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PROJECT TITLE: "Happily Ever After: Marriage in the
Stories of Edith Wharton"

I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

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Date: 28 April 2003

Comments (Optional):

This was a challenging project as Wharton's views on marriage are complicated. Ms. Williamson researched the topic well and picked fine works as illustrations for her argument. The piece is strongest in its close reading of the three chosen works.

Happily Ever After: Marriage in the Stories of Edith Wharton

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Abstract

Edith Wharton, the first woman to win a Pulitzer Prize in literature, wrote a great deal on the subject of marriage in her novels and short stories. Many of her stories are set in the high society world of the Gilded Age in America. This thesis will analyze some of the marriages in Edith Wharton's fiction.

The author's opinions on marriage were complicated, a fact that is reflected in her works. I will analyze Edith Wharton's views of marriage in three works: "The Other Two," *The Custom of the Country*, and *The Age of Innocence*.

In 1904, Edith Wharton wrote "The Other Two." In this story, her views on marriage are ambivalent. *The Custom of the Country* was written in 1913, the same year that Wharton got divorced. Her cynical views of marriage are reflected in this novel, as the main character treats marriage in a ruthless and calculating manner.

The only marriage that can be thought of as a "happy marriage" is the union of Newland Archer and May Welland in *The Age of Innocence*. The couple in this novel, unlike the couples in the other stories, did not get divorced. However, Newland Archer was in love with another woman. Edith Wharton reflects in her novels and short stories how complicated marriage can be.

Introduction

It was called the Gilded Age. During the late 19th century, men who were equally ingenious and ruthless made immense fortunes in railroads and steel while earning the respect of some and the contempt of others. New York City was the center of the action. Families like the Astors, Vanderbilts, and Whitneys held court in this American aristocracy.

Mere wealth, however, was not enough to ensure one's place in society. In his book *Mrs. Astor's New York*, Eric Homberger writes that the tone of the New York social life, its particular flavor of local snootiness, was rooted in an ethos of exclusion: the old money families were extremely reticent to allow "new money" into their circle (10). Marriage was one method in which new moneyed families elbowed their way into the desired society.

Nineteenth-century society individuals did not think too much about the importance of love and compassion in a marriage. It was something that one had to do if one wanted to keep one's position in society. Marriage was designed to keep money in the bloodlines. Without regard for the human element, many unhappy unions resulted.

A "good match" was desired by many single women, those from both old and new moneyed families. When a lucky girl nabbed some wealthy fellow or vice versa, it was a cause to celebrate. This inevitably culminated in a society wedding. The wedding was a sign of victory. The sole business of women in this society was to marry well. Their weddings had the best guest lists of the most powerful society people. Every aspect of the wedding was of the highest caliber. However, a marriage does not end with a wedding. Many society marriages were not, at least to 21st century minds, love matches.

One example of a “good match” occurred when New York society girls married a titled and usually penniless European such as the case with Consuelo Vanderbilt’s marriage to the Duke of Marlborough in 1895. She brought the ancient family some of the vast Vanderbilt wealth. In turn, he provided her (and, by extension, her family) with a title. However, this was not a recipe for success as her storybook marriage to the Duke of Marlborough eventually ended in divorce. In her essay entitled “Consuelo Vanderbilt, John Esquemeling, and *The Buccaneers*”, Adeline Tintner writes that many marriages, like the one of Consuelo Vanderbilt, were procured by the efforts of “rich American mothers desperately wanting their daughters to marry into the English aristocracy” (145). However, “the daughters [found] that life is not the romantic dream they thought it might be” (145).

Edith Wharton understood the complexities of a 19th century marriage. She was born in 1862 “into one of those New York families that antedated in their established position the famous millionaires of the turn of the century,” according to Robert Walton (17). In 1885, she married Edward Robbins Wharton of the Boston aristocracy. However, their union, as Janet Beer believes, was “not really a love match” (7). She later divorced him in 1913 while living in France. As both a member and an observer of 19th century society, Wharton understood how complicated marriage could be. She knew that many women had to make a good match in order to survive. She also knew that a good match did not equal “happily-ever-after.”

Edith Wharton, then, understood that a marriage did not end with a great wedding. She knew that there is more to a good marriage than making a good match. As Helen Killoran shows in *Edith Wharton, Art and Allusion*, Wharton valued marriage as a

stabilizing social institution, deplored divorce, especially frivolous divorce, and found single women's lives difficult (70). She saw marriage as a stabilizing force, but this was because there was no other option open to society women. Their choices were either to get married, face social ostracism, or live as a spinster. Because of her own experiences with the complex nature of marriage, R.W.B. Lewis believes Edith Wharton had a "near obsession with the perplexities of marriage" (12).

Aside from her own experiences with marriage, Wharton was a great observer of the society into which she was born. Therefore, when she began her writing career, she had much to draw on. Because Wharton knew that high society marriages were often recipes for disaster, her novels contain very few happy marriages. In her book about *The Age of Innocence*, Linda Wagner Martin writes that "there was no way Wharton could avoid writing about marriage, and about the thousands of women who planned their lives toward that end" (71).

In my analysis of the varying Whartonian society marriages, I will look at three texts: "The Other Two," *The Custom of the Country*, and *The Age of Innocence*. They each reveal a different attitude in marriages

In Wharton's short story "The Other Two," Wharton also reveals a situation in which there are multiple marriages. The female character in the story, Alice Haskett Varick Waythorn, marries three times—a rare thing at the turn of the century. She does not seem to be happy—but she is not sad. She appears to be content and nonchalant. This is a mediocre marriage.

The Other Two was written in 1904. In the story, Wharton reveals how a woman must behave in order to survive. Alice Waythorn, the wife in the story, seems to throw

herself from one marriage into another. She knows how to get what she wants from a man. Alice and her third husband seem to like each other; however their marriage cannot be called happy.

Wharton later wrote *The Custom of the Country*. The protagonist Undine Spragg is a beautiful but ruthless figure for whom marriage (and divorce) is a game. The cynical nature of this novel is due to the fact that Wharton's divorce was granted in the same year that the book was published. For Undine, the key to success in life is based on a good match. She ruthlessly goes from one marriage to another, never really happy.

In *The Custom of the Country*, the reader sees a wilder version of the Alice Waythorn figure. In the novel, marriage is the business of America. Undine ultimately finds that a good match does not equal happiness and a well-moneyed groom is not necessarily an ingredient of a recipe for marital success. In her efforts to enter into a wealthy family, Undine Spragg enters into several bad marriages.

Finally, in sharp contrast to the preceding works, *The Age of Innocence* seems to show a good marriage—Wharton-style. Both Newland Archer and May Welland, the two partners, are from well-to-do families and care about each other. But the groom falls in love with another woman, undoubtedly a strange situation. The marriage is explained in detail in the last chapters of the novel. Newland and May have a sincere regard for each other, and Newland's grief after May's death is genuine. However, the union is not completely happy. The reason is that Newland was in love with May's cousin Ellen Olenska. Newland and Ellen had the true passion that most hope to find in a marriage partner. Even more, the reader is led to believe that Newland and Ellen are more in love

than Newland and May. What makes modern readers feel that this is not a happy marriage is the apparent lack of passion between Newland and May.

My paper will explore the notion of a happy marriage in several of Edith Wharton's society works. I will explore the marriages in three stories and show how her ideas of marriage changed over time. I will first look at the ambivalent union seen in "The Other Two." I will then discuss the multiple marriages of Undine Spragg in *The Custom of the Country*. Finally, I will look at the marriage of Newland Archer and May Welland in *The Age of Innocence*, my example of a happy marriage, and compare the novel with the previous stories.

Part 1: "The Other Two"

Background

The story "The Other Two," first published in 1904, features the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Waythorn, a New York society couple. The story is set just after their honeymoon. Mrs. Alice Waythorn has previously been both Mrs. Haskett and Mrs. Varick. Her first union occurred when she was young and resulted in a daughter, Lily. Her marriage to Mr. Varick had been "a passport to the set whose recognition she coveted" (Wharton 434). Her divorce from him was a matter of small social dispute. People within society began to talk only when her plans for marriage with Waythorn were announced.

Because of his self-centered happiness, Waythorn is able to put his wife's past relationships out of his mind until he is thrown into the path of the other men for various reasons. For example, Haskett comes to his home to visit Lily, with whom he has visitation rights, while Varick and Waythorn become unlikely business partners. Waythorn thereafter comes to be dissatisfied with his wife because she is not the woman that he thought she was. At the end of the story, all three past and present husbands are gathered in the Waythorn home for various reasons. All three men are uncomfortable with the situation. However, Alice, ever unflappable, serves the men tea in the order in which she was married to them, resulting in Waythorn being served last by his wife. His final response to the situation is to laugh and acquiesce to his place in Alice's order.

Analysis

As is evident in the above summary, Edith Wharton handles divorce with a light touch in "The Other Two." In the story, the reader is presented with an interesting

marriage, which is neither obviously good nor bad. The marriage is complicated and “devalued” because of Waythorn’s feelings and realizations and his wife’s attitudes. His ambivalence toward the marriage lies in the attitudes that the two spouses bring to the marriage.

In “The Other Two,” Waythorn at first believes his wife to be perfect and untainted, even though he is aware that she was married twice before. The full realization of his wife’s past takes him by surprise when he encounters the other men in her life. Within the Waythorn marriage, Wharton, writes Margaret McDowell, shows that “perhaps the sense of possession, intimacy, and privacy cannot be attained in a marriage to a partner who has shared her love and life too completely with others” (83). Because Alice has a “past,” her latest marriage is slightly sullied, stemming from the fact that she gave parts of herself away to the other men. Therefore, the marriage seems, to Waythorn, tainted.

The author writes that “Waythorn was an idealist. He always refused to recognise unpleasant contingencies till he found himself confronted with them, and then he saw them followed by a spectral train of consequences” (Wharton 447). The realities of his wife’s ex-husbands are always present. He knew about her divorces when he began to court her but refused to think about this. He is able to ignore his wife’s past until the two men enter his life. Waythorn’s attitude is that if he ignores the realities they will go away. In one part of the story, Waythorn learns that Haskett is coming to see his sick daughter. He intends to avoid his home all day, hiding out at his club. There, ironically, he runs into Gus Varick. When he is put into a situation where he cannot ignore them, Waythorn becomes extremely irritated with his wife and begins to question his marriage.

For Mrs. Waythorn's part, it is not clear whether she truly cares for her third husband. As stated before, the reader is never given a glimpse of her thoughts and motives. However, it seems that the institution, for her, is a means of social advancement and survival. Each husband has more wealth than the one before. Her somewhat calculating nature makes it questionable whether or not she loves her husband. But, then, marriage is, after all, her business, and in some ways we can see she is quite successful in her transactions.

One trait learned by Mrs. Waythorn through marriage is the art of pleasing a man. By the time she marries Waythorn, she has all but perfected this talent. However, her husband is suspicious of this behavior after encountering the other two husbands. Later in the story, Waythorn finds that his wife's "pliancy was beginning to sicken him" (448). At this point, he realizes that she was not only so accommodating with him—she was also this way with the other two spouses. Because of this, he becomes conscious of the fact that he is pretty much indistinguishable from her former husbands. Her pliancy is not unique to their marriage; it is an art that she has cultivated.

It is important to note that the reader sees Alice only through the eyes of Waythorn. We, the readers, have no insight into the way she thinks. We have only her actions to look at in order to judge her. Waythorn, on the other hand, is completely revealed to us in thoughts and actions.

Although not ideal, the union cannot be termed a "bad marriage." At the end of the story, Waythorn, when served last by his wife, "took the third cup with a laugh" (453). Waythorn seems to accept, albeit grudgingly, his wife's history and his own unique position as the third man in her life. He realizes, finally, if not the nature of the

woman that he has married, then the nature of marriage in his society. He understands that although the situation is not as he would like, he must learn somehow to cope with the difficulties of it. He seems to accept his own action of marrying Alice and what marriage to her entails.

The reader is not given much information on Alice Waythorn's previous marriages. Her divorce from Haskett is dismissed as "the natural result of a runaway match at seventeen" (434). However, Haskett has partial custody of his daughter Lily. This hints at the possibility that the divorce may not have been the result of abuse or adultery, two reasons for courts to award sole custody. Waythorn, before meeting the unassuming Haskett, had believed him to be a brutish man. Wharton writes that Waythorn "had never enquired into the exact circumstances of his wife's first matrimonial rupture" (446). One can conclude that Alice's first marriage simply bored her or that she had gotten all she could out of it (which, in this case, would be her daughter).

As for Alice Waythorn's second marriage, Wharton reveals that the union to Varick was "brief and stormy" and this fact is used as a justification for divorce (434). Also, Waythorn "heard it rumoured that a lack of funds had been one of the determining causes of the Varick separation (441). This implies a frivolity on Alice's part. When her husband could not support her sufficiently, Alice grew distant. Again, Alice got all she could out of the marriage, namely social standing and money, and left it.

Edith Wharton is critical of both marriage and divorce in "The Other Two." Wharton creates a character that treats the institution of marriage in a calculating manner. Alice seems to be unaware of the "for better or worse" clause in her marriage vows.

However, Wharton also realizes that, for many women, marriage was their only option. Mrs. Waythorn is not an unlikable character, although Wharton clearly frowns upon Mrs. Waythorn's two divorces from Haskett and Varick in that she paints questionable circumstances around both cases. She also questions Alice Waythorn's motives for making these marriages. Her main focus, however, is on what men expect, and in this way her critique is original. She reveals how men can delude themselves before they are married only to be disappointed by the bitter truth.

The story functions as a cautionary tale about choosing a marriage partner. It raises the issue of marrying someone who has shared their life and has a history with someone else. Wharton shows how the lack of contemplation of the past one brings to a marriage can lead to trouble later on. Marriage to someone who was been married before makes the other partner wonder what the spouse's life was like when he or she was married to another person. In Waythorn's case, he did not wonder until the other men entered his life. Furthermore, he never considers the importance of his own past behavior. This is an issue that is relevant in current times, although divorce rarely raises a contemporary eyebrow.

Waythorn's marriage in "The Other Two" is thus complicated by the attitudes of the participants in the marriage. Mrs. Waythorn seems to have matrimonial motives that are questionable. She marries in one instance for social advancement. Her third husband, for his part, ignores obvious realities and is extremely dissatisfied when he is finally faced with them. However, the story ends with a sense of resolution, albeit an uneasy one. Wharton also explores the theme of divorce in her novel, *The Custom of the Country*.

Part 2: *The Custom of the Country*

Background

Written in 1913, *The Custom of the Country* is Edith Wharton's most stinging vision of marriage. The novel was published in the same year Wharton was granted her divorce. The main character is the ruthlessly ambitious antiheroine Undine Spragg.

The novel begins with Undine and her parents plotting to find a way for her to work her way into New York society. At this point, Undine has already been divorced from Elmer Moffatt, whom she married while living in Apex, Kansas. Undine soon marries Ralph Marvell who is from an old moneyed New York family. However, she soon becomes dissatisfied with her husband because she wants more from her marriage. While married to him, Undine has an affair with Peter van Degen, another society figure.

After her divorce from Ralph is finalized and van Degen has left her, Undine campaigns to become the wife of a French nobleman, Raymond de Chelles. This campaign includes obtaining custody of her son, Paul Marvell. When Ralph Marvell realizes that he has to give up his son, he shoots himself. Undine then becomes the Countess Raymond de Chelles. This marriage, too, has its flaws. She later remarries Elmer Moffatt, who is newly millionaired from a railroad fortune. During her marriages and divorces, she wounds most of the people around her, including her little boy—all seemingly unbeknownst to her. The novel ends with Undine, at the height of society but slightly stigmatized because of her multiple divorces, dissatisfied once again and wishing for a better marriage.

Analysis

The main character in *The Custom of the Country*, Undine Spragg, treats marriage as a business. There is seemingly no sentimentality and little love attached to it. Because of her attitudes toward her marriages, Undine makes a series of bad marriages but never realizing what makes a good marriage.

When Undine first arrives on the New York social scene from Apex, her goals are clear—she wants to be a part of New York society. Wharton writes that Undine “knew all of New York’s golden aristocracy by name, and the lineaments of its most distinguished scions” (Wharton 41). She is calculating in her plans to take New York society by storm.

Even before she marries into New York society, Undine’s views on marriage are excessively liberal for the upper classes. Early in the novel, during her engagement to Ralph Marvell, Undine is involved in a conversation with his family about a friend, Mabel Lipscomb. Undine, believing that Mabel’s husband is not providing her with social fulfillment, suggests that she get divorced: “He isn’t in the right set, and I think Mabel realizes she’ll never really get anywhere till she gets rid of him” (95). Those hearing Undine’s comment are shocked at her elastic view of the bonds of marriage. Everyone in earshot of her comment “reflected in varying degree...pained astonishment” (95). The crowd is composed of “Old New York” families whose views differ sharply from Undine’s. To them, marriage is a sacred bond. It does not have the same meaning for Undine.

Not surprisingly, in her marriage to Ralph Marvell, problems arise from the start. On their honeymoon, Undine and Ralph Marvell run into a problem that has troubled many couples—money. Although Marvell comes from an old money family, he cannot

spend lavishly—old money, it seems, is not equal necessarily the same as a plentiful supply of money. Undine spends money extravagantly and carelessly on clothes, believing that she needs a new wardrobe for her new role in society. Her excessive spending unnerves her husband.

Another factor that creates tension in the marriage is the differences of personality in Undine and her husband. Undine is a naturally extroverted person and seeks places that are populated with European social figures. Marvell, on the other hand, prefers to be alone with his new wife, much to her chagrin. During their honeymoon, he realizes their difference of opinion. “It came to him,” Wharton writes, “with the sharpness of a knife-thrust, that a crowd was what she wanted—that she was sick to death of being alone with him” (139). Marvell has a poetic spirit and is somewhat introverted. Undine has an opposite personality and is uninspired by art or literature. The two did not realize before their marriage that they are of different temperaments.

Also during their honeymoon, both Marvell and the reader learn of Undine’s indifference to her new husband. Wharton writes of one scene in which Marvell enters their room. Undine “turned—then, without speaking, she looked away again” (142). Such behavior is strange for someone who is just married. However, Undine did not marry Ralph for love. The reader does not even get the impression that Undine in any way cares for her husband. Elizabeth Ammons writes that Undine “has no illusions about the marriage union as a bond of love that will perfect her personal happiness or complete her personality (98). She treats her marriage as something devoid of sentimentality, and many readers find her emotionally cold. This is not a recipe for a happy union. Carol

Wershoven notices that the “conflicts of the honeymoon foreshadow the conflicts that characterize Undine’s entire married life with Ralph” (64).

After four years of marriage and enduring his wife’s indifference to him, Marvell realizes that his wife is a “stranger—that was what she had always been to him. So malleable outwardly, she had remained insensible to the touch of the heart” (202). He becomes disillusioned and begins to fall out of love with her. For her part, Undine is unfaithful to him with the ruddy-faced Peter van Degen (who is married to Ralph’s cousin Clare). Undine and Ralph eventually get divorced.

After her divorce from Ralph Marvell, Undine becomes the wife of Raymond de Chelles, a French nobleman. The suicide of Ralph Marvell hardly makes Undine pause in her battle to reach the pinnacle of society. However, her marriage to de Chelles has problems as well. Through this marriage, Wharton suggests that bad as American marriages may be, tradition-bound aristocratic European ones can be worse, according to Ammons (122). Undine, unaware of the rules of the game when she begins to play, is unable to play well. And, unlike the case with Marvell, she has little bargaining power.

One example of this is that she encounters the strict mores of the society of French aristocracy after her third marriage. She finds that “Raymond expected her to choose her friends...in conformity not only with his personal tastes but with a definite and complicated code of family prejudices and traditions” (Wharton 416). Tradition is something that Undine does not care for—unless it pays to do so. This is perhaps Edith Wharton’s sarcastic take on “new money.” Undine also finds that her husband is very possessive and wants to know where she is at all times. In this aristocratic world, she is merely a beautiful object.

Cultural issues are further complicated when Undine realizes that Raymond has a very negative attitude about Americans. She comes to understand that he “never attempted to discriminate between Americans” and that he wholly disapproves of them (431). The blending of the cultures is a difficult task. Raymond, it seems, did not think about what it would be like to marry an American. Naturally, Undine did not contemplate the details of a cross-cultural marriage. However, Raymond, to his credit, refuses to put up with Undine’s mercurial and demanding ways as she acts out the role of the crass and uncultured American.

Undine, Wharton writes, “was gradually to learn that it was as natural to Raymond de Chelles to adore her and resist her as it had been to Ralph Marvell to adore her and let her have her way” (427-428). She becomes disenchanted when she realizes that Raymond is as stubborn as she. Her unhappiness lies in the fact that she does not have a pushover for a husband.

To further her disappointment in her latest union, Undine also learns that, upon Raymond’s father’s death, her husband will not get more money. The main point of her marriage to Raymond, from Undine’s perspective, is to gain both a title and a great deal of money.

At one point in the novel, Undine complains to her first husband Elmer Moffatt about her marriage to the Frenchman: “[The French] think so differently about marriage over here: it’s just a business contract. As long as a woman doesn’t make a show of herself no one cares” (489). Her accusations about marriage being a business contract are of course hypocritical, as she treats marriage in the same manner. The fact that the quality

of her marriage sours is both the fault of Undine and Raymond. This combination of two people who are unwilling to compromise is not conducive to a good marriage.

Also, because Undine does not think about what marriage will truly be like, she encounters serious problems. Her only hope was to become the Countess Raymond de Chelles and to gain the prestige of that title. She did not think about what marriage actually meant in terms of what would be expected of her. She also did not seek to learn from her marriage to Ralph Marvell and actually marry someone for love. As with Ralph, when Undine tires of Raymond, she just moves on to greener pastures.

Undine's fourth marriage in the novel is to her first husband, Elmer Moffatt. Moffatt, by the end of the novel, is a new moneyed railroad magnate. This marriage is detailed in the final chapters of *The Custom of the Country*. The reader sees the marriage partly from the perspective of Paul Marvell, Undine's son with Ralph. His mother and stepfather "were always coming and going" and Paul "never knew where they were except when a telegram announced that they were going someplace else" (Wharton 495). As Wharton's account makes clear, their marriage is based on conspicuous consumption.

The reader also learns that, even in her fourth marriage, in which her dream of garish spending is fulfilled, Undine is not pleased. Wharton writes that "there were other things she might want if she knew about them" and Undine "had to confess to herself that Moffatt did not fit into the picture" (Wharton 506). According to Wershoven, Moffatt, despite the enormous amounts of money he is able to bestow on his wife, is "unable to give her enough respectability" (70). Undine has a picture in her mind of the perfect husband: someone who is either from an ancient family or a rich one who lets her spend

freely and do as she pleases. Moffatt's nouveau riche status, despite his great wealth, demotes him in Undine's eyes.

Wharton writes, for instance, that later Undine "saw his defects and was irritated by them," such as his "loudness and redness" (507). These are two qualities that Wharton insiders are taught to look down upon. Undine also compares him unfavorably to his matrimonial predecessors, Ralph and Raymond. As expected, the ambitious Kansan cannot compare to the dashing Old New York scion or the head of a distinguished French aristocratic family. Undine's mercurial marriage decisions, then, always result in her being unhappy.

The ruthlessly ambitious Undine Spragg makes a series of bad marriages in order to improve her position in society. To her, divorce is almost as easy as changing her hat. Ammons writes that "divorce was repugnant to Wharton; but so was marriage in many respects" (99). This observation is a reflection of Wharton's complicated views of marriage. She obviously disapproves of Undine Spragg's motives for marriage and her multiple divorces. However, she understands that a woman's sole job in society was to marry well, and she critiques this mercilessly in both this novel and other works.

Although Undine Spragg is the main focus of *The Custom of the Country*'s scrutiny, there are other characters in the novel that use marriage in the same manner that she does. Wharton notes that in the high society world, "couple[s] were unpairing and pairing again with an ease and rapidity" (255). This is seen to be so with Indiana Frusk and Mabel Lipscomb. The former is an erstwhile enemy of Undine from Apex who marries Millard Binch (Undine's former fiancé) and then the wealthy James Rolliver. Mabel, who Undine wishes would get divorced earlier in the novel, actually does and

then marries the well-off Homer Branney. Through these characters, Edith Wharton shows that Undine is not the only person in the society with loose views of marriage. The author criticizes the entire system and not just Undine.

By the end of the novel, Undine seems not to have learned her lesson. Martha Banta writes that “the novel ends at a pause, not a conclusion, for Undine’s careerist thirst is unslackable, and indications are she will bolt this most recent marriage for yet another she perceives as a new height to scale” (96). Thus, *The Custom of the Country* ends on a supremely cynical note. Yet seven years after she penned this novel, Wharton wrote *The Age of Innocence*. In this novel, the reader is presented with Wharton’s version of a happy marriage.

Part 3: *The Age of Innocence*

Background

Edith Wharton wrote *The Age of Innocence* in 1920, two years after the devastation of World War I ended. The author was living in France at the time. The novel is set in the 1870s New York.

The families of the coddled world of old money New York hold court in society and try in vain to keep the new money out. Newland Archer and his fiancée May Welland (who, according to Elizabeth Ammons is “one of leisure-class old New York’s perfect child-women”) are members of this gilded world (144). At the beginning of the novel, May’s cousin, Countess Ellen Olenska, arrives in New York after fleeing an abusive marriage with her Polish husband. Newland, as a lawyer, advises Ellen on her course of action. On the one hand, he wants her to leave the abusive relationship. However, he knows that society would not approve of a divorce.

Newland and Ellen eventually realize that they have feelings for each other and so are thrown into a quandary. Meanwhile, May begins to suspect that something is going on. She offers Newland his freedom, hoping that his sense of duty will outweigh his passion for her cousin.

Newland and May get married in the second part of the novel. The family, meanwhile, encourages Ellen to go back to her husband for the sake of keeping up a good appearance. Newland and Ellen contemplate becoming lovers. May puts this plan to rest when she tells Ellen that she is pregnant before she is sure of the fact. Thereafter, Newland and May settle down into a mostly contented marriage.

Twenty-six years later, May is dead from pneumonia, which she caught from one of her children. Newland and his son travel to Paris, where a widowed Countess Olenska lives, having never divorced her husband. Dallas, well aware of his father's history with the woman, suggests that the two go and see her. Dallas sees the countess, but Newland declines the opportunity to see Ellen again, preferring to remember her as she was. He also knows that he cannot recapture the past.

Analysis

Edith Wharton presents a tortured love triangle in *The Age of Innocence*. Although Newland has feelings for May Welland, he comes to find that he is passionate about Ellen Olenska. Because of the customs of society and the machinations of May (who is not as innocent as she appears to be), Newland marries his fiancée instead of having a relationship with Ellen. Although Newland's passion is for Ellen, he and May eventually have what one might call a Whartonian happy marriage.

One element that makes the marriage of Newland and May a happy one is the fact that they have surface similarities. They both come from the same social setting. This gives them a similar outlook on responsibilities to their families and to society. Wharton writes that "conformity to the discipline of a small society had become almost [Newland's] second nature" (255). Their marriage is a duty to their families and society. Both Newland and May understand this and perform their duties well.

Another important factor in the marriage is Newland's behavior after May's death. Newland "had been what was called a faithful husband; and when May had suddenly died...he honestly mourned her" (Wharton 274). If their marriage were truly

unhappy, Newland would have experienced a sense of relief from her death. Instead, Newland mourned the woman with whom he spent almost half of his life.

Also telling is the absence of extramarital affairs. This is particularly revealing in regards to Newland because the reader knows that he is not opposed to affairs. He was the lover of a married woman before he became engaged to May and Wharton mentions Mrs. Archer's satisfaction that the "silly business with Mrs. Rushworth" is over (41). Newland did, however, not stray from his marriage to May—not even with Ellen Olenska.

At the beginning of the novel, Wharton reveals that Newland and May have an unspoken dialogue of sorts, another sign of their compatibility. For instance, Newland senses that May wants him to come into her opera booth for a show of solidarity. They understand each other (May perhaps understands Newland more so than the other way around). Wharton wrote that "the persons of their world lived in an atmosphere of faint implications and pale delicacies, and the fact that he and she understood each other without a word seemed to the young man to bring them nearer than any explanation would have done" (25). Although his passions are awakened by the exotic Ellen, he is ultimately a product of society. This is why he stays married to May, never cheats, and does not see Ellen in Paris.

Dallas Archer suggests another example of his parents' mutual understanding later in the novel: "You never did ask each other anything, did you? And you never told each other anything. You just sat and watched each other and guessed at what was going on underneath" (Wharton 281). The two have the ability to read each other. This is how May comes to know that Newland is in love with Ellen Olenska. Also, May guessed that

Newland's sense of duty would outweigh his passion just as would Ellen's, and so May uses her pregnancy to save her marriage.

May, for her part, knows that her husband is giving up the love of his life for her and appreciates him for it. Dallas Archer tells his father about a conversation he had with his mother shortly before her death: "She said she knew we were safe with you, and always would be, because once, when she asked you to, you'd given up the thing you most wanted" (281). This is, of course, the love of Ellen Olenska. May is grateful that Newland made the decision. His decision and her gratitude also reflect their shared feelings toward each other.

Wharton writes that Newland "was sincerely but placidly in love" with May (47). The two shared a genuine regard for each other. He loved the woman, but she is simply not his grand passion. The irony of this is that Newland and May were perfect for each other, as both were destined for a conformist, unoriginal life.

The reader can also view the marriage of Newland and May as a happy one by looking at the marriages of those around them, particularly the marriage of Regina and Julius Beaufort. Another important marriage to critique is that of Count and Countess Olenska.

Julius Beaufort, who comes from a questionable background, is called a "vulgar man" by Mrs. Archer (41). His marriage to the former Regina Dallas was conceived merely in order to advance his own personal social agenda as she is from "one of America's most honored families" (27). However, he cheats on his wife with Fanny Ring, and she bears his child. After his wife's death, he quickly marries his mistress. In fact Fanny Beaufort, Julius' daughter, is Dallas Archer's fiancée. In contrast to Beaufort,

Newland never remarries after May's death. Regina married her husband in order to gain money and jewels. Beaufort married to gain social advancement. Neither married for love, thus the union is unhappy.

Edith Wharton does not write at length about the details of Ellen Olenska's marriage with her Polish husband, but the reader is aware that it is also unhappy. The reader is informed that Ellen suffered from abuse (again, whether there was mental or physical abuse is unclear). Count Olenski is called "an awful brute" early on in the novel (24). Whatever his abuses were, they were horrid enough to cause Ellen to flee her husband and her adopted homeland. Wharton paints Ellen as a strong person; thus the fact that she would flee from abuses means that they would have to be inexcusable. After she declines to have an affair with Newland, Ellen returns to Europe—but not to her husband. Her marriage was clearly a disaster.

Although the novel presents Newland and May's marriage as a relatively happy one, there is great irony in this. Wharton understood that there was no such thing as a perfect marriage. She also knew, from personal experience, that a good marriage was not easy to achieve. Janet Beer writes that Wharton's own marriage to Teddy Wharton "came to seem more of a mental and physical incarceration than a bearable misalignment of interests" (9). The marriage of Newland and May is neither "a mental and physical incarceration" nor a "bearable misalignment of interests" (9).

When modern readers think of a "happy marriage," they think of a passion that is shared between the two individuals. The grand passion of Archer's life was, of course, Ellen Olenska. Passion did not seem to play a role in the marriage of Newland and May, though the fact that Newland and May genuinely liked each other was one sign that they

fit together well. Newland realizes this after his wife's death. Although he was content with May, there was "something he knew he had missed: the flower of life....When he thought of Ellen Olenska it was abstractly, serenely....She had become the composite vision of all that he had missed" (274). However, there is also no doubt that, in some way, he loved May Welland.

The novel presents the marriage of Newland and May as a relatively happy one. May's husband mourned her after she dies, did not cheat on her (even with Ellen Olenska), fulfilled his duty to his family and his social station. The story, although written in 1920, reflects the mores of the 1870s, a society different from that of "The Other Two" and *The Custom of the Country*. Divorce, although the most likely "solution" to the love triangle in the book, was simply not done.

Conclusion

Edith Wharton explores the theme of marriage on many levels in her novels and short stories. Alice Waythorn and Undine Spragg from “The Other Two” and *The Custom of the Country*, respectively, both have multiple marriages. The two women start by marrying someone from their small town settings and then graduate to bigger marital prospects. Alice flits from marriage to marriage, but she does so with a quiet ambition. Undine is an exaggeration of Alice Waythorn, as she is incredibly ruthless in her conquests of men. She does not go about her conquests quietly. Like Alice, May Welland from *The Age of Innocence* is quietly calculating in her marriage machinations. However, the reader gets the impression that May at least cares for her husband, whereas it is doubtful if Alice Waythorn loves or even cares for any of her husbands.

May and Undine, then, seem to be completely opposite figures. As Linda Wagner-Martin states, “while May is cast much more sympathetically than Undine Spragg, both are young women fully aware of what a ‘good marriage’ is, and what such a marriage can do for their—and their families’—future” (70). By “good marriage,” Wagner-Martin does not mean a marriage in which the partners are honest and open with each other. A “good marriage” is one in which one’s husband is successful, wealthy, and part of the desired society. Undine Spragg, however, is more determined than May Welland to obtain such a husband. What differentiates the marriages of May and Undine is the fact that May did not divorce her husband or have an affair once he proved less than perfect.

Newland and May stand as the prototype for the perfect society marriage. She is from an old money family, as is he. Unlike the other stories, wherein outsiders marry into

high-class society and get divorced, the Archers never do. It is telling that the one couple that stays together is the one that married within their class. Although I argued that the marriage between Newland and May Archer is a happy one, it is doubtful that Wharton intended to depict the marriage in this manner.

In 1904, Edith Wharton's marriage was deteriorating, and she wrote "The Other Two" in response. By the time she penned *The Custom of the Country*, Wharton was in the midst of her own divorce. *The Age of Innocence* was also written at an interesting time in Wharton's life. She wrote the novel after she witnessed the devastation of World War I. Also, she had had seven years to heal from the trauma of her divorce.

As stated throughout this thesis, Edith Wharton had very complicated views of marriage. I believe she thought the institution needed mending. Elizabeth Ammons feels that Wharton believed "fairy-tale notions about romance and marriage" should be "relinquished" (57). Ammons also believes that, although *The Custom of the Country* frowns upon rampant divorce, that when Wharton "told Undine's story it was marriage, not divorce, that roused her cynicism" (124). Wharton disapproved of some people's motives for getting married and their reasons for getting divorced. She was critical of many aspects of the institution. She seemed to believe that courtship needed mending as well. Most of all, Edith Wharton believed that love should play a role in marriage. Although her works are fiction and elements of her imagination, she observed closely the marriage rituals of her class and used them for inspiration and subject matter.

In other works, Wharton explores the theme of marriage in upper-class society. In *The Buccaneers*, the unfinished novel that Wharton began in 1934, young women from nouveau riche American families marry European aristocrats. In Adeline Tintner's essay

on the novel, she reveals that Consuelo Vanderbilt, the future Duchess of Marlborough, mentioned in the Introduction, was a likely inspiration for the novel (143). As Consuelo's marriage was unhappy, so are the cross-cultural unions in *The Buccaneers*.

Wharton wrote *The House of Mirth* around the same time that she penned "The Other Two." The author writes about the efforts of Lily Bart, Wharton's quintessential tragic heroine, to procure a husband and her disillusionment at the "pre-marriage process." Bart sees the marriages around her and does not like what she sees. She is afraid of losing herself in marriage and does not want to go through the fake "courtship" process of her society. As her punishment, she dies a lonely death.

Wharton knew that it was difficult to find true love in a society where the main goal for marriage was furthering the money and familial lines and keeping money in the rarefied world of high society. Her works, however, were not just applicable to that world. In every sector of society in America, and indeed the world, there are people who move throughout life being shallow, manipulative, and mercenary. The fact that her works are relevant to many is evident by the fact that she is the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize, which she did in 1921 for *The Age of Innocence*.

Above all, Wharton presents age-old advice in her stories. One should learn to be honest with oneself and one's partners when entering a marriage. Marriages made for the sole purpose of increasing wealth can lead to trouble. She told readers to choose their partners carefully and to marry for love. Also, we can learn from Wharton's works to be as aware as possible of one's partner's past relationships and/or marriages. It is best to know the details going into the marriage rather than to be surprised later. Perhaps

Wharton's greatest advice is to learn everything you can and to shy away from the truth, whether it is pleasant or not.

In this modern era of rampant divorce, Edith Wharton's works have even more significance, especially *The Custom of the Country*. The world of this novel is a reality for those in and out of the high society world. Many people now realize that some people's motives for marriage are dishonest or ill considered and will result in unhappy unions. People also now realize that they must choose their marriage partner very carefully in order to prevent a divorce. In Undine's world, couples marry and divorce "with ease and rapidity" (Wharton 255). In the present times, people marry and divorce with the same casualness and rapidity. Complicated marriage and divorce habits are still for us the custom of the country.

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