

# Levinas's Otherness Study: Focusing on Edith Wharton's *Summer*

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**Abstract:** This paper is to examine otherness in *Summer*. The theory is based on Levinas's otherness. Emmanuel Levinas(1906-1995) suffered from being imprisoned and lost his two brothers by Nazism during the second war. He believed that the other's face was a revelation of God. That is, he considered that the self seeing face to face with Other must have a sense of responsibility. The other has femininity. The other is primarily the weak, the poor, children and female. *Charity in Summer* which is Edith Wharton's novel is the other to Mr. Royall who is her legal guardian. In the end, Mr. Royall accepted her as his wife, which is explained by the other's face of Levinas. The world gets unsympathetic, therefore Levinas's philosophy encourages us to interest the weak.

**Keywords:** Levinas, otherness, Charity, Summer, a sense of responsibility

## 1. Instruction

According to Emmanuel Levinas(12 January 1906 – 25 December 1995), the *other* is named the outside of ego. L. Feuerbach is a philosopher who called into question other's centered being, first demanding conversion on the way of private ownership in liberal center. Emmanuel Levinas explored fundamentally other's ethical significance. The other philosophers tended to assimilate the *other* but ego with ego. Instead of that, he separated the *other* out of ego. In other words, he didn't agree to other philosophers' thoughts on the *other*.

Therefore, Levinas's philosopher puts emphasis on awareness of unity and ethics of others when we confront other's painful face. The *other* can be called children, the weak, or the old. Their faces simply don't mean eye, nose, and mouth but resemble God. The face which suffers from agony authorize the person of being opposite to it a sense of responsibility.

Like this, based on Emmanuel Levinas's thoughts *Summer*(1917), Edith Wharton's novel, contains a sense of responsibility. "The Great War, a contest for dominance of the European continent, was also about global empire, about the European nations' colonies in other parts of the world, realms routinely conceptualized. By the colonizers as dark, wild, uncivilized places I need of Western law and order"(Wharton xxii). North Dormer, Massachusetts, which Charity lives in, is the place where is hard to "access to the glorious possibilities" ( Wharton xix). In the introduction of *Summer*, Ammons (Elizabeth Ammons) described that "*Summer* attacks the intellectual aridity and moral stagnation of small-town America"(Wharton xxii). In such a poor and boring place, Charity dreams her ideal world. However, she is from the Mountain which is far poorer and brutal. The Mountain and North Dormer are connected with Charity. And there are the poor and the weak in both places, say, Juliet— in fact, people as well as Charity blame her and a victim who is similar to Charity— in North Dormer and including Liff Hyatt, Charity's mother in the Mountain. Of all, especially the late of this novel, the heroin Charity Royall's face in agony has Mr. Royall rescue her. That is one of the most typical exam of a sense of joint responsibility for others.

## 2. Levinas and other's face

Levinas mentioned that "the *other* isn't equivalent to my own. Rather he/she is my owner amid his/her poverty and agony. When I get out myself and support him/her, then I am equal to the *other*"(Levinas 1948, p.140). The other is "being needing my interest and care for his/her life"(Levinas 1948, p.144-145). Next, I explore Levinas's philosophy and subject and the *other* through Mr. Royall and Charity in *Summer*.

## 2.1. Levinas's experience and philosophy

Emmanuel Levinas was born in Lithuania, and he was Jewish. So he lost his little brothers by the Nazi regime and he himself had captured in prison during the first World War. He learned Russian language when he was a child and lived other two Europe countries. Accordingly, he was called 'four culture' by many philosophers.

Based on experiencing the first World War, Levinas cognized the ills of religion and war. That was an totality. Levinas's book *Totality and Infinity* (1961), was written as "his Doctorat d'État primary thesis" ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emmanuel\\_Levinas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emmanuel_Levinas)). According to him, the totality is not accepted the others themselves and brings about war. In other wards, subject tends to integrate other. Here the *other* is the face that subject faces. He insisted that the *other* be separated from subject. It is 'Infinite'. Then his thought differed from other philosophers. He emphasizes his philosophy through other's face. Here, a face doesn't referred to eyes, a nose and mouth. the *other's* face is the metaphor of the weak and the old and children and females. New York Times wrote Levinas's philosophy like this:

Dr. Levinas's alternative to traditional approaches was a philosophy that made personal ethical responsibility to others the starting point and primary focus for philosophy, rather than a secondary reflection that followed explorations of the nature of existence and the validity of knowledge. (Steinfels, *New York Times* 1995)

Howard mentioned that "Charity Royall has much in common with Lilly Bart, who reviews her family history one final time before her death"(Howard 146). Their families are collapsed by economy and industry society. Charity's home is held in contempt as a marginal place, so her family is scattered. Similarly, Lily Bart, a protagonist of *The House of Mirth* (1905), is demoted as an outsider of social world after her father's business was ruined. When they fall into despair, Charity barely manages to be rescued by Mr. Royall. On the other hand, Lily decides to kill herself by taking too many pills. Levinas experienced severe mental and physical torture during the Great War. Therefore, he refused other philosophers' thoughts and created his thought of the *other's* face. As we can know these "when Charity looks at her mother's face; There was no sign in it of anything human; she lay there like a dead dog in a ditch. Charity's hands grew cold as they touched her," (143) Charity experiences and understands Julia and her mother.

As early mentioned, Levinas emphasized the other's face a revelation of God. Therefore we must have a sense of responsibility for the other. Charity's father's and Charity's faces have Mr. Royall feel a sense of responsibility.

## 2.2. Subject and the *other*: Mr. Royall and Charity

Levinas mentioned that subject must draw back from every object, and only can stay for itself(Levinas 1947, p. 80). According to New York Times published on December 25, 1995, his writings were filled with strikingly phrased insights and with key terms and concepts -- reflections, for example, on the "face of the other," or on "exteriority" or "moral proximity" -- that reverberated in other philosophers' writings (Steinfels, New York Times 1995). In Summer, North Dormer and the Mountain are explained as subject and the other. "The Mountain belongs to this township, and it's North Dormer's fault if there's a gang of thieves and outlaws living over there, in sight of us, defying the laws of their country" (Wharton, Summer 46).

In fact, Charity from the Mountain outside North Dormer was brought by Mr. Royall. After people from the Mountain have done a wood-cutting job near North Dormer to make money, one of them ended up with manslaughter. Mr. Royall made him imprison. After then, he asked Mr. Royall to bring his daughter out of the Mountain and nurture her like a Christian. Mr. Royall accepts his request and he becomes her legal guardian rather than her foster father. Charity has "a painful recognition of her own place at the margins of his life" like that of North Dormer (Bell 61). Therefore, if Mr. Royall is subject, Charity is considered the *other*. The below figure shows that the other is seperated and becomes infinite. That explain that Levinas rejected Totality, and the *other* is "not symmetric"(Levinas 1948, p.101) but asymmetric.



[Figure 1. Emanuel Levinas's Infinite]

### 3. The *other* : Not to own, but to separate

Levinas rejected traditional philosophy and tried to argue people's daily lives. He mentioned that subject doesn't own the *other*, but let the *other* separate from subject. Mr. Royall married Charity and he acknowledges her act—she uses up all the money that Mr. Royall gave her money for clothes to regain a blue brooch. In the end, according to Levinas, Mr. Royall has a sense of responsibility for Charity. Of course, people who live in the Mountain, as well as a brown house can be called the *other*. The structure of places like pyramid makes a region inferior to bigger city be the *other*. For example, in *Summer*, “it was in New York, at a club with a long name in Fifth Avenue: it seemed to raise an insurmountable barrier between them”(139). Julia represents a victim or the *other* in North Dormer. After she loved the young man from a big city, she was deserted and had even an abortion. Afterward Charity becomes a similar situation like her, unlike her Charity disdains and escapes such a terrible event.

As Levinas urged that “the future can't be grabbed, and rather than we are apt to be captivated by it.” That is, “the future itself is the other” (Levinas 1948, p. 86). Therefore, Charity is fascinated by the future, her baby—the link between Harney and her. Mr. Royall tried to marry Charity and that has been studied as “the threat of incest” and “ a dangerous overlapping of social relations” (Bentley 61). While that can be regarded, lawyer Royall can only help Charity flighting from the reality in that manner. When he meets Charity in the Mountain, he sees her painful face and feels a sense of responsibility. Once Charity disgusted him, but when she meets him there, she has a sense of relief. Also he doesn't ask her why she must escape from him and North Dormer. Marriage may be considered the totality, in this situation, it can be described as the act of infinite for the future.

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