

SOCIAL PROBLEMS FOUND IN EDITH WHARTON'S NOVELS

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## PREFACE

The purpose of this thesis is to discover the extent of Edith Wharton's use of social problems in her novels. I have tried to determine the accuracy of her understanding of society and its problems. I have found by reading her autobiography, A Backward Glance, that she had firsthand knowledge of society. The research for this study has been made from original sources. My conclusions are based altogether on a reading and interpretation of her principal novels.

Since I have some conclusions in each chapter, I have not thought it necessary to have a formal chapter of conclusion. Instead I have added a few paragraphs of conclusion at the end of Chapter V.

Whenever possible, I have used the original editions. In a very few cases, however, I have not been able to obtain the original editions, and in such cases I have used the reprinted editions.

## CHAPTER I

### THE AUTHOR'S ACQUAINTANCE WITH SOCIAL PROBLEMS

To those readers who can become enthusiastic about New York society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century the novels of Edith Wharton can be recommended with few reservations. The society she deals with is composed of few members. The old families, with many Dutch names persisting, form a narrow group which is known as the Four Hundred of New York City. It is concerning this group that she writes many of her most interesting novels. With these people as living figures she presents page after page of life with all its heights and depths of emotion and feeling. She draws the picture realistically; before the reader is aware of what is happening, he finds himself a member of this society. He feels the importance of each mood and incident, and he sympathizes with the characters when they are overcome with the complexities of their existence. When the reader finds his friends joyful and happy, he himself responds to this mood. The world has become a place of charm and beauty, and he is filled with the wonders of creation.

The very fact that The Age of Innocence received the Pulitzer Prize as the best novel of the year would substantiate the statement that Edith Wharton is at her best when

she is giving us a picture of old New York society. Quite a number of her novels deal with this nineteenth century New York society. Her family was a member of this group, and this society forms a background for her childhood and youth. The author is particularly impressed with New York society in its summer setting of Newport. When she describes the women's archery club meeting, a clear picture of lovely young girls in floating silks and muslin is visible.<sup>1</sup> All the women attending these meetings wore veils; the author impresses upon the reader the importance of veils to the young ladies of this day. She tells us that these gods and goddesses who attended these archery club meetings were the prototypes of her early novels.<sup>2</sup>

Edith Wharton describes the dinners given by her mother and father. She describes the bare sloping shoulders and voluminous skirts of the ladies surrounded by rosy, white-whiskered gentlemen. This society enjoyed dinners because there were few balls; operas were just beginning to be popular. The author mentions the fact that all of these amusements seem quite mild and leisurely in comparison with those of the new century.<sup>3</sup> The author writes of the fondness of the New Yorker for European trips. She continues

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<sup>1</sup>Edith Wharton, A Backward Glance, p. 46.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 61.

that most of her family's friends were going to Europe or just getting back from Europe. One interesting fact Edith Wharton records concerning New York society of that day was that differences in ages did not divide society. The young girls wished to be invited to the homes of the young married women, and they wished to be respected by the older men.<sup>4</sup> New York society was small, and the members sought each other in large gatherings.

When the author in her autobiography describes lawn tennis as a new game, her description sounds quite strange to the readers of the twentieth century. The young girls played the game dressed in tight whaleboned dresses; the young gentlemen wore tail coats. The contrast to the way the game is played today is not only amusing but interesting. Another diversion of the New Yorker at Newport was the drive. The women, attired in broccaded dresses and wearing flower-trimmed bonnets with tulle bows, drove down Bellevue Avenue. During the drive they might make several calls.<sup>5</sup> The calls must have been very boresome and monotonous, because Edith Wharton writes that the next generation of young married women refused to call. They left only their cards.<sup>6</sup>

The society of her mother's and father's group made a deep impression on Edith Wharton; this is quite evident by

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

the clear pictures she draws of this group in her stories. She gives these pictures great prominence in The Age of Innocence. In other novels she used this society and its activities chiefly as a background. She even states in her autobiography that Henry James, her very dear friend, belonged to the old America out of which she also came, and she advances the idea that he may have been searching for a similar society when he remained so many years in Europe. She also mentions the fact that many of James's French and English friends had no idea New York life in the late nineteenth century was so like the life of an English cathedral town or a French provincial town.<sup>7</sup> With her profound knowledge of this society she was able to search these people for any problems that brought conflicts into their lives.

Edith Wharton's knowledge of society was not restricted to that of New York. She also knew something of New England society, for her husband's family lived in Boston, where she often went with him to visit their people. In her autobiography she contrasted the New Yorker's love for travel with the disregard of the New Englander for the rest of the world. The New England people were content at home. When they did travel in Europe, they frequented only little "colonies" of compatriots.<sup>8</sup> They had no respect

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 62.

for Americans who forced their way into European society. They felt that such Americans did this because they were shut off from society in America.

It is true that Edith Wharton excels in describing the farm life in New England. She uses the group of people found in these little deserted villages. Ethan Frome and Summer depict New England farmers, villagers, and outlaws. The author became greatly interested in these people during the summers she resided in Massachusetts. She determined during that time to give the reading public a different picture from that one presented by Mary Wilkins and Sarah Orne Jewett.<sup>9</sup> Her deep study of this group proves intensely interesting to her. She displays her sympathy for the circumstances which bind them to a life devoid of hope.

The author's insight into English life was received from her visits to Hill Hall, the estate of Mr. Charles Hunter, in Essex. Mrs. Hunter gathered around her many people with varied tastes; however, there was always a nucleus of intimate friends with artistic and literary tastes. In this home Edith Wharton spent many happy hours, because many of her close friends were visitors also. Mrs. Hunter was quite a celebrity-hunter and was never

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 293.

happier than when she had a number of celebrities among her visitors. Henry James was often at Hill House and provided Mrs. Hill with the exact literary note that she wished. Through Mrs. Hunter's kindness and generosity, Edith Wharton learned much of English social life and social problems.

Edith Wharton devoted a number of pages in her autobiography to the description of the French salon that existed before the World War. Through her close friend, the novelist Paul Bourget, the author met the Comtesse de Fitz-James. Madame de Fitz-James's salon had much prestige at the time that the author met her.<sup>10</sup> Edith Wharton described vividly the three large drawing rooms where Madame de Fitz-James received her guests. It was only on certain days that guests were received in the salon. Since most literary personages found their way to this particular salon, Edith Wharton met many important people here and records that she listened and took part in much intelligent conversation. There were many diplomats to be found in Madame de Fitz-James's salon. The author writes that the whole purpose of the French salon was to satisfy the national taste for general conversation. As a usual thing the women listened and the men talked. No one thing was to be discussed to the exclusion of other subjects. The artistic, literary, and political were to be so blended that none predominated.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 265-282.

As Edith Wharton describes at length her years of experience in mingling with these various social groups, it is not fallacious to assume that in her relationships with them she penetrated the lives of many people. As she studied and weighed their problems, she naturally judged them by her own philosophy concerning such problems. In balancing each social problem with her philosophy she came to certain conclusions; in this manner she determined the best way to settle particular problems. These conclusions which she formed after due consideration will be found in her final treatment of all problems concerning all societies. In her autobiography she writes of her wide range of social groups. This association gave her excellent opportunity for observation and study.

Edith Wharton in her autobiography has shown a long acquaintance with the problems of love and marriage. In the first few pages of A Backward Glance she describes the courtship of her mother and father. The author does not need to tell us that the union was a happy one. That is obvious as she gives the details of the approaching marriage. Edith Wharton's mother was poor; her father was a rich man's son.<sup>11</sup> When her parents married, her wealthy grandfather gave the couple a trip to Cuba; later they

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., pp. 16-21.

enjoyed a European tour. According to the author, there was never a rift in her parents' union. When the author tells the reader that both her parents insisted on the use of good English, their congeniality and harmony of ideas are evident. Thus Edith Wharton's earliest glimpse into marriage is one in which much love and happiness predominate. This union gave her the happiest childhood possible. It is not erroneous to assume that her happy childhood made her very sympathetic toward those unfortunate children of divided parentage.

Edith Wharton was a very close friend of the Paul Bourgets, and in this marriage she found another union which, she felt, exemplified the complete understanding between two people. She writes that Paul Bourget was interested in the art of medieval and Renaissance Italy, but that his wife had a more sensitive understanding of the magic of scenes and places. Mrs. Bourget felt that she had been put on earth to be her husband's shadow, and she wanted him to experience great success in life.<sup>12</sup> In summing up this relationship Edith Wharton has made visible to us a great love. The author describes various trips she takes with the Bourgets. She knew them as a couple, but separately too. From time to time she enjoyed their company, and she was able to sense

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp. 103-105.

the depth of their devotion. These people were not passing figures to the author; they became her life-long friends, and from them she learned much of the marriage of true minds.

During one of her visits in London Edith Wharton had the pleasure of meeting Mrs. Alfred Meynell, a writer of poems and essays. The author was invited to Mrs. Meynell's home, and there she was struck with the deference and awe which this woman received in her own house. Her husband and her children treated her as if she were a sovereign. When she spoke, she was attentively listened to, and her husband clearly showed that he felt her words on a certain subject were the final words.<sup>13</sup> The prestige surrounding Mrs. Meynell in her household was astonishing to Edith Wharton, because the author sought the opposite conditions in her home life. She wished to get away from this prestige and be perfectly natural in her own home. In the Humphrey Ward home the author found the same prestige existing as found in the Meynell home. Thus again she is able to view these homes founded on the strongest of marriage ties, and these experiences along with many others give her first-hand knowledge of love and marriage.

In her autobiography Edith Wharton draws our attention to another devoted couple in her repertoire of friends.

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 223.

Monsieur Laugel, a friend interested in arts and letters, had married an American lady who was very beautiful. According to the author this couple lived a very happy life. After his wife's death Monsieur Laugel printed a small volume of poems which he did not address to the young bride in all her youth and freshness; he addressed his poems to his old and dying wife, as she lay helpless and statue-like for months before death released her.<sup>14</sup> In knowing and conversing with this man Edith Wharton glimpsed a life that had known much happiness and contentment.

Edith Wharton often deals with single women in society. She seems to be particularly concerned with the lives of such women. In her autobiography she speaks of a Miss Violet Paget, whom she met in Italy. Paul Bourget introduced her to this lady, who used the pen name of Vernon Lee. When the author first knew Miss Paget she found her taking care of an invalid brother.<sup>15</sup> Edith Wharton recognized at once the intellectual superiority of Miss Paget and acknowledged she was truly a great talker. Edith Wharton specifically notes that in her lifetime she had known only three women who could be classed as great talkers and that Miss Paget was one of them. She helped Edith Wharton much in contributing to the author her knowledge of Italian villas.

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 292.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., pp. 130-134.

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 292.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., pp. 130-134.

Miss Paget's advice and aid on the writing of certain books greatly encouraged Edith Wharton. At the time Edith Wharton met Miss Paget, she had written only two or three books, and she gives Miss Paget the credit for giving her a great boost at this time.

As Edith Wharton glimpsed the married people whom she called her friends, it is quite evident that she compared their lives with her own married life. Very little reference is made in her autobiography to her married life. She often mentions her husband when she is writing of certain trips they took or homes in which they visited. However, toward the last of the book the author quietly mentions her husband's growing ill-health. She writes that he had been in ill-health from time to time since the first years of their married life, and that year after year his condition had grown worse.<sup>16</sup> She speaks tenderly of his sweetness of temper and of his great enjoyment of life. Though he made a great struggle against neurasthenia, the struggle was all in vain, because there could be no real recovery from this disease. She tells how difficult such borderland cases are and how her husband's family would not acknowledge the seriousness of her husband's condition. Finally all realized he could not continue his

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 326.

normal life, and she writes how her friends and his helped and sympathized with her during these difficult years. Never does Edith Wharton feel anything but kindness and sympathy for her husband. In her own life she seems to exemplify her belief in marriage as a lasting thing. Perhaps this experience of living with a husband afflicted in such a way gave her a broader sympathy toward all people. Such disappointments sometimes mellow the lives of those who share them and make them more understanding and sympathetic.

Edith Wharton truly believed in the marriage of true minds. Even though she did not experience this in her marriage, she felt that it was possible for two people to be married in this way. In her autobiography the author writes:

The real marriage of true minds is for any two people to possess a sense of humor or irony pitched in exactly the same key, so that their joint glances at any subject cross like inter-arching search-lights.<sup>17</sup>

The author knew that this quality existed in only a few marriages, but she also felt that the minds of two friends could possess the same feeling for life and its experiences. She speaks of Henry James as thinking and feeling as she does toward literature and the arts.

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 173.

Edith Wharton does not mention divorce one time in her autobiography. Yet after her novels have been read, it is quite evident to the reader that she knew and understood a great deal about divorce. It has been shown that she knew many different types of society. Certain people in these groups were her close friends; others she did not know so well. Yet she observed the people and noted the problems which confronted them. She noted particularly the attitude toward divorce held by the old New York of the nineteenth century. She saw the attitude altered to a certain degree in the early twentieth century; and before her death in 1937 she saw the attitude completely altered. This same kind of observation toward divorce was made by the author when she enjoyed the social life of London and Paris. She studied their attitudes toward divorce, and she employed these attitudes in several of her novels.

When I say Edith Wharton observed people and then used them in her novels, I do not mean to imply that she used the actual people she observed. That would be an erroneous statement. In her autobiography Edith Wharton writes that all of her characters are conceived by her creative brain.<sup>18</sup> Through her wide acquaintance with society she was better qualified to give life and reality to these creations of her

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 200.

imagination. Edith Wharton expresses what she has done in character development when she writes:

Experience, observation, the looks and ways and words of 'real people,' all melted and fused in the white heat of the creative fires--such is the mingled stuff which the novelist pours into the firm mould of his narrative.<sup>19</sup>

Thus her imaginary people become individuals of problems she has observed. When she fuses some of her ideas concerning people and problems with the problems which have arisen in her plot, the novel is well begun. With her philosophy about divorce influencing the current attitude toward divorce, conflicting elements will ensue. When the author finally unites all elements, the novel is written.

If a person only reads a few of Edith Wharton's novels, he is sure to note the maladjustment of the literary man or artist toward the society in which he finds himself. The reader can easily sense the sympathy of the author toward such a maladjusted individual. Perhaps she feels sympathy toward him because she has experienced the same maladjustment. In her autobiography she often describes society's attitude toward her literary efforts. Six months after her father's death Edith Wharton returned to New York. Of this return she wrote:

My old friends welcomed me on our return, and there followed two gay but uneventful New York

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 211.

winters. I had never ceased to be a great reader, but had almost forgotten my literary dreams. I could not believe that a girl like myself could ever write anything worth reading, and my friends would certainly have agreed with me. No one in our set had any intellectual interests.<sup>20</sup>

Again when Edith Wharton goes to Boston to visit her husband's relatives she experiences the same maladjustment. Of this occasion she wrote:

I remember once saying that I was a failure in Boston (where we used to go to stay with my husband's family) because they thought I was too fashionable to be intelligent, and a failure in New York because they were afraid I was too intelligent to be fashionable.<sup>21</sup>

Not only did she feel maladjusted at home, but she didn't seem to find any better adjustment elsewhere. In her autobiography she tells how her New York friends felt her more formidable and less "smart" after she had become a writer.

When Edith Wharton really makes a literary success, she writes of the reaction of her friends and relatives toward her success:

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

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 119.

Only one eccentric widowed cousin, living a life of lonely invalidism, turned to my novels for occasional distraction, and had the courage to tell me so.<sup>22</sup>

But not always is Edith Wharton to be isolated intellectually. She writes:

From a childhood and youth of complete intellectual isolation--so complete that it accustomed me never to be lonely except in company--I passed, in my early thirties, into an atmosphere of the rarest understanding, the richest and most varied mental comradeship.<sup>23</sup>

When Edith Wharton meets and becomes a close friend of Henry James, she finds the intellectual friendship that she has needed to stimulate her attempts at writing. Their friendship was one of long length. Henry James showed Edith Wharton that genius was not an indivisible element, but one which was variously appointed; therefore the system of dividing people into geniuses and non-geniuses was quite an inadequate way of estimating human nature and its complexities. The author and James both considered Walt Whitman the greatest of American poets. The author felt that James's admiration and response to Whitman's appeal showed how divergent intelligences walk together.<sup>24</sup>

It is true that even though Edith Wharton found much intellectual comradeship with Henry James, in the society

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., pp. 143-144.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 169.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 184.

of old New York they found themselves sadly maladjusted. They sensed the indifference to all that they held important. Literary people were looked down on; they were considered tedious and strange. Perhaps this is one reason why James lived most of his life in Europe. It is true that many of the literary group took refuge in Europe. Later in her life Edith Wharton made her home in France, but she never gave up her American citizenship. She always considered America her home, although she seemed to find peace and contentment in Paris.<sup>25</sup>

Edith Wharton speaks of Egerton Winthrop as one of her oldest acquaintances. He filled her youth with intelligent understanding. Though he was much older than she, the author calls him one of the most stimulating of talkers when he was in a congenial group. This man was very sociable; yet because of his love for the intellectual he was cut off from society. Again the conflict between the man of letters and society is evident. Edith Wharton writes:

As in most provincial societies, the scholars, artists, and men of letters shut themselves obstinately away from the people they despised as 'fashionable,' and the latter did not know how to make the necessary advances to those who lived outside of their little conventions.<sup>26</sup>

Egerton Winthrop felt that Edith Wharton should fill her

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 93.

part in the society in which she had been reared. He was constantly pleading with her to take up her duty toward society. Yet in reality he was a man of letters, and he did much to direct the author into the world of the nineteenth century science.<sup>27</sup> Their friendship continued for years and was never marred by an act or deed.

Edith Wharton pays particular tribute in her autobiography to Walter Berry, who was her friend and literary critic for many years. The author records that he not only encouraged her to write but taught her how to write. She pays him the flattering compliment that he drew forth her writing instinct and taught her the use of it. He never flattered or praised her work; he analysed it and then formed his criticism. After she had written several works, Edith Wharton received searching criticism from Walter Berry. Never did he miss a defect or a fault. She knew that he wished to help her perfect her writing ability. Walter Berry did the author a great favor one time when he told her: "It is easy to see superficial resemblances between things. It takes a first-rate mind to perceive the differences underneath."<sup>28</sup> This man was always searching for the beautiful in architecture, painting, and landscape. To him these beautiful things were stirring and

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 117.

exalting. The author writes that the life of her spirit could not have blossomed without this friendship with Walter Berry. He felt that her soul needed the beauty and spirituality of life, and he gave her his knowledge of it.

With these rare glimpses given to her readers, Edith Wharton convincingly assures us that though she was always lonely in New York society, she could appease her intellectual hunger in the company of her close friends whom I have mentioned. From her experiences of social maladjustment in her society, the author felt the importance of the problem. In several of her novels the author shows her creative people confronted with this same maladjustment. Their final adjustment shows that the author feels that a partial adjustment is possible. From reading the autobiography I feel sure that the author made the maladjusted artists of her novels more real because of her similar experiences.

There is another class of maladjusted individuals to whom Edith Wharton makes frequent reference. She was greatly interested in the problem of the nouveau riche and their attempt to enter the social circle of New York. In her autobiography Edith Wharton mentions an interesting incident concerning her father's and uncle's Madeira.<sup>29</sup> She writes that she was attending a dinner at the home of

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 58.

one of the nouveau riche soon after her marriage. She was pressed to drink some "famous Newbold Madeira." The author makes clear that the nouveau riche made this pressing gesture in all sincerity. Of course the celebrity of the cellars belonged to her father's and uncle's generation. The nouveau riche were only concerned with the excellence of the beverage; they had no idea of her connection with it. This is merely cited to show that the author had been associated with the nouveau riche and was acquainted with them as a people in her New York society.

Again in her autobiography Edith Wharton refers to her writing The Custom of the Country, one of her novels, which deals with the nouveau riche. In this novel the author shows how Undine Spragg, representing the nouveau riche, attempts to conquer not only New York society but French society also. The author states that her purpose in writing this book was to record the ravages of this particular woman on the society in which she found herself.<sup>30</sup> This is evidence again of the author's interest in and understanding of this group of people. In only one other place in her autobiography does the author mention the nouveau riche. This is found when she is relating a story told to her by Abbe Mungier, whom she met at Madam

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 182.

de Fitz-James's salon.<sup>31</sup> The abbe tells a story concerning the marriage of two social "climbers," who had invited all fashionable Paris to their wedding. With these specific references which Edith Wharton made toward the nouveau riche, the reader can easily understand her interest in this group and her knowledge of them.

Some critics have asserted that Edith Wharton only wrote realistically when she pictured old New York. However, direct passages in her autobiography make this statement a fallacy. Edith Wharton was well aware of the economic problem found in remote New England villages. She mentions her delight in penetrating the remoter parts of Massachusetts and New Hampshire. She describes the discovery of derelict villages with Georgian churches. The author tells how she explored the sleepy valleys and how her car stuck in the ruts of the roads; the only repair man was the village blacksmith.<sup>32</sup> Then Edith Wharton makes the statement that Ethan Frome and Summer, whose setting was New England, were written after many excursions among villages asleep in a decaying state. She describes the people as melancholy and slow-speaking and states that their conditions had changed very little since they had held their own against Indian raids.

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 280.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 153.

To completely substantiate Edith Wharton's knowledge of the economic problems which faced these New England villagers and farmers, it is necessary to read in her autobiography of her pleasure in writing Ethan Frome.<sup>33</sup> She wished to draw life as realistically as possible as she found it in these shut-off mountain villages of New England. She writes:

In those days the snow-bound villages of Western Massachusetts were still grim places, morally and physically: insanity, incest and slow mental and moral starvation were hidden away behind the paintless wooden house-fronts of the long village streets, or in the isolated farmhouses of the neighbouring hills; and Emily Bronte would have found as savage tragedies in our remoter valleys as in her Yorkshire Moors. In this connection, I may mention that every detail about the colony of drunken mountain outlaws described in Summer was given to me by a rector of the church at Lenox (near which we lived), and that the lonely peak I have called 'the Mountain' was in reality Bear Mountain, an isolated summit not more than twelve miles from our own home. The rector had been fetched there by one of the mountain outlaws to read the Burial Service over a woman of evil reputation; and when he arrived everyone in the house of mourning was drunk, and the service was performed as I have related it.<sup>34</sup>

Edith Wharton writes how the reading public disliked reading such descriptions of the real life found in these villages. She remarks that they would rather read about the beautiful happenings in the lives of these people.

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 293.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., pp. 293-294.

Many of her reading public consisted of New Englanders, and they became indignant when they read of her descriptions in Summer; they protested that her pictures were fictitious and unreal. The author implies that they had refused to recognize the existing conditions in these villages; then she ends with the statement that they had forgotten to read the pages of Hawthorne for the actual life in the New England villages.

One summer while she was in Massachusetts, Edith Wharton decided to finish writing Ethan Frome. It seems that she had started writing it in French a few years before in an effort to perfect her French.<sup>35</sup> As she wrote Ethan Frome, she would read it aloud to her friend and critic, Walter Berry. Berry was as familiar with these villages as the author. He remembered them as they existed before the cars and telephones were known to them, and he confirmed her descriptions as actual ones. The author relates how she talked over page after page of the novel with Walter Berry and how he assured her that the "atmosphere" was accurate. She stresses this statement because an American literary critic had stated that Ethan Frome was an interesting example of a New England story written by an author who knew nothing of New England. Edith Wharton shows

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., pp. 295-296.

the complete error of this statement when she writes the following:

Ethan Frome was written after I had spent ten years in the hill-region where the scene is laid, during which years I had come to know well the aspect, dialect, and mental and moral attitude of the hill-people. The fact that Summer deals with the same class and type as those portrayed in Ethan Frome, and has the same setting, might have sufficed to disprove the legend--but once such a legend is started, it echoes on as long as its subject survives.<sup>36</sup>

The author states that her readers were not as shocked with Ethan Frome as they were with Summer. Yet even it was painful, and it did not have as great success as did her previous books.

This chapter has shown that Edith Wharton was thoroughly acquainted with certain social problems which are found in her novels. In presenting these problems she employs her own philosophy and understanding to bring about a culmination of each problem. Her philosophy, including her utter belief in realistic writing, often causes critics to accuse her of seeing only the base side of life. Nevertheless in Edith Wharton's mind she could never see her characters in any kind of situations except realistic ones. If her characters fitted into a sordid existence, they realistically pictured this life.

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 296.

Since Edith Wharton does attempt realism in whatever she writes, it is only natural that she would be interested in society. In society she would observe carefully the foundations and relationships of the group. In the next chapter I will deal with Edith Wharton's conception of love and marriage. In this chapter I will discuss the way in which the married woman's enthusiasm for women's clubs and faith healers affects her marriage. Likewise I will present the single woman as a problem of the married group. Chapter III will be devoted to the subject of divorce. Specific references will be made to Edith Wharton's different concepts of this major social problem. Free love will be discussed in contrast to divorce. Not only the American attitude toward divorce will be revealed, but the European view will be presented for a study of contrasts. In Chapter IV the discussion will center around the maladjusted individuals in the author's society. Particular attention will be given the literary man or scholar who conflicts with a society that does not understand him. The other maladjusted group is made up of the nouveau riche, whose desire to become a part of the old cultured group creates many conflicts and problems. The final chapter will be devoted to the New Englander's social problem of family relationship arising from economic pressure. In this chapter I will attempt to show how the lack of money created a

disintegrating force in the family relationships of particular New England groups. With these outstanding major social problems studied and discussed, an estimate of Edith Wharton's ability to present clearly social conflicts should be evident.

## CHAPTER II

### LOVE, MARRIAGE, AND CONFLICTING PROBLEMS

The family, which is the foundation of our society, grows out of two other social relationships. The first relationship for the formation of the ideal family is love; the second relationship is marriage, which gives a lasting and enduring quality to love. It is true that marriage may be the culmination of a feeling other than love. Many marriages are said to have been contracted for money, family position, or political reasons, but sociologists and psychologists are agreed that the family relationship growing out of love and marriage is the desired one. In such a union the family grows in well-being and gives the appearance of being cared for and nurtured. One can easily imagine such a family producing well-rounded citizens who not only find fulfillment in their family life, but fulfill their duties capably in the greater world of society.

Edith Wharton as a novelist of social institutions and problems finds the customs of love and marriage of primary importance to her in her delineation of people. She may be considered a satirist by some readers, but when her novels are read in their entirety, her treatment of love and

marriage would discount this idea. By this is meant that a writer who wishes to laugh at love and marriage would handle these two in a much different manner from that used by Edith Wharton. The writer finds now and then two people who are blessed with the ideal love. Many writers have had a name for love such as this. Shakespeare in his sonnet 116 speaks of the "marriage of true minds." Edith Wharton in her autobiography expresses her belief in "a marriage of true minds."<sup>1</sup> Thus it is authentic that Edith Wharton believed such a state of being was possible to mankind. This belief in a mental and spiritual compatibility would be laughed at by the skeptics; they would satirize such an idea with great glee. Yet one of the greatest writers of all ages, William Shakespeare, definitely expresses his belief in it. Thus it may be assumed that a love combining the mental, spiritual, and physical can exist.

When Edith Wharton published The Age of Innocence in 1920, she had no idea that this novel would become a best seller.<sup>2</sup> Her modesty is apparent when she calls this book a rare best seller.<sup>3</sup> She was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for having written this novel. In this novel the author has given the New York society of the eighteen seventies a

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<sup>1</sup>Edith Wharton, A Backward Glance, p. 173.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 369.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

major emphasis, but she has also created two characters, Ellen Olenska and Newland Archer, who were to give her novel a vibrant quality which was quite necessary. The two people were to bring to life again the narrow existences of the old New Yorkers. Their creeds and customs were to be once again in fashion; their problems and final solutions were to become living ones, and old antagonisms and gossip were to become powerful forces to the reader.

It is in the relationship of Ellen Olenska and Newland Archer that Edith Wharton weaves her ideal of three-fold love. The love experienced by these two was not to have its culmination in marriage. The problems resulting from circumstances and the intervention of society would not allow this happy ending. Yet in these two characters Edith Wharton has instilled her ideas of similar thoughts, feelings, and attitudes.

Ellen Olenska has been married at the time she meets Newland Archer. She has left her husband under a shadow of scandal and has come back to New York, which she considers her home. Newland Archer is on the eve of announcing his engagement to Ellen's cousin, May Welland, the night that he meets Ellen. At this first meeting with Ellen Olenska, Archer's only impression of her is that she is creating much talk by her reappearance in New York. He is rather startled at the statement she makes to him concerning her long absence

from New York. When Archer remarks that she has been gone many years from her homeland, Ellen replies: "Oh, centuries and centuries; so long," she said, "that I'm sure I'm dead and buried, and this dear old place is heaven."<sup>4</sup>

At their next meeting Archer realizes that he is attracted to Madame Olenska, and definitely Ellen is attracted to him. She proves this when she asks him to call on her the next day. Clearly, it is not a case of physical attraction. The author presents Ellen as representing much that Archer disapproves of. Perhaps it is her utter candidness and freedom that appeal to Archer. Moreover, Archer cannot help but admire her ease in his presence and her seeming lack of coquetry and pretense. The New York of the eighteen seventies had had no chance to train Ellen Olenska in the art of pretense. She is as free in her conversation, her movements, and her feelings as nature.

When Archer calls on Madame Olenska he is impressed with her home, furniture, and neighborhood. He is also interested to note that she feels no unusual quality in any of her possessions. She cannot reach an understanding with the New York people; never does she feel that they attempt to understand her, and she cannot grow accustomed to this lack of understanding. When Archer tells her that

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<sup>4</sup>Edith Wharton, The Age of Innocence, p. 15.

her friends wish to help her, she questions: "Does no one want to know the truth here, Mr. Archer? The real loneliness is living among all these kind people who only ask one to pretend."<sup>5</sup> When Ellen in the course of the conversation starts to cry, Archer seeks to comfort her. Again Ellen asks the following question: "Does no one cry here, either? I suppose there's no need to, in heaven."<sup>6</sup>

Not only is an excellent picture given of old New York, but Archer has his first deep insight into the depths of this woman's character. His inner consciousness tells him that she represents much for which he yearns. Perhaps the first concrete instance of Archer's interest in Ellen occurs when he sends her yellow roses. Even then he does not admit his interest, but its existence is evident, and it is becoming a potent factor in his life. After each meeting with Ellen Olenska, Archer realizes that in this woman he has found an understanding and sympathy that is illimitable.

When Archer cannot rid himself of Ellen's vision at all hours of the day, he decides to rush his marriage with May and thus end his vacillation between May and Ellen. Refusing Ellen Olenska's invitation to tea, Archer rushes to Florida and begs May to marry him at once. When he returns to New York and sees Ellen, he decides to face the fact of his love for her. He tells Ellen that May does not want to

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 76.

rush the wedding because she feels there might be another woman in his life. Finally when Ellen tells him not to make love to her, he replies: "I have never made love to you, and I never shall. But you are the woman I would have married if it had been possible for either of us."<sup>7</sup> When Archer utters this, Ellen Olenska tells him that he is the one who has made it impossible for them to ever attain the happiness they are due. From her remarks on love and marriage, Archer is given a deep insight into the beauty of this noble woman's character. It is then that he can understand the great attraction she has for him.

Ellen has fallen in love with Archer because he has been kind to her. He has helped in innumerable ways to smooth a place for her in New York society. She has felt his kindness from her first meeting with him. Ellen tells Archer that she has found much similarity in their natures. She says:

The very good people didn't convince me; I felt they'd never been tempted. But you knew; you understood; you had felt the world outside tugging at one with all its golden hands--and yet you hated the things it asks of one: you hated happiness bought by disloyalty and cruelty and indifference. That was what I'd never known before--and it's better than anything I've known.<sup>8</sup>

In the following speech Ellen proves her nobility of character: "Ah, don't let us undo what you've done! I

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 169.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 172.

can't go back now to the other way of thinking. I can't love you unless I give you up."<sup>9</sup> Though Archer is sure that he has never met anyone like Ellen, yet his prejudice will not let him completely trust her sincerity. When she tells him she will never be lonely, she wishes him to know that his love will always keep her happy. Such unselfish love is beyond Archer's understanding. The old New York society knew little of such depth of soul and spirit.

To Archer and to Ellen comes the revelation of that rare thing called love. Both of these people were attracted to each other because they possessed kindness and sympathy for mankind. Their love is an excellent example of "the marriage of true minds." They recognize the fact that their thoughts, their ideas, and their reactions toward life are much the same. Both of them are searching for happiness, but not at the cost of dishonor and cruelty toward others. Though their love cannot have its culmination in marriage, each is aware of the richness of their experience.

In a later novel, Hudson River Bracketed, Edith Wharton conveys the same idea of "the marriage of true minds." Again she gives us a vivid picture of two young people, Halo Spear and Vance Weston, who find a oneness of body,

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 173.

soul, and mind. Halo and Vance do not understand the meaning of their love and cast it aside. At their first meeting Halo reads Coleridge's Kubla Khan to Vance. Although she makes light of the poetry to Vance, she evidences a deep feeling for it by the manner in which she reads it. Vance, who is a writer and poet, is overcome with the beauty of this poem. The author describes him as drunk with the ecstasy produced by the imagery of the lines. The following passage convincingly shows that both people feel the full import of the poetry:

Vance listened enthralled. Her rich voice, modeling the words, gave them a new relief. He was half-aware that her way of speaking was unlike any he had ever heard, but too much under the spell of what she was saying to separate it from the quality of her utterance.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps it is not until the morning that Halo and Vance watch the sunrise on the mountain that they realize their like feeling for literature and scholarly writing. When he recites poetry that he has written, he knows that she will appreciate it. These two young people reside in a world unto themselves; nothing exists for them but the mountain side and the sound of poetry. The poem written by Vance impresses Halo greatly. She shows her vivid imagination and her love of the beautiful when she says:

'Yes--there are beautiful things in it. That image of the city of leaves . . . and the soul's

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<sup>10</sup>Edith Wharton, Hudson River Bracketed, p. 65.

city being built on all the murmurs and rustlings of our impressions, emotions, and instincts . . . ' She laid the page down, and lifted her head, drawing her eyelids together meditatively. 'By the way, do you know what the first temple at Delphi was built of?' She paused, smiling in expectation of his enjoyment. 'Of bird's feathers and honey. Singing and humming! Sweetness and lightness! Isn't that magical?'<sup>11</sup>

In this speech Halo shows her deep understanding of images and her penetrative feeling for nature. Never does she seem more in accord with Vance than at this time. They are two kindred souls who find in the communion of the beauties of nature a like feeling. They have found that agreement of mentalities and spirits which Shakespeare extolled in his sonnets.

Often Halo thought of the beauty of her run-down home. She admitted that the house itself showed undue neglect; yet she felt the surroundings were fairy-like. The streams, the trees, and the Hudson were magnificent creations of nature. She seemed to detect in Vance a similar feeling for the beauties surrounding her: "'Ah, that view . . . ' suddenly she thought: 'I believe that boy I saw down at the Willows last week has the only eyes I know that would really see it as I do . . . .'"<sup>12</sup>

But fate intervenes and Halo and Vance go separate ways. Halo married Lewis Tarrant; three years later Vance married

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

Laura Lou Tracy. When Vance starts writing for The Hour, a literary magazine owned by Tarrant, he remembers the beautiful old home, The Willows, where Halo used to read Coleridge's poetry to him. He is allowed to do his writing at The Willows; here he starts writing a novel, Instead, with The Willows as the setting for his book. It is in the library of this old home that Halo finds Vance one day. Again the force of being drawn to each other is felt by them. Vance reads his novel to her and when he says: "Oh, is that what I've done? You see--you do see?"<sup>13</sup> Halo fervently replies: "Of course--I see with your eyes, and with mine too. That's the strangeness--and the beauty. Oh, Vance, how did you do it? I'm so glad!"<sup>14</sup> It is apparent that their response to life is an almost identical one. It is also evident that such compatibility does not exist for either of them in their marital lives.

Now Halo and Vance meet every day at The Willows; here they discuss his novel. Halo tells him much he needs for his novel; he weaves it into a design of beauty. Vance's work becomes more responsive under the influence of Halo's help and inspiration. Edith Wharton describes in the following paragraph the oneness of spirit and mind that Vance felt toward Halo.

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 342.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

His work had always been engrossing to Vance-- something he was driven to by an irresistible force. But hitherto it had been laborious, thankless, full of pitfalls and perplexities, as much a weariness as a joy, and always undertaken tentatively, hazardously, with a dread lest the rich fields through which it beckoned should turn into a waterless desert. Now he felt at ease with his subject, assurance grew in him as he advanced. For beside him was that other consciousness which seemed an extension of his own, in which every inspiration as it came, instantly rooted and flowered, and every mistake withered and dropped out of sight. He was tasting for the first time the creator's supreme joy, the reflection of his creation in a responsive intelligence; and young as he was, and used to snatching what came to him as recklessly as a boy breaking the buds from a fruit-tree, he was yet deeply aware of the peculiar quality of this experience.<sup>15</sup>

In no other novel does Edith Wharton make such an open statement concerning the kindred feeling between two people. Time and again in her delineation of the characters of Halo and Vance, the author stresses the union of their mentalities. Yet repeatedly she presents the impossibility of this union becoming permanent. Halo must return to her husband; Vance's mother-in-law accuses him of philandering. And thus society casts ugly suspicions upon a relationship which poets and authors have immortalized all through the ages.

When Halo tells Vance that she must return to her New York home, he is faced with what she has come to mean to him. When he says, "I feel as if I'd never looked at you

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 359.

before,"<sup>16</sup> he felt that even though he had known her quite a long time, still he had never fully glimpsed below the surface of her being. In the following description Edith Wharton pictures Vance as the impact of love is felt by him:

She who had seemed to him but a disembodied intelligence was now stealing into every vein and fibre like wine, like wind, like all the seed-bearing currents of spring. He looked at her hands, which lay folded before her on the table, and wondered what their hidden palms were like and the dimpled recess of her inner arm at the elbow.<sup>17</sup>

Vance had felt the mental force of love before the physical force had manifested itself. The impact of love had been so strong that he could not grasp its full meaning all at once.

Vance's self-abasement is evident in the following passage:

He did not move lest he should lose the shock of her light touch running through him like his blood. But to himself he groaned: 'It's always the same way with you, you fool. You see only one thing at a time, and get into a frenzy about it, and nine times out of ten it's not the real thing you're chasing after but only something your brain has faked up.'<sup>18</sup>

Edith Wharton makes us feel Vance's utter disgust with his inability to grasp the important understanding qualities

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 361.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., pp. 361-362.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 362.

in life: "The tears choked in his throat and burnt his close-pressed eye-balls. He hadn't known--why hadn't he known?"<sup>19</sup> When Vance's disillusionment surges over him with intensity, he wonders if Halo has felt the oneness of mind, body, and soul as he has. In the following paragraph this thought is expressed:

But did she really think so? Or was all she had said only a protective disguise, the conscientious effort to repress emotions corresponding to his own? He had an idea she would be very conscientious, full of scruples he wasn't sure he wholly understood. For if she hadn't cared as much as he had, why should she have devoted all those hours to helping him? If it was just for the good of the New Hour, she was indeed the ideal wife for an editor! But no: those afternoons had been as full for her as for him. What was that phrase she had pointed out, in the volume of Keats' Letters she had given him--about loading every rift with gold? That was what they had done to their hour together: both of them.<sup>20</sup>

Halo leaves Vance alone at The Willows, but Vance continues to think of her. She occupies every space in his mind; there is room for nothing else: "But now there was not a vein of his body, not a cell of his brain, not a dream or a vision of his soul, that was not hurt, disabled."<sup>21</sup>

The golden days at The Willows are gone. Vance and his wife, Laura Lou, move to New York. Here Vance is considered a successful novelist; yet his existence is poverty-stricken.

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 362.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 365.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

Laura Lou's health is wretched; she seems to be languid and tired all the time. Vance, who lives in an imaginary world three fourths of the time, does not realize that his wife has tuberculosis. He only knows that she is frail and sickly. Like all artists he forgets her existence when he becomes immersed in his writing. When he sees Halo again at her home, he confesses that he has longed for her presence. He says: "I'm a fool . . . You mustn't mind me . . . I've been through hell lately . . . Just let me sit here a little while without talking, till I get used to you again."<sup>22</sup> Vance tells Halo everything that has happened to him since they parted at The Willows. Edith Wharton describes Vance as being unable to conceal his soul from Halo. When he starts talking to her of his work, he feels that they are again at The Willows and that she is listening to him absorbedly as he unfolds his ideas to her and reads his novel to her. Edith Wharton describes in the following passage Vance's deep love:

It was curious, though, how some substitution of values of which she held the secret caused the spiritual communion to bring them nearer than the embraces he had hungered for at the Willows. . . . He would have to dissociate sensual passion from all that had debased and cheapened it before it could blend with his vision of this woman who had understood and pitied him.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 409.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., pp. 411-412.

One evening Vance goes to read parts of his new novel, Loot, to Halo. After he finishes, he senses that she is not pleased with it. This fills him with discouragement. Finally when Halo tells Vance to not mind what people say about his novels, he exclaims: "Care what people say? I don't care a damn what people say . . . It's only what you say."<sup>24</sup> Halo pleads with him to be reasonable but to no avail. He exclaims:

'Oh, God, what's reason got to do with it? You've been the breath of life to me all these months. If you cut off a fellow's oxygen he collapses . . . Don't talk to me about not caring what you say. There'd be nothing left to me then."<sup>25</sup>

Vance leaves no doubt in Halo's mind that she is the reason for his existence. The following speech convinces her that the harm is done; Vance's realization of his deep feeling for her is a complete reality, and they both have much to face. Vance vehemently exclaims:

'My books? My books? . . . What do you suppose books are made of? Paper and ink, or the marrow of a man's bones, and the blood of his brain? But you're in my books, you're part of them, whether you believe in them or despise them; whether you believe in me or despise me; and you're in me, in my body and blood, just as you're in my books, and just as fatally. It's done now, and you can't get away from me, you can't undo what you've done; you're the thoughts I think, and the vision I see, and the air I breathe, and the food I

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 436.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

eat--and everything, everything, in the earth and over it.<sup>26</sup>

Vance's eloquent outburst startles Halo. She admits to Vance that even though she might have a like feeling, they are leagues apart. She reminds him that he has a wife and that she possesses a husband. Not understanding her full meaning Vance tells her that he probably started loving her even before their morning adventure on the mountain top years ago. He believes that she has been mixed up in all the sunsets he has viewed, and all the poetry he has read. Halo pleads with him to keep their friendship a free thing. At this Vance exclaims:

'Friendship! Friendship! If that means seeing you for a few minutes every now and then, and talking to you this way, with half the room between us, when what I want is nothing else than all of you--all your time, all your thoughts, all yourself--then I don't give a curse for your friendship.'<sup>27</sup>

Halo tells Vance that they can't continue seeing each other. When Vance asks her why she refuses to see him, she replies: "Because I won't take a lover while I have a husband--or while my lover has a wife."<sup>28</sup>

This speech causes Vance to remember that Laura Lou is his wife and that he has a responsibility toward her. He knows that he will not leave Laura Lou because there would

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 437.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 441

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

be no one to look after her. In the following passage Edith Wharton describes Vance as he thinks of Laura Lou:

Leave Laura Lou? No: of course he couldn't. What nonsense! There was nobody else to look after her. He had chosen to have it so--and it was so. His world had closed in on him again, he was handcuffed and chained to it. He felt like a man in a railway smash who has come suddenly back to consciousness and finds himself pinned down under a dead weight. The sluggish current of reality was forcing itself once more into his veins, and he was faint with agony.<sup>29</sup>

Thus Vance realizes what each person realizes at least one time in his life. He knows that he can't go back; he must go on. Life demands progress, and life will not be denied. Halo's strength of character shows him his duty. He is too filled with emotion to envision her great love and sacrifice until much later in their relationship.

In Edith Wharton's sequel to this novel, which she entitled The Gods Arrive, Halo and Vance continue their love affair. Laura Lou is dead, and Lewis Tarrant has agreed to divorce Halo. Thinking that her divorce is only a matter of a few weeks, Halo leaves with Vance for Europe. Their love has culminated not in marriage, but in a union of free love. Their spiritual and mental oneness is made a tawdry thing as they attempt to achieve a degree of happiness. They are at cross purposes with society's mores, and their relationship is a total failure. When their love turns to

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 442.

ashes, each goes his way. At the end of the book it is true that Vance returns to Halo and begs her to give him another chance. The author makes the reconciliation seem real, and their relationship blossoms anew. They are to be married, and their baby, which is to be born soon, will not only have a father but also a name.

Yet the author wonders as does the reader if such a relationship as the one described will become a permanent one through marriage. Innumerable questions crowd into the reader's mind. Can the past be erased and the present become so full of problems that Vance's restless nature will be satisfied? Will Halo hold Vance this time, or will he leave her again? With these doubts in each reader's mind Edith Wharton concludes The Gods Arrive. The reader is left to bemoan the fact that Halo and Vance didn't wait until they could be married.

In Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth the author presents a love which is thwarted by a girl's intense desire to marry a rich man. The girl, Lily Bart, does not understand the importance of her feeling for Lawrence Seldon, a poor, obscure lawyer. In the following passage Edith Wharton describes Lily's feeling for the young lawyer:

She could not herself have explained the sense of bouyancy which seemed to lift and swing her above the sun-suffused world at her feet. Was it love, she wondered, or a mere fortuitous combination of happy thoughts and sensations? How much of it was

owing to the spell of the perfect afternoon, the scent of the fading woods, the thought of the dullness she had fled from? Lily had no definite experience by which to test the quality of her feelings. She had several times been in love with fortunes or careers, but only once with a man . . . If Lily recalled this early emotion it was not to compare it with that which now possessed her: the only point of comparison was the sense of lightness, of emancipation, which she remembered feeling, in the whirl of a waltz or the seclusion of a conservatory, during the brief course of her youthful romance. She had not known again till today that lightness, that glow of freedom; but now it was something more than a blind groping of the blood. The peculiar charm of her feeling for Seldon was that she understood it; she could put her finger on every link of the chain that was drawing them together. Though his popularity was of the quiet kind, felt rather than actively expressed among his friends, she had never mistaken his inconspicuousness for obscurity.<sup>30</sup>

Lily Bart wants the freedom that Lawrence Seldon can give her. Her instinct tells her to seize the opportunity he presents, but her training has put too much stress on money. Her mother had instilled within her the idea that money was of greatest importance. This desire for money causes her to hunt continually for rich young men. And yet her inner spirit is in accord with Lawrence Seldon. When Seldon speaks of freedom, Lily tells him that she feels free with him. Seldon believes that she means what she is saying, and he is amazed at her inner beauty as she casts aside pretense and becomes natural. Always Seldon has recognized

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<sup>30</sup>Edith Wharton, The House of Mirth, p. 102.

her physical beauty, but now her spiritual beauty overshadows all physical attraction. These two people are carried away by the spiritual affinity that exists between them. They believe that their life would be a beautiful thing if they shared it together. When Lily becomes natural, she is all that Lawrence Seldon could wish for. Unfortunately her natural moments are few. Any reference to her world of artificiality makes her again a woman of pretense. She resumes her quest for riches, and Lawrence Seldon is left with only his memories.

Edith Wharton records few meetings between Lily Bart and Lawrence Seldon. Each meeting seems more futile than the one before. At one chance encounter Lily asks Seldon to love her but not to tell her about it. It is their unexpressed feeling for each other that seems to keep them from making progress in other directions. They both realize their love for each other. Lily will not recognize its importance over money. Seldon knows no way of proving the importance of love. The romance seems futile; yet it seems to live on. It would seem that love such as this must persist, even though it apparently plays only a minor role.

Lily Bart cannot succeed in her efforts to marry money. She has several chances to marry rich men, but she refuses each time. Her inner oneness with Seldon will not allow her to marry. Finally her pleasure-seeking friends cast her

aside. She is only accorded a small legacy by her aunt's will; thus she is forced to go to work. She attempts working as a social secretary and later as a milliner, but she is not successful at either, because she has had no training. She goes to Lawrence Seldon's apartment one evening. She tells him that she loves him as deeply as he has ever loved her; at last she divines the greatness of love in comparison to the littleness of money. As she looks into Seldon's eyes, she sees that his love for her is dead. She says:

'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: you had judged me--I understood. It was too late for happiness--but not too late to be helped by the thought of what I had missed. That is all I have lived on--don't take it from me now! Even in my worst moments it has been like a little light in the darkness. Some women are strong enough to be good by themselves, but I needed the help of your belief in me. Perhaps I might have resisted a great temptation, but the little ones would have pulled me down. And then I remembered--I remembered your saying that such a life could never satisfy me; and I was ashamed to admit to myself that it could. That is what you did for me--that is what I wanted to thank you for. I wanted to tell you that I have always remembered: and that I have tried--tried hard.'<sup>31</sup>

As Lily leaves Seldon, she places a kiss on his forehead. This gesture renounces her old life and shows that her values in life have changed. On this night of renunciation Lily takes too much sleeping medicine and is found dead the

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 497.

next morning. Ironically Edith Wharton pictures Lawrence Seldon rushing to Lily's boarding house to tell her that he cannot live without her. But Lily is dead and in this description Edith Wharton proves her realistic quality. So often people wait too late to act. In the following passage Edith Wharton sums up the relationship that existed between Lily and Seldon:

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 to live and love uncritically. But at least he had loved her--had been willing to stake his future on his faith in her--and if the moment had been fated to pass from them both before they could seize it, he saw now that, for both, it had been saved whole out of the ruin of their lives.<sup>32</sup>

Though their love was never to reach its full growth, still two lives were made richer by its existence and two people were given a reason for living.

In a short novelette, The Old Maid, Edith Wharton sketches the unguided love of Charlotte Lovell, a young New York girl, for Clement Spender. Spender loves Charlotte's cousin, Delia, but Delia, although she returns his love, wants to marry a settled man. Clement Spender goes to Europe; when he returns Delia has married another man. Charlotte loves him more than ever because of his disappointment. But again this love is not to be completed in

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 532.

marriage. Charlotte has an affair with Spender; suddenly she departs for Georgia, where she presumably hopes to help her lung trouble. Here, away from New York, she gives birth to a baby girl.

Edith Wharton pictures realistically the misery suffered by Charlotte because of this unrequited love. Charlotte gives her baby to Delia and never allows the child to know of her illegitimate birth. The little girl thinks of Charlotte as an old maid. Inwardly Charlotte suffers greatly; yet she plays the old maid rôle perfectly, and her daughter never knows her mother's identity. Charlotte loved her baby devotedly because she greatly loved Spender. Yet the child never really loves Charlotte; she only tolerates her because Delia, whom she loves as a mother, asks her to be kind to Charlotte. Somehow the reader wonders if Edith Wharton isn't unduly cruel in her treatment of Charlotte's one sin. Yet again this treatment of Charlotte definitely shows her realism.

Sometimes Edith Wharton lets her lovers marry and realize a greater love than they had ever thought was possible. In The Glimpses of the Moon two lovers, Susy and Nick Lansing, are married only in an experimental way. Both of these young people are poor, and they have decided to stay married only as long as their money holds out. Of course, Edith Wharton intimates early in the novel that

marriage is not a temporary thing, but she lets these two find this out as the plot progresses. Susy and Nick have accepted hospitality from different wealthy friends who have Italian villas and summer homes which the owners occupy only a few months out of the year.

Although this novel gives us a glamorous picture of Nick and Susy enjoying the beauty of Italian sunsets and the conveniences of their wealthy friends, it is evident from the first that their happiness is to be short-lived. The author suggests that honeymoons last only a short time; the real business of marriage lasts a long time and must have complete reality. Susy and Nick are living in a dream world that can be pricked as a soap bubble. A honeymoon at the expense of their friends is ideal, but marriage requires their own efforts.

It is sad when Susy finds that she must pay for this luxurious hospitality by being an accomplice to dishonesty; her sense of happiness leaves her. She faces the fact that everything in life has a price. Even Nick finds that basking in luxuries causes a lethargy within him and that he cannot resume his writing profession with any degree of satisfaction. More and more he is ashamed of himself and of Susy. He feels that their happiness demands much; they should be able to live moderately without the help of their friends. Susy resorts to subterfuge to conceal from Nick the deceptions

taking place. Finally Nick discovers that Susy has made possible an illicit affair of one of her friends; the woman has paid Susy by extending to them her hospitality. Such an existence is repulsive to Nick. He has always lived a decent life and has never resorted to trickery to get what he wanted. The two lovers part. The author is quite in sympathy with Susy and Nick, but she feels in their refusal to accept reality, they are endangering their love for each other.

The plot becomes more complicated as it moves along. Susy is offered marriage by an English lord. A wealthy heiress wishes to marry Nick. These two declarations prove to the two lovers that their friends have never taken their marriage seriously. Edith Wharton implies that their union was little better than an affair. Yet Susy's marriage had meant much more to her than marriage means to many women. Her union with Nick had changed her whole perspective. She sees her old way of living as unreal and artificial. The old joys and thrills that she had formerly felt are gone, and after Nick's departure from her, she cannot go back to her old life of sham and pretense. Nick has taught her the genuine qualities found in real living; he has given her a straightforward attitude toward the world. The qualities were latent in Susy, but she had never discovered them,

because her world had little use for sincerity, truth, honor, and fidelity.

Two people in love as Nick and Susy were cannot be parted forever. Susy starts divorce proceedings, and Nick comes to Paris to testify. They meet and talk over the divorce. Each thinks the other is to be married as soon as the divorce is granted. Suddenly it dawns on Nick that Susy has changed. He demands an explanation and learns that she is not to marry. They are reunited and happy once again; yet their happiness this time is quite different from their early raptures. They realize that they cannot live apart. They are too closely knit to achieve any happiness apart from each other. They know that since they have quit the world of artificiality and glamour of their wealthy friends they can rear a family in peace and happiness. Susy and Nick have accepted life in all its reality at the end of the story. They are willing to work for their happiness because they know that only through work can their happiness be made a lasting thing.

Edith Wharton shows in the following descriptive passage that Nick and Susy have reached a feeling and understanding for each other that will be a lasting thing:

For a long time she continued to lean against him, her head on his knee, as he had done on the terrace at Como on the last night of their honeymoon. She had ceased to talk, and he sat silent

also, passing his hand quietly to and fro over her hair. The first rapture had been succeeded by soberer feelings. Her confession had broken up the frozen pride about his heart and humbled him to the earth; but it had also roused forgotten things, memories and scruples swept aside in the first rush of their reunion. He and she belonged to each other for always; he understood that now. The impulse which had first drawn them together again, in spite of reason, in spite of themselves almost, that deep-seated instinctive need that each had of the other would never again wholly let them go.<sup>33</sup>

In the novel The Glimpses of the Moon Edith Wharton seems to prove to her readers that even pleasure-seeking people like Nick and Susy can become real people when they are challenged by the all-enveloping oneness of vital love. In another novel, The Fruit of the Tree, the author is dealing with two rather serious people who seem to find a great love through their common interest in humanity. Edith Wharton is interested in the labor problems of the working class in this novel. Her two main characters, John Amherst and Justine Brent, are created by the author to show a deep sympathy for the laboring class.

John Amherst first meets Justine Brent when he visits a hospital where she is employed as nurse. One of the men from the mills where he is assistant manager has been seriously injured, and Amherst calls to inquire about him. Amherst walks home with Miss Brent; they discuss the injured

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<sup>33</sup>Edith Wharton, The Glimpses of the Moon, p. 363.

man's condition. When Miss Brent imitates the superintendent's voice for Amherst's benefit, they both laugh. Edith Wharton shows that they have much in common. In the following passage this similarity of humor is made evident:

Amherst, at the change, turned on her with a boyish burst of laughter: she joined in it, and for the moment they were blent in the closest of unions, the discovery of a common fund of humor.<sup>34</sup>

Amherst tells Miss Brent that there is no justice toward the workers in the factory and that he can seem to do nothing for them. She expresses her interest in the workers and tells Amherst that she feels a great sympathy for people who have no rights at all.

But fate intervenes. Amherst meets the owner of the mills, Mrs. Bessy Westmore, who has been left a widow. They fall in love almost at first sight and marry. Amherst is deceived in his wife. She had led him to believe before they were married that she had a deep feeling for the workers in the mills and that she would do much for them after their marriage. But she forgets the workers and the social reforms after she has captured Amherst. All she is interested in now is rushing to Europe, cruising, and society. Her restlessness in searching for pleasure is quite noticeable. Amherst, who is a social reformer at heart, is disillusioned and unhappy. He is not the social type of man

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<sup>34</sup>Edith Wharton, The Fruit of the Tree, p. 12.

and is only happy when he is bettering the conditions of the world. He cannot breathe in the atmosphere of the rich; he must keep his mind and body actively engaged in work.

When Amherst meets Justine Brent the second time, he has been married for over two years. He does not recognize Justine at first. When he does remember her, she tells him that she is glad he saw through her disguise. When he questions her as to her meaning, she replies, "It seems to make it--if it's so transparent--less of a sham, less of a dishonesty."<sup>35</sup> In this speech Justine and Amherst show a like feeling for facing life without pretense or camouflage. At their second meeting they feel a close union in ideas again. Each time they meet, their similarity in attitudes and ideas grows.

When Amherst finally gets his wife to let him initiate reforms at the mills, he has little time for her. He lives in one place, and she lives in another. They are estranged and getting farther apart every day. Justine Brent has taken a position as companion to Bessy. When Amherst talks to Justine for the first time after she has become part of his wife's establishment, Edith Wharton describes his feeling toward her in the following passage:

He was much too busy at the time to cultivate or analyze his feeling for Miss Brent; he rested

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 161.

vaguely in the thought of her, as the 'nicest girl' he had ever met, and was frankly pleased when accident brought them together; but the seeds left in both their minds by the change encounters had not yet begun to germinate.<sup>36</sup>

Never does Justine feel anything toward Amherst but friendliness. She worries much because he and Bessy are at cross-purposes most of the time. Always she tries to smooth over the differences between them.

Time and again Edith Wharton stresses Amherst's interest in Miss Brent as the interest caused by another person's sympathy for his ideas. Justine understood the urgency of his task. She knew that his social reforms were his very life. She told him that the reforms at the mills must be foremost with both Amherst and his wife. In the following paragraph Edith Wharton describes Amherst's reaction to Justine Brent:

Those observers who had been struck by the length and animation of Miss Brent's talk with her host . . . would hardly have believed how small a part her personal charms had played in attracting him. Amherst was still under the power of the other kind of beauty--the soft graces personifying the first triumph of sex in his heart--and Justine's dark slenderness could not at once dispel the milder image. He watched her with pleasure while she talked, but her face interested him only as a vehicle of her ideas--she looked as a girl must look who felt and thought as she did. He was aware that everything about her was quick and fine and supple, and that the muscles of character lay close to the surface of feeling; but the interpenetration of spirit and flesh that made her body seem like

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 250.

the bright projection of her mind left him unconscious of anything but the oneness of their thoughts.<sup>37</sup>

As the estrangement between Bessy and Amherst gets wider, Amherst attempts to lessen it by spending more of his time with his wife, but this does little good. He and Bessy are too far apart in attitudes and values. As Bessy allows him little of her time, he spends much of his time with Justine and Bessy's little girl, Cicely. Finally the separation is made complete, and Amherst leaves. Bessy is seriously hurt from riding her horse. She lingers on the brink of death for weeks. Her suffering is horrible; her only means of staying alive is by morphine. Finally Justine can stand to watch her suffer no longer; she puts her out of her misery with an overdose of morphine. It is the most merciful thing that could have happened to Bessy, but Doctor Wyant, who has been attending Bessy, is very angry with Justine. Amherst had been wired of his wife's injury and subsequent death, but he is far away and cannot reach his home until several months later.

After his wife's death Amherst goes on with his reforms at the mills. Justine has Cicely, Bessy's little girl, in charge. After certain celebrations at the mills Justine is asked by Amherst if she wishes to see the Dillons, a mill

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 277.

family she is interested in. "I do want to see the Dillons --how did you guess?' she rejoined; and Amherst felt a sudden impulse to reply: 'For the same reason that made you think of them.'"<sup>38</sup> Again they feel the oneness of mind, but they accept it without emotion. It suddenly dawns on Amherst that this woman feels toward the mills as he does, and the force of what they two might do with the mills overpowers him. Before her visit is over, Justine tells Amherst that she is leaving soon. When Amherst asks her if she is to be married, she assures him that she is not.

In the following description Edith Wharton pictures the dawning of Amherst's love for Justine:

The inner voices in which they habitually spoke were growing louder than outward words. Or was it only the voice of his own desires that he heard--the cry of new hopes and unguessed capacities of living? All within him was flood-tide: this was the top of life, surely--to feel her alike in his brain and his pulses, to steep sight and hearing in the joy of her nearness, while all the while thought spoke clear: 'This is the mate of my mind.'<sup>39</sup>

When the full understanding of what she means to him is made clear to him, Amherst asks Justine to marry him. The romance is not one of glamour. Yet its very real quality implies that it will be a permanent one, and the reader feels that at last John Amherst has found a woman who is one with him in mind, soul, and body.

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 455.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 464.

Even marriages as nearly perfect as this have problems to combat. Justine had never told Amherst that she had given Bessy the overdose of morphine. When he finds this out, they are separated for a short while. Society and relatives coupled with gossip and narrow ideas almost wreck the completeness of their union. Also, the doctor who was the only other person informed of the death tries to blackmail Justine. Yet out of all these troubles Justine and Amherst emerge still united in marriage. Their first happiness has been displaced by a settled happiness, based on achievement and similarity of purpose. At the end of the novel Amherst speaks of what they had found in life and of life's best moments. He says:

'And do you remember how we said that it was with most of us as it was with Faust? That the moment one wanted to hold fast to was not, in most lives, the moment of keenest personal happiness, but the other kind--the kind that would have seemed grey and colourless at first: the moment when the meaning of life began to come out from the mists--when one could look out at last over the marsh one had drained.'<sup>40</sup>

Though Justine and Amherst had made many mistakes, out of these mistakes came a meaning of life which was necessary to give their marriage a permanent meaning. In this speech Edith Wharton seems to express her view toward marriage;

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 633.

she feels that a marriage between real people will last and will mellow with the years.

In another short novelette, New Year's Day, Edith Wharton pictures a love of such magnitude that the woman is willing to give up everything for the man she loves. Lizzie Hazeldean married Charles Hazeldean when she was twenty. He saved her from a penniless girlhood and from being thrown out on the world by a woman who had grown tired of her. She loved him with the very depths of her being, and they had six years of a nearly perfect union. Then Charles's heart grew weak; he had inherited a weak heart, and as it grew weaker, he became an invalid. Lizzie Hazeldean found that money was needed for him; too, he liked to see her dressed in new clothes or he would worry. When she found that all her money was gone, she resorted to her only accomplishment --her attraction for men. She became the mistress of Henry Prest.

All New York society condemned her for this and cut her each time any member encountered her. Never did her husband know of her affair with Prest. Edith Wharton describes his love for her in the following passage. He is very ill, and Lizzie has asked him if he has been happy married to her.

He gave her one full look; all their life together was in it, from the first day to the last. His hand brushed her once more, like a

blessing, and then dropped. The moment of their communion was over; the next she was preparing remedies, ringing for the servants, ordering the doctor to be called.<sup>41</sup>

Six months after her husband's death Henry Prest calls on Lizzie Hazeldean. He tells her that he is willing to marry her. She refuses him; she tells him that she has never loved him and that she only became his mistress so that her husband might be made happy his last year of life. She tells him that she loved her husband more than anyone else in the world and that she would have followed him into the desert if it had been necessary.

In this novel Edith Wharton has proved the overpowering force of love. A woman who is willing to become the mistress of a man she detests so that her husband may be provided for is quite rare. Though Edith Wharton does not sanction Mrs. Hazeldean's conduct, yet she seems to find in her the rare quality of deep gratitude for the one who has been kind to her. Lizzie Hazeldean had much fortitude; she risked being snubbed by all New York society just to give the man she loved a happy last year.

From these particular treatments of love and marriage it is certain that Edith Wharton knew a great deal concerning love and marriage in her particular group. It has also been substantiated that her knowledge of problems confronting

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<sup>41</sup>Edith Wharton, New Year's Day, p. 95.

love and marriage is illimitable. As Edith Wharton was a realist, she wished to represent these problems as they really occurred. Never did she look at people's lives with rose-colored glasses. She convincingly pictures the ideal type of love, and her marriages consummated by worthwhile people are usually permanent ones. Her philosophy of love and marriage is fused in her characters' personalities; thus her novels express her opinions and beliefs in people and society. She was a deep analyst of mankind, and her novels show a profound understanding of people who find themselves in the throes of love.

### CHAPTER III

#### DIVORCE AND FREE LOVE IN EDITH WHARTON'S NOVELS

The subject of divorce will never cease to be an interesting study to any writer who is engrossed in the social problems of family relationship. Edith Wharton found it especially worth studying in her society because nineteenth and early twentieth century society held many different attitudes toward it. These attitudes differed as the social group varied. Certain influences had effect on particular groups. The different attitudes often conflicted with each other; often stories could be written concerning these conflicts. The sociological aspect of divorce became quite popular during the years that Edith Wharton lived. The problems concerning the readjustment of people after the divorce, and particularly the problem of the children involved, became of especial interest to the probing spirit of the novelist.

Social disintegration is a natural result of divorce. Although divorce is intended to make right all the wrongs produced by an ill-chosen marriage, it often fails in its object. Under a number of conditions divorce is quite unnecessary; a third person's viewpoint is all that is needed.

Under other conditions divorce may seem quite necessary. It is with the complicated, trying cases involving divorce that Edith Wharton finds her interest. When her characters have been placed in trying circumstances, the soundness of her philosophy and reasoning is proved. Edith Wharton seems to be in true form when she is presenting divorce in its various phases.

Edith Wharton has written a number of novels with divorce as one of the major problems in the plot. I do not mean to assert that a particular book in its entirety revolves around divorce, but the influence of divorce creates a large enough problem to give grave concern to the major characters. In perhaps a very few of her novels the conflict revolves entirely around divorce. Divorce becomes so complex a problem that it deals as much misery as if it were a character with a leading rôle. In any event Edith Wharton realized the importance of divorce in the societies with which she was familiar, and she wished to record the manner in which society tackled the problem of divorce.

In The Age of Innocence Edith Wharton has stressed divorce from almost the first chapter. It must be remembered that this book revolves around the New York society of the eighteen seventies. It must also be understood that these people had no toleration for divorce. In their

estimation divorced people were to be avoided. In the first chapter Mr. Sillerton Jackson spoke for his group when he uttered the words: "I didn't think the Mingotts would have tried it on."<sup>1</sup> This remark was made when Ellen Olenska, niece of old Mrs. Manson Mingott, appeared at the opera. Ellen Olenska had made an unfortunate European marriage; at the particular time that she appeared at the opera, she was separated from her husband. To old New York society she had created a strained situation for herself and her family. This society resented an action that did not fit into their pattern of conduct. Old New York felt that Ellen Olenska had made a spectacle of herself; she should have remained in obscurity until she could fit into the pattern of marriage again. Even Newland Archer, less prejudiced than the others of his group, resented Madame Olenska's appearance at the opera.

Incident after incident occurs revealing the narrow prejudiced feeling the Four Hundred in New York felt for the woman separated from her husband. The group understood that she had made a wretched marriage. They also accorded her the right to become a member of their group again. Yet they felt that as a group they could not uphold her actions. Rumor held that Countess Olenska had fled from her husband

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<sup>1</sup>Edith Wharton, The Age of Innocence, p. 8.

and had found consolation for several months with the secretary formerly employed by her husband. Sillerton Jackson, who knew more about the members of his group than anyone else, felt the rumor was not unfounded. Not only was Ellen Olenska giving New York something to talk about because of her European trouble, but her actions in New York were quite indiscreet and hardly to be tolerated. After Newland Archer became a friend of Countess Olenska's, he slowly learned why she acted as she did. He barely glimpsed the freedom in which she lived. He also understood that she knew nothing of the rules of New York society, and that if she did, she would never become accustomed to them or follow them. She was accustomed to act in a natural manner and to choose the friends she liked. The rules that she lived by were of her own making. She was quite unaware that her friends and her actions were frowned on by society.

When Countess Olenska proposed to sue for a divorce, even her relatives refused to sanction the move. The Mingotts and the Wellands had taken Ellen Olenska back into their fold. When society was eyeing her askance, these two old families held their heads high and dared society to snub her. They had presented her to society without the least indication of any troubled problems. Yet even they, as old and aristocratic members of New York's soundest group, could not sanction divorce. To them divorce was

used by only the lowest class of people. It was a scandal that could not be tolerated. A divorced woman forfeited everything and gained nothing. Her position was little better than that of certain women that the mothers of the group never mentioned. It fell to Newland Archer, a young lawyer in the group, to show Madame Olenska the fatality of divorce and to try to bring about a reconciliation between her and her husband. The older members of the group felt that Newland Archer understood Ellen Olenska better than they and that his influence might be effective.

In the conversation ensuing between Archer and Madame Olenska she states her reasons for wishing a divorce when she says: "I want to be free; I want to wipe out all the past."<sup>2</sup> In these few words she expresses the keynote of her existence. Her life has been built on freedom and sincerity. Anything that keeps her life from appearing that of a respectable person should be erased from it. She has no scruples concerning divorce. Divorce to Ellen Olenska is a means of restoring her to the rank she held before her marriage. She will be free and independent again; all the horror of the past will be forgotten, and she can face each new day with the sincere conviction that her life will bear the closest inspection. She thought of divorce as a means

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 107.

to an end. In the European society where she had spent most of her life, she had accepted their attitude of frank approval toward divorce. By means of a divorce Ellen Olenska feels that she can cast off a worn-out garment and take up her rightful place in New York society.

Newland Archer presents a different version of divorce to Madame Olenska. Although he is not completely bound by his group, he is nevertheless influenced somewhat by its attitudes. He expresses the basis for his society's disapproval when he says: "Our ideas about marriage and divorce are particularly old-fashioned. Our legislation favours divorce--our social customs don't."<sup>3</sup> Yet when he tells Madame Olenska that her husband, in opposing the divorce, might circulate stories about her, he shows a sympathy and kindness toward her which his group would not acknowledge or employ. When Ellen asks him why accusations against her character would harm her in New York, he remarks:

'New York society is a very small world compared with the one you've lived in. And it's ruled, in spite of appearances, by a few people with--well, rather old-fashioned ideas.'<sup>4</sup>

In this manner he shows her how impossible her procedure would be if she wishes to continue her residence in New York. He assures her that he does not feel she should

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 108-109.

return to her former life of misery. From certain letters he has read he believes her husband to be abominable. In this belief he decidedly differs from his group. Yet he rationally explains to her how she would isolate herself from her group if she thrust the scandal of divorce into their midst. His whole reasoning is that she can gain nothing through divorce; therefore there should be no reason for such a procedure.

When Ellen Olenska faces him with, "But my freedom-- is that nothing?"<sup>5</sup> he has no insight into her nature to understand what prompted the question. He is influenced again by his group in feeling that she wishes freedom so that she may marry the secretary with whom she spent the few months. He cannot completely understand the meaning of freedom to this woman. In his group freedom is only talked about; it is never a reality. To Newland Archer freedom had been glimpsed but only momentarily; he knew very little about freedom. He sounds the final note in his argument when he replies:

'The individual, in such cases, is nearly always sacrificed to what is supposed to be the collective interest; people cling to any convention that keeps the family together--protects the children, if there are any.'<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

Society decrees that in order for it to remain intact, the members must be sacrificed for the ideals upon which it is built. Any disintegrating force must be ruled out.

Newland Archer's expression of society's intolerance of divorce seals Ellen Olenska's fate. If she continues to reside in New York, she must accept the creed of her society. If she refuses to accept it, she must expect complete ostracism. Later Archer, who realizes he has fallen deeply in love with Ellen Olenska, finds he has trapped himself as well as her by his attitude toward divorce. He then is faced with the age-old discovery that circumstances are greatly altered when they become personal ones.

Edith Wharton ironically pictures divorce in this novel as something sought for but continually evasive to those who needed it most. Each time one of the characters decided to employ divorce as a means of making the happiness he sought an actuality, he was refused this outlet. The author stresses innumerable times society's condemnation of divorce. To make the picture a real one, Edith Wharton only offers divorce as a solution; never does she allow divorce to occur. At the precise moment both Ellen and Archer have decided that they must be together at any cost, society intervenes and checks them again. New York society refuses to allow Archer a divorce. Even though Archer loves another woman, he has chosen a wife that he must protect. The other

woman who has only possessed his love is allowed nothing. She is of no concern to society. In this manner Edith Wharton in one stroke brushes away a seemingly beautiful dream. Society judged its members in this way, and New York society must appear as it really was.

In an entirely different manner Edith Wharton deals with the age-old problem of the disposal of the children when a couple agrees to a divorce. In her novel The Children her main consideration lies with the children upon whom the penalty of divorce hangs heavy. The author pictures Judith, the oldest child of the Cliffe Wheaters, as the child of divorce. Judith is a child of fifteen when the novel begins. She has six children in her care; three are of her own blood; the other three have been adopted by her parents. In the first few chapters the divorce and marriage of each of the parents, with their subsequent remarriage, have made the life of the children and their personal problems an enigma.

Edith Wharton shows how sad divorce makes the life of the children involved. She relates the manner in which the parents ship off their children to some delightful place in the charge of paid servants and either a governess or a tutor. The children are a bother to the parents, and in the life they live they must have no bothers to keep them from the pursuit of pleasure. The author's picture of the

parents' aimless search for pleasure which causes them to indulge in one illicit love affair after another seems very real to the reader. These idle rich think of no one but themselves; they feel no duty toward their children. Their attitude is that they can't be bothered. In their own minds they feel that their children are lucky to be born of rich parentage. They do not wish to believe that their children are missing anything in life.

Ferry, the oldest boy, seems to express the neglect of his parents when he expresses a deep desire for a tutor; his parents have ignored his wish:

'Of course,' he went on, 'Judy says I'm not fair to them--that I don't remember what a lot they've had to spend on me for doctors and climate, and all that. And they did send me to school once, and I had to be taken away because of my beastly temperature . . . I know all that. But it was a sell, when I left school, just to come back again to Scopy and Nanny and nobody a fellow could put a question to, or get a tip from about what other fellows are learning. Last summer, at St. Moritz, I met a boy not much older than I who was rather delicate too, and he'd just got a new father who was a great reader, and who had helped him no end, and got a tutor for him; and he'd started Caesar, and was getting up his Greek verbs . . . and for two weeks the other fellow's father let me work a little with him. But then we had to go away--one of our troubles is that we're so everlastingly going away. But I suppose it's always so with children--isn't it?--with all the different parents they're divided up among, and all the parents living in different places, and fighting so about when the children are to go to which and the lawyers always changing things

just as you think they're arranged. . .<sup>7</sup>. But Scopy says later parents settle down.<sup>7</sup>

In this one speech Terry has uttered the viewpoint of children of divided parentage. Edith Wharton has not exaggerated the condition in the least. In this note of appeal she has pictured the unfortunate condition of the child who is allowed no normal home life because his parents pull him from place to place, constantly seeking pleasures which will satisfy their selfish wishes. Never do they put the children's needs first; they think only of themselves. Terry needed that which his father could have given him so easily. He longed for the companionship of his father. He wished to know his father. Also he wished the intelligent comradeship and instruction of a tutor. But to Cliffe Wheater, Terry did not represent a boy; he represented a possession that often got in his way. When this occurred he must be shipped away. Cliffe Wheater, a multimillionaire, was only thinking in terms of yachts, amusements, and new love affairs. All else he dismissed from his mind. The author seems to think that often the divorced father and mother feel no parental responsibility toward their children. With so much money and time on their hands, they seek new thrills. Quickly they become bored with each other's society, and the need to escape boredom leads to a new love affair.

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<sup>7</sup>Edith Wharton, The Children, p. 43.

I do not feel that Edith Wharton has presented this picture of idle rich satirically. In fact, my opinion is that her picture is true in every detail. Each time that Cliffe and Joyce Wheeler enter the pages of the novel, their complete failure as parents is stressed anew. Their complete inability to feel love and regard for their children is a sad thing. Yet never does Edith Wharton allow the picture to change. Probably she felt that such people never changed, because the very last pages of the novel show them in the same setting as they appeared at the first.

The Wheelers had been married rather early in life and had born to them three children, Judith, Terry, and Blanca. The last two had been twins. Then divorce had ensued. Each parent had hurriedly married another mate, but this arrangement was not to last long. Finally Judith, through a series of skillful maneuverings, brought the Wheelers together again. After the Wheelers were reunited they had adopted a little girl and another little boy and girl who were twins. Chipstone was born, and the parents felt that he was the symbol of their renewed belief in each others. At the time the story opens, the Wheelers are embarked on their second matrimonial venture, but the author leaves the reader in no doubt as to their final separation and divorce. The author constantly reveals their immaturity and their

inability to understand each other. The author contrasts the immaturity of the parents with the early maturity of the children. In a slightly satirical vein, Edith Wharton pictures the parents as needing the protection of their children.

I have said that Judith is a good representative of the child of divorce. To her Edith Wharton gives the leading child rôle. Her introduction to the reader presents her as the head of a family. All her mannerisms and actions verify her characterization. She is happy in her part and never resents the fact that her girlhood has been sacrificed for the career of a mother. It has fallen her lot to look after her children, and she means to do it. This interest consumes her every thought. She knows little about books and reading. She reveals her attitude toward school and reading when Boyne, the bachelor who becomes interested in all the children, asks her if she would not like to go to school. Judith replies:

'Go to school? Me? But when, I'd like to know? There'll always be some of the children left to look after. Why, I shall be too old for school before Chip is anywhere near Terry's age. And, besides, I never mean to leave the children --never.'<sup>8</sup>

In this impassioned speech the author reveals her feeling and sympathy toward the child who bears the hardships of the

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 60.

divorced parents. Judith becomes a martyr of the evils of divorce when she assumes a burden much too heavy for her young shoulders.

Another evil of divorce is made known to the reader when Judith blandly comments on the engagement of Blanca, her twelve year old sister, to a lift boy in a hotel.

Judith is talking to Boyne and remarks:

'Oh, I was engaged myself at Blanca's age-- to a page boy at a skating rink. . . . But that was different. He was a very nice little Swiss boy; and I only gave him one of my hair-ribbons, and he gave me one of his livery buttons. . . . But these modern children are different. Blanca's boy wanted a ring with a real stone in it; and he was a horrid big thing with a fat nose that wriggled.'<sup>9</sup>

Judith had explained to Boyne that when she found out about Blanca's engagement the family had immediately moved, at her suggestion, to a spot far away, and thus had stopped this episode of child love. But the reader as well as the author asks the question: Was the episode stopped or will it crop out wherever the children go? What is the child searching for? The author and the reader both find that answer easily. The children are searching for love, their natural heritage. Parental love has been denied them. In their search they are led into sad situations. Blanca was saved in the nick of

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., pp. 57-58.

time, but the question isn't solved. The next time may prove serious.

As the novel becomes more complicated, Judith is forced to flee with the children. Her parents have threatened divorce again, and she believes if all their children run away, Cliffe and Joyce Wheater will be reconciled. By this time the reader has ceased to wonder what will happen next. Judith feels sure that their running away will prevent the impending separation. Boyne gives Judith's reasons for flight in the following speech:

'The last time, it appears, Judith told her parents that if they divorced again she meant to go off with all the children, rather than have them separated from each other as they were before. You see, when a smash comes the children are divided up among the ex-parents, and some of them are pretty rotten, I imagine--a blackmailing Italian prince, a rather notorious movie star, and Lord knows who beside. Not to speak of the new elements to be introduced, if Joyce and Wheater both marry again, and I've no doubt they will, in no time.'<sup>10</sup>

The reader has reached the conclusion by this time that the world is certainly a strange place when children have to resort to such means in order to have a normal life. This is one of the most pitiable incidents in the book.

When Boyne, the friend of the children, tries to bring about an understanding between the parents and the children, he gets no response. The parents have no time to devote to

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 117.

their children. They are wanted for a bridge game; they are expected to attend the boat races; they are to join a party of swimmers. Boyne's mission is in vain. The reader wonders what will happen to a society in which the parents refuse to rear their children. To whom does the job of rearing children fall? Such questions arise as Edith Wharton continues skilfully to draw her picture.

Edith Wharton proves to the readers that under normal surroundings and under the guidance of someone who loves them, these children can lead normal lives and have a chance for well-rounded lives. It is the treatment given them by their parents that makes them appear to be incorrigible and neurotic human beings. The children's stay in Italy was proof of their ability to live as children and be children. All of them were happy, and the fear of being separated vanished for the time being. The children went on picnics and on sight-seeing trips. They ate the right kind of food and slept long hours. Yet this was not to last. They could not live long outside the topsy-turvy world of their parents. Soon they must be drawn again into disorder and turbulence.

The mother is divorcing the father again. Her life is unbearable with him. But Edith Wharton subtly observes that Mrs. Wheeler had her head turned in the direction of her lawyer as her next matrimonial hope. It is strange how calmly Judith faces the situation when it occurs. The

lawyer has assured her that it may be possible to keep all the children together. If this is possible, Judith's happiness will be complete, and she will wish for nothing more.

And yet Edith Wharton has not finished. She gives us a last picture of these children of divorce. Three years have elapsed since the Italian summer when all the children were so very happy. The life of the children has not improved. They still live in hotels. The little boy who symbolized the second union of the Wheatons is dead. This life of strain seemed to be too great for his little body. Blanca, who got engaged to another left boy, is in a convent. Terry seems to be the only lucky one; he is in Switzerland in a boy's school, where he apparently longed to be. Judith has only one charge now; the others have gone their separate ways. The author sadly gives the reader a last picture of this child who learned the full meaning of life too early. She is the symbol of the cruelty of divorce. She will pay the full price for the folly of her parents.

Edith Wharton has condemned divorce often as she sketches the picture of the children. She feels that divorce used to satisfy the selfish whims of parents is horrible. She presents one picture of horror after another until the reader is filled with despair. The last scene is the most pitiful when the realization comes with full force

that no one is really hurt by divorce except the children. However, Edith Wharton does not stop even with this inference. If the children are hurt, then the citizenship is hurt, and if the citizenship is hurt, the problem takes on a great social significance. Each child has the right to a normal childhood surrounded by peace-loving parents whose interest is in the home and the family.

In the novel The Custom of the Country Edith Wharton interprets divorce as a weapon used by a nouveau riche girl against the men who enter her life. The girl, Undine Spragg, is the product of a small town. She has unusual beauty and one ambition in life. This ambition is to know the people of New York society and be considered a part of this society. With this in view she marries Ralph Marvell, a young man with little money but from an old New York family. Never does Undine pretend to love him; he merely represents all that she desires at the moment. After she marries him, she makes him very unhappy. All his hopes are thwarted. Finally she decides to divorce him and does so in a ruthless manner. In the complete disintegration of Ralph Marvell Edith Wharton aptly shows how divorce can wreck a person's life.

Being divorced from Marvell does not prevent Undine from demanding exorbitant sums of money. When Marvell does not send her as much as she wishes, she threatens to take away the child that he adores. Undine does not want the

child; she bore it most unwillingly, but she knows Marvell's weaknesses. In an effort to obtain more money for Undine Marvell becomes implicated in fraudulent practices. The last straw occurs when he finds out that Undine had been married before she married him. She has slowly made his life a thing of horror. Not only has she dragged his name through the divorce courts, but now she has dishonored it by her complete lack of principle. When Ralph thinks of his life with Undine, he knows that it has been hopeless from the beginning. He sees no hope for the future and his solution is suicide. The picture of Ralph Marvell is a gloomy one. Never does Edith Wharton give him a happy moment. He drew the unlucky card when he met Undine.

In these two characters Edith Wharton shows two different viewpoints on the subject of divorce. Undine Spragg felt that divorce was a factor in every marriage. If two people grew tired of each other, the only thing for them was divorce. She sums up her attitude toward divorce when she refers to the relationship existing between Mabel Lipscomb and her husband. Undine says:

'They like each other well enough. But he's been a disappointment to her. He isn't in the right set, and I think Mabel realizes she'll never really get anywhere till she gets rid of him.'<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Edith Wharton, The Custom of the Country, p. 94.

Undine Spragg thought no more of changing husbands than of making any other change in life. She felt that when a man ceased to give his wife everything she demanded, she had suitable grounds for divorce. Yet she felt no responsibility toward her husband or her child. Her only interest was in herself. She must be satisfied. Edith Wharton clearly presents Undine Spragg as a woman preying upon mankind. She becomes the epitome of the meanest of women. The author wants to portray vividly the system of divorce as handled by such women. Undine Spragg could easily rank with Cleopatra and Salome as a woman the world could have done without. Such women are destructive to society. They wreck human lives as cyclones wreck towns. The men who are the unfortunate victims of such women are to be pitied and not censured.

Edith Wharton's description is vivid as she pictures Undine's divorce from her third husband, Raymond de Chelles, a French nobleman. We find Undine less superior at this time. She only held the nobleman's love a short while; when he realized that her only thought was for herself, he left her to her own devices and found companionship and sympathy elsewhere. This put Undine on the defensive because she wasn't used to being treated in this manner. She was accustomed to Ralph's long-suffering attitude. Her

divorce is described in the following newspaper clipping:<sup>12</sup>

Divorce and remarriage of Mrs. Undine Spragg de Chelles. . . . The Marquise de Chelles of Paris, France, formerly Mrs. Undine Spragg Marvell, of Apex City and New York, got a decree of divorce at a special session of the Court last night, and was remarried fifteen minutes later to Mr. Elmer Moffatt, the billionaire Railroad King, who was the Marquise's first husband.

No case has ever been railroaded through the divorce courts of this State at a higher rate of speed: as Mr. Moffatt said last night before he and his bride jumped onto their east-bound special, every record has been broken. It was just six months ago yesterday that the present Mrs. Moffatt came to Reno to look for her divorce. Owing to a delayed train, her counsel was late yesterday in receiving some necessary papers, and it was feared the decision would have to be held over; but Judge Toomey, who is a personal friend of Mr. Moffatt's, held a night session and rushed it through so that the happy couple could have the knot tied and board their special in time for Mrs. Moffatt to spend Thanksgiving in New York with her aged parents.<sup>13</sup>

This quotation realistically pictures divorce as handled by unscrupulous people. Undine Spragg and Elmer Moffatt show a direct conflict with the idea of divorce held by old New York. This society thinks divorce is crude and vulgar. Ralph Marvell excellently portrays the attitudes of this group toward divorce. Ironically the author pictures many members of this social group living unhappy lives because their social code forces them to stay married at any cost. The reader wonders with the author which state of being is

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 584.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., pp. 585-586.

the worse. Is a woman better off to exchange husbands often or should two people live together when only their social code keeps them united? In reality such couples live separate lives; only to the outside world are they considered husband and wife.

It is to be assumed that Edith Wharton felt that marriage should be a lasting thing. Yet she seems to find divorce necessary under certain conditions. Certainly she highly disapproved of the type of divorce indulged in by Undine Spragg. The author feels sure that if many people resembled Undine Spragg, society would soon be in a chaotic state. In such a society there would be no stability, no creativeness, no progress; all would be disintegration.

In the last few chapters of the book Undine is pictured as married to her railroad king. Even her fourth marriage seems a futile one, because there is no tie to hold it together. Divorce seems in the offing. Both people are interested in the glitter and glamour of life; they are completely superficial and care for nothing but outward appearances. Although Edith Wharton does not mention divorce at the last, the reader feels sure that it will reappear.

Undine's child, Paul Marvell, is the pitiable picture in this group of people. His mother cares nothing for him; his step-father is interested only in acquiring new

possessions, and is no companion for Paul. Thus the child is all alone. He yearns for a father to talk to and to be with, but that father is dead. To him life is a gloomy affair and his boyhood is blighted with a melancholy maturity. He has been shifted around so much that no place seems like home to him. Not all the money in the world can buy what the boy craves, for love cannot be bought.

The author ends on a disconsolate note. Edith Wharton has left us in a suspended state. We feel that divorce is clearly no answer to the needs of humanity. Where can the answer be found? Can society go on if divorce continues to be misused? The author appears to be as much puzzled as the reader. The rational answer is that imperfections are always found in an imperfect society. Laws should be passed which would permit divorce only under specific conditions.

In the novel Twilight Sleep Edith Wharton uses divorce as a means of refuge. One of the characters, Stanley Heuston, is married to a woman whom he does not love. Her religion does not sanction divorce. Her world is one of religion, a world of unreality. Her husband does not exist as a person; he has ceased to mean anything to her. Stanley Heuston wishes to be married to a vibrant woman imbued with a normal disposition. He knows that in order to make this

wish a reality he must obtain a divorce. When he asks his wife to give him his freedom, she refuses. When it is too late, his wife realizes that she does not want to lose her husband. When Heuston realizes that he will never be able to live a happy life within the laws of society, he decides to live outside them. He leaves his wife and goes to live with a normal woman.

This instance of free love resulting from the refusal of divorce is one of several instances described by Edith Wharton. She does not justify free love, but she gives reasons why free love sometimes takes the place of married love. The author seems to feel the incompatibility of many married couples. The author implies that Stanley Heuston will not be content in this escape. He will be the subject of scrutiny and pity by his old friends and also by the new ones who will find out his history. His life will be one of subterfuge; he will be constantly on the alert, avoiding his old friends who might ask embarrassing questions. Edith Wharton thinks that instead of settling his problem, Heuston has made it worse.

Heuston's fatal step hurts others as well as himself. The young girl who loved him but would not live with him outside the marriage law is gravely hurt. Her hurt lies in the fact that she has become disillusioned much too early in life. She feels the sham of her existence; her trust in

people, in life, and in law is lost. She is even losing trust in her family. Her deplorable condition is proof that men such as Stanley Heuston often wreck the lives of others.

Edith Wharton's society is a mass of complexities. Divorce, even when it plays a minor part, brings much confusion to people's lives; yet when divorce is not granted, confusion becomes more pronounced. The author seems at a loss to explain the answer to this situation. The assumption is that divorce and free love are and will probably remain questions for sociologists to ponder over. The author seems to feel that as long as people live as they do, divorce and free love will persist. It is the people who set the standards, and they are the ones who will have to settle the problems of society.

When Edith Wharton wrote The Gods Arrive, she dealt more with free love than with divorce. Halo Tarrant, the main character, had been asked by her husband for a divorce. She had told him that he might have a divorce. Thinking that she and her sweetheart, Vance Weston, could be married soon, she leaves with Vance for Europe. At this point her husband decides he does not wish a divorce. He realizes that this will be sheer torture for Halo; if he does not divorce her, she will be living with a man to whom she is not married. By Lewis Tarrant's refusal to divorce her, Halo Tarrant's position in life is compromised. This is

decidedly not a usual rôle for Halo. Her life has been founded on high standards, and she is not a loose woman. Yet she is not the type to act cowardly; although her position is unbearable, she holds her head high.

In this novel the refusal of divorce is used as a device of torture. In this particular situation divorce is the only weapon that would have righted a complex situation. Even the author is able to find no solution for this problem novel except divorce. This seems to be one of the few times in her novels when Edith Wharton feels that divorce is necessary for those people most concerned. The Tarrants' marriage was a mistake from the start. It should never have been; therefore the sooner it is absolved, the better it will be for the two concerned.

Vance Weston, the author and lover of Halo, wanted to marry her. He was much less conventional than Halo; he thought nothing of the consequences of divorce. Through divorce he would be able to give Halo his name. Marriage to Vance meant much less than it meant to Halo, but Vance loved Halo and for that reason he wished marriage. Vance understood Halo's world well enough to realize how her social group would judge her. Thus he must protect this woman in every way he could, even if divorce had been denied her.

Edith Wharton never seems to deal with just ordinary

cases of divorce. Her cases are usually complicated ones with much tragedy ensuing as a result. This quality proves again that she is a realist. Divorce is always tragic. It takes its toll of the people's happiness, and they are left to work out their lives in the best way they can. They have to readjust themselves to new situations and new people. It is never a happy time for anyone. The answer to this would be to preserve the marriage contract. Many times this would prove to be much better for those concerned. In Halo's case, however, the author seems convinced that divorce is the only resort.

Vance Weston shows his deep feeling and respect for Halo when he makes a special visit to Tarrant; he asks Tarrant to release his wife. Vance Weston does not realize the gravity of Halo's position until one of her New York friends cuts her in public. With this insult to Halo comes his realization of what this woman has given up for him. This makes him wish more than ever for the union to be legalized.

When Tarrant finally agrees to a divorce, it seems too late. Halo and Vance have gone their separate ways. Their free love experiment had been a failure, because what they had wanted and needed was marriage to make their love blossom into a beautiful thing. Nothing less than the steadying influence of marriage could hold them together.

In the last few pages of the book, Vance returns to Halo. The author lets us imagine that they will pick up the threads of their life again in marriage.

It has been said that free love, although an adversary of marriage, is not a successful one, and Edith Wharton seems to agree with this viewpoint. Even a rich three-fold love such as Halo felt for Vance could only wither and die under the influence of free love. There are too many problems confronting free love. According to Edith Wharton the lives of the participants can never be an open book, because they have to hide themselves from the public eye. It is necessary for them to live in out-of-the-way places. Only the dregs of life fall to them. The woman is not respected by anyone, not even by other couples who are believers in free love. The woman loses her honor and her sense of well being. The man gradually loses his respect for her when he realizes how people treat her. In such a case as Halo's this was a tragedy, because her love was ideal, and it deserved better treatment.

Never does Edith Wharton shed happiness and well being over illicit love affairs and free love. In her novel The Reef she describes an affair that lasted for one week between a young girl and man. In the chapter which described the termination of the affair, the reader is convinced of the author's attitude toward illicit affairs. The two

concerned had become replicas of the rooms they occupied. The gaudy wall paper, the gilt light fixtures, and the cheap furniture seemed to reflect their state of being. These two people had changed physically. The man had lost his energy; his clothes looked ill-kept and unpressed. The girl had cheapened in looks and apparel. Yet she was the one to be pitied, because she had fallen in love with the man.

The author seems to feel that though divorce is sometimes necessary, free love is never necessary. Free love to the author is comparable to a disease. Once you are infected with such a disease, you will never be free. There will be a recurrence of the plague from time to time. Those who become involved in free love will never be free. There will always be a chance for someone to remember. Too many people and factors are concerned, and someone will be hurt.

In a short novelette, Madame de Treymes, Edith Wharton presents the French interpretation of divorce. The French do not believe in divorce, because their religion does not allow it. They believe divorce is thoroughly American. The French also believed in the early twentieth century that what concerned one member of the family concerned all the members of the family. In speaking of the French family Madame de Treymes says: "I am Fanny's friend, certainly. But with us family considerations are paramount. And our

religion forbids divorce."<sup>14</sup> Thus it is evident that the divorcing of a French husband or a French wife would be an impossibility.

In this novelette Fanny de Malrive, an American, wishes to divorce her worthless French husband. She has a young son eight years old with whom she refuses to part. John Durham, her American suitor, wishes to secure a divorce for her and at the same time give her the custody of her son. He has not reckoned with the French family who also wishes the boy. Madame de Treymes, a sister-in-law of Fanny, is the spokesman for the French family. She expresses many of her country's beliefs from time to time. She is in sympathy with Durham's effort to marry Fanny. In the following conversation concerning the women of France, Madame de Treymes says:

'You have asked a great deal of me--much more than you can guess. Do you mean to give me nothing--not even your sympathy--in return? Is it because you have heard horrors of me? When are they not said of a woman who is unhappily married? Perhaps not in your fortunate country, where she may seek liberation without dishonor. But here--? You who have seen the consequences of our disastrous marriages--you who may yet be the victim of our cruel and abominable system; have you no pity for one who has suffered in the same way, and without the possibilities of release?'<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Edith Wharton, Madame de Treymes, p. 68.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 85.

Madame de Treymes in this speech tells Durham much concerning the French women. In their illicit love affairs, the French women attempt to adjust themselves to a changing world. Since their religion forbids divorce, they employ promiscuous love affairs, which are definitely disintegrating to any society. A society with such forces at work cannot hope for progress.

Although the French family is quite opposed to divorce, they send word to Fanny de Malrive that she may sue for a divorce. Durham fears this sudden decision when he first hears about it. Fanny de Malrive is happy that she can now obliterate the past and become an American again. When Durham talks with Madame de Treymes, she explains the conditions which caused the French family to suddenly allow divorce. Madame de Treymes tells Durham that the French family of Fanny's husband consented to their divorce so that the child would be given to them. If Durham marries Fanny, the court will give the child to the father's people. Again the French woman stresses the point that the French consider the family while the American considers the individual. Since the father of the child is disreputable, his family transfers its allegiance to the child; the child will be blessed with the French religion, and he will assume his rightful place in the order of things. Madame de Treymes further explains to Durham the reason for the

family's refusal of Fanny's marriage to him. She tells him that her brother's family wants no new element brought into being; when this occurs the unity of the family tradition is broken.

Madame de Treymes is overcome when she discovers that Durham intends to give up his right to Fanny. She cannot understand that his refusal to trick Fanny into marriage proves his deep regard for her. This French woman has probably had her first lesson in honor and nobility. However, her understanding of honor is slight, for her training has been too extensive in the other direction. Durham gives up Fanny, because he knows that her child has first claim on her affection. When he understands the trickery of the French, he gives up all hopes for a happy life.

It seems that in a very few pages Edith Wharton has given an excellent contrast of French and American views concerning marriage, free love, and divorce. The author recognizes the faults in our society, but the contrast that she draws between our society and European societies produces certain conclusions. When she paints the trickery and dishonesty of the French in contrast with the nobility of the American, she has paid her highest tribute to our American man. In Paul Durham, Edith Wharton has pictured the true American who holds women in high regard and who protects them from the dishonesty and adversity of the world.

It is interesting to note that the French at this time gave no sanction to divorce because their religion disapproved of it. The consequence of this was widespread free love. It is also interesting to note that the French stressed the family relationship before any other relationship; yet this same people thought nothing of separating a mother and child. The French stressed family unity; yet they wished to separate Fanny de Malrive from her boy. The family was believed to have more right to the child than the mother. Their social mores seemed a mass of contradictions. They definitely felt greatly superior to the Americans. They contrived to get American money, but they refused to maintain social relationships with such a crude race. In an indirect but realistic manner Edith Wharton pays her highest tribute to the American people. She shows our superiority in every way. She pictures our society, our family relationship, and our customs as free and real and solid.

Thus divorce is handled skillfully by Edith Wharton in her many novels. As she puzzles over the many problems caused by divorce, she convinces the reader that she sees the necessity of divorce. It is with the men and women who employ divorce as a means of settling their problems that the author is concerned. The author feels that in their hands, divorce will resume its rightful place, or

that it will be used as a weapon of disintegration. If it is used in the latter fashion, the race will tend toward extinction, but if it is used by right thinking people as a necessary means to an end, the race will profit by it and forge ahead. With this ideal in mind Edith Wharton leaves this challenge to a race who founded its society on a land of the free and a home of the brave.

## CHAPTER IV

### SOCIAL MISFITS IN EDITH WHARTON'S NOVELS

In every social group maladjusted individuals are found. Edith Wharton observed many misfits in European society as well as in the society of New York. However, it is with the New York group that she is mostly concerned, because this is the group which she knew best. Edith Wharton dealt at length with two classes of maladjusted individuals. She was particularly interested in the problem of the literary person versus society. Of this problem she could write from experience. She herself had felt society's disregard for intellect and for the essence of culture. The other social misfit who seemed to interest her was the nouveau riche. The newly rich person created many interesting situations as he attempted to become a member of society. Edith Wharton is especially interested in the manner in which the old New Yorker protected himself from the newly rich social climber.

In her novel Hudson River Bracketed Edith Wharton criticizes society's disregard of Vance Weston's interest in literature and of his ability as a writer. Even Halo Spear, when she first meets him, makes light of his deep

love for poetry. As she reads Coleridge's immortal Kubla Khan to him, she seems amazed at his deep feeling. Later in their relationship she outwardly rejects his genius as a poet and notices only technical errors. Inwardly Halo Spear recognizes Weston's talent and is the cause of his return to New York. Lewis Tarrant, her husband and editor of the New Hour, a literary magazine, depends on his wife's judgment. He is interested in Weston's literary genius only for what it will do for him. Although he wishes to bask in Vance's fame, he does not wish to pay Vance the right amount of money for what he writes. Though Vance's short story Unclaimed causes the first edition of the New Hour to be a success, Vance receives no credit for this and no bonus. He is always in dire need of money, and his wife, Laura Lou, is in need of medical aid.

Mrs. Pulsifer, a society woman, gives a prize each year for the best short story written in that year. Outwardly it would seem that she had great appreciation for literary men, but this prize is nothing more than a fad to her. She reveals her lack of depth when she speaks to Vance of her great responsibility in awarding the prize. She shows that she has no understanding of why the prize is given or what the receiving of the prize might mean to the lucky winner. She exclaims:

'How you do know women! How in the world did you ever guess . . . ? Several of my friends have

told me that your Tullia was my living portrait. . . . But I mustn't talk of that now. Won't you come and see me some day? Yes--that would be better. I'm so alone, Mr. Weston--I do so need advice and encouragement! Sometimes I wish I'd never undertaken this prize business; but wealth has its duties, hasn't it?<sup>1</sup>

A person who converses in this flighty manner could never concentrate on a deep novel or on philosophical poetry long enough to reach an understanding of it. Mrs. Pulsifer does not credit Vance with a vivid imagination. She is only interested in him because he is a nice-looking young man, and she wishes to acquire him as she would acquire a new possession.

Vance does not keep his appointment with Mrs. Pulsifer. His wife develops pneumonia, and all appointments slip his mind. Mrs. Pulsifer, who has sent him a telegram requesting an appointment with him, apologizes for the telegram when he goes to see her. She tells him that she wired him because she wanted him to receive the prize so much, and she wanted to warn him about one of the members of the committee who awarded the prize. Mrs. Pulsifer shows her palatial home to Vance. She shows him some of her pictures; yet it is evident that she has no appreciation of the artist's genius which is expressed in all paintings. The following descriptive

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<sup>1</sup>Edith Wharton, Hudson River Bracketed, p. 288.

passage reveals that Vance felt her indifference to good pictures and classical books:

Yes, Vance said, he'd like first-rate to look around. He explained eagerly that he'd seen hardly any pictures, and wanted to get hold of some good books on the history of painting. . . . maybe she could lend him some? But he was checked by the perception that Mrs. Pulsifer was no longer listening, and that this was not the sort of thing she wanted to hear. He was dimly aware that he had missed his chance, that had he imprisoned her hand the prize would have been his. . . . She poured out a glib patter about the pictures, her pictures; her Constable, her Rembrandt, her Van Meer, and other names he didn't catch in his excitement; and then led him to another room to show him her 'moderns,' bewildering things with unknown names, and all alluded to in the same proprietary tone, as if the artists, whoever they were, had worked, like her architect, only for her and under her direction . . . Her nervous chatter disturbed his enjoyment of the pictures, and prevented the isolation of soul in which great impressions reached him. What a pity, he thought! His heart was beating and murmuring with new harmonies; but perhaps another day, when he got to know her better, and they felt more at ease with each other, he could ask her to let him come back. And he thought how different it would have been if the woman at his side had been Halo Tarrant, who always made him see beautiful things more clearly instead of blurring them.<sup>2</sup>

This passage shows the attitude of society toward the creative artist. Society does not seek to understand the reasons for the artist's creations; all society wishes is to possess the materials of culture and attain prestige through such possessions.

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 314-315.

When Vance summons enough courage to tell Mrs. Pulsifer that he is poor and that he needs money, she appears sympathetic. When he asks her for a loan of two thousand dollars, she seems shocked; yet she agrees to arrange a loan for him. Before Vance leaves, he tactlessly explains to her why he needs the money. Mrs. Pulsifer tells Vance that she did not know he was married. But as a last straw, she asks him if he is happily married. When he assures her that he is, he has made his final blunder. He sees his mistake, but there is nothing he can do. He does not get the loan, and his chance for the prize is gone. Mrs. Pulsifer was not interested in him because of his literary ability; she wished a new lover to dispel her loneliness. When he tells her he is happily married, she has no more use for him.

Even after Vance has written his successful novel Instead, he is still neglected by society. Society is composed of those who should enjoy and appreciate the best literature; yet society only feigned an interest in it. The New Yorkers of Edith Wharton's day were only hospitable to the artists and writers because they delighted in the fame of these talented people. Most of the New Yorkers never read the books of the writers. They knew little about the best in art. It was quite easy for society to pretend a great interest in all of the best in culture. It is this hypocrisy that causes Vance great disillusionment

as he learns more about these people with whom he is associated. Vance never feels at ease in a group where he should be an outstanding figure. He never felt rightly dressed, nor did he feel sure of himself. Lewis Tarrant had bound Vance with a contract which allowed him little profit from the sale of his books. With no money accorded him by society and no understanding on the part of society, Vance was never able to find a groove in this group. If society wished to bask in the fame of genius, the members should have been willing to pay for this privilege; this they refused to do. With all these wrongs directed toward the talented members, the group will naturally find many cases of maladjustment.

The neglect of the literary man is again apparent in the novel The Custom of the Country. Edith Wharton pictures Ralph Marvell, a young man from the best New York society, who is interested in writing; he is especially fond of poetry. Ralph's own people think little of his writing ability. This attitude is specifically expressed when Mr. Dagonet, Ralph's grandfather, is talking to Mr. Spragg, Ralph's future father-in-law, concerning Ralph's earning ability and his financial status. Mr. Dagonet says: "He can write poetry--at least he tells me he can."<sup>3</sup> When

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<sup>3</sup>Edith Wharton, The Custom of the Country, p. 121.

Mr. Spragg asks Mr. Dagonet if Ralph prints his own volumes of poetry, Mr. Dagonet replies: "Dear, no--he doesn't go in for 'luxe' editions. And now and then he gets ten dollars from a magazine."<sup>4</sup> From the tone of the conversation it is clear that Ralph's grandfather feels his grandson's literary aspirations are quite hopeless and certainly impractical. He has no sympathy for Ralph's love of literature nor for his sensitive spirit. None of Ralph's social group understand his talent and love of the beautiful.

The following passage which describes Ralph's feelings as he enjoyed the beauty of Italian skies gives the reader a view of his depth of emotion:

As he lay there, fragments of past states of emotion, fugitive felicities of thought and sensation, rose and floated on the surface of his thoughts. It was one of those moments when the accumulated impressions of life converge on heart and brain, elucidating, enlacing each other, in a mysterious confusion of beauty. He had had glimpses of such a state before, of such mergings of the personal with the general life that one felt one's self a mere wave on the wild stream of being, yet thrilled with a sharper sense of individuality that can be known within the mere bounds of the actual. But now he knew the sensation in its fulness, and with it came the releasing power of language. Words were flashing like brilliant birds through the boughs overhead; he had but to wave his magic wand to have them flutter down to him. Only they were so beautiful up there, weaving their fantastic flights against the blue, that it was pleasanter, for the moment, to watch them and let the wand lie.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 121.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., pp. 140-141.

A man with such an imagination could have developed it and produced something of literary significance, but this was not to come true in Ralph's case. He had selected an unsuitable wife. Not only was he maladjusted in his social group, but his wife did not understand him in the least. She knew nothing of good literature and had no desire to learn. Little by little she killed all of his aspirations to write poetry and to cultivate his literary talents. She kept him busy making money for her own selfish extravagances. Finally, after she has taken not only his money but also his health, she leaves him. Ralph's thwarted desires and literary ambitions give him no rest. When he feels that life holds nothing for him, he commits suicide.

In the novel The House of Mirth Edith Wharton presents another character who is interested in the literary side of life. Lawrence Seldon is a lawyer by profession, but he enjoys good books and good music. He likes to collect good books; yet he can pay little money for those he buys. Lily Bart asks him much about his books. He shows his deep interest in them, when in answering her question about Americana, he says: "No, that's rather out of my line. I'm not really a collector, you see; I simply like to have good editions of the books I am fond of."<sup>6</sup> Lily Bart expresses

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<sup>6</sup>Edith Wharton, The House of Mirth, p. 15.

society's inability to understand the literary man when she speaks of collectors of Americana in the following fashion:

'And yet they fetch fabulous prices, don't they? It seems so odd to want to pay a lot for an ugly badly-printed book that one is never going to read! And I suppose most of the owners of Americana are not historians either.'<sup>7</sup>

New York society of Edith Wharton's day could not understand how anyone could enjoy reading dull books, and it was completely beyond their comprehension how a person could enjoy writing books. Yet society tolerated the writer because it enjoyed his fame quite as much as he himself enjoyed it.

In a short novel, The Spark, Edith Wharton shows again society's disregard of the really great writers of the time. Hayley Delane is a wealthy New Yorker. He has spent some years in Washington, D. C., during the time Walt Whitman lived in the capitol city. He and the poet were not intimate friends; yet Delane has never forgotten Whitman. Years later he is turning through a book, and he sees Whitman's picture. He recognizes him as the man he had known in Washington. Though Delane had forgotten Whitman's name, he had remembered his face. He attempts to read some of Whitman's poetry but gives up in disgust; he cannot understand a line of it. At the last of the book Delane speaks of Whitman's forceful personality and his kindness

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 16.

toward all men. Yet Delane ends with the note that he wishes Whitman had not written such drivel.

Hayley Delane was not the only New Yorker who disliked Whitman. Very few liked what Whitman wrote or the man Whitman. The social group could not understand the meaning of Whitman's poetry or any other philosophical poetry. They had no foundation for interesting themselves in the meaning of poetry and art. Many of the social group felt that those who were interested in books and writing were peculiar. Perhaps many who might have had literary aspirations were afraid to develop them, because they feared social ostracism. Edith Wharton seems to be constantly seeking a place for her creative man in a society that seems completely disinterested in the thinking man.

In another short novel, False Dawn, Edith Wharton pictures New York society in the late nineteenth century. The plot concerns a young man from a wealthy family who goes to Europe. His father has instructed him to bring home many paintings done by the old masters. During the young man's sojourn in Italy, he meets John Ruskin, who interests him in paintings of lesser known artists, but nevertheless paintings which are beautiful. The young man purchases these paintings instead of those of the old masters. When he returns to New York, his father tells him he has thrown away his money on worthless pictures. Yet the young man

maintains his faith in his pictures. At his father's death, the youth inherits nothing from his father but the pictures. He tries to interest New York in these works of art, but New York turns a cold shoulder to them. Years later these pictures are found in an attic; they have become quite rare, and New York society is willing to pay a fabulous sum to obtain even one picture. Edith Wharton shows in this novel that people pay no attention to real artistic genius; instead they are guided by the opinion of a few.

In all of her novels concerning the writer, artist, or man interested in literature, Edith Wharton shows a great sympathy for him. The author realizes his inability to fit into society. She sees the maladjustment of the literary man as a complicated problem which refuses to be solved. Few people possess the deep imagination and feeling of the literary man. Society as a whole, whether it be New York society or any other group, can feel and understand only in a degree. The group sees no necessity in penetrating the inner soul of man; they are satisfied with his superficial exterior. The person who does view the inner man can have little in common with the many who view only the outward man. Thus the problem concerning the literary man versus society arises. Since these two groups find themselves merged into a larger group, the problem of maladjustment will ever be present.

The newly rich person found it just as difficult to acquire a place in society as did the man of letters. The society of Edith Wharton's day thought that the newly rich people were common and of low stock. The old New York society consisted of old families who had intermarried. They did not wish to include in their group any outsiders; these outsiders of course had no family back of them. A newly rich person who attempted to acquire a place within New York's Four Hundred was truly in for a great struggle. Such a person was not recognized by the aristocratic group and would not be invited to their social functions.

In The Age of Innocence Edith Wharton pictures in the character of Mrs. Struthers a good example of the nouveau riche. This lady is quite wealthy; yet she is not recognized by the New Yorkers. She has heard of Ellen Olenska and wishes to meet her. The Duke of St. Austrey, who is visiting the van der Luydens, takes her to meet Ellen. Upon meeting Ellen, Mrs. Struthers remarks:

'Of course I want to know you, my dear. I want to know everybody who's young and interesting and charming. And the Duke tells me you like music--didn't you, Duke? You're a pianist yourself, I believe? Well, do you want to hear Sarasate play tomorrow evening at my house? You know I've something going on every Sunday evening --it's the day when New York doesn't know what to do with itself, and so I say to it! 'Come and be amused! And the Duke thought you'd be tempted by Sarasate. You'll find a number of your friends.'<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Edith Wharton, The Age of Innocence, p. 76.

When Ellen accepts Mrs. Struther's invitation, she does not know that her social group refuses to recognize this woman. To Ellen Mrs. Struthers seems kind and friendly. The Duke of Austrey seems quite a friend of Mrs. Struthers, and the Duke is visiting one of New York's leading families. Ellen Olenska goes to Mrs. Struthers' and immediately New York society starts buzzing.

The fact that Mrs. Struthers is newly rich is not the only reason that New York society refuses to recognize her. The old New Yorkers dislike her Sunday evening entertainments. Never had the rules of society been broken until Mrs. Struthers started her Sunday musicals. The strict members of society refuse to tolerate her infringement of their rules. Less strict members, however, who enjoy light-hearted company and music, attend her Sunday evening parties.

It is true that if Mrs. Struthers continued her entertainments and persisted in her efforts to be recognized by society, she would finally be successful. Any society needs new life; without new life it becomes a static group. Even in The Age of Innocence, many of the old New York group were attending her parties, and this group was sure to grow from year to year. If these people knew they could find amusement at a certain place, trivialities would be forgotten, and they would be drawn toward the amusement. So Mrs. Struthers would finally find herself within the society of

her choice. Yet after she became a member, would she be a contented one? Would she find herself adjusted to these people? The reader is doubtful that her adjustment would be a complete one. Her attitudes and ideas are far different from those of the old New York group. Even after she has been accepted by them, she will find that she is a misfit.

Probably Edith Wharton's best example of encroachment of the nouveau riche in New York society is found in her novel The Custom of the Country. Mr. and Mrs. Spragg, with their daughter, Undine Spragg, have moved from Apex City to New York City. They have been in New York for two years; yet they have made no friends and know very few people. The following passage describes the condition of the Spraggs:

Since the Spraggs, some two years previously, had moved from Apex City to New York, they had made little progress in establishing relations with their new environment; and when, about four months earlier, Mrs. Spragg's doctor had called in Mrs. Heeny to minister professionally to his patient, he had done more for her spirit than her body. Mrs. Heeny had had such 'cases' before: she knew the rich helpless family, stranded in lonely splendour in a sumptuous West Side hotel, with a father compelled to seek a semblance of social life at the hotel bar, and a mother deprived of even this contact with her kind, and reduced to illness by boredom and inactivity. Poor Mrs. Spragg had done her own washing in her youth, but since her rising fortunes had made this occupation unsuitable she had sunk into a relative inertia which the ladies of Apex City regarded as one of the prerogatives of affluence. . . . It was Mrs. Heeny who peopled the solitude of the long ghostly days with lively anecdotes of the

Van Degans, the Driscolls, the Chauncey Ellings and the social potentates whose least doings Mrs. Spragg and Undine had followed from afar in the Apex papers, and who had come to seem so much more remote since only the width of Central Park divided mother and daughter from their Olympian Portals.

It is true that during these years, Undine had made little progress in becoming a member of the best social group in New York. She had met during this time Mabel Lipscomb, a girl she had known in boarding school. Mrs. Lipscomb, who had married a stock-broker, had taken Undine under her wing. She had caused the Spraggs to move to the Stentorian Hotel. She had taken Undine to many of her clubs and introduced her to many of her friends. Yet Undine is no nearer Fifth Avenue than she was before she renewed her acquaintance with Mabel.

Finally Mabel introduces Undine to a Mr. Popple, a portrait painter, and his friend, Ralph Marvell. Ralph Marvell comes of an old New York family, and he becomes interested in Undine. According to New York social customs he has his sister, Mrs. Fairford, invite Undine to dinner so that he may become better acquainted with her. It is Mrs. Heeny who tells Undine that Marvell is from one of the best families in New York. Undine had hardly noticed Marvell when she was introduced to him. To her he seemed little, shy, and insignificant. When Undine asks Mrs. Heeny, "Why,

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<sup>9</sup>Edith Wharton, The Custom of the Country, p. 10.

do you know the Marvells? Are they stylish?"<sup>10</sup> it is evident that she wishes to know members of this social group. Undine cannot understand why Marvell's sister would be inviting her to dinner. Also she cannot understand why the note was sent to her mother instead of to her. Mrs. Heeny tells her that when a young man of this group wishes to extend his acquaintance with a young girl, he asks his sister to invite her to dinner. The sister always sends the invitation to the girl's mother. Undine is not accustomed to such formality; she is used to accepting invitations from young men without her mother's knowledge of them. And she is also used to meeting young men when she pleases and where she pleases.

Mrs. Heeny explains this formality when she says:

'Don't you know it's the thing in the best society to pretend that girls can't do anything without their mother's permission? You just remember that, Undine. You mustn't accept invitations from gentlemen without you say you've got to ask your mother first.'<sup>11</sup>

Thus Undine's first introduction to the customs used by old New York comes about. She feels that she is willing to be formal if it will cause them to open their homes to her.

Undine's first introduction to New York society is a very disappointing one. She is used to glitter and gaudiness which money can always buy. Her parents are not

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 9.

accustomed to money, and they think that glitter denotes wealth. The following passage describes Undine's disappointment in Mrs. Fairford's home and in her dinner:

The house, to begin with, was small and rather shabby. There was no gilding, no lavish diffusion of light: the room they sat in after dinner, with its greenshaded lamps making faint pools of brightness, and its rows of books from floor to ceiling, reminded Undine of the old circulating library at Apex, before the new marble building was put up. Then, instead of a gaslog, or a polished grate with electric bulbs behind ruby glass, there was an old-fashioned wood-fire, like pictures of 'Back to the farm for Christmas'; and when the logs fell forward Mrs. Fairford or her brother had to jump up to push them in place, and the ashes scattered over the hearth untidily.

The dinner too was disappointing. Undine was too young to take note of the culinary details, but she had expected to view the company through a bower of orchids and eat pretty-coloured entrees in ruffled papers. Instead, there was only a low centre-dish of ferns, and plain roasted and broiled meat that one could recognize--as if they'd been dyspeptics on a diet! With all the hints in the Sunday papers, she thought it dull of Mrs. Fairford not to have picked up something newer, and as the evening progressed, she began to suspect that it wasn't a real 'dinner party,' and that they had asked her in to share what they had when they were alone.<sup>12</sup>

Since Undine had been accustomed to an outward display of money, she did not realize that Mrs. Fairford would have thought it very bad taste to serve a dinner such as Undine had expected. Undine's expectations were no different from the expectations of all newly rich people. To those people who had had money for years, the display and glitter of the

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp. 31-32.

newly rich was disgusting and intolerable. The old aristocratic families did not have to convince others of their wealth by showy extravagances; their names were convincing enough to anyone acquainted with New York's Four Hundred. This very love Undine had for the glitter of life would cause her to be maladjusted in this social group.

After the dinner Mrs. Fairford tries to talk to Undine. She speaks of outstanding picture exhibitions, but Undine has seen none of them. When Ralph's sister questions Undine about certain books, Undine is at a loss, because she does not read good books. Finally Mrs. Fairford talks of the theater, but Undine has never heard of the Berlin comedians who were giving Shakespeare at the German Theater. Undine had seen Sarah Bernhardt, but she could not recall the names of the plays in which Miss Bernhardt performed. All that had impressed Undine concerning Miss Bernhardt was that the actress appeared much older than she had expected.

Though Undine is greatly disappointed in the dinner, she is still determined to be accepted by New York society. She takes a box at the opera, and though her evening isn't as successful as she would wish it, Ralph Marvell enters her box as she is leaving. He asks to see her the next day; Undine decides that even if the opera box was expensive, she has been well repaid. Undine does not care for Ralph Marvell, but she knows that he can give her an entrance into

society. Undine is sure that this social position is exactly what she wants; in this she is sadly mistaken. All that Undine would ever want is money. She does not know that Ralph is not wealthy. It is her belief that all of the aristocracy have money.

Ralph Marvell had had no desire to marry until he met Undine. His mother and sister had wanted him to marry, but he had often wondered whom he would marry. The following is descriptive of his thoughts concerning marriage:

The daughters of his own race sold themselves to the Invaders; the daughters of the Invaders bought their husbands as they bought an opera-box. It ought all to have been transacted at the Stock Exchange.<sup>13</sup>

Ralph doesn't want to marry in his group, because the girls of his group are too limited in spirit and vivacity. He feels that they have no imagination and that they do not act free and natural. He saw in Undine a freshness which was important to him. He also saw in her a virgin innocence that he felt called upon to protect.

Two months later Undine is engaged to Ralph Marvell. She is sure that now she will become an accepted member of his family and his social group. But she is wrong. Ralph's family does not understand Undine, and she does not understand them. The night that Undine meets Ralph's grandfather,

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<sup>13</sup>           , p. 78.

she shocks the entire family by talking and approving of divorce. She tells his family that in her home town all girls are taught to divorce the men they marry if these men do not come up to their expectations. This is only one instance of the maladjustment Undine continues to suffer in Ralph's social group.

When Undine's father is told by Ralph's grandfather that Ralph has little money of his own, Mr. Spragg advises Undine not to marry Ralph Marvell. Undine tells her father that she does not wish money but that she wishes to become affiliated with Ralph's social group. Undine is not concerned about money, because she knows that Mr. Spragg will give her an allowance if she needs it. Even if Ralph is a poor aristocrat, Undine wishes to marry him for his social position.

After Undine marries Ralph, she finds money is more of a necessity all the time. She and Ralph disagree often. He goes with her less and less. She finds nothing in common with his friends or his family. His group is not the group she enjoys. She forces Ralph to go into business so that she may live in the manner she wishes. Undine's values were molded by her parents and her surroundings; Ralph's values were measured by his social group. Since these two people cannot adjust themselves to each other, Undine goes to Europe and seeks friends in a new atmosphere. Here she

makes a few friends, but her adjustment is still incomplete. She divorces Ralph and marries a French nobleman, but she fares no better in European society. Her maladjustment is caused partly by her complete selfishness and partly by her inability to be satisfied in any place with any person. Her parents had made her a completely selfish person and her ability to get money whenever she wished it had made her feel that she could buy whatever she wished. Never does this newly rich girl become adjusted in society.

In The House of Mirth Edith Wharton pictures Simon Rosedale as a good example of the newly rich man who is determined to become a member of New York's best society. Lily Bart, one of the Four Hundred, meets Rosedale after she has paid Lawrence Seldon a visit. Rosedale owns the building in which Seldon has his apartment. Rosedale asks Lily Bart if he may take her to the station. Rosedale is a Jew with much money, but he is repulsive to Miss Bart, and she refuses his invitation. In the following passage Edith Wharton describes the extent to which a person would go to climb socially:

If she had had the presence of mind to let Rosedale drive her to the station, the concession might have purchased his silence. He had his race's accuracy in the appraisal of values, and to be seen walking down the platform at the crowded afternoon hour in the company of Miss Lily Bart would have been money in his pocket, as he might himself have phrased it. He knew,

of course, that there would be a large house-party at Bellomont, and the possibility of being taken for one of Mrs. Trenor's guests was doubtless included in his calculations. Mr. Rosedale was still at a stage in his social ascent when it was of importance to produce such impressions.<sup>14</sup>

Simon Rosedale was considered "impossible" in Lily's group. One other time Miss Bart had encountered Rosedale at a party given by one of her group. Her cousin, Jack Stepney, had gotten him the invitation, because of certain favors he had accepted from Rosedale. The Jew had sought out Lily Bart because of her beauty and her complete unity with her group, but Lily Bart had snubbed him, not because he was a newcomer but because he was repulsive. Yet Mr. Rosedale was not to change his course of action. He kept right on in his campaign for climbing socially. Gus Trenor, who is at the peak in the social world, speaks to Miss Bart about Rosedale. He says:

'Not that I ought to complain today, though I did a very neat stroke of business, thanks to Stepney's friend, Rosedale . . . by the way, Miss Lily, I wish you'd try to persuade Judy to be decently civil to that chap. He's going to be rich enough to buy us all out one of these days, and if she'd only ask him to dine now and then I could get almost anything out of him. The man is mad to know the people who don't want to know him, and when a fellow's in that state there is nothing he won't do for the first woman who takes him up.'<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Edith Wharton, The House of Mirth, p. 23.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 130.

When Miss Bart tells Trenor that Rosedale is impossible, Trenor makes a prophecy which turns out to be true when he says:

'Oh, hang it--because he's fat and shiney, and has a shoppy manner! Well, all I can say is that the people who are clever enough to be civil to him now will make a mighty good thing of it. A few years from now he'll be in it whether we want him or not, and then he won't be giving away a half-a-million tip for a dinner.'<sup>16</sup>

Later in the novel Rosedale is accepted as a member of the social group. Money can often buy acceptance when other qualities fail. At Trenor's insistence Lily Bart is kind to Rosedale when she meets him at social gatherings.

Rosedale comes to see Miss Bart one day, and he sums up in the following speech the attitude of the newly rich:

'... But that's my character: if I want a thing I'm willing to pay: I don't go up to the counter, and then wonder if the article's worth the price. I wouldn't be satisfied to entertain like the Welly Brys: I'd want something that would look more easy and natural, more as if I took it in my stride. And it takes just two things to do that, Miss Bart: money, and the right woman to spend it.'<sup>17</sup>

At this particular time Rosedale wishes to marry Lily Bart, not because he is very much in love with her but because he feels that she will assure him a place in society. With her as his wife he feels that he can make the necessary show to

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 283.

win a permanent place in society. In speaking of what he has wanted in life, Rosedale says:

'I generally have got what I wanted in life, Miss Bart. I wanted money, and I've got more than I know how to invest; and now the money doesn't seem to be of any account unless I spend it on the right woman. That's what I want to do with it: I want my wife to make all the other women feel small. I'd never grudge a dollar that was spent on that. But it isn't every woman can do it, no matter how much you spend on her. There was a girl in some history book who wanted gold shields, or something, and the fellows threw 'em at her, and she was crushed under 'em: they killed her. Well, that's true enough: some women look buried under their jewelry. What I want is a woman who'll hold her head higher the more diamonds I put on it.'<sup>18</sup>

He thinks that in the same way he can buy his way into society, he can buy a wife. Rosedale is no exception to the rule in this attitude.

When Lily Bart seems surprised at his proposal, Rosedale says:

'Oh, if you mean you're not dead in love with me, I've got sense enough left to see that. And I ain't talking to you as if you were--I presume I know the kind of talk that's expected under those circumstances. I'm confoundedly gone on you--that's about the size of it--and I'm just giving you a plain business statement of the consequences. You're not very fond of me--yet--but you're fond of luxury, and style, and amusement, and of not having to worry about cash. You like to have a good time, and not to have to settle for it: and what I propose to do is to provide for the good time and do the settling.'<sup>19</sup>

Clearly Rosedale's proposition is a business one. Yet he

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 284.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 285.

is attracted to Lily Bart because she is a beautiful girl and because she is vivacious and amiable. Miss Bart does not give him his answer but asks him for time to think over what he has said. Rosedale feels rather successful; at least Miss Bart listened to his proposal. Always Rosedale is searching for a place in a world that feels only a contempt for him but will continue to tolerate him because of his money.

About a year later Lily Bart is in strained circumstances. Her aunt, with whom she lived, has died and has left Lily only a small legacy. Lily Bart and Rosedale attend a house party, and Miss Bart tells Rosedale that she is willing to marry him. But the Jew has changed his mind, and he tells Miss Bart that much time has elapsed since his proposal and that he has changed his mind. He tells her the year before he was wild about her, but she wouldn't look at him. Now her situation is changed, and that is the only reason she would agree to marry him. When Lily Bart asks him if he thinks he can do better, he says:

'Why, yes, I do: in one way, that is. It's this way, you see: I've had a pretty steady grind of it these last years, working up my social position. Think it's funny I should say that? Why should I mind saying I want to get into society? A man ain't ashamed to say he wants to own a racing stable or a picture gallery. Well, a taste for society's just another kind of hobby. Perhaps I want to get even with some of the people who cold-shouldered me last year--put it that way if it sounds better. Anyway, I want to have the run of

the best houses: and I'm getting it too, little by little. But I know the quickest way to queer yourself with the right people is to be seen with the wrong ones: and that's the reason I want to avoid mistakes.<sup>20</sup>

Rosedale could not have been more candid in this statement to Lily Bart. He has gradually bought his way into society. Soon he will have an established place. He admits that he loves her more than ever, but he does not want to discard all that he has worked to accomplish. When she tells him that last year she would have been a help to him but this year she would be an encumbrance, he admits that she is right. They part as friends, but Lily Bart knows that she has once again let money slip through her hands.

In none of Edith Wharton's novels is the newly rich and his advance on society pictured as vividly as in this novel. Simon Rosedale clearly represents the newly rich man who means to have what he wants. The character of Rosedale seems real and alive. He never swerves from his desired end. He knows what he wants and he will know no satisfaction until he has triumphed. Yet the reader wonders if Rosedale will be happy as a member of society. Many other cases similar to his have not proved happy ones. The glamour of society dulls under close inspections.

In The Gods Arrive Edith Wharton pictures Floss Delaney, a newly rich girl, who goes to Europe for the express

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 412.

purpose of marrying a nobleman. She tells Vance Weston that she intends to buy a title with her money. She also tells him that all her life she has wanted to amount to something, and she feels that by marrying a duke, she will buy a high place in society. She knows that her social position in Europe will be an assured one. She also knows that Americans will grant her the social position she desires because she will have a title before her name.

In another novel, The Glimpses of the Moon, Edith Wharton pictures the Hicks family as a nouveau riche family. They own a yacht and search for old paintings and books. Though they have much money, they have no social position. Society scorns them because they still have the attitude of the middle class. They are very lonely and are seeking ways to better their social position. On a European cruise they meet certain Italian noblemen. They suddenly find themselves a part of European society. Finally Coral Hicks, their daughter, agrees to marry one of the Italian counts. She tells Nick Lansing, a friend of long standing, that she knows her marriage is not one of love. She admits that her money is as important to the count as his social position is important to her and her family. By marrying a title Coral will buy herself a social position. She tells Nick Lansing that since she cannot marry for love, she will marry for a social position.

Edith Wharton vividly delineates the personalities of all of her social misfits. She shows that each maladjusted person should be borne with sympathetically. She feels that his problems are complicated because they are brought about by environmental conditions and circumstances. Edith Wharton seems to regard the problem of the man of letters versus society as futile. Although she often regards the nouveau riche people in a humorous manner, still her attitude toward this group is sympathetic. She does not blame them for their desire to obtain social recognition. Their frank acknowledgment of this desire makes them interesting to the reader. All of these maladjusted people make Edith Wharton's society vibrant and entertaining; they give much color to her group. Without these misfits within her group her novels would lose much of their meaning. Often her maladjusted characters assume major rôles in her novels. Edith Wharton had a great understanding of these misfits and their problems, and this is why she is able to picture them in such a realistic manner.

## CHAPTER V

### ECONOMIC PROBLEMS WHICH CAUSE SOCIAL DISINTEGRATION IN EDITH WHARTON'S NOVELS

Often the economic conditions governing the outward life of people can produce unlimited progress or rapid disintegration. In Edith Wharton's novels of New England this social decay is pronounced. The author presents a dreary picture of village people suffering from a social decay which was brought on by their urgent need for money coupled with their desire for happier surroundings. For ten years Edith Wharton studied the people and the economic conditions found in these villages, which were cut off from trains, telegraphs, and telephones. She carefully observed the villagers' customs, their attempts at making livelihoods, and their limited pastimes. When she felt that she could give realism to a novel with a New England background, she wrote her masterpiece, Ethan Frome.

It is in this novel that the author shows the tragedy of economic necessity. It is in her portrayal of its main character, Ethan Frome, that she reaches sublimity. From the first page of this short novel the reader senses tragedy.

This tragedy is especially marked in the following description of Frome:

Even then he was the most striking figure in Starkfield, though he was but the ruin of a man. It was not so much his great height that marked him, for the 'natives' were easily singled out by their lank longitude from the stockier foreign breed: it was the careless powerful look he had, in spite of a lameness checking each step like the jerk of a chain. There was something bleak and unapproachable in his face, and he was so stiffened and grizzled that I took him for an old man and was surprised to hear that he was not more than fifty-two.<sup>1</sup>

It is this unapproachable expression on his face that makes the reader wish to learn his history.

Frome's grim history is aptly stated by Harmon Gow, one of the villagers, in the following remarks:

'Well, matters ain't gone any too well with him. When a man's been setting around like a hulk for twenty years or more, seeing things that want doing, it eats inter him, and he loses his grit. That Frome farm was always 'bout as bare's a milk-pan when the cat's been round; and you know what one of them old water-mills is worth nowadays. When Ethan could sweat over 'em both from sun-up to dark he kinder choked a living out of 'em; but his folks ate up most everything, even then, and I don't see how he makes out now. Fust his father got a kick, out haying, and went soft in the brain, and gave away money like Bible texts afore he died. Then his mother got queer and dragged along for years as weak as a baby; and his wife Zeena, she's always been the greatest hand at doctoring in the country. Sickness and trouble: that's what Ethan's had his plate full up with, ever since the very first helping.'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Edith Wharton, Ethan Frome, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 14.

It is easy to see that financial problems have been Frome's lot for many years and that he has been hardly able to make a bare living for his family. It is also evident that the lack of money has caused his people to become more and more of a problem to him. It is a sad truth that money smooths the way to social contentedness.

An engineer who is working for a few months in the village near Frome's farm becomes interested in him. Ethan Frome impresses the engineer in the following manner:

'He seemed a part of the mute melancholy landscape, an incarnation of its frozen woe, with all that was warm and sentient in him fast bound below the surface; but there was nothing unfriendly in his silence. I simply felt that he lived in a depth of moral isolation too remote for casual access, and I had the sense that his loneliness was not merely the result of his personal plight, tragic as I guessed that to be, but had in it . . . the profound accumulated cold of many Starkfield winters.'<sup>3</sup>

Too long Ethan Frome had been compelled to stay in Starkfield, Massachusetts. His personality had become colored by his surroundings. There had been no attractive future to which he could look forward. He saw no chance to escape from the drudgery of his hand-to-mouth existence.

Edith Wharton allows the engineer who is to be in the village for a few months to discover and relate the story of Ethan Frome. This same engineer discovers that Frome is

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 15-16.

interested in science and engineering. He happens on this information quite by accident. He leaves a popular science volume in Frome's sleigh and finds that Frome has read much in the book. When the engineer discovers Frome is interested in science, he offers to lend him the book. Through this channel the engineer hopes to become friendly with Frome and learn about his early life. However, this does not occur until one night when a snow storm causes him to spend a night in Frome's farm home. The desolation of his farm and surroundings is described in the following:

'About a mile farther, on a road I had never travelled, we came to an orchard of starved apple trees writhing over a hillside among outcroppings of slate that nuzzled up through the snow like animals pushing out their noses to breathe. Beyond the orchard lay a field or two, their boundaries lost under drifts; and above the fields, huddled against the white immensities of land and sky, one of those lonely New England farm-houses that make the landscape lonelier.'<sup>4</sup>

It is evident from this description that the years had taken their toll from Frome's land. Every year he had been able to do less and less. Finally, he is able to scrape only a bare living from his land.

At this particular time the engineer is able to piece together the history of Frome's life and he is able to learn the secret of the unapproachable expression on his face. He learned that when Frome was in his early twenties he had

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

spent a year in a technological college. Here he had enjoyed dabbling in physics with a professor who liked him. It was also in this college that he became greatly interested in engineering. This experience had so influenced him that even thirty years later he still felt the effect of it:

And the images supplied by that experience still cropped up, at unexpected moments, through the totally different associations of thought in which he had since been living. His father's death, and the misfortune following it, had put a premature end to Ethan's studies; but though they had not gone far enough to be of much practical use they had led his fancy and had made him aware of huge cloudy meanings behind the daily face of things.<sup>5</sup>

It was this experience which had proved to Ethan Frome that his talent and interest were in science and engineering. It was of this field that he wished to be a part, but he was never able to realize his wish.

Ethan Frome had returned to Starkfield after his father's accident. He was forced to carry on the burden of the farm and mill. He had to work so hard at both of them to make them pay that he had no time to loiter in the village and be friendly with his fellowmen. He longed for human companionship, but he had no time to seek it. After his mother's mental trouble developed, she proved to be no company. Finally, Zeena Pierce, his cousin, came to take

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 29.

care of his mother. In his house again human speech was heard. Ethan Frome was so starved for human companionship that when Zeena started to leave, he asked her to stay with him. They planned to leave Starkfield and go to a larger place where Ethan could get an engineering job, where they could attend lectures, and where he could read in good libraries. But this was not to be. Their farm and mill would not sell, and Zeena developed a "sickness." When this occurred, she too became silent. His life again became a lonely one, and his craving for understanding had to be suppressed.

Finally Mattie Silver, a poor girl who was distantly related to Zeena, comes to help Frome's wife with her house work. Mattie is young and kind, and Frome feels that his craving for human understanding and companionship has been answered in this girl. She offsets the depressing atmosphere of Zeena's complaining and gives cheer and peace to his household. Though she is a frail girl, she is willing to work for her board and room and is glad to have a place she can call home. During the year of Mattie's stay, Frome's life is quite different. She gives him a new outlook and interest in life. His financial troubles fail to depress him as they formerly had. She has brought happiness and joy into his life, and her cheerful attitude makes his existence a joy. Ethan Frome shaves every day, and he takes

more interest in his personal appearance. Mattie Silver has even made nature seem more beautiful to him. Ethan treasures the hours he spends in her company, for in her presence, he becomes a complete individual.

But Zeena with her pathological complex cannot allow such happiness to remain unclouded. Zeena seems to know nothing about Ethan and Mattie's love affair; yet the two lovers feel self-conscious in her presence. She complains often that Mattie is worth little to her; yet she makes no move to rid herself of her poor relative. Zeena grows more morose and glum all the time. She feels sure that if Ethan had the money for her to spend on her illness she could be cured. Also she reminds him often that if she could afford to keep a regular hired girl, she would regain her health. Constantly Frome is reminded of his inability to make money. Yet he is glad that they cannot hire a girl, because then Mattie would have to go. Mattie, who costs nothing but her room and board, has brought more happiness into his life than he had any idea could exist. When he is around the girl, his crude house and worn-out farm become beautiful to him. He lives in a world peopled by men and women like Mattie. Life becomes meaningful to him, and he feels that he can do something worthwhile.

But dreams are like soap bubbles; they burst and fade into nothingness. Zeena has observed the happiness of Ethan

and Mattie, and she is determined to put an end to it. On the pretense of being ill, she goes to a nearby town for a day and night's visit with a friend. While she is here, she employs a hired girl. Not suspecting Zeena's purpose, Ethan and Mattie spend a happy day together. In fact, the occasion is a gala one for them. They both forget all worries and are happy in the knowledge that they are together. Mattie prepares supper for Ethan and uses a red pickle-dish. This red dish was one of Zeena's wedding gifts. She had never used it and had never intended that it be used. The drabness of the table is obscured by the brightness of the red pickle-dish. To these two the dish represented luxury. They were accustomed to so little; thus they had learned to expect little. But even such happiness as their is doomed by a little tragedy which occurred as they ate supper:

The cat, unnoticed, had crept up on muffled paws from Zeena's seat to the table, and was stealthily elongating its body in the direction of the milk jug, which stood between Ethan and Mattie. The two leaned forward at the same moment and their hands met on the handle of the jug. Mattie's hand was underneath, and Ethan kept his clasped on it a moment longer than was necessary. The cat, profiting by this unusual demonstration, tried to effect an unnoticed retreat, and in doing so backed into the pickle-dish, which fell to the floor with a crash.<sup>6</sup>

One stolen moment caused great tragedy to them. The breaking

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 91.

of the pickle-dish represented more than the mere ruin of a glass dish. It warned Ethan and Mattie that their love could wreck their lives. It seemed almost prophetic in its warning. Both knew that Zeena prized the dish more than anything she possessed. Ethan felt that he could replace the dish, but he could not do this at once. He must glue it together and hope that his wife would not discover it for awhile anyway.

As the two sat that evening in the little farm house, they enjoyed the quiet of the room. They were lulled by the tick of the clock and the sharp odor of the geraniums.

Edith Wharton writes:

All constraint had vanished between the two, and they began to talk easily and simply. They spoke of every-day things, of the prospect of snow, of the next church sociable, of the loves and quarrels of Starkfield. The commonplace nature of what they said produced in Ethan an illusion of long-established intimacy which no outburst of emotion could have given, and he set his imagination adrift on the fiction that they had always spent their evenings thus and would always go on doing so.<sup>7</sup>

Ethan Frome has had an insight into happiness. So little had he felt joy in his life that his starved soul acts strangely in the presence of it. He wishes to prolong this joy, but he knows this is not possible. His mind is brought

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

back to the sad reality of his life, and, as he looks at Zeena's rocking chair, he thinks:

'She'll be rocking in it herself this time tomorrow. I've been in a dream, and this is the only evening we'll ever have together.' The return to reality was as painful as the return to consciousness after taking an anaesthetic. His body and brain ached with indescribable weariness, and he could think of nothing to say or to do that would arrest the mad flight of the moments.<sup>8</sup>

Frome knows that out of his drab existence he has literally stolen these hours of happiness; yet he wants to prolong them. In his heart he knows that they will rush by; thus he must enjoy each minute to its fullest.

When Zeena returns, she tells Ethan that Mattie must go. He tries to reason with her by telling her that Mattie is her relative and that she cannot be cast out when she has no place to go. Finally he tells Zeena that he cannot afford the wages of a hired girl. He says: "You know I haven't got the money to pay for a girl, Zeena. You'll have to send her back; I can't do it."<sup>9</sup> What Frome tells Zeena is true. He does not have the money necessary to pay a hired girl, and he cannot have anyone around who expects wages. He clearly pictures his true condition when he tells Zeena: "I'm sorry, but it can't be helped. You're a poor man's wife, Zeena; but I'll do the best I can for you."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 123.

It is quite true that he is poor; yet this time his poverty seems to be an aid instead of a hindrance. He feels that since he cannot afford a hired girl, perhaps Zeena will be willing to keep Mattie. But Zeena refuses to keep Mattie and tells Ethan that she must leave at once.

In the following passage Edith Wharton describes Ethan Frome at this crisis in his life when his financial troubles coupled with his personal problems confront him:

Ethan looked at her with loathing. She was 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. It was the sense of his helplessness that sharpened his antipathy. There had never been anything in her that one could appeal to; but as long as he could ignore and command he had remained indifferent. Now she had mastered him and he abhorred her. Mattie was her relation, not his; there was no means by which he could compel her to keep the girl under her roof. All the long misery of his baffled past, of his youth of failure, hardship and vain effort, rose up in his soul in bitterness and seemed to take shape before him in the woman who at every turn had barred his way. She had taken everything else from him; and now she meant to take the one thing which made up for all the others. For a moment such a flame of hate rose in him that it ran down his arm and clenched his fist against her. He took a wild step forward and then stopped.<sup>11</sup>

At this moment Ethan Frome saw the past, present, and future as he looked at this woman who represented all the barriers of his life. He saw his ceaseless struggle against the ravages of poverty; he saw his youth ruined by circumstances

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 127-128.

which gave him no hope. As he looked at the future, the shadow of Zeena completely obscured it. He was left without hope, if Mattie was to go.

Ethan Frome thought long and hard that night over the coming events. He even began a note to Zeena in which he told her that he was going West but that he was leaving the farm and mill to her. He saw no reason why he should not leave with Mattie; surely he deserved a little happiness, and he fully believed that they could find it together. He felt sure that he could find work in the West. Suddenly he remembered that his farm and mill were heavily mortgaged; with this condition existing Zeena could clear very little from it even if she found a buyer. If she kept it, she could never keep the farm going by herself. Yet he was determined to go West. He found an advertisement with railroad rates to the West. Then the following revelation comes to him:

He drew the lantern nearer and eagerly scanned the fares; then the paper fell from his hand and he pushed aside his unfinished letter. A moment ago he had wondered what he and Mattie were to live on when they reached the West; now he saw that he had not even the money to take her there. Borrowing was out of the question; six months before he had given his only security to raise funds for necessary repairs to the mill, and he knew that without security no one in Starkfield would lend him ten dollars. The inexorable facts closed in on him like prison-warders handcuffing a convict.

There was no way out--none. He was a prisoner for life, and now his one ray of light was to be extinguished.<sup>12</sup>

Again Ethan Frome is denied his only chance at happiness, because he has no money. It is true that he is a prisoner; he is held a prisoner because he is in no way able to better his conditions. Knowing that he can do nothing for Mattie, he realizes that she must go and try to find work elsewhere.

It is on the following day that a definite turn comes into the lives of these two lovers. Ethan drives Mattie over to the village to catch her train. They stop on the way to take a sleigh ride. Under the influence of the beauty of nature, Mattie tells Ethan that she has loved him a long time. She also tells him that he is the only person who has ever been good to her. When they discuss her future, Mattie reveals that she has little hope of finding work. Constantly Edith Wharton pictures their poverty. At every turn their chances are blocked, because they have no money. Finally they decide they cannot be parted, and Mattie tells Ethan that they will coast down in the sleigh and hit the big elm. Both think that this impact will kill them, but they also know that only in death can they be together. They hit the elm and Mattie is unconscious for many hours. Ethan becomes conscious for a time, but he

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp. 145-146.

lapses again into unconsciousness. Both are badly hurt and are bed-ridden for months. Ethan finally recovers his strength and is able to walk with great effort. Mattie is never able to walk. It is clearly revealed that often the lack of money can cause people to wish for death. This lack of money seems to thwart many lives and cause problems and complications in such lives. The force of money in human existence is a sad truth.

The engineer learns much of his story the eventful night he stayed in Ethan Frome's home. He also meets two women as he enters the door. Frome introduces them as Zeena, his wife, and Mattie Silver. The engineer sadly observes that Mattie is now grey-haired and a complete invalid. She looks as old as Zeena and complains often of her aches and the coldness of the room. It is evident that for more than twenty years, she has been a great burden to Ethan Frome. The poor condition of Frome's kitchen is described in the following passage:

Even for that part of the country the kitchen was a poor-looking place. With the exception of the dark-eyed woman's chair, which looked like a soiled relic of luxury bought at a country auction, the furniture was of the roughest kind. Three coarse china plates and a broken-nosed milk-jug had been set on a greasy table scored with knife-cuts, and a couple of straw-bottomed chairs and a kitchen dresser of unpainted pine stood meagrely against the plaster walls.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 188.

Clearly Edith Wharton has realistically pictured a poverty-stricken household. Not only has she described poverty, but she has pictured people who are living without an interest or motive in life. They are existing only because they are not allowed to die. They find no purpose in life; they merely breathe and live.

One of the village women, Mrs. Hale, with whom the engineer boards, aptly expresses the lives of these three people when she says:

'There was one day, about a week after the accident, when they all thought Mattie couldn't live. Well, I say it's a pity she did. I said it right out to the minister once, and he was shocked at me. Only he wasn't with me that morning when she first came to . . . And I say, if she'd ha' died, Ethan might ha' lived; and the way they are now, I don't see there's much difference between the Frome's up at the farm and the Fromes down in the graveyard; 'cept that down there they're all quiet, and the women have got to hold their tongues.'<sup>14</sup>

To the engineer these three people seemed to have ceased living years ago.

Such havoc in a social group caused by economic conditions is not only a sad thing; it is a disintegrating force. A strong character such as Ethan Frome does not decide to commit suicide unless there is nothing left for him. His life is a realistic picture of denial, and this denial is largely caused by the economic status of his

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 195.

family. He is never given a chance to prove his worth because his duties as the bread-winner of his family take up all his time. His burden grows heavier as the years go by. Such suppression as he experienced cannot always remain inactive. When his real nature found expression through Mattie Silver, there was no way of stopping it. If he could have developed his interest in engineering, he would have been a live, vibrant person. He needed to feel the thrill of accomplishment; he needed to work at something which spurred him on. Thomas Gray in his "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" has aptly expressed the futility of all lives similar to Ethan Frome's:

Full many a gem of purest ray serene  
 The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear  
 Full many a flower is born to blush unseen  
 And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

Ethan Frome is not the only man who did not get to develop his latent talents and power. Many individual lives compare with his in their frustration, suppression, and loneliness. Economic conditions often force people into situations and circumstances that they would try to avoid if their poverty was less pronounced. The author's account of Ethan Frome and the two women in his life is one of the saddest stories ever told. Edith Wharton tried to see life realistically, and in realism she found much sadness.

In one other novel, Summer, Edith Wharton has used the New England background. The critics have said that the novel fails to compare with Ethan Frome. However, since it pictures a typical out-of-the-way New England village in which economic conditions are hard, it is well worth attention. In Summer Edith Wharton gives Charity Royall the main characterization. This young girl is the ward of Mr. Royall, a lawyer. She has been with him about fifteen years; all she knows of her earlier life is that she had "been brought down from the Mountain" and that the mountain is a bad place. Charity is very unhappy in North Dormer, the village in which she lives; in fact she hates it wholeheartedly. Her first view of a world outside North Dormer occurred when she had gone with a group of young people to Nettleton. The Episcopalian minister had taken them. For the first time Charity had ridden on a train, she had seen shops with plate-glass windows, and she had sat in a theatre. She had never known such things existed, and this experience developed within her a thirst for more knowledge of the outside world. But such knowledge could not be appeased in North Dormer. Edith Wharton realistically describes the village when she writes:

There it lay, a weather-beaten sunburnt village of the hills, abandoned of men, left apart by railway, trolley, telegraph, and all the forces that link life to life in modern communities. It had no shops, no theatres, no lectures, no 'business

'block'; only a church that was opened every other Sunday if the state of the roads permitted, and a library for which no new books had been bought for twenty years, and where the old ones mouldered undisturbed on the damp shelves.<sup>15</sup>

Charity was the librarian of this library; yet she hated the work. She had asked for the librarian's place because she wished to save her money and get away from North Dormer. She wished to see more of the world and make her own living.

When Charity meets Lucius Harney, she is given a glimpse of the other world she is seeking. She had never met anyone like him before, and she falls in love with him at once. He is an architect and greatly interested in all types of old houses. He asks Charity to show him all the old houses in North Dormer. The fact that her blood is bad and that her origin is wretched bothers Charity constantly after she meets Harney. When she tells Harney that she has been brought down from the Mountain, he seems interested in this fact and tells her that this one thing makes her different from the other people he has met. Charity is being praised for something that she has been ashamed of, and she glows with happiness.

The poverty of lawyer Royall is apparent. Harney asks Royall to let him take his meals at his home; Royall consents to this. North Dormer has little practice for a lawyer.

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<sup>15</sup>Edith Wharton, Summer, pp. 10-11.

Practically all he could depend on for a living came from the farm and his commissions from insurance agencies which he represented. Though Royall needs the money Harney pays him for his meals and the use of his buggy, the lawyer stops accomodating him when he sees that Charity has fallen in love with the young man. Though Harney leaves North Dormer, he continues to see Charity. She continues taking him to old homes, and she often meets him secretly.

Finally Charity knows that she is to have a baby. Mr. Royall senses this and tries to force Harney into marrying Charity. When Charity discovers that Harney wishes to marry someone else, she goes to the Mountain. She is overtaken by the Episcopal minister who tells her that her mother is dying. It is in her description of the Mountain houses and people that Edith Wharton truly pictures the depths of poverty and degradation. The house where the mother is dying is described in the following passage:

The clergyman turned to the left, across a bit of bare ground overgrown with docks and nettles, and stopped before the most ruinous of the sheds. A stove-pipe reached its crooked arm out of one window, and the broken panes of the other were stuffed with rags and papers.<sup>16</sup>

Charity cannot help but feel revulsion at the sight of such filth.

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 245.

Charity's mother is dead when they reach the place. The horror of the woman's death is vividly described.

Charity followed him, and they stood before a mattress on the floor in a corner of the room. A woman lay on it, but she did not look like a dead woman; she seemed to have fallen across her squalid bed in a drunken sleep, and to have been left lying where she fell, in her ragged disordered clothes. One arm was flung above her head, one leg drawn up under a torn skirt that left the other bare to the knee: a swollen glistening leg with a ragged stocking rolled down about the ankle.<sup>17</sup>

To Charity all this is horrible. Probably she would never have felt kindly toward Mr. Royall, until she had seen the depths of degradation she had been spared. Her mother's death reminded her of the death of some animal. As she looked at her mother, she saw little that seemed human. Charity refuses to go back to her old life, because she feels that she is not worthy of the trust of her friends.

Charity spends the night on the Mountain. As she tries to sleep, she labors with an attempt to link herself with her mother. As Charity wrestles with her problems, the author aptly describes her thoughts and feelings in the following passage:

She herself felt as remote from the poor creature she had seen lowered into her hastily dug grave as if the heights of the heavens had divided them. She had seen poverty and misfortune in her life; but in a community where poor thrifty Mrs. Hawes and the industrious

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 248.

Ally represented the nearest approach to destitution there was nothing to suggest the savage misery of the Mountain farmers.<sup>18</sup>

Charity had known poverty all her life, but this poverty and degradation was beyond her knowledge. The Mountain people seemed to have completely degenerated into animals with all the movements and desires of animals. Charity could not imagine living as these people did; she felt the need of human relationships and self-respect. She tried to imagine what her life would have been like if she had stayed on the Mountain, but the picture that she formed in her mind made her tremble.

As Charity watches the dawn come she gets a better look at the room in which she has slept. Edith Wharton describes it as follows:

She lay in her corner staring at the dirty floor, the clothes-line hung with decaying rags, the old woman huddled against the cold stove, and the light gradually spreading across the wintry world, and bringing with it a new day in which she would have to live, to choose, to act, to make herself a place among these people--or to go back to the life she had left. A mortal lassitude weighed on her. There were moments when she felt that all she asked was to go on lying there unnoticed; then her mind revolted at the thought of becoming one of the miserable herd from which she sprang, and it seemed as though, to save her child from such a fate, she would find strength to travel any distance, and bear any burden life might put on her.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 259.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., pp. 260-261.

Charity knew that she could not stay. It was true that her life had been one of poverty; yet the life she had left had been decent and clean and uplifting. Her environment in North Dormer had been respectable and ideal; her attitudes had long been molded by such an environment. She could not tolerate the life led by these people. She had risen above them, and she could not go back to a life of misery.

She leaves the Mountain and finds Mr. Royall coming for her in his buggy. He asks her to marry him. When she attempts to tell him of her plight, he refuses to listen. As they go toward Nettleton Charity's thoughts of Harney are brief and transitory. Her feeling of dislike toward Mr. Royall has changed. The following description tells of this change:

Mr. Royall seldom spoke, but his silent presence gave her, for the first time, a sense of peace and security. She knew that where he was there would be warmth, rest, silence; and for the moment they were all she wanted. She shut her eyes, and even these things grew dim to her.<sup>20</sup>

When Charity decides that Mr. Royall has offered her marriage because he knows of her plight, she feels kinder toward him than she ever has before. The fact that he wishes to save her name fills her with illimitable gratitude toward him. Somehow Edith Wharton leaves the impression at

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 273.

the end of the story that Charity will find peace and contentment with Mr. Royall. Perhaps he will bring her more contentment than she had thought was possible. Though they will be poor, they will be happy in the company of each other, and their poverty will not keep them from finding satisfaction in their lives.

Both of these novels of New England have dealt with New England villagers who crave a knowledge of the outside world. However, they cannot satisfy this desire because they do not have the money or the opportunity to seek this knowledge. Naturally they become reconciled to a substitute for this desire. It is at this point of compromise that they find themselves in complicated situations. When Ethan Frome accepted compromise, the consequences ruined his life. In the case of Charity Royall her compromise brought her contentment. Though both novels concern the derelict villages of New England, only Ethan Frome is stark tragedy from the first page until the last. The main characters in Summer finally make the necessary adjustment to their group.

Perhaps in no other novels has Edith Wharton been more realistic than in her novels of New England. Certainly she looked squarely at the villagers and wrote about them as she saw them. Her knowledge covered a long span of time, and she waited until her knowledge had been thoroughly assimilated before she attempted to write novels about them.

Her stark realism is sometimes uncomfortable in its utter drabness. Nothing is rose-colored; the environment and people are pictured as they really existed. Truly Edith Wharton understood their social problems, and often she attempted to solve them. Their main problem was the lack of money, and the author tries to help her characters find contentment in the face of poverty.

In other novels Edith Wharton has dealt with poverty; yet this poverty has not seemed as major a problem as it is pictured in the New England novels. In The House of Mirth Lily Bart is quite poor after her aunt's death. She has no training for work, and she finds it impossible to keep a job. She attempts the work of a social secretary; later she tries to learn the art of millinery. Both attempts are unsuccessful ones. Finally she has no money at all. Her health is bad, and her nights are sleepless ones. Never does she make her adjustment as a working girl. Though Lily Bart is very poor near the close of this novel, she does not suffer long. An overdose of sleeping medicine causes her death.

In Hudson River Bracketed Vance Weston lives a life of poverty before and after his marriage to Laura Lou Tracy. He is considered a very talented writer; yet he receives very little money for his writing. After his marriage he cannot afford to live in New York. He is not able to buy

the right food nor is he able to provide the right living conditions for his wife. Even after he has written his first successful novel, he is still quite poor. He is continually beset with poverty, and he is able to do nothing to better his conditions. He often borrows money; he cannot pay his bills; and his wife is in great need of medical attention which he cannot afford to give her. His living conditions grow worse as the novel progresses. He never adjusts himself to a society which has no understanding of his financial needs.

In The Fruit of the Tree Edith Wharton describes the great needs of the mill workers. She pictures their poor living conditions and their broken spirits. She describes their inability to better their conditions and the lassitude which results from such poor circumstances. Toward the end of this novel the author pictures the improvements made in the working conditions at the mills. She describes many improvements in the homes of the workers, and she pictures the happiness and contentment of the workers. Truly better living conditions cause the mill workers to make the necessary adjustment to society.

Always Edith Wharton leaves the reader with the impression that life is real and earnest and that people must cultivate a strong will to exist in any group. One of the fairest tests of her ability as a writer of social problems

lies in the outstanding fact that she was intensely interested in people. With such a consuming interest ever present Edith Wharton naturally wished to search for the causes of social problems. Thus in all her novels her group's troubles occupy her mind, and she deals with them sympathetically yet realistically.

In conclusion let me say that Edith Wharton undoubtedly deserves her place as one of the outstanding American novelists. Her ability to observe and picture realistically the problems of society would give her high ranking if she had no other abilities. In her autobiography she has provided evidence of her understanding of people. Her wide range of friends and her keen insight made her a successful novelist of society. Her thorough delineation of the people of whom she writes in her novels may account for her quality of stark realism. Her profound reading throughout her life and her interest in research prove the truth of her novels.

In a number of her most popular novels Edith Wharton has proved that she had a thorough understanding of ideal love and its problems. Her realism enters when she presents love with its many conflicts. Her understanding of human nature is evident in her solutions of these problems. Always she freely discusses the conflicts which arise in love and in marriage relationships, and always she tries to

provide the realistic note by her interpretation of the characters and their actions. Even labor problems are handled expertly by Edith Wharton. Two people find a deep love which has its beginning in their mutual sympathy toward the laboring class.

Divorce is a social problem which is frequently found in Edith Wharton's novels. In many of her novels divorce is found in conflict with marriage. In one novel, The Children, the dislike of Edith Wharton toward pleasure-seeking parents to whom divorce is a pastime is interesting and clearly realistic. Free love is depicted as an outlet for those who are denied divorce. The author truthfully shows the manner in which love can become a complete disillusionment when free love results. Edith Wharton is completely realistic concerning divorce and free love.

Never is Edith Wharton more realistic than when she presents the literary man as a social misfit. His attempts to attain a place in a society that has no interest in him is sad. Edith Wharton sympathizes with the literary man. Her presentation of the newly rich and their efforts to secure social standing is expertly rendered. Her nouveau riche characters seem real and lifelike. The author presents their attempts to enter society. When she shows the disregard of society toward the nouveau riche, the reader's sympathy for social misfits is aroused.

In the novels in which Edith Wharton shows how economic pressure can disrupt society, she is a stark realist. She pictures the actions of people who lack money. She describes the suppression of people which is caused by economic pressure. Finally she admits compromise or sheer failure when she attempts to provide a solution for these problems. Her realism is again apparent when she pictures the dreary lives of people who feel economic pressure.

Edith Wharton definitely understands the social problems which she discusses at length in her novels. Her deep sympathy for those involved does not prevent her realistic interpretation of their lives. Never does she waver in her deep desire to describe her society as she really viewed it. Her attempt to present the complete picture of life as she has observed it makes her an excellent writer on social problems. Such a writer must see all sides of society's problems. Edith Wharton proved that she was fully able to meet these requirements.

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