MARITAL TRADITIONS IN THE FICTION OF EDITH WHARTON

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This study deals with Edith Wharton's literary attitude toward woman's limited place in society and her opportunities for happiness in acceptance of or rebellion against conventional standards. Wharton's works, specifically her novels, contain recurrent character types functioning in recurrent situations. Similarity in the themes of Wharton's various works illustrates her basic idea: woman, lacking independence and identity, needs the security of tradition's order.

The insecurity of Wharton's unmarried women emphasizes the function of marriage in Wharton's time. Economic security is rarely enjoyed by the single, for very few women are able to support themselves financially. Trained for no vocation but marriage, the single woman can rarely survive on her own and must use social opportunities to secure a husband. This frantic search for a husband restricts the social freedom of a woman because she must remain pure but still attract a man. The social freedoms of gambling, smoking, giving parties, and entertaining love affairs are thus available only to the married. Economic and social insecurity, placing the single women under emotional strain, are alleviated only in marriage, and Wharton obviously concludes that any marriage of any class and wealth is preferrable to no marriage at all.

Marriage, however, is most often an alliance of unequal partners. As an inferior partner, a woman must constantly connive to remind her husband of his duties and is consequently unable to find satisfaction in pure companionship. As a superior partner, a woman is painfully aware of the spiritual limitation her marriage offers and can find happiness only in a martyr-like devotion to her marital duties.

Those who search for alternatives, however, also rarely find reward. Adultery, offering only temporary satisfaction, causes pain and confusion to others. Divorce is likewise painful and often merely sparks a chain reaction of numerous marriages and divorces, thereby confusing a woman even more.

Their concern with the shortcomings of marriage and awareness of the futility of divorce and adultery cause some women to contemplate rebellion. Wharton's females either blindly accept, weakly question, or boldly confront society's demands. Blind acceptance, which allows a woman to ignore her limitations, leaves her a mere puppet void of individuality. Weak questioning often results in frustration and may even destroy the woman who refuses to identify with tradition or change. Bold confrontation, resulting in social ostracism, eventually gives way to a mature return to tradition, a return allowing a woman to modify her rebellion in order to maintain personal identity while enjoying the social comforts of marriage.

This systematic study of Wharton's characters and settings reveals recurrent illustrations of her philosophy. Woman, backed into a corner by society's decree, is placed in that corner for her own security. Awareness of the practical reasons for her cornering, however, allows a woman to maintain self-respect while appreciating the dignity fostered by adherence to tradition.

In other words, Wharton studies the limitations society has placed on the female and questions the purpose and advantages of those limitations. As a result, Wharton concludes that though convention demands much, the female who respects tradition more readily benefits from the order tradition offers.

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CHAPTER I

MARRIAGE AS AN END IN ITSELF

A survey of Edith Wharton's short stories and novels reveals the consistent theme, illustrated through the female characters, that any marriage is better than no marriage at all. Women characters are most obviously either single or married. However, they also fall into economic categories: lower, middle, and upper class. Regardless of the economic category, though, marriage is better than nonmarriage. In other words, it is better in Wharton's world for a woman to be poor and married than be rich and single. Women attain security and comfort more from marriage than from economics.

With the economic category of extreme poverty exist the following married women: Zeena Frome in *Ethan Frome*, Nettie Struthers in *The House of Mirth*, and Laura Lou Weston in *Hudson River Bracketed*; the single women are Gerty Farish in *The House of Mirth*, Mattie Silver in *Ethan Frome*, Charlotte Love in *The Old Maid*, and Eliza Bunner in "The Bunner Sisters." Main characters of the middle class include the unmarried Justine Brent in *The Fruit of the Tree* and Sophy Viner in *The Reef*. Upper class women who are married are Judy Trenor, Bertha Dorsett, and Carrie Fisher in *The House of Mirth*, Bessy Amherst in *The Fruit of the Tree*, and Undine

Spragg in The Custom of the Country; the single ones include Lily Bart and Grace Stepney in The House of Mirth and Janey Archer in The Age of Innocence.

Whatever the class, most women in Wharton's novels are trained for no vocation but marriage. Single workers of the lower class futilely strive to support themselves through such occupations as hat trimming, housekeeping, shopkeeping, and working in nurseries. Those of higher society are forced to cater to the rich as secretaries, travelling companions, and governesses. However, almost all the workers have one thing in common: they are working solely because they are single.

Wharton illustrates again and again how the societal assumption that all women must marry places the single woman in an unsure, unpleasant situation. Socialized by her parents and society to be a wife, the single woman of all classes can neither support herself financially nor enjoy herself socially. For example, Mattie Silver in Ethan Frome, is orphaned with fifty dollars of her own and the burden of her father's debt to the family. The daughter of missionaries, clumsy Mattie can only trim a hat, make molasses candy, recite "Curfew Shall Not Ring Tonight," and play "The Lost Chord," and a pot-pourri from "Carmen." Mattie, who has failed in her frail endeavors to become a stenographer and clerk, seeks to be a housekeeper for her family as compensation for her father's debt and as means of her self-support. Realizing her weakness and

dependence, Mattie finds a husband surrogate in her cousin's husband, Ethan Frome. When Zeena Frome begins to fear that Ethan will return Mattie's love, she sends Mattie away. As Ethan carries Mattie to the train, Mattie boldly declares her love for him. Overcome by Mattie's passionate outburst and sensing Mattie's complete helplessness and utter hopelessness, Frome agrees to sled Mattie into a tree. Thus, Mattie, stationed with a totally dependent personality in a situation demanding independence, can only hope that her pleas for assistance in suicide will be answered.

In The House of Mirth Wharton creates another single female who must work to support herself. Unlike Mattie, Gerty Farish is not physically clumsy, so she is successful in supporting herself as a hat maker. However, because she lives alone in a very small apartment in the slums of the city, Gerty suffers social clumsiness. With little chance to associate with the rich, Gerty must be content to dream of the culture and excitement of higher society's exclusive parties, fancy dinners, and formal balls.

Wharton presents two other very poor, very single women of the lower class in her characterizations of Charlotte Love and Eliza Bunner. Charlotte of The Old Maid is an extremely pathetic, tired character who must be content to work in a nursery in order to be near her illegitimate child. Eliza Bunner of "The Bunner Sisters" unsuccessfully runs a small

variety shop to support her sister and herself. Receiving most of her support from frequent visits to a pawn-broker, Eliza eventually is left with nothing to pawn, and the novel ends as Eliza is left desperately searching for a job that the reader and she know will never be found.

That Wharton paints the single woman of poverty as oppressed is not in the least questionable. However, the force of that oppression is not fully comprehended until the single woman of the lower class is compared to the married woman of the lower class. For Wharton clearly believes that the suffering of the poor single woman is caused more by her single state than by her poverty.

Laura Lou Weston of _Hudson River Bracketed_, for example, is quite certainly as unfit to work as Mattie Silver. Even though Laura Lou shares Mattie's physical weakness and lack of training, Laura Lou has a husband to depend on and can thus limit herself to emotional rather than financial worries. A second example, Zeena Frome, though lacking gowns and jewels of the upper class, can afford to pamper her hypochondria and hire a housekeeper.

Another of Wharton's married women, Nettie Struthers of _The House of Mirth_, though quite poor, is presented as one of Wharton's happiest mothers. She is so content with the security of her marriage and so proud of her home that she dares to invite the cultured, aristocratic Lily Bart into her shabby

residence for tea. After contrasting the common, happily married Nettie with the refined, unhappily single Lily, Wharton reinforces her belief that a marriage of poverty is supreme to solitary nobility. Nettie cheerfully tells Lily:

> "Work girls aren't looked after the way you are, and they don't always know how to look after themselves. . . . I never thought I'd get married, you know, and I'd never have had the heart to go on working just for myself. . . ." The strength of the victory shone forth from her as she lifted her irradiated face from the child on her knees (9, pp. 508-9).

Thus, Wharton clearly contends that the married woman of the lower class has a definite advantage over the single woman of the lower class, and possibly the upper class. Created to be financially dependent, those of poverty find comfort in relying on a husband. Likewise created to be financially dependent, those who are single find only desperation in relying on their own abilities.

Wharton's study of the middle class is more limited, perhaps because the class itself was less well developed in her time. Less dependent than the poor, single Sophy Viner, in The Reef, and Justine Brent, in The Fruit of the Tree, question society's decree that they must marry. In contrast to Mattie Silver and Eliza Bunner, Sophy has been able to support herself and has maintained position in the middle class. She has worked five years as a social secretary without advancement, and therefore decides to try the stage. The young, inexperienced

Sophie tells George Darrow:

> "Oh, I never mean to marry," she had rejoined in a tone of youthful finality. . . . "Besides," she rambled on, "I'm not so sure that I believe in marriage. You see I'm all for self-development and the chance to live one's life. I'm awfully modern, you know" (13, p. 61).

However, experience conquers Sophie's doubt. Unsuccessful on the stage, Sophie becomes a governess and eventually makes wedding plans.

Justine Brent is also less desperate for a lucrative marriage. In fact, Justine's success as a nurse marks her as Wharton's only professional woman. Described as independent, collected, and intelligent, Justine possesses individual freedom and an independent existence. She feels no overwhelming need for marriage and even refuses to be courted by a rich young man. However, Justine does accept the proposal of John Amherst, with whom she shares a deep concern for social welfare. As Justine relinquishes her single state, she breathes a sigh of relief and expresses the fact that she can now worry less and be fickle like other women. Through the marriage of the modern Sophie and especially through the marriage of the independent Justine, Wharton reinforces her idea that single women, even those who are not financially desperate, view marriage as more desirable than being single.

Although women of the lower and middle class clearly see marriage as their ultimate goal, the single women of the upper class are clearly just as limited. Contrary to the single

woman of lower classes, the aristocrat has a greater demand for luxuries, such as fancy carriages, beautiful clothes, opera-boxes, and jewels, to enable her to compete in higher social circles. However, she does not have a greater potential for making her own money. Whereas the financially deprived Gerty and Charlotte, Mattie and the Bunner sisters realize the futility of seeking social recognition, single women of the aristocracy have hopes of depending on the wealth of an extremely rich husband.

For example, Lily Bart in The House of Mirth suffers a great deal more for her financial suppression than do the single poor. Though Lily is just as poor, she has been programmed dependently to demand the recognition that riches can buy. Thus, she despairs not only of self-support, but of a place in upper society, a society in which women are geared to spend their lives getting and keeping a rich husband, and men are geared to play games of maintaining wealth. Lily's society, much like that in Wharton's other novels, The Custom of the Country, Hudson River Bracketed, The Reef, and The Age of Innocence, is one in which men are harrassed husbands, struggling for money, and women are empty dolls who live to compete for social recognition. As Osbert Burdett states:

> The flatness incidental to this existence is relieved by the display of frocks, by flirtations, by shrewd gossip, and by the struggle of everyone concerned to scramble into whatever happens to be the most exclusive set of the season (1, p. 13).

Like other singles of the upper class, Lily has been socially conditioned to rely on beautiful clothes and social associations, and accepts her society's materially based value system, but like the others, Lily questions the desirability of the conventional parasitic marriage of her social circle. V. S. Pritchett describes Lily as:

> . . . one who was a cut above the rest of her circle, but who had been fatally conditioned from the first. Lily Bart is a beautiful and very intelligent girl, delightful company and really too clever for any of the men her society was likely to offer (2, p. 489).

Through her characterization of Lily, Wharton presents the dilemma of a refined young lady who, though willing to marry, dares to desire a choice in whom she marries. In conflict, Lily needs the economic security of a lucrative marriage, but she also wants spiritual fulfillment and meaning for her life other than material acquisition and competition.

Trying to decide what to do, Lily seems to realize her futility. As she converses at tea with Lawrence Selden, a single man of high values and little money, Selden reminds Lily of society's decree:

> "Isn't marriage your vocation? Isn't that what you're all brought up for?"
>
> She sighed. "I suppose so. What else is there?"
>
> "Exactly. And so why not take the plunge and have it over (9, p. 13)?"

However, Lily seems so upset at her great need for marriage that Selden suggests she might find a job and live in

her own small apartment, as Gerty Farish does. Selden, however, is aware of Lily's lack of training, her helplessness, and her almost naturalistic inability to change her life style:

> As he watched her hand, polished as a bit of old ivory, with its slender pink nails, and the sapphire bracelet slipping over her wrist, he was struck with the irony of suggesting to her such a life as his cousin Gertrude Farish had chosen. She was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate (9, p. 10).

Society has decreed Lily's destiny; she has been molded to be a fashionable wife and is unable to fit into society as anything else.

Society, however, has furnished Lily no support for her single state and has, in fact, made it almost impossible for her to live comfortably in the present without jeopardizing her future. Rather than work, Lily wishes to remain a lady, eligible for a proposal from a rich man, but she hopes for more than money. Lily is aware of the unhappiness of some of her wealthy, married friends, and thus desires both economic security and love. Judy Trenor, unhappy with her husband, finds happiness only in giving parties and buying clothes. Bertha Dorsett, like many in higher circles, is also unhappy with her marriage and uses it as a shield for frivolous affairs. Because Lily's mind has been infested with ideas of Selden's "republic of the spirit," a republic of individual

freedom outside the worries of society, Lily searches for individual purpose. She does not want to be a parasite on her husband; instead, she wishes to be a companion. Desiring love, Lily refuses three lucrative marriages; desiring money, Lily refuses Selden's proposal. Because Lily wants a marriage with both companionship and money, Lily loses her chance for any marriage and thus falls lower in her social circle. In order to replenish her bank account, Lily acts as a social secretary, hat maker, and even borrows money. Eventually, she finds herself starving, alone, and without hope. Holding out for both love and riches, Lily gains neither. Failing to fit into society as a rich wife, Lily loses all desire to live and resorts to suicide. Thus, Wharton depicts the ruin of the single woman who loses a chance for marriage because she gains just enough integrity to question and study it.

Wharton does realize that much of Lily's suffering results from her poverty, but poverty alone does not cause Lily's suffering. Like Mattie Silver and Eliza Bunner, Lily suffers primarily because she is a dependent being in a situation requiring independence. And even more difficult, Lily must maintain the facade of dependence as she is forced to be independent. That is, she must try to support herself with such ease that those who associate with her will barely notice the inferiority of her finances.

In addition to Lily, Wharton creates rich single women such as Evie Van Osburgh and Grace Stepney in The House of Mirth and Janey Archer in The Age of Innocence. Evie, Grace, and Janey do not suffer the financial strain that Lily suffers. They are able to afford luxuries, are invited to parties, and do not have to worry about working. They do, however, have to depend on their families for support. And they, too, have marriage as their ultimate goal. In fact, Janey and Grace are shamefully embarrassed when they are socially labelled as rich old maids, for wealth that fails to buy a husband fails to compensate for the social stigma of being unmarried.

Wharton paints the married woman of high society as the most comfortable financially. Freed from the worry of self-support, the rich married woman is also free from the worry of catching a husband. The ecomomic security of a wealthy marriage promotes an emotional security that enhances marriage as truly advantageous.

The married women in Wharton's novels and stories claim a second advantage. They are not only more secure financially, but are more secure socially. Again, the single women of lower classes feel the social deprivation somewhat less, because they have less expectation of extravagance. Mattie, Charlotte, and Eliza Bunner express little surprise at their social suppression. Content to operate in their limited circles, they are not expected to rely on fine dresses and appearances at extravagant balls to bid for a husband. Those

closer to wealth, such as Gerty Farish, Sophy Viner, and Justine Brent, dream of aristocratic extravagence, but are content to bid for marriage within their circles, relying on wealth less and relying on personality more.

However, Lily Bart in The House of Mirth and Undine Spragg of The Custom of the Country suffer deeply from their social suppression. Their chances for a lucrative marriage depend on presence at formal dinners, balls, and operas. Undine Spragg's father, near bankruptcy, spends all his money trying to appear rich just long enough to marry Undine to a wealthy man. With the dregs of his bank account, Mr. Spragg buys new dresses for Undine, vacations in expensive resorts, and rents a very costly opera-box so that Undine can associate with the rich and thus trap a wealthy husband. Undine is finally successful in securing a wealthy marriage, but her marriage is founded on her parents' bankruptcy. After Undine is married, her parents step down financially and are so lowered in social status that Undine scarecely associates with them. The Spraggs, desiring their daughter to have money and position, sacrifice their own position and place their future in financial jeopardy.

On the other hand, Lily has no family to make sacrifices for her. Orphaned by parents who died grieving over their financial ruin, Lily, like Undine, must look rich long enough to become rich through marriage. Whereas Undine's parents suffer financial and social ruin, Lily gambles away her own

security. In debt to her dressmaker, in need of new clothes, desiring money for luxuries and gambling at parties, Lily borrows from Gus Trenor. Lily's action sparks gossip that she is having an affair with Trenor. In contrast, Carry Fisher, separated from her husband, borrows money from Trenor, but because she is not marriage bait, is not gossiped about or suspected by Judy Trenor of desiring to marry Trenor. Lily, because she is single and eligible, suffers more than Carry, married and thus less of a threat to married women.

Lily competes not only in dress, but in other ways. Party hostesses, playing matchmaker at parties, brag socially about helping couples to the altar. When Lily's material value declines, she is in less demand at parties. Because she is unable to decorate a party and is unable to attract bachelors, Lily is invited less and less. Lily's friends, who tire of her refusal to marry and resent her fastidiousness, decide to let her find a husband on her own. In Lily's society, single women do not give parties; therefore, if they are uninvited, they lose one valuable method of association with rich bachelors. Through parties, married women can help single ones attract husbands. If the single women are invited, they must restrict themselves to personalities that will achieve their goals. Many of the single girls cannot smoke or gamble in front of the bachelors, but married women such as Bertha Dorsett and Carry Fisher can openly smoke and gamble without fear.

In addition to the freedom to smoke and gamble in public, married women appear freer to have affairs. Many of the married women, such as Bertha Dorsett and Cary Fisher of The House of Mirth, and Ellie Vanderlyn in The Glimpses of the Moon have open affairs without suffering any social ostracism. Only one married woman, Elizabeth Hazeldean in New Year's Day is socially ostracized by other women, and her exclusion results a great deal from gossip about a hotel fire during which Elizabeth and her lover are publicly seen leaving the hotel.

In contrast, mere implication that Lily is having an affair with Trenor causes the married women to exclude her from all social functions. The fact that Bertha Dorsett and Carry Fisher are having affairs is well known, but because they can maintain their place in society with money and marriage, they are not ostracized. Thus, Lily suffers more from false, unfounded gossip than Mrs. Dorsett and Mrs. Fisher do from gossip known to be true. Sophy Viner in The Reef finds her marriage plans destroyed because of her affair of five years earlier. Wharton sees that the code of married women, then, is to allow frivolous affairs within the cover of marriage but quickly and cruelly report affairs of threatening single women. Again, single women are watched more closely and judged more harshly than married women.

In general, married women of all classes find security in their ability to depend on their husbands. Single women most feel their singleness when in financial need. Their insecurity is based both on their inability to depend on another person and in the realization that they cannot depend on their own resources without social decline.

For the most part, married women are invited to more parties, are able to spend more money on luxuries, have greater freedom to borrow money from men friends, have fewer worries about impressing other people, and can more easily have affairs without social reprimand. In upper society in particular, marriage is a ticket to criticize single women and to use gossip to place single women in social jeopardy, without fearing criticism or gossip from the single. Advantages of marriage are somewhat based on money, but within each class, marriage gives a woman security that the single woman in her class does not have. Thus, in Wharton's works, extreme poverty, social desperation, and suicide are experienced more by the single rather than by the married. In other words, the injustice of marriage lies in the fact that a woman has no choice. Through socialization, all classes of society not only assume, but demand that women marry, and women of all classes discover that marriage of any kind is better than being single. Thus, Wharton firmly declares that, at all levels, being single has only disadvantages.

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CHAPTER II

MARRIAGE AS AN UNEQUAL PARTNERSHIP

Blake Nevius views the principal relationships in Wharton's novels as unequal partnerships resulting from a sentimental error of the sentimental partner (3, p. 108). The larger, more generous nature is deluded into impulsively trapping himself in an alliance with the meaner nature and thus remains a victim, imprisoned by his own ideas of responsibility (3, pp. 9-10). Although the relationships in Wharton's novels upon which Nevius bases his generalization also include non-marital relationships, the generalization can be specifically limited and applied to a study of Wharton's married partners. Focusing on the favorable and unfavorable characters as they function within their marriages supports Nevius's view that Wharton is primarily concerned with unequal partnerships, but also results in our seeing some exceptions and some finer gradations within the large category of inequality.

A classification of Wharton's marriage types reveals an overabundance of marriages with unequal partners and an interesting shortage of marriages containing mutuality. Indeed, in all but a few of the novels' marriages, Wharton clearly presents one character as victim, the other, as

trapper. Two basic types of marriages are evident in which the partners are unequal. One type draws the superior, more generous nature as a protector of the inferior, more limited one. The second type results in a parasitic relationship because of an exaggerated dependence on the part of the inferior character.

The first of four examples of a protectorship marriage is that of Newland Archer and May Welland in The Age of Innocence. Although Archer feels that he merely sinks into the "black abyss" of marriage, May quite purposefully and cleverly traps him there. With the entrance of May's independent and intelligent cousin, Ellen, into a world of dependent, nonthinking and inexperienced New York debutantes, Archer begins to doubt the satisfactions of a marriage in which he is to unblindfold and forever shield a naive, unquestioning child of his society. Compared to Ellen, May appears to be an infant so lacking in imagination that she has never dared to think until a thought is programmed into her. A mere product of her society, May is a robot-like conniver who successfully traps her goal. A. H. Quinn describes May:

> She is the concrete expression of the period and the place and is as remarkable a character as her cousin and fiance. In each of the crises in their love story she strikes surely but relentlessly to prevent the loss of the man she loves. She fights with the weapons forged from her innocence, never letting Newland know that she suspects him, but with perfect good breeding shutting from him all avenues of escape (4, p. 567).

Archer first seeks escape in his decision to accept a traditional long engagement. Freed by May's refusal to move up the wedding date, Archer begins a courtship with Ellen only to receive a telegram announcing that May has convinced her parents the wedding should not be postponed. Archer thus becomes May's "soul's custodian" in a ceremony that he himself has helped to hasten. Sole protector of May, Archer watches his marriage become, like most of the other marriages around him, "a dull association of material and social interests held together by ignorance on one side and hypocrisy on the other."

Totally bored by his completely predictable, completely traditionally styled wife, Archer searches for reason in his choice and purpose in his predicament:

> He had married (as most young men did) because he had met a perfectly charming girl at the moment when a series of rather aimless sentimental adventures were ending in premature disgust; and she had represented peace, stability, comradeship, and the steadying sense of an unescapable duty (5, p. 169).

Resentful toward May's unending demands and aware of the destructive overtaxing of his reign as protector, Archer attempts a second escape. However, as Archer makes plans to leave with Ellen, May announces a pregnancy, and Archer, again, is enmeshed in his own snare. Archer, then, by his own sense of responsibility, is doomed to rot in a marriage he helped plan. He is, for the rest of his life, destined to provide for, plan for, and think for a wife who is a completely predictable product of society.

A second example of a protectorship marriage is that of John Amherst and Bessy Westmore in The Fruit of the Tree. Unlike Archer, Amherst does not fall into his wife's trap; rather, both of them fall into a marriage based on misconceptions. Like May, Bessy is often compared to a child, but Bessy is even more infantile in her inability to understand Amherst. Bessy miscalculates Amherst's passion for social reform, and is frustrated to learn that her husband cares more for his work than for his luxurious life with her. Socialized to live extravagantly and with little concern for the poor, Bessy is unable to limit her expenses so that Amherst can use their money for social work. Bessy's aunt explains:

> "Isn't that precisely what Bessy is? Isn't she one of the most harrowing victims of the plan of bringing up our girls in the double bondage of expediency and unreality, corrupting their bodies with luxury and their brains with sentiment, and leaving them to reconcile the two as best they can, or lose their soul in the attempt" (7, p. 281).

Ironically, it is Bessy's corruption from wealth, her fantasies, naivete, and dependence that first attracts Amherst. Bessy's "cramped and curtained life" so appeals to "his diviner air" that Amherst desires to protect Bessy:

> She looked with her gentle look of trust, as though committing to him, with the good faith of a child, her ignorance, her credulity, her little rudimentary convictions and her little tentative aspirations, relying on him not to abuse or misdirect them in the boundless supremacy of his masculine understanding (7, p.100).

However, the limit of Amherst's masculine understanding is reached when Amherst notices his wife's jealousy toward his work. Shocked that he has misjudged Bessy, Amherst sees Bessy less as a partner and more as a burden. Consequently, he spends less time with her, and Bessy soon becomes even more resentful toward his absences and his extreme concern for other people. So the two grow farther apart, and as Bessy develops a detached independence, Amherst nurses a strong antipathy toward her devotion to self-comfort. He is virtually disgusted to find that Bessy cannot, in the least, share his devotion:

> Amherst had always conveniently supposed that the poet's line summed up the good woman's rule of ethics He for God only, she for God in him (7, p. 179).

Thus, the marriage of Amherst and Bessy is founded on a relationship similar to Archer and May's in The Age of Innocence; Amherst, ruled by his ideas of masculine supremacy, is attracted to Bessy, a childlike product of society. However, in contrast to Archer, Amherst has a concern outside his marriage, and in contrast to May, Bessy is awkward in her attempts to limit her husband's freedom. The Amhersts are, therefore, unable to adjust their marriage to include any compromise. Amherst develops a greater concern for social work, and Bessy deepens her dependence on wealth and social functions. Eventually Bessy's refusal to follow Amherst's plan of frugality extends to a defiance of any of Amherst's suggestions. Although forbidden to ride by her husband, Bessy is thrown by her wild

mare and is fatally injured. Bessy suffers extended pain from a broken spine and dies before Amherst, who is on the other side of the world doing social work, can arrive.

In the Amherst marriage, then, Wharton presents Amherst as the generous nature who, from his own generosity, deludes himself into marriage in order to shield a dependent woman of a smaller nature. Once he is trapped, however, he submerges his responsibilities to a wife who thus becomes even more demanding. The inequality of the partners is so accented in their divergent interests that the marriage eventually becomes destructive to both.

Laura Lou Weston in Hudson River Bracketed is also unable to share her husband's interests. Attracted by her beauty and naivete, Weston impulsively proposes to Laura Lou and later wishes for freedom. Devoted to writing novels, Weston feels hampered by Laura Lou's childlike dependence on him. Like many of Wharton's women characters, Laura Lou is totally dependent on her husband, and Weston, as protector, lacks consideration for his wife. Weston resents the demands of his role as protector because they stifle his role as creative writer. Not only does Laura Lou need financial provisions for food and almost constant medical care, but she also demands companionship. Conversations with his wife, however, drive Weston to feel that his "primitive cravings" have caused him to be tied to an unchangeable, dependent partner.

Weston resents Laura Lou's intellectual inferiority more and more, and soon views her as a mere echo of his thoughts. Seeking intellectual companionship, Weston almost abandons Laura Lou entirely; however, when Laura Lou becomes seriously ill, Weston moves her to the country and writes when not nursing his wife. Again, a Whartonian character, is tied by responsibilities that he helped to create and can think of his own self only after providing for his inferior partner.

The fourth example of a protectorship marriage is different: the superior nature belongs to the wife, rather than the husband. Halo Spear marries Lewis Tarrant in a noble effort to repay her family's debt. Educated, cultured, and adventurously independent, Halo suppresses her desire for a companionship marriage and like Archer, Amherst, and Weston, becomes imprisoned by a sense of responsibility. Halo is drained by Tarrant's need of constant approval and is repulsed by the inferiority of his limited nature. Managing Tarrant's social, business, and personal life for him, Halo carefully gives her husband ideas for his periodical and allows him to believe and convince others that all ideas as editor are his own.

Halo eventually feels so trapped and suppressed that she leaves Tarrant:

> She knew that she had at last emerged into the bald light of day from the mist of illusion she had tried to create about her marriage. Never again would she see him save as he was; but she would also, as inevitably, see herself chained to him for life (10, p. 352).

Thus, in The Age of Innocence, The Fruit of the Tree, and Hudson River Bracketed, Wharton depicts a protectorship marriage in which the protector, through his own ideas of responsibility, ensnares himself in a marriage with an inferior partner. Once ensnared, the superior partner can either justify his decision, as does Newland Archer; merely resign himself to accept responsibility, as does Vance Weston; turn his interest to concerns outside his marriage, as does John Amherst; or leave her partner in order to save herself, as does Halo Tarrant. Whatever the choice, the protector is clearly presented as a superior nature encumbered by generosity and responsibility for an inferior nature.

Although these protectors are trapped in a protectorship marriage, each is trapped by a well-meaning partner, unaware of inferiority. In contrast, the trapper in a parasitic marriage traps a victim, rather than a protector. In fact, Undine Spragg of The Custom of the Country is not satisfied with one victim; seeking to climb to the highest of social circles, Undine, says Hartwick, "drives like a ship into the exclusive circles of the elite and walks with dainty feet (2, p. 275)." Undine is Wharton's example of an extremely inferior marriage partner. Joseph Collins explains:

> The Custom of the Country treats the marital adventure of a much-married lady; but the question asked is not so much about divorce as it is about the parasitic marriage--the marriage of the woman who, by the very unpleasant "Custom" of the title, uses, instead of helping her husband, and casts him off when he is no longer useful (1, p. 302).

Undine is first a parasite to Ralph Marvell, a weak, young man of New York's upper elite, Marvell is successful in introducing Undine into the upper social circle, and Undine is, for a time, satisfied. However, Undine's financial demands become too great for Marvell, so Undine travels to France where she meets her second victim, Marquis de Chelles. Religious standards forbid de Chelles to marry a divorced woman, but de Chelles seeks to convince his relatives to let him break precedence and even encourages Undine to send for her son. Marvell is so wounded by the loss of his wife and the loss of his son that he commits suicide, so Undine is able to marry de Chelles.

Although Undine worships the position of a de Chelles, she fails to fit into the French traditions. For example, she sees no purpose in counting pennies when heirlooms can easily be sold. Thus, de Chelles becomes another of Undine's discarded husbands, and Undine marries Elmer Moffat, an American wheeler-dealer with a heritage much like hers. With Undine's discarding of de Chelles, it is revealed that Undine and Moffat were previously married before either of them gained wealth. Undine, therefore, merely closes a circle by returning, after two other marriages, to her very first husband. After ending the life of one husband and ruining that of another, Undine is disappointed to learn from Moffat that her divorces disqualify her from being an ambassador's wife, and Undine pouts that she can never reach the highest of social circles.

Wharton critically draws Undine as a cold, conniving, social climbing divorcee who uses marriage as means for social recognition and advancement. Carefully planning her attempts to rise socially, Undine stairsteps her husbands with no concern for their welfare. When she has drained a husband financially, socially, and emotionally, Undine casts him aside for a new victim. Wharton clearly presents her as a woman materially oriented to the utmost, a woman incapable of spiritual love. As a marriage partner, Undine is so inferior that she virtually destroys her superior partner.

A twin to Undine is Alice Waythorn in "The Other Two." Alice seems less vicious than Undine, but as ready to discard a useless husband. Waythorn, Alice's husband, is forced to view his wife objectively after meeting jointly with her first two husbands, so he questions her sincerity in their marriage. Alice is thus another trapper who searches for victims rather than protectors.

In contrast to Wharton's unequal partnerships there do, indeed, exist marriages of mutual good. However, such marriages are not only few, but lightly studied. For example, the marriage of Amherst to Justine Brent in _The Fruit of the Tree_ is contrasted with Amherst's marriage to Bessy. Whereas Amherst viewed Bessy as a beautiful, dependent burden, he views Justine as a beautiful, independent partner:

> He watched her with pleasure while she talked, but her face interested him only as the vehicle of her ideas--she looked as a girl must look who felt and thought as she did. He was aware that everything about her was quick and fine and supple, and that the muscles of character lay close to the surface of feeling (7, p. 277).

Thus, Amherst views Justine as the mate of his mind, one who feels with her brain.

In opposition to Bessy, Justine is alert and aware before she is married and is, therefore, able to avoid an unpleasant awakening after her marriage. Justine understands Amherst better than Bessy does and even shares in his concern for social reform. In fact, Justine refuses to be an unequal mate; she wants imagination and purpose in her marriage. Amherst and Justine's ideals and goals are bravely presented by Wharton--at the end of the novel. Therefore, one is unable to question the Amhersts' sincerity and is unable to observe much of their marriage in process. However, through comparison to Amherst's previous marriage and through Amherst's dialogue with his new wife, Wharton does achieve a positive forecast for the marriage.

Another marriage of equality is that of Halo and Vance Weston in The Gods Arrive. Because each has previously served as a protector in a protectorship marriage, a partner of equal strength is sought. Wharton, who has painted the two characters as strong individuals, hints that they will have a strong marriage. Again, however, she constructs her marriage of equal partners at the end of a novel and, as in The Fruit

of the Tree, merely predicts that her characters will live happily.

The marriage of Susy and Nick Lansing in The Glimpses of the Moon is a business transaction of equally aware characters. The Lansings are, however, in love with wealth as much as they are in love with each other and marry with the terms of a business agreement. The marriage is to last for one year in which the Lansings plan to live off savings, friends, and wedding gifts. The honeymoon, however, will end if either partner finds a better marriage deal. That is, each agrees to renounce vows if the marriage should cease to be mutually advantageous. All is well defined between the two characters when they part early in the novel over a misunderstanding. Hoping to help the other find an economically better marriage, each goes his own way. However, during their separation both realize that love is more important than money. Again, therefore, Wharton reunites two strong characters at a novel's end, and it is thus impossible to determine any evidence of success in the Lansings' marriage.

Limiting Nevius' idea and applying it specifically to Wharton's marriage partnerships, then, indicates that Wharton's marriages are predominantly of inequality. Of the twelve marriages studied, all but three are of unequal partnerships, and as many as five are parasitic. In three-fourths of the marriages, one partner is an oppressor, the other oppressed.

Indeed, marriages of equality do exist, but of the twelve examined, only three involve equal partners, and in all of them the characters are united or reunited near a novel's end. Through her characters' dialogue at the scene of a reunion, Wharton does achieve a positive feeling for the marriages, but any study of the marriages in process is impossible.

Thus, Wharton mainly writes about marriages that illustrate the suppression and oppression of unequal partnerships. With few exceptions that allow only surface study, Wharton creates marriages that are predominantly transactions between a greater and a lesser nature resulting in dissatisfaction, resignation, and spiritual limitation and suffering.

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CHAPTER III

MARRIAGE PROBLEMS MET BUT NOT SOLVED

Recognizing the social and economic insecurity of single women and viewing the majority of marriages as financial and social traps lead Edith Wharton to search for alternatives. For the single female who chances a pre-marital affair, however, society decrees a clear-cut double standard; such an affair definitely dampens a woman's marriageability. Whereas restless young men are expected by society to have an affair in their youth, a foolish young woman is permanently stained by any pre-marital adventure.

The twentieth century New York society, confused by a rapid change in culture, is less dogmatic in ruling the married woman than the single one; for some women adultery is ignored and even divorce is condoned. Wharton, however, establishes her own double standard for the married woman, and categorizes adultery and divorce on two planes: skittish and spiritual. Because the skittish defiance of social tradition results merely from a whim, it is not condoned; the spiritual defiance of social bonds, however, is another matter. It enables a marriage's oppressed partner to find fulfillment. Such a division in defiers of convention, though, does not weaken Wharton's conclusion: marriage is superior to affairs and divorce.

This double standard is bluntly stated in The Age of Innocence: it is foolish of a man, criminal of a woman, to have an affair. Nevertheless, the young men of upper society are expected to have an affair, preferably with an established older woman married into the upper class. The young man is then encouraged to marry a nice girl, such as Newland Archer's May, who then looks after her husband and keeps him respectable. Before his marriage, Archer has just had an affair; and it is echoed by Lawrence Selden and Bertha Dorsett's affair in The House of Mirth.

Like Archer, Selden does not suffer in the least, though his affair is quite well known. However, in the same novel, single Lily Bart is socially ostracized because gossipers merely hint that she is having an affair with Gus Trenor. When Trenor's wife and her friends ignore Lily she is unable to prove her innocence. In fact, Lily's own guardian-aunt will not listen to her:

> She knew, of course, that society was "very much changed" and that many women her mother would have thought "peculiar" were now in a position to be critical about their visiting lists; she had discussed the perils of divorce with her rector, and had felt thankful at times that Lily was still unmarried; but the idea that any scandal could attach to a young girl's name, above all that it could be lightly coupled with that of a married man, was so new to her that she was as much aghast as if she had been accused of leaving her carpets down all summer, or of violating any of the other cardinal laws of housekeeping (12, p. 199).

Although Selden himself has had an affair, he decides not to propose to Lily after he hears the gossip. As in most of Wharton's novels, the single female is reared to play the game of marriage, to follow the rules of society and catch the best mate she can. No provisions are made for the unmarried woman who keeps herself pure and she who does rebel against sexual tradition becomes an outcast. Lily's aunt, loyal to New York convention, not only disapproves but physically avoids her:

> Mrs. Peniston disliked scenes, and her determination to avoid them had always led her to hold herself aloof from the details of Lily's life. In her youth, girls had not been supposed to require close supervision. They were generally assumed to be taken up with the legitimate business of courtship and marriage, and interference in such affairs on the part of their natural guardian was considered as unwarrantable as a spectator's suddenly joining in a game. There had of course been "fast girls" even in Mrs. Peniston's early experience, but their fastness, at worst, was understood to be a mere excess of animal spirits, against which there could be no graver charge than that of being "unladylike." The modern fastness appeared synonomous with immorality, and the mere idea of immorality was as offensive to Mrs. Peniston as a smell of cooking in the drawing room: it was one of the conditions her mind refused to admit (12, p. 204).

Lily is, consequently, unable to reaffirm her position in the marriage game and permanently loses her place in the upper circle, banished like a rug in summer and out-of-place odors any time of year.

Characters in The Reef also affirm the double standard. George Darrow, little affected by his many affairs, plans to marry a prominent widow, Anna Leath. However, when Darrow

learns that Sophy Viner, a previous partner in a weekend fling, is engaged to Anna's son, he feels it is his duty to prevent the marriage. Although Darrow was engaged to Anna at the time of the affair and Sophy had no ties, Sophy must not be allowed to forget the affair. Darrow may, of course. Because Sophy is a woman, she is vulnerable to convention, and Darrow firmly supports the double standard:

> George Darrow had had a fairly varied experience of feminine types, but the women he had frequented had either been pronouncedly "ladies" or they had not. Grateful to both for ministering to the more complex nature, and disposed to assume that they had been evolved, if not designed to that end, he had instinctively kept the two groups apart in his mind. . . (18, p. 25).

Sophy has not been a "lady"; therefore, her marriage plans are destroyed and she must forever pay for her error in ministering to Darrow's complex needs. Anna, pitying Sophy, defies tradition's double standard and refuses to marry Darrow because he did not respect his engagement. But Darrow is not socially tainted as is Sophy, and he does not share her hopeless predicament: time can help Darrow and others forget his past, but society will not let time ease Sophy's burden. For men will not forgive women who do not fulfill their social design.

A few of Wharton's characters refuse to be limited by the marriage game and search for romance without marriage plans. Halo Tarrant in <u>The Gods Arrive</u> and Lydia in "Souls Belated"

leave their husbands and travel with their lovers. Both become paranoic and feel that they are harshly criticized by society. Halo is aware that she contributes considerably to her lover's success as a writer, but she is also aware that she is not always included in his social arrangements. Halo and Weston thus realize that although they personally approve of their life together, they must function within a society that does not accept such a partnership. Because Weston's career is negatively affected and because Halo becomes more socially withdrawn, the two finally accept convention and legally marry.

Lydia in "Souls Belated" has also left her husband to travel with her lover. When she receives word that her divorce is final, Lydia is disappointed that her lover wishes to marry; a rush into marriage would admit defeat by the system. However, Lydia reconsiders and decides that although she respects her personal bond with her lover, society will accept the bond only if it is sealed by legal marriage. The two women, then, who seek a complete relationship outside marriage decide to marry their lovers rather than endure social ostracism.

Although marriage may raise a woman's social standing or assure her economic security, it is no guarantee whatsoever that she will be happy or feel complete. So love may exist outside marriage. Such adultery, however, exists on two planes: social and serious. The social affair does not result from

spiritual love, but from temporary admiration. In The House of Mirth, for instance, married women, such as Bertha Dorsett and Carry Fisher, entertain brief affairs. Secure in their marriages, both enjoy fleeting associations, short-lived flings to complement their dull marriages. Several married women, such as Ellie Vanderlyn in The Glimpses of the Moon and Christine Ansley in "Joy in the House," have similar affairs. Neglecting their husbands and children, they satisfy their whims without jeopardizing their marriages. The same type of affair is evident in The Children and Hudson River Bracketed. Wharton's satirical tone in depicting such affairs criticizes the women for their irresponsibility toward their families and shames them for their skittish self-indulgence. A temporary infatuation, says Wharton, does not merit rebellion against tradition.

Those who indulge in serious affairs, however, do not suffer Wharton's criticism; for if an oppressed married partner feels a deep love for one other than his spouse, a defiance of tradition is warranted and is less wrong than neglect of his own soul. Marilyn Lyde explains:

> Mrs. Wharton makes it clear that for people who are unable to marry and who are of such superior moral and intellectual sensitivity that social ostracism is unimportant, an unconcealed relationship which would conventionally be termed adulterous at least holds the possibility, perhaps the only one, of spiritual fulfillment (1, p. 11).

Lovers who contemplate the seriousness of an affair and consider their love superior to any social harm, then, have Wharton's approval. Halo Tarrant does not fear social injury when Vance Weston appeals to her in Hudson River Bracketed, but she refuses to build a love based on another's pain. Not until Weston is widowed and she and her husband are separated does Halo travel with Weston. Because of her moral sensitivity, Halo rejects an affair until Weston and she are free.

Ellen Olenska in The Age of Innocence also refuses to have an affair because her lover, Newland Archer, is married. Although Ellen and Archer are unique in their questioning of convention, Ellen will not dishonor an affair by concealing it and will not practice an open affair because it would hurt Archer's wife. When Archer desperately decides to forsake his wife and convinces Ellen to leave with him, both are stopped by May Archer's announcement of her pregnancy. Again, refusal to harm others, rather than fear of rejecting tradition, causes two lovers to renounce their plans. Consideration for a weaker, though kind, spouse prevents the stronger partner from deserting a marriage; the unappreciative spouse is more likely to be abandoned.

Feeling extremely limited by a spouse who lacks appreciation and consideration, however, leads superior, independent characters to search for fulfillment. Shunning hypocrisy, they contemplate the practice of open affairs with no sensitivity to social shame. In "The Long Run" Merrick regrets

that he did not understand when his lover approached him:

> I had always looked on our love for each other, our possible relation to each other, as such situations are looked on in what is called society. I had supposed her, for all her freedom and originality, to be just as tacitly subservient to that view as I was: ready to take what she wanted on the terms on which society concedes such taking, and to pay for it by the usual restrictions, concealments and hypocrisies. In short, I supposed that she would "play the game"--look out for her own safety, and expect me to look out for it. It sounds cheap enough, put that way--but it's the rule we live under, all of us. And the amazement of finding her suddenly outside of it, left me, for an awful minute, stammering at her like a graceless dolt (15, p. 218).

Wharton illustrates, therefore, that love without the bond of marriage is better than suppressing a soul's passion; social ostracism is easier to live through than spiritual starvation.

Wharton, then, illustrates a double standard for adulterers. A flighty, skittish affair does not deserve to shake tradition; however, a serious love of sensitive people, superior to social whim, is too great to be limited by convention. Seldom in Wharton's novels are superior characters found, and even less frequently are superior lovers found. Wharton, then, suggests that adultery can be condoned under certain conditions--conditions that are never really complete in her novels.

Only one affair does Wharton strongly support. Lizzie Hazeldean suffers almost complete ostracism when she is suspected of adultery in New Year's Day. Lizzie, though, is

almost saint-like in her cause; her affair is a noble prostitution in which she raises money to support her dying husband. After his death, Lizzie refuses the proposal of her former lover and lives the quiet life of a martyr while upper-crust New York continues to gossip viciously.

Wharton employs the higher circle's gossip to reveal society's change in attitude toward divorce. In The Age of Innocence divorce is a bombshell that breaks the tranquility of the sophisticated. In The House of Mirth the snobbish dowagers keep a mental record of the new rich and of the divorces in the upper society. Carry Fisher in The House of Mirth even obtains a second divorce in order to receive alimony from a stingy ex-husband. A party in the same novel is held in honor of the new Wintons and the Farleys, who have five divorces and six sets of children between them. In fact, divorce becomes so common in The House of Mirth that at least one divorce and one case of appendicitis are present in almost every family, and divorce is easily acquired in a young child's vocabulary.

Susy Lansing in The Glimpses of the Moon is asked by a little girl if any jewels were lost in a divorce. Susy answers that she wasn't even married when she saw the child two years before. Divorce is so common that even a child notices its frequency and decides that every happy woman must be

getting a divorce or has just received one. Indeed, children often witness parties where rehashed couples are present:

> People had long since ceased to take on tragedy [sic] airs about divorce: dividing couples dined together to the last, and met afterward in each other's houses, happy in the consciousness that their respected marriage had provided two new centers of entertainment (7, p. 316).

Divorce, then, is so accepted by society that separated couples feel free to announce their next marriage even before a divorce is granted from their present marriage.

True, Wharton does view divorce as becoming more common; her ideas about the causes of divorce, however, are less clear. Regis Michaud believes that Wharton, specifically studying the "ill adaption" of man and woman in American society, sees divorce as a result of environment. The romantic values of life, replaced with materialistic values, are denied. According to Michaud, Wharton especially blames the ignorance of the American man:

> Luxury and comfort are the only standards he can imagine, and he cannot conceive of any other gifts. The American Lancelot comes to his Guinevere with jewels, dresses or a motor car, but he ignores the true surrender of himself. Women are too deeply intuitive; they come too close to nature to be easily deceived by that elementary form of chivalry. There is a more romantic allurement which their mate cannot offer because it cannot be procured with money. Hence the divorce between the sexes (2, p. 59).

However, Michaud is incorrect in assuming that all of Wharton's divorces are the result of man's ignorance. He is even more incorrect in lumping all of Wharton's divorces

together, for her divorces fall into two distinct categories, similar to the reasons for adultery: the frivolous and the spiritualistic. A frivolous divorce results from desire for material and social advancement. In Wharton's novels, frivolous divorces are sought by Michaud's American Guineveres who leave their own Lancelots for another Lancelot with richer jewels. Thus, Michaud's "intuitive" American women seek procurement of material and social goods, rather than the surrender of man's passion.

Undine Spragg in The Custom of the Country and Alice Waythorn in "The Other Two" are examples of social climbers who carelessly discard one husband for a richer one. Bertha Dorsett in The House of Mirth, Ellie Vanderlyn in The Glimpses of the Moon, and Blanche Carbury in The Fruit of the Tree are examples of bored wives who coldly toss aside an uninteresting husband. Caught in a dull marriage based mainly on financial association, women characters often divorce but then remarry into an identical situation. Frivolous divorce, according to Wharton, is caused by unnecessary selfishness, so it achieves nothing. In fact, divorced women mainly remarry for respectability. Blanche Carbury in The Fruit of the Tree remarries, not for her second husband, but to enable herself to set up opportunities for her lover and herself.

The second type of divorce, however, is not based on material and social greed, but on spiritual need. For

example, Ellen Olenska in The Age of Innocence can no longer live with her European husband. When she returns to New York and files for divorce, her family persuades her to remain married in order to preserve family pride. Ellen desires her freedom and refuses to return to her husband, but she does agree to separate rather than divorce. Thus, Ellen, unable to remarry, experiences a decrease in material wealth and social opportunities in order to free her soul.

Material and social sacrifice is also experienced by Mrs. Lidcote in "Autres Temps." Her divorce is not a frivolous one to gain wealth or position; rather, it is a divorce of spiritual needs and results in social ostracism. Mrs. Lidcote is surprised when her own daughter, Leila, later divorces and, due to society's acceptance of divorce, is spared the ostracism that she has experienced. Wharton, therefore, extends her double standard to divorce: a divorce for material and social gain often results in useless frivolity; a divorce for spiritual freedom, though just, may result in social ostracism.

Whichever category the divorce belongs to, Wharton believes that legally ending marriages is never totally satisfying. Many partners do not actually realize what divorce entails until experiencing one. Mrs. Clement Westhall in "The "Reckoning," learning that her second husband plans to divorce

her, numbly visits her first husband and expresses her regret that she did not understand his feelings when she earlier divorced him. Susy Lansing in *The Glimpses of the Moon* does not even realize that she will have to see her husband in court proceedings:

> She saw now that her idea of a divorce had been that it was something one went out--or sent out--to buy in a shop: something concrete and portable, that Strefford's money could pay for, and that it required no personal participation to obtain. What a fool the lawyer must think her (10, p. 253).

In other words, most people know nothing about divorce. One partner, selfish for his own gain, is blind to the other partner's pain, and the second partner is confused and abandoned. A newly divorced man confronts Susy Lansing in *The Glimpses of the Moon*:

> Tell you what, great thing, this liberty! Everything's changed nowadays, why shouldn't marriage be too? A man can get out of a business partnership when he wants to; but the parsons want to keep us noosed up to each other for life because we've blundered into church one day and said "Yes" before one of 'em. No--no--that's too easy. We've gone beyond *that*. Science, and all these new discoveries. . . . I say the Ten Commandments were made for man, and not man for the Commandments, and there ain't a word against divorce in 'em, anyhow (10, p. 275)!

His tirade is then interrupted by his sobs, and he begs Susy to tell his ex-wife that he is happy.

Divorce, it seems, is mostly futile, for in all but a few cases, a first divorce merely begins a chain reaction. Alice Waythorn in "The Other Two" is married three times and appears,

according to Van Doren, to become "what one husband after another has made of her (4, p. 275)." Undine Spragg divorces three men in The Custom of the Country, remarries her first husband, and remains, according to Quinn, "a symbol of perpetual discontent rather than a living woman (3, p. 564)."

Children, as well as adults, suffer from divorce. In The Glimpses of the Moon, The House of Mirth, and The Custom of the Country, children are passed from marriage to marriage and become callous and withdrawn. In The Children Judith Wheater, a young teenager, helplessly tries to mother seven abandoned children. Here, Wharton compares marriages to tents that are folded up around people and are thrown away when the marriage ends. Frivolous divorce is not only futile, it causes positive harm to others.

Wharton, therefore, vividly illustrates society's double standard. Premarital affairs make the female vulnerable to social criticism. Young women in this New York society are expected to concentrate on their future, devoting their youth to learning the rules of the marriage game. A deviancy from society's traditional expectation can result only in a loss of marriageability.

This double standard is merely presented as a fact of life; society harshly judges women who hazard premarital adventure. In writing about adultery and divorce, however, Wharton not only presents society's well-known attitudes, she also inserts her own philosophy. Though society's standards

on adultery and divorce are muddled, with confidence Wharton categorizes the two in her own double standard. Flighty affairs and frivolous divorce are practiced by selfish characters, numb to the feelings of others. And frivolity, failing to end discontent, actually removes one further and further from happiness. In contrast, some characters contemplate serious affairs and/or divorce for spiritual fulfillment. An unappreciative partner, a mere robot in society, so stifles a superior character that his soul suffers unending torment. Greatly limited by an inferior partner, the superior character searches for individual purpose and identity which is often found in comradeship with another superior soul. Socially tasting the joys that a relationship with an equally sensitive person can afford, the superior character begins to question the justice of marital limitations.

Such a character ultimately finds that his own spiritual needs surpass society's need to rule the common man. Hence, he actually feels superior to the conventions society has established for the inferior, and has no awe of social punishment. However, the very moral sensitivity that places superior characters beyond worry of social ostracism eventually prevents them from practicing their sense of freedom, because such insight prevents their founding personal happiness on another's pain. Those, then, who should be allowed to defy convention, respect tradition in order to protect those of

inferior abilities.

Newland Archer in The Age of Innocence, for example, has found an equal partner in Ellen Olenska. Because he is unable to leave his pregnant wife, he devotes himself to the partner he has chosen in society. Halo Tarrant and Vance Weston in Hudson River Bracketed find a similar possibility for a satisfactory partnership; both, however, are already socially married to inferior partners so must ignore a possible spiritual marriage.

Hence, convention is followed both by those who are too ignorant or too afraid to defy convention and by those who lack such fear, but recognize convention's virtues. A sustained marriage, says Wharton, is superior to frivolity; and absence of frivolity responsibly sustains marriage. Newland Archer reflects on his marriage in The Age of Innocence:

> Their long years together had shown him that it did not much matter if marriage was a dull duty, as long as it kept the dignity of a duty: lapsing from that, it became a mere battle of ugly appetites. Looking about him, he honoured his own past, and mourned for it. After all, there was good in the old ways (6, p. 275).

Any marriage, then, no matter how unsatisfactory, embodies more dignity than shunning duty. Although marriage may limit a superior partner, he will rarely find satisfaction in adultery or divorce. Studying alternatives to marriage, Wharton again is forced to support tradition for both the inferior and superior. Obeying convention, the inferior character avoids pain; adherence to tradition brings order to both the inferior and the superior. Wharton thus uses new ideas to

illustrate the same idea: in the old ways there is good, a dependable sense of order.

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CHAPTER IV

MARRIAGE FOR THREE TYPES OF WOMEN

Although marriage brings greater economic and social comfort than is available in the single state, Wharton still pictures most marriages as unsatisfactory partnerships. However, they are still to be preferred to adultery or divorce. Thus, Wharton's female characters appear hopelessly cornered. Nonetheless, within this bleak niche individuality mysteriously occurs, and a certain differentation among the women characters is discernible: there are the blind, the near-sighted, and the eagle-eyed.

The distant eye-chart, according to Edith Wharton, is composed of the minute letters that describe Lawrence Selden's republic of the spirit in _The House of Mirth_. Somewhere within the trivial materialism of a conglomeration of petty people lies a self--a self, that, given a modicum of freedom, can find a sense of uniqueness and value. Individuality, though, is not familiar to many of Wharton's female characters, and self-identity is as foreign to pleasure as a hot coal.

Though Wharton sympathizes with the predicament of all her women characters, she respects only a few; those she must also pity. A candid spokesman for the oppressed female, Wharton diligently studies the socialization of women in order

to discover opportunities for self-development. Despite her devotion and persistence, though, Wharton once again finds herself forced to support tradition.

Wharton's blind females could easily be mistaken for students of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for they appear to be identical with Rousseau's feminine ideal:

> The whole education of women ought to be relative to men. To please them, to be useful to them, to make themselves loved and honored by them, to educate them when young, to care for them when grown, to counsel them, to console them, and to make life sweet and agreeable to them--these are the duties of women at all times and what should be taught them from infancy (3, p. 455).

In Wharton's society, women of all social classes are blinded to their capabilities and molded into completely dependent servants. Lacking any ability to support themselves financially, women must marry to survive. Each woman is thus trained from infancy to please and console men and to make life agreeable to them. The core of her education consists of rules and hints to help her attain the love of a man, and if she learns her duties well, she can, at best, live a vicariously happy life, for her training provides no source for self-worth. All identity stems from her reflection in a man.

The socialization process directing women to marriage is treated by Wharton in all but a few of her novels. The House of Mirth, according to Harry Hartwick, deals with the "problem of a society that reared its daughters in the single

belief that their only duty was to marry a wealthy husband" (1, p. 372). Such a husband often sees disadvantages in the socialization process of women. Newland Archer in The Age of Innocence, for example, questions a society that offers a woman no freedom of choice. Vance Weston in Hudson River Bracketed is repulsed by a wife who is nothing more than his echo, and The Fruit of the Tree's John Amherst feels over-burdened by his infant wife and childish mother.

Closely supervised from infancy, most women are nothing more than products, fashioned to attract a man, then marry him, and finally adopt his identity. Newland Archer studies his fiancee's photograph in The Age of Innocence:

> 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 he belonged to and believed in, the young girl who knew nothing and expected everything . . . (5, p. 43).

Archer himself feels oppressed because he must be responsible for the custody of his wife's soul. When he dares to think, Archer sees May as a creation of factitious purity, "manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers and long-dead ancestresses." Like other women of her society, May has been trained to lack experience, versatility, and freedom of judgment. When he first proposes, Archer is pleased to ally himself with one of his kind, but as he nears marriage, he questions his ability to transform

May into the intelligent, clever wife he prefers:

> It would presently be his task to take the bandage from this young woman's eyes and bid her look forth on the world. But how many generations of the women who had gone to her making had descended bandaged to the family vault (5, p. 73)?

Shunning the opportunity to preserve his freedom and perhaps find a woman whose eyes are already unbandaged, Archer marries May. The very beginning of his marriage confirms Archer's suspicions, as he finds himself married to a child who will never be anything more than she has been programmed to be. He is dismayed to admit that his wife will never, in their entire marriage, surprise him with a fresh thought, an unexpected mood, a weakness, cruelty, or emotion. Archer sees May as inevitably ripening into a copy of her mother. Archer is unfortunately correct, and May remains so blind to any need for self-identity that her husband and children shelter her from all thoughts that might upset her dependence. Because May does not recognize or respond to change, Archer and his children must fall into a sort of family hypocrisy to protect her. True to Archer's prediction, May dies with her eyes firmly bandaged.

A second example of a woman blind to any thoughts beyond the necessities of marriage is Bessy Westmoreland in *The Fruit of the Tree*. Though she is a widow and is older than May Archer, Bessy, too, is childish when she marries Amherst. She is, in fact, compared to an infant who has found a toy in

Amherst. Desiring pleasure from her wealth and total companionship from her husband, Bessy loses her footing when her husband, dedicated to social work, refuses to play her socially-oriented marriage game. Amherst quickly tires of humoring his babyish wife and spends a great deal of time away on business. Another victim, unable to overcome her parasitic dependence, she chokes all meaning from her marriage, and remains blind to a republic of the spirit.

In The Shapers of American Fiction George Snell terms a third example, Undine Spragg in The Custom of the Country, "a heartless and evil woman who is yet presented as a typical product of her time and society (4, p. 145)." Undine, in fact, is such a product that she cannot quite feel she has fulfilled society's decree. Trained to marry the wealthiest, most well-known man available, Undine tries three marriages. Returning in a fourth marriage to her first husband, she is still unsatisfied. Society has taught her how to attract a man and win his proposal. However, society has not taught Undine how to recognize the wealthiest man, and she is unable to determine it herself. Undine, then, is also blind to any happiness derived from her own self, and emerges as an over-successful product of the system.

Other examples of female toys manufactured by society are Laura Lou Weston in Hudson River Bracketed, Mattie Silver in Ethan Frome, and Janey Archer in The Age of Innocence.

The majority of Wharton's female characters obediently follow the decree of society and remain true to social expectations. Such characters are not necessarily always unhappy, but do lack any personal feelings whatsoever and are thus deprived of a certain kind of happiness. Security, at the cost of self-recognition, is their only goal and is obtainable only in a marriage.

Wharton's novels also portray characters who, though not completely blind to their own individuality, are unable to find self-identity outside of marriage. They know what they want but are kept from achieving it because of their only partially sighted view or because of society's blindness to their needs. Lily Bart in The House of Mirth is as much a creation of her society as May Welland and Bessy Westmore. Early training has conditioned Lily, a highly specialized product, to use her beauty and grace to obtain a wealthy husband. She is compared to molded clay glazed with loveliness, and is pictured as dependent on marriage as a sea anemone is dependent on the ocean. Lawrence Selden surveys her charm:

> Everything about her was at once vigorous and exquisite, at once strong and fine. He had a confused sense that she must have cost a great deal to make, that a great many dull and ugly people must, in some mysterious way, have been sacrificed to produce her (10, p. 6).

Those who produced Lily, though, must have been aware of a flaw in her conditioning, for Lily has not been completely

blindfolded. In some mysterious way, Lily has retained an element of self, and it is this element that leads her to question the exquisiteness of her place in society. Early in the novel Lily meets Selden for tea and voices her discontent. Questioning the wisdom of a society that offers her no chance for independence, Lily declares that it is miserable to be a woman. Unable to settle for security, she demands happiness in marriage also. Unsuccessful in finding a desirable partner, she considers relying on her own self for happiness, but because she is a woman unable to care for herself financially, Lily determines to settle for society's decree. She will marry, she decides, and make the best of it.

After hearing Selden's ideas on freedom, however, Lily is not content to suppress her desire for self-recognition. She, too, wants to be a member of the republic of the spirit, to live as an individual with self-respect as well as security. Society, though, does not offer Lily a choice. After rejecting three proposals, she is alone. Unlike the blind products of the system, Lily is so near self-identity that she can envision personal freedom much like a near-sighted person can barely read an eye chart. Rejecting complete submission to the system, Lily is more sensitive than those who are willing products. This awareness, however, can only lead her away from convention. It fails to produce anything better.

Unable to reject her desire for economic and social pleasures or her desire for self-recognition, Lily eventually

rejects life. Regis Michaud sees Lily as an example of inhibited and repressed womanhood. Part flirt and part romantic, Lily's soul exhibits duality:

> Suicide, at the end of her short career, is a protection *in extremis* against the world and against herself. It is a desperate means to reconcile by destruction her dual person (2, p. 59).

A flaw in conditioning thus prevents total blindness, but lack of opportunity for self-development results only in a dim view of faraway freedom.

Duality of personality is also evident in Halo Tarrant in *Hudson River Bracketed* and Susy Lansing in *The Glimpses of the Moon*. Both have been reared traditionally, untrained for any vocation other than marriage. However, Halo and Susy also question society's decree. Halo searches for love outside marriage, but eventually marries her lover in order to be accepted by the society she rebelled against. Susy, also torn between her own wishes and those of society, compromises and marries, but for love rather than riches. Halo and Susy, then, marry in compliance with social demands, but both also have self-identity. Their marriages, suggests Wharton, are equal partnerships and may be something more than mere financial alliances. However, the lack of faith in a fortuitous future is suggested by her failure to picture in detail such marriages. They may represent her hope for the future; they are not a fact of Whartonian present.

Wharton's third group of women is able to read the letters describing Selden's republic, but refuses to join the membership. Although each woman has a strong sense of identity, she does not derive her self-identity from her relationship with a man; nor does she found her self-worth solely on society's view of her. Such self-recognition, however, gives a woman an air of independence so unfamiliar to most women that the independent female is termed a freak.

Ellen Olenska in The Age of Innocence is judged a freak when she returns to New York after a marriage abroad. Experience has not "dropped away" from Ellen, and she has a maturity the other women lack. Archer compares her to his shallow fiancee and is frightened by Ellen's confident eyes and independent personality. Regis Michaud explains Ellen's uniqueness:

> She developed a new soul abroad and she found herself totally alienated from her native surroundings. Europe made her natural and instinctive and American respectability rise up in arms against her. America is no longer a place for her to grow in. So poor Irene [sic] exits and lets the Puritans have the right of way (2, p. 57).

Michaud may be correct in explaining the etymology of Ellen's soul; he is wrong, however, in explaining her departure from New York. Ellen exits, true; however, she departs not from the Puritans, but as a Puritan herself. Ellen's instinct gives way to a need for respectability and her self-worship is replaced by a worship of convention's order.

When Ellen first returns to America, she ignorantly defies many of New York's social rules. Although she has the opportunity to live with her rich grandmother, Ellen lives alone in a middle class section of town. She visits people she wants to see, whether or not they are on the suggested visiting list. Arriving at social functions shockingly unescorted, Ellen is not always dressed in the same style as the other women. She is, as Michaud explains, more natural than the Americans and appears freer from social restraint than they. Obviously, such actions make her an outcast. Only one character, Newland Archer, is aware that Ellen deserves to be free:

> His own exclamation, "Women should be free--as free as we are," struck to the root of a problem that it was agreed in his world to regard as non-existent. "Nice" women, however wronged, would never claim the kind of freedom he meant, and generous-minded men like himself were therefore--in the heat of the argument--the more chivalrously ready to concede it to them. Such verbal generosities were in fact only a humbugging disguise of the inexorable conventions that tied things together and bound people down to the old pattern (5, p. 44).

Archer, thus tied to convention, is unable to help Ellen claim freedom. He explains social rules to her and even convinces Ellen to remain separated from her husband rather than obtain a divorce. Personal freedom, explains Archer, must be sacrificed to avoid social scandal. Though Archer is "sick of the hypocrisy that would bury alive a woman of her age," Archer familiarizes Ellen with social convention and

digs her a deeper grave. Though he voices his belief, "Women ought to be free--as free as we are," Archer helps chain Ellen's soul to tradition.

Lacking the inner confidence she appears to have, Ellen confides to Archer that she hates to be different, is lonely and unhappy. Ultimately, then, Ellen's security is derived not from her own self, but from tradition. Loving Archer, Ellen refuses to cheapen her love in an affair. When Archer learns his wife is to have a child, Ellen returns to Europe, a martyr to Puritanism. Ellen feels loved by Archer and finds purpose in keeping that love noble. Frightened by personal independence, she hides in society's conventions and tells Archer that tradition's order is her new-found security, "That was what I'd never known before--and it's better than anything I've known."

Contrary to Michaud, Ellen leaves America in order to support Puritanism. She sacrifices her identity to society. Ellen's sense of freedom, then, causes her to reject complete freedom, and she obeys society just as do the typical products. Ellen's uniqueness survives, though, in the fact that her sacrifice of identity is based on spiritual rather than material need. Nonetheless, her individuality is buried along with her freedom.

A second example of a woman with self-identity is Justine Brent in _The Fruit of the Tree_. Unlike Ellen Olenska, Justine

has not been subjected to European ideas, yet Justine also appears natural and less susceptible to social criticism. Justine's identity has been created in defense against complete conditioning by society. Pretty and of upper-middle class wealth, Justine attempts to rely on herself, to retain an element of independence. She is successful in supporting herself as a nurse, but after she has proven her ability to be self-sufficient, Justine examines her desire to be independent.

Described as "tired in spirit," Justine decides that she is disgusted with nursing and wants "to be uncertain, coy and hard to please." She who has "always been afraid good clothes might keep her wings from sprouting" dresses up and attends a party. As governess and companion, she enjoys the comforts of wealth. Justine is still firm, however, in retaining her self-identity. Even when she finally marries, her purposes are not based on material wealth, but on love, imagination, and social consciousness.

Thus, Justine emerges as one of Wharton's most independent females. A member of the republic of the spirit, she has a clear conception of personal freedom and is stronger than Ellen. Justine does not fear freedom. However, Justine tires of being different and attempts to become semi-dependent by associating with wealthy friends and by ignoring, for a while, the ugliness of nursing. Like Ellen, Justine wants to

be similar to other women. Thus, Justine places her new husband and his career foremost in her life. "I'm really just like other women, you know--I shall like it because it's your work," Justine tells Amherst.

A third example of a woman with sight enough to recognize her need for self-identity is Anna Leath in The Reef. Anna, a minor character, is independent in her rejection of society's double standard, for although society condones a man's premarital affairs, Anna breaks her engagement when she learns that Darrow has been unfaithful. She loses respect for Darrow because of his chauvinistic treatment of the young Sophy Viner. Anna's ideas are not dictated by society, so she rates as one of the few Wharton women with a mind of her own.

Thus, Wharton's female characters illustrate the advantages and disadvantages found in each of the three groups. Those blind to personal freedom are not aware of suppression; they are, however, mere products of society and are privileged with no individuality or personal sensitivity. The world of women such as May Welland and Bessy Westmore is well-defined and contains simple order, but the women of this group have virtually no choice in any matter.

Women of the second group glimpse the meaning of freedom, but find no opportunity to develop as independent beings. They have the sensitivity the first group lacks, but awareness of their potential individuality only frustrates them, until they must eventually compromise to maintain independence, as

do Halo Tarrant and Susy Lansing within marriage or Lily Bart through suicide.

Those of the third group actually practice individual freedom, but that practice does not necessarily bring happiness. Ellen Olenska returns to a lonely life in Europe, Anna Leath cancels wedding plans, and Justine Brent places her own interests second to her husband's.

The female is in a corner with no way out. Pitying the helplessness of the completely blind, Wharton must also sympathize with those who search for personal identity. The independent female is clearly a freak in society, and self-recognition most often results in social ostracism. A compromise in a marriage based on companionship rather than wealth, suggests Wharton, is a social mutant's best bet. A small bit of independence within the system proves a better source of happiness than complete independence outside the system. Thus Wharton continues the same advice: follow first the rules of society and second the luxurious desires of the soul.

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CHAPTER V

TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE VERSUS CHANGE

This study of the actions of Wharton's women illustrates a definite similarity in the personal philosophies of those characters, for the majority of them holds one of two philosopies: strict adherence to tradition without questioning and adherence to tradition as an end result of questioning. Examination of the philosophies of Wharton's female characters can initiate an examination of Wharton's own philosophy. Justification of a search for Wharton's personal beliefs in her fiction is supported by her own statement in "A Reconsideration of Proust":

> No story teller, however great his gifts, can do great work unbased on some philosophy of life. Only the author's own convictions can give the underlying sense of value which lifts anecdote to drama, drama to tragedy (9, pp. 233-234).

Whether or not her convictions helped lift her works into the realms of drama and tragedy, Wharton's "philosophy of life" is clearly and consistently evident in her fiction. It reveals her personal sense of values and her attitude toward society's values. Specifically dealing with society's ideas about conventional marriage, Wharton places her female characters in situations demanding actions that illustrate their

philosophies, thereby illustrating the author's own. Wharton, for example, questions society's decree that all women must marry in order to survive.

Very few of Wharton's married women must struggle to exist. The poorest of married women are by far happier than the richest of single women. Nettie Struthers in The House of Mirth, for example, lives in a shabby residence and mothers a child dressed in rags; she and her husband, however, are quite content. Nettie is, in fact, the last person to see Lily Bart, another single woman, before Lily commits suicide. Of aristocratic heritage, Lily is as financially poor as Nettie. Refusing to marry for economic security alone, finding herself unsuccessful at various jobs, Lily, descending socially, is not only as poor as Nettie, but is also quite alone. Because Lily's personal values clash with society's values, which render hopeless the situation of the independent single woman, upper class Lily resorts to suicide, but lower class Nettie lives happily as a wife.

Another married woman of the lower class is Zeena Frome in Ethan Frome. Zeena is able to depend on her husband for financial security and has no sympathy for her single cousin, Mattie Silver. Knowing that Mattie is in love with her husband, Zeena forces Mattie to leave. Mattie, like Nettie and Zeena, is quite poor, but Mattie has an added disadvantage. Like Lily Bart, Mattie is a single woman who must support herself

financially, but because Mattie, like all women, has been trained only for marriage, she, like Lily, is helplessly unsuccessful. Forced to leave Ethan and to find work, Mattie convinces Ethan to commit suicide with her. The failure of the attempt turns Mattie from an economic and social invalid into a physical one as well.

In Hudson River Bracketed, Laura Lou Weston survives only because she is married. A weak, unintelligent, extremely dependent person, Laura Lou is not driven to suicide because she has a husband to rely on. Although Laura Lou is actually a much weaker person than either Lily Bart of Mattie Silver, marriage provides her means to security. Again, it is not personal strength, but simple availability of a husband that provides a woman the means of survival.

Attention, however, must also be given to the few single women who uniquely manage to survive financially. A friend to Lily Bart, Gerty Farish in The House of Mirth is a poor, single female successful at trimming hats. Gerty, though not financially starved, as are Lily and Mattie Silver, has unavoidably committed a social suicide. Security in living off her meager income has cost Gerty a great deal socially, for she is doomed to reside in the slums and to associate only with the oppressed poor. Such a life labels Gerty ineligible to attract a rich husband and results in her cultural destruction. She is starved for fine things and for association with the wealthy.

Because she is single, Gerty must descend socially in order to survive financially. Though an exception to single women destroyed by financial insecurity, Gerty's social ruination results in a life so drab that she is actually as much a victim as are Lily Bart and Mattie Silver.

Gerty's financial independence is surpassed by Justine Brent, a nurse in The Fruit of the Tree. Wharton's major professional woman, Justine is, for a time, quite satisfied to remain single. Superior to Gerty in her opportunity to mingle socially with the higher circles, Justine profits both in financial success and in social position. Justine, however, feels unfeminine and alienated in her uniqueness.

Confessing to a friend that she is "tired in spirit," and that she wants to be coy and hard to please like other women, Justine, tossing aside her nursing uniform and donning a pretty dress, attends a party and is hired as a governess. Able to secure both financial comfort and social opportunities, Justine is still unable to survive as a woman, to maintain her identity as a female, and therefore resolves to end her crusade for independence. Justine marries, faithfully places her profession second to her marriage, and almost frantically assures her husband that she will humbly back him in his interests. Pledging her identity to her husband, Justine confesses, "I'm just like other women you know. . . ." The strongest of Wharton's single women, then, threatened by her individuality, is unable to survive happily.

Added to the need for economic security and social opportunity is the need for reassurance of femininity and desirability. Rich females, such as Janey Archer in The Age of Innocence and Evie Van Osburgh in The House of Mirth, share Justine's goal. In contrast to Justine, however, Janey and Evie do not have to support themselves by working; like Justine, they wish to marry in order to be accepted socially. They are, in fact, even more determined to marry. With wealth enhancing their positions as marriage bait, Janey and Evie are greatly embarrassed that they have not been "womanly" enough to attract a husband; both seek to raise their self-esteem by joining the ranks of the married.

Wharton definitely finds that the married female possesses superior security. Bertha Dorsett and Carrie Fisher in The House of Mirth and Ellie Vanderlyn in The Glimpses of the Moon, spared economic worry by wealth marriages, are free to enjoy themselves socially. Unlike the single women of their society, Bertha, Carrie, and Ellie are able to give parties and are thus well assured of invitations in return. Sans needing to exhibit themselves as marriage bait, lacking worry of pleasing a certain bachelor, married women are at liberty to gamble and smoke in public without social jeopardy. Because they, unlike single women, are not obvious threats to other married women, they are permitted to have brief love affairs without social reprimand. Married women, says Wharton, live by a self-serving code: as much freedom as possible is allowed

fellow-married women, but single females, a possible threat to existing marriages, should be watched closely. Enjoying privileges forbidden single women, married ones form a selfish sisterhood, allowing each other more freedom than they permit for outsiders. Thus, the married woman works not only to gain personal satisfaction and freedom but also to protect, elevate, and even spiritualize the institution of marriage.

Obviously, then, such a society renders any marriage better than no marriage at all. Economic and social comfort and confidence in femininity belong only to the wedded. Wharton, however, questions the conventional assumption that marriage is the only desirable state for all females. Finding no advantages for a single woman of any class or any ability, Wharton's own conviction, then, is the basis for her personal philosophy: a married woman truly has the easier path, and possibly the only path, to happiness.

Wharton's belief that happiness is more available to the married woman channels her attention to conditions necessary for a satisfactory marriage. Her study, however, is negatively presented. Wharton's idea of a good marriage must be discerned basically in her illustrations of unsatisfactory marriages, for her novels, heavy with examples of poor marriages, are starved for examples of satisfactory ones.

The Custom of the Country, _The House of Mirth_, _The Fruit of the Tree_, _Hudson River Bracketed_, _The Age of Innocence_,

and Ethan Frome all illustrate marriages in which a woman is either forced to admit her own unhappiness or to acknowledge the unhappiness of her husband. For example, Undine Spragg in The Custom of the Country, taught from infancy that satisfaction can be found only in marriage, realizes from her chain of marriages and divorces that she will likely never be happy. After divorcing her first husband, Undine searches for satisfaction first in marriage to a moderately wealthy New Yorker and then to a wealthy Frenchman. Though each marriage increases her social comfort, Undine, still unhappy, remarries her first husband. By now he has acquired wealth; she has gained experience. Surely a happy marriage will result. But Undine, plagued with doubt that she has not married into the wealthiest situation possible, still scans the horizon for a richer mate. Although she has been taught that happiness is found only in marriage, Undine has not been taught how to know happiness. Frantically afraid that she may be overlooking a richer mate, Undine is unable to enjoy a life with any partner.

In The House of Mirth Bertha Dorsett, also searching for marital bliss, does not enjoy the companionship of her wealthy husband and is not totally pacified by his money. An attempt to relieve boredom carries her to parties where she joins the sisterhood of married women and learns she is free to have affairs without social reprimand. Bertha's adultery results

in the awareness that she can search for a better partner. Thus, like Undine, she divorces and begins an endless search for happiness. Wharton clearly conveys her doubt that either Bertha or Undine will ever be happy, for neither undergoes any character change. Though freed from an unsatisfactory partnership, each woman has learned nothing that will save her from falling into a similar situation. Failing to find happiness in a marriage based on wealth, they are too ignorant to find happiness any other way.

Ignorance is also a weakness of Bessy Westmore in The Fruit of the Tree. A wealthy widow who marries into an unhappy partnership, Bessy competes with her husband's interest in social reform. Her extreme jealousy eventually destroys any chance of happiness for either partner. Unable to accept her husband's lack of interest in her social life, unable to adjust to her husband's frequent absences from home, Bessy's sour attitude makes Amherst's brief time at home so unbearable that he retreats even further into his work and comes home even less. Bessy is thus destined to be a "married widow," a wife to a husband whose love has been destroyed by her extreme demands.

Absence of love is also evident in Hudson River Bracketed. Halo Tarrant, who marries to repay a family debt, is soon bored by an intellectually and emotionally inferior husband. Refusing to jeopardize anyone else's marriage, Halo, rejecting

a proposal for a love affair, leaves her husband. She has, however, benefited from her unsatisfactory marriage, and in citing Halo's understanding of the cause of her marriage's dissatisfying failure and her determination to remarry only under more favorable conditions, Wharton suggests that Halo, unlike Undine Spragg and Bertha Dorsett, comprehends that a happy marriage is a project rather than a discovery. Illustrating a change in Halo's character, Wharton forecasts that Halo's maturity may eventually lead her to happiness.

Thus, Undine Spragg in The Custom of the Country, Bertha Dorsett in The House of Mirth, Bessy Westmore in The Fruit of the Tree, and Halo Tarrant in Hudson River Bracketed exemplify women who, despite economic and social advantages find that marriage does not bring happiness and self-fulfillment, largely because of their incompatibility with their husbands. In The Age of Innocence May Welland, quite typically socialized to find fulfillment in marriage, must carefully connive to keep her husband from leaving with another woman. Threatened by Archer's adoration of another, May hastens her wedding preparations to prevent her fiance from withdrawing his proposal. At the very start of their marriage, May watches her husband closely, so he fears to chance an affair. When May suspects that Archer is considering desertion, she informs him of her

pregnancy, although she is not yet certain. In her characterization of May, Wharton presents a woman, who, haunted by her husband's dissatisfaction, can preserve her marriage only by constantly reminding him of his duties and obligations.

Similar to May is Zeena Frome in Ethan Frome. Sensing Ethan's discontent, Zeena is alarmed at his interest in her cousin, Mattie, and Zeena, hiring a personal nurse, convinces Ethan that finances will not allow Mattie to live with them any longer. Consequently, Zeena forces Ethan to respect his duties as a husband, and Ethan reluctantly carries Mattie to her train. When they impulsively stop to ride a sled in the snow, Mattie persuades Ethan to sled into a tree which Ethan tries to avoid at the last minute. As a result, Ethan is facially deformed and Mattie, confined to a wheelchair, requires constant attention from Zeena. Like May Welland in The Age of Innocence, Zeena is threatened by her husband's interest in another woman. Whereas May must live with the knowledge that Archer remains with her primarily as a father to their children, Zeena must remember that Ethan remains because he lacked both the finances to desert her and the courage to end his life. May and Zeena, then, are painfully aware that their marriages are not preserved by love, but by a chance-induced sense of responsibility.

Portraying Undine Spragg, Bertha Dorsett, Bessy Westmore, and Halo Tarrant as wives dissatisfied with their husbands,

and presenting May Welland and Zeena Frome as discontented women who protect their unhappy but necessary marital status only by their cold shrewdness, Wharton declares that, though marriage is firmly decreed by society as extremely necessary for a woman's survival, there is no insurance that happiness will stem from a marriage's security.

Admitting ruefully that any marriage is financially and socially preferred to nonmarriage, Wharton shows over and over that marriage does not insure happiness. The single woman most definitely is unhappy because of her economic and social insecurity, but the married woman is not necessarily happy as a result of her stability. True, all of Wharton's marriages are not totally grim. Satisfactory marriages do exist in Wharton's novels, but compared to the unsatisfactory ones, they are few and are not studied so closely. Wharton, for example, creates Justine Brent in The Fruit of the Tree as a unique single woman, an independent individual. The superiority of Justine's character and her husband's recognition of that superiority are illustrated by a constant comparison of Justine to Bessy, Amherst's first wife. However, Justine and Amherst marry near the novel's end and, due to a disagreement, are separated for a time, only to be reunited at the novel's completion. Thus, it is impossible to test the validity of Wharton's prediction that the Amhersts' marriage will be a successful union.

A similar prediction is made for Susy and Nick Lansing in The Glimpses of the Moon. The Lansings' deep love for each other is Wharton's basis for her belief that the Lansings' marriage will result in mutual satisfaction. Halo Tarrant and Vance Weston's decision to marry is also supported by Wharton. A shared appreciation of fine writing and a similar respect for personal freedom add Halo and Weston's marriage to Wharton's list of desirable unions. As with Justine and Amherst, however, Wharton briefly separates Susy and Lansing and Halo and Weston. Both couples, like Justine and Amherst, are reunited only at the conclusions of the novels, resulting in an impossibility to study Wharton's favored marriages in process. Indeed, Wharton's optimistic predictions can not be disproved, but they can not be fully respected because the marriages are so briefly presented.

Hence, Wharton's novels illustrate a second basic philosophy. Although a woman's best chance for security and happiness lies in marriage, the majority of marriages does not offer happiness. It is evidently Wharton's own belief that good marriages are in the minority. Motivated to illustrate her personal convictions in her fiction, Wharton obviously shows clearer convictions in numerous detailed unsatisfactory marriages as opposed to a few vaguely described satisfactory ones. Wharton's philosphy on marriage, then, is more specifically based on what is undesirable than what is preferrable.

A marriage founded solely on material ambition, a marriage lacking mutual interest, a marriage anchored by responsibility rather than love is inferior. And, though marriage offers economic, social, and emotional security foreign to a single woman, marriage often fails to initiate and maintain a sense of happiness.

Where, then, asks Wharton, does a woman find happiness? Since social conditioning and traditional assumptions rule so strongly, since single women are totally oppressed, the only possible source of happiness is marriage. Through the view of her women characters, Wharton studies various marital partnerships and finds that wives are limited to one of two alternatives: strict adherence to convention or rebellion against convention.

Those who rebel against tradition, decides Wharton, are most often unsuccessful in their quest for a better life, for although the rebel knows what she is struggling against, she rarely has any idea what she is fighting for. Undine Spragg in _The Custom of the Country_, Bertha Dorsett in _The House of Mirth_, and Ellie Vanderlyn in _The Glimpses of the Moon_ seek change through divorce, only to remarry into situations like those they have previously tossed aside. The majority of divorces, providing no miraculous discovery of happiness, robs the divorcee of her certainty as a married woman with social position, destroys her husband's and children's security, and confuses her even more in her search for

fulfillment. Viewing countless divorces as representative of unjustified spontaneity motivated by fruitless selfishness, Wharton reveals her conviction that divorce is probably not the answer.

The divorces of Halo Tarrant in Hudson River Bracketed and Ellen Olenska in The Age of Innocence, however, are not motivated by desire for material acquisition or fun, but are regretfully entered upon after careful thought and numerous attempts at making a marriage a success. Granting Halo and Ellen a happy setting after their divorces compels a restatement of Wharton's philosophy: divorce, most often resulting from a selfish whim, not only is harmful to a woman's family, but is unsuccessful in leading her to personal happiness; resulting from the failure of serious attempts to preserve a marriage, divorce, though painful, may provide a woman spiritual happiness.

Wharton's philosophy concerning divorce is parallel to her philosophy on adultery. Although Wharton softly condones adultery in works such as Hudson River Bracketed, she firmly criticizes it in The House of Mirth and The Glimpses of the Moon. Again, the criteria for Wharton's judgment is a woman's motivation and her consideration for others. Those sensitive enough to contemplate serious adultery are often too sensitive to harm others.

The futility of divorce and adultery, suggests Wharton, offers a married woman an even smaller chance for happiness. Perhaps faithfulness is after all the answer. Wharton, however, is unable to convince herself, much less her readers, that faithful married characters are happier than anybody else, for those who are faithful are generally so only because they lack awareness. For example, May Welland in The Age of Innocence and Laura Lou Weston in Hudson River Bracketed, living a robot-like existence, are hardly capable of any personal feeling and would probably be just as unfaithful as they are faithful if society had suggested it.

Thus Wharton creates a grim situation for any female, single or married, faithful or unfaithful. Limited to her own time, Wharton cannot conceive of a single woman who can support herself financially, socially or emotionally. Unable to foresee the future, Wharton cannot imagine a working, married woman. Although Wharton's success as a writer is almost as unique as Justine Brent's success as a nurse in The Fruit of the Tree, Wharton cannot conceive of a woman finding an identity in her profession unless that profession is marriage. In the Whartonian world, then, survival demands marriage. Forced to be a wife, a woman can remain faithful or practice adultery or divorce. Faithfulness, suggests Wharton, most often results from being duped into pretending to be happy; adultery and divorce, rarely resulting in personal happiness, cause pain and confusion to everyone involved.

Wharton obviously concludes that a change is indeed required in order to allow any woman to find happiness, but any change will not necessarily be beneficial. Happiness at the complete rejection of convention is impossible, for a sense of social order must be maintained to prevent chaos. And it is Wharton's personal philosophy that the order of convention must never be sacrificed to the chaos of complete personal freedom. Writing of her own discovery of the importance of tradition to an individual she said:

> The value of duration is slowly asserting itself against the welter of change, and sociologists without a drop of American blood in them have been the first to recognize what the traditions of three centuries have contributed to the moral wealth of our country. Even negatively, these traditions have acquired, with the passing of time, an unsuspected value (2, p. 5).

Applying Wharton's philosophy to marriage requires that a woman subject her own desires to the duties her marriage demands. A woman's happiness is not found in frivolous selfishness since adultery and divorce so seldom offer a lasting satisfaction. Happiness is instead found in a mature acceptance of the personal oppression marriage requires in order to maintain social order. Despite her devoted study and questioning, despite her concern for the oppression women suffer, Wharton can offer nothing better and thus supports tradition: personal desire must, for the sake of order, be sacrificed to the demands and expectations of tradition.

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