EDITH WHARTON
AS A SOCIAL SATIRIST

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It is a truism to state that literature is life but is is hardly so commonplace to say that literature is a history of life. We may easily find many instances of the former but there is only one of the latter. The English drama and the French novel are saturated with life -- real and earnest living -- but neither of these can truly be said to give the history of their people. The periods of American literature alone are the mileposts of a nation's development.

Washington Irving, the first American to gain a reputation abroad for being a man of letters, wrote of the Catskill Mountains and the early Dutch settlers. His stories abound in the colonial atmosphere of leisure and quaintness. Cooper came next with graphic descriptions of the frontiersman's life and thus recorded another chapter of American development. When the pioneers became prospectors in distant California Brete Hart was there to recount their bizarre adventures. Thomas Nelson Page preserved for the enjoyment of future generations some of the romance and glory of the old South, while Jool Chandler Harris immortalized the central character of its existence, the negro slave.

Edith Wharton completes another chapter in the book of American life by describing the latter-day fashionable society. Following the good precedent set by the others, she writes of her own time, and I might add, of her own class. The accumulation of wealth and the congregation of people in large

cities have made for a special environment, and it is this environment and its effect on human beings that she has taken occasion to exploit. She calls attention to the new conditions that have sprung up and brings into our fiction the new type of character that has been created out of those conditions. O Henry, in his revolt against the fiction of his time, coined the phrase "The Four Million"; Mrs. Wharton's specialty is "The Four Hundred". This class, which received its name from an exclusive gathering called together by Mrs. John Jacob Astor in her palatial home on Fifth Avenue, is a class that has elsewhere received scant attention in American literature. Thackeray, Meredith and Henry James wrote of it in England, and Balzac and others in France, but thus far Edith Wharton is the single commentator in America. Hers is the Washington Square aristocracy -- the aristocracy of which she was soon to write "would, before long, be exhibiting at ethnological shows."

Perhaps no one is better fitted to undertake a delineation of this class than the subject of our discussion. Born in New York in 1862, a time when the little city scarcely dreamed of becoming the world's greatest metropolis, she saw the very beginning of the class which was afterwards to be her subject matter. She was the daughter of Frederic Jones, who had married Lucretia Stevens Rhinelander, and her grandparents were the Schermerhorns and the Stevens, the latter of Revolutionary fame. Every social prerogative and material enjoyment

were hers by virtue of ancestry and financial well-being. Though moving, as she did, in the highest walks of New York society when at home, the culture of other lands was accessible to her, and she did not fail to enjoy it. Her early life was marked by frequent trips to Europe, where her education was obtained from governesses and tutors. As a child she learned French, German, and Italian. Such summers as the family devoted to America were spent at Newport -- that rendezvous of fashionable America in the summer-time. When twenty-three years of age she became the wife of Edward Wharton, a lawyer of Boston, and the couple lived first at New York and Newport and later at Lenox. The appeal of the old world was a strong one for Mrs. Wharton, and so, like Henry James, she gave up her native land to settle in France, with a winter home in Provence and a summer home near Paris.

Mrs. Wharton's travels in many lands and her vast store of learning make her no author for the light reader seeking diversion. Her thought is subtle, her culture extensive, her prejudice decided, and her judgment discriminating. Thackeray, Dickens, Balzac, Flaubert, Henry James, Jane Austin, Meredith and many other authors flash through every story. There are literary allusions, biological and geological metaphors and references, and endless comments and reflections on human nature, art and literature in general. Twenty of her fifty stories have as their theme some subject pertaining to art or letters, while a large number of her characters are authors, painters, or

lawyers. In The Muse's Tragedy, Souls Belated, Full Circle, The Legend, and The Touchstone, the hero by profession is an author; in The Portrait, The Recovery, The Rembrandt, The Moving Finger, The Daunt Diana, The Letters, The Verdict, and The Potboiler, the hero is an artist. Philanthropy and politics are also several times chosen. In her novels the characters of importance are invariably young writers struggling for recognition, or men higher up in the walks of life. For example, in The Glimpses of the Moon Nick Lansing is a Harvard graduate (all of Mrs. Wharton's college men are graduates of Harvard or Oxford, by the way) trying his hand at a novel; Mr. Spragg and Moffat in The Custom of the Country are Wall Street brokers. Sometimes she goes far afield for her subject matter: in The Valley of Decision court life in an Italian principality is described; in Kerfol, one of her short stories, murder and witchcraft of seventeenth-century Brittany is treated; and in The Hermit and the Wild Woman, another of her short stories, the ascetic ecstasies and agonies of medieveal religion are touched upon.

Though cultured and artistic to a high degree she does not have a wide range. As some one has pointed out, most of her characters transact their affairs in drawing-rooms and country houses. It is the atmosphere that she knows best. Being a woman, and therefore denied the freedom of intercourse with the world accorded to men, she has to resort to book knowledge and the use of her imagination to save her from dullness and shallowness. She uses her penetrative and introspective

powers to supply her the information about the world in general that she needs. The result is a type of literature strongly resembling that of Henry James.

It is not to be expected, therefore, that her point of view is the common one. Far from it. From her superior, and more fortunate, station in life, with its elegance and smartness, she betrays a contempt for everything that is dingy (a favorite word with her) or disordered. She has, moreover, a strong -- perhaps some would even say an unreasoning -- instinct for social values. Little sympathy does she show for human weakness, so quick she is to vent her spleen against people's failings. There is this much to be said in her behalf, however: she is always content at merely pointing out; she never becomes the least bit partisan. All that savors of the personal element in her work is the atmosphere itself, which, of course, reflects her own luxurious environment.

So much for the general character of her work. Let us now illustrate by specific examples the points we have just mentioned, for it is inevitable that one should turn to her work itself for a true understanding and appreciation of her. For convenience, we roughly divide her stories and novels into three groups: (1) Those in which she lightly plays upon the contradictions and foibles of high society; (2) Those in which she discusses somewhat more seriously matters pertaining to love, marriage and divorce; and (3) Those in which she plays upon the weaknesses of human nature in general. The reader is

advised that the division is not a strictly accurate one, however, for Edith Wharton, delights in throwing the light on all of our foibles.

The first of the foregoing groups is properly illustrated by The Pelican, a story dealing with the woman lecturer. Mrs. Amyot, upon finding herself a penniless widow with a son to rear in the world, adopts lecturing as a means of livelihood. Though neither endowed by nature nor prepared thru training for the work, she makes a moderate success because of "her upper lip, her dimple and her Greek." Her real support, let it be added by way of parenthesis, lies in a free and literal use of the encyclopedia and the appeal that she does it "for the baby".

Thirty years pass and we find her still living on the gullibility and sympathy of the wealthy class. This time she is scheduled to speak before a woman's club in Florida, and her feminine helpers are canvassing the grounds of the hotel in an effort to sell tickets for the occasion. Pleading that Mrs. Amyot now does it to "educate her son", they urge people to attend the lecture. Mrs. Amyot's son, long since a self-supporting married man with several children, happens to be on a visit to his mother, and upon overhearing the remarks of the ticket-sellers learns for the first time of the hoax his mother is committing on the public. Both embarrassed and enraged he seeks her out and publicly rebukes her for the fraud. The story ends with Mrs. Amyot in tears over her son's incivility and thanklessness for the "seal-skin jacket which

she gave to his wife at Christmas."

Another view we have of the drawing-room activities is in *Xingu*, a story of the "Ladies' Lunch Club of Hillbridge". Membership in the Club includes Mrs. Plinth, who is outstanding because of her material wealth; Mrs. Leverett, who, despite the constant companionship of her volume of Appropriate Allusions, can only recall the one "Cans't thou draw out leviathon with a hook?"; Mrs. Ballinger, whose province is the Book of the Day, and who has a mind "where facts come and go like transient lodgers:" Mrs. Van Cluyck, whose specialties are philanthropy and statistics. Of least importance is the "impossible Mrs. Roby", who has betrayed her pitiful incompetence by remarking at the visiting biology professor's mention of the pterodactyl, that "she knew so little about nature."

The members of the Club argue as to where their coming visitor, the distinguished authoress Osric Dane, shall be entertained. It is commonly conceded that Mrs. Plinth's house, "by reason of its picture gallery, footman, and owner's all round sense of duty", would be the most impressive setting; but the privilege goes to Mrs. Ballinger, as it is her time to entertain and she tenaciously clings to the right. On the appointed day Mrs. Dane is at hand. The ladies, hoping to make a good impression and at the same time get their guest to do the talking, ask varied questions about literature. This ruse is not quite so successful, however, for instead of answering the questions, the authoress propounds some herself. Thus, when one mentions "objective method", Mrs. Dane calls for a

definition of the term, and when another says "psychology", Mrs. Dane returns "Which psychology?" .

Disaster is about to face the Club when Mrs. Roby comes to the rescue by asserting that they have been much interested of late in "Xingu". Happy in getting assistance from this unexpected quarter, her fellow-members at once rejoin, "Xingu, -- why, of course!" though in truth the very word is foreign to them. The battery of Mrs. Roby's questions opens fire on Mrs. Dane, with the result that (though the fact is not evident to the other ladies) the distinguished guest undergoes a general perturbation of mind. Alas! none of them know whether Xingu is a thing, a person, or an idea, and it is not until the meeting is precipitately ended by the departure of Mrs. Roby (with the baffled authoress at her heels) that they learn the word is the name of a river in South America, and that the Club has been made the laughing stock of the "incompetent Mrs. Roby."

A third illustration of the first group and one that perhaps reaches deeper into American life is "His Father's Son, which appeared in 1910 in the collection called Tales of Men and Ghosts. Quite a stretch of years had passed between the writing of The Pelican (1899) and His Father's Son, and during that time Mrs. Wharton had seen, written, and observed much. Little wonder it is that she saw in the "climbing" common people an inviting theme and turned it to frequent use.

By virtue of Mr. Grew's phenomenal success in the manufacture and sale of a Secure Suspendor Buckle, his family is the leading social unit of the small town of Wingfield, Connecticut. Though coming from humble origin (as so many of American families do), they have been enabled to win material success in the world and educate their son Ronald at the Harvard Law School. They keenly realize their own social shortcomings but rejoice in the fact that their son, as a New York practitioner, can enjoy the sweets of life which they have been denied. Somewhat obliquely, but at least modestly, they refuse to move to the big city because they are convinced their "ordinary" appearance will handicap him.

It must not be believed, however, that Mr. and Mrs. Grew's life has been all shadow, for there was "one exquisite hour" for them before that of Ronald's birth. This was on an occasion when they visited New York to hear the great pianist Fortune Dolbrowski. So completely overwhelmed were they with the performance that Mrs. Grew desired to express her appreciation by means of a personal letter. Inarticulate herself, she had to rely on her husband -- an adept with the pen -- to compose the letter which she copied and signed. Dolbrowski was charmed by the richness of feeling in the epistle and ventured a reply, to which the Grews answered in return. In this way an extended correspondence was started up.

The years roll by. Mrs. Grew dies, leaving to her son her priceless possession, the letters from Dolbrowski.

Ronald who has always been perplexed by the singularity of the contrast between his own brilliance and the comparative dullness of his parents, thinks he reads in the gift of the letters a tacit confession of his mother that Dolbrowski, and not Mr. Grew, is his father -- a belief he considers reinforced by his appreciation of music. Mr. Grew, his wife now being dead, has moved to the outskirts of Brooklyn where he can be close enough to see his son occasionally and joy in the newspaper accounts of his social flights without, at the same time, being too close to embarrass him.

One day Ronald appears before his father to inform him of his engagement and approaching marriage to one of the debutantes of New York. He hesitates to accept the sum of money Mr. Grew urges upon him for an establishment, because, he says, he can not honorably do it in view of what he has learned from Dolbrowski's letters. Mr. Grew is of course very much puzzled at first, but he gradually comes to understand his son's delusion, and is tremendously amused by the humor of it. He promptly removes all doubt in his son's mind as to his legitimate parenthood and assures Ronald: "You are your father's son all right, and no mistake about: You're the son of as big a fool as yourself."

It is clear, perhaps, from the foregoing illustrations that Mrs. Wharton is the bitter and undying opponent of sham. She abhors anything that savors of the imitation or false in life. Whether it be in manners, customs, love, ideals, or religion, she unhesitatingly and ruthlessly goes to the

bottom of the matter. Needless to say, from her vantage point of wealth, social station and culture she is enabled to do this with a fine sense for the correct and the truthful. We get some idea of the degree of her personal dislike for affectation when we hear one of her characters in one of her earliest books (The Valley of Decision) express the following sentiment: "None was more open than he to the seducements of luxurious living, the polish of manners, the tacit exclusion of all that is ugly or distressing; but it seemed to him that the fine living should be the flower of fine feeling, and that such external graces, when they adorned a dull and vapid society, were incongruous as the royal purple on a clown."

After reading this we are better able to understand the severity of her ridicule of "imitation aristocracy" in The Glimpses of the Moon. In creating the Hicks family she has given us a concrete example of what she means by the clown wearing the royal purple. We quote in full her description of them:

> "They presented a formidable front, not only because of their mere physical bulk -- Mr. and Mrs. Hicks were equally and majestically three-dimensional -- but because they never moved abroad without the escort of two private secretaries (one for the foreign languages), Mr. Hicks's doctor, a maiden lady known as Eldoradder Tooker, who was Mrs. Hicks's cousin and stenographer, and finally, their daughter, Coral Hicks.
>
> "Coral Hicks...........had been a fat spectacled school girl, always lagging behind her parents, with a reluctant poodle in her wake. Now the poodle had gone, and his mistress led the procession. The fat school-girl had changed into a young lady of compact if not graceful outline; a long-

handled eye-glass had replaced the spectacles, and through it, instead of a sullen stare, Miss Coral Hicks projected on the world a glance at once confident and critical. She looked so strong and so assured that Susy, taking her measure in a flash, saw that her position at the head of the procession was not fortuitous, and murmured inwardly: 'Thank goodness she's not pretty too!'

"If she was not pretty, she was well-dressed; and if she was overeducated, she seemed capable, as Strefford had suggested, of carrying off even this crowning disadvantage. At any rate, she was above disguising it; and before the whole party had been seated five minutes in front of a fresh supply of ices (with Eldorada and the secretaries at a table slightly in the background) she had taken up with Nick the question of exploration in Mesopotamia."

The Hickses are what Mrs. Wharton calls "common people with big purses." They are

"both ridiculous and unsuccessful. They had consistently resisted the efforts of the experienced advisers who had first descried them on the horizon and tried to help them upward. They were always taking up with the wrong people, giving the wrong kind of party, and spending millions on things that nobody who mattered cared about. They all believed passionately in 'movements' and 'causes' and 'ideals', and were always attended by the exponents of their latest beliefs, always asking you to hear lectures by haggard women in peplums, and having their portraits painted by wild people who never turned out to be the fashion."

It is in The House of Mirth that Mrs. Wharton gives us a picture in the fullest tints and colors of the society in which the ambitious Hickses are wont to tread. "A big, vital, masterly book of its type," says Frederick Cooper, "and one that utterly refuses to be forgotten. Though essentially a story of one character there are many so wisely chosen and so deftly sketched in that the impression left is one of many-sided and kaleidoscopic life." Lily Bart, the heroine of the book, is a child of the "typical" rich home:

> "A house in which no one every dined unless there was 'company'; a door-bell perpetually ringing; a hall-table showered with square envelopes which were opened in haste, and oblong envelopes which were allowed to gather dust in the depths of a bronze jar; a series of French and English maids giving warning amid a chaos of hurriedly-ransacked wardrobes and dress-closets; an equally changing dynasty of nurses and footmen; quarrels in the pantry, the kitchen and the drawing-room; precipitate trips to Europe, and returns with gorged trunks and days of interminable unpacking; semi-annual discussions as to where the summer should be spent, grey interludes of economy and brilliant reactions of expense."

Her mother and father were now dead and she had barely enough patrimony left with which to catch a husband. In this she should have much success, however, for she is both pretty and popular. Percy Gryce, a cautious and proper young man with a good bank account seems desirable and so she contrives to arouse his interest by putting herself in his way. The more she sees of him, however, the more she realizes that she can not marry him for expediency's sake, and the more she realizes too that by all the "laws of moral and physical correspondence" she is meant for Laurence Selden, a struggling young lawyer. But it is considered ridiculous to be guided in the choice of a husband by one's sentimental feelings, and so Lily awaits the coming of a richer prize.

A parentless girl can not bide her time in the world unless she has money, and this Lily Bart did not have. In order to manage, therefore, she had to accept the help of the vulgar husband of her friend Grace Trenor, and thru his speculations on the stock market she gets cash enough to tide her over a little while longer. Trenor, in spite of his money-making ability, cuts a poor figure in the social world, and he

aids Lily solely in the hope that in linking his name to that of a young butterfly he will improve his own standing. He is promptly disillusioned in this, but he then resolves to seek a reward from her person. To serve his purpose he arranges it so that she makes a call at his home when his wife is out of town; and Lily, unknowingly, walks into the trap. When she discovers the insulting trick she is naturally incensed and humiliated, but by the exercise of superhuman patience and tact she manages to extricate herself without personal injury.

The morning after a sleepless night of travail and sorrow over the episode brings a sudden and unexpected change in her fortunes, for she is asked by the Dorsets to accompany them on a trip to Europe. The gods do not long propitiate her even then, however, for matters again take a bad turn when Mrs. Dorset heartlessly sacrifices her in order to shield herself from a suspicion of adultery. The object of severe criticism and disapprobation, Lily returns to America only to find Mount Pelion heaped upon Ossa in her misfortunes: Mrs. Peniston, whose wealth she had fully expected to inherit, has died and made someone else the object of her bounty.

A friend in the person of Mrs. Fisher, henchman to the socially aspirant, volunteers aid in the crisis and Lily is accepted as social secretary and mentor to the Gormers on a trip to Alaska. This is a decided retrogression for Lily, because the Gormers, though immensely wealthy, have long been considered vulgar and socially undesirable. The next we hear

of her she has taken yet another step downward in becoming the secretary of the thoroughly disreputable and immoral Mrs. Hatch. Selden, her former lover, rescues her from this debasing atmosphere and causes his friend, Mildred Farish, to secure employment for her in a hat-shop. Unaccustomed to hard work and long hours, she makes little success at sewing spangles on hat-frames (her task), and so gives up the job.

The remainder of the story is a short and sorrowful recital. The girl who started life with every comfort and luxury that money and station in life could afford ends it as a suicide. Her beauty gone, her health impaired, her debts unpaid, her character maligned, her reputation compromised, life is meaningless to her. "A little too weak to do without money and what it buys, or to earn it for herself, and a little too good to sell herself," she is the wreck of her own folly. Unlike Alma Frothingham and Harvey Rolfe in The Whirlpool, that English counterpart of The House of Mirth, she makes no final, desperate attempt to save herself. She does not for a moment resolve to "strive, to seek, to find and not to yield," but goes down almost a willing object of defeat.

In the first class of Mrs. Wharton's stories and novels which we have been discussing, she shows an intimacy and an exact knowledge of the drawing-room and its occupants. Let us now, in the second class -- that dealing with Love, Marriage, and Divorce -- call attention to her penetration, lucidity and detachment. These qualities are happily illustrated in Souls of her who has taken yet another step downward in becoming the secretary of the thoroughly disreputable and immoral Mrs. Hatch. Selden, her former lover, rescues her from this debasing atmosphere and causes his friend, Mildred Farish, to secure employment for her in a hat-shop. Unaccustomed to hard work and long hours, she makes little success at trimming bonnets as hat-trimmer (her forte), and is often on the j[illegible].

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Belated , which appeared in her first collection of short stories The Greater Inclination. The story opens with Lydia and Gannett, a young couple, en route to an obscure mountain retreat in Italy where they hope to find peace and happiness from their long honeymoon. They are not a strictly married couple, however: Lydia has only that day received a telegram announcing her freedom from her first husband, and being of a proud and sensitive nature she scorns to have Gannett marry her now, as though he has to do it as the "gentlemanly" thing. They have ignored convention thus far; why stop to consider it now? is her attitude. "We are together to-day because we choose to be -- don't let us look any farther than that!" she tells him; and to this Gannett agrees.

This arrangement seems to meet with entire success at the hotel at which they are staying. The small but careful society accepts them as married and accordsthem all the privileges enjoyed by married couples. Gannett even, in his first flush of happiness, is enabled to make progress on his novel. It is not until the arrival of Mrs. Cope and Lord Trevenna andthis combine's unsuccessful attempt to practise a similar pretense, that Lydia and Gannett are made aware of the moral dishonesty of their position. They see the respectability which they enjoy merely thru an obliging assumption on the part of their hosts denied another couple whose culpableness is no whit greater than their own. Conscience-stricken by the discovery, they undergo a rehabilitation of outlook as

regards convention, and they decide to go to Paris and be lawfully wedded. "Respectability!" exclaims Lydia in her rebirth of morality. "It was the only thing in life I was sure I didn't care about, and it's grown so precious to me that I've stolen it because I couldn't get it in any other way."

A second instance is The Reckoning, which might be termed a lesson in loyalty for dissatisfied wives. Julia, wife, imagined her husband, John Arment, to be the personification of selfishness. She considered him "impossible" because "he made it impossible for those about him to be other than himself." Arment was not conscious of having so dominating a personality, however, and was crushed and dejected when he learned of her desertion to become the wife of Clement Westall, -- one whose ideas about matrimony coincided with her own, she explained. The new couple unite in championing their marital faith which has as its central law: "Thou shall not be unfaithful to thyself."

Westall's time and attention get to be completely taken up with the dissemination of the doctrine -- even to the neglect of his wife, at which, of course, Julia becomes deeply dissatisfied. What is more, she observes his growing intimacy with one Una, a pretty young proselyte, and at her first opportunity she takes him to account for his unfaithfulness. He only reminds her of the conditions of their contract, and invokes the law of the "New Ethics" to effect a separation so

as to marry Una. Bereft of the man whom she had considered the "right" one and enlightened, too, by her most recent experience with the male, she begins to see things in a different light. She wends her way back to John Arment's house hoping to find forgiveness and reinstatement at his hands, but matrimony has given him a lesson also, and he cruelly turns her from his door.

The two preceding stories are moral lessons on marriage; let us now consider a third (The Other Two) which illustrates the ludicrousness to which divorce can sometimes come. Alice, having married and divorced, first, Mr. Hasket and, second, Mr. Varick, is now the obedient and contented wife of Mr. Waythorn. The only vestige of her former alliances is a pliant personality and a twelve-year-old daughter, Lily, who has been awarded by the courts to the keeping of her mother. But the decree of justice also provides that Lily must be accessible to her father; and when Hasket begins to invade the domestic privacy of the Waythorn household for the purpose of seeing his daughter, Waythorn finds the intrusion both embarrassing and annoying. Before many trips are made, however, the two men come to know each other, and Waythorn even begins to sympathize with his predecessor.

Thru his work he is also forced to have relations with Gus Varick, the second who possessed his wife. Even more vexing to him is Varick's presence at the social functions they attend. On~~e~~ one of these occasions he is astounded to chance upon his wife and her former husband seated side by side

in a "remote" room of the mansion. From then on, hostesses did not feel constrained to omit either from their invitation list, and Varick, Alice, and Waythorn mingle as if there had never been anything between them.

The crisis comes when Waythorn, venturing home early one day, finds Hasket occupying a seat in his parlor awaiting the return of Alice, with whom, he explains, he has an appointment. The two, after a few moments of slight restraint, enjoy a smoke together, when in drops Varick to see about an important business deal. A minute later Alice enters. She takes off her wraps, cordially greets the visitors with a shake of the hand, and the four -- sit down to tea!

A number of other stories could be mentioned to show Mrs. Wharton's treatment of marriage and divorce, but the three that have been given are typical. It is better now for us to turn to her novels, for in them we shall find in ampler fashion the thoughts merely hinted at elsewhere. Indeed, so important a theme does it appear to her that she has discussed it from some angle in every one of her novels and made it the entire foundation of two. In her eagerness to exploit the subject she can not be said to be always true, however. There is an evident tendency at times to overdraw the picture, to go to extremes, or to become downright harsh. No one doubts, for example, that divorce is an evil and money-making a curse, but it is to be seriously doubted if Mrs. Wharton's representations concerning these in The Custom of the Country are wise. They are certainly not true.

Perhaps it was the novels of Herrick and Dreiser that exerted a bad influence on her in the creation of Undine, the heroine of The Custom of the Country. The conception of the American wife had become almost a habit in fiction. She was pictured as a woman bent solely upon the pursuit of pleasure and the gratification of her personal whims. A pretty but a heartless creature, she married a man only because of his ability to provide for her material wants: she little knew or cared about his interests in life, because "it was against the custom of the country". If she should perchance have a child, it was turned over to the nurse for rearing and to the governess for instruction. The American social organization existed only for the indulgence of woman, and when one husband could no longer meet the requirements of society it was the natural right of the wife to look for another.

All of this and more is contained in The Custom of the Country. Undine Spragg of Apex City origin has as her one determination to break in among the best people of New York. Established in a pink-salmon apartment at the Stentorian Hotel, with her father in Wall Street to supply the necessary money, and, finally, with Mrs. Heeny, masseuse and manicure artist, as her social mentor ,she begins the attack. Buggy rides with a dentist and an affair with a riding master claiming to be an exiled nobleman do not advance her; it takes Mr. Popple, the portrait painter of the hour, to give her a send-off. At a dinner party he introduces her to Ralph Marvell, scion of Wash-

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All of this and more is contained in *The Custom of the Country*. Undine Spragg of Apex City origin [illegible] her one accomplishment to study to seem the best people of New York. Established in a [illegible] apartment at the Stentorian Hotel, with her father in Wall Street to supply the necessary money, and, finally, with Mrs. Heeny, manicure and masseuse de luxe, as her social mentor she begins the attack. [illegible] a [illegible] a proper social [illegible] to be an [illegible] the portrait painter of the hour, to give her a send-off. At a dinner party [illegible] to Ralph Marvell, scion of Washington Square aristocracy, who falls in love with her beauty, and when she learns that he is the "real thing" she succumbs.

The conservatism of Washington Square gentility does not offer the excitment that Undine is looking for, so after bearing Ralph a child, she deserts both husband and offspring to become a member of the more brilliant Van Degen set. Paris life follows, with an occasional run back to Dakota to "drop husbands". Ralph, frail and poetic hero that he is, is unable to bear up under his sorrow and commits suicide. Undine's next husband, the Frenchman Raymond de Chelles, is made of sterner stuff, however, and when she seeks to sacrifice his name and possessions for an immediate material enjoyment he sternly rebukes her:

> "You're are alike, every one of you. You come among us from a country we don't know, and can't imagine, a country you care for so little that before you've been a day in ours you've forgotten the very house you were born in -- if it wasn't torn down before you knew it! You come among us speaking our language and not knowing what we mean; wanting the things we want, and not knowing why we want them, aping our weaknesses, exaggerating our follies, ignoring or ridiculing all we care about -- you come from hotels as big as towns, and from towns as flimsy as paper, where the streets haven't had time to be named, and the buildings are demolished before they're dry, and the people are as proud of changing as we are of holding to what we have -- and we're fools enough to imagine that because you copy our ways and pick up our slang you understand anything about the things that make life decent and honorable for us!"

Undine ends up by re-marrying Elmer Moffatt, the course-grained but smart young husbaad of her Apex days and now a "magnate and a millionaire."

Quite different is "The Reef" which does not stop with the narration of social evils arising from divorce and marriage but creates a problem plot out of them. There is the usual flavor of course of fashion and wealth: the scene is laid in vivacious France; Darrow, the hero, is of the diplomatic corps; Anna, his betrothed, is a rich woman spending her time between England and the Continent; Sophy Viner, Darrow's partner in adultery, is, like Susy in The Glimpses of the Moon, the fag of her wealthy friends. The main interest, however, centers in the solution of the difficulty which Darrow has created for himself, viz., how he can honorably prevent his step-son's marriage to a woman with whom he has had immoral relations, without revealing either his own or the woman's past.

Darrow's illicit love with Sophy Viner is ironically described as one of "man's traditional lapses from virtue", committed in "a moment of weakness" when he thought himself "destitute" of the affection of the woman who is his true love. Fortune later returns to him in the promise of Anna to become his wife, but misery comes too, for he learns at the same time that her son is engaged to Miss Viner. Naturally, he is unwilling to permit the marriage of a weak woman into the family of which he is to become a member. He can not expose her past, however, without revealing his own. Circumstances bring Anna, Sophy and Darrow face to face, with the result that Anna's suspicions of Darrow's infidelity are aroused. Convention, woman's

Quite different is The Reef, which goes a step with the [illegible] of social [illegible] divorce and marriage but presents a problem [illegible] out of them. There is the usual flavor of [illegible] of fashion and wealth: the scene is laid in [illegible] Darrow, the hero, is of the diplomatic corps; Anna, his betrothed, is a rich woman spending her time between [illegible] and the [illegible]; Sophy Viner, Darrow's partner in adultery, is, like Lily Bart in The [illegible] of the [illegible], the toy of her wealthy friends. The main incident, however, centers in the solution of the difficulty which Darrow has [illegible] for himself. That, how he [illegible] prevent his step-son's marriage to a woman with whom he has had immoral relations, without revealing either his own or the woman's past.

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What Mrs. Wharton has to say in regard to this situation is that men, though well-intentioned and fundamentally good, can not resist the attraction of women, nor can women, once in love with men, forego their love thru mere scruple or principle. Anna, the financee of Darrow, is pressed by both intuition and reason to believe that her lover has been guilty of immoral relations with Sophy, but her love for him is too powerful to resist his plea for her hand in marriage. "We are all human-beings, each with his sins and failings, and it little profits any of us to dicker over principles in the great moments of life," seems to be the philosophy of The Reef.

If Newland Archer in The Age of Innocence had had the courage to follow his own desires and marry the experienced Countess Olenska instead of allowing himself to be thwarted and cooped up by the social ritual of his class, the power of will rather than the power of decorum would have been illustrated. But here again Mrs. Wharton prefers to show the power of convention, the authority of family over the individual, the destruction of hope thru consideration for collective interests. May Newland, the girl whom young Archer did marry, was of the "finest" sort and without the reproach as to personal character superficial mates, and this comes [illegible] to [illegible] Trevor [illegible], who succeeds in ridding himself of [illegible] and marrying the [illegible] Amy.

What Mrs. Wharton has to say in regard to this situation is that men, though well-intentioned and fundamentally good, can not resist the attraction of women, nor can women, once in love with men, forget their love [illegible] mere scruples or principles. Amy, the fiancee of Harter, is pressed by both intuition and reason to believe that her lover has been guilty of immoral relations with Moeby, but her love for him is too powerful to resist his plea for her hand in marriage. "We are all human-beings, each with his sins and failings, and it little profits any of us to dicker over principles in the great moments of life," seems to be the philosophy of The Reef.

If Newland Archer in The Age of Innocence had had the courage to follow his own desires and marry the experienced Countess Olenska instead of allowing himself to be thwarted and cooped up by the united clique of his class, the power of will rather than the power of [illegible] would have been illustrated. But here again Mrs. Wharton prefers to show the power of convention, the authority of family over the individual, the destruction of hope thru realization for collective interests. May Welland, the girl whom young Archer did marry, was of the "finest" sort and without the [illegible] as to personal character or family connection, but she was "virtuous because she was incapable of temptation, and competent because she was incapable of any deep perturbation." Archer secretly longed that women were more imaginative and experienced. "Women should be as free as men are," he complained, and nourished his heresy by secret perusals of imported editions of de Maupassant and clandestine associations with a free-lance journalist.

Countess Olenska, the young and more experienced divorcee just back from Paris was the woman he loved. She had none of the "factitious purity, so cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grand mothers and long-dead ancestresses." She was independent of the thousand forms, ceremonies, and proprieties of May Welland's set; but she was skilled in the arts and graces which attract men. The New York aristocrats thought her vulgar and impossible because of her divorce and disregard for convention; but she was not. She was no adventuress nor mistress, as they supposed her to be; and Newland Archer knew she was not.

Family rights prevail over personal rights, however, and Archer becomes the partner to the very sort of union he acknowledgely despises, -- that of a "dull association of material and social interests held together by ignorance on the one side and hypocrisy on the other." He is fearful of the disapprobation of parents and friends, and rather than find happiness in marrying the "disreputable" Countess, whom

he sincerely loved, be prefers to be the victim of a "tribal order", sentenced to a "life without passion, without expression, and without satisfaction."

Bolder, but more tender, is Mrs. Wharton's treatment of love, marriage, and divorce in The Glimpses of the Moon whose central problem is stated in one of the speeches of the characters:

> "Everything's changed nowadays; why shouldn't marriage be too? A man can get out oa a business partnership when he wants to; but the parsons want to keep us noosed up to each other for life because we've blundered into a church one day and say 'Yes' before one of 'em. No, no -- that's too easy. We've got beyond that. Science, and all these new discoveries --- I say the Ten Commandments were made for man, and not man for the Commandments; and there ain't a word against divorce in 'em, anyhow! That's what I tell my poor old mother, who builds everything on her Bible. 'Find me the place where it says: Thou shalt not sue for divorce.' It makes her wild, poor old lady, because she can't; and she doesn't know how they happen to have left it out......I rather think Moses left it out because he knew more about human nature than these snivelling parsons do. Not that they'll always bear investigating either; but I don't care about that. Live and let live, eh, Susy? Haven't we all got a right to our Affinities?"

Such sentiment does not prove to be true in the case of Nick Lansing and Susy however. They love each other, but all experience has warned them of any union formed without the sine qua non of money. They contrive to circumvent their injudicious marriage by agreeing to separate whenever a more prosperous career or marriage is open to either of them. Alas! when love comes in the window, prudence goes out at the ~~window~~ door. The services rendered their rich friends for their upkeep when single prove intolerable to them as a couple. They find themselves drawn together by a common

pride and suffering, with the result that a complete revolution in their morals is effected. Their desire for wealth, social position, and pleasure becomes subordinate in the birth of their deep and unselfish love; and Susy and Nick find that their marital "adventure" must be permanent if they are to be happy.

Form all that has gone before, one might reasonably suspect that the subject of our treatment is a rank pessimist, bitter against the world. It must indeed be admitted even by the most sympathetic critic that there is an excessive amount of irony in her work, and that the edge of her blade sometimes draws blood. As we have already pointed out, the habit seems to have overpowered her in The Custom of the Country. There are other times when Edith Wharton just joys in the weaknesses of her fellowmen; and it is then that she is less irritating and more enjoyable. Then it is that her writing takes the form of a light satire.

In Trust, the first example we shall give of this third class of her work, has for its subject the good intentions of mankind. Paul Ambrose, just out of college and the possessor of a vast fortune left him by his parents, announces his intention to try out his theories by investing the money in an "aesthetic redemption of the human race." The farthest he gets, however, is to draw up plans for an "Academy of Letters", but which is indefinitely postponed on account of his marriage. Ned Halidon, Ambrose's close personal friend,

decries this weakness of character, but when, after Ambrose's sudden death, he finds himself the husband of the widow and the guardian of the money, he finds that it is a much easier thing to talk than to do. The money looked upon by Paul as "left in trust" is at first so regarded by Halidon, but he allows the extravagance of his wife to delay him in putting into execution the plans for the Academy. A loss of inspiration and determination accompany the delay, and at the end of the story we find that he has forsaken the project altogether. He expresses the hope that his son (now three years old) will, when he becomes of age, make it his life's work.

A second example of Mrs. Wharton's gentle satire is The Daunt Diana, in which a poverty-stricken devotee of art bewails his fate in not being able to acquire a far-famed Diana belonging to the Daunts. He later comes into possession of a large fortune thru the death of a rich uncle, and in the rush of his enthusiasm he invests the money in the purchase of not only the desired Diana but the entire Daunt collection. This attainment of an ideal in life is so easy and complete that it robs him of the happiness which he has been accustomed to get in looking forward to the time when he will be rich enough to possess the Diana. He therefore rids himself of the collection, at prices far below those he gave, and waits for a period of years to pass in order that the values may rise again. Years afterwards his friends come across him in Rome where he is engaged in buying back, piece by piece, the

collection. He has to stint himself to the utmost and live in very reduced circumstances to get the money necessary, but so long as sacrifice, struggle, and expectation enter into his existance he is contented and happy.

Equally as enjoyable and perhaps truer to life is The Letters. A young man makes love to a girl living abroad but on a trip to America he forgets her and neglects to answer her successive and urgent epistles. When he later returns to France and seeks to resume his affair with her, he explains away his inconstancy by saying that a decline in his fortunes compelled him, in all fairness, to forget her. This she believes (vain creature!), and accepts him for her husband. Years afterwards when she is looking thru some trunks she chances upon her letters, packed away and unopened. She does not upbraid her husband, as is her first impulse so to do, because she understands, for the first time, that she has "gradually adjusted herself to the new image of him as he is, as he will always be. He is not the hero of her dreams, but he is the man she loves, and who has loved her. For she sees now, in this last wide flash of pity and initiation, that, as a comely marble may be made out of worthless scraps of mortar, glass, and pebbles, so out of mean mixed substances may be fashioned a love that will bear the stress of life." (Tenses changed).

Sweet-reasonableness such as this is not often shown by Mrs. Wharton, but perhaps in return for the privilege of being habitually ironical she favors us now and then with

a delightful description of some humorous character. Dyspeptic old women, gouty old men, and curious maiden ladies afford her an opportunity for endless fun. No caricature in Dickens is more laughable than that of Mrs. Mingott, the ancestress of Fifth Avenue, in <u>The Age of Innocence</u>. Mrs. Wharton describes her in the way that the ancestress herself is wont to describe others:

> "The immense accretion of flesh which had descended on her in middle life like a flood of lava on a doomed city had changed her from a plump active little woman with a neatly turned foot and ankle into something as vast and august as a natural phenomenon. She had accepted this submergence as philosophically as all her other trials, and now, in extreme old age, was rewarded by presenting to her mirror an almost unwrinkled expanse of firm pink and white flesh, in the centre of which the traces of a small face survived as if awaiting excavation. A flight of smooth double chins led down to the dizzy depths of a still-snowy bosom veiled in snowy muslins that were held in place by a miniature portrait of the late Mr. Mingott; and around and below, wave after wave of black silk surged away over the edges of a capacious armchair, with two tiny white hands poised like gulls on the surface of the billows."

A discussion of Mrs. Wharton's light satire would not be complete without a mention of her ability as a maker of epigrams. Her pages are so numerous with them that an interminable enumeration could be given. They are, in fact, next to her irony, what impresses the reader most. Crack! Crack! Crack! we hear her popping them one after another: "Literature's like a big railway-station now, you know: there's a train starting every minute." "The virtues, she once explained to me, are like bonnets: the very ones that look best on other people may not happen to suit one's own

particular style." "In this interpretative light Mrs. Gracy acquired the charm which makes some women's faces like a book of which the last page is never turned." "Youth plucks the fruit for its color rather than its flavor; and first love does not serenade its mistress on a church-organ." "It would take an arbitration commission a good many sittings to define the boundaries of society now-a-days." "Ah, it's generally a woman who's at the bottom of the unexpected --- not that that precludes the devil's being there too!" "That insoluble riddle of the sentimental life: that to be differed with is exasperating, and to be agreed with monotonous."

In conclusion, let it be said that Edith Wharton is, above all, a transcriber of the wealthy and fashionable class. As such, she is more interested in form than content. Witty remarks and a rushing, scintillating style take the place of variety of character and wealth of incident. Her greatest enjoyment lies in telling a story with zest and cleverness. She does not bother to work over her characters and have them develop with the narrative. In most cases they are even foreordained to failure; in a series of episodes she sweeps them to a predetermined end. She has no philosophy of life to champion or illustrate, no theories to expound. Not profound, she relies upon her intellectual brilliancy and trenchant wit to catch and hold the reader's attention. Her habit of irony wearies at times, -- so much so that one is apt to accuse her of snobbism before reaching the end of the

book. But the class she writes about is a class of which Americans hear much and know little, and her first-hand description and observation of it is a real, if not a lasting addition, to American letters.

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