

## Women's Labor and Education in Wharton's *Summer*

Asma Alameroo

Bisha University, Saudi Arabia

As an Arabic woman, I can relay a saying that Arabs have; it goes along the lines of “money is a woman’s best and most honest friend.” I grew up with these words in my head; however, I did not completely realize their purpose and wisdom until I got married. Additionally, my parents and uncles have always advised me to study hard in order to get a good, gentle job (that is, not physically strenuous) such as my current job, lecturer at King Khaled University. They want me to earn money and then establish a business. Furthermore, I keep studying because I love my school and want to learn more, not to do what they want me to do. After getting married, I further realized the significance of having money. They want me to be an independent woman because Islam allows men to marry four women (in my particular case, my husband can marry three women), but requires a husband to be just with all of his wives. They want me to be ready in case anything that might make life more challenging for me happens in the future.

In re-reading *Summer*, I have noticed that Edith Wharton wants women to be independent, rather than dependent. She tries to direct women’s focus to the importance of work. Moreover, she focuses on “how the life of the individual is shaped...” (Vasshaug 1). Her work in *Summer* shows us that she comes from a line of feminist thinking that, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was trying to note that women’s destinies should be shaped by more than who one chooses as a marriage partner. As Barry notes:

Feminists pointed out, for example, that in nineteenth-century fiction very few women work for a living, unless they are driven to it by dire necessity. Instead, the focus of interest is on the heroine’s choice of marriage partner, which will decide her ultimate social position and exclusively determine her happiness and fulfilment in life, or her lack of these. (117)

The novel *Summer* was published in 1917. The events start with Charity stands on “the doorstep” of Royall’s house ; the fact that Mr. Royall gives her this name (signifying pity or support for those in need) reminds her where she came from (an environment of abject poverty, having come from the Mountain of North Dormer) (Wharton 1). Furthermore, at the end of the novel Charity is pushed to marry Mr. Royall for the need of money.

Wharton begins *Summer* by telling her readers the roots of “A girl came out of lawyer Royall’s house....” (Wharton 1). This girl comes from the mountains of North Dormer. This small town is “situated in a ‘lonely valley’” and is “left apart by railway, trolley, telegraph, and all forces that link life to life in modern communities” (Morante 2). Moreover, Charity herself

realizes her own lowly state, “[p]oor and ignorant as she was, and knew herself to be—humblest of the humble even in North Dormer....” (Wharton 8). Although Charity knows her truth, the young architect Mr. Lucius Harney “made her feel for the first time what might be the sweetness of dependence....” (Wharton 8). Her lack of knowledge leads her to think that Harney knows everything and intelligent, and then leads her to marry Mr. Royall to save her reputation.

In the beginning, Charity talks to Miss Hatchard and she wants to be “appointed librarian....” (Wharton 11). The question surprises Miss Hatchard, giving the reader a sign that, in fact, few women held jobs during this time period. The conversation between the old lady, Miss Hatchard, and the young lady, Charity, shows us how women of that time were dependent on circumstance:

“Why, I don’t know, my dear. Aren’t you rather too young?” she hesitated.

“I want to earn some money,” Charity merely answered.

“Doesn’t Mr. Royall give you all you require? No one is rich in North Dormer.”

“I want to earn money enough to get away.”

“To get away?” Miss Hatchard’s puzzled wrinkles deepened, and there was a distressful pause. “You want to leave Mr. Royall?” (Wharton 11)

This passage summarizes the situation of women. First, Miss Hatchard asserts that Charity is “too young.” She then protests that Mr. Royall is the provider of money for Charity; it is expressed here that women were dependents who were expected to take money from the men in their family. However, Charity feels herself, in spite of her lack of money, to have a complete if undefined power within the household she shares with Royall: “in her narrow world she had always ruled” (Wharton 8). The end result of this is that Charity is simultaneously completely dependent on Royall while also having to take control of many situations and be independent in spirit, if not in reality. In opposition to this, Charity believes that having enough money will give her the power to free herself and feel of “the sweetness of dependence....” (Wharton 8).

In the article, “The Unmastered Streak: Feminist Themes in Wharton’s ‘Summer’,” John W. Crowley states that Charity “sees that to free herself from Royall’s power, she must earn enough money to leave town; but she does not see that to depend on Royall’s help is to abet him in oppressing her....” (Crowley 88). This is absolutely true because when Charity asks about a potential job, Miss Hatchard refuses her and tells her that Mr. Royall is the one who can offer her all she needs. However, Charity needs his help in order to hold a job and have her own money; she needs his help and power in order to have power herself. Charity is unable to have power or freedom—even freedom from Mr. Royall’s control—unless he gives it to her.

Moreover, Charity believes that money will free her and give her the power to do whatever she wants to do. This is clear when she addresses her desire directly to Mr. Royall. He asks her about her reasons for desiring to work and earn money. She answers “To get away when

I want to....” She added that she wants to go “Anywhere where I can earn my living. I’ll try here first, and if I can’t do it here I’ll go somewhere else....” (Wharton 12).

Another reason for Charity to work is that Mr. Royall is a widower and she would like a woman to be with her at Mr. Royall’s house. She feels lonely after the death of Mrs. Royall and she is scared that Mr. Royall will try to rape her again. This can also be interpreted through the lens of Charity’s insistence on having money; Charity believes that money will help her have the power that will rid her of her loneliness and Mr. Royall’s control and mercy for the need of money. Money could also help her have a different life than the one she has. Her life will improve the most if she works.

While Charity believes that money means power, Mr. Royall believes that marriage will help him consolidate his own power in their arrangement. His request that Charity marry him is rooted in this power belief. He proposes marriage when she asks him to talk to Miss Hatchard to make her work in the library. His answer, at this juncture of the book, surprises the reader because at this point the reader expects Mr. Royall to behave like a father, or at least as a smart man whose job is to defend people; as a lawyer, he is supposed to protect people’s rights. It is Charity’s right to work and have her own business. Moreover, his answer was that “I want you to marry me....” He tries to seduce her by saying: “I’ll do whatever you say....” if she accepts his proposal (Wharton 12-13).

As the events of *Summer* unfold, Charity becomes a librarian at the library that is owned by the family of Miss Hatchard. In the library, she meets Lucius Harney; he is an architect who falls in love with Charity. Harney is an educated young man, in contrast to Charity’s lack of education. The distance in education and class between them is clear early on. She is poor, and he is rich. Accentuating the big gap between them is that Charity is also missing out on many other experiences in life because she is 18 years old yet tied down by her life circumstance. Ironically, the first meeting of Charity and Harney is in the “library”, possibly signifying that Wharton is attempting to suggest to her readers the significance of education. Even Mr. Royall does not provide a suitable education for Charity; she should demand her right to an education. He sponsors her living, but he does not treat her well or provide her with a good life.

Charity’s lack of education makes it easy for Lucius to pretend that he knows everything in the world. Carol Wershoven indicates that:

From their initial meeting, Charity feels inferior to Harney, and senses “the sweetness of dependence” (p. 23) on him. After her sexual ignition, Charity chooses a masochistic, servile role in Harney’s life: “she could imagine no reason for doing or not doing anything except for the fact that Harney wished or did not wish it. All tossing contradictory impulses were merged in a fatalistic acceptance of his will” (p. 175). (Wershoven 6)

This is absolutely true. She is “servile” to Harney because she sees him at the top. If she were educated, she may not have put herself in this situation, but lacking adequate experience has drawn her to think that Harney can provide a beautiful life for her as an architect. Moreover, it leads her to engage in a one-sided love affair with him (as he does not love her to the same degree in return), have sex with him, and become pregnant. Once she is pregnant, she does not know what to do. This is normal because her actions did not show that she cared overly about the people around her in the absence of being pregnant.

Pregnancy makes Charity rethink her actions and behavior; however, it is too late because Harney plans to marry his cousin, Annabel Balch. At this point, she yields to the realization that she is poor, uneducated, and belongs to “the Mountain” which is a “bad place” for her. This reality ensures that Harney will not marry her, even if she tries to force him into marriage through guilt over the pregnancy. She realizes this more acutely when Mr. Royall advises her against the relationship when he says, “Ask him when he’s going to marry you then—” (Wharton 91). Harney does not answer Mr. Royall because he knows he will not marry her because of her background. This is addressed by Mr. Royall when he says:

“They all know what she is, and what she came from. They all know her mother was a woman of the town from Nettleton, that followed one of those Mountain fellows up to his place and lived there with him like a heathen. I saw her there sixteen years ago, when I went to bring this child down. I want to save her from the kind of life her mother was leading—but I’d better have left her in the kennel she came from....” (Wharton 91)

This is the best reason for Charity not to write or to tell Harney about her pregnancy. Her society will not accept her as belonging to a higher class, nor will they be kind to her when someone of Mr. Royall’s status says that he should leave her “in the kennel.” Although he is trying to protect her, he insults her. The pain Royall causes Charity by insulting her in front of Harney is considerable. Moreover, suddenly, she knows from her friend Ally (who is tailoring a dress for Annabel) that Harney will marry Annabel. Therefore, she sends him a letter telling him that he has done the best thing by marrying Annabel. In this situation, if Charity was educated, she could move to another place and work without needing Mr. Royall’s money. Also, if she has enough knowledge and education, she will be able to face Harney about her pregnancy instead of sending him a letter. She will face him with her emotion that she loves him, and she will be learned how to trust herself. Then, she will be able to save her dignity from those rich people who do not respect her and her poverty.

The idea to look for her mother in the Mountain comes from her friend Ally as Ally discusses her sister, who is a prostitute. Ally’s family sends her sister outside North Dorset. Thus, Charity decides to seek her mother because she thinks that her mother will help her, in addition to leaving to avoid society’s insult (and to avoid contemplating prostitution to support

herself). Unfortunately, her mother has died. The death of her mother does not prevent Charity from spending her nights there, but she cannot bear the poverty.

Charity decides that she wants an abortion. At Dr. Merkle's office, Charity is genuinely pitiable when the doctor asks her to pay the bill, as she does not have enough money. The "five dollars" that Dr. Merkle wants clarifies how important financial independence is. She thinks about her miserable situation:

Charity looked helplessly at the doctor's tight lips and rigid face. Her last savings had gone in repaying Ally for the cost of Miss Balch's ruined blouse, and she had had to borrow four dollars her friend to pay for her railway ticket and cover the doctor's fee. It had never occurred to that medical advice could cost more than two dollars. (Wharton 99)

Charity lacked experience and knowledge of life; in fact, it becomes clear at this point in the narrative that not only money but also knowledge (such as how and when she should act on something or make a particular decision) is also important to make life better. To take the case of the doctor, she had no idea how much the consultation and abortion would cost, and left her house without thinking of either the money or other things that could go wrong. In addition, the doctor does not feel pity with 19 years old lady. She does not give her money up, and instead of that, the doctor takes "the brooch" and tells Charity that she "can get it back when you bring me my money...." (Wharton 99).

In order to correct her mistake, Charity marries Mr. Royall "to make things right...." (Wharton 102). She and Mr. Royall want to save her reputation in North Dormer's society because they have to respect and follow the social norms of Dormer, as noted in the article by Hanne Bjerke Vasshaug:

Thus, the social norms of North Dormer may not be generally agreed upon, but they are considered too powerful to change, and, as Kavanaugh explains, ideology is created in a situation where every member of a society understands the existing social rules as being either right or impossible to change (308). (Vasshaug 14)

We all cannot agree about some of the norms of our society, but these norms have their power and enforce themselves through the acceptance of those adhering to them. Charity's marriage to Mr. Royall is the consequence of this tacit acceptance and enforcement as she wrote to Harney, "*I'm married to Mr. Royall. I'll always remember you....*" (Wharton 126). Although she gets married to Mr. Royall, she still loves and "remember[s]" Harney. Moreover, Charity and Mr. Royall understand the necessity of marriage because of Charity's "situation." For both of them, marriage will save Charity's reputation and allow her to take her brooch back from Dr. Merkle. This brooch was a present from Harney and was primarily "a blue stone" (Wharton 99).

To sum up, Wharton succeeds in depicting the three elements in the “pyramid of power”: money, marriage, and education. These three things represent power for any woman, as some of the feminists believed. This is part of the broader feminist belief that women should be liberated and free from exploitation, oppression, and educated in order to have a suitable labor that provide a good income for them. In *Summer*, as readers and as women we see these requests and understand their importance.

As a woman, I realize that I study, work, and care about my marriage; without these things, I cannot stand. I need my education to earn money and buy whatever I need and to help my family during their times of need. I need my husband to help shape our business and take care of our children. I cannot stand alone in the way that Charity was forced to; in fact, Charity in the end was also unable to stand alone. Being alone is not a bad idea at times, but as humans we need help that’s expressed through love, money, and the feeling that you are important to someone. Ultimately, I will keep my parents’ advice that money is the best friend and connect it to their other advice that marriage is important for a woman’s independence because she will have her own house and kids. Finally, I will teach my daughter in the future that education will help her find a job, and marriage will give her independence.

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