “process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms” (Bodies That Matter 95). She further theorizes that “[g]ender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Gender Trouble 45). In other words, there is no “‘doer’ behind the deed,” as “identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Gender Trouble 34). We realize, for example, that there is no subject behind Charity’s doing when toward the end of the novella, and prior to Charity’s marriage to Royall, Charity recalls her hours with Lucius on the 4th of July, but with the fading of the landscape those fervid hours had faded, too. She could no longer believe that she was the being who had lived them; she was someone to
whom something irreparable and overwhelming had happened, but the traces of
the steps leading up to it had almost vanished. (203)

Royall especially has exerted his own power over her by this time and is the “regulatory
frame” through which Charity’s identity (and his own) is created. As Butler posits in “Imitation
and Gender Subordination,” this regulatory frame is a “heterosexual construction” that seeks to
naturalize and police gender and sexuality, but because heterosexuality “is always in an act of
elaborating itself is evidence that it is perpetually at risk, that is, that it ‘knows’ its own
possibility of becoming undone: hence, its compulsion to repeat which is at once a foreclosure of
that which threatens its coherence” (184-85, 129). Royall’s repeated efforts to persuade Charity
into marriage, efforts that would stabilize her as “wife,” reveal his need to police heterosexuality
and, at the same time, illustrate how unstable his own identity is. And Charity is often able to
disrupt the normative power structures that strive to restrain her. Butler argues that
“[h]eterosexuality is naturalized by the performative repetition of normative gender identities,”
but when performativities “repeat the law with a difference,” identities can be revealed as
“regulatory fictions” (qtd. in Jagose 84-5). Charity repeatedly undermines Royall’s authority,
rendering his own identity as unoriginal. At the same time, the quasi-incestuous relationship
between Charity and Royall further disrupts Royall’s normativity. His desire to marry Charity
highlights the relationship as queer and seeks not only to legitimize Charity but also to
(re)legitimize his own heteronormativity. Furthermore, passages where Charity performs a
“natural” gender and sexuality, for instance, actually expose such identity markers as illusory.

In addition, particular places that Charity inhabits contain references to Wharton’s
experiences within a queer community and in effect become places that further elucidate identity
as having no original “natural” essence. In fact, the artifice and language associated with queer
male culture in Europe that Gregory Woods observes in *The Age of Innocence* is apparent in *Summer*, and allusions to Wharton’s “band of brothers” in either words or actual characters are also present. *Summer* somewhat anticipates the queer subtext in *The Age of Innocence*. Pfeiffer reads *Summer* as a subversive text compared to Wharton’s other works, but perhaps the novella is not subversive but *disruptive*. In its depictions of queer characters, especially Charity, and its allusions to Wharton’s queer comrades, *Summer* is a little “troubling” and, thus, queer.
Charity

The first image of the threshold is Charity passing over it, unguarded, as she departs the “red house” toward her job as librarian at the local library. Charity is able to exit and enter her home freely, and crossing its borders mark her as liminal and queer, as all borders remain “in a state of constant transition” that allows movement (L. Hall 28). And, as David Halpern asserts, queer or queerness can indicate an opposition to normalcy or legitimacy, Charity is always already queer. Wharton introduces Charity to the reader as an itinerant character, clearly illustrated through her behavior and language. Her identity is ambiguous right from the beginning.

We learn that Lawyer Royall “brought [her] down from the Mountain” when she was five years old (93). She has learned from “[e]veryone in the village,” repeatedly, that the Mountain is a “bad place, and a shame to have come from” it (93). The place represents “uncivilized” outsiders, and because Charity was born there, she is a symbol of its depravity (93). As an orphan, and not even “legally adopted” by Royall, Charity is an illegitimate figure (99). Thus her identity as a “stable” daughter is complicated and socially incoherent by North Dormer’s standards. Pfeiffer comments that Charity “not only remains free from the trappings of social codes in which filial ties would undoubtedly involve her, [but] she also maintains a distinctly separate identity among her peers” (143). In “The Death of Love: Sexuality, Secrets, and Settings in Wharton’s Summer,” Susan L. Hall agrees, noting that this seeming autonomy is Charity’s way of “distanc[ing] herself from the community” in order to “resist the lifestyle and
conventions” of North Dormer (12). Charity’s ability to defy her village’s social customs firmly places her outside the limits of familial and community norms. However, Butler insists “that the law is generative and plural, and that subversion . . . occur[s] within [the] law” (Salih 60). It is the existence inside structures of normativity that subversion is possible. And as such, Charity’s queerness and liminality complicate her position as “feminine” as well.

Charity works outside of the home and wanders around the village unaccompanied. The public sphere serves as a “social location” for men and is therefore considered “masculine” (Chodorow 9). Yet Charity breaches it constantly and unabashedly. She troubles the separation between private and public, feminine and masculine, by violating social sanctions. Coupled with her past as an outlaw and an orphan, Charity is a subject under suspicion and is regarded as uncivilized, “half-human,” and illegitimate (119). Charity is one of those “‘incoherent’ and ‘discontinuous’ gendered beings who appears to be a person but who fails to conform to gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined” (Butler, Gender Trouble 23).

When she first leaves the “red house” to go to work, and after initially spotting the young man with whom she will eventually desire and identify, Charity has “the street her herself,” for “at three o’clock on a June afternoon [North Dormer’s] few able-bodied men are off in the fields or woods, and the women indoors, engaged in languid household drudgery” (91). But because the “few able-bodied men” labor in fields and the women work in the home, the public place that Charity now occupies transforms into a “interstitial space.” At the same time, the space that Charity occupies is never fully under her control. Here I depart from scholars’ assertions that Charity is completely free from cultural and social constraints. The streets remain sites of passage within North Dormer, what Charity calls “the norm of the universe” (92), and she has no
choice but to pass through and within these norms. She can only transgress this space inside already existing power structures. As the norm, North Dormer constructs Charity’s performance within its borders, but as an identity that is incomplete, she is able to manipulate the border-spaces unpredictably.

Yet Charity’s incoherence is not limited to her actions. In fact, her inability to articulate almost everything effectively corresponds to her illegitimacy. When Charity leaves her house to go to work at the library, the “prison-house,” she walks into a “little June wind” and exclaims dramatically “How I hate everything!” (91). This statement is in response to her spotting a “stranger,” Lucius, and then reacting by “wish[ing] for the thousandth time that she had blue eyes like Annabel Balch,” a young woman about the same age as Charity (91). Charity repeats the phrase again after imagining the beautiful Annabel, and finally heads to her destination. She hyperbolically, and melancholically, asserts this feeling twice, effectively shattering any serious meaning behind it. In her introduction to *Ethan Frome* and *Summer*, Denise D. Knight suggests that Charity’s comment “reflect[s] her sense of oppression in the small, conservative village of North Dormer” (8). Indeed, as the name intimates, North Dormer is also Charity’s “prison-house” (94). However, Charity’s exclamation, repeated twice, also signals an exaggerated unintelligibility. Unable to express herself in other ways, Charity resorts to the repetition of a single phrase that on its second articulation loses its sincerity and becomes almost hyperbolic and meaningless.

At the same time, Charity seems to delight physically in this inarticulateness. After she closes the library early, she lies in the grass on a hill “immersed in an inarticulate well-being” (97). Charity takes sensual pleasure in these brief excursions as she “feel[s] the wind and . . . rub[s] her cheeks in the grass” (97). The hill that she frequently climbs represents a marginal
space where she can embrace a seeming incoherence without the interference of the rest of North Dormer. The scene also establishes Charity as a non-normative sexual character. She enjoys the sensual and tactile pleasure that arises from rubbing her body against a non-person. The experience is autoerotic in a sense and is not the only time that her sexualities transgress reproductive heterosexuality.

Knight notices how Charity is constantly described as “bewildered” or “speechless” (7). Later in the novella, when Charity shows Lucius old houses on the periphery of North Dormer, she takes him to one with a “half-roofless shed” with occupants that are also from the Mountain (123). Before the two depart, Charity thinks that the Mountain “is where I belong—this is where I belong” (125). In the repetition, just as in her earlier declaration, “the words had no meaning for her” (125). The more she verbalizes her feelings, the less articulate they (and she) become(s). Her garbled feelings keep her liminal and are intensified and confirmed by her interaction and identification with the stranger, Lucius Harney.

Lucius

Lucius is an architect on commission “from a New York publisher” (120), and his unexpected arrival during Charity’s shift at the library marks their introduction to each other. During their awkward conversation, Lucius asks Charity if his aunt, the owner of the library, had ever mentioned him. Charity waffles in her speech: “‘No, she hasn’t,’ . . . wishing she could have said: ‘Yes, she has’” (96). Lucius responds by commenting on her lack of education: “You don’t seem strong on architecture” (96). Charity’s “bewilderment was complete: the more she wished to appear to understand him the more unintelligible his remarks became. He reminded her of the gentleman who had ‘explained’ the pictures at Nettleton, and the weight of her
ignorance settled down on her again like a pall” (96). This feeling appears merely to illustrate Charity’s lack of cultural knowledge, but her ignorance also triggers in Charity a desire for Lucius. He is not only educated; he is also to some extent indecipherable to her. Butler posits that “[t]rue subjectivities come to flourish only in communities that provide for reciprocal recognition, for we do not come to ourselves through work alone, but through the acknowledging look of the Other who confirms us” (qt. in Salih 28). Although Lucius recognizes Charity as unintelligible, he nevertheless recognizes her.

Lucius may be a characterization of Wharton’s friend and co-writer of The Decoration of Houses, Ogden Codman. Wharton and Codman were never lovers, but Codman was a “sexually ambivalent” and “clever young Boston architect” who served as the original designer and interior decorator for The Mount (Lee 135). Lucius is also an interior designer of sorts. For example, Charity and Lucius regularly meet at a little deserted house situated “interstitially” between North Dormer and the Mountain. One day Charity arrives before Lucius, and she discovers that he has decorated the house: “A rough door made of boards hung in the kitchen doorway, and pushing it open she entered a room furnished in primitive camping fashion. In the window was a table, also made of boards, with an earthenware jar holding a big bunch of wild asters, two canvas chairs stood near by, and in one corner was a mattress with a Mexican blanket over it” (164). The marginal house is now transformed into an improvised home that gives the couple, at least for a while, the freedom to carry out their affair. Furthermore, this space allows the couple to live liminally. The position between North Dormer and the Mountain situates the couple “as necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space” (V. Turner 15).
Thus the little house serves as a space where Charity and Lucius further solidifies their relationship and connects them as outsiders, hinting at Lucius’s own identity as potentially queer. Immediately after meeting Lucius, Charity discloses her desire for his short-sighted eyes, and the odd way of speaking, that was abrupt yet soft, just as his hands were sunburned and sinewy, yet with smooth nails like a woman’s. . . [H]is smile was shy yet confident, as if he knew lots of things she had never dreamed of, and yet wouldn’t for the world have had her feel his superiority. But she did feel it, and liked the feeling; for it was new to her. . . Confusedly, the young man in the library had made her feel for the first time what might be the sweetness of dependence. (98)

This scene directly links desire with identification. It establishes a bond between the two characters as intersubjective. The conflation of gender characteristics in Lucius mirrors Charity’s own discontinuous identity. Wharton’s description of Lucius marks his own gender as unstable in appearance and he becomes an ambiguously gendered being. Lucius does not express a coherent gender via his “masculinity” or “maleness.” If “gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (Butler, Gender Trouble 191-92). In other words, the description of Lucius blurs the lines of a substantive gender, such as a masculine man. His discontinuous appearance belies any underlying natural characteristics of masculinity (or femininity), and his role as a sort of decorator in the couple’s little house seems to complicate further his identity. Wharton’s description of Lucius reveals his identity to be as incoherent as Charity’s. Furthermore,
Charity’s desire for Lucius is simultaneously a desire to identify with him. Lucius represents the city and “difference.” He traverses and transgresses boundaries literally. The sense of reliance on Lucius that Charity feels here and throughout the narrative reinforces her identification with him.

Charity and Lucius spark an interdependency and establish a partnership as both comrades and lovers. Their mutual desires for and identifications with each other are further reflected in their liminal states of being. As an architect (further connecting Lucius to space, structures, and liminality), Lucius wants to travel to the Mountain because he has heard that there exists “a handful of people who don’t give a damn for anybody” (116). He finds the Mountain to be

“a curious place. There’s a queer colony up there you know: sort of outlaws, a little independent kingdom. Of course you’ve heard them spoken of; but I’m told they have nothing to do with the people in the valleys—rather look down on them, in fact. I suppose they’re rough customers; but they must have a good deal of character.” (116)

Charity has yet to tell Lucius that she is actually from the Mountain, but his words of “admiration . . . thrilled her,” and “[t]hey seemed the clue to her own revolts and defiances” (116). By calling her birth place queer and rough, Lucius confirms Charity’s self as an outlaw, as a conflicting identity in opposition to “the people in the valleys.” When she finally tells Lucius that she comes from the Mountain, Lucius exclaims, “‘How curious! I suppose that’s why you’re so different. . . ,’” sending a wave of “happy blood” to Charity’s head (117). “He was praising her—and praising her because she came from the Mountain!” Charity thinks in delight (117). Thus, she embraces this interpellation. He reaffirms her seeming otherness and
positions her in relation to him as a stranger himself. Charity’s incoherent self is linked to this “desire for recognition by another self-consciousness so that it can recognize itself” (Salih 28). It is in the desire for recognition that Charity is able to form a desire for Lucius. The threshold that Charity passed through at the beginning of the novella, then, becomes a site of increasing significance. Her queer identity crosses the threshold of the red house at the same moment she first sees Lucius, clearly foreshadowing a connection between the two. However, the threshold also presages Charity’s relationship to her guardian, Royall.

Royall

The threshold that Charity crosses at the beginning of the novella initially represented one of resistance and fragmentation of self for Charity. However, just as the streets through which Charity passes remain attached to a regime of power, the threshold too exists within the same structure. So while the threshold signifies a “first encounter” with desires and identifications, establishing a type of beginning for Charity and Lucius, the threshold also becomes a site across which Charity and Royall must negotiate power. In order to cross or use the threshold subversively at all, Charity has to move through the power structures that possess it, and this means that her desires and identifications are not grounded in Lucius only.

Sara Salih suggests, in summarizing Butler’s interpretation of the master/slave relationship as interdependent, that the “subject is inevitably and passionately attached to the law upon which it depends for its very being” (Salih 9). Thus Royall’s and Charity’s relationship is what Salih calls “mutually reliant” because they “cannot live without each other” (8). Charity must use the same law to which she is subjected in order to “repeat and re-repeat that norm in unexpected, unsanctioned ways” (Salih 8-9). Therein lies the interdependency of Charity and
Royall’s relationship. Though Royall never legally adopted Charity, he is still her guardian. Yet, Charity already feels another obligation to Royall. She is constantly reminded by the village to “never cease to remember that it was Mr. Royall who brought you down from the Mountain” (93). And this profound and yet unfair sense of duty to Royall attaches her to the power structures of the law as well, for Mr. Royall is the law and “the biggest man in North Dormer” (98). Royall uses the threshold as a framing device for stabilizing Charity’s queer identity. For example, he stands near the threshold of doors every time he proposes to her. The threshold, where Charity can cross over frequently, is used to assert Royall’s authority over her and to keep her from moving. Additionally, Royall’s proposals at the threshold seek to make Charity a “wife” thus fixing her identity into something coherent. Yet because power is relational, Charity is able to temporarily ward off Royall’s marriage proposals at the threshold via her identification with him.

When Wharton wrote that Royall is “the book” (qtd. in Rose 16), she effectively complicated her readers’ impressions of him. It forces us to see Royall as the heteronormative structure that also attempts to frame Charity’s identity. At the same time, Wharton’s claim affords us the opportunity to read queerly in order to understand how a queer identification arises between Charity and Royall. Royall desires Charity, and as her guardian, his heteronormativity is disrupted because this desire is quasi-incestuous. Royall is also “at once the source of Charity’s oppression and her kinsman in lonely superiority to their surroundings” (Rose 18). Charity may loathe Royall, but she also identifies with him. Charity sees Royall as a “dreadfully ‘lonesome’ man; she had made that out because she was so ‘lonesome’ herself” (99). Their interdependency depends on recognition. In recognizing Royall as “lonesome” because she is
also lonely, Charity shows an awareness of not only her ambiguous identity but also of Royall’s equally ambiguous identity.
The complexity of thresholds in *Summer* demonstrates identities as equally complicated. And as a word that literally means to “turn” or “twist” (Gibbs 252), a trope thus has the potential to constitute and even trouble identities. Raymond W. Gibbs Jr., in “Process and Products in Making Sense of Tropes,” says

> [v]arious scholars throughout history, . . . beginning with Quintilian, Ramus, and Vico, have argued that a great deal of our conceptualization of experience, even the foundation of human consciousness, is based on figurative themes of thought which include not only metaphor, but also metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. These tropes do not merely provide for us a way to talk about how we think, reason, and imagine, they are also *constitutive* of our experience. (252-53)

As a trope used throughout *Summer*, the threshold extends beyond a double meaning: it radically reshapes the structure of spaces and identities as multiple, overlapping, conflicting, and queer. As Somers reads Wharton’s *The Decoration of Houses* as “demonstrating that spaces affect who we are, how we feel and how we see the world around us” (113), *Summer* too connects space and place to formations of identity.

Henry James once commented that “No one fully knows our Edith [Wharton] who hasn’t seen her in the act of creating a habitation for herself” (qtd. in Somers 113). Likewise, we begin to understand Charity as we see her creating environments for herself. Furthermore, her identity as queer begins to manifest more clearly for Royall during the course of the novella. Charity begins transforming and transgressing space in North Dormer after her first encounter with
Lucius. As she crosses thresholds of gender and sexuality in these spaces, she upsets heteronormativity. She not only moves fluidly through spaces, she uses these spaces to perform her queerness.

North Dormer

Charity is “sick of North Dormer,” as it represents the “norm of the universe” to her (93, 92). The word “dormer,” dormir in French (the language in which Wharton originally wrote Summer), means “to sleep” and “dormant,” while “dormant” indicates simultaneously “inactivity” and a “fixed horizontal beam; a sleeper; a summer” (OED). Moreover, a “dormer” is still a window, a passage, and a threshold. While North Dormer symbolizes immobility, it also seems to suggest crossings. The architectural reference further establishes the village as a potential liminal space for Charity, although she perceives it as dull and virtually static. North Dormer shrinks “to its real size” in its abandonment of all the forces that link life to life in modern communities. It had no shops, no theatres, no lectures, no “business block”: only a church that opened every other Sunday if the state of the roads permitted, and a library for which no new books had been brought for twenty years, and where the old ones mouldered undisturbed on the damp shelves. (92)

In other words, North Dormer is boring and uneventful. She recalls this mundane atmosphere when thinking of Lucius: “It’s no use trying to be anything in this place” as “she shriveled at the vision of vague metropolises, shining super-Nettletons, where girls in better clothes than Belle Balch’s talked fluently of architecture to young men with hands like Lucius Harney’s” (105).
Yet Charity has already begun carving spaces within the confines of North Dormer because, as the name’s ambiguous meanings suggest, it can still serve as a passage or threshold for Charity to manipulate and cross. In the scene where Royall attempts to seduce and possibly rape Charity, she asserts her authority via the threshold, illustrating the exchange of power. Royall is also queered in this scene because his attempt to seduce his “daughter” is incestuous, marking Royall’s identity as non-normative.

She was awakened by a rattling at her door and jumped out of bed. She heard Mr. Royall’s voice, low and peremptory, and opened the door, fearing an accident. No other thought had occurred to her; but when she saw him in the doorway, a ray from the autumn moon falling on his discomposed face, she understood.

For a moment they looked at each other in silence; then, as he put his foot across the threshold, she stretched out her arm and stopped him.

“You go right back from here,” she said, in a shrill voice that startled her; “you ain’t going to have that key tonight.”

“Charity, let me in. I don’t want the key. I’m a lonesome man,” he began, in the deep voice that sometimes moved her.

Her heart gave a startled plunge, but she continued to hold him back contemptuously. “Well, I guess you made a mistake, then. This ain’t your wife’s room any longer.” (101)

As we see, Royall initially sounds collected and authoritative, as his “deep voice” represents a power that seems to move Charity (101). However, he is discomposed which implies an erasure of authority. Susan L. Hall views the image of this threshold encounter as “reminiscent of the
opening scene in which Charity appears on the doorstep of Lawyer Royall’s house; however his 
unwelcome and threatening attempt at entry into her bedroom is obviously a crucial difference”
(13). In spite of this incident, Charity remains in the house. Pfeiffer postulates that while “there 
is clear and explicit mention of Charity’s disgust toward Royall, there is an equally clear and 
explicit parallel text which points to a kinship and sort of intimacy between the two” (145).
Pfeiffer states that “when Wharton continually asserts Charity’s power in spite of lawyer’s 
isolated moments of depravity, that power becomes doubly problematic . . . because it suggests 
that Charity authorizes these moments” (145). Far from Pfeiffer’s confusion over the 
“problematic” authorization by Charity, this scene demonstrates the two characters’ need for one 
another. Royall attempts to exploit the threshold heteronormatively, but the threshold is one 
“where sovereignty wanes (or where sovereignty is given up),” allowing an “agency . . . [to] 
begin” here where “it always resides within a law that is multiple, myriad, and self-proliferating” 
(Salih 10).

Charity is able to invest the threshold with power because authority is transformed and 
transferred between herself and Royall. It is what allows her to rule in the house. Through this 
space she operates queerly and destabilizes the scene and Royall. When Pfeiffer suggests that 
the scene is problematic because Charity seems to “authorize[s] these moments,” it is because in 
order to perform her identity, and remain liminal, she has to allow them. In order to subvert the 
norm, Charity must first exist within the norm. Royall as the “agent of moral law . . . and 
prohibition” (Salih 125) enables her very existence. The threshold, as site of this law, provides 
her with the means of “possible resistance” (Salih 127). And when Charity reminds Royall that 
“this ain’t your wife’s room any longer,” she further complicates boundaries of identity because 
she is refusing that role. Because her identity is already marked in opposition to the norm, her
forceful reminder also challenges the stability of what comprises that position. Charity is not performing a discrete “womanly” gender or sex in this scene; she has already overstepped the boundaries of gender in her mobility. Charity uses both threshold and room to reassert and repeat her queerness.

This scene illustrates how Royall is queered. There is a blurring of roles—daughter, girl, mother, wife, woman, man, father, lover—at the threshold. Royall uses the threshold to “remain intact” in his relationship to Charity. However, because Royall participates in and even initiates the quasi-incestuous act, he complicates his identity. Charity is now in an authoritative position, so Royall is both relational and oppositional to her. He is queered via Charity’s appropriation of the threshold as well as through his own behavior. The impending incestuous act shows that Royall is already unstable and less powerful than he appears.

Charity further transgresses spaces in North Dormer via her non-normative sexual desires. Later in Summer, when Royall tells Charity that Lucius is not coming to dinner, Charity hears “Mr. Royall cross the passage, and presently the sounds below her window showed that he had returned to the porch” (130). Again, Royall crosses thresholds and passes into the contested site of authority in the front of the house. Charity “began to struggle against the desire to go down and ask him what had happened,” but she does not want to give Royall the gratification “by saying it” (130). She finally decides to leave, and when Royall attempts to ask her of her destination, “she swept on in silence, determined not to recognize his right to question her” (131).

As she moves on, she once more traverses the public spaces of “masculinity” in her nightly movements. She approaches Miss Hatchard’s house where Lucius boards and spots an open window. She immediately catches a glimpse of “his sunburnt hands, one holding a pencil
and the other a ruler . . . moving to and fro over a drawing board” (132). After “[h]er heart jumped and then stood still,” Charity “stepped up on the verandah and looked into the room. Harney had put his elbows on the table and was resting his chin on his locked hands. He had taken off his coat and waistcoat, and unbuttoned the low collar of his flannel shirt; she saw the vigorous lines of his young throat, and the root of the muscles where they joined the chest” (132). Charity thus re-appropriates the (male) gaze as she watches Lucius. She feels a sudden “yearning roused by Harney’s nearness” (132) and later acknowledges that “[s]ince the day before, she had known exactly what she would feel if Harney should take her in his arms: the melting of palm into palm and mouth on mouth, and the long flame burning her from head to foot” (133). Elbert notices a “world of voyeurism and auto-eroticism” in Wharton’s works, and the scene above is evidence of this. Charity assumes the position of voyeur in this public space outside Lucius’s window. It is also erotic in its language: Charity “trembles” as she gazes at Lucius stirring in bed (134).

In “Whitman, Wharton, and the Sexuality in Summer,” Abby H.P. Werlock describes this as “a brilliant scene depicting Charity on the threshold of sexual awakening . . . as Charity watches Harney lying on his back on the bed in a scene rife with masturbatory images” (252). Again, a threshold is established. As Charity watches through a window, another passage, she is situated on a threshold of sexuality. She uses this open space as a liminal site through which she can express her unabashed desires. Yet the objects of her desires remain discordant. We initially saw a charged autoerotic scene in which Charity orients her sexuality toward herself on the hill as she delighted in her own body in the grass. This time she transfers her desires to Lucius and particularly to Lucius’s hands as they move “to and fro” (132). Moreover, Wharton seems to invite readers to enjoy this scene with Charity, as we also become voyeurs engaged in watching a
young man’s seeming exposure. Because Charity is in a public space, outside an open window, the scene allows us unrestricted access to Lucius.

Bernard Berenson, a friend of Wharton’s, wrote her a letter in 1932 recommending that she read Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette’s novel Ces Plaisirs. However, he points out to Wharton that “I seem to remember you don’t enjoy Colette” (qtd. in Lee 616). Wharton responded, “No, it must have been some other lady who told you she didn’t like Colette, for I not only marvel at her but delight in her. But this last book seems to me just pornography pour la vente” (qtd. in Lee 616). Lee explains that “Ces Plaisirs explored sado-masochistic sexual relations, starting with an orgy in an opium den, and detailed Colette’s ‘own sensual torments.’ It was the self-advertisement and exhibitionism Wharton disliked, more than the sex” (Lee 616). Yet here we have a questionably exhibitionist scene in Summer with Charity and the reader as voyeurs. Wharton’s fragment, “Beatrice Palmato,” written around the same time as Summer, was Wharton’s attempt to “be more French—after all, Gide, Cocteau and Colette . . . were much more sexually candid and exhibitionist than she ever allowed herself to be in print. . . . [so] [w]hy not try it, too?” (Lee 589). Thus this scene in Summer may be Wharton’s attempt at writing like her French contemporaries, for Charity crosses boundaries of coherent sexual behaviors. Furthermore, in the town of Nettleton we see these same elements intensified, and we also begin to tease out further allusions to Wharton’s experiences in France with her contemporaries.

Nettleton

Charity discovers that Royall has intervened in Lucius’s visit, causing the young man to have to return to New York. Royall has discontinued Lucius’s use of Royall’s horse, the youth’s only means of transportation. But Lucius writes Charity a letter exclaiming that he “can’t go
away like this,” and he asks Charity to join him “for a few days at Creston River” (140). When they meet, they decide to adventure to Nettleton. The narrator explains that Lucius describes what happened between Royall and himself, and that “[h]is tone had instantly justified [Charity], and put her guardian in the wrong” (143). Charity and Lucius’s relationship at this point is “one of simple friendship,” as they “roamed the hills in happy comradeship” (143). Indeed, earlier in the novella, Charity notices that Lucius’s words were “more fraternal than lover-like,” even though they obviously desire one another (129). Wharton consistently used phrases such as “comradeship” and “band of brothers” in her writings, revealing terms that were exclusively articulated within Wharton’s queer male literary community as avowels of same-sex male desire (Califano 45). Charity and Lucius’s relationship is lover-like and yet fraternal at the same time. Charity’s identification with Lucius as both lover and brother complicates her identity and desires. Furthermore, in its literal or figurative sense, “comrades” or “brother” ostensibly connotes a non-normative partnership precisely because Charity also desires Lucius.

Although Charity is supposed to go to the Band of Hope picnic, she “was determined to assert her independence,” and that requires accompanying Lucius to the “metropolis” of Nettleton (142). The couple has “no plans for the rest of the day, and when Harney asked [Charity] what she wanted to do next she was too bewildered by rich possibilities to find an answer” (147). She simply wants to move freely within Nettleton, and thus this space operates interstitially for Charity and Lucius. This space, as Bhabha would describe it, “opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (6).

Nettleton is a place with a bustling “business block” and “saloons . . . restaurants . . . [and] drug-stores” (144). After the couple enter a restaurant, Charity all of a sudden finds herself
in the bathroom, “a dressing-room all looking-glass and lustrous surfaces, where a party of showy-looking girls were dabbing on powder and straightening immense plumed hats” (146). Later, a waitress informs the couple that it will take an hour to be seated, so Lucius suggests that they “try somewhere else” (146). The restaurant where the couple eventually dines demonstrates a keen sense of Nettleton’s “cultural hybridity,” liminality, and artificiality. The passage also hints at Wharton’s experiences in France among her “band of brothers” as she alludes to a queer subculture:

That ‘somewhere else’ turned out—after more hot trampling, and several failures—to be, of all things a little open-air place in a back street that called itself a French restaurant, and consisted in two or three rickety tables under a scarlet-runner, between a patch of zinnias and petunias and a big elm bending over from the next yard. Here they lunched on queerly flavoured things, while Harney, leaning back in a crippled rocking-chair, smoked cigarettes between the courses and poured into Charity’s glass a pale yellow wine which he said was the very same one drank in just such jolly places in France.

Charity did not think the wine as good as sarsaparilla, but she sipped a mouthful for the pleasure of doing what he did, and of fancying herself alone with him in foreign countries. The illusion was increased by their being served by a deep-bosomed woman with smooth hair and a pleasant laugh, who talked to Harney in unintelligible words, and seemed amazed and overjoyed at his answering her in kind. . . . [B]etween the table-legs a poodle with bald patches and pink eyes nosed for scraps, and sat up on his hind legs absurdly. (146-47)
The amalgamation of cultures in this scene heightens Charity’s identification with Lucius as one founded on difference and fluidity. Although Charity imagines a type of future adventure with Lucius, this desire to travel to other countries fades as soon as she thinks of it. Just the thought of being an “other” reinforces her identifications with Lucius as liminal and queer, and it also strengthens their relationship as existing only in the present, in what Bhabha describes as a “spatial distance” from a past or future (6). This scene becomes particularly interesting as it seems to connect to Wharton and her comrades. Lee suggests that “the little band” of men to which Wharton belonged “was the only family where Wharton felt secure” (244). This “band” included Henry James and the “homosexual or bisexual circle of men who paid homage to James in his last decade,” including Gaillard Lapsley, Morton Fullerton (Wharton’s lover), Percy Lubbock, and Howard Sturgis (Lee 244). Later in her life, between 1908 and 1914, Wharton also befriended the poet Jean Cocteau and the author André Gide. Werlock says “[a]pparently, Summer was at least partially inspired by a memorable but hot July week with Lapsley, Henry James, and John Hugh Smith at The Mount, Wharton’s home in Massachusetts,” and that Wharton “urged Lapsley to read her new novel, saying that certain scenes from Summer would ‘amuse’ him in a way that only they can ‘fully appreciate’” (249). Summer may have also been inspired by a trip with André Gide in France. In a letter to a friend, Wharton describes a lunch that she and Gide “had together in Toulon” in 1915:

You should have seen his amazement and delight when he found that I loved buying eatables in bags out of queer little stalls full of anchovies and things in oil! We loaded ourselves with melons (lovely little green ones), “noix de Grenoble,” dried figs (no epithets good enough for them) and squasy dates; and therewith betook ourselves to a queer little restaurant overlooking the port, where in an
upper salle delightfully frescoed with steamers and tropical vegetations and

“scenes de chasse,” we lunched on our spoils and a bottle of asti. . . . And Gide
has thought better of me ever since. (qtd. in Lee 474)

Wharton’s description resembles the narrative at the French restaurant in Summer. There
are fruits and “noix de Grenoble,” a type of walnut, at a “queer little restaurant” where Wharton
and Gide sit in a room that also contains “scenes de chasse,” scenes of chasing or hunting.
Wharton implored Gaillard Lapsley (a gay male) to read Summer, indicating that he would not
only appreciate it, but that he would also recognize specific scenes. Furthermore, Wharton also
tried “to persuade [Gide], unsuccessfully, to translate Summer” (Lee 474). The restaurant with
Lucius now bears a resemblance to Wharton’s own time spent with the sexually ambivalent
Gide. Curiously, Graham Robb claims in his book Strangers: Homosexual Love in the
Nineteenth Century that poodles were favored by Parisian lesbians as non-verbal signs of
identification (151). These references suggest that Nettleton is a queer space in which
ambiguous identities can traverse and dwell. It operates liminally in that it allows for differences
to manifest and move.

After Charity and Lucius leave the restaurant, the landscape becomes increasingly
theatric as “everything [Charity] saw seemed to glitter” (146-47). They pass
between immense pictures of yellow-haired beauties stabbing villains in evening
dress, into a velvet-curtained auditorium packed with spectators to the last limit of
compression. After that, for a while, everything was merged in her brain of
swimming circles of heat and blinding alternations of light and darkness. All the
world has to show seemed to pass before her in a chaos of palms and minarets,
charging cavalry regiments, roaring lions, comic policemen and scowling
murderers; and the crowd around her, the hundreds of hot sallow candy-munching faces, young, old, middle-aged, but all kindled with the same contagious excitement, became part of the spectacle, and danced on the screen with the rest. (147).

This description seems to anticipate Newland Archer’s experiences in Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* in which Archer “spent a few gay weeks in Florence with a band of queer Europeanized Americans, dancing all night with titled ladies in palaces, and gambling half the day with the rakes and dandies of the fashionable club; but it had all seemed to him, though the greatest fun in the world, as unreal as a carnival” (120). In *Summer* the people in Nettleton become “part of the spectacle” and thus become the spectacle themselves, blurring the lines between fiction and reality. Nettleton itself represents a town that one can traverse liminally, and its location outside of North Dormer only helps to bolster liminal identities that already exist in-between space.

Charity and Lucius continue to the Lake, a “sheet of metal brooded over by drooping trees” (148), and then they remember the fireworks display will soon occur. Lucius promises that the display will be a “big performance,” and after a while they make their way to another restaurant and seat themselves on the balcony from which to view the fireworks (149-50). The fireworks scene is replete with orgasmic imagery and language as the entire crowd delights in some sort of ecstasy. Nettleton becomes a zone of erotic pleasure, a space in which an entire community participates in a highly suggestive portrayal of desire. Wharton may not have appreciated Colette’s depictions of exhibitionism and orgies in her novel *Ces Plaisirs*, yet we cannot skirt this scene’s similarity to a figurative orgy. And the spectators, in their collective
sounds and movements, join the spectacle of the equally suggestive fireworks imagery, effectively blurring reality and fantasy. Wharton writes that the fireworks “ceased” and then the whole night broke into flower. From every point of the horizon, gold and silver arches sprang up and crossed each other, sky-orchards broke into blossom, shed their flaming petals and hung their branches with golden fruit; and all the while the air was filled with a soft supernatural hum, as though great birds were building their nests in those invisible tree-tops. (151)

When “a murmur of expectation ran through the crowd,” a voice cried out “Now—now! . . . and Charity, grasping the hat on her knee, crushed it tight in the effort to restrain her rapture” (151). Immediately “[a] long ‘Oh–h–h’ burst from the spectators: the stand creaked and shook with their blissful trepidations. ‘Oh–h–h,’ Charity gasped: she had forgotten where she was, had at last forgotten even Harney’s nearness. She seemed to have been caught up into the stars. . . .” (151).

The crowd’s orgasmic bliss, including Charity and Lucius’s, is directed toward and constructed by the environment in which they live at the moment. As a symbol of independence, the fireworks also become an image of sexual independence and difference, another crossing of boundaries as “gold and silver arches sprang up and crossed each other” (151). Additionally, the “shooting off” of the fireworks results in the shedding of the orchards’ “flaming petals” and hanging “their branches with golden fruit,” symbolizing a sexual encounter. If Wharton implored Gaillard Lapsley to read *Summer* because it “would ‘amuse’ him in a way that only [he] can ‘fully appreciate’” (Werlock 249), then it is quite possible that this was one of the scenes that would entertain him. Although it is sensually and sexually charged, the spectacle also suggests excess and parody. Wharton was thoroughly aware of innuendo in her literary
companions’ conversations and works (Lee 244-46). The above scene appears to imitate a
sexual union but it overindulges and almost seems to mock it. The scene’s very depiction of a
community participating in the display only further troubles the interpretation that “Wharton
presents feminine sexuality as a latent force that comes alive when stimulated by a man” (S. Hall
11). Although Charity is stimulated by Lucius, this scene reveals that there is no monogamous
or “normative” sexuality or desires at work here; it is arguably polygamous and multi-sexual.

The space in Nettleton only becomes queerer when, after the display, Charity and Lucius
encounter Royall with Julia Hawes, the sister of Charity’s friend Ally and presumably a
prostitute, and a “band” of young men with “secret society emblems” on their coats. Charity
notices that Royall also wears “a secret society emblem in the buttonhole of his black frock-
coat,” and when he spots Charity, he “moved a step or two away from his companions” (152).
Wharton used “companion” in a similar vein as “comrade,” and this word choice along with the
phrase “secret society” intimates a homosocial bond and possibly Royall’s homoerotic desires
which only serve to reveal Royall as potentially queer. Royall is drunk, and he sees that Charity
is bareheaded and screams “You whore” at her (153). Charity immediately touches her head
because she realizes that she has taken off her hat, linking a bareheaded woman in public with
prostitution, and in doing so she seems to interpellate Royall’s call. In Butler’s readings of
interpellation, “the subject comes into being through the simultaneous actions of submission and
mastery, and yet neither of these acts is performed by the subject that is the effect rather than the
cause of those acts” (Salih 130). In other words, the subject becomes the name it is called via the
name, but not before (no doer behind the deed). So it seems that by labeling Charity a whore,
Royall has seemingly subjected her into this role.
However, Charity does not have a coherent identity, and although a whore assumes an unsanctioned identity, Royall’s call necessarily desires to stabilize Charity into this role in order to re-assume his own “normative” heterosexual hegemonic position. After this call, Charity walks up to Royall and demands that he go home with her. Royall repeats “with precision . . . ‘You—damn—whore!’” (153). The fact that Royall has to repeat himself shows that rather than accepting his call, Charity actually fails to recognize herself in this naming process. Therefore, as Butler suggests, this challenges the “performative efficacy of the law” (Salih 130). Royall’s power is once again transferred to Charity. Royall’s participation in an arguably queer circle and his encounter with Charity also render him unstable and somewhat panicked. Furthermore, Charity disrupts normativity both outside and inside of North Dormer when she reveals identity formations as inherently unstable and heterosexuality itself as unoriginal. However, it is through Royall’s constant intrusions into Charity’s spaces and his repeated marriage proposals that finally reveal his own identity as illusory.
The Myth of the Origin(al)

Charity understands that class differences make marriage between her and Lucius impossible, and yet she continues to pursue a sexual relationship with him. But she does have fleeting fantasies of marriage to Lucius. For example, after meeting Lucius for the first time, Charity is in her room (her space), and as she gazes at her reflection in the mirror, she undoes the band of her nightgown from her throat, “freed her thin shoulders, and saw herself a bride in low-necked satin, walking down the aisle with Lucius Harney” (106). However, Charity reminds us later that she had not thought seriously about marriage with Lucius. While the couple adventures in Nettleton, Charity starts thinking about diamond rings, but “she did not know why the thought had occurred to her. Harney would never buy her an engagement ring: they were friends and comrades, but no more” (149). Susan L. Hall argues that Charity is “naïve” because “she is trying to convince herself of the hopelessness of a relationship between them” (15). But Charity seems to embrace the non-normative relationship that she and Harney have.

The repetition of marriage imagery is repeated throughout Summer. Later on, Charity notices a “dress of . . . virgin whiteness” laid out on her bed, apparently left by her friend, Ally Hawes (Julia’s sister). Charity bought the dress to “surpass” other girls, and as she looks at all the “whiteness,” she remembers her “first meeting with Harney” but “no longer had such visions . . . warmer splendours had displaced them” (167). Charity also finds some white shoes that she believes belongs to Annabel Balch, and so she tries them on. However, when she hears “Harney’s secret signal,” his bicycle bell, she stares “down moodily at her feet” and “stumble[s]
to the window” (168). This scene is almost humorous in Charity’s attempt at normalcy. She tumbles in the high heels and glares at them sullenly at the same moment that Harney passes by (168). Although Charity imagines marriage to Lucius, she nonetheless makes it clear that these thoughts are ephemeral and utterly unreal. She again remarks that “[s]ince the fanciful vision of the future that had flitted through her imagination at their first meeting she had hardly ever thought about [Lucius’s] marrying her” (177). Although Charity knows class differences prevent Lucius from marrying her, she feels that marriage to him would force her to consider the future, “[b]ut she seldom looked ahead; each day was so rich that it absorbed her” (178).

But the “myth of the original” is also presented toward the end of the novella, when Charity tries to return to the marginal space of the Mountain. When Charity travels to Nettleton later in the novella, she goes to the same abortion facility that Julia Hawes went to, largely to have her own pregnancy confirmed. She begins to wonder if “there was no alternative” to prostitution now for she has no desire to marry anyone (187). She realizes that in “the established order of things as she knew them she saw no place for her individual adventure” (187). She finally decides to return to the Mountain, her birthplace, for she has nowhere else to go. And yet, she has no sense of a past or memories, calling the idea of an origin into question.

Charity walks up to the Mountain only to find out that her birth mother is dying. The village preacher has been called, and on his way he sees Charity and sweeps her to the mother’s home. When they arrive, Charity discovers that her mother is now dead. She catches sight of “her mother’s face, thin yet swollen, with lips parted in a frozen gasp above the broken teeth. There was no sign in it of anything human: she lay like a dead dog in a ditch” (192-93). Charity’s mother, as well as the Mountain community, is described as promiscuous and illicit. As we recall, Charity is an outlaw herself, an outsider, so she think she belongs to the Mountain.
Yet Charity realizes that “it was impossible to imagine any link between” her and this community (197). Her attempts at identifying with this “queer colony” (116) are related to Charity’s struggle to try to identify with her mother as a mother. And yet, “the grave surprise of motherhood” is still unfathomable to Charity (183). Butler argues that the original “can never be recovered or known, and that “speculative origin is always speculated about from a retrospective position, from which it assumes the character of an ideal” (Gender Trouble 106). Charity realizes that the Mountain is not “ideal,” and now that her mother is lost as an origin, Charity cannot envision herself in the coherent, gendered, and ideal role of “mother” as specified by normativity.

The “original” of anything is shown in Summer to be illusory. This is further demonstrated through repetitious acts of heteronormativity and heterosexuality by Royall. His use of space and thresholds is exemplified in his acts of marriage proposals to Charity and his appearances in the marginal spaces where Charity subsists. In fact, as Charity “paused on the threshold” between the Mountain and North Dormer after her horrible encounter with her dead mother, Royall shows up to take her home (199). It is in these repetitious acts by Royall that expose his performance anxiety, further complicating his own role as “coherent.”

Performance Anxiety

Royall makes an uncanny appearance every time Charity embarks on her “individual adventures” (187). Their relational transference of authority always occurs at thresholds and in liminal spaces such as Nettleton. His presence becomes so naturalized that Charity initially perceives him as an origin: he is “the person who is always there, the unquestioned central fact of life, as inevitable but as uninteresting as North Dormer itself,” yet she begins to question him
and to “wonder what he was really like” (135). He is the dominant heteronormative power structure that attempts to control Charity as he persistently attempts to use the threshold in order to perform his role as an authority figure. The diligence of his presence causes Charity to perceive Royall as “a hideous parody of the fatherly old man she had almost known” (103). Royall’s identity is “an imitation which effectively displace[s] the meaning of the original,” and this parodic identity “imitate[s] the myth of originality itself” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 188). Since Butler has argued that an “origin” cannot be known, Charity’s observation that Royall has become a parody of a “fatherly old man she had *almost* known” hints at Royall’s illusory identity.

The first marriage proposal by Royall occurs early in the novella. Charity enters Royall’s “office,” and Royall says “I want you to marry me,” and then he immediately repeats the phrase (103). Charity “bursts out with a scornful laugh” and rejects his proposal. Royall then pauses “on the threshold” and says, “People ain’t been fair to me” and then leaves the room (104). Royall uses both his office, the site of authority and and law, and the threshold to enact his heteronormative position and stabilize Charity’s identity. However, the relationship between them is already ambiguous and blurred, rendering his authority parodic. The desire to marry Charity is quasi-incestuous and non-normative: the entire proposal is a spectacle and its repetitions mark it as unoriginal.

The second time Royall proposes further complicates structures of identity. After Royall finds out about Charity’s visit to Lucius’s window one night, he begins to chastise her. He is panicked over the very nature of Charity and Lucius’s relationship and pleads with her to explain the circumstances in order to stop the gossip of the residents (137). Charity is not impressed by his “pathetic abdication of all authority over her,” for “she could feel only the outrage of his
interference” (137). In other words, Charity finds Royall’s abandonment of power as useless because his invasions into her experiences suggest otherwise. He tells Charity that “[t]here’s a streak in me I ain’t always the master of; but I’ve always acted straight to you but that once,” referring to the incident when he endeavored to seduce Charity (138). He appeals to Charity to accept another marriage proposal, expressing an undeniable anxiousness: “‘Charity—Charity—say you’ll do it,’ she heard him urge, all his lost years and wasted passion in his voice” (138).

When Charity turns him down and attempts to leave the room, Royall “stood up and placed himself between her and the threshold” (138). Royall obstructs the threshold in order to assert his authority as well as to prevent Charity from escape. Royall then turns the proposal around onto Lucius and asks Charity if “you want him to marry you?” (138). Royall is attempting to sanction Charity’s and Lucius’s relationship. Charity feels that with Lucius, “something transient and exquisite had flowered in her,” and now Royall is attempting to “trample” that transience (138-39).

Royall’s presence snakes its way into other marginal spaces in order to disrupt Charity and Lucius’s non-normative identity constructions. He invades the couple’s little house one day when Charity was waiting for Lucius. Royall is aware that this is the place where Charity and Lucius rendezvous, and when Lucius shows up, Royall’s marriage proposal is different. He stands in the doorway effectively prohibiting mobility (spatial and physical) and asks Harney if this is “the home you propose to bring [Charity] when you get married?” (175). Charity “quiver[s] with anger” at this suggestion (175). Royall then laughs and screams at Lucius that “[y]ou darsn’t, and you know it . . . [a]nd you know why you ain’t asked her to marry you, and why you don’t mean to. It’s because you hadn’t need to; nor any other man either” (176). Charity, as an outsider, is not “marriageable.” She is unintelligible. And yet, Royall’s own
attempts at marriage strive to stabilize Charity, to make her “normal,” but they also show Royall’s position as incoherent. Butler claims that these imitative effects of queer identities “work neither to copy nor to emulate heterosexuality, but rather, to expose heterosexuality as an incessant and panicked imitation of its own naturalized idealization” (“Imitation” 129).

Therefore, the only reason for Royall’s repeated interruptions is that something threatens or panics his identity and power. Royall reveals that his identity is non-normative not only by his performance anxiety, in his repetitions, but also by entering into a queer and liminal space.

When Royall abandons his position at the doorway (the threshold) and leaves the little house, Lucius tells Charity that he will “have to go off for a while—a month or two, perhaps—to arrange some things; and then I’ll come back . . . and we’ll get married” (177). Wharton seems to use the ellipsis in this statement as an indication that Lucius is hesitant himself, which we learn later is because he is already engaged to Annabel Balch. Later Charity thinks that she had not even thought of marriage to Lucius for she “had not had to put the thought from her mind; it had not been there” (177). She knew that “[n]ow . . . everything would be different, and that she herself would be a different being to Harney. Instead of remaining separate and absolute, she would be compared with other people, and unknown things would be expected of her” (178).

“Absolute” in this context can mean a fixity and a limitlessness at the same time. Charity wants to linger in a perpetual present with no origins or future of commitment (Bhabha 6), and she still has the ability to move freely and disjointedly. But marriage would limit her and thus trap her in a role (wife) that she already refuses. Charity does not want to settle, and she “could not forget that [Lucius] had never spoken to her of marriage till Mr. Royall had forced the word from his lips; though she had not had the strength to shake off the spell that bound her to him she had lost all spontaneity of feeling, and seemed to herself to be passively awaiting a fate she could
not avert” (178). Curiously, Royall has now interpellated Harney into the role of “husband” by the mere mention of marriage. But Charity fails to assume the position of “wife.” It is this moment in the margins that Charity realizes that she cannot “adapt herself,” and that the environment around her is “pitted against” her (181). She writes Lucius a letter informing him that he should marry Annabel Balch in order to “act” right (181). Annabel is in the same class as Lucius, but she represents a coherent woman who is now appropriate for Lucius, as Royall has appeared to naturalize Lucius’s identity.

The final proposal of Summer occurs when Royall finds Charity on her trek home from the Mountain. Royall discloses to Charity that “I’ll never feel any way but one about you; and if you say so we’ll drive down . . . to the minister’s house; and when you come back home you’ll come as Mrs. Royall” (201). Although it appears that Royall is again handing some authority over to Charity, a choice to say no, he claims that what Charity really “wants” is “to be took home and took care of. . . . All I want is to know if you’ll marry me” (202). We observe how repetitive his actions are and how he uses the threshold to wield his power. He always enters those spaces of liminality in his efforts and tries to disrupt them by normalizing Charity. Butler reasons that

the naturalistic effects of heterosexualized genders are produced through imitative strategies; what they imitate is a phantasmatic ideal of heterosexual identity, one that is produced by the imitation as its effect . . . [and because] heterosexuality is always in the process of imitating . . . itself . . . it is bound to fail, and yet endeavors to succeed. (“Imitation” 127-28)

Therefore, Royall’s “project of heterosexual identity is propelled into an endless repetition of itself” (Butler, “Imitation” 128). His reappearances are what gives the illusion of his own

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naturalness and originality. But as we have seen, his repetitions only occur during those moments where queer identities are performed and in the marginal spaces that Charity specifically inhabits. His own alleged coherent gender performance, and indeed identity performance, is rendered “phantasmatic.”

These incoherencies are duplicated during the wedding ceremony. As the minister reads, Charity senses “finality” approaching (204). She hears “I will” uttered by Royall and then feels her hand suddenly “enclosed in [Royall’s] strong palm and she felt a ring that was too big for her being slipped on her thin finger. She understood then that she was married. . . .” (205). The ellipsis at the end leaves the sentence undeveloped and unclear, copyng the startling blurriness about the reality of Charity’s marriage. Charity “failed to catch” all the words during the ceremony and is completely disengaged from the entire process. There also is a sense of incoherence both in the whirlwind of the ceremony and Charity’s inability to uncover intelligibility in it. Because the marriage ceremony is already a performative act and theatrical rite, the blurriness of it, as observed by Charity, reflects it as seemingly unreal. J.L. Austin, in his speech-act theory, postulates that the utterance “I do” in the marriage ceremony is a “performative utterance,” one that does not “describe” or merely report a “doing,” but instead “indulg[es] in it” (96-7). In order for these kinds of expressions to succeed, circumstances must be “in some way, or ways, appropriate,” and in the event that these utterances are inappropriate, then the performative risks failure (Austin 97-8).

The marriage between Charity and Royall arguably goes wrong—fails—in two significant ways. Charity does not hear “I do”; in fact, she hears “I will.” The very nature of “I do” implies a present performative action. However, “I will” suggests a future action and indeed a postponement of the future. By extension, the symbolic threshold of marriage is deferred
indefinitely. Additionally, the incestuous relationship between Charity and Royall, already established as outside normative social sanctions, undermines their performances in the marriage ceremony as incorrect and, thus, inappropriate. The conditions for marriage have been unmet; therefore, the new and definable positions of wife and husband have failed. The marriage has yet to develop fully and remains in a process of becoming but never actually naturalizes. The space of the marriage ceremony upon the threshold of marriage becomes a copy of a copy as the “parodic repetition of ‘the original,’ . . . reveals the original to be nothing other than a parody of the idea of the natural and the original” (Butler, Gender Trouble 43).

Even as she becomes “Mrs. Royall,” Charity cannot recognize the role and therefore cannot assume it. At the end of Summer, Royall tells Charity that she is a “good girl” (210). The marriage has culminated in a quasi-incestuous union that is already non-normal. Charity is once again called a “girl,” even though the marriage, and her pregnancy, should firmly place her in the roles of “wife,” “mother,” and “woman.” Royall refers to Charity as if she is still his almost adopted daughter. As Butler reminds us, “compulsory heterosexual identities, those ontologically consolidated phantasms of ‘man’ and ‘woman,’ are theatrically produced effects that posture as grounds, origins, the normative measure of the real” (“Imitation” 127-28). And as a couple engaged in a marriage ceremony that fails, their respective roles as “woman/wife” and “man/husband” not only become “theatrically produced” but are also revealed as such.

Pfeiffer asserts that Charity “stays in North Dormer because she remains ultimately content with the order of things, failing her opportunities for self-advancement” (146). And Charity does feel a “certain nearness” to Royall once more (204). But this nearness is the very thing which allows Charity’s identity to remain liminal and queer. The couple identify in these ways as they both blur the boundaries of identity. Although Charity does not necessarily desire
Royall in the same way he desires her, she acknowledges his protection. In this respect, Charity “desire[s] to desire” and “will desire the law that threatens . . . rather than not desiring anything at all” (Salih 125). In other words, in order for Charity to continue longing for anything, she must seek the very thing that strives to foreclose those very possibilities, and “[s]he knew that where he was there would be warmth, rest, silence; and for the moment they were all she wanted” (203).

But because Lucius represented an “other” with whom Charity identified and desired, and knowing that it is Lucius who “had passed into her blood, and become a part of her,” Charity may still have the strength to resist Royall (185-86). When she went to the abortion clinic in Nettleton to confirm her pregnancy earlier in the text, Charity had to pay with a brooch that Lucius had bought for her because she did not have enough money for the consultation. After the marriage and before they depart for home, Royall gives Charity some money with which to purchase new clothes. However, Charity uses the money to retrieve the brooch because “[s]he wanted it for her baby: she meant it, in some mysterious way, to be a link between Harney’s child and its unknown father” (29). When Charity returns to the hotel, Royall asks her why she did not purchase new clothes. She answers, “Oh, I’d rather let Ally Hawes make the few things I want” (210). Although Charity used the money to buy back the “link” to Harney, her answer is telling. The refusal to buy dresses that would make Charity “stylisher” than any of the other girls in North Dormer (210) signals that Charity must re-enter North Dormer but as a possibly different and uncontainable self. Both the retrieval of the brooch and the answer she gives hints at the possibility that Charity can continue to resist Royall. Skillern states that Charity is refusing to become “an object for display” when Charity does not spend Royall’s money on clothes, and she further argues that “Charity’s decision to recuperate the brooch suggests that she
has preserved a space within herself that neither Lawyer Royall nor the Law of the Father can invade” (304).

However, as many critics suggest, there is a sense of tragedy and defeat at the end of the novella. Rose argues that the ending of Summer is a “symbol of entrapment” (18), and Morante suggests that Summer becomes “a story of enclosure . . . [and] of failure” (219). Indeed, Royall seemingly forces Charity into marriage after she is seduced and left pregnant by Lucius. Nevertheless, Skillern posits that Charity’s and Royall’s “marriage has not, as the traditional novel of manners would have it, resolved all differences. This marriage signals both Charity’s capitulation to the Law of the Father and her subversion of it: the two newlyweds have not (yet) become one in the wedding bed; moreover, the child made legitimate by this union also exposes the fictionality of that legitimacy and that unity” (304). And Lee’s comment that perhaps Charity’s baby represents “a necessary new influx of strange ‘blood’” (513) entertains the chance that Charity’s own queer identity will remain “strange” and liminal.

For instance, after their marriage, Charity and Royall drive “up to the door of the red house,” indicating a crossing of the final threshold. The last scene almost parallels the first when Charity first crosses the threshold of the house, but it reiterates it with a difference. The narrative ends before they actually cross this space, and Summer’s closure entertains a promise of uncertainty. Wharton once wrote, “My last page is always latent in my first” and that novels should have a purpose but should also contain “something that could not be defined” (qtd. in Lee 184). Her statements suggest that Charity may retain some control over herself as she crosses thresholds, and that she may also remain relatively indefinable.
Edith Wharton’s *Summer* accentuates the interconnectedness between space and identity. The trope of the threshold simultaneously acts to prescribe and permit particular identity formations. At the same time, identities structure and re-structure the spaces that they inhabit in order to exert or subvert heteronormative power structures. Charity uses and crosses thresholds and liminal spaces in order to upset secured boundaries of identity, and her repeated representations of a coherent heteronormative identity serve to expose and undermine the heterosexual narrative of Royall. Charity is able to disrupt Royall’s stable identity and authority. Yet, Royall’s potential queerness is revealed and his normative power is weakened by his desire for Charity. His incestuous impulses render his identity as unstable, and his compulsory performances of heteronormativity and heterosexuality only act to elucidate his anxiety over Charity’s liminal and unsanctioned identity.

Wharton has clearly linked environments with constructions of identities, as they mutually constitute, reinforce, and interrupt one another. Her careful employment of the threshold as a trope, one that has gone practically unexamined by scholars, suggests an intentional connection between borders, spaces, and identities. Furthermore, the underlying descriptions of “trope” and “threshold” establish a process of perpetual liminality, and indeed, queerness within *Summer*. Wharton’s knowledge of architecture is significant as she clearly believed that space determines identity and vice versa. Somers suggests “that because Edith Wharton could not find spaces that did not in some way restrict and limit her, she constructed her own ‘limitless’ spaces” in *The Decoration of Houses*” (9). Wharton also accomplishes this in *Summer*. Limitless, or liminal, spaces appear throughout *Summer* that nourish Charity’s
identity. Charity also violates spaces and uses thresholds in order to exert an authority in opposition to such prohibitions.

Wharton’s own paradoxical identity in relation to others and space/place helps to shed light on Summer’s often complicated and fractured characters. She preferred the company of (queer) men and even considered herself a self-made man. Wharton identified with men whose sexualities challenged the heterosexual norm. Wharton’s inner circle of friends already included such figures as Henry James, and in France it expanded to include men with homosexual, bisexual, “non-normative heterosexual,” or sexually ambiguous identifications. Wharton’s allusions to specific language, these men, and the places they frequented intimate at minimal a queer subtext in Summer. Moreover, Wharton traversed spheres, literally and figuratively. She split her life between France and America, and Summer has elements of both countries embedded and blended within it. Thus Wharton, like her characters in Summer, oscillates between and beyond identities, borders, and spaces. Wharton shows how spaces work to both restrict and relax identities and how identities themselves can use and shape the spaces that they either encounter or carve out.

Themes of eroticism and sensuality are abundant in Summer, and we can certainly draw other references from Wharton’s other relationships and identifications. Pfeiffer is relatively convinced that one of the reasons behind the “rising interest in Wharton, particularly in popular culture, emerged solely out of interest in her love affair” with Morton Fullerton, although Summer continues to be disregarded in light of this affair (141). Kenneth M. Price and Phyllis McBride, in “‘The Life Apart’: Texts and Contexts of Edith Wharton’s Love Diary,” carefully analyze the diary’s entries that Wharton wrote during the first seven months of her relationship with Fullerton (663). Wharton’s marriage to Teddy Wharton was difficult to say the least, as she
felt disconnected to him, so her friendship with Fullerton soon developed into an affair in early 1908 when she was about 46 years old (Lee 314). Wharton and Fullerton would engage in “intimate dialogues” in “the theatre of the Paris streets and salons,” and Fullerton once remarked that they were “behind the scenes together . . . on the hither side!” (Lee 315).

Price and McBride suggest that Fullerton’s “openness to sexual possibility” is what drew in Wharton and her inner circle as this openness “contributed to his charm” (665). In fact, Lee states that Henry James thought Fullerton was “extremely alluring . . . [b]ut, as usual, Fullerton played hard to get” (326). A little drama unfolded, and James would write “yearning letters” to Fullerton: “I want in fact more of you . . . You are dazzling . . . you are beautiful; you are more than tactful, you are tenderly, magically tactile. But you’re not kind. There it is. You are not kind” (qtd. in Lee 326). In “one of his last letters to Wharton, James agreed that Fullerton was the most inscrutable of men—‘he will never pose long enough for the Camera of Identification’” (qtd. in Lee 326). Identification does play a large part here, for as Price and McBride further speculate, “Fullerton’s liminality, his fluid adoptions of various gender positions, probably contributed to unsettling Wharton’s own established role” and identity (668). Indeed, they also see the contradictions surrounding Wharton that I have mentioned previously: “Wharton appears to have acted in transgressive and conforming ways at once . . . leaving her identity in flux” (Price and McBride 668).

Other themes in Summer, specifically incest, are analyzed by a handful of critics such as Cynthia Griffin Wolff and Elizabeth Ammons, who maintain that this theme reflects Wharton’s childhood experiences as an incest survivor. In her review of Gloria C. Erlich’s book, The Sexual Education of Edith Wharton (1992), Susan Goodman notices a psychobiographical trend in readings of Wharton’s most explicit texts. She argues that Erlich’s book, though stimulating,
“does little justice to the scope or the complexities of Wharton’s life and works, because—as Erlich herself notes—‘a good deal of psychobiography is inevitably speculative’” (345). While these readings certainly attempt to connect central issues like incest in *Summer* to Wharton’s life, evidence to substantiate these claims remains glaringly absent. To some it seems implausible that Wharton would, like Lee suggests, try to write like her French contemporaries. If we *wish* to draw from Wharton, we can return to her fragment, “Beatrice Palmato.” Lee asserts that “feeling her age . . . Wharton was thinking a great deal about sexuality and how to write about it” (585). She was in her fifties when she wrote “Beatrice Palmato” and *Summer*, years after the dissolution of both Wharton’s marriage and affair with Fullerton (Lee 585). In a letter to Berenson in 1935, two years before her death, Wharton even makes a reference “in an exchange about Moravia, Faulkner and Céline’s respective ‘nastiness,’ to having ‘an incest donnée up my sleeve that wd [sic] make them all look like nursery-rhymes—but business is too bad to sell such Berquinades nowadays’” (qtd. in Lee 586). Lee believes this letter refers to another fragment she had written in the 1920s about an incestuous relationship between a step-mother and step-son (386). Yet the rather humorous statement also points to Wharton’s attempt at writing non-normative sexualities both in “Beatrice Palmato” and *Summer*.

As Price and McBride observe, Wharton was a contradictory woman, and these contradictions and ambiguous references and themes are present in *Summer*, producing highly conflicting interpretations of *Summer*. The allusions and experiences I read in *Summer*, along with others, exist but remain somewhat elusive, open, and queer. Sedgwick suggests that queerness can refer to the “open mesh of possibilities” and “gaps” in places where things do not quite line up seamlessly (8). Wharton herself “was highly self-conscious about gaps in her fiction, as is indicated by a remark of the narrator in *Ethan Frome*: ‘I had the sense that the
deeper meaning of the story was in the gaps” (qtd. in Price and McBride 666). Indeed, as Summer has shown, space and identity undermine relentlessly a certain tidiness and remain liminal. Much of Summer’s disruptiveness lay in its deviation from Wharton’s other works. But it is also unorthodox because the text and possibly Wharton herself remain relatively indefinable because, as Halperin reminds us, “there is nothing in particular to which” Summer or Wharton refers. This may explain some critics’ frustrations with Summer, as its meanings hang queerly in the gaps.


Elbert, Monika M. “Wharton’s Hybridization of Hawthorne’s ‘Brand’ of Gothic: Gender


Knight, Denise D. Introduction. Wharton, Ethan Frome and Summer 1-9.


