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**THE END OF OLD AMERICA:
MARRIAGE AND SOCIAL CHANGE
IN THE NOVELS OF EDITH WHARTON**

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
Degree of Magister in English: Literature and Civilisation

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IN THE NOVELS OF EDITH WHARTON**

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Declaration

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Abstract

This dissertation aims to construe social change through the analysis of marriage in the novels of Edith Wharton. This endeavour rests on the fact that marriage functions as a social institution and microcosm of human relationships in society. While such an undertaking highlights, in particular, the crucial period in which America crossed from agrarianism to industrialism, its outcomes transcend the American context to embrace a universal dimension. Such universality finds grounds in the ascription of marriage to the shared human experience.

The result of this study reveals that at this turning point in American history, that is, the transition from the nineteenth to twentieth century, America witnessed the death of old values as Puritan ethos lost ground to the benefit of the cult of consumerism that encouraged the so-called “divorce culture.” That is, social institutions received and, in turn, manifested the change in culture. For one thing, society echoed within an alarming decline in morality. While marriage shifted from caring, loving, respect, and duty to craving desires for social ambition and personal assertion, the family shifted from production to consumption as function.

This research, hence, concerns itself with the examination of marriage through a close reading of Edith Wharton’s novels, namely *The House of Mirth* (1905), *Ethan Frome* (1911), and *The Custom of the Country* (1913). As such, it demonstrates how the literary representation of marriage transcends the definition of the institution to reach an understanding of the self. As a human relationship, it enables us to dive into the inside world of the individual to discover the way he or she perceives the other to ultimately reach accurate self-definition. Especially at times of change, the collected social data help to explain the way partners in marriage regard one another and how they negotiate a space in a changing society. While a few of them cling to the past preferring security and stability, others embrace change and look into the future with its uncertainty. In the process, practical and ideal senses would clash to define one’s choice and hence destiny. Yet, Wharton escapes the moment’s tension by revisiting the past in an attempt to aesthetically revive the old culture of marriage that she trusts and, for her, would last.

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General Introduction

The aim of this dissertation is to investigate Edith Wharton's treatment of marriage in the light of social and cultural change.¹ I chose Wharton not out of vacuum but rather because she unmistakably fits within what Simone de Beauvoir terms in her seminal work *The Second Sex* (1949) as the "women of distinction." Such a description would credit Wharton because, in my view, she is an epitome of Italian Renaissance's women who "were leaders, artists, writers, and musicians."² In their image, she embodies the cultural triumph and represents the empowerment of women through intellectual expression.³ This claim rests, in particular, upon her observation and astute reflections on Society for which she earned Edmund Wilson's acclaim as "a historian of American society of her time."⁴ Against the social constructs that disregarded the intellectual potential of women,⁵ her distinct contribution to American literature empowered and eventually led her to be regarded as an asserted gifted author and "one of America's most famous women of letters."⁶ Such title would unmistakably pay tribute to a great writer who paid allegiance to no country but to the 'Republic of Letters' as she tells us:

I felt like some homeless waif who, after trying for years to take out naturalization papers, and being rejected by every country, has finally acquired a nationality. The Land of Letters was henceforth to be my country, and I gloried in my new citizenship.⁷

In associating herself with what she called the 'Land of Letters' and I called the 'Republic of Letters' based on her concept of the 'Republic of the Spirit,' she drafts a declaration of independence from entrapment in the prevailing discourse of allegiance

¹ Edith Wharton (1862-1937). "Biographical Information about Edith Wharton". URL: <http://public.wsu.edu/~campbelld/wharton/bio.htm>.

² Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans., H. M. Parshley (1949. Rpt, London: Jonathan Cape, 1956), 127.

³ Malek Bennabi argues that the concept of Culture was "one of the fruits yielded by the Age of Renaissance." He goes further to trace the rootedness of culture in terms of its connectedness to the land. Here is the original text: "فمهوم ثقافة ثمرة من ثمار عصر النهضة" Malek Bennabi, *The Problem of Culture*, trans., Abdessabour Chahine (1984. Rpt, Damascus: Dal El-Fikr, 2000), 25. My translation

⁴ Edmund Wilson, *Justice to Edith Wharton* (1941) in Laura Rattray, *Edith Wharton in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 94.

⁵ Wharton was aware of her self-empowerment through intellectual work. I quote her in page 54.

⁶ "Hermione Lee, Edith Wharton", The New York Society Library URL: <http://www.nysoclib.org/events/hermione-lee-edith-wharton>.

⁷ Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York: D. Appleton Century Company, 1934), 119.

to one named country. For this, in my view, she is embracing a nationality that is bound with neither geographic dimension nor political abstraction, boundaries that lead nowhere but to deliberate alienation and cultural suicide. With reference to her encounter with Africa,⁸ to which she travelled a good deal, I believe that she observed American society along Ibn Khaldun's tradition *vis-à-vis* North African social phenomena he presented as universal;⁹

In that, these [social] phenomena which interact steadily with each other is the soul of society. Even though, he was stunned at the phenomena's importance realising they are neither temporary, limited in terms of the time and the environment they belong to, nor the outcome of the upheavals of the simple coincidence, he raised concerns over the existence of hidden strings behind them.¹⁰

First of all, with reference to the title of my dissertation which involves the study of a social phenomenon, a solid definition of Society proves to be crucial as a launching ground for my forthcoming discussions, which I will evoke in my attempt to unveil the above mentioned "hidden strings." While in most of the cases one ascribes to the definition of society as a gathering of people who share a number of features among which the same values and interests and live in a determined geographical area, Malek Bennabi stresses time and its underlying capacity for change as the primal factor that is really defining of Society. To quote him, "the gatherings of individuals upon whom time neither inflicts change nor alter their interpersonal relationships are by no means conceived as the special groups we refer to as Society."¹¹ Based on this, one thing that is very crucial, in my opinion, comes to light to define my dissertation as an attempt to capture how this change is defining and defined through human relationships. Thus, the study of the social values of marriage, which is a social phenomenon that "do not occupy

⁸ Brihmat Aissa explains in his course of comparative literature that literary influence occurs with the encounters that involve two or more of the following entities: author, text, time, and geography. He adds that sometimes an author is influenced by texts or authors of other times through orally transmitted stories especially in travels. For this, I believe Wharton's encounter with northern African countries could be the reason behind the influence of the legacy of Ibn Khaldun. Aissa Brihmat. Lecture. University of Laghouat "Amar Télidji". Laghouat, 2010.

⁹ On Ibn Khaldun's pertinence, see, in particular, pages 163 and 195.

¹⁰ "إذ أن هذه الظواهر [الاجتماعية] التي تتفاعل تفاعلا مطردا هي نفس حياة المجتمع. وإذ دهش لأهميتها، ولاح له أنها ليست ظواهر وقتية أو خاصة بالبيئة أو العصر الذي تبدو فيه، وأنها ليست ثمرة لتقلبات المصادفة البسيطة، فقط تطرق إلى التساؤل هل هناك سلسلة خفية". Taha Hussein, *Ibn Khaldun's Social Philosophy*, (1914) Trans. Mohamed Abdulah Anane (Cairo: Iatimad Publishing, 1925), 30-31. My translation.

¹¹ "فتجمعات الأفراد الذين لا يعدل الزمن من علاقاتهم الداخلية، ولا تتغير أشكال نشاطهم خلال المدة لاتعد التجمعات الخاصة التي نقصدها بمصطلح 'مجتمع'". Malek Bennabi, *The Birth of Society*, vol. The Network of Social Relationships (1962. Rpt, Tripoli, Lebanon: The Society of Malek Bennabi, 1974), 13. My translation.

a temporal location,”¹² would elicit a great deal about the said change in marriage and society by extension. As such, the human condition as a variable factor proves to be at the centre of Society as a whole. Above all, the human being at the centre of the institution of marriage is the primal concern of any literary representation as well as the focal point of my study. My claim rests on the notion that one cannot define himself when retreated to the boundaries of the self for it results in a complete separation from the other and, hence, the world. Thus, marriage as a social reality that establishes bridges between individuals reveals much about one’s self-definition as it develops through time. Like Wharton, who was adept to novel scientific findings, I call upon neurobiology to explain this phenomenon to say that, in accordance to recent studies, “interpersonal experience shapes the mind as it continues to develop throughout the lifespan.”¹³

With reference to the time Wharton was destined to live, the arrival of modernity agitated much of America’s social foundations.¹⁴ As a humanist, she demonstrated her deep concern over social human behaviour being defined by a nation’s “air.”¹⁵ In my opinion, the illustration of her humanistic insights would be manifested in her portrayal of marriage, which is generally agreed upon to be “the socially recognized union [...] between a man and a woman [...]. Because it legitimatizes the union and thus secures the foundation of the simple family, it is a central feature of all human societies.”¹⁶ As much as marriage is involved in human experience from its genesis, with Adam and Eve in mind, Wharton’s endeavour to bring life into her characters proves to be very important at a time where the novelist was expected to answer the expectations of his or her society and stick to the imposed limitations. To use her own words, she “had to fight hard for the right to turn the wooden dolls about which they were expected to make believe into struggling suffering human beings.”¹⁷

¹² Edmund Husserl and John B. Brough, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1893-1917)*, Edmund Husserl Collected Works (Dordrecht ; Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), xxvi.

¹³ Daniel J. Siegel, *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are* (New York: Guilford Press, 1999), xii.

¹⁴ Modernity is epitomised by the city and is manifested in *Umran* as Ibn Khaldun put it in *The Muqaddimah*. In such work he advanced that urbanism bears the seeds of cultural demise. Abd Ar Rahman bin Muhammed ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, (1377). Trans. Franz Rosenthal, 164. Bourdrillard, also, sees the seeds of demise as an intrinsic feature of the city. See the footnote in page 158.

¹⁵ Ibid. See full details, in particular “The influence of the air (climate) upon human character”, 127. See in my third chapter Ibn Khaldun’s view on the influence of cold climate on individuals, 175.

¹⁶ A. H. Mell, “Notes on Family and Marriage in Primitive Societies,” *The Nyasaland Journal* 4, no. 1 (1951): 8.

¹⁷ Wharton, 127.

That said, in my opinion, Wharton's peculiar views and reflections on American culture, which were enriched and backed up by both her vivid readings and her life experience in Europe and even in northern Africa, provide accurate portraits of these social institutions. In particular, such representations depict marriage as it went through the same social transformation as was taking place in America in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Moreover, Wharton distinguished herself with a prolific profile that added weight to her examination of American society. As Cynthia Falk tells us, Wharton provided literature with her unique contribution resting on solid grounds and supported with her architectural skills:

Through her descriptions of that earlier period's built environment and social conventions, Wharton drew conclusions about American society that carried added weight in her own day. Wharton's assessment of architecture, interior design, and codes of conduct in late-nineteenth-century America distanced her from many of her American contemporaries by demonstrating her disillusionment with her increasingly influential homeland.¹⁸

My study, therefore, attempts to make use of Wharton's convincing social comments to reach an informed understanding on different ways of thinking about marriage and how they are constructed and used in literature. That is, social reality, including marriage, and the way it is understood by people, as Emerson noted, "finds a tongue in literature."¹⁹ Since marriage involves "sexual complementarity and sexual morality,"²⁰ Wharton's engagement with the moral dimension of marriage is, in my view, rewarding in terms of the benefits that could be extricated from her investigation into American ethos. In this context, it is worth noting that the American thinking, which laid the grounds for the flourishing of a new civilisation that also built upon the European tradition, is relevant even beyond the American context and, hence, universal by virtue of the principles specified by the founding fathers and firmly asserted by *The Declaration of Independence*. Moreover, Wharton's commentary is very suggestive and rich in data because her works coincide with a turning point in American history when, as she observed, "the value of duration is slowly asserting itself against the welter of

¹⁸ Cynthia G. Falk, "'The Intolerable Ugliness of New York': Architecture and Society in Edith Wharton's the Age of Innocence," *American Studies* 42, no. 2 (2001): 19.

¹⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson* (The Pennsylvania State University, 2001), 58.

²⁰ Nicholas Frankovich, "The Vatican Suggests That His Encyclical on the Environment Will Entail a Defense of Traditional Views on Gender" URL:<http://www.nationalreview.com/article/417528/pope-francis-green-conservative-nicholas-frankovich>.

change, and sociologists without a drop of American blood in them have been the first to recognize what the traditions of three centuries have contributed to the moral wealth of [her] country.”²¹ While she shared much of Karl Marx’s interest in the “passing of the old order,” she refrained from speculating on the future as he did. However, when it comes to transition in society, her context matched that of Europe, where Marx raised concerns about the change in values. For one thing,

Life was in an interesting state. It was passing through a period of what seemed to those who lived in it a period of great changes, and they were common to all countries; changes in manners, in standards of living, in industrial organisation, political life and religious beliefs. People accustomed to the old ways were anxious as to what might be the outcome of it all.²²

Marriage, as such, as the reflecting mirror of much of the society’s values, morals, and codes has direct effects on the individual and his or her relationships within the marital confines and with community. It is, therefore, an interesting field of investigation because in being primarily a relationship it indicates how partners define themselves as individuals in that self-definition is often constructed in relation to the other. Therefore, as Edmund Wilson noted, “if we look for the key inside ourselves and learn how to read them correctly, they will supply us with a record, inaccessible up to now, of the adventures of [individuals] like ourselves.”²³ Moreover, reflections on marriage as a social institution help my attempt to shed light on social and cultural change in order to “have insights on the general conditions for prospects, generations, and ages.”²⁴ Put differently, the study of marriage is crucial to the prediction of the future of any nation in that for instance the “changes in marriage, cohabitation, divorce, remarriage, and non-marital fertility over the past [sixty] years have fuelled debates among policy-makers, scholars, and laypeople alike about the future of the family.”²⁵

Because the prediction of the future needs a clear understanding of the past, my perspective on marriage is particularly oriented by my fascination with the change that

²¹ Wharton, 2.

²² John Waugh Scott, *Karl Marx on Value* (London: A. C. Black, Ltd., 1920), 3-4.

²³ Edmund Wilson, *To the Finland Station: A Study in the Writing and Acting of History* (New York: Harcourt, 1940), 2.

²⁴ “الأحوال العامة للأفلاق والأجيال والأعصار” . Hussein, 32. My translation

²⁵ Jeremy E. Uecker and Charles E. Stokes, “Early Marriage in the United States,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 70, no. 4 (2008): 835.

took place in the years Wharton was born and grew up, that is, from the Civil War onwards. In other words, according to Spengler, the account of this past serves “as the indispensable intellectual vehicle for comprehending man as both a social and political being.”²⁶ More importantly, Spengler glorifies history to the extent that it becomes the incubator of human life. As such, he views the human being as “simultaneously inhabiting two different universes, that of nature and of history, and strove to comprehend “the world as history.”²⁷ That is, in understanding history, one would be able to decipher the philosophy of the people who lived a particular era simply because history and philosophy “complete each other.”²⁸

I consider the selected historical period as crucial, namely for embracing the century’s major event. That is, the industrialisation of America has had profound implications; not just economic but social and cultural changes ushered in modernity. Thus, such an outcome primarily raised “social criticism” and cast a long shadow on the literary production of influential writers, and Wharton was no exception. The period also witnessed the rise of a new type of Americans known as the *nouveau-riches* leading to power redistribution within American society. Put differently, power began to shift from old to new money or to the “millionaire entrepreneurs,” to use Michael Spindler’s words which go as follows:

The rapid economic and social change of the last decades of the nineteenth century in America saw personal industrial power concentrated in the hands of the millionaire entrepreneurs and financiers, ‘the robber barons’ such as John D. Rockefeller, Charles Yerkes, Andrew Carnegie and John Pierpont Morgan. It also saw, in response, a movement of social criticism that included Henry George, whose *Progress and Poverty* was published in 1879, and Edward Bellamy, whose *Looking Backward* came out in 1888.²⁹

Science and industrialism, consequently, associated America with modernity and hence developed a new culture that reflected the new conditions because, as Emerson put it, “the world rolls; the circumstances vary every hour.”³⁰ In embracing

²⁶ John Farrenkopf, “Spengler’s Historical Pessimism and the Tragedy of Our Age,” *Theory and Society* 22, no. 3 (1993): 392-393.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Wilson, 2.

²⁹ Michael Spindler, “Thorstein Veblen and Modern American Fiction,” *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 11, no. 2 (1992): 37.

³⁰ Emerson, 99.

consumerism, forces of change shifted the focus from the community to the individual. To attain a deeper knowledge into this change, namely in regards to society and culture, I will analyse it as it was reflected on the social institution of marriage. I will, in particular, look at marriage as it shifted from traditional to new forms in Edith Wharton's novels. Accordingly, this dissertation argues that the collapse of traditional marriage as portrayed in her novels articulates the end of what I term "Old America." In other words, change in marriage is ultimately a metaphor for the transformation of American culture from devoted self-sacrifice to excessive self-interest.

My procedure to study marriage goes through the focus on particular novels, which epitomise Wharton's study of American society. Initially, I rely on *The House of Mirth* (1905), one of her very representative works, to analyse what I term "old marriage." My readings of and on the novel reveal that it conveys much of the cultural anxieties around the turn of nineteenth to twentieth century. That is to say, the changing America was the setting of a massive shift from tradition to modernity. Lily Bart, at the centre of the novel and the core of my study, is the embodiment of "Old America's" values and concerns among which the refined values that guide the individual, sustain the community, and preserve the nation's cultural legacy. Her life is emphatically defined and oriented by old marriage and her clinging to old values stresses her as a hard headed epitome of Puritans who strive to fight hard not survive but to thrive.

What is particular about Lily is that her thrive is, first and foremost, spiritual; when it comes to negotiating a space in a world that has become mostly trivial, her sociability faces hardships to find grounds and to settle. In my endeavour to contrast her with other characters, my research suggests that despite her earnest efforts, she cannot eventually come to terms with social change. Hence, at one level, her death in the novel seals her fate as a doomed one only to emphatically illustrate the end of "Old America." Such a conclusion is achieved as a result of my undertaking in examining her negotiation of marriage in a changing society. Her journey parallels a quest for which she sets out in company of Lawrence Selden to evoke her yearning for freedom in an imaginative republic. My invocation of freedom as a defining element of one's fate stems from its centrality to one's definition of him or herself. This definition, which is primal to any individual to assert himself or herself, is challenged by the very conception of marriage. Thus, Lily is really to face a dilemma to remain a pure "Lily" while obliged to engage

in a social relationship. Taking into consideration the fact that the prevalent discourse of the time is all about domination in terms of race and gender, Selden's tendency to impose his will upon Lily provides an image of the problem of marriage. While an individual seeks freedom and individuality, marriage often imposes certain social codes which challenge such a yearning.

Further contrasts which are thoroughly evocative and informing in terms of social change are revealed through Wharton's accurate literary portrayals. For one thing, while Lily's innocence, spontaneity, and social necessity makes her try to negotiate a space in Lawrence's republic, his hypocrisy, unreliability, and what Emerson calls "rotteness"³¹ leads to the downfall and collapse of such a dream. With reference to idealism that is not supported by any degree of pragmatism and in the absence of cohesion between them, the fall of Selden's republic under the impact of modernity stresses the impossibility of Lily's endeavour and, hence, reinforces my hypothesis on the end of Old America. As the thorough observation of history proves, the end of one pattern of development in civilisation leads definitely to the beginning of another; in America of the time, the new pattern revealed itself through modernity. The new cult was promising in the image of liberating ideals, namely for women, but values are hard to be transferred or changed; hence, the rise of ambiguity, confusion and nervousness as characteristic features of American character proved to be a reality. As the values of tradition on which Lily built her conception of marriage were severely challenged, old marriage has become no longer viable. Her only way out of her anxiety and confusion as a conciliation is the yearning for innocence that remains captive of her imagination and, in my view, alludes to her refusal to accept modernity. It is worth noting that acceptance of reality is key for mental rest and hence mental stability, which is the opposite state to confusion. The latter results in the incapacity to think and solve problems. For one thing, one who could not explain his situation prevents himself or herself from the prompt consideration of potential solutions and hence falls in the trap of dissociation from reality. Thus, Lily's real dilemma is twofold. On one side, her troubles are outlined by her incapacity to answer the questions of the moment and, on

³¹ On Ralph Waldo Emerson's comment on the corruptive effect of institutionalised society upon the individual, see Chapter 1, 66.

the other side, her unawareness of the fact that what she really stood for has gone to the pages of history.

On the other hand, *The Custom of the Country* (1913) manifests much of the changing nature of America, which was reflected on the way people defined marriage. In the light of the decline in morality, that is, a projection of the “collapse of modern Western civilisation,”³² and the rise of consumerism, many businessmen in the image of Mr. Spragg and Elmer Moffatt grew wealthy but remained culturally deficient. Their primal endeavour, therefore, was a quest for “social capital,”³³ or a “stock of social relationships.”³⁴ One of the means used to achieve such a goal was a new form of marriage that is intrinsically void of morality and based on calculations. More importantly, in growing as a “commercial relationship,” it contained the seeds that weakened it as human relationship. Thus, in contrast to old marriage, it failed to pass authenticity on from one generation to another. Eventually, such a failure led to the birth of a “divorce culture,” which was to continue spreading throughout a century to come. In this context, as Kimberley Freeman notes,

a brief list of the titles of books on the history of divorce suggests the popularity of this idea: Whitehead’s *The Divorce Culture* (1997), Joseph Epstein’s *Divorced in America* (1974), Glenda Riley’s *Divorce: An American Tradition* (1991), and Sheila Kessler’s *The American Way of Divorce: Prescriptions for Change* (1975).³⁵

To overcome such a situation marred with the decline of morality, in my view, Wharton embraced escapism and tried to find spiritual refuge in her memories of the past in accordance to Spengler’s cyclical view on history.³⁶ It is this very history that is defined by Ibn Khaldun as “the account for a story peculiar to an age or a generation,”³⁷ which would provide Wharton with the necessary ingredients to reconstruct images of

³² Farrenkopf, “Spengler’s Historical Pessimism and the Tragedy of Our Age,” 393.

³³ By “social capital,” I mean mainly the social network of relationships peculiar to Old Society. See my selected notions on Pierre Bourdieu’s forms of capital in my second chapter, 128. See also “The value of connecting: Social capital and communities” in David Gauntlett, *Making Is Connecting: The Social Meaning of Creativity from Diy and Knitting to Youtube and Web 2.0* (Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011), 128.

³⁴ Ibid., 129.

³⁵ Kimberly A. Freeman, *Love American Style: Divorce and the American Novel, 1881-1976*, Literary Criticism and Cultural Theory (New York: Routledge, 2003), x.

³⁶ See Spengler’s cyclical view on history in my second chapter, 123.

³⁷ “نكر الأخبار الخاصة بعصر أو جيل”. Hussein, 32. My translation

marriage from the *good-old-days* America.³⁸ As T.S. Eliot put it, the “historical sense involves a perception, not of the pastness of the past, but of its presence.”³⁹ Thus, Wharton returns to the past to extricate meanings and especially wisdom to refine her ideal of marriage and, if impossible in reality, she will find grounds in her narrative as the perfect medium to embrace her attempt to find a “way out” of a desperate established condition, or *status quo*. To support this idea, I look at Wharton’s portrayal of marriage in *Ethan Frome* (1911) and the reasons behind her high expectation which find grounds only in her exploration of a past way of life.

Ethan Frome is different in many aspects from Wharton’s earlier works namely in terms of the setting as key distinction. In other words, I suggest that the writer thinks of the past as she shifts her narrative from the city back to the countryside, that is, as she herself prefers to put it, a “backward glance” towards a place that is close to nature and memories and away from reality.⁴⁰ As John Taylor Terry observes, “it is always a pleasure to look back to a notable and virtuous ancestry.”⁴¹ I would argue that Wharton, who admired much Walt Whitman’s poetry,⁴² had a nostalgia for the past in that she portrays Frome’s marriage through her account for his life as a farmer. My claim rests on Noah Webster’s definition of a farmer as a “husbandman,”⁴³ that is, farming and marriage are closely connected and both involve connectedness. More importantly, in returning to the land as a source of self-sufficiency, Wharton shows that she prefers rootedness. With Wharton’s admiration of France and its culture in mind, Malek Bennabi confirms that the European civilisation is, first and foremost, an “agrarian civilisation” and that the French individual is by definition a “land human being.”⁴⁴ With all these ties to cultural legacy, it is clear that Wharton trusts tradition and is sceptical about the new, or the future in general terms. More importantly, the land, that is, earth,

³⁸ Wharton’s scientific inclination led her to predict the decline of American culture. Thus, her fiction rendered her perception in that “often imagination leads us to believe that something is going to happen. What is common to all such cases is the emotional interest: this first causes us to imagine an event, and then leads us to think that it has happened, is happening, or will happen, according to the circumstances.” Bertrand Russell, *An Outline of Philosophy* (R. & R. Clark, Limited, 1927), 202.

³⁹ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays, 1917-1932* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932), 14.

⁴⁰ *A Backward Glance* is the title of Wharton’s autobiography and, in a subtle manner, it underlines her nostalgic views, an idea that supports my primary hypothesis in this dissertation.

⁴¹ John Taylor Terry, *Rev. Edward Taylor, 1642-1729* (New York: Privately Printed, 1892), 3.

⁴² See more detail on Wharton’s opinion on Walt Whitman’s poetry in Chapter 3, 178.

⁴³ I highlight the connectedness between farming and marriage in Chapter 3, 174.

⁴⁴ Bennabi, *The Problem of Culture*, 26.

is real and concrete whereas the future is just an idea. For this, she mourned the death of tradition and felt sorry for the loss of high culture and art as she tells us: “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 clone far less harm to the home than the Higher Education.”⁴⁵

Through a review of *The Valley of Decision* (1902), Carol Wershoven tells us more on Wharton’s attitudes toward the uncertainties of the future. That is, according to her, in this work, the novel’s main character Odo is contemplating his posture and the setting is “analogous to New York in the age of reform, and some have even commented that perhaps Odo’s final choice of the restrictive past over the radical present reflects Edith Wharton’s own attitudes about change and the dangers of too much freedom.”⁴⁶ I add to Wershoven’s argument that most of Wharton’s works evoke her anxiety in the then age of emphatic social change. In my view, all what is anxiety revolves around a sense of ambiguity and lostness. I would explain this inclination by the inner tensions she manifested as a Puritan-minded writer and thinker, on the one hand, and as a woman of letters who celebrates the technological advances, on the other. Her anxiety traces actually to the period in which new sciences began to challenge the religious explanations of the world. In this context, Avihu Zakai writes:

In contrast to traditional Christian thinking, which sought in the Scriptures an explanation for the truths of natural philosophy, thus establishing a connection between the book and the world, between text and knowledge (*scientia*), the evolving scientific visions of the heavens and of earth radically contradicted consecrated religious assumptions, such as the structure of the heavens, the geocentric system, and the place and role of God within the universe.⁴⁷

As such, Wharton’s tendency in writing manifested a sense of scepticism. In my view, her sceptical and, to some extent, pessimistic views on the future stem from her scientific inclination.⁴⁸ This claim rests on the notion that science which is based on observation and analysis can provide the scholar with the capacity to look into the future

⁴⁵ Wharton, 60.

⁴⁶ Carol Wershoven, *The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton* (London: Associated University Presses, 1982), 29.

⁴⁷ Avihu Zakai, *Jonathan Edwards’ Philosophy of Nature: The Re-Enchantment of the World in the Age of Scientific Reasoning*, T & T Clark Theology (London ; New York: T & T Clark, 2010), 87.

⁴⁸ See more on Wharton’s scepticism in post-Darwinian world, chapter 1, 85.

and predict what is going to happen. Without doubt, the outbreak of the Great War in the opening years of the twentieth century well confirms this idea. In this context, it is worth noting that she considered science as “indispensable for discovering our ‘inward relation to reality.’”⁴⁹ More importantly, such an inclination was behind her anxiety over the decline of American society. In a broader sense, the tensions which I have just referred to reflect larger in scale conflicts in visions of life between science and religion. In my opinion, it is not exactly the fall of religion *per se*, but the fall in morality which ushered in the fall of Society. In line with this meaning, in a different part of the world where modern sciences of mathematics and astronomy find grounds, society had also undergone the same phenomenon of decline. Since the status of Society unmistakably mirrors that of civilisation it belongs to, it could be said that Western civilisation seems to follow in pattern already completed cycles of rise and fall of old civilisations, be they in Rome or, in my view, Islamic Arab civilisation. While separated in time, both civilisations display common patterns of decline in terms of morality and culture, a decline that the latter witnessed more than five centuries earlier and made Ibn Khaldun develop a similar anxiety *vis-à-vis* the decline of his nation’s cherished culture. Interestingly, such a philosopher seems to be an archetype for Edith Wharton. In describing Ibn Khaldun’s posture, Taha Hussein writes:

Kremer and Freyer considered Ibn Khaldun as pessimistic to a large extent. Kremer attempts to compare him [Ibn Khaldun] to Abi Lalaa and concludes by asserting that the pessimism of Ibn Khaldun is one of a scientist while that of Abu Lalaa’s is one of a poet. The source of such a feeling both men developed is the general decline that affected the Arab state.⁵⁰

Because scientific observation of society provides examinable data, it could be safely and adequately argued that decline *per se* inevitably ushers in a new *state of affairs*. This very process of transition is called change, and in particular social change. My study of this phenomenon ascribes my dissertation to phenomenology which

⁴⁹ Jill M. Kress, *The Figure of Consciousness: William James, Henry James, and Edith Wharton*, Literary Criticism and Cultural Theory (New York: Routledge, 2002), 138.

⁵⁰ “اعتبر كرامر وفريير أن ابن خلدون جم التشاؤم، ويحاول كرامر أن يقارنه بأبي العلاء وينتهي إلى تلك النتيجة وهي أن تشاؤم ابن خلدون كان تشاؤم عالم وأن تشاؤم أبي العلاء كان تشاؤم شاعر، ومصدر هذه العاطفة عند الرجلين هو الإنحطاط العام الذي هوت إليه الدولة العربية.” Hussein, 23. My translation. I add that it is interesting to notice that the decline of the Islamic Arab civilisation coincides exactly with the discovery of America in 1492. With reference to the role the falling civilisation played in linking ancient Greek thought with the emerging Western civilisation, the cyclical view of history finds tangible credibility.

Edmund Husserl laid the ground for as “a science of ideas.”⁵¹ Therefore, a central concern to my research is the scientific examination of social change as reflected through marriage. That is to say, the common thread throughout my dissertation, as I will endeavour to progressively and smoothly reveal, is that marriage has always been subdued to the forces of social change. In addition to Wharton’s novels, extra-textual data collected from different readings that addressed the period under study will support my discussions. My research also endeavours to show how marriage reflected the dichotomies of tradition versus modernity and individual freedom versus social constraints.

Wharton, it seems, has capitalised on the rise of specialised disciplines in the study of different fields of human experience. Thus, her insights will reinforce the credibility of the results my research aims at in that her undertaking was “professionally” grounded. That is to say, as Nancy Bentley observes, “Wharton’s work embodies the connection between what she calls the ‘professional study of culture,’ which, she reminds us, was established during this period with in the disciplines of anthropology, sociology and social psychology.”⁵²

Literary texts get, indeed, into a historical moment and, above all, the reasons that led to it. In line with this meaning, Wharton tells us: “I believe, to put the facts once more on record for a future generation who may study them with eyes cleared of prejudice.”⁵³ Her inspirer, Henry James, also says the same: “to show my people, to exhibit their relations with each other; for that is all my measure.”⁵⁴ That is, through literature as a non-biased source, the psychology of people and the way it works to define their relationships, including marriage, could be explored and analysed. For Wharton, writing is even more conveying of the inside reality than spoken words. In accounting for the way she could dive into the deep self of her friend William Brownell, she tells us: “his real self dwelt in a closely guarded recess of contemplation from which it emerged more easily and freely in writing than in speech; and indeed his letters to me,

⁵¹ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, Collected Works of Edmund Husserl (Boston: M. Nijhoff, 1980), xix.

⁵² Kress, 138.

⁵³ Wharton, 339.

⁵⁴ Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881. Rpt, London: Collector's Library, 2004), 12.

which were long and frequent, always brought him nearer than our actual encounters.”⁵⁵ Therefore, the study of friendship as well as marriage within a specific environment could be helped by social theory and its light that guides literary criticism. As W. Witte observes, Hippolyte Taine’s thought on the interplay between time, space, and character in literature fosters the credibility of the latter as a source of historical data:

Taine’s famous theory, set forth with all the lucidity and persuasive grace which Marx so sadly lacks, leads him to the conclusion that literary developments are rigidly determined, that the problems which literature presents are problems of psychological mechanics’, that literary works are, in fact, ‘resultants’ produced by the interplay of certain forces: Race, Environment, and what he calls ‘Moment’, i.e. the cumulative influence of past events in any given situation. These three underlying causes determine the precise character of any work of literature, just as the structure of a rock is determined by the lie of the geological stratum to which it belongs.⁵⁶

Because “literary studies, as sciences, are, from a technical point of view, reliable as means to get at practical facts about language and literature,”⁵⁷ I borrow T.S. Eliot’s words, “that criticism is as inevitable as breathing, and that we should be none the worse for articulating what passes in our minds when we read a book and feel an emotion about it.”⁵⁸ In line with this meaning, I consider that Edith Wharton’s novels can help us deepen our knowledge on the selected period to discover a good deal on marriage.

Since I am concerned with the social and literary contexts of the author in order to elucidate Wharton’s treatment of marriage,⁵⁹ I will also rely on the sociological approach. My choice is informed by the fact that “sociology, economics, and literature share (and must share) a common aim to expose (through satire, wit, and passion) the lopsided nature of social institutions of power.”⁶⁰ In taking such an inclination in my literary analysis, I will be able to explore the social and economic processes and, more

⁵⁵ Wharton, 145.

⁵⁶ W. Witte, “The Sociological Approach to Literature,” *The Modern Language Review* 36, no. 1 (1941): 88.

⁵⁷ Salah Kaci-Mohamed, “Influence and the Search for Creativity in Ngugi’s Fiction” (Doctoral Thesis, University of Algiers 2, 2011), 11.

⁵⁸ As Cited in Wilfred L. Guerin et al., *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2005), x.

⁵⁹ Wharton herself recognises the role sociology plays in the study of cultural wealth namely in periods of change. See the quote from *A Backward Glance* I mentioned in page 4.

⁶⁰ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press Inc., 2007), viii.

importantly, how they converge and eventually connect to shape society and its institutions in the image of marriage and family. While this idea is supported by W. Witte's arguments that I referred to previously, it is worth noting that he points out also to the fact that "critics are often reluctant to define the precise nature of this connexion."⁶¹

To understand different forces that shape marriage, the sociological approach, in particular, will "dissect it into scientifically examinable questions,"⁶² to use Bourdieu's words. To fulfil such an endeavour, I will necessarily be guided by the theoretical background and insights provided by authoritative thinkers and social philosophers in that, as Kingsley Widmer noted, "the literary should allow for the possible intellectual pertinence of the founding fathers of modern sociology—say, the early Marx or the late Freud, or Mill or Durkheim or Weber."⁶³

Even belonging to a different era, Ibn Khaldun's views on history and society will further help my study of marriage in that in addition to his rich insights on human behaviour, he was an *avant-garde* social philosopher who was the first to explain history in terms of sociology. That is to say, as Muhsin Mohamed Hussein observed, his influential ideas demonstrate how history is made when "people gather and interact."⁶⁴ Such social gatherings and human interaction definitely fuel literature with important data. Hence, the sociological approach relies on such material to decipher the workings of society, namely marriage in the case of my study, and provide us with the adequate information for literary interpretation. It is worth noting that, in this view, art and society are closely related. In this context, Jeremiah Sullivan argues in his study of the historical and scientific method in literature that the "critical method of Hippolyte Taine [...] viewed religion, politics, economics, literature,[...]as related parts of a new organic

⁶¹ Witte, "The Sociological Approach to Literature," 86.

⁶² "تتمثل السوسيولوجيا كما أفهمها في تحويل المشكلات الميتافيزيقية إلى مشكلات قابلة لأن تعالج معالجة علمية", Pierre Bourdieu, *Symbol and Power*, Trans. Abdessalam Benadbelali (Casablanca, Maroc: Editions Toubkal, 2007), 6. My translation.

⁶³ Kingsley Widmer, "The Sociology of Literature?," *Studies in the Novel* 11, no. 1 (1979): 99.

⁶⁴ "فإن [ابن] خلدون أعطى تفسير التاريخ تعبيره الاجتماعي حين أعلن أن هدف التاريخ الأساسي هو إفهامنا حال البشر لدى اجتماعهم ثم علة" Muhsin Mohamed Hussein, "Theories of Sequential Cycles," *Arab Journal of Humanities* 5, no. 19 (1985). My translation. The text is available in Arabic language at: URL <http://pubcouncil.kuniv.edu.kw/ajh/homear.aspx?id=8&Root=yes&authid=924>.

concept of history. It was the interdependent relationship of literature and society that formed the basis for Taine's hypothesis."⁶⁵

According to Hyppolite Taine,⁶⁶ history imbeds and exhibits the interaction of different aspects of civilisation and by consequence enables the artist to chronicle his age. Along this idea and building on Henry James's views in terms of the novelist's contribution as a historian,⁶⁷ Joseph Conrad went even further in fostering the connection between literature, as a highly regarded art, and society. Thus, he pointed out the power of literature in documenting and providing us with the truth on social issues:

Mr. Henry James claims for the novelist the standing of the historian as the only adequate one, as for himself and before his audience. I think that the claim cannot be contested, and that the position is unassailable.

Fiction is history, human history, or it is nothing. But it is also more than that; it stands on firmer ground, being based on the reality of forms and the observation of social phenomena, whereas history is based on documents, and the reading of print and handwriting—on second-hand impression. Thus fiction is nearer truth. But let that pass. A historian may be an artist too, and a novelist is a historian, the preserver, the keeper, the expounder, of human experience. As is meet for a man of his descent and tradition, Mr. Henry James is the historian of fine consciences.⁶⁸

That said, it is safe to acknowledge that because "literature is primarily art, it must also be affirmed that art does not exist in a vacuum. It is a creation by someone at some time in history, and it is intended to speak to other human beings about some idea or issue that has human relevance."⁶⁹ Central to the human experience is marriage which is closely connected with its sister institution of family. As Simone de Beauvoir observed, "the family is not a closed community: its isolation is qualified by communications set up with other social units."⁷⁰ Hence, in my opinion, marriage manifests its importance primarily in three ways. On a first level, it creates new families and, hence, prepares society for the future. On a second level, it links established

⁶⁵ Jeremiah J. Sullivan, "Henry James and Hippolyte Taine: The Historical and Scientific Method in Literature," *Comparative Literature Studies* 10, no. 1 (1973): 25.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ In terms of marriage, Henry James envisages the impact of capitalism among other factors in shaping the marital relationships. See Chapter 1, 36.

⁶⁸ Joseph Conrad, "Henry James: An Appreciation," *The North American Review* 203, no. 725 (1916): 589.

⁶⁹ Guerin et al., 17.

⁷⁰ Beauvoir, 505.

families and passes on cultural heritage from one generation to another. In providing society with a sense of security and stability, particularly as witnessed in old times, marriage preserves the continuity of the very society within which it finds grounds. On a third level, which is very important to fulfil the previous levels, both partners should be regarded as equal persons, each one of them is allowed to define himself within the institution, enjoy his personal freedom, and express his potential.

As a mirror of society, literature has, to a large extent, reflected the concerns raised by such an institution to fulfil the premises and assumptions I have just mentioned. Much as it had been earlier, the first issues raised in terms of marriage were financial or, in technical words, economic. In a way which would have been familiar to later Victorians, Jane Austen, addressed marriage's economic power among other issues, as Jan Fergus explains:

When in the 1790s Jane Austen was drafting her first novels, she also began to go to balls, to mix somewhat with the surrounding gentry, to make visits to richer relatives, and the insecurities and ambiguities of her class position as well as her economic future must have been as evident to her as they become to the Dashwoods, disinherited in favour of a great-great-nephew by the owner of Norland, or to Elizabeth Bennet, who will be poverty-stricken at her father's death unless she marries. Female gentility is unstable without marriage or money, as shown by Emma's Miss Bates, who lost the Vicarage that Mr Elton occupies when her own father died.⁷¹

For his part, William Dean Howells in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890) shows how Basil March and his wife Isabel consider, first and foremost, the roles of husband and wife within the family in terms of responsibility. On one level, the husband is presented as the provider in terms of economic duties, while on another level, he is the authority in terms of guiding morality within the family. The role of woman is portrayed as the helper and supporter of her husband with a sense of acceptance that echoes the general tone of the time as the following passage illustrates:

The practical expression of his life was that it was enough to provide well for his family; to have cultivated tastes, and to gratify them to the extent of his means; to be rather distinguished, even in the simplification of his desires. He believed, and his wife believed, that if the time ever came when he really

⁷¹ Jan Fergus, "Biography," in *Jane Austen in Context*, ed. Janet M. Todd (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 7.

wished to make a sacrifice to the fulfilment of the aspirations so long postponed, she would be ready to join with heart and hand.⁷²

Beside the economic power, marriage provides a source of knowledge and learning. Like the quest for the adequate university to fulfil one's aspirations for education, marriage involves the search for a "knowledge provider," which would bring "a high level of consciousness through a series of experiences that lead to his development."⁷³ Good example of this is the prominent sociologist and feminist activist, Marianne Schnitger,⁷⁴ "who married Max [Weber], above all, to gain access to the precious goods of intellect that were the basis of personal autonomy."⁷⁵ In continuation to Elaine Baruch's argument, great works of literature in the image of Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815), Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856), George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871), Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1877), and Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady* (1881) exhibit "the development of the self through marriage."⁷⁶

Yet, as marriage involves two partners, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856), in particular, "describes a classic codependent relationship."⁷⁷ Thus, marriage assigns women with limited roles, namely, the roles of wife and mother. As such, "Emma Bovary marries Charles because as a woman she needs to get married, but also because through her husband she is seeking self-realization which she does not get."⁷⁸ Ironically enough, Emma Bovary becomes trapped by romantic visions of happiness, which are the product of the very learning process she sought through marriage. She, therefore,

⁷² William Dean Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, vol. 1 (1890. Rpt: Bookyards), 13.

⁷³ Elaine Hoffman Baruch, "The Feminine "Bildungsroman": Education through Marriage," *The Massachusetts Review* 22, no. 2 (1981): 335,341.

⁷⁴ See footnote in Chapter 1, 88.

⁷⁵ Peter Ghosh, *Max Weber and the Protestant Ethic: Twin Histories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 7.

⁷⁶ Baruch, "The Feminine "Bildungsroman": Education through Marriage," 335,341. While the novels' titles are mentioned in Elaine Baruch's work, I shall point out that, for the sake of contextualising these works, I complemented the references with both the related authors' names as well as the dates of publication from Wikipedia.org. URLs: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emma_\(novel\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emma_(novel)), http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jane_Eyre, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madame_Bovary, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Middlemarch>, and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anna_Karenina.

⁷⁷ Laurence M. Porter and Eugene F. Gray, *Gustave Flaubert's Madame Bovary: A Reference Guide*, Greenwood Guides to Fiction (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2002), 13.

⁷⁸ Maria Mikolchak, "Kate Chopin's "the Awakening" as Part of the Nineteenth-Century American Literary Tradition," *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 5, no. 2 (2004): 31.

fails to realise self-fulfilment as she encounters the disappointing realities of marriage as the following passage illustrates:

She was not happy—she never had been. Whence came this insufficiency in life—this instantaneous turning to decay of everything on which she leant? But if there were somewhere a being strong and beautiful, a valiant nature, full at once of exaltation and refinement, a poet's heart in an angel's form, a lyre with sounding chords ringing out elegiac epithalamia to heaven, why, perchance, should she not find him? Ah! How impossible! Besides, nothing was worth the trouble of seeking it; everything was a lie. Every smile hid a yawn of boredom, every joy a curse, all pleasure satiety, and the sweetest kisses left upon your lips only the unattainable desire for a greater delight.⁷⁹

Madame Bovary, therefore, sets the model for many characters involved in marriage at the turn of the century. In his book *Le Bovarysme, essai sur le pouvoir d'imaginer* (1902), Jules de Gaultier defines Bovarysme as the ability to construct a sense of self from illusions. Yet, such illusions, which are “sincere” by definition, extend from determining one's self to encompass a definition of the other and, hence, the “world:”

Fait de psychologie courante, le bovarysme est le pouvoir qu'a l'homme de se concevoir autre qu'il n'est. S'il faut en croire Jules de Gaultier, ce pouvoir s'exerce inévitablement, et l'illusion sur soi-même entraîne des illusions sur les autres personnes et sur le monde. Il s'agit d'une illusion pleinement sincère.⁸⁰

Accordingly, in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *The Doctor's Wife* (1864), Isabel Gilbert is a remake of Flaubert's Bovaristic character. That is, “Like Emma Bovary, Isabel Gilbert, the heroine of Braddon's *The Doctor's Wife*, is discontented with the prosaic reality of middle-class domesticity and bored in her marriage.”⁸¹ Other female characters, however, succeed in getting some independence by rebelling against society. For instance, “Hardy's heroines often display a lively degree of independence: Cytherea, Fancy Day, Ethelberta, Bathsheba and Tess all earn their own livings.”⁸² On their part, male characters are also entrapped by stereotyped visions of marriage. For instance, in Henry James's *Watch and Ward* (1871), “Roger Lawrence, from an early age, has been

⁷⁹ Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (1856. Rpt: Planet eBook), 370.

⁸⁰ Louis Vialle, “Le Bovarysme,” *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger* 132, no. 4/6 (1942-43): 111.

⁸¹ Ann Heilmann, “Emma Bovary's Sisters: Infectious Desire and Female Reading Appetites in Mary Braddon and George Moore,” *Victorian Review* 29, no. 1 (2003): 32.

⁸² Cederic Watts, “Hardy's Sue Bridehead and the ‘New Woman’,” *Critical Survey* 5, no. 2 (1993): 154.

fixed on the idea of marriage: ‘There glimmered mistily in the young man’s brain a vision of a home-scene of the future’ – placid wife, golden haired babe, and ‘in the midst, his sentient self’.”⁸³

As much as Wharton was influenced by the French culture, Kate Chopin exhibited the same in *The Awakening* (1899). In this novel, Edna Pontelier, a reminder of the French influence in Louisiana, awakens to assert her freedom and independence after being involved in a marriage which “was purely an accident.”⁸⁴ Her quest marks the novel as “one of the first important novels in the century concerned with the search for the self.”⁸⁵ In an emphatic scene in the novel, Edna dissociates herself from a World obsessed with money and, instead, endeavours to assert her individuality through her craving for freedom. I give floor to her words to speak for herself:

Then let me tell you: It is a caprice. I have a little money of my own from my mother’s estate, which my father sends me by dribblets. I won a large sum this winter on the races, and I am beginning to sell my sketches. Laidpore is more and more pleased with my work; he says it grows in force and individuality. I cannot judge of that myself, but I feel that I have gained in ease and confidence. However, as I said, I have sold a good many through Laidpore. I can live in the tiny house for little or nothing, with one servant. Old Celestine, who works occasionally for me, says she will come stay with me and do my work. I know I shall like it, like the feeling of freedom and independence.”⁸⁶

When it comes to Edith Wharton, marriage emerges as one of her main concerns. This could be related to her life which was marred with tensions between her aspirations for intellect and adherence to her family’s social codes in terms of marriage.⁸⁷ In other words, Wharton, had the privilege to access a wealth of intellect in her father’s library, yet she raised her parents’ “worry over their daughter’s becoming too intellectual and hence unmarriageable.”⁸⁸ Such anxiety developed further into the

⁸³ Greg W. Zacharias, *A Companion to Henry James*, Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 22.

⁸⁴ Kate Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Short Stories* (1899. Rpt: Epubbooks, 2014), 49.

⁸⁵ Audrey T. Rodgers, “Images of Women: A Female Perspective,” *College Literature* 6, no. 1 (1979): 43.

⁸⁶ Chopin, 207.

⁸⁷ Actually, Wharton’s treatment of marriage was not isolated, but it went along “many novelists who investigated the restrictions of marriage in some of the most important, and in a few of the very best-selling, novels of the era, including Zona Gale’s *Miss Lulu Bett*, Ben Hecht’s *Erik Dorn*, and Dorothy Canfield Fisher’s *The Brimming Cup*, in 1921, and Gertrude Atherton’s *Black Oxen* in 1923.” Sinclair Lewis and Gordon Hutner, *Babbitt*, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), xvi.

⁸⁸ Donna Campbell, “Edith Wharton by Hermione Lee,” *Studies in American Naturalism* 2, no. 2 (2007): 179.

disregard to her aspirations. As a way out,⁸⁹ Wharton sought to find an intellectual match for herself. As such, without doubt, one of the most influential literary figures in her life was Henry James. That is, as Bell put it, “in the landscape of Edith Wharton’s life the figure of Henry James is of almost too distracting importance [...] but Edith Wharton had few intimates who were her creative equals, and none who towered into that eminence where James stood.”⁹⁰

For Henry James, as Edward Wagenknecht noted, “love and fidelity were the virtues.”⁹¹ For one thing, James whose uncontested friendship with Wharton makes us predict his appreciation of loyalty in relationships, love is unchangeable, an opinion that separates him from Benjamin Franklin in terms of this particular detail.⁹² Thus, for him, love solidifies marriage and like the latter it becomes sacred. Moreover, it could be inferred that for him marriage is all about forgiveness and sacrifice in that, in this view, one should give without expecting reward. By meeting these requirements and highly regarded standards, marriage would be indissoluble, an idea that is rooted in the religious foundation of Western society, namely Catholic Christianity. More importantly, this evidences why James and Wharton’s perspectives on marriage intersect in that both of them found satisfying explanations of good human relationships in religion. As the following passage from *The Golden Bowl* suggests, a good marriage provides deep happiness and a sense of support and unity between husband and wife:

Her husband, on taking his place beside her, had, during a minute or two, for her watching sense, neither said nor done anything; he had been, for that sense, as if thinking, waiting, deciding; yet it was still before he spoke that he, as she felt it to be, definitely acted. He put his arm round her and drew her close - indulged in the demonstration, the long firm embrace by his single arm, the infinite pressure of her whole person to his own.⁹³

In another direction, I deem it adequate to specifically highlight the criticism on Edith Wharton with focus on works appearing after the Second World War, an event

⁸⁹ I suggest that Wharton suffered entrapment that is set by the rigid codes of her society, similar to her character Ethan Frome as I shall demonstrate in my third chapter. Moreover, I argue that she often envisaged escape from such an entrapment through human relationships in the image of the caring friendship.

⁹⁰ Millicent Bell, “Edith Wharton and Henry James: The Literary Relation,” *PMLA* 74, no. 5 (1959): 619.

⁹¹ Edward Wagenknecht, “Our Contemporary Henry James,” *The English Journal* 37, no. 10 (1948): 515.

⁹² In my first chapter, I argue that Benjamin Franklin separated love from friendship. Whereas, to him, the former is “transient,” the latter is “lasting.” See page 29.

⁹³ Henry James, *The Golden Bowl*, 2 vols. (1904, Rpt. New York: Charles Scribner’s Son, 1922), 55-56.

that made interest in the writer withers for a while. My choice is informed, as Helen Killoran noted, by the fact that “her creative accomplishment slept as her literary reputation languished almost from the moment of her death in 1937 until the publication of R. W. B. Lewis’s biography in 1975.”⁹⁴ In *Wharton: A Biography* (1975), R.W.B. Lewis, actually, examined the life of Edith Wharton based on her own letters, which appeared at the time, as Elizabeth Ammons observes:

Given these fears, Edith Wharton herself could not have chosen better editors for her letters than R. W. B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis. Selecting about 400 letters out of nearly 4,000, they achieve a perfect balance: a controlled, dignified self-portrait of Wharton that is at the same time personal, intense, and revealing. They structure the letters by means of seven very useful brief introductory essays, which they space throughout the volume, plus an excellent general introduction.⁹⁵

Through feminist lens, Hermione Lee’s *Edith Wharton* (2007) unveiled aspects of Wharton’s personality as “a woman of strong convictions.”⁹⁶ Additional highlights on the psychology of Wharton were introduced by Cynthia G. Wolff’s *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton* (1977) as well as Shari Benstock’s *No Gifts from Chance* (1994).⁹⁷ Above all, Wolff went beyond the classic interpretation of Wharton’s texts. On the one hand, such works had been studied only in terms of their literary relationship with established works of canonical authors in the image of Henry James. On the other hand, Wharton’s creative value had been undermined by the biased perception of her as a mere historian of “cold, cultivated, [and] aristocratic egoist” individuals.⁹⁸ Thus, Wolff’s reliance on psychology to dive into the hidden meanings helped her endeavour to examine the tensions behind Wharton’s oeuvre and how they were reflected on her narratives.⁹⁹

Based on such informed understanding on Edith Wharton, contemporary authors have capitalised on her rich artistic legacy. As such, the substance of her novels

⁹⁴ Helen Killoran, *The Critical Reception of Edith Wharton*, Studies in American Literature and Culture Literary Criticism in Perspective (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2001), 336.

⁹⁵ Elizabeth Ammons, “The Letters of Edith Wharton by R. W. B. Lewis; Nancy Lewis; Edith Wharton,” *The New England Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (1989): 441.

⁹⁶ Hermione Lee, “Hermione Lee on Edith Wharton” URL:<http://www.hermionelee.com/wharton.html> (2014).

⁹⁷ Campbell, “Edith Wharton by Hermione Lee,” 180.

⁹⁸ Leonard Unger et al., *American Writers: A Collection of Literary Biographies* (New York: Scribner, 1974), 311.

⁹⁹ Cynthia B. Taft, “A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton by Cynthia Griffin Wolff,” *American Literature* 49, no. 4 (1978): 662.

as well as her own life, often related to marriage, made it possible to produce up to date novels which extend on familiar Whartonian characters. For instance, Lev Raphael's *Rosedale in Love* (2011) built on Wharton's Simon Rosedale, while Jennie Fields' *The Age of Desire* (2012) made use of her own life as a matter.¹⁰⁰ In particular, *Rosedale in Love* is an attempt to subvert the biased prejudices that its protagonist suffered as a marginal character from Wharton's perspective. To fulfil such an endeavour, Lev Raphael, therefore, "audaciously revisions" *The House of Mirth*.¹⁰¹ In addition to that, a good number of her novels were adapted into films.¹⁰²

In my turn, I would like to mention that in operating under the light of recent criticism and in extricating meanings from Wharton's myriad of works, my dissertation aims at construing her treatment of marriage as part of her social commentary. For one thing, the readings I offer are, by definition, suggestive. That is, my undertaking is limited by its scope and approach and much of the points it treats are open to further discussion and expansion. Basically, with regard to Wharton's nuanced depiction of her characters, other approaches, namely psychoanalysis, would, in my view, elicit more data through the study of marriage as an adequate device to highlight the typology of persons in accordance to their cultural backgrounds and, perhaps, with pointed focus on the later works of the writer.

¹⁰⁰ Meredithgoldsmith, "Introducing Our Guest Speakers–Lev Raphael and Jennie Fields" URL:<http://wharton2012.wordpress.com/2012/01/02/introducing-our-guest-speakers-lev-raphael-and-jennie-fields/>.

¹⁰¹ "Rosedale in Love by Lev Raphael" URL: <http://www.levraphael.com/rosedale.html>.

¹⁰² Wharton's novels such as *The House of Mirth* (1905), *Ethan Frome* (1911), and *The Age of Innocence* (1920), were adapted into films. More detail are available in "Edith Wharton: Filmography" URL:<http://public.wsu.edu/~campbelld/wharton/wfilm.htm>.

CHAPTER I:

Old Marriage, or when things fall apart in *The House of Mirth*¹

Perhaps it was our common sense of fun that first brought about our understanding. The real marriage of true minds is for any two people to possess a sense of humour or irony pitched in exactly the same key, so that their joint glances at any subject cross like interarching search-lights.

— Edith Wharton,
A Backward Glance (1934), 173.

¹ *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is a novel by African writer Chinua Achebe. I make use of its title here in a different context to allude to the collapse of a way of life that embraced what I term “old marriage.”

1.1. Introduction

Wharton's interest in the study of American society and culture is, as I mentioned in my general introduction, widely proved and universally acknowledged. As Arthur H. Quinn put it, "it was the ability to draw that stratum of society which had its own standards, [...] while appreciating what Europe had to give us, remained content with its own heritage of culture. She shows this clearly in her four stories of Old New York."¹ Taking into consideration her biographical elements, her focus on tradition is eminent. In this context, Frantz Fanon defines tradition as follows: "Tradition, in fact, is not solely a combination of automatic gestures and archaic beliefs. At the most elementary level, there are values, and the need for justification."² For this, the study of individual and social values leads eventually to the study of tradition itself. One thing that is noticeable in Wharton's social commentary is her persistence in the study of the decline of traditional culture.³ Such a phenomenon was reflected on society and its institutions, and marriage was no exception. Thus, to undertake my study of marriage, I resort to the examination of *The House of Mirth* (1905). The peculiarity of this work stems from its richness in social data that is closely related to old marriage. Accordingly, I deem it adequate to provide my research with the capacity to unveil much on the old values and characteristic features of Old America as reflected on marriage.

In this chapter, I first look at what could be termed "old marriage" to show how its purposes and meanings mirrored and served the old American ideals before it changed with the whole American scene. For the sake of clarity and order, I mention here beforehand that my research evokes that the values of old marriage are rooted in the religious foundation of America. With this in mind, I will explore how such grounds shaped the social aspect of marriage that goes hand in hand with the role money plays in the workings of such an institution.

Secondly, I analyse the necessity of marriage in *The House of Mirth* with a focus on the main character, Lily Bart. As a female character, she establishes a specific link

¹ Arthur H. Quinn, "Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction by Blake Nevius Review," *American Literature* 25, no. 4 (1954): 517.

² Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1965), 100.

³ See more on cultural decline in my second chapter, 122.

between Wharton and the roots of American tradition in that “the Puritans followed a long and venerable tradition when they depicted Christian faith with female imagery.”⁴ Yet, because the American society witnessed some significant alterations at the end of the nineteenth century, the spiritual peace of Lily is to be agitated. Thus, my endeavour is to stress her uneasiness and discomfort with social norms *vis-à-vis* marriage by highlighting her qualities and ideals. Thirdly, I survey her quest for freedom as it intertwines with her need for marriage through an analysis of the concept of Selden’s the “Republic of the Spirit.”⁵ In highlighting the reasons behind the failure of such an ideal, I stress further her dissociation from the World in the making. That is, I endeavour to show how her clinging to her values makes life hard for her. With a focus on marriage as a thread that joins her with reality, I attempt to decipher the way her negotiation of a space in modernity reveals her confusion and sense of alienation. Lastly, I concern myself with the examination of Lily Bart’s awakening and subsequent choice to go back to innocence and purity to avoid marriages marred with corruption at different levels and hence incompatible with her own criteria.

1.2. Old Marriage, or Whartonian real marriage as a sacred institution⁶

In Old America, marriage meant the reincarnation of divine love “through moral arguments that promoted mutual love and responsibility between husbands and wives.”⁷ As I said in my general introduction, marriage involves the debate over morality, the study of which, inevitably, leads to the study of the religious view on marriage. This claim rests upon the evident interplay between religion, namely Christianity, and morality. In this context, as “Thomas Paine explained in *The Age of Reason*, ‘the morality that [Jesus Christ] preached and practiced was of the most benevolent kind’.”⁸ As such, in contrast to the wide spread understanding of the opposition of religion to the

⁴ Amanda Porterfield, *Female Piety in Puritan New England: The Emergence of Religious Humanism*, Religion in America Series (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 3.

⁵ Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (1905. Rpt, San Diego: Icon Group International, Inc., 2005), 101.

⁶ Both Ralph Waldo Emerson and Edith Wharton refer to the marital union as the “real marriage;” Hence, I use their description to envelop my study of old marriage as a sacred institution. Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 173. Emerson, 99.

⁷ Porterfield, 4.

⁸ Michael Anthony Lawrence, *Radicals in Their Own Time: Four Hundred Years of Struggle for Liberty and Equal Justice in America* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 9.

notion of love as a determinant of marriage,⁹ Max Weber advanced that the roots of modern family, and love at its centre, trace back to the puritan foundation of America. In the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), he observed that “the origin of the modern family actually finds its locus in the teachings of Protestant, and especially Calvinist-Puritan, reformers.”¹⁰ He added and put emphasis on the fact that “members of the Reformed tradition were counseling their adherents to embrace love as a basis for marriage.”¹¹ Therefore, for Puritans, who considered themselves as the children of a loving God, love was at the heart of marriage. With their asserted commitment to serve a religion which rests on love, compassion, and faith in mind,¹² it is worth noting that love was at the heart of marriage because it is God’s work to bind the union between husband and wife. As Edwin Gaustad put it, “a Christian marriage is indissoluble because God works through the mutual love of husband and wife to cement the union. But if there is no love, then it never was a Christian marriage and the earlier love only a sad delusion.”¹³ Such a love in Puritan era and until Wharton’s times was expected to be achieved through commitment to marital duties. That is, men assumed the roles of providers and women, in turn, fulfilled the responsibilities of motherhood as Jack Dominian writes:

What spouses are looking for in each other is the presence and demonstrations of love. Traditionally this love was to be found in the execution of certain duties in marriage. Thus the husband assumed the responsibilities of being the provider, the head of the household, the decision-maker, the instigator of initiatives. The wife was the childbearer, child rearer, the housekeeper and the catalyst of affection in the home. Provided these roles were observed and the couple were faithful to each other, then the marriage was considered to be good and loving.¹⁴

⁹ I evoke the notion of love in my study of marriage, because, to quote Marilyn Yalom, love “has become synonymous with marriage in the Western world. Scholars are fond of trying to pinpoint the moment in history when love began to take priority over all the other considerations.” Marilyn Yalom, *A History of the Wife*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2001), xi.

¹⁰ William R. Garrett, “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of the Modern Family,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37, no. 2 (1998): 224.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² The bible makes it clear that all Christians should be capable of embracing love in the image of God: “The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love.” John 4:8. URL: http://biblehub.com/1_john/4-8.htm.

¹³ Edwin S. Gaustad, “A Society Ordained by God. English Puritan Marriage Doctrine in the First Half of Theseventeenth Century by James Turner Johnson; the Puritan Family: A Social Study Fromthe Literary Sources by Levin L. Schücking; Brian Battershaw,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 40, no. 4 (1972): 560.

¹⁴ Jack Dominian, “Marriage: Growth and Decline,” *The Furrow* 43, no. 3 (1992): 159.

In *The House of Mirth*, the only marriage which, in my view, proves to be successful at different levels, as the penultimate point of this chapter will reveal in more detail, is realised by Nettie Struther and her husband.¹⁵ I attribute such a success to their fulfilment of the aforementioned marital responsibilities, which eventually leads to their happiness and further sets a “practical” model of marriage for Lily Bart. The latter shows distinction in that, as a Bovarystic character,¹⁶ she has only visions of marriage, which failed to be realised because she was waiting for an idealised one. As much as marriage she envisages to realise is hard to achieve or be found, her qualities as a virtuous woman are also rare and scarcely met. She, therefore, unmistakably fits into the biblical description of the virtuous wife:

Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies.
The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her . . .
She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life.
She seeketh wool, and flax, and worketh willingly with her hands.
She is like the merchants' ships; she bringeth her food from afar.
She riseth also while it is yet night, and giveth meat to her household,
and a portion to her maidens. ...
She stretcheth out her hand to the poor. ...
Her children arise up, and call her blessed; her husband also, and he
praiseth her.¹⁷

Lily's virtues, actually, rest upon her delicacy and sensitivity in human relationships, a fact that explains her romanticised conception of marriage. Hence, she puts much emphasis on the importance of love as a prerequisite for choice in marriage, a condition that ironically contradicts one of the core Puritan ideals in terms of marital issues. This could be said because despite its importance in sustaining marriage, love was not a primary factor or that primordial in one's choice of a partner. That is to say, for Puritans, love was not stressed but it was expected to grow after marriage. It was, therefore, analogous to sowing the seeds which grow into trees with the blessings of God, to use biblical diction. I rely on Stephanie Coontz's assessment of the historical development of marriage, which informs us that “love developed after one had selected

¹⁵ See Chapter 1, 89.

¹⁶ See the definition of Bovaryism in my general introduction, 19.

¹⁷ Proverbs 31:10 in Yalom, 9.

a suitable prospective mate. People didn't fall in love. They tiptoed into it."¹⁸ She adds that "Love, wrote Benjamin Franklin, 'is changeable, transient, and accidental. But Friendship and Esteem are derived from Principles of Reason and Thought.'"¹⁹ Along the mentioned lines, Ralph Waldo Emerson stresses the natural growth of the marital ties and their purifying power in what he terms "the real marriage," which is sacred by nature:

At last they discover that all which at first drew them together,—those once sacred features, that magical play of charms,—was deciduous, had a prospective end, like the scaffolding by which the house was built; and the purification of the intellect and the heart from year to year is the real marriage, foreseen and prepared from the first, and wholly above their consciousness.²⁰

More importantly, Christian love, which bonds the individual with God, transcends the emotional and psychological aspects, as we understand them today, to reach a quest for freedom. In his review of Paul E. Johnson's *Christian Love*, Daniel D. Williams tells us that the latter "goes far beyond psychology in his identification of Christian love with the perspective of liberal democratic pacifism."²¹ In other words, Johnson defined the "happy family [and] typical courtship"²² in terms of spiritual quest for freedom; hence, my subsequent discussion of Lily's journey into freedom finds grounds.²³

To set out for such a quest, men and women needed full harmony and cohesion as they chose to advance in life as one unit.²⁴ As such, "typical courtship" was grounded in respect as a criterion for the choice of a partner in marriage. In *The House of Mirth*, Percy Gryce, whose ancestral belonging ties him with old America, initially considers marriage with Lily for this very reason. His choice is, to some extent, defined by his appreciation of her endurance in resisting the corruption around her, a characteristic

¹⁸ Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Viking, 2005), 178.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Emerson, 99.

²¹ Daniel D. Williams, "Christian Love by Paul E. Johnson" *The Journal of Religion* 32, no. 3 (1952): 213-214.

²² Ibid.

²³ Paul E. Johnson's view of freedom as a prerequisite for happy marriage lays the grounds for my next point "Lily's quest for freedom." See Chapter 1, 50.

²⁴ My way to show the importance of cohesion goes through the discussion of the fall of Selden's republic. That is, the lack of cohesion in marital relationships inevitably leads to the fall apart of marriage. See Chapter 1, 63.

feature that raised his respect. Accordingly, in the following passage, Lily is defined in terms of endurance and “strength of character,” the qualities which are often associated with Puritans from the early days of such faith and ideology.²⁵ Actually, Wharton’s depiction of Lily evokes Puritanism not just as a religion but as a philosophy of life. As Al-Farabi put it, “religion is an imitation of philosophy.”²⁶

Lily had hinted to Mr. Gryce that [...] during her visits to Bellomont she regularly accompanied Muriel and Hilda to church. For this reason he had been especially pleased to learn that she would, as usual, attend the young Trenors to church on Sunday morning; and as he paced the gravel sweep before the door, his light overcoat on his arm and his prayer-book in one carefully-gloved hand, he reflected agreeably on the strength of character which kept her true to her early training in surroundings so subversive to religious principles.²⁷

Spiritual happiness, therefore, is the outcome of marriage that is grounded in Christian tradition. As St. Augustine viewed it, Adam and Eve represented the first ever status of blessing and spiritual elevation through their marriage. Their marital life blended with Paradise and their bodily and spiritual life represented the perfect sublimation of human condition. That is, in Paradise neither illness nor discomfort tainted the harmony of marriage and life by extension. In this regard, St. Augustine says:

As happy, then, as were these our first parents, who were agitated by no mental perturbations, and annoyed by no bodily discomforts, so happy should the whole human race have been, had they not introduced that evil which they have transmitted to their posterity, and had none of their descendants committed iniquity worthy of damnation; but this original blessedness continuing until, in virtue of that benediction which said, “Increase and multiply.”²⁸

In Adam and Eve’s image and based on respect and sacrifice, Nettie Struther and George succeed where Lily Bart and Selden fail, as it will be disclosed in the

²⁵ Terry Eagleton proposes a list of widely accepted definitions of ideology among which I adopt the following meanings: (1) “the process of production of meanings, signs and values in social life,” (2) “a body of ideas characteristic of a particular social group or class,” (3) “identity thinking,” (4) “action-oriented sets of beliefs,” (5) “the process whereby social life is converted to a natural reality.” Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London; New York: Verso, 1991), 1.

²⁶ Allan Bloom, *Alfarabi’s Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1962), 6.

²⁷ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 57.

²⁸ Philip Schaff, *St. Augustin’s City of God and Christian Doctrine* (New York: The Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1890), 436.

remainder of this chapter. Besides, friendship made marriage stable and lasting as Benjamin Franklin pointed out in the previous quotation. Thus, friendship within marriage is based on appreciation, understanding, and esteem, the qualities that were manifested in the relationships that bonded the literary fathers of Edith Wharton and, hence, inspired her. As Cahir put it, “Hawthorne and Melville were drawn together by the natural and inmost esteem each felt for and received from the other. They were joined by an intuitive appreciation, a shared sympathy.”²⁹ Friendship, therefore, contributes to foster the human relationships, including marriage, to resist the hardships of life. For this reason, Lily hoped that Selden could be the friend, who accepts her as she is for who she is. Above all, in being by her side, she aspired that he would help her to be strong enough to face life:

“Don’t you see,” she continued, “that there are men enough to say pleasant things to me, and that what I want is a friend who won’t be afraid to say disagreeable ones when I need them? Sometimes I have fancied you might be that friend—I don’t know why, except that you are neither a prig nor a bounder, and that I shouldn’t have to pretend with you or be on my guard against you.”³⁰

Wharton’s views on friendship merge into her conception of marriage. For one thing, she considers marriage as a relationship that is built on the harmony between two people’s minds before anything else.³¹ Such harmony would guarantee the sustainability of marriage, provide a lasting happiness, and, by implication, be reflected on the social aspect. Yet, such happiness is to be challenged for marriage is a part of a larger network of relationships. This could be said because society imposes some codes and assumptions which are to be respected at different hierarchical levels. The effect would be felt within its building blocks, that is, the family unit, as the following paragraphs attempt to disclose.

1.3. Marriage: between social necessity and social power

Almost any human action is triggered out of a specific need. Besides, because the human being is, first and foremost, a social being, his or her need to ascribe to society

²⁹ Linda Costanzo Cahir, *Solitude and Society in the Works of Herman Melville and Edith Wharton* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1999), 18.

³⁰ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 9.

³¹ Wharton calls friendship the “real marriage of true minds.” See the quotation in Chapter 3, 184.

proves to be a tested reality. More importantly, because necessity justifies human action, it serves in a way or another to question his very existence. That is, an essential question raises itself: why one needs to do this or that and why does he or she exist in the first place? In this context, I rely on Avicenna's definition of necessity "as equivalent to existence, to certainty or affirmation of existence. The assertion that it is known by itself implies that it is a primary intelligible which cannot be defined by anything else."³² Therefore, when necessity is defined, one could embrace his real self, or Whartonian "inner room", and aspire to retrieve spiritual peace and happiness.

When it comes to marriage, inner and external factors are to define one's choice, but all of them aim and converge at one thing, that is, the ultimate pursuit of happiness. To fulfil such a universal aspiration, old marriage, in particular, proves to be a "social necessity."³³ For this reason, Wharton makes it clear that Lily is different from people around her in terms of her situation only to precise the rationale behind marriage. As such, in my view, Wharton makes use of orphanhood as a clear situation in which the absence of familial warmth would point out the lack of happiness and consequent anxiety. The latter being defined as the fear of the absence of something or the risks to lose it seems to draw the background of Lily's life. My argument here is to emphasise that the absence of something points out its importance and, above all, the urgency to seek it and find it to avoid or lessen anxiety and, hence, reach a mental calm and spiritual peace. Thus, without doubt, Lily Bart is unmistakably endowed with the legitimate humane right to happiness, a quest that cannot be fulfilled without associating herself with a new stable family unit instead of her falling one. While the pursuit of happiness could be seen at first glance as a self-centred concern, in Old America happiness was regarded, first and foremost, as a shared quest. With Wharton's Puritan grounds in mind, it could be argued that, in her view, severe individualistic attitude in "being narrow minded [...] would suppress any religious spirit."³⁴ In other words, Wharton defines real happiness in terms of marriage as a shared life within the confines of the community in

³² Catarina Belo, *Chance and Determinism in Avicenna and Averroes*, Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2007), 91.

³³ The concept of "social necessity" is addressed by Jacques Donzelot as he explains that in the absence of marital ties, children and women need special care. As an alternative to families, associations, in the image of Gerty's charity proposed by Wharton, would provide such care. Jacques Donzelot, *The Policing of Families* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979), 32.

³⁴ "الفردية شديدة الضيق تمحو كل روح ديني". Hussein, 24. My translation.

which parenthood, procreation, and sustainability are central. Accordingly, she writes in *French Ways and their Meaning* (1927) that:³⁵

Marriage in France is regarded as founded for the family and not for the husband and wife. It is designed not to make two people individually happy for a longer or shorter time, but to secure their permanent well-being as associates in the foundation of a home and the procreation of a family. Such an arrangement must need be based on what is most permanent in human states of feeling, and least dependent on the accidents of beauty, youth, and novelty. Community of tradition, of education, and, above all, of the parental feeling, are judged to be the sentiments most likely to form a lasting tie between the average man and woman and the French marriage is built on parenthood, not on passion.³⁶

Because for Puritans, “marriage is a blessing; it guards the purity and happiness of the race, it provides for man’s social needs, it elevates the physical, the intellectual, and the moral nature.”³⁷ Thus, marriage would promote stability in society. In accordance with this claim, America could successfully overcome the difficulties it faced during early days of its creation in its endeavour to establish a new society. That is, “especially in New England, where Puritans were most successful in organizing a society based on their beliefs about marriage and family life, images of female sanctity and divine espousal coalesced with domestic feelings and behaviours.”³⁸ In this context, marriage was very powerful and effective in that it produced strong family units. This could be said because, like a church, the family is endowed with powers,³⁹ among other things, social power. In the case of Lily Bart, marriage would fulfil her yearning for social harmony and stability. When achieved, she would be liberated from the anxieties of a single woman. As Katelyn Durkin put it, in Lily’s world,

Families function as unified groups, sets of allies with the determination to achieve a shared goal: the continuation of their family power and their elite communities. While Lily imagines family membership to be liberating compared with the life of a single woman, her forceful exclusion from the

³⁵ See William Blazek’s “Men at Work in *The Custom of the Country*” in Laura Rattray, *Edith Wharton’s the Custom of the Country: A Reassessment* (London ; Brookfield, Vt: Pickering & Chatto, 2010), 143.

³⁶ Edith Wharton, *French Ways and Their Meaning* (1919. Rpt, New York; London: Global Language Resources, 2001), 50.

³⁷ Ellen G. White, *Patriarch and Prophets* in “Sabbath: Marriage: A Gift from Eden”
URL: <http://ssnet.org/blog/marriage-a-gift-from-eden/>.

³⁸ Porterfield, 3.

³⁹ By powers I mean other types of influence the Church has over society, namely religious, moral, and even political influence in some cases.

family also suggests that a family can wield oppressive domination over individuals.⁴⁰

In accordance to Michael Mann's model of social power that he built upon different sources he divided as "ideological, economic, military and political,"⁴¹ old marriage inherits social power from Puritan ideology which celebrates the communal ties. Thus, marriage, as "the basic unit of social order,"⁴² serves as the link between one's family and the social arena. With this in mind, in *The House of Mirth*, Wharton uses character typology to highlight social power. On the one hand, Bertha Dorset, Judy, and Gus Trenor, in particular, manifest themselves as the most powerful characters in the novel. With respect to Max Weber's classification, they are fortunate in that they enjoy "power, possession, and pleasure."⁴³ They are married and, hence, manifestly capable of making other people revolve around them. On the other hand, Mrs Bart and her daughter exhibit weakness and vulnerability in that the former is a widower and the latter is single. To bridge the gap between the two sets in terms of power, Lily's marriage is supposed to fulfil such a role and, more importantly, is urgent for two reasons. Firstly, in agreement to Michael Mann's economic and political grounds of social power, the death of her father, the only provider of the family and the embodiment of authority, made her the only remaining hope to sustain or even restore the family's status. Secondly, the rising needs of her family in terms of social power, that is, the faculty to compete in the very social arena, compelled her to assume the burden resulting from the downfall of her family. As Melissa Pennell observes,

She often perceives herself as a "victim of the civilisation which produced her"⁽⁷⁾, but needs the creature comforts and affirmation that civilization bestows. She does not want to be on the margins of the social world like

⁴⁰ Katelyn Durkin, "The (Re)Production Craze: Taylorism, the Modern American Family, and Non-Progressive Narratives in Edith Wharton's Late Fiction" (The College of William and Mary, 2012), 3.

⁴¹ Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), vii.

⁴² Amanda Porterfield explores in details the Puritans' institutionalisation of marriage. Here is her full point: "Puritans established marriage as the basic unit of social order. They grounded their plans for ecclesiastical and civil reform in the institutionalization of their ideas about marriage by imagining affectionate marriage and well-ordered family life as a model for both church and state." Porterfield, 4.

⁴³ J. M. Barbalet, *Weber, Passion and Profits: "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism" in Context* (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 143.

Selden who attends parties; she wants to be at its center like Judy Trenor, giving parties and exercising power through invitations.⁴⁴

Yet, Lily needs this very “civilisation,” its comforts, and appeal and, hence, finds herself under enormous pressures exerted by her mother, who has just lost the prestige of a married woman. Wharton makes it clear and keeps no secret in making her announce such a need overtly: “I want admiration, I want excitement.”⁴⁵ The means by which such admiration would be realised in her case is marriage. That is why Mrs Bart, as a widow now and with no social power, concerns herself eventually with her daughter’s marriage. In her view, this marriage, which is endowed with social powers, would restore the image of the remaining of her family after the death of her husband. Given the fact that the family could be defined as the “smallest political organization possible,”⁴⁶ the Barts need new leadership. However, being deprived of the privilege that marriage would provide, Mrs Bart’s endeavour proves to be a failure, namely in terms of morality. Therefore, as she tries to play the role of the leader of the family, that is, the new authority,

“[she] introduces [Lily] to what Jacques Donzelot calls ‘the two faced morality of families.’ He explains this family morality as the professing of ‘a highly moral behaviour and of practicing another composed of egoism, ambition, and a secretly unbridled sexuality.’”⁴⁷

As such, Mrs Bart’s extreme emphasis on her daughter as a physical object which is to be, literally, thrown into a rewarding marriage associates her with the second type of morality presented by Jacques Donzelot,⁴⁸ that is, the one marred with egoism and ambition. In fact, this explains the way she perceives the social power of marriage. Mrs Bart’s perception is not limited to women, but extends to men also because evidently they take part in the same institution and need it as much as women do. Wharton’s reference to this need from men’s perspective is accomplished by her

⁴⁴ Melissa McFarland Pennell, *Student Companion to Edith Wharton*, Student Companions to Classic Writers (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2003), 87.

⁴⁵ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 253.

⁴⁶ Donzelot, 48.

⁴⁷ Dale M. Bauer, *Feminist Dialogics: A Theory of Failed Community* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 104.

⁴⁸ The mentioned idea finds grounds in the following passage: “She remembered how her mother, after they had lost their money, used to say to her with a kind of fierce vindictiveness: “But you’ll get it all back—you’ll get it all back, with your face.” Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 31.

depiction of Simon Rosedale and his contemplation of marriage with Lily. That is, as she put it, “Mr. Rosedale wants a wife who can establish him in the bosom of the Van Osburghs and Trenors.”⁴⁹ In the following passage, the writer sums up how a *nouveau-rich* Jew, who noticeably values Lily’s “Anglo-Saxonness”⁵⁰ as a facilitator of access into the social elite, considers taking part in one of the Bellomont parties. I stress Rosedale’s wish to attend such social event because it is the setting where many marriages are arranged according to its attendants’ “calculations.” In particular, to Rosedale, his marriage with Lily would foster his financial success by grounding him in society. In a way marriage in his case comes to mean power itself:

He knew, of course, that there would be a large house-party at Bellomont, and the possibility of being taken for one of Mrs. Trenor’s guests was doubtless included in his calculations. Mr. Rosedale was still at a stage in his social ascent when it was of importance to produce such impressions.⁵¹

For her part, Lily Bart considers also taking part in the same social event but without doubt embracing a complete posture. Like her European counterparts, namely English women of the time, the one who wanted to marry, “did not have to be reminded that her material well-being would depend on the financial situation of her husband,”⁵² to use Marilyn Yalom’s words. Therefore, I will endeavour to undertake an investigation on the economic realities of old marriage in the following point.

1.4. Old marriage and money

In the same manner marriage represents a complex myriad of connections between individuals, money proves to be also another manifestation of the transfer of meanings between members of society. Taking into consideration that money is an emblem of abstraction, it could be said that economic processes have always been woven into society. In particular, Puritan society received the impact of economy, and marriage as a social institution was no exception. As such, marriage did not remain purely a sacred institution as I mentioned before,⁵³ but rather it received the impact of

⁴⁹ Ibid., 264.

⁵⁰ Millicent Bell, *The Cambridge Companion to Edith Wharton*, Cambridge Companions to Literature (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 79.

⁵¹ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 17.

⁵² Yalom, 159.

⁵³ See page 26.

change in economy. Not necessarily this implies negative connotations in that Puritans were actually successful businessmen. I would like to point out here that by negative perception I mean the appeal for greed. More importantly, it is very crucial to say that money helped to foster communal solidarity, which was primordial for Puritans. As William Dean Howells put it in *A Foregone Conclusion* (1875), “what does God give us money for, Mr. Ferris, but to help our fellow-creatures?”⁵⁴ However, it is worth noting also that, for his part, Henry James expressed an indicting opinion in terms of the other side, or hidden facet, of capitalism. According to him, it seems that just as capitalism rendered the economy aggressive,⁵⁵ men borrowed such a quality and applied it into their marriage practices. Women, for their part, received and transformed such aggressiveness into culture. In this context, Beverly Voloshin writes:

James points to the ways in which, on the one hand, the man’s seemingly natural economic aggressiveness represents his attachment to woman and, on the other, woman represents and converts into culture the seemingly natural conquests of the man. As the economic hero and the cultural heroine stand for each other, we might describe the masculine and feminine spheres as intersecting rather than as wholly separate.⁵⁶

The House of Mirth further examines the relationship between marriage and money. In particular, Wharton unveils the way in which American women, despite decades of social progress, continued to be dependent on their husbands as providers.⁵⁷ One should notice that, at a time when patriarchy and masculinity dominated society, many considered that “women should be relegated to a separate sphere or that marriage should be the primary goal for women.”⁵⁸ Thus, it is predictable to infer that, for a

⁵⁴ William Dean Howells, *Novels, 1875-1886* (1982. Rpt. New York: Library of America), 132.

⁵⁵ The notion of aggressiveness refers to the return to primitivism. See Chapter 2, 132.

⁵⁶ Beverly R. Voloshin, “Exchange in Wharton’s “the Custom of the Country,”” *Pacific Coast Philology* 22, no. 1/2 (1987): 98.

⁵⁷ Claudia Zaher explains that the situation of women’s dependence on their husbands was linked to the lack of their legal rights in terms of property. She argues that this was part of the “doctrine of coverture.” To quote her, the “doctrine of coverture, which held that a wife had no legal standing because her being was completely incorporated into that of her husband. The doctrine was imported from England into Colonial America and has not yet disappeared from the law.” She continues to argue that even though the industrialization of America brought about some changes, “coverture itself remained firmly entrenched under new rationales.¹¹ Women were no longer regarded as the property of their baron/lord/husband. They were viewed as unique individuals but individuals who operated in a “separate sphere.” Claudia Zaher, “When a Woman’s Marital Status Determined Her Legal Status: A Research Guide on the Common Law Doctrine of Coverture,” *Law Library Journal* 94, no. 3 (2002): 459, 461. URL: <http://people.virginia.edu/~jdk3t/ZaherWMS.pdf>.

⁵⁸ Robert Paul Lamb and Gary Richard Thompson, *A Companion to American Fiction, 1865-1914* (Oxford: Blackwell Pub., 2005), 66.

woman like Lily Bart, who has aspirations for dignity and decency of life in her own society, the only thinkable option to be accepted and respected is the union with a man within the institution of marriage. Accordingly, marriage manifests itself as the only means by which she could support herself after the death of her father.⁵⁹ Actually, “within the patriarchal system, the fragile woman goes from the protection of her father’s house to that of her husband’s.”⁶⁰ Thus, on an external level, marriage functions within the realms of society to be perceived as “social necessity.”⁶¹ More importantly, on an internal level which is a constructed one, in contemplating marriage, one’s self is affected in that marriage rises to be an obsession and, even, the main concern in life for a woman like Lily as the following passage illustrates:

She coloured and laughed. “Ah, I see you are a friend after all, and that is one of the disagreeable things I was asking for.”
 “It wasn’t meant to be disagreeable,” he returned amicably. “Isn’t marriage your vocation? Isn’t it what you’re all brought up for?”
 She sighed. “I suppose so. What else is there?”
 “Exactly. And so why not take the plunge and have it over?”
 She shrugged her shoulders. “You speak as if I ought to marry the first man who came along.”⁶²

Wharton goes even further to make an analogy between the necessity of marriage and the biological need for nutrition.⁶³ As such, as the following passage illustrates, one of the rare marriages that actually occurs after the start of the novel’s main plot proves to be realised out of Jack Stepney’s need and not of a contemplated choice. In this context, it is worth noting that, marriage is closely connected to the society’s biological needs to secure its own continuation. When it comes to Lily, her account for her cousin, means also her reflection on her own situation. Yet, she is

⁵⁹ Marriage granted women legal rights, inheritance among others, to support themselves. Zaher, “When a Woman’s Marital Status Determined Her Legal Status: A Research Guide on the Common Law Doctrine of Coverture,” 465.

⁶⁰ Lamb and Thompson, 143.

⁶¹ See my previous discussion of the concept of “social necessity” that is proposed by Jacques Donzelot, page 32.

⁶² Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 10.

⁶³ A similar analogy between the need for money and that of breathing is rendered in the following passage: “‘You might as well say that the only way not to think about air is to have enough to breathe. That is true enough in a sense; but your lungs are thinking about the air, if you are not. And so it is with your rich people—they may not be thinking of money, but they’re breathing it all the while; take them into another element and see how they squirm and gasp!’” *ibid.*, 77.

disposed to recognise that her cousin is less idealist than herself. Perhaps this is why, unlike her, his marriage will be concretised.

The couple in question were engaged in the same kind of romance in which Lily figured, and the latter felt a certain annoyance in contemplating what seemed to her a caricature of her own situation. Miss Van Osburgh was a large girl with flat surfaces and no high lights: Jack Stepney had once said of her that she was as reliable as roast mutton. His own taste was in the line of less solid and more highly-seasoned diet; but hunger makes any fare palatable, and there had been times when Mr. Stepney had been reduced to a crust.⁶⁴

This analogy of necessity could be extended to other material needs, namely the need for money. While, at first glance, the justification of marriage in terms of the necessity of money seems unthinkable in the case of Lily, the truth is that “she was equally incapable of living without it,”⁶⁵ to use Wharton’s words. In the following passage, with a sad tone, she declares her awareness *vis-à-vis* her need for money. Yet, as I said earlier, money involves different meanings among which its protective faculty. That is to say, what is really peculiar to Lily when compared to other members of the house of mirth is that, ironically, money is endowed with the power to serve as a means to protect and support her sense of morality:

The inability thus to solace her outraged feelings gave her a paralyzing sense of insignificance. She was realizing for the first time that a woman’s dignity may cost more to keep up than her carriage; and that the maintenance of a moral attribute should be dependent on dollars and cents, made the world appear a more sordid place than she had conceived it.⁶⁶

Another crucial truth is that the pursuit of money did not contradict, at all, her ideology. To say it differently, “the Puritan conscience readily reconciled piety and the accumulation of riches as evidence of successful endeavour, if not of divine grace.”⁶⁷ In this context, Weber praised the Puritans for their successful undertaking in business,⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Ibid., 52.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 179.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 188.

⁶⁷ A. W. Coats, *On the History of Economic Thought*, British and American Economic Essays (London; New York: Routledge, 1992), 322.

⁶⁸ In terms of the Puritans’ success as businessmen, Stephen A. Kent, tells us: “In the ‘Protestant Sects’ essay, for example, Weber mentioned the ‘economic supermen’ who lived ‘during the age of the Puritans’, and then referred to several contemporary capitalist magnates (e.g., Pierpont Morgan, John Davison] Rockefeller, and Jay Gould) as

which rendered capitalism, in turn, a successful economic ideology. More importantly most of the founding fathers of America were, actually, financially sound people, as Michael Mann writes:

One hundred and twenty-nine Founding Fathers signed the Declaration of Independence in 1776 or the Articles of Confederation in 1783 or were delegates to the Constitutional Convention in 1787. Almost all were drawn from the wealthiest, most prominent colonial families. None was poor or did manual work (apart from doctors and a handful of active, middling farmers).⁶⁹

For Lily, success needed urgency in that she was aging and at the brinks of her thirties. In terms of marriage, she has become old just as America she stands for. Thus, time was also a currency and in terms of conception both are abstraction. As Benjamin Franklin, who was himself a successful businessman, advocated, “Time is money. He that can earn ten shillings a day by his labor, and goes abroad, or sits idle, one half of that day, though he spends but sixpence during his diversion or idleness, ought not to reckon that the only expense; he has really spent, rather thrown away, five shillings, besides.”⁷⁰ Since marriage is closely intertwined with money, Lily considers that “only the excitement of spending her newly acquired money lightened the dullness of the days.”⁷¹ Thus, her success in life is perceived from a Puritan perspective in terms of a good marriage. As I mentioned before, Puritanism kept influencing American society even at the period of industrialisation,⁷² which coincides with *The House of Mirth*’s context. Lily, therefore, is to submit herself to the nineteenth century’s discourse that blends love and money. To quote Marilyn Yalom:

Love and money were not just the themes of great English and American fiction from Jane Austen to Edith Wharton; they were the fundamental underpinnings of nineteenth-century society. While the high-minded poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning condemned marriages of convenience as a form of “legal prostitution” that some people conducted “as of setting up in trade”(letters to Miss Mitford, January and February 1846) and the novelist

standing ‘beyond good and evil’” Stephen A. Kent, “Weber, Goethe, and William Penn: Themes of Marital Love,” *Sociological Analysis* 46, no. 3 (1985): 304.

⁶⁹ Mann, 150.

⁷⁰ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans., Talcott Parsons (1905; reprint, New York: Routledge, 1992), 14.

URL: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/weber/protestant-ethic/ch02.htm>.

⁷¹ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 167.

⁷² See page 27. Wharton herself as a “a little girl ‘to whom the Old Testament, the Apocalypse and the Elizabethan dramatists were open,” grew up under the influence of Puritan ideals. Unger et al., 309.

Dickens created thoroughly despicable characters marrying only for money (for example, Mr. and Mrs. Lammle in *Our Mutual Friend*), it was generally agreed that marrying without any money at all was at the least “imprudent.”⁷³

In *The House of Mirth*, money, therefore, obsesses both the members of Society and those located at its edge or even periphery, but, it could be said, in different manners.⁷⁴ On the one hand, those who have it want more as is the case with Gus Trenor, who speculates in the financial market and invests in human relationships in the image of Lily’s intimidation. In this case, Wharton hints at the corruption that might occur as a side effect of such a quest. This is important because it would be reflected on human relationships. Gus Trenor, therefore, thinks that his money would buy Lily’s heart. In one scene his corruption turns into vulgarity and even obscenity as he tries to approach her against her will. On the other hand, those who exhibit “a perpetual need—the need of more money,”⁷⁵ pursue it to sustain the inherited social status and secure a decent life; Lily Bart is one of them. As Elizabeth Macy put it, “money does not only make people wealthy and able to afford expensive things, it also gives them a high social status and the ability to affect the social fate of people around them. Lily is very aware of the social and political power that money gives.”⁷⁶ Aspiring to such power, Lily asserts her yearning to her friend Gerty Farish: “I want money—yes, money!”⁷⁷ This attitude is justified because money is the only means by which she is to protect herself from the others’ social power, that is, to be free from the society’s influence.⁷⁸ Moreover the lack of money means “a disability” to use Wharton’s words;⁷⁹ without it, one cannot sustain his independence and self-respect and be free of anxieties as Lily asserts:

⁷³ Yalom, 159.

⁷⁴ To some extent, money helped the westward expansion along the Manifest Destiny’s doctrine. For instance, money helped achieving the Louisiana Purchase. “Manifest Destiny” URL: <http://www.ushistory.org/us/29.asp>.

⁷⁵ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 31.

⁷⁶ Elizabeth Macy, “Forces Vs. Choices: Lily Bart’s Culpability in the House of Mirth” (Truman State University), 3.

⁷⁷ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 253.

⁷⁸ To quote Phyllis N. Hallenbeck, “power has been defined by French and Raven as stable potential influence in a dyadic relation between two persons. They delineate five types of power as follows: (1) reward power, based on the ability of the person possessing power to provide rewards for the one influenced; (2) coercive power, based on the powerful one’s ability to mediate punishments for the one influenced; (3) legitimate power, based on the influenced one’s belief that the powerful one has the right to control his behavior or opinions; (4) referent power, based on the influenced one’s identification with the powerful one; and (5) expert power, based on the influenced one’s perception of superior knowledge and skill in the powerful one.” Phyllis N. Hallenbeck, “An Analysis of Power Dynamics in Marriage,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 28, no. 2 (1966): 200.

⁷⁹ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 339.

It is not always easy to be quite independent and self-respecting when one is poor and lives among rich people; I have been careless about money, and have worried about my bills. But I should be selfish and ungrateful if I made that a reason for accepting all you offer, with no better return to make than the desire to be free from my anxieties.⁸⁰

Furthermore, married couples who earned the power of money, were exclusively allowed to host parties or at least attend them. With the money they had, they were granted the privilege to access social events that revolved around money in the image of gambling. Thus, prominent guests at the Bellomont did not miss the chance to participate in the hope of winning, doubling, or at least boasting of the money they already had at hand:

At any rate, she had so many uses for it that its very insufficiency had caused her to play high in the hope of doubling it. But of course she had lost—she who needed every penny, while Bertha Dorset, whose husband showered money on her, must have pocketed at least five hundred, and Judy Trenor, who could have afforded to lose a thousand a night, had left the table clutching such a heap of bills that she had been unable to shake hands with her guests when they bade her good night.⁸¹

Taking into consideration that any action a human being proceeds with is based on two things: faith and risk taking, it is clear, therefore, that in the case of Lily gambling, or the bridge game, she plays represents her tendency to take risks,⁸² a fact that renders her “a genuine philosopher,” to use Nietzsche’s words. In this context, on a philosopher of her type, he says that he proceeds “above all imprudently, and feels the burden and the duty of a hundred attempts and temptations of life—he risks himself constantly, he plays the wicked game.”⁸³ Taking risks is also a quintessential attribute of the American character, namely in the frontier’s life. As Lily fights hard at the society’s periphery, she further builds and develops herself in that “from the conditions of frontier life came intellectual traits.”⁸⁴ Perhaps, in this way, Lily is asserting her philosophy of life, which is first and foremost American. I support Lily’s association

⁸⁰ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 271.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁸² Lily’s risk taking is evidenced throughout her journey. This is one of the instances, she announces her tendency: ““Why not? It’s too tempting—I’ll take the risk,” she declared.” *Ibid.*, 6.

⁸³ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche and Walter Arnold Kaufmann, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (1968. Rpt, New York: Modern Library), 660.

⁸⁴ Frederick Jackson Turner’s address “The Significance of the Frontier” (1893) in Scott L. Pratt, *Native Pragmatism: Rethinking the Roots of American Philosophy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002), 3.

with American rooted philosophy with her adherence to Puritan views in terms of gambling. That is, being an innocent character, Lily does not really stray from the path of her values, as it might appear to be at a surface level, in that Puritanism was inclined “to allow gaming as long as it was for innocent and moderate recreation and not as a trade or calling.”⁸⁵ Moreover, Lily turns her sense of “exceptionalness into becoming relief, and give a soaring vastness to her scheme of life.”⁸⁶ Thus, she works hard on taking part in the parties hosted at the Bellomont to fulfil her sense of pride and allow no one to look down at her. In this regard, she seems to have inherited her mother’s sense of self-esteem which is another puritan ideal:

Mrs. Bart held herself fiercely aloof from the frugal tea-tables of her companions in misfortune. She was especially careful to avoid her old friends and the scenes of her former successes. To be poor seemed to her such a confession of failure that it amounted to disgrace; and she detected a note of condescension in the friendliest advances.⁸⁷

While most of those who attended social events had the display of money as an occupation, or what Ralph Waldo Emerson calls “ostentation,”⁸⁸ members of the working class had other interests in mind. They had to fight for highly regarded values, in that, “particularly in the bigger cities. A labor movement arose as workers strove to protect their wages and dignity at the same time that businesses sought to maximize profits.”⁸⁹ It is worth noting that women were at the centre of such movement to defend their rights as equal human beings within society and its institutions. Thus, a good number of these activists who shared much of Nettie Struther’s values, worked in factories out of necessity to maintain their dignity and freedom of decision.⁹⁰ Actually the American woman earned freedom and independence through work as Thorstein Veblen argued:

⁸⁵ “History of Gambling in the United States” URL:<http://www.library.ca.gov/crb/97/03/chapt2.html>.

⁸⁶ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 99.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 49.

⁸⁸ Emerson, 131.

⁸⁹ Phillip Barrish, *The Cambridge Introduction to American Literary Realism*, Cambridge Introductions to Literature (Cambridge UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 2.

⁹⁰ Hannah Arendt observes that work is essential to sustain human life in that it is closely tied with securing basic human needs. Here is her full point: “The laboring activity, though under all circumstances connected with the life process in its most elementary, biological sense, remained stationary for thousands of years, imprisoned in the eternal recurrence of the life process to which it was tied.” Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Charles R Walgreen Foundation Lectures (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 46.

Veblen advocated that women become independent through paid labor since he felt the exclusion of women from the productive forces diverted their energies into interests other than self-regarding ones. Although he did not address the question of child care or the redistribution of traditional female responsibilities, his socio-psychological analysis of women's position in society goes much further than a strict materialist or liberal "rights" position.⁹¹

That is, women resorted to work in order to help support themselves and their families. Yet, "crucial, then, was not economic independence as such, but having a vocation 'as objectively valuable task'."⁹² This meant that valuable vocations in the fields of law, education, medicines, and politics in being beyond women's reach at the time meant that Lily's chances of getting a fulfilling vocation were really very slight. Moreover, Lily belonged to the well-established Society in which work has come through time to be excluded from a woman's prospects. With this in mind, once a woman like Lily Bart reached a "marriageable" age to use Wharton's words,⁹³ she was generally expected to decide on marriage. As such, a financially-stable husband who would be able to support his wife was usually preferable.

However, when compelled to remain unmarried, women, such as Gerty Farish, typically depended either on work in charities or the kindness and support of friends and relatives.⁹⁴ This explains why Gerty often appears whenever there is a social gathering. Yet, Wharton seems not to be happy with the way a human being surrenders his individuality. Thus, to use her words, Gerty, becomes "a parasite in the moral order, living on the crumbs of other tables, and content to look through the window at the banquet spread for her friends."⁹⁵ Eventually, Gerty is allowed a chance to overcome such a situation and, hence, "it was wise of [her] to have taken up philanthropy."⁹⁶ It is this work which emancipated her from the status of perpetual dependence. As Simone

⁹¹ Barbara E. Ryan, "Thorstein Veblen: A New Perspective," *Mid-American Review of Sociology* 7, no. 2 (1982): 37.

⁹² Marianne Weber, *Biografia De Max Weber* (New Brunswick (U.S.A.): Transaction Publishers, 1988), xxvii.

⁹³ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 7.

⁹⁴ In praising the support of her friend Egerton Winthrop, Wharton tells us: "throughout our friendship I found him, in difficult moments, the surest of counsellors; and even now that I am told, and he has been so many years dead, it still happens to me, when faced by a difficulty, to ask myself: 'What would Egerton have done?'" Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 96.

⁹⁵ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 166.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 98.

de Beauvoir put it, “Once she ceases to be a parasite, the system based on her dependence crumbles.”⁹⁷ On the other hand, it is important to note that even though married women achieved some financial relief through marriage, they were not totally freed of different types of anxieties, namely in terms of self-assertion and education. Thus, in one scene we find that Lady Cressida, who enjoys a stable marriage and enough money to indulge herself, clearly lacks education. In asking Gus Trenor about the names of plants, she manifests her weakness in terms of knowledge about the World and perhaps about herself:

Think of my taking such a lot of trouble about a clergyman’s wife, who wears Indian jewelry and botanizes! She made Gus take her all through the glass-houses yesterday, and bothered him to death by asking him the names of the plants. Fancy treating Gus as if he were the gardener!⁹⁸

Men also look for money in marriage, but in a different manner. Lawrence Selden differs from Lily in that he is allowed more freedoms by his gender and vocation. Like Lily, he aspires to solidify his financial independence and find a suitable marriage partner. However, his choice of whom to marry is to a less extent affected by money because, as a lawyer, his own income is enough to adequately support himself and his possible future wife.⁹⁹ As a man, Selden is also under less pressure to maintain the social connections which are, in contrast, crucial for Lily. Thus in one instance, Lily shows her awareness of the social constructs in terms of the gender-based differences when it comes to the necessity of marriage: “Ah, there’s the difference—a girl must, a man may if he chooses.”¹⁰⁰ Moreover, Selden is able to take an intellectual interest in social events without actually being involved. Another social construct, that glorifies the vocation of the lawyer, allows him to be accepted into the circles of Society.¹⁰¹ In the following scene, Selden attends one ‘*tableaux vivant*’ at the Wellington Brys’ home in which his detachment and posture as an observer is stressed in his act of watching the scene in front of him:

⁹⁷ Beauvoir, 641.

⁹⁸ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 46.

⁹⁹ Selden’s financial situation seems to be similar to that of Wharton’s husband who himself “had a small allowance from his father,” that is, enough money to secure a decent life without excess. Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 98.

¹⁰⁰ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 13.

¹⁰¹ Killoran, 39.

If he did not often act on the social axiom that a man may go where he pleases, it was because he had long since learned that his pleasures were mainly to be found in a small group of the like-minded. But he enjoyed spectacular effects, and was not insensible to the part that money plays in their production: all he asked was that the very rich should live up to their calling as stage managers, and not spend their money in a dull way.¹⁰²

At the other end, *The House of Mirth*, presents Lily Bart as an idealistic woman only to stress that she represents the prospect of the perfect match to Lawrence Selden. Besides, she personifies the status of feminine economic dependence for she is approaching her thirties and in desperate need for a stable life. As an orphaned and dependent on the members of her extended family, she faces many challenges. To say the least, she has to disentangle herself from entrapment in a tight financial situation, namely her debt troubles. While she expects her family's help, she faces more pressures that foster one's sense of dependence as the following passage suggests:

[She] would have preferred a fixed allowance; but Mrs. Peniston liked the periodical recurrence of gratitude evoked by unexpected cheques, and was perhaps shrewd enough to perceive that such a method of giving kept alive in her niece a salutary sense of dependence.¹⁰³

Not being allowed to work because of the social restraints I mentioned, she cannot secure her basic financial needs. However, to compensate for such weakness, she resorts to her sense of taste that is a distinctive feature of few characters in *The House of Mirth*.¹⁰⁴ Good taste could be discerned and affirmed when the target of admiration has a tested value. Thus, Gerty's taste is proved when she shows her admiration for Lily: "Lily, dear, I never saw you look so lovely! You look as if something delightful had just happened to you!"¹⁰⁵ In making herself beautiful, Lily resorts to money as a mere means to externalise her refined senses. Like for Andrew Jackson, who was a common man and viewed that money should be called upon only for necessity,¹⁰⁶ for her, as an artist,

¹⁰² Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 199.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 41.

¹⁰⁴ Taste is a very important quality utilised by Edith Wharton in her depiction of refined characters. It is actually an attribute that is often related to characters associated with good morality, namely, in the image of Lily Bart, Ralph Marvell, Zenobia in *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country*, and *Ethan Frome* respectively. See more detail on the importance of taste vis-à-vis old marriage in my discussion of "The Republic of the Spirit", page 61.

¹⁰⁵ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 133.

¹⁰⁶ Andrew Jackson, American president (1829-1837), after whom the period (1828-1840) has been called "Jacksonian Democracy" viewed that money should not turn into excess to serve only the wealthy's interest. That

the need for money is associated with the fulfilment of her needs, that is, to acquire what it takes to accomplish a work of art as “a power for good.”¹⁰⁷ This very idea is reconfirmed in “The Verdict.” As Wharton writes, “money’s only excuse is to put beauty into circulation.”¹⁰⁸ Making herself beautiful in the eyes of people she cares about is like portraying a masterpiece whose every detail stresses the refinement and taste that makes one distinct as the following lines suggest:

The glow of the stones warmed Lily’s veins like wine. More completely than any other expression of wealth they symbolized the life she longed to lead, the life of fastidious aloofness and refinement in which every detail should have the finish of a jewel, and the whole form a harmonious setting to her own jewel-like rareness.¹⁰⁹

The incompatibility of taste she faces as she interacts socially with people renders her task difficult to be fulfilled peacefully. With the exception of Selden, men who presented themselves as prospects of marriage to Lily manifest different degrees in their lack of taste. Percy Gryce is a good example of one social group that contents itself with the occupation of collecting objects of art rather than tasting them. Another group, is better positioned and, hence, can afford to offer beautiful things, in the image of Simon Rosedale.¹¹⁰ Thus, she is to decide whether to submit to her society, that is, to remain in the house of mirth, by marrying into a member of these groups or to seek an escape from poverty in a different manner.

In her quest to escape this poverty, Lily shares Jane Austen’s Elizabeth Bennett’s traditional attitude to marriage as an economic issue.¹¹¹ Being deprived of the

is why he fought hard against the National Bank and opportunist bankers. Instead, he favoured small banks that helped the farmers to acquire the necessary means by which they could work the land and foster the sense of self-made man. “US History/Westward Expansion and Manifest Destiny” URL:

<http://www.saylor.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/HIST312-7.1-Westward-Expansion-and-Manifest-Destiny.pdf>

¹⁰⁷ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 38.

¹⁰⁸ Edith Wharton, *The Early Short Fiction of Edith Wharton* (Gutenberg, 2008), 94.

¹⁰⁹ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 100.

¹¹⁰ In Gwen Van Osburg’s wedding, Simon Rosedale offers a diamond present: “Oh, Lily, do look at this diamond pendant—it’s as big as a dinner-plate! Who can have given it?” Miss Farish bent short-sightedly over the accompanying card. “Mr. Simon Rosedale. What, that horrid man?” Ibid.

¹¹¹ Sarah Emsley establishes the literary relationship between Edith Wharton and Jane Austen in terms of characterisation. Among other things, she, in particular, discusses the links between Austen’s *Lady Susan* (1871) and *The Custom of the Country* (1913). Sarah Emsley, “Nothing against Her, but Her Husband & Her Conscience: Jane Austen’s *Lady Susan* in Edith Wharton’s *Old New York*,” *Jane Austen Society of North America* 33, no. 1 (2012). URL: <http://jasna.org/persuasions/on-line/vol33no1/emsley.html>.

right of inheritance,¹¹² a fact that points out also other issues that range from legal to political rights of women, Elizabeth looks at marriage as an outlet to avoid poverty. While she is aware of the economic comforts in marriage, she knows also about the limitations marriage can impose on her: “Our habits of expense make us too dependent, and there are not many in my rank of life who can afford to marry without some attention to money.”¹¹³ Elizabeth’s concern for money is not limited to women in that Wickham’s pursuit of marriage is also defined in the same manner as she tells us:

[He] will never marry a woman without some money. He cannot afford it. And what claims has Lydia—what attraction has she beyond youth, health, and good humour that could make him, for her sake, forego every chance of benefiting himself by marrying well?¹¹⁴

Yet for Lily, beside economic motives, her strong convictions lead her to seek the sublime, the perfect vision of relationships when organised by rooted ideals. Being deprived of money meant enormous pressures to decide on marriage, but Lily’s power and distinction relies on her transcendence of the submission to money’s temptation. In resisting such an appeal, that is enticement, she stresses her purity and what she perceives as nobility as the following passage elicits:

She was fond of pictures and flowers, and of sentimental fiction, and she could not help thinking that the possession of such tastes ennobled her desire for worldly advantages. She would not indeed have cared to marry a man who was merely rich: she was secretly ashamed of her mother’s crude passion for money.¹¹⁵

Also, as she happens to have high opinion of thrive through hard work, she recognises Rosedale’s efforts and determination to achieve his goals. This evidences that for her, money, which is Rosedale’s primal goal, could be a sign of completely different qualities than greed and even stands as a witness for the opposite end to idleness. In this context, it is worth noting that a “good” Christian was advised not to remain idle in that this would make room for devilish temptations as the bible

¹¹² Claudia Zaher explains how women depended on their husbands for they were deprived of the right of inheritance. See previous footnote, 37.

¹¹³ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813. Rpt: Coradella Collegiate Bookshelf Editions, 2004), 251.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 382-383.

¹¹⁵ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 38.

preaches.¹¹⁶ Besides, as William Dean Howells put it in *A Modern Instance*, “I found out sometime ago that a fellow wasn’t necessarily a bad fellow because he had money; or a good fellow because he hadn’t.”¹¹⁷ In her recognition of Rosedale’s implicit goodness and eventual contemplation over the potential rapprochement, Lily demonstrates her just sense of judgement which explains why it takes her time to decide on marriage:

Under the utilitarian motive of Rosedale’s wooing she had felt, clearly enough, the heat of personal inclination. She would not have detested him so heartily had she not known that he dared to admire her. What, then, if the passion persisted, though the other motive had ceased to sustain it? She had never even tried to please him—he had been drawn to her in spite of her manifest disdain. What if she now chose to exert the power which, even in its passive state, he had felt so strongly? What if she made him marry her for love, now that he had no other reason for marrying her?¹¹⁸

As the previous quotation evidences, in revealing her real criterion for choice in marriage, Lily’s aspirations prove to be transcending the material facet of her need. For this reason, with the company of Lawrence Selden, she sets out to find the freedom she yearns for, a freedom that would disentangle her from her captivity in trivial society. Moreover, her yearning for freedom is a symbolic reference to “the republican ideology [which] is a facet of the social fabric of the colonial citizens of America that may, arguably, have had the greatest effect on the struggle for independence and the formation of a constitutional form of government in the United States.”¹¹⁹ Yet, Selden is to offer his own version of the republic and Lily’s negotiation of potential citizenship into it evokes different defining factors, going from personal to social definitions and constructs. Therefore, I will rely on the said factors as they surface to explain Wharton’s perspective on marriage as she knew it. One thing to add is that whenever a status of ambiguity faces the human being, the remedy is often spiritual. For this Selden’s Republic of the Spirit as its name denotes proves to be, to a large extent, defining in terms of the value-based aspect of old marriage as the following paragraphs reveal.

¹¹⁶ “And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.” Thessalonians 5:14 URL: http://www.openbible.info/topics/idle_hands.

¹¹⁷ Howells, *Novels, 1875-1886*, 271.

¹¹⁸ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 265.

¹¹⁹ “The Republican Ideology and the American Revolution.” URL: <http://www.novelguide.com/reportessay/history/american-history/republican-ideology-and-american-revolution>.

1.5. Lily's quest for freedom: Selden's Republic of the Spirit

The spirit of the American experience has always revolved around the pursuit of happiness. In accordance to the biblical prophecy, America as a model for the world will flourish only when true relationships with God are fulfilled. As I said before, marriage borrows this principle and applies it between husband and wife. Therefore, Lily seeks this truthfulness in relationships which would make her respected as a free person. In my view, Wharton used the concept of the republic to draw a parallel between what I discussed as “old marriage” and the notion of the ideal of the “city upon a hill.” Therefore, what I evoke hereafter in terms of Selden's republic applies also to Lily's ideal of marriage. My claim rests on the idea that both marriage and the republic constitute forms of social institutions.

From its very beginning, the American experience has celebrated freedom as a supreme ideal, and Lily Bart's endeavour shows no difference to this pattern. One thing about freedom is that its invocation in the first place points out its absence. This was the founding fathers' situation in England two centuries earlier and the same could be said in the case of Lily. Perhaps, it is a natural and defining pattern of the rise and fall of any civilisation. It was the case of Rome and, in my view, the case of America from Lily's time and onwards. Yet, what is peculiar to Lily is her transcendence of the general situation around her and clinging to her ideals despite the strong temptations.

As such, *The House of Mirth* opens with a scene in Grand Central Station, the very emblem of the city and mirror of the status of civilisation. In this context, it should be noted that civilisation manifests itself first and foremost in the city. In most of the cases the countryside has been spared the drastic changes brought about by any momentum of progress. For this, from Rome's times until the end of the eighteenth century the agrarian life outside the city has not really changed even in America.¹²⁰ Yet in a complete concordance with Wharton's skill of extricating meanings out of ironic situations, the scene associates Lily with the tradition of the self-made man in the image of Benjamin Franklin and Frederick Douglass who “by standing in the crowds of the

¹²⁰ I make this idea clear here to make the focal point of my third chapter *vis-à-vis* the peculiarity of the countryside understood. That is, with tangible evidences from today's world, American pastoral life remains preserved and traditional way of life still exists in the countryside. However, I discern between drastic change and influence to describe the situation in today's world which actually belongs to the second half of the mentioned dichotomy. My claim rests on eye witness friends who have recently visited the United States of America.

city with no connection to anyone there, they imply that any success that follows can be accounted solely to their own efforts.”¹²¹ The station is also a symbolic reference to the journey Lily Bart is going to take. More importantly, the prompt appearance of Lawrence Selden in this very instant promises marriage. I rely on Avicenna’s theory to explain how coincidence joints both of them in time and place. In this context, he held that “everything happens of necessity...and chance is a cause and is called ‘chance’ only because the cause is not obvious to the human mind.”¹²² Therefore, this reinforces my hypothesis of the necessity of marriage in the case of Lily and how this necessity creates the subsequent causes that define and redefine her journey.

That said, Lily’s very intention to visit the Bellomont causes her meeting with Selden as a defining event in her life and his consequent reaction hints at recognition and even possible love.¹²³ As Wharton put it, his “eyes had been refreshed by the sight of Miss Lily Bart.”¹²⁴ Based on Malek Bennabi’s notion on the importance of time as a defining component of society,¹²⁵ my reading of Lawrence’s recognition makes me compelled to point out one crucial fact about marriage, that is, it is only time which is endowed with the power to make partners know one another and make room for mutual understanding which help in the fulfilment of shared aspirations. Hence, I am inclined to hold the view that no prompt answer to the ambiguities that could hide one’s essence behind different social guises shall be expected.

Coming back to Lily, I would argue that in this significant scene, Wharton stresses the importance of marriage in Lily’s life. In my view, the most catching-to-the-eye feature of this very journey is Lily’s perpetual feeling of discomfort *vis-à-vis* the role society expects from her, that is, to marry only for money.¹²⁶ This could be said in that one ought not to leave his place of origins unless he or she is aspiring for a better life and conditions elsewhere, that is, her rationale is a dream of freedom and happiness

¹²¹ Tom Nissley, *Intimate and Authentic Economies: The American Self-Made Man from Douglass to Chaplin*, Literary Criticism and Cultural Theory (New York: Routledge, 2003), 3.

¹²² Belo, 39.

¹²³ As I mentioned earlier, in this instance, love and marriage are used interchangeably. See footnote in page 27.

¹²⁴ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 3.

¹²⁵ On Malek Bennabi’s definition of society, see my General Introduction, 2 .

¹²⁶ This idea is overtly expressed in the following passage: “She is the best friend I have, and that is why I mind having to vex her. But I daresay you know what she has wanted me to do. She has set her heart—poor dear—on my marrying—marrying a great deal of money.” Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 92.

which are of course legitimate human rights. Like early Puritans' story which was one "of a movement away, a flight from Europe toward America, from a sinful world of depravity to a promised land of salvation,"¹²⁷ her story revolved around escape from the unpleasant.¹²⁸ In her movement, Lily endorses escapism as a philosophy of life but, more importantly, demonstrates a typical sense of American individualism; that is, embracing freedom and looking for it through adventure. Thus, she shows how eager she is for the "taste of new experiences"¹²⁹ and, hence, shares Wharton's "love of the road."¹³⁰ She, therefore, finds uneasiness in fully complying with her society's trivial expectations in that she is aware that her "real self," to quote Wharton, is deep in "the innermost room."¹³¹ Yet to find the abstract meaning behind this self, or what Kant calls "the sublime,"¹³² Lily has to rise above the material appearances of the World around her.

Asserting herself as a humanist,¹³³ Lily transcends the appearances and looks, first and foremost, at the essence of the human being as a primal prerequisite in her choice in marriage. In taking such an approach, her quest is rather spiritual than material. Her choice is further informed by her Christian ideals of marriage which, as Saint

¹²⁷ Pratt, 39.

¹²⁸ Lily's longing for freedom and escape from her captivity is evoked in her meeting with Selden at the Bellomont: "There were in her at the moment two beings, one drawing deep breaths of freedom and exhilaration, the other gasping for air in a little black prison-house of fears. But gradually the captive's gasps grew fainter, or the other paid less heed to them: the horizon expanded, the air grew stronger, and the free spirit quivered for flight." Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 71.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 179.

¹³⁰ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 96.

¹³¹ See Cain's reference to Wharton's view on the woman's nature, namely as she announced it in "The Fullness of Life" in William E. Cain, *Literary Criticism and Cultural Theory* (Routledge, 2002), 215-216. In "The Fullness of Life" Wharton makes her full point: "But I have sometimes thought that a woman's nature is like a great house full of rooms: there is the hall, through which everyone passes in going in and out; the drawingroom, where one receives formal visits; the sitting-room, where the members of the family come and go as they list; but beyond that, far beyond, are other rooms, the handles of whose doors perhaps are never turned; no one knows the way to them, no one knows whither they lead; and in the innermost room, the holy of holies, the soul sits alone and waits for a footstep that never comes." URL: <http://classiclit.about.com/library/bl-etexts/ewharton/bl-ewhar-fulness.htm>

¹³² Kant considered the "immaterial character of value," which he described as the "sublime," whereas Karl Marx described it "as the sublime value form of the commodity." Joseph W. H. Lough, *Weber and the Persistence of Religion: Social Theory, Capitalism, and the Sublime* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2006), xiv.

¹³³ Evidence of Lily's humanism is her active participation in Gerty's charities. In doing so, her vision on human relationships, including marriage, echoes her philanthropic tendency in that "charity establishes relations and ties of affection between the classes, institutes a salutary and benign hierarchy." Donzelot, 62. Wharton's emphasis on Lily as a humanist explains her vision on America's future in terms of the importance of humanism and its role in protecting the integrity of society in that, to use Gauntlett's words, "without human empathy, communication, trust, and general-purpose goodwill and friendliness, society would very quickly dissolve in a horrible apocalypse of never-ending misunderstanding, crime, and conflict." Gauntlett, 115.

Augustine developed, revolved around “an idea of spiritual companionship between the sexes that shaped Catholic teachings about marriage into the mid-twentieth century.”¹³⁴ In searching for spiritual companionship, Lily aspires to find happiness, one that is lasting, or eternal, and free from material desires and is based on a love, “which should broaden and deepen till it became the central fact of life.”¹³⁵ In other words, her endeavour rests on “sublimating personal desires into other regardingness.”¹³⁶

As an idealist, she inevitably and, perhaps, unknowingly comes to defy the social assumptions only to undermine herself by “odd” behaviour in the eyes of her society. Two scenes in the novel illustrate this tendency. First, right after her initial meeting with Selden in the scene I have just mentioned, she spontaneously pays a visit to his flat. While for her it was a necessity in that she missed her train, for her society it was an “unjustified” behaviour that could probably be interpreted as a misconduct. I support this reading by the fact that Selden’s flat is, emphatically, named the Benedick, which is an old word that stands for bachelor and, hence, a single woman like Lily is not socially allowed to bring herself into this space:¹³⁷

Miss Bart was not familiar with the moral code of bachelors’ flat-houses, and her colour rose again as it occurred to her that the woman’s persistent gaze implied a groping among past associations. But she put aside the thought with a smile at her own fears, and hastened downward, wondering if she should find a cab short of Fifth Avenue.¹³⁸

Second, her choice not to attend the Church service at the Bellomont was critically received by people around her. At a surface level, it appears that Lily’s behaviour made the Americana collector and heir of a rich family, Percy Gryce, annuls his intention to propose to her, but at a deeper level it was Lily’s choice and intention to ignore such a suitor. This could be explained by Wharton’s reference to the occupation of Percy as a collector which evokes two primal concerns. On the one hand, Lily seems to have developed some fears over her personal freedom which might be restricted by

¹³⁴ Porterfield, 21.

¹³⁵ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 232.

¹³⁶ Lamb and Thompson, 66.

¹³⁷ Rosedale explains to Lily the meaning of the Benedick: “Yes, that’s the name: I believe it’s an old word for bachelor, isn’t it?”. Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 16.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

his habit of collecting things rendering their potential marriage as a beautiful cage.¹³⁹ On the other hand, it could be inferred that he is not necessarily endowed with a refined taste simply because, in my view, his occupation made him develop a mere sense of habit. As such, Lily's deep and sophisticated character seems not to be compatible with his superficiality and lack of imagination and creativity for he is consumed with collecting rather producing. This argument is further supported by Gryce's behaviour as evidenced in the following scene, which involves him and Lily in the train. Whereas she tries to make a conversation with him to know about his essence, he contents himself with paying much attention on triviality:

It seemed wonderful to him that any one should perform with such careless ease the difficult task of making tea in public in a lurching train. He would never have dared to order it for himself, lest he should attract the notice of his fellow-passengers; but, secure in the shelter of her conspicuousness, he sipped the inky draught with a delicious sense of exhilaration.¹⁴⁰

Contrasts between Lily and her suitors are further manifested during her many encounters with Selden as she displays universal inner tensions of "free will versus predestination."¹⁴¹ That is to say, her ordeal is to choose between her aspirations for freedom which will probably be fulfilled if she embraces Gerty's way of life as a model, or to content herself with being a respectable wife. Perhaps Gerty is the closest person who often accompanies Lily and, to some extent, completes her and in her we could see much of Lily's aspirations being concretised and brought to reality. She is, in particular, the embodiment of self-esteem and social connections that work could provide and help in achieving happiness.¹⁴² Like *The Portrait of a Lady's* Henrietta, she "was chiefly a proof that a woman might suffice to herself and be happy."¹⁴³ In accordance to Max Weber's view, people become happy "because of 'the fulfilling and

¹³⁹ My reference to marriage as a cage rests on Eugene O'Neill's play *The Hairy Ape* (1922) in which he accounts for human condition as an entrapment. Yamina Deramchia. Lecture. University of Algiers 2. Algiers, 2012.

¹⁴⁰ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 232.

¹⁴¹ Edward Craig, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 10 vols. (London; New York: Routledge, 1998), 8.

¹⁴² According to Gauntlett, "recent studies of happiness...suggest that individuals are more satisfied when they are part of social networks." Gauntlett, 115-116. I add to this that marriage fosters social networks in that it links families and, hence, extends the existing social circles.

¹⁴³ James, 93.

satisfying practical profession’.”¹⁴⁴ For this Wharton tells us: “I was happy in my work, and in the new sense of confidence in my powers.”¹⁴⁵

When partners extricate the meanings of work, their marriage produces a stable family unit that respects the individual sense of its members and their aspirations. Put differently, the resulting family constitutes “the best point of support for holding individuals to the practice of hard work and for preserving their will to independence.”¹⁴⁶ In the following passage, Lily recognises the difference between her and Gerty and, besides, in an explicit way, tells us that happiness is the ultimate goal of her journey. Yet, such difference does not separate them, but, in my view, it is Wharton’s way to construct a perfect representative of Old America’s ideals by combining the two characters:

“It was horrid of me to say that of Gerty,” she said with charming compunction. “I forgot she was your cousin. But we’re so different, you know: she likes being good, and I like being happy. And besides, she is free and I am not.”¹⁴⁷

Ralph Waldo Emerson associated self-reliance with what he calls “the claim of claims; the plea for education, for justice, for charity.”¹⁴⁸ For this, like old Puritans, Gerty is a self-reliant woman who, instead of waiting for her cousin’s aid, works hard to make a living as a social worker. In a clear manner, Wharton demonstrates that she prefers action to passivity. She helps Nettie Struther, the other woman worker, through her charities. Her sense of commitment and loyalty to her community is further stressed by one other defining Puritan quality in that she remains by her friend’s side while hiding her pain in a stoic manner even at the expense of her own happiness. This is evidenced by the fact that she had some affection to her cousin Lawrence Selden, yet she kept it hidden within herself for the sake of Lily’s good. In doing so, their relationship is ultimately fostered, deepened, and rendered sustainable and perhaps this is the sense of

¹⁴⁴ Ghosh, 70.

¹⁴⁵ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 143.

¹⁴⁶ Donzelot, 63-64.

¹⁴⁷ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 8.

¹⁴⁸ Schaff, 7.

relationships Wharton is alluding to be defining of marriage.¹⁴⁹ The following passage infers Gerty's hidden feelings and points out her sense of philanthropy:¹⁵⁰

When Lawrence Selden heard I was coming, he insisted on fetching me himself and driving me to the station, and when we go back this evening I am to dine with him at Sherry's. I really feel as excited as if I were getting married myself!"¹⁵¹

In a similar way, Lily shows strong interest in philanthropy that extends to embrace philosophy as a path to self-discovery. Perhaps, for this reason, at this point, Gerty's cousin, Lawrence Selden, who is the only one in her surroundings who proposes one philosophy of life, appeals to her sense of curiosity for discovery and eventually, to use Wharton's words, makes her "eager almost, in her resolve to intercept him."¹⁵² At this stage I shall point out that Lily's approach to define her relationship with Selden evokes a paradox that will set the background of the development of their shared journey. That is, there is a big difference between Love as a really contemplated reality and love that is defined by the notion "I ought to love this person."¹⁵³ My argument explains Lily's entrance to the republic and rests on the fact that the idealist person, without noticing it, limits his choices in his obsession with the pursuit of perfection. In this context, Zsuzsa Berend observes that "true marriage" in nineteenth century meant the "holiest of all possible relationships, being of God's own ordaining. To contract such true marriage one should accept only the best mate; 'old maids' deserve 'honor for living up to the principle, 'The best, or none!'"¹⁵⁴ In the following significant scene, Lily's idealism that traces back to the origins of American thinking is evoked. This claim rests on a second crucial fact that the reciprocal attraction between Lily and Selden points out the way the former's aspirations for the spiritual fulfilment and self-discovery coincides

¹⁴⁹ Even though I mentioned this idea before, as a reminder, for Wharton friendship is imbedded in marriage and *vice versa*. For her, friendship is the "real marriage of true minds." See the quotation in Chapter 3, 184.

¹⁵⁰ Edith Wharton herself participated in charity works, namely during the First World War. As she tells us, she preferred to be in Paris where "she could be of use" rather than staying in England as she was advised. Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 343.

¹⁵¹ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 99.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁵³ My idea that is based on a human being's experience, that is, my own life experience.

¹⁵⁴ Zsuzsa Berend, "The Best or None: Spinsterhood in Nineteenth Century New England," *Journal of Social History* 33, no. 4 (2000): 948.

with the latter's proposed manifesto of freedom and success that he attributes to what he terms the "Republic of the Spirit."¹⁵⁵

"My idea of it? God forbid!" He sat up with sudden energy, resting his elbows on his knees and staring out upon the mellow fields. "My idea of success," he said, "is personal freedom."

"Freedom? Freedom from worries?"

"From everything—from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents. To keep a kind of republic of the spirit—that's what I call success."

She leaned forward with a responsive flash. "I know—I know—it's strange; but that's just what I've been feeling today."

He met her eyes with the latent sweetness of his. "Is the feeling so rare with you?" he said.

She blushed a little under his gaze. "You think me horribly sordid, don't you? But perhaps it's rather that I never had any choice. There was no one, I mean, to tell me about the republic of the spirit."

"There never is—it's a country one has to find the way to one's self."

"But I should never have found my way there if you hadn't told me."

"Ah, there are sign-posts—but one has to know how to read them."

"Well, I have known, I have known!" she cried with a glow of eagerness.

"Whenever I see you, I find myself spelling out a letter of the sign—and yesterday—last evening at dinner—I suddenly saw a little way into your republic."¹⁵⁶

In my view, Wharton shows clear confusion with reality and without doubt endeavours to find alternatives whenever a difficult situation surfaces in the path of her refined characters, and marriage is no exception as a universal quest which appeals for contemplation and often results in anxiety over one's situation. For this, she gives chance to Selden in her novel to depart from the physical world and land on a visionary one. As such, the "Republic of the Spirit," actually, stems from Selden's hope to "have access in part to the ultimate mysteries and true insights into the visionary world."¹⁵⁷ As Lois Tyson put it, he has a "desire to be free from the exigencies of a world in which his moderate income affords him little protection from 'material accidents,' are responsible for his romantic pursuit of a spiritual republic to compensate for the inequities of the concrete world."¹⁵⁸ This republic is, hence, the symbol of "transcendence." In other

¹⁵⁵ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 81, 101.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁵⁷ Craig, 8.

¹⁵⁸ Lois Tyson, "Beyond Morality: Lily Bart, Lawrence Selden and the Aesthetic Commodity in the House of Mirth," *Edith Wharton Review* IX, no. 2 (1992): 5.

words, by finding the signs in the real world one can discover the sublime and reach “a country [where] one has to find the way to one’s self.”¹⁵⁹ Moreover, Selden’s vocation as a lawyer evokes the meanings of justice and equality in that America celebrates the principle of “equal justice under law.”¹⁶⁰ Thus, Lily, as an emblem of old America and its ideals, is interested in joining Selden’s republic. From a feminist perspective, Lily’s quest for equality in this republic raises political concerns in terms of gender equality. Moreover, in rendering her yearning into the public arena, she makes herself an *avant-garde* activist who adheres to the feminist ideal of “the personal is political,” which “referred to the fact that every aspect of a woman’s private life is affected by and can itself affect the political situation.”¹⁶¹ The idea of the fusion between public and private spheres is further stressed by Richard Sennett, who viewed that “During the 19th Century the family came to appear less and less the center of a particular, nonpublic region, more an idealized refuge, a world all its own, with a higher moral value than the public realm.”¹⁶²

At another level, while American in essence, “Lily who prided herself on her broad-minded recognition of literature, and always carried an Omar Khayam in her travelling-bag, was attracted by this attribute, which she felt would have had its distinction in an older society.”¹⁶³ That is, Lily manifests her cultural rootedness and fascination with a universal appeal to literature and philosophy.¹⁶⁴ When it comes to her

¹⁵⁹ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 75. As I discussed earlier, Wharton’s perpetual concern is the search for what she calls the “innermost rooms,” or “the sublime” if we consider Kant’s views. See page 52.

¹⁶⁰ According to Wikipedia.org, “the words ‘equal justice under law’ paraphrase an earlier expression coined in 1891 by the Supreme Court,” namely by Chief Justice Melville Fuller.
URL: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Equal_justice_under_law.

¹⁶¹ Cathia Jenainati and Judy Groves, *Introducing Feminism* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 2007), 88.

¹⁶² Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 1977), 20.

¹⁶³ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 72. According to Wikipedia.org, Omar Khayyam, “born Ghiyath ad-Din Abul-Fath Umar ibn Ibrahim al-Khayyam Nishapuri (غیاث الدین ابوالفتح عمر ابراهیم خیام نیشابوری) 1048 - 1131), was a Persian mathematician, astronomer, philosopher, and poet. He also wrote treatises on mechanics, geography, mineralogy, music, and Islamic theology.” URL: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Omar_Khayyam.

¹⁶⁴ It appears that Edith Wharton shared a good deal of Omar Khayyam’s philosophy. This could be said because besides his scientific achievements, he embraced scepticism as a philosophy. He was also defiant of his society’s norms and trivial expectations. Like *The House of Mirth* implies, his philosophy also called for meditation and wisdom as the following stanza sums it up: But leave the wise to wrangle, and with me The quarrel of the universe let be: And, in some corner of the hubbub coucht, Make game of that which makes as much of thee. Khayyam Omar, Edward FitzGerald, and Daniel Karlin, *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 96. In this context, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who inspired much Edith Wharton, wrote “an essay, entitled ‘On Persian Poetry,’ in which he introduced German translations of Persian literature as his source of knowledge and revealed his high regards for Persian poets.” Abstract of Fotoohi Rudmajani Mahmoud and Taebi Naghandari

very curiosity *vis-à-vis* Selden's republic, which by definition embraces the values celebrated by the founding fathers of the American nation, her particular attachment to the American cultural legacy reveals itself. In *Our Country* (1885), Josiah Strong, like Selden, emphasised civil liberty and spirituality as the two ideals that America is representative of:

Every race which has deeply impressed itself on the human family has been representative of some great idea—one or more—which has given direction to the nation's life and form to its civilization [...] Nearly all of the civil liberty in the world is enjoyed by Anglo-Saxons: the English, the British colonists, and the people of the United States [...] The other great idea of which the Anglo-Saxon is the exponent is that of a pure spiritual Christianity. It was no accident that the great reformation of the sixteenth century originated among a Teutonic, rather than a Latin people. It was the fire of liberty burning in the Saxon heart that flamed up against the absolutism of the Pope.¹⁶⁵

America as a republic has also been built upon equality and the pursuit of happiness which crown these rights as universal human aspirations. The *Declaration of Independence* says it all: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."¹⁶⁶ Marriage also, as an institution, which adheres to the hierarchical structure of society, borrows from the top of such order its structure, ideals, and purposes. When it comes to structure, an analogy could be established in terms of connectedness between adherents, or members. As Richard Sennett observes, "people who are not joined together by ties of family or intimate association; it is the bond of a crowd, of a 'people'."¹⁶⁷ Besides, such connectedness should be supported by shared ideals whose ultimate aim is to realise specific purposes. As such, marriage inherits the republic's essential objectives, among which the pursuit of happiness. For this, Lily tells her partner:

For I suppose that is what you do wish," she continued, in the same quiet tone.
"And, though I was unable to consent when you spoke to me in this way

Zohre, "A Scrutiny of Emerson's 'on Persian Poetry'," *Language Related Research (Comparative Language and Literature Research)* 2, no. 4 (2012). URL: <http://en.journals.sid.ir/ViewPaper.aspx?ID=213917>.

¹⁶⁵ Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks et al., *Discovering the Western Past, Volume Ii: Since 1500*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2014), 249.

¹⁶⁶ The Declaration of Independence. US, 1776. URL: <http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document/>.

¹⁶⁷ Sennett, 3.

before, I am ready, now that I know you so much better, to trust my happiness to your hands.¹⁶⁸

The citizens' happiness within the republic is significantly similar to that of partners' bond by marriage. It could be achieved when equality is rendered into the workings of such an institution. Thus, in marriage the ultimate happiness would be realised when husband and wife regard each other on equal footing. That is, none of them is to be regarded as a second class citizen.¹⁶⁹ Moreover, this promising situation could not be achieved without an organising morality that maintains and fosters the harmony of their relationships and, hence, establishes a spiritual peace in the marital home.

Furthermore, taste proves to be a defining component in both establishing healthy harmonious relationships and the preservation of their continuity. Taking into consideration that one of the representative symbols of a good marriage is the child as the insurance of social continuity, his embodiment of the lively faculty of taste fosters the aesthetic quest of marriage and the perpetual need for its regeneration. That is, a child is endowed with untamed and healthy sensation and the natural human attraction to beauty and perfection. Therefore, in a good society, as Ralph Waldo Emerson viewed it, "adults acted with the simplicity and grace of children. They made vases, tragedies, and statues, such as healthy senses should,—that is, in good taste."¹⁷⁰ This sensory judgement extends to marital issues and defines the healthy attraction between partners. For this, Emerson said: "I will so trust that what is deep is holy, that I will do strongly before the sun and moon whatever inly rejoices me and the heart appoints. If you are noble, I will love you: if you are not, I will not hurt you and myself by hypocritical attentions."¹⁷¹

Actually Wharton valued taste, especially, when it shaped human relationships. In this context, she appreciated the French for their innate sense of taste that is reflected

¹⁶⁸ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 280.

¹⁶⁹ *Second Class Citizen* (1974) is an autobiographical novel by Buchi Emecheta. In this novel, she accounts for her individual experience and how her own society considered her as a second class citizen. That is, how the individual, in particular a woman, is reduced in value based on gender or other attributes peculiar to one's identity. Simon Gikandi, *Encyclopedia of African Literature* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2003), 241.

¹⁷⁰ Emerson, 17.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

on their lives, of them she writes: “they have instinctively applied to living the same rules that they applied to artistic creation.”¹⁷² Thus, Selden’s ideals of human relationships outline the vision of his republic, which embodies also an “aesthetic quest” to use Lois Tyson words.¹⁷³ His elevated taste was, in part, refined by his education in that he studied law. More importantly, his conservative family taught him to appreciate beauty. At a different level, his family seems to refer to Old America, which glorified beauty as long as it did not develop into obsession:

His father was the kind of man who delights in a charming woman: who quotes her, stimulates her, and keeps her perennially charming. Neither one of the couple cared for money, but their disdain of it took the form of always spending a little more than was prudent. If their house was shabby, it was exquisitely kept; if there were good books on the shelves there were also good dishes on the table. Selden senior had an eye for a picture, his wife an understanding of old lace.¹⁷⁴

In his “aesthetic quest,” Selden appears to be the perfect match for Lily. That is Old marriage revolved around shared refined qualities, namely in terms of taste. To use Wharton’s words, “the essence of taste is suitability.”¹⁷⁵ As such, as she prefers also to put it, “it seems he has just the same tastes; so they are exactly suited to each other.”¹⁷⁶ In being representatives of Old America, they have accumulated the rich legacy which helped sublimating their taste. As Kafka noted, “in reality one can only achieve an aesthetic enjoyment of life as a result of humble ethical experience.”¹⁷⁷ That is why Lily, the embodiment of Old America and its cultural heritage, can appreciate beauty and demonstrate a sense of sensitivity to it. Moreover, for her, at a first stage, “beauty [stands] as the symbol of morality.”¹⁷⁸ Then, in progressing in her spiritual journey, she is, as Emerson argued, to “live above the beauty of the symbol to the beauty of the thing signified.”¹⁷⁹ The following passage highlights her fascination and delight with beauty

¹⁷² Wharton, *French Ways and Their Meaning*, 17.

¹⁷³ Tyson, “Beyond Morality: Lily Bart, Lawrence Selden and the Aesthetic Commodity in the House of Mirth,” 5.

¹⁷⁴ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 231.

¹⁷⁵ Wharton, *French Ways and Their Meaning*, 18.

¹⁷⁶ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 100.

¹⁷⁷ David R. Ellison, *Ethics and Aesthetics in European Modernist Literature: From the Sublime to the Uncanny* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), Epigraph.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁷⁹ Emerson, 116.

and evokes her sense of taste which the present instance renders as an architectural portrait:

The hall was arcaded, with a gallery supported on columns of pale yellow marble. Tall clumps of flowering plants were grouped against a background of dark foliage in the angles of the walls. On the crimson carpet a deer-hound and two or three spaniels dozed luxuriously before the fire, and the light from the great central lantern overhead shed a brightness on the women's hair and struck sparks from their jewels as they moved. There were moments when such scenes delighted Lily, when they gratified her sense of beauty and her craving for the external finish of life.¹⁸⁰

Selden and Lily's extreme emphasis on aestheticism stresses their search for a utopia. Although, Selden joins his partner at the Bellomont,¹⁸¹ a reminder of John Winthrop's "City upon a Hill,"¹⁸² he keeps himself aloof from the real events taking place. His presence is, to some extent, marginal in that he has little conversation with other guests. One reason that might, in my view, be behind his self-alienation is his attempt to concretise his utopia away from the pressures of society in the city and by extension modernity. The place as its name suggests is a particularly fascinating green scene. Wharton makes it clear that it represents the Garden of Eden by making use of biblical diction: "Mrs. Trenor's hat? The one with the green Paradise?"¹⁸³ The Bellomont closely epitomises the virgin American landscape and is, therefore, an ideal landscape for American Adam and Eve:

[Lily] had a passion for the appropriate and could be keenly sensitive to a scene which was the fitting background of her own sensations. The landscape outspread below her seemed an enlargement of her present mood, and she found something of herself in its calmness, its breadth, its long free reaches. On the nearer slopes the sugar-maples wavered like pyres of light; lower down was a massing of grey orchards, and here and there the lingering green of an oak-grove. Two or three red farm-houses dozed under the apple-trees, and the white wooden spire of a village church showed beyond the shoulder of the hill; while far below, in a haze of dust, the high-road ran between the fields. "Let us sit here," Selden suggested, as they reached an open ledge of rock above which the beeches rose steeply between mossy boulders.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁰ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 35.

¹⁸¹ The Bellomont seems to be inspired from Wharton's great-grand father's house, which "stood as its name suggests at a terraced height." Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 13.

¹⁸² "Massachusetts Bay — 'the City Upon a Hill'" URL:<http://www.ushistory.org/us/3c.asp>.

¹⁸³ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 434.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 95.

Even though Lily is not yet married to Selden, she trusts him and both share much of their time at The Bellomont. If we consider that he is falling in love with her, this would be a symbolic representation of his fall from a previous state of self-alienation in his utopian world. For this, we often find them together and engaging in conversations to exchange knowledge about the world. In a way like Eve and Adam they were inherently married. However, human nature involves significant difference in opinions. As such, the couple's conversation over the principles of the republic divides them into two parties, an allusion to the divide in American politics into democratic and republican trends. Accordingly, a sense of ambiguity arises in terms of the concretisation of the republic's ideals, a fact that leads to Lily's feeling of uneasiness *vis-à-vis* the full acceptance of Selden's inclination. In this context, Wharton seems to be looking at France for inspiration in that, as Simone de Beauvoir noted, according to the "French law, obedience [was] no longer included among the duties of a wife."¹⁸⁵ As a hard headed individual with strong convictions, Lily's reluctance in adhering to Selden's discourse, it seems, stems from the fact that Selden "has, as Lily recognizes, bought the myth of the self-made, the man with absolute mastery over his own destiny. Like Coverdale's imagination of freedom, Selden's romantic utopia—a republic—cannot acknowledge a feminist objection."¹⁸⁶

In being extremely closed on itself, Selden's republic ironically disregards the public and embraces an elitist orientation that, in my view, sows the seeds of its own demise in that too idealism cannot survive in the real world that is defined by social codes, constructs, and other distorting forces. Selden, the idealist lawyer, is himself affected by the pressures Society imposed on him, a fact that is emphatically illustrated by the submission he manifests to the false rumours spread about Lily's reputation. That is, a lawyer who is not endowed with the faculty to distinguish between rumours and reality is definitely an epitome of the loss of justice in society. In a twist of events which is very illustrative of his stereotypical attitude, he turns his back on her questioning the

¹⁸⁵ Beauvoir, 641.

¹⁸⁶ Bauer, 111. Coverdale is also an idealist character in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale's Romance* (1852). Coverdale reflects on Zenobia's qualities that renders her as Eve in Edenic setting and, hence, idealising marriage: "But these last words, together with something in her manner, irresistibly brought up a picture of that fine, perfectly developed figure, in Eve's earliest garment. Her free, careless, generous modes of expression often had this effect of creating images which, though pure, are hardly felt to be quite decorous when born of a thought that passes between man and woman." Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance* (1852. Rpt: Coradella Collegiate Bookshelf Editions, 2004), 18.

feasibility of her belonging to the republic. More importantly, while his blind decision puts into doubt his rightfulness in judgement, it weighs heavily on our perception of his character. Besides, the question whether his republic could exist beyond the limits of his imagination proves to a fertile field of investigation as I will discuss in the following paragraphs.

1.6. The Republic of the Spirit as an impossible ideal and wishful thinking

Cohesion in relationships, or what Michael Mann terms as “social cohesion,”¹⁸⁷ be it in marriage or, at a larger scale, in Society, proves to be very defining in terms of the feasibility of any institution and the extent to which it could be realistic. With this in mind, the relationship between Lily and Selden presents signs of discrepancy in opinion that agitate the stability of Selden’s republic, which could be also seen and defined as a meta-institution. It is worth noting that any social institution is based, first and foremost, on the idea of agreement between the members of the very society. Furthermore, it could be said that such dissociation that erupted as a result of their conversation was the main reason behind the gap that separates Selden’s republic from reality. My claim rests on a clear idea which is Selden’s content with a talk on a way out of the troubles of social restrictions but without a clear vision or a tangible plan to follow. In other words, the “Republic of the Spirit,” as an ideal, remains captive of both Lily and Selden’s imagination, that is, an allusion.

If we consider that at the heart of any debate over the philosophy of democracy we are to deal with the following issues: “l’égalité des conditions, l’individualisme, le ‘despotisme’ démocratique, les relations entre maîtres et serviteurs, l’esprit de liberté et l’esprit de religion,”¹⁸⁸ Selden’s republic will prove to be very conflictual. To say it differently, this very republic is ironically deprived of crucial democratic dimensions that a Republic, in the image of America as conceived by its founders, would embrace and celebrate. Above all, in making the republic function as an institution, Selden reincarnates the conditions that Lily has initially escaped in the institution of marriage as an epitome of entrapment and seclusion in Society. In this context, it is worth noting

¹⁸⁷ Mann, i.

¹⁸⁸ Alexis Tocqueville, *De La Démocratie En Amérique* (Paris: Éditions Flammarion, 2010), 4.

that seclusion means also weakness for one would not retreat from his own society unless his or her weakness appealed to aloofness.

My argument on the anomalies that touch upon Selden's republic rests upon two reasons. On the one hand, transgressing Puritan ideals of strive and thrive, Selden prevents Lily from asserting her individualism by withholding her from her natural right to develop ambitions of progress in her real life. For instance, when he found her trying to join the working class, he fiercely rejected her choice in an authoritarian manner in reference to David Riesman's notion of "the cutting off of direct contact between the executive and the working staff."¹⁸⁹ More importantly in rejecting truthful conversation with her on equal bases, he shows a dangerous conflict with Kantian notion of Enlightenment. For one thing, Kant viewed that "individuals are beginning to think for themselves and all matters of common interest are to be decided by an enlightened public through free communication of thoughts and arguments."¹⁹⁰ Hence, as a hard headed individual, she eventually finds herself compelled to stand up to him: "whereas, in reality, you think I can never even get my foot across the threshold? Oh, I understand what you mean. You despise my ambitions—you think them unworthy of me!"¹⁹¹ Lily's reaction is a complete answer to the question "What is enlightenment?" She has finally come to emerge as an individual, assert herself, refrain from following Selden, and embrace Kant's appeal for Enlightenment, which, as he argued, "is mankind's exit from its self-incurred immaturity."¹⁹² Her sense of rebellion is justified by the fear aroused by Selden's oppression because as Ralph Waldo Emerson put it, "fear is an instructor of great sagacity and the herald of all revolutions."¹⁹³ With the French Revolution in mind, Lily's action is a clear assertion of herself and a determined quest for the betterment of her human condition because, as Philippe Raynaud noted it in his introduction to Tocqueville's work, "la Révolution n'avait pas seulement détruit l'Ancien Régime, elle

¹⁸⁹ David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (Yale University Press, 1961), 130.

¹⁹⁰ Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, *Immanuel Kant: Critique of the Power of Judgement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 22.

¹⁹¹ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 78.

¹⁹² James Schmidt, *What Is Enlightenment?: Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, Philosophical Traditions (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 58.

¹⁹³ Emerson, 61.

avait changé du tout au tout la condition humaine.”¹⁹⁴ On the other hand, no other character in the novel shares with them any conversation or interest in this republic or its ideals. Taking into consideration Selden’s look at himself as an elite, the republic’s denial of the common man’s right to belong to it is in itself, in an emphatic manner, an act of transgression of its very underlying principles.

In particular, from Selden’s perspective, the ideals of taste, independence, and the pursuit of happiness prove to be much distanced from any practical use. In agreement with Simone de Beauvoir’s views, from Lily’s perspective Selden’s ideals prove to obsolete because “even when her rights are legally recognized in the abstract, long-standing custom prevents their full expression in the mores.”¹⁹⁵ De Beauvoir adds that economic autonomy should be achieved to subvert customs like those of Selden’s republic. Had these ideals, that is, the rights Selden is talking about, been supported by pragmatism, they would have been concretised into a successful republic. By success I mean fulfilling the citizen’s aspiration of dignity through autonomy that I extend beyond the economic dimension mentioned by de Beauvoir to include intellectual freedom. In this context, Selden is far different from the founding fathers in the image of Thomas Jefferson, whose “presidential vision impressively combined philosophic principles with pragmatic effectiveness as a politician.”¹⁹⁶ In defining his vision, Jefferson relied on John Locke’s *Second Treatise on Civil Government* (1689) in which the latter, interestingly, advanced his principles of Meritocracy. That is, the citizens of the republic ought to “rise by virtue, talent, and industry.”¹⁹⁷ The pragmatic ideology, in turn, helps the concretisation of these ideals into reality in accordance to Richard Sennett’s idea of “making is thinking.”¹⁹⁸ With this in mind, Selden’s ideals could only be realised and made tangible in the real world through work, which makes individuals favour simplicity and naturalness of interpersonal relationships in the image of marriage. On this, Ralph Emerson said “we meet as water meets water, or as two currents of air mix, with perfect diffusion and interpenetration of nature.”¹⁹⁹ This claim is further supported

¹⁹⁴ Tocqueville, 11.

¹⁹⁵ Beauvoir, 19.

¹⁹⁶ “Jeffersonian Ideology”, US History.org URL: <http://www.ushistory.org/us/20b.asp>.

¹⁹⁷ Paul Johnson, *A History of the American People* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 104.

¹⁹⁸ Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), ix.

¹⁹⁹ Emerson, 61.

by John de Crevecoeur's association of the husband's vocation with land labour.²⁰⁰ Additionally, work provides a satisfying life and frees individuals from financial dependence even when they are joined by the union of marriage.²⁰¹ As work and talent have been withheld from Lily Bart,²⁰² she is not to secure a place in the republic. In a subtle manner, Wharton is indicting the way society has become corrupted and as a constructed institution departed from nature and altered the individual's natural love of work by instilling fear in him or her. In this context Emerson writes: "all the old abuses in society, universal and particular, all unjust accumulations of property and power, are avenged in the same manner. Fear is an instructor of great sagacity and the herald of all revolutions. One thing he teaches, that there is rottenness where he appears."²⁰³ That is, whereas Selden represents how a social or political institution destroys the natural essence of a human being, Lily prefers independence through work even as wishful thinking. As reality ceases to embrace her wishes, she is to remain "tired and confused,"²⁰⁴ to use Wharton's words, or she is to "calculate and contrive, and retreat and advance" to use her own words.²⁰⁵ Put differently, as much as the republic's ideals are confined within the boundaries of the republic, Lily, herself, is captive of her ideals of a liberating marriage that joins two partners as persons, that is, both enjoying complete freedom. Her captivity, therefore, hangs between two conflicting principles, that is, freedom and union.

Moreover, while expected to respect the essence of the early American experience in terms of commitment to the nation's cause, Lily and Selden find difficulty to fulfil such appeal. This could be said because they both have flaws which will eventually prevent the possibility of marriage, namely their lack of courage and determination which were characteristic of early Puritans. They are, instead, "wearing an air of irresolution,"²⁰⁶ to use Wharton's words. Marred by confusion and indecision,

²⁰⁰ See more detail on Noah Webster's definition of the farmer as a "husbandman" and John de Crevecoeur's notion of responsibility toward work in Chapter 3, 174.

²⁰¹ I maintain, however, that marriage as an institution comes inevitably to affect individual freedoms.

²⁰² Wharton herself was withheld from writing as a vocation in that her parents were "so little preoccupied with letters." Yet, she fought hard to establish herself as one of the greatest American writers. Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 49. On Ralph Waldo Emerson's view on talent, see Chapter 2, 144.

²⁰³ Emerson, 61.

²⁰⁴ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 435.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

their relationship is eventually doomed on both sides. That is to say, both of them demonstrate a certain complexity of feeling. As Carol Wershoven observes, they “play with the idea of their marriage, but as they come close to an outright declaration, both back away [...] the intimacy is over.”²⁰⁷ For this reason, Lily who at surface level shows rigidity, her inside which is quite sensitive is moulded with a lean of tenderness from Selden. As such, she approaches and distances herself but clings to her roots even in wavery and tempting situations:

Her faculty for adapting herself, for entering into other people’s feelings, if it served her now and then in small contingencies, hampered her in the decisive moments of life. She was like a water-plant in the flux of the tides, and today the whole current of her mood was carrying her toward Lawrence Selden.²⁰⁸

In a sharp contrast with John Locke’s emphasis on virtue as part of his ideology of Meritocracy, Selden’s catching to the eye defect is his disgrace of his own ideals, which makes him fall into the old tradition of Adam. In this context, it is worth noting that the Puritan tradition rests on the repetition of biblical scenes in new contexts in the image of the journey of the founding fathers to escape corruption in the old world and reach the Promised Land, that is, America. With this in mind, in accordance to Edmund Wilson’s description of a good number of Wharton’s masculine figures, Selden is “a man set apart from his neighbours by education, intellect and feeling, but lacking the force or the courage either to impose himself or to get away.”²⁰⁹ Even though, by definition, the manifesto of the “Republic of the Spirit” indicts materialism and the spectacle life,²¹⁰ he allows himself to attend wasteful parties at the Bellomont. On this kind of social events, Simone de Beauvoir observes that “the needless extravagance of

²⁰⁷ Wershoven, 47.

²⁰⁸ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 58.

²⁰⁹ Elaine Showalter, “The Death of the Lady (Novelist),” in *Edith Wharton's the House of Mirth: A Casebook*, ed. Carol J. Singley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 52. In *The Wound and the Bow* (1941) Edmund Wilson describes the man of the “big business era” as weak in terms of morals. Thus, the woman of middle-class triumphs over him in that she has the morals of the middle class. Here is Wilson’s full point: “One could have found him during the big-business era in almost any American city or town: the man of superior abilities who had the impulse toward self-improvement and independence, but who had been more or less rendered helpless by the surf of headlong money-making and spending which carried him along with its breakers or left him stranded on the New England hills in either case thwarted and stunted by the mediocre level of the community.” URL: <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/116317/edith-wharton-her-best-works-contributions-american-literature>.

²¹⁰ Actually, Selden associates Lily with the spectacle: “because you’re such a wonderful spectacle: I always like to see what you are doing.” Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 73.

parties [are] marked by expense and luxury.”²¹¹ In one illustrative instance, Lily shows her quite astonishment at his arrival simply because, in my view, she assumed that his ideals will prevent him from coming:

She turned to give him the welcome which such gallantry deserved; but her greeting wavered into a blush of wonder, for the man who had approached her was Lawrence Selden.

“You see I came after all,” he said;²¹²

In a rendition of what could be seen as an early version of the parties in Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925), the Bellomont demonstrates a sense of distortion and corruption taking hold of society. This paradox of the Bellomont versus the parties it embraces reflects the shift “from the antic power of nature outdoors to the community around the hearth indoors.”²¹³ As such, the sense of community ironically disappears from the very party which is supposed to gather people instead of scattering, dividing, and, eventually, alienating them. For instance, solitude, which evokes the sense of emotional distance, reveals itself in their loneliness even as they proceed with the vital biological function of nutrition. For this, everybody is isolated with no real communion with others at all. Therefore, with no real communication, they do not constitute a perfect society for one should be built on sharing and caring in everything from food to thought. In a portrayal that is very illustrative, they feel the “flavourless solitude of Trenor’s repast.”²¹⁴ Moreover, these very parties and the way they are elaborated stand for society, in particular the way it is transgressing its old values of hard work and thrift as required and necessary ingredients to success. By spending huge amounts of money in decorating the mansions and raising “the gaze of admiration,”²¹⁵ both corrupt and corrupted individuals reduced social events into a mere source of amusement. The first set of these persons is epitomised by Gus Trenor, Bertha Dorset, and even Judy Trenor and the second by Lawrence Selden. The following passage captures the limited purposefulness if not to say the purposelessness of these party-goers:

I heard that Maria Van Osburgh was asking a big party to meet her this week, so I thought it would be fun to get her away, and Jack Stepney, who knew her

²¹¹ Beauvoir, 515.

²¹² Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 75.

²¹³ Lamb and Thompson, 66.

²¹⁴ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 172.

²¹⁵ Edith Wharton, *The Custom of the Country* (1913. Rpt, Paris: Feedbooks), 29.

in India, managed it for me. Maria was furious, and actually had the impudence to make Gwen invite herself here, so that they shouldn't be quite out of it—if I'd known what Lady Cressida was like, they could have had her and welcome! But I thought any friend of the Skiddaws' was sure to be amusing.²¹⁶

Besides, corruption manifested itself in terms of gossip as a fuel for these parties. Being defined as “idle talk or rumor, especially about personal or private affairs of other,”²¹⁷ gossip meant exactly the opposite of the Puritan ideals of the self-made man and hard work. In other words, it marks the departure from the focus on building the self and by consequence a healthy community to the destruction of both of them. As such, in the following passage and in a subtle manner, Bertha Dorset sealed the fate of any prospect of marriage between Lily and Percy Gryce. Because of her gossip, the latter wrongly thought that Lily has borrowed money from strangers. Even Carry Fisher participated in the process and, in an oblique manner, making the attendants of the party share a great deal of a damaging effect in terms of marriage.

“He is my father's cousin,” Miss Bart interposed.

“Well, of course she left that out. It seems Ned told Carry Fisher; and she told Bertha, naturally. They're all alike, you know: they hold their tongues for years, and you think you're safe, but when their opportunity comes they remember everything.”²¹⁸

Actually it could be said that, to some extent, the parties harmed the institution of marriage by helping the spread of its very counter culture, that is, divorce, in the image of the news of Carry Fisher's dissolution of her own marriage. As a counter measure, one who sincerely cared about the wellness of his or her marriage would not remain in a party with the fears to neglect his or her marital and familial duties. Thus, for instance, Miss Pragg, a worker as a secretary, leaves one of the Trenor's parties to join her sister, who is “going to have a baby.”²¹⁹ This scene is very illustrative for two reasons. At one level, the baby refers to a “fruitful” marriage that we just hear about; that is, it is situated outside the realms of the corrupted world of the Bellomont. At a

²¹⁶ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 46.

²¹⁷ According to Wikipedia.org, gossip means also “an important means by which people can monitor cooperative reputations and so maintain widespread indirect reciprocity.” Thus, it is one's reliance on the others to foster his reputation. URL: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gossip>.

²¹⁸ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 85.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 45.

different level, by participating in helping the baby's mother, Miss Pragg displays an act of familial commitment that involves caring and support.

On the other hand, Lily and Selden, in being distinct from the crowd at the Bellomont in terms of ideals, come up with a completely different understanding of the setting. They transcend the superficial meaning of the Bellomont as a mere space for trivial social gatherings for the exchange of a load of information void of meanings as Boudrillard observes.²²⁰ In their case, the meaning they extricate from such a historical place, a reminder of Wharton's ancestral family,²²¹ evokes the pastoral ideals as the following passage suggests:

In the woody hollows of the park there was already a faint chill; but as the ground rose the air grew lighter, and ascending the long slopes beyond the highroad, Lily and her companion reached a zone of lingering summer. The path wound across a meadow with scattered trees; then it dipped into a lane plumed with asters and purpling sprays of bramble, whence, through the light quiver of ash-leaves, the country unrolled itself in pastoral distances.²²²

While suggesting pastoral innocence, the beautiful Mount is spoilt by the immoral practices of its guests and even hosts. Corruption and deception compromise the pastoral purity of the scene. As such, at the Bellomont, Bertha Dorset makes use of her marriage to George as a cover or a mask for the socially and supposedly distasteful practices of infidelity, adultery, and hostility. In her case, marriage freed her financially, but rendered her extremely corrupt. She, therefore, confirms the view held at the time that marriage serves as a legal and social protective act. Yet, Bertha Dorset goes too far to personify the prevailing idea that "only wealthy, financially independent women could openly have affairs and still maintain their social standing."²²³ Actually, Bertha uses her husband as a money-producing machine and goes to destroy innocent people in the process. Her cruelty and readiness to harm is announced by her host, Judy Trenor, in the following instance:

²²⁰ "عالم تزدداد فيه المعلومات أكثر فأكثر، بينما يصبح المعنى فيه أقل فأقل" Jean Boudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, (2008). Trans. Joseph Abdullah ed. (Beirut: Arab Association of Translation, 1981), 147. My translation.

²²¹ "My scandalized great-grandfather, irrevocably committed to the Republican idea, indignantly renamed his place 'The Mount'. It stood, as its name suggests, on a terraced height in what is now the dreary waste of Astoria." Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 13.

²²² Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 70.

²²³ Porter and Gray, 26.

[She] IS dangerous—and if I ever saw her up to mischief it's now. I can tell by poor George's manner. That man is a perfect barometer—he always knows when Bertha is going to—”

“To fall?” Miss Bart suggested.²²⁴

As a matter of fact, Bertha Dorset is involved in an extra-marital affair with one of the Bellomont's guests. To cover up such transgression of decent manners, she will not hesitate to save her reputation at any cost and at the expense of others' if she is compelled to. After accusing Lily with the false guilt of having courted her husband George, she ultimately destroys the latter socially. In ignoring Lily's social fall and keeping himself from helping her, Selden proves to be extremely self-centred. That is, his behaviour demonstrates his lack of concern for the one who is supposed to be his future wife, let alone for the others. For this, Selden's republic, home, and self are always in seclusion. As Simone de Beauvoir put it, “the fact is that narcissism is a well-defined process of identification, in which the ego is regarded as an absolute end and the subject takes refuge from himself in it.”²²⁵

In particular, Selden's indifference to Lily, or what William Dean Howells qualifies as “cold or lukewarm,”²²⁶ exemplifies also the state-individual relationship that Richard Sennett refers to as “formal and dry.”²²⁷ Selden's attitude, therefore, evidences his “incapacity for emotion and love.”²²⁸ An extreme interpretation of Selden's attitude goes even to distance and position him beyond neutrality of posture. As Elie Wiesel observed,²²⁹ “the opposite of love is not hate, but indifference.”²³⁰ Thus, it could be said that Selden might have the vision but lacks the capacity to bring it into reality. In religious terms, he is a preacher but, definitely, not a practiser. More precisely, Selden is a sinner preacher in the image of renowned modern-day American evangelist, Jimmy

²²⁴ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 65.

²²⁵ Beauvoir, 597.

²²⁶ Howells, *Novels, 1875-1886*, 321.

²²⁷ Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, 2.

²²⁸ Nadja Amrane, “Anxiety in Theodore Dreiser's Novels” (Doctorat d'Etat dissertation, University of Algiers, 1997), 352.

²²⁹ According to Wikipedia.org, Elie Wiesel (born 1928) is a Nobel Prize winner American professor and peace activist. URL: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elie_Wiesel.

²³⁰ Ben Casnocha, “The Opposite of Love Is Indifference” URL: <http://casnocha.com/2011/02/the-opposite-of-love-is-indifference.html>.

Swaggart, who, while preaches high Christian values, commits immoral scandals himself.²³¹

Selden, is, moreover, a self-deceptive hypocrite, perhaps unknowingly, for many reasons. At one level, while he is supposed to be fair in that he is a lawyer, he condemns Lily as he spots her leaving the Trenors' home without even giving her the chance to defend herself. That is, to use judicial terms, he builds the whole case out of misinformation and eventually makes a false judgement, a fact that demonstrates his lack of capacity in terms of the conversion of his intellectual knowledge into a practical profession. In this context, it is worth noting that Edith Wharton preferred not to judge her society, a fact that, as I mentioned in my general introduction,²³² highlights her posture as a social observer. Above all, instead of judging, the endeavour to progressively change reality is what matters not just for Wharton, but for other thinkers in the image of Max Weber. For the latter, the separation of ideology from reality is exactly the attitude to be avoided if one aims at success and happiness.²³³ At a second level, which stresses the previous level, Selden lacks honesty in that he is involved in a secret relationship with Bertha while, in the same time, he is courting Lily. At another level, he maintains and boasts his relationships with people whom he ironically considers as culturally inferior.²³⁴ As such, he keeps himself from any engagement in a deep conversation except for his cousin Gerty and Lily. In contrast to the founding fathers' efforts to spread the word and make people share their democratic ideals, he neither educates people around him nor distances himself. In my view, Wharton is indicting the passivity of intellectuals who turn their back on their society. For this, she tells us: "the literary men foregathered at the Century Club, and continued to turn a contemptuous shoulder on society."²³⁵ Despite all these anomalies in terms of morality and ethics, Selden keeps thinking of himself as a righteous gentleman even when he flatters his cousin Gerty with one thing in mind, that is, to collect gossip on Lily:

²³¹ Michael White, "Tv Preacher Falls from Grace," *The Guardian* 2010. URL: <http://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2010/jun/08/archive-tv-preacher-falls-from-grace>.

²³² Edmund Wilson's recognises Edith Wharton's posture as a reliable social observer. See my G. Introduction, 1.

²³³ See my earlier discussion of Weber's association of happiness with practical professions, 54.

²³⁴ Max Weber indicted "the impracticality and implicit futility of the academic life" when it does not convert into tangible influence on society. Ghosh, 70.

²³⁵ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 144.

The words beat on Gerty's brain like the sound of a language which has seemed familiar at a distance, but on approaching is found to be unintelligible. He had come to talk to her of Lily—that was all! There had been a third at the feast she had spread for him, and that third had taken her own place. She tried to follow what he was saying, to cling to her own part in the talk—but it was all as meaningless as the boom of waves in a drowning head, and she felt, as the drowning may feel, that to sink would be nothing beside the pain of struggling to keep up.²³⁶

Lily, for her part, cannot come to a decision. While her self-love points out her adherence to the exceptionalist ideal, her behaviour points out her failure in protecting it. For one thing, pragmatism, “the first original American philosophy,”²³⁷ which she deeply lacks in,²³⁸ would have been the adequate support in her situation. Perhaps this is Wharton's way to indict her own society for not standing to the challenge of preserving tradition. In giving up the philosophy of pragmatism, much of the original ideals were to be lost; among these are determination, purposefulness, and clarity of vision and commitment to the cause. As Lily loses much of these qualities, she is to sink into weakness that is often associated with the faculty of understanding feelings as witnessed in the following passage:

Poor Lily, for all the hard glaze of her exterior, was inwardly as malleable as wax. Her faculty for adapting herself, for entering into other people's feelings, if it served her now and then in small contingencies, hampered her in decisive moments of life. She was like a water-plant [Lily] in the flux of the tides.²³⁹

Ironically, Lily's weakness at different levels goes hand in hand with her self-idealisation which is supposed to provide a sense of pride. The irony I refer to stems from the fact that ideal people tend to manifest a sense of superiority. In this sense Lily is unique in that she swerves from the stereotypical vision of self-centred people. For

²³⁶ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 238.

²³⁷ Pratt, 6.

²³⁸ According to Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Pragmatism was a philosophical tradition that originated in the United States around 1870. The most important of the ‘classical pragmatists’ were Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), William James (1842–1910) and John Dewey (1859–1952)...The core of pragmatism was the pragmatist maxim, a rule for clarifying the contents of hypotheses by tracing their ‘practical consequences’.” “Pragmatism,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (2013).URL: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pragmatism/>. However, the European contribution to the shaping of Pragmatism should be acknowledged in that it “was a product of intellectual resources descended from John Locke, the Scottish Enlightenment, and the ingenuity of Peirce and James as they attempted to ‘clarify language in which claims to knowledge are made and to hasten the day when scientific and philosophical disputes would be settled by the use of a more rational method’.” Pratt, 7.

²³⁹ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 79.

one thing, this kind of self-centredness which is peculiar to her prevents her from considering the improvement and perfection of herself to fit into the changing circumstances. This fact evidences two crucial realities about her stagnation in terms of personality that reflect a polarity. At an inner level, her development is prevented because in contenting herself with what she is, namely in the eyes of Selden, she retreats from any endeavour to seek the betterment of herself. On a social level which drastically influences the previous level, she is the victim of her society's abstracting force. In making others look at her as an object like in the instance of the *Tableaux Vivant*, she perhaps comes to embrace that definition. In this context, as Simone de Beauvoir observes, "all love requires the duality of a subject and an object."²⁴⁰ That is why Lily's admiration of herself develops into the physical representation of such love. With this in mind, Lily gazes with admiration at her own reflection on the mirror: "'dear me! I must be off. It's after five.' She paused before the mantelpiece, studying herself in the mirror while she adjusted her veil."²⁴¹ This extreme care about her beauty makes her come to highlight her self-love, but as de Beauvoir's observes, a "woman's narcissism impoverishes her instead of enriching her."²⁴²

In remaining alone with her double instead of approaching people around her, Lily's self-alienation dissociates her from social reality and as much as she idealises her self-image, she idealises marriage to the point it would, to a large extent, remain the captive of wishful thinking. Consequently, as Wharton put it, either of her "candidates would answer to that description."²⁴³ For this, my explanation of the apparent paradox of being alienated while beautiful is the notion advanced by Emerson who considered that the human being loves not the person *per se*, but what he calls "radiance."²⁴⁴ Interestingly radiance, which seems a purely novel notion, traces actually to the creation of the world. In this context, Emerson tells us that when God created the world sent first the soul and then the body. He adds that a beautiful soul would choose a beautiful body.

²⁴⁰ Beauvoir, 597.

²⁴¹ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 14.

²⁴² Beauvoir, 665.

²⁴³ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 262.

²⁴⁴ Emerson, 96.

Thus, Wharton's choice of Lily and making her beautiful is fully understood and justified.²⁴⁵

Therefore, it could be inferred that Lily embraces a philosophy that empowers her with the capacity to explain for herself the way she is different. For this, she makes Selden show signs of falling in love with her, a confirmation of Emerson's notion of the love of radiance. However, taking into consideration that the world cannot be explained through one unique philosophy, or one perspective, Lily seems to have fallen into the mistake to explain the world only through her own lens for she admires herself to the point she sees no other person in the world. Perhaps, this is Wharton's way to point out her fatal defect in that one cannot define himself when retreated to his own boundaries as I said in my general introduction. The said inclination when not discovered and remedied develops to become an obsession with the quest for the triumph over the others, an outcome that coincides with the case of Lily as a reminder of her exceptionalist rationale. In my view, this is the problem not just of Lily but of America which departed from the glorification of the universal to the obsession with the self. As the following passage illustrates, she savours the moments of triumph at this point:

[...] and the sight of Selden's writing brought back the culminating moment of her triumph: the moment when she had read in his eyes that no philosophy was proof against her power.²⁴⁶

Lily's choice in marriage, which is to define her destination in life, is, therefore, hanging between two ends none of which is easy to negotiate. The first one would fulfil her self-love, perhaps, through the support of Rosedale who himself admires her social image. The second one would rest on a fulfilling ideal love for a man who values her for who she is and, regrettably for her, no one rose to such expectations. In this context, Stephanie Coontz noted that this very rationale is behind people considering "leaving a marriage that didn't fulfil their expectations for love."²⁴⁷ In many ways, this is a dilemma, which proves to be difficult to deal with, and hence, seems quite impossible to find a way out as the following lines suggest:

²⁴⁵ As I mentioned before, "Lily" stands for purity. Thus, here she symbolises the blending of elevated spirit and sublimated beauty.

²⁴⁶ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 155.

²⁴⁷ Coontz, 5.

She might have married more than once—the conventional rich marriage which she had been taught to consider the sole end of existence, but when the opportunity came she always shrunk from it.²⁴⁸

When compared to Selden, the issue of marriage proves to be more complicated for Lily. This could be said because as a woman, she is deprived of the privileges his gender offers. Therefore, social constructs are defining in terms of one's perception of himself, a fact that stresses Lily's confusion. Her ordeal is further highlighted by her awareness of her weakness:

I have tried hard - but life is difficult, and I am 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 called 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? One must get back to it or be thrown out into the rubbish heap - and you don't know what it's like in the rubbish heap!²⁴⁹

In fact, Lily's natural refinement is her lethal weakness. Had she accepted the intimidation of Gus Trenor or Rosedale's advice to reintegrate into society, she would have restored her reputation and accomplished "revenge and rehabilitation."²⁵⁰ Yet, her taste qualifies her, as Emerson argues, as a "wise" woman who is endowed with "spiritual perception."²⁵¹ Therefore, she chooses not to save herself at the expense of the others, let alone the one to whom she looked up. For this, Wharton depicts the way Selden seems to have noticed Lily throwing something into fire. In a way, Lily's sense of goodness guides her to do what her values dictate to her without a concern for the display and without waiting for reward. Only after losing hope in Selden's recognition, that we come to know that she buried the only evidence of her innocence: "When she rose, he fancied that he saw her draw something from her dress and drop it into the fire; but he hardly noticed the gesture at the time."²⁵² Lily's righteousness is, therefore, stressed as she retreats from seizing opportunities at the expense of her values.

Actually, in burning the letters, Lily protects her integrity and preserves the triumphant self she has come to retrieve. Moreover, as a refined person, she seems to

²⁴⁸ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 237.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 469.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 270.

²⁵¹ Emerson, 116.

²⁵² Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 472.

recognise Lawrence Selden's contribution and help in the process of finding this very self. After all, Selden has a bright side that cannot be neglected and was the reason why she developed the strength to resist the corruption around her. However, her adherence to the discourse of racial purity points out that her resistance was not enough to defy the temptation of her society which was being corrupted. At one level, the quest for purity, or the discourse of Eugenics,²⁵³ is one side of the corruption witnessed by American society. That is, within an atmosphere of anxiety in terms of the integration of new groups into society, the idealisation of racial purity contradicts the republican ideals in terms of equality between all Americans and all mankind by extension. At another level, Lily is a victim of Anglo-Saxonism,²⁵⁴ which made her prefer purity to marriage with Rosedale, as Elizabeth Ammons observes:

[...] the whitest of white women, literally named "Lily," whose task is to perform the beauty of Anglo-Saxonness in a tableau vivant, is better off dead than married to a Jew.²⁵⁵

In many ways, Rosedale's marriage proposal, which involved Lily's compromise of her ideals, makes her contemplate deeply her situation and eventually end up with the decision to protect her self-respect. With reference to the Puritan approach to revive biblical scenes, this instance is compared to the one described in the Old Testament: "the heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth."²⁵⁶ That is, wise people are "full of wisdom in serious matters," while foolish people are "entangled in wordly trifles," to use Wharton's words.²⁵⁷ The latter group is epitomised by Mrs. Fisher, the divorcee, who spends money with disregard to what the future might bring as evidenced in this passage: "once or twice of late she had won a large sum, and instead of keeping it against future losses, had spent

²⁵³ Stephanie Coontz discusses anxiety and Eugenics in terms of fears over the growing lower classes in society. Here is her full point: "Anxiety about sexual promiscuity converged with the emergence of the pseudoscience eugenics to fan fears that the lower and 'unfit' classes were reproducing like rabbits while middle- and upper-class women were restricting their fertility." Coontz, 212.

²⁵⁴ According to Reginald Horsman, Anglo-Saxonism was a racist philosophy, which was created by "the merging of the Anglo-Saxon rhetoric with the experience of Americans conquering a continent." From the abstract of Horsman's "Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism." URL: <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674948051>.

²⁵⁵ Bell, 70.

²⁵⁶ Ecclesiastes 7:4. URL: <http://biblehub.com/ecclesiastes/7-4.htm>.

²⁵⁷ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 96.

it in dress or jewelry; and the desire to atone for this imprudence.”²⁵⁸ To separate herself from this kind of behaviour, Lily, therefore, transcends the futility of making the pursuit of money an end in itself and considers deeply contemplated reasons for marriage. She, eventually, recovers her self-respect by distancing herself from impurities, namely declining Gus Trenor’s intimidation and rejecting marriage with Simon Rosedale. In the end, Lily chooses death rather than marriage to a Jew, or the distortion of her ethics. In culminating in this well thought choice, she provides evidence for her stoic character in that:

[I]n the eyes of a pupil of the Stoic schools, it went without saying that, to be saved—in other words, to overcome the fear of death—we must in the first place endeavour to understand the cosmic order; secondly, do our utmost to imitate it; and thirdly, merge ourselves in it by finding our rightful place therein, and thus succeed in attaining a kind of eternity.²⁵⁹

In designing Lily’s journey, Wharton puts emphasis not on its final point, but on the process that underlines Lily’s advancement as she negotiates meanings of marriage. In my opinion, it is Lily’s sense of self-development which leads to her self-discovery that matters. For this, even though Lily meets death, in her view, she has saved her utmost essence. She has remained a Lily,²⁶⁰ a pure “white.” Her death, in a complete agreement with the biblical reference, elevates and renders her angelic and virtuous in that “when they rise from the dead, they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels.”²⁶¹ In leaving the world, Lily opens a “portal to another life,”²⁶² or as “Hocart and others have shown—because they believe that death is the ultimate promotion, the final ritual elevation to a higher form of life, to the enjoyment of eternity in some form.”²⁶³ Selden, therefore, finally awakens to discover the “real Lily Bart,”²⁶⁴

²⁵⁸ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 29.

²⁵⁹ Luc Ferry, *A Brief History of Thought: A Philosophical Guide to Living* (HarperCollins Publishers, 2011), 72.

²⁶⁰ To quote Jane A. Stewart, “the lily is regarded as a saint among flowers. The wide use of lilies in Churches at Easter is not only because of their perfect floral type but also because of their ministry to the eye, —their symbolic meaning. The Lily is the ‘queen of flowers’ in literature. Lilies are always and everywhere the symbol of purity—the flowers of ‘virgin light’ of which it was said: ‘Lo! Thy thoughts are white!’ The word lily is from the Celtic ‘li,’ meaning whiteness, purity. ‘The lily is all in white like a saint,’ wrote Thomas Hood.” Jane A. Stewart, “The Lily in Literature,” *The Journal of Education* 93, no. 13 (1921): 346.

²⁶¹ Mark 12:25 in Yalom, 10.

²⁶² Jeff Mason, “Death and Its Concept,” *The Philosophers’ Magazine Online*, 2011. URL: <http://www.philosophersmag.com/index.php/reflections/17-death-and-its-concept>.

²⁶³ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973), ix.

²⁶⁴ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 149.

whose essence was beyond the limitations of his republic. She is far different from the one he used to superficially gaze at as a *tableaux-vivant*. Selden's ultimate reflections as he looks at her in her deathbed is another way to allude to the end of old marriage. Yet, his deep look at her is a symbol of the admiration he has had for her as a specimen and is a late recognition of the love he felt with someone else besides himself. The following passage demonstrates how they actually preserved the essence of marriage in not declining themselves to the waves of social change:

It was this moment of love, this fleeting victory over themselves, which had kept them from atrophy and extinction; which, in her, had reached out to him in every struggle against the influence of her surroundings.²⁶⁵

Like Plato's *The Republic*,²⁶⁶ Selden and Lily's dialogues, which are unmistakably philosophical, raised both of them above their own society that was sinking into triviality and heading into decline at different levels. It seems that Wharton hoped that Americans would embrace resistance to uncalculated change in society. In particular, her fears stemmed from the fact her society swerved away from a path that was informed by grounded information and guided by knowledge and moral principles in the image of the founding fathers' vision of the nation. To express this hope in fiction, she kept both Lily and Selden aloof from society to keep them representatives of the Old America she celebrates. That is, she spared them the humiliation of being mere followers by "unquestioning acceptance of received opinion."²⁶⁷ Perhaps, in this only practical scenario, she protected their freedom of choice as a natural philosophy of life in accordance to Kantian perspective:

In general, practical propositions (whether they are pure a priori or empirical), if they immediately assert the possibility of an object through our faculty of choice, always belong to the knowledge of nature and to the theoretical part of philosophy.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 502.

²⁶⁶ My reference to Plato's *The Republic* stems from the centrality of the universal human quest for justice in this work, an endeavour that is linked to Selden's vocation as a lawyer. According to Wikipedia.org, *The Republic* "is a Socratic dialogue, written by Plato around 380 BC, concerning the definition of justice, the order and character of the just city-state and the just man." *The Republic* (Plato).

URL: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Republic_%28Plato%29.

²⁶⁷ Craig, 8.

²⁶⁸ Guyer and Wood, 6.

Put differently, they preferred a *priori* knowledge of the past, which rests on their innate concepts, that is, tradition,²⁶⁹ to a confusing reality in the making and leading to a future that is definitely a source of uncertainty. In their view, they preserved their integrity and, hence, kept themselves from degeneration. Perhaps they sought to preserve a way of life in a lasting memory based on St. Augustine's belief that "all the ages of time being finite, are very little, or indeed nothing at all, when compared to the interminable eternity."²⁷⁰ Yet, not necessarily their fantasy and resistance are strong enough to take them to safe grounds. The extent to which their endeavour could possibly reach cannot be revealed without considering the context in which their relationship was being shaped. Manifestly, in crossing to modernity, much of their posture *vis-à-vis* one another and, above all, their understanding of themselves has been agitated as I shall demonstrate in the following point.

1.7. Marriage as the victim of modernity

In the image of the transition of the human being from one stage of life to another, namely from adolescence to adulthood, Modernity marks the transition of America from a traditional nation to a purely industrial one that is fundamentally modern. Therefore, as a symptom of transition from one era to another, tensions spread throughout *The House of Mirth*. In my opinion, Wharton's way to depict such conflictual world is her design of Lily's journey, which begins as *The House of Mirth* opens on a hurrying crowded scene in the "rush of the Grand Central Station."²⁷¹ The background of the scene is defined by the notion of the crowd which contrasts to Society as a concept. That is, while society means cohesion and connection, the crowd is a mere juxtaposition of people with no communication. The foreground of the scene fosters and explains its background; the moment it sheds light on is a turning point for Lily and America as it

²⁶⁹ According to Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Kant's talk of a priori 'modes of knowledge' suggests an epistemological, knowledge-oriented characterization of what is a priori. As standardly characterized, a priori knowledge is knowledge that does not depend on evidence from sensory experience." Craig, 6. See also Frantz Fanon's definition of tradition in this chapter, 25.

²⁷⁰ Schaff, 375.

²⁷¹ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 3. As I discussed earlier, the Grand Central Station alludes to Lily's journey and how she is to "collide" with different persons standing for different ideals and values. See page 50.

embraced an “act of transition,”²⁷² to use Wharton’s words. This could be said because time and place are accurately chosen to mirror the economic and social mobility at play. As all train stations share common features until the present moment, one could infer clear aspects which are to set the atmosphere and, hence, serve to inflict influence upon the human being and his psychology.²⁷³ I would like to point out one striking paradox about stations that parallels the paradox of modernity. On a surface level, the first imagined picture, that is, the impression one gets in a train station is the sense of rush and movement of the travellers. However, on a deep level, the station as a big monument refers exactly to the opposite, that is, the travellers live a perpetual status of waiting and passivity. With reference to Ibn Khaldun’s notion of big “building and city planning as features of sedentary culture,”²⁷⁴ Wharton, who travelled much in her life, tells us that: “to be a passenger was too sedentary.”²⁷⁵

Therefore, no traveller owns his/her destiny; he or she is waiting for his/her train and his/her fate is in the hands of other people. For this reason, Lily is to rely on Selden simply because she missed the train she was expecting. On a different level, the venue, itself, to which trains arrive only to move again toward new destinations, represents the way arriving values meet and interact with those in course of extinction. Furthermore, distortion which is the opposite of homogeneity and harmony is revealed through Lily’s distorted walk in the station. In contrast to the fluidity and unhesitating flow of a stream of water in nature which finds its course without disruption, her walk is to be obstructed by the passing travellers. That is why, Wharton tells us that, “in her confusion she stumbled against a man who was hurrying down the last steps of the elevated station.”²⁷⁶

Even though I discussed Lily’s encounter with Lawrence Selden in the train station before, I revisit the scene in this instance to highlight the sense of rush it involves and extricate new meanings. For one thing, rush is itself a form of hesitation. As I explained in the previous imagery, in her rush, she cannot watch her steps and eventually collides with the passing passengers. In this way her decisions function; they are marred

²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ This claim rests on Ibn Khaldun’s notion of the influence of climate on the human being as a defining element in terms of his or her character. See Chapter 3, 175.

²⁷⁴ Khaldun, 433.

²⁷⁵ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 53.

²⁷⁶ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 318.

with hesitation and distorted by the people she collides with. With this in mind, I would argue that her prompt intersection with Selden gives a sense that things start to happen rapidly in a distorted order. Knowing about old Americans' respect of time and punctuality, in missing her train, Lily manifests the effect of distortion and change brought about by modernity. This idea is emphasised by her unplanned visit to Selden's flat, a venue which is distorted by unconventional practices of Lawrence Selden in the image of his socially and morally indecent relationship with Bertha Dorset. Their casual meeting extends to a deep conversation in which they discuss marriage and, more importantly, Lily's uneasiness with it. As she leaves the place, her second encounter involves Simon Rosedale. In proposing his services, one could foresee an eventual marriage proposal, which will actually occur.

Out of these two encounters, Wharton seems to allude to the importance of the presence of a man in Lily's life, yet put together Selden and Rosedale help the writer's endeavour in portraying Lily's negotiation of a space within a changing American landscape. Taking into consideration that tensions create history, Wharton resorts to this notion to portray the ongoing change. Thus, in contemplating marriage with two men Wharton uses a scientific method that relies on the choice of prototypes to study a larger in scale phenomenon. Before I dive into Wharton's application of the said method, I find it interesting to point out that an analogy between the human brain and computer processors demonstrates that the former is actually stronger in processing power. That is, "the brain has an estimated one hundred billion neurons, which are collectively over two million miles long. Each neuron has an average of ten thousand connections that directly link itself to other neurons."²⁷⁷ However, the computer's decisions are more consistent and faster. My explanation of this is that the human being is constantly influenced by his or her atmosphere and, hence, the victim of confusion which manifests itself as tension. Based on recent neurological studies, "under these conditions, the "higher" cognitive functions of abstract thinking and self-reflection are shut down."²⁷⁸ Therefore, I anticipate Lily's difficulty to manage numerous variables in the modern world to negotiate a marriage choice. Her inner tensions, therefore, surface to evoke two opposing ends. On the one hand, to some extent, Selden represents her idealism,

²⁷⁷ Siegel, 13.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 254.

refinement, and racial temptation. On the other hand, Rosedale invokes pragmatism,²⁷⁹ but also the meanings of the distortion brought about modernity, namely pouring new blood that involves new attitudes into American society. My reference to blood, as a social tie, serves as an emphasis on the role marriage plays in constructing social connectedness, namely through assimilation. This process, however, is inevitably accompanied by multiple side effects. One of these is the sense of distortion, which is illustrated by the way Lily comes to meet Rosedale in the first place in that, as the narrator tells us, “she ran against a small glossy-looking man with a gardenia in his coat.”²⁸⁰ Therefore, in an emphatic manner, he does neither collide with her, nor walk in parallel to avoid her. At a physical level, what he does is literally illustrated as a distortion of her walk path. At an ideological level, however, Rosedale represents all the risks involved by accepting new, or “non-tested,”²⁸¹ attitudes and behaviours into society. In a broader sense, Wharton’s examination of the possibilities of marriage between Lily and Rosedale points out the nation’s obsession with authenticity as I discuss in the second chapter.²⁸²

While modernity, which Karl Marx associated with capitalism,²⁸³ was praised for the progress it offered, namely through the development of industrial production, it raised many conflicts that affected society and its institutions. In this context, Lijun Xing writes:

According to Marx, although modernity progresses with the development of society, there lie inside it abstruse contradictions, which make the progress of modernity a historical process full of twists and conflicts. On the one hand, the progress of modernity has indeed brought mankind unprecedented fruits of civilization; on the other hand, this has been done through tribulations of fire and blood. The journey of modernity is developed through such contradictions. Marx no doubt adequately affirmed the positive results of modernity and highly appraised the “great civilization of capital”; in the

²⁷⁹ As Rosedale proposes for the second time, Lily recognises his pragmatism and honesty in the following passage: “‘I understand you,’ she said. ‘A year ago I should have been of use to you, and now I should be an encumbrance; and I like you for telling me so quite honestly.’ She extended her hand with a smile.” Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 283.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁸¹ I say so, because it is safe to argue that what is new is often associated with risks, be they in society or in art.

²⁸² See Chapter 2, 133.

²⁸³ Ziyi Feng and Lijun Xing, “A Contemporary Interpretation of Marx’s Thoughts on Modernity,” *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 1, no. 2 (2006): 255.

meantime, he relentlessly exposed social fissions and various phenomena of reification resulting from modernity.²⁸⁴

Such conflicts between the dying era and the emerging one prove to be very influential and alarming. Lily, therefore, develops a confused vision in that at “whichever way she looked she saw only a future of servitude to the whims of others, never the possibility of asserting her own eager individuality.”²⁸⁵ In other words, Lily, who bears much of the ideals of Old America, is neither aware of such an impact nor able to perceive her deficiency in adapting to modernity. As Desley Deacon put it, “this was, indeed, a rapidly disappearing world, and the tragedy of Wharton’s heroine, Lily Bart, was that she could not adapt to the rapid changes that had transformed it.”²⁸⁶ Thus, as Wharton writes, “what choice had she? To be herself, or a Gerty Farish.”²⁸⁷ Christopher Gair emphasises how Lily Bart’s incapacity to adapt reflects the anxiety of those who culturally belonged to what I term “Old America.” He goes further to demonstrate “how older generations of Americans repeatedly express anxieties about a newer group of invaders, and how Lily’s sense of “inherited value” (287) ill prepares her for a more fluid society.”²⁸⁸

When it comes to marriage, Lily’s inability to decide for marriage stems from the moment’s uncertainties raised by the tensions between tradition and progress, a fact that explains Wharton’s sceptical views.²⁸⁹ In this regard Singley tells us on Ernest Renan’s influence on Wharton.²⁹⁰

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 260.

²⁸⁵ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 112.

²⁸⁶ Desley Deacon, “The Republic of the Spirit: Fieldwork in Elsie Clews Parsons’s Turn to Anthropology,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 12, no. 3 (1992): 15.

²⁸⁷ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 28.

²⁸⁸ Carol J. Singley, *Edith Wharton’s the House of Mirth: A Casebook*, Casebooks in Criticism (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 22.

²⁸⁹ I argue that Wharton’s sceptical views and pessimism stem from her scientific inclination. See my General Introduction, 11. I, also, support my argument with Bertrand Russel’s assertion that “at present, scientific technique advances like an army of tanks that have lost their drivers, blindly, ruthlessly, without goal or purpose. This is largely because the men who are concerned with human values and with making life worthy to be lived, are still living in imagination in the old pre-industrial world, the world that has been made familiar and comfortable by the literature of Greece and the pre-industrial achievements of the poets and artists and composers whose work we rightly admire.” Russell Bertrand, “The Divorce between Science and ‘Culture’” URL: <http://www.personal.kent.edu/~rmuhamma/Philosophy/RBwritings/divorceScCulture.htm>.

²⁹⁰ According to Encyclopedia Britannica, Ernest Renan (1823-1892) as a “historian and scholar of religion” authored *L’Avenir de la science* (1890) in which he stressed “the importance of the history of religious origins, which he regarded as a human science having equal value to the sciences of nature.” URL: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/497999/Ernest-Renan>.

His rational positivism fueled her developing skepticism about the role of faith in a post-Darwinian world increasingly based on science and empiricism. And his ideas about nation and nationhood helped her come to terms with her own expatriation and questions about the preservation and dissemination of cultural value in the early twentieth century.²⁹¹

Among the cultural upheavals in early twentieth century is the feminist quest for equality which faced fierce resistance from the established social order. As such, I argue that through feminist lens, Lily's indecisiveness *vis-à-vis* marriage also reflects her rejection of the masculine supremacy. On the one hand, firm positions and decisions which are associated with different hierarchical, patriarchal in nature, institutions are often associated with masculinity. On the other hand, by remaining undecided, Lily frees herself from entrapment in the masculine discourse. That is to say, she prefers to remain undecided rather than accepting submission. As Restuccia put it, "women bred to be frilly decorations run risks of various sorts of death [...] a firm position is unattractively masterful, and not female (or feminine)."²⁹²

Moreover, Lily's choice in marriage is heavily influenced by the moment's tendency for change as a sign of the arriving modernity. That is, individuals are affected in terms of the definition of their identities, a fact that was shaping the modern American society. As such, with new social codes at play, before engaging in social relations to choose a husband, Lily has to come to terms with her own conception of herself. Thus, she is to, first and foremost, reach a self-understanding to be followed by a definition of the other. Once this stage fulfilled, she could connect herself with a man. I deliberately use techs diction to make here an analogy with modern technologies that borrow social relationships' principles and apply them to computer networks.²⁹³ In this scenario, each node has its own identity and, hence, connectedness cannot be fulfilled without clear identification. Thus, marriage, as an interpersonal relationship, would involve a complex process of identification, be it personal or social. To quote David Goldber:

²⁹¹ Carol J. Singley, "Race, Culture, Nation: Edith Wharton and Ernest Renan," *Twentieth Century Literature* 49, no. 1 (2003): 32.

²⁹² Frances L. Restuccia, "The Name of the Lily: Edith Wharton's Feminism(S)," *Contemporary Literature* 28, no. 2 (1987): 224.

²⁹³ In computer networks, each node, that is a PC, has a specific identity just like humans have. To establish a link between two computers or more to transfer data, the most important thing is auto-identification in terms of each node. Interestingly, failure to be self-identified one node can never connect to the others. This, in my view, is exactly the dilemma of Lily Bart.

The intertwining of personal and social identity is fashioned significantly in terms of the conceptual order prevailing at given historical moments. How we comprehend others and conceive our social relations and how we thus come dialectically to some sort of self-understanding are molded by concepts central to the dominant socio-discursive scheme. The social formation of the subject involves, in large part, thinking (of) oneself in terms of-literally as-the image projected in prevailing concepts of the discursive order. These concepts incorporate norms of behavior, rules of interaction, and principles of social organization. The values inherent in these norms, rules, and principles exercise themselves upon individual and social being as they are assumed, molded, indeed sometimes transformed in their individual and social articulation.²⁹⁴

That said, Lily's uneasiness with marriage is defined by her clinging to her conception of herself as a white Anglo-Saxon protestant. To use Wharton's words, she "fused her whole being into one hard brilliant substance."²⁹⁵ Moreover, she adheres to spiritual Christian values as well as civil liberty in accordance with Josiah Strong's preaching.²⁹⁶ Actually Strong's ideas support my previous argument on Lily's spiritual quest as well as her pursuit of liberty.²⁹⁷ However, Lily's very quest gives a sign for the risks she might face as she departs from her reality and the life she used to have. Perhaps, Wharton's way to portray Lily's instability rests on depriving her from a family and a home as stable roots in Society. Rendering her as a lonely woman in a public room with no identification is, to some extent, a rendition of her loss of what Carol Singley refers to as "the threads of tradition and connection that were inherently hers."²⁹⁸ As Lily loses such firm connection with the past in which the human being was valued for who he is, she comes to subconsciously adhere to the social prejudices without being provided with a clear vision of the future. Had she been prepared for modernity, she would have accepted the assimilation of new races into society. The following passage illustrates how society superficially looked at differences in races without considering the essence

²⁹⁴ David Theo Goldberg, "Modernity, Race, and Morality," *Cultural Critique* 24, (1993): 193.

²⁹⁵ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 210.

²⁹⁶ Josiah Strong preached that "it is not necessary to argue to those for whom I write that the two great needs of mankind, that all men may be lifted up into the light of the highest Christian civilisation, are, first, a pure, spiritual Christianity, and second, civil liberty. Without controversy, these are the forces which, in the past, have contributed most to the elevation of the human race, and they must continue to be, in the future." Josiah Strong, *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis* (New York: Baker & Taylor Co., 1885) as cited in Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks et al., 249-250.

²⁹⁷ See page 50.

²⁹⁸ Singley, "Race, Culture, Nation: Edith Wharton and Ernest Renan," 40.

of the human being. For this, race was still a defining element of the way people looked at and perceived the other:

Mr. Rosedale stood scanning her with interest and approval. He was a plump rosy man of the blond Jewish type, with smart London clothes fitting him like upholstery, and small sidelong eyes which gave him the air of appraising people as if they were bric-a-brac. He glanced up interrogatively at the porch of the Benedick.²⁹⁹

The role human relationships play in one's self-definition is quite illustrated through the interaction at play between Lily and Rosedale. This claim rests on the fact that Lily begins her journey with, somehow, a sense of superiority, namely in terms of race. However, as she negotiates her relationship with Rosedale she actually starts to regard herself differently. And in the process, she even goes to revise her feelings towards the latter. Perhaps out of a sense of "pride and prejudice"³⁰⁰ that she resists the temptation of exposing the change that has occurred within herself. When Rosedale keeps attempting to lift her psychologically as he reminds her of her true value in society that, in his view, should be restored, she starts actually to develop a new sense of herself out of his perception of her. This is exactly, the way relationships in the image of marriage help the individual to develop his self-definition.

However, Lily's refusal to embrace the developed definition and eventual rejection of Rosedale alludes to the way she has become poisoned with the said racial anxiety. She was, therefore, inevitably trapped into her conceptions of herself and the other just as her own society compelled her to do. The following passage illustrates how Lily is chained both literally and figuratively within the realms of a civilisation that produced her and eventually put her under enormous pressures only to render her helpless in terms of deciding on her own future.

As he watched her hand, polished as a bit of old ivory, with its slender pink nails, and the sapphire bracelet slipping over her wrist, he was struck with the irony of suggesting to her such a life as his cousin Gertrude Farish had chosen. She was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate.³⁰¹

²⁹⁹ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 8.

³⁰⁰ *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) is a novel by Jane Austen.

³⁰¹ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 8.

As such, by remaining undecided and losing all chances of marriage, Lily personifies the cultural dilemma of America to define itself in a crucial moment in its history. Compared to the previous decades which engendered men of vision who laid the grounds for the nation and pointed to the right direction, the current period witnessed scarcity in inspiration. As such America, allowed modernity to embark on as a full package, in the image of a new cult.³⁰² That is, it was instilled with side effects which like diseases needed remedy. Wharton, it seems, turned to inspiration in Emerson's transcendental thought. In other words, she "flirted with Emersonian transcendentalism as an antidote to the materialism of modern life."³⁰³ In taking such inclination, Wharton associated Lily's relief with her yearning for innocence. Yet, with the inevitability of considering the effects of modernity, Lily, herself, represents a blurred image of the encounter between what is tangible and what is spiritual. In this context, Trilling writes:

It is clear that what Mrs. Wharton is captured by in Lily Bart is her ambiguity of purpose, the conflict between her practical good sense and the pull of spirit. And what makes Lily a heroine for the reader - one of the greatly appealing heroines of fiction, worthy of association with Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina - is the ultimate triumph of spirit over good sense, even though the transcendence guarantees her destruction.³⁰⁴

The destruction Trilling refers to is eventually symbolised by Lily's death. Like Max Weber's wife, Marianne Schnitger,³⁰⁵ who fought hard for ideal marriage in real life, in Wharton's fiction Lily "apparently took her own idealized impression of her marriage to the grave."³⁰⁶ Yet, before finding such a relief, Lily is to witness happiness through her dreams of innocence which are associated with her encounter with Nettie Struther, the only one who succeeds in achieving tangible happiness not through extreme idealism but rather through work. Her happiness is illustrated by the warmth of her relationship with her husband within the confines of a marital union that could be termed as a "fertile marriage" as I will discuss in the following paragraphs.

³⁰² By the term new package, I allude to the cult of consumerism which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 2.

³⁰³ Carol J. Singley, *Edith Wharton: Matters of Mind and Spirit* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 17.

³⁰⁴ Diana Trilling, "The House of Mirth Revisited," *The American Scholar* 32, no. 1 (1962-1963): 118.

³⁰⁵ According to Wikipedia.org, Max Weber's wife, Marianne Schnitger (1870-1954) was a sociologist and feminist activist, who fought hard for feminist ideals in terms of equality between genders, namely with regard to marriage. She authored many works related to marriage, namely *Authority and Autonomy in Marriage* (1912) and *The Ideal of Marriage* (1914). URL: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marianne_Weber.

³⁰⁶ Kent, "Weber, Goethe, and William Penn: Themes of Marital Love," 319.

1.8. Yearning for innocence: Nettie Struther and the working class as an ideal

Ironically enough Lily's ideal of marriage is realised by Nettie Struther, the only woman in the novel who is spared any contact with the corrupted world of the Bellomont. Two things which are crucial separate her from almost any other character in the novel. That is, she constitutes the intersection of two paths that I hold being endowed with the power to yield happiness. She is gifted with both marriage and work and as I discussed before these are the two reasons behind Old America's perceptions of happiness. Opposite to the sterile world of "the house of mirth," she is the only knowable one who is to give birth to a child. In contrast to Lily, she is able to start a family, to have a home and a reliable husband. As Sinclair Lewis, put it in one of his novels, "She made him what is known as a Good Wife. She was loyal, industrious, and at rare times merry. She passed from a feeble disgust at their closer relations into what promised to be ardent affection."³⁰⁷ Despite her poverty, she has achieved a happy marriage. This is probably Wharton's way to say that money cannot buy everything. Moreover, money in many cases would function as a disruption from the real pleasures of life. I add to this that it is the reason behind the loss of the will to learn skills of labour and craft from which one can achieve a high sense of self-esteem. Actually in her case, being poor evokes a sense of pride in that, as Paul Cahen noted: "we shall consider the proud poor to be those who have honest responsibilities and occupations, those who have operated in the past or are at present operating a shop as merchants or artisans."³⁰⁸ Eventually, we come to know that she had been saved mentally and physically from an illness in her lungs, through Lily's donation to Gerty's charity organisation:

Yes: Lily was beginning to remember. The episode of Nettie Crane's timely rescue from disease had been one of the most satisfying incidents of her connection with Gerty's charitable work. She had furnished the girl with the means to go to a sanatorium in the mountains: it struck her now with a peculiar irony that the money she had used had been Gus Trenor's.³⁰⁹

In using the money that she desperately needed for her own living, Lily's humanist essence is once more revealed. By helping Nettie to restore her health, in particular to breathe well, she actually puts the seeds of a marriage that she herself was

³⁰⁷ Lewis and Hutner, 75.

³⁰⁸ Donzelot, 60.

³⁰⁹ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 345.

yearning for in the image of the natural need for fresh air. Her generosity enabled Nettie to love and marry George who, in turn, cared for his wife for her essence. The happiness their marriage manifests is illustrated through the vitality that a beautiful baby daughter manifestly brings to their home:

“You see, it’s my husband’s night-shift—he’s a motor-man—and the friend I leave the baby with has to step upstairs to get HER husband’s supper at seven. I didn’t tell you I had a baby, did I? She’ll be four months old day after tomorrow, and to look at her you wouldn’t think I’d ever had a sick day.”³¹⁰

In the image of Lily’s resolve to resist corruption, Nettie Struther, whose work, as I said, empowered her with a sense of pride, had to fight the corruption of money in its modern sense. A gentleman, or at least she thought so, who works in the same firm had seduced her, but as soon as he realised she was ill he abandoned her. The hypocrisy he shows and the subsequent failure of such a relationship alludes once more to the reasons behind Selden and Lily’s failure in achieving marriage. Yet, in another contrast to Lily, which is illustrative of the need for communion and solidarity in society, Nettie was then rescued from destruction and fall through the charity work offered by Gerty. Then, in a typical use of Whartonian method of contrast, chance makes her meet a real gentleman, George. Wharton describes him as helpful in an allusion to humans’ need for love. My explanation of this is that every human being who follows his common sense and instinct yearns to be loved and the way to achieve this is to offer his devotion, help, and disposition to ease other people’s pains. Besides, as his name denotes, he is associated with tradition and the sense of Christian community for he shared much of Nettie’s life as they grew up together. More importantly, he did not change and rather clung to his faith on her. By combining sympathy and understanding, his love for her empowered her and drew rays of hope in her life. Drawing on George’s unconditional trust, Nettie could finally find her ‘real self,’ to use Wharton’s words, powerful enough to face life. In accordance to Emerson’s notion that “the good man has absolute good, which like fire turns everything to its own nature,”³¹¹ she explains that the real change in her life began when George asked her to marry him:

At first I thought I couldn’t, because we’d been brought up together, and I knew he knew about me. But after a while I began to see that that made it

³¹⁰ Ibid., 477.

³¹¹ Emerson, 64.

easier [...] If George cared for me enough to have me as I was, I didn't see why I shouldn't begin over again—and I did.³¹²

By the end of the novel, Nettie and Lily seem to have reversed roles. Whereas at this point Nettie has a home, enjoys a good marriage, and ultimately has a baby, Lily suffers from solitude and misery. At one level, it seems, Wharton is offering an image of what Lily would have been if she had walked in Nettie's steps. At another level, Nettie resurrects Lily. Wharton's way to achieve such a depiction is the baby daughter, whose name reincarnates Marry Antoinette, the French Queen. The latter embodied the legacy of social and aesthetic qualities associated with France that reminded the baby's mother of Lily.³¹³ Whether the baby's father is George or Nettie's former seducer is left unanswered. Perhaps, this is a metaphor used by Wharton to stress marriage as a human relationship that transcends the biological dimension. The sense of humanism that Lily embraces and is eventually credited for is expressed in the following passage:

But I presume he was too stylish for me—he travelled for the firm, and had seen a great deal of society. Work girls aren't looked after the way you are, and they don't always know how to look after themselves. I didn't [...] and it pretty near killed me when he went away and left off writing [...] It was then I came down sick—I thought it was the end of everything. I guess it would have been if you hadn't sent me off. But when I found I was getting well I began to take heart in spite of myself. And then, when I got back home, George came round and asked me to marry him.³¹⁴

When Lily holds the baby daughter in her arms, she feels happiness and organic revival and “a new hope had stirred in her.”³¹⁵ Even though she is not the biological mother, the feeling of warmth she manifests indicates three crucial facts. To begin with, despite being a single woman, Lily is well aware of the sense of motherhood and, hence, the universal and human dimensions of marriage are emphatically revealed. Secondly, her vision of marriage is closely related to the happiness it should yield. Thirdly, happiness in marriage cannot be separated from “motherhood,” and by extension

³¹² Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 480.

³¹³ According to Wikipedia.org, Marie Antoinette (1755-1793) was the “Queen of France [...] convicted by the Convention of treason to the principles of the revolution, and executed by guillotine on 16 October 1793.” URL: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marie_Antoinette.

³¹⁴ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 479-480.

³¹⁵ Ibid., 264.

“parenthood.”³¹⁶ I add that these facts are, to a large extent, defining in terms of old marriage. The following passage depicts the culmination of Lily’s journey in which she finally feels the “human affections, tender instincts, symbolic feelings, and sacraments of love.”³¹⁷ That is to say, her spontaneity and feelings of fondness in human relationships, instead of the calculations and coldness of selfishness she witnessed in the corrupt social circles of her society, are finally revealed and sensed.

Lily felt the soft weight sink trustfully against her breast. The child’s confidence in its safety thrilled her with a sense of warmth and returning life, and she bent over, wondering at the rosy blur of the little face, the empty clearness of the eyes, the vague tendrilly motions of the folding and unfolding fingers. At first the burden in her arms seemed as light as a pink cloud or a heap of down, but as she continued to hold it the weight increased, sinking deeper, and penetrating her with a strange sense of weakness, as though the child entered into her and became a part of herself.³¹⁸

Innocence is the primal sense revealed by the child’s fusion with Lily, who herself is an embodiment of this distinctive quality of old American character. For this, she often innocently put her trust in people around her only on good faith. For instance, she naively thought Gus Trenor was really investing money for her as he told her. Also, her initial belief in Selden’s manifesto of freedom points out that she tends to follow the others based on what she is told. And as I mentioned before, many of her decisions were influenced by people around her simply because she reflected her purity on the others, as Psychology suggests,³¹⁹ thinking everyone is another Lily. In this context, it is worth noting that Wharton felt always sorry for that sense of vulnerability and lack of prudence that her old society witnessed and eventually led to its gradual extinction. Interestingly, Lily epitomises Robert Gorham Davis’s notions of the struggle between innocence and experience as well as between dream and reality. In this context, LeRoy writes:

Not long ago Robert Gorham Davis devoted an article to the special relevance for America of the notion of a struggle between innocence and experience, ideal and practice, dream and reality. The conflict between these opposites, he tells us, is one that Americans have found it unusually hard to resolve [...] In *The American Adam*, which appeared a few years before Davis’s article,

³¹⁶ Amrane, 352.

³¹⁷ Lamb and Thompson, 57.

³¹⁸ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 481.

³¹⁹ Psychology, as a science that is concerned with the study of human behaviour in its endeavour to explicate the psyche, demonstrates that one who is under pressures resorts to the so-called “defence mechanisms” to protect himself. Radouane Zekkar. Lecture. University of Laghouat “Amar Téliidji”. Laghouat, 2010.

R. W. B. Lewis used the innocence experience formula as a main key to the development of American literature. Still earlier Van Wyck Brooks and Lionel Trilling, among others, had called attention to what is sometimes now referred to rather glibly, perhaps, as the fact of "American innocence."³²⁰

Since, Lily "had no definite experience by which to test the quality of her feelings,"³²¹ the baby is the only one who is blessed by the purity similar to hers and, hence, qualified to exchange this sense of innocence with her. Though not tied with blood, they are spontaneous in their relationship and trust one another without any calculations. Wharton's reference to trust at this point points out its absence throughout Lily's journey. My explanation of this is that Lily's clinging to trust as an ideal of marriage rendered her life miserable in that she could not find it. Therefore, most of the time she was consumed in this perpetual search which yielded no result. However, as she found it with the baby, she found and restored that energy which was spent on useless waiting.³²² Moreover, the baby's confidence in Lily expresses the latter's longing for a real organic loving relationship, the kind that was not available to her in "the house of mirth," with reference to the corrupt society. The baby, therefore, represents to her what Selden, altered from his nature by his own society, failed to fulfil.

Lily realises that the warmth and trust she has finally felt is what Selden failed to offer her. It was the necessary ingredient for enduring happiness to exist. She, therefore, imagines herself holding the baby once more again, a fact that stresses the rightfulness of her realisation. This gives her a sense of oneness, the kind of relationship that she really needs and, to achieve it, is ready to sacrifice the false warmth of "the house of mirth." Such vision has awakened Lily's sense of loving solidarity and community. In a way, a narcissistic and self-centred Lily comes, ultimately, to acknowledge that "individual existence acquires meaning and a sense of permanence only in so far as it is part of the larger human community" to use Ouzgane words.³²³ Her development in character and eventual longing for such flawless social bonds further qualifies her as pure and Edenic:

³²⁰ Gaylord C. LeRoy, "American Innocence Reconsidered," *The Massachusetts Review* 4, no. 4 (1963): 623.

³²¹ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 71.

³²² I hold the idea that in waiting for something that never happens, one is entrapped in a process that consumes much psychic energy in vain. I revisit this idea in more detail in Chapter 3, 190.

³²³ Lahoucine Ouzgane, "Mimesis and Moral Agency in Wharton's the House of Mirth," *Anthropoetics* 3, no. 2 (1997). URL: <http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap0302/MIRTH.html>.

[T]he old life-hunger possessed her, and her being clamoured for its share of personal happiness. Yes—it was happiness she still wanted, and the glimpse she had caught of it made everything else of no account. One by one she had detached herself from the baser possibilities, and she saw that nothing now remained to her but the emptiness of renunciation.³²⁴

However, to Lily's apparent agony, old America she knew has vanished with no chance to be resurrected under the new circumstances. Thus, the ideals she stands for would clash with those of people around her, leading to her final decision to set herself aloof as an observer, in reference to Wharton's posture *vis-à-vis* her society, in a room in a decayed house at the margins of society. To say it differently, had she been able to adapt, she would have managed to remain in "the house of mirth," that is, the non-pure altered society as I mentioned in the previous points. In other words, her failure in adjusting to the new circumstances meant also the inevitable failure in negotiating a good marriage. This fact, to some extent, additionally points out her insufficient efforts to achieve her goals. However, in a broader sense, Lily's retreat from the centre of society is Wharton's articulate way to seal the fate of a way of life that was spontaneous, more humane, stable, and, above all, happy. Lily's retreat to her seclusion is, as Joseph Lough noted in his discussion of Weber's views on the sublime, "a public expression of [her] prophetic spirit and certainly any bellicose outburst in the manner of ancient warriors [which] had been made impossible by what [Weber] described as the retreat of 'the ultimate and most sublime values from public life'."³²⁵ Perhaps, the only reconciliation is the sublime that is inner to one's inside being and Wharton's ever quest is to find it in the deeper places in one's self. For this Wharton gives much importance to home as a place of spiritual refuge and inspiration for development as I discuss in the following paragraphs.

1.9. The end of old marriage as the end of the Victorian *home sweet home*

As the novel's title indicates, Wharton had home in mind as she wrote *The House of Mirth*. In a way or another home influences its dweller and as Emerson put it, "our minds travel when our bodies are forced to stay at home."³²⁶ Home, therefore, is

³²⁴ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 488.

³²⁵ Lough, 13.

³²⁶ Schaff, 46.

not a mere symbolic reference to belonging and domesticity, but rather is endowed with a defining and moulding capacity that shapes Whartonian characters. In raising to such significance, home becomes the motor of the events and, as Sean Scanlan noted, the “plot is suggested by Lily’s movements between and her relationships to a series of homes, none of which are formally hers.”³²⁷ Above all, in this movement, as Wharton put it, Lily “could taste the rare joys of mental vagrancy.”³²⁸ That is to say, she breathes freedom as she wanders. Her very attraction to the quest for freedom ascribes her to the refined tastes of the artist whose definition of himself goes through his endeavour to build a house that is representative of his highly sensory vision. In this context, Ralph Waldo Emerson writes:

if the American artist will study with hope and love the precise thing to be done by him, considering the climate, the soil, the length of the day, the wants of the people, the habit and form of the government, he will create a house in which all these will find themselves fitted, and taste and sentiment will be satisfied also.³²⁹

Wharton, therefore, ascribes the role of home to be defining in terms of self-conception. In agreement with Jamesian tradition, she brings home very close to one’s life story. In *Turn of the Screw*, James figuratively intertwines home and a child’s story only to stress how home shapes an individual from the opening until the closing lines of his life. The opening of the novel is, therefore, the outset of a child’s life as these lines suggest: “it was a strange story which we heard in that old house, on the night before Christmas. We sat by the fire and listened silently until the end.”³³⁰ In line with this meaning, Wharton’s endeavour in *The House of Mirth* reflects how each home, being loaded with particular attributes, contributes, in a way or another, in sculpting Lily’s identity as the following passage suggests:

In whatever form a slowly-accumulated past lives in the blood—whether in the concrete image of the old house stored with visual memories, or in the conception of the house not built with hands, but made up of inherited passions and loyalties—it has the same power of broadening and deepening

³²⁷ Sean Scanlan, “Going No Place?: Foreground Nostalgia and Psychological Spaces in Wharton’s the House of Mirth,” *Style* 44, no. 1-2 (2010): 208. URL: <https://www.questia.com/library/journal/1G1-238176975/going-no-place-foreground-nostalgia-and-psychological>.

³²⁸ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 74.

³²⁹ Emerson, 46.

³³⁰ Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw* (1898. Rpt. : Penguin Books, 1999), 1.

the individual existence, of attaching it by mysterious links of kinship to all the mighty sum of human striving.³³¹

In many ways, Lily “is identified by a nomadic existence,..., and volatility, characteristics of identities perpetually in the making, which, lacking the stability of a home, depend on temporary socioeconomic arrangements to grant them value.”³³² Hence with unstable identity, Lily’s choice in marriage follows the same pattern in being undecided and devoid of certainty. This uncertainty stems from the lack of a stable home, whose meaning transcends its physicality as the following definition, which I deem reliable, suggests:

Home is not simply a place, but a set of feelings: familiarity, comfort, safety, belonging, being able to be oneself, love. Home is deeply connected to our identity. Our homes reflect much more than a style of interior decorating. They reflect who we are, where we have come from, who and what is important to us.³³³

Wharton makes it clear that, in their intrinsic differences, houses represent different degrees of the nation’s varied postures *vis-à-vis* social and cultural change. Accordingly, these houses “brought [Lily] in contact with the dramatic contrasts of life,”³³⁴ to use Wharton’s words. With this perspective in mind, in Selden’s street, “[Lily] glanced with interest along the new brick and limestone house-fronts, fantastically varied in obedience to the American craving for novelty, but fresh and inviting with their awnings and flower-boxes.”³³⁵ To get enriched from such a variety, Wharton finds different pretexts to make Lily’s path intersect with the said houses. Accordingly, the first home Lily encounters in her journey is Selden’s flat. With its closeness and secrecy,³³⁶ it represents tradition and conservatism. Actually, Selden is as secretive as his own home in that he is a lawyer and expected to be discrete. In offering Lily tea, home manifests its sense of familial warmth and hospitality and, hence, gives

³³¹ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 352.

³³² Zacharias, 142.

³³³ “Happiness” in The Life Worth Living Series.

URL: <http://www.hartmann-campbell.ch/en/content/documents/Happiness.pdf>.

³³⁴ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 167.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

³³⁶ Selden’s flat could be associated with closeness and secrecy for two reasons. Firstly, with its closed library, it kept his intellect from spreading. Secondly, it maintained his relationship with Bertha firmly secret.

her “tremendous backing.”³³⁷ Likewise Carrie Fisher’s small house at Tuxedo further provides her with a sense of “peace and familiarity,” which she cannot find throughout most of her journey as the following passage elicits:

Though it was nearly dinnertime when she arrived, her hostess was still out, and the firelit quiet of the small silent house descended on her spirit with a sense of peace and familiarity. It may be doubted if such an emotion had ever before been evoked by Carry Fisher’s surroundings; but, contrasted to the world in which Lily had lately lived, there was an air of repose and stability in the very placing of the furniture, and in the quiet competence of the parlour-maid who led her up to her room.³³⁸

In a slight contrast, Gerty’s flat evokes a sense of independence that women began to achieve and enjoy in America at the time.³³⁹ The dying past, however, is represented by the Dorsets’ home which happens to be the reason behind the second marriage in the novel after Nettie’s. In the following passage, in a subtle manner, the house elicits the way traditional marriage embraced devotion. However, as a side effect, which altered the good nature of this marriage, some assumptions and constructs about women’s roles in the institution marred its goodness.

“Of course you’ve heard that he’s perfectly devoted to Evie Van Osburgh? Cousin Grace is so pleased about it—it’s quite a romance! He met her first at the George Dorsets’, only about six weeks ago, and it’s just the nicest possible marriage for dear Evie. Oh, I don’t mean the money—of course she has plenty of her own—but she’s such a quiet stay-at-home kind of girl.”³⁴⁰

The association of old marriage with the Dorsets’ home finds grounds in the latter’s ownership. George, whose name symbolises the colonial America, attempted once to rebel against his wife to expose her hypocrisy. At one level, this paradox of George versus rebellion, that is, the king versus the patriots, stresses the change that has occurred. At another level, George’s act is a reference to the rebellious nature of Americans when they face oppression. It is also a reminder of the Puritans’ determination in terms of the right to liberty. The need for rebellion and the quest for freedom leads me to call upon the centrality of the Bellomont in Lily’s journey. This

³³⁷ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 323.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*, 274.

³³⁹ One of the major reasons behind women’s emancipation is the feminist movement in America at the turn of the twentieth century. Industrialisation also offered women the chance to realise self-independence through work.

³⁴⁰ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 100.

historic monument, actually, embraces Lily's republican ideals of liberty.³⁴¹ Against the Trenors' best efforts to alter it, it remains an authentic symbol of a long legacy of freedom:

But her [Judy Trenor] course was too purely reasonable not to contain the germs of rebellion. No sooner were her preparations made than they roused a smothered sense of resistance. A small spark was enough to kindle Lily's imagination, and the sight of the grey dress and the borrowed prayer-book flashed a long light down the years.³⁴²

The reference to the prayer book in the previous quotation infers that freedom is only achieved, as I mentioned before, through glorious work. Hence, in the millinery, Lily, with no prior experience, takes the risks and courageously attempts to acquire some skills in labour. Whereas her hands could not produce what her heart yearns for, Nettie emerges as her saviour to complete her deficiencies. Thus, Nettie's home offers her the warmth fuelled by both work and a good marriage. Following Simone de Beauvoir's advice, she would avoid remaining like women who "did not have even 'a room of their own'; that is to say, they did not enjoy that material independence which is one of the necessary conditions for inner liberty."³⁴³ As such, her journey, as Wharton preferred to put it, specifically culminates in "the solitude of a hall bedroom in a house where she could come and go unremarked among other workers."³⁴⁴ Her ultimate home, therefore, constituted also her last "refuge, a place of defense and autonomy."³⁴⁵

Despite the development of Lily's identity throughout her journey between homes, she is without doubt deprived of a stable sense of self if we consider the aforementioned definition of home.³⁴⁶ Her loss of a stable home parallels America's losses in the Civil War in terms of social stability. As such, "the culture that could pine cheerily for 'Home, Sweet Home,' in the days before the war, certainly did not invent nostalgia after 1865; but the losses of the war itself deepened the literary trade in

³⁴¹ I discussed Lily's republican ideals, namely freedom and the pursuit of happiness, in the point entitled "Lily's quest for freedom. See page 50. The Bellomont which is inspired from Wharton's Great-grandfather's The Mount, in my view, reminds her and us, as she noted, how her "great-grandfather [was] irrevocably committed to the Republican idea." Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 13.

³⁴² Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 63.

³⁴³ Beauvoir, 129.

³⁴⁴ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 437.

³⁴⁵ Donzelot, 41.

³⁴⁶ See the previously suggested definition of home in page 96.

nostalgia.”³⁴⁷ Thus, in a similar way, without a home of her own, Lily lost the centre of stability and comfort in her life. In other words, there is no place that equals home as a haven of happiness and protection as first expressed by John Howard Payne in his play *The Maid of Milan* (1823):

Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam,
Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home;
A charm from the skies seems to hallow us there,
Which seek thro' the world, is ne'er met elsewhere.
Home! Home!
Sweet, sweet home!³⁴⁸

The notions of movement and journey, as I mentioned before,³⁴⁹ are noticeably stressed in *The House of Mirth*. Yet in this instance of my research, I add that the defining components of such a journey are homes. This is the reason why Wharton tells us that she had a “photographic memory of rooms and houses even those seen but briefly, or at long intervals.”³⁵⁰ Not necessarily these homes provide Lily with comfort, but they ultimately forge her character as she contemplates her choice in marriage. In the process of shaping a final thought and even before reaching her first planned destination, The Bellomont, she finds herself compelled to visit Selden's bachelor flat. Their conversation on marriage marks a sharp contrast with the flat's name, the Benedick.³⁵¹ Such contrast emphatically reflects the difficulty of Lily's journey. Whereas the moments Lily spends at Selden's house deteriorate her reputation as a “jeune fille à marrier,”³⁵² they also indicate her inherent spontaneity and need for familial warmth.³⁵³ I would explain such an irony by referring to Wharton's distinction between marriage for the sake of marriage and marriage for the sake of lasting happiness that is deepened by the warmth of feelings, for which Lily's craving is evident in the following passage:

“Shall we go over to Sherry's for a cup of tea?”

³⁴⁷ Lamb and Thompson, 67.

³⁴⁸ “Home, Sweet Home” URL: <http://home.olemiss.edu/~mudws/texts/SweetHome.txt>.

³⁴⁹ See page 50.

³⁵⁰ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 28.

³⁵¹ See my previous discussion of Lily's visit to the Benedick in page 53.

³⁵² Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 103.

³⁵³ In my last chapter, I argue that familial warmth was associated with marriage in Old America. Wharton's praise of Whitman's poetry for being “warmth” indicates so. See footnote in Chapter 3, 178.

She smiled assentingly, and then made a slight grimace.

“So many people come up to town on a Monday—one is sure to meet a lot of bores. I’m as old as the hills, of course, and it ought not to make any difference; but if I’m old enough, you’re not,” she objected gaily. “I’m dying for tea—but isn’t there a quieter place?”³⁵⁴

After the death of her parents, Lily’s uneasy social life stresses the centrality of home as the promoter of social power,³⁵⁵ without which her chances of marriage are critically reduced. The end of Lily’s journey with no home parallels the end of old marriage in that home was its epitome. Yet, through Lily’s death, Wharton, in my view, is alluding to the spiritual sense of home. I support this idea by the fact that she deliberately overlooked the physical side of the building, not appreciated by Lily’s visitors, in favour of its spiritual dimension. Hence, in an illustrative manner, Lily ends up in a plainly furnished rented room. Wharton, who believed “that interior decoration should be simple and architectural,”³⁵⁶ seems to have chosen Lily’s room in this pattern to associate home with a specific purpose. According to Sean Scanlan’s description of the final scene, Lily discovers the real meaning of home with which she identifies herself:

In the final scene, and in her final boarding house home, Lily has an epiphany of the meaning of home and family just before she overdoses on chloral hydrate. Each of these homes situates Lily’s increasingly complex nostalgic homesickness, a feeling that leads to both the undermining and the (temporary) stabilization of identity.³⁵⁷

Lily’s strive and clinging to the spiritual quest as she ends her days in a modest room “spoke to a desire to live in a simpler moral universe.”³⁵⁸ Moreover, it demonstrates her longing for tradition and individual talent as constituents of Old America’s way of life. To some extent, this is a reminder of the original thirteen colonies as they fought hard to thrive. Thus, Lily seems to be committed to Tocqueville’s preaching to safeguard “the habits of unremitting toil, prudence, and self-restraint.”³⁵⁹

³⁵⁴ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 4.

³⁵⁵ See my discussion of the interplay of social power and marriage in page 34.

³⁵⁶ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 107.

³⁵⁷ Scanlan, “Going No Place?: Foreground Nostalgia and Psychological Spaces in Wharton’s the House of Mirth,” 208.

³⁵⁸ Gregg Camfield, “The Sentimental and Domestic Traditions, 1865–1900,” in *A Companion to American Fiction 1865–1914*, ed. Robert Paul Lamb and G. R. Thompson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005), 67.

³⁵⁹ Zacharias, 66.

In addition to that, Lily embodies a wish for social relations and architectural structures that were as simple as they were during good old days. In journeying towards the spiritual happiness, she manifests her yearning for a past void of corruption. She escapes her reality to a place that exists only in her imagination in the image of herself holding Nettie Struther's baby in her arms. That is, Lily finally asserts her nostalgia for the dying America. In this context, Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia as follows:

The word "nostalgia" comes from two Greek roots, *nostos* meaning "return home" and *algia* "longing." I would define it as a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy.³⁶⁰

Nostalgic love, therefore, can only survive in a relation that exhibits layers of impossibility like the one that joins Lily and Selden. In continuation of Boym's argument on nostalgia, Lily undertakes a doomed attempt to superimpose images "of home and abroad, of past and present, of dream and everyday life."³⁶¹ Nostalgia, moreover, represents the impossibility of a realistic reconciliation, that is, finding a home that she can actually own. Perhaps in this way, Lily becomes more universal, representing humans' wish for a home which is, in particular, created in the bonds of marriage. Going back to memories, "reconstructing the past out of which her present had grown,"³⁶² however, reflects the fall of marriage in Lily's world. As she rests alone the day she dies, her final thoughts of giving up the pursuit of happiness underline the problem of marriage. In a way, Lily is trying to find eternal peace only in her death, an idea Wharton had already expressed in "The Last Asset" (1904). In this illustrative short story, like Lily Bart and by extension Old America,

[t]he old gentleman made a contemptuous motion. "Possibilities of what? Of being multifariously miserable? There are lots of ways of being miserable, but there's only one way of being comfortable, and that is to stop running round after happiness. If you make up your mind not to be happy there's no reason why you shouldn't have a fairly good time."³⁶³

1.10. Conclusion

³⁶⁰ Svetlana Boym, "Nostalgia and Its Discontents," *Hedgehog Review* 9, no. 2 (2007): 7. URL: http://www.iasc-culture.org/eNews/2007_10/9.2CBoym.pdf.

³⁶¹ Ibid.

³⁶² Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 31.

³⁶³ Edith Wharton, "The Last Asset." 1904. URL: <http://www.online-literature.com/wharton/2928/>.

In *The House of Mirth*, Edith Wharton highlights the values of old marriage in her endeavour to reflect an old America on the brink of a new age. To use her own words, by “debasing people and ideals,”³⁶⁴ she masterfully extricated the essence of a dying America and preserved it, if not in reality, on the pages of her novels which enabled this research to find grounds. As the title of this chapter suggests, the primal concern which is the collapse of traditional marriage proves to be rendered through Wharton’s portrayal of the death of old America which is by definition an account for the death of tradition and the shift in cultural mores and ethical values.

In her portrayal of what I termed old marriage, Wharton praises the sanctity of the institution, as an incubator of human love and devoted caring, tracing back to the Puritan roots of the American nation. She, therefore, shows a deep concern with the human response to adjustments in “perception and vision,”³⁶⁵ to use Jill Sneider’s words. That is to say, how characters and their relationships, in the image of marriage, change when new circumstances alter the way they see each other and, more importantly, themselves.

On one level, the novel portrays the conflict between ‘old money’ and ‘new money.’ While this is important to my study of marriage, another level serves as the focal of point of my investigation by highlighting much of the characteristic features of individuals and their interpersonal relationships, including marriage. These features and qualities operate and manifest themselves within and beyond one’s own social circle or what Pierre Bourdieu terms as the ‘field.’ In the process, the role money plays in stimulating and then defining the workings of marriage is highlighted. Thus, in this chapter, I attempted to focus on the main character’s own qualities, motives, dreams, and conflicts which inevitably constructed her perceptions of marriage as a crucial relationship between one and the other. For this, marriage proves to be a very interesting field of study in that the concept of definition itself is relational. In addition to that, my research evoked that in defining her marriage, her values served to define herself. For this, marriage proves to be very important in that one looks at his partner as a mirror that reflects not his appearance but his essence.

³⁶⁴ *A Backward Glance*, 207 in Cahir, 44.

³⁶⁵ Actually, “vision and perception” was coined by Jill Sneider and it figures in the title of her work. Jill Sneider, “Edith Wharton: Vision and Perception in Her Short Stories” (Doctoral Dissertation, Washington University in St. Louis, 2012).

To recapitulate, I would put it this way: out of necessity, namely in terms of money, social stability, and need for security, Lily Bart considers marriage. Her undertaking, however, rests on a very defining idea: she is not to marry for money, but money would enable her to marry and achieve the fulfilment of her needs. Above all, her innate yearning for freedom as a core ideal of Old America leads her to set out in a quest for liberty and independence, which renders her decision on marriage even a more difficult task for freedom and union are extremely contradictory.

As a hard headed character negotiating the meanings and purposes of marriage, Lily has enabled us to enrich our view on the workings of such an institution at the time, namely as received by typical American individuals. However, as a narcissistic American character, she finds uneasiness to fulfil her vanity in marriage in that no man's affection would meet her idealistic vision of love, which, in her view, revolves around companionship, confidence, reciprocal respect, and spiritual bases. While Selden appears to be her best suitor, she avoids marriage with him simply because, in my view, sometimes the best choice is not necessarily a good choice. That is, even though Selden was initially presented as a refined character, modernity has actually rendered him a corrupted person unworthy of being Lily's husband. However, it is worth noting that Selden's deficiencies are not the only reason behind the failure of their relationship. In many ways, Selden's presence serves to highlight Lily's failure to come to terms with a decision on marriage. In remaining undecided, she stresses the dichotomies of survival versus progress and physical defeat, or perhaps I shall reduce it to say physical loss, versus moral triumph. The latter is portrayed by the attainment of the "real" Lily, to use Wharton's words. Such a triumph, can never be achieved while she remains within the confines of "the house of mirth," a place marred with the corruption and distortion brought about by modernity. As such, Wharton takes her beloved Lily to the safe grounds of old America in a dream that involves a good marriage built on spontaneous, pure, innocent, and organic love.

The simple, spontaneous, and healthy love, Wharton tells us, is to find place in the fertile marriage of Nettie Struther. In portraying Nettie's happiness and self-fulfilment, Wharton demonstrates that a good marriage could exist only in the bonds of love, faith, and mutual respect. Nettie's child, and her name alluding to Lily, represents the fertility of such a marriage, the fresh start, and the spiritual renewal America needs.

The little Lily, if I may say, is to reincarnate the triumphant found Lily. As such, in what is known as “Roosevelt’s Famous Race Suicide Letter,” (1902) Theodore Roosevelt emphasised the nation’s need for children to secure its future:

The man or woman who deliberately avoids marriage, and has a heart so cold as to dislike children, is in effect a criminal against the race [...] if the women do not recognize that the greatest thing for any woman is to be a good wife and mother, why, that nation has cause to be alarmed about its future.³⁶⁶

In the case of Lily, her avoidance of marriage is not about the coldness of heart, but is Wharton’s way to associate her with old America. Thus, in my view, she is deprived of a child to remain connected only with the past. Other characters, however, will have ties to the future in the image of *The Custom of the Country*’s Undine Spragg. Despite Roosevelt’s calls upon the nation, new ethos took hold of society as America crossed into a new age. Part of this change is a “divorce culture” that has resulted in the neglect of the very children who symbolise a bridge into the future. In the following chapter, my endeavour will be, therefore, an attempt to extricate the way marriage reflected such a change in *The Custom of the Country*. Such a milestone novel, in a subtle manner, illustrates the gap that separated old and emerging modern America.

³⁶⁶ Theodore Roosevelt, “Theodore Roosevelt’s 1902 Letter on “Race Suicide” to Marie Van Horst”
URL:<http://progressingamerica.blogspot.com/2013/06/theodore-roosevelts-1902-letter-on-race.html>.

CHAPTER II:***The Custom of the Country*: A divorce culture**

“[...] why does the obsolete institution of marriage survive with you?”

“Oh, it still has its uses, one couldn’t be divorced without it.”

—Edith Wharton,
The Custom of the Country (1913), 161

2.1. Introduction

As its title invokes, *The Custom of the Country* (1913) reveals much about the social customs in early twentieth-century America. In taking the risks of exploring new realities in the making, Wharton “emerged glorious with [her] satirical insights correct in overall”¹ as an astute social observer. The novel illustrates her particular interest in marriage as a mirror of social change. It highlights much of the attitudes towards marriage and divorce as America embraced the “consumerist culture,”² or what Pope Francis calls “throwaway culture,”³ which advocated “abundancy.” Ironically, the phenomenon which was created by human beings to better their lives and uplift them spiritually ended up in reducing them to the level of the things they produced in the first place. What I want to say here is that while abundancy raised prospects of a good life, or what Americans of today call “greed is good,”⁴ it did not go without critical shortcomings as Betoul Ahmed Djendia argues:

Consuming benefits goes inevitably by leaving residues, which are the shortcomings of such a process. When abundancy reaches high levels, it would be an affirmation for the tremendous piling of shortcomings. It is this piling that hinders the progress of the civilisation’s stream, which turns against itself to flood everything and usher in the nation’s voluntary and unconscious collective suicide.⁵

The spread of these consumerist attitudes, which were then by definition new and not tested, throughout society definitely endangered tradition. Taking into consideration that the building blocks of society are the two primal institutions of marriage and family, it could be said that such emerging culture rendered these

¹ “فقد نال [ابن خلدون] بأفكاره الجمة الطرافة، الصحيحة في معظمها عن المجتمع، مجدا”. Hussein, 29. My translation. In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton asserts that not just her but all the family enjoyed a sense of humour: “Luckily we all had a lively sense of humour, and now that my brothers were at home again the house rang with laughter.” Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 50.

² According to Wikipedia.org, consumerism is a “social and economic order and ideology that encourages the acquisition of goods and services in ever-greater amounts.” “Consumerism”. URL: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consumerism>

³ Frankovich.

⁴ Veblen, vii.

⁵ “إن المنافع، كما في الكائن الحي تماما، تترك خلفها فضلات، هي سلبياتها، وعندما يبلغ دور الوفرة ذروته يكون ذلك إعلانا بأن فائضا هائلا من السلبيات تراكم، وسيكفي هذا التراكم لعرقلة تيار الحضارة، وردم مجراه، ليرتد على نفسه فيضانا يغمر كل شيء، ومؤذنا بدخول الأمة في حالة انتحار جماعي إرادي وغير واع”. Betoul Ahmed Djendia, *At the Thresholds of Civilisation: A Research on the Traditions and Factors of Morality and Decline* (Halab, Syria: Dar El-Moltaka, 2011), 60. My translation.

cherished social institutions as mere means of “consumption” and “display,”⁶ or what Veblen calls “the conspicuous consumption.”⁷ In other words, marriage, in particular, as a relationship reflected the way people have come to perceive one another and, in their confusion, reached a point in which they felt the need to legitimate their presence in a new world.

In this chapter, I will particularly study the central character of the novel, Undine Spragg, as an epitome of social change through her attitudes towards marriage. In doing so, I pave the way for the examination of what could, in my view, be termed “new marriage,” one that entails the decline of old ethos as explicated in the previous chapter. Because I hold, as Wharton did, that an individual is, first and foremost, a human being, my study of his or her perceptions and reactions within the marital confines and beyond it, reinforced by highlights on characteristic features of different types of characters, serves to mirror different postures *vis-à-vis* marriage. Thus, this endeavour tries to capture the transitional nature of the period in the best possible manner. More importantly, my inclination rests upon a primordial principle advanced by the discipline of Psychology. That is, anyone’s behaviour points out his or her inner world and *vice versa*. For this, marriage proves to be very defining in terms of one’s perception of himself.

As Psychology also tells us, one who is not endowed with particular intrinsic qualities develops a kind of complex. In the *Custom of the Country*, one of the catching to the eye phenomena is the *nouveaux-riches*’ complex of cultural inferiority. For this, to compensate for their lack of inherent values, modern individuals, who are confusing things around them, have become lost in their definition of happiness in terms of a drive for fast acquired money. As a result, Undine Spragg and her ultimate husband Elmer Moffatt, who are by definition dissociated from the old definition of the American, are consumed by the search for the lost authenticity. As they advance socially, they try in vain to acquire “cultural capital,” to use Bourdieu’s words. On the other hand, Ralph

⁶ See pages 112, 115, 118.

⁷ Thorstein Veblen introduced his concept of “conspicuous consumption” in his book *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). In sum, as he assesses the development of what he calls the “leisure class,” he describes the way people come to display their social status by showing, in an excessive manner, what they are consuming. To borrow his words, “Conspicuous consumption of valuable goods is a means of reputability to the gentleman of leisure.” Veblen, 53.

Marvell typifies those who “define themselves by the past,”⁸ which Undine gives up symbolically through divorce. Hence, my last point to expand on will be an account for divorce as a disruption of the past, with marriage breaking as individuals have become valued materially rather than respected morally.

2.2. Undine Spragg, or the embodiment of social change

What is interesting about America is its perpetual pursuit of self-definition or redefinition since its creation. Perhaps, the greatness of such a country stems from its non-conformist tendency even at the price of losing ties with history. While a superficial look into the American experience would qualify such a break with history as a failure and diminishment of the American nation, Ralph Waldo Emerson answers such a claim with a clear and determined clarity: “Our strength grows out of our weakness. The indignation which arms itself with secret forces does not awaken until we are pricked and stung and sorely assailed. A great man is always willing to be little.”⁹

While I find much of the criticism oriented against Undine Spragg as an extremely self-centred character, I look at her as another victim of civilisation. Surely, she is different from Lily Bart, but perhaps someone should be associated with the other side of technological advance that was and still taking place in America. In my view, Wharton sacrificed one of her characters for the sake of revealing the underpinnings of her society at one of the most defining moments in American history. Thus, through the latter’s practices in terms of marriage, Wharton captured in more depth the distorting effects of Modernity that I initiated my account for in the previous chapter. In a Whartonian tradition, I will also continue my implicit discussion of the underlying change in the remainder of this dissertation.

When accounting for this crucial period in American history as I mentioned in my general introduction,¹⁰ change proves to be the very defining characteristic. It is worth noting, as Malek Bennabi viewed it, that Society cannot be regarded as such if not influenced by the factor of time.¹¹ In his discussion of the birth of different types of societies, he defined America as a “historical society”. That is, in his view, since its

⁸ Freeman, 53-54.

⁹ Emerson, 64.

¹⁰ See my General Introduction, 1-4.

¹¹ See Malek Bennabi’s definition of society Ibid., 2.

beginning, or genesis, the American society progressed by following a clear defined pattern of adaptation to the changing circumstances. For this, Undine is America. Because America, as a new nation, was still defining itself, “the American novelist had to depend on his or her own devices. America was, in part, an undefined, constantly moving frontier populated by immigrants speaking foreign languages and following strange and crude ways of life.”¹² On the formation of America, Malek Bennabi writes:

The American society is ascribed to the first category, that is, the historical society whose birth is a response to an inevitable choice imposed by natural circumstances peculiar to the environment in which it finds grounds. In particular, the American society is the fruit of waves of immigration from Europe which had to adapt to the natural circumstances of the new continent.¹³

With reference to the evidences provided by history in different contexts which are supported by Frantz Fanon’s statement that “the revolution in depth, the true one, precisely because it changes man and renews society,”¹⁴ I would confidently argue that change in societies is often associated with revolutions, one of which is the process of industrialization that started earlier in Europe but reached its apex in America only by the midst of the nineteenth century. While this revolution was fundamentally economic, the repercussions of which reached far beyond to define the social life, political scene, and more importantly Culture. And by evoking culture, the primal concern of literature reveals itself to dive into the way the prevailing culture forged the individual’s inside world, or the self. For this, Wharton sets in a perpetual endeavour to extricate the essence of her characters, be they appear to be appealing to sympathy or not. With this in mind, I will rely on Nicholas Timasheff’s argument about the manner the new culture resulted in the new American’s eagerness to seek social mobility which he illustratively refers to as “vertical social mobility:”

One of the most conspicuous aspects of a great revolution is an increase both in intensity and in velocity of vertical social mobility.’ Persons who were omnipotent ministers of a monarch suddenly find themselves in jail, and

¹² Kathryn VanSpanckeren and United States Information Agency, *Outline of American Literature*, Revised Edition ed. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Information Agency, 1994), 36.

¹³ “وينتمي المجتمع الأمريكي إلى النوع الأول (المجتمع التاريخي الذي يولد، فيكون ميلاده إجابة عن اختيار مفروض تفرضه الظروف الطبيعية الجديدة.” Bennabi, *The Birth of Society*, 9. My translation.

¹⁴ Fanon, 13.

former convicts ascend to the summits of political power. Persons and families who have enjoyed high income become paupers or penniless exiles.¹⁵

I will, in turn, rely on Timasheff's theory to argue that Wharton makes it clear that Undine's family move to New York in the pursuit of such a social mobility. While they used to live in the Western town of Apex, they have eventually managed to make it into New York. In other words, their social ambition and its growth is alluded to through the change in location and size from Apex town to New York City. That is to say, whereas the former is a small town, the latter is a big city. In many ways, the first epitomises the agrarian America of the Midwest, while the second stands for the industrial America of the East coast. An analogy could be established here with later Fitzgerald's locations of West Egg and East Egg in *The Great Gatsby* (1925). However, perhaps because of the power of time to inflict change Gatsby's depiction of the West and East embodies different conceptualisation with respect to the manners of those who live in each part. To mention a few, Gatsby's East is a place of corruption whereas Wharton's is one of affection. Moreover, Gatsby's West rests on benevolent purity and innocence in contrast to Wharton's West in which Undine's father lays the plans of conspiracy that intertwine business and family life in different instances. However, like Gatsby, the Spraggs' social ambition and its "vertical direction" is overtly illustrated in the following passage:

They had lived in New York for two years without any social benefit to their daughter; and it was of course for that purpose that they had come. If, at the time, there had been other and more pressing reasons, they were such as Mrs. Spragg and her husband never touched on, even in the gilded privacy of their bedroom at the Stentorian; and so completely had silence closed in on the subject that to Mrs. Spragg it had become non-existent: she really believed that, as Abner put it, they had left Apex because Undine was too big for the place.¹⁶

The Stentorian is actually Wharton's way to allude to the new social standing the Spraggs are aiming at. Actually, newly rich people often meet at hotels and exhibit what they conceive as wealth and privilege to earn what Wharton calls the "gaze of

¹⁵ Nicholas Sergeyevitch Timasheff, "Vertical Social Mobility in Communist Society," *American Journal of Sociology* 50, no. 1 (1944): 9.

¹⁶ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 8.

admiration.”¹⁷ In this context, Pierre Bourdieu explains the behaviour of the like people in terms of display that seeks acceptance and legitimacy in society. That is, “in order to impose a self-representation normally associated with a higher condition and to win for it the acceptance and recognition which make it a legitimate, objective representation.”¹⁸ For this, Wharton makes it clear that the family is in a status of transition towards recognition. For this, she portrayed them against a backdrop set by a temporary house whose attributes are inevitably reflected on its guests. Temporariness in hotels alludes to the passivity of its guests in that usually they tend to be idle and waiting for time to pass until they decide for a new destination which perhaps is just another hotel.¹⁹ Moreover, in remaining idle in the hotel with no real occupation, the guests ascribe themselves to what Thorstein Veblen defines as the leisure class. For instance, he argues that the function of the wife is to show that she is doing something only to evade real work that is useful to herself and to society. To quote him:

The leisure rendered by the wife in such cases is, of course, not a simple manifestation of idleness or indolence. It almost invariably occurs disguised under some form of work or household duties or social amenities, which prove on analysis to serve little or no ulterior end beyond showing that she does not and need not occupy herself with anything that is gainful or that is of substantial use.²⁰

Moreover, the hotel is in itself a means of making acquaintance with people who come from different regions without having to feel that complex of cultural inferiority. I would say this because no one is to notice the non-conform behaviour, or misconduct, of the other simply because everyone is just another stranger. Perhaps, the thing that provides a counter balance to this cultural deficiency is money. The latter in this instance, is regarded in a completely different manner from that of Lily Bart’s which I accounted for in the previous chapter. In my view, money here is, first and foremost, a symbol of excess and source of devilish intent. In this context, in his indictment of “savage capitalism,” Pope Francis views that “money is the devil’s dung.”²¹ As I

¹⁷ Ibid., 29.

¹⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), 255.

¹⁹ On the passivity of the dwellers of big buildings in the city, see Ibn Khaldun’s notion in Chapter 1, 81.

²⁰ Veblen, 57.

²¹ Frankovich.

mentioned before, money is a symbol before being anything else. Therefore, I suggest that it is Wharton's way to allude to the fact that consumerism as an ideology serves first and foremost to create a kind of conception of realities, and marriage of course is no exception. To return to my idea on display as a means to create these conceptions, the setting in the image of the hotel embodies much of the consumerist culture of public display. That is, as Amy Kaplan argues, "these monuments served the double purpose of a meeting ground and competitive arena for the expanding elite and an advertisement purveying their luxury and power to the masses."²²

Along Timasheff's theory, the Spraggs are ascending to the summit of Society, while old New Yorkers are descending. I would deem it illustrative to draw a parallel between the social movement of Undine's family and that accounted for by Timasheff. In fact, the portraits on the hotel's wall seem to allude to the vanishing monarchies.²³ In saying that, the idea of the end of an era, that is, Old America, invokes itself as a repercussion of the different forms of revolutions taking parts in the world. Taking into consideration that America, which we often perceive as a country that is separated from the old world's bloody revolutions in the image of that of France, has always been the cradle of revolutions that touch upon the spirit of the nation and agitate individual thinking, its ties with the old world are undeniably perceivable. Hence, in my view, the industrialisation that began in Europe transformed itself into a multifaceted revolution that found strength and maturity in America. Since this revolution is the product of human beings, it cannot be perfect. For this, a debate arises over its consequences in terms of disruption or continuity. While some thinkers were optimistic, others took pessimistic postures. One of the representatives of the latter group is René Guénon who viewed that modernity, which is the result of industrialism, "was as if an organism with its head cut off were to go on living a life which was both intense and disordered."²⁴ In a reminder of the reasons behind the failure of Selden's Republic, modernity is defined through its contradictions. In this context, Alain Touraine argues that:

²² Amy Kaplan, "Crowded Spaces in the House of Mirth," in *Edith Wharton's the House of Mirth: A Casebook*, ed. Carol J. Singley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 91.

²³ On Marie Antoinette, see footnote in Chapter 1, 91.

²⁴ René Guénon and John Herlihy, *The Essential René Guénon: Metaphysics, Tradition, and the Crisis of Modernity* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom, 2009), xviii.

Modernity is no longer a form of social life, but pair of opposed and complementary forces that give a society total control over itself: everything here is creation, action, work, on the one hand, and, on the other, unlimited freedom and rejection of any 'moralization' of public life that would restrict the actor's freedom.²⁵

In my view, this chaos that is associated with modernity has inflicted drastic changes in American culture and thinking. As such, an ironic twist of historical events reversed much of the earlier rebellious spiritual nature of Americans, a fact that made Wharton demonstrate a deep concern over the loss of cultural heritage. Her way to express this kind of anxiety followed in pattern Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle's" account for change in American attitudes and thinking, namely as she depicted the hotel in the following passage:

Mrs. Spragg and her visitor were enthroned in two heavy gilt armchairs in one of the private drawing-rooms of the Hotel Stentorian. The Spragg rooms were known as one of the Looey suites, and the drawingroom walls, above their wainscoting of highly-varnished mahogany, were hung with salmon-pink damask and adorned with oval portraits of Marie Antoinette and the Princess de Lamballe.²⁶

In contrast to Lily Bart who had a genuine sense of rebellion and created or produced a revolution,²⁷ Undine operates in the aftermath of a similar event. She, therefore, personifies the *nouveaux-riches*' tendency to take advantage of opportunities and endeavour to advance for better social positions. To the Spraggs, the means to accomplish this undertaking is their pursuit of the opportunities of marriage for their daughter. The latter, therefore, in an emphatic manner, "capitalizes on a series of advantageous marriages and timely divorces, ostensibly improving her social position with each calculated move."²⁸ As such, each marriage grants Undine and, by extension, her family a new status in Society. As the following passage illustrates, in another determining contrast with Lily Bart, Undine is well aware of the importance of class belonging in defining and, I can add, facilitating one's choice in marriage.

²⁵ Alain Touraine, *A New Paradigm for Understanding Today's World* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 73.

²⁶ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 3.

²⁷ See my discussion of Lily Bart's sense of rebellion as she defies Lawrence Selden's authority in his republic in Chapter 1, 65.

²⁸ Debra Ann MacComb, "New Wives for Old: Divorce and the Leisure-Class Marriage Market in Edith Wharton's *the Custom of the Country*," *American Literature* 68, no. 4 (1996): 765.

“Why, do you know the Marvells? Are THEY stylish?” she asked. Mrs. Heeny gave the discouraged gesture of a pedagogue who has vainly striven to implant the rudiments of knowledge in a rebellious mind.

“Why, Undine Spragg, I’ve told you all about them time and again! His mother was a Dagonet. They live with old Urban Dagonet down in Washington Square.”

To Mrs. Spragg this conveyed even less than to her daughter, ““way down there? Why do they live with somebody else? Haven’t they got the means to have a home of their own?”

Undine’s perceptions were more rapid, and she fixed her eyes searchingly on Mrs. Heeny.

“Do you mean to say Mr. Marvell’s as swell as Mr. Popple?”

“As swell? Why, Claud Walsingham Popple ain’t in the same class with him!”²⁹

While in periods of social stability “homogamy,” that is, “marriage between individuals with similar characteristics, is the dominant pattern...on marriage choice,”³⁰ in periods of change, eagerness for social position makes individuals like Undine do just the opposite. That is, they look for partners, whose qualities belong to a different class identified as a target social class. In Undine’s case, it is the established society or what could be referred to as the old class which is emphatically epitomised by Ralph Marvell. For one thing, Wharton states this intention overtly: “and Fifth Avenue was where she wanted to be!”³¹

Taking into consideration that the Fifth Avenue meant a specific class in American social fabric at the time, that is, old money, one could see what Undine is aiming at. Yet knowing also that she is coming from the West, two modes of life would inevitably clash. This is certainly a confirmation of Karl Marx’s theory on the development of history. So, here the class struggle is mirrored through individuals and the means by which Wharton could exemplify the inter-class clash is marriage.

In another accordance to Marx’s theory, individuals are shaped by the “economic order,” which would determine one’s choice in marriage. In this specific point, Weber agrees with Marx in defining social status based on what he terms as “economic production.” That is, Weber “conceives of ‘class’ in a somewhat Marxian

²⁹ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 5.

³⁰ Robert Schoen, John Wooldredge, and Barbara Thomas, “Ethnic and Educational Effects on Marriage Choice,” *Social Science Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (1989): 617.

³¹ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 12.

sense of an economic interest group and as a function of the ‘markets’—not as a social-status group.”³² With Weber’s views in mind, it could be inferred that Undine makes use of marriage to ascribe herself to a new economic group by giving up the previous one. As such, the repercussions of this idea find space in the following passage in which she demonstrates her contempt for a house that she perceives now as “shabby.” More importantly, the scene demonstrates the change in taste that exemplifies the demise of agrarian values under the impact of industrialism:

Though she would not for the world have owned it to her parents, Undine was disappointed in the Fairford dinner.

The house, to begin with, was small and rather shabby. There was no gilding, no lavish diffusion of light: the room they sat in after dinner, with its green-shaded lamps making faint pools of brightness, and its rows of books from floor to ceiling, reminded Undine of the old circulating library at Apex, before the new marble building was put up. Then, instead of a gas-log, or a polished grate with electric bulbs behind ruby glass, there was an old-fashioned wood-fire, like pictures of “Back to the farm for Christmas”³³

In raising awareness on class, social change clearly manifests itself in *The Custom of the Country*. Wharton is, therefore, engaged in this endeavour by “explaining the role of classes in the historical development of society.”³⁴ In particular, the novel accounts faithfully for the massive change in American society as well as culture in the Gilded Age. That is, as Richard Thorman put it, such a period “marked the beginning of great changes in the United States. The country that had been mostly agricultural was becoming industrial. As a consequence, businessmen and workers increasingly were gaining political and economic power.”³⁵

Undine, hence, belongs to a new generation, whose “desire for consumer goods is mediated by a capitalist, commodity culture and consequently their passion is directed primarily toward what is in fashion.”³⁶ She has, therefore, learned how to adjust psychologically into a new world defined by the consumerist culture. The latter is

³² Oliver C. Cox, “Max Weber on Social Stratification: A Critique,” *American Sociological Review* 15, no. 2 (1950): 223.

³³ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 20.

³⁴ Rune Aberg, “Social Mobility and Class Structuration,” *Acta Sociologica* 22, no. 3 (1979): 247.

³⁵ Richard Thorman, “Edith Wharton, 1862-1937: She Wrote About the Young and Innocent in a Dishonest World”, VOA News URL:<http://learningenglish.voanews.com/content/edith-wharton-1862-1937-she-wrote-about-the-young-and-innocent-in-a-dishonest-world-105595488/116514.html> (2014).

³⁶ Ariel Balter, “What Does ***** Want? Desire and Consumerism in Edith Wharton’s “the Custom of the Country”,” *American Literary Realism, 1870-1910* 27, no. 3 (1995): 20.

associated with the rising economic order, that is, the “consumer capitalism, [which,] promoted psychic adjustments, cults of individual vitalism, and a privatized spirituality that helped to refashion modern citizens for new forms of bureaucratic authority.”³⁷ In particular, women, who had been alienated for so long, were starting to develop new conceptions of themselves and, hence, embracing a new lifestyle that is associated with the modern world. As Amanda Gradisek put it, “women’s participation in fashions and therefore consumer culture allowed a participation in modernity.”³⁸

Undine, however, represents an extreme version of women who departed from tradition. She moves swiftly from alienation to the centre of social activity with no prudence at all. Thus, as if she is taking part in a spectacle, she distances herself from people around her, that is, she makes of herself the actor and of people the audience. Whereas, like on a stage, she becomes close physically, she sets herself aloof intellectually making herself what Emerson calls “an exclusionist” on whom he said: “the exclusive in fashionable life does not see that he excludes himself from enjoyment, in the attempt to appropriate it.”³⁹ This could be relevant to Undine because of the superficiality she manifests in her social encounters, an attitude that makes her avoid knowing people deeply or exchanging meaningful conversations with them. That is to say, as Jean Boudrillard viewed it, she is not really interested in “looking at things, deconstructing them and learning.”⁴⁰ With no capacity of deep thinking, Undine is, in accordance to Kantian classification, immature in thinking.⁴¹

In this context, Undine is, as Simone de Beauvoir observed, the epitome of women who contented themselves with passivity. Accordingly, Undine or “the woman who is deprived of doing anything feels that she expresses what she is. To care for her beauty, to dress up, is a kind of work that enables her to take possession of her person.”⁴² More importantly, such behaviour points out the fact that she has no vision of the future and no purpose in the present. As Kant viewed it, “a beautiful object satisfies our

³⁷ Nancy Bentley, *The Ethnography of Manners: Hawthorne, James, Wharton* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 58.

³⁸ Amanda R Gradisek, “Passing Figures: Fashion and the Formation of Modernist Identity in the American Novel.” (Doctoral Dissertation, ProQuest Publishing, 2011), 114.

³⁹ Emerson, 61.

⁴⁰ “فالنظر إلى الأمور وتفكيكها وتعلمها لا يؤثر فيهم”. Boudrillard, 135. My translation.

⁴¹ On Kant’s view on immaturity, see page 154.

⁴² Beauvoir, 505.

subjective purpose in cognition without serving any other, more concrete purpose.”⁴³ Thus, as beauty-minded character, Undine endeavours to put the most fashionable clothes only to satisfy her vanity and to earn the admiration she longs for as the following passage suggests:

The thought reanimated her, and she put on her handsomest furs, and a hat for which she had not yet dared present the bill to her father. It was the fashionable hour in Fifth Avenue, but Undine knew none of the ladies who were bowing to each other from interlocked motors. She had to content herself with the gaze of admiration which she left in her wake along the pavement; but she was used to the homage of the streets and her vanity craved a choicer fare.⁴⁴

I, therefore, attribute Wharton’s choice of Undine as her protagonist to this very fact. That is, the choice of Undine is a way to draw a parallel between her femininity and fashion and certainly this is one of the tenets of consumerism. In other words, “the importance attached to dress and ornament as a way of female self-display at dances and other social occasions in order to find a desirable partner is skilfully demonstrated.”⁴⁵ However, it should be noticed that this view was held by society as a manifestation of constructs that developed through time, namely in terms of gender. That is why the feminist tenet rests on the subversion of these stereotypes which were self-contradictory and, more importantly, served to limit women’s self-perception and prevented their aspiration for self-discovery and self-esteem. Again, I would say that here Undine is separating herself from Lily who ended her journey with a complete awakening and true sight into her own self.

My argument on Wharton’s choice of a female character to epitomise social change is further supported by Frances Harper’s assertion that America at the turn of the century was “on the threshold of woman’s era.”⁴⁶ Based on these arguments on cultural shift, it could be said that Undine Spragg embodies much of the “image culture,” which is “a socio-cultural state in which media images and media-influenced commodity-signs

⁴³ Guyer and Wood, xxix.

⁴⁴ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 29.

⁴⁵ Srijani Ghosh, “From Chantilly Lace to Chanel: Commodity Worship in Chick Lit” (Doctoral Dissertation, Michigan State University, 2013), 108.

⁴⁶ Peter Stoneley and Cindy Weinstein, *A Concise Companion to American Fiction 1900-1950* (Blackwell Publishin, Ltd., 2007), 37.

are to an increasing extent used as sources for, and expressions of, cultural identity.”⁴⁷ Therefore, it could be argued that through Undine’s lens, Wharton’s fascination with the visual is displayed.⁴⁸ In many ways, Undine is aware that she is observed “like an item on display behind a show window.”⁴⁹ This idea is further confirmed in one illustrative scene in which “Mrs. Shallum grated on [Ralph’s] taste, but she was as open to inspection as a shop-window, and he was sure that time would teach his wife the cheapness of what she had to show.”⁵⁰

Undine ascribes herself to consumerism without any reservation. For one thing, she belongs to a *nouveau-riche* family that is run like a corporation. As a “corporate family,”⁵¹ Undine’s relatives enjoy the pleasures of consumerism, which is the “social and economic order and ideology that encourages the acquisition of goods and services in ever-greater amounts.”⁵² As such, like her mother whose “fancy was already afloat on a sea of luxuries—a motor, a Fifth Avenue house, and a tiara that should outblaze Mrs. Van Degen’s,”⁵³ she manifests eagerness to acquire new items, clothes, attend the opera, and even travel abroad. Noting that much of these activities involve the endeavour to capture the other’s impression, the Spraggs do not seek personal satisfaction, but rather “social prestige.”⁵⁴ Such a behaviour is manifestly illustrated by the following passage:

Slender and shadowy in her long furs, she bent to kiss Mrs. Fairford and then turned back to Ralph. “Yes, I knew I’d catch you here. I knew it was the boy’s birthday, and I’ve brought him a present: a vulgar expensive Van Degen offering. I’ve not enough imagination left to find the right thing, the thing it takes feeling and not money to buy. When I look for a present nowadays I never say to the shopman: ‘I want this or that’—I simply say: ‘Give me something that costs so much.’”⁵⁵

⁴⁷ André Jansson, “The Mediatization of Consumption: Towards an Analytical Framework of Image Culture,” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 2, no. 1 (2002). URL: <http://joc.sagepub.com/content/2/1/5.abstract>.

⁴⁸ Barbel Tischleder, “The Deep Surface of Lily Bart: Visual Economies and Commodity Culture in Wharton and Dreiser,” *American Studies* 54, no. 1 (2009): 59.

⁴⁹ Amrane, 321.

⁵⁰ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 92.

⁵¹ Amrane, 318.

⁵² “Consumerism”. URL: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consumerism>.

⁵³ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 73.

⁵⁴ Amrane, 318-319.

⁵⁵ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 122.

In her way to acquire “social prestige,” Undine as a “self-centred” and narcissistic woman is encouraged by her family to be independent and “self-willed.” Moreover, she does not allow herself to abide by any “rigid” rules that maintain the bonds of marriage.⁵⁶ What matters for her is the comfort she finds as she sets herself aloof from her surroundings free from any responsibilities towards her family or society at large, as the following passage suggests:

But it came always from her medical adviser: she herself had grown strangely passive and indifferent. She continued to remain upstairs on her lounge, seeing no one but Mrs. Heeny, whose daily ministrations had once more been prescribed, and asking only that the noise of Paul’s play should be kept from her.⁵⁷

Undine, therefore, is to set herself free from any marriage that would endanger her aspirations for self-realisation, which are “the corporate ethos.”⁵⁸ Her inclination to maintain herself free relies on the impact of the consumerist culture in terms of divorce, implying the idea of separation with the past.⁵⁹ As divorce has become increasingly embraced and accepted, it developed into a culture of its own, with marriage transformed into a means of consumption in terms of human relationships. In other words, as Joseph McCarroll put it, “the attitude of consumerism has been transferred to the marriage relationship: if I am not getting satisfaction from this marriage, and this spouse, then I will dispose of her/him and get another.”⁶⁰

In marrying and remarrying, Undine further distances herself from tradition by giving up one of the core values related to previous forms of marriage, that is, the fulfilment of motherhood. While Lily Bart contemplated thoroughly before taking any decision about her life at fears of the reactions of her society, Undine finds it very easy to take swift decisions with no need to reflect over the consequences. Moreover, she is helped by her intrinsic construction based on “an inner core and an outer façade,”⁶¹ a fact that explains how she is easily moulded according to the circumstances. That is to

⁵⁶ Amrane, 334.

⁵⁷ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 149.

⁵⁸ Amrane, 318.

⁵⁹ See page 149.

⁶⁰ Joseph McCarroll, “Divorce, Marriage and the Family,” *The Furrow* 46, no. 10 (1995): 577.

⁶¹ Abigail Cheever, *Real Phonies: Cultures of Authenticity in Post-World War II America* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 2.

say, as Winfried Fluck observed, “what was formerly a moral scandal has become not only a fact of life but part of an ongoing series of acts of self-fashioning.”⁶² She, therefore, proceeds in her endeavour without regard to the well-being of her child Paul, who is eventually the victim of such a decline in morality. In a broader sense, motherhood has ultimately become the victim of the modernisation of society, as Susan Wolstenholme writes:

In alarm at the social upheavals through the latter part of the 19th century, social critics often criticized women, particularly in their role as mother, for rocking not just the cradle but the foundation of society itself. As H. H. Boyesen patronizingly described the problem, “mothers, who have themselves known the inestimable discipline of hardship and toil, have a natural desire to make their daughters’ youth brighter and happier than were their own; and by this generous motive are impelled to introduce a ruinous laxity into their relations with their children.”⁶³

Such a modernisation produced social as well as psychological diseases, which stimulated scientific investigation into “the problem of mental health incident upon the rapid growth of industry and urbanization in the United States.”⁶⁴ Works like George Miller Beard’s *American Nervousness, Its Causes and Consequences* (1881) are illustrative in this regard. When it comes to Wharton, it seems that she herself has been under mental pressures of the modern world. That is, in the image of many of her contemporary intellectuals, namely Charlotte Perkins Gilman, she “sought the advice of medical experts.”⁶⁵ To some extent, such nervous diseases could be explained in terms of Wharton’s fears over moral decline that developed into a real anxiety. Particularly, Wharton’s use of a female character at the centre of the *Custom of the Country* is illustrative. For one thing, Undine’s attitudes *vis-à-vis* marriage actually embodies those very fears that Wharton associated with the feminisation of American culture. This view, which was socially constructed, held that such feminisation “was bringing about its

⁶² Winfried Fluck, “Morality, Modernity, and “Malarial Restlessness”: American Realism in Its Anglo-European Contexts,” in *A Companion to American Fiction, 1865-1914*, ed. Robert Paul Lamb and Gary Richard Thompson (Oxford: Blackwell Pub., 2005), 89.

⁶³ Susan Wolstenholme, “Edith Wharton’s Gibson Girl: The Virgin, the Undine, and the Dynamo,” *American Literary Realism, 1870-1910* 18, no. 1/2 (1985): 92.

⁶⁴ Philip P. Wiener, “G. M. Beard and Freud on ‘American Nervousness’,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 17, no. 2 (1956): 269.

⁶⁵ Cindy Weinstein, *The Literature of Labor and the Labors of Literature: Allegory in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction*, Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 190.

intellectual and moral decline.”⁶⁶ The idea of associating femininity with feelings rather than rationality, especially at Wharton’s time, justified such fears. That is to say, this view maintained that intellectuals were reduced to shop clerks or assistants involved in commerce and industry assuming women’s roles.⁶⁷ In many ways, this is a confirmation of Frederick Remington’s dichotomy of “Frontier West versus effeminized East,” that is evoked by David M. Emmons’s study of the myth of the West.⁶⁸ In line with this idea, Ann Douglas’s commentary on the feminisation of American culture echoed the social change that was taking place in America:

During the second half of the 19th century there appeared in this country a plethora of writing by women and for women by those whom Hawthorne contemptuously called the “scribblers”—writers who extolled the virtues of family, motherhood, and domesticity, and who were pitifully sentimental, exuding good will and virtue. This trend, Ann Douglas writes in *The Feminization of American Culture*, arose from the social changes brought about by industrialization and capitalism. She contrasts the new culture to the older Calvinist spirit and claims that this literature was the precursor, if not the originator of modern mass culture [...] those men who had been reduced to playing the woman’s role: their congregations consisted of those who were feeling rather than thinking.⁶⁹

In choosing the East as the setting of *The Custom of the Country*, Wharton, therefore, seems to agree with Ann Douglas’s commentary on social change. For one thing, she ascribes Elmer Moffatt to the West then makes him move eastward. In this movement, he seems to bring with him a culture that rendered those who were “soft,”⁷⁰ that is, refined characters, into passive sellers of items in shops. For instance, Milliard Binch, who ironically was once engaged to Undine Spragg finds success not in marriage but in commerce. The idea behind is that passivity which is an imported behaviour reduces happiness from its humane sense to one that is material. More importantly, for Wharton, it meant also the decline in the concern *vis-à-vis* refinement as the following scene which joins Elmer Moffatt with Undine’s former suitor suggests:

[Elmer Moffatt] simply appeared one day behind the counter in Luckaback’s Dollar Shoe-store, drifted thence to the office of Semple and Binch, the coal-

⁶⁶ Rattray, *Edith Wharton’s the Custom of the Country: A Reassessment*, 145.

⁶⁷ Rose Laub Coser, “The Feminization of American Culture by Ann Douglas,” *American Journal of Sociology* 86, no. 2 (1980): 394.

⁶⁸ David M. Emmons, “Social Myth and Social Reality,” *The Magazine of Western History* 39, no. 4 (1989): 3.

⁶⁹ Coser, “The Feminization of American Culture by Ann Douglas,” 394.

⁷⁰ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 269.

merchants, reappeared as the stenographer of the Police Court, and finally edged his way into the powerhouse of the Apex Water-Works. He boarded with old Mrs. Flynn, down in North Fifth Street, on the edge of the red-light slum, he never went to church or attended lectures, or showed any desire to improve or refine himself; but he managed to get himself invited to all the picnics and lodge sociable.⁷¹

In stressing passivity and disregard to refinement in the image of Elmer Moffatt's avoidance of taking any spiritual or secular knowledge, symbolised by the church and lectures respectively, Wharton, in my view, asserts her condemnation of a consumerist America that has become void of an underlying philosophy. For her part, Undine, therefore, becomes an emblem of what Boudrillard would label as a "world, marked by a flood of information and decline of meaning."⁷² That is, she stresses the end of the old culture in which the human being reflects on his needs, plans, and then produces. She, therefore signals the beginning of "a new era of simulation in which social reproduction (information processing, communication, and knowledge industries, and so on) replaces production as the organizing form of society."⁷³ Thus, the departure from individual thinking and wisdom as ethos of society was, first and foremost, in the service of corporal interests. The side effects of such process were, in particular, affecting in terms of the decline in morality. In this light, I will study marriage under the impact of such a decline in the following paragraphs.

2.3. New marriage: The decline of morality

To account for marriage in general terms and have a clear conception of it in a specific period, it is worth noting that the circle of definition should be inevitably expanded in scope. If we look wider, it could be argued that marriage is defined by the society's culture, which in turn is associated with the status of civilisation it is ascribed to. In this context, as E. Benjamin Andrews observes, "the special phase of [civilisation] called culture has its ups and downs."⁷⁴ As deep in history as St. Augustine's thought finds ground, the status of civilisation was already interpreted as "cycles of time, in which there should be a constant renewal and repetition of the order of nature; and they

⁷¹ Ibid., 317.

⁷² "عالم تزداد فيه المعلومات أكثر فأكثر، بينما يصبح المعنى فيه أقل فأقل." Boudrillard, 147. My translation.

⁷³ Douglas Kellner, "Jean Baudrillard", Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy URL: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ baudrillard/>.

⁷⁴ E. Benjamin Andrews, "The Decline of Culture," *International Journal of Ethics* 23, no. 1 (1912): 1.

have therefore asserted that these cycles will ceaselessly recur, one passing away and another coming.”⁷⁵ Many centuries afterwards, this view was reincarnated by Giovan Battista Vico and Oswald Spengler to explain the rise and fall of civilisation.⁷⁶ That is to say, in contrast to the progressive or “evolutionary” vision, which gained momentum at the end of the nineteenth century, Spengler advocated the recurrence of particular patterns in history, that is, the rise and fall of civilisation. In this view he explained the decline of the Western civilisation in what he considered as irrational terms:

Like Giambattista Vico almost two centuries earlier in his trailblazing work, *The New Science*, Spengler championed the thesis, in *The Decline of the West*, that world history conforms to a cyclical pattern. Indeed, he conceived of his philosophy of history as a direct challenge to advocates of linear-progressive historical philosophy. Moreover, Spengler offered insights into the primacy of the irrational, of psychological factors in history, which he learned, in part, from his youthful study of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche.”⁷⁷

The moment Wharton accounted for American society and, in particular, for marriage unmistakably manifested a cultural decline. That is to say, while old marriage revolved around the supremacy of high morality, “new marriage” separated itself from any guiding morality. To show the features of this new marriage, I rely on the contrast method based on which I would say that, on the one hand, the former had been well defined in terms of principles and rules that contributed to its stability and supremacy as the originator and incubator of highly regarded morality. In fulfilling its premise, it would generate stable families that operate smoothly within the community. On the other hand, “new marriage” lost all sense of unifying principles and departed from any concern that transcends the individual boundaries. Its driving force is exactly the opposite of the former, which is the freedom resulting from the absence of norms and morality. For these reasons, I would argue that in her portrayal of marriage, Wharton manifested her pessimism *vis-à-vis* the future. She seems to adopt a tendency expressed by other authors of her time, namely, H.G. Wells. For one thing, Wells “predicted that ‘moral standards’ will be ‘shifting and uncertain, admitting of physiologically sound

⁷⁵ Schaff, 376.

⁷⁶ According to Wikipedia.org, “Giovan Battista (Giambattista) Vico (23 June 1668 – 23 January 1744) was an Italian political philosopher, rhetorician, historian, and jurist. He criticized the expansion and development of modern rationalism and was an apologist of classical antiquity. Vico is best known for his *magnum opus*, the *Scienza Nuova* of 1725, often published in English as *New Science*.” URL: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giambattista_Vico.

⁷⁷ Farrenkopf, “Spengler’s Historical Pessimism and the Tragedy of Our Age,” 394.

ménages of every variable status' and that 'vice and depravity, in every form that is not absolutely penal, will be practiced.'"⁷⁸

In this context, the focal point of social change in terms of marriage is the loss of morality without which society as a whole has become endangered. For instance, without "honesty and faithfulness,"⁷⁹ marriage would be unsustainable and vulnerable as is the case with Undine. To highlight such a change in terms of morality, Wharton, I argue, resorted also to the method of contrast in that she made use of marriage as fertile substance of her novel to establish the contrast between the old social order based on "the communal spirit and the communities' sharing of values, interests, rights, and duties to act as one unit"⁸⁰ and the emerging order. Her way to achieve this is the personification of these orders in the image of Ralph Marvell and Undine Spragg respectively. In other words, whereas Ralph stands for stable old values which are organised by high moral standards, Undine stands for change and flexibility devoid of morality.

Marriage in its new form seems to lose its human sense to the benefit of a corporate "business morality."⁸¹ That is to say, Undine does not marry to make a family or to have a loving child, at least as Lily Bart fantasises, but to make "marriage her business in life. She speculates in husbands just as husbands speculate in stocks, and she is skilful at it."⁸² In many ways, belonging to a corporate family,⁸³ as I discussed before,⁸⁴ Undine is influenced and directed by her father. As we are told, "after he made such a success with his hair-waver he got speculating in land out at Apex, and somehow everything went—though Mr. Spragg did all he COULD."⁸⁵ In naming his daughter after one of his successful objects of business, the father manifests his conception of his daughter as one of his commercial projects, a fact that renders relationships completely

⁷⁸ Theresa Notare, "A Revolution in Christian Morals: Lambeth 1930-Resolution, History and Reception" (Doctoral Dissertation, The Catholic University of America, 2011), 107.

⁷⁹ McCarroll, "Divorce, Marriage and the Family," 577.

⁸⁰ "الفعل الحضاري يعتمد على الروح الجماعية وعلى تشارك فئات الأمة المتنوعة في القيم والمصالح، والواجبات والحقوق، وهذا ماكان يحركهم" Djendia, 85-86. My translation.

⁸¹ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 138.

⁸² Elizabeth Ammons, "The Business of Marriage in Edith Wharton's *the Custom of the Country*," *Criticism* 16, no. 4 (1974): 337.

⁸³ Amrane, 318.

⁸⁴ See page 118.

⁸⁵ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 48.

corporal. His speculations serve his capitalistic drive in its consumerist version and point out his beliefs in “self-interest, which Adam Smith spoke of,”⁸⁶ as the following passage demonstrates:

“That’s not always a reason, for a woman—” It was the answer she would have given to Popple or Van Degen, but she saw in an instant the mistake of thinking it would impress her father. In the atmosphere of sentimental casuistry to which she had become accustomed, she had forgotten that Mr. Spragg’s private rule of conduct was as simple as his business morality was complicated.⁸⁷

Undine, hence, feels no love for anyone but herself as an embodiment of the corporate ideal.⁸⁸ While such ideology manifests its hostility towards the common good, it also “frees chained selfishness and promotes it and hibernates the communal sense limiting its authority in life and contenting with just what the society permits and protects.”⁸⁹ Undine’s narcissistic tendency is illustrated by her love of seeing herself beautiful in the mirror: “Undine bolted her door, dragged the tall pier-glass forward and, rummaging in a drawer for fan and gloves, swept to a seat before the mirror with the air of a lady arriving at an evening party.”⁹⁰ Unlike Lily’s narcissism which meant the glorification of a pure self, Undine’s version stresses nothing but a sense of greed devoid of real purpose. As such, through their difference in perspective *vis-à-vis* self-love, Wharton demonstrates her accurate use of Kantian judgement:

Kant introduces a distinction between ‘free’ and ‘adherent’ beauty: the former is beauty that is found in an object without any concept of its purpose at all, while the latter is a form of beauty that is perceived when the form of an object is felt to cohere freely with its intended purpose, as in a work of architecture, or even its moral end, as in the case of human beauty.⁹¹

In ascribing herself with the free beauty, Undine manifests a sense of decline in judgement. More importantly, in distancing herself from her family and showing obsession with her own judgement, she alludes to the departure from the collective ethos

⁸⁶ “المنفعة الشخصية... التي تحدث عنها آدم سميث”. Self-interest Pierre Bourdieu, *Questions De Sociologie*, 1981. Trans. Hana Sobhi ed. (Abu Dhabi: Kalima, 2012), 53. My translation.

⁸⁷ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 138.

⁸⁸ Amrane, 318-319.

⁸⁹ “وحررت الأنانية المكبلة ونشطتها، وخدرت تدريجيا النزاع الجماعي، وحدت من سلطته في الحياة إلا ذلك المقدار الذي يسانده النظام الاجتماعي نفسه ويحميه”. Djendia, 84-85. My translation.

⁹⁰ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 13.

⁹¹ Guyer and Wood, xxix.

towards a pure individualistic cult. This is, actually, a sign that foreshadows the decline of civilisation, which initially was grounded in community, that is, the Puritan foundation of America. My argument relies on the fact that in essence “civilisation is a collective human action.”⁹² In other words, as long as the individual serves the community’s ideals, civilisation continues to strive and develops.

Without doubt Undine strives, but she does so in excessive individualistic terms. That is, as the embodiment of a new society which is driven by materialism and sense of rush, she remarkably advances socially and, to some extent, develops in the image of biological organisms which are capable of adjustment to the circumstances. Once again, I contrast her with Lily Bart in terms of the sense of development. While the former seeks self-improvement, the latter aims at immediate indulging results. I rely here on one scientific phenomenon that is the body’s faculty to defend itself against malicious intrusions. In my view, Lily is like the natural process used by the body to secure itself from changing microbes. The self-defence mechanism takes time but produces effective organic means by which any strange organism would be defeated in the long term. On the opposite end, Undine is like the modern world’s over emphasis on the use of manufactured antibiotics which yes defend the body swiftly, but their effect would vanish in a short period of time and more importantly the side effects are emphatically damaging. Applying this analogy to marriage, I would say that in contrast to Lily Bart, who could not succeed in the immediate marriage, Undine manages to get married more than once and, in this, the temporary effect similar to those antibiotics’ is clearly seen. This “success in marriage,” however, serves to explain the extent to which she is pragmatic and straight forward when it comes to pointing out her goals. In the following passage, her pragmatism is expressed literally through her behaviour in one of the parties.

Undine, on entering, had seemed to be in the same mood as her companions; but Bowen saw that, as she became conscious of his friend’s observation, she isolated herself in a kind of soft abstraction; and he admired the adaptability which enabled her to draw from such surroundings the contrasting graces of reserve.⁹³

⁹² “والحضارة فعل إنساني جماعي” Djendia, 84. My translation.

⁹³ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 161.

Undine's behaviour, therefore, shows that she cares, first and foremost, about what the others think of her. That is, in consumerist culture a person is reduced to an object whose label represents the ultimate value. Taking this into consideration, we understand how the newspapers create images, or labels, that do not necessarily reflect reality. As such the news on Undine's marriages and her own life constitute a centre of interest to her and people around her, perhaps, for amusement. Neither she nor the others pay attention to coming close in order to know about her real self, but they content themselves only with the admiration of excessively magnified images on the press as the following passage illustrates:

In her hands, the newspaper clippings become both an inquisitorial resource, offering up the required information about a person or event, and a corroborative (even a revisionist) textual record, completely substituting and displacing actual events: what is written about a person is invariably more valuable and accurate than what may actually have taken place. The mutilated remnants of Undine Spragg's marital career as delineated in the popular press become, in Mrs Heeny's explanation of Undine's life to her beleaguered son Paul, both the definitive account and justification of a life, and the literal, textual substitute for an unerringly absent mother.⁹⁴

As such, in continuation to my previous argument on her symbolic representation of change,⁹⁵ Undine fits into David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*'s (1950) description of the emerging American character, namely in periods of upheavals such as the one Undine belongs to. That is to say, Undine is an "other-directed" character who is obsessed by the others' perception of herself. Put differently, she is "people-minded,"⁹⁶ to use David Riesman's words.

Being emphatically concerned with her prestige in front of the others, Undine resorts to marriage with only one purpose in mind, to achieve a better social position, that is, vertical social mobility as I discussed before.⁹⁷ To say it differently, without being guided by morality, her conception of marriage is distorted to the point such an institution becomes reduced to a mere means to acquire what she lacks. Hence, she separates marriage from its human sense and makes use of it only to compensate for her

⁹⁴ Ratray, *Edith Wharton's the Custom of the Country: A Reassessment*, 39.

⁹⁵ See page 108.

⁹⁶ Riesman, 126.

⁹⁷ See page 109.

lack of “cultural capital,” to use Pierre Bourdieu’s words. To have a clear understanding of Undine’s motives as she negotiates marriage, I endeavour in the following paragraphs to shed light on some sociological concepts regarding one’s belonging to a specific social circle. In doing so, marriage reveals itself as more than a union between husband and wife.

2.4. Undine Spragg: The doomed quest for cultural capital

Destined to be written in a transitional phase in American history, the bulk of Wharton’s works, including *The Custom of the Country*, addressed a period of social change. Thus, from a sociological perspective, I deem it adequate to rely on Pierre Bourdieu’s theories for his ideas explain society in terms of dynamic interactions.⁹⁸ One of Bourdieu’s influential ideas in sociology, which helps us better understand Undine’s drive for marriage, is his distinction between different types of capital. In particular, his notion of “cultural capital” which infers the meanings of increase and decrease sheds light on Undine’s attitude *vis-à-vis* marriage:

The social world can be conceived as a multi-dimensional space that can be constructed empirically by discovering the main factors of differentiation which account for the differences observed in a given social universe, or, in other words, by discovering the powers or forms of capital which are or can become efficient, [...] firstly economic capital, in its various kinds; secondly cultural capital or better, informational capital, [...] and symbolic capital, which is the form the different types of capital take once they are perceived and recognized as legitimate.⁹⁹

As such, I argue that Undine, inherently, lacks exactly what Lily has. That is, what separates them from one another is the gulf between the former’s superficiality and the latter’s depth of character. To say it differently, it is Culture which is endowed with the faculty to distinguish, on one side, the society of one civilisation from the rest of the world and, on another side, individuals within this very society. Therefore, it is this distinction which makes room for the social change to take place in one society under the effect of time, as Malek Bennabi observed.¹⁰⁰ Culture, therefore, has the power to

⁹⁸ Carol J. Singley, “Bourdieu, Wharton and Changing Culture in the Age of Innocence,” *Cultural Studies* 17, no. 3/4 (2003): 495.

⁹⁹ Craig Calhoun, “Pierre Bourdieu and Social Transformation: Lessons from Algeria,” *Development and Change* 37, no. 6. URL: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/42609/>.

¹⁰⁰ Malek Bennabi puts emphasis on time as the major defining factor of Society. See also my General Introduction, 2.

legitimate one's status in society. Sometimes inherited legacy helps as it is the case of Ralph Marvell, other times education provides one with the means for self-improvement and enlightenment and, eventually, reinforces the existing legacy. As such, the acquisition of culture is, first and foremost, the medium through which one asserts his social status. This claim rests on Talcott Parsons's definition of "cultural legitimation," which goes as follows:

Cultural legitimation is, like stratification, intimately involved in the emergence from primitiveness, and certainly the two processes are related. Legitimation could, perhaps, be treated first; in certain crucial respects it is a prerequisite to the establishment of the type of prestige position.¹⁰¹

Furthermore, I would explain this cultural gap by saying that Lily is empowered by the old values of taste and refinement, the outcome of which enables her to develop the complexity of character, namely through education. As such, according to Bourdieu's views, Undine lacks a significant ingredient that is a constituent part of the "cultural capital" that if present would have made her match Lily.¹⁰² Had she been granted the chance for education she would have cultivated herself, but her family's extreme concern with business and material profit in the image of her father counting the hotel's hosting capacity rendered such an outlet impossible. Whereas Lily Bart seeks the knowledge of the world and the transcendence of material appeal through her spiritual quest and indulgence in literature, Undine Spragg despises all what is related to art and literature as evidenced through the following passage:

Remembering the attention she had attracted on her first appearance in Raymond's world she concluded that she had 'gone off' or grown dowdy, and instead of wasting more time in museums and lecture-halls she prolonged her hours at the dress-maker's and gave up the rest of the day to the scientific cultivation of her beauty.¹⁰³

Since the human being is endowed with the faculty to seek the fulfilment of his myriad of needs, there is no doubt, then, that Undine is to embark on this quest. However, she passes from need as a motive, that is, the case of Lily, to drive as a

¹⁰¹ Talcott Parsons and Leon H. Mayhew, *Talcott Parsons on Institutions and Social Evolution: Selected Writings*, The Heritage of Sociology (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 306.

¹⁰² According to Pierre Bourdieu, "Cultural capital refers to the ways in which people would use cultural knowledge to undergird their place in the hierarchy (most easily pictured as pretentious displays of middle-class taste)." Gauntlett, 132.

¹⁰³ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 313.

rationale. If at first glance, one would predict that materialism involves the pursuit of money, in *The Custom of the Country*, Wharton evokes other concerns which are basically cultural. Thus, in Undine's case, her needs are not defined in terms of money since she has already a great deal of it. As Wharton put it in *The House of Mirth*, "the only way not to think about money is to have a great deal of it."¹⁰⁴ With this in mind, it could be said that like a thirsty land, Undine's instincts unknowingly make her yearn for the fundamentals she neither inherited nor learned to value. It seems that marriage is her only way out for, as discussed before,¹⁰⁵ it has a range of powers that begins with the fulfilment of the basic biological needs and extends to encompass the highest intellectual and spiritual aspirations. She, therefore, seeks marriage in an attempt to make up for her deficiencies, namely her superficiality. The following scene, in a subtle manner, alludes to her flaws by illustrating how Ralph Marvell, who is empowered by his education and inherent taste, engages in critical writing as part of his cultural activity, while Undine's appearance in this very scene hints at both the potential marriage she is seeking and her cultural weakness:

On the whole, it seemed likely that the critic would win the day, and the essay on "The Rhythmical Structures of Walt Whitman" take shape before "The Banished God." Yet if the light in the cave was less supernaturally blue, the chant of its tides less laden with unimaginable music, it was still a thronged and echoing place when Undine Spragg appeared on its threshold...¹⁰⁶

According to Todd Vogel's elaboration on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of "cultural capital,"¹⁰⁷ we can see further how Undine is the counterweight for Lily Bart. Thus, the contrast in cultural capital extends to some values which were taken for granted from the early days of America. On the one hand, Undine lacks Lily's inherent republican values which are humane and universal in essence, namely those of freedom and the

¹⁰⁴ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 77.

¹⁰⁵ Basically, this is the essence of my discussion of old marriage in the first chapter, that is, old marriage as a multi-dimensional institution served to fulfil the human being's needs, i.e., spiritual, social, and economic, to reach an ultimate spiritual happiness.

¹⁰⁶ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 46.

¹⁰⁷ Here is Todd Vogel's full point based on which I built my argument on the association of "cultural capital" with taste and republican values: "'Cultural capital' gives us a way to link two symbolic goods in the United States: early nineteenth-century republican sensibilities and Bascom's late nineteenth-century aesthetic sense of high culture. Cultural capital is the set of skills that allows someone either to produce a work of art or to unpack artistic or aesthetic codes." Todd Vogel, *Rewriting White: Race, Class, and Cultural Capital in Nineteenth-Century America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 9.

pursuit of happiness. Thus, she is not reluctant to marry even at the cost of losing her sense of independence, as her marriage with Raymond, a symbol of the restrictions of old monarchy, proved. On the other hand, she emphatically lacks taste as evidenced by the following scene in which she comes to, implicitly, manifest signs of her incapacity to savour the artistic opera performances:

She was almost sure she would get her opera box, but she did not see why she should have to struggle for her rights, and she was especially annoyed with Mrs. Spragg for seconding her so half-heartedly. If she and her mother did not hold together in such crises she would have twice the work to do. Undine hated "scenes."¹⁰⁸

In being deprived of the capacity to appreciate the artistic performances of the others, Undine is definitely not capable of producing works of arts in that "you can't get blood out of a stone,"¹⁰⁹ as the proverb goes. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Lily participated in the portrayals of *tableaux-vivants*.¹¹⁰ From this, a clear allusion to her artistic sensations manifests itself to emphatically point out the contrast with Undine's tastelessness. Yet, Undine's practical sense leads her, at least, to endeavour to acquire one of the things associated with Lily, that is, to become a member of Society. For instance by marrying Ralph Marvell, Undine would realise her dream to become a member of old society in that "Apex ideals had been based on the myth of 'old families' ruling New York from a throne of Revolutionary tradition, with the new millionaires paying them feudal allegiance."¹¹¹ This is literally realised by *The House of Mirth's* Simon Rosedale, who, as a *nouveaux rich*, proposes to pay the debts of Lily's cousin to pay allegiance and seek acceptance in her circles: "in her little set Mr. Rosedale had been pronounced 'impossible,' and Jack Stepney roundly snubbed for his attempt to pay his debts in dinner invitations."¹¹² It is worth noting that an analogy could be established between Rosedale and Elmer Moffatt, that is, what applies to the former applies also to the latter.

¹⁰⁸ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 27-28.

¹⁰⁹ This proverb means that you cannot "attempt what is not possible." "You can't get blood out of a stone." URL: <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/419000.html>.

¹¹⁰ See my first chapter, 183.

¹¹¹ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 111.

¹¹² Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 18.

Yet, even marriage provides Undine with the possibility to move on from one “field” to another in Bourdieu’s words,¹¹³ she is deficient when it comes to sustaining the acquired status in one specific circle. Her quest is, therefore, doomed because in being an emblem of change, as I mentioned before, her fate rests on the notion of perpetual movement and advance. In other words, like an invading army, as soon as she sets foot on one ground, she starts planning for the conquest of new “fields.” Her rationale is what Frantz Fanon calls the “complex of inferiority.”¹¹⁴ That is, she is driven by her inner feeling of cultural deficiency. Moreover, in my view Undine’s behaviour alludes also to the notion of the repetition of the cycles of history. For one thing, In agreement with Parsons’s definition of “cultural legitimacy,” which I advanced earlier,¹¹⁵ Undine’s aggressive tendency ascribes her to a social status which, despite the appearances, is innately “primitive.” Moreover, the two notions of cyclical history and her lack of cultural legitimacy intersect to associate her with primitive cultures that Thorstein Veblen refers to as “predatory.”

Departures from the human nature of the hereditary present are most frequently of the nature of reversions to an earlier variant of the type. This earlier variant is represented by the temperament which characterises the primitive phase of peaceable savagery.¹¹⁶

Furthermore, in a reminder of the Roman invasion of Britain, Undine’s endeavour would not be culminated in a lasting existence, but would wither under the impact of the inevitable historical change. In agreement with Fanon’s notion of the complex of inferiority, one important question raises itself: “an army can at any time reconquer the ground lost, but how can the inferiority complex, the fear and the despair of the past be reimplanted in the consciousness of the people?”¹¹⁷ I say so because despite the Roman invasion of Britain that extended from almost Julius Caesar’s times to the fall of Rome did not actually ascribe Britain, or Britannia, to the Roman civilisation.¹¹⁸ In a perfect reference to the Emperors’ quest for fame and glory in the conquest of new lands, Undine succeeds, to a large extent, in her endeavour to

¹¹³ Singley, “Bourdieu, Wharton and Changing Culture in the Age of Innocence,” 495.

¹¹⁴ Fanon, 31.

¹¹⁵ See Talcott Parsons’s definition of “cultural legitimation” in this Chapter, 129.

¹¹⁶ Veblen, 144.

¹¹⁷ Fanon, 31.

¹¹⁸ Korichi Souheila. Lecture. University of Laghouat “Amar Téliidji”. Laghouat, 2009.

accumulate social prestige, or what Veblen calls “repute and esteem,”¹¹⁹ a quest that she shares with her ultimate husband Elmer Moffatt. Like her, he is deprived of the sense of authenticity for which he aspires. To use Wharton’s words, “no one in Apex knew where young Moffatt had come from, and he offered no information on the subject.”¹²⁰ In hiding his origins which are very defining in terms of one’s identity, Moffatt manifests his fears at being exposed or looked down upon. Therefore, he illustrates a clear pattern of anxiety as an echo of the Americans’ perpetual concerns in terms of authenticity. As such with the company of Undine, he is to set out in a shared quest for self-assertion as I will discuss in the following point.

2.5. Marriage: In the search of lost authenticity

As I mentioned in the first chapter, marriage, as a constituent part of the social fabric of any society proved to be the victim of modernity from which a sense of distortion touched upon different levels of human experience. Thus, literature, including Wharton’s in American context, raised the debate over the historically inevitable quest for modernisation. For one thing, the concerns were raised as a result of the opposition between the search for progress and development, on one side, and the preservation of tradition on the other. To say it differently, modernity has become questioned in terms of “its devastating social consequences, its inability to deliver long-promised doses of well-being, and its indifference to cultural distinctions [...] the demand for development lost ground to the cry for authenticity.”¹²¹ Therefore, the question is can marriage whose success or failure is measured through its endurance and stability live in a world that calls for endless change in behaviour and consumption for the purpose of consumption? To use Tony Lack words, “Can there be a logic and a practice of anti-consumption in a consumer society? does this logic interface with attempts to remain or become ‘authentic’?”¹²²

To answer such an inquiry, one would highlight the way consumerism took hold of America. In this regard, I would argue that consumerism is closely connected to

¹¹⁹ Veblen, 24.

¹²⁰ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 317.

¹²¹ Robert Deemer Lee, *Overcoming Tradition and Modernity: The Search for Islamic Authenticity* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1997), 1.

¹²² Tony Lack, “Consumer Society and Authenticity: The (Il)Logic of Punk Practices,” *Personal Literature* 290, (1995). URL: <http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/display/86>.

modernity which embarked on America at the end of the nineteenth century leading to a twofold situation in society. On the one hand, it indicated material success and tangible signs of prosperity proved to be a day-to-day reality.¹²³ On the other hand, the social reality was in the making, that is, a completely new class was rising. This process was even accelerated by waves of immigration from Europe for people were coming in the hope of finding the said promised prosperity. For this, modernity forged its way at the expense of the established tradition. Like any new experiment science undertakes, it was accompanied with side effects and, hence, raised cultural concerns, namely in terms of the social practices of the *nouveaux riches*. In other words, “when benefits over grow, the sources of elite attract the parvenus [*nouveaux-riches*] turning benefit into the driving force while it was initially just a repercussion of the very idea of civilisation.”¹²⁴ Beside “benefit,” the other idea that echoed the rise of the new nation of America, that is, the promised new civilisation, was its pursuit of authenticity as a part of its endeavour to define itself. While early Puritans sought authenticity through the myth of American exceptionalism, contemporary authors to Edith Wharton further contributed to what Boudrillard calls “a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity.”¹²⁵ Yet, they faced new challenges raised as a result of consumerism which has the tendency to sell everything, including art, under different guises. In this context, Mary Balkun writes:

A number of studies have examined the national obsession with authenticity and its opposite, the fake or “counterfeit,” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including Miles Orvell’s *The Real Thing*, which documents the aesthetic shift from a focus on imitation in the nineteenth century to a desire for the authentic or real in the twentieth, and *Fables of Abundance* by Jackson Lears, which outlines several fields in the search for authenticity: the search for “authentic expression” in the arts (346); “[t]he quest for personal authenticity” that became a touchstone in advertising (347),

¹²³ I do discern between the superficial side of a culture, that is, the practices of the masses, and the essence of this very culture. For this, I maintain that America, while at surface level appears to have embraced a materialistic veil, on the deep level, it is fundamentally an anti-materialistic civilisation. I hold the same idea on the status of the Islamic Civilisation today.

¹²⁴ “و حين تتضخم المكاسب تجتذب مصادر السلطات النفعية المستفيدين وكأنها هي القوى الحقيقية المحركة، في حين أنها أثر من آثار

“الفكرة”. Djendia, 62. My translation.

¹²⁵ Michael Payne and Jessica Rae Barbera, *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 59.

and the growing tendency to blame advertising for the rise of inauthenticity (349).¹²⁶

In *The Custom of the Country*, Wharton, therefore, evokes the Americans' perpetual feeling of inauthenticity stemming, to some extent, from the nation's relative new creation. It is worth noting that while America was created as a direct result of historical obligations, that is, the religious and political oppression in Europe, it has no real rootedness in history when compared to other nations of the world. In my view, in separating itself from the body of Western civilisation in Europe, "the cry for authenticity stemmed, in part, from those like Nietzsche and Rousseau who would escape the straitjacket of tradition bolstered by deductive reason applied in universalistic, ahistoric fashion."¹²⁷ In this context, it should be noted that authenticity is the quality that is associated with what is "genuine, natural, true and pure."¹²⁸ I add that authenticity, simply, stands for what is real, that is, not manufactured. For one thing, Wharton shares much of Henry James's concerns in this very context in that, as Tessa Hadley noted, "James's novels all centre upon 'real things', real happinesses rendered precious, beautiful, desirable precisely by their difficulty of achievement in a dizzyingly inequitable society, in a competitive 'race for life'."¹²⁹ This concern for the real thing and happiness could unmistakably be extended to human relationships in the image of marriage. In this context, I invoke two dichotomies to show the contrasts between Lily Bart of *The House of Mirth* and Undine Spragg. Firstly, while Lily takes a great deal of time contemplating a marriage that would answer her genuine aspirations for happiness, Undine manufactures feelings to accept or, at least, show acceptance to any suitor without any meditation. While the former seeks real happiness that is lasting, the latter will content herself with temporary joy that resembles a portrait whose glittering colours lose vitality in short time. As the proverb goes, "all that glitters is not gold." Secondly, whereas Lily is aware of her cultural superiority and avoids marriages that risk to poison

¹²⁶ Mary McAleer Balkun, *The American Counterfeit: Authenticity and Identity in American Literature and Culture*, Studies in American Literary Realism and Naturalism (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), 7.

¹²⁷ Lee, 13.

¹²⁸ Chris Barker, *The Sage Dictionary of Cultural Studies* (London; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2004), 9.

¹²⁹ Tessa Hadley, *Henry James and the Imagination of Pleasure* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 142.

her purity and endanger a long legacy that has been passed on to her from her ancestry, Undine recognises her cultural inferiority and accepts the first marriage opportunity. With this in mind, she is evidently at the opposite end of a continuum that was initiated by Lily and has just ended with herself. In an attempt to bridge the cultural gap between herself and her counterpart, she looks at old Society, be it in America or in Europe; that is, New York or Paris. Her vision to penetrate such a society is her contemplation of marriage into old families with one purpose in mind, that is, to acquire the authenticity that has passed on from one generation to the other as the following passage illustrates:

What could be the possible object of leaving one's family, one's habits, one's friends? It was natural that the Americans, who had no homes, who were born and died in hotels, should have contracted nomadic habits: but the new Marquise de Chelles was no longer an American, and she had Saint Desert and the Hotel de Chelles to live in, as generations of ladies of her name had done before her.¹³⁰

Since, as Willa Cather put it in *O Pioneers!* (1913), "the history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman,"¹³¹ Undine wants to seize the culture that has been instilled in men's hearts. As such, her very marriage with Raymond was part of her attempt to reach his heart to get in touch with the fountain of culture, that is, France. Wharton, therefore, finds room to show her fascination with the rootedness of France in world history as a trusted symbol of cultural authenticity. Like Henry James who endeavoured to establish bridges of cultural encounters between America and Europe, Wharton sought through Undine's marriage to a European to connect the limb to the tree in an attempt to transfer the said cultural authenticity. In this context, Maureen E. Montgomery writes:

Traveling to Europe was an act of acculturation. As Richard Brodhead has argued with respect to the second half of the nineteenth century and the development of an American translocal social elite, the European tour was a distinctive leisure practice that contributed to self-definition. It went hand in hand with their promotion of high culture.⁷ Traveling around European cities, in particular, Americans sought an "'authentic' cultural experience,"⁸ one that brought them into contact with the art and architecture of Europe from ancient

¹³⁰ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 294.

¹³¹ William R. Handley and Nathaniel Lewis, *True West: Authenticity and the American West*, Postwestern Horizons (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 73.

Rome to the present and enabled them to formulate aesthetic judgments and then talk or write about their experience with authority.¹³²

Yet, the changing nature of the period, that is, the end of the nineteenth century, shaped new types of Americans who have become obsessed by extreme emphasis on individualistic achievements, that is, they have become other-directed persons according to David Riesman's classification. Thus, they dissociated themselves from the vanishing tradition-directed category of people in which "the conformity of the individual tends to reflect his membership in a particular age-grade, clan, or caste; he learns to understand and appreciate patterns which have endured for centuries."¹³³ They, to some extent, disregarded the accumulated cultural legacy of their forefathers at the two sides of the Atlantic. Therefore, the pursuit of "personal authenticity"¹³⁴ often overlooked the ties with the past and, hence, became hard to achieve in the emerging unstable materialistic world epitomised by America. That is to say, individuals in the image of Undine, who are associated with change, will experience such a difficulty. I attribute the reasons behind the latter to the fact that "authenticity involves behaving in a consistent manner across contexts, rather than changing oneself to fit situational demands."¹³⁵ As Ticien Sassoubre explains, individuals within a material world, as is the case with Undine and Elmer Moffatt, yearn for the stability they lost and aspire to compensate for the lack of value and authenticity. I infer that such a compensation would secure higher prospects of marriage in a world being distorted and undergoing change:

This distortion creates a crisis of authenticity because as everything becomes commodified, intrinsic value is lost. In Wharton's perception, this destabilization of value has at least two important side effects: a longing for (lost) authenticity, and the negation (or at least suppression) of difference. Wharton depicts Moffatt's extraordinary collecting in terms of his desire for access to authenticity. Moffatt has a thin relationship to objects.¹³⁶

¹³² Sven Beckert and Julia B. Rausenbaum, *The American Bourgeoisie: Distinction and Identity in the Nineteenth Century* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 28.

¹³³ Riesman, 11.

¹³⁴ Balkun, 7.

¹³⁵ Tammy English and Serena Chen, "Culture and Self-Concept Stability: Consistency across and within Contexts among Asian Americans and European Americans," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 93, no. 3 (2007): 487.

¹³⁶ Ticien Marie Sassoubre, "Property and Identity in the Custom of the Country," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 49, no. 4 (2003): 704.

In departing from the humane essence as the core of marital relationships, marriage has become simply a pursuit of an endless obsession with the acquisition of husbands or wives. The sense of responsibility disappears to the benefit of the fulfilment of the insatiable drive for growth in possessions. In a confirmation of Pope Francis's definition of consumerism as a "throwaway culture,"¹³⁷ like a child who admires to acquire a new doll, play with it, deform it, and throw it away, Undine marries, seeks to have a joyful time in spending money on trivialities, and looks for a more exciting play. As soon as she starts feeling bored in her life with one of her husbands, or he fails to give her what she wants, she starts looking at him as a useless doll only to find a way to get rid of him. In evoking the idea of the "doll," I allude to the obsession that simulates the worship of dolls in ancient times and material drive in recent times. Thus, it is easily inferred that drive functions as an impetus in this new marital relationships. To say it differently, in contrast to "old marriage" which, as I said before, was sacred, no real faith or devotion support marriage, but a drive that, as matter, withers in nature. Speaking of nature, Undine swerves from the nature of things in that for Emerson, "the plays of children are nonsense, but very educative nonsense. So it is with the largest and solemnest things, with commerce, government, church, marriage."¹³⁸

The analogy of the child's obsession with his games is nothing but a simulation of the way relationships have become similar to a play of life that involves money. Speaking of money is definitely a reference to the way marriage has become regarded as a "commercial relationship."¹³⁹ Therefore, husbands and wives are reduced to objects which could be acquired, used, and perhaps sold again just as it happens in the world of commerce. In a simulation of shoppers in the market, the following passage illustrates Undine's readiness to move from one marriage to another to fulfil her commerce-driven behaviour:

¹³⁷ Frankovich.

¹³⁸ Emerson, 218.

¹³⁹ I coined the term "commercial relationship" based on Susan Goodman's discussion of the relationship between marriage and commerce in her essay entitled "*The Custom of The Country: Edith Wharton's Conversation With The Atlantic Monthly*" in Rattray, *Edith Wharton's the Custom of the Country: A Reassessment*, 18. Here is an excerpt of her idea: "Undine acquires and sheds a husband, becoming in turn Mrs Elmer Moffatt, Mrs Ralph Marvell, the Countess Raymond de Chelles and, coming full circle as the novel closes." Ibid.

She must make the best of what she could get and wait her chance of getting something better; and meanwhile the most practical use to which she could put her shady friends was to flash their authentic nobility in the dazzled eyes of Mrs. Rolliver.¹⁴⁰

Elmer Moffatt, as another member of the *nouveaux-riches*, shares Undine's vision of marriage as a "commercial relationship" in that he asks her to help him develop his business even after he knew about her marriage with another man: "he added reassuringly: 'Oh, don't mistake me. I don't want to butt into your set—not for social purposes, anyhow; but if ever it should come handy to know any of 'em in a business way, would you fix it up for me—AFTER YOU'RE MARRIED?'"¹⁴¹ In using marriage and its powers to facilitate his business, Moffatt strips any human sense off such an institution. That is, he is not thinking of marriage *per se* but of the business behind marriage and in doing so he renders such a relationship as a mutual self-interest contract. I support this idea by the fact that he shows neither jealousy nor concern over his former wife's marriage with another man. It is worth noting that in this context Moffatt is no difference than Selden, who shows almost the same indifference to the woman he is supposed to consider as a would-be wife. In my view, this is a confirmation of my idea of the distorting effect of modernity in terms of marital relationships.

In another direction, Undine's final settlement in marriage with Moffatt, her very first suitor, shows that she failed in acquiring cultural authenticity. Through her lens, Wharton, seems "to describe a comprehensive break with the past and reorientation toward the immediate community of one's peers. Members of his generation feel kinship with those who share contemporary experience, not individuals who have gone before."¹⁴² Put differently, she failed in her endeavour to accumulate authenticity through her different marriages simply because authenticity is not a tangible matter. That is to say, even though she went through two marriages into old Society represented by Ralph and Raymond, she has not embraced their way of life nor has she earned their refined senses. In agreement with David Riesman's description, other directed-individuals like Undine show "how change of character is connected with change of

¹⁴⁰ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 203.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁴² Cheever, 141.

meaning in the same pursuits as well as with development of new pursuits.”¹⁴³ That is why Undine has never attempted to consider the settlement at one stage to show any concern for the need for stability. Since her pursuits could be anything but cultural, without giving a sign of guilt, she comes short of understanding what her husband means as he manifests his cultural taste and inspiration. In one scene which bears witness of her cultural deficiencies, she feels bewildered as she fails to grasp Ralph’s savour of his creative imagination:

At length he whispered: “I’ve just seen such a wonderful thing—I wish you’d been with me!”

“What sort of a thing?” She turned her head with a faint show of interest.

“A—I don’t know—a vision.... It came to me out there just now with the moonrise.”

“A vision?” Her interest flagged. “I never cared much about spirits. Mother used to try to drag me to seances—but they always made me sleepy.”

Ralph laughed. “I don’t mean a dead spirit but a living one!”¹⁴⁴

In escaping reality to the world of his creation, and by this I mean Ralph, Wharton seems to show resistance to the *status quo* in which marriage has become confined by capitalism. That is, in consumerist America the human being is often reduced into a measurable value, as it occurred in primitive societies when money took the forms of slaves and women.¹⁴⁵ As Karl Marx observed, such a value is expressed in terms of money, which he viewed as “the epitome of human self-alienation under capitalism, since it reduces all human qualities to quantitative values of exchange.”¹⁴⁶ Thus, as Ralph Waldo Emerson noted, persons who look at external value rather than the essence of the human being “measure their esteem of each other by what each has, and not by what each is.”¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ Riesman, 126.

¹⁴⁴ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 88.

¹⁴⁵ Abdelhadi traces the evolution of money through history and observes that money took different forms which even included humans. As she put it, “the first use of money is as old as human civilization and probably older than written history. Through its several forms: salt, cattle, women, shells, gold, silver, coins and paper, money is in the first place a means of exchange. As human society became more and more complex, it became impossible for humans to barter one commodity or service for another. No one invented money; it simply developed. Fortunately or unfortunately, throughout its evolution, money came to play a primordial role in the genesis and subsistence of that economic system we commonly know as ‘capitalism.’ Private ownership and free market, as the main components of the capitalist system, have propelled America to the top of the world’s economic pyramid.” Nadia Abdelhadi, “The American Enterprise from Faith in God to Faith in Gold” (Magister Dissertation, University of Abdelhamid Ibn Badis, Mostaganem, 2012), 1.

¹⁴⁶ Anthony Giddens, “Marx, Weber, and the Development of Capitalism,” *Sociology* 4, no. 3 (1970): 302.

¹⁴⁷ Emerson, 49.

Marx's indictment of commodification as an unethical aspect of the capitalistic society was shared by other social observers such as Gustav Schmoller who defined capitalism in terms of "unlimited desire for gain."¹⁴⁸ Marriage, therefore, as a "commercial relationship,"¹⁴⁹ in this context becomes "a natural way of making profits. However, most of its practices and methods are tricky and designed to obtain the (profit) margin between purchase prices and sales prices."¹⁵⁰ In accordance to Marx's explanation of the dehumanising aspect of capitalism, Undine Spragg regards her marriage in terms of the material value she could benefit. In the following passage, Undine's value fluctuates just as a currency does.

She lacked the adventurous curiosity which seeks its occasion in the unknown; and though she could work doggedly for a given object the obstacles to be overcome had to be as distinct as the prize. Her one desire was to get back an equivalent of the precise value she had lost in ceasing to be Ralph Marvell's wife. 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.¹⁵¹

In agreement with Marx's views, Lemennicier goes to define the "value" of individuals within a family in terms of a commercial investment in marriage. In particular, he indicted the way women have become dehumanised. He continues to define marriage in terms of a producing institution in which each member is valued in accordance to his or her contribution to the final product either as a participant or as money provider. For instance, in this view, "the value of a woman or a child is measured in terms of the substantiated value of the familial production."¹⁵²

Yet, in *The Custom of the Country*, Undine reverses marriage in terms of function from production to consumption. That is to say, if I borrow Stephanie Coontz's words, she makes marriage function as a "consumer item,"¹⁵³ that is, as a "product" and not a producer. In this context, it is important to point out the fact that in consumerist

¹⁴⁸ Colin Loader, "Puritans and Jews: Weber, Sombart and the Transvaluators of Modern Society," *The Canadian Journal of Sociology* 26, no. 4 (2001): 637.

¹⁴⁹ See footnote in page 138.

¹⁵⁰ Khaldun, 483.

¹⁵¹ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 208.

¹⁵² "[L]a valeur de la femme ou d'un enfant est mesurée par la valeur actualisée de la production familiale". Bertrand Lemennicier, *Le Marché Du Marriage Et De La Famille* (Presses Universitaires de France, 1988), 69-70. My translation.

¹⁵³ Coontz, 289.

America what is valued is the product instead of the producer.¹⁵⁴ Deprived of its human sense and becoming a mere product, marriage, therefore, is no longer sacred or lasting, but is susceptible to the inevitable end of usability and like a product it has defects. With this in mind, we find that Undine will not be reluctant to end one marriage and engage in another to secure her mobility, be it social, that is, “vertical social mobility” as I discussed before,¹⁵⁵ or economic. As Frank Furstenberg put it, “marriage is now a discretionary item that must be weighed against other options for self-protection or economic mobility.”¹⁵⁶ When a woman like Undine cannot secure such a mobility, she moves on because in her view “if a girl marries a man who don’t come up to what she expected, people consider it’s to her credit to want to change,”¹⁵⁷ to use Wharton’s words.

Ironically enough, in a time when women were often looked at as objects, it is Undine’s turn to consider her marriage with Ralph as an object of speculation. As such, while the eventual demise of such a marriage represents for her a material loss, for Ralph it is a marital loss. To say it differently, from his perspective, this loss is situated at the opposite end to physicality, that is, at the level of his humane feelings. He, therefore, considers the failure of his marriage in terms of his ideals of love and, in a sad tone, he mourns the death of a form of marriage that moved his heart. As such, to use Wharton’s words, “the flame of love that had played about his passion for his wife had died down to its embers; all the transfiguring hopes and illusions were gone.”¹⁵⁸ Considering this tragic end of Ralph’s love, it could be said that his very choice of Undine as a wife is, in some regards, a loss of his refined sentimental judgement, which he shares with other Whartonian refined characters as Blake Nevius argues:

How do these unequal partnerships come about? Invariably they originate in a sentimental error on the part of the destined victim. Amherst, in love with Bessy Westmore, is deluded into thinking that she shares his interest in reform. Ethan Frome, grateful for Zeena’s devoted nursing of his parents, marries her. Ralph Marvell, naively fancying himself a Perseus, rescues his

¹⁵⁴ Weinstein, 95.

¹⁵⁵ See page 109.

¹⁵⁶ Coontz, 289.

¹⁵⁷ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 57.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 125. Ralph’s true “individual authenticity” is proved because it is closely related to his refined sensations. To use Robert D. Lee words, “Writers such as Rousseau, Wordsworth, and Schiller evoked individual authenticity by looking upon the self not as an abstraction but as a particular person grounded in an individual ‘sentiment of being’.” Lee, 27.

corn-belt Andromeda from the clutches of rich, lecherous, pop-eyed Peter Van Degen.¹⁵⁹

Undine's indifference to Ralph's severe sadness over the failure of their marriage points out the fact that marriage, which is marred with materialistic drive,¹⁶⁰ has failed to transfer authenticity, that is, inner values of refinement, sensibility, and free spirit, from Ralph to his wife. Moreover, knowing that "the stability that one might typically value as a quality of authenticity"¹⁶¹ cannot by any means be acquired by Undine who actually represented to Ralph the "floating and fugitive vibrations,"¹⁶² as read in the novel. Thus, the argument, which holds that "the core of [Wharton's] concern is the gulf separating social reality and the inner self,"¹⁶³ could be confirmed. Moreover, we can deduce that Undine's failure in acquiring her husband's qualities highlights two crucial facts. On the one hand, the change that took place in society resulted in a cultural gap that inevitably prevented any kind of rapprochement. On the other hand, whereas progress meant novelty, it meant also through the image of Undine Spragg, a subconscious "disdain for authenticity."¹⁶⁴ In other words, marriage between Ralph Marvell, who stands for "cultural authenticity" and Undine Spragg, who stresses "individual authenticity" proves to be impossible and very conflictual. In this context Robert Lee writes:

Such a notion of cultural authenticity can, however, conflict with the freedom of choice implied by individual authenticity. Individual authenticity requires radical rejection of external standards, whether these be the product of cultural tradition or modernity.¹⁶⁵

Undine, therefore, inevitably rejects subconsciously what was, up to the then near past, considered as social standards by manifesting her version of freedom. In many ways Wharton anticipated the modernist tenet of breaking up with tradition. Even in what could be seen as an immature version, Undine's perception of freedom allows her

¹⁵⁹ Blake Nevius, "Ethan Frome and the Themes of Edith Wharton's Fiction," *The New England Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (1951): 199.

¹⁶⁰ In this context, "materialist drive" could be used interchangeably with "consumerist drive."

¹⁶¹ Balkun, 5.

¹⁶² Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 87.

¹⁶³ VanSpanckeren and Agency, 52.

¹⁶⁴ Rattray, *Edith Wharton's the Custom of the Country: A Reassessment*, 62.

¹⁶⁵ Lee, 1-2.

to think that it is her right to choose a husband and, if not satisfied, show no remorse to move on. That is why she allows herself to engage in subsequent marriages and evidently this could be realised, as Wharton put it, by “always breaking her engagements.”¹⁶⁶ This practice of hers is very defining in terms of her nature as an emblem of the consumerist culture. Bourdieu observes that one’s practices “define” his “taste” in the image of the “types of sports and hobbies, etc.” He adds that also “belongings —furniture, ties, hats, books, portraits, partner, etc.” do the same.¹⁶⁷ That is to say, Undine’s use of marriage and remarriage illustrates how taste has become distorted by the tendency of the consumerist culture to ascribe authenticity to manufactured objects. Elizabeth Outka terms this phenomenon as an attempt to reach the “commodified authentic,”¹⁶⁸ which is in her view paradoxical and self-contradictory.

In highlighting Undine’s practices *vis-à-vis* marriage, Wharton announces her indictment of modernity in terms of mass production which inevitably affected human relationships. To fulfil such an endeavour, Wharton highlights the contrast between Lily Bart, who did her best efforts to acquire labour skills in the millenary, and Undine, who shows absolutely no concern for learning at different levels. When learned and developed, a skill becomes what Ralph Waldo Emerson calls “talent.” In this context, he writes on a Man’s need for talent to secure a productive vocation: “this talent and this call depend on his organization, or the mode in which the general soul incarnates itself in him. He inclines to do something which is easy to him and good when it is done, but which no other man can do.”¹⁶⁹ In a way, Wharton is alluding to America’s transition from devoted production to careless consumption or what David Riesman calls the transition from “craft skill to manipulative skill.”¹⁷⁰ This could be said because while previously every single artefact took time, patience, and handicraft skills to be realised, the mechanisation of such a process eroded any sense of devotion and will to learn. That is, Wharton exposes the flaws of the serial production of supposedly “authentic items,”

¹⁶⁶ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 118.

¹⁶⁷ “الممارسات (أنواع الرياضة وممارسة الهوايات وما إلى ذلك) والممتلكات الشخصية (الأثاث وأربطة العنق والقبعات والكتب واللوحات الفنية) Bourdieu, 261. My translation.

¹⁶⁸ Beth Blum, “Authenticity Gets a Makeover,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 33, no. 3 (2010): 150.

¹⁶⁹ Emerson, 75.

¹⁷⁰ Riesman, 129.

or what is also known as “Fordian culture.”¹⁷¹ Even though, in this instance, I consider marriage as one of the objects being influenced by the age of technology, it is worth noting that for Wharton, the astute human observer as I mentioned in my general introduction,¹⁷² neither the human being nor his human ties will be reduced to mere items. Instead, she believed that the human being is to house authenticity within, a notion that she repeatedly evoked and maintained. If not visible, such authenticity, or “real self” in Wharton’s words, is to remain hidden within one’s “innermost rooms.”¹⁷³

Undine’s practices in terms of marriage, therefore, demonstrate the inauthentic nature of her relationships with a series of husbands. In other words, such relationships are weak and counterfeit and serve temporary objectives such as fame and the yearning for the “gaze of admiration,”¹⁷⁴ to use Wharton’s words. They serve to illustrate her superficiality, or what Thomas Petruso terms the “inauthentic nature of Man’s rapport with the World in technical age.”¹⁷⁵ Such inauthenticity is solidified by the spread culture that is centred on futility in that, as Pierre Bourdieu observes, “the social gaze in not a universal, abstract, objectifying power, like the Sartrean gaze, but a social power, whose efficacy is always partly due to the fact that the receiver recognizes the categories of perception and appreciation it applies to him or her.”¹⁷⁶ Despite such evident weakness, these relationships which are defined by consumerism keep spreading in society. As the following passage illustrates, the means by which “inauthenticity” is rendered, to a large extent, happily accepted in this “Fordian culture” is the effective method of selling items, or objects, through publicity. In this context, it could be said that “promotional culture focused on the use of visual imagery to create value-added

¹⁷¹ According to Bentley, “Wharton expresses an elegiac protest against the rationalizing forces of modernity that seemed to erode civic traditions and impose a deadening order of standardized production and bureaucracy (what Wharton in a letter once called ‘Fordian culture’). She echoes an antimodernism that was one of the keynotes of the decades of American ‘incorporation.’” Bentley, 58.

¹⁷² See my General Introduction, 1.

¹⁷³ See Cain’s reference to Wharton’s view on the woman’s nature, namely as she announced it in “The Fullness of Life” in Cain, 215-216. In “The Fullness of Life” Wharton makes her full point: “But I have sometimes thought that a woman’s nature is like a great house full of rooms: there is the hall, through which everyone passes in going in and out; the drawingroom, where one receives formal visits; the sitting-room, where the members of the family come and go as they list; but beyond that, far beyond, are other rooms, the handles of whose doors perhaps are never turned; no one knows the way to them, no one knows whither they lead; and in the innermost room, the holy of holies, the soul sits alone and waits for a footstep that never comes.” URL: <http://classiclit.about.com/library/bl-etexts/ewharton/bl-ewhar-fulness.htm>.

¹⁷⁴ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 29.

¹⁷⁵ Thomas F. Petruso, “Madame Bovary in the Consumer Society,” *Ca Parle* 1, no. 1 (1985): 46.

¹⁷⁶ Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, 207.

brands or commodity-signs.”¹⁷⁷ All this served a sense of self-amusement and “mirth” to use Wharton’s words:

She wanted to enjoy herself, and her conception of enjoyment was publicity, promiscuity—the band, the banners, the crowd, the close contact of covetous impulses, and the sense of walking among them in cool security. Any personal entanglement might mean “bother,” and bother was the thing she most abhorred.¹⁷⁸

Publicity, or what Wharton calls “hideous advertisements,”¹⁷⁹ appeals, first and foremost, to the eye. In this context, the eye which is a sensory organ in the human being captures what appears and with no means has the capacity to penetrate through the surface of things. With this in mind, consumerist culture relies on publicity to deceive the eye. Therefore, publicity concerns itself only with the superficial side of items to be sold and, hence, renders itself, as David Riesman observed, the “manipulator of people.”¹⁸⁰ For this, what matters is only the pursuit of attraction at the expense of the content or, more precisely, the essence. Undine, therefore, reflects this tendency through her extreme concern with her appearance, namely in terms of fashion as I mentioned before. It is for this very reason that feminist activists called for the just consideration of women in terms of their humane essence rather than looking at them as sexual objects. Wharton seems to highlight this appeal in her discussion of relationships that intersect with marriage. For one thing, Undine’s relationship with Peter Van Degen proves to be temporary, empty, and devoid of any human affection in that he looks at her only for sexual pleasure and never thinks of her as an authentic respectable wife. In this context, it is worth noting that “the concept of authenticity is closely related to the notion of essentialism in that authenticity implies immaculate origins.”¹⁸¹ With this in mind, as Boudrillard put it, “what we live today is publicity swallowing all virtual expressive patterns. That is, all the pure cultural forms and defined words are swallowed in this pattern, because it has no depth and is instant and fast to forget. It is the triumph of the

¹⁷⁷ Barker, 3.

¹⁷⁸ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 129.

¹⁷⁹ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 320.

¹⁸⁰ Riesman, 129.

¹⁸¹ Barker, 9.

superficial form.”¹⁸² I, therefore, compare Undine’s attitudes to George Perec’s advertised object in *Les Choses* (1967). To quote Thomas Petruso:

The “advertised” object in *Les Choses* is given an implied value just by naming of it, particularly in the case of brand name [...]. Thus the objects are surrounded by a sort of aura that is expressed literally in the language of advertising and figuratively in the lighting of a publicity photo or in the arrangement of a shop window.¹⁸³

A crucial fact about publicity is that while it promotes the sales of new products, it implicitly undermines the sales of old ones. For this, while Undine benefits from publicity to grow in the public image, Ralph loses ground in such an image and withers in this consumerist world which is evidently not his. In other words, cultural authenticity that is represented by Ralph cannot be reduced into a mere object which is transferrable from one’s possession to the other. In a complete contrast to *The House of Mirth*’s Lawrence Selden, Ralph’s honesty, as a sign of his originality, prevents him from deceiving anyone by presenting himself as not what he is. In this context, as Theodor Adorno observes, “commodity culture is a form of mass deception that generates standardized reactions that affirm the status quo.”¹⁸⁴ With this in mind, Ralph’s culture as an intrinsic feature remains peculiar to him with no possibility to be transferred to others as the following passage suggests:

As a boy at the sea-side, Ralph, between tides, had once come on a cave—a secret inaccessible place with glaucous lights, mysterious murmurs, and a single shaft of communication with the sky. He had kept his find from the other boys, not churlishly, for he was always an outspoken lad, but because he felt there were things about the cave that the others, good fellows as they all were, couldn’t be expected to understand.¹⁸⁵

Since marriage is based on the balance between husband and wife at different levels, it cannot be maintained in the case of Undine and Ralph. While the latter weighs heavily in terms of cultural legacy, the former has acquired only a temporary magnified beautiful image. Actually, “alongside such images of specialized mastery were equally

¹⁸² “إن مانعشيه اليوم هو ابتلاع نمط الإعلان لكل أنماط التعبير الإفتراضية، فكل الأشكال الثقافية الأصيلة، وكل الكلمات المحددة مبتلعة في هذا Boudrillard, 157. My translation.

¹⁸³ Petruso, “Madame Bovary in the Consumer Society,” 55.

¹⁸⁴ Barker, 2.

¹⁸⁵ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 45-46.

visible expressions of its antithesis, displays of what Mark Seltzer has called ‘melodramas of uncertain agency’: spectacles of a fragmented and diminished sense of self.”¹⁸⁶ Undine has this feeling of cultural inferiority as she allows herself to see her lover Moffatt behind her husband’s back as an act of indecency. In excluding the idea of developing herself and embracing highly regarded manners, Undine points out two important facts about the *Nouveaux Riches*. On the one hand, it could be argued that she remained the same in terms of “cultural capital” before and after her marriage with Ralph. On the other hand, she manifests her awareness that the *nouveaux-riches* like herself and Moffatt prove to have no “capacity” to develop culturally as the following passage suggests:

She felt that in the Marvell set Elmer Moffatt would have been stamped as “not a gentleman.” Nevertheless something in his look seemed to promise the capacity to develop into any character he might care to assume; though it did not seem probable that, for the present, that of a gentleman would be among them. He had always had a brisk swaggering step, and the faintly impudent tilt of the head that she had once thought “dashing”; but whereas this look had formerly denoted a somewhat desperate defiance of the world and its judgments it now suggested an almost assured relation to these powers; and Undine’s heart sank at the thought of what the change implied.¹⁸⁷

In a reminder of what I said in my general introduction, the marriage that joined Undine and Ralph proves to be a complete failure in terms of the mutual responsibility, namely to provide help in the processes involving self-development, education, and self-improvement. As they failed in lifting and developing one another, both of them assumed the consequences. On the one hand, Undine could not capitalise on her marriage to achieve a sense of self that matches her husband’s. On the other hand, Ralph did not help much in transferring his knowledge and more importantly the means and method of its acquisition to his wife. Hence, he did not contribute effectively in assisting her quest for authenticity. With this in mind, the gap between the two goes nowhere but to be emphatically enlarged. Yet, as an idealist, Ralph cannot live up with the idea of losing the woman he thinks he loves. Thus, his inevitable degeneration evokes Wharton’s anxiety over the decline of old values he stands for. In an illustrative manner

¹⁸⁶ Bentley, 11-12.

¹⁸⁷ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 64-65.

and as the last nail in the coffin, Undine seeks divorce to seal the fate of Ralph Marvell, set herself apart from the past, and eventually embrace the future.

2.6. Divorce: Giving up the past

Informed by her scientific inclination, Wharton, in my opinion, shared John Stuart Mill's views on divorce. The latter observed that divorce "was par excellence a vexed one, for it touched upon the religious nature of the marital bond [...] He also knew that Comte considered his views on that issue to be the only 'scientific' alternative to traditional justifications for the indissolubility of marriage."¹⁸⁸ Moreover, Wharton's readings of Darwin guided her to use Ralph's character to account for a higher moral order that is being extinguished.¹⁸⁹ Additionally, in making him involved in a marriage with a person who bears exactly the opposite values, Wharton, convincingly depicted the rising selfishness in American society as a new culture. In a broader sense, the rise of the "divorce culture" is, in my view, Wharton's portrayal of America's voluntary release of its cultural heritage. Her way to allude to this was the association of old Society with the Indian tribes. Like the Indians, Ralph's tribe, namely old families living in Washington Square, was dying. Through his disintegration and eventual divorce with Undine, the writer allowed herself to demonstrate the difficulty of the reconciliation between consumerist and old Americas.

As Cecelia Tichi put it, "the plot of *The Custom of the Country* is thus cyclical, but the axis of the novel is a socially Darwinian fault line, which is based precisely on Ralph's presupposition of Darwin's binary distinction between lower and higher natures."¹⁹⁰ On the one hand, the higher nature is scarce in the world that is described by the novel and is, without doubt, personified by Ralph Marvell whose delicacy appears in his disregard to triviality through his self-control, or what Wharton calls "self-

¹⁸⁸ Vincent Guillin, *Auguste Comte and John Stuart Mill on Sexual Equality: Historical, Methodological and Philosophical Issues*, Studies in the History of Political Thought, (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2009), 11.

¹⁸⁹ Wharton's readings on philosophy, history, and science are non-contested. I support my claim with her own words through which she tells us: "...but the books which made the strongest impression on me doubtless because they reached a part of my mind that no one had thought of arousing were two shabby volumes unearthed among my brother's college text-books: an abridgement of Sir William Hamilton's 'History of Philosophy' and a totally forgotten work called 'Coppée's Elements of Logic'. This first introduction to the technique of thinking developed the bony structure about which my vague gelatinous musings could cling and take shape; and Darwin and Pascal, Hamilton and Coppée ranked foremost among my Awakeners." Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 71-72.

¹⁹⁰ Cecelia Tichi, "Emerson, Darwin, and the *Custom of the Country*," in *A Historical Guide to Edith Wharton*, ed. Carol J. Singley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 96-97.

restraint.”¹⁹¹ As his name overtly suggests, Wharton seems to “refer to Emerson - and to Emerson’s poet Walt Whitman.”¹⁹² Ralph, therefore, evokes Wharton’s perpetual concern with the preservation of Old America’s heritage, a fact confirmed by his “growing tendency to keep his [intellect] to himself.”¹⁹³ Yet, under the impact of modernity, Wharton developed an anxiety *vis-à-vis* her Society’s efficiency in resisting change. That is, in a confirmation of Marx’s views on the impact of modernity on society,¹⁹⁴ the integrity of Ralph and by extension the Society he stands for would be challenged. In many ways this is a fulfilment of the prophecy of “Marx’s vision, [that] modernity is not an issue limited within an area or part of society, but a social issue concerned with the integrity of society.”¹⁹⁵

As such, like later Kate Clephane in *The Mother’s Recompense’s* (1925), Ralph Marvell disintegrates due to his divorce with Undine Spragg to raise Wharton’s “conservative critique.”¹⁹⁶ Since such a tendency, that is, conservatism, affirms interest in cultural legacy, Wharton alludes to this past exclusively by the character of Ralph Marvell, who “sometimes called his mother and grandfather, [i.e., his own Society,] the Aborigines.”¹⁹⁷ Therefore, his primordial importance to the narrative stems from what Wharton considered as a last chance to preserve the past though with little hope as she herself tells us:

When I was young it used to seem to me that the group in which I grew up was like an empty vessel into which no new wine would ever again be poured. Now I see that one of its uses lay in preserving a few drops of an old vintage too rare to be savoured by a youthful palate; and I should like to atone for my unappreciativeness by trying to revive that faint fragrance.¹⁹⁸

On the other hand, the lower nature is imbedded within Wharton’s portrayal of Undine’s selfishness and superficiality, which eventually leads her to divorce only to serve as an indictment of the consumerist culture.¹⁹⁹ By depicting multiple facets of

¹⁹¹ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 41.

¹⁹² Singley, *Edith Wharton: Matters of Mind and Spirit*, 17.

¹⁹³ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 109-110.

¹⁹⁴ See Marx’s views on the impact of modernity on society, my first chapter, 84.

¹⁹⁵ Xing, “A Contemporary Interpretation of Marx’s Thoughts on Modernity,” 255.

¹⁹⁶ Singley, *Edith Wharton’s the House of Mirth: A Casebook*, 319.

¹⁹⁷ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 43.

¹⁹⁸ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 5.

¹⁹⁹ See pages 112, 115, 118.

consumerism and its repercussions on society, namely in terms of marriage, Wharton is addressing the rise of perversity. In this context, it is worth noting that “ [Henry] James anticipates such an extremity; his novels and tales move relentlessly toward the perversity of family and marital relations one finds in *The Aspern Papers* (1888), *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), and *The Golden Bowl* (1904).”²⁰⁰ That is, according to both writers, men and women have become corrupted with the age’s social diseases. While Ralph Marvell’s life revolved around the sanctity of marriage, Undine’s “life, in contrast to her husband’s, is by definition parasitic and vicarious,”²⁰¹ to use Elizabeth Ammons words. As such, in many ways, Undine comes to realise that her choice in marriage was incompatible with her tenet and, hence, fell below her expectations and ambitions as the following passage illustrates:²⁰²

During the three years since her marriage she had learned to make distinctions unknown to her girlish categories. She had found out that she had given herself to the exclusive and the dowdy when the future belonged to the showy and the promiscuous; that she was in the case of those who have cast in their lot with a fallen cause.²⁰³

Ralph and Undine, therefore, stand for different moral standards which were well reflected on their way of life. While Ralph’s concerns revolved, first and foremost, around the needs and necessity, “his wife’s daily requirements, combined with her intermittent outbreaks of extravagance, had thrown out all his calculations.”²⁰⁴ Put differently, the couple’s attitudes represent the transition of America from a culture that primarily concerns itself with the fulfilment of human being’s needs, be they spiritual or material, to a culture that is driven by excess. Thus, Wharton resorted reluctantly to divorce to set them apart.²⁰⁵ More importantly, no wonder that in a world where individuals’ expectations are high, “loveless marriages ought to end in divorce,” to use

²⁰⁰ John Carlos Rowe, *The Theoretical Dimensions of Henry James*, The Wisconsin Project on American Writers (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 89.

²⁰¹ Ammons, “The Business of Marriage in Edith Wharton’s *the Custom of the Country*,” 328.

²⁰² Stephanie Coontz points out the fact that unfulfilled expectations are the primal reason behind the failure of marriages. See Chapter 1, 76.

²⁰³ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 111.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

²⁰⁵ One can notice here the similarity between Christianity and Islam in terms of the moral bases of marriage. They share the reluctance to proceed to divorce except as a last resort to solve conflictual marriage. In both religions, marriage cannot continue to exist without “maintaining morality and purity, love and mercy, and equality and balance.” “صيانة الأخلاق والعفة، المودة والرحمة بين الزوجين، التكافؤ بين الزوجين.” Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 1949. Trans. How a Woman Thinks (Alexandria, Egypt: Arab Publishing Centre, 2012), 9. My translation.

Stephanie Coontz words.²⁰⁶ Actually, since the beginning of their courtship such a way out was, to some extent, laid the ground for through her father's prophecy, or in business terms through his speculation in that "at such short notice, to bridge the gap between young Marvell's allowance and Undine's requirements; and her father's immediate conclusion was that the engagement had better be broken off."²⁰⁷

In American literature, divorce as an important emerging social phenomenon was richly examined. William Dean Howells's *A Modern Instance* (1882), which is "considered by many as 'the first full length divorce novel of merit,'"²⁰⁸ depicts the disintegration of marriage because of the temptations of the modern world. More importantly, divorce, as the opponent of marriage if I may say, embodies exactly the opposites of caring, devotion, and compassion, the qualities that I treated in the traditional marriage as an emulation of the sacred bond with God. Hence, as William Dean Howells clearly points out, divorce is associated with the devil and the temptation that, according to Christian tradition, led to man's fall as the following passage illustrates:

The transport broke in tears; the denunciation had turned to entreaty in everything but words; but Bartley had hardened his heart now past all entreaty. The idiotic penitent that he had been a few moments ago the soft, well-meaning dolt was so far from him now as to be scarce within the reach of his contempt. He was going to have this thing over once for all; he would have no mercy upon himself or upon her; the Devil was in him and uppermost in him, and the Devil is fierce and proud, and knows how to make many base emotions feel like a just self-respect.²⁰⁹

For such reasons, that is, the moral implications, divorce was not really welcomed in established society. In particular, old society often measured the damaging effect of divorce in terms of its impact on the others and their consequent perception of the divorced. More importantly, the extent to which divorce affected the lives of children was a primal concern for old families, while it was marginalised and neglected by the *nouveaux riches*. It is not surprising, then, seeing Undine showing extreme indifference

²⁰⁶ Coontz, 8.

²⁰⁷ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 73.

²⁰⁸ Debra Ann MacComb's essay "Is Nothing Sacred? Dissolving Bo(u)nds in American Divorce Fiction, 1880-1920:" in Karl Leydecker and Nicholas White, *After Intimacy: The Culture of Divorce in the West since 1789, European Connections* (Oxford ; New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 138.

²⁰⁹ Howells, *Novels, 1875-1886*, 489.

to the well-being of her own son, Paul. To show her protest against such attitudes, Wharton, as a Puritan-minded human being before anything else, did not have easiness with divorce when it is not thoroughly justified. This idea is grounded on the fact that divorce, as Nevius Blake noted, “was one of the convenient arrangements introduced by the *nouveau riche* invaders of her old New York as a solution to marital issues.”²¹⁰

It could be maintained that in *A Modern Instance* as well as in *The Custom of the Country* divorce “would mean ruin and disaster,”²¹¹ yet Wharton enriched her commentary with her insights into the “trans-Atlantic” marital relationships. Particularly, in her work “divorce performed for female social advancement.”²¹² It is worth noting that while social aspirations are legitimate, it is the path leading to them which was often marred with immoral practices. In the process, divorce endangers tradition in that Undine bears much of the “invading culture” of *nouveaux-riches*, which relies on a perpetual look at the future, but with “no final goals.”²¹³ As such, in looking only to the future, Undine divorces the past in an emphatic manner. In one scene in the novel, which is illustrative of the contrast between old America that Ralph and his mother stand for and the new America of Undine, divorce could be seen as an unthinkable outlet for the former, while regarded as an easy practice for the latter in the pursuit of “self-satisfaction” as the following passage demonstrates:

“RALPH!” his mother breathed; then, turning to Undine, she said with a constrained smile: “I believe in certain parts of the country such—unfortunate arrangements—are beginning to be tolerated. But in New York, in spite of our growing indifference, a divorced woman is still—thank heaven!—at a decided disadvantage.”

Undine’s eyes opened wide. Here at last was a topic that really interested her, and one that gave another amazing glimpse into the camera obscura of New York society. “Do you mean to say Mabel would be worse off, then? Couldn’t she even go round as much as she does now?”

Mrs. Marvell met this gravely. “It would depend, I should say, on the kind of people she wished to see.”

“Oh, the very best, of course! That would be her only object.”

Ralph interposed with another laugh. “You see, Undine, you’d better think twice before you divorce me!”

²¹⁰ Nevius, “Ethan Frome and the Themes of Edith Wharton’s Fiction,” 202.

²¹¹ Amrane, 276.

²¹² Malcolm Bradbury, “The Customs of the Country”, *The New York Times* URL:<http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/02/02/reviews/970202.02bradbut.html>.

²¹³ Freeman, 53-54.

“RALPH!” his mother again breathed; but the girl, flushed and sparkling, flung back: “Oh, it all depends on YOU! Out in Apex, if a girl marries a man who don’t come up to what she expected, people consider it’s to her credit to want to change. YOU’D better think twice of that!”²¹⁴

According to R.W.B Lewis, this idea of divorce with the past in American context appears in the works of Henry James. Thus, taking into consideration the literary relationship between the latter and Wharton as I mentioned in my general introduction,²¹⁵ we expect the influence of such an idea on Wharton’s depiction of Undine Spragg and her attitude towards divorce:

R.W.B Lewis has argued, America reveals in the belief in the future and the new world, a world in which an American Adam can forge his identity from scratch, divorcing his identity from history. One of the primary reasons James repeatedly placed his novels in Europe is because he believed America’s novelty and “equality” left little for the novelist, whose subject was the relation of the past to the present and the individual in society, to write about.²¹⁶

Despite her formal success in the management of marriage as a recurrent process of implementation and annulment, that is, engaging and breaking up, Undine remains unhappy. For one thing, she has grown deficient, namely in terms of a clear vision on the future, which in turn destabilised her real existence rendering it a mere collection of fragments of life. This argument is confirmed by Undine’s surprising dissatisfaction with what she has achieved socially. As she contemplates a new prestigious marriage, the signs indicate that she will be denied such aspirations simply because such a marriage requires the “cultural authenticity” she lacks, as revealed in the following passage:

She turned to give herself a last look in the glass, saw the blaze of her rubies, the glitter of her hair, and remembered the brilliant names on her list. But under all the dazzle a tiny black cloud remained. 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; and as she advanced to welcome her first guests she said to herself that it was the one part she was really made for.²¹⁷

²¹⁴ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 57.

²¹⁵ See Chapter 1, 36.

²¹⁶ Freeman, 54.

²¹⁷ Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 343.

At last, Undine comes to recognise that despite her noteworthy practical sense that culminated in her “succeeding” in a “list” of marriages,²¹⁸ she will always remain needy for what Lily Bart has, that is, refinement and cultural legacy. In a way, she is to remain like wilderness when not tamed by culture. While her remarkable success in the enactment of marriages grants her the joy and pleasures of modern life in their primitive sense, a sense of regret and guilt could be felt in the closing lines of the novel. For this, the decline of culture is always associated with the sense of guilt which often involves subsequent state of passivity. In Kantian sense, passivity is the opposite of Enlightenment and progress. That is, as the individual refrains from thinking and contemplating, he or she, without noticing it, becomes immature and lazy. In this context, Kant writes on passive individuals like Undine:

It is so easy to be immature. If I have a book that has understanding for me, a pastor who has a conscience for me, a doctor who judges my diet for me, and so forth, surely I do not need to trouble myself. I have no need to think, if only I can pay; others will take over the tedious business for me.²¹⁹

In being passive, Undine is well aware of what she is missing. Even emerging very late, this feeling of guilt stresses Wharton’s peculiar way to extricate human essence even from characters assumably not really capable of attracting our sympathy. In reference to Lily Bart’s naturalness of feelings and good taste, Undine who at first glance appears a victorious woman is emphatically a tragic figure and the victim of social change that forced itself upon her. In this context, it is worth noting that change is a non-contested reality. Yet, in my view, what the human being can do about it is prudence and preparation, which, if well contemplated, might lead to predictable results in the future. However, Wharton seems to avoid any discussion of this issue. She contents herself with pointing out Undine’s late recognition. This way she allows herself to give her some credit in that she comes to evoke an important idea, that is, the ultimate goal of marriage is the assurance of a real future instead of a moment of joy. Again, Wharton confirms her stand as a social observer and not as a critic. For one thing, she puts emphasis on Undine’s failure to find real happiness in marriage only to evoke the

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Schmidt, 58.

cultural dilemma of America in the opening years of the twentieth century in terms of the definition of a good marriage.

2.7. Conclusion

In raising concerns over the spread of the “divorce culture,” Wharton evoked through marriage and its underlying practices, be they before or after enactment, the clash between a past Old America with a future consumerist America at the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth century. *The Custom of the Country*, therefore, demonstrates the practical sense of Undine Spragg in terms of marriage, which often results in her successful social mobility.

Yet, Undine, as an emblem of social change and representative of the emerging *nouveaux-riches*, embodies also the decline of morality and personifies the future’s uncertainty as well as the lack of Lily’s qualities, that is, stability, taste, and refinement. As such, she and her ultimate husband Elmer Moffatt set about in different but convergent quests, from male and female angles, to negotiate a place in modernity as a unity in the form of the institution of marriage. On the one hand, thinking that human relationships in the image of marriage are analogous to business deals, they eagerly seek the acquisition of “cultural capital,” to use Pierre Bourdieu’s words. Their rationale is an urgency raised by their need to compensate for their cultural weakness. On the other hand, they break away from tradition in a desperate quest for the authenticity they never achieve. This could be said because defined by consumerist culture, their conception of the self and the other follows the same pattern that defines any object being manufactured, attributed a price, and specified a period of usability. That is, like an object, the human being becomes valued according to the circumstances and, hence, falls under the tenets of consumerism. Marriage, therefore, does not swerve from this posture and becomes, itself, a commercial relationship that is bond to the fluctuations of the market. More importantly, happiness might be yielded at good moments of marriage, but as soon as the said “value” of a partner decreases, the marital bonds break and both poles of the fallen marriage start over. In a way, this is a metaphor for America giving up its past and looking for new prospects which are not clearly defined.

Finally, I conclude that as Americans turned to display and consumption with disregard to morality, Wharton expressed anxiety over her Society’s posture *vis-à-vis* the central social institution of marriage. In her view, this institution has always served,

first and foremost, as the foundation of American society in terms of guiding morality and, more importantly, as a safe valve at times of hardships. To escape such worries, in my view, she tried to find refuge in the past she was unmistakably fascinated with. This very idea will make the core and substance of my next chapter in which I will suggest Wharton's vision of a possible way out that, in my opinion, finds grounds in the past. My undertaking will, in particular, rely on the examination of marriage in one of her finest novels, *Ethan Frome* (1911).

CHAPTER III:

Ethan Frome: Negotiating a way out of entrapment

One may [...] hope that the children, or the grandchildren [...] will go back to the old sources of culture and wisdom—not as a duty, but with burning desire.¹

—Willa Cather,
“Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle” (1923)

¹ Steve Shively and Virgil Albertini, “About the Cover Teaching Cather,” *Teaching Cather* 1, no. 2 (2001).

3.1. Introduction

In *Ethan Frome* (1911), Wharton's escapism manifests itself as she revisits New England as an alternative to the closeness and limitations of the city. That is to say, even though the city catches the eyes with its spectacle, it is, as Jean Boudrillard noted, marred with anomalies such as "fires, wars, plagues, revolutions, crimes, and catastrophes."¹ In other words, Wharton sets herself free in nature for experimentation in style and matter to imagine alternatives to the marred life in the city and, hence, to envisage potential ways out of such a reality, in particular *vis-à-vis* the marriage question. In seeking transcendence, she wants to leave what is temporary and seek what is lasting. In a way, she is reincarnating the old rivalry between "the eternal city of God and the perishing city of the world."² The greenness of the "city of God" is to be found only in nature on which Wharton tells us:

My secret sensitiveness to the landscape something in me quite incommunicable to others, that was tremblingly and inarticulately awake to every detail of wind-warped fern and wide-eyed briar rose, yet more profoundly alive to a unifying magic beneath the diversities of the visible scene—a power with which I was in deep and solitary communion whenever I was alone with nature.³

On one level, her endeavour proves to be a practical one that rests upon real data which is tested and extricated from the, generally agreed upon, successful Puritan experience. This could be said because early American colonists defied the hardships of the new world, established new families along their own ideals of marriage,⁴ and laid the grounds for a culture that would strive to survive and continue to thrive to remain influential until Wharton's time. On another level, Wharton's approach, while also Puritan in essence, is slightly different from her ancestors in that, as Carol Singley noted, it relies, to some extent, on "platonic ideals."⁵

Wharton's experimentation, which, in my view, makes of her an *avant-garde* modernist whose narrative on marriage in *Ethan Frome* is, to a large extent, rich and

¹ "وهكذا هي حال المدينة، فالحرائق والحروب والطاعون والثورات والهامشية الجرمية والكوارث، باختصار كل إشكالية معاداة المدينة وإشكالية Boudrillard, 137. My translation. "سلبية المدينة الداخلية أو الخارجية هي إشكالية تحمل سمة بدائية بالمقارنة مع النمط الحقيقي لفنائها"

² Schaff, v.

³ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 54.

⁴ See my discussion of "Marriage: a sacred institution" in the first chapter, 26.

⁵ Singley, *Edith Wharton: Matters of Mind and Spirit*, 12.

complex. Starting from this ground, the need for more theoretical insight into marriage proves to be a necessity to decipher her vision. As such, I chose to rely on William C. Nichols, Jr.'s model of marital relationships. His theory rests on his interpretation of marriage in terms of attraction that he divided into two categories: pathological and healthy types of relationships. For the sake of clarity, I quote him as follows:

In our attempts to understand marriage and its processes of attraction and retention from a psychological perspective, we must account for three things. With some overlap and blurring of borders, these are: 1. Pathological attraction and continuation in marital relationships, 2. Healthy (positive) attraction and continuation in marital relationships, and 3. Models of relationships and their effects. Models of relationships are a middling factor in that they may be either pathological or healthy in nature and in their effects.⁶

Taking into consideration the ambiguity one faces in reading *Ethan Frome*, I deem it adequate, therefore, to take Nichols, Jr.'s approach to separate two contradictory views on marriage that surface out of a first exploration of the novel. Hence, to soften the transition from one fold to the other, I endeavour to establish a logic of transition to blend these perspectives and reach a thorough understanding of Wharton's depiction of marriage in this particular oeuvre. Accordingly, I suggest three readings of *Ethan Frome* which are outlined by a pattern based on the following order: illusion of entrapment in marriage, process of escapism, and then the return to reality. My purpose is to achieve a final thought about Wharton's vision, that is, a possible way out of both the decline of marriage and its associated cultural dilemma which, basically, my previous chapters have highlighted.

In a first step, I focus on the "pathological attraction" between Zeena and Frome. That is to say, I will shed light on the concept of marriage as a trap to show how Frome as an individual is a prisoner of rigid social codes in his marriage and, above all, a prisoner of his own conception of marriage. I will then move to examine marriage as a fantasised escape involving Ethan and Zeena's cousin Mattie Silver, a reminder of Emma Bovary's fantasies about love and marriage.⁷ Lastly, in continuation to Nichols, Jr.'s guidelines, my culminating reading will explore the "healthy attraction" between

⁶ Jr. William C. Nichols, "The Marriage Relationship," *The Family Coordinator* 27, no. 2 (1978): 186.

⁷ See my discussion on the concept of Bovaryism in my General Introduction, 19.

the very Zeena and Frome as witness of Wharton's power to cast goodness in characters who, at first glance, seem to be devoid of feelings and empathy. Thus, I will show that Wharton considered realistic Protestant marriage which imbedded and manifested communal ethos as fulfilling, lasting, and more sustaining to society.

Before I get into these readings, I will first concern myself with some insights into Wharton's approach to build the narrative of and imbed complex meanings and visions in *Ethan Frome*. My rationale behind this structural design is that I will build upon such a complexity to elicit the adequate substance to feed my different analyses of marriage in *Ethan Frome*, all of which will converge to construct a unified Whartonian conception of ideal marital relationships. In many ways, these readings reinforce my discussion of marriage in the previous chapters.

3.2. *Ethan Frome*: The triumph of Wharton's nostalgic narrative

The distinct value of *Ethan Frome* stems not only from the setting *per se*, that is, Wharton's departure from the city and return to nature, but also from the transcendent journey into an Edenic setting that forcefully reminds us of the Bellomont in *The House of Mirth*,⁸ or what she prefers to call "Old gardens."⁹ With regard to the testimony New England pays to a glorified exceptional cultural legacy, without doubt, Wharton wrote the novel out of her nostalgia for and love of the American pastoral, because, as she herself put it, "for year I had wanted to draw life as it really was in the derelict mountain villages of New England, a life even in my time, and a thousand fold more a generation."¹⁰ In this context, it is worth noting that Wharton asserts herself and provides evidence for her independent spirit in that despite the advice of her inspirer Henry James who urged her to write about what he called "the immediate, the real, the ours, the yours, the novelist's that it waits for,"¹¹ she clung to her opinion and followed her intuition in her return to the origins of the American experience in time and space.

The novel, therefore, manifested Wharton's growth as a remarkable American writer in that she "blended the psychological refinements she had learned from Henry James with her own inimitable ability to tell a story with a beginning and an end [...]"

⁸ I discussed the Bellomont earlier in terms of its connotations associated with idealism. See Chapter 1, 61

⁹ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 343.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 293.

¹¹ Zacharias, 210.

comparable only to the work of Nathaniel Hawthorne as a tragedy of New England life.”¹² According to Carol Singley, Wharton’s distinctive style is further evidenced through her outstanding use of narrative techniques to account for Frome’s story.¹³ I will, in turn, carry out my undertaking along the lines mentioned. That is, since Frome’s story is by implication his marriage story,¹⁴ I will rely on Wharton’s peculiar use of the narrator to explain her views on marriage. The opening passage of the novel is illustrative in this regard, that is, in the capacity of showing that Wharton is reconstructing images of marriage. Hence, the narrative is structurally self-defined right from the start. In other words, the narrator actually confesses that what he knows is a reconstructed image of what actually happened:

I had the story, bit by bit, from various people, and, as generally happens in such cases, each time it was a different story. If you know Starkfield, Massachusetts, you know the post-office. If you know the post-office you must have seen Ethan Frome drive up to it, drop the reins on his hollow-backed bay and drag himself across the brick pavement to the white colonnade: and you must have asked who he was.¹⁵

That said, I would argue that through the visions of the narrator, Wharton was able to develop different narratives on marriage as I mentioned. While the first one portrays marriage as a trap. When I say “as” instead of “is,” I mean this perspective points out to an illusionary vision. The second one suggests an escape into fantasies or at least an attempt to. I discern between a fantasised escape, that is, a process of self-distancing from a non-accepted reality, and a real way out, which is Frome’s conciliation with his reality. I qualify the latter outlet as real in that it is based on a factual way of life that existed and then under the impact of time self-transformed into memories. In my view, in resorting to memories, Wharton engages in a subtle attempt to revive the old marriage that existed in the dying past and, hence, comes to touch upon more than

¹² “Edith Wharton, 75, Is Dead in France,” *The New York Times*, August 13, 1937. URL: <http://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/bday/0124.html>.

¹³ Alik Barnstone, Michael Tomasek Manson, and Carol J. Singley, *The Calvinist Roots of the Modern Era* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1997), 175.

¹⁴ I argue that Frome’s story is his marriage story because all his life was defined by his marriage. That is, all his crucial and defining decisions were related to his marriage, namely his resort to sacrifice his intellectual aspirations as well as his freedom. Also, his pursuit of happiness, as an “unalienable right” to quote the *Declaration of Independence*, was closely related to his relationship with Mattie, a potential prospect of marriage. More importantly, his suicidal attempt and final fate were without doubt the outcome of his marriage story.

¹⁵ Edith Wharton, *Ethan Frome* (1911. Rpt, San Diego: Icon Group International, Inc., 2005), 3.

one point in my discussion of old marriage in the first chapter. In this context, it is worth noting that, as Wharton observes, “as long as the scenes or incidents remembered are distant enough to revive a lost touch of local colour, or of vanished customs, to enlarge on them may be excusable.”¹⁶

This idea of visions is actually evoked by Elizabeth Ammons’s reading of the novel as a “fairy tale.”¹⁷ A claim that is also reinforced by other critics in the image of Cynthia Griffin, who tells us that “we are not permitted to believe that the narrator is recounting a history of something that actually happened; we are not given leave to speculate that he is passing along a confidence obtained in the dark intimacy of a cold winter’s night.”¹⁸ With this sense of ambiguity raised by the novel, one could understand why a good deal of criticism focused on the gloomy atmosphere of the novel, which “was greeted with mixed reviews, and it was later subjected to a scathing assessment by critic Lionel Trilling, who called it a ‘dead book’ with no moral basis.”¹⁹ Yet, what sets my view apart and makes of it a suggestive addition is that I am inclined to read it as a nostalgic longing for the past placed against a gloomy backdrop, that is, I endeavour to blend two rivalling commentaries. For one thing, this backdrop serves, first and foremost, as a facilitating device for recognition and contrasting frame accounting for the cultural problem America was facing, with marriage being no exception. I add to this conceptualisation that Wharton’s quest for spiritual revival coincides with New England’s. Thus, her endeavour paralleled the yearning of this vital part of the country to reconstruct and celebrate its glorious past. Based on extra-textual data, I would point out her fascination with this past which she found, as Hermione Lee noted, in “the surrounding countryside, its mountainous beauty, its extremes of wealth and rural poverty and small-town industrial hardship.”²⁰

¹⁶ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 334.

¹⁷ Suzanne J. Fournier, *Edith Wharton’s Ethan Frome: A Reference Guide* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 2006), 139.

¹⁸ Martha C. Carpentier and Barbara Ozieblo, *Disclosing Intertextualities: The Stories, Plays, and Novels of Susan Glaspell* (Editions Rodopi, 2006), 73.

¹⁹ “Wharton, Edith 1862-1937: Ethan Frome” URL:<http://www.encyclopedia.com/article-1G2-2859900013/wharton-edith-1862-1937.html>.

²⁰ Hermione Lee, “Estates of Mind”, *The Guardian* URL:<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/aug/07/classics.edithwharton1> (2014).

It is out of these hardships that early Puritans developed their determination to resist difficulties with perseverance and look with “an eye of wisdom to the future,” as Ibn Khaldun put it.²¹ I evoke Ibn Khaldun whose physical existence makes him belong to the mediaeval age but, above all, his thought spanned back and forth over the years to link antiquity with the nineteenth century in which modern Western thought, including Edith Wharton’s, finds grounds. To say it differently, as Leo Strauss believes, reliance on medieval philosophers is a recognition of their contribution “to the treasure of knowledge and insight which has been accumulated throughout the ages.”²² In a complete agreement with his teacher, Allan Bloom²³ considered the “Arabic view of ancient thought which is so often mentioned but so rarely studied. It is of interest to the serious student of philosophy as well as to the historian.”²⁴ Like Ralph Waldo Emerson who glorified the antique world and said of it: “the Grecian state is the era of the bodily nature, the perfection of the senses,—of the spiritual nature unfolded in strict unity with the body,”²⁵ Wharton admired and respected the past. She, therefore, embraced its philosophy and looked into it for wisdom and inspiration. For one thing, she turned with eagerness to one of the core ideals of the American experience, that is, “the pursuit of happiness,” originally coined by John Locke and eventually celebrated as a quintessential American quest. More importantly, as the *Declaration of Independence* clearly asserts, the pursuit of happiness extends to embrace a universal dimension.²⁶ To fulfil such universal quest, Benjamin Franklin pointed out the role marriage plays in one’s well-being. As a matter of fact, in “Advice to a Friend on Choosing a Mistress” (1745), he went further to make of marriage the equal of prescribed medicines to serve

²¹ See more on Ibn Khaldun’s thought on the influence of the climate on the human being hereafter, 175.

²² Leo Strauss, “How to Study Medieval Philosophy,” *Interpretation* 23, no. 3 (1994): 322.

²³ According to Wikipedia.org, American philosopher Allan Bloom was a student of Leo Strauss. URL: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allan_Bloom. Interestingly, renowned Leo Strauss “was a German-American political philosopher and classicist who specialized in classical political philosophy...Originally trained in the neo-Kantian tradition with Ernst Cassirer and immersed in the work of the phenomenologists Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, Strauss later focused his research on the Greek texts of Plato and Aristotle, retracing their interpretation through medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophy and encouraging the application of those ideas to contemporary political theory.” URL: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leo_Strauss.

²⁴ Bloom, ix.

²⁵ Emerson, 16.

²⁶ According to the website, “The pursuit of happiness,” John Locke coined the phrase ‘pursuit of happiness,’ in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689).

URL: <http://www.pursuit-of-happiness.org/history-of-happiness/john-locke/>.

as a remedy for some social anomalies, which could develop into actual diseases, namely psychological in nature.²⁷ To quote him:

I know of no medicine to diminish the violent natural inclinations you mention; and if I did, I think I should not communicate it to you. Marriage is the proper Remedy. It is the most natural state of man, and therefore the state in which [individuals] are most likely to find solid happiness. Your reasons against entering into it at present, appear to me not well-founded. The circumstantial advantages you have in view by postponing it, are not only uncertain, but they are small in comparison with that of the thing itself, the being married and settled.²⁸

According to John Stuart Mill, the institution which fostered the principles of “sympathy, tenderness, and loving forgetfulness of self” was the family.²⁹ That is to say, as he viewed it, such institution made marriage flourish under the bonds of “human love.” Taking into consideration the period Mill was addressing, it could be inferred that he meant in particular the extended family of good old days, that is, a high point in the curve of American civilisation.³⁰ In this period, the civil virtue and values which were inspired from the pastoral way of life outlined the daily life of Americans. In this context, Ralph Waldo Emerson shows his appreciation and respect for what he considered as the natural qualities of generosity and simplicity driven from nature:

These men fan the flame of human love and raise the standard of civil virtue among mankind. But hospitality must be for service and not for show, or it pulls down the host. The brave soul rates itself too high to value itself by the splendor of its table and draperies. It gives what it hath, and all it hath, but its own majesty can lend a better grace to bannocks and fair water than belong to city feasts.³¹

Such an American past, as I mentioned in the first chapter, revolved around Christian tradition,³² which stressed that marriage mainly relies on covenant love, that is, an agreement of commitment and loyalty. Such claim could be further supported by Shaunti Feldhahn’s treatise on marriage in *The Surprising Secrets of Highly Happy*

²⁷ See my discussion on psychological diseases, 170.

²⁸ Benjamin Franklin and Walter Isaacson, *A Benjamin Franklin Reader* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 125.

²⁹ Frederick Rosen, *Mill, Founders of Modern Political and Social Thought* (2013), 238.

³⁰ See my argument on the cyclic pattern of civilisation in my previous chapter, 122.

³¹ Emerson, 132.

³² See my first chapter, 26.

Marriages (2013). As she observed in this work, “highly happy couples tend to put God at the center of their marriage and focus on Him, rather than on their marriage or spouse, for fulfillment and happiness.”³³ However, Stephanie Coontz discerns some functional attributes of this traditional marriage in the real world. Thus for her, “marriage was not primarily about individual needs and desires of a man and woman and the children they produced. Marriage had as much to do with getting good in-laws and increasing one’s family labor as it did with finding a lifetime companion and raising a beloved child.”³⁴ My comment on the argument proposed by Coontz is that while it appears slightly different from Shaunti’s vision of a happy marriage which I hold as valid in the context of my study, the truth is that both visions are perfectly homogenous. For one thing, the focus on God as central to the institution involves, by necessity, the love of children, the yearning for companionship, and the sense of community, all of which are made in the image of God in Christian tradition.

It is worth noting that despite her strong convictions about and faith on the old way of life, Wharton’s endeavour to find reconciliation with the past, namely the Puritan ethos, through marriage cannot be fulfilled peacefully or as expected because of the distortion imposed by modernity.³⁵ Such a change was partially inflicted by the main event of the nineteenth century, that is, industrialisation, which “transformed the United States from a country of small and isolated communities scattered across [three] million square miles of continental territory into a compact economic and industrial unit.”³⁶ As such, the novel gives much attention to one event that is associated with distortion *per se*, that is, the very arrival of the narrator whose “job [is] connected with the big powerhouse at Corbury Junction,”³⁷ a vocation that alludes to the coming of technology.

Like the narrator who relies often on the superficial, that is, the stories about people, Modernity touches, first and foremost, upon the appearances and suggests no

³³ Shaunti Christine Feldhahn, *The Surprising Secrets of Highly Happy Marriages: The Little Things That Make a Big Difference*, First Edition. ed. (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Multnomah Books, 2013), 178 as cited in:

Ed Stetzer, “Marriage, Divorce, and the Church: What Do the Stats Say, and Can Marriage Be Happy?” URL: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2014/february/marriage-divorce-and-body-of-christ-what-do-stats-say-and-c.html?paging=off>.

³⁴ Coontz, 6.

³⁵ See my first chapter, 81.

³⁶ Fournier, 2.

³⁷ Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, 5.

real alternatives to the essence. For this, I hold that its effect is distortion and not transformation. Accordingly, in my view, this distortion is imbedded in Wharton's narrative on the lives of the villagers of Starkfield. As much as the narrator's vision is blurred,³⁸ the villagers' own way of life is. With this in mind, it could be said that they have become neither associated with the agrarian tenets nor fully ready for change. In line with this meaning, in *Outline of American Literature*, the farmers' ordeal is revealed a great deal:

Farmers, too, saw themselves struggling against the "money interests" of the East, the so-called robber barons like J.P. Morgan and John D. Rockefeller. Their eastern banks tightly controlled mortgages and credit so vital to western development and agriculture, while railroad companies charged high prices to transport farm products to the cities. The farmer gradually became an object of ridicule, lampooned as an unsophisticated "hick" or "rube."³⁹

Starting from the point revealed by the quotation above, it could be said that modernity, by providing the city with the means to produce, particularly through the invention of mass production lines,⁴⁰ made the villagers more and more dependent and less and less self-reliant. That is, they marked their increasing departure from Ralph Waldo Emerson's celebration of the individual's sense of autonomy through self-reliance. As such, instead of relying on themselves as they used to be, they began to look towards the city as a source of an easier life and comfort. Thus, the perpetual rise in the villagers' dependence on the city, made them turn away from Frome's mill and the crops he produced. Eventually, his farm inevitably headed into decline as the following passage suggests:

There the silence had deepened about him year by year. Left alone, after his father's accident, to carry the burden of farm and mill, he had had no time for convivial loiterings in the village; and when his mother fell ill the loneliness of the house grew more oppressive than that of the fields.⁴¹

Without much possibilities, Frome is to remain captive of his farm in decline. The impact of such an entanglement would inevitably affect the Fromes' marriage as a

³⁸ For more detail on the distortion of the narrator's visions, see this chapter, 161.

³⁹ VanSpanckeren and Agency, 47.

⁴⁰ See my discussion on "Fordian Culture" in my second chapter, 144.

⁴¹ Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, 40.

whole. Thus, my endeavour in the following paragraphs is to examine the extent to which marriage operates as a multi-dimensional trap. For one thing, the physical cohabitation of couples within a delimited space that is inevitably influenced by psychological, social, and economic factors, to some extent, engenders a dynamic of influence that prevents self-improvement. I will also try to discuss entrapment in terms of rootedness because while the latter has been praised for the role it plays in guarding tradition, it could also be seen as a form of entanglement that might prevent individual aspirations for positive progress.

3.3. Ethan and Zeena: Marriage as a trap

As I suggested in the introduction of this chapter, this is my first reading of the novel in which I endeavour to illustrate Nichols Jr.'s definition of marriage in terms of pathological attraction.⁴² That is, I would argue that this reading functions as an account of marriage as a trap. Such a type of marriage seems also to be a mirror of Edith Wharton's real life experience in that she herself felt trapped in marriage,⁴³ an imprisonment that was reflected through her use of "the insular society, poverty, familial obligations, and oppressive natural environment to express her despair."⁴⁴ Moreover, the function of marriage as an imagined trap is similarly shared by Lily Bart, whose entrapment was kept within her mind and extended to withhold her from taking a decision on marriage.⁴⁵ This idea is further supported by Donna Campbell who explains this marital confinement in terms of psychological imprisonment, rendered possible through "Wharton's depiction of the internalizing of external forces such as manners, social customs, or gender expectations."⁴⁶

⁴² William C. Nichols, "The Marriage Relationship," 186. See also the relevant quote in point 3.1. "Introduction" of this chapter, 159

⁴³ Wharton as an intellectual did not find a good company with her husband who did not share her highly regarded interests. As she tells us, she did not feel her real existence within marriage until she emancipated herself through her creative work. Here is her full point: "I continued to live my old life, for my husband was as fond of society as ever, and I knew of no other existence, except in our annual escapes to Italy. I had as yet no real personality of my own, and was not to acquire one till my first volume of short stories was published and that was not until 1899." Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 112. See also this chapter, 170.

⁴⁴ Nancy J. Dutton, "Appreciation of Winter and Locality in Ethan Frome," *The English Journal* 93, no. 6 (2004): 32.

⁴⁵ In my first chapter, I argue that Lily Bart is entrapped by her idealised vision of marriage, which caused her uneasiness and discomfort in taking any decision *vis-à-vis* her would-be husband. See Chapter 1, 67.

⁴⁶ Donna Campbell, "Naturalism" in Rattray, *Edith Wharton in Context*, 361.

Furthermore, Frome's entrapment is defined in terms of another dimension, that is, economic restrictions. To say it differently, as Diane Herndl observes, the American economy, which is capitalistic in nature, operates against the overt delusive propaganda as "a prison that lays too much responsibility on men and allows women too few adult freedoms."⁴⁷ With this in mind and based on Henry James's view on the closeness between economy and marriage,⁴⁸ it could be said that the status of economy in this very instance of American history pressed hard on Frome and, eventually, influenced his marriage. That is, as an externally imposed and internally accepted reality, he and other villagers found themselves more and more dependent on the city, a fact that reflected an ongoing process of change that went along the rising role the city plays in the villagers' lives. As most of them followed the temptation of the city, the land which is left with less and less care lost its vitality and became sterile. In a similar way, Frome's attitude in his marriage manifests his growing neglect that is evidenced through his silence, passivity, and the coldness that mars much of his marital conversations. The following inflexible dialogue illustrates the way Frome is reluctant to answer his wife's series of questions rendering their talk hard to follow:

"I guess I won't come up yet awhile," he said, turning as if to go back to the kitchen.

Zeena stopped short and looked at him. "For the land's sake—what you going to do down here?"

"I've got the mill accounts to go over."

She continued to stare at him, the flame of the unshaded lamp bringing out with microscopic cruelty the fretful lines of her face.

"At this time o' night? You'll ketch your death. The fire's out long ago." Without answering he moved away toward the kitchen.⁴⁹

Along the villagers' indifference *vis-à-vis* their land, the reason behind such sterility, it seems, is the coldness of winters that parallels Frome's coldness of feelings. More importantly, this analogy serves, from one facet, as a reminder of the early Puritans who suffered the coldness of the wilderness where they established the first American colonies. Likewise, Zeena appears to be stern and rigid, a quality that is evidently associated with Puritanism, which "has meant morality, a stern and demanding code of

⁴⁷ Diane Price Herndl, *Invalid Women: Figuring Feminine Illness in American Fiction and Culture, 1840-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 168.

⁴⁸ See Chapter 1, 36.

⁴⁹ Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, 31.

ethics, that bent men not merely to the law of the state but to the higher, ideal, and just law of God.”⁵⁰ In line with this, and according to Nietzsche’s beliefs, Zeena seems to represent what he calls “the ‘most moral Man’ of the community [who] comes to contain the virtue of frequent suffering, deprivation, a hard way of life, and of cruel self-mortification..., as a means of self-discipline, self-control, and the desire for individual happiness.”⁵¹ Thus, the idea of rigidity is stressed by Zeena’s adherence to rules. In one scene, Ethan and Mattie express their astonishment as they unexpectedly do not find the keys she regularly leaves for them in a much specified place she never changes, a fact implying that she permanently abides by her own rules and like early Puritans considered herself as a minster who guides and also expects respect:

“It’s not there!” he said, straightening himself with a start.
They strained their eyes at each other through the icy darkness. Such a thing
had never happened before”
“Maybe she’s forgotten it,” Mattie said in a tremulous whisper; but both of
them knew that it was not like Zeena to forget.⁵²

In her returning to characteristic features of Puritanism, Wharton implicitly shows the influence of her literary fathers. My focus on this point stems from the fact that “determining a literary work’s significance means deciphering the ways in which it relates to its precursors.”⁵³ As such, Wharton’s use of Zeena and Ethan’s names is an evidence of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s influence on Wharton’s narrative and perhaps life. In particular, as Candace Waid observed, “the names of Wharton’s characters Ethan and Zeena echo the names of Hawthorne’s characters Ethan Brand (from the story “Ethan Brand”) and Zenobia (from *The Blithedale Romance*).”⁵⁴

Wharton’s reference to Hawthorne, in my view, implies that little has changed since his time, particularly, in conservative regions like New England and, hence, my next point of this chapter finds grounds.⁵⁵ For one thing, by evoking Zenobia, Wharton borrows Hawthorne’s insights into the laws of nature and morality. As John Alvis

⁵⁰ Barnstone et al., 42.

⁵¹ Nietzsche and Kaufmann, 401.

⁵² Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, 30.

⁵³ Kaci-Mohamed, 12.

⁵⁴ Candace Waid, *Edith Wharton’s Letters from the Underworld: Fictions of Women and Writing* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 7.

⁵⁵ In my next point, I discuss New England as the natural environment of Puritan marriage. See page 175.

explains, Hawthorne distinguishes between nature, as “nonhuman but living” and nature as “refined (i.e., sublimated) by moral law.”⁵⁶ Such an idea explains how Zeena, confined by morality, keeps being deeply faithful to her marital duties while Frome envisages escape with Mattie.⁵⁷ In other words, Zeena is a refined character, while Frome seems to follow Selden’s tradition in his submission to corruption. In adhering faithfully to moral laws, Wharton’s Zenobia follows the steps of her counterpart in Hawthorne’s world only to find herself compelled to bear the pains that make her character unique.⁵⁸ To quote Sarah Wright:

Zenobia, the character on which [Hawthorne] has probably bestowed the most pains, is no doubt true to nature. Women that thrust themselves out of their sphere must inevitably lose many of those graces which constitute their peculiar charm. Looked upon by their own sex with dismay, and by ours with certain mingled feelings of jealousy and pity, they voluntarily isolate themselves from the generality of the world, and fancy themselves martyrs. They are punished with contempt, and to reformers or their fiery nature, contempt is worse than death.⁵⁹

In a slight contrast with Hawthorne, Wharton’s approach to process these women as they undergo painful experiences, however, was emphatically scientific. Actually, she was fascinated by what she called “the wonder world of nineteenth century science,”⁶⁰ a manifestation of a stage of civilisation concerned also with “complex theoretical sciences and the spread of psychological diseases.”⁶¹ As such, in addition to the fact that “Edith Wharton had personally experienced such entrapment, as a young writer suffering a long nervous breakdown partly due to the conflict in roles between writer and wife,”⁶² her interest in modern advances in medicine and science informed

⁵⁶ John Alvis, *Nathaniel Hawthorne as Political Philosopher: Revolutionary Principles Domesticated and Personalized* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2012), 10.

⁵⁷ I discuss this with more detail afterwards. See page 181.

⁵⁸ Frederick Nietzsche viewed that for the “ascetic priest,” that is the one with a tendency of self-denial, “pleasure is felt and sought in ill—constitutedness, decay, pain, mischance.” Nietzsche and Kaufmann, 1148.

⁵⁹ Sarah Bird Wright, *Critical Companion to Nathaniel Hawthorne: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work*, Facts on File Library of American Literature (New York, NY: Facts On File, 2007), 348.

⁶⁰ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 94.

⁶¹ “هذا الطور من الحضارة هو طور العقل ، وينفسح فيه المجال لظهور العلوم النظرية المعقدة، وشيوع الأمراض النفسية.” Djendia, 83. My translation.

⁶² VanSpanckeren and Agency, 52.

her treatment of Zeena's anxiety, "hypochondria."⁶³ It is worth noting that being influenced by the naturalist movement both in Europe and America, Wharton seems to walk in the steps of Emile Zola in that he "wanted the novelist to function like a scientist—to observe nature and social data, to reject supernatural explanations of the physical world, to reject absolute standards of morality and free will."⁶⁴

It is not surprising, therefore, that Wharton observes Zeena's pathological troubles along Zola's naturalistic inclination. From this perspective, "disease 'is an integral element of a given historical and social structure taken into consideration by literature [...] an analysis of disease in literature [...] helps provide a sociological context to understand the relationships between individuals and society.'"⁶⁵ Thus, a good deal of insights on Zeena's marriage could be revealed through the examination of her disease and its symptoms. The following passage affirms such a claim and highlights how both the relationships between Zeena and her community, on one side, and her husband's perception of her, on the other, are defined in terms of an eye of scrutiny, similar to that of a physician:

And within a year she developed the 'sickliness' which had since made her notable even in a community rich in pathological instances. When she came to take care of his mother she had seemed to Ethan like the very genius of health, but he soon saw that her skill as a nurse had been acquired by the absorbed observation of her own symptoms.⁶⁶

In clinging to her body through obsessive self-observation, Zeena makes it possible for Wharton to show that when separated from the soul, the body constitutes a mere source of anxiety and confusion. Taking into consideration that the body represents the physical world, as I mentioned before, it is the absence of something that points out its importance. Here, I do not mean the body but rather the soul which is hidden.⁶⁷ This claim rests on the idea that the nature of things points out that the body ages and loses

⁶³ According to The New York Times Health Guide, "Hypochondria is a belief that physical symptoms are signs of a serious illness, even when there is no medical evidence to support the presence of an illness." URL: <http://www.nytimes.com/health/guides/disease/hypochondria/overview.html>.

⁶⁴ Fournier, 72.

⁶⁵ Mary D. Lagerwey, Mary D. Lagerwey-Voorman, and Gerald E. Markle, "Edith Wharton's Sick Role," *The Sociological Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (1994): 122.

⁶⁶ Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, 41.

⁶⁷ In the last point of this chapter, I will evoke the hidden soul that Wharton is alluding to.

the beauty of youth. As the source of admiration disappears, the mind searches for alternatives. Ironically, the fall of the body is mentally transformed into a source of admiration that keeps one thinking and hence motivated to continue living. In this context, Ralph Waldo Emerson writes:

If however, from too much conversing with material objects, the soul was gross, and misplaced its satisfaction in the body, it reaped nothing but sorrow; body being unable to fulfil the promise which beauty holds out; but if, accepting the hint of these visions and suggestions which beauty makes to his mind, the soul passes through the body and falls to admire strokes of character.⁶⁸

In particular, like any disease that could be noticed and observed through its symptoms, Zeena's health is diagnosed through her pains. For one thing, they are important in one's self-definition and, hence, determinant of his or her relationships with the other, namely in marriage. In this context, Freud points out that "the ego itself is primarily a bodily ego, an imaginary construct in which the limits and boundaries of the body are defined through its experiences of pleasure and pain."⁶⁹ As such, we can explain Zeena's physical pains and symptoms in terms of hysteria, which is a "personality disorder characterized by excessive emotions, dramatics, and attention-seeking behaviour."⁷⁰ Particularly, such an illness fits into what Freud called "actual neurosis,"⁷¹ which he diagnosed as the resulting anomaly from sexual problems.

Zeena's actual neurosis, as such, could be ascribed to the deficiencies of her marriage in terms of sexual satisfaction. This idea confirms, to some extent, the importance of the physical aspect of marriage, which goes hand in hand with the presence of both partners.⁷² In agreement with this claim, as Max Weber noted, bodily presence fosters sentimental links in marriage by "the transformation of the feeling of a love which is conscious of responsibility throughout all the nuances of the organic life

⁶⁸ Emerson, 96.

⁶⁹ Amy M. Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History*, Religion and Postmodernism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 260.

⁷⁰ According to FreeDictionary.com, "hysteria is a feature of hysterical disorders in which a patient experiences physical symptoms that have a psychological, rather than an organic, cause; and histrionic personality disorder characterized by excessive emotions, dramatics, and attention-seeking behavior." URL: <http://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/hysteria>.

⁷¹ Toby Gelfand and John Kerr, *Freud and the History of Psychoanalysis* (Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press, 1992), 105.

⁷² On physical presence in marriage, see this chapter, 183.

process.”⁷³ Thus, Zeena’s clinging to her hysteria could be explained in terms of her husband’s growing absence that eventually triggered and defined her anxiety. One of the symptoms of her fears is what the *fin de siècle* discourse evoked as women’s frigidity. However, Alison Moore explains that this behaviour meant also a repressed longing for marriage that is tradition minded. In this context she writes:

There is rich variety of late nineteenth-century French sources upon which one could draw to see examples of the widely held view that women constituted the less sexual gender or at least that normative femininity entailed feigning indifference or resistance to the sexual interest of men. Feminine desire was often reduced to a desexualized longing for motherhood and happy families. *A Guide moral et universel du mariage* of 1898 celebrated rapturously the virtues of a young woman’s singular and burning desire for marriage and *le foyer* ‘depuis sa naissance!’⁷⁴

The other fact that needs explanation is Zeena’s passivity in terms of her psychological disease despite having the nursing skills. To say it differently, this would make us wonder why she is not concerned with curing herself. The answer, in my view, is twofold. On the one hand passivity is nothing but another way to regenerate energy. It is exactly like the human being’s need for sleep and rest. On the other hand, a psychological explanation would see it in terms of a natural self-defence mechanism that is innately triggered to protect one’s integrity. In accordance to Freud’s views, Zeena’s sexual problems engendered her “hysteria as a source of psychical traumas and as a motive for ‘defence’ - that is, for repressing ideas from consciousness.”⁷⁵ For this, like most of hysteric persons, Zeena, in contrast to Ralph Marvell in *The Custom of the Country*,⁷⁶ seems to aim at preserving her integrity not only because, as Phillip Barrish observed, “symptoms help make it possible to continue repressing underlying traumas but also because a symptom can provide for the hysteric a point of order, a focal point, even an anchor for identity in the face of conditions that threaten individual integrity.”⁷⁷

⁷³ Kent, “Weber, Goethe, and William Penn: Themes of Marital Love,” 318.

⁷⁴ David Evans and Kate Griffiths, *Pleasure and Pain in Nineteenth-Century French Literature and Culture*, [Online-Ausg.] ed., Faux Titre (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), 189.

⁷⁵ Sigmund Freud and James Strachey, *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (1953, Rpt. London: Hogarth Press, 1974), 4.

⁷⁶ On Ralph Marvell’s disintegration, see my second chapter, 149,

⁷⁷ Phillip J. Barrish, “The Remarrying Woman as Symptom: Exchange, Male Hysteria, and “the Custom of the Country”,” *American Literary Realism, 1870-1910* 27, no. 2 (1995): 2.

Accordingly, Zeena manipulates people around her using her illness as a pretext to appeal for caring and sympathy. Hence, she is able to keep Frome captive, namely morally, whenever he considers leaving her. To use Freud's words, Zeena's "hysteria, when used as a weapon, was always 'levelled at a particular person'."⁷⁸ In Zeena's case this person was often her husband Ethan. While hysteria could partially explain Zeena's behaviour, her inner truth would remain deep and hidden, namely for the distance kept between her and us, readers, because of the narrator. In a rare instance of confession, however, Zeena reluctantly offers hints on the sadness she had kept for herself as the following passage reveals:

"You [...] waited till my back was turned, and took the thing I set most store by of anything I've got, and wouldn't never use it, not even when the minister come to dinner, or Aunt Martha Pierce come over from Bettsbridge"—Zeena paused with a gasp, as if terrified by her own evocation of the sacrilege. "You're a bad girl, Mattie Silver, and I always known it. It's the way your father begun, and I was warned of it when I took you, and I tried to keep my things where you couldn't get at 'em—and now you've took from me the one I cared for most of all."⁷⁹

Marriage as an institution, therefore, transcends the temporary sadness Zeena feels and keeps the Fromes joined and, above all, tied to their roots. Despite the weaknesses of their relationship such as the lack of commitment, referred to in the previous quotation, marriage continues to exist and, eventually, resists change exactly like a tree which clings to its roots and defies both diseases in the soil and winds in the air. In living in the farm, close to nature, people are connected to the land. However, as Ralph Waldo Emerson viewed it, "the trees are imperfect men, and seem to bemoan their imprisonment, rooted in the ground."⁸⁰ Accordingly, Frome's fate is further sealed by the bonds of marriage. This could be said because in accordance to Noah Webster's definition of a farmer, Frome as a married man is intrinsically bound to be a farmer. Hence the notions of marriage and farming are closely intertwined and point out the function of marriage as a productive institution and source of self-reliance. To quote Noah Webster:

⁷⁸ Price Herndl, 168.

⁷⁹ Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, 75.

⁸⁰ Emerson, 280.

Un fermier; un cultivateur ou un laboureur de la terre; celui qui travaille aux labours. En Amérique, où les hommes ont généralement la propriété de la terre sur laquelle ils travaillent, le propriétaire d'une ferme est aussi un laboureur ou un husbandman, mais le mot comprend le locataire et le propriétaire.⁸¹

In another direction, according to John de Crevecoeur's beliefs, Frome as "a farmer, while not necessarily the owner of his farm, bears the responsibility of running smoothly his work."⁸² However, the sense of commitment and responsibility, in the image of his attachment to the land, puts him under enormous pressure as an individual and, to some extent, prevents his aspirations for education in places which are dissociated from the land, that is, the city. In this context, society reveals itself as a dominant power through marriage which is its very microcosm. In this context, Frome's wife who, as Wharton put it, "rose up in his soul in bitterness and seemed to take shape before him in the woman who at every turn had barred his way,"⁸³ seems to be the incarnation of the prison walls in this instance.

In remaining captive in his marriage and hometown, Frome, however, on behalf of Edith Wharton, demonstrates that the Puritan marriage, with the difficulties it bears, can only survive in its pristine setting. That is to say, it would be embraced and endured only by New England, the part of America that once thrived spiritually as I will discuss in the following point.

3.4. New England as the natural environment of Puritan marriage

According to Ibn Khaldun, the human being is influenced and even defined by his environment. That is, people's tendencies and way of life are forged and sculpted in terms of "the influence of the air upon human character."⁸⁴ In particular, he considered that people living in cold places, I apply this to New England, have a tendency to look into the future out of the fears and anxieties aroused by the present and its hardships.⁸⁵

⁸¹ The quote is translated from *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828) by Pierre Monette. Pierre Monette, *St. John De Crèvecoeur Et Les Lettres D'un Fermier Américain* (Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 2009), 49.

⁸² "un fermier qui, s'il n'est pas toujours propriétaire de son exploitation, a cependant la responsabilité de la bonne marche de son travail". Ibid. My Translation.

⁸³ Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, 75.

⁸⁴ Khaldun, 127.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

For this, conforming to this claim, for Ralph Waldo Emerson, “the desire for glory and honor is powerfully generated by the air of that place.”⁸⁶ The “human person,” to use Paul Haffner words, is melt with nature as both are the creation of God. For this, Pope Francis evoked “‘human ecology,’ a phrase used by Pope Benedict to describe not only how people must defend and respect nature but how the nature of the person — masculine and feminine as created by God.”⁸⁷ I add that in this view the Christian God calls for respect in marriage that parallels the respect of nature as His creation. With this in mind, New England, which Starkfield is representative of, evokes an environment that is inspired by religion and defined by the meanings of pride and endurance associated with Puritanism. That is, as Nancy Leach argues, for Wharton, “New England meant a type of character-proud [...] capable of hard physical labor and infinite human suffering.”⁸⁸ In agreement with this argument, Cynthia Falk observes that Wharton “credited the Puritan settlers of New England with originating modern American attitudes and customs.”⁸⁹ She continues to argue that “stern Puritans who, in the Mayflower, braved the dangers of an almost unknown sea for the new world they created”⁹⁰ were the source of Wharton’s praise. Along the lines mentioned, Ethan Frome’s Puritan sense of pride is revealed in the following passage:

After his father’s death it had taken time to get his head above water, and he did not want Andrew Hale, or anyone else in Starkfield, to think he was going under again. Besides, he hated lying; if he wanted the money he wanted it, and it was nobody’s business to ask why. He therefore made his demand with the awkwardness of a proud man who will not admit to himself that he is stooping.⁹¹

Since Puritanism serves as the organising ethos of society and is associated with the meanings of hardness and difficulty,⁹² in *Ethan Frome* social relationships, including

⁸⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Fireside Edition), 108.

⁸⁷ Frankovich. URL:

<http://www.nationalreview.com/article/417528/pope-francis-green-conservative-nicholas-frankovich>.

⁸⁸ Nancy R. Leach, “New England in the Stories of Edith Wharton,” *The New England Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (1957): 97.

⁸⁹ Falk, ““The Intolerable Ugliness of New York”: Architecture and Society in Edith Wharton’s the Age of Innocence,” 38.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, 43.

⁹² See Terry Eagleton’s definition of ideology in Chapter 1, 30.

marriage, are determined by two distinct factors. On the one hand, like early Puritans,⁹³ the inhabitants of Frome's little village which, in my view, stands for one of the little American colonies, enjoy no company but their own work at their farms. Their resolve to work answers Emerson's call for "the men of every profession; whereby all who possess talent are impelled to struggle that they may not remain in the same grade with those whom they perceive to be only men like themselves."⁹⁴ Hence, much of the time every villager is entrapped in his loneliness. On the other hand, the land whose rigidity echoes the emotional status of its owners yields no profitable harvest and inevitably marks a status of decline. With no much opportunities of social gatherings, in the image of The Bellomont in *The House of Mirth*, due to the hostility of the weather and the scarcity of big buildings, it is a difficult task to arrange marriages and especially women find no chance to meet or get to know men to establish healthy emotional links that might lead to marriage. In other words, the setting which is emphatically denoted by the village's name, Starkfield, is, as Kenneth Bernard observes, "the locus of the story."⁹⁵ In different instances of the novel this very setting blends with the social life and imposes itself through the rendition of passages like the following one:

The village lay under two feet of snow, with drifts at the windy corners. In a sky of iron the points of the Dipper hung like icicles and Orion flashed his cold fires. The moon had set, but the night was so transparent that the white housefronts between the elms looked gray against the snow, clumps of bushes made black stains on it, and the basement windows of the church sent shafts of yellow light far across the endless undulations.⁹⁶

New England, therefore, as Richard Hovey noted, "weighs on both plot and characters in three aspects: geography, location, terrain, climate; social milieu, communal mores; and what we might term the Puritan ethos."⁹⁷ As such, I deduce that just as the death of the Puritan communal mores led to the cultural decline, the death of Frome's parents serves as a reminder of the end of an old way of life, which was basically communal. This fact is explicitly expressed through the attitudes of the

⁹³ It is worth noting that early Puritans while known to be successful, they also faced initially some failures. Yet, it is their commitment and endurance of hardships that led to their final triumph.

⁹⁴ Emerson, *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 108.

⁹⁵ Kenneth Bernard, "Imagery and Symbolism in *Ethan Frome*," *College English* 23, no. 3 (1961): 179.

⁹⁶ Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, 15.

⁹⁷ Richard B. Hovey, "'Ethan Frome': A Controversy About Modernizing It," *American Literary Realism, 1870-1910* 19, no. 1 (1986): 7.

villagers who, as Wharton put it, have become “indifferent to his troubles, or disposed to think it natural that a young fellow of his age should have carried without repining the burden of three crippled lives.”⁹⁸ However, in making Frome remain close to their graves which stand as a testimony for a celebrated cultural heritage, Wharton alludes to the way New England has remained a witness on a glorious history and continued to be ready for the fulfilment of its duty just as its early settlers, namely, the founding fathers, were willing to. In my view, her way to establish such connectedness is Frome’s marriage. While on surface level such marriage appears to be an obligation, at a deep level it, unmistakeably, fosters the idea that New England’s survival has always depended on duty-based marriage, be it in the past or at the very moment. As the following passage suggests, even death cannot prevent New England from incubating marriage to sustain life: “After the funeral, when he saw [Zeena] preparing to go away, he was seized with an unreasoning dread of being left alone on the farm; and before he knew what he was doing he had asked her to stay there with him.”⁹⁹

The connectedness of Puritan marriage to New England is further stressed by the impact of the region’s peculiar weather and geography. That is to say, helped by the mountainous nature of the land, winter, by limiting and hindering transportation and travel, comes to naturally protect the region from any intruder or invader. In other words, taking into consideration that Frome’s story is his marriage story,¹⁰⁰ it could be said that his marriage is naturally protected by New England’s environment. In an emphatic contrast to the city where people have free access to travel into different directions in the image of *The House of Mirth*’s Grand Central Station,¹⁰¹ New England offers no chance for strangers to step in and inflict drastic change. Yet, it is worth noting that it allows a slight friction that is symbolised by the train stopping by, with no station at the village.

At a different level, the poor unyielding lands of the village remind us of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922) which was yet to be written. According to R.W.B. Lewis,

⁹⁸ Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, 84.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 41.

¹⁰⁰ On the narrative as Frome’s story, see this chapter, 161.

¹⁰¹ See my discussion on Grand Central Station’s symbolic reference to cultural encounters and change, 81.

later on, Wharton reproaches the poem's lack of "the warmth of Whitman's poetry."¹⁰² Yet, when it comes to *Ethan Frome*, she resorts to build its imagery out of elements of nature and culture in a way that would be similar to *The Waste Land*'s. In this context, Linda Morante writes:

Wharton's association of cultural aridity and the desert or wasteland develops into the controlling imagery and symbolic center of *Ethan Frome* and *Summer*, her nouvelles of New England life. In these nouvelles she creates a barren scene to speak for characters whose perceptions and articulateness have been limited by this very environment.⁷ The composing of the poetic fabric of landscape images becomes her principal technique for revealing and developing character as well as meaning.¹⁰³

As such, Wharton's "waste land" is her way to capture human condition by extricating it from its natural setting. In contrast to T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which was shaped by the war's agony, *Ethan Frome* leaves some space for sun rays and hope provided by the American pastoral. In accounting for the villagers being defined particularly by New England's air, she shows particular interest and continuity in her adherence to American exceptionalism. Moreover, in not returning to the distant roots of Western thought as Eliot did, she seems to endeavour to focus only on what is American by definition. Therefore, she leaves space for her fascination with the Puritans' endurance and determination to strive, a view that finds grounds in the philosophy of Ibn Khaldun which goes as follows:

[...] on the other hand, lies inland (and is) surrounded by cold hills. Its inhabitants can be observed to look sad and gloomy and to be too much concerned for the future. Although a man in Fez might have provisions of wheat stored, sufficient to last him for years, he always goes to the market early to buy his food for the day, because he is afraid to consume any of his hoarded food. If one pays attention to this sort of thing in the various zones and countries, the influence of the varying quality of the air upon the character (of the inhabitants) will become apparent.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² R.W.B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography*. New York: Harper, 1986 as cited in Singley, *Edith Wharton: Matters of Mind and Spirit*, 125-126. The warmth of Whitman's poetry reflects the warmth of human relationships in the image of marriage. That is, for Wharton, the past rather than the present celebrated human feelings.

¹⁰³ Linda Morante, "The Desolation of Charity Royall: Imagery in Edith Wharton's *Summer*," *Colby Quarterly* 18, no. 4 (1982): 242.

¹⁰⁴ Khaldun, 127.

The pertinence of Ibn Khaldun's theory is, therefore, confirmed when Wharton depicts the impact of coldness and aridity on Frome's character. That is, like the land, Frome has become poor and like his farm his marriage and, by extension life, ceased to yield. The following passage illustrates this idea by evoking the impression developed by the narrator as a result of his continuous observation and investigation: "I had been told that Frome was poor, and that the saw-mill and the arid acres of his farm yielded scarcely enough to keep his household through the winter; but I had not supposed him to be in such want as Harmon's words implied, and I expressed my wonder."¹⁰⁵

As in Mathematics, relationships that define marriage are transitive. Thus, as much as nature affects one's human condition, which in turn influences the marital relationships, nature manifests its influence on Frome's marriage. In this context, it could be said that marriage is like a tree whose life finds grounds in nature, obtains water from the soil and oxygen from the air, and yields the fruits whose colour and taste properly reflect its very environment, beautiful sometimes and gloomy some other times. Noting that the tree, when rooted, does not wait for someone to irrigate it or feed it in any way; the meaning it invokes is one of self-sufficiency and closeness to earth. With this in mind, the Fromes' house, which Wharton deliberately focuses on it being built of trees, joins them under its roof, shelters them from snow and winds, and secures them a warm marital space. Their marriage, therefore, becomes analogous to the house which is grounded on earth, self-sufficient, and naturally affected by the environmental change as the following passage illustrates:

The snow had ceased, and a flash of watery sunlight exposed the house on the slope above us in all its plaintive ugliness. The black wraith of a deciduous creeper flapped from the porch, and the thin wooden walls, under their worn coats of paint, seemed to shiver in the wind that had risen with the ceasing of the snow.¹⁰⁶

Snow as a recurrent manifestation of environment in Frome's life, evokes a figural sense of irony. On the one hand, it points out the purity of New England as a place of origins. On the other hand, its whiteness alludes to another type of entrapment

¹⁰⁵ Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, 8.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

in terms of race, a reminder of Lily's entrapment in her own definition as a pure white.¹⁰⁷ As Elizabeth Ammons noted, Ethan Frome's narrative is "literally blanketed in whiteness—white people trapped in a white landscape: bleak, frozen, snowed in—is, I will suggest, very much, and very significantly, about race."¹⁰⁸ Yet, I add to Ammons's argument that Wharton makes it clear that snow will not keep falling forever. Actually, as the previous quotation reveals, by ceasing to fall at one particular point of the cycle of seasons, the remainders of snow act like mirrors which not just leave room for the sun rays to shine but help in making them glitter just as Mattie Silver's name denotes and will prove to be in the imagination of Ethan Frome. She is there, therefore, to draw his vision of escape as the sun rays draw on the land as they cross the leaves of the trees. Yet, whether this made image is to remain or not is what the following paragraphs attempt to unveil.

3.5. Mattie Silver, or the angel of devastation

My purpose in the previous points which outlined my first reading was to discuss the perception of marriage as a trap, or a cage that is defined by both psychological and physical dimensions. In doing so, I paved the way to this pivotal point in which the natural need for escape to a "healthy attraction" in Nichols's words,¹⁰⁹ finds grounds. Accordingly, in this second reading, I try to explain Frome's need for marriage as an outlet for freedom from self-enslavement in beliefs, which could be explained through Nietzsche's theories.¹¹⁰

While freedom is the main quest, other "social needs" to use Jacques Donzelot words trigger such a process.¹¹¹ In Frome's case, the major need was the help and caring of someone for him and for his wife. These qualities actually defined the Puritan marriage, which was "ordained" by God "for mutual help, and for the increase of mankind with a legitimate issue, and of the church with a holy seed, and for the

¹⁰⁷ See my discussion of marriage as a trap, 167.

¹⁰⁸ Elizabeth Ammons, "The Myth of Imperiled Whiteness and Ethan Frome," *The New England Quarterly* 81, no. 1 (2008): 6.

¹⁰⁹ William C. Nichols, "The Marriage Relationship," 186. See also point 3.1. "Introduction" of this chapter, 159

¹¹⁰ I will rely on G. R. Thompson's idea of Nietzschean role reversal in *Ethan Frome* which he advanced in *Reading the American Novel 1865-1914*. See page 189 hereafter. See more details on Wharton's quest for freedom in Singley, *Edith Wharton: Matters of Mind and Spirit*, 19.

¹¹¹ See my discussion of social needs in Chapter 1, 32.

prevention of uncleanness.”¹¹² The one who was attributed such a role was Mattie Silver.¹¹³ In an emphatic manner, Wharton tells us that “she could trim a hat, make molasses candy, ...When she tried to extend the field of her activities in the direction of stenography and book-keeping her health broke down.”¹¹⁴ In describing her activities, she is ascribed to the working class. Interestingly, she intersects with Lily Bart from *The House of Mirth* in two points. Firstly, she is able to craft hats, a reminder of Lily’s wish to acquire this very skill. Secondly, like Lily, her health ends up deteriorated. In my view, it is Wharton’s way to point out how working class women endured difficulties even at the cost of their health. Moreover, her belonging to the working class enables her to lift the domestic burden off Zeena and presumably, in an angelic manner, uplift the emotional atmosphere in the marital home. In this context, Stephanie Coontz tells us more on the role working class women like Mattie played in helping middle-class wives:

Women who could not survive on their husbands’ wages worked as domestic servants in other people’s homes and provided cheap factory labor for the production of new consumer goods. Without their work, middle-class homemakers would have had scant time to “uplift” their homes and minister to the emotional needs of their husbands and children.¹¹⁵

In providing help, inspiring, and uplifting Frome’s emotional needs, Mattie appears to be the one who would loosen the rigidity of the Fromes’ marriage, which, as Kenneth Bernard put it, reflects Starkfield where “everything on the surface is hard and frozen.”¹¹⁶ It is worth noting that rigidity points out also the seriousness of relationships in traditional marriage. Perhaps, this is Wharton’s way to indict the way traditional marriage lacked supporting relaxation and freedom of emotions. The outcome of this would be surely similar to what happened to Frome. That is, marriage becomes kind of routine and, hence, without excitement it becomes dry emotionally. Therefore, with reservation, I rely on the argument pointing to the surface rigidity of marriage. For this, I take it as a starting point, but I add that such frigidity which stands for form and not

¹¹² James T. Johnson, “English Puritan Thought on the Ends of Marriage,” *Church History* 38, no. 4 (1969): 434.

¹¹³ According to babynameschecker.com, “Mattie is the English diminutive of Matilda[...]Matilda finds its roots in old English[...]derived from the Germanic elements “maht” meaning “might” and “hild” meaning “battle”[...] As a female given name among the English, Matilda’s fame came largely from Matilda of Flanders, the wife of William the Conqueror.” URL: <http://www.babynameschecker.com/babynames/meaning/name/mattie/1082.html>

¹¹⁴ Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, 34.

¹¹⁵ Coontz, 169.

¹¹⁶ Bernard, “Imagery and Symbolism in Ethan Frome,” 179.

for matter, as it is the case in nature, is actually there but only at surface level because what lies beneath proves to be worth the scrutiny. For one thing, under the ocean's frozen surface, a whole hidden life proves to exist, breathe, and live. This could be said based on the results my research reserves for the ultimate point of this chapter as I revisit the Fromes' marriage to explore its hidden side from which paradoxical details will surface.¹¹⁷

In another direction, I do ascribe Wharton's appeal for Mattie Silver to a peculiar endeavour. In agreement with the Whartonian tradition of merging two characters to build a perfect one,¹¹⁸ Silver seems to be called upon to complement Zeena's deficiencies rather than to alienate her. In my view, being a reconstructed image from the past, Zeena is to be refined to Wharton's aesthetic and moral views. As such, I believe that the contrast between Zeena and Mattie informs us better in terms of their complementarity rather than their differences. Accordingly, in a reminder of my implicit comparison between Lily and Undine, contrasts between the two characters are carefully defined. While Zeena embodies a great deal of complexity, namely of thought, Mattie personifies superficiality and is hence a mere source of temptation as we deduce from the following scene: "Ethan roused himself to answer. He became suddenly conscious that he was looking at Mattie while Zeena talked to him, and with an effort he turned his eyes to his wife."¹¹⁹

Actually Mattie embodies fanciful, or angelic, qualities and is "a perfectly imagined object for Ethan's confused desires."¹²⁰ With this in mind, Mattie as an imagined picture, that is, an abstract idea, is not to develop the strength and rigidity of Zeena who stands for an existing reality. From a different perspective, she is not to be an assertive individual, but to remain submissive. As a single woman, she is not apt to decide for her own destiny. In other words, she follows Frome's wishful thinking, an attitude he shares with Lawrence Selden who is amused by the living portraits of Lily Bart in the *tableaux-vivants*, as accounted for in *The House of Mirth*.¹²¹ In my view, which is supported by the tenets of feminism, Mattie represents also the views held by

¹¹⁷ See my third reading of the Fromes' marriage, page 186.

¹¹⁸ See my discussion on the complementarity between Lily Bart and Gerty Farish in my first chapter, 54.

¹¹⁹ Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, 37.

¹²⁰ David Egenschwiler, "The Ordered Disorder of "Ethan Frome"," *Studies in the Novel* 9, no. 3 (1977): 239.

¹²¹ See my first chapter, 183.

society as social constructs about women. In this light, Ima Herron argues that Mattie Silver would remain merely an imagination for amusement:

Here, in order, are Hepzibah Pyncheon, the first notable single woman appearing as a major character in an American novel; Dreiser's Jennie Gerhardt; Mattie Silver of *Ethan Frome* [...] From such critical portraits one learns that "Not one of the seven women [including Mattie Silver] is successful in an endeavor of her own; not one is widely and wholesomely influential. All are regarded as amusing, queer, or grimly tragic figures."¹²²

It seems that, ironically, Mattie's singlehood empowered her with the capacity to fill the emptiness in the Fromes' marriage. That is, her presence, combining both emotional and physical faculties, proves to be crucial in defining marriage and, to some extent, securing its sustainability. As Jacque Dominian observed, "by sustaining is meant first the ability to be available physically and emotionally to one's spouse. Physical availability consists of being ready to share one's presence with one's spouse in a personal way."¹²³ Such an argument is actually verified when we find Frome attracted to Mattie Silver and, in particular, the sensations she could actually provide him with in her presence as the following passage confirms:

The fact that admiration for his learning mingled with Mattie's wonder at what he taught was not the least part of his pleasure. And there were other sensations, less definable but more exquisite, which drew them together with a shock of silent joy: the cold red of sunset behind winter hiss, the flight of cloud-flocks over slopes of golden stubble, or the intensely blue shadows of hemlocks on sunlit snow, when she said to him once: 'It looks just as if it was painted!' it seemed to Ethan that the art of definition could go no farther, and that words had at last been found to utter his secret soul.¹²⁴

In many ways, if at surface level Wharton endeavours to portray companionship through Mattie to point out the importance of physical presence in marriage, at a deeper level such portrayal rather evokes critical concerns. That is, in a way physical presence is reduced from being an end in itself to being a reference to transcendence to a more important type of presence. To say it differently, it is Wharton's process to sublimate the body in service of the encounter of souls and minds, an idea that she often evokes in her

¹²² Ima Honaker Herron, "The Stereotype of the Single Woman in American Novels by Dorothy Yost Deegan," *Herron American Literature* 23, no. 4 (1952): 521.

¹²³ Dominian, "Marriage: Growth and Decline," 160.

¹²⁴ Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, 19.

description of the connection between man and woman, be it in marriage or friendship. As she herself put it, “the real marriage of true minds is for any two people to possess a sense of humour or irony pitched in exactly the same key, so that their joint glances at any subject cross like inter-arching search-lights.”¹²⁵

Thus, being an epitome of physicality, Mattie’s presence when over focused upon comes to break the ties between Frome and his wife. In a broader sense, this is a symbolic reference to all what is physical in relationships, namely in terms of change. That is, physical objects and materials in nature tend to change, to be moulded, and to take new forms according to the circumstances and environmental change. As Frome senses how Mattie comes to endanger his marriage, namely by distorting the harmony and cohesion of his life,¹²⁶ he becomes alert to her devastating effect and stops a moment to think over his situation. That is, Frome’s situation is, to some extent, analogous to *The House of Mirth*’s Lily who stands for wisdom. Despite his weaknesses, he separates himself from Selden’s passivity by taking an action and, hence, embracing his reality showing that he is a man who considers, first and foremost, wisdom as a compass that guides him in life. It is this very “illuminating incident,”¹²⁷ to use Wharton’s words, which makes Frome realise that Mattie is just an illusion or, put differently, an empty dream. This could be said because she raises a sense of temporariness throughout much of her fictional presence in the novel. Frome is often expecting her to leave in that, for instance, she is neither capable of learning how to organise the house’s furniture nor prepared to keep things steady in the house.¹²⁸ As she fails in rising to Zeena’s standards of conformity and decency, Frome, who unknowingly learned and developed physically and morally in the light of his wife’s teachings, if I may say, comes to surrender to the fact that his dream of escape with Mattie is inevitably and ultimately reduced to emptiness. In one illustrative scene that bears witness to his disillusionment, both of

¹²⁵ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 173.

¹²⁶ In chapter 1, I argue that the lack of cohesion leads to the fall of marital relationships. See Chapter 1, 63.

¹²⁷ According to Sharon Kim, “Wharton describes this moment not only as the subject of fiction but also the means to represent it: “At every stage in the progress of his tale the novelist must rely on what may be called the *illuminating incident* to reveal and emphasize the inner meaning of each situation.” Sharon Kim, “Edith Wharton and Epiphany,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 29, no. 3 (2006): 154.

¹²⁸ Wharton’s fascination with architecture and decor makes her always focus on furniture in her different portrayals.

them head downward the hill only to symbolise, in an emphatic manner, their fall from illusion to reality:

“Ethan! Ethan! I want you to take me down again!”

“Down where?”

“The coast. Right off,” she panted. “So ‘t we’ll never come up any more.”

“Matt! What on earth do you mean?”

She put her lips close against his ear to say: “Right into the big elm. You said you could. So ‘t we’d never have to leave each other anymore.”

“Why, what are you talking of? You’re crazy!”

“I’m not crazy; but I will be if I leave you.”¹²⁹

Failing to provide Frome with the sustainable happiness he is looking for,¹³⁰ Mattie Silver proves to be just a beautiful illusion, that is, an over idealised vision. Their relationship appears to be a mirage instead of marriage. As such, after uplifting his state of mind for a while, she will rapidly disappear as a supportive partner only to be his very equal in the need for caring. Thus, this time, in contrast to *The House of Mirth*’s Lily Bart and Lawrence Selden who clung to their idealistic vision of marriage and ended up separated by death, together they set out for a real “way out,” which shall find grounds in the real world. To say it differently, they have become liberated from illusions and, in my view, this is Wharton’s way to stress the importance of embracing reality rather than expecting too much from a future which constitutes just a mental reality. Hence, I will hereafter endeavour to express so in my third reading of the novel. From that angle, Zeena emerges as the caring wife who cares, first and foremost, about the communal sense of relationships, be it in marriage or in society at large.

3.6. The extended family, or the return of the good old days

In this last and culminating reading of the novel, I shall rely on accurate social data made available by Richard Sennett’s study of the American family at the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth century. In such a social investigation, Sennett makes it clear that the social fabric in America reached a point of complexity in which three types of family blended together. That is, without doubt time played an important role to render this situation possible and, hence, the idea of social change.¹³¹ In a clear manner he

¹²⁹ Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, 99.

¹³⁰ I maintain that the primal aim of marriage is the “pursuit of happiness.”

¹³¹ Time is a crucial factor in defining society. See my general introduction, 2.

distinguished between these patterns in terms of composition, namely, nuclear families, extended families, and single member families. To quote Michael Gordon:

Sennett looks for differences in family composition as well as in the occupational mobility of males in different family types in what was then a predominately middle-class section of the west side of Chicago which he calls Union Park. He finds three family types: 1) nuclear families comprising roughly four-fifths of the population; 2) what he calls “extended” families comprising about a tenth of the population, but which are actually nuclear families with one or more extra adults in residence in addition to the parents; 3) and finally single-member families, which make up the rest of the population.¹³²

Based on the data extricated from the previous quotation, it could be deduced that the extended families have declined in terms of number to the benefit of other types of families, namely the nuclear ones which coincided with the arrival of modernity. In a reminder and a confirmation of my argument on the tensions brought about by modernity in the previous chapters,¹³³ Talcott Parsons associated the fall of the extended family and the rise of its successor with the tensions and pressures imposed on the new couples who have become obliged to assume full responsibility without being well prepared for the new challenges of marital life. As such, he points out the fact that nuclear families represent the modern world’s tendency for isolation and departure from communion life. As such, in his social study we come to find out about:

the structural consequences, including various social stresses and strains, of isolating the nuclear family from extended kin in other generations: isolation places a burden on family relations because the marital bond depends on emotional ties within the conjugal arrangement; adolescents experience strain because they must make an abrupt transition from intense dependency within the families of their youth to equally intense involvement in new families, which they must create.¹³⁴

In my turn, I would safely interpret such a decline in terms of the demise and fall of a certain way of life, which was based on “quasi-autonomous collectivity in a wider field of action —a household, an extended family, a lineage, a genealogical clan,

¹³² Michael Gordon, “Families against the City by Richard Sennett,” *Gordon Journal of Marriage and Family* 33, no. 2 (1971): 2.

¹³³ While these tensions feed my discussions on marriage in a myriad of occasions, the point I entitled “Marriage as the victim of modernity” addresses the issue explicitly. See Chapter 1, 81.

¹³⁴ Parsons and Mayhew, 2.

a village, a tribe. Their powers derive from their ability to mobilize the resources of that collectivity.”¹³⁵ That is, by implication, the extended families stand for the past, which bares the vision of this third reading of the novel. With this information in mind and in addition to Wharton’s philosophy of life as a background, my hypothesis of a possible solution *vis-à-vis* the problem of marriage finds grounds at this very moment whose associated point in the curve of the development of American culture represents a high value that would meet Wharton’s cultural standards.¹³⁶

I argue, therefore, that Wharton, intentionally, chose the shared presence of the novel’s main characters—a reference to “civilisation [as] a collective human action,”¹³⁷ who are not only tied by marriage, but also by blood. In other words, the kinship that joins Zeena and Frome is revealed prior to their marriage. Besides, even Frome’s imaginative escape that I accounted for appealed for Mattie Silver, who is also Zeena’s cousin. Hence, in a subtle manner, their gathering stands for a reconstructed extended family, which, in my view, serves as Wharton’s vision of the incubator of a good marriage. This claim finds ground in *Ethan Frome* from which I support my argument with Wharton’s marked attachment to the caring marriage epitomised by Mrs Hale’s stable family. In particular, Wharton stresses that this kind of families preserved and promoted American culture. As such Mrs Hale’s family serves as an epitome of the families which passed intellect from one generation to another and preserved the community’s union and spirit as the following passage illustrates:

Mrs. Hale’s father had been the village lawyer of the previous generation, and “lawyer Varnum’s house,” where my landlady still lived with her mother, was the most considerable mansion in the village. It stood at one end of the main street, its classic portico and small-paned windows looking down a flagged path between Norway spruces to the slim white steeple of the Congregational church.¹³⁸

Moreover, Mrs Hale’s own marriage involves her husband Andrew who is a builder. That is to say, Mrs Hale represents also the intersection of intellectual legacy in the image of her father as a lawyer with the practical sense of production epitomised by

¹³⁵ Mann, 52.

¹³⁶ See my argument on the cyclic pattern of civilisation in my previous chapter, 122.

¹³⁷ “والحضارة فعل إنساني جماعي”. Djendia, 84. My translation. See, also, my discussion on the decline of morality in the previous chapter, 123.

¹³⁸ Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, 6.

her husband. In this context, it is worth noting that this intersection functions as a remedy to *The House of Mirth*'s deficient lawyer, Lawrence Selden. In contrast to the latter, Mrs Hales' husband who was "a kind-hearted man,"¹³⁹ is to act and help Frome by providing him with work, the very defining Puritan quality. More importantly Mrs Hale is the embodiment of motherhood in that even though she is not Frome's biological mother, she is practically more than one for him. She supports him, cares about him, and tries hard to facilitate things for him when life defies him with its hardships. The following passage sums this idea up:

Beaming maternally on Ethan, she bent over to add: "I on'y just heard from Mr. Hale 'bout Zeena's going over to Bettsbridge to see that new doctor. I'm real sorry she's feeling so bad again! I hope he thinks he can do something for her. I don't know anybody round here's had more sickness than Zeena. I always tell Mr. Hale I don't know what she'd 'a' done if she hadn't 'a' had you to look after her; and I used to say the same thing 'bout your mother. You've had an awful mean time, Ethan Frome."¹⁴⁰

I would argue that my second reading of the novel ends when Frome attempts to escape with Mattie. In that case their suicidal escape which ends dramatically represents the paralysis of culture, namely *vis-à-vis* marriage, and echoes "the nation's voluntary and unconscious collective suicide,"¹⁴¹ which coincides with the idea I advanced in the second chapter in terms of the destructive effects of consumerist culture which stands for the materialistic look into reality that glitters in the image of Silver.¹⁴² However, in this instance of my research, which is based on G.R. Thompson's idea of "Nietzschean role reversal of master and slave,"¹⁴³ the same accident becomes an incident that spares Frome death and offers him a second chance, that is, the rebirth of his marriage and by extension life.

To highlight such rebirth which is, first and foremost, an act of emancipation from one's own displaced beliefs, I shall point out and, above all, extricate what was really captivated. As such, I would argue that it is Frome's wife's "faith in opposite

¹³⁹ Ibid., 83.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 84.

¹⁴¹ "ومؤذنا بدخول الأمة في حالة انتحار جماعي إرادي وغير واع". Djendia, 60. My translation.

¹⁴² See my argument on the voluntary and unconscious collective suicide brought about the consumerist culture in my previous chapter, 106.

¹⁴³ Gary Richard Thompson, *Reading the American Novel 1865-1914*, 1st ed., Reading the Novel (Chichester, West Sussex ; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 76.

value,”¹⁴⁴ to use Nietzsche words which made her alienate herself from the real world that revolved around her marriage. That is, she escaped her reality both physically and emotionally and left the vacuum for other persons to take over, in the image of Mattie Silver who seized the chance and appealed for Frome’s attachment. To some extent, she had a *Bovaristic* tendency in that she had believed in an ideal marriage and was suffering seeing her husband happy with another woman. In sum, she was a slave of her own beliefs. However, once she retrieved Frome after the turning-point accident, she substituted reality, that is, Frome’s presence, with the abstract beliefs she had. In other words, in accordance to Nietzsche’s explanation, Zeena freed herself from slavery to “faith” and found her very “self,” which is at the centre of any quest that Wharton makes her refined characters embark on. In a similar way to Lily’s ultimate self-discovery, she comes to find the Zeena of my third reading, whose ordeal, as Nietzsche maintained, was all about freedom from faith:

It has always been not faith but the freedom from faith, that half-stoical and smiling unconcern with the seriousness of faith, that enraged slaves in their masters—against their masters. “Enlightenment” enrages: for the slave wants the unconditional; he understands only what is tyrannical, in morals, too; he loves as he hates, without nuance, to the depths, to the point of pain, of sickness—his abundant concealed suffering is enraged against the noble taste that seems to deny suffering.¹⁴⁵

As such, Zeena emerges triumphant as the outcome of this role reversal in the second “illuminating incident” of the novel next to Frome’s, which I discussed earlier.¹⁴⁶ Wharton, I argue, alludes to a triumph that “generates the necessary energy to resist the challenges and overcome the temporary momentum of minority, and foster the values, which seed the sense of duty rather than rights.”¹⁴⁷ In this context, it is worth noting that the human being when consumed by thinking about things that never happen or give sign that they will happen, he or she loses much of his psychic energy in vain.¹⁴⁸ Zeena’s emergence and revival, thus, stems from her discovery of the hidden self or what

¹⁴⁴ Nietzsche and Kaufmann, 914.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 556.

¹⁴⁶ See page 185.

¹⁴⁷ “الذي يولد الطاقة اللازمة للصمود في وجه التحديات، وللتغلب على ظرف القلة، ويعزز القيم التي تزرع الإحساس بالواجبات أكثر من الحقوق”. Djendia, 85. My translation.

¹⁴⁸ My idea, based on my own experience in life.

Wharton refers to as the “inner room.”¹⁴⁹ What makes her different from Lily Bart is that she could make it to that room in time before it is too late. Moreover, in my view, she had one privilege that was withheld from Lily. That is, one of the reasons behind her empowerment is her noble work of nursing in that it is work which enables the individual to assert himself or herself. In becoming the master of his/her fate, one could achieve the real happiness he/she yearns for. In particular, as Philippe Raynaud noted, America as a democratic country offered the chance for the average person to develop and reverse his or her status from obedience to mastery:

Dans les sociétés démocratiques, au contraire, le rapport d’obéissance entre les maîtres et les serviteurs ne vaut que comme suite d’un contrat toujours révisable, et qui est conclu entre des individus dont la situation relative pourrait être inversée (le serviteur peut faire fortune et devenir un maître et, à la limite, un maître ruiné pourrait devenir serviteur puisque, ‘chez les Américains, toutes les professions honnêtes sont réputées honorables.’¹⁵⁰

As Simone de Beauvoir put it, “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature.”¹⁵¹ As such, the Zeena of my first reading of the novel, that is, marriage as a trap, was the construct of the narrator just as Society does in a good deal of real life situations, namely when it comes to women at that particular period in history. Accordingly, the point of view of the narrator reflects society as he explicitly announces that he “contented [himself] with the story pieced together from these hints had it not been for the provocation of Mrs. Hale’s silence, and—a little later—for the accident of personal contact with the man.”¹⁵²

For her part, Gina Berriault reimagines the real Zeena, who confirms my third reading of the novel. That is, the Zeena who after her self-rediscovery mothers an extended family. To justify or rather defend her previous attitude toward Mattie, Zeena, this time, speaks for herself. With no intermediary voice, she retrieved energy and the necessary freedom to find her own voice and explain her posture *vis-à-vis* herself, her

¹⁴⁹ Rodgers, “Images of Women: A Female Perspective,” 42.

¹⁵⁰ Tocqueville, 38.

¹⁵¹ Beauvoir, 273.

¹⁵² Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, 7-8.

husband, and her cousin. She unveils the truth that has been hidden for so long within herself in Wharton's version of the narrative. In an inspiring way, she tells us, for instance, about her altruism for she actually cared much about her cousin rather than ascribing herself to other self-centred characters I accounted for throughout this dissertation:

When I asked Mattie Silver to come into this house and help me with the chores, it was not just for my sake, it was for her sake, too. She had no mother or father and was in poor health. Recollect, Edith, that she blossomed while she was here, and recollect I urged her to go down to the dancing in the church basement where she could meet a young man who'd fall in love with her and make her his wife, and recollect I urged her to go to picnics in the summer with other young people round about. I knew it was Ethan who scrubbed the kitchen floor and churned the butter when he thought I slept, doing those chores to spare her, though I pretended not to know this.¹⁵³

The reconstructed Frome's extended family is, in my view, a re-imagination of the building block of early American community, that is, good old-days American family. Such an institution played an important role in the past in that, as Bernard Gallinato put it, "la cellule familiale stabilise les individus; elle est la structure naturelle où ils peuvent organiser leur force de production avec le plus de profit possible, tant pour eux-mêmes que pour l'ensemble du corps social mais d'abord pour eux-mêmes."¹⁵⁴ Therefore, we come to understand that the family particularly provides the individual with the adequate sense of stability to eventually achieve productivity. That is, in accordance with the Puritan doctrine, marriage is defined in terms of procreation and production. As I quoted previously, Puritan Richard Baxter preached that marriage was ordained for "the increase of mankind."¹⁵⁵ I add to this that such a marriage was associated with stability which was "based on family rather than unattainable ideal love."¹⁵⁶ In this context, Tocqueville observed this sense of stability and order which fostered production and enhanced one's taste and spiritual peace:

L'Américain rentre au sein de sa famille, il y rencontre aussitôt l'image de l'ordre et de la paix. Là, tous ses plaisirs sont simples et naturels, ses joies

¹⁵³ Gina Berriault, "Zenobia," *The Threepenny Review* 64, (1996): 33.

¹⁵⁴ Bernard Gallinato, *Benjamin Franklin: Quand L'amérique S'emancipait* (Bordeaux: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 1992), 86.

¹⁵⁵ Johnson, "English Puritan Thought on the Ends of Marriage," 434.

¹⁵⁶ See William Blazek's "Men at Work in *The Custom of the Country*" in Rattray, *Edith Wharton's the Custom of the Country: A Reassessment*, 143. See also Wharton's definition of French marriages in my first chapter, 32.

innocentes et tranquilles; et comme il arrive au bonheur par la régularité de la vie, il s'habitue sans peine à régler ses opinions aussi bien que ses goûts.¹⁵⁷

Yet, individuals participated in such a process of production out of conviction and sense of duty, which, as Nevius Blake noted, is shared by “most of Edith Wharton’s protagonists who are confronted by the same alternatives.”¹⁵⁸ The second quality made possible by the Puritan family, which answers Frome’s needs, is caring, the quest for which was raised in the previous point of this chapter.¹⁵⁹ As such, husband and wife, within the Puritan family, “rule the household in ‘wisdom.’ The end of their government is twofold, the advancement of ‘Christian holiness’ in the members of the family and provision for their physical well-being.”¹⁶⁰ More importantly, when they care for each other and for their children, they develop into a microcosm of a church community and by extension humanity. The bonds between them, as it should be between all Christians, are the bonds of friendship in that, as James Johnson put it, “a comparison of the Puritans’ understanding of marriage with their doctrine of the church yields some of the most striking parallels of all.”¹⁶¹ Such a need for friendship in marriage is illustrated by Frome’s appreciation of Mattie Silver’s company. This could be said because she was not his wife, but a friend who often listened, tried to understand, and persuaded him as the following passage suggests:

She had an eye to see and an ear to hear: he could show her things and tell her things, and taste the bliss of feeling that all he imparted left long reverberations and echoes he could wake at will. It was during their night walks back to the farm that he felt most intensely the sweetness of this communion [...] spoke to him with a deep and powerful persuasion.¹⁶²

The sense of community as a Christian ideal, which reflected “the strength of the belief in the values of civilisation,”¹⁶³ developed through time to the point it shadowed and, to some extent, repressed the extended families in terms of social and

¹⁵⁷ Tocqueville, 190.

¹⁵⁸ Nevius, “Ethan Frome and the Themes of Edith Wharton’s Fiction,” 204-205.

¹⁵⁹ See page 181.

¹⁶⁰ James T. Johnson, “The Covenant Idea and the Puritan View of Marriage,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 32, no. 1 (1971): 112.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 114.

¹⁶² Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, 19.

¹⁶³ “وتتنزع قوة الوازع الجماعي مع صلابة الإيمان بالفكرة الحضارية.” Djendia, 84. My translation.

political power. Thus, families were to be reduced in terms of function as subordinate little churches as I mentioned previously.¹⁶⁴ On a deeper level, that is, on the level of individuals, historical evidences show that, as Stephanie Coontz noted, “because marriage was too important a contract to be left up to the two individuals involved, kin, neighbours, and other outsiders, such as judges, priests, or government officials, were usually involved in negotiating a match.”¹⁶⁵ In other words, the community with its higher institutions had the supremacy in deciding on one’s fate as Philippe Ariès observed:

The community was more important in determining the individual’s fate than was the family. When a young boy left his mother’s apron strings, it was his responsibility to make a place for himself within the community. Like an animal or a bird, he had to establish a domain, a place of his own, and he had to get the community to recognize it. It was up to him to determine the limits of his authority, to decide what he could do and how far he could go before encountering resistance from the others—his parents, his wife, his neighbors, and the community as a whole.¹⁶⁶

Hence, the idea of order and conformity while positive in some regards reflects Wharton’s concerns over the threat they represent *vis-à-vis* the individual’s freedom of deep thinking and, hence, creative productivity. That is to say, the Puritan community which stressed order did eventually restrict “the degree of individual judgment.”¹⁶⁷ Accordingly, informed by his sense of community to fulfil his duties, Ethan Frome has to abandon his aspirations for education in the city. The following passage illustrates how such aspirations remained entrapped in his mind as wishful thinking:

He had always wanted to be an engineer, and to live in towns, where there were lectures and big libraries and “fellows doing things.” A slight engineering job in Florida, put in his way during his period of study at Worcester, increased his faith in his ability as well as his eagerness to see the world; and he felt sure that, with a “smart” wife like Zeena, it would not be long before he had made himself a place in it.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁴ See my quotation of James T. Johnson, page 192.

¹⁶⁵ Coontz, 7.

¹⁶⁶ Philippe Ariès, “The Family and the City,” *Daedalus* 106, no. 2 (1977): 227.

¹⁶⁷ Clifford K. Shipton, “The Puritan Influence in Education,” *Pennsylvania History* 25, no. 3 (1958): 224.

¹⁶⁸ Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, 41.

However, in keeping Ethan in the countryside, in my view, Wharton tries to protect him from the corruption he might face in the city. Moreover, in my view, her praise of the communal way of life meant also her appreciation of self-education, which goes along the Puritan tradition. Actually, in real life she herself did not attend the schools in the city in total adherence to the customs held by her family, but relied on reading her father's books and the tutoring that she took at home. Even as a child she was an avid reader of books within and from which she found herself and developed her intellectual talent as she tells us: "the old New York to which I came back as a little girl meant to me chiefly my father's library. Now for the first time I had my fill of books."¹⁶⁹ In her image, Ethan was interested in reading books when he had the chance to as the following passage illustrates:

Another day, on getting into my train at the Flats, I missed a volume of popular science—I think it was on some recent discoveries in bio-chemistry— which I had carried with me to read on the way. I thought no more about it till I got into the sleigh again that evening, and saw the book in Frome's hand.¹⁷⁰

Moreover, Wharton as a conservative is aware of the countryside's natural ability to preserve the old way of life. Opposite to the city, the "rural community," to use Ariès words,¹⁷¹ referred to by New England, allows the sun rays to reach the fields of Agrarian America and bring life to the dead. As Frome keeps faith in his old ideals, all difficulties seem to be eased as the bright side of his life, I imply his marriage, finally reveals itself when "the early mist had vanished and the fields lay like a silver shield under the sun. It was one of the days when the glitter of winter shines through a pale haze of spring."¹⁷²

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, E. Benjamin Andrews explained the development of civilisation and its progress in terms of cycles,¹⁷³ a view already held by philosopher Ibn Khaldun, who considered that "the world is a garden [...] and then it begins again from the beginning."¹⁷⁴ Such an inclination that seems to be also embraced

¹⁶⁹ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 54.

¹⁷⁰ Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, 9.

¹⁷¹ Ariès, "The Family and the City," 227.

¹⁷² Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, 83.

¹⁷³ Andrews, "The Decline of Culture," 1. See chapter 2, 122.

¹⁷⁴ Khaldun, 9.

and adopted by Wharton, eventually, suggests and confirms my hypothesis that, for her, the past represented a cherished high point in American culture. Thus, the emphatic reappearance of the sun rays in the previous quotation suggests that a gloomy cycle of life has come to an end and, more importantly, ushering in a probably bright new one if we consider Ibn Khaldun as well as Spengler's views on history.¹⁷⁵ I further support this idea with William Butler Yeats's *The Wheel*, (1922) which is very illustrative in this regard:

Through winter-time we call on spring,
And through the spring on summer call,
And when abounding hedges ring
Declare that winter's best of all;
And after that there's nothing good
Because the spring-time has not come—
Nor know that what disturbs our blood
Is but its longing for the tomb.¹⁷⁶

As *The Wheel* depicts, we can deduce that despite the coming of the spring, the impact of winter continues to engender its mysterious echoes and in doing so its value is to remain crucial for it is associated with the pains Frome suffers in my first reading of the novel.¹⁷⁷ On the one hand, as Ibn Khaldun put it, those pains make one anxious about his present only to look at the future with wisdom.¹⁷⁸ On the other hand, such pains are used to fuel the struggles within himself between his real marriage, one in decline, and his fantasies. Like Yeats, who believed that "the end of art is ecstasy," which "cannot come without pain,"¹⁷⁹ Wharton, in my view, forged the "way out" toward such an ecstasy by scientifically examining Zeena's pains. Yet, the remedy proves to be found far distant in the remote past and realised only by Wharton's nostalgic look into it. That is to say, Wharton follows her aesthetic sense to go back to what Bourdieu calls a "music season" that we sometimes want to go back to revive and listen to a lasting piece of music.¹⁸⁰ In such an endeavour, she seeks the sublime because, as Emerson argues, "if

¹⁷⁵ See Chapter 2, 123.

¹⁷⁶ William Butler Yeats, *The Wheel* (1922). URL: <http://www.online-literature.com/yeats/811/>.

¹⁷⁷ I discussed earlier the way hardships forged Puritans' resolve to take wisdom as an approach to solve social diseases and pains. In this view marriage means literally an antidote. See this chapter, 162.

¹⁷⁸ Khaldun, 127. See my previous quotation in this chapter, 179.

¹⁷⁹ Michael Fleming, "Myself That I Remake: Spiritual Renewal in the Life and Work of William Butler Yeats" URL: http://www.dutchgirl.com/foxpaws/biographies/myself_that_i_remake/yeatssec2.html.

¹⁸⁰ "مواسم للموسيقى". Bourdieu, 280. My translation.

“the form of the thing is reflected by the eye, so the soul of the thing is reflected by a melody.”¹⁸¹ She, therefore, shows her spiritual yearning by reconstruction images of marriage that despite their arousal of meanings of hardships at different levels, they stimulate feelings of overwhelming happiness and spiritual uplift.

3.7. Conclusion

In this chapter, my primal goal and endeavour was to propose a way out from the status of stagnation that marriage and American culture by extension witnessed in Wharton’s times. Certainly, this approach relies on extra-textual data that point out Wharton’s nostalgic orientation. Besides, I tried to reinforce ideas on old marriage and the cultural decline that I have suggested in the previous chapters. Hence, in a way, this chapter serves as both a summary of different ideas on old marriage that coincide with Wharton as a Puritan-minded writer and as an additional suggestive interpretive account for Wharton’s general views on society and of course about marriage as a central point of investigation.

As I discussed before, despite the material success America achieved at the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth century, society witnessed enormous cultural decline which was the reason behind Wharton’s anxiety. Speaking of anxiety is to evoke the ambiguity one would face in defining moments of his life. This could be said because marriage in general terms is a real turning point in the life of any human being and is a defining factor in terms of visions on oneself and the world. To demonstrate Wharton’s vision which I consider as a suggestive one in terms of the way out of such a decline, I resorted to the study of her portrayal of marriage in *Ethan Frome*. It is worth noting that this work appealed to my interest, first and foremost, through its remarkable return to the countryside and account for agrarian life. In relying on supporting evidences, I tried to make a connection between marriage and farming to reflect the transfer of values from one entity to the other. To fulfil such an endeavour, I suggested three readings of the novel which went in the following order:

Firstly, I focused on Zeena and Ethan’s marriage to account for the way marriage lays a great deal of responsibility and enormous pressure on the individual and, to some extent, risks his potential. By studying the meanings evoked by Zenobia, the

¹⁸¹ Emerson, *Essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 201.

real name of Zeena, I evoked the rigid Puritan codes that framed marriage in the past, namely in New England. Here I tried to evoke the rootedness of the region in American imagination. In doing so, I allowed myself to make room for the study of marriage as was perceived by early Americans who were agrarian by definition. In making a rapprochement between early American Experience, namely in terms of the hardships faced by Puritans, and marriage itself, I could account for marriage as a physical as well as mental trap from this perspective. Secondly, I tried to show that, as a natural reaction, Frome sought an exit from his delusive entrapment in marriage. Hence, I proceeded with the study of Frome's relationship with Mattie Silver as a vision of escape. In the process, I tried to highlight some qualities in Mattie which, in my view, provide a completion to Zeena's deficiencies. However, like a dream, such a fantasised look into marriage was doomed to reach an end and yet an eventual disillusionment and awakening. This could be said because material appeal and temporary joy could not provide sustainable happiness. As such, Mattie Silver, by remaining a mere transitional illusion paved the way to the appeal for a real "way out," or the return to reality. Lastly, I suggested an answer to such an appeal by evoking a nostalgic look into the past in which marriage once thrived in America within the confines of extended families. In this view, I proposed that the reunion of Zeena, Mattie, and Frome represents the way they have come to embrace reality through an endeavour to reconstruct an extended family typical to the Puritan era. What makes the difference in this reading is that, this time, the hardships could be overcome within this family. That is, the good sense of community which is supportive by definition helps the individual to retrieve his human sense and feeling of security. Like good old days, marriage that embraces the sense of caring and duty pays back the community by sustaining it and providing the seeds that ensure a good future despite all difficulties.

General Conclusion

Through this research I tried to demonstrate the way Wharton's novels dealt with the question of marriage in America at the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth century. Because the period was, first and foremost, one of change, her primal concern was remarkably the tensions between tradition and modernity and, in particular, the way they served as the shaping force in terms of marriage as a whole and then penetrated to its constituent poles, that is, to inflict implications on the individual whose definition of the self goes inevitably with the definition of the other. My claim rests on a clear idea that is outlined by the fact that the self and the other can never be separated in that the human being cannot live alone for he is a social being in essence. Hence, the literary representation of marriage demonstrates its faculty to reveal and highlight much of the developing character of Americans at the time and, above all, to provide us with valuable insights on human condition in universal terms.

To keep sight of what I termed Old America, I chose *The House of Mirth* in that it embodies a great deal about the early spirit of wisdom in America, with the study of old marriage from Lily Bart's perspective as a focal point. As I followed her quest for marriage, I shed light on her values, which, in my view, stand for Old America and its puritan ethos based on respect, dignity, and responsibility to mention a few. These qualities had actually supported early Americans to overcome the difficulties they faced to create the nation. That is, they sought to embrace a culture that would fulfil the basic and legitimate necessities of life and humane aspirations. Sound evidences point out that, in the process, they resorted to money to support their quest. While this endeavour might at first glance be conceived as material, in old America it represented a second pillar of a doctrine that rests on both faith and risk taking. This doctrine sought, above all, to lift them spiritually as seen through Lily's lens. In her yearning for happiness in the bonds of an idealised marriage, she demonstrates and confirms her association with the republican values which also stemmed from the idealist visions of the founding fathers of America. That is, for her, happiness would not be realised without a marriage based on equality between husband and wife that preserves dignity and leads to self-esteem and spiritual fulfilment. In this process, work reveals itself as the safe-valve to

preserve this dignity in that in one's self-reliance, he or she could realise his real sense of self-independence and protect himself or herself from the distorting effects of any power of change. Perhaps, this is the only way change could take place smoothly without eroding the essence of tradition as a component of one's self-definition.

For this, Lily could not stand the swift change and, as a humanist, she leaves out the material futility of a society that swerved from old values. Instead, she cares much about the true value of the individual as a prerequisite in marriage, namely thrive, thrift, loyalty, and commitment. In a broader sense, these qualities further trace back to the cultural roots of America and by extension, Western civilisation. However, in a world that has begun to revolve around money in an excessive manner, she sets herself aloof only to stress that, for her, money is a mere enabling factor and not a driving rationale. In my view, this is Wharton's way to highlight Lily's taste as something beyond the corruption of money. Speaking of taste, it might be said that even though Lawrence Selden has a good one in that he ultimately falls in love with Lily, in contrast to the founding fathers, he is incapable of taking prompt decisions to lead the nation, or what he perceives as his own republic. For one thing, in part, he has become corrupted as a direct result of his institution-minded approach, or what Ralph Waldo Emerson calls the "rottenness" of a world departing from nature and self-reliance to systematic dependence on institutions. For this, Selden's obsession with an imaginative republic meant his loss of the guiding morality that has served as a fundamental foundation of American society. In a way, I propose, Wharton wanted to suggest that the good values ought not to be taken for granted and, instead, should be protected and fought for to avoid their demise and fall under the impact of change. In her attempt to embody Wharton's vision, Lily encounters difficulty in finding the perfect match for her at a time where the tradition she has cherished is being endangered and heading to extinction. Thus, she cannot decide for marriage because her taste emphatically contradicts the choices she actually has at hand. Moreover, she is not aware that the values she stands for are no longer viable as modernity began to cast a long shadow on American life. To say it differently, America she belongs to is old and dying.

The death of Old America signalled the end of one cycle of Western civilisation and ushered in the rise of a modern nation, which has, above all, collected the harvest

of a process of mechanisation that transcended the factory to reach the bones of society. The cult that the abundance of goods produced and emphatically induced by the machine is without doubt the consumerist culture. In terms of marriage, individuals like Undine Spragg, much concerned with the spectacle life of modern America, demonstrate in *The Custom of the Country* their developed skills of adaptation. In particular, Undine symbolises change and flexibility and makes use of marriage with disregard to ethics only to fulfil the quests of the emerging *nouveaux-riches* in terms of social prestige. However, despite her best efforts, while she succeeds in advancing socially through calculations, she fails culturally due to her unreadiness. That is, without a supporting philosophy, she will never acquire the spontaneity, refined values, and taste of her counterpart Lily Bart. Her apparent success in marriage will remain captive of its temporal material definition, which inevitably ends up widening the gap between herself and the real America that has been celebrated as the fountain of spiritual excellence. As her attitude *vis-à-vis* marriage glorifies materialism at the expense of her only child, who ties her to the future, Wharton seems to indict the loss of the essence of American culture in terms of its humane sense and the rush to future without reviving the spirit of excellence.

Moreover, *The Custom of the Country*, in a subtle manner, demonstrates through marriage the decline of morality in America at the turn of the twentieth century. If the future looked confusing marred with uncertainty, the past, for Wharton, represented the cultural supremacy and embraced much of the values she was fascinated with. As such, I argue that she found no way out but a nostalgic view into the past in an aesthetic attempt to revive it. She, therefore, undertook the endeavour of reconstructing images of old marriage, a view that I hold in my study of her novel *Ethan Frome*. Above all, these images invoke a way of life that is rooted in land and history. As I evidenced, Culture itself as a rooted concept in Western thought invokes the idea of Renaissance as well as the notion of the cultivation of land. For this, the culture of marriage that was preferred by Wharton was based on communal spirit in the image of old times' extended families. Inevitably, Wharton's Puritan grounds impose themselves as I endeavour to explore different aspects of marriage upon which Wharton's thought found substance. In a subtle manner, I tried to show how her approach was based on actual facts and *priori*

knowledge rather than illusionary perceptions and abstract ideas of marriage that lead nowhere but to a collective suicide.

All in all, this dissertation argues that Wharton's novels, in particular the aforementioned works, addressed marriage as a reflection of the social change that took place in turn-of-the-century America. Such a change could be seen in the image of the shift of marriage from production to consumption in terms of its function. In a way, marriage, with its imbedded complexities ranging from individual to public spheres, enabled Wharton to accurately capture the transition of America from agrarian to industrial nation. To fulfil such an endeavour, for instance, she examined how marriage intertwined with money and how people perceived both entities. Based on my study I can conclude that money passed from fulfilling necessity into an ambition for excess, that is, it echoed the transition of America from need to greed at different levels. Above all, on the moral level, marriage substituted materialistic for moral ethos. Thus, as the main social institution beside the family, its study accounted for the human qualities and interpersonal relationships and reflected universal concerns over the development of the individual when his or her society undergoes change. In particular, as I said, the adoption of consumerism as an ideology transcended economy and reached the bones of society in the image of both institutions of marriage and family. That is, consumerism inflicted drastic change upon the workings of these social institutions. As such, marriage in the image of a commercial "product" mirrored a sense of inauthenticity in that marriage and remarriage is literally a reflection of the massive production of copies of the real specimen. Hence, a good number of marriages failed to fulfil sustainability that is primordial for the survival of any society. With no happiness achieved in most of the cases, the outcome was the spread of the divorce culture.

Wharton, whose own life was agitated by the spread of divorce culture, in my view, tried to demonstrate the rise of such culture in a context that involved the decline of Old America. In different instances of this research, I tried to evidence that such processes were primarily due to the winds of change inflicted by modernity and the departure from originality. Helped by her scientific inclinations, her approach to study such a decline resulted in a remarkably rich understanding of marriage being torn between tradition and modernity. Besides, the rise of science at the time helped her to

make use of different disciplines to dive into the inner world of individuals to decipher their visions on marriage, society and, above all, themselves. Her views reflected also a universal concern over the decadence of human values and the risks such a phenomenon would inflict upon the individual and the basic social institutions of marriage and family. To say it differently, she used the contrast method to discern between old marriage, one of taste and refined values, which served the community and sustained civilisation, and a new one that is void of morality, marred with uncertainty, and introducing a status of decline.

As evidenced throughout this dissertation, Wharton, who herself endorsed philanthropy, praised the collective action of which marriage is the very representative microcosm and, in the same time, indicted excessive self-interest as a driving morality. This inclination meant also that she implicitly favoured altruism over egoism to achieve enduring happiness in marriage and life by extension. In a broader sense, her tendency is, in my view, rationalised by the theory of cyclic history. This view rests upon the idea that civilisations witnessed great development and progress only in times in which they celebrated community, democracy, and moral sense as the backbone of their societies. With this in mind, as soon as marriage sank into pure individualistic drive at Wharton's coming of age, it ascribed her to escapism. My rationale is based on the signs I tried to evoke to demonstrate how the decline of old marriage she preferred and to which she was tied raised her sceptical view on the future. Hence, as I concluded my research, I highlighted through my study of *Ethan Frome* how Wharton dissuaded herself from illusions of superficial marriages by designing an account for marriage that is real, rooted in nature, and supported by culture. My view is that her choice of the countryside which celebrates nature as a source of self-sufficiency and endless freedom pays tribute to the Puritan heritage and marks her withdrawal from what she considered as unpleasant reality in the city. As I tried to extricate meanings about the visions she held as viable and trusted for the preservation of tradition and the continuation of nation, I endeavoured to highlight her nostalgic look into the past in which good memories of marriage find grounds.

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نهاية أمريكا العتيقة: الزَّواجُ والتَّحوُّلُ الاجتماعي في روايات إديث وارتون

مُلَخَّص

تَهْدِفُ هذه الأطروحة إلى دراسة التَّحوُّل الاجتماعي من خلال تحليل أدبي للزَّواج كمؤسسة اجتماعية وكنموذج مُصَغَّر للعلاقات الإنسانية في المجتمع في روايات الكاتبة إديث وارتون. بينما وُضعت أمريكا في المرحلة الهامة التي عَبَرَت فيها من فكرٍ زراعيٍّ إلى آخر صناعيٍّ في دائرة الضَّوء، تُجاوِزُ النَّتائِجُ السِّيَاقَ الأمريكيَّ لِتَأْخُذَ بُعْداً عَالَمِيّاً لأنَّ الزَّواجَ يُمَثِّلُ تجربةَ إنسانيةً مُشتركة.

وَيَخْلُصُ هذا البَحْثُ إلى أَنَّ أمريكا شَهِدت في الفترة الإنتقاليَّة من القرن التاسع عشر إلى القرن العشرين تلاشي القيم العتيقة نَحْصً بالذَّكر منها البُوريتانيَّة لحسابِ ثقافةٍ تُشجِّع الطَّلَاقَ كمظهرٍ من مظاهرِ الثَّقافةِ الإستهلاكيَّة. حيث أنَّ المؤسَّسات الاجتماعيَّة تأثَّرت وتجاوِبت مع التَّحوُّلِ الثَّقافيِّ الموسوم خاصَّةً بتهايوي الأخلاقيَّات. وهكذا يُمكن القولُ أنَّه في حين تَحَوَّلَ الزَّواجُ من حيثِ خصائصِهِ من العناية والمحَبَّة المبنية على الإحترام والتَّفاني إلى هوسٍ ورغبةٍ في إثباتِ الشَّخصيَّةِ وإشباعِ الطُّموحِ الاجتماعيِّ، تَحَوَّلَتِ العائِلَةُ من حيثِ وظيفتها من نمطٍ إنتاجيٍّ إلى آخرٍ استهلاكيٍّ.

يَخْتَصُّ هذا البَحْثُ بدراسةِ الزَّواجِ من خلالِ التَّطَرُّقِ إلى رواياتِ الكاتبةِ إديث وارتون لاسيما منها رواية بيت المرح (1905) ورواية إيثن فروم (1911) ورواية تقاليد الوطن (1913). وهكذا تُبَيِّنُ هذه الدِّراسة كيف أنَّ التَّمثِيلَ الأدبيَّ للزَّواجِ يُجاوِزُ بُعْده المؤسَّساتيَّ ليصلَ إلى تعريفِ الدَّاتِ. حيثُ أنَّ الزَّواجَ كرابطةٍ إنسانيَّةٍ يُمكننا مِنَ الغوصِ في العالمِ الداخليِّ للدَّاتِ واكتشافِ كيف تَرى الآخرَ مُحدَّدة العلاقة بينهما النَّبيء الَّذي يُمكن الدَّاتِ مِنَ التَّوصُّلِ إلى تعريفِ نفسِها. وَيَجْدُرُ الذِّكْرُ هنا أنَّ المعطياتِ التي يُوفِّرها النَّصُّ الأدبيُّ المُعالِجُ لمجتمعٍ خاضعٍ للتَّحوُّلاتِ تُمكنُ من فهمِ الكيفيَّةِ التي يَرى من خِلالها الأفرادُ بعضهم البعض داخلَ مُؤسَّسةِ الزَّواجِ وكيف يتباحثون لإيجادِ مكانةٍ لهم في فضاءٍ اجتماعيٍّ غيرٍ ثابتٍ. في حين يتشَبَّهُ بعضُ الأفرادِ بالماضي مُفضِّلين الاستقرارَ يمضي البعضُ الآخرَ إلى احتضانِ التَّغْيِيرِ والتَّأَمُّلِ في المستقبلِ وأثناء ذلك تتصارعُ داخلهم التَّزَعُّاتُ المثاليَّة مع نظيراتها العمليَّة لِتُحدِّدَ اختياراتهم وبالتالي مصائرهم. ولكنَّ الكاتبةِ إديث وارتون تَبْتَعُدُ من لحظة التَّوتُّرِ هذه بالمُضيِّ في رحلةٍ إلى الماضي محلَّ ثقتها في مُحاولَةِ منها لإحياءِ ثَقافةِ الزَّواجِ الأصيلة من خِلالِ تصويرِ أدبيٍّ بديعٍ.

