



The Painless Peace of *Twilight Sleep*

Cheryl Miller

When Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* was first published seventy-five years ago, the critical reception was markedly unenthusiastic—but it did find one appreciative reader. Edith Wharton, then in her seventies and living abroad in France, was not a fan of the new generation of writers (she detested Joyce as “pornographic,” and thought Virginia Woolf’s novels works of pure “exhibitionism”). But in *Brave New World*, she found a work that spoke to many of her own reservations about the modern age. She praised it as a “tragic indictment of our ghastly age of Fordian culture” and “*un chef-d’oeuvre digne de Swift*” (“a masterpiece worthy of Swift”). “I suffer from a complete inability to read novels about a future state of society,” she wrote one friend, “but in this case, although it pretends to be a prophecy of the future it is really a cruelly true picture of the present.”

Huxley was flattered by Wharton’s accolades, and wrote in response that she “had ‘put the case’ already” in one of her own books, the 1927 novel *Twilight Sleep*. Wharton felt much “set up” by Huxley’s “recognition”; like *Brave New World*, *Twilight Sleep* had not been well received by critics.

Upon its publication, Wharton had been attacked as being out of touch with American life (she had spent only eleven days in her native country since 1913), and accused of selling out. In the *Boston Transcript*, Dorothy Gillman wrote, “The result of deserting her own class is disastrous for Mrs. Wharton. She now adventures in a world which she does not really know...she seems deliberately to set out to write a commonplace story that will delight and entertain readers of serialized fiction.” Frederick Hoffman concurred, claiming Wharton seemed “insulted by history,” while Carl Van Vechten, writing in *The Nation*, called the new work, “scrupulous, clever, and uninspired.”

Eighty years later, the novel remains little-read. Despite a few champions such as Dale M. Bauer (author of the superb study *Edith Wharton’s Brave New Politics*), the critical consensus is that Wharton’s three “Jazz Age novels” are not equal to her earlier works. Hermione Lee, Wharton’s most recent biographer, finds *Twilight Sleep*’s satire “thin and harsh,” while feminist critic Cynthia Griffin Wolff calls it “chaotically plotted” and “sloppy.”

The novel's plot is indeed disjointed, its disorder meant, as Wolff recognizes, to reflect the restlessness and constant turmoil of life in America after the Great War. It focuses on Pauline Manford, the wealthy, emancipated matriarch of a socially prominent New York household. Pauline, a sort of Jazz Age Mrs. Jellyby (as Lee calls her), is a relentless do-gooder, taking up donations for Bolivian earthquake victims and serving on endless committees for her many causes. Meanwhile, her second husband, Dexter, begins an affair with Lita, the beautiful wife of his stepson Jim. Only Nona (Pauline and Dexter's daughter) and Arthur Wyant (Pauline's much-abused first husband), suspect the truth. The melodramatic climax comes when Arthur discovers Dexter in Lita's bedroom, and attempts to kill Dexter. Instead, he shoots Nona, who had rushed in hoping to break off the affair. Pauline, ever worried about appearances, covers up the near-fatal incident, and the entire family soon decamps overseas to avoid publicity.

What appears on first glance to be a mere domestic melodrama is really a searching examination of the new society profoundly shaped by modern science and commerce. Wharton had long been an avid reader of what she called the "the wonder-world of nineteenth century science," and she considered Darwin and Herbert Spencer to be among the "greatest" of her "formative influences." Her library

included heavily-marked copies of T. H. Huxley (Aldous's grandfather), Ernst Von Haeckel, George Romanes, and Edvard Westermarck. Scientific themes appear often in her work. She drew on her knowledge of anthropology and sociology (particularly Thorstein Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption) for her great novels of the teens: *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country*, and *The Age of Innocence*. One of her most famous short stories is even titled after Darwin's *The Descent of Man*.

By the 1920s though, Wharton began to question the moral aims of modern science, particularly its ambition to relieve men of pain and suffering. She was distrustful of a "world that believed in panaceas." As she warned one would-be revolutionary, "The evils you rightly satirize will be replaced by others more harmful to any sort of civilized living." This warning would serve as the theme of her Jazz Age novels: *The Glimpses of the Moon* (1922), *Twilight Sleep*, and *The Children* (1928). In each, she would depict a set of free-thinking moderns who believe they have "settled in advance all social, religious and moral problems," yet still come "to grief over the same old human difficulties."

Wharton pursued this theme most forcefully in *Twilight Sleep*. The novel's title refers to the mixture of scopolamine and morphine physicians administered to women to

allow them to “forget” the pains of childbirth. The term appears at the end of the first chapter as Pauline recalls how she arranged for Lita to be admitted into the choicest hospital for the birth of her and Jim’s son. The procedure’s purpose was eugenic, a subtext at which Wharton hints with Lita’s request that “nothing should ‘hurt’ her” during her labor. By relieving this pain, the advocates of “twilight sleep” hoped to enable “delicate” women like Lita and those of her set (i.e., the upper crust) to have more children, thus providing, as the medical historian Judith Walzer Leavitt explains, “a ‘better race for future generations.’”

It’s a goal that Pauline, an enthusiastic disciple of modern science, shares. “Of course there ought to be no Pain,” she thinks. For Pauline, “avoidance of pain” is the “ultimate end,” and the eugenic production of offspring, using only “superbly sound progenitors,” is but one tactic in modern science’s arsenal. Babies are “something to be turned out in series like Fords,” the end-product of “months and years of patient Taylorized effort against the natural human fate: anxiety, sorrow, old age.”

Thus, “twilight sleep,” for Wharton, is more than just a medical procedure. It symbolizes man’s rebellion against “the natural human fate,” the foolish hope that he can forget human nature and all its attendant evils: pain, anger, jealousy, lust, and grief. The means by which this rebellion

is to be effected is modern science, motivated by man’s “blind dread of physical pain.”

But the morbidity at the root of the scientific worldview is bedimmed by the obscuring hope of progress. Fear cannot be dealt with directly (say, by courage), so it is evaded, kept at bay by an ever-increasing array of remedies and by the determined effort to think only “happy thoughts.” Like Mrs. Welland in *The Age of Innocence*, Pauline insists on keeping her mind “bright and happy.” She regards life as “a Sunday school picnic, with lemonade and sponge cake as its supreme rewards.” Discussion of anything “unpleasant” is assiduously avoided—and if it cannot be avoided, then forgotten just as the drugged women in “twilight sleep” forget the pain of labor.

The forgetfulness of twilight sleep (and of the scientific enterprise) applies not only to pain, but also to the past. America is the land of progress, its citizens so focused on the bright future they imagine they have no time for the past. To them, Europe is only the site of “obsolete superstitions unworthy of enlightened Americans,” lacking in such modern conveniences as plumbing, dentistry, and easy divorce. Thus, the only culture Pauline and the others participate in is wholly situated in the present: cinema, gossip rags, and jazz clubs. The family’s home is full of books but no one ever reads them. Dexter does attempt a course

of literary reading, starting with Tallentyre's *Voltaire*, which he finds a "revelation" since he had never heard of Voltaire, but his education ends with his second book, the first volume of Macaulay, which he thinks too long. Pauline, a professed Christian, is flummoxed when Nona reminds her of Christ's suffering on the cross: "The idea of stirring up troublesome mysteries of Christian dogma at the breakfast-table!" she fumes.

Wharton's critics may have accused her of being detached from modern American life, but she remained a keen, if disapproving, observer of modes and fashions. She stashed away stacks of news clippings and advertisements heralding the newest detergent or latest scientific "break-through." *Twilight Sleep* is stuffed with these researches, with Pauline sampling every 1920s fad: psycho-analysis, New Age spiritualism, self-help books, consumer science, drugs, plastic surgery, and, of course, eugenics. "America really seemed to have an immediate answer for everything," Pauline thinks, "from the treatment of the mentally deficient to the elucidation of the profoundest religious mysteries."

Those alleged answers become a subject of Wharton's vicious satire. Just a page from Pauline's crowded calendar ("7.30 Mental uplift. 7.45 breakfast. 8. Psycho-analysis. 8.15 See cook.") affords Wharton a crack at the modern desire for immediate gratification and control, the idea

that all problems can be solved in a matter of minutes. With Pauline's various self-improvement exercises, Wharton lampoons the burgeoning self-help industry, as exemplified by Émile Coué's 1922 bestseller, *Self-Mastery Through Conscious Auto-Suggestion*, with its recommendation that the reader recite aloud every morning the mantra: "Every day, in every way, I am getting better and better." Pauline's many gurus are also all based on real-life persons; for instance, the Mahatma, with his hip-slimming exercises, is drawn from the popular yogi, Paramahansa Yogananda, who gave lectures at Carnegie Hall with such pseudoscientific titles as "Everlasting Youth: Psycho-Physiological Rejuvenation of Cells by Recharging the Body Battery."

Wharton captures too the hygienic craze that swept America in the 1920s, with hundreds of new cleaning products suddenly lining the store shelves. Pauline is obsessed with proper hygiene, even installing a new ventilating system in her cow-stables. Her bathroom is like "a biological laboratory, with its white tiles, polished pipes, weighing machines, mysterious appliances for douches, gymnastics, and 'physical culture.'" She even smells, her husband thinks, of "a superior disinfectant." Control is the driving force behind Pauline's mania for hygiene; it is her attempt to fit one more aspect of life into her "Taylorized" routine

(after Frederick Winslow Taylor's *Principles of Scientific Management*) and thereby render it innocuous.

Even sin is to be scientifically managed. "Being prepared to suffer is really the way to create suffering," Pauline counsels Nona. "And creating suffering is creating sin, because sin and suffering are really one." Pauline's lesson to Nona illustrates what Christopher Lasch describes as the translation of moral categories, such as sin or evil, to medical categories, like pain or disease. To Pauline, sin is a health problem to be solved by "the incalculable resources of American hygiene." She "want[s] to de-microbe life," to "whitewash" pain and suffering as she would "disinfect" a dirty cellar. Every problem in life is amenable to the latest "moral tonic." Hearing of Lita's plans to divorce, she dismisses them as "frustrations," the "new psychological thing," and arranges to have Lita visit her spiritual advisor for an "operation."

Indeed, all of Pauline's visits to her various spiritual gurus have the air of a doctor's visit, with their emphasis on exercise, massage, and "hip-slimming." Alvah Loft, who advertises himself as "the Busy Man's Christ," practices "operations"—"spiritual vacuum-cleanings" which promise to remove the "frustrations" from his clients "as if they'd been adnoids." Pauline is constantly celebrating the spirituality and soulfulness of her newest guru, but the state of Pauline's soul is curiously absent from all her

consultations. Instead, she is variously diagnosed as suffering from fatigue or "brain-exhaustion." Wharton captures here what Huxley calls "the contemporary tendency for superstition to be magical rather than religious—to aim at specific acts of power, such as hip-slimming, rather than at a theory of the cosmos." It's a tendency, as Huxley put it in a letter to Wharton, that Pauline "beautifully and ruthlessly exemplifies"; the consummate consumer, she acquires more and more but cannot identify the end toward which she strives. "They all had these colossal plans for acquiring power," Wharton writes, "and then, when it was acquired, what came of it but bigger houses, more food, more motors... and more self-righteous philanthropy?"

Pauline rationalizes her never-ending expenditures as the price of "expressing herself"—the only end, besides the avoidance of pain, she can imagine. She is "all for personal freedom, self expression," and never wants to "feel under any obligation." Likewise, Lita tells Nona she doesn't "feel like duties," and claims she cannot be herself in her marriage: "I'm sort of an all-around fake."

Pauline is a fake, too; she ultimately has no real self to express. In her quest for control, Pauline has annihilated her self, numbing with drugs or facile "happy talk" any real feeling she has. Like Lita, she is completely externally directed, lacking

any inner life of her own. Terrified at the thought of spending an hour alone, she must be constantly around people, and yet she is unable to forge a connection with anyone, including her own husband. Intimacy to her is “the tireless discussion of facts.” To stave off any hint of “frustration,” she throws herself into an endless flurry of appointments and dinner parties. “She enjoys it as much as other women do love-making,” her husband thinks.

But Pauline cannot completely shake off the old notions of morality and sin, although she is unable to articulate them when challenged. Her “moral muscles” have “atrophied” with disuse. She is horrified by Lita’s stage ambitions and the lack of shame Lita evinces over a photo of herself dancing half-nude in one of the tabloids. But her protest over the photo’s indecency dies on her lips at Lita’s assertion that she was only “expressing” herself. (“She says she wants to express her personality? Well, every one has the right to do that—I should think it wrong of me to interfere.”) Later, when Lita blithely assumes that Jim is really her and Dexter’s “love child,” Pauline becomes outraged at the perceived insult. But she finds to her horror that Lita does not mean it as an “impertinence”; she is undisturbed by adultery. For Lita, the only “real wickedness” is to be untrue to one’s self, in this case, “to go on living with a man you don’t love.”

Pauline instinctively recoils from this vision of a sinless world—but she is powerless to respond, for it is a vision to which she too subscribes. She had also abandoned a husband rather than betray herself, and she had viewed Arthur’s pain and wounded pride at the divorce as unreasonable and helplessly old-fashioned. But now that Pauline’s son, Jim, is the victim, she, like Nona, comes to question the “new idea of marriage.” Leaving Lita’s house, she wonders,

Perhaps, after all, her own principles were really obsolete to her children. Only, what was to take their place? Human nature had not changed as fast as social usage, and if Jim’s wife left him nothing could prevent his suffering in the same old way.

Pauline is not heartless, but in her unwillingness to countenance pain, she inadvertently hurts those she claims to love. She thinks she has handled her first divorce blamelessly, but she doesn’t see that Arthur has been devastated by her loss and is slipping into alcoholism. In her mania to save the world, she neglects her own family, leaving her daughter alone to cope with their various troubles to disastrous results. Nona, the “bewildered little Iphigenia” of the novel, is nearly killed—a “vicarious sacrifice” to Pauline’s folly.

Only Nona seeks to understand her responsibilities, to try to find “the

best new way of being decent.” “What troubles me,” she tells Pauline, “is the plain human tangle, as it remains after we’ve done our best to straighten it out.” Pauline may pride herself on being psychic, but it is Nona who sees the far-reaching and unexpected effects people can have on one another. She is the first to notice Lita’s disquiet and her father’s infatuation with Lita. And while Pauline turns a blind eye to anything “unpleasant,” Nona seeks out those in pain and tries to comfort them. She alone visits the family maid, Maisie, at the hospital while her mother is having an operation. Seeing Jim’s misery after Lita deserts him, she suffers with him: “Where, for instance, did one’s own self end and one’s neighbor begin?” Suffering, she realizes, can have moral worth. When Pauline chastises her for worrying too much about Jim, insisting that “we ought to refuse ourselves to pain,” Nona counters, “Did Christ?” Someone, she thinks, must remember that “such things as wickedness, suffering and death had not yet been banished from the earth.”

Nona’s pain in her brother’s loss—and with it her recognition of the duties people owe one another—leads her to renounce the man she loves rather than break up his marriage. Like Ellen Olenska, another of Wharton’s tragic heroines, Nona realizes she cannot “have [her] happiness made out of a wrong—an unfairness—to somebody else.”

Before, she had shared Pauline’s view that divorce is just another form of housekeeping, a way to clean out “all kinds of domestic evils” and start anew. But now she begins to doubt. The “simple reasonable request” for divorce sounds very differently on “the lips of the other partner, the partner who still had a stake in the affair.... It was one thing to theorize on the detachability of human beings, another to watch them torn apart by the bleeding roots.”

That folly leads to more than just family tragedy, though. The sickness of the Manford household is shared by the entire society. Just as the twilight sleep drugs have inured Lita to the pains of labor, so have the constant “druggings” and “thrills” of the Jazz Age inured her and her coevals to any true human emotion or connection. Childbirth connects us to one another; it is—literally, primitively—the basic link between the individual and society. The modern desire to avoid the pain of childbirth illustrates not just the desire to avoid pain, but also the extent of our alienation from one another.

The pain of childbirth, recall, is one of the curses of original sin. The quest to end that pain, to end all pain, is finally a quest to make man anew. But as Nona finds, the experience of pain is fundamental to empathy; only through suffering can we understand what men and women owe one another. Twilight sleep blissfully closes the eyes—closes them to the pain of

others, to this broken world of grief and woe. Perfected man, man without pain, is insensate and completely alone. The quest for perfection is a quest for a self-destructive blindness. It is, in the end, an untenable

quest. This world needs our eyes wide open.

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