

THE HUMAN DILEMMA, DIVORCE, IN SELECTED FICTION
OF EDITH WHARTON

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of English
University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Marian J. Morse
June 1967

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ABSTRACT

Throughout her lifetime, Edith Wharton, in her writings, debates the nature, responsibilities, and possible resolutions of marriages of incompatible partners. Edith Wharton's moral, social, and religious attitudes toward divorce were shaped in part by her parents and the belated Victorianism of old New York's Four Hundred, with its moral and social standards and emphasis on pseudo-respectability. Although the author's code of morality developed and deepened far beyond that of her parents, her social ideas remained basically the same as those of her parents.

A close examination of the marriage partners and the circumstances surrounding their marriages in primarily eight works of her fiction shows the gradual development of her moral attitude toward divorce. From the first short story, "Souls Belated" published in 1899, to a late novel, The Mother's Recompense published in 1925, her moral concept, as it related to divorce, grew from one that depended solely on truth (critical intelligence) to one that included truth and faith (moral sense) fused by beauty into a single summum bonum.

Her social attitude toward divorce and the divorcee stems from that of her class and changes only from one of scorn to complacent acceptance. Although in her

autobiography, A Backward Glance, she praised her Episcopal Church--its ritual and Book of Common Prayer--in none of the works examined does she indicate that the divorce canons of her church affected the decisions of her characters. The emphasis by George Eliot and Henry James on morality undoubtedly accounts, to some degree, for Edith Wharton's incessant probing of the moral aspects of divorce. Over all, her convictions seemingly emanate from a reverence for the past and a belief in the value of traditions and morality. Perhaps when in 1968-1969 her personal papers, deposited at Yale University, will no longer remain hidden from the public, her own statements may reveal directly her convictions generally toward divorce and particularly toward her own divorce.

INTRODUCTION

This thesis will attempt to show indirectly Edith Wharton's moral, social, and religious attitudes toward divorce and their cultural origins. Chapter One presents the influences that kindled her concern for the human dilemma divorce. Paramount is the belated Victorianism of old New York's Four Hundred, with its moral and social standards and emphasis on pseudo-respectability. Although the author's code of morality developed and deepened far beyond that of her parents, her social ideas remain basically the same as those of her parents, Lucretia Rhineland and George Frederick Jones.

When, in 1862, Edith Wharton arrived into the Jones family, her parents had established a comfortable pattern of life, into which their daughter Edith undoubtedly came unexpected and perhaps unwanted. Her two brothers were of college age. Some estrangement--perhaps due to incompatible interests--had developed between her parents. Rumors of a relationship between her brothers' tutor and her mother may have reached the child. Her own marriage in 1885 to Teddy Wharton, which ended in divorce in 1913, was one of incompatibility. Throughout her lifetime, Edith Wharton, in her writings, is to debate the nature, responsibilities, and possible resolutions of marriages of incompatible partners.

In Chapter Two, a close examination of the marriage partners and the circumstances surrounding their marriages in primarily eight works of her fiction shows the gradual development of her moral attitude toward divorce. From the first short story, "Souls Belated" published in 1899, to a late novel, The Mother's Recompense published in 1925, her moral concept, as it relates to divorce, grows from one that depends solely on truth (critical intelligence) to one that includes truth and faith (moral sense) fused by beauty into a single summum bonum.

In Chapter Three, the cultural influences--social, philosophical, religious, and literary--that contributed to her attitudes toward divorce are identified in the short stories, novellas, and novels selected for this thesis. Her social attitude toward divorce and the divorcée stems from that of her class and changes only from one of scorn to complacent acceptance. Although in her autobiography, A Backward Glance, she praised her Episcopal Church--its ritual and Book of Common Prayer--in none of the works examined does she indicate that the divorce canons of her church affected the decisions of her characters. The emphasis by George Eliot and Henry James on morality undoubtedly accounts, to some degree, for Edith Wharton's incessant probing of the moral aspects of divorce. Over all, her convictions seemingly emanate from a reverence for the past and

a belief in the value of traditions and morality. Perhaps when in 1968-1969 her personal papers, deposited at Yale University, will no longer remain hidden from the public, her own statements may reveal directly her convictions generally toward divorce and particularly toward her own divorce.

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CHAPTER I

EDITH WHARTON'S OLD NEW YORK

The character of the New York into which Edith Newbold Jones (Wharton) was born is described by Robert Morss Lovett as "belated Victorianism."¹ This era was superficially characterized at that time as smug, stuffy, hypocritically righteous, and naively optimistic. Later it came to connote more correctly an age of great complexity that was marked by a spirit of orthodoxy, tradition, and innovation.² England was reacting against the spirit of this age, but America, in its distance from European influences, was still in that circumscribed society that valued its Puritan morality and its conformity to a pattern of respectability. Into this restricted society, Edith Wharton entered, and in a sense, she never entirely departed from it.

Edith Wharton's parents, well-born Lucretia Stevens Rhinelanders and George Frederick Jones, lived in a house at 14 West Twenty-third Street where she was born on January 24, 1862. In A Backward Glance, Edith Wharton states that one of her earliest memories was a walk up Fifth Avenue on a

¹Robert Morss Lovett, Edith Wharton (New York, 1925), p. 2.

²Martin S. Day, History of English Literature: 1837 to the Present (Garden City, New York, 1964), pp. 3-18.

clear, sunny, midwinter day with "her tall handsome father." She recalls also the gift of a white Spitz puppy at about the same time. "How I loved that first 'Foxy' of mine, how I cherished and yearned over and understood him!"³ Percy Lubbock said in his portrait of her that "there was always a dog or two about Edith in her home, a small dog of the yapping kind, a still smaller of the fidgeting and whining breed."⁴ Pets undoubtedly supplied a partial substitute for the love that was lacking in the child's home.

In addition to her mother, whom she remembers as always fashionably dressed, and her father, whose ruddy complexion and very blue eyes delighted her, there were her two brothers--one already away at college and the other still at home under an English tutor--and her beloved nurse Doyley. Edith Wharton pitied all children who did not have a Doyley in their lives, for "Doyley's presence," she says, "was the warm cocoon in which my infancy lived safe and sheltered" (26). Other friends in the household were the cook "big black Mary," the parlor maid, the butler, the chambermaid, the kitchen slavey, and the young footman. She

³ Edith Wharton, A Backward Glance (New York, 1934), p. 4. Hereafter page references to this autobiography will be placed in the text itself in parentheses.

⁴ Percy Lubbock, Portrait of Edith Wharton (New York, 1947), p. 26.

spent many jolly hours in the basement servants' hall while her parents and their friends entertained above.

With no children of her own age in the home and with parents deeply involved in social life, Edith Wharton experienced loneliness in her childhood. She probably saw her parents for only short periods at tea time and at bed time. Parental ties were not especially close. Her mother's impatience and lack of understanding of her daughter's precocity eventually grew into resentment. Curiously, very little is known of the relationship between the two after Edith Wharton's marriage. The relationship with her father--he taught her the alphabet and occasionally read poetry to her--was warmer but hardly close during her childhood. He died when the family was at Cannes. For Edith Wharton, who was nineteen at this time, his death remained a life-long memory. In her memoirs, she associates the anguish of this experience with that suffered when Walter Berry, her literary adviser and very close personal friend of a lifetime, died. She writes, "Twice in my life I have been at the death-bed of some one I dearly loved, who has vainly tried to say a last word to me; and I doubt if life holds a subtler anguish" (88). In her somewhat lengthy autobiography, however, there are only five references to her father; references to her mother are more frequent.

A recent biographer, Grace Kellogg Griffith, conjectures that although the marriage of Edith Wharton's parents was a love match, it deteriorated into a farcical yet almost too comfortable pattern of life. George's father had opposed the marriage at first, mainly because Lucretia was "one of the poor Rhinelander girls," but when he gave in, he provided a lavish wedding and honeymoon in Cuba. After returning from Cuba, Lucretia was expected, according to Griffith, "to manage her well-staffed household, to know her social p's and q's and observe them religiously, to be charming, stylishly turned out and, if possible, beautiful!"⁵ She succeeded in her social responsibilities but apparently failed, to some degree, as a companion to her husband and as a mother to her daughter. Her husband had several years previously come into an inheritance that made him independently wealthy. George had an interest in poetry which Lucretia did not share, and she could not understand her intellectual daughter, who came along after the mother had already settled into the conventional, elegant, and simple routine of her class as one of old New York's most fashionable matrons. The sensitive Edith Wharton perceived the hypocrisy of the relationship

⁵Grace (Kellogg) Griffith, The Two Lives of Edith Wharton (New York, 1965), p. 18.

and that perception added to her feelings of extreme loneliness.

Children, however, are resilient. The child, or "Pussy" as she was nicknamed, learned early to compensate. She escaped into fantasy, "making-up" stories, she called it. Many a time when "correct" little playmates came to play with her, she told her mother that she was too busy "making-up." She was never interested in the usual dolls and other activities of little girls. The people in her early stories always resembled real people, perhaps a foreshadowing of her later realism.

Another escape for this lonely, imaginative child was her father's library. There was a fireplace at one end and on either side, oaken bookcases containing some seven hundred volumes. This was the typical "gentleman's library" of the day, a collection acquired rather than inherited as her father was the second son. George Jones had provided the family with a good selection of the classics, and Edith Wharton says in her autobiography that she read most of the books. The fireplace was also a source of comfort and delight. One of the servants, possibly sensing the child's need of attention, slipped into the library and built the fire for her. Many times in her novels the fireplace is a significant part of the setting. During one of the visits between Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska "in the

faded, shadowy charm of a room unlike any room he had known," Newland noted that "a flame darted from the logs,"⁶ and at a later visit that "a log broke in two and sent up a shower of sparks."⁷ Undoubtedly, the image of the fireplace was deeply planted within her.

Some of her most dramatic scenes take place in a library or before a fireplace. Two important meetings between Lily Bart and Lawrence Selden occur before the fireplace in his small library in his bachelor flat-house, in *The Benedick*: the first when Lily unthinkingly compromises herself and the second when she destroys the letters that could restore her to her rightful, social status. Another scene in a library, memorable for its intensity and revelation, takes place between Madame de Treymes and John Durham in *Madame de Treymes*. The fireplace and the library became meaningful symbols for Edith Wharton, for in her novels the library is the setting for the separation rather than the fusion of intellect and beauty.

Her intellectual, rather than social, interests widened the rift between her mother and her. When Edith Wharton was about eleven, she read to her mother the opening lines of her first novel as follows: "If only I had known

⁶Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* (New York, 1962), p. 69.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 96.

you were coming to call, I should have tidied up the drawing-room." She was abruptly stopped with the chilling comment, "Drawing rooms are always tidy" (13). A critic has suggested that her mother was responsible for the disappearance of some slender, blue books of poems that Evelyn Washburn, daughter of the rector of Calvary Episcopal Church, helped Edith Wharton select for publication in 1878.⁸ The disappearance of these blue books of her early poems may some day be definitely traced to her mother's disapproval of her daughter's literary efforts.⁹ This icy gap in what should have been a warm, close relationship no doubt initiated Edith Wharton's retreat inward to examine some of her growing convictions about family stability. The child surely felt the disappointment of her mother, who wanted a more social-minded daughter.

There may have been another reason for the breach between mother and daughter. Close friends of her later years said that Mrs. Wharton had "some reason for believing herself to be an illegitimate child."¹⁰ Griffith suggests

⁸Griffith, p. 35.

⁹Ibid., pp. 32 and 34. Griffith raises the question of who probably financed the publication of these little books. Also she suggests that possibly Edith Wharton's mother destroyed "the little books bound in blue" to further discourage her daughter's literary efforts.

¹⁰Edmund Wilson, "Edith Wharton: A Memoir by an English Friend," in Classics and Commercials (New York,

that the reason for an early visit to England was to attempt to trace and perhaps find the "extremely cultivated English tutor" (9) who she believed was her father.¹¹

Lucretia's feeling toward her daughter's literary efforts stemmed in part from a lack of interest in literature, and attitude held in common with members of her class; in fact, Blake Nevius states that there was a "distrust of literature, which all too often advocated new and disquieting ideas."¹² An illustration of an attitude similar to her mother's occurs in The Age of Innocence when Newland Archer, as he waits for someone to answer the bell at Ellen Olenska's house, muses: "It was certainly a strange quarter to have settled in. Small dressmakers, bird-stuffers and 'people who wrote.'"¹³ To put an end to more

1955), p. 413. In addition to feeling that she was illegitimate, Edith Wharton also felt "that her family rather let her down from the point of view of social backing," Edmund Wilson writes.

¹¹Griffith, pp. 9-12. This critic states that the novelist in her later years "talked of him [an extremely cultivated English tutor] often to intimate friends. On one of her early visits to England she made a determined attempt to trace and find him." She conjectures that Mrs. Wharton perhaps found out about the tutor from the servants with whom she was very friendly (See p. 2 of this chapter.). Further, according to Griffith, the tutor might explain her interest in books and "things of the mind."

¹²Blake Nevius, Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction (Berkeley, 1953), p. 13.

¹³Wharton, The Age of Innocence, p. 62.

"writing," Lucretia perhaps made arrangements for her daughter to come out a year before the usual age.¹⁴ Her marriage at twenty-three to Edward Wharton temporarily ended her literary efforts.

The society or class to which her parents belonged was known as the Four Hundred; it was aristocratic and wealthy. Ebenezer Stevens, a general in the Revolutionary War, was Mrs. Wharton's great-grandfather; thus she was heir to some sort of historical awareness. Her grandfather was a very wealthy man who provided his sons with ample allowances upon their marriages, and thus, her mother quickly became, after marriage, one of "the most elegant young married women of her day" (18).

Lucretia Jones's interests throughout her life seem to have been primarily social. She was as final an authority on the New York society of the 'seventies as Sillerton Jackson in The Age of Innocence. In his Portrait of Edith Wharton, Percy Lubbock wrote that her mother "would . . . 'count the names of all the families, in due order of degree, who composed the world to which her daughter was born; and there her world stopped short, it was implied, and no mistake about it.'"¹⁵ Her social obligations

¹⁴Nevius, p. 12.

¹⁵Lubbock, p. 12.

included the laborious and endless duty of "calling," which took up every spare hour. Edith Wharton says in her memoirs that she can hardly recall a lady of her mother's generation unequipped with her calling-card case (83). Other activities, perhaps more pleasant, were walks and drives up Fifth Avenue or in Central Park, or along the drives at Newport. The ladies spent much of their time in idle gossip, visiting, and mutual entertaining among their set of twelve married couples. As is well known, this sort of life did not interest, exclusively, Mrs. Wharton for very many years after her marriage.

Possibly because Lucretia Jones had been one of "the poor Rhinelander girls," clothes had for her more than usual fascination. Edith Wharton notes that even though her parents witnessed from their hotel a historical flight--Louis Philippe and Queen Marie Amelie across the Tuileries Gardens--, the Paris fashions of the time made a more vivid impression on her mother than the collapse of a kingdom. May Welland, like Lucretia, was greatly preoccupied with clothes. On her honeymoon, May Welland spent a third of her time at the Paris dressmakers, and she seemed to be constantly concerned about what to wear. How much Lucretia's interest in clothes influenced Edith Wharton it is difficult to tell. That it had some influence is obvious. She herself tells of horrifying her serious-minded Aunt Mary

Newbold by saying that when she grew up, she wanted to be "the best-dressed woman in New York." When her aunt protested, she "could only rejoin in wonder: 'But, Auntie, you know Mamma is'" (203).

Anticipating meeting Henry James, she said, "I could hardly believe that such a privilege could befall me, and I could think of only one way of deserving it--to put on my newest Doucet dress, and try to look my prettiest!" However, she says that "the evening was a failure, and I went home humbled and discouraged." Then about a year or two later she had another opportunity to meet the great man. What was her first thought? It was, she says, "How can I make myself pretty enough for him to notice me? Well--this time I had a new hat; a beautiful new hat! . . . But he noticed neither the hat nor its wearer--and the second of our meetings fell as flat as the first" (172). Although Edith Wharton would never be free of these social attitudes, traditional to her mother and her group, one way or another she would need to feel her own convictions and know them as hers.

Travel, especially to Europe, was very common. Her father, as a child, had gone on one of the great old sailing vessels with his father. Upon finishing college, young men rounded off their education by spending several months abroad. The Joneses, finding their income somewhat depleted

after the Civil War, rented their Newport and New York homes and with their daughter, who was about four, spent six years in Europe. What this meant to Edith Wharton is beautifully told in her autobiography:

I remember, through the trailing clouds of infancy, . . . long sunlit wanderings on the springy turf of great Roman villas; heavy coaches of Cardinals flashing in scarlet and gold through the twilight of narrow streets

.

What clung closest in after years, when I thought of the lost Rome of my infancy? It is hard to say; perhaps simply the warm scent of the box hedges on the Pincian, and the texture of weather-worn sungilt stone (29, 31).

The attitudes of the Joneses and their set toward art, music, and the theatre were nonintellectual. In the novelette False Dawn, picturing old New York in the 1840's, the young hero, Lewis Raycie, on his European tour, met Ruskin. The latter introduced him to Giotto's, Mantegna's, and della Francesca's. But Lewis was unable to interest his father in these primitives. His father's taste, like that of others of the class, was for Raphaels.

Her parents and their friends attended the opera on Mondays and Fridays, "Wednesday being, for some obscure tribal reason, the night on which boxes were sent to dull relations and visitors from out of town" (79). Only very occasionally did her parents go to the theatre, and never to a concert or any kind of musical performance except the opera. Criticism of Ellen Olenska in The Age of Innocence

for accepting an invitation to hear Joachim at Mrs. Struther's on a Sunday evening indicates the attitude of Edith Wharton's parents toward musicals. When it was known that Ellen not only went to the Sunday concert but was accompanied by the duke and Mr. Beaufort, Newland Archer's sister Janey conveyed the breach to her brother with alarm. Mr. van der Luyden decided at once to go "straight to Countess Olenska and explain . . . by the merest hint, you know . . . how we feel in New York about certain things."¹⁶

Much good food and fine old wines were served in impeccable fashion at frequent dinner parties of members of their set. At these occasions, however, "art and music and literature were rather timorously avoided . . ., and the topics chiefly dwelt on were personal: the thoughtful discussion of food, wine, horses . . . the laying out and planting of country-seats, . . . and those plans of European travel which filled so large a space in the thought of old New Yorkers" (61).

Some of the enigmas of Edith Wharton's adult life are traceable to influences of her childhood and youth. Why was she so reticent about certain decisions of her life, such as her divorce and her relation with Walter Berry? What is the basis for her request that her personal papers remain hidden from the public until, as she states, "I shall be no longer

¹⁶Wharton, The Age of Innocence, p. 80.

regarded as a woman but only as a writer in the long line of writers"?¹⁷ In searching for her brothers' tutor was she exhibiting frustration of a father image? Can answers to some of these questions perhaps be found in the deep, emotional hurt from rejection by her mother? She was conditioned early to protect herself in later life from severe emotional blows and criticism. Perhaps her escape into fantasy and her delight in writing stemmed from her inability to win her parents' affection and approval. Her early life in the big house on West Twenty-third must have been lonely in spite of the pleasant associations of the library, the fireplace, her beloved Doyley, the amiable servants, and her brothers' "very intelligent English tutor."

While the child Edith Wharton, isolated from normal companionship of her own age and from affectionate approval of her parents, hungrily devoured the classics in her father's library where the cheerful fire burned and crackled, her parents "read little and studied not at all" but spoke their tongue "with scrupulous perfection, and insisted that their children should do the same" (48-49). The culture of her parents' New York society did not include approval of writers. In her autobiography Mrs. Wharton states that "in the eyes of our provincial society authorship was still

¹⁷Griffith, p. 14.

regarded as something between a black art and a form of manual labour" (69). Blake Nevius sums up this attitude as, in effect, "a resistance to new and unsettling ideas and new forms of experience."¹⁸ Out of such exposures as these might have grown subconsciously her defensiveness for the art of literature.

In her fiction, there are many illustrations of this cultural disapproval of literature and writers. In her Pulitzer-prize novel, The Age of Innocence, which depicts nostalgically this era of her parents, old Catherine Mingott "had never opened a book or looked at a picture, and cared for music only because it reminded her of gala nights at the Italiens, in the days of her triumph at the Tuileries."¹⁹ Before Newland Archer's marriage to May Welland, who represents the conventional life of Edith Wharton's parents, Newland had "delighted in . . . the shy interest in books and ideas that she was beginning to develop under his guidance."²⁰ He had wanted her to share his intellectual interests, but by the end of their three-months' wedding tour, "Archer had reverted to all his old inherited ideas about marriage. It was less trouble to conform with the

¹⁸Ibid., p. 182.

¹⁹Wharton, The Age of Innocence, p. 89.

²⁰Ibid., p. 45.

tradition and treat May exactly as all his friends treated their wives."²¹

When Edith and Edward Wharton were first married, she could still say that intellectual interests in their set were virtually unknown. There was disdain for creators of all but the most refined literature, and the approved authors were "Irving, Halleck, Drake, and the elder Dana."²² She resumed her own writing at the suggestion of Dr. S. Weir Mitchell after she suffered a nervous breakdown not long after her marriage. Unlike the romantic traditions the approved authors of her era reflected, she sought to assert herself in a style more commensurate with the temper of the changing age.

Like the women of Edith Wharton's old New York, the men of this period led existences hardly more productive. They usually read law after college, but few practiced it. She notes in her autobiography that the acquisition of wealth seemed to have little interest for the men in her parents' society. These were strictly men of leisure. During her early married years, she notes that the men of her acquaintance made little use of their cultivated abilities. They were dilettantes and few became distinguished

²¹Ibid., p. 159.

²²Nevius, p. 182.

as professional men. They were like her husband, given to spending much time "sea-fishing, boat-racing and wild-fowl shooting" (36).

Although this society of her parents upheld "education and good manners," Edith Wharton saw in it a very serious weakness; namely, "a blind dread of innovation, an instinctive shrinking from responsibility" (21-22). Over and over again she portrays ineffective men like Lawrence Selden, Ralph Marvell, Newland Archer--all typical of the men of her parents' aristocratic, wealthy class. These men could take their places on museum, library, and charity boards, "but the idea that gentlemen could stoop to meddle with politics had hardly begun to make its way, and none of my friends rendered the public service that a more enlightened social system would have exacted of them" (95). Many times she expressed regret that the talents of this class were wasted, because "in every society there is the room, and the need, for a cultivated leisure class" (95).

Robert Morss Lovett wrote in his fine analysis of Edith Wharton and her writing:

The most superficial reading of her work brings evidence of her absorption in the somewhat mechanical operation of culture, her preoccupation with the upper class, and her loyalty to the theory of the art of fiction set forth by Henry James, of which the basis was a recognition of moral values.²³

²³Lovett, p. 3.

Of these three areas of interest, morality is what concerns Edith Wharton, the novelist, as she constantly probes her theme of love, marriage, and divorce. Before she was seventeen, she had read two books that were to form the foundation of her concept of morality. She refers to them in her life story as "awakeners." They were textbooks used by her brother at college; namely, Sir William Hamilton's "History of Philosophy" and Henry Coppée's "Elements of Logic." Undoubtedly these must have been dry and difficult reading for a young lady surrounded mainly by an atmosphere of fashionable dress and social affairs. This arduous, yet self-motivated, reading, according to Edith Wharton, "developed the bony structure about which her vague gelatinous musings could cling and take shape" (71-72). The critic Marilyn Jones Lyde concludes from this autobiographical comment that "Edith Wharton's basic mental processes had been founded on the disciplines of logic and philosophy."²⁴ From the Hamilton and Coppée textbooks she gained, perhaps, a partial basis for coping with the moral aspects of marriage and divorce.

Superficial and wasteful of talents though the world of her parents was, it displayed the moral earnestness of

²⁴Marilyn Jones Lyde, Edith Wharton: Convention and Morality in the Work of a Novelist (Norman, Oklahoma, 1959), p. 26.

its Victorianism. In A Backward Glance she emphasizes that "scrupulous probity in business and private affairs" was observed without exception; that this class endeavored "to maintain a strict standard of uprightness in affairs; and the gentlemen of my father's day did maintain it, whether in the law, in banking, shipping or wholesale commercial enterprises" (21). Edith Wharton goes on to recall in her autobiography "the relentless social ostracism inflicted on the families of those who lapsed from professional or business integrity" (21). The "discreditable bank failure" (22) to which she refers in this connection is reminiscent of the Julius Beaufort bank debacle in The Age of Innocence. She speaks of the "financial incorruptibility" as the justification of "the existence of our old society" (22). A personal code of New York society assured that each member was to assume individual responsibility. This sense of personal obligation is to be noted in Ethan Frome's concern for the welfare of his wife, should he divorce her. Newland Archer chooses to take care of May and his child rather than experience "the flower of life" with Ellen Olenska. It is Lily Bart's sensibility, finer than that of other members of her class, that brings about her failure. The implied criticism of Undine Spragg's lack of moral responsibility is mercilessly underscored in The Custom of the Country. The invaders of old New York who disregarded the code brought

down upon their heads Edith Wharton's most severe condemnation. Julius Beaufort in The Age of Innocence was such an invader, and the social set wondered, "Who was Beaufort?"²⁵ In The House of Mirth, Simon Rosedale was another--"the same little Jew who had been served up and rejected at the social board a dozen times within her memory."²⁶ A third invader was Elmer Moffatt, who said, "Apex was too tight a fit for me . . . New York's my size--without a single alteration."²⁷

The invaders also brought an attitude toward divorce that ran counter to that held by Edith Wharton's Episcopalian parents. The Episcopal Church, until 1946, had held rigidly to the divorce pattern of the canons of the church whose constitution was adopted in 1789. These canons specified but one ground for divorce--adultery--and remarriage within the church for only the injured party. When Undine Spragg in The Custom of the Country felt that her conversion to Roman Catholicism would prevent her getting a divorce, Elmer Moffatt, an invader, said to her, "Why, you were born a Baptist, weren't you? . . . If you'll come along home with

²⁵Wharton, The Age of Innocence, p. 25.

²⁶Edith Wharton, The House of Mirth (New York, 1964), p. 19.

²⁷Edith Wharton, The Custom of the Country (New York, 1913), p. 131.

me I'll see you get your divorce all right."²⁸ There is something of the New England puritan conscience in Edith Wharton, and she resents the invasion of her old New York by people who had lost this conscience or moral sense as they moved westward. Another example of this attitude is suggested in Grandma Scrimser's dying words to her grandson as "he knelt down and pressed his face against the bed, 'Van,' she said, 'My little boy . . . maybe we haven't made enough of pain--been too afraid of it. Don't be afraid of it,' she whispered.. . ."²⁹ Her advice to Vance Weston was that the pain of life must be accepted.

The world of Edith Wharton's parents was conservative culturally, socially, and morally. Its values were good form and taste and probity in all matters pertaining to business and professional practice. She did not escape her heritage, but she came to grips with it and shaped it into something that would have astonished her parents. It is interesting to note that she attained maturity, with beliefs fixed, in one age, but published her first books at the beginning of a very different age, with standards quite at odds with hers. In a treatment of convention and morality in Edith Wharton's works, Marilyn Jones Lyde states that whereas "Mrs.

²⁸Ibid., p. 575.

²⁹Edith Wharton, The Gods Arrive (New York, London, 1932), p. 401.

Wharton's treatment of sex caused one reader in the early part of her career to ask if she had ever known a respectable woman," it caused another critic in 1934 to complain that "all this moralizing . . . leaves the advanced reader of today quite cold."³⁰ The Victorians found her too liberal, and post-Victorians, too moralistic for twentieth-century freedom of expression. Further, she was writing of the moral issues that concerned the privileged class and had nothing to do with the masses.

Edith Wharton's marriage that had been reasonably satisfactory for twenty years, according to close friends, ended in divorce in 1913. One of "the nice moral issues" that occur over and over in her writing pertains to divorce as a possible solution for unsatisfactory marriages. "As might be expected," Nevius writes, "the moral implications of divorce are debated endlessly in her fiction."³¹ Tension in her novels results from efforts to reconcile desire and circumstance, freedom and responsibility with respect to divorce as in other moral situations. Although she believed that "there is no absolute answer to the human dilemma,"³² she explored again and again in her writings one aspect of the human dilemma that was of particular interest to her--divorce.

³⁰Lyde, p. xv.

³¹Nevius, p. 111.

³²Lyde, p. 46.

CHAPTER II

MORAL PROBINGS

For Edith Wharton two seemingly incompatible primary values, truth and faith, fused by beauty into a single summum bonum, form the foundation of her concept of morality.¹ Such a concept of morality seemingly rejects traditional religious beliefs; however, Edith Wharton neither rejected nor accepted religious dogma as a solution for problems resulting from incompatible marriages. She could not accept any belief that intelligence could not sanction, and since the church required, so she felt, one to make a choice between reason and intuition, she found the traditional religion of her youth lacking as a means of finding solutions to marital problems. Marilyn Lyde concludes that her attitude toward religious beliefs represents "open-mindedness rather than indifference."²

Truth, faith, and beauty--the components of her morality--connote, respectively, critical intelligence, moral sense, and taste. With beauty acting as a sort of catalyst, Edith Wharton harmonizes intelligence and moral

¹Marilyn Jones Lyde, Edith Wharton: Convention and Morality in the Work of a Novelist (Norman, Oklahoma, 1959), p. 61.

²Ibid., p. 53.

sense. The right thing thus becomes the beautiful thing, the thing in good taste.³

The basic themes in Wharton's fiction are to be found in the sphere of moral values. These values are tested by dramatizing the struggle of sensitive, intelligent individuals in conflict with the conventions of society. Her characters reflect their moral sense as their individual problems bring them into conflict with their social group. Frequently, a cultivated character is caught in an inescapable web of moral duty,⁴ trapped by his own sensibility. The term "trapped sensibility" may be applied not only to persons in those perplexing situations, but also to marriages in which according to Grace Kellogg Griffith "a sensitive, idealistic, honorable, generous and loving nature is trapped by a much inferior nature."⁵ Edith Wharton's morality, as it is reflected in her solution of these problems, demands a sensitive understanding and acceptance of mutual responsibilities resulting from marriage ties. Moral action does not appear, however, to yield happiness or fulfillment in the conventional sense, because Edith Wharton's concept of morality does not include a utilitarian purpose.

³Ibid., p. 63.

⁴Warner Berthoff, The Ferment of Realism: American Literature 1884-1919 (New York, 1965), p. 142.

⁵Grace Kellogg Griffith, The Two Lives of Edith Wharton (New York, 1965), p. 112.

Such attributes as renunciation, self-sacrifice, spiritual waste--all measured in terms of individual responsibility--were for her the highest good, the highest attainment of the human spirit.⁶

Edith Wharton is especially interested in probing the moral attitudes and beliefs of characters whose marriages have ended in divorce. In the early short story "Souls Belated" (1899), Lydia Tillotson, one of Edith Wharton's superior characters, attempts to solve her marital problem only by the use of critical intelligence. In another early short story, "The Other Two" (1904), the writer indicates that using divorce for social reasons is immoral. In the novella Madame de Treymes (1907), she contrasts the moral attitudes of American and French characters regarding divorce. Both the American and the French rely on the use of critical intelligence; but, the Americans emphasize the importance of individual responsibility, whereas the French, the importance of social conventions. In another novella, Ethan Frome (1911), the protagonist on moral grounds decides against a divorce from his incompatible wife--he cannot repudiate his individual responsibility for the support of his wife, Zeena.

⁶Lyde, p. 64.

In the novel, The Custom of the Country (1913), Edith Wharton criticizes the traditional attitudes of her class toward marriage and, at the same time, bitterly satirizes the easy divorce of the Westerner and of the lower class. In "Autres Temps" (1916), she seems to indicate that for the younger generation, at least, morality does not apply to divorce; for the older generation, however, when divorce entails renouncing responsibility, a penalty must be paid. In The Age of Innocence (1920), although Edith Wharton shows the traditional prejudice of her class toward divorce and the divorcée, her superior characters, Ellen Olenska and Newland Archer, employ the three factors of her concept of morality in reaching their decision regarding divorce. Using their critical intelligence, Ellen and Newland consider all aspects of their dilemma. They show unselfishness and a sense of individual responsibility (moral sense). Both characters indicate that their fuller, more meaningful life, because of their relationship and their renunciation, adds a quality of beauty to their lives. In The Mother's Recompense (1925) Kate Clephane is capable of applying her critical intelligence to problems in connection with her divorce and her daughter, but she pays for her abnegation of individual responsibility (her daughter) in several ways. She is, however, unable to find the correct course of action

(moral sense) for a problem that possibly would not have arisen had she not divorced.

One of Edith Wharton's earliest short stories, "Souls Belated," published in The Greater Inclination (1899), probes two aspects of a marriage that results in moral failure, or divorce: (1) the character of the partners and (2) the attitudes of the characters toward divorce.

The marriage of the small-town girl Lydia to Mr. Tillotson of New York's Four Hundred proves to be an incompatible one, not because of social but intellectual inequality. After moving into the Tillotson family mansion on Fifth Avenue, Lydia seemed to settle down to the Tillotson way of life. Ralph Gannett, whom she met frequently at Mrs. Tillotson's dinners, opens her eyes to the fact that she had only mechanically accepted their point of view. She now sees that life with her husband lacks any opportunity for self-fulfillment and beauty. Furthermore, her mother-in-law, "commanding the approaches from the second-story front windows,"⁷ is an ever-present reminder of this endless routine of living consisting of a "series of purely automatic acts" (92). The elder Mrs. Tillotson "dreaded ideas

⁷Edith Wharton, "Souls Belated," in The Best Short Stories of Edith Wharton, ed. with Introduction by Wayne Andrews (New York, 1958), p. 92. Hereafter page references to this short story will be placed in the text itself in parentheses.

as much as a draught in her back" (92), and her son was as unimaginative as his mother, his beliefs having been "reverentially imbibed with his mother's milk" (92). With Ralph's arrival she then perceives the real nature of her married life: It was "like one of those dismal Cruikshank prints in which the people are all ugly and all engaged in occupations that are either vulgar or stupid" (93).

Lydia is one of Edith Wharton's superior characters who are capable of exercising their intelligence to work out their problems in their own, individual way. Thus, rather than to endure her unsatisfactory marriage, she, like other Wharton incompatibly married young wives, chooses to desert a husband. She has no moral scruples against living with Ralph Gannett in a free-love relationship. Lydia had left her husband to escape a narrow life, preferring an intellectual atmosphere created by Ralph, a promising writer. She was also physically and emotionally attracted to him.

For the period in which the short story was written, Lydia's attitude toward divorce and remarriage is distinctly unconventional. Since she and Ralph are intellectually superior, she feels that they should be able to defy conventions and live according to their own code of morality. Lydia reasons that since she left her husband to gain complete freedom, thus not conforming to the conventional marriage, it would be dishonest to re-marry: She would only

be taking "advantage of the protection conventions offer" (98), because she conceived of a larger, spiritual union--a concept unknown to Tillotson's world. Lydia explains her problem thus:

We neither of us believe in the abstract "sacredness" of marriage; we both know that no ceremony is needed to consecrate our love for each other; what object can we have in marrying, except the secret fear of each that the other may escape, or the secret longing to work our way back gradually . . . into the esteem of the people whose conventional morality we have always ridiculed and hated (97)?

Hence, Lydia is attempting to be intellectually and morally honest.

Ralph's attitude toward the conventions of marriage and divorce, however, is more realistic than Lydia's. He had fully expected to marry her, for during their discussion he said:

I didn't know that we ran away to found a new system of ethics. I supposed it was because we loved each other (98).

As far as he is personally concerned, he does not believe in the necessity of a marriage ceremony any more than Lydia does, but he recognizes the existence of conventions and the practicality of a degree of conformity:

One may believe in them or not; but as long as they do rule the world it is only by taking advantage of their protection that one can find a modus vivendi (98).

The modus vivendi that Lydia and Ralph both desire necessarily includes the convention of marriage. At the fashionable Anglo-American Hotel Bellosguardo, Lady Susan would never have accepted them into her select circle had she known the circumstances of their relationship. To be sure, Lydia's charm and social finesse and Gannett's intellectuality had attracted Lady Susan, but she assumed they were living in wedlock. This truth comes to Lydia as one of the hotel guests, the notorious Mrs. Cope, who "had figured in a flamboyant elopement which had thrilled fashionable London some six months earlier" (105), tells Lydia that she saw they were "in the same box" (108). Then, Lydia knows that freedom is not enough, and that life without social acceptance would be intolerable. To be socially acceptable, Lydia perceives that the respectability that marriage gives is necessary for her and Ralph. Thus Lydia cries out:

Respectability! It was the one thing in life that I was sure I didn't care about, and it's grown so precious to me that I've stolen it because I couldn't get it in any other way (112).

Therefore, Lydia's decision to leave her husband and to seek a life of freedom with Ralph Gannett was based on a search for truth through the exercise of her critical intelligence, one of Edith Wharton's primary values, but she was attempting to remove "truth" from its context--convention.

Her defiance of convention delayed her social acceptance. Edith Wharton wrote in French Ways and Their Meaning (1919) that since conventions had survived "the close filtering of time," they must meet "some deep racial need, moral, or aesthetic."⁸

Although divorce is treated satirically in "The Other Two," contained in her third collection of short stories, The Descent of Man and Other Stories (1904), the implications indicate a recurring attitude toward divorce and the divorcée.

Mr. Waythorn comes to realize that his wife, Alice, who has had two divorces, is shallow, deceitful, and unrefined. As family, business, and social circumstances involve him with her two former husbands, he learns rather too late what kind of person his wife is. Before marrying her, he had told a friend who tried to warn him about Alice "that he took the step with his eyes open." To this, the friend quipped, "Yes--and with your ears shut."⁹

Through Haskett, her first husband, Waythorn realizes Alice had no social refinement. His "made-up tie attached

⁸Edith Wharton, French Ways and Their Meaning (New York, 1919), p. 31.

⁹Edith Wharton, "The Other Two," in The Best Short Stories of Edith Wharton, ed. with Introduction by Wayne Andrews (New York, 1958), p. 41. Hereafter page references to this short story will be placed in the text itself in parentheses.

with an elastic" (51) characterizes Haskett. Waythorn then perceives the commonness that Alice's marriage to him inevitably implies. He imagines he can see her as Mrs. Haskett

sitting in a "front parlour" furnished in plush, with a pianola, and a copy of "Ben Hur" on the centre-table . . . going . . . to a Church Sociable (51).

Waythorn notes that Haskett's speech is punctuated with such expressions as "stylish education," "ain't straight," "she don't" (52); nevertheless, he detects a sincerity about the man that contradicts the impression Alice had given him of her first unhappy marriage and the "young illusions" (51) that Alice accused Haskett of destroying. Haskett's sense of responsibility for their daughter and his sacrifice to be near her suggest that perhaps it was Haskett's illusions rather than Alice's that had been shattered. In conversation with him, Waythorn not only learns that Alice has lied about seeing Haskett, but has lacked the good taste to know how offensive her contact with a former husband would be to him.

Alice's marriage to Gus Varick indicates the superficiality and insincerity of her character. Varick, of course, was a gentleman--of the same social position as Alice, or so Waythorn had thought. Waythorn realizes that Gus's lack of funds had been the principal cause of the termination

of that marriage when Gus made an offhand allusion to his former financial state:

It feels uncommonly queer to have enough cash to pay one's bills. I'd have sold my soul for it a few years ago (48)!

Alice's blindness to the impropriety of seeing Haskett is comparable to her willingness to be congenial with Varick when they meet socially. When Waythorn questions her about this, her uninhibited response indicates that she is lacking in the finer sensibilities and has no instinctive knowledge of her proper role as Waythorn's wife. He finally discerns the immorality of his wife:

Her pliancy was beginning to sicken him. Had she really no will of her own--no theory about her relation to these men? . . . It was "less awkward," as she had said, and her instinct was to evade difficulties or to circumvent them. With sudden vividness Waythorn saw how the instinct had developed. She was "as easy as an old shoe"--a shoe that too many feet had worn. . . . Alice Haskett-Alice Varick-Alice Waythorn--she had been each in turn, and had left hanging to each name a little of her privacy, a little of her personality, a little of the inmost self where the unknown god abides (55).

Alice Waythorn, then, is representative of Edith Wharton's early concept of the divorcée: a woman who lacks social refinement, intelligence, and fineness of character.

Edith Wharton disapproved of social climbing by any means, especially through divorce as this short story clearly implies. Alice's first marriage perhaps represents the folly of youth--"a runaway match at seventeen" (41),

but the succeeding two were for social advancement: "Alice Waythorn's remarriage with Gus Varick was a passport to the set whose recognition she coveted" (41). Her marriage to Waythorn assured her of substantial means and the desired social set and culture, which she had previously not experienced.

Such reasons for divorce would be anathema to Edith Wharton, who remained married to her husband until he was definitely declared mentally incapacitated. Before this point, she had borne the embarrassment Teddy Wharton had caused her, his wasting of her money, and their intellectual, physical, and emotional incompatibility.

The novelist's criticism of the New York divorce laws is suggested by the tone of such a remark as "a New York divorce is in itself a diploma of virtue" (41). With the complicity of Gus, Alice was able to obtain her divorce from him. To call a New York divorce "a diploma of virtue" is bitterly ironic.

In this story, "The Other Two," Edith Wharton's concept of morality had little, if any, application to the central character. Alice's motivation for divorce is social climbing, and divorce in her case is merely a legal manipulation without moral considerations. Alice does not use critical intelligence to solve her marital problems; in fact, her problems are not connected with marriage but with

social position. She displays little moral sense, the second of the primary values that form the novelist's concept of morality, as indicated in her dealings with all three of her husbands. The sincerity of her feeling of responsibility for her child may be questioned. She apparently used her child as a front, as Waythorn later recognizes: His wife's "affection for the child had perhaps been her decisive charm" (40) in his eyes. The courts found that she was lacking in maternal instincts; hence, custody of the child was not given to her but jointly to her and Haskett. She again demonstrates her lack of sensitivity when she can serve tea graciously to her two former husbands and then to Waythorn who can do no less than take "the third cup with a laugh" (59). Her lack of taste rules out the achievement of moral beauty--Wharton's catalyst for harmonizing intelligence and moral sense.

In 1907 Edith Wharton's Madame de Treymes, a novella or long short story, was published. In this work Wharton explores the differences between American and French moral standards against a backdrop of the manners of the two countries. The immediate focus is the possibility of Madame de Malrive's divorce from her brutal, flagrantly faithless husband. Several years earlier she had separated from him, with the complete approval of his family. The arrival of an old American friend, John Durham, has brought up the

expediency of a divorce since he has asked her to marry him. Since Madame de Malrive had not become a Catholic at the time of her marriage, she has no religious scruples about divorce. Only a civil divorce, however, would be permissible to the Malrives if they chose to agree to a divorce.

This American-born Fanny Frisbee de Malrive, then, represents one of Edith Wharton's typically superior characters whose marriage to an unequal has failed. Both her physical beauty and moral integrity are revealed as John Durham observes them. He remembers her in their youth as the outdoor type--natural, lively, brimming with health. As John Durham remarks, she was indeed endowed with "the showiest national attributes."¹⁰ The incompatibility of her marriage to Monsieur de Malrive, a member of the aristocratic Faubourg Saint Germain society, becomes evident after a few years, when her husband indulges in one affair after another. With a difference of religious background added to differences of culture and nationality, the marriage from the beginning apparently had little chance of success.

This union is one of the many examples of incompatibility to be found in Edith Wharton's fiction. The

¹⁰Edith Wharton, Madame de Treymes (New York, 1907), p. 33. Hereafter page references to this novella will be placed in the text itself in parentheses.

superior individual of this marriage learns that she cannot assume her personal responsibility for her son (exercise of moral sense) and also obtain a divorce because French law prohibits the award of custody of a child to a parent who remarries. Hence, in Fanny de Malrive's search for truth, the conventions of church and law assure the continuity of the family but do not necessarily aid the individual.

John Durham notes that Fanny, at the time of her contemplated divorce, has changed from the vivacious American girl that he remembers to a suave, utterly charming young matron. His sister Nannie sums up the effect of the new Fanny thus: "I never saw anything so French" (35). She has been exposed to new influences that "had lent to her natural fineness of perception a command of expression adapted to complex conditions" (36). He notices her lowered voice and regulated gestures that have "toned her down to harmony with the warm, dim background of a long social past." (35). Here is a cultivated individual who is capable of exercising critical intelligence, moral sense, and taste--the components of Edith Wharton's concept of morality.

These two individuals, Fanny and John, employ their critical intelligence to persuade the Malrive family through Madame de Treymes, the most influential member of the family, to agree to Fanny's divorce. In this attempt the difference between American and French moral standards becomes apparent.

Madame de Treymes repels John by offering to use her influence with the family in return for his payment of her lover's gambling debts. John refuses to accept what she considers a "wonderful chance" to get what he most wants "at a bargain" (86), because he would, in effect, be buying the right to marry Fanny. To Madame de Treymes his attitude is totally incomprehensible: "Ah, you are all incredible" (88). His willingness to sacrifice his happiness for a principle reflects his Puritan heritage.

Fanny also exercises moral sense in refusing to obtain a divorce, when she learns that she will lose control of her son if she remarries. Not only has she given her word that she will remain in France and rear her son, but she holds strong convictions about bringing him up according to American precepts of fair play and honor. Furthermore, she can agree to a divorce only if there will be no scandal to reflect on her son's future. Her unselfishness and sense of good taste are shown in this attitude. Madame de Treyme's lack of fair play during the preliminary procedures permits her to conceal from John the reason the family will consent to a divorce, thereby gaining her ironic revenge. When John advises Fanny of the situation, he knows that she will, of course, give up the idea of divorce and remarriage because of her high sense of individual responsibility for her son.

In disregarding the personal happiness of John and Fanny, the Malrives think only of family continuity. Their purpose is to get and to control the child, to assure continuance of the lineage. This idea conflicts with the American ideal of the importance of the individual.

Thus, in this story the theme concerns not so much the problem of divorce from a moral point as it does the paramount importance of family considerations. Madame de Treymes expresses this theme and the French attitude toward divorce when she explains:

We abhor divorce--we go against our religion in consenting to it--and nothing short of recovering the boy could possibly justify us (114)!

On the other hand, the Americans indicate that divorce can provide desirable escape from a wrong marriage and an opportunity for a new life. Fanny possibly expresses a view that Edith Wharton must have had during the last trying years before her divorce:

I should like anything that would do away with the past--obliterate it all--make everything new in my life (23).

In Madame de Treymes the novelist indicates that divorce in itself is neither morally right nor wrong except as it might prevent a person assuming his responsibility. In this case, divorce would have caused Fanny to relinquish her personal responsibility for her son's upbringing according to her convictions.

A recurrent idea in Edith Wharton's fiction is that moral action does not necessarily bring happiness or reward. John's refusal to help Madame de Treymes is based on his conviction that buying the right to marry Fanny would be contrary to his belief in freedom of choice. Fanny's sense of individual responsibility prevents her from remarrying. These acts of renunciation and self-sacrifice reflect Edith Wharton's Puritanical sense of morality: belief in individual responsibility, the inescapable fact of evil in the world, and the necessity of suffering. Fanny and John were fine, sensitive persons trapped in a network of moral obligation.

Ethan Frome was published in 1911, when Edith Wharton's marital situation was almost intolerable. The year following this publication, she was to place her husband in a luxurious sanitarium on Lake Constance in Switzerland and then divorce him in 1913.¹¹ The problems of marriage, the possibility of divorce as a solution, and the explanation for unions that had within them the germ of failure must have been constantly in her mind.

Although in this short novel there is no divorce, the marital incompatibility of Ethan Frome and Zenobia Pierce is characteristic of many of the disastrous marriages found in

¹¹Olivia Coolidge, Edith Wharton: 1862-1937 (New York, 1964), pp. 128-129.

her fiction. These unions involve a fine, generous person and a mean, inadequate one, and usually are the result of a sentimental impulse on the part of the larger nature. Ethan Frome is an ambitious, sensitive farm boy who has given up studying to be an engineer to help his mother with the farm after his father's serious accident. His sensitivity to the beauty of nature is noted in the following passage:

He had always been more sensitive than the people about him to the appeal of natural beauty . . . even in his unhappiest moments field and sky spoke to him with a deep and beautiful persuasion.¹²

When his mother becomes an invalid, Zenobia Pierce, a cousin, is hired to care for his mother. Ethan does not perceive that her nursing skill is based on a morbid interest in her own imagined ailments: "Her skill as a nurse had been acquired by the absorbed observation of her own symptoms" (72). Upon his mother's death, he impulsively asks her to marry him out of a feeling of indebtedness to her for taking over the responsibilities of the household and for bringing into the house once again the sound of the human voice. In fact, before their marriage "Zeena's volubility was music in his ears" (69).

¹²Edith Wharton, Ethan Frome, with Introduction by Mrs. Wharton (New York, 1911), p. 33. Hereafter page references to this novella will be placed in the text itself in parentheses.

Within a year the error of Ethan's marriage to his cousin is evident. Communication between them has ceased. The "volubility" in Zeena that he had enjoyed before his mother's death, when his mother refused to talk to him, is now a series of complaints. Since he cannot remedy her grievances, he is silent. Ethan wants to sell the unproductive farm and move to a larger community where he may continue to study engineering, but Zeena's sense of insecurity and social inadequacy preclude this ambition. Hence, the finer member of the union is trapped, and his life is immersed in that of the meaner nature.

Edith Wharton's superior moral characters do not repudiate their personal responsibility. Ethan accepts his life with his nagging, hypochondriacal wife and agrees to support her cousin, Mattie Silver, so that his sickly wife will be relieved of all household chores. When he and Mattie fall in love and he considers divorcing Zeena, he is restrained by his sense of personal responsibility to his wife. His first thought concerns how he might provide support for her. After perusing his situation, he concludes that the sale of his mortgaged farm would bring very little to Zeena even if she could operate it until a buyer came along. The thought of divorcing his wife is dismissed from his mind, since he has no way of providing for her.

Ethan's sense of honesty and fair play prevents him from borrowing money under false pretenses from Andrew Hale to pay for a trip west with Mattie. For a while he had thought that he and Mattie might start life anew. Not having even fifty dollars, he has to abandon this plan. His moral sense does not allow him to deceive the Hales for the purpose of borrowing the money.

Self-sacrifice in the case of Ethan, as in others of Edith Wharton's fiction, does not result in happiness or gain. Giving up his dream of some day becoming an engineer and of having a chance at happiness with Mattie results only in spiritual waste. Ethan knows that

Other possibilities had been in him, possibilities sacrificed, one by one, to Zeena's narrow-mindedness and ignorance. And what good had come of it? . . . All the healthy instincts of self-defence rose up in him against such waste . . . (131).

And when Mattie suggests coasting down the hill into the big elm, fate steps in to make their self-sacrifice meaningless--or worse.

Ethan, the trapped protagonist, accepts responsibility although he probes the limits to which he may go without threatening the structure of society. It is unthinkable to Ethan that he not provide for his wife, should he divorce her. For him to borrow money falsely from a friend is out of the question. Like Lily Bart in The House of Mirth,

Ethan is trapped by lack of funds and his inability to compromise his principles to gain his desired purpose. Lily needs money to move in the social society for which she had been reared, but her fine sensibilities, like Ethan's, prevent her from marriage with the rich Rosedale because he is not of her background. Her fine sensibilities draw her to Lawrence Selden, but he lacks the money to enable her to maintain the desired status.

Lionel Trilling raises a question in connection with Ethan Frome, stating that "it presents no moral issue at all."¹³ He feels that the important idea in the work is "that moral inertia, the not making of moral decisions, constitutes a large part of the moral life of humanity."¹⁴ According to Trilling, Ethan Frome's morality is merely "simple, unquestioning, passive, even masochistic,"¹⁵ and Ethan's actions do not result from moral election.

Whenever a person freely elects to act contrary to self-interest for the benefit of a fellow being, he is demonstrating moral choice and action--not Trilling's "moral inertia." Trilling is here illustrating a tenet of the naturalist--that man's actions result from the influence of

¹³Lionel Trilling, "The Morality of Inertia," in Edith Wharton: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Irving Howe (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1962), p. 139.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 143.

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 143-144.

his environment, or that his environment shapes a man's responses to life. Ethan chooses not to get a divorce because he would have to abandon his responsibility to his wife. He chooses not to procure the necessary money to take Mattie away with him because it would involve dishonesty to a friend. In both decisions he acts contrary to self-interest. Blake Nevius states that "it is Ethan's own sense of responsibility that blocks the last avenue of escape and condemns him to a life of sterile expiation."¹⁶ Ethan's moral decisions, like those of Fanny and John in Madame de Treymes, result in spiritual waste.

The morality of divorce is the only aspect of divorce that Edith Wharton probes in Ethan Frome. With satisfactory provision for Zeena and an honest way to procure money to take Mattie away with him, presumably Ethan would have secured a divorce. Then, so the novelist indicates, Ethan would have had no moral reason for not divorcing his wife..

In the year of her divorce, 1913, Edith Wharton published one of her finest novels, The Custom of the Country.¹⁷ Here the novelist explores a favorite theme--the conflict between social groups represented by individuals. Undine Spragg, whose name evolved from a hair-waver her

¹⁶Blake Nevius, Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction (Berkeley, 1953), p. 121.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 2.

father had marketed about the time of her birth, represents the invaders from the West. This group was wealthy and aggressive. Eventually these invaders from the West were to destroy the society of old New York. Undine's second husband, Ralph Marvell, represents entrenched New York society at the turn of the last century. Her third husband, Raymond de Chelles, is representative of the French Faubourg Saint Germain. Somewhat in the nature of a picaresque hero, Undine experiences one social success after another. In her own country she achieves social position by her marriage to Ralph Marvell and in Europe, by her marriage to Raymond de Chelles.

In the years just before the outbreak of World War I, divorce was becoming relatively common,¹⁸ although it was still abhorrent to both the New York and Faubourg societies. In France there was civil divorce,¹⁹ but the church did not permit divorce. Old aristocratic families like the Chelles were Catholic. In America, the Episcopal Church of Edith

¹⁸Frederick Lewis Allen, Only Yesterday (New York, 1957), pp. 115-116. He states: "The divorce rate, however, continued its steady rise; for every 100 marriages there were 8.8 divorces in 1910, 13.4 divorces in 1920, and 16.5 divorces in 1928--almost one divorce for every six marriages. There was a corresponding decline in the amount of disgrace accompanying divorce. In the urban communities, men and women who had been divorced were now socially accepted without question."

¹⁹Millicent Bell, Edith Wharton and Henry James: The Story of Their Friendship (New York, 1965), p. 187.

Wharton's class held to its rigid divorce laws. Among other groups, especially the wealthy Westerners, divorce was becoming more common and even accepted in the urban areas. The successful industrialists from centers like Pittsburgh and even farther west were pushing into New York, buying their way into a society that seemed unable to resist the appeal of vast wealth. These people were usually members of the Evangelical churches that were more tolerant of divorce. Undine and her parents are Baptists, and before they arrive in New York, Undine has divorced her first husband, Elmer Moffatt. Members of old New York society are, however, well aware of the prevalence of divorce. Charles Bowen, the detached social commentator in The Custom of the Country, remarks that he is interested in obtaining "a general view of the whole problem of American marriages." Mrs. Fairford, Ralph Marvell's sister, comments dryly, "If that's what you want you must make haste! Most of them don't last long enough to be classified."²⁰

Edith Wharton's class and religion had never accepted divorce or the divorcée. Presumably, her convictions ingrained since childhood would not be easily cast off. The pain of her own recent divorce was undoubtedly still present

²⁰Edith Wharton, The Custom of the Country (New York, 1913), p. 205. Hereafter page references to this novel will be placed in the text itself in parentheses.

even though her life-long friends corroborated its justification.²¹ Her affection and friendship for her sister-in-law, Minnie Cadwalader Jones, who divorced Freddy Jones after many years of marriage when he ran off with another woman, is recorded frequently in her writings.²² She indicates neither approval nor disapproval of divorce, but rather probes the causes of the moral failure that results in situations predicated divorce. In The Custom of the Country, she angrily, but forcefully, demonstrates in her characterization of Undine Spragg reasons for divorce that are morally unjustifiable.

Undine, the beautiful but spoiled daughter of the Abner Spraggs of Apex City, has been called the "prototype in fiction of the gold-digger, of the international cocktail bitch."²³ She is totally amoral and egocentric. She is without roots, crudely opportunistic, and vain. Her relations with her parents and her several husbands demonstrate her selfishness repeatedly. As her father's fortune declines, her parents are forced to move to cheaper living quarters. Undine, however, rises socially but shows no concern for her parents and selfishly demands "an

²¹Bell, p. 173. See also Griffith, p. 190.

²²Griffith, p. 76. See also Bell, p. 51.

²³Edmund Wilson, "Justice to Edith Wharton," New Republic, Vol. LXXXV (June 29, 1938), 211.

undiminished allowance" (562). While married to Ralph Marvell, she is willing to compromise herself by accepting money from Peter Van Degen to pay debts she has contracted without her husband's knowledge. She justifies this indiscretion by the notion that "Van Degen's cheque helped to calm her" (228). Even Van Degen turns against her when he notes her callousness towards her husband Ralph as she crumples the cable from her sister-in-law asking her to return because of Ralph's serious illness. Because she is engrossed in a viewing of her portrait done by Mr. Popple, Undine forgets and misses her son's birthday celebration. Crass and tasteless, she does not reflect even the basic instinct of motherhood. When she finds herself pregnant with her son Paul, she has a childish tantrum, saying to Ralph:

. . . Look at me--see how I look--how I'm going to look! . . . just as I thought I was going home to enjoy myself, and look nice, and see people again, and have a little pleasure after all our worries (186).

Her lack of integrity is frequently associated with a lack of taste. Perhaps one of the most poignant examples concerns the resetting of the heirloom jewelry Ralph gave her, especially the sapphire engagement ring. Showing her superficial sense of values, she has the family gems placed in modern settings while she and Ralph are in Paris on their honeymoon. Ralph had asked her not to change the settings,

but shortly before the birth of their son upon their return, he notes two items on a belated Paris bill: "Resetting pearl and diamond pendant. Resetting sapphire and diamond ring" (213). This family jewelry, preserved for generations, has been selfishly altered, and Ralph knows now the pain of his wife's deception. One of the contributing factors of Ralph's suicide is his full realization of his wife's deceitfulness: "There hadn't been a moment when she hadn't lied to him, deliberately, ingeniously and inventively" (471). Another illustration of her deception and lack of taste is her attempted arrangement behind Raymond de Chelles' back for the sale of the invaluable Chelles family tapestries.

Little is noted of Undine's education, but her intellectual capacity is satirized and never more subtly than in the ironical scene when she and Raymond are together in the library after dinner one evening shortly after their marriage. Raymond attempts to share with her various reviews and papers of interest to him, but always "her sense of inadequacy made her slip away to other subjects, and little by little their talk died down to monosyllables" (506). Ralph Marvell also, soon after their honeymoon, realizes the futility of any intellectual companionship with her. Lack of intellectual companionship is frequently brought out in Edith Wharton's fictional marriages. In these scenes was she

subconsciously portraying her own experience with her husband Teddy? It is, of course, well known that Teddy's interests lay in sports and social intercourse and not in the intellectual and cultural fields.

Possibly the one insight that Undine acquires during her social advancement is an appreciation of the fineness of character and culture which she first observes in Ralph Marvell and later notices in Raymond de Chelles. In Ralph she notices "the delicacy and finish of . . . his features" and his "finely-finished" hand (69). At a later time she is aware in Raymond of "the cool reserve of his manners" (401).

Edith Wharton's aristocratic upbringing conditioned her against the vulgarity and insensibility of the type of new woman Undine exemplifies. The characteristic that perhaps repels the novelist the most is Undine's social ambition--her thrusting herself into a social status where she does not belong. Clearly her social success results purely from her beauty, wealth, and attraction to men. At times Undine's portrayal is so one sided that she seems inhuman; however, she symbolizes, for Edith Wharton at least, the nouveaux riches who have taken over the society of her parents with their wealth and desire to invade the upper levels of New York society. Undine considers not at

all her parents' objections to her desire to divorce Ralph to try to capture a married man, Peter Van Degen:

Such things happened, as Mr. Spragg knew, but they should not happen to any woman of his name while he had the power to prevent it (248).

She repudiates the pledge she made as a Catholic when she married Raymond. She does pay, however, in what may seem a very small way for the tragedies she has caused. Her retribution is never to achieve her ambition of ambassadress --the only purpose she possesses as the novel closes-- because, as Elmer bluntly explains to her, "They won't have divorced Ambassadors" (593). Edith Wharton is perhaps indicating here that the convention of marriage cannot be broken without incurring some penalty, small as it may seem to all except Undine.

The three elements of Edith Wharton's moral code--intelligence, moral sense, and beauty--are totally lacking in Undine's character. She is not honest with her various husbands or her parents, as has been pointed out in her deceitfulness concerning the heirloom jewelry, the tapestries, and her selfish money demands. Although first a Baptist, then a Catholic convert, and finally a Baptist again, her religion affords her no basis for making moral decisions--rather religion is used to gain an annulment or divorce to remarry for selfish reasons. Beauty, the element of Edith Wharton's moral code that synthesizes intelligence

and belief, is lacking in her marriages; in its place is the ugliness of vulgarity and infidelity with Van Degen, her selfishness toward her son, and her cruelty toward Ralph. Her satirical treatment of Undine and her divorces indicates indirectly the novelist's distaste for the easy divorce for selfish reasons.

Much as she derides the type of woman Undine represents, Edith Wharton suggests through the detached social commentator Charles Bowen, an explanation for the Undines in the new society of America. During the period of Edith Wharton's parents and of her early married years, men and women of her class had time for leisurely luncheons and dinners with much delightful conversation. The men shared their interests, including their problems, with their wives. Since this custom no longer exists, American wives like Undine are not aware of the problems of their husbands. French wives, however, concern themselves with their husbands' affairs and thus are important to their spouses. In America, Bowen says, this involvement for the American wife would be "against the custom of the country" (206). As a result, the American husband tends to look down on his wife, and omits her from the center of his interest. Bowen states that Undine is only the result of this attitude of the American husband: "She's a monstrously perfect result of the system: the completest proof of its triumph" (208).

Thus the indifference and neglect of the American husband results, so Bowen concludes, in the easy American divorce. In her satirization of the easy divorce and the divorcée, Edith Wharton underlines the resultant tragedy and waste.

"Autres Temps," although published in 1916 in Zingu and Other Stories, was probably written in 1913,²⁴ the year Edith Wharton obtained her divorce from her husband of twenty-eight years. Since 1910, when he was in a sanitarium under psychiatrists, she and Teddy had been virtually separated. He remained in the sanitarium until the end of World War I, when he returned to America to live with an unmarried sister until his death in 1928.²⁵ Wayne Andrews, in his introduction to a collection of her short stories, makes the following statement: "As any reader of 'Autres Temps' . . . could tell, she was compelled to seek her release from her husband."²⁶ Considering the date of this story and the implication of Andrews' statement, one might assume that the subject of divorce was uppermost in Edith Wharton's thought. Incidentally, several of her critics appraise "Autres Temps" as one of her finest, if not her finest, short story.²⁷

²⁴Nevius, p. 177.

²⁵Coolidge, p. 129.

²⁶Wayne Andrews, Introduction to The Best Short Stories of Edith Wharton (New York, 1958), p. xvii.

²⁷Nevius, p. 175. See also Coolidge, p. 132.

Not unlike Lydia Tillotson in "Souls Belated," Mrs. Lidcote in "Autres Temps" rebels against her life with a dull husband and runs off with a lover. Unlike Lydia, however, Mrs. Lidcote in her rebellion abnegates a responsibility--her daughter Leila. For eighteen years she and her daughter have lived apart. When Mrs. Lidcote learns that Leila has divorced and remarried, she instantly thinks that her daughter is experiencing the mental suffering and social ostracism that befell her. Having been in Europe for many years, she is unaware that now is autres temps.

Upon her return to America, Mrs. Lidcote is amazed to note the changed status of the divorced-remarried woman and its dissimilarity to hers. Her contemporaries, the Ashton Giles, the Sam Fresbies, and even Mrs. Lorin Boulger, the ambassadress to Italy, eagerly accept Leila's invitation to a dinner party. Yet, even though her past is no different from Leila's, she knows that on the boat Mrs. Boulger "cut" her:

It [the past] has sprung at her the first day out when, across the dining-room, from the captain's table, she had seen Mrs. Lorin Boulger's revolving eye-glass pause and the eye behind it grow as blank as a dropped blind.²⁸

²⁸Edith Wharton, "Autres Temps," in The Best Short Stories of Edith Wharton, ed. with Introduction by Wayne Andrews (New York, 1958), p. 264. Hereafter page references to this short story will be placed in the text itself in parentheses.

Even more amazing is the fact that Leila's first husband's uncle is helping her present husband obtain the second secretaryship in Rome. Her cousin, Susy Suffern, clears up this enigma for her by saying, "There's no bad feeling between them, I assure you" (275). How well she remembers that her own family would scarcely let her cousin Susy visit her; in fact, "she almost had to disinfect herself after each visit" (272).

Another revelation that comes to Mrs. Lidcote is that her daughter really does not need her. The yearning that she has to re-establish the mother-daughter relationship is to be unfulfilled. Leila is quite capable of managing her own life. She has perhaps even lost her daughter's sincere affection. This loss of affection is shown in their visit when Leila deters her mother from attending the dinner party. After Leila has suggested that her mother remain in her room, Mrs. Lidcote asks:

Then won't they think it odd if I don't appear?

Oh, not in the least, dearest. I assure you they'll all understand.

Will they think it odd if I do (284)?

The older, rigid attitudes toward divorce thus entailed waste. Mrs. Lidcote has sacrificed a normal mother-daughter relationship. Also she has experienced the pain of watching the distress of her lover as he sees the gradual

loss of friends and position. The thought occurs to her: "I've seen what it did to one man; and there must never, never be another" (274).

Edith Wharton implies that Mrs. Lidcote, in rejecting her responsibility to her daughter when she divorced, is paying a penalty--the loss of a sincere mother-daughter relationship. The sympathy and assistance she wishes to give her daughter, thus re-establishing their relationship, are not needed. A divorce that involves the abnegation of personal responsibility is not with impunity. Aline Gorren attributed Edith Wharton's belief in individual responsibility as a moral sine qua non to "the puritanism that she transplanted from Boston to New York."²⁹

During the years since Mrs. Lidcote's divorce, there have been "new tolerances and indifferences and accommodations" (276) respecting divorce. In her case, however, "the new dispensation" (289) has not come because

society is much too busy to revise its own judgments . . . The older people have half forgotten why and the younger ones have never really known; it's simply become a tradition to cut me. And traditions that have lost their meaning are the hardest of all to destroy (289-290).

Relieved though Mrs. Lidcote is that the attitudes toward divorce have relaxed since her time, nevertheless she

²⁹Lovett, p. 10. "Miss Aline Gorren in The Critic credited Mrs. Wharton with transplanting the New England conscience to New York and giving it a home in the socially splendid exteriors of the best people."

shows that she prefers to live in a world in which there are rules of conduct. Her world--the result of the rules of twenty years ago--suits her, and she tells Franklin Ide, one of Edith Wharton's several convenient bachelors, "Oh, I've made it habitable now, I'm used to it" (290). This same attachment to life with rules is indicated in her attraction to Charlotte Wynne, the daughter of an old friend, "in whom something of the soberness and softness of the earlier manners had survived" (278).

Although Edith Wharton continues to probe the moral implications of divorce, Mrs. Lidcote exemplifies the traditional attitude of Edith Wharton's class toward divorce. The tone of this story makes divorce and its adjustments sound too easy, too superficial. Edith Wharton's experience has been like Mrs. Lidcote's in that members of her family opposed her divorce. Edith Wharton may have been wondering as she wrote this story how her friends would judge her since her divorce. Would it be according to the "new tolerances and indifferences and accommodations" (276), or according to their traditional attitude toward divorce? She indicates in her tone that in spite of her own divorce she, like Mrs. Lidcote, prefers a world in which there are some rules of conduct.

By 1920, the date of her Pulitzer-Prize winning novel The Age of Innocence, Edith Wharton had adjusted to her

divorce of 1913; World War I was over and she was free of her exhausting duties for her beloved France. It was in a relaxed mood that she turned back to the time of her youth for the background of a novel. This was the 1870's, the era of her parents, when, within the context of this cultural milieu, her basic moral and social attitudes were formed. She was far enough removed in time and distance to look upon her own society with both affection and objectivity. The relaxed tone of The Age of Innocence suggests that she was comfortable working in this early period that she knew so well. The great social and moral upheaval of the decades after the war had not yet accelerated, although portents of these changes appeared sporadically. Mrs. Struthers' Sunday evening musicales, Julius Beaufort's aberrations, and Ellen Olenska's liberal views and manners raise eyebrows, but for the most part the smug little world of the Archers, Wellands, van der Luydens--counterparts of the world of Edith Wharton's parents--moves sedately and selfishly along, ignoring any unpleasantness that such deviations might cause.

Influences that contributed to Edith Wharton's attitude toward the moral aspects of marriage and divorce are to be found in The Age of Innocence, since the setting represents the period of her parents. Society's reaction to Ellen Olenska's first appearance upon her return from Europe demonstrates the smug attitude of old New York. On a

January evening as Ellen (née Mingott) enters the Mingott opera box, she elicits both astonishment and criticism among her group. Lawrence Lefferts, a foremost authority on "form in New York," exclaims, "My God!"³⁰ Silverton Jackson, the acknowledged authority on "family," thoughtfully remarks as he returns Leffert's opera glass, "I didn't think the Mingotts would have tried it on" (19). Ellen's marriage to a Polish count had failed, and she had left him. During this era of the 1870's, however, wives did not leave their husbands. Families did not condone such action as the Mingotts were demonstrating by including Ellen in their box.

The scene in the Mingott box illustrates another attitude of the group in which Edith Wharton grew up--their clannishness. The Mingotts, by displaying Ellen in public at an important social function, are announcing their family solidarity. Newland Archer's mother expresses the clan's attitude: "If we don't all stand together, there'll be no such thing as society left" (50). The fact that Count Olenski was well known to be "a brute of a husband, who kept her practically a prisoner" (42) does not influence their attitudes or actions toward Ellen. When the Countess appears in old Mrs. Mingott's box, the family are merely

³⁰Edith Wharton, The Age of Innocence (New York, 1962), p. 18. Hereafter page references to this novel will be placed in the text itself in parentheses.

asserting the fact that Ellen belongs and will be backed up by the family. However, the opposition of the clan to separation from one's spouse is strong, and it took an invitation from the Henry van der Luydens, one of the three families who can claim aristocratic origin, to get society to attend a formal dinner to meet the Countess. Society's attitude is that "after all, a young woman's place was under her husband's roof, especially when she had left it in circumstances that ... well . . . if one had cared to look into them . . ." (209).

Ellen, with the help of her family, overcomes the clan's opposition to her separation from her husband, but when she reveals that she wishes to obtain a divorce, she is unable to surmount their opposition to divorce. As Mr. Letterblair, the legal adviser of several generations in old New York, remarks, "The whole family are against a divorce. And I think rightly" (86). The clan generally avoids the unpleasant--that is good taste. Because a divorce suit might result in unpleasantness, old New York society was against divorce. Mr. Letterblair unequivocally pronounces to the acquiescent Newland: "Divorce is always unpleasant" (87). Also, their church, the Episcopal, had rigid canons against divorce. Divorce and divorcées are ignored and not mentioned except among family and very close friends. When Janey Archer, in the presence of the butler,

drops the bombshell that Ellen is considering a divorce, Mrs. Archer's reaction is typical of the attitude: "Mrs. Archer raised her delicate eyebrows in the particular curve that signified 'The Butler'--and Janey and Newland were aware of the "bad taste of discussing such intimate matters in public" (42).

The character of the divorcée is expressed in many of Edith Wharton's works. Carrie Fisher, a divorcée in The House of Mirth, solves her problems by abandoning scruples and assisting newcomers to crash society. Blanche Carbury in The Fruit of the Tree divorces and remarries only to be able to associate in her lover's social group. Mrs. Ansell expresses society's feeling for Blanche in her exclamation to Mr. Langhope: "If you knew how I detest Blanche Carbury!"³¹ In old New York's view, Ellen as a divorcée would be no different from Carrie or Blanche.

The principal aspect of divorce that Edith Wharton was exposed to in her formative years was its social aspect. As the legal conscience of Ellen's clan remarks, "Our legislation favours divorce--our social customs don't" (95). Newland points out to Ellen that their social customs especially do not condone social acceptance of a divorced woman about whom there has been any scandal. (96) Newland recalls

³¹Edith Wharton, The Fruit of the Tree (New York, 1907), p. 279.

the rigid laws of the State pertaining to remarriage. If remarriage is Ellen's objective, he will have to inform her that remarriage is possible only for the injured person whose spouse is guilty of adultery. When Mr. Letterblair is urging Newland to dissuade Ellen from her course of divorce, his final argument focuses on the social aspect of divorce: "Do you want to marry into a family with a scandalous divorce suit hanging over it" (87)? In that age of innocence, taste was an important criterion, and exposing the family problems to the public view was decidedly poor taste.

The aspect of divorce that Edith Wharton persistently explores in her writings pertains to the moral breakdown that justifies the existence of divorce. Divorce appears reasonable to Ellen because of the Count's infidelity-- "when he wasn't with women he was collecting china" (22). Her husband is referred to several times as a "brute." Why unions between such unequal partners as the brutish Count and the sensitive Ellen occur interested Edith Wharton, and this marriage of unequals is frequent in her writings. Possibly subconsciously she was rewriting her own marital situation. Certainly she and Teddy were unequals intellectually and artistically.

Although old New York was concerned with the social effects of divorce, Ellen chooses not to divorce for moral reasons. Much like Madame de Malrive in Madame de Treymes,

she too cries, "I want to be free; I want to wipe out all the past" (94). Nevertheless, she renounces divorce, with the possibility of marriage to Newland, because she feels it morally wrong to inflict unpleasantness and unhappiness on members of her family and group. To Newland she says:

Isn't it you who made me give up divorcing--
give it up because you showed me how selfish and
wicked it was, how one must sacrifice one's self
to preserve the dignity of marriage . . . and to
spare one's family the publicity, the scandal?
And because my family was going to be your family
--for May's sake and for yours (140)--

Newland likewise renounces "the flower of life" (275) to stand by his wife and unborn child. These moral decisions of Ellen and Newland involving self-sacrifice are similar to those of John Durham and Fanny de Malrive in Madame de Treymes. Both pairs of lovers exhibit a sense of personal responsibility to prior agreements, to principles, or to family considerations. Like Newland, Edith Wharton, from her later vantage point in time and place, perhaps also saw the "good in the old ways" (275). The determination not to gain happiness at someone else's expense is expressed in The Fruit of the Tree when Mr. Langhope, Bessy Amherst's father, remarks that "Bessy will never be happy in the new way," which is "launching one's boat over a human body--or several as the case may be."³² Yet, Edith Wharton indicates

³²Ibid., p. 280.

in a remark to her friend Charles du Bos (which has been recorded by Percy Lubbock) her awareness of the waste in human happiness resulting from the self-denial that the divorce prohibition sometimes causes: "Ah, the poverty . . . of any love that lies outside of marriage."³³

Edith Wharton justifies the sacrifice of Ellen and Newland, because it enables them to have the experience of a total relationship--not "merely a matter of appetite," but a "complex of body, mind and spirit," according to Lyde.³⁴ The unselfishness of these two superior individuals that contributed to the beauty of their relationship made it impossible for them to be happy as a result of another's expense. Newland recognizes this quality in Ellen: "It was the perfect balance she had held between their loyalty to others and their honesty to themselves that had so stirred him" (197). Apparently Newland felt that throughout his life he had continued to have at least a spiritual relationship with Ellen, since he had the chance to see her again after many years and elected not to go up to her residence with his son. He states, "It's more real to me here than if I went up" (286). In this marital situation with a moral problem against a social background, Edith

³³Percy Lubbock, Portrait of Edith Wharton (New York, 1947), p. 103.

³⁴Lyde, p. 97.

Wharton implies, as she does over and over in her writings, that divorce is not a solution.

The Mother's Recompense was published in 1925, two years after Edith Wharton had gone to America to receive from Yale University an honorary Doctor of Letters degree. Although it had been years since she had returned to her native country, she stayed but a short time--not long enough probably to note "the new tolerances and indifferences and accommodations"³⁵ that Mrs. Lidcote in "Autres Temps" (1916) observes but does not herself experience. Kate Clephane, in The Mother's Recompense, although at first incredulous of the changed attitudes, finds that she no longer need endure the former criticism and social ostracism of the divorcée. By this time leniency toward divorce is generally accepted --at least among the old New York patrician society and most urban groups throughout the country.³⁶

Edith Wharton apparently preferred to take no chance of being snubbed and, therefore, was on the Atlantic bound for her adopted home after spending a day in New York and another with old friends close by. There were three outstanding reasons for the novelist's unwillingness to test a reception with her old New York relatives and friends:

³⁵Wharton, "Autres Temps," p. 276.

³⁶Frederick Lewis Allen, The Big Change (New York, 1952), pp. 133-135.

first, Teddy's family and her brothers did not support her in her decision to obtain a divorce; second, possibly she feared that information concerning her relationship with Walter Berry had drifted back to New York; third--and this is of much less importance to her in the 1920's--her group had never recognized her achievement as a writer.

In this 1925 novel, Edith Wharton continues to probe the moral features connected with divorce: its initial cause and the circumstances resulting from divorce. On the surface, the cause of Kate's separation from her husband is her inability to endure his stuffiness and his overbearing mother. In running off for a two-year yacht trip with Hylton Davies, Kate feels she is escaping from "the thick atmosphere of self-approval and unperceivingness which emanated from John Clephane like coal-gas from a leaking furnace."³⁷ John Clephane differs little from other fictional, unimaginative spouses deserted by superior mates like Lydia Tillotson and Mrs. Lidcote in Edith Wharton's writings. Kate, like Lydia and Mrs. Lidcote, discovers that she has exchanged an intolerable situation for one that has equal disadvantages.

³⁷Edith Wharton, The Mother's Recompense (New York, 1925), p. 16. Hereafter page references are in the text in parentheses.

Kate, however, has deserted her daughter Anne when the child was only three. This, in Edith Wharton's eyes, was abnegating a personal responsibility. For this moral breach, Kate pays in several ways. First, she does not find that her escape from her husband gives her any more freedom than she previously had: "And even then she couldn't breathe any better . . . The asphyxiation was of a different kind, that's all" (16). "Secretly knowing that the prison of her marriage had been liberty compared with what she had exchanged it for" (73), she later acknowledges completely her error. When she can no longer endure Hylton and his superficial living, her lonely eighteen-year expiation begins. Trying to maintain an air of respectability by retaining a maid, she wanders rootlessly from one second-rate hotel to another along the Riviera where there is a circulating library and a few quiet couples for bridge met through the doctor or clergyman.

Second, her penalty involves the loss of a basic mother-daughter relationship. This she finds out when she returns to America, after the last vestige of prejudice in the family has been removed--old Mrs. Clephane. Anne's attitude toward her mother is immediately delightfully warm and casual, but when the opportunity comes to talk frankly and seriously with her daughter about marriage, she is unable to do so.

Third, Kate must face a situation in which her daughter has fallen in love with a man who has briefly been her mother's lover--Chris Fenno.

Although Edith Wharton provides a bachelor, Fred Landers, to rescue Kate and give her an opportunity for another chance at life as a married woman in society, she refuses. Mrs. Lidcote in "Autres Temps" also rejects Franklin Ide's offer of marriage in much the same manner. Both women prefer to be drifters among the watering spots in southern Europe--rootless, aimless, alienated. Mrs. Lidcote said she could not take the chance of seeing another man's pain from loss of position. Kate feels she must reject Fred Landers for self-fulfillment:

Once at least she had stood fast, shutting away in a little space of peace and light the best thing that had ever happened to her (341).

Her reward is connected with the fact that Fred offers marriage after he has learned of her past--"had held out his hand to her . . . across the whole width of his traditions and his convictions" (341).

Of the penalties Kate pays for deserting her daughter, Anne, perhaps the greatest is her inability to help another human being in need. Edith Wharton does not, however, suggest any positive advice, had Kate been able to give advice to Anne. Dr. Arklow, the Episcopal rector, helps her reach her decision, which is to remain silent, thus refraining

from inflicting "sterile pain" (266). By not inflicting unnecessary pain, Kate will accept the fact that evil exists and that compromises will result in the lesser of two evils -- "adjustments in the balance of evil" (265). Hence, for Kate there is never to be any way to expiate for the harm or embarrassment she may prove to have caused Anne. The moral implication here connected with divorce is the same as in her other fiction: namely, with the forsaking of individual responsibility, there is an irreversible breach. Even though Kate is an intelligent woman of sensibilities, capable of applying the three elements of Edith Wharton's moral code to her dilemma, she does not escape the inexorable retribution that breaking a moral law brings. Kate Clephane's problem in The Mother's Recompense (1925) is not satisfactorily resolved, except in a rational manner, and this indicates that for the twentieth century, Edith Wharton's moral consciousness lacked the necessary comprehensiveness to solve certain problems.

Edith Wharton's moral consciousness reflects her belated Victorianism with its roots deep in New England puritanism, transplanted to a fashionable residence in New York. Throughout these works discussed in this chapter, there is gradual development of her concept of morality and its application to divorce.

CHAPTER III

CULTURAL INFLUENCES

Edith Wharton believed that a relationship between social conventions and morality may be seen in the interdependence of their development.¹ At times, in the interdependent development of convention and morality ("the one having sprung from the other"²), a separation occurs and morality no longer satisfies the needs of society. For instance, when society, because of the misconception of the importance of wealth, loses some of its traditional character, then its economic ethics goes beyond the social conventions. Should the traditional conventions disappear altogether, then morality reverts to an earlier stage for its guide.³

In A Motor-flight through France (1908) Wharton states her belief that the agreeable French manners result from the slow process of society's adaptation to changing conditions and the consequent deep "intelligence of life."⁴

¹Marilyn Jones Lyde, Edith Wharton: Convention and Morality in the Work of a Novelist (Norman, Oklahoma, 1959) p. 103.

²Ibid., p. 110.

³Ibid., pp. 106-107.

⁴Edith Wharton, A Motor-flight through France (New York, 1908), p. 28.

In French Ways and Their Meaning (1919) she explains that by "intelligence of life" she means morality--the intellectual capacity to look at life honestly and courageously.⁵ Hence, her social ideal is an attitude of intellectual honesty in a society pursuing an intellectual course toward moral maturity.

The stage of interacting social conventions and morality that influenced her socio-moral attitudes was that of the pre-Civil War period, the era in which her parents and their associates, through accumulation of great wealth, were changing from a merchant class to an aristocracy.⁶ Her social and moral code resulted, for the most part, from the values established during this period. Against this background the characters in her most productive period of writing invariably submit or rebel. The tremendous changes following World War I influenced her attitudes relatively little, although much of her writing was done during this stage of the socio-moral development when corruption from too rapid amassment of wealth and the after effects of the war were gradually destroying the society of old New York.⁷

In "Souls Belated," both Lydia Tillotson, after she divorced her husband, and Ralph Gannett eventually rely on

⁵Edith Wharton, French Ways and Their Meaning (New York, 1919), pp. 58-59.

⁶Lyde, p. 107.

⁷Ibid., p. 106.

social conventions to arrive at a final decision concerning marriage. At first, however, Lydia's attitude is that divorce is unnecessary and that the convention of marriage in their case would be a travesty against the stand she and Ralph have taken: namely, that the marriage ceremony is not in itself sacred in an abstract sense and that the individual should not be sacrificed to the family.⁸ Although subscribing to Lydia's convictions, Ralph recognizes that compromises in life are sometimes necessary. He tells her that, since the world is ruled by conventions, taking advantage of the protection conventions give will assist one in finding a way of life (98). Ralph is here using as a guide or frame of reference for their living together the convention of marriage. Lydia, not so realistic perhaps as Ralph but more highly perceptive, realizes for them, at least, the sham of a second marriage: "We both know that no ceremony is needed to consecrate our love for each other" (97). Yet she finally accepts convention's rule since she cannot live without "respectability."

After her embarrassing encounter with Mrs. Cope, Lydia perceives the reality of her own position:

⁸Edith Wharton, "Souls Belated," in The Best Short Stories of Edith Wharton, ed. with Introduction by Wayne Andrews (New York, 1958), p. 97. Hereafter page references to this short story will be placed in the text itself in parentheses.

I who used to fancy myself unconventional! I must have been born with a card-case in my hand. You should have seen me with that poor woman in the garden-- . . . I could have killed her for guessing my secret. The one thing that mattered to me at that moment was my standing with Lady Susan (112)!

Lydia probes the limits to which she can defy convention, but in the end, with the aid of her lover, she bows to convention. Lydia is one in a line of Edith Wharton's highly intelligent characters for whom morality has not kept up with convention. She tries to exercise her superior intelligence to discover what is morally right for her outside convention's dictates. In her reasoning, she errs in overlooking the value and necessity of convention to her.

Like Lydia Tillotson, Edith Wharton abhorred a social position that lacked respectability. Her patrician breeding and shyness caused her to dread even the thought of the improper.⁹ Few details are known about her relationship with Walter Berry, as her friends scrupulously respected her reticence about her personal life.¹⁰ Although Edith Wharton did not comment on her relationship with Mr. Berry, she avoided the possibility of criticism by staying only briefly when she returned to America in the 1920's. Her friend,

⁹Wayne Andrews, Introduction to The Best Short Stories of Edith Wharton (New York, 1958), p. xix.

¹⁰Millicent Bell, Edith Wharton and Henry James: The Story of Their Friendship (New York, 1965), p. 9.

Henry James, however, expressed concern with her possible social vulnerableness in connection with Walter Berry and urged her to respect American conventions because, although living in France, she would be judged as an American.¹¹ Her attitude toward social ostracism would not differ from that of Lydia Tillotson.

Although divorce is never a complete solution, it does in the instance of Lydia Tillotson lead to an opportunity for fuller living. For Alice Waythorn of "The Other Two," as for some other characters in Edith Wharton's fiction, divorce is a distinct means of advancement up the social ladder. Alice climbs from an obscure, ordinary social existence with her first husband, Mr. Haskett, to a position with Gus Varick of status and means. With her third husband, Mr. Waythorn, she reaches a mode of living that suggests the added quality of refinement. The manners of the three husbands show their respective places in the social scale and also reveal the superficiality of Alice, the social climber. The social habits of dress, speech, and dining characterize the stratum of society to which each of the men belongs. Manners thus become a means of locating these persons in their particular class.

¹¹Grace (Kellogg) Griffith, The Two Lives of Edith Wharton (New York, 1965), pp. 141 and 157.

No one can read this story of manners, "The Other Two," without recognizing Edith Wharton's displeasure with the use of divorce for social advancement. She never concealed her distaste for a person who attempted to climb beyond the social group into which he was born. One of her close friends observed that she had only contempt for those who aspired to a position which they did not deserve--the claimants to a culture that they did not have.¹² Alice is able to emulate the manners of the group into which she marries, but she lacks the quality of fineness that the group connotes. Preoccupied though Edith Wharton was with her own class, the well-born, she never overlooked the basic importance of inner superiority. Although her works plainly reveal that she had little basic information about the Westerners--for her they meant anyone from west of the Hudson--she nevertheless disliked them as the rich, aggressive invaders of her old New York. Alice Waythorn is a westerner from Pittsburgh or Utica.¹³ The novelist's opinions were not intruded in "The Other Two" by condemning or advocating divorce. The significance of divorce socially in this story lies in Edith Wharton's clear expression of

¹²Robert Morss Lovett, Edith Wharton (New York, 1925), p. 72.

¹³Edith Wharton, "The Other Two," in The Best Short Stories of Edith Wharton, ed. with Introduction by Wayne Andrews (New York, 1958), p. 41. Hereafter page references will be placed in the text in parentheses.

her abhorrence of the individual who uses divorce to advance socially.

Awareness of the novelist's social image of the divorcée is apparent in several minor characters in The House of Mirth (1905),¹⁴ the novel that established her reputation. For instance, the divorced Mrs. Carry Fisher is pictured as loud and unrefined. Her conversation consists of "the spicy paragraph," and her gowns are "as emphatic as the head-lines of her 'case.'"¹⁵ She is tolerated by both the wives and husbands of the social group in which she circulates only for her usefulness. The wives invite her because she keeps their husbands in a good humor and prevents boredom. They are even aware that she borrows money from their husbands, but like Mrs. Trenor they do not complain (45). Mrs. Fisher obtains her second divorce only to enable her to get money from Mr. Fisher. Carry Fisher's concern for money and also her lack of it indicate the novelist's contempt for the divorcée. In her autobiography, Edith Wharton refers to one of the earliest rules of social

¹⁴The novel, The House of Mirth, is in addition to the eight fictional works selected as a basis for examination of Edith Wharton's attitude toward divorce.

¹⁵Edith Wharton, The House of Mirth (New York, 1964), pp. 29-30. Hereafter page references will be placed in the text in parentheses.

conduct that her mother emphasized: "Never talk about money, and think about it as little as possible."¹⁶

Also in The House of Mirth are other similar portrayals of divorced persons with social ambition and lack of refinement. Mrs. Wellington Bry is described as a social climber who sacrifices a husband to remarry for social advancement. Even after reaching a place in society, she is unable to assume the poise but must continue to act with indecision (192). Other divorced couples--the Ned Wintons and the Farleys--have experienced multiple divorces with the resultant sets of children (46). In 1905 Edith Wharton's attitude toward the social position of the divorcee reflects that of the members of her parents' society. In fact, these portrayals of divorcees are more caricatures than characterizations.

In The Fruit of the Tree,¹⁷ published in 1907, there was no marked change in the novelist's attitude toward the social position of the divorced woman. The divorcee, Mrs. Blanche Carbury, has sharply etched qualities of vulgarity and rebelliousness toward social conventions. Bessy Westmore, the protagonist in this novel, is said to have

¹⁶Edith Wharton, A Backward Glance (New York, 1934), p. 57.

¹⁷The novel, The Fruit of the Tree, is in addition to the eight fictional works selected as a basis for examination of Edith Wharton's attitudes toward divorce.

found "something captivating . . . in Mrs. Carbury's slang and noise, in her defiance of decorum and contempt of criticism."¹⁸ Blanche's superficial reasons for remarriage--to regain respectability and to have the opportunity to be near Ned Bowfort (217)--reveal her essential lack of refinement. Remarks of Bessy's father and Mrs. Anson concerning the friendship between Bessy and Blanche imply that Edith Wharton is aware of the breaking down of her group's conventions. A note of sarcasm creeps in with her use of the word "corrupted," for example:

Mrs.. Anson: It is unnatural to see Bessy lending herself to such combinations.

Mrs. Langhope: You're corrupted by a glimpse of the old societies (217).

These divorcées--minor characters in the two early novels--show clearly the novelist's basic attitude toward the social function and status of the divorcée. These women are not necessarily born outside her particular class, but they have personal qualities she does not associate with persons of her group. One critic, Nevius, felt that she basically associated the divorcée with the lower class.¹⁹ The natural prejudice of her class for the divorcée made it

¹⁸Edith Wharton, The Fruit of the Tree (New York, 1907), p. 310. Hereafter page references will be placed in the text in parentheses.

¹⁹Griffith, p. 187. See also Blake Nevius, Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction (Berkeley, 1953), pp. 75-78.

difficult for her to present the divorcée in an attractive guise until many years later.

In 1913 divorce was becoming more common and Edith Wharton had no choice other than to accept it as a fact, even though divorce was contrary to the beliefs of her class. When she obtained her own divorce that year, she accepted the decision of the court with resignation.²⁰ Also in this year one of her finest novels was published, The Custom of the Country, in which the protagonist, Undine Spragg, obtains three divorces. The former stigma of divorce is somewhat mitigated, and Undine with concealment and distortion of fact manages to move rather easily from Apex City to Washington Square through marriage to Ralph Marvell and later to the Faubourg Saint Germain through marriage to Raymond de Chelles. Edith Wharton made it clear, however, that in Undine's social rise her father's great wealth, her beauty, and her feminine appeal were not handicaps.

Socially successful though Undine is, the familiar distaste for divorce is expressed in the attitude and remarks of the Marvell family and their friends. When Undine is first entertained at dinner by Ralph Marvell's family, she makes a blunder about her friend Mabel's anticipated divorce, saying: "He isn't in the right set and I

²⁰ Wayne Andrews, p. xvii.

think Mabel realizes she'll never really get anywhere till she gets rid of him."²¹ The Dagonets and Marvells are even more shocked as Undine continues to justify Mabel's action. Finally Ralph's mother, in an attempt to ease the tension of which Undine is quite unaware, says:

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 (95).

The implications in this novel are that Edith Wharton still has much the same image of the divorcée; however, at the same time she sees clearly the shortcomings of her own class and is critical of many of her characters representing it. They have clung too long to outworn conventions. For instance, she notes the discrepancy between Ralph Marvell's reluctance to earn money in the business world and his willingness to accept a generous allowance from his father-in-law, who earned his money in business--part of it from the sale of Undine haircurlers.

Another instance of Edith Wharton's awareness that attitudes of the upper class contribute to divorce is Charles Bowen's explanation of the increase in American divorces: the husband does not make his wife a true partner in marriage (206). In The Custom of the Country she recognizes

²¹Edith Wharton, The Custom of the Country (New York, 1913), p. 94. Hereafter page references will be placed in the text in parentheses.

the flaws in her own class with its outworn conventions as well as those in the nouveaux riches. Ralph Marvell succumbs in conflict with Undine, a representative of the rising social group, as the social conventions of old New York are destined to capitulate to the invaders from the West.

In "Autres Temps," Edith Wharton reveals an attitude toward divorce which may have represented how she felt about her own divorce. She had undoubtedly been hurt by the Wharton family and by her own brothers, all of whom opposed her decision to obtain a divorce.²² Perhaps when she returned to America in the 1920's, she feared social ostracism, even though divorce was then generally accepted. The well-known "cut" and subterfuge of the society of her parents are still applicable to Mrs. Lidcote in "Autres Temps," although recent divorcées like Mrs. Lidcote's daughter, Leila, fare quite differently. But Mrs. Wharton was of an older time and her friends, like her, possibly had not thrown off the old attitudes instilled during their early life.

Unfortunate though Mrs. Lidcote's experience is, Edith Wharton reflects in "Autres Temps" a position toward the divorcée that is now more lenient. For breaking a

²²Olivia Coolidge, Edith Wharton: 1862-1937 (New York, 1964), pp. 129-131.

convention, Mrs. Lidcote pays a high price; nevertheless, she holds to the conviction that the kind of world she values is one that respects rules for conduct. In spite of her humiliation of being "cut" by an old friend, Margaret Wynn, Mrs. Lidcote finds the daughter, Charlotte Wynn, most charming, and admires the child's acquiescence in her mother's mandate that she too not recognize Mrs. Lidcote. Mrs. Lidcote comments to her old suitor Franklin, "The child has the prettiest blush."²³ The implication in this story is that although much of the social stigma connected with divorce has been eradicated, still the world is the better for having rules of conduct in society.

In the novel The Age of Innocence, Edith Wharton again reflects the social attitudes toward divorce held by her parents and their group. These beliefs are revealed when the lovely Ellen Olenska announces that she wishes to obtain a divorce.

Ellen does not hold the attitudes of her group, to which she has just returned after living some time in Europe as the wife of Count Olenski. Her cosmopolitan experience has freed her from many of old New York's social conventions, and she does not conduct her life according to the group's

²³Edith Wharton, "Autres Temps," in The Best Short Stories of Edith Wharton, ed. with Introduction by Wayne Andrews (New York, 1958), p. 287.

standards. For instance, she chooses to rent quarters considered strange by her society--a "peeling stucco house, with a giant wisteria throttling its feeble cast-iron balcony . . . far down West Twenty-third Street."²⁴ The second time Newland Archer calls on her in this unconventional location, he finds her attired in an elaborate robe of red velvet bordered with fur (91). Such a gown is quite unlike the "simple dinner dresses" the ladies of their group usually wore. Ellen does not hesitate to accept an invitation to one of Mrs. Struther's Sunday evening musical affairs, and when the word gets around that she actually went, the most respected member of their clan dropped by to suggest delicately that "what was or was not 'the thing'" (14) was of inestimable importance in their society. Mrs. Struther's Sunday evening musicals were definitely not yet "the thing." Upon being seen walking up Fifth Avenue with Julius Beaufort, Ellen arouses the concern of Mrs. Welland. But the act that particularly disturbs her group is her visiting Regina Beaufort after Regina's husband had been involved in unlawful business speculations. Absolute probity in business affairs was one of the cardinal principles of old New York that had become almost sacred, and

²⁴Edith Wharton, The Age of Innocence (New York, 1962), p. 62. Hereafter page references will be placed in the text in parentheses.

this code Julius Beaufort had broken. After Ellen's call on Regina Beaufort is known, a conversation between the van der Luydens, Mrs. Archer, and May Archer shows the "tribe's" attitude and Edith Wharton's skill in handling innuendo by dialogue:

"Is it possible, dear, that what I hear is true? I was told your grandmother Mingott's carriage was seen standing at Mrs. Beaufort's door. . . ."

May's colour rose, and Mrs. Archer put in hastily: "If it was, I'm convinced it was there without Mrs. Mingott's knowledge."

"Ah, you think--?" Mrs. van der Luyden paused, sighed, and glanced at her husband.

"I'm afraid," Mr. van der Luyden said, "that Madame Olenska's kind heart may have led her into the imprudence of calling on Mrs. Beaufort."

"Or her taste for peculiar people," put in Mrs. Archer in a dry tone, while her eyes dwelt innocently on her son's (253).

Old New York, with its emphasis on conformity to a pattern of pseudo-respectability, at first rejects the cosmopolitan Ellen. After the van der Luydens, for the sake of family, entertain for her, Ellen is recognized as one of them. However, when her intention of seeking a divorce is known, the clan cannot agree to such a course. Mr. Letterblair, "the Pharisaic voice of a society wholly absorbed in barricading itself against the unpleasant" (86), expresses the smug, selfish attitude of the clan. Mr. Letterblair, like the clan, rejects divorce as a solution to

incompatible marriages because this procedure might bring unpleasant publicity not only on the marriage partners but on the members of the families.

Furthermore, such an act as divorce would be in poor taste. Newland Archer at first is shown to conform to the group's conventions. In fact, he feels that there are "few things . . . more awful than an offence against 'taste,' that far-off divinity of whom 'form' was the mere visible representative and viceregent" (22). When he and Ellen are discussing the possibility of her divorce, she asks, "But my freedom--is that nothing (96)? To which Newland replies: "Think of the newspapers--their vileness! It's all stupid and narrow and unjust--but one can't make over society" (96). He explains that it is the interest of the whole group that matters, not that of the individual. The opposition to divorce, he implies, is to keep the family together, to protect the children (97). When members of her family learn that she has deferred to the group's wishes, they are infinitely relieved that she has spared them "unpleasantness" (100).

To the family, Ellen's decision means only escape from "unpleasantness," but to Ellen it is much more--self-sacrifice for the preservation of the dignity of marriage (140). And, in time, Newland, because of Ellen's decision, changes his superficial attitude that convention alone is a

criterion by which to solve marital problems to one that includes a deeper perception of the value of his society's code. Although by going through with his marriage to May Welland and renouncing divorce and marriage to Ellen he misses "the flower of life" (275), he realizes that it is his vision of Ellen during his lifetime that has helped him to be faithful to May. In reminiscing on his life with his wife, he concludes that a code that assures a marriage with dignity is worthwhile:

Their long years together had shown him that it did not so much matter if marriage was a dull duty, as long as it kept the dignity of a duty. . . . After all, there was good in the old ways (275).

Edith Wharton implies here that there are advantages to blind social conventions, and that reasoned acceptance of society's taboos is not only possible for a fine intelligence such as Newland Archer's, but is the best course in life.

In her resolution of the problem that faces Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska, Edith Wharton revealed her belief that divorce is not vindicated by either the greater good to society or to the individual.²⁵ In The Age of Innocence, the rules of society are not sacrificed. Superior individuals like Ellen and Newland even benefit, in a sense, by

²⁵E. K. Brown, "Edith Wharton," in Edith Wharton: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Irving Howe (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1962), pp. 66-67.

adhering to their society's conventions: Newland acquires a "vision" and deepened insight of his social code; Ellen, an enlargement of her concept of marriage and a perspective of the worth of self-sacrifice and renunciation.

One of Edith Wharton's best creative post-War efforts is the novel The Mother's Recompense (1925), in which she shows a marked change in what she perceives to be the social situation of the divorcée. In her earlier works, such as "Souls Belated," The House of Mirth, and The Fruit of the Tree, the fate of the divorced woman is lack of respectability and social ostracism. Kate Clephane, like other divorcees, has served her eighteen or twenty years of expiation for her rebellion. In her reflections, Kate recalls her life since leaving her husband and three-year-old daughter Anne and sailing away with Hylton Davies on his luxurious yacht:

Dim also had grown the years that followed: lonely humdrum years at St. Jean-de-Luz, at Bordighera, at Dinard. She would settle in a cheap place where there were a circulating library, a mild climate, a few quiet bridge-playing couples whom one got to know through the doctor or the clergyman; then would grow tired and drift away again.²⁶

When Kate returns home, she is accepted unequivocally back into her former social group. Perhaps the fact that

²⁶Edith Wharton, The Mother's Recompense (New York, 1925), p. 17. Hereafter page references will be placed in the text in parentheses.

her formidable mother-in-law is dead helps wipe away the last trace of prejudice that might have existed in her husband's family. At any rate, the past is forgiven. She establishes almost too easily a very warm relationship with her daughter Anne, whom she has not seen for some eighteen years. One of her old suitors, Fred Landers, beams happily on her when she docks in New York (38). The "new tolerances and indifferences and accommodations" that Mrs. Lidcote noticed have apparently been in effect for a long time. Even her husband's family accept her without the slightest reminder of the humiliation she has caused them. Invited to dinner to meet her again are the older members of her husband's family, including Uncle Hendrick and Aunt Enid Drover, as well as those of her own generation. The conversation about one member of the family, Joe Tresselton, assures Kate that the attitude toward divorce and remarriage has indeed changed:

"Joe Tresselton, you know, married Nollie Shriner--yes, one of the Fourteenth Street Shriners, the one who was first married to Frank Haverford. She was divorced two years ago, and married Joe immediately afterward." The words dropped from her Anne as indifferently as if she had said: "She came out two years ago, and married Joe at the end of her first season" (60).

Unlike Lydia Tillotson in "Souls Belated," who lived in fear of losing respectability, Kate is immediately relieved of this fear and regains once again her status of respectability and social acceptance.

Gratified as Kate is for the new tolerance of the divorced woman, she is at the same time bewildered by the inclusiveness of the results of the new attitude, and she finds herself recoiling slightly from the new indifference society takes toward conventions (62). She is rather pleased that just before leaving Europe she

. . . had replaced the coloured finery hastily bought on the Riviera by a few dresses of unnoticeable black, which without suggesting the hypocrisy of her wearing mourning for old Mrs. Clephane, yet kept her appearance in harmony with her daughter's (64).

She finds that she is disturbed by the coarse ways of the Drovers' daughter Lilla "with dyed hair, dyed lashes, drugged eyes and unintelligible dialect," who punctuates her speech with remarks such as "Ain't you" (64)? That the family took so complacently Joe Tresselton's marriage to "a Fourteenth Street Shriner and a divorced one at that" (67) puzzles her. It was with a sense of relief that she notes her Anne observing the "archaic" conventions pertaining to the Clephane opera box after old Mrs. Clephane's death. She actually relishes Nollie's comment, "I like Anne's memorial manner" (76). Even Anne's conventionality in prompting Chris Fenno to ask her permission to marry Anne gives Kate a strange sense of gratification. When Lilla is finally reinstated on the social list of the Lanfreys, this restoration of acceptance in a house that was "almost the last survival of the old social code in New York" (153) obviously

elates Lilla and the family, and Kate, too, is happy to see their response.

In The Mother's Recompense the novelist recognizes that the divorce conventions of her social world have vanished and that divorce no longer incurs any significant social stigma. However, for Edith Wharton, as for Kate Clephane, there is "still good in the old ways," and Kate's delight in her daughter's "memorial manner" suggests this. Thus Kate, "caught in the web of her renunciation" (236), decides to refuse Fred Landers' offer of marriage and to return to her lonely wanderings about the watering places of the Riviera. Like Ellen Olenska and Newland Archer, she acts unselfishly and experiences through self-denial a kind of fulfillment. Kate's latent conviction that conventions developed through the centuries offer the right code for living has been reaffirmed during her stay in America:

"A frame of convention is at once a restraint and a stimulus to the joy of living, man's method of defending himself from his own frivolity."²⁷ Perhaps this suggests an interior explanation of Edith Wharton's early return to Europe when she came to America in 1923 to receive a Doctor of Letters degree from Yale University; namely, that she felt some

²⁷ Edith Wharton, The Gods Arrive (New York, 1932), p. 117. This novel is in addition to the eight works selected as a basis for examination of Edith Wharton's attitudes toward divorce.

remorse over having obtained her divorce and was unable to face old friends whose convictions she shared but had been forced to ignore.

Implanted in Edith Wharton's social consciousness was an indelible conviction of old New York that divorce and the divorcée were not entirely respectable. Although it would have been unrealistic for her not to accept the fact of divorce since she had written in a novel as early as 1907 that divorce had grown "almost as painless as modern dentistry,"²⁸ she was never able to root out completely from her consciousness the social stigma her parents' class assigned to it. Like Mrs. Archer in The Age of Innocence, Lucretia Rhinelanders Jones, Edith Wharton's mother, probably never even knew a divorced woman.

Reinforcing her image of divorce and the divorcée was the fact that Edith Wharton associated divorce with persons for whom she had only contempt and whose America she was appallingly ignorant of--the Middle Westerners. Undine Spragg of The Custom of the Country is a prime example.

From "Souls Belated" to The Mother's Recompense there is a definite enlargement of the novelist's view of the social aspects of divorce. The old restrictions on the divorced woman have all but disappeared, and in their place

²⁸Wharton, The Fruit of the Tree, p. 280.

has come recognized social acceptance of divorce and of the divorcée. She does not, however, relinquish her conviction of the value of social conventions, clearly implied in The Mother's Recompense.

Edith Wharton was a novelist of manners of the upper class. Her social consciousness did not include a sustained interest in the common man. The passage quoted below, however, indicates an awareness of the existence of the problems of the common man and of the attitude generally assumed by the upper class:

Yes--that was wealth's contemptuous answer to every challenge of responsibility: duty, sorrow and disgrace were equally to be evaded by a change of residence, and nothing in life need be faced and fought out while one could pay for a passage to Europe!²⁹

Her remark that "only the man with the dinner pail should be deemed worthy of attention, and fiction is classed according to its degree of conformity to this rule"³⁰ also reveals her awareness of the growing interest in the problems, desires, and needs of the common man. But she chose--and rightly--to write of her own society and its problems with which she was thoroughly familiar. Her preoccupation was with the social order of her upper class--its standards of good form and its established ritual of decorum.

²⁹Ibid., p. 313.

³⁰Wharton, A Backward Glance, p. 206.

In A Backward Glance, written when she was seventy-two, Edith Wharton singled out four scholars who made significant and lasting impressions on her thinking: Sir William Hamilton, philosopher; Henry Coppée, logician; Blaise Pascal, religious philosopher; and Charles Darwin, biologist. She wrote in her autobiography: "Darwin and Pascal, Hamilton and Coppée ranked foremost among my Awakeners."³¹

From Sir William Hamilton, Edith Wharton learned that since absolute truth is unknowable, reason therefore is limited.³² Her characters come up against the limitation of reason in attempting to justify divorce as a solution for their particular marriage problems. For example, superior individuals in conflict with society, such as Lydia Tillotson in "Souls Belated," Ethan Frome in Ethan Frome, Ellen Olenska in The Age of Innocence, Kate Clephane in The Mother's Recompense, usually found reason only a partial aid in resolving their marital problems by divorce. Lydia Tillotson reasoned that she and her lover could ignore society's rules, but eventually she recognized her error. Ethan Frome knew that his marriage with Zeena was a mistake, but he was unable to find a satisfactory remedy for his dilemma. Ellen Olenska

³¹Ibid., pp. 71-72.

³²Lyde, p. 29.

found a resolution to her predicament of being in love with Newland Archer, but it did not bring a completely satisfactory state of affairs for her or for Newland. The same generalization of the futility of reason alone as a guide in moral problems could be applied to most of Edith Wharton's fictional situations involving moral decision.

Hamilton's concept of the unknowableness of ultimate truth gave reason a somewhat weakened value in coping with moral problems. Coppée accepted Hamilton's concept concerning ultimate truth, but he proposed applying logic to the fragmentary truth available.³³ His concept thus provided a workable basis for at least coping with life's problems. The practicality of logic led Edith Wharton to the belief that social custom was necessary to the intellectually inferior person. The intellectually superior person, however, could adapt custom to his individual situation since he was capable of the exercise of reason in the solution of his moral problems. Examples of superior individuals in conflict with an aristocratic society are Ellen Olenska and the New York Four Hundred, or Fanny de Malrive and the Faubourg Saint Germain. Other examples are Ralph Marvell, John Durham, Mrs. Lidcote, and Kate Clephane--all highly moral individuals in conflict with their respective aristocratic societies. In The House of Mirth, Lily Bart

³³Ibid., pp. 30-31.

eventually achieves a balance between the demands of her social group and her finer sensibilities. In each of the situations the characters probe for the right solution consistent with the social mores of their particular group. Each person, except Ralph Marvell, appeared to win, in a sense, a spiritual victory. Ralph Marvell, in committing suicide, is defeated. As a representative of the New York Four Hundred, he reflected the weakness and failure of his group, although in no way was his group suggested as the whole cause of his failure. John Durham and Madame de Malrive suggested the superior morality of the American as compared with that of the French, reflected by the actions of Madame de Treymes and the Malrive family.

From Hamilton and Coppée, Edith Wharton at an early age gained respect for truth and cognizance of reason as means for finding solutions to life's problems. Blaise Pascal, her third "Awakener," also added to her belief in the importance of reason in the solution of human problems, but he noted its weakness, as well as its strength, and added faith. One of her biographers, Percy Lubbock, indicated that she was working at the time of her death toward acceptance of faith as an adjunct to the use of reason--possibly that of the Roman Catholic Church.³⁴

³⁴Percy Lubbock, Portrait of Edith Wharton (New York, 1947), pp. 233-234.

Possibly from Pascal she obtained--or reinforced--the belief that convention was vitally necessary to man and must be considered in the solution of any moral problem. In almost all of the conflicts between individuals and society in her fiction, the individual who ignored or broke the conventions of society paid in some way--often spiritually. Madame de Malrive, like Ellen Olenska, had to renounce marriage; Mrs. Lidcote and Kate Clephane had to sacrifice the normal mother-daughter relationship; Mrs. Tillotson had to renounce her rebellious convictions about marriage to gain respectability. Even Undine Spragg in The Custom of the Country had to forego ever being an ambassador's wife because she had been divorced. Although Edith Wharton believed in the efficacy of the intelligent to reason out solutions to their problems on an individual basis, she did not extend this opportunity or privilege to the masses, whose ability to reason she did not trust. Also, she believed that convention was necessary as an adjunct to judgment in moral problems for both the intelligent and the masses, but in all cases an absolute necessity for the latter. The necessity of reason as a guide in moral matters thus was accepted by all three of her Awakeners--Hamilton, Coppée, and Pascal--who contributed to and strengthened Edith Wharton's rational basis as a practical approach to life and its moral problems.

Darwin's Origin of Species and The Descent of Man also influenced Edith Wharton's thinking on the subject of morality.³⁵ Darwin, in the latter book, proposed that the development of the moral faculty from the social instincts of the lower animals paralleled somewhat the development of the physical characteristics.³⁶ Darwin also believed that the intelligence was the link that connected social instinct to conscience; therefore, the stronger the intelligence, the greater was the activity of conscience. Edith Wharton's finest moral or sensitive characters--Ethan Frome, Ellen Olenska, Lydia Tillotson, Justine Brent (The Fruit of the Tree), Anna Leath (The Reef), Lawrence Selden (The House of Mirth), John Durham, Ralph Marvell--were all highly intelligent individuals. As Darwin linked conscience and intelligence, Edith Wharton linked morality and intelligence.

The novelist might also have absorbed, in part, the value she attached to continuity from Darwin's doctrine of development by preserving and accumulating useful modifications. In The Mother's Recompense, Nollie Tresselton admired the "memorial manner"³⁷ of Kate Clephane's daughter. Mrs.

³⁵Lyde, p. 39.

³⁶Ibid., p. 39.

³⁷Wharton, The Mother's Recompense, p. 76.

Lidcote was attracted to her friend's daughter because of the daughter's adherence to rules of conduct. Ellen Olenska and Newland Archer finally accepted their group's convention on marriage and divorce. Madame de Malrive yielded to the French belief of the importance of the continuity of the family without regard to the happiness of the individual. These attitudes and decisions show Edith Wharton's recognition of the value of the continuity of conventions.

Edith Wharton's theme of the individual in conflict with society--morality in conflict with convention--bore resemblance to Darwin's picture of life as a struggle for survival. Her characters usually submitted to convention although as in the case of Ellen Olenska, Lily Bart, Mrs. Lidcote, and Kate Clephane, they experienced to a degree spiritual triumph. Each had somehow finally found a satisfactory balance between passion and duty--between individual morality and group mores.

The objective, realistic form in which the novelist revealed her attitudes toward divorce resulted in part, then, from her (1) belief in the unknowableness of ultimate truth to man; (2) emphasis on reason; (3) conviction of the value of continuity as revealed in moral, social, and religious traditions.

A very important cultural influence, especially as it concerns divorce, was her religious heritage from the

Episcopal church. Episcopalianism influenced her attitude toward divorce both generally and specifically. Inspection of the church-going habits and wedding ceremonies, as well as of the characteristics of her Episcopal clergymen, suggests a rather perfunctory attitude toward her church. That she did not ignore the stand of the Episcopal church toward divorce was, however, observed in selected situations from her fiction.

In accounts of church attendance, there was a quality of worldliness rather than of spirituality. Mrs. Trenor in The House of Mirth was an Episcopalian, but she did not usually attend church on Sunday. She indicated her orthodox attitude toward going to church, however, by providing a handsome carriage to take the members of her household to church when they were guests at her estate Bellomont. She assumed that at least her daughters used the carriage, although she did not bother to verify the fact. Spasmodically, her husband Gus coerced their daughters into attending church with him. Frequently, as the church bells rang, the omnibus drove off empty. On a particular Sunday morning at Bellomont there were several passengers. The Trenor daughters, Hilda and Muriel, would have preferred to play lawn-tennis. The Wetherals appeared "resigned," and Lily Bart, though she missed the bus, had planned to attend church to impress Mr. Gryce, a wealthy, eligible young man,

for "she had an idea that the sight of her grey gown of devotional cut, with her famous lashes drooped above a prayer-book, would put the finishing touch to Mr. Gryce's subjugation."³⁸ In this 1905 publication there appeared little indication of any spiritual quality connected with Episcopalianism as practiced by members of the Four Hundred.

In The Age of Innocence, the Wellands showed a similar, indifferent attitude toward going to church. Although it was customary for May Welland to accompany her parents to church, her mother excused her so that she could walk in the park with her fiance, Newland Archer. May had just given in to her mother's request for a long engagement, to have time "to prepare a hand-embroidered trousseau containing the proper number of dozens."³⁹ Church truancy for personal pleasure or as a reward for compliance to a parental request showed the relative laxity in church attendance.

When May Welland and Newland Archer were married, any indication of the religious significance of the ceremony was buried in the multiplicity of the superficial details concerning the clothes, seating of guests, and the food. These surface aspects of the wedding flowed persistently through Newland's consciousness as he waited on the chancel steps at

³⁸Wharton, The House of Mirth, p. 57.

³⁹Wharton, The Age of Innocence, p. 72.

Grace Church. It occurred to him that their weddings were like "a rite that seemed to belong to the dawn of history" and that "concealment of the spot in which the bridal night was to be spent [was] one of the most sacred taboos of the pre-historic ritual."⁴⁰ The account of the wedding of Anne Clephane and Chris Fenno in St. Stephen's in The Mother's Recompense (1925) differed little in tone from that of May and Newland. There was the same attention to superficial details: the same Mendelssohn March, the seating of the family in their proper pews; and "a pervading lustre of pearls and tall hats . . . expensive furs."⁴¹ No especial recognition of the religious aspect of the ceremony is implied.

In the short story, "Souls Belated," Ralph Gannett exhibited a worldly attitude toward the church. His desire to pass the plate in church was noted by Lydia Tillotson. Neither Ralph nor Lydia disclosed the need for the worship and fellowship that the church traditionally offered. For them the church had no noticeable religious significance.

A similar lack of spirituality with a consequent quality of worldliness was noted in most of Edith Wharton's portrayals of Episcopal clergy. Reference to the bishop in The House of Mirth revealed his social rather than spiritual

⁴⁰Ibid., pp. 146-147.

⁴¹Wharton, The Mother's Recompense, p. 307.

importance in society. In the best homes, such as the Trenors' home, the bishop was entertained once a year. For this occasion, the hostess chose congenial guests for "just the right tone to things." Mrs. Trenor told Lily Bart of their last bishop's visit when her husband, having forgotten about the visit, brought home two couples who had been divorced several times--proof of the bad luck that a hostess could sometimes experience.⁴² In a rather indifferent way, these Episcopalians recognized the status of the bishop and the church ruling on divorce.

The characterization of the Bishop of New York in The Age of Innocence revealed this clergyman as an old friend of the Archer family rather than as a spiritual adviser. He was described as an "ornament" of the diocese in whom the group took obvious pride.⁴³ The Reverend Doctor Arklow, the Episcopal minister in The Mother's Recompense, was also conceived as ornamental to their society. Although the Drover family entertained him once a year, his presence at one of their week-end affairs only indicated his newly acquired importance as a Coadjutor or Bishop.⁴⁴ He was portrayed as a rather worldly cleric who was "accustomed to

⁴²Wharton, The House of Mirth, p. 46.

⁴³Wharton, The Age of Innocence, p. 273.

⁴⁴Wharton, The Mother's Recompense, p. 242.

good company" and who "loved a good cigar."⁴⁵ Doctor Arklow's attention to his social position was shown by Kate's thought that he would not mention her daughter's marriage until she did because he seemed "too anxiously observant of the social rules."⁴⁶

Some inexpressible quality of Doctor Arklow convinced Kate Clephane that he was not just a "scrupulous social puppet."⁴⁷ Believing that he might have the understanding and experience for dealing with life's pain and enigmas, she decided to consult him about her daughter's approaching marriage to Chris Fenno, who was many years ago her lover. At first he gave her the conventional advice that would be applicable in the majority of such situations; namely, that it was her duty to warn her daughter. On second thought, however, he courageously stated that pursuing the usual pattern, Kate would not gain the greatest good for those concerned, but only useless unhappiness--"sterile pain."⁴⁸ He would consider the case on its own merits even though it resulted in "adjustments in the balance of evil."⁴⁹ The Bishop's advice was based on reason applied to an individual case. It did not, however, completely satisfy Kate. The

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 243.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 245.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 245.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 366.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 265.

thought occurred to her that a Catholic priest could have heard her confession and could have advised her without the embarrassment that was inevitably present in personal confessions outside the confessional booth. On her return home from the rectory, she entered a Catholic church and considered the advantages of confession to "impersonal mouth-pieces of a mighty Arbitrator, letting neither moral repugnance nor false delicacy interfere with the sacred task of alleviation."⁵⁰

Edith Wharton remained throughout her life an Episcopalian. In A Backward Glance, she praised the church of her ancestors for the beauty of its ancient rites; "the noble cadences of its Book of Common Prayer; the ordered ritual in which the officiant's personality is strictly subordinated to the rite he performs."⁵¹ Yet, she extolled the spiritual qualities of the Roman Catholic Church in other works much as she did in the instance cited above from The Mother's Recompense. One of her friends, Signorina Nicky Mariano, noticed that she had a profound emotional experience during a Roman Catholic Mass.⁵² The Signorina, as well as Percy Lubbock and Sir Kenneth Clark, all felt that she had been moving closer to conversion.⁵³ Lubbock

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 27.

⁵¹Wharton, A Backward Glance, p. 10.

⁵²Lubbock, pp. 233-234.

⁵³Griffith, p. 280.

felt that there was significance in her choice of the hymn "O Paradise, O Paradise" to be sung at her funeral and of the words O crux spes unica to be engraved on her headstone. Undoubtedly a counter influence was her life-long friend and literary adviser, Walter Berry, an "enthusiastic rationalist," but with the removal of his influence by his death, her friends felt that religious conversion was more likely. The strength of his influence could be measured by her statement in her biography that Walter Berry's "thought, his character, his deepest personality, were interwoven with mine."⁵⁴ It will, perhaps, never be known how close or far from conversion to Roman Catholicism Edith Wharton was; however, this has little importance in determining her attitude toward divorce. During her lifetime both the Catholic and Episcopal churches had rigid divorce canons.

None of the Wharton characters who considered or obtained divorce indicated that the rigid rules of the Episcopal church on divorce might have been a deterrent. In the fiction examined, only in Madame de Treymes, Ethan Frome, and The Age of Innocence were divorces considered and then not obtained. In Madame de Treymes, Madame de Malrive chose not to divorce her husband, but only after she had learned that when she remarried, she would forfeit control of her

⁵⁴Wharton, A Backward Glance, pp. 115-116.

son to Monsieur de Malrive and his family. Ethan Frome, out of a sense of personal responsibility, renounced divorce.

Ellen Olenska, in The Age of Innocence, chose not to divorce her husband when Newland Archer convinced her that a divorce would be morally wrong because it would bring shame and unhappiness to her family. Religious scruples deterred none of these three characters; a sense of responsibility was the motivating deterrent in each case.

The remaining five works selected for study⁵⁵ reveal no hint that the prohibition against divorce of the Episcopal church influenced the decision of any of the characters. Undine Spragg in The Custom of the Country was aware that as a Catholic convert she would not be able to divorce Raymond de Chelles and marry Elmer Moffatt. Elmer, however, showed Undine that as a Baptist she would have no trouble obtaining a divorce. In this instance there was not only a reflection on Undine's integrity, but also on easily obtained divorces.

Edith Wharton accepted the attitude of her religion toward divorce and scorned the lax attitude of some Protestant churches toward divorce. At the same time, however, she found her religion unable to aid in solving the problems resulting from the incompatibilities of some

⁵⁵These five works are "Souls Belated," "The Other Two," The Custom of the Country, "Autres Temps," and The Mother's Recompense.

marriage partnerships. Lydia Tillotson's Episcopalianism did not help her adjust to her stuffy husband and his domineering mother. Kate Clephane suffered a similar fate: inability to endure "the thick atmosphere of self-approval and unperceivingness which emanated from John Clephane" and "the hated figure of old Mrs. Clephane."⁵⁶

Although Edith Wharton accepted the divorce rules of the traditional religion of her class, she did not indicate in the portrayal of her characters that religion was a help in solving life's problems--especially those resulting from incompatible marriages. For those superior characters in her fiction who were capable of exercising reason, the church and society did not have answers and hence those persons had to resort to the use of their reason. In going against the rules of the church and in disregarding society's traditions, her characters have usually exchanged what they supposed was an unbearable situation for one that proved to be undesirable. Lydia Tillotson was concerned about having "respectability"; Mrs. Lidcote and Kate Clephane were wanderers, seeking status and social involvement in second-rate European resorts. Undine Spragg after her several divorces was probably no happier in her last marriage to Elmer Moffatt.

⁵⁶Wharton, A Mother's Recompense, pp. 16 and 25.

The cultural influence of the Episcopal church both generally and specifically was thus seen in Edith Wharton's portrayal of fictional characters. The inadequacy of the church was brought out in connection with the solution of marital incompatibilities that resulted in divorce. This did not indicate her disapproval of the church canons on divorce. Mrs. Wharton's attitude toward religion--and hence the divorce rules of her church--was basically the result of her philosophy of rationality. She could not accept church dogma without reservation; on the other hand, she believed in the importance of the principles of religion and society that had evolved over the years. For highly moral persons of exceptional intellect and capacity for the appreciation of beauty she suggested the application of reason for solution of individual moral problems. Generally, she and her class took their religion "with moderation"⁵⁷ like the Drovers in The Mother's Recompense.

The novelist's fiction indicated a rather perfunctory attitude toward her Episcopalian heritage; however, it did not reveal an indifference toward morality. Among the cultural influences of literary significance, the names of George Eliot and Henry James stand out because of the dominance of the moral theme in their fiction.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 242.

Edith Wharton's admiration for George Eliot is well documented. Charles Du Bos, a close friend for more than thirty years, wrote in a letter to Percy Lubbock:

I never met anybody who understood George Eliot better or admired her more than Edith . . . For us both, Middlemarch was of course the greatest achievement of all.⁵⁸

Her review of a book on George Eliot contained statements that could be applied with equal validity to her own fiction. She referred to George Eliot's "deep reverence for the family ties, for the sanctities of tradition, the claims of slowly acquired conventions and slowly formed precedents."⁵⁹

Numerous examples of convictions similar to these appeared throughout Edith Wharton's fiction. In The Age of Innocence, the importance of the family tie was instrumental in keeping Ellen Olenska from getting a divorce and Newland Archer from abnegating his responsibility to May. The rallying of the family to protect Ellen from ostracism by enlisting the van der Luyden influence was another case in point to show the depth of feeling for family solidarity. The Malrive family in Madame de Treymes has not only a strong feeling for family but also for continuity of family. Many instances of strong relationships between parents and children appeared in her fiction: for example, between Mrs.

⁵⁸Lubbock, p. 102.

⁵⁹Edith Wharton, "George Eliot," The Bookman, XV (May, 1902), 250.

Lidcote and her daughter Leila; Kate Clephane and Anne; Ralph Marvell and his sister and his son. The affection between Ralph and his sister was demonstrated in her willingness to give him funds to placate his bride Undine while they were on their honeymoon.

Like George Eliot, Edith Wharton also had a strong conviction about the importance of traditions with their acquired conventions and precedents. For the Malrive family it was not personal happiness that counted, but the tradition of family continuity. Mrs. Lidcote in "Autres Temps" rejected an offer of marriage and hence possibly another chance of happiness because of her respect for traditions. In this same short story, the ease with which marriage and divorce were effected implied criticism of ignoring the tradition of the sanctity of marriage. In The Age of Innocence the author enlisted the sympathy of the reader for May, who stood for the permanence and tradition of the family rather than for personal fulfillment and passion as Ellen did.

The fact that in each of Edith Wharton's works characters who broke conventions usually paid some penalty indicates a fundamental belief that moral and social traditions formed through the years were the best guides for living. The position of the Episcopal church and the Catholic church on divorce was disregarded by her characters

Mrs. Lidcote, Kate Clephane, Ellen Olenska, and Undine Spragg. Each of these persons--justifiably or not, Edith Wharton did not indicate--paid in spiritual or other suffering.

In the review of George Eliot's book Edith Wharton stated that it was her "faithfulness to inherited or accepted duty" that was "the keynote of George Eliot's teaching."⁶⁰ Maggie's cry to Stephen in The Mill on the Floss showed this awareness of individual responsibility: "I cannot take a good for myself that has been wrung out of their misery."⁶¹ Comparable illustrations of high sense of obligation included Newland Archer's to May; Ellen's to her family; Fanny de Malrive's to her son; Ethan Frome's to his wife Zeena. Closely allied with acceptance of duty was acceptance of personal responsibility. Kate Clephane felt a sense of responsibility for having created a situation that permitted her daughter to fall in love with the man who had earlier been her lover.

With George Eliot, the novelist shared the belief that society's conventions were not to be sacrificed for an individual's happiness: "Personal happiness is not to be

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 250.

⁶¹George Eliot, The Mill on the Floss, Vol. II (New York, 1925), p. 435.

acquired at the cost of the social organism."⁶² This thinking applied to the situation of Ellen and Newland whose group believed that divorce should be avoided regardless of the happiness of those involved; society was not to be sacrificed for the sake of the individual. As Maggie in the Eliot novel could not profit from another's misery, so Ellen and Newland were unable to seize their opportunity for a finer life together because of harm they might inflict on their families.

Henry James noted the influence of George Eliot on Edith Wharton's writing. In a letter praising her warmly for her novel, The Reef, her most Jamesian novel, he wrote:

There used to be little notes in you that were like fine benevolent finger-marks of the good George Eliot--the echo of much reading of that excellent woman here and there, that is, sounding through.⁶³

In his preoccupation with the style of the novel, James was delighted when he saw Edith Wharton moving away from the chronicle-type novel of George Eliot toward his ideal of the novel with its emphasis on a central consciousness, its analysis of the interior power of characters, and its unity and intensity.

Henry James, like George Eliot and Edith Wharton, saw life in terms of its moral drama and conceived fictional

⁶²Wharton, The Bookman, p. 250.

⁶³Bell, p. 274.

situations of moral significance or dilemmas involving moral problems or decisions. Edith Wharton in The Writing of Fiction emphasized the necessity of a moral problem to give significance to a work:

A good subject, then, must contain in itself something that sheds a light on our moral experience.⁶⁴

In reviewing two volumes of James's letters, she wrote:

For him every great novel must first of all be based on a profound sense of moral values . . . and then constructed with a classical unity and economy of means.⁶⁵

Henry James's influence on Edith Wharton's style was not lasting. After The Reef (1913), she never returned to a subject or style as Jamesian as that of this novel. James's lasting influence, if indeed it was an influence, was indirect: his emphasis on the prominence of the moral issue. A recent study of the friendship of Edith Wharton and Henry James by Millicent Bell stated that she

adopted . . . his /Henry James's/ view of the moral significance of the fiction writer's "subject," . . . but the faith and the reverence for the art of fiction, the seriousness of her feeling that the utmost dedication of craft was due her profession itself may be the most significant of James's effects upon her.⁶⁶

⁶⁴Edith Wharton, The Writing of Fiction (New York, 1925), pp. 28-29.

⁶⁵Edith Wharton, "Henry James in His Letters," Quarterly Review, 234 (July 1920), 197.

⁶⁶Bell, p. 290.

Because of the similarity of their cultural background, their removal abroad from America, and their development of the international theme, Henry James's influence on Edith Wharton has been unduly emphasized. She wrote in her autobiography, "The truth is that he belonged irrevocably to the old America out of which I also came."⁶⁷ Though her fiction did not develop artistically according to James's ideas, she considered him one of "the two or three greatest friendships of . . . her life."⁶⁸ When it became evident that her husband's behavior as a result of illness was having a deteriorating effect on their marriage, James advised her as early as 1910 to give her husband an allowance and have a separation. About the same time he wrote to a mutual friend that such a separation was "the only thing to save her life."⁶⁹ Her action coincided with James's advice.

In a broad sense it was probably the indirect influence of Matthew Arnold's concept of culture that made the most general imprint upon Edith Wharton's thinking and hence on her fiction. Her family lived in the backwash of English Victorianism. Such Arnold concepts as the following were reflected in her fictional situations: "morality is

⁶⁷Wharton, A Backward Glance, p. 175.

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 169.

⁶⁹Griffith, pp. 189-190.

indispensable";⁷⁰ "without order there can be no society, and without society there can be no human perfection"; and "for us the framework of society is sacred."⁷¹ These ideas were her cultural heritage, and as has been demonstrated, were the foundations for her mature moral and social beliefs.

Her reverence for the past and for traditions also included her religious heritage, the Episcopal church with its traditional canons on marriage and divorce. Her feeling toward divorce, as represented by her church, never changed, although she obtained a divorce and counted among her closest friends of a lifetime a divorcée, her sister-in-law, Mary Cadwalader Jones. In not one of her novels was there any hint that divorce was either right or wrong. The suggestion was only that her characters paid in one way or another when they disregarded or transgressed the tradition of marriage by obtaining a divorce. She did not present a solution for one of life's mysteries--the occurrence of incompatible marriages--although she probed their meaning time and time again. Most readers of her works will see in her fiction that

the world is a welter and has always been one;
but here and there a saint or genius suddenly

⁷⁰Matthew Arnold, Culture & Anarchy and Friendship's Garland (New York, 1883), p. 23.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 196.

sends a little ray through the fog and helps humanity to stumble on, and perhaps up.⁷²

The concept of selfless renunciation was Edith Wharton's rather desolate, ironic conclusion about man's highest moral achievement.

⁷²Wharton, A Backward Glance, p. 379.

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