Feminist Themes in the Novels of Edith Wharton: The House of Mirth, Ethan Frome, The Reef, Summer, and The Custom of the Country

Mary Lee Gabel

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FEMINIST THEMES IN THE NOVELS
OF EDITH WHARTON:
THE HOUSE OF MIRTH,
ETHAN FROME, THE REEF, SUMMER, AND
THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY

BY
MARY LEE GABEL

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts Major in English South Dakota State University 1990

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FEMINIST THEMES IN THE NOVELS OF EDITH WHARTON:
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THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY

This thesis is approved as a credible and independent investigation by a candidate for the degree, Master of Arts, and is acceptable for meeting the thesis requirements for this degree. Acceptance of this thesis does not imply that the conclusions reached by the candidate are necessarily the conclusions of the major department.

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CHAPTER ONE

"Angel of Desolation": Critical Bias

Edith Wharton, the most distinguished woman novelist in America before 1940, authored approximately forty novels, eighty short stories, and numerous (though nondescript) poems. Besides the novels for which she is best known, she published travel books, manuals of interior decoration, critical pieces, and short story collections. In 1921 Mrs. Wharton won the Pulitzer Prize for *The Age of Innocence*. Three years later she received an honorary doctorate in letters from Yale University—the first woman to be so distinguished—and the Academy of Arts and Sciences invited her to join what was then an almost exclusively male association. The National Institute of Arts awarded her its prestigious gold medal in 1924.

Mrs. Wharton's works appealed to a remarkably varied audience, appearing in women's magazines as well as in scholarly anthologies of contemporary fiction. One of her early novels, *The House of Mirth*, was adapted for the stage; a novella, *The Old Maid*, ran successfully as a stage play and later as a motion picture starring Bette Davis.

Not only did Wharton enjoy popular success, but American and English literati regarded her as their peer. Wharton found their esteem exhilarating and encouraging, for becoming a writer had been no mean task. It meant breaking with the proprieties of her social class—proprieties ingrained in her since birth. She had grown up in small nineteenth century New York society which viewed the arts as suspect at best. That any member should become a professional writer astounded its sensibilities;
that a woman should do so seemed unbelievable. In *A Backward Glance* Wharton made it clear how unfriendly her environment was to the arts:

My literary success puzzled and embarrassed my old friends far more than it impressed them, and in my own family it created a kind of constraint which increased with the years. None of my relations ever spoke to me of my books, either to praise or to blame— they simply ignored them; and among the immense tribe of New York cousins, though it included many with whom I was on terms of affectionate intimacy, the subject was avoided as though it were a kind of family disgrace, which might be condoned but could not be forgotten. (143-144)

This hostility disturbed Wharton in the beginning, but eventually she no longer cared, for, as she declared, "my recognition as a writer had transformed my life. I had made my own friends, and my books were beginning to serve as an introduction to my fellow writers" (144).

While Wharton discovered freedom from societal convention through her writing and experienced commercial success, she had to contend, throughout her career, with mixed critical analysis of her work. In the early years she won acclaim particularly for her careful and polished style; however, critics did not like her subject matter. After the 1930s, her reputation began to decline, and, by the 1960s, most of her works were out of print. College professors treated her as only a minor transitional figure; editors seldom mentioned her in surveys, and few undergraduates had
ever heard of Edith Wharton. Students of literature wrote articles and books on her, but they were relatively few. Most interest in Wharton rested solely on Ethan Frome; however, this novel is not truly representative of the bulk of her work which deals with the New York society of the 1870s, 80s, and 90s.

Critical judgments have clouded Wharton's reputation. Early critics reproved Mrs. Wharton for her preoccupation with New York society, dismissing her as an aristocrat writing of an upper class without significance and implying that she could not see beyond her restricted milieu. Others relegated her to the shadow of Henry James, tacitly ignoring her own virtues and talents as a writer.

In an essay, "Our Literary Aristocrat," Vernon Parrington made a comment reflecting his proletarian attitude toward Wharton's subject—old New York society:

She is too well bred to be a snob, but she escapes it only by sheer intelligence. The background of her mind, the furniture of her habits, are backed with potential snobbery, and it is only by scrupulous care that it is held in leash. She is unconsciously shut behind plate glass, where butlers serve formal dinners, and white shoulders go up at the mere suggestion of everyday gingham. She belongs in spite of herself to the cast which she satirizes, and she cannot make herself at home in households where the mother washes the dishes and the father attends the furnace. (Howe 153)
Other critics like Parrington regarded Wharton as only a memorialist of an aristocracy fast disappearing and her protagonists as insignificant and unimportant in light of the social changes that were taking place in America during the early years of the twentieth century. The growth of business and industry from the 1870s on created a widening gulf between the rich and the poor. This gave rise to labor unions and reform movements which voiced the grievances of debt-ridden farmers and immigrant workers who lived in slums and worked in impersonal factories. Critics believed writers should concern themselves with these issues rather than the trivial social manners of a dying aristocracy.

Dismissals such as these annoyed Wharton who knew that social injustice could be felt in the upper as well as the lower classes. Critics who treated her concerns so lightly could, perhaps, be accused of snobbery themselves. Ten years after her death critics continued to point to her narrow social range, Henry Seidel Canby faulting her for being unable to see that her "idols of the social temples" were "quite unimportant in the history of the great American experiment" (McDowell, "Viewing" (522).

There can be no doubt that Edith Wharton's reputation as a writer suffered from criticism of this sort. E.K. Brown stated in 1935 that the sociological changes under way in America during the 1930s unfairly diminished her influence (Plante 16). Blake Nevius suggests that it is difficult to think of another twentieth century novelist "whose reputation has suffered more from the change of interests and narrowing of emphasis in literature of the 'thirties than has Edith Wharton's" (1).
The branding as a "literary aristocrat" constitutes only part of the criticism which brought about the decline of Edith Wharton's reputation. Perhaps more damaging is the fact that much early criticism of Wharton calls her the "disciple" of Henry James and claims that James exerted a major influence upon her fiction. As Patricia Plante observes in "Edith Wharton: A Prophet Without Due Honor," Wharton's accomplishments have been partly overshadowed by those of the "great Master," and "she is at times swiftly and with very little thought relegated to the realm of minor disciple and forgotten there" (21).

Q.D. Leavis called Wharton James's "heiress" (Howe 73); E.K. Brown claims her debt to James is "almost incomputably great . . . . Many of her individual works would not be just what they are were it not for certain strangely similar works of Henry James" (95). Most critics agree that Brown overstates himself here. The only one of Wharton's novels to show a considerable influence of Henry James is The Reef (1912). One of Wharton's recent critics, Richard Lawson, acknowledges that The Reef is a novel after the manner of Henry James, but calls it one of a kind in a collection of her fiction. He belies the suggestion that the novel is proof that she was under James's influence. He suggests:

It is probable that at least three factors lie at the root of the formal critical view that Wharton was a literary disciple of James: the presumed Jamesian tone of The Reef, James's laudatory criticism of The Reef, and the friendship between Wharton and James. The latter two are facts, although that
does not in either case guarantee literary influence. But in the case of The Reef, the Jamesian influence is not so much in style as in the setting of the novel, in its characters, and in its internal balance. Wharton's own style, increasingly ironic and subtle, by no means excluding the plain word, bears very little resemblance to James's complex and qualified periods. As to the Jamesian setting and somewhat Jamesian characters, it is interesting to speculate to what extent they may have contributed to dulling the livelier sensibilities that Wharton revealed in her earlier novels. (64-65)

Undoubtedly, Edith Wharton strongly admired James's art. Ten years after their first meeting, at which James paid little attention to her because of her extreme shyness and inability to converse with him, Edith sent James one of her short stories. The story made him keenly aware of her as an author, and he characterized her as "an almost too susceptible student of his" (9). Lawson conjectures that this may have been the beginning, long before The Reef, of the mistaken notion that Edith Wharton was influenced by James (9-10). She did ask him to scrutinize her work, but never was it a foregone conclusion that she would do his bidding.

Irving Howe, in "The Achievement of Edith Wharton," asserts that James was Wharton's "inspiration"--something quite different from an influence. She sought his opinion because she trusted him to be always kind and honest, never malicious in his criticism. She felt indebted to James, for to her, as well as to many other writers, James "loomed as a
model of artistic conscience and selflessness; his example made their calling seem a sacred one, his devotion to craft made everything else seem trivial" (Howe 6). In tribute to him, Wharton said “he was about the only novelist who had formulated his ideas about his art” (6).

Wharton aspired to take her craft as far as she could; in this respect she drew inspiration from James. Unfortunately, literary critics sometimes assume that because a writer draws from the inspiration of other writers, nothing comes from the art of the writer alone. In her scholarly study of Edith Wharton’s life and works, A Feast of Words, Cynthia Griffin Wolff warns: “It is impossible to stress too strongly Wharton’s genuine independence of James. In regarding her as a disciple, critic after critic has managed to overlook what was unique (and often best) in her work” (424).

If James “influenced” Wharton, it was more through their personal relationship than his art. Beginning in 1904, James spent many lengthy and memorable visits with Edith and Teddy Wharton at “The Mount,” the Wharton’s home in Lenox, Massachusetts. The two authors found each other intellectually stimulating. James coined numerous epithets for Wharton, epithets which Wolff contends reveal his awe of Wharton and possibly some envy. He called her: “Princess lointaine, the whirling princess, the great and glorious pendulum, the gyrator, the devil dancer, the golden eagle, the Fire Bird, the Shining One, the angel of desolation or of devastation, the historic ravager” (144-145). He had great fondness for Wharton and respected her talent.
During the extremely troubled later years of Wharton’s marriage and during her affair with Morton Fullerton and ensuing divorce, Henry James remained Wharton’s valued friend and confidant. The two shared what was tragic and humorous in their lives. James sympathized with Wharton, fully cognizant of her husband Teddy’s worsening mental condition—a condition he had suffered from for most of their married life. In 1910, when physicians confirmed Teddy would not recover, James bolstered Edith’s determination to see Teddy comfortably cared for in a mental health institution. Afterwards, Wharton moved to France. After her divorce in 1913, she returned to the United Stated only once—to receive the honorary doctorate from Yale. In 1916, as James lay dying, Edith Wharton wrote: “His friendship was the pride and honour of my life” (McDowell 38).

Unfortunately, Edith Wharton was a woman, a wealthy woman, a woman writer, and compared to one of the literary giants of all time—Henry James. Wharton felt the sting of disapproval from her family, friends, and critics, like Percy Lubbock, who not only paired her with James, but labeled her a grande dame, a rich and fashionable woman of the world who took her writing only casually and regarded her duties as a society hostess as more important. R.W.B. Lewis, Wharton’s most noted biographer, speculates that in the midst of all this negative criticism she came to see herself as “a creature of impulses, experiences, and reaches of the imagination that a well-bred woman was not supposed capable of in an age of delimiting property, of imposed disguises” (xiii). Lewis and others have wondered if Wharton’s reputation might have fared better had she
Critics writing about Wharton today have begun to assuage the prejudice against Wharton caused by the unjust comparison of her work to James and are beginning to recognize the force and maturity of her writing. She has begun to attract, finally in the 1970s and '80s, the attention and debate due her as an important novelist of the twentieth century. Still her real subject—women—remains unacknowledged or overlooked. Critics ignore or miss the point that she aims her social criticism primarily against the cultural attitudes which demean and inhibit women.

Recently, feminist critics have written articles dealing with Wharton's portrayal of women thwarted by convention and male dominance. However, some bemoan the fact that Wharton's heroines do not effectively solve their predicaments; thus, they fail to provide role models for contemporary readers. Other recent critics continue to comment on the ways in which her heroines resemble those of James's fiction; and still others, by addressing only superficial points such as the way her male characters serve as foils for her women, completely overlook her concern with social justice.

R.W.B. Lewis is one of the few recent critics who stresses what I believe to be the crux of Wharton's major fiction: her concern with the social pressures placed upon women, the rigid expectations which society places upon them, and their confrontation with intricate and perplexing choices. In his preface to Edith Wharton: A Biography, Lewis writes:

Her writings find their larger human implications out of a vast
imaginative report on one segment of American social history and on Americans glimpsed over more than forty years amid the international community. They are also quiet, continuing testimony to the female experience under modern historical and social conditions, to the modes of entrapment, betrayal, and exclusion devised for women in the first decades of the American and European twentieth century. (xiii)

Appreciating the same concerns another recent critic, Margaret McDowell, argues that many critics "underestimate the social criticism implicit in her preoccupation with the problems of women in a changing society over a period of some fifty years. This aspect of her fiction presents a challenge to all perceptive and compassionate readers" ("Viewing" 523). Wharton's works call for the sexual liberation of women as well as men.

Within the social norms and conventions which governed women's lives in old New York society, women existed to complement men. A woman expressed the qualities deemed necessary by that society--innocence, dependence, nurturance--most often through marriage. She lived in a world of manners--signs of conformity to social expectations. Edith Wharton understood the ways conventions of social interaction could tether and diminish people, especially women. In her autobiography she called old New York society "hide-bound in its deadly uniformity of mean ugliness" (Backward 55). Cynthia Griffin Wolff observes:

Wharton was angry at the ways in which society had hedged the opportunities for even its most promising women. She
was angry at the sexual deprivations that she had suffered (and that most people then assumed to be a normal component in every woman's life). ("Visionary" 26)

In her personal life, the "well-bred" Edith Wharton stretched convention and societal expectations of women in her "hide-bound" society. She supported her husband who had less money than she. She traveled widely. She numbered among her dearest friends distinguished men such as Paul Bourget, Henry James, Walter Berry, and Gaillard Lapsley. She chose her companions carefully, as feminist critic Marilyn French says, "not frivolously, but for her edification, education, to increase her self-confidence and self-esteem" (223). Wharton defied society by having a passionate love affair with Morton Fullerton and eventually divorced her husband, Teddy. During the First World War she went door to door to raise money for its victims, giving a large portion of her personal fortune to that end.

Despite Wharton's courage, independence, and defiance of convention, she would probably not qualify as a feminist according to the modern definition--a woman desiring equality with and even supremacy over men. She disapproved of overt feminist activity. She never campaigned for social or legal reform which would improve the lot of women, nor did she participate in the suffragist movement. Her personal life exemplified her belief that women could and should develop their potentialities in the face of overwhelming challenges. However, Wharton knew enough to tread lightly within the boundaries of her society or be cast
adrift. In her mind, a woman had to, as Margaret McDowell puts it, "exist as a conventionally feminine presence in order to be seen sympathetically as a 'new woman' " ("Viewing" 524).

At times, though, Wharton stepped directly into the fray, rebelling against male condescension toward women, especially in her nonfiction. For example, writing for The Bookman in 1902, Wharton took issue with critics who thought that George Eliot's interest in scientific studies harmed her distinction as a writer. She argued that scientific investigation should not adversely affect Eliot's work when scientific knowledge had "nourished" the work of Goethe and Milton. She asked: "Is it because these were men, while George Eliot was a woman, that she is reproved for venturing on ground they did not fear to tread?" (McDowell, "Viewing" 525).

Though Wharton would never have admitted to being a feminist, her leanings in that direction seem obvious; however, determining the nature of her feminism presents the reader with no easy task. Wharton's attitudes toward women and their problems changed as her career progressed, and one cannot dismiss the evidence in her work of subtleties and contradictions that she herself was probably oblivious to. Throughout most of her life she struggled with her identity as a woman. As Wolff emphasizes, much of her struggle was entangled with her idea of femininity, both personal and as dictated by the customs of the country of her times (Feast 100). She wondered if, as a woman, she should create beauty or merely remain a mindless disposable object existing only for the gratification of others: to 'make' visions or to 'be' a vision of loveliness?"
In addition, though she intensely disliked the "hide-bound" aspect of her society, she also deeply valued its traditions, believing them to be the underpinnings of moral character. Her respect for tradition and distrust of convention gave rise to an ambivalence toward change, and her fiction reveals the complexities of women caught between the safety of tradition and the constriction of conventions. Like herself, women of her novels such as Lily Bart or Ellen Olenska, struggle, not to be man's equal or master but to be autonomous individuals desirous of self-containment, irrespective of sexual function. Their alternative is to succumb to the status-quo--and they believe that deliverance comes only through a man, which, as Elizabeth Ammons says, "in reality celebrates masculine dominance, proprietorship, and privilege" (Bloom 50).

From her viewpoint, Edith Wharton scrutinizes several feminist themes: the role of women as ornaments; relationships between mothers and daughters, husbands and wives; the social codes surrounding divorce and extramarital affairs; and the constrictive implications of marriage. In most of her fiction, as Margaret McDowell emphasizes, Edith Wharton concentrates upon the aspirations of women and reflects in a variety of situations the deprivations peculiarly theirs. Because of her sympathy with her women characters and her insight into their lives, she reveals an implicit feminism as they relate, ordinarily at some disadvantage, to individual men or to a society which men
Critics generally agree that Wharton’s female characters are stronger than her men. In fact, memorable heroes such as Newland Archer, Ethan Frome, George Darrow, and Ralph Marvell come under the control of what Arthur Hobson Quinn calls “insistent feminine forces” (578). He does not mean this unfavorably, recognizing that Wharton’s fiction involves personal relationships and that “the steady clutch of feminine hands shapes, as in real life, those situations” (578). There can be no doubt that Wharton knew American women well. She has given us a great variety of heroines; the rich and the poor, young and old, urban and rural; tragic figures such as Ellen Olenska and Lily Bart, and women who dominate others from behind their shields of marriage and respectability like May Welland and Anna Leath. There are those who yield to temptations such as Sophy Viner and Charity Royall, and the ruthless such as Bertha Dorset and Zeena Frome. Wharton scrutinizes American life, and her characters evolve from her concerns that a lack of spirituality, morality, and a slavishness to social convention have led to formlessness and aimlessness which pervades society. In such a society, woman is the chief sufferer because her minor role prevents her from effectively altering conditions that go unquestioned by the more pragmatic male.

Some recent critics seize upon Wharton’s ambiguous feelings about women, complaining that she deplores the double standard but appears to reward women who remain chaste and socially proper. In “The Ambiguity of Edith Wharton’s ‘Lurking Feminism,’” Diana Worby argues that Wharton
"struggles with the 'new Woman' who is rebelling against the constraints of an oppressive society," and, on the other hand, "satirizes Bluestocking suburban dilettantes in a scathing (even sexist) portrayal of women . . . ." (81). Marilyn French, in an essay entitled "Muzzled Women," wonders why Wharton (and other women writers, too) have granted their heroines fewer choices and greater constriction than she experienced in her own life. Why not create female characters with the same capacity for success she had?

Perhaps Wharton portrays these mean lives because she was clever enough to know that critics would not accept her works if she went too far. Drawing portraits of failed women, at least, effectively awakens the reader's awareness of the plight of women thwarted by convention in any era, be it the late nineteen hundreds, the early twentieth century, or the nineteen eighties. French, in her discussion of the disparity between the life of the artist and the lives of her heroines, seems to answer her own question. She writes: "A woman with power, and certainly a woman with power over men, will be read as a threatening monster, cold, castrating, and evil. If a work depends on some sympathy for such a character, it is doomed" (227). Certainly Wharton's The Custom of the Country, with its portrait of the vampiric Undine Spragg (to be discussed further on), exemplifies this in point.

French makes a further relevant comment in regard to Wharton's ambiguities:

When critics write about male protagonists, they assume that the character is worthy of interest or the author would not
have made him the protagonist. His flaws are therefore of interest, and readers expect they will be corrected (if the work is a comedy) or destroy him (if the work is a tragedy). Rarely does one find a critic dismissing or condemning a male character—even secondary or marginal character—with irritation or contempt: A male character is what he is and what he is has meaning within the context of the work. Critics do not scorn Hamlet for lack of manliness, Lear for his blindness, Stendahl's heroes for the naivete. Rather, these characters are sympathized with, studied: as are hundreds of simple arrogant heroes, wretched heroes who have been transformed into dull beetles, miserable scrawlers of sordid notes from underground. Female characters are rarely approached this way. (226)

French goes on to imply that critics look for virtuous female characters. If critics read of one who is unvirtuous, they make the assumption that there is some moral taint, and, if so, she gets what she deserves. This tendency to judge female characters in such a harsh manner spills over onto their creators as well when those creators are female. Male writers escape judgment, such as the sexually "masochistic" James Joyce, the "womanizing" William Faulkner, the alcoholic F. Scott Fitzgerald (228). The same critics who accused Wharton of being rich and snobbish and dismissing nonsociety people in her fiction, respected the work of these men regardless of their personal flaws. These critics judged
Wharton’s life as well as her work, victimizing her with their prejudices.

Is it any wonder, in light of the prevailing critical attitude toward Wharton, that she maintained a conservative stance in how far she went with her feminist portrayals? What is more, constriction of women was tragedy--utter waste--in Wharton’s view; it is this picture of old New York society which she explores from every angle in her works. She did not intend to create role models for her female readers to aspire to--she chose rather to deal with a universal theme--the inhumanity of men and women toward one another. Her ideas deserve our attention. Wharton subtly and cleverly invites men and women alike to recognize, through her characters, their own inhumanity and to change their viewpoints toward one another before it becomes too late.

Wharton’s first critics, concerned primarily with her polished style and her relationship to Henry James, failed to credit her with showing how stultifying convention affected society’s idea of women. There are particular aspects of Wharton’s fictional treatment of convention important in consideration of Wharton as a feminist author. This discussion focuses upon these aspects.

First, Wharton’s fiction demonstrates the limitation of women’s lives to a single sphere--marriage--and shows how the institution of marriage could make or break their lives.

Furthermore, convention in Wharton’s fiction insidiously limits women’s perception of the realities of the world. [Gary H. Lindbergh, in *Edith Wharton and the Novel of Manners*, argues that Wharton women
learn "to perceive reality through the bars of a cage" and that the "major subject of Wharton's fictions is, in fact, precisely how social convention limits the life of the spirit" (36)). In regard to this argument, Mary Suzanne Schriber makes a further observation:

Intercepting vision and encouraging the perceiver to attach indiscriminately to behavior the significance ordinarily assigned to it, tradition subjects Wharton's female characters to two injustices: their behavior is often misconstrued, or it is rendered invisible and therefore unappreciated if it in any way outstrips ordinary expectations of women. ("Convention" 189)

One final aspect must also be considered. The societal expectations which govern women's lives and delineate society's idea of woman's nature can be directed by both sexes toward destruction or enhancement of one's life. When convention destroys in Wharton's fiction, her heroines become victims; their attempts to become strong and independent usually fail, and this is to be expected for, as Margaret McDowell notes: "In a hostile or indifferent society women find no complete victory" ("Viewing" 524).

I will explore Wharton's concerns for women as she portrays them in The House of Mirth, Ethan Frome, The Custom of the Country, The Reef, and Summer, novels which deal with the restrictions imposed on women in a male-oriented society.
Edith Newbold Jones, born in 1862 and later to become Edith Wharton, entered the small nineteenth century aristocracy of old New York, a society bound by convention and middle class concern for respectability, a world of gentlewomen and lawyers who traced their roots to colonial days. Her parents, George Frederic and Lucretia Rhinelander Jones, belonged to that society called the "New York Four Hundred" which dominated New York from the time of the Dutch and English colonies until around 1880. At this time the new rich, those who had made huge sums during the Civil War, invaded established New York society--quite willing and eager to pay large sums for the privilege. Old New York regarded the new American capitalists as vulgar barbarians who posed no real threat.

In the world of old New York society, bad manners and business improbity persisted as the supreme offenses. As Alfred Kazin observes, "the revolution in Edith Wharton's world, characteristically a revolution of manners, came when the vulgarians of the new capitalism moved in upon Fifth Avenue" (Native 57). Like the rest of her class, Wharton deplored the vulgar American obsession with wealth and praised the financial values of her own distinct class. In her autobiography, A Backward Glance, she wrote:

I believe their value lay in upholding two standards of importance in any community, that of education and good manners, and of scrupulous probity in business and private affairs. New York has always been a commercial community,
and in my infancy the merits and defects of its citizens were those of a mercantile middle class. The first duty of such a class was to maintain a strict standard of uprightness in affairs; and the gentlemen of my father's day did maintain it, whether in the law, in banking, shipping or wholesale commercial enterprise. I well remember the horror excited by any irregularity in affairs, and the relentless and social ostracism inflicted on the families who lapsed from professional or business integrity . . . . At any rate I should say that the qualities justifying the existence of our old society were social amenity and financial incorruptibility.

(21-22)

Awareness of the social changes going on behind the surface of her esteemed group and the intrusion of new wealth and new ways of accumulating it tested Wharton's assumptions about the durability of this inherited social order. Granted, Wharton's esteemed society had as its basis wealth, but it was not proud of its wealth; to be so would have been considered vulgar. Her mother taught her never to talk about money and to think about it as little as possible. She resented the crude, aggressive, millionaire types of the West who broke into society through the sheer force of money. She suffered from the diminution of the Joneses' social position in a city that was being taken over by these new crass millionaires, and she feared the temptation to earn money by devious methods--marrying for it, or worse, marrying, divorcing, and remarrying for it. Speculating on Wharton's reaction to this upheaval, Louis Auchincloss suggests that she knew "the only
way that old New York was going to save itself was by intermarrying with the new rich before the latter's heiresses were grabbed up by less fastidious European peers" (Woman 40). As a novelist of manners, she took her major subject from the experience—the impact of social organization and reorganization upon the individual.

Young Edith readily accepted this amiable and well-ordered old New York of inherited wealth, leisure, and good conversation. Taste, refinement, and amenability remained the watchwords of the circle in which she moved; she never ceased to admire its chivalry. The men of this closed society kept their eyes on commercial and political ventures but had plenty of time to dine and drink tea in the homes of their favorite hostesses. Women managed their households, minded religiously the social amenities, and strove to be charming and stylish. Above all, this society rigorously defended itself from everything unpleasant. In The Age of Innocence (1920), Wharton described her society as “the way of people who dreaded scandal more than disease, who placed decency above courage, and who considered that nothing was more ill-bred than 'scenes,' except the behavior of those who gave rise to them" (335).

But what of Edith Wharton? How did she come to value old New York and at the same time dread it, seeing it as trivial and shallow, nourished only by wealth and mired in convention? How did she become, first of all, a writer, and more so, one to describe the decline of the New York aristocracy of wealth? Despite her respect for this society into which she had been born, Wharton felt impelled to write what she saw, and what she saw in the social
scene before her was "the tragedy of waste imposed by idle, luxurious living and the dedication of the whole vitality of a people to money making and pleasure" (Monroe 112). One cannot understand Edith Wharton unless one understands what went into the rearing of the child and the adolescent Edith.

Lucretia Jones, thirty-seven years old when Edith was born, had already given birth to two other children, boys, fifteen and thirteen years older than their sister, so in many ways Edith was much like an only child. Though she speaks with considerable affection for her father, she has little to say of her mother, and as Louis Auchincloss points out, "the terms which she uses in writing of her mother are all associated with coldness, formality, and appearance" (Woman 28). Edith seems to have remembered her mother chiefly for her style, that she dressed well and spoke well--that she lived up to the standards of her world. Cynthia Griffin Wolff speculates that baby Edith, probably an unplanned, unwelcome surprise to a mother unused to babysitting, came to perceive her mother as "remote, disapproving, impatient, and unloving" (Feast 12). Wolff supposes the world of Wharton's infancy and early childhood an "unpredictable and hostile place." She quotes Wharton:

I was never free from the oppressive sense that I had two absolutely inscrutable beings to please--God and my mother--who, while ostensibly upholding the same principles of behavior, differed totally as to their application. And my mother was the most inscrutable of the two. (12)

As a child Edith suffered from moral bewilderment, deprivation, and isolation. R.W.B. Lewis declares that Lucretia Jones represented a strong
negative force in Edith's life, repressing her natural curiosities and turning away her shy questions with accusations of not being "nice." She scolded, humiliated, and frightened Edith, and Lewis contends that the unconscious terror she admitted to dreading all during her adolescence was likely her own mother (25).

Lucretia Jones adhered strongly to the rigid standards by which "nice" girls were brought up. Parents expected dutiful daughters who would do "female" things. Lucretia was disappointed in Edith, a plain and stubborn little girl who preferred to play alone "making up," as she called it, instead of doing what her mother considered normal, playing with dolls and the proper playmates. Above all else, parents expected daughters to be obedient and self-controlled. In *Dimity Convictions*, Barbara Welter says that nineteenth century American society felt confident that women were and ought to be more religious, modest, passive, submissive, and domestic than men in order to be a civilizing factor in American society (4). Lucretia considered herself just so and demanded no less of her daughter. A girl's virtue prevailed as all important and protected her fragile innocence, eventually earning her a worthy and potentially wealthy young man. Edith's behavior and mastery of the social graces assured Lucretia continued acceptance in the New York hierarchy. The pressures on Edith to conform, not unlike those on most American girls of the era, seemed more urgent and sacrosanct in her world. Barbara Welter emphasizes:

As society became more self-conscious towards the end of the century, American girls played an increasingly important role in
defining their parents' place in the hierarchy. It was necessary
to develop not only a manual of ritual for the dinners, calling
cards, and balls of "the 400," but also to develop a "morality of
fashion." This assured the anxious populace that the American
girl remained internally the same as she had always been, no
matter how elaborate the society which enveloped her.
Increased wealth and style provided only a larger arena for her
traditional works and "civilizing functions." (15)

Adolescence, a brief and stormy period in the nineteenth century,
especially assailed Edith who was already deprived of her mother's love and
affection. Girls discovered their identity during this period through the
agencies of family, church, school, and the mentors of society--popular
literature, medical texts, and etiquette manuals (3). Fiction in the Jones' home was scant--they regarded it as a debased form of literature. As Grace Kellogg notes in The Two Lives of Edith Wharton, "persons like Herman Melville, Edgar Allan Poe,, and Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe were simply not mentioned in polite circles ... " (31). Edith's mother and her friends devoured trashy novels behind closed doors, careful to keep this diversion a secret from their daughters. Reading of this type, let alone a medical text, would have been banned as far as Edith was concerned. Neither did she have the benefit of school; education was by governesses.

Nevertheless, Edith Wharton, at an early age, became an intense reader of literature. She spent a good deal of time with her father, and he showed his affection for his daughter by allowing her into his library when
she was little more than a toddler. As she grew, Edith wiled away hours in her father's library preferring reading to other more "normal" childhood activities. Though reading was not encouraged by either of her parents, her mother, in her lack of attentiveness to this small child, probably remained unaware of the great amounts of time Edith actually spent with her father's books. Despite her mother's repressiveness, Edith managed to read the "classics," English and American poets, and translations into English of Ovid, Virgil, Homer, and Plato. Her passion for reading never left her.

By the time she was middle aged, not only had Edith Wharton become a prolific writer, but she could speak and write French, German, and Italian (this the result of the many years spent living in various European cities with her parents between the ages of five and twenty-one); she became an expert in furniture and gardening and well read in science, history, and philosophy. Louis Auchincloss asserts that Edith was aggressive in her early years, probably out of frustration at living entirely among the fashionable where erudition in a woman was not well received (Woman 52).

So much for popular literature, school, and other social mentors--except the etiquette manuals; with those Edith was more than a little familiar. Her parents never touched on religion itself and went to church every Sunday only out of social obligation. R.W.B. Lewis says of George and Lucretia Jones' moral code:

... George Frederic and Lucretia stood for what was known as "worldly probity," a code of behavior which took no account whatever of Christian moral doctrine but which regarded ill
breeding (a failure of politeness, for example, or tendency to grab) as the only wrong doing. (25)

However, Edith assumed that “God was one of the ‘dark fatalities’ with which mortal existence was burdened” (26). She took God for granted and regarded him as a fearful kind of being. Edith indeed found life to be a burdensome affair. Lewis tells of a revealing comment she wrote to herself in her adolescence: “If ever I have children I shall deprive them of every pleasure, in order to prepare them for the inevitable unhappiness of life” (26).

During the period between 1878 and 1885, Edith Jones had a great many things to “get through” before she could settle down to a literary career. Of course, there was the ever present repressiveness of her mother. Louis Auchincloss recounts a famous anecdote of Edith, at eleven, showing her mother the manuscript of a “novel” which began with Mrs. Tompkins apologizing to a visitor for not having tidied up the drawing room. Lucretia returned the work making this icy comment: “Drawing rooms are always tidy” (Woman 28). This rejection nearly squelched Edith’s ambition as a novelist. Auchincloss ponders this strained relationship between mother and daughter:

Yet such mothers are precisely those who gain the greatest hold on lonely daughters. I wonder in seeking the answer why Edith was so long in spreading her wings, if one need look much farther than Lucretia Jones. She was probably just kind enough, just attractive enough, just wise enough, to make any act of rebellion seem to a child an act of bad taste. 28
It is difficult to know what was in her mind, but after the subtle and effective remonstrance from her mother in regard to her “novel,” Edith gave up fiction and turned to poetry. Perhaps she considered it less “dangerous” or more private. In 1878, when she was sixteen years old, a modest volume of poems entitled Verses was printed. Grace Kellogg speculates that probably Edith’s brother, Harry, may have financed this endeavor because she would not have had the means, and her parents would not have provided them (33-34). Only three published poems appeared thereafter until Scribners published her first short story in 1891. From age sixteen until age twenty-three, Edith had to “come out,” take care of a dying father, become engaged (briefly, in 1883, to Harry Stevens whose mother squelched the match), disengaged, and finally married (in 1885, to Teddy Wharton, thirteen years her senior). Auchincloss believes that in this period “Edith may have been adapting herself, with resignation, perhaps even with cheerfulness, to the role that she expected to play in life: that of fashionable society matron in New York and Newport” (Woman 39).

In the fashionable but closed, stifling world of old New York, society women did not have property rights. A societal code warned against ambition, eschewing fame and wealth as unsuitable for females. Any desire for status or power had almost inevitably to arrive through marriage. Barbara Welter affirms:

Marriage was a demonstrable step up in the hierarchy of society, one of the few ways in which a woman could make such a move. Marriage could provide for a woman the improved
economic and social benefits which men received through education, speculation, the professions, business, and marriage. Most American girls believed that to marry for anything but the purest love was unworthy of their sex and nation. (8)

Women lacked education, training, career opportunities: their adolescent lives focused on one thing--"coming out" at age eighteen. For this they should know how to do fine needlework, music, drawing, china painting, and "the languages," French and Italian. In preparation for marriage young women were taught to make home so pleasant for their fathers and brothers that they would not be tempted to look elsewhere for diversion. Men believed in a woman's moral superiority and the double standard. A girl treasured her virginity--her greatest asset. A breath of scandal could mar her reputation irrevocably, and only a man in a "state of grace"--most fine and upstanding--was permitted to approach her (4-5). Finally, at the age of twenty, society expected a girl to put away her girlhood and to step into the weighty cares of domesticity and maternity. Welter comments on her plight:

The assumption is twofold: the American female was supposed to be so infinitely lovable and provocative that a healthy male could barely control" himself when in the same room with her, and the same girl, as she "comes out" of the cocoon of her family's protectiveness, is so palpitating with undirected affection, so filled to the brim with tender feelings, that she fixes her love on the first person she sees. She awakes from the
midsummer night’s dream of adolescence, and it is the responsibility of her family and society to see that her eyes fall on a suitable match and not some clown with the head of an ass. They do their part by such restrictive measures as segregated (by sex and/or class) schools, dancing lessons, travel, and other external controls. The combination forms a kind of societal chastity belt which is not unlocked until the marriage partner has arrived, and adolescence is formally over.

(6)

Many years later, in The Age of Innocence, through the character of Newland Archer, Edith Wharton revealed her thoughts about this stultifying process:

As he dropped into his armchair near the fire his eyes rested on the large photograph of May Welland, which the young girl had given him in the first days of their romance, and which now displaced all other portraits on the table. With a new sense of awe he looked at the frank forehead, serious eyes and gay innocent mouth of the young creature whose soul’s custodian he was to be. That terrifying product of the social system she belonged to and believed in, the young girl who knew nothing and expected everything, looked back at him like a stranger through May Welland’s familiar features . . . . (42-43)

Edith Wharton was not encouraged to be a writer. The fashionable society to which her parents belonged considered only a nodding
acquaintance with the arts necessary. Her literary activities embarrassed her family and friends. After her marriage her husband ridiculed her; her immediate circle of friends called her career absurd. She wrote that they considered her too fashionable to be intelligent, and in New York too intelligent to be fashionable (Auchincloss, Woman 12). Later she would say of this:

The people about me were so indifferent to everything I really cared for that complying with the tastes of others had become a habit, and it was only some years later, when I had written several books, that I finally rebelled and pleaded for the right to something better. (Kazin, Native 59)

Wharton spent her life trying to reconcile these opposing views of fashion and intelligence. It shaped the drama of her life as she saw it and formed her novels. Gary Lindbergh contends that society functions as a "prison" in Wharton's fiction (36). Surely, she herself felt imprisoned. She wanted to write, adopt a career, and be free of it—to an extent. In this respect Wharton may be called a feminist. However, as Richard Lawson says, Wharton's feminism is limited: "Social class was more important to her than sexual equality. She deplored the double standard as it applied to Lily Bart or Ellen Olenska; she defended it as it applied to Sophy Viner" (97-98).

Geoffrey Walton makes this observation of Wharton's love-hate relationship with old New York society:

Given her love of literature, her strength of character, and her creative power, she was able to make the most of her
opportunities for self-cultivation. As a wife and hostess, she belonged to society; as a novelist she analyzed its customs and attitudes for their human significance and value. (20)

Finally this from Alfred Kazin who succinctly sums up the social malaise Wharton found herself up against:

Edith Wharton became a writer not because she revolted against her native society, but because she was bored with it; and restlessness was a primary achievement in such a world as hers. Whatever its graciousness, its almost classic sense of the past, its mildewed chivalry, gentility excluded women from every function save the cultivation of the home. Its distrust of the creative intelligence was as profound and significant as its devotion to the appurtenances of culture and the domestic elevation of library sets and vellum manuscripts. It worshiped literature as it worshiped its ancestors, for the politeness of society; and if it distrusted the passions of literature, this was not because its taste was conscious and superior. It had not even the generous contempt for literature so marked in the boorish patronage of the arts by the industrial tycoons of the Gilded Age: it rejected what it could not understand because the creative ‘elan’ affronted its soul. It had already become a lifeless class, rigidly and bitterly conservative, filling its days with the desire to keep hold, to keep away from innovation and scandal and restless minds. There was nothing in it to elevate an intellectual
spirit: even its pleasures had become ceremonial. To judge it in the light of the new world of industrial capitalism was to discriminate against it, for it offered no possibilities of growth.

(58)

That Wharton escaped this, if only to a limited degree, is a tribute to her as a novelist, a woman, and one of the early feminists of the twentieth century.

Early in her career, Edith Wharton, for the most part, avoided the subject of New York society. In 1902, she published a novel, The Valley of Decision, an historical novel with an eighteenth century Italian setting. Henry James called it “brilliant and interesting from a literary point of view” (Wharton, House vii). However, he also had these words for Wharton: “Let it suffer the wrong of being crudely hinted, as my desire earnestly, tenderly, intelligently to admonish you . . . admonish you, I say, in favour of the American subject.” Coming exactly to the point, James said, “Do New York! The first hand account is precious” (vii). Heeding his advice, Wharton abandoned a novel she was working on at the time called Disintegration in favor of one she had experimented with previously, A Moment's Ornament. In revision it would be called The House of Mirth. James's advice in this case proved timely and well received. When she took it upon herself to “Do New York” it was a bold commitment. R.W.B. Lewis reflects on her decision to follow James's advice:

New York had provided various scenic settings for Henry James and William Dean Howells, . . . for Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser. But in no instance had New York been a
novel's chief character, and in the New York of the early 1900s that Edith Wharton knew best—"a society of irresponsible pleasure seekers," as she put it in her autobiography of 1934—she had chosen a protagonist essentially incapable of serious and significant action. (ix)

The character, of course, was Lily Bart. The House of Mirth established Edith Wharton as a writer and revealed her major strengths—an intimate knowledge of New York society and an ability to dramatize the plight of individuals, especially women, trapped by its rigid conventions and code of manners. In answer to the problem of creating a character such as Lily Bart—one who essentially cannot move—Wharton said: "a frivolous society can acquire significance through what its frivolity destroys" (ix). The novel brought exclamations of astonishment and admiration from critics. Some argued that the subject of the book was improper for literature. The general view was that Edith Wharton had at last established herself as one of the two or three most serious and accomplished writers of fiction in America in the early twentieth century.
CHAPTER THREE

The House of Mirth: The “Wasting” of Lily Bart

The House of Mirth (1905), Wharton’s ninth published book, became an immediate best seller. According to R.W.B. Lewis, within ten days of its publication on October 4, 30,000 copies had been sold. By November 20, 100,000 copies were in print (Wharton, House xv-xvi). Edith Wharton’s editor, William Crary Brownell, consultant for the publishing house of Charles Scribner’s Sons, assured her that the novel was having “the most rapid sale of any book ever published by Scribner” (xvi). As Louis Auchincloss comments, the novel signaled Wharton’s “coming of age as a writer. She had at last the perfect subject: fashionable New York” (Woman 69). Auchincloss quotes Wharton: “There it was before me,” she wrote, “in all its flatness and futility, asking to be dealt with as the theme most available to my hand, since I had been steeped in it from infancy” (69).

Wharton turned to her own society for the background and the subject of The House of Mirth. Though the novel brought her huge commercial success, critics charged that the work dealt with a trivial and dated issue. Some bemoaned the fact that the novel provided only a warning about American society rather than a hope, that its characters were displeasing portraits of humanity, that they were not “good enough” (Lewis 154)–criticism typical in the moralistic world of American literature of 1905. Critics who liked the novel debated over whether or not it could be judged a masterpiece; critics still ask that question today. Whether or not it is a
masterpiece, Lily Bart’s destruction by an overpowering, unmerciful society can move us today just as it did readers in 1905.

The society Wharton wrote of in *The House of Mirth* is one in which the Civil War millionaires, new industrialists, and crude parvenus of the West were buying their way into the established society of old New York. These new rich--the Wellington Brys, Mattie Gormer, and Norma Hatch--Wharton characterizes as having an “easy promiscuity,” and a lack of social boundaries (*House* 224). Wharton calls them “invaders” and sees them as a force of corruption undermining “old habits, old restraints, the hand of inherited order . . . “ (141).

These invaders cause a rift in the otherwise established society of Lily’s past. The old order represented by the matrons Mrs. Peniston, Mrs. Gryce, and Mrs. Van Osburgh remain staunch upholders of social and marital acceptability. Lily’s set publicly subscribes to the social boundaries of the old guard but believes that what goes on behind closed doors is a private matter. Lily Bart is caught between these worlds; she can neither accept the restrictions of the old guard, nor can she accept the promiscuity of the invaders.

Mary Ellis Gibson in “Edith Wharton and the Ethnography of Old New York,” suggests that portraying a character like Lily, caught in limbo, reveals Wharton’s ambivalence toward tradition and toward social change. (60). Wharton realized that old New York society, though worldly and as caught up in material concerns as the new rich, had a sense of order, taste, and tradition. She did not believe that those without proper background could
uphold the standards in education and manners which she firmly supported. She makes this view clear in the novel. However, as Gibson points out, the new rich of *The House of Mirth*, for all their promiscuity, are "relatively fresh and good natured," while the traditional boundaries of the old order have their virtues, too. For example, it is the restraint of the old order which keeps Gus Trenor from raping Lily (60).

Not only does Lily reveal Wharton's ambivalence toward turn-of-the-century New York society, she incorporates (as her biographer Lewis intimates) some of Edith Wharton's features: her cousins had nicknamed Edith "Lily" in her younger days, and Lily Bart is endearing, proud, sensitive, and exasperating by turns; and there are a number of moments when Lily's bitterness about her upbringing, her mother's indifference and even the featureless family home reflects that of her author's. Through Lily Bart, moreover, Edith Wharton conveyed her sense of herself as essentially unfitted for the only American society she knew, and as gravely misunderstood by that society. (155)

At the beginning of *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart is twenty-nine, beautiful, exquisite in her physical charm, socially adept, and preparing her campaign to marry for power and luxury. By the end of the novel, she is past thirty and dead of an overdose of chloral.

Lily Bart, a young woman with expensive habits and tastes but no money of her own, is a victim of a societal belief that woman's only duty is to marry a wealthy husband. Lily has three lovers, Lawrence Selden, a poor
lawyer, Sam Rosedale, a rich Jew, and Gus Trenor who supplies her with money only to make a claim on her affections, taking advantage of Lily's innocence. Lily loves Lawrence Selden, but he is not a "good catch." Lily becomes involved in scandal, and her so-called friends discard her. With no money and no "in" toward obtaining any, she tries to earn her living as a milliner. Failing at this and reduced to her last cent, she offers herself to the repulsive Rosedale (repulsive not because he is Jewish and a newcomer but because he is gross and vulgar) only to find he will not have her. Weary of it all, she ends her life. Lily Bart, Wharton's tragic heroine, epitomizes the American ideal of woman as an "exquisite object." Lily, as Arthur Hobson Quinn succinctly comments,

is thrown into a struggle against a selfish society with its own standards established for its self-protection, ready to applaud her if she amused it, and condemn her or ignore her if she was no longer of use to it. She was too generous to meet it on its own ground; too pleasure loving to take a plane above it.

(557)

From Wharton's perspective Lily Bart is locked into her position. She is a product of both social and economic standards and of the emotional energy of her sexual drive. As Patricia Plante observes, Wharton does not exonerate Lily of blame for her fall from grace even though she condemns a society in which material luxury holds sway over everyone and everything. She praises Lily Bart for preserving her integrity despite the selfishness she is up against and decries the weakness of Lawrence Selden who does not
see Lily's conflict until it is too late. However, Lily, a member of an exclusive social circle and well versed in its code and manners, breaches these conventions. For her error she is expelled from the group and finds readmission virtually impossible. As Plante emphasizes,

Edith Wharton's moral values would not allow her take the entire blame away from the individual, and these values must be understood if her work is to be dealt with without prejudice.

... Each act is set against the measuring stick of tradition and accepted good manners. It is, therefore, not good or bad according to place, time and circumstance. Hence, society can never be held entirely responsible for a man's actions, since the latter's dignity permits him, in spite of influences, to arrive at certain moral decisions. (19-20)

While it is true that Lily Bart's environment has so fashioned her that she is almost bound to be a parasite, every step in her downfall is precipitated by a mistake in judgment or her failure to meet the challenge of poverty and hardship.

Lily wastes her life through her lack of responsibility to the social code. She is guilty of impropriety. She crosses boundaries she should not; what is worse, her improprieties are all too public. She violates taboos. Lily enters Selden's apartment unchaperoned and Gus Trenor's house when his wife is absent, and she refuses the one institution society prescribes to guarantee her safety and social acceptability--marriage. She pushes the old guard beyond the limits of its sensibilities. Lily's aunt, Mrs. Peniston,
financial ruin when Lily is nineteen leaves Lily with only one way of earning a living; she must become a companion to a woman of wealth. When she is comfortably situated she must begin her search for a suitable man, one whom she can marry for money. Lois Cuddy, in "Triangles of Defeat and Liberation: The quest for Power in Edith Wharton's Fiction," notes: From the first chapter of The House of Mirth, Lily Bart is aware of her economic and social vulnerability; yet she maintains a sense of certainty in the values passed on by her mother and in her sexual attractions which she believes will eventually win for her a prominent place in society. And Lily is willing to barter her body and life to gain the husband who will fulfill the fantasy of a position at the top of her class. Even the memories of her mother’s unrealized ambitions and father’s financial failure and early death do not dissuade her from the same materialistic goals or from repeated attempts to lead the ‘right man’ (i.e., a wealthy man) into a proposal of marriage. Lily’s perception is that she has only to ‘play her cards right’ and she can have money and all that it can bring; yet she is a notoriously poor gambler. The card game becomes the paradigm of her life, for when she loses at cards, her fortune does indeed change and she loses everything--everything, that is, except her illusions. (19)

Lily’s prospects, while dismal enough, become even more so when her widowed aunt, Mrs. Peniston, leaves Lily only a pittance of the
inheritance she expected to receive. Her aunt’s will clearly expresses her disapproval of Lily’s social habits—parties, dancing, gambling—the things Lily is forced to play at in order to make her way.

Desperate to recover from her gambling losses, Lily unwittingly allows Gus Trenor, a man on the top rung of New York’s social ladder, to make investments in the stock market for her—with his money. As a result, Lily hopelessly compromises herself. She incurs the unwanted amorous advances of Trenor and the jealousy of a married woman, not his wife but Bertha Dorset, a married woman with whom he has had occasion to dally. (This sort of affair was acceptable for a married woman with a husband’s name and money to protect her.) Having already passed up an opportunity for a safe match with Percy Gryce, a dull and pompous millionaire, Lily is left with ever less suitable suitors, and the vengeful Dorset succeeds in destroying Lily’s reputation, taking away all of her marital possibilities and forcing Lily’s quick descent on the social ladder to a middle class existence and eventual poverty. The one thing that can save her is money to pay back Gus Trenor. This would relieve her of all obligation to him, but her pride makes her incapable of admitting her urgent need to anyone.

Mary Suzanne Schribler makes an insightful point about marriage in Wharton’s works. She writes: “The pervasiveness and power of cultural assumptions about women and marriage and identity are perhaps most tellingly revealed in the lives of Wharton heroines who are not married” (19). Lily Bart finds herself without a place in society because she is single and her prospects of changing that have been destroyed either by herself
or others. The houses open to Lily when she was perceived as marriageable have been closed to her. Schriber observes:

Lily Bart's descent from a tenuous foothold among the aristocracy to a lonely death is marked by her movement from house to house, houses being a woman's appointed place of duty and fulfillment, until finally Lily lands in a dingy boarding house in which she is quite literally a nobody. A woman without a house of her own, Lily is therefore a woman without duties to express and define her potential and give point to her life. Without these, Lily loses first her self-esteem and eventually her will to live. The culture provides no place for Lily Bart, no approved arena outside of marriage in which a woman of her class can satisfactorily conduct her life. As ministers told women in the nineteenth century: "Stay within your proper confines and you will be worshipped; . . . step outside and you will cease to exist." (191)

Lily sees clearly the ways in which convention enables a woman to obtain a husband and wealth. Her mother taught her to exploit her traditional role as a woman toward this end. Knowing full well what men desire in a woman, she offers her most pleasant and agreeable self, shows off her beauty, and feigns helplessness and ignorance because dependency appeals to the male ego. For example, Lily is far more intelligent than the dull--though eligible--Percy Gryce. When he shows off his Americana collection to her, Lily fawns over him and listens patiently
while he drones on about the subject. Though Lily laments having to do this, she knows that she “must submit to more boredom, must be ready with fresh compliances and adaptabilities, and all on the bare chance that he might ultimately decide to do her the honour of boring her for life” (House 25). Likewise, desperate for money, Lily uses her ignorance of finances to approach Gus Trenor for a loan--to protect her from a harsh world no lovely woman should have to face. However, in behaving in this manner, she begins to perceive herself as only an object, a thing to be admired, not a person. She views herself as an ornamented hat to be purchased at a high price and discarded when it fades. The culture within which Lily exists provides a hostile and competitive atmosphere. There is no support or nurturance for her as a person of value to give meaning to her life. Lily is judged by standards which she cannot reach; thus she cannot survive. The tragedy of Lily Bart is that she is an upper-class woman confronted by “the temptation to be a beautiful object”--society’s demand--and the consequences of succumbing to that temptation destroy her. On the other hand, Lily cannot ultimately sacrifice her integrity for marriage at any price.

Wharton’s subject, the waste of a woman’s life within a patriarchal culture, is not trivial. Lily Bart in The House of Mirth (first titled A Moment’s Ornament), discovers the mistake in satisfying society’s appetite for ornamental women. As Schriber comments, “her soul repeatedly intervenes, preventing her from making full use of a woman’s power” (198). Schriber argues:

This is the mark of her refinement and of the culture’s
corruption. Lily refuses the proscriptions and prerogatives that the concept of woman allows. Paradoxically, Lily’s recognition that she has no identity and purpose outside of marriage is also her discovery of her true identity: a woman who transcends the culture’s concept of woman, a woman whose self-esteem prevents her from stooping to conquer. (198)

Wharton castigates our traditional patriarchal society for its (as Cynthia Griffin Wolff puts it) “equation of ‘femininity’ with ‘visionary perfection’ in a tone of uncompromised fury” (“Visionary” 27). Her theme is not trivial but universal. Irving Howe concludes his essay on Wharton as follows:

When one reads and submits to the urgencies of a novel like The House of Mirth, the effect is that of being held in a steady, inexorable enclosure. Mrs. Wharton’s sense of the inescapability of waste—the waste of spirit, the waste of energy, the waste of beauty—comes to seem a root condition of life. (129)

Lily is not only constrained by society’s insatiable appetite for beauty—“visionary perfection”—but also by the prevailing double standard of the time. Jack Stepney, Lily’s cousin, also wishes to move permanently from genteel poverty to affluent society. To do so, he simply marries one of the wealthy Van Osburgh girls. Such a profitable marriage is not quite so easy for Lily. She reflects:

All Jack has to do to get everything he wants is to keep quiet
and let the girl marry him; whereas I have to calculate and contrive, and retreat and advance, as if I were going through an intricate dance, when one misstep would throw me hopelessly out of time. (House 45)

Earlier, in a conversation with Lawrence Selden, Lily asks if he minds being tied down to the routine of work "enough--to marry to get out of it?" (10). Laughing, Selden exclaims, "God forbid!" (110). With a sigh of acquiescence, Lily comments:

Ah, there's the difference--a girl must marry, a man may if he chooses . . . . Your coat's a little shabby--but who cares? It doesn't keep people from asking you to dine. If I were shabby no one would have me: a woman is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself. The clothes are the background, the frame, if you like; they don't make success but they are a part of it. Who wants a dingy woman? We are expected to be pretty and well-dressed till we drop--and if we can't keep it up alone, we have to go into partnership. (10)

Selden can practice law while Lily can be only a useless ornament. He could have a love affair with a married woman and still maintain his respectability; she is compromised when she is seen leaving his apartment. Though Selden is far from wealthy, he is still respected by society while Lily must beg and borrow money to keep up her ornamental appearance. Selden defines freedom as a "republic of the spirit" (64), freedom from everything; Lily is without choice. Marriage is her only option; however, it
will provide wealth and security--not freedom.

The double standard works in other ways, too. Wharton depicts a society in which all women, even wealthy women, are socially and economically dependent on men. Society fosters this dependency by denying women the same liberal education which prepares boys in this society to make their own way in the world. Wharton was a product of a proper upbringing; she was trained only in the arts and in the graces necessary to make a suitable marriage. The women of *The House of Mirth* come from the same type of background. They know nothing of money except how to marry it. They are trained to keep house and manage a whirl of social gatherings and maneuverings. Selden rhetorically asks: “isn’t marriage your vocation? Isn’t it what you are brought up for?” Lily replies: “I suppose so. What else is there?” As Cathy N. Davidson suggests, the answer can only be “yes.” “A well-born woman should be an economic parasite who trades on sex and her ability to display advantageously the wealth she does not earn” (10).

Lily, marriageable yet unmarried, must also maintain the decorum which polite society demands. Society will look away if a married woman discreetly violates the social standards. Judy Trenor willingly allows her female friends to entertain her husband, Gus, as long as their price is not too high. Bertha Dorset engages in affair after affair but coyly covers them up to keep her wealthy husband content and paying the bills. An unmarried woman, like Lily, who oversteps the boundaries of decorum invites censure. Lily knows this world and acknowledges, “the truth about any girl is that
once she's talked about she's done for" (House 215). Judith C. Montgomery, in "The American Galatea," astutely assesses Wharton's society. She says the "house of mirth" is essentially a genteel house of assignation in which the buying and selling of feminine graces masquerades as courtship, marriage, and love (897).

The narrative perspective of The House of Mirth clearly shows how social hypocrisy pervades Lily's world. We see how Lily thinks and how her conscience works. Unlike Bertha Dorset and Judy Trenor, Lily (though infrequently) examines her thoughts and actions. She laments to Gerty Farish: "But I am bad--a bad girl--all my thoughts are bad--I have always had bad people about me. Is that any excuse? I thought I could manage my own life--I was proud!--proud! but now I'm on their level!--" (164). Lily does have a conscience. Nevertheless, the derogatory words of Bertha Dorset, who subtly implies that Lily has had liaisons with men, are enough to condemn Lily and banish her from her circle. The rules are stringent.

What is truth? Where a woman is concerned, it's the story that's easiest to believe. In this case it's a great deal easier to believe Bertha Dorset's story than to believe mine, because she has a big house and an opera box, and it's convenient to be on good terms with her. (215)

As Cathy Davidson states, "Wealth and social status rule, pretend to morality, but in The House of Mirth, that morality, like marriage, is only expediency in masquerade" (11).

Davidson makes one further important point in regard to the double
standard:

The mores of this high society reflect the pettiness and inconsistency of those who profit by and uphold the system. Women, of course, are the most obvious victims of the various double standards. It might, therefore, seem incongruous that women are also shown as the ones most ruthlessly devoted to maintaining the same dubious rules. But Wharton, as social psychologist, is here particularly astute. A society that expects women to compete against one another for a very few positions of prestige cannot encourage friendship, trust, and mutual sharing among women. Instead jealousy must govern their relationships with one another. (11)

Bertha Dorset cannot feel secure. George Dorset could prove her an adulteress, obtain a divorce, and marry the prettier and younger Lily. Lily's beauty, which promises her a place in society, renders her a threat to those who have managed to secure a place through marriage. Her friends urgently try to marry her off; others try to destroy her with malicious gossip. Lily finds herself in a no-win situation.

Besides the character of Lily Bart, the other most fully developed character in The House of Mirth is Lawrence Selden. Convention obscures Lily's virtues and undermines her future, and we see how convention stifles Lily through the eyes and actions of Lawrence Selden. He is typical of most of the male characters in Wharton's fiction, as Harry Cargas says, "a man set apart from his neighbors by education, intellect, and feeling but lacking the
force or courage either to impose himself or to get away” (6).

It is Lawrence Selden whom Lily loves even though he, like the other men in her life, expects her to be a beautiful object. What is more, he wants her to be pure as well, to remain detached from the house of mirth with its debauchery, decadence, and exploitation, even though he knows her predicament. Selden forgets that Lily has no profession which might afford her the freedom he experiences. His “republic of the spirit” cannot possibly exist in Lily’s “real” world. As Cynthia Griffin Wolff points out, Selden “luxuriates in [Lily’s] studied decorative quality” but “would have her absolutely reject the material world that sustains it” (“Lily” 30).

Lawrence Selden belongs to Lily’s set, yet he is above it:

Not that he was notably brilliant or exceptional; in his own profession he was surpassed by more than one man who had bored Lily through many a weary dinner. It was rather that he had preserved a certain social detachment, a happy air of viewing the show objectively, of having points of contact outside the great gilt cage in which they were all huddled for the mob to gape at. How alluring the world outside the cage appeared to Lily, as she heard its door clang on her! In reality, as she knew, the door never clanged: it stood always open; but most of the captives were like flies in a bottle, and having once flown in, could never regain their freedom. It was Selden’s distinction that he had never forgotten the way out. (51)
Lily turns to this man out of need. She explains to Selden: “Don’t you see that there are enough men 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 that you might be that friend” (7). Selden promises Lily understanding and compassion, but he never delivers. He is educated and intelligent, but he is also self-centered and cannot truly comprehend what is troubling Lily. He is passive, without passion, and insulates himself from the frigidity of his own motives by using societal conventions in his evaluation of Lily. When faced with Lily’s improper behavior, he retreats behind the established code. It is the only way he can deal with the fact that she has visited his apartment unchaperoned, a direct violation of female conduct. Selden cannot see beyond her outward behavior to the genuine person within. He regards her behavior as questionable within society’s view and therefore cannot propose marriage to her. As Edmund Wilson suggests in regard to the men in all of Wharton’s works, “When an exceptional woman comes along who is thirsting for something different and better, the man is unable to give it to her . . . . There are no first-rate men in these novels” (Howe 27).

Selden cherishes his social detachment more than anything else in his life. He is outraged at the wastefulness and irresponsibility of New York aristocratic society. In this he speaks for Wharton. But while Wharton may condone Selden’s detachment, she does not make him an ideal. At the end of the novel, Selden is an unhappy man. He reflects after Lily’s death that his “very detachment from the external influences which swayed her had
increased his spiritual fastidiousness, and made it more difficult for him to live and love uncritically" (House 317). Selden is the only man who can save Lily who has been ruined by society, but he is incapable of believing in her innocence or taking an emotional risk.

Ironically, Selden does “save” Lily Bart. Because of his moral influence, she gives up her last chance at marriage for wealth and pays back Gus Trenor, regaining her innocence. She opts not to use Bertha Dorset’s letters to blackmail her. She is for a moment pure, as Lawrence Selden would have her. But she cannot live and be pure. She would eventually be forced to relinquish her purity in order to survive:

There was the check in her desk for instance; she meant to use it in paying her debt to Trenor; but she foresaw that when the morning came, she would put off doing so, would slip into gradual tolerance of the debt. The thought terrified her; she dreaded to fall from the height of her last moment with Lawrence Selden. (308)

And so to escape the “mean ugliness” of her life, Lily takes her life. Selden never realizes that in “saving” her he has actually destroyed her, and he has destroyed his own happiness.

Despite her weaknesses, Lily proves to be a strong and courageous woman—stronger than Selden. She does gain victory over a “frivolous society” though it destroys her. Josephine Lurie Jessup, in her study of Edith Wharton’s novels The Faith of Our Feminists, succinctly evaluates the tragedy of Lily Bart and the other women in her fiction:
The lament which sounds from Mrs. Wharton's fiction is not that woman must inhabit a man's world, but that, because of man's unperceptiveness, each sex is consigned to a different world . . . . Men are the visitors who never arrive. Women wait for them their life long, women who demand neither the vote nor economic equality, women who seldom clamor for a single standard of sex morals. What the women of Edith Wharton's novels crave is an understanding presence, and that, man is never able to accord. The barrier of sex for him is always insurmountable; woman can peer around it to make out what manner of being he is; but for the man of Edith Wharton's conceiving, woman is always walled away, by his own blindness . . . . (80-81)

Though Edith Wharton refused to abandon her own aristocratic ideals, she was honest about the weaknesses of the society she portrayed. Lily's tragedy remains that she bets her life on false values, values created by the high society into which she was born and tried desperately to remain. In this novel and in *The Custom of the Country*, Wharton reveals that her New York society merely plays at being aristocratic. In reality, it falls far short of true aristocratic standards. Critics continue to fault *The House of Mirth* because it deals too much with the trivial affairs of a trivial society--however tragic Lily's fate. Granted, the social values of the novel are alien today; however, Wharton's ironic style and frank condemnation of a materialistic and indifferent society (not unlike our own) give it value for modern readers.
CHAPTER FOUR
“Granite Outcroppings”

In *Ethan Frome* (1911), Edith Wharton departs from the settings and characters of aristocratic New York to write about the New England poor of the 1800s. This dramatic change in subject came about for several reasons.

First, Wharton wished to present an accurate picture of life in what she called the “derelict mountain villages of New England,” a life “utterly unlike that seen through the rose-coloured spectacles of my predecessors” (*Backward* 293). Several years after the publication of *Ethan Frome*, Wharton explained her choice of setting. In her opinion, writers like Mary E. Wilkins Freeman and Sarah Orne Jewett, in their “rose-and-lavender pages” (294), had ignored what was “harsh and beautiful” in the area (*Frome* v). What concerned Wharton was the bond between people and land. Her characters “were, in truth, these figures, my granite outcroppings; but half-emerged from the soil, and scarcely more articulate” (vi). The setting of *Ethan Frome* weighs on both plot and characters. The narrator conveys the poverty and isolation of Starkfield in his first impression of Ethan:

He seemed a part of the mute melancholy landscape, an incarnation of its frozen woe, with all that was warm and sentient in him fast bound below the surface . . . . I had the sense that his loneliness was not merely the result of his personal plight . . . but had in it . . . the profound accumulated cold of many Starkfield winters. (14-15)

Secondly, Wharton chafed at criticism that she knew and could write
about only one subject. She felt comfortable turning her attention to the rural region near her home at Lenox, Massachusetts, the Mount, because she had lived there for ten years. She described its villages as "grim places," morally and physically, "places where "insanity, incest and slow mental and moral starvation were hidden away behind the paintless wooden house fronts of the long village street, or in the isolated farm-houses on the neighboring hills" (Backward 294). These "grim places" surprised and shocked her readers, but Wharton writes of rural poverty with perception and compassion, never condemning her characters because they are socially ill-placed. She proved to critics that her so-called social superiority did not prevent her from empathy with impoverished New Englanders.

_**Ethan Frome** was not an immediate commercial success, although reviewers called it one of Wharton's finest achievements praising it for its structure and style. Some critics, however, called the novel "painful" and accused Wharton of cruelty toward her characters and her readers. R.W.B. Lewis declares that in no other work, not even in _The House of Mirth_, had Wharton poured such "deep and intense private emotions" (308). Debra Joy Goodman, in "The Scapegoat Motif in the Novels of Edith Wharton," comments: "Once the scapegoat, the bearer of guilt has been punished, there is a relief from guilt through the purging" (18). In regard to _Ethan Frome_, Goodman suggests that "in destroying her characters, in writing a book of consummate cruelty and destructiveness, she [Wharton] may have exorcized her own demons" (45).
ask of a lover, then, Edith Wharton risked the unacceptable possibility of appearing to be a burden to him even as Teddy (and for that matter Henry James as well) had become to her. ("Cold" 236)

While in no way a direct translation of Wharton's life into fictional form, Ethan Frome resembles her. Lewis claims that she "transplanted" her personal situation to a rural scene and "shifted the sexes" in creating the three central characters, Ethan Frome, Mattie Silver, and Zeena Frome (309). Both Wharton and Ethan Frome were married to sickly partners, Edith to the mentally disturbed Teddy--Ethan to Zeena. Both wondered about their spouses' sanity.

Zenobia Pierce, a cousin, had come to the Frome farm to care for Ethan's invalid mother. After his mother's death and an accident which killed his father, Ethan faced bitter loneliness when Zenobia prepared to return to her own home. He asked her to stay with him. He planned to settle his parents' affairs, sell the farm and saw-mill, and move to a larger town. Ethan dreamed of becoming an engineer. But Zenobia became firmly planted in Starkfield: "she chose to look down on Starkfield, but could not have lived in a place which looked down on her" (Frome 71). Within a year of her marriage, Zenobia developed a "sickliness" which "made her notable even in a community rich in pathological instances" (72). Zenobia fell into prolonged silences, speaking only to complain to Ethan about things he could do nothing about. Ethan stops answering her and practically all communication ceases between them. Zeena's silence does trouble Ethan;
he recalls the similarity of her behavior to his mother’s:

He recalled his mother’s growing taciturnity, and wondered if Zeena were also turning “queer.” Women did, he knew. Zeena, who had at her fingers’ ends the pathological chart of the whole region, had cited many cases of the kind while she was nursing his mother; and he himself knew of certain lonely farm-houses in the neighborhood where stricken creatures pined, and of others where sudden tragedy had come of their presence. At times, looking at Zeena’s shut face, he felt the chill of such forebodings. (72-73)

Married to and stifled by the dependency of sickly partners, both Edith and Ethan respond to the warmth and affection of other more sympathetic and stimulating companions. Ethan had Mattie Silver; Edith Wharton had Morton Fullerton.

At the time of publication of Ethan Frome, Edith had not succeeded in coping with her own fate. She questioned her marriage and her obligation to a husband whose emotional demands chipped away at her well-being. She agonized over whether or not she had the right to end her marriage to Teddy when it was likely that her affair with Fullerton had contributed to the degeneration of her husband’s mental health. However, she was finally able to break away from this smothering relationship by divorce (July 1913), two years after she had written Ethan Frome. Ethan, too, thinks of breaking away but is unable to cope with his fate. Wharton’s use of the recurring prison image conveys the hopelessness of his situation: “The inexorable
facts closed in on him like prison warders handcuffing a convict. There was no way out--none. He was a prisoner for life . . ." (134).

**Ethan Frome** describes an acute case of frustration, but frustration for Ethan alone. The women of the novel manage to have their own way. They take advantage of Ethan's conscientiousness and his weakness--his penchant for self-sacrifice. While we may hate Zeena and are appalled at what becomes of Mattie, one thing is clear in this novel. The women have the power.

Zeena's power ironically stems from her sickness, and she uses it as well as she can against Ethan. Her debility has brought Mattie Silver to the Frome farm to help, and before Ethan and Mattie are aware of it themselves, Zeena senses their attraction to one another. She silently and skillfully sets about getting rid of Mattie. When she catches Ethan doing Mattie's tasks, she whines about being left alone with nobody to do for her (37), and digs at Ethan about replacing Mattie "when she gets married" (37). She drops the name of Denis Eady as a possible suitor; Ethan is passionately jealous of Eady's attention to Mattie. Zeena makes Ethan even more uneasy by remarking that he has started to shave every morning.

It was a fact that since Mattie Silver's coming he had taken to shaving every day; but his wife always seemed to be asleep when he left her side in the winter darkness, and he had stupidly assumed that she would not notice any change in his appearance. Once or twice in the past he had been faintly disquieted by Zenobia's way of letting things happen without
seeming to remark them, and then, weeks afterward, in a casual phrase, revealing that she had all along taken her notes and drawn her inferences. (39)

Zeena continues to whine and jab at Ethan making him feel shame for his attentions to Mattie, but in chapter seven we see Zeena at the height of her power, and Ethan no match for her cunning. She complains that she is “a great deal sicker” and suffering from “complications” (107-108). The word “complications” produces mixed feelings in Ethan (108), but he responds with compassion and asks how reliable the doctor is from whom she has learned she needs an operation (109). Zeena attacks: “I didn’t need to have anybody tell me I was losing ground every day. Everybody could see it” (109).

Zeena has the doctor for an ally, and she uses his instructions not to do a single thing around the house (110) as a reason to hire another girl. When Ethan balks at the extra expense and offers to do the extra housework himself, she belittles him: “I’d ‘a’ been ashamed to tell him [the doctor] that you grudged me money to get back my health, when I lost it nursing your mother . . . . and my folks told me at the time you couldn’t do no less than marry me after--” (111).

Ethan is shamed and horrified at her insinuations. Zeena sets out to finish him off. Ethan cares only how he can manage to get another hired girl and still keep Mattie. But Zeena stabs him with “there’ll be Mattie’s’ board less, anyhow” (114). She laughs (for the first time Ethan can remember): “you didn’t suppose I was going to keep two girls, did you?” (115). Ethan is
done in.

Zeena's torture of Ethan continues until he is convinced that he can do nothing but sacrifice his life to her. Before, when he had considered leaving Zeena and escaping this sacrificial life, he reasoned:

He was too young, too strong, too full of the sap of living, to submit so easily to the destruction of his hopes. Must he wear out all his years at the side of a bitter querulous woman? Other possibilities had been in him, possibilities sacrificed, one by one, to Zeena's narrow-mindedness and ignorance. And what good had come of it? She was a hundred times bitterer and more discontented than when he had married her: the one pleasure left her was to inflict pain on him. All the healthy instincts of self-defense rose up in him against such waste...

(130-131)

Zeena defeats "his healthy instincts of self-defense." He schemes to lie to his neighbor to collect money for his and Mattie's escape, but he cannot go through with it. He cannot defy society by running away with Mattie. He then attempts to destroy, at Mattie's command, both himself and Mattie. He fails. Mattie does not die but sustains a spinal injury which leaves her more shrewish than Zeena. Ethan is now under her power, as well. Jo Agnew McManis suggests that Wharton has a punishment more severe than death planned for Ethan: "For loving one person while married to another, and for even considering leaving his wife, he is sentenced to life imprisonment in a 'No-Exit' -like situation with both Zeena and Mattie" (989).
Ethan chooses to carry out his obligation to care for his shrewish wife and for the crippled and soon-to-be querulous Mattie for as long as he lives. He has allowed Zeena and Mattie to mold him into a subservient creature who can only take on the burdensome care of others. Edith Wharton has fashioned a scapegoat in Ethan Frome. As Orlene Murad comments: "She has in some measure pushed on to Ethan the grueling life that she herself would have had to live had she tried to fathom and relieve her husband's despair" (99).

Ethan Frome marks a turning point in Edith Wharton's career. Whether or not she wrote this novel as an unconscious exorcism of her personal demons, she gained power, maturity, and confidence in her artistic ability through its creation. As Cynthia Griffin Wolff says, "Ethan Frome proclaimed a final victory over that part of herself that had inclined so precariously in the direction of passivity and dependency; it was a psychological coming of age" (Feast 193). It was another coming of age as well.

Wharton's previous fiction, as evidenced by The House of Mirth and Ethan Frome, offered no hope that men and women might confront their fate, let alone master it. Lily Bart atrophies within societal convention and dies because she has no hope of living up to Selden's expectations. Ethan Frome becomes "bound below" the frozen landscape of Starkfield rather than confront his wife's dependency. But the novels that begin with The Reef (1912) and end with The Custom of the Country (1913) show a different Wharton. Her characters, such as Anna Leath, Charity Royall, and
Undine Spragg, no longer bow to the fortunes that beset them; they confront the societal forces they encounter. They display passion and quest for sexual experience and for love. They attempt to shape the forces they encounter rather than acquiesce. As Wolff asserts:

Before, her central figures had been swayed and bent by the fortunes that beset them; now her main characters proclaim an almost muscular need to meet the forces that would shape their lives. They expand into the atmosphere that surrounds them and probe it and fill their lungs with hope. These are still not novels about man [and woman] mastering his fate (for Wharton knew that one might grow to be a lover of life, but never, in the end, grow to be its master); yet they are novels about men and women who confront their fate, and the novels are suffused with the intensity of their quests. (192)
CHAPTER FIVE
“Widening Waters”

The House of Mirth shows evidence that Edith Wharton disdained the sterile, constrictive life of the old New York society in which she had grown up. She resented its myopic perception of the world, its refusal to deal with reality. Lily Bart cannot cope with the reality of her situation. Ethan Frome shows that Wharton recognized the temptation to avoid the truth as universal, not merely peculiar to the rich. Truth seeking does not come naturally to the emotionally repressed characters of Wharton’s fiction; however, with the completion of Ethan Frome, Wharton’s fiction becomes increasingly insistent that individuals must rebel against surface gentility and confront their inner selves and real life. Several years after the writing of these novels, Wharton warned in French Ways and Their Meanings (1919), that “things are not always and everywhere well with the world” (65). One should not evade life but confront it—and adjust. The Reef (1912) marks another pivotal moment in Wharton’s career. From this point on her heroines, though not always successful, do confront life and act to change their situations rather than simply allowing themselves to be acted upon.

Although admired by Henry James and Percy Lubbock as Wharton’s best novel, (Henry James called it “exquisite” [Bell 186]), The Reef remains largely unknown among Wharton’s numerous works. Blake Nevius calls the novel “crucial” to her career (134), but surmises that its uncertain tone creates difficulty for the reader (135). One cannot be sure of Wharton’s attitude toward George Darrow; Anna Leath changes her mind no less than seven times in deciding whether or not to marry him. At the end of the novel
it still remains unclear which course she will take.

In calling *The Reef* "exquisite," James seems to have christened the novel forever his "godchild" (Ammons 615). Critics have since likened it to James's *The Golden Bowl* and see a Jamesian moral at its center. Nevius asserts: "Anna Leath is a Jamesian heroine in a Jamesian predicament" (136), but, whereas James's "tone is seldom ambiguous . . . one has to grope . . . for Mrs. Wharton's intention" (226), and the book seems to promote a "dubious morality" (138).

Louis Auchincloss recognizes *The Reef* as a "quiet controlled, beautiful novel," but calls its theme "faintly ridiculous" (Wharton 22). In an introduction to a recent Scribner's edition, Auchincloss comments that some readers may react negatively to the novel's moral climate. He says: "Before opening *The Reef* the reader must be prepared for a moral climate in which extra-marital love is considered damning to a woman and only mildly reprehensible to a man" (v). Auchincloss seems to imply that Wharton approved of the double standard, a "morality [which now] seems absurd and hypocritical" (v). As Elizabeth Ammons points out, Wharton does not approve the double standard but attacks it as "discriminatory and as a more which demeans men and women (620). Perhaps this critical view accounts for the recent interest in the novel; Scribner's offering of a paperback edition as late as 1970 argues for *The Reef's* popular if not critical appeal.

Wharton herself expressed regret over *The Reef*. In a letter to a close friend, Bernard Berenson, Wharton says of it:

I'm sending you my book though I don't want to, because I'm
sick about it--poor miserable lifeless lump that it is . . . . Only please don't read it! Put it in the visitor's rooms, or lend it to somebody to read in the train and let it get lost . . . . Anyhow, remember it's not me, though I thought it was when I was writing it--and that next time I'm going to do something worthwhile! (Lewis Letters 284)

It is possible that Wharton expressed a negative attitude toward this particular work because she associated the story with her own collapsing personal life which reached crisis proportions the year it was published. She remarked to another friend, Hugh Smith, that the writing of The Reef offered her no comfort during this period. "If only my work were better, it would be all I need. But my kind of half-talent isn't much use as an escape--at least more than temporarily" (Lewis 298).

Nevertheless, Wharton braved a new direction with The Reef. In the heroine Anna Leath, she portrays, sympathetically and honestly, a woman of refinement thirsting for passion and experience but threatened by society's demand for her ladylike existence. Society expects that Anna maintain the feminine ideal and remain model wife and mother; however, after the death of her husband, Fraser Leath, she embarks upon an exploration of her private passions and spirituality. Anna leaves the world of innocence to test the waters of experience, confronting inherited standards and the innate desires of her nature. If the waters seem to have proven too rough for Anna at the end of the novel, she has, nevertheless, attempted them and finds her past standards wanting. What changes she will make we are left to imagine,
but we can be sure there will be change.

In that *The Reef* involves psychological analysis of its main character, Anna Leath, and the point of view centers the action almost exclusively within her sensibilities, the novel reflects James's influence on Wharton. However, contrary to the claims of some critics, Wharton goes beyond mere discipleship with this novel. As James Gargano contends, "[James] paid tribute to his young friend's sensitive and tough minded exploration of the female consciousness" (40). Early critics preoccupied with the novel's similarities to James's works overlooked this main thrust.

In *The Reef*, Wharton explores the double standard of sexual morality and criticizes the stereotyping of relationships between men and women. Some of Wharton's later critics deplore her ambiguous response to woman's sexual freedom judging that Anna's rejection of Sophy Viner's lack of propriety reflects Wharton's old New York snobbishness. It is true that Anna is often unsympathetic to Sophy, but at other times she is a woman of compassion and understanding. One must remember that both Sophy and Anna struggle against Victorian conventionality.

Likewise, ingrained views of what is proper for women in polite society hamper George Darrow's perception of both women. Margaret McDowell points out that most reviewers of *The Reef* overlook Darrow's hypocrisy. He exploits Sophy's lack of propriety when it is convenient for him, and then finds her unworthy to marry Anna's stepson, Owen Leath. In turn, reviewers condemn Anna Leath for her harsh treatment of Sophy, pointing to this as indicative of Wharton's snobbish view toward an "erring'
lower-class woman” (“Viewing” 534). The crux of The Reef is not Wharton’s ambiguity about the double standard nor her high society snobbishness but the ways in which convention limits both men’s and women’s perception of themselves and one another.

Because Anna’s perception of reality is limited (she, like Lily Bart, views reality through “the bars of a cage”), she identifies herself only within the cage of inflexible Victorian society. She can only judge herself, Sophy, and Darrow in light of long standing conventions regarding sexual morality. Consequently, she cannot forgive Darrow for his extra-marital experience with Sophy Viner. Neither can she accept the fact that beneath her inhibitions she is a woman of passion. As McDowell says, “she resorts to a stereotyped thought and sees herself as the good woman, just as she sees Sophy as the bad woman” (533).

Wharton calls Anna Summers (Leath) “a model of ladylike repression” (Reef 86); yet, she tells herself that “love . . . would one day release her from this spell of unreality” (86). Anna believes that marriage will be “the magic bridge between West Fifty-fifth Street and life” (86-87). Once again Wharton’s heroine looks to a man to free her from rigid convention, awaken her passions, save her from herself—in effect, open the bars of the cage. Like Ethan Frome, Anna longs to escape loneliness and sexual repression through romantic love, but her longing proves futile. Anna’s first husband, Fraser Leath, failed to be her liberator. His kiss, instead of awakening her passion and desire, “dropped on her like a cold smooth pebble” (91). Anna does not, however, give up her dream of escape
through romantic love. After Fraser Leath's death she rekindles a romance with an old suitor, George Darrow. He is now to be her liberator, and she looks forward to another marriage with him.

George Darrow, unfortunately, is no ideal suitor, but a liar, hypocrite, and reprobate. Darrow, an American diplomat in pursuit of the widow Anna Leath, accidentally meets a young and unrestrained woman, Sophy Viner, and travels with her to Paris where he acts as her guide to the city. Sophy is unencumbered by the social conditioning of the upper class, and an affair between the two ensues; however, their lovemaking eventually disgusts Darrow who has discovered that she is from the lower class and has behaved ingenuously. He leaves her and continues on his journey to meet Anna.

Six months later, Darrow and Anna are engaged, and Sophy (employed for several moths as governess to Anna’s daughter, Effie) is engaged to Owen Leath. Within days of Anna’s joyous acceptance of Darrow’s proposal, she begins to suspect that Darrow has been unfaithful to her with Sophy. Thus begins Anna’s awakening to reality. The novel, which deals with the process of Anna’s psychological development will be, in James Gargano’s words, “a drama of acceptance and rejections, of bold advances and frightened recoil” (41). Anna’s discoveries about Darrow, Sophy Viner, and herself, remove her from female innocence, passivity, and contentment. As Gargano further points out, “Mrs. Wharton intends her to be the portrait of a lady who must know, sooner or later, what friends, family and cultural ethos have conspired to shield her from” (42).
The truth about Darrow's relationship with Sophy Viner presents the first challenge to Anna's sensibilities. As the truth unfolds, each revelation shakes Anna's beliefs and requires compromise. She tries but cannot renounce Darrow, for he has awakened her physically and emotionally for the first time in her life. She seeks justification for her love for Darrow to the end. She cannot put out of her mind Darrow's admonishment: "'You were made to feel everything'; and to feel was surely better than to judge" (326).

Anna gives into her feelings but not without realizing the danger of giving in to Darrow's wishes: "Her fear of doing or saying what he disliked was tinged by a new instinct of subserviency against which her pride revolted" (347). Even more frightening, Anna realizes that by rationalizing his lies, she degrades herself even more. In her unstable emotional state, she has persuaded herself that "only through such concessions could women like herself hope to keep what they could not give up" (322). As James Gargano puts it, "her search for a way out of her dilemma reaches a point of blind hysteria and moral impasse: Anna has strayed far from the smug convictions of those ancestors who bolted secure doors against unpleasantness" (43).

Darrow's brief affair with Sophy Viner, despite strident efforts on Anna's part to rationalize it, carries with it extenuating circumstances which Anna cannot overlook. His act is neither socially or morally neutral. Anna's sharpening awareness of his indifferences to the effects of his actions on those around him forces her to drive to the heart of the situation and discover the truth which Darrow has carefully contrived to conceal: "She
had probed, insisted, cross-examined, not rested till she had dragged the secret to light" (322).

Anna comes face to face with the unpleasantness of her situation. Not only is Sophy Viner the governess of Anna’s child, but Owen, Anna’s stepson, has fallen in love with Sophy and wishes to marry her. A suggestion of incest poisons Darrow’s relationship with Anna and with her family. Darrow has slept with the girl who may be his stepdaughter-in-law. This means that in the future Darrow will have to be especially guarded with Owen. An atmosphere of suspicion pervades all their lives at Givre’. Anna is filled with misgiving and foreboding; Owen is tortured by the secret meetings between Sophy and Darrow; even Darrow is guilt ridden by the hypocrisy he must practice. Anna, aware of Darrow’s secret, can hardly allow Sophy to remain connected to Effie or to Owen.

Anna’s efforts at concealment only heighten the tension at Givre’. Complete disclosure of the Viner-Darrow affair is inevitable. Through all of this, Anna reveals herself as a woman of passion, not solely guided by the provincial mores of the Summer society. She struggles to solve the dilemma by challenging ingrained ideals rather than immediately terminating her engagement to Darrow. Though she occasionally judges out of pride, she also lapses into self-doubt and self-recrimination. As James Gargano contends, “far from ensconcing herself in exclusivism and hauteur, as critics charge, Mrs. Wharton’s heroine probes her own class feelings and possible psychological limitations with painful iteration” (44).

Anna’s inner struggle comes to light through the character of Sophy
Through Sophy, Anna perceives that some inexpressible truth has eluded her. She tries to approach Sophy, and as she looks at her, so small, so slight, so visibly defenseless and undone, she still felt, through all the superiority of her worldly advantages and her seeming maturity, the same odd sense of ignorance and inexperience. She could not have said what there was in the girl's manner and expression to give her this feeling, but she was reminded, as she looked at Sophy Viner, of the other girls she had known in her youth, the girls who seemed possessed of a secret she had missed. (236-237)

Anna tries to reconcile herself that Darrow only helped Sophy financially in Paris because she was in dire straits. She conjectures that Sophy "had fallen in love with him, and on meeting him again had been suddenly overmastered by her passion" (277). But this self-deception cannot last. Though she cannot put the truth into words, it nevertheless lurks in the background, and Sophy begins to seem the embodiment of the unknown peril lurking in the background of every woman's thoughts about her lover. Anna, at any rate, with a sudden sense of estrangement, noted in her graces and snares never before perceived. It was only the flash of a primitive instinct, but it lasted long enough to make her ashamed of the darkness it lit up in her heart... (282)

Once Anna knows the truth about Sophy, she feels proper revulsion, but she continues to feel incomplete in her presence, as if Sophy were a
more genuine and vital spirit. As a result, Anna learns that life outside societal conventions of the rich is full of impulsive action and mutual concession. She can no longer measure her life by traditional yardsticks. Anna must recognize Darrow's hypocrisy and accept Sophy's exaltation of her "sin" as true passion. Anna thinks once again of Sophy with "a mingling of antipathy and confidence":

But what indeed was the girl really like? She seemed to have no scruples and a thousand delicacies. She had given herself to Darrow, and concealed the episode from Owen Leath, with no more apparent sense of debasement than the vulgarist adventureess; yet she had instantly obeyed the voice of her heart when it bade her part from the one and serve the other.

(320-321)

Anna's scrutiny of Sophy leads her to examine her own life and motives. This proves not only painful but shocking. Anna must finally admit to herself that she is not free from feelings she once considered base--beneath her station. She has been jealous of Sophy's beauty and terrified of her hold on Darrow. In Darrow's presence her moral resistance gives way to passion and longings she has never before experienced. She feels confused, ashamed; yet, she is unwilling to force him to leave Givre'. Suddenly she realizes that she is no different or better than Sophy: "It was humiliating to her pride to recognize kindred impulses in a character which she would have liked to feel completely alien to her" (320). Mrs. Wharton's portrayal of this woman brought low by reality indicates her belief that the
hardest truths men and women have to face are finally about themselves. The lessons Anna has been forced to learn are irrevocable:

She looked back with melancholy derision on her old conception of life, as a kind of well-lit and well-policed suburb to dark places one need never know about. Here they were, these dark places, in her own bosom, and henceforth she would always have to traverse them to reach the beings she loved best! (353)

Anna Leath has resolved to live without illusions. She has discovered that romantic love will not unlock the secrets of life. For that she must depend upon her own observing mind. At the end of the novel one can only hope that Anna will have the courage to continue to see.

Cynthia Griffin Wolff contends that Edith Wharton acknowledges in *The Reef* a need for sexual experience and a “recognition of the naturalness of a woman’s sense of initiative” (*Feast* 219). Wharton also granted that sexuality has its darker side as well. As Wolff observes, there is a renunciation of the suffocating hypocrisies of established Victorian society; yet there is an acute consciousness of the beauty and peace that inheres in the order of a society whose mores are deeply structured. Individual ‘right’ is balanced inconclusively against social ‘need.’ (219)

Wharton continued to struggle with the many-sided problem of sexuality in *Summer* (1917), a novel which again explores a woman’s awakening to
sexuality.

Like *The Reef*, *Summer* has been largely ignored by critics or compared with *Ethan Frome* with which it shares a setting in the Berkshire Mountains. Reviewers regretted its lack of tragic force and its seemingly contrived ending. They overlooked the thrust of the novel which emphasizes the complexity of human nature and the ambiguity of human relationships. Once again, in *Summer*, Edith Wharton traces the conflicts of characters who must deal with their destructive illusions and confront reality.

Wharton herself compared *Summer* to *Ethan Frome*. She wrote to Scribner’s that the novel dealt with “the same kind of life in a mid-summer landscape,” and to a friend she referred to it as the “Hot Ethan” (Lewis 395-396). Wolff points out that schematically, *Summer* is “an almost literal inversion” of *Ethan Frome*. In *Summer* Charity Royall is “poised” between two men—Lucius Harney and Lawyer Royall and the novel deals not with passivity and dependency but with passion and self-assertion (“Cold” 240). Just as Wharton described Ethan’s emotions through the natural setting of the novel [Ethan’s isolation contains the “profound accumulated cold” of many New England winters (*Frome* 14)], she places Charity Royall in harmony with the scene. *Summer* begins on a June afternoon with the sun shining brightly as it will continue to do throughout the major portion of the novel. As the summer progresses, the sun gets hotter and hotter and, to Charity, it is a “stimulant” enveloping the “whole world in the same glow that burned at her heart” (*Summer* 131).

Charity Royall yearns for something better than the mountain village
of North Dormer has marked out for her. She captivates the reader as she asserts her personal needs and desires in a society which places men above her by birth, education, and material advantage.

Charity, like Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*, Ellen Olenska in *The Age of Innocence*, Undine Spragg in *The Custom of the Country*, as well as women in Wharton's lesser novels, is the outsider heroine who exposes the reality of her situation through conflict with a weak male. Inevitably, Wharton's males reject their women because they are unable to cope with the truths these women reveal. Such is the case with Lucius Harney, a young Bostonian architect who has come to North Dormer to sketch old houses. He ends up seducing Charity in one of them, then abandons her in favor of a woman of his own social status.

There is however, more to *Summer* than the late eighteenth century conventional "seduced and abandoned" theme that continued to be so popular in the fiction of the period. Though Wharton employs her traditional outsider heroine and evasive male, Charity Royall is neither naive nor vengeful, but shrewd and strong and, in the end, willing and able to face the realities of her situation. What is more, Charity is not the only protagonist of *Summer*. This is also Lawyer Royall's story. In fact, in a letter to Bernard Berenson who expressed admiration for the novel's predominant male character, Lawyer Royall, Wharton says, "I'm so particularly glad you like old man Royall. Of course, he's the book!" (Lewis *Letters* 398). In "The Divided Conflict of Edith Wharton's *Summer*," Carol Wershoven astutely suggests that Wharton splits character and conflict of the outsider heroine into two--
male and female, and resolves the conflict through their union. Lawyer Royall, Charity’s guardian and would be seducer, eventually becomes her husband and rescuer. As Wershoven states,

> It is a union which not only satisfies the requirements of plot, but which delineates what, Wharton felt, an adult marriage must be. **Summer**, Wharton’s most uncharacteristic book, is both Charity’s and Lawyer Royall’s story, a dual conflict and, more importantly, a dual growth achieved through ‘looking life in the face.’ (6)

Charity and her guardian share certain characteristics which set them apart from the stifling environment of North Dormer. Both crave an existence which the village cannot provide. As a result they both indulge in destructive fantasies and actions. Royall is a drunkard and seeks intemperate pleasure. He surrounds himself with inferior men and women hoping to make himself feel superior and ease his concern with his diminishing law practice and his personal degeneration. Charity has an affair with a city gentleman and fantasizes that Harney will one day remove her to a larger world.

Charity’s dream of escape is particularly destructive because she, like Anna of **The Reef**, believes deliverance will come through romantic love. As Carol Wershoven remarks, “her affair with Harney is grounded on the classic feminine fantasy of romantic submission, on an abdication of will (and self) through absorption in the loved one” (6). Wharton tells us “she could imagine no reason for doing or not doing anything except for the fact
that Harney wished or did not wish it. All her tossing contradictory impulses were merged in a fatalistic acceptance of his will" (175). Charity defines her “self” through Harney and relegates their relationship to the stereotypical patriarchal romance. Geoffrey Walton suggests that Charity seeks a “fairy prince” in Harney (87). Elizabeth Ammons, like Geoffrey Walton, sees a fairy-tale connection in Wharton's novel *The Reef*. She argues that its central theme is that “deliverance by a man appears to be but is not a dream of freedom for women. It is a glorification of the status quo: a culturally perpetuated myth of female liberation which in reality celebrates masculine dominance, proprietorship, and privilege” (628). What she says of *The Reef* applies with equal force to *Summer*.

Lawyer Royall's desire to escape dreary isolation is no less impelling or destructive. He also shares Charity's idea of romantic love as a way out of his prison and, in the fantasy he indulges, he will dominate Charity, and she will submit always to his will.

From the outset of *Summer*, Wharton stresses Charity's subservience to Royall. He has rescued her from the mountain, and she owes her life to him. In fact, Wharton tells us, Charity was rechristened “to commemorate Mr. Royall’s disinterestedness in ‘bringing her down,’ and to keep alive in her a becoming sense of her dependence . . . “ (24). Charity feels no affection for or gratitude toward Royall, but in her dependency she tolerates his high handed manner and his drunkenness. Royall expresses his ruinous fantasy in an impassioned assault on Charity late one evening:

She was awakened by a rattling at her door and jumped out
of bed. She heard Mr. Royall's voice, low and peremptory, and opened the door, fearing an accident. No other thought had occurred to her; but when she saw him in the doorway, a ray from the autumn moon falling on his discomposed face, she understood.

For a moment they looked at each other in silence; then as he put his foot across the threshold, she stretched out her arm and stopped him.

"You go right back from here," she said, in a shrill voice that startled her; "you ain't going to have that key tonight."

"Charity, let me in. I don't want the key. I'm a lonesome man," he began, in the deep voice that sometimes moved her.

Her heart gave a startled plunge, but she continued to hold him back contemptuously. "Well, I guess you made a mistake, then. This ain't your wife's room any longer."

She was not frightened, she simply felt a deep disgust; and perhaps he divined it or read it in her face, for after staring at her a moment he drew back and turned slowly away from the door. (28-29)

Here again Wharton deals with incest. Even though Charity thwarts Royall's advances, she is horrified by the incestuous tone of the incident. She can no longer delude herself that Royall's interest in her is out of loneliness. Royall expects compensation for her dependence upon him. In a talk with Miss Hatchard, Charity's precarious position becomes even more
clear to her. As Miss Hatchard puts it, "I know Mr. Royall is . . . trying at times [Wharton's ellipses]; but his wife bore with him; and you must always remember, Charity, that it was Mr. Royall who brought you down from the mountain" (31-32). Though Miss Hatchard is too prudish to admit it, she implies that Charity must continue to put up with Royall's lustful advances, but never succumb to them, for that would mean the destruction of her reputation.

Carol Wershoven observes that Royall's paternal lust for Charity is no different than the behavior of Lucius Harney toward Charity. He, too, represents dangerous "paternal power"; he fathers her child and makes her a prisoner of her body. He also reduces her relationship to him to one of dependency. She becomes a child and a prostitute, "relying on him for her very identity, . . . selling her emerging self for the security of his indulgent and patronizing care" (7).

As the plot of the novel continues to unfold, Wharton exposes the destructive illusions of the two main characters. Royall and Charity continue to confront each other. Charity mocks Royall's age and appearance and shames him publicly for his lecherousness. He constantly attempts to destroy her illusions about Harney. At one point, at the Fourth of July celebration, a drunken Royall, on the arm of the local prostitute, encounters Harney kissing Charity. Charity has "a vision of herself, hatless, disheveled, and with a man's arm about her" (151), as Wershoven says, "a whore confronted, ironically, by a whomemonger" (7). The further irony is that Royall calls her a whore; Harney makes her one.
The illusions of these two protagonists persist until the end of the novel when, at a celebration of the town of North Dormer, Royall, who is asked to speak, delivers a message to the entire town—one which is directed toward himself and Charity. He confronts himself and accepts his own shortcomings and exhorts the crowd: “Gentlemen, let us look at things as they are” (194), a recurrence of Wharton’s favorite theme. Royall declares:

Some of us have come back to our native town because we’ve failed to get on elsewhere. One way or another, things have gone wrong with us . . . what we’d dreamed of hadn’t come true. But the fact that we failed elsewhere is no reason why we should fail here . . . even if you come back against your will—and thinking it’s all a bitter mistake of fate or Providence—you must try to make the best of it, and to make the best of your old town; and after awhile . . . I believe you’ll be able to say, as I can say today: “I’m glad I’m here.” (194)

Royall invites Charity to accept herself and her limitations, too, and to find her identity in the real world of “home” rather than escaping into illusions.

Eventually Charity throws off her illusions. She finds herself pregnant and alone and faced with three choices: she can abort her child, have her child out of wedlock and become a prostitute, or marry. The possibilities repel her and, in desperation, she returns to the mountain, a final attempt to escape the harsh expectations of North Dormer. The squalor she finds there repels her, too. She can have no place on the mountain either. Once again,
Lawyer Royall rescues Charity; once again, she submits to his will. His protective presence gives her a “sense of peace and security . . . she knew that where he was there would be warmth, rest, silence, and for the moment they were all she wanted” (273). In the end, Charity agrees to marry Royall.

Some critics have maligned Charity’s marriage to Royall. Elizabeth Ammons calls it “sick” and “incestuous” (Argument 133). On the other hand, Wolff calls it a “hymn to generativity and marriage” (Feast 293). But, as Carol Wershoven points out, Wharton does not emphasize the incestuous marriage of father and child, nor does she pretend that the marriage is ideal. It is the compromise of two adults for good. In the end, Wharton portrays two protagonists who have grown through confrontation and acceptance of themselves and each other (9). And, Royall offers Charity love, not passionate, romantic love, but “a love that will allow her to be free of illusions and free to redefine herself” (8). Royall and Charity have come together without illusions, with tolerance and compassion--“the marriage nothing like a surrender to the status quo . . . , but a coming home to a union built together out of loneliness and pain and shame, and dedicated to working together, as equals, for good “ (10). Geoffrey Walton puts it succinctly when he says that, “as far as it goes . . . , the marriage is the kind of compromise that Edith Wharton thought was the essence of marriage and all satisfactory human relationships” (92).
CHAPTER SIX
The End of the Age of Innocence

In The Custom of the Country (1913), Edith Wharton returns to the familiar ground of old New York society and the novel of manners. However, this time the central character, Undine Spragg, is not only a victim like Lily Bart, but an invader, a character whom R.W.B. Lewis calls “the most restless and devastating of her [Wharton’s] heroines” (339). Undine Spragg does not elicit the sympathy that Lily Bart evokes. She is not a “nice” young woman. That aside, Undine is nevertheless a victim. Critics focusing on her self-serving and vicious nature have tended to overlook this. Blake Nevius describes Undine Spragg as “the perfect flowering of the new materialism...the most egocentric and dehumanized female in American fiction” (148-149). She no doubt is “the perfect flowering of the new materialism,” but Wharton purposefully created in Undine an unlikable social climber who is able to define herself only through marriage.

Like Lily Bart, Undine Spragg is the ultimate female ornament, but, whereas Lily is unable to climb the social ladder and consequently ends her life, Undine manages to reach the top through several marriages. Wharton is again dealing with a favorite theme: American mores encourage men to value women as possessions--ornaments. Through a man and marriage alone can woman obtain prestige. In return she must provide companionship and sexual intimacy and always with a spirit of cheerful willingness to please. Undine understands woman’s place and pursues the American dream--through marriage--with a vengeance.
The villainy of Wharton's heroine, Undine Spragg, fascinates most readers. Response to the novel has echoed the prevailing literary opinion that through Undine Spragg, Wharton denounces the way in which changing moral values corrupted the institution of marriage. However, since the mid-seventies critics have tended to focus more upon the role of Wharton's women within the traditional leisure-class marital structure, and this is especially true of *The Custom of the Country*. Elizabeth Ammons accurately assesses the novel when she points out that Wharton, through Undine, criticizes the cultural attitudes of marriage as an institution which encourages male autonomy and female dependency. As Ammons observes, Undine "does not bother with the hypocritical rhetoric that rationalizes marriage--she sees what marriage is rather than what people say it is and she acts according to what she sees" ("Business" 328). Undine exploits materialistic values to her advantage in her relationship with all the male characters in the novel.

Marriage for Undine is strictly a business venture. As Mary Suzanne Schriber remarks, "it is only intelligent to work the territory of marriage as a salesman works his until the profits are satisfactory" (191). So Undine marries four times in the belief that what she has been taught will finally prove out. Marriage provides the sole opportunity to gain place, money, and power, and Undine becomes "the monstrously perfect result of the system" (Wharton, *Custom* 208).

The Spraggs have come to New York from Apex, a city in the Midwest, in the hope that Undine's beauty and her father's fortune might
gain Undine entrance into the ranks of the socially elite. Undine's parents, while not ambitious for themselves, support Undine's social cravings. Undine is ignorant of New York society and social propriety, but she is conscious of and confident in her beauty and sexual attractiveness. Her motives are entirely superficial. She cares for nothing but her own satisfaction; she is not intellectual (she doesn't read books), and she has no means of self-evaluation. She has been produced by 'the custom of the country,' spoiled since childhood, and kept in ignorance of the financial difficulty her father has undergone to indulge her. Undine's values and motives are basically uncomplicated:

She wanted, passionately and persistently, two things which she believed should subsist together in any well-ordered life: amusement and respectability; and despite her surface-sophistication her notion of amusement was hardly less innocent than when she had hung on the plumber's fence with Indiana Frusk in Apex. (354)

Despite Undine's insipid personality, it is difficult to condemn her on moral grounds in light of her background. She knows no better. Gary Lindbergh suggests Undine "is caught between being an individual character, open to moral evaluation, and being the embodiment of a social phenomenon, demanding analysis more than personal judgment" (115). Insight to Undine as "devastating heroine" and "dehumanized female" is perhaps most accessible through the character of Ralph Marvell. Ralph fits Undine into his romantic vision. He would save her from scoundrels like
Peter Van Degen and from the "devouring monster society careering up to make a mouthful of her" (Custom 84).

Ralph Marvell is a true Wharton hero. There is a remarkable similarity between Marvell and Lawrence Selden of *The House of Mirth* and Newland Archer of *The Age of Innocence*. Each of these heroes has an integral part in the theme of each novel, and each judges all action by Wharton's standards of good taste. All three uphold the standards of old New York society but feel trapped by its conventions. If they rebel at all, their rebellion proves only half-hearted and ineffectual. Lawrence Selden becomes a cynical observer, Ralph Marvell a silent and suffering observer, and Newland Archer is unable to act on the love he feels for outsider Ellen Olenska. In all three novels the women prove stronger than the men. Through such men, and particularly through Ralph Marvell, Wharton reveals the insidious effects of social indoctrination.

Like Lawrence Selden and Newland Archer, Ralph Marvell is a well-bred, cultured, and sensitive individual who is perfectly comfortable within the realm of his social set but has no knowledge of the world outside it:

For four or five generations it had been the rule of both houses that a young fellow should go to Columbia or Harvard, read law, and then lapse into more or less cultivated inaction. The only essential was that he should live "like a gentleman"—that is, with a tranquil disdain for mere 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. (75)

Ralph is ill equipped to meet the onslaught of business and industrial
invaders. He is no match for the esurient Undine Spragg who will acquire
money and prestige regardless of the cost to others. Ralph’s incredible
naivete and lack of courage render him helpless in the face of Undine’s
indomitable energy, and she crushes him.

Though Ralph realizes his class is becoming archaic, its values are
an integral part of him which he cannot deny. Wharton tells us:

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. (74)

Amid the invasion of the new rich and ensuing social change, Ralph
finds no new values to replace the old. Thus he attempts to avoid the
vulgarity and artificiality of the outside world. He focuses his attention on
Undine Spragg whom he perceives to be in need of protection from less
worthy suitors. He fails to understand that Undine is not a small town
bumpkin, an apparent outsider to society. She is the stuff of which the new
America is made.

Wharton tells us that Ralph Marvell’s profession (law) “was the least
real thing in his life” (74-75). Having lapsed into “cultivated inaction,” Ralph
dabbles at writing poetry and verse and sketching, but his efforts are left unfinished: “he could do charming things, if only he had known how to finish them!” (75). His failures haunt him, and he retreats to an inner world, a world which Wharton likens to a secret cave he had discovered as a child:

And so with his inner world. Though so colored by outer impressions, it wove a secret curtain about him, and he came and went in it with the same joy of furtive possession. One day, of course, some one would discover it and reign there with him--no, reign over it and him. (76)

Ralph believes that by marrying her he will save the crude and seemingly unsophisticated Undine from the advances of less worthy suitors and somehow restore his self-esteem. Undine is the “some one” who Ralph envisions coming to his cave to reign over it and him:

He seemed to see her like a lovely rock-bound Andromeda, with the devouring monster Society careering up to make a mouthful of her, and himself whirling down on his winged horse--just Pegasus turned Rosiante for the nonce--to cut her bonds, snatch her up, and whirl her back into the blue . . . “

[Wharton’s ellipses]. (84)

It does not occur to Ralph that Undine neither wants or needs his protection. He assumes that, like all women, she would yield “as a matter of course to masculine judgments” (178). Eventually Ralph must abandon his illusions about Undine. She will never become the supportive and dependent wife he expects; nor will she adopt his old New York society
values. While he would hide himself and Undine away in a cave, Undine wants only to be where there are many people to admire her beauty and opulence.

Undine marries Ralph Marvell because he is a member of the socially elite and will enable her to attain her social ambitions. She has no doubt that she can maintain her independence as a wife. When the vulgar dilettante artist, Popple, insists he must paint Undine's portrait --"He [Ralph] can't forbid that, can he? Not before marriage anyhow!"--Undine responds defiantly: "I guess he isn't going to treat me any different afterward" (100). Ralph's efforts to mold her and upgrade her values evoke Undine's anger. After their marriage, Ralph adds insult to injury when he proves unable to provide her with enough money to satisfy her desire for luxury. When she attempts to barter with others to achieve her goals, Ralph cannot understand.

One whom Undine barter with, and has done so all her life, is her father, Abner Spragg. Alexandra Collins points out that Undine's view of Ralph is strongly influenced by her relationship with her father. She admires him solely because he has cleverly managed to make his way in the business world (205). All of Mr. Spragg's attempts on the stock market are on Undine's behalf, and she has wheedled him into giving her money since she was a child. Undine is endowed with her father's cunning business sense. Ralph, on the other hand, has no ability in business matters, must call upon Elmer Moffatt to invest his money, and refuses to adapt to a world not of his making. Consequently, Undine looks upon him with contempt.
She feels cheated and finds ways to humiliate and destroy his self-respect. Ralph’s genuine care for her leaves Undine cold; as Alexandra Collins says, “all human emotion in her family past has been sucked into material objects” (205).

Undine’s drive for material wealth will not be thwarted. Subservient to her will, Ralph turns to real-estate in an attempt to make a living; however, he is an asset only because of his social status, and he fails. Undine breaks with Ralph, callously telling newspaper reporters that Ralph does not pay enough attention to her, and has an affair with a member of one of New York’s first families, Peter Van Degen. The fact that he is a crude, egotistical philanderer matters not to Undine. She wants to “escape” an unsatisfactory marriage to Ralph and maintain her ascendance on the social ladder of the new rich.

Undine’s marriage to Ralph Marvell has produced a child, Paul. When Undine is off in Europe having an affair with Van Degen, Ralph becomes seriously ill and asks for his wife. She, in turn, applies for a divorce. As if this were not enough proof of her inhumanity, she also demands custody of their young son knowing that Ralph will pay dearly to keep the boy with him. Ralph is unable to raise the money to appease Undine, and he will not besmirch his son’s name or Undine’s by bringing up her tawdry affair with Van Degen.

In order to raise the money Undine demands, Ralph is forced to turn to Elmer Moffatt for advice. Ralph finds Moffatt, a business tycoon, extremely vulgar and offensive. What strikes the final blow, however, is Moffatt’s
revelation that he was once married to Undine. Ralph is devastated.

He was seized with another dumb gust of fury; but it died out and left him face to face with the uselessness, the irrelevance of all the old attitudes of appropriation and defiance. He seemed to be stumbling about in his inherited prejudices like a modern man in medieval armour . . . [Wharton's ellipses]. Moffatt still sat at his desk, unmoved and apparently uncomprehending. "He doesn't even know what I'm feeling," flashed through Ralph; and the whole archaic structure of his rites and sanctions tumbled down about him. (Custom 469)

Bereft of everything he considers sacred, Ralph retreats to his grandfather's house in Washington Square and shoots himself.

As Ralph dies, so dies what is left of genuineness in the social world; furthermore, Undine continues on her path to complete entrapment through marriage. When Peter Van Degen deserts her, Undine attempts to make her way in the world as a single woman. She soon discovers that she is unrecognized and even ostracized; without a husband she has no identity, no security. She must marry again. She marries Raymond de Chelles, but the marriage does not last long, and Wharton devotes little time to it. Raymond de Chelles is much like Ralph Marvell; while she dominates him, she "gradually began to be aware that her domination over him involved a corresponding loss of independence" (481). Characteristically, Undine refuses to play the role of the passive and ornamental wife. She will not acquiesce to de Chelles' will; neither does he to hers. Undine's "weapons
of aggression" (527) fail her, and she reacts with corresponding meanness and desperation, seriously contemplating the sale of the treasured de Chelles tapestries. When de Chelles discovers her callousness, he rejects her outright.

Once again Undine finds herself in a precarious position. She is, however, not without prospects. Elmer Moffatt tempts her with his newly acquired financial empire, and she sees an end to all her troubles. She offers herself to Moffatt as his mistress knowing all too well the irreparable stain divorce would leave on her reputation. What she fails to realize is that she is merely another material asset in Moffatt's mind. He treats her as he would any business partner--sentimental love being the farthest thing from his mind. Ignorant of the implications of divorce for Undine, Moffatt insists she divorce de Chelles and marry him:

He stopped, his head a little lowered, his concentrated gaze on her flushed face. "Well, anyhow," he broke out, "you were my wife once, and you were my wife first--and if you want to come back you've got to come that way: not slink through the back way when there's no one watching, but walk by the front door, with your head up, and your Main Street look." (572)

To remain married to Raymond de Chelles would force Undine to seek out another Peter Van Degen or accept the cultural ideal of feminine compliance and passivity as de Chelles' wife. Undine opts to reject both. Rather, she flaunts her ambitious nature and opts to marry new money. She will be a material asset to Moffatt, and he is another in her long line of
commercial enterprises. As Elizabeth Ammons points out, Wharton's ironic strategy is evident:

What better way to expose how exploitive leisure-class marriage is for women than by placing men in the belittling role usually reserved for women? The book implicitly asks why, if it is distasteful to see a woman regard a man as an acquisition, is the reverse not equally true? ("Business" 338)

Although one cannot pity or sympathize with Undine's predicaments, she is, nevertheless, a product of the exploitive culture which produced her. And she has, at the end of the novel, once again entrapped herself, unconsciously, in a marriage which will be designed ultimately on Moffatt's terms. As a young woman, Undine must marry to achieve security and status, and she can either be a model of feminine self-effacement, or she can be an aggressive opportunist. Regardless, she cannot escape male proprietorship. Undine Spragg is associated with mirrors throughout the novel, and, as Elizabeth Ammons notes, this is for good reason. Undine reflects the marital custom of the country--Wharton's major target in this biting satire (338).

Not only does Wharton satirize marriage customs in The Custom of the Country, she also severely indicts twentieth century American society's attempt to conjoin spirituality and materialism as evidenced in the marriage of Ralph Marvell and Undine Spragg. Wharton seems to look back upon her old New York society with horror that it could and did entomb women within its marital conventions. On the other hand, Wharton expresses her
dismay at the predaciousness of the new America. With Ralph Marvell's suicide, Wharton reveals her pessimism about whether America can retain a vision of a better world amid the onslaught of the new materialism.

Sadly, Ralph Marvell is an anachronism. Though Wharton would escape her own class for its stultifying conventions, she also concludes that the Ralph Marvells--the gentlemen of her father's background--should not have become anachronisms. Though they were unable to cope with the problems of the newly industrialized world, their European values and traditions had significance. As she said in *A Backward Glance*, their value lay in "upholding two standards of importance in any community, that of education and good manners, and of scrupulous probity in business and private affairs" (21). Further on she laments: "In every society there is the room and the need for a cultivated leisure class, but from the first the spirit of our institutions has caused us to waste this class instead of using it" (95-96).

It can be argued that it is impossible to determine Wharton's philosophy from her fiction. Her attitudes toward men and women changed throughout her long career, and she often presents her characters with ambivalence. But is is possible to infer from her work her feminist concerns. Edith Wharton's fiction perceptively records changes in attitudes toward women and women's attitudes toward themselves. It also traces her own changes in attitude toward women from the 1870s until her death in 1937. Her work is more than peripheral (portraying only a dying New York aristocracy). As Margaret McDowell asserts: it should be recognized as central to the American scene for over some sixty years because it
encompasses economic, domestic and social change ("Viewing 537). Despite the fact of Wharton's ambiguity, her ideas deserve continued attention: she castigates men and women for their inhumanity, for their lack of responsibility to society, and reinforces the importance and necessity of such virtues as order, tradition, culture and control. By 1913, Edith Wharton had escaped the confines of her background, but she began to appreciate the values of that background in light of a burgeoning indiscriminate modern culture. Her future novels lack the sense of entrapment and stultification which resulted in such memorable characters as Lily Bart, Ethan Frome, and Undine Spragg. Nevertheless, the thrust of Wharton's novels is toward a more flexible society in which women and men can throw off their ignorance of the nature of passion and human sexuality and women can become active rather than passive agents.
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