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# Love and marriage in works of Edith Wharton.

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LOVE AND MARRIAGE IN WORKS OF EDITH WHARTON

by

Marjorie Elizabeth Andrews

A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate Committee

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

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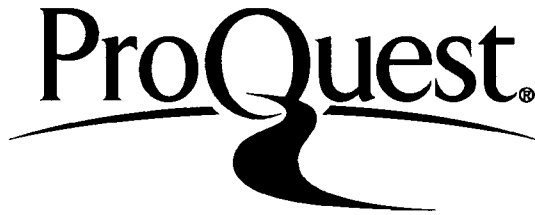
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1 May 1978  
(date)

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The conflict between personal desires and social obligations is a dominant theme in the works of Edith Wharton, recurring in her works as the oppression of the protagonist by a society that is inferior to him. The agency of this oppression is usually marriage, the societal institution that affects the protagonist most directly. Marriage is portrayed in the works of Wharton as a deadening institution because the society that marriage represents is dead. Because they are not dead--either mentally or spiritually--Wharton protagonists are superior to their contemporaries.

This pattern appears in Wharton's three major novels, The Age of Innocence, Ethan Frome, and The House of Mirth, in two novellas, New Year's Day and The Old Maid, and two minor novels, The Mother's Recompense and The Glimpses of the Moon. In the major novels the superior protagonist, who is usually trapped in a socially approved but sterile marriage, is forced to find love in a non-marital relationship with another superior person. The lovers must choose between their relationship and the "rules" of their society. If they renounce their love for the benefit of others, they triumph spiritually and are ennobled by the fact that the love affairs are sexless. If the protagonists rebel against the social "rules"--even if they manifest their superiority by avoiding a physical relationship--society destroys them.

New Year's Day, The Old Maid, and The Mother's Recompense deal

with sexually nonconforming women who redeem themselves by renouncing love or marriage. The Old Maid and The Mother's Recompense portray motherhood as the ultimate renunciation, by which the mother sacrifices her own existence for the sake of her child and attains the greatest possible inner triumph.

The Glimpses of the Moon also deals with superior protagonists who must cope with an oppressive society. It differs from the other works because it depicts a vital marriage and has a happy ending. It is the strongest statement of Wharton's belief in marriage because its protagonists, even though they remain married, are allowed to escape social annihilation because they uphold the highest civilized standards in the face of social pressure that would otherwise destroy them and their marriage.

## Chapter 1

A dominant theme in the works of Edith Wharton is the oppression of a protagonist by a society which, according to the values of Wharton and her main characters, is inferior to its victim. The instrument of this oppression is often marriage, for that is the social institution that touches the protagonist most directly. The deadening force of marriage brings the protagonist in conflict with the oppressing power of society, and he or she can find fulfillment and love only in an illicit or non-marriage relationship. It is only by conforming to the standards of their societies and ultimately by renunciation of this love, however, that Wharton's protagonists, according to their criteria, can triumph. By conforming to the demands of society, they are saved for useful but "unfulfilled" lives. Although the protagonists triumph spiritually, personal happiness is forfeited. The protagonist who refuses to obey the dictates of society, particularly those made by the institution of marriage, is destroyed.

This subject is central to Edith Wharton's three major works, The Age of Innocence, Ethan Frome, and The House of Mirth. It is also evident in several minor novels, three of which deal with the story of the "immoral" (sexually nonconforming) woman who redeems herself through renunciation. The theme is also



apparent in The Glimpses of the Moon, a minor, almost trivial novel, which nevertheless deserves special attention because, unlike the other works, it portrays a vital marriage and has a happy ending.

This theme shows Edith Wharton's ambivalence towards the standards of her culture. She condemned the hypocrisy and oppression of society with biting social criticism. But she also upheld society's standards. In The Writing of Fiction, she states, "Drama, situation, is made out of the conflicts . . . produced between social order and individual appetites" (p. 13).<sup>1</sup> Wharton protagonists can see the flaws of their worlds, but they also see the virtues and, when put to the test, will usually uphold the standards of society. Because the typical hero is a member of New York's upper classes, a gentleman, his

<sup>1</sup>In quoting from Edith Wharton's works, I refer to these editions and use these abbreviations:

- A Backward Glance. New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1932 (BG);  
The Age of Innocence. New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1920 (AOI);  
Ethan Frome. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911 (EF);  
The Glimpses of the Moon. New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1922 (GOM);  
The House of Mirth. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905 (HOM);  
The Mother's Recompense. New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1925 (MR);  
New Year's Day. New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1924 (NYD);  
The Old Maid. New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1924 (OM);  
The Writing of Fiction. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925 (WOF).

opportunities for moral choices are limited. He does not work seriously, so he cannot be given a choice to make that involves business ethics. He does not concern himself with political or social issues, so there is no chance for him to be faced with a moral choice in those areas. It is only in his family experience and love life that he is involved enough to be seriously affected by anything.<sup>2</sup> Wharton had to make marriage the vehicle for showing her hero's discontent and for imposing the dictates of society on the hero. (Ethan Frome, of course, is an exception, for he is an impoverished New England farmer rather than a New York gentleman. But he is too poor to be involved in any major business or social transactions. His life also is centered around interpersonal relationships, and marriage is the only societal institution that has a direct impact on him.)

In studying the novels of Edith Wharton, one must look first at the Wharton protagonist, then at the portrayal of marriage shown in the novel, and finally at the "love interest" of the protagonist. The central figure of each novel, who is usually male, is, in Wharton's estimation at least, superior to his society, although his friends may think him merely eccentric. Unlike his

<sup>2</sup>The Age of Innocence clearly shows how uninvolved the typical New York gentleman was with his career. Newland Archer practices law in a very leisurely fashion, coming and going at his office as he pleases and spending a great part of his time there simply reading the newspapers. As for politics, as Archer observes, "a gentleman simply stayed at home and abstained" (AOI, p. 124).

contemporaries, he shows an interest in art and music and is often very aware of the beauty of nature. Unlike most of his friends, he reads, a pastime that is usually looked on with fond amusement by others. Usually, he has less money than the other members of his group, perhaps because his ancestors did not have the cleverness to amass great sums for him to inherit. His forebears, too, suffered from addiction to art. This lack of wealth also sets the protagonist apart from his society.

The married protagonist is wed to a typical representative of society. The spouse, like Zeena in Ethan Frome, may embody all the faults and evils of the civilization of the novel and may oppress the protagonist, or, like May in The Age of Innocence, may be the best that society has to offer. The spouse is also the victim of society.

In the world of the novels marriage is used as a means to gain or keep money and position. Those of the upper classes are obligated to marry their own kind. While it is permissible for persons of "good families" to marry members of their own social class who have more money, the marriage to a vulgar nouveau riche is forbidden. In the lower classes, as shown in Ethan Frome, marriage is also a business proposition, for two people are needed to manage a farm.

In the novels, marriage is presented as a deadening institution that crushes both rebels and conformists. The Wharton

protagonist, pushed into matrimony by his social milieu, can find happiness only in a relationship outside of marriage. The love interest is also a nonconformist, superior to society, and interested in beauty, art, and literature. Unlike the protagonist, however, she may be outside of society. Usually, like the protagonist, she has little money. Another important point is that there is no sexual relationship between the protagonist and the love interest.

It is interesting to note that in The Age of Innocence and Ethan Frome, the main character is a male, and even in The House of Mirth, Selden may be viewed as a typical Wharton protagonist, although Lily is the work's central figure. In these novels, the relationship remains chaste. The three minor works, The Mother's Recompense, The Old Maid, and New Year's Day, however, deal with female protagonists who are "fallen women." All have had illicit sexual relationships. The novels deal with each protagonist's attempt to atone for her sexual indiscretions, however, and after the initial fall, the protagonist usually remains celibate.<sup>3</sup> It must be stated that the society pictured in the works is usually teeming with illicit sex. The protagonist's chastity places her or him even farther above the majority.

<sup>3</sup>An exception is Kate Clephane of The Mother's Recompense, whose deviations from the Wharton norm I shall discuss in Chapter 3.

Finally, however, the protagonist and lover are forced to renounce their love. Ironically, they do so for the good of society. They must not only give up their chances for happiness but must reintegrate themselves into society. Only by following the dictates of their own moral codes, which ultimately conform to the rules of civilization, can they be saved. If, like Ethan Frome and Mattie Silver, they violate the rules of their society, they are literally destroyed.

This theme of renunciation reflects Edith Wharton's ambivalence toward her society and its codes. She saw the negative aspects of New York upper-class society: its triviality, its anti-intellectualism, its rejection of those who did not conform. But she also saw that rules and codes of conduct were necessary for the good of the community.

To understand Edith Wharton's attitudes more fully, one must be acquainted with the main incidents of her life and marriage. Born in New York in 1862, she was the daughter of Lucretia Rhineland and George Frederic Jones and, as such, a member of New York's most fashionable set. She was not typical of this group, however, for she had been to Europe as a child and had come to love art and literature. She was to demonstrate in her novels that she was aware that these were odd tastes for a member of the Four Hundred.

Wharton's interest in culture may be traced to her father,

who loved music and poetry. R. W. B. Lewis states in Edith Wharton, a Biography that George Jones was one of the few people of his circle who went to the opera to hear the music rather than to see his friends (p. 23).<sup>4</sup> He could recite Macauley and enjoyed Tennyson (BG, p. 38). Wharton later wrote of him, showing her earliest view of marriage:

I imagine there was a time when his rather rudimentary love might have developed had he anyone with whom to share it. But my mother's matter-of-factness must have shrivelled up any such buds of fancy . . . I have wondered what stifled cravings had once germinated in him, and what manner of man he was really meant to be. That he was a lonely one, haunted by something always unexpressed and unattained, I am sure. (BG, p. 39).

An acute observer of her world, Wharton came to find it stuffy and lifeless, interested only in conventions and missing what she later called "the flower of life" (AOI, p. 350). At twenty-three she had married Edward Robbins Wharton, of Boston.

<sup>4</sup>I have drawn my biographical information primarily from three sources designated in the text by the biographers' names and the page numbers of their works: Louis Auchincloss, Edith Wharton: A Woman in Her Time (New York: The Viking Press, 1971); R. W. B. Lewis, Edith Wharton, A Biography (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1975); Cynthia Griffin Wolff, A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

Sources quoted by the biographers come primarily from Wharton's collected papers, which are in the Beinecke Library of Yale University. There is also a collection of Wharton's letters in the Houghton Library of Harvard University.

(Two years earlier, in 1883, she had been briefly engaged to a wealthy young man named Henry Stevens. His mother, however, broke off the liaison because she wanted a more profitable match for her son. This incident perhaps gave the young Edith her first glimpse of the business side of matrimony.)

Henry James would later say that in marrying "Teddy" Wharton Edith had done "'an almost--or rather an utterly--inconceivable thing'" (Lewis, p. 52). Teddy was thirteen years older than his wife. He was devoted to animals, travel, figure skating, fly fishing, and Edith, whom he called "Pussy." Unfortunately, he had no interest in intellectual or artistic matters, and, like most of his friends, he had neither a vocation nor any desire for one. Edith wrote of Teddy in her autobiography, A Backward Glance (she speaks of him only three times in the book), "He was thirteen years older than myself, but the difference in age was lessened by his natural youthfulness, his good humor and gaiety, and the fact that he shared my love of animals and outdoor life, and was soon to catch my travel fever" (p. 90).

These virtues, however, were not enough. In her diary, she wrote of showing Teddy an absorbing passage in R. H. Lock's study of heredity. He merely handed the book back and asked, "Does this sort of thing really amuse you?" She wrote in her secret journal, "That is the answer to everything worthwhile! Oh, God of derision!" (Lewis, p. 228).

Adding to the problem of the lack of common interests was the fact that the marriage was a sexual disaster. Lewis states that Edith was completely ignorant about sex and had been terrified of finding out "'what marriage was really like'" (Lewis, p. 53, quoting a portion of Wharton's autobiography that she deleted before publication). He adds, "The marriage was not consummated for three weeks. Whatever happened on those first occasions, it had the effect of sealing off Edith's vibrant but untutored erotic nature for an indefinite period" and claims that there was a "virtual--more likely, total--cessation of their sexual life together." Teddy, whom Lewis calls "a cheerful soul," seemed to accept the situation (p. 53).

Bored with her life and having no children to occupy her, Edith began to write poems, short stories, and travel articles. Louis Auchincloss points out that her first story was printed in 1891, six years after she was married, and that the quality of her earlier works shows that she probably started writing "some time before she started publishing; i.e., not too long after her wedding" (p. 50).<sup>5</sup> In her diary, she wrote that she could

<sup>5</sup>Edith Wharton had actually been "writing" even since she was a child. In A Backward Glance, she tells of "making up" stories before she could read, holding a book in front of her as if she were reading from it (p. 39). As an adolescent, she wrote poetry, some of which was published in The Atlantic Monthly (BG, p. 75). In January of 1877, she completed a novella, which she titled Fast and Loose (BG, p. 75). She had just turned fifteen.



endure the "moral solitude" of her marriage only by creating an imaginary world (Auchincloss, p. 51). She received no encouragement from Teddy, her mother, or her friends, who thought writing a rather silly and not at all "nice" occupation for an upper-class married woman. In 1894, the conflict created by her writing and the recognition it brought caused Edith to suffer a nervous collapse, characterized by depression, constant nausea, and extreme exhaustion. Lewis diagnoses the breakdown as a "severe identity crisis" (p. 76). She was treated at the clinic of Dr. S. Weir Mitchell of Philadelphia, and the therapy consisted of rest, massage, and separation from family. Near the end of her treatment, she was allowed to write. After Edith's recovery two years later, she and Teddy started pursuing their interests separately and having different sets of friends.

In 1904, Teddy suffered the first of a series of nervous breakdowns. (One is tempted to wonder how much his lack of a sex life and his efforts to remain "a cheerful soul" about the situation contributed to his collapse. Evidently, Edith's Philadelphia doctors had not dealt with her sexual problems.) He recovered, but became ill again four years later. The pair traveled in the hope that a more suitable climate could be found for him, but this was of little use. He boasted about having girlfriends, and became abusive and violent. In 1908, he confessed

to Edith that he had speculated with money from her trust funds, of which he had charge, and had purchased an apartment in Boston, where he not only lived with a mistress but also rented rooms to chorus girls (Lewis, p. 275). Edith later found out that he had embezzled and spent over fifty thousand dollars of her money and had purchased "a parcel of land with buildings" rather than an apartment (Lewis, p. 277). Although he repaid her with money from his mother's estate, the marriage, like Teddy's health, continued to deteriorate.

Edith found a more suitable companion in her old friend Walter Berry. She wrote of him, "I suppose there is one friend who seems not to be a separate person, however dear and beloved, but an expansion . . . of one's self, the very meaning of one's soul. Such a friend I found in Walter Berry" (BG, p. 15). Unlike Teddy, Berry encouraged her in her writing. She wrote that "he alone took the trouble to analyze and criticize" (BG, p. 16). Most of her friends, including Henry James, thought that she and Berry were lovers. Speaking of a trip through Italy that Edith and Berry took together, James said that they were traveling "'even like another George Sand and another Chopin'" (Lewis, p. 343). Most of her biographers, however, disagree. Auchincloss states that "Edith was satisfied with the friendship he offered . . . Edith's greatest friendships were always with men: Henry James, Howard Sturgis, Percy Lubbock" (p. 65). Lewis states that

"at no time did they actually share the same bed. But it is safe to assume that there was a hovering and gratifying sexual element in the relation . . . She loved him very much" (p. 344).<sup>6</sup>

Teddy was committed to a private sanitarium on Lake Constance in 1912. A year later, Edith divorced him, an action which generated a great deal of ambivalence and guilt. She did not approve of the institution of divorce and felt that her first duty was to care for her sick husband, however he mistreated her. But this would have meant going back to America from France where she had moved in 1910 and giving up her literary life and friends in Europe. She could not bring herself to do this. Near the end of her life, she said of her former husband, "'There was no cruelty and no unkindness in him. Yet he was cruel and unkind through weakness . . . I had to choose. Our staying together would have increased his disgrace. It was always the plea for 'one more chance', that plea of the

<sup>6</sup>Cynthia Wolff, however, states that after Berry's death, Edith Wharton wrote of him, "'He had been to me in turn, all that one being can be to another, in love, in friendship, in understanding'" (p. 383). Wolff concludes that in writing this, Wharton wanted to make it clear to her friend Gaillard Lapsley, to whom the letter was addressed, that she and Berry had been sexually intimate. Wolff states that "the distinction between 'in love' and 'in friendship' is one that Wharton would not make casually" (p. 439). This seems unlikely, however. Wharton, choosing papers that she would leave for her biographers, left no record of any physical relationship with Berry. In view of the records that she did leave, it is doubtful that she would have destroyed papers pertaining to an affair with Berry.

weak'" (Lewis, p. 531).<sup>7</sup>

This, then, was her married life. She remained in Europe and died in Paris in 1937 at seventy-five.

Edith Wharton wrote, "One good heart-break will furnish . . . the novelist with a considerable number of novels" (WOF, p. 21). One might have wondered how she knew that, for until the publication of Lewis's biography, it was believed that with the possible exception of Walter Berry, who remained a loyal friend throughout his life and did not break Edith Wharton's heart, there had been no lovers in her life. And surely the loss of Teddy, while upsetting, was not of great enough proportions to inspire even one book. But Lewis uncovered letters from one Morton Fullerton, who had written to Elisina Tyler, a friend of Edith's who was planning a biography of the author. Fullerton had written to Tyler asking, "Please seize the event, however delicate the problem, to dispel the myth of your heroine's frigidity" (Lewis, p. 540). Further research disclosed the fact

<sup>7</sup>Lewis states that the "decision to divorce was the most painful one Edith Wharton was ever required to make . . . divorce itself was something it pained her even to contemplate" (p. 333). Years later, she prepared a packet of papers that she labeled "for my biographer." The packet contained letters and reports from doctors, letters to and from Edith concerning Teddy, and letters from Edith to Teddy. The documents attempt to explain her decision to divorce her husband. Wolff says that the packet "constituted an almost formal brief defending her decision to obtain the divorce" (p. 226).

that Fullerton had had an affair with Edith Wharton.<sup>8</sup>

In October, 1907, Fullerton, the Paris correspondent of the London Times, visited Edith at her Lenox, Massachusetts, home, with a letter of introduction from Henry James. He was forty-two, three years younger than Edith and had a "marked erotic impulse and strong sexual appeal" (Lewis, p. 186). Four years earlier, he had been married to Victoria Camille Chabert, a chanteuse in the Paris Opera Comique. The marriage lasted less than a year, probably because Fullerton continued an involvement with his mistress Henrietta Mirecourt. (That the marriage took place at all may be explained by the fact that a daughter was born of the union.) Just before he met Edith Wharton, Fullerton had become engaged to Katherine Fullerton, a Bryn Mawr English instructor, his junior by fourteen years, who had been raised as his sister, but who had recently learned that she was an adopted child and was really his cousin.

This engagement, however, did not prevent Edith from falling in love with Fullerton. Three days after he left Lenox, she began a private journal addressed to him. On November 27, she

<sup>8</sup>In this and the following six paragraphs, I am deeply indebted to Lewis' biography for its quotations from Wharton's private papers, pp. 540, 221, 226, et passim. Letters from Fullerton are contained in the Houghton Library collection of papers. William R. Tyler, whose parents had been friends of Edith Wharton, also gave Lewis access to his collection of letters from Wharton as well as her notebooks and diaries.

wrote in the journal that she had received a letter from Fullerton from Paris. Edith (and Teddy) sailed for France on December 5. After her arrival, Fullerton was in constant attendance. While he was escorting Edith to plays and lectures and allowing her to become more deeply involved with him, Fullerton was not only engaged to Katherine, but was having difficulties with Henrietta Mirecourt, who was demanding that if he would not marry her or at least live with her again that he provide financial support. She was blackmailing him with letters dealing with still another mistress and was also threatening to charge him with having homosexual relations with the sculptor Ronald Gower, a member of Oscar Wilde's circle.

Until the spring of 1908, Edith had wanted to keep the relationship with Fullerton on a Platonic level. Fullerton, however, desired more than that, and after Teddy returned to New York in March, Edith started to become dissatisfied with the relationship also. On May 2, she wrote, "It would hurt no one-- and it would give me my first last draught of life . . . Why not?" (Lewis, p. 221). Lewis writes, "the physical unions began to take place (with some regularity, one gathers, and protected by such massive displays of tact by [the servants] as can only be guessed at" (p. 222). On May 23, Edith returned to the United States. She wrote in her journal, which she gave to Fullerton, "I have drunk the wine of life at last, I have known

the thing best worth knowing" (Lewis, p. 226).

Edith continued to correspond with Fullerton and began to write love poems which were published in 1909 in Artemis to Actaeon. In October she wrote to Henry James about her marriage and the situation with Fullerton. He advised her to "sit tight and go through the movements of life" (Lewis, p. 238). She and Teddy returned to France at the end of December. After her husband went back to New York in April, 1909, the relationship with Fullerton was resumed, and Edith discreetly gave him the money to pay off Henrietta Mirecourt, although the transaction was arranged in such a way that the money seemed to be from Henry James.

The liaison continued until the summer of 1910, about the time that Walter Berry returned to Paris after two years as a judge in the International Tribunal in Cairo, Egypt. Berry stayed as Edith's houseguest while he searched for an apartment for himself and remained with her for six months. Edith and Fullerton continued to be friends, however, until her death. Fullerton never did marry Katherine, who had married someone else in June, 1910.

The extent to which a critic concerns herself with an author's personal life depends on each individual's literary philosophy. Looking at Edith Wharton's life, however, one may wonder why, after her relationship with Fullerton, she would write novels like Ethan

Frome and The Age of Innocence. The amateur psychologist or moralist may declare that she was attempting to atone for her guilt by becoming excessively conservative. The cynic might suggest that she felt that such excesses were excusable, perhaps even necessary for an artist, but should not be condoned in "ordinary people." Or, perhaps, she was simply trying to present in her work a mixture of the way things were and the way she thought they should be. Certainly she did not take the relationship with Fullerton lightly, and it was a source of guilt as well as happiness to her. At any rate, it is an interesting sidelight that can add an extra dimension to the study of her novels.



## Chapter 2

The Age of Innocence, Ethan Frome, and The House of Mirth all incorporate the three features central to the moral thematics of Edith Wharton's fiction as these thematics are demonstrated through her presentations of love and marriage. Each novel shows protagonists superior to their society, portrays marriage as a deadening institution, and permits the hero salvation only through renunciation. These themes recur with slight variations in each of the works, although the novels appear to differ greatly. The Age of Innocence chronicles the development of a fashionable young man in New York of the 1870's, Ethan Frome deals with a New England farmer's passion for his wife's young cousin, and The House of Mirth depicts the struggles of an unattached young woman trying to make her way in the social world of the late 1890's. In spite of these differences, however, the novels are basically alike in plot and theme.

I shall not deal with the works in chronological order, but shall first discuss The Age of Innocence, the latest work, which was published in 1920. Of the three books, it is perhaps the most typical of Wharton's works, showing the themes most clearly and dealing with the upper classes of New York. Ethan Frome, published in 1911, has the same themes, but shifts the setting to rural New England. The House of Mirth, the earliest of the works,

published in 1905, also deals with the rich of New York, but features a woman protagonist. She, like the central characters of The Age of Innocence and Ethan Frome, struggles against an oppressive society and the deadening institution of marriage, and finds salvation only through renunciation.

## I

Wharton protagonists come into conflict with their societies because they are superior to them. Their superiority is demonstrated by a love of beauty and, to some extent, a lack of provinciality. In the introduction to A Backward Glance, Wharton wrote that "one can remain alive long past the usual date of disintegration if one is unafraid of change, insatiable in intellectual curiosity, interested in big things, and happy in small ways" (p. vii). These are the virtues of the ideal Wharton hero and are present, in part at least, in the Wharton protagonist. These virtues help to give the protagonist a moral superiority, which is the most important characteristic of the Wharton hero.

Newland Archer, of The Age of Innocence, is a typical Wharton protagonist; he is the best that his world has to offer. The effects of the First World War on France and on her life had made Wharton nostalgic for the New York of her

childhood. Although she had always found that world dull, after living in a post-war society that seemed to have lost its values, she missed the culture that upheld good manners, discretion, and integrity in business affairs. She herself wrote, "When I was young it used to seem to me that the group in which I grew up was like an empty vessel into which no new wine would ever again be poured. Now I see that one of its uses lay in preserving a few drops of an old vintage too rare to be savored by a youthful palate" (BG, p. 6).

However, Wharton also remembered the defects of that world. Wealthy New York is provincial (the women buy dresses from Paris but do not wear them for two years), and it is not really alive. The fact that Archer recognizes these flaws makes him superior to his society. His superiority can be measured by his increasing dissatisfaction with his world. He is certainly different from his friends, for he is a dilettante who likes to "keep up" with art and music and who befriends the unfashionable journalist Ned Winsett. Perhaps the thing that most definitely sets him apart is the fact that he is a reader. His wife's affectionate amusement at the fact that "'whenever there's nothing particular to do, he reads a book'" and that her mother replies, "'Ah, yes, like his father' . . . as if allowing for an inherited oddity" (p. 223) demonstrate the general attitude toward literature.

Ethan Frome had also had an interest in reading. The longest conversation he has with the story's narrator is about a scientific book that deals with things that "used to interest" Frome (p. 17). Although Ethan Frome takes place in a very different setting from The Age of Innocence and, indeed, most of Wharton's other novels, it is not really unlike them. The scene could very well have been changed to wealthy New York. Zeena, Mattie, and even Ethan could have been transformed with little trouble. Like Newland Archer, Ethan Frome is superior to those around him. Because he had attended technical school for a year and had done engineering work in Florida, he is better educated and less insular than his neighbors. He also has the capacity to be "happy in small ways," as is shown by the fact that "he had always been more sensitive than the people about him to the appeal of natural beauty. His unfinished studies had given form to this sensitivity and even in his unhappiest moments field and sky spoke to him with a deep and powerful persuasion" (p. 36).

Ironically, Ethan's superiority to those around him is shown by his poverty. Unlike the boorish Denis Eady, his rival for Mattie's affections, he does not have the crude cunning needed to make money. A comparative lack of wealth is a common characteristic of the Wharton protagonist. (Newland Archer is an exception, although it is important to remember that he has

inherited his money and that his law practice is more a hobby than a means of support.)

In the area of her finances, Lily Bart of The House of Mirth is a typical Wharton protagonist. Lily is a beautiful upper-class girl (she is called a "girl" throughout the novel, although she is twenty-nine years old at its start) whose family has lost its money. The House of Mirth contains none of the nostalgia for the past that is found later in The Age of Innocence. The novel shows the New York aristocracy at its worst: shallow, cruel, and obsessed with appearance. (This may be explained in part by the fact that The House of Mirth deals with a later society, that of the 1890's, when "New Money" had made greater inroads into the world of "the best people." However, it would have been just as easy for Edith Wharton to show such defects in the society of the 'seventies that The Age of Innocence portrays. A casual reader probably could not tell when the novels take place.) Wharton wrote of the milieu shown in The House of Mirth: "a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideals" (BG, p. 207). Lily Bart is above this society, although her superiority is not on such a high plane as Newland Archer's. Her love interest, Lawrence Selden, is a significant character in the novel, and he, too, reflects his creator's disdain of the world she was depicting. Wharton herself

described him to her friend Sarah Norton as "a negative hero" (Lewis, p. 105).

Lily's father showed that he was different from his associates because he liked to read poetry and could not make money as well as his peers. (The Barts were always a bit poorer than their friends, and Mrs. Bart, "a wonderful manager," practiced such economies as using the flowers and food left over from dinner parties at luncheon the next day (p. 46). Finally, Mr. Bart managed to lose everything.) Lily has none of her mother's talent for "managing" and knows "very little of the value of money," but she has inherited her father's sensibilities to a small extent (p. 49). She always carries a copy of Omar Khayyam in her suitcase and thinks that she has "a broadminded recognition of literature" (pp. 103-104). Also, she is "fond of pictures and flowers and of sentimental fiction" (p. 54). Most important, she is, unlike her friends, willing to help Gerty Farish with her social work with typists and factory girls, to visit Gerty's Girls' Club, to collect money for it, and even to donate some money of her own. "She liked to think of her beauty as a power for good, as giving her the opportunity to attain a position where she should make her influence felt in the vague diffusion of refinement and good taste" (p. 54).

Like Ethan Frome, Lily is a victim of a society that concerns itself only with money and position. Early in the novel, Lawrence

Selden notes that she "was so evidently the victim of the civilization which produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate" (p. 10). Because she has little money, she is at the mercy of everyone else and is forced to trade on her assets: her social position and knowledge and her beauty.

## II

All three novels show marriage as a deadening institution that victimizes and oppresses the superior protagonist. Because it affects individuals more than any other institution, it is the chief social instrument of oppression and means of insuring conformity. In a society so vitiated, marriage is deadening.

The fact that Archer's New York is dead is shown by the references to primitive tribes that occur through the novel. The opening chapter reveals that "what was or was not 'the thing' played a part as important in Newland Archer's New York as the inscrutable totem terrors that had ruled the destinies of his forefathers thousands of years ago" (p. 2). Archer compares Augusta Welland's reluctance to having her daughter's engagement announced to the shrieks of the "savage bride" who custom decreed had to be dragged from her parents' tent (p. 42). His wedding is "a rite which seemed to belong to the dawn of history" (p. 179), and no one tells where the couple's honeymoon is to take place

because that is "one of the most sacred taboos of the prehistoric ritual" (p. 180). The farewell dinner for Ellen Olenska is called "the tribal rally around a kinswoman about to be eliminated from the tribe" (p. 337).

That the people of Archer's world seek to avoid what they call "unpleasantness" at any cost also shows the stultifying atmosphere of upper-class New York. May Welland's parents show this attitude best, as Mrs. Welland begs to be spared hearing the details of such things as her niece's separation from her husband because she must "'keep [her] mind bright and happy'" (p. 145), and Mr. Welland implores his wife, "'for pity's sake, don't destroy my last illusions'" (p. 275).

This attempt to avoid unpleasantness has led to the creation of the image of innocence in women. Archer "felt himself oppressed by the creation of fictitious purity, so cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers and long-dead ancestresses, because it was supposed to be what he wanted, what he had a right to, in order that he might exercise his lordly pleasure in smashing it like an image made of snow" (p. 43). Even Mrs. Welland's face reflects this conspiracy, for it is a "middle-aged image of invincible innocence . . . the innocence that seals the mind against imagination and the heart against expression" (pp. 144-145).

Archer realizes how destructive this artlessness can be.



Before his marriage, he contemplates the escapades of the philandering Lefferts and Beaufort and the dreariness of his other friends' marriages and comes to the conclusion that marriage is, for most people, "a dull association of material and social interests held together by ignorance on the one side and hypocrisy on the other" (p. 41). Archer has a vision of a totally different kind of life with May Welland, but because she has so completely become society's ideal of innocence, such an existence would be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve, for it "presupposed on her part, the experience, the versatility, the freedom of judgment which she had been carefully taught not to possess" (p. 41).

Indeed, Archer finds that after he is married, it is impossible to do anything about his wife's naiveté and less trouble to treat May as his friends treat their wives, for "she had spent her poetry and romance on their short courting: the function was exhausted because the need was past. Now she was simply ripening into a copy of her mother and mysteriously, by the very process, trying to turn him into a Mr. Welland" (p. 298). Archer sees himself as "the dwindling figure of a man to whom nothing was ever to happen" (p. 228) and says of his marriage, ". . . I am dead--I've been dead for months and months" (p. 298).

May is also the victim of society's idea of marriage, for she has been conditioned to submit herself completely to her husband. During their engagement, Archer feels the "simple joy of possessor-

ship" when he looks at her (p. 79). After her marriage, her husband stops reading poetry to her because she has begun to express her own opinions instead of echoing his (p. 297). She is incapable of change or growth, and in spite of her husband's admiration of her virtues (for he admits that she has been "generous, faithful, unwearied" (p. 351)), he, and later their children, refuse to treat her as an adult, but conceal their views from her because they believe that she is too unimaginative and "innocent" to recognize that "the world of her youth had fallen into pieces and rebuilt itself" (p. 351).

Unlike the world of May Archer, the society of Ethan Frome has remained static. It is this lack of change or development that makes his environment so oppressive. Ethan has been in Starkfield "too many winters" (p. 1). He had been forced to leave technical school because of the death of his father and then had to stay on at home to take care of his ailing mother. If, as Harmon Gow says, "'most of the smart ones get away,'" Ethan was one of the majority who never had a chance to escape the isolation of the rural community or its deadening effect on the spirit.

It was the loneliness following his father's death that attracted him to Zeena. He asked her to marry him because "he was seized with an unreasoning dread of being left alone on the farm; and before he knew what he was doing, he had asked her to stay

there with him. He had often thought since that it would not have happened if his mother had died in the spring instead of winter" (p. 76).

The novel shows the emotional barrenness of the marriage. After seven years, Ethan cannot remember hearing Zeena laugh (p. 124), and the confrontation between Ethan and Zeena over Mattie is the "first scene of open anger between the couple in their sad seven years together" (p. 121). This is partly due to the Fromes' isolation. Although the effects on Ethan are the most visible, even Zeena has been shaped by the grim solitude and the deadening effect of the marriage as she changes from the efficient, voluble woman who wants to leave Starkfield for "the city" to a silent hypochondriac, who hoards her emotions as she does her prized possessions. She is an old woman at thirty-five. The incident of the pickle dish that Mattie uses to "'make the supper-table pretty'" demonstrates Zeena's miserliness (p. 138). When she discovers that the dish is broken, she says that Mattie "'took the thing I set most store by of anything I've got, and wouldn't never use it, not even when the minister came to dinner . . . now you've took from me the one [thing] I cared for most of all'" (p. 138).

According to Geoffrey Walton, Zeena is "both the supreme product and, for Frome, the ever-present representative of [his] environment, a silent, brooding power from which he

cannot escape."<sup>9</sup> It is Zeena who has prevented Ethan from leaving Starkfield. Ethan thinks that "other possibilities had been in him, possibilities sacrificed, one by one, to Zeena's narrow-mindedness and ignorance . . . All the healthy instincts of self-defense rose up in him against such waste" (p. 142).<sup>10</sup>

Lily Bart's "possibilities" are sacrificed in her pursuit of security in the form of a wealthy husband. Although Lily is not married, The House of Mirth shows the deadening effects of the marriage system, which treats marriage as a business venture. The burden of capturing a mate is always on the woman. Even an heiress needs a husband in order to be significant. Lily contemplates the situation of her cousin Jack Stepney, who must also make a rich marriage: "'All Jack has to do to get everything he wants is to keep quiet and let that girl marry him; whereas I have to calculate and contrive and retreat and advance, as if I were going through an intricate dance, where one misstep

<sup>9</sup>Edith Wharton: A Critical Interpretation (Rutherford, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1970), p. 80.

<sup>10</sup>Ethan chooses to believe that Zeena could not have left Starkfield for a larger community because "she could not have lived in a place which looked down on her" (p. 77). However, Zeena had wanted to leave Starkfield, and perhaps the "sickliness" she developed during the first year of marriage was caused by their inability to sell the farm and the isolation of their situation rather than, as Ethan thinks, a condition she had kept hidden from him. Ethan uses Zeena's failings as a rationalization for not leaving to "try his luck" in the world outside of Starkfield.

would throw me helplessly out of time'" (p. 75).

In order to get the money she needs, Lily sets out to ensnare the deadeningly colorless millionaire Percy Gryce. Gryce's lifelessness is shown by the fact that his greatest interest is his collection of Americana: dull, dead books that interest only historians. Lily allows Gryce to bore her for most of a weekend "all on the chance that he might ultimately decide to do her the honour of boring her for life" (p. 39). Her women friends encourage the match, but no one fools herself that there is anything like love involved. Lily "returned wearily to the thought of Percy Gryce as a wayfarer picks up a heavy load and toils on after a brief rest. She was almost sure she had 'landed him': a few days' work and she would win her reward. But the reward itself seemed unpalatable just then; she could get no zest from the thought of victory that would be a rest from worry, no more" (pp. 43-44).

If a poor girl marries for money, why should a wealthy man marry? Lily's reflection on Percy Gryce shows his motivation: "she determined to be to him what his Americana had hitherto been: the one possession in which he took sufficient pride to spend money on it" (p. 78). Later, the social-climbing millionaire Rosedale puts the idea more crudely: "'I want my wife to make all the other women feel small. I'd never grudge a dollar that was spent on that'" (p. 284). The fact that Lily's loss of her social

position prevents Rosedale from marrying her also shows a wife's function as a status symbol. Rosedale says frankly, "'I'm more in love with you than ever, but if I married you now, I'd queer myself for good and all, and everything I've worked for all these years would be wasted'" (p. 413).

Lily recognizes the dreariness and triviality of her friends. Like them, she does not want to marry without money, but unlike them, she cannot bring herself to marry without love. Carry Fisher says of her pursuit of a wealthy match that, "'she works like a slave preparing the ground and sowing her seed; but the day she ought to be reaping the harvest she oversleeps herself or goes off on a picnic . . . Sometimes . . . I think it's just flightiness--and sometimes I think it's because at heart she despises the things she's trying for'" (p. 303).

The fact that Lily will not play the marriage and money games of her world causes her downfall. She allows Bertha Dorset to scare away Percy Gryce because she cannot give up Selden's company. (Ten years earlier, she had missed her chance to marry a wealthy Italian prince because she flirted with his stepson.) She will not marry Rosedale when he first asks her (and Edith Wharton considered this a virtue, not only because Lily does not love Rosedale, but also because he is a vulgar Jew with "new money"). Finally, she refuses to blackmail Bertha Dorset with the incriminating letters to Selden, despite the fact that Bertha's cruel

snub is responsible for her ostracism, and despite the fact that this is the only way she can get Rosedale to marry her.

That Lily's New York, like Newland Archer's is greatly concerned with appearances and seeks to avoid the "unpleasantness" of immorality also causes Lily's destruction. This attitude is personified by Lily's aunt, Mrs. Peniston, to whom "the mere idea of immorality was as offensive as the smell of cooking in the drawing-room: it was one of the conceptions her mind refused to admit" (p. 204). Therefore, a woman must avoid even the appearance of wrong-doing. If she puts herself in a position to arouse gossip, even if she is totally innocent, a woman is censured anyway. Therefore, Lily falls simply because of appearances. She is suspected of taking money from Gus Trenor (although this is technically true, Lily believed that Trenor had been investing her own money), of carrying on an affair with George Dorset, and of plotting to marry off Freddy Van Osburgh to the notorious divorcee Norma Hatch. Even though she is not guilty of the things said of her, she becomes a social outcast.

### III

All three novels show the necessity of renunciation of love that is outside of marriage. If the protagonist, defeated by society, conforms to its demands and renounces the person

truly loved, he or she is saved. The rebellious protagonist, however, is destroyed. Although society is oppressive, one can triumph over it through controlling oneself, even if this means conforming to society's codes. Wharton believed that man is surrounded by forces he cannot control or defy. She also felt that the individual's desires must sometimes be sacrificed for the good of the community. As Lewis states, for Edith Wharton, "the fate of society--as the embodiment of civilization--hung upon every important moral decision" (p. 221). Wharton protagonists, caught by forces they cannot control, must make the best of their situations. They may not surrender to vulgar instincts or appetites but must control themselves. This self-restraint usually leads to giving up what they want; to triumph, they must not do anything about their plights. To Wharton, "failure was the mark of spiritual victory."<sup>11</sup>

In order to understand the principle of renunciation, one must study the love interests of the protagonists, who precipitate the rebellions against society. These are Ellen Olenska in The Age of Innocence, Mattie Silver in Ethan Frome, and Lawrence Selden in The House of Mirth. Ellen Olenska, like Newland Archer, is a superior being who cannot fit into New York

<sup>11</sup>Alfred Kazin, On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1942), p. 80.



society. Ellen "cares for art" although at first she tries to stop caring so she will be "just like everybody else" (p. 106). She had spent her early childhood and most of her adult life in Europe, where, as the wife of a wealthy Polish nobleman, she knew actors, artists, and musicians. She does not possess May's innocence, for she has not been sheltered or repressed. Unlike May, whose "eyes have been bandaged" (p. 80) by society, Ellen has had her eyes permanently opened by the Gorgon (p. 293). As she herself says, she does not avoid "unpleasantness" as everyone else does. Indeed, Archer declares that Ellen has "'[opened his] eyes to things I'd looked at so long that I'd ceased to see them'" (p. 73).

Naturally, the love between Archer and Ellen is doomed. Archer is prevented from marrying her by the arrival of May's telegram agreeing to advance the date of their wedding, and he is later stopped from going away with her to "India or Japan" or a place where "'we shall be simply two human beings who love each other, who are the whole life of each other and [to whom] nothing else on earth will matter'" by May's announcing that she is pregnant (p. 293).

And, according to Wharton, it is better for the lovers to be defeated. Despite the fact that, as Archer reasons, "Ellen Olenska was like no other woman, he was like no other man; their situation, therefore resembled no one else's, and they were answerable to no tribunal but that of their own judgment,"

individuals must martyr themselves for the good of the tribe (p. 309). As Ellen states (ironically, she has been convinced of this by Archer), "'one must sacrifice one's self to preserve the dignity of marriage . . . and to spare one's family the publicity [and] the scandal'" (p. 169). There is nothing for them but renunciation. Ellen says, "'I can't love you unless I give you up'" (p. 173). She feels that she must do so because "'if it's not worthwhile to have given up, to have missed things, so that others may be saved from disillusionment and misery--then everything I came home for, everything that made my other life seem by contrast so bare and so poor because no one took account of them--all these things are a sham or a dream'" (p. 244).

It is interesting that Ellen finally returns to Europe and that Archer is prevented from going with her by May's pregnancy. Perhaps Wharton felt that her readers would not accept Archer's and Ellen's renunciation of each other unless there was a child involved. Perhaps she could not really see the worth of it herself.

In the scene set twenty-eight years later, Wharton, through Archer, reflects on the values of her old society and the worth of marriage in such a culture: "Their long years together had shown him that it did not so much matter if marriage was a dull duty, as long as it kept the dignity of a duty; lapsing from that, it became a mere battle of ugly appetites. Looking around him, he

honoured his own past and mourned for it. After all, there was good in the old ways" (p. 350). But later he (and perhaps Wharton) has second thoughts: "The worst of doing one's duty was that it apparently unfitted one for doing anything else . . . the trenchant divisions between right and wrong, honest and dishonest . . . had left so little scope for the unforeseen" (p. 354).

Archer feels that he has missed something, what he calls "the flower of life" (p. 350). But Wharton felt that very few people could attain it; Archer thinks of it "as a thing so unattainable and improbable that to have repined would have been like despairing because one had not drawn the first prize in a lottery" (p. 350). Therefore, the next best thing to do was to live one's life with dignity and honor, as Archer has done, sitting on committees, serving in the state legislature, and working for the good of the community. At least he had always had the memory of Ellen, "like a relic in a small dim chapel, where there was not time to pray every day" (p. 362). He refuses to disturb this memory by seeing Ellen at the end of the novel. The reader must decide whether he does so from wisdom or cowardice.

While the conforming Archer and Ellen are saved for useful and meaningful lives (Ellen returned to Paris, where she could indulge her love of art), the rebellious Ethan Frome and Mattie Silver are punished. Mattie does not have the wisdom or

experience of Ellen Olenska. But when she enters the oppressive environment of Ethan and Zeena, she is a "bit of hopeful young life" (p. 36). Like Ethan, Mattie is more "cultivated" than most of the other inhabitants of Starkfield, for she can "trim a hat . . . recite 'Curfew shall not ring to-night,' and play 'The Lost Chord' and a pot-pourri from 'Carmen'" (p. 64). But like the typical Wharton protagonist, she cannot cope with society on its own terms, for her health "breaks down" when, after her parents' deaths, she tries to support herself, first as a stenographer and later as a sales clerk.

Naturally, Ethan is attracted to Mattie, who shares his love of nature and beauty, and who, unlike Zeena, will obey him. He begins to shave every day, plants geraniums for Mattie, and brings her a "box covered with fancy paper" (p. 104).

When she recognizes Ethan's attachment to Mattie and refuses to keep her any longer, Zeena is "no longer the listless creature who had lived at his side in a state of sullen self-absorption, but a mysterious alien presence, an evil energy secreted from the long years of silent brooding . . . Now she had mastered him and he abhorred her . . . She had taken everything from him, and now she meant to take the one thing that had made up for all the others" (pp. 127-128).

Ethan is defeated not only by Zeena, but by their community, the values of which decree that, because Mattie is her cousin and

not his, Zeena can do what she wishes with her. Ethan is powerless before the obligations of his marriage and his society. He thinks of leaving Zeena and taking Mattie "out West," but is stopped not only by his reluctance to abandon his duties to his wife, but also by the simple fact that he has no money for train fare and no way to get any. "Borrowing was out of the question: six months before he had used his only security to raise funds for necessary repairs to the mill, and he knew that without security no one at Starkfield would lend him ten dollars. The inexorable facts closed in on him like prison-warders handcuffing a convict" (pp. 145-146). He thinks of getting money from the Hales by telling them that he needs it to pay the hired girl Zeena has engaged, but he cannot bring himself to do so. "He was a poor man, the husband of a sickly woman, whom his desertion would leave alone and destitute, and even if he had had the heart to desert her, he could have done so only be deceiving two kindly people who had pitied him" (p. 155). Therefore, it is his moral superiority that makes it impossible for him to get what he wants.

Ethan's and Mattie's only solution is suicide, which is really a renunciation of any happiness they might have had together. Their only comfort is to know that they'll "never have to leave each other any more" (p. 179). But, in the end, they are

conquered by Zeena:

The big tree loomed bigger and closer, and as they bore down on it he thought: "It's waiting for us: it seems to know." But suddenly his wife's face, with twisted, monstrous lineaments, thrust itself between him and his goal, and he made an instinctive movement to brush it aside. The sled swerved in response, but he righted it again, kept it straight, and drove down on the black projecting mass (p. 184).

Not killed when they hit the tree, they meet a worse fate.

Ethan is crippled for the rest of his life, and Mattie is paralyzed from the neck down. What is left for them is to be cared for by Zeena on the run-down farm, and, as Mrs. Hale says, "'the way they are now, I don't see's there's much difference between the Fromes up at the farm and the Fromes down in the graveyard; 'cept there they're all quiet, and the women have got hold of their tongues'" (p. 195).

There is not even the grim satisfaction for Ethan and Mattie in the fact that they have loved each other. Mattie has become a complaining old woman and Ethan "but the ruin of a man" (p. 3). Evidently, Wharton felt that they did not deserve a better lot. Their attempt at suicide is rebellion, and, according to Wharton's moral standards, it could bring no inner triumph.

Lily Bart does renounce Lawrence Selden and is thus saved

the punishment of a life that is worse than death.<sup>12</sup> Lily's relationship with Selden shows her superiority to her society. The common indicator of the worth of a Wharton woman is her choice of a man. Lawrence Selden, in spite of a certain priggishness (he does not have the courage to court Lily seriously and is always ready to believe the worst of her, as he demonstrates in both the Trenor and Dorset episodes), is a superior man. He is a reader with an apartment filled with books, and he is interested in his profession. He says that he is "rather fond" of the law (p. 12). Like Lily, he has less money than most of his companions, but unlike her he does not want to join their ranks. His "idea of success . . . is personal freedom . . . from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all material aspects. To keep a kind of republic of the spirit" (p. 108). Of the men she knows, only Selden can occasionally see the "real" Lily (p. 218).

<sup>12</sup>Some critics, including Cynthia Wolff, suggest that Lily's death was a suicide. However, if Lily had deliberately tried to kill herself, Wharton would not have allowed her death to be so peaceful: Lily thinks as she falls asleep, "She had been unhappy, and now she was happy--she had felt herself alone, and now the sense of loneliness had vanished . . . warmth flowed through her once more, she yielded into it and slept" (pp. 522-523). A modern reader versed in the psychological doctrine that "there are no accidents" may see Lily's death as an unconscious suicide, but Wharton would not have agreed. She felt that a person might not be able to control the world, but he or she could control the self.

But when Lily recognizes her need of Selden, she also realizes that she has done so too late. When she did not leave the Dorsets' yacht when he told her to and when she worked as social secretary for Norma Hatch, she sacrificed her chances for happiness with him. "She saw nothing now remained to her but the emptiness of renunciation" (p. 518). In a touching, if rather sentimental scene, she goes to Selden's apartment and tells him:

"Once--twice--you gave me the chance to escape from my life, and I refused it; refused it because I was a coward. Afterward I saw my mistake--I saw I could never be happy with what had contented me before. But it was too late . . . for happiness--but not too late to be helped by the thought of what I had missed . . . Even in my worst moments it has been like a little light in the darkness" (pp. 497-498).

She then burns the letters from Mrs. Dorset in Selden's fireplace: thus the victory of renunciation. At the very end of the novel, when Selden finally goes to ask Lily to marry him and finds that she has died from an accidental overdose of chloral, the themes of defeat and spiritual victory are reiterated:

He saw that all the conditions of life had conspired to keep them apart; since his very detachment from the external influences which swayed her had increased his spiritual fastidiousness, and made it more difficult for him to live and love uncritically. But at least he had loved her--and if the moment had



been fated to pass from them before they could seize it, he saw now that, for both, it had been saved whole out of the ruin of their lives. It was this moment of love, this fleeting victory over themselves, which had kept them from atrophy and extinction (p. 532).

The necessity for victory over oneself through renunciation accounts for the absence of sex in the novels. There is no sexual contact between Archer and Ellen, Ethan and Mattie, or Lily and Selden. Archer sees Ellen Olenska almost as a goddess. He "kissed her palm as if he had kissed a relic" (p. 288). He also kisses her shoe (p. 172) and a parasol that he thinks is hers (p. 226). He kisses her hands twice (pp. 111, 288) and embraces her three times (pp. 170, 246, 291). She kisses him once (p. 291). Ellen suggests an affair to Archer: "'Shall I--once come to you and then go home?'" but by home she means back to her husband and that, to her, would be death (p. 314). She does not want to hurt people who have been kind to her, although her scruples are unnecessary, for everyone, including May, thinks that she and Archer are having an affair. But she and Archer do nothing, and she leaves for France.

Neither Ethan Frome nor Mattie Silver even suggests the possibility of a physical relationship. Ethan is deeply in love with Mattie, but he does not even kiss her until he has to tell her that Zeena is turning her out (p. 130). He kisses her again before he helps her bring her trunk down from her room (p. 158)

and before they go down the hill for the last time (p. 180). She kisses him just before she asks him to crash the sled into the elm tree (p. 178). Nothing more is even suggested. Before there is any idea that they may be separated, Ethan kisses only the material on which Mattie has been sewing. "It seemed to him that a warm current flowed toward him along the strip of stuff that still lay unrolled between them. Cautiously he slid his hand palm-downward along the table till his finger-tips touched the end of the stuff . . . He saw a scarcely perceptible tremor cross her face, and without knowing what he did he stooped his head and kissed the bit of stuff in his hold" (p. 104).

Ethan's treatment of Mattie shows his attempt to keep his relationship with her on a "higher" level than that of his life with Zeena. He finds it "repugnant" that Mattie should see him follow Zeena to bed (p. 59). Ethan views sex as a part of marriage represented by Zeena and, after seven years of physical intimacy, he has ceased to connect sex with the love that Mattie represents. Sex has been reduced to sharing the same bed with Zeena, who every night takes out her false teeth (p. 134), puts crimping pins in her hair (p. 58), wraps her head in a piece of yellow flannel (p. 61), and falls asleep to snore asthmatically (p. 62). Ethan is also afraid of destroying his image of Mattie's bright young beauty. He fears that a physical relationship would turn her into another Zeena. Such a

relationship would also destroy Mattie's innocence. It is Mattie's youth and childlike hopefulness that attract Ethan. If he wants her to retain her purity, he cannot treat her like an adult woman.

Ethan reflects that even when Zeena is out of the house, "he had not even touched the tip of [Mattie's] fingers or looked her full in the eyes. But their evening together had given him a vision of what life at her side might be, and he was glad now that he had done nothing to trouble the sweetness of the picture. He had a fancy that she knew what had restrained him . . ." (p. 106, ellipses Wharton's). He does not touch Mattie because he wants to keep their relationship idealized. She must remain pure and sweet.

Before Mattie is to leave, Ethan says that he would "'a'most rather have [her] dead'" than married to someone else (p. 172). He does not understand his reaction to her and says, "'I don't know how it is you make me feel, Matt'" (p. 172). To Ethan, Mattie is unspoiled and untouched, and she must remain that way. Marriage to anyone would defile her.

Lily Bart does remain unspoiled and untouched. She is a beautiful girl, but the most intimacy that any of her suitors attempts is to hold her hand. Mrs. Fisher states that Lily only flirted with the Italian prince's stepson. In the scene in which Gus Trenor tries to seduce her, he merely touches her

arm. Lily's light kiss on Selden's forehead as she leaves his apartment is the consummation of their great love affair. Lily's innocence is ironic, for it does not save her, and she falls, indeed, because of it. It is this innocence that keeps Lily, like May Archer, from becoming a fully developed person. Wharton could not have feared public indignation if she had made Lily an "impure woman," for Lily is defeated and, in novels written during the early twentieth century, a woman could be as sinful as possible as long as she "came to a bad end" or defeat. Besides, fear of public outrage did not prevent Wharton from showing Bertha Dorset's triumph over Lily, even though Bertha has affairs with Selden and Ned Silverton. (Bertha may be excused by society to some extent because she is married to a wealthy man. Married women, particularly rich ones, are permitted discreet affairs, chiefly because society would prefer to avoid the unpleasantness that an open confrontation would involve.)

In The Age of Innocence, two other "sinners" go unpunished. Mrs. Rushworth, Archer's first love, successfully deceives her husband as Bertha Dorset does in The House of Mirth, and Fanny Ring eventually does marry Beaufort. Although they are mentioned very briefly, they are important, for they show that Wharton was aware that such things went on and further demonstrate Ellen's superiority to those around her. Were it not for their presence

(and that of Mrs. Dorset in The House of Mirth and the runaway couple in Ethan Frome) a naive reader might get the impression that society had successfully repressed all extra-marital sex in those days, and a more cynical reader might come to the conclusion that unpunished immorality was as incomprehensible to Wharton as it was to Mrs. Peniston, whose very name shows Wharton's lack of naiveté.

Edith Wharton's belief in the triumph through control of the self is undoubtedly responsible for the sexless love affairs in her novels. Although the omission of sex may give an aura of unreality to the books and a certain lifelessness and priggishness to the characters, Wharton evidently felt that this control made love more beautiful. There could have been no inner victory for Archer and Ellen or Selden and Lily without mastery of the self. Only because Ethan loves Mattie so deeply can he content himself with kissing the material that she holds. The Wharton heroine must be on a pedestal, pure and untouchable. The Wharton hero must not defile her.

Also, in The Age of Innocence and particularly in Ethan Frome, the restraint shown by the lovers makes their feelings seem more intense. Archer's kissing of Ellen's hands and Ethan's stroking of Mattie's hair (EF, p. 180) show what Wharton would later describe in The Old Maid as "the blind forces of life groping and crying underfoot" (OM, p. 129). This repressed

sexuality adds to the aesthetic tension of the works. In The Age of Innocence, it further demonstrates the covering up of "unpleasant" or unrefined feelings. In Ethan Frome, the characters' sexual repression heightens the oppressive tenseness of the atmosphere of the novel. Because the characters of Ethan Frome cannot express their emotions, the feelings become more intense. Ethan's passion for Mattie combined with his anger at and hatred for Zeena (all of which are largely unarticulated) adds to the sense of claustrophobic oppression of the novel, which reflects the oppression of the society the work presents. Indeed, it is society that has forced the characters to suppress their feelings.

Wharton's views of love and marriage are shown in her masculine and feminine protagonists. Oppressed by their society because they are superior to it, they can find true love only outside of the marriage contract which is completely controlled by that society. Their triumph comes not through defeat of those forces they cannot master but through control of themselves, even when they are thwarted by society. These themes recur with variations in The Age of Innocence, Ethan Frome, and The House of Mirth.

### Chapter 3

Edith Wharton's novellas New Year's Day and The Old Maid and her novel The Mother's Recompense all have the same distinguishing characteristics as the three novels previously described. All include a protagonist who is to some extent "superior to" (or at least different from) society, all demonstrate the deadening and oppressing effects of marriage, a microcosm of that society, and all show the triumph of the protagonist through renunciation. Unlike the previously discussed novels, these works deal with sexually nonconforming women, who are "immoral" by the standards of their societies. Each protagonist "saves" herself from destruction through renunciation. She is not salvaged for a happy, useful life as Newland Archer is in The Age of Innocence, however. Instead, each of the women leads a sterile, repressed existence, her main satisfaction coming from the knowledge that she once "did something good." Also, her renunciation is not of a true love, but of marriage to a conventional member of society. Marriage would reintegrate her into society and offers the benefits of companionship. The Wharton protagonist, however, refuses to marry without love. She sacrifices complete acceptance by society (something only a respectable married woman could attain) in order to atone for her fall from virtue.

The Old Maid and The Mother's Recompense also present Edith Wharton's ideas about motherhood. The works show motherhood as the ultimate renunciation, for a mother gives up her own separate existence for the sake of her children. This finally brings the greatest inner triumph.

The three works deal with aristocratic New York, although each takes place at a different time. The Old Maid is set in the 1850's, New Year's Day in the 1870's, and The Mother's Recompense in the 1920's. The works mention characters featured in The Age of Innocence. Sillerton Jackson, watching from Mrs. Parrett's window, witnesses Lizzie Hazeldean's indiscretion in New Year's Day and admires Tina's beauty in The Old Maid. In New Year's Day, Julius Beaufort is said to have the second best cigars in New York (p. 16)--Henry Prest's are the best--and Lizzie discusses costumes for the Beauforts' fancy dress ball (p. 54). Beaufort's mistress, Fanny Ring, is mentioned as the "one conspicuous 'professional'" of New York in New Year's Day (p. 136).

Lizzie Hazeldean attends the Sunday evening parties given by Mrs. Lemuel Struthers that so shocked Newland Archer's mother, and in The Old Maid, the notorious Mrs. Manson Mingott (Old Catherine) is the aunt of Charlotte Lovell and Delia Lovell Ralston (p. 16). Indeed, Catherine's son's first name is Lovell (AOI, p. 15). Scattered through the books are references to the Lannings, the Dagonettes, and, of course, the famous Henry van der



Luydens.

This cross-pollination of characters shows the tightness of the Old New York world. Adelaide Archer, Newland's mother, is slightly older than Delia and Charlotte. Newland Archer is a contemporary of Lanning Halsey and Charles Hazeldean. Kate Clephane is about the same age as Archer's children. A reader familiar with the earlier book (The Age of Innocence was published in 1920, New Year's Day and The Old Maid in 1924, and The Mother's Recompense in 1925) knows the society these protagonists struggle against. However, the protagonists of the later works are not so much superior to their society as apart from it. Their separateness from the others of their worlds is like Lily Bart's rather than Newland Archer's or Ellen Olenska's. Theirs is not the discontent of the intellectual who is caught in the world of the Philistines, but that of the woman who is trapped by society's treatment of her sex. They have not had the opportunity to become intellectual. They demonstrate any superiority they might possess in their choice of the men they love.

Like most Wharton protagonists, Lizzie Hazeldean has less money than her friends. Therefore, she is more aware of the ways of the world than other young women of her age and class. Wharton says of her:

Lizzie Hazeldean had long since come to regard most

women of her age as children in the art of life. Some savage instinct of self-defense, fostered by experience, had always made her more alert and perceiving than the charming creatures who passed from the nursery to marriage as if lifted from one rose-lined cradle into another. "Rocked to sleep-- that's what they've always been," she used to think sometimes, listening to their innocuous talk during the long after-dinners in hot drawing-rooms, while their husbands, in the smoking-rooms below, exchanged ideas which, if no more striking, were at least based on more direct experiences (p. 49).

In addition, "Lizzie Hazeldean had always preferred the society of men," a taste that shocks the other women, but sets Lizzie apart from and above them (p. 50).

It is Lizzie's love for her husband, however, that elevates her more than any qualities that she herself possesses. Charles Hazeldean is one of the best products of his world. Typically, he does not have as much money as his peers, although he does have "expectations" from childless relatives. Unlike his contemporaries, he has an interest in his law practice and is good at it. He is "by nature an observer and a student, brooding and curious of mind," and he is a reader (p. 87). Lizzie does not read but thinks of books as a pastime on a level with solitaire that requires somewhat greater concentration. "It was an old joke between [the couple] that she had never been able to believe anyone could really 'care for reading' . . . she had never before [her marriage] lived in a house with books in it. Gradually she had learned to take a pride in Hazeldean's reading, as if it had been

some rare accomplishment; she had perceived that it reflected credit on him" (p. 39).

The Old Maid really has two protagonists. At first, Charlotte Lovell, the title character, seems to be the central figure. Charlotte is one of the "poor Lovells" and had to wear her mother's old gown at her coming-out party (p. 18). The fact that she chooses to take care of her child and, on her return to New York, starts to wear plain clothes and prefers visiting the poor to going to dances shows her seriousness. It would have been entirely possible for her to have given the baby away and returned to the gay life of a post-debutante. But Charlotte's eyes had been opened to the suffering of others when she saw the wretched living conditions of the poor in the small Georgia town to which she had retreated. Unlike her friends and her cousin Delia, Charlotte had seen that there was more to the world than what Delia calls her "safe, friendly, hypocritical New York" (p. 41). Charlotte's choice of a lover also shows her superiority. Clement Spender is an artist who refused to "give up painting and Rome for New York and the law," even though doing so would have enabled him to marry Delia (p. 17).

Delia Ralston is the more typical Wharton protagonist, however. Charlotte is really outside of society. She is the

victim of circumstances, and after she makes the decision to keep her child, she is dependent on others to help her and cannot really make choices for herself. As an "old maid" Charlotte is relatively free from the dictates of society, in spite of her dependence, for she has no husband whom she must obey. Delia, however, must cope with society. She is one of its pillars, at least by marriage. She has been prevented by her family and by the expectations that society has bred in her from marrying the nonconforming Spender. Instead, she marries Jim Ralston, a member of one of the most conservative families. The book opens with a description of the Ralstons and their milieu:

In the old New York of the 'fifties a few families ruled, in simplicity and affluence. Of these were the Ralstons. The sturdy English and the rubicund and heavier Dutch had mingled to produce a prosperous, prudent, and yet lavish society. To "do things handsomely" had always been a fundamental principle in this cautious world, built up on the fortunes of bankers, India merchants, shipbuilders and ship-chandlers. Those well-fed slow-moving people, who seemed irritable and dyspeptic to European eyes . . . lived in a genteel monotony of which the surface was never stirred by the dumb dramas now and then enacted underground (pp. 3-4).

Compared to the Ralstons, the Lovells, Delia's family "appeared careless, indifferent to money, almost reckless in their impulses and indecisions" (p. 5).

Even though Delia loves her husband, she feels crushed by the

Ralstons, although her rebellion consists mostly of wanting to redecorate and get rid of the Ralston furniture. When Delia is faced with the realities of her cousin's situation, she is shocked into action. It is Delia who must choose whether or not she will defy conventions by helping Charlotte. She is also faced with the moral decision about deceiving her husband's cousin Joe by allowing the marriage between him and Charlotte to take place. That Delia does refuse to do what society would expect of her shows her superiority. It is debatable that Delia's actions preventing Charlotte's marriage stem from jealousy of her cousin; they may come from a real horror of deceiving Joe Ralston. Probably, honesty is a greater motivating factor for Delia than jealousy. She thinks, "all the traditions of honor and probity in which she had been brought up forbade her to connive at such a plan [to allow Charlotte to marry Joe] a lie she could never connive at" (p. 66). Charlotte herself says that she is aware that Delia might be jealous of her relationship with Spender, but she also says that she went to Delia for help because Delia had loved Spender and he had loved her (p. 43). This love for the superior man also raises Delia above her friends.

Kate Clephane shows her superiority by the fact that she is oppressed by her marriage and by aristocratic New York when she says of her life with John Clephane, "'I couldn't

breathe'" (p. 16). Unlike those around her, she seeks "the flower of life" (AOI, p. 350). Kate believes that there is more to life than simple contentment or lack of unhappiness and that great happiness is worth whatever it might cost. Like Lizzie and Charlotte, Kate, in her search for that happiness, has seen that there is a world outside of New York. She has paid for her moment of joy, but she realizes that even her precarious, sterile existence on the Riviera was more real than the life of the typical upper-class New Yorker. She notices that all Americans seem to look the same. "Her thoughts wandered back to the shabby faces peopling her former life. She knew every seam of their shabbiness, but now for the first time she seemed to see that they had been worn by emotions and passions, however selfish, however sordid, and not merely by ice-water and dyspepsia" (p. 90).

Kate's superiority is shown most clearly in her choice of a lover. Kate, like most Wharton women, judges her own success and happiness in terms of the men in her life. She feels that she could have had a happy existence "if only [she] had met the right man at the right time" (p. 4). She does not think that her life was ruined because she herself could not breathe in New York society, but because she was married to the wrong man. She can escape oppression only by running off with another man, rather than trying to change herself.

Even when she meets Chris Fenno, she does not become a person her own right, although life with Chris, the dilettante artist and writer, "caught her up into an air she had never breathed before [because] he saw the unseeable . . . in nature, in poetry and painting, in their shared sunsets and moonrises" (p. 19). Kate's lack of self-definition (a failing she shares with most Wharton women) is so great that she believes that when she met Chris "her real self had been born; without him she would never have had a self" (p. 18). In the Wharton world, the superior woman is one who discovers her identity through loving a superior man.

The three works also show the oppressing and victimizing effects of marriage, the force of society that affects the Wharton protagonist most directly. Because the protagonists are women, the victimizing aspects of marriage and society are particularly apparent. Although Lizzie and Charles Hazeldean have a happy marriage, their felicity is accidental, for Lizzie had been forced to marry Charles. Lizzie is the daughter of a disgraced minister, and, like Lily Bart, she had been taken in by a sympathetic widow. But Mrs. Mant, unlike Mrs. Peniston, was not related to Lizzie. Therefore Lizzie, alone except for her penniless father, an exile in Europe, was even more at the mercy of society than Lily. When Mrs. Mant grew tired of Lizzie and accused her of stealing the household keys (Mrs. Mant's existence

is summarized by the fact that her life "revolved around [the] bunch of keys" [p. 81]), the girl became desperate. "The situation was a grave one, and called for emergency measures. Lizzie understood it--and a week later she was engaged to Charles Hazeldean" (p. 86).

Even the intellectual Charles is a victim of the marital system and looks on his wife, whom he loves, as a prize possession. "He . . . gloried too much in her prettiness, her elegance, her easy way of wearing her expensive dresses, and his friends' enjoyment of the good dinners she knew how to order, not to accustom her to everything which could enhance such graces" (p. 92). When Charles becomes ill and is unable to give Lizzie the expensive things that he thinks she deserves and that he enjoys giving her, he is heartbroken. Lizzie decides that she will spare him misery by getting the money to buy the luxuries that he wants her to have. It is typical of Old New York that the two never talk about the "unpleasant" problem. Charles is not aware of the fact that Lizzie does not really want the luxuries. Lizzie realizes that the money will have to be acquired secretly and explained by the fiction that it is from her wealthy stepmother.

But there is no way for Lizzie to earn money. According to society's rules, an unmarried girl is taken care of by her family and a married woman is provided for by her husband. It



is inconceivable that a woman would have to help her husband earn his living. Therefore, the only skill that women have is the ability to entertain and please men. So Lizzie is forced by society to become, as she herself says, "an expensive prostitute" (p. 114). Her affair with Henry Prest, the typical member of New York aristocracy--"handsome, rich, independent--an all-round sportsman, good horseman, good shot, crack yachtsman . . . gave the most delightful little dinners . . . the man of the world"--shows that Lizzie does not love Prest but is doing everything for Charles (p. 16). She says, "'I didn't care for the money or the freedom; I cared only for [Charles]. I would have followed him into the desert . . . I would have starved, begged, done anything for him--anything'" (p. 116). Because of the demands placed on her husband by society and because the rules of society prevent the couple from discussing their problems frankly, Lizzie is forced to become a prostitute, the ultimate victim of the patriarchal society.

The two protagonists of The Old Maid show how society oppresses both unmarried and married women. Delia sees Charlotte as "a victim" (p. 35) who has been "taken advantage of" (p. 38). And although Charlotte claims that "no one took advantage of me" and tries to assume responsibility for her actions, she cannot escape the dictates of her world. "Social tolerance was not dealt in the same measure to men and to women and neither Delia nor

Charlotte had ever considered why; like all young women of their class they simply bowed to the ineluctable" (p. 66). When Charlotte announces that she has broken her engagement to Joe, Delia tells her that even if Joe has had a child, she should forgive him (p. 28). However, telling Joe the truth about Charlotte's child would "at once put an end to the marriage; of that even Chatty was aware" (p. 66). Of course, Charlotte cannot take care of her child herself. She has to deal in subterfuges and accept help from others. Society has reduced her to a scheming beggar.

Delia's life shows the deadening effects of marriage. Prevented from marrying the man she loved because he did not have enough money, Delia has compromised and convinced herself that she loves the conservative, stable, kindly Jim Ralston. Delia thinks of the life of the young married woman:

There was the startled, puzzled surrender to the incomprehensible exigencies of the young man to whom one had at most yielded a rosy cheek in return for an engagement ring; there was the large double-bed; the terror of seeing him shaving calmly the next morning . . . the evasions, insinuations, resigned smiles and Bible texts of one's *Mamma*; the reminder of the phrase "to obey" in the glittering blur of the Marriage Service; a week or a month of flushed distress, confusion, embarrassed pleasure; then the growth of habit, the insidious lulling of the matter-of-course . . . And then, the babies; the babies who were supposed to "make up for everything" and didn't--though . . . one had no definite notion as to what they were to make up for (pp. 14-15).

In order to maintain the "pleasantness" of her world, Delia is reduced to manipulating her husband, for he is "still the sentimental boy whom she could manage" (p. 74). It is only by conniving and scheming that Delia can help Charlotte. She does not dream of telling her husband the truth. Years after her husband's death, she is shocked to find that he knew the whole story and had sought to avoid unpleasantness by keeping his knowledge from her because "'people didn't tell each other things much in those days'" (p. 145).

Delia is more cognizant of the circumstances of her life than her contemporaries are, and her knowledge of Charlotte's tragedy increases her awareness. She sees that there are passions and "blind forces of life" that she will never experience (p. 129). "Life had passed her by and left her with the Ralstons" (p. 129). As a middle-aged widow, she realizes that her marriage and her world have kept her from becoming a person in her own right. She has even given up the idea of redecorating the Ralston house. "All her dreams of renovation had faded long ago. Some deep central indifference had gradually made her regard herself as a third person, living the life meant for another woman, a woman totally unrelated to the vivid Delia Lovell who had entered that house so full of plans and visions" (p. 128). Delia is able to break away only twice: when she first helps Charlotte and when she adopts Tina, both actions

for which she is criticized.

Kate Clephane's marriage, though it takes place sixty years after Delia's, is just as stifling. She runs away with another man to "escape the oppression of her married life, the thick atmosphere of self-approval and unperceivingness which emanated from John Clephane like coal-gas from a leaking furnace" (p. 16). John Clephane sees his wife as an object on which to display his wealth. He enjoys giving her jewels, and "it certainly increased Kate Clephane's importance in her husband's eyes to know that when she entered her [opera] box, no pearls could hold their own against hers except Mrs. Beaufort's and old Mrs. Goldmere's" (p. 77).<sup>13</sup>

Kate's life, like that of most women, consisted mostly of "maneuvering and waiting . . . scheming, planning, ignoring, enduring, accepting" (p. 6). This was true of her marriage to Clephane and also of her relationship with Chris, when she felt driven by the "devouring need to keep Chris amused and herself amusing" (p. 54). That Kate goes from a stifling, oppressive existence to one that is just as suffocating and also empty, to (much later) a life in which her sole aim is to keep a man

<sup>13</sup>The reference to the Beauforts is really an anachronism. Beaufort lost his money in the 1870's, and Kate was married in the early 1900's, after Beaufort and Fanny Ring had died in Argentina, and young Fanny was making her way in New York under Newland Archer's direction.

amused (and that this is the best of the lot) shows the shortage of options for women.

There is also a lack of honesty in Kate's world. New York of the 1920's tries as hard as its predecessors to avoid "unpleasantness." Fred Landers tells Kate not to attempt to find out how much Anne knows about her past and not to discuss her unfortunate history with anyone. Everyone avoids distressing facts by pretending that they are not unusual or upsetting, "and not of a character to interfere with one's lunch" (p. 230). Kate realizes that Fred "has tried to buy off fate by one optimistic evasion after another till it [became] second nature to hand out his watch and pocket-book whenever reality [waylaid] him" (p. 50).

The three "immoral" women, Lizzie, Charlotte, and Kate, are saved from destruction because they spend their lives making up for their indiscretions and renouncing any form of happiness. All three give up chances to marry. However, because they are women, they do not have the option to lead useful lives outside the home as Newland Archer does. Charlotte, Delia, and Kate, do, however, find satisfactions in motherhood, although these must be limited for the fallen Charlotte and Kate.

Lizzie is excused to some extent for her affair with Prest, because she instigated it in order to help her husband. Besides, as Newland Archer observed in The Age of Innocence, a wife's

infidelity was tolerated because "a woman's standard of truthfulness was tacitly held to be lower; she was the subject creature, and versed in the arts of the enslaved" (p. 242). And after Charles's death, Lizzie repents her mistakes for the rest of her life. She never remarries, even though Prest proposes to her and accepting him would give her an entry back into society, because she does not love him. As the narrator of New Year's Day states, she withdraws herself from everyone except a few men friends whom she entertains with dinners and seats at the opera. However, she never enters into a deeper relationship than that, for "she had known no way of smoothing her husband's last years but by being false to him; but once he was dead, she expiated her betrayal by a rigidity of conduct for which she asked no reward but her own inner satisfaction" (p. 154). She does not care that society is shunning her, and says, "'I've had my day . . . why shouldn't I have to pay for it? I'm ready'" (p. 128). Her satisfaction that she made her husband happy is barely enough for her, for she has no interest in art or literature (she tries to read her husband's books, but cannot really understand them) and few concerns other than society. She befriends the narrator and eventually tells him the story of her deceit of her husband. Repeating the tale "becomes the chief luxury of her empty life. She had kept it empty--emotionally,

sentimentally empty from the day of her husband's death, as the guardian of an abandoned temple might go on forever sweeping and tending what had once been the god's abode" (p. 150). Finally, near the end of her life, she joins the Catholic church so that she may have the luxury of confessing her transgression over and over and being forgiven. She spends the rest of her life waiting to join her husband.

Charlotte Lovell also devotes her life to paying for her sin. She attempts to make a new life for herself as the wife of Joe Ralston, but effectively prevents her marriage by confessing her past to Delia. (If Charlotte had really wanted to marry, she would not have told Delia the truth about her child, for she knew that Delia would never agree to deceive her husband's cousin.) She then spends the rest of her years as "an old maid," with her one pleasure the raising of her daughter. She is denied even that, finally, for Delia takes over as the child's mother. Charlotte agrees to this, for she has made her chief fear in life that Tina should learn her mother's identity.

Delia, too, has sacrificed her potential for real happiness. Like Lizzie Hazeldean, she feels that in saving Charlotte's baby, she has done one great thing in her life and that after that nothing else is worth striving for. She realizes that she has been left on the sidelines of life with the Ralstons but decides that she will

"make the best of herself and of the Ralstons" (p. 129). For twenty years she does what society expects of her, but she feels that she is acting not as herself but as a Ralston. Only when she decides that she will legally adopt Tina (although this will cause a scandal and start rumors that Tina is the illegitimate child of Delia's late husband) does she again act as herself. She feels that in doing so, "she would once more break down the Ralston barriers and reach out into the world" (p. 130).

Kate Clephane atones for her misconduct by leaving the man with whom she ran away to live quietly in the backwaters of Europe, filling her days with trifling appointments, fittings for clothes and hats, and minor good works. Except for the affair with Chris, she makes no serious romantic attachments, and she pays for that episode by her work during the War. She is briefly rewarded for her sacrifices when she returns to New York after the death of her former mother-in-law. Like Ellen Olenska, Kate describes returning to New York as being like "'dying and going to heaven'" (AOI, p. 24; MR, p. 321). Because she has exonerated herself by living quietly and by her volunteer work, she is accepted again.

Her happiness is spoiled, of course, when she learns that her daughter Anne wants to marry Chris Fenno. Kate feels that she must prevent the marriage. She understands herself well enough to wonder if her feelings are in part motivated by jealousy. She



also thinks, however, that the relationship between Chris and Anne is almost incestuous. Chris, who did not realize at first that Anne was Kate's daughter, agreed and had tried to end the relationship before Kate's return. (He did not know that Kate would be returning and had felt that the relationship was wrong even if Kate would never know about it.) But Anne is determined to have him. Naturally, both Kate and Chris feel that Anne must never know the truth, even though they denounce everyone else's attempts to avoid unpleasantness. Finally, Kate decides that she will never tell Anne and will not prevent the marriage. She says, "'I would sell my soul for her--why not my memories?'" (p. 276). She herself sees this act as renunciation. "Renunciation--renunciation. If she could attain to that, what real obstacle was there to her daughter's happiness?" (p. 276).

Kate thinks that perhaps she can find happiness in marriage to Fred Landers. She realizes that she does not love him, but she no longer wants love and would be satisfied with "thick layers of affection enfolding her from loneliness, from regret, from remorse . . . there would always be someone between herself and her thoughts" (p. 306). However, she realizes that she cannot marry Fred and returns to her life in Europe after Anne's marriage. Even when Bishop Arklow tells her that Fred, knowing her story, still wants to marry her, she refuses. She says that her giving up a comfortable life in New York with Fred is "'the one thing that

keeps me from being too hopeless, too unhappy'" (p. 341) and that her renunciation is "'what I live by'" (p. 341). Like Lizzie and Delia, Kate has done what she considers one momentous thing in her life: she refused Fred's proposal. She has decided that she will find whatever satisfaction she can in her giving up happiness that she feels she does not deserve. She believes that she must be punished for not preventing Anne and Chris's wedding. Indeed, she has told Fred that "'I daresay it was wicked of me not to stop the marriage at any cost'" (p. 321). At the end of the novel, she thinks:

Nothing on earth would ever again help her--help to blot out the old horrors and the new loneliness--as much as the fact of being able to take her stand on that resolve, of being able to say to herself, whenever she began to drift toward new uncertainties and fresh concessions, that once at least she had stood fast, shutting away in a little space of peace and light the best thing that had ever happened to her (p. 342).

Besides their inner triumph of renunciation, Charlotte and Kate (as well as Delia) have the satisfactions of motherhood. The childless Edith Wharton portrays motherhood as the greatest joy of women, both because of the companionship that the mothers derive from their children and because of the fact that the mothers can see their offspring achieving what they have been denied. In the case of a daughter, this is a happy marriage to a superior man. To the modern reader, Wharton's expectations seem unrealistic.

Anne's reaction to her mother's return defies all principles of psychology, as does their relationship. On her return to New York, Kate thinks:

To be with Anne, to play the part of Anne's mother--the one part, she now saw, that fate had meant her for--that was what she wanted with all her starved and world-worn soul. To be the background, the atmosphere of her daughter's life; to depend on Anne, to feel that Anne depended on her; it was the one perfect companionship she had ever known, the only close tie unmarred by dissimulation and distrust (p. 87).

Of course, the fact that Kate and Anne have not gone through all the traumas of childhood and adolescence may allow them to be so close, but this explanation does not seem sufficient. Besides, Kate feels that if she had not left Anne, the two would have been even closer.

Charlotte Lovell makes her life one long sacrifice for her daughter. She gave up marriage so that she could keep her child. This, and not the fact that she cannot deceive Joe Ralston, is her chief motivation. She lets Delia take over Tina's upbringing and relegates herself to the position of the old maid aunt, because, like everyone else who is trying to avoid unfortunate truths, she has made it her goal in life that Tina should never know that she is her mother.

Charlotte is in part compensated for her sacrifices by the fact that Tina will have what she could not. Even Delia has noticed

that Tina is different from and more original than other girls, as her father was set apart from his circle. Delia thinks that "Tina sometimes said things which Delia Ralston, in far-off self-communions, had imagined herself saying to Clement Spender" (p. 102).

Charlotte's greatest desire is that Tina will have a happy marriage. She and everyone else see this as the only real life for a woman. She says, "'Tina an old maid? Never . . . my child shall have her life . . . her own life'" (p. 118). Tina further shows her uniqueness by her choice of a husband. Lanning Halsey has "literary and artistic" tastes, which set him apart and, as Delia realizes, is a lot like Clement Spender. When Tina marries Lanning (a marriage made possible by Delia's adoption of her, which forced Charlotte to give up her slight claim), Charlotte is satisfied.

Kate Clephane is also compensated for her sacrifices by being able to live through her daughter. Anne has managed to disprove most of the laws of heredity and environment and is totally unlike the Clephanes and most of her contemporaries. Unlike Tina, who has not had enough freedom or education to make her more than just "more original" than her peers, Anne is truly superior to her society. She is an artist and has escaped both the narrowness of her grandmother's milieu and the vulgarity and instability of the world of her companions. Her mother has expectations of

reliving her life through Anne. "Kate felt . . . as if Anne were that other half of her life, the half she had dreamed of and never lived. To see Anne living it would be almost the same as if it were her own; would be better, almost; since she would be there, with her experience and tenderness, to hold out a guiding hand, to help shape the perfection she had sought and missed" (p. 75). It is ironic that marriage is still the chief, indeed only, goal for a daughter. Kate is able to sacrifice herself because she believes that marriage to Chris will make Anne happy. For Charlotte and Kate, motherhood is the ultimate renunciation, that of one's own identity, and the submerging of that identity in the quest for happiness for one's child. This brings to the Wharton woman the greatest inner triumph.

To the modern reader, many of the values and ideas of the characters of these works seem psychologically unsound, if not unhealthy. Even the protagonists who are outside the stifling world of New York society make the greatest passion of their lives the desire to conceal an upsetting fact. Indeed, it is hard to understand the anguish presented in The Mother's Recompense. Edith Wharton's fictional descriptions of the joys of motherhood are totally unrealistic, and a mother's living through her child is psychologically sick. The situations presented in the works, however, show the defects of a world that

does not discuss things honestly, stifles married women, and, by making it impossible for her to earn a living, turns a woman into a whore. Today, these situations are somewhat alleviated. Yet because people are still afraid to face "unpleasantness" and women are still oppressed and kept from having their own identities, these works are valuable to the reader of this era. They are also valuable to the student of Edith Wharton, for, like The Age of Innocence, Ethan Frome, and The House of Mirth, they deal with society's oppression of the superior protagonist, the deadening effects of the institution of marriage, and the spiritual triumph of the protagonist through renunciation.

## Chapter 4

The Glimpses of the Moon, published in 1922, differs from the previously discussed works because it portrays a vital marriage and has a happy ending. But, like them, it features protagonists who are superior to their society, shows the oppression of that society as exemplified by marriage, and includes the theme of renunciation. A casual reader may be tempted to dismiss the book as "ladies' magazine fiction," but the novel does reveal the recurring Wharton themes and also demonstrates its author's beliefs about marriage.

Susy Branch and Nick Lansing are the Lily Bart and Lawrence Selden of the 1920's. Susy had been "thrown on the world at seventeen" (p. 26) at the death of her "weak wastrel of a father" (p. 26). Like Lily, she is forced to live the life of a rotating guest of her rich friends; she will do dreary jobs like answering letters or entertaining the children in exchange for food, shelter, and last year's clothes. But, unlike Lily, Susy has managed to distance herself from her friends. Unlike the other women of her set, who blithely make promises they don't keep, Susy has a "masculine respect for her word" (p. 8). She displays a basic sensitivity to art and ideas similar to that of Lily Bart. Susy laments her "hateful, useless love of beauty . . . the curse it had always been to her, the blessing it might have been if only she had had the

material means to gratify and to express it!" (p. 192). Nick notes that "Susy was not a great reader: her store of facts was small, and she had grown up among people who dreaded ideas as much as if they had been a contagious disease. But . . . when [he] had put a book in her hand or read a poem to her, her swift intelligence had instantly shed a new light on the subject, and, penetrating to its depths, had extracted from them whatever belonged to her" (p. 184).

Born a generation after Lily, Susy is more practical and has had the freedom to learn to take care of herself. She has become very adept at "managing." And, unlike Lily, she does not have to worry about her reputation, because among her friends no situation is thought to be compromising.

Nick Lansing is the typical artistic Wharton hero. Susy's love for him is the best demonstration of her superiority. Considered poor by his friends' standards, although he has a "pittance" (p. 16) and could afford to attend Harvard,<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Unlike The House of Mirth, which depicts Lily's and Selden's backgrounds in great detail, The Glimpses of the Moon just touches on the histories of Susy and Nick. The reader is told only that Susy has a "weak wastrel of a father" who "went to pieces" (p. 26) and that Nick has a "pittance." Undoubtedly, the two come from established New York families, for the early action of the work takes place in New York, but this is all the reader knows. This dearth of information reflects the lack of interest in the backgrounds or problems of other people that is common to their world.



he had graduated from college with "the large resolve not to miss anything" (p. 14). He has a "lively imagination [and] inexhaustible interest in every form of beauty and strangeness and folly" (p. 15). He has concluded, however, that his literary and scholarly talents are not marketable: "Of the thin volume of sonnets which a friendly publisher had launched for him, just seventy copies had been sold; and though his essay on 'Chinese Influences in Greek Art' had created a passing stir, it had resulted in controversial correspondence and dinner invitations rather than in more substantial benefits" (p. 16). Nick has resigned himself to "poverty" and bachelorhood.

When Susy meets Nick, her first thought is "'I'd rather have a husband like that than a steam-yacht'" (p. 6). This comment accurately reflects the values of her world. Not wanting to make a life-long career of living on her friends, Susy realizes that she will have to marry eventually, "but she was going to wait till she found some one who combined the maximum of wealth with at least a minimum of companionableness" (p. 7). Susy, like everyone around her, looks on marriage as a business venture. As a pauper, she must, according to social rules, find a wealthy husband. But, against all common sense, Nick and Susy fall in love. They decide that they must not see each other again. Susy says, "'Half the women I know who've had lovers have had them for the fun of sneaking and lying about it; but the other

half have been miserable. And I should be miserable,'" so she does not want to be Nick's mistress, nor does she want to follow the example of the artistic but impoverished Nat and Grace Fulmer, who live in cheerful chaos in the backwaters of New Hampshire with their five children (p. 21). "Poor Nat, whose pictures nobody bought, had gone to seed so terribly-- and Grace, at twenty-nine, would never again be anything but the woman of whom people say, 'I can remember her when she was lovely'" (p. 18).

Susy devises a plan, however, that will allow them to have at least a year of respectable happiness. She and Nick will marry, and they will be able to live on their wedding checks and to stay in the houses their wealthy friends will offer. But they will agree that whenever either of them gets the opportunity to make a wealthy match, he or she will be released. That Susy and Nick could make such a bargain shows the status of marriage in their world of "busy people who, having nothing to do, perpetually pursue their inexorable task from one end of the earth to the other" (p. 195), and to whom "love and finery and bridge and dining out were seemingly all on the same plane" (p. 78). Like Lily Bart, Susy disdains the triviality and dullness of her friends. She thinks, "Oh, the monotony of those faces--the faces one always knew, whether one knew the people they belonged to or not!" (p. 195).

The state of marriage in Susy's world is summed up best by the

comment made by eight-year-old Clarissa Vanderlyn. The child asks Susy if she is going to be divorced soon. When Susy asks what made her think so, Clarissa replies, "'Because you look so awfully happy'" (p. 42).

Nick and Susy's agreement puts their relationship on a higher level than those of their associates. As Susy says, "'We've not married to spy and lie and nag each other; we've formed a partnership for our mutual advantage'" (p. 49). However, the arrangement has not taken into account the fact that Nick and Susy love each other. Wharton lapses into mawkish romanticism in describing their alliance, speaking of the "mysterious interweaving of their lives which had enclosed them one in the other like the flower in its sheath!" (p. 255). Nick describes his relationship with Susy as "the one complete companionship he had ever known . . ." (p. 17, ellipses Wharton's) and thinks of her as "someone with whom, by some unheard-of miracle, joys above the joys of friendship were to be tasted, but who, even through these fleeting ecstasies, remained simply and securely his friend. . . . Never had he more thoroughly enjoyed the things he had always enjoyed. A good dinner had never been as good to him, a sunset as beautiful" (p. 65). Marriage has even inspired him to start a novel, and "the fact that [Susy] was his wife gave purpose and continuity to his scattered impulses and a mysterious glow of consecration to his task" (p. 64). It is ironic

that he can view his wife and his marriage as hallowed inspirations while he also thinks of Susy as "his property . . . she was his, he had chosen her" (p. 64).

Susy's relationship with Nick, as well as his attitude towards her, demonstrates the position of women in her world. She realizes that most of her friends' greatest happiness consists of having activity-packed days, seeing and being seen, and acquiring clothes and jewels, with the ultimate satisfaction coming from being the first of one's circle to discover a new designer or style. Susy now looks at this existence "as no more than a show: a jolly show which it would have been a thousand pities to miss, but which, if the need arose, they could get up and leave at any moment--provided that they left it together" (p. 80). Susy has completely submerged her identity in her husband's, and "whatever came to her now interested her only as something more to be offered up to Nick" (p. 102).

Ironically, Susy's burying of her self leads to the trouble in her marriage. In their lives as parasites, Nick and Susy have had to make moral compromises: to keep quiet about their friends' infidelities, occasionally to live completely on charity, to pretend to accept ideas with which they disagree. They have had to devise their own ethical codes. Nick describes his as "a short set of 'mays' and 'mustn'ts' which immensely simplified his course. There were things a fellow put up with for the sake of certain

definite and otherwise unattainable advantages; there were other things he wouldn't traffic with at any price" (pp. 25-26). Susy also has her code, but Nick, with almost unconscious condescension, views hers as one of practicality. She will "manage" when she has to, and will be guided only by "an innate scorn of most of the objects of human folly" (p. 26). Nick thinks that Susy "accepted in advance the necessity of ruining one's self for something, but was resolved to discriminate firmly between what was worth it and what wasn't" (p. 26). Nick's ethical sense, while placing him above his society, gives him a priggishness comparable to Lawrence Selden's (although Nick does realize that women are subject to greater temptations and are not so free to be moral as men are).

The incident of the cigars demonstrates both Nick's stubborn morality and Susy's abandonment of her own standards. In attempting to take four boxes of Strefford's cigars from their borrowed honeymoon villa, Susy had lowered herself to do something for Nick that she would have "scorned" to do for herself (p. 33). Nick does not see the difference, and the incident leads to their first disagreement.

The cigar episode foreshadows the Ellie Vanderlyn affair, which breaks up the marriage. Nick is offended by Susy's "managing" (in return for the use of her house in Venice, Ellie has asked Susy to mail letters she has written to her husband, so that he will think

that she is off taking a "cure" rather than a holiday with her lover), but Susy must "manage" if the couple is to stay together. Indeed, Nick has been too fastidious to try to do any of the managing himself and had gratefully left it all to Susy. The couple are oppressed mainly by their lack of money in a society that deifies the dollar. As hangers-on, they cannot afford to be too ethically discriminating. Susy thinks, "Oh, the blessed moral freedom that wealth conferred!" (p. 177). After their separation, caused by the disagreement over Susy's helping Ellie when she knew that Nick would forbid it if he had been aware of what she was doing, Nick views himself and Susy as victims of circumstances and their environment. "The fault was doubtlessly neither hers nor his, but that of the world they had grown up in and of their own moral contempt for it and physical dependence on it, of his half-talents and her half-principles, of the something in them both that was not stout enough to resist nor yet pliant enough to yield" (p. 166). Viewed this way, Susy's plight is very similar to that of Lily Bart, who loved the luxury of the world of her friends, but was too much of a lady to scheme to get it.

Nick and Susy are victimized by the aversion of their world to "unpleasantness." They are well trained in glossing over disagreements and unfortunate events. They make the drive to Venice after the cigar incident "particularly jolly: both Susy

and Lansing had had too long a discipline in the art of smoothing things over not to make a special effort to hide from each other the ravages of their first disagreement. But, deep down and invisible, the disagreement remained" (p. 32). Although there is less hypocrisy in Nick and Susy's world than in those of the previously discussed works, chiefly because here everyone is too self-absorbed to care what other people are doing, there is still a lack of communication. Nick does not understand that Susy took the cigars for him and does not realize that she could "walk away from the jolly show" with him. Although he had ceased to take their bargain seriously and thought that she had too, after their separation, he believes that she does want her freedom in order to make a better match. Like Selden, he is all too ready to believe the worst of a woman he loves. After their quarrel over Susy's helping Ellie (during which he said, "'Talking it over won't help'"), Nick leaves the villa (p. 111). He later writes Susy a note and waits to get an answer, picturing his wife crying in her room. He thinks affectionately, "Poor, foolish child" (p. 127). But when the messenger returns and tells him that Susy had gone out, "as if," Nick thinks, "nothing had happened, as if his whole world and hers had not crashed in ruins at their feet," his pride is so wounded that he decides that he is never going back (p. 128). He later sees Susy out with

Strefford and Gillow, but he does not speak to her, although doing so might have brought a reconciliation (p. 129). Without asking Susy, he decides unilaterally that she does not care about him or his standards, and he leaves to sulk in Genoa.

Susy had been devastated by their quarrel. Her way of coping is to go out with others rather than staying by herself, a fact that Nick does not understand. After their separation, she wants a reconciliation, but does not write to Nick and waits to hear from him. Like Nick, she feels that talking will not resolve a misunderstanding and thinks, "If the other person did not understand at the first word, at the first glance even, subsequent elucidation served only to deepen the obscurity" (p. 279). Like May and Newland Archer, Susy and Nick live in an emotional "deaf-and-dumb asylum" (AOI, p. 359).

Susy writes to Nick only to ask for her freedom when she plans to marry Strefford. When the two meet in Paris to "talk things over," a confrontation she has asked for because she wants to see Nick, she does not tell him that she has decided not to marry Strefford, and the encounter is awkward and embarrassed. Before she sees her husband, Susy thinks "'If he doesn't see that I am different, in spite of appearances . . . if in all these months it hasn't come over him, what's the use of trying to make him see it now?'" (p. 337).

Nick and Susy have been forced to renounce each other because



of their seeming moral differences. Nick feels that he must leave Susy so that she will not corrupt him and so that she will have the chance to make the wealthy marriage that he thinks she needs. Susy believes that she must give up Nick so that he can make a better alliance. Their new love interests are, typically, representative of the best of their world. Like Jim Ralston and May Archer, Charles Strefford and Coral Hicks are essentially good people, who are as victimized by their society as anyone else, although marriage to either of them would represent the oppression of that society. Strefford is good-natured, basically kind, and devoted to Susy. Indeed, had he the money to do so, he probably would have asked her to marry him before she married Nick. When he unexpectedly receives the title of Lord Altringham, he becomes a true conservative product of his world as he takes on the responsibilities that come with his money and position. He does not have Nick's artistic sensitivity; he thinks of art exhibits as social occasions that can be as much fun as the races if one's friends are in attendance. (Nick, of course, prefers to go to museums when they are practically deserted.) Strefford shows both his lack of hypocrisy and his knowledge of himself when he declares that the only thing that lasts is "the hold of the things we all think we could do without . . . comforts, luxuries, the atmosphere of ease . . . above all, the power to get away from dulness and

monotony, from constraints and uglinesses'" (p. 160).

Coral Hicks, unlike Susy and most of the other women Nick knows has a love of learning and a disdain for trivial pleasures. She is straightforward and occasionally (this is an admirable quality to Nick) "womanly, pleading and almost humble" (p. 185). However, she is interested only in facts, and she has "little imagination and less poetry" (p. 183).

Susy and Nick are able to return to each other only because they are married. If, at the beginning of the novel, Nick had been married to Coral and Susy to Strefford, their story would have paralleled Newland Archer's and Ellen Olenska's. Ironically, their socially-decreed marital relationship saves Nick and Susy from spending their lives with people they don't love. Indeed, Susy feels that in not marrying Strefford, she has done "one good thing." Before her reconciliation with Nick, she is prepared, like Kate Clephane, to take consolation from this single heroic act.

That Susy and Nick are able to love each other honorably only because they are married shows the work's basic upholding of the institution of marriage. Nick and Susy have made the right moral choice, because they are conforming to the older codes of society which are unlike the easier standards of their divorce-ridden world. They have triumphed over the oppression of the shallowness of their circle and have refused to surrender to its easy values, although doing so would make their

lives more comfortable.

The book shows the almost illogical ties that marriage has on a couple. Susy realizes that "the influence of a marriage begun in mutual understanding is too deep not to reassert itself even in the moment of flight and denial" (p. 280). Grace Fulmer tells Susy that she doesn't mind Nat's flirtation with his patron Violet Melrose, because, as Susy later explains it, "'she and Nat belong to each other. They can't help it, she thinks, after having been through such a lot [of painful things] together'" (p. 336). Later, Susy realizes that what is important is "'not the things [but] the togetherness'" (p. 350). Even Nelson Vanderlyn says of his former wife, "'There are some of our old times I don't suppose I shall ever forget, but they make me feel kindly to her, and not angry'" (p. 278). When Nick returns for Susy and meets her just as she is leaving to go after him, he says, "'We're married--isn't that all that matters? Oh, I know I've behaved like a brute . . . But that's not the point, you see. The point is that we're married . . . Married . . . Doesn't it mean something to you, something--inexorable? It does to me'" (p. 348).

The most positive aspect of marriage presented in the book is that marriage permits Susy and Nick to grow and develop. Susy believes that her short time with Nick was "a life unreal indeed in its setting, but so real in its essentials . . . she saw how

much it had given her besides the golden flush of her happiness, the sudden flowering of sensuous joy in heart and body . . . the deep disquieting sense of something that Nick and love had taught her . . . that reached out beyond love and beyond Nick" (p. 194). These new moral values that her life with Nick have given her make it impossible for Susy to marry Strefford. When she refuses to do so, she feels that "she was herself again, Nick's Susy, and no one else's" (p. 270). Nick has also changed, becoming more tolerant and less prudish. He says that he has been "a cursed arrogant ass" (p. 348), and when Susy tearfully admits that she never sent back the bracelet Ellie Vanderlyn had given her as a reward for her help in the deception of Nelson (and has even pawned it to pay for her and Nick's second honeymoon), "her confession [breaks] up the frozen pride about his heart, and [humbles] him to the earth" (p. 363).

Because they have matured, Nick and Susy realize that they will be able to overcome their lack of money and live a life of cheerful semi-poverty. Besides, there is indication that Nick will be able to make money from his writing, for he has sold some travel articles by the end of the novel. They have learned that there are more important things in life than luxuries or even security. However, they are not totally blind to the realities of life. Susy thinks of money as "the perpetual serpent in her Eden, to be bribed, fed, sent to sleep with such

scraps as she could beg, borrow, or steal for it. And she supposed it was the price that fate meant her to pay for her blessedness, and was surer than ever that the blessedness was worth it" (p. 355).

The Glimpses of the Moon, in spite of its happy ending, conforms to the pattern of the works previously discussed. The similarity of the works is most evident in their protagonists. Nick Lansing, like Newland Archer and Ethan Frome, is intellectually and morally superior to those around him. Susy, like Ellen Olenska and Lily Bart, is also superior to her contemporaries. She has some appreciation of artistic and intellectual things, although hers is more rudimentary and instinctive than Nick's. Like Ellen and Lily as well as Lizzie Hazeldean, Charlotte Lovell, and Kate Clephane, she demonstrates her superiority chiefly by loving a superior man.

Although The Glimpses of the Moon is one of the strongest statements of its author's belief in marriage, like the other works it shows the deadening effects of the institution as it depicts such unions as that of the Vanderlyns. The institution of marriage as practiced in Nick and Susy's world is deadening and oppressive.

The renunciation theme of The Glimpses of the Moon differs from that of the other works because in renouncing each other (even though it is supposedly for the other's "own good"), the

married protagonists are conforming to the false values of their repressive society. It is when they are reunited that they, like the earlier protagonists, particularly Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska, conform to society's finer standards. Like the other novels, The Glimpses of the Moon shows the attempt of society to make the protagonists conform to its standards. The protagonists, however, overcome the false values of their world and live up to their own finer moral standards. Because these standards uphold marriage, Nick and Susy stay married, which allows the book to have a happy ending.

The Glimpses of the Moon, like The Age of Innocence in its depiction of the relationship between Newland and May Archer, shows the unexplainable bonds of marriage that come simply from the couple's making a public commitment and living together. The later work provides one explanation of why Edith and Teddy stayed married for twenty-eight years and why the divorce was so upsetting to her. Because they conform to the basic standards and codes of society, Nick and Susy are able to overcome the oppression of their world, as Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska, Lawrence Selden and Lily Bart, and to a lesser extent, Lizzie Hazeldean, Charlotte Lovell, Delia Ralston, and Kate Clephane do with their spiritual triumph over the deadening forces of their societies. Like the other works, The Glimpses of the Moon shows the value of upholding what Wharton considered to be the finest and best standards of society.

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