

“TO GO ON DOING BABBITTS”:
RECONTEXTUALIZING *TWILIGHT SLEEP* AS LEWISIAN SATIRE

BY

SARAH JEANNE SCHAITKIN

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Approved By:

Barry Maine, Ph.D., Advisor

Erica Still, Ph.D., Chair

Rian Bowie, Ph.D.

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ABSTRACT

Despite its glowing sales record, when *Twilight Sleep* was published in 1927 it received mixed critical reviews. Today, the novel is rarely studied as scholars more often examine others of Wharton's oeuvre. The dominant criticisms of *Twilight Sleep* argue that the novel does not live up to the standard of Wharton's other works and that Wharton compromised her artistic integrity and wrote the novel to the tastes of the American reading public solely for money. This project attempts to dismantle both critiques by arguing for a recontextualization of *Twilight Sleep* in light of Sinclair Lewis' 1922 novel, *Babbitt*. Through an examination of the novels' respective forms of satire, I will demonstrate the authors' similar undertakings and the way in which *Twilight Sleep* departs from Wharton's previous novels. By reevaluating *Twilight Sleep* as a discrete work rather than as an inferior work amongst "masterpieces," I will demonstrate the value of *Twilight Sleep* as a relevant satire of 1920s America, worthy of study today.

INTRODUCTION

When *Twilight Sleep* was published in 1927, it received mixed critical reviews despite its glowing sales record. Some critics thought the novel brilliant, while those less enchanted with it criticized it for a number of reasons. In a July 1927 review published in *The Woman Citizen*, for example, reviewer S. F. H. argued that while *Twilight Sleep* encapsulates Wharton's "typical style...the brilliance that made *The Age of Innocence* and that never-to-be-forgotten *Ethan Frome* are not here" (442). Momentarily, I will more fully address both the contemporary and current reception of the novel, but for the purposes of this project it is essential to understand the views of critics such as S. F. H., which approach *Twilight Sleep* not as a discrete work but as a work that does not rank amongst its predecessors. The approach of assigning value to a text based on the way it compares to the author's oeuvre, though problematic, is typical of scholars in regards to this novel, forcing us to ask: if *Twilight Sleep* does not fit in with the rest of Wharton's works, is there another context in which we should place it that would further our understanding and appreciation?

Twilight Sleep is a biting satirization of 1920s New York society, detailing through its characters society's preoccupation with a way of life that allows its members to experience minimal, if any, negative emotion. The novel details the characters' preoccupation with the desire to stay abreast of the latest technological advances and fads, while simultaneously revealing their lack of internalized beliefs and their unsuccessful interpersonal relationships. Thinking of *Twilight Sleep* in this way, in terms of the treatment of its subject matter, the novel more closely resembles Sinclair Lewis' *Babbitt* (1922) than it does Wharton's other works. Like *Twilight Sleep*, *Babbitt* is a

satirical novel, focusing on stereotypes of 1920s American society, but taking place in the fictional, presumably Mid-western city, Zenith. Members of this society are bereft of their own beliefs, choosing instead to succumb to popular opinion on all matters, a contributing factor to conformity and rampant consumerism. Like the characters of *Twilight Sleep*, *Babbitt*'s characters demonstrate a difficulty in creating meaningful relationships with one another. The shared targets of satire and methods of satirization at the cores of these novels are so numerous and striking that it begets the question of whether or not *Babbitt* could have been an influence on *Twilight Sleep*.

At the time of their respective publications, both novels received mixed reviews but still sold large numbers of copies. The difference between the novels' receptions has been more pronounced in later years—whereas *Babbitt* is regarded as one of Lewis' masterpieces, *Twilight Sleep* is regarded as a second-rate Wharton novel. The difference in the novels' critical legacies perhaps lies in the difference between the impacts they had on society at the time of publication. Though *Twilight Sleep* sold well, it did not become an enduring cultural touchstone in the way that *Babbitt* did. *Babbitt* centers on the life of Real Estate agent George F. Babbitt, a character so vivid and memorable that his name became successfully integrated into the American vernacular, fulfilling Lewis' pre-publication prediction, made in a letter to his publisher, Alfred Harcourt, that "two years from now we'll have them talking of Babbitttry" (17 Dec. 1920, 57). Indeed Lewis did have America talking about Babbitt— for the rest of the decade and even beyond, *Babbitt* sparked a national and international conversation surrounding the enduring stereotype of the American businessman—a conversation in which, I will argue, Wharton entered through *Twilight Sleep*.

In his article “Echoes from ‘Zenith:’ Reactions of American Businessmen to *Babbitt*,” Thomas S. Hines, Jr. describes the sentiment *Babbitt* created as “the anti-Babbitt vogue,” citing various negative descriptions of how contemporary society perceived a “Babbitt” (127). The caricature of the American businessman became a cultural phenomenon that extended beyond the limits of the book. Due to the cultural relevancy of Lewis’ satirization of 1920s America through the titular character, the book itself has been able to maintain a steady stream of scholarship. As such, *Babbitt* receives a great deal more critical attention and study than *Twilight Sleep*.

Though *Babbitt*’s lasting legacy would suggest that it deserves the greater amount of attention it receives in comparison to *Twilight Sleep*, I will argue that as *Twilight Sleep* is undertaking the same critique of American society, it can be better understood by reading it through the lens of Lewis’ satire. To enable this new approach to *Twilight Sleep* it is important to consider *Babbitt*’s contemporary reception before assessing that of *Twilight Sleep*’s. Of *Babbitt*, contemporary reviewer H. L. Mencken wrote: “*Babbitt* gives me great delight. It is shrewdly devised; it is adeptly managed; it is well written...I know of no American novel that more accurately presents the real America” (28). Though Mencken’s attitude was reflected in the large volume of copies sold in 1922, it was not shared by all reviewers, some pointing out deficiencies in character development, writing style, and plot (Hutchisson 88-9). Readers and reviewers both in favor of and against *Babbitt* kept the conversation surrounding the novel active for a great number of years after its publication, helping to explain the attention and study it receives to this day.

Comparatively, *Twilight Sleep* has been “long neglected and generally disparaged” (Haytock 217). Though scholarship on Wharton’s other works abounds, relatively little has been published about *Twilight Sleep*. In one of the few recent publications on the novel, Janet Beer and Avril Horner argue that *Twilight Sleep* needs to be reexamined by scholars¹. Piggybacking off of a 1927 review of *Twilight Sleep* which compliments the way in which Wharton has not merely recycled old material but has “renewed herself with the new age,” Beer and Horner argue that “This phase of renewal, which began with *The Mother’s Recompense* (1925), has been substantially misjudged and, consequently, neglected by critics of Wharton’s work” (Wilson 435, Beer and Horner 177). This “misjudgment” seems to present itself in two veins: those who regard *Twilight Sleep* as a lesser work in comparison to Wharton’s more highly regarded canon, and those who believe it to be a sell-out—Wharton’s attempt to make money by writing what would interest the general masses. This project will attempt to dismantle both schools of thought and demonstrate, as do Beer and Horner, the literary achievement of *Twilight Sleep*.

Though there were some contemporary reviews in praise of *Twilight Sleep*, a great many reviewers felt passionately that the 1927 novel did not live up to those that had come before it. Percy Hutchison, writing for the *New York Times Book Review*, says of the novel:

¹ Beer and Horner contend that “*Twilight Sleep* is not a mere comedy of manners manqué, but a sophisticated example of Gothic satire that presents us with a sharp and sometimes melancholy assessment of modern American society as seen through the wry eyes of a mature woman writer” (178). Though the present work does not evaluate *Twilight Sleep* as Gothic satire, it is significant that other scholars are reassessing *Twilight Sleep*’s worth on the basis of a reclassification of the novel as satire.

Mrs. Edith Wharton will receive the usual felicitations on the production of a new novel. Mrs. Wharton's achievements may vary from book to book; and it seems increasingly probable that she will never again quite equal *Ethan Frome* and *The House of Mirth*. But she maintains herself at so consistently high a level that any occasional faltering of the imagination may be charitably set down as nothing more serious than a change of pace, any lapse in artistry as a mere peccadillo of the pen (431-2).

Though Hutchison begins his review positively, the sentences that follow take jabs at *Twilight Sleep*. His review suggests a suspicion that Wharton will never again write masterpieces, and moreover, characterizes *Twilight Sleep* as both a "faltering" and a "lapse" in Wharton's career. S. F. H.'s review for *The Woman Citizen*, previously quoted in part, mirrors the logic of Hutchison's critique. Though S. F. H.'s initial remarks are positive, his/her closing remarks are comparative in nature: "But the brilliance that made *The Age of Innocence* and that never-to-be-forgotten *Ethan Frome* are not here. *Twilight Sleep* belongs with *Glimpses of the Moon* on the second shelf of the Wharton collection" (442). In reviewing *Twilight Sleep*, critics were not reading the new novel for itself, but rather as a work that, in their opinions, should have been more like Wharton's others. The introduction to *Edith Wharton: The Contemporary Reviews* attempts to explain this phenomenon, stating: "In typing Mrs. Wharton principally as a historian of manners of New York high society, many reviewers were consciously or unconsciously restricting her to the material they thought most interesting or acceptable" (Tuttleton, Lauer, and Murray xix). Thus, whether critics were intentionally holding *Twilight Sleep* to an unfair

standard or not, they were nonetheless basing their reviews on their perceptions of Wharton as an author and on the kind of work one could typically expect from her. In “What Is an Author?” Michel Foucault addresses the way in which an author’s name comes to stand for a particular mode of discourse. Tracing the author function back to Saint Jerome’s Fourth Century text, *De viris illustribus*, Foucault argues that the same four criteria Saint Jerome proposed for identifying legitimate works of an author are still used to define an author today, though there is no longer the problem of authentication (111). The first three criteria are particularly applicable to *Twilight Sleep*’s reception:

(1) if among several books attributed to an author one is inferior to the others, it must be withdrawn from the list of the author’s works (the author is therefore defined as a constant level of value); (2) the same should be done if certain texts contradict the doctrine expounded in the author’s other works (the author is thus defined as a field of conceptual or theoretical coherence); (3) one must also exclude works that are written in a different style, containing words and expressions not ordinarily found in the writer’s production (the author is here conceived as a stylistic unity) (111).

The reviews of Hutchison and S. F. H. align closely with Saint Jerome’s first criterion. Making value judgments on the quality of *Twilight Sleep*, both critics find that the novel does not meet the constant level of value Wharton had produced with her earlier works. Though in Wharton’s day one need not withdraw an inferior work from an author’s oeuvre based on suspicions of inauthenticity, S. F. H.’s comment that *Twilight Sleep* belongs on the second shelf of Wharton’s collection demonstrates the relevancy of Saint Jerome’s criterion, arguing for as much a withdrawal of the novel from Wharton’s canon

as is possible. Though contemporary *Twilight Sleep* reviewers do not accuse Wharton of contradicting her own previously-stated doctrines or beliefs, Ammons credits the decline she perceives in Wharton's later works to a shift in Wharton's beliefs concerning motherhood and human nature after World War I. "As a realistic, literal argument Wharton's endorsement of motherhood is simplistic and reactionary, and in major ways it is responsible for the deterioration in quality of her novels about the twenties; their preachiness, their disposition toward caricature, their sentimentality and vindictiveness, their bathos, their unabashed misandry" (185). Though Ammons is particularly concerned with Wharton's attitudes towards motherhood, her descriptions of the way in which Wharton's writing changed in her later novels has not gone unnoticed by others. A contemporary reviewer, Dorothy Foster Gilman, criticizes Wharton for straying from her usual subject matter and writing style:

Mrs. Wharton has in fact stepped deliberately from the consecrated circle of the well bred to that wider sphere of usefulness chosen by American women who feel that no day is a success when they do not have an engagement for every hour, a non-collapsible checkbook, and a platform manner, of pretentiousness and infallibility. The result of deserting her own class is disastrous for Mrs. Wharton. She now adventures in a world which she does not really know. Her characters are, therefore, slightly exaggerated. Pauline Manford, who is the central figure in the story, is as much a caricature in the world of club women as Elmer Gantry² was in the world of clergymen (5).

² Though the focus of this project is on the similarities between *Babbitt* and *Twilight Sleep*, Foster's comparison of Pauline, *Twilight Sleep*'s protagonist, to the titular

Just as Saint Jerome's criteria suggest, Foster's review of *Twilight Sleep* takes fault with Wharton for broaching new subject matter. Foster determines that the caricature-quality of the novel is a negative byproduct of this shift of subject. Having relegated Wharton to writing only about a specific niche of people, Foster does not entertain the possibility that Wharton's exaggerated, caricatured characters were serving a literary purpose and were not merely a slip in authorial quality.

Foucault's acknowledgement that the establishment of author function is subjectively, and thus artificially, produced is valuable to the evaluation of *Twilight Sleep* in light of Wharton's other works. "These aspects of an individual which we designate as making him an author are only a projection, in more or less psychologizing terms, of the operations that we force texts to undergo, the connections that we make, the traits that we establish as pertinent, the continuities that we recognize, or the exclusions that we practice" (110). Foucault's repetition of "we" in the process of determining what an author is pertinently draws attention to the subjectivity of the process, the way in which we add a layer to each of an author's individual works in order to be able to draw the works together to create a unified whole. In their insistence on being able to gather together Wharton's books to create a unified oeuvre, critics and scholars alike have been quick to regard *Twilight Sleep* as inferior to her other works, one not befitting of the authorial stamp of Edith Wharton. Because *Twilight Sleep* represents a shift in Wharton's career, it does not necessarily align well with her other novels, making it easy to cast off and relegate to the "second shelf" of the collection, and in doing so falsely preserving the image of Wharton as creator of uniform "masterpieces". If one were to

protagonist of Lewis' 1927 novel, *Elmer Gantry*, further demonstrates the stylistic connection between Lewis and Wharton.

evaluate *Twilight Sleep* aside from the rest of the Wharton canon, taking it for an entirely new project—one similar to the one Sinclair Lewis undertakes—rather than requiring it to be a reinvention of her previous works, one might regard *Twilight Sleep* not as a gaffe on Wharton’s record but rather as a captivating, relevant text. If viewed in this way, *Twilight Sleep* need not be figuratively removed from the Wharton canon so as not to tarnish her legacy, but can instead be seen as a text whose masterfully crafted form is functioning to expose the dangerous direction in which Wharton feels American society to be fated.

The other school of thought regarding *Twilight Sleep*’s inferiority judges the novel based on Wharton’s financial needs, and thus her motivations, at the time of the novel’s publication. Benstock claims that Wharton intended to pay for an extravagant Aegean cruise she had previously taken with money made from the serialized publication of *Twilight Sleep* (392). With this in mind, Helen Killoran, in her book *The Critical Reception of Edith Wharton*, argues that despite its ostensible frivolity the subject matter of *Twilight Sleep* is grave and anything but frivolous. Even so, the novel’s depth is not apparent to all, and thus “Many critics...have felt that Edith Wharton sold her artistic soul for cash, and that the novel was merely intended as a money-maker. But so were *The Age of Innocence* and *Ethan Frome*” (133). Though *The Age of Innocence* and *Ethan Frome* were both written at a time when Wharton was financially vulnerable, they are still regarded as masterpieces amongst her works. If this is so, it forces us to question why Wharton’s monetary motives in writing *Twilight Sleep* are so important to its evaluation, as it does not factor into the equation with her other works. Reflecting on Wharton’s 1920s novels as a group, Killoran deftly reasons:

The apparent assumption that these books are merely “drugstore novels” could be productively challenged. Granted, Edith Wharton’s inheritance was small ... and personal charities had depleted her funds. Still, if people were to assume that Edith Wharton had too much professional pride to release anything she thought artistically inferior, a block might be removed that would result in further interest in novels like *The Children* and *Twilight Sleep* (133).

The view that Wharton wrote *Twilight Sleep* for money alone, compromising her artistic integrity to write about a subject matter she thought would sell well, does not hold up under scrutiny. Benstock says, “She took pride in her ability to define, discriminate, and ‘distinguish’—indeed, these traits were the hallmark of both her conversation and writing” (76). She goes on to add that Wharton was admired “not only for her literary productivity, but also because she worked ‘seriously’ at her art, had a ‘literary conscience,’ and attended to every element of her *métier*, no matter how small or seemingly unimportant” (76). The careful, deft, detail-oriented author, who takes pride in these qualities that Benstock describes does not sound like the kind of author who would compromise her work for a payout. Moreover, in a letter to Sinclair Lewis regarding his publication of *Babbitt*, Wharton says, “I wonder how much of it the American public, to whom irony seems to have become as unintelligible as Chinese, will even remotely feel? To do anything worth while, one must resolutely close one’s ears & eyes to their conception of the novel” (“Letter to Sinclair” 455). Though critics and scholars accuse Wharton of having written to the tastes of her American audience, her words to Lewis suggest just the opposite. Wharton argues that one should not cater to the desires of the American reading public. Knowing what we do of Wharton’s authorial pride and her

feelings about writing for the American public, Killoran's assertion that Wharton would not have released inferior work seems even more acceptable.

Though this project aims to propose a reevaluation of *Twilight Sleep* as a work of equal quality and importance to Wharton's other works, I do not disagree with scholars who note a change in the style and content of *Twilight Sleep*. Whereas other scholars are quick to discount *Twilight Sleep* because of the way it differs from Wharton's previous works, the changes are, in fact, what make *Twilight Sleep* a valuable text. In chapter one, I will examine *Twilight Sleep*'s departures from one of the novels considered to be a "masterpiece," *The House of Mirth*, going on to provide insight into the reasoning behind Wharton's change in perspective. Chapter two takes a two-part approach: examining the shared project Wharton and Lewis are undertaking and understanding the influence that the authors had on one another, which will become the basis for my larger argument that *Twilight Sleep* must be recontextualized and reevaluated. Though *Twilight Sleep* received mixed reviews at the time of its publication, its reputation today is largely negative and it is no longer widely read or studied. As *Babbitt* is still considered a relevant and worthwhile text of study, I will argue that *Twilight Sleep*, dealing with the same cultural phenomenon as *Babbitt*, deserves to be viewed in the same light. Such a recontextualization will perhaps save this currently disregarded text from permanent obscurity and re-interest scholars in its study.

CHAPTER ONE

The frequent observations that *Twilight Sleep* differs from others of Wharton's oeuvre are not without basis. *Twilight Sleep* does indeed depart from Wharton's previous novels both stylistically and in terms of her perception of the society of which she writes. Often regarded as her masterpiece work, *The House of Mirth* (1905), though also a social satire, provides a rich basis for comparison, illuminating the evolution of her writing over the course of her career. In the 22 years that passed between these novels' publications much about American society—and the world—had changed. As I will discuss momentarily, World War I had a profound impact on the way Wharton regarded America and its citizens, thus making a shift in the content of her work only natural. Stylistically, the literary world changed across this span of time as well. Though both social satires, *The House of Mirth* is a work of realism, whereas *Twilight Sleep* more readily lends itself to the modernist genre, which was the predominant literary genre of the post-World War I decade. In order to recognize the change in Wharton's writing that occurred between *The House of Mirth* and *Twilight Sleep*, it is imperative to understand the subject of her satirization in each novel and her method of critique.

A focus on the novels' protagonists—Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* and Pauline Manford in *Twilight Sleep*—provides a useful way through which to observe the shift in Wharton's attitude towards New York society. *The House of Mirth* satirizes and critiques society at large, while sparing its protagonist, who is portrayed as a victim of that society. *Twilight Sleep*, however, does not spare its protagonist—quite the opposite, in fact, Wharton unabashedly critiques society *through* the main character. Lily is ultimately exempt from Wharton's satirization because she is a character outside the society that

Wharton critiques, whereas Pauline is the archetype member of the society of which Wharton disapproves.

The House of Mirth details Lily's descent amongst the ranks of New York high society. Not independently wealthy, for Lily to be able to maintain her status in the elite upper class she must marry a man of means. The novel follows her through a series of self-sabotaged attempts at an advantageous marriage and details her social and physical deterioration. Lily, resolutely positioned just on the periphery of this elite society, is painted as its victim. Throughout the novel, Wharton writes of the elitist members of the upper class satirically. Describing two people who were to potentially enter into marriage, the narrator humorously states: "Miss Van Osburgh was a large girl with flat surfaces and no high lights: Jack Stepney had once said of her that she was as reliable as roast mutton. His own taste was in the line of less solid and more highly-seasoned diet; but hunger makes any fare palatable, and there had been times when Mr. Stepney had been reduced to a crust" (*House of Mirth* 83). Likening Gwen Van Osburgh to food and Jack Stepney's search for a wife to his search for an appetizing meal, Wharton parodies the way in which societal courtships take place. Though this passage is but one example of the way in which Wharton satirizes society in *The House of Mirth*, Lily's ensuing reaction to seeing Gwen and Jack together highlights the way she differs from the society Wharton mocks. Observing that "the man lounging at [Gwen's] side already betrayed the encroaching boredom which would presently crack the thin veneer of his smile," Lily reacts with disgust to the idea that Jack can sit back and do nothing other than consent to marrying a woman, whereas for Lily to marry she must make precise moves of great consequence to her future (83). Though Lily's realization of society's double standard

does not immediately change her course of action, the fact that she does not end up marrying—having sabotaged a few of her chances at a marriage such as the one she here presumes will take place—reflects the way in which she lies outside of the mainstream upper class culture. The narrator continually mentions Lily’s “nature” and her “destiny,” making it seem as if Lily had little agency in determining the trajectory of her life—a position that ultimately allows us to regard her sympathetically.

But where the authorial voice of *The House of Mirth* treats Lily sympathetically, the authorial voice of *Twilight Sleep* not only treats Pauline unsympathetically, but also satirizes her ruthlessly. Wharton mainly satirizes Pauline based on her singular interest in life—avoiding, at all costs, contact with pain. Pauline is a materially comfortable, wealthy woman, which in many ways affords her the tactics she uses to keep herself from coming into contact with negativity and suffering. Wharton writes that though Pauline “would have risen from her death-bed to show a new housemaid how to build a fire” if such an “emergency” presented itself, this is about the extent to which she is willing to become involved with a difficult situation (*Twilight Sleep* 136). By labeling a housemaid’s inability to light a fire a situation Pauline would deem an emergency, Wharton effectively satirizes Pauline’s priorities. In moments such as this, Wharton mocks the emotional evasiveness of Pauline, and the members of 1920s America whom she represents.

When a more distressing situation does come along (Pauline’s secretary’s mother, Mrs. Bruss, is diagnosed with cancer), Pauline avoids getting physically or emotionally involved in the situation, though she offers to fund anything that Mrs. Bruss might need. Pauline’s daughter, Nona, is the one who goes to the hospital to be with Pauline’s

secretary, Maisie, while her mother undergoes surgery, prompting Nona to reflect on Pauline's habit of avoiding these kinds of situations as much as she can.

She knew that nothing frightened and disorganized Pauline as much as direct contact with physical or moral suffering—especially physical. Her whole life (if one chose to look at it from a certain angle) had been a long interrupted struggle against the encroachment of every form of pain. The first step, always, was to conjure it, bribe it away, by every possible expenditure—except of one's self. Cheques, surgeons, nurses, private rooms in hospitals, X-rays, radium, whatever was most costly and up-to-date in the dreadful art of healing—that was her first and strongest line of protection; ...all her life she had been used to buying off suffering with money, or denying its existence with words, and her moral muscles had become so atrophied that only a great shock would restore their natural strength... (260-1)

Though Pauline's avoidance of Maisie and Mrs. Bruss at the time of the latter's illness is a colorful example of the way in which Pauline lives her life, it is just that—one example of what is apparently many. Nona notes that for Pauline's entire life, or at least the most recent portion that Nona has been alive to witness, Pauline has been willing to do absolutely anything within her power to ensure that she is not faced with physical or emotional suffering.

Nona's perspective in this scene marks an interesting departure from the way in which Wharton wrote *The House of Mirth*. Whereas *The House of Mirth* is written from an omniscient perspective that most closely covers Lily's perspective, *Twilight Sleep* features the shifting perspective typical of modernism, detailing among others Pauline

and Nona's consciousnesses. Jennifer Haytock, in her article "Marriage and Modernism in Edith Wharton's *Twilight Sleep*" says, "Wharton uses the modernist technique of changing and inconsistent points of view to show the conflicts and mysteries in human relationships" (218). By utilizing this modernist technique, Wharton achieves a distance from the satire that she did not achieve in *The House of Mirth*. Wharton is able to provide an assessment of Pauline through Nona's commentary, distancing herself from the judgmental words, while still providing that assessment for the reader.

As a result of *The House of Mirth*'s omniscient point of view, satirical passages sound less like another character's assessment than they do Wharton's own. For example, in a passage humorously likening the way Lily's aunt, Mrs. Peniston, opens her house for the season to a religious ritual, Wharton conveys the parody not through the voice of a character, as she often does in *Twilight Sleep*, but through a narrator's voice which could easily be perceived as her own.

The first two weeks after her return represented to Mrs. Peniston the domestic equivalent of a religious retreat. She "went through" the linen and blankets in the precise spirit of the penitent exploring the inner folds on conscience; she sought for moths as the stricken soul seeks for lurking infirmities. ... It was on this phase of the proceedings that Miss Bart entered (*House of Mirth* 135).

As Lily has not entered the scene until after the satirical depiction of Mrs. Peniston's cleaning practices, it is clear that she is not the one who is mocking the ritual. Unlike Nona's reflection on Pauline's avoidance of all contact with suffering, this passage about Mrs. Peniston, coming from the omniscient narrator, seems to come from Wharton's perspective.

Whether satirizing Pauline's misplaced priorities in wanting to assist in emergencies that are not, in fact, emergencies, or satirizing Mrs. Peniston's misplaced preoccupation in so seriously cleaning her home, Wharton treats members of the upper class New York society with derision. The key differences between her satirizations of society are in the narratorial perspective from which she does so, and the way she does not satirize Lily as she does Pauline. As she treats Pauline with more direct and scathing satire, as I will demonstrate in chapter two, it would seem that by being able to place her commentary in the mouths of other characters she is able to further distance herself from her subject because she is less accountable for the portrayal than when, as in *The House of Mirth*, one might more easily assume that the opinion is Wharton's.

In *The House of Mirth*, Wharton perhaps treats Lily sympathetically because she constantly finds herself dealing with the kind of pain that *Twilight Sleep*'s Pauline seems to be able to avoid. Though Lily's life ends in tragedy, she actively contends with all of the pain and suffering that she encounters throughout the course of the novel. In this manner, she could not be any more different from Pauline, a caricature of Americans whose pain-avoiding nature Wharton found extremely troubling. Though *The House of Mirth* still satirizes New York society, its focus on a character that is to be regarded sympathetically provokes the feeling that positive elements of society have not yet been lost entirely. *Twilight Sleep*, focusing on characters that are all irredeemable, presents Wharton's jaded outlook on America.

The attitude that Pauline demonstrates regarding suffering constitutes the basis of Wharton's satire in *Twilight Sleep*. Shari Benstock, in her biography of Edith Wharton, *No Gifts from Chance*, describes the novel as "[satirizing] New York nouveau riche bent

on getting through life without suffering—at any cost” (397). Of Wharton’s motivation to write *Twilight Sleep*, Benstock goes on to say, “Edith believed not only that this theme was timely, but also that society would pay heavily for its continued evasion and emotional bankruptcy” (398). In regards to Wharton’s concerns about the emotional vacuity of Americans and the deep consequences she felt they had in sight, it seems highly likely that her own passion spurred her to write *Twilight Sleep*.

[The war] changed the world on Edith Wharton and consequently her way of responding to it. She tried to write her cool, analytical novels and instead wrote highly emotional ones. ... The terrible experience of the [war] itself, exacerbated by Jazz-Age America’s suppression of that sobering turn of affairs, permanently redefined the cultural problem for Wharton (Ammons 184-5).

Perhaps, then, it is not as some reviewers suggest—that Wharton was too far removed from *Twilight Sleep*’s subject matter—but rather that the topic so impassioned her that she could not produce the novel with her usual detachment. Ever expecting works of a certain uniformity from Wharton, *Twilight Sleep* disappointed some; if we view the novel as having been influenced by the similar satirical work Lewis undertakes in *Babbitt*, however, we are able to gain new insight into, and thus appreciation for, *Twilight Sleep*.

Though Ammons approaches *Twilight Sleep* from the perspective that it is an inferior Wharton novel, she draws a useful comparison between *Twilight Sleep* and *Babbitt*. *Twilight Sleep*, she argues, “reads almost like a poor imitation of Sinclair Lewis. With its diffuse plotting, caricatures, and gimmicky capitalizations, *Twilight Sleep* might well be dedicated to *Babbitt*: it is as if the mentor becomes the pupil’s imitator and, twice removed, parodies herself” (173). Though the tone of Ammons’ comment is offhanded,

the possibility that *Babbitt* did, in reality, influence *Twilight Sleep* is not remote, as there is a known link between the authors' works. Benstock maintains that between 1920, when Wharton won the Pulitzer Prize for *The Age of Innocence*, and 1926, when Lewis won the prize for *Arrowsmith*, the authors had developed a friendship, and that Wharton praised Lewis as an author (365). After reading *Babbitt*, which Lewis had dedicated to Wharton³, she wrote him a glowing letter, thanking him for "associating her name with a book [she] so warmly admire[s] & applaud[s]" ("Letter to Sinclair" 455). When coupled with all that the novels share in terms of theme, emotionally vacuous characters, and style, these pieces of historical evidence lend credence to the argument that *Babbitt* influenced Wharton's writing of *Twilight Sleep*.

³ The relationship of authorial influence (that Lewis' *Babbitt* influenced Wharton's *Twilight Sleep*) which I am arguing is the reverse of Kenneth S. Rothwell's existing argument that contends that *Babbitt* uses *The Age of Innocence* as a blueprint for Lewis' take on the novel of manners (32).

CHAPTER TWO

As I will demonstrate, similarities between *Twilight Sleep* and *Babbitt* abound, and one could expend a great deal of space comparing them, but it is perhaps most interesting, and most relevant to this project, to instead examine the authors' outlook on and treatment of their shared subject. Though Lewis and Wharton note the same negative aspects of American society, they differ greatly in their *opinions* of that society. Lewis was a self-described "fanatic American," who recognized the problems of the society he wrote about, but remained hopeful that conditions would improve (qtd. in Love 62).

Love says,

Thus, we have his revealing confession to Perry Miller that "I love America...I love it, but I don't like it," and his repeated claim that he wanted to raise the cultural maturity of America by mocking its "cruder manifestations." When he ridiculed and satirized American mythologies, he did so only when they had become empty apologies for present mediocrity, rather than the spirit by which our national possibilities might be advanced (89).

As Lewis' own statements reveal, though he disapproved of his contemporary Americans, he was writing from a place of hopefulness that society would be able to improve. As such, though *Babbitt* is the focus of Lewis' satire, he is not meant to be wholly unlikeable.

Grebstein notes the interesting paradox Lewis creates in the character of *Babbitt*. He describes all that is unlikable about *Babbitt*, but notes that *Babbitt*'s character is not so straightforward as to allow us to merely dislike him: "*Babbitt* is a coward, a braggart, a hypocrite, a liar, a cheat, a poor husband and father, a worker whose work contributes

nothing towards human betterment. Yet we *like* Babbitt and are indulgent to him, just as Lewis is and intends, for Babbitt is also kind, loyal to his friends, basically simple and decent” (Grebstein 84). According to Perry Miller, Grebstein’s suspicion that Lewis intended for us to like Babbitt is not incorrect. Miller argues that “in the guise of ferocious attacks upon America” *Babbitt* and similar novels of the 1920s were “celebrations of it” (34). Basing his opinion on a comment Sinclair Lewis made at a lecture he gave at the end of his career, Miller says, “he said something which I believe he seldom brought himself to avow, which certainly he never put in print: ‘I wrote *Babbitt* not out of hatred for him but out of love’” (34). Lewis treats Babbitt satirically, imbuing him with character flaws that represent the problems of modern America, but he writes from a place of positive regard for his subject. So though he writes *Babbitt* satirically, his love for America and hope for its future compels him to paint the titular character with some potential for redemption, endowing him with the favorable qualities Grebstein notes. Accordingly, the novel’s mutedly hopeful ending exhibits that Lewis has not given up on American society.

By the time Wharton wrote *Twilight Sleep*, she was deeply disenchanted with Americans. Whereas Lewis wrote semi-negatively about a culture he still loved, Wharton was, from abroad⁴, writing extremely negatively about a culture for which she

⁴ Some contemporary critiques of *Twilight Sleep* suggested that Wharton’s geographically removed position from her subject matter negatively impacted the degree to which her novel seemed realistic. Isabel Paterson’s review of the novel for the New York *Herald Tribune*, however, provides an interesting counterargument: “No doubt her long residence abroad gave Edith Wharton a helpful perspective, Europe’s well-justified pessimism serving as a camera obscura to define the outlines of the spectacle which so dazzles and irritates the Old World” (429). In this light, rather than viewing the time Wharton spent away from America as a detractor to the novel, the time away may have been crucial for Wharton to achieve clarity and an enlightened perspective.

had little positive regard. In the midst of writing *Twilight Sleep*, Wharton responded to a letter from her friend, Margaret Terry Chanler, addressed as Daisy, which provides us with great insight into her feelings towards Americans at the time the novel was written⁵. “During their Aegean voyage, Daisy had tried to soften Edith’s attitudes about America, but to no avail” (Benstock 396). Responding to Daisy’s “lecture,” Wharton maintains that there are still some Americans she enjoys, saying, “Of course there are green isles in that sea of misery—but they’re so far apart... Alas, there are not enough to go round” (“Letter to Margaret” 492). The sea of misery that Wharton refers to is modern America—a sentiment that is not lost in her writing of *Twilight Sleep*. Elizabeth Ammons explains that World War I had a great effect on Wharton, causing her to realize the seriousness of life. Wharton “looked at the American Roaring Twenties and saw a youth cult that reduced the world to a kindergarten: a chaotic playground where life was turned into a game, carefree and hedonistic. But human life, [Wharton] protested, was not a game” (Ammons 172). Thus, with World War I juxtaposed against the “playground” that became post-war America, Wharton wrote *Twilight Sleep*, a biting condemnation of the society that troubled her. Though Wharton’s novel criticizes the same aspects of society as *Babbitt*, she did not take Lewis’ cue to include details about her main character, Pauline, that endear her to the audience, as Lewis did with *Babbitt*. Whereas *Babbitt* ends on a slightly hopeful note, *Twilight Sleep* ends with Pauline being “more than ever resolutely two-dimensional” (*Twilight Sleep* 307). Just as Wharton’s letters reveal, she had precious little positive regard for America, and unlike Lewis’

⁵ Wharton is quite literally writing this letter to Daisy as she writes *Twilight Sleep*. Her letter signs off saying, “I’m digging away at ‘Twilight Sleep,’ & must end this [letter] to take up my task” (“Letter to Margaret” 492). This letter reveals Wharton’s attitude towards Americans, which compels her satirization in the novel.

ending of *Babbitt*, the ending of her novel reveals no hope for Americans to change their course.

Keeping in mind Lewis' and Wharton's motives for writing their respective novels, it will be valuable to examine the way in which each of them crafted their satires of 1920s America. Before examining the way the texts fit within the larger genre of satire, I will briefly analyze *Babbitt* and *Twilight Sleep* separately to highlight the tasks they are undertaking, their respective author's treatment of that task and their points of departure. Ultimately, this will lead to my overarching argument that *Twilight Sleep* must be reoriented within the Wharton canon and placed into the context of the satire Lewis creates in *Babbitt*.

In his 1922 novel, *Babbitt*, Sinclair Lewis addresses American society's emotional vacuity as Wharton does in *Twilight Sleep*, but from a Midwest, middle-class perspective. Babbitt, whom the audience comes to know through Lewis' skillful characterization, is plagued by a sense of emptiness and loneliness, leaving him restless, and leading him to vaguely, but vociferously, look for more. Through the course of the novel, the audience sees Babbitt's many and various attempts to fill this void, all of which are unsuccessful as he is looking in the wrong places, too quick to conform to the day's materialism and uniformity of thought.

In another often cited letter to Alfred Harcourt, Lewis describes Babbitt's internal distress, saying, "He is all of us Americans at 46, prosperous but worried, wanting—passionately—to seize something more than motor cars and a house *before it's too late*" (28 Dec. 1920, 59). Babbitt is comfortable with his home, car, and numerous other

possessions in between, but as Lewis' conception of Babbitt intends, he is still left grasping at the vague sense that there is more to life. In a conversation with his friend Paul Riesling, the only other person with whom Babbitt can discuss his dissatisfaction with life, he says,

I've felt kind of down in the mouth all day long. ...Kind of comes over me: here I've pretty much done all the things I ought to; supported my family, and got a good house and a six cylinder car, and built up a nice little business, and I haven't any vices 'specially, except smoking—and I'm practically cutting that out by the way. And I belong to the church, and play enough golf to keep trim, and I only associate with good decent fellows. And yet even so, I don't know that I'm entirely satisfied! (*Babbitt* 55).

By Babbitt's own account, he is living up to the standards by which Zenith society measures success. He provides for his family, maintains a home and car, and participates in socially sanctioned "extracurricular" activities, but by his own standards, Babbitt feels like there is something missing from his life. From the novel's outset, Lewis highlights the materiality and conformity that constitute Babbitt's life, satirizing the way these societal habits are used to stand in for a life more personally fulfilling.

As *Babbitt* begins, George Babbitt is waking and going about his morning, providing Lewis with the opportunity to humorously enumerate the material goods that, instead of merely making up Babbitt's home, comprise too great a portion of his life.

Though the house was not large it had, like all houses on Floral Heights, an altogether royal bathroom of porcelain and glazed tile and metal sleek as silver. The towel-rack was a rod of clear glass set in nickel. The tub was long enough

for a Prussian Guard, and above the set bowl was a sensational exhibit of tooth-brush holder, shaving-brush holder, soap-dish, sponge-dish, and medicine-cabinet, so glittering and so ingenious that they resembled an electric instrument-board. But the Babbitt whose god was Modern Appliances was not pleased. The air of the bathroom was thick with the smell of a heathen toothpaste” (6).

Babbitt, who takes pride in having possessions as good as, or better than, the other families of his social set, thinks nothing of the fact that his bathroom does not reflect his tastes or his needs as a consumer, but rather relishes the fact that is he able to stay up to date with the latest consumer trends. Lewis’ itemization of the contents of Babbitt’s bathroom pays ironic homage to these goods, conveying to the reader Babbitt’s exaggerated respect for these fixtures and products. Babbitt pays such attention to the details of his bathroom that he is able to catch his daughter Verona’s tyrannical act of buying the “wrong” toothpaste, on its lingering scent alone. All of this is explained, however, by Lewis’ short but poignant notification that, in place of God, Babbitt worships Modern Appliances⁶. Using another example in which Lewis conflates religious matters with consumer goods, Glen A. Love argues that “the authorial voice mocks the triviality of...devotion” to material possessions “by raising it to an absurdly spiritual plane” (45). Of this device, T. J. Matheson notes, Lewis creates “a kind of satiric fantasy world where spiritual terms, having been cut off completely from their

⁶ Lewis’ capitalization of “Modern Appliances” enhances his message: set next to “god,” left uncapitalized, “Modern Appliances,” set in capital letters, looks even more important and revered. The juxtaposition of the two—one that is usually capitalized and revered, next to something ridiculous that most would not find important enough to capitalize—is an embodiment of Lewis’ contention that, to Babbitt, appliances are God. Love talks about this device, “the Ironic Capitalization,” as a microcosm of the inflation-deflation pattern Lewis creates throughout the novel, saying, “the romantic inflation and the satiric deflation are both neatly shorthand into the typographical ploy” (45).

original contexts, are misused as a matter of course, the words themselves having remained even though the states of being they once described have been forgotten” (qtd. in Love 45). The rest of *Babbitt* does suggest that the original religious context for references to God has been forgotten, which is an important element of the casual convergence of religious and secular worship. At this early point in the novel, when we find Babbitt in his bathroom, we do not yet know that Lewis’ suggestion that Babbitt worships appliances rather than God is quite telling. Babbitt belongs to the church because society dictates that he should, but for all intents and purposes, he is devoid of the Christian beliefs to which he supposedly subscribes. Thus, Lewis’ claim not only exaggerates Babbitt’s love of new consumer goods, but also tells us something of the way Babbitt is devoid of belief in a higher purpose.

Later in the novel, after Babbitt is asked to assist in building up his church’s Sunday School program, Lewis provides this narratorial commentary on Babbitt’s religious beliefs:

If you had asked Babbitt what his religion was, he would have answered in sonorous Booster’s-Club rhetoric, “My religion is to serve my fellow men, to honor my brother as myself, and to do my bit to make life happier for one and all.” If you had pressed him for more detail, he would have announced, “I’m a member of the Presbyterian Church, and naturally, I accept its doctrines.” If you had been so brutal as to go on, he would have protested, “There’s no use discussing and arguing about religion; it just stirs up bad feeling.” ...The kernel of his practical religion was that it was respectable, and beneficial to one’s business, to be seen going to services (188).

According to Lewis' hypothetical passage, Babbitt would first answer a question about his religion with an answer supplied by another of his societally prescribed activities, but not of his church. The Booster's Club, akin to appliances, is, in Babbitt's mind, interchangeable with actual theology. When it all comes down to it, Lewis suggests, Babbitt would turn the conversation away from religion, as his motivation to attend services is to be *seen* going, rather than stemming from any kind of actual religious belief. As H. L. Mencken describes it, Babbitt's "religion is a public rite wholly without subjective significance...What he feels and thinks is what it is currently proper to feel and think" (27).

We are once again led to question Babbitt's valuation of his material possessions as we find out that as much as Babbitt loves his bathroom, "most important of all" was his sleeping-porch. But, Lewis says, "It is not known whether he enjoyed his sleeping-porch because of the fresh air or because it was the standard thing to have a sleeping-porch" (*Babbitt* 87). This line serves to undercut the previous line, suggesting that though Babbitt's sleeping-porch is of the utmost importance to him, it might not be so because of a genuine regard for it, but, more likely based on what the reader has been told about Babbitt, that he likes it because it is the standard thing. Lewis' technique in this line is subtle, but telling. As the author of this story, it is within Lewis' realm of control to determine whether or not Babbitt actually enjoyed his sleeping-porch, but instead of coming down on the matter one way or the other, he uses his authorial voice satirically, pretending as narrator that he is removed from an insider's understanding of Babbitt, but all the while casting doubt on his motives with authority. Love notes the complex narratorial stance Lewis takes in writing *Babbitt*, saying, "What soon becomes evident in

reading a book like *Babbitt* is that Lewis, or his characteristic narrative voice, is constantly and vociferously intruding into the description, the action, and even the dialogue, telling us, through various means, what he thinks of it all, and, by implication, what we should think of it all” (36). It is passages like the one in discussion that, though seemingly neutral, make clear to the audience where Lewis stands on the matters he is presenting. When Lewis says “it is not known” what Babbitt’s motives regarding the sleeping-porch were, his technique essentially makes it known that this is once more a point on which Babbitt likes things because society dictates he should, not because he actually likes the item in question.

Demystifying his own covert suggestion, Lewis waxes definitively on the origins of Babbitt’s beliefs.

Just as he was an Elk, a Booster, and a member of the Chamber of Commerce, just as the priests of the Presbyterian Church determined his every religious belief and the senators who controlled the Republican Party decided in little smoky rooms in Washington what he should think about disarmament, tariff, and Germany, so did the large national advertisers fix the surface of his life, fix what he believed to be his individuality. These standard advertised wares—toothpastes, socks, tires, cameras, instantaneous hot-water heaters—were his symbols and proofs of excellence; at first the signs, then the substitutes, for joy and passion and wisdom (*Babbitt* 87).

Babbitt, a character symbolizing the every-man of the day, absorbs all of his beliefs from the governing bodies that surround him. A few men at the top of the societal pyramid determine his beliefs, morals, tastes, and preferences, though they do not now, nor will

they ever, know him. Using Babbitt as representative, Lewis is able to comment on this one-size-fits-all approach that was common at the time of *Babbitt*'s publication. Swept up in the acquisition, and subsequent flaunting, of possessions, Babbitt and his societal cohorts have come to let these objects, which should be small details' of their lives, completely overpower and define them. Of this section of novel, which describes in sometimes frustratingly fine detail Babbitt's mundane and consumerist daily routine, Sheldon Norman Grebstein says, "The total effect of this first section of the novel is, just as Lewis intended, overwhelming in its emphasis upon the smallness, the pettiness, the triviality, and the lack of joy and freedom in the existence of a typical member of a money society" (79). On this day of Babbitt's life that Lewis is tracing, Babbitt expresses (many times in his internal monologue, once aloud to his friend Paul) that he is restless and dissatisfied. Despite the litany of material possessions that are meant to satisfy Babbitt and make him happy, he realizes, somewhat uncomfortably, that he needs something else, though he does not know what. By juxtaposing the way Babbitt is materially comfortable with the way his soul is restless, Lewis makes the point that though society is using the fixings of capitalism to replace autonomy and human connection, it is not an even and gratifying trade.

It stands to reason that there must be a societal deficiency of some kind at play in Zenith—and in a larger sense, the America Lewis is commenting on through Zenith—to allow the toxic spirit of conformity and consumerism to make such inroads into society. Though one can lay blame for this rampant conformity on the conformists themselves—the church leaders, politicians, and advertising executives—what does it say that a whole society of average people, like George Babbitt, are willing to forgo their right to think

and determine what is best for themselves? The critique of these average Americans—not the leaders of thought, but the followers—is that they are vacuous, devoid of their own inner selves, and are thus willing and eager to allow society to think for them. When faced with topics of conversation that he has not been able to gather an opinion on from the authorities that he reveres, for example, Babbitt decides to change the subject rather than think for himself and attempt to cultivate his own ideas. Reading snippets of the paper to his wife, Myra, Babbitt announces that a mayor, who was also a preacher, was inaugurated wearing overalls. She acknowledges his statement without contributing an opinion on the matter, as is her way, and then the authorial voice tells us, “He searched for an attitude, but neither as a Republican, a Presbyterian, an Elk, nor a real-estate broker did he have any doctrine about preacher-mayors laid down for him, so he grunted and went on” (*Babbitt* 20). The phrase “laid down for him” speaks volumes about the passivity Babbitt demonstrates in his daily life, looking for prefabricated opinions that he can agree with as his groups proscribe, without having to do any deep thinking or reflection on his own values and beliefs. Passages such as this are plentiful throughout the course of the novel, making this behavior the rule rather than the exception, something that Lewis is satirizing and taking fault with.

Faced with a growing sense of restlessness, Babbitt still does not attempt to actively shape his life. He moans and groans to himself about his dissatisfied condition a fair deal, and does manage to escape to Maine with Paul sans family, but mostly, Babbitt looks for reinforcement in all of the old, socially acceptable ways⁷. Concurrently, in two

⁷ This is true until much later in the novel when Paul shoots his tyrannical wife, Zilla, a moment that serves as the impetus for Babbitt to rebel against conformity and make his own decisions, though this movement does not last. In comparison to Babbitt’s safe,

different groups of people—his family and Zenith’s social set—Babbitt recognizes encouraging interactions that appeal to him as the solution to his desire for more. But in both of these protracted efforts to find comfort and acceptance, Lewis presents this possibility and Babbitt’s correspondingly hopeful outlook on life, only to just as quickly rule them out, leaving Babbitt once again lonely and disenchanted, without a clue as to how to find the companionate intimacy he desires. In *Babbitt: An American Life*, Love details the way Lewis uses an inflation-deflation pattern as a structural device in the novel (45). He focuses his attention on other examples, but the logic he employs works to describe the situations I will detail, as well. Love draws attention to Lewis’ technique in a particularly clear example—a description of Myra Babbitt—commenting that, “The authorial voice concludes that she was ‘a good woman, a kind woman, a diligent woman, but no one, save perhaps Tinka her ten-year-old, was at all interested in her or entirely aware she was alive’” (45-6). The first half of the sentence works to build the character up and then the final detail derails that build-up. In passages like these, Love argues, Lewis inflates and then deflates his subject, a device he calls the “closing kicker” (45). Though Love finds this device not only at the sentence level, but on larger scales, as well, he does not note the device’s applicability towards Babbitt’s attempts to find more in his life through his family and social counterparts. Presently, I will detail the condition of Babbitt’s marriage and family at the novel’s outset, and then Babbitt’s attempt to see them as a viable solution to his isolation. Subsequently, I will detail his similar attempt

conformist attempts to find meaning in his life, this shift in behavior could have proved valuable, though ultimately he abandons his rebellious behaviors for a return to conformity. As the outcome of these mutinous attempts, no matter the boldness of the strokes, remain futilely the same, analyzing them here would yield nothing more valuable than do Babbitt’s earlier, conformist attempts, and in an effort to avoid redundancy, I will focus solely on those.

to use social acceptance in this same way, though in each case the option proves unsatisfactory and does not lessen Babbitt's exasperation with his life.

At the novel's outset, Lewis offers a description of the titular character's reality, and juxtaposes it with the "reality" of his dream-life. "He seemed prosperous, extremely married and unromantic; and altogether unromantic appeared this sleeping-porch, which looked on one sizeable elm, two respectable grass-plots, a cement driveway, and a corrugated iron garage. Yet Babbitt was again dreaming of the fairy child, a dream more romantic than scarlet pagodas by a silver sea" (*Babbitt* 4). Lewis' sensory description of Babbitt's real life associates the mundane colors of cement and iron, which are dull and unromantic, with his listless, colorless marriage; on the other hand, Babbitt's dream world of the fairy child is described in "romantic" tones of scarlet and silver. Of this recurrent dream, the narrator goes on to say, "Where others saw but Georgie⁸ Babbitt, she discerned gallant youth...She cried that he was gay and valiant" (4). Babbitt's desire for the fairy girl stems, at least in part, from the way she perceives him differently than do the others in his life. The narrator tells us that Babbitt is situated in an unromantic marriage, and we find out that, over a disagreement about the guest towels, "For the first time in weeks he was sufficiently roused by his wife to look at her" (8). Their marital disenchantment is not one-sided, though, as we find out from the narrator's description of Myra's response to Babbitt's morning complaints: "his wife expressed the sympathy she

⁸ The use of "Georgie" here, rather than "George" seems to be a purposeful choice. Though not exclusively, Myra is the character who most frequently calls George "Georgie". As Babbitt's dream of the fairy child stands directly opposite his marriage in a number of ways, this detail is just one more example of difference between the two "relationships". Clare Virginia Eby argues that Myra's use of this nickname "infantilizes" Babbitt, which again, starkly contrasts the way Babbitt dreams of the fairy girl seeing him (44).

was too experienced to feel and much too experienced not to show” (14). In the most positive of terms, one might describe the Babbitt marriage as disinterested—Babbitt does not look at Myra, and Myra, though saying what she is supposed to say, is in reality devoid of those feelings. Thus, Babbitt’s dreams of the fairy child signify his chance at a human connection he perceives to be valuable, one where he is viewed the way he would like to be viewed, and which, rather than the drab marriage of his reality, is colorful and exciting.

Babbitt’s sense of isolation does not stop with Myra, but rather extends to the rest of the family. Babbitt attends breakfast, irritated with his children before he even gets downstairs, but tries to hide it until “Verona began to be conscientious and annoying, and abruptly there returned to Babbitt the doubts regarding life and families and business which had clawed at him when his dream-life and the fairy girl had fled” (16). The fairy girl is not only an antidote to the marital distress he feels because of Myra, but she stands contrary to the stresses of children and work, as well. The fairy girl, who as a figment of Babbitt’s imagination naturally sees him as he wishes to be seen, is the imaginary and unattainable solution to the loneliness Babbitt feels in his everyday life. At the office later that morning, Babbitt again thinks of this dream solution after the narrator divulges that though Babbitt “had peered uneasily at every graceful ankle” he had never been unfaithful to Myra, yet “he was restless again, discontented about nothing and everything, ashamed of his discontentment, and lonely for the fairy girl” (*Babbitt* 35).

Though the fairy girl abstractly encapsulates the kind of human emotion that Babbitt recognizes as missing from his life, he thinks of her longingly but does not attempt to find a real-life fairy girl—at least until after Paul shoots Zilla. Instead, Lewis

presents moments that Babbitt shares with his son Ted that reaffirm his societally-produced faith in family, causing him to temporarily feel like he has found what he has been missing. After Babbitt presents the possibility of purchasing a new car for the family, “The favor which Babbitt had won from his family by speaking of a new car evaporated as they realized that he didn’t intend to buy one this year” (68). Having lost the short-term favor he had garnered with his family, the negativity of the encounter leaves him feeling dejected, and he ponders a way to get away from them. But then, in conversation later that evening with Ted, Babbitt finds a connection between them that lifts his mood. Bonding over courses one can take by mail, “Babbitt was impressed, and he had a delightful parental feeling that they two, the men of the family, understood each other” (76). This encounter puts Babbitt in a better mood, and instead of forcing Ted to stay home and complete his homework, Babbitt lets him leave the house, saying, “‘Well, better hustle,’ and his smile was the rare shy radiance he kept for Paul Riesling,” the only other person he seems to be able to connect with (79). As Babbitt reflects, he thinks, “Ted’s all right. Whole family all right,”—a stark contrast to the irritability he felt towards them all from the time he woke up to his positive encounter with Ted. His mood even extends to Myra as he reenters the living room—“before he settled down he smoothed his wife’s hair, and she glanced up, happy and somewhat surprised” (82). This attention shown to Myra contrasts greatly with the glance he gave her this morning that had been his first in weeks. Lewis makes it clear that through this one, positive interaction with Ted, Babbitt tries to find redemption in his familial relationship.

The change in Babbitt’s regard for his family that Ted is able to foster even continues on for some time, as Ted refers to the two of them as “the Babbitt men”.

Hearing this comment of positive affect directed towards him, Babbitt is of course thrilled: “‘The Babbitt men!’ Babbitt liked the sound of it. He put his arm around the boy’s shoulder...and they laughed together, and sighed together” (177). But almost as quickly as Babbitt gets the impression that he is developing a more intimate relationship with his son, and by extension, the rest of his family, he becomes angry, feeling excluded by them. Ted is in the midst of planning a party he will throw at the house, and “Every breakfast was monopolized by conferences on the affair. No one listened to Babbitt’s bulletins about the February weather or to his throat-clearing comments on the headlines. He said furiously, ‘If I may be *permitted* to interrupt your engrossing private *conversation*—Juh hear what I *said*?’” to which Myra violently responds: “Oh, don’t be a spoiled baby! Ted and I have just as much right to talk as you have!” (206). Just as Lewis presents what seems to be Babbitt’s viable chance at connectedness with his family, he just as quickly repeals it with Babbitt’s unreasonable assumption that his family should live only to listen to his newsy, non-personal chatter⁹ at the breakfast table. In terms of the “closing kicker” device Love notes Lewis using, Babbitt’s recognition of and hopefulness about his positive interactions with Ted serve to inflate, while this sour breakfast moment serves as the moment that deflates all of the optimistic buildup. Though Babbitt seeks to make his life more fulfilling and interconnected, he is his own worst enemy in his efforts to better his connection to his family, as he is unwilling or unable to converse with them about their interests rather than his own.

It would seem that Babbitt’s inability to connect to his family on any terms other than his own speaks to his internal vacuity, which is also the cause of his readiness to

⁹ Conversation not unlike the sort *Twilight Sleep*’s Pauline prefers.

conform and champion consumerism. After coming down sick in February, which he “enjoyed,” because he was “petted and esteemed,” Babbitt began to dread even more the life he would soon return to once he became well again (211). “He beheld, and half admitted that he beheld, his way of life as incredibly mechanical. ...Mechanical golf and dinner-parties and bridge and conversation. Save with Paul Riesling, mechanical friendships—back-slapping and jocular” (212). Faced with familial letdown and the chance to stay at home sick, removed from the hustle and bustle of the toxic society surrounding him, Babbitt comes to recognize that the deeper human interaction he seeks cannot be fulfilled by the vain friendships he has with the other members of his clubs and social groups. What was once a vague, indistinct yearning for something “more,” is now identifiable to Babbitt as a lack of deep interpersonal connections of the kind he shares with Paul, and thought for a moment he might be developing with Ted. Though he recognizes in this moment that his friendships have been mechanical, a poignant term as mechanisms are inherently devoid of emotion, Babbitt spent most of the novel prior attempting to seek fulfillment in these relationships, leading him to this moment of reflection and dejection.

Before Babbitt realizes the emptiness in his jocular relationships, while still on his quest to find fulfilling human connection, he becomes aroused by the praise his male cohorts bestow upon him at the success of his newfound oratory career. Babbitt gives a successful speech about his profession as a real estate agent, and from there garners a few more speaking engagements that are written about in the paper, providing him with the kind of attention and repute he so craves. One of Babbitt’s friends, Vergil Gunch, whose friendship Babbitt would likely later characterize as mechanical, pays him a glowing

compliment on his success, to which Babbitt replies “feebly, but at this tribute from Gunch, himself a man of no mean oratorical fame, he expanded with delight and wondered how, before his vacation, he could have questioned the joys of being a solid citizen” (171). Here Babbitt is referring to the previously discussed comment he made to Paul Riesling over lunch about how he has lived according to society’s standards but is not sure that he finds himself fulfilled (55). Reading articles about his speeches in the papers and receiving compliments from the people he wishes to be accepted by is enough for Babbitt to denounce the restlessness that has lingered over him for a number of months at this point. Not yet realizing that these surface-level friendships will not provide the emotional sustenance he so virulently desires, Babbitt gets caught up in the warm feeling Gunch’s comment affords him, causing himself to question how he could have felt discontent in the first place—a moment of inflation, surely to be brought down by Lewis.

As quickly as Lewis presents the idea that Babbitt might be able to find fulfillment in the Zenith social scene, he takes the possibility away, a macro-example of the closing kicker. At the peak of his oratorical success, Babbitt has a college class reunion and is particularly eager to rub shoulders with a classmate who is now considered his social better, Charles McKelvey. Lewis, still inflating Babbitt, describes McKelvey as not only noticing Babbitt, but as asking Babbitt to sit next to him, complimenting his recent speeches. Mockingly, Lewis then contributes, “After that, Babbitt would have followed him through fire”—positive proof that Babbitt sees this interaction as being immensely important (175). Babbitt believes they talk casually and familiarly throughout dinner, though Lewis’ description of their conversation leads the audience to believe that

for McKelvey it was somewhat awkward. Babbitt advances a dinner invitation to which McKelvey responds “vaguely,” but when Babbitt sweetens the deal with an offer of special real estate deals that might interest him, McKelvey responds “much less vaguely” (175-6). The Babbitts’ finally get the McKelveys to come over for dinner, and it is nothing short of an awkward disaster, which quickly breaks down Babbitt’s rejuvenated outlook on life.

They receive no return dinner invitation, and George and Myra become increasingly frustrated and betrayed. They read in the society column of the paper that the McKelveys have been entertaining an English Lord, which sours Babbitt’s mood towards McKelvey. That Sir Gerald Doak is involved in Babbitt’s newly founded distaste for McKelvey is particularly satirical because, only a short while ago, while Babbitt was still attempting to cultivate a renewed friendship with McKelvey, McKelvey’s mention of Sir Gerald worked positively on Babbitt’s mood because of his “democratic love for titles” (174). Now, in his disenchantment, “he passed McKelvey’s limousine and saw Sir Gerald...Babbitt drove on slowly, oppressed by futility. He had a sudden, unexplained, and horrible conviction that the McKelveys were laughing at him¹⁰” (180). Though Babbitt found himself believing that chummy relationships with people like Charles McKelvey were the answer to his lonely dissatisfaction with life, in this moment of deflation, the long-awaited closing kicker, the possibility is quickly shown not to be an option for him.

¹⁰ Interestingly, the other time that the novel mentions Babbitt being laughed at is in a dream, “among unknown people who laughed at him” (93). Babbitt’s mind’s solution to this painful situation is the fairy girl—beacon of the kind of human interaction he craves. With her, “He was gallant and wise and well-beloved,” quite the difference from the cold aspect of the reality of his social condition.

These macro-examples of Lewis' inflation-deflation pattern contribute to the work he is doing in satirizing Babbitt. Babbitt is bereft of an internal sense of self, allowing socially acceptable beliefs to stand in for his own, and worshipping the consumerist goods advertised to him. Though he is self-aware enough to realize that he needs something more from life than what he is getting, his flaws that stem from his vacuity prevent him from finding any lasting relief from his isolation. As Babbitt looks to his subpar familial and social relationships for connections that mirror the ones he has with Paul and the fairy girl, Lewis inflates and then deflates these prospects. The actions Babbitt takes to improve his life's condition are ultimately useless, even after his bolder attempts after Zilla's shooting, as the novel ends with Babbitt's return to conformity. As such, the "ultimate closing kicker," Love says, "is Babbitt's fate itself, an ironic recognition that all his yearnings and aspirations and attempts to escape have gone for naught. A conclusion in which nothing is concluded" (50). Though Love is spot on about the conclusion of Babbitt's life, the novel's true end, an exchange between Babbitt and Ted, is actually quite more hopeful—with no closing kicker. Ted elopes with his girlfriend, Eunice Littlefield, much to the family's shock, and the private father-son conversation that follows expresses much about Babbitt's sentiments towards life. Babbitt, who himself has admittedly felt stifled by society's expectations, takes Ted aside reasonably and asks of his plans for the future. Though Ted turns down Babbitt's suggestion that he still go to college, Babbitt still comes back saying,

...practically, I've never done a single thing I've wanted in my whole life! ...But I do get a kind of sneaking pleasure out of the fact that you knew what you wanted to do and did it. Well, those folks in there will try to bully you, and tame

you down. Tell ‘em to go to the devil! I’ll back you. Take your factory job, if you want to. Don’t be scared of the family. No, nor all of Zenith. Nor of yourself, the way I’ve been. Go ahead, old man! The world is yours! (*Babbitt* 356).

Love zeroes in on the fact that though Babbitt tried to break free from society’s constraints, his story ends with his continued subjugation. But though Babbitt’s life at the novel’s end represents another of Lewis’ deflations, there is an air of hopefulness that we cannot overlook. As soon as Babbitt is done giving this conciliatory speech to Ted, “Arms about each other’s shoulders, the Babbitt men marched into the living-room and faced the swooping family” (356). Though Babbitt has opted out of actively shaping his own life, he counsels Ted to do what he has failed to do and is willing to actively help him do this in his life, facing the family with him as a united front. Babbitt’s personal quest for “more” in life may go unfulfilled, but he does make an important step in terms of self-awareness, standing far from where he started, which allows him to give sound, non socially-accepted advice to Ted, in the hopes that Ted’s life will be different than Babbitt’s has been. Grebstein, sharing the sentiment that *Babbitt*’s ending is not all negative argues that, “If it is too late for him to find fulfillment, at least he may achieve realization” (83). Thus, though Babbitt has been the primary target of Lewis’ satire throughout the entirety of the novel, even he is not totally beyond redemption. This ending seems to betray a hope that society is not beyond saving.

Twilight Sleep satirizes a culture whose aim is the avoidance of pain, which is reflected in the novel’s title, a reference to a popular contemporary birthing anesthetic,

considered at the time to be revolutionary. As Haytock describes it, “The title of the novel refers to the drug-induced state in which women avoid the pain of childbirth, but the term carries over to the mechanisms through which all characters, women and men, avoid the harsh realities of life” (220). Twilight sleep is induced by a combination of two drugs, morphine and scopolamine, which produces an effect described in *Deliver Me from Pain: Anesthesia and Birth in America* as a “semi-conscious state induced by repeated injections of small doses of scopolamine and morphine [erasing] the memories of laboring women. Although they still felt pain, they could not recall their discomfort later” (Wolf 48). As the specifics of the drug were shrouded in mystery, the characters of *Twilight Sleep*, like their real-life counterparts, did not know that the drug eliminated the *memory* of pain rather than the pain itself. Thus, for a society that seeks never to be bothered by pain, an anesthetic giving the impression that labor could now be painless suits them perfectly. Pauline Wyant, the novel’s protagonist and the character treated most satirically by Wharton, is all too happy to set up a twilight sleep birthing experience for her daughter-in-law, Lita¹¹. Pauline reflects on Lita’s experience: “Of course there ought to be no Pain...nothing but Beauty...It ought to be one the loveliest, most poetic things in the world to have a baby” (*Twilight Sleep* 18). Pauline’s appraisal of the way the birthing process “ought to be” stands in stark contrast to the mentally and physically

¹¹ In *Deliver Me from Pain: Anesthesia and Birth in America*, Jacqueline H. Wolf details the way in which women who read of twilight sleep in magazines were central to bringing about the anesthetic’s usage in America. She says, “The calls to action reflected the enormous influence of women’s activism in this period, for causes as varied as suffrage, lowered infant and maternal mortality, abolition of child labor, prohibition, and access to contraception” (55). Though *Twilight Sleep* does not identify Pauline—an ironically presented active and vocal member of many progressive activist groups such as those Wolf describes—as a member of this movement, it does cite her as knowing “the most perfect ‘Twilight Sleep’ establishment in the country” (*Twilight Sleep* 18).

taxing process of natural birth, making her words sound idealistic and whimsical. The narrator says Pauline made this declaration “in that bright efficient voice which made loveliness and poetry sound like the attributes of an advanced industrialism, and babies something to be turned out in series like Fords” (18). In a single sentence Wharton accomplishes a number of things: she makes it clear that she is satirizing Pauline and her conviction with the humorous comparison of babies to automobiles, and she draws attention to the way in which industrialism, and the accompanying intense focus on modernization and progress, have come to be more important than the more simple, human elements of society. Twilight sleep is the actual treatment Pauline prescribes for Lita’s labor, so that “nothing should hurt her,” but it is the metaphorical approach she takes to handling her own life, so that she too may not be hurt (18).

Reading Wharton’s representation of Pauline, it is clear that Wharton’s moralistic belief—that American society’s attempts at avoiding suffering were dangerous—was on her mind as she wrote *Twilight Sleep*. Descriptions of Pauline’s emotional evasiveness, in combination with satirical passages Wharton provides on Pauline’s inner reflections, represent the way in which Wharton’s apprehensions about American society are made manifest. According to Benstock, Wharton’s concern over society’s emotional vacuity was spurred on by an unsatisfying trip to Italy where “she was pulled into an artificial world of meaningless diversions. This world was the backdrop of her new novel,” *Twilight Sleep* (397). Pauline is an egregious offender of reliance on meaningless diversions. Keeping a comically overbooked schedule, Pauline at one point finds herself “painfully oppressed by an hour of unexpected leisure,” which causes her to become extremely nervous about what she will do to occupy that unplanned time, which

“stretched away into infinity like the endless road in a nightmare” (*Twilight Sleep* 116, 117). The satire here is clear—Wharton’s equation of an hour of leisure to a dark, nightmarish infinity mocks Pauline, a character so internally vacant that she is unable to even enjoy, or at least not be bothered by, an unplanned hour. Haytock attributes Pauline’s joyfully forced busyness to a lack of a strong sense of self. She says, “In *Twilight Sleep*, [the] sense of self is conspicuously absent. Pauline’s mind, for example, always looks outward, toward activities and events and problems¹²” (222). Passages that detail Pauline’s internal reflections give the reader the impression that she has little emotional interiority and is guilty of a number of the evasion tactics that were of concern to Wharton at the time she wrote this novel.

Pauline’s lack of emotional interiority affects not only the way she creates her daily schedules, but the way she forms her beliefs and opinions, as well. She is particularly vulnerable to being swayed by the opinions of others, and thus she most often gathers her opinions and beliefs from leaders of fad religions and other members of her social activist groups. Thanks to the support of her other misguided but well-meaning activist counterparts, Pauline has come to believe that by denying the existence of negativities, one can stop those negative things from happening. While this belief sounds ridiculous in theory, Wharton makes it infinitely more ridiculous in practice by presenting it alongside the example that earthquakes may be prevented if their existence is denied. “Mrs. Manford had convoked the bright elderly women to deal with a seismic disaster at the other end of the world, the repetition of which these ladies somehow felt

¹² Though Haytock’s connection between the way Pauline looks outward for direction and her seeming lack of inner self is useful, it is important to make the distinction between the silly “problems” Pauline is eager to deal with versus the kinds of problems that she is attempting to avoid with these outward-facing, vacuous behaviors.

could be avoided if they sent out a commission immediately to teach the Bolivians to do something they didn't want to do—not to *believe* in earthquakes, for instance” (*Twilight Sleep* 12). In one fell swoop, Wharton satirizes both activist causes in general, with the suggestion that the activists' benefactors do not always desire their help, and more specifically, the absurd counterintuitive approach that these activists take to tackling this problem. Wharton, in an entertaining example, points out the humorousness of Pauline's logic-defying socially sanctioned beliefs.

As bizarre as the idea is that one can prevent an act of God simply by thinking a certain way, Pauline, lacking her own opinions, finds her naïve, unrealistic belief confirmed in the teachings of a healer she comes to follow, the Scientific Initiate, and in her own personal practice. Towards the end of the novel, Pauline is able to employ the same logic she recommends in regards to the prevention of earthquakes in her own personal life. Pauline's first husband, Arthur, comes to her country home, Cedarledge, to voice his concern that his son Jim's wife, Lita, who is vacationing with the Manfords, may be involved with another man. Instead of listening to, or even acknowledging, Arthur's suspicion, Pauline brushes him off and reassures him that everything is as it should be. Caught up in the busy shuffle of the household, Arthur leaves that evening, unable to broach the subject with Pauline again. Pauline, feeling victorious, takes Arthur's departure back to the city as confirmation that denying unpleasanties eradicates them. She reflects,

The encounter had fortified her confidence in her own methods and given her a new proof of her power to surmount obstacles by smiling them away. ...Dignity! Hers consisted, more than ever, in believing the best of every one, in persuading

herself and others that to impute evil was to create it, and to disbelieve it was to prevent its coming into being. Those were the Scientific Initiate's very words:

'We manufacture sorrow as we do all other toxins.' How grateful she was to him for that formula! And how light and happy it made her feel to know that she had borne it in mind, and proved its truth, at so crucial a moment! (295)

Just as Pauline heartily believes that the Bolivians may prevent another earthquake by not believing that there can be another, she also believes that by denying Arthur's concerns she has made them go away. Pauline, whose inner state leaves her vulnerable to adopting the beliefs of others, is thrilled to receive confirmation both that the Scientific Initiate shares her ideology and that she has been able to successfully demonstrate the tenet.

But though Wharton allows Pauline to have this small victory and wax sentimental about it, she quickly cuts the protagonist down. Quite the contrary to Pauline's belief that Arthur's anxiety went away because she denied it, Arthur comes back to Cedarledge that night, this time wreaking much more havoc than just trying to talk to Pauline about something negative. Upon his return, he breaks into the house and, erroneously believing that he is shooting Lita's lover, accidentally shoots Nona. Not only did Pauline's tactic of denial fail, but it caused the negativity she tried to avoid to come back exponentially. This moment perfectly encapsulates what Benstock says motivated Wharton to write about the vacuity of 1920s New Yorkers—she knew that society would not be able to continue on its path of emotional evasion without heavy repercussions. Pauline makes it her top priority to be able to avoid letting any kind of negativity enter into her life, and now she has paid a high price for that behavior. Instead of dignifying through conversation Arthur's apprehensions about Lita's affair, which happened to be

correct, Pauline has left him no other choice than to take action to get her attention. Though she was immensely proud of herself for being able to “smile” Arthur’s concerns away, she was not able to rid him, or her household, of those concerns. The elated victory that Wharton allows Pauline when Arthur leaves Cedarledge is quickly and violently undercut, demonstrating Wharton’s moralistic message on the inability to evade emotion without repercussion.

Pauline’s lack of a developed inner self not only leaves her vulnerable to being swept up by meaningless activist causes and counterintuitive beliefs, but it stands directly in the way of her ability to form meaningful relationships with those around her, particularly her current husband, Dexter. Though Pauline’s life has been a sustained effort to avoid pain, her life still ostensibly revolves around her family, though they necessarily trouble this all-consuming mission, oftentimes presenting her with challenges that threaten to allow suffering into her life, such as the concerns Arthur voices about Lita’s affair. In creating her protagonist, Wharton masterfully represents Pauline’s duality: her interests, close relationships with family and the avoidance of pain, are pitted against one another. Though she seems to genuinely care about her family, her averseness to pain and suffering, and the consequential actions she takes to avoid these negative emotions, stand directly in the way of her ability to create meaningful interpersonal relationships. Unable to connect on a deeper emotional level, Pauline replaces meaningful conversation with “the tireless discussion of facts,” thus alienating her loved ones, particularly Dexter (169). Pauline’s inability to talk about non-factual matters is a symptom of the larger personality flaw Wharton presents in *Twilight Sleep*

about Pauline's outward-facing mind, which allows her to gather and repackage the opinions of others without having to contribute anything unique of her own interiority.

In an effort to understand the difficulties Pauline and Dexter have with communication and understanding one another, Haytock, leaning on Arnold Weinstein's argument that a relationship "entails an opening, an extension of the individual," finds Pauline's emotional vacancy as the source of their problems (Weinstein 25). She says:

The Manfords show the difficulty of maintaining a marriage when individuals are unwilling and unable to open up. Weinstein's definition of a relationship as "an extension of the individual" requires that a character have an inner sense of self, resources that allow someone to reach out to another person. In *Twilight Sleep*, this sense of self is conspicuously absent. Pauline's mind, for example, always looks outward, toward activities, and events, and problems (Haytock 222).

Pauline's lack of an inner self precludes her from being able to successfully intertwine her life with Dexter's. As Haytock notes, because Pauline is a flawed character, she must constantly look outside herself for opinions and answers, hence the reason that she is only comfortable talking to Dexter about facts. Pauline is able to absorb from around her facts and figures, but more personal conversations could require her to speak extemporaneously and cause her to have to look inside herself for an opinion, which she is not comfortable doing. As such, Pauline, whose inner self is undefined and empty, is in no position to extend her shaky borders to include another person. Her internal realm is so undefined that she relies on conversations of facts with Dexter because what she lacks in real, internalized beliefs she believes she can make up for in external-facing facts.

Though Pauline expects to avoid the ramifications of her emotional lack by conversing about hard-defined facts (another ineffective solution to the problem of avoiding an encounter with anything painful), Dexter requires a higher level of emotional connection in their marriage. An early scene of the novel details a fruitless exchange between the couple and then discloses Dexter's thoughts about his wife, which convey his growing disenchantment with their relationship. As Pauline attempts to persuade Dexter not to pursue legal action against the Mahatma, her current favorite spiritual healer, he grows frustrated, thinking, "Under his admiration for her brains, and his esteem for her character, he had felt, of late, a stealing boredom. ... He began to detect something obtuse in that unfaltering competence" (*Twilight Sleep* 60). The "unfaltering competence" to which Dexter refers is the way in which Pauline, comfortable and resolute in such conversations, talks to her husband, mauling over facts and figures rather than broaching familiar, familial topics. Though Pauline feels confident in her ability to speak in this manner, Dexter's take on her habit introduces a differing opinion, suggesting that though Pauline has command of a number of facts she does not have the interiority to back them up or make evaluations based on her own beliefs. His comment also serves to alert the audience early on to the fact that all is not well in the Manfords' marriage. Pauline eventually senses and conveys that something is off between them, but either too dense to determine the cause, or too purposefully blind to their marital woes, as would befit someone who intentionally avoids negativity, Dexter's words necessarily stand in for the information Pauline is unable or unwilling to give to the audience.

Pauline, finally realizing that there is something off in her relationship with Dexter but unable to connect with him on a level they both find suitable, becomes almost

giddy at her (erroneous) realization that all the improvements she is making to their country home will give her the chance to reconnect with him. “Pauline’s passionate interest in plumbing and electric wiring was suffused with a romantic glow at the thought that they might lure her husband back to domestic intimacy” (154). Juxtaposing the ideas of domestic intimacy with plumbing and wiring, Wharton is able to mockingly demonstrate Pauline’s atypical attempts at creating familiarity and reconciling the bonds of a distant marriage. Not realizing that Dexter does not appreciate her makeshift form of intimacy, Haytock contends that, “Pauline’s failure to read her husband indicates a modernist sense of isolation¹³—an inability to understand or know another individual, rooted in the inability to know one’s self” (219). Throughout the course of the novel, it becomes clear that Pauline does not know herself. When faced with an unplanned moment, we observe Pauline’s inability to take a quiet moment for self-reflection. For example, though Pauline “had skipped her ‘Silent Meditation’ [on the] morning” of the day she found herself with a spare hour, she contemplated using the found-time for meditation, but decided “an hour is too long for meditation” (*Twilight Sleep* 116). According to that day’s schedule, provided for us at the outset of the first chapter, Pauline had only allotted 15 minutes for meditation, which seems hardly enough time to be able to spend reflecting on one’s self (9). Pauline’s discomfort at the idea of spending more than the already-skimpy 15 minutes for meditation humorously highlights her pattern of never allowing herself to truly self-reflect. Thus, as Pauline, perpetually looking outward

¹³ As the novel includes narration of several characters, the reader is privy not only to their individual points of view, but to the way in which the characters continually misunderstand one another. Wharton’s inclusion of these modernist techniques makes painfully clear a disconnect between each other characters, but particularly between Pauline and Dexter.

for guidance, has never taken the time to try to understand herself, it follows that she is unable to understand the level on which Dexter wishes to communicate with her. The audience, however, privy to Dexter's growing distaste for these factual conversations, is able to recognize that Pauline's excitement is for naught—she and Dexter have conflicting, irreconcilable ideas about how a close marriage should be maintained.

Almost immediately after Pauline thrills at the chance to reengage her husband's interest over Cedarledge upgrades, she is again presented with a situation that she thinks signals positive change in her marriage. On the night that she and Dexter are engaged to dine with the Rivingtons, a family who remain just outside the Manfords' social sphere because they view divorce as a social disadvantage, Dexter asks her to cancel their engagement so that he may be alone with her. The dinner means a great deal to Pauline as she cares deeply about improving her social standing, but after she recovers from this shocking letdown she is able to rethink the situation.

To Pauline the fact that Manford wanted to be alone with her made even such renunciations easy. How many years had passed since he had expressed such a wish? ... If only a woman could guess what inclined a man's heart to her, what withdrew it! Pauline, if she had had the standardizing of life, would have begun with human hearts, and had them turned out in series, all alike, rather than let them come into being haphazard, cranky amateurish things that you couldn't count on, or start up again if anything went wrong... (*Twilight Sleep* 168).

In the same way that Wharton satirizes Pauline at the novel's outset, comparing her birthing ideology to the assembly-line production of Fords, she again draws a humorous connection between Pauline's love for standardization and the heart, something that

should be inherently incapable of being standardized. The heart is arguably the most individual element of the human race, but Pauline, devoid of a sense of self, and the real-life people she represents are content to forgo that individuality for the steadfast comfort of conformity. This passage, in addition to bitingly satirizing the dangerous wish for human conformity, provides insight into *why* Pauline wishes for standardization. Her reflection betrays an uncommon level of insecurity for a woman normally so obsessed with maintaining her optimistic outlook at all costs, demonstrating more plainly than at other moments in the novel the cause and effect relationship of Pauline's obsession with the avoidance of pain. Afraid of the unpredictability of another's wishes and mood, the ebb and flow of feelings that may unexpectedly hurt her, Pauline would like to be able to put the apex of human individuality, the heart, within the realm of her control as she can home improvements and other external, materialistic issues. Even in this moment of pleasant misunderstanding, when Pauline is feeling positive about the direction Dexter's heart is leaning, Wharton pointedly draws attention to the way in which standardization appeals to Pauline.

On the heels of her excitement about Dexter's presumably renewed interest in her, Pauline is let down when she gets the sense during their tête-à-tête that his feelings towards her have not actually changed. Wharton constructs this moment of letdown similarly to the letdown of Arthur's violent return to Cedarledge. Wharton presents Pauline as happy with herself and her situation, in this case believing Dexter's feelings towards her have improved, and then goes on to revoke those moments of satisfaction¹⁴.

¹⁴ This moment, which negates the positivity Pauline was feeling, is akin to the happiness she felt when Arthur left Cedarledge, which was then negated by his drastic actions upon his return to the house. These situations are built up and then undercut, mirroring a

But though Manford had wished to be with her he had apparently no desire to listen to her. ... If her husband had wanted facts—a good confidential talk about the new burglar alarm, or a clear and careful analysis of the engine-house bills, or the heating system for the swimming pool—she could have found just the confidential and tender accent for such topics. Intimacy, to her, meant the tireless discussion of facts, not necessarily of the domestic order, but definite and palpable facts. ... In confidential moments she preferred the homelier themes, and would have enjoyed best of all being tender and gay about the coal cellar, or reticent and brave about the leak in the boiler; but she was ready to deal with anything as long as it was a fact, something with substance and outline, as to which one could have an opinion and a line of conduct. What paralyzed her was the sense that, apart from his profession, her husband didn't care for facts, and that nothing was less likely to rouse his interest than burglar-alarm wiring, or the last new thing in electric ranges (169).

It is clear that Wharton is once again mocking Pauline in this passage through her choice of language. That Pauline, above all, would like to speak *tenderly* and *gaily* about the coal cellar to her husband, is humorous, but what's more, sad, as it betrays her serious lack of emotional depth. One would expect that married individuals would share an intimacy that would afford them the comfort of talking to each other about topics much more personal than facts. Pauline, however, in an unusual moment of self-recognition, realizes that she has no idea how to accomplish that level of familiarity if she is unable to talk strictly about certainties and data, because without them she feels she has no opinion

technique that will presently be examined in regards to Lewis' writing of *Babbitt*, an inflation-deflation pattern that contributes to the satire he is creating.

or prescribed course of action. Pauline's method of creating intimacy is laughable to the reader, who is able to see beyond her perspective, and it is clear that these factual conversations only put her at enough ease to make her tone *seem* intimate, all the while creating a conversation that might as well be had with a stranger.

In Pauline, Wharton has created an emotionally bankrupt character, whose preoccupation with avoiding pain forecloses her from creating meaningful relationships or dealing effectively with the problems of her loved ones. At one point in the novel, Nona supposes that "only some great shock would restore...[the] natural strength" of Pauline's "moral muscles," but even after the terribly shocking shooting at Cedarledge, Pauline works her hardest to deny the entrance of any pain into her life (*Twilight Sleep* 261). Instead of facing the reality that precipitated the Cedarledge shooting—Arthur's concern over Lita's affair with Pauline's husband, Dexter—Pauline fixates on Nona's broken arm in the aftermath, which Nona believes "saved her"—or at least saved her from having to let go of her charade that nothing bad happens to her (307). True to form, Pauline is willing to face the more minor of the problems associated with the shooting rather than confront the reality that her husband was having an affair with her daughter-in-law. Nona's prediction that Pauline would learn to once again exercise her moral muscles after a great shock proves to be incorrect, as her life so completely returns to normal after the shooting. Nona contemplates of Pauline:

Had that dreadful night at Cedarledge ever been a reality to her? If it had, Nona was sure, it had already faded into the realms of fable, since its one visible result had been her daughter's injury, and that was on the way to healing. Everything else connected with it had happened out of sight and under ground, and for that

reason was now as if it had never existed for Pauline, who was more than ever resolutely two-dimensional (307).

Thus, after Pauline is tested by Nona's shooting, an event that should have caused her to question her ability to continue on as she always had and could have allowed her to prove that she was ready to reclaim the interiority she had earlier so happily shunned, the novel ends on this note of unfortunate stagnancy. In a novel so focused on satirizing and condemning its main character, the fact that she finds no redemption in the end is no surprise, and betrays Wharton's hopelessness about Americans' fates.

To say that *Twilight Sleep* and *Babbitt* have a lot in common is an understatement. Both novels satirize 1920s Americans who are bereft of internalized values and beliefs, leaving them vulnerable to popular ideology and consumerism, which come to replace close interpersonal relationships. Though there are differences in style, there are still parallels between the devices that both authors use to satirize. Though not named outright, the inflation-deflation pattern that Love examines in *Babbitt* occurs in *Twilight Sleep* as well. In the *Twilight Sleep*-centric subsection, I noted occasions on which Pauline reflects happily about something (her getting Arthur to leave Cedarledge by "smiling" him away; her excitement that Dexter's interest in her is renewed) and is then undercut by the circumstances Wharton manufactures (Arthur comes back and mistakenly shoots Nona; Pauline and Dexter have a meeting which resolutely dispels her happy suspicions). Though Wharton's inflation may take place over a few scenes, she employs the device Love terms the "closing kicker," which works to negate the happy potentialities Pauline assumes are occurring in her life.

As they are both deeply critical of the society they portray, it is safe to categorize *Babbitt* and *Twilight Sleep* as satires. Of *Babbitt*'s genre, Love says,

Babbitt presents itself as social realism, but on closer examination it is seen to violate the principal tenet of realism, that the author be backgrounded, and, insofar as is possible, seem to disappear. The fabric of social reality is certainly essential in a work in which the main character is determined by the social code, but the author is so clearly and creatively on the attack against the values of the system that we must consider the work as a satire. But satire requires a militant moral tone and a willingness to deal only with surfaces, lest by looking beneath the surface of the satiric target, the reader's scorn is softened by an infusion of sympathy. Yet Lewis the satirist *does* dive down beneath Babbitt's exterior conformity and complacency to reveal a romantic yearner who desires more than he understands. And in that yearning, we perceive a kind of vestigial worth, a solidity and a decency in Babbitt's basic nature that silences our derisive laughter (89-90).

As Love contends, *Babbitt* must be categorized as a satire because of the heavy-hand Lewis takes to Zenith's values, but the novel does not fit comfortably in this genre alone because, just as it violates tenets of realism, it too violates the tenets of satire. Resulting from Lewis' positive regard for America, his portrayal of Babbitt is not totally removed, as would befit a satirist.

Love's description of *Babbitt*'s genre raises an interesting perspective from which to examine *Twilight Sleep*'s genre. The elements of *Babbitt* that Love cites as problematizing its assignation to a single genre are absent from *Twilight Sleep*. Though

Lewis provides Babbitt with greater depth, Wharton notably neglects to do so. In a contemporary review, Dorothy Foster Gilman critiques Wharton for introducing characters that she does not describe beyond their surfaces. “She conveys to [readers] a conventionalized picture of wealth, animation and boredom. ... These men and women tumbling over one another in a succession of trivial emotional entanglements are never truly human beings. They are merely puppets who are forced into a story” (Gilman 5). The shallowness that Gilman critiques Wharton for is, according to Love’s understanding of satire, the point on which *Twilight Sleep* succeeds as a satire. Had Wharton gone into deeper characterizations in her novel, she might have sacrificed the distance from her characters that allowed her to satirize them, an objective she obtained by neglecting to provide endearing information. Coming after *Babbitt*, *Twilight Sleep* can be seen not only as Wharton’s take on Lewis’ novel, but also as her attempt to warn against the dangers of an emotionally bereft society in a more harsh and dramatic way. Though Wharton mimics Lewis in a number of ways, she diverges from his work by adhering more strictly to satire, allowing her to write more scathingly on the topic, which befit her attitude towards American society.

Scholars are quick to regard *Twilight Sleep* as light fare because of their perception of the novel’s characters as lacking depth and the way in which the plot seems to fall flat, as Pauline remains unchanged at the close of the novel. If we were to view these elements of the novel’s form as working productively towards the novel’s function, however, we might be able to determine that these characteristics are not flaws but are

actually strengths¹⁵. For Wharton to have written about emotionally vacuous characters with great depth and characterization of her subjects would have been counterproductive to her project of demonstrating society's quest to avoid feeling deeply any emotion. Far from being a second-class Wharton novel written solely for money, an example of Wharton's sacrifice of her artistic integrity, the functionality of the novel's narrative style is actually quite artistically and purposefully crafted. Through the novel's form Wharton communicates her satirization of society in a manner consistent with the novel's subject. Thus, as Wharton is writing about a changed, post-World War I society the novel's form and style necessarily differ from that of her earlier works and do not easily lend themselves to comparison on this basis.

Examining *Twilight Sleep* alongside *Babbitt* provides us with a different lens through which to view this neglected work. Though there are certainly differences between these novels, the similarities that they share are plentiful and allow us to reconsider *Twilight Sleep*'s origins. Critics and scholars are quick to judge *Twilight Sleep* against Wharton's oeuvre, where it may seem out of place, but when viewed in conjunction with *Babbitt*, it is easier to discern Wharton's intentionality and understand the authorial choices she made in representing her characters.

Though both *Babbitt* and *Twilight Sleep* received mixed reviews at the time of their respective publications, *Babbitt* has enjoyed a long-enduring positive legacy—one that *Twilight Sleep* should share. Lewis and Wharton, in their novels, are responding to the same conformist, materialistic American society, criticizing those who are bereft of

¹⁵ In this manner, Haytock views Wharton's character depictions as one of the novel's strengths. "Characters seem to lack depth, partly because of their problems with language. ... Wharton's novel indicates that words have a hollowness to them that prevents characters from communicating" (Haytock 221).

internalized beliefs and are swayed by popular opinion and material culture. Despite the undeniable similarities of the novels, however, their legacies are markedly different. *Twilight Sleep* is almost always compared to Wharton's more acclaimed novels and is pushed to the background and disparaged. If we were to discontinue this method of evaluation, however, and begin reading *Twilight Sleep* as a discrete work, we might allow it to regain some of the acclaim and interest it provoked in 1927. Though *Twilight Sleep* marked a departure in subject matter and style from Wharton's earlier works, it is no less significant a work than those novels. If scholars were to begin reevaluating *Twilight Sleep* as a satire in the vein of Lewis' *Babbitt*, noting that the novel is in fact a successful and shrewd satire of shallow 1920s New York society, it might change not only this novel's critical legacy but might incite a reevaluation of the latter portion of Wharton's career, which is sometimes seen as marking a slippage in authorial quality. In writing *Twilight Sleep* Wharton was not attempting to merely reinvent the subject and style of her previous works. Rather, *Twilight Sleep* is a product of the way *Babbitt* inspired Wharton and reflects her attempt at following advice she gave to Sinclair Lewis—"to go on doing Babbitts" ("Letter to Sinclair" 456).

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CURRICULUM VITA

SARAH JEANNE SCHAITKIN

GRADUATE STUDY

Wake Forest University
Winston-Salem, NC
Master of Arts, December 2013
Thesis title: "To go on Doing Babbitts": Recontextualizing *Twilight Sleep*
as Lewisian Satire
Advisor: Barry Maine, Ph.D.

UNDERGRADUATE STUDY

Washington & Jefferson College
Washington, PA
Bachelor of Arts, May 2012
Majors: English and Psychology

SCHOLASTIC AND PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Intern
Wake Forest University Press, Winston-Salem, NC
2013

Writing Tutor
Wake Forest University Writing Center, Winston-Salem, NC
2012-2013

Participant
Pacific Ancient Modern Language Association Conference
San Diego, CA
November, 2013

HONORS AND AWARDS

Summer Research Grant
Wake Forest University, 2013

James W. Gargano Memorial Award
Washington & Jefferson College, 2012