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**Women and Social Networks in Edith  
Wharton's Fiction**  
Bachelor's Diploma Thesis

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*I declare that I have worked on this thesis independently,  
using only the primary and secondary sources listed in the bibliography.*

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## 1. Introduction

Edith Wharton is an important American author of the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She is the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize, in May 1921, for *The Age of Innocence* (Wolff, *A Feast of Words* 345). She describes the upper-class life of New York fashionable society, which she knows well from her own experience. As Salmi puts it, Wharton “scatters a number of autobiographical facts in her novels” (17). Wharton explores female social standing. Not only does she show different strategies that her female characters exercise, she raises awareness amongst her readership that there exist such problems in the first place.

Edith Wharton wrote at a time of dramatic social change. The suffragist movement began to form itself in the United States of America. She was not the only female writer to raise awareness about the issues that women encountered in their everyday life. In the United States, there was also Kate Chopin, whose novel *The Awakening* treats similar themes as Wharton does in her works. The main heroine, Edna Pontellier, much like Wharton’s characters, struggles to break free from men’s complete influence over her life. Edna, similarly to Lily Bart from Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, also fails to accomplish her desires and dies, drowning herself. Edna, like Lily, does not plan her death. In the novel, Edna keeps swimming further into the ocean until “[e]xhaustion was pressing upon and overpowering her” (Chopin, Ch. XXXIX). A sense of desperation and indecisiveness can be felt in both novels, Wharton’s and Chopin’s, alike.

The aim of my thesis is to examine what problems there are in the society for women to deal with, what consequences these problems have and whether Wharton offers any solutions to them. I argue that in Wharton’s novels, women are being strained by their society in terms of their relationships. Single women are all the time under the

pressure of finding a suitable match and getting married. If the marriage fails to fulfill the expectations of the young couple, mostly in terms of marital fidelity, either of them tries to obtain a divorce, of which the society they live in disapproves. However disapproving the society may be and even though some characters are trying to liberate themselves from it, Wharton's characters' personalities are created and shaped and therefore dependent on the society. A ready access to money is vital for women. It is very hard for them to earn some on their own and so they are dependent on men to provide for them. When the woman is single, it is her father, and when she is married, it is her husband who has the money for her. If she refuses to marry and has no father, it is virtually impossible for her to satisfy her financial needs. Wharton shows these problems to her readership, however, she does not offer any real solutions that could be generally applicable to these kinds of problems.

I am going to analyze two novels and five short stories by Wharton. *The House of Mirth*, which was first published in 1905 when Wharton was 43 years old, illustrates the struggle for survival on the destiny of Lily Bart and how easy it is to slip from the top of the society (Auchincloss 343). Lily Bart is beautiful and needs money. The only conventional way to gain access to it is to marry well. However, she is not able to meet this condition and tries alternative ways of providing for herself. While *The House of Mirth* describes the New York society of Wharton's present day as an adult, in *The Age of Innocence*, she reminisces "the New York of her childhood" (Salmi 48). The motif of marriage is present throughout the novel. It can also be seen in "Bunner Sisters," where Wharton portrays the other side of the spectrum – the life of working-class women. It is a rare opportunity to see Wharton doing so. To show some more diversity, "Coming Home" is about French society during World War I. Here, Wharton draws from her experience from the battlefield, where, according to Tylee, "middle-aged women like

Wharton came into their own, using their administrative and organizational skills to deal with the wounded and refugees<sup>1</sup> (337). “Madame de Treymes” also takes place in France. Wharton contrasts the social ambiance and the power of family ties between the United States and Europe. It also shows the difference in the two cultures’ view of divorce. “The Touchstone” demonstrates love expressed in the letters of a well-known female writer for a man who could not love her in return. Mr. Glennard may be seen as Lily Bart’s counterpart. Finally, “Xingu” is a good example that an individual can make a difference in the society by showing their will and being brave enough to walk away.

The body of my thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter is an analysis of Wharton’s characters’ problems with marriage – either getting into or out of it. Wharton herself had trouble with men. Her first engagement did not work out, then the man she liked did not propose and finally when she married, her marriage was not a happy one (Salmi 22). Also, she tends to use patterns for her characters’ natures. These patterns are very likely based on the characters of the people she knew. Marriage is an issue in her fiction. Either her female heroine cannot find a good match to become her husband or her marriage goes wrong. Infidelity is behind most of the divorces.

The second chapter discusses a struggle for freedom from the society and how public exposure affects Wharton’s characters’ identity. The fight for independence is not an easy task to do for a woman. However, there is an example in Wharton’s fiction where such struggle is a success. Also, there are characters who get lost when they are not in the public eye. It looks as if they were not themselves and did not know what they are doing while not exposed.

The third chapter discusses problems with money and financial self-sufficiency. Wharton’s characters’ attitudes towards money are gradually formed ever since their

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<sup>1</sup> Wharton was “awarded the *Légion d’Honneur* in 1916 for her war efforts” (Tylee 337).

childhood. The usual model is that the father of the family provides all their financial resources and the mother decides where the money should be spent. In case of a female character, once she gets married, the model repeats itself. This time, it is her husband who brings in the money and she decides what to do with it by for example decorating their living room. Members of a polite society do not talk about money. If a single female character gets into trouble with money, it is very hard for her to acquire some in a way that the society approves of. Money is also one of the factors that cause changes in society.

The Conclusion looks at what effects the discussed problems have on the lives of Wharton's characters and whether Wharton offers any solutions for those problems. Although Lily Bart is created perfect on the outside, she is not quite so perfect on the inside. She is very dependent on her surroundings. She decidedly does not see all the problems around her while trying to preserve her freedom. She is criticized by the society and left alone to die. However, death is not the only way out that Wharton has in store for her characters. Some of them, like Newland Archer, simply learn to live in their imperfect society.

As I remarked earlier, Wharton uses autobiographical facts in her fiction. Salmi points out that Wharton's "relationships to her parents, husband, country, society, and avocation are reflected in her fiction," she then goes on to say that Wharton "uses her own nicknames for her heroines, some of her characteristics, feelings, scenes from her life, encounters, journeys, relatives, even love affairs. Critics have found features of Wharton in almost all of her female characters, and in quite a few male ones" (17). This is why I would like to present some information about her life.

Edith Newbold Jones was born on January 24, 1862 into an aristocratic family and spent most of her childhood "in a care of a beloved nurse, Doyley" (Wolff, *A Feast*

*of Words* 3). She and her family were staying in Paris when she was about four years old; later on, Wharton “was very grateful to [her parents] for taking her to Europe when still a child. The whole family stayed there for six years; Edith was only eleven when they returned” (Salmi 20-21). Wharton’s childhood was fairly a nice one, considering she had no financial worries and spent most of it in Europe. Her relationship with her parents was very different for each of them. She had “a powerful affection for her father” (Wolff, *A Feast of Words* 22). However, her mother, Lucretia, “had a possessive need to intrude, to influence, perhaps to dominate” (Wolff, *A Feast of Words* 34). Her relationship with her mother did not get any better during her young adult life (Wolff, *A Feast of Words* 34).

When Wharton was entering her adolescence, she was seemingly in a happy place: “Edith Jones was more fortunate than many shy debutantes because the popularity of her older brother Harry soon encompassed her and she was taken up by an enjoyable set of fashionable young people” (Wolff, *A Feast of Words* 3). However, on the inside, it was not so pleasant because “the first lesson that Edith Wharton learned about becoming a woman was that society made no provisions for her feelings” (Wolff, *A Feast of Words* 40). Even her family was not very supportive of her because their “attitude toward the adolescent girl was precisely calculated to diminish her self-esteem” (Wolff, *A Feast of Words* 45). Edith was very fond of literature, however, writing was “a career that had been forbidden in her adolescence” (Wolff, *A Feast of Words* 87). Salmi observes that “[w]riters were shunned by her parents” (21). As much as she was repressed by her parents, she felt happier in the circle of her intimate friends who supported her though much of the difficulty that she went through (Wolff, *A Feast of Words* 52).

One of these intimate friends was Henry James. At first, they met only briefly when “[o]ld friends asked her to dine with them and to meet the author whose works she had so long admired” (Wolff, *A Feast of Words* 42). When Wharton’s *The Valley of Decision* was published in 1902, Henry James “took the occasion to initiate a friendship by writing her an admiring letter” (Wolff, *A Feast of Words* 61). However it was in 1904 during his visit to America that Henry James “spent several weeks with the Whartons, and the acquaintance between the two authors blossomed into deep friendship, each finding in the other a mind quick enough and subtle enough for genuine companionship” (Wolff, *A Feast of Words* 134). Wharton was treated as James’s equal and so Wolff points out that “[t]his was a coming of age for Wharton that increased her self-confidence” (*A Feast of Words* 134). Thus Edith Wharton begins to feel more reassured of herself.

Wharton was active during World War I, helping the Red Cross and, according to Tylee, “[h]er visits to the trenches were recorded in letters to James” (337). Later during this period, a “decisive event of the war years for Wharton’s development was the death of her old friend and literary rival, Henry James” (Tylee 332). After James’s death, Wharton finished writing *The Age of Innocence*, which was published in 1920 and which is the last work of fiction which is discussed in my thesis (Salmi 24). I have intentionally omitted her marriage, divorce and love life in general since it shall be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

## 2. Problems Tied to Marital Status

There are many problems in Edith Wharton's fiction. The majority of the problems that her characters have to deal with arise from the state of society. Quindlen claims that they are caused by "the conflict between what we wish to be and what society insists we become, between our ideas and our comfort" (xi). Problems that we find in Wharton's novels can be traced to the problems she had in her life. Their very core is based in Wharton's use of certain character traits in both genders. This said, Wharton's characters either try to find a good match for marriage, or they are struggling to see a way out of a bad marriage through divorce. In most cases divorce is directly linked to infidelity of either spouse.

The life of Edith Wharton was far from being ideal. Wharton had to go through "the early death of her beloved father; the coldness of her domineering mother; disappointments with lovers; the war; her husband's mental illness [...]; her own adultery and that of her husband; the divorce" (Salmi 16). Salmi argues that similarly to Wharton's own life, she "repeatedly entraps her characters in their social roles, their marriages, their moral obligations, or the circumstances surrounding them" (15). Salmi assumes that Wharton writes about the problems she had "to gain insight into them" (16). This is the reason why Wharton's stories are very realistic – because she knew similar problems from her personal experience.

Skaggs points out that "[a]s readers of *The Age of Innocence*, our introduction to the two main female characters occurs through the lenses of two gentlemen" (NP). We also meet Lily Bart through the eyes of Lawrence Selden in *The House of Mirth*. Wharton defines patterns that she uses time and again in her stories. Most of her male characters tend to be of similar natures. On one hand, there are men about whom opinions are apt to meet at one point. Quindlen claims that "[t]he weakest characters in

the novel are male” (ix). McDowell observes that “Wharton’s males are weak, rather than reprehensible” (527). She then goes on to say that “men [...] are passive and acquiescent” (528). Therefore, this opinion is very wide-spread.

To give more specific examples, Wolff demonstrates that in “The Touchstone,” Mrs. Aubyn “had fallen desperately, passionately in love with [Glennard], and he had merely grown more acutely embarrassed by his inability to return her feelings” (*A Feast of Words* 104). Quindlen also argues that “[i]t is Selden who reinforces Lily’s disdain for the arid courtesies and compromises of their social milieu, but who offers her no alternatives” (x). It is not only Selden who is passive. George Dorset is “look[ed] after [...] while Bertha is reading Verlaine with Neddy Silverton” (Wharton, *The House of Mirth*<sup>2</sup> 197). In *The Age of Innocence*,<sup>3</sup> Newland Archer’s son Dallas summed up his father’s passivity: Ellen Olenska was “the woman you’d have chucked everything for; only you didn’t” (1298). Some degree of passivity is to be observed in a majority of Wharton’s male characters.

Auchincloss claims that this passivity is not the particular character’s fault: “Poor Mr. Selden, it is not really his fault. He is a victim of the plot requirements” (348). McDowell confirms in a way Auchincloss’s suggestion by stating that Wharton’s “attitude toward [men], instead of being strongly satirical, is tolerant, frequently sympathetic, and often somewhat condescending” (527). However, I strongly believe that Wharton’s fictional male characters act the way they do in her stories because they are based on the men she had in her life thus their behavior is reflected in her stories. Before her marriage, Wharton “had one broken engagement and one disappointment” (Salmi 22). This disappointment was Walter Berry, “she dreamed of marrying him, but

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<sup>2</sup> From now on this title will be referred to as *HM*.

<sup>3</sup> From now on this title will be referred to as *AI*.

he never proposed. [...] Men who, like Berry, lack a sense of commitment or resolve were to appear time and again in novels as negative heroes” (Salmi 22). According to Wolff, Wharton’s former fiancé, her disappointment and her husband “shared certain traits: they were punctiliously polite and emotionally reticent; above all, they were in no way sexually assertive” (*A Feast of Words* 49). Later on, Wharton’s husband was not the active one in their marriage, “[l]ike the other men she had been involved with, Teddy was not assertive. He had accommodated himself to the easy routine of his mother’s house before marriage; he was perfectly willing to fit himself into the pattern of his wife’s life afterward” (Wolff, *A Feast of Words* 50). Looking at Wharton’s social *milieu* and people in it explains a lot about the basis of her characters and the reasons behind their actions.

However, some of Wharton’s male characters are not weak or passive. Wharton has a few of them who are very powerful but who seem to be equally as wicked as they are powerful. In “Bunner Sisters,”<sup>4</sup> Mr. Remy plans to marry either of the Bunner sisters only to have someone who would take care of him while he is intoxicated, the result of his plan being the death of Evelina Bunner. As Evelina puts it when she reunites with her sister, she has “been to the hell and back” (232). In “Coming Home,”<sup>5</sup> Oberst von Scharlach is always talked about with fear: “They all said ‘Scharlach’ with a kind of terror in their voices, as if he might hear them even there, and come down on them horribly” (33). Almost all his doings are described as follows: “Put together the worst of the typical horrors and you’ll have a fair idea of it. Murder, outrage, torture: Scharlach’s programme seemed to be fairly comprehensive” (41). In *The House of Mirth*, Gus Trenor is very well able to act on his own. While doing so, he nearly rapes Lily Bart:

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<sup>4</sup> From now on this title will be referred to as “BS.”

<sup>5</sup> From now on this title will be referred to as “CH.”

“His touch was a shock to her drowning consciousness. She drew back from him with a desperate assumption of scorn” (155). Wharton has a variety of male characters. This variety that is predictable in a way considering the characters’ nature.

According to Quindlen, it should be taken into consideration that “[t]here are no true villains in *The House of Mirth*” (ix). It is the society that Wharton’s characters live in that shapes their characters. Wolff suggests that there is a third type of male characters: “There are other kinds of men – men who can love sympathetically, who can tolerate weakness in the beloved – but these men exist outside *The House of Mirth* (*Lily Bart and the Beautiful Death* 31). An example of this sympathetic love is Nettie Struther and her husband. Unfortunately for Lily Bart, Nettie and her husband are only marginal characters and do not fit into Lily’s world.

Wharton’s female characters are precisely the opposite of her male characters. McDowell claims that “the women in her novels at first seem to be humble and acquiescent, but they prove more firm and courageous than the men” (527). She then goes on to say that “[w]omen in Wharton's fiction are the dynamic people” (528). To cite a few examples, Lily tries to resist the rules of society by not marrying in *The House of Mirth*, Ellen Olenska separates from her husband and never truly behaves in the standard way that the society demands of her and to actually become free she leaves New York in *The Age of Innocence*, Mrs. Roby leaves her female friends unexpectedly accompanied by Osric Dane, another female character, in “Xingu” and Madame de Malrive tries to fight the French society by wanting a divorce and keeping her son to herself in “Madame de Treymes.”<sup>6</sup> All of these female characters are certainly not passive and their natures give the impression of being in opposition with their male counterparts.

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<sup>6</sup> From now on this title will be referred to as “MT.”

McDowell comments that Wharton's "women usually prevail, often by sheer endurance, Wharton does not idealize them" (529). Being a woman herself, Wharton met and got to know many more women in her social *milieu* than she did men therefore her female characters are deeper. Moreover, Wharton was later inspired by the World War I where "young women nursed at the battlefield or drove ambulances and carried stretchers, middle-aged women like Wharton came into their own, using their administrative and organizational skills to deal with the wounded and refugees" (Tylee 337). At this time Wharton saw the power women can gain and began writing *The Age of Innocence*.

It is not only the war that changed Wharton's views of life. In DeBorde's opinion, a clear distinction can be seen in Wharton's works "between the writings of the Wharton who married out of obligation and the Wharton who engaged in a love affair for personal satisfaction" (5). Also, Wharton was very good at separating different areas of her life – leading a social life and writing: "Wharton frequently divided her life into phases and roles that, in her estimation, could not merge and still maintain their discrete values" (DeBorde 1). This projects into her main heroines of *The Age of Innocence* where "May conforms; Ellen creates. Wharton herself felt caught between these two ways of living and saw no easy blending of the two" (DeBorde 5). Through May and Ellen, Wharton apparently analyzes the two ways of how her life could be.

The main theme that moves the fiction world of Edith Wharton is matchmaking and marriage. Lily Bart knows very well what to do when it comes to social contacts and DiCicco observes that Lily's "corporeal body defines her as a viable player in the marriage market, the accomplishment of which has been the objective of her social training" (81). DiCicco then explains that Lily "knows that her market value is tied to her body and that its value is currently running so high that she is marked off" (81). Lily

knows exactly how to capture male attention. Being twenty-nine, she knows the game and its rules very well.

Lily wants Percy Gryce to propose to her. He is an eligible bachelor with a vast fortune. However, he seems to be very uninteresting throughout the story. Wharton's narrator describes Percy Gryce during the ride with Lily Bart that: "It was not, after all, opportunity but imagination that he lacked: he had a mental palate which would never learn to distinguish between railway tea and nectar" (*HM* 20). Percy Gryce seems to have this in common with Wharton's own husband because, according to Salmi, "Teddy was not a literary man" (23). Edith Wharton and her husband had different tastes when it came to what they wanted to do: she preferred the literary circles and he preferred the leisurely life of the privileged circles.

Having her target, Percy Gryce, in mind, Lily does her preparation asking Selden about Americana, discovering it must be very dull and expensive (*HM* 11). She considers it sounding exactly like a subject that a young, wealthy bachelor might be interested in. She also finds out from Selden that Percy Gryce's father collects Americana. Before meeting Percy Gryce by chance on the train, she has "arranged herself in her corner with the instinctive feeling for effect which never forsook her" (*HM* 18). Lily does everything to keep up her appearances. When she notices him, her behavior is similar to that of a beast on a hunt: "She began to cut the pages of a novel, tranquilly studying her prey through downcast lashes while she organized a method of attack" (*HM* 18). The way she prepares tea for Mr. Gryce and herself is very alluring to him: "he watched her in silent fascination while her hands flitted above the tray, looking miraculously fine and slender in contrast to the coarse china and lumpy bread. It seemed wonderful to him that any one should perform with such careless ease the difficult task of making tea in public in a lurching train" (*HM* 19). Even though this is not explicitly

mentioned, Lily must have been aware of this appealing quality of her tea-making. To give it a final touch, she was “rightly judging that one of the charms of tea is the fact of drinking it together, she proceeded to give the last touch to Mr. Gryce's enjoyment by smiling at him across her lifted cup” (*HM* 19-20). Lily then realizes that this was his first journey with a young girl. Judging from what she had heard about his character, she knows what to do: “Some girls would not have known how to manage him. [...] But Lily’s methods were more delicate” (*HM* 20). Her manners are more subtle.

Because of Gryce’s unimaginativeness and “in spite of her efforts, conversation flagged” (*HM* 20). Lily could see “a settled look of dulness began to creep over his candid features, she saw that extreme measures were necessary” (*HM* 20). Her way out of this unpleasant situation is to talk about Americana. Lily is aware that she can show now her skilful art of being an agreeable companion: “She questioned him intelligently, she heard him submissively; and, prepared for the look of lassitude which usually crept over his listeners' faces, he grew eloquent under her receptive gaze” (*HM* 21). This scene illustrates the skills of Lily Bart when it comes to capturing male attention. She is always prepared and confident to judge other people’s characters, knows how to look pretty and is an expert on how to behave according to the rules of her society. Despite all her effort, she fails to get engaged to and marry Percy Gryce. This is not the first time she has failed: “She might have married more than once—the conventional rich marriage which she had been taught to consider the sole end of existence—but when the opportunity came she had always shrunk from it” (*HM* 164). Lily manages to develop some sort of conscience which stops her from marrying without love, solely for money. However, she also knows that she cannot survive without money.

Lily seems to have developed real feelings for Lawrence Selden but he simply cannot marry her. Selden is too poor to keep Lily’s expensive lifestyle and “[s]he had

once shown him the impossibility of such a hope, and his subsequent behaviour seemed to prove that he had accepted the situation” (*HM* 147). Lily originally plans to be friends with Selden when she says to him: “You don’t know how much I need such a friend” (*HM* 9). This appears to be her genuine wish. It is never truly revealed whether she loves him or not. Wolff reflects about this topic stating: “Lily’s capacity to feel emotion has almost atrophied. Does she love Selden? It is a question she raises almost academically. [...] Certainly she wants to be loved by him, for that would confirm her own sense of worth, of lovability” (*Lily Bart and the Beautiful Death* 35). We are not certain whether she has ever truly loved anyone. Selden does evoke some feelings in Lily when “suddenly she turned on him with a kind of vehemence. ‘Why do you do this to me?’ she cried. ‘Why do you make the things I have chosen seem hateful to me, if you have nothing to give me instead?’” (*HM* 74). She would like to become his wife if they only lived in an alternative reality where their relationship would be possible.

When Lily Bart meets Simon Rosedale in the novel, the narrator describes it being “with irrepressible annoyance on her face” (*HM* 14). She does not like him at all. As Lily goes down on the social ladder and Rosedale climbs up, her opinion of him changes. Rosedale comments on it that: “Last year I was wild to marry you, and you wouldn’t look at me: this year—well, you appear to be willing. Now, what has changed in the interval? Your situation, that’s all. Then you thought you could do better; now—” (*HM* 268). However, it is too late for her to try to marry Rosedale. He admits to being a social ladder climber and considers it being his hobby. He says to Lily that “I’m more in love with you than ever, but if I married you now I’d queer myself for good and all, and everything I’ve worked for all these years would be wasted” (*HM* 269). He is her last chance to marry for money and to make the society like her again but she realizes this fact too late and Rosedale is unwilling to marry her.

Lily Bart comments on the different conditions in matchmaking between the two genders and simplifies its rules: “All Jack has to do to get everything he wants is to keep quiet and let that girl marry him; whereas I have to calculate and contrive, and retreat and advance, as if I were going through an intricate dance, where one misstep would throw me hopelessly out of time” (*HM* 49-50). Men have an advantage while looking for a spouse. They are the ones to make a choice and possibly change the life of their future wife. Lily Bart seems to know intuitively what Edith Wharton found out by living in an unhappy marriage because Wharton “made the proper marriage that polite society decreed, to a somewhat dim young man from a respectable family with a streak of mental illness. And from Teddy Wharton, she learned what Lily feels so powerfully: that this sort of life is empty, unworthy, not enough” (Quindlen vii-viii). Lily knows she must marry in order to survive but it always goes wrong because she subconsciously knows that she would not be happy in such a marriage.

Newland Archer and May Welland’s case in *The Age of Innocence* is very different. According to DeBorde, the first scene of the novel is linked to Wharton’s life: “Surely when Wharton cast the opening to her novel in an opera, she did so while remembering the above moment—taking place in an opera box—between Morton Fullerton and her” (8). Neither Newland nor May has any doubt whom to marry, at least at the beginning. Newland is excited to show the world that he is engaged to May. He feels “[t]he desire to be the first man to enter Mrs. Mingott's box, to proclaim to the waiting world his engagement to May Welland” (*AI* 1027). We can never really know what she actually thinks because the whole story is written from Newland’s perspective. Newland idealizes his future marriage to May: “‘We'll read Faust together... by the Italian lakes...’ he thought, somewhat hazily confusing the scene of his projected honey-moon with the masterpieces of literature which it would be his manly privilege to

reveal to his bride” (AI 1020). While May appears to enjoy his poetry books at the time, Newland later realizes that he cannot expect any real opinions of her own: “[i]n the days of their engagement she had simply (as he now perceived) echoed what he told her” (AI 1249). Despite all the differences between Newland and May and Newland’s growing feelings for Ellen Olenska, Skaggs comments that “Newland, conforming to the will and expectations of his family and friends, marries May Welland” (NP). He does what he knows to be the only socially acceptable solution.

Wharton shows us another side of the marriage market from the perspective of two maiden, working-class girls, the Bunner sisters. Ann Eliza Bunner is the older sister who has never thought of marrying while her sister, Evelina, is the younger one and it has always been believed that if any of the sisters should marry, it would be her: “Evelina had not been intended by Providence to pine in such a narrow life: in the original plan of things, she had been meant to marry and have a baby” (“BS” 176). At the beginning of the novel, it is Ann Eliza who meets Mr. Remy, the clockmaker, and she falls in love with him secretly. She tries to come up with reasons why she should leave the shop that both the sisters manage so that she could meet him *by chance*. In the end, “[i]t was Evelina herself, who furnished the necessary pretext by awaking with a sore throat on the day when she usually went to market” (“BS” 174). However, Ann Eliza is not able to meet him and, to her surprise, Evelina goes to the shop to tell him to check their new clock. Mr. Remy and the Bunner sisters become friends and at this point Evelina begins to fancy Mr. Remy.

After a while of Mr. Remy’s visits to the sisters, he proposes to the surprised Ann Eliza who gives him excuses why he should marry Evelina instead of her: “The fact is, I ain’t as active as I look. Maybe I couldn’t stand the care. I ain’t as spry as Evelina — nor as young” (“BS” 202). A couple of days later, the happy Evelina tells

Ann Eliza that she is “engaged to be married” (“BS” 206). These acts of Mr. Ramy hint a certain degree of insincerity in his character towards the sisters: he wants to get married and it does not matter to him to whom it will be. From the way he proposes to Ann Eliza, it can be seen that he wants a woman who will take care of him.

In “The Touchstone,” Mr. Glennard is impatient to marry Miss Alexa Trent. He is in love with her but does not have enough money to marry her. Little known fact is that he used to be friends with and was loved by now deceased Mrs. Margaret Aubyn. Mrs. Aubyn did not have many intimate friends and so in order to marry Alexa, Mr. Glennard sells the letters he has from Mrs. Aubyn. His cover-up story is “that a small inheritance, cleverly invested, was the source of his fortune” (Wharton, “The Touchstone” 188). However, this action later becomes the source of his twinges of conscience.

Jean de Réchamp is eager to marry Yvonne Malo in “Coming Home.” They declare their love and want to marry each other. Here, Wharton points out the differences between American and French societies:

Jean went down to Réchamp to ask permission to marry her. Neither you nor I can quite enter into the state of mind of a young man of twenty-seven who has knocked about all over the globe, and been in and out of the usual sentimental coils—and who has to ask his parents’ leave to get married! Don’t let us try: it’s no use. We should only end by picturing him as an incorrigible ninny. But there isn’t a man in France who wouldn’t feel it his duty to take that step, as Jean de Réchamp did. All we can do is to accept the premise and pass on. (“CH” 35)

Wharton's narrator comments on the differences between traditions in French and American societies. The continental traditions seem to be somewhat silly from the American point of view.

Staying in the French environment, Wharton introduces us to Madame de Malrive and Mr. Durham in "Madame de Treymes." According to McDowell, Wharton might have chosen France as the setting for her story because "[i]n many ways French women seemed to Wharton to be more emancipated than Anglo-Saxon women," so she could contrast the differences between the two (526). Salmi thinks that "Wharton contrasts the American lifestyle of Old New York with the freer European way of thinking" (132). However, in neither "Coming Home" nor "Madame de Treymes" the true French women do not appear to be freer than their American counterparts. The situation of Madame de Malrive is complicated because she needs to get divorced from her French husband in order to marry Mr. Durham. However, as far as marriage goes, Durham is a very willing and patient young man: "If you'll marry me, I'll agree to live out here as long as you want" ("MT" 10). In this book, the problem is not trying to find a man to marry. The problem is to get a divorce.

Madame de Malrive does not know whether she will be allowed to get permission to get divorced by her husband's French side of the family: "The divorce, to begin with—they will never consent to it.' [Mr. Durham] noticed that [Madame de Malrive] spoke as though the interests of the whole clan, rather than her husband's individual claim, were to be considered; and the use of the plural pronoun shocked his free individualism like a glimpse of some dark feudal survival" ("MT" 12). As in "Coming Home," Wharton's narrator uses this as a chance to demonstrate the differences between the American and the French mentality.

With her tie to the Old Continent, Ellen Olenska is also in need of a divorce from her Polish husband, Count Olenski. McDowell examines this topic: “In the 1870s, Ellen Olenska decides not to dissolve her marriage to a tyrant because her relatives might be touched by the scandal,” she then adds that “Wharton does not, herself, subscribe to such a narrow view. Her sympathy with Ellen is strong; [...] While she is aware of the importance of marriage in preserving the social fabric, she is also aware of the need for individuals to escape an intolerable union” (535). Edith Wharton was a divorcee. She understood Ellen’s feelings to get divorced. However, Ellen’s story is set at an earlier time period. It was harder to obtain a divorce and not to upset one’s own family at that time than at the later time of Wharton’s own divorce.

Countess Olenska’s friends and family are strongly opposed to her divorce. Archer feels that “the idea of divorce was almost as distasteful to him as to his mother” (AI 1090). This idea is repeated throughout the novel. Mr. Letterblair utters at one point: “The whole family are against a divorce. And I think rightly” (AI 1094). While consulting Newland Archer about her divorce, Ellen Olenska argues that she is “a Protestant—our church does not forbid divorce in such cases” (AI 1102). He explains to her that “[o]ur ideas about marriage and divorce are particularly old-fashioned. Our legislation favours divorce—our social customs don’t” (AI 1103). The power of society can be felt here.

There are two divorcees in *The House of Mirth*. Carry Fisher is accepted by the society while Mrs. Norma Hatch is not. Lily Bart views Carry Fisher as the one with “with her shoulders, her eyes, her divorces, her general air of embodying a ‘spicy paragraph,’” Carrie’s extravagance seems to be tolerated by the society for variety’s sake (HM 57). While Mrs. Norma Hatch’s “offences were always against taste rather than conduct; her divorce record seemed due to geographical rather than ethical

conditions” (HM 291). There are also the Dorsets. George would like to divorce Bertha because she cheated on him with Ned Silverton. Modellmog clears up that “New York allowed divorce only for adultery” (339). However, he has no proof of Bertha’s adultery. Lily obtains letters “written by Bertha Dorset, and addressed, presumably, to Lawrence Selden,” but she decides to burn them in Selden’s fireplace at the end of the novel so George has no proof of his wife’s infidelity (HM 109). When he asks Lily to witness for him Bertha’s infidelity, Lily says “You’re mistaken; I know nothing; I saw nothing,” and then she continues “to repeat, as if it were a charm: ‘I know nothing—absolutely nothing’” (HM 259-60). She chooses the seemingly easier way for her.

McDowell claims that “Wharton is, in the main, critical of a sheltered society’s objections to sensible sexual mores” (535). Salmi argues that “Wharton’s criticism is directed at young girls’ lack of knowledge about sex, as young girls were not supposed to know anything about the facts of life until they were married” (63). She then goes on to support her argument that “Young men’s premarital experiences with married women are related [...] as a matter of course. [...] nobody minds as long as the husband does not react. But when Lily is seen leaving Selden’s apartment after an afternoon tea and Gus Trenor’s house late at night, she is a compromised woman” (63), Wharton shows us New York’s double standards for men and women.<sup>7</sup>

The continental husbands portrayed in Wharton’s stories are guilty of infidelity – both Count Olenski and Mr. de Malrive are rumored to have been cheating on their wives. When Countess Olenska talks to Archer, she absolutely stuns him:

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<sup>7</sup> Female purity is also mirrored in contemporary art, where “women are portrayed symbolically as rising above aberration, relentlessly and uncomplicatedly pure” (Wolff, *Lily Bart and the Beautiful Death* 17). Their purity is the ideal. Wharton named her novel *The Age of Innocence* after an existing portrait.

“Is it your idea, then, that I should live with you as your mistress — since I can’t be your wife?” she asked.

The crudeness of the question startled him: the word was one that women of his class fought shy of, even when their talk flitted closest about the topic. He noticed that Madame Olenska pronounced it as if it had a recognised place in her vocabulary, and he wondered if it had been used familiarly in her presence in the horrible life she had fled from. (*AI* 1245)

Once again, Archer’s reaction makes a statement about the difference between the perception of certain concept – this time of being a mistress – between Europe and New York.

To conclude this chapter, most of the problems Edith Wharton addresses in her fiction are problems caused by the society. They can be seen mirroring from Wharton’s life and they come mostly from the fact that her male characters tend to be passive and weak and while her female characters are perceived as active. The main interest of her characters is to marry well. Those who find themselves in an unhappy marriage want to obtain a divorce. The society usually allows divorce only when there is an extramarital affair present. Consequences of all these issues will be addressed in Chapter 5.

### 3. Problems Tied to Freedom, Privacy and Publicity

In Wharton's fiction, many characters are looking for independence and freedom. This is not an easy feat to do and it might be virtually impossible for a single girl. However, if one is married and does not have any other issues, one can make a difference that can inspire other characters to follow the set example. There are also characters who desire privacy but whose personality might be tied to publicity.

McDowell observes that "Wharton's women never exist apart from men," her women "learn there is no point in an affair – or in a marriage – from which love and commitment are absent. [...] The attempts women make in her fiction to become strong and independent never totally succeed" (524). There are many characters who try to become independent from men. Countess Olenska lives on her own for some time. Mrs. Roby even breaks free from her female companions. When it comes to Lily Bart, DiCicco says that she cannot be independent because she is single: "the single woman can enjoy the manly privilege of 'personal freedom' for a limited time only" (87). Moddelmog points out that "Lily oscillates between dreams of marriage and equally strong impulses to maintain her independence" (339). At one point in the novel, Lily "was beginning to have fits of angry rebellion against fate, when she longed to drop out of the race and make an independent life for herself," but then she asks herself: "But what manner of life would it be?" (*HM* 40). Lily would like to be on her own, husbandless, but she has no means to support her existence, which also happens to be very expensive. Even when she was younger, she wanted to have fresh flowers at her luncheon table, which was costly; she cared little for money at that time (*HM* 32-33).

Aforementioned Mrs. Roby in "Xingu" manages to break free. She leaves her set in awe as she walks away with famous writer, Osric Dane: "The incident had been so rapid that the door closed on the departing pair before the other members had time to

understand what was happening. Then a sense of the indignity put upon them by Osric Dane's unceremonious desertion began to contend with the confused feeling that they had been cheated out of their due without exactly knowing how or why" (Wharton, "Xingu" 16). The ladies were left clueless as the victorious pair of women left them.

Countess Olenska might be considered as at least partially successful at breaking free. At first, she lives in a "strange quarter" where "[s]mall dress-makers, bird-stuffers and 'people who wrote' were her nearest neighbours" (AI 1069). The Countess likes her "funny house," she says to Newland "To me it's like heaven," and she adds that "it's a poor little place. My relations despise it" (AI 1073). What she likes is not accepted by the rest of society: "Mr. Beaufort took me to see a number of houses—since it seems I'm not to be allowed to stay in this one" (AI 1074). She knows that society does not like the way she lives and she is making arrangements to conform to it.

Wharton also deals with the issues of privacy and public exposure. If we take Lily Bart as an example of a single girl, DiCicco says that "[t]he white, attractive, marriageable single girl constitutes the conventional norm against which all girls are expected to measure themselves. [...] the single girl compels us to look at her" (80). Tylee goes further claiming "Lily Bart self-consciously displays herself to such an extent that she seems to exist only through the eyes of some male admirer or other; their evaluative gaze seems almost to constitute her being" (331). Wolff confirms this assertion by observing that "[w]henver she wants to know how she feels, she looks into a mirror to find out. When the mirror returns a reassuring message, life seems good to Lily. [...] Given the entirely dependent nature of Lily's sense of self, we can understand Selden's importance to her (*Lily Bart and the Beautiful Death* 35). Lily needs society to be sure of herself. Without it, she does not know what to do or how she feels.

Brittan clarifies Lily's behavior by a link to Wharton's life: "relationship between exposure and identity remains a motif throughout Wharton's autobiography" (731). Wharton thought that identity is created through public exposure and "expressed in much of her writing a profound concern about the threat to individual identity" (Brittan 725). Brittan reports that "best-seller lists in 1895 quickly propelled some fiction writers to the status of 'star,' whose name, personality, and image became highly marketable entities" (734). This is roughly the time when Wharton begins writing her first works which are meant to be published. Her first book of poems named *Verses* is published in 1878, then she has a pause until 1897 when her *The Decoration of Houses* is published and her first collection of stories, *The Greater Inclination*, is made available to the public in 1899 (Salmi 24-25). It can be seen that "Wharton's letters express a certain anxiety about her growing fame and the potential injury inflicted by an increasingly invasive press" (Brittan 735). She "experienced tension between her self-definition as a professional writer, vulnerable to the inquisitiveness of the nation's growing reading public" (Brittan 729). Although she feels the tension, in Brittan's view Wharton suggests that "[r]ather than advocate a retreat from public exposure, [...] the writer's only antidote to the depersonalization of celebrity is further exposure, through the publication of private papers," however, there still is "deep suspicion in Wharton's texts about identity and whether it is isolatable from its social environment" (730). This is Wharton's concept of identity and its link to identity.

One of Wharton's stories explores these concepts in depth. Brittan assumes that "[The Touchstone]" interrogates not so much the right of Glennard to publish private letters written to him but the consequences of publishing those letters for the identity of the famous novelist" (739). Indeed, Glennard's "relationship to Aubyn changes after the letters are published" (Brittan 740). The twist in the story comes when the readership

realize that “[t]he publication of her letters bestows an individual identity not so much upon their publisher as upon their writer,” who is already dead (Brittan 743). As stated above, Wharton advocated publication of private correspondence and this story demonstrates what she imagines to happen when the correspondence is actually published. It is written at the beginning of the story that “Mrs. Aubyn had so few intimate friends, and consequently so few regular correspondents,” therefore there are very few people to remember her true personality (Wharton, “The Touchstone” 162). This is very paradoxical considering she was a considerably famous author before her death. But the publication of her letters helped to solve this problem.

Privacy is a problem in both *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*. Wharton’s characters are used to it. Selden thinks that “[a]s a spectator, he had always enjoyed Lily Bart; and his course lay so far out of her orbit that it amused him to be drawn for a moment into the sudden intimacy which her proposal implied” (*HM* 4). When Lily meets Simon Rosedale outside of Selden’s house, “irrepressible annoyance on her face was reflected in the sudden intimacy of his smile” (*HM* 14). At the beginning of the novel, every time Wharton mentions intimacy, it is connected to suddenness, which makes this situation to be very unusual for her characters to be in. When Newland Archer’s engagement is announced, he thinks that although it was his wish to do it that way, “[t]o proclaim it in the heat and noise of a crowded ball-room was to rob it of the fine bloom of privacy which should belong to things nearest the heart” (*AI* 1033). This is possibly the reason why Lily never feels well with either of the men at the beginning. They are not close to her heart.

When Brittan considers the characters’ identity and their exposure to society, “Newland Archer, in fact repeatedly suffers a sense of self-obliteration when he is isolated from the members of his tribe” (727). He needs to be seen to regain his usual

self. This is what happens to him when he is not seen in private. When it comes to privacy and natures of other characters in the novel, it must be taken into account that “[t]he narrator is a limited omniscience who gives us only the thoughts and motivations of Newland—it is *Newland’s* thinking about May and Ellen that we are privy to, so it is his view of these characters that we come to understand” (DeBorde 7). So we must keep in mind that what we read about any other character is perceived and influenced through his way of thinking. We can see only pictures of May and “[e]ach of these pictures of May is a brief glimpse into her mind afforded by a self-centered Newland consciousness,” we only see “May’s descriptions” and Deborde argues that “[t]hrough these glimpses into her struggle, Wharton reveals that she is not vapid or thoughtless, as Newland has falsely interpreted her to be” (15). May and Ellen might be different than what they appear to be to Newland.

Nonetheless, according to Modellmog, Lily Bart “relishes her existence in the public eye and has no desire to be sheltered and concealed from view. Yet the terms of her self-exposure must be her own” (345). Lily acts differently when she is alone with Selden without the close watch of their social group and she and Selden become fast friends:

He had come on her that morning in a moment of disarray; her face had been pale and altered, and the diminution of her beauty had lent her a poignant charm. *That is how she looks when she is alone!* had been his first thought; and the second was to note in her the change which his coming produced. It was the danger-point of their intercourse that he could not doubt the spontaneity of her liking. From whatever angle he viewed their dawning intimacy, he could not see it as part of her scheme of life. (*HM* 71)

Selden realizes the sharp contrast between the Lily in public and the Lily in private. It flatters him that she apparently likes him. Yet what he sees may not be the real Lily Bart because what he can see are only small fragments of her. She herself might not know who she actually is because, as Moddelmog puts it, Lily “frequently sees herself through Selden's eyes, and the result is a version of double-consciousness in which the essence of her identity is no more apparent to herself than it is to her observers – who include the novel’s readers” (355). She knows who she should be. She has been thoroughly trained how to act. But her character was lost in the process of her upbringing. Lily being lost can be represented as Wharton’s literary device to show what society does to people who have no other purpose than to entertain because, as Moddelmog continues, “[t]he ‘real Lily’ for whom she searches turns out to be plural rather than singular. [...] Her “personality” [...] is what people say it is” (353). Moddelmog also thinks that “[u]ltimately refusing to expose her heroine to the unimpeded gaze of her readers, Wharton suggests that the ‘real Lily’ may be unrepresentable” (340). Brittan goes further and argues that “Wharton leaves in doubt whether there is any ‘real self’ hiding behind Lily’s death mask,” she points out that “Lily literally dies of privacy,” and that is by “refusing to publish secrets—both hers and her friends’—Lily loses her position as a public spectacle, which is to say she loses her life” (728). All the main characters from Wharton’s longer works have their persona tied to the society they live in.

To wrap this chapter up, some of Wharton’s women struggle for freedom. They mostly do not succeed because the society they live in does not let them be free. Some Wharton’s characters are tied to publicity. However, according to her concept of identity, they are bound to be seen in public because it is unsure whether there is any

private self in Wharton's work. Consequences of Wharton's female characters' struggle for freedom and their identity tied to publicity will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

#### 4. Problems Tied to Financial Self-Sufficiency

A set of problems arises from one simple fact: whether a character does or does not have an easy access to as much money as they desire. This problem is rooted in the characters ever since their upbringing. In an ideal world, the character has a father to provide money for them and a mother who manages this money. Money is not talked about in polite society and so Wharton devises a character who can talk about it because they are different. However, language is also a marker of where Wharton's characters come from. Acquiring money is a very hard task for a woman. There are some who manage to do so but their choice of occupation is very limited. Money is also one of the factors that cause the beginning of a shift in the society.

Money plays a vital role in the majority of Wharton's works either directly or indirectly. Acquiring money is a major issue for Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*. Salmi argues that Wharton highlights gender issues with money acquisition of the time: "[I]ike Lily, most of Wharton's female characters must depend on men for support" (38). Money is also a means of social criticism for Wharton. Salmi thinks that Wharton "criticizes young girls for not knowing the value of money, as money is always provided for them by their fathers" (62). That is if they still have a father to provide money for them.

Time and again, money is connected to maleness and patriarchy. In Lily's case, her father was an unclear figure: "the hazy outline of a neutral-tinted father filled an intermediate space between the butler and the man who came to wind the clocks," yet he was seen as the main source of money and eventually the reason why the money is gone: "Lily could not recall the time when there had been money enough, and in some vague way her father seemed always to blame for the deficiency" (*HM* 30-31). Then again, her father's vagueness is connected to his ability to make money: "Lily seldom

saw her father by daylight. All day he was ‘down town’” (*HM* 30). He had to be distant so that his wife and daughter would enjoy the money. Despite all his efforts he fails to provide for his family. Lily likens herself to her father when she realizes she is in trouble because of money: “[h]ow long the night is! And I know I shan’t sleep tomorrow. Some one told me my father used to lie sleepless and think of horrors. And he was not wicked, only unfortunate—and I see now how he must have suffered, lying alone with his thoughts!” (*HM* 173). She finally understands him, making his “vague” character less vague. Having or not having money can be seen in the character’s manners. The father’s money also means the daughter’s confidence in Wharton’s world. Gwen Van Osburgh has “all the guileless confidence of a young girl who has always been told that there is no one richer than her father” (*HM* 57). If one’s father is rich, it shows not only in material possessions but also in the way a young girl acts.

On one hand there is the father as the source of money. On the other hand stands the mother who manages the money: “Mrs. Bart was famous for the unlimited effect she produced on limited means” (*HM* 31). Her capacity for management was known to most of her set. Yet, as Wolff justly observes, “Lily never does learn her mother’s capacity for management” (*A Feast of Words* 118). Lily alone should not be blamed for her failure. She “had been brought up in the faith that, whatever it cost, one must have a good cook, and be what Mrs. Bart called ‘decently dressed.’ Mrs. Bart’s worst reproach to her husband was to ask him if he expected her to ‘live like a pig’” (*HM* 31). Also, Wolff points out that Lily “has been encouraged in the expansive development of her taste at the expense of practical knowledge. [...] She is not merely self-indulgent. She genuinely needs the quick succession of fashionable clothes” (*Lily Bart and the Beautiful Death* 22). Lily cannot afford to be unfashionable when it comes to clothes. This is what her aunt, Mrs. Penniston, assumes when Lily begins to talk about debts:

“[i]f you stay quietly here until next spring, instead of racing about all over the country, you will have no expenses at all, and surely in four or five months you can settle the rest of your bills if I pay the dress-maker now” (*HM* 181). When Mr. Bart dies and Lily and her mother find themselves penniless, her mother “used to say to her with a kind of fierce vindictiveness: ‘But you’ll get it all back – you’ll get it all back, with your face’” (*HM* 30). After this, Mrs. Bart’s destiny was to go from bad to worse. She “had hated dinginess, and it was her fate to be dingy. Her visions of a brilliant marriage for Lily had faded after the first year” (*HM* 37). It was Lily’s bad luck that she lost her mother. She envies girls who still have their mother:

Ah, lucky girls who grow up in the shelter of a mother’s love—a mother who knows how to contrive opportunities without conceding favours, how to take advantage of propinquity without allowing appetite to be dulled by habit! The cleverest girl may miscalculate where her own interests are concerned, may yield too much at one moment and withdraw too far at the next: it takes a mother’s unerring vigilance and foresight to land her daughters safely in the arms of wealth and suitability. (*HM* 95)

Had her mother not lost faith in Lily, she might have found her beauty an equal or better match with money. A comparison to France can be made in “Madame de Treymes” where Madame de Malrive states that “French mothers part late with their sons” (“MT” 7), and Madame de Treymes informs Durham that “what my mother commands we all do” (“MT” 33). It can be seen that mothers in Europe had even more influence over their children and did not want to let them go that easily.

DiCicco points to another case of Lily’s bad luck: “The culturally sanctioned line dictates that, while a married woman can borrow money from a married man, a

single girl may not” (93). Lily is in a wrong place to begin with. Auchincloss clears up that Lily “has no money in a world that cares for nothing else. Judy Trenor does not mind her husband’s making love to Lily; it is only when he gives her money that she drops her” (346). Moddelmog remarks that “Lily’s lack of self-ownership is directly related to her unmarried status,” she even goes on to say that

For women in the novel, being married constitutes a form of capital, not only by facilitating access to their husbands’ bank accounts but also by shielding them from the uncertainties of reputation. Possessing a seal of domestic virtue that mere suspicions cannot undo, their status renders them as impervious to “talk” as to the vicissitudes of chance (the married women always seem to win at cards). (346)

From this point of view, married women have their husbands’ money and enjoy many more privileges. However, this is only the image that can be seen from the outside.

Women actually encounter many problems in marriage as discussed in Chapter 2.

Although Lily does not have money of her own, Moddelmog explains that Lily at first possesses something that is valuable for a young lady: “Her only form of capital is her reputation” (347). As Lily puts it into words, “the truth about any girl is that once she’s talked about she’s done for” (*HM* 236). And Lily is talked about as she falls from the top of the society. Moddelmog explicates that Lily “loses control over the terms of her self-exposure and thereby faces the possibility of *being* her reputation rather than *owning* it” (345). Thus Lily ends up with no money and no reputation, which proves to be fatal for her.

Wolff argues that Lily is one of those women who have “nothing more to offer than a superb capacity to render themselves agreeably” (*Lily Bart and the Beautiful Death* 21). Lily knows that she needs to take care of this gift: “Her beauty itself was not

the mere ephemeral possession it might have been in the hands of inexperience: her skill in enhancing it, the care she took of it, the use she made of it, seemed to give it a kind of permanence. She felt she could trust it to carry her through to the end” (*HM* 51). She benefits from her beauty all the time. It is as natural as breathing to her. Also, Lily “liked to think of her beauty as a power for good, as giving her the opportunity to attain a position where she should make her influence felt in the vague diffusion of refinement and good taste” (*HM* 36). Lily Bart is beautiful; she knows how to work with it to gain advantage over others and thinks that it is what makes her superior.

Money is a taboo word in polite society. But Wharton thinks a way around it. According to Goldman, Wharton “uses Rosedale’s Jewishness to illuminate economic issues and social hypocrisies in the society that would otherwise remain underground; by being a member of a race reputed to be vulgar and economically savvy, Rosedale can speak about subjects that are taboo to the others” (26). Therefore Rosedale’s purpose is not only to contrast with Lily but he is being used as a means of communication which would never have been spoken in Wharton’s society if it were not for him. Speaking of Rosedale, Goldman adds that

It’s not just his language that offends: even more serious is his willingness to discuss with Lily her financial need. [...] And yet Lily is both offended and relieved by his frankness. The fact that Rosedale frequently speaks of money leads us, not just to a judgment of him as vulgar, but also to one of his purposes in the novel, that is, speaking of the unspeakable. (32)

It is true that what offends is not only his language but what Rosedale talks about; the language plays a part in Wharton’s novels as well.

Wharton's use of English was at a very high level and she "was very grateful to her parents for good idiomatic English" (Salmi 27). Consequently, Salmi claims that language is important in her novels: "The pure usage of English was probably a mark of class. The language used by the upper-class New Yorkers was part of their identity as a class. In her novels Wharton clearly distinguishes between the language of the aristocrats and the vernacular of the upstarts" (27-28). Indeed, both Rosedale, who is not accepted the society in Book I, and Gus Trenor, whose usage is not very pure when he attempts to rape Lily, is not very pure: "I don't doubt you've accepted as much before—and chucked the other chaps as you'd like to chuck me" (HM 154). Characters from "Bunner Sisters" talk in a variety of English which Wharton thought of as being suitable for working-class.<sup>8</sup>

There are some women in Wharton's fiction – there is not a lot of them – who are able to make money on their own. However, they are very much frowned upon by the society in *The House of Mirth*. McDowell points out how the society is "surprisingly ironic at the expense of independent women who pursue careers [...]. These women to some degree lack charm and the feminine graces" (524). McDowell has in mind Gerty Farish, Selden's cousin and Lily's friend. When Lily first talks about her, she jokes makes a joke about her and it only when Lily realizes that Gerty is Selden's cousin that Lily tries to explain and excuse her joke by saying that the difference between her and his cousin is that Gerty "likes being good, and I like being happy" (HM 7). Towards the end of Lily's life, when she chooses to learn a trade, she picks millinery. Salmi produces her opinion that "[t]rimming hats seems to be the only work Wharton can think of for a woman with no skills, as the idea recurs in other stories, too" (37).

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<sup>8</sup> e.g. "Why, Evelina, why shouldn't I, I sh'd like to know? Ain't it your birthday, dear?" ("BS" 169).

Trimming hats is the trade that Wharton's women can do for a living. That and sewing or dress-making. In "Bunner Sisters," Evelina Bunner is very good at doing millinery, Ann Eliza Bunner sews for their clients and their friend, Miss Mellins, is "the dress-maker upstairs" (178). Either way, thread and needle is where the variety ends for female trades in Wharton's fiction. When Lily tries to learn the trade, she fails miserably: "Lily had taken up her work early in January: it was now two months later, and she was still being rebuked for her inability to sew spangles on a hat-frame" (*HM* 299). She finds out that "as a bread-winner she could never compete with professional ability" (*HM* 312-313). She is unskilled to begin with and slow to learn.

In Wharton's novels, there are families in which large sums of money have been the standard for generations such as in the van der Luyden family. But Wharton also "recorded the emergence of a new class, the *nouveau riche*, the people who with their newly acquired wealth penetrated into the New York aristocracy, to the dismay of the latter" (Salmi 27). They have obtained substantial amount of money quite recently and are desperate to get into the society. "Everywhere there is fusion between tradition (such as it is) and the new wealth" (Auchincloss 344). Auchincloss makes it clear that there are rules that apply for the newcomers:

For those who knock at the door of *The House of Mirth* the rules are simple: an opera box, a season in New York, maybe one on Long Island, and then, under the well-paid auspices of a Trojan horse like Carry Fisher or Jack Stepney, the ultimate test of Newport. No matter how vulgar and pushing the husband, no matter how "red and stertorous" the wife, they will ultimately succeed. (344)

Skaggs observes that the desire to get into the society makes the ones already in it much more powerful: "The limited availability of box seats, coupled with a great demand for

them, allowed the possessors of opera boxes an enviable position of privilege and prestige” (NP). According to Wolff, the *nouveau riche* try to pay their access to the society with their money and luxury: “During this period newly wealthy Americans went to Europe and bought ‘old masters’ – not for their beauty but for the instant evidence they gave of culture and limitless success” (*Lily Bart and the Beautiful Death* 16-17). The newcomers such as Simon Rosedale and the Gormers indeed enter the society successfully in *The House of Mirth*. Salmi states that such people are “dreaded by the aristocrats. The aristocrats try to protect themselves, propping the walls around them, but in so doing they become even more imprisoned than they had been” (15). In *The Age of Innocence*, Countess Olenska shows to Newland Archer that ‘the aristocracy’, the van der Luydens, keep their power by being distant and exclusive:

“The van der Luydens,” said Archer, feeling himself pompous as he spoke, “are the most powerful influence in New York society. Unfortunately—owing to her health—they receive very seldom.”

She unclasped her hands from behind her head, and looked at him meditatively.

“Isn't that perhaps the reason?”

“The reason—?”

“For their great influence; that they make themselves so rare.” (1075)

Despite all the power and distance in Wharton’s fiction, the change in the society cannot be stopped.

Money is important in Julius and Regina Beaufort’s story in *The Age of Innocence*. Julius’s business fails. All his friends are nervous to see what has happened to him and his wife. Everybody who means something goes to opera in the evening and Skaggs explains that “[d]isplayed in their evening dresses and jewels, the women

embodied the wealth, refinery, and gentility of their stock” (NP). What Wharton’s characters find is that: “Mrs. Beaufort appeared at the Opera wearing her old smile and a new emerald necklace, society drew a breath of relief” (AI 1229). Skaggs clarifies that “Mrs. Beaufort’s ruse attempts to pacify the fears of New York society. By parading the symbols of wealth and power – her jewels – and submitting herself for public display, Mrs. Beaufort contrives to create an illusion of permanency and stability” (NP). The Beauforts act as if their money was in their account again. However, things are not what they seem to be. Beaufort goes bankrupt. Lefferts is not pleased with the turn of events: “‘If things go on at this pace,’ Lefferts thundered, looking like a young prophet dressed by Poole, and who had not yet been stoned, ‘we shall see our children fighting for invitations to swindlers’ houses, and marrying Beaufort's bastards’” (AI 1284). Marrying Beaufort’s daughter is exactly what Newland’s son, Dallas, does: “It was just what Archer’s eldest son, the pride of his life, was doing; and nobody wondered or reproved,” his wife Fanny

was pretty, amusing and accomplished: what more did any one want? Nobody was narrow-minded enough to rake up against her the half-forgotten facts of her father's past and her own origin. Only the older people remembered so obscure an incident in the business life of New York as Beaufort’s failure, or the fact that after his wife’s death he had been quietly married to the notorious Fanny Ring, and had left the country with his new wife, and a little girl who inherited her beauty. [...] nobody was surprised when Dallas’s engagement was announced. (AI 1295)

This is how society changed between Wharton’s youth and her older age. The rich still dictate to the society how to behave but it was the society’s view on the *nouveau riche*

and the children of the bankrupt that altered over the years. McDowell illustrates that the change did not actually affect only the *nouveau riche* and the families of the bankrupt: “In her fiction Wharton documents social change as it affected woman’s status, and she reflects beyond such documentation the evolution in her own personal views on the role of women in society” (534). Wharton studies the evolution of her society from many angles.

To sum up, money is one of the major sources of problems in Wharton’s works. The act of acquiring it is very important for the characters in need and their relationship to it is formed since the characters’ childhoods. Fathers and husbands are the sole providers for the family and they are to blame if there is a lack of it. Wives and mothers also have some power when it comes to money: they are the managers of it. It can also shield them from many scandals they may be involved in. Because people in polite society simply do not talk about money, Wharton put Rosedale into the story and his being a Jew allows him to speak about such a taboo. Also, the usage of language can qualified as a marker of the character’s class. Furthermore, if a woman wants to earn her living, she usually ends up with a thread and needle doing it because she does not have much of a choice. In addition, Wharton documents the emergence of a new class: the *nouveau-riche*. The polite society frowns upon it at first, but the society as a whole evolves over the course of many years and accept this new class, mixing with it. Alongside this change, even a change in women’s social status happens. Wharton does not highlight this change in most of her works but its features can be seen. We shall look at what consequences Wharton draws from problems in the next chapter.

## 5. Conclusion

Having taken a look at the problems in Wharton's novels, I shall discuss their consequences. Lily Bart is not perfect and she realizes it. She is self-confident only in connection with her surroundings. She appears to have a degree of naiveté in her but that is at the expense of overlooking some facts. She also tries to preserve her freedom. Once people start talking about her, her fall begins. It is society that criticizes Lily and Wharton who criticizes society. Once this happens, Lily is left alone and dies. Lily is not the only one to die in Wharton's stories but death is not the only possible way out that Wharton offers as an escape from the heartless society. Newland Archer matures and accepts what life has to offer him.

Lily Bart is one of the finest and most complex of Wharton's characters. We can see her fall from the peak of New York's society and Goldman claims that "[i]f society is the focus of Wharton's novel, her message about it is not a simple one. Lily Bart, with her fine discriminations in taste and ethics, represents what it has bred at its best, and also what it destroys" (26). Lily behaves the way she was brought up to behave in public. According to Wolff, "[i]t is not altogether easy to trace the origins of Lily's failure" (*Lily Bart and the Beautiful Death* 21). Perhaps it is the way she acts in private when she is not under the scrutiny of the public eye that causes her fall. Perhaps its origins lie much deeper with her controlling mother who much like Wharton's own mother<sup>9</sup> tries to model Lily into what she thinks she should become. Lily's mother was "vigorous and determined figure," who was "still young enough to dance her ball-

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<sup>9</sup> Wharton's mother, Lucretia Rhineland Jones, was a very controlling person and motherly role-model. When Edith was young, "her father's library was her favorite place, her mother told Edith never to read any book without her express permission. In order to save herself the trouble of reading the books first, Edith's mother denied Edith all but the great classics" (Salmi 21).

dresses to rags” (*HM* 30). Her father’s misfortune that he fails to provide enough money plays a role in it, too. Yet even Lily’s own character is not faultless:

She was conscious of having been forgetful, awkward and slow to learn.

It was bitter to acknowledge her inferiority even to herself, but the fact had been brought home to her that as a bread-winner she could never compete with professional ability. Since she had been brought up to be ornamental, she could hardly blame herself for failing to serve any practical purpose; but the discovery put an end to her consoling sense of universal efficiency. (*HM* 312-13)

Thus Lily realizes her futility. Yet there are times when she feels superior. However, those times are usually in connection with her beauty or the surroundings: “What a contrast to the subtle elegance of the setting she had pictured for herself—an apartment which should surpass the complicated luxury of her friends' surroundings by the whole extent of that artistic sensibility which made her feel herself their superior; in which every tint and line should combine to enhance her beauty” (*HM* 115). Lily knows about her deficiencies and that she is dependent on the outside to show her superiority.

While dealing with society, one should be knowledgeable of its rules. Lily knows the rules but Wolff claims that “[o]ne of Lily’s genuine virtues is that she never fully loses her naiveté” (*A Feast of Words* 117). Wolff supports this view of Lily’s naiveté by saying that “we discover that Lily is capable only of short-term schemes” (*Lily Bart and the Beautiful Death* 29). Indeed, this seems to be the truth about Lily. She never fulfills her mission to find and marry a wealthy husband. Mrs. Fisher tells Selden that earlier in Lily’s life, “[a]n Italian Prince, rich and the real thing, wanted to marry her; but just at the critical moment a good-looking step-son turned up, and Lily was silly enough to flirt with him” (*HM* 197). Mrs. Fisher assesses her character clearly while

talking to Selden: “That’s Lily all over, you know: she works like a slave preparing the ground and sowing her seed; but the day she ought to be reaping the harvest she oversleeps herself or goes off on a picnic” (*HM* 197). Ironically enough, Lily goes off on a picnic with Selden when she almost gets engaged to Percy Gryce.

I do not think that Lily is simply being naïve. Wolff herself observes that Lily is sick of her society but chooses to overlook its cruelty: “Most often, Lily handles her moral queasiness by choosing not to know the full implications of her plight” (*Lily Bart and the Beautiful Death* 24). Lily understands that if one wants to survive in her society, one needs not to play fair sometimes and what she “craved, and really felt herself entitled to, was a situation in which the noblest attitude should also be the easiest” (*HM* 275). Lily’s failed attempts to marriage are only to preserve her good conscience: “Hitherto her intermittent impulses of resistance had sufficed to maintain her self-respect” (*HM* 275). Thus I disagree that Lily maintains her naiveté. The society she knows too well does not let her do so.

DiCicco proves that Lily also knows that she can be with her friends as an unmarried girl only for short time because “[w]hen a girl fails to amuse, she is in trouble” (89). DiCicco then goes on to say that this freedom is connected to maleness and limited time: “the single woman can enjoy the manly privilege of ‘personal freedom’ for a limited time only” (87). Because Lily looks away from the unpleasant, she chooses not to see that her society grows tired of her and, as DiCicco points out, “[i]t takes a near rape for Lily to awaken to the fact that she has to pay for the freedom” (88). Lily realizes that she is in danger when she is told that Gus Trenor’s wife is not in town. Lily wonders: “Do you mean that Judy is not in the house—not in town?” (*HM* 152). She is humiliated by the talk involving money and what Gus hints she had to pay in return for it. When he tries to touch her, she draws “back from him with a desperate

assumption of scorn,” but what she then realizes is that: “The words—the words were worse than the touch!” (*HM* 155). Wharton shows that one can hurt with psychological abuse equally as much or even more than with physical abuse.

DiCicco explains that this society seems to have rules about how long a female may remain unmarried because “[g]irls who refuse to comply and who attempt to maintain their existence [...] beyond the tolerated time frame must then be stopped,” and it is not men who mind their overstay but “[t]heir behavior will not be tolerated, especially by the wives in society, who perceive these girls as unacceptably blurring of the requisite line between wives and singles” (93). Being a wife has certain benefits which were already discussed in Chapter 4 but it also has its downsides as illustrated in Chapter 2. However, if the wives are willing to overlook the downsides, it is only logical that it must be the wives who maintain these lines. If they did not and single women would enjoy the same privileges as the married ones, the exclusivity of their status in society would be lost and, as Modellmog has it, “Wharton’s New York is founded upon judgment and dependent upon the ideology of domesticity to imbue its judgments with authority” (348). The wives have a certain status and exert its powers.

However, this is only one of the final factors that caused Lily’s downfall. This time it is Bertha Dorset who cheats on her husband with Ned Silverton, while it is hinted that she also had an affair with Lawrence Selden. Bertha decides to ruin Lily’s reputation by linking Lily to Ned to save her own reputation. When she discovered the plan, “Lily’s colour rose: it was growing clear to her that Bertha was pursuing an object, following a line she had marked out for herself,” but she knows how much is at stake for Bertha and that “[t]he puerility of the attempt disarmed Lily’s indignation: did it not prove how horribly the poor creature was frightened?” (*HM* 216-17). Bertha is revealed

to be scared of Lily and Lily's good manners do not allow her to increase the significance of the scandal by reacting to it improperly in public.

It is not only the wives who disapprove of other members of the society. Society can make one fall and it does not matter how well one knows the rules if the odds are against one. But it can also raise one up. Skaggs suggests that in *The Age of Innocence*, "Wharton understood the power of New York's elite to promote and condemn anyone or any venture with both its financial backing and its social approval. Ellen Olenska and eventually Newland Archer both learn the necessity of society's sanction and the sting of its rejection" (NP). Society itself is also under scrutiny in Wharton's work as her narrator judges the society because, as Quindlen suggests, "as a novel *The House of Mirth* has it both ways, disapproving of the mores of the very rich and yet portraying them as invincible, often correct" (viii). Society cannot be conquered by an individual who has as many issues to deal with as Lily has.

What follows when Lily is unjustly judged by her acquaintances is that she leaves the society. Salmi observes that "[i]n Wharton's fiction, the ostracized character is always a woman. She breaks the rules of society by leaving her husband, divorcing him, or, like Lily, by scandalizing herself in the eyes of her class" (59). Lily lives her life from day to day and "[i]f she slipped she recovered her footing, and it was only afterward that she was aware of having recovered it each time on a slightly lower level," she never realizes that she falls down until it is too late, "[s]he had rejected Rosedale's offer without conscious effort; her whole being had risen against it; and she did not yet perceive that, by the mere act of listening to him, she had learned to live with ideas which would once have been intolerable to her" (*HM* 275-76). And so she lowers her standards time and again until she is at the bottom of the social ladder.

Lily lives in a society where one needs money and, as Auchincloss asserts, Lily “lives in every way beyond her means, but she accepts the consequences” (343-44). Moddelmog notices that when Bertha accuses her of being unchaste with Ned, her “‘case’ has been decided without her own testimony and in accordance with a version of reality grounded in reputation” (348). Salmi notes that the story shows that Lily “has tried to free herself from the role she was expected to play, and she has failed” (37). She subconsciously scorns what she has to do – marrying for money – and Salmi gives her credit for having “tried the utmost to establish for herself the kind of existence she considers worthy of her, and she fails. She gives up when she has no strength left” (96-97). Lily has no more choices.

In the final scene before she goes to sleep, when she is fully conscious, Lily is desperate, “she could bear it; but what strength would be left her the next day? Perspective had disappeared” (*HM* 339). She is a drug user because of her insomnia, which she suffers before her death just like her father suffered when he had gone bankrupt. “She had long since raised the dose to its highest limit, but tonight she felt she must increase it. She knew she took a slight risk in doing so [...] But after all that was but one chance in a hundred: the action of the drug was incalculable,” it is sleep that she “desperately needed” (*HM* 339-40). Lily is aware that there is a possibility that she can die but “[s]he did not, in truth, consider the question very closely—the physical craving for sleep was her only sustained sensation” (*HM* 340). When the drug begins to soothe her, she returns “to her normal view of life. Tomorrow would not be so difficult after all: she felt sure that she would have the strength to meet it. She did not quite remember what it was that she had been afraid to meet, but the uncertainty no longer troubled her,” she feels something more: “she had felt herself alone, and now the sense of loneliness had vanished” (*HM* 340). The dream that she has Nettie Struther’s child makes her feel

much better and she does what a mother would do – cares for the baby. Nettie Struther, née Crane, was one of the girls Gerty Farish helps with her charity. Lily helped her with some of the money she received from Gus Trenor, about which she did not know at the time. Nettie was “one of the discouraged victims of over-work and anaemic parentage” (*HM* 330). Lily had met her earlier that day and went to see her and her baby.

At one point when Lily is falling asleep, there is “something she must tell Selden, some word she had found that should make life clear between them,” but we never get to know the word (*HM* 341). Thus she dies, dreaming of a baby she never had and of what she never has the chance to tell Selden. Nettie Struther’s destiny is the destiny she would have had had she not been trained for and lived in a world which only cares for money and appearances. She would be loved, full of energy and alive. DiCicco comments that what Lily “learns is that there is no world outside of the social circus for the never-married girl. [...] For the stubbornly single American girl, there is only the ‘house of mirth,’ a social world dominated and controlled by amusement-seeking norms” (95). Lily would indeed feel much better outside the ‘social circus.’ Goldman thinks that “the ultimate message to be read from Wharton’s making her interloper a Jew might be that this society is so frivolous, so irresponsible, so wasteful, cruel, and self-serving, that even a vulgar Jew is better than they are” (34). Lily’s case is a harsh and realistic criticism of New York’s society at the beginning of the 1900’s.

Lily is not the only character who dies in Wharton’s novels. Evelina Bunner and her baby die because she was cheated into marrying a terrible man. She does not know his dark secret at the time of her marriage but he is the real cause her bad fate. Wolff observes the despair at the ending of the story: “Everything has been lost, even the hope in hope in some benevolent God. [...] The story ends with cosmic desolation: Evelina dies, Ann Eliza dismantles the shop” (*A Feast of Words* 70). Ann Eliza is completely

alienated from her sister, who had converted to a different faith before coming home, so when the priest visits Evelina, all Ann Eliza “knew was that it meant that Evelina was going, and going, under this alien guidance, even farther from her than to the dark places of death” (“BS” 243). This may be a coincidence but both Lily and Evelina die in Chapter XIII. Number 13 is considered unlucky in Western culture.

Margaret Aubyn is another dead character of Wharton’s. Wolff suggests that Aubyn’s “failure, like the failure of the other women in the early stories who yearn to do something with their lives, suggests Wharton’s concern about her own future” (*A Feast of Words* 105). However, her death is different from that of Lily’s and Evelina’s in that she dies at the beginning of the story. From what we can read about her death, she dies under similar circumstances. It happens far away from her society – in London. Lily also dies far away from her acquaintances and Evelina returns home only to die, already alienated from her sister. Mrs. Aubyn, like Lily and Evelina, also dies without the love of the man she has feelings for. Glennard has “been incapable of loving her” (Wharton, “The Touchstone” 164). In this sense, Glennard can be viewed as a male counterpart to Lily Bart, about whom it is unsure whether she could love Selden.

Death of a character is not the only way out of problems in Wharton’s works. Salmi points out that “[t]he solution to the problem is generally escape of some kind, or only attempt at escape, that eventually leads to conformity with the prevailing conditions” (15). Wharton herself is not understood by her family when she first discovers she wants to write, Salmi clarifies that Wharton “first escaped by means of undefinable illnesses and frequent trips to Europe” (16). In *The Age of Innocence*, Wolff observes that “[t]here is no tragedy in this novel: Newland has been forced to come to terms with the limitations [...] at the end of the novel in 1905, he can contemplate the

integrity of his character, the realization of his nature and of his finite happiness” (*A Feast of Words* 341). Wolff continues that:

In the end he has gained more than he has lost: he has not rejected his unique moment in history; he has taken the best of it and built upon it. His final act affirms the coherence of his own identity, and in this assertion of “self,” Newland achieves genuine maturity. [...] Newland has escaped the limitations of old New York in the only way that was ever *really* available to him, by achieving an inner peace that transcends time and place altogether. (*A Feast of Words* 333)

Although Newland does not realize it at the time of the crisis, he chooses to do the best that he could have by not leaving May. If he chose to leave May, it would not turn out well:

Wharton never supposed that Newland could find happiness with a woman like Ellen; and though there are earlier outlines of the novel in which he does break his engagement to May and marry Ellen, he and Ellen are not happy together. There is no shared sense of reality: she misses the life in Europe that she has always known; he misses the familiar amenities of old New York; and finally they separate and return to their different worlds. (Wolff, *A Feast of Words* 327)

Wharton decides that she does not want Newland to leave May. If she did, she could show yet again the cultural differences of two societies – the European and the American ones. But she chooses to show that even if one’s dreams do not work out, it does not necessarily mean the end of the world. One can work with what one has and make a nice living for oneself. That is if one has enough money. Wharton shows in her novels the immense difference between men and women if they are in need of money.

Men are able to provide for themselves, women are usually not. But if that is not an issue, one needs to learn to work with what they have. DeBorde comments that *The Age of Innocence* “is about recognizing that true growth is accepting what is good— marriage and two children—instead of demanding the impossible” (27). That is the message that mature Wharton<sup>10</sup> is trying to communicate.

There is always the possibility of choice. In “Xingu,” Mrs. Roby decides to leave her society of the Lunch Club to join a bridge-party. At first, the ladies remaining at the Club “were disposed, however, to feel that [Mrs. Roby’s] departure — now that she had performed the sole service she was ever likely to render them—would probably make for greater order and dignity in the impending discussion” (Wharton, “Xingu” 15). The society thinks that now that Mrs. Roby has been used in every way she could possibly be used that it is better that Mrs. Roby leaves. The ladies are shocked when Osric Dane decides to join Mrs. Roby unexpectedly, especially when they hear Osric Dane “say, in a voice which she did not take the pains to lower” to ask more about Xingu, a topic which must be much more interesting to her than discussion about her own book (Wharton, “Xingu” 16).

The final question is: does Edith Wharton offer any solutions to the issues that she talks about in her books? To put it into simple words, I do not think that she does. Her characters either die or are assimilated by the society. Their problems are rooted too deep in the society. The only solution to those problems that can be observed in Wharton’s fiction is the slow evolution of the society itself, which can be seen in *The Age of Innocence*. As I have shown, some kind of revolution is also possible, but “Xingu” is too short a story to fully explore that topic.

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<sup>10</sup> *The House of Mirth* was published in 1905 while *The Age of Innocence* in 1920, after death of her longtime friend, Henry James (Salmi 24).

In conclusion, Lily Bart is not meant to be a strong character. Her self-confidence is dependent on who or what is around her at the moment. Some critics think that she manages to preserve a certain degree of naiveté. However, she knows about the facts that are not pleasant and that exist in the society and she chooses to overlook them. Lily wants to keep her freedom in the status of a single woman. When she realizes that it is no longer possible, she is nearly raped. The society feels endangered and tries to stop her. Wharton criticizes the society while showing this. Once Lily begins to fall, it is inevitable that she sinks to the bottom and dies all alone. The striking fact is that she dies dreaming of Selden and the baby of a girl she once helped with her money, hinting that if circumstances were different, she could be happy with a child, married to Selden. There is also Evelina Bunner and Margaret Aubyn who die alienated and without their true loves in Wharton's fiction. Newland Archer is a very different example. He has his share of suffering but since money is not an issue in his case, he matures and learns to live as a married man to May Welland. Also, Mrs. Roby shows us that if there are no economic issues, one can make a change in society. Wharton does not offer any real solutions to the problems she points at in her works.

The key points of my findings can be summarized as follows: Wharton's novels and short stories are fiction which is based on her own life. This gives them a degree of reality that cannot be obtained through anything else than knowing such an environment and problems from personal experience. Wharton's male characters are based on men from her life – mostly passive but possibly wicked. Her women are their opposite – active and mostly kind. Most of the female characters are rule-breakers, either trying to break free and live on their own, or get divorced, which is an option that is not supported by the society, just like Wharton was not supported with her writing and divorce. Her characters try to make a good match in marriage. May Welland is socially

acceptable for Newland Archer and so he conforms and marries her, by which he is rewarded with a long and fairly happy life. Lily Bart subconsciously knows that she does not want to marry without love and so she tries to establish her life on her own.

Trying to get a divorce is a socially unacceptable for most of the characters. However, that is what some desire, to be able to be with whomever they wish. Ellen Olenska wants it to be free; Madame de Malrive needs it to be able to re-marry. Wharton is supportive of them, being a divorcee herself. The only reason the New York society accepts as a valid reason for divorce is infidelity, which is an issue that some of the characters face as well.

Some of Wharton's women try to break free of the society. Wharton has two that succeed. One is Mrs. Roby who leaves behind her acquaintances from the Lunch Club. Ellen Olenska manages to live somewhat free in her little house at the beginning of *The Age of Innocence*. When she leaves for Europe, she is finally free. Wharton's characters are not used to privacy and their identity is directly linked to their public exposure. Lily Bart feels confident only when she is around people who marvel at her beauty.

Money is a problem mostly for female characters if there is not enough of it. Males are usually able to provide for themselves and their families, making them the bread-winners. Wharton criticizes this with the whole of Lily's story. Money is also the cause of a social change. At first of the more visible change, the appearance of the *nouveau riche* but one can notice that Wharton also records a shift in the female position in society.

Lily's story is the most striking one of them all. It shows the brutality of the society and what it can do to a person who has been trained to be a member but could not maintain the status due to a series of unfortunate events. Lily sees the dark side of the society but chooses not to see it at first. She wants to keep her freedom because

marriage without love would not be bearable for her. Thus she ends up alone, dreaming of Selden and a child she would never have. Margaret Aubyn and Evelina Bunner die under similar circumstances, without love and friends.

Newland's story ends positively, showing that if money is not an issue, one can learn to work with what they already have and lead quite a happy life. As Modellmog comments, Wharton is "[r]esolving its conflicts by not resolving them, Wharton's short story seems to offer a literary alternative to such legal absolutes as truth, justice, and right" (351). Wharton does not really provide solutions to the problems that she highlights. Her purpose can be seen as to raise awareness about the problems in the society that might otherwise pass unnoticed.

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## English Résumé

The aim of this thesis is a comparative analysis of Edith Wharton's two novels and five short stories, the novels being *The Age of Innocence* and *The House of Mirth* and the short stories being "Bunner Sisters," "Coming Home," "Madame De Treymes," "The Touchstone," and "Xingu." The objective is to discover what problems Edith Wharton's female characters encounter, what consequences these problems have and whether Wharton offers any solutions to them.

The first part is about the problems. Wharton's characters generally either have trouble finding a spouse or, when they are married, leaving their spouse. The main source of their problems in this area is the pressure that society exercises over the characters. There are also problems with freedom, identity and its connection to public exposure and ones that the characters have with acquiring money. It is usually very hard for women to provide for themselves if they have no male relative, and if they want to work, their choice of trade is very limited.

The consequences of these problems are as follows: Lily Bart's story shows the brutality of the society. She was trained to be merely ornamental but could not maintain her status because she developed a conscience and could not marry for money. Lily ends up all alone, dying with unfulfilled dreams of domestic happiness. The conditions of Margaret Aubyn's and Evelina Bunner's deaths are similar to Lily's. Newland Archer chooses to be assimilated by the society and matures from the rebellion of his youth. Mrs. Roby is the only character to make a difference and win over the society by leaving it.

The issues that Wharton's characters encounter in her different works of fiction are similar. All of them are problems that Wharton knew from her social *milieu*. Because of this fact, her stories are very realistic. In her works, Wharton does not offer

any solutions to the problems which she highlights to her readership. She only shows what would happen to people in such situations – they are most likely to either suffer or conform to the society. Wharton also shows her characters' most likely strategies in the times of crisis such as knowing how to behave well in society or how to appear in the way that is needed.

## Czech Résumé

Cílem této práce je komparativní analýza dvou novel a pěti povídek Edith Whartonové. Novely zde rozebírané jsou *Dům radovánek* (*The House of Mirth*) a *Věk nevinnosti* (*The Age of Innocence*) a povídkami jsou „Bunner Sisters,“ „Coming Home,“ „Madame De Treymes,“ „The Touchstone,“ a „Xingu.“ Zamýšleným účelem této práce je zjištění s jakými problémy se setkávají ženské postavy Edith Whartonové, jaké jsou jejich následky a zda Whartonová nabízí nějaká řešení těchto problémů.

V první části se hovoří o problémech. Postavy Whartonové většinou stěží nacházejí životního partnera, anebo když už jsou ženaté nebo vdané, tak od nich nemohou odejít. Hlavním zdrojem problémů v této oblasti je tlak působený společností na již zmíněné postavy. Whartonová také popisuje problémy se svobodou, identitou a jejím napojení na publicitu a ty, které postavy mají při zaopatřování peněz. Ženy mají obvykle velké potíže uživit se, když nemají žádného mužského příbuzného anebo manžela, a pokud se rozhodnou pracovat, tak je jejich možnost volby povolání velice omezená.

Následky probíraných problémů jsou tyto: Příběh Lily Bartové poukazuje na krutost společnosti. Vycvičena k tomu, aby byla pouhou ozdobou, není si schopna udržet své postavení, protože se u ní vyvinulo svědomí a nemůže se vdát jen pro peníze. Lily umírá úplně sama s nenaplněnými sny o rodinném štěstí. Margaret Aubynová a Evelína Bunnerová umírají za podobných podmínek. Newland Archer se rozhodne přizpůsobit společnosti a tím vyroste ze své mladické vzpurnosti. Paní Robyová je jedinou postavou, které se podaří udělat změnu a vyhrát nad společností tím, že ji opouští.

Těžkosti, které postavy Whartonové potkávají v jejich dílech si jsou podobné. Všechny ale Whartonová dobře znala ze svých sociálních kruhů, proto jsou její povídky

tak realistické. Whartonová ve svých dílech nenabízí žádná řešení problémů, na které svého čtenáře upozorňuje. Pouze ukazuje, co by se stalo lidem v takovýchto situacích – buď budou trpět anebo se podvolí společnosti. Whartonová také ukazuje strategie svých postav ve chvílích krize, jakými je například znalost toho, jak se správně ve společnosti zachovat anebo jak budit takový dojem, jaký je potřeba.