

**UNIVERSITY OF TARTU  
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**BREAKING FREE FROM DEPENDING ON MEN IN  
EDITH WHARTON'S *SUMMER*  
BA thesis**

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## ABSTRACT

The thesis at hand aims to analyze how the main character of Edith Wharton's *Summer* (1917) tries to achieve her independence from men. The thesis will explore the female gaze, sexual awakening, and women depending on men from a feminist perspective. For this thesis I use Annette Kolodny's feminist theories and her view on feminist literary criticism. Kolodny's perspective that feminism in literature is directly influenced by the lived world and vice versa is applicable for the analysis of *Summer*.

The thesis consists of an introduction, a literature review, an empirical analysis of the novel, and a conclusion.

The introduction provides context for the novel and the historical background of feminism.

The literature review summarizes previous studies and analyses of the novel and gives a brief overview of depictions of feminism in literature.

The empirical part of the thesis provides an analysis of key moments in the novel through close reading. The analysis explores how the chosen topics provide the main character with the strength to try to become independent.

The conclusion summarizes the main findings of the thesis.

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## INTRODUCTION

Edith Wharton (1862–1937) was an American writer who grew up amidst the New York aristocracy. Many of her novels are read through feminist lens today, even though Wharton did not write her fiction with particularly feminist aims in mind. She was the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize in fiction in 1921 and was introduced into the National Women's Hall of Fame in 1996 with an induction ceremony (Augustyn 2023: para. 1, 2, 4).

Wharton's 1917 novel *Summer* is a coming-of-age story of a 17-year-old girl named Charity Royall. Charity was born into poverty in a colony of outlaws who lived on the Mountain. Her guardian, Mr. Royall, saved her from a life of poverty to live in North Dormer, a town in New England. Charity receives several offers for marriage from Mr. Royall but refuses them as she desires a young man Lucius Harney who came to town to draw old houses.

John Crowley (1982: 87) suggests that Charity's dependence on Mr. Royall is inherent from the beginning of the novel. When he took her from the Mountain, Mr. Royall rescued Charity from a life of poverty and from parents who could not take care of her. From that moment, Mr. Royall has regarded Charity as his possession. Though Charity reveals that she has no affection toward Mr. Royall, she still feels dependent on him and lets his weaknesses become hers. Crowley (1982: 87) argues that it is Mr. Royall's drunkenness that ruins Charity's chances of attending a boarding school, but Charity blames herself for his drunkenness and ultimately abandons the idea of leaving town because she fears Mr. Royall might become lonely. Charity has been dependent on Mr. Royall for so long that she starts blaming herself for his behavior and unknowingly mirrors his self-deprecating demeanor (Crowley 1982: 87). After realizing that Mr. Royall expects something sexual in exchange for bringing Charity down from the Mountain, she begins her journey of breaking free from being dependent on Mr. Royall and

gets a job at a library. However, Charity understands that a job does not help her to escape Mr. Royall. She falls for a gentleman from the city, Lucius Harney, and becomes attached to, and dependent on him. Wershoven (1985: 6) argues that Charity sees an escape plan in her relationship with Harney and uses it to get away from Mr. Royall. While it might be true that Charity is using Harney to deter Mr. Royall, she ultimately enters another submissive relationship where she is dependent on a man.

Crowley (1982: 95) argues that the end of the novel depicts “the death of [Charity’s] summer daydreams in the autumn moonlight and her final entrapment in the dependent childish identity from which North Dormer permits her no escape.” The novel ends when Charity marries Mr. Royall after finding out she is pregnant with Harney’s child. She feels betrayed by Harney after he confesses his engagement to Annabel Balch. Feeling betrayed and heartbroken, Charity tries to go back to the Mountain but ultimately stays with Mr. Royall who continues to act as her guardian and source of support. Charity does not develop feelings for Mr. Royall, but she does see him in a new light that shows he has a caring side because he provides her the material safety she needs for bringing up her child. Wershoven (1985: 10) suggests that the union of Charity and Mr. Royall is based on the rejection of social expectations, and on the two outsiders coming together to heal and enjoy their lives with minimal judgment. While this might be the case, I argue that it is more likely that young Charity did not have a better plan to give her child a deserving life.

*Summer* is considered a radically feminist novel (Crowley 1982; Grafton 1995; Wershoven 1985) despite its ambiguous ending where Charity marries Mr. Royall. Wharton published *Summer* at the beginning of the 20th century, when women were becoming more independent in the US society, while remaining subject to sexist expectations. For example, Judge Ben Lindsey (qtd. in Freedman 1974: 377), who worked with young people in the 1920s,

frequently discusses premarital sex, birth control, drunkenness, disdain for traditional values, and how he witnessed a stark tension between the allure of freedom and the sense of sin it still created despite the moral revolution visible in society. Crowley (1982: 86) argues that Wharton wrote *Summer* to break the clichés of romance, shed light on women's struggles to be independent and break sexist stereotypes.

Annette Kolodny (1975: 75) outlines how literary fiction written by both male and female authors is influenced by stereotypes and sexist assumptions that circulate in the society in which the literary works are produced. Susan S. Lanser (1991: 3) argues that the feminist movement happened much earlier and more clearly in literature than anywhere else, as authors, including Wharton, demonstrated how women are subject to sexism. Feminist criticism redirected literary studies' focus to gender issues, leading to a significant shift in the literary landscape. Because feminist literary critics are trained to examine discourse — which both creates and preserves the political — Lanser (1991: 6) argues that feminist literary critics play a unique role in the campaign for social change.

In this thesis, I use Annette Kolodny's ideas to examine feminist issues in Wharton's novel. Kolodny is an early feminist literary critic and her essays on feminist literary criticism shed light on the sexual stereotyping of women in literature, which she argues compromises "the historical, social, and ethical consequences of women's participation in or exclusion from literature and criticism" (Kolodny 1980: 1–2). In her 1975 essay, Kolodny (75–77) argues that feminist novels are not only for entertainment but also for understanding the history and struggles represented in these fictional stories. Kolodny also notes that early women writers only wrote about what was acceptable to write about according to the social norms of their time, as some topics of female oppression were a taboo (Kolodny 1975: 76–77).

This paper aims to analyze *Summer* through three topics — the female gaze, sexual awakening, and depending on men. The first chapter provides an overview of previous research on *Summer* and background information on feminist theories and feminist literary criticism. The second chapter includes a close analysis of the novel and the chosen topics.

## **I LITERATURE REVIEW: PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON *SUMMER* THROUGH A FEMINIST LENS**

This literature review explores analyses and studies mainly from the 20th century due to the limited availability of more recent studies. In preparation for this analysis, I read Edith Wharton's *Summer* (1917) through a feminist lens and because of that, this literature review will cover women's role in the late 19th and early 20th century US society. Due to the limited availability of the original novel, I read *Summer* from Wharton's collected works *Novellas and Other Writings* (1990). The literature review will also cover how feminist literary criticism has looked at Wharton's *Summer*.

Edith Wharton's relationship to suffragism — the movement that campaigned for votes for women — was complicated. Margaret McDowell (1974) and Laura Rattray (2012) have examined Wharton's involvement in women's rights and how she distanced herself from the suffragist movement. In her early work, Wharton expressed irony at the expense of women wanting to pursue careers, for example, Gerty Farish in *The House of Mirth* (1905), who earned a living as a social worker, or Justine Brent in *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), who made a career as a nurse. In her eyes, career-driven women lacked femininity and grace — two qualities needed for liberation from social norms according to Wharton (McDowell 1974: 524). Although Wharton most likely did not consider herself a feminist — a term mostly associated with the suffragist movement at the time — McDowell (1974: 526–527) suggests that her fiction testifies to her pro-feminist views. Wharton was also an avid correspondent all her life and her letters are evidence of her personal opinions about women's struggles (Rattray 2012: 7). In contrast to Wharton's professional work, in her letters, Wharton expressed anger at the condescension against women, especially women writers (McDowell 1974: 524–525). Wharton's fiction records the changes in public opinions on women — destigmatizing divorcees, working women,

and expecting equality. Throughout her career, she became more and more aware of women's issues and her fiction records her personal attitudes toward women as well (McDowell 1974: 537). For example, the topic of divorce was considered taboo until the beginning of the 19th century and until then Wharton's fiction testified to her sympathy for divorced women and their disadvantages in society. *The House of Mirth* (1905), *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), and *The Custom of the Country* (1913) indicate the widespread public hostility toward divorce as recorded by Wharton. After the publication of *The Age of Innocence* (1920), her fiction came to celebrate the freedom of women wanting to dissolve their marriage and Wharton goes so far as to suggest that it is the only option left for a self-respecting woman (McDowell 1974: 534–536). The male counterparts in Wharton's novels are often written as weak and less mentally strong than the women. According to McDowell (1974: 527), Wharton liked to portray societal norms of women depending on men by making the men as, if not more, needy as the women. Wharton's female characters often realize their power as women and use it to their advantage (McDowell 1974: 527–528).

In the early 20th century, Wharton received poor feedback for her novels, as they were deemed “manless” and unrealistic (McDowell 1974: 522). In 1921, writer F. Scott Fitzgerald, along with critic Vernon Parrington, dismissed her as a privileged woman who only wrote about other privileged people and their empty lives (Kassanoff 2004: 1–2). Many critics also implied that social injustice only occurs in the lower classes and that the working class is made up of only men. Moreover, the same early critics dismissed the inequality between genders, no matter in which societal class (McDowell 1974: 522). And yet, at the end of the 19th century, when Wharton began her career as a writer, women were fighting for their freedom and many suffragists along with Elizabeth Cady Stanton argued that inequality between sexes is present in all classes, and that a fight for equality is necessary (Maloni 2009: 881).

According to Ruby Maloni (2009), it is thanks to the work of suffragists that at the beginning of the 20th century, American women emerged in several fields. Political, economic, and social fields were no longer strictly run by men. However, many women still saw modern freedoms like equality and autonomy as difficult to obtain. Women became important reformers even though they could not vote or be in office in most states. These changes led people to believe that American women gained independence in the 20th century, but after World War I it was obvious that societal norms were still based on sexist bias. Women were pushed back to domestic spheres after the war, men were expected to return to ‘normal’ life and take back the jobs that women had done while men were at war. As a result, women continued to be undervalued and people started seeing them as homemakers, wives, and mothers once again (Maloni 2009: 880–886). Mary Ellmann’s 1968 book *Thinking about Women* (qtd. in Kolodny 1980: 1) shed light on the misperceptions and prejudice of women in literature, and her work showed the importance of women writing about the reality of being a woman and trying to conform to society’s standards.

### **Depending on Men**

*Summer* is one of the least researched of Wharton’s novels, but its themes of sexual awakening and becoming an independent woman are continuously important for feminist literary criticism. McDowell (1974: 522) argues that female characters in Wharton’s novels are almost always in some kind of dependent relationship with a man and the plot often culminates with the woman trying to break free from that relationship. Wharton writes about how the early 20th century US women were not able to choose how they lived their lives because of social expectations about getting married, being a homemaker, and having children. However, her characters are ultimately chasing an independent life. The attempts to break free from depending

on a man do not always work in Wharton's novels, showing the impossibility of being a strong and completely independent woman, especially at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries (McDowell 1974: 522–524).

John Crowley (1982) and Kathy Grafton (1995) have researched the forbidden love and feminist themes in *Summer* — topics which support the themes analyzed in this paper. Crowley (1982) analyzes the sexual nature of Charity's relationships with Mr. Royall and Harney. Grafton (1995) explores the forbidden love between Charity and Harney along with the sexual nature of their relationship. She suggests that their relationship is not equal since Harney asserts his power over Charity. Carol Wershoven (1985) focuses on the social aspects of Wharton's novel and explores the characters' behavior through societal norms. Wershoven (1985: 2) argues that Charity and Mr. Royall both live in a fantasy world where societal expectations do not limit them. Charity hopes to find love and connection with an upper-class gentleman, while Mr. Royall yearns for Charity as a submissive wife and companion. Wershoven (1985: 2–6) notes that both characters struggle with social norms and finally marry each other, not to conform to the expectations of others, but to come together as equal adults.

John Crowley (1982: 87) suggests that the subconscious need to depend on men is imminent from the start of Edith Wharton's *Summer*. Charity's bringing down from the Mountain was met with the condition of dependence on Mr. Royall. Though Charity appreciates the advantages of staying in her guardian's care, she comes to realize that this dependence comes with the assumption of sexual compliance. Crowley (1982: 89) argues that Charity is under Mr. Royall's ownership and his goal is to defend her from other men in order to keep her dependent on him. When Charity meets Harney, she decides to shift her dependence on him as she sees Harney as a more sensible guardian for her. Crowley (1982: 92) notes that Charity and Harney's relationship blooms because of her subconscious need for dependence rather than romance or

desire. This notion has been used in many literary works, however, Annette Kolodny (1975: 80) suggests that female writers are more likely to invert societal norms and explore independent women's roles in the world. Edith Wharton is one of those authors who often contrasts traditional women and women who challenge societal expectations to shed light on women's struggles. Although most of Wharton's novels take place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the themes she uses are topical for women throughout time (McDowell 1974: 521), and relevant for understanding the history of women's struggles and feminist thought.

Women's dependence on men is an issue that is intrinsic to patriarchal societies. Although women acquired voting rights in 1920 in the United States, the fight for cultural, social, and economic freedom continues. Many women still want men to be the dominant partner and a large number of antifeminist women proves that there is still work to do (MacLean 2006: 19–21). According to Kolodny, one way of addressing and improving women's struggles is through writing fiction. Kolodny (1975: 76) argues that women have used literature to write about their and their fellow women's lived experiences to draw light on their secondary position in society compared to men.

### **Sexual Awakening**

Kathy Grafton (1995) explores the topic of sexual awakening in Wharton's *Summer* as it was one of the early novels to deal with sexual passion as an essential component of maturing according to Cynthia Griffin Wolff (qtd. in Grafton 1995: 350). In the 20th century, religion was one of the main topics for defining female sexuality in the United States, and its influence was especially present in debates over abortion and birth control. Weinberg et al (1983: 313) note that sex was seen as something men and women could both enjoy, but women were assumed to have little interest in it while men had stronger sex drives, as women's interest in

sex was primarily tied to having children, not to the act itself. Women could only engage in sexual acts once they were married and had to rely on their husbands for their sexual awakening (Weinberg et al 1983: 312). Grafton (1995: 350–352) argues that Lucius Harney’s and Charity Royall’s relationship in *Summer* is based on degradation and exploring their sexual desires. Harney needs to feel superior to Charity, and in his mind, her position in society gives him power over her. Charity is aware of her sexual instincts for the first time and sees Harney as her liberator. She begins her sexual awakening journey from the moment she meets Harney and comes to realize what kind of a life she wants.

Grafton (1995: 351–352) analyzes Harney and Charity’s first kiss, which depicts the power-dynamic in their relationship, as we see Harney make an aggressive first move toward Charity. Harney enjoys the role of a dominant man and feels himself more drawn to Charity because of her low-class status. Grafton (1995: 350) suggests that Wharton wrote *Summer* with Sigmund Freud’s work in mind, as they seem to both discuss cultural expectations and attitudes to premarital sexual experiences. According to Grafton (1995: 350), Freud’s 1912 essay “The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life” mirrors the psychology of Charity and Harney’s relationship, as he explains that men’s need to degrade their love objects stems from “psychical impotence” that was brought on by an unknown incestuous desire for his mother or sister, which is not discussed in *Summer*, but according to Freud everyone experiences incestuous feelings at one point in their life. Freud claims that men cope with this feeling by creating two love objects: one to love and one to desire, which correlates to Harney’s relationships with Charity and Annabel Balch (qtd. in Grafton 1995: 350–353). Later in their relationship, when Charity opens up to Harney more and more, he starts to view her as less and less worthy, and his assessment of Charity decreases every time a new barrier is reached in this regard.

Grafton (1995: 358) suggests that Charity is more drawn to Harney because of the sense of forbiddenness in their relationship. She reminds herself about Julia Hawes, the older sister of her friend Ally, and what happened to her once she became pregnant. Despite knowing that their relationship would be disapproved of by society, they become intimate and find privacy in an abandoned house. She tends to romanticize the small details that symbolize the hidden understanding that exists between Harney and herself, as well as the remoteness of the location of her sexual initiation. Thus, the essential condition of forbiddenness is intimately related to the growth of her sexuality (Grafton 1995: 360). Charity has been trained to believe that because of societal norms, her own sexual needs must be suppressed and kept hidden. Nevertheless, she makes the decision to disobey the rules, and her excitement is significantly increased by the awareness that she is doing so. Her society views her sexual relationship with Harvey as taboo, so she naturally makes the connection in her mind between forbiddenness and satisfying one's sexual cravings (Grafton 1995: 362).

Harney and Charity see each other as a rebellion against social expectations, which allows Charity to experience a forbidden love and Harney to degrade his love object. Grafton (1995: 365) suggests that through her forbidden relationship with Harney, Charity begins to accept herself and refuses to feel shame for her experience of a first love. By marrying Mr. Royall, she shows a sense of maturity, as she is willing to put her child's needs above hers.

### **The Female Gaze**

The female gaze is an important topic in feminist literary criticism, and central to *Summer*. Laura Mulvey coined the term male gaze in 1975 in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" — the male gaze sees women as objects and reveals how men need a strong visual and erotic stimulus from women. Men project their fantasies onto women, making women

also believe they are purely objects for sexual gratification (Mulvey 1975: 837). Many see the female gaze as the opposite of the male gaze. Susan R. Bowers (1990: 217) argues that the first representation of the female gaze was that of the mythological figure Medusa and her fierce look. The figure of Medusa combines female beauty and strength to create an antidote for the male gaze (Bowers 1990: 218). According to Bowers (1990: 218), the female gaze encourages women to stand up for themselves, go after what they want, and reconstruct sexist images of women in society. The goal of the female gaze is to fight the internalized fear and hatred for female independence and power. Bowers (1990: 220) argues that Medusa represents the wisdom that women may or may not be aware of. The power of Medusa and the female gaze was obvious to both men and women, so much so that patriarchal men turned Medusa and all women into objects for the male gaze (Bowers 1990: 220). The image of Medusa and other women like her were ideal victims for the patriarchy as destroying them did not challenge male property (Bowers 1990: 225). The impact of Medusa's symbolic murder demonstrates the destruction of female power and independence (Bowers 1990: 225). Bowers (1990: 228) suggests that the damage done to the image of Medusa only empowered women to identify with her.

Johnson (2000: 65) suggests that a persistent and dangerous female gaze can exert a strong influence on male characters. The female gaze often views men in a romantic way and depicts the image of a loving relationship, which coincides with men's need for sexual gratification. Instead of sexual needs the female gaze reveals patriarchal norms, and structures that dictate women's place in the household (Johnson 2000: 65). William Faulkner's 1932 short story *Mountain Victory* (qtd. in Johnson 2000) shares many similar themes with *Summer* as they both depict strong female characters infatuated with a higher-class man. The illusion of freedom and implied control over their own sexuality leads these women to believe in false independence and strength, only to have it shattered later. Bowers (1990: 234) argues that women need to be

fully aware of the power of the female gaze to maximize its effects and accomplish its goals. In short, and for the relevance of *Summer*, the male gaze can be seen as overly sexualizing women and their role in life, while the female gaze attempts to break sexist stereotypes and gain independence.

To sum up, Wharton's *Summer* depicts many feminist concerns and therefore is an important text to analyze within feminist literary criticism. Previous research has focused on the plot, and the character's behavior is mostly analyzed through literary terms, not through history and social conditions.

## II ANALYSIS OF FEMINIST LITERARY THEMES IN *SUMMER*

### Depending on Men

The first few chapters of *Summer* depict Charity's role in North Dormer as a 17-year-old girl. Charity was "brought down from the Mountain" and is constantly reminded to be grateful for what she has:

Miss Hatchard had said to her, on a terrible occasion in her life: "My child, you must never cease to remember that it was Mr. Royall who brought you down from the Mountain" (161).

She was taught from birth that she should be grateful to Mr. Royall, and never defy him. The term "brought down from the Mountain" has haunted Charity for her whole life, as it is mostly used as a derogatory term for lower classes and has deepened Charity's lack of confidence in being an independent woman. Mr. Royall has made sure to keep Charity close to him to eventually make her his wife. Even Miss Hatchard understands the implications of Mr. Royall being Charity's guardian:

The fact is, it's not only...not only because of the advantages. There are other reasons. You're too young to understand... (169).

Depending on Mr. Royall has given him the assumption of sexual compliance from Charity. Lawyer Royall's attempts to have relations with 17-year-old Charity depict the issue of sexual oppression — he sees her as his property and after his wife's death hoped Charity would be her replacement:

No other thought had occurred to her; but when she saw him in the doorway, a ray from the autumn moon falling on his discomposed face, she understood. For a moment they looked at each other in silence; then, as he put his foot across the threshold, she stretched out her arm and stopped him /.../ Her heart gave a startled plunge, but she continued to hold him back contemptuously. "Well, I guess you made a mistake, then. This ain't your wife's room any longer." (170)

Charity is disgusted by Mr. Royall's advances and makes it clear to him that nothing will ever happen between them. Even though Mr. Royall is the dominant part of this relationship, he obeys Charity and attempts to not show his lust for her. Charity is aware of her dependence

on Mr. Royall but is not afraid to stand up for herself to try to break free from him. Still, Mr. Royall sees Charity as his possession and even asks to marry her:

“See here,” he said at length, as though utterance were difficult, “there’s something I’ve been wanting to say to you; I’d ought to have said it before. I want you to marry me” (173).

Charity is determined to live a future without Mr. Royall and despite his initial disapproval for her getting a job, he allows Charity to work at the library in an attempt to show her that independence is not what she seeks. To Mr. Royall’s dismay, Charity finds herself infatuated with Harney, a young man from the city, and begins drifting further away from her guardian in hopes of starting a somewhat independent life. While Charity realizes that her relationship with Harney would make her dependent on him rather than Mr. Royall, she also acknowledges that depending on Harney is much closer to achieving freedom.

After their first encounter, Charity becomes instantly infatuated with Harney and leaves her work at the library early. The feeling of mutual attraction piques her interest, and she needs to clear her mind. She sits on the hillside and imagines her life with Harney: “Confusedly, the young man in the library had made her feel for the first time what might be the sweetness of dependence” (167). While Charity is already dependent on Mr. Royall, that dependency is something she desires to break free from. Her feelings toward Mr. Royall are pure disgust and hatred since she is aware of his possessive and destructive behavior. Charity sees Mr. Royall as a father figure because he has raised her for a long time, but when he reveals his intentions of marriage and sexual relations, Charity cannot bear the thought of her guardian being sexually attracted toward her. The opportunity to become dependent on someone else, makes Charity wonder if dependence is such a bad thing. She believes that Harney would be a loving partner, and thus shifts her dependence on him. While Charity did initially attempt to become completely independent from anyone, she realizes that it is near impossible in the society where she lives

and understands that simply deviating her dependence from Mr. Royall to Harney will give her a better chance of becoming independent later on. Becoming dependent on Harney comes naturally to Charity, since their first meeting reveals an instant connection, and she is eager to spend more time with him.

Although Charity has made it clear to Mr. Royall that nothing will happen between them, he grows increasingly jealous when Charity starts spending a lot of time with Harney. Mr. Royall does not approve of Charity and Harney's relationship and condemns her as a "whore" (Wharton 1990: 235). This shows the hypocrisy of men and the struggles of women in society, as they are expected to become loving wives. Mr. Royall even tries to buy Charity's love:

"Here — go get yourself a Sunday bonnet that'll make all the other girls mad" (193).

Buying a woman's love sets a power dynamic, where the man is the provider and the woman is the housewife, whose job is to cook, clean, and look pretty. Kolodny (1980: 6–7) argues that very many details of sexism go overlooked since they are so deeply rooted in society and people see them as the norm.

*Summer* ends with Charity finding out she is pregnant with Harney's child after he admits to his relationship with Annabel Balch. The month Harney and Charity spend together changes the course of her life drastically as she ends up settling for a less-than-perfect relationship. Charity's final letter to Harney depicts how much he meant to her, and she knows that the days she spent with him changed the course of her life forever:

I'm married to Mr. Royall. I'll always remember you. -Charity (310).

Charity felt so many feelings toward Harney that even his betrayal did not discourage her from hoping for a happy ending with him: "She had come there possessed with a fear which had haunted her ever since she had felt Mr. Royall's ring on her finger: the fear that Harney might, after all, free himself and come back to her" (310). As a final resort, Charity agrees to marry

Mr. Royall to provide a safe place for her child to grow up. She decides to keep the final reminder of her first love, and she is willing to go against her better judgment to raise the child. Jean E. Kennard's 1978 study *Victims of Convention* (qtd. in Kolodny 1980: 4) "points out that the symbolic nature of the marriage which conventionally concludes such novels indicates the adjustment of the protagonist to society's values, a condition which is equated with her maturity." This demonstrates Charity's inability to become completely independent, but rather her willingness to accept the consequences — a sign of her mature outlook and self-acceptance.

### **Sexual Awakening**

The first chapter of *Summer* introduces the protagonist Charity and depicts her first encounter with Lucius Harney, who becomes her first love and influences her for the rest of her life. The first paragraph gives the reader a sense of Charity's persona when the sight of a young man excites her:

/.../ the girl on lawyer Royall's doorstep noticed that he was a stranger, that he wore city clothes, and that he was laughing with all his teeth, as the young and careless laugh /.../ Her heart contracted a little, and the shrinking that sometimes came over her when she saw people with holiday faces made her draw back into the house and pretend to look for the key that she knew she had already put into her pocket. (159)

Charity's avoidance and shyness toward a young city man depicts her inexperience in engaging in relations with the opposite sex. She has never considered one of North Dormer's boys as her companion and is waiting for her true love. Charity's inexperience is the main reason for her crush on Harney, since she has never been seen as a woman by someone she finds attractive.

Sometimes she envied the other girls their sentimental preoccupations, their long hours of inarticulate philandering with one of the few youths who still lingered in the village; but when she pictured herself curling her hair or putting a new ribbon on her hat for Ben Fry of one of the Sollas boys the fever dropped and she relapsed into indifference (188).

After Charity wrongly accuses Harney of talking bad about her to Miss Hatchard, he manages to show Charity that he is not a bad person and only wants the best for her. Harney's calm and professional charm deepens Charity's crush, and she feels seen for the first time: "A new note in his voice disarmed her: no one had ever spoken to her in that tone. /.../ He had her hands in his, and she was feeling the smooth touch that she had imagined the day before on the hillside" (182). Charity's blind trust in a boy she just met is naive, but not uncommon. Charity's sexual awakening takes over her life and she feels nothing is as important as spending time with Harney. She is so in awe of her first relationship that she overlooks her morals and lets the relationship consume her. After all, Harney does fall in love with Charity, but also succumbs to society's standards and eventually marries a woman from his own class.

Charity's first kiss comes as a surprise and leaves her completely speechless as she feels her dreams coming true. Harney is more than just a charming boy to Charity, he represents everything she has ever dreamed of — a good life outside of North Dormer: "An unknown Harney had revealed himself, a Harney who dominated her and yet over whom she felt herself possessed of a new mysterious power" (234). Although Charity has intense feelings of lust and love for Harney, she is constantly thinking about the stigmas in society: "It was the thing that did happen between young men and girls, and that North Dormer ignored in public and snickered over on the sly" (211). Ultimately, she decides to do what her heart wants and is ready to bear the consequences. By following her heart Charity feels liberated and becomes more and more indifferent to other people's, especially Mr. Royall's, opinion: "She was not sorry to have the neighbors suspect her of 'going with' a young man from the city; but she did not want it known to all the countryside how many hours of the long June days she spent with him" (188).

Charity's sexual awakening is portrayed through her flirtatious and intimate interactions with Harney. She feels validated by Harney paying attention to her, and his willingness to acknowledge her thoughts and feelings.

He wound his fingers through hers. "Come — let's walk a little. I want to talk to you. There's so much to say" (242).

This encourages Charity to explore her desires and challenge societal norms. As their relationship develops, Harney and Charity become closer, and their true needs and concerns are revealed through vulnerability and shared intimacy. Their interactions demonstrate a mutual understanding of identity, desire, and belonging as they attempt to handle the challenges of societal expectations and staying true to themselves.

"Kiss me again — like last night," he said, pushing her hair back as if to draw her whole face up into his kiss (245).

But because of their different upbringings, social standings, and ambitions, Harney and Charity's relationship is also tense and complicated. Their relationship is tested by both internal and external forces, highlighting the challenges and sacrifices involved in ignoring societal expectations.

"Tomorrow I shall only see you from far off," Harney continued. "But in the evening there'll be the dance in the Town Hall. Do you want me to promise not to dance with any other girl?" (253).

Charity represents the women of 1910's being pressured into becoming stereotypical housewives, while she is determined to experience real love and sexual desire. Charity's sexual awakening confines her further into dependence, rather than providing the freedom she hoped for.

## **The Female Gaze**

Charity's perspective on life and people offers a lens through which readers can explore themes of gender, power, and identity. Through Charity's gaze, we see her fighting with societal

expectations and her own desires. Charity's use of the female gaze depicts a young lady growing up in a culture that wants to limit and control her. It provides understanding of the intricacies of the female identity and the ways in which women manage their personal goals and wants inside constrictive societal norms: "Charity's heart grew cold. She understood that Miss Hatchard had no help to give her and that she would have to fight her way out of her difficulty alone" (171).

From the beginning, Charity fuels her attraction toward Harney by analyzing everything about him. She is obsessed with the first good-looking man to show her attention, and the fact that he is a city boy makes Charity feel as though it is fate. She looked at Harney as her savior from her dependence on Mr. Royall and admired everything about him:

She had liked the young man's looks, and his short-sighted eyes, and his odd way of speaking, that was abrupt yet soft, just as his hands were sunburnt and sinewy, yet with smooth nails like a woman's. His hair was sunburnt-looking too, or rather the colour of bracken after frost; his eyes grey, with the appealing look of the shortsighted, his smile shy yes confident, as if he knew lots of things she had never dreamed of, and yet wouldn't for the world have had her feel his superiority. (167)

The key moment, when Charity realizes her feelings toward Harney is when she sneaks up to his window: "Harney had put his elbows on the table and was resting his chin on his locked hands. He had taken off his coat and waistcoat and unbuttoned the low collar of his flannel shirt; she saw the vigorous lines of his young throat, and the root of the muscles where they joined the chest" (210). She feels guilty about being so infatuated with a man she just met, but something about him makes Charity stop thinking about anything else. She looks at him, when he does not know he is being watched, and analyzes his movements imagining his caring nature in their future life: "Charity had often noticed Harney's loving care of his drawings, and the neatness and method with which he carried on and concluded each task" (210). Charity believes that she and Harney share mutual feelings toward each other and assumes that any doubt Harney might have stems from Mr. Royall's meddling in their relationship. She hopes that her

connection with Harney will allow her the freedom to live her life as she pleases, free from the expectations and demands of society.

From the beginning of their relationship, Harney keeps her engagement with Annabel Balch a secret from Charity and ends up falling in love with her. Charity could sense that Harney felt different after their visit to the Mountain together, where he learned about her heritage: “Charity thought she detected a look of constraint in Harney’s eyes. She fancied he did not want to be alone with her; and with a sudden pang she wondered if he repented the tender things he had said to her the night before” (206); but despite this, she is determined to be with him and ignores the warning signs of a betrayal. Charity is happy to finally have someone who truly seems to care about her and treats her well. However, as their relationship develops, Charity’s gaze changes to show that she is becoming more conscious of Harney’s doubt in being with her: “Ever since their meeting at the Creston pool he had been subject to these brooding silences, which were as different as possible from the pauses when they ceased to speak because words were needless” (230). Charity is conscious of Harney’s higher class and constantly tells herself that he will eventually choose someone like Balch over her. Her insecurities about their relationship turn out to be intuition, and once Charity sees him and Annabel Balch sitting together at the Old Home Week celebration, she realizes that her dream of escaping Mr. Royall and North Dormer with Harney will never come true:

In a flash they had shown her the bare reality of her situation. Behind the frail screen of her lover’s caresses was the whole inscrutable mystery of his life: his relations with other people — with other women — his opinions, his prejudices, his principles, the net of influences and interests and ambitions in which every man’s life is entangled. (259)

After finding out that Harney is engaged to Annabel Balch from her best friend Ally Hawes, Charity is enraged and rips up a lacy blouse Hawes was sewing for Balch. She goes through many stages of betrayal and eventually keeps telling herself that Harney will come back

to her, as she is not ready to let go of her dreams of a life outside of the constraints of North Dormer. Charity's first breakup takes a toll on her and she goes to Nettleton to the doctors, only to find out that she is pregnant with Harney's child; she is pressured into an abortion, but ultimately decides to keep the baby as a memory of her first love and sacrifices her own happiness to offer her child the best chance at life by marrying Mr. Royall, thus never breaking free from being dependent on men. Charity believes that her road to independence is not over, as Mr. Royall represents stability in Charity's life, offering her security and protection when she has no one else to go to. Additionally, Charity's gaze toward Mr. Royall is influenced by her own evolving sense of self and her desires for independence. In this light, her return to Mr. Royall can be viewed as a complicated decision between external pressures and internal desires, depicting the difficulties of being a woman in a patriarchal society.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to analyze feminist themes in Edith Wharton's *Summer*, with a specific focus on three topics: women depending on men, sexual awakening, and the female gaze. In the literature review chapter, it was found that *Summer* is one of the least researched of Wharton's novels despite it being a radically feminist novel dissecting society's expectations for women. Studies that have analyzed the feminist aspects in *Summer*, revealed a strong correlation between how gender roles are depicted in fiction and how they appear in the social, lived world. Studies on the societal expectations of 20th century American women revealed the lack of choices or support and thus the impossibility of becoming completely independent from men.

Through a close reading of the novel, it was found that the main character Charity is dependent on her guardian Mr. Royall, who sees her as more than a teenage girl. Although she finds strength to fight back against her guardian's advances, she ends up having to tolerate emotional and verbal abuse as a result. The contrast between Charity's rebellion, Mr. Royall's possessiveness, and social pressures depicts male control and how difficult it is for women to become independent. Her outings with her suitor, Lucius Harney, are constantly questioned and any sign of premarital sexual relations result in judgment from the society and her guardian. She attempts to break free from her dependence on her guardian by becoming dependent on another man. She believes it to be a better option, as she fantasizes about her life with a young city boy but ends up being disappointed when he as well succumbs to society's expectations and marries a woman of similar status.

The main character's sexual awakening ultimately steers her toward dependence. Inexperience paired with the feeling of mutual infatuation drives her to abandon her fear of having to conform to society's expectations. Her sexual awakening helps her understand herself

and she refuses to be ashamed of her love for Harney. Her feelings of lust and love are so strong that she is ready to bear any consequences that come from her actions. Her sexual awakening also leaves her blind to her suitor's secret life in the city and experiences her first heartbreak shortly after her first love. She experiences the heartbreaking lesson of unfulfilled goals and faces the disappointment of betrayal, despite her original hopes of finding freedom through love. Although she matures in the process and discovers her self-confidence, she ends up confined to a dependent relationship with a less-than-desirable man.

The main character's female gaze attracts her toward her suitor even more, as she projects her fantasies onto him. Her obsession with him represents her want for release from the conditions of her upbringing, but it also ultimately brings to light the harsh reality of her situation. She sees him as her savior and interprets every small action as an act of love and care. She chooses to ignore the somewhat distant behavior because for the first time she feels understood and cared for. Even after her suitor reveals his relationship with another woman, she believes he will come back to her one day. Having his baby is another attempt at keeping him close and always having a part of him with her. Her choice to keep her child also shows her resilience and how determined she is to find meaning and purpose in the face of hardship. She understands the sacrifices she must make to ensure security and safety in a world with limited options for independence, which is why she decided to marry Mr. Royall.

In conclusion, this study found that *Summer* depicts many feminist themes and sheds light on the difficulties of being a woman in 20th century USA. While *Summer* depicts a female character that is willing to make sacrifices to experience a forbidden love, the novel shows that becoming independent in such a society is nearly impossible. The main character of *Summer* represents the women of 20th century America and their struggle toward social and sexual freedom.

Although this study analyzed some feminist themes in *Summer*, more extensive studies could be written about other topics of feminism and how Wharton's work has been viewed within feminist literary criticism.

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## RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL  
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

**Erde-Mari Lehtpuu**

**Breaking Free from Depending on men in Edith Wharton's *Summer***

**Meestest sõltumisest vabanemine Edith Whartoni romaanis „Summer“**

Bakalaureusetöö

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Lehekülgede arv: 33

Annotatsioon:

Käesolev bakalaureusetöö analüüsib meestest sõltumisest vabanemist Edith Whartoni romaanis „Summer,“ keskendudes täpsemalt meestest sõltumisele, seksuaalsele tärkamisele ja naiste pilgule. Töö peamine eesmärk on välja selgitada, kuidas eelmainitud feminismi aspektid teoses avalduvad ning analüüsida romaani kõrvutades see ajaloo ja ühiskonnaga.

Bakalaureusetöö jaguneb neljaks osaks: sissejuhatus, kirjanduse ülevaade, romaani analüüs ja kokkuvõte. Sissejuhatuses on esindatud teose „Summer“ taust ja selle olulisus feministlikuks analüüsimiseks. Lisaks on sissejuhatuses selgitatud romaani ajaloolist tausta ning milliseid tolle aja ühiskondlikke probleeme see käsitleb. Kirjanduse ülevaade annab ülevaate romaani kohta tehtud varasematest analüüsides ning feminismist kirjanduses. Romaani analüüs põhineb teose läbilugemisel ning vaatleb lähemalt meestest sõltumise, seksuaalse tärkamise ja naiste pilgu kujutamist teoses. Analüüs toetub Annette Kolodny feministlikule teooriale ning feministlikule kirjanduskriitikale.

Kokkuvõtteks on Edith Whartoni „Summer“ radikaalselt feministlik teos, mis käsitleb mitmeid erinevaid feminismi aspekte. Samuti kujutab „Summer“ 19. sajandi ja 20. sajandi naiste rolli USA ühiskonnas ning näitab millised ühiskondlikud stereotüübid naistele survet avaldasid. Romaani peategelane Charity on valmis tegema ohvreid, et kogeda keelatud armastust, kuid jõuab järeldusele, et sellises ühiskonnas on iseseisvaks saamine peaaegu võimatu. Summeri peategelane esindab 20. sajandi Ameerika naisi ja nende võitlust ühiskondliku ning seksuaalse vabaduse poole.

Märksõnad:

Ameerika kirjandus, feminism, feministlik kirjanduskriitika, Edith Wharton, Summer

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