THE STORIES at which we have just looked present entrapment or one's sense of being trapped as problems that develop because marriage makes demands that the mismated, the weak, the unintelligent cannot meet. Even *Ethan Frome* with its stark backdrop of cosmic indifference focuses primarily on marriage, marriage as a catalyst slowly bringing to fruition all the worst potentials in Frome's makeup and thus initiating a chain of events that evidences much of the bleakness of life. In other significant depictions of marital discord, however, one notes a shift of emphasis. Such works as *The House of Mirth* (1905), *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), *The Custom of the Country* (1913), *Twilight Sleep* (1927), and *Hudson River Bracketed* (1929) all portray unhappy marriages but focus more on the failures of society and of human nature generally that mar those unions than on the demands prompted by marriage itself. A key means by which she attacks these failures, obviously, is to show their pernicious effects on marriage.

In *The House of Mirth*, certainly, one sees little that is not pernicious in the set that Wharton depicts. The prevalent atmosphere of menace and disorder conveyed through the pervasive ocean metaphors and through striking metaphors of war and earthquake establishes Lily Bart's world as one that for all its material comforts, is almost Hobbesian in the ruthlessness of its inhabitants and the consequent necessity in it for power in order to survive. Moreover, it is a world that allows one few options in charting one's course through the threatening landscape. Lily, who, fittingly enough, "always carried an Omar Khayam in her travelling-bag," is presented throughout as so victimized by her training that she virtually lacks free will. In the very first chapter, Selden muses aptly that Lily "was so evidently the victim of the civilization which
had produced her that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate” (p. 10). Nor is this situation peculiar to Lily; for Selden realizes later that “he was, as much as Lily, the victim of his environment” (p. 245), and throughout the work one sees little evidence that the other denizens of the house of mirth have much say in the courses they follow.² If they did, they probably would not choose the existence of social climbing, hypocrisy, illicit relationships, repression, and conspicuous consumption that they lead. But, products as they are of the crass, monied society that has been erected on the foundations of an earlier, somewhat less imperfect New York, they do not have the self-awareness to do much more than perpetuate the failings that played such a large part in shaping them. Ultimately, “good” turn-of-the-century New York society looks like nothing so much as a world in which a spurious gentility masks imperfectly a Schopenhauerian existence in which all are blindly driven to self-aggrandizement at the expense of others, and the real freedom of a morally educated will is rarely to be seen.

Though Lily’s case reveals poignantly how vulnerable the singles in her world are, there is nonetheless little glimpsed among her married acquaintances in upper-class New York that seems to recommend matrimony except the power that it conveys. Marriage in Lily’s circle is, Lindberg notes, “primarily a means of securing social power.”³ Married, Lily could with impunity do those things that lead ultimately to her destruction when she does them as a single woman. “All turned,” thinks Lily herself, “on the tiresome distinction between what a married woman might, and a girl might not, do” (p. 127). Hence, although it is “shocking” for a married woman to borrow money (especially from a man), “still, it was the mere *malum prohibitum* which the world decries but condones, and which . . . does not provoke collective disapproval of society” (p. 127). When Lily, however, borrows money from Gus in the form of an investment he ostensibly makes for her, she sets in motion a chain of events that helps bring about disaster for herself. Similarly, the ugly criticism directed at Lily when she poses in a revealing costume for Mrs. Bry’s *tableaux vivants* would be muted were she mar-
ried. Ned Van Alstyne’s comment is a telling one here: “When a girl’s as good-looking as that she’d better marry; then no questions are asked. In our imperfectly organized society there is no provision as yet for the young woman who claims the privileges of marriage without assuming its obligations” (p. 254). Finally, as a single woman, Lily has no champion, no protector. Thus, when Bertha Dorset orders Lily not to return to her yacht, insinuating thereby that Lily is having an affair with George, Lily’s social destruction is virtually assured. A married woman, though, is far less vulnerable to such insinuations. Wharton notes, “The code of Lily’s world decreed that a woman’s husband should be the only judge of her conduct: she was technically above suspicion while she had the shelter of his approval, or even his indifference” (pp. 167-68). That Bertha Dorset herself is, unlike Lily, having an affair, as most, in fact, know, and is doing so with impunity, so long as her timid husband does nothing about it, is obvious confirmation of Wharton’s observation.

Marriage, then, does offer power and security in Lily’s milieu, particularly a marriage that unites one to money. A sense of the necessity of making such a marriage was, of course, drummed into Lily by her mother, but somehow, perhaps because of Lily’s memory of her mother’s own marriage, the lesson never really took. Though a rich and therefore ostensibly happy couple until their financial downfall, Lily’s parents had a relationship that as Lily recalls it can only strike her as chilling: “Ruling the turbulent element called home was the vigorous and determined figure of a mother still young enough to dance her ball-dresses to rags, while the hazy outline of a neutral-tinted father filled an intermediate space between the butler and the man who came to wind the clocks.” (p. 45). Her father was “down town” all day, a dray horse making the money to support his frivolous but demanding wife’s extravagances; and when his business failed, all that remained of the marriage were Mrs. Bart’s recriminations and Mr. Bart’s illness and early death. Doubtless, such memories have had their effect on Lily by getting in the way whenever she is on the verge of making a marriage that bids fair to be as “successful” as that of her parents before
her father's financial reverses. Her inchoate longings for something better, including beauty and love, lead her from the prospects of such a marriage but are not sufficiently strong to lead her far enough from her social circle so that she will no longer even halfheartedly seek a marriage of this sort or be damaged by her refusals to make one.

Further keeping Lily from rushing into the marriage that confers social power may well be an awareness of the obvious ugliness of the marriages of her friends. The marriages in Lily's circle presented at greatest length by Wharton are those of the Trenors and the Dorsets, both of which are odious for the unlucky persons in them and exceedingly dangerous for those, like Lily, lacking in social power who come into contact with them. In each case husband and wife exacerbate each other's failings, bringing about an increasingly volatile situation. Judy Trenor's belief that Gus is nothing more than a vulgar but unfortunately necessary source of funds for her lavish entertainments forces him into excesses in which he might not otherwise indulge. Judy even resorts to the expedient of encouraging women to flirt with her husband so that he will be in a sufficiently pleasant mood not to question what she spends his money on. Gus, on the other hand, realizing full well his wife's contempt for him, indulges in his amatory escapades with all the vigor of a man constantly seeking to throw his wife's disgust with him back in her face. Needless to say, every new episode of misbehavior merely confirms Judy's contempt for him, leading her to throw herself into spending his money with renewed energy. No less trapped in a cycle of increasing spiritual and emotional decay are the Dorsets. The promiscuity of the waspish Bertha chronically provokes the neurasthenic self-pity of George, which, in turn, prompts further licentiousness in Bertha. In both marriages, though, it is not the partners who suffer most but Lily. Unmarried, she is the powerless bystander who is ground down by the complex social machinery set in motion by the marital discord around her.

The power that this complex social machinery confers on those who make the right marriages and thereby help maintain the order of things is conveyed graphically through
Wharton's depiction of the Van Osburgh nuptials, which she characterizes ironically as "the simple country wedding," one "to which the guests are convoyed in special trains, and from which the hordes of the uninvited have to be fended off by the intervention of the police" (p. 139). She goes on to note, no less ironically, that while these "sylvan rites were taking place, in a church packed with fashion and festooned with orchids, the representatives of the press were threading their way, note-book in hand, through the labyrinth of wedding presents, and the agent of a cinematograph syndicate was setting up his apparatus at the church door" (p. 139). Obviously, this is no quiet ceremony before a harried justice of the peace and his drowsy wife. It is, instead, one means by which a rich and strong social class seeks to perpetuate itself. While flaunting its wealth and power as it bestows its approval upon a young couple who seek full initiation into its ranks, it impresses upon all participants the attractiveness of its way of life and the concomitant necessity of working to maintain it. The febrile efforts to which those such as the Brys and Simon Rosedale must resort as they attempt to break into this world reveal its imperviousness to change and its implacability, both factors that ultimately serve to destroy the unmarried and financially embarrassed Lily.

Little as there is in the depiction of marriage in *The House of Mirth* that seems to recommend the institution to anyone not seeking power in the polite New York society at the turn of the twentieth century, the novel does not condemn marriage. Certainly, Wharton sees no valid alternatives to it even in this society. Selden's bachelorhood consigns him to a life of emotional as well as aesthetic dabbling and, as a result, finally, to regret for a life misspent. Though Gerty Farish finds a certain contentment in devoting her spinster's existence to charitable works, Wharton makes clear that few have the large stores of serenity and benevolence to make acceptance of such a lonely lot seem anything other than what Lily would call "dingy." Nor does escape from a marriage that one finds onerous bring either contentment or a worthwhile life in this novel any more than it does in other works by Wharton. The divorced Carry Fisher is reduced to a hanger's-on
existence on the periphery of upper-class society, where, thought useful though not entirely savory, she is tolerated as one who can swell a progress, enliven a party, or keep a saturnine husband in a good mood and away from a wife who does not care to be under his scrutiny. Ugly as are the lives of many of the married in *The House of Mirth*, then, there is definitely no real happiness ascertainable here outside marriage.

That happiness, though, can be found in marriage, however rarely, is affirmed in Wharton’s depiction of the lower-class couple, Nettie and George Struther. Implicit in their union is, for Lily finally, the “central truth of existence.” She sees that their life, though “meagre enough” and “on the grim edge of poverty, with scant margin for possibilities of sickness or mischance, . . . [has] the frail audacious permanence of a bird’s nest built on the edge of a cliff—a mere wisp of leaves and straw, yet so put together that the lives entrusted to it may hang safely over the abyss” (p. 517). Doubtless, this “central truth of existence” that Lily sees as bound up in their union is one of human continuity, of a tenuous but lasting, timeless order established by love and mutual commitment. Significantly, it is only the Struther marriage in this novel in which there is a visible child. The Struther baby, so appealing to Lily, becomes the palpable symbol for her and for Wharton of the unending, procreative order that love and a good marriage can help sustain. Unfortunately, though, not only is such a marriage as this rare in Wharton’s work but it is unconvincing. Rendered only briefly, with little detail, the Struther union is largely an expression of uncharacteristic sentimentality on Wharton’s part, as she trots out the comforting cliché that the poor attain a surpassing contentment, since they live more lovingly, more sincerely, more rewardingly than others. As such, this marriage is little more than an unachievable ideal, less something to strive for in matrimony than a means solely, whatever Wharton’s intentions, of heightening the bleakness of the rest of the marriages in *The House of Mirth*.

In *The Fruit of the Tree* as in *The House of Mirth*, Wharton depicts marital discord as a manifestation of problems
larger than those inherent in marriage itself. Just what those problems are and where they reside has frequently been misunderstood by commentators, leading them to believe that it is a work that lacks clarity of purpose, one in which Wharton burdened herself, as R. W. B. Lewis suggests, with “too many subjects.” Certainly, subjects abound in the novel; labor reform and reformers, marriage, euthanasia, the mores and foibles of upper-class society, and the repression of women are topics that, among still others, Wharton develops in *The Fruit of the Tree*. But the apparent plethora of subject matter notwithstanding, Wharton does manage to hold the novel together admirably, in terms of both theme and plot, as each subject ultimately is developed to one conclusion: the revelation of the human propensity for folly. Social failings exist, Wharton teaches, because of human failings; reforms rarely succeed because these failings are profound and ineradicable. This is most apparent in marriage, the subject on which Wharton focuses most intensely here, using it as a chief means of revealing the implications of the others. Through her depictions of the failed marriages in this novel, Wharton makes clear that the inability of two people who know each other intimately to forge a lasting, worthwhile union bespeaks a fundamental inability in most to overcome the selfishness, the egotism that are impediments to the achievement of happiness. More specifically, the flawed marriages in this work fail, as Wharton sees it, for the same reasons that millworkers are downtrodden, upper-class types are often supercilious and parasitical, mercy-killers occasionally self-serving, women repressed, and reformers ineffectual and frequently driven by purely personal motives.

Wharton notes at one point in *The Fruit of the Tree* that “compromise is the law of married life,” a lesson consistently flouted by the unyielding reformer John Amherst with disastrous results for the two marriages he makes. A mill foreman whose feverish devotion to bettering the lot of the millhands is motivated in great part by a desire for such “personal ascendancy” (p. 127) as may be attained through shaping others to work toward his ends, Amherst is totally unaware throughout the novel that, as Wharton asserts, “man
can commit no act alone, whether for good or evil" (pp. 605–6). 

More, this man striving so single-mindedly to realize his ideal is unaware, as well, of another truth central to Wharton's outlook, the fact that 'human relations . . . [are] a tangled and deep-rooted growth, a dark forest through which the idealist cannot cut his straight path without hearing at each stroke the cry of the severed branch: 'why woundest thou me?'" (p. 624). As such, Amherst, who combines his unremitting zeal with a consummate lack of tact or ability to compromise in dealing with others, is eminently deserving of Cynthia Griffin Wolff's sharp criticism that his "insensitivity to the feelings of others would make him unfit to be the companion of anyone in any context." Certainly, one context for which he is unfit is, of course, matrimony, as both Bessy Westmore and Justine Brent learn to their grief.

Although Amherst does not marry Bessy solely to control her and her mills, "he would scarcely have contemplated marriage with a rich woman," Wharton notes, "unless the source of her wealth had offered him some such opportunity as Westmore presented" (p. 184). And certainly this rich woman does seem to be a perfect choice for Amherst. Not only is she a physically attractive millowner but she exhibits a childlike tenderheartedness in her charity to needy individuals that Amherst believes he can shape into a lasting commitment to his program of reform. Unfortunately, when Amherst learns that Bessy's largesse to a millhand or two is in no way symptomatic of a desire to oversee the decimation of her family fortune on behalf of the community of millhands and, worse, finds that she is a querulous child-woman who, though capable of isolated acts of generosity and flashes of idealism, is incapable of sustained benevolence, he withdraws from her, inevitably destroying the marriage and making it clear that from the first the mills meant, if not everything to him, at least more than the woman did.

Perhaps an understanding husband might in the course of continually reinforcing Bessy's better traits effect a gradual improvement and maturation in her. Amherst, of course, is unable to be this sort of husband. Instead of fostering her good traits, he aggravates her bad ones. When, early in the
marriage, Bessy, totally under Amherst's sway, is caught up in an "eager adoption" of his ideas and is organizing a "Mothers Club" for the mills, planning a "recreation-ground," an emergency hospital, and the "building which was to contain the night-schools, library, and gymnasium," Amherst regards her efforts condescendingly as childish ones geared to "minor projects which he had urged her to take up as a means of learning their essential dependence on his larger scheme" (p. 181). Sensing her husband's monomania and his lack of respect for her and warned by her father and her trusted lawyer that Amherst's devotion to his vision will drain her wealth, Bessy begins to limit the scope of Amherst's philanthropic endeavors. For Amherst this means only one thing: his wife is "surreptitiously . . . giving aid and comfort to the enemy, who were really defending her own cause" (p. 183). Rather than assuage her fears, he throws himself more deeply than ever into his work, spends days and weeks apart from her on mill matters, and turns their relationship into a continuous battle of wills over money in which, through what amounts to a sort of emotional extortion, he invariably wrests more funds from her. Eventually he accomplishes just what his mother feared he might when she warned him, early in his marriage, against "sacrificing your wife to the mills" (p. 176). Bessy retreats into childishness, embarking on an endless, petulant quest for pleasure amid a horde of shallow socialites. Finally, when her money is seriously depleted by Amherst, she panics and makes him give up management of the mills and control of her property. The apparently final separation prompted by this leads Bessy into the reckless behavior that culminates in a fatal horseback ride on the aptly named Impulse, resulting in her painful, almost certainly mortal injuries and then in the euthanasia she persuades Justine to carry out on her. That there was much good and love in her nature that might have been fostered by a less selfish man than Amherst is driven home by her will, in which she left all to her husband.

No less a sacrifice to the mills and, of course, to Amherst's commitment to self from which his devotion to the mills largely derives, is Justine Brent, who from the first has been
strongly drawn to him by his strength of purpose. Unremittingly an idealist herself, she sees him as one "whom no gust of chance could deflect from his purpose" (p. 274); and after she moves into the Amherst household at Bessy's request, she is overwhelmingly "conscious . . . of the quiet strength she was absorbing from his presence, of the way in which his words, his voice, his mere nearness were slowly steadying and clarifying her will" (p. 275). Not surprisingly, then, when Amherst proposes marriage to her, nearly two years after Bessy's death, she is quick to accept although the offer is couched in terms that might give many pause. No conventionally ardent swain, Amherst "abruptly" asks, "Wouldn't you marry if it . . . offered you hard work, and the opportunity to make things better . . . for a great many people . . . ?" (pp. 464-65). To Justine this is manifestly the call for which she has been waiting her whole life, a call to a union in which the perfect love of an idealistic couple for each other will spur them on to ever greater heights of philanthropy. To her dismay, she learns how little capacity for love Amherst really has and how misguided and ineffectual much philanthropy can be.

Commenting on Amherst's two marriages, Blake Nevius suggests that "Amherst's failure to raise . . . Bessy to his level of moral insight and conviction is followed by Justine's near failure to raise Amherst to hers; the disaster which concludes the first experiment is narrowly averted in the second." Clearly, however, there is no such aversion of disaster. Though Justine does at last grow, her moral growth is prompted by the effectual destruction of her marriage and in no way serves to pull her husband out of his bondage to self. At first their marriage does indeed seem so successful that one suspects Amherst may well be humanized by it, but their happiness, Wharton reveals, is deceptive. She notes that the pair view themselves as voyaging together on seas "studded with happy islands: every fresh discovery they made about each other, every new agreement of ideas and feelings, offered itself to these intrepid explorers as a friendly coast where they might beach their keel and take their bearings" (p. 472). Perhaps the key words in this lush account are
“every new agreement of ideas and feelings.” Obviously, any marriage will be a happy one as long as husband and wife are in total accord, as Amherst and Justine are at first. Just as obviously, though, the test of a marriage comes when there arises a significant lack of agreement between the pair.

In this marriage that test is precipitated when Amherst learns that Justine gave Bessy the fatal dose of morphine. It is a test, ultimately, that the marriage cannot withstand, as Amherst turns from his wife, finding especially odious her declaration that in giving Bessy the death for which she begged she was only following his own advice and his own example by pursuing a course of independent behavior in the face of conventional belief. That this plausible assertion makes Amherst recoil so powerfully from Justine, particularly in the light of his own implicit defense earlier of euthanasia in the case of a cruelly hurt millworker, is attributable, one suspects, to his own vague guilt feelings as he perhaps realizes unconsciously not only that he indirectly brought about Bessy’s injury but that Justine acted virtually as his surrogate, unwittingly carrying out his own deep-rooted wishes to have Bessy out of the way so that he might gain unhindered control of the mills. Not given to probing scrutiny of himself, however, Amherst apparently feels only the faintest priggings of the culpability he is so quick to project upon his second wife, whom he now finds so tainted. More any lingering guilt he might still feel after this projection he assuages grandly by (probably willfully) misconstruing Bessy’s blueprint for a pleasure dome for herself to be her plans for a lavish gymnasium for the millhands. Secure in his perception that he is carrying out his first wife’s fond wish, which, of course, he now sees as identical to his own, he can indulge in the unadulterated pleasures of extended self-congratulation. That his second wife has no place in this scheme of things bothers him not at all; the needs of those close to him never have.

Thus, like the first Amherst marriage, the second turns out badly. In this case, though, Wharton does find something salvageable, and that is Justine’s moral intelligence. Until Amherst’s revulsion from her, Justine seems little more than
a female counterpart to the strong-willed reformer. With it, and the jolt to her egotism that it provides, what R. W. B. Lewis calls her "intense if uncertain moral seriousness" gives way to serenity and moral maturity. Voluntary confession to Bessy's father makes her vulnerable to his hatred, scorn, and possible desire for revenge; but it also leads, as she knows it will, to total exoneration of Amherst. Her realization that her husband, now alienated from her, is unconsciously expiating his unacknowledged sense of culpability arouses no bitterness in her, merely a calm acceptance of her own partial responsibility for his self-deception and a willingness to let him find what reassuring illusions he may. Aware too that he is beyond the reach of any help she can offer, she directs her efforts where there seems to be more hope that they will be effectual and devotes herself lovingly and selflessly to the welfare of Bessy's daughter, Cicely. No longer, one suspects, will she be prey to the proddings of a restless and relentless ego.

Through Justine's development of a profound moral awareness, then, Wharton manages to provide at least a qualified affirmation in this otherwise bleak novel. The overly comfortable and selfish society of Bessy, her father, Lawyer Tredegar, and professional family friend Mrs. Ansell will not change, nor will such unreformed reformers as Amherst whose efforts to improve that society even at the risk of bringing it down are often more dangerous than what they are combatting. Meanness and folly we shall, apparently, always have with us. To purge ourselves of these, and, having done that, to work to help one or two others within our immediate ken is perhaps the best any of us ought realistically to hope for, as Wharton sees it. Hence, the "compromise" that, as we have seen, she asserts "is the law of married life" is also, she seems to feel, the law of all social life—not compromise in the sense of lack of principle, certainly, but compromise in the sense of a willingness to accept the fact that one cannot achieve all one might wish to. This sort of compromise, this acceptance of the limitations of one's powers, is a quiet triumph over egotism. It is this lesson that Justine ultimately learns as she enters the house of pain, a lesson that
Wharton hoped might often come through marriage, as, ironically, it does here. Thus, even in this account of two desperately flawed marriages, Wharton refuses to indict the institution itself. When marriages fail, it is people who fail, not the darkly demanding institution of marriage itself; and, as one sees in Justine's case, even when marriages fail, in the process of loss something of enduring value can be gained.

_The Custom of the Country_, unlike _The Fruit of the Tree_, has never been regarded as having a bewildering surfeit of subjects. Nevertheless, it presents quite as many as the earlier work does. Among these are the enervated, anachronistic quality of old-line, upper-class life in New York, the neglect of wives by business-obsessed husbands, the powerlessness of women and the evils to which it leads them, the rise of parvenus, and the decline of business probity with all that it indicates about a general moral decline on the American scene. That this array of subjects has never suggested thematic incoherence to commentators derives primarily from Wharton's success with Undine Spragg. So strikingly conceived is she as virtually the embodiment of insatiable, vulgar appetite that Undine not only draws the subjects together by the sheer force of her characterization but symbolizes in herself, as well, the corrosive egotism and corruption that pervade every area of modern American life that Wharton explores in the novel.

Though the strength of their portrayal of Undine is sufficient to bring about thematic unity, _The Custom of the Country_ is not a novel with unity of tone. Wharton's intent seems mainly to be satirical, but there are crucial moments when emotional detachment is forgotten and Wharton's detestation of Undine and of all that she represents for modern America breaks through, with the invariable effect of turning the novel closer to melodrama than to satire. What is significant in this for our discussion is that Wharton's emotional involvement is most apparent in her depiction of Undine's disastrous marriage to Ralph Marvell. The reasons for this are not hard to see. Ralph's destruction at Undine's hands is, for Wharton, symbolic of the destruction of the lingering vestiges of an old and valuable way of life. More, it illustrates
the modern American loss of veneration for marriage, so integral a part, as she saw it, of the maintenance of that old way of life. Wreckage of such magnitude is obviously something she cannot regard with equanimity. Thus, despite the dearth of good marriages in this work (unlike *The House of Mirth*, it lacks even one appealing marriage), *The Custom of the Country*, like Wharton's other depictions of marital difficulties, constitutes no attack on matrimony. Implicit in her bitter, melodramatic account of Ralph's marriage is a defense of the relationship that Undine scorns.12

In portraying the failure of Undine's marriage to Ralph, Wharton, like Howells with Bartley and Marcia or Herrick with many of his unfortunate couples, sees the misfortune as ultimately deriving from large failings on the national scene. Undine, notes Ralph's perceptive friend, Charles Bowen, is "a monstrously perfect result," the "completest proof of [the] triumph" of a modern "system"13 in which the "average American looks down on his wife" (p. 205), turning from her to the business world, which is the real focus of his interest. In the process, Bowen comments, he inevitably turns his wife into little more than the most self-indulgent of consumers, as "money and motors and clothes" become "simply the big bribe she's paid for keeping out of some man's way!" (p. 208). Moreover, this "system," obviously not conducive to marital happiness at best, has particularly disastrous effects for Ralph and Undine. "Monstrously perfect result" as she might be, Undine represents as well, as Bowen does not perceive, a new stage in its development. Come from the West, where Wharton believes, the pernicious "get ahead" spirit is even stronger than in the East—stronger, indeed, to infect even women—Undine represents a hitherto unseen force on the national scene, one that will make itself felt increasingly in both East and West: the new woman who wants power on a scale that previously has been accessible only to men and is as unscrupulous as the worst of them in her efforts to attain her ends. Barred because of her sex from the sources of power available to men and incapable of understanding the underlying causes of her resultant sense of frustration in the role of consumer forced on her by her training in modern
America, she is chronically restive, dissatisfied, grasping—seeking feverishly in possession, social position, and men the power for which, largely unbeknown to herself, she really longs. No less discontent, clearly, in this modern marital "system" is Ralph, who, unlike Undine, has not been shaped for it by his training. As one of the last of the old-line New Yorkers, Ralph lacks the energy, the ruthlessness, the unscrupulousness requisite to survival in the modern American business world and, increasingly, as Wharton sees it, in America itself. Perhaps the most telling evidence of this is his pathetic belief that, Pygmalion-like, he can fit Undine to the mold of the vanishing codes and values of Old New York. That he will be unable to do so is as much a foregone conclusion as is the failure of a marriage in modern America between persons of their backgrounds.

Such a perception of both Undine and Ralph as illusion-ripped and even faintly comic victims of shaping national forces they do not understand might readily evoke here, as similar perceptions do elsewhere in Wharton's work, a stance of authorial detachment, but this is not the case. Instead, Wharton's portrayal of Ralph, despite its pointed delineation of his enervation, his delusions, his essentially effete egotism, is not without a good deal of sympathy. One sees no Gilbert Osmond here, balefully contemplating an Isabel who refuses to conform to his narrow specifications; nor does one see an essentially satirical figure like Waythorn, who is caught up in somewhat similar circumstances in Wharton's "The Other Two," a story at which we shall look later. Rather, one finds oneself involved in the travail of this sensitive though feeble young husband who finds to his growing horror that behind all his wife's energy and physical beauty lie a spiritual emptiness and voracity for self-aggrandizement that are of frightening dimensions. There is little of the satirical and little to promote detachment when one sees this poor fellow frightened to "broach the subject of money" with his wife because "he had too keen a memory of the way her lips could narrow and her eyes turn from him as if he were a stranger" (p. 158) or when one sees his hope of becoming a writer wither under the blast of Undine's total lack of sympathy.
with his literary efforts and refined sensibility. Now, this sort of material, of course, can be the stuff of satire, even of comic strips. But Wharton does not work it this way. Instead, she heightens its emotional appeal by linking it to a plot line that is essentially melodramatic and to a tone that has little of the urbane, sardonic restraint one often sees in her work, including, even, sections of this one not tied to this particular marriage. Thus, Undine’s faithlessness to Ralph and her young son, which eventually drives her husband to suicide, smacks of melodrama that is not suggested by such satirical touches as Undine’s conversation with her hairdresser, which opens the novel.

Nor is it merely in terms of melodrama that Undine’s marriage to Ralph is removed from a context of satirical detachment. Ralph’s slow realization early in the marriage that Undine shares little in his interests and tastes is replete with a pathos that is not encountered elsewhere in the book. Sitting with his new wife on a charming hill near Siena, moved by the setting and the beauty of the young woman next to him, Ralph tells her she looks “as cool as a wave,” lovingly fondles her hand, and thinks to himself that at this moment “earthly dimensions were ignored and the curve of beauty [was] boundless enough to hold whatever the imagination could pour into it.” Inspired, “Ralph had never felt more convinced of his power to write a great poem” (p. 142). Undine’s response to the setting and to Ralph’s evident passion is first to stir “uneasily” and then to remark with “a faint accent of reproach, ‘I don’t feel cool, you said there’d be a breeze up here’” (p. 142). When he suggests that they go to Ucceto, from which the “drive back by moonlight would be glorious,” Undine makes “a slight show of interest” and grants, “It might be nice—but where could we get anything to eat?” (p. 143). Again, this is material that could be rendered satirically, but despite the probability that Wharton’s overriding intentions in the novel are satirical, such is not the case here. The poignancy inherent in Ralph’s illusions and blighted hopes ultimately is not meant to prompt in the reader the detachment requisite to satire. Apparently, Wharton herself cannot maintain the pose of detachment when the despolia-
tion she is depicting involves, as we have noted, not merely marriage but the last remnants of that Old New York sensibility, which, for all its shortcomings, she sees as preferable to the depredations of Undine, of her first and fourth husband Elmer Moffat, and of their modern ilk.

The detachment that eludes Wharton in her portrayal of Undine's marriage to Ralph is achieved by her in the account of Undine's next marriage, her ill-fated union with the urbane French aristocrat Raymond de Chelles. In terms of Wharton's story line, there is really very little reason for this marriage, for the confrontation between the reckless dynamism of a crass, modern America as embodied in Undine and the staid way of life of a long-entrenched aristocracy has already been delineated fully in Undine's marriage to Ralph. And although Raymond's defeat at the hands of consummate American vulgarity propped up by money and power is less complete than Ralph's, the point about Undine and her destructive impact on social stability has already been made. What Wharton is seemingly attempting to do here is turn the novel back in the direction of satire. From the first, when Undine reflects that her new husband "was really charming (it was odd how he reminded her of Ralph!)" (p. 480), through her growing realization, as Raymond tries to interest her in the life of the mind, that he "had again developed a disturbing resemblance to his predecessor" (p. 506), until her divorce from him, which simply culminates her systematic violation throughout the marriage of long-held Chelles traditions, her marriage to Raymond is essentially a repetition of her marriage to Ralph, only now rendered satirically. Though Raymond is stronger than Ralph and, unlike his predecessor, can coolly withdraw into his protective shell of aristocratic disdain when Undine becomes particularly difficult, the fundamental patterns of the two marriages are decidedly similar. All that is changed is the tone with which they are presented by Wharton. The two strong-willed but essentially limited combatants in the Chelles marriage are finally so impervious to the thrusts of each other but nevertheless so unwilling to compromise that their conflict finally becomes ludicrous. With no one deeply hurt as Ralph was and with no neglected
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child as a counter for Undine to manipulate as she did in the earlier marriage, there is in her union with Raymond little to engender emotional involvement on either Wharton's part or the reader's. Though such sources of contention between the couple as the sale of heirloom tapestries, Undine’s desire to spend more time in Paris, and her difficulties in getting along with her in-laws might in other contexts be matters of serious import, the lack of real emotional depth in either combatant rules out gravity as the fitting tone in all this.

The reestablishment of a satiric tone through Undine's marriage to Raymond is sustained through the close of the novel, as Undine remarries Elmer but finds that, despite his money and power, her divorce precludes the possibility that she will ever be an ambassador's wife, a position for which she suddenly finds herself longing because she believes "it was the one part she was really made for" (p. 594). Clearly, one's sympathies are not aroused. Dissatisfied though she will always be, her schemes and goals are so shabby as to evoke little concern for her welfare in the reader. She and Elmer, who will, presumably, spawn between them a progeny of Babbitts, may well be disturbing and frightening people; but they are so contemptible to Wharton that they are, finally, objects of humor and scorn as, like so many modern Americans, they pursue a worldly success that Wharton, like Herrick, knows is thrust before them as a promise by modern America itself, but which, even if attained, can never satisfy. That Wharton's account of Undine's career departs from contemptuous satire in the treatment of her marriage to Ralph indicates just how fully Wharton valued marriage as a relationship that, by bringing a pair into intimate confrontation with the omnipresent darkness, has a capacity for nurturing just those values—tradition, order, and a sense of commitment to others—that Undine spurned.

In *Twilight Sleep* Wharton presents a society in which the values of the Undine Spraggs and the Elmer Moffats have been roundly accepted as those by which all shall live. A conversation between the frantically "modern" socialite Pauline Manford and her daughter, Nona, establishes both the dominant system of values that Wharton observes in 1920s
America and a poignant reminder of the earlier, better system now largely discarded. Pauline, a well-meaning woman but a shallow and foolish one nonetheless, assures Nona that "being prepared to suffer is really the way to create suffering" and that "creating suffering is creating sin, because sin and suffering are really one." She goes on to declare to her daughter, "We ought to refuse ourselves to pain. All the great Healers have taught us that." Nona, lifting her eyebrows "in the slightly disturbing way she had," quietly responds, "Did Christ?" an answer that does not please Pauline and that doubtless would not please the other devotees of the cult of self-indulgence that Wharton believes dominates modern American life.

The dangers of this new way are shown in *Twilight Sleep* to be particularly potent in marriage. Unable to sustain the commitments that might entail pain, the modern New Yorkers, who help set the tone for the whole nation, have made the marriage of long standing a rarity. Thus, the Jim Wyants, a young pair who have been married not quite two years, have come "to be regarded as one of the ‘old couples’ of their set, one of the settled landmarks in the matrimonial quicksands of New York" (p. 12). Pauline, herself married to Dexter Manford for twenty years since her divorce from Arthur Wyant, Jim’s father, is appalled when she thinks of an Italian relation of hers who cannot get a divorce because of his country’s laws. She “could conceive of nothing more shocking than a social organization which did not recognize divorce, and let all kinds of domestic evils fester undisturbed, instead of having people’s lives disinfected and whitewashed at regular intervals, like the cellar” (p. 19). Such an attitude, shared by almost all of those about her, leads to the sort of situation described caustically by Nona when, speaking of her mother’s dinner parties, she asks her, “Doesn’t Maisie always have to make out a list of previous marriages as long as a crossword puzzle, to prevent your calling people by the wrong names?” (p. 29).

Convinced though Pauline is that a determinedly followed course of self-indulgence will lead to freedom and happiness, such has not been the case in her own circle, in which it has
after the vows were spoken

fostered only aimlessness, ennui, and discontent. Typically, Pauline’s divorce from the ineffectual, old-line New Yorker, Wyant, so that she might marry the energetic Midwestern businessman, Manford, has brought neither her nor Manford the contentment both envisioned as within their grasp. Dexter’s feverish pursuit of money he no longer needs and Pauline’s slavish devotion to her reputation as a fashionable hostess as well as to any quack health faddist or self-styled transcendentalist guru who promises for a fee to keep her from pain evidence their dissatisfaction with the valueless way of life they have chosen.

Though unable to grasp exactly where things have gone wrong, Dexter, unlike Pauline, at least realizes that once he saw something better, more substantial, than the life he now leads. Contemplating the self-indulgent Pauline, “he had a vision of his mother, out on the Minnesota farm, . . . —saw her sowing, digging potatoes, feeding chickens; saw her kneading, baking, cooking, washing, mending, catching and harnessing the half-broken colt to drive twelve miles in the snow for the doctor, one day when all the men were away, and his little sister had been so badly scalded” (p. 79). This prompts a yearning dream of an ideal life far different from what he now has with Pauline, one, that is, which is inherently more peaceful and family-oriented, more akin to the life of the “common lot” as envisioned by Herrick, than the isolated, self-absorbed lives he and his wife lead as wealthy New Yorkers in the 1920s:

What he really wanted was a life in which professional interests as far-reaching and absorbing as his own were somehow impossibly combined with great stretches of country quiet, books, horses and children—ah, children! Boys of his own—teaching them all sorts of country things; taking them for long trudges, telling them about trees and plants and birds—. . . and coming home in the dusk to firelight, lamplight, a tea-table groaning with jolly things all the boys and girls (girls too, more little Nonas) grouped around, hungry and tingling from their long tramp—and a woman lifting her calm face from her book. . . . (Pp. 80-81)

Frustrated by the realization that such a marriage is beyond the reach of one, like himself, who too long has been caught
up in his wife’s circle, Dexter casts about desperately for anything that will take his mind off his failure to find a worthwhile mode of life. Not surprisingly, given his weakness, the distractions he finds are all too much a part of the modern pattern of things. He enters into a vapid affair with Pauline’s friend Gladys Toy (whose buxom figure reminds him hauntingly of the strong farm women of his youth but whose name shows how seriously one need take her as a woman), and then, finally, into an ugly liaison with his stepson Jim’s chronically bored little vamp of a wife, Lita. The latter relationship prompts Arthur Wyant’s accidental wounding of Nona as he attempts vainly to kill Manford and thereby defend his vacillating son’s honor. Honor, then, like a strong sense of family ties, is rarely to be seen in the world of Twilight Sleep, and the effort to achieve it can be as dangerous and abortive as are Manford’s yearnings for a lost, better life.

As Nona’s wounding indicates, this is a society in which, for all its avoidance of pain, people do get hurt. Unfortunately, the hurt that Nona receives is far more serious, ultimately, than that caused by a bullet in the arm; it is the destruction of her moral vision. Until the shooting it is Nona alone who maintains a sense of principle and a devotion to values larger than self. Unlike her mother, whose “moral muscles” Nona regards as “atrophied” (p. 307), Nona regards divorce as something a good deal less than a panacea, particularly when children are involved; “Nona always ached for the bewildered progeny suddenly bundled from one home to another when their parents embarked on a new conjugal experiment; she could never have bought her happiness by a massacre of innocents” (p. 211). So troubled is she, in fact, by the corrosive effects of divorce on society that, even though he is childless, she turns down the man she loves rather than allow him to break up his loveless marriage for her. This rigorous commitment cannot, however, survive in the face of the corruption around her; and after the shooting and her discovery that her father has been having an affair with her half-brother’s wife, Nona is terribly changed. When her mother urges her to forget her sorrow and get married, Nona answers bitterly, “Married? Do you suppose being
married would make me happy? I wonder why you should! I don’t want to marry—there’s nobody in the world I would marry. . . . Marry! I’d a thousand times rather go into a convent and have done with it.” To Pauline’s horrified reply, “A convent—Nona! Not a convent?” she wearily answers in the closing words of the novel, “Oh, but I mean a convent where nobody believes in anything” (p. 373).

Wharton’s comment on *The House of Mirth* that “a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys” is applicable to Nona’s case just as fully as it is to Lily Bart’s. From a devotion to value, Nona is brought to nihilism, to the commitment to the “none” that is echoed by her very name. Her refusal ever to marry is nothing less than a refusal ever to believe in or care for another. Thus does Wharton reveal how a society whose spiritual impoverishment is shown most blatantly by the ephemerality of its marriages spawns only more valuelessness in an increasingly sordid America. If the rendering of this situation in *Twilight Sleep* careens wildly from the farcical to the melodramatic, as commentators have noted, this failure to achieve unity of tone grows, like the similar failure in *The Custom of the Country*, out of a moral outrage so pronounced that she cannot hold it in check as she tries to satirize the scene about her, a moral outrage engendered by what she perceives to be a loss in modern Americans of a sense of social responsibility. And this loss, she believes, is felt nowhere so devastatingly as in the decline of the American marriage.

The scene Wharton depicts in *Hudson River Bracketed* is little different from the one that destroys Nona. As George Frenside, a shrewd commentator in the work, notes of the difficulties being undergone by the protagonist, Vance Weston, “It’s a bad time for a creator of any sort to be born, in this after-war welter, with its new recipe for immortality every morning.” Though the “after-war welter” does not destroy Vance, it hinders his development as an artist, increases his tendency toward self-indulgence, and leads him into a miserable marriage. In short, Vance is, in Blake Nevius’s words, “the victim of postwar confusion and the currently unstable values in conduct as well as art.” Thus,
Although Vance's marriage—like most of the marriages in this work—is a failure, and although Wharton does perceive that the artist has special problems that may well be exacerbated by marriage, *Hudson River Bracketed*, like *The Custom of the Country* and *Twilight Sleep*, indicts not marriage but the cultural disruption that causes so many marriages to fail.

Vance's ill-advised marriage to Laura-Lou Tracy is a direct result of the aesthetic and spiritual deprivation he has undergone in his Midwestern youth, spent in such environs as Pruneville, Hallelujah, and the College of Euphoria. "Born into a world in which everything had been, or was being, renovated" (p. 3), he has no sense of tradition, no example of stability that will give his romantic, febrile yearnings after absolute beauty the ballast they need in order to find adequate expression in life or art. Certainly, his family provides no guidance; Vance's father is a small-town go-getter realtor, who simply pulls his wife in his wake as he lives out the code of Babbittry he joyfully proclaims. Nor is there much help from Vance's grandparents: "Perfection was grandma's passion—ladies were grandpa's" (p. 6). Because of this dingy background, Vance's innate thirst for beauty is increased, since he can find nothing in the sterility around him to satisfy it. As a result, he seizes almost in desperation upon his pretty but not terribly intelligent Eastern cousin, Laura-Lou, transforms her in his own mind into the virtual embodiment of transcendent beauty and artistic inspiration, and marries her, with horrendous results for them both. Had the postwar Midwest been less of a wasteland peopled by money-chasers, skirt-chasers, and chasers of panaceas for the spirit, Vance never would have made the mistake he does.

Inevitably Vance finds that Laura-Lou in no way approximates his prenuptial vision of her; and, frustrated in his literary career by the politics of New York publishing and reviewing, bewildered and troubled by the spurious, ostensibly avant-garde pontifications of the poseurs and hacks who comprise most of the New York literati, he has diminishing patience for his clinging and increasingly sickly wife. Indeed, he himself brings about the tuberculosis that finally
destroys her by his foolish and selfish efforts to transform this simple girl into the muse he envisioned her to be. Forcing her to climb a snow-covered mountain with him so that she can be suitably inspired by the prospect from the summit, he succeeds only in turning her into a fatally ill consumptive as he reenacts unwittingly the pathetic end of the marriage between another driven romantic artist and his mortally stricken child-bride. Like Poe and Virginia, Vance and Laura-Lou move to the Bronx, where they live in a desperate poverty that speeds the death of the girl. With little thought for his failing wife, Vance pursues his work compulsively; and at her death, significantly, it is Bunty Hayes, the pleasant but crude suitor she gave up for Vance, who draws down the poor girl’s eyelids. Misled, then, into a bad marriage by the romantic longings in him that are ungratified by his background, disheartened and turned inward by the corrupt literary world about him in New York, Vance finally has come to care less for his wife than does her spurned suitor. He has, again like Poe, seemingly lost concern for the mundane and those who people it, not necessarily a damaging happenstance for the imaginative artist, who can create a world of his own, but a dangerous occurrence for a husband.

Like the marriage of Vance and Laura-Lou, the other union seen at any length in this novel, that of Halo Spear and Lewis Tarrant, is one that never should have taken place. That it did is, as with Vance’s marriage, less the fault of either partner than of the temper of the times. Halo’s parents, who, like many of their contemporaries, pride themselves on being advanced, even revolutionary, thinkers, are merely vapid hedonists, whose “heresies were too mild to cause any excitement outside of their own circle” (p. 62). Too selfish and weak to support themselves and their children, they pass on to Halo only poverty and their propensity for self-dramatization, lack of direction, and weakness of purpose. Moreover, Halo’s marriage itself is part of their unfortunate legacy. Grateful to Tarrant for his huge loans to her parents and thus too quick to see him as a contrast to both her father and her wastrel brother, Halo tells herself that “she ought to be able to love him” and that, even if she cannot, she will, “at any
rate . . . never willingly cause him any pain” (p. 190). Entering into her marriage with Tarrant, consequently, with nothing motivating her that is quite so potent as her desire to get away from her parents, Halo finds it difficult to maintain any sense of obligation to the marriage when she discovers that her husband, himself too much a product of the times, is cold, selfish, and as immature as her parents. Halo and Lewis’s childlessness, representative for Wharton perhaps of the emptiness of their marriage, aggravates the situation. Halo herself believes that things might have gone better “if between her and her husband there had been a presence, warm and troublesome and absorbing, to draw them closer yet screen them a little from each other” (p. 195). Lacking such a presence, each is thrust against the other’s faults and turns away, Halo to Vance and the encouragement of his work, through which she gains a vicarious gratification, and Tarrant, petulantly, to his growing self-absorption—both, finally, victims of an age unconducive to real personal growth and to marriage, which Wharton, of course, sees as so often linked to such growth.

Hence, despite the Weston and Tarrant marriages, Wharton’s faith in matrimony itself as providing potential benefits along with its pain remains. In The Gods Arrive, Frenside, again serving as Wharton’s wise observer, notes that becoming lovers, as Halo and Vance do in this sequel, offers none of the advantages of marriage; he asserts, “We most of us need a framework, a support—the maddest lovers do. Marriage may be too tight a fit—may dislocate and deform. But it shapes life too, prevents lopsidedness or drifting.”19 None of Wharton’s works, however bleak any marriage presented may be, contradicts this view. The failures Halo and Vance undergo in marriage are ascribable to shortcomings in them imparted by their backgrounds and not to weaknesses in matrimony itself.

2. For additional comments on determinism in the House of Mirth, see Nevius, p. 56; Lindberg, pp. 45-48; and Margaret B. McDowell, Edith Wharton (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1976), p. 52.
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4. Wolff sees Nettie’s baby in less affirmative terms, regarding “Lily’s powerful identification with the baby [as] silent testimony to the infantilizing force of the mutilating image of women that society fosters” (p. 130). Also apparently unimpressed by the Struther marriage as a means by which Wharton expresses faith in matrimony is Judith Fetterley, who asserts that in The House of Mirth “marriage is deadly because it is an economic transaction in which the beautiful object [woman denied her identity] becomes the possession of the man who has money enough to buy her” (“The Temptation to be a Beautiful Object: Double Standard and Double Bind in The House of Mirth,” Studies in American Fiction 5 [Autumn 1977]: 205). Certainly both Wolff and Fetterley make valid points here. Lily is infantile, marriage in her milieu is often ugly; but one must add too that Wharton had faith in the institution, believing it could be better than it is through much of this work and could help women grow.


7. Wolff, p. 143. Geoffrey Walton notes that Amherst, “an intense individualist,” has “little real feeling for other individuals” (p. 94).


10. Wolff suggests that Justine fails to reach this serenity and moral maturity because she has inchoate sexual longings that find no adequate outlet or satisfaction (p. 142). The question of Justine’s sexual needs does not seem to me to be an issue in this novel. Rather, like Marilyn Jones Lyde, I am inclined to believe that the issue is whether Justine will learn the value of “balancing individual idealism and social necessity.” Clearly, Justine seems to. See Lyde’s Edith Wharton: Convention and Morality in the Works of a Novelist (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), pp. 91-92. Also, Elizabeth Ammons notes aptly that Wharton would create few other characters as “splendid as Justine Brent, or as betrayed” (Edith Wharton’s Argument with America [Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980], p. 55).

11. Though most commentators regard the novel as a satire, many see elements in it that bring about a clear departure from the satirical tone. Louis Auchincloss asserts that “Wharton hates Undine too much” (Pioneers and Caretakers [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1965], p. 38). Nevius sees the situation in similar terms (p. 152). McDowell suggests that the “intensity” of Wharton’s portrayal of Ralph is an exception to “the consistency of tone in this satirical comedy” (p. 81).

12. Elizabeth Ammons notes that it is “not Undine Spragg, self-centered and insensitive as she is, but the institution of marriage in the leisure class [that] constitutes the main target of Wharton’s satire in The Custom of the Country” (“The Business of Marriage in Edith Wharton’s The Custom of the Country,” Criticism 16 [Fall 1974]: 327). Certainly the marriages one sees here are just as unsuccessful as those glimpsed among the leisure-class marrieds in The House of Mirth, but, as with the earlier work, it is clear that criticism of these marriages does not constitute an attack on the institution of marriage itself, in whatever class it exists.


16. Lyde notes that Nona's "loss of belief in life" represents "the negation of Mrs. Wharton's primary moral values: truth and belief" (p. 57).