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A STUDY OF WOMEN CHARACTERS IN EDITH WHARTON'S FICTION 1905-1920

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ABSTRACT

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IN EDITH WHARTON'S FICTION 1905-1920

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Edith Wharton's outstanding women characters, the focus of this study, provide vivid pictures of women at the beginning of the twentieth century. Wharton creates two opposing categories of women, the "new"--independent and mature--and the "old"--dependent and apparently innocent women.

Because there is a comparative wealth of criticism on Wharton's fiction, Chapter One reviews the most important of those books. The chapter also discusses the concepts of the "old" and "new" women. The body of the dissertation investigates Wharton's fiction from 1905 through 1920. Chapter Two focuses on Lily Bart in The House of Mirth as a moral and potentially "new" woman as contrasted with both Gerty Farish, an extremely "new" woman, and Bertha Dorset, a malicious "old" woman. Chapter Three has two female protagonists in The Reef as the foci of attention. Anna Leath, the "old" woman, reveals her selfishness in her struggle with Sophy Viner, the bold "new" woman, for the love of George Darrow. In similar pattern but more sophisticated in plot, characterization and craft, The Age of Innocence occupies Chapter Four with the analysis of May Welland, a conniving "old" woman, and Ellen Olenska, a conscientious

"new" woman. The subject of their controversy is Newland Archer. Wharton's love triangle pattern continues in Chapter Five as Zeena Frome, a possessive "old" woman in the novella Ethan Frome, competes with Mattie Silver, a restless "new" woman, for the love of Ethan Frome. In Chapter Six, Charity Royall from Summer represents a sensual "new" woman in her love experience with Lucius Harney and her marriage with Lawyer Royall. Finally, in Chapter Seven, Undine Spragg in The Custom of the Country gives the picture of the vicious "new" woman who exchanges herself in marriages with three men for improved social position. Chapter Eight concludes by discussing Wharton's attitudes toward American women in comparison with Frenchwomen as exemplified in her novella, Madame de Treymes.

This study proves that Wharton's complex and well-drawn women characters provide accurate insight into American women, literature, and culture. Her realistic characterization, sophisticated treatment of plot and style, and subtle choice of settings all contribute to her increasing reputation as one of the most outstanding twentieth-century American authors.

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PREFACE

Edith Wharton has been selected for this study primarily because of my special interest in women writers at the turn of the twentieth century--a crucial period in the development of American women. Born and reared between the two Feminist Movements (the late nineteenth century and the mid-twentieth century), Edith Wharton realized the changes occurring in the status of American women and explicitly portrayed those changes in a picture of the society. She also reflected the resulting problems of the American people, especially women, in her novels. Because she was a woman, Wharton's life exemplifies this transitional period of change in American women's lives. Her traditional upbringing in an upper-class New York family and her traditional marriage to a Boston gentleman, Edward Wharton, contrast sharply with her later controversial divorce, her career as a talented writer, and her independent life in exile.

As a writer, Edith Wharton is too seldom given attention as a modern American novelist of the first rank. This neglect is possibly due to the fact that she is a woman writer whose works are read superficially and often misinterpreted. In addition, some readers and critics have found it difficult to fit her works into the already set categories, such as popular romances, moral or didactic fiction, or serious modernist literature. If we do not attempt such large categorizations, however, it is possible to see Edith Wharton's fiction as an effective presentation of American people, especially women, of her time. Moreover, the quality of her writing, as exhibited in her language, style, and characterizations, merits study for itself.

Edith Wharton's works may be grouped according to the three periods of her publishing career. The first, her experimental period, 1899-1904,

covers her period of initiation in writing fiction. The second, her most successful period, 1905-1920, is the time of her major fictions which brought both literary and commercial success. The third, her less popular period, 1921-1938, includes a large number of works, mostly written while she lived in France, but still on the subject of American people in their country. These later works have yet to be properly evaluated.

My study will focus on the works of her middle period, which I find most interesting; these most successful works are also considered her major fictions. This period covers her novels from The House of Mirth (1905)--her first commercial success--to The Age of Innocence (1920)--the 1921 Pulitzer Prize novel. Most of her major fictions of this period will be discussed in detail with the emphasis on Wharton's characterization and portrayals of women. The order of my presentation and discussion of these works will not be chronological. Rather, I will consider them as appropriate to my critical analysis of the principal characters, who will be thematically related. Since these characters, mostly women, play dominant roles, they merit special focus according to their development from the "old" to the "new" woman.

Therefore, as far as Edith Wharton's 1905-1920 works are concerned, I will deal with her six major novels. Chapter 1 will summarize and discuss important studies which are in some way related to my investigation; the chapter will also discuss and define significant terms and concepts. Chapter 2 will deal with Lily Bart, Lawrence Selden, Gerty Farish, Bertha Dorset, and Carry Fisher in The House of Mirth (1905). Chapter 3 will examine the principal characters--Justine Brent, Bessy Westmore, and John Amherst--in The Fruit of the Tree (1907) as parallel to Anna Leath, Sophy Viner, and George Darrow in The Reef (1912). Chapter 4 will analyze in detail the three main characters of The Age of Innocence (1920): May Welland, Ellen Olenska, and Newland Archer. Chapter 5 will be concerned

with Mattie Silver, Zeena Frome, and Ethan in Ethan Frome (1911). Chapter 6 will discuss the characterization of Charity Royall, Lawyer Royall, and Lucius Harney in Summer (1917). Finally, Chapter 7 will focus on Undine Spragg, Ralph Marvell, Clare Van Degen, Raymond de Chelles, and Elmer Moffatt in The Custom of the Country (1913). Chapter 8, the conclusion, will not only sum up the consequences of the whole study but also emphasize the concept of the "old" and "new" women as evident in French Ways and Their Meaning (1919) and as presented in Madame de Treymes (1907).

Although there are many aspects of these complex major works which not only reward but require close critical examination, I will focus on women characters who play strong and dominant roles in Wharton's novels. As a woman writer, Wharton consciously and deliberately depicts diverse late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century American women. These portraits show the ambiguous status of women of all social classes during this period of change and conflicting choice between being the "old" or the "new" woman. In this context, the relationship between these women and the male characters is also important. These situations not only reflect the causes and problems of marriage and divorce in American culture but also indicate the ways Wharton's male characters have been developed from stereotypes to convincing presentations of real human beings. In short, this study has three objectives. I hope to contribute to a fuller undestanding of Wharton's novels, of American women, and of American culture.

My approach will be textual rather than theoretical or psychological. The principal emphasis will be on Edith Wharton's works, specifically on the portrayals of women characters, the stories of their lives, problems, and relationships. Furthermore, in the context of the history of American women, especially during the Feminist Movements, these women characters

will be analyzed, according to their roles and characteristics, as the "old" or "new" woman. This concept will be defined and developed in the first chapter.

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CHAPTER 1

Edith Wharton's place among the greatest writers of American literature is not yet firmly established nor widely accepted. At the beginning of the twentieth century, her fiction received critical attention primarily because of its popularity and commercial success. However, after her death in 1937, her reputation declined. This was partly because Wharton is a woman writer, usually considered one of a minor group, and partly because her works are generally misinterpreted as outdated period pieces--nostalgic stories about old New York at the end of the nineteenth century. At present, only a few critics consider Wharton seriously as an important American author. Apparently, some of her novels, such as Ethan Frome, The House of Mirth, and The Age of Innocence, are still read only because they are required in schools and colleges. It is obvious that Edith Wharton as a twentieth-century American writer is not completely forgotten, but she does not receive the recognition she deserves. To recall her achievement and to bring attention to certain critics whose works are relevant to this study, I would like to discuss briefly what I find interesting in their treatments of Wharton.

Two bibliographical works I find very useful to start with are "Edith Wharton: An Essay in Bibliography" (1973) by James Tuttleton and Edith Wharton and Kate Chopin: A Reference Guide (1976) by Marlene Springer. Tuttleton's study is informative and neatly presented under such topics as Edith Wharton as a writer of short stories and nouvelles, her major works, characterization, settings, and style. Springer's book is the most recent and complete reference guide with annotations. Since 1976, no bibliography of Edith Wharton criticism has appeared.

I find Irving Howe's Edith Wharton: A Collection of Critical Essays (1962) a valuable collection of criticism. This book gives various views--positive and negative--by important critics of Wharton's life and works. Most of these critics were Wharton's literary contemporaries such as Henry James, Edmund Wilson, Percy Lubbock, and V. L. Parrington. Their essays and James' letter to Wharton provide positive opinions, informative critical points, and constructive suggestions. Two essays in the collection, by Alfred Kazin and Lionel Trilling, sharply attack Wharton's work.

Among the critical essays, Irving Howe's "Introduction: The Achievement of Edith Wharton" gives an overall critical evaluation of Wharton up to 1962. In his judgment, "justice has not yet come to Edith Wharton"[1] fifteen years after Edmund Wilson's article "Justice to Edith Wharton." Howe makes this decision in consideration of the neglect of Wharton by literary historians, academicians, and serious literary critics as well as her lack of influence on current writers. Seeing Wharton as "genuinely distinguished,"[2] Howe points out that the amount of first-rate criticism of her work is small and that more critical issues should be raised to give her her "rightful place as a living figure in the literary world."[3] Unlike many previous critics, for example, Q. D. Leavis and E. K. Brown, Howe considers Wharton "an original writer," not Henry James' disciple or heiress.[4] Rather, Wharton is different from James in characteristic style, narrative line, and sense of life.[5] Moreover, Howe justifies Wharton's treatment of her characters, including men's "notorious vanity and faithlessness," "weak imagination," and "laziness of spirit" or "a suppressed feminine bitterness, a profound impatience with the claims of the ruling sex."[6] Howe's perceptive understanding is particularly

evident in his essay "A Reading of The House of Mirth," especially in his discussion of Lily Bart. He regards the novel as essentially presenting "a portrait of a young woman trapped in her confusions of value."[7] Lily Bart, a "weak and lovely" woman rather than a tragic heroine,[8] is seen as "a victim of taste"; her taste for morality conflicts with that for luxury, and her moral awareness does not lead Lily to the courage of abandoning the society.[9] According to Howe, the effective portraying of Lily, "one of the triumphs of American writing," is achieved by Wharton's success in showing a realistic figure "in plasticity and vibration" but at the same time clinging firmly to her concept of the heroine.[10]

Contrary to Howe, Alfred Kazin claims that Wharton has been given too much distinction as an American novelist. To this critic, Wharton cannot be compared to Henry James, and in her attempt to become a writer, she is only a specialist in "tales of victimization."[11] In Kazin's opinion, Wharton never became "a great artist, even a completely devoted artist."[12] Regarding Ethan Frome, Kazin criticizes the characterization of Ethan as a failure "because he is spiritually superior and materially useless."[13] Furthermore, Kazin also expresses his doubt about Wharton's knowledge of the New England middle class. The critic unfairly concludes that Wharton "had no conception of America as a unified and dynamic economy, or even as a single culture."[14] Kazin's final point in his essay shows his prejudice against Edith Wharton as a writer:

> . . . Edith Wharton, who believed so passionately in the life of art that she staked her life upon it, remains not a great artist but an unusual American, one who brought the weight of her personal experience to bear upon a modern American literature to which she was spiritually alien.[15]

Although I agree with Howe that Wharton is an original writer whose works are unique, the fact that some critics relate Wharton to Henry James should not be overlooked. Louis Auchincloss, for example, in his essay "Edith Wharton and her New York" (which appears both in Howe's collection and Auchincloss' Reflections of a Jacobite), began with a few anecdotes of the relationship between these two authors to show why and how Wharton's ties to New York were stronger than James'. Auchincloss, however, gives a sensible analysis of Wharton's portrayal of New York and its people in her three major novels--The House of Mirth, The Custom of the Country, and The Age of Innocence. In Wharton's novels, the critic finds New York to be:

> ". . . a city that was worldly. . . with a sense of order and form, with plenty of leisure time in which art, music, and literature could play a moderated role. The people from this world may lack strength of character, but their inertia is coupled with taste and observation."[16]

Auchincloss briefly, but perceptively, analyzes Lily Bart, Undine Spragg, and Newland Archer. In his opinion, Wharton's later treatment of contemporary New York--showing its ridiculous and disgusting elements--is not as successful as that of the old New York in the three earlier novels.[17]

Apart from this critical essay, two other works by Auchincloss on Wharton should be briefly mentioned. The Edith Wharton chapter in Pioneers & Caretakers, which also appears in book form published by the University of Minnesota Press, examines in more detail most of Wharton's principal novels from The House of Mirth to The Age of Innocence. One important point Auchincloss makes is that Wharton's attitude toward "evasion of the marriage vow," divorce, and adultery was ambiguous.[18] The

other interesting point is that Wharton and James differed in "their approaches to their art."[19] To Auchincloss, Wharton's approach as a writer is closer to George Eliot than James. This view seems to contradict his previous discussion in which he calls Madame de Treymes "a true Jamesian tale of innocents abroad"[20] and The Reef "a Jamesian novel."[21] Finally, Auchincloss' Edith Wharton: A Woman in Her Time (1971) is a pictorial biography which only briefly touches on her works. This book is valuable for its beautiful, clear, and rare pictures of Edith Wharton as well as for providing the critic's personal attitude on her life.

Another significant full-length critical study is Geoffrey Walton's Edith Wharton: A Critical Interpretation (first edition 1970; second and revised edition 1983). As evident in the title and as stated clearly in the preface, this critic focuses directly on the writer's works, touching on her life and personality only to illuminate her works. By restricting his analysis to the texts, Walton seems to claim, in the 1983 edition, that his examination of Edith Wharton as a writer is not affected by the biographical details revealed by R. W. B. Lewis in 1975.

Walton views Wharton as a critic of and an insider in upper-class New York society who was involved in analyzing "its custom and attitudes for their human significance and value."[22] He admires her characterizations, finding the writer "a great creator of heroines."[23] Analyzing her fictional works, Walton categorizes them in three major groups: tragedy, comedy, and satire. The House of Mirth and The Reef are discussed as ironic tragedies, Summer is discussed as an ironic tragi-comedy, and The Custom of the Country is discussed as a satiric comedy. The characters and their actions are analyzed on the basis of their being tragic or comic figures as well as representatives of certain groups of people. In the concluding chapter,

Walton observes that his comparison of Wharton and James is not concerned with their "superiority and inferiority" but, instead, with their "aesthetic differences and personal qualities."[24] Walton concludes that Wharton ranks with such distinguished novelists as Henry James, George Eliot, and Jane Austen.

Another approach to Wharton's novels is advanced by James Tuttleton in The Novel of Manners in America (1972). This critic argues that despite the popularity of romance in the nineteenth century and many writers' complaints about the inadequacy of material in American society, American literature has had novels of manners from James Fenimore Cooper to James Gould Cozzens. Tuttleton regards Wharton as a "social historian of old New York."[25] He finds some of her novels of the middle and later periods constitute "a brilliant but uneven series of satirical studies of the social history of New York."[26] He considers Wharton the major link between the nineteenth- and twentieth-century American novel of manners, since her works relate the generation of Howells and James to that of Fitzgerald and Lewis.

In justifying Wharton as a novelist of manners, Tuttleton points out the writer's two methods in dramatizing the theme of tradition: first, by illustrating "the importance of the web of culture and manners" and the danger of escaping or destroying it; second, by reconstructing the social world of old New York (1840-1880).[27] The House of Mirth and The Age of Innocence are the two novels of Wharton's middle period which Tuttleton discusses to illustrate why they belong to this form of American fiction. He contends that both novels provide vivid pictures and records of "the manners of the world of Edith Wharton's youth."[28] This approach to Wharton's works as novels of manners is, I believe, too narrow: despite the

critic's claim of its flexible and elastic form,[29] it restricts analysis to only the society and manners instead of going into such significant points as characterization and techniques.

Among many biographical works on Edith Wharton, the most important is R. W. B. Lewis' Edith Wharton: A Biography (1975), published seven years after access was granted to the writer's restricted papers at Yale. Considered among Wharton scholars the most definitive, inclusive, and authoritative work, this detailed study is indispensable in providing an insight into Wharton's life and works. Apart from giving the reader a portrait of the author as an intelligent, sophisticated, and emotional but repressed woman, Lewis also points out her talent as a great writer by discussing and criticizing her important works as related to her life.

Since the focus of Lewis' work is on Wharton's life, the book thoroughly examines all events and people important in relation to the writer from childhood to death. For example, Wharton's "making up" of stories and her interest in the classical books, European and American, in her father's library were two major ways of escape from loneliness in childhood, and they may account for her later productions of fiction and non-fiction. Dr. S. Weir Mitchell's advice for Wharton to write as a cure for her breakdown in 1894-5 is another interesting point in her career as a writer. The most controversial issue first revealed by Lewis is Wharton's secret love affair with M. F. (Morton Fullerton) revealed in her "Love Diary" and poetry. Other important events, such as the divorce from Teddy Wharton, the World War I experience, the winning of the 1921 Pulitzer Prize for The Age of Innocence, and her intellectual relationships with Walter Berry and Henry James, among others, are all recorded and discussed along with Wharton's

works. In short, Lewis' biography is useful and informative in terms of Wharton's life and her works.

Another influential study is Cynthia Griffin Wolff's A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton, published one year after Lewis' biography. Her concern is to find out why Wharton wrote and became a great American novelist despite her wealthy background and the discouraging society in which she lived. The critic finds that "the 'facts' of Edith Wharton's life" cannot answer the question because the recollections from her "sharply etched memories" may be only "partial truths."[30] Therefore, Wolff attempts to understand "some of the forces that compelled her to creativity" by exploring her mind through the fictions.[31] In short, the focus of Wolff's study is on the psychological aspect of Wharton as a successful writer rather on the facts of her life.

In Wolff's analysis the major factors in the making of the artist were her own loneliness and the indifference of those she was close to. In other words, the most important problem of the young artist was not only her family's attitude toward her which diminished her self-esteem, but also the society's attitude--disapproval of a woman artist.

Wolff evaluates Wharton's fictions from 1889 to 1937 in an attempt to define her characteristic achievements. For instance, Wolff discusses Wharton's use of "a double heroine" in her famous short story "The Bunner Sisters" as anticipating similar devices in The Fruit of the Tree, The Reef, and The Age of Innocence. Like many critics, Wolff associates The House of Mirth with Henry James' Daisy Miller, sees Madame de Treymes as the novella of the international theme, views The Reef as Wharton's attempt to adopt James' methods, and compares The Age of Innocence to A Portrait of a Lady. Wolff also indicates the literary kinship of Ethan and Zeena in

Ethan Frome with Hawthorne's Ethan Brand and the heroine of The Blithedale Romance; moreover, unlike other critics, Wolff emphasizes the significance of the narrator and points out his "psychological" problem as the story's focus. The Custom of the Country, according to Wolff, is autobiographically a novel of a woman's outrage with old New York apathetic society, an attitude Wharton shared with her character, Undine Spragg, but rather than Undine, the critic sees "psychic energy" as the novel's subject. Finally, Wolff observes that, as in Wharton's personal "Love Diary," the theme of self-examination as a search for self-discovery in Summer is one of the most important and pervading themes of the author's works. To sum up, Wolff's A Feast of Words is a thorough, psychologically-oriented analysis of Wharton's life and work.

In the same year as A Feast of Words, Margaret B. McDowell, another important critic, published Edith Wharton, a concise, inclusive, and insightful critical work. As stated in the preface, her two contentions are that Wharton's place in the history of American literature is secure and that after The Age of Innocence (1920) Wharton's subsequent novels were comparable achievements although they were not so well recognized.

McDowell focuses her study on Wharton's fiction rather than on her life. After relating the author's life to her fictional female characters and their relationship with men, the critic objectively indicates many points of similarities between Wharton and Henry James, without assigning superiority. The principal part of the criticism is based on McDowell's evaluation of Wharton's characterization, especially her female protagonists--Lily Bart, Justine Brent, Madame de Treymes, Sophy Viner, Anna Leath, Zeena Frome, Mattie Silver, Charity Royall, Ann Eliza Bunner, and Undine Spragg. McDowell, however, views The Age of Innocence mostly

in terms of Newland Archer's dilemma, and mentions very little about May Welland and even less about Ellen Olenska. Moreover, she not only calls attention to Wharton's earlier less well-known works but also to the later neglected novels of the 1920's and 1930's. McDowell praises Wharton as "a mannerist," "a moralist," "a psychologist in fiction," and "a remarkable novelist" whose importance is currently accepted in American literature but whose recognition as "a great one" is yet to come.[32]

Another concise and valuable critical study is Richard H. Lawson's Edith Wharton (1977). Selective in treatment both of the author's life and works, this critic briefly summarizes certain events in Wharton's life and discusses in detail her five major novels, the short stories, and other writings. The discussion of the novels is not chronological. Lawson begins with The Age of Innocence (1920), continues with The House of Mirth (1905), and then The Custom of the Country (1907). To Lawson, these three novels indicate Wharton's "affectionate irony" towards old New York society, not simply "indulgence in fictional nostalgia."[33] In other words, they reflect the writer's ambivalent feelings--love and scorn--toward her own society.[34] Lawson also focuses his study on characterization, analyzing principal characters such as Ellen Olenska, Lily Bart, and Undine Spragg.

The other two novels considered by Lawson are presented with different purposes. The Reef provides the critic with the opportunity to discuss the influence of Henry James on Wharton, especially in setting, characters, and "internal balance."[35] However, their difference, according to Lawson, is in Wharton's "ironic and subtle" style. In the examination of Ethan Frome, the emphasis is on characterization, which Lawson sees as Wharton's highest achievement in this area. The characters are "complex,

free of cliché, believable and even gripping." The style is also praised as "taut, precise, unpretentious."[36]

In his conclusion, Lawson points out Wharton's special gifts in plotting and style. Since she is not "an innnovator of novelistic form," Wharton cannot be termed a modern novelist; rather, she developed "the possibilities of the traditional nineteenth-century novel" with her "virtuosity."[37] Finally, Lawson claims that Wharton's appeal to the modern reader can be accounted for by the shared experience in materialism as well as in social and sexual discrimination.

Continuing interest in Edith Wharton is indicated by more recent critical studies of her life and works. Elizabeth Ammons' Edith Wharton's Argument with America (1980), adapted from her dissertation "Edith Wharton's Heroines: Studies in Aspiration and Compliance" (1974), places Wharton's fiction in a new perspective: the writer's public argument, recorded in her fiction, on "the issue of freedom for women."[38] Focusing on Wharton's fictional works from the 1890's through the 1930's, she discusses the difference in subject between the earlier and later works concerning the woman's plight. The short stories, novellas, and novels between the 1890's through the 1920's, according to Ammons, generally have as their subject the misery of being a woman including her isolation, powerlessness, and enthrallment. In Wharton's works in the thirties, however, the subject changes to the support of motherhood or the primacy of a woman's duty as a mother, her serving her family rather than emancipating herself.

Ammons concentrates on Wharton's eight novels from 1905 to 1920. From these fictions she abstracts certain important arguments which she finds Wharton as a woman has with the American society: women's

problems with marriage--repression, lack of independence, powerlessness, and loneliness--in The House of Mirth and The Fruit of the Tree; culture as an object of attack for repressing women and encouraging them to believe that their personal liberty can be attained by marriage--in The Reef and Ethan Frome; and the domination of female human nature by the American patriarchal culture--in Summer.

Most interesting in Ammons' study is her view of some of Wharton's novels as inverted fairy tales. Lily Bart, going from riches to rags, is seen as the inverted version of Cinderella. Justine Brent is a new version of Sleeping Beauty--awakening to reality and the misery of life, not fantasy. Zeena Frome may be viewed as the witch and Mattie Silver as Snow White who at the end turns out to be another witch. Anna Leath and Sophy Viner also are viewed through Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty motifs. Undine Spragg, on the other hand, is seen by Ammons as a modern Circe and a warrior queen.

As my interest is in the "new" woman, Ammons' discussion of Wharton's characters provokes my own research and study. For Ammons, the new woman possesses admirable qualities--she is active, independent, autonomous--but she is sometimes isolated and lonely. The child-woman, on the other hand, conforms to the society's masculine orientation, although she is considered by Ammons the least admirable heroine. Justine Brent is a Wharton heroine who exemplifies the new woman as opposed to Bessy Westmore, the child-woman preferred by men and the culture to the adult or "new" woman. Sophy Viner is another new woman of the middle-class, as is Undine Spragg, the heroine of the "business novel." Finally, Ammons views Ellen Olenska also as the new woman of the 1870's

old New York period and as the dark adult feared by men, a contrast to May Welland, the fair child-woman adored by men of the patriarchal society.

In addition to Ammons' dissertation "Edith Wharton's Heroines" (1974), at least three other dissertations deal directly with Wharton's women characters: Robert Wolfe's "The Restless Women of Edith Wharton" (1974), Jean Turner's "The Ideology of Women in the Fiction of Edith Wharton" (1975), and Carol Wershoven's "The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton" (1982).

In "The Restless Women of Edith Wharton," Wolfe investigates the women characters from Lily Bart to Nan St. George (in The Buccaneers). They reflect, he claims, the author's personal experiences as a restless woman herself and the changes in the "growing independence" of the early twentieth-century American women.[39] He finds the ambivalence in Wharton's writing to be a result of two factors: her concern with the lack of freedom for women and her dismay at "the vulgarity of women who divorce."[40] Through her female characters, Wharton expresses her ambivalent attitude towards the changing scene and increasing freedom of women.

The women in Wharton's fiction whom Wolfe considers "restless" are those who are imprisoned, trapped, or restricted by the rules of conventional society from which they try to escape, some with success and some without. Lily Bart, according to the critic, is the prototype of the restless woman who fails to escape. Justine Brent, another restless woman, exemplifies the "predicament and restlessness of the modern woman."[41] Mattie and Zeena are viewed as "restless and disillusioned by marriage and love,"[42] whereas Charity Royall is "imprisoned and defeated by ignorance and poverty."[43] Undine Spragg, however, is "restlessly

ambitious."[44] Finally, Ellen Olenska is considered by Wolfe to be the new woman of the late nineteenth century[45] while Fanny Beaufort represents a more modern version of Ellen, the American woman of the future.[46]

In "The Ideology of Women in the Fiction of Edith Wharton" (1975), Jean Turner uses the late nineteenth-century American ideology about women as the basis for investigating Wharton's "representations of insights into sexual behavior."[47] The critic points out the qualities of the ideal woman anticipated by the society: submissiveness, moral superiority, chastity, self-sacrifice, devotion to the home, and delicacy. Turner develops these traits from various writings of the period which expound upon, for example, the "cult of true womanhood," the doctrine of subordination, the beliefs in woman's "moral guardianship," and self-sacrifice.

Turner's study focuses on Wharton's attitudes towards this ideology as expressed through her treatment of the women characters in her fiction. For instance, she sees the author condemning Undine Spragg who "manipulates sexual ideology. . . to achieve her empty triumph."[48] In Turner's view, May's innocence is intended by the writer to signify ignorance and blindness to realities of life.[49] Most of Wharton's short stories, in Turner's opinion, indicate the author's opposition to the ideology of self-sacrifice and moral guardianship.

Turner also perceives in some of Wharton's characters the "Lady 'Rebel'" who fights against the society's limitations to get away from the "socially-reinforced values"--the ideal qualities for conventional women.[50] Justine Brent is a rebel, a worker, an independent woman who exemplifies Wharton's ideal as opposed to Bessy, the society's ideal. Lily Bart, in Turner's consideration, is a conscious rebel with two selves--the "known" and "socialized" vs. the "unknown" and "inarticulate"--and Lily's decision

not to kill her better self at the end is "the high point of Lily's consciousness."[51] Ellen Olenska's unconventionality makes her become a lady rebel, a contrast to May--the society's ideal. Finally, Turner also classifies Anna Leath as another lady rebel who can break out of the ideology in a search for happiness while Sophy Viner shows her consciousness but seems to be "condemned by conventions of class and sex."[52]

Carol Wershoven's dissertation "The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton" (1979), also appeared in book form with the same title in 1982. By "the female intruder," Wershoven means the recurring character who dominates Wharton's novels: the outsider who is in conflict with the society and different from other women and who is also a vehicle for Wharton's criticism of the society. The intruder has many functions but the two most important are as critic of the society and carrier of positive values.[53] These, according to Wershoven, enable Wharton to be considered "a novelist in the mainstream of American literature."[54]

This critic finds variations in the pattern of the intruder. In summary, there are the intruder in the novels of social climbing, the intruder as a part of a romantic triangle, the double intruders, and the intruder as teacher. Representing the first kind, Lily Bart and Undine Spragg both struggle in old New York, the money-dominated society or the world of wealth. Lily is an outsider to that world since her positive values--decency, compassion, and humanity--are considered signs of weakness.[55] On the other hand, Undine is an outsider who successfully becomes an insider. Wershoven considers Undine Lily's moral opposite and also a "monster."[56] As a part of a love triangle, Ellen Olenska is an intruder in the "infantile" New York world which adores woman's innocence,

represented in May Welland. Her status as an outsider is due to her values such as openness, honesty, generosity, and sacrifice.[57] Similar to Ellen is Sophy Viner who is free and neither conventionally "good" nor "bad."[58] Interestingly, the critic interprets this character as the "reef" of the novel--the hidden obstacle of the love between Anna and Darrow.[59] In the pattern of the double intruders are Justine Brent and Bessy Westmore. I agree with the first choice since Justine proves herself strong, independent, and isolated from the society. However, I do not agree that Bessy is also an intruder since she is a wealthy aristocrat--the insider or member of the society.

Wershoven's conclusion concerns Wharton's unique ability as a writer. She points out the author's purpose of writing in order "to clear the world of its shams."[60] Wershoven ends her study by citing "the secret gods of American society" which, according to the critic, Wharton recognizes and challenges in her novels. She regards what American people worship: wealth, pleasure, and the easy answer or formula, as "the empty idols." Moreover, Wershoven claims that the world of the postwar "new woman" which Wharton views as a nursery world, set apart from reality,[61] needs to become more mature and be awakened by such a writer with "grown-up ideas" as Edith Wharton.

The above critical works provide various perspectives for understanding Wharton's life and work. My study, I hope, will add to these perspectives and thus contribute to a better comprehension of Edith Wharton as one of the greatest and most important American writers.

To prepare the reader for my study, I would like to discuss a few terms I will use and the significant concepts they convey. My primary concern is to categorize Wharton's women as either "old" or "new" women. These two

terms, though quite simple, imply more meaning than they first suggest. The term "old" refers to the type of woman who clings to conventionality in her ways of living and thinking in order to conform to the standards and expectations of the male-oriented society. Expected to play the roles of a good daughter, wife, and mother, the "old" woman should be obedient, patient, and responsible for her duties at home. Thus, the term "old" also implies submissiveness and dependency in a woman towards the men in her life. Contrariwise, the "new" woman signifies the modern type who wishes to emancipate herself from traditional beliefs. The term "new," therefore, implies strong and rational, sometimes aggressive, women: independent, active, self-confident, and decisive.

According to Carolyn Forrey in her essay "The New Woman Revisited" (1974), the term "the New Woman" was used by journalists in the 1890's to describe changes taking place in women's outlooks and expectations. This term signified an ideal woman whose major qualities were self-reliance and independence--in her ways of living, decision-making, viewpoints, and careers. Moreover, the "new" woman was respectfully viewed as being well-educated, intelligent, and physically strong and active. Most important, her desire to be man's equal was regarded as "a new wave of feminine self-assertion." [62]

The history of the American new woman dates back to the early nineteenth century when women began to be conscious of their sexual identity. Their realization of this restricted "socially-defined sexual identity"--with few rights, little power, and limited role--led them to many feminist activities and moral reform movements during the period 1830-1860.[63] In Jacksonian America, these women, "militant" in action and determination, joined in a crusade against men who violated the Seventh

Commandment.[64] They tried to exterminate sexual license as reflected specifically in the prevalence of prostitutes and brothels, and more generally in the ubiquitous double standard in American society. As the prototype of the new woman in the later part of the century, these earlier women aggressively struggled for identity, autonomy, and equality with men.

In The American 1890's (1966), however, Larzer Ziff points out that women's achieving equal roles with men in public activities made them lose rather than gain power because they had to compete with men.[65] Apparently, after many decades of women's struggle, the fight was still going on without success. Yet, according to Ziff, many new women writers dealt with the theme of women's independence during this last decade of the nineteenth century. Among them, Kate Chopin distinctly presents, in The Awakening (1899), the actual plight of American women conscious of the desire for self-fulfillment.

In the 1920's, the term "new woman" was revived. Partly because of the war's effect, the women of this decade were regarded as having achieved "economic prowess" and "personal liberation."[66] A symbol of the Jazz Age, these women were portrayed as the opposite of the continuum from traditional women of the previous periods. With "cigarette in mouth and cocktail in hand"[67] and "bobbed hair and rolled hose,"[68] these post-war women, "carefree flappers," enjoyed life and adventures for their own sake. Significantly, owing to their sexual liberation and new morality, they marked the beginning of the "new" woman.

Opposite to the "new" woman--the concept of modern, free, liberated, independent, autonomous, and equal counterpart of man--is the "old" woman, the model of the perfect and true lady in the nineteenth century.

In Barbara Welter's essay "The Cult of True Womanhood" (1966), the mid-nineteenth century ideal woman was described as having four virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.[69] Being pious or religious was believed to give woman strength; it was also valuable as a means of keeping women in the home to devotedly perform their duties, according to religious beliefs. As essential to the ideal lady was the virtue of purity or innocence before marriage, after which she was expected to be a "passive" responder to her husband. Finally, a true woman was supposed to fulfill her duties not only as daughter and sister but also as mother and wife; her great task was to bring men to God. These qualities belong, I believe, to the "old" woman rather than the "new" woman, although Welter concludes her article by saying that "the True Woman evolved into the New Woman."[70]

It is difficult, however, to group Wharton's female characters in these two categories because of their complexity and diversity. Moreover, Wharton is sufficiently ambivalent toward them to make it often difficult to categorize her fictional women explicitly as either "new" or "old." Obviously the author admired some virtues of the "new" woman such as strong determination, independence, and courage, but she also disapproved of other qualities in the new woman, such as restlessness, irresponsibility, and immorality. The "old" woman, on the other hand, seems admirable in Wharton's works because of her cultured upbringing, good taste, elegant manners, and apparent innocence. However, Wharton's sarcastic attitudes towards them present these virtues as comparatively wasteful, leading to nothing. In sum, Wharton may still deeply cherish the traditional values of the "old" woman although she subtly presents them with strong irony.

CHAPTER 2

As a woman novelist and as the woman she was, Wharton inevitably chose as her major subject the woman--her way of life, plight, and problems. This does not mean, however, that her women characters are restricted to their own sphere. The narratives concern both their relationships with each other and with male characters. Interestingly, most women characters, especially the principal ones, are portrayed as stronger, more powerful, and more dominant than men. No matter whether they are "old" or "new," major or minor, these women are so realistically and emphatically characterized that their roles surpass those of their male counterparts.

Wharton's superior women characters can be traced from the beginning of her writing career. In most of her fictional work--whether short stories, short novels, or novels--of the earlier period, the women--especially the female protagonists--are treated by Wharton as implicitly or potentially "new" women. Despite their traditional beliefs and their conventional surroundings, the protagonists tend to have liberal ideas, especially a desire for independence.

Fulvia Vivaldi, the female protagonist of Wharton's first novel, The Valley of Decision (1902), clearly illustrates the concept. Given equal importance with Odo Valsecca, the male protagonist, Fulvia represents the intelligent and liberal middle-class woman of eighteenth-century Italy. Unlike the aristocratic ladies represented by Odo's mother and his wife, Fulvia, a professor's daughter, leads a modest and constructive life. Becoming Odo's mistress out of their love for each other, Fulvia clings to her ideal of reforming and improving the kingdom without accepting any

rewards of rank or money in return. Her unselfish acts, however, lead to her murder by the misunderstanding mob.

Criticized as too sentimental and trite in plot as well as language, this novel is not considered successful. However, the characterization of Fulvia foreshadows that of later women characters. With different setting, style, and plot, The House of Mirth (1905), Wharton's next novel and her first successful one, portrays the female protagonist Lily Bart, like Fulvia, as a potential "new" woman.

Both Fulvia and Lily are striking outsiders, women who struggle gracefully to survive. Possessing the same unusual feminine characteristics as Fulvia, intelligence and a strong will, Lily learns to be a strong and independent non-conformist in the upper-class society which ostracizes her. Both protagonists die, but this fact is evidence of neither their weaknesses nor their failures. The society is also responsible for their death.

The House of Mirth (1905) derives its title from Ecclesiastes 7:4, "The heart of fools is in the house of mirth," which implies Wharton's ironic attitudes toward the early 1900's New York upper-class society--its frivolity, irresponsibility, and pleasure-seeking.[1] Characters are portrayed as the "fools" whose "heart" belongs to "the house of mirth." Eventually they fool themselves with their prejudice, hypocrisy, and narrow-mindedness, enjoy the happiness of their luxurious but futile lives, and become hardened to the declining moral values of their society.

The focus of The House of Mirth falls on Lily Bart, the beautiful, graceful, but poor upper-class New York lady. The novel is Lily Bart's story, or "tragedy" as many critics see it.[2] In contrast with New York high society's luxurious way of living, the story ends with the protagonist's

failure in life and her tragic death. Thus, the novel, in broad outline, is a portrayal of a young girl's tumble down the social ladder despite her attempt to keep her status in society.

Told by an omniscient narrator, the story opens with the meeting of two principal characters, Lily Bart and Lawrence Selden, at Grand Central Station which leads to their having tea together at Selden's apartment. The result is an important conversation about marriage. In Selden's eyes, Lily appears intriguing: "he could never see her without a faint movement of interest"(p. 3); "Miss Bart was a figure to arrest even the suburban traveller rushing to his last train" (p. 4). She is "highly specialized" (p. 5) when compared to other women and magnificent: "everything about her was at once vigorous and exquisite, at once strong and fine" (p. 5). In short, Lily Bart is a beautiful, well-qualified, and marriageable lady. It is surprising, therefore, that despite her appropriate qualifications, she is still unmarried at the age of twenty-nine.

As the "victim of the civilization" (p. 7), Lily realizes the difficult plight of women in upper-class New York society. She frankly exclaims to Selden, "What a miserable thing it is to be a woman" (p. 7). The misery concerns the problem of marriage. According to Lily, "a girl must [marry], a man may if he chooses" (p. 11). And the important thing for marriageable women is to keep their appearance--"to be pretty and well-dressed" (p. 12). Lily seems to put much emphasis on the material things as a means to her success or marriage:

> . . . If I were shabby no one would have me: a woman is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself. The clothes are the background, the frame, if you like; they don't make progress, but they are a part of it. Who wants a dingy woman? (p. 12)

Despite her expensive and tasteful dresses, which make Lily attractive and accepted in the society, she still has difficulty in finding the right man to marry. One of the reasons lies in Lily's past--her upbringing and extravagant way of living--another in her poor financial situation at present.

Her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Hudson Bart, and their luxurious way of life are the main contributors to Lily's "good taste," and vanity. Lily's memory of her house and the chaos of her childhood shows how the social values have been implanted in her character:

> A house in which no one ever dined at home unless there was "company"; a door-bell perpetually ringing; a hall-table showered with square envelopes which were opened in haste, and oblong envelopes which were allowed to gather dust in the depths of a bronze jar; a series of French and English maids giving warning amid a chaos of hurriedly ransacked wardrobes and dress-closets; an equally changing dynasty of nurses and footmen; quarrels in the pantry, the kitchen, and the drawing-room; precipitate trips to Europe, and returns with gorged trunks and days of interminable unpacking; semi-annual discussions as to where the summer should be spent; grey interludes of economy and brilliant reactions of expense--such was the setting of Lily's Bart's first memories. (p. 29)

Of Lily's parents, her mother--"the vigorous and determined figure . . . still young enough to dance her ball-dresses to rags" (p. 29)--is more powerful and authoritative in the house than her father--"bald and slightly stooping, with streaks of grey in his hair and a tired walk" (p. 30). Under her mother's influence, Lily has been brought up to have good taste: have "a good cook," avoid living "like a pig," be "decently dressed," no matter the cost. Lily's "good taste" but lack of the sense of money value is evident in her suggestion that there be a twelve-dollar bunch of lilies-of-the-valley at the luncheon-table everyday. Learning about her father's ruin, Lily can do nothing but pity him "in a frightened, ineffectual

way" (p. 33) until his death. Actually, his death comes as a relief to her. Two important things which Lily has been taught by her mother are the use of her beauty and the escape from dinginess. After they become poor, Mrs. Bart tells her daughter that her beautiful face will bring the money back (p. 29). Lily, however, is clever enough to understand "that beauty is only the raw material of conquest and that to convert it into success other arts are required" (p. 35). Another bit of important advice that her mother gave--to fight her way out of dinginess--not only leads to Lily's conceited ideas about the luxurious way of life but also to her determination to marry a rich man.

After her mother's death, Lily becomes dependent on Mrs. Peniston, her father's rich widowed sister--"a looker-on" rather than a participant in life. Lily has to try hard to adapt herself to her aunt's way of living. From Mrs. Peniston, Lily does not receive a regular allowance but "occasional 'handsome presents'"--unexpected checks--to spend on dressing beautifully. Lily senses that hers is a futile and impractical way of life, but she seems to have no other alternative. Moreover, without sufficient financial support, it is necessary for Lily to cling to the upper-class society, since it provides her with the opportunity to meet and marry a rich man who will guarantee her social status and, she hopes, her happiness in life. The only way that Lily can manage to remain in that society is by staying with her rich friends, such as the Trenors and the Dorsets, as an unpaid secretary and entertainer to her hostesses. No matter how boring this work is, Lily has to cling to it if she expects to achieve her goal of a suitable marriage.

Thus, in terms of her past background, the influence of her parents, especially her mother, and her present financially dependent situation,

Lily is apparently an "old" or traditional woman in a conventional society. Like most upper-class ladies, Lily conforms to the society's assumptions about and expectations of the woman's qualities--always attractive and apparently innocent. Despite her manifest naivete, however, she is actually subtle and tactful in her manipulation of men. Lily has the art to please any man whomever she wants to notice her, such as Percy Gryce who almost proposes to Lily because of her attentiveness to his tedious talk about his Americana collection. Her decision to attract Percy Gryce, a rich but boring young man, indicates her conformity. She decides to become Gryce's possession, like his Americana collection, or his "ornament," the situation in which most of Lily's female friends--Judy and Bertha, for example--find themselves.

This concept of woman as "A Moment's Ornament," as the proposed title of this novel suggests, is later emphasized in the scene of "tableaux vivants" at the Brys. Superficially, this is an exhibition of artistic paintings imitatingly portrayed by real women. Lily as Reynolds' "Mrs. Lloyd" seems to be very successful with her "flesh-and-blood loveliness" (p. 135). However, the scene can be regarded as a display of women as ornaments or potential possessions. Lily is criticized not as an art work but as her real self. Ned Van Alstyne comments: "Deuced bold thing to show herself in that get-up; but gad, there isn't a break in the lines anywhere, and I suppose she wanted us to know it!" (p. 136) More straightforward is his later observation:

> ". . . Gad, what a show of good-looking women; but no one of 'em could touch that little cousin of mine. Talk of jewels--what's a woman want with jewels when she's got herself to show? The trouble is that all these fal-bals they wear cover up their figures when they've got 'em. I never knew till tonight what an outline Lily has." (p. 139)

Lily is also a conventional woman in her ignorance about money matters. Like her mother and most upper-class ladies in the society, Lily seems to be born to spend, not to acquire, money. If she wants to be an accepted lady of the leisure class, it is impossible for Lily to work for money. Therefore, apart from her small inheritance and Mrs. Peniston's occasional presents, Lily has no other means of financial support. Still she must wear expensive clothes and jewelry. Even worse, Lily falls into a gambling passion; she likes to play bridge for money. These expenses intensify her financial plight.

Lily's solutions to gain money by marriage and investment and to work for the material necessities she needs often endanger her. To marry Percy Gryce is a solution although one which will certainly bring her boredom and even unhappiness. Next, Lily's reliance on Gus Trenor to make an investment for her indicates how inexperienced she is in financial matters. Happily spending the $9,000 dollars Gus gives her in different installments, Lily does not know that he is attempting to seduce her--unsuccessfully because of Lily's strong self-control, or "presence of mind" (p. 144). Later, after she fails as a paid secretary to both the Gomers and to Mrs. Norma Hatch and as a hat trimmer, Lily thinks of marrying Simon Rosedale, a "newly rich" Jew for whom she has felt contempt. In brief, it is clear that though Lily is ignorant in money matters, she is clever and calculating in her choice of marriage. It is not until almost the end that she thinks of marrying Selden for love.

Aside from these actions, Lily is also an "old" woman in her conventional ideas. For example, Wharton gives a distinctive contrast in the definitions of "success" by Lily and Selden:

> . . ."Success--what is success? I shall be interested to have your definition."
> "Success?" She hesitated. "Why, to get as much as one can out of life, I suppose. It's a relative quality, after all. Isn't that your idea of it?"
> "My idea of it? God forbid!". . ."My idea of success," he said, "is personal freedom."
> "Freedom? Freedom from worries?"
> "From everything--from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents. To keep a kind of republic of the spirit--that's what I call success." (pp. 68-69)

From the quotation, it is obvious that Lily, true to her conventional belief, thinks more of success in material terms whereas Selden, in contrast, considers it in spiritual terms, although it is ironic that he does not and cannot live in that "republic of the spirit" himself. In Book I, Lily definitely clings to her traditional beliefs, especially those about her feminine qualities and materialistic success in life. Later, in Book II, she gradually realizes the realities of life and understands her true self.

Though many aspects already discussed indicate Lily Bart is an "old" or conventional woman, she also possesses certain potentials of a "new" or modern woman. Lily's hidden real self is revealed, at the beginning of the novel, in her conversation with Selden:

> "Shall we go over to Sherry's for a cup of tea?"
> She smiled assentingly and then made a slight grimace.
> "So many people come up to town on a Monday--one is sure to meet a lot of bores. I'm as old as the hills, of course, and it ought not to make any difference; but I'm old enough, you're not," she objected gaily. "I'm dying for tea--but isn't there a quieter place?" (pp. 4-5)

Lily's boredom with a lot of people indicates that she is not really a conformist. There are moments when she needs peace of mind and sincere talk as the escape from the turbulent and hypocritical world. She is happy to have tea with Selden in his apartment, though it is inappropriate. To Selden, Lily expresses herself freely and frankly: ". . . what I want is a

friend who won't be afraid to say disagreeable ones [things] when I need them. . ." (p. 9). Also, for Lily, Selden is "neither a prig nor a bounder" (p. 9), and she is comfortable to discuss whatever she likes with him.

Lily's interest in Selden grows because of his idealism which corresponds with her unconscious inner self. Their meeting at the Trenors' house causes Lily's conflict about her decision to marry Percy Gryce. It appears that Lily yields to her spiritual impulse by going for a walk with Selden and thus cuts herself off from an opportunity to marry Percy Gryce.

Another quality which makes Lily differ from other women in her set is her morality. Her relationships with Gus Trenor, George Dorset, and Simon Rosedale show that Lily is not an immoral opportunist. She rejects Gus Trenor when he tries to seduce her in return for the money he has given her. Lily's self-esteem makes her resolve to pay her debt to Gus Trenor though she has no means to gain money until Mrs. Peniston's, her aunt's, legacy is paid. Lily is involved with George Dorset because she is used by Bertha Dorset, his wife, on the Mediterranean cruise to draw George's attention and as a scapegoat when Bertha's affair with Ned Silverton is about to be revealed. Lily has pity for George, but though she has a chance to take revenge on Bertha by helping George with the evidence for the divorce and then by marrying him, Lily refuses to do so. Finally, she turns to Simon Rosedale, a newly rich Jew, who has been attracted to her because of her beauty and social status. Though she has not loved him, she is too sincere to deceive him into marrying her. When he suggests that she use Bertha's letters to Selden, which Lily has bought from a charwoman, to blackmail Bertha and gain her support, Lily's moral scruples

are so strong that she cannot. Instead, she burns all the letters without revealing her trouble to Selden.

Lily Bart is also a potentially "new" woman in her attempt to become independent, despite the indifference of and rejection by the society. Lily's decline in her social position, as seen in her working for the "nouveaux riches" like the Brys and the Gomers and the divorcée Mrs. Hatch, leads her to become a worker in a millinery. Brought up to be "ornamental" rather than "a bread-winner" (p. 297), Lily fails as a worker, however. It is not completely Lily's fault but rather the negative consequence of the society's influence. Wharton has the omniscient narrator explain Lily's situation:

> . . . Society did not turn away from her [Lily], it simply drifted by, preoccupied and inattentive, letting her feel, to the full measure of her humbled pride, how completely she had been the creature of its favour. (pp. 262-3)

Lily's death in Chapter XIII of Book II has been viewed in different ways. Wolff views it as "a conscious act" and also points out its "redemptive effect" in fixing Selden's esteem for Lily and in idealizing her triumphant tableau vivant.[3] Turner discusses this point in terms of Lily's conscious decision not to kill her better self:[4] the unknown, inarticulate self filled with desire for security, love, and freedom,[5] as opposed to her other self: the known and socialized one. For Turner, Lily's suicide shows her sensible judgment to die gracefully with self-esteem rather than to live poorly in the hypocritical society. Paradoxically, Lawson describes the death as "an intentional accident."[6] In my opinion, Lily's death is not suicide. She does not deliberately kill herself because of her own weakness and desperation. The overdose of chloral sleeping-drops accidentally ends Lily's life. Ammons states firmly that Lily's final action

"is not really suicide" since "she dies by her own hand but not by her conscious will."[7] Before her final and permanent sleep, Lily meets Nettie Struther, one of the girls at the club whom she has supported financially through Gerty Farish. Nettie and her baby give Lily "the first glimpse of the continuity of life"(p. 319). Nettie's victory over her past troubled life and the baby's warmth must have had great effect on Lily's optimistic hope, or else Lily would not have gone to sleep with the sweet dream of holding Nettie's baby in her arms (p. 323).

Since The House of Mirth marks Wharton's beginning success, Lily Bart should be considered the prototype of later successful heroines. Though Lily fails to climb the social ladder, she succeeds in strongly maintaining her self-esteem and moral scruples.

Another principal character who plays a less important part than the female protagonist is the novel's male protagonist, Lawrence Selden. A contrast to Lily, Selden appears self-satisfied, inactive, and idealistic. A young man from a well-accepted but not wealthy family in New York, Selden is, however, "as much as Lily the victim of his environment" (p. 152). A moderately situated member of upper-class New York society with a not particularly successful career as a lawyer, he lives in a shabby apartment. Selden draws Lily's interest as "more agreeable than most men" (p. 55); she also admires his social detachment and self-awareness (p. 56). The latter quality is accounted for as an inheritance from his mother: "the stoic's carelessness of material things, combined with the epicurean's pleasure in them" (p. 153). Therefore, unlike Lily, Selden does not find it necessary to struggle for anything.

Selden's lethargy is one of the bad qualities with which Wharton endows her "negative hero."[8] Realizing that Lily is making a mistake by

choosing to marry a rich man to secure her position, Selden points out to her how horrible her future life would be. However, he has nothing to offer her instead, not even his own proposal. He seems to imply an offer, but it is Lily who asks:

> "Ah," she cried, "for all your fine phrases you're really as great a coward as I am, for you wouldn't have made one of them if you hadn't been so sure of my answer."
>
> . . . .
>
> "I'm not so sure of your answer," he said quietly. "And I do you the justice to believe that you are not either."
>
> It was her turn to look at him with surprise; and after a moment: "Do you want to marry me?" she asked.
>
> He broke into a laugh. "No, I don't want to--but perhaps I should if you did!" (p. 73)

Such a passage provides a basis for Lewis' evaluation of Selden as "a sterile and subtly fraudulent figure" who represents "an emblem of masculinity" in Wharton's world.[9]

Lily's performance in a simple dress at the Brys' tableaux vivants mentioned previously helps Selden to realize his love for "the real Lily." Nevertheless, with a chance to be together in the garden, Selden is not active enough to initiate the conversation and effectively express himself:

> . . ."You never speak to me; you think hard things of me," she murmured.
>
> "I think of you at any rate, God knows!" he said.
>
> "Then why do we never see each other? Why can't we be friends? You promised once to help me," she continued in the same tone, as though the words were drawn from her unwillingly.
>
> "The only way I can help you is by loving you," Selden said in a low voice. (pp.138-9)

Many times Selden shows his intention to help Lily, but it is too late when he finally decides to translate his intentions into action. When he does decide to help her, it is because of his romantic vision of himself as a heroic figure, evoked by the seal with the word Beyond! on the note Lily

sends to him. He thinks that "he would take her beyond--beyond the ugliness, the pettiness, the attrition and corrosion of the soul" (p. 155). Selden also views himself as the mythic Perseus' helping unchain Andromeda and lifting her back to land. In his imagination, Selden sees himself doing the heroic task of lifting Lily "to a freer vision of life" (p. 159). Unfortunately, this remains only an intention because of Selden's misunderstanding when he sees Lily coming out of the Trenors' house late at night. His immediate escape to Havana shows not only his unreasonable anger but also his lack of patience to understand and forgive the woman he loves.

In addition to his passivity, Selden is not a stable man; his tendency is to vacillate. On the European trip, he helps Lily leave the Dorsets but is full of suspicion about her relationship with George. Another time, after talking to Gerty who asks him to help Lily, he goes to see her at the hotel. When he learns that she has moved to another hotel to be with Mrs. Norma Hatch, he abandons his good intention with a "gesture of disgust" (p. 272).

As an idealistic person, Selden can understand only abstract concepts like "the republic of spirit"; he cannot deal with Lily's troubling struggles for survival. Able to point out to her that her actions are wrong, he cannot provide her with the right alternative. In their last meeting, he cannot understand what Lily tries to tell him, and he lets her leave him without doing anything to help. The next morning when he decides to see Lily and to tell her "the word he meant to say to her" (p. 325), it is too late. From the beginning to the end, Lawrence Selden is portrayed as an idealistic but powerless character, imaginative and well-intentioned but unable to act.

Three important minor characters in The House of Mirth are Lily's friends Gerty Farish, Bertha Dorset, and Carry Fisher. They play different roles in her life. Gerty is poor but kind and helpful; she represents a very modern and independent woman. Bertha belongs to the rich upper class--immoral, irresponsible, but influential because of her money. Carry, a divorcée, exemplifies a "new" woman in traditional surroundings. She earns her living by working among the rich as their secretary and introduces Lily to a similar job at which Lily fails.

Gerty Farish, Selden's cousin, is an example of an independent girl who devotes herself to social work. At the beginning of the novel, Lily does not categorize Gerty among the "marriageable" girls because while Gerty likes "being good," Lily likes "being happy" (p. 7). Gerty lives alone in her small apartment--a dull, poor, and dingy place, in Lily's opinion. Like her place, Gerty herself is simple, plain, modest, and unassuming, as the omniscient narrator describes her:

> . . . Miss Gertrude Farish, in fact, typified the mediocre and the ineffectual. If there were compensating qualities in her wide, frank glance and the freshness of her smile, these were qualities which only the sympathetic observer would perceive before noticing that her eyes were a workaday grey and her lips without haunting curves. (p. 90)

It is through Gerty's revelation to Selden that we know about Lily's charitable donation and visit to the Girls' Club (p. 134). Also, Gerty is the one who discovers "the real Lily" from her performance in the tableaux vivants when she says to Selden: "Wasn't she too beautiful, Lawrence? Don't you like her best in that simple dress? It makes her look like the real Lily--the Lily I know" (p. 136).

Gerty loves Lily as a friend and when she thinks Selden dislikes Lily, she tries to make him change his mind. The faintly suggested love triangle

appears in Chapter XIV of Book I when Gerty has Selden come to her flat for dinner and they talk about Lily. Gerty is "happy in this perfect communion of their sympathies" towards Lily until she discovers the truth that Selden is "the key to the secret" of why Lily missed her chance of marrying Percy Gryce (p. 156). Unhappily, she realizes that "he [Selden] had come to talk to her of Lily--that was all!" (p. 157)

Gerty's human feelings--jealousy, hatred, bitterness, and longing for happiness--make her a realistic character. In her contemplation after Selden leaves to find Lily, Gerty's attitude becomes clear:

> . . . She had been so contented, life seemed so simple and sufficient--why had he come to trouble her with new hopes? And Lily--Lily, her best friend! Woman-like, she accused the woman. Perhaps, had it not been for Lily, her fond imagining might have come true. . . (p. 161).

The more Gerty thinks, the more she blames Lily:

> . . . On Selden's part, no doubt, the wound inflicted was inconscient; he had never guessed her foolish secret; but Lily--Lily must have known! When, in such matters, are a woman's perceptions at fault? And if she knew, then she had deliberately despoiled her friend, and in mere wantonness of power, since, even to Gerty's suddenly flaming jealousy, it seemed incredible that Lily should wish to be Selden's wife. . . (p. 162).

This section ends with a statement of Gerty's hatred for Lily who is superior to her and who deprives her of happiness:

> . . . She wanted happiness--wanted it as fiercely and unscrupulously as Lily did, but without Lily's power of obtaining it. And in her conscious impotence she lay shivering, and hated her friend-- (p. 163).

It is ironic that this passage is followed by Lily's coming to Gerty for help after she is almost seduced by Gus Trenor. Gerty kindly helps her

friend, who is frightened and lonely, by offering her warm tea, sharing her bed, and comforting her in her arms until she falls asleep.

Though a minor character, Gerty significantly represents the "new" woman, the kind Wharton anticipated and developed in the portrayals of her later female characters. Gerty's choice of being a social worker, a non-conformist, may lead to a modest way of life and unsuccessful love, but it also brings her independence, the ability to support herself, and satisfaction in helping others.

Among all the characters in The House of Mirth, Bertha Dorset is perhaps the most dangerous and villainous. Rich, married, but unhappy, she finds excitement in life by having extra-marital affairs, first with Lawrence Selden and later with Ned Silverton. Bertha's cunning selfishness is obvious in her plan to destroy Lily's expected marriage to Percy Gryce because Lily draws more of Selden's attention than she does. Bertha spitefully tells Percy of Lily's gambling obsession and her debts and thus scares him away from Lily.

Bertha invites Lily on the Mediterranean yachting cruise to use her for personal advantage. Bertha's concern is to be with Silverton so she has Lily entertain her husband, George. However, when George tries to divorce Bertha because of her scandalous behavior with Silverton, Bertha accuses Lily of trying to steal her husband. She openly insults Lily at a party by dismissing her from the yacht. Returning to New York, Bertha continues her evil plan to destroy Lily's reputation and career as the Gomers' secretary because she fears that Lily may reveal her secret. Bertha is successful in her plan to detach Lily from society because, as Lily puts it, "she has a big house and an opera box, and it's convenient to be on good terms with her" (p. 225).

Bertha Dorset is a destroyer of Lily's future and a factor in Lily's social downfall. Lily thinks of Bertha as one of the pursuing Furies (p. 295). She has the qualities of the three avenging spirits: she is unyielding, jealous, and revengeful. She never allows Lily to be happy. Thus, she is the principal agent in the destruction of Lily's hopes and plans.

Bertha represents one of the rich and powerful but pitiless leaders of the old New York society which destroys the less fortunate. Wharton's characterization of Bertha, a "vicious, self-seeking woman [who] carries on adulterous affairs while holding fast to her dull and wealthy husband," [10] as Wolfe observes, typifies the condition of women of the author's class and period.[11] Moreover, according to Ammons, Bertha clearly indicates the hostile relationship between women; they compete with and prey on each other.[12] Selfishly taking pleasure in Lily's woe, Bertha is portrayed as the most vicious. From another perspective, however, she exemplifies the "old" woman, conventional but unscrupulous and corrupted, a contrast to Lily in morality.

Another friend of Lily, Carry Fisher, is also cunning, "a perfect vulture," as she is described by a friend (p. 88). A divorcée, Carry seems to be disapproved of by the society, but she can survive scandal. Carry proves to be Lily's friend, however, when Lily is in financial trouble. She is the person who introduces Lily to the Brys, the Gomers, and Mrs. Hatch for whom Lily works successively as secretary and as one who, because of her social position, can give them entree to upper-class society. She advises Lily to marry George Dorset or Simon Rosedale as a means to escape the effect of the rumors instigated by Bertha (p. 233). She also helps Lily find a way to punish Bertha (p. 252).

Geoffrey Walton regards Carry as "a divorced hanger-on"[13] since she still clings to the upper-class society even though she is not wholeheartedly accepted. The critic also views this minor character as "a foil balanced at the opposite pole against Gerty Farish."[14] I partly agree. Carry, like Lily, puts much emphasis on material things and has to be an insider of the society to survive. On the other hand, Gerty freely lives apart as the outsider who does not care for material things. However, I find both Carry and Gerty to be strong and powerful in their will and action. Like Gerty, Carry struggles to support herself and her daughter independently. Instead of leaving or rejecting the society, she uses it as a means to survive. Wharton ambivalently portrays Carry as a willful, mature, and clever woman who can be categorized as either the "old" or the "new" woman.

Wharton's characterization of women in The House of Mirth foreshadows the superior female characters in her later works. Lily Bart, especially, has been viewed in different ways. For instance, Ammons regards her as the "society's ideal of the female as decorative, subservient, dependent and submissive"[15] and "the product of a very special, conservative class" whose "instructive life" shows the misery of being a woman.[16] Walton finds Lily to be a tragic heroine[17] in a tragedy of the upper-class society,[18] while Tuttleton contends that Lily is not really a tragic heroine but rather that "her fate is full of pathos."[19] McDowell, however, sees Lily in three different perspectives: as the fated heroine of a Greek tragedy; as an individual whose nature is a battleground for the fight between good and evil; and as a protagonist of the Naturalistic novel.[20] No matter how she is perceived, Lily Bart has proved to be one of the most realistic and unforgettable heroines of American fiction.

CHAPTER 3

The contrast between the "old" and "new" woman is clearer in works subsequent to The House of Mirth: The Fruit of the Tree (1907), The Reef (1912), and The Age of Innocence (1920). In these novels, Wharton uses a "double heroine," or two female protagonists of equal importance, to illustrate the two types of women.

Though generally unsuccessful, The Fruit of the Tree traces the fundamental pattern. The novel divides into two parts. The first half concerns love, marriage, and the failing relationship between Bessy Westmore, a charming widow who owns a mill in Hanaford, and John Amherst, the mill's assistant manager who is committed to reforming the workers' condition. The theme of the second half is euthanasia: Justine Brent, a nurse and Bessy's close friend, gives her an overdose of morphia to end her suffering and pain after a riding accident. Later, Justine's marriage to John Amherst successfully connects the two seemingly separate halves of the novel. Their married life, however, fails when the truth about Bessy's death is revealed.

Justine Brent, Wharton's "feminist heroine,"[1] undoubtedly represents the "new" woman in her professional independence, freedom of action, and strong will power. Well-educated and professionally trained, Justine supports herself as a nurse. Out of love and idealistic intention to help John Amherst, she marries him only to discover that her husband can never forgive her for being responsible for his first wife's death. Ignored and despairing of reconciliation, Justine leaves her husband to continue working as a nurse, supporting herself modestly. Her admirable strength

contrasting with the failure of her married life probably reflects Wharton's ambivalent attitudes towards the "new" woman.

On the other hand, Bessy is an "old" woman in personality, beliefs, and behavior. Of the rich upper class, she is raised to be a well-educated and charming lady who is always under the protection of men. Spoiled and willful, Bessy is able to get what she wants either from her father, Henry Langhope, or her first husband, Richard Westmore. Bessy's disillusioned love for John Amherst, her second husband, who refuses to spend money conspicuously for her personal satisfaction, leads to their disputes and her disaster--physical injury from the accident, pain, and death. Through Bessy, Wharton hints at the weakness and helplessness of the "old" woman who, though rich and intelligent, still depends on men.

Sophy Viner and Anna Leath exemplify in The Reef a pattern similar to that of Justine and Bessy in The Fruit of the Tree. The two novels differ in plots. The Reef is about two love triangles: George Darrow, Sophy Viner, and Anna Leath; Sophy Viner, Owen Leath, and George Darrow. Because of the brief and spontaneous love affair between George and Sophy in Paris, their plans of marriage--George with his old friend Anna Leath, and Sophy with Owen, Anna's step-son and the half-brother of Effie for whom Sophy works as a governess--meet hazardous obstructions as implied and symbolized by the title.

George and Sophy respectively are responsible for the two love triangles sketched above. While George causes the competition between Anna and Sophy, Sophy brings about the conflict between George and Owen. Both George and Sophy are also present in each triangle as one of the competitors. Anna and Owen, who appear in different love triangles, connect them through their mother-and-son relationship. Thus, the

problem of marriage decisions emerges, but the issues of morality and social acceptance are also involved in the two planned marriages. Owen is suspicious of the relationship between George and Sophy once he secretly witnesses their private meeting. George can never forget his infatuation with Sophy in Paris though he intends to marry Anna, the "lady" he loves. Similarly, Sophy finds it difficult to forget George, her benefactor, despite her ambition to marry Owen, the wealthy heir of Givre. Finally, no matter how much Anna loves George and anticipates a happy married life with him, she is unable to ignore the past love affair between George and Sophy. The outcomes of these conflicts are less important, however, than Wharton's realistic character portrayals in which lies the lasting significance of The Reef.

Among the principal characters, Anna is the most important and the most complicated. As one of the two characters through whom the "central consciousness" is alternately penetrated to present the story, Anna appears distinctive both in her own and George's viewpoints.

As R. W. B. Lewis points out, The Reef is "possibly the most autobiographical work of fiction" Wharton ever wrote; one of the striking similarities between the author and the female protagonist is their conventional and privileged upbringing.[2] Anna is portrayed as an upper-class American girl reared in "the well-regulated well-fed Summers world" (p. 86) of twentieth-century New York. Her conventionality, reserve, and innocence of worldly experience result from her traditional upbringing on West Fifty-fifth Street. From her girlhood, Anna's reserve isolates her from the society of the other girls and, in Anna's opinion, causes "envious mothers" to "cite her as a model of lady-like repression" (p. 87). However, Anna good-humoredly accepts her inferiority and

consoles herself as having "a reserve of unused power" which will reveal itself after she is released from "this spell of unreality" by "love" or "the sublime passion" (pp.87-88).

Anna perceives herself finding the clue to "the magic bridge between West Fifty-fifth Street and life" (p. 88) in her first encounter with young George Darrow. "But his passion swept over her like a wind that shakes the roof of the forest without reaching its still glades or rippling its hidden pools" (p. 88). Evidently, they do not share mutual needs and understanding: ". . . he wanted to kiss her, and she wanted to talk to him about books and pictures, and have him insinuate the eternal theme of their love into every subject they discussed" (p.88).

Anna's conflicting characteristics of being romantic, conventional, and hypocritical are obvious in her self-consideration and reaction to George:

> Whenever they were apart a reaction set in. She wondered how she could have been so cold, called herself a prude and an idiot. . . . But as soon as he reappeared her head straightened itself on her slim neck and she sped her little shafts of irony, or flew her little kites of erudition, while hot and cold waves swept over her, and the things she really wanted to say choked in her throat and burned the palms of her hands. (pp. 88-89)

Clearly, Anna is attracted to George but keeps him at a distance owing to her conventional upbringing as a "nice" lady. McDowell reasonably views Anna as "a prisoner of inhibitions, narcissism, and rigid mores" since she is "limited and protected by convention" of the old New York.[3]

Anna's passion is proved by her jealousy of Kitty Mayne, a "silly" young lady who has eloped with "a fat young man with eye-glasses" and "come back from her adventure no less silly than when she went" (p. 89). Kitty's flirtation with George causes a mixture of feelings in Anna: she is angry, jealous, and determined to help George from Kitty. ". . . [A]t the sight, a

rage of possessorship awoke in her. She must save Darrow, assert her right to him at any price. Pride and reticence went down in a hurricane of jealousy" (p. 89).

The next day, after George admits that Kitty is "rather good fun" (p.90), Anna is disillusioned and withdrawn from George. Restrained from expressing herself, Anna "was conscious of sitting rigidly, with high head and straight lips, while the irresistible word fled with a last wing-beat into the golden mist of her illusions" (p. 90).

Anna's decision to marry Fraser Leath, an American gentleman who spends most of his life in Europe, is not surprising. Both consciously conventional, they seem appropriate for each other. Fraser's gifts to Anna, "a prettily-bound anthology of the old French poets" and "a half-effaced eighteenth-century pastel" (p. 91), indicate his romantic, though old-fashioned, taste as well as his expectation of Anna's aesthetic appreciation. Anna's esteem, not love, for Fraser is obvious in the following:

> . . . Here was some one whose scale of values was the same as hers, and who thought her opinion worth hearing on the very matters which they both considered of supreme importance. The discovery restored her self-confidence, and she revealed herself to Mr. Leath as she had never known how to reveal herself to Darrow. (p. 91)

Life at Givre, however, with Fraser Leath, Madame de Chantelle, her Europeanized mother-in-law, and her stepson, Owen, is not what Anna has anticipated. Her inability to adapt herself to French traditions, symbolized by the sphinx image--a mystery from which she cannot find an answer--and reflected by Madame de Chantelle as well as Fraser, causes her unhappiness. An outsider who cannot understand her mother-in-law's prejudices against lower-class people nor Fraser's inconsistency and

convictions about manners and etiquettes, Anna feels that everything has "grown curiously remote and unimportant" (p. 96). Anna describes her isolation and unhappiness at Givré to George in a vivid simile of imprisonment about the close relationship and common experience she has shared with her stepson: ". . . Owen's like my son--if you'd seen him when I first came here you'd know why. We were like two prisoners who talk to each other by tapping on the wall" (p. 251).

Another vivid simile explains why Anna's married life with Fraser becomes boring and disillusioned. Their different attitudes towards life are strikingly summarized as follows:

> . . . Life, to Mr. Leath, was like a walk through a carefully classified museum, where, in moments of doubt, one had only to look at the number and refer to one's catalogue; to his wife it was like groping about in a huge dark lumber-room where the exploring ray of curiosity lit up now some shape of breathing beauty and now a mummy's grin. (p. 95)

Although she finds many disagreeable aspects in her first marriage, Anna has conformed to her expected roles as wife and daughter-in-law. Moreover, as a mother both to Owen and Effie, Anna is devoted and responsible. Her motherly love for her stepson is shown in her reason for delaying her own marriage to George: she wants "to see him [Owen] through" (p. 121) with his marriage to Sophy who is Effie's governess. Realizing that Owen's choice will be unacceptable to Madame de Chantelle because of the woman's aristocratic convictions and Sophy's inferior background, Anna volunteers to speak for Owen. Anna's attempt to help Sophy win Madame de Chantelle's approval is clear when she persuades George to support the girl. Since Anna learns that George has met Sophy, she tries to find out his opinion of the girl and persuades him to talk Madame de Chantelle into accepting Sophy. Ironically, the discovery of the

relationship between George and Sophy brings Anna's own marriage plan to ruin.

Although Anna's relationship with Effie is not emphasized, she certainly loves her daughter very much. Her care for the girl is indicated in her concern about the governess. Anna feels happy and relieved when she finds Sophy on whom she can rely for Effie's upbringing and education, since Anna plans to marry George and move with him to South America where he will have a post as a diplomat.

In Anna's perception, her escape to freedom and the realization of her dreams can be achieved through her second marriage with George Darrow. This theme is carried through the book by the image of the "wings." For instance, when Anna watches her child, her stepson, her promised husband, and Sophy together, she expresses her "sense of security": "I feel as if I could trust my happiness to carry me; as if it had grown out of me like wings" (p. 177). More important is the scene when Anna and George conclude their private talk at the pavillion at Givré. After a conversation in which George feels uncomfortable about Owen's seeing him with Sophy at a theatre in Paris, he "stooped and kissed her, and she sat as if folded in wings" (p. 116).

As in her first marriage, Anna expects the second with George Darrow to be a means of escape from a boring, restricted, and conventional life to an exciting, free, and new reality. It is an escape from Givré--the French château which has become "the very symbol of narrowness and monotony" (p. 84) to Anna. There is no doubt about her love for George, but she also needs him to help her escape to the awakening of life. Elizabeth Ammons provocatively applies the theme of Sleeping Beauty's awakening to The Reef. Anna is the sleeping princess waiting to be awakened by Prince

Charming. Ignorant of many realities in life, she has a "fantasy of freedom" with George as the prince who will come to free her from the spell.[4]

Anna's development from the first to the second marriage is clear in her attempt to make George see her as she is and to express the whole of her feeling. In other words, she wants to be more sincere and down to earth in order to make George understand her. After the first private talk and slight argument with George, Anna feels "richer, deeper, more complete" (p. 124). She is delighted to see her own changes--the reduction of her vanity and insincerity--because of love. Anna's thoughts reveal the ambivalence of her feelings:

> . . . She was glad now that she had confessed her doubts and her jealousy. . . . The sense of power she had been aware of in talking to Darrow came back with tenfold force. 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 a 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, and a goddess, and a girl in her teens. (pp. 124-5)

A well-rounded and realistic character, Anna has both good and bad sides. The "good" Anna is highly moral, charming, lady-like, kind, understanding, and sympathetic to those around her. However, her egotism, hyper-sensitivity, strong curiosity, and extreme jealousy are sufficiently serious flaws to cause some to withdraw. In fact, it is difficult for the reader to regard her with compassion. Walton is correct to doubt that Anna is "a tragic heroine." Despite Wharton's intention to evoke the reader's sympathy and George's admiration, Anna's lack of human warmth and her prudishness, according to Walton, make it difficult for the reader to identify with her.[5] In my opinion, she is not really "a tragic

heroine" because of her inability to illicit compassion. Rather, she is a selfish "old" lady who needs everything her way. Moreover, Anna's frequent ambivalent feelings, indecisive actions, and conflicting moods show that she is a woman of inconsistent character. In her love for George, for instance, Anna's inner conflict of pride vs. passion and intelligence vs. instinct (p. 130) is obvious in her indecision about whether or not to marry George.

Of Anna's human but annoying qualities which finally lead to her unhappiness, the most pronounced is her jealousy. Possessive, she reveals herself as very sensitive to, observant of, and curious about the feelings and attitudes of the people she loves. Once she senses that the relationship between George and Sophy is deeper than it appears, she is curious to know the truth even though it hurts her. Owen's outburst at Sophy's wish to leave Givré for Paris and his secretly witnessing Sophy and George in private conversations arouse more suspicions in Anna. Finally, in the crucial meeting at the end of chapter XXIV, Anna's growing suspicion is confirmed. She theorizes: "If there's nothing between them [George and Sophy], they'll look at each other; if there <u>is</u> something, they won't" (p. 247). The result of Anna's observation is "that he and Sophy had not looked at each other" (p. 247). Thus, her jealousy becomes an outrage.

Anna's quickness in understanding the relationship between George and Sophy and her imaginative ability to patch up the scattered pictures make her suffer more from jealousy. For Anna, it is "a bad dream," "the horror" (p. 267). Her broken sentence to George shows how she suffers from being observant and imaginative: ". . . There <u>were</u> little things. . . little signs. . . once I had begun to watch for them: your reluctance to speak about her. . .

her reserve with you. . . a sort of constraint we'd never seen in her before . . ." (p. 267).

In Anna's anxious attempt to find out the truth by paying attention to even the minutest detail, she tortures herself with rage and jealousy:

> ". . . there were other things too. . . crazier things still. . . There was even last night on the terrace--her pink cloak. . ." . . . .
> "You've forgotten about the cloak? The pink cloak that Owen saw you with at the play in Paris? Yes. . . yes. . . I was mad enough for that!" . . . It does me good to laugh about it now! But you ought to know that I'm going to be a jealous woman. . . a ridiculously jealous woman. . . you ought to be warned of it in time. . . " (p. 268)

Anna's conflicting character is evident in her alternating feelings towards Sophy. Sometimes Anna's pity for Sophy, "the girl. . . in a desperate plight," is so deep that "she longed to lean over with compassionate hands" (p. 275). Sometimes when jealousy overwhelms her, Anna is cruel enough to accuse Sophy as "an adventuress" (p. 290), and criticizes the girl as being "exceedingly generous" to George in Paris (p. 331). Moreover, after the confession of George and Sophy about their love affair in Paris, Anna at first seems glad to get rid of the girl from Givre, but later she feels guilty and searches for her twice, even thinking she will give up George for Sophy. Her self-sacrifice is, according to Turner, one of the traditional virtues to which Anna, as a lady, has to conform.[6] In short, her inconstancy and inability to decide show her complicated character.

Lawson interprets the novel's title as a metaphor of Anna's situation. For him, The Reef suggests Anna's personal plight: as a woman, she is confronted with obstacles to freedom. The title also implies her immobility owing to her being restricted by conventions.[7] Wershoven,

however, finds Sophy Viner, the other principal female character, the "reef" of the novel, the hidden obstacle that wrecks the "deep and tranquil current" of love between Anna and George.[8] Both Lawson and Wershoven have reasonble points, but Wershoven's interpretation properly emphasizes Sophy's role. Actually, Sophy is of equal importance to Anna but she is not equally treated. She may be seen as playing the role of "double heroine"[9] with Anna, of a "split heroine,"[10] as a contrast in background and character, or as a rival, a competitor, and an enemy in their love for George. Since the novel is never told through Sophy's point of view, however, the reader can know her only through George's and Anna's shifting consciousness, her conversation with them, and her reactions to crucial circumstances.

Compared with Anna, Sophy shows more traits of a "new" or modern woman. From a lower social class than Anna, Sophy independently supports herself as a secretary to Mrs. Murrett and later as a governess to Effie Leath. In her position, Sophy is not highly respected as a "lady" as is Anna. According to Wolfe, she represents "the plight of a poor defenceless American girl" despite her courage and sacrifice for love.[11] In their accidental and private meeting at Charing Cross and on the train to Paris, George finds Sophy "unconventional." To him she is alive, frank, and impulsive. Unlike Anna who is usually well-mannered and reserved, Sophy expresses herself freely--even like a child--and thus draws George's compassion. He wants to make her happy, to help her enjoy her experience in Paris, "to give her a child's holiday to look back to" (p. 72). Sophy's ignorant innocence, which induces George's pity, kindness, and intention to educate her, is seen by Turner as having implications of the Pygmalion theme.[12] Moreover, Sophy does not hesitate to claim she is an "awfully modern" woman who is "not so sure" about her belief in marriage (p. 62).

After the love affair with George in Paris, Sophy's feelings for him are suspended until they meet again at Givré. From the very first time they privately encounter each other in the study, Sophy, who must have known the prospect of the relationship between George and Anna, expresses her fear of George. She realizes that the possibility of her being at Givré depends on him. At first, Sophy answers George's questions bitterly:

> . . . "You <u>are</u> happy here?"
> "I <u>was</u>," she said with a faint emphasis.
> "Why do you say 'was'? You're surely not thinking of going? There can't be kinder people anywhere." . . .
> "I suppose it depends on you whether I go or stay."
> "On me?" . . . "Good God! What can you think of me, to say that?"
> The mockery of the question flashed back at him from her wretched face. She stood up, wandered away, and leaned an instant in the darkening window-frame. From there she turned to fling back at him: "Don't imagine I'm the least bit sorry for anything!" (p. 149)

Later when George insists on helping her, she answers "with low-toned intensity": "If you want to help me, then--you can help me to stay here. . . " (p. 151).

Sophy wants to stay at Givré not just to be Effie's governess but to be Owen's bride. She does not tell George about the impending marriage, but he learns about it from Anna. In their second private encounter, Sophy shows her strong determination to marry Owen despite many objections brought up by George. Sophy seems to be able to understand the problems she will face: Owen's youth and inexperience make him not "a good match" for her (p. 203); and she is aware of Madame de Chantelle's disapproval. However, the most important and perhaps unsolvable problem in this future marriage is the lack of love. This is evident in the climax of their conversation. George speaks intensely:

> "I'll tell you exactly what I meant. You'll be wretched if you marry a man you're not in love with."
>
> . . . .
>
> The girl, at his words, had lifted her head with a movement of surprise. Her eyes slowly reached his face and rested there in a gaze of deep interrogation. . . .
>
> At length she began to speak. "You're mistaken--you're quite mistaken."
>
> He waited a moment longer. "Mistaken--?"
>
> "In thinking what you think. I'm as happy as if I deserved it!" she suddenly proclaimed with a laugh. (p. 206)

The conversations between Sophy and George are important because they reveal how Sophy feels about George and the past relationship. Moreover, the arguments lead to Sophy's self-knowledge and decision to cancel her engagement to Owen. She finally realizes that her love for George and her inability to love Owen make the marriage impossible. In her explanation to George, Sophy reveals her courage and strong determination:

> . . ."Don't for a minute think I'm sorry! It was worth every penny it cost. . . . I tried to carry it off as a joke--to talk of it myself as an 'adventure.' . . . I'd been trying all the while to put everything I could between us; now I want to sweep everything away. . . . I've made my choice--that's all: I've had you and I mean to keep you." Her face was shining like her eyes. "To keep you hidden away here," she ended, and put her hand upon her breast. (pp. 259-260)

It is clear at this point that Sophy sacrifices the wealth and well-being she may expect from her marriage with Owen to her love for George. Her action indicates her self-confidence as a "new" woman but not her practicality. However, Sophy's impractical decision to give up the possible fortune is brave and rather unusual for a woman in her circumstances.

In addition, as Sophy confesses about her love for George to Anna, her generosity and good will are shown in her pointing out George's indifference and her own ignorance:

> ". . . I'm not ashamed of having loved him; no; and I'm not ashamed of telling you so. It's that that justifies me--and him too. . . Oh, let me tell you how it happened! He was sorry for me: he saw I cared. I knew that was all he ever felt. I could see he was thinking of some one else. I knew it was only for a week. . . He never said a word to mislead me. . . I wanted to be happy just once--and I didn't dream of the harm I might be doing him!" (pp. 306-7)

Sophy's final choice of escape to an independent life as Mrs. Murrett's secretary in India rather than imprisonment in wealth and life-long unhappiness with Owen Leath proves her a strong and modern woman. The Cinderella motif, suggested by Ammons,[13] is not carried through here since Sophy, the poor and neglected girl, refuses to be transported from rags to riches by Owen Leath, the supposed Prince Charming. In comparison, Sophy exceeds Anna as a powerful and "new" woman. Anna may appear modern in her secret struggle against the traditions of Givré and her advanced idea about the acceptable marriage between Owen and Sophy, regardless of the girl's background. Nevertheless, Anna's attitudes towards the revealed love affair between George and Sophy put her in the old-fashioned and conventional category. Sophy, on the other hand, accepts the truths that her love for George is impossible and that her marriage with Owen will bring her, despite wealth, wretchedness in life and even worse, will ruin the happiness of George, the man she loves. Therefore, she deserves esteem and admiration as a modern woman whose action is justified by "self-assertion" rather than "self-sacrifice."[14] Sophy does not simply leave Givré, giving up her love for George, to make him happy in his marriage with Anna; she also reveals her self-respect and independence as a "new" woman. In addition, the sympathy of critics and readers is usually directed to Sophy, instead of Anna, because of her admirable

characteristics of the "new" woman--kindness, innocence, honesty, attractiveness, sensitivity, bravery, and passion.[15]

While Sophy is often regarded as deserving sympathy, and as "the big 'winner' of the novel,"[16] George Darrow, according to Turner, is perhaps the one to blame for treating Sophy as an "eternal sex object"[17] and his irresponsibility in the affair in Paris. Turner also sees him, however, as a responsible man who has the "courage to pursue his desires."[18] I agree that George is courageous in his pursuit of Anna, but many of his acts towards Sophy, especially, cannot be considered responsible. Moreover, his courage and persistence to marry Anna is not admirable in relation to his desire to have Sophy leave Givré. Though not so outstanding as the two women characters, George's importance in the novel is clear in his involvement in the two love triangles and in his role as an intermittently central consciousness of the story. Compared to other male characters in The Reef, George appears more pleasant and warmer in personality than Fraser Leath and more understanding and thoughtful than Owen Leath. An American diplomat in London, George possesses all the qualifications and skills to enable him to lead a moral existence as well as a successful one.

If George's love for Anna and his intention to marry her had not been met with her indifference, the two triangles might never have developed. Had it not been for the telegram to stop him temporarily from seeing her without explanation, George's affair with Sophy in Paris might not have taken place. As George realizes later, he has found in Sophy, during their stay in Paris, "the frank and easy comrade" (p. 260) whose concern for his unhappiness is impressive. George feels Sophy's presence in Paris "as the element of vague well-being that suffused in his senses and lulled to sleep the ache of wounded pride" (p. 262).

It may be understandable for George to find consolation for his "wounded vanity" in Sophy, but Wharton suggests that he should be more responsible for his action. Despite his promise, George does not really help Sophy for he cannot keep his guilty feeling a secret from Anna. In George's conversation with Anna, he tries, without success, to use his diplomatic talk to conceal the truth:

> ". . . Won't you tell me the exact impression she's produced on you?"
> "I have told you--I like Miss Viner."
> "Do you still believe she's in love with Owen?'
> "There was nothing in our short talks to throw any particular light on that."
> "You still believe though, that there's no reason why he shouldn't marry her?'
> Again he betrayed a restrained impatience. "How can I answer that without knowing her reasons for breaking with him?" (pp. 252-3)

In fact George knows the reason for Sophy's leaving, but he cannot tell because it involves his secret past. Moreover, with her departure, George can happily marry Anna without any uneasy feelings.

George's irresponsibility is even clearer after Anna discovers his affair with Sophy. In their argument, George tries to explain to Anna: "I swear to you. . . it was simply that [his sympathy for Sophy], and nothing more." (p. 291) When Anna says she cannot understand this, George puts the blame on her:

> . . . Finally she brought out: "I don't think I understand what you've told me."
> "No, you don't understand," he returned with sudden bitterness; and on his lips the charge of incomprehension seemed an offense to her.
> "I don't want to--about such things!"
> He answered almost harshly: "Don't be afraid. . . you never will. . ." and for an instant they faced each other like enemies. Then the tears swelled in her throat at his reproach.
> "You mean I don't feel things--I'm too hard?"

> "No: you're too high. . . too fine. . . such things are too far from you." (p. 291)

With a stronger will power than Anna, George wins her over. However, George can never really exert his power on Sophy; she is much stronger in her will and determination than he is. Sophy's deliberate decision to go to India should make George feel less guilty since her presence will remind him of his responsibility. Consequently, George and Anna should be happier owing to Sophy's decision. Their happiness, however, is still doubtful.

Wharton complicates the plot of The Reef by including several minor characters, Madame de Chantelle, Adelaide Painter, Effie Leath, and Laura Mc Tarvie-Birch. Not fully characterized nor developed, these characters represent key concepts, substantiate meaning, and help clarify the primary characters' roles.

Madame de Chantelle and Adelaide Painter are two American expatriates who have spent a long period of their life in France and have been exposed to the culture. Regarding herself as "old-fashioned" like her furniture at Givré (p. 192), Madame de Chantelle is completely Europeanized. Married to a French aristocrat and converted to Roman Catholicism, she has accepted wholeheartedly the "civilized" culture. Her prejudiced and old-fashioned attitude is reflected in her acceptance of George Darrow because of his social status and background and in her disapproval of Sophy Viner due to her social and financial inferiority. Her friend, Adelaide Painter, is portrayed as a contrast. Unlike the arrogant, prejudiced, and hypocritical Madame de Chantelle, Adelaide comes to Givré to persuade her to allow the marriage of her nephew with the governess.

In other words, Adelaide's liberal attitude helps make possible the marriage of the two despite their different social classes.

The characterization of Effie Leath is not clear. She exists in the novel to allow Sophy Viner to come to Givré as her governess and for Anna to perform her mother role. Effie appears in the novel as a nice "little fair daughter." Her mother adores her and is concerned about her future. She thus makes it difficult for her mother to decide to marry George and leave her at Givré.

Laura, Sophy's sister, appears only in the final chapter, but Anna's encounter with her at Hotel Chicago in Paris makes the ending of The Reef ambiguous. A singer who claims to be an "artist," Laura lives with her lover, Jimmy Brance, and a poodle in a dirty and disordered room of relative poverty. This suggests to Anna the situation from which Sophy has escaped. In addition, the scene indicates Anna's inexperience of the world--the outside, unconventional, and ugly world which she can never understand.

The last chapter, or epilogue, is, in Lawson's consideration, out of place and has the purpose of balancing the reader's sympathy for Anna and Sophy.[19] If this is Wharton's real purpose, the expected result fails because Sophy gains even more sympathy than Anna. Sophy bravely leaves for India, her unstable future, refusing to follow Laura in her easy solution or to obstruct the marriage of George and Anna. Lawson also points out that Sophy is not given "authorial sympathy" because of her low social class.[20] I find this too strong an attack on Wharton's prejudice. The author may have been raised conventionally to be a "lady" like Anna, but that hardly requires that she treat the "new" middle-class woman like Sophy with bias. Actually, Wharton's subtle treatment of both Anna and

Sophy, her ambivalent attitudes towards the "old" and "new" woman, and the ambiguous ending of The Reef may cause critical disagreement, but they contribute to a more powerful and meaningful novel.

CHAPTER 4

The parallel pattern of the "old" and "new" woman, so important in The Reef as we have seen, reaches its most effective level in The Age of Innocence (1920). The structure is still the love triangle of one man and two women, similar to the principal love triangle of The Reef, but The Age of Innocence dramatizes more intensely the concealed struggle between an "old" woman, May Welland, and a "new" woman, Ellen Olenska. Their implicit battle is over Newland Archer, the male protagonist. That May seems to gain victory by marrying Newland and by keeping him afterwards does not mean absolute triumph of the "old" woman over the "new" woman, however. Other factors apart from herself contribute to May's apparent success in marriage. They include the intrusion and protection of the society, Ellen's moral and powerful decision, and Newland's conventional and inactive character.

Newland Archer, though considered "one of Wharton's most likeable" heroes,[1] is nonetheless portrayed as less decisive and less active than the female protagonists. In this, he resembles his predecessors in the works previously discussed--Lawrence Selden, John Amherst, and George Darrow--who are also portrayed as lacking in will power and in the ability to perform actively. These protagonists are all well-educated, upper-class, and physically attractive gentlemen who have the opportunities to help the female protagonists in their troubles but fail to fulfill these expectations.

Sensitivity, idealism, and selfishness are common characteristics of these heroes. Each seems to be the person who best understands the female protagonist. Nevertheless, all selfishly cling to their own

idealistic and conventional beliefs. Due to their lethargy, it is usually too late when they finally decide to help the female protagonists.

In Wharton's own words, Selden is a "negative hero" because of his self-love and indifference to Lily Bart.[2] Worse than Selden, Amherst conceitedly marries Bessy to upgrade himself and to use money for the mill reform. Moreover, Amherst can never forgive Justine for helping Bessy to quicker death, and he selfishly ignores her to idealize the memory of Bessy instead. Darrow, like Amherst, also deals egotistically with two women. He not only ignores Sophy, who loves him, but also ignores their relationship in his desire to marry Anna Leath, the rich upper-class lady he has admired. Newland Archer is better than his predecessors if only because he is forced to cling to May and thus does not have a chance to take advantage of Ellen and make her suffer more.

In terms of the love triangle, Newland, the "central intelligence" of the novel, has to decide whether to marry May Welland, an "innocent," conventional young lady of the upper-class old New York, or Ellen Olenska, a sophisticated, modern, independent lady trying to make her way into the New York society. As Wolff observes, Newland's problem in making up his mind is the center of the novel;[3] his decision to marry May despite his love for Ellen causes them all to suffer and struggle--Newland from the unfulfilled love and the monotony of married life, May from the truth she learns and the superficial victory she wins, and Ellen from unsuccessful love and moral dilemma.

As the title ironically implies, this story takes place in the old New York society of the 1870's. The setting, as Lewis points out, can be traced to the old New York world of Wharton's girlhood, adolescence, and womanhood, the world described as "safe, narrow, unintellectual, and

hidebound" as well as "endearing and honorable from distance of time."[4] However, the love-triangle structure shows that the novel is not just a nostalgic picture of New York[5] but an insightful study of human relationships, especially love, marriage, and divorce, in the setting of traditional social problems--prejudice, hypocrisy, and ostracism.

Though most of the story is told through Newland's consciousness, it is not completely his story, as some critics have claimed. For instance, McDowell observes that Newland's dilemma, his choice between May and Ellen, is central to the book,[6] and Turner states that the novel deals with his discovery of "the oppressiveness of the ideology of women."[7] Yet, May and Ellen play dominant roles in the novel. Despite the apparent device of having Newland as the focus and means of narration, Wharton successfully portrays two strong women with realistic characteristics.

May Welland substantially represents the conforming insider of the late nineteenth-century New York society. Always nice, charming, and calm, she is portrayed as a typically conventional woman--an obedient daughter, a good wife, and a dutiful mother. May first appears to the reader in the opening scene at the Opera through Newland's eyes. She is described as "a young girl in white with eyes ecstatically fixed on the stage-lovers" (p. 5). Her innocent, virginal aspect is suggested in the white color of her dress, her blush at the love scene on stage, and the flowers--a single gardenia on her dress and a bouquet of lilies-of-the-valley she carries (p. 6). May's appearance is consistently associated with the color of purity and the spring blossoms which not only imply freshness, chastity, and loveliness but also relate to her name.

May is also associated with mythological imagery: "In her dress of white and silver, with a wreath of silver blossoms in her hair, the tall girl

looked like a Diana just alight from the chase" (pp. 65-6). Diana, the Roman moon goddess, goddess of hunting and of chastity, highlights effectively May's picture as a young, pure huntress in the marriage market of upper-class New York society. May's Diana-like and athletic characteristics are repeated and reinforced in her victory at the bow and arrow contest at Newport Archery Club.

A product of the society, May has been brought up and trained according to the traditional conventions of the nineteenth-century upper-class American lady. Her many conventional qualities are, however, criticized by Newland, her betrothed:

> . . . She was frank, poor darling, because she had nothing to conceal, assured because she knew of nothing to be on her guard against; and with no better preparation than this, she was to be plunged overnight into what people evasively called "the facts of life." (pp. 45-6)

As a young marriageable girl, May is viewed approvingly by Newland for her "good looks," "her health, her horsemanship, her grace and quickness at games," and her intellectual potential (p. 46). Moreover, she is admired by Newland for her straightforwardness, loyalty, bravery, and sense of humor. May's two qualities which bother Newland, however, are her helplessness and innocence. Trained to possess these qualities, May becomes a "creation of fictitious purity, so cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers and long-dead ancestresses" in order to please men (p. 46). According to Wolfe, May personifies the innocent young woman of the 1870's whose major characteristics are wealth, purity, virginity, ignorance rather than naivete', and well-trained qualities of a hostess, wife, and mother.[8]

An example of May's conventionality is obvious in her answer to Newland when, trying to hasten their marriage, he follows her to St. Augustine, where she spends her summer with her parents: "If you call it [the engagement] long! Isabel Chivers and Reggie were engaged for two years: Grace and Thorley for nearly a year and a half. Why aren't we very well off as we are?" (p. 82) Newland correctly finds this "the traditional maidenly interrogation," an echo of "what was said for her" and not her own idea. Through the presentation of May, Wharton subtly implies the irony of the novel's title. In addition, Newland's image of May with a bandage on her eyes indicates her naive and defenseless plight in the world.[9] Brought up to be "nice," "innocent," and inexperienced according to convention, May seems to need someone to help remove the bandage and let her see the world in other perspectives. The term "innocence" in the title may imply the virtues of purity and naivete', but it also has an ironic meaning and implies such dangerous qualities as ignorance, inexperience, and helplessness.

Upon a closer look, however, May is not as completely innocent, helpless, sweet, and generous as she appears. As a product of the hypocritical and prejudiced society, she gradually absorbs those dominant qualities. May's cleverness is clear in her understanding of many subtle situations and in her calm way of handling them. For instance, she is correct to doubt Newland's intention for hastening the marriage, and she talks to him in this vein:

> . . ."You mustn't think that a girl knows as little as her parents imagine. One hears and one notices--one has feelings and ideas. And of course, long before you told me that you cared for me, I'd known that there was someone else you were interested in. . . ." (p. 149)

May cleverly begins to show him that she knows of Newland's past affair with Mrs. Rushworth. This leads to May's suspicion of Newland's present affair with Ellen, but May ambiguously talks to Newland without mentioning anyone's name:

> . . ."I've wanted to tell you that, when two people really love each other, I understand that there may be situations which make it right that they should--should go against public opinion. And if you feel yourself in any way pledged. . . pledged to the person we've spoken of. . . and if there is any way. . . any way in which you can fulfill your pledge. . . even by her getting a divorce. . . Newland, don't give her up because of me!" (pp. 149-50)

May's generosity is not limited to Newland; she shows kindness and compassion to Ellen, her unfortunate "foreign" cousin, as well. May gives Newland "leave" to tell Ellen about their engagement and reveals her thoughtfulness towards Ellen in her insistence that Newland must do so. "Otherwise she might think I had forgotten her. You see, she's one of the family, and she's been away so long that she's rather--sensitive" (p. 25). These thoughtful words undoubtedly make Newland view his fiancée as "Dear and great angel!" (p. 25)--a stereotypical ideal woman of the society.

Apart from this, May shows her kind and continuing concerns for Ellen whenever she talks about her to her Newland. When Mrs. Manson Mingott, their grandmother, has a stroke, May generously lets Newland go to fetch Ellen from Jersey City with her carriage. Moreover, Ellen is the first person to know about May's pregnancy, two weeks before May is certain. Finally, when Ellen decides to leave New York for Paris, May arranges a farewell dinner party for her.

With Newland, the reader gradually discovers the deeply hidden character of May. Under the innocent look--the childish clear eyes, the

calm and sweet temper, and generosity--May is a strongly determined lady who cunningly conspires to get what she wants. McDowell is absolutely correct in commenting that though her male acquaintances see May as "an image of ethereal purity" and a helpless being, she is, for Wharton, "a woman of considerable strength."[10] Her first victory is her getting Newland to marry her despite his love for Ellen. With the marriage, May becomes "one of the handsomest and most popular young married women in New York" and also "one of the sweetest-tempered and most reasonable wives" (p. 207). Like nineteenth-century upper-class American ladies, May gains a better social status through an appropriate marriage.

May's silence does not mean complete ignorance. Her blush when Ellen's name is mentioned in the argument about Ellen's return to Count Olenski, which amazes Newland, implies knowledge. She understands that Newland does not want Ellen to go back to her husband not only because Ellen will suffer but because he does not want Ellen to leave him. Also, May calmly consents to Newland's pretext to go to Washington "on business" because she cannot openly stop him from seeing Ellen. When May tells Newland, "And you must be sure to go and see Ellen" (p. 266), the hidden meaning is:

> . . ."Of course you understand that I know all that people have been saying about Ellen. . . . I also know that, for some reason you have not chosen to tell me, you have advised her against this course [the return to her husband]. . . . Hints have indeed not been wanting; but since you appear unwilling to take them from others, I offer you this one myself, in the only form in which well-bred people of our kind can communicate unpleasant things to each other: by letting you understand that I know you mean to see Ellen when you are in Washington, and are perhaps going there expressly for that purpose; and that, since you are sure to see her, I wish you to do so with my full and explicit approval--and to take the opportunity of letting her know what the course of conduct you have encouraged her in is likely to lead to." (p. 266)

May does not stop her conspiracy at the hint. She correctly guesses that Newland is going to leave her for Ellen, which means a divorce and her failure. Therefore, when Newland decides to confess, May is ready to interrupt him with the shocking news:

> "Madame Olenska--" he said; but at the name his wife raised her hand as if to silence him. . . .
> "Oh, why should we talk about Ellen tonight?" she asked, with a slight pout of impatience.
> "Because I ought to have spoken before."
> Her face remained calm. "Is it really worthwhile, dear? I know I've been unfair to her at times--perhaps we all have. You've understood her, no doubt, better than we did: you've always been kind to her. But what does it matter, now it's all over?"
> . . . .
> "All over--what do you mean?" he asked in an indistinct stammer.
> May still looked at him with transparent eyes. "Why--since she's going back to Europe so soon; since Granny approves and understands, and has arranged to make her independent of her husband--" (p. 324).

Ellen's decision to return to Europe is certainly concerned with May. This is not revealed until after the farewell dinner party, which May arranges for Ellen, when Newland bursts out that he wants "to go away--away from everything," to "India--or Japan." At this point, May breaks the news:

> ". . . But I'm afraid you can't, dear. . ." she said in an unsteady voice. "Not unless you'll take me with you." And then, as he was silent, she went on, in tones so clear and evenly-pitched that each separate syllable tapped like a little hammer on his brain: "That is, if the doctors will let me go. . . but I'm afraid they won't. For you see, Newland, I've been sure since this morning of something I've been so longing and hoping for--" (p. 342).

May uses her pregnancy as her ultimate weapon to tie Newland to her. Even more conniving, however, is her telling Ellen two weeks before she was sure that she was pregnant in order to drive Ellen away from Newland.

Thus, May achieves what she thinks is her victory. Nevertheless, her confession before her death to Dallas, her eldest son, shows that she has realized the truth about Newland's love for Ellen and that she has lived with it all her life. Ammons' critical view of May accurately assesses her as the conventional "child-woman" with the idealistic qualities approved by the old New York society. However, the critic indicates that May represents "a precious human burden, the highest expression of the leisure-class's 'nursery parody of life' and symbolic of its freedom from normal economic imperatives."[11] May's conformity to the society's norms in terms of "ideal femininity" makes Ammons see her as the American child-woman, with children's characteristics approved by adults: "gaiety, innocence, ignorance, acquiescence, dependence, affectionateness, and a decorous spontaneity," as well as two vicious qualities, greed and self-absorption.[12] In my opinion, May's infantile characteristics appropriately put her in the category of the "old" woman who ignores her own personal freedom but cunningly fights for the approval of male-oriented society.

In contrast to May, the Countess Olenska is portrayed as a "foreigner," an outsider to New York society. Though born a Mingott, an important upper-class family, she acquires a questionable reputation because of her unconventional dress at the début, her upbringing abroad, and her marriage to the Polish nobleman, Count Olenski, followed by her intention to divorce him. In general, Ellen is a "new" independent woman with a strong will and liberal ideas about divorce. At the same time, she is the most sincere and moral character in the novel.

Ellen's unconventionality, judged by old New York standards, is portrayed in her dress, West Twenty-third Street house, conversation, and

behavior. Like May, Ellen first appears to the reader through Newland's eyes at the Opera. She is "a slim young woman, a little less tall than May Welland, with brown hair growing in close curls about her temples and held in place by a narrow band of diamonds" (p. 9). Her unusual dress--"the dark blue velvet gown rather theatrically caught up under her bosom by a girdle with a large old-fashioned clasp" (p. 9)--is criticized by the male group of old New York gentility--especially Lawrence Lefferts, the authority on "form," and Sillerton Jackson, the authority on "family." Before this, Ellen has been a center of gossip owing to her wearing "black satin at her coming-out ball" (p. 40) instead of the white traditionally worn by debutantes. Also, in one of Newland's visits to Ellen, he observes her unconventional way of dressing, a deviation from New York ladies' "simple dinner dresses." Ellen, "heedless of tradition, was attired in a long robe of red velvet bordered about the chin and down the front with glossy black fur" (p. 105). Despite its unconventionality, the dress is undeniably pleasing to Newland.

Ellen's house at West Twenty-third Street in New York also contributes to her being considered unconventional. The location of the house in a neighborhood of dressmakers, bird-stuffers and "people who wrote" (p. 68) is considered by Newland to be "not fashionable" (p. 74). In addition, the outside appearance is shabby, although this is in sharp contrast to the inner warmth of the drawing room decorated by Ellen:

> . . . The atmosphere of the room was so different from any he had ever breathed that self-consciousness vanished in the sense of adventure. . . . What struck him was the way in which Medora Manson's shabby hired house, with its blighted background of pampas grass and Roger statuettes, had, by a turn of the hand, and the skilful use of a few properties, been transformed into something intimate, "foreign," subtly suggestive of old romantic scenes and sentiments. (p. 71)

Ellen's conversation, behavior, and manners also set her apart. Brought up by Medora Manson, her "eccentric" aunt, after her parents' death, Ellen becomes a lady "with expansive but incoherent education" (p. 60) who, according to New York norms, does not know how to talk and act properly. For instance, in conversation with Newland at the Opera, Ellen shocks him with her comment about their childhood: "I see everybody here in knickerbockers and pantalettes" (p. 18). This "misplaced flippancy" is considered by Newland to be in bad taste. Even worse, Ellen unknowingly describes New York society in a "disrespectful way," saying that she has been away "Oh, centuries and centuries; so long. . . that I'm sure I'm dead and buried, and this dear old place is heaven" (p. 18). Wershoven views her as an "outsider" to or "intruder"[13] in the New York world whose infantile quality is apparent in the "innocence" of women like May Welland.[14]

Unaware of the social rituals and taboos, Ellen freely expresses her feelings about New York and its people. This self-confident action not only reveals her sincerity but also helps Newland to see his native city in different perspectives. As Wolff indicates, Ellen is the "catalyst" who brings Newland to "self-confrontation"[15]--to the reconsideration of his value. At the van der Luydens' dinner, after breaking a rule of etiquette by walking away from the Duke St. Austrey to talk to Newland, Ellen expresses her opinion about the Duke frankly: "I think he's the dullest man I ever met" (p. 64). After the party, when Newland compliments Ellen on the arrangement of her drawing room, she answers: "Oh, it's a poor little place. My relations despise it. But at any rate it's less gloomy than the van der Luydens'" (p. 73). This frank comment shocks Newland because one was not expected to dare to criticize the privileged and aristocratic family.

Ellen's impulsive actions, inappropriate in the society, reveal that she is an audacious, liberal lady. Unlike Aunt Medora, a "modern" woman who has brought her up in Europe, Ellen does not spend her life freely and indulgently falling in love and getting married as she likes. Instead, she acts confidently, doing whatever she thinks is morally correct. She lets herself be seen openly going out with Julius Beaufort, an English banker who marries into the society but is not fully accepted. Also, Ellen frequently goes to the Sunday party of Mrs. Lemuel Struthers, the newly rich widow who owns Struthers' shoe polish factory. She performs these actions naturally, unaware that they make the society regard her as strange. Actually, Ellen has tried to observe and act like all upper-class New Yorkers, asking her cousins and Newland for information because she does not like to be a non-conformist. This fails to work out properly because of the society's prejudice in judging and accepting Ellen. Her most controversial action, however, is her decision to sue her husband for divorce. Despite her attempt to conform and her dislike of being different, Ellen becomes a source of gossip for the society and a burden for the family because of her modern idea about freedom and divorce. In fact, the reason for her seeking a divorce is simple: "I want to be free; I want to wipe out all the past" (p. 109). Although her wish for release from her unhappy marriage with the Polish Count Olenski, a collector of women and china, is understandable, she becomes the focus of scandal and the disgrace of the family when she firmly refuses to go back to her husband despite his "handsome" offer. Unlike other women at that period, Ellen prefers a modest life in separation rather than a stifling married life. She realizes how unconventional her action is, as she tells Newland in Boston:

> . . ."I hadn't thought of it [being alone at the Parker House] because I've just done something so much more unconventional." The faint tinge of irony lingered in her eyes. "I've just refused to take back a sum of money--that belonged to me." (p. 231).

Among Ellen's positive characteristics, the most admirable is her conscientiousness in adhering to moral values. Her moral reputation has been controversially regarded and gossiped about by the New York society because of the scandal about her relationship with her husband's secretary, the man who has helped her escape from Count Olenski. The controversy about Ellen worsens when she is often seen going out with Julius Beaufort, newly rich and reputed to have had many mistresses. However, with moral scruples and strong determination, Ellen successfully escapes from Julius Beaufort. As Newland is the only person who seems to understand her loneliness and unhappiness, Ellen admires him and appreciates his help in keeping her from divorce and, thus, avoiding more scandal. When Newland confesses his love for her, however, Ellen reminds him of his engagement to May which cannot be undone. Ellen's moral standard is obvious in her entreaty to Newland: "Ah, don't let us undo what you've done! . . . I can't go back to that other way of thinking. I can't love you unless I give you up" (p. 173). The paradox of the last sentence reveals Ellen's confused but determined mind. Her determination to stick to this decision is clear in her refusal to become Newland's mistress, when he proposes to her in his wife's carriage. Another paradox is apparent in her answer:

> "Then what, exactly, is your plan for us?" he asked.
> "For <u>us</u>? But there's no <u>us</u> in that sense! We're near each other only if we stay far from each other. Then we can be ourselves. Otherwise we're only Newland Archer, the husband of Ellen Olenska's cousin, and Ellen Olenska, the cousin of Newland Archer's wife, trying to be happy behind the backs of the people who trust them." (pp. 290-1)

Ellen adheres to the same moral level in her actions as she does in her ideas. She does not hesitate to move from New York to Washington after the marriage of May and Newland and to Paris when she learns from May about her pregnancy. Another of Ellen's courageous acts is her visit to Regina Beaufort, her cousin, after Julius Beaufort's bankruptcy.

Beautiful, attractive, and exciting, Ellen possesses many unconventional yet admirable qualities, such as courage, sincerity, determination, and conscientiousness, which make her a suitable prototype of a modern woman. Certain critics have seen this in Ellen. Ammons considers her a "new" American woman evident as early as 1870.[16] Wolfe regards Ellen as representing the new woman of the late nineteenth century owing to her forthrightness, honesty, independence, attractiveness, originality, and unconventionality.[17] In my opinion, Ellen's moral sophistication as opposed to her worldly innocence makes her the most sympathetic character in the novel.

The relationship between Ellen Olenska and Newland Archer, according to Lewis, can be explained biographically and psychologically as Wharton's past double self. Whereas Newland is the society's "restive and groping member," Ellen is the writer's "partial sketch of the intense and non-conformist self."[18] Thus, Lewis views the scenes of meeting and argument between Ellen and Newland as Wharton's "retrospective act of self-confrontation."[19]

Newland Archer, like May and most of the upper-class New Yorkers, is portrayed as a product of the society. He possesses the negative qualities--conventionality, vanity, hypocrisy, and selfishness--which are acceptable to that society. On the other hand, Newland is intellectual, imaginative, partly responsible, and partly liberal. Since most of the novel

is told through Newland's point of view and is concerned with his choice between two ladies, it is possible to see The Age of Innocence as Newland's story, as have many critics. It is, however, not a novel of education, a "bildungsroman," because Newland has learned very little, judging from his action. In addition, the characterization of Newland is not as strong and powerful as that of May and Ellen.

As the story develops, the reader sees Newland's inner conflict between the old, traditional values with which he has been brought up and the new, liberal ideas he is helped to see by Ellen. Originally, Newland is conventional. His conventionality is conveyed by his dress, his traditional house at West Twenty-eighth Street, his conventional family (his mother Mrs. Archer and his sister Janey), his career as a lawyer which he does not take seriously, and his general view of life. Newland is proud of being a New Yorker, and he analyzes the outsiders who try to enter the society such as Julius Beaufort and Ellen Olenska according to his New York standard. Moreover, Newland conventionally regards May as his property, with "a breath of satisfied vanity" (p.6) and "a thrill of possessorship" (p. 7).

On the other hand, Newland views his marriage to May as "a dull association of material and social interests held together by ignorance on the one side and hypocrisy on the other" (pp. 44-45). During his betrothal visit he sees himself as being "shown off like a wild animal cunningly trapped" (p. 69). He marries May partly because she is the best traditional choice and also because this marriage will give him security socially. All this reveals Newland not only as a conventional person in action but also as a vain and hypocritical man who wants to conform to society's rituals.

Despite his conventionality, Newland's compassion towards Ellen makes him better than the New York "masculine solidarity." To Sillerton Jackson, he defends Ellen, the center of gossip:

> ". . . She's 'poor Ellen' certainly, because she had the bad luck to make a wretched marriage; but I don't see that that's a reason for hiding her head as if she were the culprit."
> . . . .
> ". . . Madame Olenska has had an unhappy life; that doesn't make her an outcast." (p. 41)

Furthermore, in his argument with Jackson, Newland angrily and courageously says, "Women ought to be free--as free as we are" (p. 42). He probably believes this but may not be aware of the implications of what he is saying. This declaration of his belief in women's independence, however, is an early expression of a liberal idea which he will develop later.

Intelligent and imaginative, Newland has the capacity to be receptive to Ellen's efforts to make him more conscious of his values. He tells Ellen, "It's you who are telling me; opening my eyes to things I'd looked at so long that I'd ceased to see them" (p. 76). His acceptance of the new perspective revealed by Ellen proves that Newland is an open-minded person not stubbornly stuck to the old values.

That Newland attempts to turn from May to Ellen is not surprising, but he is too weak to act on his own. He marries May, he later confesses, because Ellen told him to (p. 241), hardly a sufficient reason. His weakness is further shown when, after receiving May's telegram of assent after he confesses his love to Ellen, he can do nothing but give an ironic laugh. He vacillates about matters of significance. Before marrying May, Newland states that he wants his future wife to be "not a simpleton, [but] socially tactful, witty, attractive, worldly wise" (p. 7) and that he wishes

to treat his wife differently from other men such as Lawrence Lefferts. Yet, after he marries May, Newland reverts to the old-fashioned ideas and puts the blame on May:

> Archer had reverted to all his old inherited ideas about marriage. It was less trouble to conform with the tradition and treat May exactly as all his friends treated their wives than to try to put into practice the theories with which his untrammeled bachelorhood had dallied. There was no use in trying to emancipate a wife who had not the dimmest notion that she was not free; and he had long since discovered that May's only use of the liberty she supposed herself to possess would be to lay it on the altar of her wifely adoration. (p. 195)

Irresolute and vacillating, Newland is also selfish. Although he is married to May, Newland still wants to keep Ellen for himself. In Boston where he meets Ellen again after one-and-a-half years of marriage, Newland tries to make Ellen promise that she will not go back to her husband. Ellen's going back will certainly cause suffering and unhappiness to them both, but Newland is afraid for himself: "He must do nothing to make this meeting their last; he must leave their future in her care, asking only that she should keep fast hold of it" (p. 244). Another expression of his self-centeredness occurs in May's carriage when he tries to persuade Ellen to be his mistress.

> "I want--I want somehow to get away with you into a world where words like that [mistress]--categories like that--won't exist. Where we shall be simply two human beings who love each other, who are the whole of life to each other; and nothing else on earth will matter." (p. 290)

Although he is not successful, Newland keeps trying because he realizes that Ellen loves him. In their secret meeting at the Art Museum in New York, Newland seems to succeed in making her come to him once by rationalizing that they have lives of their own and that the sacrifice is

worth making (p. 313). However, he cannot persuade her to elope with him and become his mistress.

Missing the chance to be with Ellen, even temporarily, because of May's trick, Newland finally becomes a good and responsible family man. His conventional upbringing and security in marrying a traditional woman help him overcome the monotony of his life, the sense of death and suffocation which at times fill him with the passion to run away. Nevertheless, twenty-six years later, he decides that he has missed "the flower of life" (p. 347).

Newland's limited development in the direction of a more liberal attitude is reflected in the last chapter. With the appearance of modern technology, life and society have changed and Newland himself accepts many new things. He sees the development of women in his daughter, Mary, who is quite different from her mother. In Newland's view, Mary is "no less conventional, and no more intelligent, yet led a larger life and held more tolerant views. There was good in the new order too" (p. 349). The most important thing that marks Newland's acceptance of new ideas is the coming marriage of his eldest son with Fanny Beaufort, the illegitimate child of the bankrupt Julius Beaufort and the "notorious" Fanny Ring--Beaufort's mistress before Regina's death.

Wharton has carefully characterized Newland through the novel so that the last scene becomes meaningful and realistic. The scene is at Ellen's apartment in Paris in which Newland sits on the bench under the balcony, letting his son Dallas go to her though she has invited both of them. Like most of the conclusions of Wharton's novels, the conclusion of The Age of Innocence is ambiguous and, therefore, leads to different critical opinions. Walton, who regards the story as having "a pervasive nostalgia for the

past,"[20] finds the conclusion "a sentimental endorsement of the tribal code."[21] Wershoven criticizes the ending for showing "gentle negatives," for not resulting disastrously for any of the major characters. Newland's perceptions are widened; May's marriage is "intact though stultifying"; and Ellen really experiences freedom and independence with her life in Paris.[22] Though some readers may be furious at Newland's inactivity or lack of power to act, it is consistent with his being a life-long, "old-fashioned" romantic, living with his past dream, the memory of Ellen, and ignoring the present. Newland's final words--"It's more real to me here than if I went up"--reveal his ultimate choice between being a conventional but secure insider and a modern but insecure outsider. Newland has chosen to remain a traditional conformist.

CHAPTER 5

Nine years before The Age of Innocence, the publication of Ethan Frome (1911)--a short novel--had won Wharton a reputation as a successful American writer. These two famous works differ significantly in their setting and characterization. The old New York cultural world is totally different from the bleak New England village of Starkfield; of dissimilar backgrounds, the characters vary in their ways of living, thinking, and working. But the two novels are similar in plot structure--a love triangle--and in Wharton's use of the double heroine to contrast two different kinds of women, "old" and "new."

Like May Welland and Ellen Olenska, Zeena Frome and Mattie Silver fight for the same man though, because they are lower middle-class women, their tactics in that struggle are more open and less sophisticated. Zeena, like May, is the wife who silently but craftily engages in keeping her husband from Mattie in the face of their increasing involvement with each other. Mattie, like Ellen, is lively, active, and unconventional and, like Ellen, is an outsider to the family, rejected because of her poverty and dependency on the Fromes. In terms of her position, Mattie is more similar to Lily Bart and Sophy Viner than to Ellen. Poor, not very well educated, and unmarried, Mattie is similar to Lily and Sophy in her need for support--financial and emotional--and her pose of helplessness. Without money, sufficient education, and opportunities to improve her situation, Mattie can never achieve freedom and independence as an individual.

Ethan Frome as the male protagonist, like Newland Archer in The Age of Innocence, is the central character of the story. The book is Ethan

Frome's "tragedy"[1] since he has most of the narrator's and the author's sympathy.[2] However, compared to Zeena and Mattie, Ethan is less powerful, less active, and less capable of decision and action.

Many literary critics consider Ethan Frome to be one of Wharton's best works. It has been widely read and, like most of her novels, translated into other languages--French, Italian, Swedish, Russian, and Japanese.[3] The novella is evidence that the writer's subject is not merely limited to that of aristocratic New York--its customs and people--but extended to a milieu as far removed as the poor Massachusetts village of Starkfield and the farmhouse of the Fromes. Wharton states her claim to knowledge of New England in the "Introduction" to the Scribner's edition, in which she says that she had known "something of New England village life long" before she lived there.[4] However, she also states that in this novella, in addition to personal experience, she drew on "La Grande Bretêche" and "The Ring and the Book."[5] Though not among Wharton's five personal favorites, Ethan Frome has been consistently well-received and is one of the best known of her fictions. Cynthia Wolff regards the book as "a statement of Edith Wharton's coming of age as a novelist."[6] Another example of recent favorable criticism is Richard Lawson's view that in Ethan Frome Wharton is at her best in characterizations--"complex, free of cliché, believable, and even gripping"--and in style--"taut, precise, unpretentious."[7]

The novella's three major characters--Ethan, Zeena, and Mattie--are the foci of attention. The story's narrator, the "I" in the prologue and epilogue, seems to be credible but very little has been said about this voice as character. We learn only that he is an anonymous engineer who has been assigned to work temporarily in that county where he gradually

learns, from the townspeople, Ethan, and his accidental visit to the Fromes, the tragic story of the three. The narration of the story, either imaginative or sympathetic according to various critical opinions, is supposed to be his own version.

Like most of Wharton's principal female characters both "old" and "new," Zeena and Mattie are portrayed as strong and determined women. Though contrasting in appearance in the main part of the story--Zeena a "sickly" woman and Mattie a young, lively girl--both show their strength of mind. They are capable of making decisions and acting on them. On the other hand, Ethan, like most of Wharton's fictional men, is inactive and unable to fulfill his life ambitions--education, career, or a new life with the girl he loves.

Zenobia, or Zeena Pierce Frome, Ethan's cousin, came to Starkfield to nurse his mother, an old woman who fell ill. When they first met, Zeena was voluble, active, understanding, and helpful to Ethan. At that time, Ethan found Zeena adorable--efficient in sick-bed duties and household chores. After his mother's funeral, Ethan asked Zeena to marry and stay with him at the farm.

Zeena is seven years Ethan's senior. By the time of Ethan's proposal, she was already thirty-five, a middle-aged woman who must have been desperate for marriage, and who, without it, was perhaps unable to lead a respectable life, according to the nineteenth-century belief. After the marriage, however, Zeena develops into a sickly and silent woman, as Ethan's mother had been. Zeena's hypochondria probably results from the "absorbed observation of her own symptoms," in Ethan's opinion (p. 72). Or perhaps because of the lonely life at the farm, her self-interest, especially in her health, has developed into extreme egoism. She thinks

that her sickness may help draw Ethan's attention to her, even as her complaints put him off. Zeena's silence is explained by the narrator as due either to "the inevitable effect of life on the farm" or to the fact that "Ethan 'never listened'" to her complaints (p. 72). Accordingly, Zeena appears to her husband as "queer," like Ethan's mother, and also boring, unattractive, unpleasant to be with because of her "shut face" and her obsession with taking medicine. Not completely Zeena's fault, her condition results from the gloomy and lonely surroundings. As Walton points out, Zeena embodies "the supreme product and the ever present representative of human and inanimate environment."[8]

As presented by the narrator and sometimes through Ethan Frome's critical observations, Zeena is an ugly, old woman, careless of her appearance. The uses of gloomy surroundings and imagery help increase the ugliness. On his way home after fetching Mattie from the dance, Ethan visualized her sleeping in the dark house with "a dead cucumber-vine dangl[ing] from the porch like the crape streamer tied to the door for the death" (p. 51). Ethan's merciless feeling for Zeena is emphasized in his vision of his wife asleep with "her false teeth in a tumbler by the bed" (p. 51). Zeena's first appearance when she opens the door for Ethan and Mattie emphasizes her unattractiveness.

> Against the dark background of the kitchen she [Zeena] stood up tall and angular, one hand drawing a quilted counterpane to her flat breast, while the other held a lamp. The light, on a level with her chin, drew out of the darkness her puckered throat and the projecting wrist of the hand that clutched the quilt, and deepened fantastically the hollows and prominences of her high-boned face under its ring of crimping-pins. . . .(pp. 52-3)

This description of Zeena in the dark, especially of "her high-boned face under its ring of crimping-pins," effectively gives the picture of a

witch. This connection was first made by Ammons, who cited Zeena's unattractive face, her dress of black calico, her "tall and angular" body, and her possession of "Pussy," the favorite cat, as contributing to this aspect of her characterization. Ammons interprets Ethan Frome as a new and original fairy tale, the reverse of Snow White. Zeena is parallel to the stepmother, a witch who is never satisfied with what she has and enjoys hurting people. According to Ammons, the fairy tale's reversal is achieved by Zeena's victory as opposed to the stepmother's defeat.[9]

I find this concept of Zeena as a witch acceptable in certain points. Certainly she is unattractive and old in appearance. Moreover, apart from Wharton's descriptions of Zeena's physical appearance which make the interpretation probable, she is also portrayed as a powerful, conniving, and cruel woman who plans to get rid of Mattie, her poor and dependent cousin. Using her "final" sickness as a pretext, she sends for a hired girl to replace Mattie and thus puts an end to the questionable relationship between Ethan and Mattie. Even Zeena's face which haunts Ethan when he is on his way to commit suicide with Mattie supports Ammons' concept. However, that Zeena wins is doubtful. Having Mattie as the second witch in the house, or "Zeena's double,"[10] should not be counted a victory. Furthermore, Zeena not only has to endure a miserable life, but she also has to take care of two crippled people in the end.

According to Ammons, Mattie is compared with Snow White, a "fairy maiden" and "princess of nature for Ethan,"[11] as emphasized by the description of her dark hair--"soft yet springy, like certain mosses on warm slopes" (p. 146)--her small hands, young face, fresh and gay manners. As Zeena is often associated with dark, gloomy colors--black, grey, brown--Mattie is usually associated with red, white and pink, for example,

her crimson ribbon at the dance, and pink hat at the church picnic, colors which, according to Ammons, suggest passion and purity respectively. Moreover, Ammons points out that Mattie's last name, Silver, connotes the precious metal,[12] and she indeed is valuable in Ethan's desperate and gloomy life, a "bright serviceable creature, a bit of hopeful young life," active and perceptive, with "an eye to see and an ear to hear" (p. 33).

A contrast to Zeena, Mattie appears to Ethan as a lively, talkative, and cheerful girl. She is attractive to Ethan not only because of her youth and light-heartedness but also because she admires him. She openly praises Ethan's knowledge about the stars on their walk home after the dance at the church. Mattie also appreciatively remembers how Ethan found her lost locket during the picnic at Shadow Pond. In my opinion, Mattie is a "new" woman, free in her ideas and expressions as well as young in her appearance.

Mattie's youthfulness is advantageous to herself; it increases her attractiveness and provides her with a chance to marry. As a helpless orphan dependent on her cousin Zeena, Mattie should grasp the opportunity of marrying Denis Eady, the Irish grocer's son who is interested in her. However, Mattie cares for Ethan from the beginning as she later reveals to him and is determined enough to keep and idolize her love in her suggestion of suicide. She strongly and idealistically believes that death will keep them together forever.

Mattie's use of the red pickle dish, Zeena's precious present from Philadelphia, "to make the supper table pretty" indicates her audacity. Though Mattie knows the history of the dish well, she dares use it to please Ethan on their first dinner together. However, when the cat accidentally breaks the dish, Mattie shows both her anxiety and

responsibility. Though Ethan tries to conceal her guilt by blaming the cat when Zeena finds the dish fragments, Mattie courageously and honestly accepts the responsibility.

The breaking of the precious pickle dish can be interpreted as symbolic. Mattie is one of the most important factors of the crash in the married life between Ethan and Zeena. Like the marriage, the dish which Zeena "cared for most of all" is broken into unmendable fragments owing to Mattie. Zeena's wrath at Mattie and the way she carries the broken glass as a beloved dead body (p. 128) prove the significance of the incident and its place in the structure of the novel.

Obviously, Ethan and Zeena see Mattie quite differently. He finds her the most pathetic creature, especially when Zeena plans to get rid of her. To Ethan, Mattie tries to please Zeena by doing the household chores without pay though she is physically small, weak, and awkward. After she is dismissed, Mattie's plight draws even more of Ethan's sympathy. She is apparently too weak, inexperienced, and untrained to find a job "in the surroundings of indifference and animosity" (p. 122) of the outside world.

From the first evening at the supper table Zeena silently observes Mattie with hostility, noticing the red ribbon in her hair. Zeena's jealousy, aroused by the changes in her husband, for instance, his scrubbing of the kitchen floor to help Mattie and his shaving every morning, makes her see Mattie as "a bad girl" who threatens her well-being. She fears that Mattie will attract more of Ethan's attention and accordingly she acts to send her away. In Zeena's opinion, Mattie is not at all a poor and helpless girl.

Zeena's powerful determination to get rid of Mattie is parallel to Mattie's willingness, even eagerness, to die with the man she loves. On the way to the railway station, Ethan and Mattie are so desperate about

her departure that they think of death. The accident of Ned Hale and Ruth Varnum which almost costs their lives while coasting down the slope gives them the idea. However, it is Mattie who directly states it:

> . . ."Ethan! Ethan! I want you to take me down again!"
> "Down where?"
> "The coast. Right off," she panted. "So't we'll never come up any more."
> "Matt! What on earth do you mean?"
> She put her lips against his ear to say: "Right into the big elm. You said you could. So't we'd never have to leave each other any more." (p. 165)

Mattie's persuasive pleadings help make Ethan yield to her plan. This strong suicidal intention reveals Mattie as perhaps immoral, irresponsible, and selfish. She is, after all, stealing her cousin's husband, trying to kill not only herself but Ethan, out of self-centered love. Mattie's actions and qualities, however, provide her with certain dimensions of the "new" woman. Trapped as a victim of the traditional belief about women, Mattie is struggling desperately for freedom. She feels that she is free to end her own and Ethan's lives regardless of the traditional beliefs in morality, responsibility, and selflessness.

Mattie, an active rebel, is deliberately contrasted with Ethan, the ambitious but inarticulate and inactive male protagonist of the story. Like most typical Wharton heroes, Ethan possesses gentlemanly qualities--honesty, self-respect, independence, and generosity[13]--but lacks the power and courage to achieve his goals. Unlike other Wharton heroes, however, he is a poor, hard-working, and ambitious farmer. His ambition to become an engineer fails because of the lack of financial support after his father's death. Ethan's unhappy condition is worsened by his dismal life accentuated by the cold weather, the poverty of the

family, and the sickness of his "queer" mother, "sickly" Zeena, and, later, a querulous and crippled Mattie.

In Wolff's analysis, Ethan is "the embodiment of some deep and mortal misery."[14] She sees the narrator's vision and version of the story as contributing to the explication of a private nightmare filled with repression and desolation.[15] It is evident that the narrator's sympathy completely goes to Ethan who is presented as a tragic figure who never experiences any satisfaction in life in his education or work or women. The narrator tends to sympathize with Ethan in his distress after learning about his story and about the cause of his physical distortion and after meeting the two women in the gloomy and impoverished surroundings. It is possible that his sympathy for Ethan emerges from his own fear that he may one day find himself in a similar situation.[16] There is a distinction, however, between the narrator's and the author's attitudes towards Ethan. Wharton's ambiguous attitude is evident in the story's ironies and its bitter ending. It is doubtful that her sympathy is entirely with Ethan. The ironies consist of the unexpected results deriving from events and characters. According to McDowell, pleasure, ecstasy, and happiness turn into distress, suffering, and pain.[17] The suicides of Ethan and Mattie do not end with "the glorious death" but "years of pain."[18] Moreover, whereas Mattie changes from a lovely girl to an old woman, Zeena develops from a sickly to a strong person who takes care of Mattie and Ethan. The ironic ending appears in the narrator's description of his shocking confrontation with Zeena and Mattie, introduced to him by Ethan, and also in Mrs. Hale's comment:

> ". . . the way they are now, I don't see's there's much difference between the Fromes up at the farm and the Fromes

> down in the graveyard; 'cept that down there they're all quiet, and the women have got to hold their tongues." (p. 181)

From the beginning Ethan surprises the narrator and the reader by his crippled form, his silence, and his "careless powerful look" (p. 3) which contrast sharply with his intellectual ambition, honesty, and generosity. Ethan's interest in the narrator's science book reveals his past ambition to be an engineer and his failure to graduate from Worcester College because of his father's death. He works honestly and lives meanly as a farmer, cutting lumber for Mr. Hale, the Starkfield builder. Ethan's pride and honesty are apparent in his inability to lie and get the advance from Andrew Hale so that he can escape with Mattie. Mrs. Hale's tender and sympathetic words rouse Ethan's conscience and self-respect. Though poor, Ethan is proud of his modest but honest living, independent in his thinking, and considerate to Mattie. He plans to rebel against Zeena's power when she tries to drive Mattie away from his life. He shows his concern for Mattie's unpromising future and is always kind to her, helping with the household chores, fetching her from the dance party at night, finding her locket at the picnic, and carrying her heavy trunk to the sleigh when she leaves. Ethan is also considerate to the narrator as well; he gives him a ride in bad weather and, on the day of the heavy storm, offers him shelter. Poor, desperate, and unhappy, Ethan silently shows his human warmth towards others.

Ethan treats Zeena indifferently and sometimes unkindly, however. Marrying her after his mother's funeral because of his own fear of loneliness is bad enough but worse is his ignorance of her needs. He "never listened" to her complaints and cannot understand his wife, especially her need for his attention and compassion. Consequently, Zeena

and Mattie both contribute to the tragic outcome, but Ethan himself is also deeply responsible.

As the story reveals, Ethan does not seem to have the chance to choose between Zeena, the "old" woman, and Mattie, the "new" woman. He is already married to Zeena when Mattie arrives. Moreover, his morality and honesty stop him from leaving Zeena for Mattie. The novella concludes with Ethan's being responsible for both women and with Mattie's turning Zeena-like, or even worse.

The contrast between the two major women characters is clear throughout the main part of the story. Though the categories cannot be sharply drawn as in Wharton's other works, Zeena represents the "old" woman and Mattie, the "new" one. Unlike the upper-class women, Zeena has nothing to occupy herself with except her own health. Zeena's conventionality is obvious in her clinging to the tradition of marriage; she has to marry Ethan before she becomes too old. She first impresses Ethan as a prospective housewife when she dutifully nurses his mother. Moreover, Zeena conventionally and strongly holds to the failing marriage by viciously getting rid of her own poor cousin Mattie. In short, Zeena's traditional beliefs, conventional manners, and dependence on Ethan prove her the "old" woman.

Mattie's portrayal, on the other hand, gives us an impression of the "new" woman. Her partial dependence, apparent weakness and helplessness make her not completely "new," but her activeness, strong determination, and attempt to be independent indicate that Mattie is the beginning of the modern woman. With better education and opportunities, Mattie could have developed as one of the strongest "new" women.

Unfortunately, her lack of necessary resources and her later crippled condition make it impossible.

CHAPTER 6

Another successful fiction by Wharton with a small-town setting and dealing with a society other than that of upper-class New York is Summer (1917). Though it has been considered "Wharton's greatest novel"[1] and her "most balanced novel,"[2] its lack of popularity may be explained by its controversial subject: the sensual awakening of an adolescent girl, Charity Royall. Cynthia Wolff sees the book as "a novel of the season of youth," in keeping with its title, and thus "the most erotic fiction that Wharton ever published."[3]

As Ethan is the focus of the narrator's viewpoint in Ethan Frome, Charity is the central consciousness in Summer. Both characters are similar in their boredom with the New England small town environment, their helplessness in dealing with their miseries, and their unhappiness in love. Designated "an ironic tragi-comedy,"[4] Summer is generally less serious, gloomy, and desperate than the "tragedy" Ethan Frome. Apart from the difference in seasons--summer and winter--the characterization of Charity as a passionate young girl contrasts significantly with that of the reserved Ethan.

Charity is a more developed version of Mattie Silver. Both represent the "new" woman--bright, vigorous, active, brave, determined, sensual, and struggling for independence. Playing the major role in a longer story, Charity has more opportunities than Mattie for self-expression and rebellion against social codes as she searches for her identity.

Charity is Wharton's clearest example of the "new" woman. Young and immature, Charity represents an unconventional, active, and strongly determined woman in thoughts and actions. Elizabeth Ammons regards her

as "a born rebel" and "a social outcast" because of her contempt for the society's rituals and morality concerning sex and marriage.[5] She also considers Charity to be "the most openly defiant and the most openly sexual of Wharton's heroines."[6]

Charity Royall was born one of the Mountain people, considered "outlaws" by the townspeople; her father had escaped to the Mountain as a drunken murderer and her mother is described as "half human" (p. 50). Taken down to North Dormer and brought up as Lawyer Royall's ward, Charity is thus named as a reminder of her benefactor's benevolence. Moreover, she is always reminded of her inferior background by the townspeople. She does not seem to belong there, and she is never satisfied with herself, her situation, and the North Dormer society. Charity's seeking consolation in nature, lying in the grass of a hill side pasture, indicates her loneliness, alienation from the town, lack of security, and need for love. Her open resistance to the social and moral codes is apparent in her choice of the secret and unstable love affair with Lucius Harney, a young irresponsible architect from the city, rather than marriage with Lawyer Royall.

The novel presents, according to Margaret McDowell, "a cliché situation."[7] Charity plays the role of an independent adolescent who is initiated into life and maturity by the love affair with Lucius Harney. Deserted by him and pregnant, Charity is saved from abortion and prostitution only by marriage with Lawyer Royall, her guardian.

As an outsider, Charity experiences loneliness in her adolescence. Sensitive, she understands Royall's similar isolation, but her independence makes her unable to relate to him. At home, they seldom converse. Therefore, after a short period of boring work as the librarian of the

Hatchard Memorial Library, Charity finds her life more and more isolated from "civilized" culture, and her dissatisfaction grows.

Lonely, passionate, and ambitious for a better way of life, Charity is attracted to Lucius Harney, Miss Hatchard's cousin from the city, first because of his appearance:

> She had liked the young man's looks, and his short-sighted eyes, and his odd way of speaking, that was abrupt yet soft, just as his hands were sunburnt and sinewy, yet with smooth nails like a woman's. His hair was sunburnt-looking too, or rather the colour of bracken after frost, his eyes grey, with the appealing look of the short-sighted, his smile shy yet confident, as if he knew lots of things she had never dreamed of, and yet wouldn't for the world have had her feel his superiority. . . . (pp. 12-13)

Apart from giving an impressive picture of the young man, the passage indicates that Charity is very observant, sensitive, and fanciful. Not only do Lucius' sophisticated looks attract her attention but she is also conscious of his superiority in appearance and knowledge to the other men she knows, the quality she cannot find in any one at North Dormer, except, perhaps, in her guardian.

Despite the realization that she is poor and ignorant and that she should be humble, Charity feels herself powerful in Lawyer Royall's house and in North Dormer. Whatever she demands from her guardian--the position of the town librarian, a hired woman to cook and do the household chores--she easily gets. She has the power of making the decision for herself not to go to a boarding school at Nettleton after Mrs. Royall's death partly because she knows Royall would be lonely. Able to feel pity for him, her willfulness and strength, however, protect her in the critical moment when her guardian tries to enter her bedroom.

> "Charity, let me in. I don't want the key [to the whiskey cupboard]. I'm a lonesome man," he began, in the deep voice that sometimes moved her.
>
> Her heart gave a startled plunge, but she continued to hold him back contemptuously. "Well, I guess you made a mistake, then. This ain't your wife's room any longer."
>
> She was not frightened, she simply felt a deep disgust; and perhaps he divined it or read it in her face, for after staring at her a moment he drew back and turned slowly away from the door. . . . (p. 17)

In addition to being strong and decisive, Charity is self-confident, a quality which makes her different from other girls, as Lucius comments on one occasion. Her feeling of superiority, originating from her privileged upbringing, is obvious in her contempt for the "village love-making" in which the youths are involved. Not until her encounter with Lucius does she realize her "disdains and reluctances" for the young people's love affairs.

Considering herself to be superior to others, Charity suppresses and disguises her passionate feelings as indifference and reserve. She feels, however, that her relationship with Lucius gives her the opportunity to be free from life's limitations on all moral and social codes and to gain the warmth and passion she had not received from her parents.

By taking Lucius to visit several old houses, Charity has the opportunity to know him more intimately. Out of fear of his contempt for her inferior origin, she unnecessarily describes to him her Mountain background. Her desire to impress him becomes more desperate when she takes him to the brown house under Porcupine owned by the Mountain people. Their poor and miserable condition makes Charity feel ashamed of her people when Lucius hesitates to give them money in return for a cup of whiskey.

From the beginning of their relationship, Charity, sensitive and intelligent, knows the differences, especially in education and opportunity, between herself and Lucius Harney. Immature and innocent, however, she cannot distinguish the "city fellow"'s superficially polite and kind manner from his "liking." She immediately jumps to the conclusion that Lucius really likes her because she loves him, and once she even imagines herself his bride.

The scene in which Charity spends the night watching Lucius through his window before he leaves North Dormer shows her emotional confusions and conflicts. Observing the man she loves--his face, expression, and movements--Charity ends up by realizing the conflict between her own youth and pride. She becomes aware of sexuality, knowing what happens between young men and girls, though the society assumes ignorance on the girl's part. Though Charity is not concerned about rumors and gossip, she decides to stay outside because, with self-respect, "she could not so cheapen herself to Harney" (p. 72).

Rationalization is one of Charity's weak points in her relationship with Lucius. Though she detects that Lucius' tone in speaking to her is "fraternal" rather than "lover-like," Charity rationalizes his treatment towards her.

> . . . It seemed to be enough for him to breathe her nearness like a flower's; and since his pleasure at being with her, and his sense of her youth and her grace, perpetually shone in his eyes and softened the inflection of his voice, his reserve did not suggest coldness, but the deference due to a girl of his own class. (p. 91)

Charity's relationship with Lucius does not end with his leaving North Dormer. They arrange several meetings, one of the most important of which is their visit to Nettleton on the Fourth of July. In a new summer

hat and a new white muslin dress which resembles a bride's, Charity thinks she manages to please Lucius and win his admiration. During this trip, Lucius buys Charity a blue brooch, the only gift she will ever receive from him. Moreover, it is also the first time Charity notices the house of Dr. Merkle, the abortionist Julia Hawes, her friend's sister, came to see.

The confrontation with Julia, now a prostitute, embarrasses Charity; her embarrassment shows her innocence and immaturity. Even more embarrassing is her later encounter with Lawyer Royall, her guardian, drunk and in the company of Julia Hawes with a party of prostitutes and loafers. Though shocked when he calls her a "damn-bare-headed whore," she unsuccessfully tries to persuade Royall to go home. From this scene, Charity experiences more of the ugliness of life.

Juxtaposed against this important scene is the preceding one which takes place during the fireworks. Charity's excitement at seeing the beautiful fireworks is parallel to the ecstasy she feels when Lucius kisses her, Charity's first passionate experience. It certainly has great effect on her: ". . . An unknown Harney had revealed himself, a Harney who dominated her and yet over whom she felt herself possessed of a new mysterious power" (p. 104).

Ironically, the Fourth of July, a celebration of independence, marks the day of Charity's ultimate dependence,[8] her deprivation of the chance to be free. After this scene, Charity is powerless under Lucius' influence. Her intention to escape from North Dormer and Lucius to the Mountain fails when he follows her and uses his power to keep her from going away.

The effect of the love affair on Charity is indicated by her changes during the preparation for Old Home Week at North Dormer. She is no more

an independent and decisive girl. Lucius becomes the most important person in her life.

> Charity saw the force of the argument [that she should return to North Dormer]; but if she acquiesced it was not so much because of that as because it was Harney's wish. Since that evening in the deserted house she could imagine no reason for doing or not doing anything except the fact that Harney wished or did not wish it. All her tossing contradictory impulses were merged in a fatalistic acceptance of his will. . . . (p. 124)

Moreover, Charity's sense of possession, of "knowing" the man better than anyone, overwhelms her. Apparently, this passionate secret adds meaning to Charity's life.

> . . . She, Charity Royall, was the only being on earth who really knew him, knew him from the soles of his feet to the rumpled crest of his hair, knew the shifting lights in his eyes, and the inflections of his voice, and the things he liked and disliked, and everything there was to know about him, as minutely and yet unconsciously as a child knows the walls of the room it wakes up in every morning. It was this fact, which nobody about her guessed, or would have understood, that made her life something apart and inviolable, as if nothing had any power to hurt or disturb her as long as her secret was safe. (p. 125)

As the secret meetings continue in the deserted house, Charity realizes her love for Lucius. Love has a beautiful meaning, not "something confused and furtive" as Charity has thought but "bright and open as the summer air" (p. 128). Moreover, being unconventional, Charity does not care about anyone's knowing. She is happy with her experience, "a new world" into which Lucius carries her. In his presence, other people are non-existent to Charity. He seems to be there just for her.

Her mistaken concept of love is revealed to her, however, at the Town Hall during the activities of Old Home Week. From the stage where Charity sings with a group of girls, she discovers the intimate relationship

between Lucius and Annabel Balch, a fair girl from Nettleton, when a maple branch collapses. They are sitting close to each other, engaged in their implicating conversation. The vision uncovers to Charity the truth, "the bare reality of her situation." It is the first time Charity learns about Lucius' mystery, his intimate relationship with Annabel. Charity does not, however, feel jealousy. Instead, she feels "a terror of the unknown" or fear of mysterious attractions that can take Lucius away from her. Yet she is strong enough to accept her loss by thinking that all she has given Lucius is not enough in comparison to other gifts he may get from other people.

Charity's realization is emphasized by Lucius' reluctance to promise to marry her when he is forced to do so by Lawyer Royall. His leaving for New York and the postponement of the marriage clearly show his selfish intention. Eventually, Charity learns from her friend Ally Hawes about the engagement of Lucius and Annabel and their preparation for the wedding. Charity expresses her anger by tearing Annabel's blouse, which Ally is sewing.

Despite her anger and violent action, Charity later comes to see Annabel as more suitable for Lucius than herself. Her feelings of selflessness and sacrifice are evident in her letter to Lucius releasing him to marry Annabel according to his promise: "I want you should marry Annabel Balch if you promised to. I think maybe you were afraid I'd feel too bad about it. I feel I'd rather you acted right" (p. 157). This simple and straightforward letter shows Charity's sincerity, strong determination, and forgiveness. She does not want to use convention to attach Lucius to her against his will.

Even later, when Charity learns she is pregnant, she does not use this as a means to draw Lucius back. She courageously decides on her few alternatives. Out of self-respect and disgust for Dr. Merkle, Charity refuses to have an abortion. Neither does she tell Lucius. Unfortunately, Charity's escape to the Mountain to stay with her mother is impossible because, coincidentally, her mother dies the day she goes up to see her. Finally, Charity chooses to depend on herself by going to Nettleton, bearing her child, giving it to other people, and, like Julia Hawes, becoming a prostitute, a sad and helpless decision. Wharton, however, ends by having her heroine reconciling with her guardian and marrying him. Helpless and desperate, Charity follows Lawyer Royall down the Mountain and accepts his proposal.

Charity's marrying Lawyer Royall, whose ward she is, is criticized by some as a kind of incest. McDowell, for instance, points out that the "overtones of incest" in Charity's marriage with her guardian, old and drunk, darken the ending.[9] Similarly, Ammons finds the novel's ending "sick," owing to the "subject of the incestuous nature of patriarchal marriage."[10] According to her, the novel thematically provides Wharton's "criticism of the patriarchal sexual economy." For her, the "quasi-incestuous" nature of marriage without Charity's willingness indicates that American marriage is symbolically incestuous.[11] Both McDowell and Ammons have reasonable points. The theme of semi-incest [illegible] novel end on a repulsive, gloomy note. Marriage, however, is the only solution for Charity's respectable survival in the society.

Wharton seems to prepare for Charity's final choice by the characterization of the only two men whom she could conceivably marry. Through Charity's thoughts we see the young girl's favorable attitudes

towards them. As a young gentleman from the city, refined, knowledgeable, sensitive and artistic, warm and tender as a human being, Lucius wins Charity's love. As Royall says to Charity, however, Lucius is "pleasant" as company but "soft" in character. The young man's indecisiveness about Charity and Annabel makes him appear irresponsible and deceitful.

Like many of Wharton's male protagonists, Lucius Harney is portrayed as inactive and incapable of making decisions. He seems too weak in spirit to act for what he believes. Marilyn French, in her introduction to the novel, argues that Lucius loves Charity.[12] This seems unlikely since he has done nothing to prove his love for her. Despite his sweet words and attempts to console Charity, Lucius gives what proves a meaningless promise to marry her after he has seduced her. He also deceives Charity by concealing his intention to marry Annabel Balch. If, in Charity's rationalization, Lucius is fair by not leading her on to misunderstanding about his love, he is unfair in keeping silent about Annabel and making Charity a false promise.

Royall, the only other man in Charity's life, possesses similar qualities--respectability, intelligence, sophistication, and superiority. Unlike Lucius, however, Royall does not express his kindness to Charity by words but by action. Despite his reputation of being "close" with his money, as Charity puts it, Royall gives his ward such presents as the Crimson Rambler and its fan, her summer hat, and her dresses. As the guardian, as noted earlier, Royall takes good care of Charity, uses his influence to help her become the town librarian, and pleases her by hiring Verena Marsh to stay and cook as Charity has wanted. Unfortunately, Royall may be seen as villainous at the beginning of the novel when he

tries to force his way into Charity's bedroom, and also at the end when he takes advantage of her predicament to marry her.

As French views him, Royall is indeed "a complex figure."[13] He does not appear fully a villain because Charity does not see him as one.[14] She not only realizes Royall's superior position among townspeople but also pities him for his loneliness. Further, Royall is the only person who knows and understands Charity. In his second proposal, Royall expresses his knowledge of Charity; like him, she wants the best, and thus a certain sympathetic understanding exists between them. Moreover, he tries to have Lucius and Charity marry in accordance with the prevailing social and religious conventions. Following them to their place of assignation, Royall forces Lucius to promise to marry Charity. In a way, this action may be regarded as Royall's trying, in a self-serving way, to efface Charity's disgraceful reputation which affects his own. Yet, his interruption of the love affair also indicates Royall's care and concern for Charity.

Obviously, Wharton has Charity gradually change her feelings for Royall from disgust and hate to respect. Charity's hatred for her guardian partly originates from blindness in her love for Lucius Harney and partly from Royall's inability to control himself. Later, Royall helps Charity to a clearer view of her blind love, and she admires his majestic look and impressive speech during his address for Old Home Week. When Royall follows Charity to the Mountain to take her back, Charity is glad to see him and does not refuse his third proposal. Moreover, though Charity associates her wedding ceremony with her mother's funeral, she accepts it calmly and seems to enjoy the luxuries of being Mrs. Royall. Therefore, Walton's comment that Lawyer Royall represents, for Charity, sexual

horror and the shame of inferiority[15] is not true. Finally, the reconciliation between Royall and Charity, represented by their exchange of compliments--"You are a good girl, Charity" and "I guess you're good, too"--has ironic implications because neither of them is "good." For example, Royall gives Charity forty dollars to buy new dresses, but she uses it to purchase the blue brooch, Lucius's present, back from the abortionist. However, their conversation shows an improved stage of their relationship.

To conclude, Wharton's ambiguous ending makes it difficult to judge Charity's success as a "new" woman. Ammons sees Charity's action as a "futile rebellion against the double standard."[16] Her attempt to be an independent woman fails and therefore, in Ammons' view, Charity ends her fight at the same point where she started, as Royall's "unnatural dependent."[17] In this regard, Charity fails as a rebel: she cannot escape from being a dependent in the society.

CHAPTER 7

Undine Spragg, the female protagonist of The Custom of the Country, represents a type of "new" woman. Charity and Undine are similar in such "new" woman qualities as ambitiousness, willfulness, and the courage to fight for independence, but they differ in significant individual characteristics.

Charity and Undine are Wharton's most dominant female protagonists, the center of consciousness in the respective novels. Ambitious, determined, and courageous, both struggle to achieve the best in life--love and identity for Charity and respectable social position for Undine. They are not afraid or ashamed to think and act independently, qualities typical of the "new" woman.

Unlike Charity, however, Undine has her father's wealth to provide her with the opportunities to enter the refined and cultured upper-class society. While Charity has a poor background, little education, and no means of escape from her predicament, Undine has her father's money and her charm to attract men to marry her. Obviously, Undine uses marriage as a weapon for her social climbing, whereas Charity's marriage leads her back to the society but dependent on Royall.

Undine's apparent success as a social climber eventually comes with her dependency on her several husbands. Lacking moral consciousness and integrity, Undine has been criticized as a monster[1]--ugly, selfish, and heartless--characteristics which, however, contribute a great deal to the novel's accomplishment according to many of Wharton's critics.

The Custom of the Country (1913), one of Wharton's five personal favorites among her own fiction,[2] is a long novel. Divided into five books

and forty-six chapters, this novel mainly focuses on Undine Spragg, the female protagonist who seems successful in her social climbing. The book is her story, her rise from the middle-class background of a mid-western town to New York upper-class society, her marriages and divorces to keep her social and financial status, and her final material success, though she remains dissatisfied.

The novel is one of Wharton's richest works, as many different critical views of it suggest. The Custom of the Country has been regarded as a satirical novel about the institution of marriage in the leisure class,[3] or, by the same critic, as a business novel, with Undine as Wharton's capitalist heroine.[4] It also has been considered a comedy of manners with the tone of a satirical fable.[5] Another interesting approach considers it as a novel of roguery, with Undine as a humorless pícara.[6] It has also been viewed psychologically as a novel of energy and initiative, concerning human psychic energy, power, assertion, drive, and ambition.[7] For me, it is a novel with a "negative" heroine who has many unacceptable qualities: selfishness, cruelty, dishonesty, and immorality. Owing to these characteristics, she stands out as an extremely "new" woman whom the society of her time found difficult to accept wholeheartedly.

Among Wharton's women characters, Undine is perhaps the least admirable because of her many negative qualities, but she is also one of the most lively and active. Like all Wharton's heroines, Undine is portrayed as a very strong, determined and independent character. She is capable of doing things that are scandalous, selfish, and malicious, as evidenced in her four marriages and one extra-marital affair, in order to get the two things she considers important for a "well-ordered life":

amusement and respectability (p. 250). Undine's negative qualities are progressively revealed as the story progresses.

It is clear from the beginning that Undine is a spoiled child in a mid-western family from Apex City who have moved to New York and tried to gain admission to upper-class society for their daughter. Mr. Spragg, a hard-working businessman, and his wife, a simple, unambitious housewife, indulge their only daughter with whatever she wants. They leave Apex because they think that "Undine was too big for the place," but then they discover that she seems "too small for New York" (p. 31). No matter what her age, Undine does not seem to grow out of her childhood game of dressing up in "her mother's Sunday skirt" and playing lady before the mirror (p. 37). Invited by Mrs. Fairford to dinner at Washington Square, Undine succeeds in getting a new dress from her father. Later, she manages to have her father buy an opera box for her as a treat to Mabel Lipscomb, her friend. Despite the parents' mild protest at first, Mr. Spragg finally buys his daughter season tickets for a parterre box for every other Friday. Both parents understand their daughter's unreasonable extravagance and willful obstinacy: "Undine never wanted anything long, but she wanted it 'right off.' And until she got it the house was uninhabitable" (p. 51). However, they never do anything to stop or improve her. Undine's difference from her parents is observed by Ralph Marvell:

> . . . Sometimes, as he sat between the lonely primitive old couple [the Spraggs], he wondered from what source Undine's voracious ambitions had been drawn: all she cared for, and attached importance to, was as remote from her parents' conception of life as her impatient greed from their passive stoicism. (p. 226)

Despite many of her objectionable characteristics, Undine still possesses certain admirable traits such as quick adaptation, frankness, cleverness, and practicality. Undine's beauty, or her lovely "form"--in Mrs. Heeny's phrase--is the most important factor in her social climbing. She appears attractive to most men, from those with artistic eyes for beauty like Ralph Marvell and the painter Claud Walsingham Popple to the newly rich with eyes for material things like Peter Van Degen and Elmer Moffatt. In addition to her attractiveness, Undine cleverly adapts herself to situations: during her second dinner party at Washington Square after her engagement to Ralph, Undine is described by the omniscient narrator:

> . . . Her quickness in noting external differences had already taught her to modulate and lower her voice, and to replace "the i-dea!" and "I wouldn't wonder" by more polished locutions; and she had not been ten minutes at table before she found that to seem very much in love, and a little confused and subdued by the newness and intensity of the sentiment was, to the Dagonet mind, the becoming attitude for a young lady in her situation. (pp. 82-3)

At this same dinner table, Undine shows her frankness and innocence, or ignorance, depending on the standard of judgment, in her conversation with Mr. Dagonet, Ralph's grandfather, on Mabel Lipscomb's divorce:

> . . . "I guess Mabel'll get a divorce pretty soon," she added, desiring, for personal reasons, to present Mrs. Lipscomb as favourably as possible.
>
> Mr. Dagonet's handsome eyebrows drew together. "A divorce? H'm--that's bad. Has he been misbehaving himself?"
>
> Undine looked innocently surprised. "Oh, I guess not. They like each other well enough. But he's been a disappointment to her. He isn't in the right set, and I think Mabel realizes she'll never really get anywhere till she gets rid of him." (p. 84)

Divorce, a controversial issue, is viewed differently by Ralph's mother, Mrs. Marvell, and Undine. For Mrs. Marvell, who represents New York society, "a divorced woman is still--thank heaven!--at a decided

disadvantage" (p. 85). Undine, however, perceives this issue from the Apex perspective: "If a girl marries a man who don't come up to what she expected, people consider it's her credit to want to change" (p. 85). As the story proceeds, this issue of divorce will become increasingly important. Undine scandalously applies for divorce from Ralph Marvell, her upper-class New York husband, and from Raymond de Chelles, her aristocratic French husband, because they cannot come up to her expectations, especially her material expectations.

None of Undine's marriages is based on love. Her rush to make Ralph marry her before the scheduled date is caused by her fear that Elmer Moffatt will reveal their previous secret marriage in Apex City and thus make her lose the chance to enter higher society. During her honeymoon with Ralph, Undine shows her selfish practicality twice. First, when Ralph romantically suggests driving back by moonlight from Lecceto, she replies: "It might be nice--but where could we get anything to eat?" (p. 115) Later, in France when the newly wed couple run out of money because Mr. Spragg cannot afford to send them more, it is Undine who makes "the practical suggestion" that Ralph should ask Laura Fairford, his sister, for help (p. 129). Undine always finds her way out. She is indifferent to her father's misfortune and insensitive to Ralph's hurt feelings.

Undine's conflict with Ralph begins with their honeymoon trip. Ralph prefers the peace and quiet of Siena, but Undine loves the crowds of pleasure-seeking people at St. Moritz. Other conflicts and arguments gradually follow. Undine's choice of friends--for example, the Baroness Adelschein, "a Russian lady of cosmopolitan notoriety" (p. 125)--annoys Ralph. When he warns her about her unsuitable choice, however, Undine haughtily replies, "Well, I guess I don't need anybody to do that [to choose

her friends for her]: I can do it myself" (p. 126). Though Ralph tries to point out that Undine is ignorant of the society's conventions and that she is "on the wrong track," Undine stubbornly maintains, "No one's ever yet gone any farther with me than I wanted!" (p. 127) It is clear that the lack of understanding between Undine and Ralph emerges from their difference in background. Even worse, Undine is too insensitive and too self-centered to listen to Ralph.

One of Undine's most careless and inconsiderate actions in her marriage with Ralph is her having Ralph's family relics--the old family ring and the pendant--reset in Paris without Ralph's knowledge. Later, when Ralph discovers it from the bill, he feels "the stab of his wife's deception" (p. 160). Undine's lies to Ralph slowly reveal themselves as their marriage proceeds to its failure.

Undine's selfishness is clearly indicated in her attitudes towards pregnancy and motherhood. When she discovers that she is pregnant, instead of being happy, Undine worries about her looks and regrets the loss of opportunities to wear fashionable Paris clothes in New York. When Ralph says that he is sorry for her illness, she bursts out:

> "Sorry--you're sorry? <u>You're</u> sorry? Why, what earthly difference will it make to <u>you</u>?" She drew back a few steps and lifted her slender arms from her sides. "Look at me--see how I look--how I'm going to look! <u>You</u> won't hate yourself more and more every morning when you get up and see yourself in the glass! <u>Your</u> life's going on just as usual! But what 's mine going to be for months and months? And just as I'd been to all this bother--fagging myself to death about all these things--" her tragic gesture swept the disordered room--"just as I thought I was going home to enjoy myself, and look nice, and see people again, and have a little pleasure after all our worries--" She dropped back on the sofa with another burst of tears. "For all the good this rubbish will do me now! I loathe the very sight of it!" She sobbed with her face in her hands. (p. 143)

From the beginning, Undine hates the idea of becoming a mother and--true to form--she never fulfills this role to her son, Paul Marvell. Preoccupied with Peter Van Degen, she forgets Paul's birthday. She uses her nervous breakdown as a pretext to escape alone to Europe, leaving Paul in the care of Ralph and his family. After divorcing Ralph, Undine is given custody of her son, but she never wants to have Paul with her while she is enjoying herself in Europe. When she needs a large amount of money to pronounce the "annulment of marriage" with Ralph so that she can marry the Comte Raymond de Chelles--a Roman Catholic aristocrat--Undine uses Paul as an instrument to get the money from Ralph: she will let her son stay with Ralph in return for a very large amount.

Undine's affair with Peter Van Degen begins after she tires of her marriage with Ralph. Though already married to Clare Dagonet, Ralph's cousin, Peter flirts with other women. Like Undine, he marries a member of the established class just for status in society. Undine is attracted to Peter because of his wealth and his contemptuousness: "She felt the strength of Van Degen's contempt for everything he did not understand or could not buy: that was the only kind of 'exclusiveness' that impressed her" (p. 147).

After Undine's first acceptance of Peter's offer to pay the bill for her dress, she feels that she has "let herself drift on the current of their adventure" (p. 172). With a plan to end her marriage to Ralph, Undine asks for her father's financial support--the old resource--to follow Peter on his trip to Europe. As she is afraid of losing Peter, her new financial resource, Undine manipulates him by pretending to be indifferent to his departure and too proud to accept his offer to let him "straighten things out for her" (p. 173).

In Paris, Undine makes every effort to obtain a strong hold on Peter, and she seems successful at the beginning: "the attention she attracted in Paris had reawakened Van Degen's fancy, and her hold over him was stronger than when they had parted in America" (p. 209). Undine's cunning and successful manipulation of Peter are clear at the end of Book Two. She uses Laura Fairford's cable, which summons her to return because of Ralph's illness, to trick Peter into an ultimate decision to be responsible for her. Undine triumphs as Peter, with his weak character, cannot let her go; he promises: "I'll do anything you say, Undine; I'll do anything in God's world to keep you!" (p. 217)

The happiest part in Undine's life and the most cynical part of her behavior is her living secretly for two months with Peter as they travel around Europe before her divorce. Undine is happy because "for the first time in her life she had been able to buy everything she wanted" (p. 257). It is obvious that her conscience has never bothered her since her self-indulgence and egoism enable her to rationalize her action:

> . . . She had gone with him, and had lived with him for two months: she, Undine Marvell, to whom respectability was the breath of life, to whom such follies had always been unintelligible and therefore inexcusable. She had done this incredible thing, and she had done it from a motive that seemed, at the time, as clear, as logical, as free from the distorting mists of sentimentality, as any of her father's financial enterprises. It had been a bold move, but it had been as carefully calculated as the happiest Wall Street "stroke." (p. 256)

Undine's relationship with the Comte Raymond de Chelles, a conventional French aristocrat from a family of moderate fortune, begins during her second trip to Europe. Still aiming at Peter Van Degen, Undine at first flirts with Raymond only to excite Van Degen's jealousy. Later, after realizing the loss of acceptance in society as a divorcée, Undine

turns to Raymond, one of her "great admirers." By now, experienced and more mature, Undine advances her relationship with Raymond carefully. She knows of her disadvantage as a divorced woman, which makes it impossible to marry a Frenchman of position. However, Undine does not want just a secret love affair as she has had with Peter. Her attitude is directly stated: "She was determined to give up Chelles unless he was willing to marry her; and the thought of her renunciation moved her to a kind of wistful melancholy" (p. 283).

It is Raymond himself who brings the idea of the annulment of marriage to Undine. This indicates his intention to marry her despite his family's disapproval. The problem of finding the money to validate the annulment is solved, with Elmer Moffatt's help, when Undine uses her custody of Paul to obtain money from Ralph. Luckily for Undine, Ralph fails in his investment, commits suicide, and leaves Undine in a better position to marry Raymond:

> . . . Ralph Marvell's death had brought about a sudden change in her situation. She was now no longer a divorced woman struggling to obtain ecclesiastical sanction for her remarriage, but a widow whose conspicuous beauty and independent situation made her the object of lawful aspirations. (p. 330)

In Undine's opinion, Raymond is much preferable to Ralph. In addition to possessing a title, which enables Undine to be a Countess, a château, handsomeness, and popularity, Raymond is sweet and charming to her. Though he sometimes reminds her of Ralph, Undine feels, because of her own egocentricism, that he is more valuable: ". . . after her bitter two years of loneliness and humiliation it was delicious to find herself once more adored and protected" (p. 329). Now Undine has regained all the

social status and privileges of a married woman and can enter easily into respectable French aristocratic society.

Undine's disillusionment starts with the move from Paris to Saint Désert, the Chelles' estates in Burgundy, where Undine has to spend most of the time in loneliness and monotony. With the death of Raymond's father, Undine becomes a marchioness, but it means "no financial advantages" for the new marquis. Narrow-minded and lacking in generosity, Undine cannot understand her husband's concern to keep the good reputation of his family's name by paying the debt of his brother Hubert. Moreover, Raymond's resistance to their taking the premier suite of the Hôtel de Chelles in Paris during their annual spring visit annoys Undine. She selfishly wants the best for herself. Later, when this suite is given to Hubert and his rich American bride because they can provide the new electric light and heating, Undine's anger and resentment lead to an argument with Raymond in which she refuses to give him a child. When Raymond explains to her: "There are many reasons why I have to think about money. One is that you don't; and another is that I must look out for the future of our son," Undine sarcastically replies, "Oh, my dear, you'd better leave it to your brother to perpetuate the race. There'll be more room for nurseries in their apartment!" (p. 343)

What seems unbearable to Undine in the conflict with her husband is his apparent indifference to her which implies her insignificance in comparison to his family. Undine's sense of helplessness leads her to approach Raymond about their child, but, to her disappointment, he is so strong that he will not "come back" under Undine's influence. Her pride is, therefore, secretly wounded. Nevertheless, Undine never stops her malicious plan. She rebels against her mother-in-law's traditional rule of the château

about the saving of fires (p. 354). The dullness of her life makes Undine spend more, as in her youth, on clothes and whatever is necessary to maintain her beauty. The greatest mistake Undine makes is her suggestion that Ralph sell either Saint Désert to cut expenses or the historical tapesteries to provide money for her happiness. The gap between them widens as Raymond keeps repeating to Undine, "You don't understand," and as Undine taunts him, "I understand that you care for all this stuff more than you do for me, and that you'd rather see me unhappy and miserable than touch one of your great-grandfather's arm-chairs" (p. 359).

Undine's anger grows because she cannot hurt Raymond with her "old weapons of aggression." Although she finally uses the suggestion of their separation as the ultimate weapon with which to wound him, Raymond's reply--"It's one of the things we don't do"--is, for Undine, "like the slamming of an iron door in her face" (p. 359).

The climax of the couple's conflict comes when Undine, in return for Raymond's refusal to pay her bills, tries to sell the Boucher tapestries to a dealer. In their argument, Undine clings to the same self-centered reasons. She has to get some money for a better life after economizing for a long time; she wants to send Paul to school; she wants to ask her friends to dinner. Undine does not at all understand Raymond's fury which bursts out in an insult not only to her but to all American women who marry French aristocrats:

> "Ah, that's your answer--that's all you feel when you lay hands on things that are sacred to us!" . . . "And you're all alike," he exclaimed, "every one of you. You come among us from a country we don't know, and can't imagine, a country you care for so little that before you've been a day in ours you've forgotten the very house you were born in--if it wasn't torn down before you knew it! 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--you come from hotels as big as towns, and from towns as flimsy as paper, where the streets haven't had time to be named, and the buildings are demolished before they're dry, and the people are as proud of changing as we are of holding to what we have--and we are 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!" (p. 370)

This passage indicates the Frenchman's attitude towards how Americans think about matters of culture. The exaggerations show how Raymond's fury extends from his wife as an individual to her whole country and to all Americans. Inconsiderate and insensitive as Undine is, it is impossible for her to understand Raymond's point of view. Therefore, it is not surprising that Undine divorces him easily after finding a better financial resource in Elmer Moffatt.

Undine's two marriages--the first and the fourth--with Elmer Moffatt, a Mid-Western businessman who becomes successful in New York, probably show her undeveloped character from adolescence to womanhood. The first marriage, a hidden and hasty one, had lasted only two weeks. Before that she had already been engaged to Millard Bunch, an ordinary Apex City man, but she had suddenly changed her mind after a passionate and swift romance with Elmer. The first marriage took place without her parents' approval, and Undine was "hauled back" to Apex since Elmer was powerless to fight the authoritative and influential Mr. Spragg. Later in Undine's recollection of her "brief adventure" with Elmer in Apex, it is clear that she was attracted to young Elmer because he was gallant, bold, and practical. Though he failed in the townspeople's eyes because he got drunk and acquired a scandalous reputation by walking openly with a prostitute on Sunday, Undine had sympathy and passionate feelings for his being rejected by the society, and thus she married him.

The similarities between Undine and Elmer, both Mid-Westerners struggling their way into New York upper-class society, are obvious. As a man, Elmer uses business as an instrument to gain wealth, success, and respectability. As a woman, Undine uses her charm and beauty to marry "the right man" who can provide her with money, amusement, and respectability. Undine, Elmer, and Peter Van Degen are in the same group of the opportunistic "nouveaux riches," or the "Invaders," in Ralph's term, of the Old New York tribe--the established rich.

The relationship between Undine and Elmer is a long-term one, and each benefits from the other. After the first marriage ends, neither of them feels resentment. Elmer, however, uses the secret of their marriage to blackmail Mr. Spragg and make Undine promise to help back him in business. Undine keeps her promise by introducing Elmer to her husband as an old Apex friend. Undine also helps Elmer, however, for her own personal benefit: with Elmer's help, Ralph can be successful in business and afford to send her for a European vacation.

Elmer's revelation to Ralph about Undine's first marriage is not intentional or malicious. It comes about when Ralph challenges Elmer in anger for the latter's insulting tone in reference to Undine:

> "Look here, Moffatt," he said , getting to his feet, "the fact that I've been divorced from Mrs. Marvell doesn't authorize anyone to take that tone to me in speaking of her."
> Moffatt met the challenge with a calm stare under which there were dawning signs of surprise and interest. "That so?" Well, if that's the case I presume I ought to feel the same way: I've been divorced from her myself." (pp. 320-1)

Elmer is, therefore, not a completely villainous character. His achievement in business, which revives Undine's interest in him, shows that he has finally fulfilled his materialistic ambition. As Undine's

estimate of people is based on their ability to get what they want, she admires his financial success. After meeting Elmer as "the greatest American collector" who is interested in buying the Chelles' tapestries, Undine identifies herself with him:

> . . . Here was some one who spoke her language, who knew her meanings, who understood instinctively all the deep-seated wants for which her acquired vocabulary had no terms; and as she talked she once more seemed to herself intelligent, eloquent and interesting. (p. 365)

Other good characteristics evident in Elmer are his kindness and his sincerity towards Undine and her son. Despite the profit he also gets in return, he generously gives Undine some of his advice, for example, about the custody of Paul and how to get a large sum of money to pay for the annulment of the marriage. When Undine suggests that they have a secret affair since the French consider marriage "a business contract" (p. 386), Elmer offers her an honorable way out of her unhappiness by marrying him:

> "Look here, Undine, if I'm to have you again I don't want to have you that way. . . . you were my wife once, and you were my wife first--and if you want to come back you've got to come that way: not slink through the back way when there's no one watching, but walk in by the front door, with your head up, and your Main Street look." (pp. 387-8)

As Undine is the most important character of The Custom Of the Country, I have focused on her thus far and considered other minor characters in relation to her. Many critics do not regard Undine as a heroine in the traditional sense, but she is undoubtedly the novel's most outstanding and vivid female character. An extremely "new" or modern woman with some far from admirable qualities, Undine does not attract the reader's compassion. At the end, Wharton portrays her as a materially successful woman who is still dissatisfied with her present husband, who

lacks "gentlemanly" qualities, and with herself for being a divorced woman and thus unable to become an ambassadress. Wharton characterizes Undine as a woman who fulfills her social ambitions by whatever means available.

If Undine is the female protagonist of the novel, her male counterpart is certainly Ralph Marvell. Like most of Wharton's heroes or male protagonists, Ralph is a highly idealistic but essentially conventional man. Though he is an upper-class New York gentleman with a distinguished family background, Ralph tries to modernize himself according to his ideals. The most significant conflict in Ralph's mind concerns the consciousness of classes:

> Small, cautious, middle-class, had been the ideals of aboriginal New York; but it suddenly struck the young man that they were singularly coherent and respectable as contrasted with the chaos of indiscriminate appetites which made up its modern tendencies. He too had wanted to be "modern," had revolted, half-humorously, against the restrictions and exclusions of the old code. . . . (p. 71)

Ralph's sense that the new class, the "vulgar" newly rich, is trying to take possession of New York from the aboriginals indicates both his conventionality and perceptivity. He views the marriage between the two groups in business terms of buying and selling:

> . . . Marry--but whom, in the name of light and freedom? The daughters of his own race sold themselves to the Invaders; the daughters of the Invaders bought their husbands as they bought an opera-box. It ought all to have been transacted on the Stock Exchange. . . . (p. 74)

This idea stems from the marriage of Ralph's cousin Clare Dagonet, of a traditional family, to the materially successful Peter Van Degen, one of the Invaders. He sees Undine as a daughter of an Invader using her father's wealth to buy everything.

Ralph's idealism is most clearly indicated in his intention to marry Undine "to save her from 'Van Degen and Van Degenism'" (p. 76). He has the romantic vision of helping Invaders like the Spraggs whom he mistakenly considers unaffected, plain, and innocent. The honorable married life Ralph gives Undine is not the only thing she wants, however. Her happiness depends on luxuries for which Ralph never has sufficient income, even though he unwillingly takes up his profession as a lawyer to make more money in an effort to satisfy Undine's insatiable needs.

Artistic, intellectual, sensitive, and romantic, Ralph has a world of his own. He tries to be a writer but is unable to finish his writings. All of Ralph's abstract qualities are represented in his boyhood image of a cave as his inner world--a secret and private place--the threshold which Clare and, later, Undine are seen as reaching (p. 72). During the honeymoon, Ralph romantically sees Undine as the muse of his creative writings though he has learned from Mrs. Spragg the real origin of her name--a hair-waver trademark used in her father's business (p. 75).

As Undine identifies herself with Elmer Moffatt, Ralph finds himself identifying with Clare Van Degen. In Ralph's suffering from the unhappy marriage with Undine, he finds comfort in Clare's sympathy and in "her shy unspoken understanding." Clare is the opposite of Undine:

> . . . After all, he [Ralph] and she [Clare] were of the same blood and had the same traditions. She was light and frivolous, without strength of will or depth of purpose; but she had the frankness of her foibles, and she would never have lied to him or traded on his tenderness. (p. 161)

Clare's tender feelings for Ralph are expressed more clearly than Ralph's for her. Her marriage to Peter Van Degen does not prevent her from showing Ralph her kindness and understanding nor from giving him

encouragement and financial help. Clare warns Ralph about Peter's influence on Undine from the beginning. She is always present to help him in time of troubles. Whereas Undine forgets her own son's birthday, Clare remembers and gives Paul an expensive present (p. 160). Also, it is Clare who detects Undine's real purpose in claiming Paul's custody. She explains to an "incredulous" Ralph how Undine needs that sum of money for the annulment. Moreover, Clare offers to help him with her Dagonet money.

While Undine and Clare are both characterized as strong and active, Ralph, in contrast, shows himself incapable of action. Portrayed as an intelligent, delicate, and sensitive man, he is apparently too weak to survive the crudeness of life. His suicide at the end of Book Four results from his failures which are too much for him to endure. He cannot bear the fact that he has lost the money he has borrowed in the investment with Elmer Moffatt, whom he relies on totally. Without the money, he cannot keep Paul with him. In addition, his discovery about Undine's first marriage and her lies to him--the bitterest truth he finds out from Elmer Moffatt--wound him terribly as is evident in his thought before the suicide: "She had lied to him--lied to him from the first. . . there hadn't been a moment when she hadn't lied to him, deliberately, ingeniously and inventively" (p. 324).

Undine's influence on Ralph is always on his mind, to the very moment that he puts the muzzle of the revolver against his head. His last thought: "My wife. . . this will make it all right for her. . ." seems to indicate that this final action, perhaps the most vigorous in his life, is dedicated to Undine who contributes most importantly to his death.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

Many critics of American literature have rated Edith Wharton as one of the outstanding writers of the twentieth century. Despite previous neglect due to misreading and misinterpretation, Wharton's fiction has been acknowledged for its vivid and effective portrayals of American people and the mastery of her language and style. Technically, she is not comparable to the modernists who were great stylistic innovators because she rarely introduced obviously new techniques into her fiction. Her use of irony, however, was far more sophisticated than the use of that device in most fiction contemporary with hers.

One way to understand Wharton's uniqueness and distinctiveness is through the analysis of her fictional characters, especially the women who are very complicated and interestingly dominant. More important, Wharton's characterization of these fictional women reflects her attitudes towards the social positions and problems of American women at the turn of the century. As a woman writer who had modern, liberal ideas about the "new" woman but who had been reared in a conservative culture and who still cherished certain aspects of the "old" woman, Wharton had definite ambivalence toward her women characters. She did not explicitly express her attitudes toward her contemporary American women in her novels but, in one of her non-fictional writings, French Ways and Their Meaning (1919), Wharton discusses the "New Frenchwomen" and compares them with American women. This chapter is the most open criticism about her female contemporaries and contributes significantly to an understanding of her women characters.

To Wharton, the major difference between the French and American women is their level of maturity. She considers Frenchwomen "grown up" whereas the American women are still "in the kindergarten":

> . . . The world she [the average American woman] lives in is exactly like the most improved and advanced and scientifically equipped Montessori-method baby-school. . . . a baby world where, shut up together in the most improved hygienic surroundings, a number of infants noisily develop their individuality. (p. 101)

Wharton sees American women as infants because of their acculturation. In her view, American women are handicapped by their lack of freedom, activity, and authority which can be developed and achieved through interactions with men (p. 102). Unlike middle-class Frenchwomen, Wharton points out, American women are not their husbands' business partners (p. 103); they do not voluntarily participate in their husbands' jobs and thus they do not grow up. Wharton's admiration for Frenchwomen with regard to this matter is clearly stated:

> . . . it is this practical, personal and daily participation in her husband's job that makes the Frenchwoman more grown up than others. She has a more interesting and more living life, and therefore she develops more quickly. (pp. 106-7)

Wharton supports the participation of men and women in all kinds of activities because she believes that such interactions will lead to "real maturity" for both sexes:

> . . . the great mass of men and women grow up and reach real maturity only through their contact with the material realities of living, with business, with industry, with all the great bread-winning activities; but the growth and maturing take place <u>in the intervals between these activities</u>: and in lives where there are no such intervals there will be no real growth. (p. 109)

Owing to these differences, the Frenchwoman has control of French life as "a business woman, a mother, and an artist" (p. 111). In comparison, the American woman, because of the inherited Puritan hypocritical tradition which obstructs open social relations between men and women, becomes retarded in her growth, futilely and unsuccessfully developing her individuality "in the void, without the checks, the stimulus, and the discipline that comes of contact with the stronger masculine individuality" (p. 103).

In addition, Wharton claims that the society's acceptance of a "balanced power" between grown-up men and women plays a very important role in women's development. In France, there are free and open social relations between men and women, but in America, the long hypocrisy of the Puritan heritage has hindered frank and sincere relationships between the two sexes to the disadvantage of women. Marriage also accounts for the differences: American women cease their roles as social factors or as influences on men on their wedding days, but Frenchwomen become social factors or full participants in society only when they get married (p. 116). To Wharton, this difference shows American women's social limitations as opposed to the "extraordinary social freedom" of Frenchwomen.

This chapter on the "New Frenchwomen" indicates not only Wharton's negative opinions on the development of the American women but also the idealistic model she found in the Frenchwomen. Wharton admired the post-World-War-I Frenchwomen because of their rapid and practical development in individuality whereas the American women still clung to their immature world. Unlike her female contemporaries, Wharton herself was a mature woman. Her inner conflicts between a traditional upbringing and her struggle for independence were indicated by her mental breakdown

in 1894. Dr. S. Weir Mitchell's treatment (advising her to write) successfully cured her illness and led to her recovery of self-confidence and, later, to independence. Moreover, Wharton's devotion to her writing career, her divorce from Edward Wharton, her participation in intellectual male company in Europe, and her expatriation in France until her death all show her as an independent and mature woman. Wharton's frank criticism of American women in French Ways and Their Meaning reveals her sophisticated and advanced ideas and suggests a new way for self-development to American women.

According to Wharton, being conservative and keeping to their old Puritan heritage, American women were infantile, immature, and ignorant of the limitations they confronted. Not totally their fault, Wharton found that social inequality and lack of independence were inherent in the "old" or conventional American women. She suggests that, like Frenchwomen, American women should realize their disadvantaged positions and try to develop themselves into the "new" and more mature women.

Twelve years before French Ways and Their Meaning, Wharton's opinions about the Frenchwomen in her novella, Madame de Treymes (1907), were slightly different, but her views on the American women were the same. The development of the Frenchwoman from "old" to "new " is clear in Wharton's characterization of Madame de Treymes, a sophisticated and powerful Frenchwoman, as contrasted with Fanny, or Madame de Malrive, an innocent and immature American woman married to a French aristocrat.

Set in Paris and told from the point of view of John Durham, the male protagonist, the novella concerns his intention to marry his old New York friend, Fanny, after her divorce from her French husband. The most

important and influential character, as the title suggests, is, however, Madame de Treymes, Fanny's sister-in-law.

Madame Christiane de Treymes is "the most powerful member of the group" (pp. 30-1) which has control over Fanny's plan of divorce. Refined, civilized, graceful, and handsome, she first impresses John because of her personality: "She was a beauty, if beauty, instead of being restricted to the cast of the face, is a pervasive attribute informing the hands, the voice, the gestures, the very fall of a flounce and tilt of a feather" (pp. 39-40). However, despite her power and personality, Madame de Treymes is an unhappy woman whose extra-marital affair with Prince d'Armillac and financial support of him cause a scandal. In addition, as a Catholic, her inability to divorce adds to her unhappiness.

Madame de Treymes' cleverness and sophistication is obvious in her understanding of John's purpose in giving a lot of money to "her ventes de charité" (p. 48) in order to enter into her social circle. Moreover, straightforward and frank, she abruptly asks him, at their first meeting, about his wish to marry her sister-in-law. From the first intimate conversation with John, Madame de Treymes reveals herself to be a sympathetic friend of Fanny, but, more important, she is a loyal member of her family and a religious person especially on the issue of divorce, forbidden by the Catholic Church. Despite her compassion and understanding of Fanny's situation, Madame de Treymes cleverly and deliberately avoids John's two important questions concerning the divorce:

> ". . . what I wish to know is, what position your family would take if Madame de Malrive should sue for a divorce." . . .
> Madame de Treymes seemed in no haste to answer; but after a pause of reflection she said, not unkindly: "My poor Fanny might have asked me that herself." (pp. 66-7)

Another unanswered question is whether or not Monsieur de Malrive will oppose the divorce. This Madame de Treymes avoids by suggesting that they meet and talk again later. The evasion and suspension of the crucial matter indicate her sophistication and ability to act; she is the person who has control of the situation.

The two traps Madame de Treymes sets for John show her malicious maturity. First, she asks him for financial help to her family in return for her support of Fanny's divorce:

> . . . "If you would [help]. . . if you would! Oh, there is nothing I would not do for you. I have still a great deal of influence with my mother, and what my mother commands we all do. I could help you--I am sure I could help you; but not if my own situation were known. . . ." (p. 82)

Failing in her trick to sell John her influence or to make him bribe her with his money, Madame de Treymes cunningly continues with her plan by helping Fanny get the divorce, showing her kindness and understanding to her sister-in-law. Her second trap is almost successful because of Fanny's innocent faith and John's ignorance. Madame de Treymes considers her support for Fanny's divorce from her brother a service for which she has the right to be repaid, apart from John's later offer of money.

The puzzle of Madame de Treymes' ironic words--"it is in the contemplation of your happiness that I have found my reward" (p. 115)--is clarified because she has discovered that John is one of the "good people--just simply, courageously <u>good</u>!" (p. 128). It is John's innocence, sincerity, and esteem in his love for Fanny that make Madame de Treymes reveal her secret plan. She knows that John is going to be in "horrible misery" as a result of the trick. The consent to the divorce, despite the

French family's abhorrence, will lead to Fanny's marriage to John. Consequently, this marriage, according to French law, will give the father custody of the son and bring young de Malrive back "to his race, his religion, his true place in the order of things" (p. 136), in Madame de Treymes' words. Since Fanny loves her son devotedly, she will not marry John if that marriage means the loss of her son. Madame de Treymes reveals the family's plan to John because she expects to use his silence as a means to get hold of the boy. However, she underestimates John's morality .

Madame de Treymes' principal purpose is to keep the boy with the French family. She considers the benefit of the family more important than Fanny's feelings. She points this out to John at the beginning in her distinction between the Americans and the French: "You consider the individual--we think of the family" (p. 135).

Madame de Treymes' failure at the end is not due to her decreasing power or weak character. Rather, it is due to her humanitarian feelings toward Fanny and John. Despite her personal sufferings from her scandalous affair with the bankrupt prince and her inability to divorce her husband, Madame de Treymes still tries to satisfy the family's need to the best of her ability. Thus, her character can be evaluated from different perspectives. To the Americans, Madame de Treymes may appear a cunning, malicious, and dangerously sophisticated lady who takes advantage of innocent people like Fanny and John. However, for her family, she must be a courageous and powerful member who helps protect the family's unity.

Compared with Madame de Treymes, Fanny de Malrive plays a minor role. An American lady from the upper-class New York society, Fanny

Frisbee has married a French aristocrat, has a son, and leads an unhappy life in Paris. In addition to her decision to divorce, Fanny's determination is evident in her intention to live in France because of her devotion to her son. Possessive and conventional, she wants "to obtain complete control" of young de Malrive and to perform the duty of a good mother.

A weak point in Fanny's character is her tendency to trust people too easily. After fifteen years of unhappy life in France, Fanny is still innocent and optimistic. She ignorantly believes that her sister-in-law is on her side, trying to help her. Immature and ignorant, Fanny becomes a victim. She does not seem to learn much about the sophisticated "civilized" world symbolized by Madame de Treymes.

The portrayals of the Frenchwoman and American woman in Madame de Treymes indicate Wharton's attitudes towards the "old" and the prospectively "new" women. Innocent, ignorant, conventional, and unsophisticated, Fanny represents most American women, the "old" or traditional type who is rarely developed and easily becomes a victim. On the other hand, Madame de Treymes, though partly "old" because of her conservative idea about her own marriage and loyalty to the family, is a mature and developing character. Her ability to use her will power and her courage to act show her potentiality to develop into the "new" woman. Conscious of the Frenchwoman's lack of freedom owing to tradition and the Catholic Church, Madame de Treymes wants to liberate herself from her position. In brief, she is growing up into an adult while Fanny is still a child.

Like Madame de Treymes, Wharton was conventionally brought up to be the "old" type but became conscious of women's inequality and lack of freedom in all aspects of life. She did not belong to the Feminist

Movement, but many of her works can be viewed through its trends. However, as an upper-class lady of old New York tradition, Wharton cherished certain aspects of the "old" and practiced conventional manners in the society, all of which resulted in what critics see in her works as nostalgic elements. The ambiguities usually found in Wharton's fictions manifest her ambivalent attitudes toward the changing status of women, both real and fictional.

Categorizing Wharton's female characters into "old" or "new" women provides an opportunity to study her major works in all their important aspects: characterization, plot, style, subject, and language. Grouping the major women characters into the categories, however, is not easy. Because of Wharton's ambivalent attitudes towards them, I found it difficult putting them definitely into the categories of the "new" and "old". For example, Madame de Treymes, Fulvia Vivaldi, and Lily Bart are "old" women who can become "new" ones. Though their beliefs about love, marriage, and family are conventional, their consciousness of the limitations in society and the lack of freedom for women prove them to be potentially "new," or modern in ideas. This first group of characters contrasts with the traditionally "old" who stay strongly attached to their inherited beliefs. The second group consists of Anna Leath, Bessy Westmore, May Welland, Fanny de Malrive, and Zeena Frome. Wharton portrays these women as dependent and unaware of their situation. Also, the author presents their ignorant "innocence" to show how emotionally immature these women are. They futilely use their strong will to fight other women and achieve nothing constructive.

On the other hand, Wharton's portrayals of the "new" women also reflect contradictions. Undine Spragg, Charity Royall, and Mattie Silver

are "new" women because of their powerful decisions, bold actions, and liberal ideas about family life for women. They all struggle for survival, for the life they wish to have. However, these three women are not really free. Their lack of freedom and their dependence are clear at the ends of the stories. Undine is dependent on her husbands who enable her to be accepted in upper-class society. Charity becomes dependent on Lawyer Royall, her guardian and benefactor, by submissively marrying him. Mattie, though courageous and determined, has to depend on both Ethan and Zeena after the suicide attempt.

The last group of female protagonists consists of Ellen Olenska, Sophy Viner, and Justine Brent who are all unquestionably "new" women. With strong will, they bravely fight sufferings caused by love and marriage. Most important, these three protagonists can successfully keep their independence though they have to lose their happiness and love in return. With freedom, the future lives of Justine and Sophy are still questionable, but Ellen proves to be a successful "new" woman. Probably, Wharton discovered her solution for the "new" woman at the time she reached the peak of her writing career.

In reaching this conclusion, I would also point out that much more study of Wharton's women characters remains to be done from other points of view than the one I have taken. Her later novels have many interesting and well-developed characters who have not received sufficient attention. Most of her short stories are also worth more attention than they have received: they are concise, well-plotted, and filled with outstanding characterization. As Wharton's work and talents are more fully examined she will be increasingly recognized as one of the major American authors. One significant basis of that recognition will be her serious, complex, and

sensitive portrayal of the emerging "new" American woman against the background of her time.

NOTES

CHAPTER 1

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[5]Howe, p. 9.

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[7]Irving Howe, "A Reading of The House of Mirth," in Edith Wharton: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Irving Howe (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p. 122.

[8]Howe, p. 126.

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[12]Kazin, p. 90.

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[34]Lawson, p. 95.

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[40]Wolfe, p. 20.

[41]Wolfe, p. 130.

[42]Wolfe, pp. 35-6.

[43]Wolfe, pp. 37-8.

[44]Wolfe, p. 41.

[45]Wolfe, p. 57.

[46]Wolfe, p. 60.

[47]Jean Turner, "The Ideology of Women in the Fiction of Edith Wharton 1899-1920," Diss. University of Wisconsin 1975, p. 20.

[48]Turner, p. 142.

[49]Turner, p. 170.

[50]Turner, p. 221.

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[52]Turner, p. 303.

[53]Carol Wershoven, The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1982), p. 17.

[54]Wershoven, p. 16.

[55]Wershoven, p. 58.

[56]Wershoven, p. 73.

[57]Wershoven, p. 93.

[58]Wershoven, p. 98.

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[64]Smith-Rosenberg, p. 200.

[65]Larzer Ziff, The American 1890's: Life and Times of a Lost Generation (New York: Viking, 1966), p. 51.

[66]William Chafe, The American Woman (New York: Oxford, 1972), p. 49.

[67]Chafe, p. 49.

[68]Chafe, p. 94.

[69]Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," American Quarterly 18, No. 2, pt. 1, (Summer, 1966), 152.

[70]Welter, p. 174.

CHAPTER 2

[1]Edith Wharton, A Backward Glance (New York: Appleton-Century, 1934), p. 207.

[2]Walton and Wolff see the novel as a tragedy; Tuttleton and Auchincloss call it the novel of manners; Trilling considers it a class novel; Lewis regards it a survey of the comedie humaine, American style; and Ammons calls it an economic novel.

[3]Wolff, p. 130.

[4]Turner, p. 282.

[5]Turner, p. 274.

[6]Lawson, p. 32.

[7]Ammons, p. 42.

[8]Richard Warrington Lewis, Edith Wharton: A Biography (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 155.

[9]Lewis, p. 155.

[10]Wolfe, p. 25.

[11]Wolfe, pp. 24-5.

[12]Ammons, p. 39.

[13]Walton, p. 52.

[14]Walton, p. 52.

[15]Ammons, p. 32.

[16]Ammons, p. 38.

[17]Walton, p. 23.

[18]Walton, p. 26.

[19]Tuttleton, p. 125.

[20]McDowell, p. 49.

CHAPTER 3

[1]Turner uses Nevius' terms, "feminist heroine," in her discussion of Justine Brent, p. 251.

[2]Lewis, p. 326.

[3]McDowell, p. 59.

[4]Ammons, p. 80.

[5]Walton, p. 70.

[6]Turner, p. 306.

[7]Lawson, p. 61.

[8]Wershoven, p. 98.

[9]Wolff uses this phrase in her discussion of Wharton's heroines.

[10]This phrase is further discussed by Ammons in her analysis of Wharton's female protagonists.

[11]Wolfe, pp. 38-9.

[12]Turner, p. 310.

[13]Ammons, p. 91.

[14]Turner, p. 315.

[15]Lawson, p. 59; Wershoven, pp. 108-9.

[16]Wershoven, p. 104.

[17]Turner, p. 310.

[18]Turner, p. 309.

[19]Lawson, p. 59.

[20]Lawson, p. 63.

CHAPTER 4

[1]Wershoven, p. 78.

[2]Lewis, p. 155.

[3]Wolff, p. 314.

[4]Lewis, p. 424.

[5]Lawson also finds that though loving and critical, the novel is not "an indulgence in fictional nostalgia, pure and simple" (p. 15). He concludes that the story provides a criticism of old New York, "a vanished society."

[6]McDowell, p. 92.

[7]Turner, p. 286.

[8]Wolfe, p. 53.

[9]Wolfe interprets this image as the "blindness of young women of that era" (p. 55).

[10]McDowell, pp. 98-9.

[11]Ammons, p. 147.

[12]Ammons, p. 48.

[13]Wershoven, p. 78.

[14]Wershoven, p. 76.

[15]Wolff, p. 316

[16]Ammons, p. 146.

[17]Wolfe, p. 57.

[18]Lewis, p. 431.

[19]Lewis, p. 431..

[20]Walton, p. 130.

[21]Walton, p. 137.

[22]Wereshoven, p. 90.

CHAPTER 5

[1]Lawson, p. 72.

[2]McDowell, p. 68; Ammons, p. 71.

[3]Lewis, p. 311.

[4]Wharton's introduction to Ethan Frome, p. v.

[5]Introduction, p. ix.

[6]Wolff, p. 183.

[7]Lawson, p. 72.

[8]Walton, p. 80.

[9]Ammons, p. 68.

[10]Ammons, p. 67.

[11]Ammons, p. 64.

[12]Ammons, p. 65.

[13]Walton, p. 83.

[14]Wolff, p. 170.

[15]Wolff, p. 183.

[16]Wolff, p. 184.

[17]McDowell, p. 66.

[18]McDowell, p. 66.

CHAPTER 6

[1]Marilyn French's introduction to Summer (New York: Berkley Books, 1981), p. xxix.

[2]Wolff,p. 292.

[3]Wolff,p. 267.

[4]Walton, p. 84.

[5]Ammons, p. 132.

[6]Ammons, p. 134.

[7]McDowell, p. 70.

[8]McDowell, p. 71.

[9]McDowell, p. 71.

[10]Ammons, p. 133.

[11]Ammons, p. 137.

[12]French, p. xiv.

[13]French, p. xliv.

[14]French, p. xliv.

[15]Walton, p. 86.

[16]Ammons, p. 139.

[17]Ammons, p. 139.

CHAPTER 7

[1]Wershoven, p. 73.

[2]In Lewis' Edith Wharton: A Biography (p. 490), her five personal favorite fictions are Hudson River Bracketed (1929), The Gods Arrive (1932), The Custom of the Country (1913), Summer (1917), and The Children (1928).

[3]Ammons, p. 102.

[4]Ammons, p. 111.

[5]McDowell, p. 80.

[6]Lawson, pp. 47-8.

[7]Wolff, p. 233.

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