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Edith Wharton Review, Volume 34, Number 1, 2018, pp. 1-12 (Article)

Published by Penn State University Press

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“Like the Heathen”

Liminality, Ritual, and Religious Authority in *Summer*

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Abstract

Early twentieth-century Christianity is typically seen as backdrop, rather than foreground, in Wharton's work. Yet the 2016 American Literature Association panel on Wharton and religion, of which this article was originally a part, demonstrated the need to move religion from backdrop to foreground, especially, perhaps, with Wharton's New England fiction. My reading of Summer *suggests that Wharton assessed the culture of Christianity around her in the rural New England of the era more carefully than has been previously supposed. The author's careful distribution of religious imagery and rhetoric at strategic points in the novel works to mark Charity's defiance and to resolve her liminality. In* Summer, *figures of religious authority mediate Charity's transition from the Mountain to North Dormer, from North Dormer to the Mountain, and back again.*

Keywords

Summer, *religion, ritual, liminality, Edith Wharton*

In Edith Wharton's 1917 novella *Summer* (1917), the residents of the primitive Mountain community, including protagonist Charity Royall, are twice compared with “the heathen” (49; 148). Lawyer Royall first wields this language against the Mountain residents, describing them as “herding together like the heathen” (49); later on, he describes Charity's mother in the same terms: “a woman of the town from Nettleton” who “followed one of those Mountain fellows up to his place and lived with him like a heathen” (148). According to the 1898 *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word “heathen” conflates the connotations of both “non-Christian” and “rural,” alluding to “heath-dwellers” and other rural folk who continued to worship “ancient deities” after “Christianity became

EDITH WHARTON REVIEW, Vol. 34, No. 1, 2018
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the religion of the towns" (*OED*, "Heathen"). For Royall, the term "heathen" not only bespeaks the lack of Christian practices but simultaneously characterizes the Mountain dwellers in animalistic terms, as they "herd" together without the laws of marriage or normative family structures (49). In *Summer*, then, the Mountain dwellers' alienation from organized religion marks part of their precivilized status. Outside the law and the urban economy, the Mountain community falls simultaneously outside the faith. Christianity, in turn, serves as a marker of civilization, which Wharton addresses in terms of urban consumer culture and ideologies of gender and marriage. These aspects are spatialized through the towns of Nettleton and North Dormer, in contrast to the Mountain. Charity, to be normalized into North Dormer society, must transcend not only her Mountain origins, but their "heathen" connotations as well.

Early twentieth-century Christianity is typically seen as backdrop, rather than foreground, in Wharton's work. Yet the 2016 American Literature Association panel on Wharton and religion, of which this article was originally a part, demonstrated the need to move religion from backdrop to foreground, especially, perhaps, with Wharton's New England fiction. My reading of *Summer* suggests that Wharton assessed the culture of Christianity around her in the rural New England of the era more carefully than has been previously supposed. The author's careful distribution of religious imagery and rhetoric at strategic points in the novel works to mark Charity's defiance and to resolve her liminality. In *Summer*, figures of religious authority mediate Charity's transition from the Mountain to North Dormer, from North Dormer to the Mountain, and back again.

If the Christianizing forces of North Dormer civilize Charity, however, Wharton also remains critical of both the sanitizing of religious ritual and the conservative forces that accompany the process. Jennie Kassanoff has argued in *Edith Wharton and the Politics of Race* for Wharton's eugenic agenda in *Summer*, in which Charity's illicit affair with Harney brings the blood of the elite New England aristocracy into a dissipated dysgenic landscape. Similarly, I would argue that *Summer* underwrites a conservative vision in which Charity's otherness is tamed, in this case via religious authority rather than by the mandate to assimilate the dysgenic Mountain dwellers. Through historical reference to the religious practices of rural New England, a far cry from Wharton's New York sophisticates, the author is as unsparing of the "genteel Episcopalian" mores of North Dormer as she is of the Mountain's "heathen" ways. Yet I am hesitant to read the novel's depiction of Christianity as negatively as Kassanoff does Wharton's racial representations, for Wharton underscores the role of ritual in negotiating liminality and establishing communal identity on a different basis from that of the excesses of consumerism.

As Carol Singley has argued, Wharton inherited the "genteel Episcopalianism" (8) of her mid-century elite upbringing. "Following Anglicanism rather than Calvinism," the New York elites of Wharton's childhood eschewed "intense piety or introspection" (Singley 8). As Wharton notes in *A Backward Glance*:

> Some of the first Stevens's grandsons, however, probably not being of the stripe of religious fanatic or political reformer to breathe easily in that passionate province, transferred their activities to the easier-going New York, where people seem from the outset to have been more interested in making money and acquiring property than in Predestination and witch-burning. I have always wondered if those old New Yorkers did not owe their greater suavity and tolerance to the fact that the Church of England (so little changed under its later name of Episcopal Church of America) provided from the first their prevalent form of worship. May not the matchless beauty of an ancient rite have protected our ancestors from what Huxley called the "fissiparous tendency of the Protestant sects," sparing them sanguinary wrangles over uncomprehended points of doctrine, and all those extravagances of self-constituted prophets and evangelists which rent and harrowed New England? (*ABG* 9–10)

In this passage, Wharton describes a conflict between not just New York and New England but between ritual and doctrine. Ritual, in Wharton's view, works against divisiveness, unifying those adhering to the ritual into a group. In New England, in contrast, bloody conflicts over doctrine allow individuals, each believing themselves qualified as religious authority, to come to the fore, damaging the stability of New England culture in the process. Just as Wharton would fear political demagogues later in her career, here she articulates a fear of religious demagoguery. "Self-constituted prophets and evangelists" (*ABG* 10) could influence and deceive. As we shall see, *Summer* contains an oblique portrait of such evangelists, demonstrating Wharton's critique of religious enthusiasm in turn-of-the-century New England. And for Charity to attain civilization, she must reject the popular religious culture of her time—associated with the evangelists, among others—and accept the simplicity of religious ritual, what Wharton once called the "matchless beauty of an ancient rite" (*ABG* 10).

Although North Dormer offers few of the rites that Wharton praised, in *Summer* the village acts as the threshold between the wilderness of the

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Mountain and the ostensible civilization of Nettleton and Springfield. While Charity's marginal status is reinforced through her name, given by the Royalls, and through constant reminders of her Mountain past, Wharton marks the class aspirations of North Dormer through the marginal status of social institutions like the library and church. Divorced from the modernizing forces of consumer culture, North Dormer "had no shops, no theatres, no lectures, no 'business block'; only a church that was opened every other Sunday if the states of the roads permitted, and a library for which no new books had been bought for twenty years" (4). The church and library, which ideally would serve as sources of stability, instead serve as sources of stagnation. Reversing the language associated with church and library, Wharton casts the library as a "queer little brick temple" (5), whose "peculiar sanctity" the part-time Episcopal minister, the Reverend Miles, wishes to preserve (64). The church, in turn, appears as a social institution, in which young women arrange themselves for conspicuous display and in which the town's middle-class mark itself off from the poorer and less sophisticated.

Wharton takes care to note that the church, "by an unusual chance, happened to belong to the Episcopal communion" (63), a rare outpost of the Church of England in rural *New* England. Significantly, then, North Dormer is not a site of rural religious zealotry, but of the conformity Wharton both satirized and admired. The part-time minister, Mr. Miles, is

> eager to make the most of the fact that a little nucleus of "church-people" had survived in the sectarian wilderness, and resolved to undermine the influence of the ginger-bread-coloured Baptist chapel at the other end of the village; but he was kept busy by parochial work at Hepburn, where there were papermills and saloons, and it was not often that he could spare time for North Dormer. (63)

The library and church act as sources of cultural literacy and class solidification; thus, Wharton establishes the church as a primary ideological force in the town.

The church and its minister reinforce conservative ideologies of gender and sexuality that serve as gateways into the consumer class. As Lily Bart aims to do in *The House of Mirth* (1905), the young women of the town, like Ally Hawes, who "show[s] herself in church with enviable transparencies about the shoulders" (6), use the church services to display their own style and marriageability.[1] Similarly, the Reverend's ministry functions as a tool of class and ethnic assimilation. "In a fit of missionary zeal," Mr. Miles takes the "dozen girls and boys who represented the future of North Dormer" "to Nettleton to hear an illustrated lecture on the Holy Land" (3). Although the lecture takes place in "an austere Y.M.C.A. hall, with white walls and an organ" (97), Charity also sees shops with plateglass windows and samples coconut pie, hints of the consumerism Nettleton represents. The Reverend offers this religious entertainment with the goal that these young people—members of the town's aspiring middle-class—will become its reproductive "future." It is therefore Reverend Miles who first exposes Charity to the consumer culture to which she will aspire early in the novel.

That the narrative flashes back to this episode emphasizes its importance in Charity's development. Wharton suggests Charity's susceptibility to images, which, as art historian David Morgan has demonstrated, were an essential tool of the nineteenth-century evangelical movement (5). Charity's experience of the "illustrated lecture" is disrupted by a "gentleman saying unintelligible things before [the] pictures," which "she would have enjoyed looking at if his explanations had not prevented her from understanding them" (3). Charity is compelled by the images; in fact, on her July 4 visit to Nettleton with Harney, "she suggest[s] seeing some pictures like the ones Mr. Miles had taken her to," not understanding why Harney seems "a little disconcerted" (97) by her suggestion. It is not simply Charity's lack of sophistication that is at issue here, in my view; Charity's reaction suggests her desire to understand images—including religious ones—for herself, without mediation. Like the rural Protestants Wharton criticizes in *A Backward Glance*, Charity shows her independent-mindedness, yet, as the novel shows, she gradually moves toward an acceptance of the minister's authority.

The novel's three spaces—Nettleton, North Dormer, and the Mountain—simultaneously mark out three different, yet interrelated approaches to consumer culture and to religious practice. Nettleton, with its lantern shows and YMCA, weds consumerism to reform; YMCAs sprang up to provide Christian, temperate lodgings for working-class men, like those who would have come to Nettleton for factory work. North Dormer's Episcopalian outpost seeks to keep the lower middle class, like Charity and her friends, in North Dormer.

The Reverend Miles, who is based in Hepburn but ministers part-time in North Dormer, is also the only townsman who regularly goes up to the Mountain and back. As a figure moving between these spaces, he also oversees Charity's movement toward normalization in North Dormer. Miles functions as a patriarchal and even Oedipal figure for Charity. During the memorable trip to Nettleton, Wharton tells us, Charity had "imagined herself married to a

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man who had such a straight nose and such a beautiful way of speaking," and is disappointed to learn that "the privilege was already enjoyed by a lady with crimped hair and a large baby" (63). The minister and his family, then, serve as a symbol of the normative family structure that Charity lacks, and to which she aspires.

Miles's role in Charity's acculturation finds its counterpart in Lawyer Royall and its counterpoint in the itinerant evangelist, who intercepts Charity in her first attempt to go up the Mountain. These two characters represent a less-sanitized version of Christianity, each of whom informs Charity's thoughts in ways that the minister does not until the novella's final pages. The first, perhaps surprisingly, is Lawyer Royall. A lawyer and a student of political rhetoric, Lawyer Royall is scarcely viewed as a churchgoer or believer. Moreover, given his inappropriate advances toward Charity, his drinking, and his association with Julia Hawes, Royall violates most of the social norms of religious decency or, indeed, the civilized society he ostensibly represents. However, as Royall tells it, his adoption of Charity suggests his desire to bring Charity into Christian civilization: Royall is approached by a man he successfully prosecuted for murder, who begs him to bring his child down from the Mountain so that she may be "reared like a Christian" (50). Acting out of pity—"I was sorry for the fellow" (50)—Royall agrees.

When accusing Charity of an illicit encounter with Harney (in fact, a vigil in which Charity watches Harney through his window), he attests that he learned of her transgression by accident, swearing that he did not intend to find her out: "My Bible oath on that," he avers (78). Later in that dialogue, when Charity admits to her midnight visit, Royall moans, "Oh, my God, why did you tell me? . . . I've watched this thing coming, and I've tried to stop it. As God sees me, I have . . ." (78). Female sexual transgression unleashes the language of divine omniscience: as "God sees," Lawyer Royall has "watched." In contrast to Reverend Miles, Royall's phrasing evokes the Calvinist tradition of sin and guilt that Carol Singley also finds in Wharton's New England fiction (89).

Royall also owns the only Bible cited in the novel (87), which Charity puts to unexpected use as she prepares for her clandestine date with Harney: "She propped the square of looking-glass against Mr. Royall's black leather Bible, steadying it in front with a white stone on which a view of the Brooklyn Bridge was painted; and she sat before her reflection, bending the brim this way and that, while Ally Hawes's pale face looked over her shoulder like the ghost of wasted opportunities" (87). The proximity of the Bible, the stone, and the mirror is hardly coincidental. Wharton places Charity at the nexus of the New England Puritan tradition; urban modernity, symbolized in the Brooklyn Bridge; and both self-reflection and consumer culture, figured in the mirror. As Charity examines her image, Wharton emphasizes her virginity, signaled in the "cherry-coloured lining of her hat" (87). However, the conjunction of images suggests Charity's place in a series of transitions: from rural to urban, traditional to modern, and even, perhaps, religion to secularity. These transitional possibilities are echoed in the geography of the town, with "Royall's faded red house at one end" and the "white church at the other" (3).

The Old Home Week ceremonies may demonstrate most clearly how Lawyer Royall acts as a counterpart to the Reverend Miles. Although they take place in North Dormer's Town Hall, they are quasi-religious rituals, as well as a display of regional pride, and Reverend Miles's prayers frame Lawyer Royall's speech, in which he describes the journey home that many of the guests have undertaken as a "pious pilgrimage" (137). Royall's language sanctifies North Dormer and the small-town regional past, as he exhorts its residents to "make the best of [their] old town" (138). As Royall concludes his speech to an "outburst of cheers" (139), Charity heard "Mr. Miles saying to someone near him, 'That was a *man* talking'" (139). Although the two men differ significantly, the Reverend and Lawyer Royall implicitly endorse each other's values, here suggested in Mr. Miles's affirmation of Royall's masculinity. The final speech of Old Home Week belongs to the Reverend, who makes clear that his aim is to keep Charity and her cohort of young men and women in North Dormer, reproducing an aspiring middle class and dominant cultural values: "O Lord, let us humbly and fervently give thanks for this blessed day of reunion, here in the old home to which we have come back from so far. Preserve it to us, O Lord, in times to come, in all its homely sweetness—in the kindliness and wisdom of its old people, in the courage and industry of its young men, in the piety and purity of this group of innocent girls" (141). As Charity, exhausted by the heat—and, as we will soon learn, in the early moments of her pregnancy—interrupts the speech by fainting at Royall's feet, Wharton ironizes the minister's valorization of female sexual purity.

A second religious character unsettles Charity in a different way. This character again demonstrates how the figure of religion presides over the formative transitions of Charity's life, since he functions as a link between Charity and Harney and is a penultimate source of her journey back up the Mountain. I cite this scene in full because it is rarely cited in scholarship on *Summer*. After Charity's humiliation at the Fourth of July celebration in Nettleton, where

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Royall has caught her on her evening out with Harney, she begins a journey toward the Mountain when she sees, as Wharton writes:

> the flanks of a white tent projecting through the trees by the roadside. She supposed that it sheltered a travelling circus which had come there for the Fourth; but as she drew nearer she saw, over the folded-back flap, a large sign bearing the inscription "Gospel Tent." The interior seemed to be empty, but a young man in a black alpaca coat, his lank hair parted over a round white face, stepped from under the flap and approached her with a smile.
>
> "Sister, your Saviour knows everything. Won't you come in and lay your guilt before Him?" he asked insinuatingly, putting his hand on her arm.
>
> Charity started back and flushed. For a moment she thought the evangelist must have heard a report of the scene at Nettleton; then she saw the absurdity of the proposition.
>
> "I on'y wish't I had any to lay!" she retorted, with one of her fierce flashes of self-derision; and the young man murmured, aghast: "Oh, Sister, don't speak blasphemy. . . ." (114)

Like Royall, the evangelist speaks with the assumption of Charity's guilt, whether an actual sexual transgression or an original sin; however, Charity, with her "flashes of self-derision," reminds us of her basic innocence—at this point, Charity has not yet slept with Harney, while it is Royall who has labeled her a "whore" (106). The evangelist sees in rigid, polarizing terms, signaled by the white/black contrasts of his skin and attire. Moreover, as Charity compares the gospel tent to a "travelling circus" (114), she notes the blurred boundaries between revivalism and entertainment. In *The Damnation of Theron Ware* (1900), Harold Frederic's narrator notes that "young farm-workers and their girls regarded the camp-meeting as perhaps the chief event of the year—no more to be missed than the country fair or the circus, and offering . . . more opportunities for genuine enjoyment than either" (211). Wharton notes a similar hypocrisy, as camp meetings were known as a site of relaxed boundaries, with men and women in close proximity and often away from their homes for several days. It is logical, then, that the man in the gospel tent picks up Harney's letters, which Charity dropped in her flight and hands them back to Harney (116). Thus, the preacher connects Charity and Harney when she wished to escape, facilitating the affair between them that begins shortly thereafter.

This scene has been occluded from the novel's criticism. Why does Wharton make the man whom Charity later calls the "fat evangelist" (170) a minor yet key player in advancing her relationship with Harney? This character embodies both Royall's Calvinist austerity and Nettleton's Christianized consumerist ethos. The evangelist's air of moral authority unsettles Charity in ways that other modes of Christianity do not, in that it presages her growing assumption of guilt. Like Royall, the evangelist suggests that God sees Charity's actions (his line—"Your Saviour knows everything" (170)—echoes in her head); perhaps in another echo of Calvinism, he suggests that guilt is a universal aspect of the human condition.

Both Royall and the evangelist thus function as minor characters whose use of religious rhetoric accentuates the role of Christianity in the novel's plot. Thus, the two scenes of clerical authority that end the book are not so much unexpected as part of a continuum. In the same way that the fat evangelist stops Charity in her first attempt to go up the Mountain, Charity encounters Mr. Miles on her way to the Mountain and learns through him that her mother, Mary Hyatt, is dying. In the burial scene, Mr. Miles attempts to subdue the Mountain dwellers with the prayer for the burial of the dead. While initially they disrupt his recitation in a kind of point-counterpoint—for example, as the Reverend emphasizes the worthlessness of material goods (179), an "elderly man with lank hair" reminds the audience who bought Mary Hyatt's stove. Eventually, though, "the mighty words" have their desired effect, "soothing [Charity's] horror, subduing the tumult, mastering her as they mastered the drink-dazed creatures at her back" (179–80). As he finally compels all the mourners to kneel, Mr. Miles speaks "in a voice of authority that Charity had never heard" (181). In this moment of interpellation, Charity kneels first, while the "others, stiffly and hesitatingly, got to their knees beside her" (181). Charity's liminality is briefly resolved as she becomes part of a community of mourners, with whom she chooses to stay the night.

It would be too much to suggest that Charity accepts religious authority at this moment. As she ponders during the night she spends with Liff Hyatt's mother, "Up there somewhere . . . the God whom Mr. Miles had invoked was waiting for Mary Hyatt to appear. What a long flight it was! And what would she have to say when she reached Him?" (183). It was impossible for her to "imagine any link" between Mary Hyatt's life and the "designs of a just but merciful God" (184). Yet interestingly, Charity has also begun to internalize both Royall's and the Reverend Miles's perspective on the Mountain people: "her mind revolt[s] at the thought of becoming one of the miserable herd from

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which she sprang" (185), and she redoubles her intention of "sav[ing] her child from such a fate" (185).

As the novel engages in an inverse trajectory, moving from death to marriage, Wharton emphasizes the austerity of ritual. When Charity and Royall enter the minister's house with its small chapel, the text is almost devoid of description: "They went out again . . . into a low vaulted room with a cross on an altar, and rows of benches. The clergyman . . . presently reappeared before the altar in a surplice, and a lady who was presumably his wife, and a man in a blue shirt who had been raking dead leaves on the lawn" (196). In a text marked by secular festivities—the Fourth of July and Old Home Week—the wedding celebration is strikingly plain, involving only participants, witnesses, and officiants. Conducted through "gestures" and plain, declarative statements (Royall's "I will!"), the wedding ceremony is stripped of ornament and superfluous detail. Unsurprisingly, the clergyman's voice echoes that of Mr. Miles, as he "read[s] out of the same book words that had the same dread sound of finality" (196). Charity is silent in this episode, as she endeavors to "understand the gestures that the clergyman was signaling her to make" (197).

Wharton writes in *A Backward Glance* that the "noble cadences" of the Book of Common Prayer gave her a "reverence for an ordered ritual in which the officiant's personality is strictly subordinated to the rite he performs" (*ABG* 10). The "ordered ritual" of the marriage and burial ceremonies in *Summer* deepens their significance. While *Summer* might not be an outright acceptance of the Episcopalianism of Wharton's youth, neither is it a full rejection of the "gloomy Calvinism of the Puritans" (102). Rather, Wharton calls attention to the importance of ritual and of simplicity. Significantly, Wharton never shows us a church service or a tent meeting; these were the sites of the consumerist excesses, hypocrisy, and relaxation of boundaries that she deplored. Instead, through their rejection of excess, the rituals of burial and marriage reassume their gravity. While Old Home Week and the Fourth of July allow their participants to perform national identity and regional pride, burial and marriage underwrite identities as members of a religion, family, or community. Significantly, these scenes lack any reference to the visual images to which Charity was susceptible earlier; rather, they emphasize the power of the recitation and repetition of language.

As readers sympathize with Charity's defiance, they might wish to reject Royall's stark moral doctrines, the belief he shares with the itinerant preacher in God's omniscience and the guilt implied for Charity as a result of her ostensible transgressions. But even as Wharton might have wished to reject the harsh moral landscape of New England, with its limited opportunities for women like Charity and quick attributions of guilt for those who transgress social norms, the novel underwrites Royall's moral absolutism. If Royall "is the book" (Lewis and Lewis 398), as Wharton wrote to Bernard Berenson, he also carries the Word, and his moral endorsement of Charity seems endorsed by the novel as well.

Summer provides a pivotal example of the unexpected significance of religious practices in Wharton texts; a deeper attention to historical context would, I believe, demonstrate how deeply Wharton understood the range of religious practices in early twentieth-century rural New England, including those that persisted into modernity. The belief that the movement into modernity accompanied a transition from religiosity to secularity has, until recently, been a tenet of Americanist literary studies. This notion, and the image of Wharton herself as a member of an elite class of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century white, wealthy, Christian Americans, for whom religion had lost its centrality, has shaped Wharton studies. However, *Summer* is just one of several texts by Wharton that can allow us to question such ideas about secularization. As Peter Coviello and Jared Hickman have made clear, the notion that the transition from religious to secular was one of the central "stories of modernity" is "dead" (645).

In *Summer* the tension between the bourgeois Episcopalianism of North Dormer, the consumerist Protestantism of Nettleton, and the mixed possibility of evangelicalism or heathenism in the rural areas, exerts a subtle presence. That Wharton's depictions of Protestant Christianity seem so inconsistent—at times satirical, at times almost oppressively Manichean, at times epiphanic, to name just a few—suggests that we should subject them to further scrutiny. Such studies can reach beyond Wharton's biography to her familiarity with texts like *Elmer Gantry* (1927), as well as to her observations of rural New England religious practices. In Wharton's New England fiction, we might consider the physical centrality of the Congregationalist church in *Ethan Frome's* Starkfield, given the absence of its minister. We might also consider Justine's debate with the Reverend Lynde in *The Fruit of the Tree* (1908), in which, when Justine seeks justification for the act of euthanasia, the minister notes that "we touch on inscrutable things, and human reason must leave the answer to faith" (407). Later on in Wharton's career, we might also consider the demoralized Baptist missionaries of "The Seed of the Faith" (1919) and Grandma Scrimser of *Hudson River Bracketed* (1929), who, like her grandson Vance, wishes to invent a new religion. Whether conspicuous or hiding in plain sight, Wharton's Christian representations merit further investigation.

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Note

1. Ally Hawes recalls Lily Bart, who views religious ritual largely as an opportunity to be the object of an appreciative male gaze. Lily believes that her attendance at church services would allow her to capture the attention of Percy Gryce, who would then resolve her marital difficulties. Lily's skepticism toward churchgoing has long been thought to characterize Wharton's perception of religion. It is worth noting, however, that this chapter of *The House of Mirth* centers on the collective neglect of ritual, embodied in the habitually empty omnibus the Trenors have hired to take the family to church.

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