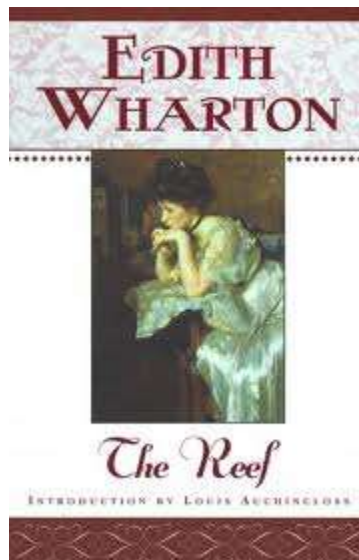


# The Quest for Emotional Freedom- Anna Leath in Edith Wharton's *The Reef*

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## Anna's Struggle

*The Reef* chronicles Anna's struggle to free herself from the prison of her existence, and half of the book is from the point of view of the trapped woman herself. For Anna, life at Givre was:

like groping about in a huge dark lumber – room where the exploring ray of curiosity lit up now some shape of breathing beauty and now a mummy's grin. (TR 95)

Now that Fraser Leath, her husband, has died, she is looking for love to release her from this spell of unreality. Anna seeks this release from a man as conventional as

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herself, one who is also trapped in the conventional pattern of thinking that categorizes women as either ‘fallen or pure’.

It is Anna Leath, the protagonist of the novel, who has attempted to live the role of the good woman and who has suffered from the restrictions of the role. Brought up in the typical old New York way, Anna has been schooled in reticence, evasion, and a kind of artificial serenity that have denied her any sexuality and caused her to suffocate in a boring marriage to a dilettante. As Wershoven observes, “**The Reef** analyses in great detail the pain and misery that ensue when society establishes the false polarities of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ in dealing with its women” (96).

### **The Setting of Conflicts in *The Reef***

Most of the major conflicts of *The Reef* take place in one setting, a French Chateau Givre, peopled by a very small group of characters. Givre is more than a stark background putting its inhabitants into sharper focus. It is a symbol of the isolated, safe world of the novel’s main character Anna Leath. It is Anna’s home and significantly, when Anna is forced out of the secure simplicity of her previous ways of thinking, she leaves Givre and travels to Paris. The novel both begins and ends with the real life of Paris, but the major portion of the book concerns the impact of reality on that fortress of innocence, Givre.

### **A Novel of Mid-Life Love**

In *The Reef*, a novel of mid-life love, Edith Wharton depicts a woman who is yearning to break out of her sexual inhibitions but ultimately she is unable to do so. “Unexpected obstacle” (TR 3) the sharp first words of the novel foreshadows the reef of inhibitions hidden beneath the flood of Anna Leath’s rising passion.

When Edith Wharton wrote *The Reef*, she was learning about her husband's flagrant infidelities after years of sexless marriage and coming to a new understanding of sexuality in men as well as in herself. It was shortly before their divorce that Edith Wharton was taking in the meaning of their belated sexual adventures, the gratifying as well as the sordid aspects. At age fifty, even after the Fullerton affair, she still had much to learn. She continued her emotional education by revisiting her own acquired and almost invincible sexual ignorance in the character of Anna Leath.

### **The Beginning**

Twenty years before the novel begins, George Darrow, now a diplomat was in love with Anna, but their relationship disintegrated for reasons no longer clear to him. When they meet in England after a twelve-year separation, Anna is now widowed, and they fall in love again. Having proposed to her, Darrow is twice put off from getting an answer. Her second postponement of his visit – this time while he is enroute to Givre, her late husband's chateau in France precipitates the action and helps unravel their relationship once again. Anna sends Darrow a telegram that reaches him as his train for Dover is about to leave: "Unexpected obstacle. Please don't come till the thirtieth" (TR 3). All the way to Dover he feels hammered by the telegram's words and in a rain storm at Dover he feels "stung and blinded" (TR 3) "by a fresh fury of derision" (TR 3). Anna's message leaves a "mocking echo" (TR 9) and twice more Darrow is struck by the derision of his case. Struggling through the crowded station, he is obscurely outraged. He feels:

It was as though all the people about him had taken his measure and known his plight; as though they were contemptuously bumping and shoving him like the inconsiderable thing he had become. "She doesn't want you, doesn't want you, doesn't want you", their umbrellas and their elbows seemed to say. (TR 11)

## **Anna's Delay**

Anna's telegram, her second delay, has clearly plunged him into the torment of shame, which is the affective core of Darrow's sense of being fooled and abandoned, and of his doubts that she truly wants him. Darrow worries about Anna's indifference. After their long separation, Darrow finds Anna subtly and beautifully changed by marriage and widowhood. She is now "a finer and surer ... instrument of expression" (TR 4), who is no longer "elusive and inaccessible" but "communicative and kind" (TR 6). Darrow senses that his meeting with her had annihilated the intervening years. Anna, by postponing Darrow's visit to Givre, inadvertently triggers his shame, and then rage – both of which divide him from Anna.

## **Picturing a Future Together**

After all these years Darrow finds Anna again and pictures a future together, one in which she will help him reach his goal of being a writer and scholar. Darrow's hopes are destroyed again when he pictures finding a letter from Anna at his Paris hotel. He had even gone so far as to imagine that its contents might annul the writer's telegraphed injunction, and call him to her side at once. Darrow finds that:

Mrs. Leath had not written – she had not taken the trouble to explain the telegram. Darrow turned away with a sharp pang of humiliation. Her frugal silence mocked his prodigality of hopes and fears.(TR 47)

Darrow has plummeted from the heights of being a man in love, a man with an exciting future, to nothing more than an inconsiderable thing, "an anonymous rag" (TR 17) shoved around at a train station.

When Darrow is certain that Anna has not written, he feels deeply disappointed. Thinking of Anna as trivial or insincere is so painful; such a violation of his image of her, that he feels a blind desire to punish someone else for the pain of this perception.

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The ‘someone’ Darrow can punish is close at hand, in the next room, Sophy Viner, whom he meets at Dover, and accompanies him to Paris. In London, Sophy had been the secretary of a vulgar hostess, Mrs. Murrett, whose barely respectable ‘salon’ Darrow used to visit in amorous pursuit of Lady Ulrica, who was apparently no lady. At Dover, where Darrow shares his umbrella with Sophy, offering to help locate her lost luggage, he only recognizes her face, though Sophy remembers him well. Darrow is intrigued by natural, comradely, enthusiastic Sophy, but his already keen sense of exposure is unexpectedly heightened early in the first conversation. He discovers that Sophy and others had observed him at Mrs. Murrett’s, talked about him and mocked Lady Ulrica as well. Darrow feels: “It was odd ... to discover suddenly that the blurred tapestry of Mrs. Murrett’s background had all the while been alive and full of eyes” (TR 17-18).

### **Sophy’s Lonely Life**

Orphaned and poor, alone in a busy and indifferent world, Sophy has had a sad, lonely life with little joy in it, and Darrow soon realizes through her conversation about acting and Paris that she has been starved for experience, for someone to talk to and share her enthusiasms with. He finds great pleasure in squiring her around Paris, to the theater, enjoying her enjoyment and his ability to provide it. Even more than delighting in her exuberance and freshness, Darrow feels proud again, important and strong in her presence. Sophy appeals to him as an expert on the theater, and the difference with which she receives his comments called from him more ideas about the theater than he had ever supposed himself to possess. When they dine out, he does not feel sorry to be seen with her in public, and at the theater, he basks in “the primitive complacency of the man at whose companion other men stare” (TR 50). With Sophy, Darrow is anything but an inconsiderable being. He is a man who attracts admiring and not mocking attention or at least perceives himself that way.

### **Ownership and Public Display**

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At Givre, Anna's chateau, Darrow thinks of Anna in terms of ownership and public display. He imagines her as a picture so hung that it can be seen only at an angle known to no one but the possessor. In the words of the author:

He reflected with satisfaction that she was the kind of woman with whom one would like to be seen in public. It would be distinctly agreeable to follow her into the drawing-rooms, to walk after her down the aisle of a theater, to get in and out of trains with her, to say 'my wife' of her to all sorts of people. (TR 130)

Darrow feels something quite different about Anna from that real and imagined satisfaction when he is with Sophy in Dover and Paris. Sophy's presence sparks the dormant habit of comparison, in Darrow. He feels with disdainful insight, Anna is the end result of "the deadening process of forming a lady"(TR 29) hemmed in by inscrutable "abandonements and reluctances" (TR 27) "reticences and evasions" (TR 29) "hesitations and reserves" (TR 29). He imagines Anna in Sophy's place. Alone in a train compartment with him, not knowing him well, she would be restless, embarrassed, uncomfortable, not unruffled like Sophy. These observations are a response to his great disappointment in Anna's not responding to his proposal. To diminish and criticize her is to ease his own pain and himself feel superior. Tomkins comments:

When shame proves too painful to be tolerated .... When the shamed one despairs of ever achieving communion again... then he may defend himself against his longing by renouncing the love object and expressing contempt for the person he cannot have. (Raphael 68)

A sense of superiority is obviously vital to Darrow, and suggests deep-rooted shame. Though he is intrigued by not being able to categorize Sophy Viner, he definitely feels she is an aesthetic and intellectual inferior.

## Switching from Anna to Sophy

Darrow's disparagement of Anna helps lay the foundation for his brief liaison with Sophy, as does his disappointment. In the reaction of his wounded vanity, after not getting a telegram from Anna, Darrow finds Sophy prettier and more interesting than before. He can do more than give Sophy a few hours of amusement between a depressing past and a not particularly cheerful future. He can restore his sense of power and control, can try to overcome his feelings of humiliation by imposing himself on a powerless, virtually friendless young woman who is without a job, without character references and without any resources but her own charm. It is not callousness, libertinism, boredom or cruelty that makes him seduce Sophy – it is ultimately the shame and humiliation Anna has all unknowingly triggered in him.

When Darrow forgets to mail Sophy's letter to friends who might have found employment for her, he is not just prolonging his enjoyment of her company, or unconsciously preparing to seduce her. To send her letter and thus speed her departure is to deliver himself up to the painful feelings he has been trying to stave off, that is, "the fruitless contemplation of his private grievance" (TR 34). In Sophy's company, Darrow has been progressively feeling more powerful and this change also guarantees that Sophy's letter will remain in his pocket. He does not admit to Sophy that he never sent her letter and also throws Anna's letter, which comes on the last day of his leave, into the fire.

The excitement of his pursuit of Sophy quickly turns into boredom and disgust. Before he remembered her name back in Dover, he sensed that she was connected with "something uncomfortable and distasteful" (TR 14). That connection to his chase after Lady Ulrica seems to balance and overpower his feeling that this adventure is outside of any category of experience he has known. His rage at Anna sullies any real attraction he had for Sophy.

When Darrow answers another letter of Anna's four months later and arrives at her chateau, he finds Sophy there as governess to Anna's daughter Effie. Their discovery begins what is a long nightmare for Darrow of lying and subterfuge, a period when each evening seems to bring "its new problem and its renewed distress" (TR 192). Initially, Darrow must at all costs keep his liaison with Sophy a secret from Anna, who wants to know more about the woman caring for her daughter, as she and Darrow intend to travel to South America after their marriage without the little girl. These interviews in which Anna seeks information about Sophy are intensely painful for Darrow, who is fighting "the insidious taint" (TR 156) of his affair with her. Seeing Sophy again, Darrow is ashamed to realize that in their liaison he had fallen below his own standard of sentimental loyalty, to any women, let alone Anna. Even worse, he discovers that Sophy is afraid that he will harm her, though she is not ashamed of their relationship. Once again, this man who has such high expectations of his future, and whose sense of self is precariously at the mercy of other's opinions is left face to face with the mere graceless fact of his inferiority.

### **Confusion Deepens**

Darrow's confusion deepens to utter helplessness when he discovers that Sophy is engaged to Anna's stepson Owen Leath. Sophy would be present at family gatherings, holidays, or at the very least, always close through correspondence, because Owen and Anna are so devoted to each other. There would be grand children. The affair he is now so ashamed of would never be over because Darrow would have no opportunity to forget having fallen beneath his own standards, of having betrayed Anna and subsequently lied to her.

After Darrow knows that Sophy loves him and is breaking off her engagement with Owen and planning to leave the chateau, Darrow admits to Anna that he had never guessed at Sophy's deep feelings for him. Once Anna has divined the nature of Darrow's



previous relationship with Sophy, Darrow has to deal with her almost morbid curiosity about the liaison and her struggles to understand it and the man she thought she knew.

### **Anna's Life**

Growing up in New York, Anna was profoundly rejected by her family and milieu, made to feel deficient and inferior. A girl with an innate appreciation of poetry and adventure, Anna had the misfortune to be raised “in a well-regulated, well-fed ... world where the unusual was regarded as either immoral or ill-bred and people with emotions were not visited” (TR 86). It was a starved youth for Anna, who eventually came to see life as ordinary and unexciting, “swept and fenced and tended” (TR 87).

Anna learned to see herself in comparison with other girls who seemed more alive and knowing and who possessed of some vital secret that escaped her. In the words of the novelist:

There seemed to be a kind of freemasonry between them; they were wider awake than she, more alert and surer of their wants if not their opinions ... the resulting sense of exclusion, of being somehow laughingly but firmly debarred from a share of their privileges, threw her back on herself and deepened the reserve which made envious mothers cite her as a model of lady-like repression. (TR 87)

Anna feels alienated and defeated. Her reserve leaves a lifetime stamp on her social behavior in the form of shyness, which was an affliction of Wharton's, who describes it as a dreaded disease. Anna is not just sexually repressed – the heavy hand of repression crushes her essential self. She is so bound by convention, that talking to Darrow as a girl, “the things she really wanted to say choked in her throat and burned the palms of her hands” (TR 89). Her inability to share what she felt with Darrow has a continuous source of self-mockery, adding to the mockery of other girls.

For Anna, her sense of herself as deficient in comparison with other girls helped destroy her early relationship with Darrow. At a dinner party, Anna observed Darrow talking to a “luminous, perilous obscurely menacing” (TR 89) young girl, Kitty Mayne, with a look in his eyes Anna both detested and longed for. Darrow’s response to Kitty thus inadvertently called forth Anna’s sense of being less attractive and exciting than other girls – a reaction Darrow was apparently unable to recognize. For Anna, the inability to express paralyzed her speech, and she felt immobilized, trapped and alone. Anna was unable to tell Darrow that she felt:

as if he were leagues and leagues away from her. All her hopes dissolved and she was conscious of sitting rigidly, with high head and straight lips, while the irresistible word fled with a last wing beat into the golden mist of her illusions. (TR 90)

Anna suffers deeply from cultural prohibition all her life. She vacillates between a sense of feeling and of not feeling.

### **Stifling Environment**

The poetry and passion in Anna have been silenced and conquered by her stifling environment. She married Fraser Leath, a dilettante living in an atmosphere of art and beauty. He offered her escape. Leath did more than flatter her taste. He restored her self confidence and countered her shame, or seemed to by respecting her opinions and implying that he thought her superior to her surroundings. Leath made her feel for the first time that she was understood.

For a girl feeling inept in the intercourse with men, less womanly and attractive than her friends, such sentiments were an anodyne. Discovering that a handsome, dignified, impressive man whom she admired for his values and taste deemed her his equal partially restored her self-confidence. But basing her self-esteem on the opinions of others made no real and lasting change in how she had come to feel about herself.

Still the marriage was a great disappointment for Anna. She felt that she was cold to Leath, and soon after their marriage she discovered him to be rigid and conventional. In the words of the novelist:

Life to Mr. Leath was like a walk through a carefully classified Museum, where in moments of doubt, one had only to look at the number and refer to one's catalogue. (TR 95)

### **Exchange of One Prison to Another**

Anna just exchanges one prison for another. To have hoped for freedom but to have found only a different kind of restriction is to suffer repression once again. Her visions laden with excitement and joy have been shattered, and her chateau in France is “the very symbol of narrowness and monotony” (TR 84). It is a dull, inconvenient place of duties, habits, defects, discomforts and shabbiness. Such a marriage ultimately confirms her sense of not being valuable and worthwhile.

The desperate need to feel wanted for who she is, fuels her renewed love for Darrow when they meet again in London. At Givre, she feels him transfixed just by her presence. The unassailable happiness he seems to offer is to love her without desiring any change. Anna knew that:

Every inflexion of her voice, every gesture, every characteristic of her person – its very defects, the fact that her forehead was too high, that her eyes were not large enough, that her hands, though slender, were not small, and that the fingers did not taper – she knew that these deficiencies were so many channels through which her influence streamed to him; that she pleased him inspite of them, perhaps because of them; that he wanted her as she was and not as she would have liked to be; and for the first time she felt in her veins the security and lightness of happy love. (TR 122)

Later, at the end of a long and tiring day, Anna gazes into her mirror and thinks: “I want him to see me as I am” (TR 124). Anna thinks that deeper than the deepest fibre of her vanity, was the triumphant sense that, as she was, with her flattened hair, her tired pallor, her thin sleeves a little tumbled by the weight of her jacket, he would like her even better, feel her nearer, dearer, more desirable, than in all the splendours she might put on for him.

For a woman who has suffered a marriage in which she felt like a prisoner tapping out messages on her cell wall, what could be more deliriously liberating? Darrow’s love of the flawed and human woman she is, can perhaps give her permission to love herself and give up longing to ‘be’ as she would have liked to be – like those girls of her youth.

Anna feels exposed when Darrow wants to know whether she will not regret leaving Givre. To readily admit that, would be to disclose her long empty years. And going to sleep the first night when he is at the chateau she feels “like a slave, and a goddess and a girl in her teens ...” (TR 125). Each image is quite revealing. Darrow has too much power over her as if she is a slave, power that would be all hers, however, as a goddess.

### **A Fairy-tale Pattern**

There is a fairy-tale pattern underlying **The Reef** in which Anna awaits a man to wake her from her sleep. What she awakens to, however, after a brief time of joy, is a nightmare, far worse than Darrow’s. The first blow comes with discovering that Sophy loves Darrow. From feeling completely secure in his arms, Anna plunges into a vision of Darrow looking at her from “a place of graves”(TR 274). And when she realizes that

Sophy and Darrow have been lovers, it seems to Anna that her life had ended just as she had dreamed it was beginning. All her previous years of pain seem dim, historical, as she

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is stretched on this fiery rack of the irreparable suffering “as a hurt animal must blindly, furiously”.(TR 285).

Darrow has proved to be untrustworthy and Anna has been reminded of her deficiencies as a woman. Even before the discovery of Darrow’s relationship with Sophy, Sophy had called forth in Anna her

romantic and almost humble admiration for those members of her sex, who, from a force of will, or the constraint of circumstances, had plunged into the conflict from which fate had so persistently excluded her. There were even moments when she fancied herself vaguely to blame for the immunity and felt that she ought somehow to have affronted the perils and hardships which refused to come to her. (TR 234)

Anna desperately needs to believe that, what has happened to her was “a hideous accident”, that “life was not like that” (TR 302). Above all, she needs to believe that “she was worthy” (TR 302) of the love she had dreamed about because everything seems to confirm her unworthiness. The whole seemingly inexplicable business torments Anna with the desire to know more, to understand better, to feel herself less ignorant and inexperienced in matters which made so much of the stuff of human experience. Sophy knows all of that, Anna believes, daunted by Sophy’s knowledge and her intense passion. Anna fears that she will never be to Darrow what Sophy was.

Anna wants to be Darrow’s lover, which makes it impossible for her to feel herself different from Sophy - that is superior. She even spends a night with Darrow out of humiliation at thinking that he doesn’t want her, and fury at her own inability to express her longing: “Don’t I feel things as other women do?”(TR 342) she wonders. Rather than releasing her, this night leaves her with a new reason to feel ashamed. In a train compartment the next day, Anna hides her eyes from Darrow, flushes with “the desire to shield herself” (TR 345), and is surprised to detect a new element in her love for him: “a sort of suspicious tyrannical tenderness that seemed to deprive it of all serenity”

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(TR 345-346). Sophy seems stronger to Anna, surer of her power to carry out her purpose of giving Owen Leath up, while Anna vacillates between rejecting Darrow and claiming him forever. Sophy, Anna thinks, would also have guessed about an affair sooner than she. Anna has always been painfully aware “of her lack of penetration” (TR 246).

### **Sophy to the Rescue of Anna**

In the end, Anna feels, it is only Sophy Viner who could save her – who could give her back her lost serenity. Anna had been incredibly humiliated thus far, by not knowing about the brief affair and hiring Sophy, who could have become her daughter-in-law; by discovering Darrow to be utterly different from her expectations, and untruthful; by being made to feel once again unwomanly, unwanted.

Anna feels so intolerable that she can only seek refuge in the seemingly wild and improbable act of going in search of Sophy and telling her that she has given up Darrow. But Sophy is already gone back to her previous employer Mrs. Murrett and Anna is faced with a ménage in which Sophy’s sister seems to be a prostitute.

The entire experience fills Anna with even more contempt for her limitations:

She looked back with a melancholy derision on her old conceptions of life, as a kind of well-lit and well policed suburb to dark places one need never know about. Here they were, those dark places, in one’s own bosom ....  
(TR 353)

When eventually Anna is forced to give up her too-long-protected innocence and recognize the “dark places” in her own bosom that she would “always have to traverse ... to reach the beings she loved best” (TR 353), she is left alone in the “desert of a sorrow without memories” (TR 302). Her belated education has left her terrified by partial insights and lurid visions. She concludes, with anguish that she will never know what Sophy had known.

## Remains a Prisoner

Though presented as a woman of charm and grace, Anna remains a prisoner of the inhibitions, narcissism and rigid mores inculcated by her old New York upbringing. Anna is passionate, jealous, and possessive in her love. She is both limited and protected by convention and by belief in monogamous marriage. Anna though controlled and outwardly passive, she refuses to accept infidelity and is stern about the banishing of a rival, even a woman previously seen favourably as a member of the family. Anna appears to be old fashioned, but she is ahead of her time in rejecting a double standard.

Through a flashback technique used at various points in the novel, Wharton economically reveals the origins of Anna's complex nature and of her present reactions to Sophy by showing Anna as she was before her first marriage. Interested even then, in Darrow, she had tried to appear unemotional, though she had longed to kiss him; and she mistakenly thought that her lack of demonstrable ardor would awaken his passion. At this point, Darrow had felt attracted to her but not to the extent of being willing to surrender his bachelor freedom; and Anna had become intensely jealous of less inhibited and less proper women who win their men. When Anna Leath learns of Sophy's affair with Darrow, she experiences resurgence of the frustrated desire and of the acute jealousy of freer women that she had felt some fifteen years earlier.

## Considerable Sympathy

Edith Wharton explores Anna's confused reactions in great detail and with considerable sympathy, but the analysis only reinforces the impression of Anna as a woman, "over fastidious by nature and so molded by social training that she cannot face the realities of life (Weshoven, The Female, 105).

Lawson observes "Anna is a victim of an overly repressive, highly artificial social system" (61). Realizing that the process of becoming a lady has deadened her, Anna fears

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that the private self she has been waiting to share is permanently trapped behind the veil that “always hung between her and life (TR 86). Anna is trapped, and the ending does resonate with the futility of every attempt to reconstruct her ruined world.

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