THE BUSINESS-MARRIAGE PROPOSAL
IN EDITH WHARTON'S NEW YORK NOVELS

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I. Here and Beyond

Introduction

The end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century were marked by an insurgence of literature that was experimental either in form or content. Leading into the era of Modernist literature were innovations in music, literature, art, social values, as well as an increase in economic gains. With the emergence of artistic and technical innovation, the phrase "make it new," coined by William Dean Howells, lent a feeling of optimism to America. New technology such as air travel, moving picture shows, regular radio broadcasts, and increased industrialization were more than the latest inventions; they represented possibilities for further innovations and endless opportunities for common people. Additionally, the modernist era opened up avenues to women that had previously been closed. Passed in 1920, the nineteenth amendment afforded women more political power with the right to vote. The strength of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the largest women's organization of its time, contributed greatly to the adoption of the eighteenth amendment, which forbade the consumption of alcohol. It was this same time of burgeoning political power for women that female American authors began to impact the literary world. Female writers such as Willa Cather and Sarah Orne Jewett invited readers to acquaint themselves with female characters who derived strength from a maternal, nurturing nature rather than characters who were plagued by the traditional rugged, unforgiving terrain popularized by the Naturalist movement in literature. Other female writers, such as Gertrude Stein and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, were more political, imparting strength and independence to the female character of American fiction.

However, every picture has two sides. The widespread inventiveness of the 1920s and 1930s resulted in a time of not only optimism but also an increase of skepticism. It

was an era of uncertainty and experimentation. Coupled with the aftermath of World War I and the influx of change in society and industry, America could be a very threatening place. The safety of tradition was threatened by a hectic menagerie of new images and roles for men and women. Women were more commonly seen in the work force, many replacing men who fought in the war. They felt more confident to explore the cities and to seek entertainment without chaperones. As always, women's clothing served as a sign of the times, and the trend of dressing in pants and shorter skirts was representative of the drive toward women's liberation. The established role of women in American society was metamorphosing to allow women more options, yet this was a change which was not enthusiastically accepted by many male contemporaries. Writer D.H. Lawrence's anxiety about the transformation of women's roles and industrial progress was evident in his belief that "women had in effect conspired with the new technology to render their male contemporaries socially and even sexually impotent." (Gilbert and Gubar, Norton Anthology 1230). The new American woman, whose strength and independence were highly touted by female American writers, was commonly seen in a negative light by America's modernist male authors.

The disillusionment of modernist writers such as Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and F. Scott Fitzgerald resulted in the creation of a new type of female American character in literature. She was a sexually liberated woman whose personality might be decadent, dangerous, merciless, faithless, narcissistic, or she might embody any combination of these destructive qualities. Whatever mélange of characteristics the modernist heroine took on, she invariably propelled the events of the novel and caused the reader to empathize with those characters left in her wake. The authors' intent in creating this character was, in part, to cast a moral light on the times by showing the negative impact that such a woman might have on others who were wrapped up in her life. This is not to suggest that Hemingway, Faulkner, and Fitzgerald were revivalists of

the repressed ideals of the Victorian era; instead, their works serve as a sign of the times. The men who filled their novels with a sense of newfound opportunity and technical progress also utilized their fiction to address the complications which accompanied influx of progress. Specifically, Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby, Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises, James' Portrait of a Lady, Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury, and Dreiser's Sister Carrie presented a fictitious type of character whose feminine attributes and power combined to produce disastrous results.

Of all of these male and female writers who wrote fiction between 1880 and 1920 in an effort to reflect their personal agendas, one writer stands out among her peers because she was unable to resign herself to a character type. Blending a feminine and masculine perspective, Edith Wharton combined the feminine characters of Jewett and Cather, the political personalities in Gilman's work, and the reckless females of modernist male writers in many of her novels, but especially in her New York trilogy. The novels The House of Mirth, The Custom of the Country, and The Age of Innocence presented something of a paradox because the female characters were complex and could not be typecast. Wharton's writing combined the attributes of many male and female writers of the time, yet it neither indisputably confirmed nor condemned female characters. In essence, Wharton examined gender roles and their inherent social conventions of the time with disgust, but she concurrently viewed social innovations with an equivalent distaste.

Wharton's ambiguity regarding the themes of her work were the product of the sum of her experiences growing up in elite New York society. As a member of the upper crust, she enjoyed many privileges not available to average Americans, but found that those privileges were also restricting. "The culture's ideology of woman had a radical impact on the imagination of Edith Wharton and the texts which resulted" (Schriber 159).

Within her own life, Wharton had to deal with multiple paradoxes of her own: being a working member of the leisure class, balancing feminine passivity with being the family breadwinner, being an intellectual yet domestic female, and maintaining the appearance of marital bliss despite matrimonial problems. Despite publishing forty-seven books during a sixty-year span, Wharton also struggled with the public's perception of her works.

A review of her novel, The Greater Inclination, published in the Newport Daily News exemplifies the mistaken perception that the public had about Wharton because of the image she displayed to the public by virtue of her gender and upbringing:

> One would almost imagine...that the author must have suffered and gone deep into life in order to bring up from its depths such knowledge of the world as is disclosed in her pages. And yet this is far from being the case. (Benstock, No Gifts 100)

The reviewer simply did not consider that Wharton's "imagination join[ed] her experience of being a woman to create a different perspective on the same world fictionalized by" her male contemporaries. (Schriber 158). The critics couldn't know that Wharton was anything but traditional, as the façade that Wharton presented to the public was one of a well-mannered, structured woman contented to live within the confines of society. However, critics now believe that "Edith Wharton's first thirty-five years of life were marked by forms of self-denial so dangerous that she suffered a mental illness and self-doubt of serious proportions" (Schriber 157). Always questioning her values in comparison with society's established codes gave Wharton material for her fiction, yet it paradoxically conflicted with her personal values.

This self-denial, coupled with a desire to break free from the rules that governed women of Wharton's era led Wharton to create characters who also felt ambivalent about

their situations in life. Like Wharton, her female characters "clung passionately to the conformities" (Wharton, Custom 233) of the leisure class, despite the fact that they were "the subject creature, and versed in the arts of the enslaved" (Wharton, Age 305). In each of her three New York novels, Wharton addressed the values of the "hieroglyphic world" (Wharton, Age 44) that labeled women as merchandise in the business of marriage. Her works are an indictment of her own upbringing, yet they do not present alternative solutions – they only expose disturbing results of the impact of society on women and men's lives. This is evidence that Wharton was not content to be the typical female of her times, but was not confident enough to break free from the constraints that bound her to society.

In any case, Wharton's works provide "a feminist analysis of the construction of femininity" (Gilbert and Gubar, No Man's Vol. 2, 128) that is closely intertwined with the business of marriage. This essay will attempt to examine Wharton's life and her society in conjunction with her fiction, with a specific focus on the roles that men and women played with regard to the ultimate goal of marriage. In volleying for position in society, marriage was the most ideal vehicle for success, but it required manipulation and positioning that actually broadened rather than reduced the gender gap. Ultimately, marriage became a tool of individual self-indulgence and advancement rather than the unification of two people in love.

II. A Backward Glance

The Life of Edith Wharton

In 1907, American novelist Henry James was reported to have described his long-time friend and confidante, Edith Wharton, with the following words: "the whirling princess, the great and glorious pendulum, the gyrator, the devil-dancer, the golden eagle, the Fire Bird, the Shining One, the angel of desolation or of devastation, the historic ravager" (Gilbert and Gubar, Norton Anthology 1167). It seems that that type of contradiction was something that was inherent to Edith Wharton's character. From her earliest childhood memories through her death at age seventy-five, Wharton constantly questioned her role as a woman in American society. In her autobiography, A Backward Glance, Wharton's first memory as a five year old child depicted her early immersion in and acceptance of the importance society placed on females' looks, but it also revealed that, at a young age, Wharton had an acute awareness of gender inequity and was already an insightful critic of this very idea. Reflecting on herself in the third person, as if she now, at the age of seventy-two, were no longer the same person (and indeed, she was not), Wharton explained:

> It was always an event in the little girl's life to take a walk with her father, and more particularly so today, because she had on her new winter bonnet, which was so beautiful (and so becoming) that for the first time she woke to the importance of dress, and of herself as a subject for adornment. (Wharton, Backward Glance 2)

Certainly, this realization of her role as a "subject of adornment" permeated many of her recollections through the age of twenty-seven. Two of these instances revolved around her first two meetings with Henry James, who would later give Wharton the aforementioned nicknames that would represent her paradoxical position on female roles. At their first introduction, she remembered that she did not know how to impress James in any other way than with her appearance. She wrote:

> I could hardly believe that such a privilege could befall me, and I could think of only one way of deserving it – to put on my newest Doucet dress, and try to look my prettiest...those were the principles in which I had been brought up, and it would never have occurred to me that I had anything but my youth, and my pretty frock, to commend me to the man whose shoe-strings I thought myself unworthy to unloose. I can see the dress still – and it *was* pretty;...but alas, it neither gave me the courage to speak, nor attracted the attention of the great man." (Wharton, Backward Glance 172)

The tone of this passage was almost wistful, suggesting that Wharton did not yet know how to function in the intellectual world, or any other world for that matter, except in the female sphere to which she was accustomed.

Her second meeting with James occurred within the same year that she would publish her first short story. Although she was preparing to enter a new phase of her life as a writer, she felt ill-equipped to assert herself *as* a writer – she still felt that the best thing that could recommend her to James was her femininity:

> Once more I thought: How can I make myself pretty enough for him to notice me? Well – this time I had a new hat; *a beautiful new hat!* I was almost sure it was becoming, and I felt that if he would only tell me so I might at last pluck up courage to blurt out my admiration for Daisy Miller and The Portrait of a Lady. But he noticed neither the hat nor the wearer. (Wharton, Backward Glance 172)

This was the Wharton who most likely depicted the angelic part of James' nickname, "the angel of devastation." This was the Wharton whose husband, Teddy, would affectionately call "Pussy," in reference to the docile, domesticated cat, and "Lily," after the pure and simple flower that commonly symbolized purity and fragility.

However, as Wharton added novel after novel to her oeuvre and gained multiple opportunities to examine women's roles in American society from multiple angles, she could not remain the sweet and innocent Edith Jones that society had created. Instead, her character evolved to be more masculine as she became the main breadwinner in her home and as she viewed much more of the world through the eyes of a European traveler and avid motorist. Examination of multiple European cultures certainly invited self-examination and re-evaluation of gender roles in America. In her second "New York" novel, The Custom of the Country, Wharton's observant character, Charles Bowen, certainly represented Wharton's frustration with a male-dominated world that valued women as objects of adornment instead of assets to the work world. Although Bowen was a male, it was Wharton's own voice declaring that the crux of the problem was the American belief that women were not capable of understanding business affairs:

> 'Why does the European woman interest herself so much more in what the men are doing? Because she's so important to them that they make it worth her while! She's not a parenthesis, as she is here – she's in the very middle of the picture...The emotional centre of gravity's not the same in the two hemispheres. In the effete societies it's love, in our new one it's business. In America the real *crime passionnel* is a "big steal.' (Wharton, Custom 131-132)

Comparing Americans to Europeans, Bowen placed the blame for the gender gap on Americans and their love of success in business. Through Bowen, Wharton revealed that in the older, European societies, women were not a tangential part of life; they were as central to men's lives as business affairs were, leading to greater understanding between the sexes.

It is intriguing to examine Wharton's purpose for using a male character such as Charles Bowen to be a vehicle for transmitting her views. Indeed, the male character who criticizes not only his country's customs, but his gender's perception of women gives more merit to Wharton's views. Not to be confined to a solely female sphere in her fiction or her life, Wharton was also referred to as "John," both by her brother, Harry, and her husband. The "intellectual tomboy" and "self-made man" were roles that Wharton could slip into (Gilbert and Gubar, No Man's Land 135) and were representative of the "devastation" referred to in the second part of James' nickname.

Much of this "devastation" was grounded in Wharton's dismantling of the class structure in which she was raised. Part of Wharton yearned for a life of leisure, as seen in a letter to her good friend, John Hugh Smith, in 1908 when she exclaimed that "These are indeed the moments...when one has the nostalgia of the idle, the 'wasted' hours; the hours when one was neither useful, altruistic nor industrious, & no one on earth was 'the better' for being anywhere" (Wharton, The Letters 173). Having experienced this type of life through her youth and early adult years, Wharton knew the security and benefits inherent in a life of leisure, but it was a lifestyle that could not sate her for long. In a 1914 letter to her close friend, Bernard Berenson, Wharton reflected that:

> It's very nice to be petted and feasted – but I don't see how you can stand more than two or three weeks of that queer rootless life. I felt my individuality shriveling a little every day, till I had somehow the sense of being a mere 'jeton' in a game, that hurried & purposeless hands were feverishly moving from one square to another – a kind of nightmare chess without rules or issue. (Wharton, The Letters 312)

Perhaps her unwillingness to be a pawn in a game of chess over which she had no control motivated Wharton to write about characters who mirrored the life she had lived

in Old New York society. She was, in fact, constantly pulled by her need to write literature, which served as yet another contradictory facet of her character. Wharton biographer, Shari Benstock, asserts that, "writing eased her lack of power to control her life, but it was also a source of insecurity" (Benstock, House 15). Wharton desperately wanted her fiction to be taken seriously, and though she was the first to admit that she wasn't "writing history," she explained to literary critic, Robert Bridges, in 1923 that the purpose of her fiction was "to render as vividly as possible the state of mind of various types of people" (Wharton, The Letters 463). As to the historic validity of her novels, Wharton added her belief that "inaccuracies...may be found in most of the great historical novels without detracting from the effect of truth which they produce – provided always the incidents in question threw additional light on the state of mind of the people concerned" (Wharton, The Letters 463). It was, indeed, Wharton's goal in her fiction to write about reality – her reality – but, because realist fiction at the turn of the century most commonly revolved around average, working-class people, Wharton's work was often not taken in the same realist context. This, too, frustrated her as she reported to literary critic William Crary Brownell in 1904:

> The assumption that the people I write about are not 'real' because they are not navvies & char-women, makes me feel rather hopeless. I write about what I see, what I happen to be nearest to, which is surely better than doing cowboys de chic. (Wharton, The Letters 91)

Even after the publication of her first truly successful novel, The House of Mirth, in 1905, Wharton took offense at the suggestion by critic Dr. Morgan Dix, rector of Trinity Church in New York, that The House of Mirth was not proper or "good" fiction because of its allusions to immoral actions on the part of its heroine, Lily Bart. Since Wharton was trying to make her fiction represent real life, she felt that it could only do so by "probing deep enough to get at the relation with the eternal laws" (Wharton, The Letters 91). Dix's reaction to Wharton's fiction actually validated Wharton's writing. Certainly,

the very fact that people would take offense to the immorality of a fictitious character showed Wharton that she had hit her mark of writing fiction to be as realistic as reality.

Wharton was very clear on the purpose of her writing. She explained to Dix that "Bad fiction treats of life trivially and superficially" but implied that her fiction was "good" because "*No* novel worth anything can be anything but a novel 'with a purpose' & if anyone who cared anything for the moral issue did not see in my work that *I* care for it, I should have no one to blame but myself" (Wharton, The Letters 99). Indeed, what Wharton felt gave her fiction "a purpose" and made it "good" was the realistic representation of New York Society and the realistic actions and reactions of her characters to their society.

The three New York novels Wharton wrote between 1905 and 1920 clearly serve to probe the society in which Wharton was raised, but each adds another layer to her realism in that they draw attention to disparity between the sexes. In keeping with her theme of realism, Wharton knew that her fiction could not provide patent solutions or gloss over the surface of the age-old problem of a male-dominated society. Wharton refused to water-down her stories or to show the silver lining; she disapproved of her predecessors, Mary Wilkins and Sarah Orne Jewett who, she said, looked at life through "rose-colored spectacles" (Gilbert and Gubar, No Man's Land 127). According to Wharton scholars Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Wharton "never openly elaborated full-scale fantasies about the liberation and gratification of female desire or about the unleashing of female power in the ways that more optimistic feminists did" (Gilbert and Gubar, No Man's Land 129). What Wharton wanted was to realistically depict the options available to women in the compelling yet constricting upperclass society in which she was raised. In Wharton's fiction, the truth was that there were few options open to

women – that there were mostly "signs that said NO EXIT" (Gilbert and Gubar, No Man's Land 129).

Being so wrapped up in the subject matter that most of her novels addressed left little space for authorial distance. Perhaps James best summarized not only Wharton's contradictory nature with his disparate appellations, but also the perplexities of her work as Wharton translated her own feelings into her fiction. According to Wharton biographer, Shari Benstock:

> It took enormous courage and persistence for Wharton to overcome Old New York society's attitudes about women's social place and the proper forms of creative expression... In many ways, Edith Jones was a child of her times, shaped by the cultural and moral doctrines of the day in America, especially the prevailing attitudes toward women. (Benstock, House 7)

While Wharton, herself, was raised within the walls of upper-class New York and chose to maintain a lifestyle within this culture, she also felt stifled by the confines of such a community. Her writing reflected this contradictory attitude through its criticism of the values of the New York's upper crust at the turn of the nineteenth century. Benstock asserts that Wharton "used writing as a means of working through and mastering the complex social situation in which she lived" (Wharton, House 9). This was doubtless the side of Wharton that James coined as "historic ravager." Through her fiction, she "criticized the standards of taste exhibited by the wealthy of her parents' generation...and the effects of social snobbery based on economic status" (Ousby 1063). In essence, the castigating approach Wharton took toward her subject matter was a direct denouncement of her own society.

It is one-sided, however, to view Wharton as a maverick of the society in which she was raised; the other side of Wharton is suggested by the "pendulum" to which Henry James referred. Wharton was a premier member of that very culture. She grew up in high society, married a wealthy Bostonian, and maintained a high-society lifestyle through her divorce and until her death, traveling expansively and entertaining exclusively. In embodying the qualities of a "pendulum," Wharton was unable to swing entirely in one direction; she could not simply reveal the hypocrisies of old New York without somehow validating elements within that culture. In her New York novels, she devised heroines who could realistically represent the complexities of being female in American society. These female characters grappled with the "vast and complex involuted social codes [that] stand as obstacles [and] which must be properly deciphered and manipulated" (Lindberg, 3). This was, as Wharton described it, the "hieroglyphic world" (Lindberg, 3) that her works attempted to decode. Because there were so many unspoken yet understood social codes by which the men and women of the leisured class agreed to live, and because any transgression from these codes could be considered iconoclastic, Wharton's characters found ways to work within the rules of society, translating the "hieroglyphic" to fit their individual needs.

Certainly, the socially-validated issue of marriage and the socially unacceptable act of divorce were central issues in all three of Wharton's New York novels because they were two diametrically-opposed forces that pulled on the pendulum that was Wharton. When she entered her social career as a New York debutante, Wharton felt shy around even her brother's friends, but she clearly accepted her role as a young, available woman on the marriage market. Even after several years of being married to Teddy, Wharton declared that "I had as yet no real personality of my own, and was not to acquire one until my first volume of short stories was published" (Wharton, Backward Glance 112). Indeed, the combination of Wharton experiencing success and happiness in a life of

III. Tales of Men

How Men Benefit from Marriage

Writer Thorstein Veblen, who was Wharton's contemporary, examined American economic and sociological views on marriage in his book The Theory of the Leisure Class. Tracing the purpose for marriage back to its barbaric roots, Veblen suggested that "The original reason for the seizure and appropriation of women seems to have been their usefulness as trophies," (Veblen 23) and further explained that this predatory relationship "gave rise to a form of ownership-marriage, resulting in a household with a male head" (Veblen 23). An etiquette manual first published in 1879, Our Deportment, seemed to validate the image of men as superior, dominant beings in its advice to men when speaking to women:

> A gentleman should never lower the intellectual standard of his conversation in addressing ladies. Pay them the compliment of seeming to consider them capable of an equal understanding with gentlemen. (Young 101)

Though Veblen and the etiquette manuals of the time seemed to be dealing with pre-historic man rather than progressive, twentieth-century relationships, Wharton's view of marriage in the early 1900s certainly reflects Veblen's view of the male as predator who sought ownership of women and treated them as trophies.

Human Nature:

Women as Trophies for Men to Own and Control

In her New York trilogy, Wharton exemplified Veblen's theory that men assumed ownership of their fiancées and wives, taking responsibility for protecting, teaching, and controlling them. A man could marry a woman to "form a wife so completely to his own convenience" (Wharton, Age 44) as Lawrence Lefferts in The Age of Innocence did, or to feel the "thrill of possessorship" that Wharton's hero in The Age of Innocence, Newland Archer, looked forward to in his marriage to May Welland (Wharton, Age 7). In the glow of his engagement, Archer seemed to be preoccupied with forecasting his role as husband and planned to both educate May and protect her from elements of society that might taint her. Throughout his engagement he congratulated himself for his catch and for the dispensation of knowledge that he would parcel out to May as he deemed appropriate, much as Young's Our Deportment encouraged in a gentleman. Having a penchant for books, he thought fondly of the "masterpieces of literature which it would be his manly privilege to reveal to his bride" (Wharton, Age 7). Archer seemed to perceive May to be an empty canvas upon which he, alone, would paint a picture that would please him, and from which he would protect any other artistic influences. Archer was the embodiment of Shulamith Firestone's theory that "every man has reserved a special place in his mind for the one woman he will elevate above the rest by virtue of association with himself" (Firestone 141). On multiple occasions, Archer looked forward to his marriage as the time when it would "be his task to take the bandage from [May's] eyes, and bid her look forth on the world" (Wharton, Age 81), suggesting that he would enlighten and educate May. Indeed, Archer's thoughts indicate that he believed it was a man's duty to make May a complete individual. This is a ringing endorsement of the theory that "Until the moment when [a man] takes [a woman's] hand she is merely the raw material of womanhood – the undeveloped and unfinished article"

(Hamilton 4). May would be "the young creature whose soul's custodian [Archer] was to be" (Wharton, Age 42). As her custodian, Archer would be her social instructor, teaching her "(thanks to his enlightened companionship) to develop a social tact and readiness of wit enabling her to hold her own with the most popular [married women]" (Wharton, Age 7).

The education and enlightenment that Archer intended to bestow upon his wife would be limited to topics that would benefit Archer. In essence, Archer felt it was just as much his duty to shield his wife from knowledge as to bestow it upon her. It was natural to Archer that he should be protective of his wife, and that he should be jealous of anyone who would influence May in a way that he thought inappropriate, even if that person were May's own cousin, Ellen Olenska. Upon first meeting Ellen at the Opera, Archer contemplated her revealing dress as more than just her exterior appearance; it was a symbol of her inability to fit into the mold of traditional society, and "he hated to think of May Welland's being exposed to the influence of a young woman so careless of the dictates of Taste" (Wharton, Age 15).

In Archer's eyes, May was the perfect trophy whom "he wanted to have...to himself, to tell her how enchanting she had looked the night before, and how proud he was of her" (Wharton, Age 67). Still, a trophy only assumes importance when it is on display for others to appreciate. Despite his desire to covet May, "Archer was proud of the glances turned on her" (Wharton, Age 80), proud of the combination of beauty and modesty that manifested themselves in May. This combination allowed Archer to "draw a breath of satisfied vanity" (Wharton, Age 6), for May was, indeed, his possession – his personal acquisition in which he had every right to feel pride.

Like Archer, Ralph Marvell from Wharton's The Custom of the Country perceived his wife to be an empty canvass on which he could paint his own picture. She was a person whom he could "lift...to the height of his experience" (Wharton, Custom 195) and for whom "the task of opening new windows in her mind was inspiring" (Wharton, Custom 94) to Marvell. Undine was someone Ralph believed he could not only own, but protect and control, and he thought of her as his "irresistible child" (Wharton, Custom 93). Assuming a paternal role, Marvell intended to monitor Undine's company and therefore keep a leash on her exposure to undesirable elements of society. When Undine insisted that she should be able to choose her own friends, Marvell dogmatically denied her this freedom:

> No, you can't, you foolish child. You know nothing of this society you're in; of its antecedents, its rules, its conventions; and it's my affair to look after you, and warn you when you're on the wrong track. (Wharton, Custom 103)

Shouldering the responsibility of acting as her father, Marvell believed that he had more knowledge and insight than his wife and that he could parcel these things out to her when he felt it would be appropriate. In his view, Marvell merely intended to "elevate [Undine] above the rest by virtue of association with himself" (Firestone 141). In his vague imagination he pictured Undine as a "rock-bound Andromeda, with the devouring monster Society careening up to make a mouthful of her," (Wharton, Custom 53) and envisioned himself setting her free, "snatch[ing] her up, and whirl[ing] her back into the blue" (Wharton, Custom 53).

By marrying her, Marvell did "elevate" Undine in his elite social circle and in her new-found status as a married woman. Without even knowing it, Marvell had "elevated [Undine] above other women not in recognition of her real value, but only because she matched nicely his...pedestal. Probably he [didn't] even know who she [was]" (Firestone

141). Indeed, in likening Undine to a child throughout his marriage to her, he didn't perceive that Undine was quite adept at maneuvering through life toward any opportunity that would benefit her. Responding to Ralph's stroke upon her canvass, Undine often interacted with Ralph and others as if she were a child, knowing that this pleased them and would help her attain what she desired. When making an appeal for something "the hope in her eyes widened trustfully...the smile that flowed up to them was as limpid as a child's" (Wharton, Custom 155). Undine knew that "that was the way her father liked her to look at him" (Wharton, Custom 155), and realized that she could gain access to desirable objects and situations through her childlike behavior.

While Undine was privy to the fact that she was merely acting and that her exterior innocent behavior did not represent the insight and manipulation of which she was capable, Ralph was preoccupied by her appearance and his possessorship of her. As his wife she was clearly nothing more than a trophy to Marvell. He was easily smitten by her exterior and the symbol of what she represented to him. Because she was his trophy, he looked only at her surface, admiring her beauty and appearance and ignoring her reminders that she was "not such a fool as [he] pretend[ed]" (Wharton, Custom 112). Like Archer, Marvell reveled "in pure enjoyment of [Undine's] beauty" (Wharton, Custom 112), mistakenly interpreting her words to be trifling and childish. Despite her demand to be acknowledged as more insightful and knowledgeable than a mere child, Marvell continued to judge her based on her exterior, thinking that "when she shone on him like that what did it matter what nonsense she talked" (Wharton, Custom 112)?

While Archer and Marvell sought wives who would be both pristine canvasses on which they could create the perfect wife and symbolic trophies of beauty who could be shaped to be esteemed by others, Wharton created a heroine in The House of Mirth who was already affected by a corrupt society. The two characters in pursuit of Lily Bart

would not be getting a clean canvass on which to paint, but they both intended to rescue her from society and use her as fitted their needs. For Lawrence Selden, Lily represented someone he might rescue from falling prey to the sins of society. Just as Ralph Marvell believed Undine to be his Andromeda, so did Lawrence Selden liken himself to Perseus, whose "task is not done when he has loosed Andromeda's chains" (Wharton, House 211). He believed that he had "strength enough for both" he and his Andromeda in the figure of Lily. He planned to protect her by sweeping her away, believing he would "take her beyond – beyond the ugliness, the pettiness, the attribution and corrosion of the soul" (Wharton, House 205). If he could isolate her from the influences of society, then he believed he would be her savior, and that she would be indebted to him for his protection. This is certainly the way an idealistic and romantic character such as Selden would view his role with a character like Lily. A more realistic and goal-oriented character such as Sim Rosedale would also like to have ownership of Lily, but, for him, Lily was a "thing [for which he was] willing to pay" for (Wharton, House 233). Once he had possession of her, Lily, with her beauty, would be an investment that would benefit Rosedale with multiple dividends.

Certain People:
Women as Symbols of Status and Leisure

In connection with the dividends that Rosedale would receive if he were to purchase Lily as his wife, Veblen stated that "The ownership and control of women is gratifying evidence of prowess and high standing" and that "the middle class wife functioned only to display luxury and idleness as proof of her husband's social standing" (Herman 244). The woman that represented the trophy in Wharton's work had already been established as an object upon which a man might exercise his "propensity for dominance and coercion" (Veblen 53). The second part of Veblen's theory was that the wife could provide important services for her husband by serving as "evidence of the prowess of [her] owner" (Veblen 53). Put more plainly by an 1878 etiquette manual entitled Sensible Etiquette of Our Best Society, " Marriage [was] an actual partnership which ha[d] more to do with our prosperity than any other" (Ward 331). Indeed, a woman could provide an invaluable service to a man to help secure his prosperity. A wife, through her dress and leisure activities, could publicly display her husband's financial success. It would be important for a wife to be highly visible in her diversions because "The very notion of leisure implied that certain people had time in which to pursue activities that conferred gentility" (Montgomery 6). If a wife had the time to be publicly at leisure, and could do so dressed in the finest and most tasteful clothes, then she would be a symbol and validation of her husband's soundness in prosperity.

An example of the validation a wife could have of her husband's financial prowess can be found in a minor character in The Age of Innocence. When Julius Beaufort began to lose footing on his Wall Street investments, Old New York perceived his imminent financial losses to be a symbol of the precariousness of wealth, especially because it was grounded in "unlawful speculations" (Wharton, Age 259). Even

"reassuring reports" (Wharton, Age 268) from Wall Street did not convince people that Beaufort was solidly re-established financially. Only when his wife, Regina Beaufort, "appeared at the opera wearing her old smile and a new emerald necklace [did] society draw a breath of relief" (Wharton, Age 268). Reports of Beaufort's financial success were less sound than the ornaments with which he could adorn his wife. Indeed, his success was measured by her dress; as Veblen suggested, "our social system makes it the woman's function in an especial degree to put into evidence her household's ability to pay" (Veblen 180).

Both men and women focusing on clothing was a consistent motif within Wharton's New York novels, for clothing was a conspicuous symbol of status. If it is true, as Wharton intimated, that women served their husbands well by becoming ornaments and living embodiment for their husbands' financial security, then it fell particularly upon the women to maintain the appearance of opulence. To be recognized in the papers for one's clothing, as Undine Marvell was, substantiated one's social status and leisure and even helped to rank one woman over another: "Mrs. Marvell's gowns are almost as good as her looks – and how can you expect the other women to stand for such a monopoly" (Wharton, Custom 199)? Even if a woman didn't have a husband for whom extravagant clothing would represent financial prowess, the finest clothes were needed to fit into society and to create appeal so that a woman might catch a husband. According to Lily in The House of Mirth, "Clothes [had] grown so frightfully expensive; and one need[ed] so many different kinds, with country visits, and golf and skating and Aiken and Tuxedo–" (Wharton, House 227). Lily was in constant search of money with which she could buy the finest clothes so that she could assert her ability to keep up with the dress society expected of her. She spent hours "deliberating over dressing cases of the most complicated elegance" (Wharton, House 146) so that she would attract the perfect candidate to be her husband.

Because she had limited funds to purchase the required attire and because she lacked a husband who would have encouraged her display of costly clothing, Lily grew to be dependent on others for apparel in which she might make impressive public appearances. From Lily's point of view, the finest dresses were necessary to maintain her image and status within the leisure class. Lily was:

> Always inspirited by the prospect of showing her beauty in public, and conscious tonight of all the added enhancements of dress...[she was] in the general stream of admiring looks of which she felt herself the center." (Wharton, House 154)

It was important to Lily to appear wealthy because, as Veblen explained, "Our dress...in order to serve its purpose effectually, should not only be expensive, but it should also make plain to all observers that the wearer is not engaged in any kind of productive labor" (Veblen 170). While Lily wanted to maintain the facade of leisure, Trenor admired Lily's dress at the Opera for other reasons:

> He only knew that he had never seen Lily look smarter in her life, that there wasn't a woman in the house who showed off good clothes as she did, and that hitherto he, to whom she owed the opportunity of making this display, had reaped no return beyond that of gazing at her in company with several hundred other pairs of eyes" (Wharton, House 154).

From Trenor's point of view, the clothing Lily purchased with his money made her one of his possessions. He certainly took pride in her looks and wanted only the benefits of indulging in his investment.

Wharton's focus on dress in the New York novels pointed to the value that society placed on clothes and display and showed how expensive, fashionable clothing and other

symbols of wealth were of consequence to both women and men for different reasons. While men might adorn their wives as symbols of their financial prowess and capacity for leisure, women accepted clothes and display as a measure of their own self-worth. It was an equally shallow display by both sexes, one which disgusted Wharton so much so that she used a minor character, Charles Bowen, in The Custom of the Country, to serve as her mouthpiece regarding the topic:

> 'All my sympathy's with [women], poor deluded dears, when I see their fallacious little attempts to trick out the leavings tossed them by the preoccupied male – the money and the motors and the clothes – and pretend to themselves and each other that that's what really constitutes life!' (Wharton, Custom 132)

Bowen's words were undeniably representative of Wharton's assessment of the superficial values of her own society. In this passage, Wharton seemed to sympathize with the women who put stock in a male-dominated society and therefore missed out on more valuable aspects of life. Such a woman who lived by the male measure of success and esteemed money and status more than personal relationships and integrity would be the paradoxical " 'monstrously perfect result of the system: the completest proof of its triumph'" (Wharton, Custom 132), as Undine Spragg was. She could prosper by the male standard of success and serve as a most compelling trophy of her husband's achievements, but she would be devoid of any emotion or principles. Indeed, the woman who subscribed to the belief that status and financial gains were socially valuable commodities would, as Hamilton declared, misconstrue the value of marriage:

> What is the real, natural, and unbiassed [sic] attitude of woman towards love and marriage it is perfectly impossible for even a woman to guess at under present conditions, and it will continue to be impossible for just so long as the natural instincts of her sex are inextricably interwoven with, thwarted and deflected by, commercial considerations." (Hamilton 19)

In essence, marriage for men and for women was just as much a display within the home and among peers as the clothing and leisure a woman might exhibit among society.

Glimpses of the Moon:
Women Help Men Climb Socially

The third way in which a wife could be useful to her husband would lie in her ability to maintain her husband's social ties and, through her appearance and conduct, help him climb the social ladder. According to the etiquette manual, Our Deportment, the woman was capable of establishing social serenity by the mere fact that she was a woman:

> From the lady there exhales a subtle magnetism. Unconsciously she encircles herself with an atmosphere of unruffled strength, which, to those who come into it, gives confidence and repose. Within her influence the diffident grow self-possessed, the impudent are checked, the inconsiderate are admonished; even the rude are constrained to be mannerly, and the refined are perfected; all spelled, unawares, but the flexible dignity, the commanding gentleness, the thorough womanliness of her look, speech and demeanor. (Young 24)

Another etiquette manual of the same period, Etiquette for All Occasions (1901), suggested that a woman "should be as dainty as a picture, as lovely as a poem...this world has its ideals, and she is one" (Kingsland 328). Because the female was considered to be a social creature with inherent social capabilities and powers, she would serve as the key to unlock a man's potential for social connections and for attaining higher status in society.

Of the three New York novels, the male character who seemed most to want social success and to need a woman to aid him in attaining it was the incredibly wealthy but entirely bourgeois Simon Rosedale in The House of Mirth. In climbing the ladder of

the New York elite, Rosedale relentlessly pursued Lily Bart because, as he claimed, "all he needed was a wife whose affiliations would shorten the last tedious steps of his ascent" (Wharton, House 323). Although Rosedale was a master at earning money, he was a known failure at earning respect among the New York elite. His intention in pursuing Lily was to use his money, as Veblen suggested that men commonly do, to purchase Lily's hand in marriage, turning her into an "investment" that would ultimately result in his future "profit" (Wharton, House 3). Rosedale explained to Lily that she would be of benefit to him because of her solid establishment within society:

> 'I want my wife to make all the other women feel small. I'd never grudge a dollar that was spent on that. But it isn't every woman can do it, no matter how much you spend on her... I'd want something that would look more easy and natural, more as if I took it in my stride. And it takes just two things to do that, Miss Bart: money, and the right woman to spend it.' (Wharton, House 233-234)

Rosedale's reference to utilizing Lily to display his wealth was only a smaller part of the picture. Lily was a social chameleon, striving to fit into the most elite society and succeeding because of "the fine shades of manner by which she harmonized herself with her surroundings" (Wharton, House 256). Where Rosedale was rough around the edges and stood out as an offense among polite society, Lily was able to fit in and utilize the "subtle magnetism" detailed in Our Deportment to further herself socially. Undoubtedly, Lily Bart would be the perfect investment for Sim Rosedale, who desired nothing more than to rub elbows with New York's leisure class.

In The Age of Innocence, social acceptance was equally important, even for those who were already well-established among the elite. The main dilemma with which the main character, Newland Archer, struggled, was centered around the importance of tradition and appearances in society. Archer realized that he would be an outcast from

society if he left his wife for his true love, Ellen Olenska. Although he was a very romantic and emotional character and despite M. Rivière's reminder that it would be "worth everything to keep one's intellectual liberty not to enslave one's powers of appreciation, one's critical independence" (Wharton, Age 200), Newland chose to remain with his wife and give her his "enlightened companionship" and help her to "develop a social tact and readiness of wit enabling her to hold her own with the most popular married women of the 'younger set'" (Wharton, Age 7). In essence, the time that Archer would spend honing his wife's social skills would directly benefit his own position in society. For Archer, it was more important to maintain his position within society than to sate his intellect or emotions. He realized that "it did not so much matter if marriage was dull duty, as long as it kept the dignity of a duty" (Wharton, Age 347). The New York from which Archer feared falling out of favor was "a powerful engine" capable of "crushing" one (Wharton, Age 74). Rather than break with tradition and risk the wrath of New York society, Archer realized it was "less trouble to conform with the tradition and treat May exactly as all his friends treated their wives" (Wharton, Age 195). He saw the benefits that his wife would provide for him, and knew that "it was undoubtedly gratifying to be the husband of one of the handsomest and most popular young married women in New York" (Wharton, Age 207). More important than his dreams was his social standing, which he knew could be achieved only with the help of the perfect wife.

While Wharton's New York novels presented similar predatory, controlling, superficial males, she seemed to make clear that their "notion of women had been formed on the experiences common to good-looking young men of [their] kind" (Wharton, Custom 52). In essence, the male characters were as much a product of their society as the women. The character types seen in Archer, Marvell, Rosedale, and Selden were probably unaware that "marriage had all kinds of motivations that had nothing to do with love" (Firestone 141), but because they worked within the established system of society,

they reaped the same results as did most men of Wharton's time period. Although the results may not have provided any of the characters with the ideal marriage, the male characters definitely achieved advantages in society. Certainly, the institution of marriage was quite desirable for a man because it served him in multiple capacities. It was important for a man to gain and maintain control of a woman, not only because it validated his masculinity, but because the right woman provided direct access to the display of her husband's wealth as well as providing stability or potential growth within society.

If a dominating male was the norm of Wharton's society, then she was correct when she labeled her sex as "the subject creature...versed in the arts of the enslaved" (Wharton, Age 236). In Wharton's fiction a woman was a tool that could be used to improve the male's ego, finances, and status. However, much of the responsibility for playing the role of a trophy fell upon the woman's willingness to be seen as such.

IV. The Greater Inclination:

Women Behave as Trophies

As discussed in the previous chapter, marriage was important to Wharton's male characters because it would help them establish dominance as well as build upon and perpetuate their own successes. However, Wharton's female characters also achieved validation in society through their married status – validation that they would not enjoy as single women. Shulamith Firestone asserted that "Women without men are in the same situation as orphans: they are a helpless sub-class lacking the protection of the powerful" (Firestone 132). Lily Bart felt that marriage would allow her to:

> Arrange her life as she pleased...she would be free from...the humiliations of the poor. Instead of having to flatter, she would be flattered; instead of being grateful, she would receive thanks. There were old scores she could pay off as well as old benefits she could return. (Wharton, House 64)

The ideal situation for a woman would certainly include being wedded to a man who could rescue her from her unmarried status and, by association, lend some of his power to her. Of course, if love and romance were a part of the deal, then the situation would only be sweeter.

The assertion that "love means an entirely different thing to men than to women; it means ownership and control [and] jealousy" (Firestone 145) is only partially applicable to Wharton's novels. Because marriage was the key that unlocked for women the door to society and status, it became the goal for a woman to marry a man whom she didn't necessarily love, but a man who could provide the easiest access to the highest levels of the social world through his money and/or connections. Jealousy, in fact, was an emotion that a character such as Undine Spragg could use to her advantage as she did

with her third husband: "The very fact that Raymond was more jealous of her than Ralph had ever been...gave her a keener sense of recovered power" (Wharton, Custom 306). To be a married woman offered the woman new options in the social realm and was, consequently, a very desirable goal. "Thus 'falling in love' [was] no more than the process of alteration of male vision – that render[ed] void the woman's class inferiority" (Firestone 132).

Although love might have had a different significance to men than it did to women, both sexes shared the same desire to be married because both gained a type of ownership and control. A woman might marry for increased wealth and status, especially since those two commodities ultimately gave her more power and augmented her ability to play a key role in society. While many of Wharton's characters were – like Lily Bart – "able to see the worthlessness of the social whirl," they were paradoxically "unable to live without it" (Goodwyn 81). Therefore, they – like Lily – would have to find a way to secure a man who could offer them the most advantageous financial and social situation. To do this, society women would have to fulfill the roles prescribed by the times. Knowing that men wanted a trophy, women might then *play* the part of a trophy in order to gain access to the power that was inherent to being married. In order to become a man's trophy, the woman would have to hone in herself the characteristics associated with the ideal woman at the turn of the twentieth century. To have value in Wharton's society, she would have to be pure, innocent, physically and socially graceful, and esteemed by society (or at least have the ability to earn society's esteem).

In Wharton's era there were multiple societal rules dictating what a young single woman should and should not do. Etiquette manuals of the time period validated unwritten social codes, trumpeting the philosophy that "there is an education appropriate to each sex" (Young 235). Most etiquette called for women to obey this education:

"whatever enjoyment we have...from our daily existence...is possible only through our obedience to the laws of...etiquette" (Ward xxi). The rules of etiquette existed largely to keep young women under control and to keep young men and women separate unless they were under the watchful eye and guidance of their elders. So that a young woman would not stray from the established leisure class manners and code, "Daughters were given very little opportunity to experience social autonomy" (Montgomery 47). Because girls were expected to be innocent and pure, they were excluded from most major social events until they reached the appropriate age to be introduced to society as débutantes. Even upon entrance into society, young women were jealously guarded by their mothers and expected to uphold the image of innocence and purity that had been so carefully cultivated in them. As Mrs. Heeny revealed to the bourgeois Spragg family, "It's the thing in the best society...that girls can't do anything without their mothers' permission" (Wharton, Custom 7).

Monitoring the social interaction of a young débutante ensured her purity, thus making her a more desirable candidate for marriage, but also making the introduction to society a very uncomfortable time period for the débutante. One etiquette manual addressed the possible pitfalls of a young woman coming out into society by acknowledging that:

> It is usually a somewhat trying ordeal for both parent and child. The mother cannot but feel some misgivings lest her carefully nurtured darling be contaminated by her intercourse with Vanity Fair, and to the daughter the novel position brings a certain awkward self-consciousness, as she feels directed towards her the lenses of a critical inspection. (Kingsland 115)

Being under the "lenses of critical inspection" taught young socialites early that being an eligible young lady in society was the same as being on stage. Young débutantes would have to be on display so that young men would see them as potential brides. As one etiquette manual reminded women, "Society itself is the court in which we are judged" (Ward 145). If they were to capture the attention and hand of an eligible bachelor, young society ladies would have to objectify themselves, using beauty and social grace to attract interest.

As protocol suggested, "The programme laid out for a debutante by a mother with social aspirations includes a box at the opera...that the girl may be seen" (Kingsland 123) and "When entering a box at the opera...a bride or a débutante is ordinarily assigned the most conspicuous or advantageous position" (Kingsland 261):

> This, it is to be assumed, is based on the idea of giving the blushing buds more poise and aplomb, and to teach them how to bear unmoved the batteries of staring eyes and whispered comments. Old-fashioned social observers view [this] custom with regret, and do not hesitate to say that there is something incongruous in the spectacle of pretty girls, at the very time of their life when they are supposed to be all maidenly reserve and delicacy, being placed as targets for the curious eyes and cynical lips of the public. (Montgomery 127)

In either case, the opera provided the ideal forum for a young, marriageable girl to be seen and inspected by prospective husbands. In all three New York novels, a scene at the opera became central to showing the objectification of a young woman, each of whom had her own "social aspirations." Each character – May, Lily, and Undine – desired to improve upon her status in society but knew that she must fulfill the role her audience expected of her. Knowing that men wanted a trophy and that the opera house was the finest of showcases, each character displayed her wares. Although there was much acting

within the walls of the Opera house, ironically, the scenes being enacted on the stage did not command the undivided attention of the patrons. It was, rather, the young débutante who was the central actress. Adorned in her low-cut dress that captured the eyes of the audience, she was coyly seated just behind the front of the box to suggest that she was on display but that access to her was limited. In accordance with the innocent image suggested by this whole scene, she feigned complete unawareness that all eyes are upon her. In all three scenes:

> Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves...thus she turns herself into an object. (Montgomery 117-118)

In The Age of Innocence, May Welland was the object that drew the attention of her fiancée. As he scanned the opera house, his eyes found a final resting place on May, who played her role as the chaste fiancée perfectly:

> A warm pink mounted to the girl's cheek, mantled her brow to the roots of her fair braids, and suffused the young slope of her breast to the line where it met a modest tulle tucker fastened with a single gardenia. She dropped her eyes to the immense bouquet of lilies-of-the-valley on her knee, and Newland Archer saw her white-gloved finger-tips touch the flowers softly. (Wharton, Age 5-6)

Wharton's incorporation of the white gloves and lilies-of-the-valley into the scene represents May's innocence and purity. As Archer's eyes moved from May's cheeks down to her hair and ultimately rest upon her breast, it became evident that he was intrigued not by the gardenia, but by its suggestive placement. The role that May was expected to play was rounded off by the combination of her blush – she knew she was on display and that Archer was compelled by her beauty and innocence – with the dropping of her eyes, a physical embodiment of her innocence and submissiveness. As one manual

suggested, a girl "knows that her virginal freshness is a power respected by the most depraved, and that with true men the influence of such wives is omnipotent" (Ward 330-31). This was perhaps the play on words that Wharton intended with her novel's title; May's perceived innocence, suggested by her nubile body tricked in pure white attire, appealed to Archer's masculinity, yet his own innocence kept him from realizing that this was all part of the plan to perpetuate male and female roles. With each subtle ornamentation of chastity and each delicate, innocent action that May incorporated into her performance, she gained a sort of control over Archer. Such performances easily secured her the position as the future Mrs. Newland Archer which, in turn, gave her freedom from her necessary subservience as a débutante and provided her access to society through her married status.

Lily Bart elicited an even stronger response with her appearance at opening night of the opera, as discussed in the previous chapter. Unfortunately, success would not come as easily to Lily as it did to May. Although she felt herself to be the center of "the general stream of admiring looks" (Wharton, House 154), she did not compel anyone to solicit her except the married Gus Trenor. And though this attempt at displaying herself failed, Lily was convinced of the importance of being center-stage; if she were on display, then maybe the right man would "purchase" her, giving her the status in society that she desperately sought.

Subsequent to her appearance at the Opera, Lily made a more obvious show of objectifying herself in a more commanding setting. In an auction-like fashion, she dressed as an image in an old painting and displayed herself upon an actual stage. Less coy than May, but equally appealing, she presented herself to be the focal point for those in her social set to admire and elicited just the response she desired:

> Trusting to her unassisted beauty, she had purposely chosen a picture without distracting accessories. Her pale draperies, and the background of foliage against which she stood, served only to relieve the long dryad-like curves that swept upward from her poised foot to her lifted arm. The noble buoyancy of her attitude, it suggestion of soaring grace, revealed the touch of poetry in her beauty that Selden always felt in her presence....It was a though her beauty...held out suppliant hands to him. (Wharton, House 179)

Completely aware that her intentions were to re-assert herself within her social group and thus improve her chances of snaring a prospective husband, Lily used her beauty and grace to command attention. She, in fact, emulated a carefully chosen painting, one that would draw attention to her "curves." With this stage appearance she drew exactly the response she intended. Ned Van Alstyne's remark that "there isn't a break in the lines anywhere" spurred Selden to "indignant contempt" (Wharton, House 179) for the society that judged her morals based on her appearance. This was a risk to which Lily had to subject herself in order to achieve her goal of marriage. She knew that by placing herself in the limelight she would be judged, but that would be a risk she would take repeatedly. She would "marry to get out of" her role as a "poor, miserable, marriageable girl" (Wharton, House 14, 8). After all, in Lily's mind, "All means seemed justifiable to attain such an end" as marriage (Wharton, House 154).

In The Custom of the Country the third instance of display at the opera unfolded for the reader through the eyes of Undine. Although this was Undine's first time in an opera box, she was inherently observant and immediately altered her behavior to fit the role necessitated by the occupation of a box. If it were true, as Undine suspected, that "to sit in a box was to be in society" (Wharton, Custom 43), then she must play the character that the part demanded. The twist that separates this opera scene from the opera scenes in

Wharton's other New York novels is that it focused on the type of gross behavior that was not appealing to society. Undine was repulsed by Mabel Lipscomb, the friend whom she had previously admired. Mabel behaved indiscreetly, pointing, signaling to others, and speaking loudly of others at the theatre. In sharing a box with Mabel, Undine was essentially appearing in society with her, but she felt that:

> No one would care to be seen talking to her while Mabel was at her side: Mabel, monumental and moulded while the fashionable were flexible and diaphanous, Mabel strident and explicit while they were subdued and allusive. (Wharton, Custom 41)

Undine wanted to be on display, but not with Mabel who would hold her back from social advancement. She much preferred the company of Peter Van Degen, whose company would help to establish her among the elite. When Van Degen did appear in Undine's box, she sat near him but "held back sufficiently to let it be visible to the house that she was conversing with no less a person then Mr. Peter Van Degen" (Wharton, Custom 42). Her ostensible desire to be seen with Van Degen could be easily translated into her ulterior motive of snaring Ralph Marvell. With an established member of the elite class, Undine could more easily gain footing in society. Undine's social aspirations necessitated that she become the focal point; the jealousy that she wished to elicit in Ralph Marvell would only help to secure her position in his circle.

The indisputable goal of Wharton's female heroines was to achieve marriages that would *provide* money and status, whereas the men seemed only to want to *further* their financial and social endeavors. In essence, both sexes reaped the same benefits in different capacities once they married. Upon examining May, Lily, and Undine, one can gather that they each consciously chose to play the role of the innocent, the coy, and the social climber respectively because those were behaviors that were encouraged in them both by men and society. The mistake that these women made in subscribing to these

V. The Buccaneers:
The Influence of Newspapers and Society

In internalizing the roles society prescribed for them, women often sacrificed their independence to the collective identity of society. Society was a very powerful influence among New Yorkers, as exemplified through the multiple references that Wharton made to Old New York in The Age of Innocence, personifying it in an effort to validate the strength of its dictates. At multiple points in the book, Wharton inserted the values or beliefs of Old New York, suggesting at one point what it might tolerate: "New York looked indulgently on [Medora Manson's eccentricities" (Wharton, Age 58); at another point what it would not tolerate: "It was not the custom in New York drawing rooms for a lady to get up and walk away from one gentleman in order to seek the company of another" (Wharton, Age 63); what it most respected: "stylishness was what New York most valued" (Wharton, Age 61); and its expectations: "Countess Olenska is a New Yorker, and should have respected the feelings of New York" (Wharton, Age 87). Through Wharton's fiction, it becomes evident that a woman's behavior was controlled not only by her husband, but by the social conventions endorsed by the newspapers. "Society columns delineated a normative role for women, a role based on femininity" (Montgomery 142). Following the dictates of appropriate behavior not only helped a woman establish herself within her domain, but actually perpetuated gender distinction. As Veblen explained,

> The fact that the usages, actions, and views of the well-to-do leisure class acquire the character of a prescriptive canon of conduct for the rest of society, gives added weight and reach to the conservative influence of that class. It makes it incumbent upon all reputable people to follow their lead. (Veblen 200)

The roles that leisure-class women at the turn of the century were expected to play were determined in part by traditions, etiquette manuals, and women's magazines, but it was society's subscription and adherence to the practice of these standards that substantiated the roles women would be expected to fulfill. In fact, because newspapers reported in detail and published extensively the doings and behavior of the socially elite, the dress and public actions of the upper class became guideposts for social climbers to emulate in an effort to increase their own status. "By making high society the subject of mass interest and reporting weekly, if not daily, on the activities of the rich and famous, society news endorsed the lifestyle of the wealthy" (Montgomery 144).

Being under the close scrutiny of the press, society women had to pay careful attention to their public behavior, actions, and overall image, making them very vulnerable to "the competing demands of propriety and publicity" (Montgomery 91). In essence, upper-class women were performers who gave life to the displays that would characterize society. "Parlors, dining rooms, ballrooms, and the opera were social spaces in which gender and class relations were enacted and performed" among New York elite (Montgomery 18). In addition to using their status as married women, society women used their social status so that they could gain access to "the press...to assert their social leadership" (Montgomery 142).

Publicizing the comportment of the elite, in turn, influenced average newspaper readers to adjust their behavior to follow the actions of the leisure class. It was a vicious circle; the actions of the leisure class were highly publicized, then emulated by the average American, thus validating the traditions and customs of an elite few. Wharton demonstrated this circle in The Custom of the Country through Undine Spragg's desire to assume the manners of high society. Before Undine met and began to socialize with New York's elite, she religiously studied them through newspaper columns, leaving her to feel

that "all life seem[ed] stale and unprofitable outside the magic ring of the Society Column" (Wharton, Custom 32). (Interestingly, "stale" and "unprofitable" are the same words Hamlet used to bemoan his father's murder, his mother's unnatural marriage, and his alienation at court. This mirrors Undine's feeling of alienation from an equally prestigious society.) She began to measure social validity based on the customs of the elite as published in the papers:

> She had read in the *Boudoir Chat* of one of the Sunday papers that the smartest women were using the new pigeon-blood notepaper with white ink...it was a disappointment, therefore, to find that Mrs. Fairford wrote on the old-fashioned white sheet." (Wharton, Custom 12)

The papers published columns mainly about those who lived on highly-respected Fifth Avenue, and since Mrs. Fairford lived off of Fifth Avenue and did not use the stationary that the papers deemed fashionable, Undine mistakenly assumed that she was not as important as Mrs. Heeny insisted she was.

While being featured locally and nationally in the media may have appeared glamorous and desirable to Undine, it was only a small perk for Wharton and her heroines:

> For Wharton, spectacle and display meant only greater opportunities for both social control and surveillance as well as pressure to conform...Wharton's characters may take pleasure in their enjoyment of luxury, their wearing of fine clothes, and the evident male approval that this appearance elects, but they are seen as entrapped, as always subject to the scrutiny of spectators. (Montgomery 134)

The newspapers kept social behavior in check, assuring that traditions would prevail and that the status quo would persist. In The Age of Innocence, when Ellen Olenska

considered divorcing her abusive husband, Newland Archer was called upon by his wife's family to help them maintain family decorum by convincing Ellen not to divorce. To lend validity to his inducement, Archer reminded Ellen that her actions would be highly publicized and that she would not only diminish the good name of her family, but that her divorce would also erode the dignity of marriage. Because she was in the social limelight, he reminded her to "think of the newspapers – their vileness! One can't make over society...the individual, in such cases, is nearly always sacrificed to what is supposed to be the collective interest" (Wharton, Age 111). Her choice to remain married was not based upon what was best for her, but on her acceptance of the fact that "one must sacrifice one's self to preserve the dignity of marriage" (Wharton, Age 168). Therefore, the very personal decision of marriage or divorce could be decided by society, which had the popular press backing its traditions:

> The end result was the production of a journalistic discourse that reinforced dominant ideals of femininity and encouraged both men and women's behavior and the appearance to be read as signifying their knowledge of high fashion, their attention to manners, and their husband's business success. (Montgomery 162)

Through her fiction, Wharton expressed her personal distaste for print media's tabloid news. She, too, had been a victim of the papers, suffering slanderous scrutiny in her early years in society. In an October, 1882, issue of the gossip magazine Town Topics, it was reported that Wharton's engagement with her fiancée, Henry Stevens, had been postponed. The magazine speculated that their engagement was broken because of an "alleged preponderance of intellectuality on the part of the intended bride" who was also described as "an ambitious authoress" (Benstock, House 14). Literary ambition was not a characteristic that society – or Henry Stevens' mother – respected or accepted. Reportedly, Mrs. Stevens believed that "ambition [was] a grievous fault" (Benstock,

House 14). This is not to suggest that ambition, itself, was not valued in a woman; Mrs. Stevens, herself, showed social ambition in using the press to break up her son's engagement. Simply stated, Mrs. Stevens' ambition was channeled into an arena in which it was acceptable; Wharton's ambition, being directed toward her literary endeavors, was blamed for her loss of footing in her engagement.

The apprehension of the press' penchant for distortion permeated not only Wharton's personal life, but her writing career. Indeed, Wharton bemoaned that her own work would be received by the public much like a society column would be. In *A* Backward Glance, she wrote,

> It is discouraging to know that the books into the making of which so much of one's soul has entered will be snatched at by readers curious only to discover which of the heroes and heroines of the 'society column' are to be found in it. (Wharton, Backward Glance 212)

Wharton did not want her works to suffer the same fate as her characters – that of being a whimsical display or having to be shaped according to the dictates of society. She intended her characters to be very realistic and for them to expose the disparity between men and women's roles in society.

VI. Crucial Instances:

Disparity between Male and Female Domains

Wharton's characters were representations of the function of society in shaping gender roles. With each turn of events, characters reacted in such a way to show that men and women were equipped very differently to deal with life's business. In the New York novels, life's business was very much divided between two realms – the domestic arena, which was clearly dominated by women, and the world of politics and business, which men monopolized. Both sexes had been shaped to be specialized in their gender-specific sphere, making them completely successful in one but leaving them sorely lacking in the other. Both wanted to get ahead in their respective domain, and both developed and plied the necessary skills to do so.

The problem with this distribution of specialization was that it severely restricted one sex from understanding the subtleties or often times the big picture of the business in which the other sex was engaged. Women were not equipped to deal with the business world, but they had successfully sharpened the skills they would need to succeed in the business of marriage, therefore ensuring financial and societal success. In return, men were able to shine in business but had a very vague perception of the subtleties of the business of marriage. In Wharton's novels, society was the locus where men and women converged and where it became evident that neither sex would be capable of the expert maneuvering necessary to dominate the other sex's domain.

The Book of the Homeless:
Women's Confusion with the Business World

Certainly, women did not occupy themselves with the same concerns as men because they did not have the expertise or knowledge of the business world or world of politics in which men were firmly grounded. In life and in fiction, Wharton felt that women had no business involving themselves in worldly issues in which they were not skilled or accomplished because competence and expertise in any domain – be it domestic, financial, or political – are mandatory for survival. Ever the devil's advocate, Wharton wrote in her autobiography that:

> That ancient curriculum of house-keeping which...was soon to be swept aside by the 'monstrous' regiment' of the emancipated: young women taught by their elders to despise the kitchen and the linen room, and to substitute the acquiring of university degrees for the more complex art of civilized living. The movement began when I was young, and now that I am old, and have watched it and noted its results, I mourn more than ever the extinction of the household arts. Cold storage, deplorable as it is, has done far less harm to the home than the Higher Education. (Wharton, Backward Glance 60)

It is remarkable to note that Wharton did not apply this theory to her own life, which was further evidence that she struggled with her role in the home as well as society. Her antagonistic comments regarding "the movement" towards women's liberation probably stemmed from her own dilemma of how to maintain a home, a husband, and a career at the same time. Wharton, herself, had to discover through her own mistakes that the business world she entered through her writing was complicated and unforgiving. On multiple occasions, Wharton was overworked and underpaid, but only with each experience did she grow more confident in her ability to produce marketable material and henceforward demand the compensation of which her works were worthy.

Wharton's first writing experience, a collaboration with decorator Ogden Codman, Jr. on the manual The Decoration of Houses, left Wharton with a feeling of frustration at Codman's lackadaisical attitude toward what would later become her own trade and industry. In a letter to him, she declared her irritation with his lack of seriousness and the mark that it left on her name:

> I regret very much that I undertook the book. I certainly should not have done so if I had not understood that you were willing to do half and that the illustrations and all the work that had to be done with the help of your books were to be included in your half. I hate to put my name to anything so badly turned out. (Benstock, No Gifts 85)

From the beginning of her literary career, Wharton understood the importance of first impressions and of blazing a path that would mark one as a success rather than a failure. She wanted her reputation to precede her, as any good businessperson would, but she wanted that reputation to represent serious business savvy. Edith's frustration with Codman was that their book was to be published by her own publisher, Scribners, but that Scribners was anticipating a short story collection from Wharton, not a decoration manual. In essence, Wharton knew that there would be a "risk" in submitting unexpected *and* imperfect material to her publisher because such an action might reflect negatively on her professionalism.

Although the book did surprisingly well in sales and remained in print "for many years" (Benstock, No Gifts 86), Wharton, who was serious about her work from its inception, was displeased with its degree of success. From the onset, she "had firm opinions about how books should be manufactured and marketed" (Benstock, No Gifts 86), showing her need to be proficient in her own business. She was a micromanager of sorts, remaining firm on every detail from the compilation of the written and illustrative

Edith's large trust and the increasing profits and royalties from her books afforded the couple the chance to construct their dream home, The Mount, in Lenox, Massachusetts. Nonetheless, this endeavor was, from the beginning, the source of problems for them both. From the time that they began to move into the home in 1902, "many tensions surfaced...including money worries" (Benstock, No Gifts 129). Because of his inability to manage their financial affairs, Edith withheld the management of her legacy from Teddy, and became responsible for delegating money to an account from which he could manage the affairs of the home. Even under these arrangements Teddy had difficulty managing the Mount, ultimately leading Wharton to "recognize that she could no longer bear its financial and managerial burdens and could not live there with Teddy" (Benstock, No Gifts 257). For Edith and Teddy, money problems often translated into marital dilemmas.

Indeed, it seemed as though money concerns were the primary source of problems for the Whartons, but this was only the external cause of the fissure in their marriage. They viewed most issues from different perspectives, but most of their disagreements manifested themselves in money matters. The sale of the Mount brought a $15,000 profit to the Whartons, a sum that was "'magnificent'" in Teddy's view (Benstock, No Gifts 272), but, because Wharton invested more than money into the house, "the emotional losses outweighed the profits" (Benstock, No Gifts 272) for her.

In essence, money concerns, business endeavors, and marriage matters became inseparable in Wharton's own life, a concept that was prevalent in her New York novels. Despite her many experiences managing money, Wharton's fictional references to the business world in which her male characters prospered were both vague and vacuous in an effort to show that her female characters could not be successful in the male-

dominated business endeavors of Wall Street. Ultimately, this would create an even larger gap in understanding between the sexes:

> How could it be otherwise – this difference in the attitude of man and women in their relations to each other? To make them see and feel more alike in the matter, the conditions under which they live and bargain must be made more alike. (Hamilton 18)

Indeed, in all three New York novels, female characters who attempted to dabble in the stock market were not versed in its technicalities and ended up losing miserably in either the business or social realms or in both. These were lessons that Wharton, herself, had already learned, but not without causing her much distress and many losses.

The House of Mirth provided a Naturalistic view of Lily Bart's struggle with money matters. Lacking the necessary funds to maintain the lifestyle she had been raised to expect, Lily found that her allowance would not be sufficient to pay for her gambling debts and the expensive dresses she had purchased. While it may seem that these were items that Lily might have done without, she felt that "luxury was the background she required, the only climate she could breathe in" (Wharton, House 32). If Lily wished to subsist among her wealthy friends, then she must play cards and gamble with them – "it was one of the taxes she had to pay for their prolonged hospitality" (Wharton, House 34). Although she was clearly aware of her role in society, Lily "had never been able to understand the laws of a universe which was so ready to leave her out if its calculations" (Wharton, House 35). No matter how she tried to overcome her debts, she found the situation worsening. Her first instinct was to hope – to hope that she might win at cards, to hope that she might marry the wealthy Percy Gryce, and, as a last resort, to hope that the balance in her checkbook was larger than she remembered; "but she found she had erred in the other direction" (Wharton, House 35).

Because of Lily's inability to comprehend social issues in terms of the business world, she was utterly unprepared to deal with Trenor's physical advances. She knew that she owed him something, but because she couldn't even explain how he had earned her money for her, she was unsure how to repay him:

> She wished she had a clearer notion of the exact nature of the transaction which seemed to have put her in his power; but her mind shrank from any unusual application, and she was always helplessly puzzled by figures. (Wharton, House 153)

Trenor soon informed her that there were "rules of the game" and that she should engage in "fair play," demanding that she "pay up" the "interest" that she owed him on his money (Wharton, House 193). "Sexual favors [were] what Gus Trenor want[ed, but his demands [were] steeped in – and legitimated by – the language of the marketplace, the language of traded benefits and reciprocal obligations" (Dimock, House 375). Their miscommunication was the result of the parallel universes in which men and women lived. The rules of the game that Lily lived by were founded on experiences inherent to the domestic world; Trenor's rules were developed on Wall Street.

Lily's refusal to "pay up" resulted in both financial and social losses. She felt compelled to repay Trenor all that he had earned for her in order to free herself not only from monetary debts, but also from any physical repayment he felt he had earned. In addition, Trenor's advances on Lily in which he demanded physical repayment had been detected by her family and her social circle, resulting in her Aunt's refusal to "countenance [her] behaviour" (Wharton, House 230) and to "recognize no obligation to assume [her] debts" (Wharton, House 230). Lily's hazy misunderstanding of the business world also affected her social ties since she was deserted by her best friend, Judy Trenor, and Lawrence Selden, the man she hoped "would help her to gather up her broken life, and put it together" (Wharton, House 231). Because they were beyond Lily's

> A man thinks that he is more intelligent than his wife because he can add up a column of figures more accurately, and because he understands the imbecile jargon of the stock market, and because he is able to distinguish between the ideas of rival politicians. (Mencken 9)

Mencken acknowledges that women may not be versed in business affairs, but he infers that they *are* intelligent – so much so that they may become a liability to their husbands if they should use their "domestic" intelligence to secure their wants.

Undine was the product of this society. Since she was not expected to learn about or understand monetary matters, she would not burden herself with the trouble. And though that is exactly how she felt when Ralph did trouble her with money concerns – burdened – her feelings, according to Bowen, were justified. It was not necessarily her fault or Ralph's that Undine "'didn't mean to worry'" (Wharton, Custom 95) or that "it was his business to do so for her" (Wharton, Custom 95); it was the fault of "the custom of the country" (Wharton, Custom 131). According to Bowen, it was "normal for a man to work hard for a woman," but because men "hadn't taught [their] women to take an interest in [their] work," women couldn't be expected to know about or be concerned with money matters. Wharton seemed to mirror Anna A. Rogers' insistence that very few "American husbands could seriously advise with their wives on the subject of business and expect even comprehension, let alone sound business advice" (Rogers 21).

Bowen further explained that the American man typically "lavishes his fortune on his wife because he doesn't know what else to do with it" (Wharton, Custom 131), further proving his theory that the American wife was nothing more than "a parenthesis" (Wharton, Custom 131). Indeed, if this were the role that the woman was expected to play

– that of the trophy rather than the partner – then Undine was the embodiment of the disaster this could cause in a marriage.

Undine's ignorance about the difficulty of earning money did not keep her from using it freely to gain pleasure and status in society. Since she had been raised by a father who subscribed to "the custom of the country," she had been led to believe that money problems would be solved for her. As a rule,

> It was not [Mr. Spragg's] habit to impart his [financial]fears to Mrs. Spragg and Undine, [who were] secure in their invariable experience that, once 'father' had been convinced of the impossibility of evading their demands, he might be trusted to satisfy them by means with which his womankind need not concern themselves. (Wharton, Custom 80)

Every evening, when her father returned home to his wife and daughter, he sat down with them to hear the latest news of Undine's social successes, but he did not volunteer any information about his business successes or failures unless he could not provide his family with their desires. At that point, his vague statement that he was "a might strapped just this month" (Wharton, Custom 28) neither alarmed nor affected Undine: "Her eyes grew absent-minded as they always did when he alluded to business. That was a man's province; and what did men go 'down town' for but to bring back the spoils to their women" (Wharton, Custom 28)? In treating Undine as a "parentheses," he not only relieved her of the responsibility of understanding the value of money; he encouraged her to think about male/female relationships in prehistoric terms. Man: provider of "spoils." Woman: recipient of "spoils." These were the simple roles each gender was responsible for fulfilling, and the complicated issue of money was reduced to a nebulous conception of "spoils."

This perception rooted itself in Undine and was easily transferred from her father to her husbands. At the core of her second and third divorce from Ralph Marvell and Raymond de Chelles, respectively, were Undine's "indifference to business matters" (Wharton, Custom 161) and the fact that "she was too much absorbed in her own affairs to project herself into" her husbands' "vague and shadowy" financial concerns (Wharton, Custom 150). De Chelles felt that "her constitutional inability to understand anything about money [was] the deepest difference between them" (Wharton, Custom 316), but because he was a Frenchman, he did not subscribe to the American "custom of the country." It mattered little to him that she had been encouraged to use her lack of proficiency in money matters as an excuse for not understanding them. However, he clearly understood and was able to accept that "his economic plea was as unintelligible to her as the silly problems... in the 'Mental Arithmetic' of her infancy" (Wharton, Custom 316). However, when Undine took the initiative to have his family heirloom tapestries appraised, he confronted her and forbade her from selling them. The source of his anger ran much deeper than her selling his possessions, but he, like the American men Bowen referred to, never took the time to explain it to her any further than repeating, "'Ah, you don't understand'" (Wharton, Custom 336). Only Elmer Moffatt would later explain to Undine what she didn't understand: "'I do understand why your husband won't sell those tapestries...his ancestors are *his* business: Wall Street's mine'" (Wharton, Custom 365).

Moffat's explanation could have done very little to change Undine's perception of things. She understood neither the value of de Chelles' tapestries nor of the Marvell family's reputation any farther than the benefits they might have brought to improve her social life. Undine had been placated by her parents entirely and by her second and third husbands for as long as they could afford it. Still, the money that they had all "slaved" (Wharton, Custom 131) to earn for Undine had never actually been what Undine wanted – It was only a means to the end that she most desired. Nonetheless, none of the men in

her life could possibly understand her goals, which were so different from theirs: "Did [they] suppose she was marrying for money? Didn't [they] see it was all a question...of the kind of people she wanted to "'go with'" (Wharton, Custom 77)? Money, alone, would not sate her; only if it were combined with marriage and the status that an Old New York family name or an ancient French title could give her would it earn her a higher esteem in the society which was, after all, her natural domain.

Much like Mencken's implication that women did not have to be versed in business to gain whatever their hearts desired, it became evident through Wharton's fiction that it was the fault of society that men and women developed disparate domains and, therefore, could not see eye to eye.

> On subjects that are familiar to [men, they] think quickly, and acquire a mental dexterity akin to the manual dexterity of the skilled artisan. But the subjects upon which women exercise this mental dexterity are not, as a rule, the same as those upon which men exercise theirs. (Hamilton 57-58)

What, then, were the "subjects upon which women exercise[d their] mental dexterity"? Certainly, women would be focused on their own domain – that of society and the domestic world. That did not necessarily mean that they were not engaged in business; what it meant was that the business in which they were engaged *was* the domestic sphere as it pertained to society.

VII. The Mothers' Recompense:

Women's Creation of Their Own Business

Wharton's works serve as evidence that women were consistently excluded from the business world and that they did not have the skills to survive in the male realm. As Mencken suggested, "A woman...cannot hope to challenge men in general in this department" (Mencken 65). Yet Mencken also asserted that the business-world prowess that men so highly prized and used as a symbol of power was not indicative of true intelligence:

> What is esteemed and valuable, in our materialistic and unintelligent society, is precisely that petty practical efficiency at which men are expert, and which serves them in place of free intelligence. (Mencken 65)

Mencken's theory was that women were the gender endowed with true intelligence – that "Women, in truth, are not only intelligent; they have almost a monopoly of certain of the subtler and more utile forms of intelligence" (Mencken 6). The very characteristics that made them female and, therefore, ineffectual in a male-dominated world, actually worked to their benefit within their own sphere. Veblen, similarly, acknowledged that women had the unique skills necessary to manage the environment that defined them:

> Woman is endowed with her share...of the instinct of workmanship... She must unfold her life activity in response to the direct, unmediated stimuli of the economic environment with which she is in contact. The impulse is perhaps stronger upon the woman than upon the man to live her own life in her own way and to enter the industrial process of the community. (Veblen 358)

Though the economic environment with which leisure class women were in contact was confined to the domain of society and the home, women actually had more insight and dexterity to manipulate situations within this domain.

Wharton's female characters comprised a "class" of their own, with their own domestic and societal pursuits, rules, and economy. Although Shulamith Firestone felt it to be a disadvantage for women to have "special ties...to biological reproduction and childrearing [that] lead to...class based on sex" (Firestone 219), there were certain advantages afforded to leisure class women in being their own "class." They became inherently more powerful because they had the capability to shape the infrastructure of their own domain and ultimately affect the class of men. As Charles Bowen explained in The Custom of the Country, "'The ideal of the American woman [was] to be respectable without being bored'" (Wharton, Custom 173). Bowen, himself, declared that "this world [women] have invented has more originality than [he] gave it credit for" (Wharton, Custom 173). Wharton's female characters reflected this desire to be both respectable and original. Although it was based upon the dominant male culture, and although they were restricted to simple lives of ornamentation because they were "active participants in the dominant male class structure" (Firestone 219), upper-class women were afforded the leisure and time to create their own business – the business of marriage.

It is ironic that Wharton's characters both strove for and bucked against the roles established by leisure. A typical wealthy New York woman knew that "her sphere [was] within the household, which she should 'beautify,' and of which she should be the 'chief ornament'" (Veblen 179-180). The lack of obligations inherent to leisure limited women to the domestic and social sphere. However, since this was a *woman's* realm and she was the "chief ornament" of it, she assumed a certain authority within this sphere. In actuality, leisure opened another door to women's potential for attaining power and

authority. The female-dominated business of marriage gave depth to their roles in society by creating intricate rules and regulations that not only occupied their time but gave them importance and authority:

> In what was effectively a class project, [women] built upon existing social structures and made use of the new methods of display and advertising that arose from the late-nineteenth century culture of consumption...As such, the display of class by women required thought, planning, exercise of judgment, work and the use of resources and skills. (Montgomery 42)

Of course, a woman's display was incumbent upon finding a husband who could provide her with the opportunities of leisure and display. In addition, a prospective husband should be well-established socially. Finding a man with the right combination of these attributes was, in and of itself, quite a task. "It [took] one's major energy for the best portion of one's creative years to 'make a good catch'" (Firestone, 138). The display of class through marriage was, indeed, a business unto itself that required as much financial manipulation as Wall Street and as much social positioning as politics. What has come to be known as "the marriage market" was defined in the following terms by contemporaries of Wharton such as writers Edward Bellamy and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who were critics of American marriage:

> The term 'marriage market' [implies] that materialistic motives were necessarily present in most marriage choices. Young ladies presented themselves as merchandise for eager young men to marry. The girls, being dependent, had to do so in order to survive. Secondly, the term 'market' suggested a terrible impersonality in the exchange of love for support. The harshness of the business world was invading the

> home itself. Home was no longer a refuge from the cold world, but rather its extension. (Welter 235)

Gilman took issue with the masculinization of marriage, basing her ideas on Charles Darwin and Thorstein Veblen's work. She "expressed intellectual debt" (Lane 299) to Darwin's theory of survival of the fittest, but felt that he had "masculinized" the theory by "stressing combat and struggle, male concepts, rather than growth, a female concept" (Lane 299). She also admired Veblen's Theory of the Leisure Class, but was equally critical that he did not address the concept that "mastery and ownership are male attributes" (Lane 299). In essence, Gilman's own theory, as detailed in her book Women and Economics, was that "what we think of as 'masculine' traits...are human traits that men have usurped as their own and to which women have been denied access" (Lane 5). Those masculine traits to which Gilman referred were clearly outlined in Veblen's Theory of the Leisure Class, which labeled societies such as those Wharton depicted in her three New York novels to be "predatory and pecuniary" (Gilbert and Gubar, No Man's 138). It seems clear that Wharton was aware of Gilman and Veblen's theories, as her close friend, Vernon Lee, wrote both the introduction to and a review of Women and Economics, the latter of which appeared in the same The North American Review (published July, 1902) in which Wharton's own review of three plays was published. "We can reasonably assume Wharton read the [Lee] review [on Economics]" (Joslin, 55), which was printed at approximately the same time Wharton was "beginning to construct the tragic story of Lily Bart" (Joslin, 55). The ideas of Gilman and Veblen were prevalent in The House of Mirth which, "like Veblen's Theory of the Leisure Class...is deterministically sociological" (Gilbert and Gubar, No Man's 138). Veblen, however, may have been one of the only links between Wharton and Gilman. Wharton, though a contemporary of Bellamy and Gilman, was less apt to imagine a solution as romantically ideal as those presented in Bellamy and Gilman's utopian novels, Looking Backward and Herland, respectively. "Wharton never allowed herself to imagine utopian

alternatives...[but] she did seek to circumvent [society's] laws in a number of devious ways" (Gilbert and Gubar, No Man's 132). Instead, Wharton, who was quite experienced in the male-dominated world of business, built from her own experiences with both marriage and business. She understood precisely the impact of the business world on the domestic world, ironically, better than her male contemporary, Henry James:

> In her memoir, *A Backward Glance* (1934), Wharton recalled how Henry James 'often bewailed to me his total inability to use the 'material,' financial and industrial, of modern American life. Wall Street, and everything connected with the big business world, remained an impenetrable mystery to him.' Wharton had to admit that her old friend was right about himself...Wharton, in contrast, perfectly understood the modern American money-making scene, including the woman's stock market of marriage and divorce. (Ammons, 123)

Certainly, the home that had been invaded by the "harsh business world" now afforded a woman a new profession with which to occupy her time and efforts. This development – the extension of the business world into the domestic world – was viewed by Wharton in her typical paradoxical fashion. On one hand, marriage definitely restricted women with the philosophy that "Marriage is woman's work in the world – not man's. It is her specific share of the world's work...allotted to her by laws far stronger than she is" (Rogers 6-7). Describing marriage as "work" gave it the attributes of drudgery and competition inherent to the work world. It became a "cold" transaction of sorts – a very desperate type of profession, indeed. It was the type of profession that compelled Lily Bart because it would satisfy her "longing for shelter and security" yet it would also feed her "passionate desire to triumph over [her rival] Bertha, as only wealth and predominance could triumph over her" (Wharton, House 340). It would essentially

provide her with the essentials for survival, but it was also a cut-throat profession that would leave Lily with only two options: to marry a man she didn't love and then mold him to fit her needs as she felt him "to be in her power to create" (Wharton, House 340) so that she could then "at least present an invulnerable front to her enemy [Bertha]" (Wharton, House 340) or to steal away Bertha's husband which she felt was in her power to do. Marrying George Dorset would give Lily a chance to bask in "great golden vistas of peace and safety" (Wharton, House 328). This was the "opportunity" that Lily needed for "revenge and rehabilitation" (Wharton, House 329). If one looks at Lily's unfulfilled needs and desire for requital as a case study of Wharton's view of a woman's domain, it becomes apparent that "Wharton would not have disagreed with the characterization of marriage as a profession" (Ammons 97) – one marked by a need for expertise and dexterity in order to rally for a position in the field.

Fast and Loose:
Skills Needed to Succeed in the Business

Finding the best possible marriage situation, in Wharton's view, was a job that limited women's pursuits, but Wharton also held it to be "the most lucrative one available, for a woman seeking status and power in American society" (Ammons 97). As with any profession, those employed in seeking a husband would be in competition with others in the field. There would be on-the-job training and insiders' information to which males, who had their own business endeavors, would not be privy. In short, a woman would have to perfect multiple specialized skills to rise to the top of her profession in seeking a husband.

The House of Mirth was the first of the New York novels that Wharton used to examine the tactics a young single woman might employ to secure herself a position among the married leisure class. Lily's beauty and her carefully-planned strategies and maneuvers to catch a husband were "a form of social currency that she [was] required to keep on spending as the price of admission to a matrimonial market" (Wharton, House 351). Since seeking a husband was Lily's career, she carefully polished and practiced the skills of her vocation. In Lily's mind, the first trick to sparking a man's interest in her was to catch his eye with her physical beauty. Once she had successfully done that, she was compelled to be quite pliable and to adjust her personality to fit the desires of her prospective husband.

At the novel's inception, Lily was already twenty-nine years old and had significant experience in practicing her marriage-seeking skills. She knew that her "beauty [was] the only defence [sic] against" the "petty cares" (Wharton, House 36) of the life of a single woman, or worse yet, the fate of becoming a spinster. Her mother had

promised her repeatedly that Lily would regain all of the money the Bart family had lost, placing stock in her "face" (Wharton, House 37) as the preeminent expedient to achievement. Her mother had "followed in imagination the career of other beauties, pointing out to her daughter what might be achieved through such a gift" (Wharton, House 44). This ingrained in Lily the belief that her looks were her strongest asset in seeking a husband and, ultimately, financial gains. Indeed, Lily's mere presence elicited the attention of complete strangers who "lingered to look; for Miss Bart was a figure to arrest even the suburban traveller rushing to his last train" (Wharton, House 4). Even Lawrence Selden, who often "found it impossible to take a sentimental view of [Lily's] case" (Wharton, House 15), was compelled by the "fine glaze of beauty" that "distinguished her from the herd of her sex" (Wharton, House 6), and he felt both "refresh[ment]" (Wharton, House 3) and "enjoyment" (Wharton, House 6) in beholding her physical attractiveness.

Lily's realization of her beauty as an asset made it all the more important for her to be seen in the right social circles, for, as she explained to Lawrence Selden, "people can't marry you if they don't see you" (Wharton, House 46). Despite her real desire to "have a place...all to one's self" (Wharton, House 8), she conceded to the requirement of being on display at such places as Bellomont, the home of her friend, Judy Trenor, which also served as a collective gathering place for some of society's most elite people, including the eligible bachelor, Percy Gryce. Even though she agreed with Selden that "those big parties bore[d]" her, she explained that attending such parties was "part of the business" (Wharton, House 15).

Personal beauty and the display of it, however, comprised only the first step in Lily's plan to secure a husband. She confided to Selden that if she "were shabby no one would have [her]: a woman is asked out as much for her clothes as herself" (Wharton,

House 15). She therefore felt compelled to attire herself in clothing that would draw attention to her beauty. Lily's attention to her physical attributes was, however, not an indication of her narcissism, but rather of her awareness of the skills needed to succeed in the business. "The concentration of energy on personal adornment, usually attributed to vanity or overflowing sexuality...[was] largely the outcome of a sound business instinct" (Hamilton 119). Although Lily thoroughly enjoyed the most beautiful clothing, she knew how to temper her attire to fit the occasion. In the case of securing Percy Gryce to be her husband, she decided not only to be in the right place (church) at the right time (when he would be there), but also to appear in the right clothing ("she had an idea that the sight of her in a grey gown of devotional cut, with her famous lashes drooped above a prayer book, would put the finishing touch to Mr. Gryce's subjugation") (Wharton, House 69). Lily was clearly aware that "for church a woman's dress...should be so inconspicuous as to prove no distraction to her fellow worshippers" and that "absolute neatness...seems more than ever incumbent at church...some women's neat appearance suggests a purity of soul, an outward sign of inward grace" (Kingsland 322). In dressing to fit the occasion, Lily played the part of the innocent, and, as a social chameleon, she used her resources, as Mencken suggested, to "search out his weaknesses with the utmost delicacy and accuracy, and play upon them with all her superior resources" (Mencken 29). Still, when one considers that manipulation of this sort was encouraged in women throughout their upbringing, Lily's actions can be justified. "Theoretically – since by her wares she lives – she has a perfect right to cry those wares and seek to push them to the best advantage" (Hamilton 30).

The combination of Lily's physical assets – including her "famous lashes" which, as Lawrence Selden noted, "were set in her smooth white lids" and which drew his attention to "the purplish shade beneath them [which] melted into the pure pallour of [her] cheek" (Wharton, House 12) – would not be the only tools that Lily would need to

reach her goal. Even Selden observed Lily's lashes "with a purely impersonal enjoyment" (Wharton, House 12), proving that Lily would need more than just her beauty to be successful. She was, however, fully aware that "beauty is only the raw material of conquest, and that to convert it into success other arts are required" (Wharton, House 45) and that she "must be ready with fresh compliances and adaptabilities" (Wharton, House 32). In essence, Lily would become malleable, adjusting her personality and interests to suit the man whom she pursued. Wharton described the "art" of Lily's adaptability during her train ride to Bellomont with Gryce. The combination of Lily's "receptive gaze" (Wharton, House 26), her "art of blushing at the right time" (Wharton, House 7), her "question[ing] him intelligently" and "hear[ing] him submissively" (Wharton, House 26) mingled with her ability to "impart a gently domestic air to the scene" (Wharton, House 24) were the skills Lily needed to complement her "art of giving self-confidence to the embarrassed" (Wharton, House 22). Using her looks and feminine actions to draw in characters such as Gryce, Lily improved upon her "faculty for adapting herself, for entering into other people's feelings" (Wharton, House 69). The ability to master such tricks of the trade gave Lily "the pride of a skillful operator" (Wharton, House 25), helping her to feel "completely in command of the situation" (Wharton, House 29).

However, as was too often the case with Lily, she only maintained her stronghold over potential husbands for a limited amount of time or in a limited capacity. In the case of Percy Gryce, Lily did not sustain the application of her "arts" long enough to secure a position as his wife. Although she knew that marrying Gryce would provide her with financial freedom and would solidify her status, her preparations to attend church with him one morning "roused a smothered sense of resistance" (Wharton, House 75), and she saw a "long light down the years" (Wharton, House 75) in which she would have to attend church with Gryce and modify her behavior in so many other respects to fit his

needs. In short, she did not follow through on the business meeting of attending church with Gryce, and so she lacked one quality essential to marital success.

The other shortcoming that kept Lily from sealing the deal was that she lacked the instinct that would allow her to go in for the kill. Judy Trenor best explained Lily's deficiency to Lily by way of comparison of Lily to Bertha Dorset:

> 'Every one knows you're a thousand times handsomer and cleverer than Bertha; but then you're not nasty. And for always getting what she wants in the long run, commend me to nasty women.' (Wharton, House 57)

Judy continued to describe Bertha as a "dangerous woman" (Wharton, House 57) who "delight[ed] in making people miserable, especially [her husband] George" (Wharton, House 58). The successfully married Bertha, who "[didn't] dare lose hold of [her husband] on account of the money" he provided (Wharton, House 58), also managed to stay active in the business of engaging young bachelors in affairs with her. Unlike Lily, who couldn't see past the potential boredom of being the wife of a bland man such as Gryce, Bertha had a "visionary gaze [that] contrasted curiously with her self-assertive tones and gestures" (Wharton, House 30). She was able to engage in multiple affairs in front her husband, but her capacity to be nasty secured her from losing the monetary and social status she enjoyed as George's wife. Bertha must have known that "nothing so cheapens a married woman and her husband in the eyes of the world as her too evident effort to attract the interest and admiration of other men" (Kingsland 419), but she had the foresight to know that she would need someone to cover her immoral behavior and was willing to sacrifice Lily's reputation to save her own.

Perhaps the contrast between Lily and Bertha can best be seen in their need to maintain the respect of the men they desired to marry or remain married to. To be truly

innocent, domestic facade, she felt confident that she would be "the instrument of his initiation" to marriage (Wharton, House 24). What he perceived to be incredibly feminine gestures and docile responses on her part were actually implements of her trade and validation of the theory that "a good many feminine actions which are commonly and superficially attributed to sexual impulse have their root in the commercial instinct" (Hamilton 33).

Ironically, the very arts Lily would have to use to secure Gryce would ultimately drive him away from her when she was exposed by Bertha as commercially-motivated instead of emotionally pure. According to the rules of the business of marriage, Bertha "had a right to retaliate" (Wharton, House 98) against Lily, who stole away with Lawrence Selden on the very afternoon she was to have attended church with Gryce. According to Judy, Bertha exposed Lily's previous attempts at securing a husband to Gryce and managed to "poison him thoroughly" (Wharton, House 99) against Lily. Once Lily's manipulations were revealed to Gryce, he got cold feet and ran from her. Bertha's "poison" included spinning Lily's past into one of ill repute. The irony of the situation is that: "at no time [did] Lily sell her body – not even in marriage, which was supposedly the respectable thing to do. She [sold] only her skills and labor. But those [did] not make her financially independent (Montgomery 99).

Unless a woman such as Bertha Dorset gave Percy Gryce some insight into the world of marriage as a business, he would remain smitten by her arts of the business. Until Bertha exposed Lily to him, Percy Gryce was just as much an unsuspecting "object of pursuit" and casualty of the female's "commercial instinct" as Newland Archer in The Age of Innocence. May Welland was, like Lily Bart, the product of "generations of women who had gone to her making" (Wharton, Age 81). The Age of Innocence was the only one of Wharton's three New York novels that made use of a male hero, which puts a

twist into the reader's perception of the actual power women wielded in the business of marriage. Initially, the reader believes that Archer was completely in control of his prospective bride and future marriage. However, as the plot unraveled, it became apparent that Archer had been quite naive about the maneuvering which victimized him. It is as if Wharton's hero was an endorsement of Mencken's theory that:

> The woman novelist...never takes her heroes quite seriously...she has always got into her character study a touch of superior aloofness, of ill-concealed derision. I can't recall a single masculine figure created by a woman who is not, at bottom, a booby. (Mencken 5)

Indeed, Newland, as his name implied, was quite green to the business of marriage and was carefully manipulated by many women in his married family to behave in a way that would best suit the family's needs.

As mentioned earlier, Archer was beguiled at the onset by May's charm and innocence. He looked forward to "what a new life it was going to be, with this whiteness, radiance, goodness at [his] side" (Wharton, Age 23). Dressed in white and with the symbolic white lilies of chastity, May had a beauty that "awaken[ed] confidence in [his] manly heart" (Wharton, Age 199). He fell under the spell of her apparent innocence and, ironically, was the truly naive character, supposing that "she [didn't] guess what it's all about" (Wharton, Age 6). Dressed to reflect her purity and innocence, Archer could only perceive that what he saw on May's exterior would be what he would get. He only realized later that women's attire was, indeed, a part of the complex woman's sphere – that it was both a "social advantage" and "their armour...their defence [sic] against the unknown, and their defiance of it" (Wharton, Age 198). Archer desired Lily to be innocent so that he could "take the bandage from [her] eyes and bid her look forth upon the world" (Wharton, Age 81). However, it was Archer who was unable to see into the workings of the woman's world. In essence, Archer was representative of the hand that

> See at a glance what most men could not see with search-lights and telescopes; they are at grips with the essentials of a problem before men have finished debating its mere externals. They are the supreme realists of the race. (Mencken, 21)

What Archer did not see were the wheels turning inside May's head, a head that "vanished from him under her conniving hat-brim" (Wharton, Age 146). The hat-brim, being Wharton's symbolic device to disguise May's insight and control over the situation, obscured Archer's ability to see that he was not at all in charge of his wedding. May protested that Archer should not "give up" his lover for her. This incorporated a type of reverse psychology, actually serving to secure her own hold on him further. "Her face had taken on a look of such tragic courage that he felt like bowing down at her feet" (Wharton, Age 148). Indeed, May's techniques had succeeded in subduing Archer into a position of worship and complete submission.

May was "skilled in the arts of the enslaved" and she was "trained to conceal imaginary wounds under a Spartan smile" (Wharton, Age 293). Although Archer would feel betrayed by his wife's subversive strategy to make him behave as she wanted, Wharton clearly placed the blame upon the society that forced May to use treasonous tactics to get what she needed to survive. She was a "creation of factitious purity, so cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers" (Wharton, Age 45). For men, "marriage was not [as they naively assumed] the safe anchorage [they] had been taught to think, but a voyage on uncharted seas" (Wharton, Age 42). Archer would have to learn that May's "frankness and innocence were only an artificial product" (Wharton, Age 45) – a facade that the female needed to secure her place in the married class.

Although it was written seven years before The Age of Innocence, The Custom of the Country showcased a unique combination of characters whose constitutions embodied the extremes of Lily Bart's drive to find a husband to acquire a solid financial position and Newland Archer's naiveté as to the techniques utilized to catch a husband. Undine Spragg was the cold and calculating manipulator in the business of marriage who broke the hearts of several men to attain what she wanted. Wharton shaped her to be devoid of emotion and compassion for anyone except herself and surrounded her with male counterparts who bent to her whims and suffered enormous emotional and financial losses because of it. Through each of Undine's husbands' losses, it seemed that Wharton's message was one of warning against marrying for love. Because society had forced women to view marriage as a business, and business subscribed to the predatory adage of "dog eat dog," men, too, would suffer the consequences.

The marriage and etiquette manuals of Wharton's time also understood the business of marriage and openly warned against marrying for love only. In Our Deportment, John Young declared that "Perhaps there is such a thing as love at first sight, but love alone is a very uncertain foundation upon which to base marriage" (Young 181). Similarly, preachers at the turn of the century warned that "A marriage based upon passion was as dangerous as an overcalculating one. Instead, men and women should...make reasonable and practical choices" (Herman 237). While this was sensible advice, it certainly backed the approach of marriage as a business. Instead of basing a marriage solely on the ideal of love, women were encouraged to consider the financial and social situations of their prospective fiancees. After all, the business world demanded practicality and foresight of such matters in order for the market participant to reap gains instead of losses. And, considering women's "precarious political situation," The Custom of the Country was evidence that "women [couldn't] afford the luxury of spontaneous love" (Firestone 139).

Even though Undine was perfectly honest with Ralph from the beginning that she wanted "everything" from him (p. 60), he was unable to accept that his wife was a capitalist and a shrewd business woman: "An imagination like his...could hardly picture the bareness of the small half-lit place in which his wife's spirit fluttered" (Wharton, Custom 94). While it is certain that Wharton did not esteem the "half-lit place" of the marriage market that kept Undine's spirit alive, it is also evident that, because Marvell did not have to rally for a position in that field, he would never understand his wife's motivations. He was hardly aware that he wasn't running the show that was their marriage – that Undine had ultimate control over his heart and, therefore, his actions. "When a man marries it is no more than a sign that the feminine talent for persuasion and intimidation – i.e., the feminine talent for survival in a world of clashing concepts and desires" (Mencken 27).

Ralph's misunderstanding of his wife could best be seen through his close examination of her fingers. When Ralph "scrutinized [her hand] as if it had been a bit of precious porcelain or ivory" (Wharton, Custom 91), he was only aware of its external attributes. He noted that "it was small and soft, a mere featherweight, a puff-ball of a hand...one to be fondled and dressed in rings, and to leave a rosy blur in the brain" (Wharton, Custom 91). He then "lifted [her fingers] one by one, like a child playing with piano-keys" (Wharton, Custom 91), but soon realized that "they were inelastic and did not spring back far" (Wharton, Custom 91). As was the case with Undine, Wharton's text was not as simple as the surface indicated. This simple scene was Wharton's cue for the reader to recognize Undine's inelasticity – her unwillingness to bend to accommodate others. Indeed, Ralph was the person who was elastic, his love for Undine making him even more flexible in matters that concerned her. Undine realized that "any man could

be managed like a child if he were really in love with one" (Wharton, Custom 186), and Ralph was as inexperienced as a child in the marriage market.

Initially, it seemed as though Undine's needs would be met through her marriage to Ralph. Like any other business person, Undine only wanted the commodity that was in demand, and, since "everybody could see that Clare Van Degen was 'gone' on [Ralph]" (Wharton, Custom 143), Undine might have been sated, since she "always liked to know that what belonged to her was coveted by others" (Wharton, Custom 143). Nonetheless, just as the stock market changes from day to day, so did Undine's options. While Ralph wanted to build a marriage based on love, Undine wanted more opportunities to show off her assets to society. Her philosophy was that there was no "use of being beautiful and attracting attention if one were perpetually doomed to relapse again into obscureness" (Wharton, Custom 32).

As married life did not provide her with the opportunity to ply her trade, Ralph lost his status as a dividend in her business and Undine sought more beneficial investments. Despite her father's objection that "Ralph worship[ped] the ground [she] walk[ed] on," Undine was firm that "that [was] not always a reason, for a woman" to stay with her husband (Wharton, Custom 151). Never mind that Ralph loved her and their son needed her; "a woman seldom allows herself to be swayed by emotion while the principal business is yet afoot and its issue still in doubt" (Mencken 32).

Undine's next attempt at success in the marriage market was less successful. When she reflected upon her interaction with Peter Van Degen, she realized that "that part of her career...had proved a failure" (Wharton, Custom 230). Despite the execution of her "bold move" in leaving her husband, which she felt "had been as carefully executed as the happiest wall street 'stroke'" (Wharton, Custom 230), she was once

again a single woman, lacking the status she had once had in being married and was once again a part of the "helpless subclass lacking the protection of the powerful" (Mencken 139). Among her former stomping-grounds of the elite society, "her new visiting card, bearing her Christian name in place of her husband's, was like the coin of a debased currency testifying to her diminished trading capacity" (Wharton, Custom 229). She no longer moved freely among Fifth Avenue society, having "forfeit[ed] the advantages of her marriage" (Wharton, Custom 177). However, she still had "a glimpse of larger opportunities" (Wharton, Custom 177) and the "business shrewdness which was never quite dormant in her" (Wharton, Custom 224). She made it her goal to "get back an equivalent of the precise value she had lost in ceasing to be Ralph Marvell's wife" (Wharton, Custom 224).

In order for Undine to regain her value on the market, she realized that she would have to employ another trick of the trade. Raymond De Chelles was easily "amused by Undine's arts" (Wharton, Custom 177) but not as easily swayed to marry as Ralph had been. Undine was faced with a new challenge:

> How does she then go about forcing this commitment from the male? One of her most potent weapons is sex – she can work him up to a state of physical torment with a variety of games: by denying his need, by teasing it, by giving and taking back, by jealousy, and so forth. (Firestone 140)

Undine had to deal not only with the stigma of being divorced, but with her prospective husband's Catholic mother, who thought Undine a disgrace to her son. Taking inventory of her wares, Undine decided that she would have to withhold her beauty from Raymond in order to increase his desire to have her. In her view, "if she could not gain her end without a fight it was better that the battle should be engaged while Raymond's ardour was at its height" (Wharton, Custom 259). While this philosophy may seem void of any

title (De Chelles), and then traded again for a husband who was "detached from life" (Wharton, Custom 358) but had achieved prosperity. In essence, Undine achieved a combination of money and status, but lost some of her rock-solid confidence in addition to the old-money status she desired. Despite his excessive wealth, Moffat could not provide her with all of her needs:

> She had learned that there was something she could never get, something that neither beauty nor influence nor millions could ever buy for her. She could never be an Ambassador's wife. (Wharton, Custom 378)

Ironically, Undine's enterprising pursuit of money and social status ended in success, except that she left a notorious trail of scandal in her wake, making it impossible for her fourth husband to ever be considered for a position as an emissary. As a result of her own social faux pas, she would never achieve the rank to which she felt entitled. Being the skilled entrepreneur she was, she would, however, pass the buck and blame Moffat for her own business blunders.

Undine's capitalist mentality both enabled and debilitated her in her search for the perfect marriage situation. Indeed, a business man was expected to be aggressive, so it follows that a woman in her own business should be equally aggressive. A man in the business world would be expected to make or break contracts to suit his needs, but this was not an acceptable transaction for a woman, even if she was positioning herself for more success in her gender's business field. Though the tactics for achieving success might be the same, Wharton clearly showed that the rules of the game were very different for men and women.

The Valley of Decision:
Drawbacks of Marriage and Courtship as a Business

Decidedly, Wharton did not find the business of marriage to be the answer to the leisure class' gender disparity. Somehow, even though treating marriage as a business expedited the union of a man and a woman or gave women more control over shaping their destinies, it essentially created barriers between the sexes' understanding of one another. Women were too highly specialized in the business of marriage, while men were skilled in the business market. Mencken touched upon the core of the problem when he suggested that:

> Man, without a saving touch of woman in him, is too doltish, too naive, and romantic, too easily deluded and lulled to sleep...and woman, without some trace of that divine innocence which is masculine, is too harshly the realist...the best effects are obtained by a mingling of the elements. (Mencken 8-9)

Wharton's New York novels were illustrative of Mencken's theory; they were inhabited by female characters who were forced to be realists and male characters who were naive about the perfidious nature of marriage.

However, none of Wharton's New York novels offered any solution or alternative to the roles women were expected to play. This was certainly a reflection of Wharton's own lifetime situation as a woman who often accepted the confining rules of the leisure class. When confronted with the issue of suffrage in a colleague's 1928 essay, Wharton, herself, commented that "women were made for pleasure and procreation" (Gilbert and Gubar, No Man's 127), a seeming endorsement of the assertion a popular etiquette manual made in 1878: "What do women want with votes, when they hold the sceptre of influence with which they can control even votes, if they wield it aright" (Ward 152). As

Wharton's fiction has shown, a women can be the ruler of her husband, but she must wield her power through subversive means. Still, Wharton's proclamation that women should not involve themselves in politics is more than an indictment of women's inability to be intellectual or to affect change on the world, and is more than a suggestion that a woman could have political power if she can manipulate her husband's vote. As was always the case with Wharton, her words contained a biting irony in the implication that nineteenth century American society did not build its women to be equals to men, nor to be proficient in politics, business, or economics, but to be like her heroine, Lily Bart, in The House of Mirth – "highly specialized" objects (Wharton, House 5). While this seems to be an accusation of the frivolity of women's lives, it was, in fact, a criticism of the society that limited its women so severely. "What [Wharton] loathed was what women had been made to become" (Gilbert and Gubar, No Man's 128), as exemplified in an exchange of words between Lily Bart and Lawrence Selden. At the beginning of The House of Mirth, Selden asked Lily, "'Isn't marriage your vocation? Isn't it what you're...brought up for?'" Lily responded with a sigh of resignation and agreed by saying, "'I suppose so. What else is there'" (Wharton, House 11)? Although it was connate in Selden's words that women had very few responsibilities and that life should be very simple for a woman, Lily's sigh of resignation is unquestionably a sign of her boredom and frustration with living a life so focused on one shallow goal. In creating characters such as Lily Bart, Wharton identified the problems of marriage in the upper echelon, but did nothing to suggest any workable solutions.

Women being relegated to playing the role of ornaments and being forced to use their arts to labor in searching for a suitable marriage left very little room to accommodate the emotions that should have been – in an ideal world – the guiding force behind a marriage. Wharton's female characters, though graced with beauty, were not content with a life of mere decoration and display. Lily Bart wanted to be to Lawrence

Selden "something more than a piece of sentient prettiness, [more than] a passing diversion to his eye and brain" (Wharton, House 125). She knew that her attractiveness was essential to helping her find a husband, but wanted her potential husband to see that she had emotional and intellectual merit. She wanted to be free to express herself, to do "a natural thing without having to screen it behind a structure of artifice" (Wharton, House 19). Of Selden, Lily wanted nothing less than that he should be "a friend who [wouldn't] be afraid to say disagreeable" things to her, for she felt she had "men enough to say pleasant things" (Wharton, House 10) to her and she wanted not to have to "pretend" or " be on her guard" (Wharton, House 11) around Selden.

The façade that Lily maintained was not, however, impenetrable. She was dissatisfied with the role she was expected to play, and yearned for the chance to be herself instead of some ornament. Yet, to be herself, she would have to stop pretending – to stop bending her actions and reactions to fit the needs of her peers and potential suitors. This was something Lily did not feel she could do; when she looked into her future, "she saw only a future of servitude to the whims of others, never the possibility of asserting her own eager individuality" (Wharton, House 134). Although she may have wanted to be an individual, Wharton seemed to suggest that she wasn't fitted with the knowledge to do so: "She had been brought up to be ornamental, she could hardly blame herself for failing to serve any practical purpose" (Wharton, House 401). The few occasions when Lily attempted to break out of her ornamental role, she found that she lost some of her status among her peers and that she was unable to carry through with her plan to break away. In fulfilling her role in society, she was doing her female duty, but, according to Wharton, "The worst of doing one's duty was that it apparently unfitted one for doing anything else" (Wharton, House 351). It was an unending, vicious circle for Lily: if she didn't pretend and play the role of an ornament, she wouldn't be accepted, but in taking on this role, she lacked the skills to accomplish anything of real value in her life.

Wharton applied this theory to her other two New York novels, as well. In The Custom of the Country, she seemed to attribute blame of Undine's shallowness to the powers that be, labeling her as "Poor Undine!" and explaining that "She was what the gods had made her – a creature of skin-deep reactions, a mote in the beam of pleasure" (Wharton, House 142). If woman had been made by the gods to be ornamental, then society encouraged her role through life, as Newland Archer realized in The Age of Innocence: "He wondered at what age 'nice' women began to speak for themselves. 'Never, if we won't let them, I suppose,' he mused" (Wharton, House 81). Wharton's words were a definite indictment of society, the people who created it, and the gods who created the people.

Wharton's works also suggested that, once a woman was born, her limited participation in the business of marriage had been pre-determined by her gender and it would be perpetuated by society. Because society carved its expectations for women through the roles they were expected to play, women were locked into the specific role of wife or potential wife. Wharton was clear that it was not the woman's fault that she was so limited. Lily Bart, who spent her entire life trying to fulfill the role for which society fit her, provided a forum for Wharton to express her views:

> She could not hold herself much to blame for this ineffectiveness, and she was perhaps less to blame than she believed. Inherited tendencies had combined with early training to make her the highly specialized product she was: an organism as helpless out of its narrow range as the sea-anemone torn from the rock. She had been fashioned to adorn and delight; to what other end does nature round the rose-leaf and paint the humming-bird's breast? And was it her fault that the purely decorative mission is less easily and

> harmoniously fulfilled among social beings than in the world of nature? That is apt to be hampered by material necessities or complicated by moral scruples. (Wharton, House 406)

To Wharton, this limitation was entirely constricting. Women like Lily inherited their roles in life and were trained to be on display, but not taught how to deal with society's complications of money and morality. In essence, Lily was only half-equipped to survive in her environment, but she also lacked the ability to leave. The few times that she rebelled against her environment, she found herself alone and stranded, compelled to return and attempt to reclaim her former, constricting role. She confided to Lawrence Selden that she knew that she was ill-equipped to survive in or out of her environment:

> I have tried hard – but life is difficult, and I am a very useless person. I can hardly be said to have an independent existence. I was just a screw or a cog in the great machine I call life, and when I dropped out of it I found I was of no use anywhere else. What can one do when one finds that one only fits into one hole? (Wharton, House 416)

Lily's was a very cold, mechanical existence that allowed for very little individuality. She was well-versed in the expectations of etiquette, but she knew that adherence to the rules that governed her society forced her to be robotic in her behavior rather than honest and expressive. Among Lily's peers, there was an unquestioned acceptance of the behavioral protocol that was trumpeted in etiquette manuals, that depicted the metaphor of being a "cog" in a "machine" as a positive, congenial experience: "Whatever enjoyment we have from...our daily existence...is possible only through our obedience to the laws of that etiquette which governs the whole machinery, and keeps every cog and wheel in its place" (Ward xxi).

Lily was not naive enough to believe that she could find joy in being a part of the machine of society, yet she consciously strove to fight her way back into society's

mechanisms. Wharton's explanation for Lily making this choice was that she was "so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her face to her fate" (Wharton, House 9) Lily was chiefly assigned the part of a prisoner and a slave to society. Being manacled to society, Lily would have to "pay so dearly for her least escape from routine" (Wharton, House 19), which she did by losing rank among her peers each time she strayed from acceptable behavior. Ironically, Lily felt strangely attracted to her constricting environment, much like a hostage might begin to feel beholden to a captor. After a brief, unsanctioned and unchaperoned stint at Lawrence Selden's apartment, Lily easily slid back into her façade of a pliable, tame, ornament at Judy Trenor's socially-endorsed summer home:

> She was startled to find how the atmosphere of her old life enveloped her. But, after all, it was the life she had been made for; every dawning tendency in her had been carefully directed toward it, all her interests and activities had been taught to center around it. She was like some rare flower grown for exhibition, a flower from which every bud had been nipped except the crowning blossom of her beauty. (Wharton, House 42)

The "bud" that would give her an impetus to leave the confines of her existence had certainly been "nipped" from Lily by this point in her life. She lacked the necessary drive and ability to leave and was a prisoner both against her will and by her own choosing.

The World Over:
The Cases of Divorce and Spinsterhood

The New York Novels do not necessarily suggest that Wharton felt a woman should escape society or an unhappy marriage if she were dissatisfied. Wharton, herself, struggled for years to deal with an unhappy marriage filled with infidelity on both sides. She suffered bouts of depression, and Teddy, her husband, was troubled by serious episodes of psychological aberration. Married for twenty-eight years, the couple "preserved a façade of compatibility for many years" (Gilbert and Gubar, Norton Anthology 1168). The two New York novels that Wharton wrote during the decline of her marriage, The House of Mirth and The Custom of the Country, tend to discredit divorced characters, almost as if Wharton were struggling against the idea of divorce for herself, using her fiction to convince herself that the sanctity of marriage and one's standing in society were more important than personal happiness. The third New York novel, The Age of Innocence, published seventeen years after the Whartons' divorce, did not shed a positive light on divorce, but it did tend to sympathize with the plight of a loveless marriage and to place blame on society for petty ostracism of divorcees. Nonetheless, in all three novels, if a woman should remain unmarried or should leave her husband, she lost status in her social circle and was either pitied or despised.

Although she was a peripheral character in The House of Mirth, Wharton created a society divorcee, Carrie Fisher, to serve as a more-experienced reflection of Lily Bart. Twice divorced, Carrie made her living in much the same way Lily did - she was a "professional sponge" (Wharton, House 111). She differed from Lily in marital status and in her attachment to wealthy married couples. Fisher "'found compensation'" (Wharton, House 54) for keeping her friends' husbands preoccupied and "'in a good humor'" (Wharton, House 54). Though both characters made a business out of using the

wealthy to retain their position in society, Lily's role as an unmarried woman forced her to maintain her purity and innocent façade and to use subversive measures to attain a husband. Carrie, being publicly seasoned and therefore used goods, was not a threat in the marriage market; she was considered to be "'clever [for] having made a specialty of devoting herself to dull people'" (Wharton, House 54).

Wharton's descriptions of Carrie's tasks in this capacity remained ambiguous throughout the novel, though it was obvious that she and Lily were not working under the same set of rules. Where Judy Trenor knew that Carrie borrowed money from her husband, Gus, and even declared that she "'would pay her to keep him in a good humor'" (Wharton, House 54), Lily was ostracized for legitimately borrowing money from Gus. Although Lily was never willing to compromise her own integrity or reputation, Carrie blatantly bent to the whims and fancies of others. It was her business to maintain her social position, no matter what scandal it invited; indeed, she only divorced her second husband because it was "'the only way to get a penny out of [him]'" (Wharton, House 53) by way of alimony. Wharton even suggested that Carrie's profession of being a social parasite kept her from the more noble profession of being a mother:

> Carrie, in her rare moments of prosperity, became so expansively maternal that Miss Bart sometimes wondered whether, if she could ever get time and money enough, she would not end by devoting them both to her daughter. (Wharton, House 336)

Wharton dealt sympathetically with Carrie, who, being equally beholden to the wealthy as Lily was, had compassion for Lily's plight. "Her real sympathies were on the other side – with the unlucky, the unpopular, the unsuccessful, with all her hungry fellow-toilers in the shorn stubble of success" (Wharton, House 336). Wharton further rationalized Carrie's aberrant behavior by describing it to be an "unconventionality [that]

was, after all, a merely superficial divergence from an inherited social creed" (Wharton, House 334). It was, perhaps, Carrie's sympathy for Lily that allowed Wharton the liberty to judge her so lightly. Wharton actually placed blame for the negative light that divorce cast on Carrie on the society that deemed divorce to be socially unacceptable.

Wharton's own experiences with divorce became much more poignant after her divorce from Teddy in 1913 and were reflected in the only one of her New York novels published after the divorce. This is not to suggest that The Age of Innocence was a mirror of Wharton's own failed marriage; in fact, it seemed to be more representative of Wharton's second-hand experience with her brother's divorce. The character of Ellen Olenska was in a similar situation as Mary Cadawalader Jones, Wharton's sister-in-law. In 1896, Minnie (as Mary was fondly known) divorced Wharton's brother, Frederic Jones, after completing the complicated series of legal steps necessary to secure a divorce:

> According to New York law, Minnie had to bring her petition before the court within five years of first discovering her husband's adultery, and to declare that she had not voluntarily cohabited with him in that time. She had known he was and adulterer for almost ten years, having caught him in flagrante with another woman at their house..in June, 1887. She remained married because of [their daughter] Beatrix, but also perhaps for her own sake. Divorce was unacceptable in old society, and a divorced woman – however much the victim of her husband's deceit – often found the doors of familiar drawing rooms closed against her. (Benstock, No Gifts 82)

The blame for divorce was commonly placed on women and said blame was validated by the theory that it was a woman's duty to keep her husband at moral attention. The personal opinion expressed by Mrs. H.O. Ward in her etiquette manual was popular

among many: [Women's] manners are indisputably decaying. They no longer silently exact that deference from men which is every woman's natural right" (Ward, 122).

The conservative society of Wharton's youth and early years of womanhood was the same Old New York society Wharton intended to criticize in The Age of Innocence. This traditional society was much less accepting of divorce than Undine's New York. Like Minnie, Ellen Olenska's reasons for leaving her wealthy husband were not for monetary motives, but because he was neglectful and unfaithful to her. Nonetheless, her family and her only support system discouraged her divorce from the darkly foreign Count Olenski. Even her grandmother, Catherine Mingott, who was iconoclastic among her society in many respects, belittled Ellen's desire to begin anew away from the Count. Her words to Newland Archer regarding Ellen reflect the value Old New York placed on status: "Silly goose! I told her myself what nonsense it was. Wanting to pass herself off as Ellen Mingott and an old maid, when she has the luck to be a married woman and a Countess" (Wharton, Age 116). As a Countess, Ellen was respected for not only her title, but for the monetary gains that were inherent to the title. Ellen's own mother figure, the Marchioness Manson, was not concerned that Ellen suffered emotionally in her marriage; she dismissed Ellen as "sensitive" and directed attention back to the "material side" (Wharton, Age 160), asking Newland to "consider...what she [was] giving up...Pictures, priceless furniture, music, brilliant conversation" (Wharton, Age 160). The commentary inherent in the Mingott family's reaction to Ellen's autonomy was that Ellen maintained value only through her married status, title, and possessions.

Further than relinquishing her position in society, Ellen's choice to leave her husband resulted in her loss of economic independence. Indeed, she gained emotional freedom from her husband, but became beholden to her family for financial support. Her collective family "reduced Countess Olenska's allowance considerably when [Ellen]

refused to go back to her husband; and as, by this refusal she also forfeited the money settled on her when she married" (Wharton, Age 264). This form of punishment was less severe to Ellen than the lack of support her family gave her in her decision to divorce. Her desire to please her family and unwillingness to compromise her family's image caused her to bend to their desire for her not to seek a divorce. Being separated from her husband both financially crippled Ellen and stunted her ability to continue her status among society. Not only was she unable to re-enter the marriage market, but her image in society was reduced to one that elicited only "pity" (Wharton, Age 152) because her family and former peers felt that "her life [was] finished" (Wharton, Age 152). Again, this was a shortcoming of the elite American society. Outsiders understood that Ellen's marriage was "hell" (Wharton, Age 160) and that Count Olenski's "wish to have [Ellen] back" was not "proof of an irresistible longing for domestic life" (Wharton, Age 254). The Mingott family's inability to sympathize with Ellen's needs was symbolic of the cold, manipulative element predominant in an elite family that was influenced more by their selfish desire to maintain their own image than for a family member's security and happiness.

Since a divorced or unmarried woman in her late twenties or older would lose value among not only her society but also among her family, the element of time factored into a woman's worth. The fear of being unmarketable on the marriage market was a motif that permeated both The Age of Innocence and The House of Mirth. Newland Archer, who represented the traditional values of Old New York, pitied his unmarried sister, "poor Janey [who] was reaching the age when pearl grey poplin and no bridesmaids would be thought more 'appropriate'" (Wharton, Age 320) if she ever *were* to marry. In stark contrast to Newland's wife, May, who followed the custom of brides wearing their wedding dresses "during the first two years of marriage" (Wharton, Age 320), Janey was to be pitied, for she not only could not display a badge of married status

in modeling a wedding dress, but the dress she would be expected to wear upon marriage would mark her as a pariah of sorts. The mortification associated with being an older, never-married woman was even more evident in Lily Bart, who "was frightened by two little lines near her mouth, faint flaws in the smooth curve of the cheek" (Wharton, House 36). She could not afford to "go slowly" (Wharton, House 59) as her friend, Judy Trenor, implored her to do. The urgency she felt by such minor reminders of her advancing age were compounded by her friends' constant reminders that she "must marry as soon as she [could]" (Wharton, House 320). As a younger débutante, she could afford to "throw away one or two good chances when [she] first came out" (Wharton, House 11-12), but as a twenty-eight year old, she was reduced to pursuing men like Percy Gryce, with whom she would lead "'an awful life'" (Wharton, House 59). Ultimately, Lily was almost willing to sacrifice her humanity and morality by blackmailing her true love, Lawrence Selden, in order to secure the hand of the man who most repulsed her, Sim Rosedale. Desperate times called for desperate measures, and time was not willing to wait for Lily to make the perfect match.

The type of life Lily feared the most was that of Gerty Farish. Although Gerty embodied many admirable qualities, including independence, compassion, philanthropy, and patience, she was depicted to be more like a nun than a woman who could act upon her emotions. In one scene when Lily came to Gerty for help, Gerty first felt "revulsion" (Wharton, House 216) upon seeing her rival for Selden's affection, but she quickly changed her response and "responded to the swift call of habit, swept aside all her reluctances" (Wharton, House 217), and plied her "trade" of "minist[ering]" (Wharton, House 217) to the needy person that Lily had become. She made tea for the emotionally ailing Lily – the first of two scenes in which she was to make tea and placate another's feelings instead of being assertive in order to fulfill her own needs. Since "a cup of tea [was] popularly supposed to be one of the consolations of spinsterhood" (Kingsland

206), it seems as though Wharton intended Gerty to embody the typical characteristics of an ascetic spinster.

Gerty's "trade," "habit," and "ministry" all spoke positively of her character, but Wharton insinuated that she had to become asexual and sacrifice her own needs for those of others; that to be a respectable single woman, one must be "disciplined by long years of contact with obscure and inarticulate suffering" (Wharton, House 361). Gerty was a sexless creature, perceived by all others to be "simple, undemanding and devoted" (Wharton, House 362) and not at all equipped to be on the marriage market. Lily, herself, declared that Gerty was not "marriageable" (Wharton, House 8) and Selden agreed that it would be preposterous for him to suggest to one as marketable as Lily that she might lead "such a life as his cousin Gertrude Farish had chosen" (Wharton, House 9). Selden and Lily's perception of Gerty was that "she ha[d] a horrid little place, and no maid, and such queer things to eat. Her cook [did] the washing and the food taste[d] of soap" (Wharton, House 8). Even Gerty "felt the poverty, the insignificance of her surroundings" (Wharton, House 215) when she juxtaposed her life with the glamour and romance suggested by the possibility of Selden and Lily becoming a couple. Yet neither Selden nor Lily knew that Gerty was just as romantic as they were, and that they both caused "a joy just trying its wings in Gerty's heart [to] drop to earth and lay still" (Wharton, House 207). The emotions that Gerty felt were equivalent to those of Selden and Lily, yet the spinster image she had assumed placed "restrictions" (Wharton, House 353) on her life; certainly, she was an independent woman, but being labeled as such, she was seen to be more of a mother figure to her friend, Lily, as well as to her cousin and love interest, Selden.

In the end, of course, Lily was less equipped to survive in a brutal society that valued her for her beauty and social status than Gerty, who was valued for her "conscious

self-control" achieved by "minister[ing] to much pain" (Wharton, House 440). Gerty and Lily were foils for one another, each representing an element inherent in the title of the book. "The title is taken from *Ecclesiastes* 7.4: 'The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth' (Benstock, House 310). Lily represented adherence to the foolish element of society that esteemed superficial society over self-worth; Gerty signified the wise-hearted type who sacrificed her emotions to appease others. Lily pondered that her role in élite society was "a hateful fate – but how to escape from it? What choice had she? To be herself, or a Gerty Farish (Wharton, House 33). In either case, both lifestyles stereotyped women's roles and neither way of life encouraged free expression in women.

All three of Wharton's works centered around the theme of women seeking marriage, but, ironically, Wharton incorporated the themes of divorce and spinsterhood, if only on the outskirts of the text, as a reminder that marriage was not necessarily the finite solution to a woman's problems. In fact, marriage might solve the problem of a woman attaining status and financial freedom, but it was also depicted to be constricting and often more of a sacrifice than it was worth. However, the alternative of not marrying at all proved to be even more devastating to a woman because she attained neither social nor financial status. Pursuing a marriage as a business necessitated the participants to focus on financial and societal positioning, leaving very little room for emotional appeasement.

VIII.The Gods Arrive:

women create moral foundation of society

Certainly, as reflected by society's behavior, the topic that was most intriguing and most commonly featured in newspapers, women's magazines, and etiquette manuals at the turn of the century was that of courtship and marriage. Whether society columns wrote about the events in a couple's courtship or a manual outlined the roles a husband and wife were expected to play, writers focused their readers' attention on appropriate behavior in marriage and ridiculed behavior that was considered inappropriate. Reading material reflected and perpetuated traditional values in which marriage was seen as the base upon which society rested and relied for stability. "Writers of the marriage manuals frequently asserted that indissoluble matrimony was the foundation of the whole social order" (Herman 233). Inherent within this decree, of course, was the belief that a woman's place was in the home, and that her responsibilities, as dictated to her by her gender, must be very different from those of her husband. "The good and beautiful scheme of life, then...assigns to the woman a sphere ancillary to the activity of the man; and it is felt that any departure from the traditions of her assigned round of duties is unwomanly" (Veblen 354). A woman who maintained her position in the home was, through her actions, an advocate of the traditional view that "public space was...fraught with risks for respectable women" and that "women did not belong...in public space" (Montgomery 89). The theory was that a respectable woman's virtue could not be questioned by "the curious eyes and cynical lips of the public" (Montgomery 127) if she remained in the safe haven of her home, but it was actually a socially endorsed method of keeping a woman within the home and out of the affairs of the business world. In this way, the woman would remain focused on the issue closest to her heart and life experience – marriage.

Wharton's three New York novels did not invalidate the popular theory that marriage was the core social institution of society, but neither did Wharton subscribe to the theory that marriage was a divine solution society's problems. Instead, Wharton focused largely on characters who did not fit the social mold. Characters such as Lily Bart, who could not function according to the rules of society, did not enjoy even the few advantages of authority that were inherent to the married socially élite. The one assurance that a married woman had was that, in being the queen of her domain, she had some jurisdiction – even if it was limited – to command others:

> Home is the woman's kingdom, and there she reigns supreme. To embellish that home, to make happy the lives of her husband and the dear ones committed to her trust, is the honored task which it is the wife's province to perform. (Young 208)

Being transitory, Lily was not the matriarch of her own home, so she was unable to enjoy the socially-sanctioned power that was inherent to a married woman's status. Remaining unmarried may have given Lily a form of independence, but it was a socially unacceptable independence that bred rumors of Lily's lack of chastity and dangerously free spirit. Condemned by popular etiquette of the time, Lily did not do her "duty" of forming a "high standard of morals and manners" (Ward xvii). The prevalent belief was that "Providence ha[d] placed the woman just where her work [was] to be done" (Ward 154) and that Lily, by not snatching the closest opportunity to marry, was ungrateful and unfocused on what should have been her ultimate goal in life.

Undine Spragg, who was anything but traditional, could never be satisfied with the role she would be expected to play as the wife of a member of the New York leisure class or the wife of a French Marquis. She could not subscribe to the established belief that "it is the glory of woman that for this end she was sent into the world, to live for others rather than herself" (Ward 434). This lack of adherence to the social code may

have given Undine the capitalist edge that helped her to financial success, but it lent her a grotesque air among the socially elite. She may have become a society vampire, but she lacked the social grace in which a woman of her time was expected to be versed.

Characters such as Lily and Undine did not fit into the standards of conduct prescribed by society in the early 1900s. Women were expected to conform to society's standards so that they could maintain the upstanding behavior of others and protect the social order. Maud Cooke's 1896 etiquette manual attributed the very solidity of the structure of society to women in pronouncing that "It is women who create society...and it is largely to women with their leisure, and their tact, that we must look to create and sustain the social fabric" (Montgomery 7). Indeed, this declaration seemed to give women unlimited power, but, in actuality, it confined the business of socially elite women to creating and safeguarding the traditions that would ultimately restrict them in so many ways. For example, the social custom of using calling cards and advertising the times that they would be available for social calls became part of the daily routine for upper class women. Inherent to this custom were multiple dictums including the type of paper of which a calling card should be made, the wording and typeface on the card, the requirement that a woman must be married or of a specific age to pay calls, attention to the status of the woman to whom the call was being paid, and even keeping an account of calls. A very important part of establishing oneself in society was tied up in social calls. Although adherence to the etiquette of social calls helped to establish women in high society, the rules regulating visitation were time-consuming and required attention to detail, leaving very little time for women to concern themselves with business outside of their social obligations. There were multiple written and unwritten codes governing each social obligation, making the seemingly simple action of social interaction a complicated web of directives.

While leisure-class women subscribed to the regulations of social calls, according to Mrs. Frank Learned's manual, The Etiquette of New York Today (1906), "a husband is not supposed to have leisure for calling and is exempt from such duties, but his existence is thus recognized socially" (Montgomery 29). Cooke suggested that this custom actually helped define Americans apart from Europeans, whose men "take up all the numerous burdens of the social world" whereas, in America, "the burden of social work rests upon women... [because American] husbands, fathers, [and] sons are all too much engrossed in the pursuit of business or pleasure to spend time in these multifarious cares" (Montgomery 39). Cooke's statement explicitly labeled the social, leisured lifestyle to be a "burden," mainly because of the amount of time required of a woman to fulfill social obligations. The very vehicle that was supposed to open up avenues of communication actually limited women by becoming a mechanical, technical process that restricted social interaction: "Etiquette is the machinery of society. It polishes and protects even while conducting its charge...It is like a wall built up around us to protect us from disagreeable, underbred people" (Montgomery 43). The "elaborate symbols and expectations" (Montgomery 42) that constructed women's roles among society were, indeed, limiting and essentially burdensome for a woman.

Wharton traced the crux of this burden back to its roots by showing the paradox of American women who were so highly specialized in the businesses of marriage and maintaining or achieving higher status that those were the only occupations that they had acquired the skills to manage adeptly. Safeguarding the traditions of Old New York society both offered opportunities to women in Wharton's fiction and restricted them. A woman who subscribed to social convention, even if only superficially, wielded power of her own but was left very little room to expand beyond her domain. In focusing her energy on maintaining the mores of her society, a leisure-class woman was both occupied and stifled:

> She not only has something tangible and purposeful to do, but she has also not time or thought to spare for a rebellious assertion of such human propensity to self-direction as she has inherited. (Veblen 359)

By monitoring traditions of their time, leisure-class women perpetuated lives for themselves that consisted of technical social codes focused on serving others and leaving very little time for focus on the self. As Newland Archer discovered about his wife early in their relationship, May's purpose in life was to make others happy, "and he understood that her courage and initiative were all for others, and that she had none for herself" (Wharton, Age 150). Nonetheless, May forfeiting her own needs to enhance the lives of others was a type of manipulation in itself: "He was once more conscious of the curious way in which she reversed his values, and of the need of thinking himself into conditions incredibly different from any that he knew" (Wharton, Age 103). Each time that Newland attempted to break away for the social norms of his class, May was there to subtly harness his iconoclastic thoughts and remind him of his obligations to the social norms of marriage and family.

There were only a select few characters in Wharton's New York trilogy that were content to function within the confines of convention and who benefited by playing by the rules. These were the characters who, as Veblen stated:

> Have a very alert sense of what the scheme of proprieties requires, and while it is true that many of them are ill at ease under the details which the code imposes, there are few who do not recognise [sic] that the existing moral order, of necessity and by the divine right of prescription, places the woman in a position ancillary to the man. (Veblen 355)

In accepting a subordinate role within society, a woman found advantages even beyond Veblen's assertion that "She is exempted, or debarred, from vulgarly useful employment – in order to perform leisure vicariously for the good repute of her natural (pecuniary) guardian" (Veblen 358). These characters recognized the benefits of being married and, though they may not have been advocates of the hypocrisy of the social order, they found that subscribing to social norms gave them advantages of their own.

Though Clare Van Degen, of The Custom of the Country, was unhappy in her marriage to the ludicrous, obscene, and adulterous Peter Van Degen, and though she "repented" of her mistake of marrying him (Wharton, Custom 48), she still enjoyed the benefits of being married to one of the most renowned and wealthy men in New York. Wharton was quick to point out that Clare benefited financially from her marriage, for she was thick with "Van Degen diamonds" (Wharton, Custom 48) and was chauffeured by the "Van Degen motor [that] bore her broken heart from opera to ball" (Wharton, Custom 48). By choice, Clare forfeited a potential match with the tenderhearted Ralph Marvell for the financial security which Van Degen could assure her.

However, it was clear through the course of the novel that Clare's heart was with Ralph, for she and Ralph were kindred spirits, as she declared by suggesting that they were "both completely out-of-date" because they "care[d]...for 'the appearance of respectability'" (Wharton, Custom 283). Both Ralph and Clare suffered the humiliation of their spouses' illicit affair, yet neither was willing to break with social convention to attain freedom or self-respect. Wharton seemed to suggest that Clare's willingness to cope with her husband's infidelity initially stemmed from her need to cling to his money, but, as she "hoard[ed] up her scrap of an income for years" (Wharton, Custom 284), she managed to save over $20,000 – "money of [her] own" (Wharton, Custom 284). This is not to suggest that she flaunted her personal cache to anyone, least of all to Ralph. There

seemed to be an element of shame in her savings, for, as she spoke of it to Ralph, a "rare blush rose under her brown skin" (Wharton, Custom 284). Though it was acceptable in Wharton's time for a woman to "cultivate a spirit of independence" and "acquire a knowledge of how business is transacted" (Young 239), the only purpose for doing so would have been to "save them from many annoyances and mistakes...as housekeepers" (Young 239). Certainly, women were not supposed to stockpile money, for it gave them a frowned-upon independence from their husbands, but Clare's reasons for saving were even less socially acceptable. Her purpose for saving was to open a door for potential escape from her own marriage.

Ultimately, Clare decided against a scandalous separation in favor of continuing in her role as mother. Feeling an allegiance to the customs of Old New York, she followed the bitter advice of the etiquette of her time:

> If, perchance, after [the married couple] have entered upon the stern realities of life, they find that they have made a mistake, that they are not well mated, then they must accept the inevitable and endure to the end. (Young, 210)

Armed with evidence of her husband's affair with Undine, she felt that " 'things were easier for [her]...since [she had] the means of putting pressure on [her] husband'" (Wharton, Custom 284). Indeed, Clare might use the information of a scandal as leverage for making Peter behave in a socially and morally acceptable manner. In addition, since she no longer needed her savings to escape her own marriage, she was able to "be of use" (Wharton, Custom 283) to Ralph's worthy cause of retaining custody of his son.

As "out-of-date" as Clare felt she was, she had the opportunity to use her money and her insight to coerce her husband to behave within the boundaries of their social code, as well as to assist Ralph in the most important and decent endeavor of his life. The

sacrifice, nonetheless, was glaring; in the end, Clare remained in her sitting room, "small and alone" (Wharton, Custom 288), under the watch of a portrait of Van Degen, whose likeness "cast on her the satisfied eye of proprietorship" (Wharton, Custom 288). Clare Van Degen had to *be* a possession before she could possess anything of her own – before she could positively affect hers and others' worlds.

The Age of Innocence introduced another independent woman who brandished her own special variety of authority in the matriarch-character, Catherine Mingott. She had "never had beauty – a gift which, in the eyes of New York, justified every success" (Wharton, Age 13), but she did hold a different key to success. Lacking the womanly wiles that brought so many of Wharton's other characters success, Catherine, who was already established in society, assumed the position of head of her family, and embodied the qualities of a male of her time period.

Most commonly called by her married title as if to emphasize her status and the power it afforded her, the widowed Mrs. Manson Mingott was a force with which society had to contend, and to whose whims society would often bend. Viewed as "independent," (Wharton, Age 27) "intrepid," (Wharton, Age 28), "courage[ous]" (Wharton, Age 183) and "carnivorous" (Wharton, Age 30). Catherine was as formidable as any male of her society, embodying the aggressive and authoritative attributes that most commonly characterized men of Wharton's era. Her decisions served as the decisions of her entire family, though this was typically the responsibility and privilege of the patriarch. As Veblen stated, "the man's prowess was still primarily the group's prowess, and the possessor of this booty felt him [or her] self to be primarily the keeper of the honor of this group" (Veblen 27).

Another of Catherine's manly attributes was her "odd foreign way of addressing men by their surnames" (Wharton, Age 30), which both separated her from other women of her social circle and forced familiarity on the males with whom she associated. To add to her masculine nature, there was never "any evidence of feminine employment" (Wharton, Age 298) at the bedside where she spent her waking and sleeping hours. She had a "firm tone" (Wharton, Age 279) that could convince a doctor to change his accurate diagnosis of her stroke to an acute bout of indigestion. In short, she was a fixture of authority among both the men and women of Old New York society.

Catherine might have assumed her almost paternal command more easily because she had lost her "plump" beauty and "neatly-turned foot and ankle" (Wharton, Age 27) to obesity, and though "a visit to Mrs. Manson Mingott was always an amusing episode to the young men" (Wharton, Age 26), Catherine's obesity served as more than a spectacle among her visitors. Her corpulence lent her an air as "vast and august as a natural phenomenon" (Wharton, Age 27). Lacking the appeal of sexuality to link her with her gender, she more easily assumed her patriarchal supervision over her family and community. Adding to her reign was her solid footing in society, attained through marriage, that gave her dominion over the "historic document" (Wharton, Age 26) that her house had become. Her company was as much in demand as the popular Beauforts; indeed, "everyone she cared to see came to her (and she could fill her rooms as easily as the Beauforts, and with out adding a single item to the *menu* of her suppers)" (Wharton, Age 27). From her "throne-like arm-chair" (Wharton, Age 298) she orchestrated the lives of her family members while thumbing her nose at the rules of etiquette. (In addition to her regal name, this is reminiscent of the last scene of Henry V. In this scene, Katherine feared it would not be fitting for Henry to kiss her hand. King Henry explained to his future wife that "nice customs cur'sy to great kings" and that they "cannot be confined within the weak list of a country's fashion [since they, the rulers] are the makers of

manners." Catherine Mingott, though female, certainly subscribed to the British king's words). She was so confident in her solid establishment among society that she could afford to be "in flagrant violation of all the New York proprieties" (Wharton, Age 27). Even after her stroke, she still had the instinct to "fight" her family (Wharton, Age 301) who did not stand behind her decision to re-admit Ellen Olenska into the family. And, although she lacked the strength to do battle herself, her "eyes [were] sharp as pen-knives" (Wharton, Age 301) and were indicative of her will to fight and her power to manipulate others to do battle when she was too weak to do her bidding herself.

Such social dominance afforded her the ability to re-introduce her potentially scandalous niece, Ellen Olenska, into Old New York society. In this arena, Catherine had more clout than any man would:

> Women functioned as society's gatekeepers through regulating the access of newcomers...The elaborate conventions devised to test the suitability of an applicant for membership in the charmed circle placed a considerable emphasis on the attributes of gentility, such as knowledge of manners. (Montgomery, 41)

Catherine was displeased with her niece's decision to leave her husband, but she had a degree of control over society's re-admittance of Ellen into society. Ellen not only left her wealthy, titled, European husband, but she brazenly disobeyed protocol for a woman in her position by seeking a divorce from him. Indeed, Catherine and Ellen were both iconoclasts of society, each in her own way. What, then, separated the niece from the aunt? Why could Catherine disregard the rules of society where Ellen was accountable for such a faux pas? Simply stated, Catherine, at the root of her reign, safeguarded the conventions of traditional society. She discouraged Ellen from the scandal of divorce, first through her nephew, Newland Archer's dissuasion, then through monetary threats. She refused to back her other niece, Regina Beaufort, in times of financial ruin, citing

"honor" and "honesty" (Wharton, Age 272) as the social code that ruled her home. Truly, being the matriarch of the Mingott family carried the responsibility for safeguarding the essential values that gave the family name such clout. "According to the modern civilised [sic] scheme of life, the good name of the household to which she belongs should be the special care of the woman" (Veblen 180).

In effect, Catherine spited society on the surface with almost laughable non-conformity, but she held onto her money and her values as though they were her key to dominance. Sillerton Jackson, a social parasite of sorts, observed that "Catherine could make [Ellen] any allowance she chooses. But we all know that she hates parting with good money" (Wharton, Age 265). Indeed, Catherine hoarded the money that had established her husband (and, respectively, her own self) in society, perhaps in an effort to maintain her position in society. She guarded a traditional view on marriage with equal ferocity, fulfilling the dictates of etiquette with the belief that "it is the moral duty of American women to exercise their influence to form so high a standard of morals and manners that the tendency of society will be continually upward" (Young 15). Only by making an impact on her family could Catherine perpetuate the traditions of her society, so she held tightly to the very conventions that constricted women because they offered her a form of power within her own social circle.

It was not simply an irony that Wharton's female characters who maintained the social decorum of their society were financially dominant; certainly, those women who were securely established financially would have the greatest impact on their own community's traditions, but they would also be most interested in safeguarding the conservative society that endowed them with such authority. Through their actions, these élite women maintained the moral foundation of their culture, reinforcing traditional, limited roles of women despite the increased power they, alone, enjoyed. It would be

important for these women to perpetuate the theory that "there is an education appropriate to each sex; that identical education for the two sexes is so unnatural" (Young 235) so that women could continue to "represent peace, stability, comradeship, and the steadying sense of an inescapable duty" (Wharton, Age 207) to their men. The female's subscription to the belief that this was her natural role perpetuated her position in society as well as limited her freedom to explore other possible occupations. It restricted women so much so that characters such as Newland Archer could rest assured that "nice women, however wronged, would never claim the kind of freedom he meant" (Wharton, Age 43), and characters such as Lily Bart would be to blame for letting "herself be talked about; however unfounded the charges against her, she must be to blame for their having been made" (Wharton, House 169). Lily's experiences with a disreputable image taught her quickly that "a woman's dignity may cost more to keep up than her carriage" (Wharton, House 225). In essence, a woman's subscription to the moral code required finesse as well as adherence to social codes, and any departure from the establisment could cost her dearly.

From this vantage point, it seems as though Wharton felt bitter about female social limitations, but it is important to remember that Wharton, herself, was a member of the privileged elite, and that even her fiction validated aspects of a male-dominated society. The lack of escape opportunities for females from the male constraints in her fiction suggests that "Wharton dismisses female learning and upholds traditional domestic virtues" (Gilbert and Gubar, No Man's Vol. 2 126).

IX. The World Over:

Conclusion

As opinionated as Wharton was regarding society and gender roles in her fiction, a feeling of ambiguity permeated her works. A direct correlation can be drawn between Wharton's experiences and those of her fictitious characters. The very issues with which Wharton grappled were enacted through major and minor characters in the New York trilogy. From Lily Bart's miscalculated social endeavors to Undine Spragg's presumptuous manipulations to Ellen Olenska's sacrificing her own image to preserve the appearance of society, Wharton had some experience playing each woman's role at various stages of her life. This made it very difficult for Wharton to see issues from only one perspective. Despite the varying personas that personify the experiences of Wharton and her contemporaries, one concept was predominant among all: that women were all "bound by [their] mistakes" (Wharton, Custom 147). Whether she was too aggressive or too passive, a woman was forced to "calculate and contrive, and retreat and advance, as if [she] were going through in intricate dance, where one misstep would throw [her] hopelessly out of time" (Wharton, House 62).

The mating dance called courtship did, indeed, require males and females alike to play specific roles – he, the money maker and she, the trophy to be won by him and admired by others in society. Each might play his or her role to perfection, but, once married, they would question the validity of the mating dance, as Newland Archer did: "What could he and she really know of each other, since it was his duty, as a 'decent' fellow, to conceal his past from her , and hers, as a marriageable girl, to have no past to conceal" (Wharton, Age 43)? Wharton certainly questioned the careless willingness with which both men and women accepted their predetermined roles.

In the Old New York novels, marriage seemed to be the desired outcome, but it very rarely solved problems beyond providing financial security. A good looking woman like Lily Bart had "better marry – then no questions are asked" (Wharton, House 209) about her virtue. But if she chose not to marry, then she certainly should not expect to "claim the privileges of marriage without assuming its obligations" (Wharton, House 209). Marriage was a tradeoff; a woman who chose to marry for wealth and status would assume more freedom among society, but would have less independence. Through her status as a married member of the upperclass, she would have advantages that a single woman would not haveand would be able to set the criteria for admittance into her elite circle. She would, however, be bound by the rules that made access to other arenas of life virtually impossible.

The separate businesses in which men and women were engaged may have allowed them to be highly specialized in a specific capacity, but the separation also served to broaden the gap that isolated genders. Women such as Lily Bart would blunder in the man's business world, or they might apply the callous approach common to business to the more emotionally-based issue of marriage, as did Undine Spragg. Men might try to superimpose the values of business into their negotiations for snaring a woman, or they might be completely naive to the maneuvering of a woman in catching a husband. In any case, women and men were oblivious to the common ground on which they might work out issues of gender.

It's overwhelmingly apparent that Wharton's texts were not written to suggest solutions to the problems between men and women at the turn of the nineteenth century. At times, Wharton could be antagonistic toward women who lived by the rules of society, and at other times, she could be relentless toward those who bucked the system. Wharton most certainly "loathed what woman had been made to become" (Gilbert and Gubar, No

Man's 128) but she "mostly saw signs that said NO EXIT" (Gilbert and Gubar, No Man's 129) from the standards society had set for both men and women. In essence, Edith Wharton's works are a mirror of her own feelings of ambiguity: she expressed both nostalgia for and opposition to the naiveté and traditions of what she coined the age of innocence; she exhibited reverence and hostility toward the custom of the country that discouraged women from becoming involved in men's business; and finally, she strove to find the house of mirth but found very few sincere morals intimated by the biblically-referenced title. In short, Wharton's works succeeded in realistically presenting the perplexing issues of gender that permeated her life and times.

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