CONCLUSION

THOUGH TWAIN SUGGESTS in the statement with which this study began that marriage is the logical place to end a book about "grown people," he offers no advice about just where to end a book about the depictions of the marriages entered into by such people. Because no line so distinct as that separating the marriage fiction of Howells and James from all stories of wedlock that came before in America divides it and the marriage stories of Chopin, Wharton, and Herrick from all that came after the careers of these five were under way, there is a temptation to strike on farther into the twentieth century. The marriages depicted by Cather, Glasgow, and Sinclair Lewis in the realist tradition, by Farrell in the naturalist, by Fitzgerald and Dos Passos, and, closer to our own day, by Updike and Bellow among many others since the days of the five authors scrutinized here all show that possibilities for significant delineation of married life did not end with these five. Yet there is, nonetheless, ample reason to stop where we do. As the first writers of fiction in America to depict married life extensively, thereby manifesting the freshest of literary responses to it, and as the realists who, of all those writing in the forty to fifty years regarded as the heyday of literary realism, look at marriage most intensely, they obviously form a natural unit of scrutiny.

As one studies the five, one sees similarities among them that link them to a common literary outlook—realism. Not only do all concern themselves with depicting an extremely significant social relationship, but they depict it in a world neither fantastic nor exotic, one at least meant to be recognizable as the one inhabited by most of their contemporaries. They are committed as well to accuracy of detail in depicting whatever specific area of this world they choose to describe.
Further, they all write with a consciousness, however vague it may be and however tenuously held, that their task of inspiring readers to be more aware of the possibilities in their own world of human suffering, human grandeur, human behavior generally, can have worthwhile social effects.

One sees too, however, significant differences among the five as they develop their views of what marriage as an institution and married life as actually lived have to offer. Thus, both Howells's fond wish that marriage could be a little realm of civility and affection that might have beneficial effects for society at large and his ultimately irrepressible fear that it would not bear little resemblance to James's view of marriage as a particularly intense form of experience that usually leads the sensitive into pain and, far more rarely, into hard-won, personal, strangely sacred triumphs not unmixed with pain. Nor do the views of either have much in common with Chopin's view of marriage as a relationship in which, for better or for worse, for the success of the marriage or not, one's authentic needs will inevitably assert themselves, or with Wharton's dominant belief that marriage, like many another institution, is a horribly imperfect but nonetheless necessary check on the folly of no less imperfect human beings. Finally, Herrick's portrayal of married life as at its best an escape from the turmoil of an acquisitive society into the calm, sanity, and quiet joys of the "common lot," though bearing some superficial similarity to Howells's vision of matrimony, is essentially a product of romantic idealization. Consequently, it is as far removed from Howells's notion of matrimony as are some of the bitter depictions of bad marriages Herrick presents that Howells could not bring himself to credit. Taking into account such differences as these on a topic like marriage, which is presumably of central interest to anyone who has a realistic orientation in literature, it becomes apparent that realism and realists are perhaps far less easy to define and categorize than one might think.

Moreover, the one major similarity that is manifested in their views on matrimony—the recurring pessimism all show about the prospects for most men and women to find happiness or undergo significant growth in marriage—reflects, I
suspect, more of a continuing influence on all of them of the highly individualistic strain in American romanticism than any ties to an outlook of realism. One’s thoughts about marriage inevitably reflect one’s thoughts about a great many other things. And certainly one common component of the fundamental outlooks of all five whether they are depicting marriage or not is a deep commitment to individualism. Be it Howells’s pragmatism or his sense of existential chaos and terror, be it James’s “imagination of disaster” and devotion to renunciatory gestures such as Isabel’s, or be it Chopin’s anarchic determinism, Wharton’s wry, terrible conviction of human limitation and folly, or Herrick’s transcendental idealism, all five present highly personal visions of life that are informed by no prevailing social doctrines of their time and are built usually on the belief that men and women must ultimately struggle alone as they confront issues involving moral and social dimensions.

Because of this, they focus, more often than not, on men and women who even within marriage are exceedingly alone as they cope with, or fail to cope with, the demands exerted on them by this social relation. The defeats endured by James’s characters and the triumphs they achieve are lonely ones—as lonely as any of the sufferings and victories one finds in Hawthorne’s or Melville’s accounts of American isolatoes. If Isabel Archer’s folly is a purely American one of quirky individualism and egotism, her moral grandeur at last is no less in the earlier nineteenth-century tradition of the self-defining, self-justifying, individualistic quester. If Maggie Verver’s struggle in the web of deceit in which she finds herself brings her at last to sacred union with her husband, the struggle itself, despite the silent partnership she has with Amerigo, is a lonely one. Moreover, the poignance permeating the union that closes the book arises from this pair’s awareness, as well as the reader’s, that such moments as this of perfect communion are all the more beautiful for their rarity and transitoriness in a world in which, as James’s marriage works show, loneliness is the rule and will continue to be so, even for these two. Similarly, Chopin’s driven men and women may, indeed, occasionally find themselves in liaisons
AFTER THE VOWS WERE SPOKEN

or even marriages that fulfill them; but such fulfillment as they find is purely personal, for the prevailing rule of human existence for Chopin is that individuals cannot help but embark on a lonely pursuit of such gratification as may involve another but that ultimately has as its sole raison d'être the meeting of one's own authentic needs and nothing, at last, to do with the well-being of others. Both Wharton and Herrick, obviously, did seek to tie their marriage fiction to a concern for the well-being of others, endeavoring to show in their depiction of failed marriages the errors of the society about them and in the successful ones the embodiment of the values that they hoped American society might some day manifest. However, Wharton's contempt for what modern America had become, her realization of the limitations of the best society she might envision—that of "Old New York"—and her unflagging awareness of the ineradicable human capacity for folly led her almost invariably to present her social values as vague ideas rather than as compelling delineations of functioning societies. Indeed, what is most striking in her marriage works—reflecting always her own personal bitterness over the failings she saw rampant on the modern American scene—are her delineations of lonely, valueless men and women swept along in the tide of corruption and of the no less lonely individuals sentient enough to envision something better than the goals thrust before them by their society but too powerless to do so. One might note too that an exception like Newland Archer, who does achieve a triumph of sorts by acquiescing at last to a legitimate sense of social duty in a less than perfect but defensible society is himself so alone in his struggles as to make clear that even in a work like The Age of Innocence relatively untinged by bitterness, Wharton's essential focus is still on the struggles of the lonely. Herrick too was generally unable to overcome his contempt for the social scene about him, but his inability to do so led him, as we have seen, not into bitterness but into a highly personal visionary idealism clearly within the tradition of Emersonian transcendental individualism native to the New England in which Herrick was born and raised. What is unmistakable here, though, is that like Wharton, and, for that matter, like James
CONCLUSION

and Chopin as well, Herrick in his marriage fiction does not
come near cutting himself off totally from the individualism
evident in the earlier nineteenth-century American fiction.

Nor does Howells, perhaps the most explicit of the writers
here in his fear that commitment to self is destructive of a
sense of social commitment, cut himself off from this individ­
ualism. Even he, reacting against the absolutism and idealism
associated with individualism, is, by grounding his social
commitment in the pragmatic outlook, finally throwing the
individual back on himself for the determination of what is
the most effectual course to pursue in trying to achieve hu­
mane ends. Thus, whatever social themes may be evident in
the fiction in which marriage figures prominently, the works
ultimately resolve themselves into Howells’s delineations of
highly individual pursuits of understanding and right con­
duct. Atherton, the Reverend Mr. Sewell, Silas Lapham, Basil
and Isabel March, whether pragmatically inclined or not, are
on their own as they struggle to discern what acting well in­
volves and what the human difficulties they observe or are
cought up in can reveal about the nature of existence. To be
sure, Basil and Isabel are together, indubitably a benefit ac­
corded them by their marriage; but such conclusions as each
reaches often differ from the other’s, and nothing in the ma­
jor works in which they figure or in the other marriage fic­
tion ever changes the fact that the pursuit of truth for How­
ells’s characters is finally as lonely a one as that undertaken
by any characters of Hawthorne, Melville, or Poe, though
certainly carried out in less outré circumstances, indeed, usu­
ally in the midst of polite society.

Hence, study of the marriage fiction of these five reveals
that realism may be at once far more pessimistic and far more
closely tied to romanticism than has heretofore been per­
ceived. Obviously this does not imply that there are no
differences between these writers and the major figures pre­
ceding them. After all, the realist traits that they do manifest
set them to some degree apart from their predecessors. But
the residual individualism one sees in the works of these five
does clearly establish a link that ought not to be ignored. Per­
haps it is this continuing concern with isolated figures and
lonely pursuits of value and courses of right conduct that makes the realists in their marriage fiction as relatively unconcerned as they are with the advocacy of specific social reforms involving marriage. Such matters as liberalization of divorce laws, more control for married women of their financial situations, equitable chances for careers for married (or unmarried) women, fairness in child custody decisions, and the like are usually touched on tangentially if at all by these writers. Thesis fiction is no more what they are about, clearly, than it was what Melville, Poe, Hawthorne, Brown, Irving, or the Cooper of the adventure novels had in mind. Perhaps too the preponderance of unhappy unions in realist marriage fiction also grows out of the traditional American individualist leeriness of confinement through conventional commitments. Happy marriages do not usually make for likely fictional subjects to begin with, but the real paucity of happy marriages in the works at which we have looked may require such further explanation as is offered by the supposition that it grows out of the residual individualism of which we have spoken. Finally, this lingering individualism may also be at the root of the conscious or unconscious tendency glimpsed among the five writers at whom we have looked to impute—either with faint contemptuousness or admiringly—pedestrianism to the happier marriages they depict. By its very nature, the individualistic outlook seems to concern itself with ideals and, rarely meeting the ideal in its observations of the world about it, may well see such happiness as it marks as the refuge of inferior sensibilities. One need only remember Ishmael's comments on happy men in "The Try-Works" chapter of *Moby-Dick* or recall how cloying and unconvincing Hawthorne seems to become in works like "The Great Carbuncle" and "The Ambitious Guest," in which he seems almost trying to force himself to believe that the happiness he posits really is worthwhile, to see the operation of this tendency in the individualistic mentality.

Such similarities as we have touched on between the realists and their predecessors are also apparent when comparing their marriage fiction to that of the American writers following them. Again, one sees a preponderance of unhappy mar-
riage and the lingering American commitment to the depiction of lone characters in pursuit of individually defined goals. The Dick Divers, Henderson the Rain Kings, Rabbit Angstroms, and battling Mr. and Mrs. Tate are all figures no less driven than Isabel Archer, Ethan Frome, or Edna Pontellier were by deeply personal needs—needs, I might add, that finally have little to do with any particular social issues of their day and that cannot be gratified by any particular reform that would right any social injustice. Though writers such as Philip Roth and Mailer, among others, deal far more explicitly, of course, with the physical relations in marriage than the writers whom we have studied and focus more explicitly, as well, on conflicts between husband and wife in terms of power struggles between husband as Man and wife as Woman—a type of conflict only anticipated in the realist period—they ultimately are still more concerned with the destiny of their characters as individuals than as reflections of sexual, political, or social types. Again, old American tendencies of thought die hard. The concerns of those writers we style romantics and those we style realists are still our concerns, and their thoughts on marriage are still ones that bear on our own lives.

Also dying hard, apparently, if dying at all, is marriage itself, which has a knack for remaining on the scene even in an era such as ours when many are writing it off. One lawyer remarks, in fact, "Perhaps the most impressive lesson one learns from exposure to divorce courts is that people generally are extremely loath to terminate their marriages; in fact what most people endure during marriage before finally resorting to divorce is practically unbelievable." Moreover, the statistics continue to tell us that although the divorce rate climbs, the great majority of those divorced do indeed try marriage again. That Howells, James, Chopin, Wharton, and Herrick were the first to look at this remarkable institution is certainly not the least of their achievements.
