AN ANALYSIS OF SIX REPRESENTATIVE WOMEN CHARACTERS

IN EDITH WHARTON'S NOVELS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Edith Wharton believed that there were two essential rules for judging a novel: one, that the novelist should deal only with what is within his reach, and the other, that the value of a subject depends almost wholly on what the author sees in it and how deeply he is able to see into it. In her biography, *A Backward Glance*, she said:

My problem was how to make use of a subject, fashionable New York, which of all others seemed to fall within the condemned. There it was before me, in all its flatness and futility, asking to be dealt with, as the theme most available to my hand since I had been steeped in it from infancy and should not have to get it up out of notebooks and encyclopaedias.¹

Mrs. Wharton became the historian of New York society, which was her own by inheritance, association, and affection. She lived surrounded by that colonial society which was indifferent to life except that which was according to its own standards. She watched the accession of the new class and the destruction of her once assured social order, as she saw the new forms of wealth and new capital gain footholds and new faces attempt to enter the social fortress of the select "400" of New York society. She watched the struggle of the old in resisting the efforts of the "New Americans"

to gain a foothold. Because she found herself the victim of its conventions, she sympathized with those who as members of that society revolted against its manners and rules, but she sat in judgment on those new comers who tried to climb the social ladder.

Since the revolution in Edith Wharton's world was characteristically a revolution of manners, the result of the invasion of new wealth and new faces into Fifth Avenue, Edith Wharton is classed primarily as a novelist of manners. The portrayal of characters, however, is inseparable from the study of manners, and it is with the drawing of characters that Mrs. Wharton was chiefly concerned. Her characters are the dominating forces in her novels. In stating her belief that characters are the main concern of the novel, she said of the novelist:

He must, above all, bear in mind at each step that his business is not to ask what the situation would be likely to make of his characters, but what his characters, being what they are, would make of the situation.\(^2\)

Edith Wharton seized her characters in the habits in which they live, presenting them as products of material and social conditions, as representations of the class to which they belong. Though the problems with which she was concerned were personal, they revealed the social problems of the day. Her characters struggle with moral questions, for she believed that a good subject must contain in itself

something that sheds a light on our moral experience. Arthur Hobson Quinn says:

She knows that characters who struggle between a temptation to break human or divine laws and an instinct to obey them, whether it be innate or inherited or acquired, are inherently more interesting than those who have no standard of conduct except personal desire.\(^3\)

She was interested in the effect of manners on her characters, the results and consequences of their conformance to custom or their disregard for accepted rules and standards.

The idea that Edith Wharton morality was a matter of personal reasoning is stated by Robert Morss Lovett, who says:

For Edith Wharton morality is a matter of emotion, preferences, instincts, imaginations. She relies on truth of understanding and fineness of perception as an introduction to righteousness, and she naturally seeks characters and circles where by the process of selection and education such qualities are cultivated. She found them among the people with whom she lived, of whom she was. Her characters exercise their fineness of perception almost entirely in their relations with one another. Their morality is chiefly of the indoor variety, and the scene of their skirmishes is the tea table or the dancing floor.\(^4\)

The portrayal of women characters was Mrs. Wharton's speciality, and her women characters are more clearly drawn than her men. She said in The Writing of Fiction that "the art of rendering life in fiction can never in the last analysis be anything or need be anything but the disengaging of crucial moments from the welter of existence,"\(^5\) and it is

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\(^3\)Arthur Hobson Quinn, "Edith Wharton," American Fiction, p. 577.

\(^4\)Robert Morss Lovett, Edith Wharton, p. 57.

her women who dominate in those "crucial moments" around which she chooses to weave her narratives.

She put into her novels a great variety of women characters, but most of her heroines touched in some way the society of which she was a member. Alfred Kazin says that "Edith Wharton could not conceive of any character who was not either descended from her class or placed in some obvious and dramatic relationship to it."\(^6\)

She wrote of women who were the products of the old society, those revolting against the old and investigating the new, those seeking to force open the doors of conservatism and those who were unwittingly and inevitably the victims of the society simply by coming in contact with its members.

For this study an analysis will be made of six of Edith Wharton's heroines: Lily Bart, the luxury-loving, aristocratic heroine of *The House of Mirth*, who was destroyed by her own class; Ellen Olenska, who neither lost nor sought an established place in New York society, since it belonged to her, and she stayed there by the sacrifice of instinct and happiness; Anna Leath, a typical product of puritan New York, who suffered from having learned so thoroughly the rules of her generation; Halo Tarrant, who took love into her own hands and defied society but felt the strength of the social

convention which shuts out the woman who does not play the game according to the rules; Undine Spragg, the social adventurer, who represents ambition, which Mrs. Wharton had come to recognize as the dominant characteristic of the new woman of America; and Sophy Viner, an American girl who, yielding to temptation, is plunged into insecurity because she comes into contact with Anna Leath and the rules of her world.

Through the drama in the lives of these six characters, each of whom touches in some way the circle of New York society of which Mrs. Wharton was a member, a revelation of the habits of that circle will be given. The uncompromising decorum of that society, the futility of the lives of some of its members, the strength of the standards and codes which it used for the protection of its own members, and the struggle of the old to resist the new forces of wealth and power will all be clearly shown as these women move through that society or come in contact with it.

Four of these characters were by birth and education members of that predominant American aristocracy which was beginning to crumble, for Edith Wharton was more interested in the destruction of her own class than in the accession of the new. Each, however, will present a different picture, since each meets the crucial occasions which confront her in a different manner. Each will be shown to be the victim of
the standards and codes of her generation, though in the changing social order such rules were becoming meaningless.

One of these women attempts to gain entrance into this inner circle by marriage with one of its members, and through her ruthless disregard of its ceremonies and ideals as she comes into conflict with them she gives a clear picture of the nature of the life of the class she is seeking to become a part of.

Since the effects of a system are never limited to the select group which comprises it, one woman here discussed, though not of this group or seeking to enter it, will reveal through her contacts with it the far reaching results of its manner of life.

Through each of these six characters an ethical problem will be presented. Edith Wharton's art as the portrayer and interpreter of women characters will be shown, as she gradually unfolds the inner life of each, showing the effects of the social and material conditions which surround her.
CHAPTER II

LILY BART

Having decided to write about fashionable New York, Edith Wharton said:

My problem was how to extract from such a subject the typical human significance which is the story teller's reason for telling one story rather than another. In what aspect could a society of irresponsible pleasure seekers be said to have any deeper bearing than the people composing such a society could guess. The answer was that a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideals. The answer, in short, was my heroine, Lily Bart.

In The House of Mirth, of which Lily Bart is the heroine, Mrs. Wharton is the social satirist. She presents in the light of mockery the leisure-loving, pleasure-seeking, parasitic group of aristocratic New York society, produced by money and the social order, and the social climbers who were ambitious to become members of the inner circle of that society. While showing the futility of the existence of that group, she also sets forth its strength and its power to destroy in the personal tragedy of Lily Bart.

Lily was a product of this modern, fashionable world, since she had been born into it. She had every advantage of birth except a fortune, and it was this vital need which

\-- Edith Wharton, A Backward Glance, p. 207. --
caused her to calculate and scheme to maintain her place within its circle. Her situation was a tragic one, for "she had grown up without one spot of earth being dearer to her than another; there was no centre of early pieties, of grave endearing traditions, to which her heart could revert and from which it could draw strength for itself and tenderness for others."^{2}

Lily was reared in a turbulent home presided over by a vigorous, determined, and ambitious mother, who taught her that she must keep up appearances at any cost and escape dinginess and poverty, which seemed to her to be confessions of failure. There were gray interludes of economy and brilliant reactions of expense. Lily's love of luxury was inherited from and instilled into her by her mother, who managed for her a dazzling debut. Lily stated her own case when she said: "The beginning of my story was in my cradle, I suppose, in the way I was brought up and the things I was taught to care for."^{3} Shortly after her nineteenth birthday Lily's father died, leaving his family very little money. Her mother lived in a state of inert anger against her fate, she and Lily wandering from place to place, paying long visits to relatives whom she despised for their acquiescence (from choice) in dinginess. She was consoled only by the

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^{3}Ibid., p. 61.
contemplation of Lily's beauty as the nucleus around which their life was to be rebuilt. She warned her daughter repeatedly against love matches and impressed on her the responsibility of such beauty as hers. Lily was secretly ashamed of her mother's passion for money. She liked to think of her beauty as a power for good. She did not, indeed, care to marry a man who was merely rich. This was her outlook before she fought her way alone for ten years in her own social world. She came to depend on her beauty to carry her through all situations, capitalizing on it to accomplish her desires. After two years of roaming, Mrs. Bart died, and her last adjuration to her daughter was to escape dinginess if she could.

After Mrs. Bart's death, Lily was "taken in" by Mrs. Finiston, her father's widowed sister. She was an agreeable companion, since misfortune had served to make her supple and adaptable instead of hardening her. It soon became clear to Lily, however, that she was to enjoy only the advantages of good food and expensive clothing, to have no fixed allowance, and no "opportunities" made for her by her aunt, who felt that she was doing her duty by giving Lily a home. She saw that she would have to open her own doors, for "when a girl has no mother to palpitate for her she must needs be on the alert for herself."\(^4\) She paid her way in society by making herself amenable, amusing and useful to her friends.

\(^4\)Ibid., p. 33.
She regarded every man as a possible factor in her plans to marry for money, but at twenty-nine years of age she was still "Miss" Bart. She had never been able to understand the law of the universe which was so ready to leave her out of its calculations, and she was beginning to have fits of rebellion against her fate. Throughout her struggles Lily invoked our pity because she was so alone, with no one close to her, no one to care what happened to her, or to whom she could turn for help. She admitted to Lawrence Selden that what she wanted was a friend whom she should not have to pretend with or be on her guard against. She said:

My aunt is full of copy-book axioms, but they were all meant to apply to conduct in the early fifties... And the other women - my best friends - well, they use me or abuse me; but they don't care a straw what happens to me. I've been about too long - people are getting tired of me; they are beginning to say I ought to marry.5

She admitted to him, however, that she was horribly poor and very expensive, that she required a great deal of money.

Edith Wharton said that it was a necessity to her that the note of inevitableness should be sounded at the very opening of her story and that her characters should go forward to their doom.6 The inevitableness of Lily Bart's tragedy was foretold in her visit to the rooms of Lawrence Selden, a lawyer of moderate means. She felt an impelling force drawing

5Ibid., p. 13.

her to him. He appealed to all that was fine in her, as he
was detached from and independent of the trivial, useless
pleasures which she required. Henceforth, the thought of
him and the better self that he had called forth in her
caused her to hesitate at the crucial moments in the path
which she had mapped out, and lose advantages she had worked
for. This visit saw the beginning in Lily of the inward
struggle between her desire to succumb to the material offer-
ings of her world and the longing for freedom of spirit which
she sensed in him. She was never quite happy or satisfied
with what had contented her before. The description of Lily
as she was seen by Selden was an impartial one and fore-
shadowed somewhat her past and future:

Everything about her was at once vigorous and
exquisite, at once strong and fine. He had a confused
sense that she must have cost a great deal to make, that
a great many dull and ugly people must in some mysterious
way have been sacrificed to produce her. He was aware
that the qualities distinguishing her from the herd of
her sex were chiefly external: as though a fine glaze of
beauty and fastidiousness had been applied to vulgar
clay. Yet the analogy left him unsatisfied, for a coarse
texture will not take a high finish; and was it not
possible that the material was fine, but that circum-
stance had fashioned it into a futile shape?

Even while Lily was in Selden's rooms she was laying
her campaign to marry Percy Gryce, a timid young man under
the complete dominance of a prudent and suspicious mother.
He was very rich. Beginning with this episode in which Mr.
Percy Gryce was the central objective, there succeeded in

7 Edith Wharton, The House of Mirth, p. 7.
Lily's life a series of happenings which led to the catastrophe of her complete exclusion from her society and all that meant life to her. The scene of her efforts with Mr. Gryce was Bellomont, the country home of Gus and Judy Trenor, the chief of a group of rich people around whom Lily's world revolved. Mrs. Trenor required a crowd around her and seemed to exist only as a hostess. She knew no more personal emotions than those of hatred for the woman who presumed to give bigger dinners or have more amusing house parties than herself, and jealousy of her husband's pocket book. Among the group of house-guests were Bertha Dorset, Lily's evil genius, a rich married woman who made her jealous, weak husband, George Dorset, miserable by what he preferred to call her flirtation with other men; Carry Fisher, a widow twice divorced, who earned her living by being agreeable, especially to the rich husbands of her friends, and by sponsoring and directing the careers of the socially ambitious; Jack Stepney, who was always halfway between the sheriff and an heiress, and was now courting a fortune in one of the rich Van Osburgh girls; Ned Silverton, a handsome young writer who had become dazzled by the life of the leisured world and was now in attendance to Carry Fisher; and others who had no more serious aim in life than participation in the amusement offered by a generous hostess.

It was Lily's craving for the external finish of life that made the possibility of becoming a permanent part of
this group appealing to her. Seeing her friends' riches gave a sharp edge to the meagerness of her own opportunities. Hers was a hateful fate to her and the only means of escape seemed to be by marriage, for Lily was honest with herself in admitting that she required a luxurious background. The luxury of her friends was no longer what she wanted, however. She was beginning to tire of the obligations which their sanction imposed, to feel herself a mere pensioner, and was becoming more and more conscious of having to pay her way. She was now trusting to her beauty and the careful groundwork she had laid to carry her through to the end in marrying Percy Gryce, and she felt that the end, as she weighed it, was worth while. Her vulgar cares would be at an end, and creditors would not trouble her. She would have smarter gowns than Judy Trenor, and more jewels than Bertha Dorset. Instead of having to flatter, she would be flattered and would receive thanks for favors she bestowed. Since it seemed that through Percy Gryce there would be room for her in this selfish world of pleasure, from which a short time ago her poverty had excluded her, the cruel, self-engrossed side of its nature became less conspicuous. She judged this society according to her place in it, which is a human reaction to any group. Since at present Lily's prospects looked favorable, her companions seemed full of amiable qualities:

She liked their elegance, their lightness, their lack of emphasis; even the self assurance which at times
was so like obtuseness now seemed the natural sign of social ascendency. They were lords of the only world she cared for and they were ready to admit her to their ranks and let her lord it with them. Already she felt within her a stealing allegiance to their standards, an acceptance of their limitations, a disbelief in the things they did not believe in, a contemptuous pity for the people who were not able to live as they lived.8

Lily, however, did not hold true to one desire. It was her tendency to see values in the light of immediate circumstances and companionships. A comparison between Lawrence Selden, who unexpectedly appeared at the house-party, and Mr. Cryce was Lily's undoing. As she looked at Selden, the world outside her own small group seemed alluring, for Lily knew that once she became a member of the inner circle of her social world she would never regain her freedom but be subject to routine and ceremonies, and all the futile activities which wound their tentacles around its members. Through Selden's eyes she saw her world, saw how dreary and trivial these people were. She saw that they were dull and boresome without achievements. Selden gave her a description of her society by saying: "When society becomes the thing worked for it distorts all the relation of life. A society like ours wastes such good material in producing its little patch of purple!"9

He felt her ambitions unworthy of her, and since she was with him and felt a glow of freedom, of emancipation in his presence, she saw into his "republic of the spirit." He made

8 Ibid., p. 79.  
9 Ibid., p. 112.
the things she had chosen seem hateful to her. He offered to place his faith in her for the first time, but at the height of their spiritual communion, some trivial sound brought Lily back to the realization of a present physical need for the things her world could offer, and she could not conceive of the possibility of renouncing them. She returned from the heights too late, however, for she had lost Percy Gryce. When Lily yielded to the impulse to break a date with Mr. Gryce, pleading illness, and spent an afternoon with Lawrence Selden, she gained the enmity of Bertha Dorset, who was interested in Selden at the time. Bertha not only succeeded in disillusioning Percy Gryce by intimating some half truths about Lily, but she did not hesitate to sacrifice Lily later for her own protection. Mrs. Fisher said of this episode:

That's Lily all over, you know: she works like a slave preparing the ground and sowing her seed; but the day she ought to be reaping the harvest she oversleeps, herself, or goes off on a picnic . . . . Sometimes I think it's just flightiness - and sometimes I think it's because, at heart, she despises the things she's trying for. And it's the difficulty of deciding that makes her such an interesting study.10

Acquiescence in failure was evidence of stupidity to Lily, so she began to speculate on the next step. One of her greatest fears was that she might have to be agreeable to such men as Sim Rosedale, a rich Jew, who had definite social ambitions. He was a man who made it his business to know

10Ibid., p. 303.
everything which he might use to his advantage about everyone, and Lily had placed herself in his power by telling him she had been to her dressmaker's, when, in reality, as he knew, she had been innocently having tea in Lawrence Selden's rooms. An unmarried girl paid dearly for her least escape from routine.

Lily's urgent need of money led her to use Gus Trenor to speculate for her. She pretended to herself that she was asking a favor of the husband of her dearest friend, though in truth she knew that it was not by appealing to the fraternal instinct that she was likely to move Gus Trenor. It was in this way that she attempted to keep up appearances to herself, however, and to hide the crudity of the situation, for "her personal fastidiousness had a moral equivalent, and when she made a tour of inspection of her own mind, there were certain closed doors she did not open."¹¹ She was genuinely ignorant of the workings of the stock market, but this haziness enveloping the transaction whereby he could take her very modest income and multiply it without risks to herself served as a veil to her embarrassment. She planned to hold him by his vanity, and so keep the obligation on his side. Lily was not the person to survey too closely the future cost of a present decision. She always felt that her beauty and tact would enable her to handle any unknown situation which might arise, and when she received the first thousand dollar

¹¹ibid., p. 131.
check her self-confidence was strengthened and she was relieved of all her lingering scruples. She felt that the transaction had justified itself by the results. Lily accepted this way out of her pressing difficulties without questioning too closely the moral implication involved. This was the first mistake which will not bear close investigation as to principles involved that caused her to lose her footing in her social world. She did not realize until later that each time she slipped, she regained her place on a slightly lower level. It was by this act that she placed herself in Gus Trenor’s power, lost the friendship and social sanction of his wife, and damaged herself in Goldon’s eyes. It was that same desire for physical comfort, for immediate possession of the symbols of wealth, and for freedom temporarily from all minor obligations that kept her from looking too closely into the honesty of the deal and made her a prey to its temptation.

As always, when Lily’s immediate anxieties were removed, she felt a renewed faith in her beauty, her power, and her ability to attract a brilliant destiny. Her mistakes looked easily reparable. It was characteristic of her that one bit of good fortune should bring fresh hopes. Lily began to find herself with few invitations from her own group, and so she stepped down into the world of the socially ambitious, whose acquaintance she had hitherto avoided. She became the guest of the Wellington Brys, who were being sponsored by Carry
Fisher, and allowed her name to be mentioned in the society columns as having been in their party. Mrs. Bry's admiration for Lily helped her to sustain her vanity and recover her self-complacency. She enjoyed the sense of being important among the insignificant. She also accepted an invitation from Jim Rosedale to occupy his opera box on opening night, thus recognizing a degree of acquaintanceship with him which she would not have admitted a year earlier.

By chance, letters written by Bertha Dorset to Lawrence Selden fell into Lily's hands. At first she was filled with triumph, for she knew that she had a source of power over her enemy, Bertha Dorset. As expressed in Mrs. Wharton's words:

Lily knew that there is nothing society resents so much as having given its protection to those who have not known how to profit by it: it is for having betrayed its confidence that the body social punishes the offender who is found out. The code of Lily's world decreed that a woman's husband should be the only judge of her conduct: she was technically above suspicion while she had the shelter of his approval. The possessor of his wife's letters could overthrow with a touch the whole structure of her existence.  

Lily's instinctive resistances of taste, training and inherited scruples rose against that feeling of triumph, however, and prevailed. It is in her resistance of the temptation to use these letters basely to attain her own success and the destruction of the woman who was responsible for her hopeless plight that placed her on a plane above those among

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12 Ibid., p. 163.
whom she lived and made her one of Edith Wharton's "rarer spirits." Lily knew that Selden would wish those letters rescued, so she bought them, with Gus Trenor's money.

The reckoning she contrived to evade rolled up interest, however. She found that she was in disfavor with "that portion of society which, while contributing least to its amusement, had assumed the right to decide what forms that amusement should take."\(^{13}\) Lily had a sense of being drawn from one wrong turning to another without realizing how she should have acted until too late. She was too prone to blame fate, to make what she wanted seem what was only right. She seemed to think that her singular situation of being alone was excuse for any mistakes she made. She was sure that "the cleverest girl may miscalculate where her own interests are concerned, may yield too much at one moment and withdraw too far at the next."\(^{14}\)

In a spectacular entertainment given by Mrs. Wellington Bry, who was attempting to attack society collectively at a dull moment, Lily was exhilarated at the chance to display her beauty under a new aspect. A famous artist, using living models, reproduced pictures of women of the past, and Lily chose to represent a type so like herself that she was a sensation. Selden, affected by her beauty, seemed to see before him the real Lily Bart, divested of the trivialities of her little world, and felt the tragedy of her life.

It was as though her beauty, thus detached from all that cheapened and vulgarized it, had held out supplicant hands to him from the world in which he and she had once met for a moment, and where he felt an overmastering longing to be with her again. 15

He felt that he would like to lift Lily out of that world she wanted to get into, and he told her when she asked him for help that he could help her only by loving her. Her answer was "Love me, but don't tell me so." She turned away the second time from his offer of love and faith in her, because she was flushed anew with her triumph and with receiving applause and approval which were as wine to her. At such times "she lost something of her natural fastidiousness and cared less for the quality of admiration received than for its quantity." 16 The sense of power over Selden was sweet to Lily, however, and she was not strong enough to put him wholly out of her life though she admitted the impossibility of marriage with him.

Her public appearance elicited various remarks from observers, one of which shows another of the social standards accepted by this group, that a married woman could indulge many a fancy or impulse that was denied to the single girl:

When a girl's as good looking as that, she'd better marry; then no questions are asked. In our imperfectly organized society there is no provision as yet for the young woman who claims the privileges of marriage without assuming its obligations. 17

This appearance also brought her face to face with a

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15 Ibid., p. 218.  
16 Ibid., p. 220.  
17 Ibid., p. 254.
settlement with Gus Trenor, who tricked her into coming to his house alone. He accused her of accepting favors she did not pay for and suggested that perhaps she had paid other men. Because she did not feel that she could go home, when Lily finally escaped she fled to Gerty Farrish, Selden's cousin, who was interested in social work and lived in a small, crowded flat. Gerty admired Lily and thought she understood her because Lily had helped her (with Gus Trenor's money) with some of her girls. She did not realize that Lily liked the admiration and interest her presence excited among the tired workers at the club and that they satisfied in a new form her insatiable desire to please. Gerty had realized, however, that Selden had sought her company merely to talk of Lily, and in knowing this, her natural instinctive feeling was one of hate toward this beautiful girl who weighed so lightly the love which to her would mean life. She saw that it was incredible that Lily should be Selden's wife, because she knew that, though Lily might be incapable of marrying for money, she was equally incapable of living without it.

As Lily thought of the flimsy pretext on which she had received money from Gus Trenor, she was ashamed. She knew that to restore her self-respect she must repay the entire amount.

She was realizing for the first time that a woman's dignity may cost more to keep up than her carriage; and that the maintenance of a moral attribute should be
dependent on dollars and cents made the world appear a more sordid place than she had realized.\textsuperscript{18}

It was in Lily's moments of failure that she was honest with herself. She admitted her mistakes but in admitting them accepted them as inevitable. She said to Gerty: "I can't bear to see myself in my own thoughts. I hate ugliness, you know - I am bad - all my thoughts are bad. I have always had bad people about me. Is that any excuse?"\textsuperscript{19}

She thought of Selden and was ready to confess all her weaknesses and faults to him in the hope that he would understand and save her from loathing herself, not knowing that he had seen her leave Gus Trenor's house the night before and was even then lost to her. External appearance had proved stronger than his faith in her.

Mrs. Peniston refused to help Lily. She had been prejudiced against her by Grace Stepney, a colorless cousin whom Lily had ignored and slighted, since it had never occurred to her that Grace could ever be of use to her. As a young woman who had never been ignored, Lily could not know the pang which that injury inflicted, nor measure the consequences of it.

To free herself of her obligation to Gus Trenor, Lily considered marrying Sim Rosedale when he offered to put his fortune at her disposal. This shows how far downward her course had swung, how her standards of value were changing.

\textsuperscript{18}Ibid., p. 273. \textsuperscript{19}Ibid., p. 268.
What, to Lily, seemed an almost miraculous release from her crushing difficulties came in the form of an invitation to go abroad with the Dorsets. Lily and Bertha Dorset had found that they could be useful to each other. Bertha wanted her husband's attention distracted while she pursued a romance with Ned Silverton, and Lily wanted the social sanction the Dorsets could give and the physical enjoyment of the luxury and beauty their wealth could give her. A change from the surroundings in which her problems had arisen seemed a solution for her troubles, for "moral complications existed for Lily only in the environment that had produced them." 20

She met with Selden in Europe, as well as Carry Fisher, with the Brys, whom she was attempting to launch in London society by way of the Riviera. To Selden she appeared to have finally settled to her course and through his eyes again we get a picture of the world of Lily's choice:

He saw her definitely divided from him by the crudeness of a choice which seemed to deny the very differences he felt in her. It was before him again in its completeness, the choice in which she was content to rest: in the stupid costliness of the food and the showy dullness of talk, in the freedom of speech which never arrived at wit and the freedom of act which never made for romance. 21

Fresh troubles were ahead for Lily. Bertha Dorset found that by the rashness of her conduct with Ned Silverton she was about to lose her husband. Since Lily was the most likely "defensive missile" at hand, Bertha accused her of

20 Ibid., p. 314.  
21 Ibid., p. 347.
trying to steal her husband, and turned her off her yacht. Not even Lily’s own kin, who were spectators of the scene, came to her rescue, so conscious were they of the power of Bertha Dorset in their small world.

This story preceded Lily to New York, and her pride kept her from explaining, just as it had enabled her to meet each new blow. She knew it was not by explanations and counter charges that she could ever hope to recover her lost standing. Her habit of facing the facts in her rare moments of introspection did not allow her to explain the situation falsely. The part she had played, that of distracting Dorset’s attention from his wife was not an enviable one. She knew that she had been ruthlessly sacrificed by Bertha Dorset’s determination to win back her husband, and that her relation to Dorset had been that of good fellowship, but she said to Certy Farrish: "In this case it’s a great deal easier to believe Bertha Dorset’s story than mine, because she has a big house and an opera box, and it’s convenient to be on good terms with her." 22

The sense of the power of money was expressed again by Lily, after she found she was not her aunt’s heir but was to receive only a ten thousand dollar legacy:

Did you notice the women? They were afraid to snub me while they thought I was going to get the money - afterwards they scuttled off as if I had the plague.

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I shouldn't have minded if I'd got the money, for, in the first place, they wouldn't have quite dared to ignore me; and if they had, it wouldn't have mattered, because I should have been independent of them.23

She met further rebuff when, ready to marry Rosedale, whom she no longer despised because he was gradually gaining his object in life, she found he no longer wanted her in her present position. She struggled to resist a temptation which both Rosedale and Carry Fisher, though not with the same point of view, put in her way. Rosedale would marry her if she used Bertha Dorset's letters to force the latter to reinstate her in her social realm. Mrs. Fisher urged her to furnish George Dorset with proof that his wife had been unfaithful to him, for Lily knew that if George were free she could marry him. George Dorset himself appealed to her to free him. Revenge and rehabilitation might have been hers for the speaking. Lily hated the baseness of this idea, but fear of succumbing to the temptation was constantly with her. By listening to these plans she had learned to live with ideas which once would have been intolerable to her.

Rejected by her own group, Lily fastened herself to a social group on the outskirts of society. To be a part of this group was hard on her lingering pride, but the charm of life where every material difficulty was smoothed away still held her. As Lily honestly viewed this group she saw that

23 Ibid., pp. 361-362.
it was only a flamboyant copy of her own world. The people
were doing the same thing:

The difference lay in the shades of aspect and
manner, from the pattern of the men's waist-coats to the
inflection of the women's voices. Everything was pitched
in a higher key, and there was more of each thing; more
noise, more color, more champagne, more familiarity, but
also greater good nature, less rivalry, and a fresher
capacity for enjoyment.\(^{24}\)

As Lily began to realize, through her continued enjoyment
and acceptance of these luxuries, that there was a void they
could not fill, Bertha Dorset took even this source of
livelihood away from her when she purposely sought out Lily's
benefactress, Mrs. Gormer, and succeeded in having Lily dis-
missed.

Faced with the necessity of earning her living, she was
forced to enter a new world, a more dimly-lit region of the
idle rich than even the Gormers, the world of the fashionable
New York hotel. Lily was to serve as the regulator of the
germinating social life of Mrs. Norma Hatch, the most sub-
stantial figure in this pallid world. She soon left this
place, however, when she learned she might be implicated in
a plot to marry Freddy Van Osburgh to Mrs. Hatch. She left
in time to save her self-respect, but not in time to escape
blame by those who needed corroboration for the many vices
they laid at her door.

As a last resort she tried to earn her living in the

\(^{24}\)Ibid., p. 376.
work room of a millinery shop, and found that she was incompetent and unable to compete with professional workers.

Temptation beset Lily anew, with Rosedale urging her again to make use of her letters and offering to lend her money. The arguments which pleaded with her to make use of facts which chance had put in her way were those for personal gratification; she felt a sense of injury and a craving for a fair chance against the despotism of society. It seemed that material necessity would win over her moral scruples as she started to Berthe Dorset with the letters to Lawrence Selden, but again the thought of how such an act would appear to Selden kept her from selling her soul for material gain. A longing to see him took her to his rooms. She thought of how far she had traveled since their first talk together, and she saw that even then her feet had been set in the paths she was now following. She told him in all sincerity that the things he had said to her, his willingness to put his faith in her had kept her from really becoming what many people had thought her. She admitted to him that she was a coward in refusing the chances to escape which he had offered her, but told him that his love for her, which she had killed, had given her strength to withstand temptations. We are made to feel the tragedy of their love in the author's description of the scene between them:

They looked at each other with a kind of solemnity, as though they stood in the presence of death. Something in truth lay dead between them - the love she had killed in him and could no longer call to life. But something
lived between them also, and leaped up in her like an
imperishable flame: it was the love his love had
kindled, the passion of her soul for his. 25

Lily understood that she could not do the thing she had
started to do, and she dropped the letters in the fire and
left.

She was found, as she sat in the park after leaving him,
by one of the girls she had helped in Gerty Farrish's club.
She visited that girl's home and was made conscious of the
continuity of life which she had missed, but she felt
stronger and happier after having seen the results of her
spasmodic benevolence.

She received that night her legacy from her aunt's
estate and freed herself of her material obligations, includ-
ing her debt to Gus Trenor at the expense of completely im-
poverishing herself. It was not material poverty from which
she shrank, however, but the clutch of solitude and inner
destitution, "the sense of being swept like a stray uprooted
growth down the heedless current of the years." As she
looked back she saw that she had never any real relation to
life; there had been nothing permanent to which she could
cling, and her future looked empty.

To escape the turmoil of her thoughts and the feeling
of loneliness within her, Lily increased the dose of chloral
which she had been taking to make her sleep, and by so doing

25 Ibid., p. 500.
placed a permanent barrier, death, between her and the world which she had found so uncharitable.

Fate once again would seem to have been against Lily Bart, for the next morning Lawrence Selden hastened to her room to offer her again the security of his love and faith. He stood and looked down at the semblance of Lily Bart.

He saw that all the conditions of life had conspired to keep them apart; since his very detachment from the external influences which swayed her had increased his spiritual fastidiousness, and made it more difficult for him to live and love uncritically. But at least he had loved her - had been willing to stake his future on his faith in her - and if the moment had been fated to pass from them before they could seize it, he saw now that, for both, it had been saved whole out of the ruin of their lives. 26

With her death Edith Wharton brings Lily Bart to what, to her, was her settled fate. Lily was the victim of her own weakness in not being able to deny the physical appeal of the luxury of a world which she was spiritually superior to. Heredity and environment played a large part in her undoing, as the author shows how "inherited tendencies had combined with early training to make her the highly specialized product she was: an organism as helpless out of its narrow range as the sea-anemone torn from its rock. She had been fashioned to adorn and delight." 27

Lily possessed unusual physical beauty, was charming, adaptable, agreeable, well-versed in the rules of the social world, and an artist in calculation and manipulation, but

26Ibid., p. 532.  
27Ibid., p. 436.
she was too impulsive, natural, and generous to exploit successfully or even maintain her place among the wealthy who were in power. There was something in her that was basically fine, which longed for a better life than the futile, self-centered one her world offered. It was this inherent spiritual superiority which kept her from selling herself and marrying for money. We watch her struggle between material desire and moral scruples and see her ethical estimates fluctuate with her immediate sense of need and desire, for the craving for admiration, excitement, money, and power had a tenacious hold on her. Since she had been made to see that there was a finer life than the one she had sought, she could not live with what she had, yet alone she was too weak to lift herself above this life of ease or give it up. Her perception of right would not allow her to regain her lost status in her world by means inherently base. She saw ahead for herself only renunciation, then loneliness and uncertainty, for she had proven materially useless in another world. Since she was the composite of these conflicting desires, she was the inevitable victim of the social order which produced her.

In writing of Mrs. Wharton's field, Helen Thomas Follet and Wilson Follet have accurately described the social world Mrs. Wharton used as a background in chronicling the story of Lily Bart:

Mrs. Wharton specializes in a social phenomenon - that in any society in which great wealth or great power is concentrated in a few hands, there is always generated
an idle and parasitic class which reaps where it has not sown. It is a class conspicuous without greatness and ornamental without beauty; with abundance of leisure it produces nothing, and all its intelligence is directed toward making the producers work for it and serve its ends. The wives and children of the rich are natural candidates for this class; the social adventurer and adventuress, and all climbers and fourflushers generally, belong to it. It consists of spoiled children of power and in the futility of its members, the tragic inequalities engendered by their very existence, and their pitiful attempts to escape from idleness into freedom, she has her chosen field.\textsuperscript{28}

Mrs. Wharton gives a revealing picture of the habits and vices of this modern, idle-rich society of aristocratic New York, as she shows the inequality it engenders, the codes used to protect itself and destroy those without its circle, the futility of all its activities, the heartlessness of its women, the external quality of its amusements, and its lack of intellectual resources. We also get a picture of the various and diminishing strata of the socially ambitious groups, who aped and mimicked the activities and the mannerisms of the more select circle, and whose lives were equally as useless as those they imitated.

\textsuperscript{28}Helen Thomas Follet and Wilson Follet, "Edith Wharton," Some Modern Novelists, p. 298.
CHAPTER III

ELLEN OLENSKA

Edith Wharton gave us Ellen Olenska in her novel of manners, *The Age of Innocence*, and Ellen was truly the victim of the social conflict of that age. New York was her own by birth, but she was not one of the "innocents," not a product of the old aristocratic New York society of the seventies. She did not receive the careful training and education in the rituals which would have enabled her to conform to its way of life. Her parents had been wanderers, and after their death while she was quite young, she was taken in charge by her aunt, Medora Manson, who was also a wanderer and given to many eccentricities which were excused because her mother had been a Rushworth and her husband was a Chivers. When she returned to New York with her niece to settle down, people thought it a pity that the child should be in such hands. (One of her kinswomen later remarked: "Poor Ellen, we must always bear in mind what an eccentric bringing up Medora Manson gave her. What can you expect of a girl who was allowed to wear black satin at her coming out ball?"

The little girl received an expensive but incoherent

education, and when Medora's husband died, she took Ellen to Europe with her. The next heard of them was news of Ellen's marriage to an immensely rich Polish nobleman of legendary fame. A few years later came news that Ellen's marriage had ended in disaster and that she was returning home to seek refuge among her kinsfolk.

After having been away from America for twelve years, Ellen came seeking the safety and peace that New York had seemed to offer from her complicated European world. She did not realize that the safety which she sought was bought by a rigid code of behavior which would prove irksome and binding to her, and that her native New York would prove less safe than she had hoped.

This aristocratic New York society of the seventies was a provincial society.

"It was a snug and gracious world of gentlewomen and lawyers and stemmed in a direct line from the colonial society, superbly indifferent to the tumultuous life of the frontier, supercilious in its breeding, complacent in its inherited wealth. It found authority in its own history and the meaning of life in its own conventions. It rejected what it could not understand. It had already become a lifeless class, rigidly and bitterly conservative, filling its days with the desire to keep hold, to sit tight, to say nothing bold, to keep away from innovation and scandal and restless minds; even its pleasures had become entirely ceremonial."

This was a society in which family solidarity was paramount to individual interests, where tribal ceremonies and taboos were kept in existence to insure the survival of the group.

2Alfred Kazin, "The Lady and the Tiger," The Virginia Quarterly Review, XVII (Winter, 1941), 103.
and to protect it against social contamination of alien elements seeking to gain entrance into its midst.

The tribal solidarity of the Mingott clan was first seen when Ellen Olenska made her first appearance in public in the Mingott opera box, and New York society saw that Ellen's family meant to stand solidly behind her and sponsor her return into their social circle. Lawrence Lefferts, who was considered the foremost authority on "form" in New York, remarked, "I didn't think the Mingotts would have tried it on."

The Mingotts tribe, however, was headed by the wealthy dowager, old Mrs. Manson Mingott, who was a recognized power in her social world even though she herself had ignored and disdained established customs and forms. She dared to do what pleased her. She had been Catherine Spicer of Staten Island, with a father mysteriously discredited and neither money nor position enough to make people forget it. She had succeeded in marrying the head of the Mingott line, and though he had "tied up" the money when he died, his bold young widow succeeded in untying her husband's fortune, went her way fearlessly, mingled with foreign society, married two of her daughters to foreigners, and put the crowning touch to her audacities by building a large house of pale cream colored stone in an inaccessible wilderness near Central Park, where she throned and ruled her family with an indomitable will. Mrs. Mingott had always professed a fondness for
Ellen Olenska. She confessed that Ellen was the only child in the family who took after her, who dared to be different or wanted to get out of a rut, saying that the Mingotts were as scared of being different as they were of the smallpox. On Ellen's return from Europe the old lady became her devoted champion.

The manners, forms, customs, and habits of old New York were alien to Ellen and she immediately began to violate their codes, though she did not know she was violating them. She appeared at the opera in an unusual dress and was from that moment a delectable topic of conversation at all dinner tables, rivaling in interest Mrs. Lemuel Struthers, a social aspirant, who was laying siege to New York society and whose Sunday evening entertainments, which Ellen soon began to attend, were denounced by all the conservatives. Ten years later everyone was going to Mrs. Struthers' Sunday-evenings, for once people had tasted Mrs. Struthers' easy Sunday hospitality they were not likely to sit at home remembering that her champagne was "transmuted shoe-polish."

/It was thus that New York managed its transition: conspiring to ignore them till they were well over, and then in all good faith, imagining that they had taken place in the previous age. There was always a traitor in the citadel; and after he or she had surrendered the key, what was the use of pretending that it was impregnable?/#

Ellen Olenska was never forgiven, however, for having been the first of her group to sanction Mrs. Struthers' entertainment.

3Edith Wharton, The Age of Innocence, p. 262.
Old Mrs. Mingott and all her kin admitted that it was a mistake for Ellen to have been seen the very day after her arrival, parading up Fifth Avenue at the crowded hour with Jules Beaufort, though Mrs. Mingott had always professed great admiration for Beaufort. "There was a kind of kinship in their fool domineering way and their short cut through the conventions." Beaufort had come to America with letters from old Mrs. Mingott's English son-in-law and had made himself an important position in the world of affairs as well as in the select social circle by marrying Regina Dallas of one of America's most honored families. He entertained in lavish style, sweeping away the rumor that he had been helped to leave England by the banking house in which he had been employed. He was never really liked by social New York, however, for his habits were dissipated, his tongue bitter, and his antecedents mysterious, and it was not considered fitting for Ellen to be seen conspicuously in his company, especially since she was considered a "compromised woman."

There was a great deal of speculation as to the relationship between her and the secretary who had helped her to escape from her husband.

Against this background of convention and clan feeling, the love story of Ellen Olenska and Newland Archer was set. It is through Newland Archer's eyes that the author gives us

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a picture of Ellen, as her past and present life, her attitudes, convictions, and reactions are revealed through his observations of her and about her. To understand her we must get a picture of Newland Archer, so as to better understand his interpretation of Ellen.

Newland Archer lived with his mother and sister, who revered their son and brother. His mother and sister were true products of old New York and observed rigidly all codes of their society and all tribal customs and were steeped in family pride; consequently the convention on which his life was moulded seemed natural to Newland. He felt superior to the men in his group since he had probably read more, thought more, and seen more than any other man of his circle. Though singly they seemed inferior, grouped together they represented New York to Newland, and masculine solidarity made him accept their doctrines on all moral issues. He felt that it would be troublesome and bad form to break away, and he had never had the incentive to assert his viewpoints.

He was a member of an old-fashioned legal firm, and for a certain number of hours each day he sat at his desk accomplishing trivial tasks or reading the newspaper. He was in the law firm because it was supposed to be proper for him to have an occupation, and the law was accounted a gentlemanly pursuit.

\[\text{\textit{\textquoteleft\textquoteleft Newland had drifted into an engagement with May Welland, Ellen Olenska's cousin, and a typical product of the social}}\text{\textquoteright\textquoteright}}\]
system he belonged to and believed in. She was the embodiment of all the qualities he had been taught to believe it was his right to expect in his bride, and at the moment of Madame Olenska's entrance into their lives, he felt himself to be a favored and fortunate young man. His first response to her appearance was one of annoyance. He felt himself impelled to action to see May Welland through any difficulties which her cousin's situation might involve her in, and when he saw that the Mingotts meant to stand behind Ellen, he insisted that May announce their engagement immediately so that Ellen might have two families to stand behind her instead of one.

Though Archer was inclined to agree with his mother and Sillerton Jackson, an authority on family connections, that it was in poor taste for Ellen Olenska to make herself conspicuous, when he heard derogatory views of her expressed by others, he found himself championing her right to be as free in her actions as he himself could be. He argued that she should not be considered an outcast because she had had an unhappy life. He surprised himself in declaring that women should have as much freedom as men, knowing however, that expressions declaring freedom for women were "verbal generosities which were in fact only a humbugging disguise of the inexorable conventions that tied things together and bound people down to the old pattern."5

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5 Ibid., p. 41.
The case of Ellen Olenska stirred up in him old settled convictions and set them drifting dangerously through his mind. He began to look more closely at May and his approaching marriage. He saw that his bride-to-be was a creation of purity cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers and long dead ancestresses. He saw that they really knew nothing of each other, since it was his duty to conceal his past from her, and hers to have no past to conceal. He knew that she was frank because she had nothing to conceal, assured because she knew of nothing to be on her guard against; and he saw that all this frankness and innocence made an artificial product, for untrained human nature was not frank and innocent. He perceived that the marriage he had dreamed of with May presupposed on her part the experience, the freedom of judgment, and the versatility which she had been carefully trained not to possess.

With a shiver of foreboding he saw his marriage becoming what most of the other marriages about him were: a dull association of material and social interests held together by ignorance on one side and hypocrisy on the other. Under the standards of their world, where the real thing was never said or done or even thought but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs. 6

Archer could not see any honest reason why his bride should not have been allowed the same freedom of spirit as himself.

His first chance at actual championship of Ellen came when the members of his circle refused to meet Madame Olenska at a dinner for her given by the Lovell Mingotts. Here we

6 Ibid., p. 42.
get our best example of tribal solidarity and an insight into the intricacies of the society known as the aristocracy of New York. As Van Doren has said, the innermost circle of that society was very small, very desirable, and very dull.

The New York of Kewland Archer's day was a small and slippery pyramid, in which, as yet, hardly a fissure had been made or a foothold gained. At its base was a firm foundation of what Mrs. Archer called "plain people;" an honourable but obscure majority of respectable families who had been raised above their level by marriage with one of the ruling clan. Firmly narrowing upward from this wealthy but inconspicuous substratum was the compact and dominant group which the Mingotts, Newlands, Chiverses, and Mansons so actively represented. But they themselves knew they were not the very apex of the pyramid. Mrs. Archer said: 'New York has always been a commercial community, and there are not more than three families in it who can claim an aristocratic origin in the true sense of the word.'

These three families of whom Mrs. Archer spoke were the Dagonets of Washington Square, the Lannings, and the van der Luydens, direct descendants of the first Dutch governor of Manhattan and related by pre-revolutionary marriages to several members of the French and British aristocracy. The van der Luydens were the arbiters of fashion, the court of last appeal, and they knew it and bowed to their fate. They were shy and retiring and lived for the most part at Skuytercliff, their estate on the Hudson, and declined all invitations on the plea of Mrs. van der Luyden's health.

Archer persuaded his mother to go to her cousins, the van der Luydens, and tell them of the slight to Ellen Olenska.

7Ibid., p. 42.
The van der Luydens came to Ellen's rescue, Mr. van der Luyden saying: "It's the principle that I dislike. As long as a member of a well-known family is backed up by that family it should be considered final. This kind of thing must not happen in New York. It shall not as long as I can help it."  
The van der Luydens gave a dinner for their cousin, the Duke of Saint Austrey, and invited Ellen. Later they held a reception to which they invited all those who had refused to meet Ellen. 

Ellen's appearance at this dinner and reception at which New York's most chosen company was assembled was somewhat of a disappointment to those present because she was not more stylish. They had expected something a great deal different from a young woman with such a history. It was generally agreed that she had lost her looks, but as she appeared in the middle of the room, looking about her with a grave mouth and smiling eyes, Newland Archer rejected that verdict on her looks. 

It was true that her earlier radiance was gone. The red cheeks had paled, she was thin, worn, a little older-looking than her age, which must have been nearly thirty. But there was about her the mysterious authority of beauty, a sureness in the carriage of the head, the movement of the eyes, which, without being in the least theatrical struck him as highly trained and full of a conscious power.  

Even while at this dinner Ellen, completely unaware that she was doing so, broke several rules of accepted New York drawing room etiquette. She and the Duke plunged into talk,
neither seeming aware that the Duke should first have paid his respects to Mrs. Lovell Mingott and Mrs. Headley Chivers and the Countess to have conversed with Mr. Urban Dagonet. Later the Countess rose and walked alone across the drawing room and sat down at Newland Archer's side.

It was not the custom in New York drawing rooms for a lady to get up and walk away from one gentleman in order to seek the company of another. Etiquette required that she should wait, immovable as an idol while the men who wished to converse with her succeeded each other at her side.10

Ellen, after talking with Newland, told him she would expect him to call on her the next afternoon at five. Archer was puzzled by the tone in which she had summoned him and concluded that she was less simple than she seemed.

When Newland called he did not find the Countess at home; she was presently brought in by Julius Beaufort and showed no surprise at seeing Archer there. Later he saw that "it was precisely the odd absence of surprise in her that gave him the sense of his having been plucked out of a very maelstrom: the things she took for granted gave the measure of those she had rebelled against."11

He had not been with her long before he was conscious of the curious way in which she reversed his values. She did not hold the van der Luydens in awe, and she showed Archer how New Yorkers were slaves to fashion. He realized that she was making him look at his native city objectively.

10Ibid., p. 61. 11Ibid., p. 114.
She admitted to him, however, that she had lived too independently, that she wanted to be like her family and friends and to feel safe and cared for. She won Newland’s sympathy by asking for his advice and guidance, telling him that he and Beaufort were the only ones who understood her; and even though Archer bitterly resented her association with Beaufort, he made out a case for Ellen. He saw that she might be drawn to Beaufort by his conversation, his habit of two continents, two societies, his association with people generally in the world’s eye, and his careless contempt for local prejudices. Archer knew that what had charmed Ellen in her past life would still charm her even though it were against her will. He advised her to listen to her family and her old friends who really desired to help her. Her answer to this was: "But on the condition that they don’t hear anything unpleasant . . . Does no one want to know the truth here? The real loneliness is living among all these kind people who only ask one to pretend."  

Archer was drawn to her by the very difference in her that she professed to want to lose. She awakened him to the sameness and emptiness of his own life. She represented all the things he longed to know about. He felt in Ellen the tendency to have things happen to her. He admired her courage and independence, yet he was often annoyed at her disregard.

\[^{12}\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 75.}\]
for proprieties. Though he felt at times that she was not nearly so helpless as she pretended to be, he never talked with her that he did not feel that she was lonely and unhappy.

When Ellen shocked and amazed her family by declaring her intention of asking for a divorce from her foreign husband, they appealed to Newland to handle her case and try to persuade her not to go through with it. A divorce, no matter under what circumstances, was still not countenanced by society, and Ellen's family felt that they would be disgraced if she brought publicity to them by this act. In persuading Archer to take the case, his superior asked, "Do you want to marry into a family with a scandalous divorce suit hanging over it?"13

After Newland had read the divorce papers, he saw Ellen as an exposed and pitiful figure to be saved from further wounding herself in her plunges against fate. Archer realized that they were still living in a society that conformed outwardly, putting appearance above honesty, decency above courage. When Ellen told him she wanted to be free, to wipe out the past, he explained to her that New York society was a very small world compared with the one in which she had lived, and that it was ruled by a few people with old fashioned ideas. He said, "Our ideas about marriage and

13 Ibid., p. 98.
divorce are particularly old fashioned. Our legislation favors divorce — our social customs don't."\(^{14}\) He added that if the woman, however irreproachable or injured, had exposed herself to offensive insinuations, the process of securing a divorce would be infinitely disagreeable and painful. Archer admitted that it was stupid and narrow and unjust, but added that they could not make over society and advised her against getting a divorce. Ellen did as he wished and gave up her suit, and Archer won the gratitude of the family who had been spared any unpleasantness. Old Mrs. Mingott said, "I told her myself what nonsense it was — wanting to pass herself off as Ellen Mingott and an old maid, when she has the luck to be a married woman and a countess."\(^{15}\)

"Archer became the victim of his own handiwork, however. He was impelled by a force within him which he could not withstand to confess his love for Ellen and told her that she was the woman he would have married had it been possible for either. He was confronted with her answer that he was the one who had made it impossible. She said:

I ain't it you who made me give up divorcing — give it up because you showed me how selfish and wicked it was, how one must sacrifice one's self to preserve the dignity of marriage . . . and to spare one's family the publicity, the scandal? And because my family was going to be your family — for May's sake and yours. I did what you told me — what you proved to me that I ought to do.\(^{16}\)

\(^{14}\)Ibid., p. 110.\(^{15}\)Ibid., p. 115.\(^{16}\)Ibid., p. 169.
Archer learned that he was mistaken in his belief that she was guilty of the accusations made by her husband and that she had given up her divorce simply because she feared the notoriety and scandal that would be brought on the family. "The silence that followed lay on them with the weight of things final and irrevocable."17 Archer pleaded for their love, telling her that nothing was done that could not be undone, but Ellen faced reality with the honesty that was characteristic of her and summed up her case for him. She told him that when she first came from Europe, New York meant peace and freedom and home to her. Everyone had seemed kind and good and glad to see her, and she had been happy to be among her own people. She admitted to Archer that from the very beginning she had felt no one to be as kind as he was, saying:

No one who gave me reasons that I understood for doing what at first seemed so hard and unnecessary. The very good people didn't convince me; I felt they'd never been tempted. But you knew; you understood; you had felt the world outside tugging at one with all its golden hands - and yet you hated the things it asks of one; you hated happiness bought by disloyalty and cruelty and indifference. That was what I'd never known before and it's better than anything I've known. Ah, don't let us undo what you've done! I can't go back now to that other way of thinking. I can't love you unless I give you up."18

Archer continued to argue that they had the right to their love since May had refused to advance their wedding date as he had asked her to; but just as they spoke, a

telegram arrived from May in which she consented to the plea he had made to her to be married within a month, thus preventing an open avowal of his love for Ellen.

Archer went through the formality which made a New York wedding of the nineteenth century a rite that seemed to belong to the dawn of history. His and May's wedding was conceded to be the most brilliant of the year. May had fulfilled all that he had expected of her as a wife and he knew that she would always be loyal, gallant, and unresentful; and that pledged him to the practice of the same virtues.

After two years of routine life, during which he had not seen Ellen, "the idea that he could ever in his senses have dreamed of marrying the Countess Olenska had become almost unthinkable, and she remained in his memory simply as the most plaintive and poignant of a line of ghosts."19

Ellen Olenska became a living presence to him again, and their love flamed up anew when he saw her and learned that her husband was making overtures to her family for her return to him, offering to return a handsome sum of money that once belonged to her but had become his on their marriage. Archer had not been consulted in these family conferences because they seemed to sense that he was on Madame Olenska's side and would influence her against going, as indeed he did.

19 Ibید., p. 205.
Archer was struck anew by her simplicity and her quietness, which seemed to brush away convention and make him feel that to seek to be alone with her was the natural thing for old friends who had so much to say to each other. She told him that she had grown tired of what people called "society" and had felt herself too "different" to care for the things it cared about, and so had gone to Washington, where one was supposed to meet more varieties of people and of opinion. She criticized New York for its blind conformity to tradition and Newland asked her why she didn't go back if she disliked their society so much.

She confessed that it was because of him, saying:

At least it was you who made me understand that under the dullness there are things so fine and sensitive and delicate that even those I most cared for in my other life look cheap in comparison . . . it seems as if I'd never before understood with how much that is hard and shabby and base the most exquisite pleasures may be paid. 20

She forced herself and Newland to be honest, and she told him that if he did not make it worth while to have given up so much so that others might be saved from disillusionment and misery, then everything that was making her life bare would have been in vain. She conveyed strength to him because he knew that any move he might make to take his happiness at the expense of others would lose her entirely to him. He saw them chained to their separate destinies, yet the perfect balance she held between their loyalty to others and their

honesty to themselves stirred him, and when he realized the depth of her love for him, he felt that he would never again be quite alone. He knew that she would return to Europe only if she felt herself becoming a temptation to him, a temptation to fall away from the standard they had both set up. Her choice had been to stay near him as long as he did not ask her to come nearer, and he knew it depended on him to keep her safe but secluded. Ellen found herself in the bad graces of her family when she refused to return to her husband. They contended that a young woman's place was under her husband's roof. Mrs. Mingott had cut her allowance. Ellen had returned to Washington, and Archer heard it intimated that Beaufort was responsible for her support. He determined to go to Washington on a visit, but fate made this unnecessary.

Julius Beaufort met financial ruin by his unscrupulous speculation, thereby ruining many innocent people. New York was inexorable in its condemnation of business irregularities. It tolerated hypocrisy in private relations, but in business matters it exacted an unquestionable honesty, and the Beauforts were doomed to social extinction in spite of the Dallas connection. Mrs. Beaufort appealed to old Mrs. Mingott to back up her husband and to induce her whole family to cover and condone their dishonor. Mrs. Mingott's answer

\[20\text{Ibid.}, \text{ p.} \ 275.\]
to her was: "Honour's always been honour, and honesty, honesty, in Manson Mingott's house and will be till I'm carried out feet first."21 This caused Mrs. Mingott to have a slight stroke and she asked them to send for her favorite grand-daughter, Ellen Olenska, and declared that she was to stay with her as long as she wished.

Archer met Ellen when she arrived from Washington. He told her that their being together and yet not being together could not last, that he had visions for them that he was trusting to come true, visions of a place where nothing else in life would matter except their love for each other.

She again was the stronger, showing him that they must face realities instead of visions, answering him thus:

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

She tried to convince him that they could be near each other only if they stayed apart, that then they could be themselves. Otherwise they would be the husband of Ellen Olenska's cousin and the cousin of Newland Archer's wife "trying to be happy behind the backs of the people who trusted them."23 When he told her he was beyond caring she replied that he had never been beyond, and that she had, and knew what it looked like there.

21 Ibid., p. 275.  
22 Ibid., p. 293.  
23 Ibid., p. 294.
Mrs. Mingott appealed to Archer to help her in her stand against the family, to keep Ellen with her. She told him that Ellen had already persuaded her to let her use her carriage to go to call on Regina Beaufort, having said that she was Mrs. Mingott's niece and a very unhappy woman, and that if her husband was a scoundrel, so was her own, Ellen's, and that her family wanted her to go back to him. Archer was moved by this account of Madame Olenska's attitude toward Mrs. Beaufort. It opened his eyes to the righteous reprobation of New York. Archer knew, however, that if Ellen stayed, it would be because she thought to keep him from the temptation of following her. He knew that she was fighting her fate as he had fought his and was clinging desperately to her resolve that they should not break faith with the people who trusted them. Archer himself was brought face to face with the argument of the individual case; he had always held in contempt men who continued their philandering after marriage, but his situation was like no one else's, and he felt they were answerable to only their own judgment. Against this argument was May, and habit, and honour, and all the old decencies that he and his people believed in.

At a chance meeting she acceded to his plea for a talk with her. She told him she had decided to stay in New York because they would be safer from doing irreparable harm. He urged her to go away with him, but she refused to destroy in this way the happiness of those who had befriended her. She
promised to come to Archer once and then leave him. Again May stepped in at the crucial moment and told Ellen of her coming child and kept them once more apart, for Archer learned from May that Ellen was returning to Europe to live, and that Mrs. Mingott had made her independent of her husband.

May insisted on giving Ellen a farewell dinner, and just as the family had rallied around Ellen when she had arrived, so they rallied around her now that she was about to be eliminated from the tribe.

There was nothing on earth that the Wellands and Mingotts would not have done to proclaim their unalterable affection for the Countess Olenska now that her passage for Europe was engaged; and Archer at the head of his table, sat marvelling at the silent untiring activity with which her popularity had been retrieved, grievances against her silenced, her past countenanced, and her present irradiated by the family approval.24 Ellen was treated as a "foreign visitor" would have been. As he sat at this dinner, Newland suddenly perceived that those present believed him to be Madame Olenska's lover, and now that she was leaving the entire tribe had rallied around his wife and were resolutely pretending to each other that they had never for a moment questioned Madame Olenska's conduct or the completeness of Archer's domestic felicity, that the occasion for the entertainment was simply May Archer's natural desire to take an affectionate leave of her cousin.

It was the old New York way of taking life 'without

24 Ibid., p. 337.
effusion of blood;' the way of people who dreaded scandal more than disease, who placed decency above courage, and who considered that nothing was more ill-bred than "scences" except the behavior of those who gave rise to them. 25

Ellen Olenska left for Paris to live alone, and Newland Archer was redeemed to good form and useful citizenship by his wife. 26

Twenty-six years later Newland Archer reviewed his life. He had been what people were beginning to call a "good citizen." His days had been full, and filled decently. He knew he had missed the flower of life, but "when he thought of Ellen Olenska it was abstractly, serenely, as one might think of some imaginary beloved in a book or a picture. She had become the composite vision of all that he had missed." 26 He had said to his son when Dallas asked if she was lovely: "Lovely, I don't know. She was different."

It was because Ellen Olenska was different that she did not find New York to be the place of safety and freedom that she sought after the failure of her European marriage. She was unhappy in that marriage because, as her husband's secretary said, she was an American, and if you were her kind of an American, things that were accepted in certain other societies, or at least put up with as a part of a general convenient give-and-take became unthinkable. When she came home she looked on the innocence of New York as

something clean and wholesome. Even though she despised European customs, however, she had adopted a freedom of action, which made New York's blind conformance to tradition intolerable to her. She found that the aristocracy of New York did not speak her language, that they lived in a world of pretense which would not face change. Though Mrs. Archer said each year that New York was much changed, her social world did not allow for that change or admit its transitions, and because Ellen was the harbinger of the new, she was persecuted because she dared to follow her emotions with action, to ignore convention and local prejudices.

Nothing shows more clearly how much Ellen was the victim of the social conflict of her age than the sweep of the trend in customs of New York during her lifetime. The standards that had bound Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska changed. The same society that was afraid and distrustful of Ellen Olenska when she appeared in New York, thirty years later received Fanny Beaufort joyfully. She was pretty, amusing, and accomplished, and nobody was narrow-minded enough to rake up against her the facts of her father's past and her own origin. None were surprised when her engagement was announced to Newland Archer's son, Dallas. People were too busy to bother much about their neighbors, whereas in Ellen's youth, families were united in their interest to survive through an accepted system of matrimonial alliances. Tribal instincts and customs, family pride, and hereditary principles which had been held sacred were on their way out.
Yet Ellen Olenska, with the help of Newland Archer, felt the fineness under the surface of old New York society, and it was for the preservation of the principles which he had showed her that she sacrificed her happiness. Newland Archer found in Ellen a kindred spirit. She became to Archer the romance which he had missed, and she loved the qualities in him which kept them apart. They observed the conventions with dread but with respect, for Ellen had known the unconventional life and found it bad. Ellen was generous and loyal because she would not take her happiness at the price of making another miserable. She perceived her responsibility to those who had been kind to her and trusted her, and she had the strength to resist Newland Archer's plea that they take their love. She held to her avowal that she could not love him unless she gave him up. She felt herself pledged to practice the virtues she recognized as fine in this New York society which had proved far from safe for her.
CHAPTER IV

ANNA LEATH AND SOPHY VINER

Anna Leath and Sophy Viner are the two women of Edith Wharton's triangle in her novel, *The Reef*. Chance and circumstances caused their lives to be intermingled though they were of far distant worlds, and the traditions and conventions of the aristocrat inevitably affected the lives of both.

Anna Leath was the highly finished, cultured product of puritan New York and a no less conventional French world which she adopted. She had lived the sheltered life of wealth and leisure and had had no contact with actual life, the world in which people must struggle for existence, accept injustices, and face ugly, unpleasant facts. She had lived in a world of unreality, in a visioned region of action and emotion which is the refuge of those who are denied actuality.

Anna Summers was born in West Fifty-fifth Street in New York, in a "well-regulated, well-fed Summers world where the unusual was regarded as either immoral or ill bred, and people with emotions were not visited."¹ Anna wondered why everybody ignored all the passions and sensations which one felt, "but little by little the conditions among which she lived conquered her, and she learned to regard the substance


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of life as a mere canvas for the embroideries of poet and painter, and its little swept and fenced and tended surface as its actual substance." Because she lived in a reserved world of dreams she was cited by envious mothers as a "model of lady-like repression." Anna expected to find, however, a magic bridge between West Fifty-fifth Street and life, but when she was given her first chance to escape through the love of George Darrow, her hesitations, reserves, and fears of life outside her knowledge kept her from accepting this chance.

Because he seemed to understand her fine feelings and dreams and to offer her release from the conventions which she thought were keeping her from the joys of real life, Anna married Fraser Leath whom she met in Europe. He had intimated to Anna that he was revolutionary, and he seemed the "embodiment of a storied past."

Every word, every allusion, every note of his agreeably modulated voice gave Anna a glimpse of a society at once freer and finer, which observed the traditional forms but had discarded the underlying prejudices; whereas the world she knew had discarded many of the forms and kept almost all the prejudices. He had seemed to offer her study, the contact of the world, the comradeship of a polished and enlightened mind which would combine to enrich her days and form her character.

Fraser Leath took her to live at Givré, his chateau in France, and Anna soon found that she had only traded the life

\[\text{Ibid., p. 85.} \quad \text{Ibid., p. 91.}\]
of the sheltered girl of New York society, bound by its forms, for the life of the sheltered young matron, subject to the conventions and prejudices of her husband and mother-in-law, for she discovered in Madame Chantelle an unexpected embodiment of West Fifty-fifth Street ideals. Her husband had unassailable convictions that his mother's prejudices created social tradition, and he "collected social instances with the same seriousness and patience as his snuff-boxes. He exacted a rigidity to his rules of non-conformity, and his skepticism had the absolute accent of dogma."  

Anna did not adopt her husband's views, but she accepted and lived his life. Failing to find the romance and reality she had sought, she resorted once again to a world of spirit, and resigned herself to the belief that life was neither real nor alive. The birth of her little girl, Effie, was the only contact with actual living which she experienced, and that reserve of unusual power to feel strong joys and pangs, of which she had always felt herself possessed, remained dormant until her second meeting with George Darrow in London.

The only point in common in the backgrounds of Anna Leath and Sophy Viner was that they were both Americans, but Sophy was a type of American girl who was wholly "foreign" to Anna, for she was the product not of a sheltered world,

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but a world of stark reality, where she had had to struggle for her very existence. Her early life might be summed up by saying that everybody had been too busy to look after her, and she had found herself alone in a busy and indifferent world.

Her small inheritance had been lost at her guardian's death, and her elder sister had not troubled herself about poor Sophy. She had traveled to Europe with the family of her friend, Mamie Hoke, and there was left by them. Eventually her only friends, the Farlows, found her a place as secretary to Mrs. Murrett, a lady of not too estimable objectives. Here, by determination and courage, and because of necessity and a desire to gain a reputation for stability, she remained for five years; but at the time of her chance meeting with George Darrow she had quarreled with Mrs. Murrett and was without money, a job, or a prospect of one. Sophy was plucky and independent, however, and accepted life as she found it. Her philosophy of life was that one's state was a matter of luck, that things came one's way or they didn't, and she thought that at any moment things might turn in her favor.

Sophy's early life was devoid of pleasure and beauty. She had always had to practice frugality and had never been able to afford a "treat" in her life. The things which Anna Leath accepted without question as her right and was sometimes bored with, Sophy Viner longed for, heart and soul.
She admitted to George Darrow that she had been jealous of his friend, Lady Ulrica.

Simply because she had almost all the things I've always wanted: clothes and fun and motors, and admiration, and yachting and Paris—why Paris alone would be enough! And how do you suppose a girl can see that sort of thing about her day after day, and never wonder why some women, who don't seem to have any more right to it, have it all tumbled into their laps, while others are writing dinner invitations, and straightening out accounts, and copying visiting lists, and finishing golf-stockings, and matching ribbons, and seeing that the dogs get their sulphur? . . . That's the kind of education I got at Mrs. Murrettas—and I never had any other.  

The lives of Sophy Viner and Anna Leath were fated to cross, and Edith Wharton has shown us what they, being what they were because of the social conditions in which they had lived, made of the situations which confronted them and how they reacted to the problems with which they were beset.

George Darrow, the young diplomat about whom their lives revolved, interpreted and analyzed both Anna and Sophy. We also get a clear, concise picture of Anna through her own self-analysis, for "her inner life had given her the habit of self-examination," but we see Sophy only through the eyes of others, for she was not given to self-analysis. "She was one of the elemental creatures whose emotion is all in their pulses and who become inexpressive or sentimental when they try to turn sensation into speech."

The coils of circumstance which brought Anna and Sophy

5Ibid., p. 18.  
6Ibid., p. 319.  
7Ibid., p. 265.
together and which led to the eventual havoc wrought in the lives of all concerned began with Sophy's chance meeting with George Darrow in Dover, just after he had received what he considered a rebuff from Anna in her telegram postponing for the second time his visit to her home in Cîvres. When no letter came explaining, he was hurt, bitter, and bewildered, and in the reaction of his wounded vanity, he turned to Sophy, whom he had chanced upon when she was in need of help. She distracted his attention from his own grievance and eased his wounded pride by showing him the pleasure she felt in his company. Consequently, instead of returning to London, he spent his ten day leave in Paris with her, getting a great deal of satisfaction from showing her Paris and giving her all the pleasures she had been so starved for.

He had found Sophy's naturalness in accepting an awkward situation refreshing after the usual traditional view of his world. She wasted no time in protestations or objections or in any vain sacrifice to idols of conformity; she either accepted or rejected a situation. She aroused in Darrow the habit of comparison, and he found himself trying to picture Anna Leath's reaction to the same situation. He knew that Anna would have shown no restlessness or embarrassment, but her adaptability would have been but "tact," and the oddness of the situation would have prevented her acceptance of it. He saw how little the "sheltered" girl's bringing up fitted her for the subsequent contact with life, and he wondered
how much nearer marriage, motherhood, and the passage of
fourteen years had brought Anna to an understanding of life.
He felt that her reticences and evasions were but the deaden-
ing processes employed by a "lady," and that she was still
afraid of life, its ruthlessness, its danger and mystery.
He seemed to see her fated to "wane into old age repeating
the same gestures, echoing the words she had always heard,
and perhaps never guessing that, just outside her glazed and
curtained consciousness, life rolled away." 8

Sophy was distinguished from the daughters of wealth by
her experience in living, "yet it seemed to Darrow that her
experience had made her free without hardiness and self-assured
without assertiveness." 9

Sophy proved a curiosity to Darrow, for he found in her
an odd mingling of precocious wisdom and disarming ignorance.
At times she seemed helpless and backward, especially when
she declared she was modern, yet she pronounced social
axioms which could have been gathered only from experience.
He could not determine the extent of her personal experience
or estimate its effect on her character. He could not place
her as any definite type which he had known, and he felt that
she might be an uncrystallized mixture of all types.

Her enjoyment of even the simplest pleasures gave him a
sudden insight into her stifled past. An evening at the
theater had been an unattainable indulgence to Sophy. The

8 Ibid., p. 29. 9 Ibid., p. 26.
plays she saw left her in a state of panting wonder. She had a quick impressionable mind on which new sensations incessantly came and went, and she felt intensely the actual and the immediate. She was vivid and vivacious, and he enjoyed watching her flexible fancies and changing face. The impression her face made on him gives us one of Edith Wharton's unusual descriptions of the physical features of her heroines.

Its fugitive slanting lines, that lent themselves to all manner of tender tilts and foreshortenings had the freakish grace of some young head of the Italian comedy. The hair stood up from her forehead in a boyish elf-lock, and its colour matched her auburn eyes, flecked with black and the little brown spot on her cheek between the ear that was meant to have a rose behind it and the chin that should have rested on a ruff. When she smiled the left corner of her mouth went up a little higher than the right, and her smile began in her eyes and ran down to her lips in two lines of light. 10

Darrow noted that she was not insensible to the charms she produced, but he felt that she was not vain, but merely aware of her prettiness as a note in the general harmony of the present pleasant world.

Sophy admitted to him that it was not often that people gave her pleasure. It was because Darrow opened up avenues to her of which she had always dreamed, thus becoming the natural object of a feeling akin to worship, that she fell prey to the temptation of an affair with him which was later to wreck her life. She accepted the pleasures he gave, and when they parted, he found that though the harsh discipline

10 Ibid., p. 15.
of life had stripped her of false sentiment, it had not touched her pride, and she rejected all his offers of help. She made it clear that she wished their brief alliance to leave no trace on their lives save its pleasant memories. Neither, however, realized the far reaching effects which this affair would have, not only on their lives but also on those of Anna Leath and her step-son, Owen, who had been left in her care at her husband's death; for when Darrow went to Givré to see Anna two months later, he found Sophy installed as Effie's governess and Owen's fiancée.

As Anna Leath reviewed her history, it appeared "like some grey shadowy tale that she might have read one night as she was falling asleep,"\(^{11}\) for from her second meeting with Darrow three months ago, when he had renewed his courtship, she had felt as if the veil which had always hung between herself and life had been lifted. A latent animation seemed to glow in her and she felt a deep inward stillness as the full strong emotions, which she had always felt she had in reserve and should not be afraid of, enveloped her. Her feelings were unlike any she had ever known: richer, deeper, more complete. "For the first time everything in her seemed to be feeding the same full current of sensation."\(^{12}\)

Her meditations extended to her home, Givré, and to Owen, for whom she felt the greatest tenderness and

\(^{11}\text{Ibid.}, \text{ p. 95.}\)

\(^{12}\text{Ibid.}, \text{ p. 123.}\)
responsibility. When she had first seen Givré, it had seemed to hold out to her a fate as noble and dignified as its own mien. That feeling passed and it became for a time the symbol of narrowness and monotony. Then after so long a time, it had become the house that one could hardly think one's self away from without suffering a sudden loss. It also seemed to have latent possibilities as she transferred her feeling to her external surrounding, so happy she was. She thought of her rebellious, undisciplined step-son, who wanted to make a marriage which would not commend itself to his grandmother, because it was with her small daughter's governess. She had promised to back him up and see him through, for she wanted his liberation to coincide with her own. Later, she said to Darrow:

What I've most wanted for him and shall want for Effie, is that they shall always feel free to make their own mistakes, and never, if possible, be persuaded to make other people's. Even if Owen's marriage is a mistake and has to be paid for, I believe he will learn and grow in paying.13

His humors suggested to Anna the voice of her own rebellion, and symbolized her struggle against the Leath conventions. He had the courage she had lacked, and she meant to help him have the chances she had missed. She did not want Effie or Owen to know the loneliness she had known and she said to Owen, as she promised to help him: "I've changed; I've decided that not missing things matters most."

13 Ibid., p. 119.
When Darrow came, Anna surrendered herself to her happiness with an impetuosity that Darrow had never suspected in her. He reflected that she was a woman to be proud of, not surmising that he was proudest of those qualities which, making her what she was, kept her unfitted for any life except one of the kind she had led.

He delighted in "the quality of reticence in her beauty. She suggested a fine portrait kept down to a few tones, or a Greek vase on which the play of light is the only pattern."  

He took pleasure in her steady gaze when she spoke, the grave freedom of her gait and gestures. He recalled every detail of her face, the fine veinings of the temples, the bluish-brown shadows in her upper lids, and the way the reflection of two stars seemed to form and break up in her eyes when he held her close to him... She was reserved, she was shy even, was what the shallow and effusive would call 'cold.' She was like a picture so hung that it can be seen only at a certain angle; an angle known to no one but its possessor.

Darrow watched the beginning of the struggle in her between pride and passion, instinct and intelligence, and knew himself to be the object of that struggle, for Anna had not accepted wholly his excuse for his delay in coming to her. As she questioned him, she sensed he was not telling her the truth. "There are things a woman feels when what she knows doesn't make any difference." "It seemed to her that she wanted his allegiance and his adoration, not so much for herself as for their mutual love, and that in

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14 Ibid., p. 126.  
15 Ibid., p. 127.  
16 Ibid., p. 115.
treating lightly any past phase of their relation, he took something from its present beauty.  

17 Her very security urged her to doubt, and her days became days of alternate joy and despair. Her emotions were of such tumultuous nature that she could scarcely identify them.

She felt like testing him by the most fantastic exactions and at the same moment she longed to humble herself before him, to make herself the shadow and echo of his mood. She wanted to linger with him in the world of fancy and yet to walk at his side in the world of fact. She wanted him to feel her power and yet to love her for her ignorance and humility. She felt like a slave, a goddess, and a girl in her teens.  

18 Anna sensed a certain reserve in Darrow's approval of Owen's marriage, and consequently her feelings toward Sophy, in whom she had had the greatest confidence, were affected. She had many reasons for wanting to like Sophy: her own sense of the girl's fine mettle, her love for Owen, and her solicitude for Effie. She admired her force of will in making her way in the world and envied her for experiences from which she herself had been excluded by fate. In comparing herself with Sophy, in spite of the superiority lent her by her worldly advantages and her seeming maturity, she felt an odd sense of ignorance and inexperience.

Darrow's arrival had plunged Sophy into the midst of complications. She had already met with the prejudices and traditions of the aristocrat, for Owen's grandmother bitterly opposed his marriage to Sophy, though she could give no more

17 Ibid., p. 110.  
18 Ibid., p. 124.
definite reason for her objection than that Sophy had been Mrs. Murrett's secretary, and that her only friends seemed to be some people named "Hoke." She said to Darrow, whom she had accepted as her daughter-in-law's suitor with affability because he had been an Everend of Boston: "Do you think a girl who has had to knock about the world in that kind of position, and at the order of all kind of people as fitted to be Owen's wife?" She added further, giving us something of the attitudes among which Anna had had to live:

Anna is modern—i believe that's what it's called when you read unsettling books and admire hideous pictures. . . . My son, you know, was very revolutionary. Only he didn't, of course, apply his ideas: they were purely intellectual. That's what dear Anna has always failed to understand. And I'm afraid she's created the same kind of confusion in Owen's mind—led him to mix up things you read about with things you do.19

Darrow cooperator with Sophy in the effort to conceal their past, though she sensed that he desperately wanted to keep her from marrying Owen Leath. Sophy's first instinct had been to defend the place she had won for herself and to learn as quickly as possible if he meant to dispute it. He was struck by the frankness and honesty of the way in which she faced the situation, though he perceived she was afraid of his power over her. She met this development with the bright bravery which it was her way to turn on the unexpected.

Darrow in trying to persuade Sophy that marriage with Owen Leath would not be best for her, hit on the one argument

19 Ibid., p. 189.
before which Sophy had no defence when he said: "You'll be wretched if you marry a man you're not in love with."

Sophy, defenceless and undone, attempted to leave Givré without Owen's or Anna's knowing her reason, but bit by bit, due to Owen's suspicions and the shrewd divinations of Anna, a woman in love, her story and Darrow's came out. Sophy's honesty with herself in following the dictates of her heart, her sense of fairness with others, and her courage that enabled her to take one more blow of fate, prompted her to renounce an assured future with Owen Leath and plunge once more into insecurity. She confessed her love for Darrow, and defiantly stated that she was not sorry of or ashamed of having loved him, saying: "I wanted to be happy just once, and I didn't dream the harm I might be doing him." Her unselfishness and generosity were magnificent. She went away so that Darrow should not have to give Anna up, and then helped to bring Anna and Darrow together again by appealing to Anna. Sophy would have faced Owen and told him the truth but gave way to Anna's judgment, and promised not to see him again. She kept her word and had the courage to live up to the line of conduct she had set for herself.

Darrow's reticences and evasions awakened in Anna a tumult of doubt and misery as she tortured herself with unrealities. At one moment she felt his love and was wrapped

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20 Ibid., p. 309.
in a sense of complete security, yet she probed, insisted, and cross examined him in her attempt to see. She was curious to all manifestations of life, yet desired that they should come to her in terms of beauty and fine feeling, and when she finally dragged Darrow's and Sophy's secret to light, she could not comprehend or understand how such a thing could happen. She had an instinctive disdain for whatever was less clear and open than her own conscience. She felt that her life had ended just as she had dreamed it was beginning; and she had no doubt at first as to the absolute inevitability of the conclusion. Her suffering reached depths comparable to the heights to which her love had carried her. She knew that all the disappointments she had suffered before had been negative sorrows, denials and postponements of life, and that she had never really suffered before.

She had always said she wanted to look at life, at human problems without fear or hypocrisy, but her life and her experiences had not fitted her to recognize them and face them when they came. She wanted to close her eyes and stop her ears to every sight and sound and suggestion of a world in which such things could be, "and yet, at the same time, she was tormented by the desire to know more, to understand better, and feel herself less ignorant and inexpert in the matters which made so much of the stuff of human experience."\(^{21}\)

\(^{21}\text{Ibid.}, p. 294\)
Darrow, in appealing to her courage and asking her not to be afraid, said:

Is it anything to be proud of to know so little of the strings that pull us? If you knew a little more, I could tell you how such things happen without offending you and perhaps you'd listen without condemning me.22

She longed to cry out, "I do understand," for she had an incorruptible passion for good faith and fairness. She had supposed that her sense of honour was her deepest sentiment and had never dreamed that any pact could be made with dishonor, yet she found herself struggling with contradicting impulses. In herself "she discerned for the first time instincts and desires which, mute and unmarked, had gone to and fro in the dim passages of her mind, and now hailed each other with a cry of mutiny."23 She felt an irresistible impulse to hold fast to what was most precious to her.

Anna came to understand that the Darrow she worshipped was inseparable from the Darrow she abhorred. At one moment her conclusion was that both must go, and the next she felt deep complications between what thought in her and what blindly wanted.

She had absolute trust in Sophy Viner, and felt an admiration and envy for her because she had the strength to follow the course of renunciation, but she was jealous of the memories that Sophy had, and she determined to give herself to Darrow so that she would have been to him all that Sophy

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22 Ibid., p. 316.  
23 Ibid., p. 317.
had been. Afterward her scruples were not overcome, but for a time their voices were drowned in the tumultuous rumor of her happiness. She was convinced that what had happened was inevitable and that she and Darrow belonged to each other. She was resolved to keep her course as though nothing had happened, to marry Darrow and never let the consciousness of the past intrude itself between them. She would ignore rather than face the facts, which was her world's way of meeting many unpleasant situations. She tried to justify that which she could not give up.

Anna's puritan conscience would not remain quiescent, however, and in her moments of self-searching, of which she was never really free, she saw herself cowering before mean suspicions and compromises, for she began to measure Darrow's every look and gesture and wonder whether he was telling the truth. She did not fear his own insincerity as much as her own trust of him, and she could not shake off the dread of being with him in any of the scenes of his Parisian episode. She saw that there would always be an insurmountable wall of silence between them, yet when she attempted to give him up, "she saw that they were as profoundly and inextricably bound together as two trees with interwoven roots."\(^{24}\) She was overcome with the futility of her attempts to reconstruct her ruined world, and "she felt a desperate longing for the

\(^{24}\)Ibid., p. 360.
days which had seemed dull and narrow, but in which she had walked with her head high and her eyes unguarded.\footnote{25}{\textit{Ibid.}, p. 702.}

She looked back with melancholy derision on her old conception of life as a kind of well-lit and well-polished suburb to dark places one need never know about. Here they were, these dark places, in her own bosom, and henceforth she would always have to traverse them to reach the beings she loved best.\footnote{26}{\textit{Ibid.}, p. 353.}

Anna Leath was a person of deep ingrained loveliness of character, human and feminine, whose conception of life did not include "moments of folly" or "flashes of madness." She had lived in a state of fearless ignorance, her judgments had been absolute, and because she had always lived in that world of fancy, she could not bridge the gap to the world of fact. Though she came to understand the weaknesses of others through weaknesses in herself she had not dreamed of, she could not readjust her conscience to compromise, and the deeply rooted code by which she had lived would not permit her to live at peace and accept the irrevocable.

Sophy Viner remains in our memory for her pluckiness, her directness of purpose, her recognition and acceptance of life's injustices. She yielded to temptation because of her loneliness and unhappiness. "She had nothing to look back to but indifference, and nothing to look forward to but anxiety,"\footnote{27}{\textit{Ibid.}, p. 293.} and she was touched when some one was kind to her. When she did find what seemed some escape from a struggle for bare existence she found herself faced with the
opposition of the aristocrat and the consequences of her own indiscretion. Both Anna and Sophy had their moments of heroism and each recognized the fine qualities of the other, many of which were common to them both: their desire to be fair, their honesty, their generous thoughtfulness of others.

Catherine Gilbertson states:

The exquisite Anna Leath suffers from having learned too thoroughly the dogma of her generation. Every one in the book is either guilty or innocent, or both or neither, according to the point of view of the reader.²⁸

Robert Lovett has this to say:

As for Anna Leath, Mrs. Wharton was never more happily at home with her material. She understands and threads the whole glowing labyrinth of Anna's mind without an instant of hesitation. The study is the most completely beautiful thing in all her work.²⁹

²⁸Catherine Gilbertson, "Mrs. Wharton," Century, CXIX, 115.
²⁹Robert Lovett, Edith Wharton, p. 69.
CHAPTER V

HALO TARRANT

As the heroine of two novels, *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*, Edith Wharton gives us Halo Tarrant, a girl in revolt against the aristocratic society of New York which was hers by inheritance. Hers is a story of love cutting across the boundaries drawn by a marriage of convenience, and it sets forth the costs and entanglements that ensue when individuals take love into their own hands and defy society.

In *Hudson River Bracketed* Mrs. Wharton tells the story of Halo's girlhood and of her subsequent marriage to Lewis Tarrant.

Halo Spear's early life was spent at her mother's family home, Eaglewood, at Paul's Landing, a New York country town on the Hudson River. Mrs. Spear had been a Lorburn, and Eaglewood, which had been the Lorburn home for over two hundred years, had become a prison for the Spear family because they could not afford to get away from it. Like many of the old aristocratic families of the time, the Spears suffered from insufficient means, and Halo's youth had been marked by economical years. Her winters were spent at snowbound Eaglewood and her summers in Europe in aesthetic but
dingy places, and she shared the family antagonism toward their country home. She envied those who were not bothered by financial worries. She remarked that ever since she could remember everything in her family had been "tied together with string and patched up with courtplaster."¹

Halo's parents had always regarded it as her rôle to restore their fortunes, but Halo had her own sense of values. She knew that a comfortable amount of money was necessary as a means of independence, but she felt that there was a price not worth paying for that independence. That price was herself and her personality. The idea of acquiring riches by marriage was distasteful to her; yet she longed for freedom, and not having been trained for any career except marriage, that seemed the only course open to her. Her parents assured her that the only guarantee of happiness was a community of tastes and interests, but Halo wanted to enjoy the raptures of life and love. She hoped that she would inherit the Willows, an old Lorburn home near Eaglewood, from her mother's cousin, with enough money to get away from it and from Paul's Landing forever.

It was while visiting the Willows one day that she came upon Vance Weston, a young man from Euphoria, Illinois, who was visiting his cousins, the Tracys, caretakers of the Willows. She found him hungrily exploring the library, and she liked his way of demanding to know about the books and

¹Edith Wharton, *Hudson River Bracketed*, p. 86.
the old house. He confessed to her his desire to write, and later he read to her some of the poetry he had written. Halo praised and criticized his work, for though she knew very little about life and how to cope with it, she knew a great deal about art and literature, and she began to open a new world to this boy whose Western education and ideals were so far different from those of the old civilization of the East. The simplest things she said presupposed a familiarity with something or other that he was ignorant of, allusions to people and books, associations of ideas and images, for "she belonged to a class of society, a type of people who naturally breathed a larger air, possessed the privileges of moving freely backward and forward in time and space and were so used to it they took the same faculty for granted in others."2

Halo's eager interest in life had not been matched by any great creative talent; she could half write and half paint, but she knew that her real gift was appreciating the creative gift in others. She was not long in recognizing that Vance Weston had the imagination for creative power, and having the background that he lacked, her greatest desire became that of fostering and improving his talent. She liked his way of leaping straight to the gist of things, disposing of preliminaries, and she thought what a beautiful thing life would be without idle preliminaries. She felt that she had

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2 Ibid., p. 124.
met some one with an imagination to match her own, some one
with whom she could share her treasures of nature, the beauty
of the living world about her. They watched the sunrise to-
gether and seemed to see the same visions. Vance thought of
her as a being goddess-like and remote, mistress of the keys
of knowledge and experience; her notice had flushed him with
pride.

Their meetings soon ended, however, for Vance was accused
of taking some valuable books from the library of the Willows.
These books had been stolen by Halo's brother, Lorry, but
because he sensed that Halo did not want her cousin, Tom
Lorburn, the owner, to know this, Vance left Paul's Landing
and went to New York, where he hoped to find a journalistic
job. Though he did get published in The Hour, a literary
review, a short story he had written, he was not successful
in securing work and was forced to return to his home in
Illinois.

Because of the affair about the stolen books, Halo
failed to inherit the Willows. She also discovered that her
family had secretly borrowed money from Lewis Tarrant all
through his courtship of her, that he had bought back the
books which Lorry had taken and had started him in his career
as a theatrical decorator; consequently she felt obligated
to marry him, perhaps mistaking for love the tenderness she
felt toward him for his generosity to her family. It was
unthinkable to Halo, who loved her parents' romantic
responsiveness as much as she raged against their incurable dishonesty, to desert them in their need.

She created an illusion about her marriage, and she told her old friend, George Frenside, that if she was not happy she was at least content, adding: "And being content is so jolly that I sometimes think I couldn't have stood being happy."\(^3\) She was too honest to disguise from herself that she had married Lewis for the sake of her parents, and after her marriage the debt grew faster than she could reduce it, and she came to see that the comfort and security he gave Mr. and Mrs. Spear, after he became their son-in-law, would take a great many years of wifely devotion to pay for. She felt the ties which bound her to him more unbreakable since they did not concern her private feelings but her sense of fairness, even after she came to realize "that all Lewis' generosity had proceeded not from the heart but from the head. He wanted her; she suited him; he had bought her."\(^4\) Halo knew that if she ceased to suit him the Spear household would fall to pieces. Common sense warned her to make the best of her fate, and she believed it her fate to be a good wife and a devoted companion to her husband for the rest of their joint lives. She threw herself with ardor into every new scheme which attracted him, and rejected with promptitude any enterprise which ceased to please him. Halo's husband

\(^3\)Ibid., p. 164.  
\(^4\)Ibid., p. 353.
had a great deal of money and many talents, but though he was brilliantly clever he could never find work which held his interest. As one of his experiments he bought The Hour and became its editor. In reading through some old copies of the review he discovered Vance Weston's short story, "One Day," and was so pleased with it that he wired Vance, offering him a place on the staff of The Hour. Thus it came about that Halo found herself again interested in the literary career of the young man who had once touched her imagination.

Before Vance reached the office of The Hour, however, he chanced to meet again his cousin, Laura Lou Tracy, with whose family he had stayed at Paul's Landing. He was so struck by her beauty that he felt he must have her, and he persuaded her to marry him immediately. In the months of their marriage he continued to marvel at her beauty, but he found that she left his intelligence unsatisfied. She could not enter into the world of his mind with its consuming curiosities, and he could not share his ideas with her. He turned again to Halo Tarrant for clues to new discoveries. "The truth was that both as Halo Spear and Halo Tarrant she had always appeared to Vance as the mysterious custodian of the unknown, a being who held the keys to knowledge and could render it accessible and lovely to him."5 Vance knew

that he and she might have walked the heights together, but
the path he had chosen was on a lower level.

The tie that Halo had counted on most in her early days
of marriage, a community of ideas and interests, had been
the first to fail her, for she learned that her husband's
pride and vanity would not admit intellectual advice or even
companionship. Though seldom alone Halo often found herself
lonely, and when Vance Weston turned to her for guidance, she
felt that she had found an object in life. She had inherited
her mother's liking for the company of clever people and
thought that it might be exciting to get hold of a budding
genius.

Vance, who was living at Paul's Landing, began to write
his first novel at the Willows, and all through one summer,
while her husband was in Europe and she was at her mother's
home Eaglewood, Halo met him and helped him with his work by
supplying him with details of the past, by encouraging,
listening, and criticizing until they had completed his first
successful book, Instead.

After her return to New York, Halo persuaded Vance to
go about among people; she introduced him to small groups of
the cultivated and intelligent who could stimulate him and
enlarge his point of view. She took him to the theater and
symphony concerts. He carried her every new experience,
every question, every curiosity, and her attentive under-
standing effaced his scruples and reserves at confessing to
her. He tumbled out to her his distresses, his anxieties, the misery of his marriage, the material cares that made his life so difficult, his resentment of what appeared to him her hardness and indifference, for she was no longer a disembodied intelligence to Vance Weston, but had become the woman he loved. "She was the woman his arms longed for, but she was also the goddess, the miracle, the unattainable being who haunted the peaks of his imagination."

Halo understood and pitied Vance, knowing he was beset by financial worries and burdened with the care of a sick wife, but she made a conscientious effort to repress his emotions, forcing him to face reality and the fact that she could not leave her husband any more than he could leave his wife who needed him. She appealed to her husband to be more generous with Vance, arguing that his contract with the writer was not fair and accusing him of destroying something fine and great when Vance, after a scene with Tarrant, tore up his first chapters of a new novel, and withdrew from the realm of Halo's influence.

Halo told herself again and again that her sympathy with Vance was all intellectual, that she was in love with his mind, and that if she were to help him, every idea except intellectual ardors must be put aside and forgotten; "And she did so want to help him; it was her greatest longing,

\[\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 439}.\]
the need of her blood. The thought of it fed her lonely hours, filled her empty life, or nearly filled it."7 Vance made her feel useful.

Regarding herself as bound to Lewis Tarrant by her debt to him, Halo had never thought that her husband might cease to need her or that the tie between them might become as irksome to him as it was to her, and she was surprised to learn that she had been replaced and that he wanted his freedom. She saw that she had failed to dedicate her every thought and impulse toward understanding him and satisfying his vanity and hence had decreased in importance to him.

Almost simultaneous with Tarrant's asking her for his freedom was the death of her cousin, old Miss Lorburn of Stuyvesant Square, leaving her in possession of the Willows and more money than she could have hoped for to secure the future of her parents, and giving her her second chance at life and happiness. She sought out Vance at a little isolated farm where he had moved with Laura Lou. Halo hoped to re-establish the companionship they had known, but when she learned of Laura Lou's death, she agreed with Vance that it would be best for him to return for a time to his parents' home in Illinois.

In her novel, The Gods Arrive, Mrs. Wharton continues the story of Halo Tarrant, a Halo who, given her second

7Ibid., p. 484.
chance at life, was determined that it should not be sacrificed to convention.

Halo had first been drawn to Vance by his need of her, and that continued to be the strongest force binding her to him. When Vance came back from Euphoria a few months after his wife's death telling her that he could not write without her, she yielded to his plea that she go away with him at once without waiting for her divorce from her husband. She hardly knew whether passion or pity prevailed, but she felt that this was her chance to be her real self and that no argument or appeal to social expediency should deprive her of it. It seemed to her that she was enclosed in an impenetrable world of love and happiness. She knew that for the first time in her life she was living in the present. She saw that "hitherto her real existence had been either plunged in the wonders that art, poetry, history had built into her dreams, or else reaching forward to a future she longed for yet dreaded."8 Now that she was happy she meant to forget the past. She tossed overboard a telegram from her lawyer advising her not to sail since her husband was not disposed to her divorcing him if she persisted in leaving the country with Weston and might even refuse to take divorce proceedings himself simply to prevent her remarrying. At that time Halo felt that her life had struck root in the soul depths that

put her beyond all reach of malice and could not imagine any threat that would make her give up a year or two of happiness, waiting in conventional solitude until the divorce, conducted with old-fashioned discretion and deliberation, was granted. Before her own conscience and her lover's they were irrevocably bound together, and she was what she called herself, his wife; for she felt that if she were not Vance Weston's for always the future was already a handful of splinters.

She knew no one would understand, least of all her family. Mr. and Mrs. Spear had always regarded themselves as free spirits, and she realized that they were burdened with fewer social prejudices than most of their friends and relations. Mrs. Spear had specialized in receiving odd people and sympathizing with self-expression, and had championed the first of the adventurers in new morality, but she had never expected anyone in her family to join that band of heroes. "She was a Lorrain of Paul's Landing, and people of pre-revolutionary stock, however emancipated their sympathies, conformed to tradition in their conduct."9 Mrs. Spear had never dreamed of her daughter's taking liberties with the institutions sanctioned by church and law, and she had been shocked and hurt by Halo's decision to go away with her lover before her divorce.

9Ibid., p. 31.
Halo felt that her faith in Vance's genius justified her casting in her lot with him. She was carried away with the thought of watching his gift unfold under her care, "but she liked to think she loved him because she believed in his genius, not that she believed in his genius because she loved him,"\(^{10}\) and at the beginning of her new life with him "she wondered what happiness could equal that of the woman permitted to serve the genius while she adored the man."\(^{11}\)

In their first weeks together Halo was deeply happy, even though she had to alter her habits of routine and order to follow Vance's impulses. She was destined to disappointment, however, in her dreams of being his Muse and inspiration, of giving him what he had always lacked, intellectual companionship and spiritual sympathy. The bright confusion of his mind, though itcharmed her, frightened her. She became uncertain and shy in talking with him of his literary plans, fearful of discouraging and misdirecting him. His hours were spent in dreaming and dawdling and not in feverish activity to express himself, as she had imagined they would be under her influence. As a guide she was superseded by critics far less discerning, and she resented keenly his intimations that she did not understand or could not follow him in his flights of fancy.

\(^{10}\)Ibid., p. 28. \(^{11}\)Ibid., p. 29.
He seemed to regard his genius as a beautiful capricious animal, to be fed and exercised when he chose and by him alone; and she forebore to remind him of the day when her nearness had seemed necessary to inspire his work and her advice to shape it. She told herself that in becoming his mistress she had chosen another field of influence, that to be loved by him, to feel his passionate need of her was a rapture above the joys of comradeship; but in her heart she had dreamed of uniting the two.\textsuperscript{12}

Vance never again took her into his confidence while his work was at hand as he had in the old days at the Willows, and she felt herself shut off from his experiences and adventures. She suffered acutely from the fact that he no longer sought her collaboration, and Halo once again became lonely. "Vance as a lover filled her life with radiance \ldots but it was in the region of thought and imagination that she had dreamed of a lasting hold over him, and it was in this region that she found herself least wanted."\textsuperscript{13}

Halo had thought herself indifferent to the world's opinions, yet she soon found herself subjected to humiliations and insults which she resented and felt deeply. Her first slight came from an old Spanish Marquesa, who refused to invite her with Vance to her home because of their relationship, which she had learned about from Vance's new friend, Alders, a wandering writer. Halo was angry at Vance for having discussed her and their situation with a stranger. Vance could not understand why she was angry or thought she needed protection from a situation which she had freely

\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., p. 49. \textsuperscript{13}Ibid., p. 35.
chosen and professed not to mind, and Halo felt that Vance's moral simplicity might become more trying than the conventionalities she had fled from. She was bewildered by his incomprehension of what she considered his responsibility toward her in their relationship and found that discussing things with him was like arguing with some one who did not use the same speech. She was beginning to see that though the conventional rules of life still perplexed him, he was close to its realities, and his inflexible honesty jarred her perception of the delicate shades of deportment. She had found out how little importance Vance attached to the idea of marriage, and she had shown him the social value it had for her.

Yet she could not help from feeling as she felt. Her relations with the men she had grown up among had been regulated by a code of which Vance did not know the first word and she now saw how such tacit observances may be inwoven with the closest human intimacies.\(^{14}\) Vance lived in a simpler moral atmosphere and she perceived that she must adapt herself. She resolved to show him that her love for him could survive their differences in outlook, but she was not able to banish the wall that seemed to have risen between them, and in fear lest she should lose the man for whom she had forsaken so much, her life became one of pretense. She grew afraid to take her happiness for granted, but she hid her fears from Vance.

\(^{14}\text{Ibid.}, p. 57.\)
When Halo was subjected to humiliations and cut by old acquaintances, she pretended she did not care, though she often longed to be back in the accustomed framework of her old life. When Tarrant refused to give her a divorce, she affected indifference and assured Vance that she did not mind, and he understood that nothing could be more distasteful to her than to seem aware that she was the subject of gossip and criticism. He saw her suffer acutely from every slight, yet bear herself with gayest indifference. "He supposed it was pride in her, the attitude of all her clan to affect indifference when every nerve was writhing."¹⁵

Halo found that free love was not the simple experiment she had imagined. "The coast of Bohemia might be pleasant to land on for a picnic, yet the interior of the country proved disappointing."¹⁶ She had dropped out of her own social world, and found herself unclassified and out of the social pattern.

She had felt that she could shake off that feeling in the tolerant air of her brother's studio group in Paris, for the social picture as understood in the Lorburn tradition had never existed for Lorry Spear. She soon had to confess to herself, however, that she did not fit into this new picture, that she would never be at home among people whose way of living was the result of their quest for novelty.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 266. ¹⁶Ibid., p. 82.
Just as she imagined herself growing happy with these harum-scarrum people who inhabited her brother's studio, she became aware that her real self was still ruled by other ideas and that her companions all knew it. Beauty, order, and reasonableness grew more and more dear to her, and the audacities she risked, instead of making her feel that she was one of them, only caused her and them embarrassment. "She had wanted Bohemianism on her own terms, as a momentary contrast to convention, and finding its laws no less irksome than the others, she bore them less philosophically because she did not believe in them." ¹⁷ Her brother, Lorry, the last person in whom she had expected to find moral scruples, accused her of going out of her way to offend the family pride and violate their traditions.

It was in Paris that Halo was cut by Mrs. Glaisher, who belonged to the old expensive New York group which her parents had once belonged to, and Mrs. Glaisher's action meant that Halo had been cut by all New York, for Halo knew that every act and attitude of Mrs. Glaisher's was the outcome of a prolonged and conscientious study of what her particular world approved and disapproved of. Halo had been ruled out of existence by her former social world.

Soon after this episode and a disagreeable one between Vance and Lewis Tarrant in which Tarrant refused to give Halo a divorce, they left Paris and went to a small English

¹⁷Ibid., p. 83.
colony town, Oubli-sur-Mer, on the Mediterranean. Here for a time they found peace and happiness, but Vance became restless and went to London, where he became very popular and was much sought after by the leading hostesses. Halo felt herself forgotten, and that was almost unbearable to her.

Halo, in trying to hold Vance and keep him from growing weary of her, came to see marriage as not only necessary as a social frame, but as a means of consolidating a bond, as a means of holding two people together. She realized that she needed marriage as a support, and she silently agreed with her friend George Fresnside, who came as an emissary from her husband offering her the divorce he had so long denied her, when he said: "Marriage may be a bit too tight a fit, may dislocate and deform. But it shapes life, too; prevents growing lopsided or drifting."\(^{18}\)

It was while he was in London that Vance chanced to meet Floss Delaney, the girl with whom he had been infatuated in his youth, the girl he had surprised one day with his disreputable old grandfather at the spot where his own trysts with her had been held, and in his disillusionment he had written his short story "One Day," which had started him on his road to literary fame. Vance found himself again under the spell of Floss' peculiar loveliness, and he became

\(^{18}\)ibid., p. 311.
obsessed with the desire of once again possessing her. Because she spurned his attentions, Vance went off by himself for weeks, but finally returned to Halo, who accepted his return without question. She was even led to hope again that they might return to their old companionship when Vance asked her to listen to the reading of his book, but when she did not seem altogether pleased with his writing, he accused her of being an amateur critic, and she saw that her unscrupulous sincerity would check his impulse to turn to her for sympathy and advice. Halo realized that each time Vance came back to her, she tried to rebuild her happiness on unstable ground. They maintained outward harmony, but this did not keep them from growing farther and farther apart. Their relations became strained and self-conscious, and when Vance confessed to Halo that Floss Delaney had a hold on him he could not shake off, she knew that the time had come for the break which had been inevitable.

Halo had early resolved that she would respect Vance’s freedom and that he should never feel that he was bound to her. She had subjected her desires to his in trying to make him feel that his happiness was all that mattered to her. Though she had been subject to suspicions and jealousies concerning his unexplained comings and goings, she had not betrayed her anxieties to him by word or act, yet she had suffered inwardly more intensely from the necessity of maintaining her outward calm. She had set his freedom above her
interests, and when her husband had finally offered her a divorce, she had not told Vance because she knew he would feel that he ought to marry her; and when this final break came, she had the strength to send him off alone to America to see his family and his publisher, stipulating that they should separate as old friends, but without any project of reunion. Her pride kept her from the use of subterfuges, tricks, or appeals to his emotion by the display of her own to hold him. She did not tell him that she was to have a child because she did not want him to feel under obligation to her.

After Vance's departure, Halo felt that there was no use in trying to make further plans. She did not want to make the effort to adapt herself to the new lonely life which she saw before her, without a husband or a lover; yet her frankness with herself and her determination to be fair to others made her refuse Lewis Tarrant's offer to take her back and give her child his name. Halo's sense of honesty had always kept her from blaming others for her situation. Vance, who came to perceive, if not always to understand, Halo's fine shades of sentiment, told his grandmother that she would have hated getting a divorce on the pretext that her husband had deserted her, when the truth was that she had left her husband because she wanted to live with him.

The blackness which had seemed to close in on Halo after Vance left her gradually passed, and she felt that out
of it a new life had emerged, her own interwoven with her child's. She decided to return to America and establish herself at the Willows, where she wanted her child to be born. She reached a state of calm and composure, was neither defiant nor apologetic at her state.

It was at the Willows that Vance Weston unexpectedly found her again. He had been mentally and physically ill after being finally disillusioned by Floss Delaney's ruthlessness. He had meant to go away until he could find himself again, but the old house which held so many memories for him drew him back.

Nalo's resistance to Vance had always melted in his presence, and when she saw him again, her scruples were borne down by a fresh wave of solicitude. Seeing him so powerless and broken made her feel strong and confident and sure of herself again, and she knew that whatever might come later, for the moment the way was clear because he once more needed her.

Nalo Tarrant, in her clutch at happiness and her longing to recapture the vision of life, acted on impulse, and came to realize the strength of the social conventions she had violated, and her story is an argument against love without marriage. That she was not Mrs. Vance Weston affected all other relationships between her and Vance. Though she felt the disapproval of the society whose code she had violated, it was not from external authority that she
suffered most, but from the violation of her own inherent sense of fitness, her instincts of order and beauty and reason. She found that she could not escape the things she had thought and been steeped in all her life, the convention, tradition, and breeding of her patrician background. It was as her brother Lorry had told her; she had stepped out of her social pattern. "She had wanted the absolute, and life had handed her one of its usual shabby compromises, and she had not known what to do with it."¹⁹

¹⁹Ibid., p. 316.
CHAPTER VI

UNDINE SPRAGG

Undine Spragg represents the class of the socially ambitious, the invaders of the old aristocratic societies. Her story in *The Custom of the Country* is enacted against old family backgrounds in contact with modern social enterprise in both New York and France. The place of the old aristocracy was being filled by those who had acquired the speech and observed the customs of the conquered race, but who did not understand its spirit, "a phantom society with all the rules, smirks, gestures, of its model, but evoked out of promiscuity and incoherence while the other had been the product of continuity and choice."\(^1\)

Undine's career moved in a cycle, as she progressed by way of marriage and divorce from Elmer Moffatt of Apex City to Elmer Moffatt of New York and Paris, with two husbands, Ralph Marvell and Count Raymond de Chelles, in between. Her story is told in the press notice of her last marriage:

*Reno, November 23rd.* 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.\(^2\)

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Undine Spragg possessed great physical beauty which, if somewhat crude, was striking and brilliant, and she came to rely on its power to make contacts for her and to carry her through every ordeal.

By her beauty she attracted Ralph Marvell, a member of an old aristocratic New York family, and won through her marriage to him the position she desired. She used it to capture the attention of Peter Van Degen, wealthy husband of Ralph Marvell's cousin, and Claude Walsingham Popple, the dashing portrait painter, whose admiration helped to satisfy her vanity. Undine cultivated her beauty instead of her mind. She learned to subdue the curves of her figure and soften her bright free stare. A major portion of her thought was centered on the enhancement of her face and figure, for "she enjoyed the image of her own charm mirrored in the general admiration of the public." Her physical charm won the adoration of Raymond de Chelles, and by her marriage to him she scored another social triumph and broke through what had seemed another impenetrable barrier of customs and traditions.

Very early in life Undine had begun to struggle for something she did not have. Her father recalled that in her youth she never wanted anything long, but she wanted it right off, and until she got it, the house was uninhabitable.

\textsuperscript{3}Ibid., p. 157.
She had always managed to get what she wanted by some method, from the time when she secretly sucked lemons, nibbled slate pencils, and drank pints of bitter coffee to aggravate her look of ill health so that her parents would have to take her away from Apex City in the summer, to the time when she consented to sell her child to obtain the money for her marriage annulment. She recognized no barriers where her desires were concerned. She got her momentary wants satisfied by scenes. Ever since she could remember there had been fusses about money, but she had always been successful in her demands, apparently without lasting detriment to the family fortunes. Naturally she concluded that there were ample funds to draw upon. The lack of what she considered sufficient money was the cause of most of Undine's problems. Ralph Marvell found that her disregard for money did not imply a willingness to get on without it, but merely a blind confidence that it would be provided, and that she would sacrifice honor and honesty to get it. Her inability to understand anything about money was the deepest difference between her and Raymond de Chelles, her titled French husband.

It was a proficiency no one had ever expected her to acquire, and the lack of which she had ever been encouraged to regard as a grace and to use as a pretext; money still seemed to her like some mysterious and uncertain stream which occasionally vanished underground but was sure to bubble up again at one's feet. Now she found herself in a world where it represented not the means of individual gratification but the substance
binding together whole groups of interests, and where
the uses to which it might be put in twenty years were
considered before the reasons for spending it on the
spot.  

Undine Spragg was the symbol of perpetual desire and
discontent; she knew what she wanted, and as soon as she got
it, she had no scruples about immediately wanting something
else. Her family had moved to New York because Undine was
"too big" for Apex City and wanted more social advantages.
Mrs. Spragg had passionately resolved that her daughter
should have what she wanted. Undine's first objective was
Fifth Avenue. Even in Apex her imagination had been nur-
tured on the feats and gestures of Fifth Avenue, and she
knew all of New York's aristocracy by name from poring over
the daily press.

She was instated in the position she desired by Ralph
Marvell, but she soon found herself astray in the new laby-
rinth of social distinctions, and she perceived that the
customs of Apex were not the customs of old New York society.
There were gradations of this society of which she had not
dreamed.

She found out that she had given herself to the
exclusive and the dowdy when the future belonged to the
showy and the promiscuous; that she was in the case of
those who have cast in their lot with a fallen cause.

It was all confused and exasperating. Apex ideals
had been based on the myth of old families ruling New
York from a throne of Revolutionary tradition, with the
new millionaires paying them feudal allegiance. But
experience had long since proved the delusiveness of the

\[\text{i}bid., \text{p. 495.}\]
Undine was conscious of having blundered. The only thing
the Marvells had that she wanted was position, and, to
Undine, position had always implied being able to have
things: clothes, amusements, motors, fun, and excitement.
When she found there was no money for these things, even
though she was satisfied with her husband, especially since
Clare Van Degen was "gone" on him, and she always liked to
know that what belonged to her was coveted by others, the
tie began to gall. She saw large opportunities in Peter Van
Degen with whose attention she had been flattered. There
was a similarity of tastes between them. She felt the
strength of his contempt for everything he did not under-
stand and could not buy. That was the only kind of exclu-
siveness that impressed her, and she laid her plans to get
him so under her power that he would divorce his wife and
marry her. She did not understand, however, the strength of
the social considerations which restrained him, and when he
failed to free himself and follow her, she was left without
position and facing social reprobation because of her di-
vergence from Ralph Marvell. Her divorce was one of the many
embarrassments to which she subjected Ralph Marvell's family.

5Ibid., p. 193.
The affair was a "scandal," and it was not in the Dagonet tradition to acknowledge the existence of scandals. In the vocabulary of his mother and sister the word "divorce" was wrapped in such a dark veil of innuendo as no ladylike hand would care to lift. They had not reached the point of differentiating divorces, but classed them instinctively as disgraceful incidents in which the woman was always to blame, but the man, though an innocent victim, was yet inevitably contaminated. The time involved in the proceedings was viewed as a penitential season during which it behoved the family of the persons concerned to behave as if they were dead.6 Ralph perceived later that by his acquiescence in his family's determination to ignore the whole episode of the divorce, he had handed his son over to Undine, and he throbbed with rage at the forces innate in him which he sensed had been the cause of his destruction.

The attitude of the new order of society in New York toward her divorce was the logic of Apex reversed. Since Undine had not been sure of Van Degen, they wondered why she had thrown away a position she was sure of, and finding herself in this precarious situation, her one desire was to get back the exact equivalent of the precise value she had lost in ceasing to be Ralph Marvell's wife. Even though the sense of what she had lost took the savor from all that was left, she knew that she must make the best of what she could get and wait her chance of getting something better. Life and opposition had administered some of the discipline her parents had spared her, and she had learned to control somewhat her storms of destructive fury.

6Ibid., p. 337.
Undine's increased experience had made her more vigilant and given her a clearer measure of her power, and she made the most of her opportunity with Count Raymond de Chelles, a French nobleman. He gave her glimpses of a more brilliant existence than any she had known, the life of the inaccessible Faubourg. As she began to hear about the French aristocracy and the life led in the houses beyond the Seine, her accepted values were again reversed as she saw herself denied this impenetrable group, and the whole force of her desires was turned in its direction. When her intention of marrying Raymond de Chelles became evident, she met the opposition of his family and faced the barrier of the decree of the Catholic church which does not recognize divorce. Her tenacity of purpose and her lack of scruples as to how she gained her objectives is shown by her decision to have her marriage to Ralph Marvell annulled, and to pay for this annulment by making him pay to retain the custody of their son. As an indirect consequence of this act of hers, Ralph, in trying to raise the money for her, discovered that she had been married to Elmer Moffatt. He realized then that she had lied to him from the first, deliberately and ingeniously, and in his humiliation and despair he destroyed his own life, thereby making it all right for her to marry Raymond de Chelles.

As at the point of each new success, she felt, when she
became the wife of this French nobleman, that the one great moment of her life had come, that this was better than any of her previous experiments in happiness. "The world was radiant, the lights were lit, the music playing; she was still young and better looking than ever, with a Countess's coronet, a famous chateau and a handsome popular husband who adored her." She soon perceived, however, that he attached more importance to love in all its manifestations than was usual or convenient in a husband, and she became aware that her domination over him involved a corresponding loss of independence. "It was disconcerting to find that Raymond expected to choose her friends and even her acquaintances in conformity not only with his personal tastes but with a definite and complicated code of family prejudices and tradition." She found herself once again cut off from the very circle she had thought to be established in, the fashionable cosmopolitan society which frequented the French hotels.

She found herself in a mysterious web of conventions, traditions, and prohibitions far more strict than those of old New York, and she felt helpless before the solidarity of the French family, for Undine knew nothing of solidarity. Things had happened at Saint Desert in the same way for so many generations that to try to alter them seemed as vain as

\[7\text{Ibid.}, \ p. \ 489. \ \ \ 8\text{Ibid.}, \ p. \ 481.\]
to contend with the elements. Once again, though she had gained an enviable position, Undine was faced with the necessity of exacting economies, which she could not submit to with good grace. She could not understand why some of the old family tapestries could not be sold to provide her with Paris seasons. She tried to laugh her husband out of his prudence and coax him round to her point of view, but she gradually learned "that it was as natural for Raymond de Chelles to adore her and resist her as it had been to Ralph Marvell to adore her and let her have her way."\(^9\) She sensed that the day she ceased to please him she would cease to exist for him. When he came to see that she did not understand the traditions of his family and was not willing to conform to its customs, he grew indifferent to her. Undine, for the first time, had a baffled feeling of not being able to count on any of her old weapons of aggression. "In all her struggles for authority her sense of the righteousness of her cause had been measured by her power of making people do as she pleased."\(^10\) Her ironies and arguments were ineffectual, and her impulses of retaliation spent themselves against the blank surface of his indifference.

Thinking that if she could make him see how easily he could give her what she wanted perhaps he might come round

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to her view, she showed the family tapestries to a dealer. This drove the final wedge between her and her husband, who realized that she was an alien who was capable of doing anything to gain her objective. He stated her case coldly:

You're all alike, every one of you. ... You come among us speaking our language and not knowing what we mean; wanting the things we want, and not knowing why we want them; aping our weaknesses, exaggerating our follies, ignoring or ridiculing all we care about ... and we're fools enough to imagine that because you copy our ways and pick up our slang you understand anything about the things that make life decent and honourable for us.11

Their incomprehension was mutual. It was impossible for Undine to understand a social organization which did not regard the indulging of women as its first purpose. She saw there was no hope of shaking his resolve or altering his point of view, so she set about altering her circumstances.

She had wanted passionately and persistently, two things which she believed should subsist together in the well-ordered life: amusement and respectability; and despite her surface sophistication her notion of amusement was hardly less innocent than when she had hung on the plumber's fence with Indiana Frusk.12

Undine turned to Elmer Moffatt, who had won a place in the business world and in Fifth Avenue, as the person who could give her the kind of amusement she wanted, offering to sacrifice her respectability to get the setting which she felt he would furnish her. From the first she had been drawn to Elmer Moffatt. They had no traditional codes to live by; their customs were the same. "He was a person who spoke her

11Ibid., p. 545.  
12Ibid., p. 354.
language, who knew her meanings, who understood instinctively all the deep-seated wants for which her acquired vocabulary had no terms. He gave her the sense of being able to succeed where she had failed. Undine's estimate of people had always been based on their apparent power of getting what they wanted, provided it came under the category of what she understood wanting. Success was beauty and romance to her. Elmer Moffatt understood her and made her feel that she was right and that everyone else was wrong. She felt an instinctive yearning of her nature to be one with his, and she was perhaps as sincere as she had ever been when she told him that he was the only one she had ever cared for "all through."

After their sensational reunion, they became highlighted figures in their cosmopolitan world, making their own customs. Elmer Moffatt gave Undine more than she had ever dreamed of having: jewels, clothes, sparkle, and excitement; but even though he gave her everything she wanted, she was not always happy. She still felt that there were other things she might want if she knew about them. When she learned that she could never be an ambassador's wife because she had been divorced, she thought that rule had been made merely to humiliate her and felt that that was the one role she was really made for.

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13 Ibid., p. 536.
Undine Spragg was an utterly selfish person, a parasite who used her husbands instead of helping them and cast them off when they were no longer of use to her. She had no appreciation of her responsibility toward others. Never did she show the slightest consideration for her parents or her husbands, taking all they had to offer and giving nothing in return. She was too busy seeking to satisfy her own ambitions to be interested in her son, who came to find, as he had often suspected, that his mother said things that weren't true in order to get what she wanted. She ascribed all interference to her plans to personal motives, and she came to think of all those who opposed her as unreasonable. She was always persuaded of the justness of her reasoning, and "it was characteristic of her that she remembered her failures as deeply as her triumphs, and that the passionate desire to obliterate, to 'get even' with them, was always among the latent incentives of her conduct."¹⁴

Undine's conflict was not a moral problem to be worked out within herself, for she had no moral scruples, but made her standards conform to her wants, making excuses for living with Peter Van Degen, offering to be "friends" with Elmer Moffatt, annulling her marriage to Ralph Marvell, and selling her son. Her struggle was one of external nature between her various desires, for she had acquired a confusion of

¹⁴Ibid., p. 98.
ideals which caused her much perturbation, since she was passionately imitative and modeled herself on the last person she met. She was not the victim of the codes and customs of the aristocrat, but she herself destroyed those of that class with whom she came in close contact.

When Ralph Marvell married Undine, he recognized her crudeness and her limitations; he knew that she had no traditional safeguards, that her opinions were fluid, that she was sensitive to new impressions and lacked a sense of relative values, but he hoped that she would acquire a finer sense of values and that he would discover in her a depth of understanding. He found however, that her mind was destitute of beauty and mystery, and that her ideals were pathetic. He found her to be a creature of skin deep reactions, of impatient greed. She had few sensibilities and could be appealed to only through her vanity or her social instincts. She wanted admiration, not love. She wanted to enjoy herself, and "her conception of enjoyment was publicity, promiscuity, the band, the banners, the crowd, and the sense of walking among them in cool security."

She never learned to care a great deal about the quality of the reflecting surface. Ralph found her completely unconscious of the states of feeling on which so much of his inner life depended, and as she gradually sacrificed his ideals to her

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15 Ibid., p. 224.
demands, even though he continued to adore her, he began to judge her. He often found that she had the face of her thoughts.

Undine's development was all external, for later Raymond de Chelles also found that she had only surface beauty, and when he could find no common ground of understanding or interest, he grew indifferent to her. Undine herself perceived, though she did not admit it, that she was inadequate in certain circles. Her entrances were triumphs, but there were no sequels, and she was left out of the small select circles. A friend explained this to her by telling her that a woman had to be something more than good-looking. Undine had not the interest to cultivate herself, however, except physically.

Her instinct for adapting herself to whatever company she was in helped her to learn quickly the correct forms of worldly intercourse and to acquire a surface polish and sophistication. Each new experience served to teach her shades of difference in conduct and actions, new terms of speech and tricks of attitude. Perceptions developed in her unawares, and she was grateful to Raymond de Chelles for the feeling of a sense of superiority which he had given her over the group she meant to reign in, for she felt she knew things they never guessed; and when she compared Moffatt to his two predecessors, the comparison was almost always to Moffatt's disadvantage.
Though Mrs. Wharton satirized the no longer applicable customs of the old aristocratic societies, she showed her contempt for Undine Spragg, the Apex beauty, who symbolized the aspirant to a position she did not deserve and the pretender to a culture she did not possess.
CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

Edith Wharton was primarily interested in three subjects, which she integrated in her novels: the history of the aristocratic society of New York; the portrayal of character; the recognition of moral problems. The three subjects received full treatment in the novels on which this study is based, and the novelist's social criticism is revealed in the lives of the heroines of these novels. Both the novels and the heroines are representative of her best work.

Through the lives of the six heroines discussed in the foregoing chapters Mrs. Wharton has given a revealing picture of the highly civilized society of aristocratic New York with which she was identified, giving particular attention to the mannerisms which pertained to that society. In *The Age of Innocence*, as a background for the story of Ellen Olenska, she reviewed the old conservative New York, that small innermost circle of society whose members Ralph Marvell, in *The Custom of the Country*, referred to as the aborigines. She represented this archaic society as marked by an uncompromising decorum, maintaining family solidarity, clinging to tribal ceremonies and inherited traditions, striving to keep
away from innovation and scandal, rejecting what it could not understand, and resisting the efforts of the New Americans to enter the "reservation." She showed this society, attacked from without by wealth and ambition and from within by the desire for luxury and amusement, in the process of change. Even in Ellen Olenska's lifetime she pictured the trend away from the old organization and showed a complete shifting of standards. She revealed the futility of the efforts of the conservatives to exclude aliens from their midst, for the Beauforts and Rosedales and Moffatts became securely established by means of what she clearly revealed to be the source of social power, money.

In The House of Mirth Mrs. Wharton satirized the fashionable, idle-rich society, composed of irresponsible pleasure seekers. She showed its power of destruction through its treatment of Lily Bart. In this study she pictured the different levels of social activity, as Lily exploited, for a time, each group in her efforts to live in luxury. Mrs. Wharton's irony is perhaps keenest when she describes the social climber. Carl Van Doren says that in satirizing these futile groups Edith Wharton indicated her own disposition: "her impatience with stupidity and affectation and muddy confusion of mind and purpose; her dis-like of dinginess; her toleration of arrogance when well-bred;
her little concern with the sturdy or burly or homely; or with broad laughter."\(^1\)

Though Mrs. Wharton exposed the narrowness of the very conservative group and the vices of the metropolitan society which was replacing it, she recognized her world as "one of subtleties of conscience and niceties of deportment, of respect for education and cultivation, of superiority embodied in an aristocracy."\(^2\)

That one dynasty had succeeded another Mrs. Wharton made clear, and chose to show how that succession affected the lives of the young women of her generation. Alfred Kazin has said that Edith Wharton specialized in tales of victimization, adding: "Her great theme became the plight of the young and innocent in a world of greater intricacy than they were accustomed to."\(^3\) These heroines, representing various types of personalities and social classes, lived in a world of shifting standards and were the victims of both their own and an alien society. Lily Bart was the product of a social system which first admired and then destroyed her. She was not satisfied with the futility of her life, but she was not strong enough to rise above her heredity and environment. She was spiritually superior and

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\(^1\) Carl Van Doren, *The American Novel*, p. 278.


\(^3\) Alfred Kazin, "The Lady and the Tiger," *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, XVII (Winter, 1941), 103.
materially useless, and her tragedy was exclusion from all that meant life to her. / Ellen Olenska, a member of an old aristocratic New York family, was a victim of the innocence of her generation, for she sacrificed her happiness out of respect for family traditions and conventions in which she did not believe./ Anna Leath had the protection and security of matrimony and position, yet inwardly she rebelled against her convention-bound life. She was envious of the experiences of Sophy Viner, the young American girl without background or wealth, who had yielded to a temptation which destroyed her life and Anna's because Anna could not compromise with her puritan-trained conscience. She was the victim of her limited training, for the women of her generation were excluded from every function save the cultivation of the home, and shielded from every contact with the unpleasant side of life. Halo Tarrant openly defied convention and was the victim not only of the disapproval of society but of her own offended sense of order and fitness. Undine Spragg was a conquering heroine of whose ruthless ambition others were the victims. She was not bound by the decorum of New York society because she ignored it, but she was truly the victim of her own discontent.

Carl Van Doren, in speaking of Edith Wharton, has said:

All the communities put heavy social pressure on the individual impulses. She had a special gift for organizing the circumstances in the lives of her characters so as to bring out a strong sense of human beings
living in such intimate solidarity that no one of them may vary from the customary path without breaking a pattern or inviting a disaster. ⁴

Around her six heroines Mrs. Wharton grouped many others who served to give a clearer picture of her world and the social currents of the day. Outstanding as types in this group were May Welland, in *The Age of Innocence*, the perfect product of puritan New York, who obeyed the letter of its rules without understanding the spirit, and whose strength lay in the conventions she adhered to; old Mrs. Mingott, in the same novel, the remarkable, domineering dowager who ruled her clan; Bertha Dorset, in *The House of Mirth*, a ruthless source of evil because she controlled an unlimited bank account which she used to shield herself and destroy others; Mrs. Gorriner, also in *The House of Mirth*, who represented the typical new-rich social climber; and Carry Fisher, in the same novel, the social middleman who launched the socially ambitious.

Mrs. Wharton gave her characters sharp, clear, consistent outlines. Her heroines possessed striking beauty, and she concentrated attention on physical traits as symbols of their personality. She analyzed their every impression and traced their mental processes, thereby preparing the reader for their actions. Most of her characters were interpreted through the observations of another character, but

occasionally, as in the cases of Anna Leath and Halo Tarrant, she permitted self-analysis.

Edith Wharton was interested, as the society of the time was not, in the individual case, the personal problems of her heroines. The personal problems of these women arose from their love interests, for Edith Wharton took "love as the most frequent and most personal of all the passions which bring the community into clash with its members." Out of their love stories came moral complications, and the attitudes of these young women toward ethical problems shaped their lives and those of the persons connected with them, for Mrs. Wharton believed that every story, to be worthwhile, should shed some light on moral questions. Ellen Olenska, Lily Bart, and Anna Leath struggled with temptations to break human and divine laws, to put personal desire above loyalty and responsibility. Undine Spragg had no set standard of conduct and recognized no obligations beyond satisfying her fleeting whims and her craving for excitement. The attitude of old conservative New York toward divorce is revealed in her story. Halo Tarrant and Sophy Viner paid for their violations of the accepted moral code of society.

Mrs. Wharton was not formally didactic. She did not try to draw conclusions or teach a truth, but pictured each

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5Ibid., p. 275.
case as an individual one to be estimated justly from its own peculiar angles. Her characters might be guilty or innocent according to the view of the reader. She offered her characters and facts as she saw them in an attempt to make clear and effective that which she chose to represent, life in the fashionable world of New York society.
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