The "Republic of the Spirit" : Marital Love in Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth, The Custom of the Country, and The Age of Innocence

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THE "REPUBLIC OF THE SPIRIT": 
MARITAL LOVE IN EDITH WHARTON'S 
THE HOUSE OF MIRTH, THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY, 
AND THE AGE OF INNOCENCE

BY 

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MARITAL LOVE IN EDITH WHARTON'S
THE HOUSE OF MIRTH, THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY,
AND THE AGE OF INNOCENCE

This thesis is approved as a creditable and independent investigation by a candidate for the degree, Master of Arts, and is acceptable as meeting the thesis requirements for this degree, but without implying that the conclusions reached by the candidate are necessarily the conclusions of the major department.

Thesis Advisor

Head, English Department

Date
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Because it is such an integral part of our lives, novels, poetry, and song texts, as well as scientific and sociological studies have been concerned with defining what constitutes a happy marriage and how that happiness is achieved. They have also recorded a changing social view toward the marital relationship.

Marriage was a literary artist who was concerned with marriage. The gradual evolution of her attitude toward the marital relationship and its importance to achieve happiness forms an integral part of her novels of upper class society.


CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Marriage has often been called the second of the three great events of life: birth, marriage, and death.\(^1\) In American society the marriage relationship holds more importance in the average person's life than any other, more than the mother-daughter or father-son association, more than same-sex or heterosexual friendships. Even man's relationship with his God holds no precedence over marriage.\(^2\) Because it is such an integral part of our lives, novelists, poets, and essayists, as well as scientists and sociologists, have been concerned with defining what constitutes happy or unhappy marriage and how that happiness is achieved. They have also recorded a changing social view toward the marital relationship.

Edith Wharton was a literary artist who was concerned with marriage. The gradual evolution of her attitude toward the marital relationship and its importance to man's happiness forms an integral part of her novels of upper class society.


In spite of the emphasis on marriage in her novels, contemporary critics seldom view Edith Wharton as an important influence in twentieth-century literature because her general subject matter—society in aristocratic New York during the decades from 1870 to the turn of the century—seems too limited and too much a part of the seldom-recalled past. But Mrs. Wharton's list of literary accomplishments belies such a claim. She was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Literature in 1921 for *The Age of Innocence*, an honorary Doctor of Letters degree from Yale University in 1923 (the first woman so named), and a Gold Medal from the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1924. Mrs. Wharton was later made a member of the National Institute, and in 1934 was the second woman ever to be elected to membership in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Mrs. Wharton was also the first woman to receive two Pulitzer Prizes, receiving the second in 1935 for the dramatic version of *The Old Maid* (part of the *Old New York* series), done by Zoe Akins.

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In spite of the testimony of these awards, however, very little of the large amount of work Edith Wharton produced—thirty-two novels, several volumes of poetry and non-fiction, and eighty-four short stories—is read today. Probably the best-known of her novels is *Ethan Frome*, the story of a sensitive man trapped in the stifling atmosphere of a small New England village and dominated by a shrewish wife. Yet this work, for all its artistic excellence, is actually outside the mainstream of Edith Wharton's emphasis on society in New York.

Much critical evaluation has been written through the years of Edith Wharton's literary talents. The verdict of much of that criticism has been that she is merely an historical, or perhaps a naturalistic, novelist. Most critics see Edith Wharton's enduring importance in her picture of the gradual decline of social standards of good conduct and in her treatment of society's control of the individual. But none relate this view of social decline to the developing idea Mrs. Wharton has concerning marriage and divorce in a civilized society.

Blake Nevius, in *Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction* (considered one of the standard works of Wharton criticism), admits that Mrs. Wharton considers marriage the action which lends greatest value to life, but he does not say that her attitude toward marriage is instrumental
in defining Mrs. Wharton's view of life in America. Nevius
believes Mrs. Wharton was concerned with "the extent of
one's moral obligation" to others, but he does not indicate
that the focus of this concern is on marriage. Even in
his final appraisal, Nevius merely states that Edith
Wharton's fiction "represents a continuous effort to define
a good society." 7

Louis Auchincloss, another noted Wharton critic,
briefly discusses Mrs. Wharton's view of marriage in his
small critical volume, Edith Wharton. Auchincloss
accurately assesses Mrs. Wharton's distaste for divorce
and hasty remarriage, and her abhorrence of any sort of
extra-marital relationship, but he refuses to speculate
further. 8 His analysis of her view of marriage as it
appears in her work is not detailed.

Also commenting upon Edith Wharton's treatment of
the marital relationship is Louis Kronenberger, who sees
her emphasis on marriage in much of her writing as a
natural outgrowth of the thinking of her own time as well
as an indication of its importance in her own life. He,

6 Blake Nevius, Edith Wharton: A Study of Her

7 Ibid., p. 78.

8 Louis Auchincloss, Edith Wharton, University of
Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, No. 12 (University
as is true of most Wharton critics, sees her enduring importance, however, in her "exposing society as an entity, a massive force, an uncircumventable fact."9 In both The House of Mirth and The Age of Innocence, Kronenberger sees society as the antagonist, the reality which makes or breaks its inhabitants; marriage plays no more important part in this drama than any other aspect of societal rule or custom.10

Another of the standard works of Wharton criticism is a collection of essays compiled and edited by Irving Howe, professor of English at Stanford University. Howe maintains that his collection contains only that criticism which is "first-rate."11 In his introduction to the volume, Howe outlines the problems inherent in Edith Wharton's literary techniques and the overriding themes of her work. As a reader might expect, Howe believes that Edith Wharton's great importance arises out of the "ruthless, so bitingly cold" method she uses to expose the "vulgarities and failures" of society.12 But neither he,

10Ibid.
12Ibid., p. 4.
nor any of the other critics represented in the collection, see marriage central to this exposé.

Even in a volume of criticism dealing with the Christian viewpoint in American fiction, entitled *Fifty Years of the American Novel: A Christian Appraisal*, Edith Wharton's view of marriage holds no place of first importance. Anne Freemantle, author of the essay dealing with Edith Wharton's fiction, speaks of the novelist's concern for human moral values, stating that Edith Wharton saw only unhappiness for man: she "misses heaven and glory...."

Edith Wharton's fiction is also discussed in two other book-length studies of American literature, one by H. Wayne Morgan, entitled *Writers in Transition: Seven Americans*, and another by Blanche Housman Gelfant, entitled *The American City Novel*. Although discussed, Mrs. Wharton's treatment of marriage does not figure centrally in either of these works.


Thus, the majority of Wharton critics do agree that Edith Wharton's works reflect a significant part of the intellectual and cultural development of American life during the time she wrote. They also agree that Mrs. Wharton's enduring importance lies in her chronicle of the social history of her age and her class. But most critics overlook the importance of Edith Wharton's view of marriage in defining the problems experienced by that society.

Three of Edith Wharton's novels of life in New York, where most of her novels are set, figure significantly in almost every critical discussion of her work. The House of Mirth, published in 1905, gave Mrs. Wharton her first reputation as a novelist. It is this novel which outlines the beginning of the invasion of aristocratic New York by those other than the "blue-bloods," the established upper class. The second of these memorable novels, The Custom of the Country, published in 1913, presents Mrs. Wharton's intense disgust for the crass intruders from the Midwest, who she believed merely played the game of aristocracy rather than sincerely embracing its ideals. This novel is often considered Edith Wharton's worst because her hatred for her heroine, Undine Spragg, is so intense that even the main theme is overshadowed by this hatred. The third of these significant city novels, published in 1920, is The Age of Innocence, for which Mrs. Wharton received her
first Pulitzer Prize. This work looks back on the society of the 1870's with no trace of bitterness and with much nostalgic longing for good days gone by.

Of these three novels, only The House of Mirth was written while Mrs. Wharton still lived in America. The Custom of the Country was published just after she had received her divorce and six years after she and her husband had taken up permanent residence in France (1907). The Age of Innocence was written in the days following World War I when Mrs. Wharton felt most painfully the loss of her familiar world. But even though written in France, these later novels present a clear and distinct picture of society in New York during the decades from 1870 until the turn of the century.

However, the real significance of these three city novels lies not in their chronicle of life in the city, but in their view of the possibility of human happiness in marriage. In all three of these novels, marriage is the central focus; everything depends upon the success or failure of the marital relationship.

A more intense study of Edith Wharton's attitude toward marriage seems warranted. The purpose of this thesis is to show that the three major society novels of Edith Wharton, The House of Mirth, The Custom of the Country, and The Age of Innocence, reveal her conception
of marriage as the ideal human relationship central to man's social happiness, but not always or readily attainable in organized society. This is apparent in the development of her ideas in the course of these three novels. In order to examine this development successfully, this writer proposes to examine the significance of marriage in Mrs. Wharton's own life in Chapter II, the limitations placed upon marital success by society and by human failure in Chapters III and IV, and the relationship between marital success and conformity in Chapter V. Before proceeding directly to these chapters, some comment needs to be made concerning the marriage customs in America in Mrs. Wharton's time.

Marriage customs among the upper classes in New York have always been more rigid than those in other social classes. And the upper classes in New York have maintained traditional marriage customs longer than those in other parts of the country. In fact, even today, divorce laws in New York are most stringent in the nation, with adultery the only grounds to dissolve a marriage in absolute divorce.16* In the upper classes from the colonial period onward, marriage was considered an alliance between families rather than a union of two individuals; romantic attraction played

16Paul H. Jacobson, American Marriage and Divorce (New York: Rinehart and Co., 1959), pp. 113-114. *Within recent months, however, divorce laws in New York have been liberalized.
only a minute part in any marriage bond since love was expected to develop and grow only after marriage.\textsuperscript{17} Furthermore, the upper classes, unwilling to relinquish their power, seldom married outside their own class. Families united to prevent any intrusion by outsiders, even to the point of joining distant cousins in marriage.\textsuperscript{18}

Once engaged, both men and women were considered bound. Each must keep his word to the other. Once married, each owed more allegiance to family than to each other; therefore, to file for divorce meant family disintegration rather than an indication of the incompatibility of two individuals. Thus, for many years, while the upper class enjoyed its greatest influence in setting social patterns, divorce was rare because of the desire to keep families intact.\textsuperscript{19}

Another custom carried over from colonial times was one which specified marriage the only honorable state for a woman. And even though more and more women became financially independent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, society still felt that a woman's success depended upon the acquisition of a husband.

\textsuperscript{17}William M. Kephart, The Family, Society, and the Individual, 2nd. ed. (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Co., 1966), p. 120.
\textsuperscript{18}Ibid., p. 485.
\textsuperscript{19}Ibid., p. 487.
American marital customs have largely been influenced by the Judeo-Christian tradition which sees marriage as a sacred institution, permanent in nature. With the coming of the twentieth century, however, Americans have generally redefined the nature of marriage. Because women can largely support themselves, marriage is no longer an economic necessity for their success. In a further move away from traditionalism, "an increasing proportion of the population defined marriage not as a religious institution ordained by supernatural sanction and therefore indissoluble, but as an arrangement of mutual gratification." In the twentieth century Americans have begun to feel that marriage partners are equals rather than superior-inferiors, as designated by the Christian tradition, and divorce has become more socially acceptable.

Lest it be assumed, however, that the social stigma attached to divorce has completely disappeared, it must here be said that although Americans have prided themselves on their ability to adjust to changes, they have been quite reluctant to alter traditional beliefs concerning marriage and the family. The family unit has been considered the pillar of American society; most people believe that as it disintegrates, so American society disintegrates. Divorce laws have changed little in the past hundred years,

20Udry, p. 524.
even though the incidence of divorce seems greater. But, J. Richard Udry explains, "American divorce rates look high because Americans have recently emerged from a period of very low incidence of divorce." 21

During the nineteenth century, many of the New England states liberalized grounds for divorce; those who failed to obtain a divorce there traveled to other states, usually to the Midwest, where requirements were less strict. As more and more states liberalized their divorce laws, divorce came to be less and less a state to be avoided. 22 Mrs. Wharton experienced the problems involved in seeking a divorce in her own life.

It is these customs and their effect on man and his society that Edith Wharton treats in The House of Mirth, The Custom of the Country, and The Age of Innocence. Although her view does not always correspond with that of the society with which she deals, Mrs. Wharton moves toward a definition of her own view of the meaning of marriage.

21Udry, p. 512.

22Kephart, pp. 246-247.
CHAPTER II

MRS. WHARTON'S MARITAL FAILURE

Almost nothing is known of Edith Wharton's private life if one depends upon what she has personally related in *A Backward Glance*, the autobiography she published in 1934. This work, written at the close of World War I when she had come to the realization that life in New York was still the "good life," reveals much about the times in which Mrs. Wharton worked and lived, the friends she cultivated, and the conversations she enjoyed. But it says relatively little about her own private life. And very little is discovered, as well, from her personal letters because along with other materials related to her writing, they were bequeathed in her will to the Yale University Library and were not to be released for public scrutiny until 1968. Thus, to date, no comprehensive biography of Edith Wharton has been published. However, certain facts about her life can be compiled through careful reading of the various partially complete studies presently available.

By far the earliest attempt to study Edith Wharton's life is Percy Lubbock's memoir, *Portrait of Edith Wharton*, published in 1947. Although a charming sketch of Mrs. Wharton's life and experiences in Europe, the book exclude much factual data such as the date of her birth, of her
marriage, and of her first arrival in Europe, and much else that would make it an authentic biography. And Lubbock himself admits in the introductory note that because his work also excludes any discussion of Mrs. Wharton's earlier life in New York, its value must be considered limited.¹

The most ambitious study of Mrs. Wharton's life published to date is that written in 1965 by Grace Kellogg, The Two Lives of Edith Wharton: The Woman and Her Work. But even though this lengthy volume was published as a Master's thesis (which one usually considers based upon scholarly research), the book is something of a disappointment to the serious student of Edith Wharton in search of concrete information about her personal life. Although Mrs. Kellogg does offer some valid information concerning Mrs. Wharton's life, she goes beyond the bounds of literary scholarship to make unfounded speculations of her own. In spite of these indiscretions, however, the Kellogg study does have merit when read discriminatingly.

The only other biography of Mrs. Wharton available at this time is that written by Olivia Coolidge, intended primarily for juvenile readers. Entitled Edith Wharton, 1862-1937, this volume is a well-written analysis of Mrs. Wharton's personality as seen in her novels, and for that

reason, the book is also important to the adult interested in Mrs. Wharton's worth as a novelist. Written in an easy, flowing style, the book is an honest attempt to study how Mrs. Wharton's novels portray her development as a woman.

Among the known facts of Edith Wharton's life are those relating her childhood experiences. Born January 24, 1862, the youngest child of George Frederic and Lucretia Stevens (Rhinelander) Jones, Edith Newbold Jones grew up in a male-dominated household under the influence of generations of aristocratic New York blue-bloods. Her two brothers, Frederic and Henry, were grown men while she was still a child. She had no sisters. Her childhood was not the usual one for a girl born in the 1860's. This late addition to the Jones family was advanced far beyond her years; she spent hours in the family library, "making up," as she called it, in her attempt to read before the age of four. She never played with dolls or other feminine toys; she preferred "reading" from the classics.

In her autobiography, Mrs. Wharton says her great love for books must have come from her grandfather Rhinelander: "My mother said he 'loved reading,' and that

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particular drop of blood must have descended to my veins, for I know of no other bookworm in the family." Edith Wharton's love of books might possibly have come, as well, from her father's instinctive liking for verse: he "knew Macaulay's 'Lays' by heart." That Edith Wharton's childhood was lonely and frustrating, there is no doubt, for she says it was "complete intellectual isolation--so complete that it accustomed me never to be lonely except in company..." Both her mother and her father felt she was too much interested in books, and since their generation either frowned upon or completely ignored intellectual endeavor for women, it was natural that they should want their daughter to become interested in something else. Mrs. Jones had probably looked forward for many years to having a little girl whom she could dress in pretty clothes, upon whom she could lavish dolls and other girlish toys. But from the first, her daughter's interests were elsewhere. Mrs. Wharton never mentions a close mother-daughter relationship; she

4A Backward Glance, p. 16.
5Ibid., p. 38.
6Ibid., p. 169.
only remembers that her mother gave dinner parties, paid social calls, and ordered lovely dresses annually from Paris.7

According to Grace Kellogg's biography, Edith Wharton's lonely childhood was the result of her mother's guilt complex and her father's doubts as to her paternity. Since Edith Jones was such a late addition to her family, Mrs. Kellogg concludes that it is possible that she was the daughter of an adulterous relationship between Lucretia Jones and the tutor who lived with the family while he prepared Edith's brothers, Frederic and Henry, for college. Mrs. Kellogg sees the tutor as a quiet young Englishman far away from home, knowing nobody in America other than the Jones family, a diligent student of the classics, and a great lover of books. Edith's father was often gone from the house during the day, and, Mrs. Kellogg maintains, Mrs. Jones was a woman who constantly needed diversion. She might naturally have conversed with the tutor, and the tutor might have come to think that Mrs. Jones was someone special because he was lonely and needed a friend.8 Mrs. Kellogg insists that the little girl's great love for


books is also more easily explained if one accepts the notion that Edith Jones' father was the tutor.

Certainly the books in Mr. Jones' library were mainly for display because he seldom found time to read them; certainly women of Mrs. Jones' social and cultural background did not enjoy intellectual pursuits as much as they enjoyed buying a new gown or planning a ball. Yet it seems reasonable to assume that a small child, precocious as Edith Jones seems to have been, might wander into the family library if left to her own devices. And it is also reasonable to assume that whatever she heard from her brothers' schoolroom would be repeated when she "read"; if she heard the tutor lecturing in the classics, her repeating what she had heard would not necessarily indicate a scholarly father, but merely a scholarly acquaintance.

Mrs. Wharton recalls that her debut into New York society was staged a year earlier than usual (when she was seventeen) in an attempt by her parents to divert her from books. After her quiet debut, Edith Jones became involved with the young married set in New York because her extreme shyness prevented her from seeking a more socially active group. Speaking of that social set, Mrs. Wharton says: "The talk was never intellectual and seldom brilliant, but
it was always easy and sometimes witty, and a charming informality had replaced the ceremonious dulness [sic] of my parents' day. 9

Mrs. Wharton gives little attention to her marriage in her autobiography. She met her future husband, Edward "Teddy" Wharton, a Bostonian, in the social young married set. He was a close friend of her brother Henry (they had attended Harvard together). Edith Jones and "Teddy" Wharton were married quietly on April 29, 1885, in the presence of the immediate relatives of both, and they celebrated their union at a wedding breakfast given at the home of Mrs. Wharton's mother. 10 In a brief, impersonal note concerning her marriage, Mrs. Wharton says:

"At the end of my second winter in New York I was married. . . . My husband . . . was an intimate friend of my brother's, and had long been an annual visitor at Pencraig [the family country estate]." 11 The difference of thirteen years in their ages mattered little because of Teddy's "natural youthfulness," and his "good humor and gaiety." 12

This is Mrs. Wharton's total comment upon the fact that she was married in 1885. She says nothing of having

9 A Backward Glance, pp. 77-79.
10 Kellogg, p. 63.
11 A Backward Glance, p. 90.
12 Ibid.
loved Teddy, and she fails even to call their relationship a close one. In fact, her husband is never mentioned by name in *A Backward Glance*, not even when she speaks of their marriage; and throughout the entire volume, Mrs. Wharton's references are never "we" or "us," but rather "my husband and I" and more often, "I visited my friends." It is also significant to note that she says infinitely more about the friendships she later cultivated than she does about her marriage.

On the basis of Mrs. Wharton's refusal, if it is that, to speak more specifically about her marriage, it might be assumed that the marriage was not the close interpersonal relationship of two people deeply and irrevocably in love with each other. Percy Lubbock states that Mrs. Wharton's relationship with her husband was one of the close companionship she enjoyed with other men, but that it was no more than this. "He was . . . the right kind of husband for her, if she could have but one; for she saw and said herself that she needed several, if the whole of her life was to be shared and enhanced by another."¹³ Olivia Coolidge says of the Whartons: "The pair got on easily; and where their interests differed, they went their own ways."¹⁴ Mrs. Coolidge maintains

¹³Lubbock, p. 63.

further that had the Whartons had children, they might have grown closer, but this was not to be. According to her, Mrs. Wharton turned to writing in order not to "make a tragedy of being childless," but even her writing career caused problems in her marriage. Teddy was proud of her literary accomplishments but he never came to understand them.15

After their marriage, the Whartons spent much of their time at their small cottage in Newport and during four months of the year, they traveled abroad. It was during these trips that Mrs. Wharton reports she "really felt alive."16 In 1906, shortly after the publication of The House of Mirth, the Whartons decided to move to Europe because as Mrs. Wharton recalls, Edward "suffered increasingly from the harsh winds and sudden changes of temperature of the New York winter..."17 Mrs. Kellogg's research has revealed that Edward Wharton had suffered periods of emotional instability even before his marriage and by 1900 they were recurring periodically, making such a change in residence necessary for his emotional well-being.18

15Coolidge, pp. 61-73.
16A Backward Glance, p. 91.
17Ibid., p. 257.
18Kellogg, pp. 124-128.
Mrs. Wharton also recounts the development of her husband's illness in a brief passage:

Since the first years of our marriage his condition, in spite of intervals of apparent health, had become steadily graver. His sweetness of temper and boyish enjoyment of life struggled along against the creeping darkness of neurasthenia, but all the neurologists we consulted were of the opinion that there could be no real recovery; and time confirmed their verdict. . . . \(^8\)

Yet there was another reason for the Wharton's decision. Mrs. Wharton longed for a life of the intellect; she was tiring of her life as a socialite. She says:

For nearly twelve years I had tried to adjust myself to the life I had led since my marriage; but now I was overmastered by the longing to meet people who shared my interests. . . . What I wanted above all was to get to know other writers, to be welcomed among people who lived for the things I had always secretly lived for. \(^9\)

Since the European intellectual atmosphere was much more conducive to such a plan than that in America, the Whartons decided to take up permanent residence in Europe. This move did more to create marital problems for the Whartons than even Mrs. Wharton's writing had done.

Percy Lubbock maintains that Mrs. Wharton went to Europe "for more talk with more people, and with people as fearless of talk, as familiar with it, as dependent on

\(^8\) A Backward Glance, p. 326.

\(^9\) Ibid., pp. 122-123.
it, as herself. . . ."21 But Teddy, essentially a lover of the soil, felt uprooted and out of place from the first, in the intellectual circles of Europe. He became irritable and hard to live with, and he forced Mrs. Wharton to do some of the things he enjoyed in an effort to placate him. Her only comment concerning the problems caused by Teddy's boredom is this: "It is always depressing to live with the dissatisfied. . . ."22 Thus, for several years after their initial move to Paris, the Whartons returned to America to spend their summers at The Mount, their country home in Lenox, Massachusetts. As time passed and Teddy became more and more difficult, and as Mrs. Wharton became more and more involved with intellectual pursuits, she returned to Paris ahead of her husband while he remained behind to participate in a fishing or hunting expedition before joining her in Europe.23 As their marital difficulties increased, the Whartons spent more of their time on separate continents.

An analysis of the particular circumstances which led to the Wharton marital failure (a failure which greatly influenced Mrs. Wharton's fictional attitude toward

21Lubbock, p. 53.

22A Backward Glance, p. 124.

23Coolidge, pp. 91-93.
marriage) is dependent upon a study of Teddy's health problems, and as well, upon Edith Wharton's personal concept of what a marriage should be.

Irving Howe reports that Teddy Wharton suffered his first serious nervous breakdown in 1908, and the attitude taken by his family complicated any effort Mrs. Wharton made to secure treatment for him. She writes:

For a long time my husband's family would not see, or at any rate acknowledge, the gravity of his state, and any kind of consecutive treatment was therefore impossible. But at length they understood that he could no longer lead a life of normal activity, and in bringing them to recognize this I had the help of some of his oldest friends, whose affectionate sympathy never failed me in those difficult years.

In 1912, after Teddy's third breakdown, Mrs. Wharton was able to persuade him to enter a sanitarium in an effort to cure his severe periods of emotional instability.

In 1913, they were divorced.

It cannot be denied that Mrs. Wharton must have suffered long hours in agonized indecision before finally deciding to file for divorce. As will be seen in her fiction, she herself did not condone divorce. None of the Wharton family nor any of the Jones family, with the exception of Minnie Jones, first wife of her brother

26Coolidge, pp. 131-133.
Freddy, approved of the divorce. The Wharton family had always refused to believe Teddy's condition was as serious as his wife thought it, and they felt she should try harder to make amends. The Jones family was already shocked by Freddy's desertion of his wife of thirty years to marry another woman in 1896, and this new unconventionality obviously met with disapproval from that part of the family. Edith's brother Henry, who it must be remembered was a good friend of Edward Wharton, refused to see or correspond with his sister during the divorce even though he and his wife were living in Paris in 1913. It must be concluded that Mrs. Wharton did not secure a divorce precipitously but simply could no longer endure the emotional strain of her husband's illness. In spite of disapproval of families on both sides, she decided that divorce was the only answer to the preservation of her own health and peace of mind.

Although it is impossible on the basis of available evidence to know exactly what Mrs. Wharton suffered and why she finally acted, it is unreasonable to assume that her motives were selfish. On the contrary, according to Percy Lubbock, her actions usually arose out of her genuine concern for others. Lubbock also maintains that neither

27Coolidge, pp. 129-130.

28Lubbock, p. 181.
of the Whartons parted from the other with feelings of animosity. They parted friends; the gap between their personalities and their interests had merely grown too wide. Neither could, or would, do what was necessary to bridge it. One must conclude then that Mrs. Wharton felt divorce the only way for either her or her husband to achieve any sort of contentment. She and Edward had grown too far apart; it was best that they separate.

Possibly the best proof than can be given to indicate Mrs. Wharton's continuing compassion toward her husband is that in a letter discovered by Mrs. Kellogg. Upon Edward's death in 1928, a mutual friend of the pair wrote to Mrs. Wharton to reveal the news. Mrs. Wharton replied: "'I like to hear from those who, like you, knew Teddy in those far off days when he was a charming companion, and the kindest and most sympathetic of beings. His death must have been a kindly release and for that I am glad: it was so long, so very long, since he had been truly alive.'"

However, some scholars believe that Mrs. Wharton's "attachment" to Walter Berry, a continental lawyer and a distant cousin, did more to prolong the proceedings than the social and moral crisis involved in a divorce. Grace

29 Lubbock, p. 65.
30 Kellogg, p. 196.
Kellogg devotes a lengthy segment of her biography to a discussion of the Berry-Wharton relationship. Mrs. Kellogg uses letters written to Mrs. Wharton by Henry James (most were written when the Wharton marital crisis was at its peak during the winter of 1907 and the spring of 1908) to prove her contention that an extra-marital affair did exist. The majority of these letters are written so cautiously that they fail to mention any names, not even in their salutations. However, Mrs. Kellogg insists that these letters refer to the "affair" Mrs. Wharton was conducting with Berry at the time.

In a letter written January 2, 1908, James makes this comment:

I admit that it's horrible that we can't--... talk more face to face of the other phenomena; but life is terrible, tragic, perverse, and abysmal--besides patientons. I can't pretend to speak of the phenomena that are now renewing themselves round you; ... Ah, I'm conscious enough, I assure you, of going without, and of all the rich arrears that will never--for me--be made up! But I hope for yourselves a thoroughly good and full experience--about the possibilities of which, as I see them, there is, alas, all too much to say. Let me therefore but wonder and wish!

James concludes the letter with "I am yours and Teddy's ever so affectionate H. J." 31

Mrs. Kellogg assumes that James' reference to the "thoroughly good and full experience" is an indication

31 Kellogg, p. 140.
of the extra-marital affair, and she also assumes that James' comment concerning life as "terrible, tragic, and perverse" refers to the marital status of the Whartons at the writing of the letter. But it must here be pointed out that James has been quite careful to omit the specific problem or persons of whom he speaks; thus, Mrs. Kellogg's interpretation is only one of several which might be made of the letter.

Then, in a letter written October 12, 1908, after Berry had gone to Cairo, Egypt, to sit on an international law tribunal (a letter which Mrs. Kellogg takes as best possible proof of an affair), James says the following:

I am deeply distressed at the situation you describe and as to which my power to suggest or enlighten now quite miserably fails me. I move in darkness; I rack my brain; I gnash my teeth; I don't pretend to understand or to imagine. . .

Only sit tight yourself and go through the movements of life. That keeps up our connection with life--I mean of the immediate and apparent life; behind which, all the while, the deeper and darker and unapparent, in which things really happen to us, learns, under that hygiene, to stay in its place. Let it get out of its place, and it swamps the scene; besides which, its place, God knows, is enough for it! Live it all through, every inch of it--out of it something valuable will come--but live it ever so quietly; and--je mantiens mon dire--waitingly! 32

Mrs. Kellogg maintains that James would not term the Wharton marital crisis a "situation" because it had been developing for years and "situation" is "an immediate

32 Kellogg, pp. 142-143.
word with a tight perimeter." She further believes that James would not admit his inability to "suggest or enlighten" if Mrs. Wharton had merely related the continually deteriorating condition of her husband's health. Mrs. Kellogg ventures also that James' admonition that Mrs. Wharton live "quietly" and "waitingly" cannot refer to her marriage because such a phrase in that connection could only apply to Mrs. Wharton's gaining of her freedom by Edward's death. James was too close a friend of Edward to wish for such a tragedy. Thus, Mrs. Kellogg concludes that all of James' comments are an indication that he believes Mrs. Wharton must patiently wait for Berry to return from Cairo; if she is patient, Berry will realize the value of her love for him.33

Grace Coolidge concurs with such a supposition. She goes on to venture, however, that Mrs. Wharton suffered emotionally because of her fear that Berry had no intention of marrying her. Mrs. Coolidge goes on to offer the theory that Mrs. Wharton had fought any permanent attachment with Berry until after Teddy's third breakdown (about 1912), when she realized that complete recovery was impossible. At this point, Mrs. Wharton supposedly entertained thoughts of

33Kellogg, pp. 143-145.
another marriage, and if she could not marry Berry, according to Mrs. Coolidge, she wanted to enjoy his love outside her first marriage.34

Yet, if there had been a budding love affair here, it seems incongruous that Berry should leave France to serve on the law tribunal in Cairo, Egypt, in 1908, the year of Teddy's first breakdown, and stay three years. And when he returned to Paris in 1911, Berry was often seen with Mrs. Wharton, but this did not deter him from also being seen with women younger and prettier than she. Mrs. Coolidge reasons that Mrs. Wharton had deluded herself; Berry did not love her.35

What seems most important, however, in determining the possibility of an extra-marital affair, is not whether Berry loved Mrs. Wharton or not, but rather, whether such an affair could have been realized at all, as far as Mrs. Wharton was concerned.

Mrs. Wharton offers no clues to her own feelings in her autobiography. The only evidence which might lead one to conclude that Mrs. Wharton could not condone an extra-marital affair comes from Percy Lubbock's memoir. Lubbock discloses a letter he received from Charles DuBos, one of

34Coolidge, pp. 131-133.
35Coolidge, p. 135.
Mrs. Wharton's close friends and French translator of *The House of Mirth*. DuBos related that on one of their leisurely drives through France, he and Mrs. Wharton had come to a discussion of the sanctity of marriage. This friendship, it should be remembered, developed after the Whartons had moved to France and after their marital difficulties had begun to appear. In a statement which can leave no doubt as to her position, Mrs. Wharton said:

"'Ah, the poverty, the miserable poverty, of any love that lies outside of marriage, of any love that is not a living together, a sharing of all!'"\(^{36}\) Thus, even though a reader might agree that Mrs. Wharton felt her marriage not a complete success, one must also recognize that she would have serious reservations about the value of an extra-marital affair in her search for happiness.

What did Edith Wharton's lifelong friendship with Walter Berry really amount to? Mrs. Wharton relates that she had met Berry about a year before her marriage and that their brief encounter had given her "a fleeting hint of what the communion of kindred intelligences might be."\(^{37}\) It was this kind of intellectual relationship that Edith Wharton hoped to find in her marriage. But even she relates

\(^{36}\) Lubbock, p. 100.

that such a marital relation was not possible. She and Teddy were too far apart in their interests.

According to all that can be discovered in Mrs. Wharton's memoirs, she considered Walter Berry the guiding influence of her life. She writes: "I suppose there is one friend in the life of each of us who seems not a separate person, however dear and beloved, but an expansion, an interpretation of one's self, the very meaning of one's soul. Such a friend I found in Walter Berry. . . ." 38

Their friendship was perpetuated because Mrs. Wharton needed someone to evaluate her writing critically since her husband took no interest in it. Berry's comments were prized by his friend because she felt him "instantly and unerringly moved by all that was finest in literature." 39 In a final comment concerning the value of their friendship, Mrs. Wharton says:

I cannot picture what the life of the spirit would have been to me without him. He found me when my mind and soul were hungry and thirsty, and he fed them till our last hour together. It is such comradeships, made of seeing and dreaming, and thinking and laughing together, that make one feel that for those who have shared them there can be no parting. 40

38A Backward Glance, p. 115.
39Ibid., p. 117.
40Ibid., p. 119.
The key words in all of these comments are "friend," and "comradeships," which would seem to indicate that the feeling Mrs. Wharton held for Berry was like that she held for her other men friends, and like that she originally held for her husband. But the feeling she held for Berry was also an intellectual companionship she did not enjoy with her husband.

Yet it also must be admitted that this intelligent communion of minds probably grew into a love she felt for no other man. Louis Auchincloss notes the following entry in one of Mrs. Wharton's journals: "'I should like to be to you, friend of my heart, like a touch of wings brushing by you in the darkness, or like the scent of an invisible garden that one passes by on an unknown road.'" But Auchincloss says that this entry and others indicate that she received only friendship and "like any woman, she wanted more: 'You hurt me--you disillusioned me--and when you left me, I was more deeply yours.'" When Berry left for Cairo, Auchincloss finds this entry: "'Oh, my adored, my own love, you who have given me the only moments of real life I have ever known, how am I to face the long hours and days?'"  

If Mrs. Wharton is full of high praise for Berry, there were others who voiced other opinions. Percy Lubbock charges that many of her friends felt that Mrs. Wharton's unreasoning dependence on Berry was to result in the increasing narrow-mindedness of her art. Lubbock sees Berry as a man of true intellect, a prodigious reader, a traveler in the art and culture of many lands, but he also describes Berry as a man possessing the "harshness of a dogmatist, the bleakness of an egotist, and the pretentiousness (I can't help it) of a snob."\(^4\)

And Lubbock charges again:

The education that she took from him was long to hold her fast, and I believe that whenever she seemed (as there were times when she did) to shut up her mind in a box, and so much for that, the reason of it went back to Walter Berry. Anyhow there he was, an inevitable factor in her circle--he was not one whom she had to seek out in a different world--but not a favoured figure among those who loved and prized her. Whether his presence in her life made more for her happiness or the reverse there was only one person, herself, who ever knew, and the knowledge died with her--if even she had ever known.\(^5\)

It was to such a man then that Mrs. Wharton looked for inspiration. After a childhood of frustrated loneliness and almost nonexistent intellectual challenge, Edith Wharton at last was introduced to a world where the

\(^4\) Lubbock, p. 49.

\(^5\) Ibid., pp. 48-49.
mind reigned supreme. She believed that Walter Berry was the main impetus in procuring that introduction.

Mrs. Wharton says nothing specifically of her divorce or of the events preceding it in *A Backward Glance*, and only one oblique reference to her life without Teddy can be found. Late in her life, after the disillusionment of World War I and the loss of her closest male friends, Mrs. Wharton contemplated another cruise in the Aegean like that she and Teddy had enjoyed shortly after their marriage. They had had only enough money to live out the year and the cruise had depleted their already diminishing funds. But she says they went gaily off: "We were young, we were two, we were ready to face any financial consequences." But now when Mrs. Wharton planned a second trip, she was more cautious: "Now I was old, I was alone, and I had learned the necessity of living within one's means." Thus ends all reference to her divorce and her life after that divorce.

Edith Wharton's marriage failed because it did not live up to her ideal of a fulfilling marital relationship. Her long friendship with Walter Berry bears out such a conclusion. Edith Wharton was not looking for romance; she sought the intellectual companionship she did not enjoy.

*44A Backward Glance*, p. 372.
within her marriage. If that companionship grew into love, it was a natural growth: that was certainly not her intent at the outset. There is no evidence to indicate any romantic feeling on the part of Berry, and there is also very little evidence other than the journal entries discovered by Louis Auchincloss to indicate that Mrs. Wharton entertained romantic thoughts of Berry.

Thus, even as Mrs. Wharton's marriage failed because it lacked the intellectual companionship she believed necessary in an ideal marital relationship, so her relationship with Berry failed because it lacked the love necessary to bring a proposal of marriage. Edith Wharton's life was actually one of continual failure. She failed to find happiness in marriage because the ideal state she believed it to be was difficult to achieve. She could not condone an extra-marital affair and Berry did not love her enough to marry her; their relationship ended as it had begun. She came to him only when he called. She learned to be content with that.
Edith Wharton writes in her autobiography, "The real marriage of true minds is for any two people to possess a sense of humor or irony pitched in exactly the same key, so that their joint glances at any subject cross like interarching searchlights."¹ It is the search for this kind of relationship, which Mrs. Wharton believed possible only in marriage, that is explored in The House of Mirth. The novel offers a suggestion of the kind of love enjoyed by "soul-mates,"² but it is also an exploration of the difficulties involved in attaining such an ideal state of marital bliss in society.

As The House of Mirth opens, heroine Lily Bart is faced with a great dilemma: she must find a respectable, wealthy husband if she hopes to maintain her present social position in aristocratic New York. Lily has several alternative choices in this search for success. She can marry Percy Gryce, naive young millionaire and shy egotist whose major pre-occupation is his collected Americana. She can marry Simon Rosedale, a crude, calculating young

¹A Backward Glance, p. 173.
man of Jewish background who could use her beauty and her family name to establish his social place. Or she can marry Lawrence Selden, young dilettante lawyer who attracts her because, although he belongs to the aristocracy by family inheritance, he rejects its hypocrisy and lives merely on the fringes of this world.

But Lily rejects her own plans for these marriages because she wants money, social position, and self-respect all in one. She discovers such a marriage is rarely found. Complications immediately arise, however, because of her lack of money and her advancing age.

Lily goes to a friend, Gus Trenor, to seek a stock market tip in order to pay her bills until she can be married. Because she has so little business sense, Lily becomes personally indebted to Trenor for the funds he has invested. Trenor is willing to invest his money, giving Lily the profits, if she will only yield personal "favors." Lily rejects such an idea, but in the process of her association with Trenor, she discovers that her reputation has become spotted.

She next becomes a traveling companion of the George Dorsets, but returns to New York in disgrace when Bertha Dorset further blackens Lily's reputation to save her own. And then she becomes a social secretary to Mrs. Norma Hatch,
but loses this position as well. Each of these changes represents a step down in the social scale.

In the interim, Lily's old aunt has died, leaving her fortune to another single cousin, Miss Grace Stepney, and a mere ten thousand dollars to Lily. Until the estate is settled, Lily has no money at all.

Finally she secures a place as a hat trimmer in a millinery factory. She lacks the skill to become proficient and loses this position, too. She decides to sell the old love letters written by Bertha Dorset (before her marriage) to Lawrence Selden. Lily had purchased the letters from the cleaning lady in Selden's apartment house because she had feared what their disclosure would mean to Selden's reputation. After seeing Selden once more, the only man whom she has really genuinely felt any emotion for, Lily cannot bring herself to such crass opportunism. She returns home, discovers the settlement check from her aunt's estate, pays her debt of $9,000 to Trenor, and finds herself all but penniless once more.

In despair at the bleakness of her future, Lily decides to get some sleep and worry about her finances on the morrow. Because a sleeping drug has offered relief in the past, Lily now increases the dosage. As Lily slips off into drugged delirium, it is apparent that she will awaken no more.
Blake Nevius believes that only in the love of "soul-mates" does Edith Wharton see freedom for her characters, freedom which men "create within themselves with the aid of culture and which they may share with kindred souls in a republic of the spirit. Edith Wharton implies in *The House of Mirth* that this ideal marital love can save sensitive spirits from destruction at the hands of materialistic society, but that even this love will fail to bring happiness if one refuses to recognize its presence or if he is prevented by society or himself from accepting it.

Lily Bart has been brought up to believe that a good marriage is a young woman's only guarantee of social respectability, and at twenty-nine, she is the object of much criticism because she is still single. Even though she rebels at such narrow demands, Lily herself seems to agree that a good marriage is her only course of action when she asks, "What else is there?" She needs the money a rich husband will provide to finance the kind of life she is expected, by both herself and society, to lead.

Training for this kind of life has been the whole focus of Lily's childhood education. Lily cannot remember

3Nevius, p. 20.

a time when money had not been wanting, nor could she remember a time when it had not been provided somehow except during her nineteenth year shortly after her bill-ridden debut when her father suffered his great loss on the stock market. This financial disaster resulted in her father's early death.

Lily's mother, however, was adept at "managing" and "was famous for the unlimited effect she produced on limited means." Mrs. Bart's view of those less fortunate than they was that these people, by choice or otherwise, "lived like pigs," and she refused such a life. Her ability to "manage," therefore, was of utmost importance.5

Lily's beauty was regarded, especially after her father's financial failure, as "the last asset in their fortunes, the nucleus around which their life was to be rebuilt." Beauty was merely a commodity to be used in procuring a rich and respectable husband. Mrs. Bart saw Lily's beauty as "her own property and Lily its mere custodian."6 And Lily, too, came to realize the power her beauty could command, but her ambitions were not as crude as Mrs. Bart's.

... She liked to think of her beauty as a power for good. ... She would not indeed have cared to

5*The House of Mirth*, p. 35.

marry a man who was merely rich: she was secretly ashamed of her mother's crude passion for money.\footnote{The House of Mirth, pp. 40-41.}

Nevertheless, Mrs. Bart's hatred for what she considered shabby was transferred to Lily: Lily could not turn her back on the necessity of marrying well.

She was too intelligent not to be honest with herself. She knew that she hated dinginess as much as her mother had hated it, and to her last breath she meant to fight against it, dragging herself up again and again above its flood till she gained the bright pinnacles of success which presented such a slippery surface to her clutch.\footnote{Ibid., p. 45.}

In spite of her desire for the kind of social success which is dependent upon wealth, Lily rejects her own plan for ensnaring Percy Gryce because she cannot abide the person she must be in order to bring him to the altar. She also refuses Simon Rosedale's offers of marriage on more than one occasion because his personal inadequacy cannot provide the kind of intellectual, spiritual life she prefers. Yet she never reconsiders her reason for once thinking Lawrence Selden a likely prospect because he does not command the finances she feels necessary to her accustomed way of life. Irving Howe says: "Lily Bart is a victim of taste, both good and bad: she has a natural taste for moral and esthetic refinements which causes her
to be repelled by the world of the rich, and she has an acquired taste for luxury that can be satisfied only in that world."\(^9\)

Lawrence Selden's unexpected appearance at the scene of her planned entrapment of Percy Gryce makes Lily pause to reconsider; the result is that she sees that the people whom she had so recently praised as symbolizing what she had expected to gain, after Selden's appearance, seemed to symbolize what she was sacrificing. "That very afternoon they had seemed full of bright qualities; now she saw that they were merely dull in a loud way. Under the glitter of their opportunities she saw the poverty of their achievement."\(^10\)

Lily's distaste for the "poverty" of social achievement is really that of Mrs. Wharton, who also saw the tragedy of society in "its power of debasing people and ideals;"\(^11\) everything about it was negative. Like Lily, Mrs. Wharton rebelled against its hypocrisy, but also like Lily, she could not quite turn her back upon it. As


\(^10\)The House of Mirth, p. 65.

\(^11\)A Backward Glance, p. 207.
Gaillard Lapsley, Mrs. Wharton's literary executor, says: "She could neither do with contemporary America nor do without it; she could neither forget nor forgive it; and as . . . she had [never analyzed or even stated the problem, her conscience was uneasy and her tongue sometimes bitter."\(^{12}\) This is also Lily's plight.

When Lily becomes involved in the precarious business of keeping George Dorset's attention diverted while his wife pursues a new affair, Selden believes that Lily "had made a pact with her rebellious impulses, and achieved a uniform system of self-government, under which all vagrant tendencies were either held captive or forced into the service of the state."\(^{13}\) Now no further responsibility for her welfare could be his: Lily had made her choice. The "crudeness of [the] choice . . . seemed to deny the very differences he felt in her."\(^{14}\)

But Selden had judged too soon. As Lily's descent into social obscurity continues, she is more than ever dissatisfied with this life: "The renewed habit of luxury--and presence of material ease--gradually blunted

\(^{12}\)Lubbock, p. 140.

\(^{13}\)The House of Mirth, p. 222.

\(^{14}\)Ibid., p. 249.
her appreciation of these values, and left her more con­sci­ous of the void they could not fill."  

Increasing financial worries result when Lily loses her position as social secretary, and again she considers the idea of marrying for money. But she cannot bear the thought of marriage without love, even though such a marriage would make her rich. Finally, in an attempt to establish herself in acceptable society once more, Lily decides to sell the damaging letters which have come into her possession.

Before she makes this final attempt to crash material society, Lily is drawn once more to the quiet of Selden's library. While there she realizes that it has been Selden's love which has kept her from complete self-deceit. Selden's love makes a marriage of convenience so abysmal. Before she leaves his apartment, Lily says: "Do you remember what you said to me once? That you could help me only by loving me? Well--you did love me for a moment; and it helped me. But the moment is gone--it was I who let it go."  

Selden's love is not gone; after Lily leaves, he realizes that he still loves her. All that night, he considers the implications of such a love: "he had cut loose

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15The House of Mirth, p. 274.
16Ibid., pp. 359-360.
from the familiar shores of habit, and launched himself on 
the uncharted seas of emotion. . . ."17 Early the following 
morning, Selden rushes to Lily to make his passionate 
declaration. He is too late. Lily has taken an overdose of 
a sleeping medicine. His avowal of love is never to be 
uttered.

Although Lily ultimately rejected marriages of con­
venience, she could not bring herself to accept a marriage 
without financial gain such as one with Selden. From the 
first, Lily was attracted to Selden because of his forth­
rightness and honesty. On impulse, she had agreed to take 
tea at his New York apartment. During the course of their 
conversation, she had said:

Don't you see . . . that there are men enough to 
say pleasant things to me, and that what I want is a 
friend who won't be afraid to say disagreeable ones 
when I need them? Sometimes I have fancied you might 
be that friend--I don't know why, except that you are 
neither a prig nor a bounder, and that I shouldn't have 
to pretend with you or be on my guard against you.18

Selden too enjoyed being with Lily, but he "could never be 
long with her without trying to find a reason for what she 
was doing. . . ."19 He thought her like too many others in 
his world; he could not conceive of a woman wanting money

17The House of Mirth, p. 377.
18Ibid., p. 10.
19Ibid., p. 13.
and social position while at the same time demanding complete freedom from social censure.

Selden says his idea of success is more than merely having money; it is freedom "from everything--from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all material accidents. To keep a kind of republic of the spirit." Social approval is not the ultimate goal in life for Selden: according to him, "The queer thing about society is that the people who regard it as an end are those who are in it, and not the critics on the fence."  

Selden's parents by family inheritance were firmly ensconced members of the aristocracy, although they were not considered rich by those who knew them. Selden had inherited from his mother a "detachment from the sumptuary side of life: the stoic's carelessness of material things, combined with the Epicurean's pleasure in them." The family home, although not lavishly furnished, was distinguished by his mother's excellent good taste. Their "few possessions were so good that their rarity gave them a merited relief. . . ." Thus Selden's training and family background had ill-prepared him for a life without all of its material comforts, even though he might try to convince

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20. The House of Mirth, p. 79.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid., p. 177.
himself that what society had to offer meant little to his happiness.

Because he refuses to obey traditional social dictates, Selden also refuses the human involvement of marriage since society demanded marriage as a prerequisite to its particular kind of success. Selden would consider no marriage of convenience, and he believed there was no woman of his temperament who would have him. 23

Mrs. Wharton's hero ultimately lets the lady down. As Diana Trilling says, Selden damns Lily's ambitions but "incapable of the spontaneous gift of his love, of the instinctual acceptance which would restore Lily's faith in herself, he manages only to reinforce her crippling scruples without ever proposing a feasible alternative to a life which uniquely punishing the weakly conscientious." 24

He believes the worst of her in her financial dealings with Gus Trenor. He accepts the conventions.

Thus, Selden is as much a coward as Lily. She is afraid to live her life as she pleases because she fears social ostracism; Selden is afraid to chance giving Lily his love because she might not be able to accept the

23 The House of Mirth, p. 104.

"republic of the spirit" he so desires. As Blake Nevius points out, Mrs. Wharton believed "freedom cannot be purchased at another's cost"; Selden will pay for his refusal to become involved.

Selden's cowardice is evident in his periods of passion for Lily and revulsion at what she has become. Musing about his affection for her, Selden realized his belief that:

experience offered a great deal besides the sentimental adventure, yet he could vividly conceive of a love which should broaden and deepen till it became the central fact of life. What he could not accept, in his own case, was the makeshift alternative of a relation that should be less than this: that should leave some portions of his nature unsatisfied, while it put an undue strain on others. He would not, in other words, yield to the growth of an affection which might appeal to pity yet leave the understanding untouched. . . .

Such a total affection seems reminiscent of that Mrs. Wharton says she felt for Walter Berry. Such an affection makes its object "not a separate person, however dear and beloved, but an expansion, an interpretation, of one's self, the very meaning of one's soul." Such is the love of "soul-mates," which exists in the "republic of the spirit."

During his periods of passionate devotion to Lily, Selden believes that because of his perceptive awareness of

26The House of Mirth, pp. 177-178.
27A Backward Glance, p. 115.
Lily's inner beauty, he can save her from poverty of spirit and lift her above her selfish desires to a finer life. Yet Selden's plans are thwarted by his own inability to completely disregard the vulgar estimates society makes of its members.

He sees Lily leaving Gus Trenor's home, believes the worst (just as he has heard through the social grapevine), and once more refuses to extend the hand of love. He believed his strength great enough to cover Lily's weaknesses, but he found that he paid as much allegiance to the double standard of conduct as did society. He expected her to maintain her moral reputation spotless in spite of all that society itself did to destroy it.

From beginning to end, Lily's tragic story is one of her refusal to accept love from one who cannot (because he will not) support a glamorous social life. When she discovers that even with money comes no freedom from want, Lily still cannot completely reject her desire for the power society has taught her money holds. Thus, because of the influence society exerts upon her, she rejects the love of a kindred spirit, the love she needs to gain the freedom she so desires. Social attitudes toward marital success prevent Lily from establishing a "republic of the spirit."

Selden as well fails to heed the dictates of his heart. He despises what society can do to its members;
he knows how cruelly unfair social criticism can be. Yet he cannot bring himself to the point of disregarding what society says of Lily. Selden loves Lily for what she could be; he hates what she is. He lets her go each time she falls, never realizing that his love could have prevented that fall.

Edith Wharton thus believes that real love, even between those whose glances "cross like interarching searchlights,"\textsuperscript{28} is a difficult state to achieve and maintain because social influence and social inheritance often prevent man from realizing that such a love even exists. She sees society in league against man to prevent the achievement of his earthly happiness.

Because a man feels personal success according to aristocratic society's rules so important, he cannot completely turn his back on social condemnation. He is torn between personal desires and those of his society. He can be free only by establishing a finely drawn balance between his allegiance to social dictates and honesty to himself. And such a state, according to Edith Wharton, is almost impossible to achieve. Man is too much tied to social convention.

\textsuperscript{28}See page 37, above.
CHAPTER IV
HUMAN FAILURE TO ACHIEVE MARITAL HAPPINESS

In *The Custom of the Country*, Edith Wharton sees even less chance for man to achieve marital happiness than in *The House of Mirth*. By this time (1913), her own marriage had ended in divorce, and Mrs. Wharton saw a world which had so materially corrupted its inhabitants that there were very few who could selflessly love another. Thus, rather than dealing with the problem of accepting love in a "soul-mate" against the dictates of society as in *The House of Mirth*, Mrs. Wharton here discusses the tragedy inherent in a marriage where love is not freely given by both partners.

In the opening scenes of the novel, heroine Undine Spragg, who has been in New York two years without having attracted the attention of the aristocracy, receives an invitation to dine at the home of Mrs. Henley Fairford, member of the elite and sister of an eligible young bachelor, Ralph Marvell.

Unknown to either Mrs. Fairford or her brother is the fact that several years before, Undine had been married for a short time to Elmer Moffat, an enterprising young man she had met in her midwestern home town of Apex City. Where others were dull, Elmer was flashy, and what Undine enjoyed most was the attention of the crowd. They had eloped, but
Undine's father followed them, forced Undine to leave Elmer, and had the marriage annulled. After this, Undine had succeeded in persuading her parents to move to New York. And at the opening of the novel, she is finally getting results in her search for a rich, respectable husband.

Ralph and Undine are engaged a short two months after the dinner party and they soon marry. Their marriage is a uniting of opposites because Undine is interested only in money—money in amounts which Ralph has no means to supply. When she is presented with a better possibility (as she thinks) to get what she wants, Undine divorces Ralph.

While touring Europe, Undine meets and marries Raymond de Chelles, a member of the French aristocracy. But this marriage, too, is fated to bring unhappiness to her husband and ultimately ends in divorce because of Undine's complete lack of respect for tradition or convention.

Undine's fourth marriage unites her once more with her first husband Elmer Moffat, who by this time is a successful millionaire. They have all that money can buy, but Undine is still unsatisfied. Undine herself believes the problem is that she has never been able to have all she wants, and that even now something is lacking in her
life. Mrs. Wharton, however, implies something far different in her analysis of her heroine.

In all of her marriages, Undine is loved romantically by her husbands, although she does not respond to this feeling. She feels nothing but an appreciation for the money and life-style she wants them to provide. Undine knows nothing of emotional attachments: what she really enjoys is "the image of her own charm mirrored in the general admiration."¹ Nor did she personally feel very deeply:

her physical reactions were never very acute: she always vaguely wondered why people made "such a fuss," were so violently for or against such demonstrations. A cool spirit within her seemed to watch over and regulate her sensations, and leave her capable of measuring the intensity of those she provoked.²

When Undine first met Ralph, she had not been unduly impressed; she did not realize, because he was so shy, that Ralph was a charter member of the society to which she wanted so desperately to belong. When she went to dinner at the home of Ralph's sister, Undine was again disappointed at the simplicity of the life led by the upper class. Her belief had been that aristocratic influence was best demonstrated in ostentatiousness. Suddenly Undine realized her mistake: she "blushed with anger at her own

²Ibid., p. 294.
simplicity in fancying that . . . she could ever really count among these happy, self-absorbed people! They all had their friends, their ties, their delightful crowding obligations: why should they make room for an intruder in a circle so packed with the initiated? Yet even though Undine has these momentary twinges of insecurity, she never stops trying to win all the advantages she thinks the aristocracy has.

Undine's view of this life is what first attracted Ralph Marvell to her. Ralph's previous life had been an aimless search for meaning; he had had very little business sense and had preferred a career as a writer, but found his calm, uneventful life an inadequate subject. He now fancied it his mission to save Undine from vulgarity. Ralph believed that because of his long involvement with the "Invaders" in society and his firm allegiance to his own class in spite of this involvement, he was capable of educating Undine in the ways of "proper" living.

He too had wanted to be "modern," had revolted, half-humorously, against the restrictions and exclusions of the old code; and it must have been by one of the ironic reversions of heredity that, at this precise point, he began to see what there was to be said on the other side--his side, as he now felt it to be.

3The Custom of the Country, p. 62.
4Ibid., p. 74.
Ralph had long sought the love of a woman who could share his "tranquil disdain for money-getting, a passive openness to the finer sensations, one or two fixed principles as to the quality of wine, and an archaic probity that had not yet learned to distinguish between private and 'business' honour." Such a woman he thought he had found in his cousin Clare Dagonet, but he had gone to Spain on a short tour and when he returned, Clare was engaged to Peter Van Degen.

Ralph had then decided that he would never marry because there was no woman left who could appreciate his personal view of life. At this point, he becomes infatuated by Undine Spragg's seeming innocence and helplessness.

Except during Clare Dagonet's brief reign the depths in him had not been stirred; but in taking what each sentimental episode had to give he had preserved, through all his minor adventures, his faith in the great adventures to come. It was this faith that made him so easy a victim when love had at last appeared clad in the attributes of romance: the imaginative man's indestructible dream of a rounded passion.

Too soon apparent, however, is the couple's variant emphasis on love. Ralph believes his love for Undine will give meaning and purpose to his life; Undine believes his love will empower her to win a place in fashionable society.

5 *The Custom of the Country*, p. 75.
Yet Undine confesses to no reciprocal love for Ralph. She has invested her emotions in him "with the coldness of [a] financial speculator." 8

Quite soon after their marriage, Ralph and Undine begin to grow apart. Ralph enjoys the quiet beauty of their European honeymoon, but Undine wants to go only where crowds gather. Ralph knows that "her mind [is] as destitute of beauty and mystery as the prairie school house in which she had been educated. . . . He was beginning to understand this, and learning to adapt himself to the narrow compass of her experience." 9 He still loves her enough, however, to want to think the best; he could not yet admit that her "pliancy and variety were imitative rather than spontaneous." 10

The absence of any demonstrated affection on Undine's part also begins to disturb Ralph. He tries to convince himself that she has never been taught to show affection, but firmly believes that "his own warmth would call forth a response from his wife, who had been so quick


9The Custom of the Country, p. 147.

10Ibid., p. 148.
to learn the forms of worldly intercourse. . . . "⁷¹
Undine does not learn to show affection: she feels none. Out of love for her, Ralph tries to point out Undine's failures to observe the social conventions of his class, but she believes his motives selfish rather than prompted by love and genuine concern for her. Undine has always believed that others want to deprive her of what life has to offer; no one understands her.

While still in Europe, Undine discovers that she is pregnant. Ralph is at first excited at the prospect of an heir, but expresses concern at Undine's uncontrollable tears. She is interested only in the social attention she will be deprived of during the year she assumes having a baby will require. After Paul is born, Undine resents the attention he demands and would rather leave him to the care of a nurse than sacrifice her own entertainment to him. Her lack of maternal love is most glaringly apparent when she forgets to take Paul to his grandparents' home to celebrate his fourth birthday. She has that day attended the unveiling of her portrait, done by vulgar, popular artist, Claud Walsingham Popple; in the glow of attention, Undine completely forgets about Paul.

¹¹The Custom of the Country, p. 151.
After four years of marriage, Undine had found out that she had given herself to the exclusive and the dowdy when the future belonged to the showy and the promiscuous; that she was in the case of those who have cast in their lot with a fallen cause, or—to use an analogy more within her range—who have hired an opera box on the wrong night.12 Thus begins Undine's gradual departure from traditional wifely conduct. She soon realizes that a divorce from Ralph is the only way she can get what she wants—a place in the most "fashionable" rather than "aristocratic" circles of society.

Undine now begins to spend more and more of her time in occupations of her own choosing, becoming increasingly involved with Peter Van Degen, unconventional husband of Ralph's cousin, Clare Dagonet. Van Degen believes that Undine uses him to get about in showy society, but refuses to pay for the privilege. He thus decides to go to Europe where women are less concerned than Undine with false propriety. Undine, always one for wanting what is inaccessible, persuades Ralph to let her vacation alone in Europe.

He had reached the point of recognizing that it was best that his wife should go. When she returned perhaps their lives would readjust themselves—but for the moment he longed for some kind of benumbing

influence, something that should give relief to the dull, daily ache of feeling her so near and yet so inaccessible.\textsuperscript{13}

After Undine gets to Europe, she convinces herself that she will get more out of life married to Van Degen, or even to the dashing young Frenchman, Raymond de Chelles, whom she has met in Paris. She returns home to the United States and goes to Sioux Falls to wait the customary period for her divorce. Ralph at first believes that he has been at fault in expecting too much of her, but then he wants to cry out in rage when he hears that Undine charges he has been too interested in business to maintain a harmonious family life. Ralph's family looks upon divorce as a "vulgar and unnecessary way of taking the public into one's confidence," and he decides to hold his peace by not opposing the divorce.\textsuperscript{14}

Undine returns to Europe after getting her divorce because society in New York has still not come to openly accept the divorcée, and she believes herself unable to combat the open indifference and disapproval she meets from her friends. At this juncture, Undine attracts Raymond de Chelles by appearing quite observant of good social conduct.

\textsuperscript{13}\textit{The Custom of the Country}, p. 264.

\textsuperscript{14}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 322.
She and de Chelles are married and once more Undine thinks she is happy with her station in life. This marriage seems much better than "previous experiments in happiness" because for the first time, "the glow of triumph was warmed by a deeper feeling." Undine believes that at last she has found love.

However, Undine believes that although it was wonderful to be so well thought of, her husband "seemed to attach more importance to love, in all its manifestations, than was usual or convenient in a husband; and she gradually began to be aware that her domination over him involved a corresponding loss of independence." She also discovered, to her surprise, that where Ralph had always given in to her, Raymond loved without wavering from his position of authority as head of his family. "And she had the half-frightened sense that the day she ceased to please him she would cease to exist for him."

Raymond de Chelles refuses to allow Undine to choose when she will observe social codes and when she will discard them. When Undine resists, he still refuses to compromise his principles. From all outward appearances, they are

happily married; but inwardly they grow further and further apart. Undine destroys any closeness they could have had, just as she had earlier destroyed this feeling in her marriage to Ralph Marvell, by considering only her own selfish motives as a factor in having a family. Disregarding her husband's belief in the traditional view that bearing children is one of the primary purposes of marriage, Undine impulsively vows during one of their arguments that she will bear no heirs. The subject is never re-opened in spite of Undine's attempts to tell Raymond that she has changed her mind. Undine's selfishness has again destroyed love.

The final break in the de Chelles marriage comes when Undine has the family tapestries which hang in the gallery appraised because Raymond tells her they have no money to finance an excursion to Paris. When de Chelles hears of this new affront, he charges that her disrespect for family and tradition are despicable:

You come among us from a country we don't know and can't imagine, a country you care for so little that before you've been a day in ours you've forgotten the very house you were born in—if it wasn't torn down before you knew it! You come among us speaking our language and not knowing what we mean; wanting the things we want, and not knowing why we want them; aping our weaknesses, exaggerating our follies, ignoring or ridiculing all we care about ... and we're fools enough to imagine that because you copy
our ways and pick up our slang you understand anything about the things that make life decent and honourable for us.\(^{18}\)

Now there is nothing left but to try to lead separate lives while pretending all is well—such is Raymond's belief in the permanence of marriage.

Throughout all of Undine's escapades, she has consistently re-encountered Elmer Moffat, who at first is assumed merely to be an old acquaintance from her childhood in Apex City. When Elmer meets Undine in New York, he has come to make his mark on Wall Street, and in so doing, he hopes to also establish himself among that city's social elite. Undine confronts Elmer shortly after her engagement to Ralph, asking him not to reveal anything about their previous relationship. In return for this favor, Elmer enlists Undine's help in arranging a somewhat questionable business deal with a client of Ralph's law firm. From profits made on this transaction, Ralph is able to finance Undine's first trip to Europe alone, which has such disastrous consequences for their marriage.

It is Moffat who first suggests the possibility of a financial settlement in the matter of Paul's custody. It is Moffat to whom Ralph goes in his attempt to secure the money needed for the settlement. It is Moffat who reveals

\(^{18}\textit{The Custom of the Country}, p. 545.
to Ralph the facts of Undine's previous marriage: the despair and shame Ralph feels at this dishonor prompt his suicide. And finally, it is Moffat who comes to buy the de Chelles tapestries. By this time Elmer has made his millions and travels about Europe buying "only things that are not for sale" in a vulgar attempt to acquire the trappings of aristocracy.19

Upon seeing Elmer again, Undine is, as always when she sees him, struck by his capacity "to succeed where she had failed."20 Her dissatisfaction with her marriage to de Chelles leads Undine to consider the possibility of remarrying Elmer. If he will not accept her on those terms, Undine is also prepared to be his mistress. But Elmer refuses to accept her on any terms outside marriage. Thus ensues a whirlwind trip to America, a six-month residency in Las Vegas, and the divorce and remarriage within minutes of each other.21 After their marriage, Elmer and Undine devote their time to jaunts between their mansions in New York and Paris. The supreme proof of their vulgarity is their purchase of the de Chelles tapestries,

19The Custom of the Country, p. 530.
20Ibid., p. 555.
21Ibid., p. 585.
bought only because de Chelles needed money badly to settle embarrassing debts incurred by a younger brother.\textsuperscript{22}

But is Undine happy in this fourth marriage, which she had believed the answer to her problems? Elmer buys all that money can buy; Undine tells him that he is the only one she has ever cared about.\textsuperscript{23} "She had everything she wanted, but she still felt, at times, that there were other things she might want if she knew about them."

Elmer's financial successes had at first pleased her, but she increasingly believed him vulgar for his loudness and his familiarity with everyone including the servants. She compared him with her previous husbands, "and the comparison was almost always to Moffat's disadvantage."\textsuperscript{24}

Elmer too becomes disillusioned by Undine's selfish, grasping nature. He had admired her when she stood by him in Apex City when everyone else had believed him a vulgar cad; he was pleased by her declaration that their first marriage had been the only time she "ever really cared—all through."\textsuperscript{25} But he also finds that Undine's declarations

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22}The \textit{Custom of the Country}, p. 588.
\item \textsuperscript{23}Ibid., p. 569.
\item \textsuperscript{24}Ibid., p. 591.
\item \textsuperscript{25}Ibid., p. 585.
\end{itemize}
of affection are made only when necessary to get what she wants. Elmer indicates his disillusionment with his marriage when he tries to comfort Undine's young son, who also believes that his mother does not love him. Moffat says to Paul, who has burst into tears: "Is it because your mother hadn't time for you? Well, she's like that, you know; and you and I have got to lump it. . . . If we two chaps stick together it won't be so bad--we can keep each other warm, don't you see?" 26

In the hour when she thought she had reached the ultimate in her drive to impress others with her money, her beauty and her style, Undine discovers that society still has the final word. Two of the guests at her Paris reception are Ambassador and Mrs. James Driscoll, newly appointed to the American embassy in England. This position is what Undine believes she has wanted all these years, and what they could have had if Elmer "had a spark of ambition." 27

But no, Elmer says, "They won't have divorced Ambassadors." So Undine meets her final defeat at the hands of the society she had so long defied.

She had learned that there was something she could never get, something that neither beauty nor influence nor millions could ever buy for her. She could never


27 Ibid., p. 593.
be an Ambassador's wife; and . . . she said to herself that it was the one part she was really made for. 28

Thus, Undine's selfishness wreaks havoc on the emotions of everyone around her. She does whatever is necessary to get what she wants, and after she has it, something else is better. She uses people and discards them when her purpose is served. She has no respect for standards and codes of conduct, traditions, or inheritances except when that respect will bring her money. She feels no human emotion whatever, not even for her own child. Money is Undine's only desire; money is her only standard for determining the worth of anything.

Marriage to such a woman is disaster, whether that marriage joins her to the romantic or to the opportunist. The cementing tie of marriage—the spiritual love which Mrs. Wharton envisioned in her "republic of the spirit"—holds no place in Undine's vocabulary. Marriage to both Ralph Marvell and Raymond de Chelles is fated to end in divorce because neither of these men can exist on the level Undine prefers and Undine cannot exist on theirs. Compromise is the only solution, but Marvell and de Chelles cannot compromise their principles and still live with themselves. Undine has no need to compromise her principles.

(the few she has) because such giving has never been required of her. Divorce is the inevitable result of such a conflict.

Undine's final marriage, though a union of more similar personalities, is also unhappy. Because Undine cannot love anyone but herself, there is no possibility for her own happiness or that of her husband. The tragedy is that Undine will continue living with Elmer Moffat until someone with more money appears—which seems unlikely—never realizing that her dissatisfaction arises not from her lack of money but from her inability to achieve the love between "soul-mates" that Edith Wharton believes makes marriage meaningful.

Mrs. Wharton believes, then, that marital happiness depends upon love, but that love from only one spouse will not suffice. Love is giving and sharing, not taking. Pride, materialism and over-reliance on convention can only result in tragedy. Ralph Marvell's tragic suicide is caused by Undine's failure to be honest with him. Raymond de Chelles' disillusionment is brought about by Undine's selfish desire for money at the expense of family traditions. And Elmer Moffat, of all Undine's husbands the one who could finance the type of life she preferred, is also destroyed by her selfishness.
Money is not enough for happiness: man needs love. "What the heart desires brings with it a price—and often an exorbitant price." And until man recognizes the necessity of paying this price, unhappiness will always be his lot. The human personality, as well as society, can block the achievement of marital happiness.

CHAPTER V

MARITAL HAPPINESS DEPENDENT UPON CONFORMITY

Edith Wharton's world crumbled around her after World War I; "suddenly she found herself a lingering stranger in a world she never made. . . ."¹ Her dearest friends, among them Henry James, had passed on; her divorce had terminated another important part of her inner life; and the standards she so treasured were disintegrating before her eyes. In further proof that she believed her world was passing, Mrs. Wharton ends the running commentary of her life in A Backward Glance with the events immediately preceding the signing of the armistice which ended World War I. Thus does she indicate her belief that nothing of monumental importance (as far as her life was concerned) occurred in the years from 1918 until the publication of her memoirs in 1934.

The final chapter of the autobiography deals nostalgically with Mrs. Wharton's long friendship with Henry James and with her desire to cruise again on the Aegean in an attempt to regain some of that earlier joy she had found with her husband Teddy shortly after their marriage. On the last page of the book appears the stirring statement which epitomizes Edith Wharton's view

¹Nevius, p. 174.
of life: "In our individual lives, though the years are sad, the days have a way of being jubilant. Life is the saddest thing there is, next to death. . . ."²

The Age of Innocence, published in 1920, is Mrs. Wharton's most artistic picture (it won a Pulitzer Prize) of the brief joys and overall sadness she believed were so mixed together in life. The novel is a penetration of the conflict which rages in the hearts and minds of Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska—the conflict between the personal freedom thought necessary to find happiness in love and their responsibility to preserve organized society's standards. The story, which opens on the evening of Archer's engagement to May Welland, a young woman of aristocratic inheritance, concerns Archer's dilemma in the choice between personal happiness in loving a "soul-mate" in the manner previously championed by Mrs. Wharton and responsibility to family and society.

Archer vaguely fears that his marriage will become as dull as the others about him because May has been sheltered too long from life as it really is. Archer is more sure than ever that this will be his fate when he meets and falls in love with Ellen Olenska, May's cousin.

Even though Mrs. Wharton in this novel sees value in conformity to tradition, she is nevertheless critical

²A Backward Glance, p. 379.
of what Blake Nevius calls the "determined innocence" of New York society in the 1870's and 1880's.\textsuperscript{3}

May Welland wholeheartedly embraces this innocence; she has been thoroughly schooled in its advantages; she knows nothing else. Ellen Olenska at first denounces and later comes to accept it because it gives meaning and purpose to her life. Newland Archer half-accepts, half-rejects this innocence because he can see its inadequacy when applied to his personal situation. This acceptance of "determined innocence" is seen most clearly in these characters' attitudes toward what they consider the importance of love over duty and responsibility in finding marital happiness.

Even though Mrs. Wharton believes in the power of tradition to carry man through life, she can also see the validity of an honest rejection of the strict codes society imposes upon its members. Yet, and herein lies the paradox inherent in all of Edith Wharton's work, she firmly believes in the power of tradition and inheritance to make man see the ultimate inadequacy of a life based on the avoidance of responsibility, most apparent in his failure to conform to social standards of conduct. Man must conform to social dictum in order to accept and carry out his responsibility to organized society. Mrs. Wharton believes that man must

\textsuperscript{3}Nevius, p. 90.
return to tradition, because without it, he can do no more than "shift from generation to generation, without a sense of the past, without depth, without blessing." 4

May Welland is one of those who gives unquestioning obedience to tradition; she has no thoughts whatever of any type of rebellion. Throughout the narrative, May is representative of the blind adherence to tradition which Mrs. Wharton so despised in her earlier novels. But now, it seems that Mrs. Wharton is totally sympathetic with women like May. She can see the value of their conformity to convention; life is simpler when decisions are made according to what the rest of society would consider proper.

May never openly tells Newland that she loves him: she merely "let him guess that she 'cared' (New York's consecrated phrase of maiden avowal) . . . ." 5 She understands "without a word" that Newland announced their engagement early in an attempt to protect her from the scandal which Countess Olenska's appearance in the family opera box (because she was separated from her husband) was sure to cause. 6 She is afraid to rush marriage plans without


6Ibid., p. 23.
waiting the customary yearlong engagement period because such originality is "vulgar" and too much "like people in novels."\(^7\)

She at first refuses to try to persuade her parents to approve an early wedding date because it is "so hard to refuse the very last thing they'll ever ask of me as a little girl."\(^8\) And when Archer vehemently presses for an early wedding, May asks the usual questions about another woman. She goes on bravely to say that there is still time for Archer to back out if he loves another woman. But all the while, it is obvious that May believes Archer as tied to convention as she; she would say nothing at all if she were not sure that Archer will observe the convention of keeping his promise to her, pronounced in the engagement. Archer and May are married soon after, and May is now a respected member of her social world.

When Archer becomes infatuated with Countess Olenska, May is aware of what is going on, but her charter membership in a world "where the real thing was never said or done or even thought" prevents her from revealing openly what she knows.\(^9\) She tells Archer to call on the Countess

\(^7\)The Age of Innocence, p. 74.

\(^8\)Ibid., p. 83.

\(^9\)Ibid., p. 45.
when he trumps up a reason to go to Washington, D. C.
(where Ellen has gone to escape family censure of her activities).

It was the only word that passed between them on the subject; but in the code in which they had both been trained it meant: "Of course you understand that I know all that people have been saying about Ellen. . . . Hints have, indeed, not been wanting; but since you appear unwilling to take them from others, I offer you this one myself, in the only form in which well-bred people of our kind can communicate unpleasant things to each other: by letting you understand that I know you mean to see Ellen when you are in Washington, and are perhaps going there expressly for that purpose; and that, since you are sure to see her, I wish you to do so with my full and explicit approval—and to take the opportunity of letting her know what the course of conduct you have encouraged her in is likely to lead to." ¹⁰

All of May's comments, mute or otherwise, seem innocent on the surface, but when reconsidered, indicate her ability to see what is happening in her small world. They also indicate her capability of fighting for what she believes to be hers by social right.

May continues to assert, although quietly, that a woman's place is with her husband. She, as well as the rest of her family, believe that Ellen should return to her Polish Count husband even though circumstances of the marriage seem to indicate an intolerable situation. And of course, since Archer continues to take Ellen's side, the two are linked romantically.

¹⁰ The Age of Innocence, pp. 213-214.
But May has the final word. She tells Ellen of her first pregnancy, relying on Ellen's sense of family responsibility to rescue her own marriage from the possible disaster of divorce. May had taken a calculated risk in revealing this news because it was almost two weeks later that she herself received medical confirmation of it. May's rationale, however, is that even though the news was premature, its being true made her act justified.\textsuperscript{11}

Lest it be charged that the evidence indicating May's scheming plan to win back her husband is too circumstantial, Archer's son Dallas reveals the truth some twenty-six years later. Dallas tells Archer that from her deathbed, May had said: "She knew we were safe with you, and always would be, because once, when she asked you to, you'd given up the thing you most wanted."\textsuperscript{12} Dallas goes on to assess the deepseated reserve of Archer's generation--so aptly demonstrated in May's every thought, word and action:

> You never did ask each other anything, did you?
> And you never told each other anything. You just sat and watched each other and guessed what was going on underneath. A deaf-and-dumb asylum, in fact!\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{11}The Age of Innocence, p. 272.

\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., p. 282.

\textsuperscript{13}Ibid.
Mrs. Wharton cannot bring herself to openly condemn May because she observes every petty custom and tradition and makes all the correct responses. This is to be expected: May has been taught thus by generations of women who have "descended bandaged to the family vault." The tragedy, as far as Edith Wharton is concerned, is that May does not even realize that she is chained to convention. May has no desire for the real, lasting love of a "soul-mate" perpetuated in a "republic of the spirit;" all she wants is a husband.

This is what her entire life and upbringing have focused upon. Using her charm and her innocence as marketable commodities, May has entrapped a man who will establish her without reservation among the ranks of the respectable. Once married, as well as before, May's only concern is for a respectable relationship as far as appearances go, a relationship of permanence.

Whatever the emotional costs to her or to her husband, May is pledged to uphold that marriage. What makes her plight even more tragic is that, aided and abetted by her family, she forces Archer too into the mold of convention. Because May needs a husband in order to be termed respectable by her world, and because Archer is too honest to be unfaithful, he resigns himself to conformity. When

14The Age of Innocence, pp. 73-74.
(after May's death) Archer is presented with an opportunity for personal freedom in the love of a "soul-mate," he is unable to rise to the challenge. Convention has stifled his desire for freedom.

Countess Olenska, known as "poor Ellen Olenska" to her family, is another one of those who wants to be free from stultifying convention but who discovers like Archer how difficult it is for such a person to live in a society where social standards are rigid to the point of ostracizing those who rebel.

At first Ellen's attitude toward the rigid social structure of New York is one of gentle but caustic irony. Upon her arrival, Archer mentions that she has been away from New York for a long time. Ellen replies: "Oh, centuries and centuries; so long ... that I'm sure I'm dead and buried, and this dear old place is heaven."15 And again she tells Archer: "Being here is like--like--being taken on a holiday when one has been a good little girl and done all one's lessons."16

But Ellen soon discovers that society decides arbitrarily who has been a "good little girl." Her family frowns upon her choice of a home because they feel it is in an unsuitable section of town: none of their class live

15The Age of Innocence, p. 24.
16Ibid., p. 67.
there. Her family tries to force her to associate only with people of whom they approve; her attendance at "common" neighborhood social gatherings is censured. Her family also continually exerts pressure upon her to return to her husband even though she tries to explain why such a move is impossible for her in all conscience to make. She is disillusioned, and again commenting to Archer, Ellen says that her family only wants to help her "on condition that they don't hear anything unpleasant. . . . Does no one want to know the truth around here, Mr. Archer? The real loneliness is living among all these kind people who only ask one to pretend!"

Ellen has discovered the hypocrisy of life among the upper classes.

Social censure of both divorce and separation makes Ellen's arrival in New York without her husband, with no intention of returning to him, embarrassing to her family. There is no attempt by her family to arrive at the truth of the situation. Their concerted effort to avoid the "unpleasant" prevents anyone's asking the details of Ellen's separation. There is evidence of a social secretary having helped Ellen to escape her husband's reported cruelty; there is also gossip that Ellen had lived with this man for a time in Paris. But instead of trying to discover the truth

17The Age of Innocence, p. 70.
about these accusations, the family tries to dissuade Ellen from filing for divorce in the hope of avoiding any public scandal.

Because of what Ellen tells him about her marriage, Archer rejects the idea of her returning to her husband, believing the social censure for the separation far easier for her to live with than her husband would be. But Archer still follows traditional dictates in urging Ellen to give up the divorce suit; too much "unpleasantness" might result from this method of "taking the public into one's confidence." Ellen, therefore, because Archer says it is for the best, agrees to stop the suit.

Now both Ellen and Archer discover that what they feel for each other is more than mere platonic friendship. Ellen believes that Archer is the only one who has made her life in New York bearable:

I felt there was no one as kind as you; no one who gave me reasons that I understood for doing what at first seemed so hard and--unnecessary. The very good people didn't convince me; I felt they'd never been tempted. But you knew; you understood; you had felt the world outside tugging at one with all its golden hands--and yet you hated the things it asks of one; you hated happiness bought by disloyalty and cruelty and indifference. That was what I'd never known before and it's better than anything I've known.  

When Archer declares he cannot marry May, feeling as he does about Ellen, she says:

18The Age of Innocence, p. 142.
You say that because it's the easiest thing to say at this moment—not because it's true. In reality it's too late to do anything but what we'd both decided on.  

It is this comment which points up what prevents both Ellen and Archer from defiance of convention. As Nevius says, there is a "chaste, almost palpable barrier which divides the lovers from the start and which they maintain, even when they are alone, by the thought of their obligations."  

Ellen believes that because of their duty to convention and tradition, the only way they can continue to love each other is by not having each other. She says that duty and tradition are now important to her because Archer has proved by his example that "under the dullness there are things so fine and sensitive and delicate that even those I most cared for in my other life look cheap in comparison."  

Ellen, therefore, rejects the idea that two kindred spirits can find freedom in a "republic of the spirit." She believes, rather, that they can find happiness together only if by loving each other, they can also be faithful to the standards of their class. 

Ellen further clarifies her belief that only in their faithfulness to tradition can they find happiness

19 The Age of Innocence.
20 Nevius, p. 188.
21 The Age of Innocence, p. 194.
when she returns from Washington at the time of her grandmothe"s stroke. Archer now makes one more attempt to make her see the importance of their going away together. He wants, he says, to go where "categories" like "mistress" do not exist. But Ellen sadly replies:

Oh, my dear--where is that country? Have you ever been there? . . . I know so many who've tried to find it; and, believe me, they all got out by mistake at wayside stations: at places like Boulogne, or Paris, or Monte Carlo--and it wasn't at all different from the old world they'd left, but only rather smaller and dingier and more promiscuous. 22

But still Archer cannot accept such a view: He presses once more:

"Then what, exactly, is your plan for us?" he asked.
"For us? But there's no us in that sense! We're near each other only if we stay far away from each other. Then we can be ourselves. Otherwise we're only Newland Archer, the husband of Ellen Olenska's cousin, and Ellen Olenska, the cousin of Newland Archer's wife, trying to be happy behind the backs of the people who trust them"

"Ah, I'm beyond that," he groaned.
"No, you're not! You've never been beyond. And I have," she said in a strange voice, "and I know what it looks like there." 23

Shortly after this conversation, Ellen abruptly decides to return to Europe since her grandmother has agreed to establish her as financially independent of her husband. She was "excessively pale and her pallor made her dark hair seem denser and heavier than ever" at the going away dinner

22 The Age of Innocence, p. 231.
23 Ibid., p. 232.
given in her honor by the Archers. She said very little to Archer during the evening except to comment mundanely about the nature of the trip on which she was about to embark. Their goodbye was a simple handshake.

Thus, Ellen has given in to the customs of her time. She contemplates an affair with Archer, agreeing to come once and then go "home" to her husband because she cannot bear the ugliness and deceit such a relationship would demand. But when May reveals there will soon be children to be considered, Ellen refuses to carry the relationship further. She cannot demand personal happiness in exchange for unconventionality; there can be no happiness in marriage when one does not conform to the dictates of his class. Her belief is that:

If it's not worthwhile to have given up, to have missed things, so that others may be saved from disillusionment and misery—then everything I came home for, everything that made my other life seem by contrast so bare and so poor because no one there took account of them—all these things are a sham or a dream.  

Ellen refuses the possibility of happiness in a "republic of the spirit" through the love of a "soul-mate" because she believes happiness even in such an ideal state impossible when one must flaunt convention and tradition to

\[24\text{The Age of Innocence, p. 264.}\]
\[25\text{Ibid., pp. 194-195.}\]
attain it. Duty and responsibility to family and respect for the sanctity of marriage are far more important than her personal happiness.

Ellen Olenska is the embodiment of what Percy Lubbock calls Mrs. Wharton's "ordinance" for life: "Mock the world if you will, sting it if you can, bless it if you dare—but in any case don't make dust of it, don't drain it of its vital juices..." For both Edith Wharton and Ellen Olenska, those "vital juices" were contained in the preservation of marriage, based upon responsibility and tradition.

And even though he often refuses to admit it, Newland Archer also believes in and adheres to the traditional view of marriage. He wants to think he is liberal and quite free of stuffy convention for the mere sake of convention, but Ellen, in her naturalness of thought and action, proves to him again and again that he is "stupidly conventional just when he [thinks] he [is] flinging convention to the winds." Though Newland Archer wants to be one of the free spirits who ignore social dictates, and "in spite of the cosmopolitan views on which he prided himself, he thanked heaven that he was a New Yorker and about to ally

26Lubbock, p. 87.

27The Age of Innocence, p. 229.
himself with one of his own kind.\textsuperscript{28} He is proud, and vainly so, that his fiancée May Welland is innocent and guileless. He is conceited enough to believe himself capable of establishing a "passionate and tender comrade-ship" within their marriage because of his own broad experiences in life. But even while still engaged, Archer discovers the impossibility of such a task:

He perceived that such a picture presupposed, on her part, the experience, the versatility, the freedom of judgment, which she had been carefully trained not to possess; and with a shiver of foreboding he saw his marriage becoming what most of the other marriages about him were: a dull association of material and social interests held together by ignorance on the one side and hypocrisy on the other.\textsuperscript{29}

Archer, consciously or subconsciously, rejects and embraces at the same time the views of his world. He wants May to set an early wedding date, but at her first signs of resistance, "his heart sank, for he saw that he was saying all the things that young men in the same situation were expected to say, and that she was making the answers that instinct and tradition taught her to make--even to the point of calling him original" to suggest an early wed-ding.\textsuperscript{30}

He pays grudging homage to the idea, prevalent in that day, that all young men had affairs, but affairs with

\textsuperscript{28}The \textit{Age of Innocence}, p. 35.

\textsuperscript{29}Ibid., p. 44.

\textsuperscript{30}Ibid., p. 74.
women one "enjoyed--and pitied" as distinguished from women one "loved." He also knows, and almost agrees personally with Mrs. Wharton's idea, that in his world "no one laughed at a wife deceived, and a certain measure of contempt was attached to men who continued their philandering after marriage. In the rotation of crops there was a recognized season for wild oats, but they were not to be sown more than once."  

Thus, when Archer falls in love with Ellen Olenska, he is forced to choose between personal happiness in loving a "soul-mate" and responsibility to and conformity with traditional standards and codes of conduct. He says he can be happy only with Ellen:

He had built up within himself a kind of sanctuary in which she throned among his secret thoughts and longings. Little by little it became the scene of his real life, of his only rational activities; thither he brought the books he read, the ideas and feelings which nourished him, his judgments and his visions.

But each time that Archer reaches the point of actually choosing between the two alternatives, he allows someone to change his resolve. That someone--mouthing (sincerely or not) the beliefs of conventional, traditional social morality--points up the contradiction inherent in Newland

\[\text{31} \text{The Age of Innocence, p. 85.}\]
\[\text{32} \text{Ibid., p. 243.}\]
\[\text{33} \text{Ibid., p. 210.}\]
Archer's beliefs. He cannot, as Ellen could not, choose unconventionality as a means of attaining happiness in love.

The conflict of Archer's compulsion to conform to tradition and his belief in the power of love is evident in his refusal to break off his engagement to May. He vows that he can never marry May because he loves Ellen too much. But just at this moment, Ellen receives a telegram from May—in effect, a "keep hands off" warning—which announces that the Wellands have agreed to a marriage just after Easter, only a month in the future. Archer heeds the call of convention; he has given his word to May; he cannot break it.

Archer again refuses to choose unconventionality in the second summer of his marriage. He had not seen Ellen since the night of the telegram; he discovers that she is spending several days close to their summer home. When she is called unexpectedly to Boston, Archer follows. When he sees Ellen again, he realizes just how much he has missed in not having the love that she could give him. And when Ellen says the only love they can have is that which keeps them near, yet apart;

for a man sick with unsatisfied love, and parting for an indefinite period from the object of his passion, he felt himself humiliatingly calm and comforted. It
was the perfect balance she held between their loyalty to others and their honesty to themselves that had so stirred and yet tranquillized him.  

Archer once again allows the pull of conformity to control him; responsibility to his wife allows him to avoid clearly defining his feelings for Ellen and doing something about them.

Archer's third refusal to turn his back on conformity comes on the evening of Ellen's going-away dinner. Newland finally realizes the family's suspicions of the affair. All are now solidly aligned behind May; the dinner is merely a front to make society believe Ellen is leaving with family blessings. He believes that the only possibility of happiness for him and Ellen lies in his going to Europe, marrying her and living where family disfavor can be ignored.

When Archer suggests to May that they tour Europe--so that he can have a pretense for a trip--May reveals her pregnancy. Her doctors might not allow her to make such a trip and of course it is inconceivable that a husband would leave his wife alone during a pregnancy. When Archer discovers that Ellen had heard the news almost two weeks before, he knows why she has suddenly decided to return to Europe. He too, succumbs to conformity, to the traditional

34The Age of Innocence, p. 197.
responsibility of a father to his children. He discards the idea of joining Ellen in Paris.

Finally, twenty years later, Archer again lets his compulsion to conform to tradition prevent the re-establishment of his earlier relationship with Ellen. He and his oldest son Dallas are in Paris on a business trip and last jaunt before Dallas' approaching marriage. When Dallas reveals the arrangement of a visit with the intriguing Countess Olenska, Archer is reluctant. He rationalizes:

More than half a lifetime divided them, and she had spent the long interval among people he did not know, in a society he but faintly guessed at, in conditions he would never wholly understand. During that time he had been living with his youthful memory of her; but she had doubtless had other and more tangible companionship. Perhaps she, too, had kept her memory of him as something apart; but if she had, it must have been like a relic in a small dim chapel, where there was not time to pray every day.35

Thus, Archer stays below with his memories: "It's more real to me here than if I went up." By now tradition and conformity to it have become too much a part of him; he cannot rise to the challenge Ellen presents.

Newland Archer is prevented from finding real love in a "republic of the spirit" by his own refusal to heed the commands of his heart. He wants to be a free man, unhampered by the stuffy demands of convention, but at the

same time, he is proud to be a member of a society which maintains high standards. He writhes with the fear that his marriage will become as dull as all the others he has observed. Yet after twenty-six years of marriage and his wife's death, he muses:

It did not so much matter if marriage was a dull duty, as long as it kept the dignity of a duty: lapsing from that, it became a mere battle of ugly appetites. Looking about him, he honoured his own past, and mourned for it. After all, there was good in the old ways.  

Archer believes Ellen his ideal woman, but after so many years of a life he believes dull in comparison to Ellen's, he fears the renewal of their relationship, possibly because he had not become the man he had wanted to be when Ellen knew him. The tragic implications of Archer's life are tied up in his dependence upon habit and in the words of Mrs. Wharton: "Habit is necessary; it is the habit of having habits, of turning a trail into a rut, that must be incessantly fought against if one is to remain alive."  

Edith Wharton believes, then, in The Age of Innocence, that real happiness found in the love of a "soul-mate" in a "republic of the spirit" is unattainable outside the framework of conformity to traditional standards and  

36 The Age of Innocence, p. 275.  

codes of conduct. May Archer never chooses this republic because she has been schooled to want only a respectable marriage; real love has almost nothing to do with attaining such respectability. Ellen and Archer as well do not choose this republic because happiness there is unattainable outside the bounds of convention to which they are tied. Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska, as well as their creator, believe conformity to tradition and responsibility to family are more important to the preservation of civilized society than is their personal happiness.

The tragedy inherent in marital happiness—for Edith Wharton, that is—is that it is often an ideal state which man can never attain. A "republic of the spirit" created by "soul-mates" cannot be achieved outside the bounds of convention, and it often cannot be achieved within those bounds either. Society itself can destroy it as well as human selfishness. In man's compulsion to make order out of chaos, to preserve society, he has forced himself to choose conformity to the common good above his own personal happiness. And, Edith Wharton seems to say ultimately that this is as it should be.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Edith Wharton's concern with the institution of marriage was both a personal and an artistic one. Her own marriage ended in divorce after many years of trying to nurse her husband through repeated attacks of mental illness. This marriage, not the ideal as far as Mrs. Wharton was concerned, was one of companionship but one lacking spiritual and intellectual satisfaction. The attitude which Mrs. Wharton gradually developed toward her own marriage and its failure is apparent in her fiction.

This thesis has analyzed Edith Wharton's three major society novels, *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country*, and *The Age of Innocence*, to reveal her conception of marriage as the ideal human relationship central to man's social happiness, but not always achievable in organized society. Chapter I gives a brief introduction to this study of marriage in Mrs. Wharton's novels and a survey of American attitudes toward marriage.

Chapter II discusses the failure of Mrs. Wharton's own marriage, focusing on the primary reasons for that failure. Since her marriage did not provide spiritual, intellectual companionship, Mrs. Wharton tried to find such a relationship outside her marriage in her friendship
with Walter Berry. But even this relation failed to satisfy her. Mrs. Wharton failed to attain her own ideal.

Chapter III discusses Mrs. Wharton's early belief, evident in The House of Mirth, that society prevented the imprisoned spirits in societies like New York from finding happiness because social pressure to succeed according to society's rules was too great to be ignored. One could not turn his back upon social dictates in choosing the love of a "soul-mate;" in spite of all that he did to attain this love, social pressure prevented his success.

Chapter IV presents Mrs. Wharton's later belief, seen in The Custom of the Country, that the human personality itself sometimes prevented the achievement of one's personal happiness. Here marriage is a disaster when the sensitive spirit unites with the opportunist--as might be expected--but the uniting of two calculating souls also brings unhappiness because of the lack of selfless love.

Chapter V analyzes Mrs. Wharton's still later view toward man's marital happiness, evidenced in The Age of Innocence. Marriage for love alone is relegated to the background when it interferes with man's duty to society and to family. Marriage is the avenue to happiness only when performed as one performs any other duty. A marriage for love without conformity to traditional standards of conduct cannot bring happiness.
But inherent in Mrs. Wharton's view toward marital happiness lurks a paradox. That paradox is that although marriages which create a "republic of the spirit" in the love of "soul-mates" are held up as the ideal, they are most often unattainable. Society can prevent the attainment of this ideal; man himself can prevent his achievement of this ideal; and the conflict between conformity to tradition and trying to find personal happiness can also prevent the achievement of this ideal.

Man is therefore caught in the inevitable conflict between his personal happiness and the preservation of civilized society. Tragedy is inevitable. Happiness is the almost unattainable ideal.
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