

Creativity Bound: The Cupid and Psyche Myth in Edith Wharton's *The Gods Arrive*

Edith Wharton (1862-1937) uses elements of Apuleius' Cupid and Psyche myth in earlier works, such as the short story, "The Lamp of Psyche" and in her novel *The Reef* to narrate the illusions of love. In Wharton's last published novel, *The Gods Arrive* (1932), the sequel to *Hudson River Bracketed* (1929), she develops the theme of Cupid and Psyche once again in the protagonist writer, Vance Weston, and his muse, Halo Spear. As previously, Wharton uses the allusion to narrate the suspicion and disenchantment that begin to seep into their relationship, but extends the metaphors of lamps, wings, and chains to develop Vance's creative journey, which is bound up in Vance's love affair with Halo. Wharton, who read Plato's *Republic*, *Symposium*, and the *Phaedrus*, incorporates Platonic elements along with the Cupid and Psyche myth to narrate of the journeys of both the artist and the muse. [Get Carol Singley's observation in here.]

Halo, in speaking of artists pursuing their calling, terms the end result their "salvation" (Wharton 201). For Vance the creative process is, in part, a development of his soul, and his story is told in terms of revelation and spiritual conversion. Halo and Vance each assume the roles of both Cupid and Psyche. At times Vance is the figure of Psyche, as he craves spiritual and creative transcendence. Halo is the divine Cupid figure who provides the means to his achieving this. At other times Halo is Psyche, who is not certain she can bear the happiness Vance offers her (Wharton 11).

Just as Psyche is tempted by her curiosity to see the divine in the forms of her husband and Proserpina's beauty, Vance too desires to see things, for which he is not ready. Costas Panayotakis, in discussing the importance of vision in the Cupid and Psyche story, compares Psyche's seeing Cupid to the vision of the prisoners in Plato's allegory of the cave, who could be dazzled by the sun if they could behold it. Halo experiences this as she looks into her future

happiness with Vance to find “she was like someone stepping into hot sunlight from a darkened room . . . And to look at the future was like staring into the sun” (Wharton 11). Vance’s education in Europe also reflects this theme obscured vision, as he is drawn to a dilettante learner, whose “talk was a blurred window; but through it the boy [Vance] caught glimpses of the summits” (Wharton 48). Halo realizes that she could give him a clearer view of those heights, but recognizes the gulf between her “traditional culture and Vance’s untutored curiosities” (Wharton 48).

Eventually Vance begins to move away from Halo’s realm of influence and dawdles unproductively. As his creative life is at the core of their relationship, Halo finds “there were times when she caught herself praying for that next book as lonely wives pray for a child” (Wharton 88). Just as the immortality of Psyche’s child depends upon her obedience to Cupid, the book resulting from Vance’s rush into the unknown is a personal failure, though a critical success. His first successful novel is born of his collaboration with Halo, and the further he moves from Halo’s direction, the more his books devolve into imitation and echo. Vance is led astray by various other influences, just as Psyche succumbs to the temptations posed by her sisters.

Halo, primarily desiring to create an environment where Vance’s writing can thrive, does not wish want to hold Vance back or act as chains; she wants to provide wings; however, it is ironically the freedom she grants Vance that inhibits his creativity, supporting one major theme of Vance Weston’s journey, which constitutes the final advice of his grandmother: “Maybe we haven’t made enough of pain – been too afraid of it. Don’t be afraid of it” (Wharton 409). Psyche must live within certain limits, wander, and ultimately toil before her reunion with Cupid and her rise to immortality. Similarly, Vance’s ascension to creativity involves wandering and feeds off

of suffering. He discovers that his most transcendent writing experiences are born out of pain and suspects his talent is an “ogre” that lives “on human suffering” (Wharton 261). Freedom from suffering and lack of limits is akin to the largeness of the things that Vance cannot wholly take in. In order to realize his creativity, he must be bound in order to soar.

Works Cited

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