IN EDITH WHARTON'S SHORT STORY "The Introducers" (1905), Tilney, a supremely knowing fellow, asserts in his most knowing manner, "It takes a pretty varied experience of life to find out that there are worse states than marriage." As a paean to domesticity, this is hardly in the same league with old chestnuts of the "it takes a heap of living to make a house a home" variety, but it is as close to an impassioned defense of marriage as Wharton ever presents explicitly in her fiction. At least once in her conversation, though, she went well beyond Tilney's tepid affirmation. Percy Lubbock reports that he was present one day when Wharton in the course of a discussion of Middlemarch "spoke out, 'Ah, the poverty, the miserable poverty, of any love that lies outside of marriage, of any love that is not a living together, a sharing of all!'" Such an outburst is, of course, more than a little surprising given the failure of Wharton's own marriage, the predominantly bleak tenor of her work generally, and the fact that the bleakness inheres most strongly in her marriage stories, which, as Geoffrey Walton notes aptly, convey "a stronger feeling of pathos and even tragedy" than do her other works. Clearly, a glance at most of the marriages Wharton presents, a group that includes such infelicitous matings as those of the Fromes, Dorsets, Marvells, and deChelleses, might lead one to find even Wharton's wry avowal of faith in matrimony in "The Introducers" a bit improbable. Yet neither Tilney's comment nor the emphatic assertion recorded by Lubbock is finally at odds with the overriding outlook on marriage that Wharton presents in her works. Though she knows that all too few marriages offer the perfect "living together" and "sharing of all" that she so passionately envisions—and, to be sure, presents no marriages of this sort—she also knows full well that there
are indeed "worse states" outside marriage, states verging on the "miserable poverty" of emotional, moral, and spiritual chaos. And her defense of marriage is not merely negative, for she stresses throughout her career that even unfortunate marriages can have worth for the individual and society. Positive as it tends to be, though, her defense is almost invariably a somber one, as even her best marriages are successful usually only insofar as they lead married folk to see the bleakness of life and the depth of human folly.

Wharton's rather Jamesian vision of marriage as invariably imperfect but invariably of potential value as well is apparent in her first works depicting married life, the early stories "The Fullness of Life (1893) and "The Lamp of Psyche" (1895). Both works merit a close look because between them they define a stance toward marriage from which Wharton never departs during her long career to come. Though the wives who are protagonists in both stories find their marriages exceedingly disillusioning experiences, neither sees any other valid possibility for herself than continuing in the union she has chosen. In accepting their disillusionment, they foreshadow the similar acceptance by a goodly number of Wharton's marrieds and act in a manner that Wharton never fails to admire as one that leads to personal growth and social stability.

"The Fullness of Life" is a fantasy in which a woman whose taste is impeccable and whose longing for beauty unquenchable finds exquisite satisfaction at the point of death in knowing that she will never again hear "the creakings of her husband's boots—those horrible boots—and that no one would come to bother her about the next day's dinner . . . or the butcher's book . . . (1:12). With these serene awarenesses, she passes away and finds herself in an afterlife of surpassing loveliness. There she tells the presiding "Spirit of Life" that she has missed the "fullness of life" and that in large measure this failure derives from her marriage. Merely "fond" of her husband, she confesses that she could not abide his flaws: "His boots creaked, and he always slammed the door when he went out, and he never read anything but railway novels and the sporting advertisements in the papers—
and—and, in short, we never understood each other in the least” (1:14). Too typical for her of their life together was the moment in the tabernacle of Orcagna when she was so smitten with all the beauty about her that she wept because “the joy, the mystery ... seemed too intolerable to be borne,” and turned to her husband, only to hear him say “mildly: ‘Hadn’t we better be going? There doesn’t seem to be much to see here, and you know the table d’ hote dinner is at half-past six o’clock’” (1:16). With a whole catalogue of such memories, the woman finds her death a heavenly escape from her marriage indeed.

Her happiness seems assured when she is told by the Spirit “that every soul which seeks in vain on earth for a kindred soul to whom it can lay bare its inmost being shall find that soul here and be united for eternity” (1:16). Exultant, she meets her perfect soul’s mate and realizes that for all time they will see everything “with the self-same eyes and tell each other in the same words all that we think and feel” (1:17). So close are they, in fact, that she finds to her joy they admire not merely the same art, literature, and music but even the same aspects of each revered work. Her vision of a blissful eternity is dispelled, however, when she hears of the less than sanguine prospects awaiting the poor fellow left behind with his creaking boots. He, alas, she is told, will have no boon companion through eternity because he has foolishly imagined his wife to be that “kindred soul” for whom all seek, and “for such delusions eternity itself contains no cure.” Learning this, she realizes that she cannot blast the man’s hopes: “If he had come here first,” she insists, “he would have waited for me for years and years, and it would break his heart not to find me here when he comes” (1:20). To the Spirit’s warning that she is “choosing for eternity,” she replies “with a half-sad smile, ‘Do you still keep up here that old fiction about choosing? . . . How can I help myself? He will expect to find me here when he comes, and he would never believe you if you told him that I had gone away with someone else—never, never.’” Consequently, the story ends with her resignedly “seated alone on the threshold” of the afterlife, listening “for the creaking of his boots” (1:20).
At first glance, Delia Corbett in “The Lamp of Psyche” seems a good deal more fortunate than the unnamed woman in “The Fullness of Life.” She believes she has found in this world the soul’s mate that the earlier woman found only too late. Delia’s first husband, “poor Benson,” was a crass moral weakling, but his convenient death allowed Delia to attain “the one portion denied to all other women on earth, the immense, the unapproachable privilege of becoming Laurence Corbett’s wife” (1:42). Having dreamed even while Benson was alive of becoming helpmate to the most gracious and refined man of her day, the romantic, idealistic Delia sees nothing ahead but tasteful joy and “noble leisure” (1:53). Her happiness is marred, however, when she discovers that her new husband sat out the Civil War. Having lost relatives and friends in the fighting, Delia is shocked not merely by Corbett’s failure to serve but by his insouciance in accounting for it. His initial explanation, “I don’t think I know,” casually yields under her prodding to another: “Well—it all happened some time ago, . . . and the truth is that I’ve completely forgotten the excellent reasons I doubtless had at the time for remaining at home” (1:56), a response so unsatisfactory to Delia that it leads her to accuse him of cowardice. After an hour, though, she apologizes, because as “a woman of sense she could do no less.” Corbett, as is his wont, is “perfectly charming; it was inevitable that he should go on being charming to the end of the chapter.” No less inevitable is it that “she should go on being in love with him.” However, “for the passionate worship which she had paid her husband she substituted a tolerant affection which possessed precisely the same advantages” (1:57).

Neither “The Fullness of Life” nor “The Lamp of Psyche” is a terribly happy story, of course, but each does offer an affirmation of sorts in the midst of its grimness. The affirmation, a somber one to be sure, and reminiscent of James’s affirmation in The Portrait of a Lady, posits marriage as an institution that can enable people to grow by making them confront the pain Wharton saw as central to existence, a confrontation in Wharton’s work that often leads one to be disabused of pleasant but fatuous illusions. In both stories one
sees what is to become a typical Wharton marriage situation, one in which a person of some sensitivity who is prone to the self-deception of believing that perfect bliss and beauty are within human reach is yoked to another incapable of appreciating such sensitivity, much less of manifesting it, and too pedestrian ever to have harbored any longing for an illusory perfection of bliss or beauty. In "The Fullness of Life," death itself offers no real escape from the entrapment; and in "The Lamp of Psyche," a second marriage proves no more liberating, ultimately, than the first. And certainly this paucity of actual alternatives to the imperfect marriage is also to become a standard element in Wharton's marital fiction. But a third factor that is to be a feature in a number of Wharton's accounts of such dreary marriages as these is also evident—one that at least palliates the grimness somewhat: the redemptive capacity of the sensitive mates here to put aside delusory hopes and grimly accept what must be accepted. Thus, for Wharton, the decision of each woman to go on with her flawed husband is the only sound one, and her approval of these two who bear what might have once seemed to them the unbearable is manifest.

For either woman in these two stories to do other than what she ultimately does would be, for Wharton, to pursue a course of self-indulgence and frivolity. Were the unmarried initiate into the tastefully appointed afterlife to allow her husband to go through eternity without her, she would not only be hurting him but would, in effect, be consigning herself to an endless conversation with herself. Her soul's mate is studiously rendered by Wharton with such colorlessness that he seems little more than a reflector of the woman's aesthetic sensibility; and over the years, one suspects, even self-admiration and self-congratulation for one's impeccable taste would pall. What the woman's clumsy, plodding husband offers her, on the other hand—the opportunity for commitment to another and for growth through loving accommodation to that other—is a better bet for lasting fulfillment. Similarly, by quietly accepting her second husband as he is, Delia Corbett overcomes the unfortunate propensities in her own nature. Foolishly romantic previously, convinced that
perfection not only is attainable but indeed is to be found in her second husband, Delia is living in a fool's world, caught up, like the woman in "The Fullness of Life," in an orgy of self-admiration because of her ostensible refinement and sensitivity. Perceiving at last that no marriage offers perfect bliss because life offers no perfect bliss, Delia learns a good deal. Though she will live with less idealism, she will live more intelligently, more aware that life, as the wife in the earlier story acknowledges, is less a matter of grand choices than of accepting what has been thrust upon one. With such knowledge one is not only more at peace with oneself but more likely to be at peace with others.

No less, then, than Melville's Urania in "After the Pleasure Party" does Wharton acknowledge that "such the dicing of blind fate / Few matching halves here meet and mate." But rather than a justification for bitterness and flight, Wharton, as we have observed, sees the unhappy marriage as itself a potentially educative if never joyous experience. In this connection Blake Nevius states, "In the antiromantic tradition none of the love affairs in Edith Wharton's novels acquires interest or significance until one or both of the partners is married. Once she has her characters ensnared as a result of their sentimental miscalculations, she is able to introduce a second, contingent theme." This theme, notes Nevius, involves Wharton's inquiry into "the extent of one's moral obligations to those individuals who, legally or within the framework of existing manners, conventions, taboos, apparently have the strictest claim on one's loyalty." The conclusion Wharton reaches invariably in her marriage works, whether novels or stories, is that there is indeed a compelling moral obligation to see through one's commitment to one's mate, even if the commitment was undertaken with minimal experience and awareness. If one can honor such a commitment, as do the two women in the stories we have looked at thus far, it indicates the presence of a finely developed moral sense, one that may well have grown out of the truth to which marriage brings so many in Wharton's world—the truth that the world is a hard place, indifferent if not inimical.
to our desires. Consequently, in Wharton’s austere vision, marriage presents one with the chance to dwell with the wise in the house of pain rather than amid the fools who flock to the house of mirth. There in the darker house, purged of illusions, no longer seeing fulfillment in frivolity or freedom in irresponsibility, one achieves not happiness, perhaps, but the clear vision and the moral awareness that link one to the great continuum of civility and order that Wharton hopes will persist even in the face of what she sees as ever-increasing chaos and stupidity.

Certainly, Wharton knows that one need not marry to come to the threshold of the house of pain, that other paths are available. But for Wharton marriage is infallibly an experience that will bring one to the choice of entering or turning back to the other house. Why this should be so for her is not hard to discern. Wharton has few sentimental illusions about human nature. One looks in vain through her work for any characterization in which the human potential for virtue is overestimated. With this less than sanguine perception, it naturally follows for Wharton that any relationship that demands of an individual capacities for sharing, sacrifice, and endurance is going to be a terribly difficult one, one that can force a confrontation with hard questions about oneself and about life. Marriage, of course, is such a relationship, in some ways the epitome of such relationships; and, therefore, to Wharton the marriage ceremony is usually nothing less than the first step in the direction of the looming house of darkness.

Many marrieds, needless to say, retreat from a confrontation with the hard questions to which marriage can bring them; but even many of this weaker sort are, as Wharton notes wryly, well served by marriage, for the experience can keep them from manifesting the worst flaws in their natures. By generating a routine, a round of things that come between a couple—“children, duties, visits, bores, relations”—matrimony can “protect married people from each other” (1:123), as a character in “Souls Belated” notes sardonically but accurately. Or, as Wharton notes elsewhere in the same story, a couple’s “common obligations . . . make the most
imperfect marriage in some sort a center of gravity" (1:108). Drawn to this center of gravity, then, this buffer of the routine, the partners have less time or inclination to attack each other or to indulge those traits that might ultimately injure their mates. Though one might hope that marriage would offer more than this, offer if not love at least the wisdom that comes with experience and disillusionment, its capacity for keeping men and women from hurting one another or embarking on the courses bound to lead to folly and suffering that they might have followed had they stayed single is, for all her sardonicism here, not, finally, taken lightly by Wharton. More than a little cynical about human nature, Wharton, like James, has no reason to believe, as Howells tried to, that marriage somehow can secure one from pain and fatuity. Marriage, to Wharton, is, like all other areas of existence, a grim undertaking. But if in the very midst of the grimness that marriage itself helps perpetuate it also provides some mitigation, any mitigation, Wharton does not see this as a negligible benefit—even if the benefit involves little more than the creation of a marital routine so boring that those who might otherwise be dangerous are stultified sufficiently to forget the use of fangs and claws. Of course, there are still other married folk—most, actually, as far as Wharton’s works show—who, unable to grow in understanding through matrimony, cannot even avail themselves of this opportunity to be stultified by the marital routine into something approximating security and stability. These attempt ill-advised escapes from marriage, become involved in sordid liaisons, or use their marriages as weapons in a fight for social status and power. Because there are so many of this sort in Wharton’s work, there are numerous bad marriages, marriages lacking even the slightest mitigation of the badness; but for Wharton the evil here resides far less in the institution of matrimony itself than in those husbands and wives who do not avail themselves of its somber possibilities for growth through pain and for palliation through unquestioning loyalty to the routine.

But again, whether benefits are derived in the marriages Wharton depicts or not, one must remember that her mar-
riage works are never entirely untinged with grimness because matrimony is inescapably part of a world that Wharton saw as far more bleak than otherwise. Wharton’s third marriage story, “A Journey” (1899), presents a marriage marked by a horror that may be more extreme than that found in any other union depicted by her but that certainly is reflective of a darkness that touches virtually all her accounts of wedded life. In this work a recently married young woman finds that her sickly husband has died in his train berth as she is taking him home to New York after a futile trip to Colorado for his health. Her great concern is that no one know of his death, for she fears being put off the train with the corpse before she can get to New York and the solace and support of family and friends. She succeeds in convincing everyone that her husband is resting quietly behind the drawn curtain, but the strain finally tells on her, and she faints as they enter New York, “striking her head against the dead man’s berth” (1:87). Adding to the general unpleasantness of the story is the fact that the marriage itself was nothing like what the bride confidently expected it to be. Shortly after the wedding, her husband’s health failed, turning him into an irritable, demanding invalid rather than the exciting man she thought she was marrying. Thus, as in the stories before, though more horribly, and as in so many stories to come, does Wharton show bright hopes for wedded life turn to the darkest of dross.

There are, as I noted, no other marital situations in Wharton’s work quite as horrible, perhaps, as that in “The Journey,” but there are so many sufficiently distressing to show kinship with it as to make one wonder why marital misfortune and the terrors and grim triumphs that mark it should so prompt Wharton’s creative energies. In part, of course, the failure of Wharton’s own marriage might have led her to turn often to the bad marriage as a subject; but, more importantly, the subject may have attracted her as well because characters’ failures to make the most of marriage could serve as a potent and ready means of indicting them and their society. In other words, given the opportunities Wharton sees marriage as offering, failure to make a go of one’s marriage or to derive benefits from it is often the clearest indication of
moral shabbiness. Moreover, the polite society that is usually Wharton’s fictional milieu is one in which marriage would naturally present itself as a chief means of establishing the conflict and complication that generate the serious moral inquiry she seeks to undertake. After all, gunfights, battlefields, whale hunts, and skirmishes between striking workers and police take place far from comfortable New York drawing-rooms. Deep personal anguish, however, is no stranger even in the best of society, and there it often is intimately tied up with the unfortunate marriage—hence, the prominence of the subject of Wharton’s work.

Because there is no change over the years in Wharton’s attitude toward marriage, a chronological overview of her marriage tales would not be as fruitful as a discussion of them in terms of the major types of marriage stories she presents. Basically, Wharton’s depictions of marriage fall into three major categories. There are works depicting marital entrapment (or, more specifically perhaps, one partner’s sense of entrapment) that show how frightening an experience marriage can be, works that present marital problems but subordinate them to the human and social failings of which the problems are manifestations, and, finally, works that focus on the benefits that can be derived from marriage. As I have noted, not only do stories of the first two types predominate, those of the third type, despite Wharton’s belief in marriage as an institution of potential benefits, are almost always somber affairs marked by Wharton’s omnipresent awareness of human failings.

The grimness in Wharton’s stories of marital entrapment—perhaps the grimmest stories she ever wrote on any topic—resides most tellingly in the paucity of pleasant alternatives available to one who feels imprisoned by his or her mate. Worse, Wharton sees a sense of imprisonment as an all too probable occurrence in marriage given the ignorance about one’s mate and the institution of marriage with which most are wed and given the dearth of virtues that most people can bring to bear on difficult marital situations. Invariably, Wharton advocates, at least implicitly, endurance as the
course to be followed should one feel trapped in one’s mar-
rriage, but she never suggests that it is easy or that it leads to
happiness. Rather, she recommends it, simply, as the line of
duty—duty to one’s family, to society, to oneself. Whatever
affirmation that may arise in these tales from the ability of
some to do their duty is, however, highly muted at best. Far
more powerfully perceived is the misery of the unfortunate
marriage itself, which is all the more palpable in those stories
in which the unhappy protagonist, unable to take advantage
of marriage’s stern opportunity to grow through endurance,
attempts an ill-advised escape. None of this, of course, con-
stitutes an indictment of marriage on Wharton’s part; one
must remember that she saw the pain in life generally as out-
weighing the happiness. That the pain can be more acute
among those who feel oppressed in their marriages argues no
failure in the institution itself; rather, it bespeaks, once again,
an opportunity to grow through enduring what must be en-
dured.

In the early stories “The Line of Least Resistance” (1900)
and “The Quicksand” (1904), the protagonists come to the
realization that their mates are beastly. Nevertheless, both
stay in their marriages and in doing so achieve results that,
without mitigating significantly the ugliness to which they
know they are inextricably bound, are less destructive than
those that would have come about were they to leave their
mates. In the former, Mindon, a befuddled and pompous but
generally good-natured dyspeptic, finds that his selfish, ex-
travagant wife has been having an affair with the arch young
fellow she has inflicted on him as a family friend. Furious,
Mendon, with “all the consecrated phrases—‘outraged
honor,’ ‘a father’s heart,’ ‘the sanctity of home’ ” (1:221)—
coming rapidly to mind, takes a room in a hotel, determining
to end the marriage. However, it is not long until his deter-
mination falters before the persuasive shabbiness of his hotel
room and the nastiness of the hotel food and crumbles in the
face of arguments from his minister, his uncle—business part-
ner, and his jaded old friend, whose past as a roué has led him
to become “the consulting physician of injured husbands and
imprudent wives” (1:223). These worthies, men of the world,
assure Mindon that the pain of accepting his dubiously peni­tent wife (who, because never seen by the reader, seems to loom all the more ominously) pales before the pain that would ensue from messy divorce proceedings and the attendant publicity. The "shadow of obloquy" that he would lay over his children and the ridicule to which he would subject himself must, they urge him, be avoided at all costs. Frightened, he yields to their arguments, stammering that "it's for the children" (1:226) that he is doing so.

That his children are spoiled brats who have little use for him, that his wife is almost undoubtedly going to continue being a difficult mate to tolerate, and that the three self-styled comforters are tired old hypocrites does not mean for Wharton, finally, that Mindon's decision is the wrong one. Clearly, the society he lives in is fraudulent in many ways; nevertheless, it is stable, providing for the continuity of the little that is admirable in the human condition, and the alternative can only be chaos and such dinginess as he finds in his hotel room. One can readily envision a better society than this, but certainly not for these people, given their background and training. Were Mindon to leave his wife, there would inevitably be obloquy and turmoil for the children, ridicule for Mindon himself, and ostracism for his wife, leading her into a demimondaine's existence and, one suspects, a chain of sleazy affairs. By keeping up appearances and staying in the marriage, Mindon avoids this and thus benefits all. Small affirmation of marriage this, but it is an affirmation in the midst of ugliness nonetheless.

Grimly affirmative too in its vision of marriage is "The Quicksand," in which the widowed Mrs. Quentin, remembering her painful life with her husband, convinces her son's fiancée to break her engagement to this young man who is so disturbingly like his father. The nasty work of the elder Quentin, who published The Radiator, a scandal sheet that makes its fortune by presenting daily "some miserable bleeding secret that a dozen unhappy people had been struggling to keep out of print" (1:408), is now being pursued by his son with a vigor that rivals that of his fallen predecessor. A woman of refinement, Mrs. Quentin found the shame of
being linked with *The Radiator* almost intolerable and, more, found to her horror that not only could she not change her husband or shield her son from the “contamination” of his influence but that with every effort to do so she herself “sank deeper” (1:408) into the noisome quagmire that had opened under her when she accepted her husband’s lie that the paper was only a temporary expedient to meet financial exigencies. Consequently, she warns the fiancée that the son, like the father, will never change and assures her that “it’s you who would have to change—to die gradually, as I have died, till there is only one live point left in me,” an “aching nerve of truth” (1:410). Obviously, it is that “aching nerve,” inflamed by the virulent infection that ravaged her marriage, which has prompted her to spare an innocent girl by hurting her own son. What is apparent in all this is that by staying in a hideous marriage, Mrs. Quentin has gained more than she would have had she sought to escape it. Brought by her marriage to an awareness of the intransigence of evil in human nature, including her own, Mrs. Quentin has been purged of illusions. She has won her way into the house of pain and from its vantage point can see her way clear to shielding another from a dark triumph like her own. Though in Wharton’s world the chances for happiness are slim indeed and such a victory as Mrs. Quentin’s may be the best for which a sensitive person ought to hope, it speaks well for Mrs. Quentin’s capacity for growth and reveals the darkly educative effect her marriage has had on her when she commits herself so bravely to allowing this girl at least an opportunity for happiness.

Both “The Reckoning” (1904) and “Joy in the House” (1933) present women who, unlike Mrs. Quentin, believe that something better than the house of pain does exist for them and, therefore, leave their marriages to find it, only to incur disastrous results. In the former, Julia Westall, finding her first husband “impossible,” enthusiastically gave herself over to “The Marriage Law of the new dispensation,” which is “Thou shalt not be unfaithful—to thyself!” (1:421). Consequently, she divorced her “impossible” mate, whose chief failing resided as she saw it in his living in a “climate in which
only his own requirements survived" (1:420), ironically enough the very sort of climate in which she herself clearly desired to live; and she married Clement Westall, one whose commitment to the "new dispensation" was every bit as complete as her own. Both agreed that marriage need no longer engender entrapment, that "there would be no further need of the ignoble concessions and connivances, the perpetual sacrifice of personal delicacy and moral pride, by means of which imperfect marriages were now held together," for, both acknowledged, "the new adultery was unfaithfulness to self" (1:427). Now, after ten years of marriage, Westall concludes that faithfulness to himself demands that he shed Julia and marry a younger woman. Deeply hurt, Julia suddenly realizes how badly she herself had hurt her first husband years before, and in tears, she stops by her old home to apologize to him. As she apologizes, she breaks out tearfully and haltingly in a vehement defense of marital responsibility: "If we don't recognize an inner law . . . the obligation that love creates . . . being loved as well as loving . . . there is nothing to prevent our spreading ruin unhindered . . . " (1:436; Wharton's ellipses). With this she leaves, finding herself "outside in the darkness" (1:437). Thus, as Wharton shows, nothing has been gained by Julia's following a doctrine of irresponsibility save suffering and the furthering of such social chaos as Westall promotes when he lectures on his marital theories to large gatherings of dangerously impressionable women. To be sure, Julia has herself been jolted into some painful insights, but only by having wilfully and wantonly hurt another ten years before. Again, escape from an unhappy marriage brings no lasting happiness, love, freedom, or moral strength.

In "Joy in the House," published thirty-three years later, little has changed for Wharton except that there is an increase in the intensity of suffering involved in both the bad marriage and the effort to escape it. Before the story opens, Christina Ansley, we learn, found herself unhappily married to a relentlessly gregarious small-town realtor, whose cloying iteration of "New Morality" clichés about "self-realization" (2:709) betokens no largeness of heart or questing intelligence but merely an inability to feel deeply or think in-
telligently. Unlike Wharton, however, Christina took such clichés seriously and was disturbed by Ansley's failure to live in accordance with them. Instead, "his life was one of bedroom slippers and the evening paper by a clean gas fire, with his wife stitching across the hearth, and telling him that the baby's first tooth was showing" (2:709). Unable to bear such a marriage, one that she felt deprived her of the "self-realization" about which her husband canted, Christina deserted him and her son to run off to Europe with a talented painter, who left his own wife to go with her.

Predictably, given that Wharton's distaste for "self-realization" achieved at the cost of responsibility exceeds her scorn for stultifying marriages, Christina's action precipitated misery instead of leading her to happiness. Five and a half months of dreariness in Europe with the impecunious painter, who, despite his passion, too often "solicitously nursed those sacred objects, his 'painting things' and forgot about everything else, herself included" (2:710), have led Christina to long now for the heretofore rejected comforts of those evenings by the hearth with her husband. Consequently, she avails herself of the "New Morality" promise he made on her departure that she can return within six months from what he calls insipidly her "trial marriage" and be accepted with no recriminations. On her return her husband's effusive welcome and the no less effusive giant floral display proclaiming "Joy in the House" seem to augur well for the marriage. However, her lover's bitter wife soon informs Christina that the painter, despondent over losing her, has killed himself. Christina's immediate realization that her husband must have known this before his warm welcome to her and apparently regarded it as little more than the "providential solving of a problem" (2:721), leads to a frantic desire to "get away . . . from this stifling atmosphere of tolerance and benevolence, of smoothing over and ignoring and dissembling. Anywhere out into the live world, where men and women struggled and loved and hated, and quarreled and came together again with redoubled passion . . . "(2:721).

Mrs. Ansley soon perceives, however, that she has tried this before, with horrifying results. So, she decides this time to accept her lot. Ordering the maid to remove the ludicrous
and now withered floral display and reminding herself "But there's the boy—" she walks "slowly up the stairs to find her son" (2:722). Thus does she finally put aside childishness and accept what Wharton believes she should have accepted long before: the necessity of staying with her odious husband so that she might counter as much as she can his potentially un­healthy influence on their son and might also keep herself from causing again such misfortune as that which ensued with the painter when she sought to avoid the house of pain to find one of unalloyed joy.

Nothing in any other stories Wharton wrote about those who leave marriages in which they feel trapped fails to con­firm the lessons glimpsed in “The Reckoning” and “Joy in the House.” Lydia Tillotson, in “Souls Belated” (1899), forced to carry out an aimless and apparently endless tour of shabby, even at times sordid, out-of-the-way European watering places with her lover—a writer who is so bored and de­pressed by their promiscuous, vagabond existence that he can no longer write—learns to her surprise that, as noted earlier, the “center of gravity” (1:127) provided even by “the most imperfect marriage” generates a complex of social relationships that can keep two shallow people from seeing the “nakedness of each other’s souls” (1:123). As a result, Lydia and her lover, though no longer devoted to each other, marry, entering willingly into a less than promising union in order to gain that “center of gravity.” Another runaway wife, Kate Clephane, in The Mother’s Recompense (1925), returns to New York from Europe some twenty years after deserting her husband and daughter and finds that by a horrible coin­cidence her most recent lover has become engaged to the daughter. Because she has not seen the girl in twenty years, Kate has forfeited all influence over her and so cannot work subtly to change her mind. Further, simply revealing the truth to her would entail giving what Kate’s minister tells her is merely “sterile pain,” pain, that is, that would serve no purpose, since the young couple apparently love each other. Thus, Kate can do nothing but hope that her daughter will find happiness in marriage or, short of that, at least stay in it so she will not run the risk of incurring a lonely grief like her mother’s.
Moreover, Wharton shows in "The Pretext" (1908) and "Atrophy" (1930) that there are even terrible dangers in being unfaithful to one’s spouse by fantasizing about a more rewarding relationship with another. In the former, Mrs. Ransom, married to a colorless fellow who is lawyer for a small college, becomes infatuated with a glamorous young visitor from England. Convinced that he cares for her, she makes him an impassioned speech in which she at once avows her love for him and renounces it dramatically as something that cannot be. Her scene played out, she feels that the memory of it will redeem the sad wastage of the years to come with her husband. Later, she is pained to learn that the young man regarded her as little more than an acquaintance, and even used her name on returning to England as a convenient cover, or "pretext," so that he could disguise his love for another and deceive his disapproving family. Similarly making something of a fool of herself because of her illicit longings for another is Nora Frenway, who is disillusioned to find just how strong the old social conventions can be even in times of "tolerance, laxity and ease" (2:501). Feeling imprisoned in her marriage, she decides impulsively to rush to the deathbed of the man she has secretly loved for years and declare at last her love for him. Instead of getting a touching final moment with him, though, she has to endure an embarrassing confrontation with his spinster sister, who, clearly guessing why Nora is there, keeps her from her brother’s room with cool politeness and then efficiently sends her back to her train with a cordial but pointed promise to "write and thank Mr. Frenway" (2:510) for his wife’s kind visit. The squalor and filth of the train and the sinister image of a trapped fly in it buzzing against a windowpane confirm that one commits oneself to ugliness and desperation when, like Nora or Mrs. Ransom, one seeks to flout convention and gratify an extra-marital romantic longing.

Wharton’s fullest treatment of the disasters that can occur when one attempts to leave even a repellent marriage is Ethan Frome (1911). Perhaps no other character in Wharton’s work is tied to a more insensitive mate than is poor Ethan. Indeed, so unremitting is his pain throughout his long marriage that some have suggested that this work is not
much more than a nasty little horror show. Lionel Trilling, for one, asserts that it "presents no moral issue at all" and merely reveals Wharton’s limitation of heart. Though Trilling’s reading is admirably responsive to Ethan’s suffering, it seems to miss the point when it implies that the loveless Frome marriage is only a means by which Wharton indulges virtually sadistic tendencies in herself by tormenting her protagonist. Actually, Wharton’s tale does present a discernible counsel on how best to face life in a universe that apparently cares little for those who inhabit it.

In Ethan’s small New England town, one sees a way of life with none of those genteel trappings that in polite society shelter people from a daily confrontation with the grimmer facts of existence. Perhaps the grimmest of these is that people are often victimized irremediably by forces over which they have no control. Gary H. Lindberg, in fact, sees Wharton as essentially deterministic in her outlook in that her characters generally seem to be caught up in a “flow of destiny” in which their private schemes “generated by personal lines of intention are simply dwarfed.” It is not, he notes, a “scientific formulation of biological and environmental determinism but rather a configuration of moral inevitability posited by the conjuction of a given choice and the social world within which that choice is made.”

Lindberg’s point about Wharton’s determinism is well-taken, though in this particular case the crucial conjunction is not that of a “given choice” and the “social world” but of a choice (itself not quite freely made) and the very nature of things, of which the dense social world usually seen in Wharton’s works is merely a manifestation. Though the context here is cosmic rather than social, the configuration of moral imperatives that inevitably takes shape is no different from that to be seen in Wharton’s tales of marital entrapment that are set in circumstances less bereft of social relations.

That Ethan’s marriage is an unhappy one for him is well known and needs no rehearsal here. What may be less obvious, though, in the narrator’s account of things is that both his decision to marry Zeena and his subsequent attempt to escape the marriage through suicide with Mattie grow out of
a deep, almost childish fear of loneliness, a fear instilled in him, in great measure, by the bleak landscape itself and all that it seems to symbolize about the bleakness of the universe. Ethan proposed to Zeena because he had an "unreasoning dread of being left alone on the farm." This dread evoked, substantially, by the wintry scene around him led him to overestimate Zeena's capacity for human feeling. Reflecting on his error, Ethan "often thought since that it would not have happened if his mother had died in spring instead of winter . . . " (p. 76). Showing more fully that Ethan was a good deal less than a free agent when he married are the references to the landscape about him as having been shaped by the huge, timeless pressures exerted on it, these references serving as an implicit reminder that those who people this landscape are similarly shaped by elements larger than themselves. Thus, the "ledge of granite thrusting up through the ferns," which seems to unroll the "huge panorama of the ice age and the long dim stretches of succeeding time" (p. 37), forces one to see Ethan's story in a larger context than the one in which one normally thinks Wharton's tales operative—forces one, in other words, to see Ethan in a universe of powerful and inevitably enigmatic forces that buffet people about uncaringly and probably unknowingly.

Positing implicitly this central vision, then, the narrator's account of the disaster of Ethan establishes as a central issue the problem of ascertaining how one is to confront life in a bleak, indifferent universe in which one's options are severely limited. The young Ethan's inability to cope with the pressures in his life in no way indicates that means of coping cannot be found; rather, it is an index to his own sentimentality and immaturity as he childishly sees Mattie as embodying virtues and as linked to a happiness that are, quite obviously, well removed from the world we all know. As Cynthia Griffin Wolff notes, "It is always easier for Ethan to retreat from life into a 'vision'" than to face what must be faced. He is, Wolff goes on to say, invariably too receptive to the "appeal of passivity and a life of regression." The childishness of his attempt—typically bungled, of course—to regress to a state of ultimate passivity through suicide is
brought out by the very form that the attempt takes: a downhill ride on a sled. One can imagine few others in Frome's village who would have chosen such a ride. The Powells, Hales, and their ilk, glimpsed briefly through the narrative, are there, in part, to offer an instructive contrast to the dreamy, dissatisfied Frome. They go quietly about their business and in the routine they establish create a little realm of order and responsibility in the midst of a stark wintry scene, an order that Ethan's crack-up crudely violates.

One possibility in this work that cannot, of course, be overlooked is that the facts as presented by the narrator may not accord with the events that occurred. The narrator's vision of Ethan's past is just that—a vision, and Joseph X. Brennan suggests, therefore, that *Ethan Frome* must be judged "in terms of the special character of the narrator's mind" and, further, that "since the narrator has had to imagine almost the whole of Ethan's history and the most important traits of his character as well, in many respects, inevitably, the sensibilities of the two are indistinguishable." So indistinguishable might they be that one cannot be sure that the real Ethan Frome ever felt anything akin to what the narrator attributes to him or did the things he did for the reasons the narrator either consciously or inadvertently offers. What is objectively verifiable does not necessarily reinforce one's sense of the narrator's accuracy. For example, the picture of Ethan, Mattie, and Zeena with which Wharton closes the work calls into question much of what has been offered previously as a probable version of the past. Though Mrs. Hale asserts that before the crash she "never knew a sweeter nature than Mattie's" (p. 194), whereas Zeena was, she says, "always cranky" (p. 194), in evidence nevertheless as the narrator enters the Frome farmhouse are Mattie's "querulous drone" (p. 187) and Zeena's quiet patience in ministering to this irritable invalid. Inevitably, this makes one wonder whether Mattie was ever quite so good or Zeena quite so bad as the narrator envisions them to have been. On this central question as elsewhere, the narrator may well be indulging his propensities for the exaggerated and the romantic that he reveals throughout the work. Indeed, were the narrator not an
exceedingly romantic fellow, even something of a sentimentalist, he would not involve himself in an extensive reverie about thwarted dreams and longings in the first place, nor would he construct the monolithic (and perhaps reductive) image patterns he does in contrasting Mattie and Zeena before the sledding disaster. As Brennan notes, the narrator consistently links Mattie with lovely and delicate objects in nature, such as birds and field mice, whereas he characterizes Zeena throughout with stifling imagery of the indoors and the artificial and through ties to such predators as cats and owls\textsuperscript{12} (which, of course, have an innate yen for field mice and small birds). Moreover, the narrator’s liking for such phrasing as “in a sky of iron the points of the Dipper hung like icicles and Orion flashed his cold fires” (p. 28) and “[Ethan] had found Mattie’s lips at last and was drinking unconsciousness of everything but the joy they gave him” (p. 130) further reveals the presence here of an exceedingly romantic sensibility and, consequently, must lead one to question the accuracy of his vision of the past.

Whatever the case, however, whether the narrator’s vision is a valid one or not, Wharton’s allegiances are clear. An accurate telling implies, whether the perhaps too romantic narrator is aware of it or not, that Frome was, as I have noted, a sentimentalist who could not face up to the facts of his existence. If it is an inaccurate account, then it is the narrator who stands indicted as a mawkish sentimentalist (or, as Wolff puts it, one with a “ghastly” mind)\textsuperscript{13} who indirectly and inadvertently makes a powerful argument for living up to such commitments as those he envisions the young Ethan as trying to escape. Finally, if one concludes, as one well might, that \textit{Ethan Frome} is irresolvably ambiguous, Wharton’s position is no less clear. In a world in which the truth is nebulous, perhaps impossible to glean with certainty, one must, she teaches, strive for order, even self-imposed order; and this must be carried out even in the face of the determinism that she sees as operative, for, rightly or wrongly, she does not regard moral responsibility as incompatible with a restricted will. The establishment of routine, of order, by carrying out ordering responsibilities imposed by the severe
demands of marriage is thus a goal to strive for, one that either Ethan or the narrator (or both) could not perceive as valuable. Without such order, Wharton believes, a difficult existence can only be made more difficult.

1. Edith Wharton, *The Collected Short Stories of Edith Wharton*, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner's, 1968), 1:547. For this and all other Wharton works cited, all references after the first to each will be to the edition cited and will appear in the text. All page references in my discussions of the short stories are to this two-volume collection.


7. Lionel Trilling, "The Morality of Inertia," in Robert MacIver, ed., *Great Moral Dilemmas* (New York: Institute for Religious and Social Studies, 1956); rpt. Howe, ed., *Edith Wharton*. Also see Walton, who views the work as having "no real moral any more than social conflict" (p. 82).

8. Gary H. Lindberg, *Edith Wharton and the Novel of Manners* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1975), pp. 47, 48. Somewhat less deterministic is David Eggenschwiler, "The Ordered Disorder of Ethan Frome," *Studies in the Novel* 9 (Fall 1977): 237–46. Eggenschwiler suggests that "Wharton will have it both ways, showing that man does determine his life in a universe that is not chaotic, but also showing that his lot is hard, his choices difficult . . . and the consequences of his actions often different from what he had expected" (p. 245).


